MAKING SPACE FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN DIASPORIC DECOLONIAL IMAGINARIES: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A 1ST GENERATION CENTRAL-AMERICAN-AMERICAN

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MAKING SPACE FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN DIASPORIC DECOLONIAL IMAGINARIES: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A 1ST GENERATION CENTRAL-AMERICAN-AMERICAN

BY

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my ancestors from Guatemala and El Salvador. In addition, to my mom the small girl named Marisol that through her bravery came to the U.S. in a car trunk and remains fearless. To my dad, Aroldo who instilled the love of words and languages. To my siblings Pablo and Priscila who have my back and allowed me to dream big. To my chihuahua pug Zoe Shakira Garcia who has been an undeniable emotional support in the last six years. To my Albuquerque family: Moi, Lucy, Soleil, Ricky, and Sofia thank you for your love and support. To my closest friends – my confidants and cheerleaders who have not let me falter or forget what I am made of.

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Finally, I’d like to honor and remember all the lost lives as a result of the El Salvador Civil War in the early 1980’s and the wave of Central American immigrants that arrived in the U.S. with nothing but their hearts and souls.
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ABSTRACT

This autoethnography argues that alternative discourses are necessary to give voice to non-dominant narratives and to engage with underrepresented identities and experiences. I use the frameworks of constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries to explore the narratives of my Central American immigrant parents and my own first generation Central American-American experiences. Specifically, I examine a graphic narrative and multimodal installation that I created in order to discover enacted constellating identities that are not fixed but disbursed and change over time. I also describe the decolonial imaginaries, the “third spaces” that are created from the lived experiences of underrepresented individuals, made visible in these narratives. Understanding and accessing constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries is vital to countering the shame, secrecy and silence that is common among the Central American diaspora.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The story of my mother coming to the United States from a civil war-torn El Salvador have haunted me. It informs various aspects of my identities, why I do things the way I do, and tacitly the survival methods I have incorporated into my daily life. This autoethnographic dissertation is not meant to make you comfortable or bring complete truth. It is meant to disrupt dominant narratives that speak about immigrant and first-generation experiences while also showing how alternative discourses and “story” can be inculcated into the composition classroom.

[It may be that you end up with questions
and in a sense get answers that lead to more questions.]

I want to make it clear that:

*My lived experience doesn’t have to match yours.*

*The truth is that my lived experience
has to start looking, sounding, and feeling like it's real.*

I remember once in my graduate studies program I was invited to go out to eat with a Latinx professor who would be presenting at our inaugural departmental conference on campus. As we were eating, the Latinx professor asked me a couple of questions about what I wanted to research. I told them that I wanted to focus on Central American immigration, my experience as first-generation, the struggle my parents went through to become legalized in this country and the sacrifice and fear that it instilled in my parents,
my brother, and myself (my sister who was about 4 years old had no clue what was going on).

[I share this story, not for the sake
of wanting someone to feel sorry
for me, but because it is my lived experience,
my reality, my story.]

As I continued my story, I shared that while I was applying to colleges my parents were also applying for their residency or “green card.” A white professor sitting in front of me moved his head back in amazement. I continued my story by explaining that for a while I supported my family by taking out student loans, working for the Dining Services on campus, and saving up money. Ideally, the most privileged potentially get helped with school and paying any other expenses. In my case, I was helping pay for utility bills, food and other expenses while still enjoying the experience of living on campus and going to school. At this point, that same white professor looked over to me in shock and asked how it was possible for me to still have to take out student loans if I am Latina, “aren’t there any special programs or funding?” I didn’t say much. I just shook my head and said no. As a first-generation Central American-American, firstborn daughter from both sides of the family, the trail-blazing energy was undeniable.

I was also confused by this professor’s question and almost in denial of having to face answering his question and being faced with more questions. Even more having to explain to someone that finds my story unusual why our educational system fails students like me. While I attended a HSI it didn’t necessarily mean I receive all the financial aid
and grants in order to eliminate the burden. This also creates conflict when others see someone with my status and assume we are “taken care of” as Latina/o students. At the time, affirmative action was in place but didn’t necessarily ensure ease of access and success for students like me.

I look back to this experience because those of us who have gone through the experience of having to support our immigrant families and support ourselves in other ways is a real thing. And unless you are a person of color you won’t necessarily begin to understand the ongoing impact and feeling of defeat this professor’s reaction has when considering what this white faculty expressed my narrative should look like. While there is a level of assumption here that potentially is more so ignorance, I think now that the white faculty has come to understand the path, I took was long and painstaking, but full of so many opportunities for reclaiming what my family, heritage, and cultural background really mean.

From my experience as a student, writer, and educator, alternative discourses have allowed exploration of my Central American identity and diaspora. The use of alternative discourses provides a version of the Central American experience that allows for multiple ways of viewing the lived experiences of the group. More specifically the dominant rhetoric used to classify Central American immigrants risks essentializing the way immigrants migrate and why they migrate. While the rhetoric of the Central American diaspora is not a prevalent topic in the field of rhetoric and composition, this autoethnography is a step forward in giving a voice and space to communicate and give an understanding of what the various identities that make up this project; it involves learning how to look at identities as not fixed or as intersectional because identities tend to reformulate, move, and disburse into different shapes – they constellate.
The notion of “constellating” is prevalent in cultural rhetorics, and I utilize constellating as a lens to understand identities within the Central American diaspora. This tool allows me to see how my experience as a first-generation “constellates” into my mother’s identity. My identities and my mother’s identities are multilayered; for example, my mother is a female Salvadoran child immigrant versus myself, who was born in California, learned English and Spanish at the same time, and I’ve experienced immigration second hand. Constellating identities become an integral aspect of my autoethnography because I get to see how my identity and my mothers have changed over time, moved, reshaped, and potentially allows both of us a form of reciprocity. The reciprocity paralleled with constellating intervenes to understand the depth of identities, positionalities, and perspectives.

The other lens I use is decolonial imaginary or decolonial imaginaries. This lens allows for the process of exploring constellating identities through alternative discourses. Through the process, decolonial imaginaries are a lens that provides a space to reimagine what identities can look like away from dominant discourses. Here is where paired with the lens of constellating, identities are most unique. Malea Powell and other scholars state that identities constellate because communities’ stories reshape them constantly. Story plays a big part in this concept when it comes to understanding the origin of autoethnography. Powell et. al. state that “The way we say it–if you’re not practicing story, you’re doing it wrong. Or, in traditional academic discourses: our primary methodology in this article is to tell stories” (Powell et. al., p. 6097)

Autoethnography paves way for allowing a person who is part of the community being observed to investigate first-hand experiences and potentially provide a more credible explanation of why that group undergoes certain experiences. I chose to use
autoethnography for this project because I wanted to be allowed to present my experiences and those of my parents. To have a platform or space to share their first-hand experiences as immigrants from Central America. More specifically, I use autoethnography to examine the possibilities afforded by alternative discourses (some of these discourses are multimodal) through the frames of decolonial imaginary and constellating identities. With this dissertation, the goal is to argue that alternative discourses are more than just valuable to the field of rhetoric and writing but also would provide underrepresented communities with the tools to engage and resist the force of dominant narratives.

In the field of rhetoric and writing, there are diverse scholars that give voice to alternative discourses and provide a look into underrepresented groups. In the present moment, there is a large breadth of literature that allows for the understanding of language identities, socioeconomic statuses and furthermore grasping the implications of other underrepresented groups. Some of this research includes work by Vershawn Ashanti Young, Malea Powell, Victor Villanueva, and Geneva Smitherman. In the case of my dissertation, I aim to provide and give voice to the Central American diasporic group to break the stereotypes and misinterpreted stories about Central American immigrants, while at the same time contribute to the identity building of first-generation Central American-Americans in the U.S. in relation to the experiences of their immigrant parents and families, who left their home countries and came to the U.S. Through their literature the scholars mentioned above have constructed conversations around race, language diversity, community stories, and furthermore propelled conversations that rupture the common narratives around underrepresented groups. In addition, there is a rupture in the conventions when it comes to how these stories are told and propelled forward to provide alternative views of the scholars’ prospective communities.
The incorporation of decolonial imaginary as a lens is important to how alternative discourses are framed. The lens allows for comprehending Central American immigrants or first-generation Central American-Americans lived experiences and the spaces they occupy. A crucial element that decolonial imaginary allows for is to further the knowledge of alternative discourses and the Central American-American diasporic group positionality within spaces that are not always represented nor are they spoken about. In this case, the notion of third space becomes an important component of understanding what decolonial imaginaries can fortify for communities of color whose stories do not look or sound the same as dominant discourses. Third space is explained as being liminal space “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, 2006). Anzaldúa speaks of this space in connection to borderlands and the identities that exist within the spaces that are not delineated by borders. The inclusion of Central American immigrant and first-generation Central American-American stories enable the understanding that in-between spaces exist for immigrant narratives that are unnoticed because of the dominance of other narratives.

Alternative Discourses

Patricia Bizzell says that alternative discourses which also includes mixed and hybrid discourses have an impact on composition classrooms. Alternative discourses make space for non-dominant discourses to enter and provide a new discourse and story for multiple identities that have been excluded, misrepresented, or marginalized. For some time, standard discourses haven’t allowed entry of discourses that show different identities or experiences. In other words, standard discourses do not allow alternative discourses to emerge and conflict with the norm (Matsuda, 2002). Patricia Bizzell defines alternative discourse as both hybrid and mixed discourses – meaning that they function in such a way
that they don’t necessarily fit the conventional mode of telling stories. Bizzell argues that while *alternative* has its own meaning within the context of academia, *hybrid* and *mixed* contain their own complexities. These complexities or complications arrive via the perceived ways others have used the terms “alternative”, “mixed” or “hybrid” in their scholarship or classrooms (Bizzell, p. 5). One complexity that she points out is that “these mixed forms are not simply more comfortable or more congenial – they would not be gaining currency if comfort was all they provided” (Bizzell, p. 7). In essence, Bizzell is saying that mixed forms have more to offer than just being comfortable or appeasing to those that look to express ideas in various forms.

Bizzell also brings attention to the fact that alternative discourses typically do not use standardized language but represent different forms of communication that speak to the idea behind Student’s Right to Their Own Language. An example of an alternative discourse that looks at language practices is the work of Victor Villanueva. In *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Victor Villanueva presents an argument about the difference between being an immigrant and being a minority. He brings representation to the generational aspects of first-generation and migrant identities while he illustrates through narratives about the worlds that make up the minority and make up the immigrant. This becomes a pivotal aspect of his research as he aims to understand these complexities in relation to the racism in his community. He experiments with the use of language while talking about the Spanish language and his Puerto Rican identity.

More specifically, through a generational lens, Villanueva explores and delves into the language usage in his own academic writing, in which he straddles the lines of standardized English writing in Spanish and code-switching. The ideas and experiences that Villanueva exposes his readers to contribute to the definition and goals of alternative
forms and content. Breaking the conventions of language by integrating his Puerto Rican Spanish language and identity makes it alternative. This is not to say that Villanueva’s story is the *only* Puerto Rican American story that can represent an alternative discourse, but it is one that is present and out there.

In Vershawn Ashanti Young’s work, *Your Average Nigga* he narrates the difficulties when asked to give up Black English vernacular to speak “standard English”. Young’s approach to revealing the complexities of black students’ racial identities through his own experience disrupts the expectations of what a Black person should sound like as he aims to dismantle how societal expectations do not equate to the Black community's lived experiences. Young’s approach in his book dives into an alternative conversation about Black English vernacular and the lived experiences for black students and the difficulties that surround their education and identities. In a similar trajectory, Malea Powell also explores her racial identity in “Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed Blood’s Story” (1999). Powell challenges the “frontier story” by concentrating on how new stories in academia should emerge from experiences and not just because we have to choose an area of study. Powell strives to inculcate a perspective about her own identity but then also questions academia and its foundation. All together Young and Villanueva, Powell question the construction and acceptance of their scholarly identity.

In addition, through her own modes of storytelling, Powell critiques and challenges the construction and view of identities and stories. This example reveals that identity is central to alternative discourse, and alternative discourse allows authors to challenge stereotypes and complicate representations. As such, alternative discourses allow for intersectionality to be utilized. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as a lens through which society can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects
(Columbia Law School). More deeply, Crenshaw sees intersectionality working “through multiple registers of recognizing the significance of social structural arrangements of power, how individual and group experiences reflect those structural intersections and how political marginality might engender new subjectivities and agency” (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 71-77). In writing about Crenshaw, Collins and Bilge explain that “as a metaphor, intersectionality is an ongoing communicative process of trying to understand race in terms of gender, or gender in terms of class. Rather than following the chain of metaphors (race is like and unlike gender), the metaphor of intersectionality provided a shortcut that built on existing sensibilities in order to see interconnections” (p. 71-77, 2016). Although intersectionality operates to create a “shortcut,” some scholars question whether the metaphor fulfills its intended purpose of revealing interconnections while honoring the notion of community stories.

Powell et al. further explains the metaphor of intersectionality in order to critique the implied linear arrangement. They state:

the metaphor of intersection implies a linear arrangement in which a subject stands at the nexus of straight lines that only cross at one point. This linearity imposes ideas about causality or origins, both of which are generally also obscuring many of the other meaningful relationships between places, spaces, events, people, and communities (p. 12).

To challenge this linearity, Powell et al. instead suggest a metaphor of the constellation. Powell et al. state (2014) that constellation “allows for all meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive” (p. 5). This is called constellating because the intersection of identity is not contained to a simple point(s) of connection(s) but allows for a more ample
version of viewing and comprehending identities and imaginaries. Literally, it is like a constellation.

The goal in mind when using the lens of a constellation is to consider the “single configuration within the constellation, based on positionality and culture” (p. 6). For different cultures and positionalities, this configuration may look different. Powell et al. state that “we want to make something that people will use, rather than to take things apart only to show that they can be taken apart” (p. 10). While constellating, the nexus isn’t defined in the manner that others may perceive your community, but in the way, you perceive the culture, the world, and more so the relationship between the community and story. Within a constellation, there is more space to understand the difference in culture and beliefs that relate to differing positionalities. This space or focus is like the space created by alternative discourse. However, Powell et al. notes that audiences may not fully understand the constellation. Still, constellations work within decolonial and cultural rhetorics by allowing for a representation that now values the lived histories, truth, and first account explanations from previous generations and ancestors, versus surface-level understanding that essentially drowns out the truth and denies the violence and trauma. I believe that the mixture and conjunction of all this allow for the elements of the story to be present versus falling through the cracks. One context in which storytelling is especially needed is immigration narratives.

Immigration and Imaginaries

To explore the discourse of the migrant body, Karma Chávez presents migrant subject positions as migrant bodies that can be translated into embodied texts through dominant discursive meanings. Chávez argues that using a framework that demonstrates translations of (seemingly) foreign bodies-as-
texts by actors who represent and enact the dominant discourse on immigration, provides a way to unpack the manner in which communication happens. Moreover, interrogating this embodied engagement also provides new ways to think about migrants that challenge dominant discursive constructions (p. 19).

Chávez’s main point in the article called *Embodied Translation: Dominant Discourse and Communication with Migrant Bodies-as-Text* asks the reader to consider how we read and evaluate migrant bodies. Typically, society will call upon a migrant body and classify it as an alien, criminal, or parasite (p. 20). The actors in the meaning making that Chávez constructs specifies that “seemingly foreign bodies” can be those that are making sense of the bodies that within the discourse. Acknowledging that the stereotypes that are in place criminalize and make the status of an immigrant more so a not living body. This means that the dominant narratives are the ones that are creating the way we perceive and understand immigrant bodies even before we actually give them an opportunity and human decency to name themselves. Chávez also sheds light on the structural aspects of this naming and marking when she says,

> Americans (of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds) only communicate about these brown bodies or, at best, through someone else to them. In other words, those deemed “illegal alien,” whether they are documented or not, are marked and translated without any acknowledgement of other possibilities of subjectivity because of the dominant discourse on migrants that compels people to mark bodies as they do (p. 22).

The focus on the marking of undocumented bodies is representative of how documentation of immigrants connotes the categorization and registry of immigrants throughout history. More so, the history that enabled this categorization and also how the U.S. has allowed for it to be a dominant narrative dictating how we perceive the experiences and stories of undocumented people. As well, there is a complex manner in which dominant discourses are created around the way immigrants are called criminals or illegal aliens. These become dominant representations because of the dominant discourse
in which legality or illegality are marked by the body and communication.

Through this dominant discourse, there is the emergence of the “The American imaginary” or the “national imaginary” which in the context of Chávez article is brought into the argument about dominant discourses in order to show how the narratives around shaming immigrants becomes permanent and embedded into the national discourse. This is controversial and is juxtaposed with the communication about the meaning of the immigrant body and its location within the immigrant imaginary. It is important to consider this imaginary in connection to the alternative imaginary of immigrants who come to the United States. The alternative imaginary overlaps with the American one, but not until immigrant groups arrive in the U.S. that they begin to piece together the various pieces of that imaginary (Chávez, p. 22). The piecing together of their own imaginaries’ points to the inconsistencies of the American imaginary. In addition, in order to understand the importance of these metaphors, Chávez refers to Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) work on metaphor to make insightful connections between the notion of metaphor and the views of immigrants. As I mentioned before, the metaphors used to describe undocumented immigrants is simply to connote them outside of the dominant narrative. The ‘othering’ of them in the eyes of the oppressor allows for more dominance and rule over how we talk about them.

Judith Butler (1993) also helps us consider metaphor and the body when she discusses the reduction of the materiality of the body, which in this case can stand for the disregard for the migrant body. Here is where Butler’s notion of materiality and Chávez’s notion of bodies as text together show that the body of the immigrant is a mere “signification,” meaning that it has concrete meaning but is devalued based on status. Accordingly, when the migrant body is disregarded, it is reduced to text or discourse and
there is no opportunity given to what imaginaries migrants bring and carry with them from their home countries. This can be both explicitly material and experiential. The dominant assumption is that although immigrants continue to carry their own homeland imaginaries the American imaginary begins to overlap or merge. In the same account, De Fina (2003) states that Mexican immigrants’ income in Mexico is insufficient while in the United States it can potentially be better. While this can be true, she also states that there is a clear separation between the gains and losses that Mexican immigrants experience. De Fina’s perspective implies that immigrants leave their home country for the U.S. for reasons that are sometimes outside of their power. From the experience noted here, there is an interesting parallel when considering the implications as to why Central Americans migrate to the U.S.

Gloria Anzaldúa breaks down extensively the notion between the gains and losses that Mexican immigrants experience through the examination of temporal and spatial views of land and borders. She allows for a “temporal and spatial view of land by taking into account the rhetorical borders through the construction of discursive space and home” (Flores, 1996, p. 43). The negotiation of identity, in this case, is based on the complexity of rhetoric surrounding immigration is troubling. The negotiation is based on the construction and placing of rhetorical borders and how those borders are also spoken about. Anzaldúa also claims that through the dismantling of oppressive powers, it becomes more and more apparent that the border is pervasive and there needs to be a clearer sense of how the decolonial lens is utilized to reveal immigrant identities and imaginaries.

According to Maritza Cardenas, “Centralamericanismo is both a conscious and unconscious process. It describes acts that overtly attempt to foster and link Central American group identification and solidarity via the use of supposed ‘common’ symbols
and culture, as well as delineate those larger structural mechanisms and discourses that either ‘hail’ subjects into becoming Central American and/or impose that label” (p. 84-85).

The connections between the conscious and unconscious processes of Centralamericanismo are fused together. Centralamericanismo only begins to have its semblance through the structural discursive elements found in how the culture and symbols are established, expressed, and harnessed. The notion of all cultures leads to signify that the discourse about Central Americans emerges in the U.S. with a new purpose to show how some diasporic groups are framed as just “immigrants from Central America” because of this meshing and unification.

