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“Not Like Your Abuelos”: A (Fe)minist/Autoethnographic Approach to Vernacular Religious Belief and Traditionalization

Ciara Bernal

“NOT LIKE YOUR ABUELOS”: A (FE)MINIST/AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO VERNACULAR RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND TRADITIONALIZATION

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By

Ciara B. Bernal

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Ciara B. Bernal

Date Recommended July 6, 2024

Ann Ferrell Digitally signed by Ann Ferrell Date: 2024.07.09 11:54:57 -05'00'

Chair

Kate Horigan Digitally signed by Kate Horigan Date: 2024.07.09 15:13:31 -05'00'

Committee Member

Mintzi Auanda Martínez-Rivera Digitally signed by Mintzi Auanda Martínez-Rivera Date: 2024.07.11 08:46:24 -05'00'

Committee Member

Committee Member

Jennifer Hammonds

Executive Director for Graduate Studies

ABSTRACT

"NOT LIKE YOUR ABUELOS": A (FE)MINIST/AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO VERNACULAR RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND TRADITIONALIZATION

In this thesis I explore how vernacular Mexican Catholicism is practiced, explained, and passed down within my family. I look at vernacular religious belief and traditionalization as an integrated process that impacts the practices, beliefs, and stories of my family. I include myself as a subject of this research, conducting autoethnography within each chapter. I utilize reflexive and vulnerable writing practices to accomplish this.

My overarching research questions for this thesis are: How has Mexican-Catholicism shaped the relationships, stories, and beliefs of my family members? What can Chicana feminist perspectives add to the study of vernacular religious belief and family folklore? What can vulnerable writing practices offer studies of religious belief and what is the impact of doing it? How is vernacular religious belief impacted by the process of traditionalization?

To answer these questions, I utilize ethnographic interviews with multiple family members. I reflect on my own experiences and memories of my family as well as conduct secondary research on topics like family folklore, narrative scholarship, religious studies, Chicana feminisms, Latinx folklore, and autoethnographic practices.

The results of this research have demonstrated the complicated and vast possibilities of utilizing family folklore and autoethnography in folklore scholarship. Looking at vernacular religious belief as impacting and being impacted by traditionalization opens new doors to understanding the complicated nature of changing religious belief and practices. This research

can speak to the ways in which people inherit religious belief, but also actively change those beliefs and practices based on their lived experiences.

Keywords: Folklore, Family Folklore, Chicana Feminism, Tradition, Catholicism, Religion

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I would like to thank my family: Abuelo and Abuela, my dad, Tía, Ariana, and Sky. For always being there. For agreeing to interviews and sharing themselves with me. I am eternally grateful for what they have taught me. I hope you'll let me do this again one day.

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Introduction

En la manita que Dios te cuide

- Abuela's Goodbye Prayer

This is the last thing I hear each time I see my Abuela. She stands from the door, watching us leave. She says this through the phone before shouting "love you *mija*, bye!" She's always said this prayer before leaving, before hanging up, before we're apart again. I can hear it in my head clear as day. It sends tingly waves from my head to feet. It feels like a hug to hear her say this prayer, even when it echoes in my mind. Throughout my life I've witnessed the religious practices of my Mexican-Catholic family, but never considered asking my family members about their beliefs. I took for granted the thousands of prayers my Abuela has said on my behalf, I assumed I knew about how my family worshipped and what they believed. I was wrong. I'm now happy to say I greatly overestimated my understanding of their religious beliefs. This revelation allowed me to learn about my family, about belief, and about myself.

This thesis explores how the traditions and vernacular religious beliefs and practices of my paternal family, are impacted by and centered around my Abuela, a beloved matriarch. The overarching questions proposed by this thesis include: How has Mexican-Catholicism shaped the relationships, stories, and beliefs of my family members? What can Chicana feminist perspectives add to the study of vernacular religious belief and family folklore? What can vulnerable writing practices offer studies of religious belief and what is the impact of doing it? How is vernacular religious belief impacted by the process of traditionalization? This small study of my family could potentially speak to broader understandings of how religion is being practiced outside of the Church and the ways that religion is enculturated, changed, and practiced privately.

Methods

To address these research questions, I conducted ethnographic interviews with ten members of my family over the course of a year. I only utilize interviews with five members of my family in this thesis, because I limited the scope to just my grandparents and their direct descendants. The interviews I utilize took place on Zoom or the Facetime app. I have conducted multiple interviews with my grandparents, some in person and one via Facetime. I utilize information from all of the interviews conducted with them in this thesis. This thesis also incorporates autoethnography, where I include myself as a subject in my research. I take an interdisciplinary approach throughout, while I draw on folklore scholarship in each chapter and utilize folklore methods and frameworks; I also draw on work from Chicana feminism, religious studies, theology, and works of Latinx literature.

Because this is a very personal project, I have utilized frameworks of reflexive ethnography, vulnerable writing, and autoethnography as a part of my methods from scholars such as Ruth Behar, Mintzi Auanda Martínez Rivera, and David Hufford, discussed in my literature review below. I've engaged in the challenging yet rewarding work of analyzing my own perspectives. This practice has allowed me to grow as a scholar and an individual. By doing this reflexive work I set the tone for my future as a scholar and provide myself with a strong foundation in developing my own reflexive approaches in the future.

This thesis, while grounded in folklore scholarship and ethnographic data, is my own representation of my family members. The time frame of producing a MA thesis and the geographic distance between my family members and I prevented attempting collaborative ethnography with my family, but I'd like to do this in the future. I try to the best of my ability to present what has been shared with me with care and respect. I am in no way an authority on what

has been shared by my family members; rather, this is an attempt to illuminate the complex and fascinating realm of folk belief as it is passed down in one family, my family. This thesis has become an act of love towards myself and my family.

Spanish and my Abuela

I never felt deserving of my Mexican heritage because I look white, and I don't speak Spanish. I'm half white on my mother's side and grew up in an English-speaking household. The language barrier led me to feel like I barely knew my Mexican family. I no longer have a relationship with my mother or her side of the family due to alcoholism and mental health issues, which left me feeling isolated as a young adult. My lack of a relationship with my mother has led me to idealize the other women in my life as role models and mentors. The focus I have on my Abuela and on other women in my family is an attempt to understand what it means to be a woman and a mother.

Growing up without knowing Spanish is something I've always felt guilty about. My cousins would tease me, my grandfather would huff and puff, and my dad would admonish me for not wanting to learn. *How could I want to learn something I was shamed for not knowing*? I took Spanish courses in college and struggled to learn. School had always been easy, and the prospect of having to try to learn something felt foreign. I didn't know how to study or practice a language. My white peers excelling at Spanish made me ashamed and angry. *Why was it so hard?* Why did I feel a knot in my stomach and a lump in my throat when I mispronounced a word or couldn't understand my Abuela? As I've gotten older, I've realized the guilt and shame I had been carrying made it impossible to learn. It wasn't my fault I couldn't speak it. I grew up in an English-speaking home, with only one parent who spoke Spanish. I lived in a white neighborhood where no other kids spoke multiple languages, I was only emersed in Spanish a

few weeks a year at most. There's no way I could've gained fluency in that environment. It's not a surprise I was afraid to learn. It felt like something I was destined to fail at, and it still feels this way today. I'm still not fluent, although I have plans to change that.

The disconnection I've felt from my heritage and my family is something I am trying to rectify. My Abuela understands English but feels more comfortable speaking Spanish. I understood basic phrases growing up and have only gained an intermediate level of fluency in adulthood. I have never been able to deeply converse with my Abuela without a family member translating. In my interviews with her, someone was present to help translate, usually my grandfather.

The language barrier has made my Abuela feel distant and mysterious. Growing up, I got to know my Abuela through stories others told about her, through hearing her short jokes and quips made in English, and through watching her. I remember watching her cook, watching her pray, watching her water the hundreds of plants she crammed into a tiny apartment patio. I'd watch her drink coffee, watch her put her make-up on at the kitchen table, watch my Abuelo curl the back of her hair because she couldn't reach it. I feel lucky I paid so much attention as a child. Because of this language barrier this thesis presents my Abuela in a similar style. It is about my Abuela but is told through representations of her based on my own experiences and my family members' experiences of her.

Spanish Terminology

For clarity, here I explain some of the Spanish names used for my family members. In Spanish, *Abuelos*, can be used to mean grandparents, grandfathers (plural), or grandfather's (possessive). My family often refers to my grandparents together as *Abuelos,* however as this can

become grammatically confusing in English, in this thesis I refer to my *abuelos* as my grandparents. My grandfather, Guillermo Bernal, is called *Abuelo* (grandfather) and *Bo* by my family members and this switch between the two names can be seen in some of the quotes I include. In this thesis Abuelo and Bo refer to the same person, though I do try to mostly use Bo when referring to my grandfather for clarity. My *Abuela* (grandmother), "Pinny" Ernestina Bernal, is mostly referred to as Abuela by my family members and in this thesis. I also utilize *Tía,* the Spanish term for aunt, when discussing my Tía Georgina. Our Lady of Guadalupe is referred to as Guadalupe, *La Virgencita,* and *La Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe* throughout this thesis. Other Spanish terms or phrases used will be translated in parentheses within the text.

Literature Review

In order to analyze the stories, memories, and religious beliefs shared in this thesis I utilize an interdisciplinary approach to the research I've integrated into this project. Some of these disciplines include, first and foremost, folklore scholarship. I focus on folklore scholarship from Latinx scholars, narrative scholars, and vernacular belief scholars, as well as work from religious studies, Latinx theology, and Chicana feminism. This literature review begins with an exploration of the Chicana feminist perspectives and frameworks that have guided this work and goes on to explore liberative theologies, vernacular religious belief, reflexivity and autoethnography, family folklore, and narrative scholarship.

"(Fe)minism," is a term I borrow from religious studies scholar María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, which she describes as an expansion of a definition of feminism that she first heard at a conference on Latinx religion (2018:213). The anthropologist Milagros Peña shared one of their interviewees' definitions of feminism as "fe en mi mismo" (faith in myself) (2018:213). Castañeda-Liles utilizes this vernacular definition, which she refers to as an

"underground feminism" to analyze the ways her participants utilize Our Lady of Guadalupe for self-empowerment (2018:213). Castañeda-Liles defines (fe)minism as a type of feminist consciousness where agency and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe intersect. This intersection allows women to develop strategies to transcend "oppressive situations and limiting belief systems" (2018:214). Through personal reinterpretation of religious doctrine and practices, women center themselves as powerful within a patriarchal religious tradition. In this thesis I attempt to expand Castañeda-Liles' (fe)minism beyond the utilization of Guadalupe for self-empowerment, but as a way to view vernacular belief as a liberative practice.

Some of the Chicana feminist perspectives I focus on were created to address the needs and desires of Latinas. These approaches are based on grassroots feminisms that emphasize decolonization and self-actualization. Women and gender studies scholar Irene Lara has put forth "Bruja Positionality" as an identity to take in epistemological thinking (2005). Lara argues that we should develop our own "bruja-like epistemology in the re-membering, revising, and constructing of knowledge" (2005:13). This is a decolonial perspective aimed at recentering marginalized voices. Folklorist Rachel González-Martin expands on this and proposes "Bruja Epistemology," which she uses to encompass a type of "magical thinking" that allows for an "intellectual pivot that reframes authoritative discourse in the field by decentering White hegemonic discourse and instead anticipating folklore's mestizo futurity" (2021:35). These approaches have inspired me to think critically about the research that I've done and the research that I'd like to do. In this fashion I aim to amplify the voices of marginalized groups with my work here and in the future. To begin doing this I utilize an interdisciplinary approach with the scholarship I've leaned on, mostly utilizing scholarship from Latinx women.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz is one of these scholars I've been heavily inspired by. Mujerista Theology, created by Isasi-Díaz, expands her concept of *Mujerista*. Mujerista is the term she proposed as an alternative to "feminist." She argues that the terms "feminist" and "feminism" had been whitewashed and were terms many marginalized women struggled to see themselves in (1996:20). "Mujerista," as a term, "name[s] devotion to Latina's liberation" (1996:61). Although this term was born out of a theological perspective it has been taken up outside of theological epistemologies and utilized in literature, history, and by community organizers (1996: 61). Mujerista theology aims to provide a theological perspective from the points of view of Latina women. Isasi-Díaz refers to this emphasis as "lo cotidiano," or the daily experience of Hispanic women (1996:68). By acknowledging and bringing to the forefront the way Hispanic women experience reality through theology, we can see the ways Latinas recenter themselves within a patriarchal religious tradition. This is an incredibly important viewpoint to take as I endeavor in exploring the religious beliefs of the women in my family. I aim to center their voices in this work.

Kat Armas proposed another form of liberation theology in her book, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength*. Armas attempts to decolonize Christian theology by utilizing Abuelita Theology as a framework that centers her own experience of religion with her Abuelita. This also applies more generally with the experiences of many Latinx people, she explains:

> [Abuelita Theology] is the practice of uncovering and naming our abuelas who have inspired, taught, and guided us in our process of becoming and belonging. In this sense, I like to think of not one abuelita theology but multiple abuelita theologies born from the diversity that makes up the lived experiences of marginalized women across religious expressions, races, ethnicities, cultures, classes, and places (2021:19).

Gaining inspiration from Isasi Diaz's *Mujerista Theology*, Armas' provides a (fe)minist reinterpretation of biblical doctrine and the roles of Latina women, one that aligns with liberation theology (2021:26). As I look at my Abuela as a matriarch in my family, one who has guided and protected us, I find myself drawn to Armas' work in thinking about the ways women are often designated the role of tradition barriers within their families, but rarely credited for their role in instilling and maintaining traditions across generations.

In this thesis I focus on the ways in which vernacular religious belief and traditionalization influence each other. I analyze the stories and personal beliefs of my family members. I also demonstrate this within my own exploration of my religious beliefs and experiences. Tradition has been defined, challenged, and discussed by many folklorists. The term, when used outside of folklore scholarship, can have many negative connotations, such as rigid, strict, unchanging, and old-fashioned. Folklorists view tradition in a very different light than the general public. I rely largely on Henry Glassie's definition of tradition as the "creation of the future out of the past" (2003:176). This definition allows for the application of Dell Hymes' process of tradition, "traditionalization" (1974). Tradition is not a static unchanging thing passed down without question or reason. Tradition is something we do; it's something we create, change, and interact with on a daily basis. I explore tradition in more depth in chapter two. However, these two initial descriptions from Glassie and Hymes help illuminate the focus I take when it comes to traditions of vernacular religious belief.

The traditions I focus on here are centered in vernacular religious belief. I utilize Leonard Primiano's definition of vernacular religion as, "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it. Since religion inherently involves interpretation, it is impossible for the religion of an individual to not be vernacular" (1995: 44). This research

focuses on how my family discuss their experiences, practices, and their religious beliefs, not on their adherence to official Catholic doctrine and worship. Primiano's "vernacular religious theory" is a guide for thinking about religiosity in my family. Vernacular religious theory is an "interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief" (1995:44). I often refer to vernacular religion as vernacular belief within this thesis. I don't attempt to change the definition; I use it interchangeably with Primiano's vernacular religion. However, I make this distinction because the term "religion" has various connotations for many people, including those I discuss in this thesis. The term "religion" itself is contentious, as it may represent the official, the public, or the widely known. I'm interested in the private and personal beliefs of individuals. This work is focused on beliefs and practices in relation to family dynamics and tradition through a (fe)minist analysis.

I utilize folklorist David J. Hufford's work, "The Scholarly Voice and The Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies," as a model for my reflexivity. The practice of reflexive scholarship is a postmodern invention in academia. Being reflexive acknowledges the researcher's role as 'subject' in their research, while their findings are the 'object' (1995:57). This allows us to consider the subjective process of knowledge creation. To put it more simply, what I find in my research is *my own* understanding of it and not the objective truth. When we consider knowledge as a culturally informed creation, we can begin to question how we've come to understand the world around us. In the case of studying religious belief, scholars are traditionally urged to remain voiceless and disinterested (1995:59). Scholars shouldn't seek to disprove the existence of a God or higher beings, but they also can't prove it or admit their own

belief. This kind of avoidant research results in a religion on display, up for judgment and scrutiny. While I utilize reflexive analysis within each chapter, I do so with more depth in chapter three as I examine some of the ways I've engaged with my Mexican Catholic heritage throughout my life in order to resituate my scholarship from a disinterested point of view to a personal process of self-discovery and meaning-making.

Autoethnography is a useful tool in producing research that highlights the researchers' own biases and experiences, and it opens a dialog about the struggles and complications of doing ethnography. Through autoethnography the researcher can demonstrate how they affect the "data" we produce (McGarry and Mannik 2017:160). Doing autoethnography is important because it works to demonstrate the ways knowledge is culturally situated (Hufford 1995:57). McGarry and Mannik elaborate:

> The ethnographer's actions, feelings, and interactions are mediated by his or her own cultural background, worldview, and culturally appropriate ways of being in the world. As a result, we need to evaluate critically not only the 'Other,' but ourselves as well (2017:161).

