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Self-Narrations as Survival for Queer Latinx People

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Abstract:

This creative capstone reexamines the ways in which we study Queer Latinx people and argues in favor of self-narrations and oral histories. Part one is a literature review critiquing damage-based literature on Queer Latinx people that denies them their voice. Part two rectifies the failures of existing scholarship by presenting a series of oral histories written in a creative nonfiction style.

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I. the importance of self-narration

A Note on Terminology

It's important to acknowledge that the terms used in this capstone, "Queer" and "Latinx," are imperfect umbrella terms with multiple (and sometimes contradictory) definitions. I recognize the shortcomings of these terms, but I use them in this capstone because they are the terms that I use for myself. J. Garvey et al. define Queerness as "the fluidity and non-normativity of people with marginalized sexual and gender identities"¹. Queerness is also an Undercommons: "a space and time which is always here"². In other words, Queerness is a refusal of the choice as offered; it is the rejection of this binary "choice" in general³. Therefore, for the purposes of this capstone, I use "Queer" as a broad label to describe those with marginalized sexual and/or gender identities: those who are non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender. To acknowledge Queerness' role as an Undercommons, I chose to capitalize the word throughout this capstone.

According to Zongrone et al., "Latinx" is a gender-neutral label describing those of Latin American descent⁴—a term that includes over twenty countries⁵. This term is highly flawed—twenty countries cannot have so much in common that all of their cultures fit into a single term. However, given that I wish to talk to people who specifically identify with this label in order to discuss their unique and oftentimes shared experiences, it is this term that my capstone will use.

¹ Garvey, J. et al. "Queer and Trans* Students of Color: Navigating Identity Disclosure and College Contexts." *The Journal of Higher Education* 90 (2019): 150 - 178.

² Halberstam, Jack. "The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons." Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1194818&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Zongrone, A. D., Truong, N. L., & Kosciw, J. G. (2020). Erasure and resilience: The experiences of LGBTQ students of color, Latinx LGBTQ youth in U.S. schools. New York: GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Erasure-and-Resilience-Latinx-2020-0.pdf>.

⁵ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "List of countries in Latin America". Encyclopedia Britannica, 10 Mar. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-countries-in-Latin-America-2061416>. Accessed 21 September 2021.

Introduction

When I decided to undertake this project—back when I was emerging into Queerness—I had just developed my first crush on a girl and didn't know what to do. I felt so many emotions at once: disgust with myself, self-hatred, hope for my future as a Queer person, and a pervasive sadness coupled with feelings of emptiness. I didn't know how to move forward, and I still don't. I don't know if I'm "doing" Queerness wrong, and this is partly because I am without community. Without community, I feel as if I am untethered to myself. Of course, I still have my Latinx community filled with friends and family and chosen family, but when I inhabit this very cisnormative and heteronormative space while hiding my Queerness, I feel like I am lying. My therapist keeps trying to convince me that hiding who I am is a form of self-protection and privacy, that it's not lying, but I can't quite make myself believe it. I have never kept secrets from my mom and now I am racking them up like bills. I don't want to disappoint. I want to make my community proud. If I hide, I will explode. If I open myself fully to who I am, I will explode.

I don't know how to relate to anyone without letting stories bleed out of me. My friends catch droplets of my stories in their cupped palms while letting themselves bleed into mine. We give away stories so freely: I have never had a lunch conversation without remarking, "Do you remember when..." or "Today, I..." There's a story in every leaky ceiling and every browning leaf, and I'm not being exceptionally poetic when I say this but exceptionally realistic, because when you ask me why my bedsheets are such a faded shade of blue, then naturally I have to tell you about all the times I've stuck them in the washing machine to tumble away their stains and bright colors. I do not always give away my stories freely—when I was applying to college, I felt compelled to share too many raw parts of myself for the pleasure of an unknown admissions

committee. Some stories are too precious to be shared with everyone. Some stories are so precious that they cannot be divorced from a person or a community; they can't be told in scientific papers or history textbooks because the pain of memorializing ourselves in the most clinical of ways means continued pain and erasure and death death death. Everywhere I turn I'm surrounded by narratives of death, and I want, for once, to read narratives of life.

I designed this capstone to be my way forward, a path towards life. When I first read the literature on Queer Latinx people, the desperate sadness got stronger. I almost quit doing this capstone altogether because of how painful it was to read the damage-based narratives of Queer Latinx people. But then, I decided to speak to other Queer Latinx people, to collect their oral histories. I learned so much through these interactions, which I turned into creative nonfiction pieces. I don't want anyone else to find the damage-based narratives when they're trying to learn about themselves. I want them to find futures, and in these pages, you will find some of the ways that Queer Latinx people carve a path forward for themselves. Here, there are stories of life, of regret, of joy, and of sadness. They are complex stories.

This is how a community blooms in a barren forest.

Research Questions

Though this isn't a traditional research project, my capstone is guided by the following overarching questions: What can we learn about the identity formation of Queer Latinx people by working within a storytelling tradition, understanding that both of these terms are so broad that there is no way to generalize these experiences? What is the value of working within a storytelling/oral history tradition to learn about Queer Latinx people?

Methodology and Scope

Methodology

I collected six oral histories in total (although I only chose five to write up as one participant was reluctant to share stories) from adults who self-identified as “Queer” and “Latinx.” Oral histories act as the best methodology for my project because one goal of this capstone is to discover how Queer Latinx people tell their own stories, how they understand their own identity formation without a researcher interpreting their stories through a trauma-based lens. To recruit my participants, I sent emails to LGBTQ centers across the country, and eighteen people responded to my sign-up form. Of those people, I did not contact anyone who was under 18 or who had not indicated their age in the form. I then chose around ten participants to email back. Of these, six participants (all between the ages of 33 and 43, all either from Texas or Arizona) responded and we met through Zoom at a time that was convenient for them. Though IRB was not necessary since I was conducting oral histories, I still wrote up a consent form. All participants gave their verbal consent to participate and be recorded.

