

# *Curando la herida abierta:*

Writing as a form of healing

Dedicated to *las mamas chiquitas*

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*La mama chiquita learns to write and to heal (from the panocha)*

We sat at the Pho restaurant on Rosecrans as my *abuelita* scanned the room. Our table was filled with steaming bowls of colorful soup and rice noodles. We talked about how *tremenda* I was and have always been. Our voices came to a halt when my grandma brought up my mom's deportation. My grandma looked at me with her loving eyes and told me that I became *la mama chiquita* when my mom was deported. My experience growing up while simultaneously having to take care of my siblings has a name.

*La mama chiquita* (n.): the young mother.

*La mama chiquita* (n.): the mother of your siblings.

A 2019 qualitative study conducted by Tanya Golash-Boza on the effects of deportation found that the children whose parents have been deported had to transition into adulthood in a matter of days. I was ten years old when my mom was detained. I was ten years old when I was forced into adulthood. I was ten years old when I became *la mama chiquita*.

My story is the story of *la mama chiquita* healing from systems of injustice and violence. I write my story so that other *mama chiquitas* don't feel alone, which is what I felt for so long. I write my story to understand and to help others understand that trauma and healing go hand-in-hand. The writing process can be so daunting at times. It feels as if my fingers are trying to birth the concepts that were once conceived in my brain. In *Writing as a Mode of Learning*, Janet Emig describes the writing process as a component of heuristic learning (1977). Writing allows the learner to fully flesh out concepts and make those concepts make sense for themselves.

For so long I never assigned words to what I was feeling. I was just *feeling things* and that was that. I didn't know that there were words that describe exactly what I was feeling. Words like despair, hope, apathy, annoyance, joy, euphoria, apprehension, *la mama chiquita*, and any other word that can explain *what* and *how* I feel. Barbara Christian explains that the experiences lived by the marginalized can be theorized. (1987). My life can, and has been, theorized. I am doing theory by existing and although I can use words like white supremacy, xenophobia, capitalist exploitation, my wounds cannot be theorized away. Unfortunately, in order for people to become more empathic to situations like mine my wounds need to be felt by others so that they know that they are real. Christian also states that theory has become a commodity in that it is extremely valuable but we have begun to lose the humanity behind the humans we theorize about (1987). My healing project, this thesis, aims to rehumanize those theories.

I have come to learn, through writing, the importance of assigning words to these feelings and experiences. We, the third world woman as Anzaldua describes us, should use writing as a tool of liberation, a tool to step into our power. Cisneros describes this action as writing from the *panocha*. Writing from the *panocha* means to look deep into the "scandalous" crevasses of our Latina existence (Cisneros, 1996). There is power in being able to effectively dig into these cracks and assign terminology to what we have faced and will continue to face. Writing, especially from these "dark" places, allows for a physical conceptualization of these forbidden feelings which is the first step in healing then followed by liberation. Our education system needs to take notes from women like Gloria Anzaldua, Sandra Cisneros, Cherrie Moraga,

Audre Lorde, and other third world women<sup>1</sup> in order to strengthen this written expression tool in our youth.

Through this self-healing project I have come to learn that writing and the practice of assigning terminologies to situations previously thought of as “just how things are” is the first step of healing and letting go. In *Borders and Borderlands* Gloria Anzaldua outlines the “process of letting go” as looking into one’s soul and acknowledging our shadows/demons (Anzaldua, 2007). Anzaldua writes,

“You must plunge your fingers/into your navel, with your two hands/split open,/spill out the lizards and horned toads/the orchids and the sunflowers.”  
(2007, p. 186)

Writing from the naval, from the heart, from the PANOCHA, allows us to validate those experiences (Cisneros, 1996). Irene Lara states that writing from the *panocha* steers the third world woman/human away from the “legacy of silence” and towards the vagina (*panocha*) as a producer of knowledge (2008, p. 117). We have been conditioned to suffer in silence because any form of emotional distress is viewed as weak by the rest of the world. No one is allowed to see our “weaknesses.” These weaknesses are seen as too emotional. Christian criticizes theorists as not allowing a space for emotions to exist in academia (1987). We must carve out a space for emotions to exist in these academic spaces to prove the effects of these theories. Writing from the *panocha* allows for the oppressed to go into their shadows (traumas) and assign words/terminology to the “hows” and the “whys” of those shadows. Writing from the *panocha* allows for that space where emotions give merit to theories. Once we learn how to write from the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “third-world women” to reference women of color. I am using the colonizer’s words in order to formulate a new meaning. The third-world woman is not subordinate. Instead, she lives in a world, the third world, where love, nurturance, and emotions lead the path for social justice/equity.

panocha, diving and cleaning of our soul becomes easier, which minimizes the effects of that legacy of silence. We allow ourselves to feel so that we can heal.

In *Speaking in Tongues* Anzaldua voices the concern of inadequacy that comes when we, the third world women, write (Anzaldua, 2015). Anzaldua describes the sensation of wanting to do anything but write, she would much rather take out the trash or make phone calls (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 164). Our current education system overtly tells us, third world women, the way we write is unacceptable (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 164). By not providing examples of writers who not only look like us, but think like us, mainstream education makes us believe that our writing is inadequate. In order to meet these eurocentric measurements of “good writing,” our writing must be purely academic (Christian, 1987). Emotions cannot be shown in our writing or else our merit is questioned (Christian, 1987). Any less and anything emotional is not acceptable within the academy.

