

Spilling the Tea on *Chisme*: Storytelling as Resistance, Survival, and Therapy

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This article explores how gossip (or *chisme*) as a genre functions in the Latinx community and the ways it has been remediated as a textual genre to serve different purposes.

The women I love do not text or write to me. Both my mother and grandmother do not own cell phones. That sounds crazy, right? Believe me, they have tried to embrace the idea. Who wouldn't? A tiny slab of glass and metal connecting you to the rest of the world sounds amazing, and that's because it is. But not to my mom and grandma. They value oral communication and find any writing genre, whether it's a letter, e-mail, or text message, difficult to compose.

This aversion to writing can be traced back to the literate activities my mom and grandma used in their youth. My grandma and her family grew up in Jojutla (pronounced "hohootla"), Morelos, Mexico. Although she attended elementary school for a couple of years, she did not complete her schooling. Luckily, my grandma's parents owned a convenience store in their neighborhood, so instead of attending school, my grandma helped maintain her family's business. Some of the literate activities she regularly practiced were keeping store inventory and making poster signs that advertised the weekly sale items—both inventory lists and store signs are **genres**, or productions that can be recognized by certain conventions and features.

However, when she migrated to the United States, the genres she used and the literate activities she practiced changed. In this new country, she had several small jobs, but her main job was as a dressmaker for a clothing factory. This occupation required her to learn different genres, such as dress designs and measurement charts. Both jobs, storekeeper and dressmaker, did not require a lot of reading or writing, but they did require learning new **genre conventions**, or features that make a genre recognizable.

On the other hand, my mom received an American education, but many of the writing genres she was taught in school were **mutt genres**. A mutt genre is a writing genre that is not used outside of a school setting, such as book reports and five-paragraph essays. My mom didn't feel that she was good at these genres, so she did not pursue a college degree and worked retail instead. Both my grandma and mom worked jobs that did not require the learning or practicing of various writing genres. As a result, they did not feel the need to use writing to communicate with people, especially outside of work.

Another reason why my mom and grandma might prefer oral communication is because they are somewhat bilingual. I say "somewhat" because my grandma recognizes basic English words and phrases (like hello, please, thank you, and I love you) and remembers all the words to Frank Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight," but she will not be able to communicate in English beyond this knowledge. To transfer and translate the grammatical structure and writing conventions from one language to the other, you would have to sit down and compare the structure and genres of each language. In other words, it would take a long time. However, if you're conversing and you happen to switch from Spanish to English, it wouldn't disrupt the conversation or meaning of the message. This language switching, or **translingualism**, often occurs when I communicate with my mom and grandma, especially when we are *chismeando* (gossiping). For this article, I will examine how *chisme* has remained a "storytelling" genre that has been **remediated**, or repurposed, from an oral tradition to a verbal and textual one: poetry.

Gossip

The literal translation of the Spanish word *chisme* is "gossip." What comes to mind when you hear the word "gossip"? Your answer to this question might be different, but for me, I think of the TV show *Gossip Girl* (the word is in its title, I can't help not thinking about it) and tabloid magazines announcing Jennifer Aniston's pregnancy (which happens at least once a week). Although

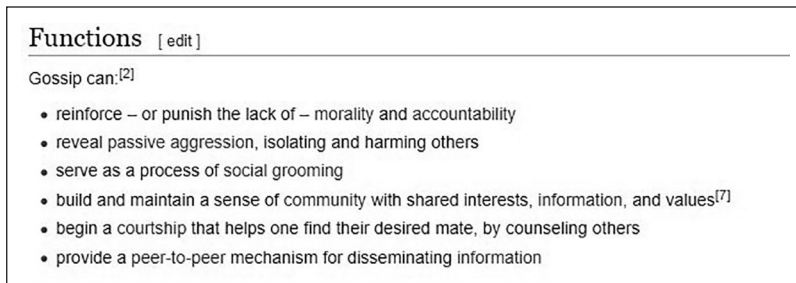


Figure 1: Wikipedia’s list of how gossip functions.

