

A Fronterizo Father: (Con)Viviendo en los mundos del otro lado

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ABSTRACT

This memoir-like essay highlights the disruption of a relationship between a father and a son on the Texas-Mexico borderlands which is caused by immigration status, education, class, sexuality, and type of communication. The essay begins in a contemporary and key moment that transports the author to analyze his relationship with his father and pinpoint what it was like to grow on both side of the Frontera simultaneously. With the hopes of achieving the American Dream, the father of the author tries to fulfill the role of the breadwinner without realizing that the lack of nurturing language and not being able to live in the same country affected the relationship and the emotions of his child. This essay serves as a reminder of the psychological and emotional trauma that people on the borderlands endure in order to survive while being critical of the various geopolitical and social structures influencing these relationships. This essay aims to open conversations about the importance of fatherhood and fathering on the borderlands as a phenomenon, especially when the fathers fulfill this role while being physically and emotionally absent from a child's life.

KEY WORDS: *Fronterizo, Fatherhood, Masculinities, Borderlands, Intersectionality*

“So what about your father? Is he in the picture?”

A professor asked me this question in 2016 as we were driving to work at a coffee shop in Windsor, Canada. He was surprised that I was only speaking about my mother and was curious to know if I had a father. This question, born out of curiosity, carries much significance today, especially on the border. As we have seen for some time now, Latin American families continue to be separated by U.S. immigration policies. Our most recent mass displacement involves children who were sent for brighter futures, but have been physically, emotionally, and spiritually detained in Brownsville, Texas, a border town; “the Border Patrol said close to 200 people inside the facility were minors unaccompanied by a parent,” (ABC News). The opening question of this article becomes relevant to not only me, but also many fronterizos whose parents live or have lived on the other side of the border while they came to the United States for this same brighter future.

Although I will never understand the emotional and psychological trauma of being detained as a child for a “crime” I had no intention of committing, my story, like many other fronterizos, regarding family separation is not unfamiliar to border crossers. The history of Chicanas/os on the borderlands being stripped of their families is unfortunately a common occurrence since the early 20th century: “one of the dramatic events of the 1930s was the repatriation of large numbers of nonnaturalized Mexicans and some American citizens of Mexican descent,” (Meier and Ribera 1993, 153). One might even claim that the first accounts of this dehumanizing tradition of separation go back to when “the border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo,” (Anzaldúa 2007, 29). These separations, rooted in the political targeting of the borderlands, have happened for over a century due to our problematic and discriminatory immigration policies. My lack of reflexivity and understanding of these larger governmental systems impacting the border, at the time, led me to answer the question by saying, “My father and I don’t have the best relationship.”

In this brief essay I aim to explore my relationship with my father, which was formed across the divide between his residence in Tamaulipas, Mexico and our home in Texas where I have spent most of my life with my mom and brothers. Aside from this separation, immigration policy, socioeconomic status, and education have all disrupted, and sometimes temporarily severed, my family bonds. Thus, this memoir-style essay is inspired by Chicana feminist epistemologies such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Theory in the Flesh*; "a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity," (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, 19). Through this theory, I underscore the memories of my father and me as a vehicle to highlight developing masculine kinship on the border as we lived on both sides simultaneously. I particularly focus on my relationship with my father, both of us men, to understand the ways in which communication and love between a father/son is disrupted.

I focus on men because there is a gap in literature concerning male kinship and masculinity on the borderlands, especially fathers and sons who live in these border spaces. I identify my relationship with my father as semi-absent. He was physically present on the weekends, and he was financially supportive at all times. I also highlight sexuality to understand the pressures of performing masculinity on the eyes of a heteronormative father. This helps us think about the disruption of traditional Mexican male roles as they lead to other factors disrupting kinships.

I consciously engage in this topic from a critical perspective as a queer Chicano de la Frontera, from the Texas-Mexico border, especially after reading *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) by Edwidge Danticat while studying blurred genres with Ruth Behar. Danticat inspires me to think about the way in which, as a writer, I can weave the voices and experiences of my loved ones in order to situate them in larger context. Behar teaches me about the way in which I map my memories and give life to the people and the experiences I am trying to honor. In this case I use my voice and knowledge to interpret the lived experiences of my father as I witnessed them and gathered his testimonio years later.

My identity—first generation, Chicano, male, queer, fronterizo, and doctoral student—has allowed me to connect to the border in complex ways. I use fronterizo as an identity, in this essay, to stray away from Chicano or Mexican American and to talk about a person that travels and resides on both sides of the border whom is affected by both sides simultaneously. This has also allowed for me to see the way in which my father's identity—Mexican, male, heterosexual, working class, and from a farming family— informs his practices and beliefs when providing for his family.

