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A WRITER IN WRITING

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Thank you to my mom for seeing the writer in me,
and thank you to my director for seeing me in my writing.

A WRITER IN WRITING

by

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THESIS

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Preface:
The writer and their voice

Throughout my project, I refer to myself as an outsider. I use it synonymous with my name, illustrating the lack of ownership I had towards my life during my childhood and adolescence. These periods caused many hardships for me. On one hand, I was going through transformative stages, maturing outside and inside out. On the other side, I was suffering from ongoing trauma, confusing my child self and disrupting my healthy development. As a result, I was stuck in a period of uncertainty, not a step in or out but standing still, watching everything around me except myself. The outsider is this kind of person—powerless, confused, and alienated.

When I began my master’s program, I entered as an outsider, still getting to know myself. Coincidentally, it was during the peak of COVID-19 and during the recovery from a severe depression that occurred the year prior. Being in quarantine, I took this time to finally sit down and address my issues. However, as it was a period of great uncertainty and I was addressing the many uncertainties in my life, I was overwhelmed by the instability of everything. Struggling with my recovery and my studies was like dealing with two toddlers on each arm squirming around and throwing a fit. I needed something to hold onto, something to express myself, and my writing was ultimately a grade, due faster than I asked my existential questions.

To meet personal and academic needs, getting to know myself overlapped with formalizing my writing. I practiced and experimented with my writing to grasp myself, and, at the same time, that bettered my work. Nevertheless, it wasn’t always a direct and smooth process. I had to assess outer influences, such as my professors’ needs, my audience, and the impact of my subject. What that had to do with me exactly, though, was as unclear as the direction I was taking myself.

I had to meet several criteria to share my writing. As a social practice embedded in language and culture, my words needed their history, too. Then, as an art, writing is also highly individualistic. It has its ambiguity and themes represented by me in one way and interpreted by my audience in another. Finally, as a study, its structure is never fixed. It switches based on educational models, beliefs, forms, trends, and techniques.

It was easy to get lost trying to encompass all its uses and evolutions. While I was aware of certain rules or standards that outlined writing, I didn't see them as practical. They were idealistic to me and, thus, unreliable. More so when a person like me wasn't considered when these ideals were popularized. They may have shaped their era, their culture, and their sex but as an outsider, as the next generation, I need something that shapes me.

Though I knew I had these disadvantages, I didn't have the drive to make a place for myself through my stories. That was until I read Mary-Kim Arnold's memoir, *Litany for the Long Moment*, in my last year of undergrad and during my heavy depression. Though her book was not particularly sad, I remember crying over it. The way she conveyed longing aligned with my longing for a place where I belong and accept myself; a search for something missing but not necessarily missing it. I related to this book in such a deep sense, coming as the daughter of an adoptee and an orphan and, inevitably, as a person of color disconnected from her culture and family. I was born as a sort of blank slate, without history, writing her own story yet unable to keep herself from looking back. I also appreciated how Arnold abstained from writing pain as an aesthetic, avoiding the desensitized image we have of the "sad girl (xiv)" that plagues womanhood as a life owned by her unfortunate circumstances. Instead, Arnold expresses the complexity of a person effectively through a collage of personal stories and formal paperwork, showing the different layers and faces of a person. After reading this, I knew I couldn't fit into the square of a

common narrative—with a proper beginning, middle, and end—and wanted to explore how I could develop this further. I aimed not only to represent myself but give others the same comfort I felt.

I lacked confidence as much as I lacked power, however. As regurgitated as this argument sounds, being a student, a daughter of immigrant parents, a woman, and so on aren't positions of power. I don't have connections, outlets, or a reputation at a great enough scale to have direct control over the effect and change I can make. I couldn't break a generational curse simply by pumping my fists in the air.

Claiming ownership over my writing was more of a sneaky tactic, mirroring my need to read between the lines. I had to be subtle—cunning—and seemingly harmless to get others to trust my words. Even when speaking about myself, it was in a detached tone, as if it was the cold truth and any bias was a little slip of the tongue or my humanity showing.

Moreover, I usually write about mental health and trauma. These topics are sensitive, requiring a slower and more conscious pace. If I speak about them in an angry tone, it's easy to get rejected, even if I am the victim. Especially when these topics are foreign or taboo to others, hence uncomfortable. And when they get repetitive, we become desensitized to it.

I didn't want to be reduced to a sad girl.

But I couldn't force the reader to think otherwise. I had to be indirect to avoid immediate rejection, writing stories that described the helplessness I felt rather than stuffing my readers with sermons on the unfairness of a system they couldn't even see. These were typically short stories in absurdist fiction in which I could challenge norms and rationale, providing a new set of rules under my direct control. This way, I tricked the reader into experiencing the absurdity I endured as an outsider without agency over their life.

As a genre of art, my absurdist stories were tolerated better than when I complained about my sour situations. The latter was easily dismissed as exaggerations, deeming my memories as unlikely, unbelievable stories. Conversely, through this absurdist genre, I could get away with my complaints because they were meant to be exactly that—absurd. Being unreasonable, unbelievable, and different as an aesthetic was fine. Once it crossed the bridge from art to intervention, it was too imposing, though.

That was the problem. I used my absurdist stories to speak about mental health and trauma, but I wasn't taking action. I was working on a fine line between avoiding rejection and avoiding confrontation—between being too passive or dominant in my writing—challenging my intention as a writer.

When do have to be direct?

When do I have to be careful?

Inevitably, I was working with a grey area, a part of writing that I find to be underdeveloped theoretically and practically. As a writer, intention is a conscious choice during the time of writing. For a reader, though, intention is analyzed as an aftermath. As intention is formative, considering its impact during writing requires predictability.

Who is my target audience?

What qualities differ and which ones do we share?

I referred to my sneaky tactics, writing sensory-charged stories. I can describe episodes of mental health in detail because I have personally experienced them, and it's easier to describe these scenes because the senses are universal. Rather than saying "I'm sad" I get to show what it feels to me, and my reader and I can reach a mutual understanding through the physical qualities and social contexts of sadness that I include. There is a more balanced flow between intention and

interpretation. So, if I could expand this ability to the overall structure of my writing, I could facilitate my intention, having conscious control over it, as well as meet the needs of my audience.

This is what inspired my thesis. I aimed to make my work interactive to facilitate intention and consider the reader. Formally, I was working with embodied narratives, the belief that narratives are developed in conjunction with the self (Cunliffe and Coupland).

As the name suggests, embodied narratives are based on the theory of embodied cognition. Embodied cognition proposes that our cognitive processes are based on experiences, and experiences are defined as the result of the interaction with our environment. This very interaction is understood by our body through physical forms, specifically, through our sensorimotor system. Subsequently, narratives are formed to rationalize these experiences (Balász).

So, narratives are inherently interactive. Moreover, because an experience is idiosyncratic, the narrative is personalized, revealing our character.

To apply the personal narrative we form naturally into writing, I considered the pickiness of our meaning-making. We are picky about what is important and what is filler information, a process that is relatively unconscious at first. In writing, this process is active and calculative. We make decisions over which points are necessary to us and our work. Regardless, these decisions are always biased, and that could negatively affect writing to be too forceful or unreasonable.

It was difficult to see how our identity and experiences developed a writing structure practically. My next proposition, then, was to find a practical method that demonstrated how identity, experiences, and narratives converge in written form. To evade the negative effect of bias, I resorted to two characteristics of mine, my personal experience as a minority and the techniques I use to analyze texts.

As I recalled before, I acquired the need to read between the lines. Such ability desires familiarity—a place where I belong. When I feel removed from a situation, I switch from being observant to taking action. Such observations reveal the collective manner of thinking. On the other hand, my actions confess my abilities, as well as my limitations. In between my observation and action, there is a series of introspective operations helping me choose the best course of action based on what the collective wants and what I can do. Though the situation may not be familiar to me at first, I can familiarize myself with it by finding shared qualities between the target and me, enabling me to act upon it.

Similarly, when analyzing texts, I think of three questions:

What did the writer want?

What do I want?

What can we all agree we want?

There is a difference between mutual understanding and agreement. To avoid bias I must recognize this difference and permit the reader to construe their opinion, too. I can be persuasive but, like reading the atmosphere, I need to know when to be more observant and when to be more present. Furthermore, to succeed in mutual understanding, I must present a familiar aspect in my writing for the reader to understand where I am coming from.

I concluded, then, that as embodied narratives showed our personal process of rationalizing, sharing my writing with my audience called for an understanding of how they rationalize, accounting for differences and my abilities.

Once I clarified my goals—to facilitate intention, consider the reader, and find a practical method—and my approach, embodied narratives, I began my thesis formally. As experience is the basic element of embodied narratives and writing, I specify writing to be an embodied, continuous,

and personal process, making it an incomplete form for the writer because experience is formative. Hence, the name of my project: A writer in writing.

To capture the complexity of individuality and storytelling, I break my thesis into three stages and theories: identity, the life story, and psychological and construal-level. These three roughly outline the process of understanding and using our experiences to write. Additionally, I chose this order to reflect the thinking process behind my thesis. Though my thesis is based on a recent period of change, I omit recent stories and use life events I have rationalized best. Correspondingly, the stories are set during my early childhood to early adolescence, the most unstable periods of my life, to express a simultaneous process in which I, as an adult, am deconstructing my identity whilst developing it.

By structuring my thesis on the unstable points of my life, I purposely write an undesirable story; I am writing the wrong way. As Chavez states in her book, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*: “empower...to do it “wrong” before they do it “right”...Give them the gift of finding their own way... (33).”

I’ve lived my life based on many wrongs, slowly overcoming my trauma and accepting my differences as a person. It doesn’t make sense for me to write the right story. Therefore, I attempt to provide an alternative way of writing that describes the reality of many misunderstood writers, the uncommon narrative that is purposely undesirable, purposely incomplete, and multi-dimensional.

I begin by expanding on the second section, the life story, the backbone of my thesis.

The Life Story

Once I acknowledge the correlation between identity and construal in the first section of my project, I introduce the concept of the life story, the “home for the self”. I introduce this concept over embodied narratives for several reasons.

First, as my thesis is inspired by my writing process, I wanted to slowly introduce the reader to my mental and emotional space. This way, I could indirectly explain my viewpoints, particularly, why I desire a space for myself in my writing.

Second, the short stories provided are examples of my life story, ending abruptly to emphasize the incompleteness of the life story and embodied narratives, and to portray the lack of control I had as an outsider. By pointing out that these are, in fact, life stories, I remind the writer of my humanity as a writer and the imperfections of the narratives.

Third, by writing a part of my life story in a manner that was purposely incomplete, I defined both the structure and purpose of my project into abrupt and intertwined pieces. This is critical to my thesis, as embodied narratives are simultaneously constructed. I reveal this midway to avoid overanalyzation from the reader from the start.

Fourth, these short stories are also experiments of my writing method. I wanted to put my method into practice, allowing the reader to intake my stories before analyzing them (as it’s typically done). As a result, I could actively show the indirect and direct choices I was making.

Finally, the life story is the most practical and universal example of embodied narratives based on the belief that everyone has a sense of identity and therefore a sense of their history. As the concept of embodied narratives is broad and arguably new, life stories help me avoid the confusion of the myriad of definitions and applications.

For these reasons, I structure and reevaluate what constitutes as a “narrative” by analyzing the elements of the life story rather than relying on a broad concept. In the general sense, a narrative is simply a connection or relation of events from a certain point of view, the narrator. In writing analysis, this is achieved through an intense collection of literary vocabulary—theme, plot, characters, setting, etc.—that I believe are too abstract and limiting. The issue is that not every story is clear-cut like this, revealing rising actions and idealistic solutions.

Because the life story is universal and idiosyncratically formed, I narrowed down the foundations of a narrative. I followed two works, Linde’s book, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*, and an article by Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira, *The Development of Global Coherence in Life Narratives Across Adolescence: Temporal, Causal, and Thematic Aspects*. I adapted their analysis of life stories to determine three major foundations—theme, causality, and coherence—excluding terms associated with technique and craft. By focusing on the development of a narrative solely, I embraced a hands-off approach in which any other aspect of writing (plot, conflict, setting, etc.) is subject to the criteria of the writer. Any additional literary term is overcomplicating the narrative.

On top of being a connection of events, I redefine narratives as a form of reasoning. The three major foundations (which I refer to as “connectors” in my project) rationalize the narrative, and with this rationalization, form is created. Accordingly, the point of view of narratives is the direction, or argument, of the narrative. I assert that this direction includes the voice or intention of the writer, and it cannot be established without it.

In my personal stories and exploration of life stories, I give special attention to causality. As I later state, it’s difficult to know what constitutes adequate causality or reasoning overall as narratives undergo transformative stages continuously, making them incomplete. So, I specified

adequate causality as “the direction of events” that “shows progression...and the details provided to explain their development are necessary”. In other words, this is writing with purpose and control, in which the writer makes conscious decisions on what details are indispensable.

Furthermore, progression is not limited to the combination of linear narration and plot, as seen in temporal narration. I purposely wrote stories that appeared to progress linearly (from childhood to adolescence) without progressive changes. I intended to express ‘direction’ despite the lack of traditional or proper twists and conclusions. Consequently, I was working on the borderline between progression and stillness (and even regression) because these stories were constantly interrupted. Rather than comparing how events were before and how they changed after, my personal stories remained relatively the same, showing my helplessness. Since I didn’t include a conclusion or a major turning point to indicate change, there is a weak sense of development in my narrative.

Instead, my narrative was developed thematically, a technique I attribute to experimental writing. The governing theme throughout my personal stories is alienation, describing my experiences as an outsider. In the analytical portions, the theme is still alienation, but the intention shifts from describing the event to analyzing it. In this manner, there are three major narrative lines: the concept of identity, the concept of story, and the concept of sensemaking. Though the first two narrative lines intersect seamlessly in my personal accounts, I break off the narration from storytelling to sensemaking in the analytical pieces that follow. Unfortunately, this poses a risk to the pace of my narrative, appearing disorganized. Such disorganization can lead to a loss of credibility.

Similarly, the sudden shifts can be jarring, causing each episode in the sections to appear unrelated, random, and isolated. This opposes my interpretation of causality, so I added spaces

within the pieces to ease the shifts, illustrating skips in thoughts and time to mimic temporal narration that readers are best familiar with. I also clarified the concepts I would explore from the beginning in hopes that the differences of each piece would fall into place in the end.

The most notable intervention, however, is the indirect shift in intention between each piece. For example, in the first section, “Awareness and Identity”, there are three personal stories: “With God”, “By myself”, and “My name”. The first one acts as a raw experience in which I narrate distantly. I don’t impose my current thoughts and emotions; I simply try to recall a nightmare that I credit for the confusion and fear I had towards the incredibly complex notions of existence and purpose. I am inviting the reader to my emotional and mental space. The raw experience also symbolizes the consequences of trauma through my removal from it.

Next, in “By myself”, I continue the story with a heavier presence as a narrator, but not as an individual. I develop myself as a character instead, adding my thoughts and emotions, and describing my reactions. I disregard my present self and the influence of my current feelings towards this event for the same reasons, to avoid overwhelming the reader and build trust. Developing my characteristics first shows how I came to be and is realistic for a child. I wasn’t self-aware or mature enough to understand and intervene in this event.

The final story, “My name”, is narrated through my present self, permitting me to address awareness and identity in a mature space. I use this piece to complain about the undesirable, asking questions to comprehend the meaning of my identity that was undermined by my trauma. Lastly, this piece also serves as a bridge to a formal exploration of identity, the piece “Awareness and Identity: the beginnings of understanding and structuring”. This is what I have been referring to as an analytical piece.

I follow this formula to ease into the theories I must present to argue for my alternative view of writing as an embodied process. As previously mentioned, I give examples of a life story before evaluating the concept. Correspondingly, these stories visualize the writing process in real-time by mimicking our process of construal (experience, interpretation, and presentation) and imitating drafts of a larger storyline.

When writing the analytical pieces, I kept Chavez's book in mind. Like her, I wanted to implement sustainable writing methodology. This was the original goal of my thesis. I had to scrap that idea to maintain the format of my thesis, focusing on identity and narrative development instead. Nonetheless, the theoretical framework of my thesis is based on education, specifically, a series of theories under embodied cognition.

To make up for the absence of educational models, I address a generalized social environment, providing the two countries I've lived in, Mexico and the United States, as an example. This leaves the social implementation and relevancy of the embodied narrative open to the reader's interpretation. Regardless, without a direct correlation between writing and its effect on society, it's harder to visualize how decisions are made in a generalized environment. I recognize I would have more success by utilizing education as an example.

This is my plan for a future version of my thesis in which my life stories would lead to my current time of writing, as a graduate student. Being a student, I have experience with writing as a study, so I would write about the methods I refined to adapt to the program, strengthening my argument for models that suit the individuality of writing and students. I provide a preview of this version at the beginning of this preface in which I mention the process of writing overlapping with my identity, and a tease in the third section where I briefly disclose my struggles with ADHD.

As for the current version of my project, I limit the implementation and relevancy of embodied narratives to the shared introspective space between the reader and the writer. I fixate on the switch between intention and interpretation, distinguishing intention as a series of purposeful decisions to get a desired effect and interpretation as the experiences and knowledge backing up that rationale. Hence, I required a method that systemizes decision-making and construal, psychological distance and construal-level theory.

Psychological distance and construal-level theory

Inspired by techniques in business, I looked for a method that resembled scenario planning. In scenario planning, decisions are based on predictions. These predictions are constructed by evaluating trends, similar situations, and identifying possible disadvantages and advantages, resulting in a set of feasible solutions. Furthermore, there must be frequent reevaluations due to changing and uncontrollable circumstances.

Overall, scenario planning helps visualize the direction (and redirection) of a business, taking a proactive approach. I argue this is like the writing process in which the writer must actively make decisions to shape their work. To find a way in which decision-making could apply to writing specifically, I compared scenarios to scenes in a story. The writer does not have a fully developed narrative from the beginning. Rather, writers begin in episodes and have an idea of the circumstances and characteristics of their composition. It could be characters, tone, subject, plot points—anything that sparked the story. The key, then, is to relate these sporadic scenes to structure the narrative.

For scene-building, I relied on the landmarks of a life story. Similar to traditional novels, landmarks envision a plot with turning points and even conclusions (in this case, in the form of causality, or events that lead to a result). By simplifying a story through landmarks, previously isolated scenes can be interconnected in the same way as life stories—theme, causality, and coherence—to relate major points. The writer then has the creative liberty to choose what themes, events, and form of coherence are suitable for their story. This is also applicable to experimental writing or any alternative to traditional novels because life stories are incomplete and told in different situations, manners (e.g. verbally versus artistically), and in episodes (e.g. focusing on childhood), making their structure flexible.

But, assuming a piece is not autobiographical, what is considered a landmark is now vague. The events in the story are hypothetical, requiring predictions and presumptions over how an event is supposed to play out. These hypothetical situations are most evident in fictional works, such as science fiction. To visualize personal and hypothetical narratives, the writer must draw from a series of sources, both internal and external.