In other words, the Central American imaginary is a space that is created even before diasporic immigrant groups come to the U.S. Once Central American immigrants are confronted with the U.S. imaginary, their own imaginaries are turned on. As well, those diasporic groups end up being ignored because of their racial, national, and cultural differences present in Central America but then also in the U.S. As Cardenas mentions in her explanation of Centralamericanismo being a conscious and unconscious process, the reality is that those who search for spaces where their identity markers are visible might “willingly self-homogenized in an attempt to obtain social-visibility, it also highlights how they are equally rendered invariant by discourse that denies the internal ethnoracial, national, and cultural differences present in Central America” (p. 85).

Much of the immigrants’ reimagination is due to the history and disregard of countless injustices in El Salvador and other countries as they endured so much violence. A large part of the reimagination is due to many factors that include the pressure of dominant narratives and the assimilation to one imaginary. In Patricia Stuelke’s (2014) essay “The Reparative Politics of Central America Solidarity Movement Culture” she
explores the potential that solidarity can have when as a society we acknowledge what it takes for El Salvador or other countries in Central America to repair from so many years of U.S. imperialism. One way in which her work brings focus to this is by exploring how internally its victimhood and reformation of Salvadoran identities is needed to ensure a new chapter within the country. More so, she calls for a movement that captures testimonies that could potentially reclaim and bring forth a clear comprehension of what the country has endured (p. 768-769).

In connection to Emma Pérez, many cultures, including Central American immigrants, through colonization have not been able to separate themselves from the colonizer. Stuelke’s point aligns with Pérez because they both seek to bring clarity and also justice to how the colonized finds healing and redemption through the portrayal of the actual truth. Pérez equates the decolonial imaginary with alternative discourses (though she doesn’t use this term) that allow communities to take their colonized identity and begin to identify themselves through a decolonization lens (p. 126). Pérez argues for a decolonial imaginary in service of Chicana/o historiography; however, it also has the ability to be used across other communities and lends itself to see communities through a decolonization lens (p. 126).

Providing that alternative perspective, like Powell et al. argue in relation to constellating, leads to allowing overlooked communities to move past discourses that produce political and discursive barriers, allowing for a disbursed and constellated effect. Pérez draws on decolonial imaginary to incorporate decolonization and allow for the dismantling of dominant histories. Another scholar that adds to the conversation about decoloniality in this conversation is Chela Sandoval in “Methodology of the Oppressed” (2000); she explains that through western colonial explorations communities were
susceptible to changes in languages, cultures, and riches for the Western consumption (p. 10). Sandoval argues that these colonial forces led to the oppression of many people. A decolonial imaginary responds to these historical situations by allowing for those communities to reclaim their existence which includes their bodies and identities.

**Recognizing the Importance of Central American Diasporic Recognition**

While existing scholarship has clearly established the need for Student’s Right to Their Own Language, language diversity, and openness to using alternative discourses in the classroom, it also reveals the work that still needs to occur in order to effectively create spaces for students with the need for access and representation. In addition, it is evident that there is a need for greater representation of Central American identities within the diaspora, more specifically Central American immigrants and first-generation Central American-Americans.

Specifically, this representation is needed for the field of rhetoric and writing to challenge the ongoing misrepresentation of immigrants and to capture, evaluate and share the narratives of first-generation people in the U.S., like myself. Taken together, the efforts to create space for student access and representation along with greater representation of Central American immigrants and Central American-Americans promises that the dominant narratives that have existed for so long, are diminished if not taken away to make way for narratives that actually embody the breadth of underrepresented communities in the U.S.

**Introducing My Autoethnography**

In order to address this need/gap, I have designed a research project that attempts to answer the following questions:

1) How do alternative discourses allow for the representations of nondominant narratives
of Central American immigrant experiences?

2) How can the focus on Central American decolonial imaginaries create space for understanding and/or acknowledging identities within the Central American diaspora?

3) How can the use of “story” afford opportunities for communities of color (including the Central American community) to “see” how their identities are constellated and to create a decolonial imaginary?

In my dissertation, I argue for the need for alternative discourses through the representation of my own experiences working with creating graphic narratives, poems, multimodal installations. As well, in relation to arguing for the need for alternative discourses, I specifically look to create representation around Central American immigrants. I have chosen to write my dissertation as an autoethnography in order to challenge the narratives that exist around Central American immigration but also to make sense of my mother’s experience as a child migrant as she told it to me and as I experienced it through her stories. At the same time, my autoethnography allows for presenting my experiences as a first-gen while being tied and connected to the Central American community. Through the analysis of alternative discourses, I also aim to show how constellating identities function within alternative discourses to create decolonial imaginaries. Specifically, I argue that alternative discourses while benefiting from the structure of constellating identities leads to how we can accept decolonial imaginaries which make space for underrepresented stories to emerge and exist.

In the next chapter, I describe my methodology. I begin by defining autoethnography and explaining the potential of this research methodology to resist dominant narratives and to center the voices of people from within marginalized communities. I then explain my methodology by describing the various frameworks I
utilize in the writing of my autoethnography. Some of those frameworks include alternative discourses, constellating identities, and decolonial imaginaries. I also explain that the purpose of my study is to understand the histories and stories of the Central American diasporic community. More so, showing how and what I will use the frameworks and data chosen to give light to those histories and stories by explaining what my data is. My data as alternative discourses inform how I view and assess the frameworks. By looking at my prior critical and creative works I explain the notions of constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries. I also present various explanations of what autoethnography means and its effect on what research for underrepresented communities looks like. Specifically, stating that autoethnography is not necessarily trying to eliminate traditional scientific methods of research, but simply giving space for research that is critical from the vantage point of personal experience. In my case, also including a cultural experience. I explain that through the process of autoethnography, there is a particular process that engages with the constellating of identities and decolonial imaginaries that illuminates a path for healing within the community, which in return leads to clearer representation of the communities in the academy.

In Chapter 3, the first data chapter, I discuss the relationship between constellating identities, decolonial imaginary and Bhaba’s and Perez’s *third space* in relation to the Central American diasporic community. These specific frameworks allow me to understand the identities of my parents in parallel but also in juxtaposition to my own. The heart of this chapter is really to question the way that the damaging rhetoric around Central American immigrants affects the way we limit how we understand the negotiating that happens internally. By giving the reader a look into the narratives that exist in my own family, I hope there is a binding between the personal and the critical – even more
specifically when considering how we understand and put into practice the notion of *third space* in cultural rhetorics or the study of immigration. My aim in opening my dissertation with this chapter is to give a way to comprehend the complexities of the framework and attempt to illustrate what identity meaning work looks like and what questions may still need be answered.

In Chapter 4, my second data chapter, I examine the importance of alternative discourses—particularly multimodal alternative discourses—in allowing for constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries. In addition to drawing on family stories and experiences, I focus on the creation and understanding of my poem, “Pupusas” and my graphic narrative “Marisol and the Pupusas”. In doing so, I draw attention both to my experiences as a 1st generation Central American-American and the use of alternative discourses in exploring these experiences and the related constellating identities. Finally, I discuss the use of graphic narratives in the classroom in order to create space for more of this work in academia. The chapter demonstrates how multimodality, alternative discourses, and constellating identities enable the construction, openness, and representation of complex stories about immigrant experiences.

In Chapter 5 I focus on my multimodal installation called *Car Trunk: A Multimodal Journey*. This chapter gives a sense of what this project means in relation to my other work and really my own journey of understand and examining my mother’s child immigration story. I explain to the reader the underpinnings outside of rhetoric and writing that I utilized in order to strengthen the layers of my mother’s story. Specifically, I explore the genre of testimonio most notably used in Latin America. As well, I explain to the reader the correlations of testimonio combined with the idea of “literacy event(s)” and “literacy and survival”. This chapter brings together these concepts in order to show how multimodality
in its essence is a way of telling story that is unconventional but also revolutionary when used as a form of creating resistance.

Finally, Chapter 6 creates a narrative around shame, secrecy and silence by recanting moments that make me reflect on my parent’s immigrant identities and experiences. The goal of presenting this in the conclusion is to make space for understand that these are the emotions that still need to be talked about when we talk about immigrant experiences. I share what the value of this uncomfortable conversations can do for students, I share my overall impression of the effect of alternative discourses and call to action the use of alternative discourses in order for students to construct their own decolonial imaginaries.

Throughout the chapters there is a continuous repetition of stories, in particular my mother’s migration story as a child and also my father’s immigration story. The repetition of these stories is intentional and in place to tackle the different arguments created through various frameworks.
Chapter 2: Methodology Chapter

Recently, my mother has said to me countless times: “I don’t feel like an immigrant.” My immediate reaction is to question why she feels this way, but immediately I settle into the notion that my mom is reacting to the existence of her identity and not necessarily mine. My mother sharing this with me is a form of resistance because even though my mother was not born in the U.S., she lived most of her life here. The resistance comes when she (as the immigrant) comes to acknowledge that within her decolonial imaginary, the word and marker doesn’t fit. Her time in the U.S. can have the same measure as someone born in the U.S. While her identity is part of my identity now, I take a moment to reflect because in her process, experience, and acknowledgment of what the U.S. has given her she is enmeshed in U.S. imaginary since the age of 10. Who am I to question the way my mother interprets and feels within the U.S? Is someone’s Americanness wrapped around the length of time they have been in the U.S., or who authorizes her state or any other immigrants’ through the indication on a piece of paper? Is this how legality is measured? I think I react this way to her feeling no longer an immigrant because it has taken so much out of her to fit in—to be “American” enough or at least seem “American.” But her assimilation in this country wasn’t just because she wanted to be here it was out of survival.

The purpose of this study is to understand the histories and stories that arise from the Central American diaspora through examining the use and creation of alternative discourses. The alternative discourses used in this study are personal and range from poetry, personal graphic narratives/comics, and a multimodal installation called “Car Trunk: A Multimodal Journey.” By analyzing and reviewing these various projects, I aim to give a first-hand view of my experiences as a first-generation Central American-
American. I want to focus inward to understand how constellating identities shape immigration discourses and specifically in the case of this project I look more deeply into understanding varying Central American decolonial imaginaries. As well, I will explore how alternative discourses can expand the decolonial imaginary to create space for more constellating identities, narratives, stories, and experiences. By using the methodology of autoethnography, I have examined “story”/“stories” related to family’s and my parent's immigrant experiences that can become part of the wider discourse of Central American immigrants. In the case of my mother, her child migrant experience comes from El Salvador, and my father’s experience is migrating from Guatemala. These stories are usually not told due to fear of deportation, prejudices, and inequalities.

To explore their stories, I focus on alternative discourse, constellating identities, and decolonial imaginaries, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1) How do alternative discourses allow for the representations of nondominant narratives of Central American immigrant experiences?

2) How can the focus on Central American decolonial imaginaries create space for understanding and/or acknowledging identities within the Central American diaspora?

3) How can the use of “story” afford opportunities for communities of color (including the Central American community) to “see” how their identities are constellated and to create a decolonial imaginary?

I want the rhetoric of Central Americans to change through understanding that alternative discourses are vital and provide a different level of accessibility for Central American communities and depth of understanding for privileged audiences to recognize their positionalities and to be allies to Central American immigrant rhetoric. In addition, I
hope this study aids in the recognition that decolonial imaginaries allows for understanding that identities that are not normalized can live in the third space versus existing in opposition to the privileged world where there is no space for others. These topics or themes are important for understanding the social and political implications of identity-making and reconstruction for the Central American diasporic community. The research questions are also important for the construction of my autoethnography.

**Autoethnography**

Autoethnography first appeared in the 1970s and was used “to describe the practice of […] cultural members giving an account of the culture” (Adams, et al., 2017 p. 1). The difference between ethnography and self-ethnography or autoethnography is that autoethnography allows for researchers to “conduct and write ethnographies of their people” (Hayano, 1979, p. 99). Ethnography is thought about as being similar to autoethnography but ethnography is described as observing and then participating in the cultural group versus being part of the group. Canagarajah explains autoethnography in an interesting and illustrative way. He states:

The best way to define autoethnography is through the three words that make it up—that is, auto, ethno, graphy. *Auto:* The Research is conducted and represented from the point of view of the self, whether studying one’s own experiences or those of one’s community. *Ethno:* The objective of the research and writing is to bring out how culture shapes and is shaped by the personal. *Graphy:* Writing is not only the main means of generating, analyzing, and recording data; there is an emphasis on the creative resources of writing, especially narrative, for accomplishing the social and scholarly objectives of this research. The triad of requirements will help us distinguish between many other forms of writing that are similar to autoethnography and treated as synonymous with it in some circles (2012, p. 113).

The writing in autoethnography is based on how the observer entered the culture and what experiences they were able to gain. Ideally, the observer takes “field notes” and there is a
clear distinction between how the observer participates within the culture. The notion of the insider and outsider is evident because the observer or participator has a different vantage point. At the same time, the outsider (the ethnographer) interviews and takes notes on the insiders’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Ethnographers approach cultural communities inductively, allowing observations to guide what they write, that is their “findings” (Adams et.al., 2017, p. 3).

In juxtaposition, when conducting “autoethnography,” you are writing about the self and rely on memory and hindsight to reflect on past experiences, talk about the past with others, examine texts such as photographs, personal journals, and recordings, and maybe even consult relevant news stories, blogs and other archives related to life events (Goodall, 2006, p.2). While this can also be emphasized in the genre of memoir, the distinction I would like to make is that autoethnography is a genre of reporting on research. While they can share similar conventions, as I have delineated above, they can be very different in their purpose, audience, and overall approach.

The process of examination through autoethnography has a particular rhythm and vantage point as it is related to the outcome of achieving an autoethnographic project. The examination allows for different ways of doing research. While autoethnography stems from postmodern philosophy, it’s not set in place to eliminate the traditional scientific method. Centrally the process of autoethnography allows for focusing on personal experience, and even more specifically allows for the autoethnographer to “speak against, or provide alternatives to, dominant, taken-for-granted, and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes” (Boylan, 2014, p. 3). This focus on creating alternate views makes autoethnography particularly well suited for my research questions and the purpose of my research.
Within the process of bringing focus to the writing involved, the personal experience serves as a way to fill in the gaps in existing research, acknowledging that the goal in mind is to fill in those gaps and provide a more grounded sense of that particular group’s cultural experience. Through the process of examination, autoethnography allows for ethical and credible “insider knowledge” and positions the sense we have of assuming that the participant of any specific community is not only relying on their experiences but actually has the same exposure or relatability to the group.

In the act of examination, I think that autoethnography allows for a more engaged and first-hand picture of the cultural group moving away from the limited experiences that the researcher may have. More critically, there is a focus on how a person who is writing an autoethnography potentially has direct experience with institutional oppressions and/or cultural problems, such as racism, loss, or illness (Adams et.al., 2017, p. 3). The first-hand experience develops a completely different way to speak about and against the specific experiences they’ve had firsthand. In contrast, those who have not dealt with any oppression will have a very limited experience with these topics. The topics that are covered in autoethnography are not limited but I have noticed that many topics relate to race or the struggles that underrepresented groups go through. Some examples of an ethnography and autoethnographies related to my project include Translated Woman by Ruth Behar, an ethnography which examines the life story of Esperanza a Mexican village peddler. Behar recounts the experiences of Esperanza as she battles to claim her name in her village since she is a victim of an abusive relationship and is gossiped about by her neighbors. The ability that Behar, a Latina has in order to give Esperanza a voice allows for breaking of stereotypes in relation to a cultural norms of passivity. “Designing for Human-Machine Collaboration: Smart Hearing Aids as Wearable Technologies”
by Krista Kennedy is another relevant autoethnography that explores the way that hearing aids are created in conjunction to the networked aids. The exploration allows the reader to see how the design expels the wearer’s voice to their embodiment disclosing their disability in a rhetorical manner. At the same time, the research gives voice to how we understand accessibility of technology and complex literacies. Lastly, “Towards Reconciliation: Composing Racial Literacy with Autoethnography” by James Chase Sanchez, is a piece that shows how communities and society at large racializes communities and doesn’t take responsibility of the effects of white privilege. His work is grounded in his experience of how this racialization came about in Grand Saline. Moreover, Sanchez historizes the racialization in Grand Saline and also considers how he responded or reacted to racial slurs and what implications this had on how he perceived the color of his skin back then. Finally, in relation to craft, Sanchez discusses how he is using autoethnography “on a meta-level” (p. 94). All of these examples illustrate how each writer involves themselves into the ethnographic or autoethnographic experience of making observations of other communities and of the self, which are principles that guided my own practices.

Following an autoethnographic approach allows me to explain the way that my parents' identities as Central American immigrants contribute to their imaginaries constructed based on their own lived experiences and how this has contributed to my imaginary. Here is where you can see how autoethnography as a method, humanizes research, by focusing on life as “lived through”. Writing from a position in which I can tell my observations about the subject and then in turn aim to reflect and express my own experiences allows for a process of understanding and claiming a decolonized imaginary. This is a key component to the process of writing an autoethnography.

The moving parts that come with the writing process are not always rigid, but the
writing of alternative discourses makes room for decolonial imaginaries and constellated identities which in effect allows healing for the community represented. To be clear, this isn’t the only aim, but the process of healing is not the initial course of action or worry for racial and political traumas in immigrant communities. As I have stated before, I believe that the process of writing alternative discourse that allows decolonial imaginaries and constellated identities to heal also drives to disrupt and discontinue dominant discourses.

In my experience as a scholar and poet, the process of writing this autoethnography has provided me with many important pieces. I think for both my parents I have found a level of reciprocity through telling and untangling their stories with my own experiences but then also the social and political implications of their statuses and experiences.

The process of autoethnography will also allow me to show that my parents’ experiences, and even my own, contribute to the alternative discourses and stories that shape the Central American decolonial imaginary. Distinctively, I feel that embarking on the journey of untangling these varying imaginaries from both the standpoint of being my parents’ daughter and then also embracing my own identity in the U.S. has informed my positionality. Autoethnography allows for that personal experience so that I can “speak against, or provide alternatives to, dominant, taken for granted, and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes” (Boylorn, 2014).

More deliberately it has allowed me to understand that as my identity shifts and corresponds with the shifting of my parent's identities, all of our decolonized imaginaries, the worlds that we are part of, shift. I have come to realize that when we think about the changes in our regular day to day lives, identities as well as the unknown shift. I imagine that my parents think about their lives embedded in the normalcy of being American, but as immigrants, it can be impossible to simply not take that into account in the shift between
identities. Alexis M. Silver refers to the shifts and reintegration that undocumented immigrants have to undergo as they work with political policies to be part of their communities. Silver calls this the “tectonic incorporation” that argues that undocumented immigrants’ day to day lives constantly shift when new policies are incorporated but there is no viable assurance it will be of benefit.

As my research method, autoethnography will allow me to speak as a first-generation Central American-American against the rhetoric that currently marks Central American immigrants. While there are other methods that can allow for this form of pushback. I believe that this research method allows for an entry: through the construction of a meaningful and humanistic exploration of the Central American imaginary, I will provide an alternative to the dominant discourse and begin to work to provide real stories and break stereotypes, allowing for much-needed representation in the academy.

Having this type of insider knowledge ensures that with my direct experience I can give a concrete picture of the immigrant experience and also the cultural issues that come with the experience. More specifically, I can tackle the representations of non-dominant narratives of Central American immigrant experiences. For example, sharing my mom’s experiences as a child migrant traveling in the trunk of a car to not be caught plays into being able to share and establish an alternative narrative of Central American immigrant experiences (even more specifically the narratives of child migrants escaping a war-torn El Salvador as a ten-year-old girl). Not only does this begin to shift the focus but causes a chain-reaction within the Central American diasporic community to open up and reclaim the representation of their identities that is not allowed when keeping their stories and trauma a secret.

