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Our Bodies, Our Souls:
Creating a Trans Latina Archive
Through Critical Autoethnography

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by

Claudia Lizet Rodriguez

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Our Bodies, Our Souls:

Creating a Trans Latina Archive

Through Critical Autoethnography

by

Claudia Lizet Rodriguez

Master of Arts in Chicana and Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Committee Chair

Transgender Latina immigrants occupy a limited and unfavorable space in the popular imagination. Essentialist and reductive master narratives erase the richness and complexity of this community. General representations of trans Latinas fixate on gender and racial violence, and victimization. Rarely do these representations focus on experiences that embody trans Latinas' everyday lives, struggles, love, aspirations and acts of resilience.

The need for alternative discourses for trans Latina immigrants is especially pressing now under the Trump administration when immigrants are depicted as economic and cultural threats

to the “Great American” way of life, and immigrant families are torn apart as parents get deported en masse and their children abandoned to an uncertain future. There are very few published works written by transgender Latina immigrants. Accounts of transgender women’s experiences in the media, and in the fields of medicine and psychiatry vastly overwhelm those of actual transgender women. My research addresses this gap in the literature by centering and facilitating recovered histories and experiences of Trans Latina immigrants through a methodology I call critical autoethnography. Using participatory action research, I will recruit, engage, and guide the participation of transgender Latina immigrants to help design a way of writing about the self that is both a personal narrative about their life experiences, as well as a critical self- reflection—hence the name, “critical autoethnography.” This collaborative writing method generates transgender Latina immigrant narratives as told by the participants, themselves, in their own voices, and focuses on issues, struggles, and experiences that they choose to make the subject of their narrative. Not only do these critical autoethnographies challenge anti-immigrant and white heteropatriarchal rhetoric, they also contribute to a trans Latina immigrant archive and epistemology. This methodology offers a new way for trans Latinas to write themselves into history, as Chicana historian Emma Perez advocates, and thus decolonize their representation.

The thesis of Claudia Lizet Rodriguez is approved.

Matthew Barreto

Justin Torres

Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Committee Chair

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Introduction

"Transgender Latina immigrants occupy a limited and unfavorable space in people's imagination." –Chanel, OBOS workshop participant, 2015

Master narratives are inherently essentialist and reductive, erasing all the richness and complexity of a group's culture, especially groups that are not part of the mainstream because of their ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious, sexual, and/or gender differences. We are more likely to hear about their hardships—discrimination, stigmatization, and victimization—or about how they vanquished those hardships on the road to becoming true-blue American citizens. In the case of Transgender people, representations of their lives largely focus on transition stories, how they became the other gender, medically and culturally, but not on other details of their lives that might render them as three-dimensional human beings. More often than not, when trans individuals are depicted in the media the stories always feature white trans individuals and the physical transition of their bodies from males to females or females to males. Trans documentaries on Netflix, Showtime, and HBO, to name a few of the networks that now regularly offer queer and trans shows or characters, focus almost exclusively on the changes taking place in the body[1]. Networks disregard the quality of life (or lack thereof) experienced by trans folks, the social rejection and isolation they endure, the constant harassment and discrimination they have to put up with at home and in the workplace as they try to live a "normal" and safe life in a world that is less than hospitable to them (Namaste, 2005, Serano 2007). The narratives in these network shows also either ignore or gloss over their relationships with their significant others, their parents, and friends, except as they are impacted by the gender transformation. Rarely do these representations provide a picture of their quotidian experiences.

The "transition stories" with the camera zooming in on the scars of the body where the breasts used to be or on the bottles of hormones that must be taken to change the voice and the amount of hair on the body are objectifying and voyeuristic, and are created to satisfy the cisgendered male gaze.[2]

The trans Latina community in Los Angeles, the home base of my research, has had a strong political presence for close to 25 years now. They have been very vocal in organizing, working with public health officials to ensure that the HIV/AIDS needs of this community are addressed and have also done extensive work with law enforcement to address the negative interactions trans Latina women have historically had with police officers. Despite their political presence, Transgender Latinas experience social exclusion; they are considered invisible in everyday U.S. life/society and their existence becomes apparent only when their presence is pathologized and criminalized. Despite the importance of written narratives in understanding the lives of trans Latina immigrants, there is not much literature written for and about this community, and there are even less published works written by transgender Latina immigrants. Trans Latinas immigrants continue to be excluded from mainstream narratives and their contributions to cultural production ignored.[3]

For too long both the quantity and quality of transgender representation across all forms of media has been an issue. Not only have transgender characters embodied stereotypes and negative portrayals that fail to capture the authentic experiences of transgender people; these stereotypical, one-dimensional representations are damaging in so many ways and work to reestablish gender binaries. Representation can be a learning tool (for some) that reinforces or challenges our cultural beliefs. The overwhelming accounts of transgender women's experiences via the media, the field of medicine, and psychiatry undermine those of actual transgender

women. Trans Latinas embody courage and resilience; they love, they dream, they work and care for others, even as they struggle every day to survive, yet we don't hear about these experiences. While the hardships they experience are important to understand if we hope to challenge transphobic and cis-gendered norms and social institutions. These "hardship narratives" are largely deficit-based representations. Rarely do we get to see transgender communities' cultural assets. Severe economic, educational and health disparities are exacerbated with undocumented status. When media reports use terms such as "illegal alien" to describe undocumented transgender Latina immigrants, and other immigrants, their effect is dehumanization. Even in post- 2015 United States, after the federal government legally recognized same sex marriage, trans Latina immigrants continue to be unseen except as outlaws or comic relief.

The purpose of this study is to share the stories of undocumented Trans Latinas who have overcome tremendous obstacles to self-actualize and survive in a country that sees their very existence as a criminal (i.e., illegal) act. What can we learn about these women who have the courage to act to change their present conditions and how can these ways of knowing inform future generations of trans Latinas (i.e. trans Latina epistemology)? Because mainstream representation of Trans Latina lives is not only scarce but also biased and based on stereotype and negativity, I want to correct that representation with the words and voices of Trans Latina women writing about their own lives and how they perceive their relationship to larger cultural contexts.

Chicana Feminist philosopher, Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes the importance of writing by women of color by calling it a political act. Throughout her life's work, and particularly in her "Letter to Third World Women Writers," Anzaldúa encouraged women of color to write and see themselves as competent and credible speakers about their own experiences. Being authors of

their "autohistorias" was crucial to disrupting and interrogating the work of white feminist scholars who write about the oppression of women. Anzaldúa defines *autohistoria* as a term she uses "to describe the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; and autohistoria/teoría is a personal essay that theorizes" (Anzaldúa, 2009, 578).[4] For Anzaldúa autohistoria/teoría is a form of epistemic resistance to cultural erasure in which women of color are the authors of their own meaning, their own identities. Through autohistoria-teoria, Anzaldúa suggests, it is possible that one can develop theoretical resources empirically. Anzaldúa believes that "writing is a collaborative, communal activity not done in a room of one's own. It is an act informed and supported by the books the author reads, the people s/he interacts with, and the centuries of cultural history that seethe under her skin" (Anzaldúa, 2009, 168).

The Anglo-Feminist tendency to view its knowledge-producing practices mainly through a gendered lens has overlooked the intersectional lived realities of women urging writers like Anzaldúa to create self- knowledge practices for women of color. Trans Latina women need to have a specific self- knowledge practice and that can result from having institutional support, resources and a community to help make sense of one's own experiences. Anzaldúa sees the power of writing and urges Third World women to write as a way to:

> "…record what others erase when [we] speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy." (Anzaldúa 1983, 169)

Self-writing, or autohistoria, is not only an effective way to communicate with others, but also, sharing one's experiences can resonate with others in positive ways that can create

understandings between people and increase opportunities for meaning-making and community-building. This meaning-making occurs when we as readers project our own experiences and vulnerabilities onto the author and in this way create a community of empathy and empowerment.

This thesis tells the story of how one small group of trans Latina immigrants in Los Angeles found their collective and individual voices in a creative writing workshop that I offered at the Bienestar Community Center in East L.A. in 2015. I called the workshop "Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Almas/Our Bodies, Our Souls" (OBOS), and by writing their own stories and reflecting on their experiences using poetic, autoethnographic, and performative techniques, these trans Latinas engaged the tools they needed to represent themselves as three dimensional people who experience joy, love, and personal fulfillment while simultaneously dealing with society's xenophobia, misogyny, and racism. Read collectively, each individual autohistoria, or "counterstory,"[5] as critical race theorist Tara Yosso calls personal narratives that go against the grain of racist representations, empowered the participants to create an alternative history of Trans Latina immigrants in Los Angeles, a history of hope and role models for future generations of Trans Latina immigrants.

Was this a fluke, or a reproducible outcome? Is it possible for a creative writing workshop to generate empirical knowledge? To offer a space, on and off paper, to heal and restore agency for Trans Latina immigrants? Can writing about the self and publishing that work via an open-access format function as both data collection and emancipatory praxis? Before I can tell the OBOS story and answer these questions, I must first provide a literature review that can contextualize my study within discourses of Latinidad, immigration, legality and illegality, sex and gender studies, Chicana feminisms, queer and trans studies, and literary and representation

studies, as these are the intersections that cross trans Latina lives. Let me clarify that I use "trans Latina immigrants," to refer to transwomen born in Latin America now residing in the U.S., who were assigned a male gender identity at birth but self-identify and live their lives as women, transwomen or transsexuals. Often, we hear the words trans, trans* (pronounced trans asterisk), transgender, and transsexual used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous identities. Transgender is a term that became highly popularized in the 1990s and used primarily as an umbrella identity to describe "those who defy societal expectations and assumptions regarding femaleness and maleness," (Serano, 2007; 25). It is a very broad "category" and can include individuals who are intersexed (those born with genitalia of both sexes), transvestites (those who dress like the opposite sex) and gender-fluid individuals (those who claim no allegiance to a particular gender identity). Transsexuals are individuals who live as the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth (Namaste, 2005, Serano 2007). Radi defines trans* as not limited to include "all those identities whereby a person does not identity with the gender they were assigned at birth (45).

I also want to clarify that I am not a Trans Latina immigrant. I am Chicana lesbian butch born and raised in Compton, CA. I am a published poet, a practicing performance artist, and the first in my family to get a Ph.D. Back in 1999, when I got my B.A. in Chicana/o Studies at UCLA, I never could have guessed that I would be back here twenty years later to work on a PhD in the same field nor that I would be adding "scholar activist" to my list of identities. My work as a scholar activist is influenced by the theories of Dr. Emma Perez, specifically the "decolonial imaginary" and her concept of "sitios y lenguas."[6] Perez is part of the Chicana lesbian/feminist historian revisionist cohort[7] who pioneered the movement to write Chicanas, Mexicanas, Mestizas, and lesbianas into the field of history, thus creating a Chicana Feminist

discursive space within academia that was not dependent on these women's relationships with men. When Perez created her "political project" the "decolonial imaginary,"[8] she bid Chicana historians to reconceptualize historiographic practices through gender and sexuality lenses, thereby centering Chicana lesbians' experiences to understand racial, economic oppression and the Chicano community's condition (Perez, 1999). Perez believed that "the historian's political project … is to write a history that decolonizes otherness" (6) and that "…even the most radical Chicana/o historiographies are influenced by the very colonial imaginary against which they rebel" (5). Here, Perez was offering a critique of Chicano historians and the way their race- and class- dominant rewritings of "American" history continued to perpetuate the exclusion and erasure of women and queers in the historical record. Perez's "decolonial imaginary," then, was a way of decolonizing the Chicano decolonizer's masculinist/ heteronormative view of the world. I want to expand on that project by decolonizing the lesbian/feminist Chicana historical record by writing the stories of trans Latinas into the archive, as they, too, form part of our collective history.

As a field, Chicana/o Studies, and those of us training as the new generation of its scholars, can do more to reflect on the ways transphobic colonialist ideals have influenced the way we study our queer community and see the totality of our society. Perez offered the decolonial imaginary as a "rupturing space, an alternative to that which is written in history (Perez, 6). This rupture creates what she calls an "interstitial space," where new attempts at redefining our colonial reality take place and give birth to a truly liberated subjectivity. In the case of my project, trans Latinas are the liberated subjects speaking out vs. "being spoken to, spoken about" (Perez, 6), and being heard vs. listening passively to stories told about them by others.

