

"There are more subtle ways that we internalize identification, especially in the forms of images and emotions. For me food and certain smells are tied to my identity, to my homeland"

-Gloria Anzaldua, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" in Borderlands

Dear Abuelita Urania,

It's been five months and a day since you've passed on. I miss you very much, it's mother's day and this is the first one to celebrate without you physically here with us. I'm working on a geography project today for school, so I'm going to the Mission district in San Francisco. The Mission District is known for being a densely populated area that is primarily Latino, constituted over several decades from various waves of Central American migration and has been so since the 20th century. I chose to focus on my project in this neighborhood because I learned about a year ago that there was a greater Nicaraguan presence than in Los Angeles. Growing up as you know Abuelita, there weren't very many Nicaraguans in LA and mostly all of the Nicaraguan people were from our church. The family was more so close to other Central American folks, Guatemaltecos, El Salvadoreños, and Mexicanos. You know LA, hay muchos Mexicanos. But growing up, I never felt that I knew much about Nicaragua. I only knew it from the stories you would tell. In all my childhood, I think I remember going to Nica restaurant once, off Pico street closer to downtown. No se si se acuerda cuando fue, but we used to make nacatamales for Thanksgiving, but around 8 or 9 years old, we started making ham and turkey. Las ollas grandes were used to soak the big turkey in wine instead of to put all of the nacatamales that seemed to take several days to make. Abuelita, la comida siempre fue la manera que usted demostraba su amor. You cared for all of us so deeply and in many ways, but food, food is how I connect to Nicaragua, a place I've never been. So for a couple of weeks now, I've been googling Nica restaurants in the Mission, to see if I can get a taste of home and trace my memories of you. Sunday, I picked a place: Rinconcito Nicaraguense on Mission Street and I walked around for a couple of hours taking the place in. Like I've said before, growing up I didn't feel all that connected except for our food, plates full of gallo pinto and platanos fritos, con ensalada de repollo, and the stories you'd tell. So if you'll listen, which you were always so great at doing, I want to tell you a story, the story of my day in the Mission district but how even a couple of hours there can tell a story that stretches far and wide across places and time. How my walk down Mission street, 24th street and a stroll down Balmy Alley, helped me tell this story, about history, culture, and memory. Una dia con el sabor, sonidos, texturas, y dimensiones que me recuerdan de un lugar muy difícil a describir: lugar/home.

Cuando estaba chiquita usted me dijo que tenía yo el don de hablar en lenguas, tal vez tenía razón. Pero las lenguas en que creo que yo hablo están menos conectadas a su Cristianismo, y más al mundo plural, pendiente una consciencia dedicada al olvidar las herencias brutales del imperialismo, colonialidad, de las restricciones a la sexualidad y expresiones del género. Una consciencia comprometida al aprender del arte, de la historia, y de nosotros del aquí y del allá, particularmente a la cultura de Otros.

Espero que esta estoria le guste, y qui sirva como el puente que tanto quiero construir con su ayuda.



21 ST AND MISSION ST.

Abuelita,

Do you remember when we would buy tarjetas to call to Nicaragua? Flimsy plastic cards to buy time to talk to family. Phone calls was how met your sister, Maria Julia, y mi prima Andreyita. I remember after these calls, maybe a week later we would walk down to places like Ria, to send money back home and help out family. I imagine that if you had moved here to SF instead of LA, you could get all your errands done quickly! There several of these money transfer businesses all along Mission Street. You could grocery shop, get a gift, maybe even get yourself a little treat all in the same errand.

