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Love, Loss, and Immigration: Performative Reverberations Between a Great Grandmother and Granddaughter

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Performative Reverberations between a Great-Grandmother and Great-Granddaughter

Bernadette Marie Calafell

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I haven't been "home" in a while. I put "home" in quotation marks because it doesn't feel like home anymore. It's been ten years since I moved. Ten years since I missed the desert and Aztlán, the US Southwest, the Chicana/o homeland. Ten years later a great deal has changed as I have moved from Phoenix to Chapel Hill, to Syracuse, and now Denver. Experiences of a US/Mexico border, then a US/Canadian border, and now back to the Southwest; not quite the border, but its presence remains. Ten years ago, I was solidly Chicana, and now I don't know where I'm really at anymore. The figurative borders shift beneath my feet and my identities seem to follow suit. Though my identities are always in flux, I remain committed to a coalitional queer politics that doesn't erase the bodies and experiences of queer women of color. Ten years later what I consider to be home is a place without any blood relatives and only a family of choice made up of Others who have left their homes because of a lack of connection or support.

Ten years ago, I left to go to Chapel Hill as a doctoral student. Now I return as tenured faculty member and administrator. I come as a representative of my university to interview prospective undergraduates. Ironic that only this "official capacity" could get me to come back "home" again.

My work is done for the day and I meet up with an old friend from college. I haven't seen Jackie in a few years, though we have maintained contact over time. Simply stated, I love her. She is the first woman I ever loved. Years ago, we were drawn to each other for various reasons. She moved to the United States when she was five years old and is originally from Jalisco in Mexico. When we met in college I was in the midst of rethinking my Mexican American identity through a Chicana feminist framework. As I wrapped my head around all the questions of identity, she pushed me to problematize the ways I thought about my sexuality. In some ways, I prob-

lematically fetishized her as "authentic" as I sought to find myself. She was drawn to me because I was the only other Latina in our class and I was white. Much like my grandmother who proudly called me *guera*[1] and embraced my whiteness, Jackie also desired my whiteness.

After all this time we remain friends, and she comes to see me while I'm in Phoenix. We find a local bar by the hotel for a drink. As we sit sharing memories and thinking about the future we see a large group of men gathered on the patio dressed in matching jackets that announce the name of an organization. These men are bikers; however, we do not know what brings so many of them together. We venture to the patio to see if we can figure out this mystery. The group of men is mostly white, and in their forties or older; however, suddenly another group arrives. These men are slightly younger and Latino. Jackie begins a conversation with one, perhaps the youngest there, asking him what their organization is about. He explains that all of the men are border patrol agents and they have formed this bike club. The majority of them are from Tucson. Seeing us engaged in conversation with their friends, some of the other Latino agents come over and start asking us questions as well. We give some background information and exchange pleasantries. Jackie and the men speak in Spanish and I sit trying to make sense of their conversations. Jackie marks my identity for me and lets them know I am Latina. Suddenly their demeanor toward me changes and things become a lot friendlier.

As the night wears on we are invited back to the resort where they are staying for an after-party. Though the days of after-parties are long behind me, perhaps it is being with Jackie that makes me feel youthful. Memories of her and me taking youthful risks, and seeing the desire in her eyes for one more adventure, I agree. Once we arrive at the resort we sit together on the couch and start talking with some of the Latino officers with whom we had exchanged pleasantries earlier. At this point, my emotions are mixed. I do not want to know the border patrol agents. I do not want to put a face to them. I do not want to imagine that they are Mexicanos, too. I feel like I'm being a traitor sitting with them. I don't even know what to talk about so I remain silent.

This is not a problem for Jackie. As we continue sitting with the Latino agents we met earlier, another agent, an older white man who is clearly intoxicated, joins us. He is introduced to us and as he hears Jackie speak he catches her slight accent and the interrogation begins. "Are you in this country legally? Do you know we could take you in?" The young Latino officer next to Jackie with whom we first started the conversation gets embar-

rassed and starts laughing nervously. Jackie likes to play games and knows he's drunk, so she refuses to give a straight answer about her status. His interrogation continues as he states, "You know, I could have you arrested and deported before you even had a chance to call a lawyer." Jackie laughs and continues to evade him, while another Latino agent tells him to stop that: "Now is not the time for work." The agent who interrogates Jackie says, "Hey, even if you were illegal, I wouldn't turn you in because we're partying." His statement brings me little comfort.

