

EMBODYING GLORIA ANZALDÚA'S "NEW MESTIZA" EN EL VALLE

by

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HONORS THESIS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my family, my grandparents, Gloria, and the Rio Grande Valley. This is also for those who straddle many identities, binaries, and worlds like I have.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a multimedia project that uses an auto-ethnographic approach as the framework and Gloria Anzaldúa's border language and identity theories to help me understand my own Chicana identity as a third-generation. She is a well-renowned Chicana-queer-feminist writer and theorist, famous for her work about marginal and mixed cultures that develop along the U.S.-Mexico border. I explore how ambiguous and powerful a Chicana border identity can be with the use of traditional 35 mm photography, writing, and video/audio recordings. I attempt to capture the experience of growing up near the border in South Texas, and I also document my family's oral histories to help explain where I come from. Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands: The New Mestiza La Frontera* unveils how multifaceted a Chicana, Latina, Mexican-American, and Hispanic identity can be as it endures many contradictions in origin, status, and location. Anzaldúa and I are from South Texas, also known as the Rio Grande Valley. It's a region displaced between American and Mexican culture which emphasizes the complex nature of border identity.

As a third-generation Hispanic, I've struggled with speaking Spanish and my legitimacy in my own Chicana identity. Many third-generation Hispanics, like myself, feel less connected to their origin stories, language, and culture while the previous generations have stronger ties to their roots. Using her theories relating to the "New Mestiza" identity, this project attempts to examine the varying levels of our personal relationship with language and identity from first to third generation, using my family and personal experiences. With Anzaldúa's work, I'm rediscovering my Chicana voice by acknowledging my family's past and rediscovering the spaces around me again.

THROUGH MY LENS:

This guide will help you view my worlds through an auto-ethnographic lens. You can choose to read the writing portion first, then watch the video or you can read each section and watch each section of the video. I do suggest keeping the recorded interviews in the corresponding order. The links for the videos and interviews can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNJLaFfUyCDxIG4v9uyCV_g and <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Cg9L3LduXd5AZsks0Wo9Aes0bCpQ4JHg?usp=sharing>. Please watch the video in the highest definition.

1. Read “Introduction”, “Space 1: Driving Home”, “Space 2: Being Home”
2. Watch the video that includes Spaces 1 & 2 (0:00-2:04)
3. Read “Space 3: Visiting Grandma’s House”
4. Listen to “Aunt Letty’s Interview” and “Mom’s interview”
5. Watch the video for Space 3: Visiting Grandma’s House (2:08-2:40)
6. Read “Space 4: Nuevo Progreso” ; Watch the video (2:546 -5:28)
7. Read “Space 5: Visiting to See Gloria” ; Watch the video (2:29-11:57)
8. Read “Space 6: Visiting San Benito with Dad”
9. Listen to the recording “Dad’s conversation about his family”
10. Watch the video (12:00-15:12)
11. Read “Space 7: Last Visit with Grandma”
12. Listen to “Grandma’s Interview” ; Watch the video (15:13-15:51)
13. Read “Space 8: Leaving the Valley”
14. Watch the last section of the video (15:50-18:22)

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Harlingen, Texas, just thirty minutes north of the *Nuevo Progreso* International Bridge. The strong smell of Valley citrus in my backyard mixes with the distinct mesquite firewood, the loud hum of chicharras, singing together along the banks of the Rio Grande in the hot summer, and the laughter of my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and twenty-two cousins all together on holidays is my home. In Anzaldúa's *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she says, "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (43). I also carry my home with me wherever I go, but I didn't always remember to be proud of my Valley roots, just like many other third-generation Latinx from the Valley. It wasn't until I discovered Gloria Anzaldúa in an English Honors class at Texas State University that I realized the depth and gravity of realizing my lost identity as a Latina. My name is Anika Adams, and this is my experience with rediscovering my Latina identity through Gloria Anzaldúa.

I am the youngest of three girls: Alyssa, Abigail, and Anika. My parents are Robert Adams and Maria Gallegos. I grew up in a nice home just outside of the Harlingen city limits. The Valley humidity clings to your skin. My sisters and I would ride our bikes near an orange orchard and groves of pecan trees along with my dad who often holds a walking stick as our family dog, Shadow, walks alongside him. My childhood consisted of reading books until the late hours of the night, playing outside with our dogs Shadow and Carlos, and evening mass on Saturdays at St. Anthony's Catholic Church, followed by visits to Grandma's house. During our visits to see my maternal grandparents, they spoke primarily Spanish. I remember the voices of Grandpa Nato laughing when he'd tell stories in Spanish and my grandma asking us, "Tienes

hambre?” We would reply, “No Grandma, gracias,” but she would still come back with a paleta for us wrapped in a paper towel. I would listen to the stories in Spanish while eating a paleta de piña. My parents would converse back in Spanish; they were taught when they were younger, but they were forced to speak English in school. Dad tells me they would slap you with a ruler or paddle for speaking Spanish. When they raised me and my sisters, it wasn’t pressured to learn it. I grew up listening to it but never speaking it. I only spoke easy Spanish phrases to get by, but I wished that I could speak long conversations with my grandparents, especially with my Grandpa before he passed away in 2016. Despite the language barrier, I knew they loved us very much: “Te quiero mucho,” they’d always say, “Ahora y siempre.”

My grandparents from my dad’s side, Nana and Gramps, lived in Round Rock, Texas, and they would drive down to the Valley to visit us. When they would visit, trips to Mexico were frequent. As a five-year-old girl, being carried on my dad’s shoulders, wearing sundresses with my long, curly hair loosely strung wildly around my face, I loved it when we all piled into our 1998 white Chevy Suburban and drove to Nuevo Progreso. Sometimes my aunts would come with us as well. We all had to have our birth certificates to cross.

The scenery of South Texas is lively and desolate. I look out the window and see the rapid, running field rows zip by, making everything seem like we were going a lot faster than we were. Tall, brushy grass along the canals, sugar cane, cotton, and cabbage crops, small abandoned buildings scatter smaller towns like Santa Maria, Texas, a total population of 733. My mom grips my hand close to her as we all get out of the car, and I am a bit annoyed because I don’t understand what the big deal is. As a young girl, I was

told several times to stay close with someone and not wander off as I tended to. They were especially stringent with me in Mexico. I remember the vague smell of hot air, gasoline, and dirt mixed as we crossed over to the Mexican-side of the border. Cars waited in lines to pass through the Border Patrol inspection.

Walking along the dirt streets, the only way I could describe Mexico is hazy, disorienting, and different—poor women and children begging with styrofoam cups, small booths with people selling Mexican blouses, leather wallets, jewelry, and candy, men shining boots, the crackling and sizzling from food booths selling street tacos, and the panadería making fresh corn tortillas. We stopped at a cantina bar where Gramps would sit with a cold beer and peanuts while the rest of us shopped and looked around. Sometimes he would buy me a soda de manzana so I could sit with him. Hearing people speak Spanish in Mexico as a young girl made me realize my safe bubble of what I knew was limited and minuscule. Even though I didn't understand what was going on half the time when we went to Mexico, I like to think that my younger self felt the brevity of everything that I experienced. I was in another world—the Third Country. Anzaldúa writes, “The U.S. Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (25). I was being split in two as I straddled the border when I was little—until we stopped going. The memory of seeing a Mexican tank and Mexican military with automatic weapons strapped to them in the middle of the main streets of Matamoros was my first realization that it was not safe anymore. I realized why Mom held me so close as a child.

As I got older, I heard newscasts about the dangerous drug cartel activity along the Mexican border towns. I'd come home from school, and my dad turns on the 5 o'clock Channel 5 News: "There are several cases of kidnapping, stolen vehicles, and shootings in public in Matamoros and Nuevo León which have all been linked back to the drug cartel Los Zetas." Hearing about the dangers of the drug wars and having political leaders push to build a border wall, my formative years were shaped by recognizing my home was politicized, and we were caught in the middle.

By the time I was twelve years old, Mexico was a vague, distant memory. I had become assimilated into knowing what was around me: my family, friends, school, Dad's home-cooking, and our family dogs. Being in my tween years, like everyone else, I was trying to figure out who I was. When it came to exam days, I had to fill in the bubbles that asked me about my race and ethnicity. My answers were: "Caucasian" and "Hispanic/Latino heritage." I knew I was Hispanic, but I didn't know what that meant. With the last name "Adams," others would question me and my family if we were White. I would reply, "no," but they would then follow up to say, "Why do you have a White last name?" I had to reply with, "I don't know." The forced ambiguity I felt by others who were trying to figure me out confused me. I have fair skin, brown hair, and the last name Adams. I don't speak Spanish. I think I knew at an early age, I was white-passing, although I didn't do so intentionally. All I knew was... that.. that I was me.

My parents both grew up in the Valley. My mom's last name is Gallegos, and my dad's last name is Adams. His grandparents were Hispanic. It's always a hot topic for conversation at family gatherings on my dad's side of the family about where our last name comes from. One of us says, "I have been asked whether I am Hispanic/Latina

because of my last name.” Then one of my aunts, Angela or Bitsy, responds with, “Well, we think back about three generations ago, our last name was anglicized from *Adame* to *Adams* when they were trying to get their papers for protection.” No one knows the full story of how our last name came to be. In addition to our name, my dad and his siblings were taught Spanish when they were young. They’ve had their own experience with others being surprised that they speak Spanish. My dad and his siblings can counter the perceptions of others by proving the legitimacy of their heritage, which is what a lot of second-generation people can do. For me, as a third-generation, I can’t speak Spanish. My last name overrides the legitimacy of my heritage, which I learned how to accept even though sometimes I wished that I felt “Mexican” enough. Gloria Anzaldúa describes how, to her, language is synonymous with her ethnic identity. She says, “So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin-skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (81). Linguistic identity is just as important as ethnic identity, and I wished I was able to take more pride in my heritage growing up. As I got older, I stood on one side of the U.S. border of what I knew and looked across the Rio Grande wondering, *what happened?*

I felt ambiguous in my identity. I knew I wanted more out of my life outside of the Valley. Other than my family, the strong cultural ties weren’t there and neither was the strong Chicana/Latina identity. After high school, I left for college, and it was only after leaving that I remembered home. I carried it on my back like a turtle. I thought that the ambiguity in how I felt was unimportant until I discovered Anzaldúa’s theory on the *mestiza consciousness*. She explains, “*La mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle

of borders, an inner war... Within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture” (Anzaldúa 100). The strife I experienced growing up externally affected me internally. I had assimilated into what I knew around me, and that was a rejection and fear of the border. In some ways, I turned my back on my home, because I believed that there wasn’t anything holding me there. Of course, I had my family, but I wasn’t comfortable claiming a Latina identity because of my fear of speaking Spanish. But then again, I am a Latina, and I am proud of not only my family but also my home, el valle. I am *La Mestiza Nueva* [The New Mestiza].

Now in my apartment in San Marcos, I read about Gloria’s *la conciencia de la mestiza*. I cry because I am reading something that I didn’t know how to explain or put into words about something I’ve felt my entire life, and here it is. Gracias Gloria. I realize that the ambiguity in what I felt was my power:

The *new mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures She has a plural personality...Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (101)

My Latina/Chicana identity knows no borders or boundaries, and that’s what makes me, a third-generation, powerful. “Rigidity means death,” says Anzaldúa (*Borderlands* 101).