Mainstream education reinforces the idea that we are writings are inadequate by only showing us writings from a specific race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Through this lack of representation, we are covertly being told that our writings are not worthy of recognition. My healing process began when I was shown pieces that weave both the personal experience with the academic. These pieces showed me that I am doing and have been doing the theories we read about written in jargon I barely understood. The only reason they made sense to me was because of my experiences. I was able to contextualize racial theories through my stories and my experiences. Anzaldua writes, “What validates us as human beings, validates us as writers” (2015, p. 166). My words, my experiences, and my existence are valid. This validation combats the inadequacy that I/we once felt before we let our fingers do their thing.

Cisneros equates having sex to the feeling of finding out she has the ability to write (1996), which is what I felt when I began writing about my story for this project. I needed teachers that encouraged me to write instead of telling me that in order to be a “good” writer I needed to write in a linear and fact-based manner. For most of my educational career I have learned that a “good” writer must write in a linear fashion. The concept of “writing to learn” should be tailored to how the student wants to learn about a topic at hand.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that if education were used as a practice of freedom and liberation there would be no doubt that students are in constant relation to the world (1968). Students will not see school and their existence as two separate spheres. Freire emphasizes that classrooms do not exist in vacuums and that they can be an essential tool for diminishing arbitrary systems like ICE, prisons, police, and anything that is not for the betterment of society (1968). The confrontation of these demons is hard at first but through a consistent practice we, Latinas/Black/Asian/etc. women, strengthen that skill. This skill can be strengthened by introducing different forms of writing. Stream of thought. Poems. Prose. Diary entries. Anything with words, anything that births the thoughts we hold in our heads through our fingertips. Writing should not just be confined to the academic realm.

Writing this thesis allowed me to make sense of my mom’s deportation. Stories, poems, and expository essays provided me with a space to create a positive feedback loop between the paper and myself. I was conceiving thoughts in my brain while birthing them through my fingertips. This collection of writing is personal, political, and academic. Writing needs to be personal, political, and academic all at once.

CRASH-COURSE SALVADORAN HISTORY





## Cafecito con leche

I remember being three, maybe four, years old and having my *abuelito* fill up my *pacha con cafecito y leche*. I would guzzle that light brown beverage. I guzzled *mi cafecito con mi abuelito* in the kitchen of our Los Angeles home while he ate the breakfast my mom made for him. Coffee beans have played a huge role in my family's history and are the reason we were sharing a meal in Los Angeles. Coffee beans were the reason why my family, my grandparents, left a country they had always known to go to a land filled with opportunities and hope.

In order to *fully* understand my parents' (im)migration stories we have to look at the history of El Salvador. Here's a little crash-course of Salvadoran history. This is the history that pushed my family to the U.S. -- to the land of "hopes and dreams."

In the 1920s El Salvador was on the up and coming, for the rich mostly. It was producing and exporting coffee beans to developed countries. Due to its location and climate, coffee beans were the driving force of the Salvadoran economy. This economic force created a deep and unequal divide between the wealthy and powerful, and those working for them, the poor and the powerless (Ching, 2016). This divide between the powerful and the powerless led to a, what I call, *un desmadre*. The rich and powerful didn't even think about the poor when they were creating and amending laws (Ching, 2016). This exclusion further created the classed divide because the poor had no voice in what was happening in their lives (Ching, 2016), even though the poor and the working class were the majority in El Salvador.

By the late 1970s this divide was at its peak. El Salvador's elitist political/economic structure and its export-crop economy worsened the lives of the peasants who were still being

excluded from political participation (Ching, 2016). This forced the peasants working the coffee crop to live in, essentially, unlivable conditions. The rich owned the majority of the land while the poor rented and worked the land for the benefit of the rich. The workers were called *campesinos* which translates to “tenant farmer.”

*Los campesinos* experienced labor exploitation. They worked long and back breaking hours to meet the export needs of El Salvador. *Los campesinos* kept El Salvador running. There was, and continues to be, a difference between the rich and the poor, the exploiters and exploited based on the premise of race (Ching, 2016). *Los campesinos* were *los indios*. The dark and subhumans of El Salvador. After years of underpaid/underappreciated labor, the workers at *los campesinos* grew tired. They began to push for a communist inspired political structure. Those in power felt as if their riches were being threatened which is why they decided to fight against this political push (Ching, 2016). While this push for communism developed, the U.S was working to diminish communist rhetoric from society by putting people in jails, putting them on trail, and even as far as murdering those suspected as “communists” (Ching, 2016).

This rise of communism in El Salvador set off alarms in the U.S which made the U.S stick their nose where it does not belong. The U.S made an alliance with the rich families of El Salvador to help combat the rise of communism. The political left was fighting for education, equal pay, and better work conditions. The political right, the U.S and the rich, believed that this communist approach went against two “natural” laws: 1) the economic law of supply and demand and 2) human beings as competitive and individualistic (Ching, 2016). Human beings were exploited because basic human rights go against these “natural laws.” The right began to

train assassins to kill political leaders and those who were affiliated with communism. A civil war emerged The right's army was funded by the U.S government.

The war began in 1979 and ended in 1992. The country my family called home was a dangerous warzone for 12 years. My grandmas decided to pick up their entire lives and move to Los Angeles.

