

**YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE: WRITING AND *TESTIMONIO* AS
COPING WHEN MAMÁ IS DIAGNOSED
WITH BREAST CANCER**

by

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DEDICATION

To my family: we who were left behind to pick up the pieces. I love you and carry you with me. My husband, best friend, and love of my life, your love keeps me writing and reaching even when I've wanted to let go.

Mary Lou, Maria, mama, to the woman who deserved more and better, all of this is because of you and for you. You are forever my brown eyed girl.

*"Who am I, and what is my family that you have brought me this far?" 2 Samuel 7:18
Thank you Jesus for bringing me this far.*

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brother and best friend, thank you for the hugs of which I never grow tired of. Jojo, my first best friend, defender and the one who still makes me laugh, I wait for the day when you will let go of the regret. Mom would want that for you. No matter how many times we disagree, I am always on your side. To my nephew Isaac, I love you with all that Mary Lou could not be here for.

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To my mommy, I miss you every day and still can't believe that you are gone. Your life and death brought me here. I hope that I have made you proud.

May 2019

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The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2019

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This study explores how Mexican American families shift in their dynamic following a breast cancer diagnosis of the matriarch. An exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative study examines the process of three different women, including myself, whose mothers were diagnosed with the disease, and certain patterns and differences will be noted as I examine each of their experiences. Discussions will be transcribed and translated for content analysis. The findings present insight into different perspectives related to how Mexican American families operate and center on the health and strength of the matriarch. There is a problem in how limited the cultural research is on this topic as most studies point toward the health care field and how those professionals can better assist this population. For this reason, the focus of this study is on these families and their experience in carrying the weight of this diagnoses. My methodological approach employs qualitative interviews as well as my own *autohistoria-teoria* as a way to understand my own journey in relation to others. I rely on a Chicana feminist lens by which to understand myself and others through this research study. This work is critical to understanding not only the culture of Mexican American families but also the culture of those battling cancer as a disease.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Few things in life are more reflective or personal than the experience of being near death. Living life has no instructions nor does the instance of death. How one lives their life is heavily based on the culture and tradition their families or communities bear upon them. It would only make sense that in dealing with disease and the possibility of death, ones' culture plays a part as well. In order to better understand how people of various backgrounds cope with these occurrences it is necessary to hear their stories since we all have one to tell.

To date, limited research has been done to explore the Mexican American culture within the trajectory of a breast cancer diagnosis. I begin this research with a personal experience that comes from a place of deep loss, as with all of the participants in this study. Using qualitative research is important to my subject, as it is emergent rather than fixed. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to create intangible dynamics of cultural facets. The information about one's human side, attitudes, views, associations and actions are just a few considerations that come through within a qualitative study (Creswell, 2006).

When I was fourteen years old my mother died of breast cancer. She was fierce, intentional, beautiful and necessary to whom I am. As children, she would sing us the song "You Are My Sunshine" even before she was sick. It was a revelatory song as it speaks volumes. For that reason, I name this research after that song, after her, after the experience. She was our sunshine. This experience and perspective is what I bring to the research.

My mother's death and the life our family lived thereafter, has taken a toll on us and I had a great suspicion that we were not the only ones left feeling this way. I cannot disassociate myself from a life-altering event such as this and I believe it insensitive to ask anyone else to do that. My mother's death has shaped the person I have become and that is not something from

which I can separate myself from. I am conducting a qualitative research project because there are some things that cannot be explained with numbers.

While numbers are helpful and will be referenced for validity, they do not have the lifeblood of a person's experience. Mexican American mothers are perceived as the backbone of a family, the ones who offer their strength on behalf of everyone else. However, what happens when they are the ones faltering in strength? What happens when the strength of a family becomes its weakness? How do you heal? The reactions of the family and their debilitated state during the sickness and after is what I am aiming to understand. I realize I may not be able to ask every single question that arises. However, when possible, I may weave queries into the conversation so that they may open up and reach for the deepest insight and information they may provide.

The approach I plan to take is grounded in Chicana feminist methodology. Through *testimonios* from my participants, I focus on the meanings Mexican American women ascribe to their experiences in this particular situation. For myself, the use of *autohistoria-teoria* will be the best method to convey my experience. Taking my approach from Gloria Anzaldúa, my personal writing will be used as a source of knowledge, to theorize, “autohistoria...a term I used to describe the genre of writing about personal and collective history...autohistoria-teoria is a personal essay that theorizes” (Anzaldúa, 2015, 578). Writing is not only a way of collaborating, but a way of fluctuating between perception, making meaning, and allowing others to understand. By using this approach, I am creating relationship between myself and the reader, between those who know and those who have lived to tell their story.

Much of the growth in *testimonio* scholarship has been within the field of education—produced by Chicanas and Latinas such as myself (Bernal et al., 2012). Let me offer that

testimonio focuses on the experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o communities in the United States. As women, we will bear witness to what became of those that were left behind. This data collection approach is most useful to my research because I believe *testimonio* and *autohistoria-teoria* as methodology are intricately aligned to the goals of this project. These approaches seek to disrupt Westernized notions of knowledge and data collection as well as generating a tool for healing that focus on communities of color, more specifically Mexican Americans, thus my emphasis on the voices of Chicanas retelling of their family's loss and their reactions thereafter. My research questions are as such: What becomes of the family when the mother has passed away? How do family dynamics shift? What processes do we use in order to navigate grief?

A Relationship with Writing and Grief

Let me begin this by stating how much I hate to write about my mom and yet it is also the most fulfilling feeling. The process of writing drains me emotionally because through it I have to confront things I know and things I do not want to know. As stated, *autohistoria-teoria* allows me to navigate how the loss of my mother has caused me to turn to writing as a way to cope. In reading *Light in the Dark*, edited by AnaLouise Keating (2017) I connected with what Anzaldúa refers to as The Coyolxauhqui imperative which facilitates healing and integration,

When fragmentations occur you fall apart and feel as though you've been expelled from paradise. Coyolxauhqui is my symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you're embroiled in differently... There is never any resolution, just the process of healing (p. 122).

Before and during my mother's sickness, the only coping mechanism I relied upon was denial. It was not until after her passing that I recognized the weight of her absence. It was then that I commenced the use of journaling to write about every day happenings and eventually I

created a dialogue with her and myself. I wrote to the woman who was no longer available to me. I believed that the things I wrote would find their way to her. She could not respond but at least she would know how sorry I was for not saying good bye and for not being more aware in her final days.

As taught in our educational systems within the greater United States, using ones voice is considered opinion and not a scholarly device for research. What I reach for and what Cervantes-Soon (2014) also gathers is that *testimonio* is the perfect methodological tool for people of color as it reclaims their authority to tell their own story. For centuries, our stories have been told via white European scholars and given us our identity based on their assumptions of our lifestyle. What *testimonio* can and will do in this research is answer any and all questions based on our cultural experiences, which only we can tell because it is based off of our very own lives. I believe that my mother was never given the tools to tell her own story because she was told time and time again that it did not matter. Her story does matter as does the stories of all people of color.

By using *testimonio* to document and analyze the experiences of other Chicanas and my own *autohistoria-teoria* to interweave those experiences, I am giving back to the Mexican American community, more specifically those who have been touched by the disease of breast cancer and letting them know that their stories matter, can be voiced, and will be heard. While the women participating in this study are all from different backgrounds and have varied lived experiences, what binds us together will be the collective experiences of losing a mother to breast cancer. With an examination of our lived experiences, I gather information stemming from theory in the flesh; our bodies will be the temples of knowledge. By listening to their stories and

telling my own, I believe we will all come to reach new level of understanding of ourselves and of those in similar situations.

The strengths in using *testimonios* is in the collaboration involved. The person who is telling their own history has the power that is rarely given to people of color. According to Haig-Brown (2003), *testimonio* research is a powerful way to gain access to information outside of academic settings. She also states that its intent is overtly political as it seeks to inform those outside of a community of the state of one's own community (Haig-Brown, 2003). Who is to say what is academic and what is not? When people of color collaborate to tell their stories something powerful happens. This method will also help those who do not have these shared experiences to understand or at least have glimpse of the situation.

Being a Chicana: The Messy Spaces

In this section I look at the intersectionalities of being a Chicana because this directly relates to how we navigate our spaces, more specifically that of disease within the family. Recognizing these ways of knowing can more accurately help to acknowledge that even in disease there are racialized and gendered histories. While this next piece is centered around the Chicana/o family structure, embedded is significant information regarding the relationships of Chicanas to their daughters. I found this to be specific to my research as all of my research participants were daughters to their cancer-ridden mothers. Relationship in caring for someone is important. Relationship in caring for your mother is necessary.

Segura and Pierce (1993) delve into the Chicana's mothering role and her daughter's receipt of such a relationship, "Chicanas are more likely to identify with their daughters than with their sons. Daughters in turn, identify with their mothers' female role" (Segura and Pierce, 1993, p. 76). While this seems to go without saying, it is required information to remember.

When you lose your mother, or when you watch your mother battle something that you cannot help, you ultimately lose a part of yourself. It is more than just identifying with their role, but it is seeing themselves in one another, “Because a Chicana’s activity as a mother revolves around family and home, Viktor Gecas (1973) argues that these constitute a major arena for the daughter’s definition of self (Segura and Pierce, 1993, 76).

There are points of cultural representations of the mother that are accounted for in this article. We know that a mother’s role is irreplaceable but the Mexican American culture takes this to another level entirely, “In Chicana/o literature and art and in Catholicism, women, particularly mothers, are represented as essentially sacred and holy” (Segura and Pierce, 1993, p. 77). In almost all of the folk tales within the culture, a mother is a central figure whether for positive representations or negative, or cautionary purposes. The importance of this piece to my research is in its repeated notion that mothering is part of the Chicana identity. One cannot exist without the other and that creates for a problematic dynamic in the experience of my participants. Two have lost their mother, what does this mean for these women and their mothering? The *testimonios* of these participants will seek to answer the question that this article brings up.

One of the most influential pieces I found was not one that catered to the healthcare industry or the social sciences; it comes to us from the *Journal of Women Studies*. This article by Blake (1998), denotes the reading dynamics of power through Chicana’s oral histories. This finding was profound for my research, it was written by an “outsider” perspective, as Blake is an Anglo woman interviewing nine Chicanas.

She is honest in her trepidation towards entering another culture and how she would be perceived. Blake made sure to let the women know that these were their *historias* and that she was just the vessel. The affiliation between she and the women would be central to the research,

as “Control of the research relationship also affected the women’s self-representations” (Blake, 1998, p. 30). Their contributions are also accounted for and the researcher’s control is accounted for, “One of the ways I hoped to rectify somewhat the discrepancy in how much control I exerted over our interactions was to consider the women as collaborators in my project...” (Blake, 1998, p. 32).

I enjoyed reading through her experience in collecting each woman’s *historia* as it helps to prepare me for my own collection, “I intend to publish the *historias* in a separate collection to provide a more complete perspective of their interests and narrative styles; however, even this collection will be subject to editorial and publishing decisions...and perhaps by the women’s own self-censorship...” (Blake, 1998, p. 31). I appreciate Blake’s openness in her outsider role but as a woman trying to tell the stories of Chicanas. It can be seen as problematic that an Anglo woman is telling the stories of Chicanas rather than a Chicana telling their own stories. I understand the issue of privilege and power that is represented here and that is something I kept in mind while engaged in the reading, otherwise I found the information to be cooperative towards what I am going to accomplish.

There is no better way to describe the researcher’s experience than with the concept of “Messy Spaces.” Chicana scholar Monica Russel y Rodriguez (2007) describes “Messy Spaces” as the space between writing others’ and writing your own experience while trying to fit it into academia. Because I rely on the *testimonios* of women to create my research, I feel it is necessary to use a Chicana feminist lens—one where I theorize my own lived experience and that of other women to create new theories and literature. There can be nothing more Chicana feminist than that.

While using her experiences along with others, Russel y Rodriguez (2007) works through each space we occupy while being Chicanas, academic, home life and social areas, “My intention here is not to dismiss the power of ethnography, but rather to think about the implications beyond self-reflexivity, using the devices of *testimonio* and undiscipline” (Russel y Rodriguez, 2007, p. 94). The use of undiscipline or reevaluating the place of personal voice and disciplinary censorship was necessary to my own research. Though I plan to use academia in parts of my research, I want to make sure that I stay true to words of the participants and create literature that will silence myself as being self-supreme, meaning my own voice will not take priority over the voices of others.

Russel y Rodriguez (2007) also upholds the fierce nature of the Chicana in telling her own stories. She speaks of how the mother is central to becoming a Chicana while using her own life as evidence, “I grew up seeing my mother as a strong Chicana, and she, in turn, raised a strong Chicana...Like my mother and other Chicanas, I do not shy away from strength...” (Russel y Rodriguez, 2007, p. 112). There is such power in the way women are valued in this piece. This encouraging and uplifting piece by Russel y Rodriguez (2007) gives me permission and even nudges me towards breaking the rules of traditional research almost as if to say, “Make your mama proud with this.” Her mother is the basis of her dissertation theory just as I am using my mother for the basis of mine. I found much of myself between the lines of her article. It was liberating to read and I am excited to apply the act of undiscipline towards my own research in a way that will make my mama proud.

Anzaldúan Philosophy and Chicana Epistemology

Throughout my *autohistoria-teoria* I bring forward Anzaldúan practice to lead me towards a path of healing. I focused on two texts in order to do so. In *Borderlands*, I drew from

her notion of writing as a counter to the traditional silence that we often engage in our culture. I used my experience and those of the participants to illustrate the ways we summon memories and construct our own pathways to healing. I subscribed to much of the meaning she portrays in “The Coatlicue State” (p. 41) and “The Path of the Red and Black Ink”(p. 89). In The Coatlicue State, I compare it to my own journey of healing, waiting, healing and waiting. All of these are methods to becoming someone who is brave enough to tell their story. The Path of the Red and Black Ink speaks to me as a writer, my journey to becoming healed through writing,

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images...I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one...It is this learning to live with la Coatlicue that transforms...It is always a path/state to something else (p. 73).