First Generation: My grandfather was born in Kenedy, TX, and moved to Mexico where he met my grandmother. They moved here to South Texas. They raised seven children, one being my mother. My other grandmother was born in San Benito,

Texas, and she lost her father when she was thirteen. She had to grow up fast and help take care of her family. She met my grandfather when he was selling barbed wire to her family. They raised four children, one being my father.

Second Generation: They lived in loving, full households with family or neighbors around the corner. My parents were told to speak English in school or be slapped with a ruler. Their tongues started to change.

Third Generation: We lack the connection to our heritage because we weren't taught Spanish by our parents who were forced to speak English. There's nothing wrong with speaking English, but it changed the way many Second Generation parents raised their children. English was normalized, and Spanish was not for many. For me, I am trying to practice my Spanish. I am trying to connect with a lost past I don't fully recognize yet. I am not my mother nor my grandmothers' experiences. I think they lived with rigidity when it came to their identities. As a third-generation, I have the opportunity to go beyond what they did, to understand more about our heritage. I know no boundaries, and neither does *la conciencia de la mestiza*.

I want to go home to understand how my family—from first to the third generation—views language and identity through Gloria's work. Most importantly, I want to learn more about where I came from—to see if I could still plant my roots with the help of Gloria y mi familia. This honors thesis will recount a visit to my home in Harlingen, Texas, and how Gloria guides me to see more of myself and my home. I will introduce significant spaces through short chapters, poetry, audio recordings with family, video, and photography. I have included a section before the introduction to serve as a guide explaining the sequence one should follow in the thesis in order to be fully

immersed in my world. All of these moments are important to me, and it will be as if you are on this journey with me to understanding *la conciencia de la mestiza*.

I. SPACE 1: DRIVING HOME

One arm rests on the window while the other holds the steering wheel. It takes four to five hours to drive to Harlingen from San Marcos, Texas. A curated playlist is well-underway playing through my car speakers: Nina Simone, Selena y Los Dinos, and some 70's Rock. As I drive, the terrain changes from Central Texas cities and rolling fields to heavy brush and small towns with speed traps along Business-77 S. I see fruit stands with signs saying "Valley Citrus for sale." I know I'm getting closer to home. I pass the occasional dried-up watering holes with cows grazing nearby. Thirty miles later, there's a sign that says, "No Service for 60 Miles." I make sure I have enough gas because we're entering the King Ranch—a long stretch of historic, unforgiving 825,000 acres of brushy land. The hawks soar high above, searching for prey. There are blue bins filled with water by humanitarians along the stretches of roads with "agua" signs for immigrants passing through. I drive past a row of cameras perched on stands alongside the road. I am heading south, so they're just documenting my presence. However, when driving US 77-North, your license plate and photo are taken, and Border Patrol stops and asks you if you're a U.S. citizen as a trained german shepherd sniffs around your vehicle for las drogas.

My friends say I have an accent when I am elsewhere but here. It only comes out sometimes when I am angry or excited or when I talk to my family. It's the valley accent—the twinge of the Mexican accent and English mixing together with the tongue smack. The vernacular changes when I see the South Texas palm trees. I see them on the horizon. It means I am getting closer to home.

Large windmills also start to appear, towering in the skies. I think of them as our Valley skyscrapers. I get off my exit and make my way to my childhood home. I'm glad I am going to spend time with my family, but like any other young person returning to their hometown, there's a sense of hesitation and familiarity. I guess it's the homecoming of your past selves. We don't always like to confront them, but we have to. This is the homecoming of *La Mestiza Nueva*. I just didn't know it yet.

II. SPACE 2: BEING HOME

The sunlight diffuses light through what looks like a net of clouds. I drive onto Business 83 where there are fallen brown husky palm leaves on the road. Cuando era joven, I thought the palm trees looked like the broom dog from *Alice in Wonderland* with the brown husk leaves hanging at the bottom of the palm tree. It's silly, I know. I drive past my childhood best friend's house, my middle school, and I finally turn onto my street. I see my mom and dad waving at me, waiting for me to pull into the driveway. The engine stops, and I step out, stretching out my cooped- up body that's tired from driving. It's hot and humid as hell. Excuse my cursing. My ears ring with the hum and high pitch sound of the chicharras singing midafternoon. Mom pulls me in for a big hug. Dad kisses my forehead.

“Welcome home mijita.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I reply. I give him a big hug too.

I exhale, tired from the five-hour drive home. I see my home. My parents built it in 1996. I was born in 1998, just two years later. I was raised in this house. My parents and my sisters Alyssa and Abigail lived in San Benito, Texas, before building this house. It's just the next town over from Harlingen. My sisters' hands are imprinted in the concrete driveway, along with the date and year they moved in. I always thought of my home as infinite as a child. I had two sisters, grandparents I often visited, and many cousins to play with.

I am hit with this unsettling feeling as I stare at the house now. My childhood home is the same, but different. It's the same beige brick, with a windy sidewalk, four pillars in the front of the house, a Mexican saltillo tiled front porch, Dad's well-

manicured lawn, Mom's blossoming plants, and weathered wooden fence. It's the same comfort. It's all those times I biked up and down our long driveway and to the street before there was any subdivision built. It's all those times our family dog Shadow protected pequeña me from the neighbor's dog Max because he knew I was afraid of him, even though they were friends and would play with each other. It's the sound of the chicharras humming on the mesquite trees as I ran around in the backyard playing hide-and-seek behind our large citrus trees and brush with my cousins. It's familiar, but coming home now feels different.

We walk inside through the front door with my belongings, and the cool air conditioning hits my face. *Gracias A Dios*, my Grandma likes to say. *Ruff, ruff, ruff*, The dogs see me from the back door, and their tails wag a mile a minute. Their names are Shiner and Sammy. I haven't been home in six months. I am greeted by Shiner, a big light brown golden lab, and Sammy, a teddy bear-looking Shih Tzu. We rescued both of them. The ritual is that when any of us come home to visit, Dad makes something for dinner we like, and we sit outside on the patio and hang out. Our house sits on an acre of land. The backyard feels alive. Tropical birds stop for birdseed. It's the smells of grapefruit, orange, and lime blossoms in the Spring, and then ripe, ready-to-pick Valley citrus fruit in the Fall. Wild bunny rabbits nest in the brush and tall grass, and they often chase each other. Ducks fly overhead and land in the irrigation water. Mom's roses bloom near her bedroom window. The hummingbirds come up to the feeders and get a drink. My dogs chase each other or follow my dad when he moves the irrigation pipes or puts meat on the grill.

A mix of Tejano music and Classic Rock play through Dad's speaker, and it's like the trees are dancing to Ramon Ayala or Santana as a gust of wind blows through.

Vicente Fernandez comes on next. The lyrics go, "Ni nadie que me comprenda. Pero sigo siendo el Rey." Nostalgia washes over me. Hearing Tejano music like Selena Quintanilla, or any Spanish music, reminds me of Grandpa Nato playing the accordion, dancing at many quinceaneras, hearing Mariachis play at special events, like my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. My mom does a big grito when she can. It always made her dad, Grandpa Nato, smile. Me, too.

My parents grew up speaking Spanish and listening to Tejano music like Flaco Jiménez, Emilio Navaira, and Mazz. My eldest sister, Alyssa, speaks the most Spanish out of all of us because my grandparents helped take care of her when she was younger. By the time I was growing up, I had two sisters to care for me. The only time I was exposed to Spanish was when we visited my grandparents and listened to Spanish music. While that may be enough for some to learn Spanish, I couldn't get over the fear of speaking it wrong, and it held me back from connecting with the language as a child.

When I listen to Spanish music, I get more of a feeling than actually understanding the song. It's a feeling of consolation for the parts of me that wish I was rooted more in my home. It's nostalgia for my family and childhood memories. It's grief over the loss of both my grandfathers as the mariachis played at their funeral. It's a feeling of contentment when I miss home. The more I listen to the lyrics, I can't help but feel like that inner child is still with me, tugging at my pant legs, reminding me of the comfort the music brings me.

As dusk sets in, the *zancudos* buzz around and ring in my ears. Pink and purple clouds fade as the night grows, and the hum of the chicharras return. My mom opens the back door, and the puppies run through, ready to relax for bed. We all go inside.

Mom asks, “Are you going with us to see Grandma tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I reply, yawning.

“Good, she wants to make you molé, your favorite. She’s excited to see you, la muñeca.”

I smile, “Sounds good. I miss her and her cooking.” I grin at her.

La muñeca is Grandma’s nickname for me because I looked like a little doll when I was born. I was born with no hair and big brown eyes. Grandma dijo, “Ahhh la bebe, aye que hermosa, la muñeca!” I can imagine her saying it, holding me as a baby. Now, I have been blessed with Grandpa Nato’s side of the family with a full head of curly hair.

As I lie down for the night, exhausted, I feel a bit better about being home, but it still feels different—like I am reaching for something that isn’t there. I don’t even know what it is. The little girl is still there with me, but the thought of seeing Grandma tomorrow calms me. Hopefully, Gloria will help me connect more with her. I’m home.

Homecoming

The rattling of the power lines,

The sound of the low, howling wind,

The faint hum of chicharras and lightning bugs,

Hawks hunting for prey against the dusk,

The windblown leaves of freshly planted sugarcane,

I am surrounded by fields and everything familiar.

Yet, I'm torn, but I am okay.

- *Anika*

III. SPACE 3: VISITING GRANDMA'S HOUSE

“Anika!” Mom calls from the kitchen.

“Whaat!” I reply, trying to awake from sleep. I put a pillow over my head.

“It’s ten-thirty. We are leaving for Grandma’s at eleven-thirty for lunch. Get up.”

“Okay.” I sigh, wishing for a bit more sleep.

Ding. I check my phone before I start getting dressed. After the morning scroll, I change out of my pajamas and into shorts and a t-shirt. Even though it’s December, it’s still warm outside. Sammy comes running to my door, expecting me to play with him.

“Ya Sammy, vamos a la casa de Grandma’s.” He still wags his tail. Grandma loves to see Sammy, so we take him with us.

We arrive at Grandma’s house. It’s a small pale yellow wooden framed house with la Virgen nestled with Grandma’s many plants in the front yard. Aloe, cactus, flowers, and many vine plants fill her planters. There’s a big tree in the middle of her yard, and the trunk has been painted white since I can remember. It is supposed to help deflect bugs and the sun, pero yo no sé. Grandma sees us from the front door. “Hola mi niña! Mira la bebe. La muñeca! Pasále,” Grandma says, motioning us inside. Grandma wears an apron over her dress, and a hairnet over her short black curls, and house slippers as she walks us in. She is about 4’11 tall. She greets me inside with a big hug and a kiss.

Right when you walk in, you see portraits of the family along the wall. It’s all seven kids from oldest to youngest. My mom is the second oldest out of seven kids, five boys and two girls. The painted portrait of Grandma Eustolia, Grandpa Nato, and their eldest son hangs next to the door. Many pictures of grandchildren, my cousins, fill the bookshelves in the corner of the living room. I am greeted by my Aunt Letty, my mom’s

sister. She has long jet black hair, short bangs, the dark, thick Gallegos eyebrows, an angular face, and petite frame.

“Hi babe, how are you? I missed you so much!” She extends her arms wide to me, excited to see me.

