

LAS HISTORIAS SON PARA TI: AN ANTHOLOGY OF ROMA, TEXAS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

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May 2020

Major: English

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ABSTRACT

Las historias son para ti: An Anthology of Roma, Texas

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The Rio Grande Valley has been in recent years the attention of media outlets, literature, and art. And while not all that is portrayed is accurate, the depictions of the Valley are created from stereotypes and its people are merely caricatures, such as in novels like Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt*. This creative artifact challenges the assumptions on how border culture is known to shape the expression of individuals of the Valley within and away from its geographical constraints as well as simply highlighting the real stories within border communities. Roma, Texas is the quintessential bordertown and backdrop in which I hope to address these issues.

Las historias son para ti will rely heavily on the individual points of view of fictional Roma residents to explore everyday life and collectively build a more holistic cultural view of life on the border. The reoccurring protagonist, Magdalena Castillo, will be seen at various stages of her life, in and outside of Roma, and the Valley at large, to give the audience a chance to see her actions dictated by the environment in which she was raised. These characters will span different age groups, genders, and sexualities to break the homogenous typecast of what Mexicans and Chicanos living on the border look and act like as well as what they believe. This

creative thesis will explore culture by looking at its nuances, through a cultural rather than historical framework.

DEDICATION

Para mis padres.

Para mi familia

Para todos los de Roma.

Para todos del valle mágico.

Para todos los que no tienen voz.

Para todos los que me han contado historias que ellos mismos no pueden decir.

Gracias.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Jason Harris, who provided guidance and support throughout the course of this research. In our one-on-one meetings, he took interest in my dual language approach to writing and his support was known by always suggesting to find journals, competitions, and conferences that were geared towards Latine writers or whose call for submissions matched themes of works of mine in progress.

I would like to thank those in charge of the Aggie Creative Collective, specially Flo Davies who gave all its participants help on our summer presentations. Praise is also reserved for my Aggie Creative Collective cohort for all their kind words and criticisms throughout this year and a half: Katie Pattison, Hannah McNease, and Rae Seguin as well as to John Heselton, Grace Hough, Kyrie Garlic, and Zoe Sherman who, while not part of my immediate cohort helped me find myself in a literary community.

I want to give special thanks to Ramiro Barrera Middle School in allowing me to spend a morning with your students and provide a creative writing workshop. It was a pleasure to share with you my work, my passion. I will forever remember the stories we created in that library; thank you to Elizabeth Perez that helped me facilitate my first creative writing workshop. Roma High School, I apologize for my faulty commitment to present to you my creative writing workshop. Thank you, Rebeca Garcia and Lamar Gonzalez, for continuing without me, and I thank all the teacher³ that recommended their students attend.

Thank you to Roma High School's counselors for helping foster a creative writing scholarship in the name of this collection; I hope that this work does not go unnoticed and will help students find their way. Shortly after this thesis is to be completed, I will also be awarding

my first scholarship recipient. And to that extent, thank you to the College of Liberal Arts and its donors, Lou and CC Burton, who helped me financially throughout my last year at Texas A&M University.

And finally, I want to thank my friends. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. Thank you for letting me into your lives and understand that my experiences weren't the only ones to be had and thank you for letting me see past my biases. Thank you to the people of Roma, people like my parents and my siblings, my teachers and town politicians (even the boys on Tinder) that I shared my project with and told me it was worth writing. Thank you for lighting fuel to my fire. Thank you for all the tales I wasn't able to use, thank you for trusting me that this is a collection you want to see yourself a part of.

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

This creative artifact is a product of microaggressions and racism displayed here at Texas A&M University. The main purpose of this storytelling is to educate those speaking ill and uninformed about life in the U.S. – Mexico border, specifically in the Roma, Texas and Ciudad Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas region. Throughout my years at this university, I have come across conversations where individuals are unaware of the realities of the area. While taking a class trip to the Upper Rio Grande Valley, many of my classmates were surprised to see that on the border we have paved roads, restaurant chains, properly built buildings with air conditioning, and even a mall. The thought came to be that while the border is a wide and popular topic, many may not want to stifle through historic documents or mentally shut down when reading opinion pieces online. I decided that taking a literary approach to portray life undramatized on the border would be a good way to draw people in on such a dense topic.

Las historias son para ti will rely heavily on the individual points of view of fictional Roma residents to explore everyday life and collectively build a more holistic cultural view of life on the border. The reoccurring protagonist, Magdalena Castillo, will be seen at various stages of her life, in and outside of Roma, and the Valley at large, to give the audience a chance to see her actions dictated by the environment in which she was raised. These characters will span different age groups, genders, and sexualities to break the homogenous typecast of what Mexicans and Chicanos living on the border look and act like as well as what they believe. This creative thesis will explore culture through nuances, through a cultural rather than historical framework.

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

Research conducted for this thesis was done so through a cultural lens, meaning that the basis was to expand upon an area of literature that was usually indulged in for exotic pleasure rather than to understand the culture exhibited. To gain a better understanding of how Latine literature structures featured cultural icons, such as Catholic tropes in Mexican culture or themes of *machismoism*, my reviews were focused on aesthetic – such as using Edward Vidaurre and Sandra Cisneros collections for knowledge of poetic structure – and chronological concepts.

The majority of my research's authors were Latine, and even more specifically Chicano/a, because I felt the author's identity was essential to the authenticity of their writing. The majority of my references are guides as to how to structure my writing as well remind me what themes are constantly used so that I can find new ways to incorporate them into my artifact. I have been toying with visual structure of some of my poetic pieces which I get ideas and examples on how to break repetitive structures from my references.

Recently, Jeanine Cummins published a book about border life and has faced much backlash about its inaccuracies and fabrication. My creative artifact is needed so White authors don't gain fame on the experiences they will never face. Roma, Texas has been largely ignored due to its small relevance on border economy and my thesis will help bring its people to light.

Previous research in this field stems from a historical framework and addresses cultural issues and the origins. This ethnographical project will be based on a cultural framework, will focus on lived experiences, and how individuals at the time don't see the historic structures that have been limiting them through experimental narrative and lyrical presentations.

I explore these texts specifically for their themes and were read and analyzed with a focus on the texts' cultural rhetoric and situational impact. When I state situational impact, I choose to believe that each creative artifact as an individual and as a whole, as part of an anthology, is written within the understanding of border culture, which can be experienced differently for individuals depending on their upbringing regardless of physical proximity to the origin of their culture. A cultural, and specifically border cultural framework, encompasses historical and sociological framework. Border cultural framework takes into account historical events and structures that were put into place that now shapes current event, yet it differs in that it does not justify today's actions by past events. The community aspect that builds culture also adapts some sociological aspects, but I will focus on a specific geographical and ethnic group.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

LAUNCH hosted its second annual Undergraduate Research Scholars (URS) Symposium at Texas A&M University. This was a free conference in which student researchers were able to present their findings in a low stakes environment and gain valuable experience and feedback. Graphics and visuals were not a requirement for our presentations. The event ran all day and was hosted in various rooms within the Memorial Student Center.

I signed up for an oral presentation meaning that I was grouped with two other URS in an hour block in which we would each have ten minutes to present. A question and answer forum would be held at the end for fifteen minutes. The last fifteen minutes, the audience would leave so presenters could hear assessment of their work. I would be my group's last presenter.

The room in which my presentation, MSC 2501, took place was small and was only supposed to hold around twenty-five individuals. Yet when I stood before the room, presentation outline and excerpt on the podium, I noticed as many as ten people stood in the back of the room entranced by the previous presenter's excerpt as well. Having no PowerPoint, I began to speak. I was able to discuss my thesis topic, its importance and distinguishment in comparison with other works on similar issues as well as read an excerpt from the creative artifact.

My feedback was mostly positive: good pronunciation, good projection, good visuals through text. My main critique was in the way I presented my research methodology; this was taken lightly as the main composition of my thesis is my creative artifact which I received little comment on.

On a Monday morning two weeks after my LAUNCH URS presentation, right before Roma ISD's 2019-2020 spring break, a handful of tables are littered with Ramiro Barrera Middle School students in their library, 7th graders wearing maroon colored polos.

For an ice breaker, I had students name male and female protagonists, either in novels or novels with film adaptations. The popular characters seemed to be Harry Potter from the book series of the same name, Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games*, and even Susie Salmon from *The Lovely Bones*. Once I asked of a single Latine protagonist, male or female, the room became silent and eyes fluttered sideways averting my gaze. One novela was mentioned: Alexandra Diaz's *The Crossroads*.

When I read one of my flash fiction pieces entitled "Witch of the Water Tower", which is originally written in Spanish, many students began whispering to each other and looking around the room when I read the English translation. It is a tale my mother told me whenever we crossed the bridge from Mexico to Roma late at night, and my energy got the best of me.

I asked them what occurred within the story once I had finished my rereading, hands shot into the air and began to give me details that weren't necessarily within the story, such as descriptors of the bridge's appearance. The only real detail I provided was about, "the chain linked fence on the bridge," yet students talked of the patrons who weaved in between cars and the Border Patrol agents who had a cooler of water for themselves at midpoint. When I remarked this to the group, one student said that it was, "...because we know what you're talking about. You said the witch was by the bridge and I was walked across it yesterday. I could picture it."

Shortly after our group discussion, the students were encouraged to reimagine a fairytale or retell one they had heard growing up. Watching from the back of the room, their librarian Elizabeth Perez complimented my retelling of my experiences in the Valley. She believed this

workshop would help them see Roma as more than what they envisioned it to be. That life here was more than what outsiders thought that it was: “I really hope you go far with your work, because it’s very important. It will be life changing just as much for these kids as it will be to the rest of the country that are viewing us with a limited gaze.”

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

While being born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley should have come with high cultural representation and the knowledge of regional histories, I gained both once I left.

Throughout my academic career at Texas A&M, I have had the privilege of taking a multitude of courses that focus on understanding and expanding narratives of those who belong to minority populations. It was my sophomore year here that I was able to take a Latine Literature course. Shortly after we had begun our discussions about our first novel of the semester did I realize that this was the first time I saw myself in literature. By this I mean that I was reading stories of brown individuals that struggled with the concept of biculturalism, bilingualism, acceptance of their own brown skin. To me that meant I was authentically represented. My language was used without indication of GoogleTranslate. My culture was holistic. My skin tone reflected. And I realized that sophomore year at a renowned university was too late to start learning about myself and my history.

This learning moment occurred after a year and a half at a predominantly white institution during the same time Donald Trump had become President of the United States of America. While I understood that the social climate did not dictate the lack of Latine Literature, I also knew that there might be a diminishing number of authors that might come to fruition due to their own surrounding environments.

I decided to use my research opportunity to represent those that I felt needed to be heard, and to do so in a way that was accessible to the people I am meaning to represent. My anthology,

entitled *Las historias son para ti* is written in both English and Spanish, has little to no technical terms, and its setting is located in Roma, Texas.

My creative thesis is a step towards realistic depictions of Mexican and Mexican American figures in literature. Together they are going to tell the stories of Roma. This project will be about breaking down the homogeneity of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the United States to show that we are more than the negative stereotypes we are portrayed as in media.

My research hopes to answer many questions: In what ways is border culture known to shape the expression of individuals within and away from its geographical constraints? How is culture visibly, as well as subconsciously, seen outside of traditional and stereotypical settings? What is the proper way to demonstrate comprehensively the nuances of a border community?