This is my political project as a scholar and an activist, a researcher and an artist. Here lies my commitment to social change. My art is my personal on-going process of self-decolonization, using my creative writings as my discourse (or lengua/tongue) and my artistic collaborations (which often required qualitative research practices to complete) as another of my sitios/locations. My art is what drives me to thrive in that interstitial space, the gaps between colonial and post-colonial and transcended dominant Western binaries (Perez, 4).

As I write about the OBOS workshop and show how the power of poetry and story transformed the lives of the participants, I will be writing my own autoethnographic endnotes in this paper, to show my own involvement as not only the facilitator of the workshop or the principal investigator of this research project, but also as a writer engaged in creating her own autobiographical study of the self and implementing her own self-critique. In these autoethnographic endnotes, I hope to better understand the liminal space between researcher and participants, so that I can be conscious of not reinforcing normative power dynamics into the project. One of the mechanisms I am going to use is poetry.[9] I am doing this work while being conscious of decolonizing otherness. I don't mean as in saving or showing others the way, I mean by supporting their ideas and their experiences, using my resources, my platforms and privilege, and most importantly my own otherness, which has largely informed my art, to support other women who have been written out of history. The following literature review will discuss, first, a chronology of U.S. immigration policies that impact trans Latina immigrants, and connect them to their representation in mainstream narratives and in scholarly work. Second, I will address the intersection between Trans and Chicana feminisms, and finally, will provide an overview of current research being done on trans Latina representation via community-engaged research and literary projects.

A Short History of Trans Latina Immigration & Representation

The overwhelming accounts of trans women's experiences via the media, medical field, psychiatry and academia undermine those of actual trans women. Unfortunately, in part because official records, including the US Census, do not include data on gender identity, we do not have an exact estimate of trans Latinas in the U.S. This lack of data and the proper mechanism to collect and analyze it is but one example of gender-based violence that works to marginalize and make trans Latinas invisible and perpetuates the notion that this community and their experiences don't matter. But Trans Latina lives, like Black lives, like all lives, do matter. According to the Human Rights Campaign, in 2019 alone, 22 transgender individuals faced a violent death, and the majority were trans women of color. While there have been some very important gains made by the LGBT community as a whole, it is important to remember that trans women-of-color are still being murdered at alarming rates, even in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco or New York where there is more visibility and presumably more tolerant attitudes towards gender non-conformity. Trans historian Susan Stryker, described discrimination against transgender people in the following way:

> "Because most people have difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person's gender, the gender changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness. That gut-level fear can manifest itself as hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust, which may then translate into physical or emotional violence directed against the person who is perceived as not quite human."[10]

Human beings have a propensity to question and fear that which we don't recognize or understand. We reject unfamiliar identities, sometimes to the point of acting out in violence. Reports show that in comparison to LGB individuals, transgender people are more likely to

experience discrimination, violence, stigmatization, and victimization leading to very stressful lives and all the complications that come with the more addictive forms of stress-management. For undocumented trans Latina immigrants the discrimination is intensified due to their status. As Karla Padrón found in the research she conducted for her dissertation, it is common for undocumented trans Latinas to be "structurally punished for having crossed gender and geographical borders."[11] Trans Latina immigrants are further punished each time they are bullied, seen as "deceitful and conniving," accused of hiding their "true" gender identity, and are called "she-males" and "trannies."[12] This particular type of transphobia, where trans individuals are perceived as liars or "gender deceivers," occurs where there is appearance-reality contrast between gender presentation and sexed body (Bettcher, 2007, 49). Although this transphobia is not specific to the way trans Latinas are perceived, it has led to the deaths of many trans Latinas and other trans women of color, as this social ill is also embedded in other systems of oppression like racism and xenophobia. (Serano 2007, 36, Bettcher 2014, 291,).

In some Latin American countries, like Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (to name a few) gender binaries are strongly reinforced which fuel transphobic ideologies and further marginalize, oppress and subject gender non-conforming individuals, especially trans women, to extreme violence and even death. Between the years of 2007-2015, Mexico had the highest reported transphobic related murders at 164, more than any other Latin American country (Mora, 2016). It is because of this violence that many trans women will risk their lives to come to the United States. Despite the hardships that trans Latinas face here in the U.S. the majority of them believe that their chances of "making it" (i.e. having a better quality of life) are more likely here than in their home countries. As described in the report, "TransVisible: Transgender Latinas in the U.S. Society," "[n]inety-nine percent (99%) of the participants in this study reported

having better opportunities in the U.S. than in their country of origin. And, eighty-eight percent (88%) of all respondents wish to make the U.S. their permanent residence."[13] An astounding 61% of trans women surveyed reported that they migrated to the U.S. to escape physical, social, psychological and economic violence. (Padron, Salcedo, 2013; 12). Despite drive and desire, trans Latina immigrants still have a difficult time accessing employment, housing, and medical services largely due to the barriers they face in obtaining identification documents to legally work and live as full citizens or residents in the U.S. For instance, 70% of the TransVisible respondents reported not having a driver's license because many states still don't recognize gender non-conforming people's gender identity as "real" or valid,[14] further dehumanizing, and marginalizing their existence through means of illegality. Denial of these privileges has a great impact on their ability to earn a livelihood.

Even with the growing body of literature related to immigration studies, women/gender and immigration, literature that addresses the experiences of trans Latina immigrants continues to be limited. Most research on Latin American migration has been centered on the experiences of working-class (mostly male) labor migrants. The U.S. immigration system is always in flux depending on which political party is in office. Under the current administration, the U.S. immigration system experienced various changes in 2019 and some that will take place in 2020, which will have significant impact on millions of immigrants living in the U.S. Some of the changes include:

- Increase in processing fees. There will be an 83% increase (from $640 to $1,170) for the naturalization application.
- Asylum seekers will have to pay $50 their application. This makes the U.S. 1 of 4 other countries in the world that charge for humanitarian protection.

- The public charge rule which briefly stated, would allow the government to deny access to immigrants who have used public benefits such as Medicaid and it also increases the minimum income required to qualify for a green card.[15]
- The list of behaviors that demonstrate "bad moral character," one of the key requirements for naturalization, will be expanded. Behaviors include, drunk driving, bank fraud, failure to pay taxes and prostitution.[16]

Although there are more changes to immigration policy that could impact the opportunity for immigrants' path to citizenship, I focused on the changes listed above because these will place a heftier economic burden on trans Latina migrants. In addition, because of their marginalized status they are at an increased risk for engaging in prostitution and taking drugs to cope with the hardships they experience like family rejection and discrimination. The policy changes stated above, criminalize the survival tactics that many trans Latina immigrants resort to in order for them to survive once they arrive in the U.S.

Immigration law reforms are made more stringent in attempt to curb immigration, especially from "undesirable" countries like Mexico and Centro America, but these laws also create the conditions that criminalize undocumented migrants. Dating back to passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) in 1965, which removed the immigration quota system, originally established in 1924, and supplanted it with a visa system that favored immigrant families. INA created harsher conditions for Mexicans to obtain visas, forcing many Mexican migrants to cross the border illegally for employment opportunities (De Genova 2010). Another significant policy change was implemented in 1986 when the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), allowed millions of immigrants who had been in the country since January 1, 1982 to file for temporary and later permanent legal status if they met certain requirements (i.e.

amnesty). While IRCA allowed for approximately 1.6 million people to legalize their status, it also penalized employers who hired undocumented workers through employer sanctions and created tougher border security and immigration enforcement (Hyland, 2015). IRCA set the precedent for the militarization of the border, 25 years after IRCA there were 20,700 border patrol agents compared to the 3,600 employed in 1986.[17]

In 1994 California passed Proposition 187, also known as Save Our State (SOS), which prohibited undocumented immigrants from accessing public services such as non-emergency health care and public education. The law was challenged in a legal suit and was found unconstitutional by the federal district court on November 11th just three days after being approved by voters. Two years later, 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, creating an easier path for deportation. Immigrants who were in the U.S. both legally and illegally and even those who were green card holders could be deported if they were convicted of certain crimes (Coutlin 2010, Golash-Boza 2013).

One of the harshest immigration bills drafted was known as the Sensenbrenner bill, which would not only make it a felony to be an undocumented immigrant, because of entering the country illegally, but it would also make it a criminal act to offer any type of support to an undocumented immigrant (i.e. providing food, housing or medical assistance). This prompted immigrant communities and immigrant rights advocates all over the U.S. to take to the streets in mass protests on March 10, 2006. Chicago drew a crowd of 100,000 while 500,00 people flooded the streets of Downtown Los Angeles making it the largest immigrants' rights demonstration in U.S. history (Padron, 11). The bill didn't pass; neither did immigration reform,

but the demonstration of unity and power on behalf of immigrants' rights activists' triggered hardline-anti-immigrant sentiments across the country.

There are many reasons why individuals migrate to the United States. Some people do it for environmental reasons (lack of resources), family reunification, and the most common, for economic reasons (low wages or high unemployment rates). Most trans Latinas immigrate for reasons similar to those of the general immigrant public but often their departure from their home country is triggered by violence, such as political persecution or extreme transphobic experiences (Cerezo et al., 2014; Chavez, 2011). But gays and lesbians were barred from migrating into the U.S. under a prohibition that was termed "sexual deviation." It was not until 1990 when President George H.W. Bush signed the Immigration and Nationality Act into law that lifted the ban that would allow gays and lesbians to seek asylum in the U.S. if they were being persecuted in their own countries. This policy is an example of the ways in which sexuality, migration, and immigration policies intersect, affecting trans Latinas differently than the general population, and another way in which U.S. immigration control has discriminated against individuals based on their gender and sexuality (Luibheid and Cantú, 2005).

Using an intersectional lens allows us to see the ways that immigration policies and power structures have rendered invisible the sexual and physical violence enacted on queer migrants. Queers have and continue to face political and social barriers that impede their asylum-seeking process. These policies are part of the larger federal immigration control system's agenda to "ensure a 'proper' sexual and gender order, reproduction of white racial privilege and the exploitation of the poor" (Lubheid and Cantú, xiv). This restrictive regime can be traced back to 1875 and the passing of the Page law, which barred unmarried Chinese women from entering

the country if they were suspected of coming for "lewd and immoral purposes" (Lubheid and Cantú, xvi)

This country's history of oppressive beliefs towards immigrants, combined with the current administration's determination to curb "illegal" immigration and radically transform legal immigration largely through the spewing of anti-immigrant rhetoric have led to an increase in negative sentiment and discrimination towards Latino immigrants. Trump's efforts to influence mainstream perceptions of immigrants also have the potential to add to the stigmatization and criminalization of those immigrant Latinos already in the country.

Trans Feminism Meets Chicana and Third World Feminisms

It is imperative to have transgender Latina scholarly and creative contributions to literature, Chicana/o Studies and Queer Studies. These narratives have the potential to transform the study of identity and recover histories mistold and untold, which, by speaking of the everyday experiences of trans Latinas, can address the misconceptions about this community. It is important for trans Latinas to contribute to the ways they are represented and to trans epistemology both from a scholarly perspective as well as from the standpoint of trans Latina advocacy (Bettcher 2014, Namaste 2009, Stone 2006 Radi 2019). Historian Emma Perez stated, when addressing the erasure of Chicana lesbian subjectivity from dominant and Chicano nationalist discourses: "We have not had our own language and voice in history. We have been spoken about, written about, spoken at but never spoken with or listened to…we speak our history to each other."[18] What Emma Perez is referring to is the importance of claiming our positionality as an integral factor from which we see the world, do our work and how we speak our truths that are often silenced. This is the work that trans Latinas, like Chicanas, need to do in

order to write themselves into history because their lives are worthy of documentation and proper representation.