Abuelita,

When I was little I dreamed of being inside of a limousine. I thought I would for my quince, but that never happened. That's okay, since by the time I was 15, I was a total brat, bien contestona. Mami y Papi se separaron, and they didn't have money for a big party anyway. I know that my resentment just shielded my disappointment. Quincenera's are supposed to be a rite of passage no? Seems like my womanhood was just by other milestones I suppose, maybe it was marked by recognizing that as the daughter of immigrants, you learn to wear masks to protect yourself and sometimes love and care and toxically mixed up with pain, stress, and let downs. I don't mean to be depressing, I just wanted to say that a big party, a big sparkly dress, a tiara, and a limousine, no one of those things were going to mark a transition for me. I think it was because I grew up knowing too much about the burdens you all carried. You let a lot of things slip. Perhaps too much for a little girl to know and carry with her. But you know what? I may have never gotten a quince, but I love the fact that the transition in time is marked by something spectacular and celebratory. I had a sleepover instead, with lovely friends, other black and brown and women that sustain me still. My family of choice. I took this picture because I wanted to point out something. One the big circle window. This is a total aside, but last year I took a Chinese architecture class and I learned that these portal windows are called moon windows sometimes. Maybe this dress shop was an Asian business? I don't know for sure, but I wanted to point that out for you. And just share this little idea. I know you always liked to save money for us and you wanted that quince for me, and were sad mami and papi couldn't provide one for me. Thank you for recognizing that sadness before I could, perhaps belatedly, I'm still learning about these little heartbreaks I felt and how they form a patina around the feelings sometimes triggered by hurt feelings in the present. It takes a long time of forgiveness and recognition to be able to locate the pain, it takes a lot love to learn how to tend to it, pour love into it and begin to heal.



2653 MISSION ST.

Abuelita,

The markets back home are never out in the open like this. Not in Hawthorne. We have Northgate, Food4less, y El Super, but those were always indoors. I imagine that you would get groceries here, con su carito, the metal cart mostly older women of color carry on the buses. Granny cart, hahaa. I have one now too. I don't know what it is but I always carry a lot of stuff with me, it's a bad habit, but my friends call me a bag lady out of love. I never played you this song: Bag Lady by Erika Badu, but two autumns ago I listened to it and it brought me a lot of peace. I think it helped me realize that I do carry a lot of stuff and not all of it is mine, it's yours, it's my mom's and your son's. I inherited a lot of the pain and trauma you all lived through. Through the violence you had seen, the civil war entre los Sandinistas y los Contras, and you coming here because no había suficiente para vivir. We couldn't really find the language for it before. I'm still trying to find language for it. These little markets, out in the open, don't look like the big supermarkets I grew up going to. Small and humble I like to imagine that if you'd seen them you would tell me how closely they resembled the mercados back home. Maybe it has to do with the tropical produce, or the colors of the buildings. I wonder if it has to do with abundance and how some of my favorite stories you would tell me would be about la fruta, how you could get it anywhere, and how the fruit in Nicaragua was so much sweeter than here.



2842 MISSION ST.

2843 MISSION ST.



Mire abuelita, una tienda con productos de su tierra. I imagine that on days when school was out you would take me there to pick some treats up when mami and papi were working. We would probably go (and depending on mami's mood) have to keep it a secret since you know she doesn't like us eating too much sugar! I imagine you would get us a couple of little things and tell us about them. A treat could also be a ticket back in time, a story to take us there as we undo the little cellophane wrapper.



24TH AND MISSION ST. (Adjacent to Sandino Plaza)

Abuleita,

This is the corner where the BART station is. I imagine you would get off at this plaza, off 24th street and Mission street after work. You stopped working by the time I was around 4 years old. Maybe it was because my hermanito Moses was born, and mami and papi asked if you could be our full-time caretaker. Before that, you worked as a seamstress. In SF, I wonder if you would have still found work as a seamstress or if you would have just stayed working at hotels, cleaning rooms. I remember you telling me that was some of the earliest work you had in the States, and that it was long and hard. In SF, Central American immigrants tended to work more in the service industries especially after the waves of migration of the 70s and 80s. You came here in the 80s, and if you had come to stay here in SF, it would have been more likely for you to find work in the city considering the density of people from Nicaragua you may have known that could've helped you find work. You never got a car in LA, puro bus. I imagine then you would have known how to take BART like a pro, and long after you stopped working, this would be our stop. You'd take Moses and I around, para pasear before your knees started to give you a lot of trouble. Abuelita, did you know this corner has a history connected to your patria? This area is also known as Plaza Sandino. There were FSLN (Federación Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional) activists here in the Mission that organized actions in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua in the 1970s. Many Sandinistas came here to the Bay during the Somocista dictatorship and were active in organizing and advocating for their community both in the Mission and abroad. Those were really hard years, and people came here to leave the violence and political repression you'd tell me about.



