Del Arbolito Una Cuadra Al Lago (one Block Away From The Little Tree)

Tania Romero

University of Texas at El Paso

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DEL ARBOLITO UNA CUADRA AL LAGO
(ONE BLOCK AWAY FROM THE LITTLE TREE)
MFA THESIS

TANIA MARIA ROMERO
Master’s Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

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Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School
Dedication

A mi familia y a todos los desarraigados.

To my family and the uprooted.
DEL ARBOLITO UNA CUADRA AL LAGO

(ONE BLOCK AWAY FROM THE LITTLE TREE)

MFA THESIS

by

TANIA MARIA ROMERO, M.A., M.Phil

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

August 2022
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the shared intersectional journeys, which place us in each other’s paths, and the fertile spaces that my family created for me to grow intellectually and creatively. To my colleagues and mentors, who along the way, have nourished my curiosity and guided my burning questions as I pursued the next quest. I also want to acknowledge airplanes for facilitating my travels around the world and being anxiety-inducing spaces that forced me to write. To the jumbled multilingual words inside my brain: gracias por el ritmo, and for using these pages as a dance floor.

Words.
I like words.

Churning like masa in the molino of the mind,
They become formless between your fingers when you squeeze.
Abstract

*Del Arbolito Una Cuadra Al Lago (One Block Away From The Little Tree)* is a an autoethnographic collection of bilingual/Spanglish short fiction, documentary prose, photography archive, and flash fiction. The work is rooted in my own Central American immigrant experience living in the United States and incorporates a variety of self-exploratory themes including the remnants of post-memory and transgenerational trauma, fractured cultural identity formation, geographical displacement, and the complexities of ideological ambiguities that result from crossing borders.

The first half of the collection (Part I and II) is an immigration travelogue complimented with archival family photographs that trace fleeting childhood memories from the Nicaraguan post-war era to the journey into the United States. The second part of the work (Part III and IV) is designed as a witness testimony of the self and a ‘call to action’ that utilizes a variety of autoethnographic writing styles including journaling, flash fiction, poetic prose, and letter correspondence. The overall aim of this work is to amplify Central American narratives that denounce recent anti-immigrant policies which have contributed to the ongoing cycles of discrimination of migrant populations in this present historical moment.
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PART I: COMIENZOS SIN RUMBO (AIMLESS BEGINNINGS)
My Life – A Timeline

Se fué

Y Llegó

Algunas veces, se fué la luz.

Árbol Familiar

Nací

MEMORIA
We came from tortilla, lime, salt, and war,
Protected by thin wooden panel walls.

Lost bullets and scorpions fell from our ceilings at night,
Free shavings from the woodshop next door,
Stuffed inside an industrial Olive Oil can,
Boiling aserrin-flavored red beans in a black pot.

The chained chancho, raised on cabbage and carrot scraps,
Sacrificed for the sake of the masa flavor,
Wrapped inside a nacatamal domingüero,
Yields a wad of cash inside the pocket of Abue’s delantal.

Backyard smoke illusions,
Of a time when the street dogs knew we had money on Sundays,
Because the Mortadella con huevo sizzled in the pan.
Figure 1.1 Irene; Bisabuela
Figure 1.2: 'Abue' Miriam; Abuela
Figure 1.3: Elia Maria; Madre
Guerrilleras: A Family Recipe*

1 cup of patience for every 2 cups of courage to leave him

Before you get left

4 tablespoons of murder-witnessing

4 gallons of determined single motherhood

Separate machismo (with a knife)

Learn to read and write

1 gallon of reactionary fervor (product brand FSLN)

Coloring: red and black

Add a fermented revolution

Shake violently with earthquakes

1 fluid ounce of all-purpose maternal love (do not sift)

A pinch of feminine cinnamon

Negritud may vary, but always indigenous (the texture of indio viejo).

*Callate mujer. De eso no se habla. Do not speak of the recipe, only write it down, and pass it on.
Figure 1.4: Family Recipe For Silence
Push-Write

Managua, Nicaragua
1982

You are born into your mother’s dream. It starts with a distinct memory that never was, of traveling inside your mother’s womb. On the cusp of another civil war, you feel her restless vibrations tugging at your umbilical cord. Stray word-bullets zing close to her belly. *Our belly,* you think. You hear the deep voice of a father you will meet for the first time in person when you’re eighteen, after you were told you were fathered by someone else. Despite both your parents being equally revolutionary, he muffles your mother’s voice when she demands a divorce. Mujeriego, she claims.

You close your eyes to taste the salty tortilla she eats before she packs her remaining chereques and walks out the door with you inside her. That taste of bitter masa will flavor your childhood.

Now you go to her.

The pen-word.

Dropping ink bombs on silky white sheets.

Pen-woman-ship is your mother now, each word nourished in the fluid embryonic memories inside your mind. Wet pages seduce the sentences. You write like you push, push to write, write-push, syncopate your breathing to that word-child throbbing anew between your legs.

Womb-fiction.
That C-major B-Comes sound on that umbilical piano chord.

Write-push to Come.

When it comes, it becomes

Comes to Be, Words to Be.

Become to words.
Tania Marias of War

The Name:

The name Tania, was the ‘nom de guerre’ of the communist revolutionary spy Haydée Tamara Bunke, born in Argentina and of East German descent. She was known as ‘Tania the guerrilla,’ who gathered intelligence and sent coded messages to Fidel Castro with a radio program called “Advice to Women.” The only female in the guerrillas under the command of Che Guevara, she was rumored to be his lover. She died in a CIA-led ambush deep in the Bolivian jungles during the insurgency of 1967.

My middle name, Maria, was the name of the first female soldier in Russia, Maria Bochkareva. She was the first commander of the Women’s Battalion of Death in 1917, recruiting over 2,000 women to fight for the Motherland in the ‘name of fallen heroes.’ Born in 1889 to a peasant family in Novgorod, she endured abuses from her alcoholic father as a young child. ‘Yashka’ as she was nicknamed during war times, left home at fifteen to work as a foreman on a construction site in Siberia, and married an abusive and alcoholic man. Looking to survive the abuses of her second husband, Yakov Buk, she wrote a personal petition to the Tsar Nicholas II to enroll in the army. Upon enrollment, she was given her first gun.

The Exile:

Both women lived in exile. Tania’s family escaped Nazi Germany and relocated to Argentina. She possessed great skills for espionage, not just because of her abilities to camouflage among the Bolivian elite, but she spoke several languages fluently.

Maria formed the Women’s Battalion of Death when the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in October 1917, then she fled to the US, returning to Russia in August.
1918. While in exile she met Woodrow Wilson, and in London, met King George I. She also wrote a memoir *Yashka: My Life As A Peasant, Exile, and Soldier*.

**The Deaths:**

Tania was ambushed while crossing a river on August 31st, 1967; Maria was stripped down and executed by a firing squad on May 16th, 1920. Upon learning of Tania’s death, Fidel Castro declared her a hero of the Cuban revolution. Maria was awarded several metals for surviving the No Man’s Land battle, where she was wounded, but managed to drag 50 wounded men to safety.

**Woman-pen-ship and Exile:**

My namesakes: Tania and Maria.

A history of a namesake-weapon.

I have yet to pick up a gun or fight for a motherland.

The island of my mother’s kitchen is the only battlefield I know.

Her name is also Maria.

Call me the invisible gap between Tania Maria.

For I am an impostor of the history I inherited.
Figure 1.5: Las Marias of War
Chela

Somewhere between the black and red frijol, is my skin complexion:

_Chela._

Chela is the geographical coordinate of interracial historicity; the gaze of myth raped chelas into existence.

Chela es de aqui, y de alla, and from somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

Chela is a passive sentence with a permissible syntax. A sedentary nowhere-woman with nomadic tendencies.

“Pasame una chela bien -elada, pos’ I can _finally_ write about this.”

“You forgot the ‘h’ in -elada, and your -eritage!”

_Babosa._

The etymology of the word comes from Latin and borrowed from the Hindi word _cela_ (I guess they also forgot the ‘h’), which means pupil or religious leader. Chela also originates from the Sanskrit word _ceta_, meaning slave. Chela is an appendage, and extremity, that reaches, and preaches, and reaches for air. Chela es una llorona sin chicha. Slave to one’s skin.

_Gasp. Let it out, bruta._

The dictionary decide y dice: ‘Chelas are like a pincer-like claw of a crustacean.’

Academic books fails to describe, however, how chela is an ambiguous and enchanting multicultural shapeshifter who holds the gaze of men. Always the wrong men. Puta with her looks, but santa en la cocina. Her power is being able to choose the color of her apron. ‘Pincing’ the masses into confusion with ambiguous magazines covers and throwing victimization onto herself. She is a colorless crayon made from all colors, purified and bred to bleed out blackness.
Like a frijol negro or rojo, chelas soak in water overnight. But they can’t escape their origin as black and red beans turn the water purple-black while boiling.

Invisible negritud is the complexion of a chela.

*Always boiling from the inside, like a frijol.*

Chelas broadcast literal translations from the teleprompter written in a second language. Chela is the look someone gives you because your privilege is always audibly-visible; especially when you forget a word in Spanish in the middle of a sentence.

Being stuck between two languages *es la sentencia de la chela.*

Chelas have chipped away their nativeness with forgetfulness of their raza.

Pero…

Raza is not the same as race: I am a raza-full chela, and purely raceless. I wish I could explain the multilingual neurological trabalenguas in my brain. I wish to brown my bones so I could yell, “See? I’m brown on the inside. Cut me like a fruit, and look inside. I am marañón-beige with a cinnamon-tint.”

I’ve been told my skin is ‘European olive.’ Always a European-something. But Chela is also a feeling: like when your Abuela hugs you longer than your brown cousins, braids your light brown hair, and prepares your favorite meal con más amor.

In your Abuela’s eyes, your non-brownness is the lucky charm of the familia.

*You will go far, Chelita.*

Defining a chela is useless.

Chelas are nothing but a ready-made, packaged spice in a cupboard.
Chela Centroamericana. You will go further than your far-ness.

Figure 1.6: Color Blanca
El Tren y El Puente

In the beginning of my story, there were trains. Trains that didn’t exist. Trains against my memory. Trains that my own narrative didn’t write. Contradictory family stories that travel past the dream-stations of my recollections. I cannot place my childhood in the memories of others: “la Niña”, “Fusita,” “Carelin.” I was many names, but never my own. People in my family have conspired to reconstruct an endearing fiction about me; a childhood that I did not experience.

My uncle Edgard claims I once forced my stepdad to drive several times under a bridge on the way to the Tiscapa Lagoon while kicking and screaming in the back seat. It was a bridge re-named El Punte de los Cachorros\(^1\) after the Sandinista revolution of 1979.

“El Puente, el puente!” I was told I shouted, starting my own revolution in the backseat. I threw my shiny red shoes off against the window until I got my way. My step-father looped under the bridge multiple times until I fell asleep.

I couldn’t possibly be that spoiled child they all describe. My family laughs when they retell that memory, but I was not there. I don’t remember being there. I don’t remember shouting.

“El Puente, el puente!” I hear the echoes of what they say I said as a child.

In my family’s eyes, I was the sound of a bridge.

If there is one family memory I want to trust, is when Abue and I mysteriously disappeared for a day on the last Managua-to-Granada train before the train routes were discontinued and re-painted school buses became the only way to travel from city to city. I desperately search in the archives of my own memory, but my imagination stands in the way.

There is a photo I took of us on an escapade to Granada as proof, and I long to believe that I was

---

\(^1\) “Cachorros” (puppy), was the nickname for Sandinista revolutionaries.
in Abue’s memory at some point. I want to trust that I was but cannot find that memory in the catacombs of my own archive; only in a fading photograph as she turned around to look at me.

I search, and search for her memory of me as I remember it, but I am constantly derailed by noisy forgetfulness and perpetual nomadism. My family remembers me as a bridge because my memory is like a fleeting train.

I want that train to stop for once and take me back to the memories I know exist. I don’t want to waive them goodbye.
Zapatos Rojos

Esos zapatos rojos, brillantes y durmientes que deje en la balijera del carro,
olvidados con mi etiqueta de comunista;

Esa, es mi memoria.
Figure 1.7: Abue and The Last Train
Dia de Sopa (Sopa Domingüera)

For Centroamericanos, Dia de Sopa is a sacred ritual. The day-long, quasi-spiritual experience, is best enjoyed on weekends or when there is plenty of time to spare for the preparation. Authentic Centroamericano-ness is measured in soup.

**Caldo (Broth):** To make a flavorful caldo for any soup, one begins at the local street market; fresh cilantro, yerba buena, culantro, ajo, cebolla, chiltoma, Sopa Maggi cubes, and the secret ingredient for the perfect tang: “naranjagria” (naranja agria). If one cannot go to the market to get fresh produce, the street venderoras with their decorated aprons and their straw baskets walk by in the mornings. They will stand on the porch, dish out a bit of barrio gossip, and let you select the best vegetables.

**Sopa de Cola (Cow Tail Soup):** A specialty in Abue’s kitchen, and a purifying experience akin to attending church on Sundays, sopa de cola contains flavorful specific vegetables: quequisque, yucca root (cassava), and chilotes (baby corn). First, the cow tail must be washed because it likely laid on a table at the market surrounded by moscas. My uncle Daniel would wash and cut the tail into pieces on the concrete lavandero in the backyard, the same one we washed our clothes on before we could afford a washing machine. After preparing the broth, Abue would cut up all the vegetables in thick chunks. I would separate the chilotes into a bowl, pulling the blonde strings off, but when Abue was not looking, I would bite into a raw chilote and taste the earth.

**Sopa de Garrobo (Lizard Soup):** To prepare this Managuan delicacy, one requires some agility. Garrobos bathe on the burning rooftops for hours without moving, so string traps to capture them require some careful climbing and a lot of patience. One can also buy a garrobo
alive from the market, but the flavor of the meat won’t be the same from the stress of being tied up for hours. Violence is a recipe for bitter meat.

