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The Dirt Under My Mother's Fingernails: Queer Retellings and Migrant Sensualities

Alejandra I. Ramírez, Ruben Zecena

Rhetorics of the Flesh

...are the cracks at the edges of my lips
Que me mereci from holding smiles for too long,
The bite marks on the inner flesh of my cheeks
Trozos que me arranque out of fear from running
Away.

Rhetorics that I've silenced because callused hands have wrapped themselves around
My heart
My mouth
My
Mother.

They are the bodies of women that lie under wooden crosses, under mesquites, under oath
Because they too often did
"The best they could."

Rhetorics
Unspoken
Because they are far too explicit to put into words.
Screams in the night that erupt when everything has been said
And we remain
Unheard.

El cuerpo sabe.

This co-written article proposes "rhetorics of the flesh" as an analytic framework and queer writing method that (re)tells stories about Latina migrant mothers within and against the violent, dominant, and forceful narratives of U.S. citizenship that criminalize their existence. Furthermore, our article serves as a place to build on the growing corpus in rhetorical studies that weaves together queer theory, embodiment, and intergenerational violences. Our theory of rhetorics of the flesh is a strategic writing act rooted in the assumption that *el cuerpo sabe*, the body knows, and it is through the senses and embodied knowledge wherein one remembers and can retell stories. Through a queer intellectual practice that arouses the senses and draws lines between small and large social issues and artifacts, we draw imaginary scribbles

that connect the themes in our essay about intergenerational migrant trauma and pleasure: embodied knowledge, sensualities, and migration (Rodríguez 69).

Importantly, this article began over a coffee shop conversation about our migrant mothers. It began in graduate seminar classes, discussions on social justice movements, common readings on poetics, and conversations before and after class. In short, the project is an amalgamation of voices, thoughts, and feminist ‘wonders’ that imbricate us in a queer sociality (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 180-181). The conversation about the lived experiences of migrant mothers began when we were children. It began in the womb before we were even born. It began with the generations of subtle and explicit brutalities of institutional, colonial, and patriarchal violence, now sustained in the increased media depicting migrant women with children as “bad mothers” and “bad citizens.” It also begins in the bodies of our mothers and in their mothers before them, extends to our bodies, and in one of our cases, to the bodies of my children. We wonder what it might take to imagine and to (re)tell the stories our mothers told us. We wonder about the historicity of what has been forgotten or untold—what we know and cannot know for certain (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 82; Purdue 8). In other words, we critically theorize, through an intergenerational and embodied analysis, the extent to which dominant ideologies and policies affect migrants, their children and their children’s children.



Figure 1. Tomasita Balderas-Hermosillo with her late mother, Irene Balderas-Leal. Carrizo Springs, Texas, 2015.

We write our memories of our mothers at a moment when once again migrants, particularly Latina mothers, are represented as threatening to the nation-state. Our mothers became central to our conversation, and we continue to sit with tensions about the ethics of retelling their stories. We resist the benevolent or paternalistic researcher-position when writing about their experiences. Therefore, we draw upon queer women of color feminisms to provide a critical method of retelling that recognizes and honors our mothers' many labors and their complexities as women with dreams, desires, and pain.

In our weaving of the narratives, discourses, and experiences that migrant mothers and their children have to endure in the U.S., we draw attention to the rhetoric that influences derogatory labels such as "welfare queens," "anchor babies," and the overall framing of migrant mothers as problem subjects in national media and U.S. politics. On a personal level, we also illustrate how our mom's stories and their working conditions have shaped us, their children.

By eliciting sensual, performative, and queer collaborative writing practices, this essay offers rhetorics of the flesh as a vital contribution and intervention within the study of rhetoric and the criminalization of Latina migrant mothers. Such analytic framework intervenes in the erasure of embodied knowledge as a valid means of knowing; furthermore, it recognizes the complexity of migrant mothers and acknowledges that they are sensual with shared desires, not only as laborers, migrants, and mothers, but also as complex human beings.



Figure 2. Image of Sandra Elizabeth Cartagena de Zecena working at Banco Agricola in San Salvador, El Salvador, 1983.

The purpose of this essay and rhetorics of the flesh is to situate the body, and the intergenerational embodied stories shared among migrants and their children, as central to alternative meaning-making practices and rhetorical imaginaries (Chávez 31). In the following section, we demonstrate how Cultural Rhetorics enables us to tell painful stories through embodied knowledge, and we propose the concept of a rhetorics of the flesh as our main intervention for retelling our migrant mothers' stories, a practice influenced by the work of Chicana and transnational feminists; a theory in/of the flesh (Moraga; Trujillo; Facio and Lara). This concept enables us to explore the importance of embodied knowledge and argues that an engagement with the body and the senses arouses critical reflections on migration. We therefore situate our essay within cultural rhetorics, informed by literature on gender and migration, as critical interlocutors for our methodological practice.