Before beginning our chats, I emphasized that this was not a social science experiment and that I was really interested in collecting their stories. I also introduced myself as a Queer

Latina. I did not use formal interview questions, but instead asked them a series of guiding questions that invited them to tell their own stories (*See Appendix*). I used pseudonyms for my participants and stored the interview recordings in a password-protected file on my computer, which was destroyed after finishing this capstone. The interviews were transcribed using Trint.

Their life stories were then written up in third-person as creative nonfiction, meaning that all of the basic facts are true but some details are imagined. I chose to write their oral histories in this manner to reflect the way that stories' details change as they are passed down from person to person. This is how oral histories stay vivid and alive as they are retold.

Scope

I recognize that many identity categories other than “Queerness” and “Latinidad” play a role in one’s identity formation. However, for the purposes of this project, I will focus on the intersections of these two categories, while also recognizing that these categories are so broad that it is impossible to create generalizable statements that apply to every individual who identifies with them.

This capstone is in no way meant to be representative of all Queer Latinx people; there will always be more stories to tell. With this capstone, however, I hope to reimagine the ways in which we discuss Queer Latinx people by complicating trauma-based narratives.

Literature Review

I struggled with this literature review for many months. I could never write it in a way that did justice to my project or to the people whose traumas were pathologized by science and history. My past drafts replicated the clinical tones of the very papers I critique. But the truth is that I cannot—and will not—shy away from injecting emotion into this literature review, nor will I invite my readers to feel comfortable. In the sections that follow, I argue for the importance of self-narrations—especially for Queer Latinx communities—as opposed to previous literature, which largely relies on damage-based narratives. By damage- or trauma-based narratives, I mean narratives that stand in contrast to self-narrations because they are ultimately written by researchers with an agenda. To put it more precisely, damage-based research is “research that intends to document people’s pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression”.⁶ Damage-based narratives are never written for the marginalized audience that fuels this research. Instead, it is used to “leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities” by portraying these communities as broken⁷. But what does it feel like when you grow up seeing *yourself* as broken?

I. Trauma-Based Narratives

In “A Glossary of Haunting” by Eve Tuck and C. Ree—a work in which they also reject traditional ways of conveying historical information—they remark,

Damage narratives are the only stories that get told about me,
unless I’m the one that’s telling them. People have made their
careers on telling stories of damage about me, about communities

⁶ Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409–427. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>

⁷ Ibid.

like mine. Damage is the only way that monsters and future ghosts are conjured.⁸

It is this idea that I will confront in the following section. This is a section that pulsates with anger and resentment, and as you read this section, I hope you feel haunted too. There are ghosts in every corner of my house.

Our communities can never be anything but “damaged” in the eyes of research, and this is precisely because research institutions like Yale have done such a funny thing: they’ve said that self-narrations of our own subjective experiences are not valid methods of studying marginalized communities. I, along with Tuck and Ree, reject damage narratives in favor of “desire,” which is “is a recognition of suffering, the costs of settler colonialism and capitalism, and how we still thrive in the face of loss anyway”.⁹ I make the case for self-narrations below, but first, I present examples of the trauma-based narratives I encountered while writing this literature review. I recognize the necessity of showing you what damage-based narratives look like in practice; at the same time, I don’t want these to become the focus of my paper. Ultimately, for the purposes of clarity, I have included my findings on these damage-based narratives below because I want you to understand exactly what my project resists.

It is important to note that these narratives are not unimportant. Understanding the academic statistics and broader generalizations is necessary for the implementation of better policies and social change. Also, I am not the authority on what a Queer Latinx narrative should look like. Some Queer Latinx people have undergone deeply traumatic experiences and it would be offensive to pretend otherwise, to deny this aspect of their stories. What I argue is that damage-based narratives shouldn’t be the *only* stories I find when I’m trying to learn more about

⁸ Tuck, E., & Ree, C. (2013). A Glossary of Haunting, *Handbook of Autoethnography*, 647.

⁹ Ibid.

myself, when I'm trying to find community through the media I consume. In reading these damage-based narratives, I don't see hope in my path. When I read about a Queer Latinx person's trauma, I want this story to come directly from them, without being filtered through a researcher's agenda. My capstone invited participants to tell their stories as they saw fit. We all have so many stories to tell. Focusing on one aspect of a person's life—as in the damage-based narratives below—is not dignity and it's not justice. It is hurt and it is pain.

* * *

The literature states that belonging to a racialized category that experiences “structural disadvantage[s]” puts Latinx youth at higher risk for poor mental health and lower educational outcomes.¹⁰ Additionally, Latinx youth are likely to perceive the societal discrimination that they experience as unfair, which may contribute to more negative mental health outcomes.¹¹ Latinx youth in immigrant families experience increased amounts of stress due to anti-immigrant and ethnic discrimination as well as economic strain.¹² The 2016 presidential election especially served to increase these stressors among Latinx youth, who reported higher levels of fear, anxiety, discrimination, and marginalization.¹³ Latinx youth are exposed much earlier than other

¹⁰ Bucholtz, M.; Inés Casillas, D.; & Lee, J.S. (eds.), *Feeling it: Language, race, and affect in Latinx youth learning*. New York: Routledge, 2018

¹¹ Madubata, I., Spivey, L.A., Alvarez, G.M., Neblett, E.W. & Prinstein, M.J. Forms of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination and Suicidal Ideation: A Prospective Examination of African-American and Latinx Youth. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 2019. DOI: 10.1080/15374416.2019.1655756.

¹² Christophe, N.K., Stein, G.L., Martin Romero, M.Y., et al. Coping and Culture: The Protective Effects of Shift-&-Persist and Ethnic-Racial Identity on Depressive Symptoms in Latinx Youth. *J Youth Adolescence*, 1592–1604 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01037-8>.