In *Light in the Dark*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, I rely on “Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound: The Coyolxauhqui Imperative.” Through this I ask, how do we take the broken pieces of our bodies and put them back together? I argue that the women in my study as well as myself, used our method of communication to begin this process. We allowed ourselves to become a community of brokenness in order to connect and feel free. There were many other instances of Anzaldúan philosophy that I applied to this body of work but these were the most significant.

Anzaldúa’s works have been my guiding light but I cannot leave out the other strong women who have assisted in their strong words. Alicia Arrizón’s work in “Mythical Performativity” has been pivotal in my research as I base this on a Chicana feminist lens. I perform in order to allow others to understand women who left too soon and the women who were left behind, my writing allows for these experiences to be shared. By using the voices of

Chicanas, I am disrupting the natural order of things, “Chicana feminists have further altered the ‘logical’ order of patriarchy and homogeneity” (Arrizón, 2000, p. 27). Though the focus for her article is on visual art for Chicanas, I relate to the use of art in the broader sense because the soul of writing is artistic.

The work of Vicki Ruiz in *From Out of the Shadows* was an incredible inspiration as I base much of my *autohistoria-teoria* on my personal history and that of my mother. Knowing each other’s histories is a stepping stone to avoiding misunderstandings. She gives us a basis for Chicana feminism and its evolution. Writing became a way for Mexican American women to become Chicanas even when their culture did not allow for it, “Through their writings, Chicanas problematized and challenged prescribed gender roles at home...” (Ruiz, 1998, p. 108).

As a historian at heart, I value literature that gives a background to current cultural situations.

I was initially wary at the notion of autoethnography which is much like my endeavor in chapter 1, *autohistoria-teoria*. After reading the article by Minerva S. Chávez, I realized that autoethnography was a legitimate tool for research. She tells her own story without hesitation and is intentional about highlighting the importance of its use for people of color. It is necessary to understand our positionality in the grand scheme of things, “My very presence, the presence of the brown, female body and lived experiences contained within, after all, is a reminder of class and racial inequities” (Chávez, 2012, p. 339).

As I seek to tell our stories, the stories of brown women, I know that it will not be completely accepted as legitimate knowledge. Not everyone who is considered an intellectual will perceive lived experience as academic. I have to prepare myself for that ugly truth. In power structures such as the academy, my way of research may not resonate with everyone but I write for me and Mary Lou. “Stories are the ways humans make sense of their worlds... Given their

importance, I argue that stories should both be a subject and a method of social science research”
(Chávez, 2012, p. 341).

CHAPTER TWO: MY *AUTOHISTORIA-TEORIA*

A fourteen-year-old girl watching her mother die and not caring enough to say her good byes, this is the reality that I carry in everything that I write. I will subscribe to Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of "Writing as a Sensuous Act" (p. 93) as it captures this effect on my senses more than my intellect but with it, I comb through what needs to be written. Through this *autohistoria-teoria* I honor the woman I analyze and bring healing to a wound that can never fully be healed. Much like Vicki Ruiz and her work in *From Out of the Shadows* (1998), it is my aim to use these memories to bring our experiences to the forefront so "women's lives, dreams and decisions take center stage" (p. xii). For example, calling back words from my memory in a journal entry of October 23, 2018, I describe my angst at having to open up old wounds:

I come to the coffee shop to sit down and pray that the words will begin to flow. I hate writing about you because it is always the place where I need to dig deep and feel what I do not want to feel. In life's great irony, you are my greatest love and my greatest heartbreak. I have to do this though, right? I need to tell people about you because if I do not, you stay hidden in the places I do not want to go. I have my headphones on, More Than a Woman by the Bee Gees is playing because you loved that song and I like to believe it is about you. I need you to help me Mary Lou, help me to share the person that you were to those who never knew you. Help me to be the writer you could not be.

As Anzaldúa (1987) noted, "The Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession" (p. 97). She is me, and I am her.

Mary Lou/Maria

I never knew my mother as a woman, I knew her only as my mother. It continues to be my life's work to figure out who my mother was as a person. Through cousins, tías and tíos, I get

a glimpse into the different personalities of Mary Lou so here I will describe her as I knew her. Much of my frustration comes from not knowing all of her. Those who knew her, knew how precious a relationship with her was and so they keep memories of her locked away for themselves, not to be shared with others, even her daughter. I plan to take the knowledge of her that I hold to tell her story and mine.

Mary Lou, also known as, Maria de la Luz Esquivel Galvan was born in Crystal City, Texas on February 15, 1952. She was the first daughter to Isabel Ramos Galvan. Isabel was a rarity for her day as she held a steady job outside of the home as a cafeteria worker at the local high school for over twenty years. Maria's father had run off with Isabel's sister early on in the pregnancy. Isabel would go on to marry a man by the name of Manuel Galvan and he would be the only man Maria knew as a father.

Manuel was a Bracero¹, from Durango, Mexico. After the Bracero Program ended, Manuel settled down in Crystal City and worked the agricultural fields locally. When my mother was born, she did not stay long with Isabel because Isabel's grandmother, Mama Lucinda, decided that Isabel was not fit to raise a daughter, so she took Maria and raised her for thirteen years. It should be noted that Isabel's mother Anita (Maria's grandmother) was mentally unstable and Mama Lucinda feared the same was true for Isabel which is why she did not feel Isabel was able to care for a baby. The mental health of my great grandmother Anita bears resemblance to a finding from a study on "Well-Being in Mexican American Women," by Diaz & Bui (2016) that states "Mexican origin women are more likely to have mental health issues than Mexican origin men" (p. 609). As stated in the article, Anita had all of the traits that were applied to the subjects

¹ Bracero is a Mexican laborer allowed into the United States for a limited time as a seasonal agricultural worker.

in that study, she was an ethnic minority, poor and a female. Anita lived a difficult life and like many Mexican women of that era, did not have the tools needed to cope.

Maria loved Mama Lucinda and cared for her through Lucinda's lung cancer. When Mama Lucinda passed, Maria was then sent back to live with her mother Isabel and step-father Manuel at age thirteen. Maria would come home to seven other siblings whom she immediately became a mother figure to: Carmen, Imelda, Manuel, Luis, Maribel & Anabel (twins) and Lucinda. Carmen, the second oldest, found relief in Maria living with the family because she would no longer bear the brunt of Isabel and her abuse. Maria's presence in the household brought about a peace and a balance to the siblings. Isabel and Manuel, both products of their time and circumstance, would treat the children harshly while Maria became a comfort to them all.

Who was Mary Lou as a person and what type of life did she have? Mary Lou was an outlet for the family, an escape from familial brutalities. Though certain behaviors continued, she was there to comfort and even stand in for her siblings when the punishments became too much to bear. Our family history is vital to whom we are; it is why she was the kind of mother she was. Mary Lou bared witness to everything she did not want for her own family.

As a mother, Mary Lou was firm that she was a mother first before anything else. She worked as a secretary for the superintendent of the school district I attended while my father was a special education teacher in the same district. Everyone I went to school with knew my mother and father and I dared not misbehave. While working full time, my mother attended college classes at night to finish her degree. I can recall attending classes with her and hating every minute of it. Looking back, my mother was trying to be an example to us by getting her education. I am filled with an enormous amount of pride when I say that I come from a mother

and father who both gained their college degrees against the odds. She taught us to be women who were unafraid, to be more than a wife or a mother and to love God. This was her legacy for us. In this account I search my memory for who my mother was to me.

My mother would never let me go to school with my hair uncombed, even if it hurt. If it was cold in the morning she would iron our clothes and tell us to hurry up and put them on so they would be warm for us. If we did not want to get up for school, she would tickle us so we would begin our day laughing. For my First Communion, she created a banner for me to hold up as I stood with the other children. When we went to Walmart, she would let us pick out whatever pattern we wanted and made our outfits for us. She was a secretary for the school district I was in and therefore warned me that she would find out everything if I misbehaved and she did. She reminded my sister and I to always walk around like we were Ms. America. When I ran for Student Council, she created all of my signs and buttons. She wanted a house warming party for her first home ever and demanded a margarita machine be present. Every summer we went camping with my cousins because she loved being outdoors. I told her I loved to sing so she would sit and listen. When decorating her home, there had to be *gallos* everywhere because they reminded her of her childhood. No one made menudo quite like her. When she thought the Catholic Church was too boring, she moved us around until we found something more spiritual. Her laugh could stop a room and often did. After watching a movie that gave me nightmares, we knelt down together and prayed. This was my Mary Lou.

(Journal entry 12/23/2007)

Through my idealized memories, I bring my mother forward in order to try and understand who she was to me and how she continues to affect me. In the same vein as Arrizon (2000) and her

notion of performativity, I engage in writing out of necessity to bring back cultural memory and create my own site of spiritual, emotional and political agency.

The Cancer: You are my sunshine even in the storms

To this day, I wonder what it was about my mother's body that made her susceptible to tumors because she battled with them most of her adult life. At the age of 43, the doctors found a tumor on her kidney. On my birthday, June 25, 1995, she underwent surgery to have it removed. I remember my Tía Lucy walking me around River Center Mall to shop for my birthday while we waited for her to get out of surgery. Then in 1997, Mary Lou was diagnosed with breast cancer but out of fear, did not choose treatment.

It was not until 1998 that she sought treatment. It is not surprising that she did not seek treatment nor went for early screenings. A study done by Pagán et al. (2011) found that "Latina women aged 40 and older have the lowest mammography screening rates in the country" (p. 133). I was twelve years old and had no idea what it meant to have a mother with cancer. I only knew that my mother would be okay. She would not die because that is not what happens.

The two years that she was sick was a rollercoaster. Her weight fluctuated as did her moods, rightly so. Her hair came and went. She decided that wigs were ridiculous and chose hats instead, hats with flowers on them because they made her feel pretty. Her breasts remained but were reminders of her sickness. She was grappling with death, losing parts of herself and we could only stand by and watch. Her faith would be the foundation of her existence. She sought out God in every place she could, and we followed her. We came to know hospitals well, my sister more than any of us since she was old enough to take her to all of her appointments.

In a study done by Wells, Cagle, Bradley & Barnes (2008) the researchers found that caregivers in the Mexican American culture believe that all of their focus should fall to the

member with cancer while their personal well-being is put aside. This was the case with Viviana. If my sister ever complained, I never heard it. She shielded us from as much as she could at the age of only nineteen.

My father was present and distant at the same time. Years of taking my mother for granted were crashing down around him. There was no comfort held for us in waiting rooms so my brother and I chose to stay home rather than visit her. Here I recount a painful memory of one of the many hospital stays she endured. I find a familiar discomfort in Anzaldúa's words as I pull up these memories from the buried places in my mind, "I struggle to 'talk' from the wound's gash, make sense of the death...and pull the pieces of my life back together" (p. 121).

Walking into the hospital room where she's laid once again. She looks up at my sister and me with tears in her eyes and says, "I didn't think you were coming to see me today. I thought you forgot about me." My sister cries as she embraces my mom. I do not cry but I embrace my mom and I wonder how long I have to stay.

(Journal entry 4/22/2017)

She thought we had forgotten about her. I still cannot imagine the loneliness she must have felt in that hospital bed.

My father, being the prepared person that he is, had signed up for additional insurance through his work which covers incidents of cancer. They were able to pay for everything that most people cannot afford, and so money was not an issue during this time. There was even an opportunity to visit Disney World because she always wanted to go and felt well enough to do so. That was something she wanted for her and us.

On her good days, she gardened, ate at restaurants with my sister and bought hats. On the bad days, we had to help her walk up the stairs, help her bathe, help her use the restroom. What

we did not know until later was that the cancer was spreading from her breasts to her spine and eventually her brain. The disease was waging a battle inside of her that none of us were prepared for. Her skin color changed but my denial did not. During her last weeks she was in a wheelchair and then bedridden. She was sentenced to die at home. I remember the day she died in this journal entry.

My dad is telling me to hurry up because he's going to be late for work and I need to get to school. My mom is in the living room, eyes closed, possibly asleep. Most days I kiss her goodbye but today I decide not to, "She's not going to hear me anyway, she can't even talk, there's no point." I walk past her and out the door. Later that day my dad checks me out of school early. In the school lobby I see my dad and brother waiting for me. My brother gives me a half smile and says, "Hey Adri, mom's gone." My dad immediately hugs me.

I was too annoyed by her sickness to tell her goodbye that morning. I carry that regret with me now like a bag attached to my back.

My Tío Luis and sister were with her as her lungs filled up with liquid and she eventually suffocated. They watched her die. The cancer that consumed her body made sure that her death was neither swift nor merciful. On September 14, 2000, her spirit left her body. I have to wonder what her last thoughts were, did she have any? Is it fair that someone like her should have the kind of death she had? These are my own wonderings. There is a lot that I choose not to remember because it hurts, because my mind has buried it somewhere and even writing cannot uncover it. Maybe this writing is how I try to compensate for my selfishness, for thinking I am too busy to tell her goodbye, for being a child. I was not available to her during her sickness. I

seek forgiveness from her spirit for this every day. I know she forgives me. I hope she forgives me.

The Aftermath: A life without Mary Lou

This was the first poem I ever wrote about her. I had written my first-hand accounts of different situations and expressed myself, but this was the first time I had done it in poetic form. In my mind, poetry had to look and sound a particular way, so I tried my best to mirror other famous poems I had seen and read.

“Sailing”

I dreamt once that I lost you.

I was on a boat and you were on shore

Calling to you was no use because the waves pushed me so far

Until I could see nothing but blue

I was lost

I was completely lost in this vacant world I knew nothing about

Not only was I lost but I lost you

I awoke in a panic only to find that my dream was real

I lost you and in the process became lost too

With you gone I could never be found

There are still those few moments after waking up

Where everything is fine and life is as it should be

Then the pain returns as a reminder of what is real

The distance hurts the most

Knowing that my boat sails farther from you

Until there is only a vacant blue

(Journal entry 11/16/2005)

The months following her death were volatile. As a family, we had to learn how to navigate life without the woman we had built it around. I still could not process what it meant to have a dead parent. My mother's family all vowed to be there for us but in life's great irony, the tías and tíos that my mom had raised as her own all fell away except for one. I am grateful for my Tía Mari because she made sure we did not feel alone.