**Mondongo:** This type of soup is typical in many regions across Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica. But it is best enjoyed as a way to overcome a goma (a cruda as the Mexicans call it, and kin to Menudo in preparation). Traditionally, Mondongo, is a soup that requires a variety of vegetables and the lining of the cow’s stomach. In Nicaragua, the best place to eat Mondongo, is the city of Masaya, at restaurants close to the city market. But traveling there requires a map of public bathrooms on the way back; the soup will clear out any remaining demons that alcohol could not reach inside your soul the night before.

**Fresh hand-made corn tortillas:** Corn tortillas compliment all soups and a steeple of any central American table. To be a true centroamericano, one must reject the perfection of store-bought tortillas. The authentic taste of a hand-made corn tortilla can be found in the maker’s fingerprint on the masa. Thin tortillas never made sense to me; they must be thick and be aluring like a woman’s hips. As a child, I always knew the soup in the kitchen was almost ready, when Abue handed me money to buy a dozen freshly made tortillas from the tortilleras down the street (women with a hot comal in the backyard, not to be confused with the slang term for prostitutes). I would take a plate with me, and a small towel to wrap the thick tortillas so they could stay warm on the way back. Watching the masa take shape into a delicious roundness, laid carefully on a steaming comal, and flipped over with a knife and a flip of an index finger, was a spiritual experience as a child I wish I could repeat in slow motion.
**Backyard table and sweat:** Soups are best consumed on hot-humid days, in the company of family and neighborhood friends while sitting at a large table in the backyard. When the steam from the bowl hits one’s face and sweating begins, so has the spiritual inward journey. As a child, Abue would confiscate the limes until I had a spoonful of my soup. I tended to squeeze too much lime into the broth. Abue would reprimand me saying I may as well be drinking cold lemonade. In her mind, sudor was the secret ingredient to all soups; sweating brought out the authentic flavor of such culinary labor of love.
The withering mata in Abue’s front porch aspired to grow as robust as the nancite tree in the backyard. With a dehydrated stem, browning leaves, and a child-like stature, the top of the mata barely reached the front of the gate handle. Its malnourished neck leaned to the right permanently in search of fresh air and sunlight. The mata wanted more; it wanted to intertwine roots with the other trees inside the fertile, waterlogged, mushroom-rich backyard soil. The mata could only press itself against the cold red clay of the decorated urn it was buried in.

The staggering nancite tree in the backyard dominated the other trees with an umbrageous embrace. It had a deep-seeded trunk-history that evolved from the revolution of 1979, when the Sandinistas reappropriated Somocista lands and distributed them without legal deeds. Like many Managuans of her day, Abue situated her doorless, wooden-plank home around a tree-landmark. She eventually grounded the walls with cheap concrete to prevent flooding from the July rains. The nancite tree was Abue’s postal code, and when I was born, she christened the soil around the nancite tree as my birthplace.

“Este es tu árbol, tu raiz, ya que este árbol te vio nacer,” she affirmed.

Abue lived with a constant fear of post-war displacement; her only reassurance was the permanency of that nancite tree and the frequency of its ripe yellow cherries falling on neighboring tin roofs so she could collect them in a plastic pitcher and launch her helado business. Abue’s helado business thrived, especially around noon, when school children in the barrio stopped by to spend their last few pesos on their way home.

“Un helado de nancite, Doña Miriam,” the children would yell across the porch. But when the frequent power-outages struck or the fridge would rattle in discontent, and she would reply, “Hoy no hay, pipe. Hasta mañana.”
One morning as I was heading to school, the wind pushed the branches of the mata against my arm as I turned the front gate handle. Like the curious child I was, I plucked the aching brown leaf and crumbled it on the ground.

I understood then, that the mata was not jealous of the over-producing mango tree, the lanky plantain tree, the limon tree, nor the cacao tree in the backyard. The mata’s sense of purposelessness originated from the anger toward the nancite tree. It wanted the opportunity to thrive elsewhere, anywhere, even among the others in the backyard.

That afternoon, as more children stopped by the front gate to buy helados de nancite, the mata began to decay right in front of us. Every child’s laughter was a stark reminder of the mata’s isolation, its decorative placement on the porch, and its fruitless shrubbery. As the hot summer season increased the number of helado-buying clients, the mata no longer sought the sunlight, nor the fresh air. It withered away in the corner, without ever being granted the gift of being uprooted to backyard permanency.
Figure 1.8: Abue and Her Matas
PART II: PATA DE PERRO (WANDERING STREET DOG)
Figure 2.2: Airport Photo Leaving Managua, 1991
New Address In Gringo-Landia

Figure 2.3: Passing New Identities

↑

In Between Address:

*Tania Maria Romero*
Barrio La Fuente,
Una Cuadra Unida al Norte del Lago
Justo a la pared invisible sin nombre
Pasa-Por-Te ordinario, USA
Managua, En Luto
Zip the Code, desde adentro
Callejera (Street Wanderer)

Soy raíz desarraigada que se plantó en tu historia,
Nomada-domada, deslenguada,
Lunatica rizomática sin país.
Soy tu narradora y tu autora.

I am an uprooted root planted in your history.
Tamed-nomadic, indiscreet,
Rhizomatic lunatic with no country.
I am your narrator and author.
Patita De Perro

when you’re a *child immigrant*

you never ask to be **returned home**

quiet acceptance

is your **permanent address**

desarraigada,

with an illegal headband in a photo,

**sin**

**punto**

**ni**

**final**

Esa sos vos
The scene opens with 5 of us lined up in the front of the classroom.

The chalkboard behind us reads “Spelling Bee Today.”

Teacher: “Tania, spell ‘ALPHABET’”

Me: “A, B, C, D, E…”

Teacher: “No, no, spell the word ‘ALPHABET’”

Me: “A, B, C, D, E…”

Everyone chuckles.

Teacher: “Okay, okay. Thank you, Tania. You can sit down now.”

They all laugh in unison.

I sit down quickly and join their laughter.

*Que quiere decir ‘spelling’?*

*Que jodido es un ‘spelling bee’?*

An ambush.

I am now the class clown for not knowing that bees need spelling.
El Cuecho: Nica Survival Guide
How To Pass for A Mexican in Gringo-Landia

**Step 1:** Use “tu eres” instead of “vos sos.”

**Step 2:** Avoid the slippage of phrases like, “Ideay”, “Dale pues,” “Chocho,” and “Quiubole?” Instead, choose words like, “Orale” or “Que onda?” in a conversation.

**Step 3:** “Chunche” is not a description for everything around you. “Chancla” is pretty much universal and safe.

**Step 4:** “Chela” is another word for beer, not just the catcall from men on the street.

**Step 5:** Never call a Mexican-American just a Mexican. Remember that Chicanos are pride Americans even if the root word of their identity is “Chilango.” New Mexicans are not new to Gringo-Landia and have an ideological division defined by the question: red or green chili?

**Step 6:** Accept the lack of diversity of avocados at the store. The choices are: Expensive California Hass or an expensive Mexican-grown variety.

**Step 7:** Accept the concept of ‘store-bought’ corn tortillas that are perfectly round with no fingerprints in the masa. Even the burn marks may be false.

**Step 8:** Accept the concept of ‘flour’ tortillas.

**Step 9:** What you know as ‘tacos’ are called ‘flautas’, and burritos are not just animals.

**Step 10:** Do not get too excited when someone offers you tamales. The difference in flavor between a corn husk and banana leaves is culturally infinite.

**Step 11:** The difference between Tex-Mex and Mexican gastronomy is vast; learn your queso.

**Step 12:** When someone asks what region of Mexico Nicaragua is in, your answer should be, “south.” Just leave that one alone. Correcting someone with your outspokenness may lead to a communist label.

**Survival Goal:** Avoid complete erasure of your Latino-ness by passing for a Mexican-Gringa.
Mis padres work 3 jobs to let me dream

Calladita, y sin lengua, I pack my guilt inside a heavy maleta of privilege that I drag along private school hallways on squeaky wheels that echo “you’re a gringa now.”
6th GRADE SCHOOL COUNSELOR:
What would you do if you met an alien?

MY RESPONSE:
I would ask to see their resident alien card and compare A numbers.
Figure 2.4: Alien #043-419-397
Notas de Lectura:

- My Spanish teacher is from Spain.
- She teaches us about Flamenco and paellas.
- We take out a textbook with the new pronoun: ‘vosotros.’
- Vosotros refers to ‘vos y otros más.’
- We must learn to conjugate ‘ustedes’ and ‘vosotros’ for homework.
- Vosotros must be the origin of the Nica ‘vos,’ I think.
- She teaches us to properly pronounce the letters “s”, “c”, and “z” en ESpañol.
- “Take out a ‘shit’ of paper,” she instructs us to take notes.
- Rafael, Roberto, and I laugh. We sit in the back.
- Rafael is from El Salvador.
- Roberto’s family is from Mexico.
- We whisper among ourselves in our distinct accents and our ESpañol.
- She overhears us and grinds her teeth.
- “La lengua ESpañola Ze reSpeta!”
- Ahora en English: “Da Ethpanish tung mu(th)st be re(th)pected.”
- The three of us get kicked out of the classroom.
- We sit on a couch outside laughing the pain away.
- But she calls us back in.
- “VoZotros debéiZ reZpetar!”
- “Zi Zeñora,” we humble our imperfect tongues.
- She asks me to read aloud and translate the short textbook story
- “EZtá lloviendo en la playa,” I begin to read.
- Ahora en English: I try to translate, but I can’t differentiate phonetically between ‘beach’ and ‘bitch.’
Mon nom est brisé,
Mon espagnol est inférieur à la langue maternelle.
Je ne retournerai jamais en cours d'espagnol.
Ne me quitte pas, ma langue sauvage.

My name is broken,
My Spanish is inferior to the mother tongue.
I will never go back to Spanish class.
Don’t leave me, my wild tongue.
May 19th, 1995

Dear Me:

What are you doing? Is it hard? God, I wish I was a vetrenerian. Don’t you? Do you have a boyfriend? If you do what’s his name? Do you have to study hard? You know what? My friend Tara is sitting by me. She is writting a letter to herself too.

I think you should really be a vet. I mean, you get to take of animals and specially “dogs.” Their your favorite pets. That’s your goal, right? I hope you get a good job. (as a vet).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Clan</th>
<th>Lodge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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</table>

So far my teachers are

GingerWhisnant                      Mr. Mukai
Dub Williams                        
Mrs. Sanchez                       
Mr. Sheeintaub                     
Mrs. Hays                         
Mrs. Fishuch                       
And Mrs. Bull.
Dear Me:

What are you doing? Is it hard? God, I wish I was a veterinarian. Do you? Do you have a boyfriend? If you do, what is his name? Do you have to study hard? You know what? My friend Tara is sitting by me. She's writing a letter to herself too.

I think you should really be a vet. You get to take care of animals. I'm your favorite pets. That's your goal, right? I hope you get a good job (as a vet).

Village Can Lodge

So far my teachers are

Gingerwroomant
Mr. Williams
Mr. Zanches
Mr. Scheinlaub
Mr. Hays
Mrs. Madd
and Missbell.

May 19 1993

Figure 2.5: Letter to Myself
Figure 2.6: Educación Agringada
Más Doraditos

We arrived back in Managua in the middle of the July hurricane season. It was my seventh consecutive summer since my parents and I had relocated to Gringo-Landia. Inside my Abue’s house, there wasn’t a single dry neck from the humidity of that afternoon’s downpour. Even the wooden panel walls had a coat of sweat. In the backyard, displaced green caterpillars relished in the wet soil, waiting for the droplets of rain to fall from the leaky tin roof, down mango leaf pipes, and finally on to their backs; the cooling effect of a single raindrop. One day they would turn into delightful butterflies, if Pepita, Abue’s trusted chicken didn’t get to them first. The destitute life of caterpillars always intrigued me.

Abue’s kitchen was more like a long open hallway in the middle of the house, defined only by a small gas stove, a small sink with potable water, and a mini-fridge that had to be disconnected when anyone needed to iron. The wire for the outlet hung visibly from the unfinished ceiling like in the bedrooms. Before moving away to Gringo-Landia, where electrical wiring was usually concealed, I remember getting lost in thought on Sundays while assembling nacatamales as a family, trying to trace the direction of all the cables that ran through the house back to the fuse box. The mini-highways of intertwined wires, before I even knew what highways were, foreshadowed the loneliness of my interconnected life in Gringo-Landia.

Occasionally while studying these maps of wires on the ceiling, I would make eye contact with an agreeable house lizard. I would look up, when I really needed to look down and pay attention to how much masa I was placing on the banana leaf before handing it off to my uncle, who would place bell peppers, onions, and yerba buena on top. I always added too much masa, and Abue would reveal her disapproval at the end of the assembly line with an
‘arrugón de cara’ whenever she couldn’t close the nacatamal with mecate because it was too fat. Fat nacatamales, although immensely savory, were always imperfect in her eyes.

***

That misty July afternoon, Abue handed me a green plátano to peel. She gave me a pan and firmly instructed, “hacelo vos.” At sixteen, I was already hecha mujer and it was time to prove myself in Abue’s kitchen. There was nowhere to run; the childhood comfort of hiding in the assembly line for making nacatamales was gone.

I began the peeling process of the green cáscara, by carefully slicing from top the bottom, then detaching the sides further with the tip of the knife. A trick I had learned by watching other fritangueras, the queens of street food. I finished the rest of the peeling action with my fingers, in true Abue-style. She watched me intently every step of the way. Luckily, I could blame the humidity for the increasing beads of sweat on my forehead.

Once peeled, I cut diagonal slices of plátano on a wooden board. Abue studied the thick tajadas carefully and intervened, “tienen que quedar mas delgaditas.” Thinner. Always thinner. Like the dresses she sowed for me growing up. I always looked like an overstuffed nacatamal with my little panza tied in a bow.

