

2016-01-01

# La Gente Entre Nosotros / The People Between Us

Gerard Stephen Robledo

*University of Texas at El Paso*, [gerardrobledo@msn.com](mailto:gerardrobledo@msn.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd)

 Part of the [Chicana/o Studies Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Latina/o Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Robledo, Gerard Stephen, "La Gente Entre Nosotros / The People Between Us" (2016). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 940.  
[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/940](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/940)

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

LA GENTE ENTRE NOSOTROS  
THE PEOPLE BETWEEN US

GERARD STEPHEN ROBLEDO  
Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

---

Tim Z. Hernandez, M.F.A, Chair

---

Sasha Pimentel, M.F.A.

---

Laurie Ann Guerrero, M.F.A.

---

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Gerard Robledo

2016

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Helena. Everything is for you.



LA GENTE ENTRE NOSOTROS  
THE PEOPLE BETWEEN US

by

GERARD STEPHEN ROBLEDO, B.A., A.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2016

## Acknowledgments

To Allegra Castro, thank you for all of your support and encouragement on this creative endeavor since the beginning of my program. Your support through all of the struggles I have faced during these last three years has made it possible for this collection to come to fruition. Thank you for believing in me and being my biggest supporter.

To my dearest friends who have always been there to provide me laughs and support during times of stress and happiness and have endured my sense of humor: Jerid Morris, Michael Cepek, Stacy Sinclair, and Amy Rushing.

Many thanks to the San Antonio poetry community for being so welcoming and inviting, not only to me but to all poets.

To that small group of writers who have welcomed me as an equal and encouraged me to believe in myself and to believe that my work is important to others: Laurie Ann Guerrero, Tim Z. Hernandez, Octavio Quintanilla, and Josh Robbins.

Thank you to Carol Coffee Repose for pushing me to continue on to the MFA and for giving me the stern motherly advice I needed from fellow a poet.

To Daniel Valenzuela, who said, “You should try writing, your good at coming up with funny stuff.” This is all your fault.

Most importantly, to my Mother and my Buelito, I hope I have made you proud of me.

Photos on pages 9, 14, 18, 29, 41, 46, 57, 72, 80 by Gerard Robledo.

Photos on pages 39, 53, by Photographer Miles Cole.

Photo on page 97 by Photographer Anthony Francis.

Internet search images of the word “Mexicans” on page iv are the property of Google Inc. and Bing.com

The images of Loony Tunes characters, Speedy Gonzales and Slowpoke Rodriguez, are owned by Warner Bros. Cartoons.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Preface.....	x
1. Inception & Historical Scope of Project.....	x
2. Documentary poetry/Poetry of witness/Anthro-poetry.....	xvii
3. Creating a narrative & Poetics.....	xxi
2.1 Section 1, Gente.....	xxiii
2.2 Section 2, Between us.....	xxiv
2.3 Section 3, You & I.....	xxvi
4. Poetics.....	xxx
3.1 Sequencing.....	xxx
3.2 Creating multiple images.....	xxxiii
3.3 White space/Line breaks.....	xxxiii
3.4 Use of the ampersand, &.....	xl
3.5 Form.....	xl
3.6 Truth & the Power of Persuasion.....	xlii
3.7 Accessible Language.....	xliii
LA GENTE ENTRE NOSOTROS/THE PEOPLE BETWEEN US.....	1
GENTE.....	2
Thunder.....	3
El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, I: God.....	4
Cartographers of El Salvador.....	6
América del Norte.....	7
Our Way Home, I.....	8
Cruzando El Rio Estix.....	10
No One Answers.....	12
Our Way Home, II.....	15
The Color in Her Hands.....	16
El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, II: Madre.....	19
A Sugar Skull in Juárez.....	21

43.....	22
Before the Next Stop.....	24
Following Crumbs.....	25
El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, III: Al Norte.....	27
Our Way Home, III.....	28
BETWEEN US.....	30
A Learned Behavior.....	31
Stigmata Mine.....	33
Broken Promises.....	35
Where Prayer Does Not Find Them.....	37
United We Stand, I.....	40
This God Is a Best of Burden.....	42
Menudo, It's like Beef Stew.....	44
United We Stand, II.....	47
Southern Hospitality.....	48
West Texas Floods, I.....	49
Cattleman Square.....	50
Know Your Enemy.....	54
Sea Muy Tarde Para El Café.....	55
Defenders of The Alamo.....	58
Los Santos del Campo.....	59
El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, IV: En Madre Mountains.....	60
Telegram from Manuela in San Antonio to Augustin in Illinois.....	61
El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, V: Óigame.....	62
West Texas Floods, II.....	64
El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, VI: Persígnate.....	65
West Texas Floods, III.....	67
YOU & I.....	68
Skin.....	69
...And Some, I Assume, Are Good People.....	70
Whitewashing.....	71

United We Stand, III.....	73
You're Not like The Others.....	74
A Lesson in Spelling Hate.....	76
Milkbath.....	78
When Your Mother Bends for Fear.....	79
A Controlled Burn.....	81
An Email from My Daughter's Mother.....	83
Igniting a Spectacle.....	84
United We Stand, IV.....	85
MLK Day for Kindergarten.....	86
A History of Violence, I.....	88
A History of Violence, II.....	89
A History of Violence, III.....	90
A History of Violence, IV.....	91
A History of Violence, V.....	92
A History of Violence, VI.....	93
Requiem for Emanuel's Slain.....	94
MLK Day for First Grade.....	98
Vita.....	104

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Google and Bing image search for the word Mexicans.....	xi
Figure 2. Speedy Gonzales and Slowpoke Rodriguez.....	xii
Figure 3. Somebody loves you.....	9
Figure 4. Electric Virgen de Guadalupe.....	14
Figure 5. Helena.....	18
Figure 6. Scouts.....	29
Figure 7. Immigrant Labor (by Miles Cole) .....	39
Figure 8. Crossing out of frame.....	41
Figure 9. My grandparents.....	46
Figure 10. Cattleman's Square Apartments (by Miles Cole) .....	53
Figure 11. Buelito.....	57
Figure 12. Helena and Buelito.....	72
Figure 13. Mother.....	80
Figure 14. Barbershop in North Carolina (by Anthony Francis) .....	97

## Preface

### INCEPTION & HISTORICAL SCOPE OF PROJECT

I must first state this. This collection of poetry is the documentation of an event. It stems from the tradition of the poetry of witness / anthro-poetry, which chronicles the lives of individuals within communities who are affected by racism, ignorance, and Americanization. The event which was the catalyst for this collection was the massive influx of immigrant children fleeing South and Central American, and Mexico to the United States in the summer of 2014. This event spurred a whirlwind of anger, confusion, and racism, which left children in the political crossfire. Thus, this collection is aptly titled *La Gente Entre Nosotros / The People Between Us*.

In this collection, I take the approach of the anthro-poet, to document and be witness to these events. This is what anthropologist turned anthro-poet, Renato Rosaldo, calls “poetry that is centrally about the human condition” the documentation of an event (101). When the anthro-poet puts everything he/she has encountered back onto the page, the writer should incite powerful feelings in the reader and create a connection to the work.

Understanding the nuances of racism can be very difficult, especially from a lens within a cultural minority. Often, the overall focus is on oppression at the hands of a white American society, cultural appropriation, and Americanization. These issues are incredibly important to this collection of work and are woven throughout. However, individuals, on the other side of the oppression, those who benefit from white privilege, still fail to see what this looks and feels like from the perspective of this minority: the Latin@ immigrant and the Latin@ American.

This collection of poetry began in 2013 as a sequenced poem focusing on the human condition, primarily life and death. At the time, the work revolved around the subject of a single

immigrant and my own relationship with that subject matter. However, it quickly evolved from a sequenced poem to a full collection of poetry, due to the socio-political landscape surrounding myself.

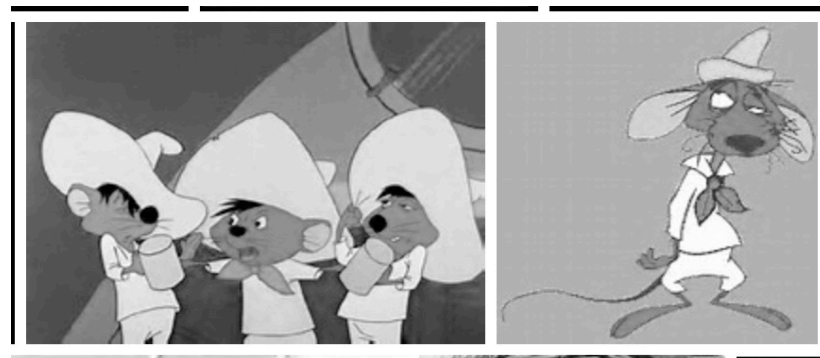
During the summer of 2014, every television news outlet streamed images of children crossing the U.S. / Mexico border and children's detention facilities overflowing with boys and girls who traveled thousands of miles, without parents, in search of freedom and safety. These children followed hope and the promise of the American dream sold to them via movies and television. However, they arrived to more poverty, disdain, and racism – the “real” America.

The America the immigrant children arrived to is a place where in television news pundits use the term “illegal” immigrant to lump all Latin@s into one space. As a result, many Americans immediately picture what has been shown on television over the decades: short, dark-brown-skinned mustached individuals working in field, wearing a sombrero. A simple google image search of the word “Mexicans” reveals extensive photos of such disparaging “likenesses”, as well as the words: gangs, crossing the border, jumping the border, and sombreros.





Nor let us forget the other prominent image of a dirty, lazy-drunk, one burned into the minds of children since the 1950's thanks to the cartoon character Speedy Gonzales and his cousin Slowpoke Rodriguez.



Though these are only images of what American entertainment culture has labeled as a Mexican, it is clear this is how the majority, if not all, Latin@s are viewed. This is because the most prominent immigration issue stems from the long history of immigrants crossing the U.S. / Mexico. These extremely negative stereotypical images are now connected to any group of

faceless brown people entering the United States – parents, children: sons and daughters. In America, children of color, either born domestically or foreign, have been and continually are treated with contempt by a misguided and misinformed populace. A most recent example would be Sebastien de la Cruz, the San Antonio born child who received abhorrent racial attacks and comments after singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” in a mariachi outfit during the San Antonio Spurs NBA playoff game in 2013. This just so happens to be around the time I began writing the initial sequence. Many Americans still fail to comprehend the circumstances immigrant children encounter on a daily basis and the shared humanity of their lives and the lives of these children.

American perceptions of immigrants are based on stories and histories of these children which have been converted into little more than sound bites on the evening news: “Another illegal found dead”, “Mexico’s Narco drug wars spill over Texas Borders”, “Hundreds of youth cross illegally into the U.S.,” with no mention of what they are fleeing from. These bits and pieces only tell a fraction of what should be understood about those without representation. They do not show every worker dying under the boot of those in power, nor the pain of watching a family being murdered, things which have become all too familiar for these children entering into the United States.

Watching the worn faces of these children being shoved into police vans and treated like hardened criminals made me realize that I needed to do something about it. Not solely because I am a writer, but because I am first a father. This is where my relationship to the subject matter spurred my action. I placed my daughter’s face on of those children and know that I could not live if she was facing such hardship, suffering, and hate. It sickened my to watch adults shouting and spitting at children as young as nine-years-old on a bus in the city of Murrieta, California. I felt the anxiety of helplessness. It came from knowing no one will hear the truth about these

children or show their treatment, and that our country has been conditioned to think of the “dark” person as the Boogy man (El Cucuy.) If I cannot go out to communities like Murrieta, then my work as a writer must extend my physical reach. It must be a voice in solidarity to educate, document, expose the reality of an event, give voice to the voiceless, and of those wrongly accused based on the color of their skin. It is my assertion that writers are the individuals who must speak for them, must paint their stories on the page, make their lives bleed into and through that of the reader.

After processing all of this, I began to piece together my own relationship with racism, its proximity to my family, and how these relationships contribute to my cultural identity and my writing. I came to the realization that racism begins at home in childhood, as it is something learned. To understand the hate these children faced and how to get my reader to comprehend this, I needed to illustrate things from the perspective of the children and the shared humanity between their lives and the readers’ lives: their love of family, community, and culture.

I also realized that I needed to show my own struggles with racism growing up Mexican-American in South Texas in the 1980’s. At a very young age, it became very clear that within my family and compared to many others within my neighborhood I was “different”. Growing up I was, and am still, a very “fair” skinned individual, who does not fit the stereotypical image of what a Mexican looks like, acts like, or sounds like. Though Spanish was my first language, I have no Latino accent, speak with clear diction, and am quite tall. As a result, I was, and many times still am, criticized and/or ostracized by members my own community/culture. It is something which has afforded me the “luxury” of being mistaken as white or treated as a “token” friend. Even within my family, this was an issue as my brothers made a distinction between me and them due to my light skin. My grandfather even gave me the nickname *guerito*, a diminutive

form of the word *Guero*, which refers to Latin@s with light skin complexion, a reference to Anglos. This word can also be used as a pejorative, as Monica Figueroa noted in her essay “Linda Morenita: Skin Colour, Beauty, and the Politics of Mestizaje in Mexico,” as this is tied back to the racist cast system of Mexico (173). As Mexicans came to the United States, they brought the words *guero* and *gabacho* with them to refer to white Americans. Growing up I routinely heard the *guero* linked with the pejorative term *gabacho*. According to Beatriz Valera’s essay, “Ethnic nickname of Spanish origin in American English,” the word *Gabacho* is one of many “pejorative ethnic nicknames used in the Southwest” region of the United States (142). According to Daniel Cletus’s essay, “Cesar Chávez and the Unionization of California Farmworkers,” the use of *gabacho* as a pejorative came as reaction to the hostile and racist treatment of Cesar Chávez at the hands of Anglos (376). As a result of receiving mixed messages via these words, I, like many others, struggled to find a place of acceptance within my own culture. I was accepted but constantly reminded that my skin was different. So this collection of poetry needed to address not only the racism we face from white society, but also the conflicts within our own communities. This parallels the conflict within the African-American community between “fair-skinned” or “high yellow” and darker skinned individuals. This is important as it is linked directly to my daughter and the blurring lines of racial/cultural identity. This is a topic which many either choose to ignore or are not aware of, but this collection seeks to bring it out as part of the dialogue. The struggle for those individuals who are children of mixed ethnicity, and/or are of varying degrees of skin complexion is very real. There is also racism between minorities which is not often acknowledged. However, it must be addressed in this work since my own child is a product of mixed race and is center to this collection.

As mentioned above, my daughter is of mixed race: Caucasian/Latino. Her skin is fair and hair is dark, so I find myself treading familiar ground with her. My collection works to give others an understanding of why confronting the complexity of racial/cultural identity is important. Ultimately, my daughter will have to learn how to navigate this world while living in both racial spaces. She will have to navigate the world of identity and racism as a child whose families sit on opposite ends of the spectrum of racism. Gloria Anzaldúa's essay, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza" provides an avenue for interrogating questions relating to cultural identity. Although my daughter is not a mestiza, she is still a product of the same system or as Anzaldúa puts it:

a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, ...  
... and in a state of perpetual transition. ...often [receiving] opposing messages.  
(100)

I asked myself the question Anzaldúa asks, *Which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned [father] listen to?* (100). And throughout the collection this question becomes increasingly prominent with the presence of ever interfering and opposing messages in my daughter's life.