Rhetorics of the Flesh

Rhetorics of the flesh is a poiesis—a poetic and embodied way of knowing and being. It is a collision between poetry and rhetorics, and of bodies communicating in space. Our project builds on Theories of the Flesh, cultural rhetorics, and U.S. women of color feminism to conceptualize a rhetorical maneuver that does not speak for or about migrant mothers, but accounts for the complexities and contradictions of our experiences as queer children of migrant mothers (Cruz; Téllez). Rhetorics of the flesh helps us to think, feel, and write about the body's seemingly "silent" ability to narrate desire, trauma, violence, pleasure, dreams, and resilience in the lives of migrant mothers and their children.

Our project title, "The Dirt Under My Mom's Fingernails," is a reference to Cherríe Moraga's play, *Watsonville*. In this play, Moraga explores issues related to the cannery worker's strike in the mid-1980s in California coupled with environmental destruction and the appearance of the Virgen de Guadalupe on a tree in 1992. In Moraga's play, many of the leaders in the strike are Mexicana and Chicana activists whose voices play an important role in challenging labor exploitation, land degradation, and anti-immigrant rhetoric. We are drawn to a particular scene where Susana, a physician's assistant at the community clinic, asks Lucha, one of the cannery workers, if she is ever afraid to strike. Lucha responds by reminding Susana that if she had the courage to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, then she has the courage to strike until the cannery workers' demands are met. Later, Lucha asks Susana why she chooses to work in Watsonville when she says "[If I had gone to college] you wouldn't find me with the dirt under my uñas [nails]...I'd move to a big city" (37). She later speaks about her dreams for her children to obtain a college education and leave the town. Both women express ambivalence about their relationship to Watsonville, but Susana offers an important response that allows us to work through our own mothers' stories and the rhetorical forces that render their bodies deviant when she says: "Maybe [your children] won't be able to forget the dirt under your fingernails"

(37). Towards the end of the play, Lucha confesses her love for Susana and asserts that she wants to be Susana's partner, a lesbiana, "un nombre sensual" [a sensual name] (104). The dirt under her fingernails, the traces of caring for the land, is the metaphor that guides our essay as we retell the memories we have of our migrant mothers, their care, their labor/s, and their fight, as well as the gendered criminalization of migrants in the U.S. We, like Susana, are invested in acknowledging the traumas of migration that are marked on our mothers' bodies and thus insist on remembering and retelling their stories. And just like Lucha, we do so queerly by insisting on the politics of desire, pleasure, and sensuality in our queer retellings.

Trying to articulate sentimientos y conocimientos that we have inherited, we opened a cherished and foundational text to our queer and feminist upbringings, *This Bridge Called My Back*. We did so quietly, hoping for some illumination as we recalled childhood memories of our mothers, their life stories, their struggles, their migrations. Max Valerio's essay, "It's In My Blood, My Face – My Mother's Voice, The Way I Sweat" helped to remind us of the purpose of our essay, asking how our bodies tell stories, how they shape stories and are shaped by them (36). The power of a mother's presence, her gaze, her posture, and all the in/visible traumas of migration, as well as the joys and pleasures, are part of their migrant histories. Our migrant histories. These painful and embodied rhetorics fuel our desire to situate our mothers' stories, and our queer retellings of their stories, as a form of liberatory praxis. Embodied political theory articulates experiences that transcend the written text. As Cindy Cruz elaborates, "our production of knowledge begins in the bodies of our mothers and grandmothers, in the acknowledgement of the critical practices of women of color before us" (658). Rhetorics of the flesh further delves into the layers of "flesh," below the surface, to theorize the body as a feeling and thinking site of knowledge production. A site of articulation and manifestation of politics—indeed, a place of meaning-making where narratives collide. Building on the work of Karma Chávez, we understand queerness as a "coalitional term, a term that always implies an intermeshed understanding of identity, subjectivity, power, and politics located in the dirt and concrete where people live, work, and play" (7). Queerness asks us to reach below the skin and down to the very soil in which we stand, the dirt from which this story begins.

