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Remaking Culture and Truth Cultural and Necro-Citizenship in the Borderlands

Miguel Díaz-Barriga

When I first arrived at Stanford University in the fall of 1983, Renato Rosaldo was working on an article for the *Annual Review of Anthropology* on the history of Chicana and Chicano anthropology (Rosaldo 1985). He invited me to read through the cardboard boxes of articles and books on the subject that he had collected. I dutifully did so and met weekly with Renato to discuss the materials in the boxes. Reading these books and articles so early in my graduate student career was formative because it provided me with a template of the history of Chicana/o anthropology through which to engage the discipline. Additionally, it is now clear to me that in our discussions Renato was already formulating the concept of "cultural citizenship." As it turned out, this concept would guide my future academic work, from my dissertation research on urban social movements in Mexico City in the 1990s to my present project on the construction of the U.S. Mexico border wall.

The Concept of Cultural Citizenship: Beyond Recovery and Critique

In the early 1990s, when I first began to engage the book *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Rosaldo's work was transforming anthropology. Up to that time, scholars had not viewed cultural *mestizaje* and borderlands as contested sites of social creativity and power. These concepts had only circulated in the academy in limited contexts, being used to describe classic Mexican nationalism or marginalized frontiers. There was little theoretical dialogue between anthropology and a growing body of work in Chicana/o studies. Cultural anthropologists were enmeshed in

debates over symbolic and structural analysis, cultural as practice, ethnography as text, and how to incorporate the theories of Marx and Foucault into understandings of culture and power.

This began to change in the early 1990s, a turbulent time in the field. Anthropologists were mainstreaming exciting developments in Mexican American and feminist studies into the discipline of anthropology—yet in doing so, they were also blunting their critical edge. For many students at the time, including me, Culture and Truth was a breath of fresh air. The book not only provided a map through the postmodern debates of the time; it also charted out new ways of understanding the contributions of women and minorities in the field and, equally important, engaging in productive criticism. Feminist, Chicana/o, and other "minority" scholars were, for example, experimenting with ethnographic writing before it became the rage in postmodern anthropology. In general, postmodernists theorized the possibilities of alternative writing strategies without recognizing the long history of experimentation within the discipline. Two notable early examples of books that engaged the politics and poetics of representation were Américo Paredes's "With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero (1959) and Jean L. Briggs's Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family (1971).

This act of "recovery" would in itself make *Culture and Truth* an impressive book. Rosaldo, however, does not dwell on this argument, but rather moves on to a more ambitious project of remaking social analysis. His drive to move beyond critique and recovery explains in part how Rosaldo could be such a generous and engaging teacher yet at the same time rigorous and difficult. As his students, we were taught that critique and recovery were never enough. Rather, we were to focus on moving the discipline forward.

Rosaldo's remaking of social analysis relies on the notion of cultural citizenship to theorize how areas of cultural invisibility inform relations of power. These areas of invisibility appear (a) within the classic norms of ethnography, where the researcher is seen as occupying a detached and objective social space, and (b) at the top of the social hierarchy, where

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members of dominant groups see themselves as being cultureless, as inhabiting a social space that is somehow not organized by cultural norms. These areas of cultural invisibility, as Rosaldo recounts in the case of his own fieldwork, allow ethnographers to overlook both cultural movement and borderlands:

The broad rule of thumb under classic norms to which Michelle Rosaldo and I still ambivalently subscribed seems to have been that if it's moving it isn't cultural. . . . Social analysts sat at the "postcultural" top of a stratified world and looked down the "cultural" rungs to its "precultural" bottom. Similarly, the borders between nations, classes, and cultures were endowed with a curious kind of hybrid invisibility. They seemed to be a little of this and a little of that, and not quite one or the other. Movements between such seemingly fixed entities as nations or social classes were relegated to the analytical dustbin of cultural invisibility. Immigrants and socially mobile individuals appeared culturally invisible because they were no longer what they once were and not yet what they could become. (Rosaldo 1993, 209)

As an aspect of social hierarchy, members of dominant groups often see themselves as full citizens while portraying marginalized and excluded groups as profoundly cultured. They do not recognize members of marginalized groups, even when legal citizens, as full cultural citizens. Rosaldo summarizes the relationship between culture and citizenship as follows: "Full citizens lack culture, and those most culturally endowed lack full citizenship" (1993, 198).