Secrecy becomes ingrained in the culture of immigrants. It is the default in order to
avoid deportation and other struggles like hardships, stereotyping, and hate crimes that only complicate how they express their identities in the U.S. This then leads to the inevitable cycle of oppression. I was 20 years old when my mother shared her immigration story. It shocked me, rattled me, and I’ll always remember the look on her face. The emotion: surprise, a sense of relief, and laughter. I’d like to think about my mother’s experience and the sharing of her story over and over since that first initial time is not only for her to remember but to see, explore and come to terms with the multiple identities and imaginaries she has existed through. I think that engaging with the potential the imaginaries can provide in terms of the complexity of identity can make space for an extensive understanding of what happens within the diaspora. What I mean here is related to the “stories” that can be extracted, shared with the same community or various immigrant communities that also experience or attest to seeing the same imaginaries.

The power of storytelling is at times underestimated as we take into regard the stories and experiences older generations don’t get to pass down. It is sad realizing that my mother held onto this story as a young child, morphed and assimilated into American culture, and struggled with many other socio-economic-political factors. I often feel that my mother’s resignation came from coming to terms with telling me about the different aspects of her assimilation and transformation to her life from El Salvador and then to the U.S, for example, learning a new language, working between two languages, missing out on learning cultural components of her culture like making pupusas, speaking the Salvadoran Spanish dialect. All of these experiences came from her need to flee a country that in its instability pushed out its citizens.

If many others shared their own experiences, there would be an amalgamation and strong construction of constellated imaginaries within our community, almost floating but
finding a home in each other’s stories, meanwhile feeling like your lived experiences are valid and real. Through the oppression, these communities have had to forgo what the power of story can allow for reconstructing those truths and realities. Ricento states that dominant narratives typically drown out the possibility of being able to understand a variety of stories for their truths, versus one dominant narrative (p. 632). The use of autoethnography resists this process and, in this case, will also help challenge the generalization of experiences and the masking of important nuances of cultural issues (Tillman, 2009). As an insider with knowledge gained from my experiences, I can inform readers about aspects of Central Americaanness or Guatemalan & Salvadoran meaning-making and world views that other researchers may not be able to.

While I want to understand that aspect, the central focus for this project will be to bring meaning and understanding to worldviews related to Central American diasporic groups. Finally, I want to inform readers and provoke a reaction to the experiences I’ve had being first-gen and try to see how stories like the ones I share create a larger awareness and space for my identity academically, scholarly, and just as a human.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

The nature of autoethnography asks for the researcher to observe their subject through a personal lens, I chose to incorporate the materials I have produced. I chose to incorporate my graphic narratives/comics that explain the experiences that my mother had in El Salvador and her journey immigrating to the U.S. These are self-made graphic narratives/comics that I created during my undergrad at University of California, Riverside. I learned how to read graphic novels in this course and read texts that assisted me with understanding the dimensions and aspects of the graphic novel. That text called *Understanding Comics* by St. McCloud enabled me to understand the layers of graphic
novels like the craft and construction. The influence from this course leads me down a path of reading graphic novels and creating graphic narratives and comics. As a creative writer, I used my own poetry to create the narrative of the graphic narratives/comics and really that became the guiding force behind what kind of comics I created and its importance in image and text. The second data source is my multimodal installation called *Car Trunk: A Multimodal Journey* which is a reconstruction of how I envision the car and car trunk my mother traveled to the U.S. inside of.

Both forms of data were birthed from family stories and dense retrievals of the experiences that most likely would have not been expressed. Through my positionality, I found that exploring my mother’s and father’s migration stories allowed me to answer not just the “Where do I come from?” question, but more deeply examine why my roots, my culture, customs, heritage, language, etc. look and sound the way they do. The graphic narrative/comic that looks into why my mother never learned to make pupusas allowed me to understand as a 20-year-old that my Salvadoran identity didn’t look the same as my other classmates. Or that my mother’s journey to the U.S. was also different and a huge marker of my mom’s childhood psychologically and emotionally. With the family stories, I also incorporated my way of collecting these stories through my poems that are part of my poetry collection called “A Guayaba’s Heart”.

It is important to note that with autoethnography there is controversy about who the autoethnographer is and the portrayal they are providing based on their positionality. Autoethnographers need to be conscious of their positionality because while studying and writing about underrepresented communities there is a risk of misinterpreting that community. Sharing my experiences of my parent’s immigration stories and also my experience being Central American in the United States will offer a more rich and
introspective perspective compared to a person of privilege telling a story about a community based on interviews or other outsider research approaches. With this in mind, I want to ensure that my positionality as a non-immigrant won’t necessarily overshadow or direct the story I am trying to share. I must make this clear because while I do want to make space for the story of my parents as immigrants, the purpose of this project also lies in making sure that I tell my own experience. As such, I won’t speak for the immigrant experience but will create a passageway to explain the experiences of Central American immigrants from the vantage point of being a 1st generation Central American-American daughter of immigrants in the U.S. I understand that insider knowledge does not specifically suggest that as the autoethnographer I will have all the answers or only hold the truth towards the experiences I am speaking about. In this same regard, I also do not wish to assume my experiences or my parents are the only experiences – I am very aware of the danger of a single story.

**Analytical Approach (Design & Methodology)**

Personally, the focus on Central American immigration is important to me. While the nature of this ethnography is personal, as the product of two Central American parents there are social and political implications to my study. These social and political implications include the fact that the 1980s civil war caused migration from El Salvador and other Central American countries; the rhetoric of Central American immigration — both now and in the 1980s—does not acknowledge the causes or full range of experiences of immigration; the experiences of 1st generation Central American-Americans living in the United States; and, finally, the generational and physical embodied trauma faced by Central American immigrants and their first-gen, U.S.-born children. While these are social and political implications, in relation to academia, there is also the need for more
representation of underrepresented communities like those of the Central American diaspora that can allow for more concrete conversations about immigration issues, language diversity, and racism found within the Latina/o community.

**Analysis Process**

During the process of choosing data, I was confronted with the difficult task of choosing 2-3 data pieces to analyze. Being meticulous in choosing the data I analyzed was vital. While the dissertation and data collection focus primarily on my mom’s experiences, I mention my fathers throughout some of the narratives but don’t solely focus inward on his story. In many ways, the matriarchal aspect of my upbringing has led me to gravitate towards my mother’s story versus my father’s. I do think that through the analysis of the data I have come to see the fruition of the work I have done to concentrate on my identity as a Salvadoran American and can now embark on understanding my Guatemalan identity. I feel that I had to start somewhere and this can also be in part because my mother’s family all lived in the U.S., and I grew up with them.

The “texts” I chose – both the graphic narrative and the car trunk serve as markers of the work I started when embarking on the journey of questioning and being curious about my identity as a first-gen Central American-American in the U.S. Among other data I collected or had at my disposal, the graphic narrative “Marisol & The Pupusas” served as a reminder of my mom’s childhood stories and their permeance to my existence among other Central American folks and Mexican communities. The stories of child migrants were not a normal conversation you had with others – my mom until this day has a difficult time acknowledging that her story is needed and that it serves a multitude of other child migrants. With that said, my mother’s stories while existing in purely oral form started to take shape in new representations for example like in the graphic narrative.
I remember that when I finished the graphic narrative, I was surprised by my effort to shed light on my mother’s experience of not learning to make pupusas. While in high school and my first years of undergrad I questioned over and over why the mothers of other Salvi friends could make pupusas and mine couldn’t. While I understand that she never learned I was curious as to what my Salvi friends’ moms’ stories sounded and looked like. Did they have to leave their country of origin at a young age like my mother? Or what were their immigration stories? At the time I didn’t completely recognize this as an obstacle when considering the statuses as immigrants, the stories of the journeys of various other Salvadoran friends and families has affected my sense of belonging and figuring out where to exist. Because of this, looking at this data was vital for interpreting the questions that have continuously existed or I’ve reimagined for myself as a daughter, a part of the Salvi community, and as a writer, educator, and scholar. With the graphic narrative, while it’s a particular piece of data and feels extremely personal, I wanted to engage in understanding why I chose to re-interpret this story as a graphic narrative – so genre became an important component to analyze. In addition, this piece of data made me reflect on who I was back in 2008/2009 versus my definition of being Central American and growth in my own identity now.

My defining of that growth to understand who I was through my Central American identity led me to examine the rhetoric and descriptions made of other Central American immigrants. While it is important in looking at how rhetoric affects a community of immigrants, in my case, it is vital to look at the specific individual experiences. In taking notice and comprehending the journey my mother took in the 80s as a young child, but now comparing her experience with the new wave of child migrants. While the reason for coming to the U.S. continues to sound and look the same for everyone, there is so much
stipulation and argument placed on how those individuals find the means to come to the U.S. to look for a better way of life. As well, the added layer is that many immigrants like my mother have to do away with the secrecy and “display” of crossing the border.

Through the graphic narrative, I learned to understand the life that my mother was living at such a young age. I began to see what my mother’s experiences represented for so many ten-year-old’s in Central America. While this is what I had to learn to adapt and understand— I wanted to make sense of my own identity. I couldn’t really “fix” or imagine my mother’s lived experience apart from what it already was. Writing and drawing my mother’s experiences brought forth the reality that I had to reconstruct my identity from fragments and even then, the pieces may or may not function anymore because my identity had reshaped itself. Learning to reimagine me as a hybrid of my mother’s quick and short existence in El Salvador and my father’s Guatemalan life as a child and adolescent led me to bring meaning and depth to my identity as a first-gen Central American-American, una Americana, una Latina Americana.

Through the writing of this autoethnography, I was allowed to engage with my data in a meaningful, emotional, and humanistic manner. I was not simply looking through the data to make a meaningful analysis but one that allowed me to reflect on the creation of the graphic narrative, its origin, display, and the time that I created the project. It also allowed me to engage more thoughtfully with the ongoing rhetoric surrounding Central American immigration. When looking back at the genre of the graphic narrative I was able to see that utilizing alternative forms and display of content makes way for more impactful and prominent portrayals of lived experiences. In its purpose, this dissertation allowed me to go more in-depth to capture and evaluate how in the composition classroom graphic novels would benefit students of color to be able to represent their identities in an
explorative and decolonized manner. Focusing inward has been a vital step in engaging with the narrative construction of the graphic novel to then prove my purpose in my dissertation.

The car trunk as a form of physical data I can explore and write about is a marker of the way I have explored my mother’s migration story. The car trunk was a culmination of time spent studying the civil war in El Salvador, from the El Mozote massacre, stories of survivors like Rufina Amaya, and many more who chose to endure so much pain but then eventually leave. Ideally, as a listener of these stories, my mother’s car trunk story became an emblematic piece among all the other stories I heard about my family’s migration story. The effect of this story on me presented first a series of questions and deeper commitment to understanding the journey of many Central American immigrants like my mom and dad but then in return recognizing that the journeys didn’t end with those that came to the U.S. but with their children. And so, the car trunk became a way that I can give more meaning to my first-gen identity as a daughter of an immigrant. Specifically, my mother came to the U.S. and assimilated into American culture from a young age. There was a confluence of differences that were apparent to me, and I wanted to represent them. The car trunk, while it is a recreation of the car trunk my mother traveled in, came to represent the effect of telling a story of its nature in a multimodal way. The construction allowed for collecting data around physical storytelling and allowed me to understand how to give meaning to a lived experience through a generational lens. Observing how others engaged with the data opened a new way to analyze how others open themselves up to the immigrant stories of others and really, in the case of the car trunk, ask questions if they are unsure of what its meaning and purpose is. I think this is where engaging with my audience with the physical presence of the car trunk created different types of conversations, I would
have with some of the installation participants, whether it be that they were familiar with
the history of the civil war in El Salvador, or they or other family members had traveled in
car trunks by themselves, the connections are endless. It felt like anyone and everyone felt
a visceral and emotional connection to my mother’s story with questions answered or little
questions asked. In the end, I also came to realize that the car trunk story and installation
prepared a conversation around my mother’s literacy of survival. The survival skills she
gained from this experience would transpire and become the lessons and advice she gave
others when they were faced with a moment of defeat and overall helplessness. While
nothing can compare to the experience that my mother went through, I do believe
wholeheartedly that she’s used this experience at the age of ten to shape and form her
identity.

Ethics and Validity

I think that whenever I have worked on any part of my mother’s or father’s
immigration stories, I take notice of the political and social implications that come with
telling stories about immigrants. I’ll be frank – it scares me. It probably shouldn’t, but I do
feel the weight of the stories: their meaning, importance, and significance weigh down on
what others may think about when it comes to understanding their stories. It is a huge
responsibility to not only hold the story but explain it, showcase it, and claim it as a part of
my own identity. I’ve come to understand how I can grapple with this but haven’t fully
grasped the potential these stories have considering the recent political climate surrounding
immigrant issues. I see that this story, the decision to migrate, and the journey that my
mother and father took is representative of my own identity (of course) but of a whole
community, that without the conversations and ideas plus overall exposure this
autoethnography makes way for – the silence, shame, secrecy would continue. I don’t
believe my project alone can stop this cycle but I strongly believe that the more ideas or the stories are spoken about the more it comes to life and the more it is viewed.

Constructing a careful but poignant project around my parent's immigration stories and more specifically my mother’s child migrant story plus my own as a first-gen allows me to strive for a mission in which I give justice, voice, and peace to immigrant’s stories that go unnoticed. Ethically I believe I have let my explorative multimodal projects stand alone with the weight and message they provide. I believe I have given time and space for them to be seen. I think that I was simply a vessel that those stories needed to get out from. I tried to remain loyal to the “story-holders” as a storyteller. While in this case, I have somewhat ownership of the stories, they have more resonance with my parents. It feels like the stories live in their world and I’ve used the ideas I’ve learned through writing to make more meaning and tell everyone they should be read. This is where I begin to see the validity of the stories because of their portrayal and still feel mystified by the connection and healing they’ve provided for others. And although I am part of the Central American community even though I am not an immigrant, I do feel that I didn’t have to search very far for these stories to gain an understanding. I know my parents handed them down to me because of my writing ability but also because it is what you do. And in acknowledging that they were allowing me to learn about these intense and life-changing moments in their lives, I have learned and continue to learn how to honor and have reverence towards the stories that shape who I am. Stories have power and, in this case, because these stories have power and bring forth rich conversation, their validity is always genuine. I also think that by using my parent’s experiences and my own as the basis for my argument and findings I created a more personable approach to understanding the rhetoric of Central American diasporas and immigration. While I give voice to what my parents may wonder about as
immigrants, I also gave myself the space to ask questions, to engage with the data at a level that potentially is unique given that my parents have different makeups of their identities.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Decolonial Imaginary, Constellating Identities, Alternative Discourses**

In my conceptual framework, I use the lenses of constellation or constellating identities and decolonial imaginary to analyze my graphic narratives and multimodal installation *Car Trunk: A Multimodal Journey*. In addition, I also focus on alternative discourses which create a space and method for constellating identities and decolonial imaginary. I seek to understand how those alternative discourses created space for different immigrant narratives, identities, and imaginaries. These frameworks help me investigate and analyze immigrant narratives that construct imaginaries, for example in my case look into what my first-generation Central American-American identity looks like based on my parent’s immigrant stories and lives in the U.S. In this case, alternative discourses are unique opportunities for examining constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries because they step away from dominant narratives that do not provide a space or consideration to underrepresented groups.

To start, the purpose of using Pérez’s decolonial imaginary is because the framework is crucial to the continuous struggle of people of color under the U.S. colonial power. In other words, choosing the decolonial imaginary as a lens for this project means looking at the instances when the imaginaries challenge dominant discourses and offer new representations. The framework, while focused on Chicana/o identities, also extends to other groups, and acts as a form of resistance to contemporary coloniality. In part, this is accomplished through the notion of time and space or spatiotemporal spaces which we can think about as forming to be decolonial imaginaries. Both Pérez and Anzaldúa speak about
these spaces that allow for the consciousness of dismantling colonial power and oppressive structures that have led to the wars, violence, and extreme poverty (among other things) in Central America. I do this by looking at my collection of writings and projects to understand the way that my own experiences allow me to look through the imaginaries that exist.

Decolonial imaginaries and constellating identities as conceptual frames are both, independently, forms of resistance: Pérez’s lens strives to show how through a decolonial approach there is an analysis of the spatiotemporal spaces of colonialist historiography. This signifies that colonial powers have been examined through time and space. To the colonizer, colonial power is a never-ending wheel of progress while to the colonized it is one of destruction, subjugation until it reaches a point of cultural resistance, which is where the decolonial imaginary begins to appear. Those who get to tell the story and its consequences begin to create a space for different imaginaries to exist. A constellated decolonial imaginary—using Powell et. al.’s lens of constellating—allows for the formulation of resistance because it focuses independently on the constellations within the decolonial imaginary of the individual or individuals and then takes notice of the disbursement of the identities and imaginaries versus trying to only see them as fixed. The reality is that through an unconstellated identity or imaginary, decoloniality can’t function. The notion is that constellating identities and imaginaries exist because of how we allow a decolonial framework to function and provide for the seeing and accepting of “story”.

It hasn’t been until recently that I noticed what these imaginaries have been all along. While I have grappled with the nuance of being a different Latina than some of my other friends. Being Central American and specifically dealing and unpacking the backgrounds and stories my parents carry with them gravitated me towards exploring and
understanding my very own imaginary. This imaginary is both to explore my Central American identity singularly but then also my American identity within my Central American. Even more specifically – I aim to explore the confines of my Salvadoran against my Guatemalan and American identities and vice versa.

Through decolonizing the dominant imaginaries that exist and pertain to potentially more comfortable narratives and experiences, I concluded that being a different Latina makes me unique and enables a more compounded experience as a woman of color. It’s a complex aspect of the theoretical framework that unpacked shows that I know what I am writing about as I live. I do want to make it clear that imaginaries through the lens of constellating identities are also not fixed. My imaginary will look different through the next couple of years as I grapple with a new academic identity and begin to understand the meaning of my identity within specific hierarchical experiences. This means that although I have grown up in an underrepresented and marginalized world, the small moments of inheriting some form of privilege (in the case of my academic identity as a status) my identity will shift. I will have potentially moved up but not necessarily changed other aspects of my identity. This is one of the future complexities of my identity and I feel that as I continue to embrace and understand my identity there will be different ways of viewing it. In part, the way the story is shaped around my identity will change and prove to be the form that gives way to understanding the Central American lived experience.

In acknowledging that these imaginaries exist I will look for how they become decolonized through language. This then leads to describing these various identities and cultures that work to identify how the journey of the Central American immigrant is described. Another framework that I will incorporate is Powell et al.’s notion of constellating identities, which examines identities through a lens that is less fixed than that
of intersectionality but still considers the many ways that positionality, culture, and discourse influence an identity while paying close attention to the communities or individuals’ “story”. This framework allows for understanding the Central American decolonial imaginary to observe the identities inside that are constellating. The lens of constellating is important as it allows for understanding the identities within the Central American imaginary but then takes it a step further to understand how the stories told within minority communities should not be intersected to connect or match with others but allowed to exist within their communal capacities.

In other words, when I share the story of my young mother escaping the civil war in El Salvador, there can be an intersection created between gender and nationality. This means that I acknowledge how my mother is a woman, Latina, and immigrant and my connection to her is that I am also a woman, Latinx, and the daughter of an immigrant. By extension (biologically) I have a connection to my mother, but through “story” it is undeniable that I am not connected to her. The constellating of identities focuses on allowing the story of my mother to exist on its own or, to have meanings specific to her (and my) multiple positionalities. It seems that there is sense made from understanding that a constellation, while it allows for a more dispersed or less fixed notion of the identity, stepping away from the intersection of gender and nationality in the story allows for observing the story organically. The truth is that stories like my mother are going to be messy due to past trauma, recollection of memory (of the event), and understanding the significance of the trauma. While I understand that there is a diversity and propensity of stories and experiences of the Central American diaspora, I look to use the mediums to engage and understand the importance of telling these stories within the academy.

