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**Decolonizing Minds: The experiences of Latina Mexican American  
Studies majors at a predominately White university**

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**Decolonizing Minds: The experiences of Latina Mexican American  
Studies majors at a predominately White university**

**by**

**Alma Itzé Flores, B.A.**

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## **Dedication**

Para mis papás, Jorge Luis Flores Grajeda y Alma Jovita Bernal Santos, mis primeros profesores en la vida. Gracias por todos sus sacrificios, amor, y apoyo.

And to all the *mujeres* that “died, scrubbed floors, wept, and fought,” (Burciaga, Last Supper of Chicano Heroes) so that I could pursue higher education. *¡En la lucha seguimos!*

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## **Abstract**

### **Decolonizing Minds: The experiences of Latina Mexican American Studies majors at a predominately White university**

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The recent attacks on ethnic studies programs both in Arizona with house bill 2281 and locally at the University of Central Texas serve as an urgent call to address how ethnic studies programs impact the educational trajectories of students. Additionally, research done on ethnic studies programs has largely focused on high school programs, overlooking programs in higher education. Therefore, this study addresses the following question: In what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the experiences of Latinas at a predominately White institution (PWI)? Using Chicana feminist thought and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model as theoretical perspectives this study seeks to; 1) understand an educational approach (ethnic studies) that has shown success with students of color, 2) fill in the gap in the literature of ethnic studies programs in higher education, and 3) look at the gendered experience of Latinas at PWIs. Through a thematic analysis of six in depth interviews and a focus group conducted with six Latina undergraduates the author finds that Mexican American Studies represents a site or process of reclaiming and redefining. Four major themes are

identified and discussed; reclaiming knowledge, the self, and space(s) and redefining *la mujer*. The findings suggest that there is a relationship between student retention and ethnic studies programs, adding epistemic and *mestiza* capital to Yosso's community cultural wealth model, and using ethnic studies programs as models of how to best support students of color at PWIs. The author concludes with the suggestion that more research is needed on the experiences of other undergraduate students (White, African American, men, etc.) that are ethnic studies majors in order to further understand the impact, importance, and wealth of potential in these programs.



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# INTRODUCTION

## MY STORY

Before ever stepping foot onto a college campus I was a student of ethnic studies. Not because I had made the self conscious decision to declare ethnic studies as my undergraduate major but by virtue of my experiences of growing up as an immigrant woman of color in southern California. Growing up I was very conscious of my immigration status, gender, skin color, and economic background. I was conscious of it when I would spend my summers cleaning the rich hill top homes with my grandmother only to witness the poor pay she would receive. I was conscious of it when I was the only student of color in my GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) and AP (Advanced Placement) courses. And I was conscious of it, when I graduated from high school and I was the only Latina to enroll in a four year university. Although growing up I was conscious of the fact that I was different, I didn't necessarily always feel good about it. In fact, I often felt embarrassed, upset, and ashamed. I was growing up in a school culture that continuously fed me the idea that Latina/os are victimized by their home communities and families. As a result, I began to truly believe that in order to be successful in school I had to rid myself of my ethnic identity. It wouldn't be until college that I would go from being conscious to being critically conscious. My experiences in my Chicana/o studies and education courses would change me forever.

As a student who continues to benefit greatly from ethnic studies<sup>1</sup> it is devastating for me to see determined politicians like Tom Horne or university officials try to eradicate these programs. This is why I believe that the recent attacks on ethnic studies programs both in

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<sup>1</sup> I use ethnic studies as an umbrella term representative of courses or educational programs that utilize a critical and/or liberatory approach as their foundation for teaching and learning.

Arizona with house bill 2281 and locally at the University of Central Texas<sup>2</sup> (UCT) serve as an urgent call to address how ethnic studies programs impact the educational trajectories of students. Despite all the hostility towards these programs I still find hope to save them through the use of academic research. I am determined and encouraged to highlight the positive impact these programs have on students of color by documenting their narratives of transformation. What follows is my journey of a larger movement to save ethnic studies locally and nationally.

### **SIGNIFICANCE AND BACKGROUND**

Latina/o students often experience an education that is remedial, unchallenging, and void of their personal experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). This limited education not only affects their social mobility but most importantly it denies them the opportunity to develop critical voices and intellectual capacities necessary to do something about it. For years educational researches have documented the underachievement of Latina/os. These studies, to name a few, have looked at schooling inequalities (Kozol, 1991; Noguera 2003), tracking (Oakes, 1985), teacher preparation (Delpit, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 2001), and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987). All of these studies have contributed greatly to the understanding of educational inequity and the disinvestment of education where people of color reside. Yet, very little attention has been given to strategies and practices that actually work, specifically pedagogy that is committed to social justice. These “counter-narratives” are important and needed in order to demystify the belief that Latina/o students are inevitably bound to fail.

One successful strategy that has not received much attention until their recent siege has been ethnic studies programs. The work of scholars like Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2007, 2008, &

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<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to protect the identity of the university.

2010), Ernest Morrell (2008), María Fránquiz (2001, 2004 & 2008) and Maria del Carmen Salazar (2004, 2008) illustrate the positive impact a critical and liberatory pedagogy can have on students of color. By using a socially relevant curriculum that centers students as creators and producers of knowledge students gain the tools to become agents of social change and leaders of their communities. Their work with qualitative research methods and/or participatory action research with high school aged youth has played a key role in the illustration of what ethnic studies can do for students of color in terms of improving academic success and college preparation.

This is particularly important for Latina/o students given that they are not only the largest and fastest growing ethnic/racial group (Villalpando, 2004), but are also the least educated major population group in the country (Fry, 2002). Out of 100 Latina/os who begin elementary school, only 50 are likely to graduate from high school compared to the 84 White students that are likely to graduate. Moreover, from the 50 Latina/o students only 9 are likely to graduate from college and from these 9 only .2 will graduate with a doctorate (Yosso, 2005; Villalpando, 2010). The population of Latina/o youth is expected to keep growing yet the educational achievement levels of Latina/o students will not increase at proportionate rates. These leaks in the educational pipeline are alarming and disturbing at the same time. This growing discrepancy calls for a need to better understand the affects that influence the achievement of Latina/os. As mentioned earlier the array of research on Latina/o education has focused on what is not working which is an important part of the puzzle yet just as important is to understand what has been working or has the potential to work.

Although researchers, like the ones mentioned earlier, have begun to look at what is working, most of the work on ethnic studies has been focused on a k-12<sup>th</sup> grade context or more



specifically at a high school site. While this research illustrates the urgency of using these types of programs in student's primary education the reality is that, unfortunately, most students will not encounter ethnic studies courses until they are in college. Overall, the work done on ethnic studies programs is very limiting however even more limiting is the work done on ethnic studies programs in higher education. Chicana/o, Mexican American, Latina/o or Raza studies program came about in the 60s when the Chicana/o civil rights movement was at its pivotal point. Much of the programs were founded during this time when student activism was at its highest (Acuña, 2007). Today, a large part of community, state, private, and public colleges and universities have ethnic studies programs. Nevertheless, we have not focused on how these programs are impacting the experiences of Latina/o students. Are they having as great of an impact as these programs are in the k-12<sup>th</sup> grade level?

The work to be done on ethnic studies programs is also very timely given that these programs are currently under attack. In Arizona, house bill 2281 has banned ethnic studies programs in all school districts. This bill was first introduced by Arizona State Superintendent for Public Instruction Tom Horne back in 2009. Yet, the bill evolved from a letter written by Tom Horne addressed to the citizens of Tucson, AZ on June 2007. The open letter that begins with the statement; "The TUSD Ethnic Studies Program Should be Terminated" targets the Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). In the letter Horne recounts his experiences with students and teachers in this program. He writes, "...the evidence is overwhelming that ethnic studies in the Tucson Unified School District teaches a kind of destructive ethnic chauvinism that the citizens of Tucson should no longer tolerate" (Horne, pg. 2). He goes on to attack Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's (1970) classical piece *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Rodolfo Acuña's (2007) *Occupied America*, both widely used

college textbooks. Although these are college level texts that are being used with high school youth Horne finds both texts as objectionable and questionable. He writes, “Those students should be taught that this is the land of opportunity, and that if they work hard they can achieve their goals. They should not be taught that they are oppressed” (Horne, pg. 2).

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, the day after massive student walkouts in response to anti-immigration sentiments, Chicana activist Dolores Huerta was an invited guest speaker at a special assembly at Tucson High Magnet School, one of the host schools of the Mexican American Studies program. Dolores Huerta, a long time activist and co-founder, with César Chávez, of the United Farmworkers Union, gave a compelling speech supporting student’s efforts to organize against anti-immigration sentiment by encouraging their communities to register to vote. Unfortunately, what was highlighted from Huerta’s speech was her statement that, “Republicans hate Latinos.” Huerta’s statement was based on the number of anti-immigration bills supported by Republicans. Horne quickly caught attention of the event and began to investigate how it was that Huerta had been invited to the high school. It was at this time that Horne also became aware of the ethnic studies courses in Tucson High. Infuriated by Huerta’s statement he became vigilant of the school, what followed was his open letter and finally the introduction of house bill 2281.

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010 Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed house bill 2281. The trajectory of the law, discussed above, shows how it specifically attacks the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson. A program that has shown to be an instrumental tool for the success of Latina/o students in the Tucson Unified School District. The law which went into effect January 2011 threatens to cut 10% of state funding to any district found in violation. Eleven teachers from the Tucson Unifies School District have filed a law suit against the state board of education

and are in the process of trying to repeal the law (Martinez & Gutierrez, 2010). While Arizona's anti-immigration bill SB1070 is an attempt to control bodies, HB 2281 is an attempt to control minds; that is to deny people of color's history.

On a more local context, at the University of Central Texas (UCT), budget cuts are affecting ethnic and gender studies centers. The Center for Mexican American Studies is expected to suffer a 40% cut on their budget. Essentially what will happen to these ethnic and gender studies centers is that they will become "hollow" centers. Although they will be represented structurally at the university, they will be limited in providing optimal and enriching experiences for students. The Academic Planning and Advisory Committee of the university has proposed the cuts to 14 centers and institutes, with the Centers for African and African American, Middle Eastern, Mexican American and Latin American studies receiving the largest cuts. Yet, the Center for European Studies was expected to receive about a 10% increase to their budget. What is especially upsetting about these cuts is that there was no student input or participation as to how they were decided. The Academic Planning and Advisory Committee has not been clear as to how these cuts were determined. Although there has been a lot of student organizing and outcry at UCT, these cuts unfortunately are still expected to proceed as planned.

Before the struggle for these centers at UCT, the Texas Board of Education was in the process of reviewing the state mandated social studies curriculum. The result of this review process resulted in a very conservative representation of United States history. Many of the republican board members suggested the removal of Chicana/o civil rights movement leaders like César Chávez and Dolores Huerta in textbooks. Since the Texas textbook market is so large

many school districts outside of Texas will also use the same textbooks, meaning that this “rewriting” of history affects students nationally.

The political context discussed both at a national and local level serve as background to why it is so important that we continue to cultivate research in such a relative young field like ethnic studies. The attacks on these programs will continue especially as they continue to make an impact on historically White spaces; this is why we need to prepare ourselves to protect them from disappearing. It is also imperative that we continue researching what these programs are doing for students especially as we look for strategies that support the success of Latina/o students. If these programs are supporting the academic success of students of color, then as educators and policy makers it is our responsibility to learn from these programs in order to support the education of all students at all levels including undergraduate and graduate degrees.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

As discussed the standard educational experience of Latina/os includes restricting use of heritage and language, silencing their historical experiences and their voices in White spaces. This is sometimes even more pronounced in higher education due to large lecture style classes, fewer students of colors, and the lack of intimacy or individual attention from professors/instructors. Additionally, many Latina/o students experience things like culture shock and racialized and gendered incidents upon their arrival to predominately White institutions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Despite these challenging experiences, Latina/o students learn to critically navigate this space of privileged Whiteness. For example, research has shown how Latina/o students engage in specific actions to culturally nourish and replenish in response to marginalizing campus climates. Often times to counter the cultural starvation

Latina/o student's seek out ethnic studies courses, faculty of color, and ethnic student organizations (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Although collectively Latina/o students face many similar experiences and challenges we also cannot deny the unique gendered experience of Latinas. During the Chicana/o civil rights movement many active Chicana feminists challenged the sexism and male domination that they were experiencing within the movement (García, 1997). Even if we look at the history of the Center for Mexican American Studies at UCT it has predominately been men of color that have been directors of the program or in leadership positions. This illustrates how Chicana and Chicanos experienced the movement and access to transformational spaces differently. Women of color continue to face layers of oppression because of their color and gender. It is for these reasons that researchers need to address the gendered experience when examining ethnic studies programs; so that we acknowledge the importance of how women of color learn, cope, and challenge White institutions.

The purpose of this study is to 1) understand an educational approach (ethnic studies) that has shown success with students of color, 2) fill in the gap in the literature of ethnic studies programs in higher education, and 3) look at the gendered experience of Latinas at a predominately White institution. The main research question leading this study is:

1) In what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the experiences of Latinas at a predominately White institution?

The subsidiary question, also guiding the study, is:

2) In what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the aspirations of Latina undergraduates?

To set the stage for my study, chapter two reviews the literature and theoretical perspectives that I use to support my study. In chapter three I discuss the methods, the setting of where the study took place, and my positionality. In chapter four I discuss my findings through themes I found in my data. Lastly, in chapter five I conclude with a discussion on the limitations and implications of my study and suggestions for future research.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE & THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

My literature review is divided into three bodies of research I utilize to frame and support my study. Figure 1 represents these three bodies of research. The different colored circles in the figure are representative of how these bodies of literature build upon each other. Because I am looking at an ethnic studies program within a predominately White university (PWI) the green circle is within the purple circle. At the center (the red circle) are my theoretical perspectives which are the lenses I utilize to examine an ethnic studies program within a PWI. As such, the first body of literature I discuss looks at the experiences of Latina/o students in PWIs in order to understand the setting of the study; the University of Central Texas (UCT). The second body focuses on the work that has been done on ethnic studies programs specifically looking at the pedagogy, results of these programs, and history. I conclude with my theoretical perspectives drawing on the work of Chicana feminists Emma Pérez and Gloria Anzaldúa and Tara Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model.

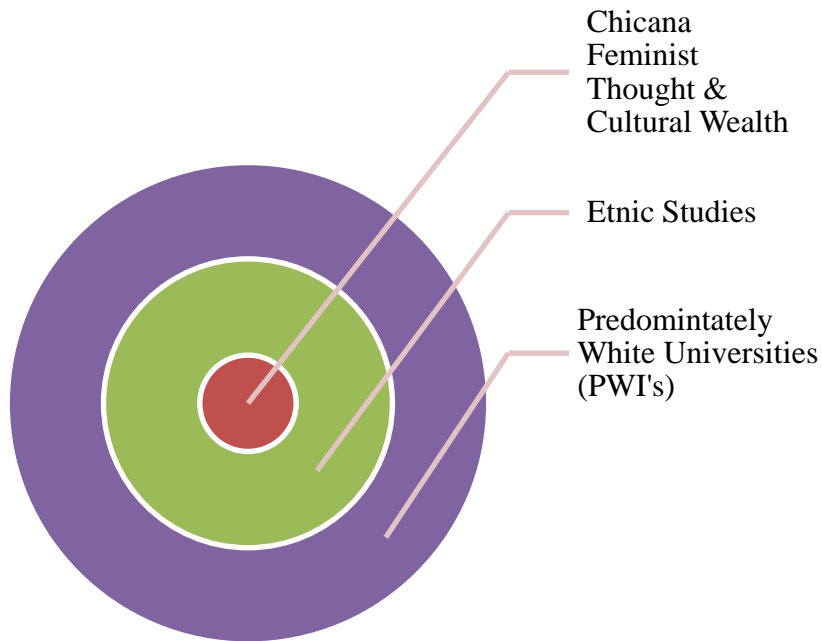


Figure 2.1 Review of the Literature & Theoretical Perspectives

## **LATINA/O STUDENTS IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIS)**

The enrollment of Latinas/os in four year institutions continues to be dismal. More Latina/o students are enrolling in two year institutions instead of four year institutions (Villalpando, 2010). The implications of this enrollment disparity are noteworthy since researchers have found that two year institutions often fail to help Latinas/os transfer to four year campuses to complete their baccalaureate degree (De los Santos, Jr. & De los Santos, 2006; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). In terms of gender, “the late 1970s and 1980s appear to mark the beginning of a reversal in the gender composition of college enrollment” (Villalpando, p. 236). What this means is that more Latinas are enrolling in college compared to Latinos.

Also, important to point out is that Latinas/os have the lowest college graduation rates (Villalpando, 2010). “Of the Latina/o students who enroll in college, only 46% attain their bachelor’s degrees” (Oseguera et al., 2009, p. 23). Clearly, there is a discrepancy in Latina/o student retention in these campuses. Just as noteworthy is how long it takes for students to graduate from these four year institutions. Villalpando (2010) reports that “only 1 out of every 5 Latinas/os attending these public campuses can expect to graduate within six years” (p. 244). By the year 2020, more than 20% of the children in the United States younger than age 18 will be Latina/o (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Unfortunately, the education of Latina/o youth will not increase at proportional rates. The implications of this call for a reevaluation of access, equity, and retention in higher education.

Because there are so few Latina/o students and overall students of color, enrolling in four year institutions, the majority students at these campuses are White students. These campuses are not only made up of predominately White students, faculty, and staff but have also



historically challenged the enrollment of students of color and women. Therefore, it is fair to say that the experience of Latina/o students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) are distinctly different from the experiences of majority students at PWIs. Research has indicated that being a student of color at these campuses is associated with an increased risk of negative outcomes such as higher levels of stress that are related with being a student at a highly competitive academic institution (Saldana, 1994). Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) found that student of color in PWIs experienced stress on a variety of levels like social climate stress, interracial stress, racial discrimination, within-group stresses, and achievement stress. Students of color in PWIs often described these campuses as cold and unwelcoming and a place where racism is often encountered. Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that minority student perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on campus negatively affect their adjustment to college and exert an indirect effect on their decisions to persist. Classical studies like Nettles (1988) and Allen (1992) also report that students of color experience lower levels of integration and higher levels of alienation and discrimination at PWIs.