¹³ Wray-Lake, L., Wells, R., Alvis, L., Delgado, S., Syvertsen, A.K., & Metzger, A. Being a Latinx adolescent under a Trump presidency: Analysis of Latinx youth's reactions to immigration politics. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 87, 2018. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740917308708>.

*young people to ideas of borders and citizenship, which leads to lower senses of belonging than their non-Latinx counterparts.*¹⁴

Similarly, almost all Queer youth have heard anti-LGBTQ language at school, and 59.1% have experienced anti-LGBTQ discrimination from school administrators.¹⁵ Queer people in general experience more suicide attempts than heterosexual people, and they are at higher risk for mental disorders during their lifetimes.¹⁶ However, as Rob Cover points out, these statistics evoke the idea that Queerness leads to higher rates of suicidality and bullying when in reality, it is “the specificities of being queer in certain contexts” that leads to these outcomes.¹⁷

These damage-based narratives of Queer people are not limited to research. Consider the “Bury Your Gays” TV trope, in which Queer characters’ deaths are devalued because they are viewed as “more expendable than their heterosexual counterparts”¹⁸. Even in fictional stories, Queer people are tragedies who live briefly and die easily. It is a story that Queer kids have seen many times before.

It always seems to be Queer youth of color who bear the brunt of schools’ homophobic policies.¹⁹ In a particularly poignant and heartbreaking story, a closeted gay high-schooler of color in an urban Midwestern school described how his classmates called him slurs and refused

¹⁴ Dyrness, A., and Sepúlveda, E. *Border Thinking: Latinx Youth Decolonizing Citizenship*. University of Minnesota Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvz0h9tq>.

¹⁵ Kosciw, J. G., Clark, C. M., Truong, N. L., & Zongrone, A. D. (2020). The 2019 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation’s schools. New York: GLSEN.

¹⁶ King, M., Semlyen, J., Tai, S. S., Killaspy, H., Osborn, D., Popelyuk, D., & Nazareth, I. (2008). A systematic review of mental disorder, suicide, and deliberate self harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people. *BMC psychiatry*, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-8-70>

¹⁷ Cover, R. “Queer Youth Suicide, Culture and Identity: Unliveable Lives?” *Contemporary Sociology* 42, no. 2 (March 2013). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306113477387b>.

¹⁸ tv tropes. (2022). Bury Your Gays. *tv tropes*. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>.

¹⁹ Blackburn, Mollie & McCreedy, L. (2009) Voices of Queer Youth in Urban Schools: Possibilities and Limitations, *Theory Into Practice*, 48:3, 222-230, DOI: 10.1080/00405840902997485.

to sit next to him. His teacher was aware of these instances, but she never reported it to the administration or intervened.²⁰

Queer Latinx students tend to feel unsafe in schools due to high levels of harassment and assault, and they are more likely to have lower levels of school belonging and higher levels of depression.²¹ In particular, undocumented Queer Latinx youth are more likely to describe themselves as having poor mental health, particularly after the 2016 presidential election.²² Luibhéid highlights the intersection of migration and Queerness for Latinx people, which has historically been a story of exclusion and of a low sense of belonging.²³

Research by Zhao et al. (2021) indicates that in general, Queer Latinx youth have higher rates of internalized homophobia and depression.²⁴ The experiences of undocumented Queer Latinx students are described as being especially traumatic.²⁵ The psychological research that I encountered centered on the “trauma” of coming out to one’s Latinx family, seemingly

²⁰ Ngo, B. 2003. Citing discourses: Making sense of homophobia and heteronormativity at Dynamic High School.. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 36: 115-124. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10665680303513>.

²¹ Zongrone, A. D., Truong, N. L., & Kosciw, J. G. (2020). Erasure and resilience: The experiences of LGBTQ students of color, Latinx LGBTQ youth in U.S. schools. New York: GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Erasure-and-Resilience-Latinx-2020-0.pdf>.

²² Fernández, M.E. (2018) "Undocumented Queer Latinx Students: Testimonio of Survival," *McNair Research Journal SJSU*: Vol. 14, Article 7. <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/mcnair/vol14/iss1/7>.

²³ Luibhéid, E., & Cantú, L. (Eds.). (2001). *Queer migrations: Sexuality, U.S. citizenship, and border crossings*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.yale.idm.oclc.org>.

²⁴ Zhao, Z., Toomey, R.B. and Anhalt, K. (2021), Sexual orientation disclosure to classmates among Latinx sexual minority high school and college youth. *J Res Adolesc.* <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12664>.

²⁵ Fernández, M.E. (2018) "Undocumented Queer Latinx Students: Testimonio of Survival," *McNair Research Journal SJSU*: Vol. 14, Article 7. <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/mcnair/vol14/iss1/7>.

*suggesting that Latinx families are uniquely homophobic*²⁶. *Still other studies focus on poor physical and mental health*²⁷ *outcomes for Queer Latinx people*²⁸.

* * *

Eve Tuck notes that damage narratives look “to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy”²⁹. All of this is true, but another notable thing about damage narratives is that they destroy futures and possibilities, kill hope and swallow dreams whole. These studies pinpoint pain and trauma as futures for Queer Latinx youth, narratives of death with tragic endings.

II. The Transformative Power of Storytelling

I argue that self-narrations are vital for telling the stories of Queer Latinx people. Charlotte Linde states that “life stories,” or self-narrations, “express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way”.³⁰ This does not mean that storytelling is a static practice; on the contrary, it is a “discontinuous unit...subject to revision and change”.³¹ A story is not a story until you tell it to someone else, but in the act of telling it to someone else, you’ve already revised the memory to fit the current situation or person.

²⁶ Munoz, Monica & D’Aniello, Carissa (2020). Latinx LGBTQ Young Adults’ Coming-Out Experiences, *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 48:2, 160-176, DOI: [10.1080/01926187.2019.1684219](https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2019.1684219).