I am particularly interested in the way in which intersectionality "has historically been applied to intersections of subordination. Recently, however, it is being used to study contradictory intersections, for example, when one social category (say, male gender) confers privilege and the other (say, nonwhiteness) is the basis for subordination," (Hurtado and Sinha 2016, 34). Through this contradiction of privileges, I view the way in which privilege somewhere can become oppression elsewhere; for example, being born in Mexico my father has a privilege that ends when his family migrates to the U.S. Therefore, in this essay I ask, how was my relationship with my father disrupted on the border? What factors impacted our family politics? And how can I understand fronterizo fathering from a perspective of radical love? I approach these questions by weaving memoir and historical accounts that navigate the economic, geographical, linguistic, emotional, and familial separation that my father and my family has endured to survive border separations.

To Father desde el otro lado

To understand the role of my father within my family, I begin by asking, what does it mean to be a father en la frontera? I think of my father as a padre and not a father, for he does not speak English and was born in Mexico. In Spanish padre has associations with the roles of being a man who has children or of being a priest; padre cannot be used as a verb. English, however, has at least seven definitions of fathering as an action. The broadest of these characterizes it as "perform[ing] the tasks or duties of a male parent; act[ing] paternally," (Dictionary.com). In Spanish, fathers hold responsibility and an identity that are fulfilled by assuming the male role in the familial relationship.

The father role is popularized with duties such as the breadwinner, protector, or leader of the family. However, in many cultures such as my own, the Mexican, fathering can be both a mixture of positive (financially responsible and protector) and negative (not knowing how to communicate with your children) attributes, “those with closer ties to Mexican or Latino culture and a lower socioeconomic status more often stressed being responsible and being a good provider over ‘spending time’ or ‘being a friend’ to children in their evaluations of the important components of the father role,” (Mirande 1997, 115).

I describe my father as a *fronterizo* father because *fronterizo* describes the experience of the coming and going and the uncertainty of building a stable family on one side or the other from the border. The *fronterizo* complicates fathering in a way that is affected by language, culture, geography, and citizenship.

The Road to Fatherhood

My father Sergio Barrera was born on July 4, 1966. He was born in my grandparent’s house in la Colonia Benito Juárez in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico, delivered by a midwife. His family called him Checo, and many years later, when he had his own businesses, he became Don Checo to his workers. He is the ninth child in a family of twelve, the youngest male. My grandparents had two houses: one in the city and the other on the ranch, both poorly made and with dirt floors. The rooms had four small beds, which had to sleep twelve children. They lived in the city house Monday through Friday so that the children could go to school, but Friday afternoon they would go to the ranch. My father and his siblings would take care of the sheep and cows as they were means of income. As a teen my father began milking goats and cows and helping my grandmother makes food to sell throughout other small ranches.

At the age of fourteen he finished middle school, but did not continue to high school. He wanted to be a physical education coach, since he was athletic and loved to swim, so he went directly to a university-like school in which he completed a physical education certificate. They did not require a high school diploma. On the first day he attended, he did not know that he needed to athletic wear, nor did his parents have money to buy him some. Everyone laughed at him because my dad showed up in jeans, a button-up shirt, western style hat, and boots. The teacher did not forgive his attire and made him exercise in boots. He tells me laughing, “nunca más me llevé las pinches botas,” (never again did I take those damned boots).

In 1986 his first trip to the U.S. occurred. He came to Florida to work picking peaches during that summer. He recalls being under the sun for long days, drenched in sweat and burned by the sun. At this time he was nineteen years old, and it was his first time away from his parents. Due to their poverty and the size of the family, they had never eaten peaches. During one of their work breaks he ate many. The juice of the sweet peach rolled down his cheeks and hairless chin. He was in peach heaven. But a couple of hours later his stomach began to ache; he had diarrhea. Shortly after, he and his sister began to feel homesick while looking at the stars, and they packed to return to Reynosa. They did not finish the picking season.

At age twenty-one, in 1987, he joined the local police department because he wanted to be a police officer. During the same time period, he met my mother at the *bailes* at the Congregación Garza at the Charco Escondido. The Charco Escondido was the ranch where my mother and her family lived and owned a house. My mother’s father had donated a piece of land in the corner so that the community could build a church. This congregation held a contest to choose the “Reina de la Iglesia” of the community, and whoever could raise the most money selling food and drinks for the church would win. My father’s youngest sister Gaby was running, and their family was selling food to raise funds. During the day the participants and their families would sell food and also race horses and at night they had big *bailes*. My father met my mother, Mayra López, since they both loved to dance, at the community *bailes*. Later that year, my mother went with her family to a *quinceañera*, where she found my father and his family; they danced throughout the entire night.