A Poem to El Metiche

You call equity communism  
You thought my people's fight was threatening  
You think my people are threatening

Our anger is justified  
Our hunger feeds our anger

You should have minded your business  
But I guess  
You only know how to mind the business that pays you

In the words of Cervantes<sup>2</sup>  
My people aren't political  
We don't even like politics  
We aren't revolutionary

Why do you consider trying to feed our babies as  
Revolutionary

U.S.hould have minded your business

A.R 2019

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<sup>2</sup> Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races by Lorna Dee Cervantes

## Los cuentos de mis abuelitas

Both of my *abuelitas* are so proud of the lives they have established in the U.S.--the seeds they have sowed and the fruits they are reaping. I am so lucky to have both of them in my life and so blessed to have them pray for me every night. This is for you guys, even if you cannot read the language I am writing in, I am so proud to be a branch on the roots you have planted en los estados unidos.

*La mama de mi mama*

My grandma was head over heels in love with my grandpa. She had found her soulmate. She tells me that their days were filled with laughter and that she had never found someone who had made her laugh the way he did. She would ride the bus in El Salvador and look around and think to herself, "wow I really have the most handsome husband." My grandma and my grandpa had three kids together: my mom and my two uncles.

In El Salvador they owned a dressmaking shop. Financially-wise they were doing pretty well, the kids were in private schools and they had nannies.

On a spring day in 1985, when my mom was out with her nanny and my uncles were playing outside, five men came into their house and robbed them. My grandma describes this event as the day that her life was turned upside-down and inside-out. She remembers walking into the room where the money was at and the robbers taking money out of the safe. While they were loading a sack full of money my grandpa walked out of the room with a gun he had and tried to shoot *los ladrones*. My grandma signaled that he should wait until things escalated. He hid the gun behind his back and waited. At this moment, my mom and her nanny walked into the scene and one of the robbers took my mom, who was only two years old at the time, by the arm

and threatened to kill her if they did not tell them where the rest of the money was. My grandpa, in a frenzy, decided to pull his gun out and attempt to shoot. The *ladron* holding my mom let her go and shot a bullet straight towards my grandpa's heart. My grandma saw my grandpa on the floor and refused to believe that he was dead.

My grandma layed next to my grandpa and called for his name. While she did this she felt another bullet whiz by her head and hit her husband in his right cheek. She saw a stream of blood come out of his face and she covered it with her pointer finger. This stirred up some type of rage in my grandma. She grabbed my grandpa's gun and chased four out of the five men out of her house. She was cursing at them and threatening them with the gun -- a gun she didn't even know how to work. She chased four of the men away with this gun she didn't even know how to use. She walked back into the house to find her three kids being held hostage by the remaining *ladron*. My mom and her siblings were lined up against the wall as this man was crouched on the floor taking money out of the safe. My grandma kicked him in the throat and lodged her high heel in this man's throat. She yanked her foot out of his throat and he ran away with blood dripping down his neck.

My grandma tells me that the men who were in that house knew how to shoot a gun, as if they had been trained to do so. She did not have an ounce of fear when she was protecting her family.

Two years after this incident, my grandma, widowed at 32, decided to go to the U.S. My grandma describes this decision as the only way to keep her three kids from starving to death. If she had stayed in El Salvador, with little to no work, she would have only made 5 *colones* a day. In those times, that was the equivalent to less than a dollar a day. My *bisabuela* told my grandma

that she should go to the U.S, telling my grandma that there are more opportunities for her to pull her family out of this financial dilemma.

In 1987, my grandma decided to trek to the U.S. She rode buses for days and she walked through mountains and deserts to *la frontera*. The U.S/Mexican border. She endured long days of hunger and heat all for the chance to survive.

Once my grandma got to the U.S, she worked on a radish farm for three months. My grandma, coming from a higher social rung on the Salvadoran social ladder, did not know how to do hard-back-breaking-labor. She joked and said that she only knew how to *mandar y no trabajar*. She worked in the sun and even got blisters on her knees in order to get a letter from the farm owner so that she can get a work visa. She received the work visa and that very same night she was in a car on her way down to El Salvador. She drove all the way down for five days straight to see her kids. She wanted to stay in El Salvador, she wanted to be with her kids but she had to go back to the U.S. and work.

A few years later, in 1992, my grandma was able to “smuggle” her kids into the U.S. That is when my mom got to the U.S.

My grandma became a naturalized citizen in 1997.

### *La mama de mi papa*

I was sitting at the same dining table that I drank my first *pacha de cafecito* with my grandma. I looked at her in awe. She was stirring some milk into her coffee as she looked at me. We dove straight into the topic of migration and her personal migration story. My grandma is always so eager to share her story. She always tells me that I will be the one to write our family’s story into a book.

Her migration story began with her son, my uncle. In the late 1970s, my grandma and grandpa received a letter stating that their oldest son was going to get enlisted in the Salvadoran army. My uncle was only about 15 years old at the time and it was a lot easier for my grandma to send him to a new country than to have him serve for the Salvadoran army. She knew what happened to young boys in the army. She did not want that to happen to her son. At that time, my grandma had family in the U.S so she decided to send him their way.

My grandma sent off her oldest son to my aunt who lives in Los Angeles (L.A.). She sent him off to a country that promised her son a future. My grandma described his departure as *partiendo su alma*.

During his time in the U.S., my uncle was getting in trouble and not listening to my aunt. My uncle ran away and my grandma had gotten news of his rebellious tendencies so she decided to go to the U.S and straighten him out.

She took a plane from El Salvador to Tijuana. From Tijuana she hid in the front of a big truck in order to cross into the U.S. My grandma emphasized how skinny she was back in the day, “*I was so skinny that I fit in the front of the truck. You had to be skinny like me to fit in there and I did because I was so skinny.*” Besides reminiscing on my grandma’s skinny days, she also described that the inside of the hood of the truck was lined with carpet so that she can have a “comfortable” ride. My grandma made it all the way to my aunt’s house in L.A. and surprised my uncle. My grandma spent a couple of months in L.A. until she got a call from my grandpa telling her that her other four other kids in El Salvador had gotten sick. My grandpa didn’t know how to cure them so my grandma trekked back down to El Salvador, leaving my uncle in L.A.



