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Ofrendxs: Yo también sé curar (I, too, know how to heal)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Patricia E. Zambrano

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Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair

Professor Eric Cho

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Professor Jillian Hernandez

2022



The thesis of Patricia Elena Zambrano is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2022

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Ofrendxs: Yo también sé curar (I, too, know how to heal)

by

Patricia E. Zambrano

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair

The works that make up my thesis look to summon up buried familial narratives of alter-kinship, love, transnational migration and home-making. At times these unearthings reveal photographic or filmic objects, and at other times they lead to physical gestures of undoing or unmaking. Not only am I interested in recovering what has been obscured, but how burial alters an object, so that what is dug up is not the same as that which was put in the ground.

## INTRODUCTION

My earliest memories of still and moving images are, like many others, of those produced by my parents and family made primarily at home. The photos lived in meticulously kept photo albums and the videos on shelves in the living room. I was saturated with images of my family, so much so that I memorized most images. In dreaming up my thesis show, a few questions kept popping up about the images & image makers in my family - what were they seeing and how did it shape what I understood then and what I see now? It was those intergenerational relationships of historical author and contemporary audience that excited me into including my family in my work in it's potential of recontextualizing images by us, for us when cared for through a queer lens. With this direction of image making, including my family in my work raised pertinent and at times difficult questions on their representation that had not come up before. Furthermore it challenged me to take on conversations of the effects of inherited trauma, trust and how to deal with the very real issue of physical distance.

For example, in order to make what would be the photograph of my grandmothers (*Socorro y Reynalda (Para Frida y Chavela)*) the three of us would have to make our way from Los Angeles, San Diego and Guanajuato respectively, to the small central Mexico town of Tecolotlan, Jalisco, my maternal grandmother's hometown. Another challenge involved trust & the unpacking of intergenerational experiences. In order to begin to make the film about the intimate life and labor of my brother, Michael, we needed to bring to the fore moments from our relationship as queer siblings growing up nearly a decade apart and specifically conversations about moments in which he needed me to "have his back" but didn't. At the time, our relationship had endured difficulties and was slowly improving, but when I approached Michael about making a film and creating a performance with him, it required us to bring our difficulties

to a sort of momentary standstill. He and my grandmothers had to trust that what I was doing with my work was honest and necessary.

The final component of my thesis was to entail an unrehearsed performance with Michael at center stage. Michael told me he was weary of the fact that if my parents came to the screening or performance, that it would be the first time they saw him in drag, and expressed a concern with it being through an art gesture versus “in real life”. These worries led him to question my motives in making art with him. The day after I put out an announcement of the performance, Michael told me he did not want to participate, saying that he wanted to spend time with me “authentically”. To me, these words cast a shadow of doubt on my work. Was my art offering something real? In order to gain Michael’s trust and understanding on the value of making art together, it meant recounting and sharing with him moment’s from my queer youth which he never really got to fully witness himself being 8 years my minor.

I like to think of my work as an ofrenda to my family first and foremost, and to my community. Ofrendas are offerings, sometimes to our ancestors, to saints, to the dead, and I have to consider this in my work, but what can ofrendas offer to the living? In an interview published in *Chicana Lesbians: The girls our mothers warned us about*, Ana Castillo states that for queer Latinx, coming out can be a death, can be suicide. She writes:

“As a Mexicana, whenever you decide to rebel against your family, the status quo, you are going to get punished. How you are going to get punished we can only guess, in the million ways, but that you will get punished, that’s very real and it’s very hard to conscientize women and say, “take that risk”...Why would we want to risk disappointing them about something they can’t understand, and above all, goes against the most sacred thing: the word of god?” (123 Castillo)

Thus, I see my work as not only offering up something to those who have died, or who the church recognizes as holy, but those who have committed this act that Castillo calls “suicidal”,



those who have risked their family bonds, which for many Latinx people means risking it all, to be their authentic, ever growing selves with and for each other.

## **CRYPTYCHS**

“And although we cannot simply conserve a person through documentation, we can perhaps begin to summon up, through the auspices of memory, the acts and gestures that meant so much to us.”