This collection focuses on the first victims, children. There are children starving and being murdered: gunned down, burned alive, buried faced down still clutching their backpacks. There are children used as drug mules, diamond mules, even as soldiers. Children, like adults, look for hope, freedom, help for themselves and their families and anything else to make it to another day. Their decision to trek hundreds, if not thousands, of miles for a better life is a testament to that hope.

I look at these events happening in our contemporary society and see my privilege of being born the son of a Mexican immigrant in the United States. Thus, by birth I was endowed with the accessibility to a better life than those still in Mexico. With this said, my purpose is to utilize my privilege as a Mexican-American writer to raise awareness of these issues through poetry. I cannot take poetry for granted and my undertaking of this manuscript is my duty to my people. A quote from Audre Lorde's essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" embodies my intentions with this collection of poetry. She writes:

Poetry is not a Luxury. ... It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (37)

This is where, as a poet, I exist: within the walls of social justice. This poetry collection aims to give a better understanding of racism from all aspects, even from within a minority towards another, and how it impacts everyone, specifically children. This collection also utilizes short creative non-fiction, or lyrical essays, as well as some photography to give an accurate portrayal of the lives effected by hate.

Documentary poetry/Poetry of witness/Anthro-poetry:

The struggle with writing poetry based in the realm of Documentary poetry/Poetry of witness/Anthro-poetry is that this work is not like other poetry, which tends to be based in fiction, but rather this work is produced from real events, and has been augmented using poetic tools. This writing methodology has greatly influenced my writing.

My initial influence to this writing framework came from Carolyn Forché's work in 1970's El Salvador and her book, *The Country Between Us*. I allude and pay homage to this book in my own title. When I discovered Forché's work as an undergraduate, I was thrilled to find a way of writing about social issues with a less blunt instrument than that of protest poetry. Reading her poem "The Colonel," I found so much could be shown and learned from writing poetry like a conversation with imagery to capture the reader. The lines, "Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground" (16), shook me and showed me so much about what the people of El Salvador were facing. The powerful part of this was knowing that this was an account of something real that was impacting an entire people. It was documenting the struggles faced by the people of El Salvador. Right then, I knew I needed to write poetry which did this, but how to do it still escaped me. It wasn't until I read Valerie Martinez' *Each and Her* that I found something that had a tangible structure and felt more accessible. I found in her work that I could use research as part of the writing; quotes could be incorporated, like an academic essay, but with emotion and tactile imagery. I found reading Martinez' work to be like combining history, research, and art to argue for the voiceless. I also discovered a voice like my own, a Latina who was fighting for her people too. From this came great freedom in shedding any sort of restraints I was taught poetry needed to have. This meant I could approach writing poetry more like a journalist than just a poet. It helped me refocus and reaffirm my belief that poetry is important: not only as an art form, but as a means to fight social injustice. But to understand what writing like a documentarian entailed, I needed to understand research from this perspective, and still make it intimate. Eventually, I was introduced to Renato Rosaldo and his poetry collection, *The Day of Shelly's Death*. Before Rosaldo wrote this collection he was prominent anthropologist. Rosaldo utilized ethnography

and his keen skills of observation to create a powerful poetry collection which documented the death of his wife and the events surrounding it. In reading the essay portion of Rosaldo's book, I discovered lines which embodied what the role of both anthro-poet and poet should be. Our work should always be to capture the event, or as Rosaldo writes, "poetry is indeed 'to be the event itself'" (102). Rosaldo quotes Jean-Jacques Lecercle to clarify this by writing, "The highest task of literature is not to represent the event, to re-enact or reproduce in memory the flash or illumination..., but to *be* the event itself" (130). But to do this accurately, the poet must research each event with the detail of a scientist, an anthropologist, or a documentarian. The anthro-poet must also use all the poetic tools he/she is capable of to ensure that the words on the page become tactile, real. Rosaldo's work taught me that the poems documenting events are not only about the subject/person/event, but also about those individuals and events occurring around it, their proximity, and how they are impacted or impact the subject/person/event. Rosaldo writes that these people, the "local-level state functionaries, doctors, nurse, teachers, polices...", are key to an ethnographer's work and understanding his subjects (110). He writes, "My collection of poems makes central the kinds of people who are placed off stage in most ethnography...", he continues, "...the kinds of people who figure so prominently in this collection of poems reveals the undisclosed infrastructure of such work" (110-11). From this line of reasoning, I found that my poetry needed to also emphasize the people affected by the events, including myself and my child. Rosaldo calls this "the traces [the event] leaves" (102). To clarify this, Rosaldo quotes Jean-Jacques Lecercle who says that traces "allow an *encounter* with elements of the situation... Those elements become the militants (or witnesses) of the event, which has initiated a process of *truth*" (102). One part of achieving *truth* is through the documentation as a witness.



I previously mentioned approaching the work like a journalist. To achieve this goal of eye witness documentation, I did outside research and interviews, along with photography of individuals affected by racism and immigration, as well as on site visits to the day labor district in San Antonio, Texas. Non-traditional resources were used, such as documentary films on the subjects of immigration and racism throughout Latin America and into the United States. Much of the work in this collection was produced via interactions with subjects. This gave me a better understanding of the themes in the collection. The influence of a journalistic approach to writing my collection came from Tom Wolf's essay, "The Birth of 'New Journalism'; Eyewitness Report." In his essay, Wolf details the emergence of New Journalism, which can be simplified as a mixture of creative non-fiction through a journalistic approach. Wolf's essay asserts that the journalist uses all the aspects of their discipline, the eye for a good story, a scoop; and mixed it with the creative strength of the novelist to heighten imagery, connect with the reader, and build tension from within the actual story onto the page (8-17). One can liken this to comparing a short story with a juicy bit of gossip. In this way, an individual can put themselves in the place of the gossip, or when it comes to anthro-poetry the reader can relate to the work because it is real and they can put themselves in place of the subject. The average person will say what happened and even give a good description of what they saw. The New Journalist uses creative craft to turn that individual's words into images, dialogue, scenes; those individuals become part of the setting as well, and even help set the tone. This is not unlike the Anthro-poet, who uses all their tools to recreate the event for the reader to experience. This is where the natural realm of the anthro-poem exists, somewhere between journalist, novelist, poet, and visual artist. The poet's unique ability is that they are naturally able to view a scene/event and reproduce it on the page, like a visual artist painting a still life portrait. The Anthro-poet is merely the natural evolution of the

poet. After they create the painting, there is a need to go deeper and give the blood and guts, the inner mechinations, the mind, the body, the emotions. The Anthro-poet must trek into the world of the novelist via the journalist.

## CREATING A NARRATIVE & POETICS

Throughout the process of creating this collection, I found myself returning to a common theme: my relationship with the subject matter. Prioritizing what was familiar and important to me became key. Thus, the collection draws heavily from my experiences, my culture, my child, and my proximity to racism and immigration. While this collection was in its infancy, a question emerged: How do I write about my culture and make it real without romanticizing it? When I originally wrote a poem which focused on my grandmother, my former professor, Sasha Pimentel, noted that my work was still steeped in very traditional and over used tropes: the beautiful, infallible, giving grandmother making food, to name one. She pointed out that our responsibility as writers of color is to reevaluate how we present these types of images to a broader audience, aka white America. So as a writer of color, when writing of one's own culture the objective is to offer a realistic, complex, multi-sided depiction of life that includes both the tender and gritty moments. I implemented this into the collection to maintain authenticity.

As a result of this realistic, unromantic process, I felt comfortable to write on everything I could surrounding the events of 2014 without restrictions; yet, I still needed to find the central focus of the work. Being that the works ranged from very personal family narratives, to the immigrant crisis, to my daughter, to racial tensions and violence, they were rife with threads to use as connections. I just had to figure out how to make those connections work together and how they responded to and pushed against each other. After I made the connections between the

work was I able to create a cohesive narrative. Even though this work is based in the journalistic/anthropological fields, there is still a literary narrative to be revealed.

Upon looking through my poems, I came to the conclusion that every piece was telling a different part of the immigrant journey, their offspring, their future in the United States, and an undercurrent that maintained a relationship between each section. Due to this and the political crossfire which intertwined these people and topics, the collection was titled *La Gente Entre Nosotros / The People Between Us*. Every word in this title is important to the ultimate narrative and the relationships illustrated in the work. For example, the words “people between us” is literally about the people between us, the U.S. and its citizens: you, I, everyone. This is why it’s in English. The people in this collection are immigrant, American born, Latin@s, African-Americans, Caucasian Americans, etc. This is America fighting to exist between itself. The Spanish portion of the title “gente entre nosotros” is referring to the people within us, within our families; the children between us and the children we are and once were. Yet, there is still more to this portion of the title. The word “gente” literally means people, folk, relating to culture and one’s family. In the context of this work, I am referring to the gente as my gente, my people, my origins, my culture, my daughter’s culture, la raza.

I decided to break the work up into three sections that each need to speak about certain aspects of the journey: 1) The beginning: migration and its perils – understanding what it’s like to travel as a Latin@ immigrant to the U.S. and why; 2) The middle: arrival and assimilation – the struggle once they do arrive, have children here, and what they and their children encounter; 3) The end: what it is like to live as a person of color in the United States, whether they be immigrant or native born because there is always a struggle for equality – becoming “real” Americans. The title for each section also mirrors the themes in each section: 1) Gente, 2)

Between Us, and 3) You & I. Below is a further break down of each section, so as to get a clearer understanding of each and their relationships.

#### Section 1, Gente:

Though the ages of these children vary, the focus is on children and being someone's child. As such, the first poem opening this section and every other section, is a piece where my daughter and I speak to each other, thus illustrating the parent child relationship. However, this is not the only poem where we are directly communicating. Throughout the entire collection there are poems just like this one which react with or respond to the themes of each section. As a side note: everything my daughter says in those poems is true. This is key because it illustrates why this work is important to me, how each section relates to me, and what is at stake. The first poem, "Thunder," illustrates the parent as protector relationship, one which has been destroyed for these children who travel thousands of miles alone. The final lines of this poem truly highlight their struggle, "*When it's that hard I cover / my ears & look for you in the dark.*" meaning when these children are facing hardship they search for hope (the parent/safety) alone in the uncertainty of darkness (17,18). This poem, its title, and its final words open not only this section, but the entire collection and set the stage for the impending storm of what is at stake. "Thunder" also gives a juxtaposition between the world we live in and the world where these children are coming from, or living in now.

"Gente," is a well-suited title because it focuses on "my" people, Latin@ immigrants, and their journey from South and Central America, and Mexico to the United States. Some of the poems take an in depth look at reasons why they leave and what happens on the journey: the hunger, the heat, and the death. There is a definite push for the reader to comprehend the conditions in which these children survive on a daily basis and why they leave their home:

murder, narcos, and gangs. For example, the poem “43” is about the forty-three Mexican students who were presumably kidnapped and murdered by the cartels at the request of Iguala city mayor, José Luis Abarca Velázquez, and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa. This is an example of the safety these children lack and why they leave and assume there will be safety once in the U.S.

The rest of the work in this section illustrates the actual journey. Poems like “El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena,” “Cruzando El Rio Estix,” and the lyrical essay, “Our Way Home,” depict the perils of the journey. These works become tactile, real, and are given a human face, sometimes even a voice. Poems such as these make up the bulk of this section and the reader begins to understand the human condition in this setting. The photos in each section are based in the Anthro-poetic approach, which links words and stories with people and faces. For this collection, my photos serve as touchstones for the heart of the collection, children, which I connect most deeply with my daughter.

## Section 2, Between Us:

This section has several intentions, the first being to show what it looks like once the immigrant is here: the struggle, the racism, etc. This section also depicts life as a second generation child of immigrants and beyond, as well as a mixed race descendant of immigrants. To get the theme and tone and to prepare the reader, this section opens with yet another personal exchange with my daughter and I, “A Learned Behavior.” In this poem she expresses the bigoted opinions which she has learned from her mother. She says:

*Well, we saw a man that looked like him  
asking for help & she said  
we shouldn't give him any money*

*because those people don't want to work,  
those people are lazy. (13-17)*

Knowing these words came from a child leaves the reader stunned and prepared for what is to come in this section – the real society waiting for immigrants. This poem also opens the door for questions regarding identity and assimilation since the words are from a child of mixed race, the granddaughter of an immigrant.

Identity is ultimately tied to acceptance; however, once “accepted” the problem of Americanization develops for the children of immigrants. These individuals want to be accepted by both their family and friends, which doesn’t always happen. It is obvious that the question of American identity lies in this work, more accurately what is American now. Am I American or Mexican or Mexican-American? Do we shun our roots and embrace a new “American” identity, or do we merge them all to create something unique for ourselves? In the collection I have included poems written from my own experiences struggling with these questions as a child. Such as, “Menudo, it’s like beef stew,” where culture and country cross paths with the U.S. pledge of allegiance in my grandmother’s kitchen. These types of poems also continue on into the final section, “You & I.”

To offer a more nuanced perspective on immigrant life, a majority of the poems are from an observer perspective. Poems like “Broken Promises,” “Where Prayer Does Not Find Them,” and “Cattleman’s Square” come from an anthro-poetic/documentarian approach: created from first hand accounts and interviews. I have taken the subject’s words, recreated settings from the interaction to position my reader to see what I see, and understand that these are people suffering. A good example is in the poem “Where Prayer Does Not Find Them,” where I write:

This tribe of men collect      in soggy clothes

& wait

for the next work truck.

Drops of dew gather

on their necks & wet backs

– crystal globes

for their time & suffering. *What Would Jesus Do* (27-32)

These lines, and this poem, illustrate that these people have been forgotten in a soggy corner of the city, struggling with the reality that not everything is possible in America, especially when your skin is brown. So, yes, what would Jesus do?

Finally, even though the immigrant is here, the journey and struggle never really quite ends. To illustrate this, I have included a sequenced lyrical essay titled “West Texas Floods.” This sequence uses dialogue from children who fled horrors in their home country. For example, Daniel is a child who barely escaped death on his journey to the U.S. and is speaking to Congress about helping others like him still out there: “*I don’t want anybody to come like that. I wanted to testify. I want people to know what happened to me. I don’t want anybody else to experience that*” (3-5). This young man knows that speaking out brings the possibility of deportation, but he is willing to risk his own life to save countless other children. To augment this lyrical essay and sustain the undercurrent of the ongoing journey, I decided to extend the sequenced poem “El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena” from section 1 throughout section 2. This shows the reader that even though the immigrant is here that journey stays with them, constantly in the back of the mind. This journey shapes part of their “new American” identity, as well as that of their children. Section 3, You & I:

This final section depicts life as an American of color, what the real struggle for acceptance and equality looks like, be it native born or immigrant. Here I continue the primary

focus on children and what surrounds them. Since this section's primary themes are racism and cultural identities, the opening poem is another conversation between my daughter and I. This poem, "Skin", balances both themes from my daughter's perception of it. She says, "*My skin, / it's like Mommy's, not yours. / Your skin is dark, not mine*" (3-5). These words are important because she is a child of mixed race trying to balance to vastly different cultural settings in which she lives: one a very liberal Spanish speaking household, and the other a very conservative Caucasian American home. This poem also finds an echo in the poem "Whitewashing", which illustrates my own questioning of skin color as a child. In the poem I ask my grandfather, "*Why / are you black?*" (4-5). These two poems show the cyclical nature of learned racism stemming from observable "differences" and questions of identity. The objective though is to question how our society resolves these issues moving forward. These two works are representative of two different generations and how each handles this issue. In "Whitewashing" the issues of color and identity are not resolved, merely overlooked with an anecdote:

*...Guerito, my mother, she didn't love me.  
One day, when I was a baby, she forgot me  
outside. I got burned up. That's why*

*I'm not guerito like you. (6-9)*

There is no reassurance by the grandfather that these two individuals are of the same origins; more over, there is an obvious distinction drawn that they are different by the grandfather calling the child "guerito", little white one. When juxtaposed with the preceding poem, "Skin" a completely different attempt at a resolution is found, wherein the parent says:

I shove my arm  
further back,  
closer to her,



*Amaris, miralo bien.  
Somos iguales,  
only lighter shades. (13-18)*

The Spanish here roughly translates to “Amaris, take a good look (at my skin). We are the same, only lighter shades.” Here an attempt is made to reconcile any perceived differences in skin color by unifying languages and emphasizing that these two individuals, father and daughter, are the same. This poem sets a precedent of equality that is being questioned throughout this section and collection. Essentially, the work postulates that a clear understanding of the words “we are the same” is deeply lacking in society.