Renee (left) and Michele (right) Vargas, daughters of Roberto Vargas, at Plaza Sandino, 24th and Mission, 1978. Image sourced from foundsf.org.



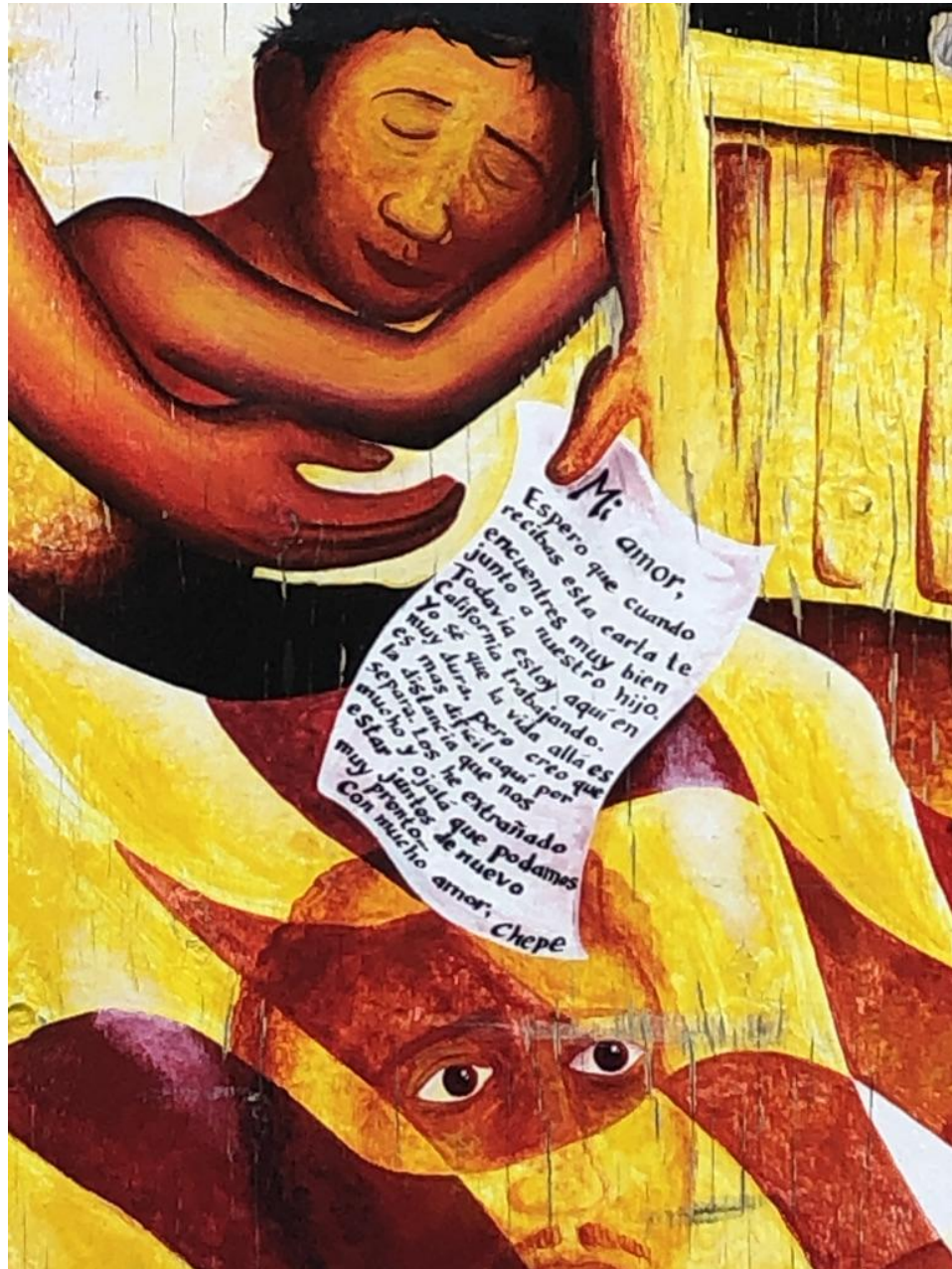
96 BALMY ALLEY

You wouldn't make the difficult journey to the States until the 80s, long after the fall of the Somocista dictatorship and during the difficult years of war between the FSLN and the contras. The embargo made things very difficult and you were a single mother, worried about her two children and how little they had to eat. You decided to come here with a whole fear and whole lot more of prayer. Papi was 17 and Tia 10. Papi came much earlier with a young wife in tow.