My mother worked at a video store, and my father would go to rent movies for his sister Gaby. On one of those nights, my father took my mother home after work, and he asked her out. My father earned his allowance by selling tamales every week, and with that money he could take my mother out

on dates. My parents dated for a year and a couple of months, and then got married. On March 19, 1989 my mother wore a simple beige dress, and my father was wearing a navy-blue western suit with a white hat and boots. Their wedding was held in my mother's living room. The wedding was small because my father's uncle had passed away not long before, and his family were still mourning. After the wedding, my mother thought that she was going to get a honeymoon; instead, my dad bought them their own small house. It was a one-bedroom house, and my mother recalls going to sleep on a mattress that had metal bedsprings coming out of it. Her wedding night ended disastrously, when she cut her calf with one of the springs. She was bleeding and crying. Now when she describes that night by jokingly says, "Se fue de luna de miel a luna de sangre esa noche!" The honeymoon changed that night to a blood moon.

In 1991 my parents had a *carnicería*, a meat market, called *Carnicería México*. Later, they acquired a bigger meat market that also had a *tienda de abarrotes*, a grocery store, called "J y R." In 1992, the year that I was born in, they built a bar, where my dad currently works. They also added a *casino infantil* (party rental place) and some apartments. Fast forward to 2003: my father moved to the U.S. because crime in Mexico increased.

Staging Unwilling Separation

My parents began their vision of the "American Dream" when they visited the U.S. for the first time and they compared the lifestyles in Mexico and in the U.S. My mother used to visit the U.S. with her aunt who would spoil her. Therefore, my mother's thoughts of the U.S. were associated with materiality. She loved that they could drive on paved roads, go shopping in air-conditioned stores, and sleep in a house with air conditioning. My father, on the other hand, as previously mentioned, came to the U.S. to work; therefore, his thoughts were fixated on the wages despite it being arduous work, the ability of reaching out to medical or law enforcement help, and the cleanliness of the streets and businesses. Through similar, but also distinct, points of view, my parents thought about what made the U.S. better than their homeland, and when my mother was pregnant with me, there was no doubt that I would be born in the U.S.

I was born in McAllen, Texas in 1992, after my mother had spent several days sleeping on the floor of my aunt's house. My father decided to remain in Reynosa, until it was time for my mother to go into labor. Then my family went back to Reynosa. In 1996, my brother Erick was born in the same way; my mother slept at my aunt's house, and my mother had planned to return to Mexico with him after his birth. However, Erick had bronchitis as a newborn, and he needed medical assistance in order to breathe. The doctors told my mother that he might not live much longer and that he needed urgent medical care. At the same time as my brother's illness, my father began to look for places to build a home in Pharr, Texas. In 1997 the Rio Grande Valley was predominantly farmland, extremely different from the economic blossoming we have witnessed recently. The same year my father began building our home.

Our house took over a year to build. My father earned Mexican wages in Reynosa and then had to convert them to dollars. The economic disparity was enormous. The peso had more value in 1996-1997—the years in which he was building our house—than it currently does. According to the Macrotrends website, a dollar was worth between 7.4 and 8.2 pesos in 1996-1997, and a 2018 dollar can be exchanged for 18.59 pesos. The peso hit a record low of 21.58 in January of 2017. Despite that, we can see that ever since Salinas de Gortari, a Mexican president from 1988 to 1994 responsible for drastic economic shifts, and the North American Free Trade Agreement signed in 1994, "the devaluation of the peso and Mexico's dependency on the U.S. have brought on what the Mexicans call *la crisis*," (Anzaldúa 2007, 32). This devaluation affected our family due to the fact that my father, even in 2018, continues to work in Mexico and earn pesos, which we later have to convert to dollars to sustain our home in Texas. Therefore, money has been more difficult to acquire. As a family, we have learned to appreciate and understand our economic differences living in two countries. In Mexico we could be having a middle-class life, but in the U.S. we continue to struggle to pay the light bill.

While I was in first grade, in 1998-1999, we slept on a mattress on the floor of my aunt's living room, so that I could claim her address and attend school in Texas. From the time I was in first grade, we lived

in Texas with my aunt from Monday to Friday, then left for Mexico on Friday afternoon, and came back Sunday night or Monday morning. I remember my mother waiting outside Palmer Elementary in Pharr, Texas many Friday afternoons. She had been anxiously waiting for us to return to Mexico, like every weekend. She would tie the rod that would hold the army green shower curtain in her bathroom to the back of our truck and would hang it with our clothes. Sometimes she would even have my father's clothes since she would bring them to wash, dry, and iron before returning them to him on the weekend.

