

“This is our home!” Chicana Oral Histories: (Story)Telling Life, Love and Identity in the
Midwest

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Dedication

For all Chicana storytellers who make this work possible, who bravely speak their lives
and especially mi mamá – la estrella which guides me, Estellita.

and

For my Aunt Cindy (1958-2009) whose stories continue to live in my heart.

Abstract

Tracing the lives of eight Midwestern Mexican American women, my dissertation interrogates the role of stories and storytelling in familial relationships and community building. I engage with Chicana feminist understandings of identity through these Midwestern Chicanas' stories of growing up in the Midwest (in the 60s and 70s) and their lives as women – while paying particular attention to the intersectional categories of gender, race, class and sexuality. Chapter One situates a “mestiza methodology” and the process of collecting oral histories with three women who are immediately related to me and five who are not. My research approach infuses and shapes the theory through which I write and interpret lives. It blurs the boundaries between autoethnography, oral history, testimonio, and storytelling in order to uncover the moments when women's words become empowered messages for other Chicana/os. Weaving in women's stories, Chapter Two looks closely at Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the borderlands (as an in-between space of creative strategies for survival and affirmation) in relation to Midwestern Mexican American woman's experiences. By situating Anzaldúa's metaphorical borderlands/la frontera in the Midwest (Kansas and Minnesota), I argue that while the physical border may be miles away the cultural clashes and borders that exist due to isolation, racism, and initially small communities of color have nevertheless mapped the borderland onto Chicanas in the Midwest. In imagining Anzaldúa's framework of la frontera as a dynamic space of transition and creation within the geography of the Midwest we see how Mexican American identities made in this context are full of opportunities for re-envisioning politicized identities (mestiza consciousness)

through the firm planting of roots, self-definition, and claiming an alienating space as home. Chapter Three explores the themes of family that emerge out of these women's testimonies. I read their commitment to family in the stories they tell about their lives as indicative of needing to find places where they can fully be themselves, even if the family can sometimes be a site of pain. This pain and a need for family become mutually constituted for some women in this context. I also link the family to the messages that these women receive about sexuality under the theoretical framing of "silence" around sexual issues. Through uncovering the complicated understandings of silence in relation to Chicana sexuality I explore how these women often resist the gendered roles they might feel constrained by in order to move the reader to think about their actions as underground feminist acts. Lastly, the conclusion synthesizes these eight Midwestern Chicana voices around the theme of storytelling. It reiterates the importance and value of the family and how storytelling has created community and served as a means to pass on important cultural knowledge. In thinking about the bonds that women specifically build through storytelling I characterize the sharing of stories for these greater purposes as *actos de amor*, (acts of love). I assert that through dissolving the strict borders between ethnography and oral history, or *testimonio* and storytelling we can write Midwestern Chicanas into larger histories and explore alternative meanings of feminist identities in these geographic places far from the U.S./Mexico border.

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PROLOGUE

KNOWING MYSELF SO AS TO KNOW OTHERS: A CHICANA JOURNEY

When I reflect on the ways I came into Chicana consciousness I must admit, my mother's brown, round face is the first thing that comes to my mind. Though she is of Mexican descent and was born in the U.S., she does not claim to be Chicana. Yet she and the other women in my family inadvertently taught me what it means to be Chicana. I grew up knowing the strength of *mujeres*, knowing the bond that sisters share as deep, meaningful connections. I saw my aunts and mother cry and laugh together; I felt the calm that washed over my *mama* after the long journey from New Mexico to Kansas when she was in the presence of her sisters and her *mama*. I always know my *mama*, *anties*, and *abuela* in their skins, not just in the abstract sense of values that they share about the meaning of being hard workers, good people, and above all else honoring *familia*. But it is also in their bodies where I find the warmth of joyous hugs of reunion and respect as tears fall from damp, tired eyes. It is in the comfortable solace of a hand squeezing mine, and the chorus of cackling laughter after a shared inside joke – these moments speak to my own understandings of my Chicana identity that I cannot and will not extract from how I think of my own identity.

Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzladúa write, “A theory of the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (2003, p. 21). My story is connected to the body I claim as my own and travels with me in the many manifestations of home that I create and sustain. These aspects – body, mind, longings, desires – all form to allow my distinct viewpoint to emerge, not in the abstract, but firmly

rooted by my light brown feet, traveling to my mind and exiting through the quick keystrokes of purposeful fingers. I recognize that my theorizing about the world is always in relation to my memory of events, and cannot help but be shaped by my lived experiences and the memories I hold within me on the way to the page. My truth is *my* truth, but truth could differ significantly if the perspective emerged from someone else who also shares the experience or memory. If they have come to know a truth, I accept their truth may differ from mine, but I do not believe that my truth or any one else's truth should be considered *the* truth. Like bell hooks ponders her understanding of "truth" when presented with the image of her father in a family photograph, I too make meaning from the relationship that exists between me and the subjects of my analysis. She writes, "Although my sisters and I look at this snapshot and see the same man, we do not see him in the same way. Our 'reading' and experience of this image is shaped by our relationship to him, to the world of childhood and the images that make our life what it is now" (hooks, 2003, p. 388). I privilege my viewpoint here as I share my autoethnographic reflection on how I have come to embrace a Chicana feminist consciousness, and how I come to this research project.

I was born in a small college town in Manhattan, Kansas. My white father was earning his Master's Degree in Engineering while my brown mama worked by day as the office assistant in the Engineering Department and by night at Godfather's Pizza. Perhaps this is why I have always love cheese covered bread and why I have always been cognizant of the ways class, race, and gender overlap and intersect. My brown mama did not earn a college degree; she worked at the college instead. As I grew up, she would often reflect on how important education is to one's own success. I would hear her say,

“Nobody ever told me I was smart.” My adolescent mind thought that surely this meant someone had told my white father he was smart. These class, race, and gender realities played out on the stage of our daily lives in our relationships with one another, in our home, workplaces, and schools. Following the completion of his degree, my father accepted a job at a National Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At the young age of two, my view of the world changed from muggy summers and golden fields of wheat, to snow-peaked mountains, dry desert air, cacti, and pink sunsets.

When I was ten years of age, my mother and father informed my brother and I that we were going to be getting another sibling. At the restaurant they had taken us to, I remember thinking to myself, ok, another sibling, maybe I’ll get a sister, I’ll pray for that, surely I had earned that. I had after all, completed my first communion a couple years back and was forced to go to catechism classes after school in preparation for my future confirmation. I was a good Catholic girl; I eagerly soaked up the opportunities to excel in the classroom, and gaining the admiration of teachers was always high on my priority list. God clearly agreed and rewarded me with not just one little sister, but a second one a year later. With the answers to my prayers, my sisters’ arrival to our family unit signaled new understandings of what my role in the family would be. This (being the eldest daughter) coupled with my increasing distaste for the many inequalities that I witnessed in the church were the building blocks to my feminist beliefs.

As the eldest daughter, I found school and places like the public library to be my new refuges. At home I was often in charge of dealing with taking care of my younger sisters as soon as I came home from school. Of course there was time for me to complete my homework, but in this part of my life I remember learning to cook, feed, and clothe

babies, then toddlers and then children with separate personalities and needs. I remember the resentment that bubbled from within me for having to babysit my sisters while my parents went to support my brother's soccer talents. I learned what it felt like and meant to be responsible to others, my sisters at home and my brother at school. It hurt me to not be able to spend the night at my friends' houses or to go to the mall for the afternoon because I had to take care of my sisters. I loved them dearly but I didn't understand why it seemed like I was the only one forced to care for them. My brother learned how to mow the lawn while I learned how to swaddle babies. I learned if they got hurt or into trouble it was my responsibility to lead them down the right path. I found safety in school, a retreat from chaos at home, largely stemming from (what I can only guess upon current reflection) was my mother's depression and general sense of unhappiness with her life. Again, this is my truth, what I saw and felt in my adolescent and teenage years. This is why I turned to books and sought whatever validation I could from teachers and volunteer Catholicism teachers who educated me on Catholic beliefs. This is why I often found myself looking at the world around me, wondering what life might be like, if I was not me. I looked for ways to confront the feeling as though I only had one option – to be a “good” girl, to please my parents, which meant doing whatever they said and accepting that as my only “choice,” while all the while never really challenging their authority, instead I was that “good girl.”

I thought maybe I'd be a nun, only to quickly disregard that thought when boys started paying attention to me and I was having “inappropriate” thoughts about my girlfriends. I thought, maybe school and studying was the way out. Despite my penchant for perfectionism, I always suspected my family did not truly believe me to be smart, I

was always the one who worked extra hard to get ahead. My brother was in the Gifted Program, I was told I was not “creative enough” after failing the test twice to get in. I heard my parents always boast about how hard I always worked and how serious I was about school, this would have been great in its own right but then I heard them say, “If only your brother worked as hard, he would be amazing.” His natural talents always outweighed my hardest work. However, in fifth grade shortly after the birth of my sisters, an amazing twist of fate allowed me the opportunity to try out for a prestigious private school in Albuquerque. My mother thought it would be unfair if they only allowed my gifted brother a chance to attend the best school in the city, so despite not knowing how they would be able to afford two private school tuitions my mother drove me to Albuquerque Academy where I took tests, completed tours and interviews, and ended up being accepted into a class of 128 students. This academic trajectory taught me many valuable life lessons. Among these are:

1. Being the first in the family has its advantages too, now everyone who came behind me had to live up to my standards – this made having to be responsible for my siblings much easier to bear, for at least I was in control of forging my own path.
2. That I am intelligent in my own right, despite often feeling as though I never measured up.
3. The importance of questioning the world around you, here I learned about politics and came into a new understanding of my role in the world as one where I wanted to make change for the better, as opposed to seeking to hold wealth away from those who do not “deserve” it. (Ideas, which were often counter to my father’s own vocal political views.)
4. That attending a private school afforded me many privileges that I recognize now created avenues for my eventual academic success. (This opportunity to go to a college preparatory school enabled me to succeed in college and then later, graduate school. A venture that many Chicana/o-Latina/os are not afforded.)

These new found beliefs sponsored by my “liberal” institution countered those that I often heard at home, causing the first ripples of difference between myself and my

parents. With the confidence of being told by my teachers that I was a capable and intelligent student I began to challenge the “good girl” image I had once been so eager to uphold. While this may seem contradictory, the confidence I gained as a student/scholar enabled me to present articulate critiques of various oppressions, and allowed me a voice within my family to begin to stand up for what I felt was right.

At eighteen, as a senior in high school, the Academy encouraged us all to explore future career aspirations by completing a nine-month long senior project. Some of my classmates chose to spend this time learning about a particular business venture, some learned about politics by working with local political mentors, some learned how to make pasta from scratch; I chose to work with the Albuquerque Rape Crisis Center. I honestly cannot remember how I came to this project, but I began working closely with their Outreach Coordinator, Andrea Quijada, a Chicana femme lesbian, who became a mentor and friend to me. We joked that she was my older sister when we met, and I consider her such now, she was the first Chicana who overtly and explicitly told me that I could be anyone I wanted to be. Her support was key to my emerging Chicana consciousness. Before I knew it I was learning how to run consciousness-raising circles. I was facilitating discussions on gender roles and expectations to high school and middle school students. I was running workshops on how to prevent date and acquaintance rape, and I was lecturing on the distinctions between gender, sex, and sexuality. An entire world opened up to me in those nine months, so much so that my father made vocal at every chance, his distaste for my newfound “liberal” views.

Yet, for me, this was just the beginning of a shifting consciousness. I have to thank and honor another one of my Chicana mentors, Edén Torres, for making this link

explicit for me. This part of my story is important because it demonstrates a dynamic and ongoing process of coming into critical consciousness. It signifies my continual learning about my own identity, as a Chicana lesbiana, or a racialized, gendered and sexed subject, and the perpetual confrontations with the patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist, homophobic oppression (that was often embodied within my own father). With the recognition of my father's role in this oppression I do not mean to imply that he is a horrible man, I know he loves me in his own way in spite of our differences (political, positional, or otherwise). But this is not to say that this oppression did not touch me, because it clearly has. My hurt has undergone a metamorphosis, it no longer can live solely within me, but instead has transformed into the desire and deep need to work toward eradicating these gender, race, sexual, and class inequalities. And so, I not only see this oppression as pain, but I also try to glean some positive aspects, without it, I may not have these same investments.

Throughout these years my family would often travel by car a long eleven-hour journey from Albuquerque to Wichita, Kansas to the obligatory quick visit with my paternal grandparents and then on to Emporia, Kansas where I rushed to the warm embraces of my Aunt Lilly, mi madrina, to sit in awe of my abuelita's comida, and her magic in the kitchen. In the earlier years we would make this trek three or four times a year, knowing that the impetus would have been my mother missing her familia (almost all of whom lived in Kansas). My dad's small family was nothing like the bonds I witnessed between my mothers' warm family so it's no wonder she missed them. Grandma and Grandpa Creel were always the bookend visits, stopping there first and last on our way into and out of Kansas. This told us that the main event was seeing my

mama's family. As we all got older, we began forgoing the winter trip, instead traveling by car for one hot, humid Kansas summer week. It was these visits that ultimately helped me decide my college future. I wanted the opportunity to know my familia and because my family could not afford to send me to my number one choice (Wellesley) I attended the University of Kansas where I got my Bachelor's Degree in psychology and women's studies.

I think about the path that got me to this point and I often chuckle. I had already begun to embrace my feminist consciousness before I left for college, and by delving into women's studies classes I often felt something that I had not yet felt in my life while in school – exhilaration, excitement, a rush in asserting my own views – something more than just a refuge. Perhaps this had something to do with the way my father viewed feminism, as something elective, or supposedly not holding much “value” in terms of real-life applicability. Maybe it had something to do with my emerging lesbian identity. As the good daughter I decided I would only minor in women's studies, thinking I could satisfy both myself and my father's ideas about what might set me up for future economic success. But as I came to realize that my life was *my* life I openly embraced my love for the discipline by boldly majoring in women's studies (alongside psychology) and by seeking ways to carve out my own experience as a Chicana within it. I know it was then that I started to find Chicana feminists in the library stacks. I began to build upon my experiential knowledge of being a Mexican American woman growing up in Albuquerque and seeking to find some sense of community in my Midwest college town of Lawrence, Kansas. While I was closer to my Mexican American family in Kansas, Lawrence, where I spent most of my time, was (and still is) a much whiter space than

Albuquerque. Simply seeing the cover of Emma Pérez' *The Decolonial Imaginary* made me feel as if I had found some community that only I recognized at my historically white institution. The pieces of the puzzle about why my life was the way that it was began to fall into place. I read Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* and thought that if she had a white parent and could claim a Chicana identity, then I could too. I saw her pain of being a girl-child serving the needs of her brother as my pain. I understood what she meant by living a theory of the flesh. Moments of my life flashed before my eyes when I experienced pain, isolation, hurt, and joy and I connected these moments with Chicanas who lived similar experiences. I gained the language to articulate these feelings tied to my experience of walking in the world as a Chicana. I was primed and ready to devour texts by Chicanas since there were no Chicana feminists in the women's studies department (or the institution) I had to make my way through these revelations alone, seeking out what it meant to be Chicana through my own journey.

I share a piece of my story to illuminate why I feel it is necessary to insert my life and experiences within this writing project in order to better understand other women's stories. As I detail in Chapter One, my methodological approach includes the incorporation of my story alongside other women's stories. My life experiences shape the outlook I have on issues related to my Chicana identity. To simply ask the reader to engage in these intimate encounters between women without knowing where I come from is both irresponsible and does not allow for a full analysis of how I listen, hear, and interpret their stories. Just as I have shared that finding Cherríe Moraga's book on the library shelf allowed me to finally identify myself in a book, I hope that sharing my story about not quite feeling as though I fit in will also perhaps be a similar "something" that

another Chicana might discover, allowing her to see herself reflected back in the pages of a book one day. I choose to boldly embrace this journey within the context of the academy to further etch out places for Chicana epistemologies, to speak back against the impetus to erase or ignore our voices, and to challenge the misguided belief that racism and sexism no longer exist. My story, the stories of Chicanas, and women of color generally, deserve a space within the academy to be heard and seen as valued sites of knowledge.

I AM THE STORY PART I

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT STORIES

This is a story about stories. This is a story about my story and the stories of many other women who have come before me and who will come behind me. This is a story about the stories mothers tell to their daughters in hopes that they will learn their own lessons about their lives. This is a story of the ways daughters tell stories about their lives in hopes that their mothers and future “daughters” may come to know them and their truths.

When I was a young girl, my mother would often tell me stories about her childhood late into the evening as my father cleaned up the kitchen after a spaghetti meal. Like La Virgen who watches over her children with clasped hands, these stories surrounded me in a protective aura. These stories gave me validation for my own experiences; they showed me that it was okay to be who I was. From these stories I learned that living as a half brown, half white mestiza in Albuquerque was nothing compared to growing up all brown in a small, Kansas town.

As I grew up I realized that these stories had protected me and had become integrated into my own stories. A story within a story. A story that began through my mother’s story and continues in my own story. My story cannot exist without hers. Our lives are intertwined, our stories, shared.

As I have collected stories from other women about their lives and their mothers’ lives I have come to appreciate these stories even more. Not to suggest that there are no differences that exist within women’s stories, but rather to allude to the similarities that are much more striking. I heard the connections when women were telling their own stories that sounded so much like my mother’s, my aunt’s, other mujeres, my own. I shook my head imagining how it must have felt to be in their shoes at that exact moment and understood how it must have felt to live with the pain that they faced through racism, sexism, homophobia, classism. To be touched by inequality and to live through it takes strength and courage. This is what I hear in these women’s stories. I have heard this through my mother’s stories, which are then often revealed through my stories about those stories.

I do not wish to romanticize the idea that all Chicanas in the Midwest are the same, nor should you think that because our paths intertwine that there are no differences. These stories are also not the first stories to be heard on Chicana life in the Midwest, nor should they be considered the last. Rather, this collection of stories is special because their stories have been woven together to highlight common struggles and yet these stories also demonstrate the ways the individual storyteller deals with hardships, pains, and joy in different and unique ways. And so, I invite you to try to hear these women’s words as they tell their own stories of individual struggles, heartaches, and successes while trying to find the ways that they are also invariably related to one another. Let this serve as a guide toward challenging just a bit of what we do and do not know about Chicana experiences in the Midwest.

INTRODUCTION

SOWING SEEDS FOR FUTURE “FIELDS”: HABLANDO IN ELEVATORS AND OTHER MIDWESTERN CHICANA FEMINIST VALUES

“Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded.” –Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*

My mother was born on February 22, 1958 in Phoenix, Arizona a birth date shared with none other than George Washington. And while George Washington’s life and contributions to what we know of the democratic dream have been chronicled by countless biographers and scholars, Estella Falcon’s birth and life has shared little in that legacy. Like far too many Mexican American women, her life story has so far gone unnoticed in the realm of the written word. Some might say it is irresponsible to compare her life to one of the “founders” of this nation, but I juxtapose her life in relation to George Washington not only because of their shared birthdays. I mostly do it to situate her life (and other Chicanas’ lives) as important even if popular history might argue otherwise. The idea in the value of some life stories over others or the endless chronicling of the lives of “great men” compels my commitment to lauding the power and necessity for feminist oral history research and this project.

In the epigraph above, Alice Walker discusses the urgency that she feels in telling her mother’s stories. She goes on to share that this is probably why she often writes characters that are so much older than herself, that they are attempting to live out her mother’s stories on the page (Walker, 1984). I feel this urgency myself, and listening to my mother’s life history, recording and transcribing it make Walker’s words resonate with me even more. It is clear exactly how much I have to thank my own mother for the

way I tell stories and the reasons why I write. Our lives, voices, histories, identities, and dreams are intricately intertwined, like Walker notes it's not the absorption of the stories alone but how they hold such much more meaning within them. The inflection in my voice so often matches my mother's, when listening to her words I know exactly when she will take a breath or continue a sentence because of the many years I have been listening to her. My dissertation is in search of my mother's garden, in search of the roots that anchor valuable stories that assert Chicana presence in the Midwest.

Situating my Project within the Fields of Women's Studies and Chicana/o Studies

While the discipline of women's studies was built largely on the notion that "the personal is political" it has since moved away from engaging the personal as a political process in the ever-increasing professionalization of the field. With the incorporation of women's studies into the formal academy new pressures have emerged in terms of those within the discipline needing to fight to keep a feminist agenda within the context of the university. Where (at most institutions) there is (at least a sense of) pressure to get rid of disciplines like women's studies (through merging them with ethnic studies, or disbanding the departments), feminist scholars are put in the precarious position of continuously having to exert their relevancy on an institutional level. I interpret this exertion of relevancy as often situating the context of the field of women's studies within the academy alone with less emphasis on connections with feminist non-academic or activist communities – a move away from the initial investments of the institutionalization in the first place. The divide between theory and practice seems ever widening and those trying to uphold scholarship that focuses on both are often disciplined in various ways. I have felt this as someone who wants to engage in communities beyond

the academy, and see this as a constant struggle identitarian disciplines will continue to face in the current socio-political landscape.

This increased academization was not meant as a move away from the personal, so much as it was a move away from methods that did not have a place within the current neo-liberal construction of the university.¹ The dismissal of identity politics is the by-product of a focus on what has been constructed as “valid” sites of knowledge production that do not emerge out of personal identities and experiences as a basis for theorizing.² This research follows the work of Paula Moya, Chandra Mohanty and Linda Alcoff’s in providing an alternative way of thinking that disrupts the argument about identity as either an essentialized category or one that does not exist by framing identity within the context of realism. Moya writes, “realists argue, ‘the real world’ is causally relevant to

¹ By neo-liberal university I mean the way the university is based on a corporate model and has elected to base its survival on the negative aspects of neoliberal social relations – i.e. the increased “flexibility” of labor (the erosion of tenured professorships and investing in contingent faculty) to the competition model where some disciplines deserve and earn their spot within the money-making venture that is the academy while others (like Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies) continue to find themselves on the margins. I have often imagined the academy as a place that is about educating students. While this may never have been the case I can say that today’s selling of a particular type of educational experience, one where the “bottom line” (who can fill seats, and effectively save money in an economically precarious time) is met above priorities for providing students an education that is based on transformative notions of positive social change, equal access for all, and the necessity for developing critical thinking skills is not the vision I share for the academy. For more on a third world feminist critique of the neo-liberal university see Chandra Mohanty’s chapter “Privatized Citizenship, Corporate Academies, and Feminist Projects” in *Feminism without Borders* (2003).

² Paula Moya outlines the trouble that emerges out of poststructuralist, and postmodernist thinking in that scholars have responded that identity is either an essentialized category or an unknowable subject. In the Introduction to the edited anthology, *Reclaiming Identity* she states that, “a theory of identity is inadequate unless it allows a social theorist to analyze the epistemic status and political salience of any given identity and provides her with the resources to ascertain and evaluate the possibilities and limits of different identities. Neither “essentialist” nor “postmodernist” theories of identity can do this” (2000, p. 7). The saliency of politicized identity or identities that are a source for political organizing is highlighted throughout this volume as the contributors seek to create, “a richly elaborated alternative theoretical framework that can transcend [the binary between essentialist and postmodernist approaches to identity] (2000, p. 11). It is, of course, exactly the *political* utility of identities that is so often contested by those who seek to discredit realist theories on identity. But this cannot be done because identities cannot be studied by social theorists using quantitative or “empirical” methods. They are subjective and slippery and thus uncontrollable by an oppressive system. In my study I seek to draw out these slippery moments for understanding gender, race, sexuality, and class intersectional identities of Chicanas in the Midwest in hopes to create dynamic understandings of these women’s identities while simultaneously grounding them within the reality of their lived experiences.

our epistemic endeavors, since it shapes and limits our knowledge of what is around us” (2000, 12). Further, Linda Alcoff writes that her goal in, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*,

...is to elaborate identity as a piece of our social ontology whose significance is still under-emphasized in most social theory, but I want to underscore the fact that I appreciate and have in fact some direct acquaintance with the contextual nature and fluidity of identity as well as the extent to which identity ascriptions can be oppressive. My attempt to develop an ontology of identity is not meant to reify identities as unchanging absolutes but to understand their historical and contextual nature, and through this, to come to terms with their significance in our lives. (Alcoff, 2006, p. ix)

It is this trajectory that I share with scholars who are committed to engaging with notions of identity and with the profound ways that these identities continue to retain and hold meaning for so many women of color, including myself, and the Chicanas highlighted in this study.

With the U.S. election of the first African American president in 2008 many have tried to argue that we now live in a “post-racial,” or a “post-identity” society. However, as a woman of color feminist, I know this is not the case; we clearly live in a society that is still very much invested in discourses on race in every area of society. The fact that Arizona succeeded in passing SB 1070 the “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act” which is considered the broadest and strictest “anti-illegal”³

³ I use “anti-illegal” in quotes here to signify the popular language used around Mexican immigration and the framing of people who cross the border as largely “illegal” or through naming them as “illegals.” As a Chicana, I am opposed to this type of language because I am aware of the dehumanizing effects such language carries, as well as the ramifications of continued use of language that stigmatizes certain people as

immigration measure in the U.S. in recent history in April of 2010 proves exactly how tenuous our status and safety as people of color are in this supposedly “post-racial” state.⁴ I am convinced that only by reflecting on one’s own positionality in the world and then constantly interrogating that position in relation to others can true changes can be made in the ways that we, as feminists and scholars of color, continue to theorize about revolutionary racial and intersectional (gender, race, class, sexuality etc.) identities. This is also the only way of resisting the neo-liberal university, one that so often seems willing to dismiss theories of education as transformative for educational models that will raise the most money for the institution. Instead, we can imagine and fulfill an academy that can only exist with the recognition that these fields are just as integral to the mission of the academy as are the sciences, business, law, or technologies.

Thinking about positionality however, is also something that needs to be qualified. Many Women’s or Gender Studies and Chicana/o Studies introductory courses focus on the role of understanding one’s own positionality within the constructs of privilege, power, and oppression. However, just as I believe this turn away from identity politics and/or personal experience implies a privilege in being able to do this, so too do those who interrogate their positionality on a superficial level enact privileged positions.

Those who are privileged and hold power however, often shut off (or take advantage of)

violence against these communities. Otto Santa Ana makes this exceptionally clear in his book, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary Public Discourse* (2002).

⁴ The act makes it a crime for any undocumented “alien” to be in Arizona without carrying proper documentation of legal immigration status and obligates Arizona police to determine a person’s immigration status if there is reasonable cause to do so. Many Chicana/os, and Mexican-origin people have protested SB 1070 citing that this is sanctioned racial profiling, unconstitutional, and that there is no way to tell who is or is not in the state as undocumented, but rather police must rely on assuming whether a person fits the assumption of what an “illegal immigrant” (the language often provoked by supporters of the bill) looks like. It has also been criticized because theoretically all Arizonians would be required to have proper documentation with them at all times, but in reality the law is intended as surveillance of a particular type of “illegal immigrant” – Mexicans. For a state that has centuries of Mexican-origin people living on its land (and was once part of Mexico) I find it difficult to understand how this could be interpreted as anything other than an attack on Mexican-origin peoples.

their understanding of their own positionality when it is beneficial to claim allegiance to those in power. While women of color or people with queer sexualities who constantly face racism, sexism, classism and homophobia daily (inside and beyond the academy) cannot and should not shut the personal “off.” And yet, women of color still need the space to share, theorize, and rework the personal on their own terms as opposed to those often set by liberal academic or feminist practices that do not account for this need. Critical consciousness often emerges from confronting the many – small/large, subtle/explicit, or individual/institutional – forms of oppression women of color face daily. The constant reminders of our positionalities by those who are privileged does not allow for the same ease of movement away from identity and/or personal experiences.

It is the understanding of our identity as different than those in power that enables (queer) women of color⁵ to build powerful theory out of painful life experiences.⁶ In this way, my research illuminates the complicated relationships Mexican American women have to their own ideas about identity and the experiences that they live daily. It is a move toward a research paradigm that resists the split between theory and method, one that is about truly understanding our place in the larger context of systemic oppressions.

⁵ By (queer) women of color I mean to include both queer women of color alongside heterosexual women of color as a group that often shares similar political investments. In doing this, I do not mean to imply that these political investments are always the same or that women of color who are also queer do not face oppression based on their sexual identities, but as a queer woman of color myself I require and depend upon the support of both queer and hetero women of color allies in order to survive the many forms of oppression I, and others, face.

⁶ Ruben Salazar, noted Chicano journalist killed in the “riots” following the Chicano Moratorium, said “A Chicano is an individual with a non-white view of himself.” Aside from the patriarchal language of the time, Chicanas know that Salazar was talking about more an ideology. The Chicana theorists who would later speak and write about concepts like mestiza consciousness, decolonial imaginary, oppositional consciousness, nepantla states, etc. were all voicing different versions of this identity as one in opposition to white supremacist, heteronormative, capitalist, patriarchal powers. Chicano and later Chicana/o identity was not just an essentializing gesture toward culture, ethnicity or language or history or even experience. Chicana/o identity is a politically savvy, strategic disidentification with those in power. I must acknowledge Edén Torres’ thoughts in helping me to further clarify my point here.

Acknowledging we can never “turn it off” is carved out in the interpretation of the oral histories I have collected here.

The mixing of methods that I purposefully engage with in this project includes: oral history, testimonio, storytelling, (auto)ethnography, field research, and the critical processes of bringing together Chicana feminist theory with the lived practices that emerge out of the eight oral histories I have collected. This multi-method approach engages in the ongoing scholarly and political project of contesting the neo-liberal university – one in which, with the increased professionalization of fields such as women’s studies, often calls for “authentic scholarship” to be conducted with “traditional” methods such as ethnography, participant observation and interviews. Much like many aspects of my own identity I do not wish to label my project by simply stating that I only used oral history as the methodology for this research. The stories I collected are so much more than that. My goal is not to disembodiment these women’s stories from their lives as Chicanas in an attempt to theorize something about identity, but instead to continue to provide contextualization as I weave in and out of their voices, stories, and re-tellings of their embodied experiences. In Chapter One I further explore my methodological groundings.

In his ground-breaking text *Culture and Truth* (1993), Renato Rosaldo aptly discusses the turn away from the “old” ways of conducting anthropological research such as “going native” and the traditional methods associated with ethnography and notes the change in the tide to challenge these methodological imperatives. He states, “The truth of objectivism—absolute, universal and timeless—has lost its monopoly status. It now competes, on more nearly equal terms with the truths of case studies that are embedded in

local contexts, shaped by local interests, and colored by local perceptions” (1993, p. 21). This is a welcome change that has created scholarly space and academic validity for a project such as mine. Instead of the academic who can “objectively” step back from her research “subjects” and analyze connections through similarities or differences, I clearly cannot separate myself from my material; in fact connecting myself to the material seems to be the only way I know how to theorize the world around me. This is what happens when the subaltern speaks.

One example of this type of work that allows for the personal to be interjected alongside ethnographic work is provided in feminist scholar, Margery Wolf’s book, *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility* (1992). In it she provides three different tales of her fieldwork research around the same event – a woman who has a mental breakdown in a little village of Peihotien (a rural village in Taiwan) thirty years prior. The first is a fictional account of the event, the second is her fieldnotes, and the third is the academic publication that is “written in a style acceptable to referees chosen by the “American Ethnologist” (Wolf, 1992, p. 7). Each account comes to a different understanding of the event. I choose this example to demonstrate the multiplicities in understanding the same event that emerge from Wolf’s various writing styles and investments. In the book she, as the scholar, reflects on each of the different writings by positioning herself within the different manifestations of the scholarship she produces. I am inspired by this conscientious level of reflection while also admitting to do that alongside my research as opposed to before or after my analysis in order to trouble the binary between theory/reflection in order to better emulate a praxis that is

made up of theory, practice, and reflection co-constitutively (Freire, 2000; Raimist, 2010).⁷

I confront objectivity as a false premise in my research because when working with oral histories I acknowledge there can never be an objective truth, and my desire to work with these oral histories as a source is derived not from wanting to find the truth, but rather to offer an alternative understanding of what Midwestern geographies look like by inserting these women's stories into the cultural and historical landscape. This is a process that requires the scholar to constantly reflect upon one's own investments/positionality throughout writing any analysis of the oral history archive. I also demonstrate that objectivity is a false premise first by simultaneously inserting myself as a central aspect to my own theorizing about Chicana identity and experience in the Midwest. In other words, I do not write in the abstract but often incorporate my experiences alongside the voices of the women I interviewed. Secondly, by pushing the boundaries of the academic model for research through the repositioning of family research as a valuable site for scholarly inquiry. In using the family as one site of knowledge alongside other sites I reposition the political possibilities held within doing this type of work. My commitment as a Chicana feminist pushes against the boundaries between my self and the subjects of my research, which cannot be collapsed with how white feminists have complicated research with family histories in the past. Instead, my repositioning pushes beyond a simple reclaiming of family history, to one that is fraught with complexities and the radical potential of a move away from individual ways of

⁷ Two Chicana scholars who also engage with this more holistic and engaged integration of the personal along side scholarship in critical reflection are: Patricia Zavella's study on Chicana cannery workers in California (1987) and Martha Menchaca's ethnographic history of her own community in Santa Paula, California (1995).

knowing to the many directions of knowledge that flow between and among women in my family to honor the stories of the past and to understand relationships between myself and others. Finally, through finding ways to discuss individual oral histories in collective or communal ways I challenge the notion of objectivity by writing about these stories in ways that require my admission to my role in what I deem important and find interesting. In this project, I do this type of framing in hopes of expanding the boundaries of what is seen as research in the context of the neo-liberal university. I believe my project is about the “personal as political” and in this case, it is not just my personal experiences that shape political understandings of identity but also the women of my family and the lives of other Chicanas who also uphold this investment.

For example, due to constraints (based on what is perceived to be valid knowledge production within the academy) that research projects such as mine often face, this project was almost stopped before it began. In the spring of 2009 after struggling with developing a “more acceptable” writing project on migrant farmworkers in the Midwest for my dissertation work, I thought about the research that I really wanted to do; an in-depth set of interviews with the women of my family to explore the issues of gender, sexuality, race, and class for Mexican American women in the Midwest. When I first began thinking about the realities of actually undertaking this project, I pitched the idea to my committee members. Although my advisor Edén Torres was extremely supportive, changing my dissertation topic was not a decision that I approached lightly. One of my committee members initially told me that this was a “post-tenure” type research project, which I interpreted as she thought it would be unwise to try to do such a personal (read something that could be labeled non-academic) project without the safety

net of having a tenured professor position. Despite this risk I forged ahead with the project because it was the project I felt simply had to be done, both for my own intellectual curiosity and to address what I see as visible gaps in Chicana feminist scholarship. However this was not the only small hurdle over which I had to jump in order to complete this project.

Two examples from my attempts to etch out a space for my project jump out at me on the ways that women of color epistemologies (and my particular project) have been devalued within this context. In the early part of 2009 before I began conducting my oral history research, I set out to make sure that I was in compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Minnesota. After contacting the IRB office via email to see if I would need to submit an application for review they informed me that would be necessary. My advisor and I filled out all of the required forms, took the tests that verified we knew what was and was not appropriate for human subject research and waited for the results. The email that accompanied their response was quite telling to me. It read –

Dear Ms. Creel,

The IRB received your application entitled “This is our Home! Chicana Oral Histories: (Story)Telling, Life, Love and Identity in the Midwest.” Upon review of your application the IRB determined these oral history activities do not meet the regulatory definition of research with human subjects and do not fall under the IRB’s purview. (i.e., The proposed activities are a) not systematic investigation and/or b) not designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge). (Personal Communication 2009)

Now, knowing that the IRB exists in order to prevent exploitation of human subjects I found it quite surprising in my working with what they deem a “minority” population (Mexican American women and the content of the interviews which may include sensitive material (like sexual histories and racial identity) that this was not actually under the IRB’s purview. While not being under their purview helped me in the construction of my research project, I was disturbed by the language that was used to determine my project’s eligibility to be monitored by the IRB – “the regulatory definition of research with human subjects,” that the oral history research and analysis of those oral histories would not be considered “a systematic investigation,” and/or my (non)-research is not “designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.” All three of these responses to the project indicate to me that when it comes to women of color ways of knowing the academy is not always capable of recognizing their worth. While I am privileged to do this project within the academy, I still feel the very real constraints that are placed on work that attempt to challenge what counts as “generalizable knowledge” within the institutional context.

The second example occurred in the summer of 2009 when I was one of two nominees from within my program to compete for a campus-wide dissertation fellowship – the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship (DDF). My project was not one of the fifteen chosen but the remarks on my proposal were sent to the Director of Graduate Studies who then forwarded them on to my advisor and me.

Reviewer #1:

The idea of using oral histories is promising, but I see no evidence that the candidate has any coursework or prior experience in qualitative research methodologies from a

discipline like sociology. I also did not see much attempt to control for issues like age, socio-economic status, health, marital status, etc. in the search for subjects. Without some attempts to control for such issues, it's hard to know how representative the subject pool will be, which will limit the applicability of any conclusions drawn from this research.

Reviewer #2:

Study topic is significant and interesting but must heed its own caution: that while it is important to discover the heterogeneity between Chicana (sic) from the borderlands and those in the Midwest, it should not assume that Chicana (sic) in the Midwest is a heterogeneous group. The oral approach is therefore appropriate and valued for the depth of richness of the narratives rather than generalizability, although the study occasionally appears to claim to be able to do the latter. I would be surprised that there aren't more qualitative and quantitative studies of similar if not oblique foci in this area from other disciplines. (Personal communication from Naomi Scheman, June 2009)

In the set of comments from two different reviewers (who we only knew to be of varying disciplinary backgrounds) my project was called into question on multiple levels. The first level again, was the “generalizability” of my research – who would care about such a study on the lives of Mexican American women and what conclusions could possibly be drawn from these efforts? The second level was challenging my ability to undertake this research – how did my discipline (and interdisciplinary program in Feminist Studies) enable me to undertake oral history research. And the last level I see here is disbelief in my claims that there are no studies that do the work I take up here, and that Chicanas in

the Midwest might be a homogeneous group of women. To me, the responses to my project from these scholars at the University of Minnesota represent a general attitude that I felt with me as I attempted to complete my project. Beyond the context of my committee, I often had to fight for the right to do this project. I attribute part of the resistance to my project as emerging from the context of the neoliberal university that seeks to protect itself by controlling the types of knowledges that emerge from within its halls. I read these responses to my work from both the IRB and the DDF reviewers as epistemic violence against my work and my place as a woman of color invested in researching alongside other women of color within the Academy.⁸

After deciding that I wanted to interview the women of my family, I began to make room for my project within Women's Studies and Chicana/o Studies, a leap that was not far to make with the knowledge that projects such as this have been seen as innovative academic pursuits in the context of women of color feminisms for quite some time.⁹ Despite knowing that the field of Chicana/o studies has significantly expanded beyond issues of (hegemonic) cultural nationalism through incorporating necessary intersectional analyses of race and class alongside gender and sexuality, the field still

⁸ This epistemic violence however seems to function in different ways at different institutions. This is exemplified by the fact that I submitted my very same proposal for the DDF and was granted a \$4000 grant to complete my research through the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University which signifies to me that there is something specific in the devaluing of my work that happened within my particular institutional context. However, that being said, I was also challenged on the validity of my work at a job interview of April 2010 when a historian asked I how others looking at my data could replicate my analysis. It is clear that this question is absurd in the context of humanitarian scholarship, as I have not reason to attempt to create work that is replicable, nor do I claim to be doing empirical research that can be replicable. I think this boils down again, to the generalizability piece, if I am the only one who analyzes women's words in this way, is this a valid method or contribution to the field? I argue yes, but some scholars are clearly not invested in that type of knowledge politics.

⁹ One striking example of a theorization of race in historio-political context through familial ties is Carroll Parrott Blue's *The Dawn at My Back: A Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing* (2003). Other family memoirs or Chicana feminist theorizing about families and Chicana identity include, Norma Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la frontera* (1995), Pat Mora's familial novel *House of Houses* (1997) and Kathleen Alcalá's *The Desert Remembers My Name: On Family and Writing* (2007).

lacks a true shift away from the physical geographic borderlands of California and the US Southwest.

Because Chicana/os have been in the Midwest for quite some time I situate my research within the conceptual work Gilbert Cardenas calls for in the Introduction of a special issue of *Aztlán* in 1978 (while also working to add and provide a feminist lens):

The historical presence of Chicanos outside the Southwest suggests that the scope of Chicano studies must be expanded to include a national perspective. Incorporating the study of Chicano populations outside the Southwest into Chicano studies may help eliminate some of the obscurities concerning the conceptualization of the Chicano experience in the United States in both its past and present situation. The implications of the study of the Chicano experience as a national issue in contrast to the longstanding preoccupation with a regional focus in Chicano studies [must] be accessed. (Cardenas, 1978, p. 146)

While I appreciate Cardenas' effort to shift the frame of investigation of Chicano experience I take issue with his clear privileging of the Chicano male experience within it. In this way, I am pushing the notion of Chicanos in the Midwest, which is already a marginalized field within Chicana/o Studies to be conscious of gender and sexuality. I also push for a specific and intentional inclusion of Chicanas within this move beyond a cultural nationalist perspective, seeking out ways that we can understand how racial identities are formulated in the Midwest through employing an analysis that situates gender and sexuality intersectionally alongside race and class.

Of course, Cardenas' article in the special issue of *Aztlán* is not the only scholarship on Chicana/os in the Midwest. However, I would argue that many of the texts

focus on men – male migration to the Midwest, male labor in the Midwest – and most fail to include women’s participation in these narratives. Some more recent work that inspires my own is Amelia María de la Luz Montes’ article, “Tortilleras on the prairie: Latina lesbians writing the Midwest” (2003), and to a lesser extent (because it focuses on newer Latino migration to the Midwest), Ann V. Millard & Jorge Chapa’s book, *Apple pie & enchiladas: Latino newcomers in the rural Midwest* (2001).¹⁰ What these works and my own reflect, is that it is often difficult to construct a notion of what the Midwest looks like, what the Midwest is, or how the Midwest truly “differs” from the Southwestern/Californian Chicana/o experience. Because understanding the Midwest often requires an essentializing of the values that are often held within it (such as a hard work ethic held over from the legacies of farming, or the “bootstrap” mentality) that are very hard to pinpoint, I have tried to weave a sense of the geography into my analysis to demonstrate the ways that the women in their oral histories have come to understand the importance of the Midwest in their own lives. Not to etch out differences per say, but to acknowledge that there is something specifically Midwestern about their experiences even if they (or sometimes I) can’t articulate it to the Midwestern/non-Midwestern reader. Oftentimes these differences are manifested in an understanding of “difference” from Southwestern experiences (see Chapter 2) while at other times, their concerns about

¹⁰ Some historical studies that more closely mirror the settlement of the families I chronicle include – Dennis Nodín Valdés’ work, particularly his excellent essays which overview the various historical scholarship on Chicana/os in the Midwest, “The New Northern Borderlands: An Overview of Midwestern Chicano History” (1989) and “Region, Nation, and World-System: Perspectives on Midwestern Chicana/o History” (2000). As well as, David Gutiérrez’s essay, “Significant to whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West” (1993); Valerie Mendoza, “They Came to Kansas Searching for a Better Life” (1993); Leobardo Estrada’s “A Demographic Comparison of the Mexican Origin Population in the Midwest and Southwest” (1976); Lorraine Esterly Pierce’s “Mexican Americans on St. Paul’s Lower West Side” (1972); Richard Santillán essays, (1989) “Rosita the Riveter: Midwest Mexican American Women during World War II, 1941-1945,” and (1995) “Midwestern Mexican American Women and the Struggle for Gender Equality: A Historical Overview, 1920s-1960s.”

their livelihoods based around gender, race, or class concerns are seemingly no different than those that might emerge from a different geographic context (see Chapter 3 and the Conclusion). It is my hope here to continue to flesh out exactly how the Midwestern landscape shapes these women's lives, and of course how they in turn shape the Midwestern communities in which they live.

A Note About Terminology

I have struggled with the terminology to use throughout my dissertation when referring to the women of this study. Out of the eight women I interviewed, only three of them choose to call themselves Chicana. Most of the Kansas women chose Hispanic as the terminology they use when referring to themselves (with one choosing Mexican American), but many of them also seemed to be uneasy with this designation preferring to think of themselves as "American" before privileging any racial identity. On the other hand, most of the Minnesota women refer to themselves with politicized, hybrid identities such as Minnesotana or Chicana-Indigena in their responses to this question. Among these identities they have chosen for themselves, they are also more likely to be comfortable being referred to as Chicana, and often embrace the term as a valid expression of their politicized identity as a Chicana when used in our conversations.

The differences may be accounted for by the design of my own study. The women whose testimonies come from growing up and living in Kansas are mostly family members. The women whose words describe their experiences in the Sunflower State faced similar experiences of growing up as they literally came to their womanhood under the same roof, in the same small, Kansas town. While there are valuable differences between these women they have also influenced each other throughout their entire life in

the way that they think about their own identity. However, they often have particular reasons for why they have chosen such designators that did not simply occur to them without reason. For example, my Aunt Cindy suggests that her preferred term of Hispanic is based upon a particular experience she had on the U.S./Mexico border.

I consider myself Hispanic but when we went to Mexico, gosh, about fifteen years ago, when you go through the line they ask you what your nationality is. And I said “Mexican American” and the guy goes, “there’s no such thing as a Mexican American” and I go “What?!” and I showed him, I go here’s my birth certificate, my passport, I’m Mexican American and he goes, “No. You’re either a United States citizen or you’re a Mexican citizen.” And I go, “In that case I’m a United States citizen.” So then that’s why, when I heard that I said I’m not going to use that word Mexican ever again because I’m going to be Hispanic or a United States citizen. And that was at the border and that was coming back from Mexico to the United States so I’m not sure if those border cops go both ways or one way but I thought, you know if he’s going to harass me by using that word Mexican then I’m not going to use it anymore. (Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

It is clear in this discussion of her identity that choosing the term “Hispanic” was not simply without consideration but rather due to forces that I read as preventing her from identifying as who she really thought herself to be.¹¹

Because of my role as an academic in the Chicana/o-Latina/o community in Minneapolis, many of the women who agreed to record their oral histories with me came from political organizing, non-profit, writer/artist and more generally, activist-based communities. In this sense, it is no surprise that the women in this group had a different sense of politicized identities and were more comfortable with claiming Chicana as their identity.

¹¹ Clearly this is a complicated subject because Martha describes the ways she learned (along with many other women) that “Mexican” was a bad word to be called. That even in places such as Kansas and Minnesota where there might not have been large populations of Mexican-origin peoples that to be called a “Mexican” carried stigma and shame even if those who were being called did not interpret it as such. I explore this further in Chapter Two, when Martha shares an experience of how her teacher called her “Spanish girl” which Martha reads as her teacher not “offending” her by calling her “Mexican.” Ironically, Martha found this to be ridiculous as she *spoke* Spanish and did not consider herself to be Spanish at all.

Instead of settling on one term that I have chosen to encompass all of the women collectively or choosing to only identify them by their individual preferences throughout the document I have taken the approach to use Chicana to signify my analysis of their words, stories, ideas through the lens with which I analyze them. For instance, while my mother may not choose to use the term Chicana to identify herself, I, as the Chicana interloper choose to use the term at times to signify my reading and interpretations of her oral history as a text. As a scholar committed to Chicana feminism many of the tools I use to analyze all of the oral history texts here come from this background. I see this as particularly telling in the development of “mestiza methodology” that I cull from Chicana feminist theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez. When I use the term Chicana throughout my analysis, I am not necessarily referring to the woman or women involved in the study, rather, demonstrating my commitment to how I see my analysis of their stories as being in conversation with other Chicana feminists and Chicana/o scholars and theories. In essence, my use of the term Chicana is a signification of my reading of their stories and actions within the larger context of the field of Chicana/o Studies.

While I also intersperse the terms Mexican American alongside Chicana I do so in effort to highlight the heterogeneity of the group and also to illuminate how their actions and words demonstrate closer ties to Chicanisma than some of them may imagine.¹² I am

¹² Drawing on the rich traditions of Chicana feminist writers and theorists, chicanisma to me embodies a politically and socially active feminism. This does not always have to include a self-awareness or a self-labeling of Chicana/isma. Edén Torres notes in reflecting on her grandmother’s various acts of resistance in many different forms, “While Mexican American women may not commonly use the term, they perform acts of Chicanisma in their daily lives” (2000, p. 240). Furthermore she argues, “Chicanisma simple means Chicaneness—the essence or spirit of being a Chicana—Mexicanness with an added political conviction” (2000, p. 240). When I think of my own mother who does not claim this term I think of how she was surprised that I would interpret her insistence on becoming the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) President at my elementary school as an act of contestation when she and some other parents perceived that the

invested in uncovering the ways that these women challenge our notions of what Chicana means. I believe there are reasons that Chicana has not been the designator of choice for some women but this does not mean it does not describe their behavior and stories, or my analysis of their actions and ideas.

In one regard, it is not surprising that some of these women who grew up in the Midwest may have never come in contact with the term and may not choose it because they are not fully aware of what it means (either through lack of contact with mobilizing efforts to use the term or through their own misconceptions or assumptions they hold about the meaning of the word). As I demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, these women share that they were often members of extremely small communities of Mexican Americans as they grew up in the Midwest. With this history we can maintain that a Chicana/o movement, which relies on a number of people, might not have gained currency in the same ways. This however does not discredit the need for or actual organizing pressure Mexican or Chicanas/os exhibited within the particular towns in which they lived. Nor does this disregard the movements for social change that they may have been a part of in other ways, or larger social movements taking place in urban centers of the Midwest. Lastly, while I acknowledge that choosing a term that might erase these women's personal subjectivity (for those who do not see themselves as Chicanas), I am willing to take that risk because I believe that in their agreement to be a part of this

students were being disadvantaged by the high turnover of principals. While she does not think this was a political act, I remember seeing and hearing her convictions on making sure her children (and the children of our school – largely students of color and working class children) received the best public elementary school education possible. Though completely different contexts and on a much different scale, when I read Mary Pardo's "Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: "Mothers of East Los Angeles" (1990) I immediately recognized my own mother as one who shared similar commitments to the mothers of Los Angeles and the need that Pardo calls for to create alternative models that demonstrate Mexican American women's political investments/actions. Again, this echoes what Torres writes above, the idea that despite not recognizing the potential political intervention my mama was making in terms of her role as mother and as a Chicana in her community, her actions have moved me in countless ways.

project, these women have taken their first steps into claiming Chicánidad. In other words, through their inclusion of their stories here, they are contributing to a project larger than themselves that speaks to, “a priority of personal commitment to La Raza, active seeking of basic institutional change, and a sense of urgency and immediacy in bringing about this change” (Basso, 1997, p. 65). In cases where women fight on behalf of their children or call out against acts of racism they face in their lives I interpret these actions as worthy of being named Chicana. In this vein, while they may not choose this label for themselves, I read their actions as upholding at least some, if not all, of the elements that Basso points to above. While this is by no means an equal claim for each woman, I argue that their very participation in sharing their oral histories situates their actions in a Chicana space – through their interactions with me, as the scholar who is upfront about her Chicana feminist identity. As I point to in Chapter Three, many of the women involved in the study have an uneasy relationship to the label or identity of feminist. I use Aída Hurtado’s concept of “underground feminism” to highlight the ways that they participate in the goals of a diverse understanding of feminism in their resistance to patriarchal control and domination. In the same vein I would like to borrow this notion of “underground” to also apply it to Chicana identity, recognizing that Chicana is by no means a monolithic term nor does every woman come to choose that term in the same way. If we think about their actions as contributing to an understanding of “underground Chicanisma” their characterization as Chicanas (in an underground sense) thus emerges again, from my interpretations of their ideas, stories, and behavior. I choose to use this label in describing their identities not as a means to erase their personal choices, but in an effort to demonstrate the many actions that align them with Chicana

political goals in order to expand the meaning of Chicana. This being said, there are still moments when I elect to use Mexican American acknowledging the slippages, and for places where assigning Chicana identity may be too much of a stretch.

Talking in Elevators and Other “Midwestern Values”

This project is concerned with multiple questions and points of origin. It comes out of my own identity as a Chicana, born in Manhattan, Kansas but growing up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My mother always seemed so strange to me as a teenager, especially when she *always* had to start a conversation with random people in elevators. It was not simply a superficial conversation including “how are you today?”, but rather a genuine attempt to get to know another person in the short time she might have with them. When riding in an elevator with a complete stranger she would just strike up a conversation that ultimately moved into something more involved than a discussion about the weather. She would ask about what was going on in their lives and connect it to whatever we were doing, inevitably embarrassing us while she revealed details of our trip to the dentist, library or school event. While I would describe those who live in Albuquerque as friendly, I would never recognize this to be their first impulse, as evidenced by riding many elevators without my mother in total silence. Once I moved to Lawrence, Kansas to attend college, I recognized my mother’s behavior in New Mexico elevators as the same as most Kansans I met. Imagine my surprise when I finally put these two things together! My mother was not so odd in her need to find connections, as I had previously assumed, rather she was deeply entrenched in Midwestern/Kansan behavior that I had never known until I was immersed in Kansas culture.

I share this story as a means to express how being immersed in two distinct cultures is what led me to my research project in the first place. I grew up with Midwestern parents in the Southwest. My Mexican American mother understood racism within the various contexts in which she moved in the world in brown skin. This was complicated by the life she made with my white father, and the subsequent birthing of four mestiza/o children. I began to wonder about how I came into my own identity as a Chicana and how my Midwestern cousins who also have brown mamas (my mother's sisters) and white fathers did not develop this same sense of Chicana/o consciousness or identity. I wanted to know if it was because my cousins grew up in Emporia, Kansas whereas I grew up surrounded by Mexican Americans and Chicana/os in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Is it the geography or the numbers of other Chicanos that matters? I realize that these curiosities cannot really be answered without an in-depth conversation about identity with my cousins, which I have not actually had. Instead, I have discussed these issues with my aunts when I asked them to reflect on the identities of their children. My Minnesotan (white) partner has also encouraged me to think about how perhaps they do have some ideas about their identity yet Midwestern culture might actually prevent/dissuade them from discussing these issues in the ways that I choose to reflect upon my identity. I include this thought simply to outline where this project emerged, out of my conscious choice of claiming a Chicana identity and the observation that many of my family do not engage with this identity in the same way I do.