The writer has a social responsibility over their work, and the external sources they draw from must reflect that. If the writer chooses a topic on a different culture, for example, proper research must be done to make sure the culture is properly represented. Unlike scenario planning, though, the writer also draws in from inner sources, particularly, personal experiences to comprehend information that is foreign to them and convey it in writing. Therefore, the writer switches between removing themselves from their work to engaging in it to manage internal and external sources. It's important to balance this out, too, as being removed excessively risks ownership while being involved too much risks rejection from the reader because the project appears one-sided and irrelevant.

I believe managing the balance between outer and inner sources is key to scene-building. As indicated before, identifying landmark scenes first could facilitate the writing process by easing the intended trajectory of the composition, like in the life story. To get into the act of writing these landmarks, though, requires an ability to capture interaction and balance the outer and inner. That is to say, to define the dimensions, or reality, of the scene and acknowledge when to distance ourselves as writers.

This was the most demanding part of my thesis. I didn't know where to start in my research, although I did know what I was looking for. First, I wanted a method that could help the writer remove themselves and engage in their work. Second, it must be flexible, adapting to different needs and the evolving technique of the writer. Third, it must implement the self to establish voice as witnessed in life stories. Fourth, the method had to be practical and proactive to meet goals, in addition to empowering the writer to enact their vision.

Lastly, I debated on the role of language.

Language is, undoubtedly, a crucial part of writing. The writer is expressing themselves, and language is a vessel for that. However, language at primitive stages lacks a body. Words without context are sounds, and the ideas are lost. Language is not fact. It speaks of experiences, is highly contextual, and works on a set of agreements. Finding the right words can't be tamed simply by having an extensive vocabulary but by a series of relationships.

What does this word mean at the time of this novel?

What does this word express to a group of people?

Should I attempt a translation even if no word in English does it justice?

The last question conveys best the limits of language and the experiences that transcend it. One of the common problems I have when writing scenes, especially dialogue, is the lack of

onomatopoeia in English. And there is a joke that, whereas we struggle to describe our complex emotions, there is already a long German word summing it up. While language is powerful and captivating, our experiences are much more intricate. Language, too, is a type of reasoning that requires direction to be structured.

Apart from being a form of communication, language is an art. If we compare verbal and written art to visual, tactile, and performative forms, all share an audience that takes something more from what is presented at face value, because all are interactive. What is the common factor for all these forms of expression? Again, it's experience.

What helps us understand an experience, then?

My last requirement for a writing method answers this question. Though writing is inseparable from language, I couldn't refer the writer to a specific use of language. Not only do I find that too imposing, but it's also unreliable and unrealistic. Using my background as a bilingual person, I noticed that languages indicate differences in thinking. In addition to acceptable meanings and usages, it describes the way we reason. I use Japanese as an example: "...the English language has a future tense. Other languages, like Japanese, do not have this... it shows how something as small as verbs can affect how we view time."

This example indicates a cultural difference in temporal distance between Japanese and Americans. At a general level, English is direct compared to Japanese. Meanwhile, Japanese is ambiguous, relying on the speaker's attitude towards the sentence, like the high pitch at the end of our sentences that serves as a question mark. To understand the ambiguity, the recipient must rely on highly contextual markers as opposed to a direct command in English. Of course, English is also ambiguous, and we engage in high construal, too. This is evident in art. Therefore, apart from the language we use, the success of communication depends on our interpretation.

We won't always get it. If the receiver doesn't share the same beliefs or encounters supporting the speaker's idea, the receiver's interpretation is bound to stray from the speaker's intention. Additionally, there are varying levels of interpretation. Sometimes, more engagement, or high construal, is necessary. Other times, things are so apparent we don't need so much to fill in the blanks, putting us on the other side of the spectrum, low construal. So, I concluded that the last requirement to understand experience was to manage the differences in thinking, aligning with the ability of the writer to remove themselves and engage back, and amending the disconnection between intention and interpretation. To manage, the writer must be crafty, manipulating experience based on a common ground: a common factor that both the writer and reader can understand.

These four points, removal and engagement, flexibility, individuality, and finally, manipulation of experience, are met by psychological distance and construal-level theory. These two theories were first introduced by Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman. For my thesis, I refer to their article that develops psychological distance further, *Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance*.

Right away, I was inspired by the questions Trope and Liberman ask:

People directly experience only the here and now. It is impossible to experience the past and the future, other places, other people, and alternatives to reality. And yet, memories, plans, predictions, hopes, and counterfactual alternatives populate our minds, influence our emotions, and guide our choice and action. How do we transcend the here and now to include distal entities? How do we plan for the distant future, understand other people's point of view, and take into account hypothetical alternatives to reality (1)?

Accounting for both the causes and effects of our thinking by transcending the present self reminded me of the influence of writing. Either we write with conscience or through other forces we are not in control of. It could be a limitation or an underlying theme we didn't intend. Whatever the cause is, it can affect the reading of our work. I proposed, then, to use the ambiguity of writing—its openness to interpretation—to the writer's advantage by predicting how the target audience would react to a scene.

I expand on predictability through psychological distance and construal-level in the final section of my thesis, where I apply the parameters of the theories to scene-building. While I recommend using landmarks for this method, the writer can apply it anywhere. That being said, this method is a tool and not an automated writing machine, as I find it to be time-consuming. Thus, it's reserved for moments in which the reader may be unsure of certain choices or may need help visualizing their story into place. The writer is still the owner of what sparked their writing and what stylizes it.

That is why I focused solely on the process of facilitating decision-making, omitting recommendations for language that can visualize a scene ambiguously or concretely. I gave an example in the final section where I go over my decisions without relying on specific language:

Starting with social distance, I look at the characters in the scene. Stephanie, mom, and neighbors. Who is Stephanie close to? She is a child, so she depends on her mom. She hates her neighbors, so she is naturally distant from them. Thus, it's expected that interactions with her mom would be more detailed than those with her neighbors.

I didn't add, however, how short and simple I made Stephanie's dialogue throughout the stories. Stephanie is a very detached character, on top of being unconfident. To portray this, I was

picky with how Stephanie interacts and how she responds to someone because she would be picky too, making her interactions limited. The type of language that can express pickiness comes after this decision. So, it didn't make sense for me to recommend certain words, phrases, or tips on language use because I would be skipping over the writer's decision. And, language is adaptable, changing from soft to harsh depending on the context even if we were to use the same words. This is considerably important for a bilingual person like me who cannot adapt to a single use of language.

So, language in writing is simply out of my jurisdiction. I maintain my position as a facilitator, working to find and establish the relationship between the writer and their writing. As I discussed at the beginning, this relationship is joined by experience, making it "egocentric (1)" as Trope and Liberman describe psychological distance and construal-level theory. Therefore, I argue that writing is maintained on the same underlying mechanisms that the self is developed through.

The Self

The first narrative line I introduced in my thesis is the concept of the self, shown on the very first page. This is an untitled piece where I introduce myself and my name, preceding the first section, "Awareness and Identity". With the lack of a title and being the first piece, this part serves as an introduction and a first impression of me and my work, marking the topic of my thesis right away.

Moreover, considering my reader would not know who I am, there would be no preconceptions that justify a title, making it the only untitled piece. Alternatively, the absence of a

title is a shared feature with the other pieces that precede their respective sections. To avoid confusion, I nickname these ‘artistic pieces’, complementing the ‘analytical pieces’ at the end of each section.

In the second artistic piece, “Houses and Homes”, I speak of the contrast between a house and a home, alluding to my lack of stability and a safe space in the personal stories, and the life story that I claim as the “home for the self”. Correspondingly, the first artistic piece is untitled to introduce the concept of identity. The title of each (or lack of) sets up the theme for its accompanying section.

The remaining artistic piece, “Gestaltzerfall of my self”, does not have a section, however. In contrast to the untitled introduction, this piece acts like an epilogue. As indicated by its title, the theme is ‘deconstruction’, a necessary process to mature identity. Additionally, this piece speaks directly to and of my self, demanding self-accountability, hence why I begin with the line, “sometimes I wonder what it’s like to be with you”.

So, while the first page serves as an introduction to the reader, creating “Stephanie” as a character, I wrote the last piece to be directed towards the writer—me—pointing to the absence of my present self. This piece should also be considered as a possible turning point, as I acknowledge that I want to change, suggesting for a more ‘complete’ story and grounded identity. By using “Gestaltzerfall of my self” as a closing piece, I give a sense of continuation, reminding the reader that the writing and identity processes are continuous.

Finally, I want to address the structure of the artistic pieces. I wrote them to resemble poems because they are more abstract, visualizing the switch between abstract to concrete thinking: from artistic pieces to analytical ones. Furthermore, these poetic bits allow me to experiment with the themes, especially when I consider poetry to be my weakness. This

experimentation and weakness in my poetry begin each section with vulnerability and honesty. I also wanted to use these poems as a breather between the sections considering they succeed the heavier, analytical parts.

The final reason for choosing poetry is due to the inspiration I drew from documentary poetry. I had mentioned Arnold's influence on me, and now add Sara Uribe's *Antígona Gonzáles*. Like Arnold's *Litany for the Long Moment*, Uribe elaborates on the obscurity and multidimensionality of a person as a missing life, identity, history, and security. *Antígona Gonzáles* served as a model for my third poem, "Cáscaras de huevo", and its accompanying section, inspiring me to write about the violence I had become desensitized to and kept hidden. This was a big step for me, and I hope to elaborate on these sensitive aspects further in a future version. As I state in my thesis, in this version, I purposely omit details in my stories to protect myself and to avoid overwhelming my reader.

My primary focus in the present version is on the discovery of identity and writing, or the "beginnings of understanding and structuring" as I title the last piece in exploring identity. To visualize beginnings, my stories are about my early life, narrating an incomplete and undesirable narrative. As a writer and individual, I argue writing as an embodied, continuous, and personal process, using my life story as an example and enactment of a method that purposely includes the writer in their writing. This way, I hope to instill alternative and sustainable writing methodology where marginalized, misunderstood, and outsider writers can write their uncommon narrative, the other side of the story that is often disregarded and silenced.

Abstract

As a writer and individual, I speak between many roles, presenting myself as “I” but also “her”. Inevitably, there is a gap between “who I am” and “who I am made out to be” that I am not always in control of. Similarly, there is a disparity in intention versus interpretation in writing. Since we don’t exist in a vacuum, I must account for these gaps, acknowledging my individuality while adapting to changing circumstances and needs. As an individual with several disadvantages and particularities, however, my sense of self is unstable and uncertain, reflecting the instability and uncertainty in my life. Unable to neither defend myself nor depend on someone, I take on the persona of an ‘outsider’, construing my character based on “who I am not” and “who I cannot be”. I recognize my alienation and its negative effects on me, working backward to understand myself through writing. Accordingly, I converge three narrative lines—the concept of identity, the concept of story, and the concept of sensemaking—labeling the three sections of my project following these concepts. I provide important yet traumatic accounts of my life, identifying the root of my alienation and finding similarities in how I rationalize my life and my writing. Additionally, I explore three major theories—identity, the life story, and psychological and construal-level—to support the process of acquiring and grounding individuality and ownership of voice. I finalize my project with a writing method based on the final theory to facilitate and argue for individuality and voice in writing, claiming that writing and the self are inseparable because the writer composes through experience, as witnessed throughout my project.

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My name is Stephanie.

My birthday is May 26.

I was born two weeks late.

My mom says I didn't want to come out.

1:
Awareness and Identity

With God

By myself

My name

With God

When I was in elementary school, I kept having the same nightmare every single day. For a little over a week or so.

It would start with limestone stairs that were long and wide enough to have me climbing them. They extended into a blurry, white horizon my mind could not fully capture. But the never-ending stairs stopped once my head pulled my body back and I pushed my fingers down to hold on. There it was—way up there—a faded line outlining their end hiding behind patches of mist. On top of the faded line was a temple that extended across the horizon. No, it was the horizon itself, the only indication between the white sky and the limestone stairs that reflected its light. And my only indication of where to go.

Going up and down the stairs—and some standing on the steps chatting—were what I figured out to be angels. They all had different types of wings. Some none. Some with a dozen, others with three. Black wings. Blue wings. Purple. Yellow. Shimmering wings. They wore clothes that were both familiar and foreign. But most of them had a simple T-shirt and jeans. Angels are normal people, I thought. Though they looked at me with confusion and disgust.

I put my head down and continued climbing.

I eventually reached the top and there was a tall, slender, and annoyed man with thinning and long extremities like a cartoon character. He stood behind a thick wooden podium.

“¿Qué necesitas?” his expression was blank and his face was glued to a large book.

“No sé dónde estoy.”

“Pues,” he began, “¿Dónde crees?” He still didn’t look at me.

“No sé.” I stood there.

“Hay ángeles,” he looked up, his glasses sitting halfway. But he was still not looking at me, but above me, into the distance. I guess he was just that tall.

“No parece,” I snapped back. Heaven shouldn’t feel so unsettling.

“Pues sí.”

“¿Puedo ver a Dios?” I pulled on my finger.

“No puedes así nomas,” he frowned and let out a hefty sigh, “*es Dios.*”

“¿Entonces?”

“Dios no ve a cualquiera,” he grunted, “A ver...¿cuál es tu nombre...?” he flipped through the book that fanned out. The pages seemed to multiply in the middle, until he suddenly stopped a page with the belly of his finger. “Ajá,” he said unenthusiastically, “Stephanie.”

“Sí.”

“Ah,” he now sounded hurt, “Eres...eres una niña.” He paused, tapped his foot, bit his nail off, and closed the book. The weight of the towering book was cushioned by its silky pillow covers.

“Sí, lo soy. No me veo grande,” I extended my arms out. It’s obvious. That’s what I was trying to say.

“Lo siento pero no te puedo ver. No puedo ver a nadie.”

“¿Cómo puedes hablar conmigo si no me puedes—?”

“Así es. Adelante,” he stepped aside to reveal a dark slit in the Roman-like temple behind us. “Te está esperando.”

“Okay.”

I walked past him slowly into a complete shutoff from light. Like a blink. Because in a blink, I saw two very, really, very long muscular legs with feet that were bigger than me even now, as an adult, if I laid down with my back as straight as possible.

“¿Dios?” I looked up, my eyebrows bending to ask for permission. It was a habit to do so, as my parents would often stomp when my eyes were glued to the floor while they lectured me.

“¡Enderézate y mírame!” they’d yell. “¡Es de mala educación cuando alguien te está hablando!” they attempted to explain.

But if I looked at their eyes, they’d react the same way. My knees would bend, too, so to straighten my back, I had to throw the weight of my feelings under my teeth tearing through my lips and my hand that squeezed my thumb hard enough to turn it white. I couldn’t help but cry from the pain that came from everywhere.

“¡Deja de llorar o te daré una razón para llorar!” they pointed at me. I sniffed and forced it back in, and back out went a frown I inherited from my grandma, accentuated by dark eyebrows passed down by my father. My frown was not expressing anger. It was defiance. At that age, though, that was a misunderstanding.

God still didn’t reply to me. I didn’t want God to misunderstand me, although I knew God knows everything. I thought the same about my parents, though, and they still got upset. I quickly rehearsed a little smile. However, my wiggle of a smile was in vain, as the same misty clouds and blurry horizon that covered the stairs covered God’s upper body. I could not find a face. His body from the upper torso was covered in a blinding white.

I looked down again and interlocked my fingers. It’s like praying, I thought.

“¿Sí mi niña?” his voice was soft and thick like dense whipped cream.

“¿Por qué estoy aquí?”

“Todos mis hijos me visitan cuando llegan.”

I didn't know what to say so I went back to staring at my feet. I had my favorite holographic shoes with purple glitter. The soles were wasted, and the holographic pattern was scratched on the front. I've been wearing them since the day my mom had them hiding behind her back, her face will a full grin as she tip-toed towards me sleeping and yelled “¡Sorpresa!”

I inhaled. “¿Por qué?”

“A veces el mundo no merece a los niños.”

“Pero” I choked, “¿Dónde está mi mami?”

“¿Quieres verla?” God spoke slowly, as if he was giving me time to think.

“Sí,” I shot my reply right away.

“¿Segura?” God spoke slowly again.

“Sí,” I paused, “¿Es malo si digo que sí? ¿No puedo?”

“Por supuesto que no mi niña,” he soothed my nerves, “mira.”

A small, floating whirlpool formed in front of us foaming at its tail ends to become bubbles. The bubbles lifted themselves off the whirlpool and swarmed towards my face. I flinched, raising my arm to block my eyes from the bubbles that bathed me in their pops. The constant pops from everywhere partially blinded me, but through one shut eye and another half open, I could see that the whirlpool's center was now glowing. A silhouette was moving within it. I heard my mom's voice.

It was hoarse. Strong and loud then weak. Cries escaped from her throat as a slash on the string of a violin. Mumbles were repeated, almost chanted, followed by grunts. I threw my arm to

the side and saw her eyes shut, crow's feet forming, her mouth stretched open. She was crying like a child. And in her arms was me.

My eyes widened and my eyebrows dug so hard into my forehead I thought someone was shoving their fingers into my skin. Yes, that was me. But that skin did not belong to me. It was pale. It was purple. It was green. I looked asleep. Yet I never twitched. Instead, my body bounced in my mom's arms from the great gasps for air that kept her crying. Her chest puffed up and settled flat every other second as she whined for me. No, God.

“Por favor, Dios todopoderoso, por favor, te suplico, déjala quedarse,” my mom pleaded. But her pleas weakened as her puffs slowed down. Her silence begged at my lifeless body.

“No quiero ver a mi mami llorar,” I looked at her slouched body with pity and fear.

“Puedes regresar pero,” God paused for me to think again, “al regresar crecerás y entenderás este dolor.” God's milky voice flattened. “Aquí seremos amigos.” Soft again.

I was fixed on my mom. She was now as lifeless as me. My lips turned sticky.

“Aquí no tienes que preocuparte por nada. Nada te pasará.”

“¿Nunca dejará de llorar?” I watched my mom's tears hang heavily on her eyelashes.

“No.”

“Quiero regresar.” I turned away from the whirlpool. I couldn't stand seeing my mom vulnerable anymore.

“Bien,” God paused, “te veré en otro momento, mi niña.”

I didn't see him smile but I believed so. That's how his voice sounded to me—kind. Honest. I heard the whirlpool sloshing around mimicking the sound of waves crashing and retreating from the sand. It got louder, becoming unbearable, but for some reason, I did not turn back. And in a

moment, the water shot to my sides and the waves crashed in front of me to join as one. The water covered me entirely and the current pulled me backwards harshly.

I would then wake up coughing with the insides of my nose burning.

By myself

My gasps for air after waking up were not exclusive to this nightmare. Neither was the chest pain that followed as I jolted awake and let out coughs that resonated through my rib cage. I'd grip my blanket and run my fingers through my sticky bangs. I'd look at my digital clock on my nightstand and my calendar framed by princess stickers that were peeling off. This was the routine I developed to counter the disorientation that comes as a side effect of lucid dreaming, more so when I had them daily as a child who couldn't grasp the complexity of time yet. I didn't know if it was rare or difficult for others to have movies playing in their head at night and somehow not know what day it was. I just thought the magic of dreaming was greater than me and that was that. Kind of like God.

However, God was in my nightmare. I twisted and turned in my bed wondering if I was being ungrateful or committing a sin. I was with God, but I was still scared. I checked under my blanket to find if my shivers were from fear or...that again.