One day my grandma and grandpa received a ransom note stating that they would get killed if they did not pay a large amount of money. They stayed up all night thinking about what they were going to do. The following day they heard of a coyote who would be able to cross the whole family (all six of them) into the U.S. The day after that they locked up their house, left with nothing but the clothes on their back, and trekked to the U.S. My grandma described it as if they had just left for work for the day.

LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

*“The only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 25-26).*

### A Love Story

When my parents met, my mom was actually dating my dad's uncle. Her boyfriend at the time invited her to the mountains with his family and my dad was there. That day my mom only hung out with my dad. They talked about everything and nothing up in the mountains. A couple of days later my mom's boyfriend invited her to my dad's house for a family Christmas party. At that party my mom only danced and laughed with my dad. Days after the party, she broke up with her boyfriend to get with my dad. My mom and dad dated for a little while. But this isn't their love story. This is the love story between my mom and her four kids -- the truest most purest love she has found.

*Real love, I'm searching for a real love  
Someone to set my heart free  
Real love, I'm searching for a real love  
(Real Love Mary J. Blige, 2008)*

On April 1, 1996, my mom's best friend had her first child. My mom went and visited her friend in the hospital and saw this little creature in his mother's arms. She looked at that child and got a spark in her eye. She left the hospital, met up with my dad, and created me with so much love. A couple of months later my mom was beginning to show signs of pregnancy. She went to the Santa Clarita Clinic in Cudahy. They ran tests on her and told this very scrawny 14-year-old that she was pregnant. They sent her away with prenatal pills and a smile. She got to her mom's house and accidentally dropped the pills in front of my uncle, her older brother, who like most older brothers likes to pick on their youngest sibling. He told my mom that if she did not tell their mom of her pregnancy he would do it himself. My uncle went to my grandma and told her, "listen, you need to talk to your daughter because she is pregnant." My grandma was in

denial. So, my mom had to have a difficult conversation with my grandma. My grandma posed the question, “well, what do you want to do?”

My mom, a small 14-year-old, made the big decision to keep the love of her life.

After my grandma found out her youngest daughter was pregnant, she told my mom to pick up the phone, dial my dad, and tell him the news. My dad didn't pick up and when he did he denied it and said that I was not his. My grandma drove all the way to my dad's house where they were having a father's day celebration for my paternal grandpa. My dad continued to deny that the baby in my mom's belly was his.

*El dia que tu nacistes nacieron todas las flores*  
(*Las mañanitas* Vicente Fernandez, 1990)

The night of January 30th, 1997, my mom was feeling great pains in her lower stomach and back. She told my grandma what she was feeling. My grandma told her that they were contractions. My grandma then told her to go for a walk around the block. My mom and one of my *tias* walked around the block during this walk my mom was crouching in pain. After some begging my grandma finally gave in and took her very pregnant 15-year-old daughter to the hospital. My mom remembers all of the nurses asking her for her age and replying with “wow, you're a kid yourself!” My mom was in too much pain to care about their snide remarks.

In the delivery room, my mom was laid on the birthing bed with her knees pulled up to her stomach. She was ready, excited, and in pain. Ready and excited to meet me. In pain because of me. A doctor, my mom describes as a beautiful *mestiza* comes in to assist my mom. My mom was pushing as hard as her small could. My mom was pushing out my head and I would not budge. The nurses attached a suction cup to the top of my head to help assist my mom's pushing and still, I would not come out. The suction cup flew off of my head and the doctor made a quick

decision to snip at my mom's vagina so that I could come out. All my mom remembers seeing is the surgical scissors and feeling a soul-twisting pain in her genitals.

Throughout this whole process, my grandma was on the phone with my dad. She gave him one last opportunity to meet his kid. She told him that if he was completely sure that I was not his child that she did not want to see him around. My dad drove with lightning speed to come and meet his first love as well.

On the morning of January 31st, 1997 I was born to a 15-year-old-girl in Los Angeles. I was her first true and pure love. I was her motivation to do well *y echar le las ganas* in school. My mom was in the 9th grade and would endure long nights of changing diapers and finishing up homework assignments. My mom says that from the moment she met me she did not want to leave my side. She would sleep with me on the same bed and spend every waking moment with me. She was obsessed.

A few months after she had me, my mom found out she was pregnant again! She had to drop out of school to focus on her *tesoros*.

On June 6th, 1998, my younger sister was born. *La guera sin nombre*. My sister went a full month without having a name because my mom did not want to name her after my grandma from my dad's side. She put up a good fight and my sister received her beautiful name.

On July 30th, 2001, my youngest sister was born. This one was not so lucky. My dad insisted on naming her after my grandma once again and my mom decided to pick up another fight. She said that it was not fair for her to be named after just one grandma so she also added her mom's name.

On February 1, 2004, my youngest brother was born. Completing my mom's *tesoros*.

She was in love with every single one of us.