²⁷ Allen, S.H. & Leslie, L.A. (2020) Considering queer heterogeneity: Do immigrant Latinx sexual and gender minorities have poorer health outcomes than their U.S.-born counterparts?, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 32:4, 479-501, DOI: [10.1080/10538720.2020.1762821](https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2020.1762821)

²⁸ Garcia-Perez, J. (2020) Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer + Latinx youth mental health disparities: A systematic review, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 32:4, 440-478, DOI: [10.1080/10538720.2020.1764896](https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2020.1764896)

²⁹ Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409–427. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>

³⁰ Linde, C. (1993). *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*. Oxford University Press.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Every story I tell and receive is unique and yet, “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence”.³² In other words, the individual’s self-identity is always situated within their social context. Judith Butler argues that in giving an account of ourselves, we cannot divorce ourselves from the communities that have shaped us into an “I,” or an individual.³³ And the thing is, that I am only “I” in relation to “you”.³⁴ Without a “you” to listen to my story, then there is no story because “[i]f I am trying to give an account of myself, it is always *to someone*”.³⁵ The point is that even self-narrations are relational and carry the weight of an individual’s communities and generational pasts. When I recount a story of myself, it is also the story of my great-grandmother and what her life could have been. Our self-narrations carry the weights of our ancestral pasts and hopes and dreams and parallel universes where we may never have existed. It’s a messy concept and it’s confusing and maybe just a bit paradoxical, but it’s exhilarating; it feels like that moment on a rollercoaster, when you let go of the bar pinning you to your seat.

Self-narrations *matter* because they are ways in which we can relate to others, to know and let ourselves be known. And if I am not an “I” without “you,” then you are not “you” without “me.” Let me put it this way: I have been shaped by my life experiences, and all of these experiences involve other people. And how do we most commonly interact with others? We exchange stories. When I come home and my roommate asks, “How was your day?” I will immediately launch into a series of stories about my day. Therefore, many (or even most) of our interactions involve exchanging self-narrations.

³² Butler, J. (2008). *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham Univ. Press.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

This is an especially important concept in Queer coming-of-age stories. In her thesis, Sarah Janette Moore argues that coming-out stories act as a form of Queer folklore.³⁶ Coming-out stories are simply a genre of self-narrations. Moore argues that the coming-out story “may mean something different to the teller each time it is told, just as it may have different meanings for those who are listening to or reading the story”.³⁷ All of this is just a way of saying that stories of any kind need storytellers and recipients, and to make ourselves known to this world and to this Earth, to haunt others into remembering that “I was here,” we must necessarily engage in self-narrations.

Self-narrations are a kind of ghostly haunting. Damage narratives will burn under the rage of a million ghosts, but you and I, we will live on in the stories we exchange. They are not our stories alone but the stories of our communities and our ancestors, and through us, they burn lightning-hot. Sometimes these are burdensome stories, and in that case, the burden must be passed to the next person, and the next. Tuck and Ree make the comparison to the movie *The Ring*, in which the only way to keep oneself safe from ghostly rage is to pass on the tape—the burden—to another person; they call this “spectral dissemination” as opposed to “spectral containment”.³⁸ Burden-sharing is a necessity: as a method of survival, endurance, and interdependence. In other words, without burden-sharing, there is no real way to heal, either as an individual or as a collective.

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³⁶ Moore, S.J. (2017). “When I Came Out”: Coming Out and Personal Experience Narratives of LGBTQ Persons in Newfoundland and Labrador. [Doctoral Dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland]. <https://research.library.mun.ca/12892/1/thesis.pdf>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Tuck, E., & Ree, C. (2013). A Glossary of Haunting, *Handbook of Autoethnography*, 641.

Finally, what follow are excerpts from the Queer Latinx self-narrations that I encountered. My own research translated participants' oral histories into creative nonfiction, but these are narratives written by the storyteller, or at least transcribed verbatim. I want to honor them here, and thank each author for passing on the burden.

Mario Anthony Balcita writes,

...and I was born. Into a life of old and had to grow up fast...I felt a voice,
deep this time, and I learned to sing on paper and act with my pen. I
discovered movement that I expressed in life. The beauty I have, no one
can touch. I am a muse for the movement. So look for me in the sunset.
These have been my first 21 years, and I await the next.³⁹

And Meliza Bañales responded,

and no,
she does not have an ending for this
and yes,
this makes you uncomfortable
but life and the memory
can only keep the jaw
wired
for so long⁴⁰

And Kayla told Katie L. Acosta, who told me,

³⁹ Sonnie, A. (2005). *Revolutionary voices: A multicultural queer youth anthology*. Toronto: CNIB, 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

I went and found where the priests lived on campus. I knocked on the door. I'll never forget him, Father O'Malley. He answered the door, and I started crying right there in the doorway. He goes, "My child, my child, what's the matter? Come in, come in." I was bawling my eyes out, and he sits me down in this little area that they have right by the door and he goes, "What's going on? What's the matter?" And I said, "My mother told me I had to see a priest. I just told my mom that I'm in a relationship with a woman, that I'm gay." He was so compassionate, and he says to me, "You know what? Let me tell you something. There are men in this priesthood who have killed themselves over this, because of their sexuality." And then he said something that set me free. He said, "There's nothing wrong with giving your love to another human being. There's nothing wrong with that, and that's all that you are doing."⁴¹

And, and, and...

⁴¹ Acosta, K. L. (2013). *Amigas y amantes: Sexually nonconforming Latinas negotiate family*, 53.

II. gifted stories wrapped in fictional bows

Marisol

Marisol (she/her) is 43 and back in El Paso where she began, after years of being shuffled around the world by the military. She smiles through our interview and I can't help but smile back. She's got the kind of kindness that's sticky, the kind of kindness that life's tried to shake her of but that she refuses to let go. This is a woman who loves and feels so much. When I ask her what she would tell her child self, she says, "I would tell myself that as long as I'm happy and the love is true, there's no judgment—there's nothing wrong with that because my love is a true love."