Though Jackie is a US citizen, I am nervous. This is not the first time I have witnessed these kinds of tactics, as I am taken back to another life in Syracuse, New York, when my then-partner, Mohamed, and I went through the process of permanent residency and then the application for citizenship. "Rights" and "protections" haven't felt like rights and protections for years since we started that process shortly after 9/11. I'm always on guard and always suspicious. The Latino agents seem nervous and embarrassed by this whole scene and even begin saying, "Dude, she's legal. She came when she was like five years old."

In the background one of the other men falls in a drunken stupor and the conversation stops, as Jackie had begun to turn the tables and start interrogating the officer about the politics of the Canadian border versus the Mexican border. Just as he had started to tell us that it was just all about "terrorists," the conversation halts as he runs outside to make sure an agent they call "Froggy" is okay. I give Jackie our prior agreed-upon signal for leaving, and we say that we need to get back to the hotel because it's late. We leave a little shaken and just wanting to be away from the surrealness of the whole scene. Jackie and I deconstruct it all as we try to make sense of the interactions and the Latino agents.

Later, as I reflect on the events of that night, I wonder if the people I love will always be subject to surveillance and suspicion. The first suspect of this suspicion was my former partner, Mohamed, an Egyptian-born man, and now Jackie, a Mexican-born US citizen with whom my relationship continues to be complicated. After 9/11 they are interpellated by a shared Otherness or affect of brownness that links their differently storied and historied bodies. Ten years ago, south Phoenix hadn't yet been gentrified, and Sheriff Joe Arpaio had just started his crusade of hate. Ten years ago, I hadn't yet considered the possibility of a shared affect of brownness that moved beyond a Latina/o body, but my experiences in the last ten years have forced me to consider it. This shared affect also causes me to return to the story of my great-grandmother, Teresa Carbajal Benavides.

And so it begins . . .

This is a story that has been waiting to be told, but I don't know if I was always ready to tell it, or for that matter hear it. It's not like I even know the entire story. I remember her. But my memories are not always complete or in necessary order. Instead they are fragments. They are sounds. They are moments of intimacy that defy the confines of language.

I performatively write to explore the story of my maternal great-grandmother or, as I used to call her, Little Grandma— Teresa Carbajal Benavides, who lived with me in my grandparents' house in which I grew up. We spent a great deal of time together; however, I never completely knew or understood the significance of her story until now. It was during the past eight years that I began to feel the reverberations of her story in a way I never had before. My affective connection with a discourse of Otherness post-9/11, based on incidents such as the previously described one, made my body remember.

I become obsessed with her story, wondering if perhaps it might shed some light on my own. Is this where my feminist consciousness began? *But I move too quickly.*

In the past I have written about my own troubled relationship with immigration post-9/11 (Calafell, "Performing the Responsible Sponsor"), or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, Mohamed's troubled relationship with immigration and my performance in helping him secure citizenship. It was a story based in love, fear, and performance. It was a story that finally had an ending that was somewhat satisfactory, but far from anyone's American Dream. In the end, I was a responsible sponsor and he performed patriotism and a desire for citizenship in ways that were acceptable and lauded.

On May 8, 2002, in the blink of an eye my life changed forever with the words "I do." The changing of one's life after marriage is certainly not a remarkable or unique situation; however, the specifics of my marriage created a series of events I could not even imagine. You see, I was a twenty-seven-year-old Chicana doctoral student far from home, newly married to an Egyptian citizen after 9/11. Though I knew we would have to begin the process of applying for residency and eventually citizenship, I had no idea just how much this process would forever change me or us. Narratives of immigration and border crossing were not outside of my frame of reference, both because of my background as a scholar doing work in Chicana/o studies and because of my family's narratives of crossing the border from Mexico. This encounter with immigration was the starting point for think-

ing about her: Teresa Carbajal Benavides and my desire to know her and understand her so that in some ways I might know myself.