-Jose Muñoz from Cruising Utopia

I wrote the poems in Cryptychs during a creative writing workshop class taught by Mexican writer and then Professor in the Literature Department at UCSD, Cristina Rivera Garza. At the time, I was doing work in Tijuana with my partner and thinking about the relationship between the infamous gay cruising spot, Parque Teniente Guerrero and the church directly across the street. The church has a columbarium in its basement, with over 500 spaces, some ornately decorated in gold borders or marble with the words etched in. Others, those families with not so much monetary wealth to spend on the decor of the space, are covered in plaster, with words written in pencil or sharpie and often with stickers adorning the space. One such space that called my attention was plaster covered, and had written in sharpie “Claudia y Gerarda 4EVER”. This led me to imagine who Claudia and Gerarda were/are. Were they sisters, cousins, friends, lovers? Whatever their relationship, this inscription prompted me to look closer at other inscriptions and to think about the ways in which we, specifically queer people, are memorialized after death through text and thusly the limits of language. I ended up writing down the epitaphs from surrounding spaces in the same columbarium, only the extra text withholding names, and created poems that expand upon the epitaph while it still remained intact and in the center of the poem.

This epitaph:  
**RECUERDO DE TU**  
**MAMA Y FAMILIA**  
**SIEMPRE**  
**ESTARAS EN**  
**NUESTROS CORAZONES**

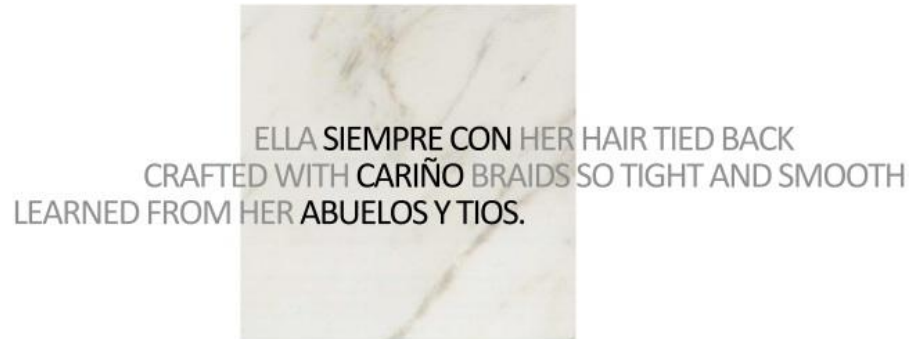
Became this poem:  
**RECUERDO DE** Tus manos on my body  
quietly so **MAMA Y FAMILIA** wouldn't hear  
porque **SIEMPRE** hacíamos so much noise  
**ESTARAS EN**side of me,  
**NUESTROS CORAZONES** pounding.

The poems in Cryptychs found their way into a video, where my friend Ele Valenzuela, a queer woman from Tijuana, read the poems over a video of photographs taken inside the columbarium and video taken from the park with the effect of weaving the spaces together both visually and sonically. The screening of the subsequent video happened in a dark room with no seating except for an exaggeratedly long church kneeler that I built where the audience was invited to kneel or sit. I wanted to prompt a specific way of positioning the audience's bodies when viewing my work; kneeling mirrored the position of a body at church and in the park during cruising hours. I use the writing of Adrienne Rich in "Writing as Re-vision" to think about the ways in which, as she writes, entering "old texts from a new critical direction" is an act of survival. Rich writes:

"Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see -- and therefore live -- afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."

Rich argues that to move beyond the oppressive ideology of heteropatriarchy, we need to deeply understand how the discourse of heteropatriarchy operates. In the context of the Mexican diaspora this heteropatriarchy is embodied by the Catholic Church. Cryptychs is a gesture to imagine ways of countering or queering the narrative of memorializing loved ones after death, to

question which narratives are left out that need to make their way in, and what forms of evidence or gestures should or can be preserved through this act.



