MAKING MENUDO, FEEDING THE SOUL: TOWARDS A FAT CHICANA
EPISTEMOLOGY

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By

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To my mom and uncle: You inspire me to be a smarter and stronger warrior for myself and the family.
DEDICATION

There are some fierce fat Chicanas out there! To those I have had the honor of meeting, thank you for getting really excited about the work I’m doing and for reminding me that our stories as fat Chicana women are long overdue to be shared with the world. This thesis is for all the Chicana comadres who are fat or have ever felt fat, so that you may know that someone out there recognizes and honors your lives as beautiful and powerful women.

I dedicate this thesis to my tia, Gloria A. Ceseña and my grandparents, Alfredo S. Ceseña and Josephine G. Ceseña: The best way I know how to honor you is to continue doing what I do best—give you reasons to be proud of me, which have always been through my academic accomplishments. Thank you for instilling in me the value of getting an education. Thank you for teaching me all those life lessons that can’t be found in books. Thank you for leading by example what it means to be a person of your word, to command respect, to treat others with dignity, and most importantly, to love unconditionally. I will always try to do right by you.
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ABSTRACT

TOWARDS A FAT CHICANA EPISTEMOLOGY

BY

Mónica E. Hernández

Master of Arts in Chicano and Chicana Studies

People today have inherited historically rigid guidelines of what constitutes beauty and bodily acceptance, with multiple institutions normalizing a particular body type while simultaneously making the “other” out of those bodies that do not adhere to the norm. This thesis presents the ways fatness is constructed as an imposed “othered” identity, which is used as a tool of continued western hegemonic control over the Latina/o demographic. It exposes the continued invisibility of fat Latina women within dominant discourses as well as in seemingly “progressive” ones like the fat positive movement. Utilizing Cindy Cruz’ (2001) "Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body" as well as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's (1981) "Theory of the Flesh" as a theoretical framework, fat Chicana consciousness is located as a powerful identity, one that centers the body as agent and advocate of healing, resistance, and autonomy. Using testimonio as methodological tool, the researcher’s personal narratives are woven with Chicana feminist literature, de-colonial literature, and queer of color literature to construct what Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) terms, an “autohistoria-teoría” that challenges destructive dominant belief systems and promotes individual and collective change through caring and understanding.
“...the era of fat-girl apologies and tastelessly retrograde fatphobic remarks is coming to a close and the day of the fierce, too-much-to-handle fat girl is close at hand”

-Virgie Tovar
(Tovar, 2012, p. 173)

“For if she changed her relationship to her body and that in turn changed her relationship to another’s body then she would change her relationship to the world. And when that happened she would change the world.”

-Gloria Anzaldúa

In May of 2012, halfway through this thesis writing journey, I was medically diagnosed with Cholecystitis, or inflammation of the gallbladder due to the presence of gallstones. The gallbladder is an organ in the body that is attached to the liver and stores a chemical called bile used by the body for digestion (“gall bladder,” n.d.). Due to the fact that I had been misdiagnosed with Dyspepsia, or acid reflux, after the second episode of abnormal symptoms in 2009, I ended up experiencing intense gallbladder attacks for three years meaning heartburn-like pains, regurgitation, nausea, bloating, and even shortness of breath that lasted one to almost six hours at a time. The attacks would not happen often, maybe three times a year, but I remember my entire body would feel excruciating pain with no prescribed or suggested remedy to soothe the aching sensation inside. The solution for my Cholecystitis was a laparoscopic Cholecystectomy, or removal of my gall bladder. I was privileged to still be under my mother’s health
insurance at the time and had a supportive family who lovingly cared for me through the recuperation phase. Thankfully, I am now fully recovered.

A long time ago, my godmother once told me that physical illnesses are manifestations of an ailing heart and soul. Along this strain of thought, Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa states,

I was afraid to let my feelings loose in the world. I began to hold things in—anger, sadness, frustration, fear, guilt. I began to hold in my most closely guarded stories. I hid from myself. I left my body-disassociated. I did not want to inhabit my body. I became a visitor in my own skin. My body’s memory—that’s what Coyolxauhqui\(^1\) symbolizes for me (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p. 297).

My body is forever branded from my gallbladder surgery with three scars on my panzota,\(^2\) reminders of countless other scars from holding in the emotions that Anzaldúa talks about, “anger, sadness, frustration, fear, and guilt.” I held on to those feelings, believing in their legitimacy for twenty six years, unknowingly compressing them into tiny deposits of minerals that had nowhere else to go but into my gallbladder. It is no wonder I reached an extreme point of having to undergo physical rajadura\(^3\) to purge my body of my sick organ. For years she had been talking to me and I never learned how to recognize her voice, much less listen to what she was trying to tell me.

I am fat. I am fat and brown. I am fat and brown and a woman—una mujer gorda. It has taken me years to come to terms with these opening statements, words that remind

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\(^1\) In Mexica mythology, Coyolxauhqui is a dismembered warrior goddess symbolized by the moon.

\(^2\) Big tummy

\(^3\) Slice, split or crack
me of memories of a lifelong journey filled with instances of struggle and perseverance, pain and joy, vergüenza y orgullo. Actually, the memories that tug at my heart are more about inhabiting the middle grounds of these binaries, negotiating the push and pull of the extremes, always in Nepantla. How I’ve often hated being here, between both worlds, a site of confusion, anxiety, and loneliness. At the time of my gallbladder removal surgery I felt isolated from being geographically separated from my academic support group (they were in Los Angeles, California and I was in San Diego, California), defeated from being emotionally disconnected from my research, and indifferent from not wanting to unleash suppressed emotions caused by my grandfather’s death in 2011 and subsequent family dramas. I was at a standstill in which I couldn’t find the motivation or direction for my academic work. Yet, silence and stillness served a greater purpose during this time, for it was here that I realized I had neglected myself; the proof was in the pudding (literally, the pudding because that was all I could eat post surgery). What brought me to this point? What did I want out of life? What would make me happy? By asking myself these questions, I opened up the doors of responsibility and possibility. “In Nepantla you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and to “see through” them with a mindful, holistic awareness” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544). I asked myself, “How was I helping or hindering my journey towards happiness?” Perspective

4 Shame and pride

5 In one of Gloria Anzaldúa’s descriptions of Nepantla she writes, “In this liminal, transitional space, suspended between shifts, you’re two people, split between before and after. Nepantla, where the other boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality, is a zone of possibility” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 543).
has everything to do with subsequent emotion and action. “Meeting the world with a loving heart will determine what we find there” (Boyle, 2010, p. 124). The viewpoint I harbored towards my life and the world around me was of no assistance to me on this journey because it was not coming from a place of love. It was especially obvious in my initial approach to my thesis, as deficit thought and an internalized habit of disconnecting myself from my scholarship guided what I was writing. These ideas floated around during a time of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual vulnerability, a time that I became aware of the ways I was fragmented. I decided that being in this state is not a way of life or love. In Pensamiento Serpentino, Chicano playwright Luis Valdez writes, “Once you learn your limitations you encounter your infinite potential you find God in your heart. But first you have to know yourself pos luego how could it be otherwise” (Valdez & Teatro Campesino, 1990, p.190)?

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6 “Once you learn your limitations you encounter your infinite potential you find God in your heart. But first you have to know yourself then how could it be otherwise?”
This thesis is just about that, about getting to know myself in a way that honors my embodied existence as a fat Chicana woman, la diosa gorda en mi corazón.\textsuperscript{7}
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

THE INVENTORY

“The odds were heavily against her. She hid her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. And though she was unable to spread her limbs and though for her right now the sun has sunk under the earth and there is no moon, she continues to tend the flame.”

-Gloria Anzaldúa

(Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 45).

My First Bowl of Menudo

When I was a little girl, I hated menudo. I hated menudo without even trying it. Anytime grandma would make it I would say “Ew, huele muy feo! Yo no quiero menudo!”

She would verbally reprimand me “Que muchacha tan repunosa! Ni lo haz probado!” then make me something like a hot dog or bologna sandwich. I was one of those picky eater kids who made solid conclusions based on sight and smell rather than taste. If it was green, it would taste bad. If it smelled funky, it would taste bad. I lived my little girl life pushing dishes away and sorting through plates full of (now) delicious food with my fork.

One day, when I was about twelve years old, grandma decided she was going to make menudo. She pulled out her pad of paper and pensively jotted down what she

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8 “Ew it smells bad! I don’t want menudo!”

9 “What a picky little girl you are! You haven’t even tried it!”
needed. Off to the grocery store we went a special trip just to buy ingredients to make
menudo that afternoon. We pushed the cart together, first through the produce section for
cebolla blanca, ajo, and cilantro.\(^\text{10}\) Then to the “Hispanic aisle” to grab cans of hominy
and chile rojo.\(^\text{11}\) To the condiment aisle for a new bottle of oregano since they ran out the
last time they had menudo. Finally, we walked all the way back to the meat section
(which was always last on grocery visits to keep the meat cold) to sort through the best
pre-packaged cow tripe and pig’s feet. We had left Grandpa in the car, who waited for us
listening to AM 1360, a radio station that played big band music, while discreetly
sharpening a couple small kitchen knives in preparation for cutting the tripe.

By the time we got back home and unpacked everything poor grandma was too
tired to prepare and assemble everything. “Ven, te voy a enseñar como limpiar y cortar la
tripa,”\(^\text{12}\) she commanded. I stood in front of the kitchen sink next to grandma, watching
as she opened one of the packages, unfolded the honeycomb looking white tripe and cut
about a 4x4 inch piece of tripe. “Esto es la gordura; se necesita cortar,”\(^\text{13}\) she said
trimming off the stubborn fat deposits on the tripe. Next she scooted me over, took the
piece she had cut and ran it under running water in the sink. “Vez esta cosita verde? Es el
sacate que se comió la vaca. Se tiene que limpiar.”\(^\text{14}\) I watched as she used her fingers to
scrape away any residual grass on the tripe. Then she set the clean piece of tripe on the
cutting board, diced it into bite sized squares, and then threw them into a big bowl. “Ten

\(^\text{10}\) White onion, garlic, and cilantro

\(^\text{11}\) Red chile

\(^\text{12}\) “Come here, I’m going to show you how to clean and cut tripe.”

\(^\text{13}\) “This is the fat; it needs to be cut off.”

\(^\text{14}\) “Do you see this little green thing? Its grass the cow ate. It needs to be cleaned.”
cuidado y no te cortes un dedo. Me voy acostar un rato que estoy cansada.¹¹⁵ She walked off to her room, leaving me to clean and cut three packages of cow tripe. Admittedly I was acting lazy on top of being annoyed at the task ahead. I walked into the living room to see if I could baby talk grandpa into the job. But by this time grandpa had fallen asleep on the living room floor after playing with the dogs for a little bit. Darn it. It really was just going to be me with this stinky, funky looking meat. I didn’t even eat menudo!

I started cutting away, trying to follow grandma’s instructions to the T. Chop, chop, chop. Rinse, rinse, rinse. My chubby pre-adolescent hands, cold and wrinkly from constantly running tripe under the water, filled the bowl with clean and perfectly cut squares of cow tripe. Fifteen minutes, turned to half an hour, then an hour, all the way to almost an hour and a half of preparation. I threw the last piece of tripe into the bowl, covered the bowl with plastic wrap and carried it over to the refrigerator to keep the meat cold. I had managed to get it all done before the grandparents woke up and without cutting a finger off, success was mine. Like the nerd I was (and still am) I then grabbed my backpack and started sorting through my homework assignments at my corner of the kitchen table.

“Grandma I finished!” I yelled joyously as grandma walked into the kitchen a few minutes later. “Thas good!” grandma replied with her broken English accent. She washed her hands and started assembling the ingredients. My attention was divided between books and cooking. I watched as grandma opened and drained the juice from the hominy. “Focus, Mónica, focus,” I reminded myself; back to schoolwork for a few minutes and in

¹¹⁵ “Be careful and don’t cut your finger. I’m going to lie down for a while because I’m tired.”
walked grandpa. “La olla está muy pesada”\(^{16}\) grandma commented. Grandma always had a way of asking a person to do something for her, without ever asking directly. “La olla está muy pesada” was code for “come fill the pot with water and carry it to the stove because I can’t do it.” We all knew her code phrases, and I watched as grandpa not only cleaned the biggest pot (used only for tamales and menudo), filled it with water, and carried it over to the stove but then grabbed the bowl of tripe from the refrigerator and carried it over to the stove too. He was that good that he knew what else he had to do before grandma “asked” him to. “Focus now;” back to reading and jotting down notes. I glanced up in time to see grandma tossing in a few cloves of garlic and a couple tablespoons of salt into the water, then gently placing spoonfuls of my perfectly cut tripe inside to avoid splattering. That was that. She covered the pot, washed the dishes and her hands, and then walked over to the adjoining room to watch whatever was on Canal de las Estrellas.\(^{17}\)

About half an hour into the cooking process, the kitchen began to fill with the smell of cooking cow tripe. It’s a unique smell. Not quite pleasant, not quite repugnant. It smells of earth; grass, corn, and animal fat all mixed in together. It makes sense since corn and grass is probably what the cow ate and digested in its lifetime. That afternoon, I inhaled the oxygen filled smell of cooking cow tripe and exhaled the “ew huele muy feo” carbon dioxide; deep breaths, in and out, in and out. I took in the hard work that went into what was simmering in the pot and let go of the “yo no quiero menudo!” I inhaled deeply, supplying my lungs with fresh air, opening my mind to the possibility of something new.

\(^{16}\) “The pot is too heavy.”

\(^{17}\) Canal de las Estrellas, translated as Channel of the Stars, is a Spanish programming television network.
Could it be that today was the day I would choose menudo over a hot dog or bologna sandwich? I mean, how could I not even try it after spending all that time cutting and cleaning?

Grandma walked back into the kitchen a few minutes later and slowly lifted the pot’s lid. Hot steam poured into the room, fogging up the little window in the kitchen door. She grabbed a fork, took a piece of piping hot tripe out, touched it with her index finger and finally tasted it for the texture to see if it was done. “Ya mero”18 she concluded and proceeded to slowly dump in the pigs feet, cans of hominy, and re-covered the pot. Back to Canal de las Estrellas for her, back to my homework for me.

“Vamos a necesitar limones,”19 grandma called out from the adjacent living room. “Okay!” I yelled back, excited for the excuse to abandon homework and run outside with the dogs in the backyard. The lemon tree grandpa had planted years ago provided us with big, juicy lemons every year. I watched him and my uncle pay special attention to that tree when they did yard work. They turned the dirt at the base of the trunk, pruned the sides a little bit, and gave it special plant food. One summer grandpa hung an orange bird feeder on one of the branches to attract a couple yellow breasted birds and a blue jay that flew around the backyard and that grandma loved to watch from our open patio. The plan worked, but a lot of our lemons got bird droppings on them, making them harder to pick and clean. That was the only summer we had a bird feeder. I walked around the tree, eyeing a couple lemons within reach for the taking. The bright yellow ones are the ones ready to be picked. You don’t cut a lemon or yank it off a tree, but grab it with your

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18 “Almost.”
19 “We’re going to need lemons.”
hands and start twisting in one direction so that it breaks off. You know you’ve picked a lemon that’s ready when you barely touch it and it falls by itself. I picked my prized treasures, ran back into the kitchen, and rinsed the lemons just as grandma poured the chile rojo\textsuperscript{20} into the pot. “Menea esto”\textsuperscript{21} she said, handing me the spoon to stir the menudo. Meanwhile she expertly chopped the cilantro then the cebolla blanca (which made our eyes water), and sliced the lemons. She arranged all the toppings in a special plastic Tupperware and took over the stirring.

I cleared my books from the table and set the tableware, three bowls, three spoons, and plenty of napkins. Decidedly, I proclaimed, “I’m gunna try the menudo today grandma.” “You’re gunna like it mija,”\textsuperscript{22} grandpa said walking into the kitchen, lured in by the spicy aroma in the kitchen. “I wouldn’t give you something you don’t like.” He grabbed the flour Porkyland tortillas they sell at Costco and heated a few up for us over one of the stove burners as grandma served us menudo. Of course she served me like half a ladle full, with more hominy than pieces of tripe and pigs feet (just in case I didn’t like it), and I sat there staring into the bowl, taking in the aromas, waiting for them to sit and begin eating. I looked to my right and watched grandpa sprinkle a little oregano, a touch of cilantro, a hint of cebolla, and a ton of salt. He always put salt on his food without tasting it first. Grandma, who sat across from him, put a bit of everything in equal parts (minus the extra salt) and squeezed lemon juice into the bowl. “Échale un poquito de todo.”\textsuperscript{23} Try, you like it,” she said.

\textsuperscript{20} Red chile

\textsuperscript{21} “Stir this.”

\textsuperscript{22} Diminutive term for “My daughter”

\textsuperscript{23} “Put a little bit of everything.”
I did just that and prepared myself for the first spoonful. I decided to take a bite of my tortilla first and then a spoonful of hominy and caldo\textsuperscript{24} with the idea that if the hominy didn’t taste good, at least the tortilla did, making it easier to swallow the one and only bite of menudo I would ever take in my lifetime. I took my first bite. “Not too bad” I mentally told myself. I spooned through the bowl for more hominy. This time, I wouldn’t eat tortilla with it, just to make sure I got a better taste. I took my second bite. “Hmm. Still not bad. I can eat this.” I gobbled up the hominy in my bowl, leaving the bite sized tripe I had spent so much time cutting and cleaning swimming with chunks of pigs feet in leftover caldito.\textsuperscript{25} I was still hesitant to try the tripe and little chunks of pigs feet. I knew what taste to expect with the hominy, but the tripe and pork was completely new to me. What if it was gross? What if it made me sick? Then Grandpa nudged me with his elbow, “See mija, I told you it was good!” He was too content with our meal to even notice my pickiness. I smiled and watched him slurp the last of his caldo directly from the bowl. My grandparents wouldn’t steer me in the wrong direction right? I had already tried the hominy, might as well go all the way and try the meat too! My twelve year old mind told me it was now or never. I got a spoonful of tripe, closed my eyes, and chewed through it. It was a rough first bite. The texture of the meat threw me off. It was such an unexpected level of chewy that I couldn’t savor the flavors infused into the meat. I pushed my bowl away, rejecting the entire thing. I didn’t want any more tripe and didn’t even dare try the pieces of pig’s feet. It was back to hot dogs and bologna sandwiches for me after that. At least I could now say that I had tried menudo and it just wasn’t my thing.

\textsuperscript{24} Soup
\textsuperscript{25} Soup
The irony of this story is that I am now deeply in love with menudo. I can’t get enough of it, whether it’s from my favorite hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Barrio Logan or from the Guadalupanas\textsuperscript{26} who sell it after Sunday morning masses in the parish hall. In the time between being twelve years old to now, I somehow came around to giving menudo a few more tries to the point that I truly desired it. I can’t pinpoint an exact moment when my perspective changed. I guess taste buds develop as part of the growing up process. And I guess I was willing to challenge myself to keep trying it throughout the years. Meaningful change is a slow process, but realizing the possibilities are fulfilling.

\textit{The Fat Chicana’s Stomach Growls} \\

It took me months to remember this particular menudo story. I fought myself day after day, suppressing the bittersweet coming-of-age story in fear of unleashing uncomfortable emotions that come from the grief of my grandfather’s passing and my grandmother’s daily battle with Parkinson’s disease and Dementia. My grandfather is no longer here to tell me the stories of his youth and my grandmother’s brain does not allow her to remember the stories of her youth. Death and disease have tried to silence us. While working on the proposal for my thesis, I had an epiphany. My silence was a choice, whereas my grandparent’s silence was not. I am privileged to speak, to remember, to think, to write, to feel, and to be alive. Why choose to remain silent? Why choose to fear my own self?

\textsuperscript{26} The Guadalupanas are members of a religious club of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. They host fundraisers to support any financial needs of the parish, including serving weekly menudo after Sunday morning masses.
I begin with this menudo story as a symbolic initiation towards allowing my soul to open the door to a new way of embracing my heart, mind, and body. Like my initial approach to menudo, I lived the first quarter of my life hating my fat self without questioning or reflecting on the origins and context for such hatred. I believed I was the problem, my fat brown body being the defect that burdened my world and the world around me. I found ways to blame my fatness for any type of criticism and rejection by others until three summers ago I decided I would close my heart to the world around me and live in a world that was black and white. Clearly my fat brown body would always be the problem and becoming skinny would always be the answer to the problem. Indifference over emotion and solitude over companionship became my escape, manifestations of someone who no longer wanted to feel pain, guilt and sorrow for being a fat burden to others. As a naive twenty three year old, I imagined a pre-destined life of seclusion, accepting a false belief that the skinny world around me deserved to feel alive, whereas I, the forever fat brown girl did not.

One warm August day, my best friend of twenty years texted me; “I miss you! I’m dropping off a book in your mailbox I want you to read. Love ya!” That book was *Fat?So!* by Marilyn Wann (1998), a fat positive text that shook my being to the very core. Upon finishing reading the book, I called my best friend to meet up at the Starbucks near our homes so we could talk about it and our lives as fat women. We talked for hours until the coffee shop closed and then even more hours, well into the early morning in my car in the parking lot. “In the midst of this physical crisis, an emotional bottom falls out from under you, forcing you to confront your fear of others breaching the emotional walls you’ve built around yourself. If you don’t work through your fear, playing it safe could
bury you” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p.544). “I’m fat” I finally said to her. “I’m fat too!” she said to me smiling, “I’m also hungry from all this talking! Let’s go to Denny’s. Are you hungry?” she asked me. I buckled my seat belt and turned the ignition and headlights on. “Yeah, my stomach is growling!”

It has been three years since that tumultuous summer; three years since I realized I had to take control of the steering wheel and travel a path that would make me feel alive again. I listen to my growling stomach, having accepted and embarked on the mission of cleansing myself of an apologetic stance towards my fat body, cutting away at a Western belief system that has always been unforgiving. I am still in a fragile beginner’s stage. I take inventory of what I know as well as what I need to fulfill the meaningful change. The journey looks long for this weary traveler.

I inhale deeply, supplying my lungs with fresh air, opening my mind to the possibility of something new. Hesitation, skepticism, and anxiety entice my spirit; deep breaths, in and out, in and out. Awareness of my surroundings floats into consciousness. My heart beats a steady rhythm, letting me know that I am not alone. My mind tells me I have cultivated the skills and knowledge to depart at any time. My soul sings to me a powerful tune reminding me of my strength and endurance. My body dances, rejoicing at knowing and feeling that a new dawn is near. “Through (w)riting, ancestors do come to visit and become our informants for a literature of transformation” (Moraga, 2011, p. 94). My grandfather walks into my vision. I smile and joyously tell him “I’m gunna try something new today grandpa.” “That’s good! You’re gunna like it mijita!” he says to me. He knows what the path ahead holds for me.
Thesis Overview

This thesis tells the story of how I arrived at this point of locating and writing about my fat Chicana consciousness as an empowered and subversive identity. The goal of my thesis is to “doctor the self” as proposed by Inés Hernández-Ávila, in which persons who have been marginalized embark on journeys of healing to reclaim and transform their lives (2006). In “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process,” the writing process is conceptualized as a method of healing. Personal narrative invokes pain, anxiety, and fear. Even Anzaldúa says “Memoir is a difficult genre” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 247), which is especially true for me, a student scholar who, for years has been taught to value and unquestioningly legitimize objectivity. Thus, the quest for me is to reclaim the subjective. “I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 44).

I recognize that I am privileged to write as a means for “carving and chiseling my own face.” La diosa gorda en mi corazón²⁷ tells me that it isn’t just about what I have to say in my writings, but also how I want to write it that is just as important to the project. I listen to her message, knowing that my method for this thesis must also come from a place of love.

One of the greatest loves of my life, especially being a fat Chicana, is food. I am in a long term relationship with food. Most of my closest relationships with those around me involve the presence of food. In many ways food has facilitated the journey that has brought me to this thesis. I have chosen to organize my work around my family’s recipe for menudo, a dish that in itself is testament to the joy, fulfillment, and life that

²⁷ The fat goddess in my heart
transformation has to offer. Each chapter represents a step towards the creation of this traditional Mexican dish, steps that are also infused with double meaning as I reveal my stories, messages, and goals throughout the text.