In her 2006 study on Latina/o ethnic identity Vasti Torres found that Latina/o college students at PWIs must navigate both the obligations and expectations of their communities and the culture of higher education. Because of this Torres found that this often pushed students to exist at the margins of two cultures or choose one over the other. In addition to Torres' findings researchers have also found that Latina/o students are also vulnerable to culture shock and feelings of doubt about their ability to succeed in PWIs (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Studies on campus climate have also found that students that experience prejudice or bias based on their race, class, gender, or sexual identity have a challenging time adjusting cognitively, emotionally,

and socially which is often directly linked to a student's decision to leave college (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) have explored the experiences of undergraduate Latina/o students at PWIs by examining their encounters with racial microaggressions and campus racial climate. Their study looked at the experiences of Latina/o undergraduates at three selective universities. Their findings illustrate how racial microaggressions have a huge influence on the undergraduate experiences of Latina/o students. Students experienced a heightened awareness and stress of being the minority at these campuses. They had to deal with nonverbal and verbal racial affronts from students, faculty, and/or teaching assistants such as having their intelligence questioned or White students feeling intellectually superior to them. Students also experienced racial jokes and hate speech like being called "wetbacks" or "beaners." The racial jokes and hate speech further created a hostile campus environment for students, making them at times steer away from joining certain groups, organizations, or sport teams in order to avoid confrontations. Students also constantly dealt with a feeling of guilt for not speaking up immediately or not having the energy to confront racial incidents.

Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano also describe institutional microaggressions which they define "as those racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to People of Color" (p. 673). These institutional microaggressions diminish the value of Latina/o students on campus through the privileging of White middle class culture. This can be manifested through the lack of faculty of color, ethnic studies courses, or programs/organizations that support students of color. González (2002) talks about this through an epistemological perspective. He

explains that students “experience marginalization and alienation due to the lack of Chicano knowledge existing and being exchanged on campus” (p. 207). He describes it as “cultural starvation” because of the lack of opportunities for students to learn and exchange ideas about issues pertaining specifically to their experiences as Chiana/os. These institutional microaggressions serve as a barrier towards creating a nurturing space for Latina/o students. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano find that Latina/o students typically experience the following stages upon their arrival at a PWI: “rejection, community building, and critical navigation between multiple worlds” (p.674). Although the main purpose of their paper is to highlight the additional challenges that Latina/o students must face at PWIs they also focus on highlighting how students successfully navigate these barriers. Part of my theoretical framework will draw on Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model that acknowledges the way students successfully navigate these White spaces.

There is an important gap in the literature in terms of addressing how racialized stress is gendered. With the exception of Daniel Muñoz’s (1986) study that found that racialized stress is indeed gendered, I was unable to find other studies that focused specifically on Latinas in PWIs. Muñoz’s findings indicated that “Chicanas as a group consistently reported greater stress than any other group” (p. 145). He found that they experienced higher levels of stress on items such as “taking unmeaningful or irrelevant courses, seeking help with personal or academic problems, not meeting teacher’s expectations for academic achievement, approaching a staff or faculty member for assistance, being asked to verbally participate in class, and adjusting to a new school environment” (p. 145). There is a need for research to account for the distinct ways that Latinas experience and respond to racial microaggressions or simply what the gendered experience looks like at PWIs. Similarly, there is also a need to examine the experiences of Latinas in ethnic

studies programs especially programs that are within PWIs. I now turn to discuss the literature that addresses ethnic studies programs.

## **ETHNIC STUDIES**

Although there is an existing tension to place Chicana/o or Mexican American studies under the umbrella term ethnic studies my purpose here is to focus on the pedagogy of these courses. Reynaldo F. Macías (2005) *El Grito en Aztlán: Voice and presence in Chicana/o studies* gives a powerful explanation of why Chicana/o studies is not ethnic studies. He explains that the attempt to equate ethnic studies to Chicana/o studies is often a way for university administration to limit the resources of this particular field of study. He writes, “They appeal to an ‘intellectual’ justification that ‘comparative’ study of racial and/or ethnic groups is acceptable but not the study of ‘single’ groups, such as Mexican...” (p. 172). I understand and completely agree with Macías on this point because I have personally witnessed this in several university campuses. Macías also makes the differentiation between Chicana/o and Latina/o studies. Latina/o studies are commonly defined as “the aggregate study of the individual national-origin groups from Spanish-speaking Latin America and the Caribbean” (p. 171). I share this to give a glimpse into the debate on how Chiana/o or Mexican American Studies are defined. However, my purpose here is to discuss the literature on ethnic studies through a pedagogical perspective not to define what ethnic studies is or is not. I use the term ethnic studies to be inclusive of Raza, Chicana/o, and Mexican American Studies programs.

I begin by discussing the work of Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) in their book *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell describe ethnic studies as offering “important insight into the histories, legacies, and cultures of communities that are

often lost in U.S. educational narratives of Western progress and Western values” (p. 135). This does not mean that ethnic studies are or should be at odds with the Western educational paradigm; however they are certainly lacking in traditional education. These courses generally and particularly in the academy, offer counter-narratives of resistance or agency against oppression. They challenge dominant epistemologies forcing us to rethink how we have come to know what we know, what we believe in, and even question how knowledge is produced to determine concepts like truth, science, and scholarship. Most importantly, these courses are rooted in the struggles for social change and thus take a very social justice orientation.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell have developed a model of what they call “critical pan-ethnic studies” (CPES) in urban education. The foundation of this model is critical pedagogy. They explain that the reason for this is that “critical pedagogy, in a Freirian sense, begins with the problem of dehumanization and seeks, through dialogue and praxis, to develop an individual who is able to participate in the transformation of society” (p. 134). Along the same lines, Julio Cammarota (2007) focuses on developing a socially relevant curriculum through his Social Justice Education Project (SJEP). The SJEP was a two year course that was offered for high school youth that focused on critical theory and a participatory action research project. Students in this course learned about concepts like hegemony, microaggressions, social reproduction, and the intersectionality of race. Through CPES and SJEP we are able to see the positive impact these programs have on youth of color. Students in these courses develop sophisticated research, literacy, and writing skills. Yet most importantly, they leave these courses with a critical consciousness and as agents of social change for their respective communities.

The most recent work by David Stovall and Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2007) focuses on the ethnic studies programs in Tucson, Arizona. Their evaluation study of the four departments

(African-American Studies, Pan Asian Studies, Native-American Studies, and Raza/Mexican-American Studies) in Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) Ethnic Studies Program shows the positive impact these programs have had on high school students, in terms of student retention, engagement, and overall academic performance. Compared to the general high school student body population the retention rate of Latina/o students that participate in this program is much higher; meaning Latina/o students that participate in the program are less likely to drop out. Even more impressive is that students who participate in this program are more likely to go on to college (Duncan-Andrade & Stovall, 2007). The program has had a dramatic impact on the engagement and achievement of its participants (Cammarota & Romero, 2006). Students that have participated in this program have also significantly outperformed their non-participant peers on the states standardized AIMS tests (Duncan-Andrade & Stovall, 2007).

Like ethnic studies, Mexican American Studies are not necessarily defined by course content but can be better understood as being bound together by a pedagogy that defines their purpose. However it is the content of these courses that is an important motivational tool to help students learn and in many senses "correct" the negative self images that have come about through an oppressive school curriculum. By an oppressive school curriculum I refer to the way mainstream curriculum is structured around a White middle class reality, marginalizing the experiences of anyone outside of this. It is also important to point out that although there are several strands of ethnic studies (African American, Asian American, Native American, etc.) the focus is on the collective struggle for racial and economic justice that includes members of all ethnic groups. These courses focus on developing a collective agency by positioning students as producers of knowledge rather than consumers of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

When compared to other academic disciplines or fields of study, Chicana/o, Mexican American, and/or Raza studies are indeed unique because of their historical struggle. These programs are a product of the 1960s Chicana/o student movement. They were a response to student radicalism characterized by massive student walkouts across college and high school campuses. Students were demanding things such as equal access to institutions of higher education, bilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and representation of Chicana/o faculty and teachers. Most importantly, students were demanding an education that would teach them about their people's history and provide them with the tools and knowledge to make change in their communities. Chicana/o studies have profoundly promoted equal access to the advancement in higher education for students and faculty of color which is why they are so important and valuable at predominately White institutions. It has been a long fight to get these programs established and with recent budget cuts affecting institutions of higher education it will be an even bigger fight to keep them.

### **CHICANA FEMINIST THOUGHT & CULTURAL WEALTH**

I will now turn to the theoretical perspectives I utilize to examine Mexican American Studies at the University of Central Texas. Because I am only focusing on Latinas I use the work of Chicana feminists to help me understand their experiences. I also use Tara Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model to examine what kind of cultural capital Mexican American Studies nurtures or provides for Latinas.

In order to examine the experiences of Latinas it is important to understand what has been written on Chicana feminist epistemologies. Epistemology can be understood as the nature, status, and production of knowledge (Harding, 1987). Therefore, Chicana feminist

epistemologies are concerned with the knowledge production of Chicanas. Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) explains that Chicana feminist epistemologies “question objectivity, a universal foundation of knowledge, and the Western dichotomies of mind versus body, subject versus object, objective truth versus subjective emotion, and male versus female” (p. 560). A Chicana feminist standpoint also acknowledges that as women of color we lead significantly different lives than males and White women. This standpoint is grounded on the unique experiences of Chicanas and highlights the multiplicity of factors like skin color, immigration status, class, generational status, and English language proficiency that differentiate Chicanas’ experiences. Most importantly, a Chicana feminist epistemology is committed to achieving social justice. For the purpose of my study I use Chicana feminist epistemologies as an encompassing umbrella term to account for the theoretical perspectives of several Chicanas who have dedicated themselves to challenge race, class, gender, and heterosexual oppression by highlighting the intersectionality of these various axes. Specifically, I focus on the theoretical perspectives of Chicana feminists Emma Pérez (1999) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). How educational research is conducted determines whose knowledge and history is legitimized. Therefore, I utilize these frameworks not just for the purposes of academia but as a political statement to reclaim my own, along with my participants’, subjugated knowledge.

Emma Pérez’s (1999) third space feminism is a site of negotiation that allows for marginalized women to practice agency. For the purpose of my study I use the concept of the third space as both a metaphorical and physical space. Metaphorically it is an “in between” space that is both powerful and transformative and physically it is a space outside of dominant and visible structures of power. The third space is a site where marginalized women can speak from and through a practice of negotiation empower their hybrid, or mixed, identities. In this



space Chicanas become subjects rather than objects of history. I also use Pérez's concept of *sitios y lenguas* because I see Mexican American Studies as a *sitio*, or a space, where decolonized *lenguas* or discourse can occur. Emma Pérez (1998) explains that "marginalized groups must have separate spaces to inaugurate their own discourses, *nuestra lengua en nuestro sitio*" (p. 92). We must create spaces where we can challenge the normalized ways of thinking about language, race, gender, class, and sexuality that do not allow for hybrid ways of being and exclude individuals who exist within the borderlands. It is through spaces like ethnic studies that we can create our own discourses to challenge these normative ways of thinking

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) captures the meaning of Pérez's third space through her concept of the borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness to illustrate how Chicanas are marginalized in multiple ways. The borderlands used both in a literal and metaphorical way captures the ways race, class, gender, and sexuality have been used to oppress and marginalize people of color. I use the borderlands to explore the potential physical and metaphorical borders my participants occupy, navigate, and challenge. Most importantly, I use the borderlands to acknowledge that this third space is a potential source of resistance. Anzaldúa recognizes that Chicanas are not just powerless victims but can form a potentially liberatory opposition to oppressive structures. A *mestiza* consciousness is born out of the borderlands. It is a form of consciousness that comes from learning how to straddle cultures and negotiate boundaries as part of everyday life. She describes the *mestiza*, a mixed race woman, as being able "to cope by developing a tolerance for contradictions" and "a tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 79). It is an awareness "developed as a survival tactic that people, caught between two worlds, unknowingly cultivate" (p. 39). As such it is a consciousness that comes from being aware of the contradicting spaces and realities we occupy as women of color.

Lastly, I use Chicana scholar Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model to frame how my participants potentially navigate, challenge, and resist a predominately White space like the university. Yosso argues that Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital does not take into account the experiences of people of color. Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) explained that the knowledge from middle and upper middle class people was a form of capital that sustained the hierarchy of class structure. This form of capital was deemed valuable through schooling hence if one was not born into the middle or upper middle class one could access this knowledge through school. From this perspective, Bourdieu's theory has been used to explain the academic and social outcomes of students of color. The assumption becomes that because students of color lack "cultural capital" schools must work to help these "disadvantaged" students gain the necessary skills and knowledge.

Yet, Yosso explains that students of color do indeed have cultural capital. The problem is that schools do not recognize or cultivate the type of cultural capital students of color have. Her cultural wealth model constitutes six forms of capital that students of color have and are nurtured in their communities. They include; aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital recognize the knowledge students of color bring from their homes and communities. They should also not be seen as mutually exclusive but rather as building upon each other. I utilize this framework because it challenges deficit perspectives such as the belief that students of color are victimized by their own communities and are therefore at fault for their poor academic performance. Along the same lines, this framework challenges the belief that students of color participate passively in their education. I argue that Mexican American Studies nurtures these various forms of capital along with others that I discuss in my findings.

## METHODS

The main research question guiding this study is: In what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the experiences of Latinas at a predominately White institution? My subsidiary question is: In what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the aspirations of Latina undergraduates? To answer these questions I draw on the following qualitative methods that are explained in the first section of this chapter. For organizational purposes this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses what and how data was collected and analyzed. The second section looks at the site of my study, the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) at the University of Central Texas<sup>3</sup> (UCT). Lastly, I conclude with a brief discussion on my positionality.

### DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

To recruit participants for my study I used a snow ball and convenience sampling method (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). With snowball and convenience sampling I identified participants through participant's recommendations or through personal networks. To participate in the study participants had to identify as either Chicana or anything falling under the umbrella term of Latina (i.e. Mexican, Mexican American, Salvadorian, etc.), a woman, and be a Mexican American studies major. Erica<sup>4</sup>, my first participant, was recommended to me by a professor in my college. Once I met with Erica she recommended Diana. In turn, Diana recommended Tanya and Marianna. Camila had been recruited to a previous study of mine and later agreed to also participate in this study. Lastly, Zyanya was recruited through a class I was serving as a teaching assistant for. I use a portraiture method (Lawrence-Lighfoot & Hoffmann, 1997) to

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to all names in order to protect the identity of the university.

<sup>4</sup> All the women have either chosen or been assigned a pseudonym.

create the short narratives in the following chapter. The purpose of this method is to provide the reader with a brief background on the *mujeres*. Through these portraits I wish to provide an essence of where these *mujeres* are coming from.

Data was collected through two methods; interviews and a focus group. I conducted one on one in-depth interviews with each of the six *mujeres*. With the exception of Erica, who I interviewed twice for the purpose of clarifications, all the *mujeres* were interviewed only once. These interviews lasted between an hour to an hour and forty five minutes. Kahn and Cannell (1957) describe interviewing as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 149). Although I had an interview protocol with questions arranged by themes, I found that for the most part the interviews were more like conversations. I did not restrict the *mujeres* to stick to any specific structure for the purpose of keeping the interviews like conversations. There were instances where some of them went “off topic.” Although these “off topic” discussions were not necessarily themes in my interview protocol I found that these discussions allowed for a greater understanding of the *mujeres* experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2006) state that in in-depth interviews; “The participant’s perspectives on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)” (p. 101). Thus, in retrospect these “off topic” instances allowed for the participants views to unfold through their perspective. These instances later became valuable resources for the data analysis. Topics covered in the interviews included the *mujeres*’ educational upbringing, their choice to select Mexican American Studies as a major, their experiences in the major, and their future goals.

The interviews took place either at a local coffee shop or at the education building on campus. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by me. If questions arose or I

felt I needed clarification I would email the *mujeres*. For the most part, all the interviews were transcribed immediately after they were conducted. This allowed me to assess my performance as an interviewer, begin tracing themes, and continuously edit and reflect on my interview protocol. This also explains why I asked for a second interview with Erica. Since she was my first interviewee I realized that I missed a lot of opportunities where I should have probed and did not ask the most fruitful questions.

Before, during, and after the interview I took notes on a small notebook. These notes included my personal reflections, themes that arose, questions, and physical observations of the *mujeres* such as facial expressions, what they were wearing, and our surroundings. I took special note of body language, movements, space, tone of voice, and emotions expressed. For example, with Tanya I noticed whenever she referred to White people she would say it in a very low voice, almost whispering it to me, as if we were engaging in dangerous talk, especially when it came to instances of racism. All of the *mujeres* code-switched between Spanish and English in their interviews but English was the dominant language. As a native Spanish speaker and proponent of bilingualism I let the *mujeres* know that they could use the language in which they felt most comfortable. I also found myself code switching during the interviews. After each interview was completed I asked each of the *mujeres* if they wanted to select a pseudonym or if they wanted me to select one for them. Zyanya, Diana, and Marianna chose their own pseudonym and Erica, Tanya, and Camila elected that I choose one for them. All of the *mujeres* also received a copy of their transcribed interviews and were given an opportunity to edit or revisit any instances.

The second set of data was collected through a focus group conducted with all six of the *mujeres* after each had been interviewed individually. Focus groups generate a greater

understanding of participants' experiences through guided discussion which allows for further insight into the participants world and for eliciting new perspectives that may have not come up on individual interviews (Gray, 2004). For the focus group I asked the *mujeres* to bring a cultural artifact that was representative of their experiences as a Mexican American Studies major. A cultural artifact could be a photograph or image, an article of clothing like a *rebozo*, a book, or even a class paper. I left it very open in order to give as much ownership to the *mujeres* selection of their artifact. I did not want them to feel as if I was expecting something in particular. I was more interested on how they made sense of their artifact rather than the artifact itself.

Prior to meeting as a group I emailed the *mujeres* what we would be doing explaining that the discussion would revolve around each other's artifact. The focus group took place in the education building and lasted approximately two hours. I had prepared a focus group interview protocol and again I was more concerned on having a conversation than asking each question on my protocol. Each of the *mujeres* had a chance to share their artifact, explain how it was representative of their experience as a Mexican American Studies major, and how they went about selecting it. After this, I asked questions directed to the group as a whole that focused on the pieces similarities, differences, stories, and categories they could come up to group them. The *mujeres* were also encouraged to ask questions to each other. Just like in the interviews the *mujeres* and I code-switched using Spanish and English throughout the discussion. I also took notes before, during, and after the focus group paying attention to the same things I had during the one on one interviews. The focus group was audio and video recorded. I took pictures of each artifact and transcribed the focus group discussion as well. The pictures and transcriptions

were later analyzed for themes. It was my hope that the artifacts would serve as a way to triangulate data in order to get multiple perspectives from the *mujeres*; visually and orally.