## **OPEN STUDIO**

In November 2015 I made the decision to take the door off of my studio located in the Visual Arts Facilities. It was an action that, along with accompanying text, was meant to provoke conversation amongst my peers and faculty in my department as to the lack of black and brown students and faculty in the Visual Arts Department. Taking the door off of my studio was an invitation for students of color in the university to enter it freely to use as a space of art making and challenged the individualistic model of art making imposed by the structure of and access to the graduate studios. I drove this action behind the words of Theaster Gates in conversation with bell hooks discussing purpose in his work, "The tactics of belief had to do with generosity and belief in other people and an openness like - we never locked our door. And it made us

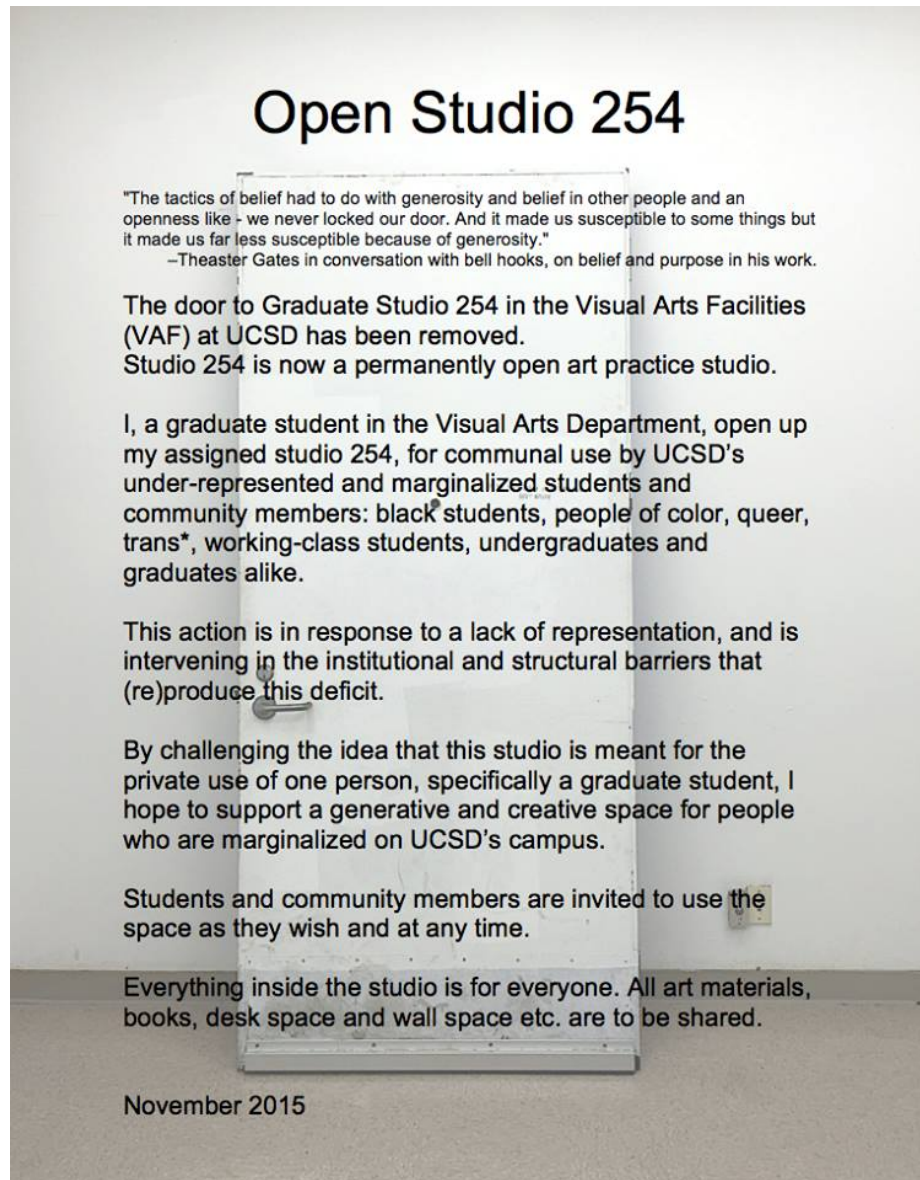
susceptible to some things but it made us far less susceptible because of generosity." I thought about this quote and then thought about the fact that my parents also never locked their front door and because of this, the community and sense of belonging that was invited into our home and family structure.

