

Family Communication as Performance

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Every performance scholar we know has always said, “Show, don’t tell.” That is the mantra of performance, and in some ways it is the mantra that drives many families as they demonstrate love, compassion, and trust. Thus, in exploring family communication as performance, we start with the voices of our Other mothers to guide us as we show you family communication as performance for us as Chicanas.

One of my Other mothers, my doctoral advisor, D. Soyini Madison (1999) writes, “I enter performance as a witness and a doer. Performance is hard work” (p. 108). Like performance, family is hard work. Family as performance is also familiar work; “We see the familiar for the very first time and after that we can no longer speak or reason about what we thought we knew in the same exact way, lest we forget the performance” (Madison 1999, p. 108). Family as performance is based on reiterations and at times, alternated performances of change.

“Performance helps me see. It illuminates like good theory. It orders the world and lets the world loose” (Madison 1999, p.108). *Family orders the world and lets the world loose.*

On December 13th, 1974 my mother, Martha Muñoz, who was just fifteen years old gave birth to me on a Friday the 13th. I like to think the date of my birth explains a lot about me, but that is another story for another time. I like to think that in many ways we grew up together. For a while we lived with my grandparents, then on our own in various apartments, and then finally I made my way back and forth between my grandparents and mother. We were a solidly working class, Mexican American Catholic family. My grandmother, or nana as I call her, who was a first

generation American achieved an 8th grade education, while my grandfather, or tata, also a first generation American had only completed fourth grade. There was no shame here; both were always among the most educated people I had ever known. Educated by lived experience and theories in the flesh; “A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives - our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings - all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, p. 19). My mother was married before she could drive, and divorced well before she could vote. I wouldn’t meet my father for another twenty-one years. I don’t share any of this to create any kind of victim narrative for any of us. Rather, I do so to contextualize the history of struggle that my mother and other women in our family not only strived in, but thrived in. This is the case for many of us who are Chicana. My mother, like others before her, demonstrates what Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) terms a tolerance for ambiguity. Not only does the new mestiza, a woman born out of the borders of Mexican and U.S. American cultures, learn to juggle her multiple cultures, as Anzaldúa (2012) tells us, “She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (p. 101). This is the performance my mother taught me. This is the performance she showed me. This is the performance that the women in my family passed down through everyday acts and stories. This is a story of familial and feminist survival.

Joshua Chambers-Letson (2018) draws on the work of Diana Taylor who sees performance as “a means for the transmission of knowledge and affect vis-a-vis embodied practices defined as the repertoire” (p. 48). For Taylor (2003), “Multiple forms of embodied acts

are always present, though in a constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next” (p. 20). Our everyday actions such as sharing of our family history, or stories of *La Llorona*, or *El Cucuy* bonded us. They created practices or a repertoire.

My mother took all the shame and judgement directed toward her and used it to thrive. She took the hurt, the pain, the judgment, and the psychic trauma associated with contemporary and inherent colonial ideologies associated with the virgin/whore dichotomy that affects all of us as Chicanas, and turned them into something beautiful and empowering for herself and me. This tolerance for ambiguity that enables us to be shapeshifters and cultural translators took her from Phoenix College for an Associate’s degree, to Arizona State University for Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees to eventually the University of Texas to get her Ph.D. I followed her example, attending the same community college and eventually transferring to the same university to complete an undergraduate degree. It was her tenacity and support that enabled me to dare to leave the state and the safety of my family to attend a doctoral program out of state. North Carolina seemed a world away to Nana.

I am reminded by Chambers-Letson (2018) that “performance *is* pedagogical: ‘Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge’” (p. 49). I will note however, that my mother got her Ph.D. after I had received mine. Her story was a story of resilience, strength, and determination. The kind of resilience, strength, and determination that drive many of us who are Chicana. The kind of resilience, strength, and determination that are intimately connected to the everyday experiences of the new mestiza. I start with lived experience because that is at the

heart of Gloria Anzaldúa's (2012) work. The story. The theory in the flesh. These are the things that mattered to her and should matter to us all.