One major and foundational aspect of how constellating is crucial to the uncovering
of my mother’s story is when I consider the way her identity has grown from a child immigrant to an adult who is a permanent resident of the U.S. I believe that the process she’s gone through involves in-between aspects of searching within an identity that can be potentially too fixed and structurally limiting to those trying to understand and bring meaning to stories that constellate from their end. Because of this, I take notice that the emotional and psychological effects of having to potentially find alignments and strict x & y coordinates that may shave away at underlining findings are troubling. For example, through my mother’s recollection of her experiences migrating as a child to the U.S. shame and secrecy were later aspects of the story that became prevalent through my mother’s retelling of her story.

In the next chapter, I will present and discuss the complexity of decolonial imaginaries as it is related to constellated identities when considering how my immigrant parents’ identities are constructed. Moreover, I aim to discuss what my parents’ identities look like in relation to the imaginaries they’ve had to create when coming to the U.S.
Chapter 3: The Central American Diasporic Third Spaces

The Central American diasporic community knows about the experiences that come with being an immigrant or *inmigrante*. It’s not easy. The socio-political implications of being an immigrant in the U.S. at any time in history segregate and alienate many. As a first-generation Central American-American, I have noticed the hardships my parents have endured, the way they’ve navigated oppressive structures.

The definition of oppressed is

*burdened with cruel or unjust impositions or restraints; subject to the burdensome or harsh exercise of authority or power (dictionary.com).*

When I was growing up my parents didn’t dismiss the oppressive powers they were bound by, but at the same time they cued in frameworks and rhetoric of equity to show me and my siblings that our opportunities as Americans and descendants of immigrants were limitless. This always promoted a sense of belonging even though I was always questioning why oppressive structures kept black and brown folxs at bay. In 2014, on a trip to Washington D.C. for a poetry conference, my two friends from undergrad, at the time, struggled to make me understand or to admit I was oppressed. I think that at that time I had come to understand the implications of being oppressed but not fully grasped the effects on me. Really, who sits around and tells the Latinx/Hispanic community that they are oppressed? Really, who tells anyone? I don’t think that my parents ever mentioned the notion of how they felt oppressed or that my siblings and I were oppressed. I remember sitting with my friends during dinner at a local ramen soup restaurant in D.C. as they tried to convince me that my stories were stories of oppression.

Until this day I have always felt that they were very pedantic and bossy about their
goal to make me feel something in relation to admitting I was oppressed. However, I admit that I did come to terms with recognizing that I am oppressed, but it took some time. I realize now that one of them found their identity constellating against mine. I think that we had similar experiences around our families talking and discussing their immigrant experiences, from the foods they cooked to learning a new language and assimilating into the American culture. I see now that this might have been a connecting force and made them feel they could connect to me and my own experiences, but I felt that this connection was farfetched. It felt like they were operating from a place of some or complete privilege. Both of my friends were Asian American and 2nd generation, and I always felt that their 2nd generation lens allowed them to practice a form of oppressive shaming that made it feel like they had privilege big enough to judge me and make me think I was oppressed. I am not entirely sure why they chose to do this or why they felt it was important to have me come to terms with my own positionality. Their sacrifices and experiences were different, and they weren’t fully able to recognize this. Although they did succeed in pushing me to accept aspects of my identity, it took a lot of searching to locate instinctively what part of me was really oppressed.

In summary, this anecdote presents the level of negotiating that happened externally and then what happened internally. It felt like I wanted to scream in protest about what they were saying to me versus what I knew deep down inside was just part of my experience as a first-generation. Deep down inside I was working through understanding the weight of my identity in comparison to others, onto a university and onto my students. Wrestling with who we are in different spheres where oppression is clearly existent is difficult.

After that experience, I let go of those friends. Instantaneously I discovered they wouldn’t substantiate the level of intricate care I needed into understanding my first-
generation identity. The meaning of oppressed was never in my vocabulary until I started college. The mention of it was abrupt and confusing at times.

It’s awkward to think that we have become identified with a word that doesn’t really exist within the community. The rhetoric that I grew up around was one that claimed to be an immigrant as something that should fill you with pride and admiration. The word oppressed doesn’t fit within that perspective. In my experience, the world and word of the oppressed doesn’t exist presumably how others would like it to for the Central American community.

The imaginary that exists within my family is one that acknowledges the struggles that come with being classified as an immigrant. They are real, they are not denied or ignored. Although I denied that oppression existed before, I do recognize that it exists in our daily lives. Acknowledging now that it exists in my daily life doesn’t mean that it takes away from the experiences from before but that by pushing away and not surrendering to the marker of oppression, I have just redefined my definition of what it means to be oppressed. I define oppression in conjunction to racism. They are both entangled together and work to minimize and exploit the identities of many people of color. Oppression, to me, is the language and actions of those that do not seek to listen to or understand the experiences of underrepresented groups and instead lessen the access for underrepresented communities, seeking only to erase their existence and contributions.

My mother migrated to the U.S. at the age of ten and my father when he was 23 years old; both of their experiences migrating are unique not just because of their age, but also because of the reasons they came to the U.S.

**February 2022**: While writing about the importance of this autoethnography, I find that my identity has morphed and changed over time, even through this discovery. The
constellation continues to reform and I am beginning to morph and become someone entirely different, accepting the complexities of having to move through and continuously rebuild my own constellation. And if you really stop to think – the power of dead stars is consumed to reappear as new stars. Consider this – when thinking about privileged identities versus the oppressed stars within my own constellation, I have to consider how communities are perceived in relation to their own identities. Identity is viewed differently in Powell et al.’s concept of constellations, which seek to show how identity markers are not fixed or intersect or cross. Constellations use the power of underrepresented stories from communities to distinguish, comprehend, and accept identities. The power of Powell et al.’s framework of constellating allows us to see stories as interacting in a non-linear mode and furthermore to observe how individuals' identities and stories come to meet. Identities can’t be understood through a single intersection where all the other strands may be expected to meet. Identity just doesn’t work in a linear function, and we have to begin thinking of disbursed identities while some are random and others are structured.

When not using this framework, it can seem that stereotypes, generalizations are created (and can still be created), and they affect the rhetoric that then shapes a specific community. For example, common stereotypes and generalizations in the case of Central American immigrants are that they are not worthy because they come from a war-torn El Salvador during 1980-1992 and are criminals, potentially marking some of these immigrants as criminals that are part of gangs in El Salvador or other parts of Central America. The experiences that the Central American community faces often is not acknowledged because of those stereotypes. These communities to a certain degree conform to the expectations of the American imaginary in fear they will not be accepted. The fear drives them to accept the way others have delineated their status and (lack of)
accessibility to have a voice. Since the rhetoric of immigrants in the U.S. is shaped around colonial powers, immigrants act upon that power and feel like they are not able to push back. Most notably, we can see this through the laws in place that criminalize and treat immigrants like objects versus actual humans. My parents inherited the American imaginary when they first came to the U.S. They inherited the American imaginary by believing that they needed to know English and adapt to the food and culture in order to be accepted into society. The imaginary has changed and become refined as they have adapted more and face assimilation into American culture. In addition, this means that the American dream that my parents came with has changed and morphed over time.

**Summer 2010:** The rhetoric of going to “El Norte” filled with curiosity was and continues to be about the “unknown”. My father put on Gregory Nava’s movie called “El Norte” for me one afternoon in the summer of 2010. I have always been marked by the depth and clarity this movie provided for me about the immigrant experience. While the movie was filmed in 1983, I never forgot the gruesome portrayal of Enrique and Rosa Xuncax, two indigenous siblings migrating to the U.S from Guatemala. More specifically, I remember the moment when Enrique and Rosa go through a sewage pipe on their hands and knees. This was a particular moment in my own father’s story of heading to California from Tijuana that always remains in my mind: my father crawling on all fours – through a dark tunnel, not knowing where the end would be.

This was the only movie I had that allowed me to wonder and challenge the notions of what “El Norte” really meant. I am not sure what hope or expectations are created from the rhetoric of “El Norte” but I know that in this instance my father chose to tell me his story by giving me images that were found in this movie. Up to this day, this movie marks and shapes the rhetoric I have about coming to the U.S. It is vital to see how the existence
of my father’s imaginary contributes to the imaginaries that any immigrants construct for themselves as they attempt to step into the American imaginary and build upon their evolving identities.

Another movie I watched around the time I was about 12 was the movie called Voces Inocentes. This move captured the story of Chava, a young Salvadoran boy who experiences the civil war in El Salvador. The movie captures difficult scenes that reflect the experiences that I remember my mother telling me she experienced right before she left. Chava’s relationship with his Tio Beto and his mother encapsulates so much of the unity and survival that countless children went through during the war in order to not become child soldiers. In the latter part of the story, Chava unfortunately becomes a child soldier. Seeing many of the images in this movie were difficult, but really painted a picture about what my mother may have seen as a child and as a young girl what she escaped.

My mother feels “American” most of the time. This is probably because she came to the U.S. at a young age, but the new spaces she inhabited were primarily immigrant spaces and the people within them spoke Spanish. My father came to the U.S. after leaving his country and living in Mexico for a couple of months. In his time in Mexico, he lived through the deadly 1986 Mexico Earthquake and then left for California. His American imaginary is also made up of his time in Mexico. I always explain to people who ask about my father’s immigration story that he speaks Mexican Spanish more than Guatemalan Spanish. His imaginary is conjoined and observed through the lens of his journey and connection to border countries. Through the continuous adding and breaking away from places, he’s had to cope with the friction and urgency to continuously search for the true meaning of belonging. Belonging for him means something entirely different than for my mother.
When explaining the experience that my mom had when coming to the U.S. at the age of ten, I find myself over-explaining the causes and effects of immigration. At times certain individuals strip the emotional aspect from the story and focus on what logically should be done, but by including the instability that individuals face when migrating and the traumatic and psychological effects that immigrants carry with them for years and years, there can be more emphasis to the story. My mother’s car trunk story is a symbol of an untold narrative about immigrant migration journeys to the U.S. I ask myself constantly does my father’s story contributes to the shame and secrecy that my mother’s story illuminates. For much of my life, my identity, my existence as a first-generation collided and meshed with my mother’s and my father’s.

April 1982-1983: My mother was ten and when she left El Salvador and traveled via foot and in the trunk of a car. She arrived inside the trunk of the sedan my grandmother had contracted through a friend who knew a coyote. It isn’t unusual for the immigrant community to establish a connection with someone who knows a coyote. In most cases, the coyote is white and knows his way around the technicalities of taking immigrants or smuggling them into the U.S. as some would like to interpret the experience. My grandmother sat in the back row of seats, and my aunts – Jancy and Karina both sat in the front with the coyotes. One detail about them sitting in the front that always establishes a racial difference between my mother and my aunts is that my aunts were lighter-skinned, and my mother was morenita. I am not certain my other family members see this difference or are able to capture it, but her brown skin and features are the reality of my mother’s existence out of El Salvador, through Guatemala, and then through Mexico. While it’s not just dreadful that she rode in the trunk of the car for the purposes of hiding her, there is a clear implication as to why and how she was hidden. Because my mother is darker-skinned
than her siblings, she was “hidden” because she couldn’t pass as white.

I also believe that my mother dealt with being hidden from outsiders because my grandmother potentially didn’t want her to be seen by other men. My mother did as she was told and accepted this as a good reason to be hidden. There seem to be elements of being hidden in my mother’s story that didn’t necessarily come out all at the same time. I think her process of understanding and coming up with the steps to combat the trauma she faced at such a young age remains within her now. My mom learned to face situations candidly and without much intensity. Trauma is not something that my mother reacts to. Maybe it’s the process of synthesizing her experience. That must be how she learned to hide her trauma as much as she’s dealt with being hidden and hiding when she was undocumented in the U.S. as a child. My mother uses her laughter to hide the real pain. She’ll usually say, “what do you want me to do, cry?” It must be that my mom either never learned or was blocked from seeking the process to show emotion about what she went through. She uses laughter to move past the fear and pain.

**November 1986:** My father arrived in the U.S. right after having lived in Mexico City for a while. I have always taken into consideration the basis of my father’s immigration story, from where he began to where he ended up. In his narrative, there is also a metaphysical component that can’t be ignored. A year before my father arrived in the U.S he experienced a deadly earthquake in September 1985. I always tell him that the earth was trying to get rid of him, the earth was pushing him out of Mexico. He admits he could have died, but he is always careful about telling me the story of his arrival in the U.S. He says that while he lived in Mexico City, he became friends with another Guatemalan man and maintained his loyalty. I think that this paid off for him. He says that this friend was scared to go and purchase airline tickets because he feared the Mexican airport officials
would find out he was illegally in Mexico. My father at the time had already obtained his Mexican citizenship but still sounded Guatemalan. To purchase the tickets, he faked a Tijuana accent and was able to purchase the tickets without any problem. When the day came that they would fly to Tijuana, my father’s friend was caught by Mexican immigrant officials and was questioned. Luckily, his friend was able to deter the Mexican immigrant officials, and he got on the airplane with my dad. In Tijuana, there was a coyote waiting for them to take them to California. My dad says that his first meal in California was at McDonald's. His first night in California was on the streets. My favorite detail is about what he first drank in California. He had a Sunkist orange soda. My favorite.

When I review the different elements that make up my identity, I consider that some of those lived experiences and identities I have acquired were momentary. This is the same for my parents. The different elements that make up their identities have shape-shifted over time and their identities have never remained static. The momentary existence of my identity when I was four years old versus when I was 25 years old, don’t necessarily exist in the same constellation. The old stars that existed no longer apply to who I am right now even though their power, in the new stars, pave a path to understand other aspects of myself.
My identities have shifted over time.

I haven’t found through yet, are twinkling of who you a brown with a portion of her speaking Salvadoran-English twisted chu chi
because the land that my father left will stay with me no matter and space is between I am always to the handful of shaped into new by the undocumented bodies they are they are legal.

my way all I have found specks think I should be girl tongue white girl English tongue and at times a to tongue behind how much distance us. returning stories stars surrounded of my parents legal,
Decolonial imaginaries are constructed through the disbursement of constellated identities. It is through constellated identities that we can begin to see decolonial imaginaries emerge. Constellated identities allow for decolonial imaginaries to exist because the “structural” aspect of looking at identities as constellating, as in that they are disbursed and not fixed – opens a door to understand the idea of how imaginaries are decolonized and can push back against dominant narratives. As a point of value, the meaning of decolonial imaginary is: “Fusing the words ‘decolonial’ and ‘imaginary’, each term riddled with meaning, I located the decolonial within that which is tangible. Here the imaginary conjures fragmented identities, fragmented realities, that are ‘real’ but a real that is in question” (Pérez, 1999).

I see decolonial imaginaries as existing within different generational circles. There are layers that while they make up my own identity, are also layers that are part of my father and part of my mother. The ones that identify my parents and are part of my identity have remained wedged in between. The decolonial imaginaries that make up my mother and father are not part of my identity. I think it would be different to see the stars within their own constellations emerge and dissipate while emerging with mine. I don’t think that it’s conceivable that their decolonial imaginaries match or look anything like mine. In my perspective, their decolonial imaginaries come from different purposes and lineages that have given way to mine but not necessarily make up mine. Generationally, I don’t think that my identity fits within their own decolonial imaginaries. It is important to realize that generationally there may be connections between the decolonial imaginaries, but it is not possible that my identity fits within theirs. If we think about the generation and origin (as in where they come from) gap between my parents and me it would be an immeasurable difference to capture. For example, parents in general will tell their kids, “you don’t know
how hard we had it”. The reality is that I will never know how hard my parents had it when it came to making through their day to day because of poverty, family circumstances, and really a sense of peace and habits shaped around a stable home life. I think that through the trajectory of my parents' life they have always compared themselves to me and my siblings because of that gap. The gap between an immigrant and their American children.

I strongly believe that while my story is tied to their immigrant stories, their decolonial imaginaries are based on the time, space, and generation they are part of. To understand this complexity a bit more, understanding the physicality of a constellation is important. Imagistically, a decolonial imaginary is not really any specific shape, but for the sake of having a sense of what decolonial imaginaries can look like, I’d like to think that they are in the shape of a circle but have perforations that allow for identities to cycle in and out. They are never static, they are 3D. Decolonial imaginaries, much like constellations, need to be flexible and breathe to work together.
A constellation is perceived to look this way:

Figure 1: An image of constellations

I imagine a constellation to look this way:

Figure 2: My image of a constellation
The differences between these two types of constellation images are that I think more about the physicality and fluidity of the constellations and try to show in Figure 2, how the constellation is rough and not perfect. I think that when we think about constellations in relation to decolonial imaginaries they are not as fixed as the ones we are used to looking at. The circular shaped lines in Figure 2 represent movement, while the straight lines represent the multidimensional and shifting intersections we may find in our own identities.

My mom’s imaginary:

I imagine my mother’s decolonial imaginary to be full of light and trees. Most of her stories and nostalgic memories she has of El Salvador is her life at the top of trees. This is her childhood: swinging from branch to branch and picking fruit. I often think that my
mom dreams in blues and greens and so her imaginary, from my perspective, looks like Figure 3.

My dad’s imaginary:

![Image of a drawing with yellow and black lines]

*Figure 4 My Father’s Decolonial Imaginary*

I imagine my father’s decolonial imaginary to mimic the enclosure of his childhood home, which was yellow. As well, there were tall walls that enclosed him and his family. In the center I can see the gray sewage pipes he crawled through. I think he constantly thinks in these colors or compartments because of the spaces he’s existed in in the past.

The layer that makes up my own experience continues to expand, almost intuitively against mine. These spaces represent the decolonial imaginary that becomes ingrained through the generations and gaps that are created and destroyed. The expansion that comes through the constellation of identities is implemented through the understanding my parent’s experiences through mine generationally. When I look at the different imaginaries that exist between myself, my father, and my mother I see the relationship between “story”.

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The relationship of decolonization and departure from the hold of dominant narratives makes way for freedom and healing. The experiences of my father against my mother’s experiences are similar in status but different in what makes up their stories – their imaginaries are alike but not the same. They are not alike because it would mean they are the same person, but they are not. This shows the precarious nature of how we see and identify different immigrant experiences.

In “Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood Story”, Malea Powell provides an array of stories to look in depth at the stories our bodies tell or don’t tell. In some cases, the bodies that she is speaking of—the Indian bodies—are not seen or taken into consideration. There are several crucial parts within this essay that make me think about the body of my mother being transported above roads and highways in a car trunk to realize that there are many other stories she hasn’t told me. There are many other stories her body hasn’t told her. On a larger scale, there are several stories the bodies of immigrants haven’t completely been unearthed. And as the autoethnographer, I have begun to excavate the stories that while never lost, could be hard to retrieve. Powell states in relation to Victor Villanueva “How do nice people abide by and maintain not a nice thing, like a system in which certain groups are consistently relegated to the bottom of the structure in disproportionate numbers? (Rhetorics is Politics, 1994, p. 332)” (p. 5). She then states that it is important like Beverly Moss’ advice to “take stock of where we have come from, where we are and where we think we are headed – especially before we get there (1993, p. 347)” (p. 5). It is important to understand the reality of my parent’s experience onto my own. This is the way that I understand how to remember where I come from, where I am now and what I need to do next in relation to the patriarchal structures that oppress me and my community.
A lot of my mother’s story has come to fruition because of its constant telling and retelling. It is apparent to me that since the day my mother shared her childhood experiences, I have wrestled and found myself asking questions about representation about the structures that oppress immigrants like my mother, my father, and myself. And in that same thought process, I also question where her story, my father’s story, my story will take us next in relation to how we understand and abide by the structures that created those stories. Much like Powell, the complexities in combining my experiences with my parents is really related to the attempt to find a middle ground within the multiple positionalities that I carry, that my mother carries, and my father carries. This is a lot to carry. The complexity in my case is having to mitigate what shame and secrecy my parents still practice in relation to their status in the U.S.