In this exploration I engage in a performative writing methodology or framework because of its ability to tap into the affective or emotive. This is both a scholarly and personal story that continues to have reverberations in my day-to-day experiences. This is a story I juxtapose in many ways with my own. I consider it alongside my recent experience with immigration with my then-partner and in the everyday incidents I experience after 9/11, such as my encounter with the border patrol agents. I juxtapose it with my experiences as a Chicana in this anti-Latina/o nativist time and place (is there ever a time that isn't?). I think about the politics of love that tie the stories together. In engaging in this methodology, I turn to Ron Pelias and Della Pollock to frame my understanding of the politics and form of performative writing, but I also turn to others such as Sandra Faulkner and Diane Grimes (Faulkner, Calafell, and Grimes) to engage in poetry as research method. Scholars such as Pelias and Pollock ask that performative writers create experiences on the page that affectively connect with readers. Pelias writes, "Performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective" (418). Furthermore, this work stakes a claim in an experience, or position, persuading through narrative identification or empathy (Pelias). Similarly, Faulkner, Calafell, and Grimes wonder how we might use poetry as a method to explore and nuance experiences, particularly as they relate to those in marginalized positions.

Like other feminist scholars who set the standard for the politics that should drive a performative writer, I understand the importance of theorizing and unpacking experience as a way of knowing (Hill Collins; Moraga and Anzaldúa). As Anzaldúa has long argued in her framing of theories of the flesh, experience is fundamentally important to the ways that women of color have long theorized. Barbara Christian and Patricia Hill Collins explicitly connect theorizing through experience and the body to a history of oppression (for example, slavery, and not having access to education) that has often forced women of color to theorize through everyday actions and ways of making do. Furthermore, examining experience can point to the ways that the personal is located within what Hill Collins terms a larger matrix of domination that speaks to the intersecting nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality and how power shapes them. The critical examination of experience, particularly of historically marginalized groups, is also of

central importance in performance studies as scholars have examined personal narrative (Corey, "The Personal"; Langellier, "Personal Narrative") or what others term a performative autoethnography (Alexander, "Performing Culture"; Holman Jones; Spry). From a performance ethnography paradigm undergirded by Conquergood's dialogic performance ("Performing as a Moral Act"), the personal acts in dialogue with the larger frames of the social, political, and cultural in order to theorize beyond the self. Enrique Murillo Jr. describes his positionality as scholar and Chicano as traveling in blurred boundaries, when "Other becomes researcher, narrated becomes narrator, translated becomes translator, native becomes anthropologist, and one intermittent identity continuously informs the other" (166). Like Murillo, I draw upon my experiences or theories of the flesh to performatively understand the experiences of Otherness as they relate to the here and now, as well as those that occurred within my great-grandmother's story.

Looking for Teresa Carbajal Benavides

In first looking for her story I turned to my own body. Looking in the mirror, I longed to see something of her in my face, yet I did not see it. Somewhat disappointed, I turned to my grandmother, Consuelo Muñoz, and started asking questions. I asked about love. I asked about citizenship. I asked about family history. I wanted to know everything.

I feel like being the good scholar and I'm documenting family history. Maybe I'm a little too self-congratulatory. I'm going back to Phoenix to do an interview with my grandmother, Consuelo Muñoz. Bryant Alexander, like other scholars of color before him, writes poignantly of going home and negotiating the self as PhD/professor versus son/sibling/etc. In this moment I know that feeling all too well. My grandmother and I sit together in the living room across from one another, near the front window. Ironically, this is the space where my great-grandmother used to sit stationary. It is as if she is ghosting us. I test my recorder and our conversation begins. We start out with the basics: place of birth, any family history, and such. I've got my list of prepared questions, but I'm thinking things will probably deviate. At least I'm hoping so.

I want to flesh out the story of a woman whom I knew, but never *really* knew. As a woman, then thirty-three years old at the time of this conversation, I want to know about her desires and challenges. I want to know about things like love and loss. I push because I need to know so that I might also know myself in the process. This desire is in my blood as I'm always looking for the stories of my mothers before me (Calafell, *Latina/o Communication*

Studies). Through the fleshing or reclaiming, I hope to enable some kinds of potentiality. Potentiality for me to find a space of identification across time and beyond bloodlines. Writing on possibility within the framework of performance ethnography, Corey argues that it "is one way of releasing suspended voices, building connections between the expression of a people and those people themselves, with power, possibility, and integrity" ("On Possibility" 332). I look for potentiality or possibility that might give me some kinds of mechanisms, theories of the flesh, or ways of knowing that defy dominant logics, particularly those that emerge around constructions of Otherness. Are there things she can teach me about love and loss? These are the potentialities I hope for.