My head hurt trying to piece everything together, but telling my mom was out of the question. She would make my head pound more with stories from the bible that I could not imagine, and my heart drop with stories from her childhood that I clenched my jaw not to imagine. I couldn't tell her that I couldn't comprehend how God's pair of long legs could save me from these strange feelings. Once again, I convinced myself to forget about my nightmare and changed the bed sheets.

I changed and headed to the car. I never asked questions in the morning, anyway. I'm not good at breaking the silence. I preferred to ruin moments where my mom would be humming, dancing, or laughing on the phone. All of which she never did when she dropped me off at school.

A Mexican male stressing his throat on a radio channel replaced our voices with chismes of cheating husbands, and the constant pounding of my chest and head was substituted by the constant kicking from my youngest brother. My eyes averted to the window the middle one looked at. The cars honked and passed, many newer and cleaner than ours.

The magic of the human mind allows me to retrieve my nightmare and my mornings, but not my school days. There is a blackhole inside, constantly sucking out my childhood, serving as evidence that I didn't enjoy it. Or I didn't enjoy school.

Or maybe I daydreamed too much.

I got reprimanded for that a lot. My name was always on the yellow, neutral face. I hated it back then. Now I laugh at how much that expression suits me. So, all I can say about my day was that I probably sat at my desk looking at the ceiling while swinging my leg. My teacher probably asked me a question and I probably asked her to repeat it. Then we had to work on something silently. And, as always, lunchtime came.

This time, however, my stomach twisted and turned as heavily as I did that morning. I couldn't finish my food and grunted. I held a tight grip on my shirt, twisted its fabric, almost tearing it off, and froze. I can't breathe, I thought. I feel sick, I got up. I'm dizzy, I stumbled. It's okay, I regained balance. I can't, I immediately stopped. No, it's okay, I kept walking to the trash can to throw away my tray. And the lunch lady behind the trash can smiled.

I frowned. I could hear her voice in my head telling me to sit down again and "At least finish the fruit". Not today, though, as the mere thought of food down my throat caused something to come back up.

But lunch ladies are not fortune tellers, and they must do their job. And most of them are mothers too, so their insistence is personal. I hated to argue with them. I wasn't even healthy enough to be careful with my manners, less argue. My heart was bouncing around, trying to escape through my temples, and I had no room to think of anything.

“Mija, you need to finish,” she started.

I got closer to the trash can.

“You need to finish as much as you can,” she stood between the trash can and I. “Mija, look at me, you need to finish that,” her voice got louder.

I grunted.

“At least finish the fruit,” she softened her voice.

I felt a tug in my throat and pushed her to throw away my food.

“Y—” her lecture was cut immediately by the mess on the floor.

The smell of it and the trash can and the sight of my shirt forced out more.

The lunch lady jumped and rushed to put her hand on my forehead. “Get me the nurse!” she yelled at her coworker as I cried at the mess I was and the mess I made for everyone.

My mom came to the school seemingly against her will. I could hear between my huffs that the nurse was trying to convince her to believe the state I was in. If I was a saint, I'd come up with something smart to say about that but I'm childish. As a child, I just wanted my mom—now—and my mom was telling the nurse she would be late. She didn't believe in sick days, especially raising us as practically a single mom. My father was always away, and when he was home, he was my

mom's fourth child. She was constantly in a rush, looking for ways to get as many chores done, and me getting sick got in the way of that.

Eventually, between long blinks, my mom came. She talked to the nurse and helped me stand up. She asked me how I felt, and I imagined my replies. I stumbled along her holding my hand and threw myself on the seat. After pulls from the car from the turns my mom was taking, the garage door rattled and opened.

I chugged some nasty syrup with tears, and she laid me on her bed. A big, warm, cushioned bed where I melted in the middle. My mom left to make a phone call and I blinked slowly.

I almost fell asleep when the door opened. I widened my eyes and wriggled to the middle of the bed to make space for my mom to lie down with me.

She bent over me. "Voy a recoger a tus hermanos. Dejaré la puerta cerrada. Ten cuidado," she rapped.

"¿Qué? ¿No te vas a quedar conmigo?" I coughed out.

"No. Vuelvo más tarde. Lo prometo," she kissed my forehead.

"Okay."

I didn't see her leave, but I heard the door close. I remember my hot breath hitting my cheek and my body shaking. And my nightmare began.

The cold water slapped my body, asphyxiating me with its waves that wrapped me in its forced embrace. A cold hand grabbed my arm and I gasped. I rolled to face the ceiling and rubbed my eye. I tried running my fingers through my hair, but my bangs were stubborn, sticking to my forehead in thin curls. My eyes adjusted to the blurry lights. I looked at the tiny hand.

There he was, the kid with missing teeth showing off what he had left with a huge smile. “Mamá Wywy,” he pulled on my arm while using that embarrassing nickname. The one my parents came up with after hearing me yell “Weeeee! Weeeee!” to counter the nervous feeling in my stomach whenever my father rushed up and down the colinas in Juárez. They thought I was having fun. But I was terrified.

“¿Qué?” my voice was sore.

“Mami dice que vengas a comer,” he pulled harder.

“Ahorita,” I rubbed my eyes more.

“Ya,” he tugged.

“Ahí voy,” I jerked away from him.

“Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry,” he kept going. I swayed trying to get out of bed, my ears ringing. He jumped in circles around me squealing.

The kitchen light blinded me with the full force of its warm lighting that is tame on a regular day. The youngest rushed back to the table to finish his chicken caldo and a small plate of arroz rojo, the tradition I started for sick days. Everyone ate it to prevent the rest from getting sick. We all plumped ourselves up to strengthen our defenses. It also made the sick person feel included. Or, at least, it helped make my mom’s job easier if we all ate the same thing.

I sat down and my mom set a big bowl in front of me. I thanked her and took a generous spoonful. The fatty consommé slid down and soothed my throat. I kicked my feet in the air and took another spoonful. The soft potato broke in my mouth and sunk inside my stomach. This is real food, I thought. Carrots, celery, cilantro, and rice settled in my stomach in a party of flavors. I no longer felt like a small, shaky kitten anymore—I had energy.

“¡El caldo es mejor que la medicina! ¡Te lo dije!” I turned to my mom.

“Sí,” she nodded. “¿Ya te sientes mejor?”

“Sí,” I smiled.

“Qué bueno,” my mom smiled back. She took a bite of her tortilla.

The youngest left and ran upstairs to his room. There was a loud thud followed by short, rapid steps.

“¡Ten cuidado!” my mom yelled without looking back.

I stared at my empty bowl. I wanted more but I wasn't that brave. I felt better but not enough to go to my room. I had to rest, but I was also bored of resting. I sat there staring at my mom eating.

My mom chewed and hummed. I looked around. Being alone was weird. I was used to the youngest's constant talking, the middle one's random interruptions, and my mom finding ways to ask us what we are up to indirectly.

“Ma, guess what?” I took the middle one's role.

She held her hand in the air signaling she was chewing. “¿Qué pasó?” she swallowed.

“Tengo el mismo...sueño todos los días.”

“¿En serio?” she stuffed her tortilla with rice.

“Y guess what?” I squeaked.

“Stephanie,” she covered her mouth, “déjame comer primero.” She stood up to serve herself more rice.

I followed her. She turned towards the fridge and almost hit me. I skipped back.

“Pues, no es un sueño...normal,” I skipped again, “es un sueño donde veo ángeles.”

“Ese es un buen sueño,” she cut a lime. She smiled.

“Ssssí,” I pushed the word out. I curled my lips in. “Estabas en mi sueño, mami. Te vi con Dios.”

Her body swung with the dry lime in her hand to face me. “A ver. Dime.”

I paused.

She threw the lime away and brought her plate back to the table.

I sat down and inhaled.

“Todo comenzaba con escaleras parecidas a esos templos de las películas de Jesús que pones. ¡Eran muy grandes! ¡Y yo tenía que escalarlas!” I leaned back, pointing at our high ceiling, almost falling off my chair. I huffed and pushed my glasses down my nose. I threw my hands in the air and covered my face. “No veía nada,” I peeked through.

My mom’s eyes were fixed on me. Her caldo lost its steam. A piece of tortilla hung from her fingers.

I put my hands on my lap and interlocked my fingers.

“También te veía llorar,” I revealed, “en esa burbuja mágica. Dios me dijo que podía quedarme pero quería regresar. Tenía mucho miedo allí...” I sniffed.

My mom tossed her tortilla in the tortillero.

“Qué fascinante,” she extended her arm towards me. “No lo puedo creer,” she grabbed my hand.

“¿Por qué?” a smile wriggled out.

“Sabías que,” she chuckled, “cuando tenías como un añito, siempre querías beber el agua sucia para trapear. Siempre te decía que no y parabas pero... siempre tenías tanta curiosidad por todo,” she sighed.

“¿Y luego?”

“Bueno, un día te caíste. Yo estaba en otra habitación. Cuando te encontré, tus piernas estaban hacia arriba,” her voice shook.

“¿Y qué pasó?” I flinched.

“Tu carita estaba morada cuando te saqué del bote e hice CPR. No sabía como hacerlo. Todavía no abrías tus ojitos pero seguía y seguía tratando,” her eyebrows twitched. “Comencé a rezar,” she rubbed my hand.

She tightened her grip. “Dios decidió devolverte a mí. Fue un milagro. Estoy segura.” She stared at me. “Tu sueño es la prueba. Dios te eligió a ti, Stephanie.”

I frowned. “¿Me eligió? ¿Para qué?”

“Todos tenemos un propósito, pero tú eres especial. Te regaló la vida,” she paused, “*una vez más,*” she stressed the words.

A gift, I thought. A luxury you must pay for with gratitude. Twice, I repeated.

She stood up, hugged me, and kissed me on the forehead as I sat down frozen. Her movements strung around the dining table like ribbons on tablecloths as she collected bowls to stack them against her chest. She looked animated—elegant—ecstatic. She sent the dishes to the sink with her angelic hum, and I wondered why I couldn’t hum along her. All I could do is sit at the thought of God choosing and it being *me*.

I was horrified.

My name

I often feel—some days attacking me more than others—that I am a supporting character in my own story. I'm forced into a cliché hero's journey surrounded by peculiar things and promises of grandness even though I never considered myself great. The peculiar and the promises remain as potentials, their energy directed nowhere to dissipate as guilt. It's an unbreakable cycle that drags me out of my bed every day.

“You'll do this, you'll do that”, I've heard it many times from my hopeful and hardworking immigrant parents. But I haven't done this or that. In fact, I don't even know what I could do except nod, frown, scratch my skin, and clean.

I'm an imposter. Because I don't know what to do, and they don't really know me.

I reflect—not fit in.

I am the black sheep of a black sheep family in a country with an overbearing presence. The first child and only daughter to Mexican parents who established themselves among strange faces; the first to be born here with a strange last name. A stranger to the life my parents grew up with, a stranger to the people at school, a stranger to my own skin, rough and pale, my tongue trabándose all the time.

A stranger to all, aware of what she is not.

I know the best I can do is watch from the sidelines to try to meet in the middle. I am not the character in the religious stories my mom put me to sleep, but I don't bring it up. I know I am not the woman she grew up to be, but I acknowledge her worries. I know, too, that I am neither American nor Mexican, but something in-between, and that in-between stretches far to the point that the hyphen is meaningless.

The strangest part of a stranger is being aware of what they're not, but unable to put a name to what they are. Always roaming without a home, without direction, without staying long enough for someone else to know what that's all about.

Those who have seen me describe me along the lines that I don't talk much. They're right. Instead, I think too much. I have too much to wonder about; maybe that's why I write. With all these years of thinking and keeping quiet, I accumulated too many reasons to explain why I see myself as an outsider. And why I'm so confident about that.

I'll start it off with the horrors of awareness. I don't know how common it is to be aware of the hyperawareness you had as a child. I don't have fond memories of it. To me, awareness has always been sort of a tease; a smirk from an invisible entity. It's an endless chase to get the bigger picture—the hidden treasure—with a trail of breadcrumbs cut short that others claim as enough. They call it proof or miracles while I grit my teeth at the joke. I wanted to know what it was I was seeing, what it was I was feeling, what that meant, and what I should do about it. But being a child meant closing my eyes on purpose, if not I had to lock myself in my room.

My mom admired the fresh innocence of children. She told me childhood is meant to be happy, careless, and free. Satisfying.

But I was an old soul. Whenever I thought or noticed something I felt I wasn't supposed to, I would punish myself before she did, usually dragging a small stool we used to grab things from the cabinet, placing it in a corner and sitting on it, wondering how to be a normal child. I couldn't ignore the ugly things. I wasn't like the children she described, happy and satisfied with that feeling.

My constant curiosity came to me like a curse.

My mom gave me reminders that children are innocent, and only the innocent could go into Heaven. If I already asked questions, doubted things, and noticed lies, what fate awaited me the day I became a teen? I pretended not to care about all I wanted to figure out, and with that, began my wandering. Could be to a place where I didn't have to think so much, could be to a place where thinking was normal. Most likely it was just an attempt to drag out the time it took me to accept what I knew.

But I'm not so scared of that anymore. I don't fear Heaven or Hell, and now I'm used to nightmares. Like a bitter old woman, rather than fear, I react with anger or tiredness. Not cause I'm trying to rebel against it, this old woman is no hero. I am just aware of how things work, and to my luck, I cannot work that way. What I wanted to figure out, I did, and I don't know what to do with it. There's no one to talk about it with, not unless I want to give my mom a heart attack. I need to make a new friend, or I'll bore the one I already have, maybe get my brothers to open the door, or speedrun my boyfriend falling asleep.

Awareness is not pretty when there's not much to do about it. Without an outlet, it stays bottled inside, pushing up against my temples. And somewhere in there, there's me. I solve things and forget myself. I finished this chapter but forgot to eat.

The cycle repeats.

In the end, awareness is not a hunger for knowledge. It's simply when your eyes widen without your permission, and once you realize, you can't pretend to fall asleep. It's a continuous, endless process. It's not always bad, but when it is...I guess there's a reason why it's harder to sleep the

older you get and easier to accept that you must wake up. Living a life on autopilot, with consciousness yet forgetfulness, is possible because we have things to do. Siempre hay algo que hacer, no hay por qué aburrirse. I'm wasting time if I pause and breathe.

Pausing and breathing isn't an action. If there's something to do, there's purpose in your life. We become fast, forgetful city bugs that don't bother with anyone. That's the type of environment I grew up in. So, then I think, how is it strange that I see myself as an outsider when we all do our own thing?

How do you know what you want if you forget yourself, too?

One question brings another, and the collection of questions points out different aspects of myself and my life. Even their origin is a question itself, like the chicken and the egg. Am I like this because of my life, or is my life like this because of me?

To solve the mystery means that the concepts of "life" and "I" exist independently. Therefore, neither my life nor I need the other to exist. Since there is no direct or fixed cause and effect, "who I am" and "why" are always in an awkward relationship composed of a jumble of variables. These variables can be named, but not isolated.

I am an outsider because of our differences; differences which I can control and not. If I had the choice to be in another place—if I wasn't some broke college student—maybe I'd find myself. For now, I can be named according to what I am not: the gap between me and the other that defines both myself and that.

Awareness and Identity: the beginnings of understanding and structuring

Since we don't exist in a vacuum, there's an undeniable relationship between our identity—that is, how we define and present ourselves—and our environment. We become aware of distinctive features, patterns, and laws that map where we are, mirroring our surroundings to ourselves instinctively. Automatically, this relationship determines identity as an external and internal practice that is under constant construction. The relationship is reciprocal, unless there's a disconnection in the way, consequently compromising identity. Making you feel cold and lonely.

As an outsider, disconnections are inevitable. First, to explain better, a disconnection is not the same as a difference. *Disconnections* are presented as a gap between the self and the other that cannot be characterized, resulting in an inability to relate, comprehend, tolerate, and adapt. Simply put, it's a clash between experience and interpretation.

The tricky part is that disconnections derive from differences, as these differences acknowledge individuality, and with individuality, we are bound to have different values and perceptions that leave us thinking: am I weird? However, to claim differences automate disconnections is too vague. Rather, the type of difference between the individual and their comparison is responsible because the knowledge, circumstances, and perspectives that we have may not match or be insufficient to assimilate. We are selective about what we connect to, and other times, we have no choice, such as the home you are born into. So, when I hear my best friend laugh with her parents across the hallway from the room I'm waiting for her, I can't help but feel a coldness in my chest. It's lonely. I can't relate to that relationship, and I feel disconnected.

I wouldn't feel that way if I had grown up laughing with my parents, too. Instead, I grew up learning to straighten my back and say "Mande". She might not understand this loneliness, even

if laughing is such a simple task. Disconnections are always attached to a “bigger picture”, you cannot understand a person by looking at the mismatch of feelings, thoughts, and all at face value. There’s a deeper reason, a collection of experiences that are responsible for the distance we feel from one another. This distance can be internal, too, in which we feel a disconnection from our own self. We don’t understand our feelings. We don’t understand why we act this way. Again, it’s a clash between interpretation and experience. Even if it’s our life, we can’t always understand it.

How do we come to understand to begin with? How do we own our experience, making it part of who we are? The most basic form of learning begins with the interaction with our environment.¹ We notice the sun goes up during the day and goes down at night. This is the knowledge we accept as fact. Once we talk about ourselves, it isn’t as easy as that. We need to argue for our specific traits, confident that it’s what brands us against others who shake their heads in disbelief.

For instance, I don’t believe in zodiacs or blood types, even though they are used to describe me. I’m a Gemini. I’m a curious person but I’m not unpredictable, only when I interrupt conversations with a thought I have. In fact, I hate unpredictable things, except for movies. I like to watch movies and see if I can guess the ending, which I am really good at, so I enjoy it when I am proven wrong. I’m not arrogant, either, although I may appear that way. It’s just that I have become accustomed to distancing myself so if someone comes up to me, I can’t get rid of my robot body. I feel uncomfortable, sorry. I haven’t oiled up my brain in a long time to have a proper conversation.

¹ My approach to identity development is grounded on embodied cognition. For more information on embodied cognition, see Macedonia, Manuela, *Embodied Learning: Why at School the Mind Needs the Body*.

See how these traits are too general to describe me?

To own experience as our own, we need an additional, intricate, and intimate level to the way we learn. Without it, we cannot even point out what's wrong. I wouldn't be able to split myself from words I don't believe describe me. However, since we don't exist in a vacuum, we cannot always split the self from the other without an external factor. As a Gemini, as an older sister, as a woman—as anything—I've been told often that I am this and that. There is a difference—a disconnection—between the way I appear and the way I am. I have to find a way to make space for my own interpretation so I am not constantly reconstructed by what others think.

Therefore, in addition to figuring ourselves, we have to figure out how we can make space for ourselves in our environment. After all, that is what identity is: how we define and present ourselves. To present Stephanie, I refer to my environment, picking up on certain cues.

Movies set in high school always do this: repeating the types of social groups each belongs to, and the main character never knows which one suits them best. I'm a little nerdy but I am also artistic. I can't exactly cut myself in half to be in both groups. To present the nerdy, artistic me, I need to learn how to slither around.

Being able to adapt is already part of our survival, testimony to the necessary fluidity of identity. Nevertheless, to avoid having constant midlife crises with constant exposure to different perspectives and experiences, there's a level of consciousness we have over our experiences that processes and regulates our selectiveness. In other words, we have some control over our identity development.