The use of autoethnography has expanded beyond just reflecting on the experience of doing ethnography. It is being utilized to demonstrate the researcher's own experiences, feelings, and stories as a valuable source in research and as a contribution to academia. Latinx anthropologist Ruth Behar has contributed greatly to the field through her utilization of autoethnography within her framework of vulnerable writing. Behar challenges notions of what is considered knowledgeable through utilizing the personal voice to communicate intimate works of autoethnography. Through utilizing the personal voice scholars can lead the reader to larger social issues "when readers take the voyage through anthropology's tunnel it is themselves they must be able to see in the observer who is serving as their guide" (Behar 1996:14-16). In other

words, when readers can see themselves within the writing, within the author, we can promote deeper understanding and empathy within our work in a way that the scholarly voice cannot do on its own.

Autoethnography is utilized heavily by Latinx folklorists and other Latinx scholars. In *Chicana Traditions,* edited by folklorists Norma Cántu and Olga Nájera-Ramírez*,* multiple chapters incorporate autoethnography and vulnerable writing. In Yolanda Broyles-González's chapter, "Indianizing Catholicism: Chicana/India/Mexicana Indigenous Spiritual Practice in Our Image," she discusses memories of her abuela as a spiritual guide not only for her, but for her community. Within this piece she analyzes the colonial influences that designated her Abuela's place as a Yaqui woman in southern Arizona (2002). This work is written as a narrative, as Broyles-González writes about her abuela's final days and the funerary process, she weaves in historical context about indigenous life in northern Mexico and the southwestern US, a history most are unaware of. She analyzes the Indianization of religious belief and calls for the study of Chicano religious practices, all while demonstrating her abuela as a spiritual leader and healer for her community in southern Arizona. Broyles-González weaves vulnerability, personal narrative, and academic writing in a way that exemplifies Behar's point that "the exposure of the self who is also spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go" (1996:14). This chapter is a powerful introduction to Chicano and indigenous belief practices, that challenges and inspires readers like me to do research in these fields.

Folklorist Mintzi Auanda Martínez-Rivera adds to the growing examination of autoethnography by re-presenting the "field," as in where fieldwork is conducted, as steeped in colonial traditions and oppressive practices. She utilizes the term campo/field to propose a new approach to fieldwork. Campo/field emphasizes decolonial, anti-oppressive, reciprocal, and

collaborative approaches to the ways in which fieldwork is done (2022:186). She stresses the importance of the researcher's own reflexivity on their positionality, especially when conducting fieldwork on their home (2022:181). Within campo/field is the understanding that fieldwork is done with communities, not *about* communities (2022:182). These considerations help native scholars conducting fieldwork close to home or doing autoethnographic work maintain their position as fieldworker and mediator between communities and academia without imposing privileged authority.

In an effort to decolonialize academia and question traditional epistemological thinking, Latinx folklorists are very open and encouraging of vulnerable writing styles within academic work. For instance, in *Theorizing Folklore from the Margins,* Martínez-Rivera uses a poem to organize her essay on conducting research in a conflict zone (2021:257). Another chapter in this academic collection is written in Spanish, without translation (Cuesta 2021:169). In the JAF special issue "Redirecting the Currents: Theoretical Wayfinding with Latinx Folkloristics and Women of Color Transnational Feminisms" Domino Perez and Norma Cantú collaboratively write their piece on *testimonio* in the form of an interview rather than an academic article (2021). This use of experimental writing is reminiscent of prominent Chicana scholars Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo, who have published and written in a variety of styles and domains. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands-La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* a book referenced in the majority of pieces I write about here, is a combination of short stories, essays, and poetry that swings between English and Spanish, likely in representation of the identities of mestizas on the borderlands (1987). In Ana Castillo's book, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma,* she merges the historical, academic, and spiritual voice to write about the various manifestations of Xicanisma (2014). These creative approaches call into question white hegemonic epistemology. Why is only one

way of writing scholarly? How can we tell these stories, create new frameworks and methodologies, and question authority through modes of writing often looked down upon by academia? I join those challenging hegemonic epistemology in this work and in my future research.

This thesis is a work of family folklore as well as autoethnography. Family folklore has often been overlooked within our field, but many scholars have made notable contributions to this genre that have been invaluable in shaping this thesis. Kathrine Borland's "That's Not What I Said: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research" (1991) has been a guide in analyzing the stories shared with me. Borland's piece is particularly thought provoking, as I view my memories and my experiences of my Abuela and my female relatives in a feminist light. I believe their experiences are powerful examples of feminism and motherhood, but I don't know if they share that view. This is something I reckon with and reflect on throughout this thesis. Borland states, "ultimately, oral personal narratives, like other verbal performances, have voiced and unvoiced dimensions and are directed to a particular listener or set of listeners who actively contribute to their form and meaning," (1991: 453). As I look at my family as a speech community, I analyze the voiced and unvoiced dimensions of the stories shared with me.

Amy Shuman's work on storytelling and tellability aids my analysis of stories told by my family members. Shuman points out that, "as stories travel beyond their owners. . . the messages they convey are larger than an individual incident or an individual life" stories become a "site for negotiation of meaning" (2005:6). The stories and memories shared in this thesis have meaning beyond the incidents themselves and these meanings will be analyzed from an interdisciplinary approach. In my interpretations of narratives about my Abuela, I look to Ray Cashman, who states, "characters attract the most attention, and the anecdotes about them bring narrator and

listeners together in circles of participation that create community while simultaneously representing those who comprise and may symbolize it" (2008: 222). For my family, our Abuela becomes a character in stories we tell of her rebelliousness, strength, and strong personality, that reflects our own creation of a shared family identity. I will draw on the literature discussed here and on others discussed throughout this thesis.

Chapter Outline

I organize the chapters to chronologically reflect the subject of each. I begin with discussing the story of how my grandparents met. The second chapter is about my family members' current religious beliefs and practices, and the final chapter is a reflexive autoethnographic piece about how I've come to understand myself and my beliefs through this thesis. I chose to put my autoethnographic work at the end of this thesis instead of in the beginning. This reflects the process I went through in writing this thesis, which I discuss in more detail in my conclusion.

The first chapter of this thesis, "*Me lo sacqué en el bingo*: Family Character Anecdotes, Identity Creation and my Abuela," focuses on the courtship story of my grandparents. In this chapter I ask, how do these tellings demonstrate elements of tellability in family oral history? How does the use of anecdotes about my Abuela demonstrate her role in shaping each retelling? How is this story changing in each retelling and how do these changes affect its meaning? How does analysis of a changing narrative add to the complexity of telling and retelling family stories and what can this offer family folklore scholarship? Through utilizing a (fe)minist perspective, I ask what can the role my Abuela plays in this story illuminate about how she is viewed and presented within my family? The story has become full of contested details, parallel meanings, and subversive counter narratives. I provide four variants of this story from family members and

analyze the changing details and meanings these variants hold. I utilize narrative scholarship from folklorist Amy Shuman, as well as sociolinguist William Labov and oral historian Alessandro Portelli. I build on folklorist Ray Cashman's analysis of what he calls "local character anecdotes" by proposing the "family character anecdote" as a storytelling category through which families create a shared sense of identity through a beloved family member. Tradition is a "dimension of every creative act" (2003:191). The tellings of the story of my grandparents' meeting demonstrate the creative aspects of storytelling as they pertain to traditional views of my Abuela. My grandparents' version of their courtship story provides an Ur version of this narrative. Through using their original version, we can see how the story has diverged as it is passed down from their children to their grandchildren. I analyze the potential meaning of these changes and demonstrate the ways my Abuela's voice has become a guiding frame for telling this story.

The second chapter, "*Like your Abuelos:* Vernacular Belief, Tradition, and Change within Three Generations," demonstrates the vernacular beliefs of my family. I start with my grandparents, Guillermo and Pinny Bernal, and focus on the ways their religious practices have been shared with their direct descendants, their two children, and two of their four grandchildren. In this chapter I ask, in what ways are my grandparents the religious role models in my family? How have these three generations experienced religion and in what ways do they interact with it currently? How have these experiences been shaped by my grandparents and in what ways does this reflect traditionalization of belief? I utilize (fe)minism in my analysis to demonstrate what feminist analysis can offer vernacular religious theory in regard to changing beliefs and practices. To do this I draw on folklore scholarship on tradition (Glassie 2003; Hymes 1975; Handler and Linnekin 1984). I demonstrate that tradition and belief "are created by individuals

out of experience. They have reasons for their actions and their actions entail change" (Glassie 2003:180). I also utilize Leonard Primiano's work on vernacular religion to analyze the ways my family's religious beliefs have been impacted by their lived experiences (1995).

Chapter three, "My Vulnerable Approach to Autoethnography in Studies of Belief," discusses my own vernacular beliefs through Chicana feminist frameworks and liberative theologies such as Mujerista Theology and Abuelita Theology (Isasi-Díaz 1996; Armas 2021). I also draw on Latinx folklore such as work from Rachel Gonzalez Martin (2021). I utilize a reflexive position in this autoethnographic chapter, inspired by folklorist David J. Hufford. Hufford's emphasis and demand for scholars of belief to take a reflexive approach to their own beliefs and make those biases known is a guiding principle for this chapter. All knowledge is subjective, all knowledge is culturally situated (Hufford 1995). My own experiences demonstrate the ways I am forming belief traditions in my own life, through what Glassie describes as an "integrated style of creation" (2003:192). This chapter displays my experiences and beliefs as a product of my culture, family, and experiences. In writing this chapter, I hope to make myself vulnerable by putting my own biases, motivations, and beliefs on display.

The conclusion of this thesis comes back to my overarching questions: How has Mexican-Catholicism become a framework that has shaped the relationships, stories, and beliefs of my family members? What can Chicana feminist perspectives illuminate about these relationships, stories, and beliefs? In what ways has vernacular Mexican Catholic belief been passed down, changed, and reckoned with within my family? How is vernacular religious belief impacted by the process of traditionalization? I provide an analysis of what this work can add to the field of folklore, family folklore and vernacular religion. I also provide a brief reflexive

analysis on what this research has offered me personally and as a scholar. I conclude with a discussion of potential applications of future research.

This thesis has been a welcome starting point for me to reexamine my own beliefs and experiences and reflect on the people who are present in every meaningful memory I hold of religion in my life: my family.

Chapter One:
Me lo saqué en el bingo: Family Character Anecdotes, Identity Creation, and My Abuela

> "No one person in the family is the ultimate source of the group's oral history. It's poems, tales, and proverbs. Many people must be heard to tell their 'two bits' before the whole begins to make sense."
>
> – Karen Baldwin

The first time I heard the story of how my grandparents met, or rather, heard about the consequences of their meeting, was at my cousin's house in El Paso, Texas. Ariana and I were going through a dusty plastic container filled with old photographs in preparation for a surprise 57th anniversary party for our grandparents. We had just found photos of their wedding and were gleefully cooing over the pictures. My Abuela wore a long sleeve wedding dress, fitted around the bodice, that puffed out in a big circle skirt around her waist, a quintessential dress design of the early 1960's. She wore pearls around her neck and a pillbox hat with a veil; she looked stylish and elegant. Our Abuelo, Bo, was in a tuxedo with his hair neatly greased over, wearing thick square black glasses. Late into the night and after a few beers I commented, "Abuelo looks like the dorky guy you get with after dating bad boys." This set off a surge of laughter and stories about our Abuela. "Abuela was a bad girl," my cousin excitedly added, "she stole him from the priesthood!"

As we continued fawning over the photographs and guessing "who was who" in the wedding party, this rumor, "she stole him from the priesthood," took root in me. As I relayed this story to others, a fascinating character emerged. I grew up hearing stories of my Abuela standing on galloping horses, stories of her defending her grandchildren from rude in-laws, and stories about how she quit smoking cold turkey after the birth of her first grandchild. She is a strong fierce woman, a force to be reckoned with, *of course she stole Abuelo from the priesthood*! (Or

so I thought.) This new anecdote only added to who I saw my Abuela to be. As I began asking my relatives about this story, I discovered the statement, “she stole him from the priesthood,” wasn’t as much of a fact as I thought it was. However, the idea that she stole him away was present in my family members versions of the story and became a plausible theory. In some tellings this detail is directly refuted, in others it’s a possibility that explained tension between family members, and for my cousin and I, it’s one story that we see ourselves in.[1]

In this chapter I analyze four variants of the story of how my grandparents met. I ask, how do these tellings demonstrate elements of tellability in family oral history? How does the use of anecdotes about my Abuela demonstrate her role in shaping each retelling? How is this story changing in each retelling and how do these changes affect its meaning? How does analysis of a changing narrative add to the complexity of telling and retelling family stories and what can this offer family folklore scholarship? Through utilizing a (fe)minist perspective, I ask what can the role my Abuela plays in this story illuminate about how she is viewed and presented within my family? This work is similar to work in family folklore published by other scholars. Their work has made important impacts on the extensive categories of family stories (Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker 1982), the collaborative nature of telling family stories (Baldwin 1985), the complications of family stories that aren’t remembered in the same way (Tye 2017), and the tensions that can arise when the family folklorist misrepresents the teller in their analysis (Borland 1991). These works have laid the groundwork and provided important perspectives for consideration as I attempt to make tangible an oral tale that means so much to me. I hope to add to the growing work of these scholars and others whose scholarship is used in this chapter. Through looking at the Ur version of one family story retold by three generations, I provide narrative analysis on the ways in which this story has changed and been given new meaning as it

is passed along and what this meaning demonstrates about my family's views of my Abuela. To do this, along with scholarship from the folklorists cited above, I also draw largely on narrative scholarship from folklorists Amy Shuman and Ray Cashman, oral historian Alessandro Portelli, and sociolinguist William Labov.

On Tellability

I analyze the variants in this chapter using Amy Shuman's scholarship on tellability as a framework. Shuman describes categorization as a frame that shapes our experience of an event and that in turn frames the way we narrate the experience to others. For my family, because we know this is a courtship story, we tell this story in a specific way that frames the narrative. We understand what the story concludes with, Bo and Abuela dating and eventually getting married, so we tell it with that in mind. To my family, the stories shared also reflect a counter narrative, one where my Abuela is blamed for Bo leaving the priesthood. Details emerge that frame the narrative in a way that interacts with our family history and representations of our Abuela. These details remain a consistent part of the stories and would likely seem to be miniscule details to an outside listener, but as I'll discuss, they offer different interpretations of whether my Abuela did in fact steal Bo from the priesthood. In my analysis, the details my family members choose to highlight emphasize the ways in which narratives "identify and impose pattern on experience" (Shuman 2005:13). The story of how my grandparents met is a tellable narrative because it falls into a recognizable category of narrative, the category being a courtship story, or as my generation calls it a 'meet cute' story. As I'll demonstrate, as the story travels away from my grandparents, it is imbued with new meaning. As the story comes back to me, a third generation teller, the changed meaning is a crucial aspect of my interpretation and love for this story.

In their 1967 essay, "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," Labov and Waletzky describe the structure of personal experience narratives through five major points: the orientation, the complication, an evaluation, a resolution, and the coda (32-41). While only one narrative provided in this chapter is a personal experience narrative, the other three are what Labov and Waletzky term "vicarious experience narratives" about my grandparents' meeting (34). The narratives that I use don't exhibit all five structural elements that Labov and Waletzky describe; however, they all provide an orientation, placing the story in time and place. The orientations of the story directly or indirectly give plausibility to or refute the statement, "she stole him from the priesthood." The stories all utilize codas to close the narrative; the codas used by my father, Tía, and cousin are all anecdotes about or from my Abuela. In my grandparents' retelling my Abuela provides the coda that closes their story. In this way, my Abuela's voice is heard through reported speech in each telling and shapes the narratives as they move away from her.

Furthering this, the orientation helps impose an order of events on the stories told. This ordering provides a chronology that frames the experience and gives it meaning (Shuman 2005:13). As the details shift between each narrative told by my family members the meaning of the story shifts as well. Portelli's work on memory and storytelling shows that the importance of stories "lies, rather, in the fact that [they] became ground upon which collective memory and imagination built a cluster of tales, symbols, legends, and imaginary reconstructions" (1991:1). The changing details of the narratives demonstrated in this chapter "allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them" (Portelli 1991:2). I focus on the differences in narratives, not to assert one true narrative over the others but to demonstrate the

way the varied details within this story have shaped its meaning and expresses the meaning given to it by my family members.

