TESTIMONIOS OF THE U.S. RURAL “HOMELESS”: A CRITICAL AND
DECOLONIZING-DECOLONIZED ETHNOGRAPHY

By

NANCY EMILCE CARVAJAL MEDINA

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the requirements for the degree of

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of NANCY EMILCE CARVAJAL MEDINA find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Pamela Jean Bettis, Ph.D., Chair

Linda Heidenreich, Ph.D.

Paula Groves Price, Ph.D.

John J. Lupinacci, Ph.D.

Marcelo Diversi, Ph.D.
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Anzaldúa (2000) states that “every few years [we] pull up the roots, get on the train, and move. Some of it changes pero las raíces como culture, race, class- some of that stays… [we] always pick up [our] roots and take them with [us]” (p. 242). 2013 was the year when I travelled with my roots and was embraced by the land of the Nimíipuu to whom I am grateful for having allowed me to walk on their territories to develop new understandings. I was honored to listen and learn from you Dr. Renee Holt, Dr. Zoe Higheagle Strong, Dr. David Warner, Angela Picard, Veneice Guillory-Lacy, and Phill Allen. Your presence in the classroom is a reminder of a history that is not to be ignored or neglected. Thank you for bringing your selves into colonized spaces and teaching with the ways you live your lives.

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One of the things I learned from people experiencing housing instability is that home is a feeling and that we, human beings, can become home for others. Pieces of me will remain in the hearts and memories of my friends and colleagues in Pullman. My dear FRIENDS and now Doctors, Maria Isabel Morales, Manee Moua, and Charise DeBerry, your company, words, and unconditional love will make me miss you while taking my roots with me and moving again. Thank you for having cared, for thinking of me, and always being special in your own unique ways. To my friends Carolina Silva and Danica Wixom for having been willing to explore ways of expression through theater and arts. Thank you both for having allowed me to concretize and enrich my creative ideas. Carolina Silva and Jeremiah Sataraka thank you for having been there when darkness came and for being the inspiration for many young generations. To the members of my committee, thank you for allowing me to count you among my friends due to your qualities as human beings and scholar-activists. Thank you, Pam, Linda, Paula, Johnny, and Marcelo for having believed in this work and having trusted in how it would evolve. My dear Pam, I would like to thank you for the patience, for having walked by my side while I developed understandings and organized my ideas. Thank you for having supported me every time I came with a new idea or thought although you may have not been sure of where I was heading. I know at times my process of thought may be complex and for that reason I would like to thank you for guiding me with your questions. When I first met you Pam, I told you at a dinner table in a restaurant downtown Pullman I thanked you for believing in each one of us, those who were then, new to the Cultural Studies and Social Thought in Education Program. Today, I thank you again for continuing believing in your students, for listening attentively, and being generous with
your time and energy. Dear friends, I carry memories of each one of you, your laughter, energy, and commitment to make possible things you believe in.

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To the believers, the utopians, and the doers, may our bodies become our homes and home for others.
TESTIMONIOS OF THE U.S. RURAL “HOMELESS”: A CRITICAL AND DÉCOLONIZING-DÉCOLONIZED ETHNOGRAPHY

Abstract

by Nancy Emilce Carvajal Medina, Ph.D.
Washington State University
December 2017

Chair: Pamela Jean Bettis

Homelessness is a structural and political problem that is commonly pathologized in research and media, and criminalized through policies in the U.S. Rural homelessness has been rendered invisible, societally and discursively, compared to urban homelessness. This critical ethnographic study centers the testimonios of thirteen people who have experienced housing instability in Springfield, a U.S. rural town. Houseless people use their testimonios as a political tool to unframe and challenge the discursive construction of their identities. They also deconstruct the meaning of the American Dream and re-envision it by redefining success, parenthood, and the meaning of home. I use a decolonizing research methodology grounded in Chicana/Latina feminism and Indigenous epistemologies, to analyze the processes of identity construction of unhoused people. Critical researchers like O’Flaherty (Lee et al., 2010) and politicians like Ellison (NLIHC, 2017) argue that the U.S. government lacks the “political will” to do what is right and re-evaluate housing policies, the job market, and medical services. I argue there is not one way of being homeless. Unfortunately, the label “homeless” demarcates the houseless’ body within a limited set of behaviors and characteristics, that negates the possibility of acknowledging that these individuals possess spiritual, cognitive, ontological, and emotional dimensions.
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Dedication

To Chrisanne, Samantha, Sancnite, Sophia, Isi, Ethel, Madison, Alex, Mathew, Lawrence, Jack, Mark, and Daniel for having trusted me and shared slices of your lives. It is my deepest wish that I had honored your stories. To the roots that I can trace: my great-grandparents Celia Castro, Eudoro Ramírez, Antonio Medina, Juana Montanez, Buenaventura Carvajal, Benedicta Suárez, Ebaristo Vergara whose voices and stories live in my parents’ deeds. To my grandparents, María del Carmen Ramírez Castro, José de Jesús Medina Montanez, Ana Bertilde Vergara Manrique, and Marco Tulio Carvajal Suárez for having been a home to many. To my parents María Margarita Medina Ramírez and Marco Julio Carvajal Vergara for having offered me the opportunity to live. To my nephews and nieces Haider, Valentina, Natalia, Camilo, Dylan Julián, and Daniel Josué for being my teachers and inspiration. To my siblings Paola, José Anselmo, and Yovanny for giving life and being willing to listen. To my KIA\@s for being my family, my motivation, and my strength. To my cousin Teresa Carreño and her husband Gillermo Vivero who I got to know in these lands. Dear cousin Teresa, life surprised me and blessed me with the opportunity to know you. Your support, love, and friendship are a blessing to my spirit. I love you cousin. To Rouge for being the wind that sustains me and for showing me the light in the middle of the darkness. To the roots that I cannot trace but whose histories I carry in my blood and whose memories I hope to, one day, go back to.
TOWARDS A CONSTRUCTION OF A POSITIONALITY: PART I

Saturday April 8th. Hands to the Soil

That time of the year has come. The sun caresses our souls through our flesh and bones while the wind fills our lungs with the scent of the moist soil. My parents’ shadows provide shelter and warmth. Manos a la tierra- hands to the soil- Right on my knees, my three-year old’s fingertips sense the beating wet soil. My palms want to trace the path to unknown ancient roots. While digging, the golden treasure comes to the surface lighting my eyes. “Small, just like her,” my mom says. And she adds, “Those are her favorites.” She searches for the small potatoes and puts them in a bag. “The little tiny potatoes are what she will eat”.

Now, more than three decades later, that 3-year-old hears your voice Clarissa, clear and loud:

Whenever you raise a child, leave the hairy roots on, the dying leaves under the new leaves, the dirt clods swaying behind, so the child has something to sashay with in life, something to remind them they are made from dust of earth and dust of stars, so they have something to point them toward home.

(Fragment Planting the Child, Clarissa Pinkola Estés)

Figure 1: “Roots” Painted by Nancy Carvajal

1 Every date in this document represents a stage in which I developed a new understanding, I started a new process, and/or I lived a new experience.
FRIDAY, AUGUST 8. GETTING ON THE ROAD (INTRODUCTION)

Where have we been? Where are we heading?

While the current U.S. government invests money in prosecuting immigrants and building walls, it forgets to restore the dignity to the millions of houseless people that walk along the streets of its own nation. (Montaner, 2017).²

Listen. The whisper of a fugitive voice is traveling with the northern winds and heading south. “And nobody has ever listened to my voice. I have some good things to say” (Chrisanne)

High probability of rains and electric storms are predicted. No wonder why the call of a black-billed magpie sitting on the cup of the tree announces a sunset that is slowly running behind the clock.

“[…] Bond people together. What’s the glue?” (Samantha)

“Blue Mountains, I’m here. I’m Home” (Mathew)

“Yeah, I know about sweat lodge, the pow-wows, the dancing. Yeah, I know my heritage” (Isi)

“I essentially lost everything overnight” (Sophia)

“My identity as mother, as mom, was gone” (Ethel)

I used to always think that people are homeless because they didn’t try (Jack)

Did you listen? Multiple voices continue emerging from the wheat fields

“We’re out there, you know. We are just not being heard” (Sancnite)

“Peace is the American Dream” (Lawrence)

“I’m not homeless. I’m houseless” (Mark)

“The beginning of a new chapter is being written in the book that is my life” (Daniel)

² Translated by author from Spanish version.
“Don’t tell me slavery is dead” (Chrisanne)

“Judgement doesn’t make it feel like home” (Alex)

“To have my family back together, I guess is what would make it a home” (Madison)

Some voices may sound familiar. Some voices may be intriguing. Some voices might have been unheard and ignored. Why have they traveled so far and what are their stories? How will we listen to and respond to those stories? On this journey, you and I are coming to a road to explore truths of housing instability rooted in people’s lived experiences in Springfield, a U.S. rural area. This document is the result of a three-year critical ethnographic study informed by Chicana/Latina constructs like “theory in the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015); “oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval, 2000), and “Nepantla” (Anzaldúa, 2002). I have also embraced Indigenous principles like interconnectedness, reciprocity, and relationality (Wilson, 2008) to guide every stage of this process.

Both Indigenous and Chicana/Latina scholars have developed theoretical discussions to decolonize research agendas and decolonize the self (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1980; Cruz, 2001; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Chicana/Latina and Indigenous’ theorizing and activism has been grounded in understanding the relationships to land, reclaiming ownership of their bodies, and exploring their spirituality.

As a new mestiza scholar, I accept the invitation formulated by Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) to explore ways to decolonize western epistemologies and adopt research as a political act. In exploring possibilities, I acknowledge the critiques to critical ethnography and envision ways to mobilize the field. Some critical ethnographers have been critiqued for being “too theory-driven” and for their lack of self-reflexivity that lead to enacting detached research and writing practices (Hytten, 2004). Therefore, postcritical scholars have attempted to reconcile
these gaps in making of ethnography “dialogic, collaborative, and pedagogical” (Hytten, 2004, p. 101). Thus, this study has served two purposes. On one hand, I put the testimonios of unstably housed people into conversation with Chicana/Latina and Indigenous knowledges to deconstruct the “homeless identity”. On the other hand, I have developed theoretical and methodological comprehensions to decolonize the ‘self’ thanks to the three years of interaction with houseless communities and deep reflection on Chicana/Latina and Indigenous knowledges. These understandings have evolved organically and continue to be re-signified and enriched through socialization of the process in academic and non-academic environments.

**Tuesday, August 14. Why US rural homelessness?**

“Being homeless is not a choice” (Sancnite, May 27, 2015)

*Homeless Say Booming Cities Have Outlawed Their Right to Sleep, Beg and Even Sit*

The Washington Post - 6/2/2016

*Michigan Lawmakers Target Homeless with Ban on "Aggressive" Panhandling*

Think Progress - 5/27/2016

*Adequate Shelter? A Lawsuit claims Eureka is criminalizing homelessness*

North Coast Journal - 5/5/2016

*Homes Not Jails: Santa Cruz City Council Votes to Continue the Sleeping Ban*

Spare Change News - 4/3/2016

Housing instability is a structural and political problem that tends to be understood as an individual responsibility. The public perception of agency and choice as the main factors

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3 News obtained from data bases of The National Law center on Homelessness & Poverty.

[https://www.nlchp.org/news](https://www.nlchp.org/news)
influencing homelessness is the result of dominant discourses found in media, research, and policies. As exemplified in the above newspaper headlines, when understood as an individual issue, people experiencing homelessness continue to be criminalized. Unfortunately, human behaviors like sleeping or even sitting in public spaces and giving food to unhoused people is criminalized and constitutes a trend that is growing across the U.S. (Watts, 2016). After surveying 187 U.S. cities, the 2014 National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP) (Watts, 2016) showed that 53 percent of those cities criminalize sitting or lying down in public places and nine percent criminalize sharing food with the houseless. Ironically, these laws have not been enforced against tourists or wealthy locals who also trespass the law when sleeping in public (Finley & Finley, 1999). Furthermore, even though in 1986 the court abolished the law against public sleeping in New Orleans, in the nineties houseless people, youngsters especially, were arrested for obstructing the sidewalk (Finley & Finley, 1999).

Houselessness is an everyday palpable reality for many nations. U.S. citizens and residents from different genders, ethnicities, ages, abilities, academic levels, and social class status experience housing instability in varying degrees and for different periods of time in their lifetimes. Thus, the complex nature of houselessness, that is, the diversity of people who experience it, the multiple definitions and types of housing instability, the wide range of its causes, and houseless’ fear of the system (due to abuse of power, murders, and disappearances where some governmental agencies have been involved) complicate the endeavor of obtaining accurate numbers of unstably housed people (Fiske in Min, 1999; Rogers & Marshal, 2012). However, an estimated number of the world’s houseless population is approximately 200 million (Sherwood, 20014, Theories/Speculation section, para. 1). Between 2002 and 2003, houselessness increased in countries like Hungary, Netherlands (McGah, 2005) and the north of
the United Kingdom (House of Commons ODPM, 2005). Income and Poverty in USA: 2013 (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014) reports 45.3 million people lived in poverty between 2011 and 2013. In the same direction, the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress estimated 610,042 individuals were deemed unhoused in the United States on a single night (p. 5). In 2015, AHAR reported these numbers decreased to 564,708. Still, this statement is not to be taken for granted when cities like Chicago, for instance, reported an increase of youth houselessness in the same year (De Bradley, 2015). This disparity reveals the need to consider the particularities of a specific context to understand the nature of housing instability and plan actions accordingly. Furthermore, the decrease in the numbers of housing instability “cannot overcome the inability of low-income households to afford housing” (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2016, p. 4).

The total number of unhoused people in U.S. rural areas is unknown (NAEH, 2010; Patton, 1988). The 2016 point-in-time count of Springfield (pseudonym), the state in which this study took place, revealed an overall increase of 14 percent from 2015 with 2,247 men, women, and children experiencing housing instability (2016 Springfield Point-in time Count Report). The same report highlighted that 32 percent of people were unsheltered and unstably housed people. It is important to emphasize that point-in time counts cannot provide accurate numbers on unsheltered homelessness due to the difficult geographic conditions of certain areas and the inability to reach out to all the individuals in both urban and rural places. The Estimates of Homeless People (Figure 2) maintains that homelessness is latent across nation in varying degrees.
Figure 2: Homelessness rates per state in the United States. (AHAR, 2015, p. 12)

Twenty first century U.S. citizens’ perceptions of stability and welfare have been affected by changes in their geospatial surroundings. For instance, the dominant fictional perceptions of the suburban areas as “places with large proportions of home-owning non-Hispanic whites and native born with relatively high household incomes, high levels of education, and without any problems” (Teaford, Keil, Kneebone & Berube, as cited in Anacker, 2015, p. 1) have been debunked by the reality of growing poverty. In 2010, poverty increased 3% in the U.S.A. (Teaford, Keil, Kneebone & Berube, as cited in Anacker, 2015). In 2013 “forty-four percent of America's poor [were] considered to be in ‘deep poverty’-defined as an income 50% or more below the government's official poverty line” (Neil, 2013, para 2). These phenomena have represented a migration or decentralization of impoverished U.S. citizens coming from the city to inhabit the suburbs and outlying metropolitan areas (Lucy & Phillips as cited in Anacker, 2015; Pooley as cited in Anacker, 2015). This change in the city’s landscape has symbolized diverse
challenges and triggered initiatives like ‘not-in-my-back-yard’ (NYMBY) that oppose affordable housing projects in suburban areas (Galster as cited in Anacker, 2015).