My hope for the Central American community and where they can be in the future, is to see a decolonial imaginary that allows them to see that the instabilities of their countries don’t create limitations for them in the U.S. This is a rejection of the oppression that pushed them out of their home countries and led them to seek help in the U.S. – another space of oppression. It is almost like a marker of how limited they are not just because of their undocumented status in the U.S., but ideally a mindset imposed by dominant narratives over the Central American mindset. To reach this way of thinking, there needs to be recognition of the stories these people carry, or in the case of my mother and father, the stories they’ve shared or have had to overshare to make reality elevated. Powell refers to the notion of “un-seeing of Indian peoples” in relation to how the “American tale” of all “civilized” life was neutralized to be accepted (forcefully) and so the rhetoric about Indians was formulated around what seemed “civilized”. This is the same for my parents and the Central American community. The oppression and immigrant status marks them and makes
them “uncivilized”.

And in this same vein, the correlation of Powell’s explanation makes me realize that the bodies of Central American immigrants or the diaspora is “un-seen” (p. 2). The reason behind this is really because no one talks about the bodies of migrant bodies in car trunks or sewage pipes because that is not civilized enough. That is not how they should come. When you think about the disposition of bodies that can be deemed civilized or not in relation to how they move – I begin to personally think about how much dignity is stripped from the sacrifices that migrants and their families make to come to this country.

Finally, to start to see my mother’s story in relation to my own story, Powell claims that we must “write ourselves into this frontier story”. In the case of my scholarly work, in embarking on the journey of telling my mother’s story and my father’s story leads me to understand that the ‘fringes of the “the known” to stake out and define a piece of “unoccupied” scholarly territory, that our skill at explicating and analyzing, will become our own scholarly homestead’ (p. 2). The journey of opening the book to say to others that they should embrace the immigrant story is not to search for what is already taken, but to demand recognition for what has not been evident, for what has been un-seen, what has been hidden, what has been shamed.

The relationship between decolonial imaginary and the powers that are present between colonizers and oppressors require those reaching a moment of decolonization to come to terms with their lived experiences. In the case of my mother and father, they have learned to recognize or even at least see their positions as immigrants from their countries as positive aspects – they’ve written into the “frontier story” and new entities in the U.S. The purpose of this section is to enable an understanding of how the individuals that are being colonized are perceived. Through the passing down of this story ephemerally – as in
from my mother’s body to mine – there seems to be a connection that is not always evident. This connection is because the experiences of my mother are my own, but they are not ones that I have gone through specifically on my own.
Third Space

In this space, you are allowed to swim through understanding the implications of third space. The third space is defined in conjunction with the term *borderlands*. At the same time the connection also connotes my own experience within the conjecture that the “borderlands” are spatialized and can be nonexistent. This also means that they are not geographical or have any physical context. (Licona, p. 4).

I welcome the reader of this section to embrace the feeling of not understanding where they belong. This is a space where that experience can exist, while an explanation is presented for the reader to understand the “existence” of this space, I will also offer a representation of this space to bring meaning to my own third space and the images of the third spaces that my parents as immigrants may occupy.

Remember this is not a physical space, this is a space where remnants of your identity exist.

**My third space:**

Since I was in the 4th grade, I remember feeling like I didn’t exist in the same way the other brown girls explained their home lives, language, texture of their hair. For the most part, many of the brown girls in my class were Mexican. All I knew was that I was not Mexican. I was Salvadoran and Guatemalan. My mother had curly hair; her Salvadoran-English code-switching tongue didn’t sound like the other moms’. I struggled internally to see how I was different and at the same time I struggled to understand how I was unique.

I always felt that I was neither here nor there. I was always wedged in between trying to see where I fit in. And slowly I became used to the notion that I didn’t fit anywhere. I couldn’t.

I was trying to fit myself inside a space that didn’t understand how to hold me. As a young girl, my parents embraced their identities, culture and
language but never fastened me into a way of representing that identity, culture, and language. Is this something they should have taught me? I was floating. I was swimming through and trying to understand what my identity could and could not do.

Now that I have come to terms with understanding the third space, I notice that all those years of evaluating myself and finding a way to fit inside a space that I didn’t need to occupy has me exhausted. I can live freely in the third space and don’t necessarily have to exclude myself from moving closer or farther away from where I should exist. I do not have to seclude myself to “one way” of existing.
Espacio Tercero

En este espacio, estas permitido a nadar para entender las implicaciones del tercer espacio. El tercer espacio es definido con el conjunto de tierras fronterizas. Al mismo tiempo la conexión también connota mi experiencia con que la conjetura que las tierras fronterizas son especializadas y pueden ser inexistentes. Esto también quiere decir que no son geográfico o tiene un contexto físico. (Licona, p. 4)

Invito al lector de esta sección que tomen la emoción de no comprender adonde pertenecen. Este es el espacio adonde esa experiencia puede existir, mientras una explicación es presentada para que el lector entienda la existencia de este espacio, yo les ofreceré una definición de este espacio con el fin de traer el significado de mi propio tercer espacio y las imagines de los terceros espacios que mi mama y papa ocupan como inmigrantes.

Hay que recordar que este no es un espacio físico, este es un espacio donde se pueden encontrar restos de tu identidad.

Mi tercer espacio:

Desde el cuarto grado, recuerdo el presentimiento que yo no existía en la misma manera que las otras niñas de piel morena explicaban sus vidas en sus casas, el lenguaje que usan, la textura de sus cabellos. Por lo tanto, muchas de las niñas de piel morena eran mexicanas. Lo único que sabía era que no era mexicana. Yo era salvadoreña y guatemalteca. Mi madre tenía pelo colocho, y su lenguaje era el código mezclado entre el Salvadoreña y guatemalteca. Mi madre tenía pelo colocho, y su lenguaje era el código mezclado entre el Salvadoreña y guatemalteca. Yo luchaba internamente en ver que yo era diferente y a la misma vez luchaba entender como era única.

Siempre sentía que no era de ella ni de aquí. Y siempre estaba en el medio de tratar de ver adonde pertenecía. Y poco a poco me acostumbré a la idea
de que no encajaba en ninguna parte. No pude. Esta tratando de encajarme dentro de un espacio que no sabía como sostenerme. Cuando era niña, mis padres aceptaron sus identidades, culturas e idiomas, pero no me enseñaron como identificarme sola. Sería esto algo que me tuvieron que enseñar? Definitivamente esta flotando. Estaba nadando y tratando de entender lo que mi identidad podría y no podría ser.

Ahora que he llegado a entender el espacio tercero he notado que todos esos años que me evaluaba a mi misma y trate de encontrar una manera de encajar adentro de un espacio que no necesitaba ser parte de me tieno cansada. Puedo vivir libremente en el espacio tercero y no necesariamente tengo que excluirme de moder moverme mas cerca o mas lejos de donde debo existir. No tengo que aislarme una manera de existir.
(third space)
My mother’s third space: My mother’s body

My mother’s third space wedged in between the sides of the sedan car that she traveled. Imagine transporting your body to the U.S. at the age of ten because your mother couldn’t find a way to hide your brown body. So, she hid you at the tops of trees where no one could see your budding breasts and long skirts that hide your legs. I think about the space my mother’s body lives in, the body that as a young girl turned into a woman and carried me. The car transported the body transported the earth transported the life, that transported breath, exhaust fumes that my mother inhaled to keep her breathing going. I don’t think she knew she’d make it. Imagine the country you imagine pushing you out of all you know. I welcome you to think about this as you listen to the car engine signaling a turn.

The white space is the space my mother might have had in the car trunk she traveled in. Her body is represented by the words in the middle of this poem.
His space is always a funnel of words, words never heard

and words never understood.

I think that night he crossed those sewage tunnels, his voice drowns

as the rats tipped-toed next to him, looking for food to eat. My dad always travels through the tunnels between imagining having stayed

in Guatemala and not leaving his mother, not leaving behind 6 biracial siblings he took care of out of love and instinct.

He didn’t know where he’d arrive. GUA → MEX→MARS→CALIFORNIA→DEATH

Maybe to a new country or a new planet? The life of un inmigrante is a never-ending world of not really knowing where you’ll land.

My dad always had the song Mojado by Ricardo Arjona playing loud every Sunday morning. The demise of his Guatemalan life marked by the lyrics in this song:
Empacó un par de camisas, un sombrero
Su vocación de aventurero, seis consejos, siete fotos, mil recuerdos
Empacó sus ganas de quedarse
Su condición de transformarse en el hombre que soñó y no ha logrado
Dijo adiós con una mueca disfrazada de sonrisa
Y le suplicó a su Dios crucificado en la repisa el resguardo de los suyos
Y perforó la frontera como pudo

Growing up I called my dad emo
for putting this song on, now
I realize that he was trying
to tell me something.

On mornings when he goes and picks up a cup of McDonald’s coffee
he’ll call me and tell me about a recent dream he had. A dream of finding
that little boy he remembers being and telling him that he grows up
to be the father of a daughter una Americana who writes poetry.

The purpose of the black rectangles that encase the words are to present the effect of a tunnel. In this case, words are passing through but I imagine that this is some of what my father carries with him.
Chapter 4: Constellating My Mother’s Identity with Mine: Why My Mother Never Learned to Make Pupusas

Pupusas

My mother did not know how to make Salvadoran quesadillas. She had seen her grandmother squeeze pieces of dough firmly against the wooden table as gunshots flew through the humid air and shattered the windows like messenger bids of death—table legs wobbled and pounded against the kitchen cement floor my mother sat on.

Thirty years later I learned how to make pupusas and taught my mother. I remember it something like this: I pressed the dough against my palm, circling the edge with my finger as if molding pottery and then carved out the inside. On my hands, the mush leftover hardened like sea salt after swimming. I took the fillings of loroco con queso, chicharron con frijoles, and then pressed them, closing the ball tightly making sure nothing would seep out. The pores of the pupusa absorbed the oil from the metal plate.

My mother tells me that in El Salvador if she’d learned to make them, she would have died. I roll another circle of dough. I look at her and tell her “I’ll teach you.”

This poem was the first successful poem that I shared during a creative writing workshop. I still remember the depth of vulnerability that I brought into the classroom. It was a strange emotion. I didn’t know how others would perceive me and how they would interpret my work. More so, I knew that the vulnerability had so much weight because it was not just “me” on the page but my mother’s story and her legacy as a survivor of land that pushed her out. After writing this poem, I began to have the thrust and desire to understand what my experiences meant against the backdrop of all other Salvis that fit within the diaspora that shared similar experiences. I felt outed—even othered by the expectations of the normalcy of how first-gen should perceive or “perform” their identity among a common way of enacting and understanding the layers that come with surviving a civil war. For instance, migrating to the United States at a young age and establishing a new identity, learning a new language, and finally having and raising the first generation
in the U.S. while battling with the complex history of a country impacted by the United States colonial power.
The linkage between my mom’s child migration story and multimodality is happenstance. I didn’t necessarily plan to construct her story to then result in it being told in various modes. It has come to exist in different forms and modes out of necessity to heal, to understand, to be shared with different audiences. The journey in experimenting with writing, rewriting, and revisioning this migrant story has led me down a path where I see the story from so many different angles.

I dug more deeply into my mother’s immigrant story and saw more and more of myself. The reality is that her story is my story in some regard, but as well, her story exists among other migration stories. The exposure of these stories changes the rhetoric of Central American migrants. The exploration of this story through multimodality now has a lasting effect on my mother’s immigrant story because the story can’t be seen through one lens or
version. In the past when I have shared the critical artistic work I have created around my mother’s or father’s immigration journeys, there is an empowered feeling that settles in.

Meanwhile, my artistic process through this story has allowed me to explore the story through various genres. My artistic process is bound through poetry, graphic narratives, and an art installation I created that interprets her story. While there are multiple other genres and modalities I have used in other projects, ultimately the exploration I have gone through has become imperative for classroom use. There are still issues that arise when considering the implications of Central American immigration and its representation. In the examples I provide, from my standpoint, I enable the reader to understand my experiences as a 1st generation Central American-American but not necessarily argue that it is the only way to view this group of individuals. As well, the use of graphic narratives in the classroom, for example, begs the question: who is allowing this mode into the classroom and what exposure to the genre should students receive? I believe that by engaging in forms of multimodal alternative discourses, students and educators can honor stories from underrepresented groups. This chapter demonstrates how multimodality, alternative discourses, and constellating identities enable the construction, openness, and representation of complex stories.
the story of my mother is not my story.

I will repeat this because I want to make it evident that I know this, but I do relate to her story as her daughter, and as a teller of her story. Beyond being her daughter, I draw on her experiences to bring awareness to stories that go unnoticed and unheard of. My mother’s story is unique not just because of what happened to her, but more so because it becomes part of a large swath of stories that need to be understood at a deeper level and with more sensitivity. More so, the writing and analysis of her story—and my interactions with it, my retellings, are an attempt to understand the repercussions of the civil war as a rupture in her experiences in El Salvador and were cut short by the violent experiences of her homeland.

In the construction and retelling of my mother’s story, I see connections to the stories of other immigrants, particularly the stories of children who left El Salvador at a
young age during the 1980s. This dissertation, in its autoethnographic process of understanding how the history and discourse of these children may have gone unheard and unnoticed for too long. Through the lens of constellating—considering identity as a three-dimensional, shifting series of relational points—my mother’s story shows that the awareness that is needed by the Central American community for these stories doesn’t happen instantaneously, but occurs through a process of “passing down” stories. While the “passing down” of this story within my family is important, I also believe that the “passing down” of this story to other groups outside of the Central American community is vital when utilizing the lens of constellating. To be clear, the experiences of my mother are profound and produce a large array of stories and truths about her experience as a migrant child. While she has so many stories and truths that derive from her experiences, one story—*the pupusa story*—is a precursor that leads to various other stories of her experiences and identity.

**My mother’s story stands out.**

Individuals that have gone through the traumatic experience of being displaced and having to leave their country of origin don’t consider that they won’t have their cultures wholly. I have noticed that other cultures could invest in learning and passing down customs like family recipes as a way to cultivate their culture. In the case of immigrants, they are not able to take everything that they own, but they do carry the notion of the traditional cuisines of their homelands. Depending on age, if the immigrants are too young, they may not be able to embrace or take in the cultural foods they grew up on. In the case of my mother, she could not learn how to make pupusas from her grandmother because remaining in El Salvador was not a choice. While my mother could have passed down a
lot from her time in El Salvador, this meant that her knowledge of El Salvador was different. Here inheritance is a big component as to how we see cultures being passed down. Instead, her stories are the passing down of culture and uniquely make up my own drive to figure out who I am as a Salvadoreña americana. Many of my Salvadoran and non-Salvadoran friends are surprised when I tell them how I’ve had to either teach my mom how to make certain Central American dishes, or how we’ve learned to make them together.

In this piece, I focus on my mom’s pupusa story and my engagement with this story through the construction of graphic narratives during my undergrad studies to show how I created an alternative discourse from her experience. My mother shared this story with me when I decided to start taking notes of her memories to write as narrative poems. In retrospect, I gathered a constellation of stories and their connection to migrant people. The process of constructing this story was to show the written and emotional process of explaining the reasons why my mother never learned how to make pupusas.

At the time, I had no clue that what I created as a poem and then into a graphic narrative was an alternative story of how we see traditions and customs, in this case the making and cooking of a traditional cultural dish. According to Powell et. al., the evolution of storytelling and the creation of new stories allows for identities to be a constellation where identities find a relationship, converge, and mix together.

Constellation allows for all meaning-making practices and their relationship to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive (Powell, p. 5).

It is important to understand how constellations function when considering the power of stories to represent individuals and a community of people. In my experience, the
story of my mother escaping the civil war in El Salvador and never learning to make pupusas became a new discourse that challenges traditional constructions of identities, traditions, customs, and heritage. I have inherited this story and it informs how I make sense of the cultural practices and overall identity of my family as Americans but connected to their homelands: El Salvador and Guatemala. This story also challenges definitions and common representations of identities such as immigrant, 1st generation, 1.5 generation, or refugee. These alternative meanings and constellating identities are an important component of what my mother’s story means to my particular and social status as a 1st generation Latinx woman in the United States.

While my mother’s experience as a “Salvadoran” in her home country was short-lived, her experiences as a child immigrant are integral to how she has come to understand her identity as a Salvadoran immigrant in the U.S. Within the expanse of constellations, my mother has learned to understand herself in relation to her experiences. Meanwhile, my identity is formed in relation to my mother’s memories, like overlapping and interlocking constellations. The compilation of her identity is determined by the fact that she lived in El Salvador until she was 10 years old. Upon arriving in the U.S. her identity as a Central American was changed. As a child migrant, she had to adapt to a new lifestyle, language, culture, and food.

**When my mother first immigrated to the U.S., she daydreamed about eating red apples.**

My mother’s identity was drastically reassembled because she had to leave one way of life to start another. When I think about the influence that her new life in the U.S. had on her, I think about the stories she tells me about climbing trees and picking fruit. These
stories are created by the sense of nostalgia about the home she had on her grandfather Papa Chico’s farm. She mentions in various stories the size of the fruit that grew on his farm and how she always climbed the trees.

Her fascination with the red apples began because my grandmother, Abuela Vicky told her that in California there were lots of fruits. My grandmother would say no mamita las frutas son mas grandes alla. My grandmother wanted my mom to believe that the fruits in the U.S. were larger and better. That there were big fruit piles. Everything has to be better in California, right? I know my mother imagined massive fruit piles and what the colors of the fruit would be. When I think about this story, I consider the implications of the “American Dream” on my mom as a young child and the narrative that my grandmother had at that point accepted and now used to convince my mom that the U.S. was a better place because of all the fruit they had.

The nostalgia lived on as the struggle to miss fruit from a country that was left behind, but the desire grew to explore the fruit in a new country. I saw this as a battle of displacement. And within my own battle, I also felt that I inherited the nostalgia that my mother discovered at such a young age and (re)produced it in my alternative discourses. I’ve never been to El Salvador or Guatemala. These places don’t exist physically, but ephemerally. The nostalgia has been there, and I am not sure where it comes from. This is where the concept of constellating identities can be imagined again. The ephemeral sense of nostalgia coupled with my collecting of her memories begins to weave together a web of constellations that don’t necessarily look perfect but represents the complexity of my mother’s departure from her home country and the Salvadoran identity alive in me.

This anecdote provides a glimpse of what being Salvadoran looks like from my mother’s memory. She has felt more American than Central American. I think that my
mother has struggled with grasping what it means to be Salvadoran because of the expectations that come with claiming to be part of the culture. While she shares that she was born in El Salvador, I can see the narratives of her stories and life be contested. From the questions about “can you cook pupusas?”, “do you still have family there?”. These questions unintentionally or intentionally begin to contest her identity as Salvadoran and her acceptance within the Salvadoran community. In conjunction, I think about the measure of my mother’s identity as a Salvadoran and how that is then interpreted to my worth or the measure of my Salvadoran identity. Is my own “Central American-American” identity as valuable or authentic as someone whose parents frequent El Salvador or have ties to the culture, land, and any other form of inheritances?

It is vital to consider the importance of how this anecdote can be viewed through the lens of constellating identities and decolonial imaginary. While there are questions proposed that provoke thought about the authenticity of being a 1st generation Central American-American or a Central American immigrant, the constellation of identities allows for comprehending those identities are not fixed but are fluid but are affected by political and social upheavals like civil wars. Identities within a normal environment can’t be contained and fixed, what can make us think that within a country with a civil war that those identities won’t shift or change?