I poured oil in the pan, and turned on the stove. I could feel the weight of Abue’s eyes on me. When the oil was hot enough I placed the first (now corrected) thin tajada inside; it immediately began to sizzle. She never took her eyes off me, wondering if the prickly oil would burn my delicate hand as I put the rest of the tajadas in the pan. I patiently waited until turning them over. When I thought it was time, I grabbed a fork and began to flip the first ones. She forcefully intervened a second time and commanded, “dejalos más doraditos.”

More brown, Gringa.

Her timing was impeccable. I could hear the disappointment in the tone of her voice:
“Ya se me Agringó esta chavala,” she probably thought. She’s now too American and can’t even fry a plantain properly. But it wasn’t just my cooking that she was judging. I may have been her nieta a-dorada, but I was never dorada enough for Abue. While supervising my cooking, I could feel how she studied my chela hands, my chela arms, and my light brown hair. I was too light-skin for a Nica, and after living in Gringo-Landia for just a few years, my skin had turned the color of green plátano-beige. I needed to be fried a little longer. She grabbed the fork from my hand and finished frying the plantains herself.

I was still cruda in the kitchen.

I sat defeated at the dining table looking out the window, watching Pepita peck the wet soil in search for green caterpillars. Suddenly, Abue slid a plate of perfectly fried tajadas con queso in front of me. She gave me her signature arrugón de cara, shrugged a bit, and repeated, “No te me agringués, mi niña. En la próxima, más doraditos.” Plantains with cheese never felt more like home than on that rainy afternoon, the first and last time I cooked with Abue in her kitchen.

Now in my own Gringo-Landia kitchen, distinguishable only by the covered ceiling, a working microwave and dishwasher I never use, dusty stainless steel appliances, and a self-cleaning oven that doesn’t need me, I smile when I peel plátanos with my fingers, a la Abue-style, wishing I could hear her scorn me once again: más doraditos.
Figure 2.7: Agringada; Self-Portrait at 16
Nicaraguan Día de las Madres

30 de mayo 2012: Día de las Madres

At the Austin airport.

On my way to Italy to begin doctoral degree.

First phone call from Managua.

Abue survived the surgery.

She’s awake.

Sigh of relief.

At the airport gate.

Boarding my flight.

Second phone call.

Abue woke up.

Abue reached for her leg.

It was missing.

Heart attack.

She closed her eyes.

She passed.

Change my flight.

New ticket to Managua.

Pain travels inward.

On my way home-home.

Meet Abue while we both ascend toward the friendly skies.
Pata Podrida (Rotten Foot)

El pie izquierdo de mi abuela se puso viejo y podrido. For seven years, the diabetes consumed her from the outside-in. First the vicious disease settled in her soul like the gangrene that rotted her small toe, then traveled slowly through her bloodstream. In the last years of her life, her spirit left her gaze. I remember watching my uncles, year after year during home visits to Managua, taking turns cleaning the oozing gash on her foot. She refused to pay for doctors out of pride and to save the last bit of her dignity; she refused to ampu –

She didn’t like that word.
She would die before anyone
Said that word aloud.

Pero emputada se murió amputada.

Tonight in my imagination,

I dream of dancing, with my grandmother’s amputated foot.
Figure 2.8: Open Wound On Her Left Foot
Dicen

Dicen que nació y murió,
En un tal mes de mayo.
¿Pero, como se mide la infinidad?
Su cronología arbolada,
Como raíces enterradas,
Que sobreviven siglos,
Aun sin sol, agua, ni aire.
Su vida encapsulada,
En el corazón de un marañón.
Pitaya ensangrentada,
O tal vez en la semilla de nancite,
O de mango:
Maestras primordiales de nuestra tierra.
Un día cualquiera,
En un tal espacio terrenal que llaman Granada,
Vagamundiamos por calles abandonadas,
Discretamente hacia el lago,
Al ritmo silencioso de nuestros efímeros pasos:
Palabras secretas de un idioma femenino ambulante.
En ese,
En ese soplo de vida,
Exactamente sin rumbo,
En los cañavares de mi memoria,
Vive ese instante,
Que solo nos pertenece a las dos:
Cuando ella paró el tiempo con su mirada.
Figure 2.9: Escape to Granada
Figure 2.10: Portrait of Abue
Nomada Domada

I am very good at leaving.

Leaving this place, that place, no place; myself.


I only adapt to you, Silencio.
Every week, my memory turns to a place called Silencio. I first visited the place growing up in Managua, the same day my stepdad was late picking me up from preschool. I waited on the curve, watching snobby older kids with their chauffeurs; silver lunchboxes swung blissfully into air-conditioned Mercedes-Benz. The delicate, blue-eyed Blonde girl with an unpronounceable name held her Chacha’s hand as she climbed the backseat. Nicknamed ‘Vaquita’ despite her thin frame, she always brought an imported can of condensed milk for lunch; the kind only certain families could buy at La Diplotienda with a military carnet.

I sat on top of a rock near the gated entrance, sipping the remnants of orange juice in my yellow plastic thermos. My mother squeezed fresh oranges every morning, because my family could not afford a live-in Chacha like the other kids. The liquid was still refreshingly cold on that sweltering midday. By the time I finished, everyone but the faded hero cartoon sticker on top of my lunchbox and I, was gone.

Cars zoomed by and I longed to hear the engine roar inside the rattling red hood of my stepdad’s Lada. But it never arrived. In the adventurous spirit of characters like Red Riding Hood from the folktales teachers read to us before naptime at school, I decided to walk in the direction of Abue’s house all the way across town. Teachers always raved about the heroism of Caperucita Roja when she defeated the Big Bad Wolf with her wit; she was an intrepid pata de perro who didn’t sit nor stay.

By car, Abue’s house was probably thirty minutes away from school. By bus, if one could find an empty seat among the mercaderas with heavy straw baskets heading to El Huembes (the local city market), it was a comfortable hour and a half. But measured in the steps of a five-year-old girl? Abue’s house was a sweat-drenching eternity in the scorching midday...
heat. As I walked down the unpaved side of the highway, the draft from the speeding cars occasionally lifted my pleated blue skirt, and nearly ripped the insignia from the left pocket of my buttoned-down white shirt. Dressed in blue-white, I probably looked like a miniature Nicaraguan flag in a windstorm.

At a busy light intersection, I sat down under the shade of a mango tree. The skinny branches with long leaves ran for miles into the sky. Suddenly a blue-black Toyota pickup truck screeched to a halt before me. As the cloud of dust settled, I could discern it was La Guardia in disguise: The Big Bad Wolf from the cautionary tales Tío Miguel told me. When he was a child, La Guardia raided people’s homes like in the Three Little Pigs, huffing and puffing bullets into concrete walls to check which houses crumbled. They didn’t search for chimneys to climb because Managuan homes at the time, no matter the construction material, were door-less. Abue would force Tío Miguel to wear a dress before hiding him under the bed so La Guardia wouldn’t take him to a place called Guerra. It seemed no one in my family wanted to go to that place, and I was no different.

Dressed as a different wolf breed but with the same razor-sharp canines, La Guardia had a new namesake: La Contra. A Morena with curly black hair tied in a bun, dressed in an olive-green uniform and military boots, stepped out of the front passenger side. Sunglasses, the man at the wheel, wore a similar uniform except for a camouflage cap shading his face. For a slight second, Morena resembled my aunt Ligia who also had a flawless blend of Miskito cinnamon skin. She had the kind of skin shade that chelas like me wanted to have, even after enduring chancletasos from our mothers for standing in the sun too long.

“Mirá vos,” she called for Sunglasses. “¿Dónde vas, chaivalita?” she turned to me. I didn’t answer.
“¿A dónde vas, Amor?” she reached out for my hand. When I touched her frosty skin from riding in the air-conditioned cabin, my whole body went numb. I had never been in the presence of a cadaver, but I imagined she felt like one. *Del susto, sentí un soplo en el corazón.*

“Donde mi Abue,” I murmured.

“¿Y dónde queda eso?”

“Por El Huembes,” I replied.

There was no turning back. She knew where I was going. My trembling legs synchronized to the offbeat patterns of my emergent heart murmur. Surprisingly, I felt like a grownup in that moment, referring to landmarks like a real city slicker. No one in Managua actually uses a number address; our postal codes are defined by the most accurate subjective orientation to places and things. We navigate the city by referring to markets, old buildings, monuments, lakes, or trees: “del Arbolito, una cuadra al lago,” we say. Abue had the habit of asking if a place existed before or after the earthquake, just in case.

Morena opened the door and boosted me up to the backseat, placing my faded lunchbox next to me. As I scooted to the center, my overheated legs squealed as they rubbed against the plastic seats. The door closed behind me and Morena got back inside the passenger side; one last gust of hot air filled the truck, and I knew I had found Silencio. The air difference inside the cabin was palpable; the dead-cold breeze from the vents sent chills to the back of my neck. My mind went blank.

I once heard that all girls should cross their legs when they enter Silencio, specially when La Contra is in the front seat. But that cold breeze would occasionally lift my skirt and feel satisfying as it dried my sweaty thighs. Every now and then Sunglasses would turn his head toward the front mirror. I could tell he wanted to be like the cold air penetrating my pores.
Morena gave him some side-eye, but never said a thing. I kept pointing in the direction of Abue’s house, but Sunglasses drove slower. Slower, until time stopped.

I wish I could recall more details about Silencio. But every time my memory roams in that direction, all I can remember is the smell. From a certain smell, *una cuadra al lago de la memoria*; that is the murky postal code of Silencio. Sometimes when I return, there is an overwhelming scent of burning plastic, mixed with the coolant from the air vents at full blast. Sometimes there is a pervasive smell of sweat and male cologne infused in the upholstery. At times the smell is a combination of gasoline fumes and burning tires. What I do know, is that there is *always a smell* in Silencio.

The next thing I knew, we turned left at the red-black prism memorial for the militant-poet Leonel Rugama, who never came back from Guerra. As we headed down the street, I could see the outside of my Abue’s house in the distance. The pickup truck pulled up to the front. Abue, in her embroidered green *bata*, dropped her transistor radio and jolted from her *mesedora* on the porch. Morena got out first and opened the door for me. I jumped out and ran as fast as I could out of Silencio. Abue’s eyes widened when she scooped me into her arms. Instinctively, she lifted my skirt to check between my thighs. Heart racing, eyes sealed, I squeezed tightly; my legs were shamefully frozen-dry but I was unharmed.

Morena chuckled at how firmly I latched on to my Abue’s body. She gave Abue a warm nod and handed her my lunchbox. She returned to the front seat and rolled down her window. I watched her pull out a concealed red scarf under the neckline of her olive-green uniform, an identifying marker of bold volunteers who went to Guerra. She was not La Contra at all; she was a *Cachorra*. A *Caperucita Roja* who prevented Sunglasses from turning into the cold air between
my thighs with her indisputable presence. I never saw either of them again even though they
knew how to get to Abue’s. I figured like many others, they got lost coming back from Guerra.

Thirty years later, during my weekly talk-therapy sessions, I try to deconstruct why I
return to Silencio. Why I sit on rocks for hours. Why orange juice tastes better when served in a
thermos. Why I sit under trees to purposely obstruct my view of the sky. Why I gravitate toward
murky bodies of water to find my place in the world. Why my nickname is \textit{pata de perro}. And
why I nod in silent gratitude at women who wear red scarves.
PART III: SOLEDAD Y AMORES PERROS (SOLITUDE AND HARD LOVE)
In the blank space above, Abue tells her life story in her own words, but I will translate: When she was fourteen, she was molested. She ran away from home, found out she was pregnant, but the baby was still-born. She taught herself how to sow dresses, wash clothes, and iron for rich families. That same year, while working for an unnamed employer, she was raped by the owner of the house, became pregnant, but gave the child up for adoption. At fifteen, she fell in love with a man twice her age who left her pregnant again, but this time, she kept the child. She raised four more children as a single mother, enduring hunger and poverty, rebuilding after the 1972 earthquake, and suffering food scarcity after the 1979 revolution. She learned to read and write at the age of fourth-one, but she spoke many languages: silence, passivity, submissiveness, and invisibility. De tal arbol, de tal tronco endurecido, las ramas soy yo.
Daddy Is A Ghost From A Dream

Daddy is a ghost from a dream,

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Echoing through my brain. Daddy didn’t love you enough.

Screaming
to be *FREE*.

Beauty is a t-h-i-n-g

of the p-a-s-t,

With fierce curiosity I *DANCE* upon graves,

Graves of my female ancestors that once came before me:

Burn-ing
down
Burn-ed
away
Burn-ed
to dea-th

A lightless sunset in her eyes,
Time, slowly undoing,
Washes away towards a shoreless beach.
Photos painted in my memory for an eternity.

Hide my face in the *DARK*.

Smile when they *SCREAM*.

MONSTERS should never be seen *WOMAN*.

*SILENCE* is a virtue.
His Window

She eagerly knocked on his door, but he peeked out from behind his window. The stars lied. The silences and vague denial were complicit in this irreversible end. Their end. The end of many. She attempted to let him go: traveled, met them, slept with them, rejected them. None of them were him. He was these words. Always him. A dream.

She came back, he went. He came back, she left. She slept and cried; by now she didn’t know the difference except for the difference it didn’t make. Breadcrumb-love with haunting text messages and empty Inboxes. Then he married her. The other her. The one not her. By then, the universe inside her whispered she should value herself because she would never again be first. To him, she was already deaf because she married him at the age of twelve. During the ceremony, she was sure he pushed her first before she pushed back. He put a ring around that bruise, and she loved him indefinitely. The unspoken pact was sealed with a fluttering eye trace. Ever since that union, only violent men were worthy of her love. He nestled in her wound, and molded her heart into the shape of a blade. Always sharpening that blade. To cut. Cut. Don’t cut.