While I do believe many other Latine authors have spoken about these issues, I also believe that my creative artifact will be a needed addition to the Latino Literature research field of today and will be a great resource to future writers. Because of its themes within the context of our sociopolitical atmosphere of the day, my thesis can be explored through various lenses. Of these the most prominent would be through historical and political context, but it would also help readers in understanding the culture of a specific geographical location within the United States. The poetic and prose structure of each creative piece, which are comprised of prose, flash, and poem artifacts, can also be analyzed and can expand understanding on bilingualism and the importance of language as a cultural symbol of residents of the Rio Grande Valley, but specifically to Roma, Texas.

My writing process included a lot of reading, both canonical Latino Literature as well as newer publications. Because I wanted my short stories and poems to be a reflection of the actual

residents of Roma, I have interviewed individuals from the town and tried to incorporate their experiences into my fictional writing.

Literature and other research have been done on border communities, but the city of Roma, Texas has yet to be a focus. The anthology that is my thesis also exhibits various character perspectives while Latino Literature novels tend to have one main point of view for the duration of the creative artifact. Because my main focus on this project is to build a well-rounded view of life on the border, various perspectives are needed in order to understand that life in that region has a range experiences to be understood. The sequence of my work begins with a flash poetic piece documenting specific historic events of Roma, Texas; followed by a reoccurring character named Magdalena Castillo, who will demonstrate to readers experiences within and outside Roma and the Rio Grande Valley as a whole; then alternating narratives of fictionized Roma residents; ending with poems from my own perspective before repeating the cycle. Through this structure and chronology, I am able to holistically reproduce my hometown through different lives in order to showcase the U.S.-Mexico border is not the caricature that the media shows.

Many have already found solace in my work. I have been invited back to my hometown in order to conduct a reading to students in order to display Latine Literature at an earlier stage of their lives as well as conduct a creative writing workshop to show students research can be done outside the traditional STEM narrative. My work has also found its home in two different literary outlets: one Texas A&M's very own *The Eckleburg Project* and *Fudoki Magazine*, an online literary collection. I am also currently a prospective author in Texas A&M's research journal *Explorations*' twelfth volume.

The students both at Ramiro Barrera Middle School and Roma High School appreciated the work and commented heavily on the fact that my work made them feel seen. It was in that moment where my pointed audience shifted once again; while before it was about showcasing the community to others that were non-locals, the feedback from students made me realize that this work was also to validate the experiences of those living in the area.

My collection was set to have twenty-six pieces by the final submission date, eight which are completed and eleven still in progress or in their final draft stages. Due to recent events dealing with COVID-19, I was unable to have access to all of my pieces that were either in progress or completed that needed editing. My mental health also was affected due to the stressful situation of this pandemic era, which unfortunately made me lose motivation and concentration on this project which I hope to continue even past the submission date.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

What Was Once Forgotten Will Now Be Remembered

If you were to leave College Station by heading off on Texas State Highway 21 until you reached Bastrop, took a quick left at Buc-ee's then right at the light, got off at the second exit and followed Farm Road 20 until you passed the railroad tracks in the small town of Bateman and turned left heading towards Luling, if you kept straight until Helena, took a slight left right outside of town, and followed through to Three Rivers, took another dizzying left towards George West, a right once there headed towards Freer on US Highway 59, drove straight for an hour, past checkpoint in Hebbronville, and took a left on the corner where the DPS trooper is stationed in Randado, drove straight until you hit US Highway 83 then, after the red light turned green, turned right for another ten-fifteen minutes, you'd reach Roma in about six hours – only if you didn't stop to eat along the way.

Roma is a small-town straddling two nations, embodying a culture of its own unique to the area. I don't bother anymore to correct people's misconceptions of which side of the Rio Bravo Roma is on, because even though I am not from México and I am not a *mejicana*, it was my backyard to explore, just as much then as it is now.

I spent my childhood trying to distance myself from my surroundings. Every other weekend when I was still in elementary school, we'd go across the river to the house my mom grew up in and have a *carne asada*. The adults would sit under the shade of a small shack while the boys plus my older sister played soccer. I would stay inside my grandma's room, the only one with A/C, and play dolls with my cousins even though I struggled to understand them.

Spanish was foreign to me, no matter how close I was to it.

It was my mother's language and yet I couldn't grasp it. I was lucky she knew a little bit of English, learning it for my sisters and me. I hated sleeping over at my cousin's houses, without A/C, without cable TV, without my *mami* to translate for me. Every other year, we would give our hand-me-downs to whomever needed it most, and we'd buy clothes at thrift stores for my tíos and tías. Crossing the bridge was like entering another world. Houses made of cinder blocks and kids playing barefoot on the unpaved streets. It was all something I could distance myself from, something I could leave and forget, but only before we returned again.

I grew up reading books about faraway places, in viewpoints of people who never looked like me. I read of characters who lived in suburban, affluent areas who had blonde hair and blue eyes and pale skin and travelled out of country and had vacations even when it wasn't summertime. Because of this, I grew up thinking that since I knew their world, I would survive in it. So, I left Roma for College Station. I left Roma for Texas A&M University.

I started classes in the fall of 2016. I started my first day of college in an English classroom where I was to read books written by a white man, taught by a white man, surrounded by white people. I chose to attend a predominately white institution as a way to find myself outside of my culture and was suddenly only viewed as the manifestation of it. A few months later Donald Trump would become elected president of the United States.

I realized only then, being the face of adversity, how much I missed home, the place I was raised. The place where there was a multitude of stories, the place where people switched languages as fast as my mother flipped *tortillas* with her bare hands on the *comal*. Home was referred as a battleground of narcotics, the land of "drugdealers, criminals, and rapists" by our very own president and other fellow students. Home was ugly and corrupted with dangerous

‘illegals,’ as they would say. And even though I lived less than a mile from the river, even though our mariachi sang for Obama my junior year of high school, even though I lived there my whole life and they considered San Antonio as part of South Texas, even though I went home last weekend and the week before and the week prior my personal experiences of what life on the border was actually like, my experiences were not enough. I don’t know if they ever would be.

My stories, like so many others, are disregarded. What they can’t see is there are stories hidden in this town, found in cracks of concrete, and in potholes on the roads after long rains. There are stories inside small houses, crowded with one too many family members, next to a small front porch with so many potted plants, either in clay or tire wheels. There are stories that you can follow across the suspension bridge into *Ciudad de Miguel Alemán*, nested under the shade *en el centro*. The stories in this collection are real, some more so than others.

Roma’s stories need to be told, and I hope that you are ready to listen.

Witch of the Water Tower

*¿Recuerdas las historias que mamá nos contaba cuando estábamos chiquitas? Las historias que nos contaba cuando cruzábamos el puente a Roma de la casa de guelita Laya en Miguel Alemán – como las historias de las sirenitas. Ellas nadaban en el río. Ellas nos iban a cachar y ayudar a la orilla si nos apoyábamos en la cerca del puente y nos caíamos. ¡Espera! ¿Te acuerdas cuando temíamos a la bruja que amá nos dijo que estaba en la torre de agua? Nos agachábamos atrás de los asientos de mamá y papi, temblando de miedo. Mamá nos decía que si la bruja nos viera nos iba a llevar con ella, arriba en su escoba a la torre. Que ahí ella nos iba a aislar de todo el mundo. Nos quedaríamos en su torre para siempre. Me recuerdo que mamá nos decía que nos calláramos, que no hiciéramos ruido, que ella nos escucharía. Y yo recuerdo el enojo que sentía cuando no me dejaba cruzar enfrente para estar con ella. Ella siempre me decía que iría la única manera donde ella no me podía proteger.**

* Do you remember the stories Mamá would tell us when we were little girls? The ones she would tell us when we crossed the bridge coming home to Roma from Grandma Laya's house in Miguel Alemán – like the stories of the mermaids. They swam in the river. They were to catch us and help us to shore if we leaned against the chain-linked fence on the bridge and fell below. Wait! Do you remember when we would fear the witch that Amá told us lived in the water tower? We'd duck down behind mom and dad's seats, trembling with fear. Mamá told us that if the witch were to see us she would take us with her, up on her broom to the water tower. That there she would isolate us from the whole world. That we would stay in her tower until the end of time. I remember that Mamá told us to be quiet, to not make noise, that she would hear us. And I remember the anger I felt when she did not let me cross the front seat to be with her. She would always tell me that it was the one way she could not protect me.

Magdalena's Trip Out to Six Flags

Today was the family's first and last day of summer vacation even though the school year would be starting in a couple of weeks. In the Castillo household, summer break and summer vacation were two vastly different things. Summer *break* meant going to summer school in order to keep the girls out of the house, but also out of trouble; Magdalena helped Mrs. Garcia teach her fellow classmates multiplication tables while Filomena took Spanish I at Roma High School. Ernesto was well connected to the community, and even though Magdalena did not qualify for summer school, he had asked for a few favors to be handed. The two sisters would have swim lessons in the afternoon with Magdalena in the beginner's sessions while Filomena was training to compete.

Summer *vacation*, however, meant a two-day trip to San Antonio to visit Six Flags Fiesta Texas and then go shopping for school apparel at the outlets in San Marcos. Here the girls would buy new school polos, jeans that didn't end above the ankle, a new backpack for Filomena that didn't have cartoons drawn all over it as well as return the winter coat grandma bought Magdalena on sale that was a size too small. Vacations like these were luxurious. To Magdalena, it didn't matter that they had only left town only for the weekend, and she and Filomena had to take turns sleeping on the couch one night then on the motel floor the next.

Filomena, however, had her reservations.

Magdalena was nine years old and about to start her last year of elementary school; Filomena was fourteen soon to start high school. And yet despite this age difference, Juanita, their mother, made them wear matching outfits so they wouldn't get lost. Both girls wore jean shorts and bright green t-shirts their mother had picked out from the thrift store.

There, in the city in which the Alamo must not be forgotten, the family of four spent their day with long hours waiting for rides, waiting to experience moments of gleeful terror. Juanita, who was scared of heights, left Ernesto to accompany their daughters on the towering rides. But with the day finally coming to a close, and the majority of park guests were starting to leave. Ernesto determined to have Juanita get on one ride and his main argument was that since there was less people around, Juanita could scream as loud as she wanted without being embarrassed of any worrying looks. It would also be the day's last ride. Juanita said yes, she would join her family on the Rattler. All four headed up the ramp.

The Castillos had arrived at the park around ten that morning, having left Roma two green blobs asleep in the backseat. It was currently seven in the evening. Magdalena and Filomena lazily followed their parents to the end of the line, both of Magdalena's lopsided ponytails bouncing slightly with her walk. Magdalena is now hungry and tired.

The Texas heat intensified as the summer sun lingered in the sky and slithered its way in between the wooden beams of the ride's foundation. The heat caused Magdalena's long brown hair stick to her face and neck. The breeze that followed cooled the sweat that made her body feel icky. The sweat hidden underneath her clothes made her shorts feel uncomfortable. She now needed to use the restrooms. She began to shift her weight from one leg to the other, slowly at first then at a quickening pace, the wooden boards beneath her creek and crescendo. As they shuffled closer to the front, the sound weakened entering a more open area.

Filomena squeezes her younger sister's skin between her fingers, and cautions Magdalena – soft, but sternly – that her incessant fidgeting would cause her to wet herself. Magdalena, becoming frustrated with the skin she was trapped in, dramatically pulled away and hid behind Ernesto for protection. Filomena rolled her rich green eyes and leaned against the railing and

leaned towards the sound of screams, facing away from Magdalena, facing away from her family. Though she did enjoy the time outside her small town and into the big city, Magdalena grumpiness was irritating, and Filomena had lost her patience for her younger sister's antics for the day. Filomena had found herself nearing the front of the line, leading her family forward.