Housing instability is not a new phenomenon for U.S. society and has been broadly explored within the urban context, but not so much in rural areas. Urban houselessness has captured wider attention compared to rural houselessness due to its population concentration. Nevertheless, researchers highlight that the rates of unstably housed people in rural areas may be higher than in the urban sector (Lawrence in Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). Rural areas are envisioned as “scenic countryside” where the ethic “we take care of our own” prevails (Patton, 1988; Wright et al., 1998; Wright, 1999). Unfortunately, the economic crisis and changes in the labor market have diminished the economic conditions of farmers and increased poverty levels (Patton, 1988; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006; Wright et al., 1998; Wright, 1999). Rural houselessness represents unique challenges partially due to the geographical location and the lack of shelters or social services offered (Lawrence, 1995; Wright, et. al., 1998; Wright 1999).

Thus, this study explores the complexities of being unstably housed in Springfield, a U.S. rural context, and how this reality impacts identity construction processes.

Ongoing misrepresentation and mystification of houseless people come from media discursive and stereotypical representations, policies that criminalize both the houseless and those who assist them, research that tell stories from a deficit perspective (Horsell, 2006), and some individuals’ lack of criticality to interpret messages from media in terms of who the houseless are. Terms like: witch, disposable, drug addict, broken, shadow people, criminal, unhappy déjà vu, and problem, among others, have constituted, what I call, the building blocks of “the homeless identity”. Therefore, I argue that “the homeless identity” is a societal and discursive construction; such an identity does not exist per se. In listening to the testimonios of
individuals experiencing housing instability in a U.S. rural area, this critical ethnographic study intends to contribute to critical examination of systemic structures of power that sustain master narratives on the homeless. Furthermore, the testimonios presented in this study will also contribute to deconstructing the notion of ‘the homeless identity’ while providing a nuanced portrayal of the challenges and complexities of, first being houseless in a rural area, and second forming an individual and social identity where constructs like the American dream and national identity are demarcated by values of individualism, competition, and success. These discussions invite different parties including policy makers, educators, and community members to generate long-lasting actions that may transform discourses about and/or actions towards those who are unhoused.

**What are the goals of this study?**

Despite the substantial body of research on housing instability, few critical studies that describe the shelter life from the unique perspective of the individual experiencing homelessness in rural areas were identified (Rose, 2015). Furthermore, houselessness is hardly discussed and analyzed in education, cultural studies, or human development and when it is raised as an issue, analysis is focused on the concept rather than the experience (Finley & Diversi, 2010). There is an urgent need to conduct more research to hear the narratives of homeless people in rural areas (Davis-Berman, 2011). As Moore (2007) highlights, it is useful to pay attention to the specificities of different physical settings when intending to trace routes to homelessness. Therefore, the experience of homelessness in a rural area in the U.S. may generate insights in terms of the particularities of this phenomenon in western rural areas with a political tradition, geographical conditions, and sense of community.
The literature consulted evidences that housing instability in the U.S. is not a temporary reality, that there are pervasive metaphors that constitute the blocks on which the homeless identity has been fabricated, and most research on homelessness has focused on theoretical debates rather than accounting for the lived experiences of houseless people. Therefore, this study embraces theoretical and methodological frameworks that center the lived experiences of houseless people while de-constructing systemic and oppressive ideologies that tend to represent them in deviant ways where individuals are blamed and made responsible for their own inability to provide for their families. Thus, this three-year critical ethnographic study challenges the existence of “the homeless identity” and envisions methodological ways to decolonize the self by asking the following research and methodological questions:

**Main Questions:**

➢ What do the testimonios of houseless people in a rural context in the Pacific Northwest reveal about systematic structures of power and its influence in identity formation processes?

➢ How may listening to the houseless testimonios enrich theorizing to decolonize the self and develop understandings of what it entails?

**Sub-questions:**

➢ How does the ideological construction and common-sense of the American dream shape societal perceptions of the houseless? How do the unhoused people redefine the American dream?

➢ How do unhoused individuals position themselves in relation to society, challenge stereotypical representations, and un-frame their identities?
How can Indigenous epistemologies and Chicana/Latina feminism be used to create a third decolonizing space to unframe the homeless identity while resisting the disembodied nature of western research practices?

Although home is usually associated with having a stable physical space to live, some houseless people interviewed associated home with feelings (love), people (friends and family), and moments (a conversation, sharing a meal). Furthermore, they did not use the term “homeless” to describe who they are or their experience. For instance, Lawrence (pseudonym) self-identified as “houseless” and elaborated on the issues of using the term “homeless”:

You know, people always think that homeless people are bad, that all they do is ask for money so they can get drunk and that they’re living off people’s money. It is not true. A lot of people that are houseless, end up houseless in different situations. Everyone has their own differences. (Interview, April 7, 2015)

The term houseless is used by activists and other unhoused people who have attempted to move away from derogatory allusions to who they are (Finley & Diversi, 2010). In this study, I used the term houseless to dignify the lives of those who experience housing instability. Simultaneously, and given the different connotations the word home has acquired in this study, the term “houselessness” is proposed as an alternative to “homelessness”. The expression “the homeless” is used to allude to the mainstream stereotypical discursive construction of the identity of unhoused people.

Wednesday, May 16. Towards a Construction of a Positionality: Part II

We may not walk the same streets, but the asphalt feels the same.

As a child, I witnessed my parents’ tenacity to face discrimination, humiliation, and some economic struggles to form and sustain a family. I also heard my grandpa’s stories of
displacement due to violence inflicted by the Colombian government, the two political parties at the time (conservatives and liberals), and illegal armed groups. When I was six, as the older child of four, I helped, mostly observed, my parents to put brick by brick to build our first owned house. My parents have always supported the communities they have been part of. Today, my dad is the president of a community council and my mom is actively engaged in the tasks promoted by the Catholic church she is ascribed to. These experiences may have contributed to the development of a kind consciousness I had never rationalized or talked about until I came to the U.S. These experiences may not provide a definite answer about when, how, or why my drive to engage and work with and for communities emerged. But, these experiences represent some values that inform my mission and vision of the world.

As a university educator, I came to the realization that social justice becomes a reality when doing grassroots work. For ten years my grassroots work was in the classroom working with English as Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (U.P.T.C.). But, enrolling as a university teacher was not an opportunity I could have aspired to. My age and lack of university experience disqualified me before the eyes of administrators who arbitrarily took my Curriculum vitae from the pile of candidates who were about to go through the selection process and returned it to me. Due to Stella Diaz, a professor who insisted I should demand for the right to go through the selection process, I persisted in demanding my rights and eventually was selected to be a university teacher.
Being aware of multiple layers of oppression and discrimination, I used my position as a university teacher to create critical, empathetic, in-action communities or communities of possibilities or what Andersons (1983; 1991) calls “imagined communities”. For Anderson (1991) “horizontal comradeship” and the “fraternity” generated within them make possible that limited imaginings be challenged and prevent people from dying. Elaborating on this notion, Mohanty (2003) argues communities are “imagined” not for being fictional, but because this word “suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries” (p. 46).

Inspired by Freire’s (1993, 1994, 2004) notion of criticality rooted in action I decided to found Knowledge in Action - K.I.A. as a community of critical thinkers and pedagogues committed to social justice agendas. Founded in 2007 K.I.A has become a family that continues to be present for every one of its members in small ways despite time and distance.

Since its inception K.I.A. has generated spaces of critical dialogue and understanding inside and outside academic environments. In 2010, K.I.A. had the opportunity to collaborate with Juventas, a non-governmental (NGO) organization supporting displaced and low-income

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4 Designed by Jonatan Cárdenas and Yenny Deily Patiño.
children and youth in Tunja, Boyacá. K.I.A., volunteered pre-service teachers of the Language School, and Edward W. Littlefield, a Fulbright English assistant at the time, taught English to Juventas’ children and youth until 2013. On U.P.T.C.’s campus, K.I.A. invited students and staff to critically position themselves as citizens and political agents through spaces like the “Series of Lectures on Culture”.

With the goal of developing further understanding on how to do grassroots organizing and enhance criticality in deeper levels, I applied for a Fulbright scholarship. When I was notified I had obtained it, which I did not expect it, it was hard to leave mis K.I.An@s. But, the time has arrived to go back to them. When I started the study on houselessness, Samantha (November 7, 2014), one of the houseless’ women interviewed, asked why I was doing this study and what I was going to receive in return. My answer was not satisfying for Samantha. I started this study to listen, develop understandings, and be present. And I continue to engage in the same actions. Thus, the purpose of this document is to share understandings developed during a three-year journey. This study intends to tune up the critical and political voices of unhoused people. In writing these pages, it has been my intention to be in dialogue with scholars who have built decolonizing/decolonized research roads and to engage in dialogue with you, as a reader. As a human being under construction, I express my gratitude for every step given and every lesson learned in the lands of the Nimíipuu. As I said at the beginning of this section, although we may think we may not be walking the same streets, the asphalt may still feel the same.

**Monday, October 9. What is the road map?**

Dear Companion,

We have started this journey by approaching the personal, social, research, and political motivations behind this study. This dissertation is written as a journey into the lived experiences
of thirteen unhoused people. Every date on this journey speaks to specific moments during this journey: when the research started, when I gained a new comprehension of an experience, and when interviews took place, among others. This work is introduced as a journey because it has never been static. It has a departure point and date, but it is a journey that is expected to continue beyond these pages and beyond this time and space.

As any journey, you may want to get equipped with basics for the road: music, food, and drinks. You are invited to bring your own worlds- beliefs, assumptions, prejudices, values, culture, lived experiences, fears, hopes, ‘mindbodyspirits’- and put them into conversation with thirteen houseless people’s worlds. I organized the document in chapters named after different directions (e.g. North, South-West) inspired by the way in which Indigenous peoples honor the four directions. Inspired by Anzaldúa (2002) and Avila (1999) Facio and Lara (2014) organized the collection of essays *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s lives* into Four Directions (East, West, North, and South) as a way of “spiritual activism”, “communal prayer”, and “a ritual to incite radical social change” (p. 14).

This decolonized-decolonizing research has been a powerful, insightful journey into the lives of unhoused people, into my own subjectivities as a critical researcher and human being under construction, into a mindbodyspirit’s effort to continue exploring spirituality and wholeness, and into a new Mestiza exploring healing paths. Moved by the lived experiences of the houseless, Facio’s and Lara’s initiative, and my understandings of Indigenous epistemologies and Chicana/Latina feminisms I decided to honor the lives of the houseless and this research experience by using different directions.

I was in my room looking at the visual representation of “decolonizing the self” (see page) and I remembered Dr. Linda Heidenreich’s allusion to one of the elements in the image:
the Nahuatl symbol of communication. Then I started writing this dissertation as a journey where every direction is an opportunity to dialogue and develop understandings about housing instability, critical ethnography, decolonizing methodologies, and spiritual activism. Every direction constitutes a chapter of this document. I posed one or two questions at the beginning of every direction that illustrate the themes or areas explored as a guide for the reader. Although, the directions in this document do not directly align with the ways in which Chicanas/Latinas like Facio and Lara (2014) have envisioned them, they were written as part of a ritual to honor and acknowledge human-human and human-nature interconnectedness. Like Facio’s and Lara’s endeavor, every direction is this study has been written as an act of spiritual activism and a concrete action to enact social justice agendas. Every step given in these three years is a ritual infused with a prayer for change and action. Every step has been given with the hope to dismantle discursive borders. Pedacitos de vida [slices of life] of the houseless are introduced with the understanding that the whole spectrum of who they are is not captured in these pages. Every one of the eight directions (North, North-East, North-West, East, West, South-East, South-West, and South) is one thread to weave a corner of the quilt of the lives of thirteen individuals experiencing housing instability in Springfield.

I painted using acrylics on canvas the image that constitutes this document’s navigational compass. Every wing represents the symbol of communication and a path to develop different understandings. At the center, there is a spiral that is the place where different layers of understanding of an individual intersect. Right there, at the end of the spiral is the houseless. The document navigational compass is meant to guide you in the reading of this document. Before every chapter there is a section called Construyendo memoria [building memories] where testimonios of some of the participants in this study are shared. Some visual representations may
also be found accompanying these testimonios. Below there is a description of each direction (chapter) and the question(s) guiding the different discussions. Following the description, you will find the compass provided for easier and further reference to the directions (Figure 4).

**East: The place of confrontation and realization (Literature Review).**

What are the historical roots of U.S. houselessness? In this direction, we will explore when and how housing instability originated in the U.S. We will also get familiar with the discursive changes used throughout time to refer to the unhoused. We will also navigate the building blocks of ‘the homeless identity’, that is the discursive representation of houseless as the deviant other. In presenting this analysis and evaluation we will refer to the need to conduct critical studies that contribute to the body of literature that portrays homelessness as a structural problem rather than an individual responsibility only.

**North-East: The place of new beginnings (Theoretical Framework).**

What has constituted my theoretical niche for three years of self-reflexive and critical thinking? This direction provides a brief historical account of the origins of Chicana feminism. This discussion is followed by an analysis of Chicana/Latina theoretical tools like: differential consciousness (Sandoval, 2000) and framing theory (Gaspar de Alba, 2014). These two frameworks will be further discussed in terms of the possibilities they offer to deconstruct the notion of ‘the homeless identity’ and to create a methodological approach to decolonize the self. This initial theoretical discussion is continued and enlarged by putting these tools into conversation with Indigenous notions of interconnectedness, relationality, and reciprocity (Wilson, 2008).

**North: The place of intuition (Methodological Framework).**
How can we move beyond colonizing/colonized (disembodied) research practices? What are theoretical and methodological possibilities to decolonize? In this direction, I describe how critical theory and interpretative ethnography merged to create a liberatory methodology that would permit re-imagining the world while immersed in chaos and despair. After, in addressing critiques of qualitative research, in general, and critical ethnography, in particular, I illustrate how research continues to be a colonizing/colonized space and practice in the twenty first century. In this direction, I also explain how Chicana/Latina Feminism and Indigenous epistemologies account for notions of interconnectedness, holism and relationality and how they can be used to decolonize the self while engaged in a critical ethnographic experience. The ways in which I have intended to decolonize myself and people I am in relation with in this study are also described. In this direction, I provide a description of the process followed to share houseless testimonios and the ways in which these stories were approached. I continue to develop insights about my positionality.

**North-West: The place of empathetic listening. (Testimonios: Construyendo Memoria).**

What are houseless stories? How do our stories dialogue with houseless people? This direction will invite us to hear the testimonios of houseless people in a U.S. rural area collected within a period of three years.

**West: Interstitial Room/Space 1: Unweaving/Weaving the American Dream. (Data Analysis).**

In this direction the following questions are addressed: How does the ideological construction and common-sense of the American dream shape societal perceptions of the houseless? How do the unhoused people redefine the American dream? The construction and
redefinition of the American dream are introduced with the understandings of the challenges faced by houseless people to achieve the American dream.

