

SONOGRAM IN MEDIAS RES

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dean of the Graduate School

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2017

PREVIEW

DEDICATION

To my little piece of existence.
May we meet in another lifetime.

PREVIEW

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SONOGRAM IN MEDIAS RES

by

CARLA E. ARELLANO, B.A.

THESIS

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN CHICANA MEMOIR

I write about women.

Women of Mexican and Mexican-American heritage.

Chicanas.

Proud, flawed, all powerful, and human.

I write about grandmothers rubbing eggs over their retoños to cure mal de ojo as the curanderas of the New World taught them, yet still attend church every Sunday morning to appease an Old World God. I write their stories to give them a voice and I write about my own to heal my wounds.

There has always been a purpose to my fiction; to create characters that mirror those around me and dare to explore the deepest part of humanity, the areas I have always been too afraid to explore on my own. I've always wanted to push boundaries and birth bold, fearless, and strong characters in order to prepare them to engage in the good, the bad, and the *in-between*, because even the most sinful can be *re-built*.

In fiction, we are given a safe space, one where the audience does not entirely know if what they have read is based on truth. The writer of fiction maintains ambiguity, but most importantly, *privacy*, one that, as John Gardner claims, allows for the writer to theorize on human emotion:

On reflection we see that the great writer's authority consists of two elements. The first we may call, loosely, his sane humanness; that is, his trustworthiness as a judge of things, a stability rooted in the sum of those

complex qualities of his character and personality (wisdom, generosity, compassion, strength of will) to which we respond, as we respond to what is best in our friends, with instant recognition and admiration, saying, ‘Yes, you’re right, that’s how it is!’ (8)

The fiction writer is seen as a great master and all knowing, but the writer has to gain the trust of the readers first and establish that he/she knows of pain, grief, happiness, and all human emotion so that readers *can* say, “Yes, you’re right, that’s how it is!” Regrettably, the safe space, where the fiction writer works, is a parallel universe; it is a parody of life.

As I wrote fiction, a question, small and quiet, began to unfold from my subconscious asking; *is this where I heal myself?* I began to wonder where I belonged in this realm. Would I get to tell *my* story? Are these not the reasons why I wrote? So that I, too, could tell my truth, to remind the world what it is like to be human?

For some of us, we must begin our search in another writing sector, one that is the *opposite* of fiction. As writers, we rarely see the *self* as a character, a protagonist in our own writing. For women of color, it is even more common not to think of ourselves at the center of a story, to think of ourselves as secondary. It has been our conditioning, our colonization, a product of mixed breeding, as Gloria E. Anzaldúa addresses in *La conciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness*:

The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness. In a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn

between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed...Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. (Anzaldúa 100)

It is effortless to get carried away in a wave of self-doubt and confusion, but as Chicana, as mestiza, writers we must re-appropriate our mixed heritage, using it to our advantage in the way we write our stories.

While there is a trace of this idea, of this genre that is *not* fiction in our community, such as *testimonios*, testimony, in our Latino/a community, this oral tradition poses a dilemma to the writer looking for something *other* than fiction and something in the personal. Most testimonios have *middle men*, and while their purpose is to bring a voice to those who have been silenced within our community, such as women, “interlocutor[es], who [are]...outside activist[s] and/or ally, records, transcribes, edits, and prepares a manuscript for publication” are not necessarily the individuals who are telling *their* stories (Bernal et. al 365). The story holds a different power when it comes from the source than from the *middle man* who may (or may not) edit/modify/change the story, depending on how the story will be used. It is the difference between the water and the faucet.

Other Chicana writers and scholars such as Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, and Norma E. Cantú have also used other forms of writing to call attention to the Chicana voice.

Their use of the essay, especially in academia, have paved the way for emerging Chicana writers to convey their experience, yet there are still subjects plaguing the women in our culture that have scarcely been addressed. This is where I found myself. How do I approach an issue that has not quite been written about within my own culture? Where to begin tackling the admission of truth for a truth that is *uncomfortable*?