**I am a real Central American-American**

I view my Central American-American identity as valid. Lessening my experience as such because it doesn’t look like someone else’s that maybe has different experiences devalues the way we define someone’s cultural and linguistic worth. Therefore, it is imperative that alternative discourses be used. The power of narratives is connected to the
ability of stories to bring forth shifts and to resist closure or finality. However, narratives often portray privileged groups and dominant stories because privilege has allowed them to reign and be the only experiences that are real. In contrast, alternative discourses speak about lesser-known experiences or experiences that are not accepted, because they are not understood. Because more privileged audiences would not be open to any discourses other than standard ones, the vitality of alternative discourses is important. Specifically, alternative discourses have a power that allows for a multiplicity of identities, experiences, languages, and cultures to come through. For example, in my case alternative discourses have allowed me to share the experience that my mother had in El Salvador at such a young age as a representation of stories that potentially would go unheard of. It centers on the narrative of child migrants, highlighting details about the journeys and decisions their parents/guardians have to make to ensure their safety (even to this day) and allows for my stories as a first gen Central American-American. Alternative discourses also challenge forms of stories and writing; they are hybrid or mixed discourses that aim to disrupt and transgress, (Bizzell, p.7). The point here is that alternative discourses disperse power and shift the way we understand oppressed groups.

For decades, scholars have been studying the benefits of using alternative, hybrid, or mixed forms in the classroom. Canagarajah seeks to understand the complications that arise when alternative discourses are read and studied. He states that “hybridity is a pragmatic response, which seems to accommodate both the voices of the authors and established discourses of the field. In this sense, it eschews the extremes and stakes out a middle path between tradition and change” (p.1). The coupling of tradition and change is intriguing when observing the complexity of alternative discourses. It is important to keep in mind the traditions that alternative discourses come with and the traditions they
Patricia Bizzell identifies alternative discourses as hybrid and mixed discourses that step out of the norm of dominant or standard discourses. Bizzell explains that there is a complication that arises from this consideration and space is limited because not everyone accepts or understands its purpose. Consequently, these discourses are not understood. They are not seen as “typical” or what is expected when we think about discourses. In addition, the tendency to view them as unusual is due to the construction of standard discourses and the advantage that privileged standard discourses have over alternative discourses. Since alternative discourses tend to emerge from underprivileged communities they are silenced. Both Bizzell and Canagarajah acknowledge alternative discourses, or “hybridity” as Canagarajah mentions, through their function as opposed to only the style or form'. Bizzell defines hybridity as a blending between non-academic discourses and traditional academic discourse that form new hybrids. (Bizzell, 11). The focus is that alternative discourse, or as Bizzell explains as the blending of traditional academic discourses while including elements of non-academic discourses does not eliminate the credibility that is present.

As well, there is an argument of comfortability in relation to accessibility, for example, when alternative discourses are written in other languages, those that only read traditional academic discourses can’t find a way to engage with the discourse. When Canagarajah states that hybridity “eschews the extremes and stakes out a middle path between tradition and change,” (p. 1) he is saying that there is a space for those hybrid or alternative discourses to exist. Even further, Canagarajah is claiming that there needs to be space for these narratives to achieve the balance that is required to capture the different lived experiences. Bizzell also expresses that she does not see hybrid forms as just being
comfortable for the underrepresented groups that use them but as allowing for the intellectual work to be done without being confined to traditional discourses. Alternative discourses allow for those that don’t fit within the nomenclature of the standard discourse to step out and embrace the discourse as different, surrounded by what was before and what it can be now.

Due to this recognition, the alternative discourse is held up to the traditions of either oral or written communication but at the same time is open to change. In this combination, we can understand the power that these discourses have. One way of uncovering the notion of power in alternative discourses is when there is the emphasis on the materialized or embodied, which in this case is the story or narrative itself. Power and dominance, while hand in hand, function in the confines of cultural capital when either materialized or embodied aspects of language can’t be a commodity (Bourdieu, p. 242). In other words, the notion or existence of power within alternative discourses doesn’t necessarily assure that the narrative is “protected” but it can exist in its own container. As the form, the power shifts through the recreation of my mother’s story, for example, when the story goes through one genre or form, in my case a poem, then a graphic short, and finally a multimodal installation there is a constant reimagining and reconnection to the worth and force of her experience. As the form shifts and is envisioned, I now realize that my mother’s story gains power and momentum through the new aspects of the story that become visible. We can begin to consider how the story is transformational.

It is only through this shift and process that I have learned as a writer that I can rethink, question, and observe the story of my mother. Through the cultivation of my mother’s story from a lived experience to an oral story and then the “version” I have come to portray through my poetry, graphic narratives, and multimodal installation. Now I
understand that there is power born from different forms of genre and modalities used to retell her story. Over time, her story acquires new layers that morph, and ignite a new and different conversation when it comes to Central American child migrants and 1st generation identities. I am advocating for an active process to uncover these layers of both oral and written alternative discourses.

**I became obsessed.**

When telling my mother’s story, I try to ensure that it is not regarded just as “another immigrant narrative”. I want the story to lead to exploring the historical, societal, and emotional elements of her own experience. As an artist, my process involves considering the journey that she’s had to go through to retrieve this memory. Initially, this all started with the stories my mom would tell me about growing up in El Salvador. The storytelling grew and eventually, my mother started to tell me stories about her migration to the U.S. At the same time, the continuous sharing of stories made me curious about my family history. I now see that there was a lot of uncovering happening for me through this process and in many ways, I was looking to imagine and connect the different constellations that appeared to make sense of my identity.

Through this exploration, I became obsessed with family trees and how this representation of family is also a form of constellating. I wanted to understand the backstories of my family history and I began to explore this through YouTube videos I found about the civil war. I also checked out Salvadoran and Guatemalan dictionaries to be connected to the specific Spanish dialect that my parents spoke and to understand the idioms and *dichos* and phrases they communicate with. During undergrad, I discovered the testimonio of Rufina Amaya – the only sole survivor of the Mozote Massacre in El
Salvador. While I did know about my mom’s stories and her experiences as a child, this propelled me to understand the testimonio that Amaya shared. I researched the massacre, its interviews, readings, and research that portrayed stories of Salvadoran people who had survived the civil war in the ’80s.

Through this research, I explore what else she had to wrestle with when she places this memory in a particular historical, societal, and emotional context. Not only is her telling and passing down of these stories important, but the secrecy involved in guarding and the keeping of immigration stories because of the fear of deportation, criticism from other people who have immigrated, and ultimately shame. I believe that within the Central American immigrant community the discourse around your own migration story is that you mostly share the story within a safe space. Especially if you are undocumented. There is a level of secrecy that exists because shame is the number one emotion that arises because of the “status” of immigrants that are not accepted.

When I wrote the poem titled “Pupusas” I was in UCR’s creative writing undergrad program. I noticed that everyone else was writing provocative poetry about their family experiences and identities. At this point, I joined “Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios”, or U.S.E.U. This collective focused on creating a space for 1st gen or Salvadoran immigrants to have a university community that engages in embracing Salvadoran identities, history, language, culture, etc. Much like in my family life or when we went over to my neighbor’s house — being a “real” Salvi meant having specific qualifications: (1) you had to sound like a “Salvi” or have a Salvadoran accent which attributed to the authenticity of being Salvadoran. (2) Visiting the homeland: if your parents had returned to El Salvador to visit family (3) being able to cook Salvadoran dishes and taking any part in that journey back there or staying connected was a christening of sorts.
This was a common “requirement”. I mean — how could you understand your culture if you’ve never been to El Salvador? The land and its tie to the body were vital. Since my mom’s departure from El Salvador in ‘81, she had never returned. I have never gone back with her to learn of the land she’d grown up in. My fixation on her childhood in E.S. was merely constructed on the memories of a place that looked entirely different and now non-existent.

I wrote the pupusas poem after a conversation with my mother about why she never got to learn how to make pupusas from her grandma Paola — really the poem became a triumphant moment for me. The poem brought to life not just that experience of my mother but the ones that complicated my identity and how I fit into the world of being Central American. This essentially is a new star to my constellation that has existed for a while, but now I am fully aware of it. The tradition of food and passing down recipes is one aspect that allows for interpreting how an individual fits into the larger world of the country they leave behind as immigrants or the construction of your identity as a first-generation. The darker side of my mother’s story is that as a child she never “formally” learned about this aspect of her identity growing up but learned about it through me. This is what I call a passing up of cultural traditions explicitly in juxtaposition to the passing down of culture. The process of “passing down culture” is notably known and expressed as one generation teaching the next about a tradition, receipt, etc. In my case, it has felt that because my mother’s choices were between a new life in another country with a new identity or death in a country with a tumultuous violent history. Through this, the notion of identities constellating is noticeable. More specifically, my identity acquires a “new star” within the constellation. The identification of this “new star” within my constellation allows me to understand that my identity is not fixed but that it moves and that new stars can be born.
through the process of self-discovery. The following poem captures the moment my mother came to terms with the idea that her life in El Salvador was one of no prosperity but death.

A few quarters later, I took a comic book course where we surveyed several graphic novels and graphic narratives. We were assigned to construct our own graphic short. While many were constructing fictionalized stories, I focused on converting my poem into a graphic narrative that visually depicted the story of my mother and why she didn’t learn to make pupusas.

I wanted to turn my poem into a graphic narrative because there is very little visual representation of Salvadoran & Guatemalan identities. While the end goal may be that I am seeking representation, on a personal level I am seeking to establish myself, the story of my mother, and what those stories mean to the larger discourse of Central American experiences. It allowed me to see my mother’s story with a physical emotive lens versus just reading about it. As well as a creative writing major at the time, creating and experimenting with different genres allowed me to dig and dig further into the stories that make up my family and to locate myself within the Central American diaspora to carve out an imaginary for myself and my family lineage.

As I started to write through the different panels, I organized the different parts of my pupusa poem to place the various elements and details I had placed originally in the poem. I wrote the poem as a prose poem (a poem that looks like prose, utilizes elements of prose but also maintains elements of poetry throughout). While there was a timeline in the conception of the different genres, I also had a process I followed to think about how I could transfer the elements of the poem into the graphic narrative. I separated the poem “Pupusas” into chunks then organized it on a storyboard to divide the prose poem into sections based on the number of panels I would include. This organization proved to be
more focused, organized but let me feel less overwhelmed about the integrity and fluidity of the poem versus its existence as a graphic narrative.

This was helpful to visualize and understand how this story could be unpacked and organized. I had never written or drawn a comic before, but I felt that it would all come together. I observed how other published graphic novels had strong narratives and the drawings were not as defined, meanwhile, others were. The crucial elements made up the story. The story of my mother came to life. Even more, I was able to see the importance of this story and my retelling of it in an artistic form. While the poetry was vivid and communicated the point that needed to be made about her story, the graphic narrative took on a completely different message and impact. It also enabled the vision of constellating to take form when it came to the non-traditional aspects of this discourse.

Immediately, when I think about how others interpret El Salvador they’ll say that they either remember the war because they saw it on the news when they were young, or they will explain how their family members escaped the war in some way or another. Either by fleeing El Salvador or by moving to a neighboring country in Central America that was in a better state of affairs. Other friends talk about how their parents took them back with them to El Salvador during the middle of the war several years later. While there are all different instances, anecdotes, and experiences, the bottom line is that the war never ceased to be the marker of what El Salvador stood for at the turn of the century. While El Salvador is marked by its culture, language, socio-political nature, its profile can mostly claim death, trauma, war, displacement, exiles, victims, and refugees.

In the opening panels of my graphic narrative, I locate El Salvador on the map for the reader and reference pupusas — the Salvadoran quesadilla. This is how I remember hearing about this place from a young age. The image I have drawn of my mother is the
one that I imagine in my mind. A girl with puffy black hair, adventurous and knowledgeable of the war in her country.

It is constant that I question the identity of my mother considering the story that this graphic narrative tells. Leon and Rebecca Ginsberg (1989) explain that “Babies and small children, without having stabilized object constancy of people, pets, and things left behind, cannot be “typical” immigrants or refugees like their parents. Because of this “parents may be voluntary or involuntary emigrants, but children are always ‘exiled’: they are not the ones who decide to leave, and they cannot decide to return at will” (p. 125). While this graphic narrative doesn’t necessarily speak to or enable the reader to understand or “see” the “status” of my mother as a refugee, the reader can realize that my mother’s “status” is not under her control. While the graphic narrative is not attempting to establish her status, it did allow me to uncover the “truth” behind my mother’s journey to the U.S. and to understand that my mother’s status is based on trauma and my grandmother’s decision to flee.

When I created the panel with bullets as birds, I thought about a time when my mother and I were walking home from the Northgate supermarket on Pacific Ave & Hill St. in Long Beach, California. Out of nowhere, we heard a gun firing. I remember my mom running quickly and telling me to duck down as we crossed the street and hid behind one of the nearby bushes. I never forget the quick reaction. The reaction that a survivor has to violence. I can’t say that she wasn’t scared, but she was aware of how fast the bullets were coming and what the position of our bodies were. It was interesting to think back and wonder where she learned to react instinctively and naturally to a sound that has no preparedness and comes at you without warning. This memory made me think about how my mother learned how to experience violence and dodge bullets at a young age. While
my experience with gun violence has been minimal or none — the image of my mother dodging bullets under the ledge of a window has never left me. The importance of creating and visualizing this panel was important. So many times, the violence and trauma that children go through goes unnoticed and it can be interpreted as an embellished version of what happened. In the end, it doesn’t matter because it has come to shape the way I see and understand the world around me. Her memories and her experiences of bullets as birds will stick with me.

**Teaching Alternative Discourses, Making Space for Constellations**

The use of poetry and graphic narratives helped me to unpack and understand my mother’s story and, therefore, aspects of my identity. When I created this graphic narrative, I wasn’t entirely sure of its impact. In addition, I had never really worked on a visual-text project. Apart from writing poetry, I had mostly read non-fiction, poetry, and picture books growing up. Creating a graphic narrative allowed me to go through a journey of growth and curiosity towards storytelling. While it can be seen as an unconventional way to read and engage with analytical perspectives, this form allowed me to understand and communicate differences in culture, identity, race, and language differences. Because of these opportunities, I ask my students to create a graphic narrative of their own.

Students embarked on their own writing and drawing experiences to create their own graphic narratives. First, I ask them to read through and understand the major components of *Understanding Comics* by St. McCloud, and then they further their experience with drawing certain shapes to practice if they’ve never drawn before. In groups, students also discuss how they will plan out their graphic narrative by exploring the panel structures that exist in the texts we have read.
Teaching students to use imagery and narrative structure to help their audience have an embodied reaction felt familiar to me from my MFA background that utilizes the notion of “show not tell”. For example, when going through the process of choosing the next genre to represent the poem “Pupusas” I considered thinking about what its representation was doing in the poetic form. While I was able to explain actions through verbs and give a narrative that is moving from one image to the next, the graphic narrative or comic makes descriptive images into actual drawn images. The transfer between poem and graphic narrative bridges the alphabetic or textual communication into an imagistic value that then translates the information to create a duality between text and image. Like Kress mentions, the mode function in the graphic narrative is offset by the reader’s interaction with the story. It can also be interpreted in the way that students create analysis in a poem. The analysis is never the same for everyone, but there can be some commonalities. The same process occurs with the mode of a graphic narrative, but there is more to analyze. This scholarship is important because it lays out the fact that multimodality will never be a fixed subject. And at the same time, readers can begin to understand that stories and experiences of others as not linear or that it straightforwardly carries meaning. I think therefore multimodality, graphic novels, comics, and alternative discourses come together in such a profound way where written, visual, and oral communication are getting closer and closer to being as unmediated as possible by the creators of the information. In other words, literacy, and multimodality function together to show that language, writing, and communication are continuously in flux.

The graphic narrative is an alternative discourse that captures a lived event that may go unnoticed. While the form isn’t often used to capture stories about refugees and exiles during the war, it allowed me to process my mother’s experience through retelling her
stories. In the classroom, the use of graphic narratives that involve alternative discourses that are personal narratives allows for critical statements about language, race, or identity. In addition to being an alternative discourse, graphic narratives may also benefit students as, according to Andrew Bourelle, they can support student understandings of how multimodality functions. He states that instructors can use a genre-based approach to help students explore graphic novels as rhetorical texts and that the multimodal conventions of graphic narratives change the way stories are processed. The use of graphic narratives in the classroom is an important key component when teaching multimodality.

When designing my English expository writing course on graphic narratives, I thought about my own response to being exposed to graphic novels and how much more of a critical “visual reader” I became. This was not a concept I was aware of or one that was presented to me as an important contribution to my literacy as a reader and writer. So, when I designed this course, I thought about how students should be introduced to the “reading” of graphic novels, comics, and graphic narratives. I also wanted to introduce these alternative discourses so that there is more acceptance of certain stories and identities. While students would potentially come in with their perspectives and ideas about what this genre contains and its definition, at the end of the day I treated our engagement and learning about graphic novels as an experiment. This model of a classroom allowed for students to have freedom when it came to questioning the materials they were reading and how to also question how reading graphic novels can be seen to enhance literacy.

In the process of the experiment, students begin to question the way they should read a graphic novel. I think that this is why first-time students are hesitant to even consider opening the graphic novel they are reading. I know that for the first time reading the graphic novel “Black Hole” by Charles Burns was difficult for me. First, because I had never read
a graphic novel before and secondly, the nature of this graphic novel connected the reader to consider questioning how we view, discuss, and interpret our sexuality and others. From my own experience, I instruct students to simply open the graphic novel to any page and key into how the panels or boxes are flowing. Questions like: What do the panels provide as far as a narrative? Are they easy to follow? Are they difficult to read through? Do you find yourself moving to other panels even though they are on the other page? A lot of the questions and discoveries that students have from the get-go is that they are challenged when it comes to the way they should read or “comprehend” the graphic novel structure. I share with them that graphic novels are not like the typical novel that they are used to reading. Graphic novels allow for a story to be told in a much more unconventional model and so the story is affected by that model. More so, this is how students become exposed to the various aspects of alternative discourses. While we can consider the importance of alternative discourses at the level of what those discourses are portraying through their stories, it is also important to think about the genre of graphic novels, comics, and graphic narratives as having an alternative form of reading. This plays into how students are exposed to graphic novels and how they read them. The key component of graphic novels and alternative discourses is that there is no mastery needed. Students do not need to come in with any or a complete understanding of how to read, create, and discuss them. The genre allows for not a variety of analysis but also puts into question how others define what reading should look like and sound like.

The juxtaposition between the images and text within graphic novels, comics, or graphic narratives is important to discuss and discern. Discussing the importance of text in graphic novels is vital as to how it interacts with the images. I typically call graphic novels, comics, or graphic narratives “visual readings” because I think it sets off readers to think
about the text involved and then also the visuals that they will have to interpret. For example, “Fun Home” by Alison Bechdel is a well-known graphic novel that I have also used in the classroom. This graphic novel is told in the first person by Alison Bechdel, and it presents themes about family life, daughterhood, sexuality, and suicide. I enjoy and look forward to breaking down this graphic novel with students because both the visual and textual narratives that are offered as part of the storytelling move readers to consider the importance and vitality of the story. When I first read this graphic novel, I was able to gather a different experience from Bechdel about sexuality that I potentially don’t often hear. In class, students think about the emotional component that this graphic novel elicits when it comes to talking about LGBTQ+ people and communities. The experimentation that readers go through when reading this graphic novel constructs a constellating of identities in that readers are formulating their connections to the experiences that Bechdel openly shares.

Through the reading of “Fun Home” as an alternative discourse about suicide, daughterhood, sexuality, and secrecy, these themes, or aspects of Bechdel’s identity are not provided to the reader in a linear construction. They come through the narrative of the story and in many ways are presented as problems that the reader has to process as much as the storyteller. The notion of constellating identities appears as a form of experimentation when it comes to identifying Bechdel’s identity and other topics. As well, as a reader, there is no guarantee that you will find a connection to the identities described or to the topics and so therefore the dispersing or constellating of identities is vital to not see identity as a mold. Unlike intersectionality, constellating identities allows for a story to be analyzed completely away from a linear or fixed manner. With constellating identities, stories can be analyzed in a messy, humanistic manner that may leave the reader with more
questions than answers. This is an important aspect of the process of reading and writing graphic novels that tackle topics about identity.