Her loss was too great for the rest of them to be there for her children. It has still taken me time to forgive them, but I choose to try because she would have wanted me to. Just recently have they come around to be available to us, but it took nearly twenty years. My family became a shell of its former self. Before, I would not have called myself a writer and I hesitate to do so now. However, this loss created the artistry and created me into an author of sorts, the author of this particular sadness. As time passed, the words came slowly and then all at once.

“Homesick”

I felt homesick for you today.

Summer time when I was a kid was the best because it meant that I could spend time with my cousins more.

I had the best childhood memories with them and I hold them dear still.

Though I spent weeks looking forward to staying over at their houses, I always reached a point where I knew: this wasn't my home.

I remember crying whenever I'd be gone for too long.

I had no real comfort because I wasn't home.

I revolved my life around you and still do.

That's what missing you is like; it's wanting to go home but never being able to.

I felt homesick for you today. And every day.

8/6/2014

I realized that this time in my life was going to be what Anzaldúa (1987) referred to as the Coatlicue state. This was my internal whirlwind that invoked my writing self which, if allowed can leave me in a dark state or I can crossover into a more enlightened one. Of the Coatlicue state, Anzaldúa (1987) writes that our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are, or they can remain meaningless. The Coatlicue state can be a way station or it can be a way of life. I would argue that I remained in this state for most of my 20s. The loss of my mother was causing my soul to do work on itself and this could also be physically painful. I was engaging in rites of passage and this was solitary work.

The morning of my wedding day was one I dreaded. In the early hours, I scraped together my feelings towards my soon to be husband while at the same time acknowledging the incredible sadness that accompanied the day. I put on her pearls and wept like a baby because she should have been the one to place them on for me. Yet another life event that she would not be there for.

“Vows”

I wrote once about how I have had this perpetual homesickness ever since she died.

Homesick and tired.

I wrote about it and read it to you.

After I read it, you told me,

“Maybe I can be your home now.”

And even though I already knew you would be the one to spend my life with,

I believe God showed me something new:

Life had taken away my sense of home but with you God was giving me a new home.

It wasn't meant to replace anything but to finally give me somewhere to rest my heart.

So yes, you can be my home now and I will be yours.

(Journal entry 3/4/2015)

I began to use writing as a way of traversing my feelings about her death. There were questions I thought I needed answers to and no one available to give me the answers. I wanted to know who Mary Lou was, who Maria was, and I kept hitting a wall each time her name was mentioned. Graduate school gave me a platform to finally face the issues that were hanging over me daily. My classwork began to evolve into healing work. I accelerated my journal writing and the poems began to emerge.

“My Mother’s Daughter”

I did a presentation once on how my identity rested in the absence of my mom. After she died I made sure to put her and all things associated with her away. I wish I knew where I put them all because they feel lost.

It wasn't until my adulthood that I could feel the effects of her absence. I began to feel robbed.

My brother remains more buried than I and my sister as my main source for all things Mary Lou. I began to scour for memories, pictures, anything. I thought that because I was robbed of her so young I never knew her.

It seemed that everyone else had more of her than I. My brother was a tightly locked chest. My sister, I envied, though her experience was laden with sacrifice and pain, she

had the most precious moments. The aunts and uncles whom she raised, who readily called her their mother, all kept a piece of her that they were unwilling to relinquish.

Mary Lou. Maria. Ram. Mare. Mama Lou. Mama.

After another failed attempt to redeem a memory from a relative, my sister opened a realization: I already knew her.

My brother, my sister and I, we are her. She was us. She IS us.

Though I did lose some memories, I did not lose her.

She was the one who ate lunch with me as I wore native feathers in kindergarten. She was the one who made sure my hair was combed, always. She was the one who tickled us to wake us. When it was cold, she was the one to make sure we would step into warm, just ironed clothes. She was the one to love our friends as her own. She was the one to embed God so deeply in our hearts that the world could not touch. She was my mama.

I knew her then and I know her now. Time may have been taken but she was greater than time and still is.

They can keep their pictures, their faded memories and jaded remnants. I will always have more. I have the privilege of being the daughter of Mary Lou.

(Journal entry 9/26/2012)

Poetry, journal writing and scholarly research in my graduate program helped me to understand that telling my own story as well as that of my mother's was an act of resistance while also production of knowledge. It was a way of creating new *conocimiento*. Chicana feminist scholar Minerva Chávez (2012) argues that there is validity in telling our own stories, "Producing autoethnographic research acknowledges and validates my Chicana presence as well as draws attention to my marginal position inside dominant structures of education" (p. 335). I

found the words of Anzaldúa comforting as I struggled to bring forward my feelings through words, “I seek a way to bring all my feelings and thoughts together to create un *testimonio* that’s harmonious, cohesive, and healing. Only by speaking of these events and by creating do I become visible to myself and come to terms with what happens” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 21). I had to learn how to make my pain visible. I did that by making these words visible and in this way, I learned to survive.

“Surviving”

I’ve been told by several people that they don’t think they could ever survive what I’ve been through.

Losing a mother isn’t devastating to everyone but it is to most. You are the physical result of having been embedded in your mother. It is a loss of the greatest caliber.

My response is that I got through it, I get through it because I HAVE to.

I would not be my mother’s daughter if I crumbled into myself and did not keep surviving.

Some survived by burying her memory, not speaking to her children, avoiding where she lived, not looking at her pictures.

We survived by remembering.

We had to remember because how dare we forget?

She was pivotal.

She was necessary.

She is gone.

How do you survive a death? You live.

“I fasted and wept while the child was alive, for I said, ‘Perhaps the Lord will be gracious to me and let the child live.’ But why should I fast when he is dead? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him one day, but he cannot return to me.” 2 Samuel 12:22

(Journal entry 3/21/2015)

Surviving was the last thing I felt that I was doing but it was also second nature because I was the daughter of Mary Lou and I knew she would expect nothing less. In my days where I felt that the only way to survive was to speak about her, I was often met with responses of nervousness or discomfort. Tías, Tíos and most who knew her did not want to talk about her, and the excuse was for my sake when I knew the exact opposite was true. Death is an uncomfortable topic but only because we are taught to fear it and fear what we feel. In my aggravation over this, I wrote the following:

“Let’s Talk About Mary Lou”

People are so skittish around the topic of death. They want to avoid the topic not out of respect for you but for their comfort.

I understand though.

It isn’t easy even for me but I know that it is something worth talking about.

I want to give advice to those who feel awkward talking to someone about their deceased loved one:

That deceased person deserves to be talked about.

Get over it and have the awkward conversation. Deal with the possible/probable tears.

Do yourself and your loved one a favor and listen.

Do you know what it means to listen when they speak about them?

It means you care and that that person was worth talking about.

Now, let's talk about Mary Lou.

Some days I don't feel like I know much but here's what I know: She was a woman who loved to dance. She loved to sing; some of my best memories are of us singing in the van together. She loved to sit and read her bible; Mary Lou knew her bible verses and always used one when she prayed with us. She enjoyed a good margarita. She was not afraid to tell you the truth; almost as if she knew her time was limited. Mary Lou loved having her family around; most of my cousins grew up loving her like no other. She told my sister and I to walk around like we were Ms. America, just like she did. She was a woman who hardly went anywhere without her three little ducklings following behind. Mary Lou would entrench the love of God by example in her family.

There's so much more and not enough space.

Why wouldn't I want to talk about Mary Lou? She was magnificent.

Next time it feels awkward to bring her up, deal with it because she is worth your time and mine.

(Journal entry 5/10/2015)

One of the biggest frustrations I have had to face is her absence in the midst of pivotal moments. In my next entry I imagine conversations with my mother before big moments in my life. I wrote this as I sat in my car before a big moment at the university.

“Big Moments”

I've been thinking about you as I always do but today is different as it always is. I've been thinking about big moments and when you'd be there for them. Today's another moment that I imagine calling you or visiting you and asking for your prayers because to me your prayers are more meaningful than others, as if God listens to you more even

though I know that's not true. Your words are different not just because you're a mom but because you were Mary Lou. Mary Lou's words made an impact. I'd say, "Mama it's happening today!" I'd tell you how I'm not nervous but really you'd know that I am. You'd say that I don't need to be and pray peace over me. You'd tell me that worrying is a waste and that I already have what I need. You'd pray a prayer that made me feel ready. I have to imagine these conversations. I have to imagine that you'd be proud even though I can't know for sure. I have to imagine that I'm something like you otherwise I'll feel like you're really gone. I have to have these conversations in my head because they can't happen any other way. I've learned to be ok with it. But here's another big moment where I'm imagining you and I while I sit in my car alone.

(Journal entry 9/14/2018)

Family: Jose. Viviana. Joe. Adriana

In a study conducted by Calderón-Tena, Carlo & Knight (2011), Mexican American families found familism values to be stronger than in Euro-American families. When mentioning the term familism, it is used with the meaning that the family unit takes precedence over the individual. This was the case with us and our extended family growing up. My father and I were always close; a daddy's girl I could identify with being. I can imagine he was more lost than any of us since he had more time with her. My father, who was an advocate for the Chicano Movement in Crystal City and a brilliant mind, had a master's degree while most other men his age did not. He was many things but a great husband he was not. His side of the family will argue otherwise but they were not witness to his treatment of my mother growing up. I loved him anyway and saw him as one of my idols. Is he the same since her death? He's not and it took losing my mother to change his heart.

“Dear Dad”

Tía Lupe likes to send me old pictures of the family. I think she likes to because at least another generation will have them to value. Today she sent me pictures of Chico. You two had similarities but weren't identical, I guess like me and Vitsey. On the back of one of the pictures he dedicated one to you. I bet you loved him a lot. I started to cry after seeing the pictures because it made me think about how much you've lost. We have all lost something or someone but you've endured more loss than anyone I know. Your parents, brother and wife. How are you still so strong? Our family has had its ups and downs and you have grown so much since mom died. All of that and you are still happy to live each day, taking care of the house, the cars, yourself and us. We aren't emotional people towards each other and never have been but I cannot let anything go unsaid.

Thank you. I love you. I can't imagine life without you and on the day I have to I'll be waiting until we're all together in heaven with mama.

(Journal entry 4/21/2015)

I sent my father a copy of what I had written, and his response was the faith in God that our mom had instilled, her memory and his love of exercise has helped him to keep living and enjoying life (J. Macias, personal communication, April 22, 2015).

My sister Viviana, who after my mother, is the strongest woman I know. Not yet out of high school, she was Mary Lou's unofficial caretaker. She was my mother's nurse and best friend. I find so much of what I needed in a mother from her even though it was never her duty to take that on. In my life, she continues to walk the line between mom and sister. While Mother's Day is a difficult time, I could not help but let my gratitude towards my sister pour out on to a page.

“Vivi Lou”

Mother’s Day is coming and I will inevitably cringe at all of the Facebook posts from people who are showering their mothers with praise.

I am bitter but I reserve the right to be.

Getting that out of the way, I want to write about someone who has not gotten enough credit from those around her.

I have a mother and she is irreplaceable but in her absence, my sister is the closest I have to Mary Lou. She is my mini-Mary Lou.

I want to write about her because she needs to be recognized for how much she sacrificed and strived during and after my mom died.

While my mom was sick, I was in my young ignorance trying not to feel like my mom’s sickness was an inconvenience.

While I was stuck in that regrettable world, my dad was in his world and my brother in his own denial which still exists today.

My sister was not allotted that privilege.

My mother’s sickness was in her face day after day.

She was on cancer duty.

I don’t speak for her experiences, only she can do that but I am writing what I remember.

No one was more available to my mother than she was.

My mother’s family will say they were there and maybe they were, I recall them coming and going but it was Viviana who carried the weight.

She was everything to my mother that no one else could or wanted to be.

It should have been a time where she enjoyed her youth, went off to college and made mistakes.

Instead, she had to watch my mother die.

Death Cab for Cutie said, "Love is watching someone die." And so she did.

There would be no time for mistakes because losing my mother would make her an immediate adult.

She was my mother's best friend and carried her through that sickness with gracious strength.

After my mom died, she became the buffer between my dad's grief and us.

She parented my brother and I when necessary and continually took the brunt of my dad's anger.

Just as my mom did when we were little, my sister took me everywhere with her.

She and her boyfriend (now husband) became like my parents and best friends at the same time.

Our mom was dead and the only way to move forward was to stick together, so we did.

There is no one on Earth I look up to more than my sister.

My brother gets continual praise for being male and playing an instrument but it's my sister who deserves the focus.

My mother's death would have been the perfect excuse to hate life, instead she chose to be someone my mother would be proud of.

She carries the best of Mary Lou inside of her.

So as we move towards another Mother's Day, I want to thank you sister.

Thank you for choosing better and continuing to be just like my Mary Lou.

(Journal entry 4/30/2016)

My sister will forever be my soulmate and I believe that Mary Lou would have wanted it that way. Her death brought us together.

In a study on grief responses of Mexican Americans versus Anglo American college students, Oltjenbruns (1998) found that responses from Mexican Americans were most intense than from Anglo Americans. The study was specifically looking at loss of control and somatization, "Mexican Americans see grief as both an emotional and a physical process" (p. 150). After reading this article, I immediately thought of my brother, Jose. No one took my mother's death harder than he did. He has never been the same and I believe it is because he is buried with guilt for not being available to my mother.

I can rationalize my absence with being too young, but he was older and had greater awareness. He plays the accordion and is one of the best I've ever seen. My mom pushed for him to be great at the instrument even if she did not agree with the Tejano music environment. I believe music is an escape for him just as much as it's a reminder. Growing up, he and I were inseparable. I played with his toys and we always rode bikes together. All throughout my primary school life, my brother was around to protect me. He was my hero and, in some ways, he still is.

In most of our childhood pictures, you'll see him embracing me. Once she was gone, he distanced himself from everyone, numbed himself with substances and continues to do so. If he can ruin a family gathering, he will. All of my extended family see him as a charming, talented musician that they choose to revere but do not care to know who he is away from that identity. To my immediate family, he is broken. It is a struggle for him to be around my sister and me

because together we are Mary Lou. I receive rays of light every now and then when he allows himself to be my big brother again. This was one of those times.