I am  $\frac{1}{4}$  of my sweet *madre*

I see her in everything I do

When I get excited my hands flap like her's

When I find something funny I use my pointer finger the same way she does

Wagging it at every word I say

I see her in everything I say

When I have to say decision the tip of my tongue hits the roof of my mouth just like hers did

When I get angry my voice gets stone cold just like hers use to

When I laugh my laughter turns into a carcajada just like hers

I see her in everything I do

When I can't make a decision, there goes that word again, I bite the skin around my nails

When I'm concentrating, the space between my eyebrows come together forming little hills, just like hers did

When I storm out of a room I walk the same way she did

I see her in everything I listen to

When I play El Chico Del Apartamento 512 by Selena I can see her dancing in the driver's seat

When I listen to a good song I can hear her saying "Oooh Ale this is a yam"

When someone says "Mira mira" I picture her grinning to herself as she shows me what she found so exciting

I see her in me

I see her face when I look into the mirror

The way our noses curve up the same exact way

Our hair twists and tangles the same way

I see her dedication when I stay up all night going over notes, studying for tests, cranking out assignments

The same way she would stay up nights to provide for her four kids

I see her wagging her finger at me and repeating "Don't givet up mí princesa, chonchi locat"

Always reminding me that "the sky es the limit"

Even from Mexi/cali

If it weren't for arbitrary lines on a map

That turn people into aliens once they were crossed  
I wouldn't have to look for her in me  
Instead  
I would just see her with me



## Heartbreak y la herida

My mom told me that sometimes the radio talks to you and tells you messages you need to hear. She remembers that day, that feeling, so vividly. She remembers seeing the police officers behind her and she remembers the song that was playing on the radio. Alicia Keys' *No One* was playing on the radio. I guess this was the universe telling my mom that she was going to be okay, that things were going to get bad but they were going to be fine.

No one can get in the way of what I feel for you. I know people will try to divide something so real.

On December 1, 2006. My mom was arrested. She was driving on the freeway after dropping us off at a gas station parking lot to spend the weekend with our dad. That weekend turned into 10 years.

I remember my dad getting a call later that night. We were in the Little Ceasar's parking lot. I sat behind the driver's seat and I saw my dad looking puzzled at his phone. He asks me, "What does locked up mean?" At the moment my mind quickly went to Akon. "Locked up? In jail? Who's in jail?" My dad said that it was my mom who left the message.

*No One* (Alicia Keys, 2007)  
 I just want you close  
 Where you can stay forever  
 You can be sure  
 That it will only get better  
 You and me together  
 Through the days and nights  
 I don't worry 'cause  
 Everything's going to be alright  
 People keep talking they can say what they like  
 But all I know is everything's going to be alright  
 No one, no one, no one  
 Can get in the way of what I'm feeling  
 No one, no one, no one  
 Can get in the way of what I feel for you, you, you  
 Can get in the way of what I feel for you  
 When the rain is pouring down  
 And my heart is hurting  
 You will always be around  
 This I know for certain  
 You and me together  
 Through the days and nights  
 I don't worry 'cause  
 Everything's going to be alright  
 People keep talking they can say what they like  
 But all I know is everything's going to be alright  
 No one, no one, no one  
 Can get in the way of what I'm feeling  
 No one, no one, no one  
 Can get in the way of what I feel for you, you, you  
 Can get in the way of what I feel  
 I know some people search the world  
 To find something like what we have  
 I know people will try try to divide something so real  
 So till the end of time I'm telling you there ain't no one

My mom. Locked up? In jail?

My mom was at the jail on Imperial and Alameda, three and a half miles away from her tesoros. We visited her every weekend. I remember the first time I saw my mom through the glass windows. I picked up the phone and was so excited to catch her up on my life. I remember her crying, but I also remember just being so happy to finally see her. My mom recalls that first visit. She tells me that I had been frustrated because I couldn't brush the back of my hair. My thick curly hair only knew the touch of my mom's hands. The loving touch and the caring tugs. It was true. The back of my hair was a tangled mess. My mom told me that, in order to brush curly hair, I would have to brush it in sections. Starting from the bottom and working my way up to the top.

For several months, our weekends were spent like this. We would visit her and she would talk to us through this glass window. Then, we would then go back to our house and live our lives without our mom.

### *Mexi/Cali*

I saw women standing in front of the jail with their belongings in a bag waiting for their loved ones to pick them up. I pictured my mom waiting on the corner with her belongings. That day never came. Instead I got a long car ride to Mexicali.

I was always confused as to why Mexico. I didn't understand why she wasn't in the U.S. She's my mom. She belongs in the U.S. with US.

My mom. The one who birthed me, cared for me, and laughed with me no longer there. I had to remain strong. As the oldest sibling you always have to be the strongest. *Como la mama*

*chiquita* I had to take care of *mis hermanitos*. I shoved my mom and her beautiful memories to the back of my head and buried them. I had no mom.

My siblings, my dad, and I arrived to Mexicali. We met her at the Famsa where she looked smaller than I remember. She drove this big pickup truck. She jumped out of that car and ran to us. I gave her the In n' Out she ordered and she gushed about how she had not had it in so long. She hugged us and cried. I don't remember feeling as if I missed her or if she was missing. I don't remember feeling anything.

I have this scar on my left knee. I got it from sliding down a steep hill at the apartment complex we lived at with my mom. I, being the adventurous/thrill hungry tomboy I had always been, decided to scooter down this very steep hill. My sister told me I would get hurt but it didn't matter. I did it anyway. I remember the scooter flying one way and my tiny 9-year-old body skidding all the way to the bottom of the hill. I don't remember feeling anything. I didn't even cry. I was picked up by the apartment complex gardener in his golf cart and taken to my mom. She was in the kitchen and I walked in. I was bloody and shocked. She took care of me and my wounds. But there is this one wound. The one on my left knee. That was so deep that I couldn't feel anything. I have that scar on my left knee from this day. I graze my fingers on top of it as I write this and it feels numb. Like I once did.