What my action initiated was mixed reactions and subsequent uses of the open space. The first reactions came from my peers in a critique class. One person told me that my action was undermining the work of the Black Resource Center and the Raza Resource Centro. Another person asked me if I would take responsibility if an act of violence happened in my studio because the door was not there to which I replied the obvious fact that something could happen with the door on and closed, and who would take responsibility in that case? Many of my peers in that class and in my department showed their support for the gesture. One student who was visiting from Mexico for the school year and was not granted a studio used the opportunity to work in the space for his remaining time at UCSD. Students from other departments used the space to convene with writing groups and to hold seminars and one student used it as an art studio to paint with his young son.

The University threatened to charge my student account with the fees of replacing the door and kept me away from conversations as to what should be done in response to my action. After about four months of the studio door being down, the University replaced it without notice.

One concrete product of the action was that it happened at the same time an idea was forming in visual arts undergrad Angela Webb-Pigg's mind, to start a collective on campus that centered black artists and art making. Because of the action, Angela approached me and asked me if I would like to be one of the founding members alongside herself, Erick Msumanje and PhD

student in Theater, Tezeru Teshome. I gratefully accepted. Through Black Arts Collective we hosted a number of events that brought black filmmakers, performers and artists to campus and held a number of meetings in my open studio before and after its door was shut.



## Open Studio 254

"The tactics of belief had to do with generosity and belief in other people and an openness like - we never locked our door. And it made us susceptible to some things but it made us far less susceptible because of generosity."

—Theaster Gates in conversation with bell hooks, on belief and purpose in his work.

The door to Graduate Studio 254 in the Visual Arts Facilities (VAF) at UCSD has been removed.

Studio 254 is now a permanently open art practice studio.

I, a graduate student in the Visual Arts Department, open up my assigned studio 254, for communal use by UCSD's under-represented and marginalized students and community members: black students, people of color, queer, trans\*, working-class students, undergraduates and graduates alike.

This action is in response to a lack of representation, and is intervening in the institutional and structural barriers that (re)produce this deficit.

By challenging the idea that this studio is meant for the private use of one person, specifically a graduate student, I hope to support a generative and creative space for people who are marginalized on UCSD's campus.

Students and community members are invited to use the space as they wish and at any time.

Everything inside the studio is for everyone. All art materials, books, desk space and wall space etc. are to be shared.

November 2015

## JARDÍN DE LAS MARIPOSAS & TEMPORARY SHELTERS

I started making documentary films in Professor Zeinabu Davis' course in the Communications department. The structure of the course pushed me to work in a group and because of this I worked with four Ethnic Studies PhD students on our first film, *Jardín de las Mariposas*. *Jardín* is a documentary film made in Tijuana centered around the home of my friend Jaime and his mother Yolanda which they turned into a drug and alcohol recovery space for members of Tijuana's LGBT communities. Both Jaime and Yolanda live in the home, running the rehabilitation center where they invite "patients" to also live in the home alongside them. The film attempts to think about the ways in which homemaking, family relationships and the political and social constructions of the space located in Tijuana, are dealt with in the maintenance of the home as a space of recovery. Working with my peers in Ethnic Studies and my partner who was to start the Ethnic Studies PhD program the following year, really shaped the way I think about the documentary form. Because of each person's particular field of research we were able to cultivate rich questions to ask ourselves and the participants of the film. Likewise, we were all learning filmmaking alongside one another which made the process that much more dynamic.

When in November of 2015 I tried my hand at a second documentary film, this time rooted in my own family and home, I decided to work alongside my youngest brother Michael to create a filmic portrait of him. The product is a short documentary film *Temporary Shelters*, that acts as a triptych that follows Michael navigating his gender identity through three spaces: our parents home in Pomona, CA, the queer community in Tucson AZ, and a migrant aid camp on the AZ/MX border where he works with the nonprofit organization No Mas Muertes to help people survive the perilous desert border crossing. Working with my brother at NMM brought up

new perspectives to questions I posed to myself regarding filmmaking. What should and shouldn't be filmed? When should the camera be on or off and out of the way? Who will see this film? Because the film explores Michael's gender identity and expression and is a recording of who he is when he is away from our family in California, I had to be careful with who I showed the film to and was aware of constantly being in conversation with him about what he wanted.