**South-West: Interstitial Room/Space 2: Living in the borderlands/Unframing “the homeless identity”. (Data Analysis).**

How do unhoused individuals position themselves in relation to society, challenge stereotypical representations, and un-frame their identities? In this direction I use the metaphor of an under-construction- travelling-house to represent the subjective spaces (encounters with inner self and others) where identity formation occurs. I also introduce the term conceptual borders and I analyze how houseless’ mindbodyspirits dismantle conceptual borders and redefine their own identities by showing their agency and political voice.

**South- East: Embracing Spiritual Activism. So what? (Data Analysis).**

In this section I describe two concrete actions that speak to my understanding of spiritual activism and decolonizing research. I speak about my experience creating the series of collaborative workshops *Under the Skin: An Introspective Look at the Self*. This space has been crucial to dialogue communally about what it means to form one’s identity, tell our stories, and challenge stereotypes. The second action is the design of the three workshops “*My story is the only thing I own. Houseless’ Testimonios of Survival and Resistance*. These three workshops represent an attempt to develop empathetic listening and invite the community to re-evaluate their assumptions and prejudices about houseless people.

**South: The place of re-birth (Conclusions and Implications).**

Who can we be/become? In this section I challenge mainstream discursive constructions of the homeless’ identity. I also share some insights about what it entails to conduct decolonizing
critical ethnographic studies. I finally present some implications for research, policy, and practice.
**Figure 4:** Document Navigational Compass. Painted by Nancy Carvajal.
NORTH-WEST. THE PLACE OF EMPATHETIC LISTENING. (TESTIMONIOS: CONSTRUYENDO MEMORIA).

Samantha. My story is the only thing I own.

We both moved here. We were single living in two different houses and came together. We wanted to have a family together. We have a daughter. We tried to create a family. We’re dealing with what the male, the woman and the child expects. We tried to make a home. We tried to create a nuclear family, something I hadn’t had. There’s a lot that comes into play when you find a partner to settle down. We tried to create a family. It’s amazing. A miracle. People even don’t do it but having that bond, having people bond together, What’s the glue? cause we’re all separate individuals

*Both of you became houseless because of financial problems?*

We started having problems to reach out. We reached out to family, friends … and the problem is the social fabric. Now, landlords are much more careful and they don’t want people coming in. When I was living in an urban area, anyone could come in and sleep in the couch. Now, my brother has a big house in Greenville but he didn’t offer. His daughter has a big house. My two brothers I don’t talk to them anymore. I was alone and him the same thing. He has a house. Some families are more generous and giving and some wait for the person to die and give to their son. His mom is not real open. It would be fantastic to have a sister or one person in my life…

*What has it been like living in the apartment provided by the shelter off-site?*

It’s like paradise. It’s like heaven. I’m alone with my dog. It’s amazing.

*How did you find out about the shelter?*
Through Anna, in a center that support women who have experienced any type of abuse. I have a lot of fear. At the time I had a lot of fear. Do you know what it means to be in the dark? You’re in complete dark and you’re trying to reach outside and you try to walk and it’s completely black and you don’t know what the ground is like. That is what it’s like. It’s being in a different place. I’ve never been before in the dark. There’s not flash. There’s no pitch of light. You don’t know if someone’s gonna be around the corner, you don’t know if there’s someone in the bushes. You don’t know if there’s a black animal outside. It is like that in a strange place. Someone just takes a car drives you in the middle of nowhere and drops you off. It’s like driving a car without the light. It’s like driving a car 60 miles away and you don’t know where you’re going. Now the light has come. Now the light is here. Everything is fine. It’s not that kind of fear that you’re in the car even if someone’s in the back seat. You’re going in a car someone opens the door pushes you in the car and you don’t know who’s in there or where the key is and you’re going 60 miles an hour.

*Does the shelter feel like home to you or not at all?*

It is home. It is my life. I am not talking about the shelter. I am talking about my apartment. It’s everything I hold dear. But, I did gain an understanding that I do not really even need a home. I can survive like a rat (starts crying) sorry…It makes me sad, it’s like being a non-human being because I can survive like a rat, I can go and dig on garbage cans. It does not represent safety. It’s like you’re driving around with this label.

*How would you describe the woman I have in front of me now?*

I start to see myself differently as a homeless. Something doesn’t fit. I value things differently. The only thing I have is my story so, if you can preserve it and keep it somehow scientific. It is my life. It is my art project.
Walking along the streets of La Candelaria, which is one of the historical and most central neighborhoods in Bogotá, Colombia, I met Mauricio, and his art brought us together. A question about his art opened a door to painful memories and stories that may sound fictional due to the atrocity and Machiavellian Depiction of some chapters of Mauricio’s life. The multiple layers of one story comprised of individual decisions and socio-economic circumstances coalesced in a range of emotions and insights while Mauricio was still in motion. These painful events and memories portrayed the history of a colonized country whose remnants of war, and new colonizing-neoliberal economic systems take shape in Mauricio’s mindbodyspirit. I know

Figure 5: Conversation with Mauricio in La Candelaria.\(^5\)

fiction is not the word to describe the space where the boundaries of the real and the surreal blur to inform those stories. Those stories and memories cannot be healed with a coin or a bill. I notice Mauricio’s watery eyes while I struggle to keep mine dry. I kneel, keep silent, and listen. My ears seem to be hearing while I remove some part of my ‘self’ from that time and space. I would rather let the wind take some of his words and not let them come back. Laid down on the cold asphalt, right leg injured, under mild rain drops, Mauricio takes his black charcoal and white chalk to draw what appears to be the symbol that would redeem all his demons. Art is the language that brought us together.

![Figure 6: Mauricio’s painting. Chalk on asphalt](image)

My mind trying not to judge while understanding how and why. My skin shivering while listening to a cold narration about lives Mauricio’s hands have taken away. To my mind flash

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images of female activists in Colombia who have confronted the perpetrators of violence against their family members. I remember their bravery and strength when telling their experiences and my imagination cannot even picture the pain and level of forgiveness needed to move on. I regret to continue witnessing and accepting that others’ desires, ambitions, and expectations determine the worth of one’s life. The sound of a coin on the asphalt, on Mauricio’s San Michelangelo’s drawing, reminded me how little the life of a person living in the streets of a city in Colombia is worth. I could not be silent. I turned around and looked at the man who threw the coin and asked him for kindness and respect. He reacted and was full of anger. It was time to walk away by thanking Mauricio for opening his heart and sharing his art with those who walk along the streets of La Candelaria.

Homelessness is a situation experienced by many world citizens. From encounters like the one with Mauricio in Colombia to conversations with people living in homeless shelters in rural Springfield, I can clearly see how socio-cultural and economic systems inform these experiences differently and uniquely. When people ask me: Why do you do this? I still don’t understand! I always feel intrigued about the place where the questioning is coming from. As time passes, I find a new purpose for this study. I have found myself listening more and I continue to honor people’s lives.

In the East- The place of confrontation and realization, which is labeled the Literature Review, I explain trace the historical roots of homelessness in the U.S. and attempt to partially answer the following questions: What insights has research generated in terms of the nature of homelessness, perceptions promoted, and discourses used? How has “the homeless” identity been societally and institutionally constructed? What are future directions in researching US homelessness?
U.S. Homelessness: Historical traces

“Hark! Hark! The dogs do bark!
The beggars are coming to town:
Some in rags, some in tags
And one in a velvet gown”
(Bloy, 2002, para. 6)

Most U.S. studies refer to the industrial revolution and war as the origins of homelessness (Shlay & Rossi, 1992). However, homelessness is not new in Europe and the U.S. (First, Rife & Toomey, 1994; Hoch, 1987; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006); some of its roots are found in English history. According to Bloy (2002) the increase in the number of beggars in the Elizabethan era may have inspired this section’s introductory nursery rhyme (Bloy, 2002, para. 6). Vagrancy laws where hosts took responsibility for the behavior of any stranger that spent three nights in their house were enforced in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland between 673 and 686 (Ribton-Turner as cited in Axelson & Dail, 1988). In the early middle ages, the social structure of Saxon and Western Europe societies denied the existence of rootless individuals who would require charity of some sort (Axelson & Dail, 1988). Churches were expected to care for the poor but the increasing demand of their services and the shortage of churches led monks to experience homelessness as well (Axelson & Dail, 1988).

The Catholic doctrine in England was informed by the scripture of Mathew in which every Christian was expected to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger, among other values (Bloy, 2002). When Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne in 1558, she created the Church of England or Anglican Church (Cody, 2014). The reformation of religion in England provoked changes in the values originally promulgated by the Catholic Church. Therefore, between sixteen
and seventeen centuries, poverty in England started to be regulated by law. The 1601
Elizabethan Poor Law officially consolidated previous legislation and the poor were put into
different categories such as: deserving poor – those who wanted to work but were unable to find
a suitable employment or those too old, young or ill to be employed- and underserving poor-
those who could work but chose not to (The Tudors, 2014). This law continued to be adapted
until the XIX century when it was critiqued for benefitting the industrial and commercial groups
in society (Bloyd, 2002). The notion that the responsibility for the poor was with local
governments, reinforced by the Elizabethan Poor Law, was then adopted in the American
colonies (Axelson & Dail, 1988). By 1770, U.S. colonies, except for Georgia, adopted laws
where residency became a requirement for economic and social relief (Axelson & Dail, 1988).
However, in 1969, “the Supreme Court of the United States declared residency requirements for
social welfare unconstitutional” (Shapiro & Thompson as cited in Axelson & Dail, 1988).

The economic depression of the 1890’s caused a range of people to walk the “open road”:
“[broke businessmen], alcoholics, young boys escaping from home, the unemployed, those
avoiding the police, gamblers, thieves, and con men” (Axelson & Dail, 1988, p. 464). The
changing nature of the roots of homelessness generated two new terms. Tramp was associated
with a “migratory nonworker” and bum referred to a “nonmigratory nonworker” (Axelson &
the 1920’s and 1930’s, 5% of people experiencing homelessness were women who were labeled
as “political agitators” (Axelson & Dail, 1988). According to Axelson & Dail (1988) the 1920’s
and 1930’s homelessness was the product of “the closing of the West, the development of the
modern tools, a series of economic depressions, and the changing character of [the United States]
social structures, especially the family” (p. 464). Additionally, the economic depression also led
to further migration as “families that had been displaced by drought, bank failures and mortgage foreclosures” (Axelson & Dail, 1988, p. 464) were forced into homelessness.

And then the dispossessed were drawn west—from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas families, tribes, dusted out, tractored out. Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do—to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut—anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 158)

Steinbeck’s (1939) novel *Grapes of Wrath* depicted the effects on the American population via the socio-economic changes in the late years of the 19th and early years of the

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7 Image taken from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hobos2.jpg
20th century. In this period, the U.S. economic development depended on the exploitation of the American West through railroad construction, mine excavation, and deforestation (Axelson & Dail, 1988). This economic development and the effects of the Civil War generated a migration of about two hundred thousand workers known as ‘hobos’ (Buns; Anderson as cited in Axelson & Dail, 1988). At the end of the XIX century, hobos “the heroic figures of the frontier” (Anderson as cited in Axelson & Dail, 1988) were no longer needed with the growth of a new era: the industrial revolution (Axelson & Dail, 1988).

In the 1980’s visibility of homelessness increased in urban areas and it attracted researchers’ attention as a significant social problem (Cilbuskis & Hoch, 1985; Rosenheck, 1994; Wright, Rubin & Devin, 1998; Quigley & Raphael, 2001). Research reports from this time portrayed homelessness as a “tragic but temporary aberration” that affected marginal and minority populations including mentally ill, drug addicts, and mostly young unemployed African American men; therefore, homelessness was not associated with the characterization of the U.S. “societal core” (Rosenheck, 1994). The historical roots of homelessness in the U.S. indicate that homelessness has not been temporary, but it has been tragic. In every historical period, there has been an allusion to the term “the new homeless” as an example of the changes in the homeless demographic.

The new houseless of the twenty first century are “middle class, poor, rural, urban people of all ethnicities, cultures and faith communities” (NLIHC, 2017, p. iii). The twenty first century new houseless is also diverse in age, gender, and education level. Therefore, there are multiple definitions for homelessness and diverse factors that may influence this phenomenon. None of them are definitive or defining of who the houseless person is and who s/he may become.
Homelessness: Understandings from Social Sciences and Social Justice Oriented Research

“Home is where the Heart is.”

The U.S. history of homelessness has been partially determined by fluctuating economic conditions. Since the 1980s it has been discussed within societal values shaped by discourses of progress and success. In this way, studying a reality like homelessness represents challenges involving ethics, social justice practices and discourses, research agendas, social/individual/institutional responsibility, and policy making. The complexity also is derived in the myriad of definitions, causes, and peoples experiencing this situation. There is no institutional (government, research, shelters, NGO’s, societal organizations, and communities) consensus on what homelessness is. The language used to describe people who experience homelessness has also evolved throughout time. The 1950’s sociological studies on “tramps” (1890’s-1920s) and “skid row residents” (1940s-1970’s) initially portrayed homelessness as a lack of “personal ties and relationships to the broader society; [it] was not a housing problem” (Bahr; Bahr & Garett as cited in Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Lee, Tyler & Wright, 2010). For instance, those who “had few social attachments, moved frequently or drank heavily” were considered homeless (Lee et al., 2010, p. 502). In the 1990’s and 2000, homelessness was associated with lack of a stable place to live (Lee et. al., 2010; Shlay & Rossi, 1992) or a continuum of “housing” (Cloke, et al., Watson & Austerberry as cited in Moore 2007).

Defining home and homelessness draws from ideological, political, and ethical debates that are influenced by evolving societal values as well as theoretical and political postures. Later in this paper, the roles that psychology and sociology, as disciplines that have conducted research on homelessness, have played in providing insights on homelessness will be discussed to generate reflections on the ethics and politics of the research approaches of this phenomenon.
Therefore, understanding how homelessness operates and what it means is deeply rooted in conceptualizations of home. A “placed-based” or a “significant-based” perspective may be used to define homelessness (Christina as cited in Moore 2007). For North American citizens, home “became a consumer item, a measure of success, and an avenue for spatially and socially differentiating [themselves] from others” (Hill, 1991, p. 298). These values and the idea that the individual is responsible for her/his situation of homelessness reinforce the construction of the “homeless ideology” (Blau; Chesterton; Sutherland & Lock as cited in Hill, 1991). More than a result of lacking a permanent physical accommodation, ‘homelessness’ is portrayed as a circumstance where the ‘abilities’, capacities, and determination of one sector of the U.S. population are scrutinized. Under an individualistic and consumerist ideology, U.S. citizens are expected to “work hard” to be successful i.e. to achieve the American Dream; otherwise they will inevitably be moving themselves towards shelters, streets, and hostels.