Magdalena wormed her way between her parents, tugging shirts, and calling their names out loudly; she tried her best to intercept their conversation. "*Mama, llevame al baño, por favor. Papa, tengo hambre. ¿Ya nos podemos ir, porfis?*" And yet Juanita and Ernesto's conversation carried on in Spanish: What to eat for dinner? They didn't have the biggest incomes, barely making ends meet at the end of the month and were deciding between McDonald's on the way to the motel or ordering pizza once there. Surely there will be a coupon book in the front office or their room, Juanita mentions. And it would be cheaper to buy a large one-topping pizza for all of us to share than to buy four meals that each would cost the same as a medium pizza, Ernesto agreed. It was decided. Pizza delivery it would be.

The line inched forward once more; the Castillos were almost at the front. Magdalena's pleas to her mother annoy Filomena, and, Magdalena, knowing, she was being ignored, tried her hardest to climb onto the rails and sit without much luck. Filomena seemed to ignore the conversations that surrounded her, focused on the cart pulling into the boarding dock. Filomena felt a gust of wind cool the sweat on her face, but only momentarily, as the cart slowed and pulled into the boarding dock. The passenger's chatter loudly recalling the ride. She looked ahead and then up; her emerald orbs traced the tracking on which the ride zooms on.

Magdalena crashed into her back, and Spanish curse words fumble out of Filomena's mouth.

"Excuse me."

Filomena turns back to face a smiling white lady standing behind her parents. She was dressed in a bright pink shirt with white shorts, making her look tanner than she actually was. An older lady was holding a man's arm and shuffled slightly forward, trying to join the Castillo's familial ring. Juanita and Ernesto moved back and leaned against the rail creating a parting for *la gringa's* eyes to find Filomena's before speaking.

"Hi y'all! We've been standing behind you for a while and heard you speaking a different language and were just curious as to where you all were from." Filomena hadn't uttered many words since they started waiting in line other than saying *mierda* and *pinche pendeja*. She was sure the conversation was meant for her parents and yet this lady was fixated on her, her parents' eyes averted the strangers and looked down. "My name is Jordan, my husband's name is Thomas, and we have family all over the world. I'm Eastern European and Thomas has some Irish roots on his great-, great-grandfather's side."

Thomas smiled slightly, but quickly looked down at his phone and evaded the rest of the conversation. Jordan's Southern accent grew louder and more confident, her voice became as invasive as her questions. She proceeded to ask the family what they were doing in the states, what job Ernesto had, when they arrived, how they arrived. As Jordan spoke she moved closer and closer to Magdalena, tried to brush some hair off her face, but before her manicured nails could reach her, Filomena pulled her younger sister into her chest, holding her protectively. Jordan's smile didn't waver.

Ernesto's back straightened as a thickness lingered in the air between the humidity and the sweat. Jordan's questions were left unanswered which enabled her to ask again. Slower and louder, causing other riders to turn back to them. Ernesto's round belly fell over the waistline of his shorts, and his cap shifted upwards allowing his eyes to more directly look at the couple,

squinting slightly as the setting sun's ray spotlighted his face. In English, with a heavy accent and a cold tone, he informed Jordan they were from Roma, his hands positioned inside his pockets. His stand demanded respect Jordan refused to give. Juanita leaned forward and rubbed his arm, trying to comfort him.

"Oh, wow! Rome, Italy! Y'all are a long ways from home, aren't you?" Jordan leaped over the girls' parents, crouched down and cupped Magdalena's face in her hands and lost balance when Magdalena stepped back and hid behind Filomena. "You know," Jordan said as she stood up and leaned against the railing on Juanita's side, divided from distracted Thomas, "I've always wanted to go to Italy. But while y'all are in town, I would love to recommend this authentic Italian place. It's nearby —"

"I meant," Ernesto interrupted, "we are from Roma, Texas." Ernesto's response felt like the Pope's homily, something to not be questioned. "We're from South Texas."

"I haven't heard of that subdivision in the area before. Is it near Boerne?"

"No. We're from the Rio Grande Valley. In South Texas. Geographical, four hours directly south of San Antonio. Stop right on the U.S.-Mexico border."

Ernesto's breathing grew into long and paused hymns. Filomena stared down Jordan who distanced herself from Juanita's side. Due to the silence that followed, Magdalena felt the need to chime in about her grandma's house in the town across the river. Jordan soon stopped listening about the soccer games her and her cousins played during Easter, birthday parties, and Christmas. Jordan eyes lost their light as Magdalena described crossing the bridge at night, payed no attention to Magdalena reciting a Spanish poem, and ignored the young child as she talked about being excited for this once-a-year summer *vacation*, distinguishing the difference between summer *break*.

As soon as Filomena pinched her arm, the line moved forward. And although Jordan and Thomas were behind them at the beginning of their conversation, Jordan had managed to slip herself and her husband past the Castillos and climbed aboard the Rattler.

Magdalena stood still and watched, face jammed between the gates' bars, witnessed them slowly creep higher and higher until they were out of sight. The sun had set and the distant screams of the riders echoed the near empty boarding dock.

I Am Not Brown

My mother taught me English,
Because I was born here,
Inside of Starr County Memorial Hospital,
North side of the river.
I was raised in a small house,
Where I had a room of my own,
With a window that had bars on the outside,
They were to protect me from those that
Crossed that dirty river.

I won't **ever** be dirty.

My tanned skin stays with me all year round,
But I am not brown.
My eyes are a shade darker than hazel,
Darker specks are hidden within my irises,
But they, too, are not brown.

Never will I be brown.

Mi amá may speak the **beaner's** language,

But I won't be guilty into it.

I will not respond to *Gilberto*.

Soy Gilbert.

Soy americano.

No seré como mi familia.

No seré alguien que burlaran.

I will not be like my family.

I will not be someone to laugh at.

La mancha en mi alma

I. La primera mancha

Sir, puedo ir al baño?

I don't know, can you?

Como te explico?

Is there orta frase to say,

“Ya estoy crecida.”

Sir, I need to use the restroom.

It's important.

How important?

Pienso que me manche.

II. Y las consecuencias

A stain

Caused by the dark red

Historia that flows through my Gualmar bought underwear

Hidden, though, by my dark denim skinny jeans.

Tengo miedo to go home

A home that's not home

Una casa que es una prision.

A place where I am told como guardar

My secret garden.

The cramps were not what scared me.

Blood did not scare me.

That was part of growing up, acting tough.

No more playing fútbol with the boys on the streets,

No more licking paletas jokingly,

No more hanging upside down guelita's naranjo trees,

No more being silly little me.

III. La inocencia: perdida

He stood before me, luces de color brillando across his skin.

Guapísima.

Heat masquerading su sudor as a discotheque ball.

Bella.

Hands gripped my hips as though they belonged to him.

Amor.

Pecho contra pecho.

Vida.

Pressuring me further back.

Dime que me amas.

But I don't.

And back.

Como yo te amo.

But you don't.

And back.

Como debíamos de estar juntos.

We will only last tonight.

When the act was finished, he shortly left,

And with him went my innocence.

Then there I stayed nested in my bed,

Con la mancha en mi alma.

Goodbye, adiós.

The Gang Story

*¿Crees que el Valle tiene pandillas? ¿Que esta llena de gente peligrosa? Pues todo eso es un mentira. La única historia que conozco de pandillas en Roma es la que me contó mi Papí. Me dijo que en su ultimo año de la prepa, dos primos se mudaron a Roma desde California. Allí ellos eran parte de una pandilla. Aquí no. Intentaron relutar pero fallaron y fallaron hasta que lograron enganchar algunos. Luego golpearon a un niño, como una pandilla, como iniciación. Sus números no mas de cinco en total. Ellos siguieron como antes; fragmentaron las reglas de uniforme, luciendo pañuelos rojos que siempre terminaban confiscados. Entonces, un día, el golpeado pidió a la pandilla que lo encontraran en el estacionamiento de la quinceañera de su hermana. Y la pandilla cumpla el pedimento. Pero allí ellos eran los sorprendidos. El golpeado no vino solo. Siguiendolo esta su papá, sus tíos, sus primos, sus amigos, los papas y tíos de ellos. Entre ellos eran casi veinte. Entonces los de Roma golpearon a la pandilla. Papí dijo que los de Roma obviamente salieron victoriosos, entonces, ¿por qué parece que todavía estoy luchando para mantener en imagen de Roma? 1**

* You think the Valley has gangs? That it's full of dangerous people? Well, that's all lies. The only gang story I know about Roma my Papí told me. He said his last year at the high school a couple cousins came into town from California. There they were part of a gang. Not here. They tried to recruit but failed and failed until they didn't. Then they beat up a kid, as a gang, as initiation. Their numbers no more than five total. They went about their ways; broke school dress code, sported red bandanas that always ended up confiscated. Then one day the beaten-up kid asked the gang to meet him in the parking lot of his sister's quinceañera. And they did. But here they were surprised. The beaten-up kid didn't show up alone. Behind him came his dad, his uncles, his cousins, his friends, their fathers, their uncles. Almost twenty of them. Then the Romans beat up the gang. Papí said the Romans obviously came out victorious, so why does it feel like I'm still fighting to keep Roma's image clean?

Magdalena Seeks Out True Love

All Magdalena ever really wanted was to feel love. It was the thought that kept resurfacing while she stood leaning against the padded wall. She, a wallflower, watched as paired bodies danced to the beat that echoed through the school cafeteria, decorations glimmering and tables of friends laughing, retelling stories.

It was prom night, and she was forced to attend due to her mother's incessant pleading and Emiliano's elaborate prom-posal. He had hired some of the high school mariachi varsity stars to come serenade her during calculus then he gifted her a necklace for their four-year anniversary. She agreed to attend prom with him a whole week later.

A lot had changed since eighth grade year. Emiliano got rid of his braces freshmen year. Magdalena's breast grew two cup sizes the summer between sophomore and junior year. And Emiliano and Magdalena had been dating on and off – though he never seemed to count the off parts in his anniversary gifts. Bianca had moved to Rio Grande City and then back junior year and throughout the whole time she seemed to still be friends with Maggie, even though their friendship was only really alive through text. Bianca had reinvented herself as the sporty basketball It Girl while Magdalena continued her life in the shadows.

Both Emiliano and Magdalena stood near the back of the cafeteria near the domed ceiling at the intersection of the hallway headed towards the library and the one from the front doors all the way to the end of the math wing, with Emiliano's right hand around Magdalena's waist. They stood opposite of the stage, away from the speakers and lights that caused Emiliano's migraines. His closest friends were sitting at the table nearby sneaking sips of vodka hidden in plastic water bottles. She knew the boys only by name; they'd only really talked in settings like these,

Emiliano having his group of friends and Magdalena having her own. Bianca was the only one of their girlfriends Magdalena actually liked. She seemed real; the other girls couldn't talk about anything other than their boyfriends. Bianca and Magdalena chatted and complimented each other briefly when the couple had recently arrived.

Magdalena's emerald dress clung nicely to her curves as she softly swayed to the music. Emiliano didn't dance, and his tux was stiff unless a laugh rioted through his chest because of his friends' raunchy jokes. She leaned into him looking at the dance floor. Magdalena wanted to give Emiliano the attention that other girls gave to him. She wanted to hold him while they danced to *cumbias* and *corridos* and *huapangos*. She wanted to know him and smile. She wanted to want him and be contented.

