

ME HACE LA VIDA CUADRITOS: A TESTIMONIO OF LIFE IN THE BORDERLANDS

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“If you want to be happy, just be.”¹ The author of this simple, beautiful phrase intended for us to embrace every moment of our process in becoming. That means that, to be happy, you must love both the beautiful and the flawed aspects that allow for the synchronicity of your being. Too often, we get lost in what is expected of us, what we think we ought to be, and, in some cases, that which we are too scared of becoming. But, what if the thing you are most scared of becoming is where your happiness lies? Humans tend to have the tedious habit of highlighting only the positive and joy filled moments of their lives, while ignoring that which causes them pain and heartache, unknowingly preventing themselves from healing altogether. The notorious “grass is always greener” paradigm is a tale as old as time. We fail to see that, while we would all rather exist in continuous moments of bliss, the only way to recognize these precious moments is if we know what it means to experience loss and bleakness. As a scholar in the process of completing a doctoral program, I find that the harshest part of this journey has been the process of coming to terms and making peace with the inner workings of my mind, which reveal the flaws in my character, the constant reoccurrence of self-deprecating habits, and the nagging desire to try to control what’s to come. There have also been some delightful discoveries along the way.

Albeit it uncomfortable, allowing yourself to become emotionally and mentally stripped of what you thought you knew is a beautiful, emancipatory ordeal. When we consent to the acknowledgment of these vulnerabilities, we open ourselves up to the challenge of growing. There is a wealth of knowledge that we all have authority over, yet our eyes strain looking for an answer in how others live their lives. We subscribe to master narratives of “what should be,” rather than alternate possibilities of what is.

COLORBLIND—SCRATCH THAT—COLOR-BLINDSIDED

I call it “ROARING.” At least, that is what it feels like. It feels like the most deafening bellow has made its way from the very core of my being and expelled itself into the world in a moment of sheer force. It sounds crazy, but when I ROAR, it is with the greatest peace of mind and spirit. The calm is almost startling, as the tone of my voice lowers an octave, and my mind, suddenly, is clear as a bell. I don’t know what it’s like for the audience, but that’s what it feels like to me. The first time I ever felt it was on the evening of November 8th, 2016. It came riding off the high of a creative piece I had just shared with colleagues at a symposium on campus. Looking back at it now, the ROAR came on my way back home. I dialed my mentor, Jodi, calling to share the news of my victory. I had found my way back to making Art once more. A part of me that I had failed to nurture for so long would not be silenced anymore. As I jabbered on to the woman who has been my mentor, friend, and family for almost half of my life, I couldn’t help but skip along the sidewalk, gazing up at the stars. I should have known then. Jodi always has the foresight to see what’s to come. Her trepidation at my enthusiasm in the midst of that historic moment was palpable. Yet, the ROAR was still working itself through my body and into the soles of my shoes, carrying me all the way home.

We all know what happened that night. No need to go into that. What came next is what matters. Many a dream was dashed during the early morning of November 9th. Among them were my hopes for a more comprehensive immigration reform that would allow for the exploration of alternative pathways to residency and citizenship for the over 11 million non-U.S. citizens that reside in this country. What we got instead was our deepest fear coming to fruition.

Understanding immigration policy and legislation was not something that I intentionally sought out to do. It came from my own humanity. It was bred by fear of the unknown, of loss, of powerlessness. It is one that I resented for the longest time because this “undocumented intelligence” (Chang, 2016) came as a result of great heartache. It is the windfall accrued after a series of tedious reminders of my invisibility as a result of my liminal status in this country. When you have no claim to U.S. citizenship, you keep your head down and your nose clean in an attempt to fit in to the orderly description of a “good immigrant.” This was my first mistake. In doing so, I unwillingly accepted that my worth and deservingness be quantified by those who don’t know me and who refuse to see the unique contributions I bring to their community. In a matter of speaking, this makes me an acquired taste.