Significantly, these rhetorics of the flesh are in critical dialogue with cultural rhetorics. The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab defines cultural rhetorics as the telling of stories about how the world works (Powell et al.); it is a methodological practice that challenges how academic disciplines have traditionally conceptualized culture "as an object of inquiry" that is static and open to interpretation (Powell et al.). In other words, object-oriented approaches to "culture" erase, omit, and isolate the actual bodies within culture. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall defines culture as a "set of practices" where people make sense of the world, arguing that meaning-making practices have real effects on the social organization of everyday life (3). We

situate rhetorics of the flesh in dialogue with cultural rhetorics because these theoretical and methodological practices argue that the traces of the body, like the dirt under our mothers' fingernails, have the capacity to re-story and reconfigure dominant narratives about migrants and mothers. Through a rhetoric of the flesh, we challenge a dominant culture that underestimates the power of story and the power of the migrant narrative. Our essay elucidates a queer methodological practice, which queer of color and performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes as the “remaking and rewriting of a dominant script” (23). In a similar vein, cultural rhetorics and rhetorics of the flesh tell a different story that challenges the rhetorics of the U.S. empire. As Daisy Levy proposes, cultural rhetorics pushes for transdisciplinarity as a methodological practice, positioning the body as a site of knowledge (8-9).

Cognizant of the problems that Gayatri Spivak's essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” poses for theories that attempt to speak for or let the subaltern speak, we insist on a rhetorics of the flesh that engages the body as a site of knowledge (78). Such rhetorics of the flesh enable us to analyze normative discourses about migrant mothers and disrupt anti-immigrant rhetoric that renders migrant mothers as always already criminal and abject. In positing the body as a site of knowledge, we ask: how can a rhetorics of the flesh *re-story* the criminalization of migrant mothers in the U.S.? (Driskill, *Asegi Stories*, 4) And what can this queer retelling reveal about the embodiment of migrant, intergenerational histories? Ultimately, rhetorics of the flesh enables us to see queer paths and queer pasts. It dislodges the heteronormative and racist rhetorical forces of anti-immigrant legislation and allows us to imagine an elsewhere within academia—expanding the intellectual space necessary to “make the world bigger” (Herrera y Lozano).

Structural Inequalities and the Criminalization of Latina Migrants

U.S. homonationalist rhetoric plays a central role in the creation of anti-immigrant legislation whereby mothers of color are blamed for social inequalities; and thus, those rhetorics create a cultural and political discourse that invisibilizes the role of the state in the creation of these structural conditions. Because this essay focuses on our queer retellings about our migrant mothers' labor, it is grounded in transnational feminist theory that equally informed our growing understanding of their (im)material conditions. Rhetorical forces, as we understand them, have material and violent effects on migrant mothers.

Gender and migration literature demonstrates how immigration and welfare reform policies of the 1990s worked to extract labor from poor migrant women while criminalizing their bodies. For example, Grace Chang identifies how cultural and political structures disproportionately target poor migrant women's mobility within the U.S. neoliberal imagination. As Chang argues

in *Disposable Domestic*s, immigrant women's reproduction is rhetorically imagined as a threat to the national body (4). In connection to the disproportionate criminalization of migrant women, Lynn Fujiwara sheds light on how the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) functioned to limit Asian and Latina migrant's access to citizenship, safe working conditions, and social services through nativist discourse (128-130). Neoliberal legislation such as PRWORA relies on the discourse of "personal responsibility" to privatize public resources away from those who most need them, namely migrant mothers and their children.

Martha D. Escobar goes on to describe the racialized policies of criminalization in the U.S. against Latina migrants and writes that Latina sexualities are "constructed as racialized national threats" (11). Furthermore, Escobar writes that migrant mothers' "irrecuperability is made viable because their origins are outside the US nation-state and their entrance is consigned to the realm of (il)legality since the dominant imagination equates the figure of the (im)migrant to that of the 'illegal'" (5). Such "irrecuperability" subjects migrant women to precarious working conditions and makes their access to citizenship impossible. In addition to the criminalization of migrant women, Tapia alerts us the rhetoric utilized in popular media, politics, and law to blame mothers for social inequalities; and thus, it creates a cultural and political discourse that invisibilizes the role of the state in the creation of these structural conditions (51).

