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The Space Between

A Photographic Exploration of Identity and
Place as an act of Self-Determination and
Social Consciousness

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Senior Capstone Project

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Introduction

I chose to center this study on myself, after working on a photographic project about Salinas and the environment during the wildfires in the summer of 2020. This was also a period of sheltering-in during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the uprising of Black Lives Matter protests across the country, drawing attention to historical and systemic racism in the U.S., particularly after the murder of Black Americans by police. All of these events had an effect, pulling me toward a period of contemplation and self-reflection about my own life and the transformation that was being called for in American society, highlighting the importance of racial reckoning and the need for social unity.

The call to come together to honor and acknowledge all human beings starts with first honoring our own lives and coming to truly know ourselves. By understanding our own stories, we can see how our identities, and we as existential beings, are inextricably intertwined with the lives of others. Embracing diversity whether through religion, race, gender identity, culture, or ethnic background is essential in society today because the history of intolerance in America continues to erode our human connection. Opening up the space from which to dialogue with others so that we can connect to broader common ground is something that is needed now during this great societal shift in consciousness, calling us towards our shared humanity with greater equity and justice.

Self-knowledge and the sharing of our stories is also a valuable form of personal activism. Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* speaks of the “responsibility” we have in knowing who we are, as a form of “self-determination,” that if we don’t determine our own lives for ourselves, then who we are in the world will be defined for us, by others (Lorde 43). The risk

when that happens is that we lose valuable parts of our own identities in the process and can become limited to dominant culture roles and expectations, both in the way others see us and in the way we pressure ourselves to conform and fit in. This is key— that by embracing who we are and where we come from, despite struggles and hardship, we take personal ownership in interpreting our own identities for ourselves. Self-agency is an act of empowerment. As individuals we only represent the tip of the iceberg or what is visible externally. What is unseen is the foundation of that which symbolically lies beneath the ocean and is so very relevant because it represents that we are part of something much bigger than just ourselves.

Developing the concept for *The Space Between*

This project is first and foremost a visual exploration of identity and place through a collection of photographs that reflect my personal family history, particularly as a daughter of Mexican immigrants growing up in California. As a photographer, visual imagery is my chosen form of expression as it invokes a more holistic engagement than a purely analytical research process, therefore not just the intellect, but also emotions and instincts. I started this investigation by doing both academic and family history research, including interviewing my mother, searching through vintage family photographs, and creating new images that reflect on the lives of three generations of my family. My focus was to consider our ethnic and cultural background and our place of origin, Mexico, as well as our life as immigrants in the United States; also looking at the subsequent generations of our family who were born here. My goal was to gain a better understanding of my own history and ancestral lineage, and the cultural shifts between the generations from the time my family emigrated from Mexico to the United

States. The outcome I hoped for was to build a bridge from the past to the present so that I could better know and define my own story and understand how that experience is relevant to shaping my identity. My goal is to encourage others to look towards themselves and understand who they are in light of their own personal histories and lineages, and to recognize the value in self-knowing as an act of personal sovereignty¹, as well as a crucial link to connecting with others—thereby deepening the level of social consciousness in society.

Family background

My maternal grandparents left San Luis Potosi in 1948, leaving their land and property behind to start over with their six children, including my nine-year-old mom, in the farming town of Salinas, California. My grandfather specialized in leather work making horse tack for Garcia Brother's Saddlery in Salinas after which he became an independent contractor. Ten years later my mother would marry my father, Jesse, a Mexican man who came to California in his early twenties. They lived what looked to be the American Dream—my father was employed as a mechanic at a local produce company, while my mom was a full-time parent who cared for her three children for most of her adult life, and later worked at a local library. My family resided on Central Avenue in Salinas, the same street where my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, and eight cousins lived.

¹ A personal form of self-governance; an intrinsic authority to determine one's own identity or destiny. A form of self-empowerment through self-determination.

Salinas Background-The Place

Salinas is my birthplace. It is a valley surrounded by rolling hills and situated between the Santa Lucia and Gabilan mountain ranges in Monterey County. Its first peoples were the Salinian, Ohlone (aka Costanoan) and Rumsen tribes (“Native Land”). Salinas has a large underground river creating the dominant riparian corridor along California’s Central Coast which makes for its rich and nutritive soil; this is one of the main reasons Salinas is one of the most productive agricultural regions in California, referred to as “The Salad Bowl of the Nation” (“Salinas River Watershed”). Migrant labor, particularly Mexican labor, is central to the farming industry and labor strife is a part of Salinas’ history due to farm labor union strikes and boycotts. Notably, César Chávez and the United Farmworkers Union led the strike against lettuce growers in 1970, calling for decent wages and better working conditions. My father worked for the largest lettuce grower (Sun Harvest) in Salinas at the time and, after a lengthy seven-month strike, they were the first to sign a contract with the union. (“U.F.W. Reaches”). This was memorable in that my father had to decide whether to cross the picket line or not. He later expressed he decided to cross it for economic reasons and out of concerns for our family.