Referring back to the existential question of order, control cannot precede the assimilation of our surroundings. We weren't born figuring things out. A relationship that is under constant change and adaption is reciprocal and, thus, simultaneous. When we interact with our surroundings, we are not taking information as it is but finding its relevance to us—its meaning—that cannot exist without a reference, such as memories and knowledge.

References, however, cannot resurface on command, consciously, without fail due to our limited memory and capabilities. Control, then, cannot equal absolute authority and is limited to our cognitive processes and predetermined circumstances, or inner and outer factors. Thus, I define control as a conscious effort, or the ability and degree to which we self-analyze and make decisions, formally known as *introspection*.

Introspection works at several stages, from awareness to action, because it addresses both the experience and the individual. As a result, it is involved in every stage of development and understanding, providing stability. If not, our experiences would be cold, meaningless information computed for basic and mindless survival, without direction and attributed to our species over our singularity. Without a single story to tell.

Eventually, there comes a point where our analysis reveals our distinctions—our essence—like planets forming around each other with trails of dust waiting for their owner. Our experiences that were messy at first are cleaned up to reveal our individuality. Since the process is simultaneous, it cannot be traced nor isolated and, more importantly, the process is irregular. It's impossible to know when our self is truly grounded. We have a sense of it, best expressed as a confidence in our comprehension of ourselves that remains stable despite being introduced to new ideas and environments. That's not to say it's unchangeable but that it can do so while keeping oneness, maintaining the ecosystem of our being. When we start to attach new experiences to our

growing self, the process matures to the extent that identity affects the way we analyze, allowing itself to be revised. Hence, introspection involves the regulation, or homeostasis, of our self.

The problem is that everyone's world doesn't rotate the same, perfectly in sync, in a perfect universe. What about the outsider who still lives in chaos, with a sense of self being built on disconnections? How do we manage gaps that cannot be characterized?

After a calamity, we hope to find some sanity. It's not as easy as the cliché promise that time heals, though a period of great change is a catalyst for identity reform, and it's not always pretty. Uncertainty is part of us, too. This is too obvious to the outsider. To survive the chaos and establish identity—to manage disconnections—we must be conscious of the distance, or the gap between our self and the other. In other words, the differences and similarities that make up our individuality and why they get in our way.

Like our experiences, figuring out why is bound by a selective process. It's impossible to define how everyone establishes themselves, however, there is one commonality: adaptability. I mentioned before that identity is fluid, reconstructing itself. It's subject to a reciprocal relationship between interaction and reaction, the inner and outer factors that make up who we are. Therefore, to define the gap requires an approach that is just as flexible, a conscious effort that matures as we do. More importantly, this approach acknowledges the outsider because understanding who we are means understanding what we are not.

I begin by describing the most apparent gap: our social environment.

Being that identity is also the presentation of the self, there is a heavy social influence that affects the meaning of identity, evident in the fear parents have towards their teenagers' change. We begin with influence within smaller units (e.g. our family) to bigger groups (e.g. politics). Both will have differing views that can cause disagreements, rejections, and, ultimately, disconnections that make us rethink what we identify with.

Disconnections are clearer at smaller levels and usually faceless in bigger units, a frustrating cause of systemic troubles that implement standards and expectations, such as gender roles. Regardless, neither unit of society is homogenous despite their crusade for a common mentality and attitude. There are still gaps that we recognize and adjust to accordingly. To understand the diverse requirements of each group and our roles within them, we need to adjust our level of thinking, adjacent to the way we adjust our personality in each group we participate in.

At first glance, the most immediate form of interaction is physical. The way we look. If it stopped at that, though, we wouldn't have so many wars and discriminatory issues. As we mature, our thinking includes more of the psychological, concepts beyond a tangible experience. These levels of thinking, between the physical and psychological, allow us to adapt from smaller to bigger units in society.² For example, during our early childhood, we understand experiences primarily through *local* terms. Our relationships are immediate and within smaller units. Sister and brother, daughter and mother, teacher and student. These local relationships are physical, visible concepts that require less engagement to comprehend. Then we grow, and our world grows with us. To

² Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira evaluate this development.

comprehend what these identities mean outside one's immediate circle requires thinking in more abstract, or *global* terms, to broaden concepts.³

Accordingly, our role adapts to the local and global needs of our social environment. That does not mean, though, that we engage in close relationships through local terms only and in large groups through global terms. I don't talk to my friend about simple topics only. I'd bore her away. No, within a social unit of just two people, there are both simple and complex concerns. These two types of conceptualizations, local versus global, simply represent the two extremities of our spectrum of learning. So, I use these two terms to describe how we can view the diverse needs of our society through simpler or more general lenses. I use the two countries I'm from, Mexico and the United States, to visualize the adjustment between local and global terms and how we adapt to these contrasting needs.

America, in general, follows individualism. Extreme individualism follows isolation and absolute control, claiming that one's environment, resources, and life overall are directly influenced by their choices and actions only. We see this dominate self-help (or self-success) media where an expert advises on approaches to the target subject to improve your life.⁴ On the other hand, Mexico follows collectivism. Collectivism is collaborative; the individual works to satisfy the goals and needs of the group they belong to, acknowledging that their choices and actions are influenced by predetermined factors, resulting in putting the group's needs above their own. A stereotypical collectivist is a housewife as they are expected to handle the well-being of their family. The family, then, acts as a unit, where one's choices affect the entire family.

³ Global and local terms adopted from Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira.

⁴ Example from Linde 200.

Individualism versus collectivism are extremes. Society can lean towards one, though they will always coexist. Even if we begged and prayed and put a note under our pillow and slept on it, there's no perfect, pure, single-minded country. A country that leans heavily on one side will have someone who rolls over to the other. The structure of society and any survival practice, in general, requires degrees of independence and interdependence, so I remind you once again of the unrealistic standard of extremism.

For instance, housewives participate in individualistic practices, too, like advice columns from a fictitious, reliable aunt next door. Therefore, when we analyze a country at localized levels (per individual) we notice that individuals adapt and adjust according to their situation. I do not talk to my mom the same way I do at work. I appear more submissive when conversing with my mom than I usually present myself. If not, she'd communicate with her sandal. And, at work, no one would take me seriously if I spoke softly.

Adapting while retaining our sense of self is one of the biggest challenges and contradictions to our identity development and, consequently, a determinant in our disconnection. I say contradiction owing to identity being an ongoing and simultaneous process, making it impossible to point out exactly when or how it has been formalized to then revise itself. As a result, identity performs with uncertainty, a fine line bordering an unfinished process that hasn't been grounded and a stable foundation that is added onto. Revision itself signifies change, and change is neither linear nor exclusively positive. It can regress instead.

To stabilize the self is an existential question again. It invites the discussion of an essence, a core, a perfect size for us. More precisely, it's a part of us that remains unchanged, a sort of control variable. In our environment, this would be natural law. Identity, though, purposely

opposes natural law. Instead, it works based on beliefs we hold true about ourselves. Beliefs that others have for us, as well, unfortunately.

As much as I wished I didn't have to consider what is expected of me (I mean, really, can we normalize taking month-long vacations off work?), I know the world doesn't revolve around me. We must respond to our personal needs and those of our community. We cannot remain restless, ignorant, complacent, or blindly expect our will to pave the way. Our social environment institutes certain beliefs that define proper action or the presentation of who we are, signaling a disconnection when we cannot do that.

Some beliefs are regarded as common sense, assumptions that vary culturally. Don't step inside the house with your bare feet or you'll catch a cold. Other beliefs are specialized, for instance, parents prefer one school over another based on the educational models they agree with. Together, these *belief systems* are comprised of interpretations that have been predetermined by a particular individual or group.⁵ Therefore, the individual must work to filter the belief systems of their society whilst filtering and evolving their own to know what is true about them.

But opposing a belief system that has been widely accepted is like chasing your own shadow. To understand who we are, we must also defy how someone, or a society, thinks and acts. More complicatedly, some disconnections may be normalized, or desensitized, starting an endless loop. An example that hits home for me is motherhood. My family is traditional when it comes to parental roles, with the only exception being making money. It's expected that I will work and raise children, the ultimate package. Currently, I don't see how I can do that in the U.S. with the

⁵ Adopted and redefined from Linde 163.

economic state and unpredictable healthcare we have. I, like many women, have to choose between careers or families. It's such a commonly repeated problem we have become desensitized to it, consequently losing its value and importance even further.

Even though I want children, it's not part of my definition of womanhood. This view is stressful because I am bound to clash with the standard view of womanhood, which remains fairly traditional. Taking a stance to protect your own beliefs but also acknowledge the other side is impossible when society doesn't allow you a space for you to squeeze in. My voice can be so small. Even if I had the power to say "This is who I am", it's hard to be accepted by others who have grown up differently, in an environment where who you are is rare. Arguments that are labeled weak and unwanted go in one ear and out the other to become nameless statistics. Our names introduce empty shells, held by broken bits that hang on by a thinning thread, a single connection that we scavenge to introduce ourselves. And then, to top it off, our struggle is romanticized. The broken woman is somehow seductive, her pain making her a delicate flower.

There's no foolproof solution to this issue, more so considering that there is no direct proof of a stable identity. Nevertheless, as we need to acknowledge what we are not along with who we are, I propose that the best trick is to learn how to meet halfway—how to explain and present myself to those who don't see me the same way. It's ridiculous to expect to be accepted so easily if my beliefs are not generalized; not the standard that others are comfortable with. They didn't live my life. They don't feel what I do. Like I said, I cannot expect my friend to understand the loneliness I feel when I see others getting along with their parents. That is if I were simply to say: "I'm lonely". So what?

To play along, I need to localize my experiences, proposing an experience that is relatable and, hence, understandable. My loneliness feels like looking out the window during a car ride. I feel detached; separate from the world out there. It's not like I'm missing anything outside that window, still, I want to keep looking. Being far from the scenery allows me to appreciate its simplicity. And, at the same time, it's so simple that I feel lonely because I am satisfied with such a tiny thing. So, when I think about how others can have those simple, loving moments with their parents when I can't, I realize I miss something I didn't even know existed until I saw it from afar.

Being able to present myself as more relatable is something I have practiced as an outsider because I'm constantly alienated, viewing everything from the outside. I'm constantly put to the test when I speak with my family in Mexico, trying not to appear too Americanized.

I'm faced with constant disconnections from my two cultures. To fit in with the locals, as they say, obligates one to expand their experience, detach from it, and then localize it once again to act upon it. It's similar to speaking in the third person when telling a story to someone. We know the difference between "I" and "me" yet agree that these two belong to the same person. Correspondingly, I know the difference between my role and actions within the Mexican community and that of the American side. When I'm faced with a difference I cannot adapt to yet, I pay attention to my surroundings and pick up mannerisms and cues until imitation becomes agency. It's like I forget about myself temporarily then yank my soul back to respond.

In the end, adapting requires a high degree of awareness that construes our environment, defining the similarities and differences as a mirror definition of our identity. We cannot live without the other, but with the incredible amount of information we are exposed to, we must develop the ability to clean up the area, choosing which beliefs to keep and which roles to play, adapting to the situation overall. Regardless, this ability which I define as conscious control, or

introspection, is possible only if we relate an experience to ourselves. Because, with the changing climate of things, with all those daily challenges and running mouths, the one that remains constant is the owner of your life, you. Therefore, yanking our soul back is not easy when we do not have a solid foundation of who we are, bringing me back to the relationship between our identity and our environment, the beginning of experience.

Just as we desire familiarity to be accepted by others, do we desire to be familiar with ourselves. We need to understand our experiences further and organize them in a way that makes them part of us. Describing the environment through social terms is insufficient to capture the complexity of identity development. Thus, I expand my approach to structure the environment formally, as well as introspection.

Because to get to know me is to know more than what I present. You must listen to the story of my life. This is the bigger picture, the collection of experiences that show how I came to be, and what I must conquer first.

Houses and Homes

Houses are stripped from arches and curves
with windows to wow highways
I'm left with few stars
but enough for me to count my blessings

I yawn stretch my arms and hit a wall
If I open the door I dance on hot concrete
descendant of the grass that dried up (ni modo)
cause our water tastes bitter to nature
so I run my fingers through the cracks of the cement
watching the ants run away

I don't want to be here either, I say
but my family is also hungry
I grab one by the tiny leaf they're carrying
it twists and turns and settles down,
and I place it near its home

A car beeps behind me
Crazy girl what are you doing in the middle of my driveway!
the old man ruins everything, always proud
of his cube with a silly pyramid on top
painted a shade darker than the dirt digging inside my toenails

He sweeps the air around me trying to get me to leave
I run to my house and remember my mom hates dirt inside
I push my finger into the hole of the water hose
cold water sprays my face and drips down my shoulders
I smile at no one, at nothing
and run around in circles drying under the desert sun, laughing
for no reason

I stop at the large shadow at my feet.

Niña traviesa! my dad slaps my back
Te resfriarás y yo no pagaré nada—te cuidarás sola!
he drags me to the kitchen by my shirt tag
I feel like I'm floating when I no longer twist and turn
but I have to admit my armpits hurt

Now I'm on the chair staring at my third tomato soup this week
with star-shaped pasta peeking through
I have to eat

I sniff
then wipe my nose on my arm.

And I swallow stars and tomato and thoughts about homes that are more than a roof above my
head, far, far away.

**2:
Identity and The Life Story**

The end of the world

Without me

That's the way my life is.

The end of the world

The first time I remember keeping a journal or diary on my own was during the end of the world, May 2009. The first of many ends of the world. It was three weeks before my birthday, and right after a field trip to Peter Piper. I was very nervous, not only from the excitement but also from the pocket money my mom gave me that day.

It was probably around ten dollars, which felt like five too much, but I didn't expect anything. Really. Nothing. I grew up knowing not to ask for money from my parents because money always made them fight. We weren't well off, I knew that. I didn't need to be traumatized to know how to read the situation. Because even if my parents were kind, my classmates let me know when they would point at my shoes.

That morning, I saw my tired mom smile at me and tell me, "Ten, mija," as she reached into her bag. She stretched her arm to the back seat where I was sandwiched between my brothers.

"Why does she get money? I want money!" the youngest yelled.

"Es para el field trip de tu hermana. Tú no vas a ningún lado," my mom responded. My brother groaned and kicked around, hitting me every other time.

Even though my brother's accidental kicks to my knees were painful, I did not move. I left my hand extended. My fingers twitched a little. I was staring at the smelly, wasted paper. 40 tokens was too much. Too fun.

Eventually, my brother got tired of kicking and cars started honking. "Ya váyanse," my mom shooed us. "Van a llegar tarde."

I hid the money in my pencil case and slid out of the car. My brothers and I watched the car leave while holding hands. The car became a tiny toy with the turning signal blinking, the signal the middle one used to pull his hand away from mine and start walking inside.

It was our little routine, one that I stopped questioning and stressing over when I accepted he was responsible enough to get to class on time and safely. And one I secretly thanked him for when I had to deal with the crying koala whose voice screeched when I dropped him off at his class.

“Don’t go, Stephanie!” the koala would cling onto me.

“I have go to my field trip soon. Maybe tomorrow we can play.” For once I had an excuse he could believe. Usually, he’d continue crying until the teacher managed to pull him off me or I tricked him into coming into his classroom by sitting down in a chair and then running out. It was always embarrassing, but it was that or an alarm in my ears.

He pouted, hugged me, and left. It was strange seeing him agree fast, but at four years old, he understood how important a field trip was. It meant fun. You don’t mess with fun.

I headed to my classroom where everyone was everywhere, their voices bouncing off the walls of the room.

The desks weren’t in rows anymore. My classmates wriggled through them like worms. At the heart of the crowd were the two girls who called themselves my friends. Their giggling became louder since they had their fight. They were made for each other, always paying attention to what the other did and said, always fighting about the same thing. After they never reached an agreement, they would try to convince me that the other one was wrong. I couldn’t figure out what

they would gain from that or what they wanted from me, either. I also didn't want to speak badly about either of them. I don't talk shit behind someone's back (unless I don't have the chance to tell them) because once I decide to talk, I am the straightforward type. Not in a rude or cool way, but in a socially inept way. To avoid that, I went with "I'm surprised she didn't notice this about you".

That was until my parents' fights became more frequent, louder, messier, and obvious, and my patience was tested. I cringed at loud noises. Disorder stressed me out. I was annoyed at how messy people were and how they flaunted their flaws.

My therapist—my first one after the end of the world—called this being a "perfectionist".

But before the professionals got to me, I was being treated for my social crimes by a couple of nine-year-olds. In solidarity, my supposed friends refused to talk to me because not listening to them meant ignoring me. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't being bullied. At least, I didn't see it that way. What they did was literal child's play. No one screamed. No one threw anything. They couldn't bother someone that they needed to copy their homework, or someone who ran fast, or someone with nice, colorful pens. It was simple.

The teacher lined us up, everyone as messy as the desks zig-zagging around the classroom. She yelled at us to settle down, threatening to cancel our field trip. I sighed at how slow everyone was. Why couldn't people just do things right?

After our bumpy ride on the yellow bus with smelly and ripped seats, we arrived. I recognized the road because Peter Piper was next to the Walmart I went to with my mom. I knew where I was, and that was comforting. Immediately after entering, the poor Peter Piper was filled with high-

pitched screams and laughter and complaints of students being sent to sit with the rest of their class instead of their friends. Everyone's legs kicked in excitement, tightening their fists to stop themselves from snatching the tokens the teachers were handing out—some pity tokens from whatever party pack the school chose amounting to a little less than half a plastic cup. You'd think they were serving medication to some seniors instead of children with energy to spare for the teachers who groaned and sat down.

My pinch of tokens and a wasted ten-dollar bill would have to last four hours until we went back to school. I was afraid the machine would not read it because of how faded the whole thing was. It looked like it was made from pocket lint instead. These were the types of bills my parents carried, but judging by how easily it was given to me, this was from my mom. My father had the habit of giving too much when you asked for too little, and too little when he felt you were asking for too much. I used to call this the ugly stranger syndrome because he'd take pity on people he didn't know and help them out with our money, our clothes, our toys, and our time. Then he'd whine at my mom to control us when we'd cry because we missed our stuff.

It was too much to ask for field trip money. I wouldn't die without it.

Little by little, I'd exchange dollars for more tokens, hoping to make the best out of it. My plan worked well at the beginning since the boys hogged the expensive racing games I enjoyed. I used a handful of tokens to play lottery games, especially one with a bouncy ball. The bouncy ball fell from the top of a glass box, rolled around, then snuggled into a hole. The holes were part of a circle that spun around. The pace never changed, and the bouncy ball bounced the same. Its repetitive

and diminishing bounce both bored and soothed me. I wasn't thinking anything. Not looking at anything. Not expecting anything. I was free to doze off because no one wanted to play this game.

It didn't last long, though. I got bored and my stomach grumbled every now and then. I also didn't want to spend all my money on a silly game. Honestly, I don't remember how I spent the first maybe two hours before lunch, but knowing me, I probably went to every lottery machine and tried figuring out how they worked. Of course, I wouldn't know they were rigged. Still, I wasted time looking for any pattern that gave me an advantage.