I acknowledge this impetus to explore one's own identity is part of a privileged position – that with my college education I gained a space to explore these issues in relative safety and was able to more easily claim an ideological Chicanidad because of

this privilege. But all of these questions continued to lead me to investigate what it must have been like to be an isolated brown family in a small Kansas town in the 1950s. My identity, which is intertwined in the stories that I sought for this project cannot be separated from the “research.” The impulses to speak to strangers in elevators seemed to be largely attributed to their background as Kansans, leading me to begin to question what do Chicana identities look like in the Midwest?

As I currently reside in Minneapolis and have been interested in the differences I have witnessed and experienced as a Chicana transplant from the Southwest, I felt it was also important to investigate what it was like growing up and living in Minnesota, a different Midwestern state that shares many of the same “core values” as Kansas. In this sense I hope to provide some examples of the similarities among these women who grew up in the Midwest, and as a woman who has lived within both of these states I believe my experience and identity provides a connection between the women who have grown up and lived in Kansas or Minnesota and who agreed to tell their stories in the form of oral histories. My lived experiences in both of these sites positions me with a specific standpoint for exploring how Chicana feminist theories apply and need to be expanded to account for Midwestern Chicana experiences. Again, this process is embedded within my experience, another example of how I do not claim objectivity in this scholarship – rather I fully embrace the complexities involved with thinking through my relationships to the subject matter at hand. While I have worked to weave these oral histories in conversation with one another and have analyzed their content in this manner, they are by no means intended to describe every Midwestern Chicana experience. It is my hope that many can read these stories or this analysis and build upon what has begun here.

When thinking about what makes this set of oral histories specifically located in the context of the Midwest I am often troubled by the fleeting sense of how one can truly characterize what is it like to live in a place such as the geographic region of the Midwest. When I talk to folks who have grown up in the Midwest there seems to be a shared understanding of a set of “core values” that shape the Midwestern attitude – core values then, have come to mean what is generally thought of as Midwestern characteristics (either perceived or real) that have grown out of the legacy of farming the land. These include notions of being “hard working” or having a “good work ethic,” “hardiness,” living a life dedicated to family, and one’s community alongside general assumptions that the Midwest is largely politically conservative, white, Christian, and sometimes even “backwards” (in other words, afraid of change/progress, homophobic, racist, sexist, or any characterization of behavior/social norms that can be interpreted by some as anti-progressive). While the Midwest has obviously had its share of progressive politics over the centuries, I would argue in today’s imaginary places like Kansas and Missouri are only thought of as conservative bastions, while other states like Minnesota and Illinois are painted as liberal hotspots.

Because the Midwest is understood to be such a large region oftentimes the “conservative” picture is painted over all of the areas even if it may not hold true for the specific state or region of a state that might be different. For instance, when I lived in Kansas, friends from New Mexico would often question how I could be politically radical, queer, and of color in a place like Kansas, assuming then that one could not have any different opinions from what the imagined Midwest/Midwesterner is constructed as. Considering that is the state where I was born, where my family grew up and most

remained, I found this to be an interesting question and thus creates the sense that there is something unique to the Midwest that other regions of the U.S. don't have despite also being constrained by the same "American" ideals of the bootstrap mentality. When I lived in Kansas, and through visits with my family I interpreted the Midwest as a place full of contradictions and hospitality, I made my home there in spite of different political ideologies (the majority of Kansans are largely conservative Republicans) and this is also where I came into and fully claimed my queer identity. This is to say that the Midwest is not monolithic and yet there are still uniquely Midwestern aspects of life – for instance a friend once said, "I used to like Garrison Keillor (Lake Wobegon) before I moved to Minnesota and learned that it was true." This signifies to me that in Minnesota, the stereotypical white, Scandinavian Lutherans, who are fictionalized to be passive aggressive is something that permeates the lives of all people as a culture of the state even if they are not of Scandinavian heritage. From my own observations about living in the Midwest and in the echoes of many of the women's own stories that appear in this project, there also seems to be a sense of a high belief in a "boot strap mentality," in other words, a belief that if you work hard enough, you can succeed despite setbacks, I am not sure if this is unique to the Midwestern experience, but something that seems to come out very strongly throughout their narratives. I explore and critique these attitudes more in the following chapters.

This note on the Midwest and "Midwestern values" is also to posit my research in relation to my unstable understanding of exactly what I mean by the Midwest. While there are definite themes that emerge in my analysis that I see as being directly related to emerging out of the context of small Latina/o communities in the Midwest, to be able to

pinpoint exactly what is the Midwestern Chicana/o experience is not my ultimate goal. Rather, to understand how these lives are seen much more in the context of the migration stories that accompany them, or perhaps a claiming of Mexican American spaces within the Midwest as an extension of the Mexican diasporic networks and connections that should include a look at Mexican-origin peoples in the Midwest. I thus, situate my work in conversation with Chicana/o scholars doing work in other geographic areas of the U.S. in order to etch out what a Midwestern Chicana/o reality might entail.

Mande? Asking Questions and Gathering Answers

Asking questions has always been a part of my own life story, questioning the world around me and wondering why things were the way they were occupied my mind as a young girl and continued with my entrance into academia. While I often kept these thoughts to myself, knowing never to question my mother when it was clear she was in no mood to provide answers, I always had the desire to seek these answers. In that sense, it is not surprising that this project starts with my discussions with my own mother about her life growing up in a small Kansas town in the 1960s. As the project grew, I thought I needed to analyze and contextualize the stories of her life and so I incorporated the oral histories of her sisters. Expanding out of the context of my own family experiences, I then decided it was important to incorporate additional frames of Midwestern Mexican American women's experiences, which became the impetus for adding in women's lives from outside of my family and in a different Midwestern site. After completing these oral histories I know that although three of my research participants are related, their oral histories while similar to one another in terms of their life experiences, are also different in many ways and these oral histories are no less valuable than the oral histories I

collected from women in Minnesota. While I presented each woman with the opportunity to choose a pseudonym or alias to be assigned to her story in the research, all of my oral history participants decided to use their names to go alongside their words. I read their choice as further evidence of their willingness to share their story and proudly claim all the complexities within them.

In total the women from Kansas are also a diverse group. I interviewed my mother, Estella Falcon Creel (the youngest daughter), and the eldest and second eldest sisters of her family, Gloria Falcon Madrid and Lydia Falcon Rider, respectively.¹³ I also interviewed my Aunt Cynthia Perez Falcon who married into the Falcon family and her mother, Margaret Perez. As evidence that I offered the women of my family a choice to be a part of the research or not, my Aunt Dolores Falcon Storrer did not elect to be a part of the project. In this sense the Kansas women are a diverse group of women, as demonstrated in their profiles highlighted in *Appendix A*. While I acknowledge their similarities as three of the women of my study grew up with the same set of parents, their unique experiences and lives presents possibilities for diverse readings of the collection of their oral histories here. In many ways approaching my family for my dissertation research was unexpected. It was a project that I always knew I wanted to do, but was not sure it would emerge in this form.

¹³ I have reclaimed my mother's maiden name alongside my given surname such that my academic name is Kandace Creel Falcón. I choose to bring back the accent but as far as I know my family has never spelled their last name, Falcón, with an accent. My abuela always refers to Los Falcones as opposed to "the Falcons" when she speaks of her husband and his family, which I interpret as the correct pronunciation of this family name. In this document I use the unaccented version to document the anglicizing of their name despite not knowing when that actually occurred. Recently, when my mother saw my email address signature with the accent she exclaimed – "Hey! I want that on my name!" even though she now only goes by Estella Creel. This is to say that while her name Falcón was anglicized to Falcon she fully embraces my desire to be connected to her by the accented Falcón and believes my connection to the accented version to be "cool." While none of my aunts have kept Falcon in their name, I reinsert it to honor their maiden names before they married and took men's names while also realizing in the tradition of Mexican naming they would have been Hernández Navarro Falcóns with the inclusion of their mothers' last names.

When I asked the women of my family if they would be interested in sharing their life stories with me their generosity in allowing me to “pry” into their lives was overwhelming. In general, they were all eager to help and that is exactly the language that they used. In many ways they saw participating in this project as a familial obligation, not as something they dreaded but rather simply a means to further my success. In this context I am honored by their trust in me but also am aware of the potential backlash that might emerge out of this revelation. It is my hope in sharing this however, not to simply expose myself as a researcher who some could interpret as not being willing to engage in a community beyond her own family, but instead, I hope it demonstrates these women’s commitment to education as the means out of the difficult lives that they have endured. In other words, despite potential trepidations of sharing their experiences with an academic world to which they do not have direct access, I was never aware of these feelings because the women of my family forged on with this process much like they have confronted other challenges in their lives, straight on, with heads held high.

As my project expanded I began to notice similar and different experiences of Mexican American women living in Minnesota, another site in the Midwest. These two sites of Minnesota and Kansas provide different histories and patterns of Mexican settlement, which ultimately inform both differences and similarities that one can draw from these women’s oral histories. Because parts of Kansas used to be Mexico, whereas the Mexican population in Minnesota has largely (im)migrated, these two sites hold innate differences in terms of Mexican culture in the state but similarities in terms of regional and agricultural histories. These different histories and regional backgrounds represent potential divergences in the kinds of stories told and related experiences.

However, they also yield interesting similarities based on their isolation from the Southwest and in response to the common elements of oppression that are present in both locations. Because I am interested in seeing how these geographic areas are similar and different to one another, I purposefully tried to find women in different geographic regions within Minnesota, looking to the Twin Cities area as well as the Southern and Northwestern parts of the state that have different regional Mexican migration settlement patterns.

The Minnesota women who provided their oral histories for my project came to me in different ways. Martha Casteñon volunteered for the project after I contacted a group in Moorhead, Minnesota called *Mujeres Unidas*, in which she is involved. A fellow graduate student who thought my work would benefit from her testimony referred Teresa Ortiz to me. Guadalupe Morales (La Lupe) was also referred to me by several women of the Chicana/o academic community at the University of Minnesota. In general, I tried to identify research participants to women who grew up or had lived the majority of their lives in the Midwest and who were over fifty years of age. I had initially chosen this group of women to interview because at 50 years of age, these women would have a wealth of life behind them and (hopefully) ahead of them. These were the general parameters yet not rigid boundaries. For instance, La Lupe was only 46 years old at the time of the interview and Teresa Ortiz was born in Mexico City and was the most recent transplant to Minnesota, moving here when she was college-aged. The women's ages ranged from the youngest at forty-six to the eldest being seventy five years of age – with the majority being in their fifties. Table One demonstrates the range of age, occupations, marital status and geographic areas below.

Table 1
Chicana Oral Histories Respondent Demographics

Name	Year Born	Age*	Education Level	Occupation	Relationship Status	Children	Where they Grew up	Where they currently reside
Estella Falcon Creel	1958	51	High School, VoTech School	Clerk	Married	4	Greenleaf, KS	Albuquerque NM
Lydia (Lilly) Falcon Rider	1951	58	Nursing School	Nurse	Married	2	Greenleaf, KS	Emporia, KS
Gloria Madrid	1950	59	High School	Payless Corporate Office	Once then divorced, partnered	3	Greenleaf, KS	Topeka, KS
Cindy Perez Falcon	1958-2009	51	Some Community College	Admin. Work	Married	2	Winston, KS/ Topeka, KS	Topeka, KS
Margaret Perez	1933	75	2-years Junior College	(Retired) Spanish Teacher	Once, then widowed	5	Colorado	Topeka, KS
Teresa Ortiz	1948	61	4-year College Degree	Writer/ Former non-profit worker/ Educator/ Activist	Once then divorced	3	Mexico City, Mexico	Minneapolis, MN
Martha Casteñon	1959	50	High School	Paralegal	Once, then divorced, partnered	3	Sabin, MN/ Moorhead, MN	Moorhead, MN
La Lupe	1963	46	Some 4 year College	Writer/non-profit worker	Once then divorced, partnered	4	Fairbault, MN	Minneapolis, MN

*Age indicates the age each woman was at the time of the oral history collection. Which took place over the course of a year in 2009.

In total, I have collected eight oral histories for my dissertation. I decided to stop at eight because I had a concern that more voices than this would not allow for a clear analysis throughout this text and I needed enough space for every reader to have a sense of each of these women as individuals through their stories. I am reminded of a conversation I had with Rachel Raimist, a scholar and documentary filmmaker, now teaching at the University of Alabama about how it would be hard to be able to give more than eight subjects adequate space within a documentary. Like a written form of a

documentary, I embrace the need for etching out adequate space in what I have critiqued as the conventional neo-liberal research institution. As one form of resistance, I fight for the space for this project (and others like it) to emerge and thrive within the institution. While this is not easy work, the choices I made about it ensure that my project was about depth as opposed to breadth only. This is particularly important to me as a qualitative scholar in order to be able to read stories closely as opposed to relying on other methods to code data. As this project unfolded I realized that the concepts I wanted to explore such as issues of home and belonging, race, gender, sexual and class identities and the borderlands in the Midwest developed through the oral narratives of these eight women with enough specificity to demonstrate a sense of cohesion but also adequate spaces for differences to emerge.

Each of my research participants approached the questions I brought differently. Many of my participants strayed from the intent of the initial questions and I was flexible in seeing where their testimony took me. For instance, when interviewing Gloria Falcon Madrid, the first question I asked was about tracing the movement of her parents to the Midwest and her response actually included her flight from the Midwest to El Paso, Texas. Likewise, after asking Martha Castañon the first question, she did not stop talking for over an hour, not needing me to pose any further questions. In this case, I simply allowed the conversation to take us where it would and acknowledged that I might not get the specific answers to some of my questions. I welcomed women going off topic, because it was in these moments that women fully shared details that they found important to their lives, as opposed to me simply prompting them to explore something I found pertinent.

Some however, wanted more direction and would ask for the next question after they were done responding to a prompt. I tried to pose open-ended questions for the women to use as a means of exploring their girlhoods, familial relations, racialized, gendered and sexualized experiences, their memories of their educational experiences, work histories and community involvement. I generally asked questions in three groups. The first traced their families' migration to the Midwest, focused on what they knew about their parents and grandparents, and included a reflection of their experiences of growing up in the Midwest. The second section detailed questions about their personal identity, how they see themselves, questions regarding racism, sexism and general discrimination they or their family faced in the Midwest. The final section of the oral history questions guided them to discuss their educational and employment histories and their involvement with the communities in which they lived.¹⁴ If they had not previously mentioned motherhood, this theme was also explored toward the end of the interview including asking them to expand on what home meant to them. In the stories that each woman shared, some themes immediately jumped out at me such as: issues of isolation (language, cultural, and geographic), the gendered roles that each of their parents played throughout their childhoods, economic struggles, silences, connections to Mexican family, culture and traditions as diasporic refiguring of identities. These themes became the content by which I organized the analysis portion of my dissertation (Chapters Two and Three). These themes also became the foundation for connecting their stories and the basis for listening for common experiences that might tie these women's lives together.

Paying attention to women's stories and guiding them to talk about their histories was a delicate balancing act. As many oral history research books suggest, one should

¹⁴ My list of oral history questions can be found in Appendix B "Oral History Questions."

always listen more than speak with the research participant. Of course, as I approached each of these interviews I found it hard to simply ask the questions and write down my notes regarding their response, instead I found myself wanting to interject about similar things that I, or other women, had faced in our lives. The connections were so glaringly obvious that my head was literally spinning after each new oral history was added to my collection. There were tears of laughter and sadness shed throughout the process, as I tried to recreate a “story time” where the women could see me as a daughter (both figuratively and literally) to whom they might impart their stories of life and to an audience they imagined might listen to or read their stories through this project. Many times after an interview I felt their joy and pain find a place to settle within my bones, as their stories were now mine to protect and connect with others, as well as my supreme responsibility to engage with their stories in ways that honored the spirit behind them.

In addition to the processes of recording women’s oral histories I also had to manage the fact that part of my research is indeed family research. I follow in the trajectory of theoretical and critical scholars who have researched their familial experiences as sites of knowledge production. Scholars like Michelle Citron and Evette Hornsby-Minor who integrate scholarship based on their familial experiences as feminist practices have influenced my work that explores family stories, truths and lies, and the roles of public/private personas as sites ripe for interpretation and meaning-making.¹⁵ I

¹⁵ Citron’s text, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999) explores a box full of home movies that her father gave her and serves as the theoretical background for her film using that footage that weaves together and focuses on the lives of mothers and daughters. While she uses film as a medium (in addition to the text she writes) I see her commitment to integrating theoretical knowledge production alongside an understanding of the family as a site from which to begin understanding the world around her. Hornsby-Minor’s book, *If I Could Hear my Mother Pray Again: An Intergenerational Narrative Ethnography and Performance Ethnography of African American Motherhood* (2004) is also not simply a text but a one-woman show, in which she traces feminist ideas and understandings around motherhood and examines this theme particularly through the death of her mother.

charted new paths in both my approach as a researcher to my family members as research participants for this project, and in my role as a daughter and niece. In some ways this negotiation marked my initial thinking about mestiza methodology (which I lay out in Chapter One) because the boundaries of research were constantly being blurred. I also think my approach to questioning and understanding the world around me led me to the need to know the answers to the questions I posed, some of which had to do intimately with my own identity—“Mama, why did you choose to marry a white man?” But there were also some questions that I believed would move the field of Chicana Studies in new directions—“What was it like being the only Mexican family in the whole town?” These questions rely on a reimagining of the common migration narrative so often told/lived/experienced of crossing the border and settling just on the other side.

An open-minded approach was also very necessary in this process. I was surprised multiple times when it came time to ask questions about sexuality and gender how open and willing to discuss ideas such as queer sexualities and first sexual experiences my mother and aunts were willing to be. I thought perhaps, it was my own inhibitions to discuss these issues that had apparently prevented us from discussing them as openly in the past. However, I also acknowledge my status as “researcher” with my audio-recorder might have allowed for a temporary free pass to discuss these subjects that perhaps we might never have openly approached without this unique situation.

Besides these surprises, I was also taken aback at how this type of research might better lend itself to family research in some ways. I found it easier to analyze the respondents’ words in some cases because I could add in years of experience through already knowing the historical and social contexts in which their experiences occurred. It

was also difficult in that same vein, to know how to weed through and glean out things that might account for certain ideas, thoughts, or behaviors. It was a constant balancing act between listening only to their stories and interpretations of their experiences, and analyzing by choosing what to add or omit of previous knowledge of their circumstances. I found this to be both particularly rewarding and on the other hand most difficult with my mother's (Estella Falcon Creel's) narrative.

In collecting someone's oral history it is not only important to hear what is said but also what is not said. In the silences, many things can be revealed. The places where I noted silences in these oral histories occurred less often throughout the recording of my family's interviews. The familiarity of reading silences with family members' narratives sometimes made them less apparent to me and which forced me to also rely on alternative/outside interpretations of their words to help shape and hone my analysis here. Rather with the Minnesota women, because of our less familiar relationships, I was never sure how to read the silences that emerged out of their narratives. I was left to surmise this was due to their uncomfortability in broaching certain topics or due to the researcher/participant dynamic that was facilitated by the oral history methodology. Again, I point to the fact that analyzing these stories is not a clear-cut process, rather they are full of unexpected twists and turns because of the complex relationships I had between myself as the researcher and the women who agreed to be interviewed.

Listening to Stories/Writing Our Narratives

Collecting, organizing, analyzing, situating, and writing about these stories are as involved a process as any conventional methodological approach. In reading several oral history texts and observing variances in terms of format, I have decided to forge my own

path in writing about these histories. Part of this includes interjecting myself as both listener and analyzer of their words, a practice I outlined earlier as intricately connected to my own thoughts on the value of situating positionalities. I am not a trained historian and I do not believe that the purpose of this study is to create an alternative or additive history of what life must have been like in the second half of the twentieth century for Mexican American women in the Midwest.¹⁶ This is not to say that these women's stories do not do that but within the context of my work this is just not the main objective. More exactly, I hope to provide a mestiza lens through which we can analyze the key themes of identity, home and borderlands via a geographic focus. Drawing on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, a mestiza lens creates intellectual space for me to purposefully seek out moments of cognitive dissonance, ambiguities and the blurring of binaries. I see the mestiza lens as a purposeful mixing of methods, acknowledging the consciousness that emerges from "in-between spaces," and as grounded in the politics of locating oneself within the work (see more on this in Chapter One).

I approach the writing of the stories I collected by looking for and drawing out commonalities that weave through multiple stories yet also to highlight individual differences. This process is a fluid one where there is no right answer, but instead a collection of moments that I have woven together to tell another, sometimes contradictory, story. I found that searching for similar moments in these oral histories to be a relatively easy task yet looking for divergences was much more difficult. I

¹⁶ For inspiration, I look to oral history texts such as Rothschild & Hronek's *Doing What the Day Brought: An Oral History of Arizona Women* (1992), which explicitly rewrites history to include the presence of women in settling of state of Arizona. And to Patricia Preciado Martin's *Songs My Mother Sang to Me: An Oral History of Mexican American women* (1998), a text that provides analysis in the introduction and then follows with ten women's oral histories each contained in their own distinct chapters. Both of these texts have unique ways of approaching their oral history material. For the purpose of this project I want to merge these stories together to forge larger narratives about Midwestern identities.

acknowledge it is a balancing act to serve as the interlocutor who weaves these stories together and who also wants to ensure that the reader gets some sense of each of these women. But, I am comfortable if this does not always reach a point of equilibrium. And I accept that within the space of this dissertation, I have chosen to only draw out pieces of each woman, some gain more page space than others in order to highlight common themes. I accept this because I know that this document will not be the final words on these women's lives – by my hand or by their own continued storytelling. I aspire to demonstrate the complex identities one finds in Chicanas of the Midwest by analyzing their narratives within the context of what Chicana feminists have already theorized about Chicana identities. I turn to scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Emma Pérez, Cherrie Moraga and Patricia Zavella among others to see how Chicana Midwestern identity aligns with these sociopolitical theories that have been developed referencing different geographical locations (Texas, California, and other areas of the Southwest).

For instance, in *Home Girls: Chicana Literary Voices*, Alvina Quintana pushes us to think past simply celebrating the presence of women's voices in literature (or research and scholarship) but to really drive ourselves to develop tools to read and analyze the stories that these women tell. Like Quintana, I seek to “survey both poetic and narrative voices of an emergent Chicana literary enterprise to develop an analysis that will enable us to move beyond a celebratory interpretation that merely identifies the presence of women's voices” (1996, p. 29). I do this through the processes of oral history (instead of literature) as a way to both honor women's voices and attempt to move their experiences “from margin to center” as bell hooks argues (2001) and to provide a deeper analysis of

these experiences by reading them against one another.¹⁷ Taking seriously Quintana's charge to move beyond simply celebrating women's voices, Chapter One sets up the tools that I have identified and theorized as the means to explore my oral history texts.

When revealing women's own words throughout my narrative I have decided to lightly edit when the spoken word does not translate well to the written word. I do not wish to imply that I am cleaning up their words to make them more palatable for a specific audience, but in the review of written transcripts of their words many women themselves have commented that they do not like how they come across or with how the spoken word appears as text. I do this in hopes of making these narratives clearer in the written sense while consciously keeping their voice in their testimonies. I realize the power in altering language and do so with major trepidation, as our words are often ignored or changed to suit mainstream ideas of appropriate language use, I have only changed women's words in order to support a clearer reading of their meaning or intent. As all of them are excellent storytellers, I have often had to juxtapose pieces from their oral histories that came from different parts of the text itself and merging these sections also requires a light touch of editing.

In the following chapters I analyze the content of these women's oral histories to make a larger investigation of their understandings of their identity, to capture a sense of daily life, and develop alternative readings of these eight oral history texts. Instead of approaching the material from these oral histories chronologically, I have chosen to organize my analysis thematically with Chapter Two exploring racial identities and the

¹⁷ In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2001) bell hooks argues for the shaping of feminist theory from multiple positions. She says, "Although feminist theorists are aware of the need to develop ideas and analysis that encompass a larger number of experiences that serve to unify rather than polarize, such theory is complex and slow in formation. At its most visionary, it will emerge from individuals who have knowledge of both *margin* and *center*" (2001, p. xvii, *emphasis mine*).

ways that women make claims of homespace in the Midwest. Chapter Three examines the importance of familia, theorizing silence around sexual issues, and ends with a look toward examples of underground feminisms through their resistance to gender and sexual norms. Lastly, the Conclusion exposes the need to envision oral history as story and the power in the ways communal knowledge is produced and transmitted through storytelling in these women's lives.

Along with these themes, certain women's stories are highlighted more than others in varying contexts. Because of space and time limitations I was unable to include every woman's response on particular subjects. However, I have worked to include each woman's response where I wanted to highlight the importance of a particular theme (such as home, and storytelling).¹⁸ Chapter Two relies on the testimony of Cindy, Lilly, Estella, Martha, and La Lupe. To a lesser extent, Gloria's perspective is also interwoven along with Teresa's experiences. Chapter Three explores women's ideas on the family and sexuality with a focus on Gloria, Estella, Cindy, La Lupe and Martha. I have made these editorial choices in order to weave together a story that speaks to a diversity of experiences. As Margaret's life occupied the generation of women before the majority of the women interviewed (she is Cindy's mother), I was less able to situate her experiences within the same historical, geographic, or social location as the majority of the women featured throughout. Teresa's status as a Mexican-born woman who moved to Minnesota in her early twenties also inhibited my ability to fully integrate her into an analysis of what life looks like growing up in the Midwest, as she grew up in Mexico City. But these differences did offer some opportunities for interesting comparisons. Thus, I have not

¹⁸ These women's complete oral history audio files and copies of the transcribed interviews will be housed together in the Schlesinger Oral History Library in the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University.

erased their contributions to this project. On the contrary, their lives have only further diversified the experiences of Chicanas in the Midwest and I have sought to include their voices in order to do just that.

For me, the end of collecting an oral history is an experience that includes the sad realization that our time together may have come to an end, while also being a happy occasion of thinking about the possibilities of a future friendship or different relationship with one another after we have shared these truths. Again, it is not merely one emotion or another, but these contradictory feelings are included in our goodbyes. For those of my familia, the feeling was a goodbye until the next time we make time for familia. However, a sad reality is that we never really know when the next time we will get to see each other might be due to distance and the cost of travel.

The last memories of my Aunt Cindy are now forever captured through the oral history I collected in the summer of 2009. She passed away at the young age of fifty-one due to complications with the H1N1 flu virus on October 25, 2009. Sadly, the last words of her interview will never be realized.

I'm just proud of who I am, and what I've accomplished, and it's not over yet. I think God has other plans for me to stay on this earth so I'm going to use it to the best of my knowledge. But definitely if I think of anything else I'll get a hold of you. (Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

She will never be able to share the experiences of the rest of her life with me, but I know that it is now that much more important for me to share her story with others, as a testament to her life, and the lessons that we can learn from it. For the women I interviewed that were not my blood relatives, I also wondered how our relationship might evolve. While we said goodbye we have still connected with one another through other means, sharing information about important events occurring in Minnesota, adding that

many more people into a Chicana network concerned with Latina/o activism, positive social change, and relevant cultural events.

Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai in their anthology *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), note that often the process of oral history collection can be empowering and that women can be a part of the ideas behind what they want to share but they often have to navigate/negotiate the oral history interview questions (instead of posing/shaping the questions themselves), ultimately demonstrating the imbalance of power between researcher and researched. They further argue, most of the time the relationship ends following the end of the oral history collection or once the work is published, specifically stating that “the scholar/interviewer typically returns to her life and her scholarly enterprise, having transformed women’s words into various written forms, but having also walked away—usually for good—from the situation that led her to her subject in the first place” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, pp. 2-3). I think that my project disrupts this progression of scholar as taker of knowledge and also questions the necessary end of further relationships with the women I have interviewed. Instead, it is impossible for me to leave these relationships. For my family members, we continue to build new understandings of our familial relationships. For the Minnesota women, I am now Facebook friends with all of them and am connected into their networks of activism and community engagement in ways that I would not have otherwise been without their purposeful connection with me outside of this oral history context. This relationship development has not come about as a one-way relationship either, I have wanted to foster deeper relationships with them, and from my reflections, and they have wanted to form closer bonds with me as well.

While I was initially troubled by the trend that the three women in my family all asked me after we finished their oral history collection, “Did I do ok?” I began to theorize that this lack of confidence in their own stories did not mean they did not think they were important, rather years of living in a world where their experiences and stories were marginalized taught them that their stories were in fact not valued.¹⁹ This written text is the affirmation that they (and all women who participated in the project) *did ok*. In fact, they did better than I could have ever imagined.

When I think back and compare their reactions to those of the Minnesota women who were more likely to seek me out and want to share their stories, I am reminded again about the complicated nature of this type of research. There are no clear cut lines as to which “attitude” lends itself to a better analysis, rather the multiple means through which they came to the research becomes the point of departure. Because the world has told us (Chicanas/women of color) that we are unimportant throughout our lives, that we are not worthy of multiple representations in the media, that our truths are never “The Truth,” I want to call attention to the ways that Chicanas in the Midwest challenge this through their oral histories. As a Midwestern Chicana, it is clear through the ways scholars organize analysis of identities around gender, race, sexuality and class in intersectional ways are complicated to explain. Nevertheless, the revelations of the struggles Chicanas face in the Midwest also point to the ways that racism and other forms of discrimination are still forces with which we all have to deal through on the ground resistance, education, and the continued telling of stories.

¹⁹ Their trepidation could have also emerged from the close relationship that we share as mother/daughter, aunt/niece or from fear of looking “dumb,” or from their distance from academia. I include this vignette to signify the larger thought process I had after hearing this reaction consistently upon the completion of their oral histories.

Through a mestiza lens (which honors contradictions, and the blurring of binaries, boundaries and borders) the following chapters will explore these stories, these women's truths through the themes that arose in these oral histories that weave in and out of testimonio narratives and perhaps allude to a repositioning of what Paolo Freire (1976) acknowledge as "political consciousness." I seek the answer to the question "What does a Chicana identity look like in the Midwest?" An answer, through my analysis of eight Chicanas' stories, emerges in the application of a mestiza methodology, where I reveal embodied understandings of identity by seeking out women's words that are too often ignored. This is not a comprehensive understanding of identity, but an invitation to understand *these* women's lives, in the hopes of creating new discourses about Midwestern Chicana identities. This method validates women's stories as sites of knowledge and highlights how the processes of storytelling move communal pain to places of healing while exploring issues of gender, race, class, sexuality and home in this geographic context.

I AM THE STORY PART II

LOS CUCUMBRES

Standing at the sink in my childhood home my mother takes the cucumber into her hand and cuts off the top. She quickly runs it across the cleanly cut side and then promptly throws the nub into the sink. Rotating the cucumber around she says, “this is how my mama does it, I don’t know why but she does it like this and so do I.” Fifteen years later I am standing at my kitchen sink, several states separate us while I quickly rub the cucumber tip across it’s glistening white insides. Before I discard it I know that this connects me to my mother and my grandmother at that exact moment.

As the youngest girl-child my mother reflects that she wasn’t able to learn Spanish as well as her older sisters. She has never been proud of the fact that growing up in a small town in Kansas meant there wasn’t much incentive for being bilingual. By the time she began to talk her sisters were in school already speaking mostly English at home. While my Aunt Gloria speaks it with the most ease (the eldest sister) my mother’s tongue has never quite been able to wrap itself around Spanish with much proficiency. To this day she has always been able to understand what is said around her in Spanish but rarely able to speak, to contribute to the conversation in the language her own mother spoke to her. When I was growing up with my siblings, she would often laugh at herself when we would ask her to translate common words from English into Spanish to help us with our homework in school. When one of her children asked her what cucumber in Spanish was she very proudly and excitably said, “I know this one! Cucumbre!”

While cucumbre is not the word that means cucumber in Spanish, it isn’t too difficult to imagine how my mother would come to know the vegetable in this way. Her own mother’s first and most comfortable language is Spanish and while my mother was growing up she was learning English. I imagine a lot of words became Spanglishized in the Falcon household. When I listen to my abuela speak today she often mixes Spanish in with her English words, often my brain doesn’t even catch when she does it, it’s her way of speaking.

Knowing this about my family then, it isn’t surprising that Spanish was still a part of her and our (her children’s) lives. When my abuela calls she often speaks in Spanish to my mother and she responds in English. After baths every night we had to make sure that we moisturized our skin with “crema” a word used so much that I didn’t know the English word to describe “lotion” for a long time. My younger sisters are called las niñas by all of us, including our gringo father, when we discuss the pair of them together. They are still lovingly called that to this day.

Pepino is a pretty word, it rolls off the tongue with ease, but I like cucumbre better. I guess that means I will run the risk of being laughed at when I cut the end off my cucumbre and quickly rub it against the intact side of the vegetable before tossing it in the sink, just like my mama and mi abuela.

CHAPTER ONE

Exploring Intimacies in Chicana Oral History Collection: A Mestiza Methodology

Before I started recording Martha Casteñon's oral history in February 2009 I had met with her five months before in August 2008. We had exchanged emails after I had contacted a board member of a Moorhead women's organization, Mujeres Unidas. When Martha and I met for the first time, I wanted to introduce her to the project and get her ideas on whether she might be interested in being a part of it. She and I talked about a lot of issues that first meeting. I showed up with only a pen and a notepad, not my recorder. I did not think that Martha would say so many wonderful things and that I would regret not being able to capture every word. After taking furious notes I quickly typed them up so as not to forget important elements of our conversation.

This pre-meeting with Martha is unique in that I did not spend the same amount of time with any of the others. For one, my family members agreed to be a part but did not express needing to know more information about the project. Though I did spend about twenty minutes with each of them going over the goals of the project and what I would be doing with their stories. Similarly, the other women from Minnesota who agreed to be a part of the project were convinced of my pitch through email, so a pre-meeting with them was unnecessary. After my first oral history interview with Martha and recognizing that her initial meeting and then oral history collection took up six hours of her time, I wanted to be respectful of the time I was asking women to commit. This is all to say that Martha's interview was unique in that I really felt I was able to get to know her in a way that I was unable to with my other respondent's from Minnesota. Not only

was I able to get to know Martha but this extra meeting also allowed me to learn more about the context of what she perceived life to be for a Chicana in Moorhead, Minnesota.

I want to pull out some key points that she brought up at that initial meeting from my field notes to highlight one of the methodological aspects of doing this oral history research. I wanted to know what she saw as her role in Mujeres Unidas and why this is important to her. The following is an excerpt from my field notes on Martha's answers to these questions.

Field Notes: August 23, 2008

[Martha] tells me about the way that Mujeres Unidas (MU) came to be, starting with Sister Carmen who recognized a need for a place for women to come and share their experiences, to learn they are not alone and to find a way to put that into action. Mujeres is a place for this to happen. It's also struggled to be recognized in the community, but finally/recently it has gained more respect after a change in leadership.

In response to whether she saw it as a feminist organization she thought that she is not as traditional as some of the other women involved. She thinks it is difficult to get [more women] involved, she finds that so many of them are "traditional." At this point she starts listing why she's not traditional, she was married and divorced once, she lives with her current partner but doesn't want to get married again, she was pregnant and then got married, her daughter committed suicide and she is a very active in raising awareness and drawing attention to this cause, she has a large tattoo on her chest commemorating her daughter's life.

Back to MU she talks about how she has been a board member over the last year. She likes how it is trying to get Latinas to empower themselves. They are concerned with high drop out rates of young girls especially in Moorhead. She also notes that MU is really getting involved with the community. She says it's important to get involved if you want to see change, like for the upcoming election she (and MU) knows that everyone needs to be voting, so they are working with Centro Cultural (another Moorhead organization) for registering people to vote.

When asked about the challenges that exist for women in Moorhead/Fargo she says:

- Some times women don't want to "rock the boat" or they don't want to say anything. She thinks that some women who are very traditional are afraid to be "troublemakers."
- She thinks that some women let "ourselves" fall into the same stereotypes that they might even be trying confront, like if her son were to get married, people would ask her if his fiancé knows how to make tortillas or have a clean house as indicators she would be a good wife/woman.
- She also says that women who go to bars are seen as "loose." She tells the story about if her and her friends wanted to grab a beer and they were seen at the bar

after a certain time (like 6:00pm) they would be seen as bad women, whores/ “loose.”

- She also mentioned “culture clash” as a major problem.
 - She sees the role of MU to push for parent involvement in their daughters’ lives. She wants to teach girls that they don’t have to marry their first boyfriend. This also involves talking to parents about supporting girls going to college.
-

These insights on her own community in our pre-meeting allow me to interpret what Martha says in her oral history (when I recorded it) by always situating her thoughts within this context. It is a context in which I would argue she is constantly fighting against gender and racial cultural norms that are expecting her to act in a particular way that she expresses as “traditional,” and which she is ready and willing to resist.

It is also with an understanding of this context then that I approached our interview session where I would record her oral history with excitement. As it was February in Northwestern Minnesota, I parked my car and shuffled across the snow-packed street to her front door. Martha had invited me to her house to do the recording and when I got there I was welcomed with a giant hug and asked if I wanted some coffee or water. Her Husky had just given birth to puppies that had still not opened their eyes and she kept them in one of the back rooms of her house. She gave me a quick tour and I got to pet the puppies before we finally sat down at her kitchen table in her warm house. In the background a radio had a low hum of the Spanish radio station, playing Mexican corridos, which reminded me of the presence of Chicana/os in Minnesota, an obvious legacy of migrant streams that have traveled from Texas (and Mexico) to Minnesota for over a century. At the end of this interview I wrote the following in my *February 7, 2009 Field Notes*— “Wow, if this is what research feels like, I like it, I feel energized, ready to work, excited to do something with these stories, and nervous that I won’t be able to do them the justice they deserve.”

I point to this particular experience in collecting one of my oral histories to speak to the importance of consciously acknowledging my emotions as I situate myself within the research. It is this awareness of experiencing that shapes this chapter's exploration of my research methodology along with my constant need to disrupt conventional thinking about the "distant" researcher or objective scholar.

1.1 My Story is not Mine Alone

As a Chicana who constantly navigates the borderlands, it should come as no surprise that my dissertation project takes on multiple methods and approaches. If I am able to survive in the many categories of my own identity, my research can most certainly endure without strict boundaries narrowly defining the methods, which I purposefully employ. Further, it is crucial that I am able to explore issues of Midwestern Chicana and Mexican American identities with a multi-method approach that is based in lived experiences.

This chapter explores the tensions that arise in my research: eight interviews with Chicanas in the Midwest who explore their own journeys that I have read as painful, personal and powerful. As the collector of these oral histories I recognize I must examine the methodological framework that shapes my research and writing approaches to uncover the difficult processes within oral history research and what I see as the value of placing women's voices in conversation with one another. I explore how one is able to integrate the self into one's own research while writing about other women's lives. The result of this interrogation of the self through research profoundly showcases the bringing together of voices and the melding of stories based on life experiences— stories that then begin to point toward what we might potentially learn about what it means to live in the

Midwest as a Chicana. I have utilized a framework, which I call, mestiza methodology as my approach to conducting and analyzing my research. While I understand that “methodology” emerges out of quantitative research models, which provide concrete research approaches for analyzing data, I borrow the term to detail the approaches I deem necessary in analyzing these oral histories. It is true that no one can “replicate” this analysis through this methodology, yet I argue for understanding the value in illuminating my research processes in order to counter dominant research practices that often leave out this level of reflection.

Through honoring Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, this framework fuses the critical thinking skills necessary to survive as a Chicana in the Midwest with how I have approached my research to create a mestiza methodology that I employ as a means to historically contextualize these women’s stories – to firmly situate and anchor them. Mestiza methodology grows out of Anzaldúa’s notions of the borderlands and *la consciencia de la mestiza* to provide a framework of research that interrogates the Anzaldúan conceptualization of mestiza and applies it to a research methodology that embraces the ambiguities and porous boundaries of traditional methods of research and genres of writing. In critically applying the theoretical concepts of Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness and borderlands, mestiza methodology calls for purposeful embodied research – a methodology made up of constant negotiation of valuing communal and shared experiences while balancing the responsibility of the researcher. It is a way of affirming personal experiences as a means to theorize the world around us as Chicanas.

Having lived in the Midwest for approximately ten years, I have spent a significant portion of my adult life occupying the borderlands in terms of my identity as

Southwestern and/or Midwestern. I recall feeling different than others while growing up around my Chicana/o friends, because my Mexican roots grew out of Kansas not the Southwest. Out of my entire Chicana/o family, only one half of my history, were natives of Kansas, not Chicanas who have lived centuries on Southwestern land. Throughout the years that I have spent in Kansas and Minnesota, I have often felt a sense of ease that was not present in my formative years in New Mexico. In the Southwest, I was always referred to as the girl with a Kansas accent even though I had lived in Albuquerque most of my life. This is not to say that the time I have spent in the Midwest has been easy. I have also faced the pain of isolation in ways Chicana/os living in states where the “minorities” are the majority rarely experience. These feelings are potentially attributed to the awakening of my consciousness, which largely happened around the time of my senior year of high school; accordingly, this was also my last year in New Mexico. The understanding of the sense of multiple locations and identities made both the Southwest and the Midwest, for me, feel like home.

1.2 Defining My Mestiza Methodology

Mestiza methodology serves as an approach, a backdrop, a way of knowing and further, a way of learning that emerges from my own mestiza identity. The process of engaging the self in research, a process that builds on the history of the Chicana and women of color, comes directly out of the experiences of individuals living in brown flesh; it also honors the body as a major site of epistemic knowledge. I build on Chela Sandoval’s notion of the “flexibility of identity” in which she details how Chicanas and other U.S. third world women of color have historically deployed political identities to survive “conquest, colonialism, and domination” (1998, p. 362). I agree that we not only

have to continue to navigate within “third spaces” because of this legacy and the contemporary formations of oppression against us as Chicanas but this necessarily must also involve how we think about the ways we approach research and navigate the spaces of the academy. I have come to understand “flexibility of identity” in many ways. For the purposes of this project it is in the way that we wear different masks when conducting oral history research, especially when we are doing work within our community, which can be an exhilarating and incredibly intimate (as well as a potentially scary) process. In this way it is impossible to disconnect the self from our Chicana feminist research as we must constantly be employing “flexible identities” within and beyond our research that means something to us.

In *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of race in Chicano Culture*, Rafael Pérez-Torres builds on Chicana feminist foundations when he speaks to the ways that using a “critical mixture of race” or “mestizaje” has shaped our understanding of “third spaces.” He explains,

Chicana/o critical discourse has privileged the role played by mestiza and mestizo bodies. These bodies serve to destabilize the unity and coherence integral to racial and gender hierarchies as these hierarchies seek to naturalize unequal relations of power; that is, mixed-race bodies undo identity formations based on purity... Similarly, Chicana culture, in claiming its mestizaje, undertakes a project of decentralization. Meaning is undone in order to forge new understandings based on the doubleness implicit in mestizaje, a doubleness that leads to a third state or condition. (2006, p. 3)

This sense of doubleness is not only intended to serve us in the ways we may conceive our identities but I argue we must also think about how this theorizing of “third space,” “flexibility,” and “mestizaje” can and should be channeled to create ethical models for conducting research within one’s own community. I envision a mestiza methodology to encompass this sense of flexibility and a need to carve out new spaces for thinking about the relationships between those in a research relationship and the ways we analyze the research that emerges from these relationships. I contend that this must be done with a healthy reflection on the role of the researcher and by situating the research in the relationships that exist or develop between the “researcher” and the “researched.”

Mestiza methodology allows for the blurring of boundaries and ambiguities and requires a conscious ability to theorize the material world or social location and one’s place within it. My approach to developing a framework of mestiza methodology for my research is predicated on my personal experiences as one who constantly lives “in-between.” Gloria Anzaldúa explains this feeling and the power that lies “in-between” throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999). As a Chicana with a white father I feel a profound connection to Anzaldúa’s concepts of living in the borderlands and building a mestiza consciousness. While having a white father has bestowed certain privileges upon me, such as light-brown skin, and the occasional ability to “pass,” having to navigate a biracial existence has introduced me to what mestiza consciousness means – surviving and living in two worlds and fitting in neither of them fully. These ideas embody my daily living and become the theory that I live “in the flesh,” to borrow a term from Cherríe Moraga, and also guide my understanding of what I see as valuable research approaches (Moraga, 2002). In this way, I have adapted Anzaldúa’s theoretical concepts

into a living methodology that shape both my life and my research practices. Anzaldúa calls for “a new mestiza consciousness,” in which she articulates the many different situations that la mestiza faces in her daily life. She says,

These numerous possibilities leave *la mestiza* floundering in uncharted seas... She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. (1999, p. 101)

In my own experience I understand Anzaldúa's emphasis on a consciousness that embraces multiple potential modes of thought that can be used as a survival skill; an experience that women of color have been confronting and resisting throughout their daily lived practices. It is a shift in thought that moves from the individual to the communal. It manifests itself in the way that recognize my problematically visible self when I am with my white father and invisible self when with my brown mama. This consciousness is present in the ways that I see myself as different than those who hold power; yet I also realize that there is power in difference. In a world that systematically oppresses you as a woman of color, one must be able to navigate as one whose relationship to power is more tenuous than those who feel entitled to it. These possibilities are the ways in which one subsists with the barrage of information that comes at her, saying that she is both useful for some things (housecleaning, working in the field, bearing children) and dispensable because of these very same things. La mestiza then, needs to find a way to deal with “floundering” and her move away from deadly rigidity. Anzaldúa states,

Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. *La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (1999, p. 101)

In other words, “the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” and perhaps the most transformative aspect of the theory: “not only does she sustain contradictions she turns the ambivalence into something else” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 101). It is in this sense that I embrace my own research practices and identify as a new mestiza. Working with women’s oral histories is rife with contradictions; the stories that women have shared with me are interpreted from many different perspectives, angles, and modes of analysis. They hold within them contradictions and ambiguities and my understanding of the messages within them are also full of questions that are always up for debate. In this way, I approach this research and my own thinking about the world around me as something that is non-linear. My perspective is not simply moving from point A to point B, but rather involves intricate storylines that intersect, merging and diverging both to and from one another. It is through the process of containing the many voices and stories that something powerful can be gained by means of contradictions and ambiguities. Even before these stories are read here, there is power in the connections that grow out of the story – telling, sharing, and feeling. Writing about the stories and the process behind them communally and flexibly builds upon the trust that is shared in the telling of these stores, Through my

retelling and analysis of these stories, the trust bestowed upon me by the women who share their stories opens spaces for new political possibilities.

The mixture of methods that I purposefully engage with in this project include oral history, testimonio, storytelling, (auto)ethnography, field research, women's written narratives and the critical processes of bringing together Chicana feminist theory with the lived practices that emerge out of the eight oral histories I collected. It is both my story and the stories of the Chicanas who gave their time to this project that shape this process in meaningful ways. In the following section I put this call toward honoring "flexibility" and "ambiguities" into practice as I trouble the assumption of oral history as simply the taking of knowledge, and instead explore the oral history methodology as one in which we should recognize and honor the development of women's relationships with one another.

Some scholars might argue this negotiation of understanding one's own positionality has already been theorized within the "insider/outsider" researcher framework. Chicana researchers have been reflecting on these categories of "insider," "outsider," and "insider/outsider" since the inception of Chicana feminism's development in academia.²⁰ I have always been what many Chicana scholars who have come before me would deem as an, "insider/outsider" researcher, trapped and learning to thrive in the borderlands. The "insider/outsider" framework implies that one has to be in opposition to a research subject, yet align oneself with them on the other hand, to me this still leads us to either/or thinking (despite the development of the category "insider/outsider"). I wish to think about the connections I have made with women throughout this project reflect

²⁰ See for example, Maxine Baca Zinn's article, "Field Research in Minority Communities: Ethical, Methodological and Political Observations by an Insider" (1979) and Patricia Zavella's "Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants" (1993).

the give and take between *relationships* (storyteller and story listener specifically) as opposed to a category based on our moments in the research process.

I could argue the insider/outsider was the case many times in the process of collecting the oral histories for this project. For instance, I was younger than all of my research participants, yet I am Chicana. I was maybe seen as not always a Midwestern Chicana, but I was still able to pick up things about Midwestern culture that a true outsider might not. I was always the researcher and they were always the researched. Yet, each time I inserted myself in the narrative, I blurred those boundaries. A mestiza methodology builds on the idea of “insider/outsider” in even more fluid terms. Challenging the very notion of who gets to determine what is deemed “insider” or “outsider.”

When bringing it back to embodied research, it is much more about the building of a relationship between two women for shared goals. An example I can point to is the fact that many of the women who gave their oral histories for this project are looking forward to using their oral histories as a jumping point for their own writing. At least three of them said they were planning on writing a book or some other writing that related to their lives. Consequently, their participation in this study encouraged them, or revitalized their goals for their own writing. Through this acknowledgment the research is not just traveling unilaterally from “researched” to “researcher.” Another example was the exchange of ideas and stories between myself and the women who participated in this research, I did not simply absorb their stories silently, rather I actively engaged with the collection of and was often complementing their stories with anecdotes of my own experiences or from drawing connections to the stories shared by other women. Thus my

method was less interviewer/interviewee and more of a flexible and communal processing of experience – a kind of Freirean learning through mutual sharing or shared dialogues.

1.3 Understanding Women’s Bonds: Intimacies of Chicana Relationships

I see the commitment to a mestiza methodology as closely related to the development of intimacies. It exposes the intimacies between “researcher” and “researched” along with a commitment to being responsible, respectful, and ethical in doing research such as this. I use these terms in quotes because I disagree with this binary and to emphasize that this is the language I am trying to move away from. When intimacies are developed between two people in this research context I believe there are no longer these strict boundaries between who is the “researcher” and who is the “researched.” Exploring intimacies is about the processes of (sometimes) having to get to know someone quickly and developing a bond and trust in a short amount of time and this also applies to the practices of researching women who I have known my entire life. This project has shaped my views on a mestiza methodology invested in and conscious of the strengthening or development of intimate relationships between women (mother/daughter, aunt/niece, stranger/confidant); through confronting the intimate challenges for myself (having to work beyond what I perceive to be difficult conversations and being comfortable in ambiguities); in the passing of intimate knowledges from one person to another (multi-directionally); and with the recognition of how intimate settings play a part in the passing of knowledge (theorizing the kitchen table).

In “The Intimacies of Four Continents” Lisa Lowe defines intimacy in three ways purposefully moving away from an idea or understanding of intimacy as “usually taken to mean romantic or sexual relations, familiarity, or domesticity” (2006, p. 192). Her text pushes scholars to think about, “not simply about what we know and do not know of the links and interdependencies between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas but also what the circumstances and conventions were for producing these distinctly shaped comparative knowledges” (Lowe, 2006, p. 192). Instead she, “employ[s] the term against the grain to elaborate three meanings, which [she] place[s] in relation to one another within the emergence of modern liberal humanism” (Lowe, 2006, pp. 192-3). She then defines intimacy, “as spatial proximity or adjacent connection” (p. 193); “of privacy, often figured as conjugal and familial relations in the bourgeois home, distinguished from the public realm of work, society, and politics” (p. 195); and in the context of, “the variety of contacts among slaves, indentured persons, and the mixed-blood free peoples living together on the islands” (p. 202). In similar ways I move beyond thinking about intimacy in a romantic way but rather privilege the intimacies of knowledge production and development of relationships in this particular research context.

In the seminal anthology *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), Kristina Minister contributes a chapter that explores the differences in the ways that women speak to one another and the feminist practices that oral historians must consider to ensure that projects allow for women’s specific gendered patterns of speech. Further she discusses the ways in which oral history has emerged from an androcentric model of oral narration and developed out of male social science scholars. The expectation is that (like the male orator) the interviewer will ask a question and then

indicate it is time for the oral history respondent to “take the floor,” or perhaps more precisely dominate and speak at his audience. However, women’s modes of speaking to one another are more about building relationships, less linear (talking over one another, or holding several conversations at once) and are more about forming a relationship between women through speech practices (Minister, 1991). She goes on to note that, “the standard oral history frame—topic selection determined by interviewer questions, one person talking at a time, the narrator ‘taking the floor’ with referential language that keeps within the boundaries of selected topics—denies women the communication form that supports the topics women value” (Minister, 1991, p. 35).

Mestiza methodology engages with these practices, allowing the scholar the means to seek out these different forms of speech, where the interviewer enters into the conversation and facilitates the practices of women speaking to one another in order to uncover the topics that are the most pertinent to women’s lives. This is one way of creating spaces for women to explore their own lives in the ways that they want to discuss them, moving away from the idea that we have to have a linear progression, thus being able, as the interviewer, to see where the discussion takes you. This is evident in the ways I have approached the collection of my oral histories. I would reason further that being aware and open to different communication styles is only really facilitated through acknowledging that the oral history process is about developing intimate relationships (in this case between women).

As a graduate student there seems to be a tension between finding “the answer” and being academically sophisticated enough to live with not always knowing the answer. It may be counterintuitive to believe that research should be about ambiguities,

but this is exactly what I have come to recognize oral history research to be. One aspect of oral history collection (especially in the case of gathering women's stories) is about the value of writing ourselves into history as Emma Pérez suggests.²¹ However, what we gain from the ambiguities in oral history research is not always considered. Understanding Anzaldúa's concepts of borderlands and *la mestiza* as a methodological approach to research allows us to value ambiguities, uncertainties and silences in order to mold them into a powerful teaching tool that might have otherwise been overlooked. In the Freirean sense, this is a communal or mutual process where all participants (including the researcher) learn *with* and through each other. I also contend that this ability to be open to what might be unspoken in oral histories can only occur by directly acknowledging one's own position and personal stake in the research. For instance, I speak to many points in my oral history collection where I was almost held back by my own insecurities and assumptions about women's own comfort level in discussing sexual matters. I had to move past this intimate challenge and face my own trepidation to broach such topics and I believe that my oral history texts are much richer because of it. I also know that being able to approach intimate subjects furthered the development of intimate relationships between myself and my oral history respondents.

An excellent example that emerges from my fieldwork involves the interview I conducted in July of 2009 with my Aunt Cindy. Sitting at her kitchen table in the heat of summer, I reflected on the similarities and differences between collecting her oral history and that of Martha's, completed five months earlier. My aunt and uncle had openly welcomed me into their home to spend the night before my Aunt Lilly came to pick me

²¹ For more on Pérez' call to write ourselves into history see *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999). For an example of collecting oral histories as a way of writing women into history see, Rothschild and Hronek's *Doing what the day brought: An Oral History of Arizona Women* (1992).

up in Topeka the next day to travel on to complete more interviews the next day. I had come from a couple of busy days of travelling from Minneapolis with a stop in Lawrence, Kansas to visit some friends from college. I was tired, but excited to see my aunt and uncle.