“Good!” I reply.

Whistle, whistle, “Hello!” Loris says at the sound of my voice. Loris is my Grandma’s bird.

“Hello, Loris!” Grandma responds from the kitchen.

Aunt Letty and I laugh at him. She has an infectious laugh. It makes me smile.

Grandma’s house has the rooms in the back and then it moves into the living room and kitchen. Along the walls of the living room are what we call the green magic sofas. What’s magic about them is that we all fall asleep on them because they are so comfortable. I remember when I was in elementary school, sick with a cold, Grandma picked me up from school and took me to her house to rest until Mom got out of work. She gave me a cool fluffy pillow y un colchita, and I fell asleep on the green sofa. They are still the same. Aunt Letty and I sit across from each other on the sofas while Sammy tries to play with her. We sit and talk for a bit until lunch is ready. The local news plays on TV in Spanish. Grandma and my mom are in the kitchen getting plates and glasses together to set the table. A portrait of La Virgen de Guadalupe and The Last Supper hangs next to each other in the kitchen. Dad is sitting and watching the news. I smell the Spanish rice with tomaté y papas. Grandma is heating tortillas on the comál while Mom mixes the pot with the molé.

“It’s ready. Come and eat.” Mom tells us from the kitchen. We all grab a plate and serve ourselves.

“Bob, what do you want to drink? Big Red, lemonade, or Sprite?” Mom asks Dad.

“Uhh, I’ll take a glass of lemonade,” Dad responds as Mom opens the freezer to fill a cup with ice. The display of grandkids’ sports photos and newspaper clippings of academic achievements are proudly posted on the refrigerator.

“Gracias, Grandma!” I tell her.

“God bless you,” she replies in English.

She tries to speak English to me when she can because she knows I don’t always understand Spanish. It’s sweet, and I know she tries because she loves me. I love her so much, and I am grateful for her. I just wish I could tell her more in Spanish. She asks us if we need anything before she sits down.

“It’s okay mom. Sientese por favor,” Mom tells her. Grandma loves to care for us. We all sit down to eat at the table. Dad says grace in English, and Grandma says grace in Spanish. The chicken falls off the bone as it’s covered in molé sauce. The spiced, rich chocolate sauces mix with the Spanish rice and refried beans—it’s my favorite thing ever. My dad grabs a corn tortilla from the warmer and tears it to sop up the molé sauce.

“Muy sabroso, Grandma,” Dad tells her.

“Gracias!” Grandma smiles at him across the table as she eats.

As I eat, I remember all that Grandma did to care for Grandpa Nato. He would sit on the sofa and play the accordion and sing in Spanish while we listened. He would sit in the very chair that Dad is currently sitting in and eat what Grandma made for dinner. It’s been four years since he passed away. I still remember his smile and the twinkle in his

eye when he would tell stories. Mom, Letty, and Grandma all start conversing in Spanish, and it brings me out of my thoughts. I start to pay attention and listen to what they are saying. I can follow the conversation for the most part. They are talking about how we are planning on going to Nuevo Progreso soon. I tend to be more of an observer than participating in the conversation. The little girl inside me is tugging at me again. *Say something*. I chime in occasionally with a sentence or Spanglish. It's what gets me by and past the language barrier. When I have moments alone with my grandma, I become very aware of getting stuck speaking Spanish. I just have to remember to keep trying, but it's hard to feel legitimate in your nonnative tongue.

Then, I remember Gloria and her forked tongue:

For those who are neither Spanish nor live in a country which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are Anglo;... what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. (Anzaldúa 77)

Gloria's words help ease me into this reality of my family's language. I have to understand that my experience is still important, no matter how I choose to speak to my family. I have a forked tongue like Gloria. I am still trying to define what my forked tongue means to me. At this moment, it's a release of freedom in just being me. I think primarily in English, but I still try to access my Tex-Mex Spanish tongue. It's difficult, but it matters that I am still trying. Gloria gives me the courage to say a couple of

sentences in Spanish to my family. I did stumble on a word in Spanish and said it in English, but Gloria was there to catch me.

After lunch, we say our goodbyes. Mom and Dad have errands to run after. Sammy says bye to Grandma and Aunt Letty.

“Bye mijita. Dios de bendiga, ahora y siempre. I love you,” Grandma tells me.

“Te quiero mucho también. Gracias, Grandma,” I tell her with a hug and a kiss. We get in the car to drive home, and I am holding Sammy while mom has the leftovers Grandma gave us. I look back at the pale yellow house, and I imagine Grandpa sitting outside waving us goodbye, but it’s Grandma waving at us from her doorstep.

A Spanish Singsong Rhyme Grandma Would Sing To Us:

Naranja dulce

limón partido

dame un abrazo

que yo te pido

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, page 95:

“My flowers shall not cease to live;

My songs shall never end:

I, a singer, intone them;

They become scattered, they are spread about.

—*Cantares mexicanos*

IV. SPACE 4: NUEVO PROGRESO

Beep. Beep. Beep. My iPhone alarm goes off. It's 6:45 a.m. on a Saturday. I hit snooze. I purposefully set it fifteen minutes before I actually have to get up. The sun is just peeking out behind the morning clouds.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I groan. I roll over to my side and slowly get up. I hear the rustle of the newspaper page turning. Dad's already awake and having his morning coffee. I shuffle my feet to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

"Morning babe, you're going to be ready soon?" Dad asks.

"Yes, I just need to wake up first," I reply as I grab a mug and pour coffee. One cream, one sugar, with a dash of cinnamon.

"You're going to take your film camera with you?" he asks.

"Yes, that's the plan. Hopefully, it won't be a big deal," I respond.

"I think it will be fine. Mom and I want to leave at eight o'clock, so you better hurry up and get dressed. You go before the drug lords wake up," he tells me.

"Yeah, I know." I take a sip of my coffee and head to my room.

It's a bit of a joke, but there's some truth to it. We recently started going back to Progreso this past year, 2019. Before, I hadn't been since I was at least ten years old or younger. It became dangerous to cross over due to the drug cartels near the border. When we went once last year, we went early in the morning and were back home by 2 p.m. We felt safe, so we decided to continue to visit, but only if we arrived there early and left before more people crowded the shops.

Okay, I have forty-five minutes until we leave, I think to myself. I pull out my denim shorts, my tennis shoes, and a Texas State t-shirt from my overnight bag resting on the window seat in my room. Spotify plays an indie-folk playlist I randomly chose. Sammy runs up to my door again as I get dressed, looking at me with bewilderment as his tongue sticks out of his tiny mouth, gray ears alert. He's figuring he's going with us wherever we are going. *Maybe Grandma's again.* I think not, Sammy.

"No, Sammy, you're staying here with Shiner. We will be back soon," I tell him as I put my favorite small gold hoop earrings in. Mom found them a while back. They were one of my first pairs of hoops we bought in Mexico. It's only appropriate to wear them again. He whimpers and runs away.

We like to go shopping for medicine and clothes and to eat lunch at Pancho's Bar inside El Disco Supercenter. We became friends with a server there, named Jerry. He's always excited when we come to see him. I know mom wants to get a Mexican dress for Grandma, and I also want to get another Mexican blouse. Dad likes to get liquor and a pack of fresh tortillas at the panderia. It's more than we can eat, but we share them with Grandma.

I see my film camera peeking out of what used to be my Dad's old weathered brown pleather camera bag. It's not very big, but I will just carry my camera in my crossbody purse.

I need to remember to take it. My hands tie my slightly-frizzy, second-day curly hair up in a chonguito. Hesitation and nervousness settle over me. I want to take photos in Progreso because I believe I will connect more with Gloria and the parts of myself that feel ambiguity. To not visit for so many years, and then suddenly go back as a young

adult—bits and pieces are slowly coming back to me. It's never complete though. *We'll see if this works.* I grab the camera and put it in my brown Fossil crossbody purse.

“Ani! Are you ready? Let's go,” Mom calls me. I hear the jingle of the keys as she grabs them.

“Yes, estoy lista.” I grab my purse and a couple of extra black and white film rolls.

“Okay, we'll be in the truck,” she says, walking out the garage door.

I walk out through the garage door. Dad is behind me, locking up the house. Warm air hits my face, although I can still feel the morning dampness. The clouds have opened up a little, and the sun is not fully out yet. I hope it stays a little cloudy today. I hop into the backseat of our blue Nissan truck. Mom already grabbed the tote bags we use for shopping. We pull out of our driveway and start driving to Progreso. It takes about forty minutes to get there.

The whirring and low hum of the truck settle my restlessness. A smile creeps on my face as I remember something. When I was a baby, Mom and Dad would have to put me in the car seat and drive to the stop sign at the end of the street to get me to fall asleep. I would be fast asleep, finally. I guess I always found cars soothing.

I peer out the window, and cotton and corn fields zip by as we drive through Santa Maria as usual, a very small town. Canals, cows, fields, small communities, and one small Catholic church is all I see. Big industrial trucks are driving the country roads. The truck blows black smoke out of the exhaust pipes in front of us. As we turn a corner, there's a Valero Stripes convenience store and a fruit stand with pottery for sale. We're almost there, just two minutes away.

It's close to nine o'clock. The truck slows down and pulls into the side parking lot. It's two dollars to park. We park on the U.S. side and walk across the Rio Grande using the footbridge. Cars can still drive over, but we feel safer parking. There aren't many vehicles here yet, just enough. We drive on the caliche parking lot and find a space.

"Mijita, are you awake?" Dad asks.

"Yes, I am awake," I reply to his tease.

"Pos, I don't know. You fall asleep sometimes." He responds.

Mom laughs. I roll my eyes. I try not to do that anymore. I grab my purse and the tote bags, and we all get out of the truck. Dad has the quarters for us to cross the bridge. It's a dollar to cross and another dollar to come back. We walk alongside the sidewalk up to the turnstile. Cars are alongside us, waiting to be inspected to go through the border. There's a viejita in front of us with her basket cart on wheels paying to enter the bridge. She looks through her coin purse and pays with the last quarter she looked for. She turns around to us and smiles, signaling her gratitude for our patience. I smile back at her. Then, we each put a dollar into the turnstile. *Clink. Clink. Clink. Clink.* First Mom, Dad, then me.

Car exhaust, dirt, and the dampness from the Rio Grande all mix in the air. I feel the weight of my camera against my side. I can see the Rio Grande as I walk the footbridge. My pace is a bit slower than my parents. I am taking everything in, trying to notice how I am feeling, what I am noticing. As each step gets closer to the middle of the bridge, I see the plaque that says, "Boundary of the United States" and "Límite de Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos" with a line separating the two texts. In the middle of the Rio

Grande, this plaque is posted on the footbridge. Often, people take tourist photos with them straddling the line to “be in two places at once.” They smile big with a pose. When I see that, I can’t help but feel discomfort because of how politicized this area is to then be reduced to a tourist photo...

I stop walking for a minute. I stare at the sign. I could feel Gloria’s words ringing in my ear again: “1,950 mile-long open wound dividing a pueblo, a culture, running down the length of my body, staking fence rods in my flesh. Splits me, Splits *me raja me raja*... The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa 24-25). Tears start to well up in my eyes just for a moment as I stare at this sign. I am standing, not in two places at once, but in the Third World—this liminal space. I imagine my feet not being planted on the ground. It’s as if Gloria is resting her hand on my shoulder, gesturing me forward. I look out past the sign and see the Rio Grande, the brown, muddy, wide river.