Ever since I was a child, crossing the border meant seeing my father. I associate crossing el puente, the bridge, with seeing him in Mexico. I also associate the colorful enlarged butterflies on top of the "Pharr International Bridge" sign as a symbol of our return journey and the fact that he could not come to visit us in the U.S. Although many people in Mexico know the common phrase el otro lado, the other side, my other side was Mexico and it was a reencuentro, reunion, with not only my father but also Spanish and my homeland.

My brother Erick and I resented my father for staying behind. Many times, I cried because I did not want to leave Mexico because that meant that we would not see him for over four days. I would ask him why he would not go to Texas more often, since by the end of my first grade year we were living in our own house, but he would always say because of work, "por el trabajo, m'ijo!" I will not say that my father never went to Texas to spend a night, but the times that occurred were slim in comparison to the times that we crossed the bridge to go to him. Crossing the bridge became something we got used to quickly, but we never understood where home was. Was home where I lived during the week to go to school, or was it where my father lived? I could not say that home was where we had a house because we had one on each side of the border. As a child, I did not understand the complexity of my fronterizo identity.

As my brother and I grew, our relationships drastically changed when we went to Reynosa. It was not enough to just see him because many times we saw little of him. Since my father ran a billar, a bar, the weekends were his busiest and longest workdays. Therefore, every weekend my father would give us money so that my mother could take us to the movies or somewhere else. Sometimes, he would go out with us on Sundays, but if he did, we then had to wake up earlier on Monday to cross the bridge in our good clothes and ready to be dropped off at school.

Going to Mexico became less about my father and more about going to the ferias, palenques, plazas, and sometimes de paseo a Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, a neighboring state to Tamaulipas, where my father lives. Since we were fine with that, it became a way for my father to keep us happy and entertained and also out of his way so that he could work efficiently and make enough spending money to give my mother to last us through the next week in the U.S. Not having my father present for five days out of the week and having him for only a couple of hours during the weekend meant that I never fully knew my father. I knew that he worked at a billar. I knew that he liked to bet money during las carreras de caballos, horse racing, and peleas de gallos, cock fighting, but he was always a mystery to me.

This mystery distanced me from my father especially because I was not as attracted to the bar and gambling as he was. I did not enjoy going to his parent's ranch because it was too hot to be without air-conditioning, and we did not enjoy playing in the dirt, something that he would tell us to do with our cousins. I preferred to be indoors, coloring on the floor or painting, but in Mexico that was never a possibility. He wanted me to be outdoors, and I wanted to continue the things I would do while I lived in Texas. My mother in Texas did not allow us to be outside, talking to strangers, playing with dirt or on the street. My mother became my role model—the one from whom I learned everything since we lived with her most of the time. She would show up to our awards assemblies, attend my dance performances and help us with homework. My father, on the other hand, would tell me not to be a faggot "no seas maricón," when I would tell him I did not want to ride the pony he had purchased for my 8th birthday. He would say stop acting gay, "deja de andear joteando," when all I wanted was to be dancing to the music of popular novelas for children like *Complices al rescate* and *Aventuras en el tiempo*. These insults hurt me profoundly. As a ten-year-old, I had just fallen in love with dance and I saw that as an artistic form of expression that brought joy to not only my mother but also others that watched me perform. My father rarely saw me perform and as a child I never knew if it was because he did not have the time or he did not want to see me dance with other girls on a stage.

These unkind words that I heard many times as a child scarred me and I began to build walls near him. Every time I would see him there was a voice in my head that would remind me of my queerness as a child. I did not want to speak to him because my mannerisms were very effeminate and I felt monitored at all time. As a result, I spoke to him less because the things I had passion for, he did not approve. I especially found it shocking when my mother told me that they had met dancing because that was my passion. Except I never danced with girls when I performed, I only danced next to them. In *All about Love bell hooks* states that “many men in our culture never recover from childhood unkindnesses,” (hooks 2000, 23). She references the African American community, but I also relate to this as a Chicano because the abuse that I was endured as a child took me many years to come to peace with. Often times I thought, maybe if I had been raised in Mexico I would have been manlier or straight for I would have had my father to look up to instead of just my mother. Sometimes I questioned if I would ever make him proud because I did not like the ranch lifestyle or anything outdoors like he did and our taste in music and clothing were different.