Although I have made these two films, I still think of myself primarily as a photographer, and cannot help but look at filmmaking through a still photographic lens. As Jose Esteban Muñoz writes in his book chapter, "The Photographs of Mourning," "The photographic text itself, as Barthes suggested, is already dead; therefore, as a work of art, the photograph is always already a text of mourning," Muñoz goes on to explain that in making the film *Looking for Langston*, a film that I draw on for inspiration, Isaac Julien was himself drawing on photography from Van Der Zee's *Harlem Book of the Dead*. Muñoz then frames his conversation about Van Der Zee's photographs through Barthes' discussion of a photo of his own mother:

"What fascinates him most about this old photo is the depiction of the time "right before he lived," the historical moment that most interests him because that is when his mother lived without him" (Muñoz 67)

Muñoz argues that this moment before one's existence is central to Julien's interpretation and use of Van Der Zee's work, as Julien attempted to excavate the buried histories of black queerness in the time before his own community. As Muñoz writes:

"For a generation of black gay men engrossed in the project of deeply buried histories, these pictures depicting everyday life and death during the (queer) Harlem Renaissance show a very crucial moment: a "right before we lived" moment that is as important to this community as the moment in his mother's life before his birth is for Barthes." (Muñoz 67)

While not attempting to erase the difference between black queer communities and Chicana queer communities, I want to sit with this notion of the “right before we lived” moment. In my work I have been repeatedly drawn to a photographic image of Frida Kahlo and Chavela Vargas, known lovers, lying in each other’s arms and laughing. I have come to see this photo’s place in my work in a similar way to what Muñoz describes as Julien’s relationship to the photos of Van Der Zee. This is the moment before I lived as a queer Chicana woman. But I am also, like Barthes, fixated on the moment before I existed as a member of my family, specifically trying to excavate the queer, or non-normative histories of my ancestors. In search of this information, I decided to travel with both of my grandmothers to their hometowns in Mexico, the birthplaces of my family.







## **SOCORRO Y REYNALDA & OFRENDXS**

These two conversations with my grandmothers prompted a performance:

### **“Yo tambien se curar.” - Reynalda Casillas Zambrano**

My abuelita Reynalda recounts a moment where she walks into her sister-in-laws house where they are seated with other women and they are in the process of talking to a curandera (healer). My abuelita, skeptical of the curandera, stands in the room and does not sit and when the curandera turns towards her my grandmother asks, “Y yo que tengo mal?” (What about me, is there something wrong with me?) to which the curandera replies, “Nada” (Nothing). My grandmother, in a soft joking manner responds, “Yo tambien se curar” (I, too, know how to heal). Then almost immediately, as if embarrassed as to how she responded, turns quickly and leaves the room. The following week, she is running errands and goes to the carniceria (butcher) where she runs into the curandera. My grandmother tells me, laughing, that the curandera looked at her almost as if she was afraid of her.

**“Me comi una estatua de el David, y una de la Venus de Milo. Se me antojaba a verla. La quebre adrede para empezar a comérmela. Pero no me comi su parte. Eso lo respete. Me dio asco. Tu mama salio blanca blanca blanca. (I ate a statuette of the David, and one of the Venus de Milo. I craved them as soon as I saw them. I broke them on purpose to eat them. But I didn’t eat his part. That, I respected. It disgusted me. Your mom was born white, white, white.)” - Socorro Huevo Duran**

When my grandmother Socorro was pregnant with my mom, her first daughter, she ate two plaster statuettes she had in her house, one of the David and one of the Venus de Milo. She describes her desire to eat them as something she just had to do. Her body craved them even though they were not food. She doesn’t remember how she broke them but she knows she did it on purpose. She says she ate the Venus whole, but the statuette of David, she ate all except “su parte” (his penis).