Therein lies the beauty of creative nonfiction, more specifically, the memoir. While this genre encompasses a multitude of forms (literary journalism, personal essay, etc.), at its core there is a form of self-awareness, an *evolution* of the self where the parallel universe fades and the writer becomes the main character in a story:

The self as continent, and you its first explorer: another definition of creative nonfiction. For self, however, at the center of what [we] are writing of however tangential, must inform the heart of the tale [we] are telling. It is indeed *self* that is the creative element of creative nonfiction. Without [us] and who [we] are, a piece of the writing that tells what happened is simply nonfiction: a police report. But when [we] begin to incorporate the sad and glorious fact that the way [we] see it shape and form what it is to be seen, [we] end up with creative nonfiction. (Lott 195)

Finally, a space of our own, of *my* own. A space where we can adapt culture, the self, experience, and voice our reality.

In this place, this realm, I have accepted my truth and adopted the term *survivor* as my own. Survivor of death, sexual trauma, depression, loss of faith, and loss of self. I

have survived through writing, but survival does not bring closure. I have found that fiction helps writers tell the story, but creative nonfiction helps us be brave.

For those of us plagued with cowardice at how the world will receive our truths, but bare them anyway, creative nonfiction gives us a medium, a safe space to heal. Social psychologist, James W. Pennebaker discusses how “the mere act of disclosure is a powerful therapeutic agent that may account for a substantial percentage of the variance in the healing process...[and] writing about upsetting experiences, although painful in the days of writing, produces long-term improvement in mood and indicators of well-being...[because] writing about emotional topics is associated with significant reductions of distress” (162). If this is true, then creative nonfiction goes beyond literature. It is a healing agent.

This genre is the balm containing self-reflective therapeutic properties that soothes the writer as we explore our own stories. In her essay, “Resurrections,” Sandra Cisneros claims that as a writer, she had to feel in order to write, so that as writers all emotions wash through us:

In the spring after my mother died, a doctor wanted to prescribe pills for depression. ‘But if I don’t feel,’ I said, ‘how will I be able to write?’ I need to be able to feel things deeply, good or bad, and wade through an emotion to the other shore, toward a rebirth, of sorts, a return to the living, I knew if I put off moving through grief, the wandering between worlds would only take longer. Even sadness has its place in the universe. (300)

By writing from own experiences as *ourselves*, not as fictional characters, we come closer to gaining closure with our past and rebuilding our soul. We begin to approach topics that in Chicano/a culture are considered taboo, such as mental illness and abortion.

True, it is much easier to write about fictional characters, even when the characters mirror our own lives and choices, than to admit these characters – and *their* choices – have been *us* all along. But, if we have a balm that provides us with the ability to endure pain, even in short spurts, then we are able to write these stories, to take possession of our truths. In this memoir, I appropriate my own truth and explore a variety of other contemporary issues that affect the El Paso borderland culture: mental illness, abortion, and gender roles.

Due to our unique location, between the reminder of our past that is Mexico and our highly demanding present, the United States, our region finds itself once more, in what I have to come to call the *in-between*. A form of limbo, a midpoint where mixture and mestizaje, as Anzaldúa refers to in her work, create a uniquely wondrous and dangerous culture if its own. Pulling from both cultures, the good and the bad, we find ourselves as Chicanas caught *in between* conflicting ideas that heavily influence our choices as women; the *traditional nurturer* that is predominant in the Mexican and Mexican-American cultures and the image of the *progressive female*, independent and strong in the American culture. In the piece, “Matachines on the Sidewalk”, I address this very issue and how it played a vast role in my choice to end my pregnancy:

...I decided to take in fresh air, to let my skin warm in the sun and find comfort in the midmorning sunshine. The view seemed different. There was

a softness, almost a tenderness to the blue of the sky, like it also felt lethargic. Had I ever noticed how the city rolled into the distance? How at one point in the horizon, El Paso and Juárez blended into one giant metropolis? There has always been a fluidity between these two worlds, something that moves between them, between us, the people caught in between both cities, two cultures. I have lived my entire life in this city, abiding by its rules, by its people, and at times, by its confines, but I had strayed. Pushed my boundaries and tested my limits, finally rebelling against its traditions and ended up in another *in-between*, on a verge, a *border*, and whichever side I chose, I would never truly feel like I *belonged*. Regardless of the path I took, I would forever wonder what my life would have been on the other side. This had been my struggle six years ago. Which side to choose? Neither one looked promising, neither one could offer security, and on either path, I would never be the same. My last visit to this mountain had been clouded, I had not even noticed to the walking trail in front of me, much less the borderland or how much the terrain resembled me. I was like the land, caught in the middle. There were expectations from the people on both sides, yet these people didn't seem to care that the land had stood on its own, without borders or restrictions long before we began to document its history. Before them, before any of us. Why couldn't either see that the land was not meant to live by their rules, by their confines? Tearing it in two would only cause resentment.