In spite of migrant women's labor for the nation, their own bodies and sexualities have historically been regulated through eugenic rhetorics and policies where their labor, and reproductive capacities, are controlled by the state. The recent film *No Más Bebés* directed by Renee Tajima-Peña (2015) captures/documents the ways institutions of power control the bodies of Latinas. The film connects issues of gender with eugenics in the U.S. by providing testimonios from the mothers of the 1975 civil rights lawsuit against the University of Southern California Medical Center. This lawsuit brought visibility to the forced sterilization of Latinas in the 1960s and 70s. Overall, images, literature, and film on gender and migration provide historical and theoretical accounts of the ways U.S. anti-immigrant discourse "obscures the fact that the modern family—as an offspring of imperialism—was always an institution structured by and productive of inequalities based on gender, race, class" (Tapia 51). Such literature productively maps the effects of gendered U.S. racist rhetorics against migrant mothers and serves as a starting point for our own rhetorical engagement as we deconstruct our experiences as children of migrant mothers.

As a contribution to the literature on gender, sexuality, and international migration, a rhetorics of the flesh maps the memories of our mothers' stories and our eye-witness accounts of the

“traces” of their working conditions on their bodies. Traces that include smells, scars, and pain, all of which speak to the title of our piece: the dirt under my mother’s fingernails.

Queer Retellings and Textual Intimacies

“Learning happens through our bodies, through embodied practice, through doing.”

-Qwo-Li Driskill (*“Decolonial Skillshares”* 57).

For our mothers, learning also happened through forced migrations, land dispossession, sexual violence, and inhumane labor conditions. Through our discussion of the body as a story, we posit that a rhetorics of the flesh reveals traces of violence on the migrant body. Thinking through rhetorics of the flesh is a queer decolonial practice that enables us to offer a *re-storying* of the colonized migrant body (Driskill, *Asegi Stories*, 4). A story that occurs both on the body and below the skin; a “happening” to the body. A body that sheds its skin. A body that knows from within—visceral knowledge. With the permission of our mothers, we discuss rhetorics of the flesh through their stories of migration, labor, and parenting, which offers an important contribution to academic discourses of queerness, heteronormativity, and cultural rhetorics.

Through centering the body, rhetorics of the flesh is a counterpoint to the criminalization of migrant mothers explicit in today’s popular media, heteronormative anti-immigrant legislation, and what Nicholas De Genova calls *the deportation regime* (2010). These structural conditions and embodied realities necessitate a queer retelling, and contestation, of the material realities of Latina migrant mothers and their everyday experiences. In this next section, we offer our mothers’ stories and our own reflections as the theory that we call rhetorics of the flesh: embodied practices of meaning-making that present opportunities for a nuanced analysis of migrant kinship structures, a critique of labor exploitation, and a turn to the senses as a means to remember and retell.

El cuerpo es una historia y tiene historias que contar.

“For our bodies to be sites of theory, they must be honored as sites of desire.”

-Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano (*“What Courses Through My Veins”*).



Figure 3. Image of Sandra Elizabeth Cartagena de Zecena receiving an appreciation recognition award for her work at a Washington State Inspire Development center, Pasco, Washington, 2017.

Ruben: Where to begin? I could start with a story about the time when the big open-secret in my family was “revealed.” Or the time when my mom told my dad that she would not leave El Salvador without both of her children. But instead, I want to start with a scene that I remember thoroughly and mainly through my senses. I was in middle school working on homework when my mom came home, and she was emphatically relieved to be out of work. She was a line worker whose job was to cut out the rotten parts of a potato, sort them, and do so under a quick pace. She sat at the kitchen table and told me that her supervisor threw a potato at her because she could not keep up with the speed of the line. And because she was undocumented, she did not report this incident out of fear that she would be fired, or much worse, reported to la migra. As I listened to her story, I looked and tended to her hands. They were usually swollen from long periods of cutting potatoes. These are hands that have been marked by the experiences of migration and agricultural labor. It was these swollen hands that were always there to encourage me in my pursuit of higher education. My undocumented mom, her loving

hands, were reduced to body parts at the factory that day, and all I was able to do was listen to her story.

I recount this story because I remember the touch of my mother's hands, the smell of potatoes on her hair, the sound of her voice, and the resilience that she continues to embody. Her story elucidates a non-normative and gendered critique of power that invokes the field of queer theory. In his articulation of "Quare" as a modality of knowing that differs from the term "queer," performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson asks: "what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed, where the body is the site of trauma?" (5). Johnson challenges 'queer' due to its lack of intersectional analysis; thus, situating his piece within the broader field of queer of color critique. The title for his essay is indicative of queer of color material realities, and I thus reflect on his piece to make sense of my mother's story. As he notes, he learned about Quare, a queer of color analytic, from his grandma. And it is my mother who taught me that structural critiques of power can emerge from the body. In my retelling of her story, I am brief. I refuse to make my mom a spectacle of violence, and there are details that I keep to myself. However, this retelling, a queer retelling, shows that for my mom, the "American Dream" is defined in the moment that a factory supervisor threw a potato at her. Asking to extract more labor from her migrant body, this was a dehumanizing action aimed at reminding my mom of the precarious conditions that structure migrancy. And in particular, the gendered labor of undocumented Latina migrant mothers. While there are no easy answers to this story, I recognize that my mother's action, a lack of action, was a strategic act that allowed her to keep her job but also enabled a strong critique of the American Dream.