In dreams, he always appeared inside a bus. She saw him riding again on the July 28th, 2018 bus, the one he had been riding since the 1995 bus stop at 2:55am. He always sat across from her. She longed for his dark eyes to caress her body, to follow her legs as they crossed. She thought of him thinking of her, but thinking of her was not thinking. He only thought with his eyes closed and he never bothered to blink around her. At his doorstep, in her dreams, she wanted to ask him if he was happy. Happily married to the one who was not her. But he closed his window and went back inside. She didn't knock again. She went back home to sharpen again. On her mental wall, she wrote the rules as follows:
1. Don’t feel.

2. Don’t feel.

3. Don’t feel.

4. Don’t feel.

5. Don’t feel the don’t.
Remember to Forget

Sometimes I want to forget the things I can’t remember. Time seduces my memory into a tantalizing non-linear dance: an Argentine tango. *Un lapis cortado que me cortó la vida.* Like a permanent, prickly-violent tattoo, memories resonate sharply when they appear: in the shower. In the car. In the kitchen. Tonight, I lend time my hand as she pulls me to the dance floor of remembrance. I reluctantly step off-beat to the soundtrack of my life, pushed into the abrupt musicality of she-time, she lures me into a she-space. When she sings off-key, I pour myself a drink so I can remember to forget.

It all began when she locked the door behind her. On the other side, her boyfriend pretended to cut himself with a kitchen knife to worry her enough to let him back in. She watched that wobbly doorknob intently; the only thing standing between his anger and her fear. No, that’s not it. That sounds straight out of a Stephen King novel. No one would believe it happened.

The story began earlier that night, when he kicked her in the face and chipped her front tooth. The uneven tooth edges split her lip open upon impact. But then again, that’s too visceral for a general audience rating. No, let’s try again. Let’s start the story now she reluctantly stepped into his car after the break-up and held on tight as he ran every red light in the middle of a Philly snowstorm. If he was driving to hell, he was taking her with him, and she was too cold and emotionally numb to care.

I need to give her story a proper beginning, however. Let the music begin.

So here it goes: she said yes. She was complacent. She let him in. She said, no, but meant yes. She said yes, when she really meant no. She didn’t draw the line. She was drunk. She was a broke college student. She was drunk *and* broke. She didn’t know the meaning of self-respect. She was 21.
That night she learned the language of blinking. He smelled of Nicaraguan rum; a putrid aftertaste like the one from drinking gas station Ron Plata, not the Flor De Caña one saves for special occasions. His wide eyes pressed against his smooth canela complexion; the thin red veins around his dilated pupils formed cobwebs. Once before, he had gently lured her into the bedroom, stumbled against her fragile neck, and with brute force pushed her to the ground like a piece of paper, crumpling what was left of her air. She couldn’t make a sound, but she was used to the silence, so she blinked it all away.

The vision of the world around her, a sour note. Blink it all to black.

In the corner of the room, his dog rattled inside the locked kennel with feverous rage. Bark echoes in stringendo. With asynchronous sharp momentum she scratched, kicked, struggled like a throttled fish on the ground. Downstair neighbors came knocking but no one answered. Instead, he released the pressure around her neck and stood up to check the peephole. She curled up on the bed because her legs would not travel any further. Get your camera, she thought. Document this moment, she thought. This is your movie, she thought. You owe your life to that unexpected knock and a courageous bark. They deserve eternal recognition. Get your camera.

When he came back into the bedroom, he dialed those three numbers for her, as a test. Another test of her loyalty. He gave her the cell phone. A robotic voice on the other end answered. She reported, “my boyfriend beat me up.” Boyfriend with an iron-fist that left a gaping wound on her lip and purple fingerprints around her neck. He listened with his face in his hands. “The address? Right across the police station,” she continued. What a cinematic vantage point, she thought. Your eyes are not enough. Get your camera now. But she lacked the strength to focus.
Police sirens wrote the next measure of this score. Click. Click. She wondered if the police used manual settings to deliver the proper camera exposure for the evidence photos. Or did they use automatic settings because she was just one more victim. The blinding flash was on automatic, that’s for sure. So maybe she should take a number. She used the tip of her tongue to gauge how much of her front tooth was missing.

“What a dumb bitch, she let him in,” she imagined the voice-over of the male cops scorning her with their silent glares. One of the officers wrote a treble clef on the report that read like this:


The shame crescendos with every stroke of the pen on the Incident Report sheet. It is at this point she became a half-note. She would forever hold silence for two beats inside her and take half-steps everywhere she went. Measures of silent pain.

Wounds will heal, but scars are permanent. Some of this happened the way she told it, and some of it happened the way she lived it. None of it happened when she forgets until she hears the sharp notes again. The high pitch, from any instrument of memory pinch her ears at every turn. Time is not linear, it’s an Argentine tango. *Un lapis cortado.* That’s why he’s always there now, like tattoo ink on her body. Prickly-violent, and permanent, even though this happened decades ago. She convinced herself it was not W-rape because she loved him back. It’s never W-rape when you love him back, she told herself to forget.

The story does not end with her. The story ends with me and her. The story ends with us. The story ends with us, and not him. The story ends because it never ends. The story ends because she is now writing it.

For her
Solas, But Together

Self-love begins with an invitation. My soledad texted me at 3:14 am to remind me to purchase two tickets to La Boheme for Saturday night. She really wanted to go, because she was lonely, and wanted to eat Opera with her ears for dinner. She remembered that the best date she’s ever been on was with me. She scrolled through her contacts, sent that booty-call, and disturbed my sleep. My soledad said nighttime was the worst for her because of the pillow-nightmares about endless conversations with unrecognizable eyes. She would wake up in the middle of the night, thinking about the eyes of a potential man-child with man-trums, arguing about the cost of every item on a check at a restaurant, down to the tip amount. He wasn’t even wearing a tie. She always spilled a drink on ‘accident’ just to test what else these monsters were made of. Then she woke from the night terror all on her own.

I was empathetic, but reluctant to decide. I promised to treat her like a real De Havilland, a Norma Desmond, ready for her close-up. Take her to Paramount, Universal, whatever lot she wanted to go to. Opera first, however. I told her I would pick her up at 6pm sharp, no sushi this time, and make it closer to the -ish minute. I suggested various story sequences: If she was at home, I would arrive with an umbrella at her doorstep, Gene Kelly style. In this sequence I suggested she could wear that soulful white dress that arrived from Amazon Prime, walk down the stairs holding a ceremonial bouquet of desolation and defeat in her hand. The perfume of despair would fill the foyer, and she would be picture perfect. The second story proposal was what happened. I met her in a field, she ran into my arms, and with all my strength, I twirled her into being while in midair. She was a barefoot Queen in the middle of a rainstorm and I didn’t bring an umbrella. At the Opera, she handed me a new box of tissues in case I needed to sneeze again. I guess my soledad was the perfect date after all.
A Letter To My Ivy League Education

Dear Ivy League Education,

This letter is a love-demon. A demon that waited to be written for nearly 20 years. As you sit commemorating the associate professorships or tenure thrones, published accomplishments, and fully funded research in your intellectual communities, I wanted to remind you of the brown students you left behind.

The ones who made it late to class during inclement weather, because the bus was late. The ones who walked in the snow all the way across campus just to hear the wisdom and experience of white professors. The ones denied a history of themselves in your books. The ones who worked two jobs to pay tuition, arrived late, and sat outside locked classroom doors without knocking, listening to muffled lectures, hanging on to every other word, because they honored that clause on a syllabus that read, “no late students admitted, and no late assignments allowed.”

I, was late. I was late to an understanding of your authority because I fell in love with your indoctrination of success. I inherited the American debt-dream without any questions, just like you instructed. I was late to an understanding that my admiration for your vast experience and limited historical lenses have been, all this time, the gatekeepers to my own creative process and my practice as a thinker. I was late to an understanding of your ideological supremacy because I felt insignificant with my corn tortilla-making abilities, alone with the crumbs inside the pockets of my delantal and hid under my 5’5 feminine shadow.

Once, you shook my world when you opened your classroom door and asked, “what the hell are you doing here?”

“I was late because of the weather,” I replied. I think, I replied. I wanted, to reply.
But I probably kept silent as your gaze studied the holes in my soaking, nearly soulless shoes, instead of letting me into class. Impostora: Usurpadora intellectual.

Even in the feedback for my work, you combed my words and asked, “Is this word in Spanish? Pick a language when you write.”

I upheld the Ivy-League mantras:

_Sell yourself, without being yourself._

_The right choice is the white choice._

But, now, decades later, I realize I was late to my own validation of my _brownness_ even as I passed unperceived with my chela-ness and lack of an accent in English.

Us browns sat in your classrooms, first-graduates, aspiring storytellers and high archivers. We graduated as shell-walkers, silently conformed, failed your classes, forever hearing whispers in the hallway, “You do not belong. You will always be late.”

In this love-letter, I ask for no more indoctrination, no more silence, no more domination of my writing style, or calling me a _pendeja_, for writing in what ever hybrid language I call home.

And with this love-letter, I inform you that with or without my demons, I will create. I will write, because that is what the demons I bought with my expensive tuition, have urged me to do.

Yours kindly, but never truly,

A Late Brown Student
Dear Gregory Nava,

At the age of 13, I saw my Central American identity on screen for the first time in your movie *El Norte* (1983). I smiled as if for the first time.

Dear Ken Loach,

At the age of 18, I saw my Nicaraguan identity for the first time on screen in your movie *Carla’s Song* (1996). I cried rivers.

Dear Eveline Fernandez,

You gave me a reason to breathe with your film *Luminarias* (1999).

Dear Patricia Cordoso,

At the age of 20, I saw my childhood immigrant experience and my relationship with my mother in your movie *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). I felt validated.

Dear Lupe Ontiveros,

You are every woman in my family in every character you play. Thank you.

Dear Florence Jaugey,

At the age of 27, I saw my homeland and heard my Nicaraguan accent in your film *La Yuma* (2009). I was proud of my roots.

Dear Rita Moreno,

You are every Latina girl who decided to go for it. EGOT. Mic drop.
Zurda

Yo nací zurda. Cuando era niña, Abue me cubría la mano izquierda con un calcetín con el propósito de motivarme a usar mi mano derecha. Tenía la creencia que había que domar mi mano izquierda; esa mano imperfecta e inmoral. La verdad es que los zurdos representamos un problema para el diseño y la funcionalidad de los objetos cotidianos. Hacemos las cosas “al revés” y nos acostumbramos a una experiencia opuesta a las condiciones en las cuales vivimos. Abue me estaba preparando para entrar imperceptiblemente a una sociedad en la cual era más factible fortalecer la debilidad de mi mano derecha con el hábito, que reforzar mi intuición zurda.

Con el transcurso de los años, logré domar a mi mano izquierda para que se quedara quieta y silenciosa. Pero seguía escribiendo zurdamente en secreto. Claro que no lo hacía en público porque descubrí a muy temprana edad que se me hacía imposible no emborronar la tinta cuando escribía en la página con la mano izquierda; escribir a lo zurdo significaba desfigurar las líneas legibles. Años de entrenamiento y costumbre fortalizó mi mano derecha, pero mi mano izquierda se quedaba dormida y borrada de mi cuerpo aunque estaba capacitada para hacer lo mismo. Escondí mi ambi-dextreza porque mi abuela tenía razón: el mundo era menos complicado si uno seguía la corriente.

De esta manera, Abue se convirtió en mi primera maestra de cine porque difundió una filosofía auto-didáctica en mí. Ella no estaba reprimiendo mi naturaleza, si no, enseñándome que todo en este mundo se podía lograr aprendiendo-haciendo. Sobre todo el cine, porque es un diálogo constante entre la intuición y el aprendizaje. El deseo de interpretar la realidad con el uso de imágenes es intuitivo para el cineasta, pero la expresión de este deseo está directamente relacionado con el aprendizaje y los recursos que el cineasta tiene disponible.

El amor de mi Abue, y me hizo cineasta and taught me to see the world-inverted.
Figure 3.1L Self Portrait; India
PART IV: TESTIGO SIN NOMBRE (NAMELESS WITNESS)
What lies
On the border
Of Dignity?

What lies, on the border of dignity.
Austin, Texas 2016
Journal Entry: November, 9th 2016

Shit. It actually happened. The fucking world ended at 2:33am on November 9th, 2016. The previous night, the night of the presidential election, I had been sitting on the couch watching the half-filled map of the United States on TV. I anxiously waited for red and blue colors to indicate the voting results in each state. Texas was already a lost cause. I must have been mentally exhausted from the conflicting media coverage in the previous months, I went back to my bedroom and dozed off into a slumber.

I woke up to the end of the world.

I sat up on my bed. Thunder and rain had taken over the night. The moonlight played shadow-puppets with tree branches on my wall. I picked up my cell phone from my nightstand and swiped across a Yahoo main page. There it was: a smirking Donald Trump, his left-hand waving at unsuspecting crowds as if welcoming them into a fourth Reich, with the caption ‘45th president of the United States…’

Fuck. I put my cell phone down. I laid back down. Was I still dreaming? Why did I ever think I could calmy go to sleep on election night and let the universe take care of itself?

I watched the shadows dance on my wall. A few minutes passed until I checked my cell phone again. It was almost 3:00 am and no missed calls. Shit, what day was it? I could call my parents in New Mexico to check on them, I thought, but not in the middle of the night. My step-dad, a radical-liberal who was a “CNN-on-24-hours-a-day” political fanatic, didn’t have a heart attack after hearing this world-changing news. Otherwise I would have gotten a call. I always get the call. I was slightly relieved. Phone calls from family are always for one of two reasons:
1) someone in the family died or 2) someone is ill.

But this was different. The world had ended. Did my parents sleep through the ruckus?