It’s like the water is bleeding for the two worlds, for land that was once connected by its people and tongue. I think of the river splitting me down in the middle, “*me raja me raja*”, as I stare down at it. I welcome this ambiguous feeling. I am straddling two worlds at the same time, and yet, I feel connected to something bigger. I straddle the border. I straddle myself, balancing two identities.

I snap a photo with my camera. I see Mom and Dad waiting for me. I am taking too long. As I walk to catch up to them, I notice the difference of the view when looking out to the river. On the U.S. side, I can see out to the river. However, on the Mexico side, it starts being fenced up, and I can hardly see out. I think Gloria would say that we turned against our motherland and we fear our roots a bit. I think South Texas tries to claim to

be a part of the United States, but we are caught in the middle. How can we be free to look out when our mother country cannot?



Fig. 1: Limite de los Estados Unidos



Fig 2: The Rio Grande

Once we approach Nuevo Progreso, I hear beggars calling to us in Spanish through the fence. It breaks my heart every time. Poverty is common in these small Mexican towns that need tourism to keep going. Young children are with their mothers alongside the river bank. Strollers, random broken toys, and trash can be seen through the cracks in the fence. I say a silent prayer for them. We are greeted by the Spanish street signs that gesture cars in and people into the security lines. The Mexican flag is painted on the wall of a side of a building, with the statue of the golden eagle perched on a cactus with the snake in its mouth, wings stretched out. The sign says, “Bienvenidos a Mexico.”

We get to the security check, and a police officer checks our bags. The sun cleared, and it is brighter than it was this morning. I snap another photo, adjusting the

meter to the light.



Fig. 3: Aduana Reynosa

Cars are honking as they try to find a parking space or to drive through traffic as people cross the street. The dirt roads have almost permanent tire tread marks. Mom and I walk ahead while Dad is behind us. The street vendors are just opening their booths alongside the sidewalk. El Disco Supercenter is one of the first stores we see since it's near the entrance. We usually walk a couple of blocks and then come back to El Disco to shop and eat before we head back home. A kid walks up to me, trying to sell chicle. "No gracias," I tell him, apologetically.

We move along, and there are many people who try to sell us services such as manicures, braids, leather wallets, anything. Sometimes we stop, but we generally keep it moving because we already know what we want to purchase.

We stop in an alley filled with little booths and shops that sell jewelry, dresses, blouses, ponchos, bags, a little bit of everything. Mom knows which booth she wants to go to, and Dad and I follow her. Beads of sweat form on my forehead. Small personal fans in these little booths are the only consolation from the humidity. The air is hot and still, away from any breeze from the streets. Dad wipes his forehead with his gray t-shirt. La señorita who runs the dress booth is fixing a dress on a mannequin. She has slicked brown hair in a tight chonguito. She has a petite frame, angular eyebrows and face. The fan in the corner blows her ponytail. She sees us from the corner, and she walks up to Mom.

“Hola Señora, cómo puede ayudarte?” she asks.

“Tiene vestidos en una talla grande? Es por mi mama. Usted es chiquita también.”

Mom tells her.

“Sí, tengo vestidos en colores de azul, rosa, negro, y rojo,” the clerk replies.

Mom flips through the wall of dresses to pick one out for Grandma. There are several embroidered designs with flowers, peacocks, and lace patterns.

“Aye mira, que bonita.” Mom sees a black dress with elaborately embroidered flowers at the chest that flow down to the bottom of the dress.

“Tengo en azul también.” The salesgirl shuffles through folded dresses in the back of the booth. She pulls out the same dress, but in a turquoise blue color in a size large. Mom asks for my opinion.

“I think she will like it. It’s a good size for her.”

Mom agrees to buy it for her. I ended up buying a black blouse that I liked with red and blue roses embroidered around the neckline. Dad is out waiting in the alleyway

where it's cooler. Mom and I walk around the corner to meet him. He wants to get tortillas from la panadería that lies a block away from across the street. More vendors are out selling, asking us if we want to look or buy anything they have.

I smell the fresh masa a few feet away. The aroma is sweet, warm, and savory. We get to the booth entrance. There are about three women and two men working in the panadería. Three women work an assembly line, mixing the masa, forming the tortillas, and putting them on the conveyor belt to cook in the oven. Their hands are quick and fast at forming perfect, small circles of masa. Orders in Spanish are taken by one man running the cashier. The other man is bringing in the masa from the back. Small fans blow hot air at the tortilla stand. A few people wait in front of us for their fresh corn tortillas that sell for about two dollars a kilo. One lady grabs the fresh tortillas off the conveyor belt and weighs them on a scale. Then, they are wrapped in paper all nice and tight. Dad orders one kilo of tortillas and pays.

As we weave our way through the people, more people start filling the sidewalk. We walk past a man sitting on a small chair selling bags of freshly cut nopales. The lady next to him has a container filled with Mexican candy for sale. More people start lining up to food trucks like elotes, lonches, and tacos. From the movement to the smells, everything is stimulating. I see a man making necklaces with names out of wire. They are beautiful pieces. He works and maneuvers the wire into curvy, connecting letters for a young girl in front of me. I wanted to get one because it is hard to find my name on anything.

“Hola hija, escriba su nombre aquí por favor,” he tells me.

He hands me a pad of paper and a pen to write the spelling of my name. I write “Anika.” I choose the gold wire instead of the silver, and he immediately gets to work. All he’s using is a pair of needle-nose pliers to form the letters. Within five minutes, he’s done.

“Muchas gracias, Señor! Ta muy bonita,” I tell him.

He gives me the necklace back and also thanks me for my business. We start to make our way back to El Disco Supercenter. It’s close to noon, almost lunchtime. This walking and the heat are building my appetite.



Fig. 4: Street Artisan



Fig. 5: Nuevo Progreso Market

We look both ways as cars and foot traffic crowd the street. We make it to the other side of the sidewalk from where we originally started. I hear a man with a traditional guitar singing Tejano songs for tips. He's got a deep, soulful, Tejano voice. People walk past him and smile. He smiles back with an endearing, wide smile, even though he has broken teeth. He wears a tan vaquero hat, a button-up plaid shirt, a brown leather belt, and worn denim jeans paired with worn boots. His face is leathered from the age and the sun, but his wrinkles around his eyes still make them twinkle. He seems very rich in life and blessed to be here singing for people. My heart warms at the sight of him. He reminds me of Grandpa Nato. He sees us, and he begins serenading us to a classic Freddy Fender's song "Rancho Grande." He strums the guitar and rocks back and forth

singing with his eyes closed. He plays just for a short minute and ends with a “dun-dun!” on his guitar. People around clap for him. We tip him, and he smiles in gratitude.





Fig. 6: Street Musician

A few blocks down, there is El Disco Supercenter. Dad gets the liquor there. The air conditioning hits our faces right when we enter. El Disco has two levels: the first level has the pharmacy, groceries, Mexican pottery, liquor, toys for children, and Pancho's Bar and Restaurant. The second level has more clothes to shop for. My sister Abigail calls it the "all in one" store. Mom and I tell Dad that we will meet him at the restaurant. He leaves to make his purchase.

Mom and I walk in, and Gerardo "Gerry" greets us. He's always quick on his feet, moving people in to seat them. He tells us hi and asks for Dad.

"He's coming. He's getting the tequila." Mom says with a laugh.

"Ahhh muy importante." Gerry responds with a tongue smack and a smile.

Gerry guides us to our table. There's a man who sings Tejano music with a keyboard and microphone next to the bar. Sometimes people dance to his singing on the small dance floor.

Gerry asks, "Que quieres para tomar y comer?"

Mom tells him, "Yo quiero un orden de lonches y una margarita. Para Bob, igual."

"Bien, y tú?" He responds to mom and then gestures towards me with a pen.

"Yo quiero un orden de lonches también pero una soda de manzana." I tell him.

Gerry leaves with our orders, and then Dad shows up at our table. He places the paper bag with the tequila inside one of the tote bags that's underneath the table. An elderly couple dances on the dance floor to the man's music. It's sweet to watch. Here, sitting with my parents, I feel comfortable. I am less afraid of speaking Spanish because I am surrounded by it. I order my food in Spanish, which I definitely have done before. However, here it feels different. I am welcoming the side of me that has been silenced for awhile—a side of me that I hardly get to see and experience. Gloria is with me again. She's telling me to welcome the native tongue that's been suppressed for so long. I know I tried to at Grandma's house, but at this moment, I feel more liberated. I sit there for a minute.

I'm taken out of my daze as our food appears on the table. My soda de manzana is cold from a glass bottle, and the margaritas are full to the salted brim. The lonches look delicious—fried bolillo bread with chopped bistek, shredded cabbage, tomato, avocado, and queso fresco sprinkled on top. The limes are juicy and fresh. Mom squeezes them all over her food, and I do the same. We also snack on the salty Spanish peanuts they put on

the tables. We enjoy our food, the atmosphere, and we laugh about small things. It's like another homecoming to a place I feel deeply connected to. The little girl inside me, coming here, is dancing on the dance floor to the man's music.

It's about time to get ready to leave. We thank Gerry and make our way across the street to the footbridge going back. We pay the dollar in the turnstile and walk across the bridge back to the U.S. side. I see the Rio Grande again, and I thank it for its blessings. At the end of the bridge, there are two lines for security checking: one for passports and the other for other forms of identification. We line up in the Passport line. The security officers check for our passports, and they ask us what we bought. We show them our items, and we are let through. Dad stops at the liquor tax booth to claim the bottle of tequila, and he pays the tax. We cross the street to the parking lot where we parked. It's now 1 p.m., and it's starting to get even more packed. We get in the truck, ready to go back home. I whisper to myself, *gracias Gloria*.



Fig. 7: Walking alongside of freedom



Fig. 8: Footbridge back to The United States

The Smell of Mexico

Mesquite burning,
Rural casitas with wooden framed homes,
Tiene dirt floor,
Con los animales in the back,
Cooking la lengua on a cast-iron pan,
Her mom₁ was forty-one years old when she died.

- *Anika, Conversations
with Mom*

-

₁ Grandma Eustolia's mom

V. SPACE 5: VISITING GLORIA

As a part of my journey to rediscover myself, I am driving to pay a visit to Gloria Anzaldúa in Hargill, Texas. Gloria was born there and rests with her family in a small cemetery called Valle de la Paz Cemetery. It is about a forty-five-minute drive from my home in Harlingen, Texas. It is a very small town with a population density of about 887. I have been feeling and experiencing her words throughout my time at home. I feel anxious and excited to drive to visit her because I think it will reveal more about how I feel about my identity as a Chicana, as a *Mestiza Nueva*.

I grab my keys to my little maroon 2007 Ford Focus, and I set the GPS to the cemetery. My camera and notepad lie next to me in the passenger seat. Linda Ronstadt's mariachi album *Canciones de mi Padre* plays while I drive. My paternal grandpa, "Gramps," liked to listen to this album. I sing along to Linda's Spanish lyrics, and her voice carves deep in my Chicana heart. The mix of the Spanish lyrics, the chasing fields, and canals create a perfect drive to see Gloria. It's almost like I am preparing myself for the experience by immersing myself in my own valle world.