Despite this psychological trauma through his insults, I knew that there was something that I could always get from my father: money. If I needed something for school or clothes, no matter how effeminate it was, he would not think about it. If he would not give it to me, then my mother would work her magic so that I could get what I wanted, even if the request seemed absurd. My brother Erick and I began seeing my father more as a walking bank than we did as someone who was supposed to be a male role model. The language that we spoke as father and sons was not one of love and kinship but rather one of money and materiality.

To further complicate things, there was also the fact that our communication was disrupted once I began to acquire a second-language in elementary school. At first, I was labeled an LEP (Limited English Proficiency) student, and when my classmates found out about that my classmates listened carefully to the way I spoke with hopes of finding something they could mock. I was placed in the Dual Language Program at Pharr-San-Juan-Alamo Independent School District, in which I learned English and Spanish at the same time. This later became an advantage because I would complain about my father to my younger brother while my father was in the room since I knew he would not understand us. However, I began to know more English than I did Spanish. After all, the exams that we took in order to advance to the next grade level were always in English.

The Spanish that we began to learn was on the formal side of the spectrum and the teachers were aware of how we spoke at all times. Although I knew the working class Spanish of border dwellers, I strayed away from it as the school prepared us to be fluent in the more formal vernacular; colloquialisms were not part of the curriculum. My father, because he left school at age fifteen, had an extremely colloquial Spanish. He would use *maldiciones*, bad words, and things that only people with ranching backgrounds knew. For example, he would say, “*Me duele la paleta*,” which in English translates to “my lollipop hurts.” What he wanted to say was, “*me duele la scapula*,” or the shoulder blade. He never knew the difference, but I did, and as a child I would correct him. I knew that he did not approve of my queerness but I would not think twice to let him know that I did not approve his Spanish. I corrected him many times but I knew that he was not going to change. However, by correcting him I felt like I was better than him, even if that educational advantage was a result of his sacrifice living in Mexico.

My father would call us *cabrones*, *huevones*, or even *arrastrados* which were all insulting variations for calling my brother and me lazy. Once again, because that Spanish was not acceptable at school and because my mother did not appreciate such language, I would feel embarrassed when I would go out with my dad. I wanted him to behave the way I thought a father should, and that meant to not scream, not say bad words, and to act seriously and not take everything as a joke. My mother did not scream, say bad words or joke, and I wanted my father to do the same. He refused to behave as my mother, especially with his humor.

It was not until I studied Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas Pan American I learned from Anzaldúa that Chicanas/os speak “a language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés but both. We speak a patois, a forked language, a variation of two languages,” (Anzaldúa 2007, 77). This to me meant that colloquialisms and even curse words in English that had been transformed to sound like Spanish were all dynamics of living on the borderlands. However, as a child and especially as a young

adolescent, these groserías, in addition to the Mexican male humor for which my father is famously known, irritated me because he represented a working class and a tone of vulgarity that I was trying to escape through my education. His language reminded me of the things I did not want to become therefore I focused more on school to think of myself as above those that did not have education and him in particular. I have since then analyzed why I continued to pursue education and realized that I was harming myself by thinking myself as better than anyone, but more so my father whom made things possible for me to have the ability to study more.

My father loves to enact his humor anywhere, but he enjoys doing it in public spaces or around strangers. One time while we were at home and his friends were over he was talking about a friend that they all had in common. The lady was embracing her natural curls but my father always made fun of her. He would say that she looked like her boiler had exploded on her face, “a esa vieja le explotó el boiler y no se fijó cuando salió.” Every time I hear this I could not believe that he was talking about her. I was so embarrassed that he would be critiquing a woman for her hairstyle and more so that he was mocking her. I took most offense at the fact that he called her, a stranger, vieja and not a señora, both of which in English could be translated ‘older woman,’ though in Spanish vieja has a negative connotation.

It was not until graduated school and I read Jason de León’s *Land of Open Graves* that I realized that my father’s humoristic way of expressing himself likely helps him to cope with the anxieties of the border and specifically monetary issues. Another recurring joke in our house is always about money because my mother has never had a job in her life aside from being a beloved mother to my brothers and me. My father jokingly disapproves of her failure to generate income. My mother is now a U.S. resident, and ever since she became one, she has been saying that she will get a job. It has been over five years, and my father still asks her about this supposed job. When she complains about not having enough money, my father often replies, “pues si tuvieras buen cuerpo de perdido pudieras irte a bailar al tébol, pero con ese cuerpo de lavadora, ¿quién te paga, viejita?” My dad tells my mother that if she had a nice body she could go be a stripper, but with her washing-machine-type body, he doubts any one would pay. Although my father would never approve of my mother working, much less as a stripper, he jokes with her about using body and womanhood as a source of income. When I was younger, I hated that he would disrespect my mother because she would get mad and say, “ya vas a empezar a chingar.”