In the introduction to the 1993 edition of *Culture and Truth*, Rosaldo more fully spells out the concept of cultural citizenship in the context of the controversies surrounding diversification of the curriculum at Stanford and elsewhere. The concept of cultural citizenship renders visible the processes by which members of minoritized groups struggle to belong and to participate fully in the academy. As Rosaldo states in his essay "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy":

The term *cultural citizenship* is a deliberate oxymoron, a pair of words that do not go together comfortably. Cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense. It claims that, in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others. The notion of belonging means full membership in a group and the ability to influence one's destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions. (1994, 402)

This formulation of cultural citizenship revolves around the seemingly contradictory notion that engaging in cultural practices deemed different is fundamentally about belonging. As William Flores and Rina Benmayor point out in their introduction to the volume *Latino Cultural Citizenship*, Latina/os do not necessarily see their cultural practices as being about difference, but rather as about claiming social space (1998, 15). The problem is not with Latina/o cultural practices, but with a dominant culture that cannot recognize difference as enriching the social fabric. And, as Rosaldo (1998) points out in his essay in that volume, the state's program of militarizing the border to keep "us" safe from "illegals" is part of a wider national project to erase the cultural citizenship of Latina/os. In light of the current construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, Rosaldo's words seem prescient.

Indeed, the current debate about immigration reform in the United States provides a good example of the dominant culture's inability to embrace the value of having a diversity of languages and cultures within the nation. Conservatives argue for more restrictive immigration laws in large part because of the threat they perceive from Latina/os, who, these critics say, refuse to assimilate. Improved communication technologies and ease of travel to and from Latin America allow Latina/os in the United States to maintain ties with their home countries, which advocates of assimilation see as a bad thing. Conservatives also stress that because of the multicultural nature of the U.S. educational system, the school system no longer plays a role in assimilating migrants. But a focus on assimilation underlies even more liberal approaches to immigration. In an analysis of Barack Obama's speeches and policy statements during the 2008 presidential campaign, Margaret Dorsey and I (2007) found that then Senator Obama's calls for immigration reform were linked to more general arguments about the possibilities of assimilating Latina/o immigrants. In the present political climate, the positive aspects of cultural difference are brushed aside in favor of the question, can they assimilate? What then about Latina/os who are already citizens—are we already assimilated?

In *Culture and Truth*, Rosaldo critiques this view of migration and assimilation through a brilliant rendering of the "melting pot":

North American notions of the "melting pot" make immigration a site of cultural stripping away. Seen from the dominant society's point of view, the process of immigration strips individuals of their former cultures, enabling them to become America citizens—transparent, just like you and me, "people without culture." Often called acculturation (though

deculturation seems more apt), this process produces postcultural citizens of the nation-state. In this view, social mobility and cultural loss become conflated, for to become middle class in North America is purportedly to become part of the culturally invisible mainstream. The immigrants, or at any rate their children or grandchildren, supposedly become absorbed into a national culture that erases their meaningful past—autobiography, history, heritage, language, and all the rest of the so-called cultural heritage. Where José Rizal and Gregorio Cortez once stood, there shall be George Washington and the Texas Rangers. (1993, 209–10)

As in the case of his characterization of classic norms in ethnography, through the caricature of the "Lone Ethnographer" and description of "Nacirema," Rosaldo's critique engages dominant norms through a mixture of insightful commentary and biting irony. In the case of Nacirema (American spelled backward), Rosaldo draws upon Horace Miner's (1956) work to show how an objectivist description of US culture renders every-day practices as unfamiliar and almost unrecognizable. Indeed, both the "Lone Ethnographer" and members of the US middle class seem to meld into a cultural nothingness, detached from their own and other cultures. The assimilated middle class becomes, if one takes dominant norms to their logical conclusion, "decultured" and "postcultural." The violence of stripping people of their cultures and histories, their meaningful past, is made convincingly apparent. Would we really want the Texas Rangers to replace Gregorio Cortez?