Through this story and other stories that emerged when discussing my Abuela, it is evident that she is a popular character in stories told by my family members. Anecdotes about my Abuela are commonly heard within my family. Anecdotes are short amusing stories told about a real person or incident. Character anecdotes have been defined and described by many scholars; folklorist Ray Cashman's analysis of the "local character anecdote" is useful to think about the ways my Abuela has become what I call a family character anecdote. Cashman defines 'characters' as "people who offer the most entertaining material for anecdotes and are therefore most often discussed" (2008: 170). He employs the term "local character anecdote" in order to characterize real people, local to the community of Aghyaran on the Northern Irish border, who are commonly used in anecdotes as a notable character by others in the community (2008:171). Cashman explains that individuals who become the subject of popular local character anecdotes do so because of behavioral or psychological reasons. They embody certain attributes that often transgress lines between appropriate behavior and inappropriate behavior. These transgressions are what make the stories entertaining, they "set social norms in relief, and allow for either a challenge to or reaffirmation of these norms" (2008:171). By telling family character anecdotes about my Abuela, my family members and I have constructed a representation of our own values and morals through these stories. This concept builds on Cashman's work, but focuses on characters within family stories, rather than a larger community. These family character anecdotes function in similar ways to the local character anecdotes, but also hold family history within them.

My Abuela, as represented in family character anecdotes, has a reputation of being strong-willed, humorous, and a force of nature. These traits make her an attractive character to my family members, especially to me and my cousin Ariana who interpret these stories as being representative of our own character. Anecdotes that she stars in often demonstrate the ways she has not conformed to traditional expectations or behavior of a woman of her time and demonstrate her wit, characteristics that my cousin and I believe make her a "bad girl." The anecdotes that are told most often are told because they represent the teller's own views, or as Cashman puts it, "local character anecdotes are uniquely suited to people's efforts to, in Durkheim's formulation, represent themselves to themselves." (2008:221). In telling these stories about my Abuela, my family members and I connect ourselves to a beloved matriarch. The versions of this story I share here demonstrate the ways my family members engage in meaning making, participate in identity creation, and show adoration for my Abuela in their tellings.

Background Context

Before discussing the variants of the story of how my grandparents met, it's important to give some context for the clarity of the story. More biographical information about both of my grandparents will be shared in the following chapter, however it's important to provide context as to why Bo, my grandfather, was believed to be heading towards the priesthood. Bo grew up believing he would one day become a priest. He served as an altar boy during mass and in fourth grade began attending Catholic school, along with one younger brother. His mother, Trini, and grandmother, Carolina, were very encouraging of this decision. For his high school education he attended seminary school three hours north in Tucson, Arizona. After graduating he decided against continuing his education as a priest and joined the Army National Guard. It was while he

was in the National Guard that he met my Abuela, Ernestina "Pinny" Campbell. They were both around 21 when they met. They dated for two years before getting married in Agua Prieta, Mexico and moving to Tucson, Arizona.

Version One: My Grandparents

I start with my grandparents' version of the story, the only version that is a personal experience narrative. This example is the Ur version of the narrative; it is the original telling that other variants have been based on. I asked my grandparents how they met over a facetime video chat, the format of video calls they are comfortable using. I was unable to record the conversation due to the app design. I wrote the following story based on notes I took while interviewing them and on my memory of the way they told it, so this is not a word for word transcript of our conversation. I chose to write it out like a transcript for clarity and to keep uniformity with the other variants shared in this chapter. When I asked my grandparents how they met Bo responded,

> Bo: We met in church! (*laughter*) I was in the National Guard for several years. I worked at Bingo every weekend. Abuela's aunts went every day to bingo. Abuela walked in and we were all staring at her. She walked in with her white skirt and high heels--
>
> Abuela: Short shorts! (*laughter*)
>
> Bo: Everyone was looking at her and saying, 'I'm going to go talk to her.'
>
> Ciara: Did you?
>
> Bo: No, (*laughter*) one week later I said 'hi' to Alice [mutual friend, Abuela's sister-in-law] and told her I wanted to meet her.
>
> Abuela: *Yo misma tomé una gran flecha y le disparé* (I took a big arrow and shot him) [like cupid]
>
> [Alice gave Bo her phone number. He called her and drove to her home in Agua Prieta to meet.]

Bo: I drove past her house, everyone was outside, all her sisters. She went inside when she saw my car. I drove past and had to make a U-turn- they were all laughing at me. . .

[My grandparents bickered over whether my Abuela went inside at the sight of his car. Bo insisted he met her inside her home].

Bo: We've been married sixty years, on April 4th [2024].

Abuela: *Ahora somos una planta que creásemos juntos* (Now we're like a little plant that grows together)

Ciara: with a lot of fruit.[2]

My grandparents told this story together, but Bo spoke more. Their retelling is an example of co-narration, the co-narrator is also a listener reacting to the performance of the other co-narrator (Borland 2017:440). My grandparents worked together to tell this story like Borland explains in regard to her own grandparents and co-narration, "a married couple's affective ties built from long association will, of course, heighten their improvisational skill in speaking together and/or allow them to fall back on familiar co-produced routines" (2017:440). It is likely that this story has become a routine for my grandparents, like many other couples who have prepared and retold the story of how they met countless times. Bo starts off with a joke, "we met at church." They did not meet at church; they met at a bingo game that was held by a nearby army base. The joke pokes fun at the assumed religious ideals of my grandparents. Bo then states that he had been in the National Guard for a few years at the time of their meeting; this is the orientation. This detail is important, as it is often believed that they met while he was in seminary school.

My Abuela is known for her witty quips and jokes, like how she interjects above that she was wearing short shorts when my grandparents met, a potentially scandalous detail for a Catholic woman in the early 1960s, if the listener believes it to be true. My Abuela's use of jokes and quips is a notable characteristic that will be demonstrated in the other tellings. Their narrative provides more details, as they technically did not meet at bingo. Bo saw Abuela at

bingo and asked a mutual friend for her number, eventually meeting at her family's home in Agua Prieta. The encounter at bingo becomes the primary setting for their meeting in the following versions, likely due to my Abuela's jokes about the story that are visible in my family members' tellings. Bingo also played an important role in their courtship story. Bo would give Abuela free bingo cards whenever she came to play, which was most weekends**.** One of these weekends Abuela won the big jackpot and she split the money with Bo. They eventually bought their first car together with the money after they married. The significance of bingo to their early life together illuminates why bingo has become the notable location of their meeting.

Each of the following versions were recorded in personal interviews with my family members: my father Bill Bernal, my Tía Georgina Diaz, and my cousin Ariana Haro. These interviews were conducted over Zoom and transcribed word for word, with minor grammatical edits for clarity.

Version Two: Bill Bernal

> Ciara: Do you know the story of how they met?
>
> Bill: At bingo. I don't know if you remember the story, so- the- the way they met is I guess, the girls, I don't know if it was the sisters or friends of my- you know, Abuela. They went to play- they went to bingo, and was it at Fort Huachuca? So, Fort Huachuca's here in Arizona and it's an army base and its military, um, it's like all the brains, you know, of the military. It's not like Fort Bliss in El Paso, with flyers. This is more like- the computer guys, uh I'm trying to think of the- military intelligence! Military intelligence, kind of an oxymoron though sometimes. But, uh, so that's where Bo was based, he was in the National Guard- Army National Guard.
>
> So, uh they went to Bingo night one night, and that's where they met, and you know, they started dating you know from there, but the- I don't know if you remember the story, well- ok, I remember Uncles on Bo's side, brothers of Bo, kind of mentioning it once, but you'd hear it more on mom's side, Abuela's side, that Bo's mom always would say, "Oh, she stole him from the priesthood, she's the one that caused him to leave," well, no- it was- that was not the case. That was I think in high school, they met after.
>
> So, but uh, when I named Skyler, so your mom and I were trying to decide names, your mom goes, 'well, you pick if it's a boy, well you pick the name,' so, I kind of came up

> with Skyler, I don't know where I heard it, um, but because we kind of met through the air [airline employees], so Sky, and then I'm like oh well, Skyler.
>
> When I told Abuela what we named him, she's like 'ay- I can't', well you know Abuela, 'I'm not going to be able to say that' in Spanish she's telling me this.
>
> [I said] 'Well, just call him *Cielo'* because Sky [means] *Cielo*, you know, and she's like 'Aye!'
>
> 'Well, because we met through the air mom,' I'm trying to explain it to her.
>
> Abuela goes, 'Aye, if I would've named you where I met your father, your name would've been Bingo!' (laughter)
>
> So that was a- that was her big joke. She said that in Spanish, '*Si te hubiera nombrado como donde conocí a tu papa, tu nombre seria bingo'*[3]

My father's version is the longest narrative I recorded from my family members. At the beginning of his retelling, he orients the story by explaining where Bo was based in the Army National Guard. This situates my grandparents meeting after Bo finished seminary high school. His statement on how they met is the shortest part of this narrative, told only in one sentence, "they went to Bingo night one night, and that's where they met, and you know, they started dating you know from there." This statement functions as the result, rather than the complication. He goes on to describe the complication, which is the family tension that ensued. My Abuela's side of the family would comment on how Bo's mother would say, "she stole him from the priesthood," my father immediately refutes this statement. He refers back to the beginning of the story when Bo was in the National Guard and no longer in the seminary. So, Abuela was not connected to his "leaving" the seminary.

My father uses a story about my Abuela's reaction to the naming of my brother, Skyler, as a form of personal narrative that brings this narrative to a close. After explaining the story of how my grandparents met and the family tension that wrongfully ensued, he tells a story that paints my Abuela as stubborn, clever, and funny. In this narrative my father is attempting to explain his

reasoning for choosing the name, a newer and stereotypically Anglo sounding name. My Abuela, a native Spanish speaker, insists she cannot pronounce it. She is unamused by my dad's touching relation of the name to how he met my mom and states, "if I would've named you after where I met your father, your name would've been Bingo!" This story and her joke that closes it reiterates the meeting place of my grandparents at bingo. This is also an example of a character anecdote about my Abuela. This amusing story highlights her stubborn and humorous character. The story of how my grandparents met is one that has been carried on through my Abuela's quips. Even though Bo did most of the talking in their version that I give in this chapter, it is my Abuela's voice that is shaping how the story is told by my other family members as we'll continue to see.

Version Three: Georgina Diaz

Ciara: Do you know the story of how they met?

Georgina: So, what I know about that story is that um, so Abuelo was in the seminary, he went to a Catholic high school. He was in the seminary, and he would help at bingo- bingo nights or whatever in Douglas, Arizona. And Abuela would go with her elderly aunts to bingo. Like she would be the young one, I guess, that was willing to accompany them, to go with them, like I don't ever remember hearing- 'cause Abuela has sisters- I don't ever remember hearing that her sisters would go with her, like I think it was always just Abuela that hung out with the older aunts or whatever, and went to bingo and so the story I know of how they met is that they met at bingo. That's-that's what I know.

Ciara: Do you remember ever hearing that she stole him from the priesthood?

Georgina: Um, no and I've never heard it like in a bad connotation, I've always just kind of heard it like in a joking kind of way. 'ahaha' like in Spanish, she'll say '*me lo saqué en el bingo*' like in other words, 'he was the grand prize at bingo that night.' You know what I mean? So, like that's how I've always heard it, so it's always just been like in a funny sort of way, he was the grand prize and she won him.

In a backstory kind of way and now that I'm older, you reflect a little more on 'hm, why were things like that?' you know, whatever. I think because Abuelo's parents were religious and he had six brothers- or five other brothers, you know, all men, like I think

> his parents probably really wanted him to be a priest and so the fact that you know, he left the seminary, he got married, he had a family, whatever- I don't think that ever sat very well, especially with his mom, with Mama Trini. I don't think that that ever sat very well with her, um and I think it's probably because he didn't become a priest, like-like he had intended, and how she wanted it to be, I guess.[4]

Here we see "me lo saqué en el bingo" described as an anecdote about how my grandparents met. My Tía uses this statement to explain how they had always heard the story told, only after I asked about the rumor. Here, "me lo saqué en el bingo" is used by my Tía as a counter narrative. My Abuela didn't steal him, in my Tía's words, Abuelo "was the grand prize and she won him." The topic of Abuelo being stolen from the priesthood did not come up until I asked my Tía directly about it. However, in her version, she orients the story by explaining that Bo was in seminary school, therefore he was still in the seminary when he met my Abuela. This change in detail adds to the plausibility that it had potentially happened. Only after thinking back on family tension my Tía recalled witnessing in her childhood, does she connect that maybe my Abuelo deciding to have a family could've been an upsetting outcome for his mother.

Version Four: Ariana Haro

I first heard the rumor about my Abuela stealing Bo from the priesthood from my cousin, three years prior to writing this chapter. While I was interviewing her over zoom, I asked her if she knew anything about our grandparents' parents. To which she replied,

> The only thing I know is, Mama Trini wasn't a big fan of Abuela and I think it was because Abuelo and her, because Abuelo was going to the seminary and Abuela took him from the seminary- I don't know how that worked, that's all I know about them-

This rumor comes up before I ask about how our grandparents met and here it is also used to explain family tensions. Later in the interview we discuss our grandparents meeting.

Ciara: How did they meet-

> Ariana: Abuela was at bingo with her Tía's and Abuelo was in seminary, and I don't know I guess he was helping at Bingo night and "me lo saqué en el bingo," that's the story we know. I mean I don't know how she won him, but- I don't want to know (*laughter*). . . And she'll say, "me lo saqué en el bingo," and it's her biggest flex, like it's so cool.
>
> Ciara: What do you think Abuela was like when she was younger?
>
> Ariana: Crazy (*laughter)* Yeah, crazy. I think she was like me. I think it skips a generation; you know? This is like me and Abuela, [brings hands together] me and Abuela are very much alike, like the way we talk, like she'll come over to my house, I just feel like Abuela has this- like this fire in her, you know? You know, like, she comes to my house and she's like- even now. . . she comes over and the first thing she asks for is- if she sits down at my table, if we're gonna have dinner or whatever, she asks for her *cervezita*, which is her beer. I just feel like she has that fire in her, you know? And not saying it's because of the alcohol, but she just knows what she wants. She's gonna get it, if she wanted Abuelo, she was gonna take him from bingo. If Abuelo was with someone else she was gonna take him from someone else. I just feel like she's just *that girl*, that woman.[5]

In Ariana's version, again we see the orientation used to place Bo in seminary school, although my cousin doesn't elaborate on the importance of that detail here, likely is because she already stated that Abuela had taken him from the priesthood. So, the connection between seminary and them meeting is inferred. My cousin uses Abuela's quip, "me lo saqué en el bingo," to complete the story. This line from my Abuela has become the guiding frame of reference for how my grandparents met. Ariana also insinuates the idea of our Abuela being a bad girl when she states humorously, "I don't know how she won him, but- I don't want to know."[6] This kind of commentary is an example of using jokes to push social boundaries and reiterate a shared belief in the kind of girl our Abuela presumably has been. My Abuela also makes similar jokes that play into our ideas of her having been a "bad girl," or rather a woman who was willing to get what she wanted, regardless of the religious and gender expectations of the time. In my grandparents' version of the story, my Abuela jokes that she was wearing short shorts when she met Bo, rather than the more appropriate white skirt Bo remembered. This is an example of the kind of commentary that has helped shape our views of who our Abuela was in her younger life.

Abuela's Quips as Feminist Discourse

In each retelling of the story, my Abuela's voice can be heard echoing in the tellers. In version one, the use of co-narration by my grandparents demonstrates my Abuela's speaking style of utilizing quips in storytelling. Although she said less than my grandfather, her interjections are prominent features of their retelling that add humor and close the narrative in a touching evaluative coda, "Now we're like a little plant that grows together." Part of this kind of speaking style, utilization of quips and short interjections, is likely a result of the language barrier present within my family. My Abuela understands English but doesn't speak it as often as my grandfather does. Utilizing quips and interjections is likely a more comfortable way for her to remain involved in English conversations. In the versions told by my father, tía, and cousin, my Abuela's quips are carried over and play a prominent role in each version. For my tía and cousin, what my Abuela 'always says' is "Me lo saqué en el bingo" (I won him at bingo). This anecdote from my Abuela has shaped the way the story continues. My cousin used this line to tell the majority of the story, only adding an orientation to place the story in time and place and provide context, which I'll discuss later. "Me lo saqué en el bingo" has become the anecdote for how my grandparents met.

"Me lo saqué en el bingo" can be analyzed as a form of coded message from a feminist perspective. Lanser and Radner define coding as, "the expression or transmission of messages potentially accessible to a (bicultural) community under the very eyes of a dominant community for whom these same messages are either inaccessible or inadmissible" (1993:3). This coded message would not be accessible to someone outside the family with no knowledge of my family history or the religious connotations of Bo's early life and desired career. While my Abuela has not said this, one way this statement could be read is as a response to "she stole him from the

priesthood." My Abuela didn't *steal* him, she *won* him. In my Tía's version, she utilizes the statement "me lo saqué en el bingo" in a similar fashion, potentially demonstrating the context that she may have heard this statement used while she was growing up. This statement becomes a possible case of indirection through the use of a metaphor when considering the implication of their meeting, which was Bo not becoming a priest. Metaphor as a form of indirection in coded messages uses a single image or statement to "elaborate fantasies, [and] may create both distance and ambiguity," (Lanser and Radner 1993:16). "Me lo saqué en el bingo" becomes a metaphor that ambiguously tells the story of how my grandparents met. My Abuelo was not literally a prize for winning at bingo, but in that statement, my Abuela won him. This play on words is reminiscent of common themes of courtship metaphors like winning someone over or viewing a romantic partner as a prize to be won. My Abuela's statement intrigues me because it positions her as the active partner in pursuing courtship where Bo is the prize she claimed, and presumably the more passive partner in their courtship. Often the woman is the prize to be won. When considering the time and social context of their early life, both being a part of Mexican Catholic families in the early 1960's, it can be assumed that a woman pursuing a man would've been improper.