This societal belief entrenched in U.S. mindsets, has nurtured a notion of nationalism where receiving welfare is considered shameful because it means you have failed your society, your family, and yourself. Experiencing homelessness is a reflection of the inability, “low intelligence, low ambition, or morals” (Wright, 1993) of an individual to succeed and to fulfill the American Dream of pursuing happiness by having economic stability, a “good” education, and property. In this sense home “represents a center of activities, source of identity, belonging from the past, a goal for personal and social development, an abstract state of being, and a legal concept [italics added]” (Moore, 2007, p. 145). Thus, the concept of home implicitly structures diverse parts of an individual’s identity. If home is a “way of expressing individual identity and a way of belonging to a culture” (Moore, 2007, p. 145), dichotomous views of ‘home’ may place US and worldwide citizens into an unsettling place where losing or not being able to afford a
house deeply transforms not only their relations to their surrounding environments but also their views of who they are and their worth as human being.

Fox (2002) argued that “as laypersons we know that there is ‘no place like home’, that ‘home is where the heart is’, and that ‘a man’s home is his castle’” (p. 580). However, the creation of binary opposites where home is envisioned as a safe, secure, and private space as opposed to a risky, fearful, and invasive environment (Wardhaugh, 1999), not only idealizes the domestic place but also hinders the possibility to understand power relations that may expand the phenomenological view of home. For instance, in Wardhaugh’s (1999) words, Katy, one of the participants in her study on homelessness and identity, “could be described as ‘homeless at home’, given her lack of any sense of home while living with her family” (p. 94). Thus, if violence disrupts home, the physical space where people share with those who are supposed to be their beloved ones, the heart may look for another space, which may not be a physical building/structure necessarily, to call home.

Conceptualizing home and homelessness becomes an ideological, political, and ethical endeavor when identifying the voices of those who may be asked to join the conversation both inside and outside of academic environments. A cautionary note is to be made in terms of the purpose of this discussion which is not to diminish the value of specific fields of expertise in how they address this sensitive topic, but to portray the complexity of understanding and taking actions to prevent homelessness. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the possibilities and limitations from every academic field in understanding such a nuanced social reality. It is also important to clarify that research on homelessness is informed by diverse ideological postures, personal experiences, life philosophies, and professional backgrounds that mark a difference in which discourses are used to portray and define home and homelessness. As an ideological
process, research becomes a ground for political debate that generates a wide range of reactions from individuals from diverse academic, socio-economic, religious, and governmental, and non-governmental communities.

As previously stated, psychologists and sociologists have conducted a substantial body of research on homelessness. Psychologists’ have mostly focused on analyzing individual characteristics that lead to or exacerbate physical and emotional problems because of experiencing homelessness. Most longitudinal studies reveal homelessness generates and increases emotional and psychological distress (Wong & Piliavin, 2001; Wade & Kendler, Ahrens & Alloy in Gadalla, 2009), mental and physical disorders, substance abuse, and exposure to trauma (Bassuk et. al., Gelberg et al., in Lewinston et al., 2014) that may affect how adults perform their roles as parents (Brooks-Gun & Duncam in Gadalla, 2009). Other studies, emphasize mental health (Bassuk et al., Crane et al, Jasinki et al, Shinn et al. as cited in Lee et al., 2010), alcohol and drug abuse (Bassuck & Rosenberg, Risher & Breakey, Goodman et al., Milburn & D’Ercole, Mills & Ota as cited in Thrasher & Mowbray 1995; Gaetz, 2013; Hill, 1991; Lee, et. al, 2010; Moore, 2007), among other individual traits, are responsible for homelessness.

Some sociologists highlight a widespread public perception that embraces “individualistic explanations for poverty” while critiquing “the role of academics in the victim blaming” dynamics (Wright, 1993). Part of the reasoning for the latter perspective may lie in the research traditions that explore the social and cultural meanings and uses of home and homelessness while “leaving aside its experiential significance” (Moore, 2007). The prevalence of a sociological research field ingrained in a culture of blame of the individual reinforces the view of American sociology as a “classic middle-class liberalism” practice that seeks to "reassert
social stability through scientific understanding of the relationship between individual motivation and social needs” (Wright, 1993). Even though scientism has ruled western research traditions and analyzed homelessness since the 1920’s, some scholars claim there is an ongoing need to procure further studies to find different solutions to this phenomenon (Irwin, LaGory, Ritchey, & Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Psychological and sociological studies on housing instability that emphasize the individual is responsible of her/his fate as a houseless partially contribute to building a deviant and confining identity for the houseless. Thus, in the following section, I argue “the homeless identity” is the result of societally constructed ‘building blocks’ which emanate from discourses reinforced in media, policies, and research. Interrogating these building blocks may help us continue exploring the politics of identity formation, societal stigma, U.S. values, and the treatment towards the houseless.

**Building blocks of ‘the homeless identity.’**

**Building block one: Homeless= Immoral and Deviant.**

‘Shadow people’

‘An epidemic’

‘Unhappy déjà vu’

‘Public nuisance’

‘Threat’

Homelessness is not just experienced but it is also imagined or ideologically constructed (Somerville, 2013). Some research, media, and policies in the U.S. emphasize an “individual deficit” rhetoric (Horsell, 2006) that overshadows institutional responsibilities in relation to homelessness and perpetuates the stigmatization of unhoused people. These hegemonic
stigmatizing, constraining, discriminatory, and exclusionary discourses on “the homeless” constitute building blocks on which societal ideologies and imaginaries are built. Thus, the common-sense of homelessness in the U.S. is a too ‘diffuse’, ‘ill-defined’ (Fiske in Min, 1999), ‘binding’, and ‘misguided’ invention (McCarthy, 2013). Therefore, classifying individuals who do not own a house legitimizes differences and naturalizes social injustice “and so, injustice is not questioned, it comes to be understood as the natural state of things” (Thompson as cited in De Melo Resende, 2009, p. 366).

Hegemonic discursive constructions of ‘the homeless identity’ are embedded in metaphors that are “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). The label “homeless” is charged with metaphors like “shadow people” (Sydney City Mission 1995 as cited in Fopp, 2010). Media and official reports refer to homelessness and the homeless as “an epidemic” (Somerville, 2013; Fessen, 2015; NCH, p. 1; Villanueva, 2017), an “unhappy déjà vu” (McKinley, 2009, para 3), a “public nuisance” (Medina, 2015, para 2), and a problem (Horsell, 2006; Wasserman & Clair, 2012). For Fopp (2010) “the use of such metaphors in research about homelessness is influenced by, and contributes to, the general cultural and social discourse about its explanation, the alleged characteristics of people who are homeless, and how they are expected to change their circumstances [italics added]” (p. 273). These metaphors denigrate individuals, limit their agency, and contribute to the ideological construction and imaginary of a deviant, sick, and threatening other.

Furthermore, metaphors on homelessness do not accord with the real-life experiences or attributes of houseless people and legitimate “pejorative dominant stereotypes of homelessness” (Fopp, 2009). Metaphors “coalesce to represent a particular social worldview and a normative
social model of how society should operate” (Lakoff in Fopp, 1999, p. 277). In this sense, the metaphorical representations of unstably housed individuals are associated with an apparent inherent deficient and immoral character. Fopp (2009), for instance, was intrigued with the problematic nature of the metaphors ‘pathways’, ‘careers’, and ‘safety nets’ used in Australian research concerning homelessness housing and policy development. Fopp (2009) concluded that depicting homelessness as a ‘career’ “is not only a misfit but it is outrageously contrary to their experience” (p. 283). Moreover, acknowledging that metaphors may be widely defined and interpreted, Fopp (2009) argued that there is a relation between societal constructions of moral (healthy, strong, rich) and immoral (sick, weak, poor) citizens and policies that reward or punish them.

Fopp’s (2009) assertion is relevant when analyzing how the discussion of the morality of the houseless is situated in a deficit perspective associated with dysfunctional personalities or behaviors (alcoholism, gambling, drug-taking, drinking, irresponsibility) (Horsell, 2006; Somerville, 2013) that diminishes the agency, self-sufficiency, and accountability of the subject. In this way, “sin talk” is still used in the U.S. to make unstably housed people responsible or “culpable for their own situation” (Somerville, 2013, p. 288). According to Torino and Sisselman-Borgia (2017), “the social welfare system in our country [the U.S.] has placed blame on people for being poor and/or homeless” (p. 154). Therefore, when an individual’s lack of success or failure is associated with her/his inability to procure or profess moral values, the dichotomy “us” (normal) and “them” (deviant) is created (Fopp, 2009; Scheider, Chamberlain & Hogetts, 2010; Whang & Min in Min, 1999; Forte, 2002; Shields, 2001).

This dichotomy is problematic to the extent that it shapes U.S. “normal” citizens’ imaginaries who tend to behave in less compassionate ways towards those who visibly or
invisibly experience housing instability (Baumgartner, Bauer & Bui, 2012). Blame and lack of compassion contribute to this stigmatization and make microaggressions towards the houseless feasible (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). The manifestation of some microaggressions can be seen in descriptors such as: “sub-human status, invisibility, aesthetically unappealing, criminal status/dangerous, assumption of mental illness, assumption of substance abuse, laziness, and intellectual inferiority” (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017, p. 156).

Thus, a discursive construction or building block (label or metaphor) contributes to the construction of imaginaries and ideologies that partly shape U.S. citizens’ behaviors-attitudes, prejudices, and assumptions towards the houseless (See Figure 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Block (label) Hegemonic Stigmatizing &amp; Exclusionary Discourse</th>
<th>Imaginary/ideological construction (prejudices, and assumptions)</th>
<th>Manifestation of oppression/discrimination (behaviors-attitudes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immoral and Deviant</td>
<td>lazy, irresponsible, lack of self-sufficiency, immoral, not accountable.</td>
<td>“sin talk” = blaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Mentally-ill, Drug Addict, Criminal</td>
<td>Less compassion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>Lazy, Idle</td>
<td>Microaggressions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Undervalued

**Figure 8:** Building Blocks of the “homeless identity”

**Building Block Two: The Homeless= Threat.**

Homelessness in the U.S. is criminalized and pathologized (Finley, 2003; Hellegers, 2011; Mathieu, 1993). News often fosters the image of ‘the homeless’ as mentally ill (Min,
Mathieu (1993) explains how these pathologizing discourses serve to distract public attention from crucial discussions on homelessness:

[…] during the 1980s, the New York City government publicly and politically linked homelessness with mental illness, a linkage frequently reinforced by the press. This medicalization was used to divert attention from the socioeconomic roots of the problem and to justify the removal of homeless people from public spaces (p. 170).

In pathologizing the houseless, her/his human dignity is neglected (Finley, 2003).

Furthermore, Hellegers (2011) argues that “[f]or the past three decades, the emphasis on the individual pathologies of homeless people has provided a dose of rhetorical Prozac to middle- and working-class people in the United States” (p. 5). The government rhetorical Prozac supported by some media, research, and policies has created an imaginary of the homeless that constitutes the second building block of her/his identity. Thus, the houseless people who suffer from disabilities or illnesses and drug addiction, and those who have a criminal record represent a threat to U.S. society. However, as stated by Mathieu (1993), homelessness has to do with structural causes:

While some homeless people are mentally disabled, the majority are not—they are homeless because they lack sufficiently well-paying jobs and because of a lack of adequate, affordable housing (p. 170).

Ana, a Canadian woman who was labeled as homeless, mentally ill, and a drug addict challenged the relationship between mental illness and substance abuse. She highlighted that a person who is supposedly successful (having a career, an apartment, earning good money) “can find herself alone, helpless, homicidal, hopeless, and suicidal in a short time” (Montgomery et al., 2009, p. 628). Secondly, Ana’s experiences and dominant discourses disclose how people
who do not own property are undervalued and treated without compassion. This critical discourse analysis revealed that disabilities are not a pre-condition to homelessness. On the contrary, a finding was that low economic status and stigmatization influence poor women’s health (Montgomery et al., 2009). Thus, according to Adame and Knudson (Montgomery et al., 2009) creating *dialogical spaces* with those experiencing mental disabilities and homelessness avoids assimilating dominant narratives of their realities. Critical inquiry studies that open spaces for self-representation may be an initial step towards avoiding silencing and misrepresentation.

When people experience multiple realities, e.g. being houseless and experiencing a mental or physical disability, they simultaneously experience multiple forms of oppression. Some health service providers discriminate against people due to their houseless status without considering their mental health situation (Cruz, 2011; Skosireva, O’Campo, Zerger, Chambers, Gapka, & Stergiopoulou, 2014).

**Building Block Three: The homelessness = A lifestyle.**

A generalized common-sense idea that homelessness is a lifestyle is another building stone to ‘the homeless identity’. Neoliberal discourses position citizens as responsible for their homelessness instead of analyzing the systemic structures that generate the situation (Rogers & Marshall, 2012). Rogers and Marshall (2012) analyzed how these neoliberal discourses were reproduced or contested in the self-representations of Canadian youth and adults in memoirs and multimedia zines. This post-structural discourse analysis argued that cultural texts like the memoirs *The Glass Castle* (2006) and *Tweak: Growing up on Methamphetamines* (2009) reified the neoliberal notions that homelessness is the result of individual choice. Simultaneously the 1990’s zine publication *Another Slice* collected youth’s literary and journalist accounts that disrupted these neoliberal notions. The writers used satire to ‘provide counterdiscursive claims’
about systemic social inequities like the lack of affordable housing. The overlap of these discourses on homelessness reflects the complexity of the phenomena and the tensions between individual and systemic responsibilities (Fopp, 2009; Rogers & Marshall, 2012; Campbell and Reeves as cited in Min, 1999).

These three building blocks—‘immoral and deviant’, ‘threat’, and lifestyle—support the idea that “the homeless identity” does not exist per se, but it is an “amalgam of stereotypes” that influence not only public perceptions of those who cannot afford a house but the sense of ‘selves’ of those experiencing this condition (McCarthy, 2013). In categorizing and framing the houseless with a fixed label, the “white man status” prevails as a universal truth (Pascale in McCarthy, 2013), i.e. the imagined norm against whom all others are constructed.

For English researchers, homelessness is not merely concerned with lack of access to a physical space, but it is a much more complex “multidimensional” reality (Somerville, 1992; Somerville, 2013; Watson & Austerberry, 1986). As argued by Somerville (2013):

It [homelessness] involves deprivation across a number of different dimensions—physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose) (p. 384)

Therefore, every building block that intends to portray who the houseless are offers a reductionist perspective and a limited understanding of the causes of homelessness, the subjectivity of the houseless, and the houseless’ process of identity formation.

In this section, I discussed how definitions of home may illuminate the meaning of homelessness and the ideologies and societal values informing U.S. citizens’ sense of nationalism. I have also put into conversation both structural and individual factors that may
influence homelessness to highlight the complexity in counting the houseless and defining homelessness. Finally, I have briefly discussed the pervasive nature of three building blocks that have contributed to the societal construction and taken for granted ‘homeless identity’. In the next section, I introduce some social justice oriented studies that move away from a pathologizing approach and explore housing instability from a macro perspective.