Finally, the teacher called us to eat. Pepperoni pizza, questionable Coke, and watered-down Sprite. Everyone sat close to each other—shoulders rubbing, arms linking and overlapping, bodies stretching out to cover the faces of others—all trying to grab pizza while talking. I managed to get two slices. I peeled the pepperoni off and made a tower at the edge of the plate.

“You don't eat pepperoni?” the boy next to me asked. His voice was loud. Then again, everyone was talking. He had to be loud.

“No,” I cringed.

He got closer. “Why?”

“I don't like it.”

“What?” he got even closer.

“I...don't like it.”

“You're the first person I meet that doesn't like pepperoni.”

I looked down.

“Hey, Stephanie doesn't like pepperoni,” the boy tapped on his friend's shoulder.

“No way,” his friend leaned in to look at me. And word spread that I didn’t like pepperoni, and everyone talked about me without me.

“You’re so weird.”

“Yeah.”

“But free pepperoni.”

“Yeah!”

“Can we have it?”

I nodded. I was about to place them on a napkin when the little savages snatched the pepperoni away from my paper plate. The plate spun around, sliding on the table making short, scratchy sounds. My pizza was probably touched by their palms or a pinky or two.

It cost me my pepperoni, appetite, and promises to give them the chocolate cake we got served at the cafeteria sometimes that I also didn’t like to have the boys invite me to the racing games. I laughed so much I cried and, surprisingly, the only fights that happened were for cheating allegations. We pointed fingers at each other with our chests puffed up, called each other names, and yelled through chants from our classmates to rematch. After spending all the tokens in my tiny budget, I retired, and the boys forgot about me. I went back to eat my cold pizza.

I wondered what reaction my classmates would have had if they knew I preferred cold pizza. Would they have agreed that the stiff cheese and cold marinara sauce somehow has a better and stronger taste than the stringy cheese and messy marina that burns your tongue off? Or would that be the start of actual bullying? It was difficult to know what was crossing the line with others. Liking cold pizza may have been an irreparable sin. Letting them copy my homework, running faster, or even lending them my colorful pens would not be enough. It was simple, I was just too weird.

I shook it off.

“Stephanie,” I heard a squirrel voice. It was from one of my frienemies.

“Hmm?” I chewed on the stiff cheese.

“Want to go on the rollercoaster simulator?” their smile revealed almost all their teeth.

“I’m eating,” I mumbled.

“Come on, it feels so real!” the squirrels insisted.

“Why don’t you go? You still have time,” the teachers sitting near me also shot a smile that revealed almost all their teeth. They couldn’t talk with me there because I tell on them and then my mom storms into the school calling them inútiles straight to their face.

I suppressed my sigh and shoved the last bite of pizza in my mouth. The squirrels screeched and pulled me by my arms as they used to and stuck their faces close to mine, talking nonstop.

“Ah, we only have like a token each, thoughhh,” they stretched the last word. “Do you have any tokens left, Stephanie?”

“No,” I lied.

“What about money?” one looked at my pocket.

“Well,” I froze. The other patted me down.

“You do!” she yelled. “I can feel it on this side!”

“It’s cause—” she already invited herself to stick her hand in my pocket and pull a dollar bill out.

I went to the machine and spent the remaining dollars I could have put in my piggy bank on top of my closet. Not the type you break but a plastic box with stickers to look like an ATM. I liked that piggy bank as much as I liked saving money. I suppressed tears. My goal was fifty dollars at that time, and I had forty. I was so close. I could only scratch at the scabs on my knuckles to

deal with the guilt of spending money that was mine. Each scratch hurt more than the last, each time getting harder for me to hide my tears.

The end of the world is a comical tragedy. It's absurd. One would think, well, it can't get worse, right?

Mimicking movies where they cut to the next scene (after what, a ten minute ride?) we were back in school. Students were more sluggish, sticking to their own little groups away from me. I was able to sit down. Then, I was made to stand up again because the counselor came to pick me up. There was no phone call, just a tap on my shoulder to which the teacher, who was always upset at me for not paying attention, said quietly for once, "Stephanie they're here to pick you up. The counselor is going to walk you, okay?"

I saw her waving at me outside the door. I threw my backpack on and ignored the punch I felt on my stomach. I walked towards her.

"Hello," she introduced herself. "Your mom talked to me earlier," we began walking, "I offered to pick you up since she had to get your brothers."

"Why?" I stopped.

"She had to talk to their teachers." It was a lie, but I accepted it. I know for a fact because my mom only talked to the youngest's teacher, and it was always through a phone call or meetings. At that moment, I was just like my youngest brother—minus the crying. If I asked questions, they would not get answered because I am small and I don't know better.

The rest of the walk was silent, and we arrived at the office. Behind the glass door was my mom talking to the secretary and my brothers sitting down, quiet. Even the youngest was quiet.

“Bye!” the secretaries waved at us with large grins and loud voices.

“Digan adiós,” my mom scolded us.

“Bye,” my brothers and I let out a weak and dry farewell. The secretaries sounded excited, but no one looked excited. Especially not my family.

The confusion and silence punched my stomach again as we headed to the parking lot where our 2001 Civic Honda car was parked with its trunk half open. My blurry eyesight and stubborn refusal to wear my ugly-red-nail-polish-colored glasses couldn't make out what was sticking out of the trunk held by thick strings. “¿Qué es eso?” I pointed.

My mom didn't reply. I walked faster.

Sticking out the trunk of the car were laundry baskets stuffed with clothes and toys, including my little ATM. I looked inside the car. My backpack almost slipped off my shoulders. I didn't want to go inside.

However, with my mom, there is no want but do. Our entire life was forced to fit in the trunk, passenger seat, and between our legs inside a car whose air conditioner didn't work and could not be trusted to run further than two miles, and I know I couldn't ask about it. All I could do was to try avoiding the piles of things my mom placed in the back with us.

I didn't fit. No one did. I was uncomfortable. I wanted to kick around like my brother to make space for my legs but how could I do that when even he was staying still?

I looked outside. We didn't turn at the usual intersection.

I bit my lips trying to hold in my question. I also suddenly wanted to pee. The punches on my stomach were going all out. I closed my eyes and slowed down my breathing, forcing myself to fall asleep.

I woke up to a sharp turn. I rubbed my eyes to check for anything familiar, only to find old buildings and cars. I bit my lips again and stole a glance at my mom through the rearview mirror. Her eyebrows dug into the curves leading to her nose bridge. They created slits that reminded me of my piggy bank. I wanted to press a dime against them and get her to relax her face. If she didn't relax anytime soon, I'd have to admit I was scared.

I tightened my fists. “¿Dónde vamos?” my question was more of a statement.

“A un lugar.” My mom continued looking straight onto the road.

“¿Dónde?”

Silence.

“Dime ¿Dónde?”

Quiet.

I let out a groan and pressed my wet cheek against the cold window. I just hoped that I didn't go to ‘The Government’ my father yelled about.

“¡A ver qué hacen cuando yo no esté! ¡El gobierno cuidará de ustedes, mocosos malcriados!” is how it went.

He wasn't here with us. His stuff wasn't either. Now my nose was wet and the window felt colder. The blurry buildings kept passing by until we crossed a bridge next to the hospital where I was born. Oh.

Now I knew we were on the ‘other side’ of the city, not the Far East where realtors and banks once bragged about the houses that were new, big, and inviting. But in 2009, what was new in the Far East were papers posted on doors of empty houses surrounded by a desert covered in plastic bags, beer bottles, tires, and old furniture.

We passed by a tire shop.

“¿Vamos a la casa de abuelita?” I rubbed snot off my nose.

“No, pero estamos cerca.”

“Entonces ¿Dónde?”

“Ya verás.”

She turned onto a long, poorly designed street. There was a handful of desert pink apartments accompanied by a tiny elementary school and several lines of brick apartments on the other side. The sidewalks were cracked and raised from the heat with tall grass sticking through. Everything about this street was dangerous and unsettling, especially for the children who were crossing it alone.

I groaned. This was the school next to my grandma’s house, though. I thought my mom was lying to me. But then we passed by the dark laundromat that scared me and kept going further to another set of apartments taking an entire block. They used the same ugly bricks as the apartments earlier. A stop sign stood in front of the entrance.

“Vámonos.”

I put my hands under my butt. My mom stepped out.

“Afuera,” she said.

Without me

My diary was given to me on my ninth birthday, three weeks after I moved to The Cube, a government apartment with the smell of dust stuck between other cubes to make the perimeter of a raspy concrete heart.

We could hear each other's conversations through the walls. If you tried whispering, we would know the chisme anyway because we opened our doors to shoo the smell of dust that was unbearable. The heavy wooden doors had to be dragged against the wasted tile to be thrown open, leaving the flimsy metal one closed. The design was so basic: two thick parallel lines with white chipping paint curling at the ends with mesh wide enough to poke your finger in. With open doors, we would know each other's breakfast, lunch, and dinner, too.

The outside was just as bad. We were near the train tracks cutting through Basset Avenue, the same ones that cut through the alley my grandma lived in. Every night, trains would blow our eardrums out, waking us up if we weren't already from the thoughts of wanting to go home or a person trying to break in again. We couldn't go on afternoon walks anymore or ride around on our bikes. As soon as my mom parked, we had to rush inside, maybe not to avoid getting kidnapped but definitely to avoid the cars speeding through the street, always a hair away from taking our car's mirrors. At least our old car didn't look out of place. Everyone's cars were old, and they all matched this ugly building with wasted bricks in need of some fresh paint.

Flimsy, cheap, and temporary like The Cube, my first diary was a tiny notebook of thin, grey paper that was best used for tracing from its transparency bound by black, shaky plastic coils and hard cardboard covers. I knew my mom picked it out for me because the cardboard had cutouts of palm trees that revealed an aqua-colored paper underneath. She loved the beach despite never

being there. Maybe that's why. Our home had blue towels, ocean shower curtains, jars of shells, sand, palm tree paintings, and all that. And, based on the quality, the tiny book was from the dollar store. She frequented the dollar store for decorations, cheap birthday cards, and small gifts like pens.

Powdery balloons and a papery plastic table cover decorated a single folding table topped with a medium slow cooker full of nacho cheese, an open bag of tostadas, a smaller slow cooker with beans, foam bowls, and a simple cake with white whipped cream. Food I didn't like, but food that was easy and cheap to prepare. Underneath the table was a single gift bag with tissue shooting out. Slowly, my new neighbors came out, walking towards the food.

My mom returned from the office at the corner—which was the entrance to the apartments—inviting the social worker in charge to come eat. She signaled to her to come closer, and the worker waved her arms, smiling apologetically, mouthing that she had too much work. Seeing the line of neighbors forming, my mom let it go and rushed to the table, grabbing a spoon with one hand and a foam bowl with the other. The neighbors immediately pointed at what they wanted, asking if they could have more cheese and if there were some jalapeños or something.

“Qué bueno sería. Pero a miya no le gustan los jalapeños.”

They whined a joke out, left it with a “No se crea”, and went back to their place after a short thank you.

My mom attended the next one the same. Busy. Neither party looked at the other in the eyes. My mother's hands were shuffling foam bowls and spoons of cheese and beans, theirs scavenging for plates of free food, the bottom of the table empty with the single gift. The only ones celebrating were them.

I stomped towards her.

“Stop,” I put my hands on hers.

“¿Qué pasó?” she froze.

“Por favor...para,” my voice shook.

“Stephanie.”

She waited for my response. The neighbors stared above me.

“Perdón, sírvanse ustedes por mientras. Ahorita vuelvo,” she looked over at the rest of the line. She grabbed my arm and pulled me aside.

“¿Qué pasó? ¿Te sientes mal?”

“No...” I swallowed sour saliva.

“¿Entonces?”

“No quiero que coman nuestra comida,” I stepped back.

“Stephanie,” my mom called for my attention.

I stayed still.

“Stephanie.”

I lifted my head.

“Esta comida es para tu fiesta de cumpleaños. Es para que todos coman. Les dije que vinieran,” she stated.

“B-but they don’t care about me. They don’t care about anything! They just want free food!” I frowned. Half my view was blocked by my mom who was pinching her nose bridge, and the other half had my neighbors’ kids grabbing the tostadas, breaking them in the bag with their careless grips, and adding them to their erupting nacho volcano. “I hate them. They are so greedy. I hate them.”

“¿Qué quieres que hagamos?”

“Diles que no coman ya.”

“¿Entonces qué hacemos con toda esta comida? Si quieres, la tiro. Junto con el pastel porque se va a echar a perder,” she turned around.

“No!” I pulled her shirt.

“¿Qué es lo que quieres?” my mom turned around.

“No sé. I didn’t want a birthday party, Ma.”

“Stephanie,” she paused, “sé que es algo simple pero aún así quería celebrar tu cumpleaños. Lamento que no sea lo que querías,” she stared at the table and pulled my hand away gently, “al menos toma tu regalo.” Then she went to fix up the table.

My hands gripped my shirt to wrinkle its entire bottom. I’m stupid, I thought. I’m so stupid, I choked. I repeated it. I crinkled my nose and my eyes stung. Stupid. Everything is stupid. Through blurs, I saw the girl I hated the most smile at me and ask my mom for a plate. She was more stupid. She deserved the cheese spill on the floor instead.

I ran to the table, pushing past her with my shoulders hoping she would drop her plate then flinching at the guilt of wasting the food. She clicked her tongue and I ignored her, squatting down to grab my present, standing back up with my eyes glued to the floor to avoid my mom, and stomped back to The Cube where I would not come out for the rest of my party, writing—tearing—through the pages of the innocent little book while everyone finished my cake and my mom cleaned up by herself.

That's the way my life is.

I lived in The Cube for a month, and I took up the hobby of writing in my diary daily. My nightmares were less reserved for the night to push me around during the day. I became accustomed to my lucid dreaming, gaining the ability to control them well and, inexplicably, perceive that I was dreaming.

Still, while I was able to end a nightmare and wake up if I didn't like it, or manipulate the events to play out the way I wanted it to, I couldn't do anything about the girl I despised stealing my money and toys, her kicking me in the stomach until I spit out blood because she lost at a game, the older boy next door banging on the shaky metal door yelling that he loved me and he'll kill himself if I don't go out right now, and the mothers in the other apartments calling me a little slut for wearing my mom's shirt without a bra to play with the rest of the kids. I was aware I didn't have any control over my life. However, unlike before, I became aware that my parents didn't either.

My family was split, and everyone tried helping themselves. What I meant to them—what I could do for them—was useless now. In my mom's own words, "No hay nada que puedas hacer. Así son las cosas a veces."

But wrong things kept happening. Even if I couldn't prevent them or fix them, I still had to respond to them. That's how I found out that I can't cry from sadness but tear up so easily from frustration, and the only way to calm this frustration was to be left alone to think. As a nine-year-old, though, I had to pair up thinking with something else because I didn't have enough support, experience, maturity, or some vision and dream for something different.

Tomorrow was a luxury for me. My problems were now, and I had to do something as it happened to me.

In attempts to understand and do something about my frustration, I wrote coded questions and doodled daily scratching at what was on my mind and chest.

Why do the birds cry outside every morning? Are the baby birds sad to go to school?

When will my brothers become bigger than me? Do they act bigger too?

A drawing of a princess trapped in a cage, crying gold coins around her. The princess will die if she doesn't drink or eat soon.

These were coded because I was afraid that my mom would find it. Afraid she could read my mind and find that living was scarier than the Hell she warned me of. Afraid that she would know the reason there are blobs of ink and pen marks across the page was to hide the worst parts, and that the drawing of a snail I put on each corner was to cheer me up after my tears burned my face.

Eventually, I trained myself to keep these thoughts and feelings to myself, so I could easily decipher what I was asking about without needing the messy ink or the support snail. I knew it wasn't exactly an answer, but a grip on my experiences. Without stability, my child self was left trying to understand that the only horror wasn't your eyes being left wide open but what came after, even if it was running after turning off the lights.

After tiring myself out, closing my eyes, and waking up, the tingles and goosebumps remained. My emotions got complicated and mixed. I wasn't happy one moment and sad another, it wasn't clear-cut like that. Whatever happened in the past persisted in my present. What I

understood became more permanent because I wasn't facing my life at face value. I had to find stability in what I couldn't see, and with that, I was forced out of the comfort of a straw house and dreams.

The end of the world was to survive, to find a safe space in which I could rely on. My unit of safety was a matryoshka during my childhood, starting with a house until my parents argued and destroyed furniture, to my room where I was once somewhat content staring at my textured walls and ceiling fan, pretending I couldn't hear their screams. My safe space didn't move with me to the dusty room and bunkbed I now shared with my brothers. Neither did it shift to another location, at therapy where I drove my therapist crazy by swinging my legs constantly, nor at school where my closest friend was my desk glued to my cheek. My safe space was as small as the fragile, dollar-store diary in my hands. And keeping it alive were my thoughts, where home was at the back of my mind.

Identity and The Life Story: the pillars of a home and the landmarks of our world

For a child, a safe space is a home, and a home provides stability. But for a child that is taken out of a physical home, the meaning of stability, a safe space, and home starts to change. It's a shapeshifter, a brain-breaker, and the child is at a disadvantage because the rate and depth at which they can understand falls short to the complexity of their experiences. Their world is as big as they are. From house to room to book, a safe space is within their reach; the future is uncertain.

What they're working with are still beginnings, beginning with questions of where they are, who they are, how things can happen or change, and why they do. Formally, they are working on the beginning of their life story: the home for the self.

Life stories house experiences that were previously secluded and unrelated.⁶ Each room holds its history, connected to a bigger story. The home for the self contains many personal touches along with unwanted crumbs of mud left at the front door by guests that leave you silently screaming. Forgotten tales hypnotize during spring cleaning, reminiscing about the what-was and the what-ifs. Once you snap out of it, you tiptoe back to your room, passing by rooms that you don't wish to visit at all: rooms adorned with chandeliers of spiderwebs and a glitter of dust, rooms with so much clutter you trip, and rooms whose doors almost whisper to you, reminding you with each drop of sweat to stay away. Sometimes, there's no hallway at all to access the stranded doors, and you're left staring at walls.

What doors may open and when depends on the situation. Opening all at once is impossible. There are so many rooms we would forget what was inside most, and the reminiscence begins

⁶ I inferred that the difference between single accounts and life stories would be the manner in which they are organized.

again. Our history is not based on cold facts—the undeniable “truth” that we cannot store even in the most minimalistic of homes.

Correspondent to the meaning we give to a single experience, life stories are composed of an array of experiences and meanings that offer an inner perspective of our identities throughout our lives. These experiences are reasoned and organized as stories that give us memories, lessons, perspectives, and grudges. Unlike talking animals and bedtime morals, these stories breathe life—rather than mimic—because they represent a person instead of a governing theme. Without these stories, identities wouldn’t exist. We’d still be here, of course, but would we live to tell that?

As life stories are, well, stories, they require a structure that manages to establish and convey the self. There’s not one set example of a life story, which makes it difficult to describe and harder to structure. In technical terms, the life story is the recollection of events that create a coherent narrative that defines our self.⁷ What is considered coherent may vary from one individual to another due to differences in beliefs. Therefore, to expect a singular, universal example of one invalidates the life story as experiences are personalized.