That must have been incredibly difficult. And you took care of them. Love is a complicated thing. The way it flexes and bends for some and the way it seems distanced and cold to others. Money flows one way, but love, love doesn't always translate as directly across time and borders the way we would like. We don't have a Rio Money Transfer for the love and nurturing needed in those critical moments, when we may feel alone. Tia shared this with me once, and I thought I would share this with you. I mention this because the hardship and trouble of mediating relationships across distance, time, and space, was also the subject of something I saw in Balmy Alley.

I think you would have liked to take Moses and I there. Down 24th street, the alley is a brilliant corridor of art. Imagine if this is what we would see on the weekends! Back home we had to drive to go to places, and we didn't see very much visual art at all. We didn't go to museums and much less all the way to centros culturales in DTLA. So let's say you had heard of Balmy Alley? And you encountered these wonderful displays of art. Displays that spoke directly to these experiences of migration. I saw this one mural and I thought of you. This mother, child, a

smuggled person (?) and a letter, sent to a loved one. The letter, it's tone, it's a reassuring tone of being alive but speaking of the difficulty of being in a different country and trying to survive. It reminded me of you. And the letters you must have written to your children when you had come here, working long days to send money for school and food. Maybe the letters were later replaced by phone calls at one point, maybe over time the grew fewer and far between. But there's something very special and personal about the letter, which is why I felt the tenderness and longing in the warmth of the mural. It's earthy colors, the mother's tilted head looking out to some faraway place. Maybe she's imagining a future. A future of togetherness.



Detail of Balmy Alley Mural



BALMY ALLEY

After Balmy alley, I saw another mural, heading up 24th street back towards Mission. The loteria cards were adapted by the artist to speak about life here. I like the one that reads: La Fuerza. The loteria card features a picture of a family, kind of like mine! Papi's darker, Mami's light, I'm the darker older sibling, and the baby is Moses. Although, family doesn't always look this way. If this was the loteria card of our family growing up it would be missing it's center: you. You provided so much, so much care, grounding, patience, understanding. In anycase, it was heart-warming to see this game we used to sometimes play at home be adapted into neighborhood art. I would have loved to walk down the street and see more works like these with you.



3077-099 24th ST.