The Space Between—Personal Self-Reflection

As a child of Mexican immigrants born and raised in California, I reflected on the impact that being a part of two cultures has had on my own life and identity. As a Mexican American, my personal experience often seemed centered on *the space in between*—that the duality of existence between these two cultures meant I didn’t fully belong to one or the other, yet paradoxically I was part of both. As the ancestral culture of origin, the Mexican side felt more

central particularly in the earliest days of my childhood because it was experienced within the intimate space of my home and through our close family connections and daily interactions. The American side, though still a part of the culture we experienced in daily life and especially through school, felt more emphasized in the space outside the home.

Gloria Anzaldúa talks about this idea in *Borderlands La Frontera The New Mestiza*, with a reference to “nepantla” which, in Nahuatl (language of the Aztec civilization) means the “the space between two worlds” where transformations occur and where one is “torn between the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (Anzaldúa 277, 100). This space is important because it involves “shifts in consciousness” that offer opportunities for change (Keating 1). Within my own experience, I interpret “the space between” as the state in which selfhood is navigated between dominant American cultural ideas and those of the Mexican culture. I also see this as positive, potentially life-changing space, despite that it can also be one of great struggle and loneliness. I can relate to the idea of what it means to move between two worlds, where boundaries are not as clear and where rigid concepts of identity are problematic, particularly when those identities are multicultural. The “space-in-between” is where my true identity is born because it is the place where things are malleable and open, not rigid, therefore allowing a more authentic reflection of me.

One of my shifts in consciousness that came from being in this space is related to women’s roles that were visible to me within my own family structure and were informed by traditional patriarchal Mexican cultural values and the expectations of 1950s America. My grandmother taught her daughters to be in service of their families and particularly their husbands. She also modeled this for me in the way she lived her own life, serving my

grandfather and all of her own children. Her level of independence was hindered not only by not fully adapting to American culture, but also by staying in a narrow domestic role as influenced by the Mexican culture. In this instance, I came to understand that women's roles looked differently in American culture and that I had a choice, because I could see examples of independent women around me, including by my own mother who was self-determined in her own right as she was of a younger generation than my grandmother and more emancipated. Had my grandmother been more willing to embrace the in-between space, despite how uncomfortable or threatening it might have felt, she likely would have found greater independence through the redefinition of her own identity.

This has been a large theme in my life: looking at how I have internalized perspectives that made me feel that there was something wrong with me rather than there being something wrong within the larger system, not just within my family but just as importantly within society. The shift in consciousness here is in gaining greater clarity of what belongs to me and what does not. It's understanding that some things are passed on by default or imposed upon us unless we awaken and dispel them by choice, like patriarchal views of women's roles within the family. This is what I want to encourage in others: to look at the larger story and understand how our identities are impacted or constrained by the influences and narratives present in our formative years, within our family systems and society, so that we can make choices to liberate ourselves and to know ourselves. I believe in doing so we also learn to value and fight for the liberation of all people.

Mexican American Identity

According to Jessica Vasquez in *Mexican Americans Across Generations*, assimilation and identity formation in those who identify as Mexican American can vary. Her research looked at how people hold on to their culture of origin, which she defines as either “thinned attachment” or “cultural maintenance,” both of which lead to a path of Americanization (Vasquez 64).

Thinned attachment represents those who see their ethnicity as optional, while cultural maintenance refers to those who work to remain attached. In my family there is a mix of both. For example, only one of my grandparents spoke English while the other did not, despite living in the U.S. for approximately sixty years. My grandmother stayed attached to the Spanish language, which considering that Americans are predominantly English speaking, limited her communication with others throughout her life.

Language is very important in assimilation, as is marriage (Vasquez 41). My mother was nine years old when she, her siblings and my grandparents emigrated to the U.S. My father arrived independently as an adult in his twenties and my parents later met and were married in Salinas. The fact that they both came from the same ethnic and religious backgrounds with similar family values meant that their cultural heritage of origin was reinforced. According to Vasquez marrying a “co-ethnic” is a major opportunity for “cultural revitalization” (121). By marrying, my parents consolidated their racial identity as Mexican (and eventually when my mother became a U.S. citizen, as Mexican American). This is part of why it was imprinted so deeply in me. Had my mother or father married a white American for example (or any non-Mexican American), the attachment to Mexican heritage would likely not have been as relevant. My parents maintained a cultural connection to their roots (cultural maintenance) by

staying closely involved with the Mexican community in Salinas, as well as their families in Mexico. They shared stories of their lives there, as well, they continued to speak Spanish and passed that on to me and my siblings. Maintaining cultural foods and music, particularly dancing, were other small but important ways they kept their Mexican heritage alive. However, they also adopted mainstream American culture by celebrating American holidays and traditions, learning to cook American foods, and developing a love for football. The rest of my family members including my cousins, siblings, aunts and uncles, as well as myself, did *intra-marry* with white Americans which resulted in a “thinned attachment” for most of my family. This means that three of my mother’s siblings and all of my cousins living in Salinas married outside of their culture of origin thereby diminishing the connection to our cultural lineage of origin.