I explained the personalization effect of experiences previously through the relationship between my social environment and identity. Similarly, culture largely dictates the workings of a life story and other forms of narrative accounts. As such, culture attempts to set an exemplary

⁷ The overlap between identity and the life story is described as “requiring the creation of coherence (Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira).” Linde 107 points to the same conclusion.

outline for expected norms, progress, and history that converge fundamental details. This is regarded as a *cultural concept of biography*.⁸

Moreover, language is also primarily cultural, affecting how life stories are to be told. So, culture governs what is considered coherent on top of desirable and feasible through our word choice and their connotations. Starting a story with the time your dog ate your homework and ending it with your goal to become a CEO loses the reader without some necessary context behind it. Context adds an “ahh, I see” to what was first condemned as absurd. Being able to present a storyline that is divergent from the standard due to context presents an opportunity to structure the life story outside of cultural bounds. Nevertheless, knowing which context is appropriate remains tricky.

A more apparent influence of language is grammar, syntax, and speech. As a bilingual and bicultural person (plus a mix of social anxiety) and as a writer, these are my greatest tests. The Spanish language and my Mexican background affects my English writing and discussions with awkward pauses and strange clauses that I cannot help at times. I forget many words. They come to me in either language first, their translation gone. The way I move my lips, the placement of my tongue, and the intonation, accent, and rhythm of the syllables are different for both languages, causing me to bite my tongue often.

After moving to El Paso when I was four years old, I tried hard to learn English so I wouldn't be made fun of, staring at the way people moved their lips. I did so well that I forgot to keep up with my Spanish, and now I am back to the same problem I had when I was four. I get anxious with all the s's I must shush out, a main indicator of the Chihuahua dialect. But I do not

⁸ Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira 3; refer to Linde, Chapter 2, for a deeper analysis on the relation between culture and life stories.

have that strong dialect, I have a soft voice, and I focus too much on pronunciation I end up sounding like a bad actor pretending to be a Spaniard. I end up stuttering in both my native languages. It's so bad that when I went to Cancún recently, A British man living there for twenty-five years told me I was good at English.

"I'm from Texas," I stared at him.

"Oh, then you're good at Spanish," he smiled.

"I'm from Juárez," I looked down. You don't call native speakers "good".

"That's great. You're teaching yourself both languages." He continued to speak about his children learning perfect Spanish, as one would expect from a child born and raised their entire life in Mexico. Not like me, who spent the first three years there, when I could barely read and write.

He kept going but I couldn't catch the rest. I was stuck at the words "good" and "teaching". Somehow I felt discriminated. He was right, I did have to teach myself Spanish and English. But I still didn't like those words.

Why does he have to say I'm good at all? As if I was competing. And why not say, "That's great that you *speak* both languages"? Was I bound to be teaching myself forever?

Condemned to be a mere apprentice of language, it's difficult for me to structure sentences sometimes because I sound unnatural. What is considered credible is usually the correct way of speaking or writing, and I like to mix things up. I can't help but stutter, make up words, and combine languages. It's crazy how a slip of the tongue and strange body language can lead to a loss of credibility in one place and be normal in another.

Additionally, there are specific differences in language that affect what we consider proper narration. For instance, the English language has a future tense. Other languages, like Japanese,

do not have this. Instead, the present tense is used. It's a basic example, but it shows how something as small as verbs can affect how we view time. An ambiguous present can challenge the standard narrative progression. So, depending on language to structure a life story just doesn't suit me, the outsider, that exists between languages.

I acknowledge that the deep roots culture has in life stories are unavoidable and, consequently, inseparable. However, to properly define and structure life stories, there should be a clear distinction between the normative and the personal whilst coexisting, in line with the version of identity that is generalized and the version we accept as ours. The normative is what is expected (often confused as natural) and the personal is the individualistic (specific) portrayal of it. This way, we provide a juxtaposition, a mirror image of our surroundings to ourselves that isn't clear-cut. Essentially, life stories should clearly define the gap: the life story of those like me versus the way life happened to me.

To recognize a life story, one must acknowledge the individual. Working backward, acknowledging the individual is possible by acknowledging the self: the several identities they possess. Next, identity is established through interaction with our environment, which I summarize as experience. Experience, then, is the basic unit that the individual and life stories share. Therefore, the life story should be achieved through the same rules, just at a higher level of complexity. For that reason, I refine my definition and application of introspection to construe an environment beyond social terms. To determine these terms, I turn to the theory of psychological distance.

Psychological distance is the perceived distance or distinction between the self and other phenomena that result from our interaction with the environment.⁹ Previously, I simplified the phenomena to social demands, which make up the first category of psychological distance: social distance. Hence, *social distance* is the perceived distinction between the self and social demands. These demands present themselves in many forms, such as friendship or systemic issues. Put differently, social distance measures how intimate or tolerant we are towards social interactions. Since the self is at the center of judgment, psychological distance is a perception. Meaning that how “close” or “far” we feel varies by person and situation. Psychological distance is not a literal, physical interpretation of how approximate one is.

So, not only does psychological distance analyze experience, but it can also serve as a measurement of our personalization of experience. For example, we can feel closeness, or familiarity, to an object that reminds us of a loved one (like a letter) despite them not being physically next to us. Conversely, we can feel far, or detached, from a stranger at a concert even if we are rubbing elbows against our will. The literal distance is irrelevant to the perceived distance. Near versus far distance works as a measurement of our personalization of experience, providing a clearer and universal spectrum for extremes that apply to categories outside of social distance.

The next category is *temporal distance*, the perceived distance between the present and the event we recall. Like the example of a loved one as opposed to a stranger, there’s a difference in the time we perceive versus the time that has actually passed or will pass. Moments stretch or flee, and our limited memory recalls distinctions in our past compared to our present, as well as expectations for the future. A classical example of temporal distance is the timeline of our

⁹ Definition and categories adopted from Maglio, Sam J et al.

progression regarding age. It's been around five years since I graduated from high school, a period that is usually determined as an important time in life.

Personally, though, I feel as if it's been longer than that, by three more years or so. I view high school Stephanie as immature, lost, cold, and detached. I cringe at the spark of a memory. After graduating, to survive university, I changed many habits, starting with my severe social anxiety. This change seems dramatic to me. Additionally, with the responsibilities I now carry as a young adult, my growth in maturity seems dramatic, too. In my opinion, my change is not proportional to the time that has passed, causing me to feel that a greater amount of time has passed by. Therefore, the psychological distance between present me and high school me is far.

The third category is *geographical distance*, also known as spatial distance. Despite the physicality of our surroundings, geographical distance remains a type of perception. Being physically close to a place—in my case, my house—can still result in detachment (far distance). A house is not necessarily a home. A physically far place could also result in far distance, however. I find that to be the case, usually, since a place far from where we live is bound to have great differences that we aren't used to. The average person doesn't have the time and money to travel and intake the diverse landscapes.

Despite being from Mexico, when my mom tells the locals from the south that the sun whips our skin red with dry heat, they shake their heads unable to truly imagine what that's like when they are used to wet roads and greenery blocking those roads. Likewise, being from a city, I cannot imagine what their life is like tending to farms or buying from local shops.

Finally, the last category is *hypothetical distance*, the possibility of an event occurring. I consider hypothetical distance to be heavily dependent on the other categories. I immediately think of a common Mexican experience: asking your mom if you can stay over at your friend's house.

Once you have the balls to ask her, you start by scoping out her mood. If I ask her when she's watching her favorite show, will that be a horrible interruption or the best timing since she's laughing?

Next, you think of the time. You know she dislikes you staying somewhere else too late or too long, so you draft a promise to be home before 10 AM. Maybe she'll be so happy with your punctuality that she'll let you stay longer next time. Okay, now how far is your friend's house? It's just seven minutes away, close to your neighborhood. And it's a good neighborhood, too! Everything looks good, so you ask. Of course, no matter how hard you visualize and attempt to predict an event, that doesn't guarantee a yes, even if everything seemed to point to that. I got so good at predictions I simply told my friend that my mom rejected me without even asking.

Hypothetical distance best expresses how several fields of distance work together to visualize a plausible environment. Likewise, the remaining categories intersect.¹⁰ Social distance can be affected by geographical distance, for example, long-distance relationships. While experiences may lean towards one, the other categories are simultaneously present at differing levels, contingent on what part of the experience is dissected. This further supports the personalization of experiences and our ability to adapt their meaning to our current needs.

Psychological distance provides an introspective analysis of experience that outlines an individual's unique response to their environment. The simultaneous collaboration of the four categories of psychological distance signals a spectrum that our process of understanding and identity development rely on. I went briefly over the existence of a spectrum in the previous chapter by comparing local versus global levels in individualistic versus collectivistic practices in

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis on the intersection and influence of the four categories, see Maglio, Sam J et al.

societies. To expand this to the omnitude of the environment requires a spectrum that can work at these two levels. For this reason, I ground introspection through psychological distance, structuring the environment through the same four categories.

Fundamentally, I am working backward, basing the environment and our thinking on the same structure. This creates a common ground between experience and introspection, resulting in an approach I can use at local levels, within a singular experience, and at the global level, within the life story. Additionally, I use psychological distance to structure introspection on the trust that the life story can be accessed through self-analysis solely.¹¹

Finally, the theory of psychological distance is proof that the gap exists. Its four distinct categories clarify the position of the individual. It's an egocentric theory that automatically accounts for the varying interpretations of a concept or experience. The gap is defined as its name states, a psychological distance, that varies from the raw, physical occurrence, thus resulting in a meaning that will never fully align with another's.

More importantly, psychological distance suggests that the gap is inherent to the self. We can't get rid of that gap, just adjust to it. The outsider is like everyone else. Despite that, the outsider remains kicking rocks by themselves. Something is missing—a sense of belonging—longing for a complete version of themselves. The outsider may draw the world to consist of their shoe, the rock, and the floor, hunched over to ignore the bright, blue sky but this setting is part of a larger universe. The self is not fully or nearly developed through singular scenarios, but through the events that make up the individual's life.

I now attempt to structure the life story.

¹¹ Linde 11

The life story is interesting because it's both natural and manmade due to our consciousness over our experiences. In part, our responses are automatic such as an increased heartbeat when talking to our crush. The other part, we can determine our response, such as choosing to speak to them after breaking our brains trying to figure out the best next step. When these two converge, we begin constructing a narrative. In this narrative, there's always the good, the silly, and the parts we want to escape from. We can't avoid disconnections because we can't control everything. The only way to eliminate disconnections permanently is to find them meaningless and factual, a background factor that has no value until we pick it up. So, just as I can't reduce identity to appearances, I can't reduce the life story to facts.

Relying on facts solely removes the self. They are insufficient to produce proper explanations for individuality because they are one-dimensional and inarguable. Instead, there's a need for a narrative, a set of accounts that reasons and authorizes control and oneness.

In the life story, the narrative generates a sense of individuality by demonstrating development. The focus is on this development. Unlike the exemplary novel we know, development is not a beginning, middle, and end. It's not a rising action, climax, and solution either. The life story is always incomplete yet possesses oneness.¹² Like identity, to possess oneness in a process that is constantly under review, there must be stable components we consider to be unchanging or accompanying us along the way. These are landmarks, the pillars of our life story.

¹² Linde 25.

Landmarks are major episodes that delineate the progression of our life and its meaning to our self.¹³ In other words, they are important events that we use to evaluate the rest of our life. Akin to personality traits, such incidents help explain why we think this way and how we came to be, revealing unity and permanence of the self. They provide a stable foundation to build on and branch off because we know what to attach purpose and meaning to. Therefore, experiences are no longer fleeting but part of a complex repository that defines identity.

Landmarks do not escape the storyline our parents have drafted out for us. They are comparable to goals in that they define our purpose. Prom, university, career, marriage, and family are popular landmarks that act as hubs for the trajectory of our lives and the position we hold. They're noticeably positive and linear. Idealistic. However, for the outsider who faces prejudice and injustice, an emotionally charged and negative event can become a pillar of their life story. I've found it hard for others to understand me when I describe my life, seemingly finding me bland or pessimistic. I'm a heavy thinker, a record scratch after a beautiful and lively scene. These are the types of scenes that make up my life, interruptions to spring-colored youth.

My first landmark describes my childhood, my first test of uncertainty, unresolved trauma, and instability. There I was learning how to read and write while wondering if I was good enough to be praised without any strings attached because I was taught by my mom that my purpose was to serve my family and God. I had to work for everything, watching my father complain about my existence being another debt and my mother shaking her head telling me that my worries are nothing compared to someone else's. Look at the starving children. Look at the children your toys go to. Look at the food on your plate. Her efforts to straighten my back never came without stories of destruction.

¹³ Definition adopted from Linde 43.

And my second landmark represents my alienation. Moving away from my own house, away from my childish father, cemented my survival need to become more independent. I was the child but have always been expected to be the bigger person. I'm a big sister, after all. I didn't listen because I knew I would be rewarded later or because thank God I at least had a roof over my head. I was obedient because that's all I could do. It's an early turning point in my life that helps explain my reserved nature that has come with more downs than ups, unfortunately.

Trauma, even if it's expected, is a painful landmark.

Consequently, it can be an unstable landmark, causing many disconnections that prevent other landmarks from obtaining greater importance. With a dysfunctional family like mine, it wasn't weird for me to tell my mom that I would never marry. My only wish for my future was to make enough to buy a house and take care of her when she was older. To her, marriage and children are an important part of life, a necessary landmark, and she refuses to view them as a sacrifice for the remaining goals. Compared to my mom's times, my vision for the future is not so weird now. But if you replace this traditional landmark with the future of my career, I'm back at square one. It's an event I have trouble visualizing, an event that I cannot consider part of my life story yet.

Lacking landmarks that are considered crucial to a successful life story affects the credibility and coherence of my story. Although life stories are eventually shared publicly, thus subject to social criticism, landmarks change as society does. As a result, relying on landmarks solely is insufficient to structure the life story, and they can be restrictive.

So, I return to the idea of context to personalize the story. Landmarks should be connected to reveal context. I refer to these connections as *connectors*, forms of reasoning that link landmarks in a life story, consisting of theme, causality, and coherence.¹⁴

Connectors help identify disconnections and demonstrate development because they act as glue to the complexities of the life story. Moreover, these three connectors can be localized and generalized instead of breaking down the life story in isolated directions that are difficult to layer together, such as language. Rather than feeling out what would be a proper use of language for the life story, the three components aren't assumptions but forms of reasoning and uniformity.

The first one, *theme*, is marked by events linked by similarities pointing to a singular subject, for instance, womanhood. Like identity, theme gives a name to experiences, producing an original concept that can be generalized, as well. Because a theme represents a concept, identity can be part of a theme, such as womanhood and identifying as a woman. That doesn't mean that a theme is owed its corresponding, immediate identity. A boy who grew up with a single mother may include the theme of womanhood in their life story without identifying as a woman. Therefore, the application and role theme has is situational, working at various levels. Even if two life stories share the same theme, the meaning differs.

Next, *causality* is the sequence or order of events that are responsible for a specific result. There are two types of causality: *adequate causality*, an acceptable and reasoned sequence of

¹⁴ Theme adopted from Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira; causality and coherence adopted from Linde.

events versus *inadequate causality*, an insufficient explanation. Similar to belief systems, characterizing what is adequate versus inadequate causality is subject to outer influences.

In Linde's book, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*, she specifies adequate causality as continuous interventions that display proper agency. On the other hand, inadequate causality is defined as a string of events that are incomplete, interrupted, and coincidental. "Coincidental" and "interrupted" specifically are tricky because Western ideology values independence which is equal to direct and controlled actions that purposely favor the individual. Claiming a result happened due to factors outside of control may be unreasonable to a highly individualistic person. But to the individual who values forces of nature, like religion or destiny, coincidental events may make sense.

Furthermore, while disjointed stories may be troublesome, they express the reality of many. Accounting for interruptions, for events that we acknowledge as beyond our control, is possible without writing them as continuous and fluid. Its application is broad, but we can see these types of interruptions in experimental writing, poetry, and personal journals in which writers focus on specific details of a moment or several of them, appearing disjointed at first glance. However, as these details add on, we notice their direction.¹⁵ I can best describe it as a mosaic. The events don't fit as snugly as puzzle pieces. All pieces are different sizes but reveal an image in the end.

Lastly, as the life story itself is incomplete, it's difficult to know what exactly an incomplete sequence of events is. Overall, I believe inadequate causality is confused with passive narration. A moderately passive narrator doesn't necessarily cause the tragic removal of the self, only when it's done in extremes. Instead, it can indicate a wider gap between the self and the experience, a sort of silent conflict, requiring us to read between the lines. The individual may feel

¹⁵I recommend Arnold, *Litany for the Long Moment*; Uribe, *Antígona González*.

alienated from the subject or event they are narrating. It's unreasonable to expect them to have everything figured out, accounting for every detail of their story, especially when that story is hurtful.

I have been dealing with this closely as I write about events in my life. Besides the limitations of my project, I have purposely left details out to not only protect myself but also because I considered them to be too heavy for my project, getting in the way of the concepts I want to explore. Certain details are necessary while other details can be omitted and still provide a satisfactory description of my experience.

For these reasons, I simplify inadequate causality as the consequence of unrelated information or the omission of crucial details that led from one event to another. This is typically the result of missing turning points and singularities that visualize the direction of the events. The key word is this direction. In inadequate causality, the direction may be stuck or regressed.

As for adequate causality, the direction of events shows progression, the events are related, and the details provided to explain their development are necessary. These definitions are broad to include diverse life stories and stray away from definitions that do not translate to all societies.

Finally, the last connector is coherence. In simple terms, coherence is established when two points are connected. In the life story, however, coherence is achieved when events develop the sense of self. The process is described effectively in this quote:

When the ability to construct coherent life narrative emerges, two previously independent developmental lines merge: the development of narrative and the development of the person concept (Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira 2).

The phrase “developmental lines” is vital to comprehending how identity development intersects reasoning to create the life story. It outlines the two elements of the life story, the “narrative” which I explored here, and the “person concept” I explored as identity.

Due to disadvantages in our cognitive abilities, coherence begins to be formalized at a later period, typically early adolescence. During this transformative period, we acquire a formalized sense of self that updates itself as we meditate and mature.¹⁶ The very acquirement of a sense of self prompts the existence of the life story because our experiences adhere to it like a rod for weaving, pulling on and keeping strings in place no matter the length and complexity.

By establishing theme, causality, and coherence to connect landmarks, the life story can be structured and retold at different points, maintaining stability as we change. In addition to being accessed at different times, it can be accessed at different levels (that is, in local versus general terms). Meaning that, although we must construct a life story that connects several events, this version of the life story is not shared in its entirety. Just as I decided to omit details from my life in my writing, there are many other stories that I just can’t fit here. Ultimately, the life story is an inner story and the life story we share alludes to the inner story we hold.

We share life stories in many ways—at sleepovers late at night when we can’t sleep, through journals, or novels. To manage the life story at these different levels and with our different audiences signifies ownership of our experience and expertise in manipulating experience. Hence, the final step in identity development is understanding how to manipulate experience to meet the needs of the situation in which the life story is being told.

¹⁶ Habermas and Cybèle de Silveira

I address this as a writer, as I am sharing my life story in writing.