I like to imagine my great-grandmother as a Chicana feminist blazing new trails and performing the theory of the flesh that I now like to write about.

Single mother
moving her family
across borders;
        from Chihuahua,
                to Jerome,
                        and finally to Phoenix.
Shifting borders,
shifting desires,
shifting priorities.

Perhaps my desire to see her as this everyday feminist is driven by a narcissistic desire to imagine myself in the same way. Where do my scholarly interests end and my personal desires begin? Are they even separate? Is this a question even worth asking?

I continue looking for answers. We get to the questions about her crossing the border:

"So, she was here in the United States the whole time without papers?" I ask the question to understand contexts. I ask the question though I feel the irony of getting your "papers" in Aztlán of all places.

"No, she became a citizen."

Taken aback, I pause for a moment and consider my quick jump to illegality. Does this come from the fact that as Chicana/os or Mexicana/os we are always depicted as forever foreign or outsiders (Calafell, "Mocking Mexicans")? As the good academic, the Latina/o Studies scholar, wouldn't I know better than just to assume illegality? Have I been so warped by dis-

courses of crossovers and invasions that my sense of self is so distorted? Have I forgotten about all my talk of Aztlán? Or is this assumed illegality a symptom of my living in suspicion for years and years as my former partner and I strived to "prove" the legitimacy of our union (Calafell, "Performing the Responsible Sponsor")? The scholar turns the mirror to herself to see the way *I perform and embody hegemony* . . .

"I didn't know that . . . when did this happen? Do you have her citizenship papers?"

"She was seventy-three years old when she became a citizen."

I sit quietly for a moment wondering what possessed a seventy-three-year-old woman who had lived in the United States for many years, never speaking English (even until the day she died at age ninety-six), to become a US citizen at such an advanced age. Is this about patriotism? Is this about claiming one's space in the face of denial of everyday rights in the racial tensions of the 1960s, the era in which she became a citizen? I desire to know; however, I am fully aware that I will never know and can only think of possibilities. I draw on my theories of the flesh, my lived experience as a woman in this country, to consider the various possibilities. I draw on my experiences of having been partnered with someone going through the process of immigration and citizenship to consider the desire that motivated her choices. My grandmother interrupts my thoughts as she continues . . .

"I have her citizenship certificate if you want to see it."

My mind is flooded with all kinds of thoughts. It's as if I have found the holy grail. It's been here the whole time, and yet I never knew any of this. I imagined a family history of migration that was much different. My former partner Mohamed received such a certificate just a few years ago and I wonder how time has changed these documents. What would these certificates look like side by side? We move to the bedroom and from a small metal box my grandmother produces the immigration certificate along with a US flag that was given to my great-grandmother on the day that she received her citizenship. I move in closely to inspect it all.

I survey the certificate, looking over the date it was issued, the date of my grandmother's birth, and such. However, one thing stands out. This document lists her "complexion" . . . is this a way of getting at race? Is this how her difference would be forever marked? According to the United States of America, she is "dark." How does this fit within larger discourses of blackness and whiteness? All of these thoughts race through my head. I consider how this marking of difference feels like a colonial racial hierarchy similar

to the ways that *mestiza/os* have always been marked and assimilated based upon the idea that "whiter is better." I think of my grandmother, who is darker skinned, always alluding to her fear of us being ashamed or embarrassed by her because she was dark. I remember her attachment to *Imitation of Life,* a story in which a young African American woman who can pass as white continually tries to distance herself from her mother who cannot make the same pass. My grandmother who loves me unconditionally, but also loves the whiteness of my skin. This is another moment of our difference being marked in an official way that would again have everyday reverberations. I think of the politics of my Egyptian former partner being racially classified as white, though he was certainly never privy to the benefits and privileges of whiteness, particularly after 9/11. I consider the interrogation of Jackie by the border patrol agents. Her accent and appearance immediately marked her as Other in their minds, while I remained inconspicuous. How have discourses of whiteness and difference shifted over time? Have they? How are these shifts tied to the shifting or tightening of borders?