Cultural Citizenship and Borderlands in Mexico City and Pennsylvania

Rosaldo's understandings of cultural citizenship and borderlands were key for defining my own ethnographic projects as I began publishing my field research on urban social movements in Mexico City. Culture and Truth was a major influence on my first work on urban culture, "The Culture of Poverty as Relajo" (Díaz-Barriga 1997). Rosaldo's writing about subaltern humor—he notes Paredes's (1977) critique of anthropological writings on Mexican Americans and the uses of irony in Zora Neal Hurston's work (1935)—taught me to be on the lookout for jokes and irony. (Those readers who know Renato personally will recall that one has to be ready for his sharp sense of humor when talking to him about any topic, even social theory.) In his reading of Karl Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question," Rosaldo describes the anguished interpretations of Marx's apparent anti-Semitism, all the more disturbing because Marx himself was Jewish.

Rosaldo emphasizes that one should not read Marx's essay "straight" (1993, 190). In criticizing "practical, real Judaism," Rosaldo says, Marx is in fact criticizing the Christian state in which "the more communitarian 'species bonds' of political life have been lost, and civil society has dissolved into a world of mutually hostile, selfish monads" (190). In Rosaldo's reading, Marx turns stereotypes about Jews into a critique of the capitalist-Christian state.

As it turns out—and this was unexpected—this non-straight mode of reading helped me understand the culture of poverty. While conducting field research in Mexico City, I had become attuned to the sharp give-and-take of *echando relajo* (a term that can be roughly translated as "cutting up" or "joking around"). One day, while reading Oscar Lewis's *Five Families*, I found myself laughing out loud. Guillermo Gutiérrez, the patriarch of the Gutiérrez family, was telling Lewis about his plans to sell a modern design for bordellos to the mayor. Lewis reports that Mr. Gutiérrez even made a cardboard model:

He also had worked out a design for a modern house of prostitution, a problem that had come to his attention when the newspapers had publicized the appalling condition of houses of ill-fame on nearby Tintero Street. He had constructed a cardboard model of a building in the hope of selling the plan to the mayor who had declared he meant to improve the city. The building, roofed in glass, had no windows in the walls and only two narrow entrances, one at the front and another at the back of a long central hallway. . . . Each room was to be equipped with two cement beds (to avoid bedbugs) with mattresses, a washstand, and two cement chairs. (1959, 143)

Mr. Gutiérrez goes on to describe his model at length and then claims that the mayor will pay him 2,000 pesos for the plan. Lewis did not register this as a joke. In my article, "The Culture of Poverty as Relajo" (Díaz-Barriga 1997), I argue that Gutiérrez's statements are a direct commentary on the modernist economic and cultural program of the Mexican government during the 1950s and 1960s, including attempts at urban renewal by leveling poor neighborhoods. My article shows that Lewis's informants were engaged in irony and *echando relajo*. Ironically, scholars had not caught this use of humor among Lewis's informants (partially due, I think, to our serious reading habits). In the end, I argue that Lewis, without realizing it, got the culture of poverty right (61). Indeed, many Mexicans would agree that living in poverty in Mexico City *es un relajo* (is a chaotic joke).

As I focused my work on social movements in Mexico City, I stubbornly resisted falling into the debates that motivated most writing about Mexican culture at the time. I wanted to develop a new vocabulary for understanding urban poverty. My next article, on the uses of the concept necesidad among residents of low-income neighborhoods (Díaz-Barriga 1996), focused on how urban dwellers and the state conceive of the urban poor as gente necesitada (needy people). In the article, I describe how the state, urban social movements, women's groups, and residents of a low-income area in Mexico City contest the concept's meanings in terms of what it means to have necesidad, the causes of necesidad, and the best means of fulfilling necesidades. My aim is to show how urban residents creatively seek to redefine their social circumstances both by articulating alternative urban development projects and by contesting the meanings of urban poverty. These alternative plans include designing new forms of urban space that incorporate urban gardens, workspaces, and alternative recycling technologies into low-income neighborhoods.