To continue writing along these themes, I realized this work needed to be wholly “authentic”, honest to all sides of this conversation, even those which are uncomfortable. Consequently, I knew there was something that needed to be included which many times has been ignored, that being racism within minorities. However, I am writing from my experiences and what I knew, so I had to depict the racism in my own family and from within my own community towards African-Americans and White Americans. To be wholly honest, I had to demonstrate that this is something I learned as well from within my community. Take for example the poem, “A Lesson in Spelling Hate”. This poem spells out the N-word on an elementary school playground. In the process, it reveals how it was learned and that it is everywhere children play. It reads:

it is not a word. It does not exist  
in his six-year-old head until he hears it  
.....  
a joke said by his Buelito,  
in his broken Mexican

.....  
you will see

those letters littering the playground:

(10,11,19,20,24,25)

These lines highlight what is at stake and how easily hate is tossed around children. Also, the punching letters at every stop on the playground illustrate that the violence of hate has no bounds, no age restrictions. The lyrical essay, “United We stand, IV” also illustrates this through the actions of a Latino community leader and his mistreatment of a homeless African-American man. As with the previous poem, the perpetrators of this hate are actually role models and loved ones. Though these may be examples specific to my own experiences growing up in south Texas, they are not isolated. We have a documented history of this. The final lines of “United We stand, IV” are the words of the Civil Rights era black activist and NAACP official Reverend D. Leon Everett. According to Brian Behnken’s book, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, Everett’s words are in response to LULAC national president Felix Tijerina’s comments: “Let the Negro fight his own battles. His problems are not mine. I don’t want to ally with him” (1), as well as comments yelled at Everett by an unnamed Latino youth at a school board meeting: “We don’t want to go to school with the Blacks because they are dirty!” (2). These comments are tied to the segregation of schools, which illustrates the generations of racism embedded into every aspect of our society. Once immigrant children are inserted into this fractured system, it becomes more apparent how/why the American populous is so easily blinded with fear and hate. The only way to “fix” a broken system is to bring the deeper issues to light, even the ones we are afraid to discuss.

In section 3, we find poems, such as, “You’re Not like The Others” and “Milkbath,” which touch on issues of acceptance and racial identity that the next generation faces. These ultimately lead the reader up to and through the sequenced poem “A History of Violence”, which is bookended by the two poems “MLK for Kindergarten” and “MLK for First grade.” Here we find a depiction of political and social violence steeped in racism, with the work culminating in the mass murder at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, as represented in the poem “Requiem for Emanuel’s Slain.” To help set up this sequence and tie it to my overall narrative, I chose “MLK for Kindergarten” to lead into the sequence with a powerful question from the mouth of a child, “...*Daddy, did the white people ever hurt the black people?*” From there, the reader is taken through the world of racism. To maintain that narrative structure of what is at stake, this section and collection closes with a conversation between father and daughter. I tried to close with optimism by writing, “All I can do is try / to wash her ears & eyes clean / .... / I wrap her in love / my grandmother left me” (3,4, 21,22). However, due to the racist interaction she witnessed and will continue to witness in our society the question is raised, “Why didn’t they like him, Daddy?” (7). It becomes clear that this is an ever present uphill battle that cannot be easily “washed” away. This poem illustrates the racism and the efforts to find a solution, as a result it is the perfect way to close the collection and narrative. The immigrant journey finds its destination colliding with American racism.

POETICS:

Sequencing:

Since the inception of this collection I was constantly thinking of how the poems should work together to give a larger narrative as a collective whole. Valerie Martinez’ *Each And Her* and Charles Reznikoff’s *Holocaust*, both of which document horrific events, inspired aspects of

the structure of this collection and helped me figure out my approach. Perhaps the most significant influence was, *Each And Her*. Martinez' book, in its entirety, is structured like a sequenced poem that documents actual events through research. Throughout the book, there are quotes from news sources, and poems about roses, which seem disconnected, but are actually tied to the themes and images, as well as pieces which read like lyrical essays. Martinez' work sequences events and images from one to another, building upon each other and making every component essential to the whole. Charles Reznikoff does something similar in that his entire book, *Holocaust*, builds upon each section to create an entire narrative, each piece being essential to the whole. It only made sense to follow this sort of structure because I felt like every single poem worked as part of the overall narrative, even if it did not seem like it on the surface. Thus, I began looking at the collection as one large sequenced poem, with each poem either containing a piece of another, or a reference to something which happens in another poem, or even echoing colors or words. I also felt that sequencing poems is like telling a narrative within a narrative. Each piece of the sequence acts like independent vignettes, telling small stories which seem unconnected, yet, are tied together by simple moments or themes or images which call back to each other to create an overarching narrative.

To further strengthen the narrative structure throughout the entire collection and to tie all the sections together I concluded that there needed to be a unifying thread, more so like a spine. Thus, I decided to sequence pieces throughout each section of the collection, continuing them from one section into another. Though there are a several sequenced pieces in the collection, there are two specific ones that work together to unify the entire collection, "El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena" and "United We Stand." The main objective in "El Coyote..." is to illustrate the immigrant child's journey to the United States, whether they arrive or not. And

once here in the U.S., “United We Stand” picks up where the other leaves off: with the disunion of peoples, more racism, and the struggle immigrants and their children will face once they arrive here. The idea of doing this came from Laurie Ann Guerrero’s sequenced poem, “One Man’s Name: Colonization of the Poetic.” Guerrero threads this poem throughout her entire book. It keeps a constant theme embedded throughout and ties poems back to its theme and imagery. My sequence poems do this as well, snaking their way through the collection, either working with the sequence or juxtaposing against it to create tension and raise questions in the reader. Following that line of thought, this process illustrates each poem’s and individual’s proximity to danger and the subject matter.

Sequencing poems also came from the structure of the works of lyrical essayists who connect stories to other moments either working with or against other pieces in their collections. The works of Claudia Rankine and Eula Biss were incredibly important for me because their collections connect works in very nontraditional ways. Both Rankine and Biss connect small narratives moments from page to page, sometimes even within a page. In Rankine’s book, *Citizen*, each page accounts an event, but are different from page to page. These stories only have the narrator as the major common thread, but the themes are still racism and microaggressions. Rankine leaves this for the reader to figure out and does not title each piece; she only has the words on the page. Biss’s work will at times switch stories in the middle of the page: some narratives are told in one paragraph and the following paragraph is a different narrative, but both are similar in their themes and images and work in the same way sequencing poems does. Biss makes the work feel like moments in life turned into texturized snapshots.

Like Biss, I tried giving a snapshot of what I wanted the reader to see and experience. By connecting and interweaving these with each other, I created a collection which works like a

single narrative. Yet, each individual piece is strong enough to stand on its own to convey its own meaning and image. To achieve this, the work needed to use strong imagery to make a connection and show the reader what else they needed to see.

Creating multiple images:

As previously mentioned, concrete imagery is key to a successful narrative, as well as building and maintaining a connection with the reader. For me, the most influential writers in creating concrete imagery are Theodore Roethke, Li-Young Lee, and Natasha Trethewey. Like them, my writing strives to have the imagery focus in on small, sometimes missed, moments like a camera lens on zoom. This is something I learned from reading both Theodore Roethke and Li-Young Lee. From Roethke, I learned to create multiple layers in the imagery. For example, Roethke's poem, "My Papa's Waltz" can be read as either a sweet moment between a tipsy father and his son, or as a depiction of domestic violence at the hands of a drunken father. We find double meaning in Roethke's words choice, which is specific and intentionally chosen to border two possibilities: "...I hung on like death: / ... / We romped until the pans / slid from the kitchen" (3,5,6). All of this can either be violence or exuberance. Roethke masterfully conveys so much imagery and movement in so few lines. What also makes each line stand out and give the reader pause are the breaks, which are intentional. They force the reader to wait and take in the image before moving on. Roethke wants the reader to notice every word on each line, as such, it is no accident that the first line states that there is alcohol involved. So anything that happens after that is tied to it. As such, this poem also serves as an example of focusing on the small moments happening, the zoom in on life.

Lee also focuses in on moments incredibly well. A prime example is in his poem, “Early in the Morning,” wherein he gives the details of the love between his father and mother through watching their routines and paying attention to the details of their lives. Lee writes:

my mother glides an ivory comb  
through her hair, heavy  
and black as calligrapher’s ink.

She sits at the foot of the bed.  
My father watches, listens for  
the music of comb  
against hair. (6-12)

Lee’s writing zooms in and through their lives like a camera lens, everything else shed away in a soft haze as we focus in on the moments others might over look: the contrast of the ivory comb and her black hair, the father waiting for her and listening to the soft rhythm of her actions.

The detail in the imagery and emotional power that these two writers can produce is something which I strove to achieve in my own work. A prime example of this is in the poem “Cruzando El Rio Estix”, where I write:

it grows heavier with every footstep,  
rain drop, every day. Our shoulders quiver

like palm-shacks in hurricane winds.

.....

mother’s breath grazing at our earlobes

– her voice is the only cashmere ever known.

In this poem about immigration, I wanted the reader to feel everything the immigrant feels. The readers needed to have their shoulders feel heavy and weak, and that at this point a quiver feels more like a hurricane rather than fatigue. Like Lee, I wanted the reader to feel the soft warmth of a mother's presence that is no longer there for these children, hence the grazing cashmere at the earlobe. And like Roethke, I wanted there to be a sense of movement with the footsteps and quivers and wind. Moments like this are wherein my work zooms in like a camera to show what others normally don't see.

To further heighten the power of an image, knowing where to break a line becomes key. In Natasha Trethewey's poem, "Theories of Time and Space," she layers ideas and images into multiple lines. She writes:

by-one mile markers ticking off  
another minute of your life. Follow this  
to its natural conclusion – dead end  
at the coast, the pier at Gulfport where (6-9)

The important focus should be on the two center lines which create multiple meaning. When read as a regular sentence her directions are clear, but once the lines are broken those center lines take on a different image. The work suddenly becomes a commentary on the impermanence of life, and a commentary on following this to where it leads you. This is brilliant. This is not isolated to this work, no, Trethewey does this throughout her entire collection, but on a much grander scale. In much of the work, every single line can be read with multiple meanings and imagery. Thus, a single sentence or two with what appears to be one intended image, once broken up, can actually contain multiple images. This is something I tried throughout my work. I felt that I needed to get



as many images in a space as possible without over telling. Thanks to work like Trethewey's, I learned that breaks would help me achieve this. A great example of this is my poem "A Sugar Skull in Juárez," which when read without the breaks is about a discarded candy sugar skull in the sand, but with its breaks, the image reveals children being murdered in Mexico. I write:

red filigree smears    into brown, running

under a heel-print. Its purple & blue

eye sockets affixed to heaven,

the sun's gold sours

globes we called eyes. Juvenile,

expressionless (3-8)

The breaks here blend the imagery of a melting candy skull with the rotting body of a child in the desert. From master poets like Roethke, Lee and Trethewey I learned that I could achieve my intended goal of impacting the reader via my work through tactile, concrete imagery, calculated line breaks, and emotional engagement.

White Space/line breaks:

White space is also very important as it works with and against breaks to create tension, pacing, tone, while heightening imagery. The influence for this technique of expansive white space and scattered breaks used in many of the poems in my collection, came from two poets: Valerie Martinez and Monica Hand. The most significant influence on my collection in regards to white space has been the work of Valerie Martinez. Martinez' contribution to my work comes from her book, *Each and Her*. Her entire book reads as one sequenced poem: each poem is part of the one before and the one after, and each poem is as short as one word, with even one poem

that exists with only its title “63”, and nothing else on that page. The reason this is important to my work and my technique regarding white space is because of her subject matter and how this mirrors my work. Her collection focuses on the thousands of missing and murdered women on the U.S. / Mexico border. When Martinez uses only a single word for an entire poem, or on a page, or even several words scattered across a page of white space, it creates tension and anxiety for the reader. What makes this powerful is subject matter: the lost, dead, dying, tortured, bodies found in the middle of desert, some never found. In this way, my work tries to reflect what Martinez does in her own collection, to use white space and whispering line breaks to create an anxious breath in the reader’s lungs.

A prime example of my use of white space in relation to the work of Martinez’ is the sequenced poem “El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena.” To understand her influence, one must look to the endings of each piece in the sequence poem, as most of them end with a line or word hanging there in the white space, alone. This creates tension and anxiety for the reader reminding that nothing is yet resolved, not even the final ending in the sequence. A specific example is in the sixth and final piece of the sequence, “Persígnate,” which means “to make the sign of the cross on one’s self.” This is also known as the stations of the cross. The poem ends with the word “santo...” at the top of its own page with nothing else other than white space to fill the page. Though it may appear that it was accidental, it was not. This poem was intentionally designed to end with as much white space on the page following the four stations of the cross and the ellipsis:

En el nombre de el Padre,

del Hijo,

y del Espíritu

My intention is to mirror the idea of the afterlife, the everlasting void of nothing, the serene white presence/visual idea of “heaven.” The ellipsis also serves to reinforce the notion that what follows this moment is unknown, open, unresolved, etc. Though this is possibly the most drastic/overt use of white space in the collection, it is used intentionally throughout the “El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena” sequence. Every piece in this sequence is broken up into very short line breaks or fragments of sentences drizzled on the page. This was done with the specific intention of reproducing the desert which these individuals in my poem, and in real life, traverse to seek freedom. If each piece in this sequence were to be placed side-by-side, it would mirror the aerial perspective of a map, with the words and lines representing individuals and groups lost, serpentineing their way through the desert with the vast disorientating expanse of death surrounding them.