Unfortunately, transgender bodies, experiences and their knowledge production have not been recognized but rather controlled or erased by societal institutions. The medical field for example, has attempted to control and regulate trans bodies by forcing them to abide by the normative dichotomous gender system, starting from birth, by imposing an assigned sex (Bettcher 2014, Koyama 2001, Serano 2007, Stone 2006) based on genitalia. The field of psychology has had a stronghold on the trans experience and identity by diagnosing transgender individuals as experiencing "gender identity disorder" (GID). In many states, trans individuals have to be diagnosed with this disorder and then required to commit to living for a year as the gender they want to transition to before they are "approved" for any gender confirming medical procedure (i.e. hormone therapy, top surgery etc.). In other words, trans individuals are required to prove their commitment to being trans before being medically recognized as such. It was not until 2013, with the release of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), that GID was renamed gender dysphoria in an effort to remove the stigma from what was once recognized as a disorder. Psychology viewed transsexuality as a disease of the mind, where individuals felt/perceived themselves trapped "in the wrong body," in other words a misalignment between that individual's sexed body and their gender identity (Bettcher, 2014).

In academia, since the 1990s, Anglo-American feminists have largely relied on the use of transgender bodies and images as a way to further the conversation around gender and its many theoretical iterations, or what Vivian Namaste likes to call "The Transgender Question" (Namaste 2005, 2009). Namaste defines this concept as "the many ways feminist theory depends

on looking at transsexual and transgender bodies in order to ask its own epistemological questions (2009, 12) and as a way to interrogate the ways that sex and gender are reproduced and understood. In other words, "transgender" has in many ways become the ontological and analytical category that theorists use to work through the problem of gender itself," as stated by Dabrinski (304). Namaste especially critiques the work of Judith Butler who looks at transsexual women and transvestites as objects of inquiry that help prove her argument that gender is constituted via speech, dress and mannerisms (Namaste, 2009, 11). Namaste argues that Butler's and other scholars recommendation that feminist theory be centrally focused on the constitution of gender is limiting specifically to transsexual women who's gender, Namaste argues, is largely constituted through work/labor (i.e. sex work to live and afford the very expensive sex affirming procedures needed to self-actualize). Trans identified folks have constantly been the objects of inquiry for gender, sexuality and queer studies but with many difficulties have been welcomed into academic spaces leading to what Blas Radi calls "trans* epistemic marginalization" (Namaste 2009, Radi 2019).

Many Feminists and queer scholars attribute the rise of transgender politics to Leslie Feinberg (1993), Kate Bornstein (1994) (Bettcher, 2014, Namaste 2009, Radi 2019). Their works marked the beginning of transgender individuals theorizing about themselves for themselves and it also greatly popularized the term "transgender," an umbrella term which is used encapsulate all individuals and identities that do no conform to society's binary classification of gender (i.e. male/masculine; female/feminine). What this new politic fostered in was the "beyond the binary" model for explaining all forms of gender variance. The idea was that academic gender studies and queer feminist analysis of gender and sexuality have tended to favor the notion of "shattering the gender binary," or moving past the binary. This school of thought also stated that the

pathologizing of transsexuality or the medical regulation of trans bodies are some of the ways that society tries to erase trans lives (Namaste 2005, Bettcher 2014, Radi 2019, Stryker 2004).

Although seemingly progressive, these analyses have triggered a lot of resentment and distrust from trans Feminist theorists (Serano 2007, Namaste 2005, Bettcher 2014, Stryker 2004) who identify as transsexual and feel that Queer and Feminist analyses of gender treat transsexuals as abject objects (Bettcher, Stryker 2004) and often use transsexuality as a way to ascertain the social construction of gender. Furthermore, Namaste argues that social constructivist notions of gender, which embrace the notion of gender non-conformity, invalidate the experiences of transsexuals who definitively want to identify themselves as either man or woman although they were not "born in female or male bodies" (Namaste 2005, Bettcher 2014). This leads to the creation of other categories such as "genderqueer," to capture the experiences of those individuals who live in opposition to the gender binary and "trans*" to identify those who identify as men and women and those who do not (Bettcher 2014, Serano 2007).

"Disdain for trans* subjects and the discrediting of knowledge developed by them is common within the academy and beyond it" (Radi, 2019:49). Trans* studies scholars credit Sandy Stone's essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto," (1991) as the foundation of trans* studies. In her manifesto, Stone is retaliating against very transphobic arguments made by Janice Raymond, a lesbian radical feminist who views transsexuality as the "rape" and appropriation of female bodies and spaces. In her manifesto, Stone critiques the white capitalist medical establishment and radical feminists' attempt to create epistemologies about the transsexual lives and experiences without giving voice to transsexuals themselves. Stone's manifesto urges the trans community and scholars to establish trans narratives that originate "from within the gender minority itself" (1991; 8) and develop a counter-discourse. But what

Stone failed to recognize is that the transgender community had been engaged in research and knowledge production, mainly outside the academy.

Vivian Namaste reminds us that before the era of the Internet, transgender and transsexual women all over the world "transsexual prostitutes and drugs users in particular," (Namaste, 2009, 13) felt the impact HIV/AIDS had on their lives. Leaders in the transgender community recognized the high rates of HIV seroprevalence amongst transsexual women but there was a lack of scientific data to prove this claim. At the time epidemiological HIV data was organized based on "risk groups" (i.e. intravenous drug users, sex worker, people from a country where HIV is prevalent) and trans women were often categorized as "men who have sex with men," based on their medically assigned sex. This mis-categorization largely distorted the true impact HIV was having on this community. This prompted transsexual women leaders and activists from all over the world to collect information and design resources specific to this community (Namaste, 2009, 13). This led to two important developments: first to larger epidemiological studies, some in collaboration with the community, which revealed the sad reality of the devastation that HIV had on the transsexual community; second, it led to the recognition of transsexual women's knowledge production within public health.

All of the transgender scholars that I have referenced here are in agreement that when it comes to transgender representation in medicine, the media, social sciences, academic gender studies and queer and feminist politics, transgender people have little to no power to control the narrative about their own lives. Sadly, cisgender people have more opportunities to speak on/about trans individuals, trumping the perspectives and experiences of actual trans individuals (Bettcher 2014, Koyama 2001, Namaste 2009, Serano 2007, Stone 2006, Stryker 2004, Radi 2019). Serano call this the "cis-sexualization" of transgenderism, which has thwarted the ability

for transsexuals to express their own perspectives and visions around gender activism (356). Namaste call this academic marginalization an act of epistemic violence by Anglo-American Feminist theory (Namaste, 2009).

It is clear that "epistemological concerns lie at the heart of the transgender critique," (Stryker 2006, 8). I would also add my observation that much of the transgender critique is coming from primarily white transsexual identified scholars. There are several Latinx scholars like Marcia Ochoa, Karla Padron, Eddy Alvarez and Frank Galarte who are doing important work and contributing to the body of research about trangender Latinx; but again these are all cissexual scholars with the exception of Galarte, a Chicano trans scholar. Galarte reminds us that because of the masculinist culture in which the field of Chicana/o studies was founded, transgender and gender non-conforming Chican@s are seen as "inadmissible subjects."[19] He further states that [t]ransgender and gender non-conforming Chican@s' varied sexual and gender practices and narratives remain at the margins of theoretical space, as envisioned in Cherríe Moraga's "Queer Aztlán,"[20] a discourse in which gay men, including femmes and lesbians are included within Chicanidad. I recognize that Moraga is not the only Chicana feminist who has addressed transgender issues in her writings, an identity which she recognizes as significant and able to "provide critical approaches to knowing that open roadways to radical transformations in our collective progressive thinking."[21] Moraga did stir up some controversy with her essay "Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer," in which she examines transgenderism in communities-of-color. Moraga feels that there is a form of censorships in communities-of-color that have not allowed for an open discussion around the process of transgenderism. More specifically, she fears that a mixture of " the political agenda of the transgender movement at large" (184) and peer pressure are influencing young Queers to make

hasty decisions about their bodies and choose to transition as opposed to remaining in a liminal gender space.

It appears that for Moraga queer is defined as occupying the borderlands of sexual ambiguity. Ultimately Moraga's message is that, "womanhood matters. I do not want to keep losing my macha daughters to manhood through any cultural mandates that are not derived of our own making."[22] This line of reasoning falls in line with what Serano defines as "subversivism-- the practice of extolling certain gender and sexual expressions and identities simply because they are unconventional or nonconforming" (346). As a result transsexuals who are gender-normative post-transition and identify are heterosexual are targets of this critique for being too assimilationist. This is what Moraga means by her fear of "losing [our] macha daughters to manhood."

Trans scholars who do work in trans studies have developed guidelines for those who want to do research on trans subjects. Here I focus on Vivian Namaste who posits "guiding principles for critical Feminist social theory," to produce Feminist knowledge "that is truly emancipatory. Her four central principles, which are: Empiricism, Relevance, Equity and Ownership. I mention these briefly here but will go into further detail about these and their application to my research under the section on "Participatory Action Research" (Namaste, 2009; 21-27).

Trans Latina Literature

Trans Latina immigrant communities are more often than not rendered invisible because of the marginalization they face and the regulation of their bodies via policies of legalization. It was this urgency to meet trans Latina immigrants' needs that prompted the "TransVisible" report.[23] As Bamby Salcedo, one of the report's co-investigators, stated, "what we need[ed] were

numbers. We need[ed] to let everyone know that we are here and that our needs are material. Nobody counts us or what we have to say, not the mainstream queer movement, not the immigrant movement, and certainly, not the U.S. Census."[24]

In her review of the existing literature that documents the lives of Latina/o transgender individuals, Ochoa noted two significant findings: "first, no published monographs exist that focuses exclusively on any Latina/o transpopulation; second, there is a dearth of written and other archival forms of cultural production by trans-Latina/os themselves."[25] Ochoa's findings, although unfortunate, are affirming to my research. These findings suggest the importance of collecting, evaluating, analyzing and disseminating stories of trans Latinas created by trans Latinas. Ochoa speculates that this trend towards invisibility could be attributed to the collapsing the range of trans experiences under larger LGB projects and "ambiguous practices of categorization," for example, the mischaracterization of trans Latinas as Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) in HIV and other public health assessments or transpopulations being mentioned under the LGBT umbrella.[26] Ochoa does offer a bright spot, that there is more visual media available that affirms and captures the lives of trans Latinas. She lists a series of videos and documentaries that document the everyday experiences of trans Latina immigrants and archive trans Latina immigrant community leaders. For example the oral history of Alberta Navares (aka Teresita la Campesina) in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (Roque and Boyd, 2012). Or the auto-ethnography of Adela Vázquez, a transgender activist from San Francisco, published in *Queer Brown Voices: Personal narratives of Latina/o LGBT activism* (Quesada, Gomez, and Vidal-Ortiz, 2015).

Graphic novels have also been one of the more prominent forms of visual media for trans Latina representation. Jaime Cortez's graphic novel *Sexile (Sexilio*) is based on the life of Cuban

immigrant, a *marielito*, and San Franciscan community activist Adela Vazquez. Cortez conducted hours of interviews with Vazquez recorder her childhood life in post- revolutionary Cuba and her transition, her experience with AIDS, drugs, sex work and migrations to Miami, Los Angeles and finally landing in San Francisco.[27] Although originally created as a collaborative HIV-prevention project by the Institute for Gay Men's Health and AIDS Project Los Angeles, this graphic memoir gained a lot of traction within LGBT academic and artistic circles because of its innovative style, a graphic novel that was made available in both English and Spanish and its focus on a marginalized community.

Although written narratives are important in understanding the lives of trans Latina immigrants, Chicana/o Studies scholar Eddy F. Alvarez Jr. offers up another method of archiving trans Latina experiences. In his essay "Finding Sequins in the Rubble: Stitching Together an Archive of Trans Latina Los Angeles" states [trans Latina] experiences and memories are instrumental in the development of "finding sequins in the rubble," a theoretical framework for understanding trans and queer Chicana/o and Latina/o life in the city, and how they make sense of their lives, engaging in an ongoing process of self-fashioning that involves aesthetic and affective strategies, fashion, and style practices. In sum, Alvarez brings awareness to the ways that fashion, what one wears and how one wears it, can be a form of resistance against invisibility. Fashion is one means by which trans Latina immigrants can be recognized and by which they assert their subjectivity.[28] Or as Alexandra Rodriguez de Ruiz, co-founder of El/Las in San Francisco states "just by the fact that you put on some high heels and a dress, go out on the street and make yourself so visible in a society that points out anything that is different…To see these girls having the guts to go out, stand on a corner, or to try to be who they wanted to be—just that alone makes them so strong and so powerful."[29]

Self-Actualization Through Self-Representation or "Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing?"[30]

While theorists of gender have argued extensively about what, exactly, transgender as a concept does to gender itself, trans authors have offered new ways of looking at gendered subjectivity through their self-narratives and memoirs. Drabinski urges us to look at trans narratives for what they can teach us "about critical ways of being in the world, beyond the question of whether or not transgender subjectivity undoes gender norms" (304).