This introductory chapter serves as the first step in which I take inventory of what I know about myself and fuse personal experience with what is needed to make menudo. Something calls me to this particular dish. When I was younger, my tia told me an origin story of menudo. She said that menudo is made of beef tripe, which is a part of the cow that rich people in Mexico didn’t want and tossed out as trash. Poor people took the tripe and combined it with other limited ingredients available to them to create what we now know as menudo. My grandma used to make menudo for New Year’s Day, a tradition in Mexican culture that I now know to be associated with aiding in the effects of hangovers. Yet I’ve also known menudo to be a family treat after mass on Sunday morning or to warm up the body on a cold day. It has the power to heal, provide comfort, supply heat, and when seen in these ways menudo is in fact a useful tool for survival, symbolic of the beauty and deliciousness that transformation has to offer. This is where I see and feel the connection between this particular dish and my fat Chicana experiences. Because what we eat, how we make it, and who we share meals with is testament to who we are: inheritors of rich histories, agents of love and wisdom, and proponents of social change.

In chapter two, also identified as “The Purchase,” I ask “How does fatness get determined in the United States?” and explore Fat Studies and medical and public health literature to present current mainstream discourses about fatness, thus exposing what we buy into about it. In these fields of study, I find that fat Chicanas remain an extremely overlooked and under-examined demographic, which speaks to the pervasiveness of their
invisibility in conversations that necessarily need their voices. With this finding and my own consciousness as a Chicana, I ask “How does Chicana culture play a role in the formulation of a fat Chicana identity?” I transition into introducing theatrical works of Chicana feminists, whose characters contest their secondary status, taking into account various intersections that situate them in marginal positions, including their fat bodies.

Chapter three, or “The Preparation” establishes Cindy Cruz’ (2001) “Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body” as well as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1983) “Theory of the Flesh” as the theoretical tools used to interrogate the dominant negative belief system that “others” fat bodies and normalizes thin bodies. Like the extensive amount of time and effort to prepare menudo, I ready myself for the journey, using these theoretical tools to draw connections between this systematic “othering” of fatness to the systematic “othering” of additional intersectional markers of identity including race, class, gender, sexuality, and generation. The works of Cruz and Moraga and Anzaldúa center the body as the literal physical site in which difference and “otherness” is experienced and therefore, must become the site from which transformation must occur. For me, centering my body means learning how to love every part of it, and that requires tending to the wounds that have been inflicted on it throughout my life, wounds that I chose to ignore rather than confront.

In chapter four, also labeled as “The Transformation” I ask “How do fat Chicanas navigate their identities within a fat-phobic society?” Utilizing testimonio and Anzaldúa’s (2002) notion of “autohistoria teoría” I present my own flesh and blood experiences as a fat Chicana woman to propose an alternative framework for re-conceptualizing fatness. Here you will read some of the most intimate experiences of my life, testimonials that
come straight from my open heart in an effort to create new ways of thinking about and treating our bodies. These stories cover a lifetime of Nepantla-like feelings and ever-changing identity, all arising from being a fat woman. What I feel in my heart and imagine in my head is enacted through my body; I hear her voice and she tells me she is ready to heal.

Defining Terminology

Certain terms are used throughout this thesis that must be defined in order to understand how and why they are being used. First, I differentiate between Chicana, Hispanic, Latina/o as markers of racial/ethnic identities. The term Chicana has been purposefully chosen with the understanding that to identify as Chicana is to acknowledge a consciousness of specific intersections like racial/ethnic descent (i.e. Salvadorian, Bolivian, Mexican) as well as gender and sexuality, and how such a consciousness contributes to the understanding and construction of identity and social locations (De la Torre & Estrada, 2001, p. 125). This is especially important to note because it distinguishes this demographic from the broader, more popular terms that are utilized in other areas of scholarship, Hispanic and Latina/o. To borrow from de la Torre and Estrada, Hispanic is defined as “of, relating to, or being a person of Latin American descent living in the United States. It includes people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American, or South American origin” (p. 129). Latina/o is “a person who is a native or inhabitant of Western Hemisphere countries that are South of the United States, including Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean; it also applies to a person living in the United States who comes, or whose ancestors come, from one of these countries” “(p. 130-131). Hispanic and Latina/o have become umbrella terms,
adopted by political, economic, and social institutions to reference a general “minority”
group with little or no acknowledgement of the diversity that exists within those
categories. As the literature is explored, specifically Medical/public health and even Fat
Studies and Gender/Women Studies scholarship, the use of the term Latina/o dominates
existing research and discussion.

I have also made the conscious decision to use the word fat as the most accurate
term to describe my body. Marilyn Wann, a self-proclaimed fat-positive advocate writes,
“In fat Studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word fat, both as
the preferred neutral adjective (i.e., short/tall, young/old, fat/thin) and also as a preferred
term of political identity” (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). In this way, the word fat is more
than a scientific and medical term whose definition is limited to biological and chemical
language. Rather, fat is not only identified as just a physical characteristic of the body,
but as a marker of difference that carries extensive and malleable connotations that vary
across time and space. Like Chicana, the term fat is intentionally used as a critical
method that indicates political consciousness of its significance and contribution to
identity and social location.

Fat as indicator of body political consciousness speaks against other more
commonly used terms within hegemonic institutions that have come into existence
through the profitable field of medicine. Rebecca Puhl and Chelsea Heuer (2010) in their
article, “Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health,” explore the term
“Obesity,” specifically the way in which the medical community (i.e. medical
professionals, public health researchers) has taken a lead role of influencing themselves,
the government, and the media (all of which directly impact the general public), that
imposing weight stigma on fat people is for their own interest and for the interests of the country as a whole; this is the process of the medicalization of fat. (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Since the early 1990’s the medical community has greatly impacted the standards from which bodies are measured, especially through the use of the Body Mass Index (BMI), which measures body fat based on height and weight, to determine if a person is “healthy.” As a result, bodies are categorized under one of the following labels: “underweight,” “normal,” “overweight,” “obese,” or “morbidly obese” (Campos, 2004; LeBesco, 2009; Wann 1998). The category of “fat” is divided into different levels of fatness including “overweight,” “obese,” and “morbidly obese,” all of which are deemed “unhealthy.”

In their book Mexican Americans and Health: Sana! Sana! Adela de la Torre and Antonio Estrada (2001) define obesity as “the state of being significantly overweight. Anyone who is more than 20% over his or her ideal weight is considered obese.” Obesity is a term that is widely used within the medical community to quantify and categorize fat bodies based on mass and height ratios (p. 32, p. 132). When viewed in this way, obese bodies become subsumed into an oppressive paradigm that conflates numerical value with health and wellness. As the literature will show, the use of obesity has only recently been challenged and merits further discussion since it does carry serious implications for people of color.

Lastly, I clarify the use of my stories, or testimonios, throughout this thesis. They are essential and politically tactical components towards generating an alternative paradigm for understanding fatness as another important marker of identity formation.
testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history (Yudice, 1991, p.17).

My testimonios are not stand-alone narratives, but rather accounts of real experiences that expose the construction of master discourses about fatness and move to challenge those discourses. Through the use of testimonio, the reader gets to experience a “real” person in a manner that designates the writer’s story as valid and important.

*Enacting the Vision*

This thesis is a journey of learning to love oneself. It is a journey of healing and imagining a world of continuous possibility. My being does not walk in a linear direction, for there are no final answers or measurable results that put an end to the beginning. Like my relationship with menudo, learning to love all of myself has a rocky beginning. It is easier to refuse the entire journey after only a couple steps into it and give in to the temptation to remain in my comfort zone. Truly loving every part of the self allows for the recognition that you exist, that you are whole and complete just as you are, that you deserve to be alive. This is a dangerous mantra to have in the narrow and rigid Western society we live in today. Anna Lee Walters writes, “A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared. In the eyes of the world, this makes us dangerous beasts.” (as cited in Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 164). The lemon tree in the backyard comes to
mind. Oh how my grandpa and uncle used to care for it, doing everything they could to make sure it would bear delicious fruits every year. “Meaningful change is a slow process,” I remind myself as I write. “Beneath your desire for knowledge writhe the hunger to understand and love yourself” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p.543). My challenge is to keep going, to the give the journey another try and to fall deeply in love with every part of my being.
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

THE PURCHASE

“I don’t look in the mirror and see a beautiful, bountiful me with a sunset on the horizon and doves flitting around in the air. But I no longer apologize for who I am or how I look.

I have more important things to do.”

-Wendy Shanker

(Shanker, 2004, p. 3)

“Silence is like starvation. Don’t be fooled. It’s nothing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life. When we are not physically starving, we have the luxury to realize psychic emotional starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized - if one is willing to take the risk of making the connection - if one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection.

For me, the connection is an inevitable one.”

-Cherríe L. Moraga

(Moraga, 2000, p. 44)

*Menudo my Love!

Gustavo Arellano, author of *Ask a Mexican!* explores the question “does menudo really cure a hangover?” (Arellano, 2007). Yes, it is widely believed and known that menudo helps cure hangovers. It is a soup with plenty of fat, spices, and carbohydrates that give the body the nutrients it needs to recover from too much alcohol intake. It’s rare to find a Mexican restaurant or taco shop that doesn’t serve menudo every Saturday and Sunday. People are catching onto this too, at least here in CaliforniAztlán where almost
everyone knows a person of Mexican descent who introduces them to hole-in-the-wall places that serve the meal of champions (not Wheaties, Menudo!).

When I finally came around to eating menudo, I had no idea that it was seen as a hangover remedy. I simply enjoyed helping my grandma make it and of course savoring the delicious flavors. Reflecting on this time, I recognize that I found myself caught in a contradiction. My grandma would serve me a piping hot bowl of the soup with a steaming corn tortilla as its sidekick, but just as I was ready to take my first bite, she would say “menudo no es bueno para ti, es pura gordura para los lados.”28 As a result, for years I negotiated guilt with pleasure at consuming this beautiful meal (and many other homemade dishes). As the cliché goes, “how can something so good be so wrong?” If menudo is nothing but fat, and my grandma didn’t want me to get fatter, then why was she giving it to me to begin with? Again, I found myself in Nepantla, the site for ambiguity and possibility.

Arellano writes, “Will menudo cure a hangover? No doubt. But if that’s all you eat it for, then you truly don’t know love” (Arellano, 2007, p.149). You see, there’s so much more to menudo than meets the hungover and fat-fearing eye. For me, my story in the previous chapter, “My First Bowl of Menudo” is what it’s all about. Making menudo takes time, effort, and if you want to make it especially delicious, it takes a good amount of love. It has the power to bring families and communities together. Through its mixture of diverse ingredients and flavors, it becomes symbolic of the very culture, a mestizo culture that created it as a means of survival.

This chapter is just about that, survival of the fattest (a play on Spencer and Darwin’s “Survival of the fittest”). I explore the question “how does fatness get

28 “Menudo isn’t good for you, it’s nothing but fat that makes you bigger.”
determined in the United States?” I go into this knowing that it is widely believed that
fatness is viewed as something ugly, immoral, and needing to be eliminated at all costs.
Fat itself is a necessary component of sustaining the human body. Yet, fatness and fat
bodies have been hijacked with terms like overweight, obese, the obesity epidemic, and
the latest, obesity as a disease, all carrying significant meanings that influence ideology
and action. People buy into these terms and their meanings, adopting and sustaining a
dominant belief system that to be fat is a bad thing. But, like Arellano says of menudo, to
understand fatness only in this way is to not know love.

What I Bought Into About my Fat Self

A six-word sentence often flows in and out of my consciousness. “If only you
would lose weight.” In Spanish, that becomes a four-word sentence, “Si nomas perdieras
peso.” Small sentences, big punches. The faces of my family members are the images
that come to mind as I think about and write these phrases. I am my mother’s only child,
my grandparent’s only grandchild, tia’s only niece. I have always been this little family’s
not so little pride and joy. I am blessed to have grown up with love and attention
constantly showered on me by this little family. And yet, my reflections also reveal that
home is precisely the space where I learned that being fat is a bad thing. “Your hair is so
long and shiny and you have big brown Tapatio eyes, if only you would lose weight then
you would be so beautiful” tia used to say. Even grandpa would tell me “If you lose
weight I’ll give you a thousand dollars to buy all the pretty clothes in the stores!
Wouldn’t you like that?” At first I never knew what to respond to them so I remained
silent. Then at some point my auto-pilot response became “yeah, I know” or “you’re
right.” Eventually, I realized that I got angry when they would say these things to me so I
decided to drown them out and ignore them.

Needless to say, the words “If only you would lose weight” and “Si nomas perdieras peso” are words that have played a significant role in different phases of my life. I was the fat daughter, the fat granddaughter, the fat niece, the fat friend, the fat student. I believed that because fat is bad and I was fat that I was bad. As a result, from a very young age I instilled in myself that I had to excel in anything I did to try to make up for my fat body, to try to show others that I’m not bad. As a way to feel validated as a person, I wanted to earn praise, respect, and even admiration for everything else in my life. Looking back at different experiences in different phases of my life, I succeeded at fulfilling this desire, having established “legitimacy” for my existence by excelling in school, getting involved in extra-curricular activities, being known as everyone’s friend or that bubbly girl who could always make others laugh. All I wanted to do was prove that I was someone who had value, talents, and skills that could outweigh my weight, which clearly had been established to be my only flaw.

As I write this, I feel foolish for believing that my fatness made me into a bad person, that it could possibly be my one and only weakness and for spending my whole life trying to prove to the world that I am worthy to exist despite my fat body. How dare I punish myself to adhere to such a twisted belief system? For a quarter of a century I bought into the belief that “thin” bodies are the norm and “fat” bodies are the other, there couldn’t possibly be an alternative belief system could there? My best friend let me borrow her copy of Fat?So! (1999) three summers ago because it spoke to her and because she saw that I needed to be spoken to as well.

As a student who studied Chicana/o Studies throughout my college career, I had
learned to cultivate a critical lens when discussing themes like race, class, and sexuality. Ironically it took Fat Studies to come into my world to realize that the critical lens also had to be applied to the construction and perception of body weight and body image. Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby (2009), authors of *Lessons from the Fat-O-Sphere*, spoke to me when they wrote “Fatness absolutely does not need to stand in the way of us living our lives with joy, pride, brio, and plenty of healthy self-respect. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that often insists it must” (p.xii-xiv). I know this culture all too well. It is one that for years told me I was a defected person because of my fat body. I learned to become a blind follower of these faulty, even criminal messages that is until I realized that the way dominant culture creates a binary between fat and thin, designates fat as bad and thin as good, is nothing more than a construct. Fatness as deviant, ugly, wicked, all the negative connotations we are taught to associate it with is not absolute. “Words are just a bunch of letters in a row. A word isn’t negative, it’s our connotation that is. The words can stay the same; it’s our attitudes about them that have to change” (Shanker, 2004, p. 10). I desperately wanted my attitude towards the word “fat” to change from something negative to positive, and by extension change my attitude towards my fat self from something negative to positive. I am a firm believer in the cliché “You can’t know where you’re going until you know where you’ve been.” To satisfy my desire to change my attitudes about fatness, I had to explore the forces that rendered it as something negative. My guiding question has been “How does fatness get determined in the United States?”

My stomach growled for a fulfilling meal of intellectual scholarship that could nourish my forsaken soul. I immersed myself into the world of Fat Studies literature,
reading blogs, books and articles that covered a wide range of topics about fatness in the hopes that I could find some answers that would surely satisfy my hunger. Fat Studies is an emerging discipline that challenges “othering” processes of fat bodies as a way to deconstruct the deeply embedded stigma that has become “fatness” and opens up the possibilities for alternative thinking about fatness (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Wann 1998). Here, I share an assessment of what I found in this literature in order to better understand current dominant ideas and practices towards fatness and, in particular, how those ideas and practices are connected to social, political, and economic structures that situate fat bodies in a subordinate position. I also explore medical and public health research on obesity in Latina/o communities, an area of study that has grown, especially in regards to children and teens in order to gain a better understanding of why the numbers are increasing at alarming rates every year (Vega, Rodriguez & Gruskin, 2009; Woodward-López & Flores, 2006; Yeh et al., 2009).

The literature in the following section serves to initiate a more holistic discussion of fatness as it is experienced by Latinas/os as an overlooked subgroup. Medical/public health literature and Fat Studies literature have been placed in conversation with each other, exposing both their limitations and possibilities as well as highlighting the malleability of the meaning and treatment of fatness. Incorporating a history of “fat” within the context of the United States provides a vital building block to understanding the current positionality of the fat Chicana body. Here we see the evolution of fatness, which has greatly contributed to the birth of deficit beliefs and practices in science such as the quest for biological determinants of fat; medicalization of fat with the advent of terms like “overweight” and “obese;” the role of law and public policy that impacts civil
protection of fat bodies; stereotypes constructed by media outlets, the fashion industry; and gender/sexuality expectations. As you will read, these fields of study are not independent from flaws and critiques. However, a continuous exploration is imperative to the project of transforming the current negative meaning of “fat,” using caring and understanding as more humane approaches than imposing stigma and continuing a vicious cycle of “othering” people for their differences. Also, an ongoing assessment of these fields of study can be used to provide context for building alternative, more culturally comprehensive research, education, advocacy and action that addresses fatness and Chicanas.

**History**

An important way to begin this discussion is by beginning with a history of “fatness” in the United States. Laura Fraser (2009) in an adaptation from a contributing chapter entitled “Never Satisfied” presents a brief history of the ever-changing category that is “fat” within the context of the United States. The female fat body was at one time respected by society because it was symbolic of wealth, fertility, and “whiteness”. However, during the late 1800’s and into the early 1900’s the term “fat” shifted in meaning due to various interconnected factors including a changing economy, Eurocentric cultural ideals, religion, gender roles, medicine, and consumerism (Fraser, 2009, p. 13). The Industrial Revolution sparked a shift in economics as means of production demanded and lured immigrant labor. As immigrants from around the world entered the country and became part of the labor force, wealthy and prestigious Americans needed to assert their white identity as a way to distinguish themselves from the “others,” who were classified as stockier populations. For Americans, embracing and
enforcing a culture of thinness followed in the footsteps of Europeans, who had adopted a “thin ideal” as a signifier of upper class ranking, intellect, and superiority. The changing labor sector also meant that women entered public spaces with modern notions of gender expectations and independence; exchanging their fuller and fatter bodies for thinner ones (Fraser, 2009).

Furthermore, conservative religious ideals played a role in the shift, as bodies were denied any form of indulgence deemed immoral, including adopting a mistrust of the consumption of food to appease human appetite. Complimentary to this notion of immorality was the thriving field of science, especially during this time period when medicinal practices sought to “measure humans,” establishing standards for human body regulation that promoted weight loss through prescribed medications. Women in particular experienced these cultural changes the most; “By 1930, American women knew how very important it was for them to be thin. From then on, despite moments when voluptuousness was admired again (e.g. popular culture icons like Marilyn Monroe), American women could never be too thin” (Fraser, 2009, p. 14). This mentality has withstood the test of time as evidenced through mass media production that glorifies thin and fit bodies while vilifying fat bodies.

In one of her articles about fat identity, Kathleen LeBesco (2009) follows a historical trajectory of eugenics within the United States in order to provide a background to popularized discourses in regards to the “fat gene” and “gay gene,” both of which are said to be biological explanations for these characteristics and also impact political and social spheres. She argues that the supposed discovery of these genes in the early 1990’s is an extension of the American eugenics movement of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s
that sought biological evidence to justify racial differences and restrict breeding patterns of certain groups. “Fatness and queerness disrupt U.S. social and economic hierarchies—both cross class and race lines to interrupt privilege (whereas fatness once conferred privilege). The application of eugenic principles might be imagined as a ‘sensible’ solution to counter this decline” (LeBesco, 2009, p. 68). To LeBesco, it is important to group “fat” and “gay” together because the discovery of genes as causes for these attributes (which were only two years apart, the gay gene in 1993 and obesity gene in 1995), is evidence to how science legitimized the marginalization of the individuals who are thought to have those genes. She draws from two contemporary examples, gene therapy and prenatal testing for disability, which commonly determine whether a pregnancy will continue or be terminated in order show how selective breeding poses a threat to diversity and survival, but also how bodies themselves remain the target for change instead of the ideologies that sustain narrow definitions of bodily value (LeBesco, 2009). Her final call demands that the ways in which bodies are socialized and politicized in the U.S. need to be transformed because they do hold significant power over science that still justifies the quest for ideal traits and selective breeding.

While these scholars have made a contribution in re-assessing the construction of “fat,” with Fraser (2009) providing a brief history of fatness within the context of the United States and LeBesco (2009) building on that history by evaluating the discourse on eugenics in relation to the discovery of “fat” and “gay” genes, their work also highlights certain gaps that must be filled especially when the discussion is aimed at attaining a more comprehensive understanding of Latinas/os and the current “obesity epidemic”. Fraser’s perspective generalizes the experience of “fat” to an essential category of
“woman” and overlooks racial, class, and cultural lines. LeBesco’s approach on eugenics is of particular interest especially for the general Latina/o sub-group who has historically been a target of population control through Eugenic practices (Fraser, 2009; LeBesco, 2009). Certainly, LeBesco’s connection with sexuality and argument of transforming the ways bodies are socialized and politicized in the U.S. is important, especially for assessing a trajectory of our inherited belief systems towards fatness, but it must also be seen as just a starting point for work that incorporates how other intersections like race, class, and gender impact socialization and politicization processes.

Notably, what these trajectories show is a lack of an analysis of the concepts of fatness or even body image from within various sub-groups, including that of Latinas and Latinos. Incorporating such a very important and neglected body of knowledge could provide a more insightful historical understanding of the different ways fat has been experienced by different bodies especially when trying to navigate through the current obesity epidemic that is greatly impacting different communities at different levels. For Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, such a project should be interdisciplinary in its approach, taking into account the historic and current socio-cultural, political, and economic changes that have impacted the various racial/ethnic groups that comprise this sub-group. As a result of the social upheavals of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the existence of academic programs such as Chicana/o Studies and Gender and Women’s Studies serve as appropriate spaces for creating such relevant scholarship because they are sites in which knowledge can be extracted from different disciplines and resources in order to create new understandings and informed activism towards the lived experiences of fat Chicanas/os and Latinas/os.
One such example is that of Elena Levy-Navarro (2009), who in her article entitled “Fattening Queer History: Where does Fat History go From Here” advocates that fat activists and scholars heavily incorporate history as a vital component of a transformational movement towards fat-acceptance. She supports this claim by drawing upon a queer historiography that is rooted in an open and inclusive definition of “queer,” one that incorporates all who challenge normative categories. Levy-Navarro proposes that utilizing fat histories enables a critical critique of socially constructed standards that oppress certain groups according to their size and also challenges people to create more imaginative and meaningful interventions that promote positive relationships between people and their bodies (Levy-Navarro, 2009). More specifically, she calls for an interrogation of the terms “health” and “obesity,” both of which have been utilized against fat bodies in U.S. history, and especially as they have greatly contributed to “othering” fat-ethnic bodies away from privileged “whiteness.”

Levy-Navarro states, “The category ‘obesity’ is appealing because from its inception it has played a central role in reinforcing hegemonic power relations” (p. 16). Such hegemonic power relations have been recorded by the status quo to construct a historical record that not only upholds rigid norms for bodies, but also makes those norms seem natural and expected. Since that documented history is widely accepted and follows a linear and temporal order, Levy-Navarro posits that “fat” as a category is much like the category of “lesbian” in that they are both situated as markers of “before” identities that necessarily demand change as “thin” or “heterosexual” “after” identities in order to fit into a neat Western historical canon. Furthermore, changing such perceived unacceptable bodies (i.e., becoming thin and heterosexual) demands that they be tossed into the realm
of the past in order to step into an unknown, yet speculated positive and more perfect future as skinny and straight persons (Levy-Navarro, 2009).