“Enchiladas”

I heard once that when someone dies you begin a long term relationship with your grief. I thought about how true that is. If you have ever lost someone whom your soul was tied to, this is the result when they die.

You have to learn how to take on a new relationship and it’s one that you never grow accustomed to. I still cannot get used to not having my mom around and never will.

I miss her so badly and always at the most peculiar moments.

One night my husband and I wanted to make enchiladas and I immediately thought of her because she made the greatest enchiladas. My brother knows how to make them exactly like hers.

Before I go on, I need to explain about my brother. He has not always been the most reliable or kindest sibling. Ever since she died, he’s been a shell of his former self and we never know when he will be the brother we grew up with.

Even so, he carries so much of my mother it hurts. He is more Mary Lou than he realizes.

As I was saying, with my brother’s directions on how to make the enchilada sauce I inevitably mess it up.

I went to my corner and like the child that I am, I threw a fit. I let her down.

Here comes my brother.

Instead of some sarcastic comment or form of ridicule, he takes me by surprise.

He washes away the failure I’d made and starts gathering ingredients.

He summons me to the kitchen to learn how to create it correctly. To make it like hers.

I was missing her so much and there she was. Her essence was in that sauce.

My mom makes herself known at the most peculiar moments.

As I've said, we are her and she is us.

My brother came through for me because he embodies Mary Lou, especially in a kitchen.

I write to bond with my grief, maybe that's where he bonds with his.

I brag about my sister because she deserves it but today this one is for my brother, the dark horse.

He is still broken and won't always come through for me but it's these moments I cherish.

None of us will ever be the same person, nor should we be.

We are people who have a relationship with grief.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of relevant literature includes studies that vary greatly in their research approach. I do not find this to be problematic; rather, I find that with the variety of approaches and perspectives this can only contribute to the study. Ranging from the research done on Mexican American caregivers, to the relationships between family members, to Chicana Feminist Methodology and the spiritual, all of these aspects are key to understanding and supporting my research on breast cancer and its effects on Mexican American families. The literature will also show the gaps in research pertaining to Mexican American families—literature that gives voice to experiences and relationships and not merely statistics. In this literature review, I examine relevant literature with the following themes: Mexican American families and breast cancer. This organization of literature will provide a more nuanced understanding of how my work—my *autohistoria-teoria* and qualitative interviews (*testimonios*) amplify existing knowledge on the disease of breast cancer and the way in which traditional Mexican American families function.

Mexican American Families and Breast Cancer: The Healthcare Perspective

In a grounded theory study on Mexican American caregivers, Wells, Cagle, Bradley and Barnes (2008) focused on thirty-four female caregivers of cancer patients who were majority married, mothers and low-educated. The article does not provide regional demographic information but participants were continually described as low educated, “Components of their struggles were being uncertain, having no money, getting sick, and needing an interpreter” (Wells et al., 2008, p. 229). Right away what became problematic to me was the continued focus on how low-educated Mexican American women persevered despite their limited knowledge on

health care. Wells et al. (2008) does focus on the cultural qualities of the women pertaining to how the care is given.

It is noted that the women continually prioritized the care of the patients over their own and found it difficult to speak on their experience, as they would rather focus on their family member's response to cancer. What is also acknowledged is the cultural preservation of a female family member's caregiver needing to be strong in front of the family. Generally, it is not culturally correct within the Mexican American community to acknowledge being burdened by another member of the family. It is duty, it is family, and it is required. Through a grounded theory approach, the authors point to the importance of changing the current cancer care approaches from patient-focused to family-focused.

These points support my focus on the Mexican American family culturally being a unit, which leans on one another. While my study will pursue the methodology of *testimonio*, this grounded theory study has a health care focus. Since I am pursuing the route of *testimonio*, there will be a greater emphasis on creating a rapport with the participants as opposed to this article which states that it may have limited information due to participants not being comfortable enough to reveal their feelings to interviewers. This article is significant due to the knowledge it brings about the experience of being a Mexican American woman in a delicate situation. Studies on the culture are growing significantly but it is imperfect. Despite its limitations, their work brings more information to light.

In keeping with how Mexican American women handle family members with breast cancer, this next study shifts to cultural views of breast screening for breast cancer. In yet another grounded study theory this time by Borrayo and Jenkins (2001) found that Mexican descent women took issue with the insensitive breast cancer screening procedure that violated

their culturally appropriate behavior standards. This health care study highlighted four key purposes. First, to respect the uniqueness of the culture and individual by acknowledging the effects of acculturation, education and life experience. Second, that cultural beliefs have a great effect on health care practices. Third, the delivery of health care needs to be altered in light of varying cultural factors. Lastly, it is necessary to advocate for varying cultures to gain access to appropriate health care without violating their beliefs.

What the study found was that women's behavior during a screening revealed feelings of indecency in showing their bodies to another and having to touch their own bodies. The contribution of this article to mine is embedded in the emphasis on culture within the Mexican American community. This study supports why this particular community has low survival rates due to late detection and cultural beliefs and norms, "Mexican-descent women believe that females should conform to the prevailing traditional cultural norm of privacy regarding their body. More specifically, women believe that it is indecent for a female to touch or to see her own body, as well as to show or allow other to touch her body" (Borrayo and Jenkins, 2001, p. 542).

I can recall memories with my mother in which she would chastise me for asking questions about the body. I cannot fault her as it seemed she was keeping her cultural knowledge in practice. I find it important that the study revealed how great of an influence one's culture is even to the point of risking health. The limitations were noted in the conclusion of the article and it was that this particular theory was still in its initial stages and therefore opened to much debate. I believe the use of quantitative measures would help in developing this theory further.

In another related study on breast cancer screenings among Mexican-descent women Borrayo and Jenkins (2001) focus more closely on their cultural interpretations on the cause and nature of breast cancer. I found this article to relate very closely to my personal experience. In it

many of the participants state that they do not see reason for getting screened because they have no family history of breast cancer, “The belief that heredity causes cancer is the most influential of the physical predetermination beliefs across women of various levels of acculturation and education” (Borrayo and Jenkins, 2001, p. 816).

This is something I found to be true in the community as well. There is a great fear for women to find anything foreign in their bodies, as it will interrupt their position. My mother was one of those who did not engage in screening until she was found to have something more serious. She felt healthy right up until she realized she was not. Even with the knowledge of being sick, she did not want to acknowledge the gravity of it.

As with Borrayo and Jenkins’ (2001) previous article, this study contributes to my research as it confirms many of the reasons why my participant’s mothers’ succumbed to their illness, “Women of Mexican descent differ from other ethnic women and even from other Hispanic women in that they are at higher risk of failing to comply with breast cancer screening guidelines, which has been further associated with higher incidence of late diagnoses and higher mortality rates” (Borrayo and Jenkins, 2001, p. 821). While still geared toward providing more information in the healthcare field, this article speaks volumes of the impact culture has on a community. Both of Borrayo and Jenkins’ (2001) pieces have confirmed how great of an impact the disease of breast cancer has on a Mexican American family.

The article by Pagan et al., (2012) is one of the pieces I found to be supportive in my *autohistoria-teoria* because it helped me to understand in a medical sense, why my mom did not seek help sooner. I know that it was not just her but others like her who were wary of cancer screenings. The numbers were deafening. They used a survey based approach to gather the data from 722 Mexican American women all over the age of 40. The authors found that “With a

mortality rate of 15.6 per 100,000, breast cancer is the primary cause of cancer deaths for Hispanic women” (Pagan et al., 2012, p. 132). Socio-economic status and age were just a few factors that they looked at when studying the health practices of Mexican American women.

The only limits of the study I found were the areas studied. They focused solely on the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. I realize this could be due to various factors and that they may not have had the resources for a broader study. I only count this as a limitation since my research is not focused on women from that region specifically. It was crucial to understand the need for more literature on Mexican American women and their health needs pertaining to cancer.

Mental Health and Grief

While this could be a different research topic, it bears importance in the life of my mother and affected us as well, the mental health of Mexican American women. In a study on the subjective well-being of Mexican American women and their mental health, Dias and Bui (2016) found that because of multiple oppressions that Latinas experience, they have higher chances of experiencing issues with mental health. This study included 194 females who identified as either Mexican or Mexican American, were 18 years and older and came from a low socio-economic status. This was significant to my *autohistoria-teoria* as it gave evidence to why my mother’s family struggled as they did.

According to the researchers, “Latinas are often marginalized in different contexts, including within the family, work, and education arena, which can affect their well-being” (Diaz & Bui, 2016, p. 609). The matriarch is the pillar of strength and when their mental or physical health betrays the culture, it has a tremendous effect on the woman. We saw this with my great grandmother Anita; then the reactions of my tías and tíos towards my mother were telling also.

Once my mother's strength was failing, they looked elsewhere for their familial strength. Diaz and Bui make suggestions as to how to make mental health more visible within the community in things such as community health fairs and conscious-raising groups. They do make note that their findings could have additional variables that contribute to their outcome and that future research is deserved. Latino males are not examined but they make note of this as well. The identity of a Mexican/Mexican American woman is complex and they should be supported in their communities rather than experience additional layers of oppression.

Since much of what I am using in my research is connected with grief, I thought it would help to have a study that recognized this within the Mexican American culture. The article by Kevin Ann Oltjenbruns (1998) is the closest I found that connected ethnicity with grief responses. In my *autohistoria-teoria* I used this to put into context my brother's response to my mother's death. I thought it could be useful in his case since he was of college age when my mother died. Anglo American college students and Mexican American college students were the pool studied which has its own limits. Even with the increase in studies done on grief responses, we still only have articles such as these to pull from. My hope is that this research will contribute to a much-needed conversation about how Mexican Americans deal and respond to their grief.

The findings were that Mexican Americans were more likely to report that they would allow themselves to react strongly in the instance of death. Examples of grief reactions were not given and that they stated they would not specifically focus on. There was also a greater difference in regard to denial, anger, social isolation, sleep disturbance, and loss of appetite (Oltjenbruns, 1998, p. 151). In all of my participants' stories, there was someone in their family who showed those reactions to the death of their mothers. Denial was always the initial response to the families' reactions.

Gender Roles

Much of what has been discussed references the family and focuses on the disease of breast cancer. I would like to introduce the importance of gender roles within the Mexican American family. Specifically, I would like to look at the role that the mother serves and view it through Anna Nieto-Gomez's article (1995) of the suffering that Chicanas inherit from their culture. I believe viewing from Nieto-Gomez's lens will allow for a better understanding of attitudes that are revealed during a sickness from a Mexican American woman/Chicana. Please note that I will use Mexican American women and Chicana interchangeably due to the nature of this article.

There is a reason that Chicanas do not seek medical assistance right away or why they place the health and vitality of their families over themselves. It is possible that my own mother denied her sickness in the beginning because it interfered with her role. Nieto-Gomez states, "The veneration of the Virgin Mary defined the woman's identity as a virgin, as a saintly mother, as a wife-sex object, as a martyr...Connie Nieto affirms the fact that Marianismo has had a tremendous impact in fostering beliefs of negative existence and self-denial" (Nieto-Gomez, 1995, p. 49).

In deciding who takes care of their mother has more to do with gender and tradition than we like to admit. The following article gives a more in depth look at the traditional gender roles we see within the family. In a study conducted by Updegraff, Mchale, Zeiders, Umaña-Taylor, Perez-Brena, Wheeler and Jesús (2014), the authors investigated the domain of gender development and gender role attitudes. This contributes to my study in its confirmation of the roles that traditionally fall within the Mexican American family scope. The links between

mothers, fathers and adolescent's gender role attitudes are important when caring for a family member with an illness.

Traditionally the women in the family have taken on the burden of caring for those in the family while the males provided financially, "Traditional gender role attitudes refer to beliefs that social roles should be differentiated by gender, including that responsibilities for childrearing and household tasks be designated to women and educational achievement and economic provision be assigned to men" (Updegraff et al., 2014, p. 2042). The research being focused on adolescents I found to be relative to my research as well seeing as how my participants were adolescents when they began care for their mothers. What I found important about this article were its contributions toward the study of gender roles particularly adolescents. This is a pivotal age where one is beginning to discover who they are. Yet these ladies had to grapple with finding out whom they were while holding the responsibility of an adult.

Disease knows no age nor cares who it affects. While not clearly stated, this study was geared toward a quantitative measure with many statistics being laid out for the reader. The study was also limited to one geographic region, which gives limited results. For future articles it will be of great use to have a greater geographic region studied and to let the reader know if they are going to be given a qualitative or quantitative study.

Fitting into the dynamics of the Mexican American family and the traditional ideals about the social roles of women and men comes the study by Mchale, Updegraff, Shanahan, Crouter, and Killoren (2005). We are shown in this study the patterns of parent's differential treatment of adolescent siblings. Again, in keeping with where the responsibility of care lies, we need to look towards familial roles. The study aimed to find whether parents' cultural orientations were linked to their patterns of differential treatment, precisely between sons and daughters. Again, we are

looking at a critical age especially in respect to their responsibilities, “A body of research and theory suggests that parents’ differential treatment of siblings is a central dynamic in family life” (Mchale et al., 2005, p. 1270).

Using telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews, the researchers collected data on various topics dealing with the treatment of siblings by their parents. The finding resonates with my research on the treatment of daughters in respect to household tasks. Whether or not the daughter was older or younger than her sibling brother, she was still assigned more of the household duties. I thought it interesting that age was not even a factor when determining whether or not the child was ready for taking on duties, it was determined by their gender. I took this information and applied towards my theory of family dynamics shifting towards the responsibility falling on the daughter.

How do fathers treat their daughters when the mother falls ill? Will the father step up and take on the major role or will it be laid on the other members of the family? In a two-parent household, it is the daughter, usually the eldest who will be holding the entire family together in place of the mother, almost as if she were an interim mother. Perhaps it is seen as training for when she has her own expected family. In my experience this is true of the majority of Mexican American families and true of my research participants, the daughter took on the care of her mother. This study adds to this literature by recording the family designs and links of differential treatment in two-parent families.

In character with the analysis of the Mexican American family is an article that explains why it is important to take a second look at how academia has positioned them. According to Mirandé (1977), there are two conflicting views of the family; one is the traditional social science view that paints an unyielding, male-dominated unit that accounts for the passivity of its

women. The other view is that of a warm, fostering, and compassionate family that shelters one another. In my studies I would be amiss if I said I had not come across both of those perceptions and Mirandé (1977) himself states that these generalizations are rampant even without the use of hard evidence.