*The border. La linea. La herida.*

That's how it felt when I saw my mom. It felt like I couldn't feel. I remember we talked. But I don't remember what we talked about. She straightened my hair. She cooked breakfast for

us. And we were on our way out. We drove to the Mexicali border. We sat in the car. I remember complaining. We waited 3 hours to cross back into the U.S. My mom watched us cross. I don't remember feeling anything.

The second time I saw my mom I was about to be a senior in high school. I told my dad I was going to go to UC San Diego for a medical camp. I forged paperwork and he signed it. I woke up early. Put my lab coat on. Parked the car at my school and was picked up by my grandma. I drove all the way down to San Diego. We parked the car in San Ysidro and walked across the border. I saw her again. Still I didn't feel anything. Maybe anger was the closest thing I remember feeling. Anger. I was so cold to her. She felt like a stranger. Her eyes weren't the ones I remember. I didn't feel connected.

The third time I saw my mom was the summer before my senior year at CC. I took a trip all by myself to TJ. I took an Uber to the line and crossed it on my own. I saw her. Waiting for me in this pink and white striped shirt. Her lil' head popped out of the crowd and we ran to each other. This was the first time I felt like I missed her. I spent her birthday week with her. We laughed and we cried. She still felt like a stranger but not as strange as before. There were times when I would look at her and see myself in her. I was a reflection of her.

One night we sat on the bed together. We were wearing the exact same outfit. Black shorts and a navy spaghetti strap. We talked about the universe and time. We talked about our politics. We talked about love. We talked about growing up. We talked. I was starting to get to know her again. The woman who raised me at the age of 15. My wound was starting to feel something.

She took me to the border. She took me as far as she could. Everything in me wanted her to cross over with me. It felt as if an invisible force kept her from walking any further.

That's when my wound began to hurt.

U.S/MEXICAN BORDER/LA HERIDA ABIERTA



*La sangre llama: A letter to my sister*

Guera sin nombre,

I would like to start this letter off by apologizing to you and taking responsibility for the seeds of hatred I have planted in your heart. The seeds that have now grown into thick and thorny vines that protect your beautiful heart of gold. In order to deal with our mom's "removal" I had to grow tough. My toughness definitely rubbed off on you. You heard me speak negatively about my mom and you copied me. Oh man. I remember when we were younger and getting so upset when you would copy me. I would say something and you would quickly jump in and repeat the last few words of what I had just said. It would drive me insane. Now thinking on it you were just trying to be like your cool older sister; I don't blame you for that! Who wouldn't want to be like me? But right now, I feel terrible for being the model of a mother-hating-bitch you now aspire to be. But again, I don't blame you. Our brains, my brain, was just trying to protect us.

I have been reading a lot about attachment trauma theories and complex-PTSD, trying to make sense of what happened to us. It's kind of comforting to know that others, to many degrees, have experienced exactly what we have experienced. It's comforting to know that this hatred we have for our mom has been experienced and overcome by others. It does not make it any easier to heal but it does make me feel hopeful.

Our dad didn't have the tools to sit us down and have an adult discussion about our mom's deportation. One day we were living with her and the next we were with our dad. That was that. No questions asked. Tanya Golash-Boza explains this "no questions asked" phenomena by stating that the parent who stays behind very seldom has the proper vocabulary to effectively

explain the situation (2019). This lack of explanation leads the children to feel as if they have been abandoned by the deported parent (Golash-Boza, 2019). This perceived abandonment, *guerita*, is what has been watering the seeds of hatred that were given to me by the U.S government. We believe that our mom has left us behind and has started a new life in Mexico. This perceived abandonment makes us feel as if she no longer cares about us. This is far from the truth.

Our mom became a mom at the age of fifteen. Guera, do you know how young that is? Fifteen! I remember being fifteen and crying because I cut my hair too short and it made my head look massive. I can't imagine how it would feel like to push out my massive head through my birthing canal. Infants are a lot of responsibility. They literally don't do anything. They sit around, eat, cry, and poop themselves. Harry Harlow and Margaret Harlow explain that the primary role of a mother is to meet these very basic needs of the infant (1966). Our mom, despite how young she was met these basic needs. She fed, clothed, and cleaned us with the little resources she had. By Harlow and Harlow's definition, she did a pretty good job despite her young age. Secondary responsibilities of a mother is to provide physical and emotional support (1966). John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth state that the infant should experience a "warm, intimate, and continuous" relationship with their mother and the relationship should be enjoyable for both parties (1951). I can assure you that our mom loves being our mom. We come from her. She was in labor at the ages of fifteen, sixteen, twenty, and twenty-three just to meet the four of us and get to know us.

After spending a month with our mom I can tell she paid attention to every part of our being. The way we talked, the way we walked, the way we laughed, and the way we got angry.



Our mom has so many stories about each and every single one of us. She tells those stories without missing a beat. She told me stories about rainy days filled with snacks and movies on the pull-out couch and how we had to have a family meeting because we all thought she was playing favorites. Guera, we slept in her bed with all ten of our legs intertwined with one another. We all had our own beds, even Wippy, but she wanted us close to her. Skin-to-skin.

I remember when she tried to teach me how to dance *punta* when I was 5 years old. We were in the living room of our peach house and she was blasting a song in Spanish. I stood next to her as she told me that this is the dance they do in El Salvador. She told me to arch my feet and roll on them to the beat. We danced around the living room and she took me by my hand and twirled me all around. She then told me that sometimes when people dance *punta* they get tossed up in the air. She grabbed my hands tightly and swung me up in the air until I was completely upside down. She put me down quickly and we laughed and continued to dance.