The use of this anecdote takes power away from the negative connotations that arise with the accusation of stealing a man from the priesthood. The negative ramifications of the rumor "she stole him from the priesthood" also fall in line with misogynist religious ideals that view women as evil witches out to tempt good men from religious salvation. These themes of women as source of sin can be found within the Aarne-Thompson-Uther motif-index such as, *virtuous man seduced by woman* (T338) and *woman's voice as source of sin* (T336.2). Similar themes can be seen in popular myths like Adam and Eve or Pandora's Box, where both women are blamed

for the suffering of the world. My Abuela was viewed as the reason Bo didn't become a priest, even though they met three years after he made the decision to not continue seminary education upon graduating high school. In my father's retelling, he openly refutes the idea that his mother stole Bo. In my Tía's retelling she sees the possible connection between that rumor and family tensions. While both Bo and Abuela's children deny that Abuela stole him away, the negative connotations of that belief are understood by them, and they make an effort to deny or reason with those inaccurate beliefs within their tellings.

To highlight the (fe)minist implications of "me lo saqué en el bingo," (fe)minism involves paying attention to ways people find agency within a patriarchal or otherwise domineering religious tradition. This is done through the process of vernacular religious belief, where people interpret and practice religion in unique ways. Within (fe)minism, this is often done in ways that are counter to the official doctrine or rules of that religion. While this family story is not representative of religious belief directly, it is the religious affiliation of my grandparents that influences the meaning this story has taken on. My Abuela, who is blamed for stealing Bo, through which she is indirectly accused of seducing a future priest, is made a villain. However, through this clever and concise anecdote of their meeting, "me lo saqué en el bingo," my Abuela recenters herself as the victor in an honest game.

Seminary or National Guard: The Use of Orientation in Meaning Making

Bo's position at the time of meeting my Abuela, either in the seminary or in the National Guard, is mentioned in each version. This kind of information about my Abuela is left out, we don't know if she was in school or had a job. She went to bingo with her tías, this is the only detail necessary to orient her in the story to my family members, presumably because it's Bo's position that complicates the interpretation of their meeting and not hers. The orientations are

used as “unvoiced dimensions” insinuating meanings that may not be obvious to a listener outside of the family (Borland 2017:438). To an outsider, whether Bo was in the seminary or the National Guard when meeting my Abuela at bingo may not seem like an important detail of the story. It’s only when understanding the implications of those details and some family history that they take on a meaning of their own. The different orientations given set up a chain of events that order the story and the meaning of its outcome (Shuman 2008:13). If Bo was in the seminary, then maybe Abuela stole him away. If Bo was in the National Guard, then my Abuela had nothing to do with him not becoming a priest. Similar to Portelli’s work on the story of Luigi Trastulli’s death, key details were changed in the narrative that gave new meaning to each person who told the story (1991). Portelli found that the story of Trastulli’s death was representative of politics, labor history, and collective identity rather than a simple retelling of one death. The storytellers in his work alter the location, timeframe, and other important details to make the story fit into their perceived understandings of the ramifications of Trastulli’s death. The changing details in that story “allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them” (Portelli 1991:2). Portelli concludes with the poignant point that if the story of Trastulli’s death was a simple factual statement we would know much less about the event and its ramifications (1991:26). In this chapter, we see the story of how my grandparents met opening a door to my family history, family tension, and ideals about who my Abuela is, rather than just a cute courtship story.

In my father’s version, he uses the fact that Bo was in the National Guard to prove that Abuela had nothing to do with him leaving seminary school. In my Tía’s version she places him in seminary school and makes the connection that family tension could’ve resulted from Abuelo choosing to have a family, rather than becoming a priest, like his mother had hoped. Ariana

makes a point to mention that Bo was in seminary school but does not elaborate on this detail while discussing how our grandparents met. Ariana does bring up the rumor when I ask about our grandparents' parents, stating that our great grandmother did not like our Abuela because of it. This again reinforces the connection this rumor has to past family tension, rather than it being directly tied to the story of how they met. In chapter two, I discuss my father's response to what being religious means, he concluded his statement with, "they're religious, and you know Bo was in the seminary, to become a priest, you remember that?" For my family members, the time my Abuelo spent in seminary school, which was his high school education, is a prominent detail about him that continues to shape the story of how he met my Abuela and demonstrates our own understandings of what details are representative of Bo and necessary to share.

My father and Tía both mention family tensions within their narratives. My father brings up that he had heard from uncles on his dad's side, but mostly from family on Abuela's side, that Bo's mother would say, "she stole him from the priesthood." In my interview with my Tía, prior to discussing how her parents met, she provided a different orientation to her story by describing memories from her childhood. She noted that she felt closer to Abuela's family, rather than Bo's family. Visits with Bo's parents were short and gave the sense that they weren't necessarily wanted there. My Tía reflects on the statement "she stole him from the priesthood" as a way to explain why those family tensions could've started. I'd like to emphasize that even in my Tía's theorizing about why Bo's mom was upset, she doesn't place the blame on Abuela. My tía states, "*he* left the seminary, *he* got married, *he* had a family." She never puts the blame on her mother. Presumably, Mama Trini was upset because Bo didn't do what she had hoped he would, not because there's any truth in "she stole him from the priesthood." The potentially reputation

damaging rumor, “she stole him from the priesthood,” is not given any power or carried on with any truth by my father or Tía.

“I think she was like me”: Abuela as Represented in Family Character Anecdote

The statement, “she stole him from the priesthood,” took on a different meaning for me when I first heard this story. When I shared this story with others, before writing this paper, “she stole him from the priesthood” was a powerful statement, one that made my Abuela seem legendary. This statement created a narrative in my head that featured my Abuela as a feminist heroine subverting patriarchal religious traditions and taking what she wanted. This, I suppose, is a far cry from how this statement was seen by others in the 1960’s when my grandparents met, or rather it just wasn’t viewed as something to idolize. As soon as I heard that statement, I already had an understanding of what I thought had happened and who my Abuela was because of it. In retrospect, the believability of that statement came from how I already viewed my Abuela and the other stories I’ve heard about her that helped shape those views. I grew up hearing my Abuela was a tom boy, that she had worked the cattle ranch with her brothers, that she could stand on galloping horses, that she never served Abuelo like a stereotypical housewife would’ve, Bo and Abuela were always equals. I heard stories of her nearly fighting my maternal grandma after she refused to take my brother to the ER. He eventually made it to the ER, where his appendix burst. My Abuela had to be held back from attacking my maternal grandmother after receiving the news. She is a powerful woman, and “she stole him from the priesthood” was the cherry on top of a legendary woman I look up to.

My cousin Ariana holds a similar admiration for our Abuela. My cousin brought up the rumor “she stole him from the priesthood” when I asked about our great grandparents. This rumor is connected to family tension. She does not mention it when I ask about how our

grandparents met. When asked to describe what she thought Abuela was like when she was young, Ariana said, "Crazy. . . I think she was like me." She goes on,

> I just feel like she has that fire in her, you know. . . she just knows what she wants. She's gonna get it, if she wanted Abuelo, she was gonna take him from bingo. If Abuelo was with someone else she was gonna take him from someone else. I just feel like she's just that girl, that woman.

My Abuela has become a role model for me and my cousin in our own image. My cousin directly states that she thinks Abuela was like her and, for me, through writing this thesis, I've reflected on who my Abuela is and my relationship with her. I've discovered there is a need within me to see myself in her. I want to be like her, so I find myself in her. The stories we've heard and the experiences we've had with our Abuela have continued to shape our understanding of her and ourselves. For me and my cousin, stories of our Abuela represent our own "recalcitrance towards conformity and official culture" (Cashman 2008:219), in terms of what it means to be a Mexican Catholic woman. Through discussing stories of our Abuela as if she were a "bad girl," my cousin and I demonstrate Cashman's point that "an individual's portrayal is the product of and for the individuals who constitute the speech community that prizes such portrayals" (2008:221). For us, being a "bad girl" means my Abuela subverted gendered norms of her time by stealing Abuelo from the priesthood and by being "that girl." As other scholars have demonstrated, family narratives have the power to reinforce memories and connections between family members, ultimately shaping family life and identity. However, as they are passed from person to person the meaning of these stories can be replaced with new meanings depending on the listener and teller (Sims and Stephens 2011:46-7). For me and my cousin, "she stole him from the priesthood" takes on new meaning, and will likely be a continued anecdote, one that describes the powerful matriarch we adore.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how the different tellings of my grandparents meeting have very different meanings for my family members. This story is an example of the complicated and nuanced aspects of storytelling as Shuman describes,

> Storytelling is a highly contested site for determining norms and values. From negotiations of who can tell what, through comparisons of different versions of a story, to questions of how an experience is interpreted and what significance is attributed to it, we can observe the ways in which relationships in a story intersect with relationships between the storytellers and listeners. (2005:12).

My grandfather's time in Seminary high school is a notable part of his history and it has complicated the meaning of my grandparents' courtship story. My father and Tía both demonstrate their disagreement with the rumor, "she stole him from the priesthood," while my cousin and I find excitement and comfort in the rumor that reflects our own ideas of our Abuela. My Abuela his represented through family character anecdotes, and it is through stories about her that my family emphasizes a shared identity relating to certain characteristics attributed to her. For my family, I believe some of these shared ideals are strength and wit. In each person's use of anecdotes about my Abuela we can see the ways individual members represent themselves through her. I have mostly demonstrated this with my cousin and I; however, this is something I'd like to come back to in future work to explore in more depth. My Abuela's voice is carried on in each of the tellings through the use of anecdotes about her or repeating her own quips about how they met. This story has become one of the many stories that will be passed down in our family about my grandparents.

As Shuman describes, storytelling is never neutral. The story of how my grandparents met is a surprising example of just how controversial one story can be within a family and the

varying meaning these stories can take on. “Me lo saqué en el bingo” is a counter narrative to the rumor, “she stole him from the priesthood.” This counternarrative has been used by other family members to tell the story of how my grandparents met, but also to negate the rumor. As overheard by my father and Tía during their childhood, the rumor that she stole him was used to “persuade the listener to accept a particular interpretation of what happened” (Shuman 2005:14). Although that did not actually happen. My Abuela’s line, “Me lo saqué en el bingo,” refutes that statement and has carried on in each generation of tellers. My cousin and I view our Abuela as a subversive character, as is evident in the way we discuss her. I will continue to tell this story through the line, “she stole him from the priesthood,” but my reasoning for utilizing this rumor has changed. My interpretation of the rumor is still one of admiration; however, I view my Abuela not as a thief, but as a woman blamed for a man’s decision. My Abuela’s line, “me lo saqué en el bingo” demonstrates her retaliation to said rumor, while asserting herself as the winner.

This story has changed across generations and has been impacted by others who have told it and those who have acted in it. My father and Tía utilize other members of the family in their versions to give meaning behind “she stole him from the priesthood.” Their experiences of overhearing family gossip in their youth shaped the way they describe the outcome of their parents’ meeting. Even though our parents both refute the rumor, my cousin and I have carried it on and have given it a very different meaning. In this family narrative, my “family draws its narratives from many sources and tells its story with many voices,” and the ways my family has “change[d] and interchange[d] their portions of the whole are importantly collaborative.” (Baldwin 1985:150). Telling this story and others about my Abuela has become a tradition within my family and in this tradition, we can see storytelling as a traditional creative act. “Tradition

[is] a dimension in every creative act" (Glassie 2003:191). As this story continues to be passed on it will continue to change, and new meanings will be ascribed to it. As my cousins and I pass this story along to the following generation I hope to come back to this story and discover how it's changed for my nieces and nephews. The religious implications and gendered expectations will likely change and be reflected in their versions of the story. In the next chapter, I'll demonstrate the ways in which religious belief and practices have begun changing in my family, starting with my grandparents.

Chapter Two:

Like Your Abuelos: Vernacular Belief, Tradition, and Change within Three Generations

"One day we shall all be dead
But those who keep moving
Tracing and retracing their steps
They shall never die"

- Patti Smith

In August of 2023, I began doing ethnographic research for this thesis. I travelled to Agua Prieta, Sonora, without a clear idea of what my research would become. I intended to interview my extended family about their beliefs. While attempting to explain my reasons for wanting to interview them, after giving a brief and poorly thought-out summary of my topic of interest at the time, like "I want to know about Our Lady of Guadalupe and your views on her," I often got back the response, "Oh, I don't know, I'm not religious, *not like your Abuelos*." This statement continued to reverberate in my mind, "Not like your Abuelos." What were my grandparents "like"? How did they come to represent "religious" people? Why were they referred to as religious when other members of my family weren't? This caused me to ruminate on memories of my grandparents and question how I came to know them as religious and what that means to me.

I limited the scope of my research to my grandparents and their direct descendants, while interviewing them, their own religious practices and their definitions of "religious" were incredibly impactful and surprising to me. As I listened to their stories, their upbringing, their experiences, and their expressions of personal faith, I felt I began to know them in a way I hadn't before. This chapter is very much focused on my grandparents' religious practice, but in it I also

discuss the ways they've enculturated the next two generations into religion, and how those generations now view and engage with religion in their personal lives. Each generation of my family has had less official religious experience than the previous and unsurprisingly participates in less religious practice. However, the aspects of religious belief and devotion that are being continued or forgotten within each generation of my family displays how religion is functioning in each person's life. Even though adherence to official modes of worship is waning, vernacular religion is continuing. In this chapter I ask, in what ways are my grandparents the religious role models in my family? How have these three generations experienced religion and in what ways do they interact with it currently? And finally, how have these experiences been shaped by my grandparents and in what ways does this reflect traditionalization of belief?

On Tradition and Belief

In my attempt to represent my family's experience of what being "religious" means and what their own religious practices demonstrate, I utilize folklorist Leonard Primiano's concept of "vernacular religion" (1995). Primiano defines vernacular religion as, "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (1995: 44). Primiano argues the need for a distinct term and framework for the study of religious belief within folklore, because of the lack of emphasis on the experiential process of belief in other academic fields. Primiano argues that folklorists are best suited for studying the experience-based interpretations of religion by everyday people. He explains that religious studies as a field was more concerned with the historical and liturgical elements of religion and not with the ways people practiced, experienced, or lived through religious belief. Primiano explains that,

> The process of religious belief refers to the complex linkage of acquisition and formation of beliefs which is always accomplished by the conscious and unconscious negotiations

> of and between believers. This process acknowledges the presence of bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing. (1995:44).

In other words, an individual's belief system is shaped by many internal and external forces, such as family dynamics, relationships, social norms and expectations, and many other factors. In the inverse, individuals also shape family dynamics, relationships, and social norms and expectations through those systems of belief. This chapter and thesis as a whole is not concerned with the ways Catholicism is taught or practiced according to the institution, but rather the belief systems of my family members and the ways they have been shaped by my grandparents. I look specifically at how my family member's separate systems of belief have been influenced by my grandparents and how that is an example of both vernacular religion and traditionalization of religious belief.

The term for looking at tradition as a process, to "traditionalize," was introduced by Dell Hymes in his influential 1974 presidential address at the American Folklore Society's annual conference, titled "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth." In this speech he describes tradition to be, not an unchanging monolith passed from one generation to the next, but a process that involves the intention of doing tradition. Hymes' term, "traditionalize" describes the seemingly universal need of any group of people, to create, maintain, and pass on certain aspects of their culture. The need to "traditionalize" is a human need and one we can find in nearly all aspects of human life (1975). Hymes explains further,

> In every sphere of life, occupational, institutional, regional, personal, and familial, one can find expressions of traditionalization. Such expressions may not take shapes readily recognizable as major or minor genres. . . but our task is to discover the forms they do take, what people do to keep a sense of traditionalized identity alive, universalizing our discipline and deepening its contribution in the process (1975:354).

I attempt here to identify the forms of traditionalization within the vernacular religious beliefs of my family, specifically focusing on the familial expressions of traditionalization.

Handler and Linnekin's article, "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious," continues the analysis of tradition, not as a noun, but as a verb, as something that is done. They define tradition as,

> an interpretive process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity. As a scientific concept, tradition fails when those who use it are unable to detach it from the implications of Western common sense, which presumes that an unchanging core of ideas and customs is always handed down (1984: 273).

Again, it is pointed out that tradition is not a static thing passed down without change or disruption; the implication that traditions have and always will be the same is flawed. Traditions are reinterpreted by those who carry them on, and it's in their reinterpretation that we are able to find individual meaning in them. Following Jason Baird Jackson's work on tradition with Yuchi orators, I focus on the ways in which traditionalization of belief within my family may offer a new avenue for the interpretation of systems of belief (2013:76). I do this to illuminate the ways my grandparents have directly and indirectly passed on belief and practices of belief to their descendants. This seeks to demonstrate the role family or kinship groups play in the continuation of religious belief.