I appreciate that there is recognition of the efforts made by Chicano authors to combat the stereotypes of the family that social science has readily stabilized,

...while Chicano perspectives on la familia have served as a badly needed corrective for the negative and stultifying social science view, they have not been without their pitfalls.

In their eagerness to counter the pejorative social science view, some researchers have tended to overcompensate and present an idealized and romanticized image of the family (Mirandé, 1977, p. 747).

After reading this quote, I realized that I have based some of my information on traditional views of the Mexican American family but even with that, I believe the *testimonios* of the participants of the study will erase any idealized views. In using these women's voices, it is not idealization but truth that comes from women embedded in their culture and families. I could not help but appreciate the efforts of this editorial in showing different versions of the Mexican American family. Further into the piece there are more explanations of the Mexican American conceptions of masculinity and femininity and even depictions of the mother and her significance to the family, "...she is extremely important in intrafamily relationships" (Mirandé, 1977, p. 753). My biggest concern is how dated the material is but looking past that I found an engaging and supportive article to any future research I have.

In another analysis on the Mexican American family unit we have a study by Calderón-Tena, C. O., Knight, G. P., & Carlo, G. (2011). The focus was on values held by the adolescents

in the family and I used this to compare the shared value systems that all of us as participants had. What I took away from this was that the Mexican American family unit has a unique view of familism. Every person in the family carries a responsibility but the weight of those responsibilities are not always evenly distributed. The focus on the mother was stressed throughout the article.

They found that the older adolescents or the more mature ones tended to generate prosocial behaviors. This translates into, the older children/mature children were found to have the role of caring for their families. The values of putting the family first was stressed among the adolescents who showed these prosocial behaviors. Again, this was at the inspiration of a mother who instilled these traits.

Is It Ever Enough?

The topics of these articles vary greatly while others are perfectly intertwined. I chose each piece for its usefulness to my research. My subject matter is new territory, as I have not seen any cultural based literature on the topic. It is a difficult topic and not one that I write about excitedly. I look forward to what these pieces will bring to my research and how it will help me to create a theory that is deserving of the issue. There is much more information that needs to be looked at and more time needed to comb through it all. The goal will be to turn this into a dissertation where I can give it even more attention, allow more women affected by this disease in our community to speak their certainty.

Through loss or hardship, we remain Mexican American and it is this identity that I want to hold to as these stories are told. Too few of our accounts are told and yet there are so many to tell. Together with these articles, I will contribute another piece where important narratives are told. Used together, the results indicate that culture plays a heavy role in determining the roles

we play within the Mexican American culture. It is nearly impossible to separate us from our traditions and beliefs and it is these articles that help to articulate this. Is any of this information enough to understand how to be a Chicana and grieve? Probably not but at least we can hear from those who have walked a similar path. Maybe this will shed some light to let others know that they are not alone.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Beginning with my *autohistoria-teoria* as an onto-epistemological (Keating, 2015) framework for understanding the self, this qualitative study uses *testimonio* to examine the ways in which women of color (Chicanas in this research) use their stories to bring forward healing and reach new understanding on their own identities. It is a fine line to walk between meeting the needs of the participants and the research. There is no correct way of engaging in reflexivity as a researcher. The best way to make sure that I remain true to the research is not to disassociate myself from the experience but to find myself in it. If I can reach a new level of *conocimiento* then I will have properly engaged in reflexivity. It is not helpful to pretend as if I do not have a personal attachment to the subject but to recognize that and find a way to use it to help my community.

My research questions are simple but with many facets: how does the Mexican American family cope when the matriarch is diagnosed with breast cancer? How do they cope with the loss of the mama? These questions seek to understand the state of the traditional Mexican American family, the gender expectations that are assigned when a matriarch is diagnosed, the way in which it functions, how family members cope and how lives are uprooted when the pillar of the family is the one needing care. As those involved in the study, we were witness to how all of these issues took place and their effects thereafter.

Theoretical Framework: Onto-Epistemological Approaches

Though it is difficult for me to open up about my experiences, I realize it is necessary in order to create research that will positively affect those who encounter it. Our stories have beginnings and mine is at the heart of my intended research. My family and I are from a small

town called Crystal City, Texas which was pivotal to the Chicano Movement. My mother and father are both college graduates and come from an activist background.

Eventually the town was becoming too small and when I was four years old, we moved to San Antonio, Texas where we found our true home. We were happy, sad and dysfunctional just as most families were. Our dysfunction came from the volatility of my parent's relationship. There were many things we had to ignore, such as my father's indifference to my mother and instead focus on the love we had for each other. At the age of fourteen, I had to learn to live without the one person I continually gravitated around. After she passed, my family who was once tight knit, became a shell of its former self. In order to cope, I turned to writing.

When I began graduate school, I finally found where my heart and research could meet. I would combine my personal tragedy along with my love of writing to create something that might speak to others. I had to believe that my family was not the only one left feeling broken after my mother's death. I knew that Mexican American families were special in how they revere their mothers and when that essential piece is gone, what happens?

Most people go to college right after high school but this was not true of me. I took time off after high school to figure out what kind of woman I was without my mother. Eventually I made my way to college beginning at Northwest Vista College. It was here that I took my first Mexican American Studies course and my dormant eyes were opened. I majored in History but kept a love of MAS on the back burner. When I enrolled at the University of Texas at San Antonio, I knew I had to earn the degree for myself but also to make my parents proud.

Though I continued working full time, I slowly received my Bachelor of Arts in History. I would not make the same mistake as before and I entered the Bicultural/Bilingual Studies graduate program at UTSA immediately after graduation. It has been in this program where I

have developed the greatest self-awareness. I began learning about Chicana feminism and how to articulate and theorize what I was encountering in my inner and outer struggles as a Chicana, daughter, and scholar writing and researching.

My voice has power, and this is the greatest lesson I've learned from Chicana feminist epistemology. Telling my story as well as that of my mother's was an act of resistance while also a production of knowledge and healing. I was resisting against western ideologies that silenced women of our culture and erased our histories. Through graduate school I learned what I wanted to research and how to begin this journey. Mexican American mothers are often seen as the backbone of a family—the ones who offer their strength on behalf of everyone else. However, what happens when they are the ones faltering in strength? What happens when the strength of a family becomes weakened by illness or disease? Beginning with my own lived experiences, and the voices of other Mexican American women, this research examines the reactions of the family to the diagnosis of the disease and the impact on the family during and after battling such a grave illness.

Chicana Feminist Epistemology

Being a proud Chicana who is seeking to give voice to other Chicanas, I will use a Chicana feminist epistemology lens with which to conduct this research and self-discovery. I will center Chicanas and their experiences within this research. Relying heavily on the great Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, her theoretical frameworks will help me to navigate my research. I use the voices of other brilliant scholars like Dolores Delgado Bernal, Claudia Cervantes-Soon and Alicia Arrizón to assist in this as well. This pathway to healing is being paved by the voices of Chicanas and I wanted it to be clear that the scholars I used were those who used their own voices to guide their journeys. It is vital that women of color support one

another in academic spaces. By using this lens, I can also disrupt forms of western pedagogy which is important to myself as a researcher. It is part of the process of unlearning.

A Chicana feminist epistemology sounds heavy in its meaning, but I felt once I understood it, it was very simple. According to Delgado Bernal (1998), a Chicana Feminist Epistemology is a way of knowing that is embedded in the life experiences of Chicanas. It involves Chicana research participants in analyzing how their lives are being interpreted, documented, and reported, while understanding that many Chicanas lead lives with very different opportunity formations than men or white women. To me, this was extremely liberating because here is a Mexican American woman outlining why Chicana experiences belong in academia.

Chicana Feminist Epistemology is a means of resisting conventional paradigms that often alter or overlook the experiences and knowledge of Chicanas. Delgado Bernal (1998) posits that a Chicana methodology encompasses our positionality as Chicanas along with political and ethical issues we encounter during the research process. Delgado Bernal charts her path from Anzaldúa's work in *Borderlands* as well as Black and Native American feminists in order to define concepts like cultural intuition as central to a Chicana identity and consciousness. Delgado Bernal (1998) purposes that four sources contribute to a Chicana Feminist Epistemology: one's personal experience, existing literature, one's professional experience, and the analytical research process. However, in defining cultural intuition we are reminded that this includes a collective experience and community memory. I pull from this in order to piece together our stories in this research. With this lens and my own cultural intuition, I am grounding my research in the experiences of Chicanas.

We are bound together by these communal experiences that we have chosen to share with one another and our community. By using an Anzaldúan frame work we can explain that

Chicanas have a strength that stems from their borderland experience that is embedded in a state of duality. We do not have the experiences of black or white women because of our unique mix of indigenous heritage. In using the term intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to describe how women of color carry various identities to their being, I use that definition to describe Chicanas as well. As Chicanas we experience identities pertaining to: culture, language, spirituality, sexuality and many more; these are not and can never be the positions of the Chicano male or anyone else for that matter. “Within this framework, Chicanas become agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience, research, community, and social change” (Delgado-Bernal, 1998, 559). The use of our voices is a channel for social change.

Theory in the Flesh

In my time in graduate school, I have been inundated with knowledge that is contrary to what I learned in primary school. My voice, my experiences, my body is a source of knowledge. My English teachers who heavily repeated to never put “I” in our essays kept replaying in my mind. With my undergraduate in History, I was plied with even more discourse that left out the personal in favor of the Western ideology. In graduate school, I was engaging in the process of unlearning so that I might bring forward a new way to absorb. The works of Gloria Anzaldúa left me appalled and enthralled at the same time. I was appalled at the historical accuracy of Mexican Americans that she made me aware of and enthralled to be free of the untruths that clouded my educational experience. Using a theme of the text *This Bridge Called My Back*, I turn to theory in the flesh to make sense of our experiences.

I understand why Anzaldúan thought might offend and it is because she completely turns the world of a Mexican American woman upside down. As stated earlier, I applied two of her

texts, *Borderlands* and *Light in the Dark*. With *Borderlands* I drew from her notion of writing as a counter to the traditional silence that those in our culture often engage in. Women, much less women of color, have been made to believe by those within and outside of our own culture that we should be seen and not heard. In chapter 6 of *Borderlands*, The Path of the Red and Black Ink (p. 89), Anzaldúa says that writing feels very much like being a Chicana, a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. You have to look inside yourself, your experience. She says, “Living in a state of unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create” (p. 95).

All of the cultural traits we grow up believing as truth are questioned and challenged in her work. She dares us to look at ourselves and engage in difficult tasks, “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...The attacks continue throughout our lives” (p. 58). We are challenged to see the borderlands of our identities rather than a physical space. Before her, the duality of my culture and identity was not one that I knew to question, it was merely accepted. I read her work and immediately felt connected to her. She was a writer and I am a writer. She wrote through her pain and I do as well.

Chicana feminist epistemology allows women of color to draw from our own embodied knowledge. As people of color and women, we hold many forms of pain that is rarely allowed to be felt or articulated. Anzaldúa, in many of her texts, emphasizes that our wounds need to be felt, they deserve to be felt. If we are brave enough, then the wound must be expressed, “Besides dealing with my own personal shadow, I must contend with the collective shadow in the psyches of my culture...” (p. 121).

Our culture joins in wounding those from within as well as battling wounds from those on the outside. In order to heal, we have to feel for each other and with each other. Though I am

using the voices of women, I am also using their lenses with which to look at these situations. In using the Coyolxauhqui imperative, we interweave the personal and collective. It is imperative to reach out to one another through our wounds in order to transform these experiences into work that restores. I name this as my initial method of research because to engage in the next two methods, we need to theorize with our bodies.

Autohistoria-teoria

I love to write but with that comes the process of digging up unwanted feelings. My feelings belong to me and no one else. My writing belongs to me and no one else. The notion of laying out all of my private writings to be scrutinized by “scholars” and those in the community, terrifies me. I can only imagine what Anzaldúa must have felt.

My mother was employed by the district I went to school in and when she passed away, everyone knew—the teachers, staff and students. I remember coming back to school and receiving grievance posters from all of my classes, actual posters which I still have. I felt ashamed of my loss. I had to sit back and let everyone feel sorry for me. Poor Adriana’s mom died. Those who never even looked my way suddenly began giving me their sympathetic smiles.

I was and am appreciative to those who gave condolences, but I would forever be the girl whose mom died. Moms don’t die, that doesn’t happen in our culture. Grandmas die, grandpas die, maybe even some cousins but not the mom. She’s supposed to be forever. Along with the various identities that we carry as Chicanas, this would be one more to add, mother-less, because believe it or not, it is an identity. You carry that identity daily, but it feels heaviest during major holidays and life occasions. We are all, as women, our mother’s daughter but I have chosen to wear that piece of my identity proudly. Yes she is gone, she died but she was and is my mother.

Even as I write this now, she is mothering me through this process. All of this I use through this process that I have come to identify with so strongly, *autohistoria-teoria*.

This is a fairly new method to me but a brilliant professor revealed this to me. First introduced by Anzaldúa, in an article by Andrea J. Pitts (2016) we are given a studied look at what *autohistoria-teoria* contains which is a nature that is collaborative, sensuously embodied, and productive of critical self-reflection. Anzaldúa does not provide a simple definition for what this method embodies but I believe she gives us enough insight to use it as a tool for the ongoing process of reflexivity.

As a Chicana feminist scholar researching the self and the experience of other Chicanas who have endured a similar experience, I am able to document and interpret our stories. Stories are not used in the sense of fiction but of the stories we carry from our experiences. I collect the stories of myself and those who are along this journey with me. With *autohistoria-teoria* I am putting myself up for the task of revealing truths and wounds—wounds inflicted upon me by my culture, family, and myself. There is a lot of inner-work that needs to be done in order for change to happen.