* * *

One hazy and hot teenage afternoon, Marisol is in her room with The Girl, the white door shut and the windows thrown open. Outside, the neighborhood kids chase each other with sticks. They bump and skid across the uneven road on bicycles, having just let go of their training wheels earlier in the summer. And inside, a heavy humidity, the kind that curls under your clothes to get at your skin and frizzes your hair into a fuzzy halo. They're listening to The Girl's favorite CD, sitting on the white carpet and leaning against Marisol's bed. The pink sheets flutter every once in a while, when a breeze from outside finds its way into the room. Maybe their hands are too close, the tips of their pinkies touching softly. Maybe it's the music or maybe it's the heat, maybe it's The Girl who turns to look at Marisol first. Maybe she just can't stand it, the way that The Girl's hair brushes lightly against Marisol's bare shoulder when she turns her head. Maybe Marisol's mom is home but for once, she can't make herself give a shit. Maybe she leans forward. Does it matter who kissed who first? Marisol and The Girl are kissing and for once, Marisol isn't thinking about her parents. She isn't thinking about anything except that all those

years of kissing boys must've just been practice for a moment like this. They run hesitant fingers through each other's damp black hair, sweat pooling on their lower backs as they move closer.

Marisol would later wish she'd heard Mami's footsteps getting closer, wish that she'd remembered Mami's nasty habit of opening her bedroom door without knocking. When Mami opens the door, the stillness of the room shatters and Marisol and The Girl jump apart. Marisol wishes she could forget Mami's expression of frozen disgust, lips curled inwards and eyes cold, the way she looks at strangers she doesn't like.

"Get out," says Marisol's mom evenly, not bothering to look at The Girl. The Girl can't look at Marisol, and she quickly stands, grabs her backpack from the corner, and moves past Marisol's mom. She didn't even remember to collect her CD. Marisol hears The Girl's bangles clanking together as she runs down the hall and out the door.

When the front door closes, Mami lunges forward and slaps her, so hard that her head whips to the right, and then quickly leaves the room. Marisol fears that Mami will tell her dad, but days pass and no punishments arrive. Mami has found a new family secret to keep.

In the best versions of Marisol's dreams, Mami whispers, *Marisol, don't worry about your father. Women are always the greatest disappointments to their fathers. Why do you think we are the only ones fit to speak with ghosts?*

* * *

But there are pockets of joy in this life too. The military is freeing. You don't ask and you don't tell but Marisol can breathe when she dances with the German girls. She starts seeing as many girls as she can, frantically, like she's making up for lost time. The girls come in all forms: straight, in hiding, experimental. And then she gets stationed back in the United States, in Texas, and that's where she meets Clara.

Marisol is taking college classes, studying legal assistance, but she swears she's back in high school when she meets her. She's chewing on the cap of her ball pen when Clara walks into the classroom. It's like a rom-com, the way their eyes meet. And Clara looks right back at her. So many years later and nobody else has ever looked at Marisol like that.

A few months later, Clara and her four-year-old son David move in with Marisol. David's just as crazy as Marisol, and they get along so well that Clara's always grumbling, *You turn into a child when you're with him*. Marisol and Clara are both so young that they have no idea what the fuck they're doing, but it's exciting, to be making it up as you go.

One day, David—who just turned five and is making sure nobody forgets it—climbs onto Marisol's lap during breakfast, still wearing his dinosaur pajamas and rubbing the sleepiness out of his eyes. Clara's still sleeping, that's how early it is, and Marisol is just about to lift him into her arms and tuck him back into bed when he grabs a piece of paper and a pen from the dining room table and draws a shaky-lined triangle. There's something so resilient about a triangle. You can roll it onto one of its three sides and it may wobble, but it'll stand its ground.

Marisol squints at the drawing, about to ask what it means, when suddenly he adds three disproportionate figures wearing jagged smiles, one at each corner of the triangle.

“That's us,” he says, turning to her with a satisfied grin. “We're The Unbreakable Triangle.”

Afterwards, Marisol sits in the car, unmoving—smiling to herself as a woodpecker knocks against a tree—before buckling herself in and starting the car. Then she takes her foot off the brake and cruises the rest of the way to work, humming with a strange adrenaline that carries her through the next day, and the next.

Felix

Felix (he/they) is 41 and carries himself with quiet confidence. They aren't the type to smile much, but at the end of the interview, they say, "I appreciate you, Blanca" with a toothy grin, and I know that they mean it. Felix is the type of person that will thank you for existing genuinely as yourself. It's a special and freeing kind of joy to be seen by him, for him to see just how much I'm flailing in the pursuit of my identity—clinging to pieces here and there—and still embrace all of the ugliness in me. Felix doesn't think that love can be conditional. I ask them what they would tell their child self, and Felix tells me (with tears in their throat), "Be your authentic self to the best of your ability. And try to look. Look at everyone in the world—look in their eyes—and feel where they're coming from. Understand instead of trying to be understood."

* * *

It's the summer after eighth grade—another hot summer day in El Paso, but no hotter than usual—and Felix is at his friend Michael's house. They live two doors down from each other. Whenever Mami is gossiping to her friends, she describes their friendship as being *this* close—and here, she intertwines her pointer and middle finger, because words alone can't express how close they are. Michael's mom says he has to clean his closet before he can go outside and chase the other neighborhood boys. Felix and Michael have never gotten through a summer without their knees getting scuffed raw by the pavement.

Felix is lounging on Michael's bed as he tosses shirts out of the closet, aiming for Felix's head. Felix laughs and catches a shirt in mid-air before it hits their face. They unfold the shirt as Michael continues rifling through his closet, and it's a pretty purple blouse. It could've belonged to a man or a woman, and Felix is fascinated by the duality of this shirt. It has long, puffy sleeves, and when he holds it up to the light trickling in from Michael's window, it looks like it's

shimmering. Michael throws another shirt at Felix's feet, laughing, but Felix sits up, a serious look on his face, and thrusts the shirt in Michael's face.