In Henry Glassie's overview of tradition as a key word in folklore studies, he describes tradition as the "creation of the future out of the past" (2003:176). For Glassie, and for many other folklorists, tradition is a creation. Traditions are something that people create through doing. We give meaning to the things we do and find connections to the past through them. Traditions "are created by individuals out of experience. They have reasons for their actions and their actions entail change" (Glassie 2003:180). People influence traditions just as traditions influence people. I look at my family members' religious beliefs as a tradition that has been

carried on and recreated in each generation. Each person's recreation of belief is based on their experiences, I focus on the ways family relationships have impacted the creation and maintenance of their systems of belief.

First Generation: Guillermo Ernesto Bernal and Ernestina Campbell de Bernal

To better demonstrate my grandparents' religious views and practices, I provide short biographies, followed by my ethnographic research. Starting with my Abuelo, Guillermo Ernesto Bernal, who is called Bo by his children and grandchildren. He was born in Douglas, Arizona in 1941, Douglas is a small town on the US-Mexico border, directly above Sonora, Mexico. My Abuelo, who I will refer to as Bo, was the third child out of six boys to his parents, Trinidad and Felipe Bernal. Trini and Felipe were both born in the US, but Felipe's mother, Carolina, was born in Mexico. His Abuela, Carolina, lived in a detached home behind Bo's childhood home. While I was interviewing Bo about his childhood, many of his fond memories started with his Abuela. He described learning how to pray from her. Every evening, Carolina would call all six of the boys inside, and make them pray the rosary before dinner. His Abuela Carolina would also take all six of the boys to mass every Sunday at 6am. Many of Bo's early memories were tied to religion, being Catholic was an important part of his upbringing. When he was a kid, he wanted to be an altar boy, once he was able to, he decided he wanted to attend Catholic school as well. He was the only child, along with one younger brother, to attend Catholic school in Douglas. As he got older, he decided he wanted to be priest, this idea was heavily encouraged (and likely influenced) by his mother and Abuela Carolina. To accomplish this, he attended a Seminary high school three hours north in Tucson, Arizona, which he described as the best years of his life. His family wasn't affluent enough to afford this, so Bo would often help out as a janitor after class to help pay his tuition. As Bo got closer to graduation, he had already decided to not pursue

becoming a priest. Which he prefaced by explaining that the head priest told his class of 30 on their first day, that if even three of them became priests, that would be a very big deal.

After graduating, Bo enlisted in the Army National Guard and was based in Fort Huachuca. During this time, he would work at bingo games on the weekends, where he met my Abuela. They married two years later and had two children together, my father Guillermo "Bill" Bernal JR and Georgina Bernal, now Georgina Diaz.[1]

My Abuela, Ernestina Campbell de Bernal, called Pinny by family and friends, was born in Mexico in Agua Prieta, Sonora. While my Abuela was growing up, Agua Prieta was an agricultural town, it sits on the US-Mexico border, directly south of Douglas, Arizona. She is the eldest daughter and third of six children to Magdalena and Archibaldo Campbell. When I interviewed my Abuela about her life and childhood she didn't have much to say, rather what I know is based on what other family members have told me. I believe one of the reasons for her not saying much is due to the language barrier between us. Her sister, Guadalupe Campbell, who my cousins and I call Nana, told me that their mother and grandmother were both religious, while their father was not particularly involved in religion. My Abuela and her siblings completed their sacraments through Catechism school. As a child, my Abuela grew up working on her father's ranch, alongside her two older brothers. She helped raise cattle and farm maguey, a type of agave used for making mezcal. As I grew up, I heard stories of her impressive horse-riding skills that rivaled her brothers, she often competed in *charrerías*, Mexican rodeos meant for demonstrating ranching skills. There's even a family legend that she could stand on a galloping horse. Her brother's nicknamed her La Pinny, in awe of her skill and hard work. The use of the article *La*, meaning 'the,' in combination with her name implies that she is something of a wonder; she was *The Pinny*, not just Pinny.

Today, my Abuela prays every morning. Seeing her pray has become a significant memory for me and others in my family. My Abuela's use of prayer cards was something I never really understood. While doing research for a short paper on an item of belief, I interviewed both my grandparents about how they pray and their prayer cards. These earlier conversations made me question how much I actually knew about their religious beliefs and Catholicism in general, which admittedly was not a lot. What struck me most about these conversations was the emphasis on formula. I assumed their prayers were free-form or conversational with God. However, they do not pray directly to God at all. Bo explained to me that it is improper to go directly to God for your needs, how instead that was the work of saints. Both of my grandparents pray to saints for their needs. This is a common practice in Catholicism, praying to saints as intercessors to God has been a practice within Catholicism since at least 400 CE (Brown 1981:61). Bo emphasized that they venerate God and that it is God's power the saints use to help you with. He emphasized that they don't worship the saints; they pray to God through them.

I assumed my grandparents, specifically my Abuela, would talk the most about Our Lady of Guadalupe. She wears her necklace, she gave me a *Virgencita* necklace, there are images of her scattered about my Abuela's bedroom, and she prays to her every day, but she didn't have much to say about her when I interviewed them. When my cousins, my brother, and I were children, she would pray the full rosary to *La Virgencita* every day for us. Despite what I thought was a clear devotion to Guadalupe based on what I had seen and experienced, both my grandparents emphasized their devotion to St. Jude repeatedly. I don't see this as an either/or devotion, but rather their need to emphasize a saint that did so much for them and one I didn't know much about. In retrospect, the somewhat obvious nature of her devotion to Guadalupe may have made it seem redundant to tell me about her and is something I'd like to come back to in

future conversations with my Abuela. My grandparents both agree that my Abuela has received healing from Saint Jude for her rheumatoid arthritis; they believe he helped heal the "crookedness" in her feet. She now prays the rosary to Saint Jude once a week. She prays the *Novena Hora de San Judas Tadeo*, the Novena to St. Jude, to help her family members accomplish whatever we need. She had recently done this for my brother while he was looking for a new job in 2023.

My Abuelo and Abuela seemed united in their devotion to specific saints, but they haven't always prayed to the same saints or agreed on which ones were appropriate to pray to. Bo has always prayed to the Infant Jesus of Prague. He was given a statue of the Infant by a priest who blessed it and instructed him to pray to it. He currently has this statue on his bedside table. When my grandparents first began dating and eventually married, my Abuela did not believe in praying to the Infant. As mentioned previously, Bo explained that praying directly to God, instead of praying to the saints, could be improper. My Abuela viewed the Infant of Prague as representing Jesus, which meant it was inappropriate to pray directly to him because of their belief in praying to saints as intercessors. However, while my Abuela was in labor with my father, the first thing she saw upon entering the hospital was a large image of the Infant of Prague. She took this as a sign and began praying to him immediately in that moment and has prayed to him ever since.

As this story suggests, my Abuela's religious beliefs and practices are influenced by her experiences directly with the divine. While she was describing why she used specific cards and prayed to specific saints, stories unfolded before me that illuminated her personal experiences of the sacred, like the ones I've mentioned above. Another example of this can be seen in how she received one card that she prays with daily, *Mensaje de Jesús*, the Message of Jesus. This card

was given to her by someone in an airport. She told me that she felt a tap on her shoulder and when she looked to see who tapped her, they had vanished, and the card had been placed in her hand. My Abuela now prays every day with it and the evidence of much love and use is obvious in its façade. Learning about my Abuela's experience with miraculous prayer cards, epiphanies, and healing opened my eyes to her spiritual practices and beliefs in a way I hadn't expected. Sitting on the floor of their bedroom while they recounted these moments felt like I was gaining a glimpse of a part of them I had never seen before.

Throughout Bo's life, his beliefs and practices have been guided by official modes of religion. I use "official" here to refer to the institution of the Catholic Church. He wanted to be a priest when he was young, he served as an altar boy, received prayer cards and statues from priests and followed their instructions on who to pray to. In contrast, my Abuela prayed to those she had some form of personal experience with. Bo's admiration for the Catholic Church and following their rules has been evident throughout my life. As I've grown up, I've witnessed the attempts of Bo to bring or keep the family within the Catholic faith, using official or institutional pathways for this. Both their children attended Catholic school for their education. Their daughter, Georgina, raised her two kids within Catholicism. Her children both attended Catholic school and received all their sacraments. My father did not raise me or my brother within the Catholic faith. We didn't grow up in any specific faith, but there was an understanding that God was real. I grew up hearing my father and Bo argue over this. My brother and I were both baptized as babies because of Bo. He knew a priest in Tucson that allowed my parents to bring us to the baptism ceremony without any courses or fuss. He is currently attempting to get my cousin Ariana and her husband, who were married in a civil ceremony in 2019, to marry within the church. My Abuela attempts to keep us within the Catholic faith through prayer and sacred items.

She gifts every member of the family a prayer card, *La Mano Poderosa* (The Powerful Hand), that we're instructed to keep in our cars to protect us while driving. I keep mine in my wallet so it's always on me. She gave me a Guadalupe necklace, and when my brother's daughter, Eden, was in the hospital my Abuela gave my brother a Guadalupe statue to keep by her crib. Since I started this research, she has gifted me two St. Jude figurines, one small one to keep in my purse and one slightly bigger one to put near my bed, which currently sits on my altar. She also gave me her mother's rosary which also sits near my altar. These gifts were described by my brother as, "gifts of her love."[2]

Views of my Abuelos

For as long as I can remember, it's always been understood that my grandparents are religious. I never gave it a second thought until I asked my extended family about their own religious beliefs, and they said, "I'm not religious, not like your Abuelos." My extended family's views on religion and their own practice demonstrated a rift between the official and vernacular. It became evident that I needed to think about how others view religiosity. When I interviewed the descendants of my grandparents, I asked them how they would describe what being a religious person means. My cousin Ariana stated,

> Because they go to church every Sunday, they're very involved in their faith, every single word that comes out of their mouth has to do with God, *like Abuela*, like they say 'hi' to you and they're like 'que te vayas con Dios' or 'Dios te salve, Maria.' Someone that uses God's terms [religious phrases] regularly, someone who devotes time daily to God, and somebody who goes to church even if it's snowing outside and practices those roles through everything in life and just like relates everything in their life to God.

My cousin brought up our Abuela when describing a religious person. I hadn't asked her about our grandparents' religious beliefs yet, but she was aware the interview had to do with them. When I asked my father what being religious meant, quoted later in this chapter, he concluded

his statement with "[Your grandparents] they're religious, and you know Bo was in the seminary to become a priest, you remember that?" These are just two examples, but they do illustrate how my family members' own understanding of religiosity is tied to their views of my grandparents. I asked my Tía Georgina how her parents came to be known as the religious members of the family, and she stated, "I think because they've been consistent, like I think consistency is what everybody around them sees. Like, they've never swayed from it, you know what I mean? Like, it's just always been that consistency." My grandparents' perceived consistency makes sense as one reason they are described as religious by my extended family members, who viewed being religious as attending mass and not questioning the church.

When I asked my Abuelo what being religious meant to him, he said, "I don't know, we didn't think about it, we were born into it. We didn't think about it- until 7th, 8th, 9th year [old]. I became an altar boy and then I wanted to go to Catholic school. I switched to Catholic school in 4th grade." When reflecting on his adult years spent with my Abuela, he stated, "We just became closer to the church." My Abuela described being religious as having your sacraments, being confirmed, being baptized, and praying to the saints. I asked them these questions through an interview on the Facetime app, which I was unable to record. My Abuela's description of religion was translated by Bo in the moment while I took notes. Our language barrier kept her answer much more concise than other members of the family. Bo's description of being religious started before he was aware of it and reflects an ongoing enculturation into Catholicism. My Abuela relates being religious to being a full member of the Catholic church, meaning having attained sacraments, attending mass, and performing prayer.

While reflecting on memories of my grandparents and how I came to know them as religious, I realized that there wasn't a specific memory or point they became religious. To me,

they just always were, similar to Bo's experience with religion, he just always was as well. It didn't need to be explained to me, because I saw it all around them through the decorations in their home, the necklaces my Abuela wears, and going to mass with them. I experienced their religiousness firsthand. In my eyes, it was all of those things that made them religious and it's all of those things that I associate with being religious. What I view as being religious is based on how my grandparents demonstrated their faith throughout my childhood.

Second Generation: Bill Bernal and Georgina Diaz

The first child of Pinny and Guillermo, my father, Bill Bernal, was born in Tucson, Arizona in 1965. The family eventually moved to El Paso, Texas, where my father spent most of his childhood. Bill went to Catholic school for his education and often served as an altar boy. He described fond memories of his childhood that included riding horses, participating in *charrería*, like his mom had, and playing lots of sports. He moved to Arizona at 21 after receiving a job at Southwest Airlines, where he still works today. Bill eventually married and had two kids, my brother Skyler and me. In our interview while discussing his religious views presently, he stated,

> I think because I went to Catholic schools all my life it was always church, church, church, Wednesday was church and Sunday. And then being an altar boy, they gave you a schedule of when you were doing what masses, so I mean, it was quite a bit. That's why I think I stepped away from that, you know? I don't consider myself religious, I believe. I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I believe in everything that I was taught growing up, but they're things that I don't quite agree with- with that church. So, I would call myself more of a non-practicing Catholic or, more of a non-practicing Christian, I guess. Yeah so, to them, they're religious [his parents], and you know Bo was in the seminary, to become a priest, you remember that?[3]

The emphasis on 'non-practicing' is of interest to me. My father does not view himself as religious, but still sees himself as Christian. His belief isn't enough to make him religious and his emphasis on "non-practicing" suggests that what he views as being religious relates to practicing

something. For my father, religiosity lies in outward acts, like mass attendance, mentioned in the quote below. When asked more specifically about what being religious means he said,

> Praying every night. I don't know if Bo prays, but he goes to church and he goes to confession. So, to me someone that's religious that's really- that's into their faith, is someone that does that, that will pray- not only pray at night, but they'll do the rosary- they'll do Saints Day, they'll pray for that saint and go to church. Everything associated with that, to me, is religion.

In both quotes from my father, we see the relationship between religion and my grandparents demonstrated. For my father, to be religious means to practice religion through prayer and attending mass. Belief and religiousness are two different things.

The second child of Pinny and Guillermo, Georgina Diaz, was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1967. She attended Catholic school with her brother in El Paso, Texas, where they grew up. My Tía Georgina described riding horses and competing in *charrería*. Her horse's name was Susie; she recalled learning how to ride by figuring it out for herself. She taught herself how to bareback ride, riding a horse without a saddle, by climbing on her pony and leading her back and forth until she mastered it. Her and her brother also danced *Folklorico* together while they were in elementary school. Georgina attended university for teaching and has a master's degree in education. She has been a teacher for two decades and currently works for a public school district near El Paso, Texas.

Neither Bill nor Georgina recalled their parents ever directly teaching them about religion or rituals. Their Catholic education was left up to institutions like their school. Georgina described realizing her parents weren't as religious as she thought when she began hanging out more closely with friends. She realized through comparison to her friends' families--who observed holy days, holidays, and ceremonial rituals more closely than her parents did--that there

were different levels of religiosity being practiced by other families. The Bernals attended church every Sunday and on most holy days of obligation, such as Easter Sunday, but they did not attend mass for the days leading up to Easter. She doesn't recall ever eating the traditional Lenten food either, something practiced much more closely by the family she married into. She attributed the lack of Lenten food likely to Abuela's distaste for it rather than a distinct choice to not participate.

Georgina raised both of her children within the Catholic faith. Both children attended Catholic school for a portion of their education; they went to mass every Sunday and participated in their local parish. Georgina's husband at the time, Mike, was also devoutly religious. She explained to me in our interview that it was a shared responsibility between the two of them to raise their children within the church. They divorced in 2016, and although Georgina continued going to mass after the divorce, she slowly drifted away from it. Today she no longer attends mass but continues to be a religious person. In our interview, she stated,

> Today, what being religious means to me is simply having faith and so, that can look different to everybody, you know what I mean? Like, it looks different, like I don't- I don't feel today at this moment that I have to go to church in order to consider myself religious. But I pray every day, I have faith, you know what I mean? I talk to God, so to me that's being religious.[4]

My Tía's description of being religious is based on having belief in God. My Tía explains that being religious doesn't have to mean going to church, but she emphasizes that she prays every day. We still see a connection between practice and religiosity in my Tía's answer. For Georgina, praying is on a regular basis. She described her prayer with "I just pray to God, I don't pray to any, saints in particular, no. I don't even think that I necessarily pray, like to the Virgin Mary, I don't- I don't. I just pray to God." Her prayer practices are very distinct from her parents' practices. She elaborated,

> Mine are like free- free everything, you know what I mean? Even though, yeah, I mean mine are not the traditional, 'let me read the card every day and that's my prayer,' but my prayers are pretty similar from day to day, because it's like the same thing, but at any point in time I can free verse it, you know what I mean? Like, oh today I really need to pray for this in particular and I'll just stick it in there, you know what I mean? But it's nothing formal it's just me, it's just me talking and asking for whatever, or being thankful for something.