Instead she feared she would never feel love. Instead she curled up by his side and faked it. Instead she drank her share of alcohol and laughed and tried to pretend that in this moment she was fulfilled, and she was in love with Emiliano. She kissed him, even though she was uncomfortable with P.D.A. She kissed him and imagined herself wanting to melt into her, him.

She parted lips with his when she heard *Payaso de rodeo* start playing. A vodka-induced smile swept across her face as she slide off Emiliano's lap. She pulled Bianca up to dance who in turn called over her shoulder half way to the dance floor for the other girls at the table to follow. They didn't. The alcohol loosened Magdalena's limbs and as the song sped up, her feet did as well. Soon, however, Bianca caught Magdalena as she tripped on her own dress, and snuck her outside to sober up, the humid air sticking to their sweaty skin.

They sat on the benches underneath front entrance, and watched the curb where students waited for their buses after school with Magdalena's head on Bianca's shoulder, their hair sticking to each other. It was outside with the faded songs playing in the background where

Magdalena realized she was at peace. There. With Bianca. As they had once been in middle school. With Magdalena's judgement still clouded with vodka, she turned her head towards Bianca, cupped her face, then kissed her.

This is love, thought Magdalena. This was contentness. This was happiness. This was real emotion.

The door behind them swung open and Emiliano stood there, his face pained. His shoulders slacked and his mouth floundered. Bianca's face was confused. And in an instant, Magdalena was left alone. Bianca ran back inside and Emiliano, walking face down, headed to his car.

While Magdalena wanted to smile and forever have the taste of Bianca's strawberry lip gloss on her lips, her heart sunk knowing she had hurt them both. She was scared, too, to acknowledge what part of her had always known.

Her phone buzzed beside her: I'm going to leave; do you want to come with me?

Yes, she replied, without hesitation.

Bianca came back out a few minutes later, two clutches in one hand and a pair of heels in the other. "You had forgot yours inside." The gold embedding one glistened as it exchanged carriers. "If you're still drunk, I can just pick you up, so you don't fall on the way to my car."

"I think I can make it to your car. I'll probably just have to lean on you a bit since these heels suck," Magdalena said, trying to master the art of balancing while drunk.

"I got you." Bianca's hand found her way around Magdalena's waist. "I got you, Maggie." Then she lifted Magdalena, bridal style.

Bianca walked in silence other than the occasional hiss when stepping on the rocky asphalt. The only thing that Magdalena could think to make the night better was tacos. Bianca laughed. “Do you want Hidalgo or La Chalupa?” Shit, she’d said that out loud.

They’d reached Bianca’s car, and Magadela didn’t really know what she wanted at the moment. “Surprise me.”

And so Bianca did; she’d kissed her. She’d set Magdalena down on her tip toes adding uncomfortable pressure on the ragged edges of rocky debris and leaned into her body slightly, tangling her fingers through Magdalena’s bobby-pinned hair. Mouths open and hungry, tongues awkwardly crashing. Hands pawing.

“How was that for a surprise?” Every word followed by a kiss. One on her lips, another on her nose, one on her cheek then the other, one down her neck, and then the last on her shoulder.

“That was a good surprise,” a smile dancing on the edges of Magdalena’s lips.

“Now let’s go get those tacos.”

Toronjas y naranjas y limónes

Winter had arrived late to South Texas

A January of cloudy skies, wind, and 60° weather.

Pink citrus littered the ground in the garden

Skin split open.

Dirt clung to the wetness of its enclosure,

And the scent of grapefruit filled the air.

The oranges held on to their tree branches, tightly,

Though closer to the ground they hung.

Weight of the fruit drew a curve from green branches,

And though bright orange fat and thick skinned

There they remained hidden.

Their tree bore more leaves than fruit, a delicacy.

This was season for grapefruit, oranges and Mexican limes;

The plump fruit decorating backyards like lights did trees.

A tree so tall, its fruit forgotten,

Until past its prime they fell.

Limes and trunk half sunk within the dirt,

Cracked bright green shells, pulp dry and worthless.

The citrus lingered in our yard, on the ground, on the trees,
Week after week after week,
Inside recyclable shopping bags, taking up garage space;
No one had the appetite for them to be eaten.
As a child and a woman, Papi made me climb high to pluck them
Knowing they'd rot in the heat.

History of the word “Gringo”

*Orígenes son conceptos extraños para ensamblar. Y como uno tiene una madre que los creó, quien los mimó desde cuándo nacieron hasta que sean adultos, palabras detrás de ellos también tienen historias y contextos en donde sus significados y sílabos se juntan. Como haces de células que se forman un humano pequeño; una colección de “otros” construyendo algo único. ¿Pero de donde empieza todo esto?**

*Gringo. ¿De donde vino esta palabra? ¿De verdad vino de mi gente criticando los griegos o los romaníes, los peregrinos? ¿Será posible que vino de la frontera de México durante la guerra contra los Estados Unidos cuando sus soldados cantaban canciones de marcha? ¿O vino de todas las otras guerras en países latinoamericanos en donde se involucro el ejército de los Estados Unidos?***

¿Que significa esta palabra? Obviamente ahora en día, la palabra representa a un Anglo-Saxon, muy diferente de un güero que es alguien que tiene la piel de un tono claro; ellos son los que reclamamos aún cuando ellos no los reclaman. Usamos esta palabra contra las personas que tienen el nopal en la frente y no saben español.

* Origins are odd concepts to muster. Just as one has a mother that carried them, who coddled them from birth until their adult years, and words beyond themselves have histories and contexts in which their means and syllables bond together. Like a bundle of cells that form a tiny human; a collection of others forming a unique.

** Gringo. Where did this word come from? Did it really come from my people criticizing the Greeks or the Romani, the pilgrims? Is it possible that it came from the border communities during the war against the United States when U.S. soldiers sang their marching songs? Or did it come from all the other wars in Latin American countries where the United States military forced its help into?

*Esta palabra es para aquellos que no conocen la diferencia de nuestra cultura y nuestra lengua. Esta palabra es para oprimir a los que nos oprimen.****

*Gringo; los que yo no soy.*****

*** What does this word really mean? Obviously nowadays the word represents Anglo-Saxons, very different from the word *Güero*. A *Güero* who is someone who has a light skin tone; they are the ones we claim even when they don't claim them. We use this word against the people who have the cactus on their forehead, that have their Mexicanness embedded into them yet do not know Spanish. This word is for those who do not know the difference between our culture and our language. This word is to oppress those who oppress us.

**** *Gringo*; the word that I am not.

Magdalena's Social Position Essay

INSTRUCTIONS:

You are to write a short essay (as long as needed) explaining the various ways in which you may hold privilege or face discrimination. Markers include – but are not limited to – class, education, gender, generational status, nationality, phenotype, race, religion, or sexuality. This essay can be informal and does not require citations from class readings. Type your social location essay below.

Sociology of Latinos

Rough Draft No. 2

September 17, 2017

Howdy y hola! My name is Magdalena Castillo and I grew up in a large Mexican American community, literally right next to Mexico. Many people that have met here at Texas A&M have expected that it was easy to find my ethnic identity within a largely brown Latino community. And while I feel close to my culture, I'm not sure I feel close to the identity that comes with it. Being Mexican American or Chicana or Latine has been a label I've adopted, but I'm not sure which is supposed to be the right fit.² Maybe I'm just not used any of them. In this essay I will be exploring my identity through various markers in my life to see if I can find the label I best identify with. Maybe this essay will make me feel less alone.

Class. Raised in a border town in Texas, I lived well off in a middle-class household. Mi papi My father made most of our family's income working as a teacher, while mi mamá my mom had a part time job at one of the day-cares in town and was the home's primary caretaker. Due to

² These terms are completely arbitrary to me. I'm not entirely sure what the difference is between any of these. All I know is that I'm not supposed to call myself *Hispanic* – at least that's what my roommate told me. Something about that word having a history with colonialism, but if that's the case, shouldn't we not use most of the English language since it's all borrowed from other languages, right? That's imperialistic or something.

this economic advantage, I was always allowed to do things for fun; I joined clubs and sport teams even if I wasn't at all good at soccer or baseball or basketball or tennis or golf or cheer camp or swimming or track or anything related to athletic sports. In an area where the majority of people were poor, no, underprivileged, no of low economic status, did come with 'perks' I felt at times awkward to take; free lunches and having required uniform five days a week were annoying, I mean, lackluster. But getting free dual- and concurrent-enrollment to community college and our local university over the summer was pretty cool. Some of my classmates, even though they had the grades to take those free classes, couldn't afford the online homework access codes and instead worked long hours at the pipelines. My grades honestly weren't the best and I'm really happy they only transferred as pass fail. Now that I'm attending school full time, I receive academic scholarships mostly so I really can't mess up anymore, but my parents still help with some expenses even if it means taking out loans.

Education. While I am not a first-generation college student since my father got his Master's degree at the University of Texas – Pan American a school that no longer exists and my mother's Mexican degree didn't transfer with green card, it has been difficult adjusting to Texas A&M because it is a predominately white institution with little to no cultural, ethnic, and racial representation in top elite positions. My high school had only a majority brown population, and all of the stuff we learned in our classes was dumbed down, so when I got to college, especially a good college, I had to learn how to learn again. And I actually tried in high school! and was divided into two large factions: the people that cared and those that acted like they didn't. The ones that openly cared were known as the try-hards, they had parents that worked for the school district, and were mostly active in marching band, track, or swimming. I would ask my dad for help, him having done the whole college thing already, maybe pick up a few studying tips, but he also went to school

in the 80's when dorm rooms still had landlines. How do I ask for help with homework if he doesn't like the fact I got accepted to A&M with my major undecided? Sadly, there has been so much technological advancement since then along with the fact that he studied a different discipline that asking for help is not necessarily feasible.

Generational status. I am a second-generation Mexican American on my mother's side since she was born in Mexico and third-generation on my father's side since he was born here, but his parents were born in Mexico. Growing up, labeling myself by nationality or ethnicity had always been a puzzle I was unable to solve; my mother forbade me to say I was a *mexicana* as I was not born in Mexico, pero but I was also told by my grandparents to not say that I was a Mexican-American as I did not migrate from Mexico to America. *Que mas puedo ser?* Everyone wants to label me one thing or another because of my skin tone. What else am I supposed to categorize myself as? So recently Chicana is a term I've read a lot in this class, and while I don't know much about it, I feel like it is the one I want to be seen as.³ Because of my generation, I grew up in a bilingual home, learning Spanish to communicate with my parents and English as a means learn from the American education system and communicate with society. I like to believe I have a good work ethic modeled by grandparents who worked long, hard hours in fields picking crops and have a sound foundation, economically as well as academically. This is contributed by my generational status, and the fact that I feel the expectations of my family members and their struggles to uplift them, which then fuels my anxiety and therapy talks that I'm not supposed to talk about in front of my grandparents because my mom doesn't want me to be judged by them. ⁴

³ Chicana to me means being Mexican American while being disconnected to your 'national' identity. Because I'm from the border I feel like I don't know what it means to really be 'Mexican', but since I know what that culture is like, maybe not the history though I do want to learn it, I still want to be associated with that.

⁴ Chicano culture doesn't truly believe in mental illnesses, unless it's physical – like brain cancer; everything else, you're just making it up. I'm not sure if it stems from *machismo* or something, but anything that isn't external pain, can't be justified to the only community. And in my experience women are the ones that are more 'susceptible' to this type of illness.