I think this text is pivotal for students who are learning to understand the graphic novel reading experience. At the same time, I felt that as an instructor while I had read the material before, I was learning how to teach material through re-reading. This is the magic and excitement of graphic novel reading. It is never just a one-sided perspective or learning process. Through these preliminary steps, it is important to explore and be open-minded about how graphic novels could reshape the definition and models we have of an English composition course. For example, another scholar, Daniel Jacobs, emphasizes that by bringing graphic novels into the classroom, there is an improvement in literacy rates. More so, graphic novels allow for the type of challenge in which students learn to be better “readers” and more specifically “visual readers”. I think this statement reigns true, but I would also like to emphasize that while this type of reading is enriching, different, and challenging, these readings are also valuable at the level of seeing the experiences of others more tangibly.

I found that students were eager to understand the major underpinnings of how others tell stories about their lived experiences that are closely related to topics about identity, language, and race. In this course, I focus on developing depth when it comes to the readings students coupled with, analytical writing and thinking and presentations students create. While the course is an exploration of the identities surveyed in the narratives, they “visually read” I specifically focus on making students understand the value of understanding and bringing value to others’ experiences. While students have their journeys and discover a wider array of messages, symbolisms, and key components in the works they read, I wonder if this is the first time, they are facing vulnerability as students
in a classroom. The various experiences that students bring at the individual level also means they have certain expectations about their experience reading and creative graphic narratives and arrive to a point of being surprised by what they learn and create. Ashley King brings emphasis to the process students go through when reading and creating their own graphic narratives when she speaks about her experience assigning a project she calls auto-ethnographic narrative project (6). She quotes Savage who says “a focus on diasporic experiences, for example, recognizes the importance of those experiences to identity creation and student lives in general. Providing spaces that position [students] to think critically about the politics of representation, power, knowledge, and the influence of various ideologies” (Savage, 2008, p. 65). In addition, King emphasizes if education is a way of introducing young people to new ways of seeing, hearing, and understanding the world (van der Veen, p. 2012) then it follows that different modes of communication must be used to reach learners and engage them in this transformational process. This is especially true for students from minority culture homeworlds [who] must make a transition to the dominant culture of the school world, with the language being one of the barriers.

Considering the features of graphic novels, particularly the parameters of the graphic novel and blending visual and verbal information, leads to a focus on the importance of semiotic systems. Kress uses linguistic theory and semiotics to look at the modes of speech in writing to understand multimodality. Kress argues that multimodal resources provide users of the resource with the ability to reshape the modes they are working with (Kress, 2013). Kress questions how a mode is co-present in a text and then through the reading of that mode there is a reaction from the reader. This is key when considering the semiotics that occurs within multiple modes of a graphic novel. One specific meaning has to be understood to see how the modes are interpreted in their first rendition and then how they change over time. Kress specifically questions how a mode is
co-present in a text and then how the reading of that mode will be affected. From this view of literacy and multimodality, Kress is focused more on the process of signaling how a mode functions or doesn’t function when the reader is interacting with it. This is a pivotal component of graphic novel reading in its relationship to visually reading, being receptive to emotions as images and shifting the reception we have with text to text and images.

The inclusion of alternative discourses and more specifically the use of constellating identities establishes an acceptance towards discourses that repeatedly go unnoticed. In my case, acknowledging that the merging of my mother’s memories of El Salvador, her journey to the U.S. as a child migrant via a poem and then a graphic novel has shaped and helped to dismantle previous misconceptions of migrant trauma or the silence that comes with what they undergo. This piece should shed light on the growing narratives of 1st gen experiences and social statuses in this country. Shedding light on the complexity of 1st gen identities and furthermore the recent stories of Central American immigrants’ wave from the 80’s through a growing and evolving lens. More crucially, the reality that we have a lot of narratives to learn from and accept.
Chapter 5: Reconstructing My Mother’s Child Migration Car Trunk Story through Multimodal Storytelling

The following poem gives voice to my perspective on my mom’s experience as she went through multiple border lines to get to her destination.

*Untitled*

My mother still recalls the sound of tires pressed on road, the whiff of exhaust fumes drifting in through the small hole that was made for her to

*breathe-in*  
*and*  
*breathe-out.*

Every time that she remembers this story something changes.

When she first told me this story, she only describes  
*[a body in trunk]*  
curled in the back pocket.

She told me the story again:  
she smiles and laughs.  
“*There is nothing funny*”, I say.  
*Imaginar el cuerpo de una niña encogido en el cajon de un carro* esperando la llegada al Norte.

She told me the story again a couple of years ago, but now she’s gotten use to that ten-year-old body that traveled  
in the trunk of a car  
to arrive to California.  
She describes the smell of the earth like *bien empapada*  
and when she described it to me last week,  
now the story is forty-one years old,
now the smell of the earth
is perdida.

she tells me: *Como quisiera llegar de nuevo
a los campos donde encontraba
agua el los rincones
de la tierra*

Something happens to my mother when
She longs for the soil
of her country.
The earth that was bien empadada
but now her body has traveled away,
wedged between new ground
and old times. That land that could locate her,
with no idea of border
*la tierra que ahora es nostalgia.*

The construction of the car trunk came out of a course I took an independent study
for with Professor Mia Sosa-Provencio. The course was focused on Latin American
testimonio and its crucial role in giving voice to first-person narratives of struggle and
resilience while also paying close attention to ongoing oppression. The course focused on
testimonios of Latin American females front and center and other marginalized silenced
people(s) to uncover the sense of consciousness they gather through their experiences and
the agency they gain (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, Flores Carmona, 2012; Diaz Soto,
Cervantes-Soon, Villarreal, Campos, 2009; Menchu; 1984; Sosa-Provencio, 2018).

The notion of testimonio and its use of it allowed me to explore personal narratives
around my own parents’ experiences in Central America. For the longest time I explored
the tenants of testimonio in order to understand how to tell the story of my mother’s
experience fleeing the civil war in El Salvador and my father’s own immigrant experience.
In this exploration, I discovered that testimonio in its own right was a genre that is overtly
overlooked and not given the space and importance that it deserves – especially around
Latin American experiences and narratives. Through my time in this independent study with Mia, I began to see more and more of my mother’s experience traveling in the trunk of the coyote’s car was really a testimonio. It’s the tie to understanding how my mother’s body moved between borders enabled me to come to terms with understanding the embodied impact my mother’s story had on my own life as a first-generation. While we focused on various readings throughout the semester, the final of this course was to focus on how I can tell my mother’s story by creating a multimodal project. While I had learned how to use multimodality as a pedagogical tool in my Rhetoric and Writing composition pedagogy courses, I learned to couple the ideas I had pedagogically to utilize them in a creative way. Even more deeply, the idea would be to use multimodality as a form of resistance and to decolonize dominant narratives that haven’t allowed there to be an emphasis on stories like my mother’s that have been silenced meanwhile drowned out by shame and secrecy.

I still remember when Mia looked at me and asked me – “so what project do you have in mind? Remember you want it to be something physical something tangible.” The whole day I had been thinking about an idea and I told her “I’ve been thinking about recreating a car trunk – like a physical reconstruction of the way I imagine the trunk my mother traveled in. Morbid as it sounds, I want it to be “open casket”. To imply the death of my mother’s existence in El Salvador and her new life in the U.S.” I continued to explain to her what the trunk space itself would include like clothes that represented the ones my mother wore and these jelly sandals that she remembers wearing throughout her childhood in El Salvador. Through this conversation, Mia and I went to work to figure out who would
help with the construction of the car trunk. After much trial and error, Mia was able to put me in touch with a welding course at Rio Grande High School where two high school students (see Figure 7 below) constructed the car trunk from scratch.

![Figure 7: Rio Grande Welding Workshop students](image)

The other elements I included came together overtime and presented themselves as I began to think about how to “retell” my mother’s immigration story. The conception of this idea came from a reading “What are Literacy Tools and How Can We Use Them? Moving Legacies into the 21st Century” that comes from a text called *Literacy Tools in the Classroom* by Richard Beach, Gerald Campano, Brian Edminston, and Melissa Borgmann. This was a predominant text in the independent study with Mia and I felt that through this particular reading, mentioned above I learned to really understand the notion of literacy in relation to the body. In the section that I read, I read a story about a young Quecha migrant girl named Maribel who is crossing the border and from that experience, she gained a “literacy” from crossing the border. I have never seen my mother’s experience as a form of literacy – more specifically a literacy of survival. Beach et. al. emphasizes the importance and value of seeing Maribel’s literacy as a form of literacy of survival in order to understand how “reading” and “writing” are not just the primordial aspects of being literate. Beach et. al. states
it is in the portion of the migration that may be attributed to the agency where we can begin to understand Maribel’s border crossings as a complex and studied literate negotiation: or build of Heath, a performative high-risk literacy event. In Heath’s (1983) well-known formulation, a literacy event is defined as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (p. 12).

Finally in this section, which couples really well with the notion of how we perceive literacy events, Beach et. al. state that Maribel’s literacy event of the border crossing is most likely high-risk “because it occurred within conditions of stark power asymmetry. Several of the border patrol agents at previous crossings were cruel, and there were severe consequences if this one did not go well, including possible imprisonment, and deportation to a life of constant economic struggle, if not abject poverty” (p. 13). In other words, while Maribel is well aware of the aspects of her migration journey she has to negotiate and assimilate to, it isn’t enough to not notice that her border crossing shows her “literate agency”. The connections between this particular anecdote and my mother’s experience correlated so well and made me think about the aspects of her journey that were also a “literacy event” and highly risky. I found a lot of comfort and regard in how Beach et. al. explained and brought emphasis to the ways we can view literacy and survival together.

While I had pinned down an idea for how I wanted to recreate my mother’s story, I also wanted to make sure to understand that I was retelling her story and through the process of storytelling I wouldn’t necessarily arrive at a complete replica of the story and nor would I have all the correct aspects of the story. Explaining my mother’s story through the recreation of the car trunk was tricky in the sculpting of the project but then also the emotional toll it would have on my own storytelling but then also my mother’s acceptance towards retelling a story she had not healed from. In order to bring justice to her story, I
wanted to make sure to utilize the tenants of multimodality in order to give participants the experience I had in learning about my culture, heritage, and the history of my mother’s country.

In order to do this, I had to meticulously think about what I wanted the car trunk to “carry” apart from the clothing and elements that she carried. As I mentioned before, the car trunk included clothing inside that I felt was representative of my mother’s clothes that she wore at the age of ten. I included a gray cotton dress and a tan light sweater. As well, I included the black jelly sandals. In addition, I made sure to include a Slip Lock bag with money inside (see Figure 8 below). My mom emphasizes that my grandmother sewed money in the plastic baggies into their clothes, so if any of them were split up they could use that money to get help or eat. This was an emblematic moment in my mother’s details because of how much thought and emotion into the possibilities that my mom and aunts were to go through. I know that this is definitely a big detail in the “literacy event” that in itself has so much weight and significance. The next detail that I put into the car trunk is a recent development in my mom’s car trunk migration story. I don’t think I have thought about this detail with enough careful attention or asked enough questions to really take into consideration all the meanings behind it.
During the summer of 2018, my mother was visiting me in Albuquerque and among many of the things we discussed, one detail that appeared was how my grandmother instructed my mom to take sleeping pills during the time my mother was in the car trunk. All I can say is that this particular detail really elevated and brought so much darkness to my mom’s experience inside of that car trunk. The bit that my mom shared illustrated how she was not able to stay still in the car trunk because of how small the compartment was. If you recall, my mom was breathing through a small hole and so the chaos and no comfortability were unimaginable. When I heard her share this part of the detail the first image that popped up for me was a lifeless body. One that didn’t have much say in what she could or could not do. Obviously, when my mom was awake, she had more agency, but when my grandmother asked my mom to take those pills, I can tell that my mom still lives with the fear of my grandmother asking her about it (see Figure 8 above). The look in her eyes is really one where she questions how she made it through. Think about it: your mom asking you to take sleeping pills so you can cross the border without making noise, without dealing with the discomfort? I immediately think about the repercussions of my
mother taking that sleeping pill – what if she was raped? What if she never woke up and died? I don’t really have much to add other than it’s unimaginable. It’s inconceivable to me. There is so much emotion I still haven’t explored in just this one detail, and I know that my mother took a brave step forward in shedding light on a detail that she has kept and now is out in the open.

Apart from the physical materials in the car trunk that bring emphasis to the body, I had to consider how participants who viewed the installation could interact with the sculpture. In order to do this, I had to consider the technological implications of the installation and its power when connecting and making participants part of the experience. The car trunk included QR codes that were on the outer aspect of the car trunk (see Figure 9 below). The functionality of the QR codes was to ensure that participants could take part in the different forms of media I had integrated representing my learned history of El Salvador and also, its implications on my identity. The media included uploaded YouTube videos of war footage in El Salvador with different news reporters during the time. As well, I included music, more specifically cumbias streaming from Spotify representing music that I grew up listening to like Sonora Dinamita’s *Que Nadie Sepa de mi Sufrir*, El Viejo Del Sombrerón, La Parabólica. The choice in including music is to pay tribute to the music that my mother taught me to dance to – small remnants of the country she left behind and what she was still able to keep within her culture because of my grandfather who played the accordion and danced frequently. In addition, I also included poetry written by me and other poets that I have come to admire and regard as the holders of all things Salvadoran. Some of those poets are Javier Zamora, Roque Dalton, Claribel Alegría, William Archilla, Manlio Argueta, and Jose B. Gonzalez. Poetry has been the bedrock of this project and
allowed for so many stories that changed and materialized the experiences my mother had and also the ones I’ve experienced through her.
Through the culmination of all these details, I think that the car trunk project came together in a powerful way to give an emotional experience. As mentioned before, in thinking about the embodied experience that my mother went through in the car trunk, there are elements in thinking about her body that strike me and left an ephemeral reaction. I return to the connection that my mother’s story has a parallel to my own experience as a first-generation brown Latina. I met my mother’s brown girl within the construction and binding of our constellating identities. I remember one night, my mother and I sat outside on the front steps of my childhood home in Long Beach. The moon bore a lot of the silence between us. I think it was summer because we had been doing this nightly regimen of sitting outside on the front steps to cool off during the summer days. On this night, my mother told me a story about her experiences sitting out on the front porch with her Papa Chico. I remember distinctively that she remarked on the fact that she didn’t imagine her life the way it panned out. Both as a child coming to the U.S. and now as a woman, as a mother, and as an immigrant. I think back to this moment with her and our conversation not because of what was said, but because of what wasn’t said.

My mother lives in me through the rizos or colochos we share. The fearless nature she passed down to me, makes me see a challenge as a simple task. *It must get done* is usually what I’ll whisper to myself. When I think about the brown girl, I inherited, I see the tallest trees and how my mother never feared falling from them. She probably almost did, but instead, she hung out with some of those fruits whose bellies floated above the earth. Her body inside or beside nature, feeling, smelling, and molding herself into the land.

As a little brown girl, climbing, running, imagining my body pressed against wet earth has brought me closer to the land that my mother describes. When my mother shares
her childhood stories with me, I realize the depth of survival instinct and emotional negotiation my mother had to learn at such a young age. That survival had positive and negative repercussions. As a young mother, she saw my defeat as a weakness, I only saw it for what it was: defeat. I’ve learned the underpinnings of her survival method, a literacy that she passed on to me. I have learned to accept and negotiate this about myself. A way to read the logical and the emotional for my status in the world. I inherited the ability to use words to find a way out of feeling defeated by dominant discourses that I should be a housewife, bear children, or stay silent when patriarchal forces present themselves. My mother sometimes tells me, with a look of realization on her face trying to convince me that the present challenge is not really a big deal: “No vine desde El Salvador en el baúl de ese carro para sufrir o para que suframos”. My mom sees her childhood body in that car trunk, not as lost time, but the time that was devoted to the ultimate sacrifice for a future, she didn’t know would look the way it does.

There is a transcendence that happens when considering the time and way my mother has learned to vacate the last memory, she has of being inside that car trunk. I try not to ask my mother about this moment because it’s evident she lives in the fear of enclosed spaces – when she visits me in Albuquerque, she takes the train. When we ride in elevators, I can see her leave the conversation we are having or even leave the space altogether. I feel that in moments of trigger she returns to that moment and honestly, I don’t think she ever saw it as a trauma. Her agility and will to move past those moments remind me of what Cherrie Moraga says about memory. She writes, “I only collect broken shards of memory and try to shape a bowl that can hold the full promise of my want” (p.85). I think through much of my mother’s experience growing up with the memories of her
immigration journey forced her to prove herself equipped enough to surpass any sort of trauma. It’s troubling quite frankly, to be cemented between the fatality of having to prove yourself to the world over and over because there can’t be anything more painful, but then also having to admit that what you have been through is not normal. I think this is where my inclusion is not as an autoethnographer but ideally as my mother’s daughter. Cherrie Moraga refers to this as ancient knowing, the idea that we carry thoughts, ideas, and truths from our ancestors, but we fear turning out just like them. She writes:

The next day he will ask me as if intuiting my thoughts, “Is life a dream?” I pause before responding. He quickly inserts, “Some people say we are dreaming—don’t tell me ‘Yes.’” I remember fearing the same as a child, teetering on the precipice of my teen years as he does now, yes, yes, yes, it is a dream we walk, son. This is what I say inside. Aloud, I give him what he wants. I say we dream at night truths that teach us for our waking life. (And this is so, but only half-so). I do not tell him that last night I walked down to the riverbank with him and knew us so clearly dreaming. Dreaming, remembering. We have been here before. A leaf, a trout, a quail. Woman. Indígena. We had been here before. These visions, primordial ways of knowing, are all of ours since forever: those sudden moments of consciousness that remind us that our time is short here on this planet and that our precious “I” can so easily dissolve into the ancient original world around us—the redwood forest, the darkening sky, the silencing of birds for the night (p. 79-80).

I don’t think there is any way that my mother can escape this, but I’m sure that she tries to figure out a way to erase and make the memory as “light” as possible. My mother has never shown remorse for what she experienced in the past. Her expression has been humored and in disbelief, as she told the story out loud. I wanted to express worry and concern for the experiences she had at such a young age, but my mother didn’t necessarily make space for this or accept it wholly. It has felt that when my mom shares her immigration story, she not only returns to the moments she can recall but ideally must return to the moments of survival. While my mother left under the guise of the civil war and the implications of the war made living in San Salvador unbearable, my mother was also dealing with an abusive
alcoholic father. In the stories my mother shares she expresses how yes, the war created much of the violence and intensity while growing up, but also the instability that her father’s lifestyle created. My mom tells me in moments of reflection that the war worked itself in her favor because either the war or her father would have killed her. The entanglement between the war and my mother’s experience created an emotional environment for my mother in which she had to understand more fully how to verbalize her experience.

For more than a hundred miles, her body curled itself inside the trunk and only a small peephole on the opposite side of the exhaust adjacent to her mouth allowed her to breathe. The image of that hole remains with me. There is no way that image can’t exist. At the time that I learned this story, it became the image and representation of her migration story. The way her body laid inside the car trunk haunts the way I perceive a young girl’s body. I almost dare to say that the mold of the car trunk, while it was uncomfortable, was in the mold of her body. My mother arrived at the border between California and Tijuana via car.

My mother’s decolonial imaginary as well set forward a collective knowledge that there should be physical embodiment to the healing that occurs. In her case the healing did not occur immediately – after her arrival in the U.S. has lived on with her and passed down. When does healing happen this way? I am not sure if my mother’s healing happened instantaneously or through avoidance, she’s let become a way of life. I’d like to think that over the course of time, unknowingly, my mother humbly collects wisdom from the experiences she has been through. While she may not acknowledge it completely or
understand that her experience has all along been of a brown girl, there is ultimately the
generational battle as a brown girl that I have inherited.