**Homelessness according to Social Justice Researchers**

Researchers like Finley and Finley (1999), Aviles de Bradley (2015), Hellegers (2011), Cruz (2011), Finley (2003), and Diversi and Finley (2010) have studied U.S. urban homelessness from a critical and social justice oriented perspectives. These scholars have used stories and testimonios as tools to center houseless people’s lived experiences and activism. Finley and Finley (1999) used a “storied representation” to allow unhoused youth to use their voices and join conversations with educators and policy makers. In dialoguing with fifteen “travelling” youth from New Orleans, Finley & Finley (1999) highlighted that these youths had been failed by schools, family, welfare, and legal systems. This study raised different questions including the role that assigning labels like Attention Deficit Disorder play in preparing students to be part of the social structure, what school success looks like for students who are more interested in arts than math and science, and the curricular and structural accommodations needed to address students’ learning needs and interests (Finley & Finley, 1999).

Aviles de Bradley (2015) conducted a qualitative study with 6 unaccompanied homeless youth of color aged 15-19 and five adults at two high schools in the Chicago Public school system. The researcher placed the experiences of youth in relation to housing instability in conversation with the McKinney -Vento policy which provides federal and state funding to support unhoused children and youth with food, shelter, and medical care (p. 6). Although the
law is in place, houseless students are still denied access to education for not providing a permanent address or being unable to provide immunization records (Aviles de Bradley, 2015, p. 7). Aviles de Bradley (2015) states that the McKinney-Vento policy needs to be strengthened in terms of the vague language in the appointment of “homeless liaisons”, funding, and accountability systems at federal, state, and school levels (p. 89).

Hellegers (2011) argues that our stories are “our lifelines, the cords that connect us with communities and with ourselves; they are what enable us to thread together the past and the present” (p. 3). In establishing that connection with communities, Hellegers (2011) started collecting houseless women’s stories in 1991, 1996 and continued to do so between 2006 and 2008. Hellegers interviewed more than thirty women including those who had been involved in political and cultural organizing in Seattle in the 1990s. The fifteen women included in the book No Room of her Own. Women’s Stories of Homelessness, Life, Death, and Resistance (2011) share their lived experiences and insights about religion, spirituality, and sexuality; and analyze diverse institutions that had attempted to assist, treat, domesticate, reform, and rehabilitate them (p. 3). Hellegers (2011) emphasized that none of the women interviewed “chose to become homeless but many of them found hope and meaning in working to end poverty, homelessness, and oppression” (p. 187).

Cruz (2011) embarked on an ethnographic study with 35 unhoused youth aged 14-21 who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer in an urban area. In collecting these testimonios, Cruz (2011) positioned herself as a “resistance researcher” following Maria Lugones’ understanding of the role of the researcher “to sense and acknowledge resistance” (p. 548). Cruz (2011) points out that non-reproductive sex tends to be pathologized; therefore, LGBTQ youth are associated with infection and contamination by default and blamed and made
responsible for their own medicalization and poverty. Thus, queer, brown, houseless bodies experience intersectional oppression. However, youth in this study learned the literacy of the street and reanimated their agency through small actions of resistance that challenged the inscriptions of invisibility, expendability, and infection.

For Finley and Diversi, (2010) the dominant blaming perspective when referring to “the homeless”, is dehumanizing and hinders dialogue and actions “to address the systemic and ideological roots of homelessness” (p. 9). As acknowledged by Finley and Diversi (2010), activists and some of the youth with whom they have worked contest the use of the derogatory term “homeless” and prefer to use the term “houseless”. Similarly, in my own study Lawrence (pseudonym) self-identified as houseless and re-signified the meaning of home.

These scholars’ social justice and resistance research has used stories to center-stage the voices of unhoused youth and women; verbalizing and conceptualizing their critical, political, and ethical stances; and critiquing the neoliberal oppressive economic system that maintains homelessness while establishing honest relationships with their participants.

This brief discussion about different research approaches to explore homelessness reflects the political implications of the focus, discourses used, practices, and voices or silences present in a study. As argued by Shlay & Rossi (1992), a researcher may be an advocate for a variety of reasons. For instance, in portraying the houseless as either ‘deviant’ or ‘worthy’ the advocate is creating a language and generating understandings that may continue to demonize or sanctify “the homeless”.

Who’s to blame? Structural and Individual Causes of Homelessness

Homelessness should not merely be understood as an individual agency issue. Homelessness is the result of the convergence of many macro and micro level dynamics or what
O’Flaherty (Quigley & Raphael, 2002) calls “a conjunction of unfortunate circumstances” (p. 510). Structural factors may be defined as “economic and societal issues that affect opportunities and social environments for individuals” (Gaetz, S., et al., 2013, p. 13). Some of the structural causes of homelessness in both rural and urban areas include the housing market dynamics – lack of affordable housing, policy shifts, and inadequate income (Axelson & Dail, 1988; Butler, 1994; Hill, 1991; Lee et al., 2010; Hellegers, 2001; Mathieu, 1993; Moore, 2007; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010; O’Flaherty in Quigley & Raphael, 2002; Quigley & Raphael, 2002; Shlay & Rossi, 1992), economic restructuring & labor market- lack of job opportunities or “cyclical unemployment” (Hill, 1991; Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Burt, et. al., 2001; Moore, 2007; Lee, et. al, 2010, Wrigth, 1993); concentrated ownership of property (Kerbo in Wright, 1993); uneven changes in technology (Wright, 1993), and deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill (Hill, 1991; Rosenheck, 1994; Quigley & Raphael, 2002;); among others.

These structural changes threaten the quality of life of people forced into living this circumstance. For instance, “[t]he deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, particularly, had failed to provide adequate community supports for patients discharged from state mental hospitals [in the 1980’s]” (Rosenheck, 1994, p. 1885). Besides, these structural shifts in government policies “help generate personal vulnerabilities” and exacerbate their consequences (Institute of medicine as cited in Hill, 1991; Lee et al., 2010; Growan; Greenberg & Rosenheck as cited in Lee et. al., 2010). O’Flaherty (Lee et al, 2010) argues it is an “unfortunate circumstance” that the government is lacking the political will to re-evaluate housing policies, the job market, and medical services.
Causes of homelessness that focus on the individual vary according to age, gender, individual experiences, and socio-economic status. Some of these influential factors include substance abuse (Hill, 1991; Lee, et. al, 2010; Gaetz, 2013; Bassuck & Rosenberg, Risher & Breakey, Goodman et al., Milburn & D’Ercole, Mills & Ota in Thrasher & Mowbray 1995; Moore, 2007), domestic violence, in the case of women particularly (Hill, 1991; Lee, et. al, 2010; Bassuk et al., Crane et al, Jasinki et al, Shinn et al in Lee et al. 2010; Wilson, Chin et al., in Speirs, 2013; Home in Zufferey, 2011; Bassuk et. al., in Lewinston, 2014); institutional experiences (Lee, et. al, 2010); early exposure to physical or sexual abuse, family conflict, or neglect (Moore, 2007; Koegel et al.; Tylet, Yoder in Lee et. al., 2010); mental illnesses (Bassuk et al., Crane et al, Jasinki et al, Shinn et al in Lee et al. 2010); death of a spouse (Bassuk et al., Crane et al, Jasinki et al, Shinn et al in Lee et al. 2010); divorce; and buffering factors (Lee et al., 2010).

As previously argued, nationalist ideologies influence the conceptions of home and homelessness, even with supposed “objective” social science researchers. The emphasis of psychological researchers, for instance, on individual responsibility for homelessness “is consistent with a traditionally strong support in the United States for ideologies grounded in liberalism” (Lewis as cited in Wright 1993). However, despite the varied range of individual vulnerabilities that may lead to homelessness, Quigley and Raphael (2002) argue that “straightforward conditions in US housing markets- not social pathologies, drug usage, or deficiencies in mental health treatments- are largely responsible for variations in rates of homelessness” (pp. 324- 325). Thus, political values and ideologies inform research on homelessness.
The body of work that has emphasized that “the homeless” are responsible for their fate, has informed the rhetoric of the old vs. the new homeless (Axelson & Dail, 1988; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). The category of the ‘new homeless’ historically evolved as circumstances generated new conditions of poverty. For instance, in the 1920’s the new homeless were displaced families (Axelson & Dail, 1988). The old homeless were homogeneous “largely white, male, single, and beyond middle age” (Swanstom; Hoch & Slayton; Cohen & Skolovsky in Shaly & Rossi, 1992). According to Shlay & Rossi (1992) the new homeless in the nineties were comprised of diverse women, children, and families. Although there is not a clear-cut demarcation about who is considered ‘new’ or ‘old,’ people experiencing homelessness, there is a wide range of studies that account for the varied definitions and types of homelessness. For example, research that focuses on adults has multiple subcategories like: men, women, single parent, elders, veterans, people who experience emotional or psychological health problems, among others. There is also a body of research focusing on children, youth, and families.

The diversity in populations who experience homelessness is accompanied by a different set of terms determined by governmental and nongovernmental, national, and international organizations like National Alliance to End Homelessness, U.S. Census Bureau, National Coalition for the Homeless, and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, among others. Among the terms used to refer to homelessness and its typology appear: Continuums of Care (CoC), Chronically Homeless People in Families, Chronically Homeless Individuals, People in Families with Children, Sheltered Homeless People, Unaccompanied Youth (under
18), Unaccompanied Youth (18-24), and Unsheltered Homeless People\(^8\), among others. These multiple categories and their wide range of definitions as well as the individual and structural factors that may influence homelessness complicate the rhetoric that defines the ‘new’ homeless in the U.S. in the twenty first century. This rhetoric may be further debated when the assumption that there is ‘one homeless identity’ that portrays the experiences of ALL the people living this circumstance is challenged by multiple stories and voices.

Psychological and sociological studies on housing instability that emphasize the individual is responsible of her/his fate as houseless partially contribute to building a deviant and confining identity for the houseless. Thus, in the following section, I argue “the homeless identity” is the result of societally constructed ‘building blocks’ which emanate from discourses reinforced in media, policies, and research. Interrogating these building blocks may help us continue exploring the politics of identity formation, societal stigma, U.S. values, and the treatment towards the houseless.

**Rural homelessness: The Shadow of Urban Homelessness?**

The substantial body of research on urban homelessness places the study of its counterpart rural homelessness in an invisible position. Rural homelessness has been historically overlooked not only in the United States but also in the United Kingdom (First et al., 1994; Patton, 1988; Wright 1998; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006; Cloke et al., 2001; Cloke et al, 2007).

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\(^8\) Key terms used in “The 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress”. As clarified in this document these definitions may differ from the ones found in Homeless the Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act and in HUD regulations.
Although experiencing homelessness in both urban and rural places represents challenges in terms of access to affordable housing, analyzing homelessness in rural areas entails understanding the socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics that define it. First, the “rural” is usually portrayed as “a scenic countryside” where values that reify community support would hinder possibilities of envisioning poverty in such areas (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). For other scholars, rural residents value privacy, property, and independence (Lawrence, 1995), to such an extent that they prefer self-help and reliance on relatives or close friends to applying for state or federal support (First et al., 1994; Patton, 1988; Wright, 1998). Similarly, unchallenged constructs of rurality in England are bound up with notions of an idyll, problem-free, and hidden world of peace (Cloke, Widdowfield, & Milbourne, 2000, p. 79). Idealizing rural areas prevents their inhabitants from acknowledging the existence of problematics like homelessness which may remain unexplored and unresolved.

Second, the continuous governmental changes in terms of ‘city-size categories and its designations’ (Wright, 1998) complicate the nature of demographics, policy making, homelessness rates, and the type of social services and federal/state financial aid granted to these regions. For instance, changing labels like farm/nonfarm, rural/urban, nonmetropolitan/metropolitan may overlap in their definitions, but they reflect the changing realities of economy and demography (Wright, 1998).

“[…] the farm population is defined as persons living in rural territories who derived some specified minimum of their income from the sale of agricultural products. The rural category consists of the farm population plus other nonfarm persons residing in nonurban areas. Finally, the nonmetropolitan population refers to all persons outside metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs-) it includes the farm population plus the rural population plus the
populations of small cities and towns. (An MSA is a central city of at least 50,000 plus the surrounding county.)” (Wright, 1998, pp. 178-179).

Thus, addressing poverty issues varies when addressing any of these three designations. The economics of farmers fluctuate with the “vicissitudes of the agricultural markets” (Wright, 1998). Third, “[h]omelessness is experienced differently in particular physical settings” (Moore, 2007, p. 146). Therefore, experiencing homelessness in rural areas represents challenges due to the geographical conditions. In rural areas people have fewer access to shelters and tend to live in public places like: woods, parking lots, highway rest areas, among others (Lawrence, 1995; National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2010; Wright et al., 1998; Wright 1999). Transportation for those who experience housing instability in U.S. rural areas is a major issue (Hilton & Trella, 2014; NAEH, 2010). The public transportation system in rural areas is nonexistent as in urban areas which makes it difficult to move in town or to other towns; furthermore, depending on the season, mobility becomes a greater a challenge. Furthermore, the fact that “federal priorities and programs tend to be awarded in criteria that favor urban areas” (NAEH, 2010, para 7) is a burden that is added to the persistent reality of poverty in rural areas.

Fourth, in the United States, houseless people in rural areas do not fit the national stereotype and are referred to as “the hidden homeless” (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010 para 2), and become invisible due to the scarcity of social services and shelter programs unable to identify, assist, and/or respond to unhoused people’s needs (First et al., 1994; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). Apart from the labels identified for the urban ‘homeless’ in a previous section, some scholars introduce other categories in rural environments like: 'on the street’, ‘quasi-homeless’ (those living in improvised shelter such as tents, cars, or abandoned structures), ‘shelters’ (including those in runaway and abuse shelters together
with overnight shelters), and ‘doubling-up’ (those who, if not living with relatives, would be homeless). [...] 'near- homeless' [...] includes those individuals and families who would be homeless without such entitlements as fuel and rent assistance (Lawrence, 1995, p. 299)

Thus, although the experience of rural and urban homelessness differs in terms of service access, geographical conditions, and visibility/invisibility houseless people in both areas face stigmatization and challenges to secure affordable housing (First et al., 1994; National Coalition for the Homeless [NCH], 2007).

The economic crisis and social changes experienced between 1980 and 1990 affected the fortunes of many U.S. rural people and led to the increase of homelessness in unprecedented ways since the Great Depression (First et al., 1994; Mathieu, 1993). As argued by Patrick J. Leahy, chairman of 1987 Senate Agriculture Committee, between 1981 and 1987 the Reagan administration “killed the funding for federal programs essential to rural economic health [...] overseeing, [in this way] the creation of a new generation of rural poor” (Sinclair, 1987, para 11). The changing economic landscape in these two decades generated farm foreclosures (650,000 reported in 1987), loss of jobs, and failures of businesses (First et al., 1994, p. 98; Wright, 1995). This situation jeopardized the well-being of rural residents and rural homelessness became an unattended reality in the U.S. (First et al., 1994).