In the background of her interview imagine a whirring fan, rotating on an axle cooling us as we talked. We had an amazing conversation before, after, and during the oral history collection. One of her biggest concerns seemed to be that my cousin, (her daughter Ashley), was no longer attending school and my aunt wanted me to impress upon her the value of a college education. The fact that she could feel the importance of this project for my own educational future seemed to focus a lot of our discussion on how I could help Ashley with being committed and returning to her studies. The next day, I held up my end of what I certainly felt to be a bargain even though we had not made it a formal verbal contract. I visited with my cousin and along with her dad/my uncle we visited the Brown V. Board of Education National Historic Landmark in Topeka, Kansas. I spoke about my joys in college and how college had helped me to pursue dreams that would be impossible without it. My interview with my Aunt Cindy was a rich and rewarding experience and though I have yet to successfully convince Ashley to go back to college, I hope that in witnessing my academic project and her mother's investment in it, my cousin Ashley will see the value in a higher education.

Directly following our interview which lasted about two hours, Cindy was so excited about the opportunity to participate in this type of project that she asked me if I would do the same interview with her mother. Even though it was late I was very excited to have another woman's oral history and I was encouraged by Cindy's own excitement

for the project. So, around 10:00pm we drove over to her mother's (Margaret's) house. I learned that this was where Cindy and her four siblings grew up, a small, unassuming two bedroom house where her mother still resides. Inside we all sat around discussing life and laughing about how the last time Margaret had seen me was at my Aunt and Uncle's wedding when I was about five years old. The following are my field notes directly following both of these women's interviews.

Field Notes: July 16, 2009

I've been dealing with the notion of the "wise Latina" as this term has been thrown about quite a lot in the media as of late in reference to the soon-to-be confirmed FIRST Latina Supreme Court Justice. The white republicans have been tearing her down for a comment she made in a speech about how her background benefits her in ways that white men just can't fathom. My Aunt Cindy said the same thing tonight in her interview. Yes, she is different, but because of that difference she is stronger and often has a different perspective to add to the conversation. I realize at this moment that although the white men on the committee who are grilling Sotomayor find the term "wise Latina" to be some type of contradiction that I am constantly surrounded by wise Latinas. We are wise, our experiences have forced us to gain wisdoms that others who do not have to deal with oppression are unable to conceive. We are wise when we can look at the world and see it for what it is. We have been through so much yet we are still able to hold our heads high and be proud of what we are. Cindy's oral history interview was so powerful that she called her mom immediately to see if we could go talk to her about her life. She sat in the same room listening to her mom tell me stories and she told me when we finished, "even I learned something, I didn't know my grandpa was orphaned at 9!" It was as if three generations of wise Latinas had in that one moment joined destinies. We were walking the same path toward helping me complete a major step in my dissertation, teaching each other about the paths that we sometimes think are our sole journeys but what actually end up being shared roads. We may be walking on them at different points along the way but it is the same road, some of us have cleared the roadblocks for the path-walkers behind, some are at the beginning, some are in the middle, some are at the end, we're all taking our own paces but we're walking toward freedom. Because that is what "wise Latinas" do – we protect, we persevere, we survive.

These words that I wrote while reflecting on Sonja Sotomayor's "wise Latina" controversy demonstrate the ways that I situated my own thinking within the historical,

social, and political context of the collection of my oral histories.²² The words of my field notes also helped me to see the pattern by which the individual story becomes one which is shared. Here, Cindy encourages me to interview her mother, insisting that this become part of my project. It also reflects the wonderful opportunity I had when my oral history respondents were able to speak to one another in their interviews. Cindy and her mother discuss certain events or questions throughout Margaret's interview. I believe one aspect of Cindy's excitement in asking her mother to take part in the oral history project was her recognition of her mother's investment in family history. When we both went to visit Margaret, Cindy's presence enabled me to better collect Margaret's story. In this case, the sharing of familial history was more important to me than the fear Margaret's potential self-censorship due to the company of her daughter.

Cindy's (or other women's) excitement for the project has encouraged my own enthusiasm for the power within these oral histories. It has often been in the writing when things might get difficult that I can turn to and remember how wonderful it felt to hear these women's stories in order to push through with more writing or deepen my analysis.

²² In late July and early August 2009 President Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayor as a Supreme Court Justice. Consequently, Sotomayor's personal and judicial histories were unearthed over the month-long confirmation process. While she is the first Latina Judge nominated and confirmed for the highest level of the US court system, she did not bypass this landmark without several dissenters who questioned not only her ability to do the job at hand, but also challenged her personal worldviews on what it meant to be a Latina. When Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor said in a speech at a conference that she considered herself to be a wise Latina, she outraged white (male) conservatives who went on to imply that she was racist. This prejudiced thought grew out of the fact that she stated that as a woman of color she possessed knowledge about the world because of her Latina identity in ways that white men do not and cannot due to their often-limited worldview. The actual quotation in "question" comes from a 2001 speech she delivered at a conference on Latina/o judges and reads, "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life." What seemed to come of this conflict amongst the white men who towered above Sotomayer as she was questioned about her comment (that she had made in an entirely different context) was that the notion of a wise Latina was in fact a contradiction, and that as a Latina, she had no right to claim that she might have knowledge that white men might not. In my life, this has meant that I, according to these white men (and in general, those who align their politics with this type of thinking), could never be a wise Latina. This revelation forced me to think about the ways throughout my life that this has been an unspoken truth.

I do this because of the intimacy created in this process and the amazing responsibility I feel to do their words and stories justice as I continue to work with their oral histories as texts.

1.4 Mestiza Methodology as Embodied Research: Intimate Settings for Intimate Connections

The stories collected here challenge us to think about the content, the lessons within the stories and the delivery, as well as the ways the stories are disseminated. This process is one that cannot simply be thought of as “collecting data” to be analyzed, but rather it is the intricate processes of hearing stories and finding the meaning within them that should be valued. In other words, I am not concerned with statistical analyses of words that come up throughout all interviews or coding, but am instead interested in the moments that feel important for me to explore. The point being, because of the personal nature of these stories, women’s lives and the sharing of women’s joys and suffering throughout, I cannot step back and approach them without feeling, emotions or the connections I feel to the women who told these stories, or the women themselves.

Mestiza methodology then reveals the embodied self (and the process of embodied theorizing and analytical methods) in research; provides a deeper, more meaningful connection to women’s words and lives; centers the ability to interpret meanings from women’s stories and lives with multiple perspectives without an interpreter (although I am interpreting these stories in my analysis of them the raw data could be viewed alternatively depending on the context of the scholar analyzing them); and creates spaces for reflection on meaningful connections between the researcher and her research.

As I have written in this chapter through my reflections on undertaking these oral histories, many of the interviews that I conducted over the course of 2009 took place at women's kitchen tables and living rooms. I am amazed by the generosity of women opening their homes to me and continue to recognize the privilege of recording their life experiences in spaces where other major events have happened in their lives. The space of women's houses and in particularly the kitchen, traditionally known as the woman's space inside her home, is an amazing place to be. As I listened to these women's stories about their lives, about their childhoods, about their parents and their lives as mothers, I often thought about the fact that those kitchens were spaces where these stories had probably been told to other women many times before I arrived. Cynthia Perez Falcon herself notes in her oral history that she most often feels at home in the comfort of her own kitchen. She says,

So I think of home as grand central station for us. You've got to meet here [the kitchen] first before you go anywhere else. We always have breakfast, we start our day off all of us eating breakfast, like I said, I usually sit here, I have that TV in there, I would rather sit here and watch TV, I just feel more comfortable here in my kitchen, even though I don't like to cook, it's still my favorite place!"
(Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

There is something profound to be said about research being conducted in spaces outside of the physical buildings of the academy. Just as my research tries to illuminate stories that are often not heard within the academy, I see the value in approaching women as contributors to this research outside of these spaces. Where and when it is possible, I conducted this type of research in these central spaces, because of the level of comfort women themselves feel in familiar environments and the ways that the space of the home becomes another character in the saga of a woman's life stories. This additional layer of getting to know the women behind the stories they share in their oral histories is part of

being an embodied researcher. One cannot simply remain the distant observer when one is invited into someone's home, in that case, the researcher is forced to be herself in someone else's home, whether she knows them or not. The relationship between two women is negotiated within a space that is full of love, family and safety, which only enriches the process of collecting a woman's oral history.

Almost all of my interviews took place inside women's homes, in fact all but two. While this is the obvious space for these interviews to occur in the case of family members, the meetings with women in Minnesota felt more comfortable in women's homes. I conducted one interview at my office on campus, which seemed to have a more formal feeling to the interview, where it was not as easy for me to disconnect myself from the performance of a typical researcher and another took place at a local coffee shop. I wish I had been able to conduct all of these interviews in women's homes, at their kitchen tables, because I do feel there is an extra layer of connection between myself and the women sharing stories that demonstrates the power of embodied research. I am certainly not implying that the kitchen or the home is always a liberating space, as I take up the positives and negatives of these spaces in the following chapters. But it is, as Black feminist writer Barbara Smith and others have argued, the kitchen table is a repository of women's epistemologies.

Again, I see the relationships that emerge out of these methods as necessarily based in intimacy. This intimacy can only be recognized when one is attuned to what being an embodied researcher means. I see it in the ways that I am always situating my experiences within the context of these women, either in the interview itself in order to gain trust and shared understanding, or in the ways that I write about their stories. To me,

this process is facilitated by replicating the ways that knowledge has often been passed from women to women (at least from my family experience) through stories and making meaning in places that at first glance might seem oppressive – like in the kitchen, at the kitchen table.

I am by no means the first feminist scholar to understand the value and power of mining women’s stories from the kitchen table. Barbara Smith writes on this topic in an article devoted to the Kitchen Table Press, a women of color press developed in the 1980s which was responsible for publishing key women of color feminist texts that continue to be cited today such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s (Eds.) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and Barbara Smith’s (Ed.) *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). She argues that the name “Kitchen Table Press” was chosen,

...because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grass roots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class privilege to do the work we need to do. (Smith, 1989, p. 11)

This same sentiment informs my ideas on the power of the kitchen table. It is where the knowledge of women of color has been passed on throughout generations and it has been a pleasure taking part in this transfer of knowledge at women’s kitchen tables. This setting also allowed for the easy development of trust and bonds. I felt this in the warm welcomes into women’s homes, in the glimpses of understanding a day in their life

through this interview process, and in the familiar sensations of being surrounded by women who care for one another (whether that be with family or not).

In illuminating these women's stories, I have sought out the significance of a kitchen table; exposing the richness of everyday life as holding deeper meanings for yourself and those around you. Aligning oneself by sharing similarities with one's research participants is not simply an academic venture, rather in the case of my research this creation of community that is a byproduct of my interviews is the cornerstone of intense relationships that one's academic questions actually fosters. While recording their life stories, I heard the hopes their parents held for their lives as those compared with their personal dreams as young girls and the reality of their adult lives filled with pain, sadness, joy, happiness. I heard their regrets and future plans alongside warnings and advice for the Chicanas coming of age in the Midwest now.

As an embodied (inside/outside) researcher, the process forced me to explore my own feelings toward not only the content of these women's stories, but also the pain that resonates long after the last echoes of hearing their stories. I had to explore how I have emotionally dealt with their pain and joy. They have become part of my story. My life has been touched and changed because of hearing and recording these women's life stories. My academic voice is now rich with my experiences and a never-ending consciousness of my role in opening the door for others' interpretations of these women's oral histories.

1.5 Intimate Knowledges – Pain and Loss in Life and Research

Chicana feminists and women of color have always brought attention to the importance of shared stories as they are passed down from generation to generation. I

credit this to what Edén Torres describes as communal pain, or the legacies of historical trauma. In her groundbreaking book, *Chicana without Apology* Torres examines how theories around Post-Traumatic Stress may account for a lot of the negative behaviors that are often blamed on the Chicana/o community as inherent. She clearly demonstrates how, “the effects of discrimination and dominance are cumulative” through tracing the development of behaviors such as shame culture, addiction, physical and sexual abuse stemming from a history of colonization (Torres, 2003, p. 33). Torres argues that these behaviors and feelings of anguish have been passed down through the generations because we have not had the (privilege of) time or space to truly grieve the losses of land, people, and culture that were taken from us. She highlights the danger in avoiding the traumas of the past and present, and the pain of our ancestors’ pasts as one that inevitably will affect more than the individual because as she claims, “We Chicanas/os are often communal actors, whose individual desire is subsumed by the needs of the whole” (Torres, 2003, p. 32). She continues further by saying, “Unfortunately, this way of dealing with anguish does not stop with any individual. We pass it all on to the next generation, the effect of the original trauma, the unresolved grief, the shame, the dysfunction, and the addictive behaviors” (Torres, 2003, p. 37). She resolves that Chicana writers who bring light to these pains through poetry and literature have forged the path out of this destructive cycle. “Chicana writers seem to know that pain, anger, and fear—as well as their corollary inappropriate reactions—will not dissipate without exposure. It will only grow more intense and explosive as contemporary stresses exacerbate the problems that began with social and political injustice” (Torres, 2003, p. 38). However, while exploring the effects of historical trauma and unresolved grieving, Torres also

makes it clear that the associated psychological and social problems are not explicitly expressed evenly throughout Mexican American communities, and she ultimately argues that Chicana/os are a resilient people (Torres, 2003). Thus, the vast majority of Chicanas/os have overcome, have been unaffected or have otherwise resolved these difficulties. I posit that women's pains here manifest in various ways, and I seek them out as a site from which to ground some of the analysis within this dissertation.

I believe that this type of acknowledgement of pain and how we might attempt to deal with it also emerges from shared or collective storytelling as a theory-making process. My research focuses on the processes of interpreting women's words about their lives and the stories they share as the building blocks of theoretical knowledge through the meaning that can be culled from these stories. The embodied scholar works to create theory from the ordinary, the everyday, the mundane along with the extraordinary – reading stories together in order to theorize Chicanas' lives in the Midwest.

Texts that undertake this sort of work of building theory from stories and personal experiences are works that blend personal experience storytelling with a politically conscious *testimonio* or deep reading and analysis of collective memoirs. These are works that combine many women's stories to share both individual experiences yet provide opportunities for thinking through collective pain and strength in the sharing of similar memories. Texts like *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001) and *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays* (2008) bring multiple individual stories together to form larger narratives about women's lives, hardships, joys, and women's experiences. These texts are important because of the way that communality is reflected through the individual, a complex process that Chicana

feminism (and literature as Torres suggests) particularly allows. Communality indicates both the unique aspects of one's life and the shared similarities that are held in concert with other women's stories from similar or dissimilar backgrounds (however this background is defined). Finding spaces of communality is the product of interpreting women's stories as sites of knowledge production and theoretical understandings of the world. In the following chapters I provide examples of the ways I see collective meaning making occur. Largely, it is through stories that are told with "we" as opposed to "I" that I read as either purposeful or unintentional through the language that these women use to discuss their life experiences.

In a similar way, collective theorizing can emerge from processes of writing together. *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006) details both the process and the stories and theories that emerge from collective story writing. The authors of this text, Richa Nagar and the Sangtin Writers (a group of eight women), engage with the hurt and happiness that they have experienced mostly around their involvement with their community and a Non-Governmental Organization that becomes the site where their lives intertwine.²³ These three texts are living examples of women of color learning to deal with pain and finding ways out of it through collective means. While my project is somewhat different in that I am both the interlocutor for women's stories *and* confessor or storyteller, I see the power in providing space for individual stories *and* creating opportunities for larger narratives to be able to serve as a lens to explore Chicana identity. Again, I look to Torres as she describes her own methodology for writing:

²³ The Sangtin Writers include: Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Richa Singh, Shashi Vaish, Shashibala, Surbala, and Vibha Bajpayee.

Like many of the women before me, I have consciously combined autoethnography with critical expository writing and research. Because this method has produced highly readable accounts of lived theory and practice in the past, I have used it to paint my own verbal portraits. I do not mean to imply that the life of one Chicana can speak for all others, but that it can be used as a lens through which to analyze and critique oppressive phenomena, behaviors, and symbols. (Torres, 2003, p. 3)

This project dances this delicate balance. It acknowledges the individual, yet also calls for an understanding of the collective. It looks for moments of communality when women's lives intersect and give us insight into what identity looks like in the Midwest, revealing the many ways that women produce knowledge about their lives and challenges the notion of borderlands beyond the physical space of the Mexico/U.S. border.

All three of these texts serve as examples to demonstrate the theory, knowledge production and power in being attentive to these processes that can arise from the merging of more than one story. In this way, the process of understanding one's pain in the world becomes an important component of embracing a mestiza methodology that actively engages with the many pains that s/he faces daily.

Without a doubt, this type of work is incredibly intimate and requires a commitment to being respectful of the connection that ensues. As a Chicana I have lived with the type of pain Torres references throughout my life; undertaking a deeply personal research project led me to face not only my pain, but the pain that other women (and family members) have endured in their lives. When I posed questions about their experiences as Mexican American girls and then further as women in Midwestern towns, I suspect that I asked them to unearth pains that they might never have previously

examined, much less given voice to. This seemed to be reflected through the tears that would often accompany their testimonies, sometimes stemming from events or incidents that did not seem particularly sad/painful (in my opinion as someone who had not lived these pains). While in my aunt's Kansas farmhouse sitting at the kitchen table in the early morning hours, (my Aunt) Lydia Rider cried on and off throughout the first half of her oral history. When (my mother) her sister, Estella Creel woke up for the day, the first thing Lydia said to her, with tears in her eyes and a catch in her throat was, "This interview Stella, oh my God." My mom's response, "I know me too!" (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009). This cathartic release for women then became my pain to understand and manage. In the scope of this project it means coming to terms with painful revelations from women about their lives and how to relay them to both Chicana and non-Chicana/o audiences responsibly.

Torres states, "If we avoid grieving, which necessarily includes thinking about the trauma, then we never face the injured Self" (2003, p. 35). In response to this responsibility, I have tried to do exactly as Torres urges us to do: take our pain and anger and move it toward something productive, to acknowledge it, make meaning from it and find the moments where pain and anger become places where women can work through the pain in empowering ways. I see healing possibilities for all of our collective and cumulative pains through the processes of oral history, testimonio, and storytelling. As the researcher I cannot simply measure whether or not the processes involved with sharing one's own story are inherently cathartic or "natural" healing practices. Each woman must face these things on her own terms. However, I know the power in reading others' stories of pain and healing has affected my own sense of self, as a Chicana. I see

the power in illuminating these stories in order to offer similar possibilities for other women who will read these stories, testimonios and life histories.

Writing about these stories has also been an exercise in confronting my own pain because in the collection of their oral histories, I came to share in their grief and to shoulder the responsibility of bearing this pain. The sorrows that we shared, the pain that was unspoken in the silences between stories became our (cumulative) pain. I heard my own mother discuss instances where she experienced sexual violence, and Martha revealed her pain in dealing with the loss of her teenage daughter to suicide. While these were the most striking examples, there were many other wounds that were uncovered and some that remained in the silences. All of them bore witness to the intersecting and overlapping forces of race, class, gender and sexuality.

I must clarify that the transference of pain via the interview is not to imply that I can inherently know their pain because we are all Chicanas. Instead hearing their stories of suffering, hurt or abuse and subsequently comforting them through their tears means that I too now empathetically carry their pain with me. Through writing about this collective pains that emerged out of these interviews I hope to begin healing some of these open wounds, just as two sisters conferring to each other about the difficulties present in talking about pain might lend to healing as well. The written journey and the merging of these stories can hopefully become my/our way to grieve and eventually become stronger because of it (Torres, 2003).

It also becomes a point for exploring emotions, feelings and experiences as valid sites of knowledge production. In essence, this dissertation speaks to the power of stories as a means to find ways of healing, through oral histories and in the processes of writing

these stories down and the transformative power within acknowledging joys, pains and the mundane aspects of everyday life as critical lenses for further understandings of Chicana epistemologies. Likewise, through connecting back to a sense of intimacy in the knowledge created in this setting I think it is important to think about what is revealed and how once those experiences are revealed those words can serve as a call to action, much like in the case of testimonios.

1.6 The Relationship between Testimonio and Oral History Research

The genre of testimonio is the politicization of life stories that encourage us to act in some way. Testimonio as a genre emerged out of the 1970s and 1980s by people in Latin America who were using their testimonies to resist oppressive governmental regimes. People like Rigoberta Menchu (*Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me Nació la Conciencia/I Rigoberta Menchu*, 1984), Domitila Barrios de Chungara (*Let me speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*, 1978), Alicia Partnoy (*The Little School*, 1998), and Victor Montejo (*Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*, 1987) come to mind immediately as daring to speak out for themselves and others about oppressive conditions in hopes of moving readers to take some type of action to help rectify the situation. It is a genre that has also impacted Chicana/o literature and means of writing as well. Take for instance Maria Elena Lucas' story, *Forged Under the Sun/Forjada bajo el sol: The Life of Maria Elena Lucas* (1993) as an important example of Chicanas' connection to testimonio. I also appreciate testimonio because it explicitly calls forward the personal as a means of theory-making, which is an integral component of researching with a mestiza methodological framework. Recent Chicana feminist scholars like Dolores Bernal Delgado, and her students at the University of Utah, have

focused on the healing properties of testimonio, building from Chicana feminist scholars before her, she understands testimonio to also be about sharing one's story in the context of fostering healing. In a booklet she and her students self-published, entitled *Unidas We Heal: Testimonios of Mind/Body/Soul*, they write that the processes of telling testimonio comes out of a desire for "healing the fractures of our mind/body/soul" and they call upon Anzaldúa in their framing of this mission stating further, "our testimonios seek what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a healing image, one that transforms consciousness, bridges our mind, body, and spirit, and reconnects us with others (Latinas Telling Testimonios, 2009, p.4). It also demonstrates the power in finding communal meaning from the individual's experience. It is all of these factors combine that push my thinking in wanting to align aspects of oral histories with the power that is invested within the genre of testimonio.

For example the first line of Domitila Barrios de Chungara's testimonio, "I don't want anyone at any moment to interpret the story I'm about to tell as something that is only personal. Because I think that my life is related to my people" (1978, p. 15).

Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio begins in much the same way, "My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people... My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (1984, p.1). It is significant that Menchú purposefully calls attention to the communal aspect of her story yet also firmly grounds her story in herself, as opposed to one that might have emerged from "books" or scholarly knowledge.²⁴ It is in this sense I am

²⁴ I am aware of both the attempt to discredit details included in Menchú's testimonio laid out by David Stoll in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (2007) and the scholarly discussion surrounding the controversy in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001) edited by Arturo Arias. In general, I find Stoll's criticism of Menchú's truth in her statements as evidence of my earlier

deeply invested in the processes and power of testimonio and exploring how an analysis of its key contributions as a political literature genre can lend itself well to analyzing content within oral history research. I find it also useful in thinking through the investments one makes when sharing a testimonio, and what that looks like then, if I as the scholar, provide my testimonio alongside/inter-woven with others' oral histories.

Testimonio often seems to be thought of as bound to the literary genres of scholarly inquiry, but as both oral histories and testimonios often are mediated through scholars, I think we should interrogate these two seemingly different methods of research for their similarities. I do not see this as a stretch since the notion of testimonio itself is grounded in a “speaking of truths,” coming directly from those in the midst of struggle and oppression as grassroots leaders of revolutions, local political mobilizers, or educators. I articulate the main difference between testimonio and oral history as the testimonio teller/author is telling a story in hopes of challenging the status quo and to effect change. This means, that in order to tell a testimonio it is assumed that one must have a larger sense of her place in the world, why her story might represent more than herself, or how her story might influence those in positions of power to think differently about her community that may be marginalized. However, like so many other points made about ambiguities, borderlands and deconstruction of binaries, the oral histories that I collected are neither fully devoid of Chicana concienzación, nor are they ever fully engaged with the processes of testimonio. Thus, I urge the question, how do *Chicana* oral

discussion on being able to be an “objective” scholar. Stoll’s criticisms also seem to simply serve to discredit truths by women of color, that despite discrepancies in the “factual truth” of the story, they still hold power for those who have witnessed and experienced similar atrocities. Because of this, Menchú’s insistence that her testimonio is also the story of her people should not be dismissed. It is exactly because of her testimonio (and those who came before and after her) that allow for my own approach in seeking out ways to describe and account for Chicana lives in the Midwest. It also allows for the larger discussion of “truth” which will be discussed at further lengths in Chapter Two.

histories push the boundaries of what can be interpreted as testimonios? Is the very notion of Chicana oral histories connected intimately to the processes behind testimonio? How might an understanding of the tools required for telling and listening to testimonio help us in thinking about the power in Chicana stories about their own lives and pains? Through looking at the ways that contemporary Chicana scholars have read pieces like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* as testimonio, or have utilized the writing of testimonios pedagogically in Chicana/o classrooms (Bernal, 2006) I want to applying an analysis of Chicana/o truth-telling regarding testimonios to the ways we might approach the text of oral histories.

The examples of testimonios I have provided emerge out of a political need to challenge oppressive regimes often calling out physical violence, war, and death that has been brought upon the communities from these which truth tellers speak in hopes for national liberation. This is quite different than Chicanas in the First World who suffer pain, but not in the same ways. Here, I am not trying to equate the stories that emerge out of these oral histories as the same. As someone like Rigoberta Menchú, who suffered at the hands of sanctioned governmental or military forces, has experienced a much different *need* to tell her life story as opposed to one of the women who *wanted* to be included in this project. However, I am arguing for a need to think through how testimonio methodology can inform an analysis of oral history interviews in order to retain some of the powerful political lessons that both can share. For instance, in contemporary Chicana understandings of the genre of testimonio, whether that be telling stories about one's life within the academy (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001), healing from eating disorders, stress, racism, sexual abuse and physical trauma (Méndez-Negrete,

2006; Latinas Telling Testimonios, 2009), or thinking through the power of testimonio in the feminist classroom (Delgado Bernal, 2006) testimonio at least in the Chicana feminist imagination is a flexible genre that no longer must be thought of in a narrow form of necessarily challenging oppressive governmental regimes.

In this sense then, I believe framing both of these tools (testimonio and oral history) within the context of the value of storytelling can help to blur this distinct line that exists between the two, as Chicanas who have seen the value of testimonio as healing have done before me. I contend that the power of stories exceeds the making, telling, and internalizing of these stories, regardless of what form they take, meaning that neither the telling of the stories nor the reading of stories can measure the political impact enabled by these stories. In this way, oral histories can share in the political project of testimonio, if only marginally. The other aspect of troubling the distinct characterizations of oral history or testimonio lies in my role as the scholar to analyze and interpret these stories such that the value in their stories can emerge in powerful (political) ways. I am invested in thinking through the connections between them in order to also situate Chicana oral history as a political project. While clearly not on the same level of national liberation/revolution, I argue that stories can be revolutionary in themselves and on multiple levels each oral history imparts knowledge that is not solely based on one's own life but also accesses the communal aspect of Chicanidad in the Midwest. Ultimately, I draw on my own analysis (and the potential for others to follow) of moments within the oral histories that reflect a similar movement toward change that can be seen in testimonios.

Each of these oral histories holds stories within them impart meaning, value, and varying levels of political consciousness to the listener/reader. While not a testimonio in the sense that the works I previously discussed are, these stories hold meaning and provide value to both the storyteller and listener. In much the same way that testimonio emerged out of people trying to give voice to the violence and oppression they faced in their life, I frame my oral histories as powerful tools to illuminate discrimination and oppression that these Chicanas have lived. Not only in this way, but alongside acknowledgments of their lives, actively claiming home space in the Midwest, or articulating the meanings of love as they began to understand their sexualities. Alternatively, these stories are complicated exchanges in which we as the audience have as much say as those who told the story, especially as they are mediated through scholarly interpretation. And while I do not want to characterize these oral histories as testimonios, I cannot allow them to simply be characterized a de-politicized stories. Instead, each Chicana's oral history holds moments where their stories become larger lessons for us to learn, and provide us with many ways that these amazing mujeres inform a world with their truths. I borrow from the methods of analyzing testimonio and apply them to a reading of these oral histories. It is here that I see the connection between testimonio and oral history as places where we can begin to explore deeper meanings that stories and words impart on the listener.

These women and their stories have changed me in ways that I did not anticipate which, I think is uniquely related to our shared status as women of color. I do not mean to imply that all women of color are inherently connected because we are women of color, because I know this is not true. However, women of color do share common elements of

oppression though they may be experienced differently.²⁵ My role as the researcher encompassed being a daughter, (literally and figuratively), and confidante or comadre. I do not believe this would occur if we did not share in some way the life experiences that we have lived through oppressive and unequal systems of power. The term comadre is usually intended to define women's close relationships with one another as they provide support for one another as mothers and specifically names the godmother of one's children. But it can also mean a good friend or close neighbor. While I am not a mother, and all of the women I interviewed are, I used the term to imply the deep connection that we shared with one another even if just for the short times we were together recording their oral histories. The term comadre also represents friendship, trust, confidence, support and love, which I felt many times in the working with all of these women. I choose this word because there does not seem to be a word in English that really expresses the deep connection between women that comadre does. Using Keta Miranda's words on comadrazgo, Rosa Linda Fregoso speaks to the importance and value of thinking about relationships between women in this way. She states,

Based on Catholicism's godparent kinship system, comadrazgo is a female-inflected model of reciprocity or, in the words of Keta Miranda, a 'form of feminine Chicana solidarity' encompassing familial as well as political ties of friendship and intimacy. Although largely absent from mainstream images of la familia, for decades comadrazgo has served as a kinship system crucial to women's survival in the absence of males. In light of large numbers of Chicana/Mexicana female-headed households, comadrazgo developed historically as a woman-centered alternative to

²⁵ Suzanne Pharr acknowledges this, and the pervasive role homophobia plays in women's abilities to build coalitions with one another in her groundbreaking text, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1997).

the patriarchal kinship basis of familia, as a form for appropriating la familia for women's communities. (Miranda qtd in Fregoso, 2003, p. 90)

In the context of my study I recognize the importance and bond between women in order to explore issues intimacy. This chapter and the subsequent analysis of stories is exactly concerned with these intimate process. It is about both the stories that women tell and my role in listening to them, interpreting, mediating and analyzing these stories.

In the questions I posed to women throughout the oral history collection process, I also asked them to think about these issues (of oppression and marginalization) as well as their thoughts for the "future generations" as I purposefully wanted to know the answers. My curiosity stemmed partly from wanting to know what racism looked like in their historical/geographic context and partly in wanting to know if the increased presence of Chicana/o-Latina/os in the Midwest has somehow decreased the racism that women deal with today. I was sometimes taken aback by some adamant statements that they were not treated any differently than their white peers. But then they would share stories about being treated differently seemingly unconscious of the contradiction. In this way the processes behind testimonio and oral history become even more complicated; where the act of speaking truth to issues of sexism, racism and classism might not in fact be what the women want to pass on to others in the first place. It also is the point of entry for me as a scholar to assign meaning to these contradictions, to understand how systems of power and inequality work to create such contradictions, and to interpret these words within the context of these women's lives. It forces me as the interlocutor of their words to look for the theoretical explanations of their statements, feelings and ideas. It is in these moments that I have been able to uncover complex understandings of Mexican

American/Chicana identity, including assimilation, denial, internalized racism, difference, (in)visibility and the navigation of the world with various performative “masks.” These survival techniques, such as wearing different masks in different contexts, or choosing to acknowledge (or not) social and cultural differences become even clearer in a Midwestern context and demands a barebones analysis of what life must look like in this context for these women.

In thinking through and defining a mestiza methodology this process has facilitated my continued investment in exposing the necessary intimacies associated with this work. Uncovering these intimacies has also directed my writing on the themes that emerged around this notion of intimacy. For instance, the pains that occurred and were transferred led me to consider shaping an entire chapter around the theme of silence, which included an illumination of sexual violence, and the ways that many women fought back against it. In the course of writing this chapter I also knew that I wanted to include stories as a central way of analyzing oral history archives as texts to be explored. Mestiza methodology then has been about thinking through the research process and allowing that purposeful and sustained reflection to shape the nature of my writing while letting the analysis demonstrate the necessity of thinking through these issues for future Chicana feminist oral history research.

I AM THE STORY PART III

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART LIES

Home

I've always been concerned about home. Home, what is it? Is it where the heart lies? Can we have multiple homes? Home. What does it mean to be at home in a place you aren't supposed to be? Home is a fragile and fleeting thing. How do we make homes? How do we keep homes? How are we at home?

Homelands

I feel connections to land that I have only recognized upon my return, after a great absence. The pink and orange sky of the setting sun in Albuquerque brings joy to my heart and fuels my spirit. Watching the sunset is a magical experience there; to view the sun going down from the heights as it retreats over the valley creates a moment where it is as if time stands still. A sheer dome covers the sky when all of the people are tied together within that brief, fleeting moment. And honestly, I have seen other pretty sunsets but none make my heart warm the way that an Albuquerque sunset does.

Beauty in a different way envelops my love for my Kansas homeland. Born in the state where wheat waves freely, my connection to golden stalks blowing in the wind goes deep into my soul. Breathing in the smells of wet, dew filled soil that grows crops that feed so many people is a powerful sensation. Knowing that I was born in a land full of such rich opportunity for giving shapes my understanding of what Kansas as home means to me. It is always full of possibilities.

Being at home

What does it mean to belong somewhere? A feeling of home comes from being able to be your fully realized self. What if you can't find that, or others won't allow you to find that? Where are you from? Every time I would meet someone new when I was studying at the University of Kansas their first question was always, "Where are you from?" This question seems innocent enough; until you are asked it so much because the assumption is that "You are clearly not from here." And, "You have no ties to this land."

My classmates would often call me Dorothy when I was growing up in Albuquerque, you know, like from the Wizard of Oz? "Where are your ruby red slippers and your little dog Toto?" they would taunt. "Why don't you follow the yellow brick road back home," back to where you came from? "Kandace from Kansas," real original.

It was neither here nor there that was my home, but both places actually. Having multiple homes is not allowed. Or, is it that to have multiple claims to different spaces is only acceptable if you look like you should be there?

Going home

I have many homes, real and imagined. My first home was where I was born, "the Little Apple" Manhattan, Kansas – a college town that at the time I did not even know would hold my future within its limits. My second home that I know is in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Northeast Heights, my "land of enchantment." My home away from home with my Aunt Lilly, Emporia Kansas; her farmhouse buried deep in

fields of wheat on bumpy gravel roads. My home away from home, Lawrence, Kansas the stop in between Albuquerque and Emporia, not geographically but emotionally. Finally I make my home in my south Minneapolis duplex with my partner and our two animals only to open the door for new homes. While these homes are firmly anchored in geography they also move with me, redefining my sense of home. Like Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) writes, I too carry my homes in my heart (on my back), they are always with me wherever I go.

CHAPTER 2

PLANTING ROOTS AND MAKING CLAIMS: CHICANAS NAVIGATING NOTIONS OF HOME AND BELONGING IN THE MIDWESTERN BORDERLANDS

2.1 “Far, we’ve been traveling far without a home but not without a star.” – Neil Diamond *America*

As the only relatives who had moved away, my immediate family would take two or three trips per year from our home in Albuquerque, New Mexico to visit relatives in Kansas. Each summer we would make the long, dry drive across the hot New Mexican desert, through the tumbleweeds blowing across northwest Texas and the Oklahoma panhandle. We always knew when we crossed into Kansas because of three things: it smelled like cows, your clothes stuck to you upon exiting the air-conditioned vehicle, and the likelihood of seeing anyone who looked like us significantly decreased.

On one of these many summer excursions, my mother only brought with her my younger sisters and me, and she drove the entire ten hours to Wichita where she dropped us off with our Grandma Creel. After spending the night she drove on, picking up her sisters: Lilly in Emporia, Dolores in Osage City, and Gloria in Topeka. Together these four Chicanas drove to Kansas City to watch one of their favorite singers perform, Neil Diamond. As I recall they had fifth row tickets, but regardless they were close enough to gather falling sequins from Neil Diamond’s shirt. I didn’t get to see my aunties that trip, but when my mama came back to Wichita we were all very happy to see each other. And for once she was not the tired woman we had come to know. Instead she was herself; the happy mama we loved to see.

The drive back to New Mexico included listening to the double disc set my mother had purchased in hopes of getting “Neil Baby,” as she liked to call him, to sign it.

The family story goes something like this: Dolores convinced her sisters that they would be able to sneak around the back entrance and get Neil to sign things for them before the show. Needless to say, security escorted the four Falcon sisters away from the star – a story that is told (about four wild brown women) in my family to this day.²⁶ On that trip home my mother and I sang Neil Diamond songs until our throats were sore and dry. I do not know about my sisters, but this was a special moment that I shared with my mama. The trip to see “Neil Baby” created and forever instilled in me an undying love for “Sweet Caroline”, “Brooklyn Roads” and “Song Sung Blue.”

I share this story because in many ways it helps to paint a fuller picture of my mother, one that she herself does not always portray in the few hours we captured through her oral history recording. Neil Diamond came to fame mostly in the 1970s when my mother was in her teens. Her sisters, Lilly and Gloria, who were seven and eight years older than her respectively, also enjoyed listening to his music. Neil Diamond is an important figure to consider in my mother’s history as demonstrated in her reflection of the close relationship she has with my Aunt Lilly. She begins to cry and says:

[Lilly] always made me feel special. When she went off to college she would send me birthday presents and stuff, like an album or something. Because she knew I liked Neil Diamond...one time for my birthday [she sent me] a Neil Diamond album. And, she just always took care of me. I guess I trusted her the most. Like when I broke my collarbone I wouldn’t go to the hospital without her. Dad had to go downtown, it was after their softball game and [find] Lilly and [then] we went

²⁶ Perhaps as evidence of the severe differences that my mother and aunts perceived between their skin color and the skin colors of those in their small-town Kansas existence, my family often remarks on their “brownness” in both a comical sense as well as to indicate they are referring to something that is “Mexican.” In the retelling of this particular story they situate themselves as what is perceived to be “wild brown women” by the white security guards protecting the Neil Diamond. I find it interesting to call attention to this detail in the many ways that my mother and aunts navigate the ways that they have been racialized in Kansas and the conscious acknowledgment that this “wildness” is perceived to emerge from their brown skin. I see this as a powerful moment of disidentification with the racist forces that attempt to oppress them – in calling out their brown skin they recognize that this is often seen as a negative, instead of only understanding it in this one way however, they re-imagine and reclaim the possibilities of their own agency in claiming their brownness without apology.

to the Emergency. Because she always made me feel safe. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

In this way, Neil Diamond not only represented a moment in time when my mother was a young girl and when her sister left to go to nursing school, but he also represented an *acto de amor* shared between sisters.²⁷ It was an act of love that spanned many years until they were adults with children of their own. My mother's attention to Neil Diamond in her interview and the gift (literally – the record, figuratively – her close trusting relationship with her sister) prompted me to think about the importance of Neil Diamond as an artist and how it relates to her life.

Deborah Vargas explains in her article “Brown Country,” the impact of Chicana/o musicians and music on Chicana/o and Tejana/o communities in Texas. Her article resonates with me because Vargas shares her research on recording artist Johnny Rodriguez and is moved to write about it because of her mother's love of the artist and his music. While she outlines the ways in which musicians like Freddy Fender and Johnny Rodriguez held particular importance in the shaping of Chicana/o and Tejana/o identities, she also explains that because Johnny Rodriguez was a country artist some of her colleagues, “often stress that there's not much radical possibility worth analyzing in country music” (2007, p. 225). Conversely Vargas argues that, “cultural studies analyses of music have demonstrated quite well that music that may seem nonanalogous with racial/ethnic communities may indeed resonate with them and move them in unlikely ways” (Vargas, 2007, p. 225). Neil Diamond might just be that nonanalogous musical figure for my mother and aunts whose music definitely resonated with and moved them in “unlikely ways.”

²⁷ I discuss *actos de amor* and their significance in my concluding chapter.

Upon further exploration of Neil Diamond's life experiences I discovered many points that I read as relevant for these women. As a child of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants growing up in Brooklyn in the 1940s, my mothers and aunts may have imagined Neil Diamond as a familiar figure in the sense that he was trying to etch out a place for himself in "America" in much the same ways as the women of my family.²⁸ In an interview with David Wild, Neil Diamond's biographer by Carl Wiser on www.songfacts.com, Wild describes the common themes in Diamond's songs as, "a deep sense of isolation and an equal desire for connection. A yearning for home – and at the same time, the allure of greater freedom. Last but not least, the good, the bad and the ugly about a crazy little thing called love" (Wiser, 2008, para. 4). I believe it is exactly these themes within Neil Diamond's songs that resonate with my mother and her sisters – home and love.

This becomes the clearest to me in the many ways that my mother and aunt assert their "American" identity through patriotism, an assertion of love for the U.S.A., and through the gathering of cultural artifacts that portray this same sense of American pride. It is interesting that one of Neil Diamond's most recognizable hits is a song entitled, "America" which was released in 1980. "America," is a musical interpretation of the history of immigration to the United States with the phrase "they're coming to America" as the loudly sung communal refrain. One could make the argument that this song really reflects largely European immigrants' experiences and constructs "America" as a nation of (European) immigrants – the line "on the boats and on the planes, they're coming to America" seems to primarily substantiate

²⁸ I use "America" in quotes here to designate the United States of America as opposed to the broader understanding of America to mean North America (including Mexico and Canada).

this thought. However, the spirit and sense of moving to a new place – one that welcomes you and in which you can claim and make a new home – would clearly appeal to Mexican American girls growing up in Kansas.

While I have always been aware of my mother's love of "America," (the song and country), my brother's entrance into West Point in 2001 was the catalyst for an entire overhaul in the decoration of her home. Her patriotism for "America" merged with her pride in her son. She had my father erect a 25-foot high flagpole on which she began flying the American flag high above her house and inside country-style American flags and other U.S.A. paraphernalia took over. Imagine a wall full of differently distressed wood planks painted like American red, white, and blue flags as they hung on distressed, twisted wire or are accented by quilted fabrics. My mother's understanding of her own place within "America" must be read through this context of having to symbolically represent and "prove" her Americanness.

In the same way that Vargas uncovers that an analysis of Chicana/os and Tejana/os in country music creates alternative representations of Chicano/Tejano masculinity, my exploration of my mother's and aunts' love of Neil Diamond can inform my analysis of their own ideas about and desire for America and home respectively. When anyone imagines the fans of Neil Diamond, there is no impulse to conjure up a crowd full of Mexican American women. A fact that they themselves acknowledge when they retell the story of being escorted away from Neil Diamond by his security team for trying to sneak around to the back of the arena for his autograph (as they described themselves as the "wild brown women"). As I referenced above, I read their specific drawing attention to their race (as brown or

Mexican) through the characterization of “wild brown women” mark their own presence as unusual juxtaposed to the mostly white crowd mark them as aware of themselves as security threats beyond merely being avid (white) fans of the singer.

This chapter is about that kind of knowing that you do not belong and a yearning for home. It is also about the recognition of the complicated processes of racial formation, assimilation, and claiming and making *home* in the Midwest. I describe and analyze the “allure of greater freedom” for Chicanas growing up in the Midwest in the post-war “Americanization” decades of the fifties and sixties, women who simultaneously recognize the ways that their racial formation was shaped within a Black/white context while also asserting their claims for home space as they live as brown women within Kansas and Minnesota. In looking at their recognition of the ways they were forced to articulate their racial identities, I reference Gloria Anzaldúa’s understandings of the way the U.S./Mexico border shapes Chicana/o culture and mestiza consciousness in her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999). In understanding the contexts by which these women gained ideas about their racial identities we gain insight into the ways that they also actively claim home outside those borderlands in the Midwest.

I first investigate the Midwest as the potential site for alternative readings of Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” and then turn to analyze the ways women’s experiences of being marked as racially different complicate these notions. Moving from the ways they negatively experience life in the Midwest I turn to the ways that despite these feelings of isolation or cultural clashes women do survive and actively claim the Midwest as their homes and end up defining the places they cannot imagine leaving. Their stories reflect

the *complicated* processes by which these Chicanas built identities as Mexican American women and laid claims to home space in the Midwest. Complexity is reflected in the way these readings are full of contradictions. For instance, despite my mother's American flags she can never erase her identity as a Chicana in this world, as a brown woman and thus as "other" in her own country. It is not about how these experiences deviate from what we know of as a "normative" Southwestern Chicana experience, but rather how racial identities have survived in the context of geographic and cultural isolation and the means by which women continue to carry on their culture in spite of this to find ways to belong in the Midwest – to be "American" and Mexican and Chicana – an identity that is more than a combination of the other two and is created in the ideological space in-between.

I am clearly not the first person to engage with the questions of making place and home in relation to ethnic communities, as feminist and cultural geographers have been concerned with these very processes. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods' edited anthology *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (2007) is a collection of powerful essays on place making and the meaning making in place. In their Introduction they write,

Because we live in and through social systems that reward us for consuming, claiming, and owning things – and in terms of geography this means we are rewarded for wanting and demarcating 'our place' in the same ways that those in power do (often through the displacement of others) – we also need to step back and consider how these geographic desires might be bound up in conquest. Inserting black geographies into our worldview and our understanding of spatial liberation and other

emancipatory strategies can perhaps move us away from territoriality, the normative practice of staking a claim to place. (p. 5)

Despite the different context from which their words emerge, I am emboldened by their use of critical reflection that “suggests that black geographies demand an interdisciplinary understanding of space and place-making that enmeshes, rather than separates, different theoretical trajectories and spatial concerns” (p. 7). Similarly, I think about the need for a study that looks at home making and claiming for Chicanas in the Midwest as also not wanting to replicate models of territoriality, but to uncover the many ways that these Chicanas shape the places in which they live while they are also simultaneously shaped by these Midwestern places.

2.2 Midwestern Aztlán: Las Otras Fronteras and Isolation

When Chicana/os shout out the call to reclaim Aztlán,²⁹ Kansas and Minnesota are not always initially recognized in the cultural imaginary of what Aztlán looks like. Most historians know that part of Kansas could be reclaimed since the Southern part once was Mexican land. However Minnesota may not be part of this history, and it is doubtful that even in the minds of many Chicana/os living in California or the Southwest that the Midwest is in the Aztlán cultural imaginary at all.³⁰ Minnesota and Kansas have dealt

²⁹ Aztlán refers to the land annexed from Northern Mexico following the end of the Mexican/American War with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Within the context of el movimiento it has served as a “mythical homeland” and has also been re-imagined within contemporary Chicana/o literature. I bring it up here to refer to the ways that Chicana/os of el movimiento have had an investment in seeking connections to “homelands” – in this case Aztlán – which supports the notion that Chicana/os are often searching for that feeling of home that they can never fully achieve because of the loss of the “homeland”/Aztlán. For more on the importance of Aztlán see – Pérez-Torres (2001) “Refiguring Aztlán,” Acuña (2006) *Occupied America, 6th Edition*, and Anaya & Lomelí (Eds.) (1991) *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*. Also, Gloria Anzaldúa’s first chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera* which is entitled, “The Homeland, Aztlán” calls attention to this important cultural imaginary.

³⁰ However, as Edén Torres notes, “Certainly some think it could be. The Aztecs and Chichimecs talked about the parts of Aztlán being very cold and snowy. Some say this is a reference to the mountains in the Southwest or parts of Colorado. But others say that Aztlán actually referred to the Northern half of the continent and that it was understood as including land far north of the Southwest. The fact that Indigenous

with their own unique histories of colonization and U.S. imperialism with the forced extraction of indigenous peoples from their lands. Since Chicana/os are not indigenous to this land (Minnesota) and are not exiled (Kansas), their movement out of Mexico or Aztlán for employment or for better economic opportunities has in fact created a way that the border and the borderlands have traveled with them. It is then, this understanding of the history of migration to the Midwest that should fall within a new Aztlán imaginary.

In his article entitled, "Refiguring Aztlán" Rafael Pérez-Torres argues for a refiguring of the traditional notion of Aztlán alone. Noting that Aztlán has actually become an "empty signifier" not to erode its' meaning as a "metaphor of [Chicana/o] connection and unity" but to express the great potential for multiple uses and readings of the term (2001, pp. 213-214). It is in this call that I situate an understanding of the importance of homelands extending beyond the geographic area of the Southwest. Pérez-Torres argues that in refiguring Aztlán "we move toward a conceptual framework with which to explore the connections between land, identity, and experience" (Pérez-Torres, 2001, p. 213). These concerns for understanding the relationships between land, identity and experience do not only lie within the geographic "traditional" Aztlán but are perhaps even more of a concern for Chicana/os looking for home on land where they are often not fully welcome (the Midwest). He further suggests "these connections become centrally relevant as the political, social, and economic relationships between people and place grow ever more complicated and fluid" (2001, p. 213). Mexican and Mexican-American peoples have been in the Midwest for generations continuing to create these networks of

groups in Minnesota are part of the Uto-Aztecan language groups lends some credence to this idea" (personal communication, July 14, 2010).

people engaging in socio-politico-economic struggles in efforts to claim home spaces.³¹ It is in this spirit that I use a call for Aztlán, one where Chicana/os unite beyond the physical U.S./Mexico borderlands in order to bring forth narratives of that “which is ever absent: nation, unity, liberation” (Pérez-Torres, 2001, p. 234). In this way, I challenge the traditional notion of Aztlán for one more critical in nature; in hopes of creating coalitions between Chicana/os residing within the U.S. Southwest and those who are actively claiming and making homes in the U.S. Midwest.

While the ancestors of the colonizers/imperialists in Kansas and Minnesota would like to think that the increase in migration post-NAFTA to ‘their’ land is a recent phenomenon, we, as a people, have in fact been here for a long time. Mexicans and Chicana/os have been migrating to and settling in Minnesota since the nineteenth century, with larger numbers coming at the turn of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Chicana/os have returned to Kansas after the conquest of the territory in significant numbers for quite

³¹ Dennis Valdés’ historical writings on 20th century Mexican and Mexican American settlement in the Midwest can be found in his two seminal texts *Al Norte* (1991) and *Barrios Norteños* (2000). In these texts he traces the migration and settlement patterns of Mexicanos who come to work in agricultural fields in the upper Midwest from Texas and Mexico (1991) from 1917-1970. He also focuses on the creation of communities in St. Paul as an investigation of Chicano political movement in urban Midwest centers (2000). My study builds upon his scholarship through the insertion of Mexican American women’s stories into migration and settlement narratives as well as through analyzing the movement to smaller, rural Midwestern towns and not necessarily through farm work settlement. S.M. Diebold (1981) provides an excellent overview of Mexican presence (migrants and settled-out Mexican Americans) from the 1850s (when the population was zero) through the 1980s. Additionally, historians such as H.J. Avila (1997) and R. Oppenheimer (1985) trace the movement of Mexicans to the state of Kansas beginning at the turn of the 20th century as well through their scholarship, “Immigration and Integration: The Mexican American Community in Garden City, Kansas, 1900-1950” and “Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II” respectively. While there seems to be more of a willingness to at least mention Chicana/os in the Midwest, there still seems to be a scarcity of diverse scholarship. In the Introduction I mentioned several other historical accounts of Chicana/os in various regional locations within the Midwest. More recent interdisciplinary work includes Adrienne Viramontes’ published Master’s Thesis, *On Becoming Chicana in the Midwest: A Phenomenology of Decolonization* (2008) which traces her coming to Chicana consciousness in Indiana, the text itself is a written journey/testimonio on how she reaches this new understanding of her own identity. I am also inspired by the work of colleagues I have met at conferences researching Mexicans and/or Chicana/os in the Midwest in various fields like Aidé Acosta (anthropology) and Ramon Guerra at the University of Nebraska – Omaha (English & Latino/Latin American Studies).

some time. Mexicans and Chicana/os came to the Midwest for work. Whether it was on the railroads paving the way for manifest destiny or picking crops local to the Midwest regions, we have been here. I now turn to trace the ways that the border is manifested in the Midwest through Anzaldúa's understandings of the borderlands by exploring issues of geographic, social, and cultural isolation.

I argue that Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualizations of the borderlands are just as applicable to women who live in the Midwest if we look at Anzaldúa's definition of the borderlands as a place/space (physical and metaphorical) where, "the lifeblood of two worlds merg[e] to form a third country—a border culture" (Anzaldúa, 25). I call attention to Anzaldúa's understanding of the borderlands as a means to complicate Chicana identity in the Midwest.³² If we understand the borderlands to be the space where two cultures meet and rub up against one another to form new cultures then this is happening beyond the physical space of the U.S./Mexico border itself. While the socioeconomic and political drama of the U.S./Mexico border region may be much more public and spectacular, the social and cultural tensions playing out in Kansas and Minnesota can be every bit as meaningful. Outside their homes there is no safe communal space where Chicanas can relax the necessary performance of "Americanness." The process of friction between two distinct cultures is perhaps even more evident in places of the U.S. where, as these women have noted, they were the only ones. Living in small communities (sometimes being the only families in a rural Midwestern state) these women experienced cultural clashes everyday simply because of their marked racial difference. We also see how Gloria Anzaldúa and other Chicana scholars writing about the Chicana experience

³² This is not to say this is necessarily unique to the Midwest but I demonstrate how it functions in this context specifically. I would imagine similar issues play out in geographic areas where Chicana/o, Latina/o communities are smaller.

cannot quite understand the Midwestern Chicana experience because living among one's own people and dealing with racism creates a different set of concerns from living in isolation from larger Chicana/o or Latina/o communities. However, all Chicanas regardless of place experience the real repercussions of borders created to either keep some in or others out, and this occurs in various manifestations.

Like most of the women involved in this project, my mother, Estella Falcon Creel, can trace the ways the border has moved with her throughout her family history. Her father's family hailed from Kansas City. Brought there by a job with the railroad they settled in what was at the time one of the larger Mexicano/Chicano communities of the Midwest in the 1930s.³³ In his travels with the Air Force in the late 40s he met my grandmother working in a restaurant in El Paso. He took her from her family, moved her to Phoenix, Arizona where she birthed my mother. They then moved to Belen, New Mexico and finally settled in Greenleaf, Kansas – to be near to his family – population 500. They were the only Mexican/Chicano family in a field of whiteness. My grandmother withstood the clash of cultures, being Mexican and married to a Mexican American man who had grown up in the Midwest. She was constantly navigating more than one culture.