As previously mentioned Jason De Leon’s text speaks specifically about the way in which Mexican men use humor as a way to cope with tough times, just like my father: The joking that occurs on many occasions described in this book happens within, and is shaped by, not just ‘Mexican working-class culture’ but also the systems of federal immigration policy and capitalism. Migrant humor can highlight the tensions experienced during various parts of the crossing process, soften the blows of border enforcement and social marginalization in Mexico and the United States, and help people stay positive and focused. (2015, 92)

When I read that passage, I immediately thought about how my father would make a joke about anything. When I asked him why he makes jokes even at tough times, he told me that if he would take life so seriously that he would have already been screwed over, “ya me hubiera llevado la chingada.” Although my father does not joke about immigration because he is still saddened that he cannot be in the U.S. with his family, his “working class culture” language serves as a way to make humorous critiques of capitalism and the need for every member in the family to make money in order to survive. Especially, this “humor” attacks my mom for having the privilege of working legally in the U.S. and getting paid in dollars but not doing anything about it. Therefore, his humoristic attacks on my mom are reflections of him not being able to provide enough.

For many of us, surviving in the U.S. means gaining a better education, and my father is aware of that, however, he is not aware of the demands that the university has for its students. When I began my undergraduate career in fall of 2010, I was on track to becoming a lawyer. My father had moved to the U.S. in 2003, as previously mentioned, and remained here until I was in graduate school. My father did not want me to struggle financially, as he had, and he knew that I did not like to be in the sun, without air-conditioning, or doing manual work. Therefore, he supported my education as long as he could control what I studied. Throughout my high school years, he had convinced me that becoming a lawyer would secure financial stability and could also help the family with immigration issues so that they could live in the U.S. legally; my mother attained her residency after I turned twenty-one years old in 2013 and could claim her.

Once I began college, I went into pre-law but found out that political science was not for me. I switched to study Spanish and Mexican American Studies, and he disapproved because he did not know why I needed Spanish when I had been studying it throughout elementary, middle, and high school. My father has never understood the demands of being at a university, and this separated us even further. I lived at home because he did not allow me to work, live outside the house, or take out college loans. This, however, complicated things; while I was busy trying to figure out how to navigate what it was like to be the first one in my family to attend a university, my father demanded that I take more responsibility with duties at home, such as cutting the grass.

Me being a young adult, the first one to go to a university from my dad's side of the family, and first generation U.S. citizen added many pressures to perform well. I was expected to perform the "model minority" and anything less would be a disappointment to the family, even when my other cousins had not gotten this far. He would tell me, "tanto que me esfuerzo para que no le echen ganas a la escuela." My father would guilt trip me by telling me that he would go above and beyond, and I basically repaid him by not trying. I also had to be available to answer questions for my little cousins who were asking about college. I did not even know how to even manage my own life, much less advise them about theirs. Most challengingly, I had to continue performing heteronormativity in public while behind closed doors being queer.

My father's presence while I attended college meant that I was highly monitored for I was now the same age as he was when he began working and got married. He created a sense of hypersurveillance at home that would affect the way in which I behaved outside our house. This affected me, specifically from 2003 to 2015, from the time that I was eleven-years-old to the time that I was twenty-three. I had to re-learn how to live in our home through every different phase of my life. This was alarming for I was not able to express myself as vulnerably as when my mother was the only one that took care of us.

In my teen years, I was frustrated by having to fulfill the expectations of performing life as a straight Mexican young man. However, being queer, Chicano, from the border, first-generation, and educated meant that different types of "masculinities are constructed in complex ways at the intersections of race, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality," (Hurtado and Sinha 2016, 13). These complex intersections are sometimes different from other masculinities in my home. My brother Erick for example whom is four years younger than I am, was the athlete, while I was the dancer. Therefore, the way in which my father spoke to Erick in comparison to me, did not measure. With Erick he would joke around more and especially made misogynistic jokes with him. When I was present, he knew that those behaviors would not be acceptable and I would try to correct his behavior, so he avoided the topic. My father's sexuality (heterosexuality) and his lack of knowledge about college led to expectations from me that resulted in conflicts between myself and my mother, and him. After every clash I felt attacked and questioned whether he approved of anything I did.

One of these was dealing with my aesthetic as an undergraduate. On the Texas/Mexico border, in 2010, there was a fashion trend where many men began to wear shirts and jeans with Swarovski crystals and sequins. I would see them from afar at the store but never wanted to ask my dad if he could purchase one for me. While I was an undergraduate, he still paid for my clothes. I also knew that my father disapproved of these because they were too flashy. However, when my father's younger friends began to wear them, he also liked them and this opened a window of opportunity for my queer expression to flourish via my wardrobe. It was not until my father, who was straight, wore these clothes that I could too. This informed me that I needed a straight man's approval to make something my own in order to not be othered or ridiculed.