I already know what gossip means, I thought it would be interesting to look up some of its definitions online and see if there are any variations. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines gossip as a “casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details which are not confirmed as true,” and Wikipedia defines it as “idle talk or rumor, especially about the personal or private affairs of others . . . also known as dishing or tattling.” In this context, Wikipedia is a quick and useful source to get the overall perspective on the word gossip. Along with this definition, the Wikipedia page also offers several ways that gossip functions (Figure 1).

Although the OED’s definition provides a more neutral definition than Wikipedia, both definitions suggest that gossip has no intellectual or truth value. But wait, aren’t some of the functions listed by Wikipedia *good*? Who wouldn’t want to build “a sense of community with shared interests, information, and values”? Can gossip be much more than just shallow or idle talk? Let’s examine how gossiping works in different communities.

Chisme

When I think about the word *chisme*, I don’t think about its literal translation. Instead, I think about my grandma telling me a story about her sisters or my mom describing the reviews she read for some skincare product. The *Gran Diccionario de la Lengua Española* defines *chisme* as “*Noticia o rumor que se cuenta por placer o para criticar*” (news or a rumor told to please or criticize). It’s difficult to define a word and genre with so many functions, but I think “rumor” is far too short of a description for what *chisme* can accomplish.

When examining the definitions of gossip in both English and Spanish, there also seems to be little consensus over its genre conventions. Gerrard Mugford, a linguistics professor at the Universidad de Guadalajara, describes one difference between the English word “gossip” and the Spanish word *chisme*: “A noticeable difference between Spanish and English is that gossips in Spanish will often use the word *chisme* (gossip) in their openings in

contrast to English where the pretense at secrecy and discretion is frequently an overriding concern” (Mugford 151). Some of the Spanish openings for gossip are the following:

Deja te cuento un chisme . . . (Let me tell you a piece of gossip . . .)

Te tengo un chisme . . . (I have some gossip . . .),

Te tengo que contar algo de . . . (I have to tell you something about),

and *Fíjate que . . .* (Guess what).

Spanish-language gossip acknowledges the lack of secrecy in this activity, while English-language gossip asks their listeners to keep the information to themselves (ex: “Don’t tell anyone but . . .” and “just between us . . .”). The lack of secrecy of *chisme* means that those who interact in this activity can disseminate and co-construct the information they receive. Furthermore, as a group activity, gossiping can help create group cohesion, as well as reinforce normative behavior, values, and attitudes among communities.

I belong to two different communities: the Mexican-American and the Latinx community. The Mexican-American community are people of Mexican descent who were born in the United States. On the other hand, the Latinx community is much bigger and includes all people who were either born or have descended from a Latin American country, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. Furthermore, if you’re familiar with Spanish, you already know that all nouns have a grammatical gender. Nouns ending in *a* are usually marked as feminine and those that end in *o* are masculine. In the word *Latinx*, the *a/o* ending is replaced with an *x* to include people who identify as non-binary. Both these communities have shaped the way I think about *chisme*/gossip.

Rubén Angel, a queer Latinx sociocultural critic and full-time *chismoso*, accurately summarizes the many different functions of gossip as a cultural practice in the Latinx community. He argues that *chisme* is ancestral knowledge; it is how we pass on recipes, remedies, family history, legends, jokes, songs, and phrases.

Moreover, *chisme* also helps construct, preserve, and situate communities in the world by teaching new generations this ancestral and **antecedent knowledge**, or the things we already know.

As a genre, one of *chisme*’s main features is that it is primarily an oral tradition, which means that it can also be considered a “storytelling” genre. Not many of our ancestors had the privilege to learn to read and write,



Figure 2: Rubén's (@QueerXiChisme) Twitter thread on *chisme*.

especially in languages that have since been eradicated by colonization. As a substitute for documents and records, *chisme* was used as way to archive history and personal experiences. For example, if I ask my grandma for her Spanish rice recipe, she might start by describing her experience of learning how to cook this recipe. By recalling and situating herself in a particular moment, it helps her remember what is not written down. On the other hand, because many of these experiences and histories are not written down anywhere, they are often excluded from being recognized as real and significant.