The different manifestations of borders were often present in Estella's family. First there was a distinct language barrier in her household; even though her father's parents were Mexican on both sides. Growing up in Fairbury, Nebraska had meant the loss of Spanish language proficiency. Her mother on the other hand only spoke Spanish upon her initial move to the Midwest. Second, all of the families chronicled here

³³ See Garza (2006) "The long history of Mexican immigration to the rural Midwest" for a more detailed history of the Mexican and Chicana/o migration from Mexico/U.S. Southwest.

continued to have ties to the actual physical Mexico/U.S. borderlands, either through family members who still lived there (on both sides of the border) or through the stories their parents would tell about their childhoods in Mexico. Despite their distance from Anzaldúa's borderlands they continued to have to navigate them in their daily lives.

Martha Castañon tells of how her father and mother moved from Zacatecas and San Vicente, Mejico (respectively) to Northwest Minnesota in the mid '50s. They met in the fields of Comstock, Minnesota. She details the ways that the border was with her parents and then also her and with her siblings. As a child of migrant farmworker parents, she and her siblings traveled from Minnesota to Crystal City, Texas and across the border to visit familia during her second, fourth, fifth and seventh grade years. She navigated the world as a migrant kid where she did not exist solely in South Texas but was always aware of the difficulties she would face in a very white and relatively secure economically Minnesota context. In reference to her time in school in Texas she says,

Even though the schools up here in Minnesota are *really* good schools, I loved school down in Texas. I loved it so much because I felt like I fit in, you know? Everyone else was poor like me, they were brown like me, they spoke Spanish, their parents were poor like me, not really educated, I felt like I really fit in. And I could relate to everybody else. (Interview with Martha Castañon, February 7, 2009)

In Martha's story we hear about the actual physical borderlands of South Texas, where Martha felt a sense of community, of shared experiences around race and class that she was not able to have in Northwest Minnesota. She details the differences she felt based on her race and class identities and the comfort she felt when she could see her self reflected in the culture around her. Feeling like she really fit in could only happen when she was surrounded by friends in school who looked like her and spoke as Martha did. These feelings of isolation are highlighted in many of the oral history narratives and

provide an important context for understanding how the women came to acknowledge their identities as well as actively claim Chicana space in the Midwest.

Martha's case is somewhat exceptional for the migrants who traveled the Midwest migrant stream (from Texas to Minnesota) because her family decided to remain in Sabin, Minnesota (in the Red River Valley) all year long instead of migrating back. With the exception of three winters when her family traveled to Texas, Martha's experiences as a farmworker did not include much migration. Thus, when her friends and family went back to Texas, her family remained, and the isolation that ensued was even more apparent with the loss of temporary community.

This is exemplified with the opening of Martha's oral history. When I ask her to trace how her family migrated to the Midwest she firmly states, "Well, I was actually born here [in Minnesota]" (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009). She also points to the importance that her father placed on his children being born in Minnesota: "My mom said she could never figure out why he was very insistent that all of us be born here" (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009). In the context of her oral history I read this as her father's belief that greater opportunities existed for the family in Minnesota despite the isolation that occurred when they did not travel back to Texas with other families who were also working the Minnesotan agricultural fields in hot summer months.

Teresa Ortiz provides some alternative understandings of how the U.S./Mexico border is present in her life. Teresa's migration to the Midwest is a different case than the rest of my oral histories. She is a Mexican national who moved to Minnesota initially as part of a college exchange when she was twenty years old and later came back following

a brief return to Mexico City where she married an Anglo Minnesota man whom she met during her time in Minnesota. She immediately reflects on the absence of other Spanish speakers when she moved to the Midwest and I read in her narrative what Anzaldúa refers to as borders which she argues are, “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (1999, p. 25). Teresa narrates,

Well when I came here there were almost... I didn't know any Mexicans. I mean I really didn't know hardly any Mexicans. When you met somebody that was from Mexico or even from Latin America I mean it was like a party- it was so exciting! And you'd end up talking Spanish. I mean I spoke English. I learned English younger and then I forgot it and when I came here I had to relearn it again. And I felt comfortable reading- I mean speaking English. I used to do a lot of writing when I was in Mexico but that was one of the frustrations that I felt. That I couldn't share my writing with anyone because I wrote in Spanish so that's when I made myself kind of like a commitment that I would learn to write in English. (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 16, 2009)

Teresa uses language as a way to conceptualize the border that exists between her life as a Minnesotan, which necessitated the mastery of English, and the harsh reality that there was no one else with whom to speak Spanish when she moved to the Midwest.³⁴ Her experiences signify a border defined by language, one where she was constantly navigating both the Spanish and English in speech and writing. Teresa's story also demonstrates the power of segregation and isolation even within urban centers that have populations of Chicana/o-Mexicana/os. Dennis Valdés claims that in the 1960s “more than half the Mexican population of the Twin Cities area resided on the Lower West Side of St. Paul” (2000, p. 178). Despite established Mexican American communities in St.

³⁴ The connections between tongue, silence, and voice for Teresa are illuminated with her own struggles with which language in which to write. As a writer, she found writing in Spanish or English was necessary at different points in her life, but as we will see at the end of this chapter, her writing now, embodies English, Spanish, and Spanglish. To me, this embodies Anzaldúa's idea of the borderlands as a third space – one where both of these tongues can live side by side, between, and among one another. I explore this idea further in my Conclusion and Teresa's connections to stories as “actos de amor.”

Paul, Teresa would not come into contact often with other Mexican-origin peoples at her time studying at the University of Minnesota (a historically white institution located far – only about a 20 minute drive, but what feels like worlds away – from the tight-knit Latino community of West Side of St. Paul). This would also probably hold true in the context of living in Southwest, rural Minnesota.³⁵

In particular, I recognize isolation as the most salient theme when I read how the borderlands come to define women’s lives. In the sense that Anzaldúa describes the borderlands as both spaces of conflict but also spaces of possibilities these women’s testimonies reflect this contradictory space (1999). Teresa specifically speaks to the complex ways that isolation played out in her own life, in both initially positive and then later more negative ways. She says:

I didn’t feel much discrimination. I did feel the moments- I mean, because I was a rarity. People were like “Whoa! She’s a Mexican” so whether I was working or whether I was at school like at the U of M it was like, “oh!” Kind of like exotic which is another form of discrimination but you don’t see it when it is happening. You are just like “ooh! People really like me you know a lot!” But you don’t see it that way. But the biggest thing is that I was really isolated from people like me. And I felt isolated and that was hard and I never felt that was again until very recently. You know that whole thing of... because later on I started hanging out with people who were like me. But when I’m with people who are not like me it

³⁵ Teresa is rather silent on the issue on how her parents or Mexican community responded to her marriage to a white Minnesotan man. Initially during the interview I read this silence as not necessarily being open to discussing a relationship that she had put behind her. Upon further reflection however, I now read this silence around her relationship with her white ex-husband as a refusal to acknowledge the borders present in her own romantic life. This is most telling when I ask her about how she thinks her children identify themselves racially, and she admits to never really talking to them about this. She raised her children in Minnesota, Guatemala, and Mexico and tends to define them based on their national allegiances versus a Chicana/o identity. Furthermore, as a light-skinned, Mexican woman who grew up in Mexico City, who had enough money to attend college at la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and could travel to Minnesota on a study abroad opportunity, her class status was much different than the rest of the women included in this study. Part of her isolation may have emerged from this class difference, a border erected between her as someone who came to Minnesota to study within the halls of the University of Minnesota and those who came to work the fields north or south of them. On the other hand, as a former labor organizer, through her work with the Zapatistas and her commitment to working on behalf of Mexican and Chicana/o laborers in the U.S., I do believe she is well aware of this border and understands these privileges.

just really hits me again. I'm like "I don't fit here" and it's just really tough when you don't fit. (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 16, 2009)

In this retelling of the feelings of never quite fitting Teresa speaks to the ways that she is so very isolated from people who are like her. Later with increased migration of Mexican and other Latin American people to the Midwest, she begins to see herself again in others. However she does note the ways that her difference marked her as an exotic other to Minnesotans and how in her youth she did not recognize it at the time. Upon further reflection she suggests that even with this special attention, she was still definitely isolated (geographically and culturally). Reading this experience against Martha's statements of how she really felt she "fit in" Texas clearly speaks to the ways isolation took a toll on women's sense of belonging in the Midwest. Teresa's story does speak to a sense of the border that is both full of conflict – not seeing oneself among classmates and in how she is considered "special" because she is exotic. These very differences that she feels also allows for possibilities and opportunities – even though these possibilities sometimes occur in problematic ways (others take interest in her because she is exotic) – her experiences as being ostracized and engaged because of her differences demonstrate the inner workings of two cultures meeting, merging, and clashing.

Martha acknowledges the isolation she felt as a young girl growing up in Minnesota along with her recollections of her mother's loneliness and feelings of seclusion. Martha's life story allows us to see the many manifestations of isolation as she dealt with issues of feeling secluded, both geographically (physically) and culturally (through a sense of small community and oppressive practices around language). Through examples drawn from her oral history stories alongside examples from other

women's stories, we can see how these women survived and lived through this isolation, which impacted their senses of self.

While recalling the stories of how her mother and father ended up in the Midwest, Martha shares a story about how her mother felt during her first full year in Minnesota in after living the majority of her life in Mexico. It was 1958 and instead of traveling back to Mexico as she was used to, she stayed the full year in Minnesota as a newly married woman.

The farmer that my parents had worked for when they met had a friend by the name of Douglas Suthers who offered my dad work throughout the year because he had sheep and my dad knew how to take care of animals. So, that year my parents moved to South Moorhead, and my mom said it was really hard for her because it was the first time she had been away from her family, for a long time like that. There was nobody else around, she felt very isolated, she didn't know any English. My dad was trying to learn English, and my dad I mean, he would go out to work with the farmer and leave mom at home. Well my mom got hired ... by the farmer's wife to do like, cleaning and stuff and the farmer's wife told me you know, that they didn't know how to communicate it was all signs. She would hold the iron and look at my mom and go like this [makes ironing motion] and point to the basket of laundry and that's how they communicated, it was all sign language. But my mom said it was very, very hard for her. She would look out the window and to her it was like the end of the world. They hardly knew any other Hispanic families, back then there were very few families at that time. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

Martha's recollection of her mother's feelings of isolation implicitly shows her own gendered analysis, where she notes that while her dad might have been experiencing isolation, he was at least able to leave the house and work. Martha notes that she felt her mother felt isolated when she at home taking care of the childcare and household needs. Even when her mother worked outside her own home, her feelings of isolation followed her to the home of the white farmers where she might have been among others, but still lacked a feeling of community. For many women reflections on isolation (either their own feelings or those they observed of their mothers) are common themes.

La Lupe reflects on how the process of her family's migration in the early 1960s was an isolating experience as well. She clearly demonstrates this in the recounting of what was in Minnesota for her family after her father was informed of the steady work and good place to raise children.

So I kind of imagine, I think I remember but you know how these things are, my parents would be kind of discussing, and mother would say "No I don't want to move to Minnesota, what's in Minnesota for me? My life is here, my mother is here," and then just seeing vast whiteness everywhere. And that's the rest of my life going from my grandma's house [in Texas] to here and that's how we came. You know because of the supposedly steady work and my grandparents were already here. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

In this recollection and La Lupe's doubt in her own memory, we see the fashioning of a story where her mother expresses trepidation of moving to the Midwest from Texas, already evaluating the experience as one that will ultimately lead to geographic isolation from her own mother and all that she knows. La Lupe ends this section of her migration story with a little sarcasm: "and so when we moved here we came to a huge community of three Mexican families and one of [them] was my grandparents, my father's family" (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009). This reflection of actual isolation in terms of community is made clear here, with her family's move to Fairbault, Minnesota.

La Lupe also provides description on the harsh reality of remoteness. In rural Minnesota, as part of a very small Mexican American community La Lupe and her family were often subjected to racial discrimination. When I asked her to speak to what it was like growing up as a Mexican American in Fairbault she simply responded, "Brutal. Absolutely brutal" (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009). Upon further elaboration she goes on to say that while her family taught her to be proud in her skin and culture she often faced racism beyond the safety of her home.

But the outside community was very, very, very, very racist and very brutal. Just [a] lot of instances of racial slurs and actions... I have memories like that. I did not realize the whole framework of racism until I came to academia here in the cities for my college career. So back then I knew it was wrong and of course it was painful and very hurtful but I didn't have the words to kind of frame it and talk about it until I came to the university. Oh yeah I remember being a young girl and walking across the street and having some guy in a big old pickup spit at me and say, "Go back to Mexico." You know all those... all those things we used to hear about and talk about. Been there done that. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

Here La Lupe seems to identify the racism that she and her family experienced as a by-product of being a Chicanita cut off from a larger Chicana/o community. Part of not having the language to articulate the racism that she faced due to this isolation came from the very sense of loneliness and separation from community, the lack of Chicana/o community led to sparse solidarity around racist experiences even if most of these three families were facing similar experiences. Her own voice as a Chicana did not have the space to emerge until she gained it through education; due to isolation she was unable to articulate, share, or collectively feel these experiences of racism. A lack of a larger sense of community meant fewer opportunities to contextualize this type of oppression as systemic, institutional, or structural and it meant having to deal with these painful experiences alone.

Apart from the geographic isolation that existed in these women's experiences, they were subjects of cultural isolation as well. Experiences such as attending school led to feelings of social isolation and they became aware of their exclusion from other classmates' activities. Additionally their friends also shaped how they came into their identities as Mexican American girls/women. Martha describes a memory of her school experiences as a child that clearly demonstrates the ways that girls were not only observing their own mothers' feelings of loneliness and isolation, but also experiencing it

themselves in other contexts, mainly in relation to feeling excluded at school and making friends. She narrates,

I didn't really have anyone that I hung out with. In grade school, there were very few birthday parties that I was invited to, and I remember that, one family, the Benedicts, very nice family, but I remember their daughter, Stephanie had a birthday party and I was invited. None of the other girls that were kind of the nobodies like me were invited, only the other friends that she hung out with and then me. And when my other friends found out, the girls that were, you know, there must have been three or four of us that must have been on the, I would say, the bottom level, they were kind of hurt. And they were like, "well why did *you* get invited?" and I was like, "I don't know." And it wasn't 'till years later that I felt like, I felt like I was a charity case, like I was a token. Like, oh, we've gotta invite Martha, we've gotta invite the little Mexican girl, 'cause it makes us look good. That's how I feel, like it was. Now, if I were to state that to them, they'll deny it, you know. So, I don't know, there really was nobody that I hung around with. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

In this example Martha expresses how lonely she felt as the only Mexicana in her class.

We see the consequences of isolation from growing up in Minnesota, and her story of being a token echoes Teresa's earlier statements. Others similarly reflect on their girlhood friendships with sentiments like Lilly's.

Um, I really only had one truly good friend in Greenleaf and that was a white girl, her name was Jean Waltzy and we hung out a lot together. I never went to her house but she came to our house several times. She was the closest friend I had and then other girls there in Greenleaf that I went to school with you know we wouldn't see each other outside of school but that's where [we] usually hung out. But usually [it was just me and] my sisters, [who] hung out. And mostly the guys that hung around our house were boys because we played a lot of softball in front of our house with the neighborhood kids. (Interview with Lydia (Lilly) Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009)

Throughout many of their stories, the women I interviewed discuss how their siblings served as their main companions when it came to socializing, however when they entered the school system they often befriended at least one girl. For instance, Gloria also recounts that she had one close white female friend but reflects that she was really closest to her sister Lilly. In general, these women who speak of not having many friends seem

to reminisce that this was due to being marked as different (either through race or class). This is clear in the ways that they acknowledge that they were treated differently by their friends' families at least when Lilly and Cindy share memories of white friends whose houses they were not allowed to visit, while their white friends were always welcome in their families' homes. In these reflections it is clear to see that the race of their friends mattered and through their conscious attention to the fact that they were not allowed to go to their friends' houses clearly marks a moment of recognition of their racial and cultural differences. I now turn to trace the ways these women experienced the marking of racial differentiation in their lives within this context of extreme geographic, social, and cultural isolation. I contextualize cultural isolation by acknowledging that this was in no means a dearth of culture within the home/family but rather through the ways that Mexican/Chicana/o culture was not overtly present in their lives outside of the family home. In other words, these women did not lose all signifiers of culture (food, cultural expectations, dress, rituals etc.) but rather I want to bring attention back to the general lack of seeing themselves or their experiences in the world around them. It speaks back to how then Neil Diamond becomes a central musical figure in the Falcon sisters' lives as opposed to someone like Freddie Fender.

2.3 Growing up Brown: Coming to Know Class and Racial Difference

Lydia Falcon Rider eloquently states that growing up in the small town of Greenleaf, Kansas shaped her as "different." I theorize "difference" in the spirit of feminists of color who have come before me. Drawing on Baca Zinn and Thorton Dill's (1996) "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism." I seek a discussion of difference as one full of possibilities. Whereas some white feminists might have

trepidations with framing discussions of gender identity based in differences (race, class, sexuality, etc.), I purposefully do so here in order to “demonstrate the racial meanings” that “offer new theoretical directions for feminist thought” (Zinn & Thorton Dill, p. 321). Difference is often perceived by the women in this study as points of both disadvantage and advantage which points to a necessary relational understanding of power and the processes of subordination; it is also about how the self understands, identifies, and empowers itself in relation to others. Race and class difference must be understood in relation to what is often perceived to be the norm with the accompanying knowledge that these difference are not inherent nor innate, but rather constructed by societal norms and institutional hierarchies and should be deconstructed based on the challenge of these assumptions.

In fact most of the women, in describing their childhoods growing up in the Midwest brought up something about being different in their response.

Well, since we were mostly the only Mexican Americans in towns, they just kind of looked at us a little bit different. I don't think they looked at us like we were equals at all. They were kind of skeptical at first, you know until they got to know you, especially the kids, sometimes I knew some of the kids especially the ones that had more income they just kind of looked at you a little bit down. (Interview with Lydia Rider, July 18, 2009)

This description of difference is based on her own readings of her status as a poor, brown girl. When asked about her own childhood she situates her experience within the context of her family as a unit whose members were caught up in experiencing the same events as she did. Saying statements such as “they just kind of looked at *us* a little bit different [*my emphasis*]” sets up the role in which difference played in her childhood—as being the other in an all white town as well as understanding that her difference extended beyond herself and was simultaneously mapped onto her family at the same time.

I remember one girl, that she, her parents had, like a furniture store, a grocery store she made fun of my dark knees. She said, “why you got those black knees for?” and I guess it’s just the discoloration on our knees, I guess from when you, sometimes when you kneel down and stuff, I guess they get just a little bit of discoloration on ‘em and stuff. You know to me it wasn’t anything but I guess to her, she pointed it out, that’s for sure. You know, it was different, I never felt like I was their equal, I wasn’t their equal, they kind of looked down on us. And you know, growing up in Greenleaf, it was kind of about the same until they got to know you, they treated me a little bit more equal. (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009)

It is impossible for Lilly to separate her racial and gendered experiences from her own consciousness around class difference. Take for example the young girl who made fun of her “discolored” knees. She places her in another class through the acknowledgement that her father owned furniture and grocery stores in town. While she does not clearly state that she felt some of the attention she received was due to the distinction that emanated from her class standing in these excerpts, one could postulate that based on the simple fact that she mentioned the girls’ class standings is telling enough. She does go on to say that she was aware of her family’s poverty while growing up, and I will elaborate on later. But this discussion is not just about class, but rather Lilly’s own internalization that her “black knees” are not the norm. She sees this as “discoloration,” something that is “unnatural,” and attributes this to a cause beyond her body’s own norm (despite her mother, father, and sisters having the same color knees). As a target of this little white girl’s racism, she internalizes its flawed logic and accepts this as a deviation from an acceptable norm – rather than asking the white girl why her knees have no color. She might have done this if she would have grown up in a place where the majority of the kids’ knees were darker in color. This also serves as an example of how the Falcon sisters often navigated white people’s inquiries about their

racial identities within a Black/white binary – an argument I will revisit at multiple points throughout this chapter.

Lilly's older sister, Gloria recalls the ways that differences were clearly illustrated in her own recollections of moving from Hanover, Kansas to Greenleaf when she was school-aged. In a response to a question on what was it like to grow up as a Mexican American in Hanover or Greenleaf she says the following,

The only thing I remember in Greenleaf was that lady behind us who put up the petition to, that she wanted us out of there, she didn't like us. And she put a petition to get our family out, and she went around town to see who was going to sign it and nobody signed it. I guess she just didn't like Mexicans, that's what we thought because we were the only Hispanic family there, but that's where dad found his job at the Co-op, we weren't no hellraisers or nothing like that, we were small, and going to school and whatever. But that lady for some reason didn't like us. That was a good little town. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Gloria also sets up her feelings of being different in the context of "us" and "we," when pointing to the fact that a woman tried to circulate a petition to get them expelled from the town. To this end she calmly states "we weren't no hellraisers or nothing like that." Yet, despite the fact that their neighbor was certainly upset by their presence she concludes, "that was a good little town." Without elaborating further the listener/reader of her testimony ascertains that despite the fact that at least one member of the town was vocal about their removal, Gloria still understood her childhood town as a generally good place. Further, despite the isolation and discrimination they endured, she still felt that this was their home.

Estella, the youngest of the Falcon sisters has this to say about her experiences growing up in the Midwest,

Um, it was pretty different I guess. I didn't know that I was brown till some people would, when I would travel into the different towns, you know because

then I was different you know from you know, other people. But in Greenleaf, oh, at the beginning I don't think it bothered us much. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

Three young girls with a span of seven years between them all situated their experiences in relation to their familial experience. Estella's statement, "I don't think it bothered *us* much [*my emphasis*]" comes from a point of view of not knowing about the petition that was circulated when her family moved to Greenleaf.³⁶ As the youngest girl, she often did not know the stories about events such as the petition, but she still situates her difference as a shared one, one that did not belong to her alone, but rather in relation to her entire family's difference. While her town may have eventually come to tolerate the Falcon family and embrace them in certain ways, when they left this tokenized acceptance, they lost that protection. Moving among communities that did not need to accept them as their neighbors, work with them, or attend school with them, opens up a space for the expression of racism.

In addition to the characterization of Greenleaf as a "good little town," Gloria and Lilly also speak to the ways they felt at home in this space. The statements "until they got to know you better" and "we weren't no hellraisers or nothing" also relate to the ways this family attempted to "fit in" although they were marked as different (due to their class and race status). These feelings of fitting in are related to processes of assimilation that surely informed how these women perceived themselves in relation to being members of the communities in which they lived.

In Alma García's study on second-generation Chicana college students, she remarks the several ways that their identities are informed by the processes of

³⁶ This petition came to light at a recent family gathering when Gloria brought it up to her mother and sister. As the youngest child, Estella didn't know anything about the petition until Gloria spoke about it.

assimilation and their experiences as children of immigrant parents. Many of the women in García's study had ties to immigrant parents or grandparents that complicated their notions of identity within the U.S. Midwestern context. I am not so invested in labeling these women in terms of their generational status, but rather want to reflect that many of the same processes that worked to force them to "assimilate" (lose their original culture to be replaced with "American" white culture/values) shape their values and understandings of the world around them.³⁷ García notes that this transition is neither inherent nor simple arguing, "the second generation does not merely inherit cultural identity forms from its immigrant parents but, on the contrary, its identity emerges through a multifaceted and multidimensional process" (García, 2004, p. 20).³⁸ She also contends that, "research on ethnic identity formation among first- and second-generation women has further documented the process of "becoming American" as one that challenges the assimilationist perspective. These studies have focused on the historical and contemporary experiences of immigrant women and their daughters as they navigate and negotiate their way in American society" (García, 2004, p. 22). The processes by which the women in my study "become American" are also complex and fluid.

³⁷ Because of the nature of intermarriage I am unsure on how to define the immigrant generations (first or second based on their birth in the U.S.) within the usual delineations of what makes one "first generation" versus "second generation." This is especially true for folks who have a mix of immigrant and U.S. citizen parents or grandparents. With the exception of Teresa who grew up in Mexico City and came to the U.S. as a young adult, all of the other women were born in the U.S. with varying combinations of immigrant/citizen parents and grandparents, making it difficult to truly assign first or second generation status upon them. Also, in the case of La Lupe she does not speak to where her parents were born but notes that her grandparents were born on both sides of the border. Others, like Cindy, are unsure of her grandparents' place of birth and/or citizenship status in the U.S. further complicating ideas about fixed identity.

³⁸ I also borrow from García here in her discussion on the critiques of assimilation perspectives that have emerged out of Eurocentric models of immigrant acculturation. She points to the ways that classic assimilation theory has often tried to erase race, noting that it does in fact matter stating, "various immigrant groups and their children, those who are not European American, must contend with externally imposed definitions of themselves" (García, 2004, p. 21).

Economic struggles haunt many of the women I interviewed. For example, when Lilly was growing up she distinctly remembers money problems and they in turn caused her to resolve to never allow these stresses to rule her adult life. The external forces that marked her as different from the norm of her location also became the inspiration for her to *be* different than her family. In her hopes and dreams as a young girl she often fantasized about “wanting something better.”

I wanted something better. I knew that there was something better for me to do out there. I either was going to be, you know growing up a Catholic well first, you want to be a nun, because that’s pounded into you when you go to Catholic school. And then I decided no, I don’t think I want to be a nun, and then I thought well maybe I want to be an artist because I like to sketch, I like to paint, do crafty things you know. But then I thought well, you hear all these stories about starving artists and I said well that’s not going to be any good. But I always liked helping people so I thought, if I could do anything I would want to be a nurse. (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009)

She goes on to explain that she wanted to be different because she saw first-hand how difficult it was to live in poverty. Moved to tears, she explains how difficult it was for her family to pay bills on time and keep up with their financial responsibilities. The pain of witnessing her family struggle with money lives with her to this day.

Because I knew how hard it was for mom and dad, I saw it, how they struggled to feed their children. I wanted something better for myself. And dad was very bad about not paying his bills and they were always struggling to try to meet those bills and I said “I’m never going to be like that. They’re never going to turn off the lights, or never turn off the water.” Those kinds of things, I would never do that. I said I’m going to be where I can’t pay for my bills, I’m going to be a responsible person. I wanted to do better, there’s a better life out there. (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009)

Here Lilly reflects upon the poverty that shaped her life. Her words of “knowing there was something better” expresses her expectation that a nation such as the U.S. is full of opportunities if you just work hard enough. She uses the experiences of witnessing her father’s lack of ability to pay bills on time to insist on a different future for herself. Her

pragmatic thinking on what types of jobs will provide her with this security and her subsequent achievement – she is currently a nurse – further instills the belief for her that you can attain the American dream.

In the case of Lydia Rider then, she was able to work herself out of poverty to provide for her family. While she achieved this individual success through hard work, many other Latina/os have not always been able to gain significant economic progress and are still faced with unequal access to wealth within the U.S. economic context. Scholarship like *The Color of Wealth* clearly outlines policies and procedures that shape the access to wealth for people of color. The authors of *The Color of Wealth* speak to the ways that increased financial stability comes with the passing of each generation of Mexican Americans in the United States along with greater educational opportunities.³⁹ The women outlined in this study speak to the ways their lives were shaped by poverty and were often based on their generational status, through racist practices that decreased income levels, and through the lack of larger Chicana/o communities to help attain financial success. Because of this economic marginalization many relied on strategies that enabled them what they might have perceived as pathways out of poverty – such as marrying white men, pursuing educational pathways that would provide stable careers (like nursing or becoming a secretary) – whether or not these strategies were easy choices or “successful” is discussed in the next chapter. In many ways, their economic realities have also influenced their relationship with their children. For instance, they reflect on

³⁹ The authors, Meizhu Lui, Bárbara Robles, Betsy Leondar-Wright, Rose Brewer, and Rebecca Adamson, state that in 1999 52.9 percent of the U.S. Mexican American population had attained at least a high school diploma. But, “when parsing the Mexican American population by generation, these educational attainment rates change substantially: foreign born, first generation, 36.6 percent; native born, second generation, 68.7 percent; and native born, third generation, 74.1 percent have a high school diploma” (Lui et al, 2006, p. 147).

the hardships of having to work within and beyond the home while also taking care of the family and also address the necessity for their children to attain higher education because they might not have had the same opportunities.

Culturally, these Chicanas were also isolated in terms of the languages they were able to cultivate. This often was manifested in their pronounced regret in losing their Spanish-speaking abilities. These women also were unable to take part in important cultural rituals because of the lack of a larger Chicana/o community in the Midwest. These practices that were negotiated summarize the ways that these women, to borrow from García's study, "are engaged in a process of self-invention and (re)invention, of (re)imagined selves and (re)imagined communities" (García, 2004, p. 27). Despite isolation, these Chicanas still fashioned home and communities for themselves, even if they were negotiating different languages or missing out on cultural practices that a larger community might have fostered.⁴⁰

In her chapter entitled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" Anzaldúa writes about the violence that she faced as she was forced to conform to the American pronunciation of her name. She shares a story of being sent to the corner of the classroom as a punishment for "talking back" to her Anglo teacher even though she was just, "trying to tell her how to pronounce my name." The teacher's response is, "If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong" (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 75). In a sense Spanish language marks where you belong. If you want to be a "real"

⁴⁰ For instance, I see this in the way that Gloria still thinks that Greenleaf was "a good little town." Despite the racial discrimination that some in the town tried to enact upon her and her family, she still sees this place as one that holds meaning for her. In effect, (re)imagining her community as one that was not simply oppressive to her.

American then you need to have a mastery of the English language.⁴¹ Two incidents in relation to Spanish language emerge as important narratives to complicate the understandings of these women's claims to belonging in America.

Martha grew up speaking Spanish as her first language. As the first-born child of immigrant parents who were trying to learn English upon their settlement in the Midwest, she began school without the knowledge of English. She shares this painful recollection of how difficult it was for her to be a Spanish speaker.

When I started going to school I was six years old and I was put in first grade, and I didn't know a word of English except "hi" and "bye" and "ok" that was it. And it was really hard to be in there. I remember I would take off running when I had to go to the bathroom and the teacher was getting kind of upset as to why I wouldn't say anything. I didn't know how to tell her I had to go. I guess she had finally had enough and marched me out, down to the principal's office and my dad was called in. And they were trying to tell him, "she takes off running we don't know where she goes to" and all of this kind of stuff and my dad asked me, you know "Porque te vas hija? Porques estabas salida el cuarto?" ...and I looked at him and I said, "Apá es que tengo que usar el baño." And my dad just looked at me and he realized you know what a challenge I think it was for me to be there, and he told the teacher in his very broken English, she has to go use the restroom. And then my teacher was like "Ahh..." and so then the teacher I think became more understanding about how hard it was for me and she taught me when you want to go to the bathroom you raise your hand and just say "bathroom" and you can go. But she said, "just don't take off running like that." (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

While an initial reading of this excerpt from Martha's oral history might allude that Martha's teacher was extremely understanding of her inability to communicate with her

⁴¹ This is clearly a complicated situation however as there are many Chicana/os who do not have a mastery of the Spanish language, forcing the question of where do they/I belong then? As someone who is not fluent in Spanish this has been a constant struggle for myself, though I have taken ten years of formal education in Spanish, I am still unable to communicate with my grandmother as well as I would like. Furthermore, outside practices have resulted in large-scale Spanish language loss (like English-only mandates in school). In the case of my own family it is due in part to being in the Midwest that Spanish was not preserved (my mother addresses this in her oral history). In the context of the Midwest with its historically smaller Latina/o communities (than the Southwest for example) I imagine that the pressure of being able to master the English language was of top priority for Spanish speaking (im)migrants. And, maintaining a language takes practice. If you are isolated, with whom do you practice?

and the rest of Martha's class she also tells another story within this story. In a tangent during the telling of this bathroom story she says the following about her teacher:

Oh, and there was one thing that was really bothering me and it's still so clear in my mind, she kept calling me "Spanish girl" and "hey Spanish girl" and I couldn't understand that because to me, Spanish was a language and I kept looking at dad you know and, "why is she calling me Spanish? And I'm Mexican." And back then you know, I didn't know until years later that the word Mexican was like a dirty word, nobody wanted to use that word. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

In this tangent Martha shows a different side of her teacher who seemed to initially be understanding of her difference. However with the revelation that she always called her "Spanish girl" demonstrates that Martha's teacher wasn't necessarily all that understanding. She shows a disregard for Martha's personhood by refusing to call Martha by her name, and she actually calls out Martha's difference through a misidentification of her nationality (Spanish instead of Mexican) or in calling distinct attention to the language that she spoke. Martha interprets her teacher's name for her based on her status as Mexican while I also read it as a distinct recognition of Martha's language facility in Spanish (as opposed to English). Although, when it is written out the final interpretation must be one that is based on her brown skin and visible racial difference with which Martha is marked as the only Spanish-speaker in her class (and because to call someone "English girl" seems preposterous). It is also unlikely that a Spanish-speaking student who was blonde and blue-eyed would have been called out as "Spanish girl," demonstrating the racial context for such a label. For Martha school meant a complete lack of ability to communicate because the first language she learned was Spanish. The reality of her life at school meant that she was unable to talk to any other child – an

experience that she recognizes as difficult and fully exemplifies a context of seclusion from other children like herself.⁴²

In a different way Gloria shares a painful experience about her facility with Spanish, the only language her mother spoke to her when she was young, when she took a Spanish class in high school.

I took a Spanish class in high school and [my friends] thought I was going to [get] an A, because I speak Spanish you know, but my Spanish as I was growing up is a slang and then in school they teach you the formal. And, you know for speaking Spanish, I passed that with a C instead of an A! And these girls who were English [speakers], they passed it with an A and I think it's because I was growing up with the slang portion of Spanish, not the formal and that's what I think was my downfall, because I'm still in the slang part. I had to learn the formal Spanish. But, my teacher would tease the hell out of me, "Gloria, you're Hispanic, you should know!" And I said, "but yours is formal, I learned mine in slang and what I picked up you know, it's not the formal way." And that's why I had a hard time! And I passed it with a C, damn, I was so mad at myself. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Gloria's frustration with her inability to earn an A is clearly seen through this story.

While her move to El Paso in her early twenties enabled her to pick up more Spanish, at least enough to use in a formal capacity in her current job, she still expresses regret and frustration in her limited ability to speak Spanish as a young girl in school. To me, this

⁴² When researching the histories of Spanish language loss I learned of this incident shared by María Elena Zavala who recalls the punishments associated with unauthorized Spanish speaking in grade school. She writes,

Speaking Spanish at school was one of the "major crimes" at my grammar school. It ranked with hitting someone in the face. It was punished by the offender sitting on the double yellow lines that were painted on the black asphalt at the "line up" end of the playground. It did not matter if the asphalt was hot or cold the "miscreant" had to sit on the lines. Other students could taunt Spanish speaking offenders. In Kindergarten one of the kids forgot how to say bathroom and the teacher would not let us tell the word. She peed in her pants and had to stand in the corner for the rest of the day after she cleaned up the puddle. No one forgot the "right" word for bathroom again in that class. (personal communication, April 19, 2010)

This story also comes from a written testimonio in Norma Cantú's edited collection, *Paths to Discovery: Autobiographies from Chicanas with Careers in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering*. (2008). While this is a different context of a Chicana growing up (outside the Midwest) Zavala shares a story that closely mirrors the violence that Anzaldúa notes in her quote about speaking "American" I see parallels at varying degrees with the stories the women of my study share about their relationship to Spanish. Martha clearly embodies these contradictions in her struggle to speak English at school initially. Her story however, also differs because while she might have felt shame she was not necessarily ostracized in front of the whole class as Zavala's friend clearly was.

frustration is rooted in a lack of opportunity to use Spanish outside of her home environment and the complicated language practices that were present in her home. She goes on to explain that her father knew almost no Spanish when he met her mother and her mom knew almost no English. Her stories of first attending school do not seem to be preoccupied with her inability to understand English, but rather it is her inability to connect with Spanish in a way that is validated by her white community that is upsetting to her.⁴³ However, it is not just about her own frustration but also about the teacher's expectations in why she received a "C." Here's another example of the internalization of racism, Gloria accepts the idea that her Spanish is inferior because it is different than the teacher's normative language. Despite a much different context than Martha, Gloria nevertheless internalizes the shame associated with what she deems a deficient mastery of the Spanish language; she turns the anger inward, as opposed to outward at the oppressor – the teacher who has the power to define proper use of the language.

These feelings of being different not only pervaded experiences when interacting with white classmates and neighbors, but it also is reflected in many women's narratives on the ways they felt somewhat distant from their own cultural traditions. They were unable to participate in these cultural practices because of the lack of a larger Chicana/o

⁴³ The women's experiences with Spanish mirror Gloria's case more closely than Martha's. In fact, Estella, Lilly and Cindy's relationship to Spanish is one filled with longing and regret (especially Gloria's sisters but Cindy and La Lupe also express similar sentiments. They state in their oral histories how they "wish" they knew how to speak it and how they really regret not learning it from their parents. They don't speak to trying to lose their Spanish purposefully nor do they suggest that their parents did not encourage them to keep it. In fact, despite their parents advice that they should continue to speak Spanish these women still lost this language despite the fact that it was spoken in their home. La Lupe relearned her Spanish in her adult years. She explains, "Me and my first son are self taught again but I spoke total Spanish until I was four when we moved [to Minnesota] and then it was all English." She also prefaces this desire to know Spanish as a true bilingual in her memory of her grandparents "being physically punished for speaking Spanish in school" (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009). While these language losses and feelings of regret are not unique to the Midwestern experience I believe they are important to highlight how easy it was for these women to lose this piece of their culture and traditions despite their wishes to hold on to it precisely because of these issues of isolation that they speak to.

community with whom to engage. Martha remembers that though she might have enjoyed having a birthday celebration for her quinceañera (or quince), in this geographically isolated area the reality was the absence of a community to share in this ritual.⁴⁴

My birthday's in September, so I didn't have a quince, my parents really couldn't afford it. We didn't have hardly any family around for me to do a quince. That was one thing about growing up here that we missed out on were all the relative's quinces and weddings and that kind of stuff. I remember my mom made a very small birthday party for me, out on the farm. I had some cousins that were still working here and they came over we took a drive into town, but that was about it. None of us had a quinceañera, none of us did. I guess to us, because we didn't grow up seeing that, we weren't really used to it and the thought of having it, it was a thought that didn't really cross our minds. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

La Lupe, growing up in Southern Minnesota, also shares a similar sense of not having a larger Latina/o community. She reflects,

It was interesting because when I was growing up in Fairbault my parents taught us to have a lot of pride in who we were. They taught us about our rituals and our ceremonies. It's not like I had a quinceañera because who was I going to have a quinceañera with but it was very much a part of our lives to be proud of who we were. And then also to just live strong and do the best that you can in everything growing up in Fairbault. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

La Lupe's memories of being taught traditions echo Martha's own ideas about the lack of a quinceañera. Despite where they lived and despite not being able to have their

⁴⁴ A quinceañera is the celebration of a young girls' step into womanhood on her fifteenth birthday. According to Rafaela Castro, "it is a custom throughout Latin America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, and in many areas of the United States to distinguish this birthday with a special observance" (2001, p.194). Traditionally the ritual emerges out of Aztec culture whereupon the fifteenth birthday marked a young girls' ability to be married. In more contemporary understandings it is less about marking proper marriage age but rather more about passage into a more mature womanhood. Most quinceañeras involve a religious mass where the young woman wears a white dress and is accompanied by her "damas" (maids) and "chambelanes" (their escorts). Following mass she takes part in several rituals such as being given a ceremonial last doll "la última muñeca," exchanging a flat shoe for a heeled shoe, and sometimes a choreographed dance with her damas y los chambelanes. Within the U.S. context this custom has also become a party to remember for young girls – often equivocal to a "Sweet 16" party. The quinceañera has also been theorized by Chicana/Latina feminist scholars in terms of "life-cycle rituals" (Cantú, 2002), as a theory of social experience in the making of gender and ethnic identity (Davalos, 1996), and in its relation to consumer culture (Alvarez, 2007).

own quinces, they were still educated on the ceremonies and traditions and thus painfully aware of missing them. Even though the actual cultural event of the quinceañera did not happen for these women, their knowledge of the tradition as an important cultural moment in a woman's life is still passed on to them by their parents.⁴⁵

Much in the same way that isolation worked to shape these women's ideas about their identities, the process of assimilation and their experiences as children of immigrants clearly informed their worldviews. In an attempt to hold onto cultural practices and (re)negotiate their own identities as Mexican American women living in the cultural isolation of the Midwest, they engaged in practices that García claims “negotiated discourse between an individual, her personal and public network of social relationships, and the patterns of interactions within which individuals construct, invent, and (re)invent their ethnic identities and group boundaries” (2004, p. 27). This is not to say that these women were deprived of their cultural identities, but rather that the geography and the social networks they developed in this context shaped understandings of their identities and complicate notions of what Chicana identity looks like. These processes of assimilation were projects of loss or absence – a natural thinning of Mexican American culture due to living in historically smaller Mexican American communities, as opposed to forced or conscious decisions to rid themselves of culture in order to attain better standings in the white community. Yet, it is also true that these communities were oppressive to these women's understanding of their own identities. While not consciously

⁴⁵ I can relate to the ways that these practices were present in my own life. While my aunts and mother do not speak on not having quinceañera celebrations, my mother did ask me if I wanted to have a quinceañera when I was turning fifteen. I opted for a “sweet 16” party instead and I have regretted that choice. So much so that in the footsteps of Chicana scholars like Norma Cantú I hope to expand the notion of the quince to fit other milestone success in my life. See her chapter “Chicana Life-Cycle Rituals” in *Chicana Traditions* (2002).

chosen as a political strategy, assimilation and loss of cultural identity were nevertheless survival mechanisms that have had repercussions for their own children and serve as continued or further sites of loss and regret that shape these women into who they are today.

2.4 Complicating (Racial) Difference: Chicana Racial Formation in a Black/White Binary

Assimilation processes were not the only forces at play as women came to understand their racial identities. American discussions around race in the 1960s and '70s were largely concerned with question of “blackness” or “whiteness” which further complicated the relationships between people of color in this Midwestern context. However, as historians document, racial segregation was not simply a Black and white issue. It is important to detail the racialized context in which these Chicanas came of age in effort to document shared histories among people of color in the U.S. and as a means to complicate the black/white racial binary as many of these women negotiate their racial identities within this framework. As Cynthia Orozco notes in her book *No Mexicans Women or Dogs Allowed*, racial segregation in Texas meant that segregation between whites and Blacks was typical practice, but Mexicans were also subjected to the practices of racial subjugation through segregation. She explains, “posted signs reading ‘No Mexicans Allowed’ and ‘Whites Only’ signified racial location and privilege that ‘Mexican’ bodies were not supposed to transgress” (2009, p. 30). While conducting my oral history interviews, I did not learn of segregation signs explicitly naming Mexicans as “others,” but the history of Mexican segregation is present in these testimonies.

Women’s memories of these incidents complicate understandings of race and racial formation during this time period in the Midwest. Additionally, some of the women

grew up as members of communities where they were the only family of Mexican Americans (the Falcon sisters- Gloria, Lilly and Estella), but where they were also the *only* people of color. This framed their understandings of their own racial difference and often led to articulations of their race identities as *not* Black. Since many of these women grew up relatively isolated from other large or historic communities of Mexican Americans, popular discussions of race were largely framed in terms of Black and white. The process of racial formation becomes negotiated around these categories, particularly for Cindy and Estella. In my analysis of their stories I complicate the understanding of a black/white racial binary in the Midwest while acknowledging that their tactics for dealing with the black/white binary are often not critical of the binary itself. For instance, Cindy recognizes her brown skin color as the midpoint between white and Black but does not provide her own critical analysis of how this upholds the black/white binary. Estella sides with whiteness in her narrative as her strategy for dealing with racial discrimination that is fueled by a black/white understanding of racial identity only.

Most Kansans have in the imaginary of their state history a sense that Kansas has always been known for being a “Free State.” Frank Wilson Blackmar’s, *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History* describes in multiple entries the fight for power over asserting Kansas as a slave or free state in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁶ Following the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska act, which organized these now-states into territories for sovereign expansion, a struggle between pro-slavery supporters from the South

⁴⁶ For a more extensive and detailed history, see Blackmar’s entries on “Border War” p. 208, “Abolitionists” p. 20, “Anderson County” p. 70, “Hickory Point, Battle of” p. 841, “Atchison county” p. 111, “Black Laws” p. 90 and “Blue Lodges” p. 196.

(especially Missouri) and the many abolitionists who had fled the slave-owning South or moved from the North ensued over Kansas land (Blackmar, 1912).⁴⁷

The city of Lawrence, Kansas where the University of Kansas now stands had a particular importance in the state's fight against slavery. My four years in college in Lawrence confirms the prevalence of this rhetoric. As undergraduate students, we were constantly reminded of Lawrence's history. It had been burned down twice by pro-slave forces. We were taught that Kansas is free because of the stand against slavery taken by the white men who "settled" Lawrence. Some have capitalized on this sense of pride in this history as indicated by Freestate Brewery's presence on Massachusetts Street (Lawrence's main thoroughfare and consumer strip), and through other reminders like the "Border Wars" rhetoric employed frequently to assert dominance and pride over Missouri. Disturbingly the legacy of the border wars between Kansas and Missouri have lost their meaning in racial terms and are continued today in popular representations of the rivalry between the University of Kansas and the University of Missouri. In a play on the violence that was perpetrated based on the struggle to make Kansas a slave state, these two Universities now publicize athletic competitions (men's basketball and

⁴⁷ In the Topeka constitution adopted in the fall of 1855, Blackmar summarizes the following in the bill of rights section,

The principal declarations of this article were that all men are by nature free and independent; that they have the right to enjoy and defend life, acquire and possess property, and to seek happiness and safety; that all political power is inherent in the people; that the people should have the right to assemble together to consult for their common good, and to bear arms for their defense and security; that the right of trial by jury should be inviolate; *that there should be no slavery in the state*, nor involuntary servitude, except for the punishment of crime; that all men have the right worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience; that every citizen might freely speak, write and publish his sentiments on all subjects, being responsible for the abuse of the right; that there should be no imprisonment for debt, unless in case of fraud. (Blackmar, 1912, p. 415, *emphasis mine*).

football) between the two schools using the language of “Border Wars,” devoid of its racially important history.

I call attention to this history briefly as it sets up the ways in which race continues to be negotiated within a Kansas context.⁴⁸ Despite the fact that in order for the territory to exist it had to forcibly overtake the many indigenous peoples in the area and shed its Mexican history, once the territory became “sovereign” the conversation was about the rights that white men had to own slaves (or not). Interestingly the white men who “settled” Kansas land were able to fight on behalf of Kansas land to end oppression of slaves while somehow forgetting how they came into that land in the first place. Because of this history in which the state was ultimately deemed a “free state” as opposed to its neighbor, Missouri, one would think that it might have escaped some of the racist practices that the post-slavery U.S. nation instituted and endured—mainly the Jim Crow laws of the South. Of course, families of all marginalized racial identities in Kansas know that this is not the case.

Cindy Perez Falcon recounts her father sharing stories of the expectations of “separate but equal” for all people of color in 1940s Winfield, Kansas.

I remember one time that my dad did tell me that when he lived in a town in Kansas they had two pools and the white people could go to one pool, and it was just a little country town, and then the other pool just said “other.” It didn’t say “Black” it didn’t say “Hispanic” it just said “other.” So you were either white or other. So he knew he wasn’t white, so he had to go to the other. That’s how this town dealt with it, they didn’t

⁴⁸ For instance it also has (along with other agricultural strongholds like Minnesota) the perception of being a nearly all white state despite histories that clearly say otherwise. So much so that when new immigrant communities revitalize small towns the rhetoric is often shaped as “surprise.” Take for example this CNN online story that came out the summer I conducted my field work entitled, “Whites Become Minority in Kansas County.” The second sentence of the article reads, “Though not new in California, Arizona, Texas or Florida, the change of demographics is a bit more surprising in southwest Kansas” (Callebs, 2009, para. 1). This conveniently erases the historical fact that part of Kansas was actually Mexico at one time and that Mexicans have had a long history of working in Kansas.

discriminate as far as black/white but it was white or other. (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

The question that remains from this part of her oral history is whether or not there was an extensive Latina/o population in Winfield, Kansas at that time to signify that “other” designation.⁴⁹ Perhaps a more accurate reading would have situated the “other” as a way to “lessen the blow” so to speak about the clear racial discrimination that white Kansans were enacting. Knowing the characterization and pride in labeling Kansas as a “free state,” this demonstrates why some Kansans might try to lessen their guilt over discrimination against African Americans because of the state pride in its “free” status. This is a memory that Cindy notes as a story of significance and leads me to believe that it meant something to her father as well in the 1940s. Cindy also recalls,

I think he remembers, he was telling me one time about going to a theater one time where again, there was the balcony for “other” it just said “seating” and then there was a sign that said “other.” And I think there was an usher there who said, “you go up and you go down” type of thing. Those are the only, the really the two stories that he told me. I’m sure there are others but...(Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

⁴⁹ According to census data of 1930 and 1940 for Cowley county there were 40,903 and 38,139 people living in the county respectively. However, based on this data it is difficult to discern what percentage of the population was Latina/o because the only racial designations were as follows, “Native white,” “Foreign-born white,” “Negro,” and “Other races.” To complicate matters further the 1940s census data states, “Figures for white population in 1930 have been revised to include Mexicans who were classified with ‘Other races’ in the 1930 reports” which means that persons of Mexican origin were not included in the “Other races” but could have been in the “Native white” or “Foreign-born white.” In deciphering the figures from Table 24: “Foreign-born white, by country of birth, by counties, and for cities of 10,00 to 100,000: 1940” there were 117 Mexican foreign-born whites in Cowley County but from this table it is unclear as to where the Mexicans are residing within the County. While this number doesn’t strike me as particularly significant (in order to challenge segregation signs from “White” and “Negro” to “White” and “Other”), it does cause me to pause and think about what might have caused this difference (as opposed to Texas). As of the 2000 federal census there were 12,206 people in the city of Winfield, Kansas with the population percentage responses as follows: White (88.1%), Black (3.3%), Hispanic/Latino of any race (4.7%), American Indian (1.1%), Asian (3.7%), some other race (1.7%), two or more races (2.1%). With these figures in 2000 we can see that there is what some might consider a pretty substantial percentage of people of color. Whether this is newer migration or sustained communities from the same years that Cindy’s father resided cannot be determined without further archival investigation. (U.S. Census Bureau “Kansas by Place – GCT-P6.” Race and Hispanic or Latino: 2000)

As the thought trails off and Cindy readies herself to move onto the next topic, the revelation of this experience that is again shared with her by her father marks the clear discrimination that existed for all people of color in Kansas. In this sense like the many Mexicans who were historically and institutionally segregated in Texas, Mexicans in Kansas were also experiencing segregation, which as Orozco uncovers segregation meant, “we couldn’t go into restaurants, swimming pools and theaters” (M.C. González as cited in Orozco, 2009, p. 30). The illumination of segregation on this level against not just Blacks, but other racialized others (Mexicans), demonstrates the irony in Kansas’ political discourse as a “free state.”

Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as, “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.55). They organize their discussion on racial formation as both “a process of historically situated *projects*” and link it “to the evolution of hegemony” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.55-56). It is clear that with this understanding of racial formation one must conceptualize the many ways that race is individually articulated but also shaped by external structures of power. This legacy of separation of “white” and “other” creates a specific context in which understanding racial formation must be negotiated. The women highlighted in this chapter understand racial formation in both of these ways and I examine how they understand their own racial formation through the stories they tell about their racialized identities.

In the context of smaller ethnic groups in the rural Midwest these Chicanas share stories about how race is articulated in opposition or contrast to other raced groups, sometimes in problematic ways. People of color have been and continue to be pitted

against one another through systems of oppression. Ronald Takaki explains this in his book, *Iron Cages* contending, “What whites did to one racial group had direct consequences for others. And whites did not artificially view each group in a vacuum; rather, in their minds, they lumped the different groups together or counterpointed them against each other” (Takaki, 2000, p. vi). Further, Myra Mendible argues specifically about how the Latina body in particular becomes conscribed within these systems. She states, “to the extent that U.S. Latinas sign in for hybridity, a racial construct between ‘white’ and ‘black’ Americans, the Latina body functions as a floating signifier within the American cultural imaginary” (Mendible, 2007, pp. 6-7). It is useful to think about these women’s racial formation within these complicated understandings of race within what is perceived as a very white Midwest.

In her oral history where she speaks about growing up as Mexican American, Cindy describes the move from the small town of Winfield to Topeka, a larger city. This relocation allowed her family to be among other people of color, and they were no longer part of a community of only a few Mexican American families. This forced her to navigate race in new and different ways at school.

When we moved to Topeka we moved to the part of town that was mainly, ethnic[ally] based African American. So, we didn’t feel, we felt they were more discriminated against than we were. There weren’t very, in most of my classes there were probably maybe five Hispanics and I don’t know, maybe ten Blacks and just a few white kids. You know, we got along, in grade school there was never any racial tension but when I got to high school there was a lot of racial tension. (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

In this case Cindy’s family difference emerged in relation to African Americans in Topeka and the cultural clash or conflict emerged between not only whites and Latina/os

but between whites and Blacks, and Blacks and Latina/os. When describing the racial tensions she states that it was happening within all groups,

Oh, by all. You know even the Black people would call Mexicans names and of course white people would call us names like “beaners” or you know “spics” or whatever...But, high school, and of course I went to school in the seventies so there was a really big tension there. (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

This “tension” that Cindy describes seems to be accepted as a sign of the times and growing up in a tumultuous social period of unrest. In her telling of these experiences she simply relies on her listener to understand that because she was a teen in the '70s, that racial tension was expected and negotiated based on these assumptions. Her narratives here also situate herself and her family in a racial hierarchy where she realizes there were certain barriers for her in terms of equality with whites but that she saw herself as “better off” than her African American neighbors and classmates. While the media’s representations and her own observations based on the ways African Americans were treated by whites must have contributed to Cindy’s belief that the Black community was more discriminated against than her family was, her refusal to categorize herself in the same boat as her African American classmates (even when she recognizes on a certain level they were treated poorly in similar ways) signifies a certain amount of privilege and power in being able to distinguish herself from blackness. It is not surprising then to consider a conversation about race as framed within the problematic terms of “black” (bad) and “white” (good) and how Cindy would want to distance herself from these negative characterizations (at the expense of others) even as it was a failed project (Cindy’s dark skin would never allow her to fully pass).

This is particularly evident when Cindy goes on to detail one specific example that resonates with her about noticing the racial tensions when she was in high school.