Geographical location. The struggles of living in such a controversial geographic area also arose my senior year of high school, the year Donald Trump won the 2016 Presidential Election. This was a time where all of my neighbors, classmates, the people I grew up with became insecure about not only their own well-being, but of the people they knew, and they grew up with. There were people all throughout my country who believed that my ethnic group was the cause of their problems; Latinos were grouped together to mean ‘Mexicans’, seen through a xenophobic lens as the ‘other’, and marked as a scapegoat for social tensions; my ethnicity became a title I could no longer escape. Over the years my father’s jokes about having to pronounce my last name in a *gringo* accent in college grew more serious.⁵ There was no need to be associated with Kate del Castillo, famous Mexican actress known for playing a narco on *Telemundo’s La Reina del Sur*. And even though Amado Carrillo didn’t have the same last name as I, my father was still terrified of any misconception. Home was no longer a place of rich culture, it was a place where ‘illegals’ were detained, it was a place to establish political dominance over Mexico.

Sexuality. Additionally, as a lesbian my sexuality influences others’ perceptions of myself, within a Mexican society and society as a whole that views heterosexuality as the norm and correct way of attraction being a lesbian isn’t something that I proudly state. I’m not proud to be scared about people’s possible reactions to my sexuality. Growing up, I struggled with my sexuality given the fucking toxic heteronormativity of Chicano culture and my family’s rigid religious views.⁶ It

⁵ My father wouldn’t understand how much harder acting like I wasn’t in touch with my culture would be to make friends when everyone else embraced themselves fully for who they were.

⁶ Catholicism was the only way of life growing up. Every night my sister and I would kneel by our shared bed and pray to the crucifix hanging above us: *Ángel de mi guarda, dulce compañía, no me desampares, ni de noche ni de día. No me dejes solo que me perdería*. Even when driving in town we would pray before leaving the house and there was no, “*Portate mal, pero cuidate bien*.” Sunday school was not optional or a gateway for the grand *quinceañera* and even after receiving our first communion and confirmation, we still went and volunteered for the younger classes. There was believing in *La Morenita* and the Risen. Pope was basically a godfather even when my godfather was distant. Being a lesbian would kill them.

was something I was never comfortable with; the media turned my Latina identity into a sexual icon – but something only men were to enjoy. And this icon was something I was not comfortable in playing into nor the fantasy of turning straight if I found the right *guy*. It wasn't until recent years at I was able to be surrounded myself with my girlfriend and a small group of friends that were accepting of my sexuality; within this community I was able to express myself without fear of judgement and embrace my identity as a queer Chicana.

Identity labels. While I don't always feel comfortable within them, I find comfort in them. Within my mind, terms are constrictive, and because I will never fully experience colorism, classism, sexism, or racism in the same ways that other Latina women have or will face, I feel as though I will never be worthy enough of being *x* term. My social location, as a lesbian, Mexican American woman of a middle class and moderately well-educated household has given me access to opportunities that individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds might not have. I would not be the Maggie I am today had I not had all these small consistencies in my life. Had my household income been slightly higher or slightly lower, I might've not had the same access to certain academic aspirations in my life; maybe I would've had more financial aid. Maybe had I been straight I would've fallen in love in high school and not gone to a school six hours away from home. If I were born in Mexico and not the U.S. I could have had a slight accent that deters from me gaining a stable job. The possibilities are endless. As meta as it may sound, all these small choices make me unique. All these interlocking events made me, me.

Comparing Two Cities on the River

A breakfast plate of Mexican styled eggs – made with tomatoes, onion and serrano peppers – and hash browns and beans as its sides, was the best comfort food, especially when accompanied with a hot cup of coffee. Guadalupe had only wished her mami had made it for her.

From the layout, one could tell that the empty restaurant was a converted gas station whose interior walls had been painted bright orange then lined with booths. In front of the entrance, a jukebox was filled with Spanish music. *Banda MS*'s song *Hablame de ti* was currently playing and filling the room. Earlier that Saturday morning, feeling incredibly homesick, Guadalupe drove to *El Sol de Mexico* in Bryan, where her parents brought her during her New Student Conference, but not the one on Villa Maria.

Being away at college, Guadalupe found herself searching for home in all the ways she had once avoided in Roma. And while eating her eggs with salsa and beans, she had come to the conclusion that Bryan was to Ciudad de Miguel Alemán as Roma was to College Station. Back home, Roma was where the majority of her friends lived. They were all in the same advanced and AP classes together, and all their parents were middle class.

Ciudad de Miguel Alemán was where the “regulars” were from, even if they really weren't. Though Guadalupe thought herself, then and now, to be a progressive, viewing students as “regulars” and “advanced” was classist in the way the school dynamics played out. Subconsciously, she thought herself better than them and for some reason associated them with Mexico due to the way they spoke Spanish all *mocho*. She hated going to Mexico back home, she felt like the outsider with broken Spanish and light skin. She poked her hash browns with the tips of her fork trying to distance herself from the dirty thought.

And yet in College Station that's how she felt, too. She lacked the proper poise of English SAT words that slipped naturally into everyday conversation and even though she was not *morena*, she would never be White. College Station was made up of a majority White population, and they really only went to downtown Bryan for First Fridays and photoshoots outside of Caff  Capri's murals.

Her mind couldn't help making the comparison that White, affluent students were the equivalent of the "advanced" students in Roma. In College Station, Guadalupe was now a "regular".

She wasn't sure what she was most uncomfortable with, the fact that she realized how elitist she had been back home or knowing that even back home she would still feel judged by the Whites. Guadalupe continued to play with her food, until she decided she wasn't hungry anymore and asked for a to-go box. Maybe she would also be uncomfortable. Maybe she would always have to relearn how to navigate spaces. After paying for her check, she looked around and smiled nonetheless at how close home could be if you looked for it.

Magdalena's Letter to the Unknowing Racist

November 11, 2018

Dear [REDACTED],

I know I should have said this on the ride home from the party, and I don't know if you could already tell, but I was mad at you. I didn't say anything because I couldn't get my words together. My tied-together-like-a-knot tongue couldn't get the words past my lips. Instead I turned off your music; instead I yelled at you to be quiet even if you were too cross-faded to understand why.

I honestly did not like those jokes you were making at the party; the ones about you identifying as a different race and ethnicity. I didn't like the way you 'jokingly' commented that political correctness is dumb. How we should refer to you as our purple alien friend who sexually identifies as an attack helicopter; you are obviously white, with blue eyes, always raving about your Western European ancestry. It got to me because even though I know you meant it sarcastically, it hurts knowing my ethnicity, my mother's nationality, my main identifier, the community I call home is seen as something we're not. Your lame attempt at a joke only hinders other's people ability to express themselves.

You're white; you will never fully understand why your jokes hurt. This letter is for you; this letter calls you out and is telling you to get your shit together.

You get to claim your nationality only when you feel it benefits you. Ethnicity is optional to you. Your family arrived generations ago and because of your skin phenotype and because America is a 'melting pot', you've become assimilated. Because I am brown, I don't have that privilege; *yo siempre tendre el nopal en la frente*. Which you also made a point to call out at

least five times throughout the night. She's my brown, Mexican friend, guys. She's my ethnic friend, y'all. We should all celebrate Cin-co day May-o! Do you know any good margaritas recipes? I felt uncomfortable being your physical representation of a white man's tolerance to 'otherness'.

I didn't like your machismo; it did not feel like witty banter; I felt dismissed and belittled. Your calling attention to my lack of sex appeal had me praying my oversized sweater would swallow me whole. I don't like the way you used 'gay' as an insult. I don't like how you said I was an unwanted friend. I don't like how you said I was only there because I was your designated driver. Don't worry about her, she's only here to drive me around. Claiming that I am taking up space on a couch where drunks are supposed to lay. She doesn't drink because she's boring. Bringing up the fact that I also can't drink due to the fact that my nationality paints my being into a target. Cops already don't like her, can't risk her getting deported.

I want to tell you I don't like those jokes because of how shitty they make me feel. Please take into consideration my oppression in today's social climate before you make jokes equivalating yourself to my position due to your symbolic Irish roots. Stating your great-, great-, great-grandfather fought the same struggles that I do. Do you not realize that the shade of my skin changes all of the rules? My skin tone makes me a minority, makes me a target; I'm not allowed to accept my culture if I want to be progressive and help my family out of poverty. I'm not allowed to speak my language in fear I will be singled out and ridiculed in my classes. I have to suppress my identity because the stereotypes you keep reiterating are what makes my struggle harder and longer and more important to fight.

The fact that I had to take a mental note on the way home to not yell at you shows how much it has been imbedded in me that I have to watch myself, my tone, and the way I come

across to other people due to the fact that I am a Chicana, an angry Chicana. You will never understand the extent of your privilege. You made me drive you to your apartment and had me walk 20 minutes to my dorm alone. It was 2am. It was rainy. It was cold. You should have had the common decency to understand that what may be safe for you is not safe for everyone else. This is the event that made me realize no matter how much detail I put into my stories, how dark I describe my demons, how many times I need to hold my tongue, I can't force you to understand or empathize. I am not a girl for you to silence and be made small. *Mi raza me levantara y yo misma estaré en cargo de proteger mi gente.*

They Love When I Speak Spanish (*Aman cuando hablo español*)

They love the way my *rr*'s roll off my tongue,
Smoothly,
While they struggle to pronounce our names correctly.
They love to hear me say my *ñ*'s and my *ll*'s
The way my mother taught me.
They love the way I speak,
Compliments *con doble sentidos*,
Loud voices imposing their views of me.
In their eyes,
I
am
exotic.

They love learning our language only to butcher it.
Commodifying *nuestra cultura*;
Stripping the traditions from our aesthetic;
Laughing at my mother
And her broken *ingles*.
They hide their awes with protests
To *un lenguaje* that feels at home within my mouth,
Resting sharply on my tongue.

The place they

cannot

ever

colonizar.

They love to look at my bilingualism as a threat,

Gatekeeping the spaces in which I am allowed to speak,

Picking out the words they find appropriate

Only for them to appropriate;

They love to speak over my words,

Correct my mispronunciations,

Calling me slow while my brain is thinking in two dialects,

My mind on two different wavelengths.

They love to spark the anger in me,

Love to hear me say my vulgarities.

My mother reminds me

That their *comentarios* cannot hurt me.

Ellos no me avergonzarán a borrar me

Porque mis palabras siempre serán mías

Y yo no regalaré mi voz a los que no me quieran escuchar.

Loss of Transnational Innocence

The day is young, infantile. The rising sun has not yet dared to show the ground its light, withholding its heat, allowing humidity a few more moments of sleep. There in the Rio Grande Valley, out in the brush, mostly tall and dry yellow grass sway in the breeze, out there you can see that the green jays have not yet woken up from their nest in the awkward leaning honey *mesquite* trees. Dry shrubs linger in the vast open areas, surrounded by thicker *granjeno* tree branches covered in Spanish moss, home to rodents or owls. None are awake. And yet hidden beneath the wilderness, deep within the brush, a grouping of individuals can be found. A gathering in the number of eighteen wear tattered clothes and pass around a gallon of water. Beside them lay two empty containers.

These men and women and children have traveled a long way; whether they were from the southernmost tip of the Mexican-Guatemalan border, grand Mexico City, or the rural community of the Northern states one could not tell from a quick glance. Of the various barriers they had overpassed, the river had been their most difficult, but they were still so far from safety in anonymity. Teresa could tell, however, that they were tired, that they were low of supplies, and they were all willing to die to enter the civilized United States.