Throughout time, the economic trend that has replaced small scale farming by large-scale agribusiness enterprises has influenced, in some degree, the size of farm populations (Wright, 1998). The abandonment of farming led people to join factory labor which was more lucrative (First et al., 1994; Wright, 1998). Rural poverty, usually associated with the one evidenced in
nonmetropolitan areas, involves intact families and is highly overrepresented in the south (Wright, 1995). The NAEH (2010) emphasizes that:

[p]overty is a persistent problem in rural America. The national poverty rate [in 2010 was] 14.5 percent, whereas the poverty rate in rural areas [was] 16.1 percent. Perhaps most staggering is the problem of child poverty. Sixty-four percent of rural counties had high child poverty in 2010 (para 5).

Jensen (NCH, 2007) highlights that in 2015 “15.1 percent of rural Americans were living in poverty compared with 12.5 percent of nonrural Americans” (p. 7). Thus, the homeless rates in rural areas may be higher than in the urban sector (Lawrence as cited in Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). In both urban and rural areas, homelessness is the result of displacement; in the case of the rural areas, it takes the form of farm foreclosures (Wright, 1995).

Two large scale studies conducted (between 19 and 21 counties studied) in rural Ohio reported that economic factors (unemployment, evictions, problems paying rent) were the main cause of homelessness (First et al., 1990; First et al, 1994; Roth & Bean, 1986). First et al. (1990, 1994), for instance, interviewed 919 houseless adults in 21 nonurban areas in Ohio and found that 45 percent reported economic factors were the main reason to become houseless, 30 percent alluded to family problems, and 5.1 percent indicated they were unhoused due to alcohol or drug problems. Therefore, the severity of the economic crisis- agricultural economic decline and uneven transformation of the rural labor force- as well as a lack of affordable housing represent the main causes of homelessness in U.S. rural areas (First et al, 1990; First et al., 1994; Lawrence, 1995; Patton, 1988; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006; Roth & Bean, 1986; Wright, 1998).
In 2017 the lack of affordable housing in the U.S. is “reaching almost epidemic proportions” (National Low Income Housing Coalition [NLIHC], 107, p. iii). Congressman Keith Ellison, U.S. House of Representatives (NLIHC, 2017), states that Congress has failed to address the U.S. affordable housing crisis which “is hitting middle class, poor, rural, urban people of all ethnicities, cultures and faith communities” (p. iii). According to Ellison (NLIHC, 2017), the U.S. has “the resources and solutions to effectively end homelessness and housing poverty” but the government does not have the “political will to do what is right” (p. iii). Under these circumstances in 2017

[a] full-time worker earning the minimum wage needs to work 117 hours per week for all 52 weeks of the year to afford a two-bedroom rental home or 94.5 hours per week for a one-bedroom rental home (NLIHC, 2017, p. 1).

Ellison’s proposed act, *The Common Sense Housing Investment Act (H.R. 948)*, reforms the mortgage interest rate reduction and urges the reinvestment of $241 billion in making rental homes affordable. The historical traces of homelessness, the studies on urban and rural homelessness, and the socio-economic and political reality in the U.S. evidence that the faces of homelessness have been continuously changing. However, when speaking about solutions to homelessness, First et al.’s (1994) conclusion continues to be relevant in the twenty first century “[u]ltimately, success in preventing homelessness in rural areas will depend on eliminating poverty and increasing the amount of affordable housing stock” (p. 106).
Jack- “I used to always think that people are homeless because they didn’t try”

I had a lot of problems with my life and stuff and different problems growing up physically; so, my family, my parents were very important to me. They were always there when needed. I didn’t have everything I wanted, but I had everything I needed. As a kid, I wanted a lot of toys and everything but I did not need them. Not so much anymore but when I was younger yeah. My parents supported me till my early 20s. Then my dad decided “you’re an adult and you’re on your own. No more help at all.” I had my own place for a while and I lived in Franklin for a while. I was married for a couple of years in Franklin and then moved back and lived with my brothers in Lexington. I was single for a while, and then lived with various friends here and there. In Franklin, I did a few different jobs, I worked twice for Burgers for a while. I worked for Castle for a while… let’s see… I worked for another small restaurant. I’ve, I’ve had so many jobs.

When I was in elementary school, my dad only punished me as I needed to be punished but it usually went too far and there was one time I remember, I don’t remember what I did for sure but, my mom and brother trying to put him off me.

When growing up there what did home mean to you?

Safety. Even though my dad would beat me down, he was cool.

How did you become houseless?

hum, I ended up in a mental hospital for about six months and then when I got out I stayed with a friend. And he was up here going to college. Then he decided to drop out of
college and go back to Cleveland where we both worked for a while, where he’s from. He left and now I’m stuck up here in Small City.

Why were you in the hospital for six months?

I’m bipolar. I suffer from barbarian personality and depression, and anxiety. I started having problems when I was in junior high… I think it’s just something I was born with, but they did not really show themselves. I mean as a kid I was having issues but nothing major, until junior high they really started to come out. I don’t like meeting with people at all. It takes me a lot to get comfortable with someone who stays, even talk to you like this makes me really nervous.

Oh, I am so sorry. My apologies about that. I appreciate the effort you’re making Jack for being here sat down and talking to me. If you feel at any point you wanna stop just let me know. We can do it. The important thing is that you feel good, okay? Do you want us to stop now?

No. This space is like my therapy now.

Thank you once more for this dialogue. Let us continue. How did you hear about this shelter?

I was called by PATH Specialists. I can’t remember what the acronym meant. They started writing me things from the time I got out of the hospital. One of the specialists helped me find a lot of resources here in Small City. Since I am here, at the shelter, I don’t talk to most of my friends and family. I talk to my mom and there’s a couple of friends that have tried to contact me that I talk to but not much. Actually, just pretty much my mom and one friend. I don’t want them to know about my situation. I don’t talk to most of my friends just cause I’m kind of ashamed. My mom knows I am in the shelter. She’s just happy I have somewhere to live. And what are your plans now?
I’m trying to get on disability but that can take up to two years unfortunately. I can’t work. There’s a… a sclerosis on my back and knee problems. The only thing I worry about is medications. The Chase clinic provided medications for a while. Now, I’m still trying to figure out what to do again.

*What do you think has been one of the lessons you have learnt from experiencing homelessness?*

Patience to handle the people in the house. And boldness and gratitude. I’m so happy to have a roof over my head instead of sleeping in a park.

*You previously said that you felt ‘ashamed’ of being called ‘homeless’, right? Why do you feel ashamed?*

Because it means that I’m a failure to society, to friends and family.

*What else is the term homeless associated with by the community, friends, family?*

I used to always think that people are homeless because they didn’t try. You know… they didn’t go out and try to get a job or… and I know how it is now. I’m trying to get a job and I’m trying to get assistance but it’s just taking forever.

*And how did your perception change? What do you think now?*

It’s just that people may be at hard times and this place can help people get back on their feet. So, it’s a good place.

*What would you replace the term homeless with?*

I, the term I use is ‘transitional’. I looked down in a dictionary and I think this shelter is like a temporary place. It is like you past through and stop by for a little while.

*What do we, as a community, still need to understand about homelessness?*

Homelessness is just not a habit since people are trying to get back on their feet.
What has constituted my theoretical niche for three years of self-reflexive and critical thinking? In 2013, as a Colombian critical EFL scholar and learner, I entered a U.S. academic environment where Latinx scholars are not widely represented. My mindbodyspirit was in the search of a space where I could embrace the complexity of my humanity and my philosophy of life. Taking a course with Chicana/Latina scholar Linda Heidenreich in 2015 allowed me to reconnect with Gloria Anzaldúa at a different level and introduced me into a wide range of unapologetic and community driven Chicana/Latina scholars. In listening to their voices, I started re-connecting to my own. Chicana/Latina feminism has been my niche to develop understandings about myself, to theorize, and to re-imagine methodological paths.

In this direction, the north-east, I offer a brief historical account of Chicana Feminism and discuss how this framework offers tools to address analysis on identity politics. Following this discussion, I introduce Sandoval’s (2000) ‘methodology of the oppressed’ and Gaspar de Alba’s (2014) ‘framing’ theory as specific tools to deconstruct the notion of “the homeless identity” and to envision an activist methodology to decolonize the self as both researcher and researched. Indigenous principles/values like interconnectedness, reciprocity, and relationality (Brayboy, 2005) are intricately connected to the ways in which I position myself, develop theoretical and methodological understandings, and act. I discuss some of these principles I take as values in an attempt to build bridges between Chicana/Latina feminism and Indigenous ways of knowing and living.
Chicana Feminism: Origins

In the 1970s Chicano feminism emerged as an ideological and political tool of resistance against the oppressive discourses and practices within the Chicano civil rights movement as well as the dominant Euro-American culture. Informed by a new mestiza consciousness, the birth of Chicano feminism- ‘a colony within a colony’ (Rowbotham in García, 1989)-opposed Chicano cultural nationalist ideologies grounded in sexism and patriarchy (García, 1989; García 1997; Vidal in García, 1997; Orozco, 1984; Nieto in García, 1989). Although Chicano cultural nationalism or Chicanismo ‘advocated an ideology and spirit of active resistance within Mexican-American communities throughout the United States” (García, 1997, p. 3), it failed women by constraining their agency and exerting control on their bodies, minds, and spirits. Chicano’s glorification and romanticization of the Chicano family (García 1997) where a woman was expected to be “submissive, faithful, devoted, and respectful to her husband” (Rincón in García, 1997, p. 25) positioned Chicana women as second-class citizens.

Chicano male oppression (Vidal, in García 1997; del Castillo in García, 1997) motivated Chicanas to question “machismo, discrimination in education, the double standard, the role of the Catholic church, and all the backward ideology designed to keep women subjugated” (Vidal in García 1997, p. 21). Challenging Chicano movement’s pre-established values turned Chicana feminists into a threat for the Chicano movement. Chicanos argued Chicana feminists were destroying the family (Orozco, 1984). With such a harsh critique, “feminism has been suppressed and feminists repressed” within Chicano communities (Orozco, 1984). Chicana’s critique of limiting traditional female roles, imposed upon them by church and Chicano communities, represented an initial step in reclaiming their agency.
In the first part of the twentieth century women writing in Mexican feminist journals (La Mujer Moderna, 1915-1919), and participating in different organizations and groups (Mexican Y.W.C.A, the Liga Feminista and the Asociación Panamericana) continued to fight against women’s discrimination (Cotera as cited in García 1997). In 1959 these struggles allowed Mexican American women to vote for the first time (Cotera as cited in García, 1997). Thus, Chicana feminists built on the work of these Chicana and Mexicana community organizers. These earlier Chicanas and Mexicanas’ active participation in politics and community organizing benefited the Chicana community in the fields of education, journalism, politics, and labor (Cotera as cited in García, 1997). However, Chicana feminists continued struggling to raise their political voices when fighting for equal participation in social and political movements within the Chicano community. In the first national conference of Raza women held in Houston Texas in 1971 women demanded the right to have control over their bodies and improve their status as women within the larger movement (Vidal in García, 1997; Nieto Gómez in García, 1989). Likewise, they claimed “[c]hicana motherhood should not preclude educational, political, social and economic advancement” (Vidal in García, 1997, p. 21). Ultimately, Chicana feminists’ battles against sexist oppression within the Chicano movement developed a new mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2012).

The new mestiza consciousness aligned with the efforts of diverse third world internally colonized women to fight for social justice locally and globally. Chicanas were not ‘late-comers’ to the field of feminism (Cotera, 2015). This Bridge was not the first manifestation of the participation of Chicanas in feminist conceptualization (Cotera, 2015). Since the 1960s Chicanas had been negotiating with white feminists (Cotera, 2015). The 1970s U.S. third world feminist movements conceptualized feminism and oppositional activity differently from the U.S. white
feminists (Sandoval, 2000). White middle-class North American feminist movements have been criticized for lacking unified efforts to fight against multiple forms of oppression that affect minorities (Nieto Gómez in García, 1997; Cotera in García, 1997; Saldivar-Hull, 1991). For instance, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century white women’s movement in gaining the right to vote excluded minority and illiterate women (Cotera in García 1997). For Saldivar-Hull (1991) “feminism as practiced by women of the hegemonic culture oppresses and exploits the Chicana in both subtle and obvious ways” (pp.2-3). Furthermore, Chicana feminists alongside white, black, and Asian American shared common grounds of struggle to end multidimensional forms of oppression rooted in sexism and racism (Cheng, Chow, Hooks cited by García 1989; Nieto Gómez in García, 1997). Third world women moved forward feminist agendas that sought equity within their communities by addressing issues of class, race, sex, and gender.

Since the 1960s U.S. Third World women and Chicana feminists have developed a politics of resistance and opposition to multiple systems of oppression informed by a new mode of consciousness. Chicana feminists have explored the complications and intersections of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy (Saldivar-Hull, 1991) informed by differential consciousness. They embraced U.S. third world feminism as “a model for oppositional political activity […] that can be generated and coordinated by those classes self-consciously seeking affective liberatory stances in relation to the dominant social order” (Sandoval, 2000, pp. 43-44). This movement represented a coalition of third world women who embodied oppression in diverse ways (Longeaux in García 1997; Sandoval, 2000). Third world women refused to be silenced by a hegemonic feminist movement that denied, permitted, and produced differences (Sandoval, 1991). However, in some ways US third world feminism also builds liberal, Marxist, radical/cultural, and socialist feminisms, to propose a fifth dynamic called differential
consciousness (Sandoval, 2000). This new form of consciousness challenges the rigidity and “mutually exclusive” nature of hegemonic feminist waves.

**Indigenous Epistemologies: Research as a Ritual and a political act**

Indigenous blood runs through the veins of Mestizas(os). Colonizing processes were devastating for Indigenous peoples worldwide. Our ancestors were unrooted from their lands, some of their cultural values (languages, traditions, beliefs, deities), their sense of self and their value as human beings. Being intergenerational and historical trauma a fact (Burstow, 2003; Denham, 2008), Chicanas/Latinas like Anzaldúa have allowed us to explore ways to go back to our Indigenous roots to reclaim ownership of our mindbodyspirits, re-signify our histories and stories, and heal. Indigenous communities and Chicanas/Latinas have embarked on actions to decolonize *the mindbodyspirits* (Anzaldúa, 1980; Brayboy, 2005; Lara & Facio, 2014; Saavedra and Nymark, 2008; Sendejo, 2014; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous and Chicana/Latina scholars have modeled ways to decolonize research (Cordova, 2007; Kovach, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Smith, 2012) and fighting for land and sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Both Indigenous peoples and Chicanas/Latinas centerstage the land, bodies, stories, lived experiences, and communities as sites of knowledge, struggle, and resilience. Chief Joseph (as cited in McLuhan in Wilson, 2008) emphasizes that “[t]he measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same” (p. 60). Indigenous and Chicana/Latina’s communities’ values inform their research agendas.

For Indigenous scholars, for instance, research is a ceremony (Wilson, 2008), a site and place of wisdom (Basso, 1996), and a respectful, relational, and reciprocal process (Wilson, 2008). From an Indigenous perspective, processes are more important than outcomes because they “are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate” which are key steps
towards self-determination (Smith, 2012, p. 130). Smith’s (2012) research agenda, for example, includes self-determination as the core element around which decolonization, survival, healing, mobilization, and transformation take place. In Smith’s (2012) words, this type of research embeds “a social justice agenda which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains” (p. 120). This research agenda, in which communities and the ‘self’ are central, infuse social justice practices where power, as defined by Brayboy (2006), resides in every individual; therefore, it cannot be taken or given.