After data collection was complete I went through a highly selective process of coding, starting with initial coding and followed up with focus coding (Charmaz, 2006). By coding I refer to the process of generating categories and themes. My coding process involved me selecting text data, creating common categories, and labeling or naming these categories (i.e. reclaiming space, reclaiming knowledge, etc.). Throughout this process I also began an extensive process of writing analytic memos. I would write notes, reflective memos, thoughts, and insights. In the end this helped further solidify themes, throw out previously identified themes, or create new themes. Initially, I began with several themes but through a more focused round of coding and memo writing I finalized four codes; reclaiming knowledge, reclaiming the self, reclaiming space(s) and redefining *la mujer*. I tried to create themes that would be able to tell a story about the *mujeres* experiences as Mexican American Studies majors. To further understand this story I now turn to describing the setting of the story; the Center for Mexican American Studies.

#### **CENTER FOR MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES (CMAS)**

*“The Center for Mexican American Studies was not handed to us on a silver platter because this all happened through politics, and when it involves politics, it involves struggle.” –University of*

*Central Texas Professor*

Like many other ethnic studies programs, centers, or departments, CMAS has a history of struggle. The story of CMAS begins in the late 60s when students approached Professor Alonzo Perez with a vision to create a center at the university that would address the experiences and

contributions of the Mexican American community. Backed up by professors, students staged protests and used other grass root methods to bring attention to their cause. The goals for CMAS included the recruitment of more students and faculty of color, community outreach, and coalition politics. Although there is no singular person to whom CMAS can attribute its foundation to, Professor Alonzo Perez and Genaro Salinas were instrumental in the establishment of the center. Both professors worked closely with students and the university to negotiate the plans for the center. With a strong critical mass of students the professors were able to successfully navigate institutional barriers and schedule negotiations with the university. In 1970 the center was born with Professor Alonzo Perez as the first director. As director, Perez fought against CMAS' integration into the Latin-American Studies program and played a large role in the growth and development of the center.

It is important to further contextualize CMAS' struggle since many other ethnic studies programs, centers, and departments were born around this time too. The 1960s was the height of the Chicana/o civil rights movement. A year before CMAS' establishment El Plán de Santa Bárbara at the University of California at Santa Barbara had been drafted, a master plan for the education of Chiana/os. The first Mexican American center was established five years earlier at San Jose State University. The vision of CMAS has deep roots as well in the consciousness of the Chiana/o Student Movement in the Southwest, where students were becoming aware of the harsh realities Mexican American students were facing in local universities. Nevertheless, although it is important to localize the struggle it is also important to recognize that CMAS was part of a larger national movement.

Other influential figures in CMAS' history include Juan Lopez who was instrumental in the hiring of Mexican American studies faculty and pushing for the center to include a graduate



program. Gabriel Campos who was director of CMAS from 1990-1996 was successful in writing and receiving grant money from the Ford Foundation to put together a little radio show called Latino USA. Campos also started up the CMAS newsletter and got the Texas legislature to support programs within the university. In 1996, CMAS also took a big step in the preservation of diversity at the University of Central Texas (UCT) with the creation of the Texas Ten Percent Plan. The plan was formed in response to the Hopwood decision that outlawed the use of affirmative action in Texas higher education system. CMAS students, professors, and the director at the time, worked hard to not only put together the plan but advocate for it. Under the plan, any Texas high school student in the top 10 percent of their class would automatically gain admission to any state-funded university or college.

Since its establishment, CMAS has also worked very closely to strengthen community relations and make a real impact on the community beyond UCT. The center's community outreach is generally geared towards Latina/o students, their families, and the larger Latino community targeting areas like the south and east parts where most working class Latino families reside. CMAS has worked with the local school district to conduct lectures on Mexican American Studies and college readiness for the public in schools. CMAS is also supportive and very much involved with the student group MEChA, who also does a lot of collaborative work with the Latino community. To this day CMAS continues to increase the number and quality of public events, including lectures, film screenings and art exhibitions.

Today the center has an undergraduate degree program, a master's degree program, and a graduate portfolio for master's and doctoral students. The center continues to collaborate with community organizations beyond UCT and host a number of public events. The center is home to over 50 faculty members, many who are also cross listed with other departments like

education, anthropology, and history. A key member to the center and the study is Naila Sanchez who serves as the academic advisor and undergraduate program coordinator. Naila was often mentioned by the *mujeres* as serving more than just an academic advisor, often being described as a mother figure away from home.

Students in the undergraduate program get to select either a concentration in policy studies or cultural studies where they choose from an array of interdisciplinary courses. Students can major, double major, or minor in Mexican American Studies. With the exception of Erica, all of the *mujeres* were double majoring, some with minors as well. Erica was the only one that was only majoring in Mexican American Studies. Regardless of what concentration is selected, each strand includes an introductory course and an advanced seminar. Approximately 25 courses are offered each semester, courses include “La Chicana,” “Chicano Educational Struggle,” and “Latino Politics,” to name a few. Students are also encouraged to take on internships. In the past students have interned at the capitol, Resistencia bookstore, and La Peña, a local non-profit space for art. Shy of its 40<sup>th</sup> year anniversary the center continues to grow and expand, yet with the recent budget cuts it is difficult to envision what the future looks like for the center.

## **MY POSITIONALITY**

I believe it is important to acknowledge my positionality since this directly affected how I collected and analyzed the data. As mentioned in the introduction I am a product of Chicana/o studies and therefore find ethnic studies to be extremely valuable to both my growth as a person but also as a scholar. I went into this study wanting to tell a counterstory on the negative framing around ethnic studies. I felt angry and upset when I learned what was happening in Arizona and even more disappointed when the budget cuts hit UCT. Therefore, as I listened to the women

speak I could relate strongly to their narratives. I found myself constantly empathizing with them rather than sympathizing. Yet, there were also instances where I was surprised and at times alarmed to hear what they were telling me. Although I could relate there were also multiple times that I wasn't able to. They were all raised in Texas, I wasn't. Four out of the six had been born and raised in the United States, I hadn't. Some came from single parent homes, I didn't. Others identified as lesbian, Mexican American, and/or were not first generation college students. I am a first generation heterosexual Chicana college student. So there were differences and similarities between us. I was an insider and outsider at the same time.

It is also important to point out the human responsibility I feel to these *mujeres*. In *Las identidades también lloran, identities also cry: Exploring the human side of indigenous Latina/o identities*, Luis Urrieta, Jr. (2003) makes a call to scholars for “consciousness and greater human responsibility” when studying identity. In many senses, I feel indebted to these *mujeres* for sharing and letting me in their lives. I do not view the process of interviewing as just a research method but as a sacred process of gift giving. It is my hope that I am able to do justice to the *mujeres*' narratives as they have been very kind to allow me to enter very personal and at times emotional spaces in their lives. I also struggled a lot when it came time to dissect their narratives in order to create themes and essentially write this up. Yet, for the purpose of not only meeting the requirements of academia but also hoping to add a counterstory to the current discourse on ethnic studies, I find some peace in this process.

## FINDINGS

My findings were derived through a thematic analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) I conducted with the interview and focus group data. As described in the previous chapter I went through a highly selective process of coding where I generated categories and themes. I selected themes that were the most recurrent across all of the *mujeres'* experiences. Through coding I began to see how Mexican American Studies served as a process of reclaiming and redefining for the *mujeres*. It was as if Mexican American Studies had allowed them to recover knowledge or parts of themselves that had been excluded from their experiences prior to beginning the major. This process of reclaiming and redefining is represented in the following four themes: reclaiming knowledge, reclaiming the self, reclaiming space(s) and redefining *la mujer*. The first three themes were most recurrent in the interview data and the last theme, redefining *la mujer*, was most recurrent in the focus group data. Redefining *la mujer* was explored more through the focus group data because of the artifacts the *mujeres* brought and the collective experience of everyone being a woman of color. This is not to say that these themes were not concurrent across all of the data but rather that some were more prevalent in the interview data than the focus data.

Before I discuss the themes, I provide a portrait of each *mujer* to give the reader a glimpse into their lives. The descriptor next to each of the *mujeres'* name should be understood as an encompassing theme of their narratives. The descriptors for Marianna, Diana, and Erica were provided by them in their interviews and the descriptors for Tanya, Zyanya, and Camila were created by me based on their interviews and participation in the focus group. The *mujeres* ranged from second to fifth year students at the university; the portraits follow this order.

## **LAS MUJERES**

### **Tanya- The Language Warrior**

Tanya was the youngest of the six *mujeres*. She was a second year student, 20 years old, and in the policy strand of the Mexican American Studies (MAS) major. I call her the language warrior because her narrative revolved largely around her process of reclaiming the Spanish language. Her mother, who was born in México, and immigrated to the United States at a young age, chose not to teach Tanya or her brother Spanish. When Tanya's mother began school in the states she did not speak English and was placed in special education classes because of this. It was these negative experiences that fueled Tanya's mother to choose not to teach Spanish to her children. As Tanya explains, "I understand that where my mom came out was a place of love because she loved me and my brother and she wanted us to be as well off as we could..."

Although Tanya was born in California in a military base she grew up in San Antonio, Texas. When the family first moved to San Antonio they lived in the south side which was a predominately Mexican American community. It was at this time that Tanya really began to learn Spanish. She was surrounded by her grandparents that were monolingual Spanish speakers and a predominantly Spanish speaking community. Yet her mother's commitment to provide the best opportunities for her and her brother pushed the family to move to the northeast side of San Antonio where there were better schools. Although Tanya found herself displaced from a largely Spanish speaking community to an English only speaking community she made the commitment to learn Spanish by taking language classes in middle and high school. Much of Tanya's narrative focused on negotiating different spaces. For example she said, "I had this feeling all the time of being really kinda pulled in two spots you know, two different spaces, because my mom was always telling me to kinda not be too obvious (referring to being Mexican) and then my grandparents were always like you need to learn Spanish so that you can represent

everyone....” Tanya’s artifact and word to describe her experiences in MAS illustrates this very well. For her artifact Tanya brought *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa and she chose the word discovery to sum up her experiences in MAS. MAS for Tanya was about giving her the tools to negotiate and understand who she was. Through what she was learning in MAS she was able to learn about herself and claim her identity as a Mexican American woman that was reclaiming her Spanish language.

### **Marianna- The Chicana Feminist**

Marianna was a third year student in the policy strand of MAS. Originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico she moved to Texas for college. Before coming to the University of Central Texas (UCT) she attended an all women’s college in northern Texas. Marianna identified as a Chicana lesbian which shaped a lot of her narrative. Marianna was tracked early on into the gifted and talented education program yet dropped out of the program her junior year of high school when she lost interest in the classes. She felt what she was learning was “stupid” and did not keep her engaged. It was in her regular courses that she was exposed to books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. Yet it was theatre and the arts that Marianna credits for keeping her in school. She found a Chicana mentor from the University of New Mexico who encouraged and supported Marianna to apply to college. The first college Marianna attended was actually where her mentor was awarded her bachelors. She spent a year and half there yet felt like “a big fish in a small pond” and was unhappy with the limited options the college offered so she decided to apply to the UCT. Once at UCT Marianna found Mexican American Studies (MAS) and was amazed that you could actually major in that. She picked up the major, remembering the words her mentor from the University of New Mexico had told her countless times; that she needed to learn her history. It was in MAS that Marianna

began to identify as a Chicana instead of Hispanic. Additionally, Marianna also became a film major. Her experiences in the Radio, Film, and Television department pushed her to realize the importance of telling her story and those of her community. Because the department is largely dominated by White middle class men she soon became conscious of how important the tools MAS was providing were. She explained “Now that I am culturally validated through MAS I am ready to be like, no! Let me tell you! You know what I mean, stand up for myself finally instead of just taking it from everybody all the time, so I am always looked at like oh you’re just the lesbian feminist Mexican bitch...” In other words, MAS gave Marianna the tools to resist and challenge her peers in this predominately White space. Marianna shared with me that MAS is a huge reason why she has stayed in school. She shared with me that the most valuable thing MAS has given her is confidence. For the focus group Marianna brought a necklace made of turquoise beads because it reminded her of home. She explained the connection with MAS and home as the following “I guess it’s like when you’re comfortable with yourself then you’re comfortable going back home. I don’t know how else to explain it, like when you’re comfortable and you know who you are and you feel validated through your classes and stuff you can go home...”

### **Diana- The Panocha Power Ranger**

Out of the six *mujeres* Diana was the most expressive, often making myself and the other *mujeres* laugh. Diana like Marianna was also a transfer student and in the policy strand of the major. She began college at Brown University before transferring to UCT. Diana’s narrative began with her experiences growing up in the very conservative community of Kramer<sup>5</sup>, Texas. She described it as the following, “My community really wanted to, I feel portray the sentiment

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<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to the community to protect its identity.

into everyone that was growing up there, like you're American and that's what you are first, you know, it's all about rebel confederate flags, country music, drinking beer, and football games, you know, and if you're Mexican, you should be ashamed of that." As the only Chicana in her Advanced Placement (AP) or honors courses Diana often felt marginalized and disconnected from her White peers and what she was learning. She described her experiences in high school as testing her tolerance rather than her intelligence, that is her, tolerance to put up with such a conservative and White curriculum. Diana selected the word *panocha* which translates to vagina in English to describe her experiences in Mexican American Studies (MAS). She said, "I feel like my journey (referring to her MAS journey) has been a journey into the *panocha*." In high school Diana was diagnosed with endometriosis which causes her to bleed internally during her monthly cycle. Diana explained that this is an important part of her life because it has put her through many challenging experiences, physically, emotionally, and mentally as well. In many ways MAS was a healing process for Diana. She learned how to negotiate and redefine what it meant to be a *mujer* through her courses. This helped Diana a lot since she constantly thought about her gender due to her diagnosis. For example, she said "I've always hated it (referring to having endometriosis) like I freaking hate having a uterus, give me hysterectomy, gut me like a fish, like just take it out, just take it out, I don't want it, you know, like why wasn't I born a boy..." As illustrated, Diana struggled with having endometriosis often hating the fact that she was a woman. It wasn't until she began learning about gender and other Chicanas in her MAS courses that she began to feel empowered about being a *mujer*. She came to understand her identity as something that was constantly being negotiated and redefined. For her cultural artifact Diana also brought *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa. She described the book as providing her with the tools to name and understand what she had been experiencing.



For Diana, MAS awoke a part of her that had been suppressed through a Eurocentric and subtractive form of schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). Because of this, she was very invested and involved with the current budget cuts affecting MAS. Alongside other concerned students she organized a student group called The Students Speak that focused on organizing around the budget cuts. A Mechista<sup>6</sup> as well she was very committed to not only learning about the Mexican American experience but also taking action to improve the experience. This usually translated to participating in student marches, speaking at the state capital or other events, and organizing community events.

### **Erica- The Underground Activist**

Unlike Tanya, Marianna, and Diana, Erica was in the cultural strand of the major. Erica will be graduating this spring 2011 and heading off to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to begin work on her Ph.D. in education. As mentioned earlier, Erica was recommended to me by a professor in my college, Dr. Carlos<sup>7</sup>. This professor served as a transformational mentor for Erica. Transformational mentors are mentors from one's own racial/ethnic group who are committed to social justice work and guiding and socializing students (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Erica first heard Dr. Carlos speak during a summer program she was participating in, prior to starting at the University of Central Texas (UCT). She explained, "I heard Dr. Carlos speak, they brought him as one of our first speakers to the Preview Program and then I was like, he didn't mention anything about Mexican American Studies but I was like I want to study that, I want to study what he is talking about..." Erica had come in as an English major but after hearing Dr. Carlos speak about education and race she was convinced she wanted

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<sup>6</sup> Members of the student group MEChA are often referred to as Mechistas. MEChA is a politicized student group that promotes Chicana/o higher education, culture, and history.

<sup>7</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to the professor to protect his identity.

to study what he had been talking about. She immediately switched her major to MAS before the summer ended. Originally from Roma, Texas Erica shared a unique experience of living in a border town, where México was literally walking distance from her home. Although Erica attended a high school that was predominately Mexican American she never had any exposure to ethnic studies. On the contrary, within this predominately Mexican American community Erica was exposed to a lot of deficit discourse on Mexican Americans which later prompted her even more to pursue MAS. Through MAS Erica was able to see the unique perspective she could offer. MAS served as a way to validate Erica's experiences and made her feel important and that she did matter. Not only was MAS a process of reclaiming knowledge for Erica but she also began to learn, like Diana and the other *mujeres*, how to negotiate conflicting ideas and spaces. For example, Erica struggled with defining herself as an activist. She said "When we think of a political actor or an activist per se or a fighter, what comes to mind, very quickly, is a person with a sign fighting very strongly, that is just the image that comes into mind and to know that I don't fit that image but I still fit the definition, I just have to keep reminding myself of that." Because Erica did not participate in student marches, organizing, or student groups like MEChA she often felt like she couldn't define herself as an activist. However, Erica who was a McNair Scholar<sup>8</sup> committed herself to doing research on Latina/os in education. She called herself an underground activist because her activism was through writing and talking about issues affecting the Latina/o community, this in many senses is understood as another form of activism yet it is outside of the traditional activist who is out picketing and marching, hence the word underground. For her cultural artifact Erica also brought *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria

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<sup>8</sup> A McNair Scholar refers to a member of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program. A TRIO program that is committed to helping students of color pursue graduate school through research, mentorship, and workshops.

Anzaldúa and to describe her experiences in MAS she chose the two words agency and negotiation.