In March 2017 I traveled to Mexico to spend time and make images with my grandmothers. My abuelita Reyna lives in Leon, Guanajuato and my grandmother Socorro (Lita) lives in City Terrace, CA but was visiting her childhood home in Tecolotlán, Jalisco. Since childhood, the relationship between my grandmothers as suegras (in-laws) was something that had and continues to have a strong impression on me. In my memory as well as evidenced by family albums and home videos there exist many photos of my grandmothers in each other's homes and hometowns for different events. My grandmothers have always had a good relationship; they have flown together from Mexico to the US or vice versa, have cooked in each other's kitchens, hosted each other's children in their homes, and slept in the same bed together on various trips. From my perspective, I have seen my grandmothers in more intimate scenarios than I have my grandmothers with their own husbands. I wanted to think about their relationship as one that has influenced my notions of queer and familial desire and place a conversation about

them in relation to an image that had been engraved in my mind since I was in my early twenties, that of Frida Kahlo and Chavela Vargas in a photograph by Nikolas Muray. I thought about making that iconic photograph with my grandmothers in place of Frida and Chavela. To me this would be a move towards re-affirming and locating the power in familial and matriarchal intimacies & desire in the Mexican diaspora.

In “Imagining Her Selves”, Gannit Ankori writes that in 1926 Wilhelm Kahlo made a series of photographs of his family where Frida is dressed in a three-piece suit. As Ankori writes, “A retrospective view of these images, however, reveals that they are also telling statements of Kahlo’s innate sexual ambiguity, about her awareness of the role of costumes in identity formation, and about her affirmation of the right to be different and unconventional. (178) It is this negotiation between being seen as always in relationship to a man, specifically a husband, while being aware of identity and difference, that I took up in the re-staging of the photograph with my grandmothers.

In her autobiography, Chavela Vargas has a chapter on her relationship with Kahlo. In the book she does not hide her identity, instead writing about her queerness at the outset, and the relationship between queerness and healing. As Sofia Ruiz-Alfaro writes:

“*Y si quieres saber de mi pasado* immediately begins with Chavela's public self-affirmation of her sexual identity, and the idiosyncratic way she conceives her difference as part of her identity. In the first chapter of her memoir Chavela talks about her queerness, or *rareza* as she refers to it, as one belonging to the world of nature, a *rareza* that is also in communion with the spiritual, in her case the world of shamanism. Indeed, the climactic point of this chapter occurs when Chavela goes through a *limpia*, a rite of purification with a shaman, a way to metaphorically open up to the readers and render plain her beliefs on this other faith based on nature and its powers, a faith that has saved her at different stages of her life and sets her apart from the rest of the modern, Western world. More importantly, through this other spirituality Chavela construes her own understanding of her lesbianism as a part of herself that she also considers natural and pure. Being what she calls queer or *rara* has become a way of understanding

life's pain and sorrows, these two becoming indispensable elements of her spirituality and her conceptualization of her own self.”

Vargas’ assertion of both her non-normative sexuality and her non-western spirituality disrupt notions both of heteropatriarchy and of who holds the power to heal. Vargas also writes about Frida’s cross-dressing, elaborating on Ankori’s conversation. As Ruiz Alfaro writes:

“She discusses what Frida's cross-dressing meant to her: “Only years later have I understood the meaning of that painting in which she appears with short hair; at the time I was not able to understand that”. For Chavela, these observations about how Frida was able to show her masculine self, to be masculine and also a woman, define the expression *muy mujer*, often used by Chavela to identify Frida and herself in their courage to be *raras*. This rareza or queerness meant breaking traditional gender and sexuality norms, embodying female masculinity and desire, and, ultimately, being who they wanted to be: “We were two women that ... well, we were *muy mujeres*, like we Mexicans say, and we loved each other because we were women. And we were not afraid of anything or anybody” (Vargas, Ch. 2002. *Y si quieres saber de mi pasado [And if you want to know about my past]*, Madrid, Spain: Planeta, p. 116).”

Here Vargas explains her reading of Kahlo’s painting, as one not relating to her heartbreak over Diego Rivera, or her desire to be less feminine and more spiritual, but of her assertion of her identity as a woman loving woman.