I know where your sadness and resent comes from. I was really angry for a long time too. I know I reinforced the idea that our mom was a terrible mom and that she abandoned us. On many levels it made her “removal” bearable. After spending a month with her I realized how our brains trick us in order to protect us. I’m still working on accepting her love and I hate that I have any hesitation to accept her love, but that’s an effect of American imperialism. My form of activism is personal. I am working on my personal being *y curando la herida abierta*.

Our mom *esta rascando la frontera* waiting for us to return. She knows it’ll happen. *La sangre llama*.

We will find the beauty. We are her *cuatro tesoros*.

*Full Circle*

It's crazy how things come full circle and you never realize when it's happening.

2018 put a lot of things into perspective. It allowed me to put myself in my mom's shoes and experience the hopeful hopelessness (oxymoron intended) that comes with *la linea*.

*Feb. 16, 2018*

My dumb college friends and I got arrested because we tried to smuggle one joint back into the U.S. As I sat with my right hand cuffed to a bench I thought about how life altering this event could be (thankfully it wasn't). I thought about how I wasn't going to be sitting in my upcoming 6th block, how I was going to be sitting in jail that coming Monday, how I wasn't going to be able to graduate.

*May 26, 2018*

I got my lil' heart broken. This event made me think about the relationship my mom had with my dad and how irrational and beautiful love can be (I learned that from my mom). This heartbreak of mine brought me so much closer to my mom. It was my first real love. I talked about him with my mom for hours and I received a lot of amazing *consejos* from my mom.

*December 24, 2018*

Oh man. I was in Mexico this day. This was the first time, in my entire life, I had spent Christmas away from my siblings. I tried so hard to be happy because this was the first Christmas my mom had spent with one of her kids in the past ten years. I tried so hard to be positive but as the clock approached midnight I felt my heart tear even more. I wished so hard I could be in two places at once. In LA with my siblings and Mexico with my mom. My mom and

I cried on her bed for a little bit. I told her I have no idea how she had done it for so many years and she looked at me and said she doesn't know either. She then told me that the reason she's in Mexicali "rascando la frontera" is so that we can visit her when we are ready. We heard the fireworks go off and we ran outside. On the radio we hear the song my little sister (now 20) sang during her Christmas kindergarten performance. I felt chills run down my spine and settle in my heart. My mom and I mimicked my sister by capping our mouths and singing at the top of our lungs.

**!FELIZ NADIDAD! FELIZ NADIDAD!**

*La espera dolorosa*

*“To claim victimhood would inadvertently reinforce the hegemonic belief in people of Color’s inferiority and inability to assert agency” (Hurtado, 2003, p. 217)*

After spending a month with my mom I took a four hour bus ride to Los Angeles. I got to the house that was filled with so many memories of my mom that my heart felt as if it was going to explode. I was in bed one night about to write in my journal and realized that my mom had written me a four page letter. This is an excerpt of what she wrote:

*December 1, 2018*

My heart was full of illusions and plans. I got to the border and waited for my first love. When you texted me and told me that the bus was going to be late I was pumping gas. That was when I began to think many things. I thought about how I never was the patient kind. But then I thought, “Ambar! You have waited 10 years, with your arms empty waiting to have them filled once again.” I also thought about how I waited 9 months for each and everyone one of you guys. To meet your faces and those 9 months are called *la dulce espera*. This wait has an approximate date. When this date comes I am able to see your guys’ faces, count your fingers, and feel your body. Learn every centimeter and kissing every centimeter. From the souls of your feet to the tips of your hair.

*Para conocer los.*

To learn about what you like and what you don’t like. What makes you laugh and what makes you mad. To learn what makes you go to sleep and what to feed you when you wake up.

The two and a half hours I was waiting for you I remembered the first few months of each and everyone of you guys. *Mis cuatro tesoros*. How is it possible that you all come from the same mom and same dad but are all so different. In that moment another thought came to my mind. If those 9 months of pregnancy are called *la dulce espera* what does one call these past 10 years? And no matter how hard I tried I couldn't find a name for it. I couldn't, but what did come to mind was nights of *dolor y sufrimiento*. Impotence and *coraje*. This is where I was at mentally when you texted me that you were at the border.

Mami:

I think the word you are looking for is *dolorosa*.

It took me so long to realize the injustice that happened to us and our connection. The violent disruption of our beautiful mother/daughter relationship. It was not until the summer of 2018 when I saw kids being separated from their families that something in me felt unsettled. This was something I had been ignoring for so long. Maybe it was my own way of protecting myself. Maybe it was a way of protecting my sanity. I did not let myself think about you, let alone miss you.

I think this is what is happening to some kids on the border. I have looked at attachment theories. I have read studies written by psychologist and they can only explain the behaviors but they cannot truly explain what it feels like to miss a parent so much that you don't miss them. I guess the closest word I can come up with is "lost." I lost you and in a way I lost myself. I, being the oldest, invested in my siblings. My grandma described it as me becoming *la mama*

*chiquita*. That's what I was. *La mama chiquita*. I enrolled us in schools, I picked out our school uniforms, picked out our school supplies, and picked out our first Christmas tree.

It was not until I was given the chance to attend college and, in a sense, discard that role of *la mama chiquita*. Not by choice, I guess it was by chance.

I was able to focus on myself. Focus on who I was. I was able to take classes that assigned words to what I have experienced. I was lucky enough to use academia to explain what we experienced. I wish nothing but healing for the 400,000 families who have been affected by the twisted laws, the same way we have been affected.