The rotten parts of the potato, lo desechable as Diana Taylor remarks, act as a metaphor in this story for Latina migrant mothers and their labor ("Performing Ruins" 22). So I ask: how can my mother's hands represent both violence and refusal? And more abruptly, how has the story about Latina migrants been confined to stories of criminality? In asking these questions I am wary of the "heroic" narrative that this story may present, as my mother is no longer undocumented and currently works as a family advocate for a migrant seasonal Head-Start program in Washington State. But my mother's story, and the story of her body, is complex and exists in the in-between spaces of the "good" and "bad" immigrant. Furthermore, in my use of memory through the senses, I posit a queer way of discussing and retelling my mother's story, one that refuses to reenact scenes of violence but also looks at the wounds that migration has inflicted. Refusing to heal and refusing to cause more violence, I reflect on this story because it challenges hegemonic framings of Latina migrants and allows me to think about ways of surviving that, in Johnson's language, quare our conceptions of migration.

Alejandra: I have to admit: I have mommy issues. I go back and forth with my feelings for her. She has healed me and hurt me. That being said, I know she did the best she could, and that's all you can do as a parent. Especially after my dad left, and abandoned my mom with six young children, I see my mom as the woman who fed us, clothed us, and saved us. Everything was for us. Sacrifice and duty were constant messages in our traditionalist family. The sacrificial mother who puts her children's desires, and her man's desires, before her own. This anti-feminist narrative in patriarchal and nationalist cultures is in part what makes the lives of women and mothers susceptible to domestic and labor abuse.



Figure 4. *Tomasita Balderas-Hermosillo, with her cat, Lucille. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2019.*

An odor triggers memories of my mom coming home in the early morning from working overnights at the turkey factory in central Minnesota. I can't get that smell out of my head. It was the smell of sterilized death, like attempting to purifying old blood, or something like a

morgue. Sometimes it makes me sick to think about it. The white garments that she would wear for her job would be stained in pinks and reds. Her brown rubber boots always caused her feet and back aches.

The factories looked like some sort of airport hangar, and at night the lights would illuminate the nearby neighborhood of trailer homes in which many other migrant families lived.

I thought she was fierce and powerful with her knife sharpening tool, and I imagined her with large knives at work. Though I didn't want to think about what they were doing to the animals at the factory she worked at. My mom worked at two meat factories: one a turkey factory and the other a chicken factory.