It is not a matter of being enough in the eyes of those who tolerate my presence in this country. It was never about my “deservingness;” it is about my inability to submit to the wildly impossible standards that promote White supremacy. With the election of 45, the guise of a colorblind United States fell to the floor. People of Color knew better. Yet, we too were blind-sided. We were blind-sided by the aloofness to which citizens of this country subscribed, believing that blatant racism was a thing of the past. For non-U.S. citizens, sponsorship, residency, and even citizenship into this country already felt unobtainable. Now, it is difficult to not be overcome with nihilistic thoughts. The fine print you never get to read alludes to the idea that, because they serve as an endorsement of Whiteness, procuring those statuses, based on merit alone, is as elusive as a post-racial United States.

Luckily for me, this is also the path that led me to Critical Race Theory. Bell (1995) describes Critical Race Theory writing and lecturing as an unscripted and unapologetic engagement in the “use of first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of law, and the unapologetic use of creativity” (p. 899). Delgado Bernal (2002) speaks to how Critical Race Theory, and specifically LatCrit (Latina & Latino Critical Legal Theory), emphasize the epistemological significance that lies in the lived experiences of People of Color. The same can be argued for the sake of our scholarly writings. Anzaldúa (2012) speaks of writing as a performance, a living, breathing entity, one that carries with it a life of its own, rather than a slew of unresponsive characters that lie flat on a page (p. 88). It becomes an embodiment of life, the people in it, and the light and dark funds of knowledge that we accrue along the way. **Stars can’t shine without darkness.**

In her book, *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Anzaldúa (2015) describes what it felt like during the aftermath of 9/11—how the pain that ripped through New York City and this country resonated across the world. When an event of this magnitude occurs, it tears through the fabric of lives. She refers to it as “a crack in the world as we know it, where our perception of the world, and how we relate to it, and engage in it changes” (p. 16). It opens us up to a world we may not have known before, even if we’d rather not see it.

When I read Anzaldúa’s (2015) work, it reminded me so vividly of that morning of November 9th, 2016. For weeks, it felt like there was no poultice in this world that

could cure the emotional wounds caused by the results of that election. Waves of fear tore through me on a daily basis, ones I saw reflected in the faces of others, some I knew well and others I didn't know but whose fear and angst I shared. She referenced that in-between place as "*nepantla*, a psychological, liminal space, between the way things had been and an unknown future" (p. 17). This is a place I know all too well.

So, how do we find solace in the obscurity that comes with the unknown? I would argue we can find hope if we dare to adjust our eyes to the darkness. Once we move past this, we can focus on any trace of light. This brings me back to one of the most valuable lessons Jodi ever taught me, the brilliance behind the Japanese aesthetic of Wabi-Sabi. Wabi-Sabi is based on the notion that all material things are in the process of becoming—that there is a story in that which is flawed, cracked, or blemished—that it has endured hardship and, in its resilience, has withstood the test of time. The same can be said about us—that our experiences, both positive and negative, are inscriptions on our persons, which serve as reminders of overcoming obstacles and our process of transformation.

Working through the process of becoming requires us to do introspective work. This can be achieved in myriad ways. We must realize that we are interconnected and that at the very core of our humanity is the relationality of our existence. In order to do the work, we have to find our means of communication. For me, my catharsis comes from aesthetic expressions—through my writing and my painting. It is through this work that I find the intersections between the past, the present, and the future.

ADJUSTING YOUR VIEW (FINDER): A NEW COMPOSITION

What makes art memorable? It comes from a personal connection to a piece. It is, as the old adage says, in the eye of the beholder. It's funny how we find solace in timeless expressions such as this. The ones I turn to in the time of need are often conceived in Spanish. One in particular, "*Me hace la vida cuadritos*," rings particularly true. A literal translation from Spanish to English using Google translate results in the end product, "Makes me life squares." Another online Spanish-English translator offers this translation, "It makes me dices life." Both are close, but neither is accurate. This expression is often used in reference to how a person or a situation complicates the life of another. Whether we mean to or not, others will try to fit us into their narratives with whatever resources they have at their disposal. If these depictions are used often enough, they paint a picture that is easily replicated, drawn with thick lines, lacking finesse and with little personal connection attached to it. It is far easier to make a copy of something than to spend time trying to recreate it from scratch. The parameters against which we are judged and measured are social constructs. They are flawed, rarely accurate, but one thing is for certain; ultimately, they are human. Sometimes they are limiting. At other times they are liberating—but they always fall short of representing what it means to be the Other.