Both Georgina and Bill describe a growing removal from more authoritative aspects of the Catholic Church: mass attendance is less important, formality with prayer is less important. The areas of importance have become personal faith and having a closer relationship with God directly, rather than through a saint or Priest.

Third Generation: Ariana Haro and Ciara Bernal

I begin with my cousin Ariana Haro, the first grandchild of Bo and Pinny Bernal. She is the daughter of Georgina and grew up just outside of El Paso in Clint, Texas. Most of her childhood was spent in close contact with our grandparents. While she attended Catholic school in El Paso, her mother would take both her and her brother to our grandparents' apartment before heading to work. Our grandparents would get both of them ready for school, feed them breakfast, pack their lunch and take them to school. In the afternoons they'd pick them up from school and watch them until Georgina came to get them after her workday ended. When I asked Ariana if she remembered our grandparents teaching her anything related to religion, she stated,

> They taught me how to pray in Spanish. I never knew how to pray in Spanish. I mean they're the reason I speak Spanish to be honest. My parents never talked to me in Spanish. My dad even less, you know what I mean. I feel like they're the reason I even spoke Spanish. They taught us how to pray in Spanish and the rosary too. Especially like, I remember Abuelo would teach us how to do like the 'Gloria al Padre al hijo' too and I never knew like I always thought the rosary was all 'Hail Mary full of grace'. . .[5]

Our grandparents took on a teaching role with my cousins when it came to religious practice. My cousin now has three children of her own. All three are baptized and she and her husband plan to

have their oldest receive her first communion, although they don't currently frequent mass. Having her children receive their sacraments is more about them having them completed by the time they're adults, so they can make their own decisions about getting married through the church or being Catholic. When asked if she considers herself religious, Ariana stated,

> You know, I was. I was super religious, you know! I went to private [Catholic] school through 8th grade. In high school I went to [public] high school, my parents still took me to mass on Sundays. But I went to college, I did go to church- at ASU [Arizona State University] sometimes, but not all the time and I feel like it started to end once my parents got a divorce and not saying that's the reason why, but I just think that that's the reason why. You know what I mean, like no- I don't know, my religious views are different, I am a religious person, I believe in God and all that, but I don't practice it and I don't push it on my kids. My kids know who God is- [who] Jesus is, stuff like that, but I haven't immersed them, but they're baptized. Because that's the Catholic thing to do, right?

Ariana is currently considering, with much persuasion from our grandparents, getting married through the Catholic Church. Her husband Carlos hasn't completed his sacraments, which makes it impossible to marry within the church. She also was frustrated with the need to find friends with their sacraments to be the godparents of her children, since godparents must have their all their sacraments to take on that role officially. While interviewing her, she told me about one friend who was denied marriage through the church because they deemed her and her husband incompatible. This made her wary of attempting to go through the counseling, classes, and retreat required before marriage, if they can still turn around and deny you. The strictness and emphasis on rules is a deterrent to her family's adherence to Catholicism. However, it hasn't fully deterred her from wanting her kids to receive their sacraments. This experience with the complexities of sacrament attainment within the church seems to be a big part of why she wants her children to go through the process. Even with these frustrations, it's still seen as important

that her kids are able to complete their sacraments, as she stated, because “that’s the Catholic thing to do.”

After listening to my family members’ views on being religious and their own practices, I am left feeling unsure of what I thought “religious” meant before starting this research. I never gave much thought to it (even as a former religious studies major, which I’ll discuss in chapter three). I know I thought of my Abuelos as religious, and seeing my Abuela pray was a clear example of her religiosity. After conducting this ethnographic research, my personal view of what being religious means is simply having a personal relationship with something divine through prayer, meditation, or ritual and having that connection to something higher than oneself. I don’t view myself as religious, because I don’t attempt to have a relationship with something higher, although it is something that I want. I personally feel more drawn to saints, rather than a God. I don’t view adhering to the teachings of Catholicism or going to mass as an indication of religiosity. Within the past year I’ve begun rethinking my own approach to religion and what I would like to do. After interviewing my grandparents and hearing how important being a part of the church is to them, it’s made me wonder if I should go through the process of receiving my sacraments. This would be something I do for them and not because of God or being close to the Church, which they likely wouldn’t approve of. I’ve also thought about who might pray for the family the way my Abuela does when she no longer can. These thoughts are something that have begun to haunt me and are changing the way I think about my own practices and beliefs.

The quotes and stories of my family given in this chapter can demonstrate the influence that socialization and upbringing can have on religious beliefs and practices; as Castañeda-Liles states, “people are socialized and resocialized into (or out of) devotion to certain sacred images

as they experience the joys and challenges that come with life, and as their petitions to God, *La Virgen,* and Saints are granted or denied," (2018:59). Castañeda-Liles is speaking more specifically about who one might venerate or pray to, but this can is seen within my family as well. My grandparents have very strong devotional practices with saints and refrain from praying directly to God. They venerate God but access him through the saints they pray to. They pray to Saint Jude often, because of the healing and help he has offered to my Abuela and to her family. Georgina prays directly to God in a more informal capacity. While I didn't ask my cousin who she prays to, since she only felt the need to clarify her and her children's belief in God and knowledge of Jesus, saints were not brought up. I reached out to her later to follow up on her views of saints, which she stated, "saints are important, our kiddos don't know about them, I don't think, since we aren't church goers. They know about the bible."[6] Here my cousin demonstrates the changing emphasis on saints within my family. They are still seen as important, but so far, she has not taught her kids about them. I'm drawn more towards the saints rather than God, likely due to my anger with God as a concept when I was younger, discussed more in chapter three, but also because my religious beliefs are deeply connected to my grandparents and how they worship. For me at least, religion is a tradition I am only interested in pursuing because of my family, not because of an institution.

(Fe)minist Approach to Vernacular Religion

I use Castañeda-Liles concept "(fe)minism" to analyze the ways members of my family have personalized their religious beliefs and practices in ways that center themselves with their faith (2018). This (fe)minist interpretation of the ways in which my family members interpret their religious beliefs and practices can illustrate alternative meanings in understanding changes in religious practice and devotion from a feminist perspective. While the shift away from official

religion can be related to systemic issues within the Catholic Church, in this shifting away we can see the reinterpretation on religious belief, doctrine, and practice that allows for continued religious belief based on what's meaningful to the individuals practicing it.

I see an example of (fe)minism in my Abuela's belief practices. Throughout her life she has based who she prays to on her own personal experiences with the divine, rather than instruction from a priest. In one example she shared with me, while she was in labor with my father she saw the image of the Infant of Prague in the hospital, who she initially didn't believe in praying to. Seeing his image at a time when she likely felt she needed the help and protection of the divine was an impactful one. She took this as a message and began praying to him immediately. This epiphany centers her experience as the defining point of choosing to pray to the Infant of Prague. This kind of centering can be seen in the other examples she shared, where it is her own encounters with the divine that define who she chooses to pray to.

In my interview with my Tía Georgina, she expressed to me notions of feeling like she knew without being told what was expected of being a Catholic girl and later a woman. These beliefs around marriage and childrearing stuck with her and were one reason she raised her children within the Catholic faith. She explained,

> um I joke about it now, because I think *damn they traumatized me* (laughter), you know with- and it's- it's funny, because of like Catholicism, or whatever like, for some reason, like a lot of those beliefs, *me*- like I took them to heart, you know what I mean? As a small girl and growing up or whatever, like I took them to heart, like I just- I just thought this is the way it has to be, this is the way- you know whatever. And I never thought of breaking any of those rules, you know what I mean? Like I just wanted to be like- I wanted to be what they wanted me to be, you know?

My Tía lived most of her life being involved in the church, attending weekly mass, and sending her kids to Catholic school. However, when in 2016 she got divorced, she was afraid to tell her

parents. Even though her brother had gotten divorced eight years prior, my Tía was still afraid she was going to disappoint them because of the expectations that were never explicitly said but that she felt were known. My grandparents were not angry or upset by her divorce. Her description of what being religious means to her no longer centers on adherence to official Catholicism, rather on belief and connection to God. My Tía maintains her relationship to God in her own way, praying directly to him without the use of prayer cards. My Abuela and my Tía have not directly expressed that they're doing some sort of feminist religious practice, and I don't intend to make that claim for them. Rather I see evidence of utilizing their experiences to lead the ways they choose to worship, rather than choosing to adhere strictly to official Catholicism.

Conclusion

Looking at my family's belief in Catholicism as a tradition passed down throughout generations illuminates new pathways for understanding how religious belief and adherence is changing. Each generation of my family has had less religious experience than the previous and has a different interpretation of belief and practice than the previous generation. This trend, each generation moving further away from the Catholic Church, is not surprising when considering the decreasing rate of religious affiliation among Americans as a whole (Pew Research Center: 2022). However, I see my family as an example of what I believe could apply more generally, that even though religious affiliation is dwindling, belief and practice outside of official religion is continuing. This lines up with other Pew findings, that Americans are more likely to say they've become more spiritual rather than more religious (2024). In studying tradition and vernacular religion, scholars could potentially find what elements of religious belief and practice are continuing to resonate with individual people or groups.

My family members are still interacting with Catholic practices, beliefs, and customs, but the second and third generations are not attending mass, going to confession, or expressing admiration for the institution itself. Rather, some of them continue to believe, pray, and fulfill some official requirements, like sacrament attainment in their own individual ways. Each member of my family, discussed here, has a different definition for what being religious means, but they all still ascribe themselves to some form of religion or belief. My father did not call himself religious, but still referred to himself as a non-practicing Christian. Belief still impacts the way he identifies himself. In my conversations with my cousin, Ariana, she emphasized that her kids know who God and Jesus are, despite not going to church. Ariana and her husband are continuing to pass on their own interpretation of religion to their children, without the help of the Catholic Church.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated some of the ways my family members have encountered, interpreted, and practiced their religious beliefs, each impacted by the previous generation. This reflects Glassie's concept of tradition as "creation of the future out of the past," (2003:176). My family members' individual interpretations and experiences with religion have shaped the way they continue to practice or not practice religion. In this way, tradition is "created by individuals out of experience. They have reasons for their actions and their actions entail change" (2003:180). I hope to continue studying vernacular belief and its intersections with gender, ethnicity, and family practices. In regard to my family, the changes in religious belief and practice may seem drastically different than my grandparents' beliefs and practices, but they are meaningful in their own ways and will continue, so long as they maintain meaning. My grandparents will forever be intertwined with my family members' thoughts of religion, something I think gives even more meaning to our religious lives. In the following chapter, I

will discuss in more depth my own experiences with religion and the ways this research has impacted my own understanding of myself.

Chapter Three:

My Vulnerable Approach to Autoethnography in Studies of Belief

"*A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared.* In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts"

- Gloria Anzaldúa

My experience doing ethnography throughout this thesis has been a life changing one. Throughout the course of studying, interviewing, analyzing, writing, revising, rewriting (and rewriting again) my perspective of this project, my religious beliefs, my relationship with my family, and my goals for future research have shifted tremendously. I've gone from looking at this thesis as doing research *on* my family to doing research *with* my family. This shift has taken me from entering this project with plans of looking at the private religious beliefs and practices of my family members like a disinterested scholar. I had no plans of looking at my own beliefs or writing about myself. The shift to doing ethnography *with* my family emphasizes my role as first and foremost a member of my family, secondly as an active participant in vernacular Catholicism, and lastly as an academic.

To demonstrate this shift, I'll begin with an early fieldwork blunder that greatly impacted the direction of my research. When I first started this project, I thought I'd focus on the women in my family and their relationship to Our Lady of Guadalupe. I had no plans of focusing on myself or sharing my own beliefs. In August of 2023, I went to Agua Prieta, Sonora, to start my research with grand plans of interviewing nearly everyone in my family. Initially, I thought group interviews would go over well. However, during the nights when most of my family was over, it was a social hour and didn't feel like the proper occasion. On one of these occasions my dad, believing I needed help, announced to the whole family that I wanted to interview everyone

there. I was, along with eight members of my family, awkwardly forced into a group interview. When I explained that I wanted to know about Our Lady of Guadalupe, most of my relatives insisted they weren't religious, "not like my Abuelos," as I discussed in the previous chapter, and stated that they didn't know anything. They deferred mostly to my Tía Magda (my Abuela's sister) and Bo. During the interview, my Abuelo and my Tía Magda got into an argument in Spanish over what she had to say about Our Lady of Guadalupe. As it was translated to me in the moment, my Tía Magda was explaining that Jesus and *La Virgencita* had all the same chromosomes, because it was a virgin birth, there was no genetic material from his father. I was confused by the repeated emphasis of this statement and ignorantly asked if she meant that they were "like the same person" because they have the same chromosomes, which was probably a poor question to ask. She responded with a puzzled expression and a "no." At this point, my Abuelo began insisting that Jesus is God's son and they argued for a while in Spanish until he left the table. The next thirty minutes were noticeably tense. I worried I had ruined the night until normal conversation resumed, and the worst was behind me. While this was not a particularly successful interview in any obvious way, I did learn a lot from this experience. One of the main takeaways was that religion would be a contested issue within my family, and I began to realize how naïve my research goals and my proposed methods were.

I assumed my extended family would talk endlessly about Our Lady of Guadalupe, about Catholicism in general. *I mean, I knew they were Catholic, it should've been easy to ask about what they think*. I was very wrong. What I did find within difficult conversations were people with complex beliefs and complex relationships with religion based on their lived experiences. What I had assumed, quite naively, was that I'd find blind faith. I thought my whole family would worship in the same ways, believe the same things, and view themselves all as Catholic.

I'm embarrassed of these assumptions now. How could I, a reasonably trained ethnographer, hold these beliefs without realizing it? What had I not done? Why had I not realized beforehand my limiting beliefs?

Unsurprisingly, what I realize now is that I had not done the work to understand the ways my experiences with religion and belief shaped the way I viewed others, the way I viewed Catholicism, and the way I viewed myself because of it. This chapter seeks to be a start to this process. As I continue my research and my academic career, I will always be in the process of trying to be reflexive. I'll always be trying to understand the ways my own beliefs, assumptions, and experiences shape my worldview and shape my research. I'm starting to be reflexive about myself and my research at the end of this project, which is not how I will go about it in the future. However, this has allowed me to reflect on the ways the scholarship I've encountered during this process has helped shape my thoughts, beliefs, and future goals when it comes to my religious beliefs, my family relationships, and what I hope to do with this work. As I discuss my experiences and beliefs, I will be reflecting on work from Latinx scholars from a range of disciplines: folklore, religious studies, women's studies, and creative writers. The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the ways my own experiences and beliefs have guided the scope of this research project and in turn have been shaped by the research I have conducted. While each chapter has included autoethnographic writing, this chapter is solely autoethnography and focuses on utilizing vulnerable writing (Behar 1996) and creative writing practices inspired by works in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983). In the words of Ruth Behar, "the exposure of the self who is also spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go" (1996:14). I hope through utilizing these approaches, I can bring something valuable to autoethnography and the study of belief.

The edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa features the writing of many women of color on their experiences with feminism and about feminism from their point of view. This work touches on issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender. It utilizes autoethnography, narrative, poetry, and feminist analysis to amplify the voices of third world women. The ability I have to write, to write this thesis, and to write in general, is a privilege. To write about others is to claim some form of authority over their existence (at least as the writer understands that existence to be). I am not an authority over what has been shared with me, I'm one person interpreting what has been shared. That interpretation is based on my own beliefs and experiences in addition to the academic work I've engaged with and utilized. I hope in attempting Ruth Behar's "vulnerable writing" I can make myself vulnerable in the same ways I've made others. Vulnerable writing is Behar's proposed genre of ethnographic writing that centers on the researcher's personal experience with what is being written about (1997). Through writing about yourself, making yourself vulnerable, the readers can potentially see themselves within you (Behar 1997:16). It is my goal that through exposing myself as an active participant in vernacular Catholic belief that I can bring this thesis to a deeper more meaningful place.

Conducting an ethnographic interview is a foreign social experience that reverses practices of normal conversation. Ask a question, a broad question, no 'yes or no' questions. Wait. Sit in silence, let them break it. Don't make any noise. If you 'mm-hm' too much, you'll have to transcribe it. Don't offer yourself up. Ask others to open themselves to you, but you can't do the same while the tape is rolling. Ask people to tell you about their religious beliefs and hope they don't take your silence, your closed-off posture as judgement. If you open up, if you converse, will you taint the outcome? Will your words, your experiences, your beliefs sway the

other person? Will you put words in their mouth? These questions have left me wondering, *isn't this what we do*? We pretend to be disinterested, unbiased, we act as if that is possible. We turn around and interpret the data, the words spoken to us, we give them new meaning whether we intend to or not.