Chisme has also been demonized and dismissed as a feminized practice, meaning that those stories told by your mom, grandma, aunts, cousins, and other women in the neighborhood, whether they are true or false, would be considered “idle talk.” The gossip among women, however, usually concerns issues on personal, familial, and cultural identity; and for this reason, I do not think it should be considered “idle” talk. Despite these setbacks, this genre is now starting to incorporate literate activities in genres like poems, memoirs, and narratives, thus making our ancestral knowledge and experiences more tangible, accessible, and valid.

More and more young people in the Latinx community are attending universities and bringing *chisme* to the academy, but that is not the only reason why the **distribution** of this genre is more widespread. Social media platforms also play a key role in determining where these texts go and who might receive them. As mentioned before, Rubén (@QueerXiChisme) uses Twitter to create dialogue and offers resources to learn more about the Latinx community, social justice issues, intersectionality, and *chisme*. Rubén also writes essays, makes and hosts podcasts, creates YouTube videos, and tours as a public speaker across university campuses. The various media used

Genre Conventions of <i>Chisme</i>				
Attention grabber or opening sentence	Usually a group activity	A way to share ancestral knowledge (stories, experiences, recipes, etc.).	Concerns issues surrounding personal, familial, and cultural identities.	Primarily an oral tradition that now incorporates literate activities (ex: poetry, tweets, videos) and various tools.

Figure 3: My summary of *chisme*'s genre conventions.

for producing and disseminating *chisme* helps distribute these issues more widely across different platforms.

Storytelling as Resistance and Survival

As previously mentioned, *chisme* or gossip is a popular means of transmitting vernacular histories for various communities of color because of its narrative form. Similarly, poetry as a literary genre also shares this narrative convention and is now used as a medium for Latinx writers to share their stories. Examining the poetry of Latinx writers like Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Yesika Salgado, then, can help us understand how *chismes* or stories are reconfigured and recreated in a textual genre.

Melissa Lozada-Oliva, a poet and Master of Fine Arts candidate at New York University, explores the intersection of hair removal and her Latina identity in her poetry chapbook *Peluda* (Hairy). At the beginning of this collection, she recalls how her immigrant parents used to clean houses. Several years later, her mother remained a cleaning lady, but instead of cleaning houses, she cleaned bodies as a beautician who waxed hair for a living. Throughout the chapbook, she conflates her identity with her body hair: her bangs help shape her personality (“Ode to Brown Girls with Bangs”), her long last name sticks out like hair that needs to be waxed (“What If My Last Name Got a Bikini Wax, Too”), and most importantly, she considers her hair a family heirloom (“I Shave My Sister’s Back Before Prom”). Although her mom is a beautician, she resists cutting or waxing her body hair because she associates it with the erasure of her identity:

remember your body / the body—a land of feelings we’ve been
told to cut down / we rip the things we hate / about ourselves out
& hope / they grow back weaker / but hair is the only thing that

grows / the way things grow in the homeland / which is why we
 get goosebumps / when we hear Spanish words at the supermarket
 . . . the hair follicles click back to life. The buds shake themselves
 awake. They rise from the grave we insist on digging. The hair
 stands up. A million ancestors rooting for the home team. (“Mami
 Says Have You Been Crying,” 32–33).

In the last poem of the chapbook, “Yosra Strings Off My Mustache Two Days After the Election in a Harvard Square Bathroom,” she finally removes her mustache. Threading a mustache in a bathroom may seem like a completely normal and non-political task; however, she uses this small moment to speak out on the oppression of women and minorities, especially after the 2016 presidential election. In this poem, a Middle Eastern friend threads her mustache before she meets her date. She calls this moment an “emergency” but suggests that the bigger emergency is the uncertainty of their future and whether they can stay in America. Although threading her mustache to conceal her identity aches, it is a sacrifice she must make.