We are only stuck in an all-too-oppressive present if we impose on ourselves the modern temporal logic in which the past is supposedly over and done with, in which justice and joy can only be achieved in some utopian future. There is justice and joy enough right now, if we only use our imaginations to write histories that move across the conventional logic of time (Levy-Navarro, 2009, p. 21).

Thus, Levy-Navarro argues that the project of a fat queer history challenges a dominant, hegemonic historical trajectory by acknowledging the oppressive processes that have constructed a faulty belief system that demand fat bodies to change. A fat queer history project also establishes alternative ways of being that are more inclusive, or as Levy-Navarro states “fat-positive” and “creatively queer” (p. 22).

Medical/Public Health

The prevalence of obesity in the United States has reached epidemic proportions in the 21st century as it has impacted people across race, class, age, and gender lines. The Latina/o subgroup has become a focal point of research, even more so as the 2010 census data shows that this particular population has increased to 16.3% of the general population (Passel, Cohn, & López, 2011). Latinas and Latinos have been disproportionately affected by obesity as evidenced by national statistics that continuously monitor obesity trends. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Hispanic adults have the second highest adjusted rates of obesity at 39.1% (“Adult Obesity Facts,” 2012). They note that Mexican Americans in particular
have an adjusted rate of obesity of 40.4%. As of 2011, the state of California (whose majority population is Latina/o), has a 23.8% self-reported obesity rate among adults, and as of 2007 the county of Los Angeles (whose majority population is also Latina/o), had a 26.2% prevalence of obesity (“U.S. Obesity Trends,” n.d.). These percentages point to a significant number of people who have been classified as “obese” in recent years with that number expected to be higher in the present day. As such, research has directed its focus to not only treatment or solutions for obesity, but also to prevention efforts, which by extension involves an assessment of various factors that contribute to the increasing rates of obesity in Latinas and Latinos (Bell & Lee, 2011.; Vega, Rodriguez & Gruskin 2010; Woodward-López & Flores, 2006; Yeh et. al. 2009).

Utilizing Levy-Navarro’s theories, I argue that for Latinas/os to interrogate the terms “health” and “obesity” is to engage in a fat queer history project because to understand Latina/o health and obesity rates one must become familiar with those hegemonic power relations that in many ways have established determinants of Latina/o health and rates of obesity. In The California Endowment and PolicyLink’s 2011 public health report titled "Why Place and Race Matter: Impacting Health Through a Focus on Race and Place,” issues related to the connection between environmental factors and race of community members are explored in order to assess the roles race and space play in the health status of different people. They illustrate that although the United States currently claims to be a “post-racial” society, health indicators show that people of color, especially those concentrated in ethnic enclaves and/or low-income communities suffer disproportionately from poor health and are at a greater risk for developing illnesses.

Race is an overarching consideration that affects where and how we all live.
Race continues to fracture our society, compounding disadvantage and perpetuating it across generations. The structures of racism—many of them rooted in discriminatory policies and practices of earlier eras—pose perhaps the most intractable barriers to equitable opportunity and a healthy, prosperous future (Bell & Lee, 2011, p. 9).

When discussing the intersection of race, space, and time in this way, we can gain a more honest perspective of the role it plays in the construction of our belief systems, especially in relation towards fat bodies who as Fraser (2009) noted have a history of shifted meanings depending on the cultural, political, and economic contexts they are situated in. Bell and Lee expose the pervasiveness of hegemonic racial hierarchies, thus, a task that we all must engage in is navigating through these inherited legacies of racism and classism that situate certain people in subordinate positions in society, a phenomenon that certainly continues to be imposed on Latina/Latino communities.

The Latino Coalition for a Healthy California published “Obesity in Latino Communities” in 2006, a report that makes vital connections between the profile of Latina/o communities and the prevalence of obesity in those communities.

Latino communities must be involved in a collaborative and comprehensive effort to improve eating and activity behaviors and environments. Education for children and their families is needed as well as stronger policies to ensure healthy school nutrition and physical activity environments, safe communities with ample recreational spaces and affordable healthy foods, and an end to the marketing of unhealthy products to children (Woodward-López & Flores, 2006, p. 2).

By studying various communities in the state of California, the report enters a discussion
of how many Latinas and Latinos are low-income, thus the only affordable communities to move into are low-income neighborhoods where many barriers exist to healthy living. Common identifiable community barriers to Latina/o health that this report and other emerging works highlight are; limited access to supermarkets where fresh food options are available; the high cost of fruits and vegetables; overrepresentation of convenience stores and fast food restaurants; fewer and unsafe parks, recreational facilities, and sidewalks; unreliable transportation that limits access to supermarkets or health care facilities; schools that have poorer physical activity programs, health education, and cafeteria food options for students; and increased exposure to environmental pollutants that place residents at higher risks for developing illnesses (Woodward-López & Flores, 2006). I argue that it is necessary for Latinas and Latinos to become aware of and involved in urban planning and policies, especially with the understanding that to the power holders of politics and economics, people of color continue to be the necessary expendable bodies that sustain worldwide free-trade and globalization. Whether out of neglect or conspiracy, barriers such as those listed above are testament to the perception that the health and well-being of Latina/o bodies is not important to the status quo. Yet, these barriers exist and greatly impact the lifestyles and lifespan of Latinas and Latinos, becoming a vital factor to understanding the growing rates of obesity within this ethnic group.

**Acculturation**

This discussion must be extended to include acculturation, which is briefly defined as “...the processes of acquiring and internalizing the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of a new culture, either to supplement or to replace those of one’s culture
of origin” (Yeh et. al, 2009, p. 105). Acculturation into “American” culture is a popular and relevant topic because it is connected to obesity in Latina/o communities. Vega, Rodriguez, and Gruskin (2009) in their article “Health Disparities in the Latino Population” examine health disparities of Latinas and Latinos living in the United States by drawing connections between characteristics of this population (e.g. nativity, generation, age) and mortality rates.

While both acculturation and assimilation have been variously defined across academic disciplines, the most dominant inference in the epidemiologic literature has been causal; for example, changing beliefs, knowledge, and health behaviors of Latinos in sequential generations have resulted in differential morbidity and mortality outcomes (Vega, Rodriguez, & Gruskin, 2009, p.107).

Ethnic enclaves become sites in which acculturation processes can be negotiated especially for Latina/o communities that may have a higher presence of immigrants and second generation members who preserve protective cultural traditions that are beneficial for maintaining health and wellness. Furthermore these cultural traditions can serve to protect against a faulty belief system that pushes people to adopt a “thin is healthy, fat is bad” mentality.

In the article, “Determinants of Latina Obesity in the United States: The Role of Selective Acculturation,” the authors highlight a correlation between processes of acculturation and obesity, specifically among Latina women. They propose a new concept of Selective Acculturation based on the premise that once there is a better understanding of the role and presence of acculturation processes, they can be controlled to filter out bad health habits and maintain and/or adopt new ones. “…selective
acculturation seeks to distinguish the different aspects of acculturation and then guide individuals to retain the healthful behaviors of their culture of origin while acquiring the healthful behaviors of their new culture” (Yeh et. al., 2009, p.111). The authors recommend that in order to gain a better understanding of the connection between acculturation and obesity, future research should be longitudinal, should include control groups in different countries of origin in addition to those who have immigrated to the states, and assess the role SES plays in obesity related behaviors. They suggest that community programs that center Latina/o health be culturally competent and involve participatory action of members of the community. Finally, although they do not provide an action plan for policy change, they advocate for new policies that improve community environments and offer Latinas/os the opportunities for economic mobility (Yeh et. al., 2009).

Selective acculturation has the potential to be a very useful preventative tool and approach to obesity within Latina/o communities, especially once research, law/policy, and community programming shift in their approach, meaning, and service. What’s vital to the success of any of these endeavors is creating and fostering culturally comprehensive education for Latinas/os to understand the cumulative factors at play that determine their health status. Ideally, this type of education would lead to transformative action. Perhaps this hope of educating and fostering proactive people can impact the ways in which research, government sponsored programs, and even media outlets talk about obesity, especially now that these institutions heavily focus on obesity in children and adolescents. In general, obese children and teenagers are becoming the targets of change, with the belief that if a dramatic shift in lifestyle does not occur, the United States will
be at risk for some type of failure that is somehow indicative of national principles (Weinstock & Krehbiel, 2009). However, this dramatic shift in lifestyle is measured through numerical terms, centering BMI as the most accurate tool to classify body types of people, rather than putting a stronger emphasis on promoting health and wellness at any size. In this way, weight loss to achieve an ideal body size defined by medicalized standards is conflated with being healthy and leading a happier life. What is also important to acknowledge is that these emerging discourses of obesity that are dependent on numerical calculations, are components of a Western dominant discourse, one that constructs and upholds the current climate of the United States, which is fatphobic. What should be of great concern is the fine line between fostering change through caring and understanding versus imposing yet more stigma on obese “othered” bodies.

Stigma/Shame

In “What is ‘Health at Every Size?’” Deb Burgard (2009) offers an in-depth analysis of the Health at Every Size (HAES) alternative health model. HAES is considered a grassroots movement aligned with the size movement, which advocate for self-acceptance of the body at any size and promote healthy lifestyle choices. Burgard specifically critiques this approach for the importance and reliance it gives to Body Mass Index (BMI) calculations as a key factor in determining a person’s health. An increasing majority of health professionals take into account an individual’s BMI to determine whether or not that individual is healthy. However, through statistical analysis, Burgard finds that only about 9% of health problems that are supposedly caused by increased body weight are correlated, not directly connected to BMI calculations (Burgard, 2009).

Burgard argues that by HAES medical professionals using this method as a means
of determining a person’s "health," the greater social context of weight prejudice is ignored and also perpetuates stigmatization of “fat” by reinforcing the medical community’s assertion of negative physical consequences caused by “controllable” life choices. "Although the size acceptance movement advocates for the rights of all individuals regardless of health practices, the HAES model attempts to define health in the absence of weight prejudice, and on an empirical basis." (Burgard, 2009, p. 9). It is important to note, however, that Burgard does not completely dismiss the HAES approach to size acceptance. She sees this model as an initial step that works towards ideological and practical day-to-day changes, which also has the potential to foster a stigma-free environment for people of all sizes.

Rebecca Puhl and Chelsea Heuer in their article, “Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health” (2010) provide an overview of the medicalized term called “Obesity,” driven by their interest in a 66% increase of weight discrimination in the last decade (p. 1). Since obesity has been relegated as a disease and epidemic, they begin with a discussion entitled “Disease Stigma and Public Health,” in which the tendency to blame certain groups or individuals for their illnesses renders serious consequences on the physical and psychological health of those people. The medical community has taken the role of convincing themselves, the government, and the general public that imposing weight stigma on fat people is for their own interest and for the interests of the country as a whole because it forces them to halt their destructive behaviors in order to achieve acceptable, healthy bodies (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). The authors argue that utilizing weight stigma against people to shame them of their bodies is not effective. “Rather than using stigma as an incentive to lose weight, it may be that
supporting individuals with adaptive ways to cope with weight stigma can facilitate weight loss outcomes” (Puhl & Heuer, 2010, p. 4).

Their conversation then moves towards the impact that obesity discrimination has on healthcare. Since obese men and women are perceived as lazy, unintelligent, and unfit, oftentimes healthcare providers overlook the needs of those patients, spend less time with them than thinner individuals, and provide them with less education about health or wellness. Because of this reality, neglected obese clients are left feeling disrespected and lack a trusting relationship with their doctor(s). For the Latina/o population, being overweight or obese complicates an already established secondary position within the healthcare system. It is important to remember that healthcare is an institution that is influenced by and in itself upholds exclusionary practices of people based on race, class, gender, and nativity (Kimbrough, 2007; LaViest, 2005). Since weight stigma is prevalent in the health care industry and more importantly detrimental to the health of actual people, Puhl and Heuer (2010) argue that it is not a method that should be used to combat obesity.

The issue of bullying holds great significance in the present day, especially as it has been singled out as the root of many deaths among children, adolescents, and adults. In “Fat Youth as Common Targets for Bullying” the authors look at statistics and the impact of bullying on fat youth, taking special interest in the question “What are the causes of weight-based bullying and bullying directed at youth who are fat” (Weinstock & Krehbiel, 2009, p.122)? This is a question that is identified as being overshadowed by a more popular discussion of what the consequences are of being fat. Weinstock and Krehbiel explore the causes of weight based bullying, most notably that fat children
become easy targets because it is widely accepted to bully others based on weight. Citing the work of Myers and Rothblum (2004) in “Coping with Prejudice and Discrimination Based on Weight,” bullying fat people is an expression of prejudice against fat people, actions that are driven by the perception that weight is controllable. Thus to be fat is perceived to lack control or self-discipline, which are values that are highly respected in U.S. society (Reference Fraser’s history of fatness). Since fat people are seen as not exhibiting such values, they deserve to be bullied and shamed (Weinstock & Krehbiel, 2009).

Weinstock and Krehbiel (2009) propose that an effective solution to end bullying of fat youth is to transform the way fat bodies are perceived and foster a political and social climate of acceptance of those bodies. “It is thus our view that multilevel prevention efforts directed at systemic change are needed, and that such efforts must address and challenge all forms of violence and oppression. At their core should be a valuation of diversity and respectful treatment of all youth, whatever their size, and an appreciation for the critical importance of acceptance to (and of) all youth” (p. 124). By demanding systemic changes at an ideological level, institutional outlets such as the media and medical providers must necessarily change their practices as well, all of which will contribute to ending and preventing multiple forms of bullying.

Again, as in the earlier discussion of the history of fatness and eugenics by Fraser (2009) and LeBesco (2009), addressing obesity stigma from an alternative standpoint that advocates for a shift in the social constructions of bodies must be seen as just a starting point for future research. How does obesity stigma impact Latinas and Latinos who have historically experienced other forms of stigma based on race, class, gender, and
sexuality? Although Puhl and Heuer shed light onto the overlooked presence of obesity discrimination in healthcare, what does that conversation mean to the vast numbers of Latinas and Latinos who cannot even afford to have healthcare? Furthermore as being overweight and obese is linked to illnesses including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain cancers, sleep apnea, increased risk and cases of asthma, mental health, and reduction in lifespan (“Overweight and obesity among Latino youths,” 2010; “Profiles of Latino Health,” 2009), all of which need a form of medical intervention, is the U.S. healthcare system ensuring that the needs of its Latina/o patients are being met?

Jennifer Bennett Kimbrough (2007) in her article, “Health Literacy as a Contributor to Immigrant Health Disparities,” identifies healthy literacy, “The ability to obtain, understand and use the information needed to make wise health choices (p. 93), as yet another factor to health disparities of Latinas/os. Through the use of focus groups comprised of East-Asian, African, and Latin American immigrant participants Kimbrough concludes that healthcare providers and health and wellness advocates play a major role in facilitating the health literacy of their patients. Participants in her study reported language barriers, lack of proper instructions and explanations of illnesses and treatment, discrimination based on race or class, and lack of basic literacy skills, all of which create inadequate and uncomfortable experiences for immigrants (Kimbrough, 2007), and I believe for other people of color as well regardless of their status. The other ways in which healthcare mis-manages and treats the Latina/o demographic, as in the case of neglecting health literacy, must also be taken into account when having a discussion of weight-based discrimination.
Feminist Approach to Size-ism

While interrogating fundamental power systems that shape fat identity has become more visible in recent years, it is important to acknowledge that the general movement towards fat-acceptance is something that was born of the social upheaval of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) is a civil rights organization that was created in 1969 to improve the quality of life for fat people, specifically by working towards ending fat discrimination. The “About Us” tab on their website, www.naafa.org, provides key information about the association. “Vision: A society in which people of every size are accepted with dignity and equality in all aspects of life; Mission: To eliminate discrimination based on body size and provide fat people with the tools for self-empowerment though public education, advocacy, and support,” and “Promise: NAAFA will be a powerful force for positive social change. Using our collective will, talents and resources, we will improve the world — not just for fat people, but for everyone. We come in all sizes. Understand it. Support it. Accept It” (“The Issues”, n.d.). As such, the NAAFA advocates for the general public to become members, donate to their community projects, and take part in their annual convention. They also provide resources from their website itself including links to books and articles that promote body diversity, access to a size diversity toolkit, and facts pertaining to healthcare, law/policy, and workplace environments.

Complementary to the work of different organizations and movements that have existed for a few decades are bodies of literature that overtly proclaim “Fat is Beautiful.” FAT!SO? written by Marilyn Wann (1998) argues for a necessary re-conceptualization of the word “fat.” Utilizing personal narratives from fat men and women, photos of fat
bodies, drawings, quotes, and statistics, Wann not only creates a visible space for fat people, but celebrates fatness as a way to argue for the acknowledgement and acceptance of the diversity of body sizes. “I’ve learned that you can absolutely be happy and healthy and successful-and fat…I wrote this book to share the FAT!SO? attitude with as many people as possible, because life is too short for self-hatred and celery sticks, because you don’t deserve even one really bad day, because you don’t have to apologize for your size (Wann, 1998, p. 12). Her approach to “fat identity” challenges a widely accepted practice of believing fat is pathology and those who embody that characteristic should be relegated to a subordinate, almost invisible position in society. Fueled by her own personal experiences as a fat woman (which are reflective of common experiences of other fat persons), the “attitude” that Wann speaks of is a powerful alternative response to the imposition of a thin ideal norm by societal institutions.

A critique of dominant ideas about body image, specifically the constricted archetype of “thin as beautiful” fuels feminist approaches to thinking alternatively about “fatness.” Notably, these approaches argue for a re-construction of stigmatized labels with an essential component of being critical of Western social, political, and economic ideologies and practices towards subordinate bodies. A well-accepted norm for women’s bodies in American society is that of the thin body. Cecilia Hartley (2001) in her article entitled “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship” addresses the need to insert the fat body in feminist literature by providing a perspective that critically explores and connects cultural productions of “docile women,” fat oppression in American culture, and the prevalence of sexism in size-ism between males and females. Hartley states, “Women who do not maintain rigid control over the
boundaries of their bodies, allowing them to grow, to become large and ‘unfeminine,’ are treated with derision in our society, and that derision is tied inextricably to the personal freedom of women” (p. 63). This conclusion stems from her assessment that culture has imposed new ways for regulating women’s bodies as a continuation of the idea that women’s bodies should be inferior to those of men. Furthermore, when contextualizing this idea within American culture, standards of beauty imposed on women instruct that they must fit within a rigid mold of thinness. “Fat-phobia is one of the few acceptable forms of prejudice left in a society that at times goes to extremes to prove itself politically correct” (Hartley, 2001, p. 65). She maintains that this phobia is a morphed form of hysteria in which “fat” has become taboo, bringing upon a serious fear of shame for not adhering to the constructed norm of femininity.

Hartley’s discussion turns towards a concept of “the sexism of size-ism,” as she conceptualizes the extremes of morbid obesity and anorexia as responses to the constructed sexual female body. In this analysis, bodies that are characterized by either extreme are theorized to be simultaneously asexual and hypersexual due to the biological changes that occur when a woman is fat or anorexic as well as the change of perception by others towards those female bodies. The anorexic body, however, has become the glamorized standard, which Hartley believes is as a result of “ambivalence about femininity,” which serves to reinforce patriarchal standards that uphold the male as the superior sex (Hartley, 2001, p. 67). Thus, her drawn conclusion is that fat women are the antithesis to “ambivalence about femininity” and are in fact powerful beings whose bodies reveal defiance of narrow and imposed standards of feminine normativity by patriarchal structures (Hartley, 2001, p. 67-70).
Women, but in particular fat women, are constantly bombarded through media outlets, celebrities; the size system in clothing, even in the workplace, with the general message that she must be the one to fit into the established “mold,” this message contributes to an epidemic obsession with the exterior self that infiltrates identity and concept of the self. It is the incessant quest of many to obtain and maintain the ideal of physical thinness, especially as it is equated to true beauty and the feminine. However, this idea can become a modern paranoia and a lifelong journey for women that fosters internal hatred and in turn leads to negative mental, emotional, and physical practices towards their bodies. Tracy Royce (2009) in “The Shape of Abuse: Fat oppression as a Form of Violence against Women” explores the intersection of fat oppression and violence against women. She argues that violence impacts fat women in ways that are specific to their size and because of their size become targets of violence. Building on feminist literature, in particular the works of Kimberle Crenshaw (1995), Royce provides a discussion of verbal and physical abuse of fat women by their partners, figures of authority and even strangers. She makes the connection between the fat intersection of a woman and how other intersections construct a unique identity, one that is vulnerable to abuse. “Because victims’ experiences are not only shaped by their gender but also by their race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other aspects of identity, batterers can exploit societal prejudice as an additional means of abuse” (Royce, 2009, p. 152). She asserts that fatphobia has a two-fold purpose within this context; it functions against a fat woman through an abuser who can verbally and/or physically assault her and it also works as an oppressive psychological tool for the fat woman herself who fears the inability to enter into another relationship. Furthermore, such abuse isn’t just experienced within the
context of a relationship, but can also occur through language such as fat jokes as well as by complete strangers who may inflict violence based on a woman’s body size (Royce, 2009). The discussion of abuse towards fat women shifts to one of feminist research in which Royce advocates for scholars to produce research that centralizes the voices of fat women in order to create a consciousness that is critical of fat oppression especially in relation to anti-fat violence. Complementary and equally important to academic work is advocacy and action of community members, both of which require the interest and participation of people of all sizes in order to more effectively combat violence (Royce, 2009).

Chapter seven of *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women’s Writings* (2009) explores how multiple forms of abuse towards women foster a “shame identity.” In North America the obsession among women to constantly work towards meeting almost impossible standards of beauty fosters a culture of shame, especially because those standards are so narrow and the majority of populations simply do not meet those standards. “When women, who have internalized the ‘societal message that equates beauty with thinness, measure themselves against this standard and fall short, they feel ashamed because of this ‘comparison failure,’ as Silberstein, Streigel-Moore, and Rodin explain” (Brooks Bouson, 2009, p. 106). It is this internalized feeling of shame, as a result of failure to fit into the acceptable and desirable ‘mold,’ that promotes a low self-concept based not just on physical appearance but that somehow one’s physical appearance embodies one’s personality and competence, so that to not have the ideal body is to not have the ideal personality or capabilities.

The work of Cecilia Hartley, Tracy Royce and Brooks Bouson examine themes
that can extend to a reassessment of “obesity” and “fat” within Chicana/o Latina/o communities. Academic work that provides an in-depth examination (rooted in the principles of Fat Studies and size acceptance) of fatness in conjunction with race, ethnicity, nation, and other intersections of identity are minimal, especially when the topic includes the Latina/Latino demographic. While Hartley sees the need to insert the fat female body into feminist literature, I believe that the category “fat female” itself generalizes a fat experience. In regards to Chicanas/Latinas, cultural constructions play a role in the way fat is experienced whether it is through the idea that having a fuller body means to be, as my grandmother says “buen cuidada,” or even the ways American popular culture has created and portrayed “Latina body” archetypes that are commonly associated with the hypersexual, curvy woman to be desired or the asexual, overweight working-class woman (Mendible, 2007; Molina-Guzmán, 2010; Rodriguez, 2004). These types of narrow binaries can be connected to Tracy Royce’s theory of fat oppression and Brooks Bouson’s theory of embodied shame. It can be argued that a fat Chicana experiences violence in ways that are unique to her based on multiple intersections like race, class, national origin, and sexuality, all of which foster a culture of shame, or “vergüenza.”

29 To be well taken care of

30 Here I adopt Eden E. Torres’ (2003) concept of shame to provide a better understanding of vergüenza, “Shame is an insidious method of social control…When people who feel deep shame act out, their inability to live up to prescriptive expectations of the dominant culture is perceived as representative of the entire group—as bringing dishonor to the community, ethnic group, or nation…Thus shame can be used to promote discriminatory actions thought to increase the public good and make criminal those behaviors that interfere with its interests” (pp.30-32).
normative standards, but it is also a historically imposed identity as the “other” based on
legacies of whiteness and patriarchy that work with body size oppression to maintain her
in a marginal position.