### **Zyanya- La Maestra**

Zyanya was another student that was in the policy strand of the major. Zyanya and Camila were the two *mujeres* that were born in México but had immigrated to the United States at a young age. Zyanya, like Erica and Camila, was also about to graduate. She was a double major in Mexican American Studies (MAS) and Bilingual Education. Zyanya struggled when she first started at the University of Central Texas (UCT), failing all her classes her first semester and being put on probation. She struggled to see herself as an academic student at the university that is until she found MAS. It was in MAS that Zyanya's grades began to improve and she began to see herself as belonging at UCT. She explained, "I started to see myself as a student here at UCT that I could do it you know and I could succeed and I could graduate." For her cultural artifact, Zyanya brought a box of *fideo*<sup>9</sup> because every time she would make A's her grandmother, who lived with Zyanya, would make her *fideo*. In other words, the *fideo* was a reminder of how MAS had saved her from failing and essentially dropping out of school. MAS not only retained Zyanya as a student but it also helped her, like many of the other *mujeres*, deal with issues of self esteem. She explained, "I always questioned why I looked the way I did, when I was small I use to ask myself why I was brown, why does my family not have any money, why am I poor?" Through her MAS courses Zyanya reclaimed herself and began a process of self loving and appreciating herself and family background. By reclaiming a history that had been denied to her as a young girl she came to understand her feelings. As she continues through this process Zyanya has made it a commitment to spread this knowledge and

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<sup>9</sup> Fideo is a traditional Mexican type of pasta commonly used in soups.

self love. For example, she has younger sisters who she takes with her everywhere, from immigrant right marches to university lectures. She is committed to teaching them what she is learning through MAS because she knows how not having access to this knowledge affected her so much. Beyond her family, Zyanya is also planning on teaching, working specifically with immigrant English language learners. She has a strong commitment to educate the youth through the knowledge she has gained in her MAS courses. She also emphasized teaching self love with her students. For example, during her student teaching she shared with us how she always tells her students “*que los quiero mucho*” and constantly reminds them about the beauty and importance of their backgrounds and families. It comes as no surprise then, why I call Zyanya *la maestra*. She is truly committed to improving the education of Latina/o students through the reclaimed knowledge she has gained in MAS. Zyanya’s word to describe her MAS experiences was education. She explained, “The education I’ve gained is something that no one is gonna be able to take away from me and it’s also the education I am providing my students with.”

### **Camila- La Psicóloga**

Camila was a fifth year student in the cultural strand of the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program. Like Erica, Marianna, and Diana she was also a McNair Scholar. Born in México but raised in Kaufman, Texas Camila grew up in a single parent home. Camila like four of the other *mujeres* was a double major as well. She was an MAS and Psychology double major with a minor in Educational Psychology. Camila also came from a very conservative and White community and like the rest of the *mujeres* struggled to find herself when she was growing up. For example, because she was placed in the Advanced Placement (AP) or honors track that was entirely made up of White students, Camila was often referred to as the White girl or the girl that

wanted to be White. She explained, “Most of the people who used to say that I was the White girl or trying to be White were people of color who kinda shared the same lifestyle as I did and I remember I use to always say to myself like I am more Mexican than you are like go to my house, watch what I eat, like I don’t even speak English at my house like my mom can’t speak English...” Although her friends were White as well she never felt like she could really be herself around them. It wasn’t until she came to the University of Central Texas and started taking MAS courses that she began to make sense of her past experiences. She explained, “It kinda just certified (referring to MAS) my experiences like everything that I had thought and it kinda explained a lot of things and it put a lot of names to things that I didn’t know.” For her cultural artifact Camila brought an essay that was on her culture, explaining how her definition of culture had evolved from high school to now in her MAS courses. In many ways, by reclaiming this knowledge through MAS Camila began to make sense of her past, present, and future experiences as well. She explained to me that through these courses she has learned to appreciate herself and value her background and experiences. Camila chose the word appreciation to describe her experiences in MAS, like Zyanya, Camila also began to love and appreciate her differences and background. The experiences Camila went through also pushed her to focus her research on the adversity and resiliency of first and second generation Latina/o college students. She is very much interested in understanding the experience of what keeps or motivates Latina/o student to pursue college and stay in college as well. In the future Camila plans to combine her two majors, psychology and MAS for her focus in graduate school. This fall she will be attending New York University where she will pursue a master’s degree in the bilingual school counseling program.

### **The Mujeres as a Group**

As a group the *mujeres* ranged from the youngest being Tanya who was 20 to the oldest being Zyanya who was 23. Out of the six, five were double majors and two had minors. Four of the six were McNair Scholars, five out of the six were first generation college students, and two out of the six had been born in México. Zyanya and Tanya identified as Mexican American, Diana and Marianna as Chicana, and Erica and Camila as Mexican. Erica and Camila were in the cultural strand of the Mexican American Studies program and the rest were in the policy strand. All were native Spanish speakers with the exception of Tanya who was not a native Spanish speaker but was fluent in Spanish. All had been raised in Texas except for Marianna who had been raised in New Mexico. For the focus group three out of the six *mujeres* brought *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa as their cultural artifact, the other three items included an essay on culture, a box of *fideo*, and necklace made of turquoise beads. Lastly, with the exception of Zyanya all of the *mujeres* had future plans of pursuing graduate school after graduation, Zyanya planned to start working as an elementary school teacher after graduation.

### **THEMES IN THE MUJERES' NARRATIVES**

As mentioned earlier, looking through the interviews and focus group data I began to understand how Mexican American Studies (MAS) served as site or process of reclaiming and redefining for the *mujeres*. The visual representation in Figure 4.1 below represents the four ways MAS served as a process of reclaiming and redefining. These four ways should not be looked as separate entities as they are very interrelated and fluid. It is important to look at them as a process as they are ongoing not complete. I am by no means saying that the *mujeres* have fully reclaimed their knowledge, self, and space(s) or that they have finished redefining *la mujer* because it is an ongoing process, and arguably a lifelong process. For all of the *mujeres* MAS

was a space of authoring (Holland et al, 1998) new selves through redefining and reclaiming spaces and knowledge. Emma Pérez’s (1998) concept of *sitios y lenguas* is important here because MAS served as a *sitio*, or a space, where decolonized *lenguas* or discourse were able to occur. Emma Pérez (1998) explained that “marginalized groups must have separate spaces to inaugurate their own discourses, *nuestra lengua en nuestro sitio*” (p. 92). It was in MAS that the *mujeres* were able to challenge a lot of ideas about identity, language, race, gender, class and sexuality. It was through MAS that the *mujeres* were also able to create their own discourses to challenge hegemonic and normalized ways of thinking. What follows is my discussion on each of the themes.

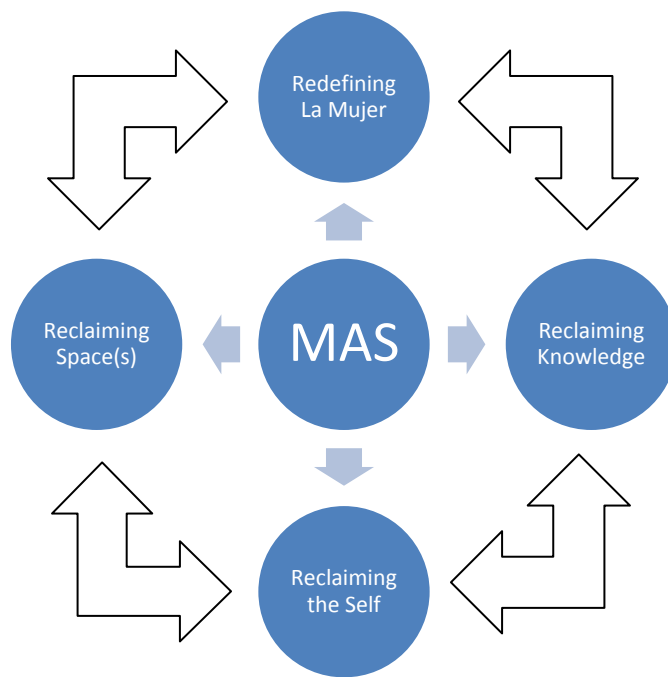


Figure 4.1 MAS as a Process of Authoring New Selves

### **Reclaiming Knowledge**

Reclaiming knowledge seemed to be the most illustrative of the process of reclaiming that Mexican American Studies (MAS) provided for. None of the *mujeres* had had access to any form of ethnic studies prior to coming to the University of Central Texas (UCT) and many were

surprised to hear that ethnic studies or MAS even existed. Their experiences in MAS awoke them to a complete new way of thinking and understanding of their experiences and themselves. Therefore when I refer to reclaiming knowledge I refer to the process of gaining a new knowledge base founded on the experiences, history, and cultural wealth of people of color specifically Chicana/os. I strategically choose the word reclaiming because of the fact that this knowledge base had been denied or excluded from the *mujeres* educational experiences prior to MAS. Figure 4.2 represents the process of reclaiming knowledge. This process 1) served to legitimize the *mujeres*' experiences and as emotionally challenging, 2) as gaining "a new pair of glasses" which can be understood as gaining a level of critical consciousness, 3) as gaining ownership of the knowledge production, and 4) lastly as providing the *mujeres* with epistemic capital.

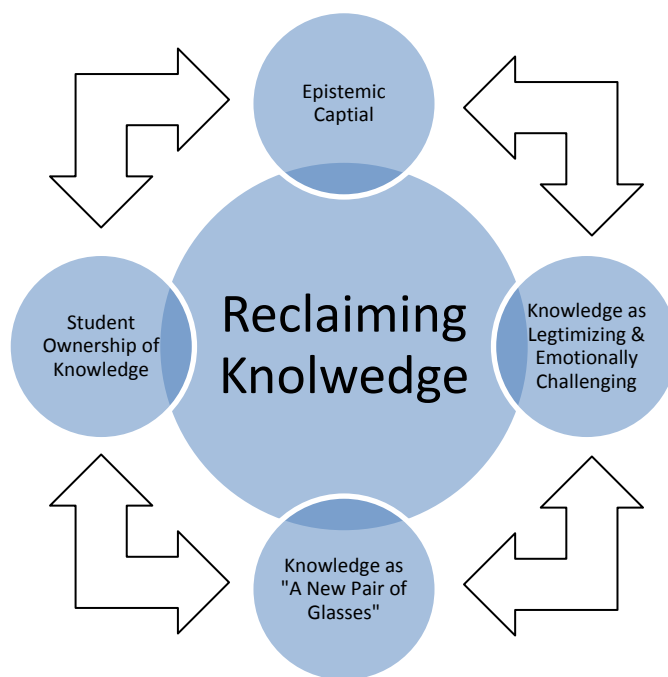


Figure 4.2 Process of Reclaiming Knowledge



### ***Knowledge as Legitimizing & Emotionally Challenging***

Diana who came from a very White conservative community explained how the knowledge she gained through MAS legitimated her experiences,

...hearing that Mexican American Studies was a major I was like is my culture really like something that is academic, that can be studied and is legit because I always sorta felt not legitimate growing up in Kramer, you know, cause it was always like you're not Mexican, you're not Mexican American, you're American, you know there were like confederate flags, American flags, USA everything, it was always like when your family left México you let that all behind and you need to fully assimilate sorta thing and so when I started MAS I was like wow I don't actually have to do this, this is awesome...

For Diana, the knowledge she gained through MAS legitimated her experiences and feelings of growing up in Kramer as a Xicana. She also began to question why she had been made to believe that she had to rid herself of her Mexican identity in return for acceptance and success in school. This opportunity to reclaim knowledge that had been denied to her prior to MAS at UCT was often very emotionally challenging for Diana. On the brink of tears she shared with me the following,

Driving home I would cry cause I was so angry because I was like why am I just learning this now? Why didn't I know this growing up? Like why do I feel like this freedom? Like why do I feel like I can speak now when I wished I could have spoken you know growing up and in high school when I wanted to defend myself, why am I just getting this now? And I am thinking about the fact that I was the only Latina in my AP classes and I was one of the very few Latinos that graduated from high school and I am angry that they aren't learning about this and that they aren't having this same empowered feeling...

For many of the *mujeres* this process of reclaiming knowledge was often very emotionally challenging. Prior to MAS this knowledge had been nonexistent and many of them experienced a strong process of shaming through school and their home communities. Tanya was often made to feel like she shouldn't be "too Mexican" or that she couldn't be Mexican because she wasn't a native Spanish speaker. For Tanya, the knowledge she gained through MAS helped her accept herself and realize the multiplicity of experience that Mexicans go through. Despite her nontraditional background of having not learned Spanish as a child she

could still be Mexican and there was nothing wrong with that. For Camila, “it explained a lot of the things” she had gone through and “put a lot of names to things” that she didn’t know what to call before. This knowledge helped certify her experiences and understanding of why others saw her as the “White girl” or the “girl that wanted to be White” in high school.

### ***Knowledge as “A New Pair of Glasses”***

Mariana described the experience of reclaiming this knowledge as “putting on a new pair of glasses.” She said, “it’s like all of the sudden you can see things and its clear.” For example, she began to make sense of institutional and internalized racism on campus. She provided an example from one of her McNair cohort members,

There is this one guy in particular who’s the darkest one in the whole class, mind you, and he is constantly saying racist stuff because he is always trying to be the best and he’s always trying to please somebody by putting other people down and it usually comes in the form of a racist joke or he’ll say something like they really didn’t teach you how to speak proper English did they?

Marianna mentioned that prior to her MAS courses she wouldn’t have thought about incidents like this one as problematic but now that she has gained such a keen understanding of power, privilege, and racism in her courses she sees everything differently, hence the idea of new glasses. This can also be understood as what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as reaching a level of critical consciousness, where one gains an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing them to see how historical, social, political, and economical forces manage ideologies, reproduce hierarchy, and resist change. For Marianna, being critically conscious meant being able to see things all of a sudden that she hadn’t seen before.

### ***Student Ownership of Knowledge***

Most of the knowledge the *mujeres* gained in their MAS classes came through a unilateral learning process with their professors. In the sense that the professor was not centered

as the only one holding all the knowledge but they were positioned, as well, as creators and beholders of knowledge. For example, Erica said, “What I really like about my MAS classes is that you’re having a discussion in class about something and you are able to draw on your personal experiences and have it be valid and acknowledged, it’s a great feeling.” Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) critical pan ethnic studies are exemplary of this, where student’s experiences are centered as sites of knowledge. On a pedagogical level, the *mujeres* described their MAS courses as based around dialogue and discussion. It was through dialogue that this knowledge was transmitted. Additionally, because the *mujeres* were able to see their experiences contribute to the knowledge production in their classes they also gained a sense of ownership of the knowledge. These were *their* stories and family histories that were being discussed, which much to Diana’s surprise, was actually a base of knowledge and inextricably also a way of legitimizing their lived experiences.

A great example of this was Marianna’s experience in her La Chicana course when they began to talk about the culture of *cholas*<sup>10</sup> through the book *Homegirls in the Public Sphere*. She said, “...so like we are learning about like cholas in my Chicana class right now and I am like homegirl that’s my cousin!” Marianna’s mentor from the University of New Mexico would constantly tell her that she had stories to tell but Marianna never quite understood what she meant by this until she began the MAS major and realized how important her lived experiences are. The importance of lived experiences as a base of knowledge was especially highlighted in Marianna’s experience because of her other major, film, which is predominately made up of White middle class males. She shared a particular experience with me about a productions course where they were broken up into groups and assigned to come up with an idea for a video.

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<sup>10</sup> The term cholo/a usually refers to Mexican Americans associated with gangster culture.

The group that Marianna was put into was made up of all White males who outvoted her in their decision to do the video on online poker. Turns out the entire class had selected ideas based around video games. Realizing this Marianna said,

I am going like yup this is why my ideas are important, this is why my culture matters, why because there's nothing like this out there, you know, and if there is it's probably made by outsiders and they don't have the same perspective that I do...this is why my story matters because it's different, I have a different story to tell and that's why I'm like Mari you have to suffer through this film program because soon you're going to make something that matters because you have a different story to tell.

It is difficult to say how Marianna's experience in the film department would be had she not also majored in MAS. However, throughout Marianna's narrative she talked in depth about knowledge as a form of cultural capital. Being at UCT in a department like film made her realize how unique her stories were and why they needed to be told. When she first entered the film department she was disappointed to see how much of the films done on her community were made from outsiders who typically framed these films through a very negative and victimizing framework. Through her MAS courses Marianna gained knowledge that can be understood as capital. The more she learned and reclaimed the more empowered and motivated she felt to tell her stories.

### ***Epistemic Capital***

As discussed in chapter two Yosso (2005) introduces six forms of capital through her community cultural wealth model which include; aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. Based on my analysis of the data I felt that I needed to add a new one that would be fitting of the idea of knowledge as capital. Many of the *mujeres* talked about using their reclaimed knowledge to “defend” themselves or to “stand up” for themselves. Yosso talks about cultural wealth that is developed in the home and communities of students of color. The type of capital that these *mujeres* gained was developed through the fusion of two

metaphorical spaces; the knowledge gained through their lived experiences and the theoretical knowledge gained in MAS. What is remarkable about this is that prior to their MAS major the *mujeres* did not understand their lived experiences as a base of knowledge; they saw nothing of it, like Marianna who never understood what stories she had to tell. Yet it was within the space of MAS that they realized that they did have unique perspectives, as Erica put it, or stories to tell, as Marinna put it. It was through MAS that the *mujeres* gained a new way of thinking and understanding the world. This is why I say they gained epistemic capital. Epistemic capital refers to a base of knowledge gained through a process of critical pedagogy where lived experiences and theory bridge to create a new critical way of understanding the world.

The idea of knowledge used to defend or stand up for themselves was discussed by each of the *mujeres*. Many felt upset or angry that for so long they had not had access to this knowledge in order to “talk back.” For example, in the earlier excerpt on how emotionally challenging MAS was for Diana she said, “Like why do I feel like I can speak now when I wished I could have spoken you know growing up and in high school when I wanted to defend myself, why am I just getting this now?” Because Diana went through a strong shaming process where being Mexican was looked down upon a lot she felt in many ways disempowered when it came to her self identity. From this excerpt, I suggest that if Diana had had access to this knowledge she would have been able to defend herself from the shaming and negative perceptions on Mexicans, instead of internalizing it. Although the lived experiences were there all along for these *mujeres* they were never framed as a type of capital or as a validating way of knowing.

For example Camila said,

I’ve learned to appreciate myself more and value myself and because I’ve taken such interest in this, I can defend myself more too just because before I didn’t really know

what to say and now like if anyone were to say something to me I could defend the way I feel by like actual concrete information, you know information that I've read and learned, I can defend myself like that

For Camila, she felt that she had gained epistemic capital through MAS and could use it to defend herself. For her specifically, with instances when she was called White washed this type of capital would come in handy because she now had the knowledge to understand critically why her classmates would refer to her in that way. Marianna, spoke the most about this form of capital. She said, "I feel like I know my history enough to speak up now whereas before I would be like, I mean this is part of who I am and I have the lived experience but I don't have a written one so how can I prove what I lived you know what I mean." She added, "Now that I am culturally validated through MAS I am ready to be like, no! Let me tell you! You know what I mean, stand up for myself finally instead of just taking it from everybody all the time..." Marianna talked about how epistemic capital gave her academic confidence; through the knowledge she was gaining she was also gaining confidence as a student. She was often looked at by others, especially in her McNair cohort and film courses, as the raging Chicana feminist because she felt the need to always speak up when problematic or racist things were said. Standing up for herself was manifested in various ways, not just through talking back, for example Marianna set up a meeting to talk with the dean of the film department about the lack of people of color in the program. She also started a student group, along with Diana and other peers, called *La Colectiva* that served as a site to further discuss and challenge issues like race, gender, class, and sexual oppression.