Teresa could tell they had lots to lose if they were caught entering without proper documentation, without waiting in line; but seeking acceptance legally was just outside their time constraints. Teresa was one of them.

Months prior to Barack Obama's second presidential election their communities had become even more unstable. These people came in search of employment opportunity; they came fleeing the violence *Los Zetas* had caused in their communities; they came fleeing homes even if

they hadn't originally meant to cross. Some came without being forced, all they had were dreams that brightened their nights. Laying there on stained sleeping bags, one could not judge the choices that led them there. These thoughts, while not spoken, floated in the air as the water canister was passed along. As the water pooled in Teresa Ruiz's mouth, a thin stream slipped down the side of her neck, her matted hair clung to her skin.

Teresa Ruiz: mid-thirties, mother of a thirteen-year-old kid named Mateo, widow of Gabriel Ruiz, former secretary at LOPEZ Y SANCHEZ. Many of the women in the group had lost children, their boys forced into battles, their girls had been raped then murdered. Mateo escaped this monopoly of violence by being away at a private school, but it was only a matter a time before *Los Zetas* needed more bodies. Bodies they felt needed to die for them, or bodies they felt that needed to die.

Many of the men were there crossing because they had refused to fight, because they had long ago upset someone who was now in power. Much like Gabriel. He was active in Vicente Fox's campaign, being loud about his vote, being careless. Teresa came home one day, made *entomatadas potosinas*, and turned on the news. Gabriel didn't come home that night, or the following night, or the next. He became *unos de los desaparecidos*.

The few children that joined on this hazardous trek were on a mission to fulfil their parents' dying wishes of leaving the violence behind, even if it meant leaving their families to bleed out on the streets, or to be buried in unmarked mass graves, or to be found weeks afterwards with maggots in their eyes and their mouths full of protests long forgotten. And this was the journey Teresa set out on. Teresa hoped to cross into America and settle on the other side of the border making evacuation of her family easier when she saved enough money. A

family friend already in *Gringolandia* told her of a job vacancy, a nanny position. Teresa hoped to stay with her.

These migrants had heard salvation waited for them in the sanctuary churches across the border. If only they were to make it. It was almost time to head out again. To continue their trek. And hope for a better life, not death. The familiar morning rouge cast shadows upon their faces. But the green jays did not greet the rising sun; Border Patrol vehicles did. Their 4x4 drive kicked loose dirt up. The chatter of men and their round laughs ricochets through the arid air. And so, the group held their breath as agents surveyed the surrounding area.

In that pensive dawn, police dog barks grew louder, the shuffling of the grass lingered with hesitation not knowing where the snake holes were. Teresa knew this could be the end. Teresa knew the thousands of American dollars she paid their *coyote* could go to waste if apprehended now; Border Patrol would warn them all about the potential bans if they continued. If caught too many times trying to cross the border without authorization, individuals had the potential to be barred from applying to enter the country legally as well as asylum or refugee status. They would be turned away to the nearest border town on the Mexican side of the Rio Bravo, and forced to cross the terrain again, but this time without guidance.

El coyote reminded them he would not take them forth anymore; it was the last day of their journey and if they wanted to savor the bitter-sweet taste of freedom, they would have to make it across the border now or never. *El coyote's* voice wasn't smooth, it was rough and dry and the coughs full of nasty phlegm after years of smoking. As softly as he could, he counted down the minute and a half his followers had to pack up their belongings and be ready to disperse through the wildlife, hopefully finding themselves on the right side of the border.

Teresa rolled her sleeping bag then thought better trying to run with it on her back and focused on shoving clothes in her backpack. By the time she thought to at least take the blanket her mother made her, it had been claimed by another getting a head start to the border.

Cinco. Cuatro. Tres. Dos. Uno. ¡Vayanse, rapido!

The soles of Teresa's shoes were wearing thin, but she didn't have time to focus on that now; she could hear others' cries for help, pleas to be let go. They were captured, but she wouldn't let herself be. She ran holding her *rosario* in the palm of her hand, breathily saying her *Ave Marías*. Lights were flashing in front of her, and she could see a vehicle rushing in her direction. Without calculating, she dove into a bush with thorns and held her tongue as Border Patrol agents ran by.

While mouthing the words to her prayer, she noticed her rosary was stuck on the branches and gave a light tug, rustling the whole of it. She took a sharp breath in. Held it for almost a minute and let it out. *¡La virgincita le ha cumplido un milagro!* Her traveling acquaintances' voices echoed around her and could be heard in the break of day. And when she finally believed she was safe a light flashed on her from behind.

"Well, well, well, boys. What do we have here?"

§ § §

Music played softly in the background, masked by the sounds of cashiers bagging groceries, squeaky shopping cart wheels, children begging for a candy bar at the check-out line, the butcher slamming down ribs on the weight, fresh produce being not so carefully sorted into flimsy plastic bags. The sounds lifted to Teresa's ears as the doors slid open and the cold air rushed to meet her face. The gentrified farmer's market, indoors and basically a local supermarket, almost reminded Teresa of the *mercados* back home. Back home, however, the

mariachis would play as the women bargained for produce with the few pesos they had. Things didn't always used to be that way.

Mexico's economy suffered through NAFTA; she remembers growing up and her *tios* along with her *papí* went north to the U.S. for labor jobs. They picked crops in Texas and California at times. NAFTA was supposed to help trade and bring money into Mexico, but it all went wrong and suddenly everyone was leaving for jobs outside the country and Mexico no longer had the workers to make their own produce and imported the basics.

Looking at the tomatoes, Teresa frowned. They were picked too soon, yellow-green spots over-shining the red. A lady asked for three tomatoes and Teresa struggled to formulate the words that she too was shopping and not the seller. Her simple green dress and cardigan allowed her fade into the background. And though Teresa had been living in the United States a couple of months now, her verbal and written English was sloppy which is why she always asked Jaslen to go grocery shopping with her. One less thing to juggle while caring for the Johnsons' son, Anthony, a round and bubbly ten-month-old. Though both her friend and the child had been lost in the crowd.

Jaslen, the family friend, kept her promise of helping her find employment with the Johnsons, the family whose house she cleans that now Teresa is nannying for. The other nanny, Ariana, left a couple of weeks before Teresa arrived after getting engaged to a local car mechanic and now lives with him. The Johnsons only wanted in-home care for their first child. Jaslen lived in her employer's house in their spare room in the basement completed with a half-kitchen and a bathroom was hers momentarily. The two weeks between Teresa's arrivals and Ariana's departure was the only time in Jaslen's life that she had a room to herself.

“¡Ya apurate!” said Jaslen, appearing behind her with canned peaches and in her cart, Anthony, held by Jaslen, had a banana in his mouth. “*Puedes agarrar los tomates al final. Si no, van estar todos aplastados por la leche o las latas de elote o algo mas.*” She whispered quietly as both she and Teresa passed other white mommies, nannies, or maids at the store. “Oh! Don’t forget to buy the Johnsons’ purified water,” Jaslen added in English, codeswitching whenever she walked ahead in the refrigerated section of the market, not wanting to stand out too much in the crowd. Jaslen, at 5’4” tended to be overlooked, literally and figuratively, but with her heavy accent, whenever she spoke loudly in public places, people usually wanted to identify the source.

“*No entiendo porque les necesitamos comprar más cosas. Pense que nuestras comidas y cosas eran separadas de los de ellos.*” Teresa and Jaslen got paid every other week, alternatingly. While they were able to use the Johnson’s kitchen and the Johnson’s laundry room, they weren’t allowed to use the Johnson’s pots, pans, utensils, food (including spices), detergent, and lint sheets. The Johnsons wanted them there with them, but with a distance.

“*¿Y porque crees que te pagaron un pocito más esta vez? Ellos no nadamas los van a dan más dinero simplemente sólo porque les da la gana; somos sus empleados. Y por nuestro status —*” Jaslen halted and leaned into Teresa as she organized the gallon of milk and coffee creamer into the cart, “*nosotros les debemos mucho. Un galón de agua purificada no te debe de costar mucho.*” Anthony, oblivious to the tension of their words, looked at them, back and forth and back and forth, pupils wide and his smile was too. Jaslen passed the small child to Teresa then she shuffled the cart between shoppers, continuing with her shopping list. Teresa followed at a distance with Anthony’s small hands wrapped around Teresa’s finger, he waved it. Anthony looked like Mateo, if only Mateo had blue eyes and lighter skin and all the privilege being white had to offer. Even being half-white.

A gallon of water might be nothing here, but it would help pay the bills back in Mexico, Teresa thought to herself. Mateo needs new shoes and *Amá* is running out of favors to ask for. After receiving her paycheck every other week, Teresa bought groceries then sent the remainder to her mother, tasked with taking care of her grandson. Teresa's paycheck helps with food and rent, but *Guelita* Imelda helps out at the local church and the nun's share their allowances with her. *Guelita* manages all the money and had recently started saving, but Mateo got a cold and right back into debt they sunk.

Teresa puts down her 2-ply toilet paper back on the shelf and gets 1-ply from a generic brand. *Ojalá no me meto un dedo en el culo tratando de limpiarlo de mierda*. She knew the few cents she saved from brand to generic could help her family. It was all there was left to hope for. Teresa knew she was doing the best for her family, but she also knew she had more struggles left to bring.

The Johnsons, while more generous than most, still underpaid most of their employees. It also wasn't a stable position; the turnover rate as the Johnson's gardener was ridiculous. Their most recent hire, Benito, had asked Mr. Johnson for more fertilizer; Mr. Johnson was offended at the thought of him having to provide anything to a service he was paying for. Teresa was scared of unknowingly caring for Anthony the wrong way and being let go. She didn't need more pressure to do well.

Caring for Anthony had become an emotional burden. Ever since The Crossing, Teresa kept hoping for a sign of what she feared would result wouldn't occur. But earlier that week three pregnancy tests proved her fears right. She was carrying a child, and she wasn't sure if her employment status would be impacted by such a discovery. Caring for Anthony felt like carrying guilt; having to put his needs over Mateo and over her unborn child. She felt guilt and wanted to

be proactive and selfish and care for the family she has not. Rubbing her silver *virgincita* necklace did not calm her nerves, it only exuberating them.

Jaslen had finally gotten all the items off their list and gotten in line in order to pay; her English was better for small talk. Teresa wandered around the floral section leaning in, crouching down so Anthony could smell the flowers then giggle as the petals tickled his nose. While picking out a white rose for the altar at home, a shadow stood before her.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?”

Teresa froze; her eyes stuck on the black boots before her. Anthony looked up blankly as well. Her sight traveled higher, and while she couldn’t read the terms *Border Patrol* on his chest, she knew what he was. He, however, was not looking at her; he was looking at Anthony. Or maybe he was looking at her cleavage, even if there wasn’t much.

“I think it’s time for you to go home.” This time he was talking directly at her; then pointed his chin behind her. Jaslen had their items in paper bags and was waving at them. Teresa faked a small smile, paid for a single white rose, then left the uniformed man behind without saying a word to him. Jaslen held one hand out and Teresa took it and exhaled deeply.

They walked home.

§ § §

Teresa hadn’t spoken a word since having been let inside the church. She had lain at the church’s steps unable to muster up the strength to see if the door was left unlocked or see if the priest or nuns or volunteers were around. It was late into the evening and night was crawling in when she was dropped off. She was actually tossed out of the moving vehicle, but she couldn’t voice that either.