The first Trans narratives of the 1950s were what we now define as being transnormative, the social and political current of those times demanded that they be so. Transnormativity was the creation of norms, strategies and believes developed by/for/and about transgender individuals regarding who can and should be considered transgender.[31] The mass media coverage of transsexuality during the 1950s opened up the possibility for discourse around gender. This was during the time when Christine Jorgensen, the "ex-GI who became a blond beauty," which opened up the possibility for individuals, who claimed their story to be like Jorgensen, to request and get access to medical procedures. These normative (i.e. transnormative) narratives became the means by which trans individuals were now able to gain access to medical treatment. The emergence of transgender studies in the 1990s opened up the possibility for trans individuals to challenge the transnormative tropes of the past. Self-writing was an essential part of the new discourses and community building that came out of the 90s. Often times the only community that marginalized gender-non-conforming individuals find is in narratives of the self-written by transgender individuals (Drabinski 2014, 309-311).

We can have more depth and expand the social understandings of what it means to be transgender for both trans and cisgender communities when transgender people tell their own stories. Although the potential of these types of narratives is known, there is still a dearth of literature written by trans Latina immigrants, these voices are still largely silenced. Sociologist Andrew Young put together a sample of transgender literature covering the past two decades, from 1997-2016. He based this list from finalist and winners in the Lambda Literary Award transgender categories. Lambda Literary is the only organization and award in the country that exclusively focuses on LGBT writing. Although his list is limited in that it only reflects books that were on Lambda Lit's radar, the list is still disappointingly lacking in diversity. There are no books written by trans Latinx authors and definitely no book written by trans Latinas immigrants or about trans Latina immigrant experiences. Literature is a vehicle by which marginalized communities can claim cultural citizenship (Young, 2018, 75-77). Young defines cultural citizenship as "a concept that refers to contemporary demands in the western world for the extension of citizenship beyond the acquisition of formal legal equality and political rights, it refers to the notion of having fair cultural representation. Black, Chicano, Jewish, young adult, and immigration literature are but a few examples of social justice struggles that have used literature as a vehicle for cultural citizenship (Young, 118).

Throughout his research experience, Trans* Chicano scholar Frank Galarte observed the way academia has written about the trans* community as "continually disavowed and described as vulnerable and "at-risk ," and further states that there is "very little literature about trans* Chicana/o and Latina/o populations, … most of what we know we learn in relationship to rates of violence and death among trans* people."[32] Galarte also posits that we have to build/foster new ways of engaging with the Chicana/o and Latina/o Trans* population. It is through the

building of bridges[33] that we can move past the conversation of "inclusivity," and dig into the discussion of "community survival, sustenance, empowerment and healing" (Galarte, 2011). The OBOS workshop was my first attempt at building a bridge between myself as a Chicana lesbian writer/performer/researcher and the trans Latina community, and so serves as a case study that we can examine as an example of critical autoethnography.

Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Almas/Our Bodies Our Souls: A Case Study

> *"The transgender community is a very diverse spectrum of personalities. Each and every one builds a different culture based on unique stories."*
>
> -Nikitta Ferrer, OBOS participant, 2015

The seed for this project started with a harsh realization, circa 2005, while I was working for Bienestar Human Services—a not-for-profit organization that provides HIV prevention services to the Latino community.[34] At the time, Bienestar housed one of the few transgender Latina programs in Los Angeles County. My official title was Program Manager for the Evaluations Department and I was mostly responsible for assessing the behavioral intervention programs the organization implemented. I was excited when I was presented with the opportunity to work alongside the Program Evaluations Director. I would be supporting him in researching and adapting a behavioral intervention that would address the specific HIV prevention needs of transgender Latinas. Because transgender women were and still are considered an at-risk group for HIV[35] by the Center for Diseases Control, the agency decided to adapt a behavioral intervention called "SISTA-- Sisters Informing Sisters About Topics on

AIDS" to address the growing rates of HIV transmission amongst trans Latina immigrants, because of the severity of HIV rates amongst transgender women.

SISTA, as explained by the Center for Diseases Control's behavioral interventionists, is a group-level, *gender- and culturally- relevant* social-skills-building [behavioral] intervention project designed to reduce sexual HIV risk behaviors among African American women. SISTA focus[es] on *ethnic and gender pride*, HIV knowledge, and skills training around sexual risk reduction behaviors and decision making. One of the core elements of this project was the use of cultural and gender appropriate materials to acknowledge pride, enhance self-worth in being an African American woman (e.g., use of poetry by African American women).[36] Implementing SISTA for trans Latina immigrants required modifications to the gender and ethnic/culturally specific materials, so that the poems or stories could adequately acknowledge pride in being a trans Latina immigrant. The team of Program Evaluators and I searched the Internet, contacted other community organizations locally and across the country and asked leaders of the Transgender Latina community for recommendations for any trans Latina specific literature we could incorporate. Unfortunately, our efforts were in vain as these materials, poems, and short stories written by trans Latina immigrants did not exist.

Not to be left empty handed, we opted to substitute poems and stories with popular songs that had some elements of empowerment and resonated with members of the community. For example, one of the songs we integrated into the intervention was "Arrasando," by Thalia a Mexican pop singer who was very popular amongst the gay community at this time to the point of being considered a part of the "queer aesthetic." *Arrasando* from the verb *arrazar* has many meanings and can be translated as: to sweep, to raze to the ground, to destroy, or to triumph among others. From Thalia's lyrics we can surmise that she was using "arrasando" to mean

triumph when in the chorus she invites us (the listeners) to triumph in life, do away with all negativity, take advantage of every day and not let anything stop our inner light from shining. Given the lack of published trans Latina immigrant narratives, we invited trans Latina clients to suggest other songs we could use in the intervention. To my surprise, the majority of the recommendations were songs by Mexican pop stars, like Thalia, Paulina Rubio or Gloria Trevi that spoke about strength in being a woman who doesn't succumb to societal pressures and expectations of what a woman should be. The agency was satisfied with the way that SISTA for trans Latinas was adapted and implemented successfully. The pop songs that replaced the culturally specific and empowering poems really spoke to the clients.

As previously stated, I am a writer who writes to resist invisibility and am driven by the need to write counter stories and raise awareness around social issues through my art. Not being able to find any published trans Latina narratives to fully and adequately adapt the SISTA Intervention left an impression on me. I know what it feels like to not see myself in the mainstream's cultural representations, but I was fortunate enough to have butch Latina literary models and followed in their traditions. Being exposed to and impacted by the creative works of powerful Chicana/Lesbians motivated me to create my own artistic productions that shouted my truth. It was through the written word that I was able to "liberate myself" and establish my own identity, come into my own as a writer and a Chicana lesbian. Because of my artistic principles, my allegiance to the trans Latina community and my feminist values, I was determined to do something about this void we had identified in the transgender Latina community. I wanted to use the resources, knowledge and skills I had gained as an *artivist* to help this community, and when the opportunity presented itself I did just that.

In the Fall of 2014 I was granted an Artist-in-Residence (AIR) award from the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. AIR "supports artists in providing community-based, participatory projects in self-selected non-arts venues throughout the City of Los Angeles in order to gather, connect, and inspire audiences with underserved or little exposure to artistic and cultural opportunities."[37] It was my responsibility, as a teaching-artist to put together a project that engaged participants via artist-lead workshops intended to be "highly participatory and/or educational." For my AIR project I proposed a creative writing program, "Nuestros Cuerpos/Nuestras Almas: Our Bodies Our Souls (OBOS). My objective with OBOS was to nurture trans Latina[38] immigrant writers, centering their voices and experiences, because I believed that this type of intervention could serve as a strategy to address the lack of literary representation of and by trans Latinas, while turning the production of these counter-narratives over to the community itself. Typically marginalized groups or "groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective – whose consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized" (Delgado 1995, p. 64)[39] tend to gravitate towards the use of counter-narratives. The counter-narratives created by marginalized groups, narratives they tell themselves and others, help to document and validate a 'counter-reality' (Delgado 1995, p. 64). Counter-narratives are one way the women of OBOS can represent their position and their location in space and time, in the sitio y lengua to use Emma Perez's terms. I saw some value in the "counter-narrative" approach and believed I could adapt it to suit a creative writing workshop at Bienestar that would help us develop a deeper understanding of the discriminatory socialization process of transgender Latinas while affirming transgender identity.

"Con mi boca puedo informar, educar ¿Y por que no? Posiblemente salvar una vida," said Chanel when I told her about the transgender Latina immigrant creative writing program,

"Our Bodies, Our Souls (OBOS)" which I was organizing and was hoping to recruit her to participate (circa 2014). She said she had never heard of such a program before, "especially not for chicas como yo," but that she believed words were powerful, that words could inform, educate and even save a life. The life she specifically envisioned was that of a young transgender Latina, una mexicanita sola y perdida, who was eager for and in need of hearing stories of women that looked and sounded like her, everyday stories featuring the diverse spectrum of personalities that make up the trans Latina immigrant community.

I recruited participants at trans Latina support groups all over Los Angeles County. I networked with organizations that already had support groups established in Downtown LA, South El Monte, Pomona, Hollywood, East Valley, and the majority of these organizations being HIV/AIDS serving organizations. Twenty transgender Latinas enrolled in the OBOS creative writing workshops to explore their life stories and write their biographies. I collaborated with Bienestar Human Services as the hosting organization because of the strong professional history I had with the center. I facilitated a total of 8 (2-hour) workshops, every other week, from October 2014 until January 2015.[40] Because I understand that it is of utmost importance to use the proper designation of a community, particularly the one where our research is centered, I wanted workshop participants to name themselves. At first, they used the terms, *chicas, chicas trans and transexuales, but then, as* a group, they decided that the term "trans Latinas" more aptly captured the way they perceived themselves and the way others perceived them, an identity that encompassed not only their gender and racial differences, but also, their cultural heritage.

It is not easy to bare one's soul, the way that creative writing sometimes forces us to do, especially when working with novice writers. During my first workshop, I realized that my idea of deploying the "Memory Work" framework was not going to work. For many of the women

this was literally the first time they were writing about their personal experiences and they didn't know how to just write their experiences. It was almost as if no one ever told them their experiences, outside of HIV/AIDS prevention and risk behaviors, mattered enough to write them down, and for many it was easier to talk about their experiences than write about them. The other challenge that I did not anticipate was the issue of literacy; the level of education and comprehension in the group varied vastly.[41] Fortunately, I contracted Mariana Marroquin,[42] a leader in the trans Latina community with a background in theater and , to be my co-facilitator. Mariana is an artist, a great writer and passionate activist. With her artistic vision and leadership skills, and of course, insider knowledge, she was able to support the participants and throughout the entire process.

Mariana was a bit tentative at first with giving me advice. I realized she was going so to observe me and then reveal the areas where the workshop needed to be modified. We realized that I had to revise my curriculum, and she helped me reformat the workshop meetings into a more free-flowing gathering so that the women could feel relaxed enough to share their thoughts with the group. I listened and recorded their ideas, and quoted powerful statements that I later transformed into writing prompts. In the subsequent meetings, they would use those prompts to begin their writing exercises, from which we generated overall themes for the workshop. It was very important that the workshop content be informed by their platicas and not my agenda for a workshop. Before each session we had a meal, a nice catered lunch, which I paid for using grant, funds, this allowed us to catch up and socialize with one another while "breaking bread." It was during these lunch conversations that the women were the most comfortable and open, and where the themes for our writing sessions emerged in the most organic of ways. I listened and engaged with the women during these lunch sessions and took notes of the issues that they talked

about and then managed to integrate these as writing prompts during the actual writing sessions. In each facilitated session the participants discussed, explored, reflected on, and wrote about various themes, among them: sex, gender and differences, the intersectionality of gender with race, class and immigration status, love, family and intimate relationships.