The directions require me to take the country and county roads, away from the Business 77. I hear the grinding of the loose rocks against my tires. It is surprisingly windy today. I can feel my car rocking when I drive against it. The tall grass hugs the sides of the road. The only vehicles on the roads are transport trucks, tractors managing the surrounding fields, and my little car. A truck transporting citrus drives in front, and its exhaust fumes blow right in front of me. The only thing on the horizon is the sun against the blue sky and the Valley palm trees. Barbed wire outlines the neighboring ranchitos,

keeping the cows away from the road. They still peek their head through the fence to eat the grass along the ditch.



Fig 9: Las Palmas in the distance



Fig 10: Cows grazing



Fig 11: Abandoned structure alongside a county road



Fig. 11: Cropduster plane flying overhead

I see the “Hargill” street sign approaching as I enter the town. Small houses are tucked away behind brushy trees. A family sits outside drinking while the kids run around the small front yard. There’s not much here, but I can tell there is a real community here. A few convenience stores with peeling paint are on the corners of some streets. I imagine Gloria growing up here when she was a young girl. She called herself *terca*. In *Borderlands*, Gloria says, “At a very early age, I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. I tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were” (38). Her imagination ran wild as a child, and she was often diminished for it. In the ways young Gloria felt different in her own skin against the valley fields and sky, I felt it too. I am still learning to be more accepting of this side of me.

I am a street away from the cemetery. There are large, rusted grain silos resting behind a row of houses on this street leading to the cemetery. These signal an old past to agricultural industries in the area, often common in small towns in the valley. My GPS signals that I have arrived, but I missed the turn. I make a U-turn, and I see the small entrance. I couldn’t see it because mesquite trees, tall grass, and cactus hid the entrance so well. I turn into the entrance slowly because of the rocky, uneven caliche road. As I drive, I see a few dogs perk up at the sound of me. I hope they belong to the neighboring houses around here, but it’s hard to know in these country back roads.

I park my car and start looking for her. It’s just me in this small cemetery. It looks no more than three to five acres. I feel ready to see her, but I am aware of everything around me. There’s a flagpole flapping hard with the wind. The wind blows my hair and

whistles in my ear. I'm wearing my sunglasses to prevent dust from getting in my eyes. I hear the wind chimes ringing in the tree. It rests over a bench dedicated to someone. I start walking, and it feels like I am being drawn to something. Almost immediately, I find the Anzaldúa family. I had no idea that I parked right next to her.

I see her grandparents and some other family members. At the end of the row, lies her. I stop. Her resting place is adorned with candles, calaveras, marigold flowers, small windmills, rosaries, and Virgens de Guadalupe. I see several notes left for her from past visitors. Stone surrounds the perimeter of her resting place, and rocks lie in the middle. Her view is of mesquite trees and cactuses poking through the barbed wire fence. She has a beautiful inscription that says, "May we seize the arrogance to create outrageously, sonar wildly—for the world becomes as we dream it." Engraved snakes border her tombstone, symbolizing her serpent tongue, her forked tongue. Seeing the snakes, it reminds me of the biblical stories taught in Catholic school as a child. It's the symbol for Satan tempting Adam and Eve. To me, snakes represented danger or ill-will, but Gloria is teaching me a new significance and power to them as she invites Aztec mythology into her stone and literature. She's claiming her side of la indigena. I sit with her, close my eyes, and meditate on how I feel. The breeze continues to blow past my face.

She accomplished so much in her life, and she is revered for her work. Even though it was difficult, she was unapologetically herself. Gloria serves as a mythos that guides me. Often, people read an author's work that deeply impacts them, and they seem like far away concepts. However, here I am sitting with her, and I am overcome by this profoundness I feel. I start to tear up. I begin to write in my notebook:

Hola Gloria,

Monday January 6, 2020

My name is Anika y yo soy Nepantle. Gracias por todo. To be in the town you grew up in, I can see your book come to life—the silent way of hushed tones, birds chirping, wind howling, and constant cars driving by the service roads.

I am from Harlingen, TX, and I discovered you in an honors class at Texas State University. I am forever grateful for you because it was the first time in a long time I felt seen. My identity is something I struggle with, but you have helped me see that it's what I want it to be.

You are a person that inspires me. I knew you passed away, but it wasn't until I found you here that made you real. You have become a piece of home for me, a comfort in knowing I have been seen. I feel the same deep contrast to life that you felt growing up, everything contradicting each other.

Te quiero mucho. I hope to also seize the arrogance to create outrageously, as you've had. You rest peacefully with the South Texas terrain around you. Are you home now in your mother country? Free to be and speak how you like? I aspire to be free as you've made me feel. Visiting a cemetery reminds me of an end, of my mortality, but Gloria, you remind me that we must make life count to create the world we want to be in. You remind me that I am free to choose. Muchas gracias, Gloria. I have found home in you, as you did for yourself. You felt a deep

connection with your heritage, with love, life, endings, anger, and sadness.
You serve as a reminder to be human.

There's so much I want to say, but I think I will sit here with you
instead. Be at peace Gloria, and I too will carry the Valley on my back like
a turtle.

La Mestiza Nueva,

Anika Adams, 21 years old

I tear off the page from my notebook, fold it, and leave it underneath one of the
candles. I say a prayer for her and her family. I truly feel whole in this moment. Often,
we try to run away in search of something to find ourselves. However, the thing we need
often starts at our roots. We end up running into ourselves. I am guilty of that. I left to
earn a higher education, but also in search of something "different". I didn't know the
contradictions I felt until Gloria spelled it out for me. It's like she threw *Borderlands* at
me because she knew I needed to come home. Today, I became *La Mestiza Nueva*.

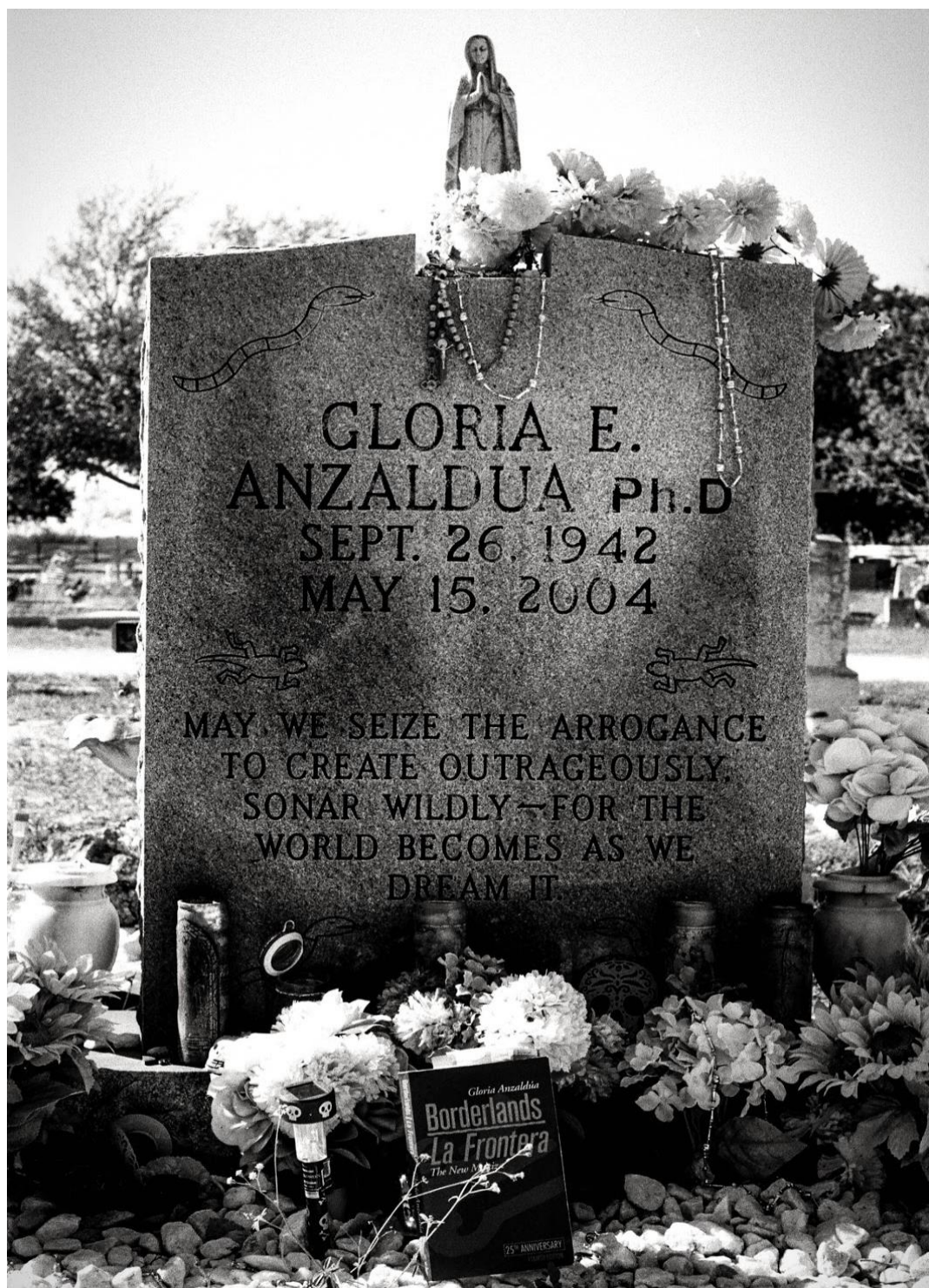


Fig 12: My copy of *Borderlands* with Gloria

VI. SPACE 6: VISITING SAN BENITO WITH DAD

Dad and I are driving in the blue truck to San Benito which is the next town over from Harlingen. Dad was born and raised in San Benito. I hope I can learn more about him and his family, like my grandparents. Dad met Mom working in Harlingen, but they lived in San Benito with my two younger sisters for a couple of years. They would build our house in 1996, and I would be born in 1998, two years later. The house I grew up in is the one I've known all my life, and so I have no concept of what San Benito was like growing up for my Dad. After my time with Gloria, I am more willing to take in these moments with him.

Dad tells me he is going to show me the historic parts of town, his childhood home, and parts of town that relate to my family history. My grandparents, Nana and "Gramps," both grew up in San Benito and raised four children. My Dad is the second oldest. There's a story that Nana likes to tell us about how she met Gramps. She was outside helping work their land, and Grandpa came up to sell them barbed wire. Nana was wearing bright red shorts, and the rest was history. I remember hearing this story at the dinner table at their house in Round Rock, Texas. They retired in Central Texas. My sisters and I would spend two weeks with them in the summer.

We are almost getting into town. It's just a ten-minute drive on the expressway from Harlingen. Dad has the talk radio on. It reminds me of the times he would drop me off at school growing up, and the morning news would play through. He drives with one hand on the steering wheel. He wears a cap that covers his salt and pepper hair. He had jet black hair when he was younger. I've seen younger pictures of him with a mustache, but now he's got a salt and pepper goatee. His wrinkles crinkle at his eyes against his tan

skin. It's from the many weekends he spends outside cutting the yard. He's got a sharp nose like his mother. Mom says my nose is like the perfect mixture of both of theirs: long like Dad's, but with a button like Mom's.