The change is a lifelong process, and this is merely a chapter in my life that counts toward this change. Without fully understanding it, I began this work long ago when I put pen to paper, then fingers to keys. I will switch between using a scholarly voice and poetic voice, this will be important to know as you read through. Amid lived experiences, I am able to create this new type of research design. I seek to make my methods of research into more than something academic but into something beautiful. Combining *autohistoria-teoria* along with *testimonios* became a multimethodological genre of self-reflexivity, knowledge creation and change which led me to the creation of a new *conocimiento* on healing, personal and social change.

Testimonio

In order to know whom we are as Chicanas, speaking for ourselves is crucial. *Testimonio* allows an opportunity to reclaim and acknowledge the legitimacy of our personal experiences. It is at heart a first-person narration by a witness of a socially significant experience. Historically they were used as a tool for the persecuted and subaltern to express themselves (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Unlike the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing or oral history, *testimonio* seeks to bring light to a wrong, a point of view or is an urgent call for action; it is intentional and political (Reyes and Rodriguez, 2012). The issues concerning this as a methodological tool are that of legitimacy and this comes from a Westernized notion of what is truth and what is not. I use this methodology in the way described by Delgado-Bernal (2002), "...testimonio is a tool for inscribing struggles and understandings, creating new knowledge, and affirming our epistemologies..." (p. 367). If we are to create a more inclusive academic community, we need to understand these approaches as justifiable methods for the collection of data.

Another important facet of this research is that the researcher and the researched are from the same community. It is an unfortunate pattern that research is often done by outsiders who are not a member of the cultural community. The fact that a Chicana is engaging in research with other Chicanas is central to Chicana feminist epistemology. My story and their *testimonios* disrupt traditional methods of research practice. We know each other culturally and personally because our experiences intersect in more than one way. Perhaps in being the agent in this experience, we can all come to a state of higher knowledge about ourselves. In Delgado Bernal's (1998) cultural intuition, it is specific to Chicanas that we bring an embodiment of knowledge that no one else can. The power of *testimonio* can bring about a change that we may not even be

aware that we need. The emancipatory power of using *testimonios* is that it brings forth an active journey from marginalization into empowerment.

Participants

For the recruitment of participants, I used purposive sampling as I needed people with specific past experiences with a particular cultural background in order to better assist with my relevant research purposes (Creswell, 2006). The characteristics of my fellow participants are Mexican American women who have had a mother who has passed from breast cancer. The women did not need to be a particular age or family member, meaning they do not need to be the eldest, middle or youngest daughter. I have not come across many women who have been in this particular situation but those that I have are open to speaking about their experiences.

My recruitment of the women stemmed from already knowing who they are personally and a little of their experiences. I reached out and asked them if I could honor their mothers and their sacrifice by giving them a chance to give their *testimonio*. In order to gain access into this particular research setting I relied on personal connections to better build a rapport. It is necessary to have a relationship with my participants so they can be open with their stories. I asked to come into their homes or wherever they felt comfortable to listen to their stories which allowed them that space to relive a difficult experience.

Data Collection Methods

I conducted a semi-structured interview process using *testimonios* and interview questions based mostly on the experience shared between myself and the other women. I believe our experience of a great loss bonded us together and in allowing the other participants to partake and speak about it created a trust and connection. The initial semi-structured interview turned

into what I would refer to as a *plática*, in which we met each other as equals and engaged in conversation. It was not a matter of gathering data anymore as it was two women sharing stories.

I recorded each interaction with an application on my phone and stored the information on my personal computer. I transcribed the interview verbatim and I analyzed it by using the experiences of the women to support information in my research. For the qualitative analysis, I compared and contrasted the women's stories and mine in order to find what weaves us all together. I read the transcripts line by line in order to investigate preconceived ideas and compare those with current concepts and literature. For coding, I drew from Chicana feminist epistemology in which knowledge comes from Chicana researchers' cultural intuition. I found my themes based off of my intuition of topics that came up collectively between all of the participants such as their personal experiences.

Both women who shared their *testimonio* in our interviews and in each evolving *plática* contributed something powerful and therefore it was vital that I kept everything as true to life as possible. I sought to keep their identities true to themselves and for this reason I asked if they would not mind using their real first names. If they did mind, I offered a pseudonym, but each woman agreed to revealing their first name. All other aspects, such as work places, family names aside from their mothers and detailed living spaces were all kept confidential. All of the in-depth information that they shared was kept accurate and as true to form as possible.

I met with the participants on several occasions at a place of their choosing in order to ensure that I gain their trust. What they gave me is invaluable and I would like to make sure that a relationship is formed in order for their truth to be told explicitly. I was entrusted with valuable information and will use it at their discretion. I left it up to them as to what information I used in the study, it was only ethical to make sure that they had the final say in what I used for my

research. I am the only person with access to their information, as it remains encrypted on my laptop.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I read the *testimonio* transcripts line by line, coded passages through category generation, creating codes as they aligned with occurring themes. This data collection will be the most useful to my research because I believe *testimonio* as methodology to be intricately aligned to the goals of this research. I also referred to the use of literature reviews in order to connect the roles of Mexican American women in families along with their roles during a family member's sickness. The data analysis will be broken up into themes such as what the traditional role of the mother is in the culture, the stigma of breast cancer affecting the pillar of the family, the personal experiences (*testimonios*) of the participants and myself (*autohistoria-teoria*) and my findings of their similarities and differences.

As I shift from analyzing this data to its interpretation, I keep my Chicana feminist lens on at all times. By implementing my cultural intuition, I am combining my lived experiences with others. It is a process that has no linear expectations as I am constantly moving from one practice to another. I am never finished with this analysis because there is always something to revert back to, apply new and different meaning to. In using this lens, I can focus on interpretation that honors these women and our culture while making them visible.

I know this is not a rarity, but I believe the research on Mexican American families in this situation is rare. As Blake (1998) referenced, I use my own perspective to reflect upon oral history as a feminist practice while never forgetting my own racial, cultural and class position. This research is not perfect and will not represent all Mexican American families. The research

seeks to identify themes in this experience and tell the stories of a few to bring more light on this topic.

Research Limitations

I am not seeking to take the traditional route of qualitative research that states a particular number of people need to be interviewed/researched. I am not seeking to leave myself out of my own research. I am using some forms of data collection and analysis. I am not seeking to provide concrete evidence of anything in particular. What I am seeking to do, is to provide a small view into the proficiencies of three women. Three women who have undergone a similar trial and chose to speak on it.

My cultural worldview is inspired by my mother and losing her, and this could be seen as a limitation. She instilled in us a strong faith and fierce Chicana feminist attitude. While she left us an incredible foundation, I do realize that the loss might overshadow the research itself. I cannot separate my feelings from the study, and I do not think I want it to. It is my sentiments about this topic that create the passion necessary to accomplish this. I have a love for my culture and seek to give it more of a voice than it has currently. My desire to see Mexican American women produce more knowledge through their experiences is my cultural worldview. I realize that may not be the response that academia is seeking or that it may not be an answer worthy of the doctorate level, but it is sufficient for my goals. It is what I plan to accomplish and what I believe my mother would have wanted for me.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

People choose to live with their grief in different ways. It is our right as human beings to choose how we want to heal or not. The fact that these women were vulnerable enough to tell their story shows me that they chose to heal. Without even realizing it, being vocal creates a step towards social change. As a Chicana feminist scholar doing research from the wound, I echo Cueva and Huber's sentiment: "Chicana feminist scholars theorize from lived experience as a knowledge base to understand, critique, and challenge systemic oppression and theorize identity, sexuality, the body, resistance, healing, transformation, and empowerment" (Cueva & Huber, 2012, p. 395).

My research questions are as follows: how do the family dynamics shift when the mamá is battling breast cancer? What processes do Mexican Americans use to navigate their grief? We will see this reveal itself through the words of these women. While the women in this study might not consider themselves scholars, they are conducting scholarly work. By speaking on their experiences, they take part in a movement to decolonize what we know as knowledge. They are using their own bodies as brown women to document a life altering experience; historically this has rarely been used as a legitimate source of knowledge but that changes here.

While I used the first chapter to document my own story, I will use this chapter to introduce the other two women who took part. After their introductions I will share what themes emerged from my time with each woman and how their stories weave together with my own. Their perspectives are unique, and I do not want to make our shared experiences seem as if they are one. We each bring something different to the research, but I do want to identify themes that emerged from all of our stories. As a conscientious researcher, I do all that I can to make sure

they are each acknowledged for their bravery in being vulnerable and not reduce them to themes for the sake of scholarly work.

By speaking from their wounds, both women were able to communicate about how their experience brought them to a moment of realization or in the words of Anzaldúa (1987) *conocimiento*, I plan to use this as one of the analytic themes that emerged from their *testimonios* along with the following themes: mother as the core, caretaking and the disease, family reactions and *conocimiento*. Many other themes emerged in their narratives, but I feel that these were the ones that were represented with the most intentionality by each woman. Along with what I found in the literature review, these themes relate to the experiences of those pieces but also create a more vivid picture of what it means to be a Chicana whose mother has battled breast cancer. Anzaldúa (2002) would refer to this as an offering, “By redeeming your most painful experiences you transform them into something valuable, algo para compartir or share with others so they too may be empowered” (p. 540).

Gabi

My first *testimonio* comes from Gabi who I met while caring for her daughter at my place of employment four years ago. My first impressions of Gabi were that she was one of the most joyful, involved and kind people that I had ever come across. If it had anything to do with her children, Gabi was the first to make sure she was involved. It was not until I left that place of employment that I befriended Gabi via social media. It was then that I began seeing personal posts of how she had lost her mother to breast cancer. After I began my research on women losing their mothers to the disease, I reached out to her and asked if she could tell me her story.

As a child, Gabi found that she had a valid place within her family thanks to her relationship with her mother. According to Gabi, her mother corrected her when she was wrong,

praised her for the good but most of all loved her unconditionally. More than what she imagines most mothers did, she was a shoulder to cry on, a light for her day and she says that they spoke every day. She admits that childhood was a difficult one due to her dad's battle with alcoholism and sporadic abuse of her mother. These are things that she readily admits to having blocked out and prefers to remember having an adventurous, supporting and caring upbringing.

The relationship she held with her sister was a tumultuous one and was even the reasoning for sending her to counseling, at age fourteen. Gabi says that as the youngest of three, her brother became the mediator between the siblings and remains so to this day. Confirming my belief of Gabi as a positive person, she claims to have had the childhood of a lifetime. Her parents were incredibly supportive and never fails to remind us of that. She says that despite these things her family was tight knit and overcame their barriers, sticking by each other no matter what.

When asked if she identifies as Mexican American, Gabi believes she is especially since her grandparents were from Mexico. Her parents were first generation Mexican American and made sure to strive for the best for their family. Growing up she felt that her family came from an upper-class background since they had a large home. Her mom did have to work three jobs at one point just to maintain this lifestyle. Looking back, she says that it's now obvious that they were middle class trying to maintain an upper-class way of life. After high school she attended junior college and was just two credits shy of receiving her associate of arts degree when she found out her mother had stage four breast cancer. She does not regret leaving college behind because it gave her more time with her mother.

At the time of our conversation, Gabi was working for a major banking institution but found that her life was not balanced, "I don't want work to affect me anymore or my

family... Work is the number one thing that I want to change about my life.” She describes herself as being an involved mother for the sake of her children. As the youngest of three she has found herself to be carrying a majority of the weight during and after her mother’s death. Her life is not necessarily where she’d like it to be but believes that the most important thing is to create memories. The memories and pictures are what matter because once someone is gone, that’s all that remains. Gabi’s mom, Julie, was diagnosed in 2000; she passed away in 2003 when she was fifty-two, after battling breast cancer for three years. This was not her first encounter with cancer as we will later learn from Gabi’s account. This *testimonio* as well as our *plática* will be just one more way to create something that will remain, in memory of her mother Julie.

Viviana

My second *testimonio* comes from Viviana. Growing up, her family came from a small town in Texas called Crystal City and were a rarity for getting out of that town. They eventually settled in San Antonio, Texas. Viviana’s family came from a middle-class background with her father having a master’s in education and mother a bachelor’s in psychology. She believes that she fits in with her family and that everyone brings something different to the table. Her time with them is something she cherishes because she truly likes her family as people; this was true growing up and now.

She is married with no children but holds that they will be in her future. She identifies as Mexican American and followed in her parents’ footsteps of pursuing higher education. Much like Gabi, Viviana had to leave college in order to care for her mother, but she returned and completed her bachelor’s in education. Viviana maintains that she has a quiet life that includes a close relationship with her husband and a friendship with her sister. While she loves her brother and dad, it is not the relationship it once was. She and her father have always been combative but

that has fallen away with time. When asked to describe herself she lets me know that she is loyal, hardworking, caring, loving, guarded and comes with a lot of grit.

Viviana brings first-hand account of what it meant to be available to her mother in her darkest moments. She and Gabi witnessed the face of a disease that embodied their mothers towards the end of their lives. My account holds the weight of regret, while theirs holds the weight of experience. Mary Lou was diagnosed in 1998 and she passed away in 2000 when she was 48. Similar to Julie, this was also not Mary Lou's first encounter with cancer.

Mother as the Core, My Mother as my Everything

All women in their *testimonios* immediately described their mothers as either being the “glue” or the “core” of their families. Gabi would state:

She was amazing. She was the core of the family, she did everything for us. I don't know how she did half of what she did. She was a person who made everybody smile. She could light up the room. She really taught you that life is short.

Viviana would also go into detail on why her mother was the glue in her family while also giving a description:

She was the glue. Everything revolved around her but she was, she was kind but at the same time she was direct, she was very direct. She told you how it was...She was smart.

She was educated. She believed in that. She loved God more than anything.

Although I did have this as an interview question, both women did not fail to express the importance of their mother's role in their immediate and non-immediate families (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.).

I will, speaking on my behalf, admit that it is easy to sentimentalize the memory of one who has passed. I cannot say that this is what these women did when describing their mothers,

but it was recognizable in my writing. Both Gabi's and Viviana's *testimonio* reveal that they revered their mothers. According to Gabi:

She wore many hats. I could never be mad at her. She was fun. All of my friends would call her mom. That's another thing, I don't know how my mom did things. She worked a very stressful job and she still went to all of our school activities, went to all of our school functions, I mean I don't know how she did it...She was very close to her family and made us close to her family. She was very artistic, loved to bake. She would take those cake decorating classes. I would always go with her because I wanted to go everywhere with her.