Out of the 20 participants that started the workshop series, eight women completed all eight sessions. Some dropped out due to health issues, lack of transportation, or competing priorities.[43] For others, the idea of writing down their experiences was too intimidating and uncomfortable for them to continue. At the end of the program, the workshop culminated with a 50-page manuscript of all the writings produced by OBOS participants. From this collection of work, we then selected 1 creative writing piece per participants to feature in a chapbook that we were going to produce, self-publish (very low cost, printed and photocopied at Kinkos) and distribute at various public reading events across Los Angeles. As a group we met, at first every other week then as needed to develop the chapbook that was going to capture their experiences and write their lives into history as only they could write themselves. Emma Perez would see this process as a way of inverting power by changing the focus on the representation and the author of the narrative (1991, 177). This notion of sitio, of having a physical space, as proposed by Perez, where women can come together and support each other through racists, sexist, xenophobic and transphobic experiences they encountered through the week was crucial to these trans women's empowerment and ultimately render their reality for themselves.

The twenty-four pages (24) chapbook was a way to give audiences something to revisit or share with each other. Despite its size, the chapbook provided great insight into the social realities of transgender Latinas. The OBOS chapbook was also a way of addressing the scarcity of literary work created by and for transgender Latinas while contributing to the collection,

preservation, and documentation of trans Latinas' agency in their struggles to tell a better story about their place in the world. It was great to see the eight women take ownership of the project. One of the participants, Nikitta, designed the cover image for the chapbook based on her artistic interpretation of what being a transgender Latina "looks like," metaphorically speaking. In Nikitta's painting we see a sad figure standing with a sword in their hand, symbolizing the guerrera spirit, moving towards a more colorful screen to symbolize the beauty and freedom of self- actualization.

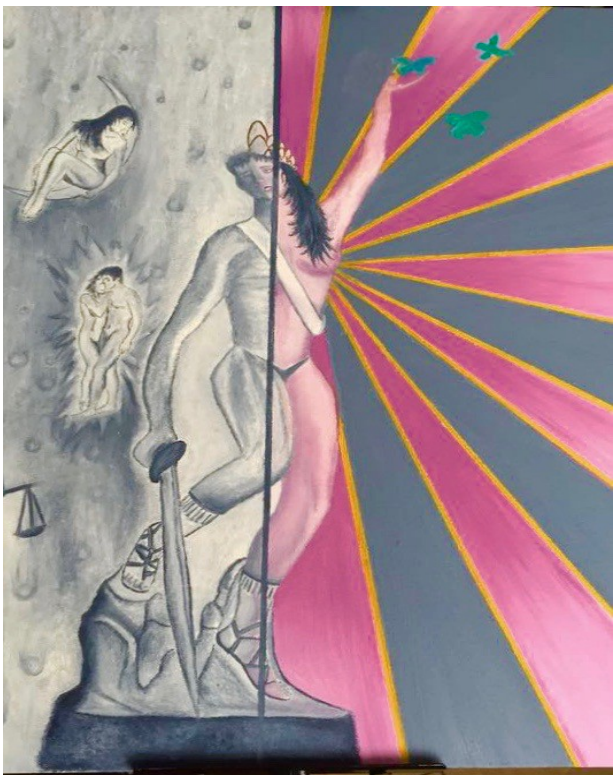

Figure 1. "Our Bodies, Our Souls." By Nikita Ferrer, 2015. Oil on canvas painting 24X18. Used by permission of the artist.

Because of the pride and excitement they felt and the urgency to disseminate the chapbook as much as possible, one of the participants suggested we develop a promotional video about the OBOS project.[44] The image design and the promotional video were way beyond the

expected deliverable of the AIR Grant I had received, but I completely supported the women in this regard and used some of the grant fund to pay Daniel Galo, a friend of one of the participants, to record and edit the video for us. I supported the idea of creating this promotional video for two reasons: 1) it demonstrated to me another way that the women were invested in this project and taking ownership; 2) this was another means of capturing and archiving OBOS activities, an online presence would make OBOS more accessible to more people.[45]

Ultimately what the OBOS participants wanted was for the chapbook to be about love. The eight warrior women opened their hearts and allowed us to experience their souls. But they also opened up their minds; they were very calculated about what they wanted to share for the next generations of trans women who would be picking up the chapbook. That is one of the reasons why reader-feedback on the chapbook noted the absence of conflict, and wondered why all the content of those counter-narratives was unapologetically positive. This showed me to what extent their expectations as consumers of Trans Latina immigrant narratives had been shaped by negative representations of this community. I also understood, however, that the rose-colored interpretation did not adequately represent this community, nor did it make for the most compelling or marketable writing.

What makes stories interesting and memorable is the way in which the main character deals with life's challenges and conflicts, and ultimately overcomes adversity, or gets destroyed by it. This is one of the main issues I want to address in the second iteration of OBOS that I will develop for my dissertation. And for that I need to focus on the creative side more, the art piece of this project, which is the writing of a narrative that is so engaging, the reader cannot put it down. However, it's also important that the way we frame these stories does not stress-out their bodies or make them flashback into experiences of violence.

At the time I implemented OBOS for the first time (2015), I did not have the awareness to create any analytical tools to measure whether or not participating in OBOS impacted participants' sense of empowerment. However, the very fact of their ownership of the project, the pride they felt in sharing the chapbook and contributing to the producing more materials, such as the promotional video, are strong indicators that they felt empowered by telling and collecting their stories.

I collected audience evaluations during the initial chapbook launch. 44% of audience members who completed an evaluation reported that the stories the Trans Latina authors shared were "a powerful message about love and personal struggle;" 100% of respondents believed this program should be duplicated; 72% of respondents commented that these narratives are a good way educating society about trans Latina immigrant lives. With limited content analysis I was able to determine the following recurring themes, the most popular of which were "Father issues," denial, resilience, religion and happiness/love. These themes extended beyond what much of the scholarly literature says about trans Latina immigrants.

I also managed to implement to collect some information about how OBOS participants felt about the writing workshop series. Here are a few of the comments I received from participants (real names not used) about how they felt about having participated in the OBOS writing workshops.

"It was something that enriched all of us to listen to each to each other's, listen to the things that we were writing in the course of this project… it was something that also motivated me to reawaken that part of the mind where the stories were stored there."

- *"Alejandra"*

"I am motivated in a very positive and inspiring way by OBO and seeing that there was a common interest within the trans community to capture our stories, to share our stories and to learn more about how to write and how to put an idea on paper."

- "Carmen"

"..the pen and the paper were my psychologist and I ripped everything off and I explained to him and tried to show him everything that I had in store."

-"Felicia"

Little did I know at the time, that through this first iteration of OBOS, I was laying the groundwork for my Master's thesis on participatory action research, and utilizing an arts-based methodology that would evolve into OBOS 2, a dissertation project based on the premise and narrative focus of the first workshop, employing the power of memoir as critical autoethnography, and aimed at creating visibility from the inside/out, representing their own stories, and correcting the stereotypes assigned to the trans Latina community.

Participatory Action Research

As a research method, participatory action research produces social change in the setting in which it is used. This change is a result of a cyclical process where researcher and participants engage in an ongoing dynamic of action and reflection. Kemmis & McTaggart (2000) developed a model of the process so it could be easier to remember the steps participatory action research entails:

Planning a change

Acting and observing the process and consequence of change,

Reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on …[cycle repeats] (595, emphasis added)

PAR is a promising model amongst scholars who want to engage in community-grounded research based on knowledge exchange and engagement of the community throughout the entire process (Gannam 2012, 341). A large part of the appeal for PAR is that it doesn't require that numerous surveys be conducted nor the use of experimental conditions to test hypothesis. The fundamental function of PAR is to change the setting in which it is used and not so much generate knowledge. Typically the group working on PAR starts off with a question they want to address, a question relevant to their current context and then set up a series of activities and events to answer said question (Gaffney, 2008. pp. 9). After the activities/events are implemented, the group then meets to evaluate the impact of these and makes necessary changes. Given that I already piloted OBOS the next step would a point of reflection, here I meet with the participants of OBOS and collected qualitative information. Some of the preliminary points of interests are; overall evaluation of their experience with OBOS; identify the weaknesses of the project, identify the strengths, what questions/topics did we leave out in OBOS 1; establish how OBOS 2 should be implemented.

Other characteristics of PAR include people participating in different roles and capacities but still treated as having an equal say and equal exchange of knowledge. I see the women of OBOS as co-researchers, and not just as participants, they are central to the knowledge creation generated by the workshop. This approach ensures that participants are involved and develop skills and capacities that will prolong the legacy of the project, and the impact of the work

completed will be felt long after the project ends. One of the deliverables of OBOS was the chapbook of stories that we put together when the workshop ended, and which the participants shared with their friends and families. This chapbook was the entry point to an archive of trans Latina narratives and a collective of writers who can use those skills to enhance their lives and those of others.

In retrospect I can see that the piloting of "OBOS" was a somewhat small-scale action research project where I was building my skills of working in community, working on a project with a social justice agenda, and working collaboratively with members of a community that was being unjustly targeted. Moreover, the theater projects I collaborated on circa 2002-2010 entailed these same community-building skills. That is one thing performance and PAR have in common, the coming together with people to discuss, question, challenge, draft, review, revise, and perform the stories we want to share with our audience. In that regard, my arts-based research praxis in Butchlalis de Panochtitlán matches up nicely with the process of PAR.

To further ensure that I don't employ exploitive research practices I will be mindful of my gender privilege (i.e., being born into a female body) and conscious that I don't appropriate the participants' experiences. I will deploy Vivian Namaste's "guiding principles for critical Feminist social theory," which she recommends in order to generate Feminist knowledge "that is truly emancipatory." The four central principles she recommends are:

- Empiricism: we have to allow room for empirical research to elaborate on theoretical ruminations. This type of knowledge creation demands attention to trans Latina's experiences as a resource for developing trans feminist accounts of knowledge (i.e. trans Latina narratives);

- Relevance: we need to articulate how the research will be useful to the people and communities under study;
- Equity of community participation: research subjects should have an equal say in all aspects of empirical research.
- Ownership: the knowledge being generated belongs to the community, they own it and they also have the right to keep certain things a secret (Namaste, 2009; 21-27)

Empirically, this research will be grounded in the experiences and knowledge of trans Latinas. This research is relevant to the community as it addresses multiple issues (i.e., literary invisibility or misrepresentation and the lack of access to publishing opportunities and resources) and establishes an archive of this community. It goes without saying that the participants will have an equal say in the development of the curriculum and the final product of the workshop. The participants will retain all publishing rights to their work and will also have the opportunity to exclude anything they don't want to be included in the narrative. Most importantly, the curriculum will remain accessible to the trans Latina community so that is can be replicated and modified to the needs of any group that wishes to implement it.

Critical Autoethnography

Gloria Anzaldúa in her powerful letter to third world women writers, "Speaking in Tongues" urges us to infuse our personal experiences, our history and worldviews into our writings as a form of compensation for misrepresentation and invisibility.

> Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear…Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does

> not give me…I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me (2009 30, 31).

This principle heavily informs my own research and process of writing, both as a writer, myself, and as a teacher and facilitator guiding others through the labyrinth of self-discovery that leads to *conocimiento* of the self and the self's connection to others. Anzaldúa describes *conocimiento* as a tremendous shift in how one perceives the world. It is an urgent shift in consciousness that prompts one to act on the knowledge gained (Anzaldúa 2002, 541). She further states that *conocimiento* is a form of spiritual inquiry "reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing…Through creative engagement you embed your experience in a larger framework of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet" (542).[46] I hope to describe the development of trans Latina narrativity without any speculations about the ways transgender identities are in conversation with gender as a larger system in both a heteronormative society in general, and the Latinx community in particular.