I was the daughter of a single Mexican mother; these two contradictory messages plagued me into adulthood. Which one to be? Which side would provide me with better opportunities? Would I lose a piece of myself or discover one that I did not know was there? Would I like it? Additionally, I was a first generation Mexican-American female, which meant that the pressure of succeeding, of making something of myself, rested on my shoulders. As children of immigrants, we are seen by our parents as the *golden children*, those that will achieve something better than they could in their native country, after all, that is why they left their home country for the United States.

These pressures and ideals take shape into how we see the world and how we write about our experiences as Chicanas. This defines what we are able to say and write *comfortably* in memoir. Our culture and location dictates which boundaries to push. In this memoir, I write from the perspective of a Chicana alongside the Rio Grande, specifically the El Paso region.

There is great importance in publishing this memoir, a Chicana memoir, because in order to break our confines as women, we must be able to bring those issues we consider taboo into light. Abortion is a topic we shun in our culture, even though it is extremely prevalent. White women have found a safe space to speak openly about abortion. It has not been easy and it has taken them decades to be able to acquire this space. This is crucial. It is crucial because in order to gain equality and keep our rights, to be able to be at the forefront of our destiny and keep a choice about our bodies, Chicanas must find a safe space to *admit* abortion. Our biggest flaw is keeping these wounds quiet, hidden in the corners of our hearts where they begin to fester and consume us. Until we, the women who

have made this choice, say it, “I had an abortion,” we are in danger of never creating a safe space, not only for the women that will follow us, but the women *now* that hide their truth in the shadows.

Sadly, we use our own history of conquest and religion to do just that, *conquer*. We mimic the same idea, using the same tool, religion, to subjugate women to fear their own lives, leaving home, question their own choices, and when they do, they are conditioned to feel *guilt* which causes various forms of emotional and mental torture. On the El Paso border, Catholicism is all around us, from the moment we are baptized to the moment we begin to question our choices. My religious foundation, even though I never considered myself religious, was tested after my abortion. Perhaps I never noticed how ingrained religious beliefs, those I used to call *my mother's beliefs*, were tied to my own consciousness, to my daily life. Not until it felt like I had committed a mortal sin – as defined by the Catholic religion. Once again, the hybridity and the mestizaje in me pushed and pulled like the borderland.

A recurring symbol in my memoir is mataachines, folklore dancers with impressive costumes that re-enact various scenes from the Spanish/Mexico conquest. This motif was not intentional, quite the opposite. The idea took root after one of my visits to the abortion clinic where I terminated my pregnancy. Outside of this building, I was greeted by protesters in matachín costumes. These dancers seemed out of place to me. Of course I had encountered them before, but only as a child with my mother during a festivity at our church.

Their presence at the abortion clinic should not have surprised me, after all, matachines are closely tied to religion and can mainly be found at Church events and bazaars. Throughout Mexican and Mexican-American culture, the dance of the matachines has been a medium to re-tell history and reinforce culture and religion. Key female figures in these dances are Our Lady of Guadalupe and Malinche, the abhorrent lover of the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, who was blamed for the fall of the Aztec Empire. The good and the bad. The pure and the sinful. Even in the dance of the matachines, the virgin/whore dichotomy is prevalent.