In two articles that followed, I employed Rosaldo's notion of cultural borderlands as a tool for understanding the participation of women in urban social movements (Díaz-Barriga 1998, 2000a). In these articles I argue that urban social movements attempt to improve the quality of life in low-income areas by creating a borderlands space between the public and domestic domains through the organization of collective kitchens, gardens, and childcare co-ops. I detail how activist organizing, both outside and within urban neighborhoods, faces the constraints of sexism, inflexible and repressive state policies, and a lack of resources. I also show how women who reject the projects of social movements are also involved in struggling against the notion that a "woman's place is in the home," something they do through a variety of strategies, including migrating to the United States.

In "The Domestic/Public in Mexico City" (Díaz-Barriga 2000a), I wrote about a woman named María García, who had migrated to Mexico City from a rural area of Mexico to work as a maid. In our discussions, she told me about the extreme poverty that she had experienced in the countryside and the lack of dignity and respect that she endured working as a domestic in the city. After marrying, María was able to raise a family by purchasing an industrial sewing machine, which she housed in her living room, and selling school bags that she sewed at home. She emphasized to me that her young daughter, Flor, would never work as a maid. When her husband was injured on the job, María attempted to migrate to the United States to seek domestic work. She was caught by the border patrol three times, and after exhausting her savings, returned home. She continued her sewing job to keep the family afloat. Flor also learned how to sew school bags.

Flor is now attempting to complete a BA in anthropology while taking care of her own two children. Flor's parents stopped supporting her studies when they found out that she wanted to major in anthropology, since, according to them, this was a career without a future. Flor writes me regularly about the lack of support that she receives from her husband, who does not help with child care. Flor studies after she puts the children to bed. During the 2009 Christmas holidays she sent her husband away with the kids in order to focus on her studies. From María, who escaped the countryside only to suffer the indignities of being a maid, to Flor, coming from a low-income background and attempting to make it in academia, these struggles and their meanings can only be captured through analysis of individual narratives.

In my next series of projects I engage Rosaldo's notions of narrative analysis to write about the changing meanings of vergüenza (shame) and La Virgen de Guadalupe for Chicanos, that is, for Mexican American men. In one article (Díaz-Barriga 2001), I explore the meanings of vergüenza found in works by Ernesto Galarza (1971), Sandra Cisneros (1986), and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). I contrast these meanings to those found in more traditional anthropological works that seek to identify the characteristics of "shame cultures" (often contrasting them to "guilt cultures") rather than look at how social actors contest and modify the meanings of shame. I also discuss the lack of writing about vergüenza by male Chicano authors. A male-based critique is needed, I argue, because of the deep entrenchment of vergüenza within both patriarchy and notions of proper behavior, including allegiance to one's community. I take a similar approach in my writing on La Virgen de Guadalupe (2002) by pointing out that vigorous reexamination of the meanings of Our Lady should move beyond transformations in Chicana identities. My starting point is the edited volume by Ana Castillo, Goddess of the Americas (1997), which explores changing meanings of La Virgen for both Chicanas and Chicanos.

In my article on *distracción* (which roughly translates as "amusement"), I extend Rosaldo's notion of cultural citizenship by linking it to Raymond Williams's (1977) concepts of hegemony and cultural emergence (Díaz-Barriga 2008). Rosaldo's own engagement with Williams's work in *Culture and Truth* focuses on the need to bring emotions and tempo into social analysis:

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams similarly argues that objectivist social analysis conflates society with already completed processes. When society is reduced to fixed forms, social processes elude analysis. Williams argues that the processes he calls structures of feeling (a deliberate paradox) both shape and reflect the quality of social relations. Structures of

feeling differ from such concepts as "world-view" and "ideology" because they are just emerging, still implicit, and not yet fully articulate. (1993, 106)