In considering how to move beyond this photograph, to make something that can serve as a living archive of this troubling of heteropatriarchy and desire, I considered ways that I could use performance to disrupt notions of what is female and what is holy. I decided to create a performance called *Ofrendxs*, which would be a meditation on my grandmother's collection of *nacimientos* (nativity sets) made up of statuettes of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. This work began with an interest in the individual moveable parts of each *nacimiento*, and how, through her collection and arrangement, she is constantly aware of the position of the bodies, particularly that of the Virgin Mary. In the nativity set, the Mary statuette is forever in the same hunched over position, staring down at baby Jesus. In the performance my brother was to kneel in the position

of and dressed as the Virgin Mary. I was to replace baby Jesus with a curated set of objects to disrupt the object of the gaze with objects that are meant to alleviate the stress of the body in the same position for so long. Since my brother decided not to perform with me, I had to rethink my performance. I felt in order for it to have the same significance, I had to take his place and perform myself. I dressed as the Virgin Mary and curated a set of actions that at times invited the audience to participate.

This idea of performance as an *ofrenda* is not new, but as Diana Taylor writes, has been a part of Mexican knowledge production since before colonization. According to Taylor, “Since before the Conquest, as I noted, writing and embodied performance have often worked together to layer the historical memories that constitute community.” (Taylor 35) Taylor cites a poem by an indigenous artist who lived in sixteenth-century Mexico, Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, who writes of memory as something that is both written and performed, and is meant to be embodied and passes down through the generations:

“Never will it be lost, never will it be forgotten, that which they came to do, that which they came to record in their paintings: their renown, their history, their memory. . . . always we will treasure it . . . we who carry their blood and their color, we will tell it, we will pass it on.”

The telling is as important as the writing, the doing as central as the recording, the memory passed down through bodies and mnemonic practices. Memory paths and documented records might retain what the other “forgot.” These systems sustain and mutually produce each other; neither is out-side or antithetical to the logic of the other. (Taylor 35-36)

Sitting with these words from an ancestor who is not forgotten, I offer *Ofrendas* to my family and my community. I hope that it allows for the interrogation of the societal and intimate positioning of bodies, through the example of the Virgin Mary in the *nacimiento*, not only physically - Joseph standing behind her and baby Jesus below her - but also socially as a piece of set that makes a family, a hypervisible symbol of heteropatriarchy, and allows a rupture or shift

in the physical/symbolic position/posture of Mary when separated from the familial/familiar scene. This disruption may ask more questions than it answers, but these are the questions that I have to offer.

## **BEYOND THE PHOTOGRAPH**

After seeing the photo I made of my grandmothers and the photo of Frida y Chavela it was modeled after, my sister Elizabeth sent me a photograph she found, from the same moment by Nikolas Muray. The photo shows Frida y Chavela from a different angle. The camera's new perspective is pulled back and opens up the frame of the photograph to include three more people, artists Adolfo Best Maugard and Rosa Rolanda, and the hands of an unseen, unknown figure holding a guitar. Viewing this scene in a new light was hugely impactful. I had seen the iconic photograph of Frida y Chavela countless times, and to me, it was a beautifully intimate, immovable moment. But with the image sent to me by my sister, I saw the scene shift; the moment moved. This new perspective did not, however, make the original scene less meaningful to me, rather it recovered my own sense of positionality as a photographer, author and artist. Just as Frida and Chavela were not alone together while being photographed by Nikolas Muray, when I photographed my grandmothers, it was not just them there. I took the photo, my grandmother's sister was there and provided a cigarette, my aunt Paty helped with the wardrobe, and everyone was joking and laughing. In both photos, the joy captured comes not only from intimacy between two women, but also from their community.

This is the thing that we risk, as Ana Castillo writes, as Mexicanas coming out as queer. We risk our family -- our first community. I hope my work can offer those who are like me a



roadmap, showing how I, along with my chosen community, navigated and negotiated those risks  
-- because, as my grandmother stated, “*yo tambien se curar*”.



Photo by Nikolas Murray, 1945



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