Yet, the characters in these dances are also hybrids. Since Christianity was used as a colonizing agent for the Aztecs, the Spaniards used a mixture of Aztec mythology alongside Christianity to instill their own religious beliefs. This is evident in the dance of the matachines and the use of the female role in these dances. In his article, “Moctezuma's Daughter: The Role of La Malinche in Mesoamerican Dance,” Max Harris claims that *danzas* contain hidden transcript. These transcripts are used as subliminal messages for those observing these dances. Among the multiple roles Malinche plays in matachín *danzas*, her “...reputation [of]...treachery and sexual promiscuity provided a convenient public transcript into which to insinuate the hidden transcript of a pre-Christian fertility rite. The kind sexual mimicry required of a dancer representing the goddess of fertility could then be explained as a disparaging reference to ‘sin’ of Malinche, and the dance characterized...as an attempt to exorcise the evil sexual instincts of women in general...” (Harris 171). A perfect subliminal message for an abortion clinic.

It should not be a surprise that religion, in various forms from Catholicism to indigenous traditions, uses numerous forms of intimidation to modify choice, especially abortion. In order for these scare tactics to work on women, they must play and rattle their core. For me, the combination of death and the soul rattled my foundation after my abortion. I had never contemplated my own soul and for the first time I wondered, *could I go to hell?* Did the clump of cells in my body have a soul even though it did not have a heartbeat? If there was a soul, would *that* soul stay in limbo? Heaven? Hell?

Still, in ritual, such as the dance of the matachines, death is present. In a study by J.D. Robb, the scholar claims, “There is some evidence that the matachina as danced by the Mexican Mayos, Yaquis, and Tarahumares is sometimes associated with death. It is danced at funerals... and it is sometimes associated with a *velorio* or wake...the term *mattasin* was treated as a synonym of *totentanz* ‘dance of death’” (90). The combination of death and religion was no accident by the matachines outside of the abortion clinic. It was meant to be a reminder to the women of the path they had taken, that like Malinche, they had strayed. Now, it was also a warning that they should not commit an even larger act against their soul. In a 2016 interview with a local El Paso matachín during the Pope’s visit to our region, the dancer confirmed the purpose of these danzas, “The dance is a prayer. Each step that we do is a prayer of the rosary...and this is the meaning of the matachines is that we are all united in prayer.” As I stood outside of the abortion clinic, next to the matachines, I wondered if they were aware of the damage their actions were doing to the women inside the clinic. Their loud drums were rattling my nerves and I was not there for an abortion. I had returned years later to confront my past and begin my

journey to atonement. I had survived depression and a very close suicide attempt, yet their presence still affected me. For those of us who had already made this choice, what message did the matachines have for us?

Another forbidden topic among our culture is mental health. It has been seen as a weakness. Women, like my mother and I, who have suffered from depression are seen as *too weak* to cope with the difficulties of life! By publishing this memoir, it is my hope to not only voice these issues, but begin *movement*, begin ramblings in schools, in factories, in kitchens where tías, mothers, abuelitas, and comadres gather to cook and share information.

I want to be information.

I want my story to be the discussion of the good and the bad because I know I will be labeled as good *and* bad, but isn't that what is inside all of us? What makes us complex? Those areas of good and bad that blend and mesh together to create the human experience. Neither wrong nor right, even though we always think one is right and the other wrong. There will always be a protagonist and an antagonist in every story. This memoir will show how these two can be one and the same.

THE WRITING PROCESS

The biggest challenge about writing memoir is not memory, it is not the timeline of events nor is it the arrangement of these facts. The challenge exists in revisiting our old selves, in re-opening the old wounds, and in excavating the old demons. Those of us writing a survivor's memoir walk a fine line between maintaining our newly re-acquired sanity or regressing to our old instability. It is like walking between two skyscrapers on a tightrope holding a balance beam because in many aspects, "As writers, we naturally return again and again to these...[moments] and scrutinize them. By paying attention to the illogical, unexpected details, we just might light upon the odd yet precise images that help our lives make sense, at last long enough for our purposes as writers" (Miller and Paola 4). Our art requires us to remember those things that damaged us at one point in our lives, to gaze upon it again and again from multiple angles and share its grotesqueness with the world.

Through our art, we must decipher key messages from past experiences because what we have at least taken away with us is wisdom. With memoir, we look to our past not only to tell our story, but to analyze *how* we survived a period of darkness, *how* we were able to re-build ourselves into who we are today. We hope that our story, that our techniques, will help others, to give purpose to the darkness. We must look at the past from atop the skyscraper, high above from a distance, at times detached, for our own survival, once again. It is through this somewhat detached lens, one we cannot look

through too closely or linger too long for fear that we could become distracted and fall into a bottomless pit once again, that we can examine our memories.