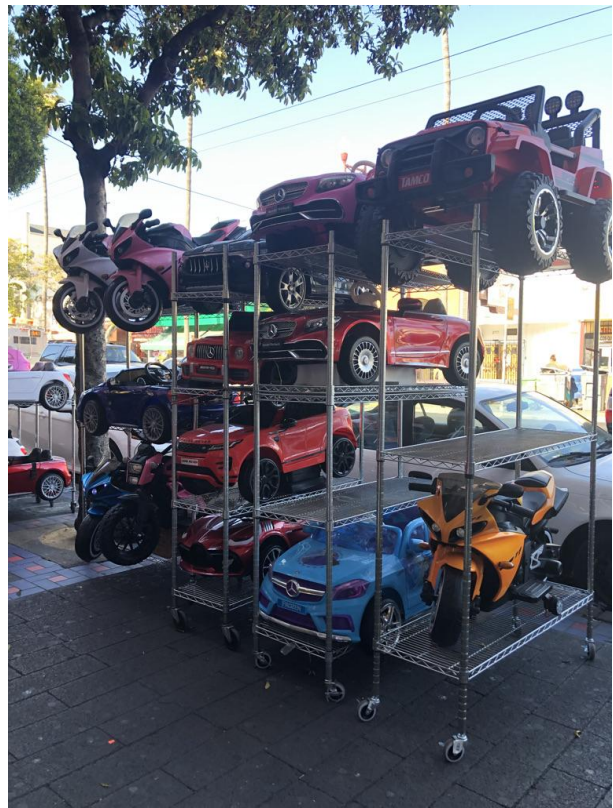
Abuelita,

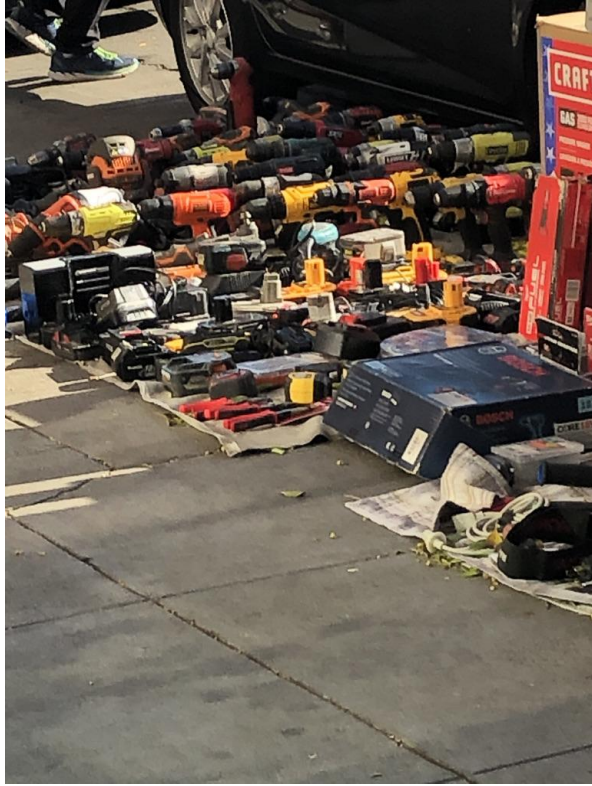
The second part of this story is going to be a little experimental. I want to tell you about what I come to see, know, and theorize. I studied art history and I learned a thing or two about representation and seeing. These are two very important pieces of visual culture and visual languages. Well here's the thing... in LA, we didn't see much "Art" and we didn't have access to these flourishing murals. But we still had vibrancy and the aesthetics of everyday life that still color my vision. There's something about murals I noticed. They're large and typically quite crowded, spatially speaking. There's also narrative at work and site-specificity. There's a collective character to them, some were even made collectively. There's a rich history of the murals here in the Mission. And you may already know Nicaragua also had a rich history or cultural programs, and mural making was part of it. Art, culture, and literacy, in the earlier years of the Sandinista government was considered the right of the people. I know you remember it differently, the socialist takeover displaced and harmed a lot of those in your community. However, there are things, like art and poetry that still, I like to think, can be incredibly important for self determination, education, expression, and liberation.

There's something about the aesthetic of the murals, that I think has much to do with the aesthetics of the street, of everyday life. In the Mission, commerce happens everywhere, it practically spills out over into the sidewalk. I realized that kind of "spill over" this fluid crossing over of commercial-civic-social space, it translates onto the murals. The ways landscapes sprawl across compositions and figures take up the picture plane in unexpected formulations. Murals are pretty densely covered in the happenings of life. The Mission district's streets, it's busy-ness brimming with energy, color, flavor, and animacy, it's everywhere.

These details I share with you, are not of people but of things. The objects bought for children, parties, and even tools and equipment for making. These objects were in LA too, just in different and disparate districts: Broadway/Jewelry District, Santee Alley/Callejones/Fashion District, and Toy District. Imagine if they just all unfolded, one into another, with little regard for commercial boundaries. These different areas all share the same street. While in LA, the distinct areas had specific markers with large scale commercial production, here in the Mission the scale is compressed and made to share space with each other.

This less formal character of commerce, I think, relates to the animated relationship between figures in the picture plane of murals. They speak to a specific energy, place, and pace of the barrio. And I think, these aesthetics of the street and street vendor, they speak volumes of what it means to share space with other immigrant communities, of the ways that cultural practices continue beyond formal limits, and the ways that living in proximity to other Central American peoples engenders the vibrancy of life in all its rich diversity and particularity.