A kind lady with dark features kept asking if she needed anything. Kept handing her water to drink which she wouldn't down and food to eat that she had no appetite for and clothes to change into since hers had stains and were torn and a blanket to keep her warm even if the material was itchy. Teresa arrived on a Monday and spent two days without eating and almost a week without talking. She spent her days in the front pew praying to the Virgin Mary trying to make sense of what had happened. The kind lady kneeled next to her and prayed, too, wanting everything to turn out okay.

The nights were silent, there was a cot made out of her in the main chapel and she used to move it in front of the Virgin's statue. Teresa would fall asleep in the hopes to wake in the glory of salvation and freedom.

Teresa broke her muteness that Sunday and asked for a phone. She called Jaslen at the Johnson's landline who in turn called in a favor and they both slept in the Johnson's basement that night.

§ § §

The wooden doors are pushed open and the hinges creaking, the scrapping of the door on the tile floor echo across the vastness of the church's interior. The outside light, glittering in through the stained-glass windows, overpowers the too high yellowing bulbs. Plain wooden benches weathered by anxious praying and minimalistic Stages of the Cross were illuminated by shades of green and red and yellow. There was a handful of elderly women either reading their bibles or silently praying, and none of them turned to watch as Teresa struggled to get the doors to close with a rose in one hand and a bag of groceries in the other. Before the door shut, Anthony's laughter could be heard outside as Jaslen watched the child wobble then fall on the grass.

Teresa's footsteps guided her to the candle altar at the entrance on the right side. She placed the bagged fruit on the floor behind her as she dropped a donation into the cardboard box then carefully used a small flame to light a near burnout stub. After placing the grocery bag's loop on her shoulder, Teresa stood still for a few seconds allowing the glow of the blaze to warm her skin. Teresa focused on the flame, small yet energetic. The dancing light amused her. Her eyes trailed upward following the stream of smoke where she noticed on a portrait of the altar's saint: Saint Philomena. It was an image of a beautiful young girl with big eyes and winding chestnut hair. The golden halo captivated Teresa momentarily as it reflected the shimmer of the burning candles onto Teresa's face, but her eyes were then called to the white statue at the front of the room.

She then made her way to the upmost front left pew, placed her bag on the seat beside her, then stood right in front of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. Though the statue was made of stone, the skin was made to look soft; though the stories of the Guadalupe recall her as *morenita*, the stone was pale. A small angel was uplifting her from below, testifying her importance within the church. There were stars that could be seen faintly littered throughout her mantel, even without its vibrant color. Below her lay bundles of roses from her believers, mostly white petaled, asking for miracles. She placed her single rose in a vase with water among others. Moving back to the pew, she removed her rosary and began her prayers by placing her thumb above her index finger then calling out to *El Padre, el Hijo, y el Espíritu Santo*.

Finally, Teresa's bare knees felt the coolness of the wooden bench as she got into a comfortable praying position. Teresa looked at Lupita and prayed to the virgin as if she was God:

Diosita, yo siempre miraba hasta ti para que me guiáras. Sé que soy de mente simple y no voy a entender tus metos, pero si pudieras darme un señal de por qué

*tuve que sufrir el dolor que a sufrido me gustaria saber que es lo usted sabe. ¿Por qué es que ahora me abandonas? Morenita, yo he sido nada más que fiel y leal a ti, pero desde esa mañana en la maleza yo ya no te he sentido guiándome. Esa mañana te vi desaparecer ante mis ojos. Yo siempre volteaba hacia ti cuando estaba pierdeda. Volteaba a ti cuando había perdido todo; cuando mi esposo fue asesinado y me quedé sola; cuando tuve que dejar a mi familia en México porque no ibamos a sobrevivir con solo pan. Yo giré hacia ti cuando esos hombres me violaron. **

*¿Y santa Filomena, donde estabas cuando Mateo se enfermó y perdimos todo nuestro dinero? ¿Cómo pensaste que sería bendición criar al hijo de mi violador? ¿Por qué creiste que hora fue bien tiempo para tener un hijo? ¿Cómo es que este niño podría serle bien para esta situacion? ¿Aquí y allá? ***

Teresa has rested her forehead on her thumbs while her fingers were interlocked, and her body was shaking. The tears were rolling off her cheeks as she bit her lip, stifling the sobbing that was desperate to escape. Her long dark hair covered her face, but her hair itself could not hide her from the shame she felt. And her prayer grew more and more disorganized; she heard the church doors open and babbling was shushed.

* Oh, my precious womanly god, I have always looked up to you to guide me. I know I am of a simple mindedness and I will not understand your methods, but if you could please give me a sign of why I've had to suffer the pain I have, I would like to know what you do. Why have you abandoned me now? Oh, my dark-skinned goddess, I have been nothing but faithful and loyal to you, but ever since that morning in the brush I no longer feel you guiding me. That morning I saw you disappear before my eyes. I have always turned to you when I was lost. I turned to you when I lost everything; I turned to you when my husband was murdered and I was left alone; I turned to you when I had to leave my family in Mexico because I knew we wouldn't survive on only bread. I turned to you when those men had raped me.

** And my dear Saint Philomena, where were you when Mateo got sick and we lost all our money? How did you think that it would be a blessing to have the child of my rapist? Why did you think that now would be a good time to have this kid? How could they be good for the situation my family is in? Both here in the United States and back in Mexico?

Footsteps drew closer, and Teresa took those few seconds to collect her emotions. She grabbed her bag and came face to face with Jaslen and Anthony. Teresa held her arms out, and Jaslen obliged in handing the boy over.

“*Estás lista para ir?*” Jaslen said preppily, either not seeing the redness in Teresa’s eyes due to the tinted lighting or ignoring it. “*No creo que los Johnson’s nos quieran estar fuera tan tarde con el niño.*”

“*Si, vamonos.*”

And the trio headed down the aisle to the front door. Teresa stopped at the end, turn back to the crucified Jesus and stared down the hollowed white ceramic eyes of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. It was there, in the peace of a quasi-empty church, where she realized no miracles would be happening for her, or for all others that placed their white roses on her altar.

Magdalena's Second Coming of Age Story

Life in the Mind of the (Not Really) Repentant Magdalena

Drafted on November 11, 2020 at 9:27pm

Hello blog readers!

As most of you have heard, I have graduated college in May (a whole year early!!!), and just recently started working with an amazing team down here in the RGV helping organize communities with LUPE (La Unión Del Pueblo Entero) and letting individuals know their rights for claiming things like paved roads or simply helping them file for taxes or distributing clothing during the cold months – y'all should definitely think about looking them up and figure out ways to volunteer and donate since the holidays are nearing.

I know it's been a while since I last wrote – almost five months – but for some reason I've been getting a lot of comments on a post over three years ago and wanted to come back and chat with you about something that has been on my mind lately. And this has all been sparked by conversations with co-workers and families I've helped.

Though some may argue that because I've already had my quinceañera I am a woman, I am matured, there is nothing left to symbolize my growth. But there has been a different set of events leading up to my rebirth as a confident Chicana woman. My journey to comfort within my identity was noticeable my last year of college; in reality, the path was carved much earlier. Growing up in a border town, because my family was much more financially stable than the majority of my town, because I didn't listen to Spanish music, because I had good grades, because I was tracked gifted and talented, I considered myself white.

Not phenotypically. Just in the way that I acted and had opportunities available to me that others didn't. I equated privilege to whiteness. As a child, I was totally uncomfortable with my

culture and privilege. My papí got moved up to vice-principal of my elementary when I was in high school, and for some reason I stopped hanging out with friends simply because of it. I didn't want them asking to use my phone to call their parents after school if they missed the bus; I'd tell them I had low batteries, for them to use the front office phone. I stopped wanting them to come over and do homework, because we had a Wii that we didn't use, and they loved.

Due to the work that I've been doing lately with LUPE, I thought it was best to kind of show some of that progress with you guys. I've grown up with some of you and some not, and at whatever point that you did meet me, I would like to say that I think I've changed and grown for the better. To kind of show that to you, I recently found a writing exercises that I had to do for a class in college. Basically, it had me answer some type of questions – kind of like when you were in drama club in middle school and your drama teachers made you like say everything in character – I had to answer these questions about myself to show my professor who I really was. Sort of like an icebreaker.

So, I have chosen to look at these questions again leaving the original responses from my junior year in college and also answer them from where I am now under them. Keep in mind, I was timed when I originally did this, so I'm giving myself a minute and a half to answer myself.

I hope you guys enjoy and definitely post some of your own responses in the comments below!

1. Who are you?

Past (Sep. 2019): Mi nombre es Magdalena Castillo. Soy hija de Juanita and Ernesto Castillo, pero soy mas de lo que pienso que soy. I am a lover of food and someone who is still learning to

love myself, searching for acceptance within spaces that were not designed with me in mind.

There are places I wish to escape and places I wish to go. Yo estoy viviendo mi vida en una tierra con dos pisos: un para los gringos y el orto para todo los demas.

Present (Nov. 2020): My name is Magdalena Castillo y todavia estoy aprendiendo como amarme.

While I have removed my physical presence from Texas A&M, I feel I've left an impact. That

I do belong there even if I felt I didn't. Soy una semilla de toronja plantada en el valle mágico dando fruta a mis cultivadores.

2. Where are you from?

Past: The vale del rio grande is my home. Es donde mi familia a crecido, donde han muerto. It is the place of suffering and beauty. I am currently atrapada. Entre mi misma. I am limiting myself, my growth due to fear.

Present: I am proudly from Roma, Texas, one of the last few cities with a suspension bridge into Mexico where my roots lie. Vengo de un pueblo that has uplifted me and now I am doing my part to uplift it.

3. What makes you uncomfortable?

Past: I am currently uncomfortable with the topic of my existence; I am in a period where others feel the need to dictate for me what I am and what I am to be. I want to be happy, but I cannot know happiness if I do not find comfort within the color of my skin. I put so much hate outwardly.

Present: I am uncomfortable driving into las colonias trying to help people in my new car. Growing up my family never had a car de año and I feel disrespectful. Estoy incómoda with knowing how deep my hate was for my skin and my culture ran.

4. What are you?

Past: I am currently attending college, here, at Texas A&M. I am Sociology student, I am a lover.

I work as an assistant in the nearby daycare, working with elementary students, teaching them the power of language and the importance of opening their mouth and biting their tongue.

Present: I am kind of like a social worker, a community organizer. I am a foster parent. I am an amateur cook, but most of all I am loved.

5. What are your goals?

Past: Me gustaria estar libre de la presion que me pongo. I wish I could find my place and stop having to validate my own feelings and needs to those that don't understand. My goal is to be a teacher en un pueblito.

Present: I would still like to be a teacher – one day. I want to start a donation fund to LUPE. I want to adopt my foster child, Valentina. I want to continue to help my parents with the bills. I want to be a bridesmaid to Ojos Verdes. I want to help people. I want to do things for others.

6. What are you missing in life?

Past: I wish I had money to take care of myself. Money to send back home. Es que mi familia esta pobre and I want to help out more, I wish they'd let me. I wish people didn't look down at me and allowed me to show what I am truly capable of. Mi mami y papi siembre.

Present: Maybe some chocoflan, but I currently have a life I don't want to change.

7. What do you love?

Past: I love the people who love me. I love Diosito y la Virgen. Amo los angeles en el cielo, a mi tia y mi tio y my guelito. No murieron en vane. I love my friends and my family, I love the elote man on the corner of the street next to the church I think I got baptized in, but I don't think I love myself.

Present: Amo mi trabajo, amo mi pueblo, amo a Valentina, y amo a Bianca, my fiancé and soon to be wife. I love my family, I love my education, I love God and the Virgen Mary. I love me.