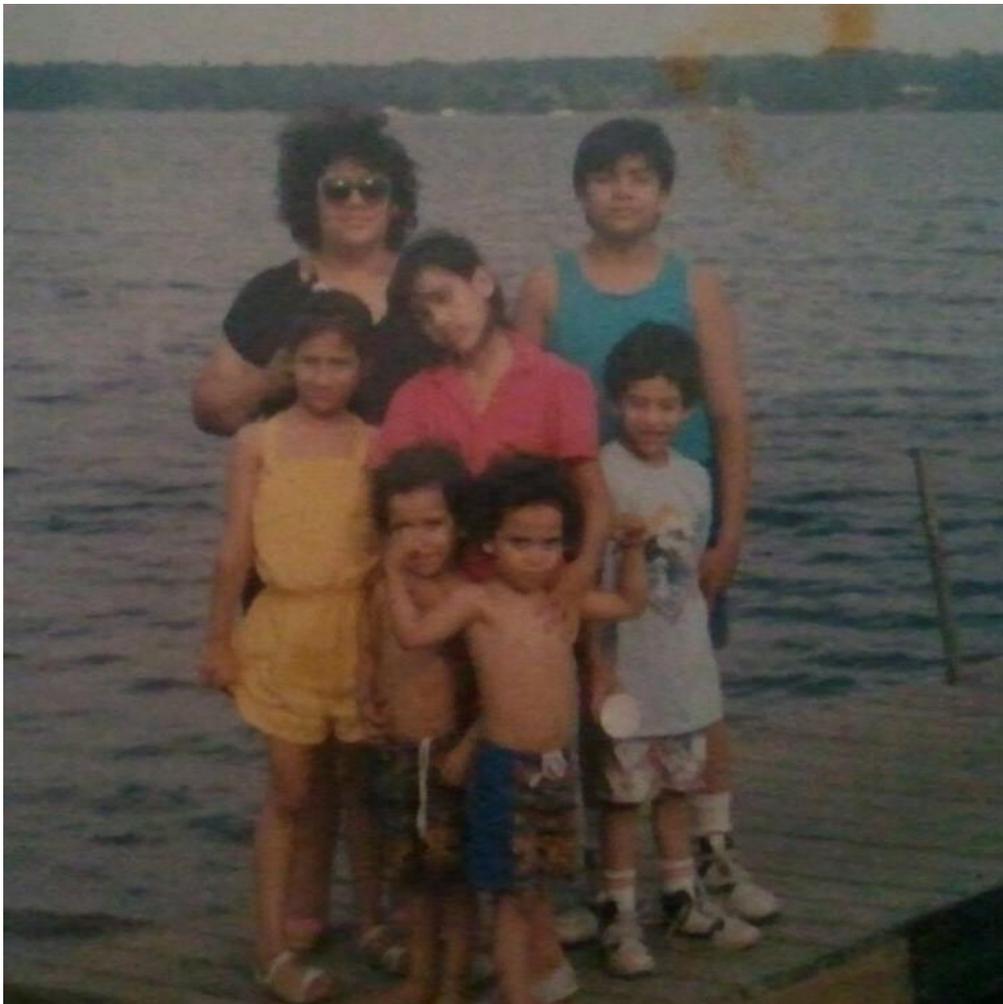


Figure 5. Tomasita Balderas-Hermosillo with her children. Detroit Lakes, Minneapolis, 1990.

The turkey and chicken factories were, in many ways, an economic solution for a lot of the migrant families in the area. My mom and dad worked there; so did my older brother and older sister. Our family friends and *conocidos* also worked at the factory. It became a hub to socialize and central to the city. Our lives revolved around the factory.

I remind myself that the work I do in no way comes close to the degree of physical exhaustion and pain my mother endured in order to feed her family and pay the bills. She was on her feet all day for 8 hours, unless she worked overtime, which seemed like an ironic blessing to get to work 12+ hours at a job like this.

Her labor didn't just include factory work. It was her scratching my head and humming my favorite rancheras, it was cleaning hotel rooms, and it was making frijoles and tortillas de harina from scratch. Why can't her parenting, the masa under her fingernails, be celebrated as much as her ability to pay the bills? My mother is not just her labors or her ability to give birth; she's a sensuous woman first, with dreams and desires. I recall her love of *bailes* and after parties, and the times when she wiped the sweat from my brow after I'd given birth.

Sitting, typing this in an air conditioned library at a research one university seems so far away from those early mornings when I would see my mom come home from work, just in time to see us off when the school bus would pick us up in the mornings.

Amasando: Performing and Laboring Relational/Embodied Theory

Stories untold remain lodged in the throat, tightened

Always present, impatiently waiting to be undone

Spontaneous gestures of the body

Choking on tears because words refuse to come up.

To Surface.

Through gendered anti-immigrant discourse, the story that is told about Latina mothers is articulated as always already deviant, excessive, and burdensome on the nation. Those narratives are imprinted on the body. Yet, through a retelling and re-storying of our own mothers' migration narratives, we have bridged a gap between greco-roman centered rhetorics and corporeal realities (Juárez 13; Hinojosa 5). We do so with deep acknowledgement that our families and communities already have rhetorical practices that speak to our unique experiences. In this collaboration, we embody Anzaldúa's theory of *amasamiento* as "an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (103).

This rhetorical practice of the amasamiento of re-storying is like the kneading of masa (103). It is tiresome, repetitive, and physically demanding, and it leaves the same physical and metaphorical traces. For example, working in the garden or in farm fields or labores causes direct contact with the soil, and the dirt lodges itself under your fingernails. It is this “dirt underneath my mother’s fingernails” that we are invested in. Furthermore, amasando causes direct contact with all the organic materials. For example, the corn, manteca, salt, and boiling water: the masa, the dough. It stays under your fingernails and acts as another layer of knowledge and cultural memory. Amasando — working through embodied rhetorics as children of working class migrant mothers — hurts. In our case, this retelling process has been emotionally and intellectually exhausting. It is performative and methodological in the sense that amasando is a cultural practice with cultural memories (Taylor *The Archive*, 82).

We are invested in re-storying gendered labor, such as cooking tortillas and pupusas, to give visibility to migrant women’s labor as a feminist rhetorical practice of survival that refuses to engage with the traditional canon of rhetoric. It was, after all, our migrant mothers who taught us how to teach rhetoric not as static, but as relational and embodied.