Cáscaras de huevo

písalos.

polvo fino, las suelas solas.

una mujer chilla. un nombre desaparece.

ambulante: písalos. aféitate de tu piel.

piel agrietada, dejas cáscaras en el suelo.

pisoteadas se convierten en pólvora,

todo se borra,

alguien se asoma

todos se meten a su cáscara sin yema.

no eres dios (gobierno todopoderoso)

pero mira silenciosamente

tus manos cubren tu rostro rompecabezas

sin saber quién eres

si nadie dice tu nombre.

divide,

divino atrevido:

caras secas

y muertos de hambre.

ambulante sin identidad, sin tratar de deshacer todas las piezas que no encajan

piensa que su imagen es la historia original—

la creación de tu conciencia que muere con tu libre voluntad.

jorobado. en cáscaras de huevo.

¿No te gusta crudo?

la naturaleza se destruye.

pasa—y púdrete también.

uno se cuida. entonces

camina.

3:
The Life Story and The Writer

The curse

The girl

The outsider

The curse

I was in fifth grade when my mom told me another one of her jaw-clenching stories. This time, however, it was about my cousin. And it wasn't something of her past. It was happening now, on a school morning before dropping me off, cleverly giving me no time to process, less protest.

Soon after, when it was still morning, I was taken out of class to attend my cousin's funeral in Juárez. I tried gathering my stuff quickly, almost running out the door until I was stopped by my nosy teacher who asked questions thinking he expressed worry. If he was worried, he wouldn't have thought to ask me in front of the class, stopping his lecture, the school of fish staring at me, waiting for an answer.

What he wanted was drama. He loved it. I didn't. So, I gave him some trauma to shake him off once and for all; just a little taste of mine. I was angry that he couldn't have just dropped it and left me alone, but my trauma dump was mostly because I was an awkward kid who read books instead of atmospheres and didn't know how to lie. That was adult talk.

"I'm going to my cousin's funeral," I answered simply at first, a chance he should've picked on to stop.

"What..." he sighed, "you're so young, though, he must have been young himself," he continued.

"Kind of," I raised my eyebrow.

I wasn't about to explain that we have an...interesting family structure. My aunt had him at 15, still playing house with my mom who was a year older than her. And my mom had me at 32. Besides our age gap that made me look like a baby doll to his family, I was their so-called princess. The one that was the exception to the family curse. Everyone had failed to conceive a daughter.

Instead, my mom's siblings ended up with a pair of boys before tragedy prevented them from wanting more.

My mom described my birth as some sort of holiday. My uncle—one of the remaining survivors—and his family were crying, dancing, almost throwing their hands in the air. Abuelito, unable to pronounce my name, baptized me as “Tiffany”. Every day, my uncle's family asked to borrow Tiffany, now playing house with me.

My late cousin especially adored me. After being dressed up and fed several chuchulucos, he would cook arroz y frijoles and heat some tortillas for me. He would take a spoonful of the arroz and spread it out on my tortilla, layering the beans on top, sprinkling some salt, rolling it up, and then blowing on it before he fed me. I wasn't even hungry—my belly would often stick out of my shirt since I had eaten right before—I just liked to be fed. And spoiled. I was very selfish and expressive back then according to my mom. After eating, I would stick my arms out and wriggle my fingers, mouthing gibberish to my cousin. He would carry me on his shoulders, running around while we giggled.

“What happened to him?” he continued.

My eyebrows pleaded. “He was killed and left in a trash can,” I felt a sharp sting in my nose.

“I-I'm so sorry,” he got red and sweaty.

“That's Juárez,” I stepped out and closed the door.

That's how I was accustomed to tell stories. I learned from my mom's cold narration and harsh endings. The potential of those stories was always in the middle. A sudden, promising change was

always trampled by the curse we all tried to escape from once when we were young and naïve. This type of storytelling has been passed down in our family.

The end—the triumphant curse—always left a ringing silence in the room and a sour taste on the tongue.

My family never spoke of it out loud nor did they name the curse directly. Instead, we feel its presence as discomfort and anger if we get close enough to it. The adults spoke to the children with lullabies of danger and to each other by shaking their heads or clicking their tongues. Then, as if they had said enough, they ended it with “That’s how it is”.

“¡Porque digo yo!” is how I understood the curse. It has authority. Our grandmas teach our mothers who teach me, the only daughter, to respect it. We assimilate it into our daily lives, and we get used to it and forget it, consequently forgetting ourselves. Then the curse slips in to snatch another one of us.

That’s why my cousin was taken next. We were starting to forget his face and he was starting to forget himself. We no longer had daily encounters but scattered memories and scraps of interactions where I would ask him out of curiosity if he could still carry me. He would laugh and try it again, my head hitting their ceiling fan hanging by a cable sticking out through their makeshift-turned-permanent concrete ceiling. But it was only for a solid second before he put me down complaining he was getting old.

He would then leave, sometimes returning smelling of smoke and alcohol, singing to my aunt who pushed him away and told him to have some decency in front of the children. Soon, my mom started our visits by asking where he was, which turned into a conversation that lasted all day about the trouble he was hanging out with while my brothers and I played with our toys. He became known to us as the cousin who was never home and the cousin who did bad things. We

heard of everything. He got tattoos, he got his tongue pierced, he sold or did drugs, and he was a Satanist. His presence in the house seemed less like luck and more like discomfort.

Like the curse we ignored.

Then, on one of the days he wasn't looking for trouble, he walked up the colina where my old house sat carrying the remaining candy he was planning to sell another day. He had almost reached the top—near the free, public graveyard where you would bury loved ones inside the same desert that was used to build our homes—when he was greeted by a group of drunk police officers and their owners.

I was told he did nothing wrong this time. The group of drunk police officers and their owners were swinging and singing from the bars behind their police truck. They asked for a bite of the coins that clanked together in my cousin's pocket. My cousin rejected them. Maybe he yelled at them, I don't know. He had nothing to give them. Furious, one of them stepped out and pushed him down. From this point, I cannot imagine how it ended. Because it's so illogical. Inhumane. Maybe he had hurt himself when he fell and they didn't want to pay for hospital bills or get in trouble—if trouble was possible for them. Maybe they were just crazy and did it for fun. But the fact is that they put the truck in reserve and then threw him away.

This is what my mom told me before going to school.

The girl

My mom has always been the type to move on quickly. At least, that's what she pretends to do. She closes herself off, almost shrugging off any event without giving her mind and heart to it. She's always one step out of every situation, preparing to exit at any moment. But her exits are never announced, no matter who it is. Even if it's me, crying to take me with her and not leave me alone with my father just because I am the oldest and he doesn't know how to be alone.

“You're free to leave whenever you want,” she tells me. “We all are.”

One step already out, my mom did her best to help my aunt at the funeral before she abandoned her—to keep her mind and heart to herself without giving it to my aunt's instability, I guess. She would stop my aunt from running around screaming at the bare desert behind the graveyard, holding her tighter with each squirm, each squirm letting out heavy tears from both that slid down to collect at their chins. My mom screamed, too, but not at the desert. She screamed in front of my aunt's face, yelling—demanding—it was okay when my aunt's screams were wails and to stop when my aunt shouted she was going to kill them and then herself with the deepest part of her throat.

My brothers and I stared, planted in the dirt, not knowing if we should or could comfort them. My father was the same. He grabbed our arms tightly, pushing us to our car. We protested, although it was the type of protest we didn't mind failing. We wanted to be where our mom was but felt we didn't belong with the sadness. Sadness was adult stuff. And my father wasn't adult enough for it either.

We all waited in the car without air conditioner for the remainder of the funeral. The doors were wide open, letting the hot air circulate, boiling us inside at times. We complained and our

father yelled at us. We complained again and he said he would take away our DSi. We gave up and played until the battery ran out, and the only thing left for us was to wait again. I looked around the graveyard.

There was no grass like the ones in El Paso, not even a pathway made to lead you to the “better place” the adults said they lived in. After the row of skinny trees at the entrance, all I could see were rocks and tombstones sitting on top of leveled land. Maybe it was a better place because the land didn’t have a bunch of potholes nor was it eroded from broken water pipes or rainfall. It contrasted the zone I had lived in, one ready to flood at any moment the rain rushed down our dirt roads, creating rivers at the bottom that dragged generations along its currents. I always felt its placement was too convenient. Too close to us and the natural disasters and the manmade ones that were becoming more natural as the drought dried our dirt and faces.

The heat slapped sighs out of us. After ten sighs or so, my father gave up on yelling at us to stop and that it was annoying. Slowly, we had no energy to even sigh, and we all stayed still, watching the peeking sunset in silence until my mom came back wiping her face harshly.

“No podremos volver por un tiempo,” her voice shook. She closed the door loudly and the questions scratching at our throats were immediately silenced.

That was the last time I saw my aunt and her family before entering middle school. My mom said it was not a good time, but good timing didn’t come for several years. She tried to make it up by answering my aunt’s many calls until her questions about visiting became too repetitive. The calls were no longer ringing of sadness but discomfort. And the curse slipped in once again.

Time passed so slowly, and I graduated middle school without ever seeing my family. I honestly cannot remember a single instance when I went back. My first home, the one right next to theirs, was always on the news for homicides, femicides, kidnappings, and stealing, and the funeral was my last memory of it. I could only steal glances while driving next to the wall separating Loop 365 from the road I recognized to lead to my house over there. I'd ask my mom if we could return, and she would immediately end the conversation by saying, "Juárez ya no es el mismo." I was easy, her eyes told me.

I was so easy, always on the verge of being the curse's next victim. I was ready to be snatched at any moment, my name erased from the news, adding up to numbers that lost their sadness, too. I was the new discomfort in my family, an unstable little girl who knew nothing of the world out there. But the violence my mom kept from my little bubble found its way in from inside me. I lived in a new body. One that bled, that ached, and felt dirty. I lived in a violent body that tried tearing me apart and putting me back, draining me of life, and often reducing me to scraps before it took its sweet time to fix me.

I turned into a butterfly without wings. My mom said I was pretty and young so I had to be careful.

I saw what I lacked.

It started when I couldn't keep away from looking at the mirror. I looked like a children's drawing. Curvy at the wrong points, gravity pulling at my hanging chest and flabby thighs that rubbed together. The seams of my jeans always poked at my disappearing waist, leaving a red dent. My shirts stretched and stuffed themselves inside my rolls. Every piece of clothing on me tickled and itched, causing me to shiver easily and get chicken skin. The hairs of my hairy arms and now

my legs stood up proud. The worst part was when I looked down between my legs. It looked like grass sticking out from the sides of my underwear.

Actually, it was the second worst part. My chest hurt all the fucking time.

After checkups to find holes in my heart, stories from my mom to the doctor about diabetes on her side and heart attacks in my father's family, and doctors scaring me with words like "cholesterol" and "fatty liver", I wanted to rip the lumps of fat off me even more. I didn't need them. They hung and hurt, especially when running. It was hard to hide them. They were the first thing I noticed in the mirror and the first evidence of the body I now hated.

I began covering up, wearing shirts two sizes bigger than me with undershirts that hopefully flattened my chest. I gave up on that soon, adding a jacket that stayed on even on the most snake-biting desert days. I also didn't wear a bra, because wearing one would make my chest look more round and obvious. I was being petty, I still didn't accept having breasts—as if I had a choice. The wires were also foreign to my body, and the bras were covered with itchy materials that caused me to get chicken skin again. So, I went braless for all of middle school, hunching over to hide my need for one.

My mom called me out for not wearing a bra many times, angry that it was improper. She told me everything she could think of.

“¡Si sigues así te colgarán y te parecerás a tu abuela!”

I would flinch. I could never tell my paternal grandma this, but everyone thought she was ugly. She waddled instead of walking. She grunted and exhaled at every word. Her dresses made her look like a big lamp. You couldn't even see her armpits because of her saggy arms. Instead, you could see the sides of saggy breasts from her dress that wasn't big enough to cover her completely.

I shook my head. I didn't want to make fun of my grandma who has been laughed at her whole life, enduring abuse from her husbands who called her worse things, having to give away her bastard child, my bastard father, to save herself from being killed by whoever she was married to at the time. She doesn't bother anyone; she just stays glued to her bed watching the same novelas on her staticky TV.

I shook my head again. She is my grandma. She can't be ugly.

“¿Qué sigue? ¿No usarás calzones y dejarás entrar la brisa?” I bit my tongue, swallowing how unfair it was for my mom to say this just because my chest was obvious. If it was flat, the ungodly sight of them peeking through my shirts disappears. I wanted to be flat as a board, taking up the least space possible. I wanted to be invisible. I wanted to be left alone. Yes, just like my grandma, whose name became “The woman who let herself go”.

I wanted to be let go, although I wasn't sure from what.

I just knew I didn't want to meet the same fate—the same story—of those in my family.

The stories that keep you turning those pages, mistaking the curse as the occult, keeping you in a daze as the pages start sticking to your hands. The ink imprints on them until you turn your palm around and read that you're next.

I got that sticky feeling from the very beginning. Back when I was given the gift of life twice while those around me died, their stories outliving them, being carried around by me all over my body.

The outsider

I knew that my life was full of ticking bombs since I could recognize my name. But knowing I was the ticking bomb was something new I had to figure out.

Again, I don't know what came first, my self-destruction or the destruction of my life. It didn't matter because I had no authority over my body. I couldn't stop it from destroying itself to recreate teenage me who would eventually become the adult me.

I felt like a walking bag of errors. It's no surprise that I was back on the pills I couldn't swallow as a child to tame my legs that swung high and accidentally hit desks. I couldn't eat at school and stuffed myself at home and, at night, my thoughts were eating me instead.

I began having nightmares again, really vivid ones of pale faces with frowns and glass tears stretching and floating over me like sheer fabric trying to catch up to me. I would be running on a hill with deep, dark green grass blades swaying in the wind under a rich black sky. I couldn't see what was ahead of me, it was consumed by the same darkness that created the sky. I just kept going, reaching the end of a hill where sometimes I would fall, and other times, the pale faces would get to me first, wrapping themselves around my body, choking me until I jolted awake. Regardless of the ending, the faces that chased me chanted, repeatedly, the same thing: "Why do you deserve to live?"

These chants continued in my head whenever I couldn't concentrate on what I had to do, particularly when I was trying to sleep. I tried sneaking my nightmares to my mom, telling her of the scary figures that asked me about my right to life, ending it with a joke about how they must be jealous.

“No seas ridícula,” she looked at me, “los fantasmas o lo que sea de lo que estés hablando no existen.”

My mom, thinking I am also the type of person to ignore and move on, fanned the flames of my fears away from her, unknowingly causing them to be hotter for me. She never saw the ghosts I talked about, so they didn't exist. What she did see, though, she quickly dismissed as evil and made sure to purge it from her life.

But she couldn't get rid of me. One day, seemingly out of nowhere, she read to me a story about a disciple of Jesus who tried to kill himself.

“Dios rompió la rama del árbol del que se colgó para asegurarse de que no fuera al infierno.”

“Entonces ¿la gente que se suicida es mala?” I frowned.

“No, quitarte la vida es malo,” she shook her head.

“¿Cómo? It's their life,” I couldn't understand.

“No, es la vida de Dios. La vida es su regalo.”

Again, that damn gift.

All the gifts I've ever known were never truly mine. They're always taken away from me the moment I say something back, slapped as disrespectful. And in a year or so, I see that gift being given to my cousins and random children who are less unfortunate than me. If I'm lucky enough to keep it, I'm back to being constantly reminded that it can be taken away from me at any moment and that my father worked hard for it and I should be grateful.

Being given the gift of life—twice—meant I had to be twice as grateful. Grateful to my two parents and many more generations before who grew up dirt poor eating arroz y frijoles while I ate up my words. I, the first and only daughter, the so-called princess, didn't wear a crown made of gold. That's what my name means, crown. My crown wasn't made of thorns, but it was still heavy. It weighed me down, hunching me over and giving me constant headaches.

I had so much responsibility, starting with myself. I was tired of everything.

So tired I felt dying would be the best-suited ending to everything. An abrupt end suffocating chaos with nothingness.

But I still felt too angry to do that. I still had the energy—the youth—to complain and want something else.

I wanted to stop pretending it didn't feel disgusting when my father forced his hugs and kisses on my mom and me, conveniently saying sorry while ignoring the bruises on our bodies. Pretending that I loved him when he constantly asked me if I did, because if I stayed quiet, he would let out a heavy huff and puff and tell me to bring him an object that never belonged to me and that I was an ungrateful bitch that should be given away. How unfair it was that, because I couldn't do anything, I also had to become a lying piece of shit like him, telling counselors and officers that my father has never done anything and I'm fine or I would curse my family to live in a place worse than The Cube again.

I wanted something different but I had no power, no voice, subjected to the same stupid ending as the others in my family. Descendant of the girls who have had their lives taken from

them. I didn't want to continue the common story of the girl, always a damsel in distress, being abused, forgetting themselves, and dying trying to escape that life.

I wanted to be something other than myself.

Other than being the one left behind to deal with all the sacrifices they shove down my throat because I am their princess, and princesses don't complain. Yes, I have it all, so I need to sit there, looking pretty always, always, always being reminded by my father who knows it all, his eyes widening and his jaw tightening as he gets close to my face and tells me, "No pienses, sólo haz."

Other than the first child that tied my mother down to that.

I wanted to transform my life to be anyone, anything, or anywhere I could depend on. But I couldn't even have the gift of leaving whenever I wanted to. Of being left alone.

Constantly, my parents would pound acting normal in my head. Anytime I expressed something that wasn't tamed, peaceful, or supporting their own beliefs, I was this ticking bomb waiting to destroy whoever, if not, herself. I reminded them of the uncomfortable—the curse—the missing part of the story they couldn't talk about without realizing that the castle walls they built for themselves are an illusion that is as broken as the walls in our own house.

Until they could recognize their own mistakes and tear down their walls willingly, I was left trying to take care of myself as they were once forced to by their parents who left them, too. Like them, I could only disassociate, becoming an outsider.

I didn't know who I was looking at in the mirror, just that I didn't like her. And it was hard to pretend I did. But I didn't need to be liked, I just wanted to be understood.

Beginning with understanding that I don't have to answer to you just because you call my name.

The Life Story and The Writer: a beginning, middle, and end, and the distance in-between

Being understood is such a soul-stripping task when you aren't very vocal, expressive, or, at the very least, responsive. As an outsider (and partly due to my undiagnosed ADHD) I had trouble picking up expectations, cues, and other small details that got in the way of what I could do and what I was supposed to do. And, on the other side, I had severe social anxiety that made me a stutterer. So, not only did I lack the social skills needed to read a situation, I lacked the confidence to ground my thoughts. There was this space between my thoughts, my words, my actions, and reactions that would not agree with one another. A mistranslation of my language and theirs. And, together, they took my voice away.

Inevitably, there's a distance between everything—the inner and the outer—that must be reasoned and balanced out so we can make a space for ourselves. We can't predict the right answer every time but we must put in effort anyways. To balance what we think, what we say, what we do, and the reactions we get requires several levels of engagement where you need to be a little more personal at times and less self-centered at others. We can't avoid butting heads. We can't read minds nor have we lived the life of someone else to understand their eccentric views. And they think the same way about us. As a result, there must be a common ground, or a mutual understanding, to communicate more effectively.