The thought of my mother’s anxiety weighed heavily on my chest. Living in republican Texas, next door to the democratic state of New Mexico, I could still feel the tone of her melodramatic voice prickling my skin like the raindrops outside my window. Over the decades, my mother and I developed what I call a ‘working-relationship.’ We have an imaginary umbilical cord that somehow maintains our mother-daughter connection, but I wouldn’t necessarily go to her with my own problems. The best way to describe it is, I inherited her war-trauma in my genes, so I feel inexplicable things sometimes. But that night, however, her words were vivid and came to me as visions of being in her womb like when I have those dreams. The noisy womb dreams that always compel me to write. A transgenerational cross-over of memories I never lived. Her memories.

I imagined my parents on the presidential election night: my stepdad would sit on the edge of the coffee table studying the political stats on the lower third of the TV screen and make disapproving muecas, pacing back and forth to the kitchen to refill his glass of carbonated water with fresh limón during commercial breaks. My mother probably laid on the couch yelling “¡Cálmate Edgar!” to prevent another stroke. She would make dismissive statements toward the election results like, “esto ya lo vivimos en Nicaragua varias veces después del terremoto” or her perpetual point of reference, “después de la guerra.” According to my mother, nothing could be worse than the 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua or what happened after the revolution of 1979.

On election night, my mother’s stories resonated deep in my mind, colluding with a strange redolent and deathly smell in my apartment. Did a squirrel get stuck in the pipes again?
My mother had a habit of recounting her life under the Somoza dictatorship at any given opportunity; death was always eminent. After living in the United States for almost thirty years, the thought of living under the new Trump regime probably didn’t faze her. I imagined that on the election night, she probably ranted about how she raised her younger siblings and survived on a diet of sal, limón, y tortillas when arroz y frijoles were hard to find. Then there’s the story when she was a teenager; my aunt Ligia and her were shot at by Somoza’s guardias in a crowded market. As bullets rained down on them, all they could do was lay on the ground and play dead like the others around them until the Guardias drove away. A young teenage vendor with a canasta full of fruit was killed on impact next to them. My mother procured not to blink and laid there watching the young man’s eyes fade away. A moment of silence followed when she told that story.

Always that damn motherly silence that Abue handed down to both of us.

She would compress her own life events like a movie. She praised herself for fulfilling her civic duties as a teacher during the literacy reforms while living in Miskito communities. But at just 18 years old, two years before I was born, she almost died of dengue fever. She lived her own version of Apocalypse Now deep in the jungles of Northern Nicaragua. Her stories as a revolutionary reassured me that I carried that same adventurous blood. But I could never tell her that.

One time, she let it slip that a group of women teaching in a small rural community nearby were rape victims by Sandinista rebels; the same idealist revolutionaries who defended gender equality in their speeches were the culprits of such horrendous crimes. She concluded that not surprisingly, many women of her generation who participated in the country’s reforms
married foreigners and left the country out of despair. She certainly did when she married my stepfather. Those who stayed were probably married to government officials. Still to this day, by some accounts in the barrio where we grew up in Managua, the perception of my mother is that she is a daughter of a Sandinista revolution, who became a greedy exiliada and married a Yankee, and seized economic opportunity in the same country that oppressed her own.

Growing up, I knew different, however. Although, my mother’s narrative was like a 90’s mixed tape on repeat, exhausting to hear all the time, it was necessary for my understanding of why relocating to the U.S. during an Amnesty in 1992 was both a sacrifice and a necessity for our family. Sometimes leaving is the only means to survival, and silence a way to keep the calm. Silence moves us forward.

I thought about survival that night. No, I thought, I’m not ready to call my parents. I am not ready to hear my parent’s disappointment in Gringo-Landia post-election night. They worked so hard for this American life, to plant their seeds on American soil, and now it felt like that new beginning was demanding a refund.

I picked up my cell phone again and texted a filmmaking collaborator in New York who would understand me. At this hour she was probably in as much shell shock as I was. I thought: she’s an immigrant from India, she would understand my distress over how the blatant anti-immigrant Trump rhetoric had won over common sense. No immigrant was safe under this new regime and we had to stick together. But my message was left unread. Was she unresponsive because of the shock? Was she asleep? How could she sleep on a night like this?

The rain poured outside and questions cascaded in my mind: What happened? What happened Mrs. Clinton? You weren’t perfect, but damn, history was staring at us women
straight in the face. *It was our time, our turn, our space. Our moment washed away in the blink of an eye. What happened Hilary?*

    Alone in my apartment, I felt abandoned by the world. It was a new kind of loneliness, different from immigrant alienation that I felt as a child. I felt displaced, reliving all sorts of repressed memories, like sitting on an airplane with my parents as a child, holding my favorite toys for reassurance, and being told we were never going back to live in Nicaragua again. Presidential election night took me back to that fateful traumatic flight to the U.S. when I was nine. I leaned on the airplane window and woke up mid-flight with an earache from the engine hum. Still decades later, I still hear a faint engine hum: the sound of guilt, shame, and isolation. An opportunistic hum. I hear the hum when I get embarrassed thinking back at how kids laughed at me for mispronouncing words in English, dealing with the guilt of being forced to fit in with the ‘American oppressors,’ and overcoming the cultural dissonance I had with the American way of life. The gaze of shame overwhelmed me. That night, I was decaying inside, suppressing any distinguishable emotion.

    An earthquake of repressed childhood emotions stirred within me that night. It was a wave of apocalyptic doom that blurred my mind and dug deep into some potholes of my psyche. My eyelids felt heavy with an urge to forget, but I didn’t want to blink. I felt a voluminous llanto that only another un-married, child-less, thirty-something, Ivy-league educated Latina immigrant living in solitude with a history of shame could understand. I could not escape my own mind that night. I would have to face the reality show alone, at least four years of it.
Knock-knock, deport me, motherfuckers. I see a crack in the screen monitor. I see the control-room with all the monitors, and I want out, you puppeteering bastards! I want out of the land of capitalist opportunity, the “melting pot” sin sabor, the “manifest destiny” of Yankee gentrification. I’ll naturalize your ass with this chancla! Deport me and give me my Maduro con queso when I arrive en mi tierra. Take me out of this Donald Trump-Show nightmare that is about to begin.

Fuck. I really need to stop talking to myself. Why is it raining outside? Is this a movie? Call cut already, or move on to the next scene. If this was the end of the world, I had nothing to complain about. I had the stamp of a private school kid with an Ivy League degree; all of it achieved on my parent’s shoulders and thanks to their sacrifice. How could I desire to be deported when so many die crossing borders just to ask for asylum? I was granted naturalized citizenship when my mother applied for hers so I didn’t even work that hard for my privileges. I was practically served an endless supply of ready-made corn tortillas; I didn’t have to churn the masa to make them. All I had to do was heat them up in a microwave like a Gringa.

But I don’t even use a microwave.

Who the hell have you become Tania?

Malagradecida. Stop this incoherent rant.

By now my pillow had soaked my tears; una rabia infernal que no me dormia. I got distracted by the shadows of tree branches on the wall again. I was taken back to a windy night in the middle of hurricane season in Managua when I was a child. I secretly stayed up to watch the German expressionist film Nosferatu; the film that traumatized me into filmmaker. There was
thundering that night too, and I laid in bed with both eyes wide open projecting scenarios of how a decrepit vampire would appear in my doorway and tug at my feet. But it was the long vampire finger-shadows on the wall that made me realize how illusory our perception of reality could be. Fear compels us to react because it paralyzes our soul into believing a certain reality is truth.

I wasn’t afraid of the shadows on my wall. Nor was I afraid of the possibility of a mind-controlling, Trump-looking Führer-monster with pointy fingertips appearing in my doorway, toupee flying in the wind. I was afraid of another form of evil unleashed into the world: the fear of mass erasure and xenophobic extermination through a rhetoric of half-truths.

That the world ended in 2016 was no coincidence. The sky was crying, the moonlight knocked at the window with shadow messages, and the darkness compelled me to relive my past. It was clear to me, that a new human narrative was about to be written as humanity was thrashed back into the womb of the universe to be reborn. At sunrise, I decided to get my journal and pen. It was time to grab my camera and start recording too. The time had come to witness the truth in whichever form the universe presented it to me. And so, I wrote my fiction so I could not be erased; I would not be erased by fear. And so it goes...

*Flash the truth. Flash into fiction. Flash into truth-fiction. Fictionize Truth.*
With This Page I De-Construct

Your Blank Silence.
Call me Yashka Maria

Я солдат

Я солдат

Я солдат

Я солдат

Я солдат

Я солдат

Me llamo Yashka Maria, camera-loaded in hand, jodido.

Me escribo yo sola en mi futura memoria y en mi pasado presente.
Figure 3.2: Figureless; Art-ivist Self
El Paso, Texas 2018

Paseo del Norte, International Bridge
Figure 4.1: Donations to Churches
Welcome to the Violet Nation,
Of Lawful No-laws:
No entry, No pass, No mames!
We cock our arms, with open arms,
A dash of tear gas for your nachos, Nacho?

CBP:
Compasión Con-Front-Era.

Zipote sin coche,
Para que venís aquí?
Si serás -chacha y -chacho,
Wearing migra-reporting shoes,
Tacón alto with shiny grilletes,
Cordones de doble filo te amarraran el zapato.

“Pero, La American poverty looks shiny from afar,
When bullets carve your bedroom walls.”

That’s why,
They trip, trip, drip,
Lágrimas y sudor,
Traveling salados sin luck,
Blue and white flags raised high,
Just to wait in the low,
Temperatures of La Hielera.
Runny nose, wet jeans,
Icicles forming on their tempered spleen,
A two-year old cocooned in a soiled shirt,
Trembles in her father’s arms.
Refunfuño desesperado,
A mother drags her twins from the violet smoke,
Chancleta abierta y descalza de mi corazón,
Why can’t Violeta wait her legal turn to churn?
She can endure just a little more violence,
Can’t she?
Figure 4.3: Church in Las Cruces
He heard the boy scream for his momma,

A lonely carita pálida,

Among the masses of Tent City children.

The boy held up a Crayola drawing:

A half-split Nopal in the middle of the desert,

A half-buried bullet in the crackling dirt.

He cradled the boy in his arms,

“No llores m’hijo,

Dream of Cloud Cities instead,

Those borderless airlands,

Where belonging is a birthright no matter the line,

Where clouds roam free in the sky,

In the shape of transient turtles escaping from stray cats.”

The boy studied the man’s eyes as he continued,

“I was once scared of turbulent clouds too,

The ones that cast dark shadows over canyons,

The ones that echo ‘Deportees’ into the careless winds of history,

The ones that hinder the smoke from our nameless ashes to rise into the sun.”
The boy interrupted,  
“But I don’t have a passport to breathe.”  
The man held the boy closer,  
“Dream of Cloud Cities m’hijo,  
A place made of open ports for passing,  
And passing in air-ports,  
No need for useless passports with names.  
In the Cloud City, everyone breathes home,  
Lawlessly, Namelessly, Fearlessly, Shamelessly,  
And are Crimigrantes

no

More

"
Tornillo, Texas 2018

Tent City
Field Notes in Tornillo and El Paso, Texas: Joshua Rubin

Joshua Rubin sat across from me at a Tex-Mex restaurant that claimed to offer the ‘best margaritas in El Paso.’ It was a quaint place, decorated with Mexican war iconography, celebrity photographs, colorful saints, and traditional Spanish courtyard adornments. I felt surprisingly at home. The busy waiters proudly paraded their Mexico soccer team jerseys, despite the devastating loss to Brazil in the 2018 World Cup earlier that day. After ten years living as an Austinite, I eagerly ordered the Texas-sized margarita; I was aware of the commitment I was making. Joshua on the other hand, a Brooklyn-native, conservatively opted for the regular size. After watching him at a rally earlier in the day, his now calm and collected demeanor surprised me.

It was hard to imagine that Joshua, a 68-year-old Jewish man who traveled with a Mexican circus in the 1960’s, was indeed a die-hard revolutionary. His heart harbored an unfading liberal fire, that motivated him to fly into Texas the week before, get arrested for protesting, and days later, drive to Tornillo to stand outside the Tent City with a “Free Them” sign.

During our lunch, the spark in his eyes for social justice dissolved any first impressions I may have had of him as a ‘white savior.’ An avid musician, Joshua recited a song that was dear to his heart: Woody Guthrie’s lyrics to ‘Deportee (Plane Crash at Los Gatos),’ about the plane crash that killed 28 Mexican nationals and 4 crew over Los Gatos Canyon in 1948. Surrounded by the busy restaurant noise, I was overwhelmed when he sang acapella, “Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita, Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria.”
I knew then I had met a true witness in the middle of a culture war.

Figure 4.4: Joshua Rubin and Film Crew
WITNESS: TORNILLO

More than 2,300 immigrant teenagers
Are now imprisoned by the United States Government
Separated from their families
In tents in the Texas desert.

What will you do?
Come to Tornillo.

CHRISTMAS IN TORNILLO

JOIN
Josh Rubin, Don't Separate Families, Witness: Tornillo, Indivisible El Paso,
Resistance Choir of South Central Texas, Hope Border Institute and more

CHRISTMAS IN TORNILLO
December 23 - January 1
Tornillo-Guadalupe Toll Plaza, Tornillo, Texas

A Gift They Can't Block Caroling in Tornillo
Sunday, December 23, 10 AM-8 PM

Other Events/Protests in Planning Stages

Please contact Josh Rubin, 917-693-9676
@Witness:Tornillo, @Christmas in Tornillo, @A Gift They Can't Block Caroling on Facebook

"Will they get away with it? Will hiding an internment camp, some say concentration camp, for children in the
desert, out of our sight keep us from gathering forces and stop us? Or will we manage somehow to overcome our
willingness to blink at their sleight of hand?" -- Josh Rubin

Figure 4.5: Witness Tornillo
Field Notes Interview: Joshua Rubin

1) What is your full name? What is your profession/title?

Joshua Rubin. I am a partner in the company Rubin & Poor. We develop software related to the testing of blood for transfusion.

2) How do you define yourself on the political spectrum?

I am a socialist.