The work of Monica Hand influenced much of my work with an unorthodox approach to the use of white space and breaks, which creates work that can be read either horizontally, diagonally, or vertically. Monica Hand’s poem, “Libation” being the best example. Her poem is divided into vertical columns, almost like lists twenty-four lines long divided into four columns. In each “column,” there are either one or two words, then beneath another one or two words, and so on for twenty-four lines, like so:

Town Crier	<i>Call her name</i>	Chirp	Zip Gun
Drum Speaker	Gift from God	Hum	Coolness
Dirge chanter	Left Hand	Warble	<i>Call her name</i>
Wood thrush	Right hand	On the down	Cinnamon

(5-8).

globs we called eyes. Juvenile,  
 expressionless  
 Mexican  
 ts dropped from a trunk. Unidentifiable  
 mementos buried – lost faces (7-11)

I did this in many of the poems, as I wanted to create as many images tied to the themes as possible, while keeping the work as clean and tight as possible. The multiple ways of reading each piece, when read each way, are intentional and aid the over all narrative. I want the reader to lose him/her self in the work and find those different ways of reading each poem. Another

method I used to fit a much larger concept into the work without spelling it out onto every page was my use of the ampersand to symbolize equality.

Use of the ampersand, &:

One of my main goals in the work was to achieve an understanding for the need for equality. I needed to figure out a way to convey the concept that everything and everyone is equal and important to society and our actions impact others and vice versa. I found the answer in Aracelis Girmay's book *Kingdome Animalia* and her use of the ampersand as a symbol of equality. In her collection, she uses the ampersand in place of the traditional "and." As a result, everything in the collection is connected, and a continuation of the former. Whether its people or ideas, everything is relevant because everything is equal. In a manner of speaking, the ampersand breaks everything down to its bones, to where we are all the same. A good example of this is the final line of my piece, "Our Way Home, III" it is written, "But for them to die on their way there is freedom in of itself, liberation, & an honorable death" (6,7). The ampersand helps to convey to the reader that freedom and death are the same. The ampersand creates equality for all things at all levels in my collection, but it also pulls the reader along, as if saying, "and then this happened," "and let me show you this," "and I want you to feel this," and so on, and so on. For my collection, the ampersand functions as a technical tool for conveying meaning and equality.

Form:

The only piece in this collection which utilized any sort of specific form/structure is the poem titled, "Requiem for Emanuel's Slain." The choice to call this piece a requiem was not an aesthetic one, but actually tied to the meaning of a requiem. A requiem, according to Webster's Dictionary, is broken down to two things relating to death. The first being a Christian religious ceremony/mass for the dead. The requiem mass is usually broken into several

sections/movements. The second being a musical composition or solemn chant in repose or honor of the dead. According to Christoph Wolff's book, *Mozart's Requiem: Historical and Analytical Studies, Documents, and Score*, musical requiems, like that of Mozart's "Requiem Mass in D minor," traditionally have anywhere between six to twelve movements or strophes, with seven to nine being the most common. According to Wolff, Mozart's contained the: Introit (entrance), Kyrie (short repeated invocation), Sequentia, Offertorium, Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei, Pie Jesu, Libera Me, & In Paradisum (70).

In "Requiem for Emanuel's Slain", I tried to emulate the requiem as much as possible by giving it seven strophes and two epigraphs to serve as nine movements to my requiem for the dead of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The purpose for including the elements, or structure, of a requiem is to strengthen the tone, meaning, and power behind this offering I am giving for these slain individuals. The non-traditional approach to a requiem for me also mirrors my own life. Though I have no religious affiliations, this poem serves as my own mass/prayer for these people and their community. To achieve this, I had to play with tradition, so as to make it my own. If I had followed a strict guide and reference to a requiem, the poem would not have worked as well, and much of its strength would have been lost in restricting it to a rigid form.

My approach to form in "Requiem for Emanuel's Slain" is not unlike Laurie Ann Guerrero's crown of sonnets, "A Crown for Gumeecindo." In "A Crown for Gumeecindo" Guerrero changes her first lines ever so lightly from the last, and ever so slightly in the final sonnet each line has changed again. In my opinion, what makes Guerrero's crown work are those very personal changes she makes to each of those lines. Now, by no means does my work here parallel the amazing structure and form with which Guerrero executed her crown of sonnets, but

I am inspired by her fortitude to utilize the form and make it malleable to her needs, to appropriate it for her goal, thus making her collection much more powerful. In this way I chose to make my requiem my own. Also, like Guerrero, my choice to modify form becomes a way of subverting the rules and form dictated by white cannon and literary history. In doing this, I am now appropriating it for my own use. This is very important in regards to the message my work is trying to send, as well as the subject matter of this poem, and key to the intention of telling “our side” of the story. To do this, one must document and give an accurate portal of the events. Truth & the Power of Persuasion:

Solely injecting facts and augmenting them with imagery does not make a strong anthro-poetry collection. As noted previously, to achieve the intended goal, the work needs to attain and project *truth*. Herein lies the responsibility of the anthro-poet to create and maintain the “Power of persuasion” in the work. The “Power of persuasion” as Mario Vargas Llosa coins in his book, *Letters to a Young Novelist*, is key to creating a powerful narrative. Llosa simplifies this to mean that the “way [the story is told] is what determines whether the tale is believable or not” (26). Much like New Critical theory, the assertion here is that everything written in the work should exist for the specific reason of aiding the over all piece and is all the reader needs to comprehend the work. The focus here is on the work’s unity and how every element in the work builds together toward the theme(s). Even though anthro-poetry uses facts, there still needs to be proper use of narrative, style, form, and specifically truth. Just because there are facts on a page means nothing unless the intention is to also engage the emotions of the reader, and give them the tactile sense of the event.

Within my work, much of the believability comes from the tactile imagery I use. My goal is to have the reader see, feel, smell, and taste everything in a poem because everything in my

poetry is intentional and serves the overall image/message being conveyed. It is important to my work because I want the reader to feel that this instance they have become privy to is the only thing that matters in that moment. Since my work focuses heavily on social justice, I want the reader to forget there is even a world existing outside of the image I have painted on the page. The form, the line breaks, the images, the names, the voices, and the tone are all there for the reader once it leaves my hands. My strategy follows Llosa, who writes, “it must transmit to the reader an illusion of autonomy from the real world...”, and that the work should be, “...freed from *real* life, of containing in itself everything it requires to exist”, and in doing so, “it has ... successfully seduc[ed] its readers” (27). With this said, it should be clarified that what I mean in using Llosa’s words “freed from *real* life” is that once the reader delves into it, my work exists on its own separate from me and my experiences. The world the reader enters is from the vantage point of the person of color, the oppressed. Or as Llosa writes, “[the work] liberates itself from its creator (me)... and impresses itself on the reader as an autonomous reality” (31). Thus, the power of persuasion rests in the work’s accessibility / credibility. With Anthro-poetry, the writer must maintain a plausibility with the facts and the poetic license: using the tools of imagery, emotion, and senses to create and maintain a connection between the reader and the subject. This is not only about the study of a human, but more over, the study of humanity and empathy.

#### Accessible Language:

The final, and perhaps most important, aspect of my work to aid in the “believability” is through my use of accessible language. The language a writer uses is key to the target audience, especially when trying to enact change in society. My work strives to reach all readers, not only academics, and to do this my language can not be academic at all times. In her introduction to the anthology, *Civil Disobediences: Poetics and Politics in Action*, Ann Waldman clarifies that the



social justice writing in the collection “answers an urgent call to a poetics of engagement”, calling it a “talking” book (1). Thus, being a collection which opens a dialogue with the readers and the community. This is important as my own work strives to create a dialogue between the community and readers outside of the community. Waldman’s words mirror the importance I find in my work and ambition as a writer. She writes, “These texts are not necessarily “polished” or academic. They are refreshingly free of the jargon of critical theory and predictable ideas. ... This book unequivocally implies that poets as thinkers, as ‘legislators of the race’ exist to be heard” (2). The focus here is on the word “polished,” which, when it comes to poetry, it usually implies academic writing and jargon. My work rejects academic jargon for the sake of academia because I believe that to start a dialogue as a poet, one’s work must remain accessible to a much larger audience. This is because poetry receives a horrible stereotype of being cryptic or only for the intellectual elite, but that could not be further from the truth. Good poetry can pull most any reader in and hold their attention, and social justice poetry must do this as well. If the work is focused on engaging the community in what affects them locally, then the writer must speak to them directly in their language. The Anthro-poet must use the language of the people to communicate with the people and not alienate them. For example, I cannot write from an academic’s perspective about race relations in the barrio and still get the barrio to respond to me. Doing this will only keep my audience at arm’s length. My mother won’t understand a reference to Eliot or Wordsworth, but she would understand a reference to Tejano culture, local race relations, regional language and references. Using honest language, or layman’s, opens those doors as opposed to creating intellectual barriers. This ensures, at a minimum, access to a dialogue regarding change. Accessible poetry can and will inspire change. Our language, both spoken and written, becomes our history and effects us all. Long after I am gone, my words will

still exist on some page, in some book, on some screen, or in my daughter's mind. This collection can be passed down, continually affecting others, impacting their lives in some way, inciting deep thought and questioning.

Whether or not the poetry is about a tragic event or a simple moment between lovers, the goal of the writer should be to express that in a manner which the reader is able to experience, be a part of, almost touch, and relate to or connect with. Renato Rosaldo's words express this best, "The work of poetry, ...is to bring its subject – whether pain, sorrow, shock, or joy – home to the reader" and others in the proximity of the event (105). This Anthro-poetic collection can serve as a connection from one culture to another, it can speak for those who can not, and it can allow a reader to feel what the others feel.

# **La Gente Entre Nosotros**

## **The People Between Us**

**GENTE**

**I.**

## **Thunder**

*Daddy, do you remember the night  
there was thunder, it roared  
like a lion? It was so loud that  
it flipped our house, & you were running  
to my room & caught me  
in the living room. I was crying so hard,  
my throat burned from shouting.*

*Yes, I did.*

*You knew I was afraid.*

*You were. Very frightened.  
Your back was wet  
& your screams were louder  
than the thunder in my ears  
& at my back. The lightening sparked  
another fire in the streets  
before I could get to you.*

*When it's that hard I cover  
my ears & look for you in the dark.*

## El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena I: God

*More than 57,000 youths, mostly from Central America, have crossed  
into the U.S. illegally since October.*

*– CBS DC online July 22, 2014*

God,

in the middle of the Sierra Madres

the Coyote speaks

to

his dinner:

hands

bound,

face

down, buried

nose,

nothing

but

the surrounding

mountain

faces

– Where

sometimes

images,

made from waters’

perpetual carving, of

hope,

with

faith

appears

God:

Mamá,

sin

voz

– nadie,

no

one

there

to say,

*I'm sorry,                      hijo mio.*

Si era

una

Madre,

Dios?

## **Cartographers of El Salvador**

The callouses hardening your young  
fingers scour & snag where you plot  
the future on paper grids. Inch-by-inch  
you trace an unseen path,  
becoming pixels of color bound  
north, ghosting through The Devil's Highway,  
laying prayers on the razor  
lips of La Santa Muerte. Al norte.  
Former lives buried  
beneath your nails, you follow  
The Beast to the agonizing end  
– Los Estados Unidos.  
Mexico, now the middle man,  
exporting friends & family.



## América del Norte

*It is a gate of hope through which they expect to find  
the sunlight of a better life for themselves and their families.*  
– Cesar Chavez

Before first light a comal heats  
slowly, wraiths of smoke raise,  
beneath,

blue flames thrust upward, scorching  
metal – the surface of the sun

in a dilapidated home. The small star cooks  
masa: firm golden halos, sustenance

placed with continued devotion – made from sweat  
& single digit pesos. Eating like kings,

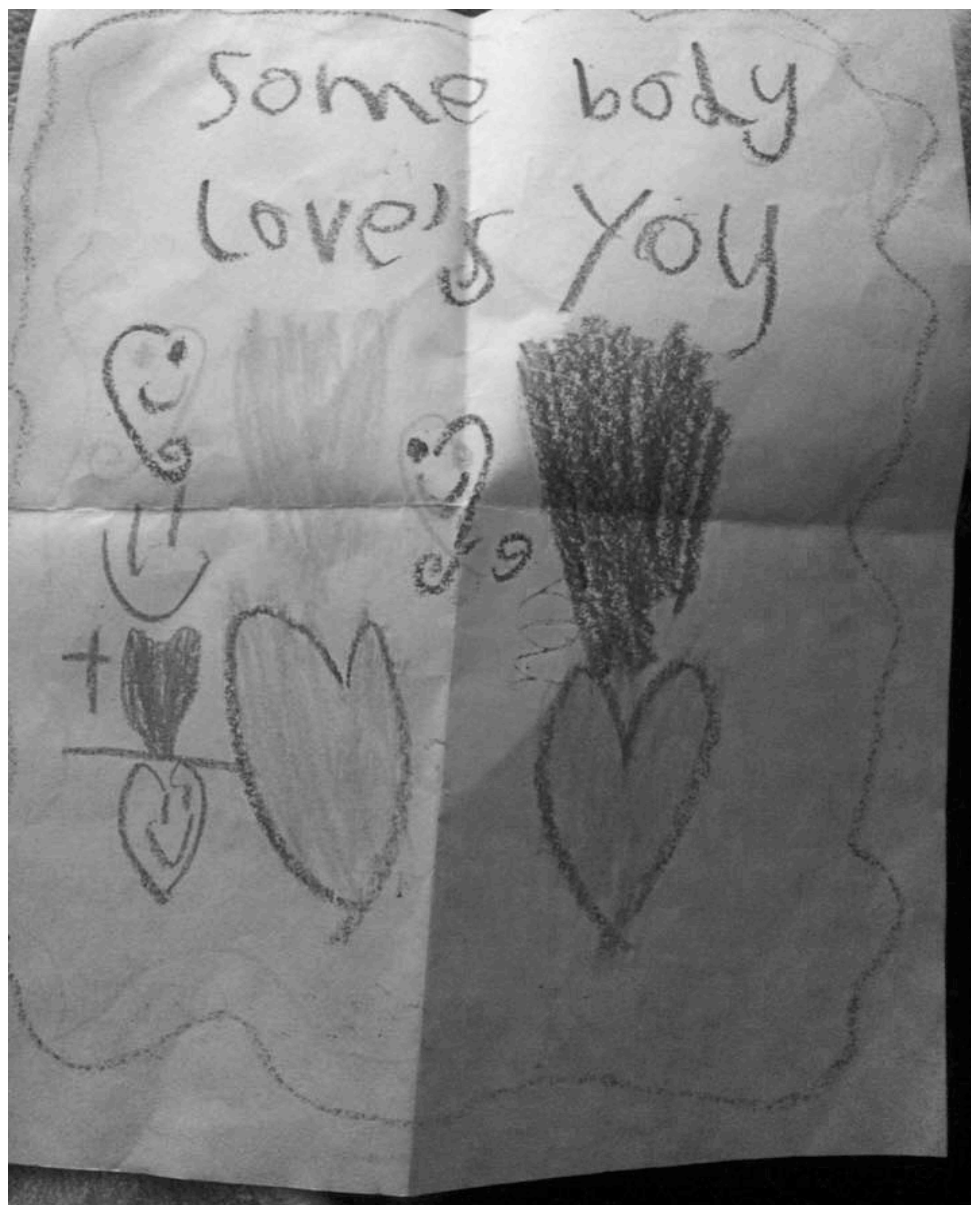
power over only the blackened metal disc.  
Its terrain drizzled with debris:

drops  
from a house  
painter's  
brush;

forty years of predawn meals.