While my research is focused on the voices of the workshop participants, I will also include my voice and experience by employing autoethnography as one of my methods. Authoethnography is a qualitative research method sometimes simply defined as "the study of the self" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, 9). It is related to autobiography, narrative, ethnography, self-study and hermeneutics in that they all, in their own way, observe the ways people make sense of relationships between humans and their sociocultural context. I believe in inscribing my own knowledge and skills, my artivism into the research. Sandoval and Latorre define artivism as "a hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism" (2008, 82). Through my artivism I am able to merge creative expression, social activism and self-empowerment. My knowledge and worldview are largely

shaped by my multiple identities and ways of being othered: poor, Chicana, daughter of an immigrant, from Compton to first generation Ph.D. student, butch married partner, and now, parent. My 20 years of doing collaborative art projects with marginalized populations and eleven years of teaching Sociology make it necessary for what I do to have a social justice orientation. Through my application of autoethnography, and the use of first-person *testimonios* or stories of witness about both my problems and my privileges as a researcher, I am hoping that this process will instigate a spiritual and ideological shift inside me. Here it is important to mention that autoethnography is also applied as a methodology to explain the role of the researcher in relation to research participants (Hughes and Pennington, 2017, 10).

My purpose in using autoethnography is to provide an honest and introspective view of my role as a researcher and methods used in my research while addressing issues of representation, "objectivity," and ethics while working with a community that has bee denied access to self-representation. Ultimately I want to highlight the possibilities and challenges of working with trans Latina immigrants in a partnership, taking into consideration our different stakes in the issue of representation. Here I look at the ethnographic work Marie "Keta" Miranda, in *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* (2003), did with gang affiliated young women from Oakland, California. Miranda's book is an exploration of how these young women represent themselves in the public arena and offers a critique "revolving around relations of power in ethnographic research" (p.#). I consider her work to be a model of how I as a researcher can establish a collaborative relationship with the women I am working with, or, as Miranda refers to it, a "co-discursive partnership" (23). It was because of the trust and partnership, most importantly her willingness to listen to the young women's concerns about how Miranda wanted to portray them, that Miranda changed the focus of her study from "a study of girls in gangs," to

"a study of girls in gangs speaking on behalf of themselves" (3). Her study ultimately was about self-representation and embracing the "study subjects'" agency. Her work is a good model for how scholars can push their respective field, in my case trans Latina studies, without objectifying or perpetuating damaging narratives about the community one is working with. In her chapter entitled "An Ethnographer's Tale," Miranda writes what I see as her own critical authoethnography, as she shares personalized accounts of her research process, her positionality as both an outsider/academic researcher and an insider/Chicana and former working class inhabitant of Oakland, and the "tensions and conflicts" that developed in her field work because of her initially unconscious top-down approach. By being willing to listen to her co-discursive partners, and being attuned to their concerns instead of getting defensive or turning away from the tensions, Miranda was able to expand the scope of her study and learn to see the value of integrating the girls' agency into the final product. She states "[t]hrough thick description, my tale evokes these relations in order to show how the girls were co-participants in my project's aim—from its restricted perception of representation as media images to a broader examination of the politics of representation" (37). As a form of self-empowerment and an exercise in reflexivity, I am writing my autoethnography and including it in the endnotes. Here I reflect on the experiences conducting research and working with trans Latinas while scrutinizing my power and privilege in this researcher role.

In the new OBOS workshop, I want to use this application of autoethnography to provide an account of my decolonizing process that will allow workshop participants and me to become conscious of the ways a queer Chicana academic can engage with a segment of the Chicanx/Latinx community that is not her own. This I feel is important because I know that many scholars, especially young/novice scholars contend with the idea of writing about facets of

our communities that we may not necessarily be a part of. I want my autoethnography to serve as a resource. My intent is to record my conscious efforts to decolonize the ways I study community and build bridges with trans Latinas both as subjects of their own narratives and objects of study.

Arts-based research

An arts-based research approach engages with epistemic issues such as, how knowledge is produced, how research is conducted, what research is considered valid, and how we come to know what we know. This is not a research method that makes claims but rather asks questions, explores possibilities, and expands understandings, often through complex and subtle interactions. These interactions are brought to the surface through the use of some expressive form (music, dance, poetry, film). Barone and Eisner (2012) state, "arts-based research is a means through which we seek new portraits of people and places" (5). Arts based research is not quantifiable; we are not looking for numerical or reproducible results. What arts-based research does is "the conscious pursuit of expressive forms in the service of understanding," (7). The arts-based research method I used in the 2015 OBOS workshop centered the narratives, the sitios y lenguas of trans Latina immigrants. The participants' stories helped everyone understand the many ways of knowing that trans Latinas employ. What forms of knowledge production do Trans Latina immigrants illustrate through their creative writings? The creative writing workshop was the data collection method (if you will), in which the specific information about their lives shaped itself into stories of both personal and community relevance. From these stories, an alternative epistemology emerged.

I center transgender Latina immigrant voices in my research to recover histories mistold and untold. Challenging anti-immigrant and white heteropatriarchal rhetoric, my research focuses on Trans Latina immigrant creative writings, specifically, Trans Latina immigrant personal stories about their lives and cultural experiences told in their own voices. As a poet and performance writer, I have been using the personal narratives method in my own work for over twenty years and have been teaching it in my Creative Writing and Composition courses for a decade. I know, first-hand, how healing it can be to write down and share my own story, and how this sharing creates a space for the awakening of a political consciousness and the exchange of new knowledge. It is this type of autoethnography that I propose to teach, facilitate and interpret in my project.

It is because of my previous experiences in teaching creative writing and as a grassroots-oriented poet/writer/performer-- that I identify as an artivist. Oral history, queer publications, youth-oriented poetry workshops, and theater are some of the genres I've worked with over the last nineteen years. Specifically, my positionality as a Chicana Lesbian U.S.-born daughter of a working-class Mexicana immigrant has granted me insider access to create community-based projects committed to telling more nuanced stories about other queer people of color and the places they inhabit.

As a young Queer Chicana hungry for positive representations of brown queer women, I co-founded and artistically contributed to Tongues, a non-profit collective of Queer Latinas that produced a magazine and developed other artistic outlets to address social issues across the LGBT and Latina/o communities. In 2008 I was selected to serve as the Humanities Expert of the "*Las Grandes de East LA: Historic Women of the Community,"* an oral history project which documented the history of the Chicana/o community in East Los Angeles from the perspective of

women activists who helped to transform the community. This was a collaboration among faculty and students at the CSU Los Angeles, as well as faculty and students at Roosevelt High School, and me. The links between and among the university, high school, and community provided opportunities to foster college aspirations, civic participation, and continued educational success, as well as a sense of community pride for the youth involved. The oral histories were collected and edited into a short documentary which is readily accessible on-line and to date has approximately 8,000 views.[47]

As co-founder of Butchlalis de Panochtitlan (BdP), a sketch-driven performance ensemble, I authored and performed sketches that addressed topics such as cross-gender identification, immigration, gentrification, violence, addiction and interracial desire through an intersectional lens. In 2007 BdP was the recipient of the University of Southern California's "Vision and Voices: Arts and Humanities Initiatives" award ($8,000). This gave us the opportunity to work under the tutelage of acclaimed Los Angeles playwright and MacArthur Fellow, Luis Alfaro, to write/produce the play "The Barber of East LA." The play is set in 1980 and tells a story about two generations of different kinds of East L.A. outlaws – a gender non-conforming Chicana lesbian barber named Chonch and her niece Betty, a lead singer for a band in the underground Chicano punk scene. The play was based on the life of a 77-year-old Chicana butch lesbian, Nancy Valverde, who had a barbershop on Brooklyn Avenue (now Cesar Chavez), and Chicana punk rockers from the underground LA scene. We conducted interviews with Nancy and renowned figures in the Chicano punk scene such as Alice Bag (founding member of the Bags). The interviews, combined with archival work, made it possible to tell a more accurate story of East Los Angeles, one that retrieved forgotten butch Chicana histories and Chicana

cultural imaginaries while resisting the erasure of Queer lives from often-stereotyped barrios, or ethnic neighborhoods.

I have dedicated my efforts as an *artivist* to creating work that challenges dominant paradigms of gays, lesbians, transgender, and immigrant communities and record their alternate histories. By adopting qualitative data collection strategies such as field observations, one-on-one interviews, and archival research, I have developed art projects that engaged with the political and social aspects of the everyday experiences of LGBTQ and immigrant communities. It is this experiential knowledge, this personal journey and my dedication to writing/storytelling as a strategy of empowerment and resistance to stereotypes counter- narratives that motivate the research for this M.A. thesis project.

Conclusion

In retrospect, I realize that the goals I set forth for the OBOS program were very much aligned with the objectives of what is more commonly known as a "literacy program" that is a writing program that is often implemented with marginalized communities such as inner-city youth, homeless populations, and prison populations, to name a few. These programs, also considered radical pedagogy,[48] are aimed at honing participants' writing, editing, and public speaking skills, while providing a space for participants to be self- reflective and critical about their place in the world. Radical pedagogy literally asks participants to reflect on the teaching ability of their "sitios y lenguas." Literacy programs are meant as a form of empowering communities to "find their voices," advocate for themselves, and find the power in writing. They are not meant to turn novice writers into more experienced writers.

At the time I facilitated OBOS, I could not have understood that this creative writing workshop was a manifestation of participatory action research, arts-based research, or

autoethnographic praxis, nor that the workshop could be analyzed as a case study of a methodology that rendered narratives and shared knowledges of, by, and for an invisible community, who in the act of writing about their lives were actually "writing [themselves] into history," as Emma Perez writes. Now, as I prepare to advance to Ph.D. candidacy, I realize that I have been engaged in this kind of research and methodology in all of my work, even before returning to the university for my Ph.D. And I realize also that the OBOS experience, as rich and eye-opening as it was for all of us, formed only one small link in the chain of decolonial thinking that would take me twenty years to bring full circle.

By writing trans Latinas into history, "OBOS" asserted and celebrated the experiences of trans Latina immigrant women. The public readings we organized for this project were always a celebration. People who attended our readings felt good, you could see it in their smiles that they were in a place of hope and possibility thanks to the stories they had just heard. OBOS was expanding hearts and minds. This project was decolonial, and confronted face-to-face the lenses by which we conduct Chicana/o/x research. The method also has the capacity to build bridges as it sheds colonialist heterosexist, racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic norms and values. Most importantly, through the process of writing trans Latinas into history we, myself as facilitator, but especially the women of OBOS, were cultivating new ways of being and knowing and materializing hope and faith in the future of many more trans Latinas.

In 2016 Emma Perez stated in her keynote, "The Will to Feel: Decolonial Anzaldúan Methods," at El Mundo Zurdo 2016, that "Decolonial is not decolonial without a queer trans analytic," it's as if, like Galarte, she too recognizes the importance of building bridges and expanding her analysis to include trans*. We have to be self-reflective, look at our shortcomings, this is where I see the decolonial process begins. An active decolonial imaginary requires its own

"sitio y lengua." Chicanas, Perez asserts, need a space and language where they can digest and reject the colonially- induced ideologies that manifest as sexism, racism, and homophobia. A place secure from white men, women and men of color where they can find and express their voices without the fear of being "discursively and territorially colonized" (1991, 93). Perez saw carving out a physical sitio as a survival strategy for Chicanas. For a period of 9 months the women of OBOS, the self-dubbed guerreras[49] (warriors), got together and freely talked about their lives, their jobs, relationships, and politics. OBOS was a process of sitio y lengua.

As part of Lambda LitFest 2018, a Los Angeles queer literary festival organized by the Lambda Literary Foundation, I organized an event called "Guerreras: Trans Latina Narratives, Trans Latina Visibility," and brought together some of the OBOS participants to read from their "warrior" stories. Figure 2 shows the flyer I created for the reading, demonstrating the empowerment the OBOS participants felt in using the guerrera/warrior label for self-promotion.

Figure 2. Flyer for Lambda Literary Festival reading event,

designed by Julio Salgado 09/06/2018, author's personal archives.

As an aspiring Chicanx Studies scholar, I have gained this new awareness of how I have been employing arts-based research methods into my community-service work. For my dissertation, I plan on using the OBOS model I created in 2015 for a second iteration of the project with a new group of trans Latinas to come together in a safe space (sitio) to exercise their tongues and storytelling abilities and "speak [their] truths to one another" (Perez, 1991, p#?). This new creative writing workshop—whether offered as a program in a community center like Bienestar or an LGBTQ Studies seminar for undergraduates—will be both participatory action research in praxis, as well as an empirical study that will generate the data I need for the dissertation. My use of creative writing as a means to conduct research places my work in line with other artists of color who have used the arts to combat oppression and push the limits of knowledge-building practices within academia.