A Queer Turn, Indeed: On Performing a Rhetorics of the Flesh at NACCS 2018

In the following and final section, we turn to our experiences presenting this working essay, “rhetorics of the flesh,” at an academic conference to analyze the possibilities, difficulties, and limits of sharing embodied knowledge. A “rhetorics of the flesh” is a scholarly and academic thinking/feeling process; therefore, it makes sense to include the academic conference presentation as part of this intellectual/emotional process. Here we engage our collaborative writing as a queer retelling full of world-building possibilities.



Figure 6. NACCS Panel titled "Encuentros in Translation: Sharing Queer Knowledges across Borders y Lenguas". Sandibel Borges, Sebastian Ferrada, Ruben Zecena, and Alejandra I. Ramirez. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2018

For the 2018 National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the theme was "The Queer Turn." For us, this theme implies a movement that constitutes the work of feminist "wondering" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 180-181). It weaves in and out and together; we wondered/wandered around the rooms of the conference hotel, the indigenous lands of Minnesota and the Dakota peoples, and even with the table at which we sat and presented. We were "moved" by the theme and purposefully decided to include a performative element to our paper presentation. In the spirit of the "queer turn" and feminist wonderings, like a dance, we decided to maneuver through our essay and to read a paragraph each, and that we would go back and forth, exchanging voices, in a kind of literary dance. A queer reading or performance of our collaborative writing process that is modeled after the cultural rhetorics "storying" tradition (Powell, Levy, et al.). We had first performed this paper in a small group setting on our campus. At the presentation white students were our main audience, with the exception of one queer Chicana professor. When it came to the part about retelling our mothers' stories, we both cried. We cried for one another, and we each cried for our mothers. The tears came as a surprise, but were a deshaogo and cleansing cry.

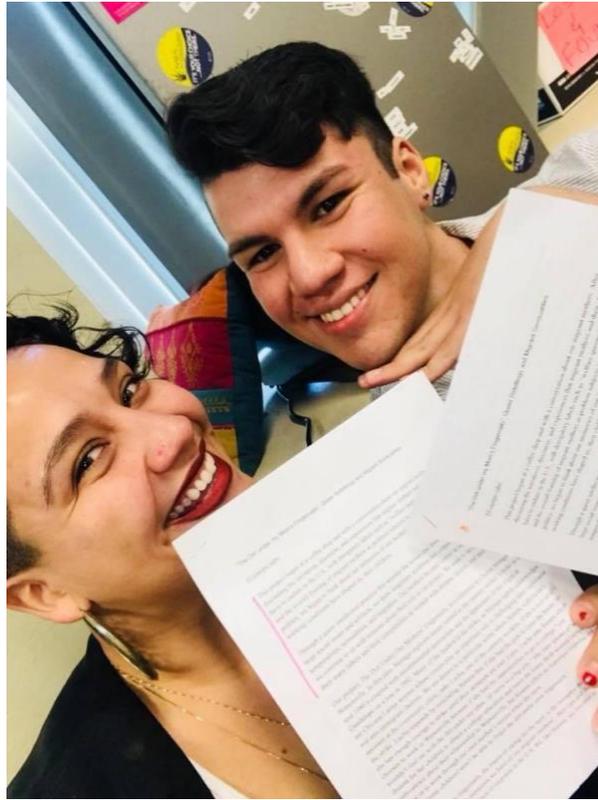


Figure 7. Image of Alejandra Irene Ramírez and Ruben Zecena, “before the tears,” presenting this paper at the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 2018.

At NACCS, we performed this paper as part of the panel: “Encuentros in Translation: Sharing Queer Knowledges Across Borders y Lenguas,” which invoked queer couplings and queer affinity forms: the meeting together of bodies, closeness of proximity, friendship, and intimacy in scholarship. We practiced right before and told ourselves that this time we wouldn’t cry. *¡No llores!* We joked. Prior to the conference, we discussed how the university has taught us not to cry. Patriarchy has taught us not to cry. *Femme-phobia* has taught us not to cry. Visible emotion challenges the objectivist tradition, within which subjectivism and embodiment are not acknowledged as valid epistemologies or ways of knowing. The body that cries is feminine—not “civil” or “respectable” or “logical”—because it wonders and wanders too much. It feels too much.