In Viviana's account she says:

My mom was always a mom first but she was still my best friend. I think sometimes she told me things she shouldn't have, like about my dad and stuff but I heard it. I could go to her for anything. Even my ex-boyfriend stayed close with her which was weird but she had that effect on people. She didn't like him as my boyfriend but she made sure he knew she cared about him as a person. He ended up introducing his new girlfriend to my mom. His girlfriend went to my mom's funeral. People just loved her.

Gabi and Viviana confirm Mirandé's (1977) insight to the notion that mothers are key to all of the relationships within the family. I can also add from my account, that my friends growing up looked to my mother as a maternal figure. My cousins from my mother's side all thought of her as their mother and the loss was great for them as well. Even now, she remains a sore subject for those who remember her. Both women, Julie and Mary Lou greatly affected those around them, and their daughters have taken on the responsibility of bringing back the memory of a woman who never really left.

Along with the admirable qualities of these women, they also shared the similarity of juggling jobs and/or education while remaining “wonder women” in their homes. As stated earlier, Gabi still holds wonder at how her mother could be involved while also carrying the weight of a career:

She was a big deal at her job. I just remember her being a big deal. She had a big corner office and everything. She would take me to work sometimes and I’d stamp things for her, it was fun for me. After that she quit to become a part time substitute teacher and she loved it. At one point she was working three part time jobs, she was like wonder woman.

Viviana also remembered her mother’s efforts to work full time while getting a college education:

My mom went to college classes at night. My dad was actually good about that. I mean of course he wanted dinner home when he got there but he encouraged her to get an education. Eventually it paid off and my mom graduated, got her Bachelors in Psychology. I think that was perfect for her because she wanted to understand people, she was good at it. She juggled a lot of things.

Though Viviana does not express her mother as being involved in school activities, she does make sure it is known that her mother was always emotionally available to her and her siblings.

Both women while giving their mothers’ character analysis, made sure to detail the qualities in their mothers that they remembered most. Memory comes to the forefront when engaging in *testimonio*. Even as I think back to who my mother was, I write this with tears that have already been cried but this is the work of writing from the wound. I understand that some might argue against this type of voice being used as a form of research. These memories of someone’s mother may come off as idealized but that dismisses the point of *testimonio*.

According to Haig-Brown (2003), “To attempt to dismiss the story by setting out to question and ultimately disprove some of its details is to miss the point of testimonio as a genre...” (p. 420).

If we look back to the literature, it can be noted that the women within the Mexican American family unit are important for the day-to-day functioning. It was repeated during my *platicas* with both women that their mothers were central to how their families operated and how they chose to live their lives. I believe we all wanted to be good people and contribute to our communities because of the influence of our mothers. Were they perfect women? I can think of almost as many bad memories of my mom, but I would never choose to dwell on those because she was more than those negative moments. Of course, they were not perfect, but did they inspire us to want more for ourselves? Absolutely. That’s what great people do, they inspire you. Mary Lou has been inspiring me throughout this entire process.

Caretaking and the Disease

For this theme, I will exclusively apply my findings to the experiences of Gabi and Viviana as I cannot relate this to my own experience. As stated earlier, my role in my mother’s illness was limited. When describing the women as caretakers, I am applying a particular meaning to the term. They were not necessarily partaking in nursing roles, although they did some of those duties, but they were the ones who were exclusively there for the majority of the care needed for their mothers. Gabi and Viviana took their mothers to doctors’ visits, communicated with medical staff, and witnessed the declining health. Here we get the first-hand experiences of watching the most important person in your life die with helplessness ensuing. Anzaldúa (2002) describes just these types of experiences and the attacks on the self as *arrebetos*:

Every *arrebato*—a violent attack, rift with a loved one, illness, death in the family, betrayal, systematic racism and marginalization—rips you from your familiar “home,” casting you out of your personal Eden...Cada *arreatada* (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your reality, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief, and emptiness, leaving behind dreams, hopes, and goals. You are no longer who you used to be (p. 546).

During Gabi’s senior year of high school, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Once she found out, she immediately began to research the disease and made sure she was in communication with her mother’s oncologist:

I would pick her up during my senior year and I would take her to pay bills or doctors’ visits and we would go out to eat. We’d still have our girls’ days, go shopping and stuff. I took her to get her head shaved. I was with her like all the time. Then my dad would get home and I’d go to work. Same thing all over again the next day. But I wouldn’t trade it for the world. I got to have that time with my mom.

Gabi did not ascribe sadness to taking care of her mother. It was clear that she had gratitude for the time she was available to her mother. In much of my research about gender roles, more specifically in the Mchale et al. article (2005), it is generally the older daughter who is held responsible for this type of care, so I find it interesting that Gabi held this role. Being the youngest of three in a Mexican American household, she generally would not have had this responsibility but that is what makes her account unique. Gabi did not hold to traditional values when it came to her mother; she stepped into this role because she wanted this time with her mother.

Viviana's experience of taking care of her mother holds many similarities to Gabi's; they were similar in age as she was nineteen when it all began:

When she finally went to get chemo I would take her. That's how I started driving cause I had to take her. And she, I would sit there with her, 2 or 3 hours and then we'd come back home. The first few weeks it was almost every day that we had to go. So my role was kinda just like being there, taking her, bringing her back, talking to her, keeping her active. And I remember she told me that, that she said, 'I'm so thankful for you because you kept me going.' I didn't have a lot of taking care to do in the beginning other than taking her. The only big thing that happened after she started chemo was her hair falling out. And that was the only time I was ever grateful for my grandma (laughs) because she was there when it happened.

Looking back at the literature, it rings true that the caretaking should fall to the females in the family while the males focus on the economics of the household (Updegraff et al., 2014). The males were physically present and yet their emotional presence was lacking. I realize this is not the same for each situation and the presence of the males in the family took on different faces. Viviana's father had to work as did Gabi's, but it should be noted that they both had brothers who were not present in the caretaking process. I can remember my brother and I telling our dad that we did not feel like going to the hospital to visit our mom; however, that was not a choice that Viviana had. When asked about her role changing with the sickness, Viviana went into further detail:

When she couldn't walk anymore? Yes. Because that's when it started making a difference. And the first time I really felt it she had to go get an MRI and she had to go to the bathroom, and I couldn't help her, I couldn't put her on the toilet, so I had to ask the

MRI guy to come help and she let me. I started crying and I never cried in front of her. Ever. But I couldn't help it then. I told her, 'I can't take care of you. I can't carry you. I can't do it all by myself.' And that's why she went to the doctor and told them because she hadn't gone to the doctor and told them that she couldn't walk yet. So that's why she went to the doctor because I started panicking.

I inquired about how the other members of the family contributed to her care and she noted that it was few and far between for anyone else to take on those responsibilities. Doctors' visits fell to Viviana even if her father was at home. It was unspoken and yet she knew that she would be the only one to sit with her mother in the doctor's offices and this agrees with the gendered expectations proposed by Updegraff et al. (2014). If her father or siblings did go to visit, it would be a quick event. The absence of her father was evident even to the doctor:

I guess it was so much that, that it was mainly me, that when she was already passing away and she just wanted to go home the doctor asked me what I wanted to do. I refused to answer, I said, "I'm not answering that." So I don't think they contributed much.

Both Gabi and Viviana agree that their family's roles in care taking were limited. It is of note that both women were either out of school or finishing up school and this was also why they were able to be put in these positions. When the question of college came up, they both felt that their experiences affected their willingness to attend, the desire was no longer there because of the loss of their mothers.

As I mentioned earlier, both Julie and Mary Lou had more than one encounter with cancer before they were diagnosed terminally. Gabi mentions this briefly before going into detail about her relationship with her mother:

I didn't find out until after she died that she had breast cancer back in 1980 and she was in remission for a long time. She had thyroid cancer her whole life and always took a pill for it but we never knew about the breast cancer until after she passed and I went to the family doctor for a checkup.

In Viviana's case, her mother had a tumor removed years prior to being diagnosed with cancer. That tumor would only be the beginning of Mary Lou's relationship with disease:

Even after she had breast cancer, her body just kept coming up with tumors. It wasn't just her breast, it seemed like it was everywhere after a while. She had gotten tumors in her brain and spine, that's why she couldn't walk after a while.

Both Julie and Mary Lou, would be betrayed by their own bodies more than once in their lives until they would finally give out.

Referencing back to the articles concerning familial roles, it was agreed that the women would be looked at for the household tasks while educational achievement and income were placed upon the men (Updegraff et al., 2014). This falls in line with Gabi and Viviana's experiences as they were left to care for their mothers. It was not something their fathers asked of them, it was an unspoken agreement within the family. Though they had other siblings who were also capable of applying their help, it was not placed on anyone else's shoulders. The two females who were college-bound had to sacrifice their pursuit of higher education in order to meet family needs.

Unfortunately, I cannot apply my own experience to that of caretaking. Like Gabi, I was the youngest of three but because I was not old enough, the responsibility of caring for my mother was not placed upon me. I witnessed my mother's sickness from a distance and that I hold with regret. I was old enough to help and though I did, I remained distant because I did not

want to see my mother as the frail person she had become. I do know that in being close to their mothers during the sickness, left them with more time and memories. For that they were grateful.

Family Reactions

Aside from the *testimonios* my research question centered around wanting to document the outcome of the Mexican American family during and after such a traumatic loss. Through the words of Gabi and Viviana we get a portrait of families who could not be put back together and that continue to find their way to do so. This particular theme was one that I found to be pivotal to this research because I have yet to find literature to support this. I believe this is because there is little to no research concerning what becomes of a Mexican American family after the mother has passed away. This is something that is not spoken about, much less researched about. With the Coyolxauhqui Imperative, we have this notion of putting the pieces back together. In this case, we see how families have fallen apart but how did they go about putting themselves back together? One of the first statements from Gabi refers to her relationship with her family:

I feel distant from my family, sister, brother and dad. I feel like ever since my mom has passed away that played a huge role in the fact that she was the core of the family and we really were like this (crosses fingers).

When pressed further about the current state of her family, she says:

My sister was never really in the picture. I talk to my dad but it's still difficult. We've all said it, let bygones be bygones, let's be family again but it's easier said than done. We all know that that's what my mom would want. That's the one thing I wanna fix, try to get them back to my life, into my kids' lives.

Gabi readily admits that even though her father has remarried, her view of her stepmother is not a positive one. She is grateful for her presence in her father's life but it is difficult even now for

her to process. Along with her immediate family, she speaks about the reactions from her distant family after the death of her mother:

We got tired of all the 'I'm so sorry' after every family holiday it'd be like 'Oh come here, I'm so sorry' and I'm like, 'Yes we mourn her, yes we're sad but we cannot keep doing this every single time. You cannot keep holding us just because you feel bad for us. It was your sister, your aunt, you know? You all have moved on, you know? You need to allow us the space to move on also.' We distanced ourselves from that and we kinda became just our family, my brother, my sister, my dad. Which I guess in the end kinda sucked (laughs) because now we're all (points fingers away from each other).

I wanted to know more about how her family personally reacted after Julie's death. They were not a tight knit unit anymore. This was evident but I was interested in how they each dealt with the loss:

My dad drank a lot. We almost lost him because of it. He went to work, came home and was just sad. My sister, she's got a lot of regrets, a lot of regrets, for not being there. My brother was living on his own, trying to go to school, not really around. Everyone thought I was very angry. They even put me in a mental institute for a week and I was so mad but now I thank them for it. I stuck around for my sister because on my mom's death bed she made me promise, 'Please take care of your sister. I'm not gonna worry about you, I'm not gonna worry about your brother but I'm gonna worry about your sister.'

Gabi also knew that being the youngest of three made it difficult to try and fulfill her mom's wishes:

She held this family together and for the longest time I tried to do that. I tried to hold this family together. It's hard to fill her shoes but at the same time it's up to us to try and

mend that because it's what she would want. I mean I was the youngest so getting them to try and listen to me it was 'Get out of here'.

Viviana gives her account of what behaviors were when they initially found out about the diagnosis:

I just remember being worried but I don't remember seeing that in my brother or my sister or even my dad. I could see it in my mom and I could see that she was, she was stressed out but that didn't stop, the family expectations were still there. She still had a family to take care of, she still had to cook and she still had to go to work. She still had to do what my dad wanted her to do. So other than that I don't think a lot changed.

I inquired about why she thought her family did not feel up to helping with the care and it told much of what they were feeling as a result of their mother being sick:

I know my brother just didn't want to see her like that. I think he was weak. And my sister, she was young but she wasn't a baby so I don't know if she exactly knew. I think there was a lot of denial with everyone, with my mom, with myself. And my dad? I don't know. Maybe it's just not what men do.

She went into detail about the reactions of each family member as a result of their mother's death:

My dad had to learn how to grow up and he tried to pin it on me even when she was sick. I'd end up being with her all day in the hospital and then coming home and the house was a mess and he would say I had to clean and I said, 'No I was with my mom.' My brother went down and spiraled. He wouldn't talk much about anything. He just didn't care. And my sister, at first like I know she was hurting but you couldn't see it all that much. It's really hard to be the person who's not the mom and you wanna say all these things and

keep them from doing all these things that a mom would do but you don't want to cross that line. I knew what I was and I knew what I wasn't. I wasn't their mom.

The reaction of their immediate family had many similarities. Everyone did their best to stay uninvolved perhaps as a way to preserve their own views of their mother. If they did not have to see the sickness, then it was not real. For these Mexican American families, ignorance was the preferred method to deal with the sickness and denial for when their mother passed. I did find that this was a sad reality for both families involved. They did not recover from the loss but found that avoidance held comfort for what they did not want to confront. It was all on the shoulders of these two women who not only had to witness their mother's sickness but also the crumbling of their own families.

Conocimiento: Stage Five

“With the loss of the familiar and the unknown ahead, you struggle to regain your balance, reintegrate yourself, and repair the damage” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 546).

We know that these women have all endured great trauma but what happens next? Where do you go from there? According to Anzaldúa, “When creating a personal narrative you also co-create the group/cultural story...Coyolxauhqui personifies the wish to repair and heal, as well as rewrite the stories of loss and recovery...” (p. 562).