Little did I know how much this everyday expression would have an effect on me. *Me hace la vida cuadritos*. **Cuadritos**. That word alone stands in stark contrast with the word *Vida*, the Spanish word for Life. *Cuadritos* is the diminutive expression for a square. The word *Cuadro*, however, not only refers to a four-sided geometric figure, but it can also be used in reference to a work of art—a painting for example. Ultimately, this is the reason I chose this as the title of my narrative. I am an Artist. It has taken years for me to say that—years of hearing, "I didn't know you were an art major;" "I didn't know you painted;" "Didn't you used to paint?" This is my own doing. I could rattle off a laundry list of excuses as to why this happened—

correction—why I allowed this to happen. But, it really came down to fear. I was too busy being afraid and constantly worrying about other things that I deemed more important at the time. And so, this part of my life was relegated to a small box labeled “Miscellaneous” and left buried under a pile of self-doubt, abandoned to a cob-webbed and dusty corner of my mind. I realize now what a mistake this was. It is a part of who I am—a part that brings me a great deal of joy and tremendous peace. It allows me a different perspective as a scholar.

As an Artist who is also a non-U.S. citizen and Female Scholar of Color, sometimes, *mi vida esta hecha cuadritos*. Like the intersecting lines of a graph paper, the *cuadritos* are there to outline the boundaries of my perimeter. Lines I am forced to toe. Lines I have to make the most of. Lines that run into one another only to box me in. Boxes that society likes to use as a template. Boxes used to replicate an image of something because its curves, its edges, its imperfect nature make it too difficult to render by freehand. Boxes to box us in. Boxes to keep us out. I am forced to choose identifiers next to these boxes, identifiers created for the convenience of “Others.” Boxes with hard edges. Edges that serve as frames. Limited frames of reference. Limited frames of mind. Frames that become Borders—a word that became a constant presence throughout the entirety of the 2016 Presidential Election—a word whose notoriety is like a cinnamon flavored Hot Tamale in the mouths of many people today.

Borders are the ones responsible for my additional label of a non-citizen, non-resident alien, here on an F1 student visa. These are a mouthful of identifiers, none of which I picked myself. This is the language of Immigration and U.S. Border and Customs Protection. These are the labels of “Otherness.” There are no phenotypical distinctions on my body to give them away. Much like an invisible fence, I get a slight jolt if I am ever too close to breaking through. In this country, certain liberties, such as applying for a job, working off-campus, entering and exiting this country under painstaking scrutiny, are dimensions that outline that liminal space in which I exist. I know them. I know them well because I must—because understanding their power and their margins allows me to think outside the box. It bequeaths me an embodied knowledge that I continue to accrue as time passes, gaining legitimacy every time I am reminded of these labels. They are always on my mind, in the periphery of the choices I make in my personal, professional, and academic lives. I used to see them as this nagging hindrance, a deficit. I was wrong. This liminal space allows me a small moment in time to gain perspective on myself and how the liminal parameters of non-citizenship affect the lives of millions of people in this country. Many of them have been allotted the lawful authorization to be here corroborated before and after their entrance into the U.S. through points of entry through air, land, and sea.

LIFE IN THE BORDERLANDS

On November 8th, millions of people exercised a right that was theirs alone, one that countless others could not partake in. It was, after all, a privilege. Whether it is limitations of socio-cultural capital or financial solvency, many Others have applied and been denied the opportunity to lawfully enter the United States. This, however, does not solve nor deter many of them and their need to seek a better life for themselves and their families. Often the lived experiences of minority groups, in this case that of Hispanic/Latino/a populations, are oversimplified, painted in wide brush strokes incapable of the hues and tones that adequately depict their stories. Gotanda (1996, as quoted in Trucios-Haynes, 2001) incorporates the concept of “racial stratification as a hierarchical structure that creates subaltern groups within

minority groups” (p. 2). As the largest minority group in the United States (at 32% of the population), Hispanics are also the youngest major racial and ethnic group in the country; six in ten Hispanics are millennials or younger (Patten, 2016). Of this large group of young Hispanics, only 6% of them were born outside of the United States and emigrated here. Almost half of these young U.S.-born Latinos (47%) are children of immigrants whose parents migrated to the U.S. in recent immigration waves (Patten, 2016).