3) Discuss your cultural and/or ethnic background (you many decline to answer this).

I am of Eastern European Jewish heritage, second generation American.

4) Discuss your engagement in previous protests/rallies or organizing communities.

I have been active, off and on, all my life. First, with the antiwar movement, later with other organizations, off and on. Always concerned, not always extremely involved.

5) In general, what is the purpose of civil unrests? Why do you hold this opinion?

Civil unrest may fulfill a purpose, but its cause may not have a purpose. It is an expression of discontent. When things get bad enough, and it is identifiable as unfairness to a group, that group may act up. And it may get some notice, and some change may occur.

6) What motivated you to fly to Texas? Why was protesting important for you at this moment in time either personally or professionally?

One of the most difficult things in the world is trying to figure out why we do things. Mostly, we make up stories to tell ourselves and others why we did what we did once
we have done it. So I will make one up for you. I watch too much news. I am one of those old guys who watch the news, distressed by what he sees: Trump, injustice, black people getting throttled and killed by police. Then comes the insane zero tolerance at the border policy. Something in me boiled over. In my mind, I imagined others going to the border to witness, to protest. I started looking up airfares, got my wife’s approval, and set up a journey. My business partner said he could hold the fort back here. I got up early in the morning and went to the airport.

7) Describe your journey to Tornillo? Where were you before? What did you expect to find? What were your first impressions? What did you discover while there?

I first went to McAllen, then to Brownsville before going out to Tornillo. I had originally planned to be at Tornillo for an event planned for July 1, but that event had been moved up a week. I wrote to a contact out in El Paso to find out if anything would be happening when I got there, but nothing was planned. By now, I was used to showing up with my protest and my sign at places where I was a lone presence, or among a few. For Tornillo, I was with a friend, Doug Roller, and two cinematographic journalists who had joined my trip earlier, in Brownsville. We all had driven across Texas the day before. The next morning we piled into my rented car and looked for the internment camp at Tornillo. I asked some people at a stand selling food. They understood my Spanish enough to recognize that I was looking for the place where the children were being kept.

It was still confusing. We found the road to the border crossing, but still needed to look at video from the internet to recognize the place. We sort of circled the place as far as we could, but could not get around it; it butted up against the border, and the road got
too rough for a rented sedan. Back around, drove up the entrance, approached by uniformed guards. Asked them if we could go inside. No. It’s not a zoo. A security car would escort us out. Drove back out towards the road we approached from. Pulled alongside the guard’s car, he helpfully told us that federal land stopped shortly ahead and that we could do what we want out there. And so, we did. I parked on the shoulder, across from a border control plaza, we go out, I took out my sign, FREE THEM, and displayed it to passersby for a few hours in the hot sun. At some point, we realized we could see people moving around inside, and watched and filmed it. Others stopped to talk. One, a German cyclist, another, you. Many of the people in cars showed their support. Thumbs up. Friendly honk. At one point, music played inside the camp. Sounded Mexican. At another, there was a loudspeaker announcement. Couldn’t make it out. Hoped others would come, despaired after a few hours, and left.

8) Describe the events that led to your arrest. Was this the first time? How did it happen and where? What did you do while you were arrested and who did you meet?

I had been showing up at the Ursula Border Patrol facility in McAllen for a few days, with my sign. The news media was anxious for news, so I was getting interviewed a lot, local and some national coverage. Also, a few European. One morning I could not do it. McAllen was so flooded from the rainstorm, that I just could get close enough. But the following morning, I braved some deep water to get there, and took a few moments to figure out what I was seeing. There were two civilians near a pickup truck, back loaded with, among other things, a big pink teddy bear. A young man sitting on the tailgate, another, even younger, filming with his iPhone.
Surrounding them, Border Patrol agents. The truck was parked diagonally across a driveway, the same driveway that the buses full of detainees used to go in and out, prisoners in, prisoners out, to the courthouse. This facility, it was said was the place where most of the separation of children was taking place, and notoriously, children kept in cages. I crossed a small flashflood lake to get close. I heard that he was refusing to leave until he could deliver his cargo and go inside to have a look at conditions. He clearly was going to get arrested. An act of principle, and act of publicity: he was the Democratic candidate for Senate in Maine. I asked him if he wanted me to join him. He did and invited me to sit next to him on the tailgate. It was not long before we were searched, pockets emptied, manacled by McAllen police, and led to a car to be transported to jail.

Fingerprinted, held in a cell with others, then another cell at Hidalgo County jail. Shackled, searched again and again, retinal scanned. Got to speak more than I had spoken in years. Finally, maybe, suffering enough. Cold, they keep it cold. Sharing space with a coyote, a gangbanger, a terrified DACA boy, a family of Gypsies expecting deportation. And a succession of drunks in various stages of sleeping it off.

Lots of talking. I interpreted for Zach (Ringelstein). My poor Spanish, but in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is the translator. We all exchanged stories of what brought us to that cell. We talked legal strategy, more important for those facing years. Zach and I face 6 months, we later learned. The DACA kid had a panic attack. I walked him round the cell. The gangbanger, kind of bipolar, ranted, rapped, very charismatic, then occasionally sat and put his head in his lap. Hours passed. People were. Brought in, brought out. They skipped Zach and me for the afternoon.
arraignment. We later learned they were looking to find more serious charges to tack on. More than just criminal trespass. The final hours at McAllen jail playing 3-way catch with a ball of crumpled tinfoil, Zach, Carlos, the tattooed rapper, and me. Counting up how many before someone missed. Zach wondering where the hell is outside support was. I heard that my wife had been calling. Then the arraignment. For us, personal recognizance, no bail needed. Carlos happy about prospect of 2 years. Not released though. Transport to Hildalgo County for “processing.” Takes 6 to 7 hours. Separated. Put in a drunk tank. Cold, overcrowded. Open toilet. No place to sit. Released 20 hours after arrest. Called a cab. Car was impounded.

9) After this trip, what did you discover about any of the following: separation of families, immigration policies in our country, mental health in our country, the purpose of protesting, journalistic integrity, volunteerism, and community service?

What have I learned? That we act when it is intolerable not to act. That it’s a long struggle. That I left too soon, because I feel like my heart is still there, and it is breaking. That the people on the border have been alone too long.
Figure 4.6: Crossing to Juarez
Figure 4.7: Crossing Over to El Paso
Figure 4.8: Tornillo Tent City
Tornillo Torcido

On a desolate stretch of interstate highway, about 30 minutes from the city of El Paso, an unmarked white charter bus slows down as it approaches the dark-green exit sign for the serene town of Tornillo. The silence is measurable; if one listens long enough, even the sun rays chime in your ear with a wind song chorus. A sidewalk-less, two-lane street opens the town, leading to a fire station that is across the street from a gloomy dirt softball field within a fenceless park. Behind the tinted windows inside the bus, Jorge imagines the sound of invisible children playing in that field; shapeless clouds of dust form a trail behind the children as they run past home base, without heavy grilletes tracking every one of their movements.

The bus enters a stretch of residential areas. Old used tires, sheets of metal, plastic bags, rusty car parts, a dirty rag doll; all encompass the cluttered front yard aesthetic of the quaint concrete and adobe homes. The city’s gray water tower overlooks the tattered rooftops. Josue reads the word “Tornillo” printed in big letters. The name reminds him of Cerro de los Tornillos in Honduras, where he once pointed at the spiraled petrified snails before his younger brother Carlos nearly stepped on them during a family trip.

The bus halts at a railroad crossing. Most of the eighteen teenage boys inside the bus remain indifferent, but a few skittishly peek out of their seats into the aisle. The boys are almost indistinguishable in their baggy khaki pants, except for the limited color assortment among their oversized shirts. On this day Josue wears his least favorite color: orange. From the windshield, he can see a trapped empty Coke bottle inside a tumbleweed rattling across the railroad tracks, rolling toward the city’s downtown up ahead. The droning sound of the bus motor suddenly disappears in the crescendo of freight train machinery that approaches.
The train rolls like boisterous thunder. Josue recalls riding on top of La Bestia during his first attempt to cross la frontera. That was two years ago; he was now fifteen. But he could still feel the numbing prickles of air on his face, the hunger pains, the purifying cold drops of rain that cleansed his sins from the treacherous journey he didn’t disclose to even his own mother, and the relief of hanging his bleeding toes over the edge. Lingering in the beehive of Josue’s memory, were the trusting eyes of that Man who satiated his desperate hunger with a can of birra, and then waited. He waited for Josue to be alone, asleep, away from all the other boys.

“Catracho, sos torcido,” he jokingly nudged him before finally pinning him down. Even after all this time, Josue’s upper thighs were still tender from the Man’s brute force. Josue vowed never to speak of that Man again. To anyone.

The yellow-red boxcars swipe by in the direction of the mountainous horizon. The bus is clear to move again, and the soothing vibrations of the motor relieve the restlessness in the boys. Just as Josue loses himself in the greenery of Pecan trees out his window, the bus slows down near a bridge checkpoint. Josue surveys several men at the gates, dressed in green border patrol uniforms, hands on their holsters, squinting their eyes trying to catch a glimpse of the boys inside passing bus. This time, they aren’t pointing blinding flashlights in their eyes nor asking questions in a language Josue didn’t understand. Josue recalls their confusing questions:

*Paypers? Yu travelin alon?*

Instead of crossing the bridge, the bus turns left and enters an area with several circus-sized beige tents. The pistons on the bus door release the air pressure, and the boys are instructed to form a uniform line as they exit. After traveling in the air-conditioned bus, Josue feels the thickness of the desert air consume his lungs once outside. A chain link fence surrounds them, and just beyond that, unnaturally tall dirt hills. Even if Josue wanted to plan a
swift escape back to the shelter of his bus seat, surveillance cameras were monitoring his moves from all possible vantage points.

Josue peers directly at the clear blue sky; hungry vultures survey an appealing carcass sizzling on a hot pavement nearby. Trapped within the inescapable jail of mid-day sun, vultures can’t get enough of the view below. Clandestine migrant children or dead carcasses; vultures don’t know the difference. Vultures understand instinctively that tracing circles before catching prey is an indispensable way of life in the desert.

Josue’s grumbling stomach makes it challenging for him to stand in line with the other boys. But he knows it is not meal time yet. A robust woman with a clipboard indicates his tent assignment. Once inside, Josue lays down on the neatly tucked bunk bed, staring at the bottom of the mattress above, and envisions his next attempt to cross. Maybe the third time will be different. Maybe, just maybe, he won’t be torcido after all.
Figure 4.10: Tornillo Tent City
Figure 4.11: Tornillo Tent City
Figure 4.12: Tornillo Tent City
El Paso, Texas 2019

I.C.E. Drop Offs

Annunciation House
Figure 4.13: Asylum Seeker Intake
Figure 4.14: Central American Children
Figure 4.15: Migrant Intake El Paso
Figure 4.17: Migrant Intake
Figure 4.18: Emergency Blanket

EMERGENCY BLANKET

Retains up to 90% of body heat in cold climates
Reflective surface provides high visibility & cooling
Waterproof and windproof

Made of durable, insulating Mylar-type material
Reusable
Size: 52" x 84"

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Figure 4.19: Greyhound Bus Tickets
My Facebook Posts

December 22, 2016  
El Paso, Texas

Holding a trembling 2-year-old from Honduras in my arms and knowing her fragile body spent 4 days in "La Hielera" with her father, has re-affirmed why the fight for migrant children must continue. Those little brown ojitos committed no crime. We have a human crisis on the border, not an invasion. I don't care what political affiliation you align yourself with: If you're looking for a reason to ALWAYS be right, fight for migrant children NOW.

December 25th, 2018  
El Paso, Texas

Coordinating sponsors for asylum seekers related by I.C.E. At a hotel, translating for asylum seekers recently released from detention centers. A Mayan 3-year-old put baby oil in her long black hair all by herself, sat in front of me and let me comb it. The room smelled like a rotting wound, muddy rainwater, from their 9 days in the same wet clothes. But her smile on Christmas…PRICELESS.

December 26th, 2018  
El Paso, Texas

Drove a Guatemalan father and son Greyhound station from the hotel. The father earned $7 a week harvesting coffee in Guatemala. His son, 15 (the height of a 10 year old), didn't speak Spanish and sat in the back seat. We stop at CVS, because they are both sick with a cold, but also get some chocolates for the long bus ride to Ohio. He teaches me to say "have a great journey" in Mam. At the Greyhound station, we find out his sponsor in North Carolina accidently bought the ticket departing from a different city and will have to re-purchase a new ticket. So we will try again tomorrow.
Round Rock, Texas

Asylum Seeker Sponsorship, 2019
Una Alondra Canta (A Lark Sings)

Facebook Post

The public post on Facebook originated from a California lawyer named Helen. She sought a Spanish-speaker who could visit Nicaraguan asylum seekers in a detention center near San Antonio and Taylor, Texas.

It was a Thursday morning. I scrubbed through the sea of posts on my feed before the daily grind, before the loud school bell, and before the teenage angst overwhelmed my classroom. I only read two words from Helen’s post: Nicaraguan and asylum. Without ever meeting her in person, nor having her as a Facebook friend, I inquired about the visitation process in a private message. Helen replied right away with her cell phone number and we exchanged email address. She sent me a list of A-numbers for each of the detainees, the address to each detention center, and their full names.

I took a personal day at work to visit the first detainees Helen listed: Leylling (26) and her younger sister Alondra (23) in a detention center in Taylor. They were a short drive away, only thirty minutes away from where I lived. The name Alondra stood out to me, because being a naturalized immigrant from Nicaragua, I couldn’t help but to recall Ruben Dario’s poem “A Margarita Debyalé.”
Yo siento

en el alma una alondra cantar;

tu acento:

Margarita, te voy a contar un cuento.