Julia McCrossin (2009), whose article entitled “The Fat of the (Border)land: Food, Flesh,
and Hispanic Masculinity in Willa Cather’s Death Comes for the Archbishop” states "Scholars often dismiss fat as nothing more than a stereotype, or as incidental to cultural analysis. By failing to attend to the specificities of the fat subject, though, we also dismiss those subjects who actually inhibit the body of the fat minority. These failures are part of a practice that alienates any fat body from its racial, cultural, gendered, and sexualized identities” (McCrossin, 2009, p. 242). McCrossin’s work is aimed at centralizing the voices of those fat bodies that are marginalized not simply because of their fat identity, but also how that fat identity works with other “specificities” like race, gender, and class to create unique social locations (McCrossin, 2009).

Artistic Expressions of Fat Chicana Identity

Within the world of academia, the study of fat Chicanas is fragmented or non-existent. As this literature review has revealed, medical/public health studies tend to produce quantitative research on obesity trends in Latina/o communities, oftentimes generalizing the “Latina/o” category with little or no regard for the ethnic diversity or even gender differences that exist within that umbrella term. Academic disciplines such as Fat Studies overlooks fat Chicanas as they are oftentimes disregarded from discussions that focus on white or black demographics. Under Chicana/o Studies, in particular Chicana feminist scholarship, skeletal work that bridges a mind/body dichotomy touches on various aspects of female body politics, allowing the possibility for the exploration
and creation of scholarship that can serve to establish a foundation for understanding fat Chicana bodies (Anzaldúa, 2007; Cruz, 2006, Hernández-Ávila, 2006; Pérez, 1999).

Chicana women continuously find individual as well as collective ways to promote spiritual, mental, and physical health not just for themselves but for all members of their communities. The plays *Real Women Have Curve* by Josefina López (1996) and *The Panza Monologues* by Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga (2004) serve as examples of this, as they challenge a widely accepted practice of pathologizing fat, promote the acceptance of body diversity, and provide glimpses into how future scholarship can capture the complexity of people’s lived realities (Wann, 1998). López and Grise, and Mayorga centralize the voices of fat women while also highlighting many unique “specificities” that are commonly experienced among Chicanas/Latinas in the United States including such issues as immigration status, poverty, labor and workplace exploitation, “Comadreship,” complexity of gender roles, and religion. Equally important to such issues is the revelation of body size and body image as it intersects with Chicana/o culture, particularly gender roles and generational differences. These Chicana playwrights create characters who contest their marginalized status through re-conceptualizations of their minds and bodies, thus bridging a mind/body binary as a form of empowerment and transformation.

In one pivotal scene in *Real Women Have Curves* (1996), Carmen and Ana, mother and daughter respectively, engage in a conversation regarding fatness and womanhood. They are at their sight of employment, a hot, sticky, and poorly ventilated room in Los Angeles where they make expensive dresses for high-end retailers that profit from their low wage labor. Ana cannot take the heat anymore and begins to take off her

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31 Like extended family/sisterhood
clothes, stripping down to her bra and panties. At the sight of this, Carmen asks Ana if she is embarrassed to be exposing her fat body to everyone, believing that Ana should have vergüenza, or shame for baring it all. To this, Ana responds, “Why? You already think I’m fat?” Nevertheless Carmen continues on, pushing Ana to think negatively about her body, “You know Ana, you’re not bad looking. If you lost 20 pounds you would look beautiful.” To Carmen, Ana needs to lose weight in order to be attractive to men so that she can one day get married. Ana, however, does not share her mother’s point of view, and in a voice of proud rebellion proclaims, “Ama, I do want to lose weight. But part of me doesn’t because my weight says to everyone, ‘F... you!’ “It says, ‘How dare you try to define me and tell me what I have to be and look like!’ So I keep it on. I don’t want to be a sex object” (López, 1996, p. 58).

It is clear that Ana and Carmen’s relationship is somewhat strained because of differences in the way each woman thinks of her body and her individual role as a woman. Carmen believes that her daughter’s beauty would be best exhibited if she were to lose weight, such beauty being perceived as something that should be important for young women because it is a constructed desirable standard needed to make themselves “marketable” for men, sex, and marriage. These ways of thinking are shaped by differences in age, generation, and environment, which do cause rifts between women who are more immersed in traditional Latina/o culture, such women oftentimes being older, and women who become more exposed to non-traditional ways of thinking, many who are younger and negotiate between “white-American” and Latina/o values. Ana’s outward defiance is testimony to rejection of the value that is placed on women’s bodies as defined and internalized by both men and women for the sake of marriage and sex. She
also simultaneously re-claims a fat identity to be a difference that should not be looked down upon, but rather accepted as making up a part of who she is.

Like *Real Women Have Curves* (1996), *The Panza Monologues* (2003) centers the voices of women, locating agency in the physical site of a woman’s panza. The literal translation of “panza” to the English language is “tummy.” However, the socio-cultural references to panza/stomach can mean a variety of things such as womb or fat. “*The Panza Monologues* boldly places the panza front and center as a symbol that reveals the lurking truths about women's thoughts, lives, loves, abuses, and lived conditions” (“About the Play,” 2013). This brief description on the play’s webpage captures the intimate connection Chicana feminists have made between their bodies, culture and politics. In an interview with *Ms. Magazine*, Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga discuss the origins and purpose of creating *The Panza Monologues* (2003). When asked “What do you see as the play’s political message?” Irma Mayorga responds,

I think that the play doesn’t try to be political, but it is political. Our play has a nice balance between trying to say we’re going to celebrate our bodies but also critique how these bodies came to be. We [Mexican Americans] are historically situated in the kind of neighborhoods where you don’t have farmers’ markets or grocery stores, even. There’s a piece called ‘Political Panza’ [in which a] woman talks about what her world would look like if we created panza positive policies. Health is dependent on issues of fair wages, access to food, education, healthcare (as cited in Grossman-Heinze, 2011).

Importantly, *The Panza Monologues* (2003) is constructed out of the very personal and very real stories from women themselves. In this way, their experiences as told by them
(versus of them) allows for the voices of Latina women to be heard, which in itself is an act of rebellion and the site for transformative change.

*Where to go from Here*

Through an intersectional analysis of different areas of existing literature, I have attempted to weave together the context of how fatness is being discussed, in particular how it is related to political, economic, social, and cultural institutions that are powered by ever-changing Western ideologies. I will forever be grateful to my best friend for introducing me to this area of scholarship and I will forever be proud of myself for taking the chance on it. I remind myself that meaningful change is a slow process, but realizing the possibilities are fulfilling. From the perspectives presented here, I became aware of the existence of an alternative framework for looking at and understanding bodies. Generally speaking, Fat Studies is a subversive body of knowledge that I believe has the capacity to empower people of all sizes. I learned that we are inheritors of rigid guidelines of what is physically acceptable and beautiful, with multiple institutions normalizing a particular body type while simultaneously making the “other” out of those bodies that do not adhere to the norm (Fraser, 2009; Garland-Thompson, 2009; LeBesco, 2009; Puhl & Huer 2010). Institutions such as the media, medicine, law/policy, and employment are driven by Western ideas that have historically labeled and filtered people, differentiating between who are the desirable and acceptable from the undesirable and unacceptable.

My critical lens from Chicana/o Studies emerged with every reading, drawing connections between the disciplines and linking my personal experiences with the
literature. *La facultad*\(^\text{32}\) kicked in, illuminating the proverbial light-bulb right above my head. “As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness-an experiencing of soul (Self)” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 61). My *facultad* immediately saw and felt what I could not find in the Fat Studies or medical/public health texts themselves; myself, or rather, the absence of fat Chicanas. For Chicanas, this type of body filtering and labeling is yet another layer of systematic “othering,” as a complex history of conquest and colonialism has already relegated this subgroup as undesirable and unacceptable on racial, cultural, national, gender, sexuality, and linguistic lines. Various bodies of Chicana/o literature attest to the multiple ways these multifaceted forms of oppression have been experienced and resisted throughout history (Anzaldúa, 2007; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Pérez, 1999).

The limited representations of fat Chicanas in the literature pains me, for I know that this speaks to a reality of continued invisibility and silencing. Yet, it is also an empty space of opportunity to continue a legacy of resistance and reclamation. Here, I find comfort and motivation from José Esteban Muñoz who writes, “But if the eye is sensitized in a certain way, if it can catch other visual frequencies that render specific distillations of lived experience and ground-level history accessible, it can potentially see

\(^{32}\) Gloria Anzaldúa identifies *la facultad* as “…the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world (Borderlands/La Frontera, 2007, p.60).
the ghostly presence of a certain structure of feeling” (*Cruising Utopia*, 2009, p.42). Barbara Noda echoes this thought when she writes, “Even nothing speaks” (*Anzaldúa & Keating*, 1983, p. 138). From the absence arises an all too familiar figure. She is my presence, that of a fat Chicana, whose entire essence, the physical and immaterial, is ready to become a site for transformation.
CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

THE PREPARATION

“No se ve, pero siento que hay algo en mi que está cambiando”

-Julieta Venegas

(Sorokin & Venegas, 2004)

A History of Menudo

The thought of a piping hot bowl of menudo with freshly made warm corn tortillas awakens what I have come to know as the “traditional” five senses of the human body, sight; sound; touch; smell and taste. For me the act of making and consuming this dish has become sacred ritual, a way to infuse passion, respect, and love into the art of making good food and sharing it with those closest to me. My senior year in high school, tia decided to give our family cable television, which led to our love of the cooking channel. The programs I enjoy the most on this network are those where star chefs expose their heart-felt connections to whatever dish they decide to make for that particular segment. I love listening to the origin stories of their dishes while watching their hands move along to the different steps of their recipes, memories and movements harmoniously synchronized to create the sustenance of life. Have you ever tasted the difference between dishes that are prepared with love to those that are not? I believe there truly is a difference, for the act of creating something beautiful and plentiful entails that it be done from a place of love.

The sensory awakening that menudo offers me is connected to the idea and sentiment of love. I echo the perspective of Gustavo Arellano (author of Ask A Mexican! [2007]) when he writes,
Menudo is a sociohistorical lesson in a bowl: the fat, pale kernels of pozole have nourished Mesoamericans since time immemorial; the use of tripe and not the better parts of a cow is a testament to its status as a poor person’s meal. Menudo is delicious, the trinity of firm pozole, chewy tripe, and fiery, bloodred broth producing a comforting fatty flavor.

More important, Menudo is amor. It’s the soup Mexican women slave over for their hungry families on weekend mornings, the dish over which families unite and teens fall in love as they pitch woo while passing along a wicker of tortillas. Menudo nowadays exists in canned form, but that’s heresy. True menudo is a difficult feat, taking hours to create, but it comes with a payoff that transcends taste buds and strives for the sublime (Arellano, 2007, p.148).

A recorded history of menudo is one that is difficult to find in the world of books and articles, but easy to locate by word of mouth. My research to find something on the origins of menudo constantly took me to articles, blogs, or web pages that presented various recipes from different regions in Mexico, the U.S. Southwest, different parts of Latin America and even the Philippines; references to it being a hangover cure; restaurant reviews; and yes, the Puerto Rican boy band Menudo. I was able to locate a website that offered me a brief synopsis of the soup, offering a few sentences that paralleled the origin story of menudo that my tia told me.³³

Menudo is an ethnic dish that has its roots firmly planted in peasant food heritage and poverty. In pre-revolution Mexico, poverty amongst the campesinos was chronic and little if anything that might be prepared as food was left to waste. Usually, the best cuts of meat would go to the hacienda owners while the offal

³³ Story told in Chapter 1, p. 17
went to the peons. These leftovers consisted of organ meats, brains, head, tails, hooves, etc. Inventive peasant cooks created a soup that made good use of one of the major leftovers: -- the stomach (“Menudo,” n.d.).

As frustrating as it was to locate a history of the red chile menudo I’ve been exposed to and have enjoyed for years, the quest reminded me that reality is not linear the way we are taught to believe it is. Menudo varies across time and space as evidenced in the different recipes available online or in books and articles (recipes that themselves don’t have documented histories either), which I suspect might only be a handful in comparison to the thousands that are out there in the world. Menudo doesn’t fit neatly into a Western historical canon that the internet or books capture, not because it doesn’t merit a place there, but because it has been denied a place there. As beloved as menudo has been to generations of people and as trendy as it has become in emerging restaurants or food trucks, the lack of a documented history of the soup speaks to it’s perceived status as being the food of people who do not or have not belonged.

My search for the history of menudo took me to a one page article that stood out to me for the following reason; “Menudo’s origins remain rather murky. While you can find variations of the soup throughout Mexico, it seems to be most closely associated with the areas near the U.S. border, where cattle ranching flourished” (Trulsson, 2003, p.30). As the article does not provide sources, I do not know where these statements come from, if they are grounded in research, or whether they are true or not. I do, however, find validity in what is being said. By viewing menudo in this way and evoking Gloria Anzaldúa’s writings of Nepantla where the borderlands or middle grounds serve as sites of possibility and transformation, I consider menudo itself to be a fellow
Nepantler®, the third space materialized, the Holy Communion for this border dweller. Ironically, for me the process of making menudo reminds me of how small I am, how small we all are, within the greater scheme of things. I am a small fat creature existing within a grand universe understood through notions of time and space. Being the creator of an olla of menudo resurrects my past, enlivens my present, and gives me hope for my future.

_Opened Framework._

Theoretical Framework.

Locating a history of menudo parallels my quest to locate myself in different bodies of literature. My search has exposed the pervasiveness of illegitimacy, disposability, and invisibility of both. The literature in the previous chapter shows that contemporary mainstream discourses on body weight and body image objectify fat bodies, pushing for weight-loss under a predominantly medicalized profit-driven market with the belief that if fat people rid their bodies of excess weight, they will be happy and healthy thin people (Lyons, 2009; Puhl & Huer, 2002; Woodward-López & Flores, 2006). Although some scholarship has emerged that speaks against the objectification and “othering” of fat bodies, fat Chicanas still remain an overlooked demographic. Therefore, this thesis research allows for an unexplored discourse, that of Fat Chicanas, to be placed at the center, validating personal experience while critically interrogating Western weight-based belief systems that are unavoidably connected to colonial agendas that serve to police people of color. I ask, “How do fat Chicanas navigate their identities within a fat-phobic society?”

Cindy Cruz’ “Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body” (2001) is the theoretical framework that contextualizes and guides this thesis project. She writes, “It is
in my opinion, the contemplation of the body that is essential in the development and evaluation of an epistemology of Chicana thought and culture” (p. 61). This statement becomes a crucial starting point for moving towards visibility of fat Chicana bodies, for it is in the literal physical embodiment of difference-fatness, browning, and femaleness that a new lens for understanding and conceptualizing can be born. The movement from a “colonial object” to “radical subject” is an act of reclamation that cannot solely exist in the psyche, but must necessarily be enacted through the materiality that is the body. My fat Chicana body is the site of the third space of possibility, nourished by menudo; my fellow Nepantler®, who symbolizes the beauty and love that transformation has to offer. We take this journey together, literally wearing our fat on our sleeves to contest our histories and re-fashion our futures. Citing Gloria Anzaldúa and Emma Pérez, Cruz affirms that relying on reason and traditional methods of conducting research (i.e. quantitative methods) contributes to the invisibility and fragmentation of the brown body because they are tools that uphold a greater colonial structure (Cruz, 2001). Thus, as a fat Chicana scholar, the quest for reclamation of the fat Chicana must expose the limitations of the colonial and find possibilities through those limitations (Anzaldúa, 2007; Pérez, 1999).

To apply Cruz’ approach of centering the body means acknowledging that fatness, much like femaleness and browning has been labeled as a limitation under a Western Imperial gaze. As evidenced in medical and public health research, even in Fat Studies, fatness becomes an isolated and quantified marker of difference with very little or no regard for the variety of ways fatness is experienced across time, spaces, or cultures. This Western Imperial gaze has done the same to menudo, rendering it as only a “poor brown
person’s food” with no regard for its history or purpose. This status of invisibility echoes the dominant paradigm in which the fat Chicana is nonexistent as she is subsumed under a homogenizing and lifeless label of the “fat Latina,” a brown, fat body with negative connotations and associations as her shadow. However, this seemingly narrow possibility of existence can and does become the site of transformation for theorizing and understanding fat Chicanas because it is precisely from this point that what is missing can be located and validated. “Situating knowledge in the brown body begins the validation of the narratives of survival, transformation, and emancipation of our respective communities, reclaiming histories and identities. And in these ways, we embody our theory” (Cruz, 2001, p. 73).

Complimentary to the work of Cruz is and Moraga and Anzaldúa’s “Theory of the Flesh.” In the preface of This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1981) Cherríe Moraga writes, “I am talking about believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives” (p. xviii). The writings collected to create this anthology speak to the embodied experiences of women of color, or a “theory of the flesh” in which bodies themselves become metaphorical bridges that connect the mind with the body in the spirit of connecting bodies to one another. Moraga, Anzaldúa, and all contributors of the book envision a society of tolerance, respect, and love, which can only come from “flesh and blood experiences” (p. 23). The challenge then is for those of us who have been historically “othered” in society to recognize the ways we have been rendered as “invisible,” put aside fear, and do something about it.
Methodology.

Engaging in this project allows for the personal to be the central figure. Gloria Anzaldúa affirms that,

Living in Nepantla, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labeling obsolete. Though these markings are outworn and inaccurate, those in power continue using them to single out and negate those who are ‘different’ because of color, language, notions of reality, or other diversity. You know that the new paradigm must come from outside as well as within the system (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 541).

In the spirit of Anzaldúa’s words, this thesis is an autohistoria-teoría, a piece of literature located within a Western academic system, but written in a non-traditional, non-objective manner. In a 2001 interview with Irene Lara she identifies such a method as this, “…autohistorias: historia for history, the story of the self, and the story of the culture; auto for self. This pretty much takes care of memoir writing, autobiography, and fiction. The other half of autohistorias, autohistoria-teorías, brings theory into the personal anecdote” (Keating, 2005, p. 52). AnaLouise Keating elaborates on this definition by introducing the purpose of engaging in this method of writing, which I think is pivotal as it speaks to an overarching purpose of writing a thesis like this within the field of Chican@ Studies.

“Deeply infused with the search for personal and cultural meaning, or what Anzaldúa described in her post-Borderlands writings as ‘putting Coyolxauhqui together,’” both autohistoria and autohistoria-teoría are informed by reflective self
awareness employed in the service of social-justice work. Personal experiences-revised and in other ways redrawn-become a lens with which to reread and rewrite the cultural stories into which we are born. Through this lens, Anzaldúa and other auto-historia teorístas expose the limitations in the existing paradigms and create new stories of healing, self-growth, cultural critique, and individual/collective transformation” (Keating, 2005, p.6).

Engaging in this genre of writing allows for the personal to be the central figure. The experiences I dare to write about as a fat Chicana are my testimonios of a lived reality that has been cast in the shadows by dominant society and even myself, as I bought into the belief that my fatness belonged there. John Beverley (2005) writes of testimonio, “The predominant formal aspect of the testimonio is the voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an ‘I’ that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention” (p. 548). In this way, I see testimonio as a vital method and component to writing an autohistoria-teoría that centers not just fatness, but how fatness and other markers of identity like race, class, gender, and sexuality create a unique social position in our society. In bringing forth my own voice as a fat Chicana and weaving in the literature with my experience this research promotes critical observation and analysis of body image and body size, works to bridge a mind/body dichotomy, engages in self-reflection and activism, and seeks to establish alternative theoretical understandings of space and bodies. Furthermore, this type of project is testament to the basic tenets of liberation and self-determination for Chican@s because it enables the possibility of the healing of bodies that have been historically “othered” and further
marginalized from within and outside of our communities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Hernández-Ávila, 2006).

Towards a Pedagogy of Healing and Transformation

In her article, “In Praise of Insubordination, or, What Makes a Good Woman go Bad?” Inés Hernández-Ávila (2006) explores the concept of individual and collective healing by utilizing her positionality as a self-identified native woman to challenge what she terms the “rape culture” of the United States. This culture has been created and upheld by tools of conquest such as capitalism, sexual violence, and genocide, which stem from deeply embedded pillars of Imperialism, Colonialism, and Patriarchy. In order to transform this “rape culture” Hernández-Ávila advocates “doctoring the self” in which the marginalized undergo individual and collective journeys or recovering minds, bodies, spirits, hearts, and wills in order to fashion a world that truly respects and values difference.

The journey to loving oneself is also a journey of learning how to heal those hurtful, almost destructive wounds that have been inflicted on us. For the longest time, my question was “How?” “How do I recover all the fragmented and wounded parts of my being in order to heal?” Not school or church or even my home taught me how to do this because they didn’t teach me that I needed to be healed from anything. I felt helpless, a lost cause because I couldn’t find the answers in them. My gallbladder surgery and the physical recovery period afterwards allowed me to reflect on my life and see the other ways I needed to heal. I discovered and accepted the truth that answers were not what I needed but rather, taking the initiative to embark on the journey itself is what I needed. Locating and honoring all the parts of myself was something I had never done before, but
for the first time in my life I recognized that fear and indifference were no longer viable options.

You struggle each day to know the world you live in, to come to grips with the problems of life. Motivated by the need to understand, you crave to be what and who you are. A spiritual hunger rumbles deep in your belly, the yearning to live up to your potential. You question the doctrines claiming to be the only way to live. These ways no longer accommodate the person you are, or the life you’re living. They no longer help you with your central task—determine what your life means, to catch a glimpse of the cosmic order and your part in that cosmovisión, and to translate these into artistic forms. Tu camino de conocimiento\textsuperscript{34} requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you’ve programmed yourself (and have been programmed by your cultures) to avoid (desconocer), to confront the traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full sense of your facultades\textsuperscript{35} (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, pp. 540-541).

Hence, at this particular moment in history when body image and weight standards are a popular topic in government, medicine, and even popular culture and in the spirit of continuing a strong legacy of resistance and reclamation, an exploration of the knowledge and wisdom I have to offer through my life’s experiences as a fat Chicana is useful, even necessary to challenge my invisibility, gain a more culturally comprehensive understanding of bodies like mine and ultimately create sites of transformative ideologies, action and pedagogy. By delving into the memories of my heart, mind, and body I give value to my fat Chicana experience and do so in a critical and transformative

\textsuperscript{34} Your path of consciousness, knowledge and wisdom, or experience

\textsuperscript{35} Faculties
manner that connects theory with practice. Fat Chicanas like myself can and have found individual as well as collective ways to promote and embody spiritual, mental, and physical well-being not just for ourselves as fat brown women, but for all members of our communities.

My Fat Chicana stomach has been growling and I have searched for something to satisfy the ferocious hunger inside. I once denied it; buying into the belief that self-fulfillment was bad for me. I tried to minimize it; buying into the belief that a shrinking body was the only answer. I bought what Fat Studies told me, which temporarily relieved my hunger, but whet my appetite for something bigger and grander. I prepare to take the next steps on this journey of love; it is a path that takes me inward to reveal la diosa gorda en mi corazón.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{36} The fat goddess in my heart
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

THE TRANSFORMATION

“How do we re-member rupture?”

I write. It is a pitiful and necessary gesture toward something un-named, beyond what we have been schooled to imagine.

This, the core of the Xicana teatrista’s journey: the effort to uncover what we don’t remember, to use the Xicana body as a way to dig up the dirt, to find something of what is left of us.”

-Cherrie Moraga
(Moraga, 2011, p. 46)

My body announces my decision to remain big, a refusal to become complicit in our society’s efforts to restrict, shrink, and finally annihilate all those relegated to the second term of a series of implicit binaries. We have to say and act as if our bodies matter.”