## **Our Way Home, I.**

Your twelve-year-old palms hold tight to the hot rusting steel. It leaves them as blood-red as the dirt around your neck, ankles, & the faces you left at home. The calluses on your hands rival that of the men before you & keep your young flesh from fusing to the metal spine below. On the back of this beast, you smoke & cuss like American sailors on leave. They too phone home for a soft voice on the other end, but your nights are reserved for empty playgrounds & dumpster dinners. The metallic slide warming your legs & pacifying the longing for something & someone familiar. The seesaw dividing you boys: one going up into the clouds, the other plunging down to meet broken bottles & blood – no one there to sooth your wounds & say *I'm sorry mijo*. Back on the train, laughter trails behind, tracing sleeping ears – specters, leaving only footprints behind as proof you were once there & no one noticed.



## **Cruzando El Rio Estix**

Like candlelit paper boats floating  
down the Ganges, we hold prayers: offerings  
for blessings in return. We carry the fortune  
of a beggar in our pockets – coins for our eyes.

Dragging the muddy waters,  
our feet stir up a red viscous stew,  
byproduct of public policy & business  
– it tastes just like apple pie. All of this

swept downstream & out of sight.  
Memories, like ginger on the tongue, are piercing,  
sweet, & eye-opening. But what you will see  
on television is some dirty person paying

their way out to freedom. Their heads swim  
with dreams of caviar & cashmere;  
clean clothes, shared beds, & mother's prayers.  
From behind your gates, you will hear

how we suckle at the tit of the rich  
& middle-class. What a dirty, evil  
bunch of greedy beggars

we are. What we see  
is a burlap satchel, slowly bowing  
closer to the ground,  
it grows heavier with every footstep,  
rain drop, every day. Our shoulders quiver

like palm-shacks in hurricane winds.

The only power urging us forward,  
mother's breath grazing at our earlobes

– her voice is the only cashmere ever known.

Her words keep our mouths shut  
& their rope away from our throats.

## No one answers

Bone-dry desert surrounds  
his seven-teen-year-old body like plastic  
wrap, this warm blooded creature drips

liquid salt. A memory: hunger & home  
– Mamá wakes before roosters call out  
the sun, metal heating. Lacerated tissue sears,

cauterizing: black soot spreads at its edges.  
Scorching pain & lingering stench  
fill her kitchen, and her arthritic hands  
quiver as she forms circles of maíz.  
Her Palms pressuring together,

fingers, like breaking tree limbs,  
crack with every press. She howls out  
into their vacant home  
the names of her four apostles.  
She waits & listens for them,

the television quietly reveals  
*fifty-two daily drug war deaths – 12,598*  
*since July*, no one answers,  
like Jesus – he, too, loved his mother,

*he, too, would be a victim...*  
*he thought. That's how life had become*  
*for people without means.* Outside of borders die

hunger & hope, where the sun dries all  
liquid, white stains form from the inside,  
& no one is there to say, *I'm sorry mijo*.





## **Our Way Home II.**

Before the van speeds away, before your eyes close out the sun, before you feel the cashmere of your grandmother's voice against your ears & heart, you hear adults shouting back to the man coming ever closer to your vulnerable nine-year-old body. *Leave him!* But this man cannot leave you, a child he does not know, alone to die – dinner for the mountain, to be swallowed into the sand like countless children. You will not meet your mother today. You will live with your grandmother in her home, where you still believe the angels hover over, protecting from the evils of the world.

## **The Color in Her Hands**

*Miniscule sprinkles of color  
broken down individuals:  
a pixilated map, grains resting  
side by side – Personal cubes rubbing  
shoulders, mixing in a confined space – sealed in.*

*Daddy, do you like my sand art?*

*It's for you.*

*Yes. It's beautiful,  
my love.*

*I don't like it  
because I added brown.*

*Why is brown bad?*

*Because it's the color of poop.*

*Hmm.*

*Well, what else is brown?*

*Cookies  
...and chocolate.*

*And?*

*Me!*

*And?*

*Grandma...*

*and Buelito...  
and Uncle Rene.*

*And?*

*You...sometimes  
you're not as brown, but I love you.  
But Mommy's not brown.*

*Well, then, is brown really bad?*

*No, it's not.*

*Then maybe it can be beautiful too?*

*Yeah, it's pretty, too.*



## El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, II: Madre

...Madre,  
if these children had floated a raft  
across a blue ocean, not across a murky brown river,  
they would be known as refugees on television,  
  
not illegal immigrants. I watched  
from the soft comfort of my living room, a screen  
flooded with adults, parents, a Mayor, free people  
  
and their flags, stopped a bus stuffed with frail, terrified children,  
who escaped being buried face down in their uniforms,  
or being burned alive, clutching their backpacks  
  
and notepads – young skin fused to metal –  
to be welcomed with freezing beds, closed fists & hissing  
words pummeling their hearts;  
  
misspelled brown cardboard signs that read:  
*Save our children from diseases*, – Tiny red, white, and blue  
flag in the corner – *Our tax money for U!!!*,  
*Hell No, Go Home*,  
*U.S. Citizens don't get FREE PASS*  
*Y should illegals*;  
  
and a man spitting on another human  
face. It is the only thing to make the city apologize. *My heart sank*  
*when I watched the video, Mayor Ramos said.*  
  
*In losing control for that moment unquestionably*

*that individual gave the city a black eye...*

*I do want to take this time*

*on behalf of the City of Murrieta*

*to give our most sincere apologies...*

to Lupillo Rivera.

His words whipped across

my back...

...like El Coyote, with money

burning holes

in his pockets.

## A Sugar Skull in Juárez

*...More than 5,000 people (an average of more than five a day)  
have been killed in an intensifying drug war that has reached  
deep into children's lives — kids gather at crime scenes,  
stumble onto recently slain bodies, are forced to witness  
relatives' assassinations, or are killed themselves.  
— Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, Miami New Times.*

White cheekbone peaks

through layering dirt,

red filigree smears    into brown, running

under a heel-print. Its purple & blue

eye sockets affixed to heaven,

the sun's gold sours

globes we called eyes. Juvenile,

expressionless

Mexican

exports dropped from a trunk.    Unidentifiable

mementos buried    — lost    faces

we remember, pray for. Everyday is día de los muertos.

*...without a doubt, we can conclude that the students at the teachers' college were abducted, killed, burned, and thrown into the San Juan River, in that order.*

– Mexican Attorney General Jesus Murillo Karam

Their old bus eventually found  
broken and empty. They were not.  
Sons, taken, leaving beds without impressions,  
& classrooms to echo their names:

Abel García Hernández	Abelardo Vázquez Peniten
Adán Abrajan de la Cruz	Alexander Mora Venancio
Antonio Santana Maestro	Benjamín Ascencio Bautista
Bernardo Flores Alcaraz	Carlos Iván Ramírez Villarreal
Carlos Lorenzo Hernández Muñoz	César Manuel González Hernández
Christian Alfonso Rodríguez Telumbre	Christian Tomas Colon Garnica
Cutberto Ortiz Ramos	Dorian González Parral
Emiliano Alen Gaspar de la Cruz.	Everardo Rodríguez Bello
Felipe Arnulfo Rosas	Giovanni Galindes Guerrero
Israel Caballero Sánchez	Israel Jacinto Lugardo
Jesús Jovany Rodríguez Tlatempa	Jonas Trujillo González
Jorge Álvarez Nava	Jorge Aníbal Cruz Mendoza
Jorge Antonio Tizapa Legideño	Jorge Luis González Parral
José Ángel Campos Cantor	José Ángel Navarrete González
José Eduardo Bartolo Tlatempa	José Luis Luna Torres
Jhosivani Guerrero de la Cruz	Julio César López Patolzin
Leonel Castro Abarca	Luis Ángel Abarca Carrillo
Luis Ángel Francisco Arzola	Magdaleno Rubén Lauro Villegas
Marcial Pablo Baranda	Marco Antonio Gómez Molina
Martín Getsemany Sánchez García	Mauricio Ortega Valerio
Miguel Ángel Hernández Martínez	Miguel Ángel Mendoza Zacarías
Saúl Bruno García	



Students who dreamt of being teachers, burned to black ash,  
like paper wads for kindling. The investigator said  
the only found dental remains burned upwards

of two-thousand-nine-hundred degrees Fahrenheit,  
hot enough to liquefy iron  
& steel. The names that once came  
from those mouths can never be identified.

No one will ever be able to say  
this was my child –  
mi criatura

## Before the Next Stop

With each step we plow our feet  
into pebbles, dirt, & thorns – splitting  
the barren earth open like a parched mouth  
gasping for water, waiting to swallow. My little brother's

hot breath sears the base of my neck.

We shoulder my brother & sister, like cattle  
with yokes digging in at collarbones,  
through this thick heat. Mamá calls

to me, *keep moving forward,*  
*it's only a few more kilometers*  
*to the next pueblo.* My footfalls break  
the rhythm in the footprints I follow, leaving

tracks like feral animals. Our skin burns  
with the thirst of freedom  
from these sandpaper clothes,  
for the clacking train standing by

ready to lift our soles & cart us through the air,  
vibrating with the same cadence of my heart  
as we get closer. My mother's voice becomes white  
noise as I realize the only breath I feel pounding is my own.

## Following Crumbs

Brick-red palms on rust we ride, white knuckled.  
Eyes set forward, al norte, away from what  
we abandoned: la muerte, los narcos, amistades,

& mamá's guiding voice. Here childhood dies,  
split knuckles replace school & we hang  
our heads & trek forward like soldiers  
in another land – we follow crumbs of a freedom

we may never see, & *if* we do,  
we send portions of hope back  
for loves left behind. But once  
free we must still lurk in shadows,  
in kitchens, & beneath noses turned up

to the late night calls for help  
from the other side of the tracks.  
Where are we when we arrive  
in the land of promise & find words striking  
out at us, jutting across our juvenile throats

like straight razors? Your knuckles spewing rage,  
your voices flinting hate. We're not mistaken,  
this ruddy soil is where anyone can sing  
holy praises, corridos of freedom,

not where the sins of our country  
are supposed to find us – narco bullets  
piercing our backs from afar, our feet dragging

long shadows south in the sand: thin lines tracing back  
to empty homes & empty stomachs;

where gin lead to a surplus of skulls & crossbones  
on this map. We'll never finger those names  
on a memorial: those plotlines laying  
needle point, sowing our autopsied land shut,

& holding back Mamá's tender voice in the torrid June air.  
*Cuidate* rests behind our ears, but here  
the Coyote whispers, *soon*.

### El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, III: Al Norte

... Words fire out  
the chamber of his mouth,  
knees buckling, flesh cauterizing  
&  
they fall  
at the edge  
of  
the Sierra  
Madres, where  
they bleed  
into Arizona,  
where  
they feel his voice piercing  
their backs  
before grasping the fact,  
these  
Mountains  
are where they will see blue for the last time,  
and that  
this mother will kill them.

### **Our Way Home III.**

I watch a border patrol agent say to a reporter that these children's parents shouldn't be surprised if their child never makes it because they put *these kids lives in the hands of a stranger*. His indignation spews from his mouth – La migra. His brown skin carries no accent. His government salary affords him central air & Ray Bans. There is no equal in his wallet to the pennies "*these people*" slave to earn, & the bullets following them from Guatemala only to die alone in the desert a mile from freedom. But for them to die on their way there is freedom in of itself, liberation, & an honorable death.



**BETWEEN US**

**II.**



## **A Learned Behavior**

We pass a hackneyed man,  
his shoulders bowing, barely  
supporting his head, as he crosses  
the street. His elbows & knees

soiled from a day working  
in the Texas sun. His filthy umber skin  
only a few shades darker than mine. My child's  
words run through my back,

*That man doesn't want to work.*

*What? Who told you that?*

*Mommy did.*

*What did she say?*

*We saw a man that looked like him  
asking for help & she said  
we shouldn't give him any money  
because those people don't want to work,  
those people are lazy.*

*I'm sorry your mother told you that. She...  
It's not our job to judge anyone.*

*We don't know why someone lives on the streets  
& is asking for help or money.*

*Our job is to help all people in need.*

*Money comes & goes. We could lose all of our things  
in a fire, but what is the most important thing we should have?*

*Family.*

*You & me, daddy.*

*That's right. We can all become that man, even  
your mother. It's wrong to think like that,  
we are not better than anyone else.*

*I'm sorry, daddy.*

*No, I'm sorry, mi amorcita.*

*I'm sorry your mother was misinformed.*

## Stigmata Mine

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
...where there is despair, hope; ...  
...and where there is sadness, joy  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned ...  
- excerpt from the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi*

My mother made me

recite this prayer daily.

Each morning she impressed

on me the gravity of poverty

for St. Francis, the first person to receive the Stigmata:

visible marks & intense suffering

mirroring Jesus Christ's wounds of crucifixion

– bleeding hands, feet, & sides, sometimes

without end. He lived the pain of someone else,

ardent to aid those in need. Back then, we hung

a large painting of St. Francis next to our front door;

each morning we walked passed bloody hands,

then dropped quarters at the unwashed feet of men

massed on downtown corners, blackened skin

in undeniable heat. There my mother

gripped my pale hands & scurried me to safety

behind the locked doors of St. Mary's Elementary School,

before heading to her second job

– she said nothing was free.

When I asked her why

we couldn't help those men on the corner

she answered with another prayer,

*because God gives*

*us the serenity to accept*

*the things we cannot change.*

I still wonder when he will

give us the courage to know the difference.

## Broken Promises

We drive past Durango, Buena Vista,  
& Commerce, on the cusp of downtown  
– the borderline separating

the Westside. To the right, capitalism  
– The Tower of the Americas & HemisFair Park,  
where nations & corporations met on flat land.

To the left, poverty – the *Outcry in the Barrio*,  
Jesus swaddled in two flags,  
outreach with no one reaching back  
– it buries the sound of my mother's  
Juicy Fruit gum crackling like distant cuetes.

We slow  
down to turn

on Houston Street, our car attacked  
– ruddy brown hands bang & paw  
at the windows, dark worked faces surround the car

before my crying five-year-old eyes shut.

We rock side to side, a battered cradle.

Speeding off

my mother repeats, "I'm sorry,  
mijo! That won't happen again.

I promise." Now,  
I drive down Frio Street,

passing Cesar Chavez & Buena Vista.

I see packs of abode

faces running to a slowing truck, buckets of white paint & gasoline

tumble around back. Their ruddy brown hands

pawing its windows: tired, hungry

eyes plead, “Trabajo?!”

The truck speeds away, no one there

to say, “I’m sorry, mijo.

## Where Prayer Does Not Find Them

*...Te pido también por mis hermanos  
más necesitados, por los que sufren,  
por los oprimidos, por los marginados,  
por los que hoy más necesiten de  
tu protección.*

*– Oración para San Antonio de Padua*

These two men step back, chunks of cold dirt  
chip off white Pro-Wings. They politely call,       Yes,

*Sir?* Names roll from red carpets  
exiting our mouths, our father's voices  
    & tongues releasing

accents. Stepping forward,  
    another chip falls  
& their shoulders slope back  
                    down,  
                    echoing the mountains

their feet carved       to reach this pavement.  
    Their names come across,

José & Jesús – peace offerings from El Salvador,  
                            the land without  
                            savior.

Our hands meet, like dirty winter ice  
melting into coffee; heartbeats exiting,  
            our mouths       spirit out

gray, then nothing

into the wet frigid December morning.  
Behind them, slender vent-like windows of Bexar country

jail – filtering the west side & its filth from the Riverwalk’s  
immaculate lights acknowledging the birth of Jesús

Cristo. To men with badges larger than my presence  
they're all the same  
— from Mexico.