### **Reclaiming the Self**

Through the process of reclaiming knowledge the *mujeres* were also reclaiming themselves. The process of reclaiming the self is represented by Figure 4.3. I refer to reclaiming

the self as the process of reclaiming a self identity that has been historically oppressed or denied. This process of reclaiming the self provided the *mujeres* with 1) self knowledge, 2) self affirmation and self acceptance, 3) a sense of self empowerment, and 4) a structural and metaphorical space for self discovery.

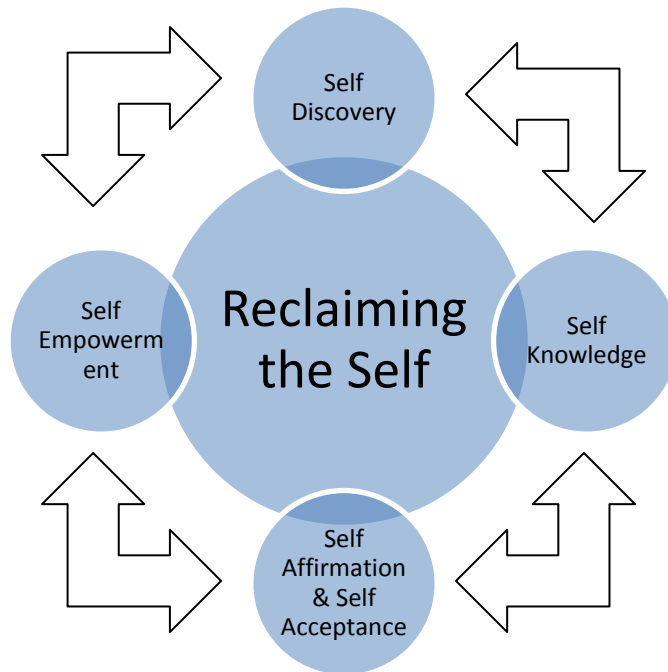


Figure 4.3 Process of Reclaiming the Self

### ***Self Knowledge***

Reclaiming knowledge and reclaiming the self are very much interrelated because it was through self knowledge that the *mujeres* were able to reclaim multiple identities that had either been denied to them or oppressed. An example of how interrelated the two are was the story behind Zyanya's name. She shared with me the following,

My name is Zyanya and I hated it growing up, hated it, I hated it in high school and in middle school, everyone use to make fun of it, and it always made me so sad and then when I came here (referring to UCT) it was like oh it's indigenous! It's beautiful! I learned the history of it, it totally changed my perspective on it, I learned to love it because of my major because it's so different and it's like the history of it, my dad was

involved in the Chicano movement here in Texas and that's why he gave me an indigenous name because he grew like an indigenous consciousness.

From Zyanya's story I understood that the knowledge she reclaimed through MAS also gave her the avenue to reclaim her name. She learned about her name through her MAS courses.

Through the process of schooling, where her teachers and peers struggled to pronounce her name correctly and/or made fun of it, she became very ashamed of it. She mentioned to me that she used to hate when she had substitute teachers because of the embarrassment of having them pronounce her name. Because of this she longed to change her name. Yet, as she began to uncover the history of her name and what it stood for she learned to love and appreciate it.

Understanding where her father came from, the Chicana/o movement, when he selected the name Zyanya for her, made her realize the historical power and roots the name had. Her name transformed from something embarrassing to a historical representation of the Chicana/o movement. Naming is also a principle of critical pedagogy as envisioned by Paulo Freire. This again illustrates the critical part of ethnic studies courses. Zyanya reclaimed a part of herself, her name, which had been oppressed during her schooling experiences.

### ***Self Affirmation & Self Acceptance***

Reclaiming the self also came through a sense of affirmation that was given through the knowledge gained in MAS. Many of the *mujeres* talked about reaching a state of peace with themselves. For example, Tanya explained how Gloria Anzaldúa helped her reclaim a sense of peace with herself, "I read *Borderlands* and it was just this moment of clarity of like really coming to terms with all the confusion you know all these years back and granted to say that I am completely understanding of who I am would be lie but it was just this kinda new understanding of myself...." This sentiment of the book *Borderlands/La Frontera* was shared among all the *mujeres*, even the ones that did not bring it as a cultural artifact. Tanya made an



important point in this excerpt which is to claim that she understood herself completely now would be an overstatement. This serves as a reminder of what I stated at the forefront of this discussion which is that these four entities (knowledge, self, space(s), *la mujer*) should not be looked as complete but as a continuous and recursive process. Tanya was in the process of understanding who she was and this will continue on even after she leaves MAS. What I am claiming here is that MAS provided a physical and metaphorical space in the *mujeres* college trajectories to explore themselves and thus supported the process reclaiming the self.

This new understanding of the self that Tanya talks about was an acceptance of her history of being pulled in so many directions; her grandparents wanting her to embrace her Mexican culture and her mother wanting her to only be American. For Tanya Anzaldúa's book helped her be ok with herself. Similarly, Erica shared the following, "For me it was more about negotiating different identities and naming myself...it was a vehicle that allowed me personally to put into words the confusion I was feeling and the understanding that I am, that I am still coming to..." Both for Tanya and Erica, Anzaldúa's book served as a self liberating process in the sense that they were finally able to reach a state of peace with who they were and who they were becoming. Self liberating was actually how Diana described the book. They had all read the book through a course they had taken for their MAS major, the course, La Chicana, especially utilized the book to talk about gender. Anzaldúa's book helped them be ok with who they were; it was ok if they were in a constant state of ambiguity (Anzaldúa, 1987), or living constantly in the third space, that Pérez (1999) talks about. The third space in the sense of not just being Mexican or American, they occupied a gray space, a blend of the two. Erica put the relationship between MAS and the self very well in the following excerpt, "The whole idea that identity is not static and it's constantly changing and your constantly negotiating different

environments, different beliefs, and it all culminated within a program that allowed us to explore ourselves...” MAS became a space where the *mujeres* were able to explore their multiple identities and find some sort of peace with the process.

### ***Self Empowerment***

As mentioned, self empowerment was talked about with many of the *mujeres*. For example Diana shared with me the following,

I feel honestly, like growing up in my high school I saw a lot of low self esteem from women of color, VERY low self esteem, a lot of seeking validation through men....and I feel that's because they didn't see how they could be successful or how they could accomplish certain things because there weren't any Chicanas in our textbooks....and I feel that especially for women if they are exposed to a lot of these Chicanas while they are in high school they would be way more self empowered, like you know, to feel like I can do this, I don't need a man, I can speak out against this and I don't have to feel ashamed.

In this excerpt, self empowerment was linked to knowledge, specifically Chicana knowledge.

What I understood from Diana was that she felt that many women in her high school sought out men to seek validation and a sense of worthiness. This is very much related to Angela

Valenzuela's (1999) work in "*Checkin' up on my guy*": *Chicanas, social capital, and the culture of romance*. In this piece Valenzuela talks about Seguin High School, an overcrowded school

where teachers do not care for students and focus on subtracting Latina/o student's cultural and social capital, instead of embracing and developing it. Because of this lack of care many of the

Latinas in this context seek out validation and a sense of worth through mentoring and helping their boyfriends with school work, often putting their boyfriend's needs before theirs. This is

very similar to what Diana described here, women seeking out validation through their

boyfriends. What Diana suggested is that this would be different if they had access to some of

the knowledge she has gained in MAS. She felt that they would feel empowered and a lot more motivated to pursue higher education. In other words self validation would manifest itself

through knowledge not a man. Yet not any knowledge, Diana specifically suggested knowledge in which Chicanas are valorized and presented as role models. She suggested requiring all young women to read *Borderlands/La Frontera*; she called it every Chicanas bible. She added that reading about strong Chicanas like Gloria Anzaldúa and Dolores Huerta had “made her feel empowered about who she is and made her want to follow in their footsteps.” For Diana learning about herself had led to more self pride and a stronger self consciousness.

### ***Self Discovery***

Most importantly, for all of the *mujeres* MAS represented a space and time for self discovery. When I say space I refer to both a structural and metaphorical space. By structural space I am referring to the fact that because the *mujeres* were students at UCT they were provided a structural space, most likely a classroom in a university building, to discuss and learn material that happened to push them towards self discovery. It is structural in the sense of physicality and also in the sense that the university is structured to be an institution of learning where students are to specialize in one body of knowledge and therefore responsible for providing structural resources like classrooms for students to do this. By metaphorical space I refer to Emma Pérez’s (1998) idea of *sitios y lenguas*. A *sitio* translates to a space, specifically Pérez talks about this *sitio* as a space where “decolonized discourses can occur.” I also see MAS as providing this metaphorical space where the *mujeres* were able to decolonize ideas about who they were and were not. Lastly, by time I refer to an opportunity in their lives to explore themselves.

The idea of space and time is specifically important because all of the *mujeres* felt like they were never given this opportunity prior to MAS to really explore who they were and what that encompassed. Although this was manifested uniquely to each of the *mujeres* experiences

and history they all shared this commonality of discovering a part of themselves through MAS. For Zyanya self discovery led to gaining self love and self esteem. She said, "...it's kinda helped me also with my self esteem, I am proud of who I am and what I have to offer and it's made me a better person overall I think." As shared earlier Zyanya often questioned why she was "brown" or why her family was "poor." This often caused her to feel bad about her self image but through her experiences in MAS she began to love and appreciate herself. Similarly, for Erica MAS represented an "urgency to understand myself." Comparing biology to MAS Erica said, "It has helped me understand myself in ways that biology well I could understand my body but not myself, you know, not why things happen the way they do, why I might think a certain way or why I am uneasy about certain things and if I hadn't taken classes like these I wouldn't have been able to express myself..." Erica specifically talked about how MAS pushed her to understand herself as a *mujer*. What did it mean to be a woman of color at a predominately White university? Or what did it mean to be a Mexican woman studying far away from home? These were question that pushed Erica towards a deeper self discovery in regards to her gender.

Camila spoke about self discovery leading to self acceptance. She said, "I think it's just acceptance of who I am like that it's ok that I look the way I look that the fact that I differ from others is ok and if anything it's something that should be cherished..." Again referencing the shaming these *mujeres* experienced, this time and space for self discovery allowed a reconciliation with the shame and acceptance of a new empowered self. Tanya who chose the word discovery to sum up her experiences in MAS explained her experiences as the following, "...it helped me really discover who I am and that it's ok that I am different, you know cheesy, but you know that was very important for me...and it's just very nice to know that I am not alone

too.” Tanya’s history with language and always being in this state of ambiguity where she felt that she was and wasn’t Mexican is important in understanding why she felt she discovered herself through MAS. For Tanya, self discovery encompassed discovering the third space and a *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987). For Tanya the third space represented a space of ambiguity where she was in a constant state of redefining and negotiating who she was. She wasn’t in the “first” space where she was only American and she wasn’t in the “second” space where she was only Mexican; she was in the third constantly negotiating the two. Similarly, a *mestiza* consciousness is defined as a consciousness that is developed by mixed raced women who are able to cope with ambiguity and “in-betweeness.” These ideas were self validating and also helped her realize that she was not alone, that many *mujeres* have and continue to live in the third space. She found solidarity within this space; the importance of reclaiming this space is discussed next.

### **Reclaiming Space(s)**

When I refer to the process of reclaiming space(s) I refer to the idea of recreating/creating both structural and metaphorical spaces. These spaces can be structural in the sense that they are physical enclosed spaces like classrooms and they can be metaphorical in the sense that some spaces can be representative or metaphors for other spaces. The metaphorical spaces are usually understood by those that share that space. For example, in a metaphorical sense the student group MEChA often serves for Chicana/o students as a “home away from home.” For students that don’t identify with MEChA this metaphor may be difficult to understand unless they are in that space. The process of reclaiming space(s) is represented in Figure 4.4. Reclaiming space(s) was manifested through the 1) third space, 2) *mestiza* capital 3) nurturing different spaces of learning and 4) recreating the space of home.

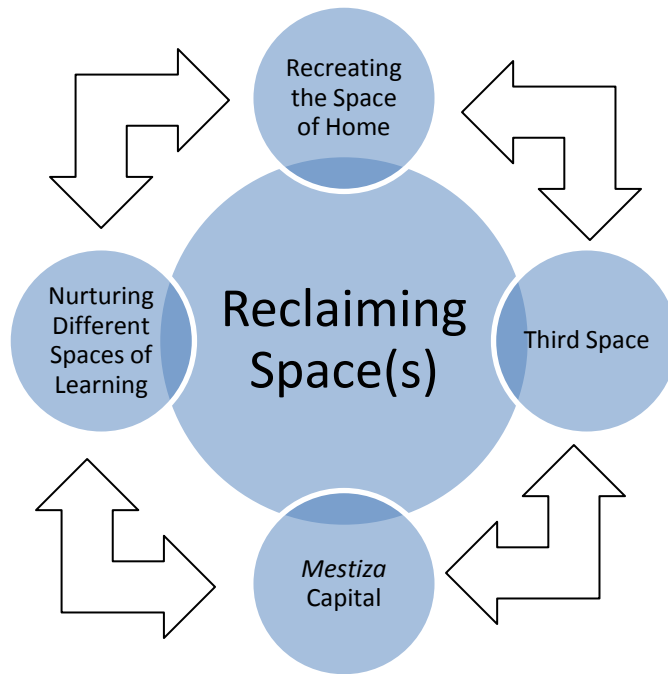


Figure 4.4 Process of Reclaiming Space(s)

### ***Third Space***

The third space in the *mujeres* narrative was understood as a metaphorical space where they were able to negotiate tensions they experienced as women of color and practice resistance. This space was representative of the *mujeres* hybrid ways of being or the idea of “being in between.” Again, I reference Emma Pérez (1998) idea of the third space as a site of negotiation that allows the *mujeres* to practice agency. In this space the women are not objects of history they are subjects of history. Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of the borderlands the third space is also a site of resistance.

Each *mujer* experienced the third space differently. For example, Diana explained her experiences with being a Catholic and also being a member of MEChA. She said,

I had found MEChA and I went in there like oh cool radical people or whatever and they were like oh or a lot of them didn’t have or might have been atheist or denounced their faith, or were like religion is oppressive blah blah blah, it’s part of the institution, patriarchal blah blah blah, and I was like oh crap I am Catholic, I dig it, like does that mean I can’t be here? Does that mean I am not Chicana cause I am not like screw you

priest? So I often felt weird in these spaces because I was, I am, you know like traditionally Catholic...it's a very much a part of me.

For Diana the third space represented a space where she could negotiate being Catholic but also identify as a Mechista and Chicana. She explained to me this experience as always feeling “bipolarish” where she had to practice and negotiate two confronting identities. Also important, in Diana’s narrative was her commitment to learn about not just Mexican history and culture but indigenous history and culture. Again this often created conflicting feelings in terms of wanting to go back to her indigenous roots yet also identifying as a Catholic, which historically was a religion imposed on indigenous people.

Similar to this, Diana spoke about her experiences with the book *Borderlands/La Frontera* and how she has not been able to finish it. She said, “I got to the part where she’s like ok you recognize your *mestiza* indigenous side but then you also have to recognize that there is a part of you that is Spanish, there is a part of you that is European and I was like no! So I threw the book down and I was like what the hell?!” Diana shared with us that she has not finished the book because she is still coping with or trying to come to peace with this; being indigenous but also being European and Spanish. The third space has allowed Diana to be all of the above; Catholic, Mechista, Chicana, and *mestiza*. In this sense Diana was not in the “first” space where she was a “traditional” devoted Catholic, since she did recognize the conflicting ideologies within the religion, she was also not in the “second” space where she was your “traditional” Mechista or Chicana that denounced religion, she was in the third space where she was all of those things. In many senses Diana was also redefining what all these identities meant to her in the third space. It is also important to point out the resistance that Diana practiced in the third space, she could still be involved in MEChA and be Catholic, she could still commit to learning about her indigenous roots and recognize her European and Spanish side, and she was definitely

still a Chicana. This is also illustrative of how the third space allows for women of color to practice agency.

Throughout their high school experiences Diana, Camila, and Tanya all shared this experience of belonging but at the same time not belonging with the Mexican American and/or Latina/o students in their high schools. For example, Diana brought up the fact she was often called a “*vendida*” by her Latina/o friends which translates to a sell out because she was in classes where all her peers were White. Similarly, Camila dealt with being called “White washed” or “the girl that wanted to be White” because she was also in the honors track that was made up of all White students. Tanya often felt divided because she couldn’t fit in with the “Mexican nationals” or the “*cholos*” in her high school. Yet, all the *mujeres* identified as Mexican American, Latina, or Chicana, so how could they belong but at the same time be told that they didn’t belong? The notion of the third space is again important here in the *mujeres* experiences, even prior to MAS. Although they may have not been able to name this as the “third space” in high school they certainly felt they were in it. They were in a space where they were negotiation and recreating conflicting ideas about what it meant to be Mexican American, Latina, and/or Chicana.

Being in the third space can also be a very painful experience full of tension yet it can also be transformative. This speaks to the painful confusion and division the *mujeres* felt prior to UCT. I would argue that although they are still experiencing the pain of being in this space the *mujeres* are moving more towards transformation now where they are reaching a peaceful state of ambiguity. This I would say has come through MAS and the tools and knowledge it has provided them with, especially the feeling of solidarity within the space; that there is also others going through this. The pain of this space can be manifested differently. For example, for Erica



who grew up in a predominately Mexican American community she never questioned her identity as a Mexican woman until she studied abroad in México. She said, “I went through this process of solidifying like who I was as a Mexican woman living in México for like two months and having people telling me that no you’re not Mexican.” Diana also shared this experience of being called a “*pocha*” which is a derogatory term used by people living in México to describe Mexicans who live in the United States and have forgotten or rejected their Mexican heritage.