Conducting interviews with my family members was harder to do than interviewing a stranger. It was humbling and made me realize I should talk to my family more. I was more afraid of reaching out to my family for interviews than the dozens of strangers I had contacted for other projects before this. What if they said no? What if they didn't like what I was trying to do? What if they thought I'd judge them or mock their beliefs because I was never outwardly religious? When I did get up the courage to ask, they were all agreeable and supportive. I thought the asking would be the hardest part, but interviewing someone I knew was a weird experience. To go from grandchild, cousin, niece, daughter to researcher was an awkward shift that made me feel firsthand the power dynamics of being a researcher versus being an insider. I wanted desperately to join in conversation. It felt uncomfortable to interview my relatives as if I didn't know them or didn't know the people they were discussing. The interviews were successful, and I learned so much about my family members in the process, but I'm unsure if I would go this route in the future, at least when it comes to studying religious belief. I was limited in what I could do, given the distance and time I had to complete my research. It would've been nice to discuss these topics over coffee and buñuelos instead of over Zoom. I'd love to employ a reciprocal ethnography style with my family in the future, even if it's for the purpose of recording family history rather than for an academic pursuit. However, I'm thankful for having been able to do the work that I did. I'm grateful to my family members who opened themselves up to me. I hope I can do the same through my writing, and eventually in person with them.

As I continue to develop my writing style and voice in an academic setting, I've reflected on the ways writing professionally has always been something I've wanted to do, but never admitted. Throughout my life I've been drawn to writing. In elementary school I dove into creative writing assignments, I was dying to write scary stories like the books I read every day and was continuously encouraged and pushed by my teachers to do so. As I got older and writing assignments went from creative to argumentative, I rolled my eyes at the prompts and slowly stopped writing for fun. In high school, I attended a small charter art school, we had creative discipline majors to choose from, creative writing was an option, but I chose painting and drawing. In an English class we had to write college application essay prompts. I wrote one essay about my mother and art, a slightly fictious story of seeing Gustav Klimt's *Three Ages of Woman.* My mother did love this painting, but we never saw it in person. This essay detailed my mother seeing this piece and sobbing. The painting is often cropped to just feature the young mother sleeping next to her small daughter, a feeling of love and warmth emitting from it. What is usually cropped out is the third woman, a naked crone, standing near but apart from the mother and daughter. She covers her face in shame. While the crone could be analyzed in multiple ways and I normally would dislike ascribing shame or negative ideas on to any representation of "the crone," (*and what could Gustav Klimt -a man- know about the stages of womanhood and how to represent that anyways*), this is the way it stuck out to me as a teenager and the way I believe my mom may have seen it. The crone covering her face in shame is a stark contrast from the love of the mother and daughter. This intentional cropping of the painting reminds me of the relationship I had with my mother. She has bipolar disorder and a drinking problem. When she would choose to be in my life, she clung to me like the mother in the painting, forcing me to accept her, to love her, to care for her when she was drunk or in a depressive state. I think she wanted to believe that

we were like the mother and child in the painting, but the crone was always there. It was the part of our relationship she refused to acknowledge. The part that has forced me to remain out of contact with her, the part she knew was coming perhaps. I no longer have a copy of the essay I wrote for this class, but I remember coming into class the day after we turned them in, my teacher asked me to read my paper out loud. Shaking, I complied and nearly burst into tears saying the words out loud; writing them was so much easier. My English teacher, Mr. Day, begged me to switch my major to creative writing, and I wish I had, but I've made my way back to writing ten years later. This marks my first attempts at merging the personal, the scholarly, and the creative voice.

Prayer

> Early in the morning I watched my Abuela pray. I woke up just before dawn. The dim kitchen light creeps through the doorway of my Nana's room. The fan whirrs above me, the rhythmic hum of the fan is all I can hear as the smell of coffee drifts in. Abuela is awake. I sneak out of the room, slowly walking down the apartment's dark hallway, until I see my Abuela, engulfed in warm light. She's sitting at the kitchen table, prayer cards and rosary in hand. She softly whispers and rocks back and forth. Something about this moment feels important. I stop at the end of the hallway, careful not to interrupt. I wait until she looks up, "¿Qué haces despierta?" I shrug and walk over to her. I stand next to her as she hugs me and kisses my head. She says something else in Spanish that I can't make out, I know it means it's time for me to go back to bed.

This memory is one I hold dear to me. I've witnessed Abuela's morning prayers countless times and it's how I'll always picture her. When I was a child, I remember wanting to emulate her, but I didn't know how to pray. I had a short stint desperately wanting to be Catholic. I believe this desire to emulate her came from the way it felt to be in Texas with my father's family. After my mother left, life in Arizona felt very lonely. My mom had done the majority of the "kin work" (de Leonardo in Turner and Seriff 1993:93) with her family in Arizona and it felt

like all sense of normalcy ended when she left. When I'd get to visit my father's family in Texas, I felt normal again, like I could pretend what was happening at home didn't exist. I wanted to stay there, to speak Spanish, to go to Catholic school like my cousins. I remember receiving a red rosary in the mail, I believe it was a free rosary that came along with requests for donations to a specific parish. I rode my bike around my neighborhood with it around my wrist, unsure of what to do with it. It made me feel connected to my grandparents and to my heritage.

Altar Practice

> I wanted to build an altar when I was eight. My mom had recently left, we didn't hear from her for a year. I had a skinny yellow cabinet in my room that my mom had painted flowers on, it held my Disney and Power Ranger VHS tapes. This is where I wanted to build my altar. I had this image in my mind of me posed like Mother Theresa, hands clasped together, looking at the sky, surrounded by light blue and doves, an image you'd see on a one-dollar prayer candle. I imagined devoting myself to something, but I don't think I knew what. I wanted to be a saint. I wanted to dedicate myself to something for my mother's return.

I don't fully know where I got this idea from, as no one in my family had an altar space like that. My grandparents always had religious decorations and holy items that would surround pictures of family members on their dresser or hanging around their house, but there wasn't a designated altar where candles were lit and people kneeled in front of statues. The only praying I'd seen was done in church or at the kitchen table. I never told anyone I wanted to make an altar or wanted to learn to pray. I felt unable to do this for some reason. This desire ended quite abruptly when somebody told me my mother's abandonment and her illness was God testing us. I was angry and unable to express that. *What kind of test was that?* The anger I felt towards my mother was impossible for me process at eight years old so, instead I took it out on the God who was "testing me." I decided I hated God; I hated religion, it was something weak people used to

make themselves feel better. I put my religious interests in a box and buried them deep within me, only to begin uncovering them in college.

During my undergraduate degree I was majoring in anthropology and was looking for a second major to take up all the elective credits I needed in order to graduate. I initially thought art history would be a great option. I loved art, I had already taken the 101 and 102 courses in community college, and I thought it'd be easy. I signed up for a course titled "Art of Asia," in which I was introduced to sculptures of Hindu gods and Buddhist Zen paintings. The symbolism of religious belief integrated into the art intrigued me, and I found myself much more interested in the religion the art was depicting and not so much in the art itself. I switched my second major to religious studies and dove into Hinduism courses. These courses led me to a study abroad semester in India, but before I went to India, I went to Nepal. I had little to no plans set and I wound up in a meditation course at a Buddhist monastery called Kopan outside of Kathmandu. In this course, a Buddhist nun carefully told the group of Westerners before her, all of us seeking something in Eastern religion, that the religion we were born into was likely the religion we needed to be in for Karmic purposes. This statement filled the room with discomfort, a collective squirm felt through us all, *why make us reflect on ourselves*? I buried this discomfort, but her statement stuck with me like a thorn in my side. I was not ready, nor did I want to address my own religious background. My path in studying religion has always been a veiled attempt to find something I didn't feel comfortable searching for on my own. Without the smokescreen of academia, I'd have to address the fact that maybe I am religious, maybe I am spiritual. Those sentiments were in conflict with the anger I still held toward the Christian God and wasn't something I wanted to address. I studied religion because I wanted to feel connected to

something higher, without putting myself in the position of actually trying to do that. I studied Eastern religion because it wasn't about *the* God I felt so conflicted with.

As I made attempts to think about the nun's statement, I struggled to figure out what I was born into. I wasn't born into Catholicism; I was always on the periphery. I was not raised within a religious faith, even though I was baptized as a baby, neither my brother nor I ever completed our other sacraments. We were never 'officially Catholic.' I felt as if I had one foot in and one foot out. I was born into a liminal space, put into the position of researcher. My first memories of religion are reminiscent of participant observation. As a child I attempted this without having words for it. I wanted to understand what was happening in mass. It was strange to be the only one who didn't know when to stand, when to kneel, I didn't know the prayers or the right things to say at the right times and this made me deeply uncomfortable. I felt like an outsider trying to fit in, trying to learn how to belong. Now, I can't help but feel that what I'm 'meant to be in' (according to the Buddhist nun) is the study of belief and writing about it. Is it in writing about the ways others have found their own meaning that I'm supposed to find mine? Will my interpretations and my writing be beneficial to anyone but myself? *Does it need to be*? These are questions I will likely always be considering as I continue my academic career. This is my first attempt at addressing them.

Ladies of Guadalupe

> Our Lady of Guadalupe has always been a part of my life, even before I was aware of it. Some of the most important women in my life who have guided me, taught me, and protected me, were all avid devotees of Guadalupe. Not all were Catholic, not all were Latinas, yet Guadalupe was a prominent figure in their lives. My mother loved Guadalupe, although I don't remember in what ways she demonstrated this. The therapist I started seeing at nine who is like a member of my family and has helped me in countless ways, told me a story I never forgot. She met a nun in an airport while traveling, somehow, they began talking and Guadalupe came up, the nun told her something along

the lines of, “you love her, because she chose you.” I remember wondering if she would choose me too.

My high school painting teacher, who I looked up to as a mother-figure during a tumultuous period of cutting off contact with my mom at 15, was also a devotee to Guadalupe. She encouraged my art inspired by Guadalupe and introduced me to the artwork and stories of different saints, something that has made its way on my body in tattoos and decorates my apartment. It was in her class I first engaged with Día de Los Muertos and the altar creation that goes along with it, traditions not practiced by my family, but ones I have now chosen to continue.

My Abuela gave me a *Virgencita* necklace when I was 21. She had given me countless prayer cards throughout my life for protection. She told me to never take the necklace off, adding that she only takes hers off to dye her hair. When I was child, my Abuela prayed the whole rosary to Our Lady of Guadalupe everyday as protection for her grandchildren. I can’t help but wonder how often her prayers saved me. Guadalupe has been with all the women I’ve admired, through them she was given to me, or maybe I was given to her.

Today my religious practice is still developing. When I was studying Hinduism, I was drawn to the many warrior Goddesses: Durga, Kali, Chinnamastika. At 20, I saw an image of Kali, a blue woman, a garland of heads around her neck, a skirt made of arms circling her waist, standing on a man, who I later learned was the God, Shiva. She held a head in one hand, a blade in the other, and her tongue stuck out like something fearsome screaming. I knew immediately that image was going to be on my body forever and it is, forever on my right arm. As I’ve gotten older, I think about the significance of this tattoo often, and why I was drawn to Kali in the first place. She is a goddess, but not necessarily one you should mess with (*probably not one that should be tattooed on your body either*). She is the destroyer, she is indifferent. If you call upon her, her only concern is moving you through your karma, which could result in serious suffering or death. The image she is often depicted in (what I described above) is not the gruesome and powerful scene it seems to be on the surface. This image of Kali is the moment her reign of destruction ends. Kali is an incarnation of Durga, a warrior goddess. Durga couldn’t kill a demon

which caused her great frustration. Out of this frustration Kali sprouted from Durga's third eye. She was birthed from rage and was hellbent on killing this demon. Kali eventually kills the demon, but her rage and rampage doesn't end. She continues destroying everything in her path. The gods knew this was a problem and they tasked Shiva with stopping her. Shiva disguised himself as a log and waited for Kali. When Kali finally stepped on him, the log was not destroyed. This stopped Kali in her tracks and Shiva revealed himself to her. The act of stepping on another individual is extremely disrespectful, feet are considered the most polluted part of the body in Hinduism. This great offense snaps Kali out of her destruction. Her facial expression, mouth open, her tongue out, is an expression of embarrassment and shame, not screaming rage. This moment is one of self-actualization, realization of wrongs, and transformation into a new purpose.

This moment reminds me of my own path in many ways, but specifically with my relationship with religion and belief. The realization that the hate and rage I felt toward religion was destructive, to myself and to my relationships with others, is helping me uncover connections and traditions I didn't know were missing from my life. It kept me at arm's length from my religious family members and from understanding myself. Through engaging with Chicana feminist literature and liberative theologies I've been able to begin realigning myself with my Mexican heritage, identity, and my spiritual beliefs.

The beliefs I held about religion before studying it were mainly that it was evil. Religion can be seen as something people in power use to keep their power, control the status quo, and upheld patriarchal or racial hierarchies, why would people continue to adhere to that? This kind of perspective makes it incredibly easy to assume that anyone who is religious is ignorant or complicit in religions negative impacts, but this viewpoint is incredibly limiting and insulting.

When I began my religious studies coursework, I encountered many people who, after learning about my major, loved to talk my ear off about how much they hated religion. I assume these people thought I was investigating religion for the same reasons they hated it. I also encountered religious people who, after learning about my major, wanted to have open conversations with me about my take on religion, possibly confusing me for a theology student, but none the less were happy to listen to me talk about what I was learning. The people who hated religion were hard to listen to. After a while, they all seemed to say the same things, but I didn't know how to respond. Eventually I resorted to, "I know more about it than you, I don't want to hear you talk about it anymore," and this usually shuts them up, although, it didn't feel quite right. What they were saying was true: it's hard to argue with the historical (and more recent) use of religion as justification for war and genocide, or the exposé on the Catholic church protecting sexual predators, why did I want to stand up for it, *was I standing up for that*? I couldn't articulate to them what it was I was finding, the beautiful things, the embodied things, the community, the connection, it was overwhelming.

One of these overwhelming things happened to me in Nepal. I had been there for two days; I was about to start a trek on the Himalayas and had just arrived in Pokhara where the trek started from. The sky was cloudy and grey, my guide pointed up at it for me to look. I couldn't see what he was looking at, all I could see was grey sky and then as I continued to look further up I saw it. The peak of the mountain high up in the clouds. I had never seen something so big. I shrunk; I was an ant. An overwhelming feeling of terror and amazement came over me. I could feel it in my chest, and I remember thinking, "this is why people believe gods live up there." This moment stuck with me and was something I dreamed about for years after. In the following semester, I had a religious studies theory course where we learned about famous approaches to

religious studies, from people like Durkheim and Freud. One person we read, Rudolph Otto, emphasized the need to experience religion in the ways religious people did (1923). He described four different types of religious and mystical experiences that he believed led to the creation of different kinds of religion--not a perfect theory by any means but thought provoking. One of these types of experiences he described was exactly what I felt looking up the Himalayas in Nepal. Terror, amazement, smallness in the presence of something greater and older than yourself. I realized, according to Otto at least, that what I experienced was a religious experience, an embodied reaction, something others had felt before, something so powerful I can feel it in my chest as I write about it again. How do you explain that feeling to someone? The reasons why many people believe and practice religion are often beyond description.

Another experience that changed my understanding of religion, specifically Abrahamic religious traditions, happened through talking to my Abuela about prayer. I first realized my Abuela was someone I wanted to write about when she told me about her experiences with the divine when I interviewed her and my grandfather for a short paper about their prayer cards. While interviewing them, I realized I had little understanding of their personal beliefs. I assumed I understood what they did, how they prayed, who they prayed to, but I was very wrong. Listening to Abuela's revelations and experiences of mystical moments changed something in me. I had always been interested in other people's religious beliefs, but I never considered the very real and embodied nature of belief within Catholicism. My Abuela prays to those she had intimate experiences with; sometimes this was through epiphanies, healing, or receiving a prayer card through a mysterious messenger, as discussed in chapter two. Learning about how my grandparents experienced religion, how they learned, how they prayed was fascinating, but I was still not interested in official Catholicism or learning about Catholic theology. I still had a limited

view towards official religion at the start of this project and I was hesitant to explore that. However, the tidbits my grandparents shared about their own personal experiences opened a door for me to consider my own.

Abuela's Kitchen Table

> When I see my Abuela at her kitchen table I see her mother before her, sitting at her kitchen table. Praying like my Abuela does, the soft sway and mumbled words. I see her engulfed in light. I see a long line of women at their kitchen tables, eating, chatting, drinking coffee, praying. The kitchen table is a portal, a portal to my ancestors praying for their families, sharing meals with loved ones, catching up with friends. As I write this at my kitchen table, I feel them around me still and hope that they pray for me.