Maintaining My Cultural Heritage

I looked at some of the ways that I stayed attached to my Mexican heritage throughout my life that allowed me to go beyond “thinned attachment” and fit more into “cultural maintenance.” These include keeping close ties to family in Mexico, cooking and documenting my heritage foods, celebrating and sharing the Day of the Dead tradition, speaking Spanish, participating in volunteerism and activism of Latinx and marginalized peoples, and also by relating to and embracing the Mexican culture, identifying myself as a Mexican American, Latinx woman. Through Anzaldua I also understand I am a “new mestiza” as my ancestral lineage is “founded in the spectrum between Euro-American and indigenous traditions” (245).

What this part of the project helped me to understand more clearly, however, is that by standing in that uncomfortable space in-between, I did not forgo one part for the other, but rather made a bridge between the two parts of my identity. This is why keeping my cultural heritage alive is so important, because rather than assimilating I acculturated. This means I didn't have to lose rich parts of myself and my own identity, I integrated both. Assimilation results in "abandonment of the original culture" in order to adopt a new one, whereas with acculturation "the values, norms and practices of another group may be adopted while still retaining the culture of origin" (Andhikari). Rather than giving up one part for the other, I maintained a connection to my Mexican heritage and also embraced dominant American culture within me. If I had not been willing to stand in the space between, and be in the discomfort, I would have limited myself. Being in the space between forced me to grow. It gave me the opportunity to explore, which resulted in a sort of unification of my identities...as well as gave me a stronger sense of self, which is an on-going process and continues to evolve. I believe this is why activism and a sense of social justice and equity is so important to me particularly now in my adult life, and one of the underpinning motivations for doing social documentary photography. I have an inherent need to integrate and unify, and to embrace diversity. I have a strong need for justice. I understood that one of the goals of this project was to bridge the past with the present, but it is clear now that it also showed me how I created (and am still creating) a bridge between the two parts of my cultural identity. This project is another form of maintaining my cultural heritage, because it tells a story that is relevant to my experience of exploring my own identity and place; it is my intention to share it with my family and the younger generations of family members to come.

Discrimination

Through this part of my project, I had a revelation about my mother's emigration experience and how difficult it had to be for a nine-year-old to fit into a new foreign life. She had no prior knowledge of the surroundings or the language; as well, there were many beloved family traditions related to Mexican cultural heritage that were lost. My mother's family had both class and socioeconomic privilege in Mexico that changed after arriving in the U.S., in which they adjusted to a middle-class life of an immigrant family in a small American town. I also better understood why she was reticent to admit having felt discrimination, something not uncommon according to Vasquez, as generation plays a role in the way that one perceives and responds to that. She noted that first-generation immigrants more often "opt to avoid" conflict, where second and third-generation Mexican Americans are "inclined to struggle for social equity" (Vasquez 144). This is true in my family. My mother only spoke of the struggles she had with discrimination in school after I was an adult and specifically asked her about it.

There is an interesting story which involves my mother's relationship to her birth name. When she arrived from Mexico her name was Amelia, but as an adult she legally changed her name to the more American sounding name, Emily. If anyone ever referred to her as Amelia (pronounced: *ah-MEH-li-ah*), she would become offended and let them know that her name was Emily, *not Amelia*. This comes from her early experience of being made fun of by the other American children at school because her name sounded different. According to my mother, her teacher replaced her name with the more anglicized "Emily" to help her fit in. The symbolism of rejecting one's name of origin tells me that my mother internalized perspectives that made her feel that there was something wrong with her rather than understanding that there is

something wrong with a system that does not make her feel good about being who she is because she was different. Though her teacher may have been trying to help her, Vasquez notes that “for teachers to rename students is for them to erase a native culture and superimpose a U.S. centered national culture” (165).