Taylor, Texas

The T. Don Hutto Residential Center is built across rusty railroad tracks. The freight train usually stops for an unexpected number of hours, detained overnight with all its cargo in full view. On the other side of the tracks, there is a beaten-down sign with an alternate route for cars in case the train blocks the way. Behind the maroon concrete building of the residential center, there is an enclosed field with the greenest grass; greener than any of the cluttered front lawns of disheveled homes facing the north side of the detention center building.

Several unmarked white SUV’s and Chevy passenger vans are parked together in the corner of the parking lot, while other cars are likely from shift workers. A white SUV patrols the perimeter, circling the building a few times in an hour. The only cameras allowed on the property are the ones documenting every person who enters and exists the buildings.

When I parked my black Nissan Rogue, I wrote down the A number for Leylling and Alondra on the back of an old HEB receipt and only took my driver’s license with me. The website had stated no cell phones were allowed, so I left it in the car.

When I entered the building, a few things stood out: the front door had tinted glass, while inside, there was a tall front desk, chairs, a body scanner and a conveyer belt with an x-ray
machine. The smell was overwhelming, as if someone had re-mopped the floor with filthy sewage water. I went up to the young woman behind the desk who looked like a college student behind a fast-food counter, and I gave her the A numbers for the two women as if giving her my order. She asked me to fill out the form on a clipboard where I stated that I was a ‘family friend’ despite not ever meeting Alondra nor Leylling. She instructed me that I could only touch the detainees at the beginning and at the end of the visit.

I put my jacket and car keys in a black plastic bin for scanning. The young woman returned my belongings, stamped my left hand with an invisible circular stamp, and shined a florescent light to check it. I waited to be escorted to a small visiting room with green plastic chairs and small green couches made of some sort of cleanable squishy foam material.

When Leylling and Alondra entered the visiting area, I gave each of them a hug. I could only imagine their treacherous journey from Managua in that humid heat, through Mexico, and finally to the U.S.- Mexico border. Their feet were too big for their crocs; their bodies, too small for their saggy sweatpants, and the necks from their plain color t-shirts were stretched. I bought each of them a coke from a vending machine nearby. Without knowing me, they could only smile back in gratitude.

We talked for almost two hours. I listened closely to Alondra recount their four-month trek to Eagle Pass. The familiarity of her Nicaraguan accent filled my heart; it was like being home again. Leylling talked about her fear of political persecution after she protested during several marches. “They knew where we lived and worked,” Leylling recounted. “We still don’t know where some of our friends who protested with us were taken,” she continued. While listening to her sister Leylling, Alondra’s slight smile disappeared; she expressed how helpless
she felt being separated from her husband Yunior, who was placed in some detention center in San Antonio for male detainees. Her brother Yilber was there as well. All four had travelled together to Eagle Pass, but they were now separated without contact for over three weeks. “Why did they separate us if we’re all from the same family?” she reproached. I had no soothing answers for them, except to promise I would do everything possible to get them out. At the end of the visit, Alondra was tearfully thankful. I jokingly told both we would celebrate their release over Gallopinto con tajadas, as if we were eating outside a fritanga back home.

Round Rock, Texas

The next day, I texted Helen to ask about the sponsorship process for Leylling and Alondra. I faxed a notarized letter of support, a water bill, and a copy of my driver’s license and passport to Leylling’s case manager. I did the same for Alondra. Neither of them had a criminal history nor prior deportations, so I was hopeful. I waited for any news.

Taylor, Texas

11:59pm: Three days after sending the notarized documents to Leylling’s case manager, I received a call from Leylling’s case manager that she would be released that same night. I got in my car and drove to Taylor, but before going inside the building I checked my horoscope in the car. Capricorn: “Free your mind and consider alternative options. This is a time to throw away the old and make room for the new. The more idealistic in your approach to people and situations, the better off you will be.” I prepared myself for the stench in the lobby and made room in my car for Leylling.
6:37pm: The next day, I got a call that Alondra would be released. Leylling hid in the backseat of my Rogue, because she feared that she could have been recorded embracing her sister as she came out. When Alondra existed the building, I saw Leylling’s smile across her face: simply priceless. The three of us celebrated by going to HEB to buy green plantains, beans, cheese, and rice. We cooked gallopano con tajadas, as promised. Over dinner, I looked over the documents they were given: I advised them to start the asylum application process as soon as possible because the deadline was within a year. I was astonished by the fact that ICE took away their passports and birth certificates. Their only form of identification was that flimsy piece of white paper with an A-number. I told them I would be visiting Yunior, Alondra’s husband the next weekend. Alondra smiled.

Pearsall, Texas

A prison. That was my immediate impression when I first parked outside the South Texas Detention Complex. Unlike the residential center in Taylor where Leylling and Alondra had been detained, there was barbwire on top of the fences, cameras on high posts in the exterior, and the parking lot was divided into sections. I parked in the visitor parking area where the spots were not wide enough for my Rogue. Like before, I wrote the A-numbers for Yunior and Yilber on a piece of paper and left my phone in the car. While walking toward the entrance of the building, I could hear men playing basketball inside. If this was a prison, at least the men had some physical activities scheduled.

The front desk was drastically different from the last detention center. The putrid smell was gone. The woman behind the desk had her hair styled in a beehive and fake nails that sounded like raindrops on the keyboard as she searched for Yunior and Yilber in the computer
system. She said Yilber had been transferred to another detention center a few days prior but could not reveal where. I was furious but didn’t want to sabotage my chances to see Yunior that day, who was still located in that detention center. The unapologetic woman reluctantly advised me to search for Yilber on the ICE website and then told me to sit in the waiting area. I showed her my identification and went through security.

While in the waiting area, I was intrigued by the names printed on the khaki uniforms of the workers who clocked in nearby: Pena, Rodriguez, Hinajosa, Perez. The majority of the workers were heavyset; hard to imagine they could still outrun anyone in their army boots. I thought about the dramatic irony of it all: the detention center was managed and maintained by workers who had similar last names as the detainees inside.

I waited almost an hour to see Yunior, when I was finally called to enter a long hallway of individual cubicles with chairs that faced Plexiglas windows. Unlike the other detention center, where I could be face-to-face with the women, this place separated the detainees with physical barriers. I had never met Yunior, but I deduced he was the only one without anyone sitting across from him. He didn’t recognize me because he didn’t know me, but his smile revealed that he was elated to see anyone. Like a prisoner, he wore blue scrubs to distinguish him from the other criminals in orange. I picked up to phone to speak to him: he didn’t know what city he was in, and had no idea the whereabouts of his wife Alondra and her sister Leylling. I told him that they were safely at home with me. He let out a sigh of relief, and I knew I had to help him get out.

I asked him about their journey. Unlike the women, he revealed that him and Yilber had spent two days in the ‘hielera’ before arriving at the detention center. Once there, they were
separated into different cells where they had no contact with each other. He had a suspicion that Yilber was moved without notice, and I confirmed this information from what I was told at the front desk. He had no money in his commissary and that is why he had not contacted anyone. As I listened to him recount the experience of being detained, I heard the pain in his voice. Before I left, I told him I would deposit money in his commissary account and I asked him to write down my cell phone number. That is when I discovered that he didn’t know how to read nor write. So he asked a female guard nearby for a piece of paper and she wrote down my number for him.

**Today**

I remain Leylling and Alondra’s sponsor. To make them more comfortable, I made a public post last week on Facebook, searching for gently used mattresses and clothing. I can tell that at home, Leylling and Alondra are anxious: getting Yunior and Yilber out of their respective detention centers has been more challenging. Yunior’s case is still pending in Pearsall, Texas. Any day we could get a call that he has been released. After weeks of research, several phone calls back and forth, and waiting around for answers, we finally tracked Yilber to a detention center in Tallahatchie, Mississippi. According to Helen, the lawyer from California who made the original post on Facebook, this is one of the worst detention centers in the country. We have not heard from Yilber in over two weeks because the place is currently quarantined; apparently when one person gets sick, no one comes in or out. All we can do now, is wait.
Figure 4.20: Outside Detention Center
He Sees Her Blue

The horseshoe crab reluctantly swam in her dreams that night. He evaded a multitude of suicidal crabs heading straight into the lethal seaweed floating in Lake Nicaragua. He wondered why he found himself in a freshwater lake unfamiliar to his species. He was accustomed to the unpredictable waters of the mid-Atlantic; New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware. Or perhaps the Gulf of Mexico, where his prehistoric lineage fossilized on the Florida shores before the dinosaurs arrived. But this was her dream, after all.

There were no sharks that night because the natives ate them all. But that lake, that dream-lake, was too calm for the mating demand of the full moon. He was a living fossil, smaller than other males, but with immense feminine intuition. As he crossed the foreign waters which even the Spaniards mistook for an ocean, he swung his sharp tail from side to side, slashing the legs of drowning migrants trying to reach a dream-shore. They were fools to think they were close to any American soil swimming in the depths of Lake Nicaragua, he thought. They drowned their sorrows, hemorrhaging iron-red like humans usually do. All, except for One. A heavenly figure swimming alone among the frantic human masses. Her legs were slashed from the horseshoe tails, leaving trails of copper-blue blood in the water.

Her blueness told him she was of a different feminine variety: he had finally found the ten-eyed arthropod-Mother that he worshiped in his own dreams.

Streams of blue flowed out of the wounds of the arthropod-Mother as she swam toward him, but she did not meet his gaze. For if she had, she would have noticed they both bled blue-copper. He yearned to touch her with his shelled secrets as she swam by, but he
knew she would retract in fear. If she only knew how clumsy he was when the morning waves overturned his exoskeleton in the sand, leaving his sensitive legs exposed to the sunlight!

All he could do in that fleeting dream-moment was to watch as the hard-shelled migrant, arthropod-Mother, reached her dream-shore without realizing all the potential blue fertility she left behind in the water; remnants of her divine femininity tangled in seaweed.
Brownsville, Texas
Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico

M.P.P. Refugee Interment Camp
2018-2019
My Facebook Posts

October 20th, 2018
MPP Camp, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico

“We’re from El Salvador. I was kidnapped with my son while in a taxi trying to make it to the MPP camp in Matamoros to seek asylum. My husband paid $4000 for me to be freed. But before the guy let me go, he tried to rape me in front on my son. Now we’ve been waiting for 8 months in the camp.”

October 20th, 2018
MPP Camp, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico

“I cannot go back to Nicaragua. They attempted to kill me twice already. I have all the evidence with me, yet I’ve been here almost 10 months in the MPP camp. They just keep re-scheduling my court date and tell us to wait.”

July, 2019

MPP Camp, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico

“The camp now has a fence around it. Surrounded by military and police. Officially an internment camp”
Figure 4.22: MPP Camp
Figure 4.23: MPP Camp
Figure 4.22: MPP Camp
Figure 4.26: MPP Camp
Fifteen Meters From Brownsvil

Yaritza was sure that her quinceañera would become an international headline. While getting dressed in her green-dome tent on the day of the party, she could hear the impatient American journalists rustling around like vultures: they clicked their cameras, spoke in English on their cell phones, and cued their digital voice recorders. By that afternoon, most newspapers on both sides of the Matamoros-Brownsville border had been notified about the quinceañera preparations in the internment camp under the Gateway International Bridge.

After living in the camp for eight months with her mother Mirna, Yaritza had developed a Spidey sense for journalists who combed the campgrounds for harrowing stories. She was most apprehensive about the local Mexican reporters. They habitually disclosed full names without consent and fueled the hysteria around potential Central American ‘riots’ at the bridge. If her name or her photograph was published anywhere, she calculated it would only take a few days before someone back home in Nicaragua could determine her whereabouts. On the day of her quinceañera, the last thing Yaritza wanted was to put herself and her mother Mirna at more risk. Their anonymity was all they had.

As the booming noises outside her tent josseled her, Yaritza tugged at the door entrance and interior mesh screen zippers. Thankfully, they were tightly sealed shut. Inside the torrid enclosure, she tamed her long black hair into a bun to prevent further overheating, and tilted her face up toward the only ventilation coming from beneath the rain fly. Her embroidered pink quinceañera dress hung freely in the middle from the intersecting poles of the tent roof. Any other young woman on the edge of fifteen would have cherished the ceremonious gown. But in
that moment, Yaritza’s dress weighed heavy on the entire tent structure as well as on her heart; she regretted nagging her mother to organize a quinceañera under these circumstances.

For as long as she could remember, Yaritza long-anticipated her grand entrance into womanhood. Now she dreaded such life threatening notoriety. She wished her ‘coming of age’ celebration remained as clandestine as when they crossed the trenches between the Guatemala-Mexico border on their way to the United States. It was no Darién gap between Panama and Colombia, but she could still taste the dry sand in her mouth while crawling on the ground at night. All she wanted now, was to stay within the safety of her dome asylum.

A few tents from Yaritza, near the Rio Grande ravine, her mother Mirna joined a group of women around a half-painted table constructed out of wood planks nailed between two cedar trees. The various ingredients for the traditional savory quinceañera party dish *arroz a la valenciana* were divided across the table inside plastic bowls: sliced boiled hotdogs, fried white rice, cubed carrots, chopped onions, boiled chicken meat, and ketchup.

La Catracha, a venerable woman with coarse gray hair and papier-mâché-cinnamon-skin, delegated tasks to the other women with subtle, but discernible nods. Without flinching her calloused fingertips, she shredded the scalding-hot chicken meat into a blue plastic strainer. That day, La Catracha was deeply lost in the catacombs of her memories. More and more, she found it difficult to come back from that deep headspace, even as she prepared the dishes for Yaritza’s quinceañera.

Mirna quietly joined the assembly line, and carefully arranged the sliced Bimbo bread into an aluminum tray, occasionally swatting the swarms of flies away with a wet rag. Three women ignited the fire inside the repurposed inner tube of a washing machine turned wood-burning-stove. One woman crumbled outdated newspapers into paper balls, a second woman
threw in a plastic grocery bag on top of dry scavenged twigs, and another blew the rising smoke with the top of a cardboard shoe box. They kept a bucket of dingy river water nearby, to tame the possibility of unruly fires.