When I was a graduate student at age twenty-three, I began to learn to live, love, and forgive my family and myself. As a graduate student I learned about the histories of sexuality, especially rooted in indigenous history through Maria Lugones, and I also began to learn about theories of healing through Native American scholars such as Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart. These studies and the assignments I was required to do made me reflect on my positionality and how I embodied this. In Stephanie Álvarez's class I had a breakthrough moment of healing and it changed my attitude so much that my mother once told me, "you are not as angry as you used to be. Now you are more calm and don't fight us." This was because I understood my sexual identity not as an issue but as another layer. Unfortunately, in the midst of my healing my father had to leave the country through a forced self-deportation.

A Father Rises from Ashes

In 2015, after a series of misfortunes, my father was terrorized by local law enforcement in the Rio Grande Valley. He was driving and answered a phone call, which distracted him from the road and caused him to swerve and drive over the lines that marked a ramp to enter the highway. The police, after noticing that he did not speak English, interrogated him and found out that his visa had expired and that he had remained in the U.S. illegally. He was questioned about his job, his home, his history and even the vehicle he was driving. When they found out that my father worked in the local nightclub scene, they gave him two options: to cooperate or be deported. In 2013 in Falfurrias, Texas, a group made headlines as they found “630 lbs of cocaine slevled from tour bus of RGV-based Tejano Group Zinzzero,” (Ortiz 2013). This opened up an investigation for many musical groups on the border. Since my father had admitted working with a music group, they told him he was to work undercover for them or that officers would raid the house to remove him from the country.

My father, terrified, did not leave the house. He stopped working and did not want to drive. It was like he was on house arrest. However, because the officers told him they would raid the house, he did not want to be at home either. He was immobilized in my aunt’s house.

One night, I was studying and my mother called me to go to my aunt’s house; it was an urgent matter. My father was crying when I entered. I had only seen him cry once before, when his father passed away. He stood in the living room of my aunt’s house. It had been about a week since I saw him because he wanted to seclude himself and protect us from being in trouble with law enforcement. He hugged me and said he was leaving to Mexico, “Me voy a ir para México.” I squeezed him and tried to hold back the tears. I knew that I had to be strong for him, for my brothers and my mother. However, I never told anyone that when I drove back to the house, I had to stop on the side of the road. My eyes were filled with tears, and my body filled with rage and helplessness. I hit the stirring wheel out of desperation and let out a cry. It was like I had just found out he had passed away. I saw my life deteriorate, as I was getting ready to apply to doctoral programs and felt like I could no longer continue that path. My family was going to be split again, only this time my father would not be able to visit us in Texas without crossing illegally. It seemed like our life had gone in a circle; the border once again split us. We had to learn to live apart anew. This time it would be different because I was working on my master’s degree and teaching at the university with little vacation time.

The following year, in 2016, I moved across the country to begin a new life and my doctoral program. Now my family could only support me through long distance communication. I could not be with them, but I had my computer and my phone. My family was once again split: someone in Mexico, three people in Texas and another person in Michigan. However, I, like Anzaldúa, felt the need “to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me,” (Anzaldúa 2007, 38). The time I would spend with my father would be even more limited and rushed because I would not be able to be in Mexico for the full duration of each of my vacations from school, but I have managed to make the most out of the trips that I do take to South Texas and Reynosa. I realized that my father had sacrificed so much for my mother, my siblings, and me, and it was now my time to do the same. Since leaving la frontera, I am the one who has had to reach out to him via message, phone calls, or video calls. I have cheered him up when he feels like he is not earning enough money to support our home in Texas because he is making several hundred pesos a day, which sometimes is less than fifty dollars. I constantly tell him that it is better to have a decent job than to be risking his life in the U.S. and risking the ability of seeing him as much as we do.

Since leaving home, I have had to be the tender one and show him love from afar. In early July of this year, 2018, for his birthday I sent him an extensive and emotional text that said how much I love him and how much I admire all he has done for us. This was the first year I could not be with him for his birthday because I was undergoing surgery and had to be in Michigan. All he could reply was, “gracias.” I spoke to my mother to tell her that when I woke up in the morning and read that one-word text as a reply to a very heartfelt message, I was devastated. My father had told my mother that he had not expected that message from me and that he froze. He did not know how to reply because he did not know what to

feel. bell hooks explains my father's inability to articulate his feelings as a function of his masculinity: "Given the gender stereotypes that assign to women the role of feelings and being emotional and to men the role of reason and non-emotion, 'real men' would shy away from any talk to love," (hooks 2000, 23).