In considering my own experience with discrimination, I was sheltered to some degree being surrounded by an extended, loving and involved family. As mentioned earlier, all of my family members lived on the same street in Salinas including my parents, my grandparents, each of my aunts and uncles and all my cousins who even after they married, they came back, or some simply never left. Growing up we regularly socialized with other Mexican families and would spend weekends at parks having picnics, playing baseball and staying connected within our own cultural community. This didn't mean however that I was unaware of the racial bias in Salinas towards Mexicans, it simply means I didn't directly experience it first-hand. Salinas, as a farming community with a large immigrant population and a need for farm labor, has a fraught history in the relationship between growers, who are predominantly white Americans, and pickers, who are predominantly immigrants, that exists still today. I understood that as a Mexican American I was part of the group that was the outsider. In general, though I identify as a woman of color, I don't feel the oppression faced by minority (specifically Latinx) communities because I have class and education privilege, was born and raised in the U.S., speak English as a first language, and hold strong ethnic pride.

According to Vasquez, there are factors that act as forms of “protection” against discrimination, such as racial pride and achievement, noting particularly that racial pride is a “preventative defense mechanism against nefarious consequences of discrimination” (Vasquez

149). The achievement piece for me was ingrained in early childhood and relevant in both my school-life and life in general. It was the feeling that I always had to perform my very best as though I needed to prove my worth, which serves as a protection in overcoming “negative stereotypes” and lowered expectations of Mexicans (Vasquez 212). Though this message was never outwardly spoken to me by my family, it was felt and internalized. A third factor to consider in protecting against discrimination has to do with second and third generation Mexican Americans involving more direct confrontation, usually in the form of making verbal demands for equality in order to combat discrimination at its “core principle of enforcing dominant and subordinate relations” (Vasquez 156). I have experienced all three of these “protections” and whether I felt a bias directly or not I understand that I internalized subtle messages not just from society but also from my mother (not so much from my father) about the need to fit in and belong. There was a sense of having to prove to others who we were (and that we were good enough), all driven by an underlying need to assimilate, which considering my mother’s immigrant experience makes total sense.

Future Generations

Although my children identify as being “part Mexican” they are also “part Norwegian” from my husband’s side, and mostly they present as white Americans. Both speak only some Spanish (as well as other languages) and my daughter’s husband is Palestinian and Greek Orthodox, adding even more of an ethnic/cultural mix to our family. Through this project it has become clearer than ever that it will be up to me to keep the connection to our Mexican heritage alive, in part by recognizing that it will likely die with me if I don’t. Through the

knowing and sharing of my family stories and personal history, I understand this will have an influence on my future grandchildren and help them to know their own family histories and ancestral lineage from at least one of their parents. This feels like an important and meaningful piece because it was the way I came to feel connected to my own heritage, through histories and personal stories from the older generations in my family, particularly my father. It is interesting to now stand in this space between them and the future younger generations of my family. They will be the fifth generational link in the chain since my family's immigration.

Conclusion

This investigation helped me see that the confluence of certain factors such as: a sense of the duality inherent in two cultural backgrounds, a strong connection to family, being part of the larger community of Salinas as a Mexican American, and an integral need for autonomy—all which provided me with the impetus to make connections and find bridges that helped me navigate what it means to live in *the space between*. Understanding and appreciating that we are not all the same and that this adds to the depth and richness of our collective histories matters. In knowing our own histories and engaging in the larger stories of what it means to be human we learn to practice tolerance, compassion, and to develop a thirst for knowing and going deeper than just the surface. This project has given me a chance to think about my ancestral lineage in a way that does not limit me to my family stories, but rather allows me to comprehend that I have some human experience which is relevant to these times. By opening up to a better understanding of my own identity, of who I am and where I come from, I can appreciate the uniqueness and diversity not only of myself and my family, but of all human

beings—and this contributes to both a sense of personal sovereignty and the deepening of our collective identity and social consciousness.

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The Space Between: A Photographic Exploration of Identity and Place as an act of Self-Determination and Social Consciousness

Exhibit

This project is a photographic exploration of my personal family history that considers how life is shaped through identity and place. The imagery in *The Space Between* is divided into three collections. The first collection (01) are photographs reflecting my family's life and history in Salinas, California after emigrating from Mexico to the United States, briefly touching upon themes of connection, cultural heritage, and family values. Some images were rephotographed by taking a present-day image in the exact location as the older more historical one, creating a juxtaposition between the past and the present.

The second collection (02) is an abstract assemblage of black and white images symbolically reflecting parts of my identity throughout my life. It considers the way that we are shaped by numerous components and representations of our persona, that come together as a whole and at the same time are fragmented and stand apart, reinforcing the many ways one is defined either freely (by choice) or through constraints. It is situated between the two other collections mimicking the liminal space in-between two different cultural-ethnic backgrounds. It also reflects any point in our lives where we struggle with paradox or a sense of duality or of being between opposing and undefined states of being.

The third collection (03) are images of my birthplace, Salinas, taken this past summer in 2020 through to early 2021. They are a reflection of how I see the land in Salinas and derive a

sense of place from a somewhat idealized point of view. The images are associated with the idea that the land that surrounds us is part of who we are.

View photographic exhibit: [*The Space Between*](#)