In 2014, the U.S. foreign born-population (26%) originated primarily from Mexico (5,850,000), El Salvador (700,000), Guatemala (525,000), India (500,000) and Honduras (300,000). About half of the Mexican immigrant population (48%) and Central American Immigrant population (50%) are unauthorized immigrants (Passel & Cohn, 2016). Though their pathways are different, both of these representational groups share a common strand that links them generationally. They have the opportunity to choose the points of origin they identify with, how they navigate the societal pressures that seek to compartmentalize them as part of an homogenous group, and, most important, the need for them to take an active role in how they choose to identify themselves.

For this reason, LatCrit scholars challenge us to create our own language, one that reaffirms and aligns itself to the cultural legacy laced among tiers of the racial stratification of the Latino/a population of this country. The anthology of their *testimonios* [first hand accounts of those who have suffered the brunt of institutional power, oppression, and marginalization] is the preeminent instrument to best understand what it means to reside in the “borderlands” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012), a place of congruent presence, one that cultivates an engagement in becoming and existing outside a single nation-state, race, ethnicity, and citizenship status. Though multifaceted, when we express the dimensions of what it means to be Latino/a, we need to ensure that our image cannot be easily manipulated to incite racial fear, promote stereotypes, and further ignorance (Trucios-Haynes, 2001).

Constructing our space, as told through our own words and histories, incites self-preservation amongst communities of Color. When confronting White Supremacy, we are affected in different but significant ways. For example, among the concerns the Hispanic/ Latino/a community faces are the disconnect between familial generations due to assimilation—the issue of language proficiency in English but not in Spanish, Portuguese or the native tongue of the parent’s country of origin—and the complicated nuances of immigration reform (Trucios-Haynes, 2001).

Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987/2012) speaks to the potential of a space—the potential to recapitulate a language that allows us to renew our identities. In this political climate, a person’s legal status is an ever-present cue of belonging to more than one place at a given point in time. When used as a label to indicate “Otherness,” it then becomes a reminder of “not belonging.” The colloquial tags affixed to one’s legal status are nothing more than societal concepts used to assign values of deservingness to human beings, thus becoming a means of oppression. After all, as Bromley (2000) explains, “Becoming American is more than a courthouse process” (p. 74). Legal status, like “language, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality,” is constructed and assigned—“a product of social and historical contingency” (Bromley, 2000, pp. 32-33).

Because identity is ever-expanding and ever-changing, it is impossible shut out part of one’s identity. No matter how high the wall, no matter what material is used, or even how many square inches are claimed in attempt to further physically isolate the U.S./Mexico Border, living in the Borderlands, *La Frontera*, is an ever-present

juxtaposition of here and there, now and then, belonging and exclusion. Here, you are the only person responsible for the parameters of your identity. Those who identify as Hispanic/Latino/a trace their ancestries to ancient civilizations, scars and birthmarks left from being colonized, and all the narratives that took place in this Hemisphere. The Americas.

The purpose of my *testimonio* is to urge you to look past the binaries with which we are constantly inundated and focus on what drives and sustains them. There are countless degrees in the scale of identity. What we all have in common is that we are born into a nation, with a namesake, a proponent of a cultural legacy, an inherited nationality, an heirloom of those who sired us—the DNA of another, who chose our name, decided whether or not we were going to be born, and chose the space in which this would take place. This is the first gift all children are given. No child ever signs on a dotted line acknowledging receipt of this upon her birth. It is part of who we are. We have no say whatsoever in this matter. And yet, this is supposed to set in motion how our future is meant to unfold? This is where all narratives—those of Master and Counter narratives—begin. No matter how grim and complicated our present situation may be, let us not lose sight that, once upon a time, we started off as equals.

I ROAR, *Este es mi cuadro y mi testimonio*.

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¹ This quotation is often misattributed to Aleksy Tolstoy’s more famous second cousin, Leo Tolstoy. The phrase, however, actually comes from a work entitled *Fruits of Reflection (1853-1854)*, which Aleksy Tolstoy published under the name Kozma Petrovich Prutkov.