We take the exit for the San Benito historic district. My arm rests on the window, and I feel the heat from outside. The sky is pretty clear today. Dad points to the McDonald's on the corner.

"Your sister Alyssa, when she was little, she would point and call it Ee-oos. 'I want ee-oos Dad!' I was like what is she talking about? Then I remembered the Old Macdonald song. E-I-E-I-O," Dad explains with a chuckle.

We make a left turn at the light. He's driving to Hidalgo Street which is where Nana would visit Tía Berta. It's just off of Sam Houston Street, the main street that runs into town. We turn onto La Palma street, and there's a canal that runs alongside it. Tall grass peers over the banks of the canal. We pass by an old industrial warehouse and small businesses, like Amigo Food Mart and Karin's bakery. Dad swerves a bit to avoid a large pothole. Small neighborhoods start to appear on the passenger side, my view. The street signs are traditional Mexican names— Rosita, Maria, Panchita, Juanita, Juan, and Virginia—that are one right after the other. I see one cute house on the corner of Maria Street. Fresh green grass, blooming flowers, and a tree offering shade to the grandmother watering the plants while the kids run around the small front yard.

We turn onto Hidalgo Street, and my eyes are drawn to a mural of La Virgen the Guadalupe with Juan Diego at her feet. It's painted on a brick wall of an abandoned, boarded-up building. I think of Gloria's words again:

In Texas, she is considered the patron saint of Chicanos... La Virgen de Guadalupe is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-*mexicanos*, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess.

(Anzaldúa 52)

I do the sign of the cross. It's an acknowledgment to her and God, but also to my Mestiza identity. Seeing her image reaffirms me in this process, and I have a deeper appreciation for *Guadalupe* because I can see myself in her. Soy diferente y indígena.



Fig. 13: A mural of our Indígena mother, La Virgen De Guadalupe

Dad parks along the street. The houses are small wooden A-frame homes. Neighborhood dogs and cats walk near the cars. He tells me that Nana used to visit Tía Berta's house, right across Salome's Meat Market. It was the neighborhood market, una *tiendita* Dad calls it. My great-great-aunt, Tía Berta, was Nana's father's sister. She was a respected educator and Spanish teacher in San Benito. She taught Dad and his siblings Spanish in 8th grade. Her house is currently occupied with a family. It looks weathered with time. The white paint is chipping. The screen door lets in the warm breeze. A big tree looms over it, and I imagine Nana sitting outside on the porch with her visiting, and the same tree being there, providing her shade. The odd twists and age make it look like it has seen some things—very mystical y que la vida de mi familia está aquí. Dad and I couldn't find the house that Nana grew up in, but he did remember Tía Berta's house.



Fig. 14: Tía Berta's house, present day

Dad walks into the Salome's to check it out while I look at the house. I allow my imagination to run. I could see Tía Berta being an example for Nana. Tía Berta earned her Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree in Linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin when it wasn't common for Latinx women to earn a higher education in the 1960's. Nana earned her Bachelor's Degree from St. Edward's University when she was raising a family. She taught my sisters and me to be independent. One of her sayings that she still tells us today is, "You know what you gotta do. So do it." I come from a line of strong women. Carved out of a little corner of Hidalgo Street lies an ancestral history I am discovering for the first time.

Coming out of the store, Dad asks, "Mijita, are you ready? We're just going to drive to Berta Cabaza Middle School." "Yes," I replied, coming out of my daze. We hop in the blue truck again and cruise to the school that my great-aunt is named after.

We appear at the middle school. It's currently Winter Break, so there aren't any cars in the parking lot. Palm trees line the entrance of the school, and they are swaying in the wind. The thing about South Texas is that the wind can pick up and die down at any moment. Dad parks the truck as I walk to the entrance of the school. The doors are locked, but I can see a portrait of Tía Berta hanging in the foyer of the school. Tía Berta conducted linguistic research and published for the University of Texas Press. She was widely recognized for her methods for teaching Spanish, and she was considered the Consultant and a resource for San Benito's Spanish Department (*School Profile – About Us – Berta Cabaza Middle School*).

I reflect on her work in the Rio Grande Valley, teaching Spanish in innovative ways during a time when many tried to silence speaking Spanish. In a way, she was fighting for her people's native tongue, just like Gloria. Ella era una pionera. I feel immense pride in knowing that she is part of my history. I think of my Nana, and I remember her strength and stubbornness. She also spoke Spanish to me, and she taught all of us the importance of working hard. I look back at my Dad from the school, and he's waiting for me, whenever I am ready. He's letting me explore his side of his family in a hometown I never knew. I walk back to the truck, and I smile at him.

"You ready? Was it open?" He asks.

"No, it wasn't, but I got to peek inside. Thanks for taking me." I respond.

"Next, we're going to just drive downtown and then check out the old house."

We pull out of the parking lot, and a warmth comes over me. I think I am realizing that the homecoming of me is also the homecoming of my Dad as well.



Fig. 15: Berta Cabaza Middle School Entrance

We drive through downtown San Benito, and we park in the parking on the side of the street so I can look around. I see another Valley town come to life around me—another local meat market, sections of houses with neighbors talking to each other, preserved historic buildings, and cranes stalking the banks of the resaca, and St. Benedict’s Catholic Church. It’s the church where his parents got married and where Alyssa was baptized. Dad points out where he went to school growing up, where Nana went to school, where he and his friends get lunch off-campus. He tells me about his childhood friends, like Billy and Patrick. A smile appears on his face as he’s recounting his childhood memories. It’s like I am seeing a different part of the valley through his eyes, and I am still connected to it because of him. I feel as if I am being pulled into his world filled with memories of his childhood, stories of family members that have passed on. I never got to see his roots until now. He’s always been my dad, but driving around San Benito again, he’s a young boy, a young man being raised by my grandparents, Tía Berta, close friends, his community. San Benito is a part of him, which makes it mine as well. I am just realizing it now, as his daughter, that every bit of his story is also my own too.



Fig. 16: Historic Azteca Building in downtown San Benito, TX

Next, we drive to Dad's childhood home. We make a couple of turns and drive past his old friend Leroy's house. He is outside doing yard work. Dad gives him a wave. He also went to school with him. We turn onto Pennsylvania Street, the street he grew up on. We pass by unplowed fields and empty framed houses. There's one that says "S. De La Fuente & Sons," almost collapsing.

Dad points out and says, "Santiago De La Fuente built framed houses, and he would finance them. Then, they would finish the inside with sheetrock and everything. I went to high school with his daughters."

Gramps worked in lumber in San Benito, and Santiago would buy materials from him to build the houses. They look like relics of an old San Benito that time left behind.



Fig. 17: A marking of the De La Fuente's family business

Soon, we arrive at Dad's childhood home. It's just a couple houses down from the De La Fuente's. This is where he grew up with his three other siblings. The house sits on two and a half acres of land. They had cows and hogs on the furthest part of their land. Around 1986, Nana and Grandpa moved to Austin. He tells me the house doesn't look the same.

"It's weird looking at it," Dad says in slight disbelief.

There's a family currently living there, and it looks like they renovated it a bit. Gramps would be outside working the land, and my dad and his siblings would help. Seeing his reaction to the house, it makes me wish I knew him as a young boy—to see my grandparents in their youth, as parents. He's here with me now, and I am his daughter. We look at the house in silence for a moment, together.

"Thank you for showing me around, Daddy," I tell him.

"You're welcome, Babe." He responds.

Then, we drive home back to Harlingen. I contemplate the experience on the drive home...



Fig. 18: Dad's childhood home

With him, I witnessed a different part of the Valley that is still connected to me. I never knew San Benito like this. I just knew it as a place where my Dad grew up, but I never considered the roots established before me. It was a grounding experience with him. Gloria is guiding me in a new light. It's like I entered a different realm within the same world. I know that sounds crazy, but I feel something changing the more I notice myself against this world. I know I remember looking back at the Mother Country, Mexico, for some consolation as to where my roots began a long time ago. But with Dad, I looked back at my family's history, beyond my own world. I am looking at the past through my father while still planted in the ground, in the present. I think of Gloria's concept of *la facultad*:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world... It's a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds unknowingly cultivate. (60)

Not only did I recently become *La Mestiza Nueva* when I visited Gloria, today I held my ambiguity in my arms and carried it with me to another realm. With Dad, I was caught in his world while still being caught in my own. I think of Tía Berta teaching Spanish to children, my grandparents raising my dad and my aunts and uncles, and of San Benito having its own roots apart from my own. I am tapping into *la facultad* as I see deeper realities within this one. I have always felt things so deeply as a child and even

now, but I never thought it could have been related to where I grew up. My senses pierce through concrete objects and people—*the sixth sense de la Chicana*. The depths open up underneath my feet, and yet, I find footing in nothingness.

Despite the internal conflict I feel sometimes, I find a moment of peace and rest as I experience *la facultad*. It's like I feel the grating of my two worlds, and I am caught in the middle unable to move. I somehow find comfort in its pain. Soy sensible. I notice the trail of your voice and the intentions you have. It's the secret glances from two people across each other, and I am in the middle, witnessing it, while others carry on in their own realities. It's the release of dancing to a song that's been inside of me for years. I can breathe in South Padre saltwater off of your skin and exhale your memories. It's when I pull the shedding bark off a mesquite tree in my backyard—the roughness of the bark between my fingers and the dryness of the grass beneath my feet—it's the same feeling. I can see the pain behind your eyes, and yet, you still have a gentle spirit that you wish to give to the world. The strumming of a guitar to a simple Tejano folk song becomes kisses around my face. It's Grandma's laughter forming around her crinkled eyes that I wish to store in a box forever. I feel this in all worlds I encounter. The little girl, with long curly hair, jumped off the swing set and landed. However, she landed in an abyss of her own home. She's learning and nurturing it well. This is *la facultad* for me. It's how I survive and feel excruciatingly alive at the same time.

I found more of my roots in the past of my father. My identity as a Chicana, as *La Mestiza Nueva*, is starting to transcend beyond this one. *La facultad* holds ambiguity at its core and moves *la indigena*, *La Mestiza*, forward into the world. Gloria, how do I explain that I hold many spaces, both supernatural and real, in my heart and soul to

others? I guess I can try. Now, it's become more than just speaking Spanish. It's my identity being alive inside of me for the first time. I am truly embodying Gloria's *La Mestiza Nueva*. Estoy despierta ahora. Gracias Gloria.



Fig. 19: Roots in Abyss

VII. SPACE 7: LAST VISIT WITH GRANDMA

It's almost the end of my visit at home. When any one of us visits, me or my sisters, we stop to see Grandma Eustolia before we go back home. I truly feel comfortable in my own skin, and I haven't felt like that in a long time. Gloria continues to help me understand that my experience before realizing my identity as la Chicana, *la Mestiza Nueva*, was just as legitimate as it is now. I have prepared questions in Spanish to ask her, and mom will be there to help me as well. I want Mom to be there because I think witnessing our three generations—Grandma, Mom, and myself—communicate can be powerful as it shows the varying difference in our experiences.

I am wearing the new Mexican blouse I got from Nuevo Progreso, paired with some colorful earrings that match the embroidered flowers on the blouse. I make sure I have my bookbag—laptop, film camera, notes, interview questions, phone, keys, wallet, oh, and my *Borderlands* copy. I walk out the front door, and I see Dad cutting the grass. It's a Saturday, so he does his weekly ritual on the mower. He waves at me, from across the yard, telling me bye. The sun is so bright today; I am still somehow squinting a little as I wear my sunglasses. My chanclitas can feel a little warmth radiating from the concrete driveway. I start the engine and make my way over to the house.