What has been the secrecy and shame that she has felt? Why didn’t that get
transferred over to me? Is it because she never really spoke to anyone about this experience
and now, I am the one who must understand and bring value to it? I am trying to fit the
stories into a decolonial lens that provokes the understanding that through my generational
lens I have come to carry her story and express how keeping it a secret, shaming, judging,
or not acknowledging the realities of so many other children immigrants destroy their own
emotional and psychological healing that is required for an alternative story to come from
children like my mother. I think that as my mother grew up, became a mother, she
embarked on the path of understanding that her story was no longer hers, but also mine.

My mother’s decolonial imaginary is constructed based on my grandmother
deciding to leave El Salvador. It is almost at the hands of my grandmother that the decision
is made. How has my mother learned to “decolonize” her existence? At the age of ten, once
her body moved between borders, she began to decolonize her identity and slowly became
more and more aware of what existed in the U.S. while unaware of her new American
identity and battling the existence of her Salvadoran identity – almost like clothes she’s
pulled off herself. At that age, she barely knew the identity of her body. How can a young
girl at this age understand the repercussions of her skin? Of the color of her skin?
Opening to see an eye
quickly to the birth of land
like hips that shake
a third-floor studio apartment
throng between the sway
warmth of my grandmother
night tangled in a red blanket
to think
this is what is not felt
whispers move
the land shakes

Bare feet splintered
cracked skin
eat words for us
replant them like weeds
with a fist, hands cupped
bound with closure
protect: mothers do this

If breath is held
death arrives
if it is strong
the inhale of tremors
no exhale exists
only bubbles do
from above the door
pushed against force
my grandmother pressed her hands
against white sheets
above her swayed
the chandelier, the light

Like a womb
blanket swoop
an orange-red
a body inside
mother cradle swoon
an up-down rattle
off to side to side to side
by the force and slurp
the door is eaten

My mother’s memory at ten years old is wrapped inside this unforgettable journey.
I think that in the case of my mother’s immigration story because she was young and has
very little to no recollection of what happened, the imaginary is mixed in with the nostalgia
of the country she was born in and muddled by the experience she endured when coming
to the U.S. at the age of 10. Her identity constellated against the narrative of a country that
disposed of bodies so unusual, carnage is really the word. My mother’s identity was
constellated at the mercy of the rhetoric of child migrants in the 80s. What does this mean
for my own identity? I can say I am a first-generation of Salvadoran and Guatemalan
descent, but realistically, my own identity is wrapped up with my American identity. How
can I peek at the identity that she unboxed and boxed up to understand her imaginary?

The identities of immigrants are not only colonized in the U.S. but also become
colonized within the third space that exists along the border. My mother’s experience of
decolonization started when she wedged her body inside the car trunk, even then – the
notion of her survival instinct became a new tool to exist within the collision of the place
she was from and the new space she had to inhabit. I imagine that my grandmother didn’t
know what to tell my mother at this moment - probably only told her to inhale and exhale.
What else would you tell your daughter? Breathe, mija, chamaca del ollo. She’s taught her
to learn the survival that comes from within – animal instinct wrapped in the absence of
your mother, your parent who protects you.

To learn how to survive on your own is to create an imaginary from a young age
that you don’t belong in the country your mother’s tongue speaks in. The acknowledgment
of the Mestiza/o body, through the embodiment of its generational lived experiences,
acquires the skill to defy and ultimately heal a colonizing curriculum of “illegal histories,
rape, murder, slavery, bad pronunciation of names, of streets, rivers, towns, the loss of our
names entirely, the internalized tendencies to think poorly of ourselves, conflicted bodies,
bad blood & wounded ghosts” (Pendleton Jiménez, 2006, p. 22). Through the concentration
on the Mestiza/o body, I can see my mother’s body as a labyrinth in which she herself has learned to accept her decolonized body entering through ruptures.

**Workshop Experiences with Albuquerque and Costa Rican Teachers**

A big aspect of all this testimonio and multimodal installation work was having the opportunity to implement and instruct a diverse breadth of educators in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and in Costa Rica. Both experiences have fostered and created a drive to understand the importance of testimonio, embodied work, and really understanding how valuable storytelling is for oneself but also in the classroom. The workshops focused on sharing my own experiences with multimodality but more specifically looking into the experiences that educators want to make for their students within the classroom. Since Albuquerque’s student population is diverse and includes a large population of Native American students and other underrepresented students it is crucial to create a curriculum that can be ample enough to understand how to rise and make those underrepresented group’s stories be at the forefront of the experiences needed to be learned from.

![Figure 11: Futuro Verde Private School Mural](image-url)
Figure 12: Futuro Verde Teachers

Figure 13: Discussion of Testimonio workshop
Through the workshop K-12 teachers were asked to bring an emblematic object that symbolized an important aspect of their life, more specifically looking at a particular experience they’ve had. Many of the teachers brought photographs of loved ones and others brought forth physical objects they could utilize through the workshop. The goal was to have the teachers explore the image and “recreate” it through the construction of another object by using modeled clay and clay tools. The challenge with the transfer of representation really was being able to focus on having the teachers be open-minded about the shape and mold of their sculpture and not necessarily paying too much if it was sculpted perfectly or that the meaning was completely overt. A lot of the sculptures were emotive in the sense that they paid tribute to the representation of their loved one in the image. As well, having the teachers use their hands allowed them to see how the mix between image and the emotion they felt towards the person could come together. One of the sculptures that I remember vividly was the sculpting of a wheelchair wheel. The participant brought an image of a child in a wheelchair. In their representation, the wheelchair became the emblematic image that was then transferred into the sculpture. I found the transfer between
the photograph and the clay to carry so much emotion because of the simplicity in its story. I think this teacher in particular found the process to be descriptive in the storytelling aspect because of how much weight the multimodal nature of the project had.

After this workshop, Mia, myself, and another colleague worked on constructing a workshop for a private school in Costa Rica. At the time, I had already started to construct the car trunk with a few Rio Grande High School students through the welding course they were taking. The car trunk was almost completed and Mia wanted to present my experience with the building of the car trunk. In this particular workshop, the teachers were a diverse group that came from various parts of the U.S. and Latin America. While some of them were Costa Rican, some had just come from neighboring countries like Honduras, Ecuador among other countries. It was enriching to see a large array of teachers with diverse backgrounds and to enhance their teaching by sharing my own research and installation project. The workshop heavily focuses on land and body epistemologies and gave my colleague and I the opportunity to see how we can infuse those epistemologies with our own pedagogical tools. In my segment of the presentation, I specifically had the teacher group free write about the object that they had brought to share with the group. The workshop had the same tenants from the previous workshop, but now I could share with these sets of teachers the experiences I’ve had in constructing and retelling my mother’s story about the car trunk. After they free wrote I had the teachers talk amongst each other about their object and we then moved into sharing as a group what the meaning behind their object was and what it meant.

To be frank, I never forget the impact of that session on my life, on my identity as an educator, and its implications on my experiences as a first-generation Central American-
American. The teachers brought up topics about fleeing their home countries because of poverty and moving to Costa Rica. Another teacher brought in his marriage certificate and shared how important the document was because he was able to marry his partner after gay marriages were accepted. Another teacher shared a specific greeting card that she kept where she wrote to her daughter about seeing her again one day after they had separated for a brief time before moving to Costa Rica. So many different stories about how individuals’ identities, bodies, and connections to land shifted the way of life for these teachers. I took away so much from this experience. The level of emotion and vulnerability really made me realize that the teachers carried stories like my own. They also needed more time to heal and find comfort in the discomfort their experiences had brought them. Providing a space like this for teachers and educators is important as to how we perceive and grasp understanding testimonio work and its force.

Testimonio as a form of an alternative discourse allowed me to explore and comprehend the complex aspects of my mother’s migration story. In retrospect, I fused so many different genres and forms in order to construct a message that is alternative but in the heart of it is a hybrid form that challenges the notions of the immigrant story, identity construction and moreover how we can begin to listen to the lived experiences of others.
Chapter 6: There is Still a Lot of Work to Be Done: Paving Way for Action in the Composition Classroom & Community

In my data/findings chapters I provide examples and experiences of academic projects I created. The projects I cover and thought about in the creation of these chapters were a graphic narrative depicting why my mother didn’t learn to make pupusas. As well, I discuss the creation of the multimodal art installation that reconstructs the car trunk that my mother traveled in. In addition, the installation was my attempt to bring together different modalities to tell the story about my mother and more deeply my experience learning about my mother’s country. The car trunk installation challenged other’s knowledge of the civil war in El Salvador and the repercussions of migrants like my mother. Both chapters challenge the notions we have of Central American experiences, story and how we define and understand the identities that emerge from so much violent history. Even more deeply, there is a clear connection between how alternative discourses, multimodality, constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries work to provide a form of push back against dominant discourses.

Through the creation of the data/findings chapters and writing my dissertation as an autoethnography, I discovered that Chapter 3 enabled me to put into question the narrative of my mother’s immigrant story and more specifically what happened before my mother left El Salvador. In the third chapter, I come to discover that for a long time I had not allowed myself to understand that my identity is not marked by the expectations of other Central American first-generation experiences in the U.S. Even more so, through the exploration of how my mother didn’t learn how to make pupusas, I also came to understand that my mother is not any less Salvadoran just because she came to the U.S. at the age of
ten. I also questioned how in some cases the notion of immigrant stories gets generalized in lieu of so much political upheaval when it comes to underrepresented groups. By no means do I think that this is fair or good – even more so, I think that even within the confines of this dissertation there is still work to be done to understand how we can dismantle oppressive powers that shame underrepresented immigrant groups. So, I ask that there be more consideration as to how we understand, pay reverence to, and grasp the experiences of immigrants who have been silent for too long.

**Shame**

**Vergüenza**

I remember that during much of my childhood well into leaving for college my dad was proud of who his children were but at the same time felt the shame of not being able to be free in the U.S. My dad was embarrassed of the car he would drive us in, and all I can remember is that it felt like home. That car drove us to visit my grandmother in South Gate, it drove us to visit the ocean countless times. I think slowly I began to see that my dad learned the importance of comfortability versus commodities. We could have all the nice things in our lives as their children, but the reality was having him and my mom home with us and learning how to face all kinds of issues was more important. Even then, the shame continued to grow and know it still exists in some ways. All the memories in the cars we owned happened because we were worried about where we were going and that we would get there together. My dad spent a lot of his 30’s thinking about how much of his life in the U.S. he imagined having money and there was the never-ending shame when he couldn’t pay for everything. Even when he used credit cards and was in debt because he is giving the Argentinian abogada money to pay for the immigration case he’d open to get a green card. Be legal in the U.S.
In so many ways, the rhetoric of the immigrant is damaging even when the U.S. promotes prosperity and an imaginary that is unrealistic and unreachable to many immigrants. Somewhere along the way, my dad accepted the American dream, but I don’t think he was aware that he already carried a “dream” with him – in the case of my narrative the imaginary he was already existing in. This imaginary existed in the stories coming to the U.S. by airplane, then foot, and arriving to California. Now as I have told his story, his imaginary exists in the sewage pipes he crawled through and in how much he dreamed to be accepted in this country.

Secrecy

Secreto

I can imagine my grandmother telling my mom that she shouldn’t share she’s an immigrant at school. That she needs to keep that part of her identity in secret. I’m sure my grandmother reminded my mom that if she spoke up, that if she shared any details about their car ride to the California border, she would probably be deported. Chapter 3 really tested me as the autoethnographer to understand the effects of sharing my mother’s car trunk story. The effects of sharing her story from my positionality in 2020 were difficult emotionally but through my positionality it was easier. I recognize that through my position as a graduate student and also an instructor I had more at my disposal to navigate a heavy story like my mother’s. Even then, when in the lens of the autoethnographer, I think as her daughter it was a still a daunting task. I think that the construction of the car trunk broke free the secrecy that enclosed much of my mom’s lived experience across multiple borders and then the life she was forced to take in the U.S. I learned that secrecy still remains a big aspect of my mother’s identity as a child migrant. As I’ve mentioned before her choices were very minimal and she had no say really. My grandmother was making decisions based
on need and the urgency to escape. In the beginning of conducting research on the materials I had at my disposal, I really only had more questions about the level of secrecy that immigrants adapt into their daily lives. This is why I had to dig a little further and establish that decolonial imaginaries are needed in order to push back against the forces that constrict immigrants into a world of secrecy. The decolonial imaginaries that I uncovered in this first layer of writing only demonstrated how difficult it is to take up space and question the structures that oppress the alternative discourses of narratives. In the case of my mother and father, it took me as a first-gen to uncover and give voice to those narratives and uphold them as valid and crucial to how we talk about Central American immigration in the U.S. In part that was due to my acceptance into a PhD program that allowed me to have the tools to validate these stories and experiences—in other words, I had access to academia and could make the discourse a hybrid. Through understanding the decolonial imaginaries that my parents have created for themselves, I then also turn to understand how within those decolonial imaginaries the identities of my parents constellate. Understanding the complexity in how their identities constellate was a difficult task in that because a lot of the work is about uncovering and then analyzing, the constellating will be messy and not completely readable. I say this considering that much of this project in its experimental stages forced me to ask more questions than actually answer any. I think I have learned to understand how secrecy leads to the experiences of wanting to survive and making it through. Secrecy in some ways become the tool that leads to the freedom that my grandmother and parents as Central American immigrants made for themselves. While it has negative implication at the same time it was another literacy event in their lives.

Silence
Silencio

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As mentioned before, I have come to understand that in the case of my experience with alternative discourses, multimodality is an essential component when considering how certain stories are told and who they are told to. Alternative discourses in their essence need to be both unique in their content and form, for example utilizing modalities has allowed me to tell my mother’s story in various genres and modalities to make sense of the story. Alternative discourses and multimodality coupled together allow for a decolonization of dominant narratives that conform much of the U.S. to the power structures that are in place that create hateful and super harmful rhetoric around Central American immigrants. The process of decolonization is not linear much like identities are not linear.

To understand how these narratives come about it is important to see constellating as a framework that can make sense of the existence of my own parents. Decolonial imaginaries are just one way of understanding how immigrants begin to reconstruct and see their lives in the new land they inhabit. Decolonization depends on the notion of constellating identities because without decolonizing would be too fixed. Because of this I argue that as the country continues to understand and/or push back against immigrants migrating to the U.S. there will continue to be efforts to push back against dominant narratives that harm the individual stories of those who make the journey. In thinking about this process, there is something thrilling about knowing that the process of decolonizing and dismantling is messy and not necessarily a quick fix. This is because that process needs the disarray and imbalance to let the other identities become embedded into this country without force and without reshaping or remaining who they are as immigrants. This is not to say that this already happens, but even more consciously through academia it is
important that there be a prominent set of discourses and rhetoric and begins to change the configuration of the Central American diaspora in the U.S.

And then in return, make 1st generation Central American-Americans carve out several spaces to recognize that the harmful rhetoric used against our communities is overdone and dehumanizing. It disregards the effects of the U.S. colonial powers on many countries in Latin America and why so many have come to the U.S.

**Teaching Students to Imagine Their Decolonial Imaginaries**

It is important for students to create and conceive imaginaries that they can feel normal and safe in. Through the course of the last 20 years throughout my academic journey I have moved in and out of different decolonial imaginaries that were never really perfect but were never unsafe. As a brown woman in the US, I have come to understand that now in my position as an educator, students rely on spaces that allow them to explore and not feel judged. Specifically in the times that we're living in it is important that students don't have to justify why they speak different languages, why they codeswitch, why they are able to talk about the different aspects of their culture and their heritage. And more specifically have the ability to understand that the world around them doesn't have to always look the same. The idea of judgement leads to notions of secrecy, shame, and silence and some within underrepresented communities may end up feeling like the dominant narratives do not allow them to exist within the space that makes them feel valuable. I've come to understand that through constellating identities and decolonial imaginaries my parent’s stories make a lot more sense and there is a depth that wasn’t (at least for me) before.

In exploring and understanding how decolonial imaginaries make up constellating
identities, I think that these concepts would offer students the ability to understand the journey that their own identities take when they reform overtime. Explaining the notion of identities to students through these two frameworks can lead to them analyzing and understanding that the experiences that others have gone through can’t be fixed or manipulated to look a certain way. The experiences that make up each and every individual are raw and are in flux. The tools that these frameworks offer would be revolutionary but would offer students a foundation to explore and experiment.

Through the notion of shame, I can see how students feel like the standardization of language and also the assimilation into American culture has not allowed their communities to flourish. Now this can look different for communities that may be more privileged than others but the task of teaching students how to imagine their decolonial imaginaries can be a tall order when students view and understand their own identities in a specific way. I believe that exposing students to this form of thinking will enable them to understand the worlds and imaginaries that their peers live in instead of assuming they share completely the same ideas or have similar experiences. For example, through the various workshops that I led, the participants were able to have autonomy and agency of the “story” they were sharing. In one workshop, the teachers focused on the ways land shapes and is bound to the experiences that an individual carries. Meanwhile other times, it is important to tell the story of others in order to be a vessel for their story to be heard. Many underrepresented communities continue to be oppressed and have been forced into washing away aspects of their identities that are not suitable or ideally are not given much attention or comprehension. For example, I remember growing up having to explain to other teachers where my parents were from or having to explain why I didn't know how to
make a certain food from either the Salvadoran or Guatemalan side of my identity. I'm sure this is a reality for many more students in the US, that struggle to face the difficult conversations around explaining to others why their cultures or backgrounds are the way that they are.

I still remember when I first taught the UNM expository writing course that had student read, create, and analyze graphic novels and how intrigued and open minded those students were to the topics and ideas that I was presenting. Keep in mind that the majority of the students were white in the class and some were students of color. In those moments when we read texts that challenged our ideas and our preconceived notions of what racism looks like, what white privilege means, what the lives of LGBTQ+ looks like, what language should sound like – the students were sometimes comfortable and sometimes uncomfortable. I think that they enjoyed the way the class allowed them to explore emotion and understand the importance of each story.

Having them understand how to dissect story through images and text gave them not just an alternative view of what a story can look like but it provided for them a complex and layered understanding of someone’s lived experience. And so, through the various text that we read like Fun Home by Alex Bechdel, La Lucha by Jon Sack & Adam Shapiro et. al., American born Chinese by Gene Leun Yang students came to realize that identities were not static. As we compared specific stories to each other that had similar topics and themes there were stories that could speak to each other and give them more depth and understanding about how we can talk about the forceful systems that are in place to deny us the right to choose a path in which we can understand somebody else’s story or not. It is clear that through this particular creation of telling stories, students were able to
constellate their own identities through the graphic narratives. As well, as we continued the course, students were able to also constellate within the class, when sharing ideas and analysis of the graphic novels we read.

In retrospect, I learned that through my own navigation of different genres like poetry and graphic novels/comics I was writing alternative discourses specifically through the exploration of my own identity via the experience of my parents as immigrants I have inculcated a sense of alternative and unconventional storytelling into my composition classroom that is not completely present throughout most English composition courses. This concept of alternative discourses needs to be more prevalent and engrained into the ways that we allow students to read underrepresented stories and in the way that we also allowed the students to explore aspects of their identity that may not be fully explained or are simply underrepresented. Like I said before this can be a tall order, but in order to decolonize the system we have in place institutions need to start inculcating action to allow students the space, time, and emotions to navigate the static world of academia. In my future artistic and scholarly endeavors, I hope to call to action the power that alternative discourses can have in the composition classroom first-hand. I think that this can be explored and done in order to bring new perspectives, ideas, and a sense of freedom for writers like myself that through the hard work and dedication of two immigrant parents have allowed me to explore dimensions of my identity through different forms of writing and reading.
References Cited