"Can I buy this from you?"

Michael reaches out a hand and Felix carefully gives him the blouse. It's got a few loose threads and they don't want it to unravel. Michael opens up the blouse, holds it to the light, turns it first to the left and then to the right. Felix looks away from him, staring at Michael's mud-caked black shoes that he tossed in the corner the minute he threw open the door and herded Felix inside.

"Hmm," says Michael. Felix looks up and Michael's frowning at the blouse. "I guess? I don't think I've ever worn this. But you sure you want it? It's kinda ugly."

Felix takes the blouse back and smooths it out on their lap, smiling faintly. "How much?"

Years later, Felix will see what Michael means: the blouse *is* kind of ugly and outdated. But they will never forget the day they wore that purple blouse with a pair of bright blue baggy jeans. They stood in front of the mirror, breathed deep, and gave their reflection a small, hesitant smile. His other friends may have laughed when they met up at the mall because *Isn't that a girl's shirt?* But that *feeling* he got when he put on that blouse. It's like when you fly in your dreams once, by accident, and think it'll never happen again. Until one night, your dream self jumps and never comes back down.

* * *

Felix is thirty-nine when they come out as Queer. When he comes out, it's not just for himself but also for his friend Cesar, who died recently of a rare disease. Cesar and Felix were baseball players together in high school. They dated for a short period of time, and Cesar came out as gay because of their relationship. Now, Felix wants to live in Cesar's legacy, in his honor.

It's the only way he can think to thank Cesar, all these years later. Words would never be enough.

And this is how it happens: they're taking sociology classes at the local community college in a classroom full of twenty-one-year-old girls when the professor proposes an experiment: "On Monday, come to class but don't dress up. Just wear jeans and a T-shirt, and don't wear any makeup." At this point in time, Felix identifies as a heterosexual cis man, but something compels him to raise his hand and ask, "So should I come dressed up and wearing makeup?"

On Monday, they wear a black dress and get their makeup done by a friend with particularly steady hands. They take their seat in class, smiling at everyone who walks into the room. *This is what it feels like*, he thinks to himself—over and over like an incantation—without particularly knowing what he means.

* * *

I thought a lot about how to end Felix's section—they gave me so many beautiful stories, and I wanted to do my best to honor them. But I know no other way to end this piece than by using Felix's own words.

It was near the end of our conversation, and he was sitting outside in the grass. Golden hour in Texas and nighttime in New Haven, and it felt like experiencing two sunsets in one day. We were at that point in a long conversation with a stranger where everything starts to feel a bit dreamy—like you can't quite believe that you've just been so open with someone that you may never meet again. I asked them about their coming-out experience. He looked up at the fading light in his sky—a dog barking faintly in the background—and said, "I think 'liberation' or 'liberating' are terms that don't do justice to how it felt to come out as a Queer person." And

lying in my bed later that night, staring at my white dorm-room ceiling, I think I know exactly what he means.

Araceli

Araceli (she/they) is 35 and has the remarkable ability to analyze her past with precise insights. For them, healing means making connections between the past and the present. She doesn't have that same desperate desire that I sometimes do to erase chunks of my past from memory. Araceli is the type of person to love her ghosts, to smile at them each time she catches them lurking in the corners of her house. I ask them what they would tell their child self, and they respond with, "You don't have to be so scared. It's going to be okay. It may be hard, and it may even be lonely sometimes. But it will be okay."

* * *

Araceli is eleven and the minute the front door closes and she's left home alone, she runs to her dad's closet and steps inside. They like hugging the clothes hung neatly in the closet because it reminds them of hugging him. The closet is damp and smells of powerful cologne. Araceli stumbles over several pairs of sneakers before she finds what she was looking for: a pair of bright red basketball shorts. She loves them because of the color; they're as bright red as the monkey bars on her school playground. Araceli glances behind her before stepping out of her pants and shirt and slipping on her dad's basketball shorts. She has to double over the waistband five times before the shorts stay on her hips. On her, they look more like pants, but here comes the part she loves. Now she can stand in front of the mirror and smile at the masculine version of herself. She puffs out her chest and puts her hands on her hips with a laugh. She tries not to think about how the image in that mirror is going to change someday, when she "becomes a woman," as Mami likes to say with a grin.

Mami likes the puffy dresses and the frilled white socks and the skirts that announce your presence before you even enter the room because of how much swish the fabric has. Araceli does

not. Araceli will only wear the puffy white dresses to church—they're too itchy and uncomfortable to be worn regularly. About once a month, Mami comes home with an even more egregious dress; the colors get brighter and the dresses get poofier. When she walks inside after one of these outings, she starts chattering immediately about *the most gorgeous clothes—I just know you'll love them!* She's always talking in a hurry. And Araceli chases after the rose-perfume trail she leaves behind as Mami steps into their room. They know what's going to happen next, wrinkling their nose as Mami drops a giant plastic bag onto Araceli's bed. And then Araceli tries—they really try—to pretend to like each dress and skirt and itchy blouse that Mami pulls out of the bag with a crazed smile, each item of clothing more horrendous than the last. Then, when Mami leaves, Araceli tucks the clothes into the back of her closet where they'll remain for years, with the tags still on.

Mami looks disappointed every time Araceli chooses to wear their comfier, more masculine clothing instead of the dresses that Mami buys. Today, Mami is chopping potatoes in the kitchen and she sighs when she sees Araceli's outfit: a black button-up with men's shoes.

“Why don't you ever want to be beautiful?” Mami asks. “Even the shoes? You have to wear men's shoes too?”

Araceli only smiles and says, “You don't actually think I should wear heels with this outfit, do you?”

Mami—the woman with the clever tongue, who has never stopped talking for as long as Araceli has known her—has nothing to say to that. She can only shrug and turn back to her potatoes with a pinched expression. “I guess you have a point.” And Araceli laughs all the way out the door.