The month I spent with you, with my role model, learning and understanding in order to heal our wounds was the best month I have had in a really long time. I got to know you again but most importantly I got to know myself again. I was able to connect to your divine feminine, you, which helped me connect to myself. I saw myself in you. I saw you in me. But most importantly, I saw me and you in the same room. In the same bed.

This healing isn't over, it's far from over. I know that we come from very strong people and that this was meant to strengthen our relationship. This experience was meant for us to make a difference. We have experienced the injustices and would not want anyone to experience what we have experienced.

This heartbreak is unnatural. Unnatural like the border.

Unnatural like a wall separating the love and affection of a mother from the love and affection of her kids.

*tus ojos*

“You’re just looking at yourself in the reflection of my eyes!”

Me and my mom would joke about how self absorbed we both are, even when we look in each others eyes. The first few weeks with my mom felt as if I was with a stranger. A stranger who took my heart and shattered it to bits and pieces. A stranger I once knew. A stranger who knows every part of me. I hated that feeling. I would sit on her couch and watch her cook food. Analyzing the way she moved from one side of her body to the other as she stirred and watched over the food.

I’ve always been jealous of girls who were close to their moms. It always felt as if I didn’t have a mom. In my head my mom was nowhere to be found so I did not have one. I had to grow up on my own without the help of a model who I am supposed to copy. I sat on her couch and watched her every move. Why were they so familiar? Why do I know what she’s going to say and what she’s going to laugh at?

For the first few weeks I would look in her eyes and not connect to her. A stranger. The very panocha that birthed me. The panocha who taught me about my period. The panocha who brushed my hair and picked out my outfits. A stranger.

I brought some seeds from the U.S to Mexico, I wanted to make a garden for my mom. I know I love her but I don’t know her anymore. I know my heart beats for and because of her but I don’t know her. I wish I never forgot about her. I wish we grew up together. I wish so many things. I wish I could have had my first period and run to her room with my bloody underwear in hand. I wish I could have looked into the crowd of my graduation and seen her shed a couple of tears. I wish I could have crawled into bed with her when a dumb boy first broke my heart. So

many moments I wish I could have had with her. So many moments I have lost because of the stupid *linea* that separates my physical being from her physical being. So many moments that have been robbed. So many memories that have been ripped away.

I now understand *que la linea* not only stole my mom from me but it stole all of these *moments* as well.

I have always been so jealous of girls who are close to their moms.



*La herida abierta*

*“The U.S-Mexican Border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 25).*

Xenophobia, as defined by Baltes and Smelser, is the fear/hatred of the stranger/foreign (2001). Frantz Fanon states that society has come to align justice, truth, and purity with Whiteness (1952). Eurocentrism frames White people, and those that align with White people, as the most civilized of a society meaning they must be treated with the utmost respect. Whiteness essentially states that White people are more worthy of humanity. Xenophobia, analyzed through the lense of Whiteness, creates the divide between us versus them; where “us” means White people and “them” means everyone who is not White. Xenophobic immigrations laws are meant to protect “us” from “them.”

The U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement website there is a tab that states, “ICE Immigration Removals.” The term removal has a dehumanizing connotation to it. It is as if our families are these nasty moles on the backs of the American people. The moles that must be “removed” because they are carcinogenic. This tab on the website breaks down the yearly “removals.” In 2015 there were 337,117 apprehension and removals (Department of Homeland Security, 2015). This number is eerily exact. It is not round nor is it an estimation. It is an exact number of hearts and souls who have been “removed” from their families. The heartbreak does not just stop and start there. Those “removed” oftentimes have been in the U.S since they were children and have started families of their own. These households are considered “mixed-status households” where there is a mixture of non-citizen and U.S citizen family members (Fix & Zimmerman, 2006). About one-third of the “removals” have established a life in the U.S and are

now displaced to a location they have no connection to (Golash-Boza, 2019). One-third of 337,117 hearts have bled on other souls and have broken those hearts as well because of the xenophobia and White supremacy that exists in our country.

We, are currently exhibiting a clear fault to our immigration policies. We see this flaw when mothers are ripped away from their children because of their legal standing, when kids are sent into a new country without their parents, when children are locked up in cages.

My mom tells me about a woman who she met in Eloy, an ICE detention center in Arizona. This woman had five kids. One was a newborn, a little less than one years old. This mother of five was in the kitchen cooking dinner while her husband was in the shower after a long day of work. While she is cooking, the newborn falls out of its crib and lands head-first on one of its toys. The family rushes to the hospital where the mother's immigration status is discovered. The child is in a coma and the mother gets arrested. She is sent to Eloy where she finds out their her newborn has passed away. She is in Eloy instead of attending her child's funeral. She is in Eloy because of the xenophobic and inhumane laws. My mom tells me that she thinks about this story often. She thinks about how this mother and children were affected by these laws. She then tells me about how, in her words, "fucked up la *ley es*."

Justice for all. Lady justice is blindfolded. I do not think it is for an equitable decision. Instead I think Lady Justice is blind-folded so that she does not have to see the atrocities consequences of our legal system. Me and my siblings are just one of hundreds of thousands families who have been affected by the "removal" of a love(d) one due to the xenophobic immigration laws our country enforces.

*Wounds*

The scar on my left knee is what the border reminds me of. A wound.

My mom tended to that wound when I slid down that hill in 4th grade.

Who will tend to this *herida abierta*

*La herida* that has affected children, mothers, dads, cousins, siblings, grandparents,

*Who will tend to those 400,000+ wounds?*

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