By "turning the narrative over" to trans Latinas, we can understand the full depth of their experiences. And, by producing a high-quality, publishable-quality anthology, edited by me and perhaps a Trans Latina co-editor, I believe we can start making inroads into the representational sphere with personally-meaningful, autoethnographic portrayals of how trans Latina immigrants navigate, mitigate, and overcome the challenges and conflicts they face in a sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, and often Latina/o-phobic society. I accomplished this by working with Trans Latinas and teaching them techniques in "critical autoethnography" that helped them not just tell their own stories but do so while being critically self-reflexive, and beginning to document and shape a Trans Latina archive and epistemology.

In the preface to *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation* philosopher/poet/theorist Gloria Anzaldúa said "empowerment comes from ideas—a revolution

is fought with concepts, not guns, and it is fueled by vision. By focusing on what we want to happen, we change the present. The healing images and narratives we imagine will eventually materialize" (2002, 5). She urges us to share our narratives so that we can foster hope in future generations and in the future itself. Perez and Anzaldúa urge women to get to narrating, telling our stories, embodying faith and hope for our future in our written and spoken words (Perez, 1991,163). The women of OBOS were actively writing themselves into history. Karla Padron states that "writing Trans Latinas into history means that their lives are important and worthy of documentation, investigation and analysis" (2015, 23). Despite this fact, trans Latinas are not included in Latinx immigrant history, or Queer history or women's history or Chicanx history.[50] Just because their stories of resilience, stories of their knowledges of how they navigate this world, are not acknowledged and recorded does not mean they didn't happen and that they don't persist. My research is founded on my desire to shine a spotlight on this glaring omission of Tran Latina narratives. By focusing on a literacy program, "Nuestros Cuerpos/Nuestras Almas: Our Bodies Our Souls (OBOS) that set out to nurture transgender writers and center the voices and experiences of transgender Latinas, I argue that this type of intervention can serve as a very viable strategy to address the lack of representation specifically through a type of creative writing instruction that turns the narrative over to the community itself. My use of creative writing as a means to conduct research places my work in line with other artists of color who have used the arts to combat oppression and push the limits of knowledge-building practices within academia.

The writing, sharing, and teaching of these personal counter stories, or critical autoethnographies, are imperative strategies for the survival and empowerment of Trans Latina immigrants, particularly in the Trumpian political climate that has shown more than just total

disregard and disrespect for all immigrants from south of the U.S.-Mexico border, but outright hatred and cruelty. These stories are the "sitios y lenguas," to quote Emma Perez again, of a community that for too long has been voiceless in the literary world, and would greatly benefit from participating in a creative methodology for finding and liberating their voices, telling their stories, generating new knowledge, and raising their consciousness about the place they've chosen to call their new home.

Like the "homegirls" in Keta Miranda's study, who challenged the ethnographer's traditional knowledge-creation process, the participants in my first OBOS workshop focused on co-creation of socially constructed knowledge, ensuring reciprocity, authenticity, and mutual benefit for our communities. They constructed new narratives that framed trans Latinas in a different sensitivity, one that did not tax their bodies and transformational experiences, and one that did perpetuate transgender trauma by the retelling of anti-trans violence. As self-representations, these narratives insert a trans Latina world view into the Western-centered heteronormative academic space where the question of "whose narratives are valid?" is always contested. By writing their own narratives, the OBOS participants rejected the privileging of non-trans scholars' interpretations of trans Latina lives. OBOS narratives served as more than counter narratives; they provided an example of how researchers can work collaboratively with the participants of their studies to critique and correct mainstream representations through the practice of autohistoria, autohistoria/teoría, counterstory, critical autoethnography, self-narrative.

Self-narratives have the potential of self- understanding by reading and connecting to the experiences of others. These types of narratives can also serve as tools enabling recognition by readers outside of the immediate community. When used in the academy, self-narratives, and I include critical authoethnographies in this category, challenge notions of what counts as

knowledge and who counts as knowers. In critical autoethnography, experience becomes writing and writing becomes knowledge, and the writer becomes the knower, the speaker, the author and authority of their own lives.

End Notes: An Autoethnographic Exercise

[1] The *Chaz* documentary on HBO depicted the transition process of singer/actress Cher's child, Chelsea, from a femmy little flower girl to a tomboy to a butch lesbian to a transman. The Amazon Original, *Transparent*, is the story of an older Jewish transwoman (played by a straight male actor) and her relationship with her grown children and ex-wife, as they struggle to accept "MaPa's" new gender presentation.

[2] Cisgendered male gaze is a concept created by combining "male gaze" with "cisgendered gaze." Both of these concepts are related to how the world views women and trans people. The notion of the male gaze arose out of feminist film theory and first introduced by scholar and film maker Laura Mulvey in her famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" interrogates the sexual politics of the assumed male audience's gaze and posits that there is a sexualized way of looking at another that empowers men and objectifies women; women are positioned as the "object" of heterosexual male desire. She argued that visual representations via media sexualize women for the male viewer. At the expense of women's agency, this type of cinema's intent is to satisfy male desire. The cisgendered gaze then, refers to the way in which trans people are presented in visual media; the ways cisgendered individuals see trans people, and the ways those bodies are sexualized to appeal to social voyeurism**.**

[3] According to GLAAD's "Where we are on TV Report," which tracks the number of LGBT characters across cable networks and streaming services, 2019 marked the highest year of LGBT representation in the fifteen years that GLAAD has been collecting this data. It is important to note that while the racial diversity of LGBT folk remains a problem across all media 2019 marked a year of increased representation. Of the "879 series regulars counted, 409 (47 percent) are people of color (POC)."

[4] Although I am quoting from the version of the essay collected in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, (2009) a book of previously published as well as unpublished pieces of Anzaldúa's writings, she wrote her "Letter to Third World Women Writers" in 1981, and it was originally published in *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981, which was later reprinted in 1983.

[5] "A counterstory recounts experiences of racism and resistance from the perspectives of those on society's margins" (2). Tara Yosso (2006). *Critical Race Counterstories Along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline*. New York: Routledge.

[6] Perez, Emma. (1998). "Irigaray's Female Symbolic in the Making of Chicana Lesbian Sitios y Lenguas (Sites and Discourses). In Trujillo, Carla. *Living Chicana theory* (Series in Chicana/Latina studies). Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press.

[7] Other members of the cohort include Vicki Ruiz, Antonia Castañeda, Adelaida Del Castillo and Deena González. Antonia Castañeda is a historian and is recognized as one of the founders of the inter-disciplinary field of Chicana/o Studies. Dr. Castañeda, along with Dr. Ybarra-Fausto and Dr Summers, published Literatura Chicana: Texto y Contexto/Chicano Literature; Text and Context (1972) a fundamental book to Chicano studies which placed Chicano literature along its western antecedents. She, alongside Deena J. Gonzalez and Emma Perez, is credited for founding MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambios Sociales), and organization of Chicana scholars who's work also addresses community based issues.

Adelaida del Castillo is the author of the seminal article on La Malinche "Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective," in which she rewrites the image of La Malinche from being a traitor and main culprit in the Cortez's colonization of the Aztec to a young woman, sold into slavery by her family to become a talented linguist who was making decisions solely based on her parameters. Her work has always been at the forefront of Chicana Feminist issues and as a graduate students she coedited, with Magdalena Mora, the anthology *Mexican Women in the United States: Struggles Past and Present.* Del Castillo's essay "Sterilization an Overview," was one of the first published work to shed light on the state sanctioned violence against Latina women's bodies via forced sterilization. (Retrieved from Sánchez Korrol, Ruíz, & Ruíz, Vicki. (2006). *Latinas in the United States: A historical encyclopedia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Pg. 199-200).

Deena J. Gonzalez is the first Chicana to complete the history doctoral program at the University of California, Berkeley. Born and raised in New Mexico (14th generation) she is largely respected as founding expert in the are of Chicana/o history, Borderlands Studies, and U.S. women's history. Her first book *Refusing the Favor* (Oxford University Press, 1999) is focused on the women of Sana Fe and their responses to conquest and their efforts to preserve their culture. Her work is also analysis of Spanish-Mexican women's omission from the regions history.
(Retrieved from https://global.oup.com/academic/product/refusing-the-favor-9780195145946?cc=us&lang=en& 05/31/2020)

Vicky L. Ruiz is a distinguished professor of History and Chican@/Latin@ Studies the scope of her work has largely focused on exposing the importance of networks of kin and friends in women's lives. She is the author of 14 history books but is more readily recognized for her book *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives* (1987) which centered around Mexican American women's union organizing, which had largely been ignored by scholar. This work features the biographies of cannery workers who, from 1930-1950, worked to successfully establish union local throughout Southern, CA and secured maternity leave and daycare benefits. Through her many years of scholarly activism, Ruiz has been able to shift and expand the framework for which U.S. women's history is studied.
(Retrieved from https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/vicki-l-ruiz/vicki-l-ruiz-biography 05/31/2020

[8] Perez, Emma. (1991). *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history* (Theories of representation and difference). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

[9] I am including a poem here, which very much speaks to this awareness.

Mindfulness (12/02/2019)

All of this time
focused on how They feel.
Stuart Hall, cultural studies
the returning to a place
as a way to break away from it.
Cultural critics critique art,
Artists art.
So add auto ethnography
look into my process
child's eye peering into a magnifying glass
blank curiosity
an exercise in
Hermeneutics
cause I am doing a session just looking
at my own process
Putting a lens to cultural production
I'm on a treadmill of thoughts
Going no where
"should I be the one telling and working these stories?"
No resolution yet, but pushing forward is my answer.
How do I evaluate it?
Have them interview me
See what questions they ask
What this says about my approach
Turn the tables on the subject
A cis butch woman studying engaging
with not just a marginalized community
but the transgender community
My
Coming at you with my papers of consent and
Liability
Here I the researcher come with my vulnerability
It was jarring, very jarring to have someone
Tell me that my dissertation could not be a collaboration
What is it if not that?
Define collaboration

a sharing of ideas
Of trust
Has to be trust
Both ways.
I didn't argue
Don't like to argue as much
I just pushed ahead.
These are people's lives
and
stories.

[10] Susan Stryker, Transgender History (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 6.

[11] Padron, K., Torres, Eden, Castellanos, Bianet, Brown, Karen, Desai, Jigna, & Sun-Hee Park, Lisa. (2015). *Legal Injuries: Deportability and U.S. Immigration Policy in the Lives of TransLatina Immigrants,* ProQuest Dissertations and Theses., 9.

[12] Padron, 10.

[13] https://www.translatinacoalition.org/

[14] TransVisible, 12.

[15] https://www.uscis.gov/greencard/public-charge

[16] https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article239058173.html

[17] https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/its-25th-anniversary-ircas-legacy-lives

[18] Perez, Emma. "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes From a Chicana Survivor." In Chicana lesbians: The girls our mothers warned us about Trujillo, C. (1991). . Berkeley: Third Woman Press. 175.

[19] Galarte, J., & Darder, Antonia. (2011). *El Sabor Del Amor Y Del Dolor: Violence, Affect and the (trans)body in the Chicana/o Historical Imaginary,* ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. pg. 7

[20] Ibid. 7.

[21] Moraga, C., Rodriguez, C., & Ebrary. (2011). A Xicana codex of changing consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. pg. 88.
[22] Ibid. 186

[23] *Trans Visible* is a report generated by the Trans latina coalition "to inform key stakeholders about the current social conditions affecting the lives of Trans Latina Immigrants." The report was compiled by the Trans Latin@ Coalition "is a national non-profit organization (doing business XQSí *Magazine)* Advocating for the rights of Trans Latin@s in the United States. The

organization was founded in 2009 as a grassroots response to the needs of TransLatin@ Immigrants in the United States" (Padron, Salcedo, 2014). From May 2012 to June 2013 the TransVisible Research Team has gathered 101 surveys from Trans Latina Immigrant women across the U.S. The research team was able to gain insight into the migration narratives of Trans Latinas as well as their perceived social conditions throughout the nation. The TransVisible Research Team presents this report in order to express the needs of members of the Trans Latina Immigrant community.