This tribe of men collect            in soggy clothes  
   & wait                         for the next work truck.

Drops of dew gather  
on their necks & wet backs  
— crystal globes

for their time & suffering. *What Would Jesus Do*

emblazoned on a rubber band over a frail wrist  
– scar tissue keeps it from setting in place.

These men left \_\_\_\_\_ in a muddy, \_\_\_\_\_ ignored corner of a city  
named \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ for the patron saint of finding  
\_\_\_\_\_ lost people.





## United We Stand, I

Since you're a big man, people don't stop. If they slowed down they would see the broken arm, the flat tire, & the petite head bobbling in the backseat. Finally, one man pulls his truck to the side of the road. His voice chops out in the same broken cadence of your father's footsteps crossing the border. Your fears suddenly calmed because this altruism is what you & he were raised on as gospel: treat everyone as brothers – Hermanos unidos, gente unido en Los Estados Unidos. His daughter pops with the same helpful smile & a bottle of water for you at his instruction. She & your daughter sit together like old friends watching you & he work together – strangers.

When you get home, you see the news through the blond strands of your wife's hair: Women & Children Now Being Released from Dilley, Karnes City Detention Facilities. Can you believe it. *...Texas immigration judges releasing undocumented women and children wearing ankle monitors...A California judge ruled that locking up children violates a two decade old agreement, even if the kids are with their mothers.* Your daughter plays with the the toy her new friend gave her.

Hundreds of thousands of Central American women and children were caught last summer, entering Texas – fleeing drug wars, mass murders, & corrupt governments. Texas took a hard line, denying bonds & placing the families in detention as a way to send a message to others considering entering our country. In other news, 12 million non-Americans flee Syria, half are children. We are treading blood in hail storm of babies.



## **This God Is a Beast of Burden**

*After Patrick Rosal*

*Anger – you sonofabitch – is but one god and gods require  
men to prey ...”*

*– Patrick Rosal,*

But I need something different from my Tio's  
anger, smoker's hack & guera barfly wife.

– They met down from the Alameda Theater, at that bar with the neon  
hula girl. Her hips moved in rhythm to Freddy Fender's "Wasted Days

and Wasted Nights." There my grandparents & I picked him up,  
because, as his mother put it, *esta tan borracho ni si quere*

*puede gatear a la casa.*

His liver & wife hang from his sides

– that pack mule – *hijo-de-puta-madre.*

He also requires my fear to be

a god – he even wanted my mother  
to carry him on her shoulders. But I did,  
until the night he fell

into our kitchen, pisteadó, otra vez – dropped off  
by Ometochtli. His breath hissing with pulque Lite,  
*You and your brothers think*  
*you're too cool, but I'm your Uncle.*

*I deserve respect.* He did.

So I gave him my back and prayed  
to Anger – *that son-of-a-bitch.* I believed,

because the gods, Anger, and his brother,

Drink, seemed to follow & carry me, too,  
from wherever I went. I prayed.

## **Menudo, It's like Beef Stew**

His five-year-old arms embrace

black & white

copies of the American

Pledge of Allegiance – its white edges dig in

at his throat,

the first of his many cuts made

with papers. Her

old kitchen knife drops:

chopping tripe into digestible bits.

Her handle,

two chunks of cracking mesquite,

held together with layers

of masking

tape & a few screws.

– Someday he, too,

will carry her blade, make meals for his children,

& cut his fruit

with what

she has left

for him. The pungent odor of a weakening stomach,

decaying animal, wet hay, & dirt,

escape from the seething white honeycomb – it reeks

& he cannot resist it. Once the crimson spice is added,

the red viscous stew lulls to simmer  
behind her ears.

He will repeat this recipe  
over the next thirty years,

stirring the blood-red Mexican soup. Today,  
she needs to learn to pledge allegiance. He will

finally teach her: pointing to every word, his  
small olive tinged fingers barely touch, "... the flag

of the United States of America..." She follows,  
pausing to catch the seconds moving forward

on the singing-bird-clock, another sparrow chirps away,  
& she inspects her kitchen from a distance.

She continues along, wooden paddle in hand. Outside,  
her husband tends yard,  
masking tape in hand,

mending a hole in their fence – his white stains  
seep through his brown shirt,  
over his heart.





## United We Stand, II

The cold of December holds you in your brother's home, but it's the frigid distance between your hearts that keeps you silent & watching the wrong words fall from his mouth. He asks your visiting cousin if she likes white people, because, as he says, *I don't like them at all*. Confused, she looks at you quickly, then back to him & responds in her Chicago accent, *They're alright, but I guess things are different down here*. You walk to your daughter & pull her up through the field of strawberry-blonde snuggled around her skin & the three of you walk out. The last thing you hear is your brother's annoyed voice, *What I can't speak my mind in my own home?*

## Southern Hospitality

In a vineyard of tired ruddy faces & verdant leaves, her  
dirty-blond-hair glistens. Like grain in wind  
it shifts from gold to brown. Her pale skin  
strikes against his adobe skin & black hair. Both

their shoulders cart pain, & callused hands drop  
another bunch of grapes into his bag – the overripe burst  
under pressure. His neutral gray eyes keep watch  
wherever they go: California, Illinois,  
Texas: San Antonio. By the 1980's

our Blond-Texan neighbors loved Granny. Judy would call  
every day, *Can I speak to Mel-a, please?* Her drawl gushed  
of Bud Jones' chicken fried steak, brown gravy,  
& diner plate chatter. They entered *our* home  
daily for coffee, sweet bread, & conversation –  
Granny would not sit until she served both women

first. I never played with their children. I was busy  
working in the back with Buelito – his eyes  
kept watch, the saw ever closer. From over the fence  
their husband's distant brows paced, silent. Buelito's dark  
sun-dried hands always busy, a steady pulse,  
mending our fence & repainting our home white  
for her. He never argued, only exhaled & continued on.

## West Texas Floods, I.

Even though it's been more than a month since you left El Salvador, the memories still quiver out of your 14-year-old throat every time you speak, *The gangs go into the schools and take girls out and kill them. On the TV everyday girls are buried in their uniforms with their backpacks and notebooks. ...and I had to walk by myself.*

What's left of your voice still trails behind on parched, cracking earth – surrounded by mountains & buzzards; where you muttered goodbye to your mother for the last time. This is where the last of her kisses faded like a distant radio signal. Where you heard of bullets dropping other daughters & their fathers along the route.

But your father told you that here, *safety was guaranteed*. Either way, he is gone now & this sheriff's barrel holds an eye on your filthy blouse. So now you know this is what life has become for children without means in El Salvador, & anywhere else R's roll off the tongue like the bodies into the river.

## Cattleman Square

The McDonald's General Manager's eyes shift  
    & her hands fidget when she speaks of these men  
standing outside & all around us.

Another Police officer coasts passed their soiled faces & jaundiced eyes,  
    sipping on a soda, arm hanging from his door,  
        his eyes fixed  
            forward, away,

behind protective lenses. These filthy men line two city blocks with their backs  
    faced south. Building shadows  
        cast from behind,  
            down, over their faces.

Her words shudder  
    when another ruddy-faced man walks in, *People are afraid*  
*because they all stand*  
        *on the corner, around the whole block.*

Some cling                      to a chain-link fence that cages  
    off a parking lot:

an outdoor Tejano  
    dance hall,  
        its shadow,  
  
grill marks on their skin.

*People ask us, 'What are they doing here?'*

*Are they going to jump us?*

*Steal from us?*

- An inner city cattle drive.

*I tell them, 'No,*

*they're just day laborers,*

*they're just looking for work.'*

[illegible]

stand bold in the background  
– the city’s university, a stone’s throw.

*They just crowd the trucks and SUVs that look like the ones that pick them up for work.*

To the left of this herd of men,  
the red bricks of the country jail,

and the nation's distance

between them & the hooved prints

they followed to get here,

overworked

– only the Frio street

sign separating them.

*People are just afraid of them,  
but they don't bother us,  
sometimes they come in  
for a drink or to cool off,  
but usually they just stand  
  
out there all day waiting for work.*

To their right: I-35 droning & Santa Rosa Hospital's mural:  
an Angel watching over a brown boy  
holding a white dove over  
his heart.

*The District Manager is working with the police to get them  
moved, because their presence  
does affect  
  
our business.*



## Know Your Enemy

There is only work for the day, nothing more. So we sit, wet  
backs sticking to his truck, skulls cocked up: our eyes  
directed at God, his silence cores us & keeps heaven closed,  
until we are ready. We ride along, toeing the line that burns our wrists &  
blistered hearts, tied back to cauterized families. Under raining fists  
our dignity is carved out & served: broken, abandoned, & balled  
on the side of a road in Juárez. There is nothing else, only laboring  
breaths carrying us on, like candles floating down the river & over  
the ravine there is no guarantee we'll come out the other end  
a whole person with any light left burning. It's so simple  
to give nothing & say we take everything, but we take your word  
& hope for the best. Because at the end of the day we'll almost  
have enough soot covered bills to send for our children & be redeemed  
in their crystal eyes, in the eyes of Gods. Skin makes criminals by  
way of fear – this shade of dirt, so close to brown, so close to what  
people believe we are. Ignorant fools that say, *he*  
*can't understand us anyway*, don't understand that we tried  
fighting narcos & held our arms to the sky in protest, only to  
swim through blood, & labor for ears shut to what we say.



## Sea Muy Tarde Para El Café

*You know why my father took me back  
to Mexico? Buelito said. He was afraid  
something would happen to me here  
because of the racism. He thought  
I would have a better life back in Mexico.*

The news flashed on the television

beside us: images of men, who looked like  
his labored son stuffed into green & white blazers,  
by men who looked like my sun  
ripened uncle, except with clean collars,  
real paychecks, & guilt  
caked on their hands.

He crossed his arms, fell silent,  
& glared down at the worn path  
in the dulled floor boards. He looked back  
up at my girlfriend, her amber hair mirrored his wife's,  
then spoke:

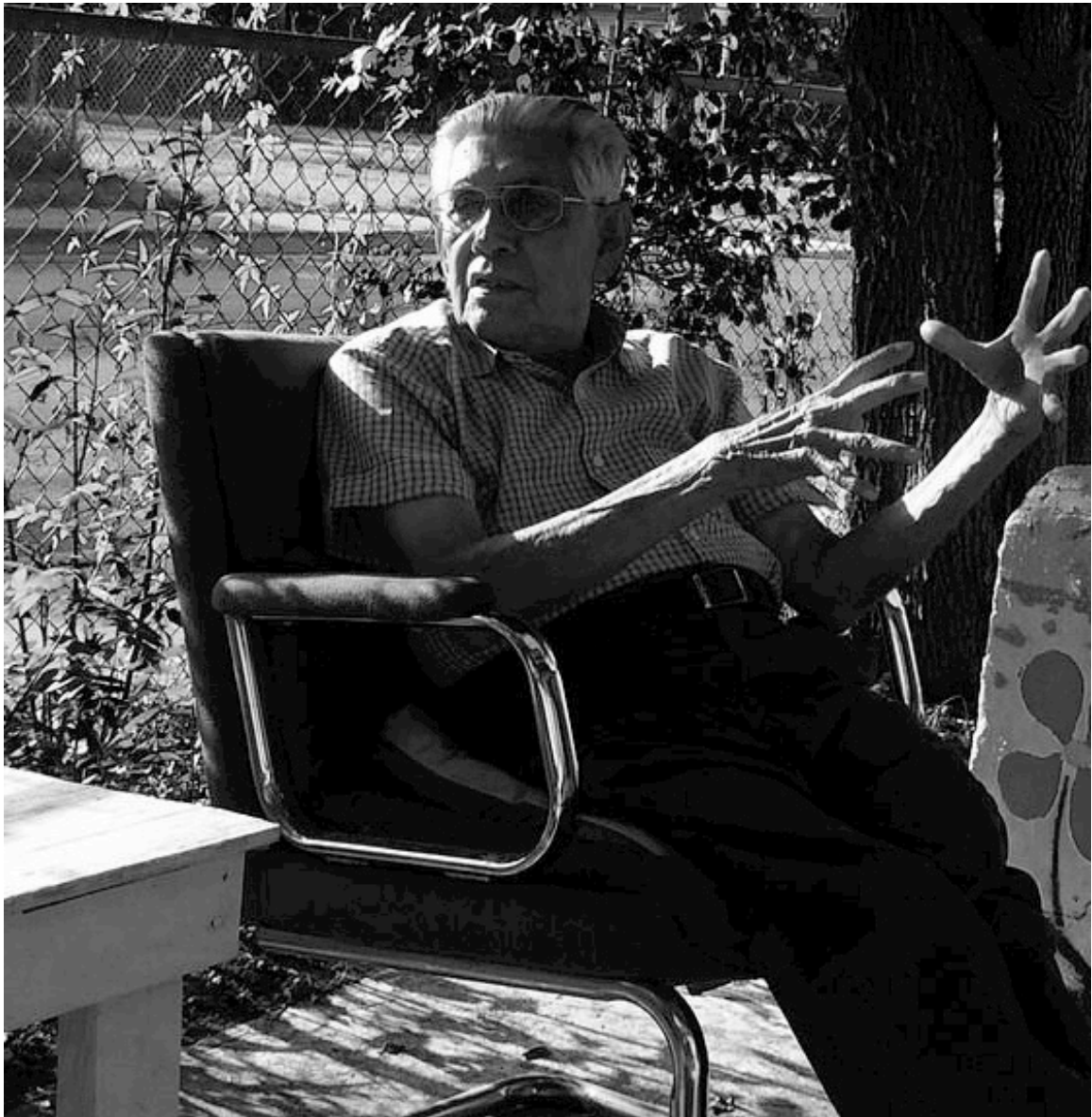
*Do you know the story of Santa Anna and his sword?  
Because seeing all of these Mexicanos reminds me of what he said  
when he left the Alamo. From his horse he threw down his sword  
into the dirt, and shouted, 'One day I will return for my sword!'*

He stared into her blue eyes, *Ese espada rompe  
la tierra aqui*, swing his right arm down  
with the weight of a two-hundred-year-old sword  
that buried itself into the ground

– splitting us from the American city outside.

*Todo ellos son Santa Anna, él viene tarde,  
viene a reclamar esta tierra para nosotros.*

He pushed his coffee cup back toward me,  
across the faded-white table top,  
*Sea muy tarde para el café.*



## Defenders of The Alamo

*Venimos a defender El Alamo,*  
*a reclamar lo que es de nosotros,* we say,

with a laugh, sitting in the shadows of its façade.  
Our boots layered in miles of dirt, sweat

carving canyons across our wrists & over the white paint  
embedded into flesh. Another old work truck

slows to turn & we stand at attention – guerreros,  
raising hands to salute the welcomed pickup.

*I only need dos. Dos!*

His clean fingers make a peace sign

in the sky. His soldiers lay down  
in the flatbed behind him, his peace sign disappears.

Speeding off with two deserters, the tires kick up the day  
& it covers us – making us indistinguishable

from the earth we work. We settle  
back down beneath the façade of this city's pride.

## Los Santos del Campo

You stand out here all day under the sun's thumb,  
without SPF 100 – no layer of white to protect you.