In Stage Five of Anzaldúa's seven stages of *conocimiento*, we come to a point where we begin putting pieces back together. Here, our selves are reinvented from the destruction we have endured. By combining my personal narrative along with the narratives/*testimonios* of these Chicanas, I am hoping to bring about healing to our stories, to ourselves. Once we come to a state of realization (*conocimiento*) we can begin to heal, to speak our truth. I thought it vital to bring to light when these two women believe they reached this level and how they got to that

point. For myself, it was writing that brought me to my point, for the other women they spoke their mothers into their family memory. Gabi begins with an admission:

Life is just so different without her. My kids would be jumping all over her, spending the day with her. I feel bad all the time, for my kids and for my husband because I feel like they got cheated. I tell my husband, my mom sent you to me. My dad's wife, she tries but I hate the fact that somebody else gets to see them grow up. All in all, life is completely different without her. Because of the fact that I've lost her, I try to be with my kids every minute that I can. I love talking about my mom. I love letting her memory live on. I love to talk about her and yea it opens up some sad times but I need that.

Gabi admits that it is painful to talk about her mom but what else can she do? She needs to talk about her otherwise it will not get better.

Every New Year's we go to my father in laws and every year I'd sit there and cry because it's another year without my mom, another year I'm celebrating without her and it sucks. But this past year for the first time, I didn't cry. Not that I'm getting over missing her I just know that she doesn't want me to be sad, she wants me to be happy. Nobody understands what you go through unless you've gone through it yourself and yet this is something you don't ever want anyone to go through.

I believe that Gabi, in her own way, reached her level of *conocimiento* by understanding the need to speak about Julie. For her own healing, she needs to talk about her mother no matter what feelings it might bring with it. By speaking her mother's existence to her children, she is creating an emotional and spiritual connection to Julie. For Viviana it is in forgiveness that she found as a pathway to healing:

I still find myself feeling bitter at times. Like why, out of all people, did she have to die? People go into remission all the time but she didn't. It was hard to get to a place where I wasn't feeling like that all the time. I had to forgive my mom's family and my dad. I get it now but I guess at the time it was just easier for them to stay away. I went through a lot with my dad most of my life and my mom was usually there to be the middle man for us. When she died, it was just he and I butting heads all the time. He hurt me a lot with how he treated me but thank God he's changed so much. He's a better man now and we're in a better place.

Viviana credits her relationship with God for why she has found her healing. She does not believe any other way would have brought her to a place of peace with those around her.

Reaching *conocimiento* does not look the same for everyone. For some it might be finding peace or for others it might mean having a deeper meaning out of life. Our *conocimiento* belongs to us and its meaning is ours as well. I believe that those involved in this research are using their voices in order to reach this level. It took a life altering situation to bring themselves to a place where they could truly know themselves and what they are capable of as Mexican American women without their mothers. Their lives are not what they were, and it finally feels ok to know that.

For Gabi it was a particular New Year's Eve celebration, for Viviana it was an ongoing process in her relationship with God, for me it was writing, these processes and points of *conocimiento* reflected differently in our lives. Much like Anzaldúa's *Light in the Dark*, we have all become connected through this experience. By using our accounts, we have created a connection to bring a collective healing to one another. Sometimes, in order to relate to others,

we need to go back to the pain and dig up what was once covered. This, I believe, is what Anzaldúa meant by sharing in one another's experiences.

For the ending of our *platicas* I asked both women how they feel they have grown and what they believe they have learned since the deaths of their mothers. What kind of person do they believe they are now? I asked them to remember and to connect who they were then with who they are now. I did not get responses quickly, but I am thankful for that because I knew this meant they were being careful, thoughtful with their legacies. Their answers were different, but both gave an incredible account of growth. They were Mexican American women who had come out of a life altering event and told their account. Gabi stated,

I like to think I am an overall happy person. I smile at everyone. I laugh at everything. I have a song for everything. I live life to its fullest. I enjoy what's in front of me. I inhale the flowers and blow out the candles. I try to be a good listener. I'm a great friend. I'm an awesome ear. A great shoulder to cry on or with. I do the best I can to show my kids how to be the best they can in life. I try to lead by example but again I'm human and make mistakes. I try to correct them and I can't always but I own up to them and try to move forward. I always try to find the positive in every situation and the good in every individual.

Viviana stated,

What surprised me the most about helping my mom through her cancer battle was how little I thought about myself. Love really does conquer and is about putting someone else first. After the fact, I learned that I am a lot stronger than I thought I was. I could look evil in the eye and still stand unwavering. I'm remembering the time I had to see my mom's breasts pretty much eaten up by cancer. I can be strong for the people that need

me then cry about it later. Most importantly I learned that God really does take over for our weaknesses. I don't know how you come out of that still loving, still willing to love, still hopeful without God walking you through it. Some people become angry with God and stay away but I think as the apostle Peter did and say, "Where else would I go?".

Viviana believed that having to look at the state of her mother's breasts was similar to looking evil in the face. We are nurtured by our mother's breasts and view them as a source of life. In the case of breast cancer, this source of life is affected deeply and many times permanently. The faith Viviana has inherited from her mother is the reason she continues to love despite having to face an evil early on in her life.

Findings

My goal in creating this was not to fix these women because only they can do that. I believe that in letting them speak, they came one step closer to feeling whole again, because they brought to light something that society teaches you to suppress. This research is unique because it weaves together the scholarly voice, artistic voice and collective voice together to create a new kind of narrative. My voice is valid whether it is used academically or artistically. I am a writer and it is how I cope with loss. Viviana and Gabi are women who used their voice to cope with loss; all of it counts. I believe I am adding a new type of research approach in the limited topic of disease within the Mexican American culture using a Chicana feminist lens.

I like to think of this thesis as a starting point. It is a starting point to creating an even greater dialogue with other Chicanas who have lost their mothers to breast cancer. Should I get the opportunity to take this further I plan to find more women and allow them a platform to tell their stories. My story was about the aftermath and almost an outsider perspective. Viviana and Gabi were there every step of the way. Whatever I may "find" in this research cannot hold a

candle to the power of what our words hold when given the chance. Read through this far, those of you who are willing, and take from it what you will. I believe that my main finding is the confirmation of the transformative power of words in our Chicana voices, this is what binds us together, the collective experience.

“We are ready for change.

Let us link hands and hearts

together find a path through the dark woods...

build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim these puentes our

‘home’

si se puede, que asi sea, so be it, estamos listas, vámonos.

Now let us shift” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 576).

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In closing, I return to the entire reason for this proposal: my mom. While I am heavy hearted, I feel impassioned to tell a piece of her story, as she is my constant muse. I have to think back and remember my own experiences with her and how her sickness changed everything. We were still a family but never functioned the same after her passing. I know this is not a rarity, but I believe the research on Mexican American families in this situation is rare. Historically we are a culture and gender that has been silenced or told that we did not matter. This work will show that our lives have meant something and that we have everything to contribute.

So how, as Mexican Americans, do we put ourselves back together after we lose our mother? Do we put ourselves back together? How do our families function without the one who held relationships together, the mamá? With the Coyolxauhqui Imperative there is only a process of healing and no resolution. It is the symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations we are embroiled in differently. It is up to us to make and unmake our lives through the way we handle occurrences of loss, fear and confusion (Anzaldúa, 2015).

I believe this is much like the process of grief. It is a lifelong relationship where you heal and open wounds repeatedly. By speaking and writing, we open our wounds but how else do we engage in healing work by staying silent? Speaking our truth to one another, we create a bridge to those who have these same *heridas abiertas*. “Conocimiento...leads to awakening, insights, understandings, realizations, and courage, and the motivation to engage in concrete ways that have the potential to bring us into compassionate interactions” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 121).

My mother cannot be here to help change the world, but I want to help by letting others know her. Remembrance of those that have gone before us is vital in knowing who we are and

what we can contribute. I want to remember her and others to know who she was. Everything I do stems from my desire to acknowledge and make her proud. As Blake (1998) referenced, I use my own perspective to reflect upon oral history as a feminist practice while never forgetting my own racial, cultural and class position. This research is not perfect and will not represent all Mexican American families. The research seeks to tell the stories of a few and what patterns might exist between the experiences. Research in the form of storytelling, if you will, contributes to the purpose of Anzaldúa thought, “My ‘stories’ are acts encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken aloud or read silently” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 67). I contribute to my mother’s legacy, to Julie’s and to the great Gloria Anzaldúa who has guided me through.

In a moment of missing her, I try to speak with my mother:

“Big Moments”

I’ve been thinking about you as I always do but this is different as it always is. I’ve been thinking about big moments and when you’d be there for them. Today’s another moment I imagine calling you or visiting you and asking for your prayers because to me your prayers are more meaningful than others, as if God listens to you more even though I know that’s not true. Your words were different not just because you’re a mom but because you were Mary Lou. “Mama it’s happening today!” I’d tell you how I’m not nervous but really, you’d know I am. You’d say that I don’t need to be and pray peace over me. You’d tell me that worrying is a waste and that I already have what I need. You’d pray a prayer that made me feel ready. I have to imagine these conversations. I have to imagine that you’d be proud even though I can’t know for sure. I have to imagine that I’m something like you otherwise I’ll feel like you’re really gone. I have to have these conversations in my head because they can’t happen any other way. I’ve learned to

be ok with it. But here's another big moment where I'm imagining you and I while I sit in my car alone.

(Journal entry 3/23/19)

With *testimonios* the debates will be no less problematic, but it will be difficult to contest someone's personal experience. There will be always be questions of what counts as legitimate truth. This is not intended to claim the practices of all Mexican American families encountering breast cancer. I have to acknowledge the limitations in doing a study such as this. It is difficult to provide quantitative measures, as there are few studies on the topic. It is also difficult to refer to this as a study since academia has still not welcomed the methodology of *testimonio* or *autohistoria-teoria* as a legitimate methodological route. Here and now I am claiming the legitimacy of our encounters in the personal, academic and collective.

Culture incorporates all aspects of life and most importantly lends significance to the human experience by selecting from and organizing it (Rosaldo, 1993). As far as Mexican American culture goes, the *testimonios* of the participants provide insight into their cultural lived experience in the context of their everyday life and this is worth listening to. Unfortunately, witnessing the death of their mother was once part of their everyday lives. The use of voice whether speaking or writing is as powerful a tool that we, as people of color, can use. It is difficult work and the menace of grief never leaves. As Anzaldúa (1987) states, we fought our words, tried pushing them down but they had to come out. Mary Lou was my sunshine as their mother was their sunshine; I use this work as a way to revere those who have battled the clouds and are now on the other side.

Using my background in history, I find it important to tell this story. I echo Sandra D. Garza's (2014) sentiments, as I identify as a Chicana and a historian. She states, "I am inspired

by the works of Chicana/Latina feminist historians who use history to heal by making visible the invisible and exposing the historical aspects of everyday lived experiences that continue to influence our ways of knowing and being” (p. 58). I write even though it hurts. The hurt is necessary because I have to believe that it precedes healing. I have to believe that this pain is worth something. These experiences, her story, my story, it has to be worth telling because someone is experiencing something similar. I cannot be the only Mexican American woman who has lost their mother to breast cancer and through this I learned that I am not alone. We are bound together by our loss.

Through writing, I have found that I am closer to Mary Lou than ever. The trauma does not leave; it merely evolves into a piece of writing that may speak to others. I can only mirror the sentiments of Gloria Anzaldúa about writing, “That’s what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be” (p. 95). Some days I struggle to remember her and other days, she is demanding to be recollected. Her memory goes in and out of focus, but erasure is never in question. I feel as if I’ve betrayed her by forgetting any part of her, but it is my mind’s way of protecting itself. Protection from the pain that her memory brings.

It is for her that I keep going, to make her proud, to make her life mean something. I write for her, I write for us, I write for me. I write to survive my life without her. She was my sunshine and remains so. As a people, Mexican Americans are resilient, and this is further proof of that resiliency. Quiet we may be, but our voices are growing louder. As Anzaldúa asserts, “To write, to be a writer, I have to trust myself and believe in myself as a speaker...I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one. When I write it feels like I’m carving bone...My soul makes itself through the creative act” (Anzaldúa, 1987, 73).

To keep her alive in me and to honor her memory, I will continue to write. In closing, I dedicate this work to my mamá, with whom I have found peace and self-love.

“I Miss Mary Lou”

I miss you.

I miss how brave you were.

I miss how you said things and made them matter.

I miss your hugs and how it made things right.

I miss your words even when they cut.

I miss your laugh and how it stopped a room.

I miss your smell that was a mix between detergent and comino.

I miss our secrets.

I miss your strong words to dad.

I miss your tears because they created mine.

I miss your strength because it created mine.

I miss you and how you knew what I didn't.

I miss you and how you could endure what I couldn't.

I miss you Mary Lou, every day.

(Journal entry 2/2/2017)

For Mary Lou.

APENDIX



Adriana Macias Mata
COEHD-BBL



Approval

Document No.:	Date:	Page:
HRP-522	19 March 2019	Page 1 of 1

Dear Principal Investigator:

On March 19, 2019 the IRB approved the following:

Type of review:	Initial Review
Title:	You Are My Sunshine: How Mexican American Women Cope when the Matriarch is diagnosed with Cancer
Principal investigator:	Adriana Macias Mata
IRB number:	19-134
Faculty Sponsor:	Lilliana Saldana, Ph.D.
Documents reviewed:	Initial Review Application; Research Personnel; Protocol; Recruitment Script; Consent Form; Interview Questions

No later than one month prior to your approval anniversary date, you are to respond to the IRB annual check-in e-mail to request continuing approval or closure. This e-mail will be sent to you approximately six weeks prior to the approval anniversary date of March 18, 2020. If the IRB does not receive a response to this e-mail, your study will be closed and you may not conduct any further research activity on this study.

Copies of any approved consent documents, consent scripts, or assent documents are attached.

When you have completed all your research activities (including analysis of identifiable data), please notify our office to close the study.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements in "INVESTIGATOR GUIDANCE: Investigator Obligations (HRP-800)."

Sincerely,

Tammy Lopez, J.D.

Date: 2019.03.19 14:20:31 -05'00'

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VITA

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