[24] Padron, 14.

[25] Ochoa, Marcia. "Latina/o Transpopulations." In Latina/o sexualities: Probing powers, passions, practices, and policies. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 230.

[26] Ibid. 236

[27] Cortez, J., Hebert, P., & Institute for Gay Men's Health. (2004). *Sexile: Sexilio*. Los Angeles, CA]: Institute for Gay Men's Health.

[28] Alvarez, Eddy. "Finding Sequins in the Rubble." Transgender Studies Quarterly. vol:3 iss:3-4 yr:2016 pg:618 -627

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[30] Anzaldua, G. (1983) "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers." In, *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (Second ed.). Moraga, Cherríe, Anzaldúa, Gloria, & Bambara, Toni Cade. (Eds). New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press. Pg. 165-174

[31] These narratives succumbed to dangerously essentialist notions of who could be considered transgender, and what the trangender experience looked like, which led to a very specific kind of gender regulation within the trans community that included having a heterosexual orientation (i.e. transwomen were/are assumed to be heterosexual). Transgender women adopted hegemonic gender norms largely for survival, because it was a way for them to gain access to treatment and ultimately be considered "authentic" women by society at large. Earlier I spoke about a situation that occurred in the group (see note 45) where several of the participants had an issue with Juana, one of the participants who, despite identifying as a transgender woman, still presented as male, meaning Juana dressed, acted and lived as a male. In their eyes, Juana couldn't self identify as a trans woman if she didn't adopt any gender affirming procedures (i.e. surgical enhancements to make Juana more feminine) furthermore, Juana was jeopardizing the validity of other trans women's "womanhood" by not presenting as an "authentic woman."

[32] I had the opportunity to ask Prof. Galarte about his use of the term trans* and how he defined it. His response was "I think at that time folks were just starting to use the asterisk - and it felt the most inclusive And broad enough to encompass how I identified as trans at that time. But now years later I think I like thinking about that the asterisk can do/does to a term like Chicana or Chicano." (Personal communication 04/29/20)

[33] Perhaps this is a nod to Anzaldua and Moraga's 1981 anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Galarte was heavily influenced by Chicana Feminist Lesbian Theorists.

[34] Bienestar Human Services, Inc. is recognized as one of the largest Latino community-based organization in the United States that meets the social services, health education and prevention needs of Latino men, women, and children living with HIV/AIDS, and those most at risk of HIV, sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) and other infections. According to their website "Bienestar was founded in 1989, primarily as a direct response to the lack of resources for the Latino LGBTQ community in Southern California at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis." At one point Bienestar enjoyed the privilege of having 10 locations, one in each of LA County's eight service planning areas, and an office in San Bernardino and San Diego. I selected Bienestar as my collaborating agency for "OBOS," primarily because of my extensive history with this agency.

Back in the mid-1990s to approximately 2015, Bienestar dedicated one of its East Los Angeles Centers exclusively to LGBT youth programs. This center was known as "La Casa," and it served as a drop-in center where LGBT youth could stop by, hang out, receive services, use the computer lab or access the food pantry. While I was an undergrad student at UCLA (1994-99), I was a member of La Familia de UCLA the Latino/a focused LGBT activist organization. La Familia established a mentorship program with La Casa in which La Familia members would mentor youth from La Casa, do community service hours there and access the programming that La Casa had to offer such as dance parties, poetry nights, support groups or retreats.

I started dating one of the employees at Bienestar and continued to do even more volunteer work, such as facilitating creative writing workshops or performing at the lesbian themed poetry nights (early 2000s). In 2002, one of my mentors who worked as a Program Director, seeing my commitment and support for the lesbian programming and clients of Bienestar, offered me an opportunity to be a program manager at the agency.

I accepted with some reservation mainly because I didn't see myself working in the public health sector. But I figured my writing skills would come in handy when applying for grants and I already had rapport with staff and clients. To my surprised, I ended up doing HIV/AIDS prevention with populations at high risk for contracting HIV, such as young men of color, transgender women, and undocumented day labors for eleven years, four of those with Bienestar. It is through my experiences at Bienestar that I was first introduced to the trans Latina community via the TU Program (Transgeneros Unidos), which worked with transgender Latinas, primarily undocumented, monolingual Spanish speaking women. When I decided to apply for the LA County Department of Cultural Affairs AIR (Artist in Residency grant) which "supports artists in providing community-based, participatory projects in self-selected non-arts

venues, I without a doubt knew that I had to work with Bienestar to make OBOS as successful as possible.

[35] Transgender specific data has always been challenging to collect. When I was working in the field, Transgender women were classified as MSM (men who have sex with men) therefore underreporting and representing an accurate picture of how the HIV epidemic was specifically affecting this community. Factors such as stigma, discrimination, social rejection, and exclusion act as barriers and prevent transgender people from fully participating in society and accessing health care, employment, education, housing. These negatively impacts the health and well-being of transgender people and places them at higher risk for HIV. The CDC and the nation as a whole have made greats strides to address these unique barriers but unfortunately transgender women may not be sufficiently reached by current HIV testing recruitment methods. Data shows that A 2019 systematic review and meta-analysis found that an estimated 14% of transgender women have HIV. By race/ethnicity, an estimated 44% of black/African American transgender women, 26% of Hispanic/Latina transgender women, and 7% of white transgender women have HIV. Transgender people are 3 times more likely than the national average to test positive for HIV (https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/gender/transgender/index.html). Given these findings the CDC pursued a high-impact prevention approach to maximize the effectiveness of current HIV prevention methods among transgender people, such as developing interventions specifically for transgender women, such as SISTA.

[36] https://effectiveinterventions.cdc.gov/en/HighImpactPrevention/Interventions/SISTA.aspx

[37] https://culturela.org/grants-and-calls/artists-in-residence-program/

[38] Alexandra Rodríguez de Ruíz, co-founder of El/Las in San Francisco, coined this term as a way to empower and give visibility to the Spanish speaking transgender Latina community.

[39] Delgado, R. (1995). Legal storytelling: Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A Plea for narrative. In R. Delgado (Ed.), Critical race theory: The cutting edge (pp. 64–74). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

[40] After I left my position at Bienestar, I maintained ties with several of the trans Latina staff at Bienestar, they were my friends and I was also their ally. I established strong bonds with Maria Roman, Bamby Salcedo and Mariana Marroquin, all strong and prominent figures in the Los Angeles trans Latina movement and were supportive in making sure OBOS ran successfully. In 2009 I wrote my first full length play entitled ***Cosa Rara***. This play features Jacqui, a Chicana butch lesbian, who falls in love with Kat, a Salvadoran transgender woman. Cosa Rara questions gender norms—both heterosexual and queer—by setting up two women—a lesbian and transgender woman—in a romantic comedy that explores our intrinsic and universal need for belonging through the particulars of sexualities, bodies, desires, and HIV status of cisgender[xvii] and transgender women. This play, inspired by the work I did in the HIV/AIDS field, represents a contemporary voice and point of view on HIV/AIDS as it explores how gender and gender equity affect transgender women's health experiences as they relate to HIV while affirming

transgender identity. I was able to receive support for Cosa Rara from Bamby and Mariana, both who served as consultants and provided guidance on the content.

[41] In order to address this unexpected challenge of variance in literacy level, I recruited a group of volunteers, all friends of mine, all educators (primary through college) all-bilingual and all writers in their own capacity. During one of the workshop meetings I paired up each OBOS workshop participant with one of the volunteers. My plan was for the volunteers to help the participant develop the writing assignment for that day. This provided assistance to the participants that were having difficulty expressing themselves while not singling anyone out.

[42] Marianna Marroquín is a Guatemalan actress and community advocate. She graduated from the National School of Dramatic Arts ENAD. Her stage credits include: Manzanita, La Loca del Frente, Mexican History 101 and the Soldaderas with Grupo de Teatro Sinergia. With Teatro Akabal, she appeared in "Yo La Puta," and "Sentado en un arbol caido." In film, she has worked in "Disclosure," a short by Jacqueline Calderon-Guido; in Carlos Aguilar's documentary Skid Row and in the award winning film "Remember Me in Red," by Hector Ceballos. Marroquín was also "The Voice," and Associate Producer of the multi-award winning documentary "Wildness." She has performed at the REDCAT Art Festival with P.I.G (Politically Involved Girls), which was also presented in New York. Mariana was named Best Actress at the East Los Angeles Film Festival for her performance in RMIR.

[43] It was hard whenever one of the participants dropped out, no matter how few sessions they might have attended. We managed to create such a comfortable space that I felt I bonded with so many of the women so easily. First "La Cuchilla," dropped out. That's not her real name but she was dubbed that because of a story she shared with the group, which made us all crack up with laughter. La Cuchilla had diabetes and lived out in Simi Valley, that's almost 40 miles from our meeting location in Hollywood, when her health got bad she stopped coming and so did "Wendy" who carpooled with her. Then Bebe, she too had some stories, but her sadness got to her, "Ay!, Bebe has always been like this," some of the other women would say. We all just hoped that she would make it through this one. As warm and tight as we all felt, nothing is perfect. There were disagreements in the group, different perspectives created tensions and sometimes it couldn't be resolved and one of the elders in the group Selma (R.I.P) who at 65 years of age had never seen a program like OBOS that offered trans women the opportunity to tell their story dropped out without finishing her story. She left and didn't allow us to use any of the work she created during the group. Which is fine, "ownership" one of the guiding principles in Vivian Namaste's "guiding critical Feminist social theory," which mean the OBOS participants completely own their work. There were other times when the group was able to overcome differences and people like Juana were able to stay. Some of the women in the group had an issue with Juana identifying as a transgender woman but "presenting/reading" as a gay male. Life of a Guerrillera was not easy, life kicked you down hard but the beauty was in getting up and looking fierce. And of course there was some essentialism in that too, the kind that says "if you're a woman then you should look like a woman." This is an example of transnormativity, here the women were regulating their gender presentation and upholding hegemonic gender norms.

[44] The video idea was a no brainer, we did it. She had the connections, a young talented director friend who could do it very affordably and with very fast turnaround time. I'm embarrassed to think what I paid this gentleman to complete the video, the women were thrilled, I was thrilled, we now had another way of documenting this project, their experiences and voices. This was a way to create more positive representation of trans Latinas that was beyond publication.

[45] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9rYFbNZ_vs

[46] Conocimiento is a concept that Anzaldúa speaks about in her essay "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts," published in *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002). Here she lays out a seven-step process towards achieving this spiritual inventory that leads to perceptual changes by deprogramming ourselves from all the sociocultural values that limit us from establishing new paradigms.

[47] This short documentary profiles five women community builders: Ofelia Esparza, an altar maker and artist. Juana Beatriz Gutierrez, a church/environmental activist, Martha Soriana, the president of a community organization established during the Great Depression; Susana Reynoso, a highly acclaimed teacher at Roosevelt High School; and Josefina Lopez, award winning playwright, screenwriter and founder of Casa 0101. Directed by Dionne Espinoza and Claudia Rodriguez.

[48] There is no agreed upon or rigid definition for "radical pedagogy." Some theorists see it as education that is geared towards radical social change, while for others is the practice of using the latest theories, techniques and methods in education with the potential to reinvent the process of learning (Fedotova and Nikolaeva, 1998. Pp. 787). In particular McGettigan (1999) defines radical pedagogy as being "all about knowledge and education, and how they can (or should) change to best serve the purposes of both educators and the educated. Since the one constant in the universe is change and because education has come to be among the most important social institutions in the world, then it is very important to consider as broadly as possible the nature of education as it exists today – as well as how it might change as we move into the future."

[49] One of the participants used this word in a poem. When she read her work to the group so many of her peers said that they related to the guerrera image and felt very much like warriors taking on life. That's how they referred to themselves and that's how I too refer to them in many of the promotional materials created.

[50] This is urgent. If the field of Chicana/o/x studies is to continue growing with its community we need to create and support trans Latina knowledge producers. I should clarify that none of the women that I worked with identified as Chicanx. What I meant was that immigration has and continues to be a huge area of interests for Chicanx scholars as in various disciplines. And in this focus the experiences of trans Latina immigrant women are too few.

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