Elena Levy-Navarro
(Levy Navarro, 2005, p. 169)

My first memory of the word “Chicana” comes from an anti Prop 187 demonstration that my tia took me to, a time when she was involved in the non-profit organization, MANA, whose mission is to empower Latina youth. Although I was only seven years old, I distinctly remember walking next to tia, raising my right fist into the air the way she taught me, and chanting “MANA! San Diego! Latinas Unidas!” It is this memory that I carry with me as the moment that birthed my Chicana consciousness.
Through the years I learned about my aunt and mother’s activism in Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan (MEChA) at their community college and through unions in their work environments, the racism that my grandfather faced in high school that pushed him out of school and into the army in WWII, and my godmother’s experience of discrimination as a little girl in the Lemon Grove Incident, the city that has been home to me, my parents, and my grandparents.

This lifelong exposure to the stories of family and friends helped to shape my identity as a Chicana, which in turn sparked a great desire within me to learn about it when I entered Grossmont College and saw that there were courses titled “History of Chicano Peoples” or “History of the Americas.” As a seventeen year old fresh from high school with a 2.9 GPA, I had no idea what I was doing in community college, what the transfer process was, or that I could even think about attaining my BA at universities outside of San Diego, which was the general path for students. By taking Cross-Cultural Studies courses, immersing myself in course readings, and especially engaging in discussions with professors outside of the classroom, I became exposed to the idea that to be an educated woman of color is an empowering politic. I am a product of a long history marked by struggle, endured by Chicanas and Chicanos who have come before me. That positionality necessarily makes me into a Chicana who must utilize my privilege of obtaining a formal education for the social, political, and economic betterment of not only me and my family, but the greater Chicana and Chicano community.

In being grounded in this newfound purpose and identity, I made the conscious decision to continue taking courses on people of color experiences in the United States, became actively engaged in the honor society, associated students, and a community
service organization, all of which provided me with the discipline, extra-curricular activities, leadership skills, and interaction with community members that inspired me to apply to universities I never even dreamt of. UCLA became the next stepping stone in my academic career (BA degree) followed by CSU Northridge (MA degree), both institutions that provided environments and experiences that taught me the value of educational praxis. It is this type of pedagogy, bridging classroom education with activism within the community to foster critical and imaginative scholars that fuels my desire to be an educator at the community college level.

I begin with this trajectory because it is the default story about my life as a Chicana. I tell it just as neatly as I write about it when people ask me questions like “What got you into Chicano stuff to begin with?” or “Why Chicano Studies?” Truth has many sides, and all that I’ve written about in this opening narrative is my truth to the best of my knowledge, but it doesn’t capture the one aspect about me that has significantly impacted my experiences and the way I view the world; my fatness. I have been fat as far back as I can remember, but only respectfully acknowledged this fact beginning in 2009. It is very likely that the only time I was not fat, at least fat measured by weight, was from the time I was growing in my mother’s body to about two years old. And yet, my fatness became the “pink elephant” in the room that is my mind. It was that awkward trait of mine that I knew was there, but didn’t want to deal with so I put forth all my mental efforts to ignore it.

Ironically, my uncle of all people gave me one of the most important pieces of advice without intentionally doing so. During one of his diet phases (he’s a very fat man and an extreme yo-yo dieter); he sat me down at the kitchen table to lecture me about
losing weight, and ended with “you can’t just wish the fat away.” He meant it in a way that communicated “fat doesn’t just go away by itself; you have to diet and exercise if you want to get rid of it.” But what my uncle, and many other proponents of this mentality don’t see, is that for many of us fat people, fat isn’t something that should be sent away at all. Having a fat identity is a part of who I am, of who I always will be, why keep running away from it? Why hide this identity and contribute to my own invisibility? My tio is right; you can’t just wish the fat away. It is here to stay, for better or for worse, through thick and thin, for as long as I shall live.

Family dynamics

My family is unique, to say the least, and my understanding of how and why I grew up within this unique family is muddled at best. I’ve taken what I’ve been given and hope for the best. I grew up with my maternal grandparents and my aunt (my mother’s younger sister) my entire life. My mother and father got divorced when I was a baby, so from the get-go I never experienced a nuclear family. As a result of my parents’ divorce, my father played no part in my life with the exception of sending me cards and gifts for my birthday and Christmas until I turned eighteen. To his credit, my father did attempt to maintain contact by calling and visiting me a couple times, once when I was thirteen (coincidentally on my first day of high school) and the second time when I was seventeen. I was always scared to allow myself to develop a relationship with him because I had internalized a fearful belief that to do so was to betray my family’s love for someone who was a stranger. I was afraid of talking to him, hugging him, meeting his family or new wife, and going out of my way to get to know him. This is something I couldn’t fully understand as a kid or teenager, or put into words until my early twenties.
It is something I have never shared with my family, and quite honestly my father and these feelings are “out of sight, out of mind” until he randomly calls, nowadays in a drunken stupor.

Lucky for me, I grew up with two father figures, my grandpa and my uncle (my mother and tia’s older brother). My uncle will always have a special place in my heart because in my mind he is my one and only uncle and I am his one and only (biological) niece. He is married, never had children of his own, and has a slew of nieces and nephews and now grand-nieces and grand-nephews from his wife’s side of the family. I grew up with my tio constantly coming over to hang out with my grandpa and help with the gardening and maintenance of our house. I always labeled my uncle as a funny man because he had hilarious jokes to share or gave me silly toys that he would pick up at the 99cent store or at a garage sale. My uncle is the second oldest child of my grandparents, but became the oldest when their first born daughter died of a brain tumor at seven years old. Taking on the role of the oldest child and being the only male, my uncle “had it made” as my grandpa would say. Everyone (and I mean everyone) tells me that I was the apple of my grandpa’s eye because I was his only granddaughter. If I was the apple, my uncle was the rest of the fruit basket. There is nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing my grandfather wouldn’t have done for him, a fact that my uncle knows and has always used to his advantage.

It is difficult for me to begin to talk about my mother. I don’t know where to begin. She is divorced from my father and got re-married to her current husband when I was eleven years old. I am her only child, an unexpected pregnancy at the age of thirty one. I don’t ever remember asking my mom why she left me to be raised by my
grandparents, but was constantly offered an explanation. “I didn’t want you to go to public school because of what I went through at Helix (her high school). I wanted you to go to Catholic school, which costs a lot of money. Since I’m paying for your schooling, you have to get good grades in return.” Reflecting on that explanation, I find the words to write what I cannot verbally express; I have been unsatisfied with it and have felt incomplete for far too long. At some point in my late childhood years, I realized that to understand what my mother was telling me, I had to read between the lines. My mother wanted to send me to Catholic school, which indeed does cost a lot of money and she needed to make good money to pay for it. I guess finding a job that paid her good money meant being away from me, and that’s that. My mother has a managerial title and managerial paycheck at a DMV branch in Los Angeles. She was what I call “my weekend mom” because she would drive down to San Diego every Saturday and go back to LA on Sunday. She did this until she got re-married. The weekend visits turned into every two weekends, sometimes once every three weeks, and sometimes once a month. When my grandpa died my mom stayed at our house for a couple weeks and now visits my grandmother on Sundays or Mondays. I can’t say that I have a close relationship to my mom. She is simply “mom.”

It is equally difficult to begin to talk about my tia, but for completely opposite reasons. To say my tia has been my “mom-away-from-mom” is fairly accurate, but it somehow doesn’t do her justice. One time I asked my tia why she moved back to our home. After all, she had moved out years before I came into the picture. She told me she came over to the house to visit, heard that I said my first words earlier in the week, and started crying because she wasn’t there to be a part of that moment. She said she knew
she had to come back to be a part of my life. Now, my tia is that one person who can get me to cry just by seeing her cry. She never got married or had children of her own. She once told me that although she is just my aunt, she is happy that she could be there for me for whatever I needed and I know that I can count on tia for absolutely anything; advice, money, emotional support, even a good tongue-lashing. With sixty years between me and my grandparents, my tia became that intermediary who could see both sides and find spaces for compromise, which I am especially thankful for. I could give one example after another to show the many ways my tia has expressed her love and care for me throughout my life. Suffice to say, we have a bond that can move mountains.

The title “granddaughter” is one that I carry proudly because I have been blessed to have very special grandparents. I am indebted to my Lito and Lita for everything they have done for me; they are the best thing to have ever happened to me. Who knows what type of person I would be today if they hadn’t been there (at their retirement age), more than willing to take me as their own (embarking on that parenting journey one more time). I thank my lucky stars for having been given a loving home to grow up in. My grandparents taught me to treasure institutional education and whatever I didn’t learn there, they taught me from the space that is my home. Sometimes I reflect on those lessons and become acutely aware of the fact that I didn’t pick up on all of them. Perhaps from my memory fading or not paying enough attention in the moment they were happening. Whatever the excuse is, it pains me because my grandpa has been gone for almost two years and my grandmother’s mind and body inch further into a cloud of haziness from Parkinson’s and Dementia.

This is who I consider my immediate family. This is the village that raised the
person writing this today. My relationships with each person have changed as times have changed, the most significant blow to this clan being my grandfather’s death in 2011. As if dealing with death and grief isn’t traumatic enough, my grandpa’s passing revealed the darker sides to the personalities of my mom, uncle, my tia, and even me. You see, all of our lives have been shaped by the privilege of material comfort. My grandpa worked hard to provide for the family, an act of love that became twisted by the hands of a couple of greedy and self-serving children who learned the bad habit of monetary dependency. In my lifetime I’ve seen and experienced how much both of my grandparents trusted my aunt and me with their personal, business, and financial affairs. Personally, I grew up learning what medications Lito and Lita took, when they should take them, and what they were for. I grew up helping them with their residential properties, from counting laundry room quarters to re-tiling unit bathrooms; to drafting residential agreements. When I was about seven years old, my grandma taught me how to write a check and fill out a deposit slip so that I could help her at the bank. If I write of these things, it is to locate the position of privilege that being a trusted apprentice affords as well as the level of responsibility that has been passed onto me. It never occurred to me being there would cause tension, anger, frustration, and jealousy in the family; in this moment, there is little room for love in my home, except between my grandma, my tia, and myself.

Now, in my mid-twenties, and in gratitude to Chican@ Studies, I am armed with necessary and relevant vocabulary to assess my life and mold myself to be a better person. As a result of current familial turmoil and becoming aware of the politics from growing up in a non-traditional household, I internalized guilt for believing I was at the center of all the problems in my family. I hated always being placed in the middle. When
I broke my left ankle in 2003, my mom and tia got into a huge argument over some silly gossip. That fight somehow turned into a guilt-fest where I was accused of loving my tia more than my mom (and in traditional Mexican culture, to love anyone more than your birth mom is a sure way to go to hell). It is with a heavy heart that I write these stories because I realize that I’ve always felt like I had to negotiate between sides, pick allegiances, perform loyalty, and dare I say, perform love. I recognize that I’ve built my life around wanting to prove to everyone in my family that I love them, and that meant learning what each of them wanted to make them happy, even if it didn’t come from a place of love and even if that meant never thinking about what made me happy.

With this purpose in life and these learned behaviors, who could have the time or the heart to learn self-love? One of my favorite movie lines comes from Tyler Perry’s (2005) *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, when Helen, one of the main protagonists angrily asks her husband who abused her for years, “What about me? What about me” (Cannon & Grant, 2005)? As a result of losing my grandfather, current familial turmoil, and living a life of fragmentation, I find myself at an emotional crossroads unlike no other I have ever experienced. I am tired from constantly feeling the push and pull of family members, of having to prove and provide explanations for my love, and for feeling guilty that whatever I have to offer will never be enough. “What about me?” I ask. I know I am the only one who can find the answer.

*Haciendo mi Cara, Trabajo de Nepantlera*37

Like a message straight from the heavens, I pick up *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* and immersed myself in the text. Anzaldúa speaks directly to me when she says,

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37 Shaping my Face, Work of a Nepantlera
‘Making faces’ is my metaphor for constructing one’s identity. ‘/Usted es el moldeador de su carne tanto como el de su alma.’ You are the shaper of your flesh as well as of your soul…In our self reflexivity and in our active participation with the issues that confront us, whether it be through writing, front line activism, or individual self-development, we are also uncovering the interfaces, the very spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p. 125).

When I began this thesis journey, I knew I wanted to write about the intersection of fatness and Chicana feminism, after all, these are my areas of expertise and there is little to no scholarship in academe on the connection between the two. But what I did not know at the commencement of this writing endeavor was that my essence would call me to take the journey inward to write about my very own experiences as a fat Chicana. As an undergraduate, I discovered that I do my best writing in the wee hours of the morning (1am-5am). Clearly, Coyolxauhqui, the moon and dismembered warrior goddess in Mexica mythology, has a magnetic pull on my heart. I see my reflection in her luminous round shape. She shows me how to contest patriarchal discourses, how to survive “American” colonization, how to gather the fragmented pieces and ignite the inner flame. I have learned how to talk to my body who has been dying to have her voice transcribed onto paper.

Many times, I reprimanded my hands for finding the keys that typed the words that formed the sentences that told the stories of my own fatness; airing the dirty plus-size laundry of my life. Scolding the hands that yearn to type truth is like warning the musician against playing songs of love; the world becomes bland, sterile, and dull. To
write is to create; the body expels both good and bad and everything in between and everything beyond our understandings of this dichotomy; a new life makes its entrance into the world. Through sleepless nights of reading and writing se me alumbro el foco.\textsuperscript{38} Yo soy Nepantlera;\textsuperscript{39} I’ve always been an inhabitant of the ambiguous middle grounds, but did not have the language or mind set to locate that as a space of value and possibilities.

So \textit{Nepantla} is a way of reading the world. You see behind the veil and you see these scraps. Also it is a way of creating knowledge and writing a philosophy, a system that explains the world. \textit{Nepantla} is a stage that women and men, and whoever is willing to change into a new person and further grow and develop, go through. The concept is articulated as a process of writing: it is one of the stages of writing, the stage where you have all these ideas, all these images, sentences, and paragraphs, and where you are trying to make them into one piece, a story, plot or whatever—it is all very chaotic. So you feel like you are living in that mist of chaos. It is also a little bit of an agony you experience (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp.237-238).

This chapter is a written testament to my life in Nepantla. I recover the fragmented part of self I denied as a result of buying into a belief system that has continuously told me my fat brown body is the problem. Here I present narratives of different experiences that significantly impacted my life. Despite the ease these chubby hands had at typing away, it was still hard to write these stories because they required that I dig into the deepest, darkest crevices of my memory, my Pandora’s Box of trauma, shame, and inadequacy.

\textsuperscript{38} The light bulb turned on

\textsuperscript{39} I am a Nepantlera
caused by being a fat brown girl in a fat brown girl-hating society. It isn’t easy to continue on this road of recovery, but it is a journey I must travel, for it reveals a fat Chicana consciousness that leads me towards healing and wholeness.

*Sana Sana, Cuerpo de Marana*\(^{40}\)

Every day I battle it out with my panza. We have a love and hate relationship, my panza and I. More like my llantas\(^{41}\) as my grandma calls them. I inherited my mother’s torso (with the exception of my having small boobs), we have panzas that are divided into upper and lower rolls of fat, imagine two car tires stacked one on top of the other and you have our panzas. Like I said, every day my panza engages in warfare with my psyche, and it’s been that way for as long as I can remember. “Remember to suck it in mija!” my mom or tia would say, then demonstrate for me just before a recital or school play. And then there was grandma providing me with advice for pictures. “Si te paras de lado, no te veras tan hancha en el foto”\(^{42}\) or “si levantas la cabeza un poquito, la papera no se ve y se mira como que tienes un pescuezo.”\(^{43}\) To this day when any of the women in my family, including myself look at recently taken full-body pictures of us, we’ll say things like

\(^{40}\) *Heal, Heal, Body of a Pig.* This is a play on words from the popular children’s rhyme “Sana, sana colita de rana; si no sanas hoy, sanaras mañana,” which literally translates to “Heal, heal little frogs tail; if you don’t heal today, you will heal tomorrow.” It is recited to a child who has gotten hurt as reassurance that the grown up will help heal the wound.

\(^{41}\) Tires

\(^{42}\) “If you stand sideways you won’t look as wide in the picture.”

\(^{43}\) “If you lift your head up a little bit it will look like you don’t have a double chin and that you have a neck.”
“well from the neck up we look good, but the rest…” then shrug shoulders or shake our heads disapprovingly of our bodies.

It’s interesting to reflect on the many little “helpful” hints passed down to me in the effort to disguise my body fat. Along the way, I myself discovered a few tricks to manipulate different areas of fat on my body in the effort to thin things out. Like in high school I realized that wearing tacones\textsuperscript{44} gave me a bit of a vertical stretch that seemingly dispersed my panza and leg fat more evenly. Then there came Lane Bryant body shapers, followed by Spanx, which don’t really suck in inches of panza, but at least smooth the llantas out to at least make panzita take on the shape of a half moon rather than tires. Even now I catch myself adjusting my bra band along my back to try to smooth out the love handles that somehow break out of containment a couple times throughout the day. There’s the frequent lifting of the waistline on my jeans so that one of my muffin top llantas doesn’t spill over too much. Then there’s the constant tugging at the ends of my shirt so that they’ll pull away from my body in the effort to hide the extra here and there rolls of panza fat.

I would be lying if I said that writing about these memories and identifying the habits I enact (both consciously and subconsciously) on a daily basis in regards to my own fatness don’t make me feel foolish. I do feel foolish, juvenile, even conflicted. How is it that a consciously fat Chicana trying to spread the word of fat positivism practices such silly things? Doesn’t that make me a cop-out? How can I not practice what I preach?

I’m not sure I have a solid or complete answer to these questions and doubts, but I think I’ve nailed down some of the response along this thesis journey. There is going to be both the push-and-pull of my psyche, and I’m going to try to box my behaviors into

\textsuperscript{44} Heels
neat categories, question if I’m legitimate, and worry about a greater audience. In school, through Catholicism, and at home I was taught that to master knowledge and the body, I had to think in terms of extremes (i.e. good or bad, right or wrong, high or low), to separate identities into categories and organize those categories into vertical hierarchies. For example, in the media skinny women are portrayed as beautiful, good, and happy, unlike fat women who are represented as ugly, bad, and depressed beings. In order to be beautiful, good, and happy, I, as a fat woman would have to lose weight. I equated losing weight to giving up food and exercising rigorously every day. Growing up, I saw my mom, tia, and tio go through what I now consider extreme diets, where they would survive only on fruit and vegetable liquids or only eat one meal a day. I saw them lose weight, believing that their weight loss was reaching success. In this mode of thinking there are no middle grounds, only extremes.

Even while writing this thesis, I’ve has to negotiate between these thoughts and behaviors about my own fat body. I get lost in my daydreams when I’m at my local coffee shop, taking a break from writing or lying in my bed at night, reflecting on what I’ve written that day. Having read This Bridge Called my Back (1983) and This Bridge we Call Home (2002), I picture myself standing in the middle of a bridge right over a river. If I turn my head one way, I see the comfort and lure of mastery, clarity, the world I’ve known my whole life. If I turn my head the other way, I see only fog, a haze of the unknown and unpredictable. I think about my own character. I’ve never been one to take risks or be spontaneous, there’s always something that is too much at stake. To be stuck in the middle of this bridge has been a lonely place for so long and when seen in this way, the bridge became a cage, and I, a caged animal with no way out, and much worse, no
desire to get out.

My favorite memories of my grandfather are of us going bike riding on Coronado Island. He used to randomly load our bikes onto the bed of his baby blue Silverado truck and say “C’mon mija, let’s go ride our bikes.” I would put on my white helmet with the Lisa Frank stickers and ride alongside him around the parameter of the Island. We would stop to have ice cream and he would let me go into boutiques to look at jewelry. To go home, we had to drive back over the Coronado Bridge. If we happened to go bike riding when there was a full moon and left Coronado at just the right time to be crossing the bridge, I could look forward to see the moon rise over the mountains and look back to see the sun set over the Pacific at the same time. The heavens have a way of reminding us that being on a bridge can be the part of a journey that is most remarkable.

It dawns on me that my perspective towards what I see and feel on the bridge in my daydreams must change. I do not stand there alone, many Chican@s have come before me and many there standing with me. We are a collective of survivors and must be agents of love.

Our people have proven over and over again that we have the desire and tenacity to not only survive, but to become whole (or self-actualized) and to actively resist oppression. Despite our attempted annihilation, or perhaps because of it, we have continued to fight-to struggle against repression. But we cannot ignore our wounds, for they too will affect the nature of our survival and the quality of our lives (Torres, 2003, p. 18).

For me, the deconstruction of twenty-six years of regimentation and order begins through consciousness. My struggles with my weight, my race, my gender, my sexuality are
shaped by my lived experiences. They are real struggles born of the realities of my life; being third generation Mexican American, a woman, growing up in a non-traditional middle class family; choosing to identify as a Chicana feminist; having a fat body as long as I can remember; the list goes on. These realities do not stand alone but are interwoven to situate me in a unique standpoint. What can I contribute to the world from my standpoint?

*Grocery Shopping*

I grew up going to the grocery store every week with Lito and Lita. The weekly store flyers would arrive in our mailbox on Tuesdays, prompting Lita’s thorough research for the best deals. “A ver que necesitamos de la tienda” grandma would say. Then she would look through our pantry, refrigerator, and sit down at our twenty something year old kitchen table to scour grocery flyers, circling the good deals and proceeding to create a weekly grocery list, a list that hardly ever changed, but nonetheless was re-created week after week. I watched as grandma would pull out the free notepad sent in gratitude by the American Lung Association for my grandparents’ donation and write that list, over and over again. It was written all in Spanish and misspelled English including things like pan; kashup (ketchup) arroz; frijoles; or codage cheese (cottage cheese). Everything would be ready for the next day’s trip to las tiendas. The moment I got out of school at 2:45pm, we would make our routine stops in Lemon Grove to Boney’s for produce; Weber’s Bread Outlet for bread and sweets, Super Saver Food and Lucky’s for gangas;

45 “Let’s see what we need from the store.”

46 “Bread, ketchup, rice, beans, or cottage cheese.”

47 “The stores”

48 “Really good deals”
and Thrifty’s for ice cream y las medicinas. Once or twice a month we would venture out to Price Club in Sherman Heights, which was my personal favorite because we would shop then have hot dogs in the little food court, imagining where the airplanes that flew right over us on route to Lindbergh Field, San Diego’s International airport, were coming from.

Since Lita didn’t drive, Lito would take us to the store and wait for us in the car while we shopped. Before my teenage years it was my job to help bag the produce, pick out the meats, grab the boxed and canned goods that were too low in their shelves for grandma to bend over and get herself, and figure out coupons and weekly promotional deals. When we were ready to get in line to pay, I would run out to the car to get Lito so that he could put all the groceries on the conveyor belt to be scanned and then bag them up while I helped grandma pay. These were the years that I loved going to the grocery store. It was fun helping push the cart, picking out food, even getting complimented by strangers who would say things like “you are such a good girl for helping your grandma out.” At some point, grandpa didn’t have to get out of the car anymore since he taught me how to properly bag groceries and eventually he stopped going altogether when I was old enough to drive my grandma to the store.

I went through a rebellious phase in high-school. My version of rebellion wasn’t what you might picture, drugs, sex, or alcohol, it was disobedience. I discovered the word “no” and justified it with “because I don’t want to.” When I didn’t get my way, I was left feeling angry and frustrated at the imagined idea that I was unlucky for having to help my grandparents out with seemingly “menial” things like going to the grocery store. After

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49 “The medicines”
all, my friends had their mothers and/or fathers who went grocery shopping for their families, why couldn’t Lito and Lita just go by themselves and let me be a “normal” teenager? I wish I could say this was just a spoiled teenager with attitude issues, but this phase lasted well through community college, when I transferred to UCLA and moved to Culver City, and yes, even through grad school at CSUN and moving to Van Nuys. These were the years that I just wanted to be the “normal” student whose family understood my desire to be independent, go away for college, move out from home, study endlessly and socialize with friends whenever I wanted to. My mentality was if Lito and Lita wanted me to do well in school then they shouldn’t bother me with such tasks like going to the grocery store.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s final section in her last chapter of Borderlands (2007) called “El Retorno” comes to mind. Here, Gloria talks about returning home, the ultimate site of contradictions and ambiguity. “I have come back. Tanto dolor me costó el alejamiento” (p.111). My grandfather’s death in 2011 and my grandmother’s struggle with Parkinson’s disease prompted my retorno, a journey that fills my heart with so much love and yet so much grief and pain at the lack of treasuring the memories and experiences. Why is it that only through my grandfather’s death could I realize my own steady and ever-blinding selfishness? I truly believed I wanted to be a “normal” teenager, student, and young adult, none of which really exist yet, still came at the expense of the small things, like going grocery shopping with my grandparents.