8. What do you hate?

Past: I hate the demons in my head. The ones that keep me up at night, telling me que mi cultura en impura, es mal, que me devo de assimilarme. I hate the guy that raped my friend in high school. I hate my sexist manager.

Present: I hate going to visit my parents and my mom introducing Bianca as my friend. I hate that people think I'm overqualified for my job. I hate that Valentina gets bullied at school. And I still, hate that guy that raped my friend in high school and my old sexist manager.

9. What do you envision for your future?

Past: I spend too much time focusing on school. Cadaves que mis amigas me invitan al Bajio, les dijo que tengo que estudiar. Me enfoco mucho en la escuela, pero no vivo mi vida. My future is my life. I never saw myself to be this age. I never saw myself past high school and every day I try too far to make it to the future, but I never live in the now.

Present: I feel myself at some point retiring with my family, continuing to foster kids, maybe even have some of our own. I see Bianca and Valentina and me cuddled up in holiday cards. I can't wait to have our first Thanksgiving and Christmas together. I'm trying to take it one day at a time but there are definitely things I'm looking forward to.

10. What do you regret?

Past: I regret leaving home. Sometimes I feel like if I stayed nothing bad would have happened. Se que asi no es la vida, que esas cosas todavia iban a pasar. I can't help doubting myself, however. I regret telling my primos that everything was going to get better, that tia was going to get better. I regret telling my mami that I was okay when I wasn't. I regret so much.

Present: I regret not taking advantage of more opportunities when I had the chance. I regret wanting to come back home when there was so much that was still out there left for me to explore. I regret coming out sometimes, but not as much as I regretted keeping it a secret.

11. What are you scared of?

Past: Mami. I know ojos verdes tells her everything. Even the things I told her were secret. I know mom knows my secrets and my lies and the fact que yo ya no voy a la terapeuta. Ya sabe que mi novia es puta, que yo soy puta. Mi mami sabe que no creo en ella.

Present: I'm scared of paying rent sometimes. I'm still scared of mami. I'm scared of the people I help finding out I'm a lesbian. I'm scared of my high school reunion in thirteen years. I'm scared of figuring out my contentness is a lie to myself and I'm scared for me depression coming back.

12. Who are you really?

Past: Yo soy Magdalena Castillo. Yo soy amante, yo soy envidiosa, y chiquitita. I am the one that tries too much and knows not enough. I am the one that climbs mountains in pain to lift up mi familia, to distance myself from el pasado. I am the one that suffers in silence, a curse all women must bear. I am still learning to find love in my brown skin.

Present: My answer is still the same.

Hometown First Love

I want to write more poems but I'm tired of writing them about you,
I want to write about sunrises, but I picture a sunset over the lake by your side,
I want to write about the last time I laughed so hard my breath escaped me,
But you were my date to the theater when I did,
I want to tell you I cut my hair as a way to get rid of you,
You always told me pretty girls wore sensible clothing,
That girls only looked pretty if they had long hair and only ever had minimal makeup on,
I'm tired of doing things because of you, either against your opinions or for them,
Every time I think I wrote you out of my system
I find another piece of you still nesting in the corner of my heart,
I can smile at a love song on the radio then feel completely empty because you're the memory
 embedded into it,
I want to get rid of you,
 I know this poem won't reach you,
I'm not speaking to you, I'm speaking for myself,
I'm saying these words because of tired of holding them in,
I don't need you to understand my actions
and I'm trying to stop caring for yours,
I'm writing because it's the only way I can slowly expel you from my system.
it's a painful process but I'm holding on to the hope that one day I will be better off than when I
 was with you,
I love you,
But the timing was never right,

Our opinions were the essence of us, and our love was not stronger than our beliefs.

Nuestros transgresores

All that seemed to capture Alonso's attention under the cover of darkness was the *banda* music playing his car, silencing the rustling of blue-green leaves and dried grass bellowing in the breeze outside. He had just parked, car and headlights off, facing Roma's City Hall. *Casa Del Rio*, an intimate party salon, was to the right of the building, bright orange and with an intricate metal fence design. Though it was only ten o'clock, Alonso could already briefly see the traffic on the bridge, but not enough to see which way the traffic was headed: leaving the U.S. or entering it. He checked his phone for the third time and reread the text message his father sent him over lunch; bullet-pointed instructions.

His presence was unmistakable as he was in the only vehicle in the lot. It didn't help that he was right under the burnt-out lamp post, either. A Border Patrol truck was stationed around the corner, closer to the bridge on the steep hilled road. Other troopers were walking up and down the American edge of the river. The majority of them were lingering at the Port of Entry, checking individuals' for proper documentation while crossing back to Roma from *Ciudad Miguel Alemán* and for any illegal substances that could not be brought over from Mexico, like avocados with their seeds still inside.

After a deep sigh, Alonso opened the car door, placing one foot outside. The cool air ran outwards while the humid heat met his face, fogging his glasses. The arid jungle was to Alonso's right. And behind the trees and overgrown weeds was a sealed off staircase leading down to a narrow dirt road that separated Alonso from the guarded river which the moonlight flickered off of.

It was the summer before Alonso's sophomore year in college and instead of being at pool parties, or any kind of party, he was filling in for his dad who'd gotten sick earlier last week. It was Alonso's first time working alone and was scared of troopers questioning him being there. He knew his job wasn't complex, but he knew the risks associated with it. He shifted his full weight to the grounded leg, lifting himself from the driver's seat, and softly closing the door behind him. With the river to his back, he looked ahead to the church, Our Lady of Refuge.

Since this area of town wasn't highly populated, he had minimal fear of walking in the center of the road. His walk had been mastered mid-high school, suave. He looked at the Manuel Guerra Building to his left, its pink paint chipping, leaving the sandstone to turn into powder. The window blinds were falling and crooked, the glass was shattered, and a tree seemed to be growing between the cracks of the sidewalk. The Roma's Bluffs and Birding Center across the street was in highly better condition. He remembered volunteering during high school, both on the exterior such as pulling weeds from the garden out back and inside helping new residents learn English. He tugged lightly on the side door leading to the small amphitheater, hoping not to cause any squeaking, but with no luck. Lock rusted. He could, however, still see some of the flowering plants through the slits of the wooden boards and smiled.

It was good being home, and it was nice seeing childhood hangouts and their memories. Alonso liked the walk up to the church. The darkness comforted him. He saw the now closed off building that was once a hospital, its walls also deteriorating. The church was now before him. He moved up eleven steps, found a small key in the rose bush, as per the directions in his father's text, and unlocked the door. His footwork echoed once inside as he propped the door open.

It was now ten thirty-two. He could now only wait; whether it be minutes or hours, he had only time to wait.

At some point during the night, a group would swim across the Rio Bravo. They would be helped up the riverbank, then made to run up the nature trail staircase, rushed and invisible. They would have to run to the church in order to be able to plead asylum, to be untouchable. Alonso's job was to stand by and let as many individuals inside, but the rules were not to be broken. At the earliest sign of trouble, he was to lock the doors and not let anyone in. He'd have done it once before, working alongside his father. He hoped not to disappoint tonight.

Alonso sat on the steps feeling the sweat build on his forehead and under his arms and behind his knees. He looked at the sky and made a quick prayer before the tensions rose too high. All there was left to do was wait.

Bordertown Synopsis

When the sun goes down, all the small, little critters come out to play and feast on your skin. You either stay at home watching your younger cousins and their friends all playing violent video games or go out to your culture's grand and traditional way of a birthday party, surrounded by people and their heated bodies, swaying to *cumbias*, *corridos*, and *banda* music. The streets are always covered in a fine layer of dust and the vehicles behind you are stuck trying to see past your clouds of chaos. A pair of young graduates die in a car crash caused when they were too high to see past those clouds. The year was 2015 and my sister's boyfriend was friends with them. Only those closest to them remember their good qualities, everyone else glorifies some person they never met or bad mouths the long gone for ruining a front lawn, judging their 'bad decisions', not caring that they never had a chance to live.

Your *guelita* is always eating that pink sugar-coated sweet bread that your *tía* brings over from the other side of the border because your *guelo* isn't here anymore to walk her over the bridge to get some. And because the guilt of his death consumes her, she never stops eating those home baked sweets; her sugar rises, and her figure grows plumper and the disease your mother tried so hard for her not to get has finally won over. All those Easters and Christmases and Halloweens are in the past and you just want everyone to get better. You pray every night to a saint you don't really know that you believe in so that those monsters in your head won't ever rot you away like so many have before. You struggle with your mental health and you can't tell your favorite cousin in fear they might judge you due to cultural beliefs that depression and anxiety aren't real, and you just need to grow up.

You can see your old school mates become college students, go on to get their Masters, go on to become doctors; they come home for break and have stories to tell. It's glorious. They say that this place never changes. Some argue that it never evolves. Yet when you've been away for so long you don't know the little things that have changed over time. It may not be so noticeable to them that our small bordertown is a historical landmark and that those before us have uplifted us in order to pursue our dreams. We come from a unique background, straddling two borders, two cultural ideologies; slowly becoming Americanized in all the ways our parents vowed never to let us assimilate into a society that belittles our values, our traditions, our existence.

When you go to drop off your older sister for her first year of college someone calls your traditional breakfast tacos 'burritos' with a *gringa* accent and you can't help but laugh; then immediately regret. It's not their fault, they don't know any better. After all, they weren't raised by the magical delta. All you can do is pray for those that refer to melted cheese as *kay-so*. They want so badly to take your traditions and whitewash them, clean of your culture's impurities.

All the elderly around here respectfully mourns those who pass before their time and you watch them pray for the souls of so many under the shade of trees in their front lawns. The old men sit in highchairs and sleep with an old baseball cap that their nephews had bought for them while the wrinkle-faced women tend the weeds and pretty, potted plants. Even then, as you lie under that shade, the sun's heat waves are burning blisters onto your skin and you want to scream. You want to get out of your clothes, get out of your skin. Even in the winter the heat never stops, and you see social network statuses of some girl you went to high school with on a vacation to Hawaii. She can afford it because they have found oil in her father's land. She went to Baylor and is engaged to a white man.

You find out over summer break your first year of college that your childhood friend had an abortion and you're the fourth person to know. You hate yourself for not being able to physically be there for her during her struggle, having to hide it from the world. You can't let it get to you; you need to be strong for her. You need to remember the trust and love that bonds you. You must never put more value on the harder memories. Remember the days that you laughed even after you've broken their *ama's* best chair. Remember the friends that will throw a surprise party for your birthday two weeks late, make you climb the roof when they know you're scared of heights then you all watch the sun go down as it shines into your eyes realizing you have to seize the life before you.

Living in this border town is like being under that piercing sun. You want to leave; you need an escape. I've been wanting to run ever since I can remember, but the sun is burning the town's brand onto my back. I will carry these memories and experiences with me. I will always come home. Because I can walk to my front lawn and I can smell the jasmines that my mother took from her childhood home and carried them to my room to reduce my stress levels. I can walk down my street and see the times I sold Girl Scout cookies; Samoas, the ones that they changed the name to 'Caramel Delights.' I can hear my grandma saying *Que Dios te bendiga* instead of Goodbye. I can feel the *maza* warm in my hand was I stand around a crowded table making tamales for Christmas. I can taste them, too.

I can go into my room knowing that it's small and cramped and that maybe it gets too cold for my taste during the winter. But my home soothes the ache and pain of the mistreatment and hardships, struggles and hypocrisy that comes with this town that make this the place I would never change.