In "Distracción: Notes on Cultural Citizenship, Visual Ethnography, and Mexican Migration to Pennsylvania," I build upon Rosaldo's analysis by more explicitly linking structures of feeling to articulations of cultural citizenship. I describe how Mexican migrants in Pennsylvania articulate their feelings of not belonging to the wider community through their body language, physical positioning, and concepts that they employ in describing their participation in community events. Specifically, I argue that Mexican migrants' discomfort with participating in an annual mushroom festival, a community-wide celebration of the mushroom industry that employs many Mexican migrants as pickers, represents a "structure of belonging" (playing off Williams's notion of "structures of feeling"). In a video that he made about the mushroom festival, Luis Tlaseca represents this feeling of not belonging. Tlaseca, who first migrated to Pennsylvania to work in the mushroom industry and is now a labor activist, used video as a tool for prompting workers to articulate their feelings about labor conditions, belonging, and race relations. This video, along with a protest that Tlaseca helped organize during the festival, thus represents an emergent form of claiming cultural citizenship that links expressions of feelings with political organizing.

The U.S.-Mexico Border

It is fitting that I, as Renato Rosaldo's former student, am now doing research on the U.S.-Mexico border. For Rosaldo, the U.S.-Mexico border region informs a rich understanding of the ways that social actors creatively rework culture. Rosaldo focuses on how border residents simultaneously engage Spanish and English, creatively integrate U.S. and Mexican cultures, and challenge a dominant culture that does not register borderland identities. Critiques of Rosaldo's writing on the borderlands emphasize the need for a more analytical approach to the specificities of deterritorialized capital (Heyman 1994) and the complicated relationship that Mexican Americans have with Mexico and Mexican nationals (Vila 2000). These competing truths about the border, and border culture, do indeed coexist as partial truths. The border is, of course, not just one place or entity. Residents of the border, as indicated in my own interviews, do perceive a lack of respect toward their mixing of Spanish and English when they are outside of the border region (both in the United States and in Mexico).

The uneven impacts of free trade, the drug violence in Mexico, and the militarization of both sides of the border are all topics that inform how border residents conceptualize and talk about the region. At the same time, many residents recognize the social richness of this bicultural region and talk openly about ways to foster and deepen their culture. In writing about cultural borderlands, Rosaldo points us to understanding the social creativity of residents of the borderlands, a social space laced with power and inequality that lends itself to multiple truths.

In my current research, a National Science Foundation-funded project titled "The Border Wall, Immigration, and Citizenship on the United States/ Mexico Border," my research partner Margaret E. Dorsey and I explore how the border wall has affected articulations of cultural citizenship among border residents. The wall project raises issues that are critical for understanding the future of cultural citizenship and democracy in the United States (Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey 2011; Dorsey and Díaz-Barriga 2010, 2011). For one, the US government through the Department of Homeland Security waived more than thirty-five laws in order to construct the border wall, thus severely limiting the ability of environmental groups, immigrant rights organizations, and landowners to challenge its construction. For another, the construction of the border wall demarcates the southern border as a zone of death and exclusion, a zone of necro-power where militarization and migrant deaths are normalized. Residents of the border, we argue, are being transformed into necro-citizens—citizens subjected to the forces of necro-power. In our research, we ask to what extent the border wall, and the waiving of laws by government agencies, will lead to the expansion of necro-power throughout the United States. Are incipient expressions of cultural borderlands, as sites of cultural creativity, now limited by their demarcation as being within war zones? Is necro-citizenship killing cultural citizenship?

Border residents do not feel as if they are treated as full citizens of the United States. This marginalization is ironic, given the strong sense of patriotism that most border residents feel toward this country. It is illustrative to compare two different understandings of the border, that of former Colorado congressman Thomas Tancredo and that of border resident Reynaldo Anzaldúa. On April 28, 2008, Representative Tancredo attended a congressional hearing hosted by the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College. At this hearing, a number of Brownsville landowners, activists, and concerned citizens expressed their opposition to construction of a border wall in South Texas, citing the government's seizure of property, among other issues. The presentations made at the hearing

were well thought out, and Tancredo initially responded with a series of counter-arguments. But toward the end of the hearing he became shrill, asserting that too many people in South Texas do not think that borders matter. He criticized the audience's "multiculturalist attitude" and stated in an exasperated tone, "If you do not want a fence between you and Mexico I suggest that you build the fence around the northern part of your city." In just a few sentences, the congressman cast aside the rational debate being conducted at the hearing and marginalized the mainly Mexican American audience, accusing them of being multiculturalist and loyal to Mexico.