As I write this, I recognize that fat little girl in me who would get excited about grocery store trips and eating hot dogs under the airplanes outside of Price Club with her

50 “The Return”

51 “The estrangement has cost me a lot of pain”
Lito and Lita. She never fully grew up, became “normal,” stopped loving food, and I don’t think she ever really wanted to. She’s been in a very deep slumber, a self-induced coma, sedated by the desires that society told her to have; to be average, skinny, and mainstream. She has returned-sees home in the distance, eager to jump at the joy of being the grocery helper, to laugh and play freely without caring what society thinks about her growing body. Although in hibernation, her heart allows itself to re-open, the soul readies its wings for flight, all the while her mind dreams of the awakening. The seemingly lifeless body prepares itself for the journey to become whole.

The Doctor’s Note

I never thought I would accept the fact that being fat is an important part of my life. I’ve recently discovered, more like admitted to myself that I intentionally blocked out painful memories as a way to convince myself that my fatness played no role in who I am. In the quest for my social security card, just before my first semester of graduate school, I came across a white envelope with an old folded up piece of paper. It was a doctor’s note from an office visit that was supposed to have been passed on to my mother by my grandmother. Dated June 13, 1991, the note reads:

Dear Mrs. Hernandez

Monica’s cholesterol level was 258 at her last physical exam. Any cholesterol level over 200 needs to be repeated with a fasting cholesterol level. That will require Monica to not have any food after 8-9pm someday next week, and then return to any Kaiser lab with the enclosed lab slip at 8:30-9am that next morning (No appointment is necessary). I will call you within 1 week to 10 days with the results. If you have any questions please call me at 589-7100. Thank you! -Marianne Katz
I was four years old when this doctor told my grandma and grandpa I had high cholesterol, something that four to five year olds shouldn’t have. I don’t remember my grandparents having a conversation with me about it, but I do remember for the few days after this doctor’s visit, they tried to get me to eat carrots and broccoli and every time I took another bite they clapped and yelled “Yay for Mónica!” To their credit, it was a lovely way to support me and this new food choice. Yet, it is quite possible that this was also my first diet. As much as I could comprehend at four years old, I came to understand that whatever I had eaten up to that point was bad for me.

Looking back on my eating habits, I am keenly aware of the fact that I grew up knowing that the things I ate were bad for me, simply because my family always blatantly told me so. The irony of it all is that they were the ones giving me the very food they knew was bad for me. I grew up in a home notoriously known for its amazing food. To this day, I firmly believe that no one can cook the way my grandmother cooked. Lita spent her life making delicious meals for her family, recipes that have been passed down to my mother, my tia and to me. When I drive through my hometown of Lemon Grove, I see anti-obesity campaign ads displayed on liquor shop windows or on billboards towering over the strip mall next to the freeway where In-N-Out Burger, Carl’s Jr., Del Taco, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald’s, Burger King, Submarina, Alberto’s Taco Shop, and China King Buffet have resided as far back as I can remember (yes, there’s that many fast food places in one strip mall in my hood). Ironically, on the same street as this strip mall there are three bilingual food education centers that accept WIC and target Latina and black mothers for their food education programs. What comes to mind is Vicki Ruiz’ (1998) *From out of the Shadows* when Americanization programs infiltrated
the kitchens of Mexican women in the 20th century. Here I am, one hundred years later, and my kitchen is still trying to be Americanized, only now as a part of fighting off obesity. My grandmother’s recipes would never pass as American, and are much less anti-obese.

Elena Levy-Navarro transgressively writes, “…I am spiritual in my fatness. My fat is a blessing that has come to me to insist that I should live life large” (Keating, 2005, p. 169). These words comfort me and remind me so much of my grandpa who would always say “I’m living on borrowed time.” My fatness is symbolic of so much love that has been given to me by family and friends throughout my relatively short life. The love I have been shown is oftentimes expressed through food. Are there healthier choices that I can make as an adult? Of course, and I have to add that the privileges of education, financial stability, and access to even making choices allow for that possibility. But these decisions are not made with the intent of following the direction by proponents of “anti-obesity” campaigns or to lose weight. Also, I could never give up the sacred tradition that is sharing a decadent meal with loved ones precisely because that act is an expression of love and culture. What is a person without love or culture?

A higher power determined that I was worthy of receiving love. If indeed, as my grandpa believed we are all living on borrowed time, what is the point in not recognizing the gift that is my life at whatever weight or body shape I live it in? The way our society is, time becomes easily (and expensively) squandered away on diets and surgeries or hiding from the world in the hopes that one day, we will have “normal” and beautiful thin bodies. When I was twenty years old I visited St. Jude’s Shrine in San Diego and intently prayed for the liquid diet I was on to work so that I could finally be skinny for my tia and
that my dreams reserved only for when I became skinny would come true. My prayers received an answer. I ended up quitting that diet, having lost only twenty pounds, when the established goal for my body was to lose 130 pounds to achieve a “normal” B.M.I. I quit because I realized that I was the happiest I had ever been in my life before I even started that diet. I also quit because I realized that the desire to be a skinny woman wasn’t mine, but belonged to my tia. Father Greg Boyle (2010) says,

At Homeboy Industries, we seek to tell each person this truth: they are exactly what God had in mind when God made them—and then we watch, from this privileged place as people inhabit this truth. Nothing is the same again. No bullet can pierce this, no prison walls can keep this out. And death can’t touch it—it is just that huge. But much stands in the way of this liberating truth. You need to dismantle shame and disgrace, coaxing out the truth in people, who’ve grown comfortable believing its opposite (pp. 192-193).

Nepantla is a contradictory place. When it came to food, this fat Chicanita was certainly confused; I ate what I was given while being told it was bad for me. I yearned to be normal by rebelling against trips to the grocery store with my grandparents, trips that I loved to make. I have always been a fat kid having to negotiate the pros and cons of what that means in the time and space I’ve grown up in. Building on the words of Father Boyle, acknowledging that I am a border dweller allows for the recognition that I look exactly like what God had in mind for me. My fat brown body is a product of being from multiple worlds that intersect with each other. That I am alive is no accident, and more importantly, I deserve to honor my existence just as I am.
A Fat Little Dancer

A couple of muddled memories I have revolve around ballet, tap, and jazz classes I used to take as a kid. Looking back on those days, I know I was the fattest girl of all the other girls in my class, but I also know that the Mónica at that time was not aware of that. The times that my size became something to think about was when I would get new dancing shoes or leotards at Capezio or when I had to get fitted for the costumes I would wear at recitals. This was much like every August, just before school started, when my mom, grandma, and tía would have to go to the uniform store to buy bigger jumpers and white button down blouses because I had outgrown the ones I wore the year before. I would try on their first guess-timate, a size that rarely fit the first time, and then we would work our way up to bigger sizes from there. These fittings never went without some sort of commentary about my size, “la niña come mucho” Lita would say or I would overhear the sales associate say they had to special order my outfits or shoes because they didn’t carry “special” sizes in store. These are the spaces that I experienced vergüenza for literally not being able to “fit in.”

My mom went to my first jazz class when I was about seven or eight years old. What was supposed to be a fun first day, rapidly turned into another instance of

52 “She eats too much”

53 Here I adopt Eden E. Torres’ (2003) concept of shame to provide a better understanding of vergüenza, “Shame is an insidious method of social control…When people who feel deep shame act out, their inability to live up to prescriptive expectations of the dominant culture is perceived as representative of the entire group—as bringing dishonor to the community, ethnic group, or nation…Thus shame can be used to promote discriminatory actions thought to increase the public good and make criminal those behaviors that interfere with its interests” (pp.30-32).
vergüenza. Right off the bat, during warm up stretching, I couldn’t do a certain floor exercise that involved sitting on the floor with legs open in a side split and pushing my body onto my stomach using my arms. Although I could do the side split with my legs, for the life of me I couldn’t suck in my panza enough to push myself onto my stomach. I tried as hard as I could, with beads of sweat starting to accumulate and drip down my face. Eventually, the instructor had to help me do it, and kindly reassured me that I would get the hang of it with some more practice (which, I did eventually). I was embarrassed, but that feeling was exponentially multiplied by the fact that my mom, who was sitting in the corner the whole time, laughed hysterically at my efforts. Now my mom has the type of laugh that can be heard miles away and if something is really funny, she turns red, cries, and ends up coughing intensely from lack of air. That day, my attempts were that kind of funny, the only memory I carry with me from that night.

Ironically, around the same time the ballet company I danced for honored me with a gold medal for dancing excellence accompanied by a dozen long stem red roses at the big annual end of the year recital. You see, despite my weight, I was really, really good at ballet, tap, and jazz. I would pick up the moves right away and mastered all the routines with the precision and delicacy that such forms of dance require. My instructors always put me in the front for performances, and a few times I got to perform with girls that were a couple years older than me. I was just that good. As an adult, I am reminded of this talent anytime I’m out at the clubs or fiestas and the dj plays one of those synchronized dance songs like The Electric Slide or El Payaso del Rodeo.\textsuperscript{54} I’m always one of the first ones on the dance floor leading the pack around in unison.

\textsuperscript{54} The Rodeo Clown
Professional dancing played a significant role in my life in my early formative years. The reason why I was put in those classes to begin with was because I was a very shy little girl, more like vergonsoza\textsuperscript{55}. As an only child I would entertain myself with my Barbie dolls, VHS tapes, and Disney books. I wasn’t very good at interacting with other kids or adults in pre-school, a weakness that was worsened by the fact that I struggled to communicate with them since Spanish was my first language and they were predominantly Caucasian and Filipino. My family caught onto my shy behaviors, believed this characteristic would hinder me in the future, and decided to put me in dance as a way to grow out of my shell. It worked, as my love for dance introduced me to what it meant to be good at something, boosting my self-esteem and pushing me to interact with other dancers. I was passionate and dedicated to something that made me feel good about myself. I loved to dance ballet, tap, and jazz.

Sadly, my dancing years ended in the 4\textsuperscript{th} grade when the time came for me to graduate from ballet flats to the real, adult ballerina slippers, the kind where you actually have to dance and balance yourself on your tippy-toes. When I told my family that it was time for me to move onto the real ballet slippers, I became the target of jokes. I remember being in the kitchen when I gave them the news and my tio and Grandpa laughing at the thought of me balancing my fat body on my tippy-toes. “You fat little pig, how are you gunna wear those shoes?” my uncle managed to say between laughs.” “A dancing little piglet” my grandpa joined in. I went along with them, laughing at the jokes, but the thought of being seen in this way gave rise to my skepticism and self-doubt at my dancing abilities. I went to my room, threw my backpack on the floor and flopped onto my bed, the vibration causing the dresser mirror to shake my dancing medal that dangled

\textsuperscript{55} Embarrassed, shy and shameful
on the post. If my own family members saw me this way, of course the audience would see me like that too. Maybe they were right; maybe I wouldn’t be able to dance in the real shoes just as I danced in the ballet flats. I was going to look ridiculous on stage. Oh, I forgot that once ballerinas started wearing real ballet slippers, they stopped wearing tutus and would just wear the leotards and tights. I couldn’t do that. My tutu kinda hid the lonja56 that was growing around my tummy. What if I broke my big toes from putting all this weight on them and trying to dance? I would look ridiculous. “There’s no such thing as a fat ballerina.” These thoughts and questions raced through my mind. I easily convinced myself that I was simply too fat to continue dancing, and just like that, in one afternoon, I made the decision to quit. Throughout the years, I had received little porcelain ballerina figurines, collected ballerina books, Vhs tapes, other miscellaneous paraphernalia and dried some of the flowers that I had received from my friends and family after recitals. They all went into a box that day and I distinctly remember the last thing I packed up with my collection was my dancing medal, the only possession I had been proud to have was surely something that was awarded to me out of pity, and not because I was truly a good dancer.

It’s been seventeen years since I packed up my dancing career. After a month of not showing up to dance classes, my instructor mailed a note to my house expressing her sorrow at losing me as one of her best dancers. I never told my family the real reason why I quit; choosing to give them my cop out excuse that “I didn’t want to do it anymore” and telling others “dancing started getting in the way of schoolwork.” In 2012, I moved back home to Lemon Grove to help my Tia take care of my grandmother. I had an apartment full of stuff that needed to come back with me, and the only solution I could

56 Roll of fat
think of was storing everything in a shed in the backyard that my grandpa and tio built about twenty years ago for decorations and luggage. As the years went by that shed grew to house toys I grew out of, tools that took up too much space in the garage, seasonal clothing, and old house wares. The time had come to thoroughly clean out that shed, deciding what would get trashed, donated, and kept. This is when I stumbled across my dancing career box. Everything was in there, just as I had packed it ages ago. I realized that up until this point in my life, I tried to feed myself my own excuses for quitting, hoping that one day I would truly believe them. But, my mind could only try to trick my heart and soul for so long, and the re-connection with my fat Chicana essence has revealed the buried truths. I loved to dance ballet, tap, and jazz and I was very good at being a professional dancer. Who knows if I would still be dancing it today? Clearly I still love to groove out on the dance floors, maybe; just maybe, it’s something that I would consider doing again. I once told myself, there’s no such thing as a fat ballerina and true, I personally have never seen a fat ballerina on television, on stage, or in magazines. But why the search for something in the media when I can just go to the mirror and look at my reflection? There IS such a thing as a fat ballerina. She is me.

Talking Back

Lita wonders where I learned to talk back. “De mi no aprendistes ser hocicona”57 I’ve often heard when I talk back. While being reprimanded for my ways, I have also been told, “deberias ser una licenciada,”58 I should be a lawyer because I like to talk back, argue, and debate. I can’t fully pinpoint a culprit for my hocicona ways, but I do

57 “You didn’t learn how to be hocicona from me”

58 “You should be a lawyer”
believe I have picked up some of these tendencies from my tia. She would probably have a heart attack if she read that I’m attaching the term hocicona to her, but when I use the word, I use it in a way that re-appropriates its meaning. I was taught that an hocicona is a woman who talks back to her elders, uses bad words, or is sassy, “bad habits” that render that woman un-ladylike. Although I think that is a general understanding of what it means to be hocicona (which is viewed negatively), talking back oftentimes needs to be seen and used as another tool to navigate through narrow and rigid expectations.

When I was a kid, I had a couple incidents in public where I heard some older ladies make commentary about my being fat in Spanish. I was about six years old the first time it happened and around nine years old the second time. Both are somewhat fuzzy recollections (I purposefully tried to make myself forget them), but what I do remember is the feeling of vergüenza.\[59\] As I attempt to re-open these dusty files in my memory bank, I remember the second incident much more than the first. It happened at a store called Fedco, a store that resembled Walmart and Target and no longer exists. I had wandered one aisle away from tia, anxious to look at the porcelain figurines housed in a glass case. I loved peeking at the new and old pieces, especially the delicate dolls with immaculately painted faces and arranged curls. As I looked admiringly at these dolls, I didn’t notice two older Spanish speaking women on the other side of the case observing me, that is until I overheard one of them say to the other “mira la niña gordita. Bonita, pero que lastima que es gorda.”\[60\]

\[59\] Shame

\[60\] “Look at the fat little girl. She’s pretty, but too bad she’s fat.”
I remember getting that frog in your throat when you know you’re about to cry and the tears start welling up in your eyes, but you don’t let yourself cry so you hold it in, which somehow feels like it hurts more than just letting it out. I took my time walking back to my tia, wishing that frog would go away before she could hear it in my voice and ask what was wrong. “Don’t cry. Do not cry” I repeated to myself with every step I took. As much as I tried, tia knew me well enough to know something had happened. She knelt down to be eye-to-eye with me and asked “What happened mija?” Eyes down from vergüenza, I told her what I had overheard. Upon hearing this, tia turned into what people call a Momma Bear, protecting their young at all costs. She was furious. She put whatever she was buying back on the shelf and together we walked back to that glass case. The ladies were no longer there, but that didn’t stop tia. She grabbed my hand and said “C’mon mija, we’re gunna find those viejas.” We walked around every section and eventually found the ladies in another part of the store. She waited until we were the only women in the aisle and then led the way in. Tia didn’t saying anything directly to them, but made sure they saw the both of us, and as we walked right by them she stared them down from head to toe then looked down at me and loudly said “Mija, remember es mejor ser gordita y bonita que vieja y fea. Lo feo no tiene remedio.”

I’m sure we both walked away feeling like champions who just won a battle. My tia’s determination to do something about the situation managed to make me feel better. We walked back to get what she had put back in the aisle and proceeded to finish

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61 Diminutive term for “My daughter”
62 Old ladies
63 “It’s better to be fat and pretty than old and ugly. There is no remedy for ugly.”
shopping as planned. My memory fails me when trying to recall what happened after that. I don’t remember if we ever talked about it and don’t think it ever came up again in the future. As I look back, I think to myself how proud and lucky I am to have my tia, a woman who dared to talk back to elders. Without hesitance she spoke up, and it wasn’t just the speaking up, but it was the speaking up and against two older women, speaking up and against them in a public setting, speaking up and against them for perpetuating the stigmatization of fatness, ironically as fat women themselves.

As I recall this story, I am reminded of a dicho\(^{64}\) my grandpa used to repeat to us, “El que no habla, Dios no lo oye\(^{65}\).” Now that my grandpa is no longer with us, I often hear tia say this to me during those times when I communicate to her my hesitance to speak up about something. One day during my first semester of graduate school, a friend in my cohort and I took a trip to Wendy’s after a long day of studying at the library on our college campus. As college students on a strict budget, we decided to reward ourselves as best we could, which basically meant we could eat out, but only order from the dollar menu. As I waited to pick up my food from the counter, I slightly observed a nuclear family of four from the corner of my left eye as they shared their meal together. What caught my eye was the chubby little boy next to his even chubbier sister, around four to five years old, eating their chicken nuggets. As the little girl reached for her last chicken nugget, the mother of the family lightly hit her on the hand, snatched the nugget away from her and gave it to her brother. “Don’t eat the last one,” she said “you’re

\(^{64}\) Saying

\(^{65}\) “If you don’t speak up, God can’t hear you.”
already gorda\textsuperscript{66} as it is.” The father just sat there and continued eating without paying much attention to anything going on at the table. My cheeks flushed with rage. I yearned to walk over to that little girl and hold her in my arms. I wanted to tell her she was beautiful and special and to never let anyone, not even her mother, let her believe she wasn’t. My reactionary side wanted to yell at the mother for treating her daughter this way and tell the father to not just sit there and let it happen. I wanted to say “if you don’t want your kids to be gordos then maybe you shouldn’t bring them to Wendy’s.” Then I realized that wasn’t the problem. What I really wanted to say was “people come in different sizes and your children, whether fat or thin, are beautiful just as they are.” As I walked by their table, I saw the chubby little girl just sit there staring down at her lap or her hands, I don’t know what, but staring down. I know that look and feeling all too well.

Adults forget that children feel things too; oftentimes they feel things more than we do as older people who have learned mechanisms to maneuver ourselves through emotions. How many other little girls, whether fat or not go through similar experiences of vergüenza\textsuperscript{67}? Why do we, police our own bodies and the bodies of each other in ways that reify a fat-hating culture? My whole life, I decided it wasn’t my place to say anything to my own family about my feelings of vergüenza, much less that their words and actions contributed to those feelings. That day at Wendy’s, I decided it wasn’t my place to say anything to that family, a decision that I still question today. However, I also decided that there was a reason why the cosmos arranged it for me to witness this experience at a time when I doubted my purpose in graduate school.

\textsuperscript{66} Fat

\textsuperscript{67} Shame
Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time I couldn’t figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there. Pena. Shame. Low estimation of self” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 80). My efforts to expunge my mind from hurtful memories of being bullied due to my fatness came from not wanting to acknowledge the vergüenza they caused me, much less not knowing how to deal with that vergüenza. As a result, I bought into a false belief that my fat body was the problem. During my adolescence and young adult years not only was my fatness a problem, but I started believing that I deserved to be made fun of and that I would never be “woman” enough because I was fat. Thus, I deeply internalized and normalized a belief system of shame and low self esteem. To make this even more complicated was my intent to ignore these feelings and focus on the “good” and “controllable” things in my life like hanging out with friends or being smart. An additional layer to this complexity is the fact that this belief system originated in the home, a site traditionally viewed as a site of comfort and sanctity. In my family of proud personalities, having open discussions about hurtful words or sharing feelings either doesn’t happen or results in verbal arguments. When I started the graduate program and in the early stages of writing this thesis, I thought that to challenge my shame was to challenge my home—the grandparents and tia and uncle that didn’t have to take me in as theirs, but nonetheless did. As my grandma says, “Con que descaro?”

68 “That nerve?”
Now, at twenty-six years old, I feel tired in every way possible from living in a paradigm of vergüenza and silence. My body speaks to me, “Ya basta.”

For silence to transform into speech, sounds, and words it must first traverse through our female bodies. For the body to give birth to utterance, the human entity must recognize itself as carnal-skin, muscles, entrails, brain, belly. Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized, or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through them. *No hablas de esas cosas, de eso no se habla. No hablas, no hablas. Callate! Estate quieta.* Seal your lips, woman! When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p.132).

Confronting years of unacknowledged shame and low self-esteem is no easy feat, especially because I live in a matrix of worlds that point to me as the one who has a problem (my fatness) and the one who has the key to solving that problem (lose the weight and be skinny). In *Chicana Without Apology, Chicana Sin Verguenza: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, Edén E. Torres (2003) writes,

> When we do not mourn what we have lost, or deal with the shame, when we deny our emotions, avoid any thought of the events in our lives or memories of our past that cause us pain, we only increase or prolong the symptoms of PTSD. If we avoid grieving, which necessarily includes thinking about the trauma, then we never face the injured Self. (Torres, 2003, p.35).

A physical transformation of becoming a thin woman doesn’t combat a culture of shaming, much less reveal the Self. It won’t erase the feelings of inadequacy and ugliness

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69 “Enough”

70 “Don’t talk about those things, you don’t talk about that. Don’t talk, don’t talk. Be quiet! Remain still.”
that those ladies at Fedco and even my grandpa, mom, and uncle made me feel as a child. To lose weight without confronting the forces that have made me feel ashamed of myself would be to choose to live in silent ignorance. My best friend Jamie has walked along this thesis journey with me. One night over dinner and a conversation about our fatness she so cleverly said, “If we can’t love ourselves right now, just as we are, what makes us think we’re going to love ourselves if we were to be thin? That’s not to say being thin is a bad thing, it’s not. What would be bad is us using thinness to walk away from all those things that made us feel like shit for being fat.” Jamie’s right. The transformation cannot just be physical, it has to be holistic; an intent to connect and heal mind, body, and soul that has to come from a place of self-love.

I feel reluctance and anxiety every time I lift open my laptop to pick up where I left off in this writing endeavor. I’ve shared the topic of this thesis with friends, colleagues, and scholars, but have found it difficult to say the words “I’m writing about my life as a fat Chicana” to anyone in my family with the exception of my tia. This testimonial speaks against a system that judges, discriminates, excludes, and oppresses fat Chicana women. More than that, it recognizes that this system is a parasite that finds its host in the homes of people like me. The reluctance and anxiety I feel stem from the deepest desire to avoid demonizing my family, when I do not know their real reasons for making jokes about my fatness. In my heart, I don’t believe the bullying I faced from them came from a place of trying to intentionally cause me pain. I’ve grown up with parents who yearn to see me reach success and happiness in every way imaginable and have provided me with the tools to do so. I do think that their bullying was a form of poking fun at my fatness in order to get me to lose weight, intentions that were rooted in
faulty imaginations shaped by their own experiences and influenced by dominant discourses. My mom, tia, and tio are currently very fat and have struggled with fatness since their twenties. Unlike them, my grandpa and grandma were never fat, but accompanied their kids down their journeys of “dealing with” being fat. The adults in my life have had to endure society’s stigmatization of fatness and it is quite possible that rather than having serious, heartfelt conversations about my fatness, joking around became an alternative.