However, to avoid compromising our identity, we need to be manipulative, finding the best way to make them understand us and we have tried to understand them. Therefore, it's necessary to adjust the distance between the "I" and the "other" to present a version of ourselves that can co-exist. In other words, we are speaking at the personal and general level, manipulating experience to pick and choose what detail is necessary or not just as we do when we first experience.

It's like telling a story to your mom. You don't tell her the version where you did something wrong, something you know will get you in trouble or even worse, give you a lecture that you can't escape from. Manipulating experience requires storytelling, too, as witnessed in our life stories. But storytelling is not easy when you don't know the person you are telling it to, making it harder to predict their reaction and convey your message. It's frustrating, but that is the fate of communication. There's always going to be a mistranslation.

As a writer, this is one of the biggest and most common challenges: communicating with your audience. I have to put on many hats. I am a simple individual. I like to watch movies and fall asleep halfway through and I wish I could make money by taking naps. But I am also a writer, and in writing, I must consider social responsibilities. I have to be serious; I can't spend my life without a care in the world. There are rules to things, and these rules become more ambiguous in settings and through forms that are not face-to-face. To write, we must find just the right dose of creativity and dependence to maintain our identity and voice.

Again, there's no right answer to expressing yourself. This is painfully obvious when structuring writing. Therefore, to own and manipulate experience, I cannot focus on the result but on the process itself. This is in line with our own identity development and life stories that are continuous and concurrent, thus incomplete. Accordingly, I base exercising voice on the same process of understanding and construing identity.

More specifically, I focus on achieving mutual understanding by finding a way to provide a common ground. This way, we can access the life story at different levels with different audiences, adapting to several situations to exercise voice and continue grounding the self.

To provide a common ground, I return to the theory of psychological distance to understand how to adjust the gap to manipulate experience.

Since there's a gap between the self and an experience, I believe psychological distance is a gateway to predict how removed or familiarized someone else could react to our experience. To clarify, I am not claiming that we can meddle with or assume the experience or interpretation of our audience. That's putting words in their mouth. Instead, we are meddling with our own experience, viewing it as both the owner of that experience and a participant, like the way we judge and cringe at memories of ourselves during childhood and adolescence. We are not the exact same person as back then, allowing us to form a different opinion than we once had when we made those embarrassing decisions.

Applying this concept to manipulate experience requires us to distance ourselves as we do when talking about the past or even the future. However, when exercising voice, the distance must be closed again. Because, to have your audience relate to your views requires something to latch onto, a point that is general enough to be comprehensible to others but personal enough to represent you.

Still, as it's difficult to determine when we, ourselves, are removed from our experience is it difficult to determine the appropriate distance between us and our audience. We can work based on clues, for instance, if you are close to your friend, you should be able to speak more personally. You'd avoid trauma dumping on a stranger. Not everyone is our friend, though, so I expand on the cues we can go by.

Notice how there is another level of reasoning that causes us to act on our judgment. Why is it that we are so confident that we can trust our friend? It's an obvious question but, in the end, it reveals how we make judgments. Some decisions are immediate and as obvious as calling the

sky blue. When faced with a less obvious situation, though, things are less clear. How do we clarify the situation for ourselves to act upon it, then?

To answer this question, psychological distance must overlap with our construal of it, formalized in construal-level theory.¹⁷ As its name suggests, *construal-level theory* is the degree to which our thinking is abstract or concrete.¹⁸ If we layer psychological distance and construal-level theory together, far distance elicits abstract thinking and near distance elicits concrete thinking. So, to visualize, psychological distance is the position we are standing at, and construal-level is how well we can see what is in front of us or far into the horizon.

It's comparable to the way our vision works. If you have astigmatism like I did, you might relate to the many instances I blurted out the wrong word on the whiteboard when I didn't have my glasses. The further the whiteboard was, the blurrier the words became. Alternatively, the closer I shoved my nose into the book I was reading, the easier I could distinguish the words that once looked like little blurry ants. This concept is comparable when we think about an experience that is either far or near us. Except, instead of our literal, physical vision, it represents our imagination or visualization.

Furthermore, abstract versus concrete visualizations concern themselves with two primary approaches. In abstract thinking, we emphasize the “why”, or the desirability and purpose of the event. For concrete thinking, the “how” is emphasized instead, corresponding to the feasibility and functionality of the situation.¹⁹ This results in further events being judged more abstractly—more blurry—in which we make out the overall picture rather than details. Alternatively, nearer events are judged more concretely—more physically—and are oriented around details and their

¹⁷ This overlap is more thoroughly explored and formalized by Trope and Liberman.

¹⁸ Trope and Liberman.

¹⁹ Trope and Liberman.

practicality. To put these approaches into practice, I use temporal distance as I find it to be one of the clearest examples of abstract versus concrete thinking because our memory is limited, so our visualizations automatically give away how near or far an experience is to us.

For example, our attitude to a project can change depending on the time it's due. If you are a typical procrastinator like me, you may find it easier to work in shorter timeframes because you can determine how to use your time more effectively, hence you have a clearer work schedule.²⁰ Since the project's deadline is near, your priority is the "how". You may be asking questions such as: how likely is it that I can finish this section by today? In this case, the main concern is to be realistic or to be hands-on. You have no time to waste on having an existential crisis, you just need to get it done.

On the other hand, if the project took five years, our thinking may shift to be abstract, prioritizing the desirability of the project. You may be asking questions like: why am I doing this? Is it even worth it? Because we won't see results for some time, we must focus on the overall picture—the happy ending in which our efforts pay off. It's like a business pitch in which the purpose of our project keeps us motivated, directing our decisions to support this purpose. What is a loss now (what is seen as impractical) is an investment for the future. Our focus is not on how we can make things easier for us in the present.

The difference in temporal distance between these two scenarios shows how we can make two different decisions based on the same project. Nevertheless, as there is no experience in which psychological distance is determined as completely far or completely near, our decision-making

²⁰ The correlation between near psychological distance and motivation is an assumption discussed by Trope and Liberman based on the belief that action is dependent on specific details which near distance elicits. However, they clarify that they have not found any direct effects in their research. For these two claims, refer to pages 10 and 14.

gets more complicated. Therefore, as it's expected for an experience to encompass varying levels of distance and construal, we must look at both the details and purpose. The key, now, is how to determine which part should be more about the details and which should be about the purpose.

Once again, this is heavily dependent on the scenario and audience we share our experience with. As I am a writer, I evaluate scenarios in writing. I also choose writing as an example because it directly visualizes how we manipulate experience to exercise voice and prepare for the reaction of our audience. Lastly, I believe writing is an extension of the self and, thus, an extension of the life story of the writer.²¹ This way, I can connect how identity, the life story, and voice work together to reinforce the self more evidently.

As a writer, not only do I have to be conscious of the topic I'm writing to determine the content and format of my work, but I must consider its impact, as well. Sometimes, the latter is harder because of differing views, especially when others police and project negatively onto your work. This is a common experience for the outsider writer who lives in between worlds that are so specific and unique that they cannot fit into the standard story as much as they force the shoe to fit.

If you live in an area or write for an audience that is predominately what you are not, you are bound to hear that your work is "unrealistic" or that they "don't get it". It makes you angry. How can they read and write about dragons destroying cities with their magical fire but writing about my struggles racks their brains?

²¹ My claim is based on the introspective qualities life stories and written forms share. Although my focus is on creative writing, I believe it is possible to apply the life story across various fields, including formal.

In addition to the topic, content and format are also predetermined. Write a beginning, middle, and end. Write a character that solves their conflicts because we live in a perfect world. Write a story that is logical because it's realistic, and we live in a world where things always make sense. Use that word but not this one because I don't like it. Think about the rising action. What does that even mean? You mean that anxious drop I feel in my chest before I deal with yet another test of life? In that case, I'm constantly in the high of the rising action, stuck in character development. When do I become a hero?

Tearing stories apart like this makes us forget that we are the ones writing the story. I am an individual. Just as I struggle with social expectations in real-time am I going to struggle against the expectations of my audience. Adjusting to the standard narrative in writing is taxing when my own life story cannot reflect it. My life story is under constant construction, living a life of surprises and disappointments where past, present, and future mix in because shit doesn't seem to change. Yeah, how do I write that in a beginning, middle, in end?

I don't have the superpower to wake up as a different person. I can only write as Stephanie, the writer who bleeds, the writer who speaks a different language, the writer who lives in insecurity, and the writer who needs to fight for her voice. So, when I look at novels written by the greats, some old dude in a time that I don't even know if they had toilets or not, it's no surprise that I can't relate to that type of story.

Society changes and its demands change, too. However, writing methodology continues to be stuck in time. Currently, the matter of representation versus appropriation shows the gap between the writer and their audience. There's this angel and devil calling out to write because "you are one of us" but also "you have to write like this or you are not one of us". Determining what writing is appropriate or acceptable is a task that, as writers, we can't answer blindfolded, in

ignorance. However, we can't be too dependent on the narrative others have prepared for us, either. Ultimately, we write from our perspective, from our experience, from a life that always gives us that "but" in our sentences. Yes, I am Mexican American but I cannot relate to the immigrant as much as I cannot relate to the blue-eyed, blonde American. To write a story about this common experience, this common struggle, I can't help but write it as an outsider.

Nevertheless, without localizing my own experiences to understand the narrative I did not live, I am not using my voice effectively or responsibly, resulting in a disconnection between myself, my work, and my audience. Detaching myself to view a topic outside of my immediate experiences is counterproductive without readjusting the distance. And it can be destructive. We are talking about the experiences of living, breathing people. We are borrowing their life story which is made up of memories that they share with others and memories that are personal to them. Therefore, we need to generalize and personalize the experience, writing closely yet acknowledging our distance.

I must write as "I" but also "her", understanding my work and audience simultaneously. Essentially, there are three gaps, the writer, their writing, and their audience. To navigate these gaps, writing methods must concentrate on the conscious control of the writer. A method that acknowledges me and the choices I actively make in my work, that doesn't hide behind a perfect scenario.

An inclusive method cannot be subjected to play in specific scenarios, empowering the theory rather than the writer. By focusing on the process of our decision-making and our life story, I believe we can give voice back to the writer. As decisions are situational, I refer to a specific scene in my project, my ninth birthday party during the end of the world, to show how I expressed myself while connecting the scene to the rest of my story formally. Like before, I use psychological

distance and construal-level theory to highlight these decisions. In addition, I include the three connectors in the life story—theme, causality, and coherence—to describe how the scene plays into the project overall. This way, I can manage the shift between local to general components in writing to include both its desirability and its function while considering my audience.

A birthday party during the end of the world exists in two contrasting settings or visualizations, a clash between a positive and negative image. To take a general theme such as “party” and write it out negatively demanded closer inspection. I know this experience is specific to me and uncommon. Therefore, I need to be as specific as possible to grasp the emotion and atmosphere that contrast a joyful experience. In this case, I established that my audience is automatically detached from my experience, consequently thinking more abstractly, wondering why they should care about poor little Stephanie and her failed birthday party.

I begin by using psychological distance and construal-level theory to break the scene into four components. Starting with social distance, I look at the characters in the scene. Stephanie, mom, and neighbors. Who is Stephanie close to? She is a child, so she depends on her mom. She hates her neighbors, so she is naturally distant from them. Thus, it’s expected that interactions with her mom would be more detailed than those with her neighbors. Next, time. This is a memory being told by an adult. Because our memory is limited and the event took place in the past, it’s expected that the scene would not be fully developed, having fuzzy borders. If it was too perfect, it wouldn’t be believable, so the setting should be minimal.

This brings us to the third category, spatial. I focused on this category the most because of little Stephanie’s displacement. While my memory is limited, consequently being thought of more

abstractly, I can't express the contrast between a party and my emotions without heavy, physical representations. When wondering what to focus on, I considered the theme of the story, the concept of a home, and the governing theme of my stories, alienation. I compromised by keeping the setting minimal, focusing on small, physical focal points to keep the reader's attention on Stephanie and the party. Consequently, I omitted details that would expand Stephanie's little world. I didn't include the weather that day because it would force the reader to pay attention to the sky, away from the conflict. Instead, I narrowed the view to be seen from a single line of sight: me, the table, and the people in front of the table.

For the details in the setting, I returned to the theme and purpose of my scene to insert a breathing, living Stephanie. What do I want to convey? I missed my home, even if it wasn't perfect. I felt lonely, angry, and disregarded, and my heart still breaks for little Stephanie who grew up to hate birthday parties to this day. However, I can't just say "I felt angry". Anger remains an abstract emotion subject to several interpretations.

No, I want you to understand my anger. How it happened to me. I expressed my loneliness by physically removing little Stephanie from the scene, viewing her birthday party from a distance, and reminding my audience of my outsider status. To express my anger, I brought her back into the scene, making her stomp to her mother, specifying my anger as betrayal and a consequence of alienation which I attempt to address. Finally, the scene ends similar to its beginning, in which the birthday party continues without me, further stressing the lack of control I had over my life. As a result, I challenge the original, positive connotation for parties. In the general concept, a party is visualized with balloons, food, and gifts. In my version, the balloons were cheap, the table was simple, and there was a single gift brought by my mom, destroying the feeling of celebration that is fundamental for its positivity.

Finally, hypothetical. To understand this part, I need to understand what Stephanie wanted to achieve. It goes back to the theme and purpose of the scene. I'm angry. I'm hurt. However, as strong as emotions are, that doesn't guarantee a happy ending. If this event didn't happen to me, I would wonder, what is the likelihood of a child acting on those emotions? Next, what is the likelihood of her conflict being resolved? For the first question, because she is a child and is closer to her mom than the others, and because she isn't the confident type, she would act those emotions on her mom rather than the strangers. The possibility of her fighting them is low. If I wanted my scene to go a different direction though, to express the intensity and helplessness of little Stephanie in that very moment, I would have written her fighting them for that dramatic factor.

But that's not how it happened. As the next story suggests, that's just how my life is. There are no satisfying endings; that's the type of character I am and the backstory I have. Moreover, being a child pulled away by their mom to not cause a scene, my failure was easily predictable. If I was the reader, I would find it unbelievable that asking to stop a birthday party would work. And parties ending as soon as they began are unlikely in general. So, the conflict remains unsolved.

To tie the scene to my project overall, I followed the structure of the life story. More so considering that the stories are an example of my own life story. Appropriately, my choices must consider theme, causality, and coherence. I already touched upon the theme, the concept of a home and alienation. To connect home and alienation along other themes, I had to find a commonality they all shared: the gap. The mention of a gap and distance continues in all three sections, illustrating its many manifestations, including the gaps between the stories themselves.

Secondly, causality describes the direction of the story. To avoid inadequate causality, the scenes and stories must be related to each other. However, because these stories are early landmarks, the life story is not yet formalized. Therefore, when retelling my experiences, the

progression is slow or stuck. Furthermore, because I refer to myself as an outsider, I am purposely writing disjointed and distant stories, representing the imperfection and lack of control I had over my life. Thus, there are no clear turning points that envision change, especially with the lack of future events or predictions.

As the absence of turning points could damage the progression of the narrative, I write in my present self, though restricted. This way, I avoid a need for the stories to envision a “future” since here I am alive and well. Finally, understanding who I am requires me to look back, so it is not strange for me to work backward or slowly. Writing my present self is most evident here, where there’s a shift of voice from storytelling to me, the narrator and essayist.

Lastly, coherence is the intersection of the life story and the self. For personal, autobiographic stories, this is directly applied. It belongs to the writer. In other narratives, the life story is comparable to the subject.²² How do we have the writer and the subject overlap? I explored this question before, but differently. Like voice, the life story, and in any subject or format, the writer works as an outsider and participant. Hence, the self must be involved in making decisions.

In the end, there is no hierarchy to the steps of writing just as there are none in our decision-making. I only described the different components. The writer can start by finding the purpose of the story, then finding the applications of the story, overlooking its direction, and its themes, and eventually coming all together. Or they could work from the themes and so on. Whatever cocktail of components is made is up to the writer, the owner of their story.

²² I came to this conclusion on the comparative relation between the life story and the individual as represented by single to whole, or an input and output. The life story is subject to outer presentations as is the subject of the story.

Although the application of my method, to use our process of understanding to write, is in its early stages, I wanted to look at how voice is also a choice and how we can manage choice against predetermined rules to give ourselves a fair chance. As a writer, I work with choices constantly, and fair chances are not considered in writing. Inevitably, there are many gaps we work with, whether in writing or life.

Being a person who feels disconnected from her life, the gap is further stressed. Figuring out the complications of my messy life reminded me of the mess writing can be. I wanted to be represented in my work, so I ended up writing about that.

This is my interpretation of voice. We define and present ourselves, sharing our views and parts of ourselves—of our life—and by sharing, we are creating an outlet for others to judge. Being heard—understood—is not guaranteed. I know that well. Yelling gets attention but not the message. Even the greatest scorching anger can be tamed by a couple of sighs from someone. After many years of experiencing this, I wanted to find a way to tip the scales back. Whether it be from anger still, loneliness, or fear, I want to continue to understand and be understood, to be someone more than my name.

Gestaltzerfall of my self

sometimes I wonder what it's like to be with you.

would you come to see the buildings curving in above me, would you see the hiding trees from the busy cars rushing on lanes I can hear distantly would you see the children surrounding me stepping over yellowed grass always holding something in their hand, always falling crying laughing and getting up? and the parents and couples walk next to benches avoiding the buildings, looking down, catching their breath. you just look somewhere else. why are you trying to find the sky? when you find a big slice of sky, I wonder what comes to you think of things that didn't happen? things you wish weren't present? you see a man throwing trash on the floor and feel angry, but your eyes are directed at the trash not the man you look at it for a moment in disbelief until it stretches to the back of your mind—forgotten. and now you're sad. why

would you think of the smiling people with their faces blurred behind them? why their curved smiles. as if you're looking at them through a microscope. one eye at a time. but you can't copy them cursed to look at everything one time and forget. they pass by, and you hear laughter from somewhere. it gets louder behind you and you know you are just there still, you won't turn around. why you remain blind to the big buildings surrounding me. why then, do you think of yourself only? standing with the slightly cold breeze tickling your fingers your heartbeat in your ears why everything around you keeping up to its beating distaste with everyone trying to act out, playing some role in their little characters with no mind. you look at them with one eye without your heart, your mind only for yourself. why the more I wonder and wonder what it's like for me to finally be with you, the more I can't recognize you. you're someone else a part apart from my eyes. would you come to see everything for me?

why?

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Curriculum Vita

Stephanie Lamas is a first-generation Mexican American and university student. Beginning as an early college student, she graduated with honors from the University of Texas at El Paso in August 2020 with a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and a minor in Graphic Design. In that same semester, she joined the Online MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso, working as an advisor for the first two years, from August 2020 to June 2022. In her final semester as an advisor, she received the opportunity to co-teach the course, “Teaching Creative Writing”, in the undergraduate Creative Writing department. She went on to further her career in teaching at the Ysleta Independent School District as a substitute teacher, covering all subjects and ages with a special interest in English, ESL, dyslexia, and special education. Currently, she is preparing to join the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program as an assistant language teacher. She plans to continue the research in education, development, and writing that prompted her thesis to refine writing methods and models to advocate for alternative and sustainable writing practices in the classroom for neurodivergent and marginalized individuals.