My own beliefs are tied to my Abuela and to the kitchen table. I want to pray like her, I want to learn how to pray the rosary and start my mornings with my coffee, at my table, praying for those I love. I want to feel my ancestors around me, like I feel them around my Abuela. This connection to abuelas and religious belief is a prominent motif I've found in many works of writing from Latinx scholars, theologians, and writers. It is one motif I'm particularly drawn to but it's also one that is prevalent in many Latinx cultures and is easy to find in Latinx writing. Armas' Abuelita theology names it, calling for credit to be given to the Abuelita's who have taught and guided the religious teaching and development of the next generations. Ana Castillo recognizes the "women who have long been relegated the task of preserving those cults [religion], often not as official representatives but with daily rituals of popular culture and by passing faith from generation to generation," (2014:153). This can be seen in the edited collection, *Voices from the Ancestors*, multiple works from various writers focus on lessons learned from their Abuelita's (Medina and Gonzalez 2019). In Theresa Torres' piece, "What My Abuelita Taught Me About Prayer and Memory," she ruminates on memories of her Abuelita, connecting her current prayers used daily to her Abuelita (Torres in Median and Gonzalez

2019:142-143). She also discusses the ways that even in death her Abuelita taught her that death was not an end. This piece reminded me of a statement my cousin, Ariana Haro, made in our interview about our bisabuela (great grandmother) Mama Nena's funeral. Ariana was around ten when Mama Nena passed,

> I remember going to the rosary- in Mexico everyone is like very strict, like wearing white to a rosary and that's where I first saw like, like the *true meaning* of wearing white to a rosary, I never understood why the immediate family wore white, 'cause you're supposed to wear black- you're supposed to wear black to a funeral, but her kids wore white for new life. Because in the bible you wear white for new life- I don't think I've ever seen that, but Abuelos [our grandparents] believe in that.[1]

Even in our Mama Nena's death she taught my cousin an important lesson about religious symbolism in death, representing new life rather than an end. This concept of death not being an end is exemplified in Sybil Vengas' piece, "Nana's Hands" (Vengas in Medina and Gonzalez 2019:125-126). Vengas discusses how her Abuelita taught her curandera healing practices that she eventually used on her ailing mother in her final months. Vengas utilized egg cleansing along with reiki to help calm her mother suffering from dementia. During the healings her mother would calm down and tell her daughter stories from her childhood. During her mother's last hours, Vengas performed a healing ritual on her in which she described feeling the presence of her Nana's hands also healing her mother that night. In my personal vignette, "Abuela's Kitchen Table," I connect to the idea of the continuation of life and having a connection to a long line of women through a tradition I've watched my Abuela perform, praying at her kitchen table.

Within this thesis I focus heavily on women, and I will continue to do so in my future research. My turbulent relationship with my own mother and the desire to recreate that relationship very well may be to blame for my initial focus on women in my personal life and the female deities I've loved along the way. However, my continued focus on women, specifically

Latinx women, is inspired by the work of many Chicana scholars. Ada María Isasi-Díaz's "mujerista anthropology" has inspired me to continue producing ethnography about Hispanic women (1996:128-147).

> A mujerista anthropology is about Latinas as human beings, not in the abstract but within the context of our given reality. And it takes into consideration what we understand our task in history to be. . . Latinas are makers of history. A mujerista anthropology insists on the need to denounce the way the Hispanic women have been erased from the histories of our communities and of our countries of origin, and from the history of the USA. (1996:132)

I hope to continue shedding light on the role Latinas play in the religious belief of their families and how the people who have been shaped by Abuelita's are challenging, changing, and subverting patriarchal religious traditions.

To do this work involves taking a stand in my research as a Bruja. Irene Lara's development of Bruja positionality is a call for Latinx women to reclaim their power that was stripped of them. Inspired by the negative image and treatment of Bruja's historically and currently, taking up a Bruja positionality is an act of decolonization (2005). Lara's work and Rachel González-Martin's expansion of Bruja positionality into "Bruja Epistemology" has inspired me to take on this identity as I continue my academic career. This positionality and epistemology calls into question the ways in which we've come to understand the world around us, what is deemed knowledge, and the ways we've come to trust academia. It emphasizes listening to, learning from, and strengthening marginalized communities and people from all walks of life (2021).

These different approaches to Chicana feminisms and theology have in common goals of decolonization. For women marginalized by a colonial power, any recentering or reconstruction of beliefs and values that uplift and liberate will always be a practice of decolonization. Ideals

and expectations of womanhood for much of Latin America and the Western world, have been guided and controlled historically by the Roman Catholic Church. In Mujerista theology and Abuelita theology, to reconstruct and reinterpret religious doctrine in a manner that applies to and strengthens Latinas is a revolutionary act. It demonstrates Anzaldúa's point, "*a woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared.* In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts" (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981: 164). These efforts to revise what is the 'cannon,' decolonize theological teachings, and give voice to yourself and other Latinas falls in line with Isasi-Díaz's purpose of mujerista anthropology, being "to demand that we be listened to is a way for us to assert our own identity, to demand that our understanding of our own humanity has to be taken into consideration in the understanding of all humanity" (Isasi-Diaz 1996:137)

In this chapter I've attempted to merge the scholarly voice and the personal voice in order to demonstrate the ways my experiences have shaped my religious beliefs and scholarly interests. An individual's religious beliefs and practices are shaped by their personal and often very emotional experiences, if I expect others to share that with me, I need to understand and share the ways my experiences have impacted my own beliefs. Doing this has illuminated, to myself and to those reading this, my own motivations and goals in studying belief. When studying topics that are so easily controversial, judged, or shamed, it's imperative that the researcher does this kind of writing. I've been inspired by Behar's vulnerable writing to attempt this, however this is also a practice of Bruja Epistemology (González-Martin 2021). Through looking at my own experiences and beliefs, I attempt to challenge what can be considered academic writing in order to illuminate the potential impacts of studying belief, not just to those being studied, but to the researcher. It is impossible to be a disinterested and unbiased scholar, our own goals,

motivations, and biases will always be there. If we can find them, display them, and reflect on them I hope we can produce deeper, more impactful research on vernacular belief. As I take up a Bruja positionality in my research and part of my identity, I realize my own experiences, thoughts, and feelings can be shared in an academic pursuit and that it is a worthy pursuit.

Conclusion

> I have never thought of describing God because for me it is not a person, it is a sentimiento [deep feeling], a force that makes me move, which pushes me in difficult moments. It is a force, something I cannot explain. But if they would ask me to draw God, I would draw my grandmother smiling. Because she is the only person that I believe has filled me so much that I can compare her to God.
>
> - Testimonio published in Isasi-Diaz and Tarango 1989

As I think about the ways my Abuela has impacted me, I realize that the process of writing a thesis about her has been another way she has guided me to find myself. Writing this thesis has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life. I feel like I have come to know myself as a researcher, as a granddaughter, and as a spiritual person in ways I couldn't have without doing this work. This has ignited a fire in me to continue studying Chicana feminisms, Latinx folkloristics, and creative writing in my future research.

Throughout this thesis I've attempted to utilize Leonard Primiano's vernacular religious theory, defined as an "interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief" (1995:44). I utilized interdisciplinary work from various categories of folklore scholarship like narrative studies (Shuman 2005; Cashman 2008) Latinx folkloristics (Otero and Martínez-Rivera 2021; Cantú and Nájera-Ramírez 2002; González-Martin 2021) and family folklore (Borland 1991; Baldwin 1971; Tye 2017). I've also incorporated work on feminism from women and gender studies (Lara 2005; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983), theology (Armas 2021; Isasi-Díaz 1996), anthropology (Behar 1996) and religious studies (Castañeda-Liles 2018). The utilization of interdisciplinary scholarship helps create a more holistic view of complex topics, like religious belief.

I utilize (fe)minism as a feminist approach to vernacular belief, built from Casteñeda-Liles term, (fe)minism (2018). When studying marginalized groups that appear to adhere to and/or submit to a patriarchal religious tradition, (fe)minism can be utilized to study the ways they interpret doctrine, view their own spiritual experiences, and gain self-empowerment through the same religious traditions that may have historically disempowered them. This is a necessary position to take when studying the religious beliefs of marginalized people who practice a religious tradition brought to them through colonization either in the distant past or the present. This thesis has planted the seed of further developing and utilizing (fe)minism in my future work.

I focus on tradition and traditionalization within my family. Through this thesis I've discovered my love for learning about traditions, specifically religious traditions. This is something I will continue working on and studying, because tradition to me is coming together. It's holding, embracing, and supporting, but it's not stifling. It's comforting and squishy. It grows, it changes, it dies, it's born. Tradition connects me to my younger self when I make *arroz con pollo* and I remember how it felt to be nourished by my grandparents. Tradition connects me to my ancestors when I see their pictures on my altar and hold my bisabuela's rosary. Tradition reminds me I am loved when I see the *La Mano Poderosa* prayer card in my wallet, a gift from my Abuela. Tradition grounds me, it reminds me of who I am and where I come from. It tells me where to go and how to get there. I'm guided by tradition, but *I* also guide *it*. I chose what I want to continue, what I want to change. I continue what feels good, what connects me to myself, what makes me feel whole. To reiterate Glassie, tradition is creation. It is communally created, and individual created, they always reference each other. Like looking through a portal mirror, tradition reflects yourself and it reflects those you've been shaped by.

In doing work about those who have shaped me, my family, I've stumbled upon the fascinating potential of studying family folklore. Family folklore as a sub-field of folklore has long been trivialized and overlooked within the field. It is remarked on as something that exists but is made to seem only worthy of utilizing in classrooms with students. It's an introduction to folklore, rather than a topic worthy of dedicated study. In this thesis, I've demonstrated the ways that studying your own family and the folklore genres that exist within it, can illuminate layers of meaning. Meanings that might easily be overlooked by an outsider. There's so much just beneath the surface of family history, stories, beliefs, traditions, and memories that could open the doors to new pathways and applications of folklore studies. While studying your own family is not possible for everyone, for many valid reasons, it's worthy to attempt (if able) and worthy of taking note of. There are folklorists that have done incredible work on family folklore, like the ones I cite in this thesis (Borland 2017; Tye 2017; Baldwin 1985), however, it is still a sub-discipline that deserves more serious attention to and study of.

Through doing research with my family, I've realized firsthand the complicated nature of attempting research and writing about people you know personally. Even just doing interviews was difficult. It was difficult to sit in silence, wait for their answer and not discuss things conversationally. It was then hard to write about the things they told me, *what if I got it wrong? What if they don't agree*? These were questions that plagued me throughout this thesis. As difficult as it was, I'm so glad I had the ability to do this research. It showed me firsthand the implications and potential ramifications of doing research and writing about others, something I may not have felt as intensely if I was doing work on a group of people, I had no long-lasting ties with.

When it comes to doing research specifically on religious belief, the ramifications of doing it wrong could be incredibly devastating. As I worked on writing this thesis, I realized the importance of my own reflexivity and the fact that I hadn't really done that kind of work on myself before. The ordering of the thesis chapters reflects this discovery. I attempted to order the chapters chronologically, starting with how my grandparents met, leading into my family's present practices and beliefs, and then to my autoethnographic work. It is often important to begin with the autoethnographic work, to show yourself first, which I'll likely do more readily in the future. However, the choice I made to end with my autoethnographic chapter reflects my own process in discovering myself during this thesis. I began the reflexive work at the end, and thus it is reflexive of the ways I've changed and developed because of this project.

Coming back to the broad, overarching questions I hoped to answer with this thesis, I begin with: how has Mexican-Catholicism shaped the relationships, stories, and beliefs of my family members? This is a question I'll likely always be attempting to reflect on. It's also a question with an answer that will change as my family gets older, larger, further apart or closer together. For now, my grandparents and their religious practice and perceived religiousness has continued to impact the ways my family members understand what it means to be religious. It is through them that we understand what is considered a religious practice, specifically in looking at my Abuela's consistent prayer practice. Prayer is practice that reflects being religious to my family. My Abuela's prayer practice is something that inspires me to continue the tradition of prayer at my kitchen table like her and her mother before her.

In chapter two, I looked at stories about my grandparents, specifically the story of how they met. I found that even in a courtship story the perceived religious goals of my grandfather impact the story in profound ways, resulting in the rumor that my Abuela stole him from the

priesthood. For me and my cousin, our continued belief and retelling of this detail can demonstrate the changed views of official Catholicism and gender roles. To us, it isn't bad that Abuela stole him from the priesthood, it's a powerful statement about taking what you want in a world that often does not encourage or allow that, especially for marginalized women. This relates to the second question I hoped to answer: what can Chicana feminist perspectives add to the study of vernacular religious belief and family folklore? Within this story is an example of Mexican Catholic hopes for a having a priest in the family. It is believed that my great grandmother's hope of having a son become a priest was ended, and my Abuela was blamed for this. Utilizing the Chicana feminist perspective, (fe)minism, we can see that my Abuela's saying, "me lo saqué en el bingo," reframes the narrative as one of triumph in an honest game. She is not a passive victim in the rumor, she retaliated with this line and it's the story that's prevailed. Even though my cousin and I still enjoy the counter-narrative, we do so out of admiration and not shame.

I asked, what can vulnerable writing practices offer studies of religious belief and what is the impact of doing it? To answer this, I incorporated autoethnography and vulnerable writing in each chapter of this thesis but focused solely on the practice in chapter three. By writing about my own religious beliefs and experiences I reject the idea that scholars of religion must remain ambiguous in their religious beliefs. In putting my beliefs on display, I don't seek to prove or disprove my beliefs or anyone else's, rather I demonstrate the ways in which my own beliefs and experiences have guided my research interests. I also demonstrate how I am also an active participant in vernacular religious belief and how those beliefs have been impacted by my family and my experiences. I am also a firm believer that if we want others to open up about personal or potentially controversial beliefs and practices then we should be open about our own. This is

particularly important when publishing work on those beliefs. It's not enough to think reflexively about yourself privately, those beliefs should be available publicly. How can we ask others to do what we won't?

The last question I address, how is vernacular religious belief impacted by the process of traditionalization, is seen throughout this thesis. In chapter one, Glassie's point that tradition is a "dimension within every creative act," can be seen through storytelling (2003:191). Storytelling within my family is shaped by Abuela's voice, through utilizing her quips and anecdotes, but also in telling stories about her. These stories, like the one of how my grandparents met, are complicated by perceived notions of religiosity within my family. My grandfather's plans for priesthood and the perceived hopes of his mother change the way the story is understood by my family members. In chapter two, my family members' own interpretations of what being religious means is shaped by their views of my grandparents. However, their definitions of being religious have changed greatly from my grandparents. It is their lived experiences that have led to changing belief systems. In chapter three, I discuss my own experiences that demonstrate my process of traditionalizing belief for myself. I analyze the ways my experiences and family members have impacted my own belief systems.

I hope that in doing this work I have demonstrated the ways the interdisciplinary study of religious belief can offer a more holistic understanding of a person or group of people's beliefs and the meaning they find in those beliefs. In the future I would like to come back to the religious practices of my family, specifically prayer, and do more in-depth research on that practice in particular. I'd like to learn to pray from my grandparents and discover the ways they were taught and how that has impacted their practices. I hope to engage more with Chicana feminisms and autoethnographic practices as I continue my academic career. But mostly I hope

I've written something that inspires others to reflect on their own religious beliefs and the people that have impacted them for better or worse. I end here, where I began, with a prayer from my Abuela: *En la manita que Dios te cuide.*

NOTES

Chapter One

[1] While stories about my Abuela could be looked at and studied as legend, I have chosen not to do this here. As time passes my Abuela's character and stories about her will likely become family legends and I may come back to this when they do.

[2] Interview with Guillermo Bernal and Pinny Bernal, 1 March 2024. All quotes from my grandparents in this chapter come from this interview.

[3] Interview with Bill Bernal, 10 January 2023. All quotes used from Bill Bernal in this chapter are from this interview.

[4] Interview with Georgina Diaz, 4 January 2023. All quotes from Georgina in this chapter are from this interview.

Chapter Two

[1] Interview with Guillermo Bernal, 11 August 2023

[2] Interview with Skyler Bernal, 25 January 2024.

[3] Interview with Bill Bernal, 10 January 2023. All quotes used from Bill Bernal are from this interview.

[4] Interview with Georgina Diaz, 4 January 2023. All quotes from Georgina in this chapter are from this interview.

[5] Interview with Ariana Haro, 9 January 2023.

[6] Text message communication with Ariana Haro. 13 March 2024.

Chapter Three

[1] Interview with Ariana Haro, 9 January 2023.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Exemption Letter

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

DATE:	July 18, 2023
TO:	Ciara Bernal
FROM:	Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[2080805-1] Family Oral History and Religious Belief
REFERENCE #:	IRB# 24-010
ACTION:	DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	July 18, 2023

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM FULL BOARD IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records. Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project in a secure location on campus.

If you have any questions, please contact Robin Pyles at (270) 745-3360 or Robin.Pyles@wku.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB's records.

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Keywords (3-5 keywords not included in the title that uniquely describe content): Folklore, Chicana Feminism, Family Folklore

Committee Chair: Dr. Ann K. Ferrell

Additional Committee Members: Dr. Kate Horigan

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