Mom is going to meet me there after she runs an errand. I am excited and nervous to interview Grandma. I think it will be special for me to connect with her in ways I never have. To get to Grandma's house, I have to drive on a windy bridge over the Arroyo Colorado, a small river running through the Valley that empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Sometimes I am able to spot cows along the banks of the river. I peer over to the side to see. *None today, hmm.* Eventually, I reach a stoplight, and I have to make sure traffic is

clear. Rangerville Road tends to be busy because it runs through a portion of Harlingen. I make the turn, passing a small brick house with la Virgen statue outside. Like my mom, I do the sign of the cross. I make another turn that leads to Grandma's house. There's a pasture of cows and goats grazing. The road contains a lot of potholes, and I have to drive slowly and try to avoid them. There's an unplowed field to my left. The farmers plant cotton in the summertime, and the stark white looks beautiful against the dried leaves and the bright blue sky.

I park outside, and her neighbors' kids are playing on their new playground. I turn off the car, and I take a minute to take a deep breath. I imagine Gloria sitting next to me, waiting a bit impatiently for me to get out. *I know, Gloria. It's nothing I haven't done before. She's my grandmother.* I pull myself together, and I start walking to the front door. Loris' birdcage is outside the front door. He hears me approaching, and immediately says, "Hello!" Grandma opens the door with a big smile and hugs me. She's wearing a dress we got her some time back, and her hair is straight, pulled back in clips. She wears the same gold hoop earrings she has been wearing for as long as I can remember.

"Pasále mi niña!" She says while gesturing to me inside.

"Gracias, Grandma," I respond.

She tells me that she has menudo on the stove. It's not my favorite thing to eat, but I still like the broth and the hominy con salsita. Aunt Letty comes out of her room and greets me with a hug and a kiss. I try to tell them that Mom is on her way in Spanish.

"Mamá está en camino. Ella tiene un mandado" I explain to Grandma.

"Ah okay, tienes hambre? Quieres un poquito menudo?" she asks.

“Si, pero mas hominy por favor,” I laugh.

“Ah okay, mi niña.” She smiles, grabbing a bowl and spoon from the cupboard. She starts to serve me a small bowl while I get a glass of hibiscus tea she recently made.

The Spanish noon news is on again. The kitchen light is on and the rest of the house is dim. The sunlight manages to peek through the blinds and curtains to illuminate the house a bit. I sit down at the table, and Grandma places the bowl in front of me.

“Gracias, Grandma,” I say.

“De nada, mijita,” she replies.

I sit there eating, and I can feel the silence. It’s just the noise from the TV commercials. She sits beside me for a bit, and she tries to communicate with me in English. I know she’s doing it because she wants to try, and I want to speak to her in Spanish because I want to try. I feel the worlds blending and clashing a bit at this point. I manage to get by with my forked tongue, my Spanglish. I tried to communicate with her about my school project.

“Yo tengo un proyecto para escuela y que es about mi familia,” I explain. I didn’t remember the word “about” in Spanish.

“Ah okay... que bueno,” she nods her head.

Then, Mom comes in from the front door.

“Hola!” she says while taking her sunglasses off and putting them in her hair.

“Hola, mi niña. Siéntese,” Grandma replies.

Mom pulls up a chair to the kitchen table. I am feeling a bit nervous to start interviewing Grandma. I only know bits and pieces from her story, from her life growing up in Mexico. Mom helps me explain to her that I want to ask her a couple of questions for my

project. I didn't know how to say "Honors thesis" in Spanish, so the word "project" works. Grandma agrees, and I begin recording and asking these questions:

In English:

1. Where were you born? What was it like growing up in Mexico?
 - a. Where did your name come from?
2. What was your childhood like?
3. Who taught you how to cook?
4. What do you remember about your mother and brother or your family?
5. How did you meet/know Grandpa?
 - a. What was he like when he was younger?
6. Did you only speak Spanish growing up?
7. Did speaking Spanish cause challenges for you? Were you treated differently when you worked, or just in general?
8. Do you miss anything about Mexico?
9. What do you think about your grandkids not speaking as much Spanish?
10. When your kids started learning English in school, what did you think about that?
 - a. How did it make you feel?
11. What was it like working in the fields with your family?
12. What is one thing that you've always tried to teach your children and grandchildren?
13. What are you most proud of?

In Spanish:

1. Donde naciste? lo que era como crecer en México
 - a. ¿de dónde proviene tu nombre?
2. ¿Cómo fue tú niñez?
3. ¿Quién te enseñó a cocinar?
4. ¿Qué recuerdas de tu familia? tu mamá o hermano o famil?
5. ¿Cómo conociste al abuelo?
 - a. ¿Cómo era él cuando era más joven?
6. ¿Sólo hablabas español creciendo
7. ¿Hablar español te causó desafíos? ¿Te trataron de manera diferente cuando trabajabas, o sólo en general?
8. ¿Extrañas México?
9. ¿Qué opinas de que tus nietos no hablen tanto español?
10. Cuando tus hijos empezaron a aprender inglés en la escuela, ¿qué pensaste de eso?
 - a. ¿Cómo te hizo sentir?

11. ¿Cómo fue trabajar en el campo con tu familia?
12. ¿Qué es algo que siempre has tratado de enseñar a tus hijos y nietos?
13. de qué estás más orgulloso?

We all sat around the kitchen table as I began interviewing Grandma. She sat to my left while Mom sat on my right. Grandma had her arms crossed in front of her on the table, directing towards me, signaling her willingness. The questions in English help me refer back to the questions I already asked while the questions in Spanish are the ones I asked her. In the beginning, I stumble a little in asking the questions in Spanish. I find myself looking to Mom for validation in the way I am speaking Spanish. Mom helps me a bit with some of the translations because the words I am using aren't the same colloquially. She looks at me with encouraging eyes to continue.

The more I speak Spanish to her, the more confident I am becoming in my nonnative tongue. I imagine my own forked tongue like Gloria's. Grandma's responses about the way she grew up, how she met Grandpa Nato, the language barrier between her and her grandkids, and how much she loves her family is warming my heart. Grandma's eyes are full of love and pride for me, and she tells me in Spanish that she will do anything I need her to, that she will always be there for me.

"Te quiero mucho mucho mi niña." She wraps her arms around herself, signaling a hug to me.

I start tearing up. I am overcome with love for her, and acceptance for myself. She hugs me, and then mom starts tearing up as well. We all start a small group hug. Three generations, holding each other, tearing up. We then laugh at the fact that we are crying. I find home in my Grandmother's heart. I can imagine Gloria smiling at me, nodding with pride. I have learned more about Grandma just by having a conversation with her in

Spanish. I think about the twenty-two grandchildren and five great-grandchildren she has that may not know some of these details about her. There's nothing wrong with that, but speaking Spanish, even a little, creates a connection to her. I think of it as an acknowledgment of a past that I don't know. She grew up in Mexico, but she doesn't know all of her family. I have a history there, too. Maybe someday I can find more about her side too.

As a third-generation, I don't think in Spanish. I think in English. I was not taught, but I knew some Spanish. I was afraid of being wrong, of speaking it incorrectly to the people I love. I think many third-generations fear speaking Spanish wrong because of possible rejection. We have assimilated into "Western" culture where English is the primary language. When trying anything new or different, like speaking Spanish, you feel a grating feeling against yourself. It's the constant fighting of how you normally operate and know the world. We fear to stray from what is comfortable. I assimilated to other places, even at home. But now, I don't have to anymore. I see the Valley. I see my identity. I see my family. I see Gloria. I have come home to myself, and I will continue to, each time I come home.

After the interview, we continue to visit for a bit before we leave to go home. It feels like we just didn't break through a language barrier today; we broke through lost generations of connections. I peered into another world again, hers, just like I did with Dad in San Benito. Mom tells a goofy story about our dog Sammy, and it makes Grandma laugh. Grandma loves him. Then, all of us stand up, and Mom and I help her clear the table. Grandma doesn't like it when we do it, but we do it anyway. It is just another silent way of expressing love on both sides—the "no you don't have to. I don't

want you to worry or get up,” and the “Ya, it’s okay let me. I am your family. Let me help you.” It makes me laugh, honestly. I think this translates to every culture beyond just Grandma’s house.

After cleaning up, Mom grabs her purse from the green “napping couch,” and I follow her. Grandma walks us outside. I give her a big hug and tell her goodbye since I will be driving back to school the next day. She tears up a bit and tells me how much she loves me. She does the sign of the cross on my forehead. I notice the twinkle in her eyes as the late afternoon sun shines. The right golden tones hit Grandma’s face perfectly. I stop and ask her for a photo. She’s shy, but she agrees out of love. I pull out my camera. *Click.* The light burns the film of a portrait of my grandmother. I also shot a photo of her hands to show the lineage of hard work and love. Te quiero mucho también, Grandma.



Fig. 20: Portrait of Grandma Eustolia



Fig. 21: First and Third Generation, Grandma and Me



Fig. 22: Grandma's hands

Mom and I got home some time ago from Grandma's house. Dad made picadillo for dinner, and it was delicious. It's now night time, and I am writing outside in my backyard underneath a full moon. It's the biggest moon I have seen in a long time. The dogs are with me outside, too, chasing each other. Mom and Dad are inside watching TV. I think more about what happened today...

I talked to my grandma, and I overcame my fears of speaking to her in Spanish. I know she loves me, but it was hard to accept it when I felt like I couldn't communicate more to her in Spanish to show her how much I love her. I wanted to say more than, "Te quiero mucho." More of my Chicana identity was realized today. Through the generations, I am here because of her. The strong, shy, humble Abuela. Usted es mi Abuela y gracias a Dios por ella. She knew grief, she knew life, she knew poverty, and she knew love and family. And to talk to her and appreciate her when she's here is one of the most amazing things I have been able to do. I looked at her and then I looked at my mom. I... I was just me, with them. I was enough for her. I was enough to be her granddaughter. I have never felt more proud to be her granddaughter until today, January 11th.

I used to separate home and family from my life in San Marcos, but it continues to merge and become one here. I am una Nepantlera. I am free to choose. To speak however I like. That's my power. The big river, el Rio Grande, is the energy of life for me. I was born into a family of love, and I was meant to realize more than myself, to realize more worlds in this one. Grandma's house is my home. Family is home, and I sometimes try to run away from that. I try to find a home in other places, in other people. It's this restlessness in not being grounded in my own nature. Here, it makes sense that I

can find comfort in South Texas because my feet can be anchored in two worlds whereas they struggle just to be anchored in one. I find myself in moments with Gloria and with my family. I've struggled to find myself, but through Gloria, through my grandma, I have found home. I was always running away, trying not to look back. Now, I have a reason to, and I am grateful.

Often people politicize South Texas. Others say things like, "There's nothing there, just the border, fields, and nothing much to do." You want to talk badly about my home and say there's nothing? Yeah, there's nothing but fields and bi-culturalism. There's the Spanglish forked tongue of my ancestors. Of my family. Of myself. There's the hot summer sun baking us with the humidity like no other—our personal Third-World oven. Here en el Valle, things stop for a moment, for peace, at night. There's the silent full moon at night, the fields around me, and bright stars. It's the wind in the trees and the stars in the sky that are the ancestors of my past. The chicharras start their nightly chorus. I'm learning and appreciating the oral history of my people, of my family, the places I know.