Rev Anzaldúa, a Vietnam veteran, former customs agent, and resident of a small border town, is a staunch opponent of the border wall. He has presented his views in interviews with CNN, the New York Times, and other media outlets. In his presentations and activism against the border wall he always wears a red, white, and blue hat with a patch that designates his Veterans of Foreign Wars post. He wears the hat because he feels that the rest of the United States sees neither border residents nor opponents of the border wall as being full citizens. He argues that illegal immigration and drug smuggling are not border problems but issues that confront the entire United States. As an ex-customs agent, Anzaldúa argues for a more traditional approach to border security, one that avoids militarization. His hyper-performance of citizenship, by wearing his patriotic VFW cap, thus serves as a perfect example of the unevenness of cultural citizenship that Rosaldo describes in Culture and Truth. Indeed, Anzaldúa starts his talks by pointing to his patriotic hat and emphasizing that he does care about the border region, that he has studied border issues in depth, and that he is concerned about the entire United States.

Overall Lessons From Culture and Truth

One of the reasons that Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth* is just as important today as when it was first published is that the social issues of inequality, power, and marginalization that he described are, unfortunately, still central features of our society. Political discourse on Latina/o migration still focuses on the impossibility of assimilation into a postcultural middle class. Flor García, like her mother, still struggles to gain dignity and a career in a patriarchal society. The culture wars continue, with politicians like Tom Tancredo throwing out the word "multiculturalist" as an insult. And Mexican American veterans like Rey Anzaldúa still feel compelled to prove their legal and cultural citizenship.

When Culture and Truth was first published, Rosaldo's colleagues in anthropology did not, by and large, view the book in a positive light. Indeed, among many of Rosaldo's senior colleagues the book hit a nerve. As James Clifford points out, many postmodern anthropologists were aghast at the use of the word "truth" in the title.³ I recall one senior Stanford faculty member commenting that there was a lot of culture in the book but not much truth. On the other hand, for many younger scholars, including me, the book was groundbreaking: it both provided tools to analyze the interstitial zones of culture that many of us were interested in researching and highlighted social spaces that many of us inhabited. In the early 1990s, when I was a new PhD, the concepts of cultural citizenship and borderlands guided not only my research but also how I engaged in academic politics and expressed my identity as a Chicano anthropologist.

Some twenty years after its publication, anthropologists are still actively engaging the theoretical and methodological issues that Rosaldo raises in his innovative work. Scholars in the field are theorizing about the cultural dynamics that inform citizenship while charting out its various expressions—as flexible, empty, or biological, for instance. The notion of cultural borderlands, with its focus on multiplex identities and the micropolitics of power, still serves as a point of departure for the critical engagement of identification, globalization, and culture. Finally, the book raises fundamental questions about the role of subjectivity and creativity in the construction of social truth(s) that the discipline has yet to mine.

An essay in honor of a great social theorist should probably end with a series of abstract statements. I would like to take a different tack by recounting the practical lessons that I learned from *Culture and Truth*.

- Always be prepared to laugh. Humor is an integral part of life and scholarship.
- Listening is important. Narrative analysis should not be limited to what interlocutors say but should also attend to what they write (and, I would add, film).
- Sites of social creativity often happen in social interstices, places that are overlooked or looked down upon.
- Truth is not only about the actual but about the possible.
- There is no monopoly on truth.
- Articulations of cultural citizenship within the academy and in our society, including at the U.S.-Mexico border, are inextricably linked.

Renato, I think, would appreciate how many of these lessons are not only about theory but also about life.

Notes

- 1. The joint oversight field hearing, "Walls and Waivers: Expedited Construction of the Southern Border Wall and the Collateral Impacts on Communities and the Environment," was held by the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, then chaired by Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Arizona), and Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs, then chaired by Del. Madeleine Z. Bordallo (D-Guam).
- 2. See "Tom Tancredo's Controversial Remark at the UT Brownsville," posted on YouTube by TXReporter, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiQWc4wK2l8&NR=1.
- Comments made during a presentation on a panel honoring Renato Rosaldo at the 2006 American Anthropological Association annual meeting in San Jose, California.

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