Detachment, on the other hand, is another challenge on its own. It is a challenge for the art. The purpose of looking and writing from a distance, from atop the skyscraper, is for the protection of the writer, but it is possible for the writing to *suffer*. The writer is the medium, the psychic standing between the art form and the memory trying to channel the two. What happens when the medium cannot channel correctly and does not allow the message to be reiterated word by word, piece by painful piece? At that moment, the writing has the potential to suffer.

The key in overcoming these particular challenges, however, is knowing how to balance the beam, because after all, the beam is the tool that holds us steady. In real life, the beam is the constant reminder that our past is over. For me, pulling out of my hell was not instantaneous nor did I do it alone. It was a blend of therapy, friendship, family, and exercise, both physical and mental. However, this routine never stops. As we begin our healing path, we practice all forms and techniques on a daily basis until – or *if* – we get to a place where their daily use is not necessary, only periodical; when we feel the beam shifting. Even in a survivor's memoir, we do not only concentrate on the bad. Yes, a key part is to tell our story, to tell facts, and let the world know our reality. Nevertheless, we can all pinpoint moments, key events or people that, similar to how their counterparts changed us negatively, we can equally remember those moments in time that propelled us forward and helped us realize we *are* survivors.

Writing *Sonogram in Medias Res* tested my state of mind, which began to impact my writing. Three years of learning how to build tension, create scenes, and be precise with my descriptions came to a halt. It was as if I had never done any writing exercises or been in graduate level courses. Unlike writers of fiction in the program, I was nudged during workshop about actual facts, questioned why certain painful actions that challenged religious and political views were taken, and examined why I had acted in a certain manner. This was not their intent. Later, I came to the realization that their questions were not about me or my actions, but that my peers were trying to *help* me tell my story. This had been the first time I had let anyone, much less a classroom full of graduate students from all over the world, read about my abortion. It was the most nerve-racking experience I had ever encountered as an adult.

The question of why I wanted to keep the sonogram was a recurring one throughout workshop and my conscience began to tickle. The ghosts I had made peace with returned and I found myself confronted with old questions I had once asked myself, but now, they were being asked by others, by the world, which in itself is another fear of the nonfiction writer. The biggest criticism I faced by my peers was how *unclear* the reasons behind keeping the sonogram were to them. They claimed the reader would not know why I wanted to retrieve something I chose to give up previously in my life.

I could understand my colleagues' question. Perhaps all they were trying to do were help me create more scenes, *show not tell*. To me, on the other hand, it seemed they were saying my motive was rather hypocritical. My internal fears got the best of me. They asked questions I had not asked myself. Why would I want to keep a token of something

so painful and *prove* my abortion, an action that by its sole definition means to expel? I had expelled something from my body, from my life. There is a misconception about the termination of pregnancy, it is believed that every single one is *hated*. That the reason women want to abort is because the pregnancy is unwanted, not just unexpected, and that all emotions of happiness during that time span are never experienced. In essence, the woman is in a pure state of hopelessness.

That had not been me.

I did not experience hopelessness until *after* my termination when I tried to swallow a whole bottle of Tylenol. I had been home alone and locked myself in the bathroom. Living with my guilt for months was unbearable. In Catholicism, we are taught that we will suffer in hell for our sin. To me, it felt like I was living my own hell every day. Taking a bottle of pills was the bulletproof way to ensure the end to my misery and perhaps gain a sense of relief from my reality.

On the day that I mustered the courage to shove a handful of pills in my mouth, my mother came home early from work. In five years, the pant factory she worked for had not released them early, but on that day one of the main machines broke down and the entire workforce was sent home. As a believer of destiny, I like to think that I was not meant to die on that day. I was meant to live and write this memoir. This is my atonement.

I had experienced happiness with my pregnancy. Even in my uncertainty, I found happiness. The first emotion I felt when I found out about the pregnancy *was* happiness. It was then followed by wonder and fear. The second time I felt the same tenderness was when I was shown the sonogram. I wanted to take it home with me, to show it to my