### ***Mestiza Capital***

Like epistemic capital, *mestiza* capital is an addition to Yosso’s (2005) six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. Like epistemic capital I felt that *mestiza* capital, a gendered form of capital was missing in Yosso’s analysis of community cultural wealth. The pain of being told what you are and what you’re not is challenging yet it also builds what I call *mestiza* capital. Similar to a *mestiza* consciousness, *mestiza* capital is built on women of color’s ability to navigate and cope with ambiguous spaces. It is a gendered capital, unique to the experiences of women of color. A great example is the capital Tanya gained through having to learn how to successfully navigate the space of “not having to be too Mexican or American.” She shared that she was always looked at as “weird” because of her “in betweenness” yet *mestiza* capital acknowledges this “weird” state as a form of capital to build upon. It takes skills to navigate this space successfully and these skills are largely picked up through the connection between theory and lived experiences that MAS did a great job of connecting. All of the *mujeres* learned through living in the third space how to find strength in their ambiguous state.

Erica shared the following, “I am not just one thing and I can say this space is mine and you can’t take it away from me, it’s similar to being able to study MAS within a predominately

White institution, it is about claiming space and saying were here,” she adds, “...it’s definitely a claimed space and an authoring of space, an authoring of how we want to live our lives within the third space.” *Mestiza* capital is also about claiming a metaphorical space that is always “in between” never being just one thing or the other, but claiming intersectionality and multiplicity. From Erica, I understood this space as also being about acknowledgment; a validation that they as women of color are part of White spaces as well. Again, the ability to navigate this space of Whiteness is important and valuable capital, which is gained through MAS. Lastly, *mestiza* capital is also about the practice of agency or power to claim how to live one’s life as a woman of color that lives in the “in between.”

### ***Nurturing Different Spaces of Learning***

MAS created a responsibility in the *mujeres* to go out to their communities and embrace this space as a site of learning and growth. The *mujeres* gained a wealth of knowledge and experience from participating in community organizations, events, or projects beyond UCT. For example Diana said the following,

The education that ethnic studies has started me out in has taught me that education and learning can happen outside of the university and education doesn’t just have to occur in the university, within ethnic studies, education can occur at a march, the experiences, your experiences that’s education, education can happen when you’re protesting in front of the state board of education, education can happen when you are at Resistencia Bookstore...

All of the *mujeres* talked about how MAS provided them with learning experiences in spaces outside of the university. This was different for each *mujer* but they all shared this idea of MAS giving them an opportunity to not only learn and exchange knowledge within UCT but to also go beyond that into community organizations, the state capital, marches, etc. For Diana, she saw how knowledge came not only from her experiences at UCT but also through her experiences in the countless marches she participated in, her work in the state capital, and even at Resistencia

Bookstore which is a bookstore that holds political educational materials and also organizes community events like poetry readings, indigenous art exhibitions, and grassroots organizing meetings. Similarly, Tanya and Zyanya were involved with work at the state capital where they also learned a lot about policy that affected their communities directly.

MAS nurtured these different spaces of learning by bridging them through their courses. For example, Tanya had to attend city council meetings in her Mexican American Studies policy course. The professor would also bring outside organizations like the Workers Defense Project to encourage students to get involved. Zyanya got an internship through MAS at the state capital with an MAS professor who was a lobbyist. Through the nurturing of these different spaces of learning the *mujeres* also gained a strong network where they were connected to many Latina/o community members outside of UCT. For example Zyanya was able to create a strong network of Latina/o community members through professors or courses in MAS. She was involved with the local history center, the Mexican American Center, and Casa Marinela a refuge house.

Zyanya explained,

My professor who was a lobbyist would take us to the Central Texas Club where all the lawmakers hang out and he just opened up a lot of windows and opportunities for us and like my Chicana feminist teacher that I had she took us to a *curandera* in the east side and it was crazy cause like they had a moon ceremony when she had taken us...then I had one professor take us to the Mexican American Center when it had first opened and there was like a deer dance...and I mean it all depends on the student, like if they are willing to learn from these experiences.

This excerpt illustrates how MAS bridged learning spaces in and outside of the university. The *mujeres* got to experience and also learn not just through the traditional space of a classroom but beyond that. Important in Zyanya's excerpt is that she points out that it all depended on what students did with these experiences. From the six *mujeres* I worked with it seemed like they all took advantage of these opportunities by getting involved with work outside of the university.

In addition to this, the *mujeres* took on the responsibility to get involved beyond their MAS courses and recreated spaces of knowledge production in and outside of UCT. Although their involvement may have been created through pathways that MAS implemented the women went beyond what was required from them as students at a university. For example, Diana collaborated with the janitors at UCT to set up college prep Saturdays where the janitors would bring their children to campus and UCT students would provided mentoring services like help with SAT prep, college applications, college tours, and answering any questions on the college experience of students of color. In reference to this experience Diana said, “We want to see more people like us in college you know. We know how lucky we are that we made it and we want to share that with as many people as we can.”

Like Diana, Zyanya took on the responsibility of also bridging what she was learning through MAS with her work outside of the university. For example, as a pre service teacher she constantly took any opportunity presented to her to teach her students about the Mexican American experience and history. She said, “The classes I’ve taken here (referring to UCT) I am also taking them into the classroom, as a future teacher I want to expose students as early as possible to this knowledge and support their Latino identity because you know we’ve all talked about how it took until college to really grow this consciousness.” Additionally, Zyanya took on the responsibility to inform herself about who was on her local school board and educate senators on the importance of bilingual education through her work in the state capital.

Lastly, there was a clear commitment to bridge the knowledge that the *mujeres* were gaining in the space of the university with others spaces like the personal space of the family and home. For example, Zyanya would constantly take her younger sisters to marches and other volunteer work she did. She said, “I take them to immigration rallies with me and I make them

volunteer with me like at Casa Marinela because I am like man they need to learn this stuff young and they need to understand that they also have it made.” For Zyanya it was important that she instill the knowledge and experiences she was gaining through MAS in her sisters lives. Similarly, Erica would engage in conversations at home with family on the knowledge she was gaining through her MAS courses. She shared with me an experience when her brother was worried that his son was not speaking Spanish. In this situation, Erica was able to bring in literature that she had been exposed to through her MAS courses to aid her brother in his concern. Diana shared experiences of “pushing” her mother on her ideas of what a woman was suppose to be by sharing what she was learning in her MAS courses and Tanya used the literature in her MAS courses to discuss her feelings of being both Mexican and American with her mother. The *mujeres* bridged the knowledge that was being created in the space of MAS with the space of home and the family.

### ***Recreating the Space of Home***

This was a reciprocal exchange as knowledge being created in the space of home and family was also brought into the space of MAS. The reciprocity was explained by Marianna in the following, “...I can take the stuff that my family knows and bring it into like a classroom setting and be like hey I can incorporate you and I can interview my cousins for classroom work like that is unheard of...this reminds me of what MAS is and it reconnects me to my home.” Through Marianna’s excerpt we see the bridging of these two space; the home and MAS. Also interesting is how the notion of home becomes blurred between Marianna’s actual home and MAS as a home too. This is something I noticed that the *mujeres* also tried to do; recreate the space of home while at UCT.

All of the *mujeres* described MAS as providing a metaphorical space of home where they felt cared for and welcomed. Erica shared how MAS made her feel at home. She said,

I feel that I am more comfortable in my space here at UCT than in another major for example an English major or some other major and it's just like it has allowed me to carve my own space here at UCT and feel comfortable with the people I surround myself with and feel comfortable having the conversations I do...

The idea of MAS providing a home away from home was largely discussed in Erica's narrative. In a large university that is predominately White, students of color can often experience feelings of hostility or marginalization, as discussed in the literature review in chapter two. Therefore, it is very important that students of color are able to find spaces, like MAS, where they feel welcomed, cared for, and comfortable in. In the space of MAS Erica felt like she could be herself without being judged. She experienced a sense of caring and even love that she didn't feel in her courses or with professors not affiliated with MAS.

Naila, the undergraduate advisor of the MAS program, was mentioned by all the *mujeres* as a prominent figure in recreating this space of home. Erica explained a situation where she was having some personal issues in a class that wasn't even an MAS class yet it was Naila who stepped up to help her work through the issue. She said, "She just dropped everything to just go with me...she checked in with me via Facebook and it's like a strong sense of caring and community that's there for you." When I asked Erica what had been the most valuable thing that MAS had provided her with she said a sense of community. Once again mentioning Naila, Erica explained, "I can just pop in and talk to Naila about anything, she cares for us and has got our back." The sense of a community in a large White university is again important not just for the academic success of students of color but also for their psychological and mental well being. Students of color need to feel and know that someone cares for them and is watching out for

them because of the hostility and other challenges they may experience in predominately White universities.

When I asked Tanya if she thought being an MAS major had made her experience at UCT any different she pointed, like Erica, to this sense of community and a home. Transferring from a university where there were even fewer amounts of students of color compared to UCT she said, “It’s very different coming from Western University because it was very cutthroat like no one really cared about you or helped each other out, very doggy dog and then to go from that to coming here and having everyone be very like helpful and concerned with how you’re doing is amazing.” Like Erica, Tanya quickly gained a home when she transferred to UCT.

Tanya also mentioned Naila comparing to her advisor from her international studies major she said,

I appreciate her (referring to Naila) a lot because I have an adviser for international studies and I went to go get advised by him and it was absolutely terrible so it makes me, I think being in the MAS program kinda just makes me really appreciate the sense of family that’s there as oppose to other majors where it seems in my own personal experience where their just like oh well figure it out by yourself so it’s been really great because you know there is a sense of family there and people that genuinely care for me.

From this excerpt we see the experience of someone who is a double major like Tanya compare two spaces; international studies and MAS. International studies is described as a terrible space and uncaring juxtaposed to MAS where Tanya felt a sense of family and genuine caring. Tanya went on to add that when she is having a bad day she will typically go to the MAS building and come out feeling better. She felt that there was always someone there to talk to and help you regardless if it was related to MAS or academics.

Professors affiliated with MAS were also described as “being incredibly genuine and helpful.” All of the *mujeres* mentioned that they felt more comfortable approaching an MAS professor than a professor not affiliated with MAS. These professors often served more as

“*padrinos*” or “*madrinas*” which translate to godparents. The professors were committed to students well being on a holistic level, caring for them not just academically but culturally and socially as well. They checked in on students to see how they were doing. Marianna shared how one of her MAS professors called her one evening to check in and see how she was doing. The relationship Erica had with her mentor, who is affiliated with MAS, also reflected a very caring relationship. Erica and her mentor shared family dinners, presented at educational conferences together, and supported each other’s work. Therefore, professors and staff affiliated with MAS all contributed to recreating this space of home where the *mujeres* felt cared for.

Marianna described the importance of having a home at UCT in the following excerpt,

Our adviser Naila makes everybody feel at home and to me that’s what you need in a center, you need to feel at home because if you don’t how are you suppose to stay here...how are you suppose to feel invested in a center if you don’t feel at home...Naila was the first person to actually listen to me, she was the first person to ask how I was and not just how my classes were going

In Marianna’s excerpt she made the relationship between the recreation of home and student retention. For her it was important that she felt at home in order to stay at UCT. In order to feel invested in MAS she had to feel that the program was invested in her not just academically but as a person as well. Also important is how she described Naila, like the professors affiliated with UCT, Naila cared for students holistically, beyond just their academic well being. Again, there was an emphasis on MAS and people affiliated with MAS caring for students beyond academics; the focus is on creating a family within the university.

Marianna described this notion of a family in the following excerpt,

...that’s something about MAS that I feel like when you can build that community there you know that your supported and you’re not a number, like here (referring to UCT) nobody knows your name, my MAS teachers know my name always, here also nobody cares about your individual circumstances, nobody cares where you came from, nobody cares about the cultural things that impact your learning, nobody cares about your family



situation, nobody cares that you're way from home and miss home so much but you know what in MAS they care.

Again we see the importance of MAS providing students a home where they feel cared for. Students of color experience college differently than White students at predominately White universities. Therefore, students of color also require different things to succeed in predominately White universities. Having a sense of family or a "home away from home" is important for student's success and retention. The unique background these *mujeres* came from provides us with a glimpse into why students of color experience college differently than White students. With the exception of Tanya, all of the *mujeres* were the first in their families to go to college and finding a "home away from home" was important to all of them, for some it was what kept them at UCT.

### **Redefining La Mujer**

The theme of redefining *la mujer* was mainly discussed in the focus group however this is not to say that the concept did not appear in the *mujeres'* interviews. Redefining *la mujer* came through the focus group largely because of the use of Gloria Anzaldúa's iconic book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. As mentioned earlier, three out of the six *mujeres* chose this book as their cultural artifact for explaining their experiences in MAS. The other three, although they had not selected it as an artifact, commented on the artifact as well. By redefining *la mujer* I refer to the process of challenging traditional notions of what Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana, and/or Latina women are suppose to be. This process is explored through the following three sections; 1) redefining *la mujer* through Gloria Anzaldúa, 2) caught in between "traditional" and "not traditional" and 3) gendered consciousness. Figure 4.5 represents this process.

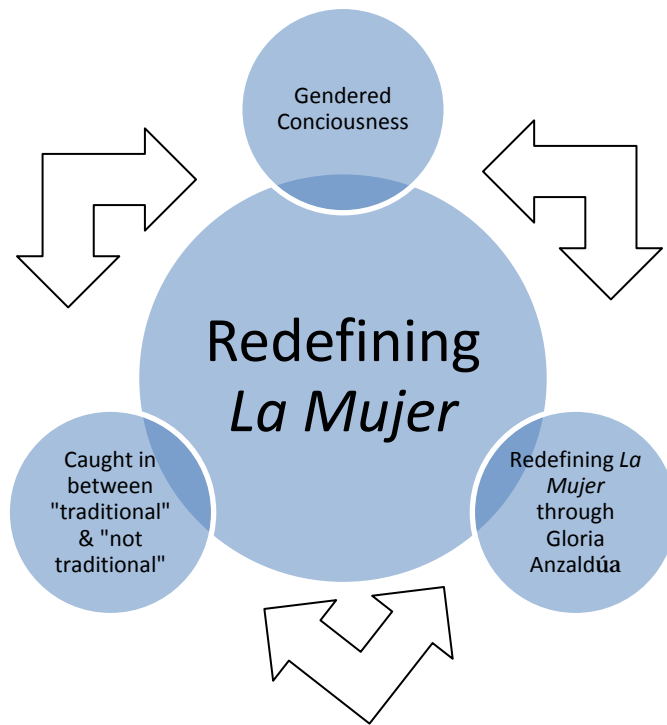


Figure 4.5 Process of Redefining *La Mujer*

***Redefining La Mujer through Gloria Anzaldúa***

Many of the *mujeres* felt a deep connection not just with *Borderlands/La Frontera* but with Gloria Anzaldúa herself. As Diana put it, “There is a Gloria Anzaldúa in all of us.” How each *mujer* related to Anzaldúa differed but there was an encompassing theme of Anzaldúa helping them understand themselves and come to the realization that there is no right definition of what a *mujer* is. For example, Diana said that the book helped her realized that “there is no one definition of a Chicana.” Erica added, “yeah or what it means to be a woman or a feminist.” For Erica, Anzaldúa’s concept of a *mestiza* consciousness was important for her in redefining *la mujer*. She said, “The way *mestiza* consciousness applies to me doesn’t apply the same way to you and it’s just because that’s just the nature of what the third space is, we can all occupy it but differently, I see myself as living in the third space constantly in the gray area.” From Erica’s excerpt I understood that as women of color there is a shared experience of identifying all as

women of color yet our experiences and narratives as women of color are vastly different. We can occupy the metaphorical or physical third space at different points in our lives and in different ways. This is important in terms of redefining *la mujer* because this goes against the idea that there is a “right way” or a correct definition of what a *mujer* should be. Acknowledging our differences and accepting them is part of the process of redefining *la mujer*.

Tanya spoke about redefining *la mujer* in terms of religion. She said,

Another thing that I dealt with a lot that this book kinda helped me guide me through in a really weird way was the fact that I am an atheist which is completely different from anyone in my family and although she never expressively addresses it you know she really goes through the fact, I feel that the major point of this book is just like you are who you are and there is no reason to hide that or pretend that you’re not and so it made really be at peace with what I was.

For Tanya religion was something she had to negotiate in terms of defining what a Mexican American woman was. Her grandmother and mother were both religious and at times felt that she didn’t fit the traditional notion of a Mexican woman because she was an atheist. Yet, she identified strongly as Mexican American so could she claim this identity even though she wasn’t Catholic or practiced any form of religion? In this case Anzaldúa helped Tanya come to the realization that she could still claim this identity regardless of her non-religious background.

She explained further in the following excerpt,

I feel like being a woman is just so complex because you have to deal with of course your culture and you have to deal with like family expectations and often with culture comes religion and religious expectations and it’s just like when you’re a woman you have so much that expected of you like so much that you’re suppose to do or not suppose to do like how to be proper and how not to be proper and so I feel like reading Anzaldúa it’s so refreshing because it’s finally saying like you don’t have to get married super early, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do!

In this excerpt we further see how Anzaldúa was instrumental in the process of redefining *la mujer*. In many ways Anzaldúa represented the complete opposite of what many of the *mujeres* had understood was representative of what a traditional Mexican American woman was suppose

to be. In Tanya's excerpt we can see the complexity of being caught between so many expectations and how Anzaldúa broke through all of these expectations by providing a fresh new perspective on the experiences of women of color. For Tanya this perspective was simple; you are who you are and that's ok. In many ways I saw how Anzaldúa represented an opportunity for the *mujeres* to author how they chose to live their lives in the metaphorical third space.

For Marianna, who identified as a Chicana lesbian, Anzaldúa also gave her a sense of peace with who she was as a lesbian woman. She said,

For me it was like a sexuality thing, I found myself trying to construct myself like I don't cook like I don't clean I don't do girl stuff I don't wear dresses I wear pants and I chopped all my hair off but it was later after this (referring to Anzaldúa) that I was like I don't have to be, I don't have to be anything, I don't have to be a butch I don't have to be a femme I can build shit and cook you know.