I can remember one year in high school we had our homecoming parade downtown, I remember coming home, oh, not coming home but walking from downtown back to the high school which was probably three or four blocks and these white kids were just being raucous and calling people names and then of course you know when you get angered you want to fight back so then kids started fighting and so they were just trying to pick on any ethnic minority, Hispanic or Black they didn't care, they were just coming at you. I remember my girlfriend, who was white, and I were both running. We were first walking and then someone said, "oh you better start running because they're coming after us" we thought "well, what the heck" you know, so we turned around and we saw this group of people just running toward us, toward the high school and so then we started running and then someone said "these cops had let out these dogs" you know how they put out dogs to help control crowds? So we right away just ducked in one of the first high school doors that we saw but they said it was because these whites just, they didn't like something in the parade, I think either the African American put a float in or the Mexicans put a float in, I'm not sure which one but they didn't like the way it looked or something so they were just blaming us and came after us that way. (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

Interesting to note in this story is the way that all ethnic minorities (in Cindy's words) are implicated in racial tension, that whites were not only yelling at the African American students but also the Mexicans. This complicates the picture of civil unrest in the context of Topeka and clearly delineates *all* racialized "others" as targets of violence and in need of social control (with the release of police dogs) during the 1970s. In a sense Cindy contradicts her earlier statement where she articulates that when she moved to Topeka she felt the Blacks in her neighborhood (and community at large) had a more difficult time. She explains that her family, as Mexican Americans, encountered similar obstacles because in the example she shares Blacks and "Mexicans" were equally interchangeable as the "instigators" of racial tension with their float entry in the Homecoming parade. Cindy herself notes that she doesn't know which group fueled the conflict with their entry

into the parade. As the listener I understood that it did not really matter who started it, but it is unclear if she also makes this connection. Further while Cindy recollects the racial tension she simultaneously continues to subtly situate herself in a racial hierarchy below whites and above African Americans as a Mexican American woman. However with this story it is clear how fragile that line of privilege in the racial hierarchy really is, when it comes down to it. Cindy was just as much at risk for being made to feel inferior due to her race as African Americans were.

Cindy's recognition of her status as being "in between" black and white is further highlighted in the following story:

In middle school I had a friend, she was white, her name is Kim and we were like best friends. We'd walk home from middle school, we'd take the long route, there were times that school would get out at three and we wouldn't get home until six. We would just walk everywhere for hours, just talking about things. [My friend] liked a Black guy and she knew her parents wouldn't let her you know date him or anything, of course we were only you know thirteen or fourteen years old but, we would walk by his house which was twenty miles one way and of course we lived this way so it would take us hours to get home.⁵⁰ We had to walk by his house so she could see if she saw him or not... and I think she came to me because you know, here she was white, and I was brown and the guy she liked was Black, and so I was kind of like in the middle. And her parents didn't like me because I was Hispanic and I never got to go to like sleepovers or anything at her house. But yeah, she and I were the best friends at school. (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

In a story that begins as one about two girls who grew up as friends, Cindy calls attention to her friend's racial background and how her status as "brown" became a way for her white friend to feel as though she had a better chance of getting to know a boy in their class who was Black. Cindy becomes merely a token in the way that she became the link

⁵⁰ In the grand tradition of storytelling conventions, Cindy uses exaggeration here to convey that she would spend hours talking to her friend and walking clearly beyond the path that she needed to take to get home just to prolong her time with her. She laughs later about how she uses these similar conventions as her own father who would often talk about having to walk to school uphill both ways in feet of snow. While she was surely gone hours on her walks, she was not walking twenty miles one way by any means.

between her white friend and the object of her desire, a “Black guy.” Cindy’s recognition that this was happening does not seem to soften the blow, but her nonchalant retelling of the experience seems to imply that she has formed her understanding of race around the pre-set categories of Black and white. Similarly to the stories she retells of her father’s segregation experiences, Cindy too recognizes she is the “other” but negotiates her identity as the mid-point between black and white granting her some privileges in some instances but in others not as much. This is clear when her friend Kim is able to be friends with Cindy only if she does not bring her brown friend (Cindy) into her home.

In much the same way Cindy understood her brown, Mexican American woman identity as one based within a racial hierarchy, Estella Falcon Creel negotiated this same racial hierarchy as a dark skinned woman. She relates these experiences through her time as a teen in the ’70s when she would play on high school sports teams and travel to other schools where she was often the target of stares and whispers due to her racial difference.

Well, back then, well yeah, I knew we were different, but I don’t think it affected me. I was probably a lot more shy though, I was pretty shy and quiet then. You know, [I tried] not to bring attention [to myself]. I recall being in one of the other towns having to cross the cafeteria and having people staring and looking at me. And you know, probably trying to figure out what I was. I remember that kind of uncomfortable staring, knowing that I was different. But I tried not to bring attention to myself I guess except with my sports, you know I was part of the team so to where I knew I had my buddies with me, playing basketball and stuff and softball and so my close friends there was no problem, if we had fights or anything, no one would call me names or anything. “Dirty Mexicans”, “Spic” or anything like that. I didn’t grow up with any of that in the Midwest, in Kansas...And then when we would go to these different towns they didn’t know what I was. I overheard somebody in Blue Rapids maybe, some little town where they said, I overheard them talking about, I guess there were different levels of Black, “sambos” or something like that and they were trying to figure out what I was. But I overheard that, [it] wasn’t like directly to me. But of course I know they were talking about me because I am the only one, the only brown one. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

When she first starts to speak about her experiences of noticing the stares and whispers while she travels to other towns she initially frames these events as recognition of how her skin did mark her as different. I believe this recognition of difference must be thought of in terms of the assimilation and “becoming American” projects in which she was so invested. While most of her stories focus on the way her identity was perhaps defined by others, she did not think she should be treated differently because of her skin color because she defines herself as an American (as opposed to Mexican). She speaks to this point when she discusses her views on politics, as a Republican.

I'm more of the taking care of yourself and then having a little help probably from the government but I don't see why they should have to do everything for us. I mean you make your choices of whether you're going to be educated or not, that's the fruits of your labor is your education, if you get the correct education, just because you do go to college it might not be the right field, and then you know like my brother he went to Kansas State with Forestry Game Management degree and he doesn't have a job in that. My other brother, he went, paid for his own college and he went in business so then he is working in a business, so that worked for him. So I think it's just an option of what people go and get with their education. And if they're going to get a real job or a, I guess like a foo-foo job, but they'll be lucky if they get their job in what they're getting. So I think you have options there. And then if you do have different dreams I think you should get your job in two degrees to where one is for you to get money so that you can pursue your other job. The fun job that you want to do that would be hard to get a career in. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009)

This excerpt represents her ideas on what it means for her to be an American – it's about taking advantage of educational opportunities and securing the right type of job to ensure your own economic success. It also indicates a lack of self-awareness of the success of the assimilation project. Here, she speaks abstractly about how regardless of race or class, (the proper) education can be your “ticket out” of poverty without engaging with her own experiences. She never attended college, instead she married her way out of poverty. There is a complete denial in the rhetoric of how marrying a white man changed

her access to power and privilege, and a complete denial of institutional barriers (despite acknowledging many points in her oral history at various points how she has felt as if sometimes she is not seen for who she is but rather as a “brown woman”). Again, here it is clear of her unawareness regarding her own choices and how they are completely dependent on whiteness as an ideology. It is this thinking that informs what I perceive as her nonchalant attitude about the way others defined her identity. Her pragmatic approach to how she believes one should go about getting a job relates to the ways that she was always trying to distance herself from the reality that she faced as a poor, brown girl in small-town Kansas.⁵¹

Her ideas on her own racial identity and the racial formation of others also seem to be tied to an investment in being “better than” those who she was so often lumped together with, African Americans. Horizontal racism is the process by which people of color oppress other people of color – this destructive practice is highlighted here. Virginia

⁵¹ As the scholar intent on providing an analysis of my mother’s words and experiences I am aware of my own limitations in fully articulating or speaking for (and sometimes about) my mother. While I acknowledge our lives are entwined, there are moments in reading and writing my own observations that make me wince with my own pain of dealing with my mother’s ideas that are so different from my own. In part, it is my fears in thinking others might view my mother (or me) in a negative light due to the choices she has made about her life, or her tendency to identify with whiteness. On the other hand, I recognize that this is an important and powerful project in that I seek to uncover the messy space between my mother’s own failed understandings of larger systems of inequality/oppression and my conscious and open embracing of a Chicana feminist identity. I realize that my mother is not the only Mexican American to ever identify with whiteness, but as her half-white daughter who has spent a lot of time loathing that part of myself, it is difficult for me to reconcile. It is also difficult for me to believe that my mother *only* identifies with whiteness. I want to challenge the idea that it is not possible for her to ever fight on behalf of her Mexican/Chicana identity despite her lack of awareness of larger socio-political understandings of power, privilege, and race. I also acknowledge that coming to consciousness is an ever-evolving process, one that I am also constantly engaged. I have learned to stand up against individual acts of racism because of my mama – certainly not by the hand of any of my white family or white people I have encountered in my life. I also saw the glimmer of recognition of an alternative way of knowing for my mama when she came to the 2009 MALCS Summer Institute, raised questions in panels, and smiled the entire time. I hope to provide some understandings of *why* she may have this particular worldview and why she may not be willing to lose it in my further discussions of her life history. I recognize the complexities held within these statements and I write it here as commitment to my mestiza methodology – the refusal to attempt objectivity or deny my feelings and emotions. As a Chicana daughter this (sometimes) feels as if I am being disrespectful to my mama, as a Chicana feminist I feel these revelations make me vulnerable, as a Chicana scholar I see the value in uncovering these feelings. This is truly the beginning of this journey as a scholar writing about her mama that I will continue to work through in my future work.

Harris and Trinity Ordoña highlight the problems that exist between women of color as they try to build alliances or work in solidarity with one another. They argue,

It is a struggle to own the characteristics from our cultures which the dominant culture has turned into vilifying caricatures. We try to deny and avoid these stereotypes by assimilation. We adopt the basic tenet that we must be “better than” to have real worth. Nothing is more difficult than identifying emotionally with a cultural alterity, with the Other. Striving to be “better than” another; one language is “better than” another; one color is “better than another; one size is “better than another; one type of hair is “better than” another, ad nauseam. We find ways to legitimize the “privileges” this hierarchy provides us while being victims of it. (Harris & Ordoña, 1990, pp. 306-307)

Part of Estella’s racial attitudes emerge out of this very notion that Harris and Ordoña call attention to, she finds ways to legitimize the privileges the racial hierarchy provides her while ignoring the fact that not everyone has the same access to these privileges. Estella also does not acknowledge in her willingness to do whatever it takes to gain that access (such as marrying a white man with good earning potential and/or adopting white values and prejudices) that she is further legitimizing a system that ultimately seeks to oppress her.

This is clear in the following examples where Estella speaks about her racial subjectivity as *not* Black. While Estella is conveniently unaware of the larger societal structures that provide her with a sense of being “better than” other racial minorities she purposefully and forcibly sets herself apart from being labeled as black, or identifying with blackness in any way.

And then, J.D. Wyman was the one who called me Black one day when we were out on the playground and I took him by the scruff of his shirt, and he was a big tall guy. And I said, “don’t you ever call me that, ‘cause I’m not.” And that’s the last time he called me that. And of course, I wasn’t the first one. Because Glor and Lilly and Doe had already gone through elementary [school] and now they’re in high school and stuff, but they knew the Falcons good or bad. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

When she went into other towns she was often stared at and people would often label/misidentify her as Black, but this example speaks to how this also happened when she was in Greenleaf, her hometown. In this story we hear a forceful move against that label because of her strong reaction to what I read as her interpretation of an accusation of being Black from J.D. Wyman. In this instance I interpret her reaction a couple of ways. I see it as a manifestation of anger that has been bottled up on her many trips into different towns as a frustration of not being able to speak back to the stares and whispers. She knows J.D. and is able to assert herself against him because she identifies him as the name caller and can “fight back” at that moment. Also, because Estella noted earlier that no one called her names like “Dirty Mexican” or “spic.” She understood racist acts in terms of Black oppression because these were the names she was called. This conceptualization of her racial identity forced her to articulate herself in opposition from these categories (when she is called “sambo” or “Black” in a derogatory manner) as she is constantly forced to deal with the misrecognition that occurs by white peers. Like Cindy I also believe her reaction is an attempt to distance herself from the label of “black” because in her mind, African Americans are discriminated against more than she has witnessed her own family endure. This perspective allows for a critical reading where horizontal racism is enacted through Estella’s beliefs of being “better than” and through her discourse.

This is particularly evident in a story about her coming to learn that her mother picked cotton.

Now, as we're traveling with her and stuff, like we just found out that mama picked cotton! When we went to Memphis and when we were going through Arkansas, then you saw the little cotton fields and that's the first time I saw cotton fields, and I said Lilly, what is that? And she said, "well that's cotton fields" and I said, "oh my!" And then mama's sitting in the back and she says, "I picked cotton" and me and Lilly look at each other and go, "What?! You did? When?" And so then, you know she told us and at that time, and so now so what, when we went to see Elvis, so that was in my late 40s my mom finally [says] that she picked cotton! So then when she told us that she picked cotton it kind of like hurt me because my mother was picking cotton like the Black people did. And I think I'm above the Black people because I'm brown. So you know that they were slaves, but we weren't ever slaves. So it did hurt me, but it was intriguing. 'Cause then we said, "well mama, how'd you do that?" And she said, well, when they were going across the river to come over and they'd be picking the crops and stuff but mama was too young and she couldn't do it as well as, so then she would babysit others and keep them across the way. But she didn't pick much of it. But yeah! (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

In this story that Estella and Lilly hear from their mother about an experience she lived, they hear how she crossed the border with her family in order to look for work. Estella mentions that finding out that her mother picked cotton was upsetting, perhaps because she felt as though her Mexican American family did not have a history of working in any fields.

It is also apparent that she is also upset not just from learning that her mother's family were campesinos but that they were picking cotton, a crop that has been imagined to have only been the domain of African American labor. This also points to the lack of education about Mexican workers in the U.S. Cynthia Orozco states that in Corpus Christi, Texas in, "1932, 97 percent of the cotton pickers were of Mexican origin, having displaced African Americans by the mid-1920s" (Orozco, 2009, p. 29). The lack of popular knowledge on these statistics may have also contributed to Estella's bad feelings

about her mother having to pick cotton. It is also about the internalization of attitudes about who is deemed “suitable” for what type of work and the internalization of racist images and representations in popular culture in the ’60s and ’70s – i.e. the general absence of Latinas and the either absent, or problematic one-dimensional representations of Black people in television or movies.

The revelation that cotton was the crop she picked also frames her perception within the context of racial hierarchy in which Estella positioned herself and her family above Blacks. She points out that “they were slaves,” demonstrating the way in which cotton is thought of as a crop that was historically imagined as solely tended to by Black slaves in the South. The stories shared about articulating racial identities in contrast to blackness, or living within the hierarchy without challenging it, are examples of the ways that both Estella and Cindy speak to being “better than” in subtle and direct ways. In Estella’s understandings of race she fought to distance herself from the Other. In certain ways, her imagined social privilege of not being Black also allowed her to imagine herself as “better than,” even as some whites continued to define her as Black.⁵²

Both of Estella’s examples – of being marked as Black, and her incredulity in finding out her mother picked cotton – speak to her internalization of the racist attitudes of the society in which she grows up. Her reactions to being made to feel the same as Black folks are racist. Instead of approaching the situation through acknowledging that as people of color Black *and* Brown folk are both oppressed by whites, Estella’s experience

⁵² Stories can sometimes serve as painful memories of harsh realities, but they still present lessons to be learned. I want to hope that my mother’s ability to retell this story means that she is working toward new understandings of my grandmother’s revelation. I do recognize this is not my story to continue to write a “happy ending.” However, having learned the important history of my grandmother working in the fields, I was able to understand her story in a different way than my mother’s “disbelief.” To me abuelita’s story indicates that coalitions between African American and Mexican Americans (and other communities of color) need to continue to be cultivated as our histories pass through one another in dynamic and important ways.

of being seen as Black, not white in a Black/white racial binary that so heavily disadvantaged Black people, contributed to her inability to see this connection. This is especially true during the period in which she grew up and was traveling around Kansas, in the 1960s and '70s she emerged as a product of a culture trying to reconcile the end of Jim Crow laws and burgeoning civil rights demands in all areas of society. By placing these experiences back in the context that Omi and Winant lay out when describing how racial formation occurs within U.S. society that it was not simply her ideas alone, but rather the response from being cast alongside those who were marginalized that shaped her understanding on why it may be more beneficial to align herself with white values and ideologies.⁵³

Estella also frames the feelings she has about others labeling her as different when she moves to Manhattan, Kansas and first learns “officially” that she is a “minority”. Again we can read her resistance to labels as her way of battling to solidify her identity as an American.

I remember distinctly when I was college age, when I went off to Manhattan (KS). I was working as a clerk, clerk II I guess the position was. That's when they said I was a minority. I thought I was just a person and being me, that I wasn't a Mexican other than my color and dark hair. I didn't think that I was discriminated against other than when I was traveling in high schools to the different towns you know going to the other school places and I would get that. And understanding what it was to be different there, but I thought that was more like individual people that were ignorant and just stupid. And I knew I was a good person so it like, it didn't make me think that I wasn't, but when I was in college age, and at the college working that was then, when an official, the university said that I was a minority. Because I had gotten some papers saying something about minorities and I had to fill something out. But I didn't learn that until I was 20 years old that

⁵³ As I write about this moment in the oral history I also remember thinking this was the first time I can ever recall my mother speaking negatively about Black folks in such explicit terms. As someone who is very conscious of race and racial discourses in my family home, I do feel confident I would have remembered this. To me, this signals again how, on an individual level Estella is able to identify and fight against racial discrimination that she encounters (and fight on behalf of others if she “sees” it) but is still often aligning herself ideologically with a denial of systemic forces that keep her (as a dark-skinned Mexican American) marginalized.

I was a minority. And after they told me that I was one is when I knew I was one.
(Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

Estella's statement, "I thought I was just a person and being me, that I wasn't a Mexican other than my color and dark hair" is a direct window into seeing the reasoning behind her need to distance herself from blackness or even her Mexicanness. To me, this thinking emerges out of a wish to be accepted as a "person" (read "American" typically imagined as white/race-less) and is bred within the context of isolation. It is the complicated understanding she has built under the false pretense that if she performed as an American, and adopted a color-blind identity, she would somehow be safe from discrimination based on her skin color. By thinking about the individual people as just "ignorant" or "stupid," she denies any recognition of systems of power or institutional barriers that uphold racial hierarchies. However, it is also the failure of this thinking that allows her to move from allowing others to define her to a point of better understanding where she can embrace her Mexicanness.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ I believe this transition occurs upon her move to Albuquerque in her early twenties. My vision of my mother was never where she shied away from calling out behavior that she perceived to be racist. Perhaps moving to a geographic location where she felt that she was no longer the "minority" aided her in coming into a more politicized understanding of her identity. While she still defines her identity in relation to being an American she also brought up her children to know their Mexican heritage and ensured that Mexican culture was an important part of their lives. Her "first" racist experience in Albuquerque occurred when she was at the airport waiting to send her mother home, who had helped her move, back to Kansas. She told me a white woman called her a "spic" after she said something to this white woman's daughter. This moment exemplifies a different type of racism that Estella now navigates living in the Southwest where her identity is never constructed within a Black/white binary alone. Perhaps this is a moment where one can begin to construct a possible difference between her life in the Midwest and the Southwest. While Estella never really notes that she dealt with *explicit* racism in the Midwest (beyond being called slurs for African Americans), her first moment where she acknowledges racism is when it happens to her face and is actually based on her Mexican identity/brown skin. While I am generalizing here, I am willing to go out on a limb and say that race and racial conflict happen/look differently (at least for Mexican-origin folks) when they are in a place that has been fraught with Mexican-Anglo conflict (like the Southwest) for centuries as opposed to navigating xenophobia from white communities against Mexican Americans that tend to occur in much more insidious ways (like how the Falcons' neighbor went around town to have folks sign a petition – I don't read this as confronting the family and calling them "spics" to their faces but rather instilling/instigating fear and distrust based on their racial ideologies in different ways).

The two stories that I previously highlighted speak to the complicated processes behind racial formation for Mexican American women in the Midwest. While I have touched on the many ways that isolation worked to narrowly define women's racial identities, these women also firmly felt their roots planted in the Midwest—a region that is not only home, but they also conceptualize this home to be one ripe with opportunity.

2.5 Defining and Making Home

Racial difference and racial formation are exposed through the use of these women's words on the topic of isolation and how they negotiated daily practices as they grew up in the Midwest. This leads to a complicated understanding of identity and home for these Chicanas. It is important to consider how the making of homes became particularly important safe spaces for women's survival within this context.⁵⁵ Anzaldúa articulates the ways she brings her home with her everywhere she goes. In this sense, we can see how the manifestations of the borderlands/la frontera occur in different ways, through rural and urban spaces in the U.S. Midwest and in Chicanas' own understanding of their own lives. She writes, "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 43). This line exemplifies the many ways that these women successfully carve out meaningful home spaces for themselves in the Midwest. They have witnessed the ways their mothers have carried their homes on their backs and continue to do the same as they make their own homes and honor family through their conceptualizations of home. Home is also a "third space" that allows women to be free from outside definition of their racial identities.

⁵⁵ While home is generally conceived of as a safe space extolled in these women's oral histories, I also want to challenge that a bit. While home may have been a safe haven away from racial violence it was not free from sexual violence (one respondent shares that she was molested by her uncles) nor was it an entirely liberating space (in particular the ways that women's sexuality was policed). For more on this please see Chapter Three.

Emma Pérez characterizes a “third space” in her theory of the “decolonial imaginary.” For her, she brings these two words (decolonial and imaginary) together to, “locate the decolonial within that which is intangible. Here the imaginary conjures fragmented identities, fragmented realities, that are ‘real,’ but a real that is in question” (Pérez, 1999, p. 6). For Chicanas who reside within this intangible third space, “One is not simply oppressed or victimized; nor is one only oppressor or victimizer. Rather, one negotiates within the imaginary to a decolonizing otherness where all identities are at work in one way or another” (p. 7). For Pérez she seeks spaces for this process to occur and be privileged; one where the writing of history is a political project that purposefully asserts that scholars need to pay attention to what happens in the third space. Further, this third space can only be uncovered in hearing what is so often silenced. She argues that one when we can uncover these silences, “when heard, become the negotiating spaces for the decolonizing subject. It is in a sense where third space agency is articulated” (Pérez, 1999, p. 5). In the case of claiming space in the Midwest, these Chicanas demonstrate through their narratives the ways that home becomes one constructed space where their identity can be developed outside the purview of restrictive racial understandings. The third space that the home represents for these women is one where identity can be constructed and re-constructed in a safe space, within the comfort of four walls that enable them to understand themselves in their own space, it is not a place of confinement but rather the only place they can often feel free.

Pérez also draws on Homi Bhabha and Chela Sandoval in her construction of a third space in order to “negotiate new histories” (1999, p. 5). I also draw on Bhabha’s cultural studies approach when he says the following about the importance of identity

formation with the context of third space. He argues that a fluidy and “indeterminate space” must exist for subject enunciation stating, “it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 55). While he is writing in relation to post-colonial studies, and in particular a specific moment when Fanon calls attention to how those involved in the processes of activism and political change are necessarily in flux which allows for different imaginings of identity that are transformative and liberating, my study obviously diverges from this. Bhabha also must have been reading Chicana/o scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez in their understandings of the political potential in theorizing “third space.” It is important to note however the differences in experiences between Bhabha, Fanon and Chicana/o scholars. There are different experiences and articulations of displacement and these different kinds of displacements from home, community, political power etc. create “different forms of thirst for the third space.”⁵⁶

On a related theme, the anthology *Home/Bodies: Geographies of Self, Place and Space* (2006) points to the many ways that scholars have uncovered how home has been defined in relation to the subjects they study. Particularly Tabassum Ruby reflects on how Muslim women “negotiate the categories of woman, immigrant, and Muslim, and also how these women situate themselves as to who they are and where they belong” (2006, p. 28). She explains the following about how these women have conceptualized “home.” She cites Allison James when she notes that, “‘home’ is ‘both a conceptual and a physical

⁵⁶ I must acknowledge Richa Nagar’s poetic words here for helping me to solidifying this key distinction.

space. It is an idea that guides our actions and, at the same time, a spatial context where identities are worked on” (James, 1998 as cited in Ruby, 2006, p. 37). Ruby notes that her participants, “also identified ‘home’ as an imaginary place, as well as a psychological concept that often shapes their identities” (2006, p. 37). In the case of the Muslim women in Canada she also demonstrates that their, “physical dislocation from the place of birth to their current land of residence has liberated them from a fixed spatial ‘home,’ and they perceive the concept as fluid” (2006, p. 37). Thinking about this fluidity of identity in the home space I see how a framework of understanding home as a third space can be useful in interpreting these Chicanas’ ideas about their need for home to be a (safe) third space within the context of building homes as products of these particular migrations to the Midwest.

Like the women in my study, Ruby’s research participants share in the histories of migration. While almost all of the women included in my study (seven out of eight) were born in the U.S., their families experienced multiple paths of (trans)national migration until they finally settled in the Midwest. In this way they also share in the conceptualization of home as not necessarily a “fixed space” but rather a metaphorical space filled with family, love, and messages about what it meant to live in the world as Mexican American women. Ruby further notes, “Rapport and Dawson (1998) state that “home is “where one best knows oneself” (9), and most often the starting point of knowing oneself is one’s place of birth” (Ruby, 2006, p. 39).

However, revisiting my earlier analysis of Midwestern Aztlán the place of one’s birth or the notion of a “homeland” has been one vexing Chicana/os since the annexation of the northern half of Mexico into the US and before in the many ways writers and

scholars have understood and constructed Mexican identity. Chicana/o scholars been preoccupied with this sense of home in many contexts from conquest to colonization and occupation of “our” land, stolen from us and evident in narratives like, “we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” The Chicana/o identity itself was formed out of a feeling of not fitting in, an awareness of not belonging to either nation, being neither Mexican nor fully “American,” and the continued histories of (im)migration of Mexicans to and from the U.S. have complicated notions of home and belonging. In this sense, home has always been a tenuous concept for Chicana/os but perhaps even more tenuous in the case of the Midwest where communities consisted of only “three Mexican families and one of them was my grandparents” (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009).⁵⁷

Generally the women’s ideas about what home means revolve around the themes of sanctuary (safety or security from racism), or as a place for family and love (as a means to be re-energized by the space). The women seem to often characterize home both by the physical space in which they lived (or grew up) and in terms of a more fluid concept where they see it as a space for comfort, security, and familial love. However, this is not a space defined by a particular set of four walled-structures, but rather often an abstract idea (third space) where they felt fully “at home.” Cindy explains,

Home means to me safety and security. It’s my privacy where I can come and shut my doors and I don’t care what’s going on outside these walls, [I feel] the safest inside my home. My door’s always open for friends and family to come over... But when I’m here I’m relaxed and safe... But we don’t go out... we like being together, so we sit and watch these silly movies together... But we just don’t go out anymore. So, I think of home as grand central station for us.
(Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

⁵⁷ Here I point back to La Lupe’s migratory experience because it was not unique, many of the women reflect on the lack of a sense of Mexican community in the Midwest when they finally settled and the greater understanding of being the “only ones.”

Cindy describes her home as a fluid space and concept, it is both “safety and security” along with an actual structure that protects her from “what’s going on outside these walls.” In her statement she describes how home has become a safe space in which she does not feel like leaving it if she does not need to. She and her husband rent movies or bring food home but rarely go out anymore because they have created a haven away from what happens beyond their home. To a certain extent this extreme “homebody” behavior could also be read as the survival strategy that she has employed to live with the pressure of racism and sexism that she has faced throughout her life. In this context home becomes particularly important. Home is the space where these women can express themselves fully. In essence, scholars like Emma Pérez, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Chela Sandoval demonstrate that third space is where one can be comfortable in between many worlds. Through these women’s narratives I theorize that their home space (read through safety and security) become the spaces where they can fully become the person they want to be within the space.

In similar ways Gloria describes that home has been a safe space both for herself and for her family.

Home to me is like when you go home and you’re relaxed, you feel safe, that you know that your family will be coming to the house and they know that home is their home. And they know that it’s a safe place for them. Like John and I, when we were [bringing] up the boys, we were surrounded by the boys’ activities, their games, their school and then little by little they started leaving and now we’re by ourselves and it’s so quiet, we have more time to ourselves. [John, my partner] doesn’t like to go to movies because he falls asleep, so home for us is just like a place to stay but we feel safe there. But, home is a safe place and that’s where the boys will find us whenever they were to need us. And Lilly knows where I’m at and mama, yeah, it’s a safe place and that’s what I feel. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Similarly to Cindy, Gloria focuses on the way that home has truly become a safe haven for her. It is a place where she relaxes and takes time for herself, but it is also the space where she knows her extended and immediate family can find her.

La Lupe shares that home to her means a myriad of things:

Home means to me a houseful of children and grandchildren and my partner, great food, friends and that's it. Home is my grandmother's house. Home is with Michaela in Powderhorn [a racially-mixed Minneapolis neighborhood]. Home is with my partner and her family. Those are so sacred to me and that's what home is. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

La Lupe characterizes her home as a space for her family, but she also describes home as something that means being *with* the important people in her life. This moves her understanding of home into one that is not necessarily tied to the structure, but again to a fluid, metaphorical conceptualization of home. Home is the understanding of relationships with her partner, and the many different ways that she has made family (queer or through kinship bonds), relationships she deems as sacred and necessary in her life.⁵⁸

Teresa also explains home to be more of a feeling of knowing that you are where you are supposed to be.

Home is, I heard once from Garrison Keillor of all people, home is where they miss you. I love that saying! Home is where they miss you and it really is true. My house is my home and it has always been my home wherever I have lived. There is a feeling whenever I'm coming from someplace else and I get on the bus or as I am walking in my neighborhood and there is this feeling of "I'm getting there." And then walking into my house seeing my plants, and my pictures on my

⁵⁸ I choose to make a distinction between La Lupe's families that are her blood and between the family that she has chosen for herself – her queer notions of familia. It corresponds with her identity as a queer Chicana in the sense that she has made a new family with her current partner and her children. It is also queer in the sense that I mean a non-normative form of familia because it is chosen and not necessarily built on either romantic or kinship bonds. In the next chapter, I discuss how La Lupe "comes out" to her parents and her grandparents. This revelation that she is with a woman creates a riff between her and her mother. In the process of healing from this sense of alienation from her mother she cites making her own queer familia was the only way that she survived their period of estrangement. In this sense, both/and forms of family influence La Lupe's own characterization of the importance of home for her.

wall or when my daughter lived at home opening the door and smelling garlic. I was like “Ooh! I’m home!” because she was always cooking. So yeah that’s home. That’s home. (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 25, 2009)

For Teresa home is familiarity, but it is also the sentiment of knowing that she is loved and or “at home” with her family. Through the use of Garrison Keillor’s quote she is also claiming her right to making home in Minnesota. Keillor is most known for his writing about Minnesota culture and has gained notoriety through his national public radio show “A Prairie Home Companion” which focuses on a small Scandanavian Minnesotan fictitious town, Lake Wobegon. Teresa’s conscious use of his quote subtly challenges Keillor’s tendency to only write about white Minnesotan culture where she is clearly claiming her space in Minneapolis through her own ties to the city through riding the bus, walking in her neighborhood, and by claiming “home is where they miss you” even if it is in a historically Keiloresque location. Her side note on how she thinks of her own home as coming from “Garrison Keillor of all people” demonstrates her consciousness in the peculiarity of her choice to quoting him (a white Minnesotan) as well as her resistance in claiming home in Minnesota as a Mexicana despite Keillor’s Lake Wobegon imagining (and others’ construction) of Minnesota as a community full of only white residents.

I posit that these women’s understandings of the need for home to be characterized as a safe space is due to the fact that outside of their homes they were constantly facing racism or having to navigate a world full of whiteness that existed outside the walls of their homes. When they think about home in terms of safety and security, it is the place that is free from outside struggles. Both my mother and my Aunt Lilly seem to note this in their characteristics of home. Both of them began to cry when

asked to think about what home meant to them. Estella articulates home is simply “somewhere where you’re safe and warm no matter if it’s in a trailer in Greenleaf or a house in Albuquerque or my mama’s low-income housing. Just to be safe and warm” (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009). Here she notes that it really doesn’t matter what the outside structure of the home is – the trailer she had to live in when her family’s house was taken by a tornado, her house in Albuquerque that she built with her husband and where she raised four children, or her mother’s low-income housing apartment in Emporia, Kansas – home is the knowledge of a place and space where you can be “safe and warm.” Lilly also suggests that home is so much more than the simple four walled structure saying, “Home is a place where you can always go back to and have the love and support of your family. You can always count on home. You can always count on home to be there for you” (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009). It is a space where no one called them names or mistook them for Black and where they did not have to enact racism in response. Thus it is absent of primary and secondary racial violence.

The fact that these women begin to cry when thinking about home underscores exactly how important the notion of “home” is to them. It is something that symbolizes the site of the family as most often their space for warmth, love, safety and security. Through their own definitions here of what home meant to them these women are simultaneously situating themselves within the context of Midwestern communities and asserting their rights to these spaces. Interestingly, there is no romanticization of, or longing for an imagined home in Mexico – something omnipresent in the Chicano movement’s rhetoric of the period. While their stories speak to having to face and survive

isolation and assimilation and have formed racial identities within these contexts, they often don't detail how their families articulated these struggles. Rather, they taught them how to survive them. Through this approach these Chicanas have conceptualized home in the Midwest as a necessary safe spaces.⁵⁹ In other words, through the practices of finding warmth, comfort, safety and security in their Midwestern homes they have found ways to confront and survive intense feelings of isolation of being the "only ones."⁶⁰

Lastly, women's understanding of their identities in relation to the place in which they came of age is evident throughout their oral history testimonies. They note that they are cognizant that life for them would have been radically different if they would have grown up in the places they often visited— in the case of the Falcon sisters, El Paso and for La Lupe and Martha, South Texas. When reflecting on these imagined differences they often conceptualize how these experiences of being oppressed based on their racial difference in the Midwest was on a certain level more bearable because of the "greater opportunities" they felt they had in the Midwest.

Cindy highlights how she felt being one of a few Mexican Americans growing up in the Midwest in terms of feeling special.

To me, just from my perspective, if I would've grown up in El Paso or something like that I would be the majority and not the minority there. And you probably wouldn't be anyone special or different. And then growing up here in the Midwest, being pretty much, I don't know what our population is but, sometimes I feel like I do stick out a little bit. No one ever sees me as, "oh, you're a Mexican" or "I'm not going to talk to you about certain things" or do things with you. But I do feel that, I consider myself special, not a hindrance to the society. I

⁵⁹ Estella and La Lupe speak to the ways that their families would often tell them to ignore the racist behavior of others. In the case of my mother, I think she felt that her parents were too busy surviving to be able to have "story time." However, families created home environments that were the respite from this intense feeling of isolation surrounding these women.

⁶⁰ I also acknowledge how these processes of making and defining home are gendered. A point I explore more fully in Chapter Three with a specific exploration on the importance of la familia, gender, and labor.

think I have something more to offer than what someone else might who doesn't have my background. (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

Within the context of growing up as a Mexican American in the Midwest, Cindy characterizes herself in terms of the strengths she feels she can offer because of her diverse background. Despite her recognition that she is seen as different she also acknowledges that this is a strength for her and that if she were a Mexican in Texas she wouldn't be able to claim this difference in the same way.

Martha comes to describe the difference she felt in terms of how being in Minnesota actually enabled her to act differently as a woman. In detailing the ways she felt being in Minnesota shaped her thinking. She explains,

And how, just how some of our way of thinking, we will think like, "oh esas gringas they have a different way of thinking but yet at the same time we find ourselves with different, with a different way of thinking than what some of our counterparts in Texas might have, or relatives in Mexico. You know, I've been told that, and I don't know if it comes from living up here for so many years, that I'm different. I'm not like some of the women from Texas, and I'm like, "well, how am I supposed to be?"⁶¹ (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

Martha's acceptance of her difference is a clear indication of her pride in being a Minnesotan, a sentiment that is present throughout her oral history. When asked by her relatives who still remain in the Crystal City area when she is returning to Texas she says, "I have no reason to move back, I have my job here, this is my home" (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009). The last lines of her oral history are her explanation to her relatives in Texas who find it hard to believe that this could be Martha's home, she puts it simply,

This is home to me. And to them [my relatives], it's like strange, it's strange to them that we would consider Minnesota home and to us, this is where we grew

⁶¹ When asked to reflect further on these differences she maintains that these different ways of thinking involved being independent, and her mother's fear that Martha was getting too many "gringa" ideas in Minnesota. I explore these issues more fully in Chapter Three.

up. So I don't know, it's like how Kansas is home to you I guess. So you know?
(Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

Her question to me makes me consider how Chicana/os living in the Southwest or other heavily Latino-populated areas of the U.S. are often in disbelief when Midwestern Chicana/os claim these lands as their homes. These claims of homelands in the Midwest become the active resistance to small communities and living through isolation. Despite the negative aspects of living in the Midwest for these women, they still characterize it as their home and realize that their identities could not be understood without this context.

Lastly, I turn to a poem written by Teresa Ortiz, which aptly summarizes the complicated nature of claiming home and being brown in the Midwest (Appendix B).⁶² In her poem "Territorio Norte" she traces the complicated notions of migration, claiming space and her ties to her identity ("soy Mexicana"). In the poem she switches between English and Spanish to call attention to her bilingual tongue, the many worlds she inhabits, and her ease in both distinctly marking her claims in understanding her home in relation to a third space. The line she repeats over and over "Mestiza soy" signals her play with the many worlds she inhabits. This is exemplified in the middle of her poem when she firmly states, "Yo, ahora aquí vivo / Aquí está mi casa ... I live here / This is where I have my home / In the northern zone of the northern territory, / Minnesota. / Here, my children were born. / This is my home" (Ortiz, 2006). In this section, she initially does not state where she lives when she writes, "Yo, ahora aquí vivo" and "Aquí está mi casa" she does not place her home and where she lives here and now in either the U.S. or Mexico, but in this line I read her creation of a third space, one where she can inhabit both of these nations in her ambiguous reflection of where she lives and has her

⁶² Because of the length of her poem I have placed the text in its entirety as an Appendix.

house. In the next verse however she firmly claims space within Minnesota, “in the northern zone of the northern territory” while also outlining how she has planted her own roots in relation to where her children were born “here my children were born. / This is my home.”

She further creates a sense of third space when she writes the following, “And so, I must finally tell you that / Geographically speaking, / My home is here, / North America, / And I won’t allow for anyone to take it away from me / Or to call me a foreigner, or an illegal alien” (Ortiz, 2006). Here she again refuses to place herself within a U.S. or Mexico context but instead opts for claiming her home as “North America” broadly in effect, creating her own third space of claiming home as a place within *both* the Midwest and her native Mexico. Her poem creates the space where she wants her identity to be read in multiple and flexible ways exemplified in the final words, “Soy Mestiza, Nativa, Inmigrante / Minnesotana / Soy Mexicana / I was born / In the Heart of the Sky/Heart of the Earth, / Center of this land / And this is my home / América, / Territorio Norte (Ortiz, 2006). In ending with “América, Territorio Norte” Teresa creates a new space, the reunification of the northern annexed portion of Mexico, dissolves borders between nations and merges all of North America into one homeland. Like the women who shared their oral histories with me for this project, Teresa summarizes the claims to multiple spaces of home as particularly necessary for her sense of identity. Within this, is the demand for space within the Midwest and the reimagining of what cultural ties and identity means within this space, one that allows for ambiguities and flexibility despite their distance from the physical/geographic U.S./Mexico borderlands.

I AM THE STORY PART IV

UNFOUNDED FEARS: EMBRACING CHICANA SEXUALITIES

In the fall of 2008 I taught a course entitled “Chicana/o-Latina/o Gender and Sexuality Studies” at the University of Minnesota where I saw first hand the assumptions with which most of my students entered the classroom – erroneous and common beliefs regarding Chicana/o and Latina/o gender and sexuality representations and constructions. The course was offered through the Department of Chicana/o Studies and was made up of approximately fifteen students – two who self-identified as women of color. With the exception of one gay white man, the rest of the students were white women (one identified herself as a “queer radical”). While students didn’t use theoretical words to frame what they had been bombarded with by the media, that Mexican machismo is both revered and reviled and that Chicanas are dangerously fertile and their bodies need to be controlled somehow, they nonetheless came in with these ideas of Chicana/o sexuality. I witnessed this in their responses to discussion questions, in their initial writings on our course blog, and in their “surprise” when they learned that the realities might be different than what they had absorbed passively or simply presumed. My goal as the instructor was to confront these assumptions and expectations by turning to Chicana narratives that spoke to the history of how these problematic, singular representations have come to hold cultural relevance and to either complicate or diverge from these mainstream or normative scripts of Chicana gender and sexuality.

In one particular section of the course I had my students explore Chicana feminists’ claims that silence (the cultural aspect of a non-existence discourse on sexual activities of any type) could be a safe space for women to explore their sexuality, specifically for lesbians. At one point, my gay male student did not agree that it was possible to live a full lifestyle if no one ever talked about sexuality fully, arguing that those who are gay must “come out of the closet” in order to be fully accepted by their family.

These conversations that I had with my class allowed me to also think differently about normative constructions of Chicana sexuality – specifically they forced me to deal with my own assumptions and examine my own experiences with sexuality in my family context. In response to my students, as a Chicana lesbian, I held firm to my agreement with the ways “coming out processes” that shape white understandings of queer sexualities might not function in the same respect within the Chicana/o family. Students had to confront their own assumptions as I shared my own experiences of being queer through my anecdotes that as half-Mexican, half-Anglo lesbian I faced much different reactions from my white and brown families based on my sexual identity – and not in the ways that one might expect. As opposed to the white family “acceptance” and brown family “disavowal” model they alluded to believing (again through comments that they felt that Chicano/Latina communities were just more inherently homophobic than white communities), I shared that my white father and I (at the time) hardly spoke after my “confession” and how my Grandmother Creel now says I am on her “naughty list” without speaking to exactly what has placed me on this list.⁶³ For many students it was a

⁶³ In the typical Creel family communication style, I told my mother who then told my father. When I asked my mother what my father had said, she replied that his response was, “I’m not surprised but I don’t

surprise to learn that my brown familia has been more than willing to accept my relationship with my partner. My Grandma Falcon asks about “my friend” and I know this is her way of extending her support to me. She no longer speaks of her hopes for me to find my “principe,” whereas Grandma Creel never fails to ask me when I am going to get a boyfriend despite the presence of my partner at family gatherings.⁶⁴

Regardless of my understandings of the complex levels of my family’s acceptance of my lesbian identities I still am often reminded about how pervasive the repressed Chicana archetype extends. My own (unfounded) fear of discussing sexuality with the women interviewed for this project is a perfect example. In reality, this fear was shaped from years of a relationship with my own mother where we did not broach these topics in deep or meaningful ways. This project forced me to discuss issues of gender and sexuality with family members in ways that I had never before braved. I interpret my family’s openness to exploring these issues because of the distance created by the form of this dissertation project. But I also interpret my access to my mother and aunts’ candid responses toward sexuality precisely due to my identity as a lesbian. This is of course my interpretation and reading of the situation. I don’t believe I could call my mother and ask her “hey mom, do you think me telling you I’m a lesbian made you more comfortable in your interview to discuss issues around your own sexuality?” in order to receive an answer that wasn’t already biased by the question. But, in living my life and embracing my lesbian identity fully I believe I enabled the women of my family to discuss sexuality (sexual history, sexual experiences, and sexual violence) in ways that even I previously thought impossible. It is this complicated space of fluidity where I hope to explore the construction of these women’s gendered and sexual experiences of being Chicanas in the Midwest.

condone it.” While not overtly homophobic (he didn’t say he was going to disown me) it clearly demonstrated his disappointment in what he considers my decision to love women. My grandmother (my father’s mother) also does not speak directly to me based on this choice, yet I am to understand that I am no longer considered to be worth her time – she had never expressed these sentiments to me but rather tells other family members who then relay the pertinent information on to me.

⁶⁴ Of course, these relationships are complicated and gendered in themselves. For the sake of this discussion I won’t dwell too much on this but I also recognize that my identity as a queer femme allows my parents and family to often easily (or maybe conveniently) forget that I am queer and this has been a point of resistance – as evidence of my mother’s initial disbelief when I came out. For instance, saying things like, “but you don’t look queer” is a common narrative that has been spoken and continues to be unspoken by some family or strangers alike. There are of course members of my family who have been immensely supportive, namely my younger sisters who accept me as I am and fully embrace my partner and my queer identity. This is only to say that varied levels of acceptance are informed by gender and relationships (I am much closer to my mother than my father) that need to be acknowledged.

CHAPTER THREE

“THE VITAL PART OF OUR HEART IS OUR FAMILY.” HONORING FAMILIA AND DESTABILIZING SILENCES AROUND MIDWESTERN CHICANA GENDER AND SEXUALITY CONSTRUCTIONS

My Aunt Cindy passed away due to complications from the H1N1 virus in Topeka, Kansas on October 25, 2009; she was only 51 years of age. It had only been four short months since I stayed in her home, visited with her, and collected her oral history for this project. After the first wave of grief and guilt (for reasons including but not limited to not sending her the finalized transcript of her oral history) passed, I knew that I needed to honor her memory in whatever way I could. In between making frantic travel arrangements to get to Topeka from Minneapolis for the funeral and numerous incoming and outgoing phone calls with my family, I was inspired to write a short piece that I was asked to read at her funeral. I imagined that this would occur at the church (since my family is largely Catholic and my Aunt Cindy discusses the importance of faith and spirituality in her oral history). The reality however, was that I was asked to deliver the eulogy at her gravesite, right before her body was lowered into the ground in front of her family and her many friends that had come to pay their respect. In a sense I spoke the last “formal” words on her life in this setting with my reading of several quotes from her oral history. However, what was revealed in the piece I wrote informed by my Aunt Cindy’s testimonio is important to note and serves as a solid framework from which to read the rest of my oral history narratives that focus on both the idealized notion of la familia and the relationships between gender and sexuality through the lens of the family.

3. 1 A Tribute to my Aunt Cindy: En Paz Descanses⁶⁵

I don't have to tell you all that my Aunt Cindy was an amazingly warm, funny, generous, loving woman. I am lucky to have had her in my life, even if it was for too short of a time. When I was in college she would often stop by Lawrence and always made it a point to take me out to lunch or dinner. Usually she would be alone, on a work trip or she would have just dropped her daughter Ashley off at soccer camp. Either way, she always made it a priority to catch up with me and see how things were going. In these moments my Aunt always made sure to listen to what was going in my life, she was always interested in what my next steps would be.

When I interviewed my Aunt Cindy for my dissertation research in late July of this year I was privileged to hear the stories about her growing up in Winfield and Topeka and what it was like as a Mexican American woman in Kansas. I also gained insight into why it was so important for her to reach out to me as a young girl in college. She shared with me her own hopes and dreams for herself, to one day, after Trevor [her son] graduated, go back to college and finish her degree. She shared with me the traditions in her family when her dad would write her and her siblings long cards for birthdays and other holidays that inspired her own desire to write. As always, my short visit with my Aunt was an amazing time, for her kind heart, open mind and generous spirit always shined through our brief meetings. It was always like we had just seen each other, always comfortable, never awkward, just two women knowing each other as friends and familia.

⁶⁵ This is the transcript of what I read at my Aunt Cindy's burial ceremony, October 31, 2009.

I think it's important to share some of her own words with you today. As the keeper of these stories, along with many of you, my responsibility lies in providing opportunities for her thoughts, words and stories to live on. I know many of us carry her spirit with us, and I know based on her enthusiasm for my project that she would want me to share this with you. When I read her words in the transcript of her interview or listen to her speak them, I know there are many lessons to be learned. When I asked her to reflect on memories of her family that she felt really shaped her. She said,

My family, probably my mom, I think I admire her the most. She's, like I said, she's had to put up with us for one thing. Like I said, my dad's very sports minded so as far as I can always remember he was either coaching a baseball team or basketball team and dragging us along and whether she liked it or not we all had to go, not just us, but her, we all had to go with him to all these games. But then again she also had to try to develop a career where she could help get money to bring into the family. She never really raised her voice, whenever we were in trouble it was like, "wait 'till your dad got home" kind of thing. So, she never really punished us in a way that would make me want to hate her or anything. There's been times when I'm sure she [told us] we need to help with the dishes or help with the laundry you know those basic chore stuff, of course as a teenager you don't want to do it but, you have to help somehow. So I'm sure I rebelled a little on that one. But I just admire her dealing with my dad's death and still going on with her life and going places and visiting family and friends, still teaching.

In this passage I clearly hear the themes of family and finding joy in the mundane aspects of everyday life. In fact familia/family was a theme that ran consistently through her interview. When I asked her how becoming a mother shaped her own ideas about her self she replied,

Oh, I think it's helped me become, I think it's helped me to understand who I am a little better. Because at first I thought I never wanted kids and then I thought I do want kids and I always wanted a boy and a girl and if that's what I get I'm going to stop because I don't want more than two. To this day I think I really wanted more than two, and I wish I would've had at least maybe a third, not four but at least a third one, because as soon as they started getting, and my kids are four years apart, once they started getting more independent I started missing that I'm needed, [that] "I'm a mom" feeling so, I wish I would've had one more younger one, one more. I think it's helped me to know who I am and know that

I've gone through a life cycle and I'm leaving, you know I'll be leaving something behind me when I do leave this earth.

For those of us who were lucky enough to know her strong spirit, we all knew my Aunt Cindy as a very proud woman. This pride in herself and her life came from the strong ties to her familia. When I wrapped up my interview I asked her, if she could say one thing to the Mexican American girls growing up in the Midwest what would it be? I would like to close with her remarks because I feel they say everything about Cindy Perez Falcon in her own words, in ways that I could try to summarize, but are that much more powerful from her own point of view. She said,

I'm very proud of what I am, of being Hispanic, of my culture and I just think that for the future generation that I think too that they need to know what their backgrounds are and be proud of it, not ashamed of it, 'cause there's nothing to be ashamed of because you are who you are. And just to learn the language, learn the culture and I know that Hispanics are always into religion, get religion back in your life, it may not be Catholic but bring another religion back in your life, and family. Keep your family, because Hispanics always have their family around them. They're your lifelines I think, and I think that's the biggest, 'cause like I said, here in the Midwest we're the minority, if you were in Texas you're a majority and I'm sure they have it down there too, I'm sure they have their family clusters and stuff, but here we really need to stick together 'cause we're such a small minority. I think family is the biggest, whether you are a woman or a Hispanic or whether you have a family, or you don't have a family, and that's what I keep telling Ashley, your family is your first lifeline that you'll ever have, and you can't lose them.

In writing this piece for my Aunt I attempted to provide a glimpse of the woman I was lucky enough to have in my life. Drawing on her own words I also tried to select pieces from her oral history that would connect with many different people who also had connections with her as family and friends. I purposefully chose excerpts where she spoke to the importance of familia, the connections she had to her own mother, father, and siblings and then to her role as a mother to her children, Ashley and Trevor. In this

particular reading I was unable to provide much analysis of these quotes. Rather I left it up to my grieving audience to interpret her words for themselves. In fact, the response to this piece was immediately gratifying.

My family remarked how beautiful it was and how everything I said about family was true (even though I would argue Cindy is the one who spoke the most of the importance of family). The points about family seemed to resonate particularly with my family, as my mother, father, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins were visibly touched by the tribute and it has continued to impact us today (in speaking with my own family they often voice how important family is as a constant reminder). Cindy's friends were also very gracious and approached me throughout the meal after her funeral ceremony in order to let me know how they appreciated my words. Upon further reflection I was struck by the notion of family as an important, perhaps even vital, theme that emerged throughout all of these women's oral history narratives.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, home is described by these women as a "safe space" and serves as both a literal and a metaphorical understanding of how they belong in the Midwest. Much in the way that these processes were shaped by the complicated understandings of their racial identities as Chicanas, the family serves as an additional layer of how their identities are shaped in the Midwest. Drawing on the narratives that remark on the importance of familia throughout these women's oral histories, I also recognize that the family is an important site where women were (and still are) socialized into their gendered roles. This is where they initially developed understandings about their sexuality.

Using Chicana/o scholars who have theorized the Chicana/o familia, I read these women's experiences against hegemonic, patriarchal notions of la familia in order to challenge what Rosa Linda Fregoso deems the "Chicano familia romance." As Fregoso notes, the family is often conscribed as a singular heteronormative formation based on particular patriarchal ideals. However she argues, "the ideology of la familia fails to acknowledge the complexity of sentiments and relationships within actual familias: the fact that familias are riddled with contradiction – [where we are] objects of nostalgia and remorse, beloved and yet blamed for our shortcomings" (2003, p. 72).

This chapter is an example of those contradictions and alternative narratives about familia. Narratives where these women discuss the hardships they faced within their families as well as how women's familial bonds are intricately tied to their notions of personal subjectivity. Additionally, this chapter highlights women's experiences and understandings of their gendered and sexual identities to purposefully counter the image of la familia as one rooted in Chicano nationalism and patriarchal ideology. These narratives "break the silence" about women's joys and hardships within their families in the Midwest. In Fregoso's call to highlight women's complex relationships with their familias, I choose to highlight the ways that these women's families are sites of refuge, sites of freedom, as well as sites for restrictive policing of gender roles and sexualities. After tracing these women's own words about the importance of familia I also demonstrate what they share about how growing up in this particular context was not solely a restrictive upbringing. Following their thoughts on how they were socialized as women, I turn to Chicana feminist scholars Patricia Zavella, Aída Hurtado, and Yolanda Chavez-Leyva's theorization of silence and the many ways it functions when thinking

about Chicana sexuality. In this sense, I uncover the complicated relationships between family, gender expectations and sexual norms, while also acknowledging the many facets of how these women “break the silence” on these subjects as loud examples of “underground feminisms” (Hurtado, 2003). These approaches to breaking silence also pose powerful challenges to dominant articulations of (white) feminisms.