Freedom is bitter; it takes guts. Gloria had the guts to be different, and it scorned her. It was bitter, like the taste of a bad Valley citrus orange peel or an espina stuck in your foot from dry grass. She took her powers de *indígena y la Mestiza Nueva* and became free. She helped me become free. I will eventually return to the dust and it will bear fruit from the Valley fields. It will help the sugarcane leaves dance in the wind. My spirit will be free, knowing that I danced to the accordion playing in the cantina bar in Nuevo Progreso with my sister and loved wholeheartedly. Gloria, God, and Grandma. Para siempre en el Valle.

VIII. LEAVING THE VALLEY

“Morning mijita,” Dad tells me as I walk slowly to the kitchen. I have just woken up. It’s about to be 10 a.m., and the sunlight is blinding me perfectly through the blinds.

“You ready to go soon,” he asks.

“Yes, I just have a couple more bags to load in the car,” I reply while serving myself a cup of beautiful, strong, caffeine into my favorite mug I keep here at home.

Dad rustles the Sunday newspaper to straighten it up as it was falling limp. I always liked to read the Sunday comics when I was younger because they would print it in color. I turn around to face the kitchen island while I take a sweet, wake-up sip of coffee. I see two full white paper bags resting on the island which means that Dad went to Lara’s bakery to get some pan dulce for them and for me to take back to San Marcos.

“Thank you Dad,” I tell him sweetly, in an awed voice.

“What? Oh, you’re welcome. I got up early, so I went and got some barbacoa for breakfast from Steve’s and pan dulce for us to have with coffee. I also went on a walk this morning.” He says. He looks at me past his reading glasses and makes a joking cara.

“Sounds like you’ve had a full morning already,” I replied.

“That’s what happens when you wake up when the sun starts to rise,” he says, with a flip of the “A” section of the newspaper.

I make a face at him back, with a scrunch of my nose and a grin. Steve’s Food Mart is a small hole-in-the-wall gas station/food mart. It’s a local favorite, and they have the best breakfast tacos. I walk towards the island to peek inside my designated bag, deciding if I want one now or later. My favorite thing from the bakery is their fresh pumpkin empanadas. When I go with Dad to get some, the sweet warm smell of the

empanadas coming out of the oven is one of my favorite things in the entire world. Everything smells like cinnamon and memories that haven't been unlocked yet. I remember going after Sunday Mass to Lara's, and the line would be so long, sometimes outside the front door.

Gloria says that we internalize identification in more subtle ways, like in forms of images and emotions. She says, "For me food and certain smells are tied to my homeland. Woodsmoke curling up to an immense blue sky; woodsmoke perfuming my grandmother's clothes, her skin" (Anzaldúa 82). Like Gloria, it's the woodsmoke rising out of the chiminea we have on the patio, keeping us warm on the rare occasions we have forty-degree weather in the winter. It rises into the night sky and disappears. I imagine it fueling our ancestors up above. I think there's some mythos to what we do. For me, it's the barbacoa on Sundays, pan dulce, and the smell of Grandma's tamales in the winter that tie to my identity. I know Dad got some because it's a Sunday, but it's also a treat before I head back to school in San Marcos. I am thankful to have these moments and images in my head to keep forever.

I look at the empanada. I think I will have one later, after breakfast. The oven beeps, signaling it's done preheating. Dad put in the barbacoa in the oven to keep warm. The cilantro, salsa, and tomato are all prepared and kept in the fridge.

Mom comes out of the room, looking fresh and dressed. She's wearing her Sunday bata, perfect for lounging around the house.

"Hey, Babe! Good morning." She greets me with a kiss.

"Morning mom," I respond with a lean of my head on her shoulder. My frizzy hair gets in her face. She doesn't mind it.

She starts setting the table for breakfast, which is brunch at this point. I help her with the plates. Dad gets up and starts to take out the food from the oven. Hay frijoles también. I get the salad out from the fridge and place it on the table, along with Dad's favorite spicy salsa verde. Dad places the hot tortillas, barbacoa, and beans on the table. Sammy follows us to keep up with the commotion while Shiner stays in his crate, fast asleep and snoring.

We all sit down at the table and say grace. We pray over the food and for safe travels for me back to San Marcos. I make little taquitos with barbacoa, cilantro, tomato, and a squeeze of lime. We don't have any fresh limes from the trees because they're not in season, only in the summer. The tacos taste better in the summer when we do have fresh limes from our tree. It's like an unspoken thing in Mexican culture to have barbacoa for a late breakfast on Sundays. It signifies a start to a new week, and it also brings families together because barbacoa takes time to cook and prepare. It strays away from the normal huevos con _____ during the week. Channel 5 Morning News is on in the background, with the volume low. Sammy is just looking up at us, expecting something to fall for him to eat. Dad talks about what he has to do this week, and Mom talks about how she needs to do some chores around the house.

Eventually, we finish and clear the table. I help clean the kitchen, and I walk to my room to collect the remainder of my things to take to the car. I walk outside carrying my last couple of bags I had in my room. Dad follows me to help me check on the car before I drive.

"Mijita, your car is ready and loaded?" Dad asks me while I load the last bag into the trunk.

“Yes, all good to go. I even have the pan dulce from Lara’s bakery in the front seat. Gotta keep it temperature controlled.” I reply with a teasing smile.

The trunk closes with a rattle of my Texas State license plate cover. The clouds look a bit dark, meaning it will probably rain a bit on the drive back to San Marcos. Dad checks my windshield wipers, just in case, along with my oil and tires. My hair is tied up in a curly knot with sunglasses on my head. I am wearing my Johnny Cash t-shirt and some yoga pants. I call them my “driving clothes.” Mom comes outside to join me and Dad. Mom gives me a sad, wistful look. Su bebé se va.

“Everything looks good,” Dad says, closing the hood of the car.

“Let’s say a prayer,” Mom says, grabbing Dad’s hand and mine.

We say the Lord’s prayer and ask for protection for me on my travels. It’s a ritual we do when either my sisters or I travel. Dad gives me a hug and a kiss on my forehead, and Mom does the cross with her thumb on my forehead. She also gives me a hug and a kiss. I tell them how much I love them and that I will call and text when I stop and when I get to San Marcos. I get in my car and start pulling out of the long driveway I used to ride my razor scooter on. I wave at them from the car, and I head for the expressway. They wave back. I think about how I am forever grateful for them and where I come from.

Linda Ronstadt plays through my car speakers again, reminding me of the overall experience I had with Gloria and my family. I pass by the local fruit stand that my parents get produce from. El Señor waves at me at the stop sign, and I wave back at him with my hand that is still holding the steering wheel. He tends back to his work and helps a customer. Then, there’s another store that sells Mexican pottery and the kinds of piñatas I used to get from there for my birthday parties when I was younger. Nostalgia and grace

wash over me, and I can't help but feel humbled by my roots. Before, I was struggling to be, but I have let go of the sun, the sky, God, family, Gloria, and el valle. My shoulders relax, and I let Linda's voice carry me to the First World, San Marcos, Texas.

As I drive on Business 77, heading north, the rolling clouds still hover above. The old Harlingen cotton textile mills fade behind me. Sometimes, there's a pungent odor that lingers in the air when they are processing it. You can smell it when driving by, but this time I didn't. I was grateful for that. The more I drive, the more spread out the land becomes. I think of the many smaller communities around the windmills, surrounded by fields that are smaller than my own. The canals that flow through them, the many country dogs that roam the roads, the rows of fields that are endless—creating their own Third World. I think there are many Third Worlds in the Rio Grande Valley. We can only visit if you know about it. I feel many infinities within my own Third World. It's like I am constantly awake, and I feel *la facultad* again.

The palm trees and windmills still stay with me for a bit. They look ominous against the sky. Feeling compelled, I stop to take a photo of the space around me. I pull over and turn onto a country road. It's just me, a few soaring hawks, and a house across the street that is just around the corner from Sebastian's fruit stand.



Fig. 23: The Valley Terrain against the dark clouds



Fig. 24: Sugarcane fields and my car

I say a prayer over the land because I know how difficult it is to get rain here. I am thankful that the clouds might bless the land. Then, I get back in my car, and Selena y Los Dinos is playing now through my speakers. I sing to “Como La Flor” very loudly in my car and make my way back to the expressway. I imagine Gloria sitting in the passenger seat, laughing at me. It makes me smile. I think of Grandma and my family the further I drive north. I also carry them with me.

The scenery changes to longer stretches of roads and brushy, dry land lined with barbed wire. Many hawks are soaring through the sky, hunting for prey. Trucks zoom past my little car on the highway. Traffic has an easy flow, but then starts slowing down as we approach the Border Patrol checkpoint in Sarita, Texas. Eventually, the traffic forms two lines—one for big trucks and the other for vehicles. Cameras are documenting you, your car, and your license plate. There’s also a small “Wanted” billboard with faces of criminals on them. Sometimes their faces are crossed out, signaling that they’ve been found. I am used to it because we have to go through any time we drive north. I remember explaining the checkpoint to my friends who have never been to South Texas, and it sounded so different and a little scary to them. I can understand that, but it’s just what we have to do.

Next, is my car. I turn down my music and roll down the window. A german shepherd sniffs around my car for drugs. A tall, green-suited Border Patrol officer approaches my window.

“Hello, are you a U.S. Citizen?” He asks.

“Yes, I am,” I reply.

He peers into my car and checks the backseat since my windows are a bit more tinted than my front windows.

“Alright, thank you. Drive safe,” he tells me.

“Thank you,” I respond, and drive forward.

Sometimes I see vehicles pulled aside to inspect. This time, there aren’t any. I don’t mind the Border Patrol officers. I know they are a part of the community as well, and they are doing their jobs. They do a lot to protect people. I say a silent prayer for them because I know it’s not easy.

I continue to drive on. The further I get from home, I feel myself adjusting to the space around me. It makes me afraid that I will lose this consciousness. However, as Gloria says in *Borderlands*:

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in a new territory... But if I escape conscious awareness, escape “knowing,” I won’t be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me conscious. “Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before. (70)

This helps me acknowledge that I will be constantly moving, and I should. Gloria continues to teach me to be curious about “knowing” because I can then tap into realms other than my own, as I have done before. It changes you. It changed me. It changed Gloria. It’s painful to be so aware, but I think that is how we can create change.

We find forces within ourselves to cross, be an alien, cross again, and be an alien, and do it again—so much so that we become pieces of many. With *la consciencia de la*

Mestiza, we have to transcend the voices that tell us “no” so we can hold many worlds within our own. I am realizing that even if I do stray away from my roots, I know I can come back to consciousness de la *Mestiza Nueva*. I just have to tap into it. That is my own power, and I thank my ancestors and the land of the Third World, el Valle. My soul carries South Texas on its back like a turtle wherever I go, just like Gloria did (Anzaldúa 43). Soy una Chicana. Soy indígena. Soy *La Meztiza Nueva*.



Fig. 25: No Trespassing the Third World

“This is my home

This thin edge of

barbwire.”

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, page 25

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