Family isn't just about blood, it's about choice. As a queer Chicana, my family of choice (Pattisapu and Calafell 2012) is just as significant as the one I was raised in. It's about the embodied practices and shared repertoire we draw upon to get through the cruelties of everyday life in a world that doesn't want you to survive, let alone thrive. Anzaldúa (2012) wrote that the borderlands were occupied by the misfits and queers. This is where my family of choice lives. I am cautious about who I share my space with and who is in the family of choice: students, collaborators, and Others. I am here extending this invitation to you now. Will you take it? Can I trust you? Family sustains, but with it at times also comes risk. This is a risk I am willing to take. *I am vulnerable*. Please tell me your story as well.

Accepting the Invitation: Sharing an Other Performance

I am the daughter of Mexican immigrants who braved an angry sun and biting night winds to cross the desert that led them to their promised land-- the United States of America. "It was in 1986, mija. Two years before you were born when your dad and I crossed together." Her crossing story is as long as the desert they crossed so a big chunk of the story always gets skipped and all of a sudden the scene comes where my mom runs despite her lungs begging her for air. "And I ran. I ran fast. No podía respirar. I saw the sky light up. At first I thought it was lightning but I did not know because el coyote¹ told me not to look back no matter what. But then the light got closer and closer."

¹ A coyote is a person who smuggles Latin Americans across the US border, typically for a high fee.

This story of mami's rite of passage is one of our first family stories that I was born into (Koenig Kellas and Trees 2013) and a constant staple at our home. The performance of this story nonchalantly creeps up when one of us is not giving their best effort in an endeavor. If my parents can cross dangerous borders we can do anything-- *that* is the moral of the story. Because this story is my mom's motivation ammo, I have memorized every segment, my mind knows the sequence of the scenes. The next scene is always the most vivid in my mind. The one where my mom is almost there, the place "where two worlds merge" (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 34). I always root for her, even though I already know the ending.

She's almost there. She runs faster.

The lightning in the heavens transforms into a massive spotlight.

The siren scolds them.

The lights began to grace her heels.

Faster, mami. Faster.

The light snatches her ankles.

She falls to her knees. Her hands know what to do.

That time, the hunters in green uniforms (Anzaldúa, 1987) run faster and win that race.

"And they took us to jail the first time we tried to cross. We were new at this. Unprepared. We didn't know the tricks yet." I am not sure if she does this out of pity for those who listen, but somehow the ending of this story transforms into a love story for the books. "And there we were," in a cold concrete cell, "*dos inocentes* huyendo de la pobreza" "We just wanted a better life for our kids one day. For you."

When my mom tells this story, my throat collects tears that I quickly swallow and then my stomach boils them into anger. Two fugitives seeking soil that bore more fruit. *What a crime.*

But her story always works because it gives me meaning (Galvin et al. 2019). The fire in my stomach motivates me.

My mom tells this story mostly from her perspective and as the main character, but if there is a different lesson she wants us to learn, she makes my dad the main character. Oh my sweet dad. Though patriarchy commands machismo to be his front stage, below my father's stoic demeanor, is gentle kindness. He is smart. He is resilient. He is our wheel, that's for sure and his life is one that any telenovela writer would long to emulate- but that is a story for another time.

Today, I continue to tell you about my mother and about the favorite moments that I have had the honor to witness. In these moments, she is just being her, she is just being my mom, but like a child indulging their favorite movie, I'm diligently watching her perform. Maria del Rosario is her name, but like many migrant women who even after crossing the border continue to cross the daily trenches of whiteness to taste their American dream, her name recoiled over time to fit neatly within the Anglo palette. Now, this side of the border knows her as Rosie. To me, she is mami or mom depending on the context and what language I feel like speaking. The moment my mom landed in rural Nevada she worked the garlic fields with my dad. A true campesina willing to be tattooed by yet another angry sun to keep her family fed in Mexico and to garnish tasty American family meals. Garlic is delicious, just not when its pungent scent kidnaps your already limited wardrobe and stains your fingers for months. So for my mom, receiving a promotion to be a dishwasher at a local restaurant was a true delight.