3. 2 “I had my family.” On the Importance of la Familia

Chicana/o scholars, Chicano queer scholars and Chicana feminists particularly, have investigated the site of the family/la familia as a significant site of cultural, political and social meaning for Chicana/os. Interpreted by scholars, the Chicana/o family has served as a site in mainstream sociology to demonize and pathologize Chicana/os as a racialized group, contributing to the larger context of anti-feminist values deteriorating the “American” family. Further it has been theorized to be required to be a monolithic form (heterosexual male-headed family unit) for the upholding of Chicano nationalism (Madsen, 1964; Lasch, 1977; García 1996). More central to my project, it has served as a feminist site of analysis for understanding Chicana/o gender relationships (Zavella, 1987; Ruiz, 1987; Ruiz 1993). La familia, as a concept, has also served as a political mobilizing tool as Maxine Baca Zinn theorizes with her term, “political familism” (1975). This is as she describes, “the fusing of cultural and political resistance” and “a phenomenon in which the continuity of family groups and the adherence to family ideology provides the basis for struggle. El Movimiento has gone into the Chicano home” (1975, p. 16). More recently, in his book, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*, Richard T. Rodríguez traces the many cultural manifestations of the Chicano family beginning with the Chicano movement. He powerfully demonstrates the myriad ways that the Chicano

family shaped heteropatriarchal cultural nationalism imperatives in the not so distant past. Rodríguez argues that the “historical” precedent of framing the Chicana/o family in patriarchal and nationalist terms is not relegated to the past alone. “Yet the insistence upon adhering to such family formations is not a phenomenon to be relegated to the recent past of the 1960s and 1970s but one that continues to surface in recent Chicano/a cultural politics” (2009, p. 4).

While Rodríguez argues the construction of *la familia* that is often represented as the Chicano macho patriarch who subsumes women’s roles within the family underneath him for the sake of *el movimiento* grew out of the 1960s and ’70s, he also notes the contemporary formations of this representation. Rodríguez’ goal in analyzing the way *la familia* has been portrayed and represented within Chicana/o cultural texts “poems, manifestos, drawings, paintings, murals, music, film, video and television” and how these texts have also consequently shaped our understandings of the Chicana/o family urges us to consider the importance of *la familia* and the value of diverse kinship bonds or readings of the family as not always the repressed, macho-male-headed family it is often made out to be (2009, p. 2).

This reading of the family, alongside Rosa Linda Fregoso’s call to imagine Chicana/o families beyond an idealized or romanticized Chicano family, informs my subsequent readings of these women’s oral history narratives on *la familia*. My theorizing of the family diverges from this important interrogation in that many of these women’s oral histories demonstrate how their families were not necessarily immersed or (possibly not as) invested in the nationalistic ideological imperatives Rodríguez points to in the

isolated setting of the Midwest.⁶⁶ And in the context of these oral histories, women demonstrate the relationships that they share within their families as the alternative examples Fregoso calls for when we, as Chicana/o scholars, imagine the Chicana/o family. This section is an example of alternative narratives about familia, where these women discuss the hardships they faced within their families, as well as how women's familial bonds are intricately tied to their notions of personal subjectivity. This subjectivity is inseparable from resilience and resistance – always defined not just in terms of the person, but also within the familial or the collective.

Speaking about the family has not always been a safe endeavor however. As Fregoso notes, Chicana feminists have been instrumental in challenging this “gag order” that often is seen as a “betrayal of the rules of familismo” (2003, p. 30). This chapter challenges the notion that what happens within the “family should stay there.” Family is a theme that is recurrent throughout these oral history narratives, but it is sometimes the site of pain. This analysis of these histories also highlights the relationships among women to purposefully and collectively counter the image of la familia as one rooted in Chicano nationalism and patriarchal ideology alone. Instead these narratives “break the silence” about women's joys and hardships within their families in a social context where even when faced with unbearable pains caused by family members, the family is an entity that retains much value for these women.

Familia as a theme manifests in several different ways: from women's feelings of strength and safety to a place to build dreams and realize them about future families, as well as a place that often holds secrets of violence that have been revealed through the process of this oral history collection. The importance of familia also seems to come from

⁶⁶ For more on the theorization and effects of isolation on Chicana/os in the Midwest see Chapter Two.

becoming close to one another as a strategy to support each other in the context of racial oppression.⁶⁷ I read this continued reference to their families as something more than just being prompted to speak about their growth and development. This rings true as these women speak of familial memories during their oral histories even when they might not need to reference the family in that particular instance. In these moments they characterize their lives in relation to their family's well being and the cyclical repetition of learning from their own parents that they then wanted to impart on their children.

One example of the importance of family is the clear tie that binds between sisters. Growing up with siblings they were often these women's first companions. When I asked Estella who her companions were when she was a young girl, she began to cry upon answering the question. She finally said, "I guess I didn't realize that I didn't have any friends 'til I went to school. I guess I didn't need any, I had my family" (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009). Her sister Lilly also echoes a similar sentiment when thinking about how racism affected her. She found strength in her familia and said, "To me, I was you know, it really didn't bother me. I just thought, 'it's their loss.' I wasn't going to let it affect me. I had my sisters, so you know if I couldn't be friends with the white girls, hey, I had my sisters" (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009). These examples, among others, are the intimate references in their oral histories where memories, feelings, and secrets held within and by families are shared, protected, or revealed.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ For more examples on how I interpret this, see my section in Chapter Two where I outline how often in their descriptions of racial subjugation these women refer to the shared experiences with other members of their families.

⁶⁸ For the most part whenever any of these women spoke about their sisters they saw them as a source of great strength. However, sister relationships are not always good, strong, or infallible. For instance, while Estella often gets very emotional when discussing her relationship with her sister Lilly, her relationship with her sister that is closest to her in age, Dolores, is somewhat strained. They do not communicate with

This desire to have one's own family and the dreams they held for their own children emerges directly out of their own bonds within their respective familial relationships. These women extol the value of their relationships with their families, and specifically their sisters, as the paramount force that shaped ideas about what they wanted in their own lives.

I guess maybe my older sisters, Glor and Lilly when they went off to school. Gloria, when they graduated high school, ended up going to El Paso with family and learning Spanish and being fluent and then would go across to Mexico then at that time too when it was safe, and go see family down there. And Lilly stayed back and she went to Emporia for nursing. So I guess my two older sisters [were] someone to look up to, not so much Gloria I guess, but Lilly she did get out and go to nursing school. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

Not only was this bond between sisters evident in Estella's description here, but her sister Gloria also relates their sisterly bonds to the roles in terms of gendered tasks they had to undertake to assist their mother.

When [my sisters and I] were growing up, Lilly was the sewer, Dee was the baker, I was the cook, and we each had our roles so when mama was working and we'd come from school, we already had our roles, our duties for that. We knew what we had to make, Lilly would have to sew if a dress tore or something, she would make, mom would buy the patterns, very simple patterns and Lilly would make our dresses. Because we weren't rich, by any means we were not rich. And Dee would bake, and that's why Dee's such a good baker. I never bake, I don't

each other as much as she does with Lilly, nor do they seem to share the same close relationship. On her relationship with Dolores as they were growing up, she says,

She and I didn't get along too good I guess because we were too close. Well, she threw me away for one, after I got home from the hospital. I don't know how old I was but my mom heard me crying far away and [Dolores had thrown] me into the trashcan which in those days were the burning metal cans where you'd put your trash in and burn it, so she threw me away in there! She didn't want me anymore I guess. So that was when she was, we're five year[s] apart in age], so when she was five she threw me away. And growing up, we were just, I think it was because we were all athletic and doing sports growing up, but I think I was real pretty and so that was one of the problems she had with me. We didn't fight over boys or anything like that. But we just never had that connection it was more a tension, we didn't get along. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

While in their older years I would say that they have repaired this relationship somewhat, it is still clear that there is some tension that remains between these two sisters. Also, while not within the scope of my arguments in this chapter, Estella's mention of her beauty as a source of jealousy for her sister provides some clues into Estella's worldview – as an attractive woman she may have been able to move through the world impervious to a larger analysis of race and gender/sexuality analyses because she was prettier and therefore benefited from some privileges based on her looks.

know how to, I mean, I bake, but my baking is not like Lilly or Dee. Estellita was the tiny one, she was a smaller, youngest of us so, she was the baby so we would never have to have her do anything because she was the baby of the family. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

These assigned roles that the sisters inhabited related closely to their mutual responsibilities and love for one another.⁶⁹ These bonds that they developed with one another growing up as Mexican American women in the Midwest influenced their own desires for their future families. In fact, when asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, Estella points to the importance of having her own family.

I don't think I wanted to be anything. I wanted to get married and have a family I guess. I always knew I wanted to have lots of kids, I didn't want to be lonely. So there was no, nobody to guide me, not mom and dad you know. No one said you could grow up to be anything you wanted. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

In this same train of thought, she speaks to how she had a college counselor at her high school but that he “probably saw my grades and [was] saying ‘you’d be lucky to graduate’” as opposed to being the person who told her that she had a future beyond marriage and children (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009). Her contradictory statements seems to allude that she wanted someone to tell her she had an alternative future but she reflects that no one told her what those alternatives could be. Yet she also says, “I didn’t want to be lonely” which I interpret as her desire to be surrounded by her own children, a specific nod to the importance of having her own family that I see based on her experience of growing up with five siblings (she fulfilled that dream with four children of her own). In many ways then, Estella was in no way

⁶⁹ Their birth order within the family also corresponded with different levels of responsibilities – “Estellita” was babied, and the older daughters were often closer to their parents’ economic hardships they witnessed. Both Lilly and Gloria speak to this in their oral histories while Estella glosses over it. Lilly seems to really notice this in her recollection of how “hard it was” when her parents couldn’t pay their bills and services (like when the lights) were shut off. This also means that since Estellita fulfilled the role of “baby girl” in the family, from whom little was expected, it is not surprising to see her political ideology emerges as someone who may feel more entitled to things and a sense that these things might come easier in life.

willing to deviate from the standard script – find a husband, marry and become a wife, have children – in her ideas of becoming a “good” woman.

Perhaps it is clear to see the importance of family for Estella when her sister echoes a different perspective on how her mother encouraged her academically. While discussing how her mother always encouraged her and her siblings to continue their education so as not to end up “like her,” Gloria concludes by describing what I extrapolated as the cyclical relationship between herself and her mother and what she hopes for her own children.

But [mom] would push us, she wanted us to get a good education so she didn't want us to end up like, doing housecleaning or maid service or waitressing or anything like that. Yeah, she would make sure that we were going to go to school, to finish it. She is proud of all of us. I know she is. She tells us all the time. And that's what I want for my boys, for my family. That's what I want for A.J. [my grandson] I think they'll be good. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

While Gloria shares that her mother was actually invested in her education (whereas Estella didn't feel the same), she also discusses how her mother's encouragement shaped her own hopes and dreams for her children. In her discussion on education she reveals the class anxieties Gloria's mother had when she was raising her children. She didn't want her children to engage in the work that she herself had done for a wage (housecleaning and waitressing) even though all of her daughters did do some form of this work, they did go on to work in pink collar and professional jobs – Estella, a clerk at an elementary school, Lilly, a nurse at the Emporia, Kansas hospital, Gloria, working at Payless Shoes Corporation, and Dolores prepares income taxes. Gloria understands this as her desire for her children's future alongside her faith that they

will “be good.” As we see here, class for these sisters is inextricably linked to morality, as it was for most of post-World War II America.

Gloria’s hope and dreams for her own children emerges from a discussion of economic labor and a desire and attainment of a middle-class lifestyle. Chicana feminists have long made the links between gender, labor and families. Take for instance, Patricia Zavella’s groundbreaking text *Women’s Work and Chicano Families* (1987). This publication brought much needed attention to the realities of Chicana women workers. It simultaneously challenged work by white feminists, whose scholarship on women laborers excluded Chicanas, and work by Chicano historians whose work on labor also excluded Chicanas.⁷⁰ In her ethnographic study in the Santa Clara Valley, Zavella reads the realities of women’s lives in both their work and family contexts. In her study she finds, “that the structural constraints on women’s lives and the ideology of family reinforce Chicanas’ subordination” and further that, “within this context, women construct varied meanings of work and family” (Zavella, 1987, p. 15). Zavella uncovers that even though a second wage was necessary for these families, women’s work often brought them tension at home. While the women of my oral history studies clearly

⁷⁰ Zavella’s work is joined by other Chicana feminists interested in the relationships between Chicana/Mexicana labor and family or community life. Vicki Ruiz published in the same year a historical overview of Mexican women’s experiences as canning and packing workers in California in the 1930s and ‘40s, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives* (1987). Ruiz also edited *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family* (1993) exploring the following categories “confronting the state, negotiating the family, situating stories, and taking charge” as women navigate both their family and labor lives (p. 4). The co-authored text *Sunbelt Working Mothers: Reconciling Family and Factory* similarly took up these issues with an in-depth study focused around mothers working in the factory industries (focusing on apparel industries but largely on technology factory growth in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the 1980s and ‘90s). The authors of this text specifically located working class Hispana and Anglo women who were mothers in order to shed light on the gendered relationships between work, class, and mothering. Other texts like Mary Romero’s *Maid in the U.S.A.* (1992) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s *Domestica* (2001), focuses on the particular issues related to Mexicana domestic workers (nannies, housekeepers, live-in/out maids) working in affluent Anglo-American homes. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Global Woman*, (2002) situates these issues in a more transnational context and have certainly laid the groundwork for a feminist exploration of the connection between women’s work and women’s family lives.

discuss the relationship between their work and family lives they do not characterize their work and family lives in the same ways that Zavellas' participants do, rather they speak about it in terms of class mobility aspirations (as Gloria does) or in terms of a reality that did not cause gender tensions.

For Martha, a child of farmworker parents, her understanding of work emerges in relation to her familial commitments and in terms of economic survival. This becomes clear after reading the following excerpts from her oral history.

To me, a little bit of sweat and dirt doesn't hurt anybody, and it's what shaped me into the person I am today. And, I don't think that if it ever came that I would lose my job for whatever reasons, I would not be afraid to do some hard work if I had to. My mom, after dad got sick, she went and worked at the beet piling stations for about twenty years. Every fall she did that, and that was hard work. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

When thinking about her experiences of working in the field or doing other hard labor, she mentions the tradition that she upholds based on her mother's commitment to making sure her family was as economically secure as possible. Following her father's kidney failure, which she attributes to years of farm work and exposure to pesticides, both she and her mother had to do whatever they could to gain additional income. Martha describes the hard work that she and her mother endured, which can be read as a way to contest what is expected from women in terms of working outside of the home, as well as a commitment to economically supporting one's family.

When I became a single mom, I divorced my husband after about thirteen years of marriage. I went and worked at the beet piling stations for three seasons and that was incredibly hard work. To me, it was harder than picking cucumbers or working in the fields, 'cause you would work twelve hours straight and you had to be alert and dealing with sacks of sugar beets, samples and constantly sweeping, climbing into the machine, it was hard work, really hard work. I don't know how my mom did it for twenty years but she did that. She did that because after dad got sick, while he was getting social security, she hardly got anything, she hardly got peanuts for us, so every summer we worked in the beet fields to bring in that

additional income and then [in the fall] she would go work at the beet piling stations. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

In order to provide for her children, Martha worked in the beet piling stations for three seasons and describes how difficult that labor was, which leads her to think about how difficult it is to imagine how her mother did this work over the span of twenty years. Yet, in her story we see that there were not many other options, and that working side by side with her husband (before his illness) allowed her to continue doing this type of work.

Martha's family, as migrant farmworkers, engaged in this type of labor because this was their way of life (Martha's mom and dad both grew up on ranchos in Mexico) but also because of the social hierarchies that ensured that her parents would not be able to move into less grueling work. I believe this is why Martha includes this moment in her oral history – her mother's return to the beet piling stations after her father's illness that is a direct effect of his work in the fields. Martha discusses this when she reflects on what others may have thought about her and her family working in the fields.

You know, other people, who have not done it might make judgments on the families that work out in the fields, and that their kids are there. People don't understand that sometimes you're working towards a common goal, whether it's maybe to get a new vehicle or buy that bedroom set, the family's together and they're working together, they're close. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

While the above examples speak to the ways that women interpreted their family life as influential in shaping their lives as mothers and as laborers, I want to honor Fregoso's caution in always interpreting the Chicana/o family in an idealized way (or the tendency to romanticize it). In the stories I have chosen to share from some of the women's responses that speak to the importance of family and the relationship between their home and work lives, they offer many opportunities to read against Fregoso's

“Chicano family romance.” Fregoso critiques the Chicano family romance as found on film in the following ways,

Instead of providing meaningful alternatives to right-wing ideology on the family, Chicano/Latino screen familias are complicitous with the “rampant nostalgia for the modern family system.” For, even as the idealized screen familia has contributed to the strong family values image of Chicanas/os, traditional images of la familia ignore the diversity of actual familia life in most Chicano/a households. (2003, p. 72)

In one sense these characterizations of women’s labor are also complicit in casting certain families as suited to doing menial labor or work in particular jobs. For Martha’s statement above, her interpretation does seem to characterize her family’s struggle in romantic terms – she and her family were working toward a common goal. I understand the impetus to do this, as someone who has witnessed the disparaging remarks people can say about Chicana/os who do farmwork, the need to distinguish it in such a way as to grant this labor dignity is essential. However, increasing class status for these families was not their only concern, their gender and race intersected with their class motivations and were all shaped by the larger societal hierarchies that worked to try to keep them in their place. Martha’s memories of her mom working the fields also challenges what Fregoso criticizes as the traditional script of the family in the necessary reliance on women’s labor for their family’s economic stability.

In traditional family constructions I also interpret part of Fregoso’s critique to mean the representation of the ever-present, perfect, selfless mother who cares for her children above all else, who might also be continuously seen as virginal. Take for example this problematic representation of the Chicana mother figure often represented through

reverence to La Virgen de Guadalupe.⁷¹ Gloria speaks against the narrative of the loving mother (La Virgen) archetype when she details her (and her sisters') relationships with her paternal grandmother.

You know on my dad's side, we weren't close. My grandmother on that side, as you've heard, was mean! We didn't even like to be around her because she had a very hard character. She wouldn't acknowledge us you know? I don't know, she was just a mean grandmother. I didn't really like calling her grandmother because she didn't seem like a grandmother to us, to me or none of us. She was just too mean. I always thought to myself when I ever have grandkids that I wouldn't be like her. I just knew that she was mean grandmother and I don't know anything about her or their side of the family. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

In essence, the relationship between Gloria and her paternal grandmother was nonexistent; she states that she would not acknowledge her presence, much less her sisters. While she and other family members point to the fact that their grandmother had birthed thirteen children, many of whom were the either the same age or close to the ages of Gloria and her sisters when they were growing up, the relationship between them and their grandmother was marred by what they perceived as her mean and hard character.⁷²

Challenging the notion of an idealized Chicano family as Fregoso argues, by exposing "the diversity of actual familia life in most Chicano/a households," is what I have demonstrated through the attention to women's relationship between work and family.

⁷¹ For instance, in his patriarchal ethnographic description of Mexican American women's roles in relation to her husband William Madsen writes, "In her role as wife and mother, she is frequently compared with the Virgen of Guadalupe. This holy model for female behavior possesses all the most prized values of womanhood: purity, sanctity, tolerance, love, and sympathy" (1964, p. 48). I will spend more time discussing the relationship between La Virgen de Guadalupe and virginity and the policing of women's sexualities as well as Chicana feminist response to this characterization of women and La Virgen in the next section of this chapter.

⁷² Sandra Cisneros also confronts and breaks this maternal/grandmotherly image in *Caramelo* (2002) through the character of The Awful Grandmother. Cisneros always writes her with The (capitalized) in order to signify the power and fear that she often imposes upon The Awful Grandmother's grandchildren (and sometimes adults) of the family in this powerful novel of cuentos she strings together.

Finally, I turn to the challenges of patriarchal domination and control of which many of these women speak, (either through having witnessed their mothers negotiate relationships with their fathers, or through what they have personally experienced), in order to elucidate their gendered family roles in non-traditional ways. Even though these women did often experience restrictions placed upon them by their families because of their gender, they also credit these experiences for making them the women they are today. They recount decisions (like moving to the Midwest) as often dictated by patriarchal domination. However, within the memories of their mothers' struggles, these women also provide views of how they resisted such domination. I trace how even though their mothers often did not get to make big decisions about their lives, they still resisted in interesting ways. Using the concept of cultural citizenship and viewing it through a gendered lens, I read the memories of their mothers' resistance and concessions in relation to decision-making (through migration) and home practices (cooking) respectively.⁷³

Patriarchal domination and its meaning for their families in regards to moving and settling in the Midwest is revealed throughout these women's narratives. They largely relate to their mothers in the way that they were expected to support their husbands' decisions upon relocating in order to find work or reconnect with family. Lilly reflects on how she remembers the story of how her family came to settle in a small Kansas town in

⁷³ I use the framework of cultural citizenship (see more on page 161) to blur the space within the family as solely existing within what is theorized to be the "private sphere." I do this to avoid the tendency of theorizing public and private spheres as distinct spaces that don't overlap. These women's experiences point to the many ways that relationships within the family influenced their attitudes toward labor beyond the scope of the home while using familial relationships or the space of the private sphere (mainly kitchens) to engage with the "public" sphere. For example, Vicki Ruiz states in the introduction of her edited volume *Las Obreras* that the chapters she has chosen, "point to the conceptual vacuum inherent in the feminist edifice of separate spheres" (1993, p. 5). She further argues, "the inextricable nature of family life and wage work in the histories of immigrant wives and women of color explodes the false oppositions at the heart of the public/private dichotomy" (E. C. DuBois and Ruiz, 1990 as cited in Ruiz, 1993, p. 5).

the mid 1950s, and the isolation she felt due to her father's decision. She explains the decision that he made in moving the family to Kansas following his discharge from the Air Force.

I think [dad] moved [us], well, we were moved here by his mom and then after he got out of the Service he felt like he needed [to be close to his family], [Kansas] is where his family was. And so that's why he came here, to help his dad. And for him to be closer to his family. I don't think he thought about [mom's] family. You know it was him, he wanted to be by his family, I don't think he thought about her missing her family. (Interview with Lydia Rider, July 18, 2009)

When Lilly's father, Zeph chose to move the family back to Hanover, Kansas, his father, Pastor Falcon, was working on the railroad and his daughter interprets his choice to move the family as a reality that her mother simply had to accept. The patriarchal assumptions made by the male decision-maker in the household, is present in many of these women's stories. He felt he did not need to consult anyone else about moving or what was best for the family. This serves as an example of domination because of the lack of concern for their respective wives' feelings of isolation, loneliness or homesickness.⁷⁴ These decisions also were emblematic of a time (the 1940s and 50s) when most women (regardless of race) were expected to do as they were told without question.⁷⁵

The expectation that women should move with their husbands is reflected in the narrative of Margaret Perez who stated that her move from Colorado to the small town of Coffeyville, Kansas in 1956 occurred because it was just that, expected of her. When asked if she ever reflected on her move to the Midwest she clearly states, "Well, like I said, my husband was moving, I had to go with him. I didn't like it. I hated leaving

⁷⁴ For a fuller explanation and discussion of the ways that isolation worked in relation to racial identity see Chapter Two.

⁷⁵ This is not to say that *all* women always did "as they were told" rather to illuminate that to challenge male authority was (and sometimes still remains) the expectation. In fact, as Vicki Ruiz uncovers in her chapter entitled "The Flapper and the Chaperone" in *From Out of the Shadows* many young women fought against mandatory chaperonage of their activities (1998). Throughout her text she provides many examples of women who fought against these limiting gender expectations.

family behind but... I did it. But I think all in all, there is nothing in that little town” (Interview with Margaret Perez, July 16, 2009). Margaret represents the experiences that most of the women know of their own mother’s experiences. She, along side Estella Falcon (Lydia’s mother) and the mothers of La Lupe and Martha felt this sense of isolation fully, and lived with the knowledge that their mothers were clearly unhappy with the situation. Lydia observed and lived with the pain her own mother experienced in the distance between her and her family who resided in El Paso, Texas while also acknowledging that her mother is more willing to discuss these hardships (perhaps in light of her husband’s passing in 1988). She remembers her mother often expressing that she missed her family so much that it would build up to a point of conflict with her husband:

And in fact sometimes she would get very homesick and dad would have to send her and us kids to see her family. I know we went there by bus, no by train, and then we would make a trip so she could visit her family. Because it was important for her, after so many years you know you want to see them. Instead of just writing to them and stuff so yeah. It would almost get to the point of “well you need to take me to see my family.” And so he would, but not often. Because you know, being poor you don’t have the means. But yeah, she would voice that she wanted to see her family and he would finally consent to it. (Interview with Lydia Rider, July 18, 2009)

Lilly’s acknowledgement of the role of her father in making the decisions at the cost of her mother’s happiness is clear and demonstrates the lack of control their mothers had in decision-making processes. She continues with memories of what it was like when her mother reunited with her family.

Um, yeah, [my mother’s family] were always glad to see her and they always had a good time and visit with them and we had a good visit with our cousins. And we would stay for like maybe a week but then it was hard for her to leave, she didn’t want to leave them. But she talks about that all the time now; that it was hard to be away from her family. (Interview with Lydia Rider, July 18, 2009)

And while I acknowledge that these times away from her husband, with her family in Texas were incredibly important for her mother, her ability to make claims to such spaces was met with resistance in the form of economic barriers, geographic distance and patriarchal control despite the desire to be physically near to her own family.

On the other hand, women discussed many of the ways that they witnessed their mothers resisting this patriarchal domination in the ways that they sought outside employment in gendered ways. They observed their mothers engaging in gendered labor within and beyond the house and were then also expected to engage in these same gendered practices. For instance, Estella Falcon (my grandmother) would sew skirts by hand or alter hand-me-down dresses from her mother-in-law for her children and she also worked at several restaurants in town. She would also (with the help of her eldest daughters) bring tacos to the restaurant once or twice a month for a special taco night where she could earn some extra cash. These types of strategies that women employed to gain additional income were common among the women interviewed for this project. In an attempt to make additional income for her family, Martha's mother also picked up whatever outside work that she could in order to keep the family financially secure.

And my mom, during the winter months there was a lady, an elderly Hispanic lady here in Moorhead who would hire my mom to make tamales, to make tortillas for her, all kinds of stuff and my mom did it, it was extra income for her. She would go and clean the farmers' houses because it was extra income for her. You know my mom taught us that no matter how hard times are that you gotta keep going forward, you've got to keep doing what you can. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

In exploring women's gendered labor within and beyond the space of the home I must link this to the imperatives of Latina/o cultural citizenship. William Flores and Rina Benmayor lay out the terms of Latino cultural citizenship as the

processes by which Latinos, “claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country” (Flores & Benmayor, 2004, p. 1).⁷⁶ In the context of Chicanas (gendered) home making practices in the Midwest we must attend to tasks like decision making processes and cooking in order to understand that cultural citizenship does not only mean engaging with large scale “broad manifestations of organized social movements.” Rather, cultural citizenship should also be used to highlight, “more subtle cultural practices that nonetheless play an important part in creating social and cultural identity” (Flores & Benmayer, 2004, p. 13). Understanding these Chicanas’ actions as seeking to claim space within the communities in which they live through their gendered labor skills speaks to how viewing these actions as claiming cultural citizenship can also open up space to think about how labor, gender, identity, and home making become inextricably tied together. These “subtler” cultural practices are the politics that enabled their daughters to envision their own forms of cultural citizenship and I argue took place largely within the family context.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Noting that Latina/os are often treated as second-class citizens even if they were born in the U.S. these scholars bring attention to the need to move away from understanding the diverse Latina/o communities of the U.S. in terms of citizenship status alone explaining that, “the sociological and political notion of citizen as political subject a broader and more useful concept to describe the current realities of Latino communities” (Flores & Benmayor, 2004, p. 11). These ideas emerge out of Renato Rosaldo’s characterization of cultural citizenship as an eternal paradox – of the desire for Chicana/os and Latina/os to still be able to claim difference yet also be treated as first class citizens. For instance, he and William V. Flores write, “cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic processes” (2004, p. 57). I believe that these processes of claiming space do differ in relation to region and I hope to continue to consider how, “cultural citizenship is a process that involves claiming membership in, and remaking, America” in this and future work (Rosaldo & Flores, p. 58).

⁷⁷ Building off the limitations of the ways that assimilation models fail to really “fit” these women’s experiences, Flores and Benmayor argue that framing practices of claiming spaces and understanding Latina/o communities through cultural citizenship contests the typically oppressive models that require brown people to assimilate into white culture. They explain, that unlike assimilation or cultural pluralism, “cultural citizenship allows for the potential of opposition, of restructuring and reordering society” (2004, p. 15).

These gendered activities of sewing, serving, and cooking were shaping forces in the lives of these young girls and then in their lives as women. Not only did they serve as examples of how their mothers resisted patriarchal control but these moments also reflected their familial claims to a *gendered* sense of cultural citizenship. Through selling tacos or tortillas specifically these mothers showed their daughters how they were making distinct claims within their cultural context for citizenship and because these acts emerged out of kitchens (typically thought of as women's spaces) they also signified the ways that created new understandings of what being a citizen within their smaller, rural, Midwestern towns truly meant. Denise Chávez also extols the connection between her identity as a Chicana in relation to the tacos her mother and then herself makes, bringing up the importance between food, family, and culture. In a poem entitled, "Prayer before eating tacos" Chávez writes, "We remember that culture is more than culture. / Family is life. / Food is life. / Culture is life" (2006, p. 17). Gloria's account of how the women in her family made tacos speaks to both their economic ingenuity as well as their ties to their own community.

We used to make tacos, I think it was a Friday night, they called it "Taco Night" and we would make the tacos. And my mom would make them at home and then us daughters, the older ones would carry them to the restaurant at a certain time and we couldn't make enough tacos for the restaurant. Mama would make the salsa and I think it was called "Friday night tacos" or something like that. And everyone knew that my mom would make the tacos. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Carole Coulihan also notes that the process in making labor that is usually constrained to the home into a profitable commodity to be bought is a way her respondents use food and control the means of production in resistance to economic oppression.⁷⁸ To me, this

⁷⁸ For more see her article, "*Mexicanas'* Food Voice and Differential Consciousness in the San Luis Valley of Colorado" (1997). Also, on the connection between food, love, and the importance of passing on

experience is important and demonstrates how through the gendered labor practice of cooking tacos in one's home (or tamales or tortillas) this family was able to connect to their community and make claims to what Flores and Benmayor would certainly suggest as cultural citizenship. It is also a far cry from when Gloria describes her embarrassment of having to eat burritos at school when she attended school in Belen, New Mexico for a short time.⁷⁹

These actions also trickled down to these women's understandings of their own roles within the family. Many of these women had to engage in gendered work in the home (through taking care of siblings and helping their mothers with chores) at a young age and were also often responsible for helping engage in these gendered labors that connected and changed the communities in which they live. These gendered labor practices also are emblematic of the linkages between family and labor and how these examples become the point at which they trace their own work histories that begin by working to earn money outside of the home in their pre-teen years through gendered labor such as babysitting, cleaning houses, and waitressing.

Engaging in these types of gendered labor practices meant earning money that was not controlled by their fathers. Oftentimes Estella's stories revolved around her mother trying to "survive" and her need to work outside of the to gain access to money to

women's cooking traditions within the family see Meredith Abarca's "Los Chilaquiles de me 'ama: The language of everyday cooking" (2001).

⁷⁹ In a separate part of her oral history Gloria recounts, "I remember mom and dad used to bring us our lunch, our school lunch, mom would make us the burritos you know of course we wouldn't want the other kids to know what we were eating so we would eat covering our burritos [with our hands]. Because we felt, I don't know, we felt different you know growing up there" (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009). Ironically, in a place like New Mexico where one would imagine there would be other children with burritos for lunch, Gloria felt more embarrassed eating her food prepared by her mother than in Kansas where she never mentions this same worry.

buy her children the bare necessities. When thinking about what her mother did with the money she earned as a waitress at the town restaurant Estella reflects:

With her money? Well, then she didn't have to ask dad like sometimes if we needed shoes or clothes or stuff she would be able to just get it for us. You know, just the necessities things and stuff like that, nothing like albums or vinyl records, none of that, that was all luxury. Ah, maybe, I don't remember even asking her even for money to go to the movies or anything like that, we hardly ever got to go to the movies and stuff. I guess that was after I started working I would do such things for myself. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

While it is clear that money was often an issue for her family, this excerpt also sheds light on the ways that her mother fought against patriarchal domination. Her mother earning her own money meant not having to ask for it, and it meant opportunities to buy her children necessities that might not have been possible on her husband's wage alone, especially as he often spent much of their money on alcohol.

This serves as another point of silence for all of the members of the Falcon family interviewed here. While I have heard stories about how my grandfather possibly passed away due to alcoholism-related illnesses when I was just a young girl, as well as stories about my grandfather driving my mother, aunts, and uncles around drunk they are surprisingly absent from Estella, Lilly, and Gloria's oral histories. Though I have heard these stories as evidence of why my mother does not drink and tries to prevent her own children from partaking, the silence screamed loudly at me when none of them chose to discuss it in their interviews. There are moments here or there where I hear someone almost "go there" to tell about how sometimes he was mean, or how he did not always think of the family first, but then they quickly shy away as if not wanting to disrespect his memory (speak ill of the dead). What I do know is that using this money in this way was a patriarchal privilege and a source of family strife, a point of contention that further

shaped what gendered roles were allowed to play out in their lives.⁸⁰ Though alcohol abuse is by no means unique to the Chicana/o community, my grandfather's abuse of alcohol in his life could have been connected to his status as a Chicano in a small Kansas town.⁸¹ While I may never know the motivations for which he drank, alcoholism, as a disease, certainly left its mark on Estella, her sisters, and their mother.

Similar to how many of these stories about gender, family, and work relay the message that women became the people they are today, so too did negative experiences affect these individuals. Even though family is stressed as ever important in these oral histories, it can also be a source of pain in some instances. For instance, Estella speaks to a history of her own potential sexual abuse by two of her uncles on her father's side of the family and she also implicates her sisters in having to deal with the abuse as well. Like Josie Méndez-Negrete's powerful book, *Las Hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* (2006), Estella's experience speaks to a history of silenced offenses even while she may

⁸⁰ In a meeting with Martha she also spoke to how as a Chicana in Moorhead she has often felt as though she is not able to freely access particular spaces within her community – the bar in particular. She felt as if she entered that space the men would act as if that is not a “woman's place” even if she went while the sun was still up! While this clearly marks a gendered space, Martha also somewhat upholds the way that her gender is confined by essentially saying that women who do enter the bar space may deserve to be labeled as “loose” if they enter after sunset. Needless to say, Estella does speak to the way that her father would visit the local bars in Greenleaf and often bring home friends from the bar which put her mom in the bad position of trying to scrape together whatever food she could find to feed the drunks. Though she does not quite use this language in her oral history, I do imagine this to be what she means.

⁸¹ The literature on Mexican American men and drinking seems mixed in terms of whether or not cultural marginalization has any affect on whether one is more likely to abuse alcohol or not. In a review of the literature Zimmerman & Sadowsky (1993) contextualize alcohol abuse in relation to Mexican/Mexican American acculturation to the U.S. They find in a,

...study by the World Organization (Gilbert & Cervantes, 1986b) also found that 33% of Mexican [men] drinkers got drunk at least once a month, compared to 43% of Mexican-American immigrants, 42% of second-generation, and 56% of third-generation Mexican Americans. Although the increasing frequency supports the linear acculturation model's hypothesis regarding the adoption of higher American frequency rates by later generations, the increasing episodes of inebriation by higher generational status Mexican Americans could be explained by the acculturative stress model. That model's hypothesis is that the greater the stress, the greater the consumption of alcohol. (1993, para. 19)

I read “stress” here to mean race or class marginalization, which could account for the high level of alcohol use among Chicanos (men).

have suspected her other sisters were dealing with similar (if not worse) abuses. In the epilogue to her testimonio on surviving physical and sexual abuse by the hand of her father, Méndez-Negrete writes how digging up this pain brought her to a “year of darkness” (2006, p. 188). She writes, “Although I had long been the spectator and protector of my mother’s beatings, for the first time in my life I learned about the desecration and the insidious violence my little sisters endured” (p. 188). She details the extreme harm in silence, that despite her thoughts that by her actions and silence she was protecting her sisters from their father in fact, “because we never talked to each other, I had no clue, and if I had intuited it, I did not allow myself to see” (p. 188). She places this silence as the product of the violence, fear, and shame they lived with under the same roof as their abuser. She also implicates larger structures that sanction this violence, reminding us that, “Silence and complicity with hierarchies of socialization through the family, church, and other institutions continue to restrict how we act as sexual and sensual beings” (p. 196). She shares her story not as a means to reinforce “another culture of poverty argument of the Mexicano experience” (p. 194) but to reclaim her experiences and heal from the familial trauma of living with an abuser. Her goal therein is as follows: “to reveal the social power vested in my father by a society that sanctions or, at best, ignores men’s violence against women and children” (p. 185). Though risky as Méndez-Negrete notes, I too expose this history of abuse through breaking the silence here for my mother and others who suffer at the hands of a culture that sanctions violence against women and children.⁸²

⁸² Méndez-Negrete that some of academics have questioned whether this is the place/space to expose such truths – to break the silences. For her, the process of writing her story has helped her and her sisters heal communally. She writes, “The process of healing takes place in those internalized spaces of the memory of those who experienced incest as they reclaim their story in their own way – whether in journal form, in a

In Estella's case, her uncles would often stay with her family for extended periods of time, and she had to evade their (unwanted) sexual advances as a young girl (starting when she was "maybe two years old"). She recounts the following experiences:

Uncle Juan would come and visit and I remember when I was out at the farm and I was maybe two years old and in the chicken coup he'd pull my pants down and he was probably in his 20s but he didn't touch me he just was looking. I knew that was wrong. And then another time my Uncle Francis, I was in grade school so I was in puberty and we were visiting him in Kansas City and he took me out for an ice cream cone and ended up at some park and overlooking but I knew that he was wanting to do something with me. And I just kept looking out the door and he knew that I knew. And I said, "I want to go back home." So he didn't do anything, but he wanted to. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009)

While in her mind she seems to have evade any real violence (they just looked or tried) and she managed to evade their advances somehow, she still knows that as a young girl, this was wrong. Additionally, the town's mailman would, "have me sit on his lap and then he would put his hand under my dress or shorts or something and not penetrate but touch me and I knew that was wrong, and he was creepy" (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009). While she initially frames the abuse by her uncles as just looking, she also says:

And one time [Uncle Juan] was, we were on the porch and he was rubbing my breasts and mom was walking from working from the restaurant coming and she was um, walking home and he gave me some money and said, "Don't say anything." I said, "Yeah, I won't," and then I ran to mom when she was coming up the walk. It was daylight in front of everybody and he was drunk. But that was it on that kind of stuff. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009).

confessional, or in a public voicing of the past" (2006, p. 195). I see my mother's request, Estella Falcon Creel, for me to turn my recorder back on so that she can add this last part of her story as evidence that she wants to break the silence on multiple levels. I see her inability to engage in these conversations on an academic level and I believe she has entrusted me to move her story somewhere beyond herself. I share her story here not to further pathologize Chicana/os but to call attention to the real violence that occurs and in hopes that this story does aid in healing for everyone involved. This is of course, not an easy process, as I alluded to this in Chapter One, I have also had to come to terms with my mother's own molestation. In earlier drafts of this chapter I vaguely mentioned the abuse she suffered, here it is written in the same detail that my mother provided to me in July of 2009. I disclose this as a means to shed light on the difficult decisions involved with "breaking the silence" and to make visible my own writing processes on this subject.

All of these experiences (and perhaps more that she kept silent) all speak to her inability to really feel as though she is able to fully enjoy her sexuality. This is revealed when she speaks to her own sense of sexuality in this part of her oral history.⁸³

You know you get in that situation where you're always wondering if you're going to fight or flight you know, so I think I'm a pretty strong person with that. And so sexually, I do have problems with that. So, you know it's not [my husband's] fault, but you know, it's men. I don't talk to anybody about it. I didn't tell my sisters or nobody, [especially not] my poor mom, because I didn't want her telling dad and his brothers because you know how it is growing up with all the uncles and stuff. So, I don't say anything like that. And Uncle Francis is one of the closer ones for mom, since dad died, I've been trying to keep her on that side of the family so I don't say anything. And it was the same with Uncle Juan. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009)

Lastly, Estella also seems to “know” about other violence that may have been happening in the house, but because no one spoke about it, she does not really “know.”

I know one time dad had a big fight with Uncle Juan over Lilly. I could, I know I was young enough, they were of course in high school and I was in grade school. And I remember a big fight with Dad and Uncle Juan and it had something to do with Lilly. So I don't know. But you know maybe it has to do with promiscuity, whatever that word is. Yeah, with my, because I know Gloria was rather like that, Doe was rather like that. I don't know if anything ever happened with Doe, I could've been better. But, you survive however you can survive. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009)

This paradox of knowing but not really knowing if her sisters also suffered similar abuses weighs heavily on Estella's mind. In her analysis she reads her sisters' potential promiscuity as related to potential abuses they also faced. In her statement, “I could have been better” I also read her blaming her self for being a victim of sexual abuse (and for also potentially being promiscuous herself). If Méndez-Negrete's story enlightens us at all, is that she, along with other Chicanas who speak on the subject do implicate the entire

⁸³ She also shares an event where a friend tried to rape her when she was in high school. Estella's youth was filled with multiple sites of sexual violence that has affected her ability to fully embrace her sexuality as an adult.

family as knowing and/or experiencing some aspect of the violence that is taking place in the home. Ultimately, her last sentence of her oral history, “But, you survive however you can survive” strongly emphasizes her strength in being able to simply live through the abuse she (and others may have) faced.

This segment provides a fitting example of the complicated relationships present within families. While Estella discussed openly her bond with her sisters and the closeness she felt with her family, she never (before) spoke so openly about her sexual abuse by her uncles. Here, she breaks that silence. She tells the truth of the painful experiences of her past, while also divulging that the reason she has chosen not to give voice to this at least to her mother is a way to protect her and her relationships to her husband’s side of the family since her dad’s death. Yet, after we had concluded the oral history collection, following the second part of our interview, we sat on her bed together in the bedroom she shares with my father. She asked me to shut the door and turn the recorder back on. She began the last part of her oral history with two words: “sexual abuse.” These words act as a constant reminder that her Chicano family is not something to be romanticized or idealized, but rather as something that needs to be spoken about in great complexity.

The history of sexual abuse that my mother shared with me has also become a particular burden for me to hold onto and to decide whether or not I should share her experience in the context of this project.⁸⁴ As a feminist I refuse to deny that violence

⁸⁴ As a specific example my Aunt Lilly revealed to me in the context of taking her oral history that the Falcon family genealogist is Uncle Francis, one of the very same Uncles who violated my own mother. So, how do I proceed with wanting to uncover more history about that side of my family when I will need to rely on developing a relationship with a man who abused my mother? Furthermore, the processes of exposing this trauma is frightening especially as this is opening a wound that many (including Lilly and Gloria) did not speak to in their own oral histories.

occurs within our families and within the community at large, but inviting criticism of our communities by sharing this is a risk I take in illuminating the violence. I hope that along with Fregoso's characterization of the need to discuss violence that occurs in our families, homes, and communities that I along with other feminists and those interested in social justice for all will join us in recognizing that,

“Politicizing family violence means that we should also frame our discussions within a historical framework. As multicultural feminists we need to recognize that most of the empirical evidence on sexual assault and domestic violence shows that Mexican and Chicano men are no more prone to commit violence against women than are those from any other national or racial group” (2003, p. 34)

And as she further notes, feminists have been aware for years that, “domestic violence is a leading cause of female injuries in nearly every country, cutting across the axes of race, class, religion, nationality, and ethnicity” (Fregoso, 2003, p. 34). By including this example of sexual violence that was hidden in family secrets and unheard whispers in the night, I hope to, along with my courageous mother, continue to break the silence on issues regarding the Chicana/o family and complicate the representation of the idealized Chicana/o family.⁸⁵ I place this conversation of violence in the family alongside other

⁸⁵ Again, I join the many courageous Chicana/Latinas who have paved the way before me, who have braved breaking the silence on these issues like the anonymous contributors in *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. One specific Latina Anónima writes “Night Terrors” (2001) a testimonio about being raped by her father and a stranger while she was fifteen and babysitting at a friend's house. The story ends with journey toward healing through taking her young daughter to self-defense classes and beginning therapy to discuss the violence brought against her. Arcelia Ponce also writes of being raped by her father in “La Preferida” in *The Sexuality of Latinas* (1993), and living in a constant cloud of domestic violence as her father beat and threatened her mother and her and sisters throughout her childhood. Lastly, Carla Trujillos novel, *What Night Brings* (2003) details two sisters' fight to break the cycle of physical violence by plotting to kill their father – the man who brutally attacks them and their mother. The link between these stories and the women here are frightening clear like uncovering secrets rarely spoken, pondering their

experiences that involve the importance of family to de-stigmatize the discussion of sexual violence and to highlight the many facets of how family has become the important factor that has shaped so many women into those who they have become.

3.3 “Cuidate, Cuidate.” The Politics of Sexuality and the Many Readings of Silence

In “Listening to the Silences in Latina/Chicana Lesbian History” Yolanda Chávez Leyva encourages those invested in illuminating the silences that Chicana/Latina lesbians experience in regards to their sexuality to stop “imagining silence as the absence of something. Rather...to listen for what silences held within them” (1998, p. 429). In effort to continually challenge the notions of how the family is constructed, I incorporate these women’s words on sexuality to rupture silences and interpret them beyond an “absence,” and move them toward an understanding of how their sexual identities have developed within the Midwestern context.

Patricia Zavella uncovers how Mexicana and Chicanas characterize sexuality in her article “Playing with Fire,” she notes that the processes involved in talking about sex is often empowering for women despite the fact that “knowledge about sexuality is often ‘nondiscursive,’ that is, knowledge that is assumed rather than made explicit” (1997, p. 393). Through the words of one of her interviewees, Zavella relates that they often struggled to put their feelings or experiences into words specifically saying, “I heard a common refrain: ‘We just *knew*. There were certain things you did not talk about, and sex was one of them’ or, more pointedly, ‘Talking about sex meant I was a bad person. So I

sisters’ own (potential) abuse (and the effects of the abuse), and attempted rapes by strangers and acquaintances.

didn't want to talk about it'" (Zavella, 1997, p. 393). Similar to Zavella's observation that "The interviews themselves, then, were transgressions of the silencing in which women had been trained," (p. 393) I illuminate sexuality within these oral histories in order to disrupt and challenge the silences surrounding Chicana sexuality in addition to situating these experiences within the Midwest specifically. In a similar article, "Talkin' Sex," Zavella urges Chicana feminists to specifically take on this work on all levels:

In this regard, then, the Chicana feminist project related to sexuality becomes breaking the silence—theorizing the relative absence of discourse about sexuality, naming lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgendered subjects in our communities, challenging heterosexist assumptions and homophobia, and understanding the myriad ways in which women construe pleasure. We Chicana feminists must engage in the political work of moving sexuality from the realm of silence, repression, and control toward women's autonomy, empowerment, and creativity. We must create multiple spaces for women to continue "talking' sex." (Zavella, 2003, p. 248)

Chávez Leyva also notes "As a people who have passed on our historia through the sharing of *historias*, storytelling itself provides a basis for unraveling the multiple meanings of silence" (1998, p. 430). In essence, this section explores the complicated notions of Chicana sexuality around the themes that emerge out of some of these women's oral histories. Their stories, which acknowledge their status as racially sexualized bodies, explore the meanings of silence as it functions not just oppressively, in the sense that valuable information about sexual matters were not often discussed, but how these silences can also be read as liberating in terms of these women's own abilities to be sexual without feeling an explicit sense of shame. I also move to expose the

relationship between these women and their understandings of virginity in the ways that their sexuality was or was not policed by their parents. Lastly, there are many ways that these women actually have not remained silent on these issues of sexuality in order to complicate this notion of silence, and “repressive” Chicana sexuality. These women’s stories fulfill Zavella’s call to Chicana feminists interested in the subject of Chicana sexuality.

The ways that these women came into their sexual identities is shaped by their families and their Midwestern context. It is also shaped by the fact that their sexuality is always shaped by their racialized bodies. Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano reminds us in her article on the need for a Chicana/o Studies that integrates sexuality alongside other categories of analysis, “No one becomes who they are in relation to only one social category, and no representation of sexuality or desire is free of racialization (even in the absence of people of color) (1999, p. 341). For instance, these women share stories where they acknowledge that their sexuality was constructed through their raced bodies in the ways that they situate their (hetero)sexuality in relation to their potential partners in the Midwest. Their brown bodies and the way that (white) men interact with them means that they are constantly racially sexualized bodies. Lilly, Estella and Martha exemplify this through the recognition of the ways in which their brown bodies meant that their race was intricately tied to their sexuality.

The intersections between race and sexuality for Chicanas are particularly important issue to attend to. Carla Trujillo discusses this in terms of both heterosexuality and lesbian sexualities in her chapter, “Chicana lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community” (1991). She speaks about the need to understand how the

oppression of heterosexual Chicanas' sexuality by Chicano and Anglo cultures work to also keep Chicana lesbian sexuality marginalized as well. When looking at the intersections between race and gender in this way, she argues that the racialization of sexuality confines and constrains a multiplicity in gender performances for Chicanas. Racialized sexuality is also linked to Chicana/Latina efforts for access to reproductive technologies. The arguments surrounding the intersections of race and sexuality within a larger understanding of power often revolve around Chicanas/Latinas' systemic exclusion from concerns about reproductive health (and at worst involve projects to further demean women's control over their own bodies – such as forced sterilization).⁸⁶ As a poignant example of the lack of control on woman had over her own reproductive choices, Martha's mother was forcibly sterilized after delivering her sixth child. Due to language barriers and institutional racism/sexism, the doctor simply sterilized her while she was under anesthesia after giving birth. The doctor claimed that she would die if she got pregnant again so he decided this was for the best. While this was in the 1960s, these pernicious practices continue, and are particularly dangerous for women of color.

Recognizing the ways that their sexuality was racialized manifested in multiple ways. At a point when she is discussing what it was like to grow up as part of the only family of color in Greenleaf, Kansas Lilly states, “when I got to be [older], where I could start dating, you know when the boys look at you more we were just something to look at besides the white girls too. So, I guess it was ok” (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009). Lilly's acknowledgement of the power that she held as something different to look at when she grew older speaks to how she recognizes that her race and

⁸⁶ See Adaljiza Sosa Riddell's *The Bioethics of Reproductive Technologies: Impacts and Implications for Latinas* (1993) for more on this subject.

sexuality are intricately tied. She describes growing up when the boys of her town became interested in girls and reflects upon the intersectional understandings of race as it related to her.⁸⁷ It is impossible for Lilly to separate her race and gender markers, such that when she becomes older that mark of difference becomes a point where she sees her difference as an advantage, although the “so I guess it was ok” part of her statement might allude to the fact that she did not feel completely comfortable with this arrangement. It is clear that she sees how being marked as different (as a brown woman) became a reality that she had to negotiate, ultimately coming up with her difference as somewhat acceptable in the context of sexual attention from (white) boys and perhaps using it to her advantage when and if possible.

In the Introduction to the edited anthology *From Bananas to Buttocks*, Myra Mendible discusses the processes behind understanding the historical and socio-political contexts of the Latina body. She writes,

Narratives of race and gender are crucial vehicles in the production of national identity, and in this sense the Latina body has played a formative role in the defining discourses of “America.” Since the early nineteenth century, her racially marked sexuality signaled a threat to the body politic, a foreign other against whom the ideals of the domestic self, particularly its narratives of white femininity and moral virtue, could be defined. At the same time, the Latina body offered a tempting alter/native:

⁸⁷ In an article focusing on the unique race and gender social locations women of color face as they deal with domestic violence Kimberle Crenshaw explores, “the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color” (1991, p. 1241). Her theorization on intersectional identities has been adopted as one of many key tenets in feminist thought in relation to women of color: that women who are raced cannot be separated from their racial category or their gendered status as a woman of color.

an exotic object of imperial and sexual desire. Gendered, raced tropes framed debates about immigration, territorial expansion, and nationhood. (Mendible, 2007, p. 8)

I use this quote to signify the many ways that the Latina body has been shaped as a site of contestation and to highlight the way that the Latina body in particular becomes a site of exotic objectification or exoticization.⁸⁸ I read Lilly's description as the playing out of the exoticization of her body. She recognizes that her brown body holds "something different" than what her white counterparts might, and in turn she acknowledges that this difference was appealing to white boys.

Lilly's sister Estella also discusses her raced body in relation to her heterosexuality but in relation to her own "choice" in who she envisioned she would end up with as her partner; she ultimately imagined a white man as her eventual husband (which she did enact). When asked to think about what her life might have been like if she grew up somewhere with more Mexican American people, she immediately frames the conversation within the context of her choices regarding her sexuality.

Well, you know like in places like we'd go sometimes like to Topeka or Kansas City where you did see Black people and other Mexicans and stuff, the Mexicans that I would see were um, like vatos, they were like, they thought they were just all that in their "wife beaters" and, seeing that when I was younger, because it was the same fools just turned me off and I knew I wasn't going to be marrying no Mexican man because I just didn't like what they portrayed. That was ridiculous to me, so I guess growing up in a white town I knew I was going to marry a white man. I guess that's one of the impressions that I knew. And then also at that time when I was working at the university then that's when you saw you know, Black people and different people, races and stuff. But, I guess the Black men tended to

⁸⁸ The process of exoticization is the sexual desire of racialized bodies. It is often a product of white (male) desire for the bodies of people (women) of color because of their "exotic" read "non-white" features, whether this is amplifying particular body parts that seem foreign, exotic, disturbing, or titillating like the Hottentot Venus (Magubane, 2001) or Jennifer Lopez' butt (Negrón-Muntaner, 1997) or through the desire to consume cultures for tourist pleasure (Trask, 1999), or in the representation of Disney's animated characters (Lacroix, 2004). The stories highlighted above place their exoticized bodies in conversation with these many readings of exoticization, but are emblematic of the particular ways that brown women's bodies are consumed as "different and exotic," which as Mendible notes means that the bodies of women of color are also constructed in opposition to "proper" notions of the white body, sexuality, and femininity.

come to me and like me, from afar or from wherever and they tended to really like me but then I knew at that time and age I'm not messing with a Black man because that's just, I don't want to mess, I had enough trouble with myself let alone being a mixed couple in that age. I remember there was a white girl and a black man that were acquaintances and you know to me, it was no big deal, I thought it would be hard because her [family] wouldn't like his side, his wouldn't like her side you know, so I knew enough growing up like that, that I was going to not make that harder on myself. And so that's why I said well, "I'll marry white then." I guess that's one of the impressions of growing up in the middle of Kansas versus somewhere like you know, Albuquerque. I'm sure dad would've had us down in the south valley and yeah it would've been way different, way different. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

Here, Estella links the ways she thought about her relationship choices in terms of her status as a woman in the Midwest. Visibly turned off by the "vatos" who were always "the same fools" and afraid to engage in a relationship with a Black man because of the racial tensions, she strategizes that part of her way out of the struggles she faced as a racialized other was to marry white.⁸⁹ In much the same way Estella categorizes her choice in a husband based on what could be read as her desire to move beyond the "vato fools" as a means to gain what she perceives to be upward class mobility.