The week after his birthday I had a major knee surgery in Michigan, and no one from my family could come up here to be with me: my mother is scared of flying, my brother has a full-time job, and my father is unable to enter the states. This affected my father in ways that I had never seen him affected for he knew that I was in pain, unable to walk, but also far away from loved ones. My father ever since my surgery has made sure to contact me through phone calls, text messages, or video calls to ask if I have eaten or how my recovery is going. Through this surgery I have seen a change in my father's communication with me and he makes time for me because he knows that he is physically absent. Unlike when I was a child, my father has even called me from his job to check in on me and tells me to cheer up.

During week two of my recovery I sent him a video that a friend took of me at a local grocery store. I was in an electric cart for handicapped people and my father replied, "No vayas a chocar, buey," meaning do not crash, dude. Then thirty minutes later he wrote, "tienes un corazón bien grande mijo. Échale ganas. Todo para delante," (You have a very big heart, son. Give it your best. Everything moving forward). My father's first reply was to make a joke and inserting his masculine tone by calling me dude, however I believe that after thinking about it he instead decided to give me, what I would call, the most heart felt message I had ever received from him. This change did not come easily and I did not expect it from him.

My father is capable of understanding the circumstances of being away from me and giving me the type of support that I needed to hear. It was through a constant push and pull on my part to open up to him that I felt he opened up to me, for as a queer son I have to learn to break the patter of silences that were passed down to my father.

Conclusion

Fathering is extremely difficult when you are a working class, Mexico-born, father whose family lives in Texas while you live in Tamaulipas, Mexico. Families like mine endure separations of mind, spirit, body, and heart. I understand fronterizo fathering as a man whose family is "ni de aqui, ni de alla," they are not from the U.S. nor are they from Mexico. Fronterizo fathering, to me, is an act of radical paternal love. This love penetrates the constraints of the border and also tries to cover la herida abierta, as Anzaldúa calls the border, in order to ensure that the children that live in the U.S. are never too distant from the motherland: Mexico. Based on my lived experiences, fronterizo fathering is a position of loving your family so much that you are willing to endure the pain of being separated to ensure a good future for them. Therefore, embarking on a road of sacrifice to fulfill your role as a father.

My family's separation through the border caused separations dealing with education, opportunities, class and identities. These created an emotional displacement rooted in geopolitical separation, generational differences and internalized expectations and ultimately created different lives for us. Many times, I feel limited about the things that my father and I can discuss because the things that surround me on a daily basis in academia are foreign to him. I cannot relate to his working life either. However, I have tried to understand that my fronterizo father continues to endure many lonely nights away from his family and unanswered prayers about being reunited. As I write this I reflect on the change in his communication with me by trying to adopt a language that shows affection when he cannot be physically present, as he had tried to do ever since I left home. This has been an arduous and slow task of him and myself for I found out that we needed to nurture and make up for the geographical and emotional separation.

Being a fronterizo father includes adapting, adjusting, and resisting all obstacles that try to split your family and navigating the complexities of your relationship to the best of your ability. For me, being a child of a fronterizo father means that I have to go beyond what is expected of me when it comes to communicating so that I can get some of the responses I need from my father. It has meant that I have had to embark, and continue to learn through, a journey of discovering love where I thought love did not exist between my father and me. It is having to seek the light that shines en el otro lado while I also consciously reflect on how I can nurture,

heal, and love him and myself from este lado de la frontera. Through this article, I continue in that journey of amending the relationship that the border has splintered. Through these thoughts and writings, I aim to stitch esa herida abierda que ha sangrado but also realizing que ese ensagramiento es un sacrificio inspirado en amor.

Notes

i Although I studied the border and lived in it, it was not until I left it that I understood that the lifestyle of the southern border does not compare to the northern. I also understood that what we see as normal surveillance, for example border patrol vehicles and checkpoints, was unheard of near Canada.

ii I use privilege consciously and not in the context of the U.S. where privilege is often associated to wealth, status, and education. I use privilege to state that having a job or a business, such as my father in Mexico is more attainable than in the U.S. because he has access to things within his geographical constraints.

iii Maricón is a derogatory word commonly used in Mexico that is supposed to mock someone's sexuality. The English translation would be "faggot." However, there is something that my cousins would tell me specifically which was "Mari-con Bolas" which translates to Mary with testicles. This alludes to someone who behaves like a girl even if they had the genitalia of a boy.

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