This job opened many other opportunities for my mom to expand her income as she was able to gather houses to clean. Often, mami took me to avoid paying for child care. Sometimes I would nap in the car or sit in the kitchen while she cleaned. Other times when she let me, I would help her vacuum. My favorite house to clean with her was Sara Lorenzo's. My memory recalls

this house as the house of fine aromas. The house where my mom would get on her knees and diligently massage a lemon oil onto every piece of sandalwood. The house with horses who rested in the stall by the backyard, with large T.V. 's, exotic fur rugs whose smell welcomed us all the way from the garage door. The house with Bryers boxed French vanilla ice-cream. A delicacy.

Oh how I loved this house. It was fancy and smelled like a rich woman. And Sara was nice as she would offer me ice cream and attempt to talk to me in Spanish because I barely knew English then. She was always so elegant with her perfectly lined lipstick even on an early summer Monday morning. When we would leave her home, I imagined her going to her upstairs living room, sitting by her freshly sparkled window smoking a cigarette on a stick tucked under one of her heavy fur coats like Cruella De Vil did in *101 Dalmatians*.

One day, as we were cleaning Sara's bathroom my mom noticed lipsticks in the trash can. Before my mom emptied it she asked Ana if it was okay to keep it. Sara was delighted to "gift" these to my mom and thereafter she would give my mom her unwanted makeup. "Ay Dios. Mija! Esto es muuuy fino! Es lan com!" (lancome). On extra special days, she would also give my mom mini perfumes which as I got older I realized they were samples. Elegant nonetheless and to get to bring the aroma of wealth home was just like Christmas morning for my mom. Over time, my mom saved to treat herself to a bigger bottle of this perfume and I will never forget the day when I witnessed my mom ask Sara where she purchased her perfume. Her response was not a place, a boutique, or a store but a simple reminder of where we belonged on the socioeconomic spectrum, "Oh no, Rosie. This stuff is super, super expensive." And that was that, mami never asked again.

We made it through the survival years and so my mom stopped cleaning houses. She had saved enough money, collected the bits of knowledge she had learned as a dishwasher, as well as all of her recipes she inherited from her grandma and she opened her very own Mexican restaurant. My mom did not need a high school diploma or a business degree to shapeshift into a successful entrepreneur. “All you need is *ganas*, a dream, and hard work,” she says. Her restaurant feeds her customers, multiple charities in Mexico, and it employs people that started out like us. I don’t tell her enough, but I love witnessing her thrive.

Just the other day my mom and I were at Macy’s smelling perfumes when all of a sudden she shoved a bottle in my face. “Oh, *mija*!! It smells like Sara. Do you remember?!” It definitely was Sara’s scent confined in a golden Chanel flask.

“Sara most definitely would wear Chanel. But I like this one better, mom. It is sweeter, younger, and not so heavy. It’s by Chanel too.”

My mom looked at Sara’s perfume. Then glanced at the one in my hand.

If I knew my mother, I know that at that moment she had made her decision. And so yet again, I watched.

The woman behind the counter approached us and asked if we needed help, “Hi, can I grab something for you?”

With her bold, beautiful accent my mom picked up the Sara perfume and said, “Yes please. But first, how much does this one cost?”

“\$110. It is a classic sophisticated scent. It is so feminine you can’t go wrong with that one.”

“And how much does this one cost?” My mom asked pointing to the one I had suggested.

“That one is \$120. Not as bold and rich but also such a beautiful scent.”

My mom looked at me, quickly considered her choices, and indulged in two final smells.

“I will take both, please.”

For most, this experience seems like an ordinary mother daughter moment, to me it meant more. My mom choosing the first perfume was simply a gift of reclaimed agency and modeling self-empowerment. She chose herself. This is the performance my mom taught me. I hope that every time she sprays that big, complete, bold bottle of Chanel on herself, she remembers who she is and that she has arrived. And well, my favorite part of this story is her choosing the second perfume. Because at that moment, she chose me too. She knew I was watching then and knows I am watching now. Just like I know my son is watching me.

Conclusion: Family as Performance

We tell the stories of our Other mothers.

Stories of hope.

Of raw resilience.

Of survival.

Of thriving.

Our mothers perform for us as we watch and listen diligently and though each performance teaches us something unique, one thing is for sure:

“The revolution begins at home” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, p. xlvii).

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