And so we took deep breaths. And our voices sounded strong and bold. Our mothers would be proud. The larger group made up of our friends, colleagues, and esteemed professors and mentors was comforting. It also challenged us to be vulnerable, as the piece hailed us to embrace the powers and politics of emotion. The atmosphere in the room was heavy, almost palpable. The immateriality of emotion in a way created an affective bond. The audience was in

sync as we performed. Some were teary eyed, the room was silent with occasional sniffs from audience members. Bodies were leaning forward, listening. We opened the panel by asking for permission to be open.

Though we had promised ourselves that we wouldn't cry, when it came to telling their stories, again, our voices cracked. Our speech slowed. We had to pause, inhale and exhale. Tears burst, so heavy that they dropped onto the printed essay. *Se nos salieron hasta los mocos!* We were ugly crying! But we pushed and pushed through the nudos en la garganta, until we finally finished. To our surprise, the performance continued with engagement from the audience, hugs, pictures, and a sense of affirmation post Q&A. Afterwards, audience members approached us. A group of high school students came up to us and told us that our performance reminded them of their mothers coming home after work. The performance continues as we write, months later.

We realize we quite literally poured our hearts onto the writing. We could not have come to this conclusion without having performed this collaboration, and thus performing a rhetoric of the flesh. Still, we ask: What do/can we make of our tears and our corporeal responses?

Queremos Bailar: Dando vueltas, back to the body.

"Queer-inclusive scholarship should set amygdalas on fire as you resist the push, the tug, the prodding of the boundaries of your imagination. Queer-inclusive scholarship should hurt a little, it should be hard, because making the world larger is hard. And what is the point of scholarship if not to make the world larger?" -Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano ("What Courses Through My Veins").

Due to homophobic violence in the public sphere, for many queer subjects the academic conference does not end at the last panel; it continues on the dance floor at the nearest queer club. In a sense, our bodies are oriented or gravitate toward similar spaces. As Ahmed contends, "Sexuality itself can be considered a spatial formation not only in the sense that bodies inhabit sexual spaces...but also in the sense that bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space" (*Queer Phenomenology* 67). The ambiente, the environment, is palpable at the queer club because it is a space of celebration that permits us to be ourselves.

There is no need to "straighten up," as Justin Torres reminds us in his poetic rendering of the Pulse shooting ("In praise of Latin Night"), or professionalize our bodies in order to feel liberated—this is the "how" of what Sara Ahmed calls a queer phenomenology. It is through rhetorics of the flesh that we understand such inhabitation of space as venue for embodied knowledge and collaborative meaning-making. This liberating and scholarly dance for us is

about how bodies are oriented toward each other, how they come together in motion, in tempo with one another in liberatory ways. We remembered to avoid over-simplifying or romanticizing “dancing,” and honor the threats against queer joy. The Pulse Nightclub shooting reminds us that for the ideologies of homonationalism there is something that is threatening about queer of color joy coming together in celebration of queerness, liberation, and pleasure.

Similarly, we danced through our writing, thinking, remembering—back and forth, in circles, like cumbias, spinning, and returning. Even after our NACCS panel presentation, audience members noticed the dance and asked questions or approached us to comment on our back & forth presentation style and collaborative writing. A queer intellectual and embodied dance on paper, a textual intimacy, and a remembering or recalling moments of exuberance, pain, and resilience.

An act of e/motion, (e)motion.

We remember in our bodies and through our senses, the sweat from *jotería* night after NACCS conferences, just as we remember the smells and sights of the lives and labors of our migrant mothers. In the process of writing the essay, we shared queer affinities and difficulties but also stories of possibility. We realized that in the performance of co-creating meaning, there is a space for generative growth and new understandings. Our moms, whose seemingly impossible location within the immigrant rights movement (as demonstrated through immigration reform that continues to exclude them), make possible our refusal to be victimized and criminalized. Like the scene in the film *Selena*, where her mom teaches her to do the “washing machine,” our mothers teach us to make beauty out of seemingly impossible situations. Accordingly, we dance, write, and celebrate together as a liberatory praxis. The retelling of what we previously perceived as bad memories prompted us to conceive of our paper as a dance, one in which we share public space and hold hands with like-minded people. Through dancing we are able to learn from one another and continue writing, thinking, and remembering. We maintain a strong commitment to queer women of color feminisms, wherein intersectionality is central to making sense of how systems of oppression intersect in varying moments at the conference, the coffee shop, and the dance floor.

This is not a conclusion, but a joining of bodies with *sentimientos* and *conocimientos*. A continuation.

Aqui volvemos a empezar.



Figure 8. Alejandra Irene Ramirez and Ruben Zecena at Lucce Coffee Shop, Tucson, Arizona, 2016.

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