You crouch, face parallel to the dirt,

bowing with a burlap satchel & your spine, just so  
everyone else can pay that unbelievable price  
on their produce. Your filthy hands barely able to hold

the truck & your children at the end of days. You are dead  
tired, with aching mouths to fill & kiss. Friday's second job  
approaching. You can scarcely survive, a single breath:

greet your loves in passing waves – head hung low,  
shoulders creaking & planting into the ground –  
seeding, bearing enough in this field to feed uncountable

ruddy, cracking lips. Ask your neighbors, friends & loves  
why they've never done anything so depleting, so low  
to the ground – almost beneath the dirt. There are children

relying on this job to save their families –  
like everyone else. There is nothing to shelter you out here  
as long as you're still pretending this is not your problem.

## El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, IV: En Madre Mountains

... A mother surrounds

with silk hands, carefully placed kisses,

& an embracing smile

(a velvet sun

bouncing

from her mouth),

but this one

is unforgiving: beating her children

beneath a searing fist.

Leaving miles of tears & dirt coated skin, cracked

like every dried riverbed passed,

& the hollow sound of death

echoes from her mouth.

Cierra tu boca,

Mamá, por favor.

Your skies now seep red,

no longer                      welcoming.

### Telegram from Manuela in San Angelo to Augustin in Illinois

Been months & still  
nothing. You don't return  
calls. Starting to worry  
something has happened. Tino says  
he hasn't seen your face anywhere  
around el campo. Your voice is missing  
at home. *Please, send help*, he said,  
*if we don't get anywhere by next week.*  
There's not enough in the bank to live here.  
Mr. Weir wants rent I don't have.  
I need you to send back something.  
I need to know if I should just meet you there.  
I need answers.  
Are you alive?  
Did they send you back?  
I'll be waiting,  
until I hear from you again.

## El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, V: Óigame

Óigame,

hazeme caso:

Listen

to me.

*My voice scrapping your ears*

*with a quiver.* Listen,  
do what I say.

*The ground crunches*

*beneath his boots,*

*pebbles embed into my cheeks.*

Do listen

to me.

*His hands leave Indian burns on my throat.*

Do what I tell you.

Pay

attention.

*There's the sun's placement and the blackbirds*

*circling in the sky.*

No,

hazme caso...

*My children's names*

*pour out my mouth,*

*down*

*my swollen cheek,*

*into my ear, mixing with their voices,*

*foaming at the edge.*

NO,

PAY

attention

TO ME

*Before my pockets & bones have been picked white by those vultures.*



Pay me  
attention.

*I am worth \$7,000 crisp clean dollars*  
– American.

OBEY  
ME.  
*Before the characters of my name are reduced to numbers in a cabinet.*

Hacer me  
caso:  
Make me  
a case.  
Make my case  
*I could not...*

Make me pay  
attention.

Hear me?  
Hablando con El Coyote....

*...surrounded*  
*by heat,*  
*thirst,*  
*isolation,*  
*y la muerte.*

## West Texas Floods, II.

I watched this boy, no older than my niece, speak to a wall of white men in crisp, clean suits & star studded shoulders. His words hit their faces and fell like so many bugs on a speeding windshield. My daughter's voice responding, *He looks like you, daddy*, but he wasn't like me.

When the lawmakers asked Daniel why he left San Salvador, he said there was no other choice: his stepfather was murdered, his mother was left to support him & his three siblings, & the gangs would not stop with just killing people like his stepfather. Daniel detailed how they just walk into schools & get kids to join them or just kill them. They fire bullets through their heads or burn them alive in front of the school. There is no more entertaining the idea of an education there.

With hollow eyes that only terror can carve, Daniel stared back at those lawmakers & stated that *it was my grandmother who told me to leave*. She explained that *if I did not join those gangs, then I would be killed by them, or worse yet, by a police officer. So at least no one would kill me here*.

Holding my daughter in my arms firmly, I watched this boy tell these men that the only thing which kept him going was thinking of his 13-year-old sister back in San Salvador. All he wanted to do was survive, so he could work in any place he could & send money back home to get her a safe education. During the final days in the desert, thirst & hunger seized his throat & body; he finally began to break. His will flecked off like paint chips off so many American homes. He said he started to cry & knew that he was going to die alone & surrounded by heat. All Daniel wanted was for a Border Patrol agent to find him. The certainty of death appeared to calm him before he finished speaking to their concrete faces. Daniel said he prayed to God that at the very least someone would find his body & send it back home to his family.

## El Coyote Habla Con Su Cena, VI: Persígnate

Dirt caked thumb and index finger pressure  
together, forming a fleshy cross. Trembling,  
the nails scrap away a clean spot  
in the middle of a mixture of red, sand,  
brown sweat, & a furrowed brow.  
They pause over  
the heart – white stains form  
from the inside out – the swift beating  
moves the hand to the rhythm of a native drum:  
natural tanned skin stretched  
over a white pine-wood frame.  
– Some will confuse this  
with a death rattle.  
The fingers nail left and right  
shoulders back:  
there hangs a warning  
sign. Finally, ending  
on blistered lips,  
the tight knuckle rests  
on a fractured tooth,  
and a sand riddled breath escapes.  
En el nombre de el Padre,  
del Hijo,  
y del Espíritu

Santo...

### **West Texas Floods, III.**

*So why are you here today, sir?* The lawmaker's voice responded with a boom that only the dying would recognize as Godlike.

With a clear & firm voice Daniel spoke, *Because I don't want anybody to come like that. I wanted to testify. I want people to know what happened to me. I don't want anybody else to experience that.*

The thought of this boy & hundreds of others being sent back haunts me everyday like the ghosts of those children who were murdered in his town haunt him; like the ones who died on the same journey, the ones who have to choose between death at home, death on the road, or a penny filled existence alone in a country they do not know, nor are wanted in.

**YOU & I**

**III.**

## Skin

Behind my back, Helena asks me  
to give her my hand. *My skin,*  
*it's like Mommy's, not yours.*  
*Your skin is dark, not mine.*

I think back to her mother  
and I in bed:  
lights out,  
a black room except her  
skin mirroring the moon.  
My skin, like her

last name: rough, awkward,  
& ends with a hard consonant  
when Helena says it. I shove my arm  
further back,  
closer to her,

*Amaris, miralo bien.*  
*Somos iguales,*  
*only lighter shades.*

*Fine*, she says. Her eyes follow  
the American sprawl streaming  
passed us.

### ...And Some, I Assume, Are Good People

No one prepares you to question who you've married. Is there someone deeper down inside of them waiting to come out against you? Do they accept the Rs rolling from your tongue & the accents in your surname. But sometimes you must & all of those awkward silent moments around your family begin to make sense. Where did this come from? You wonder.

But you do know & reluctantly unlock that memory of visiting her parents in Oklahoma. Her mother's criticizing twang ringing in your ears about *those people, the Indians, the Native Americans, or whatever they're called* in the neighborhood. All you could do that day was look out the passenger window & let your teeth tear through your thumbnail, as opposed to her throat.

And then the next morning, over black coffee & egg whites, her father casually asked you if *you ever noticed how purple Obama's lips are*. Your body stiff, only your eyes move, quickly onto his daughter holding your tan baby in her creamy hands against her strawberry hair. Was this a joke? A test? Your words stumble out half angry & confused, *Well, he is half white ...and I'm sure that has something to do with it*. Your reflection no longer present in the deep black drink – you've poured too much cream into your cup.

His flat response widened your eyes & flared your nostrils, *Well, all I know is I want to see his birth certificate*.

Before you can even swallow this down, her mother opens the kitchen curtains, letting the sunlight in, clearing the dark corners of their home, & sings softly over her breath, *Oh, Lord, send the old-time power, that mighty power! That Sinners be converted and thy name glorified!*



## Whitewashing

With every stroke the white paint splatters back down  
on me. It melts into my skin, Buelito's coffee hands  
pour more paint into my pail. He urges me to continue  
painting our house. I ask him, *Why*

*are you black?* With a worn-out half smile,  
he says, *Guerito, my mother, she didn't love me.*  
*One day, when I was a baby, she forgot me*  
*outside. I got burned up. That's why*

*I'm not guerito like you.* Against his dark skin  
his hazel eyes are lost. From his words, *Someday we'll be done,*  
laughter streams, like his blood, from him to me as we walk

around the white house. My soles settle  
into his footprints. He pours gasoline  
on my hands and shows me how it is best  
used to cleanse the white paint from my skin.



### United We Stand, III

One night when you were eight-teen, your brother & his white friends cracked jokes over beers at the bar you all worked at. Later you decide to tell one of their jokes to a buddy who wasn't there, *What does BMW stand for? ...Black Man's Wish*. At home your brother yells at you, *Those jokes are just between us, don't be saying that shit out loud*. You didn't know that one "friend" of theirs is black, *he's just light skinned*. You learned a lesson that day that won't impact you until you live in a city where your skin raises eyebrows.

## **You're Not like The Others**

The first time you fell in love  
you were twenty-two-years-old.

She owned the education,  
dusty books & big words,

few in your neighborhood  
ever believed they could have, or want.

She taught you how  
the rest of the world outside

Texas worked.  
So you followed her

away from your neighborhood,  
friends & family,

and found yourself  
accepted. You started to think that

*those people,*  
*Los Americanos,*

as your mother called them,  
had been misrepresented

all these years  
in Texas.

You wanted out  
of poverty so much

you brushed off  
her friend's amazement

of the Spanish rolling  
from your tongue. Her thought,  
*you're just a tanned white guy.*

After all you're tall &  
fair skinned, your mother made sure

you didn't have an accent.  
Months later you came home late,  
the black of your girlfriend's eyelashes  
pouring down her chin;  
her sister spewed over dinner  
*all Mexicans are lazy, filthy,*  
*criminals.* All she could say was that  
your father came from that country  
for a secure land where your feet will sow  
& reap the goodness here.  
Her sister's only words,  
*Oh, but he's not like the others.*  
That beautiful compliment  
always landing with a ring  
finger across your mouth  
& only the slightest scent of endearment.  
You used to think this wasn't true,  
your mother's mistrust was a product  
from a different time in the south.

## A Lesson in Spelling Hate

Oy, chacho, te gustan los frijoles negros?

NO.

No, me gustan los negros.

Prefiero los frijoles Mexicanos: los pintos,  
los que son café

NO.

A word known by its first letter: N,  
the N-word.

If nothing follows the N, then  
it is not a word. It does not exist  
in his six-year-old head until he hears it

at school. With a punch  
line extending from the ER  
the word skips out  
onto the playground from  
the mouth of an adobe boy. The two G's hit  
the scorching blacktop together, while the

I stands: erect, alone. Stunned,

a joke said by his Buelito,  
in his broken Mexican  
accent, "...the reason those brains

are so expensive is because they never  
been used before!” Thirty years later  
you will see

those letters littering the playground:  
one G jumps  
from the swings, the other G  
tags the fountain, the N trips  
you in the sandbox, the ER waits  
below the climber, punch  
line extending from it,

I stands at the gates. The Texas sun  
bleaching them, limestone.

## Milkbath

Helena sits in her bath, surrounded by clouds of bubbles & the day's water,  
like a candlelit paper boat floating down the Ganges. She swirls  
an eddy of Ivory soap, thick conditioner, & silky shampoo into a cup

imprinted with fair Disney princesses. One of which resembles her  
mother, she makes note of this regularly  
with her pleading eyes. She offers up her bathing cup to me,

*Daddy, I made un plato de leche.*

With a nod I scrub the day's dead skin & dirt off  
tanning shoulders – her petite body, a beacon  
swaying against her white background. I say thank you to her.

*Look at me, Daddy,*

Raisin fingers gripping the throat of her plastic man,  
she dunks him feet first into the cup. It's milkbath splatters  
out, smothering her arms, my face, & bits of our floor.

Her eyes pause, holding her breath back,  
waiting for my reaction. Wiping the white  
from her skin, my question trickles out to her,

*He's bathing in the milk?*

*No, he's drowning in it.*



## When Your Mother Bends for Fear

Because your father died when you were still

dragging

your belly

on the filthy ground,

your mother

taught you to speak up for yourself,

be respectful, & assertive. She would say,

*You're a man, since your father is dead*

*I will make you*

*learn to act like one.* Her voice: sharpened iron,

cutting open the earth & your eyes

as you step forward day-by-day.

So what parts of your body broke

when you realized that the moment

this woman met a new white person

she humbled herself? The steel of her tooth

softened,

her shoulders sloped,

& she became small, apologetic, & nervous.

Suddenly the English crumbled from her mouth

like brittle chalk.



## A Controlled Burn

Buelito abruptly shook the tank of gasoline  
over the dying brown grass: up, down, left, & right.  
He stood like the father blessing his parishioners at mass  
– en el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo.  
They call it a controlled burn: cleansing the brown

land, paving the way for the future.  
– That day we changed the earth,  
its new growth never indicative of what happened,  
never a visible sign of how it came about.  
What lengths we went to care for it, to make it pure  
– it's what needed to be done.

It's what our neighbors, with their southern drawls, did  
to make their land rich & beautiful  
in Tejas, *it's just easier to slash & burn*  
*than to pay someone to kill those pesky weeds & their seeds.*  
Field burning is what industrialized nations use  
as part of what they call "Shifting Cultivation."  
Land is cultivated temporarily, then abandoned,

left to return to its natural state. – I told Buelito that  
we liked playing baseball in this field. With the flames  
reflecting in his grey eyes, & the heat pushing me back,  
looking past me, he responded in a broken voice,  
*My father taught me this.*

*He learned it working for a German landowner  
in Gonzales, after he rode with Pancho Villa. Me dijo,*

*'Ese Alemán era un hombre corajudo,'  
he would get as hot as these flames.  
My uncle also worked for him.  
One Sunday he wanted to go  
watch a baseball game in town,  
y el Alemán se enojo.*

*While my Uncle was walking away  
the Landowner shot him in the back,  
and left my uncle to die in the middle of the road.  
After that season we returned to Mexico.*

### **An Email from My Daughter's Mother**

I don't trust the kids in that area, inner city kids. They're more dysfunctional and ghetto. I don't trust low income areas because of my upbringing. Those kids are abused (not all but some). I hear about it all the time from teachers who work in S.A.I.S.D. – Many ghetto kids have problems.

I am not bigoted. I am concerned still about her going to the YMCA. I hear stories from elementary school teachers who prefer to work with inner city kids because they need the most help. I also experienced bad school districts.

I walked around an elementary school on the south side a few years ago. I heard kids as young as 6 cat calling and yelling, "hey lady, I want to f\*ck you". They didn't learn that from other kids. They learned it from their family. And it scares me for her to hear and see that kind of Stuff.

I turned out okay, but I would have given anything to attend a better school district. I can't change my past, but I can have a choice with her schooling.

## Igniting a Spectacle

*...charred body hangs from a chain in a chestnut tree in Waco, Texas, in 1916.  
...the front row of a crowd of white men all dressed in suits and ties  
and fashionable hats stares into the camera. One laughs  
– Steve Scafidi*

Steel wool burns vigorously when given enough oxygen.

So to make a glowing spectacle you will tie rope around the head  
of it & give it a good swing – making sure to give ‘em enough  
rope for their own safety. They hold an acetylene torch to its end  
until it screams a molten red drip, hot enough to ignite the worn out ground.  
Crowds will gasp, a few may get burned, so let them know you’re in control  
& they’ll be safe as long as they follow the rules  
& do whatever you say. But make sure to stand behind a shield  
to protect your own flesh from any possible blow back in the wind.