Abuelita,

I'm graduating from college next week. Can you believe it? I'm so sorry you aren't here to see it. Sure it'll only be a recording, but come to think of it, you wouldn't have been able to see it in person in a non-pandemic world anyway. You could barely get around your apartment, so you traveled the world right from your chair. You'd learned how to navigate to Youtube on your SmartTV. Hahaa, so savvy and determined to learn even in your condition and late age. I've always admired your tenacity to do things even as your body continued to weaken. Abuelita, I have to tell you that, I'm going to finally get a passport. I've never been outside of the continental US, but I think it's time. I'm going to go to Nicaragua and continue my senior project. Things got a bit complicated but I realized that this project hasn't much to do with the formalities of thesis or finals, but has everything to do with you. It has to do with you and memory, culture, distance, diaspora, and time. It has to do with recuperative work and recovery. It has to do with what it means to write from my position and limited awareness of Nicaraguan history and the hardships the family tried to protect me-- but mostly themselves from. Forgetfulness is a dangerous tool, and I have to actively fight against forgetting. This photo may seem unspectacular but it spoke to me because of the dual nature of the photo studio: passport--identification and professional portrait--personal document of achievement or milestone. Is there something serendipitous of seeing these young women? I'm not sure but something called me to it. I have a lot more access to the world that you maybe could have dreamed of, and it scares me. Big changes and shifts are happening as I move into the world and next stages of my journey. If could periodized my life it would be: self-discovery via self-inflicted injury on account of somewhat misguided-amateurish historiographic endeavors (and other discontents) haahaaa. Ay humor es algo que espero que usted podría entender algún día. But I think now my laughter has a deeper tenor, I think it's because I laugh for my sake but for yours as well. I love for us and my never ending love and search for you.

I wanted to close out this project with one last photo, to recall how we can make connections across geographies and mark our place in the present.



Mire abuelita, un mural pequeño con pájaros tropicales. You would tell me that about los loros that would repeat anything you would teach them. Another incredibly vivid feature of your stories. The nature and wildlife that was not exterior to the domestic space, to the home, instead it was integrated. Of it.

This mural style illustrates one of a younger generation, something Latin-American-American, Latino/a/@/x?, “Hispanic”, what is it? Lo que quiero decir, is that this place is already of a people who have established a connection “here”. Look, for example, at the “415” in old English font, the classic red Oldsmobile, the proud lettering: “keep hoods yours”. Above we can see a register of a Mesoamerican style motif and roses detailing the bottom of the work. The SF Skyline and Bridges recede into the horizon, while artistry takes up space and commands the composition.

The migrant community here faces ongoing threat of gentrification and displacement. Abuelita, it's happening in Hawthorne too, it's why your rent kept going up in your “not-so-good”

neighborhood. The battle over claims to space is an old one, and one that keeps repeating here in the Bay area, and back home too. Public spaces have a very complex relationship to communities and belonging. Who gets to be the “you” in “yours” is contingent upon social changes, history, and time. I wanted to share this with you so you could see all the places I went to visit today and try and tell this through my diasporic imagination. My intention was to share with you how through this lens we could be attentive to and notice these ongoing and intersectional histories, cultural artefacts, and the on-going livingness that makes the Mission the incredibly rich neighborhood it is today. I thought this last image was a nice way to encompass the different ideas I tried to share with you about the story of this day.

I think that drawing connections between spaces of culture and memory making, their relation to particular places, and their emergence over time, is something I want to keep reading and studying. I think in part it is how I’m choosing to heal from the gaps in the narrative, the wounds I’ve inherited, and how I combat that debilitating feeling of not belonging here or there that left me feeling lost and out of place for most of my life. I carry all of this with me and I think as I keep going in between places, studies, disciplines, neighborhoods, countries, and historical periods, the load may get a little lighter if I lean into the relationships between these different and disparate things and embrace them. Perceived discontinuities or not, spatializing these relations can help contribute to the active and committed project I have to consider alternative modes of worlding with others.

Como siempre, gracias por escucharme.
Su Nieta,
Jenebrith