Clearly, there are many ways to read and analyze my experiences of bullying. I offer this reading as way to highlight the contradictory context in which I experienced both vergüenza\textsuperscript{71} and love, a site of Nepantla. I also harbor this perspective as a form of rationalization for not only being vocal about these experiences, but to openly say that these experiences can lead to personal, familial, and collective healing.

But do you realize, Ma, that I could never have reacted the way I have if you had not provided for me the opportunity to be free of the binds that have held you down, and to be in the process of self-affirmation? Because of your life, because of the physical security you have given me: my education, my full stomach, my clothed and starched back, my piano and dancing lessons—all those gifts you never received—I saw myself as having worth; now I begin to love myself more, see our potential, and fight for just that kind of social change that will affirm me, my race, my sex, my heritage. And while I affirm myself, Ma, I affirm you (Woo, 1983, p.143).

It’s a tremendous order to explore these very personal and painful memories that I didn’t know I intentionally tried to forget in the effort to disregard my fat identity. And yet,\textsuperscript{71} Shame
deep down inside in the abyss of pain and anger and sadness I know the work must be done for me, my family, my community of fat brown women, and it must be done urgently. “El que no habla, Dios no lo oye.” It’s time to listen to my grandpa’s advice and follow in the footsteps of my tia. With my hocicona mouth and mind, this fat Chicana has chosen to talk back.

La Ropa de Amor Viene en Tallas Grandes

There’s something comforting in knowing that I can talk about plus-size clothes with another fat woman who knows what the struggles are to find affordable, age appropriate, good quality, plus size clothes that fit just right. You see, usually we fat girls get one or the other, but not all of them together. On the first day of my Chicana Feminism class in grad school, I sat next to a chubby undergrad mujer who was sitting in on the course. Just before class started she turned to me and asked “I have to know, where did you get your skinny jeans?” I said “Oh I got these at Torrid. They were expensive, but they were the first pair of skinny jeans that actually fit like skinny jeans.” She laughed and responded “I hate that I can’t find cool clothes that fit right. Like all the pants I try on fit my stomach but make my legs look like pillars.” We both laughed, knowing all too well how hard it is to find “cool” clothes that fit just right. It’s almost an oxymoron that we fat girls try to find skinny jeans that fit just right. I mean, can that ever really happen? Yes, plus size skinny jeans do exist. But to find a pair that have enough stretch for all of panza to fit in and that tightly wrap around the thighs, down through the leg, all the way to the ankle is on a whole other level of plus size shopping. Finding a

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72 The Clothing of Love Comes in Plus Sizes

73 Woman
good pair feels like you’ve literally embarked on a challenging quest to find some far off hidden treasure.

My first encounter with clothing struggles actually came in the form of shoes. From the time I was a toddler, my family had to order special made shoes from Stride Rite because my feet were too wide to fit into the ones that were available in store. After Stride Rite, Payless Shoesource became my go-to shoe store because they actually had a selection of wide-width shoes to try on. Finding adequate clothing for my fat body was always an issue, from uniforms to ballet costumes to everyday clothes. I somehow never fit into clothes that were made for girls my age, and had to go up a few sizes, which of course cost more money too. I think the worst time period for me was the teenage years, especially my early (13-16) teenage years. This was a time of movies and malls, cosmic bowling with friends, football games on Friday nights, dances at the gym, and of course, like most other teenage girls who exaggerated their lack of clothes, I never had anything to wear.

Even though my mind is taking me back only fourteen years or so to 1999, at that time finding plus size clothes for plus size girls was nearly impossible. Yes, plus size clothing stores and sections of department stores existed. However, I was not (and am still not) in the market for matronly and grandma-like tops, bottoms, dresses, or undergarments. My friends wore cute bright colored skirts with little flowers and butterfly prints on them. They could find graphic T-shirts in their sizes that had images of boy bands I loved. I just wanted to fit in, to be seen as “normal” like them despite being the only fat girl in our class. I remember I longingly walked by stores like Charlotte Russe, Wet Seal, Anchor Blue, or even the junior section of department stores, wishing
my fat body could at least squeeze into the X-large. I was especially conscious of this feeling when I would hang out at the mall with my friends who would go into these same stores and I was left exploring purses, jewelry, and sitting in the shoe section as they tried on clothes.

I was lucky to have Lita and tia to indulge me with fashion, especially during that awkward body phase of my life. Lita has always been known as a glamour girl, having a good eye for building stunning outfits and I’ve always known tia to have that same ability, but to do so at a fraction of the cost. My poor tia, looking back she was the one who truly navigated me through my coming of age fashion issues. It seems like my tia and I would make a weekly trip to Parkway Plaza, the one mall in San Diego that had the most selection of stores that had plus size clothes. I remember we would go from one end of the mall to the other, hitting up Robinsons May, JC Penney, Sears, Mervyns, Lane Bryant, and a store called Modern Woman (that no longer exists), all in the effort to find me clothes that made me look like any other teenager. My struggles were tia’s struggles. She felt my lack of self-esteem. The doubt in my eyes reflected the doubt in her eyes when she would help me try on mountains of clothes just to find one outfit that could pass for “cool,” trendy, and normal. My frustration at not finding anything was her frustration, just as much as my success at making a top or a pair of bell bottom pants work was her success.

If only fitting rooms could talk. Those are the spaces that together, my tia and I felt the highest of the highs and the lowest of the lows. Watching the transaction totals grow, I stood next to tia at the cash-wrap of every store. She would buy me the clothes that fit, never putting a price tag on the feeling of success we had achieved in the fitting
room. She opened up credit cards to those stores. She spent a good chunk of her paycheck money on what I put in my closet. This is not to be confused with being rich. Tia worked hard every day for her median income just as much as she saw a majority of her earnings go back into the system towards debt and bills. Yet, tia always managed to set funds aside for me. Her niece. Her fat niece, who always wanted to fit in, be cool, and accepted.

I recently found a box full of clothes I kept from that era. Bell bottom jeans from a 15-hour sale at Robinsons May, my favorite denim jacket we bought at full price from Lane Bryant that I wore to every Friday night football game, a sky blue chiffon blouse with purple butterfly print that I wore to my very first dance in middle school, the list could go on. I decided to take an inventory of these things, listing each article of clothing and identifying the what, when, and where; what store they came come, when I wore them and where I wore them to. The list is there if the day ever comes that I don’t remember. It dawns on me that I didn’t identify who, why, or how, but I guess those are the things that only something like Alzheimer’s or Dementia could ever make me forget; tia bought me those things, by any means necessary simply because she loved me, her fat niece who always wanted to fit in, be cool, and accepted.

Writing this story came easy to me because I love fashion. To me, the clothes, accessories, and makeup I wear are ways for me to put on my creativity cap and match things together that will make me feel beautiful. In Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate politics, Bell Hooks (2000) traces how feminists have challenged sexist thinking about the female body in the fashion industry. She states, “Challenging the industry of sexist-defined fashion opened up the space for females to examine for the first time in our lives the pathological, life-threatening aspects of appearance obsession”
Hooks advocates that feminists go back to the beauty industry to create a revolution that teaches us to love our bodies as ourselves (Hooks, 2000). I’ve had the honor of meeting some women who have taken these critiques and reject the fashion industry altogether, a decision that I understand and respect as they are ways to resist and contest male controlled notions of women’s bodies. I am of the camp that takes these critiques and uses fashion as a method to communicate my fat as beauty to the world, an act that I consider transgressive. All you have to do is walk by a magazine stand or tune into the latest episode of Project Runway to understand why. All fat people, but in particular fat women are not desirable candidates for mainstream fashion industry.

In May 2013, a story was released to the media about comments that Mike Jeffries, CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch made in 2006 in regards to his ideal demographic. “In every school there are the cool and popular kids, and then there are the not-so-cool kids. Candidly, we go after the cool kids. We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don’t belong [in our clothes], and they can’t belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely.” Furthermore, Jeffries justified this mentality by stating, "Those companies that are in trouble are trying to target everybody: young, old, fat, skinny. But then you become totally vanilla. You don’t alienate anybody, but you don’t excite anybody, either" (as cited in Lutz, 2013). To me the irony of this statement is that his company is “vanilla” to a majority of people. Abercrombie & Fitch came to my local malls about ten years ago. The skinny mannequins and images of skinny white teens in the window display as well as white, skinny shirtless male greeters at the door told me all I had to know about the store without ever taking a step in, fat brown chicks are not welcome here. When this story about Jeffries came out a few
months ago, I wasn’t surprised. If anything it sparked my curiosity to visit the Abercrombie & Fitch website where I saw images of young, good looking white and black people and learned that the company only makes jeans sizes zero to twelve and shirts sizes extra-small to large for women, hence confirming what I’ve known all along, fat brown chicks are not welcome here (“size charts,” n.d.).

Abercrombie & Fitch isn’t the only culprit normalizing thin bodies and imposing stigma on fat bodies. Karl Lagerfeld, fashion designer and creative director of Chanel and Fendi has been very vocal in recent years of his distaste for fat women. In 2012, he commented to *Metro Magazine* on British singer Adele’s body, “The thing at the moment is Adele. She is a little too fat, but she has a beautiful face and a divine voice” (as cited in Krupnick, Feb. 6, 2012). In a 2009 interview with *Focus Magazine*, he issued a statement in response to another magazine’s decision to use real women for a photo shoot, versus professional models. “These are fat mummies sitting with their bags of crisps in front of the television, saying that thin models are ugly.” He also said that the world of fashion is about “dreams and illusions, and no one wants to see round women” (as cited in Connolly, Oct. 12, 2009). There is something to be said for the fact that at one point in his life Lagerfeld was himself a fat man who lost over one hundred pounds. This is a clear example of how weight may be lost, but the fat identity or fear of fat identity remains.

The words of Native American scholar, Andrea Smith (2005) offer an understanding for the behaviors of both Jeffries and Lagerfeld. She writes in her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, “As a consequence of this colonization and abuse of their bodies, Indian people learn to internalize self-hatred,
because body image is integrally related to self-esteem. When one’s body is not respected, one begins to hate oneself” (12). For those who have been othered to the point of not being recognized as human, constant marginalization and exclusion becomes internalized, allowing for the possibility of seeing themselves as not human either. This is an all-too familiar story for Indigenous communities who have experienced colonization on multiple levels. As a result of Western political, economic, and cultural impositions, from the forced displacement from homelands to the erasure of spiritual practices, Indigenous communities around the world carry a historical legacy of being seeing as un-grievable that can lead to self-destructive patterns and behavior.

Jeffries and Lagerfeld are not members of Indigenous communities and have not experienced the deep levels of colonization that those communities have. If I share Smith’s words here it is neither to liken the experiences of Jeffries and Lagerfeld to that of Native people nor to provide excises for them, but rather to highlight the many ways in which colonization easily renders un-fit bodies as not human. Jeffries and Lagerfeld are victims of fat oppression, but their access to privilege and power as affluent white males gives them the option of perpetrating fat oppression onto others. I also suspect that it is their choices to remain ignorant of their privileges that keep them blind them from seeing the ways they experience colonization, much less the ways they impose colonization. What a dark, hopeless, and loveless world they live in. Resistance may not be a way of life, but it can serve as a necessary step towards re-fashioning a world that recognizes the humanity of everyone.

Not a Cinderella Story

I don’t know how to begin this story. Only that it starts with girl meets boy. His
name was Jason. We met in a Chicano Studies course at UCLA during the winter quarter, my second year. I sat next to my friend Carmen who sat next to Alejandro who sat next to Jason. As the semester progressed, the four of us became friends. One day that class was over, I asked “hey why don’t the four of us get together sometime this week to study for the midterm?” We ended up studying at Coffee Bean, which is where I think Jason and I hit it off. From that point, the four of us would hang out at least once every week. My crush grew into definitely liking him. Now before I go on, I have to let you know that I need to put into words the way I’ve learned to deal with guys I have feelings for. If I suspect that I get checked out, I immediately tell myself they aren’t, simply because I’ve bought into the popular notion that guys don’t check out big girls. If I suspect that someone I like might reciprocate the feeling, I immediately tell myself that I’m imagining it, simply because I’ve bought into the notion that guys don’t desire to be with big girls. I’m sure I’m not the first girl to do these things and I’m sure that if this was to be psychoanalyzed or whatever, it would be seen as a way to put walls up and not let anyone in. This is true! Who wants to get hurt at any size?

With Jason, it was me liking him, me thinking he reciprocated the feeling, but me not saying anything because I didn’t want to ruin anything. My mistake was silence. Not with him, but with a girl named Allison. This girl transferred to UCLA the same year I did and we happened to have a couple mutual friends. One night these friends, including Allison and I were having coffee on campus when she said “Creo que a la Mónica le gusta el Jason.”74 I shook my head to communicate no and tried to laugh it off. Sometime after that, during one of the outings with Alejandro, Jason, and Carmen, Jason mentioned that Allison told him that someone close to him liked him a lot and started dropping

74 “I think Mónica likes Jason.”
telling hints about who this person was. This ended up being the hot topic of the day, a topic that wouldn’t get dropped.

That day I ended up letting Jason know I was the one who had feelings for him and the response I got in return completely threw me off. You see, I got no response. Despite the fact that we had other classes together and mutual friends, Jason avoided me at all costs. The four of us stopped hanging out together, he no longer went to meetings for the organization we were involved in, and of course I got blocked from Facebook (insert gasp!). Needless to say, I felt confused and even felt embarrassed. I think it’s one thing to have feelings for someone and not have those feelings reciprocated. But it’s quite another thing to like a person and for that person to act as if they get offended by the fact that you like him or her in that way. That’s exactly how I felt, as a result of Jason’s behavior. I felt like I had transgressed some imaginary line that differentiates between people that should intermingle with each other from those who shouldn’t.

This high school drama gets worse. One night that Carmen and I were studying for a final at my old apartment, we somehow got the bright idea for her to chat with Jason about what was going on over the internet. They say curiosity kills the cat, but they also say cats have nine lives. Curiosity killed a big part of my spirit and broke my heart that night. Three years later I am still shattered and am slowly putting together the pieces of my broken heart. I learned that night that Jason did in fact have feelings for me, that he liked everything about me, except my weight. Jason said he just couldn’t get past my size and that he suspected that deep down inside I wasn’t happy with my size either.

There it was the words that I had been dreading my whole life. I somehow managed to live twenty-two years without being bullied at school, without having any of
the boys I liked in high school tell me they didn’t like me because of my weight, of buying cute and trendy clothes, of being a well-liked and respected person at school and in organizations, of having plenty of guy friends (which was surprising to my mom and my tia because they didn’t have guy friends when they were my age), and yet none of that mattered or measured up the fact that my being fat was the problem with this one guy.

I know that I have internalized a lot of dominant beliefs about what it means to be fat. This is especially true when it comes to romantic relationships, my sexual being, even my femininity. Yes, despite all the reading and writing about the virgin/whore dichotomy in Chicana feminism or sex-positive work in Fat Studies, I still subscribe to the notion that because I am a fat brown woman, I am unattractive, undesirable, and incapable of being in a healthy and loving relationship with a partner. In my mind, I believe that as a fat brown woman, I am perceived as an either/or by the opposite sex; hypersexual fetish or asexual being—both colonized archetypes. Tasha Fierce (2012), author of “Inside Out” writes of her personal experience with sex and fatness. She concludes by saying,

As an ending to this story with no end, I want to make sure that you know that it’s okay to not be perfect at being fat or loving your body. It’s okay to be nervous about taking off your clothes front of a guy. It’s okay if you’re worried that a new sex partner is turned off by your body. No one is brave and fierce all the time. So many young women have expressed these fears and others like them to me in shame, as if it’s breaking the rules to have insecurities. Our society puts a lot of importance on ‘strength.’ We who have been at this for a while often don’t share when something bothers us. I think that gives a lot of people—especially people new to the fat acceptance movement—the idea that at some point you’re beyond all
the bullshit. It gets easier, definitely. But there are going to be times when it’s really fucking hard (Fierce, 2012, 166).

Writing this particular “girl meets boy” story and talking it through with my most intimate friends and mentors forced me to confront the reality that “I am not beyond my own bullshit” when it comes to life, love, and sexuality. I have to give myself credit for acknowledging what I have internalized because at least that opens up the possibility to work through those limiting ways of thinking. When you ask me what I think of myself, I want to channel my inner Carrie Bradshaw and say “I’m fabulous.” I know I’m smart and I know I do it in style. I own more clothes and shoes than my thinner friends, and that’s being a size 22-24 and 11 in shoes. I’m fun to hang out with and a really good friend. I will go the distance for my family and my friends, and pour my hard work into what is asked of me. I’m a great follower and a greater leader. I may not be as much of a practicing Catholic as I used to be, but I know that I try to be a just person—to do what’s right and help anyone any chance I get. In this moment, to ask me what I think of myself, I envision a scale, where these qualities lay on one side and my fat body on the other. Guess which side weighs more? I’m mad at myself for thinking this way and in every crevice of my heart I yearn to one day say these things proudly.

Jason and I eventually came around to talking about what happened almost a year later. That conversation took place right after the summer that I had decided that my life was destined for seclusion, accepting a false belief that the skinny world around me deserved to feel alive, and I, the forever fat brown girl did not. That was also the same summer that my best friend (thankfully) introduced me to Fat Studies, allowing for this path towards healing to open up. I somehow found it my heart to forgive Jason and
allowed a new, albeit more distanced, friendship to resume with him. To this day, those
who know our story wonder how I could find it in my heart to forgive someone who
completely turned my world upside down. Truthfully, I still wonder how I could forgive
him too. I guess for me to not forgive him was not to move forward with my own life in a
more productive and loving way. Once Jason and I resumed a new friendship, I learned
that he is someone who has issues with his own weight and body image, a struggle that is
defined by a desire to meet society’s standards of what an ideal male body should look
like. His rejection of me and recognizing his struggles revealed how much I didn’t want
to continue living a life of anger and sorrow at always falling short of the norm. There are
too many experiences and relationships that get missed out on with this mentality. So
forgiving him was no problem. If anything the time to embark on the journey of self-
forgiveness and self-determination had come.

Fat on Fat Violence

I recently attended the National Association for Chicano and Chicana Studies (NACCS) Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas. For these conferences, it’s safe to
say that students work hard and play harder. Since our panel presentation was taking
place the last day of the conference, the group that I traveled with decided we would
celebrate that night by going out to the local gay bar scene. Indeed we found a bar/club
where brown gay Tejan@s can dance to Selena and 2pac all on the same dance floor, not
to mention enjoy an array of drinks for half of what it would cost at a gay bar in Los
Angeles.

Aside from the predominant presence of Latin@s/Chican@s, bilingual music and
cheap drinks, being at this gay bar/club was in itself a unique experience than spending
the night at a straight or gay cosmopolitan bar/club in Los Angeles. Fat men, fat women, fat cross dressers, and fat drag queens filled the rooms, truly diversifying the shapes and sizes of the crowd. It was a sight to behold and a feeling of comfort for this fat Chicana, who has *never*, and I repeat *never*, felt like part of the bar/club scene. My fat brown body has always stuck out (like a red apple in a box of bananas if you will), something that is entirely hypervisible and in my experience becomes a nuisance at these places. I take up “too much” space from standing in line to get in to a bar/club, to squeezing through crowds of people who are reluctant to scoot a few inches, to sharing a sardine can packed dance floor with gyrating bodies. All these things float in and out of consciousness in the moments I’m experiencing them. It’s like the half of me that is aware of these surroundings and in tune with my emotions of being “too much” battles it out with the half of me that tries to ignore and silence it. Yet, here I was in San Antonio, in a gay bar/club finding myself (for the first time) letting go of those inhibitions not because of alcohol, not because of psychological warfare, but because I was in the presence and part of queer fat utopia (I borrow from José Esteban Muñoz’ [2009] idea of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia*).

Then came 2:30am (closing time), leaving my group with nothing left but to huddle outside having tipsy conversation about queer theory, PhD programs, and Chican@ identity as we waited for our cab to arrive and take us back to the hotel. Some chose to chain smoke to keep warm in the crisp early morning Tejano air. My carcinogen of choice came not from tobacco but from charred BBQ’d carnitas, cheap and greasy taco truck food right outside the venue. We were surrounded by inebriated party-goers (tacones in hand) who engaged in similar activities and dodged police cars while trying to
hail down cabs. As much as our conversation interested me, my attention shifted to a battle going on next to our group between a group of girls and a queer male couple, both of which were trying to grab the attention of cab drivers speeding past us. At best the competition turned into verbal cattiness as one girl exclaimed to one of the guys “You’re probably going to get a cab first, you have an ass big enough to get their attention!” He gasped at her. Clearly offended by her remark, he grabbed his partner by the hand and together they stomped a few feet away from them, sandwiching us between both parties. I could hear everything both sides were saying about each other, “That bitch called me fat! Maybe I shouldn’t have worn my white pants!” said the guy to his partner as they hugged each other. His partner comforted him, “your pants are fine” caressing his butt, “you look good.” The girl who made the comment drunkenly told her girls “He’s just jealous cuz he can’t be sexy like us,” they laughed. Upon hearing their cackling, the offended guy spun around and yelled out “puta gorda sin chichis pero con lonjotas!”

Now I’m not sure if either party was aware that I was listening in on their fight, since my back was to them and I was trying to steal glances from my peripheral vision (playing it cool like a true chismosa), but then the offended guy walks up behind me, puts his hand on my shoulder and says “can you believe that bitch? She called my ass fat!” I knew he was drunk or tipsy at best, but I just turned to him and said “I don’t know about that, but you’re definitely working those white pants!” He continued “you don’t think I’m fat like that bitch do you?” Putting my hands on my lonjas, I responded “Well

75 Fat bitch with no boobs but big rolls of fat!
76 Gossiper
77 Rolls of fat
in comparison to me you both are palitos.” He laughed, sloppily hugged me then said “But you’re so beautiful!” then walked away, back to his partner.

One of my friends asked “What was that all about?” Apparently, the group of friends I was huddled with saw the mini conversation that had just taken place. I laughed then briefly filled them in, “I don’t really know! He randomly came up to me and I guess he got offended that this girl called his ass big and he told her she had lonjas and no boobs. What’s up with this fat-on-fat violence? There’s just no need for it!” We all laughed since the group knows the fat-positive work I’m doing and the previous conversation continued on.

It’s been almost a month since that night, and the experience has floated in and out of consciousness as I try to analyze the whole experience. In the moment of conversation I was trying to be funny by asking “what’s up with this fat-on-fat violence?” But now that some time has passed and I’ve had the chance to familiarize myself with the construction of fatness and make connections between literature and my experiences, I seriously ask, what’s up with all this fat-on-fat violence?

I want to note that I borrow from the terminology and concept of black-on-black violence (black victims of crime caused by black perpetrators) to briefly identify and discuss this notion of fat-on-fat violence. It is a concept that I am only beginning to work through and would like to expand in future research. David Wilson (2005), author of *Inventing Black-on-Black Violence: Discourse, Space, and Representation* offers an insightful assessment of black-on-black violence, as it was constructed and represented

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78 Sticks
through media narratives in the 1980’s, that informs current discourses of blackness. He writes,

At the core of this violence, in renditions, was blackness rather than poverty, economics or class. Instead of economic circumstance or social situatedness, race was the template applied to understand this violence. In media hyperbole, here was proof that inner city blacks had become dangerously distant from civility. Many narrativists communicated this violence as one more marker of a failing problem people who had become dangerously discordant and self-destructive (Wilson, 2005, p.4).