* * *

The day that the Supreme Court legalizes gay marriage—June 26, 2015—Araceli stops giving a fuck about her dad’s threats and chops off all her hair like she’s wanted to do for years. The only thing holding them back was their dad’s threat of disownment. “It’s bad enough you’re a lesbian,” he always said. “And now you want to cut off your beautiful hair? If you ever cut your hair, I will disown you.” But Araceli does it anyways.

* * *

When they come out to their abuela, she wraps them in her arms and holds on tight. Right now, tucked under Abuela’s chin, Araceli feels like a child again. Abuela strokes the top of her back like she did when Araceli was little, and whispers wisdom into her hair: “Your whole identity doesn’t have to be about being a lesbian. I don’t want you to be ‘Araceli, the lesbian.’ I just want you to be you.”

Araceli smiles and closes her eyes against the wave of relief and love bubbling in her chest. They rest their head on Abuela’s chest as she continues rubbing circles into their back, and every beat of Abuela’s heart seems to whisper, *Because you exist, that is enough.*

Dulce

This section differs a bit from the others. Dulce (she/her) is 33 and used to be a teacher. The way she described her experiences as a Queer Latinx teacher was so compelling that we mostly ended up talking about her time in education. But this, too, is an important story to tell.

Dulce is the type of person to say exactly what she means. She's honest because to her, there's no other way to be. She carries herself with compassion, and she teaches me that anger can be productive, a feeling to feel when words fail. At the end of our conversation, I ask Dulce what she would tell her younger self. She laughs and says, "You're a little nerdy. You're a little different. And you're going to be just fine."

* * *

Dulce was going to become an attorney, until she actually started working with attorneys. She feels unsettled deep in her soul, like her ancestors are begging her to return to her community. So that's exactly what she does. And the way she rejoins her community is by becoming a teacher. It's important that her students meet her as a Queer Latina who's doing just fine. Dulce tells me, "I didn't want them to feel like if they lived their lives differently than what their families wanted, that they couldn't live fully."

In Dulce's middle-school classroom, there are three rules. *One: Don't throw things because you all have terrible aim. Two: Just be honest with me, no matter what's going on. Three: No derogatory language—nothing racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic in this classroom.* And these rules are as much for herself as they are for them.

The students like asking her questions during lulls in the lesson. One day, a girl sits next to Dulce on the couch—because their classroom has couches for the days when desks are too much—and asks, "Miss, do you go to church?"

When Dulce says that she doesn't, the girl is quiet for a few seconds. Dulce smiles and the girl asks, "I don't mean to be offensive, but do you not go to church because you're Queer?" Dulce thinks that this is a brilliant connection to make: "Yeah, you're exactly right—church doesn't feel safe to me." The girl nods in understanding before joining her friends in the corner.

Sometimes Dulce just wants to *exist* for her students, to stand as a representation of what a future could look like. Another day, a different girl sits on the couch next to her and whispers, "How did you know? How did you know you were Queer?"

Dulce says, "You'll know, if that's what you're concerned about. For me, I knew I liked girls because of the cartoon characters I liked and my crushes at school." The girl nods shyly before walking away. Dulce watches her leave and hopes, desperately, that the love she has for her students is enough.

* * *

Dulce tells me with a laugh that parents would be surprised to know just how many Queer teachers there really are.

"So many of us didn't have support in the classroom," she says. "So we became the support that we didn't have."

Dulce's classroom invites everyone to enter with honesty, exactly as they are. There is a pride flag and a trans flag on the wall right next to a Mexican flag. And next to that, an American flag.

"I'm not going to shy away from my identity just because I work as a teacher," she tells me. "And I think that's a good place to work from. I'm just being honest. I'm not going to dim myself to make you feel comfortable."

* * *

Finally, I asked Dulce what a teacher should be to their students, and her words were so powerful on their own that I leave them here for you, edited only for clarity:

I think you have to be a part of their life to be their teacher. If you're just going to clock in and then dip, you are missing the human element of this. I think that's cold. Why would you want to teach them? We can say that it's about multiplication, we can say it's about whatever. But at the end of the day, it's about: How do you interact with children in a way that inspires them? And it's interesting because if you're a teacher in different ethnic communities, it's an honor. There is some sort of placement for you in the community that says, you're a really important member here. But Americans aren't like that. Arizona's got this law that says that if we do not put children to their parents, we're in trouble. But that's so unsafe, and we need to be these kids' safety. We need to be the only adults who don't scream at them, who don't demand things of them, who aren't angry with them all the time. We need to be better. We need to say: *I got you, because you're a member of this community.*

Benito

Benito (he/him) is 37 and lets emotion infuse all of his words. He teaches me that vulnerability is a strength. When he cries during our interview, he doesn't apologize for his tears, as I've done so many times before. I ask him what he would tell his younger self, and he says, "I probably would want him to know that he's gay. I wish I could've expressed my Queerness in high school and in college and beyond. I feel like there have been so many missed opportunities."

* * *

There are moments in Benito's life that feel like they came straight out of a storybook. He still remembers the night his youngest brother, Lucas, was born. The memories are seared into his brain as a series of sensory experiences. The sound of the car engine as his mom drove him to his grandmother's house, all while experiencing contractions. Her face twisting in pain, and Benito feeling a bone-deep terror. The way the car sped off to the hospital, leaving Benito shaking in his grandmother's arms. His mom was all alone when she had Lucas. Benito doesn't ever want Lucas to feel alone.

They're ten years apart but so unbelievably close. When he goes on a school trip to San Francisco one year, Benito visits the local Build-a-Bear and records himself saying, "I love you, Lucas!" The teddy bear says this every time you press its arm. And of course, Lucas pretends to hate it, but he sleeps with the bear tucked under his armpit every night.