I look closer at the photo on the certificate, once again looking for some kind of resemblance. This time, instead of seeing any trace of myself, I see my grandmother's face. It's a somber face I can't read, one that stands in contrast to Mohamed's wide smiling face in the photograph that graces his certificate. His picture says, he's made it. But hers has something else behind it. Perhaps the circumstances of being a woman, and a Chicana at that, inform the somber yet straight-ahead expression she gives. So many questions remain unanswered, and so I began to dream . . .

The Politics of Love

"I don't want to do this anymore," and with those words he broke
my heart.
Sitting here alone I wonder if those words were all too familiar to
you as well.
A Mexican woman in a foreign land
Persevering
Journeying
Crossing borders in ways that are not
Glamorous
Or trendy
Eventually granted citizenship
But never the full rights it promised.

Alone
But with children
Yes, that's a plural
Seven to be exact
So you're never really alone.
Making do
Was love a luxury you had time for?
Or did it just get in the way?

I like to imagine you briefly brokenhearted
But the tug of a child at your sleeve
Makes the pain seem not so important
Or at least a privilege
Maybe the pain is gone for the moment
But the affect of it remains
And you wear it in the lines of your skin
Thinking of lovers past
Wondering if you might ever feel that way again

Decades later I sit brokenhearted
Yet again
Wallowing in my pain and self-loathing
which in many ways seem so miniscule to all you shouldered
For all of us
But remember I'm not about comparing or ranking oppression
So why am I asking these questions?

Aretha told me that "a rose is still a rose."[2]
While my Lady says she'll never talk again
And she'll never love again[3]
Kind of dramatic, but that's exactly what I need right now
I listen to those words like they're some kinda feminist melody
Thinking if I listen hard enough just maybe my mood will change

American great-granddaughter
Always hyphenated
Always feeling like second class.
Both in work
And in love
Unlike you the love I desire is queer
Despite the promise of citizenship that you ensured

For me in this place and time love does not feel like a luxury
It feels like a necessity that I'm always in search of
So much so that I've become the professor who's always writing about love
But it's hidden behind different kinds of veils.
The sacrifices you made give me time to dream of possibilities

And so I sit alone
Thinking of you
Thinking of love
Thinking of borders
and spaces I still can't cross
and spaces you have overcome
Looking to you for some answers across the years
A maternal connection of love
that binds beyond time
and leaves me asking like Cherríe
"What kind of lover have you made me mother
So in love with what is unrequited?"[4]

Final Thoughts

The narrative I have crafted is incomplete. The story continues to unfold as the borders shift and tighten around us. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, I construct this story only out of fragments and perform possibilities out of a desire for connection. The border shifts all around, inside of us, and beneath our feet. Ideologies of race and Otherness are re-crafted as old scapegoats become new again and new scapegoats get marked in old ways.

In this performative piece I have tried to bring together fragmented narratives of Otherness to understand or feel affects of difference that permeate across space and time. In doing so, I have ended with a poem that attempts to bring together the past and the recent present through love, both romantic and familial, immigration, and borders. The borders crossed in each narrative are different, both as physical spaces and experiential. It is my hope that this performance piece might get us to *feel* the shifting borders around us, both figuratively and literally, as a way to connect with and understand affects of Otherness. Through these narratives I have pointed to shifts in borders and the feelings that span them. In these scenarios, the contexts, their specificities, and nuances might vary, but in ending with the

poem "The Politics of Love," I try to perform the theory of the flesh handed down generationally through a Chicana feminist ethic of love. This ethic of love guides a previously written-about narrative with homeland security, the contemporary narrative of interactions with border agents, and that of a Mexicana who at an advanced age sought "legalization" through citizenship so decades later, a great-granddaughter who continuously feels the pressure of the border might garner some everyday knowledges of resistance. In offering these narratives, I do not try to answer specific questions; rather I invite you to feel so that we can begin the conversation and start to name or consider the layers of shifting borders (political, social, historical).

Notes

1. *Guera* is often used to refer to light-skinned Latina/os.
2. Aretha Franklin, "A Rose Is Still a Rose."
3. Lady Gaga, "Speechless."
4. This quote is from Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years.*