Thus, race, or blackness has become the primary target, suspect, culprit, and problem in similar ways that excess weight, or fatness has in popular imagination. In his book, Wilson expands on the culpability of race by also intersecting the role that space (i.e. geography, urban centers, and ethnic enclaves), economics, and a historical legacy of marginalized identity has played in the construction of such narratives.

The night that I posed the question, “What’s up with this fat-on-fat violence?” I asked it in the context of trying to highlight the fat shaming that occurred between the queer male and fat female through their exchange of words, and to even point out the possibility that I was singled out as “the token fat girl” who was accessible in that immediate space for opinion and even comparison. There are multiple layers to this notion of fatness and violence. On one level, I see and hear it everywhere. When one person looks another up and down and makes fat negative comments about his or her body that is fat-on-fat violence. When we choose to blindly adhere to a Western society’s narrow standards of body sizes that is fat-on-fat violence. When we measure each other
and attribute that person’s value based on those narrow standards that is fat-on-fat violence. On another level, this concept of fat-on-fat violence isn’t exclusive to what the popular imagination conceptualizes as a fat person either. Every human needs fat in their bodies to survive.

Fat cells, also known as adipocytes, store excess energy from foods as fat. Fat is stored in the form of fatty acids called triglycerides. Adipose tissue, or a group of fat cells, is found between the skin and muscle (subcutaneous fat) and around the organs in the main body cavities (visceral fat), primarily in the abdominal cavity…The triglycerides stored in fat cells act primarily as energy reserves. After your body uses all the available sugar (known as glycogen) for energy, it begins to use the stored fat. Fat cells have several other roles, as well. They cushion and protect vital organs, insulate the body against heat loss, secrete chemicals that play a part in appetite and other processes, protect nerve tissue, and help regulate women's menstrual cycles (“Why fat cells are important,” n.d.).

Despite everyone’s need for fat cells, Western ideologies about fatness center aesthetics, and depend on narrow indicators to assess health, thus creating a culture that demonizes fat.

In America today, the medical and public health establishment has managed to transform what has traditionally been considered a vice-physical vanity-into that most sacred of secular virtues: the pursuit of ‘health’. In the context of the war on fat it has done so by systematically distorting the available evidence regarding the relationship between weight and health, by severely exaggerating the risks associated with that evidence, and by pretending that an extremely complex
subject is actually quite simple (Campos, 2004, pp. xvii-xix).

Since such negative ideologies and practices have infiltrated our perspectives about fatness, it can be argued that most everyone, regardless of body size has the potential to experience, impose, and combat fat-on-fat violence.

But what is the purpose of Chican@’s/Latin@’s inflicting fat violence on one another, especially as people who have marginalized positions in imperial empires? Why do we use words as tools to shame and demean each other, when the only thing we really do is perpetuate our own marginalization by doing so? Have we internalized so many “isms” that we have normalized hurtful ways of treating one another? Audre Lorde so wisely writes,

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference--those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older--know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (Lorde, 2007, 112).

For me, to locate fat-on-fat violence allows for the development of radical terminology that re-defines seemingly neutral or un-harmful language and action against fat persons to
what they really are, acts of violence. It opens an exploration of ways fat violence has been inflicted on me especially through the tool of verbal shaming. Through this exploration I also hold myself accountable to the instances I have imposed fat violence on other people as well as myself. Furthermore, naming fat-on-fat violence highlights the ways it is uncritically inflicted on and within members of different marginal groups, as in the case of the queer male and fat woman in San Antonio. Author Sandra Cisneros’ offers useful and thought-provoking words for comprehending fat-on-fat violence as tool of oppression and also site for transformation,

There is pain and suffering in the world, true, but I think we must ask ourselves as writers, as people who have suffered oppression, are we guilty of perpetuating pain with pain, oppression with oppression. Has our fear and our rage forced us to hold knives, pull triggers, to fight evil by being evil.

I am convinced that the power of an oppressed group is its vision, its ability to see pain where others might not see it because they have not experienced it…Each of us has witnessed unique atrocities specific to our gender or race or class or sexuality; each of us, and our distinctive visions, is our gift to each other as a group and to the world at large (Trujillo, 1998, p. 85).

When seen in this way, fat-on-fat violence allows for the personal to become central figure, more like agent in recognizing fat violence and establishing modes of healing that allow alternative modes of thinking about fatness to come into fruition.

Changing Identities

As an undergraduate at UCLA, I took a class called “Latinos and the Law” offered through the Chicano Studies Department. The professor organized the class
historically and thematically, presenting various legal cases involving persons of
Mexican and Mexican-American descent and covering relevant issues like land rights and
immigration policies. One of the things that stuck with me from this class is just how
easy it is to change the way people are classified. The colonization of the Americas by
Spain relegated aboriginal peoples as objects on their own lands and property of the
Spanish crown (Acuña, 2010; Martinez 1990). Through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,
persons living on territories acquired by the United States from Mexico became second-
class American citizens practically overnight (Acuña, 2010; De Leon, 1983; Chávez-
García, 2004). The U.S. Census Bureau has imposed ever-changing racial categories on
the Latin American population who has had to negotiate identity with terms like “White,”
“Latina/o,” or “Hispanic” (Wallerstein, 2006). These examples depict an ignored history
of the way hegemonic power relations jostle groups of people, oftentimes with just the
stroke of a pen that determines labels and the meaning behind those labels.

During the process of writing this thesis, I experienced this phenomenon when the
American Medical Association (A.M.A.) officially declared obesity a disease in June
2013. Despite being a “healthy” young woman (according to my last full physical exam
in 2012), this group of physicians determined that my body is now medically classifiable
as a diseased body. Interestingly, this decision was made against the conclusions of the
A.M.A.’s own Council on Science and Public Health, which studied this issue and found
that the body mass index (BMI) used to classify people as underweight, normal,
overweight, and obese is too simple and flawed an indicator to capture health and
wellness of those bodies (Pollack, 2013). My grandpa used to tell me “Remember mija,
money talks, shit walks,” which I think is relevant to the A.M.A.’s final decision. Now
that obesity is a disease,

The AMA seems eager to expand weight-loss treatment and convince insurers to reimburse for it. Big Pharma has two new weight-loss drugs out, with users losing at most only 10% of their body weight at a monthly cost of $100 or more and possible health complications. Bariatric surgeons would doubtless like to expand insurance reimbursements for the practice of surgically interrupting healthy internal organs. And the $66 billion per year weight-loss industry has a stake, too (Wann, 2013).

Clearly, big bodies mean big money for the medical community and weight loss industry that have taken a lead role in normalizing the “othering” of obesity. People are led to believe that obesity is ugly, a financial burden, indicative of gluttony and immorality, and even a death sentence. In contrast, what becomes the idolized ideal is thinness. The A.M.A. might argue that the medical ideal for obese bodies to work towards is what the BMI identifies as “normal.” Again, as the Council on Science and Public Health states, the BMI may be a way to calculate “normal” numbers for assessing body mass, but it is not indicative of health and wellness. To the popular imagination, a healthy body is a skinny body.

Furthermore, another chilling aspect of this new designation is the A.M.A.’s faulty rhetoric of investing in preventative care and promoting health and wellness for all Americans. According to A.M.A. President, Dr. Ardis D. Hoven, “Rapidly rising obesity rates have led to a decrease in health and wellness and an increase in costs for treating obesity-related illnesses. We must address this juxtaposition to improve the health of our nation. The A.M.A. is working to reduce the burden of preventable disease to ensure
health, wellness and well-being for all Americans” (Hoven, 2013). Yes, there are correlations between obesity and illnesses like type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers, all of which reduce the quality of life and life expectancy (Campos, 2004; Torre & Estrada; 2001; Woodward-López & Flores, 2006), yet a cause and effect relationship between obesity and poor health has been established and grossly exaggerated. Aside from the profitability aspect discussed earlier, this relationship between obesity and poor health justifies designating obesity as a disease without taking into account the complexities that arise from doing so. On the CNN Opinion website, Marilyn Wann shares the responses of different members of the body diversity community to the A.M.A’s decision, all of whom believe obese people will face more stigma in medical settings.

For more than two decades, health professionals who promote the Health at Every Size concept have argued that a weight focus does no lasting good and much harm to physical and mental health and to fat people's social status. They are finding that a weight-neutral approach based in self-acceptance and social justice yields far superior results for people's health and happiness. People are able to develop enjoyable, sustainable eating and exercise habits and a positive feeling about their bodies. If the AMA truly cares about the health of fat people, they will end the war on obesity (Wann, 2013).

The fatphobic society we live in has created an environment that says its okay, almost necessary to define obesity as a disease, thus blatantly targeting people like me as the problem. Sadly, generations of Chican@s know all too well what it means to be constantly labeled as “the problem.” However, we know we aren’t and we fight back.
I refuse to accept that because I am obese, I am diseased. I refuse to accept the term obesity because to do so is to succumb to the institutions that profit off of making a mockery of my fatness. I admit their mockery is cleverly guised in discourses of “ensuring health, wellness and well-being” to quote A.M.A President, Dr. Hoven. But I know better. The A.M.A. plays a huge role in a profitable medical-industrial complex. This is the same institution that sterilized countless Chicanas and other women of color against their will (DeFine, 1997; Stern, 2005). This is the same institution that has used the bodies of women of color as test subjects for birth-control and arguably for race control (Ross, 2006; Smith, 2005). This is the same institution that in the 20th century permitted delousing Mexicans at the U.S./Mexico border with gasoline and pesticides in fear they carried Typhus into the United States (Dorado Romo, 2005). Yes, I know better, because the struggles of my ancestors are encoded in my very flesh.

Oscar Zeta Acosta’s The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo (1989) is one of those obscure, but valuable Chicano Studies texts that almost missed making it into this thesis, precisely because it is not very recognized in the Chican@ community. I did not know that a Chicano male had experienced consciousness of fatness and dared to write about his fat life as a fat brown man. Zeta Acosta is one of those rare figures that some love to hate and hate to love, precisely because he lived his life blatantly exposing the hegemonic powers that rendered him as the “other,” but bashed almost everyone along the way including lesbians and women. I wonder what he would say to a fat Chicana situating his life in Nepantla? I am cognizant of his prejudices as I write this and understand the fine line I walk in choosing to include a brief discussion of his work here. I do, however, make use of Sandra Soto’s (2010) Reading Chican@ Like a Queer, The De-mastery of
Desire to re-read his text with an alternative lens that allows for queer imagining. That is, Zeta Acosta’s work as part of a nationalistic, male, and heteronormative Chicano literary canon from the early Chicano Movement is read beyond his sized and racialized body to locate the queer, a life of Nepantla.

Marcia Chamberlain, author of “Oscar Zeta Acosta’s Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo, A Fat Man’s Recipe for Chicano Revolution,” offers a critical reading of the text that I find connects to the issue of current national discourses of obesity, in particular this discussion of relegating obesity as disease. She places the themes of fat, race, and nation in conversation with each other, to show the complexity of Zeta Acosta’s embodiment of fatness, browness, and over-use of his voice. “A 300-pound modern-day buffalo, Acosta paradoxically pushes to the extreme what the dream is supposed to represent. His fat body is simultaneously the ultimate dream-come-true and the ultimate American nightmare, ‘a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country’” (Braziel & Lebesco, 2001, p. 92). If I apply my queer Chicana feminist lens to this understanding of Zeta Acosta, I see in him a fellow border-dweller, someone who understood American culture as the context that gave rise to his fat brown body and is the same culture that sought to eliminate his fat brown body. To be caught in that paradox is something I know all too well. In the final chapter of his autobiography, Zeta Acosta affirms who he is, by turning towards Chicanismo and indigeneity.

What I see now, on this rainy day in January, 1968, what is clear to me after this sojourn is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American. I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant. I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice….Like my old man used to say, an Indian forgives, but he never
forgets…that, ladies and gentlemen, is all I meant to say. That unless we band together, we brown buffalos will become extinct. And I do not want to live in a world without brown buffalos (Zeta Acosta, 1989, p.199).

I think it is this powerful re-affirmation, this location of the self as his own unique identity that Zeta Acosta was able to write about, offering a recording his own life story, and by extension providing a record of his existence. Although he is a complex figure in Chican@ literature, the ways in which he acknowledges and interprets his fat brown body is useful and symbolic of resistance to the nation(s) that “other” him for his fatness and brownness.

To parallel Zeta Acosta, the works of photographer Laura Aguilar resonate with me and also inform a culture of Chican@ resistance, especially in the world of art. She combats racism, sexism, homophobia, Chicano cultural nationalism, and fatphobia, all “isms” and “phobias” that work to keep certain groups invisible. Importantly, the people that she captures in her images literally embody the notion of “queer” not as it is commonly understood just through sexuality, but also through gender, race, and body size, precisely those markers of identity that are deemed “the problem” by a society invested in whiteness. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano writes “Aguilar’s representation of the ‘non-ideal’ body is read in the context of Western art’s marginalization of racial and sexual ‘Others,’ while the size of many of her subjects resonates within other cultural histories in which massive bodies carry different connotations” (Trujillo, 1998, p. 297).

In one of her more notable photographs, *Three Eagles Flying* (1990), Aguilar’s nude, fat body stands in between the Mexican flag and American flag, while another American flag wraps around the lower half of her body and a Mexican flag covers her
entire head, the eagle of the flag placed right where her face would be visible. Both flags on her body are bound by a rope that wraps around her lower abdomen, ties her hands in the front, and reaches around her neck as if to communicate she is in a hostage situation. Yarbro-Bejarano shares her reading of this portrait, offering the following insight, “The representation of the female body as both constrained by and escaping rigid constructs of identity in *Three Eagles Flying* recalls Moraga’s writing of the flesh that is especially female, lesbian, and mestiza as the site of a desire that can overflow and destabilize binary categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Trujillo, 1998, p. 286). When read in this way, Aguilar’s work locates Nepantla as the space for those who are “othered” to reclaim their subjectivities.

In “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother,” E. Patrick Johnson (2001) writes of the “othered thing,” the racialized, classed, and gendered queer body through a political and intellectual strategy of resistance. He argues for the need to “quare” queer since queer theory has failed to be inclusive of all queer bodies, hence reinforcing the norms it has set to destabilize. He also advocates for the inclusivity of the different intersections of queer bodies in quare theory, demanding that such theorizing requires a commitment to materiality because such bodies are material that exist in real time and space. I think the works of Laura Aguilar can be read in a quare way because the bodies and symbols she photographs capture ideologies and meanings that are enacted through the material world. Like Zeta Acosta, her aesthetic of centering bodies that represent specificities of identity like race, sexuality, nation, and body size expose the paradox of an American culture that makes these bodies possible, while relegating them as “othered.” Furthermore, the
visibility of these same bodies disrupts an investment in whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity that exist even in subaltern movements like queer art, Chicanismo, and fat positivity.

By reading the works of Oscar Zeta Acosta and Laura Aguilar, I inch closer towards the affirmation that my fat Chicana body is not the source of my physical, mental, and emotional problems. Rather, the hegemonic powers that label my fat Chicana body as “the problem” are the culprit. To quote, actress, Marilyn Monroe, “To all the girls that think you’re fat because you’re not a size zero, you’re the beautiful one. It’s society who’s ugly.” Let it be known that from this day forward, I am a beautiful fat Chicana.
EPILOGUE

“Our present moment becomes history. History is enacted myth. Myth is remembered story. Story makes medicine. I am in daily search of these acts of remembering of who we once were, because I believe they will save our pueblos from extinction.”

-Cherríe L. Moraga

(Moraga, 2011, p. 81)

Writing is an act prompted by intuition, a whispered voice, a tightening of the gut. It is an irrevocable promise to not forget what the body holds as memory.

One night, during the final stages of creating this autohistoria-teoría, my grandpa briefly appeared to me in my dreams. Together, we made our way through crowds of people at his favorite casino to get to the buffet. From the table where we dined, I watched him drive his little red electric wheelchair to different food stations and finally back to our table with his plate of food. No words were exchanged, only a magnificent meal, followed by a night of his favorite pastime, gambling and jackpot winning. In my immediate family and most intimate group of friends, we treat each other to a night of celebration for the many milestones and accomplishments we achieve. Even though my grandfather is not here in the physical world, he still found a way to say “You did it mija! I’m very proud of you!”

In the beginning, I was afraid to let my heart loose on paper, as if the process of writing my heart’s revelations would throw the deadly daggers that finished off my spirit. It was only until I read Father Greg Boyle’s Tattoos on the Heart that I recognized I feared my own capacity to love and embrace myself for all that I am. This thesis served
as a vehicle for me to pave a pathway towards healing and wholeness. It is a journey of love that honors my embodied existence as a fat Chicana, revealing la diosa gorda en mi corazón.⁷⁹

Making Menudo, Feeding the Soul: Towards a Fat Chicana Epistemology

Each chapter of this work represented a step along the journey towards making the Mexican dish menudo as well as towards locating consciousness to generate a Fat Chicana Epistemology. In chapter one, or “The Inventory,” I provided a brief account for the context that gave rise to this thesis. I also embedded a literal inventory of ingredients and steps to make this dish within a narrative of my own initial experience with menudo. Chapter two, “The Purchase,” explored Fat Studies and medical/public literature in response to the question, “How does fatness get determined in the United States?” I initiated this assessment by presenting what mainstream society has bought into about the purpose of consuming menudo and what people have bought into about fatness. My Chicana consciousness revealed the absence of Chicanas in this literature, prompting me to ask “How does Chicana/o culture play a role in the formation of a fat Chicana identity?” I presented a couple theatrical works of Fat Chicana feminists who center fatness, thus creating spaces for fat Chicanas to contest their secondary status.

In chapter three, or “The Preparation,” I established Cindy Cruz’ “Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body” (2001) as well as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s “Theory of the Flesh” (1981) as the theoretical framework for this thesis. I presented a history of menudo and designated this dish as a symbol of Nepantla, the sustenance for my fat-self as a Nepantlera preparing for my journey towards transformation. I also identified the method of this thesis, an autohistoria-teoría, in which

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⁷⁹ The fat goddess in my heart
testimonios are located and used to situate the self as central figure. Lastly, in chapter four, “The Transformation,” I asked “How do fat Chicanas navigate their identities within a fat-phobic society?” and presented my own experiences of being a fat Chicana, highlighting the ways I now negotiate the push-and-pull of my fatness and how Nepantla can serve as a way to re-claim fatness and give rise to a Fat Chicana Consciousness.

The writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cindy Cruz, and Cherríe Moraga significantly inform and guide the path I now travel. Their concepts and understandings of Nepantla, Coyolxauhqui, and the body allow for the birth of Fat Chicana Consciousness, a holistic state of being (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) that acknowledges fatness as a worthy and precious identity. To borrow again from the words of Anzaldúa,

The path of the artist, the creative impulse, what I call the Coyolxauhqui imperative is basically an attempt to heal the wounds. It’s a search for inner completeness. Suffering is one of the motivating forces of the creative impulse. Adversity calls forth your best energies and most creative solutions. Creativity sets off an alchemical process that transforms adversity and difficulties into works of art. All of life’s adventures go into the cauldron, la hoya, where fragments, inconsistencies, contradictions are stirred and cooked to a new integration. They undergo transformation.

For me esta hoya is the body. I have to inhabit the body, discover its sensitivity and intelligence. When all your antenna quiver and your body becomes a lightening rod, a radio receiver, a seismograph detecting and recording ground movement, when your body responds, every part of you moves in synchronicity. All responses to the world take place within our bodies. Our bodies are tuning
forks receiving impressions, which in turn activate other responses. An artist has to stay focused on the point of intersection (nepantla) between inner and outer worlds through her senses. Listening to an inner order, the voice of real intuition, allows it to come through the artist’s body and into the body of the work (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p. 292).

Letting my heart reveal the truths of fatness on paper allowed my own fat, female, brown body to come alive. Guided by the light of Coyolxauhqui, my narratives anxiously spilled out, one after the other, as if to exclaim, “Finally!” Furthermore, by locating my fat Chicana voice I allowed my narratives to spill into Nepantla, the site that allows for the ambiguities, contradictions, and transformations of these life experiences to occur.

Recommendations for Future Research

I believe that the power of future work comes from creating connections between both quantitative and qualitative work. This approach is necessary and urgent given that we live in a society in which quantitative work is generated and used as tool to impose stigma on fat people. How that stigma is experienced within the Chican@/Latin@ community is left out. How does “obesity” stigma impact Chican@s/Latin@ who have experienced other forms of stigma based on race, class, gender, and sexuality?

In Speaking From the Body: Latinas on Health and Culture, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian and Adela de la Torre (2008) reaffirm, “Our health data are collected primarily at clinics and hospitals and through various government agencies. These bland inventories of data do provide important information for pinpointing potential areas of risk for our population, but they give no insight into the meaning of these diseases for our families and communities” (p. 178). In this manner, gaining a better understanding of
Chican@/Latin@ health continues to be overlooked as necessary connections are not being made between institutions and communities, “authority” figures and the people they collect data from, and importantly between Western conceptualizations of health with cultural and traditional perspectives. With such fragmented knowledge, it may come as no surprise that Chican@/Latin@ bodies are overlooked or relegated to the margins by Fat Studies, medical/public health reports, and even within Chican@ Studies. The absence of this knowledge is exemplar of the way in which a marginalized sub-group of an already marginal group can remain suspect as a legitimate subject even within academic disciplines that are considered “progressive” and “radical” given their claimed stance against imperial standards of normativity.

Testimonios should be a starting point as they are created by those who speak to their realities in ways that not only make their beings visible and political, but also have the power to heal minds, bodies, and souls from systematic forms of oppression. “Seeking to contest and transform the very disciplines that taught us the skills to recover our subjugated knowledges, we reclaimed testimonio as a tool for Latinas to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity. Despite its complicated history, testimonio captures Latinas’ complex, layered lives” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, 17-18).

Fatness is a source of difference that adds another layer to the lives of Chican@s/Latin@s. Where are the stories of fat Chican@s/Latin@s? What does obesity as disease and epidemic in dominant discourses mean for Chican@s/Latin@s? What role(s) does a fat body play in Chican@/Latin@ lived experiences, especially in an increasing fat-phobic society? In order to attempt any answers that will do justice to these questions, the voices of “the fat” themselves must be the central point from which any
alternative discourses are created.

Final Thought

In “Now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts,” Anzaldúa (2002) takes her readers through the journey of “conocimiento” or the path one must take to finding what life means in order to recognize the roles and positions we all have in a greater cosmic order. She argues that Nepantla can lead to discovering one’s “conocimiento,” which also leads us to transformative ideologies and practices towards one another. Anzaldúa calls us to recognize that the path of conocimiento is not an easy one, nor is it linear with an end point, but is on-going, cyclical, overlapping, and necessary when trying to make sense of what our lives are all about (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). This thesis has been exactly that, the commencement of my own path towards conocimiento; the hope that my words and experiences can prompt other fat Chicanas to embark on their journeys towards conocimiento.

One of my all-time favorite quotes is from HBO’s hit series, “Sex and the City.” In the very last scene of the show, Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker), the main protagonist writes,

Later that day I got to thinking about relationships. There are those that open you up to something new and exotic, those that are old and familiar, those that bring up lots of questions, those that bring you somewhere unexpected, those that bring you far from where you started, and those that bring you back. But the most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all is the one you have with yourself. And if you find someone to love the you-you love, well, that's just fabulous (Fields, et. al., 2003).
This journey towards healing has by far been the most rewarding, precisely because it centers the relationships I have with others and the one I have with myself. It is through Nepantla—the contradictions, the ambiguity, and the push-and-pull of people or ideologies that I feel the most alive and open to love. Nepantla itself is a space where the possibility to transform and find love can happen. I have only just begun my walk down the path towards conocimiento, and am sure that there will be times when I will encounter obstacles that make me question the purpose of this journey. For now, I do believe that I have seen and found the me that I love, and well, that’s just fabulous.
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