Melissa’s poems explore her roots, womanhood, and her experiences as a brown woman living in America. Reading this chapbook felt like stumbling upon someone else’s journal; it was intimate, funny, and for me, achingly familiar. The stories she shares aren’t meant to be universal, and because of this, her voice is set apart from the flood of voices that chant similar stories. But how does this book fit into *chisme* as a genre? For the most part, the stories, or *chisme*, Melissa tells are personal experiences shared in a conversational tone that make the reader feel like they’re listening to a friend. Throughout the chapbook, she suggests that her hair, which is often threatened of being cut off or removed, is a symbol of her cultural identity and is not something that can be entirely removed or forgotten. Since her experiences are written in print, they can easily be shared and validated by other people of color who also balance and resist the erasure of their cultural identity across different languages and contexts.

Like Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Elizabeth Acevedo also uses her hair to represent her identity and her ancestors. Acevedo is an Afro-Dominican author and performer who uses her platform to speak about issues such as police brutality and violence against women. In her spoken-word poem “Hair,” she begins by stating that her mother wants her to fix her hair. By “fixing,” her mom means that she wants her to lighten and straighten her dark, curly hair. Acevedo asks herself how she will fix this “ship-wrecked history of hair,” these “tresses held tight like African cousins in ship bellies.” She sees her curls as living ancestors, and to straighten them with a flat iron is equivalent to erasing them. She ends this poem by suggesting that her hair, and her refusal to fix something that isn’t broken, is a reclamation of her ancestry.



Figure 4: Screenshot of Elizabeth Acevedo's poem "Hair."

What makes this story unique is that it retains *chisme's* oldest genre convention: transmitting information through verbal speech. Although there is one transcription of this poem available online, the only way to access this poem is by watching Acevedo's recorded performance. Even these recorded performances on YouTube serve as documentation, which makes these stories and their history more accessible than they once were.

Storytelling as Therapy

In her poem "Molcajete," Yesika Salgado uses the preparation of a familiar meal to meditate on her failed romantic relationship. In this poem, she describes the process of making green salsa: "boil the tomatillos / boil the chiles / place them into the molcajete / with peeled garlic cloves / take the stone in your right hand / press it into the green" (38). She claims that this is the same process her mother used to show her love and devotion to her father. The narrator then asks herself which role she and her lover played. Was she the stone or the hand? She answers: "you were definitely the chile / you were the bite and the fire / you were the tears and the tortilla / I sat my heart before you. watched you eat. waited for you / to tell me it tasted like home, you didn't" (38). One deeply rooted belief throughout the Latinx community is that the way to a lover's heart is through their stomach. In other words, to show that you love a person, you should be able to prepare their favorite meals. However, in this poem the narrator is no longer preparing these meals, but recalling their preparation and their failure to get her lover to stay. I think this poem is evidence of how ancestral knowledge (such as recipes and beliefs) evolve to serve new purposes. In this instance, recalling



Figure 5: Yesika Salgado's chapbook "Corazon" and Melissa Lozada-Oliva's chapbook "Peluda."

this antecedent knowledge serves as a kind of therapy and meditation that helps the poet reconcile her loss. On the other hand, the poet's antecedent/ancestral knowledge about love and its connection to food has also failed to work in this context and suggests that there is a separation between the poet and her ancestors' knowledge.

Remediating *Chisme*

The poems of Melissa Oliva-Lozada, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Yesika Salgado can be considered a remediation, or a repurposing, of *chisme* and its conventions, such as sharing ancestral knowledge and focusing on issues concerning a cultural identity. The most important thing to note, however, is the various tools that are now used to produce *chisme*. When it was still an oral tradition, the only tool needed was our memory and verbal speech. Although those tools are still needed, the genre of *chisme* has expanded to include written texts, recorded performances, and translingualism. Meaning that English is also a tool used to tell experiences from various languages and cultures.

Wait, What Is *Chisme* Again?

Chisme is more than its literal translation. It is how we participate in dialogue and share our stories. Sitting down to spill the tea is a time to discuss, deconstruct, challenge, criticize, and dissect ideas, issues, traumas, and histories. But most of all, it's a time to remind ourselves that who we are and what we have to say matters.

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