La Catracha was somewhat of a culinary sensation among the refugees. A year prior, she had arrived with the first Central American caravan and slept on the sweltering pavement on the Mexican side of the Gateway International Bridge. That was before volunteer organizations from Brownsville crossed with donations into Matamoros: they brought tarps, foldable camping chairs, air mattresses, food provisions, and tents. She was also among the first settlers to be relocated away from public view to the other side of the concrete wall by Mexican officials and told to remain in the dirt field adjacent to the Rio Grande river. On this exposed patch of sunburned soil, she constructed her first canopy shelter out of commercial rice bags and fallen tree branches. A few days later the structure was swept away by mudslides triggered by unpredictable torrential rains. Soon, she rebuilt and extended a section of her shelter into a welcoming restaurant-like area that had foldable chairs around a grill on top of cinder blocks. As one of the first unofficial businesses in the camp, she charged a mere 20 pesos for a hot plate of rice and beans.

Unlike those who willingly compared journeys and shared reasons for seeking asylum, La Catracha never disclosed her cryptic past in Honduras. Few knew her legal name, Celia, and she preferred the anonymity of her nickname. She never bathed in the river either, like many who ritually submerged themselves to cool off during the afternoon heat and to wash away their daily sins. Occasionally on starless nights, when she couldn’t bear her recurring hopelessness, she had the impulse to jump in and attempt to cross. But she could never fully trust a body of water that swallowed human desperation.
Rumors spread about the circular, bullet-sized scars that perforated the upper and lower part of La Catracha’s right arm. Among the Hondurans, her ‘healed bullet wounds’ resonated with folktales about the origins for mouth-watering street food like *baleadas*. On a weekly basis, La Catracha cooked *riz* with a side of fried plantains for Hatians, and fried pork for the Cuban doctors who worked in the mobile medical unit. The Cubans lovingly nicknamed her ‘Celia Cruz, the Guaracha of the kitchen.’ For most refugees, La Catracha’s cooking was the silver lining in their darkest hour.

Mirna however, was doubtful. In her opinion, La Catracha lacked loyalty to her own kind. Her opinion was substantiated when La Catracha reassembled her new tent in a location to share a common area under a black tarp with deported Mexican nationals from Chiapas. Mirna believed that any Central American exile who was associated with displaced Mexicans, could not be fully trusted.

According to Mirna, despite diverse nationalities, there were only two types of people at the camp: those who were thrown out from the American side, and those trying to get in. She discerned this palpable distinction based on deportation status. She suspected La Catracha hid her deportee status and this explained why she maintained alliances in both ‘camps.’ She probably felt ashamed and made the best of her time in the camp because she had nowhere else to go. But that was only speculation.

Other incidents contributed to Mirna’s unfavorable opinion of the camp’s chef. The week before Yaritza’ quinceañera, Mirna left a brand new bottle of Pert Plus in the women’s shower. When she went back to retrieve the bottle, it was gone. While washing clothes in the communal lavandero the next day, Mirna got a sudden whiff of Pert Plus shampoo. When she peeked over people’s shoulders, she caught La Catracha pouring the rest of the shampoo onto her
wet clothes. Mirna fought her anger in that moment. In a finders-keepers kind of world, where alliances determined survival, she kept quiet, and chose to dismiss La Catracha as a cold-hearted and dishonest thief.

When La Catracha volunteered to prepare the arroz a la valenciana for Yaritza’s quinceañera, and donated what appeared to be the last of her savings to pay for Yaritza’s gown and party decorations, Mirna hesitated. It caught her by surprise. She wasn’t inclined to entrust such a significant endeavor to an unreliable person like La Catracha. But it was Yaritza’s big day and there was no way Mirna could have managed alone. So, she reluctantly accepted La Catracha’s help.

On the day of the quinceañera, Mirna kept her eye on La Catracha as she delivered on her promise. La Catracha went the extra mile to organize the food preparation among the women and to deliver an appetizing grand culinary opus. Mirna was grateful for the insurmountable energy that La Catracha gave to the success of her daughter’s quinceañera. As a result, Mirna accepted the effort as an apologetic gesture for snatching the Pert Plus bottle. And for Yaritza’s sake, Mirna let bygones be bygones that day.

The anticipation around Yaritza’s grand exit from her tent spread like wildfire around the campgrounds. The stage was set for her public reveal: flocks of neighbors planted their folding chairs outside, joining the growing masses of eager reporters trying to catch a glimpse of the quinceañera. Groups of children claimed new play areas by kicking a deflated muddy soccer ball back and forth to get closer. Opportunistic stray dogs weaved in and out of the crowds scavenging scraps.

Rafa, a charming Salvadorian teen with features like the popular Boricua pop-singer Chayanne, was the Chambelan of Honor. He guarded the double-sealed entrance to Yaritza’s tent
waiting to escort her to the white canopy where the party was being held. He wore a gray suit he found in the abandoned tent belongings of a fellow Chapin. This unfortunate soul took his chances crossing the river rather than waiting for the results of his asylum case. Yaritza and Rafa were the same age, but he arrived in the camp without any other family members. For Rafa, living in solitude among the refugees was better than trying to evade extortion from the maras back home.

Several reporters approached Rafa for an interview: *What was the name of the quinceañera? Did he know the quinceañera? What country was she from? Was he the quinceañera's boyfriend?* But Rafa didn’t budge. Mirna’s strict instructions to avoid journalists would not allow it. However, he secretly wanted to respond ‘yes’ to the boyfriend question, even though he never could reveal his feelings to Yaritza. He imagined the celebration would be the ideal opportunity to make his move, perhaps while dancing. But after observing the chaos surrounding Yaritza’s tent, he decided against it.

To distract himself from the commotion, Rafa practiced his English. He counted numbers and repeated colors in his mind. He read the media credentials on the lanyards of journalists, “Nu Yor Taims” and “Wuachinton Post.” He listened to the conversations of journalists, catching every other word. Just a few more lessons on the Internet and he would soon speak English, he thought. He knew exactly what he would do if he was ever granted asylum: he would find construction work in “Bronsvil,” the town on the other side of the Rio Grande River, save money, and finish school. All he needed was a chance. He wanted to do things the right way, and not risk his life. He had heard rumors from the other men that the river was a mere ‘15 meters wide,’ but the white crosses planted on the side of the river in remembrance of those who
drowned, did nothing to encourage him. The true distance to Bronsvil, especially at swimming at nightfall, was not 15 meters, but an aimless infinity.

Mirna rushed back from the cooking area like a lighting bolt and interrupted Rafa’s daydreaming. She was immediately overwhelmed by the unusual crowds around the tent. Rafa persuaded the journalists to step back while Mirna entered the tent. She undid both zippers to the entrance, startling Yaritza as she braided her own silky black hair.

“¡Idiay! ¡Apurate!” Mirna commanded Yaritza to hurry.

Yaritza pulled out a pink Hello Kitty cosmetic bag from her backpack and sat on the air mattress that they both shared. Mirna patted Yaritza’s face with a towel to wipe the sweat before she could plaster the sticky foundation and eyeshadow. Despite Mirna’s slight annoyance, Yaritza welcomed the momentary calmness she felt from having her mother beside her.

The increasing body heat and little ventilation quickly transformed the tent into a scorching sauna. It was a team effort to slide the quinceañera dress past Yaritza’s sweaty thighs. But when she finally zipped up the dress, she completed her look with a pair of glittering earrings, a red rose entangled on the right side of her braided hair, and a brand-new pair of white heels. Mirna could not contain tears of joy at the sight of the radiant young woman she had raised. Yaritza smiled back, taking in and cherishing the fleeting normalcy of her mother-daughter moment. The time to celebrate had arrived, even if it would be temporary. The media vultures would not ruin the special day for either of them.

Mirna stepped out of the tent first, followed by a lovely Yaritza. The mesmerized crowd went silent for a few seconds. But then, the first camera click went off, and then a second, and a third, followed by a cascade of interrogating voices. While she endured the spotlight, Yaritza
ignored them all. This was her Cinderella moment, and nothing could take that away. Not even the looming threat of a published photograph.

Yaritza studied the many faces in the crowd as if they were moving in slow motion: children laughed while blowing bubbles into thin air, groups of women gossiped, men gawked behind their tents, and reporters pried. La Catracha strolled in the back, surrounded by her own entourage of female sous-chefs, and what appeared to be a usual swarm of crows circling in the sky above her. La Catracha gave Yaritza a farewell nod, making her feel uncomfortably sanctified. Before she could wave back, La Catracha swiftly blended into the crowd.

Out of the corner of her eye, Yaritza honed in on a Mexican guard observing the commotion like a hawk. He wore khaki military attire, a combat helmet, and his rifle was strapped across his chest. The daily walk-throughs from Mexican police were commonplace, but the idea that her quinceañera party was a threat to national security, made Yartiza chuckle on the inside.

Rafa stood near Yaritza and extended his arm. Her beaming smile darted straight to his heart. Leading the parade together, they walked down an uneven dirt path as people joined in the procession toward the white canopy for the night’s festivities. Mirna trailed behind, untangling the bottom of the quinceañera gown to prevent any dirt stains. As they strolled down the dusty alleyways, the swarm of journalists aggressively procured photographs of Yaritza. Mirna wished she still had that torn wet rag to swat them away.

By the time they reached the entrance to the gala, Yaritza, Rafa, and Mirna could barely move as the crowds massed around them. Thankfully, at the entrance door, there was a handwritten sign that read: no photos allowed. Journalists and photographers alike were held back. As Yaritza walked into the gala and left the crowd behind, she noticed the same crows that had
followed La Catracha earlier, settle in military line-formation on the tree branches above. They surveyed the area, as if searching for souls.

When the party ended, Yaritza couldn’t sleep. She expected to feel different at fifteen, more grown up perhaps. *Hecha mujer.* A real woman. But despite the savory banquet, the decadent canopy decor, and dancing with the handsome Rafa all night, nothing had changed. Her entrance into womanhood had been as bland as the *arroz a la valenciana* that night. The more she thought about it, it was unusual for La Catracha to leave a meal unflavored. But perhaps her mind had been elsewhere that day.

Close to midnight, she strolled down the ravine of the Rio Grande to absorb the purifying calmness of the water. She glared at the night’s sky searching for answers, perhaps looking for her newfound womanhood, but it was empty of stars. Dejected, she closed her eyes, only to be grounded back to the familiarity of the internment camp at night: Christian music in Spanish on the radio, the cries of children refusing to go to sleep, cigarette smoke in the air, the crackle-pops from burning trash, and the indiscernible whispers of intimate conversations in the distance. When she opened her eyes, she contemplated the line of cars waiting to cross the Gateway International Bridge into the U.S.

In the turbid water under the bridge, she saw a floating silhouette. It was La Catracha, naked, with her gray hair floating untied, willingly submerging herself several times into the water. Yaritza gasped for air, but she didn’t call for help. La Catracha submerged herself one last time, and never resurfaced. Bystanders dove into the water in an unsuccessful search for La Catracha. But the water had embraced La Catracha’s body. Yaritza realized that her quinceañera was not a becoming after all, but a release of everything that she had become.
Figure 4.28: Quinceanera at the MPP Camp
Inmigrante Rise

When I grow up,
I want to be an immigrant,
I want to be displaced,
I want uncertainty,
To slap me in the face.

I want to feel indignant,
From the futility of civil rights,
That will never be served on my plate,
When I sit at your dinner table.

I want to leave my family behind,
I want to be told to go back
To where I’m really from,
But know that in my heart,
Where I stand firmly before you,
Is the only place where I belong.

For now.

I want to be deported,
After 40 years in America,
Take my empty suitcase,
So when I arrive in Palestine,
I can fill it,
With the concrete rubble,
Of distant memories,
That are no longer mine.

Inmigrante rise,
Above all words,
Above this time,
Above this space.
Above all else.

You are not a heretic,
Of the political machine,
Speak your past and write your future,
Mold your tired wrinkles,
Into ancestral warrior faces,

And fight on.

Aztec-Mayaztec,
Nahuatl radiowaves in Mesoamerica,
Miskito-mito with a Quechuan blaze,

My refugee Haitian Queen:

Let our African Sovereignty,

Boil in our veins,

Show the world we are timeless

In this transitory space.

Take your color back,

Before they paint border walls,

With it.

Reclaim the human race,

Our only home.

Inmigrante rise,

Above all words,

Above this time,

Above this space.

Above all else.

Neplanta se planta.

Now.
Leave this page blank.
New memories will be written,
Desde el centro.
References


Vita

Born and raised in Nicaragua, Tania Romero (M.A., M.Phil), is an award-winning filmmaker, published writer/poet, and digital media instructor. Her film credits and awards include editor for the SXSW feature documentary “Ya Basta” (2007), about the waves of kidnappings in Mexico City. Tania continues to passionately work as a director, cinematographer, producer, and editor. She directed the documentary “Helmets from Heath”(2013), which won Judge’s Choice at Faces of Austin and her short documentary “Even with their nails: Women Filmmakers of Nicaragua” (2016) was an official selection at various international festivals, including the 69th Cannes Short Film Corner, Habana Film Festival (Cuba). The documentary won an Icaro Award for Best Documentary Short at the Icaro Film Festival in Guatemala and Best International Short Documentary at the Official Latino Film Festival. She was also the editor for the short documentary film, “Swim for the Reef” (2016) which raised environmental awareness about coral reefs and this film was also an official selection at Cannes.

As a bilingual writer, she has published her work in several journals including Sin Fronteras, Somos En Escrito, Art Cultural (Brazil), Label Me Latino/a, and the Rio Grande Review. Her poetry and prose book, #MeToo and Poems That Survived (Flor y Canto Press) is a testament to individual healing through participatory 'art-ivism' and aims to inspire other victims of violence to voice their silence. Tania is a world traveler, multilingual artist, on a mission to empower the voices of BIPOC communities with her work. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Communication Department at Villanova University.

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