In Marianna's experience Anzaldúa affirmed her sexuality, she didn't have to be one thing or the other, she could be whatever she wanted and that was ok. She added to this that Anzaldúa helped her realize that "no one Chicana or Latina, whatever you identify yourself as has the same story." Again, Anzaldúa became representative of a hybrid identity and hybridity as an affirming and powerful state. As *mujeres* they could constantly reinvent themselves, they did not have to fit one specific mold of what a *mujer* was. This was also exemplary of *mestiza* capital; the ability to constantly negotiate and reinvent yourself based on social location and time. If Marianna really wanted to act like a femme she could but she could also decide to act as a butch. Identity became relative to space and time here; where they were at that time and their historical and social context of that time.

It was with this idea of privileging hybridity that Diana said the following, "If any of the girls in my high school like Chicana or Mexican American girls could get their hands on like Gloria Anzaldúa and could read that, I know they would feel empowered and inspired to speak

out and do what they wanted.” Diana explained that she often saw a lot of low self esteem with the women of color in her high school. Many of them sought out a sense of value and acknowledgment through their boyfriends. Diana felt that if they could relate to a strong *mujer* like Gloria Anzaldúa they could see the power they held as women of color. They could build epistemic capital through Anzaldúa. The knowledge to understand themselves as powerful women could lead towards challenging their relationships with men. They might discover different avenues to seek self acknowledgement or a sense of value in themselves. Their views on gender and education might change completely. They could find their voices through Anzaldúa.

Being able to relate to Anzaldúa was something all the *mujeres* spoke about. For example, Marianna mentioned the fact that even knowing that Anzaldúa had struggled here once at UCT yet managed to still fight for what she believed in motivated her to succeed at UCT as well. Similarly, Tanya felt that Anzaldúa provided her with an empowering feeling while being at a predominately White university. Through Anzaldúa she understood the complexities of what this meant, in terms of being part of a small group of women of color at UCT and how they navigated the university.

### ***Caught in between “traditional” and “not traditional”***

Through the process of redefining *la mujer* the women discussed instances when they felt they fit and didn’t fit the traditional notion of what a Mexican American woman is. Many times they were in the “in between” of being traditional and not traditional. Being in the middle of these two axes became a way to redefine the notion of *la mujer*. For example, Zyanya’s cultural artifact was a box of *fideo* which she later shared with us in the focus group that it was also representative of how she was “not traditional” because she didn’t know how to cook. As

Mexican American women the *mujeres* discussed how they were expected to know how to cook and keep up with a household. With the exception of Erica all of the *mujeres* shared that they didn't really know how to cook.

Because Erica did know how to cook she challenged how she could be both traditional and not traditional at the same time. Erica said,

It's strange because in many ways I do see myself as fitting into the traditional role but in other ways I don't like I do know how to take care of a household very well and I am a very good cook...so where does that place me? In a lot ways I am traditional in that sense but then I am not religious at all, I am raised Catholic but non-practicing

From Erica's excerpt we see how she pushed to redefine what a *mujer* is. A *mujer* from Erica's perspective could be both traditional and not traditional. Erica did know how to cook and keep up with a household, as is expected from many Mexican American women, however she was not religious at all which challenged the traditional notion of Mexican American women that are practicing and devoted Catholics.

The *mujeres* often struggled with their mothers or families in challenging the notion of what a *mujer* is. For example, for Diana, her mother constantly pushed her to learn how to cook and keep up with a household. Diana resisted this but at the same time took time to create dialogue between her mother and herself about these sexist expectations.

Diana shared the following,

So when my mom says a comment like *mija* when are you gonna learn how to cook your poor husband is gonna be like oh I am stuck with a wife that can't cook so my sister and I are like fine were not gonna learn how to cook you know because she said that...or *mija* when are you gonna learn how to clean, your husband is gonna be like I have a lazy wife so were like fine were not gonna clean and then when we do cook she's like see your husband is gonna be proud of you, you know and its difficult to get that through to her like what we do is not for our future husbands it's for ourselves so I don't know it's one of those traditional things that we want to challenge.

From this excerpt I saw how Diana was resisting being positioned as what is traditionally understood to be a *mujer* in Mexican American families; someone who knows how to cook and essentially take care of her husband. Diana constantly resisted this position yet, as mentioned earlier; she also found an outlet to talk with her mother about why she didn't want to be positioned this way. In other ways, although Diana was being acted upon by being positioned this way she was also practicing agency by resisting and creating dialogue with her mother.

Additionally, because Diana was diagnosed with endometriosis she was put on birth control at a young age. This also pushed the boundaries of what a traditional *mujer* was suppose to be. As practicing Catholics *mujeres* are not suppose to be on birth control. Diana's mother would tell her to hide the birth control afraid that she may be looked at as a whore or "loose" woman by other family or community members. Her mother also advised Diana to not tell any potential boyfriends about her diagnosis since there was a possibility that she may not be able to have kids. Diana's response to this was, "Is that really like what I have to offer is my womb only...is that what I am, I am a womb, there's nothing else about me you know? So I think that's another reason why I've tried so hard to succeed academically because just to prove like I have brain you know..." Diana's diagnosis pushed her towards a process of redefining what a *mujer* was. She could be on birth control and still be a practicing Catholic. Most importantly Diana saw herself beyond just being a potential mother but also an educated *mujer*. She was not limited to just being a mother or just being Catholic, she could be all of these things. This was Diana's process of redefining what a *mujer* meant to her.

For Tanya the process of redefining *la mujer* involved religion as well. As an atheist she struggled to see herself fitting in with the traditional notion of a Mexican American woman that is a practicing Catholic. Yet, through her MAS courses specifically Gloria Anzaldúa's work she

was able to find peace and balance with being traditional and nontraditional. The course La Chicana also helped many of the *mujeres* in the process of redefining *la mujer*. For example, Tanya and Diana both struggled to get family to understand their choice to move away for college. Tanya shared how this course helped her, “I had a very emotional connection to the course because a lot of the course was about Chicana women being considered like odd in some senses because they do you know the opposite of what’s kinda expected generally...” As *mujeres* attending a predominately White university, statistically and historically speaking this is understood as doing the opposite of what is expected. For Diana and Tanya moving away to attend college was understood as going against what was expected from their families. They were expected to study but continue living at home.

For Marianna the process of redefining *la mujer* involved her sexuality. Marianna who identified as a lesbian felt that for the most part her mother was supportive. In many senses Marianna’s mother challenged the traditional notion of what a Mexican American *mujer* was suppose to be. Marianna’s mother was a single mother who considered Marianna’s real dad a sperm donor. She was always very independent and as Marianna describe her “did a lot of things my aunts didn’t do like fix cars and not get married.” So in many senses Marianna’s mother deviated from the traditional. Yet Marianna was surprised to hear how her mother could embody this nontraditional representation but at the same time also embody this very traditional representation of Mexican American women. For example, there was an incident when Marianna was considering getting married to a man for the financial and health care benefits solely. When she shared this news with her mother Marianna said that she was shocked to hear mother “let out a sigh of relief” when she found out it was a man Marianna was considering marrying. Marianna’s mother explained that she wanted grandkids badly and knew that would



only be possible if she married a man. Although Marianna was upset she said that her courses in MAS have really helped her deal with navigating her sexuality with a mother that can be both traditional and nontraditional. Redefining *la mujer* for Marianna meant embodying both traditional and nontraditional representations of Mexican American women.

### ***Gendered Consciousness***

Part of the process of redefining *la mujer* involved a keen consciousness of what it meant to be a woman of color. All of the *mujeres* understood this form of consciousness to be unique to their gendered experiences. This type of consciousness differentiates from Marianna's idea of "a new pair of glasses" in that it's based on the collective experience of living in the metaphorical third space; where one is in a constant yet powerful state of being in the "in between." Personal experience represents a very important part of this consciousness because it's our critical understanding of our backgrounds that are important for gaining this consciousness. Gendered consciousness was described differently by each of the *mujeres*.

For example Tanya said in relation to navigating the metaphorical third space, "There are a lot of things that we just can't say or were expected not to say...it's kinda of exhausting to be like not able to say things and learning when it's the right thing to say thing..." In this excerpt I understood the challenges Tanya faced in navigating the metaphorical third space. Part of the challenge was learning when to say things at the right time. For example, Tanya shared that she had not told her grandmother that she was an atheist but was waiting for the right time. She had a very close relationship with her grandmother and therefore wanted to look for the right time to tell her this news. Part of this gendered consciousness is learning how to successfully navigate the metaphorical third space, this of course will manifest differently according to our individual experiences.

Part of having a gendered consciousness also involved having a degree of sensitivity when it came to issues pertaining in particular to the experiences of women of color. For example, Tanya said the following,

I find it very sad that there is a culture of domination of women and it's one of those things you want to change but it's not that simple but you know as a woman I get more upset about these things than maybe a male would I don't know I mean I guess I can't really speak for them but I can speak in saying I have an extremely personal connection with like you know what your family says you should be as a woman or what other Mexican people say you should be as a woman so it's kind all very relatable just based on personal experience.

From Tanya's excerpt I understood that as a woman of color she was a lot more sensitive to issues that affect specifically Mexican American women due to her experiences. From her excerpt we also see how personal experience is important to gendered consciousness. She was speaking from personal experiences when she made the statement that she was a lot more sensitive to particular issues.

Similarly Camila also shared having this keen sensitivity to issues affecting women of color. She said,

I don't know how to describe it like I guess I just view things very differently or that I am just almost always like on tippy toes about something if you say something and it triggers something that's like you're not taking into account this and how it applies to women you know stuff like that, the experience is different because we do have a different experience.

From Camila's excerpt we see the sensitivity through her feeling of always being on "tippy toes" about particular issues. She also experienced feelings of being "triggered" to say something or speak up when she saw that the accounts of women of color were not being considered. There was also a realization of how Camila does have a unique perspective and understanding because she is a woman of color. Having a gendered consciousness was part of the process of redefining

*la mujer* as well. It was this consciousness that supported how the *mujeres* began to reevaluate their experiences as women of color and their understandings of what a *mujer* is.

Having this gendered consciousness also involved praxis; action and reflection. For example, Diana's experiences in the student group Save Our History which focused on organizing to stop the state board of education from taking out important historical figures in social studies textbooks, showed the relationship between gendered consciousness and praxis. Diana was at the forefront of this student group, protesting and testifying at board meetings. Yet, she recalled the incident when the state board was on the verge of letting César Chávez stay in textbooks yet was not considering Dolores Huerta at all. She said,

...and then they were going to take out Dolores Huerta and nobody said anything about that! So it was like ok c'mon seriously! It's like ok well will leave this paragraph there but you know that's it and it's like you never see women of color in books! Never! Never! Men of color very few but women of color not at all.

From this excerpt we see Diana's gendered consciousness in terms of being aware of the lack of representation of women of color in textbooks and the sensitivity she expressed towards this.

We also see how Diana has taken action on this issue by bringing this up both to the student group and state board of education. Diana's personal experiences in high school where she saw "this confidence exuded from all of the males" and "tons of pregnancies and domestic abuse" with women of color shaped her gendered consciousness. She felt strongly about having women of color in textbooks so that women of color in school could have role models to look up to. She wanted them to exude that same kind of confidence that she had witnessed with males in her high school. Personal experiences as such provide insight and perspective towards building this gendered consciousness.

Similarly, gendered consciousness is related to having a critical consciousness. Marianna talked about being aware of the second class status she has to constantly navigate through. She

said, “So you’re always going to be second class because you’re a person of color and then you’re always going to be second class because you’re a woman.” Having this gendered consciousness also led her to having a critical critique on an on campus program called MALES where the university recruits Latino men and focuses on supporting them academically, socially, and culturally. The following is what Marianna said about the program,

...it’s really interesting to know that like even though there are less Latino men enrolled in college than Latina women when we all go up for those jobs, whose gonna get it? Of course it’s gonna be the guys so again it doesn’t matter how much freaking experience you have you’re always gonna be looked at as second class and that’s what’s frustrating.

Through this excerpt we see that Marianna has a critical understanding of what it means to be a woman of color. Even though there may be less men of color in higher education this does not eliminate the existing sexist institutional structures where men are still privileged over women in the workforce. This was why Marianna had such a strong critique about a program like MALES. Again, it was through this gendered consciousness that the *mujeres* were also able to redefine what *la mujer* was. The process of redefining was not always easy, as it could be frustrating coming to terms with this “second class” status, yet the *mujeres* managed to find a lot of strength in this process through building solidarity, strong role models like Gloria Anzaldúa, and their experiences in MAS.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The research questions outlined in chapter one were: 1) In what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the experiences of Latinas at a predominately White university (PWI)? and 2) In what ways did being a Mexican American Studies major influence the aspirations of Latina undergraduates? Based on the thematic analysis I conducted on the data I collected for this study I found that MAS represented a process of reclaiming and redefining for

the *mujeres*. MAS influenced the experiences of Latinas at a PWI by providing and nurturing this process. Through this process the women were able to 1) reclaim knowledge, 2) reclaim the self, 3) reclaim space(s) and 4) redefine what it meant to be a *mujer*. Furthermore there was a process imbedded within each of these units. The process for reclaiming knowledge involved 1) legitimizing knowledge and making it emotionally challenging, 2) gaining “a new pair of glasses,” 3) gaining ownership of the knowledge production and 4) gaining epistemic capital. The process of reclaiming the self involved gaining 1) self knowledge, 2) self affirmation and self acceptance, 3) self empowerment, and 4) self discovery. The process of reclaiming space(s) involved the 1) third space, 2) gaining *mestiza* capital, 3) nurturing different spaces of learning and 4) recreating the space of home. Lastly, the process of redefining *la mujer* involved 1) using Gloria Anzaldúa, 2) being caught in between “traditional” and “not traditional” and 3) gendered consciousness.

As mentioned earlier, with the exception of Zyanya, all of the *mujeres* planned to pursue graduate school after graduation. Zyanya planned to start teaching as an elementary bilingual school teacher after graduation and eventually return to school to get her master’s degree. Erica and Camila will be starting their graduate program in fall 2011. Yet, what is important to point out in terms of how MAS influenced the *mujeres* aspirations is the responsibility they all felt to improve and continue working with and for the Mexican American community. This was manifested differently, some wanted to produce more scholarship on the Mexican American community in order to spread awareness and tell their “stories.” There was a sense of urgency to share and learn from their lived experiences with others. Others were more interested in policy or working for the government to bridge a better understanding of the Mexican American community. Overall, all of the *mujeres* expressed that they wanted to continue working with and

giving back to their communities. They all felt very privileged for the experiences and opportunities they had been offered through MAS and felt that it was now their responsibility to make sure others could benefit from their experiences and opportunities as well. Their commitment to MAS became marked as a community investment not an individual investment. Therefore, the process of reclaiming and redefining is ultimately for the benefit of the communities where the *mujeres* came from.

## CONCLUSION

The central question guiding this research was: in what ways does being a Mexican American Studies major influence the experiences of Latinas at a predominately White university? I also aimed to understand in what ways did being a Mexican American Studies major influence the aspirations of Latina undergraduates?

In the first chapter I outlined the significance and background of the study. I discussed how a lot of research done on the education of Latina/o students has focused on their underachievement. Although this is an important piece to understand the context of Latina/o education it is also important to understand strategies that have been successful. One successful strategy that has not received very much attention, until their recent attacks, have been ethnic studies programs. This is an area that needs more research and development especially given that most of the research that has been done on ethnic studies programs has focused on programs in high school settings. There is very little known about the impact that ethnic studies programs in institutions of higher education are having. Also significant is that Latina/o students are not only the largest and fastest growing ethnic/racial group (Villalpando, 2004), but are also the least educated major population group in the country (Fry, 2002). The discrepancies and leaks in the educational pipeline remain alarming and in need of research that can help us understand how to best support Latina/o students educational achievement.

Within this chapter I also gave a brief background and context of the study highlighting how timely the study was because of current policies and budget cuts. In Arizona house bill 2281 has banned ethnic studies programs in all school districts. I provided a history of how house bill 2281 was introduced and framed in Arizona specifically discussing events and influential figures that were central to the introduction of the bill. On a more local level I

discussed the current struggle to save ethnic and gender studies programs at the University of Central Texas (UCT). I discussed the political context of this struggle at UCT by mentioning events such as the Texas Board of Education's attempt to remove important figures in communities of color like César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.

The chapter concluded with my problem statement which argued that there is a need to look into ethnic studies programs at predominately White universities since research has found that these programs often help students of color successfully navigate White spaces and "culturally renourish." I concluded the chapter by outlining the purpose of the study which was to 1) study an educational approach (ethnic studies) that has shown success with students of color, 2) fill in the gap in the literature of ethnic studies programs in higher education, and 3) look at the gendered experience of Latinas at a predominately White institution.

In chapter two I reviewed the three bodies of literature that supported and framed by study. The first body of literature looked at the experiences of Latina/o students at predominately White universities (PWIs). Through a review of various studies I showed how students of color faced a lot more challenges and barriers than White students at PWIs which continue to not be accounted for or addressed by universities. Some of the challenges and barriers included higher levels of stress, racism manifested through racial microaggressions, higher levels of alienation and discrimination, and a higher chance of dropping out. The second body of literature looked at studies done on ethnic studies programs. I discussed the liberatory and critical approach courses in ethnic studies take. I illustrated the success these programs have had with high school youth and the lack of research done on programs in higher education. I also pointed out to the history of struggle and student activism in these programs and the need to continue fighting for them. The last body of literature focused on my theoretical perspectives



and discussed Chicana feminist thought and Tara Yosso's cultural wealth model. Within Chicana feminist thought I focused on the work by Emma Pérez and Gloria Anzaldúa. I discussed the concept of the third space and how I used it metaphorically and physically. I also drew on Pérez's *sitios y lenguas* framework to situate Mexican American Studies as a *sitio*, or space, where decolonized *lenguas*, or discourse, can occur. Similar to Pérez's third space I discussed Anzaldúa's borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness as well. Lastly, I discussed Yosso's cultural wealth model to explain how she posits that students of color do indeed hold cultural capital. Through the six forms of capital imbedded in her cultural wealth model she exemplified the knowledge and resources found in communities of color. These forms of capital are valued and nurtured in the families and communities of students of color.

In chapter three I discussed the qualitative research methods I utilized in this study, the site of the study, and my positionality. My methods included a one on one in-depth interview with each of the *mujeres* and one focus group with all the *mujeres*. To recruit participants I used a snow ball and convenience sampling method. After all data was collected and transcribed I went through a highly selective process of coding where I looked for reoccurring themes. My coding process involved me selecting text data, creating common categories, and labeling or naming these categories (i.e. reclaiming space, reclaiming knowledge, etc.). Through this thematic analysis I ended up with four themes; reclaiming knowledge, reclaiming the self, reclaiming space(s), and redefining *la mujer*. The site of the study was the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Central Texas. I gave a history of how the center came to be by highlighting the struggle it took to establish an ethnic studies center at a predominately White university. I also presented an overview of what the center looks like today and what type of services it offers. I concluded with my positionality explaining how this influenced the way I

put together the study and analyzed the data. I mentioned my insider and outsider position with the *mujeres* and the responsibility I felt for doing justice to their stories.