* * *

There are rumors about Benito being gay in middle and high school. Benito doesn't like to think about that. There are rumors about the Home Ec teacher too, because he's a guy and what is a guy doing teaching Home Ec. Benito doesn't like to think about all that. He's a good

kid—he focuses on school. But sometimes there’s an unbearable feeling that burrows in his stomach, like he can’t *breathe*, like he’s choking on his own lungs. Why is it that he always wants to scream?

* * *

When Benito arrives at Queerness’ doorstep, he is in his mid-twenties. He gives himself a year to come out to the world. When he finally comes out to his siblings, it’s through a group text, and they are supportive in that funny way only siblings can be: roasting you with love. The day he decides to come out to his parents, it’s the day before they leave for a trip. If it goes badly, at least he doesn’t have to see them for a while. Benito steps carefully into his childhood home, struggling to take deep breaths, and knocks on his parents’ bedroom door. They smile when he steps inside and start talking to him about so many things, so many meaningless little things that Benito can’t even hear because he’s just trying to get the words out. And then, he says it: “You know I like men, right?”

His dad gives an audible gasp as if they’re in a bad horror movie. His mom just looks straight ahead at the TV. All Benito hears is the creak of the ceiling fan. Benito is looking at his mom but she doesn’t look away from the TV. He can tell that she regrets her own reaction, but she can’t seem to make herself look at him. There’s nothing else to say—Benito leaves the house and his parents don’t talk to him for three months.

Later, his mom sends him a text apologizing for her behavior. She tells him that they support him and love him so much. And then Benito and his parents start talking again like nothing happened. Part of Benito is relieved.

But that hurt doesn’t just go away. Matter cannot be created or destroyed—the hurt has to go somewhere. And Benito is getting tired of holding on to so much.

* * *

In a sense, Benito is still learning and growing—he has only just come out, really. All of his friends are younger and Queer. They give him books about Queer Latinx people and Benito reads them all. When the books are about teenagers, he cries especially hard at the end. Sometimes, he thinks he's not just crying for them but for himself, too.

Every day, Benito gives himself permission to feel his emotions from start to finish. He doesn't know where the hell he's at mentally, but in feeling, there is a way forward. Benito can see the footprints of those who have walked here before, and when he moves forward, it is towards their ghostly outstretched arms that he steps.

III. self-portrait, or: how to dream your way forward

Conclusion

There is no overarching takeaway from this capstone, just a series of stories and an invitation to feel. I cried so many times throughout this process—it was a capstone that hurt deeply, but it was also incredibly joyful and meaningful. It hurts to be vulnerable and it hurts even more to mourn a version of myself that could have been but never was. In high school, I did all the right things: I never went to parties, I spent all of my time studying, and I completed my duties at home without having to be told twice. I was the kid that teachers loved because of how *well-behaved* I was, sitting neatly in my desk with my legs crossed tight. I think of that Blanca now and I want to *scream*. I want to rage. I want to burn in anger and sadness, and I want—for once—to live selfishly, to put myself first.

I began this process with no clear future for myself. The way forward is still hazy, hidden behind a cloud of fog. But I know now that there are people waiting for me at the end of the path. I can hear them.

And if I look behind me, I can see the Blanca of the past, who never did anything for herself, who would move backwards if it meant others could move forward. I used to hate this Blanca, for her timidity and her inability to act. But now I can see that she's just scared. She lives in so, so much pain. I have to honor her. I have to dream up a future for us somehow. She's done her part; now it's my turn. She never could take that first step, but I am brave enough for the both of us. The voices are calling me and I am going forward.

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This was written through tears in Bass Library, so forgive me for the parts that are incoherent. I love everyone who helped me through this process so, so, so much—I don't know what to do with all of this emotion except to bleed it onto the page.

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Mami, no sé si leerás esto algún día, pero te lo escribo anyways. Te lo escribo en nuestro lenguaje: Spanglish. In some sense, I wrote this capstone for you. Y no quiero que leas esto y pienses que yo pienso que eres una mala madre, porque en realidad, it's the opposite. Tu me has dado todo, y everything I do, I do for you. This capstone is for you even if you don't want it, pero te lo regalo anyways. Mami, te amo con todo mi corazón, pero it's time for me to hacer mi propio camino. Te agradezco con todo mi corazón todo lo que sacrificaste para traerme a este punto de mi vida, pero I can take it from here. Me voy pa'lante pero no te dejo atrás. Te quiero tanto que estoy escribiendo esto y llorando—es que tu no sabes cuánto te quiero y te aprecio. Words in any language will never be enough. I love you so so much, Mami. Espero que un día me entiendas.

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Appendix

Guiding Questions

1. Tell me a little about what your childhood was like?
 - Family
 - Elementary school
 - Friends

- Community
 - Relationship to Latinx community/culture
 - Did you know any Queer people (or Queer Latinx people) when you were a child?
What did you think? What was their relationship to the community?
 - Gender / sexuality
 - Sports? Religion?
 - When/how did you first become aware of Queerness / attitudes toward Queer people?
2. What were your teenage years like?
- School
 - Dating
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Crush? First love? First Queer experience?
 - Sense of belonging? Or an outsider?
3. Would you like to tell me about “coming out?”
- Is there a story there?
 - How / why
 - How did it go?
 - How did you feel before / after?
4. Overall, what were your experiences as a Queer Latinx person in schools? Elementary, middle, high, college, etc.
- Supportive environments? Not?

- Did you feel you were represented in course materials?
 - How did your identity shape your learning and relationship to school?
5. When did you first become aware of your own Queerness? What was that experience like for you?
- Family?
 - Friends?
 - Community?
 - Gender identity?
 - Sexuality?
6. What was challenging about growing up?
7. What was joyful or beautiful about growing up?
8. How has your understanding of your identit(ies) changed over time?
9. Do you feel being both Queer and Latinx has shaped your experience of life? (For you, what has it been like to be both Queer and Latinx?)
- Family
 - Community
 - Identity
 - Religion
 - Work
 - Love life?
10. What would you tell your child self or want your child self to know / experience / feel?