Creation

I know nothing

Of great mysteries

Know less of creation

I do know

That the farther backward

In time that I travel

The more grandmothers

And the farther the forward

The more grandchildren

I am obligated to both

(Lee Maracle in Graveline, 1998, p. 59)

The land, the people, stories, bodies…these are core elements in Indigenous ways of living. Indigenous epistemologies offer the possibility to non-Indigenous scholars immersed in western academic environments to reclaim the right to feel whole, to find a voice, and embark on a journey of self-discovery, reconnection, and healing. Critical Indigenous researchers use
‘multigenerational’ and ‘transdirectional’ models of self in relation that account for their responsibility to and interconnectedness with others (family, community, the world) and their welfare (Hodgson & Dion Stout in Graveline, 1998).

As reflected in the poem *Creation*, an understanding of the bonds that trespass the notions of time and space enables a person to find herself/himself in relation. Unless that ‘spiritual core’ (Forbes in Graveline, 1998) or understanding of bonds is developed, even the most knowledgeable individual may use their skills to hurt others. In Forbes’ words (Graveline, 1998) “knowledge without the spiritual core is a very dangerous thing” (p. 59).

In decolonizing processes of both Chicana Feminists and Indigenous scholars, land, mindbodyspirit, interconnectedness, healing, and communities are core values. Joining these decolonizing efforts, new mestiza (o)/Latina (o) and/or other non-Indigenous scholars embrace these values as a unifying force in times when inquiring “what does it mean to be a human being?” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, Vinay Lal, and Grace Lee Bogs in Dirlik, 2006) becomes a complex endeavor. Both Chicana feminists and Indigenous scholars have proposed alternative research approaches and epistemologies to avoid being complicit with neocolonial western research practices that provoke fragmentation.

Despite various attempts of critical qualitative inquiry and critical ethnography to mobilize research agendas towards more tangible in-action and social justice oriented methodologies, the critiques of these fields are that they still rely on representation, objectification, and positionality (Noblit, et. al., 2004). In approaching the field of critical ethnography, I respect, value, and am thankful for the knowledge, reflections, and the evolution of ethnography since its origins. However, the current turmoil of hatred and inequities in which multiple societies around the world are immersed urge us to imagine alternative ways to redeem
the history of oppressive traces of research, and continue to create spaces of dialogue to trespass geospatial locations or hierarchical categorizations that divide humanity.

Western research continues to be a colonizing/colonized practice. Scholars like Smith (2012) illustrate the multiple ways in which those colonization practices occur within Indigenous communities. For instance, the western concept of knowing leads academics to classify, categorize, describe, and dissect nature, animals, and human bodies. Colonizing research agendas ranked Indigenous communities, colonized their minds by neglecting their traditional ways of knowing, and controlled and exterminated their bodies through ecological imperialism (Smith, 2012). For Indigenous communities, survival “has entailed survival from the effects of a sustained war with the colonizers” (Smith, 2012, p. 111). Within the practices of survival, the generation of Indigenous research agendas is one more step towards decolonizing western ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Decolonizing processes of Indigenous communities included reimagining research. The research agenda presented by Smith (2012) includes self-determination as the core element around which decolonization, survival, healing, mobilization, and transformation may take place. In Smith’s (2012) words, this type of research embeds “a social justice agenda which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains” (p. 120). This research agenda in which communities and the ‘self’ are central are infused with social justice practices that include a sense of responsibility, respect, and reciprocity.

Indigenous notions of self-determination, interconnectedness, community solidarity, empowerment, and healing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2012) constitute core pillars to sustain a decolonizing/decolonized research agenda geared towards avoiding fragmentation and
dehumanization of the ‘self’. As argued by Denzin & Lincoln (2008), Native American and Chicana Feminism are two of the epistemologies that “embody a critical politics of representation that is embedded in the rituals of Indigenous communities” (Denzin & Lincoln in Denzin et. al., 2008, p. 3). Therefore, non-Indigenous critical scholars committed to decolonizing the ‘self’, decolonizing methodologies, auto-conocimiento, solidary work with communities, social justice, and equity struggles are invited to listen to, learn from, and honor Indigenous epistemologies. Thus, the journey I have embarked on is conducive to envisioning methodologies that decolonize research, the researcher, and the researched.

**Identity Politics: Towards a Construction of the Self**

When you take a person and divide her up, you disempower her. She’s no longer a threat.

My whole struggle in writing, in this anticolonial struggle, has been to… put us back together again. To connect up the body with the soul and the mind with the spirit (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 11).

Identity politics is a complex notion conceptually addressed from multiple perspectives with different political agendas. Scholars whose posture may align with Marxist or neo-Marxist views, see class inequality as “the only real source of exploitation and oppression” (Berstein, 2005, p. 49) but do not see class as an identity (Berstein, 2005; Burgmann as cited in Pritchett, 2005). Thus, for these scholars, identity politics and class politics are not elements of the same equation, i.e. they do not make part of the same political practice (Bernstein, 2005). In contrast to this logic, the social movements that emerged in the 1960’s and 1970’s centered the relationship between culture and identity (its elaboration, expression, or affirmation) as part of the agenda of identity politics (Bernstein, 2005; Kauffman, 1990; Princhett, 2005). Social movements politicized “sexuality, interpersonal relations, lifestyle and culture” (Kauffman, 1990, p. 67).
Some critics argued that the essentialism of identity politics, i.e. the grouping of individuals around narrow categories and the belief that people are born with pre-determined universalized traits, “precludes the articulation of a universal vision for social change” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 51). However, Martin Alcoff and Keating (as cited in Moraga, 2016) respond to this criticism about the homogeneous and separatist nature of identity politics by arguing that identity discussions that account for racial, class, and sexual oppression are key in the political work of collectives like Combahee River (Moraga, 2016). Furthermore, “claiming essentialist differences is a strategic maneuver made by activists rather than an ontological position” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 51).

While identity politics will continue to be a contested terrain, Anzaldúa (2000) acknowledged the tensions between social constructionist and essentialists views that have characterized identity politics discussions. Anzaldúa (Trujillo, 1998) herself struggled with “naming without fragmenting, without excluding” (p. 266). Although, she named herself as a “survival tactic” to avoid being “stepped on” (Anzaldúa, 2000), she expressed the urgent need to envision possibilities to rethink identity beyond the confining nature of “identity boxes” and embrace the self “in more global-spiritual terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 561). Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002) wondered:

How can you step outside your ethnic and other labels while cleaving to your root identity? Your identity has roots you share with all people and other beings-spirit, feeling, and body make up a greater identity category. The body is rooted in the earth, la tierra itself. You meet ensoulment in trees, in woods, in streams. The roots del árbol de la vida of all planetary beings are nature, soul, body (p. 560).
Anzaldúa (2000) states identity construction is a collaborative effort, but at the same time she offers theoretical constructs for the individual to name and reinvent her/himself. As mentioned in the epigraph of this section, when a person’s humanity is divided by assigning constraining labels, s/he is disempowered and no longer a threat (Anzaldúa, 2000). Throughout her life, Anzaldúa used her own experiences and went back to her Indigenous roots to introduce concepts that portray the intricacy and complexity of identity formation. Thus, Anzaldúa theorized about identity using myths and metaphors like: borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987); la conciencia de la mestiza [new mestiza consciousness] (Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa, 2009); “making face”, i.e. construction of one’s identity (Anzaldúa, 1990); nos/ostras (Anzaldúa, 2000; Anzaldúa, 2015); geography of the selves (Anzaldúa, 2000 interviews; Anzaldúa, 2015); nagual, shapeshifter (Anzaldúa, 2009); Nepantla, the space in between, (Anzaldúa, 2009); new tribalism (Anzaldúa, 2009); and the seven stages of “the path of conocimiento” (el arrebato, nepantla, the Coatlicue state, the call…el compromiso, putting Coyolxauhqui together, the blow up, and shifting realities…spiritual activism) (Anzaldúa, 2002). Some of these constructs will be further discussed in the data analysis section since they inform the process of identity formation and consciousness raising of houseless people.

Anzaldúa’s theorizing on identity as an ongoing process of construction is decolonizing in the sense that she writes from within “suppressed knowledges and marginalized subjectivities” (Martinez as cited in Keating, 2015, p. xxix). Anzaldúa’s theorizing serves as a bridge among people from diverse ethnic backgrounds whose selves have been labeled, stigmatized, fragmented, and displaced. Although Chicana Feminist constructs, including Anzaldúan foundational work, have been widely used by Chicanas/Latinas to analyze their personal, social, cultural, educational, and political locations within a specific context, I find a rich and complex
theorizing that can be used to develop understandings of other minoritized people’s realities and identity construction processes like the unhoused people. I enter the terrains of Chicana/Latina feminism acknowledging the contributions of Chicana/Latina scholars who have elaborated on Anzaldúa’s constructs. I hope the critical analysis and theoretical and methodological elaborations presented in this research broaden the use of Chicana feminist theoretical tools and generate some insights towards tangible ways of decolonizing the self.

**Chicana Feminist Tools: Differential Consciousness and Framing Theory**

Chicana feminism was born as an oppositional ideological tool to confront patriarchal values infused in Chicano social movements and the hegemonic notion of feminism. Chicana efforts to reclaim agency, re-signify the concept of family, and redefine their roles as women led them to look at their colonizing roots. Understanding the ways of oppression instilled by Spanish colonizers in Mexican communities became the road map to analyze the values, archetypes, and figured worlds that determined socio-political relations within Chicano communities. Chicanas challenged these pre-established values and traditions that fragmented, silenced, erased, rejected, and murdered their identities. In order to find their voices and establish the ideologies that characterized Third World and Chicana feminism, the authors of *This Bridge Called my Back* (1980) collected stories, poems, and essays of Indigenous Chicana feminists and other women of color. As one of the most representative Chicana texts, this anthology introduced concepts like ‘theory in the flesh’ (Moraga) and the ‘new mestiza consciousness’ (Anzaldúa).

From the publishing of *This Bridge* in 1980, Chicana feminists have elaborated on these core constructs and have proposed alternative ways of embracing them while seeking a holistic sense of their ‘selves’. In this section, I will explain how Sandoval’s (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* and Gaspar de Alba’s (2014) *[Un]Framing the Bad Woman: Sor Juana, Malinche,*
Coyolxauhqui and other Rebels with a Cause provide tools to understand multiple identity constructions in a convulsed twenty first century U.S. society. These constructs and tools represent an opportunity to decolonize a ‘self’ immersed in neoliberal socio-economic systems that continue to reinforce race, class, sex, and gender exploitation and oppression. Concepts like ‘theory in the flesh’, the new ‘mestiza consciousnesses’, and mindbodyspirit will be utilized throughout this discussion.

Methodology of the Oppressed, as described by Angela Davis, is a “method for emancipation that builds bridges across theoretical chasms and creates strategies for globalizing resistance from below” (Sandoval, 2000, p. xii). Methodology of the Oppressed is a ‘methodology of renewal’ or ‘of social reconstruction’ conducive to developing a ‘self-conscious flexibility of identity and political action’ (Sandoval, 2000, pp. xii, 6). In this sense, this methodology constitutes a guiding ‘cognitive map’ of resistance and coalitional consciousness where love is embraced as a mobilizing force to navigate a post-modern social reality.

Sandoval (2000) acknowledges the premonitory ability of Fredric Jameson to depict the ways in which a new socio-economic and political order - ‘postmodernism’- might affect the subjectivity of twentieth century citizen-subjects. According to Jameson, modernity provided the subject with a “solidity of identity” challenged by a post-modern cultural aesthetic of fragmentation. This new condition inhibits/impedes the citizen-subject from evaluating his/her present situation and putting it into conversation with the past and future (Jameson in Sandoval, 2000). For Jameson (in Sandoval, 2000), the mutation suffered by the modern citizen-subjects living a post-modern condition does not enable them to assume a critical, oppositional, resistant, and ethical stand (pp. 36-37). Jameson positions the subject within a modernist/historic reality or a post-structuralist/postmodernist condition. In the former, there is the certainty of an ‘isolated’
but ‘real’ subject (p. 32), while in the latter, individuals confront the contradiction of considering that the subject never existed.

However, for Sandoval (2000) “the fragmentation or split subjectivity of subjection is the very condition against which a modernist, well-placed citizen subject could coalesce its own sense of wholeness” (p. 33). The silencing, oppression, and at the same time the skills of survival developed by citizen-subjects who move between modern and postmodern conditions make possible the development of a resistant-oppositional consciousness. According to Sandoval (2000), a state of oppositional consciousness requires being aware of and ‘making translucent’ one’s condition of subjection to power (p. 36). Sandoval recognizes that Jameson’s fear of facing a time of ‘democratization of oppression’ is valid (p. 36). Nevertheless, Sandoval (2000) finds this landscape as an opportunity for both the oppressor and the oppressed to generate “new forms of identity, ethics, citizenship, aesthetics, and resistance” (p. 37). This reality entails a transformation in the roles and co-responsibilities of every citizen regardless of social caste in becoming revolutionary agents that generate critical and transformative discourses and practices.

Sandoval’s methodology of the oppressed has its roots in third world feminism. As stated above, U.S. third world feminism is “a model for oppositional political activity and consciousness in the postmodern world” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 43). Sandoval (2000) created a topography of consciousness that includes different modes in which feminist opposition can be manifested. They are: the equal rights form, the revolutionary form, the supremacist form, the separatist form, and the differential form. As argued by Sandoval (2000), the “differential” mode she proposes “enables movement ‘between and among’ [the other four] ideological positionings” (p. 58). Using the differential mode of consciousness requires developing the ability to read a situation of power and adopt an ideological stand to push against it (Sandoval, 2000). Thus, the
methodology of the oppressed is “a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (Sandoval, 200, p.69).

Likewise, methodology of the oppressed becomes a way of “lov[ing] in a decolonizing postmodern, post-empire world” (Wong, Lugones & Collins in Sandoval 2000, p. 83). Sandoval (2000) argues love is central to a liberatory methodology. Love is that liberating force that takes individuals to an abyss, an unlimited space, a no-place where that third middle voice may be present (Barthes in Sandoval, 2000). Love is a revolutionary voice that opposes western narratives that dictate destinies.

Opening the door to a new way of consciousness is opening the door to a metamorphosis. Thus, the methodology of the oppressed provokes a mutation of the individual using five technologies that include La facultad and democratics as a way of loving, transformation, and emancipation. For Sandoval, methodology of the oppressed “comprise[s] a hermeneutic for defining and enacting oppositional social action as a mode of ‘love’ in the postmodern world” (p. 147). Methodology of the oppressed complicates the way we love by challenging binaries and opening possibilities to step on unsettling grounds. Methodology of the oppressed speaks to an identity politics used as a survival tactic; in that sense “identity is thus both disguised and not disguised in a form of differential consciousness that thrives on oscillation” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 145). Understanding the politics of identity construction is challenging if we consider the uniqueness of lived experiences, the level of consciousness reached individually, and the willingness to move away from assumptions and pre-conceived notions of the other.