Lastly, in chapter four I discussed my findings through the four themes I found within the *mujeres*' interviews and focus group. I described Mexican American Studies (MAS) as a process of reclaiming and redefining and in doing so how MAS also provided a process for the *mujeres* to author new selves. For example, MAS supported Tanya's process of reconciliation with feelings of having to either be Mexican or American by providing a space where she could explore and examine these feelings through other scholars work like Gloria Anzaldúa and peers that also shared similar experiences. MAS provided her with the tools to negotiate her feeling of being "in between" and also gave her the knowledge to understand herself more. For Marianna, who was a double major in film, MAS served as a space to "renourish" from being in such a marginalizing space like film. Because MAS nurtured epistemic capital for her she was able to also use this capital to challenge and interrogate predominately White spaces like film. Similarly, the epistemic capital that Diana gained through MAS gave her the confidence to pursue an academic and lifelong agenda that was dedicated to challenging gender and racial norms. Diana, like the rest of the *mujeres*, also found strength in the space of MAS because of the knowledge she was provided with. It was this knowledge that helped Diana make sense of her historical positioning throughout her life and currently. For Erica, MAS represented a space where she could choose to author how to live in the metaphorical third space. MAS privileged the third space through the knowledge and tools it provided the *mujeres* with. MAS not only gave Erica a strong academic identity at UCT but also a space where she was able to explore and make sense of who she was. It solidified, challenged, and interrogated feelings of being "in between." For Zyanya, MAS essentially saved her from dropping out of UCT. MAS helped

Zyanya see herself as a student at UCT that belonged and could succeed there. The space of MAS nurtured self confidence and self love for Zyanya. Lastly, for Camila MAS gave her the epistemic capital to make sense of her conflicting past of growing up in a small White conservative community. Also, like the other *mujeres* that were double majors MAS provided her with a unique perspective to use in her other major, psychology. Camila had an interdisciplinary perspective that she could offer because of her MAS major. This is also how Camila was prompted to pursue an academic career that was interdisciplinary where she could mix her two majors; MAS and psychology. In conclusion, MAS nurtured a space where the *mujeres* could explore and examine issues affecting them directly. It provided them not only with knowledge that they could apply at UCT but beyond the university. Most importantly, the process of reclaiming and redefining was ultimately for the benefit of the communities where the *mujeres* came from.

To conclude my thesis I discuss the limitations of my study, directions for future research, and most importantly the implications of the study.

#### **LIMITATIONS & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The experiences of the six *mujeres* in my study cannot account for the experiences of *mujeres* at community colleges, private or liberal arts colleges/universities, and/or Hispanic serving institutions. The University of Central Texas is a research I predominately White university. The experiences of *mujeres* in ethnic studies majors at these other institutions may be vastly different and/or similar. Therefore, not only is this a limitation of my study but it is also direction where more research is needed. For example, it may be interesting to explore the

experiences of Mexican American Studies majors at a Hispanic serving institution. How does the context of being in a space that is no longer predominately White influence the experience?

Similarly, my study focused only on Latina women that were Mexican American Studies majors. It is also necessary to explore the experiences of other women of color that are pursuing ethnic studies majors. For example, what does the experience of African American women who are ethnic studies majors look like? Does African American Studies provide the same process of reclaiming and redefining? Although I was interested in the gendered experience in MAS another direction for future research would be looking at the experiences of men in these programs. How do their experience in ethnic studies programs differ from women's? Is there a gendered form of capital like *mestiza* capital that men gain through ethnic studies program? Or can they gain *mestiza* capital too? How about gendered consciousness? Do they become more conscious of their privilege as men through ethnic studies courses? These are all great questions that have the potential to add to the body of literature on ethnic studies.

Also important to think about is what ethnic studies can offer to White students. When we think about the way multicultural education has been framed in k-12<sup>th</sup> grade education it is typically discussed as a way of meeting the needs of students of color. It is assumed that only students of color possess "culture" and therefore they are the sole beneficiaries of this form of education. However when we start to think about culture as a practice, as experiences, as knowledge, and identity formation we can begin to highlight how multicultural education or ethnic studies is emancipatory for all humanity and benefits all students. In order for social change to occur we need to create allies that are just as critically conscious as we are.

Paula Moya (2002) describes the epistemic privilege that oppressed people have as "experiences that people who are not oppressed in the same way usually lack that can provide

them with information we all need to understand how hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society” (p. 38). This epistemic privilege benefits all humanity because it provides a better understanding and knowledge from various situated positionalities. In other words, as people of color who have been historically oppressed we cannot continue to talk amongst ourselves only, we need to engage White people as well in these conversations. From the work done on ethnic studies the student demographics in these programs tend to be largely students of color, which is understandable, however we need to seek to understand the experiences of White students in these programs as well. Therefore, it is important that research address how we can begin to create more dialogue with the White community and also explore the experiences of White students that are currently in ethnic studies programs. This may also help alleviate the rhetoric that these programs only target and benefit a specific race, as Tom Horne has accused the ethnic studies programs in Tucson, Arizona of doing.

Additionally, my study only focused on the experience of students and did not account for the experience of professors in MAS. As mentioned in my chapter on findings the *mujeres* described all of the professors in MAS as genuine and caring. They also felt a lot more comfortable reaching out to professors affiliated with MAS. Therefore, it would be beneficial to understand the experience of professors in these programs as well. What can we learn about these professors that can further teach us about how to best support students of color or about pedagogy? How do these professors conduct their classes that helps create an environment where students feel cared for not just academically but as individuals as well? Or is this caring pedagogy unique to professors only affiliated with ethnic studies? I recommend that research also address the experiences of professors in ethnic studies programs.

My study also did not look at any one particular course in MAS but rather focused on MAS as a whole. Yet, it would be interesting to do a study focused on one specific course in MAS. For example, many of the *mujeres* mentioned the course La Chicana as being their favorite course or the course that impacted them the most. What can we learn from one course in particular? Why did this course have a larger impact on the *mujeres*? Doing a case study on one specific course could provide us with a better understanding of what a successful ethnic studies course looks like. It would also help us understand the role of professors in ethnic studies courses and the material that seems to have the largest impact on students.

Lastly, I feel strongly about pursuing further research on the pedagogical insights that Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera* can provide us with. There is more to be learned from and explored with this iconic book. I was not surprised how much of the discussion in our focus group was based around this book since it had such a large impact on me personally as well. What can Anzaldúa teach us about how to best support women of color in education? Anzaldúa continues to resonate highly in the lives of young women of color and as educators we need to listen and learn how to incorporate her writing and knowledge with all students not just women and students of color.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

One major implication of this study points to the relationship between ethnic studies and student retention. All of the *mujeres* expressed that their MAS major was one of the major reasons that kept them in college and also pushed them to succeed. This implication resonates with David Stovall and Jeff Duncan-Andrade's (2007) evaluation study in Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) Ethnic Studies Program where they found that students who

participated in these programs were less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to go to college. Similarly, the *mujeres* in the MAS program all spoke about how the program kept them interested academically and gave them the confidence to also succeed academically. Also judging from the *mujeres*' future plans, it is fair to say that MAS also influenced their decision to pursue graduate school.

A great example of the relationship between MAS and student retention is Zyanya's narrative. If you recall, Zyanya spoke about how she failed all her courses her first semester of college and was on the verge of being dropped from the University of Central Texas (UCT). It wasn't until Zyanya started her MAS major that she began to see herself as a student at the university but most importantly as a student that could succeed at UCT. Zyanya's grades improved drastically once she started the MAS major along with her self confidence as a student at UCT. Similarly, Marianna also spoke about how MAS was what kept her in school. If you recall from Marianna's narrative she almost dropped out of high school because of loss of interest. Marianna shared that MAS was what kept her interested in school and also directed her towards pursuing graduate school. Just like Zyanya, when Marianna transferred to UCT she struggled a lot and in retrospect she shared with me that most likely she would have dropped out had she not been so interested in the courses she was taking.

Additionally, four out of the six women in the study were members of the McNair Scholars Program, an undergraduate program that prepares students of color to pursue graduate school and is quite challenging to get into. This certainly speaks to the type of students MAS is producing and retaining. Overall, all of the *mujeres* were excellent students, not only were they successful in academic terms but they were also very involved in extracurricular activities within and outside of UCT. Like Duncan-Andrade and Stovall's study, my study also suggests that

there is a positive relationship between student retention and ethnic studies programs. More research is needed to further understand this relationship but there are stronger indicators of how ethnic studies can help retain, specifically, students of color.

My findings also suggest adding epistemic and *mestiza* capital to Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model. Epistemic capital refers to a base of knowledge gained through a process of critical pedagogy where lived experiences and theory bridge to create a new critical way of understanding the world. Epistemic capital is developed through the fusion of two bases; the lived and historical experiences of people of color and the theoretical and written experience of people of color. MAS nurtured epistemic capital by acknowledging lived experiences as an important base of knowledge in understanding the self and others and by providing the written experience of people of color written by people of color. Similar to Moya's (2002) epistemic privilege it is a form of capital that is unique to people that have been historically oppressed however this capital is beneficial not only to people of color but to everyone because it helps us understand the knowledge and experiences from different positionalities. *Mestiza* capital is built on women of color's ability to navigate and cope with ambiguous spaces. Like Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, *mestiza* capital acknowledges and affirms a hybrid state. There are skills and a base of knowledge that one gains through experiences unique to women of color and are therefore worthy of recognition as a form of cultural capital. Like Yosso's six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital, educators need to find ways to nurture and develop these types of capital. We can use MAS to learn about how to support these types of capital found in community of colors especially epistemic and *mestiza* capital.



Implications also point to using ethnic studies programs like MAS to learn about how to best support students of color at predominately White institutions (PWIs). Many times students of color seek to recreate the notion of home when they occupy predominately White spaces. As my findings suggested the *mujeres* sought out MAS because it also created “a home away from home” for them. Some of the women struggled being away from their families and communities and therefore felt the need to find places or people that reminded them of home. MAS did a great job of doing this through their staff, professors, and courses. MAS became a safe haven where the *mujeres* felt they could truly be themselves within a marginalizing White space like UCT. They could speak in Spanish, they could go hang out at the office freely, and most importantly they felt like the program genuinely cared about them not just as student but as people as well. As discussed in my review of the literature students of color face a lot more challenges in PWIs therefore it is important that we find avenues to support them as best as we can. What can ethnic studies programs teach us about supporting students of color at PWIs? How can other majors or spaces in the university model this type of genuine caring? Again we need to take the opportunity to continue learning from ethnic studies and evaluate how important these programs really are not just in terms of academic purposes but also the value they provide in terms of student retention and support as well.

I would also like to suggest requiring all incoming college students to take an ethnic studies course. In a growing and drastically changing country it is important that we commit to understanding our experiences and ourselves. If higher institutions of learning are truly committed to producing students that are “well rounded” and prepared to work in a culturally diverse world it is important that we learn about each other’s experiences. As I discussed earlier, ethnic studies does not only benefit students of color but all students. It is a focus on

understanding each other and how different positionalities affect our identities and the way we view the world. This is especially significant for teacher education programs where typically the college of education will require a single course on “multicultural” education. Why not require students in these programs to take courses in ethnic studies? Yet this is not limited to just teacher education programs, students in all majors can benefit from a course in ethnic studies. In the end this is to benefit not only students but most importantly the future communities students plan to work with.

I would like to conclude by reminding us that all of the *mujeres* had no exposure to any form of ethnic studies courses prior to starting at the University of Central Texas. This serves as a reminder of the importance of teaching ethnic studies courses at the k-12<sup>th</sup> grade level. There are few ethnic studies programs in high schools and none that I am aware of in middle or elementary schools. Ethnic studies *should not* represent a process of reclaiming and redefining. This process would not exist if these courses were presented to students on their first day of school. I am suggesting that ethnic studies begin as early as kindergarten and continue on to graduate or professional school. We are robbing students from opportunities to create affirming identities and learn about histories of struggle, resiliency, and transformation. If we are truly committed to the education of *all* students we need to reconsider ethnic studies as an option to improve our educational system

As I reach the end of this thesis I wonder what will happen to future generations that may not have access to ethnic studies courses. Will Tom Horne and current education budget cuts succeed in whipping out all ethnic studies programs in this country? What will be the cost and consequences of whipping out all these programs? Certainly, it will affect students of color that continue to receive an education that is marginalizing of their lived experiences. I worry for

students that are currently straddling feelings of being in the “in between” or are living in the borderlands without a space that nurtures and examines the epistemic privilege and capital found in this space. I have always lived in the borderlands, in the in between, yet prior to being exposed to ethnic studies I occupied that space very painfully. To say that it is no longer painful would be lie but having been in spaces like ethnic studies I have come to appreciate the strength and resiliency that comes from being in the “in between” or the borderlands. Like Marianna said, I have stories to tell and knowledge’s that need to be understood.

The significance of destroying a space like ethnic studies is an attack on the history of struggle and fight that it took to get these spaces. This thesis serves as a testament of what ethnic studies can do for students. It is my hope that I have done justice to the stories of these *mujeres* and at the same time highlighted the importance and wealth of potential in ethnic studies. *¡En la lucha seguimos!*

## Appendix

<b>Name</b>	<b>Full Major/Minor</b>	<b>MAS Strand</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Identified As</b>	<b>First Generation College Student</b>	<b>Cultural Artifact</b>
Tanya	MAS & International Studies w/ a minor in Latina American Studies	Policy	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Mexican American	No	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>
Marianna	MAS & Film	Policy	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Chicana	Yes	Turquoise Beaded Necklace
Diana	MAS & History	Policy	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Xicana	Yes	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>
Erica	MAS	Cultural	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mexican	Yes	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>
Zyanya	MAS & Bilingual Education	Policy	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mexican American	Yes	Box of <i>Fideo</i>
Camila	MAS & Psychology w/ a minor in Educational Psychology	Cultural	4 <sup>th</sup>	Latina	Yes	Essay on Culture

Table 1- Study Participants

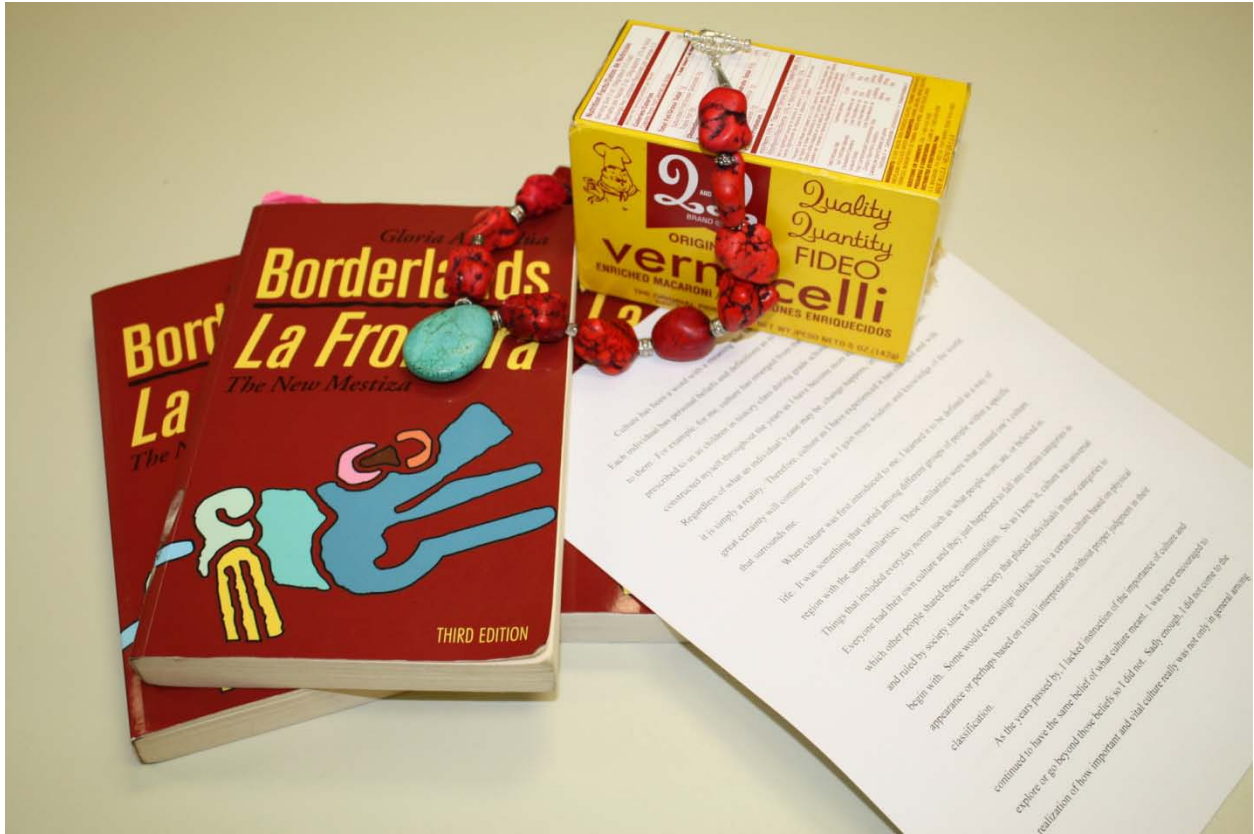


Illustration 1: *Mujeres'* Cultural Artifacts

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## Vita

Alma Itzé Flores was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco to Alma and Jorge Flores. At the age of eight, Alma along with her family immigrated to Santa Barbara, CA where she grew up. After graduating from high school in 2005 Alma moved to Los Angeles, CA where she studied at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). In 2009, Alma graduated from UCLA with her bachelor's degree in sociology and a double minor in Chicana/o studies and education. After graduating Alma made her third major move to Austin, Texas to pursue her master's degree in curriculum and instruction with a concentration in cultural studies at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). After graduating from UT in 2011 Alma relocated back to Los Angeles where she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at UCLA in social sciences and comparative education with a concentration in race and ethnic studies. She continues to pursue her passion through scholarship and activism to improve the education of Chicana/o students.

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