This choice did not come without consequences however. Her differently shaded brown skinned children have had to navigate a world that was still not eager to fully accept them even with a white parent. It is apparent that Estella cannot separate her sexuality from her racial background, noting that if she were to be in a mixed relationship with a Black man this would be hard, but at the same time she does not consider how it would also be difficult if she were in a mixed relationship with a white man. It is exactly this omission (not acknowledging her relationship with a white man as mixed) that

⁸⁹ Estella also discusses her reaction to being misidentified as Black, growing up as a very dark brown woman. I do believe then choosing a Black husband or boyfriend would signify a move toward Blackness that she openly opposes in the ways she uses discourse to clearly demarcate a difference between her racial identity and those of African American people as she grew up in Kansas. For more on this discussion see Chapter Two.

shapes how she herself views her sexual choices. She also has privilege in the choice of who she would decide to marry; whereas a Black woman coming of age in the same time might have found it much more difficult to make this same sexual choice. Again, Estella herself points to how growing up “in the middle of Kansas” meant to a certain extent that her sexual choices were limited, but that ultimately “she just knew” that she would end up “marrying white.”

Also, her contact with other Mexican men was not occurring in the middle of Kansas (it was when she traveled to Kansas City to visit family), which minimized her ability to be around these “vato” types where she might have been able to form a different opinion about them. It becomes clear from the quote that she was very set on marrying white, and that as the exotic other she was able to fulfill that choice that she made as a young girl. While this reading of her “choice” does present a desire for white men over any other men as one rooted in internalized racism and classism, I also can read this as her own aversion to Chicanos as they (her uncles) were her abusers. This may be her subconscious and thus, enacted response to the abuse she suffered at a young age by the hands of her Uncles who she describes as fitting these very disparaging description of the “vato fool” when she talks about how they would often get in trouble in Kansas City which would then force them to move to Greenleaf for a while. While this would be the quick and easy understanding for me, as her daughter, I cannot be sure that this is definitely the case, nor do I wish to pathologize all Chicanos in this reading. However, this is a silence that Estella holds when she speaks about her experiences or perhaps another level of how unaware she is of her motivations and their connections to larger structures of power (like race and class hierarchies). If her subconscious truly dictated all

of her actions she might not have been with any man (regardless of race or class) as she was also the victim of dating violence as a teen and fought an attempted rape by a high school friend – both of these attackers were white men. And, while Estella was certainly successful in marrying a white man the ways that sexism overlaps and intersects with racism has both facilitated her desires while simultaneously trapping her in an eternally unequal relationship.⁹⁰

These women's sexual choices were limited or shaped by their location in the Midwest but Martha adds that her location in the Midwest allowed her to have different ideas of what sexuality might look like for her as opposed to growing up in South Texas where her mother (among others) might have been able to better police her sexuality. When discussing her parents' desire to move the family from Moorhead, Minnesota back to Eagle Pass, Texas (they had bought a plot of land there) she recalls laughing, "My mom wanted us to go to school down in Texas 'cause she thought we were getting too many gringa ideas you know" (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009).

When I asked her to elaborate further on what she meant by "gringa ideas" she explains,

⁹⁰ As her daughter I have seen this play out in multiple ways. I will use my observations about my parents' discourses around money and the unequal power relations that ensue as one particular example. My father earns a lot of money as an engineer and while he has "given" my mother access to credit cards and accounts he still usually has the final say on where money goes and she gets into "trouble" when she spends money that he has not accounted for. When she would buy me things on a simple trip to Target this would often produce worries like, "well, I better keep this receipt from your father for a little while so he doesn't get mad." I see at least a little resistance to his monitoring when she actually does spend the money and she says, "I'll deal with him" – but this attitude begs the question, why should she have to "deal" with him if it truly her money as well? The money she earns (a meager \$10/hour wage for 20 hours a week) is the only money that she does not have to ask his permission to use. Ironically, in the very need to marry out of poverty she inadvertently continues to live out a similar situation regarding money, as her mother once did (albeit on a different scale). In marrying a white man, with good earning potential, she still lives with a central concern of whether she can spend the money without being chastised by her white husband. This is a moment where her race and gender merge to create understandings about my white father's expectations for her as a brown (poor) woman – that she will be unable to manage the money correctly or that she will use it for things he doesn't approve (such as gifts for her mother or sisters that often take her months to save up for).

Well, for one thing it was this issue on dating. Because, I had seen my cousins and a lot of Latinas, friends of mine, that it was like they go out with somebody and that's it, they end up marrying this guy. And I didn't want that, and I had mentioned to my mom, that I wanted to go out with different people. And that didn't sound too well with her. Another fact was that, that we would be asking to go to the movies all the time or to this and to that and I remember one time saying, "I don't know why I have to ask for permission all the time, my friends they don't tell their mom and dad they just say, tell 'em, 'we're going to the movies' they don't have to ask for permission, why do I have to?" it was those kinds of things. And (this was after I left the household and got married) when my sister Amelia graduated high school and started college at Moorhead State she moved into the dorms. She moved into the dorms and my mom was like, "no proper young Mexicana, young girl, leaves home without getting married." And the thought of us leaving home without being married was, didn't sit too well with her. And I remember when I was a senior in high school, I had applied for several colleges and most of them were in Texas and mom was like, "y porque te has applicando aya? No, aquí, aquí a la escuela aquí." And I'd be like, but mom I want to go to there... and she would say, "y con quien estas a vivir?" Because to them, if I was going to be going to college I was going to be staying with a relative. That was the gringo ideas that my mom, she just didn't like that. She didn't like the fact, she wanted us to be more in tune with our *cultura*, with our traditions, our ways of thinking 'cause she thought we were just too liberal compared to my cousins from Texas. (Interview with Martha Casteñón, February 7, 2009)

Martha's mom's belief in her daughters' gringa ideas that emerged out of their location in Minnesota, meant that without proper supervision her daughters were at risk of sullyng their reputations as "good girls." Leaving the home without being married, even if it was in pursuit of education "did not sit well" with her mother. And while Martha laughs when she thinks about these "gringa ideas," indicating to me that she thought it was somewhat ridiculous, she also mentions that her mother viewed her and her sisters as not "proper" or influenced by "gringa ideas" because of their location in the Midwest. In her mom's mind, Martha interpreted her philosophies as indicating that in a place like South Texas, Martha would not have gotten away with such behavior (like asking for permission to go to the movies, going to college without living with a relative, or dating multiple people – as opposed to simply marrying the first boy she dated).

While Martha was able to discuss openly what her mother meant when she was afraid the Midwest was giving her too many “gringa ideas,” most other discussions on sexuality when these women were growing up were shrouded in vagueness, “just knowing,” or silence. Attitudes about sexuality were often not openly discussed and frequently women were left to learn about sexuality from older sisters, friends, or school sexual education classes. Gloria recalls how her mother did not inform her on matters pertaining to the acts of sex or what might happen if she did have sex with a man.

Well, mom never talked to us about the birds and the bees, because I asked Lilly the same thing as we were growing up. I don't know, maybe mama didn't know how to talk to us about the birds and the bees at that time. So, I learned at school you know, like P.E., and they show you a film and all that stuff. I think I would see my friends, you know how they act or in movies but I don't think I would try to, I would never try to be like somebody else that I shouldn't. Like maybe two different people, like from school to the workforce, you know how there could be two different styles, but I don't think I ever did that. I learned by watching my friends or with TV or I asked my mom certain things you know. But, mom was not good, not comfortable in explaining that because maybe they didn't tell her anything. So, a lot of it was from my friends and school and watching TV I think. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

While it is unclear who “they” were (those who informed her mother about sexual matters), Gloria clearly states that she learned the most about sexuality in class and through popular culture. Her own mother's lack of discussing such matters could have been related to her upbringing as well, upholding a chain of silence that extended from her own mother.

Estella supports Gloria's point on the silence around sexual issues. Her mother did not inform her about sexual matters either, but neither did her older sister, meaning that the culture of silence pervaded on multiples levels within the family. Her parents were silent on the subject, and then this same lack of discourse was then experienced by her sisters.

I don't recall much at the school level I guess, like the health classes and stuff like that. I suppose it was probably from movies, maybe some books, not from mama, not from dad. And my older sisters, no. We didn't talk about it, we just experienced it ourselves. I remember one time, Dolores, because she was five years older, she was, she had her boyfriend over but then she changed her clothes I guess when they were going to go out or something and then at that time, I knew that she had changed her clothes in front of him so then I kind of figured out that they're probably doing more than whatever. Nothing was said, but I could just figure, figure that out. With my friends, who was doing what, we just kept that to ourselves, we didn't sit around and talk and say "hey" did you hear this about that and whatever. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

In Estella's revelation we see that sexuality was not merely a taboo subject within the context of the family, but that a culture of silence surrounded the subject among her friends (and even her closest confidantes, her sisters). Learning from what she witnessed in her immediate surroundings was more informative than the silence from her family and friends on the matter.

At home, there was a silence in the lack of discourses regarding sex, but her father made his thoughts about his eldest daughter consorting with boys very clear. Gloria explains how her strict father, in the following excerpt, closely monitored her sexuality.

I remember I loved this friend in high school, his name was John Marlow, he was my first crush. I always wanted a boyfriend who was white, blue-eyed and blonde. You know, that's what they say right? That was mine, and John Marlow was that. He was tall, he was a football player, a basketball player he was an all-around well-liked kid and he had blue eyes, blond hair, gorgeous, to me he was gorgeous. And my dad, I never even went to a movie or nothing with him because my dad was so strict. And uh, the only time I would see him was at school, when I would go to school, on the bus. He was my crush, my first crush. And dad would stand on the porch with his hands folded, didn't crack a smile when we'd come home from school and John would walk me, he would get off the bus where I would get off to go home and he would walk me to the porch, and dad would be on the porch just looking, not cracking a smile or nothing. And I would tell John you know, just be nice, smile and say hello and whatever. And I'd say "he looks mean, but he's not!" And when I'd get home he'd be on the porch just looking at me like that and John would say, "Hello Mr. Falcon, have a nice day today?" And my dad had very small talk but John was deathly afraid of my dad. My dad, he would look like that, he would be mean but he really wasn't. He made it a point to

let the guys know not to mess around with his daughters. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

In the silent intimidation her father used to scare her young love, Gloria felt very clearly that boys needed to be on the best behavior with her and her sisters in order to appease her father.

It is interesting to note that Gloria also describes her ideal man as being tall, blond and blue eyed (traits that were all fulfilled by this popular football player, John). It is not a surprise that growing up as part of the only brown-skinned family (and only family of color) in her small Kansas town that Gloria would imagine her “dream man” to be white, blue-eyed and blonde. In the same ways that the Falcon sisters were perceived as something different in terms of appearance, their attraction to who was looking at them was also constructed by the community in which they lived, and in the general expectations of what is deemed attractive by societal norms.

Latin American and Mexican television was not available in those days, popular movie stars embodied this Anglo ideal, and other media representations offered few alternatives to it. Thus, the “All American boy” aesthetic was the only option for heterosexual attraction and they were also the boys that these women (as young girls) socialized with during their formative sexual years. While it is clear that this ideal man (white, blond, blue-eyed) is not limited to the Midwest, I bring this up to demonstrate the limited options in terms of Chicana/o men for the Falcon sisters (regardless of whether they ended up marrying the men that fit this description). This acknowledgment further complicates notions around her, and her sisters,’ own sexual development as young brown girls in Kansas. Martha shares a similar experience (yet different because Martha’s suitors were Mexican and Mexican American) through a story of when a young boy

approaches her father and asks his permission to take Martha to the fair. His response initially was silence, followed by his hand banging on the table and a stern “No! No va” (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009). Martha also mentions another incident involving her father “protecting” her from boys. When she was in seventh grade her father intercepted a letter from a boy in Texas, writing to her after her family moved back to Minnesota for the rest of the year, and Martha found out about it via a different friend who was also receiving letters from him. After finding out that the boy did indeed write to her she says, “my dad never questioned me about it, never asked me about it” (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009). These examples point to the fact that while there was no real discourse about the “birds and the bees,” parents were policing their daughters’ access to boys as a common practice.

In some regards, silence around sexual issues (her mother’s inability to talk to her about sexual matters) had detrimental effects on some of these women’s lives.⁹¹ Toward the end of high school, Gloria became seriously romantically involved with an older man named Don Mullen. Following graduation she left Greenleaf and moved to El Paso to live near her mother’s family. She made this move largely because of an incident with Don Mullen. In her words, he “stabbed her in the heart.” Silence did not protect Gloria from discussing strategies for dealing with her older boyfriend.

When I met the Dons (the Mullens). He was way older than I was, I had just graduated and my dad did not like the Mullens. He knew that they were, well Don was the one I was dating and Dan was a little jotito. And you know, he wasn’t afraid of him, but he was afraid of who I was dating. I don’t know how my dad would let me go out with him. I guess my dad thought since he was older he would have a little respect but he was an asshole. And that’s how I learned pretty quick. And we would go to a movie or drive around town you know, but it was such a small town you could hardly do anything, to go to a movie you had to go to

⁹¹ As mentioned earlier Estella’s own silence (her refusal to tell her mother in order to protect her) about the sexual molestation by her two uncles really caused Estella a lot of pain.

Washington which was 12 miles out of town and I had to be home at a certain time. Dad made sure I was home at a decent hour, I couldn't be late and Don knew that. But yeah, we got engaged but I think because I was so young, so naïve you know? And he thought that because I was seeing John in high school [that] I wasn't a virgin. But I was a virgin. He asked me, and said, "No you can't be" and I said, "Yes I am!" you know, and he never believed I was a virgin. Yeah, I was a virgin until I was 18, and he's the one who took my virginity and then he stabbed me in the heart and that's why I told dad, "Nope, I have to get out of here." And I left and started my life in El Paso [following graduation], that's where I met John [Aguilar]. And that's why I think that my dad let me out. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

In this story Gloria brings up several important things. First, in describing the Mullen brothers, Gloria references that one of them was a "jotito" who her dad was not concerned with because he was queer. While there was not really an open discussion of sexuality in the Falcon household, living in a small town where everyone knew everything about everyone else's business meant that there was a general understanding that gays (and lesbians) were just left to their own devices, accepted as they were by the residents of the town but also "othered" in particular ways. In fact, her sister Lilly reflects on the gays in Greenleaf and her mother's discussion of them as being "joto" as no big deal.

All I remember is [mom] calling them jotos. She would call them jotos, you know, "he's a little bit joto" and you know until she would tell us what the term meant I would say, "oh ok." But then you know, they never said anything bad about anybody being gay, it just was "well you know he's joto" and I said, "oh, ok". I don't think you know, people just knew, especially in a small town, they knew, but they weren't discriminated against I don't think. You know they were treated just like everybody else. We just knew that they were gay... I really didn't know about them until I was like a freshman in high school. To me they were just ordinary people. (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009)

In Zavella's article on Chicana and Mexicana sexuality, one of her lesbian respondents speaks to the issue of "just knowing" and how it plays out in Chicano/Mexicana communities. She refers to it as a "secreto a voz," an unspoken secret in which everyone

“knows” about sexuality, but no one speaks about it.⁹² This may be what is playing out in terms of just “knowing” who is a “little bit joto,” in speaking about who is “joto” within their communities they are in effect breaking the silence on speaking about sexuality.⁹³

Cindy also reveals the same discourse around her family acceptance of those who are gay as opposed to degrading them for their sexual orientations. When discussing how she learned about other sexualities she says the following:

I’m trying to think because you know Topeka is well known for Mr. Phelps and his crusade.⁹⁴ And I can’t remember when I first experienced, it must have been in high school probably when I first experienced him and knowing what his organization was and [that] is when I understood ok there’s gay and straight and what lesbian meant and what all that meant. But it wasn’t until then. We never talked about it in our family until my brother told us that he was gay, you know we still love him, he’s not purple, he has the same personality he’s had for forever, he’s never changed. So you know I’m not against it but as a family we never talked bad about people. And you don’t harass those people it’s their personal choice, we never harassed them. (Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

While Cindy’s family also did not have any thing bad to say about those who expressed different sexualities, she does use an analysis of queer sexuality as being a “personal choice.” In her discussion of her brother, Cindy seems to assert that she distinctly

⁹² Zavella notes that one of her lesbian interviewees mentioned that her lesbianism within her family and community was a “*secreto a voz*.” Her informant Maria says the following, “It was a big *secreto a voz* (unspoken secret). That is a big concept in the Latino family in Mexico, whenever some sin is going on, we have a social psychology happening here protecting the victim and the victimizer. And it has come here [to the U.S.] somehow. They say, “Don’t say anything about your aunt, poor thing, she has a big problem.” And it’s like [groans] now I’m guilty too. You break the guilty feeling in pieces and distribute it among the whole family, but over a long period of time. Whenever someone gets pissed with somebody, they will yell it and say, “Enough is enough, I’m going to tell the secret!”” (Zavella, 1997, p. 402)

⁹³ While at least in theory, these discussions illuminate the presence of gays/lesbians in these women’s lives, but their acknowledgment of difference is also clear. While this is not overt homophobia it is an enactment of normativizing heterosexuality.

⁹⁴ Fred Phelps is an anti-gay pastor who is very well known locally because of his church, Westboro Baptist in Topeka, Kansas. Although he, and his group have also garnered national attention through protesting the funerals of victims of anti-gay hate crimes like Matthew Shepard and Veterans. His (and his church’s) philosophy is that the sin of homosexuality is the cause of natural disasters and other societal “ills.” As a student at the University of Kansas I witnessed his infamous “God Hates Fags” sign more times than I care to remember.

separates herself from anti-gay crusaders like “Mr. Phelps,” but in her characterization of her brother as “not purple” she seems to allude that it is just a part of him, while simultaneously postulating that it may be his (or other gays’ or lesbians’) choice to deviate from heterosexuality.⁹⁵ In these discussions of joto sexualities there is a sense of just “knowing” but there is also a discourse accompanying indicating a breaking of perceived silences around non-heteronormative sexualities which I highlight as particularly important when one thinks of the both Chicana/o discourse on queer sexualities (as inherently homophobic) or on the discussion of queers in the Midwest.⁹⁶

Revisiting what Gloria reveals in her quote about the Mullen brothers, not speaking about sexuality openly in her family meant that she was left to figure out how she would deal with the issues of “virginity” on her own. After having sex with Don Mullen she doesn’t speak to exactly how she was “stabbed in the heart,” but we can possibly presume that after she gave up her virginity to him, he was no longer interested in her. We can also read Don’s refusal to believe Gloria’s virginity is intact in the racist assumptions around Latina sexuality – that Chicanas/Latinas are in their very essence hyper/overtly sexualized or “loose” women. This event leads Gloria to leave her family, to strike out on her own, and re-evaluate former and future relationships with men.

⁹⁵ I bring up this side note about discussions of joto sexuality to discuss it in the context of heterosexuality and to complicate the ways silence functioned around issues of sexuality. Here I highlight how speaking about gayness (and the opinions that it was not acceptable to degrade those with different sexualities) did take place even while discussions of other sexual relations were not.

⁹⁶ These responses surprised me, and my aunts’ ease in being able to speak to me about this subject furthered my need to characterize their willingness to discuss these matters as in effect breaking the silence around issues of non-normative heterosexuality. For more on LGBTQ communities in the Midwest please see *Reclaiming the Heartland: Lesbian and Gay Voices from the Midwest* (1996) a collection of stories by a racially diverse sampling of lesbians and gays in the Midwest, and for an excellent discussion on how Latina lesbians claim space and community in the Midwest through their writing see, Amelia María de la Luz Montes’ “Tortilleras on the Prairie: Latina Lesbians Writing the Midwest” (2003).

John, who she speaks about meeting in El Paso, is her current partner and is the father of her three children. But she purposefully chose to never marry him. On this subject she says,

I wanted a family, you know I was getting older and I wanted a baby. And [John] already had six kids from his marriage and he didn't want any more you know. And I had told him, the only thing I want from you, because he asked me three times to marry him, and I said, "No," because it seems like when you marry someone they sign that little piece of paper and they change. [So] I said, "No." I said the only thing I want is I want to get pregnant. I want a baby. And he says, "Ok." And before I knew it, I was pregnant. And that's when I had to call my mom and I was afraid to call her. I mean, you know, I was grown or whatever, but that's when I had to call my mom, that's how I had Cory and yeah, he was with me when I had mijito, but we never got married up to this day, we've never gotten married... (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Here, Gloria speaks to her deliberate decision to not get married. But despite her assertion that she won't marry John because men "sign that little piece of paper and they change," she is still afraid to call her mom and tell her she is pregnant and not married.⁹⁷ This demonstrates the strength of narratives about virginity, marriage, and purity that clearly affected Gloria's sense of Chicana womanhood, but also shows her willingness to confront these very same forces that try to dictate her own sense of her sexuality.

Gloria is the only Falcon sister who ended up being with a Mexican American man, in spite of her initial dream man's characteristics (white, blond, and blue-eyed). Gloria's openness to discuss these *sensitive matters* with me, and with her sisters and mother, also speaks against the trope that Mexican Americans do not speak openly about sexuality.⁹⁸ Also, even though there are silences around sexuality, this did not mean that

⁹⁷ Another point of silence in Gloria's interview is the refusal to discuss a marriage that she did enter before her relationship with John. I believe it was this bad experience with marriage coupled with the negative experience of her relationship with Don that shaped her ideas about the institution of marriage as being one she no longer needed to enter into in order to be the kind of woman she wanted to be. In many ways, I see this as a feminist act, and I admire my aunt on her willingness to stand on this belief.

⁹⁸ Gloria's recognition of the ways these narratives impacted her sense of self have also evolved over time. When her sister Dolores called to tell her she was pregnant Gloria's first thoughts were that of celebration and excitement, while her sister was worried about what everyone else might say about her. Gloria

women were not making sexual decisions or were not engaging with ideas of sexuality. Sexuality was negotiated all of the time in these women's families – through mentioning and noting “joto” sexuality or in the unspoken strict rules and policing of women's sexuality by fathers.

Closely related to the issue of silence around sexual matters is the subject of virginity, which is another tool that Chicana/o families often use in order to police sexual activity. Chicana feminists have long engaged with La Virgen/Malinche (Virgen/Whore) binary/complex in their explorations of how these archetypes have historically been used to constrain women's sexual choices. On the other hand these figures have also been forcefully reclaimed in an effort to challenge these normative sexual formations.⁹⁹

Of interest to me is how Estella explains that this wasn't something that was driven into her at a young age, despite her family's Catholic background. She says that

answered her concerns with, “you don't have to be afraid to tell anyone, nowadays you don't have to be married to be, to get pregnant Dee” and I said, “look at me, I never got married” (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009). She used own use of her experiences as an unmarried woman who got pregnant to ease her sisters' concerns. I also see the value in her deciding what she wanted – a baby but not a husband – as opposed to someone like Martha, who after getting pregnant was essentially pushed into marriage by her father because of the constraints of the Catholic Church. She reflects, “I got pregnant and so my dad when he learned I was pregnant told me, “You have disgraced the family, you have shamed the family, you have to marry him.” And that was it! I was a good Catholic girl, I did what I was told” (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009).

⁹⁹ Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) is not the only Chicana feminist to challenge this construction of la virgen which Chicana feminists recover and reinterpret as a cultural representation beyond the patriarchal reading of her (along with other archetypes such as La Llorona and Malintín/La Malinche) See *Infinite Divisions “Myths and Archetypes”* (1993) for reclaiming of La Virgen through Chicana literature. La Virgen does not simply exist as a tool to oppress, for instance, Chicana feminists like Carla Trujillo have reclaimed La Virgen and have imagined her in relation to Chicana lesbian desire in “La Virgen de Guadalupe and Her Reconstruction in Chicana Lesbian Desire” (1998). Religious scholars, Jeanette Rodríguez and Ted Fortier also write about how La Virgen de Guadalupe holds such cultural relevance specifically through cultural memory of the figure of Guadalupe as “of the people” which they read as meaning she is able to exist beyond the patriarchal rule imposed on sexual relations via the Catholic Church, such that she is a figure that challenges the very colonialist and patriarchal imperatives of the Church in her accessibility to the people, see “Chapter Two: The Power of Image” in *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith & Identity* (2007). Perhaps the most exemplary is Ana Castillo's anthology *Goddess of the Americas* (1996), which provides an overarching account of La Virgen's use as a patriarchal tool as well as several Chicana feminist responses and reclaiming of her as a feminist figure. Chicana creative writers, like Sandra Cisneros, have also helped to establish La Virgín as a powerful, female cultural symbol for women generally and lesbianas more specifically.

there wasn't any pressure to keep her virginity intact, "Whatever happened, nobody was there to say 'yes, take care of yourself' or 'no'" (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009). As a young girl however, *my* sexuality was heavily policed and closely monitored by my mother with a specific emphasis on keeping myself "pure" for my future imagined husband. Virginity was a topic that was often brought up, specifically in relation to my mother's spirituality through her reconnection/rededication to the Catholic Church. Although this policing was very difficult for me as a young woman, I recognize that this was perhaps in attempts to (over)compensate for the fact that no one ever told her "take care of yourself."

In an earlier quote Gloria mentions that her virginity was taken from her, but when she discussed it she did not seem to express any particular regret or I, as the listener, did not interpret any stigma surrounding her discussion of her virginity. It is also important to note that while the Falcon sisters were raised Catholic they did not attend mass regularly after an incident where their parents were unable to continue paying for Catechism classes. From Estella's interview she recalls,

We were sent to Catechism, didn't go to church everyday, more like special days like Christmas and Easter. And then when we were in third grade, because we were done with our first communions, Father Ashenbremer was his name, decided that if you didn't come to church and pay regularly then you didn't deserve to have your children in Catechism, so then we got kicked out because my dad didn't pay or go. So, I remember that, and I was in third grade. So that kept me and my friends separated. So, it backfired, we just didn't go then. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

Because there wasn't this focus on Catholicism as an oppressive tool in the Falcon family, the women might have been saved from oppressive conversations about female sexuality as related to la Virgen de Guadalupe and virginity. Estella also relays that her mother initially only spoke Spanish when she moved to the Midwest and was only able to

understand mass when it was still offered in Latin. However with the change to English-language masses, she was no longer able to understand the mass as well, which decreased her visits to services. This indicates to me that while church or Catholicism may have been valued in theory, it was not the only means by which these women received messages about “proper” sexuality. Lastly, the repressive view of the Virgin Mary who would be a much more prevalent figure in a Midwestern church (at that time) is not mapped onto these women’s bodies/sexuality in the same way that La Virgen de Guadalupe is for Mexican women and Chicanas. In an all white town, the attention to La Virgen in the church would have been minimal (if any at all).

However, refusing to discuss sex with daughters led to some difficult times in terms of their sexuality for both Martha and La Lupe. In discussing how her father was very vigilant about letting her go out with boys Martha echoes a reluctance to discuss sexual issues from her mother (similarly to Gloria and Estella).

Well, it was mainly dad who made the decision [of allowing me to date], mom would just tell me to be careful. She would just tell me to be careful but she would never say why, which irritated me. It’s like when I started going out with Juan, she just would say, “cuidate, cuidate.” But she never explained why. She never told me you know, “if I guy starts touching you and all this stuff...” she never told me anything. I didn’t know anything about sex. And I wish she had. I remember when I got my period I was in fifth grade. I thought I had hurt myself. She gave me pads and said, “you’re going to get this every month.” She never explained to me about developing and all that kind of stuff. She just said, “when this happens you got to put these on every month.” And then she said, “you can’t be climbing in the trees like you used to” because I was a real tomboy. But she never explained why, she never explained to me you know, what could happen when you were alone with a guy, things happen, and that I could get pregnant, she never said anything. I didn’t start learning about sex ed. Until I was in, in high school, but even then, I mean, I knew about how a girl got pregnant and what happens when she gets pregnant, the development of the baby and stuff like that, but mom never told me, explained to me, what would happen when you were alone with a guy and things start to happen. She never explained that stuff to me and I wish she had. Had I been aware of that, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten

pregnant, but it happened. It happened. (Interview with Martha Cateñon, February 7, 2009)

Martha connects the silence around the subject of sexuality as moments in her life that were important to her sexual development, like her initial menstruation and when she started dating Juan (who she married after they met in high school). This description of having to act more like a girl is not unique to Martha. Chicana feminist scholars have documented these realities as women entered puberty they were often faced with increased policing of their bodies. In “Playing with Fire” Zavella summarizes, “[Women] were no longer able to walk around in bathing suits or underwear, sit with their legs open, or play rough with brothers or other male kin, and they were discouraged from playing ‘boys’ games” (2003, p. 239). Also, Aída Hurtado’s informative text *Voicing Chicana Feminisms* (2003) weaves together the voices of 100 young Chicanas who share similar stories. It is troubling how much these young women’s ideas about gender and sexuality (who grew up in the 80s and 90s, and who could easily be the daughters of the women interviewed for this project) mirrored the experiences of these Midwestern Chicanas who came of age in the 60s and 70s.¹⁰⁰

Martha describes that while her mother gave her the necessary materials to “deal with” her monthly period, she did not receive the information she really wanted/needed to know about *why* she had to do these things and why her freedom was limited by it. She also regrets that she did not know the specifics of how a woman got pregnant, information that she did not learn in school and definitely not from discourse at home. “Cuidate” doesn’t really afford much information; as the vague term “be careful” or “take

¹⁰⁰ While not within the scope of this project, it would be interesting to try to uncover why in some cases these ideas about gender and sexual norms have not changed in the span of time between when these women were growing up and Hurtado’s research participants were coming of age.

care,” did not fully prepare Martha for the reality of what a pregnancy meant for her life. Shortly after high school she got pregnant with her first child and she seems to express regret over this event. It was not regret that she had a child, but rather that she wasn’t prepared or able to plan for the pregnancy because she was not well informed of her reproductive choices. In her oral history she breaks the silence that was oppressive to her by speaking her mind on the subject of young women’s sexuality issues today.

And, when I hear parents that buy birth control for their children, I’m like, that’s a good thing. I’m not condoning that the kids have sex, it’s not about that. It’s about protecting them. You know, I’ve seen too many young girls get pregnant and they miss out on a part of life that they’re not, they’ve got a responsibility that they’re too young for. They should be out having fun, not dealing with that kind of stuff, to be taking care of a baby or they’re taking care of a baby and they start resenting the baby. And that’s not fair to the baby, [or] they start neglecting it, or abusing it, and it’s not the baby’s fault he was brought into this world. But, I don’t know, I’ve seen too many kids become parents too young. And my mom used to say, and this was long after I had my kids, you know, in this day and age, there is no reason for girls to be getting pregnant when there are so many contraceptives out there. Back in my day there wasn’t the availability of birth control or condoms like there is now. That wasn’t available back then. And she would say, with all the opportunities that women have, that young girls have to go to school that’s what they should be shooting for and not getting pregnant. I said, “well mom, sometimes they get pregnant because they want to get out of situation that they’re in in their homes.” And she said, “but still, they should be working on their education.” But, I don’t know, it’s a different time these days. Different from when I was growing up. You know if I had the educational opportunities that a lot of these young girls have, I would be going for that. If I knew then, what I know now, and I look back now, back in high school, as long as I was passing classes I was ok. I was satisfied with that, and now I wish I would’ve done better.

(Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

Martha’s advice to other young Chicanas is clear when she says that if possible, one should delay starting a family. Although, this is not a simple clear-cut situation as she explains the conversation she had with her mother about teen pregnancy, she recognizes the educational opportunities she was not able to achieve because of her marriage to her first high school boyfriend, Juan, and lack of information on and access to contraceptives.

Martha also discusses her marriage to Juan as maybe not working out because she was so “imverde” as her family called her about sexual matters. Getting married and starting a family at a young age created certain stresses for Martha and her husband which she hints contributed to the demise of their marriage. Also, within the scope of this chapter I do not have that much space to attend to these issues but many of the women also admitted their own struggles in discussing issues of sexuality with their daughters/children. Teresa says, “When your kids are little, not little like little-little, but when your kids are pre-teens and teens the whole issue of sexuality is something that is difficult to deal with as a parent. Because you don’t want to go overboard at the same time you do you become very worried about it. Especially with your daughters, you know you turn into... well you worry” (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 16, 2009). This sentiment seemed to be reflected throughout these Chicanas’ oral histories indicating that the silence around sexuality still needs to continue to be broken in many ways.

La Lupe also discusses that the silence surrounding sexuality in her family led her to act out against her parents as they were trying to control her sexuality. When thinking about dating she reveals, “Well dating was not allowed so when [my parents] did find out they would send my brother to walk with me to school back and forth” (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009). In her case, the surveillance of her sexuality was passed on from her parents to her brother, the ultimate example of distributing patriarchal control among males. Unfortunately during our interview the tape recorder did not record the story of her decision to get married and start her life as a married woman with an older man. What I recall of the story is that she did not enjoy being told that she was unable to date, which forced her into marriage with an older man when she was still in high

school.¹⁰¹ As I fixed the audio recorder we realized that this part of her history was somewhat erased by a mechanical error, to which La Lupe said, that perhaps it was fate, because speaking of that marriage was clearly uncomfortable for her. While she was happy with the children that came out of that marriage, she ultimately left the relationship because he did not want to support her going back to school when her children no longer needed her full attention during the day (when they were all school-aged).

After leaving her first husband she started dating a woman after initially becoming very close friends. When she discusses her queer sexual identification, she initially frames the conversation within her family's refusal to discuss issues related to queer sexualities but then moves on to her own feelings when she says the following:

No, [my family didn't talk about homosexuality] not when I was growing up but I would speak to, if there was anyone wanting to belittle someone I would say that's not allowed. That's not acceptable and I'm not sure where that came from. I've talked to my parents about this actually. No one's really sure where my activism came from. You know because there was never talk about the social and racial justice issues or anything like that. It was just something about being humane for me. I always did know, though, that I liked both girls and boys. It was about the person for me. But I always thought I think that, you know when I look back, I always thought that I would be like 60 or 70 and then I would be able to do what I wanted because all the kids would be gone then anyways. But it was never something pressing on my heart, you know that I had to... you know it was just something that was like ok, maybe someday. But it was so slight that I can only just recall that little bit. And it wasn't like earth-shattering or anything like that. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

La Lupe makes it clear that she did not allow gays or lesbians to be "belittled" in her family or by friends and questions (along with her family) where she gained the courage and need to stand up for others who might be oppressed or marginalized. In her own

¹⁰¹ As a means to get away from her family that she felt was restrictive, she agreed to marry an older man when she was still in high school. I read that she was "forced" because due to familial/social pressures the only way to have any sort of relationship with a man had to be within the context of marriage. Because of these pressures, La Lupe, as a young girl, was unable to explore her option through dating and instead rushed into a marriage that seemed to really affect La Lupe's future goals and definitely shaped her expectations of womanhood.

thoughts on accepting the possibility for loving a woman, she frames it as an option that she did not see as an urgent matter but instead as a possibility for the future. When the right woman came along, she was open to the possibilities. This relationship has forced her family to deal with La Lupe's sexuality.¹⁰²

When La Lupe reveals to her parents and grandparents that she was making a life with another woman, she experienced some fallout from her family for her "choices":

I was pretty much disowned for a couple of years and I think towards the end of those two years, or maybe a year and a half, when I was feeling the depth of the loss of family and everything I was almost going to break down and, not leave my relationship, [but] just say like "Hey," you know, "pay attention to me, look at me" but I didn't. I just thought [to myself] no. If I don't stand my ground with this one I'll never be respected and they won't know that this is really serious business for me. And I just was steadfast and created family and friends with the dearest of my hearts and that was it. Eventually my parents came around. And my grandparents, [my grandmother] was, of course, whatever I wanted to do that's my path and that's what's right for me. And my other grandparents when I saw them and I met them and they knew what was going on they were not belittling to me or anything. They may have had thoughts about it or had feelings about it that maybe they shared [with each other] but not with me. And I think that it was important that it was at a family gathering that my grandparents saw the person that I was dating interact with my children and grandchildren in such a loving way. I think it surprised them, like whoa this person is a good person. This person really means a lot to the family. So I could just see it I could see it in their eyes. They treated me with respect. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

When thinking about her choices to be open with her family about her relationship with her lesbian partner, La Lupe experiences another silence, the one that comes with the absence of family. Holding strong to her instincts she decided that her family needed to come to terms with her relationship in their own way and with time and patience her love was accepted because of the strong bond between her partner and La Lupe's children. For

¹⁰² Chávez Leyva brings up an excellent point in her piece that when we look into what the silences hold (as opposed to simply an absence) we can learn many things. For instance, even in denial there are silences that are loud, such as "visual noise." She uses the example of a woman whose family refused to believe that she was a lesbian, in response she, "went to a barber and got a crew cut. Her family may have tried to silence her, but they couldn't stop her visual "noise" (1998, p. 434). I interpret visual noise then to be La Lupe's life (and other Chicana lesbianas – myself included) that she makes with her partner, living together, bringing her to family events that make the silence not so silent.

her, silence was never something that she couldn't handle, as she notes in the making of new family when her biological family dealt with her sexuality. To her, announcing her sexuality to the world was not pressing on her heart,

I've heard of those coming out experiences and, I don't know for me it was a matter of living in a way that was respectful. And I'm not hiding anything, I don't need to hide anything. No one needs to hide anything absolutely but I also don't need to have a parade down Main Street to be validated in being queer, in being a lesbiana. I think it's in that respect that people will or will not decide to be in your life. And that's on them. I'm not going to hold so much value on someone's opinion to decide what that's going to be. Had they decided to stay away forever then that would have been their decision. That would have been their loss. The conversation with my mother about me being queer was when we first started kind of getting back together and having time together she asked me "are you with that woman?" and I said "Yes, mom. We're dating. And I love her." And she was just kind of like hearing it was just like ok, it's no longer hidden. And with my grandparents, as with anyone that I adored and respected, I had to introduce my partner. You know abuelitos this is my compañera and they were respectful. They were kind to her and so that's the way it is. They asked for my partner like "Oh, is so and so coming" and I say "Yeah, they're coming grandma" so they're right there with me as being part of understanding that my compañera is part of my life and part of our family. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

So, "coming out" was not really a paradigm that La Lupe wanted to take part in. To her, the decision to openly love another woman was more about being up front with her family about it when she was asked and not being afraid of what their reaction might be. Her statement, "Yes mom. We're dating. And I love her" is powerful because her framing of the relationship she has with her partner as one where love is a central part allows her to connect her relationship to the way that her family has always stuck together and loved one another in the Midwest. It is also a breaking of the silence that can no longer be ignored, that she is a lesbian and that she still desires a relationship with her family with her new partner.

In a sense it is not surprising that these women have come into their sexuality because of external factors that might have worked to oppress them. Whether it be a

desire to find a way out of harsh racial oppression through choosing a white partner, or if it was rebelling from patriarchal control in the form of strictness by fathers through early marriages, loss of virginity, or unplanned pregnancies, women's sexual futures were very much shaped by the other important aspects of their identities, their families, and the forces that often kept them in marginalized positions.¹⁰³ These Midwestern Mexican American women also were left up to their own devices to learn about sex at school, which sometimes did not turn out to be a very good education. Sexuality is but one of the ways that women continued to carve out complicated relationships between their gender, race, and class identity categories.

3.4 Underground Feminisms and Resistance: Speaking Out

While many of these women speak to the ways that silence defined their experiences with dating and sexual activity, it is also clear that they did not remain silent on the subject. La Lupe firmly carved out space for her female partner in her family; Estella spoke out on the abuse she experienced growing up as a young girl, and all of the women were open to discuss what they did and didn't learn about sexuality and how they then passed on this knowledge to their own children. In many of these examples I define these actions as feminist, especially when considering Aída Hurtado's theorization of "underground feminisms." She argues,

¹⁰³ In the example Gloria shares about her first boyfriend she mentioned her father was strict with her in regards to allowing her to date, Cindy mentions her father was "more protective than her mom" (Interview with Cindy Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009), Lilly, Martha and La Lupe also acknowledged that "dating" was something that their fathers had the final say on. However, Estella seems to mention that she did not have the same strict guidelines on her with boys, saying her parents let her do whatever she wanted as long as she "came home at a decent time" (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009).

... feminism might look different if we were to expand its definition beyond the feminisms developed and defined by the academy. If we were to take into account women's lives and actions rather than restricting ourselves to theoretical definitions, we might find an answer for the apparent lack of feminist identification among women today. (2003, p. 261)

Indeed, most of the women in this project did not refer to themselves as feminists throughout their oral histories. However, many of their acts of resistance as women would qualify them to participate in feminist actions not always recognized as such. Like Hurtado "heed[s] Lamphere, Ragoné, and Zavella's call to show how women 'resist subordination through their activities in everyday life, whether in renouncing the cultural prescriptions that control their bodies or rejecting pejorative self-perceptions,'" so too do I uncover the multiple ways that women resist subordination in their daily lives despite their lack of recognition of the potential (1997, p. 6 qtd in Hurtado, 2003, pp. 261-2). In the context of attempted silences around sexuality by familias, it is important to expose stories about how these women resisted sexual harassment and engaged in their communities as feminist agents.

Hurtado applies her theory in her analysis of interviews she conducted with Inocencia who does not, "explicitly identify herself as a feminist, [although] many of her actions violated the norms defined as appropriate for a woman who was also an immigrant, poor, and Mexican. The restrictions placed on her came from multiple sources, including her family and culture, but also from her structural position in this country, as a result of which she encountered racism, sexism, and classism. In fact, there were very few contexts in which she did not experience restriction. Yet her story is a

testament to her use of wits, talent, and courage in not succumbing to these restrictions. Inocencia's strategies for resistance constitute a form of feminist that remains unlabeled and for the most part undocumented, beyond the reach of feminist theorizing. Her life exemplifies what might be called 'underground feminisms' – forms of feminism that have not yet seen the light of the printed page to inform how we conceptualize women's oppression and liberation" (2003, p. 262). Despite some of these women's reluctance to claim feminism as a vital part of their identities many of their stories on how they have resisted patriarchal control and shaped their own sexual futures belong in the category of "underground feminisms."

My interpretation of some stories from Gloria and Estella's oral histories provide two examples on how underground feminism might also apply to the lives of the women profiled here. I argue that their examples from their families, and perhaps their locations in the Midwest, enabled them to be able to stand up for themselves in these situations as individuals. As a waitress Gloria quickly learned that there were certain expectations about what it meant to be a woman when she faced harassment on the job. She experienced sexual harassment as a waitress when she was younger in Greenleaf and when she moved to El Paso, but she also speaks to how she refused to allow this type of access to her body.

When I left Greenleaf, I went to El Paso and [when] I ran out of money I started working in a restaurant [where] I started as a waitress. And when I was working as a waitress, to me, that was one of the lowest jobs that you could get and it came across to me, at that time, this is what mom did not want me to become, somebody working in a restaurant like she did. When I was working in [that] restaurant in El Paso, you get all walks of life, in the restaurants you know, especially men who think that because you're serving them that they have the right to touch you and I don't like nobody touching me. You know, they might slap you on the behind when you're passing by, think they have that right and I

would tell them, “you don’t touch me, I’m just here to serve your food but you do not touch me.”

And that happened to me when I was in high school when I was working at that restaurant. It was an older gentleman and he touched my ass you know and I, I was cleaning the table, I turned around and I threw the rag right at his face and I said, “you do not slap my ass!” And I went back there to where the dishes were and I was crying because I was so angry and then the owner which was an older lady said, “what’s wrong Gloria?” and I said, “well he touched my ass and I threw the towel at him and you’re probably going to get confronted by him and you’re going to fire me, but I’m letting you know now, nobody has the right to touch me like that!” That was the only time that I would have this anger that I didn’t want them touching me. And I got out of there real quick. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

In this story the strength she exhibits in refusing to take the man’s harassment was a survival strategy in a time where sexual harassment was not as closely monitored as it is today. She does not mention if she was fired, but I assume that if she had been fired, she would have included that point in the story. I read in this particular experience, Gloria’s ability to stand up for herself as a woman grows out of her unique location in the Midwest.

As a woman she does not accept strange men touching her, and she immediately resists this behavior by informing her boss about the situation. I contend that Gloria is able to confront and resist this sexual harassment because she witnessed her father always standing up for himself and his family in situations of racial oppression. This strength of being able to speak her mind emerges out of the Midwestern mentality of individual rights. I read this as a Midwestern practice where Gloria sees herself as an individual with certain rights. “Nobody has the right to touch me like that” denotes her ideas on her personal space and boundaries and the rights she has to her own body. She speaks of the ways that her father and mother both stood up for their rights and how this has made a lasting impact on her. She recalls, “when we were growing up, my mom protected us

from, if she thought that somebody was doing something bad to us my mom would speak up and my dad too” (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009). She also states that speaking up has become the biggest asset that she has learned from her family saying:

If you see something that is wrong or somebody is getting verbally abused or something, you speak up. You try to help that person and you know like some of these families in Topeka that, let’s say they come [with a] language barrier and some of these people that don’t understand them and they don’t understand their language, the English version and you can hear them making fun of them and I’m there and I can hear what’s going on, they probably think that I don’t speak any Spanish or something. I’ll speak up and I’ll tell them hey, you don’t speak to them like that, just because they don’t understand you, they have feelings too, you know, don’t be mean to them. And I do speak up my mind and maybe sometimes I get in trouble for it but you know, I can’t see somebody being mistreated because of their language barrier or the other people are making fun of them because they can’t understand English too well. I speak up for them and I’ll fight, I’ll fight for them. And the people who I’m speaking for, they’ll tell me in Spanish and they’ll say they didn’t know that I spoke in Spanish and I’ll say, yeah, “they shouldn’t treat you like that, don’t let them treat you like that” you know? And my dad, he was always strong, and I think I picked that up too. I don’t want people to be mistreated. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Gloria’s recognition of the way she stands up and “fights for” others signifies her as one capable of doing so even though sometimes she does “get in trouble for it.” Also, because of her unique location as one of a few Mexican Americans in the town where she grew up, she does not have the same pressure or fear of being personally punished, nor does she fear that her community (of Mexican Americans) will be punished because of her resistance to the sexual harassment. In Chapter Two I highlighted the many ways that women felt that they had a better life as a Mexican American growing up in the Midwest, there were more/better economic opportunities for their families, they did not feel that racism was as bad, and they felt as though they were special (as opposed to growing up somewhere like Texas or California). I read their interpretations of life in the Midwest as

part of why they have the outlook that they can resist harassment without fear of retaliation against their communities. I do not wish to imply that Midwestern Chicanas are the only women to stand up against harassment in their lives or work, but rather to emphasize the context that I believe helped shape these women's' ability to do just that.

Gloria also situates her privilege with the ability to move out of being a waitress to work in a different field. She goes on to say,

But that was the only time when I was growing up that I didn't like working [was when I was] a waitress. So, when we go to a restaurant or something, I understand what they go through and I never want to, want to make them feel like they're that low on the totem pole. But that was the only time that I felt like, like maybe I was being really low or something and that's how I felt, so I had to get out of that setting. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

It is important to see that she not only reminds us of the ways she was made to feel bad in this line of work but she also explains her consideration for other women who are currently in this line of work. Through sharing her own experiences of how it was upsetting for her to feel "really low," and reiterating that her mother did not want her to be a waitress. She also knows that it is important to be respectful for other women who are put in similar positions as waitresses.

These experiences became the catalyst for Gloria to seek employment in areas where sexual harassment might not be as openly prevalent (at least for her). Following the times when she felt these low periods as a waitress and recognizing that her mother, who also worked as a waitress in El Paso as a young girl, would not want her daughter doing this type of work, she began working in a factory where they manufactured men's trousers. She successfully worked her way up off the factory floor into a management office and spent about ten years with the company. When she moved back to Kansas to

be closer to her family, she got a job at the Payless Shoe Company corporate offices where she is still employed today.

However, office work wasn't always a safe place away from sexual harassment as her sister Estella remembers. Following high school in 1976 Estella identified office work as something she knew she could do, so she attended a technical school in Emporia, Kansas to gain the necessary skills to do such a job. In a job she took right after she finished her technical training she recollects the following:

After I got out of Votech school I was an assistant secretary to the president of Sauter Industries which was a steel company. And so I worked there for like a few months only and then got laid off because the steel industry had collapsed. So of course I was one of the first to go because I had just started. But the [boss] I guess him and his secretary, he was married, but him and his secretary were having an affair. And so when I came, and she was probably 30, 40 years old in there, but he wanted new meat, young meat, which would've been me, and I was 19. And so he would try to brush up against my breast, chase me around the file cabinet and I'd tell him to stop and I didn't want to tell the secretary because they were sleeping together. So I went down to the Human Resources and told that lady there that I was getting [harassed], [I told her] what he was doing [to me] and I don't know what she did. [But] I trusted her, I had to tell somebody and um, I guess that I was pretty smart to [know] how, [that] I had to take care of myself when I was 19. You know a lot of people when they're 19 they don't know what to do. I did that. I don't know, I think she just listened to me and stuff and [I] tried not to be alone with him. But then like I said, it didn't last very long and I'm pretty sure it wasn't because I was talking to her, you know I didn't tell anyone else. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009)

Estella recognizes that her status as "new meat" was attractive to her boss but that she also had the foresight to take actions that might have resulted in a safer working environment. While she wasn't at this job for very long because of the collapse of the steel industry, her recognition of the complicated relationship between her married boss and his secretary (who I assume to be the woman she directly reported to because she could not turn to her about this issue) forced her to take specific actions in order to protect herself on the job. She admits that she didn't really think about her decision to

report her boss' actions in terms of sexual harassment or her rights as a woman on the job, but rather because it was simply wrong that she had to put up with that behavior. She states, "it wasn't, I don't think it had the sexual harassment terms then, but I knew it was wrong. And just having that feeling of knowing that it wasn't right. But I knew I was smart enough not to be opening my mouth [to the secretary] you know" (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, July 26, 2009).¹⁰⁴ Similar to how Gloria recognized her rights as a waitress, Estella asserts herself as someone who knew she had rights. It is also interesting to note that the type of work she engaged in "pink collar" is typically imagined to be white women's work. Estella's ability to break into this work is related to her position in the Midwest and reflected in how she identified that she knew she could do well as a secretary, so she went to school in order to do so. Despite the privilege of being considered for this job without any discussion about her race and its effect on her ability to get a job, the consideration about her ability to stand up for herself comes off as if she knew that it was the right thing to do.¹⁰⁵

This is particularly interesting if we contrast this with another example Estella shares from her oral history. When she is discussing her dating past, she alludes to how she did face some challenges as a woman.

Um, oh and, about what you were saying about the sexual, sexuality stuff, what was being treated as a woman, yes, I did have a boyfriend and he did beat me. He didn't give me any black eyes or anything but you know sometimes he'd be

¹⁰⁴ While the 1964 Civil Rights act protected women from being discriminated against in the workplace, it wasn't until the 1970s that women started bringing cases of sexual harassment into the courts. In this sense, Estella might have begun hearing about sexual harassment cases through popular culture, but she also mentions that she did not really have the language to understand that this is what was happening.

¹⁰⁵ In her oral history, Estella does not mention ever feeling discriminated against as a woman of color when she was looking for employment, however as I discussed in Chapter Two, the moment when she had to fill out paperwork at her job at Kansas State University that labeled her as a "minority" was a turning point in her own identification of her racial subjectivity. So, she might not (and we definitely might not know) how her race did actually affect her hiring especially if we place her time working there in the late '70s, early '80s in the context of burgeoning affirmative action programs.

taking my head and trying to hit it against the car, things like that. He'd kick me, and then I'd turn around and try to kick him too, so I wasn't putting up with it, but of course they're always stronger than you. But not like punching me in the gut or anything like that. But I knew it wasn't right. But he figured he could treat me like that because I had no self-esteem, so then I would think he would be the only one would love me. And, you know of course he was a badass to where people would be, we'd be broke up and he'd be running the streets and if anybody would like to see me then they'd be scared of him. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

In her contradictory story she discusses how her high school boyfriend would push her around and that she would try to fight back against him when she could. She also, however attributes his behavior to her own "low self-esteem" indicating that despite her resistance to his behavior, she somewhat felt that she did not have any other options but to put up with it since he was physically stronger than her. However, if we look at these experiences together it might be more evident as to how she was able to find ways to protect herself from harassment as she both had the experience of being "roughed up" by an ex-boyfriend, and her early dealings with sexual abuse.

In addition to these highlighted incidents where Gloria and Estella fought against sexual harassment and violence, these women's oral histories shared multiple places where they exhibited various levels of resistance to the sexism that they faced in their daily lives. Their stories are "testament[s] to [their] use of wits, talent, and courage in not succumbing to these restrictions" (Hurtado, 2003, p. 262). Estella became the president of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) at her children's elementary school after noticing that the school was not receiving principals that would stay with their students for more than a couple of years at a time. Despite protests from her family, Martha divorced her husband Juan to free herself from a draining, unsupportive relationship. After convincing her parents it was the best move for her, they fully supported the decision. La Lupe

embraced her lesbian sexuality and found a way to make meaningful family bonds in spite of initial resistance to her new female partner.

These are but a few examples of the strength that these women exhibited, as clear acts of resistance against what was often expected of them. Above all else they attribute their ability to achieve these successes (and many more) because of their strong ties to their families—families fraught with contradictions, complexity, and only the things that each family holds in order for these women to be made into the women they are today as products of proud Chicana/o families in the Midwest.