## United We Stand, IV

You finally broke through & were accepted among the “old school” Chicanos. You felt you had arrived. You finally got to hang out with that old guy you’d heard so much about, had read about. The friends you admired called him compadre & tonight he called you hermano while handing you an ice cold beer. He put his arm over your shoulder, held his bottle up high & said, *This is how it must be: fighting la batalla together, juntos – una raza unida!*

After the third hour & tenth round you can barely stand & his guard is down. There enters the man from the shadows – the Cucuy your grandmother warned you of. His voice cracks the night, *Excuse me, would you all have any change you could help me out with?* His shaking hands extend out and blend into the night, only slightly darker than your grandfather’s fingers. Your new hermano laughs at him, tells him he doesn’t have anything before laying a twenty down on the table for the next round. All you have is a ten to get you through the week. Your new hermano takes another jab, *Wait, I might have something for you. Do you have change for a hundred?* The cucuy’s mouth cracks a half smile as they walk away drinks in hand. You stop the old man, hand him that ten, *I’m sorry.*

You can’t help but think of the stories you heard your new hermano telling of his battles during the civil rights movement, of standing brown and proud. Now you remember reading something you thought couldn’t be true, that in Houston Chicanos fought for equal treatment, but also yelled in objection to unifying black & brown children in their schools, *We don’t want to go to school with the Blacks because they are dirty!*

The Reverend Everett’s comments bring a quake to your center and you are now back outside, where you started: *I will join any group of oppressed people...but when that group employs the same form of discrimination that I have been up against all these years, I will cut them loose. ...Let them fight their own battles.*

## **MLK Day for Kindergarten**

*Daddy, I learned a song at school about MLK*

*Please sing it for me.*

*Okay, I forgot it.*

*What did you learn about him?*

*He wanted peace.*

*Why?*

*Because the white people were being mean  
to the black people, and they hated them.*

*That's what they told you?*

*Yes. My friend Cassy is black and I like her a lot.*

*That's wonderful. You know this is a very complicated topic.*

*It's not just about the color of your skin...*

*...I know because I'm Mexican.*

*Si, Mija, but you know your mom...*

*...my mom is white.*

*How did you know that? Did she talk with you about her culture?*



*No, I just looked at her. Her skin is really white, not like yours.*

*Mine is kind of like hers & yours, but still a little lighter.*

*...Daddy, did the white people ever hurt the black people?*

## **A History of Violence, I.**

Yesterday, you shot a man in Ferguson.

His blood ran across the country.

Today, his people shot your people.

The heat from their mouths burnt a city to ash.

Tomorrow, someone else will shoot your children.

Covered in blood, you will wash, rise, & repeat.

## **A History of Violence, II.**

Arrested, twenty-two-years-old, charged with public intoxication  
& public endangerment. You keep asking why  
they arrested you, while your last name echoes back  
from others in lockup.

An officer tells you to *shut the fuck up*,  
*because nobody gives a fuck about your rights*  
Your rights fire back out the chamber of your mouth.  
So he & two other officers grab you,  
they hammer across the back of your head,  
& throw you into a 3x3 holding cell.

There you proceeded to urinate in your pants: handcuffed  
behind your back, the metal scours your wrists  
with every move. They refused to let you use a toilet – they laugh.

### **A History of Violence, III.**

Your wife gives you a book  
which contains a history of political propaganda,

#### *The Art of Persuasion.*

Its text is black & white.  
All you want is a cool tattoo.

On the cover: Hitler  
holding a flag emblazoned  
with a black Swastika,

encircled in white, in a sea of blood-  
red cloth. Hitler bathed  
in light falling from the heavens.

Inside: AMERICA FIRST!,  
Churchill holding a Tommy Gun,  
Yellow Japs; fists, cannons, & guns

pointing to the skies – facing East & West;  
the Star of David, the KKK,

Native Americans painted red  
with oversized noses & firewater;  
Black men with swollen lips, hanging to the ground,

skin as black as the char on the crosses in their yards;  
a section titled, “Propaganda For Peace.”

## **A History of Violence, IV.**

*Eastern Promises*: the film by David Cronenberg gives  
an accurate depiction of life as a member of the Russian mob,

sex trafficking,

ultraviolence,

& the culture of tattoos

within the Russian mob.

Tattoos & criminal organizations are nothing new.

The tattoos that Hollywood actor,

Viggo Mortensen, wore

in the film were so realistic that

diners in a Russian restaurant in London fell

silent out of fear,

until he revealed his identity & admitted

they weren't real, the tattoos;

he was only acting in a film.

From that day on he washed the tattoos from his skin,

whenever he went off the set

the color from his skin poured

down the drain.

## **A History of Violence, V.**

Your father isn't Russian,  
                    he's just brown,

except for the majority  
                    of his body,

                    covered in fading grey-green placas.

You have teardrops on your face,     & on your chest  
                    a black hand holding the logo  
                                    E.M.E.

                                    Too bad

when you go out into public & apply for jobs  
                    you can't wash the color from your skin.

## **A History of Violence, VI.**

When you asked the tattoo artist

if the bright colors will pop

against your skin,

she shuffled for a bit and replied,

*Well, it's harder to see details*

*& lighter colors when you have darker skin.*

*So for colors to really pop*

*& for the details to be seen*

*clearly, the lighter the skin the better.*

## Requiem for Emanuel's Slain

*I have no choice. ... We have no skinheads, no real KKK,  
no one doing anything... Well someone has to have the bravery  
to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me. – Dyaln Roof*

*And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven,  
Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom  
of our God, and the power of his Christ... – Revelation 12:10*

My friends, brethren, studied me through  
& through, knowing in their hearts every black line  
scrawled across me was truth, before he took them  
away from my brittle white pages bearing witness  
to the good deeds of another man  
who came to save them.

My friends, brethren, lifted my spine above their heads  
to shield from the mistrust & suffering in our streets,  
before I fell from their gentle coffee hands  
& we were all left there in crimson,  
splayed out– open to God  
& his pristine white  
angels & downy clouds.

My friends, brethren, held me safe  
against their thumping chests as they hugged  
& welcomed him into our home, where peace was  
planted and grew plentiful, before he stood  
in front of brother Sanders, red eyed  
& without tears, seething, *I have to do it.*  
*You rape our women*  
*and you're taking over our country.*  
*And you have to go.*



My friends, brethren, laid me into the hands of the lost,  
the answer seekers, the troubled young with scared  
shoulders & distant eyes,  
before brother Sanders leapt  
to stop that angry boy's bullets from opening  
a hole in his Aunt's heart.

My friends, brethren, guided their children's fingers  
across the silk of my welcoming sheets  
before he walked passed  
our 5-year-old sister lying  
next to her grandmother,  
cheek flat against the floor, shaking  
with every booming step,  
pretending to already be dead  
so that she would not meet the Lord  
that day.

My friends, brethren, placed their cashmere kisses,  
rivers of tears, & whispers of peace inside of me  
before he calmly walked through  
our doors, held me in his steady hands  
& waited for the appropriate pause in their prayer  
to lay waste to nine brothers & sisters,  
bringing his *real world* inside.

My friends, brethren, still look through me  
for strength, anchored words, & solutions  
for a hemorrhaging community that sleeps on razors.  
Inside this splintered home my brittle pages  
do not break but mend the holes of hate,

wipe clean the tears of doubt  
& absorb the blood left on floors,  
across backs, & in the cracks of our hands.



## MLK Day for First Grade

After hearing my compadre use the N-word  
against our friend's brothers.

All I can do is try  
to wash her ears & eyes clean

as she asks me about the screams  
& words she heard.

*Why didn't they like him, Daddy?*

*People don't see their similarities with other people  
of color, people like us – brown people.*

*But I'm like Mommy.  
Daddy, I'm not brown.*

*I mean Latinos, Mexicanos, mija.*

*I'm Mexican too, Daddy.*

*Yes, you are, my child.*

I scrub her shoulders clean,  
her words & dead skin careen

through my heart & life

lines in my hands. They coat the cream porcelain tub  
in a slippery layer

– not all that filth washed away.

I wrap her in love  
my grandmother left me.

## Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "La Conciencia de la Mestiza." *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012. Print.
- Behnken, Brian D. *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the struggle for Civil Rights in Texas*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print.
- Biss, Eula. *The Balloonists*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2002. Print.
- Cletus, Daniel E. "Cesar Chavez and the Unionization of California Farmworkers." *Working People of California*. Ed. Daniel Cornfed. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1995. Pdf.
- Figueroa, Mónica Moreno. "Linda Morenita: Skin Colour, Beauty, and the Politics of Mestizaje in Mexico." *Cultures of Colour: Visual, Material, Textual* 15 (2012). Pdf.
- Forche, Carolyne. "The Colonel." *The Country Between Us*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.
- Girmay, Aracelis. *Kingdom Animalia*. New York: BOA Editions, Ltd, 2011. Print.
- Guerrero, Laurie Ann. "One Man's Name: Colonization of the Poetic." *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Print.
- Guerrero, Laurie Ann. *A Crown for Gumeccindo*. San Antonio: Aztlan Libre Press, 2015. Print.
- Hand, Monica. "Libation." *Me and Nina*. Farmington: Alice James Books, 2012. Print
- Lee, Li-Young. "Early in the Morning." *Rose*. Rochester: BOA Editions, Ltd, 1986. Print.
- Lorde. Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, Print.

- Llosa, Mario Vargas. *Letters to a Young Novelist*. Trans. Natasha Wimmer. New York: Picador, 2011. Print.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An America Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014. Print.
- Reznikoff, Charles. *Holocaust*. Boston: Black Sparrow, 1975. Print.
- Rosaldo, Renato. *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.
- Roethke, Theodore. "My Papa's Waltz." *The Collected Poem of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Anchor Press, 1975. Print.
- Sanders, Ed. "Investigative Poetry" 1976. Woodstock: Blake Route Press, Pdf.
- Trethewey, Natasha. "Theories of Time and Space." *Native Guard*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- Waldman, Anne. Introduction. *Civil Disobediences: Poetics and Politics in Action*. Ed. Waldman, Anne, and Lisa Birdman. Saint Paul: Coffee House Press, 2004. Print.
- Wolfe, Tom. "The Birth of 'The New Journalism'; Eyewitness Report." *New York*. 14 Feb. 1972. Print.
- Wolff, Christoph. *Mozart's Requiem: historical and analytical studies, documents, score*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Pdf.
- Varela, Beatriz. "Ethnic Nicknames of Spanish Origin in American English." *Spanish Loanwords in the English Language: A tendency towards hegemony reversal*. Ed. Félix Rodríguez González. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996. Print.

## Bibliography

### Poetry:

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012. Print.

Forche, Carolyne. *The Country Between Us*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.

Haro, Joy. *She Had Some Horses*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006. Print.

Girmay, Aracelis. *Kingdom Animalia*. New York: BOA Editions, Ltd, 2011. Print.

Guerrero, Laurie Ann. *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Print.

Guerrero, Laurie Ann. *A Crown for Gumeecindo*. San Antonio: Aztlan Libre Press, 2015. Print.

Hand, Monica. *Me and Nina*. Farmington: Alice James Books, 2012. Print

Lee, Li-Young. *Rose*. Rochester: BOA Editions, Ltd, 1986. Print.

Martinez, Valerie. *Each and Her*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2010. Print.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York: Greenwillow, 1994. Print.

Reznikoff, Charles. *Holocaust*. Boston: Black Sparrow, 1975. Print.

Rosaldo, Renato. *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.

Roethke, Theodore. *The Collected Poem of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Anchor Press, 1975. Print.

Sze, Arthur. *Archipelago*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1995. Print.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Native Guard*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

Young, Kevin. *Ardency: A chronicle of the Amistad Rebels*. New York: Knopf, 2012.

Print.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I, 1909-1939*. New York: New Directions Book, 1991. Print.

### **Theoretical works:**

Abrams, Lynn. "Revisiting *Akenfield*: Forty Years of an Iconic Text", *Oral History*, 37.

Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2009. Pdf.

Lorde, Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984,

Print.

Sanders, Ed. "Investigative Poetry" 1976. Woodstock: Blake Route Press, Pdf.

Waldman, Anne. Introduction. *Civil Disobediences: Poetics and Politics in Action*. Ed.

Waldman, Anne, and Lisa Birdman. Saint Paul: Coffee House Press, 2004. Print.

Wolfe, Tom. "The Birth of 'The New Journalism'; Eyewitness Report." *New York*. 14

Feb. 1972. Print.

### **Creative non-fiction:**

Biss, Eula. *The Balloonists*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2002. Print.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An America Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014. Print.

Rankine, Claudia, ed. *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*.

New York: Fence Books, 2015. Print.

### **Historical:**

Barron Cruz, Martin Gabriel. "La Bestia: La tenue linea entre La Migracion y La trata de

Personas". Distrito Federal: Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Penales, 2013. Pdf.

Basu, Moni. "Daniel's Journey: How thousands of children are creating a crisis in



- America”, *CNN online*, June 2014. Web.
- Behnken, Brian D. *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the struggle for Civil Rights in Texas*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Print.
- Behnken, Brian D. *The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Relations During the Civil Rights Era*. Black in Latin America. PBS. WNET, New York. 2011. *Netflix*. Web. 13 Jan. 2015.
- Canclini, Nestor Garcia. *Hybrid Culture: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Print.
- Fischler, Jacob. “Nobody is allowed to cry alone.” *The Monitor*. 6 Sep. 2014. Web.
- Llosa, Mario Vargas. *Letters to a Young Novelist*. Trans. Natasha Wimmer. New York: Picador, 2011. Print.
- “Juárez.” Narr. Eros Hoagland. *Witness*. HBO, 5 Nov. 2012. *Amazon*. Web. 15 July 2015.
- Kennedy, Elizabeth. “No Children Here: Why Central American children are fleeing their homes.” Washington, D.C.: The American Immigration Council, 2014. Pdf.
- Which Way Home*. Dir. Rebecca Cammisa. HBO Films, 2009. *Netflix*. Web. 28 May 2015.

## Vita

Gerard Robledo is a San Antonio poet who grew up on the city's south side. He holds a B.A. in English Literature (with a focus in Creative Writing, emphasis poetry) from Texas State University and an A.A. in English Literature from San Antonio College. Robledo works as the Academic Program Specialist at the San Antonio College Writing Center and is Associate Editor of *Voices de la Luna: A Quarterly Poetry and Arts Magazine*. He is also a cofounder/instructor for the San Antonio chapter of Barrio Writers. His poetry and Spanish language poetry translations have appeared in *Voices de la Luna: A Quarterly Poetry and Arts Magazine*, *Texas Poetry Calendar*, *The Thing Itself*, *Outrage: A Protest Anthology for Injustice in a post 9/11 World*, and *The Texas Observer*. Robledo is also one of the first 16 poets to be archived in the newly established San Antonio Poetry Archive at Palo Alto College, among other poets, such as Carmen Tafolla, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Laurie Ann Guerrero. He is also a frequent guest MC and organizer for poetry events throughout the city including the annual Dia de los Muertos Calaveras reading at La Villita. Robledo is also an advocate for literature, social justice, community engagement, and the preservation of culture.

Permanent address: 434 E. Formosa  
San Antonio, Texas, 78221

This thesis/dissertation was typed by Gerard Stephen Robledo.