I AM THE STORY PART V

SWIMMING WITH DOLPHINS

In the summer of 1989 I was seven years old, fresh off of finishing out my second grade year at Acoma Elementary. My father, an engineer, and the rest of his company (as I perceived it) were sent to live in Kawaii, Hawaii for a month. My mother, brother and I all got to go enjoy the white sandy beaches, the hot humid air, and the beautiful colors of plants that I could not even in my wildest dreams imagine. We rented a condo while we were there and I played pen pal with friends from school. This summer and one like it five years later when I was in my pre-teen years were amazing. I knew that to spend time in Hawaii for summer vacations was an incredible opportunity and certainly one that no one else I knew got to experience. I recognized this to be a privilege, even if we were there because my dad was at work.

Besides the beauty and privilege of being able to swim in the pool, boogie board in the ocean's waves every day, and feel the sun on my skin, it was on these two summer trips that I learned some very valuable lessons that have continued to shape me. The first lesson I learned was that my father's employer funded weapons projects that were not universally supported. I distinctly remember driving up in our rented van to go to a party on the Air Force Base where my dad worked. This was the day that they were going to launch the rocket off the side of the island, blow it up in the sky and land the debris in the Pacific Ocean. As a young girl I remember thinking this might be harmful for the creatures living in the sea, others also seemingly shared these concerns. This is my first memory of people picketing something as I saw the men and women of Hawaii, hoisting signs into the air, yelling at us as we drove by, protesting the actions of the U.S. Government and Military. Years later I would drive by Kirkland Air Force Base in Albuquerque and see similar protestors. I also heard my father and mother talking about those who were protesting as "bad people" who shouldn't be doing that. I don't remember the specific language but I do remember a feeling of being ashamed on behalf of my father – what could he have done to upset all of these people? And I felt confused, perhaps empathetic, for the first time siding with a group of people who were standing up against my father's company even though I could not understand or articulate why.

My father's job involves what he and others see as defending the nation from potential foreign predators. While no one has successfully launched a long-distance missile at the U.S., the threat is enough such that my father's company has been working on ways to defend the possibility. In Hawaii, he was responsible for writing the software that controls missiles that (are supposed to) intercept enemy missiles from Russia (back then) and North Korea (now). He's still in this line of work but instead of the Native Hawaiian protestors he now deals with Alaskans – launching missiles off the coast of Kodiak Island. When I was young I used to think this was "cool" because my dad had to go through a lot of security to get to his office and he has to have "clearance" for special government projects. As I grew up however, I learned that my father had to report my abuela's permanent resident card number because she was considered a "foreigner" every year to retain his clearance. I started to understand that his job equaled privileges for my father while also maintaining and confining knowledge to only a certain type of person. His line of work relies on the U.S. government and military to remain "armed

forces,” which made it difficult for him to hear opposing viewpoint as to why building weapons might not be the only U.S. international relations strategy. Whenever I would question this, he might say, “Do you like having a roof over your head?” I really couldn’t argue with that, however much I might have wanted to.

The other lesson I learned on that trip is slightly more amusing. For some reason, this land-locked half Mexican, half white girl had got it in her head that she wanted to grow up and become a marine biologist. I think I might have watched a movie involving whales or maybe a special on the Discovery Channel but the seven-year-old Kandace really wanted to live on the ocean and track migratory patterns of humpback whales. Like many people, I felt a special connection to these animals despite growing up in a desert. Living in Hawaii made me feel even more certain that this was the path I was supposed to take. So, one weekend when my dad wasn’t preparing the launch pad for his million dollar missile and when he didn’t have to fight off the “bad people” (the Russians with their Cold War concerns and the Americans who objected these military tests being done on their land and sea) he decided he was going to take a deep sea fishing trip with my brother early one Saturday morning. I know this is one of the moments in my life where I really feel I gained my feminist consciousness, because my father had neglected to even ask if I wanted to go, assuming that I would rather not. Well, I threw a fit, yelled that it was unfair my brother could go and I couldn’t. I was mad for a few reasons: 1) I was older than my brother and in my mind felt as though I deserved to be consulted on family activities first; 2) I loved marine life and my brother couldn’t care less; 3) to my knowledge this was the first moment my father really separated us due to our genders. (Being 17 months apart in age we always did everything together whether we liked it or not – my brother even had to do dance class when I did.) So, for my dad to neglect to even consider that I might want to go infuriated me. I must have thrown an appropriate level fit because I was permitted to go on the fishing expedition after all!

Fast forward to that early Saturday morning. My dad woke us up around four a.m. for our trip out into the ocean. I’m not sure if it was nerves, excitement, or the early morning hour but when my father made us some buttermilk pancakes before we left I could hardly choke them down. We drove out to the edge of the island and boarded our vessel, sadly it was a simple white boat, with a dark stairway leading downstairs where I assume the man who owned the boat slept or possibly lived. My dad had invited another friend from work along and he and I quickly bonded as we shoved off and the effects of the waves started taking their toll. I felt so betrayed, no one had told me that riding the waves could induce motion sickness. And once I saw some of the creepy fish they were trying to catch I thought it to be quite an unsavory expedition. I lost my pancakes over the side of that boat but I did see dolphins swimming alongside and next to our vessel in the dark blue, rocky waters. Unfortunately with the loss of my pancakes I also lost my dream of ever becoming a marine biologist, but in a way that’s ok because that one day in the heat of the sun on a boat bouncing in waves I did see dolphins. I stood up for what I felt was right, and I know that moment made me able to get to the point I am now. I felt strong and proud of myself for not simply sitting back and letting my brother go with my father alone. Even though I had gotten seasick, I remember that part of our trip fondly – I remember the feel of salt water on my face, and the wind in my hair, and I think about how I would not have gotten that experience if I wasn’t willing to stand up for what I believed was right. I took the time to start to try to understand why those protesters were

out on that one stretch of road, and why my father was so quick to dismiss them. I realized he had dismissed me in his neglect to invite me on the boat trip, but I did not allow him to drive by my protests without a second thought. Instead, I have turned into one of those protestors with a sign held high above my head and a tireless fighter for what I think is right even if it sometimes costs me a dream and my breakfast.

CONCLUSION

“I LOVE STORIES.” THE STORY IS MORE THAN JUST A STORY: MIDWESTERN CHICANA STORYTELLING PRACTICES AS ACTOS DE AMOR

My “stories” are acts encapsulated in time, “enacted” every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and “dead” objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a “who” or a “what” and contains the presence of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be “fed”, *la tengo que bañar y vestir*. –Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Gloria Anzaldúa’s quote above demonstrates the complex relationship between stories and storytelling as related to both the practices of delivering and hearing as well as a need for an approach to analyzing their content. It is my hope and goal that in the analysis of the stories shared within this project that the reader has gained a glimpse into the powerful meaning these stories have held for those who have shared them. These women’s discussion of the ways they learned stories about their families’ lives points to the importance of the story for them. Reading the stories in the context of isolation that many of these women express growing up in the Midwest in the 1950s and ’60s creates interesting opportunities for me, as the researcher to put these stories in conversation with one another. I have sought to build shared communities and geographies through their stories despite the differences between these women who may never be in contact with each other. This is captured by my theorizations of third space and the claiming of home. It is also encapsulated in understanding these shared geographies, of both place (in relation to the regions these stories emerge and la frontera’s impact on these many regions) and across struggles (as the ways these stories converse with other powerful women storytellers like the Sangtin collective in addition to how they challenge dominant

feminisms' tendencies to erase or appropriate our stories). To me, this is the power of the story. In an effort to illuminate the power in the story I weave together discussions of both the process and content of these story/telling moments throughout these women's oral histories to honor the voices of these women and others who have shaped this project and have served to make apparent their presence in the Midwest.

I am not the first person to acknowledge the power of the story for Chicanas or for women of color, nor the first to insert my own story into the text, but in reading these oral histories as stories and asking the women to reflect on the importance of storytelling in their own lives I am purposefully linking oral history as a form of storytelling about one's own life and research as a Chicana feminist practice. As I previously blurred the boundaries between the oral history and testimonio (Chapter One) so too do I obscure the lines between oral history and storytelling. What Chicana feminists have often documented is the power in the story that usually ends up as lines in a poem, or carefully held within the pages of a literary text. I use these same impulses (the need to validate the stories of women of color and to demonstrate the importance of these women's stories), to show the significance of stories that have been shaped by women and to interpret them in context.

As I discussed in Chapter One, the process of this project has been intricately tied to my own experiences, desires for research that reflects myself, and a purposeful interjection of how I see myself in relation to these stories. Sometimes this has been easy to reflect upon, how as my mother's daughter her experiences with sexuality have translated to ideas about sexuality that I was then taught to believe and not question. Other times, this has been difficult. Can I really claim to be a part of this community

when I grew up in New Mexico? How do I emotionally deal with what has been revealed? But regardless of the ease or difficulty in finding how to write about these stories, or the processes involved in weaving together what I find to be important, these stories have affected me profoundly. These stories continue to tell me who I am and who they are in much the same way that stories haunt you after you close the cover of a beloved book.

I have relied on the help of Chicana feminist scholars who have analyzed Chicana/o literature, and Chicana writers themselves in order to find the words that help describe the importance of seeing these oral histories as stories, from short stories sharing excerpts from everyday life to the overarching narratives of these women's lives from childhood to adulthood.

In *A Taco Testimony: Mediations on Family, Food and Culture*, Denise Chávez details her life through the many tacos her mother has made and her family has consumed. This autobiographical tale where she weaves together stories, recipes, and ruminations on her life closely mirrors what I have sought to do here. She writes, "all my life I have been trying to write my family's story. It hasn't been easy, not because I can't remember, but because I can't forget" (Chávez, 2006, p. 17). This sentiment resonates throughout these women's oral histories, many of which intersect with my life in some way or another. I also find the value in oral history as a means to help write the family story, that by its collection and circulation we cannot be tempted to forget or be the sole person responsible to remember.

In her analysis of Chicana literature Alvina Quintana writes, "Chicana storytellers are involved in a process of self-fashioning. Ultimately their narratives

suggest an identity politics that mediates between race, class, and gender” (1996, pp. 11-12). I, as an author, am inserted in and inseparable from the other stories of “self-fashioning” that I retell here. In fact, this project has allowed me to fashion myself as a storyteller academic, a process that I have no doubt will continue to shape my academic writing. Through my interpretation, I have read these women’s oral histories as stories that demonstrate the realities of what it means to live in the world as Chicanas in the Midwest. I have written their experiences with an intersectional analysis attending to each woman’s race, class, and gender identity categories, floating between them as I tried to theorize what happened in the intersections. Because I have chosen to view these oral histories as stories I have also joined Quintana in exploring the “tension between fact and fiction” within them. In the difficulties entailed with writing women’s biographies she states,

My representation of the past has made me painfully aware of the tensions between fact, fiction, and subjective interpretation. Like an anthropologist, who textualizes culture by deciding what merits cultural interpretation, a biographer chooses a central focus, decides what are the “important” events in an individual’s life, then packages the events for consumption in a familiar narrative form that includes a beginning, middle and an end. Ethnographers and biographers negotiate spaces between worlds and sensibilities in order to record the “significant.” In my stories, the move between past and present are apparent, while the narrative form contains my more subtle mediations between the real and the imagined. (Quintana, 1996, p.11)

With these considerations then, it becomes clear that this project, much like Quintana’s, is about privileging these women’s stories and not, as so many oral history resource

books argue, coordinating the facts of what “really happened” (Perks & Thomson, 1998; Ritchie, 2003). While I have sought to contextualize these stories within their specific geographic, political, and social locations, I have not sought out corroborating “evidence” to prove such events as true. In fact, I am not sure that such an “archive” even exists which is why I found it necessary to explore these research questions through the process of collecting oral history narratives.¹⁰⁶ Instead, I have attended to the oral histories singularly and collectively in order to flesh out certain themes that weave together a new story about what life was like for these eight women growing up and/or living in the Midwest.¹⁰⁷

I have also relied on Louis Mendoza’s work to read my oral history texts as though they are stories through his argument for the potential for Chicana/o literature and history to be co-constitutive of one another. In his text *Historia: The Literary Making of Chicana and Chicano History* (2001) he, “challenge[s] conventional notions of the relationship between historical and literary narratives by examining the literature of

¹⁰⁶ While certainly not my purpose, I have in the course of this project consulted U.S. census data which I feel comes closest to “proving” some women’s claims – mainly around whether their families were the only people of color in the towns where they grew up. But, census data can be somewhat difficult to decipher especially if we think about how the definitions of who is “counted” as a Mexican American according to the different ways that Mexican Americans have been considered “white” or “other” throughout the years.

¹⁰⁷ Likewise, I join with María Eugenia Cotera who in her book, *Native Speakers*, places Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston and Jovita González, three women of color from different communities in conversation with one another through their writings. She raises questions for herself in how does one engage ethically with such a subject matter. “How do we elaborate a mode of comparative analysis across race, nation, and historical context that does not assimilate the experiences of “others” to our own? How might we respect the particularities of different historical experiences even as we mine the similarities of these experiences for key points of connection that reveal the systemic workings of patriarchal, heteronormative, colonialist, racist, and classist networks of power? *How do we strike a balance between a respect for difference and a search for meaningful similarity that allows for a coherent account of the historical experiences of women of color?* Finally and most importantly, what knowledges and perspectives do we need to mobilize to do such work? That these rules of engagement take the form of questions rather than statements of purpose suggests just how tenuous the path toward responsible and truly illuminating comparativist scholarship can be” (Cotera, pp. 10-11). These questions have shaped my working with these oral histories as I have placed them in conversation with one another, even when there have been impulses to only look for the similarities.

people of Mexican descent in the United States as they have chosen to represent their past through ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ narratives” (2001, p. 15). Throughout unearthing texts that speak to the history of Chicana/os (through “factual” historical and “fictional” literary means) Mendoza brings, “the literary and the historical into a dialectical relationship with one another [to] promote an interpretive practice that enables the reader to imagine possibilities for intervention and produce new strategies for social change” and that, “seeing history as a literary genre is similarly enabling” (2001, p. 19). In fact, I have envisioned these oral histories as lying somewhere in-between history and literature, they hold keys to understanding the past through these women’s personal experiences, providing both a history of what life was like for these eight women in the Midwest and as stories shaped by their own lives. This is especially important as these stories have been omitted from traditional histories *and* mainstream literature, neither of which have valued or reflected the lives of brown women generally and those in the Midwest specifically.

It has been necessary for me to interrogate and understand these stories as capable of writing Chicanas into the history of the Midwest (and likewise, Midwestern Chicana/os into the Chicana/o history) and in terms of imagining them as powerful stories documenting these individual Midwestern Chicana lives. This is not just my interpretation of these oral histories, rather a concerted effort to draw together the research involved within the oral history with these women’s own desires and histories of writing stories themselves (whether that be through poetry and spoken word –La Lupe and Teresa – or through larger autobiographical writing pieces these women intend to write about their lives – Martha and Margaret). This project’s genesis lies in the stories

my own mother used to tell me when I was a young girl and to deny this history devalues the story as a valuable site of knowledge production and community building. I turn to explore the connections between writing, storytelling and the importance of stories and storytelling for these women in the next section through theorizing these stories and the processes behind telling and listening to these stories as *actos de amor*.

Actos de Amor: Storytelling Life, Love, and Community

After listening to these eight women tell their life stories multiple times, through the initial collection of the oral history and the months spent capturing their words into written transcripts, I have come to think of the stories they have shared as *actos de amor*. I theorize *actos de amor* as the shifting processes within telling and listening to stories, it is what lies between the act of telling and the act of listening – it is the reflection of the meaning the story holds for a person that encompasses an *acto de amor*. These *actos de amor* shift in relation to who tells and hears the story, in essence simulating a dynamic process that lends itself to the building of community. These *actos de amor* represent both the storytelling practices behind the need to share stories to build community and pass on knowledge to other family members and the ways that stories have served as a means to express love, care, and concern for others. I have witnessed these *actos de amor* in my own life and through listening to the stories of the women interviewed for this project. In the sense that these stories have sought to make meaning from daily life, I explored the ways that these women conceptualized their lives in relation to the themes of home and belonging (in Chapter Two) and family and sexuality (in Chapter Three).

These women's stories also provide opportunities for the passing of stories from previous generations to their children, creating a circuit of historical knowledge that is

passed not just from grandparents to mother to children but works to inform each generation through shared story telling, knowing, and building in multifaceted ways. Through the familial stories that are and in the processes of sharing their own memories, these women make clear the many ways that their life and family stories have shaped their understandings about who they are as Chicanas in the Midwest. These *actos de amor* clearly mark strategies for survival through imparting lessons about gender, race, class, and sexuality, through comedy or general amusement, and as a means to continue family legacies through oral traditions. It is important to view the story in the context in which it was told and in relation to how these women gain particular meanings from the stories they have heard and in turn seek to share. To document this importance I turn to their own words on how they have been the listeners and tellers of stories and the value they see in these practices.

When La Lupe acknowledged a change in the family dynamic with the addition of her female partner she purposefully shares that she had to tell her children before anyone else. Out of respect for the changes they would face in their life as a family, she made sure she was open and honest about the development of love with her partner.

I had to tell my children first. I had to tell them this monumental shift in who would be involved in their life, who would be seen as my partner, as my companion so I told them absolutely. I think first, I said it in a poem first absolutely to my soul. [It] was in a poem, in a writing. And then to them when I decided this was something I would act on. I sat them all down, we had a meeting and I discussed with them my feelings. You know [to see] if they had any thoughts and feelings. (Interview with La Lupe, October 6, 2009)

In this recounting of her actions when she introduced her new female partner to her family (and herself as a romantic possibility she decided to “act on”) La Lupe bares her soul through poetry to describe to her children the importance of the multiple

relationships she wanted to continue cultivating between her children and her new partner. She also provides them space and time to discuss their feelings along with her feelings on the matter in a dialogue, as a means to demonstrate that her sharing this with them is not simply a “one-way street.” I interpret this story as an excellent example of the ways that a story represents so much more than just a story, rather an *acto de amor*. For this family this story documents the history of La Lupe’s own recognition of her new relationship with her female partner as well as creating a space for children to recall an important family story with the addition of a new family member. As a creative writer, La Lupe initiates this story with her children through the written word, specifically poetry and in the context of her oral history reflects on the importance for her to inform her children in this way. Through this we can see how framing the upcoming changes in her family’s life within a poem (story) became a way that she engaged with intimate feelings and relationships between herself, her children and her new partner.

Teresa also uses the written word to document her life history experiences and uses the stories about these events to work toward larger social change, locally, and transnationally. She also simultaneously demonstrates to her children the power and need to work in collaboration with others to create positive social change. In her oral history Teresa devotes much time to her lengthy and impressive work-history as an educator, researcher and labor organizer spanning from Minnesota to Guatemala to Mexico and back to Minnesota again. In particular, Teresa shares the story of an organization that she began and the growing importance writing had for her as she attempted to work with indigenous women/communities in Chiapas, Mexico.

[I started] an organization called Cloud Forest Initiatives. It started as a, kind of like technical assistance and support to autonomous communities. By autonomous

we mean Zapatista. We started that in 1990... well we started the work in about 1996. By 1997 we started a non-profit organization based in Minnesota with a board in Minnesota and I became the Executive Director, which doesn't mean anything. I mean it sounds fancy but the organization is so tiny that it wasn't really. And Thomas [who] was my ex-husband [by then], he was the Chiapas coordinator and then we had a U.S. coordinator so we were three people on staff. [Thomas] was a volunteer and the only person in the U.S., in Minnesota, and myself were paid – we got funding from the U.S. What we did is we started, in like I said we started in the winter of 1996 I was able to get funding from a foundation here. A very small foundation to do two things- one was to start to project that ended up being the organization and the other one was for me to do research to write a book about women in the Zapatista movement. And I wrote a book that resulted that was “Never Again a World Without Us: Voices of Mayan Women in Chiapas, Mexico” and it was published by another non-profit organization that was called Epica, a community program in Central America. And it was funny because I tried to get publishers and nobody would publish that and Epica wrote me and said we know that you are writing, well I had a friend that worked there and she wrote me and said “I know you are working on this research and we would be very interested in publishing it.” And they did! It was published in April of 2001. So in 1997 I spent a year doing research for the book. So I traveled throughout all over the places getting testimonies. (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 25, 2009)

In this excerpt Teresa shares one small portion of a work history that spanned decades. However, she also interweaves information regarding her personal life while discussing her work history, spinning a story as many women do where they begin on one subject, visit another only to circle back to the original story.¹⁰⁸ I highlight this contribution by Teresa to the activist and academic communities as one of many ways her stories live on.

In her oral history she also discusses the way that she became interested in writing poetry, she admits, at first it was simply a way to deal with being in Guatemala. She also

¹⁰⁸ While I would love to be able to put every word every woman utters in this text it is just not possible. Teresa talks at length about making the decision to move to Honduras and Guatemala with her husband at the time (Thomas) with their three U.S.-born children. She discusses their socialization in a very recent post-war Guatemala as well as what she observes of her children going to school. When she and her husband got tired of traveling in between one another they lived together in Guatemala and then moved to Mexico to do work where her children began to see themselves as Mexicans. Throughout all of this she discusses having troubles with a “rebellious daughter” and her failing marriage. Ultimately, her story points to the intricate ways that stories are tied together and in their delivery in an oral history form are often told in a non-linear form.

traces how her personal writing as a private activity became something that she identified as healing and developed a need to share it with others.

Writing for most writers [including me – is] a private, personal affair. When I went to Guatemala the experience was so powerful that I didn't know how to deal with it. I had a little notebook that I bought there that's kind of like leather-bound and I started writing poems. Writing poems about everyday life. The first poem that I wrote is called *Mañana en Guatemala*, which is about my experience in the mornings but it is very political.

In a new environment, following her move from Minnesota to Guatemala, Teresa used writing as a means to engage the feelings that she is trying to reconcile through her family, work, and political commitments. Years later, after recognizing the genesis of performing her poetry as related to the many private writings she has done at many points in her life, she branches out and participates in the Twin Cities spoken word scene.

One of the first times that I shared my poetry people started inviting me. And I read, I actually just read my poems I didn't even perform them because I was sitting at a table and didn't know what the reaction was because people didn't say anything. And then they started sending me emails saying "I love your poetry. [It's] so powerful," because it was a lot of anti-war poetry that I read at that time. And you know people started then knowing me, inviting me to more things and so then you start reading things and so then you think "Eh, that might not be so good." I was very bad. You want people to like it so you abandon it. And then you read something else and you know people tell you that was so powerful, that was great. So you know when you write it's such a private, lonely activity that you know you could die and nobody ever knew that you wrote anything! It's not like art, well art you can put on your walls and nobody will see it but, you only have so many walls so you have to show it. So with writing it's not like that but with spoken word it is because it's spoken. It's performance. (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 26, 2009)

Teresa's story of how she really got into the Minneapolis writing scene and her desire for her private activity of writing to become a performance that affects others is the last story that she recorded in her oral history. To me, this powerfully sums up this woman's life, as she mentions in response to my question how did you become a writer she strongly asserts "I think I've always been" (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 26, 2009). I read

this in how she reflects on how she wrote poems and stories as a teen and never really gave it up. I read her dedication to the story as necessary for her own efforts to build community and she sees the performance of her stories and poems through spoken word as a true demonstration of *actos de amor*, when she discusses the ways that she wants others to respond to her writing. Not only do they represent *actos de amor* for an audience who clearly understands the sentiments held within her poetry but they also represent *actos de amor* for Teresa, as they serve as the documentation of her own life through her written words that she passes on through performance. The love that goes into writing and making these stories is based in the reality of her daily life and the act of sharing these stories becomes the avenue for her experience or history to live beyond just herself.

Finally, she also admits the relationship between storytelling and family are intertwined alluding that she cannot truly imagine being a daughter or mother without these shared stories.

I like stories. I really, really like stories. I mean there is the story about how I was born. How my parents met, what happened when my grandfather was going to die but he didn't die...you know all these kind of stories that were living in my family. And I like to tell stories to my kids or I did, now not as much. Like for example, my daughter when she was little there were two songs that she would love to hear before going to bed. When I tell people they laugh because they think that's ridiculous. One of them was Rosita Alvarez, which was a woman who died from three shots. And the other one is Spanish romance about the daughter of a king that you know her boyfriend was killed by the king and then she died of love! That's all she wanted to hear all the time! She would say 'can you sing me those two songs' and I would sing her those two songs. And you know she was like five years old and I was singing those but it never occurred to me that that would not be appropriate like they say now. And then they had a lot of sayings, sayings and made up sayings. My dad had a long thing that I memorized from hearing him say it. Sometimes when I'm just a little down or something I just say it to myself and it's a very long, kind of like repetition of things and, yeah. My mom did too. Words were something very important in my family. (Interview with Teresa Ortiz, June 16, 2009)

Teresa's love of writing and sharing stories and of spoken word is clear here. It is this cycle of stories being passed down and shared among different groups of people that creates legacies and means for cultural knowledge to be passed, whether it is through fictitious stories being told and heard or through stories about everyday life and family history.

With a different relationship between storytelling and writing, Margaret also shares what she feels as very important in relation to storytelling.

Yes, stories are very important. Grandma used to tell us stories. It was something to hear all they went through and then they came over here and all of the changes that happened in the United States. We used to ask Mom if she ever wanted to go back and she said no. She did go back once to visit. And so did Dad. He was trying to get his papers fixed when he was going to retire but he became a citizen but Mom didn't so they became very much part of this country. (Interview with Margaret Perez, July 16, 2009)

Here, we see her commitment to seeing stories as the way that knowledge is passed through families and particularly around her understandings of her mother and fathers' relation to Mexico. In particular the story that she shares about her grandmother's stories points to a history of her family's journey from Mexico to the U.S. and their subsequent issues living as transnational citizens.

Furthermore, Margaret shares that this same passing of knowledge is like a chain, it cannot be broken and she sees it as her responsibility to ensure that it continues to go on.

I have and I'm writing a book for my kids, a lot of things that have happened throughout my life because I feel like I tell them and it goes in one ear and goes out the other. Like my grandson, he asked me one time, Grandma, what kind of Indian blood do I have? I said, well you're Aztec and you're Maya and then his grandfather's father had come over with the soldiers, French, and then my grandma has a grandma who was Italian so I keep telling him all of these things and he said, Grandma, you better write this down, I can't remember all of that. So this is why I think it is important and tell. You should see my genealogy chart on

my side of the family. I show it to him every once in a while. (Interview with Margaret Perez, July 16, 2009)

She has become the person in charge of their cultural heritage and this is a job that she takes very seriously. In fact, after we finished with her oral history she brought out the genealogy chart for me to view. It was very impressive with several pieces of flip chart sized papers taped together demonstrating the extensive genealogy of her family. As she carefully unfolded it for me to see, she also shared that it was important for her to know that her children would get together to read the family stories together, so her intention with the book is to give each of her children a section so that they have to come together to read the entire text. The love and care she has put into the planning of the stories she deems necessary to pass onto her family is an excellent example of how stories represent *actos de amor*, not only will the stories she writes be valued but the process behind those stories will also be appreciated and her stories and her memory will live on in many ways beyond her own life.

Oftentimes a woman finds stories important because of the ways that her family found value in them. Stories also become *actos de amor* when families bond because of stories that their parents tell them. As her mother Margaret already mentioned, stories held value in their families, Cindy shares this about her parents as storytellers:

Oh, both of my parents told stories. It was mainly [about] as they grew up. Like, my mom she had a younger sister who was just a terror and she'd be the one who would get into trouble for everything and then my mom and her sister are only a year apart so she would be the one who would get in trouble and my mom was always tagging along with her, well she'd get in trouble too! ... But, like I said, she told a bunch of her childhood stories. My dad was a little harder though he would tell, because up to eighth grade once he quit school in eighth grade he had to get a job and I think his mom died when he was fourteen, so my grandmother on my dad's side we never knew, so he grew up pretty quick. So his stories are mainly about him and his brothers and sisters and how they survived. And living in a train car, you know those train cars? That was their home, they lived in a train

car, it was probably about the size of a trailer house nowadays. But they had to have an outhouse they didn't have no running water. But they would talk about how they would play baseball with a rock and stick or they'd get a, you see the old stories where someone would get a rim of tire and use a stick to make it go around, well they had those kind of things and how he had to walk a mile to school you know you hear that story that people say "I had to walk a mile to school in the snow three feet high!" he goes, "literally we really did have to walk to school for a mile." (Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon July 16, 2009)

The survival stories hold meaning for Cindy and she seems to discuss them in relation to thinking about perspective and exaggeration. While she may have experienced a "rough time" growing up in Kansas as a Mexican American girl, listening to stories, (from her parents living through poverty, her father living in a train car, losing parents at a young age, doing migrant work, and bonding with siblings through stories that seemed unbelievable at the time), was a valuable way that information was passed from generation to generation. It schooled them on what life is like and how families have survived en route and in the Midwest. The part where her dad would talk about walking in three-foot high snow brings a smile to anyone's face who has heard the stories of "walking uphill both ways" for miles in order to do the things that young children often take for granted, such as walking to school. These stories serve as *actos de amor* in the ways that they carry on beyond each person, meaning that even though her father has passed away (and now Cindy has too) these stories are still preserved by those who continue to pass them on.

Cindy sees the value in this project when she says that it is important to carry on the tradition of telling stories about your life to one's own family, in particular to her own children.

Yeah, we would tell [our kids] how we had to survive when my mom started working, how we had to take care of each other. Like I said my sister and I had fights where one time we, I don't know we were chasing each other for something

and we ended up in the bathroom somehow and I pushed her into the fiberglass shower doors and they cracked. So we would say how we're the best of friends now but you know back when we were eighteen, sixteen we just did not get along, we fought. Yeah, we've told them stories like how onetime we were outside playing and my sister, we had like a Schwinn Stingray bike where it's one of those with the big banana seats and I was on the front pedaling, no, I was in the back pedaling and she was on the front of the banana seat steering and we yelled at my little brother to get out of the way and he didn't move and I'm pedaling, not knowing when to brake or anything and I couldn't see around her, we said, "get out of the way! We're going to run you over!" And I think he was like five years old, he didn't move and we ran him over! So yeah I tell my kids that, how much fun we had as kids because we didn't have TVs or computers or anything. So our fun was going outside and playing on bikes or that kind of, you had to make your own fun. Whatever you had you had to make your own fun. And so that's the day we played circus and ran over the little brother! We dared him to move and he didn't move, we warned him to move! ... Like I said, we were really close on playing, those are the memories that I have of my siblings. (Interview with Cynthia Perez Falcon, July 16, 2009)

These survival stories also became lessons for her children, when they did not want to play outside and would rather stay inside. Cindy would often remind them through telling stories about the fun that she had as a young girl on her bike with her siblings. These types of stories passed from mother to children create bonds within the family, create understanding of where one's mother comes from and provide comic relief for the family.

Not only are the contents and transfer of stories important but so are these women's understandings of who they see as storytellers, and how that person often gains a particular place within the family. Estella shares that when she thinks of who was the "storyteller" in her family she immediately identifies her father. In the sense that "storyteller" meant the telling of tall tales, exaggerating the truth for whatever reason (she seems to think it was for entertainment purposes or to gain notoriety within a circle of friends or family). In particular she shares this memory:

I guess the big ole storyteller was probably dad, he was a storyteller alright because he was [saying] the pro. Golfer was supposed to be his friend and he only said that because he was a Mexican. You know, on the golf tour? So, he's all

spewing off that his “good friend” Lee Trevino was his name, was the golfer, which he still golfs, Lee Trevino was his good friend! And you think now, Lee Trevino doesn’t even know about dad! But he was spewing off because he was a golfer and he was brown and then dad was brown and that was his friend, Lee Trevino! So, those are stories alright. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

In her discussion of her father sharing stories about being friends with Lee Trevino she reveals that at the time when she was younger and he told these stories she was inclined to believe him but as she grew older she realized that he was simply making this story up to tell people in town and the family. But regardless of whether or not Zephyrinus Falcon (her father) knew Lee Trevino this story acted as a moment where her father shared stories as an *acto de amor*, a means to entertain his family and attempt to create a history where he knew an important Mexican American athlete. It was also an attempt to claim (Mexican American) community in Kansas – linking himself to an important, symbolic Chicano who is known nationally as well as being an important figure to his homeland of Texas as well.

As a testament to varying perspectives within a family on who was the main storyteller Estella’s sister Lilly points to their mother as the storyteller. In her description of the storyteller of the family she also mentions how the stories she heard from her father contained knowledge on how she should also stand up for herself and others if someone was being mistreated (largely around issues of race).

[My mom.] She’s the one who tells you about her life and how it was for her, what a struggle it was for her. [Dad], he never really talked too much about his family because you know, coming from a large family I think, you know he just never, he was close to his brothers once they got together they would have good times, and he kind of helped raise his brothers. And I can remember many summers when you know one of his brothers would stay with us and then finally go back to Kansas City, you know but he never really talked too much about his childhood or how it was. I know he played a lot of baseball because he was pretty athletic and stuff, you know he’s one that people weren’t going to tell “well you

can't live in this neighborhood because you're a Hispanic." He always had a home regardless, he was going to make sure we had, we lived within a house, even though he couldn't afford it sometimes but yeah he was going to say he wanted a home, it didn't stop him, from you know going into somewhere and saying "I want this" or that he didn't. Your grandma was more shy about it but you know, he [was like] "no, you treat me like everybody else." (Interview with Lydia Falcon Rider, July 18, 2009)

In this discussion about the storytellers in the family she points to her mother as being more open about sharing aspects of her life with her children. Lilly's story about stories also reveals a larger lesson about how her father might not have told many stories but that did not mean that he did not use words to stand up for himself and his family in the context of small town that might not want him and his family living there. He asserted his right to live where he wanted through the use of his words, and these events have turned into stories that she has sought to share within the context of her oral history. She also speaks to how my grandmother was not as comfortable doing this and I read that this might be due to gendered differences or other privileges (my grandfather was a U.S. citizen whereas my grandmother is not) and also could be due to her unease with speaking English (especially as Spanish was her only language until she was in her 20s and moved to Kansas). Regardless, this story reveals the underlying pride in family and culture that was not going to be taken away from the Falcons, a story that has served as an *acto de amor* and has traveled in many different forms and with different examples to the descendants of my grandparents, largely to myself, my siblings and cousins.

Sometimes stories are also painful realizations. When Estella talks about her mother's lack of storytelling she first frames it within the language of survival. As she was growing up she does not recall her mother telling many stories because she was busy raising children, taking care of the house and just trying to survive in a strange land.

But no, I don't really recall her, you know being the one of six kids, her you know, sitting around and telling any stories or anything like that. Plus she was busy trying to learn English. Because she went from her family and had dad taking her to nowhere, she didn't know anybody, just you know just taking care of the family, finding a place to live, you know doing laundry and life, and cooking and cleaning. No. You know, as I got older but not when I was growing up. (Interview with Estella Falcon Creel, March 19, 2009)

As Estella got older she learned more and more stories from her mother, perhaps in direct relation to her mother having more time to herself and no longer under the demand of taking care of young children, here she provides even more context on why her mother might not have been as vocal around telling stories – she was clearly busy surviving as a mother of six children “doing laundry and life.”

Gloria weighs in on who was the storyteller in her family and the important family stories that she recalls as often spoken by her mother and grandmother in particular, two significant women in her life.

I don't remember too many of the stories. The only one I remember is the one that mom told me about how she met dad. I really love that one. And dad had a good memory but I don't remember him ever telling us any, no war stories. Just mom, and her stories when she was growing up and she would like to go back, where is it, somewhere in Mexico to go see where she was growing up. So she would tell us all of these stories about growing up eating the fruits on the trees and abundance of fruit and they would eat. She wanted us to see, us to see how it was back then, but it's not the same [now]. And it's probably that little town isn't even around any more, but Mama's the only one that I remember [telling] stories.

And then my grandmother, and she was, toward the end, she already had Alzheimer's and she couldn't remember who you were. And my grandma thought that I was my mom because she would tell me stories about my mom thinking that it was my mom. And I found a lot of things about my mom. And of course in Spanish she would tell me all these stories and I said, “I had no idea that my mom was like that!” My mom was always good, she was never doing anything bad. My grandmother would, *pobrecita*, she was already getting much older and she was getting sick and she wouldn't even remember who I was anymore and she thought I was mom. And I liked her stories you know. And when my mom came down to see her I was so, so afraid that my grandmother wouldn't remember her, and when she saw my mom, she knew who she was and I was so happy because it would have killed my mom if she didn't know who she was. But, I told my mom some of the stories that she had told me and my mom says “she did tell you that?!” and

I said, “well yeah Mom, because she thought I was you” and she said, “oh, ok.” I mean, they weren’t bad, they just were things when she was going to school and my mom only went to like ninth grade I think it was and she couldn’t afford to send her anymore to school, my mom had to help her out and she thanked her, she thanked my mom. But, I guess it was so hard back then and I was just so happy that my grandmother remembered her before she passed. That was the only story told from my grandmother and my mom, mainly, not so much my dad. (Interview with Gloria Falcon Madrid, July 18, 2009)

Storytelling for Gloria represents an *acto de amor* among women as she describes the ways that she remembers her mother sharing stories with her and then when she was older and living with her grandmother she also benefits from hearing stories about her mom from her grandmother. These stories also grew the bond that Gloria and her mother have because of the content that was shared and because of the context in which it was shared (her grandmother’s mind was struck with Alzheimer’s and she mistook Gloria for her own mother). These stories Gloria learned from her grandmother allowed her to see her own mother in a different light through learning about her life. This was particularly important for Gloria because her relationship with her mother was not always the best. She describes the tension that they had when she was younger and attributes this (along with a negative experience with a man) to her fleeing from Kansas to Texas. However, the stories that she learns about her mother enable her to rebuild that relationship with her and ultimately pushes her to move back to Kansas to be closer to her mother and her sisters.

Martha’s life as a child of farmworker parents revolved around stories in much the same ways as outlined above, they served to keep hopes high in the fields, to pass knowledge from generation to generation, and they served as valuable lessons for her future. These *actos de amor* instilled a work ethic in Martha (and her siblings) and were ways to provide support for one another in potentially trying times.

[Our parents] would talk about mainly stories, just about their growing up, about dad growing up. Or sometimes there would just be eavesdropping because they would be talking about things going on with other relatives or something. My mom would sometimes get kind of angry that the farmer wouldn't pay them, she would try to tell my dad, "You know you need to tell Douglas that he needs to pay us more, this field is really weedy." But it was mainly stories that I would hear about their growing up or Dad would tell me that if I wanted really, really curly hair that I needed to put cow dung on my hair, and let a dog lick it. Something like that, it was really stupid, he was always trying to make us laugh. They would talk about how important it was to finish school that was a big thing for them, for us to finish school. Because dad only went up to sixth grade, and he said, he would always tell us that he didn't have that opportunity for him to continue school because he couldn't afford it. Because in Mexico, education is free up to sixth grade and after that you had to pay. And mom said, that she was really lucky that Grandpa paid for her education for her to go to continue on. It was really rare for young girls from la rancho to continue their education. Most of them would only go up to sixth grade and then stay at home or they would have to help work, or got married very young. Both of her sisters got married very young. They would talk about, Mom would talk about her dad and I could tell that she was really close to him and they would, I don't know, they would just talk about things. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

Martha shares the many different types of stories her parents would tell them as they were working in the fields. She heard her mother asserting herself in the family by trying to convince her father to demand more money for the work that they did. Her father used humorous anecdotes to lighten the mood by telling them if they wanted to change their appearance they could find the remedies in the fields themselves. The stories her father and mother told her also revolved around the importance of getting an education, especially because in Mexico they were not necessarily afforded the privilege to continue studying. In this excerpt I also highlight how the mundane holds meaning for Martha, as she remembers stories from daily life that might not hold particular meaning for others, but for Martha and her family, stories served as a means to put their minds on other things as they undertook hard work together as a family. These key seeds grew into stories that Martha herself feels important in terms of sharing her own life experiences

with others. Telling stories in the field became a way to pass the time and helped to make work less mundane.

It became clear that these messages of pursuing education resonated with Martha who had dreams of attending college but expressed regret that because she got married and started a family at a young age she was unable to fully attain this goal. But the lessons she learned through the stories of her parents in the fields and through watching her parents work so hard in the fields are valuable stories that she wants others to know. When her father got sick she saw the effects of what it meant for the family to be without his income. Her mother took over by working all year round and by taking odd jobs. Martha, as the oldest child also had to step up and help earn money for the family. I think that most of the women would agree with Martha's thoughts below, that all of the experiences they have lived in their life are shaped by familia, attitudes about work ethics and actos de amor.

But you know, I wouldn't change none of that. I don't regret the life I had as a kid growing up because it's shaped me into the person that I am today. You know, I'm really thankful for my mom and dad for teaching us to appreciate what we had and to make the best out of a bad situation. You know, 'cause mom would always say, you can't whine and moan and cry cause it's not going to do you any good. You know you have to do something, regardless, whatever that may be, you have to keep going forward. And for her, to, each summer going, each year going and working at the beet piler that was her way of going forward and doing the little odd jobs, cooking and all that kind of stuff. (Interview with Martha Casteñon, February 7, 2009)

It is not surprising to see that these women have found stories as a means to impart information, knowledge and history and that stories have also functioned as a means of survival. Knowing the importance of familia and the lessons that were learned from mothers, fathers and sisters were key survival strategies for them as they lived in the

Midwest as isolated families in Kansas and Minnesota and had to deal with negotiating racial and class differences and gender and sexual oppression.

These stories have served as *actos de amor* that will continue to live on, through re-telling to family members or friends. These stories have demonstrated that my experience as a girl with one foot in the Midwest, and one foot in the Southwest can be reflected in others' stories. I hope this collection and analysis of these stories can serve as the jumping off point for thinking through how we can continue to envision oral histories as dynamic texts to be read and loved, sites where we not only analyze the stories of significant historical events but where the mundane details of everyday life can be considered valuable stories, artifacts, and testimonies that hold mountains of meaning. I have been impressed by what these stories have done for me. They have been examples of great sadness and pain right along side the stories of strength and pride. They have illustrated a few examples of women living, loving, forging identities and making home in the Midwest, but I know that their stories hold many more meanings to be mined and uncovered as they will now forever live on. These stories serve as testaments to our existence and demonstrate the need for the space of the academy to allow them to be heard from within its halls.

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APPENDIX A

Oral History Respondents Biographies

Born in September 1959 in Moorhead, Minnesota, Martha Casteñon was the child of Mexican migrant farmworker parents. The oldest of five siblings she grew up in Sabin, Minnesota (approximately 10 miles outside of the Fargo/Moorhead metropolitan area). Following her high school graduation she was married for thirteen years and had three children. Beginning in 1980 she worked for Migrant Legal Services for seventeen years as a secretary and then as a paralegal. She is involved in a local Chicana/Latina group in Moorhead called *Mujeres Unidas* and she also finds time to engage in suicide prevention community work as she has been shaped by the loss of her daughter. She currently resides in Moorhead, Minnesota with her partner.

Estella (Falcon) Creel was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1958. Her family moved to Belen, New Mexico before settling first in Hanover and then finally in Greenleaf, Kansas where she lived her childhood and young adult life. After graduating high school she made her way to Manhattan, Kansas where she began working as a clerk in the Engineering Department at Kansas State University. She took one class at the University in English and met her husband there. After two years of marriage and two children, her husband was offered a job in Albuquerque, New Mexico where they moved to and where she currently resides. She had two more children in Albuquerque where she currently works part-time as a clerk at a local elementary school.

Born in Coffeyville, Kansas in 1958 Cynthia Perez Falcon is the second oldest of five children. Her family moved to Topeka when she was still a girl, for better job opportunities which is where she currently resides with her husband and their two children. She completed one year of Community College before deciding to leave school and learn from life experiences, first in the banking industry in Winfield, Kansas and then in Topeka at a major corporation headquarters. After her last child moves out of the house she intends to go back to school to get her four year degree, a goal she was not able to achieve previously. She is currently working at a smaller company and actively involved in volunteering at a local hospital.

Gloria (Falcon) Madrid, the oldest child among five other siblings was born in 1950 in El Paso, Texas. As a young child she moved around to Phoenix, Arizona, Belen, New Mexico and then finally settled with her family in the small towns of Hanover and Greenleaf, Kansas. Following her high school graduation she fled the small town to El Paso to live with her grandmother. She worked in a factory, married, had three sons and divorced then ended up meeting her current partner there. They moved back to Kansas to be closer to family in late 1980s where she currently works for Payless Shoes Corporate Office in Topeka, Kansas. This is where she currently resides as a happy grandmother herself.

Guadalupe Morales (La Lupe) was born in the South Valley of Texas and moved to Fairbault, Minnesota by the time she was four to join her paternal grandparents who had

also moved to Southern Minnesota. Growing up as one of three Chicana/o families in Fairbault, La Lupe experienced brutal racism. She married young and birthed four children. When her husband at the time would not allow her to go back to school after staying home to raise their children, La Lupe got a divorce. After attending the University of Minnesota she was able to give voice to the oppressive experiences she lived. She now lives in Minneapolis, with her compañera, spends time with her children and nine grandchildren, and is still working toward her higher education goals while helping others with their career goals.

Teresa Ortiz was born and raised in Mexico City, Mexico in 1948, the only girl child with three brothers. She first came to Minneapolis, Minnesota as part of a Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) exchange program where she studied for one summer following the student riots in Mexico City in 1968. During this summer she met her then-husband who traveled back to Mexico City with her and wed. After this short break in Mexico City she moved back with her husband to the Twin Cities and began attending school at the University of Minnesota full time in 1970 where she studied education and had three children. She resided in Southern Minnesota where she finished her college degree and taught at a small grade school before traveling and living as an ambassador to Guatemala (for two years) and then in Chiapas, Mexico where she worked with the Zapatistas and started her own non-profit organization. Following this she returned to Minneapolis to work as a labor organizer coordinator at the Resource Center of the Americas and now currently teaches Spanish at a local middle school.

Margaret (Dominguez) Perez, the youngest of six children, was born December 23, 1933 in Sedwick, Colorado to Mexican farmworker parents. She graduated high school in 1952 where she then went on to study education/teaching at a junior college for two years. A year later she met her husband and moved to Coffeyville, Kansas in 1956. She settled in Topeka, Kansas with her husband and five children in 1964 where she worked as a homemaker and then at the famous Menninger Clinic in an office work capacity. She is now a seventy-five year old grandmother who teaches Spanish to elementary school students.

Lydia Marie (Falcon) Rider was born in El Paso, Texas in 1951, the second daughter of six siblings. She did some schooling in Phoenix, Arizona and then Belen, New Mexico before her family moved to Hanover, Kansas where she attended a Catholic elementary school for a short time. Shortly thereafter the family settled in Greenleaf, Kansas a neighboring town where she grew up. Following her high school graduation she attended nursing school and is a RN at a hospital in Emporia, Kansas where she currently resides. She is married, has two grown sons and one grandson.

APPENDIX B

Oral History Questions

Family History/Background¹⁰⁹

- Tell me how you and your family came to Minnesota/Kansas.
- Tell me about your grandparents or your great-grandparents if you know about their lives? Where were they born? What did they do for work? What are your favorite stories/memories of your grandparents?
- What about your mother? Where and when was she born? What did she tell you about her childhood?
- What did your mother do most of her life?
 - Did your mother marry?
 - Did she work outside the home?
 - Was she working any time when you were growing up? What do you remember about your mother when you were a child?
 - How much schooling did she have? Did your mother ever speak to you about education when you were a young girl?
 - What were her hopes for her life? What hopes did she have for you?
- Now, let's talk about your father, that do you know about his boyhood? Where was he born? When did he begin to work, what work did he do?
 - What was his educational background?
 - Did your father ever speak to you about your education when you were younger?
 - What hopes did your father have for you as you grew up?
- What was it like growing up as a Mexican American girl in ____?
- Who were your companions as a young girl? Tell me about any brothers and sisters? How have those relationships changed over the years?
- As a child, did you want to live a life like your parents' when you grew up? Did your parents want you to live a life similarly or differently from them?
- Did your parents emphasize spirituality or religion when you were growing up? How have your ideas changed on this subject throughout your lifetime?

¹⁰⁹ The following questions were built upon similar questions from Brandt's *Working Womenroots: An Oral History Primer* (1980).

- What particular memories do you have about your family (parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, grandparents, cousins...) that you think really shaped you as the person you are today?
- What was your relationship with your mother/father/siblings? Did you perceive this to be different than white friends'/neighbors' relationships with their family?
- What has your relationship been with your parents, siblings, grandparents? What do you think you've learned from your family the most?
- How does your family reflect on the decisions to move/come to the Midwest?

Identity

- What do you think it means to be a Mexican American in the Midwest? Do you ever imagine how it might have been different to grow up in an area where Mexican Americans were the majority?
- Have you ever had experiences that you would describe as "racist"? If so, how have you dealt with it?
- What memories do you have of stories that were shared in your family? Who is/was the main storyteller? How do these stories affect you today?
- What types of stories were passed around in your family about what it meant to be Mexican and/or Mexican American?
- Talk to me about how you feel about your identity. Do you identify as Mexican American, Mexican, Chicana, Latina, Hispanic or none of these labels? How did you come to this label and what does it mean to you?
- Do you think being a Mexican American in the Midwest is different than say Texas, the Southwest or California? Why?
- What types of struggles have you faced as a woman? Did these experiences cause you to think about your identity as a woman and as a Mexican American?
- How did you learn how you should act/behave as a woman?
- Tell me about how you learned about sex and/or sexuality? What are your first memories of this? Did family members speak to you about sex or did you learn about it outside of your family?
- Can you talk to me about your first romantic crush? How did your family feel about you dating? What rules were enforced?

- How do you think your earlier experiences with romance, love and/or sexual activity affect your sexual identity today?
- Did your family ever talk about homosexuality? What do you think accounts for your family's understanding of homosexuality and/or sexuality?
- How did your up-bringing affect the way you interact with your family now? Think about some of these same questions but for you as the wife/mother/partner.
- If you are a mother, what has that experience taught you? Does it define you? As a Mexican American, how do you approach issues of race, gender and/or sexuality with your children?

Life Experiences: Education, Work and Community

- Tell me about what it was like to be Mexican-American in your educational experiences. Do you think your race affected your education? How?
- What did you think about school? What subjects did you like?
- Can you discuss a specific educational experience that made you feel good about yourself? Likewise, did you have any experiences that made you feel poorly about yourself?
- What were your family's expectations about your education? Can you remember any specific instances where someone talked to you about education?
- Were your classmates from the same background as you (ethnic, socioeconomic, religious etc.)? What about the teachers? How did you feel about this arrangement?
- When did you stop going to formal school and why? Did you ever wish you could go further? Do you have memories of informal school/teaching that are important to you?
- Is there anything special about your early educational experiences that you credit to who you are today?
- Describe the community in which you first lived. Did neighbors get together informally? Were you and/or your parents involved/active in community organizations? How have you noticed the community changing over the years? How does this impact your sense of belonging?
- Did you belong to any religious, social, or political groups as a young girl? In later life? Which ones are you active in now? Do you feel like this type of community engagement is important?

- How have your political views changed over the years? What types of discussions occurred around politics by family members when you were growing up?
- What type of job did you want to have when you were younger? What happened to that dream? Can you trace your work history here?
 - What was your first non-paying job?
 - What was your first wage-earning job? How old were you?
 - What is your current employment? Do you feel like your education prepared you for this job?
 - What were the best and worst jobs you've ever had?
- Have you faced any particular challenges in the workplace because of your identity as a woman, Mexican American or both? Have you ever dealt with sexual harassment or racial discrimination?
- Have you faced any challenges trying to work and have a family?
 - Were these expectations demonstrated or taught to you about work and family as a young girl?
 - How did your husband/partner feel about you working outside the home?
 - What types of child care arrangements did you make throughout the years?
 - What type of home life did you expect to come home to after work?
- What does home mean to you?
- If you could say one thing about what it means to be a Mexican American woman living in the Midwest for future generations what would it be?

APPENDIX C

Territorio Norte

Teresa Ortiz, © 2006, Minneapolis, Minnesota

You!

Me?

Yes, you,

What are you?

Hispanic? Mexican-American?

Latino? Chicano?

What?

What do you people call yourselves?

... It is all so confusing

Me?

Meshicaan ...

Soy Mexicana

Nací en el Corazón del Cielo

Centro de la Tierra

Soy Mexicana

I was born under the shadow of the Angel of Independence

I was born in the Heart of the Earth

City of millions

Capital of Aztec warriors

My parents were Norteños,

To be more precise

Coahuilenses – Laguneros,

Born and raised in that piece of land that is a desert

My grandparents, Fronterizos,

Their parents were Texanos,

They lived in that territory when it still belonged to us

And I could go on and on and on

Back and back and back

My people were Tarahumaras, Yaki, Kikapú.

All Native people

My people were Judíos, Sefardís, Ladinos,

Árabes, Nofrafricanos,

Economic refugees, displaced from their homelands

My people were Españoles,
Portugueses, Franceses
They migrated to this continent from the other side of the ocean

Mi familia toda:
Nativos e inmigrantes por igual.
Nativa e inmigrante,
Esa soy yo.

Mestiza soy

Yo, ahora aquí vivo
Aquí está mi casa.
Como decía José Martí, “Vivo
En el Corazón de la Bestia y la conozco”

I live here
This is where I have my home
In the northern zone of the northern territory,
Minnesota.
Here, my children were born.

This is my home.

But they say that they say that they say
That my ancestors originally came from this very same region

From the Great Plains of the Northern Midwest,
They migrated south

My mother used to tell me,
That our people came from Wisconsin
To populate the deserts
Of Arizona, Texas,
Coahuila

The Mexican story says,
If you check your history books,
That from there,
My people walked south

For days and days and days they walked
For months and months they walked
Until they arrived to the center of it all
To build a wonderful, amazing city,

Symbol of a nation

Where I was born

And then, myself,
From the southern tip of the northern zone,
Territorio Rebelde Zapatista,
Where I lived for a while,
I learned so much

I learned from my people
That our history is long and it is living
That our future is here and it is now

And I want to say,
If of me it is permitted,
Que yo también soy
Indígena Maya Zapatista Chiapaneca
Esa soy yo.

And so, I must finally tell you that
Geographically speaking,
My home is here,
North America,
And I won't allow for anyone to take it away from me
Or to call me a foreigner, or an illegal alien

No le permito a nadie que me lo quite
Ni que me llame fuereña o ilegal

Soy Mestiza, Nativa, Inmigrante
Minnesotana

Soy Mexicana

I was born
In the Heart of the Sky/Heart of the Earth,
Center of this land

And this is my home
América,
Territorio Norte