Gaspar de Alba (2014) speaks to Sandoval’s call to use a mode of differential consciousness and a revolutionary love that invokes a re-evaluation of heteronormativity. She builds on Foucault’s mapping of power in relation to individuals’ identities mediated by social,
interpersonal, and political contexts (p. 72). Historically, power has been garnered by misrepresenting and mystifying the ‘other’ through stereotypes and labels/frames. Daily interactions are subjective practices that are culturally and historically informed. De Alba (2014) annotates the ways our lives and identities are interpreted differ from the way we construct and imagine ourselves; she argues each identity functions like a frame: an interior one that we claim and an exterior one that is imposed upon us (p. 21). For Gaspar de Alba (2014) framing is an act of conspiracy to blame and place guilt on people for something they did not do (p. 18). Imposing external frames on marginalized others upholds societal values that commodify and objectify. These two processes are reified by economic, political, religious, and colonizing processes that widen the range of inequalities and oppression. Framed bodies, are “bodies framed within a particular discourse and patriarchal imperatives, which are capitalist, racist, and imperialist imperatives” (Gaspar de Alba, 2014, p. 18).

Internal frames/labels raise awareness about the technologies of oppression and become a survival tactic. Moraga (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002) asserts “[m]y lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings” (p. 26). Castañeda agrees that stereotypes are “the product of a campaign of ideological manipulation” (Barrera in Heidenreich & Castañeda, 2014, p. 37). Therefore, putting into conversation those interior frames with the external ones is a challenging and threatening enterprise for those who live different gender and racial identities. It may be a similar experience for those who are envisioned as deviant or a problem for societies: disabled, mentally ill, drug addicts, and homeless. The political and societal agendas that impose external labels ignore/blur internal frames through policies,
discourses, and practices that deport bodies, displace bodies, murder bodies, disappear bodies, and silence bodies.

Using labels as a survival tactic illustrates the complexities of being visible/accepted/acknowledged/respected and becoming invisible/muted/torn apart/rejected/non-existent. Anzaldúa experienced the entanglement of naming herself as a survival tactic and feeling the unrest of choosing among labels. Anzaldúa avoided the loss or erasure of her Chicana and Lesbian identities by creating that internal frame. Anzaldúa (Trujillo, 1998) also named herself as a Chicana, tejana, working-class, dyke-feminist poet, writer theorist as a survival tactic while, at the same time, struggling “with naming without fragmenting, without excluding” (p. 266). She states labels like “lesbian” and “homosexual” are iron-cast molds that constrain and control. She argues that “[b]y forcing the label on the writing they [critics] marginalize it” (Trujillo, 1998, p. 265). Despite all her internal frames, Anzaldúa wants to be perceived as an embodied symbol.

Anzaldúa’s discussion of the limiting nature of adjectives speaks to Cordova’s idea that avoiding discourses of victimization is a way of resistance (Trujillo, 1998). If external frames/imposed labels are colonizing, it is imperative to create discursive practices that free both the colonizer and the colonized. This exercise opens the possibility for the former to release the burden of making profit out of every living and non-living source by exploiting on the grounds of race, gender, and/or class. For the latter, liberating discursive practices allow them to reclaim their dignity and humanity. Inviting, instead of condemnatory, discursive practices may allow the construction of unframed identities.

Gaspar de Alba’s (2014) framing theory is a useful tool to deconstruct societally demonized identities. Informing identity politics with the analysis of interior and external frames
helps in the analyzing the responsibility of institutions in both the representation of the other and the policies that permit the others to function as human beings. Sandoval’s methodology of the oppressed and Gaspar de Alba’s framing theory question patriarchal imperatives and permit the re-envisioning of an identity politics that does not fit any imposed frame.

**Use of Chicana/Latina feminist tools to de-colonize the ‘self’**

“An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self; in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the dessert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.”


Entering the world of Chicana feminism as a Colombian new mestiza has meant re-discovering and putting into conversation Mexican-Colombian colonization experiences and values rooted in ancestral Indigenous roots. Raising a new mestiza consciousness in spite of oppressive neoliberal systems has meant claiming ownership of my mindbodyspirit in my roles as educator, researcher, and activist. Chicana voices in the books discussed above and the collection *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s lives* speak to values such as “generosity, mutuality, and interdependence” (Carvajal, 2015). In this sense, differential consciousness, framing theory, and la conciencia de la mestiza may be used to decolonize western research traditions, the researcher’s self, and the researcher’s
relations with study participants. I argue research and researcher’s relationships can be
decolonized when the researcher’s holistic ‘self’ and philosophy of life are welcomed and inform
the research process. Therefore, in this section I will briefly address how Sandoval’s and de
Alba’s theories may contribute to decolonizing the self. I will also share some insights on how
the use of these theories unframe the ‘homeless identity’ and provide a more nuanced portrayal
of what it means to experience homelessness in a U.S. rural context.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have proposed alternative ways to decolonize
research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Cordova, 2007; Kovach, 2012), decolonize the
academy (Facio & Lara, 2014), and to fight for projects that address issues of land and
sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decolonizing research attempts have included avoiding the
Visiting Researcher status by building “authentic collaborations” and leaving aside one’s
research agenda to build relationships and volunteer (Swadener & Mutua, 2008). The decolonial
process embarked on in this paper deals with the ‘self’ while developing collaborations with the
shelter and raising awareness in the community. Decolonizing then is rooted in action.
Decolonizing the ‘self’ is rooted in raising a type of ‘differential consciousness’ (Sandoval,
2000) mobilized by intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and intellectual empathy (Paul &
Elder, ).

But, what does it require to walk into that utopian space? It requires being intellectually
humble to, as Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2008) stated, acknowledge the limitations,
prejudice, and bias of one’s viewpoint. This humility is not submission. On the contrary, it
enables us to be caring and attentive listeners, to be fair and move away from arrogance and
pretentiousness. But, being humble requires being courageous enough to recognize that ideas that
we might consider “dangerous or absurd” may be rationally justified and that our beliefs and
conclusions may be misleading (Paul & Elder, 2008). Thus, intellectual courage involves reflective processes conducive to critically discuss an argument, debate ideas, and make a stand. And yes, we can use our empathic imagination to “reconstruct […] the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own” (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 14).

The initial small actions inspired by these intellectual traits - humility, courage, and empathy - become a loving resisting force that inspires further and more transformational actions. They are the pragmatics through which oppositional/differential consciousness is developed and permit us to decolonize our mindbodyspirits, to ‘be’ and to let others to be. Decolonizing the ‘self’ urges us to self-possess our mind/body/spirits. It moves us to challenge fear and find our strength in self-love and grassroots community organizing. It compels us to disarm our discourses and use them as powerful tools to heal and take action. In this way an in-action loving, resilient, and revolutionary philosophy of life is conducive to create spaces of “being”.

Chicana feminism encourages decolonizing the ‘self’ by finding worth in the existence of the human being and questioning power relations within academic and nonacademic communities. It permits finding one’s voice through writing. Chicana feminism provides the opportunity to use our shared Chicana/Latina values of community, solidarity, and activism to deconstruct the politics of identity construction in the U.S. In this sense, Chicana Feminism, as well as Indigenous epistemologies, contribute to understanding homelessness from a perspective where the human dignity of those experiencing homelessness is recovered.

Homelessness is a structural and political problem that tends to be represented as an individual responsibility. The common sense of homelessness in the US is a too ‘diffuse’, ‘ill-
defined’ (Fiske in Min, 1999), ‘binding’ and ‘misguided’ invention (McCarthy, 2013). Categorizing individuals who do not own a house or have a permanent residence legitimizes differences and naturalizes social injustice “and so, injustice is not questioned, it comes to be understood as the natural state of things” (Thompson as cited in Ressende, 2009, p. 366). Understanding homelessness, embedded in common sense, categorization, and difference, is defined through “the generation and social circulation of meanings, pleasures and values” (Fiske, in Min, 1999, p. 10). The ideology of the American Dream reinforces that circulation of meanings, pleasures, and values. Winslow (2017) argues that the American Dream “fits within one part of a larger universal desire to make sense of other people in a way that allows ordering and categorizing” (p. 132). Thus, ‘the homeless’ identity is the result of a culture that revels in hierarchically categorizing and framing people’s human existence.

Housing instability around the world, including the U.S., is entrenched in metaphors that stigmatize the ‘the homeless identity’. Metaphors on homelessness produce contradictory notions of nationalism and citizenship that motivate intolerant attitudes and behaviors. Discourses that promote a perception of the homeless as a threat to the preservation of national identity motivate citizens’ violent behaviors and outrage (Green, A., 2008, para 1). According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) between 1999 and 2007 “advocates and homeless shelter workers from around the country [US] have received news reports of men, women and even children being harassed, kicked, set on fire, beaten to death, and even decapitated” (NCH, 2008, p. 1). This landscape illustrates how language may be used as a powerful tool for granting or taking away others’ freedom to ‘be’ and express their individuality. Violence and discrimination stray from the ideals of freedom in the construction of the American Dream for U.S. citizens.
Locally, for some Springfield inhabitants, homelessness is a distant reality. I spoke to older people who described homeless people as ‘lazy’ and broken people who deserve to be where they are due to their lack of effort for succeeding in life. Some of the experiences of houseless people include ‘getting the looks’ (Daniel, May, 2015) when walking into a coffee shop. Other voices speak about co-workers dropping them off at the shelter in Small-Town, and expressing “I wouldn’t have imagined it this way. It looks pretty normal” (Sancnite, May 2015). Assumptions about an individual’s lack of agency and stereotypes on those experiencing homelessness are latent in the imaginaries of some Small-Town’s inhabitants. Houseless people are aware of the existence of these assumptions and stereotypes; they constitute another burden when searching for a job or renting a place. Houseless people I have talked to, acknowledge there might be some people who fit the stereotype; however, ‘normal’ citizens, those who are not houseless, do not know the whole story.

As Baldwin’s (Tapia, 2001) epigraph highlights, identities are questioned when they are understood as a menace. The type of menace I have witnessed, as result of pejorative stereotypes used to ‘characterize’ the homeless identity is a menace not only to the physical condition of the houseless but to their emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Moreira and Diversi (2011) question “[w]here is the untheorized visceral experience of everyday discrimination? Possibilities of inclusiveness must be viscerally felt, not simply disembodiedly spoken” (p. 229). To deconstruct the meanings of the societally and institutionally constructed ‘homeless identity,’ it is paramount to account for the ‘visceral experiences’ that portray the nuances of homelessness. This entails listening attentively to the voices of those who have experienced homelessness. It also demands bringing a mindbodyspirit who can relate and develop layers of understanding of the spectrum of homelessness.
Baldwin’s (Tapia, 2001) words reflect the complexities of shaping identities:

“Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self; in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the dessert, through which robes one’s nakedness can always be felt, and sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes [italics added]” (p. 733).

One individual may make use of different identities as survival tactics (like in the case of Anzaldúa and Moraga). This means there is no fixed frame into which a person’s identity fits. Reclaiming the power to feel and discern our naked ‘selves’ is a human right. Chicana feminist tools of differential consciousness (Sandoval, 2000) and interior/external frames (de Alba, 2014) complicate the notions of identity politics just as other traditions do (queer studies, postcolonial studies, post-modernism, critical feminism) by presenting fluid and intersectional views of our post-modern realities. Homeless bodies are framed bodies “that is, bodies framed within a particular discourse and patriarchal imperatives, which are capitalist, racist, and imperialist imperatives” (Gaspar de Alba, 2014, p. 18). I envision using Sandoval’s and de Alba’s theories as activist, embodied and loving practices where the notions of home and nationalism informed by the American Dream are re-envisioned when listening to the voices of those who cannot own/rent a house in the U.S.
Madison-You can’t live your life in the past. Move forward and live for the future.

I’d like to go back to the place where I was born if I could. It was nice. We had a family ranch so that’s a place that I’d like to go back to and visit, I miss… I miss the horses and the cows, and the cleanliness of the farm. I come from… actually my dad’s side of the family is very high society, very wealthy. As to my mom’s side of the family, they’re wealthy too, but my mom isn’t. My mom has a mental disability, so it keeps her from working and striving to move them forward and provide more for us. So, we don’t get no help from no family so it’s kind of like a struggle with my mom. Taking care of all the things that she needs to.

*What do you think is like one of the most vivid memories that you have from your childhood in the farm?*

Feeling the difference between the life styles that I’ve lived. My mom and my real dad divorced when I was young because of the car accident. As to my biological father got in a car accident. I was little and ended up paraplegic and ended up dying and I never knew him so he ended up living all of his life in a wheel chair until he got COPD and died. And like I said it’s two different life styles. When I was on the farm, I was more relaxed. It was nice and clean, it was kept up versus like with my mom life was more about being on the move or shuffling from place to place or whatever so… And the farm was stability. At the farm, I was around good family that I’m sure would protect me and with my mom I was a molested child so memories that I like to go back to is being in the farm with my biological dad’s family and just having the peace.
You were telling me that one the reasons why you’re receiving support from the shelter is because of your experiences as a teenager in one of the places where you lived in...

I’ve been homeless since January 2\textsuperscript{nd} last year. Due to the people that I hang around with, that I associate my life with, have gotten involved in drugs, pretty heavily. Ended a few crimes and that led us to getting kicked out of the place that we were living in. and I’ve been homeless and living in a tent in a cramped tent trailer and whoever we could stay with until we found this shelter. With the shelter, they’ve provided me with a home. I was homeless and then they provided me with a home. And they’re getting me on my feet. I’ve actually been treated fairly well. I’ve gotten housing assistance, they’re gonna help me out with being able to maintain my bills. They’re gonna get me hooked up with the doctor with all my mental status, I guess because I have a disability. I have PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder which was brought on from being a molested child when I was a little girl and ADD, not being able to learn and understand at a level that most people do. I don’t take medicines. I don’t believe in it, I just don’t. They kill you. Yeah, they kill your liver and your kidney. They are not good. Anyway, the shelter and they’re just around to talk to and good when you need them. They help build lives, I guess.

What do you consider are some of the biggest challenges of being homeless?

Knowing where you’re going to get your food from and where you’re going to sleep. I haven’t had to sleep on the streets like most homeless people, in boxes or in alleys. I’ve always made sure that I’ve had a camp trailer that has propane and lights and stuff so like I said it’s more or less, I could make a camp trailer feel like home so…Having to leave my stuff behind, affected me emotionally Oh, Hell yeah! Emotional stress? You put it into that stuff and when it gets taken and stolen man... You can’t really afford to go out and get it again, I lost a lot of stuff

We are very attached to material things
We are. You can’t take them to your grave but, you know, still you got to learn to let go of them some time but yeah. Being homeless, you can’t manage personal items. You can’t carry a luggage rack on your back…

What do you think are some of the lessons you’ve learned from being homeless?

To associate your lives to different people. Find good people to hang out with that are going to support you, instead of leading you down the wrong road in life. My friends, well, used to be friends, they only wanted to be my friends when I had something to give, to put on the table. Otherwise, they are not my friends, and so that’s why I don’t have them anymore.

And now?

I don’t want to have a friend if they only want something from me, you know. They don’t wanna call you up to say “hey, how is your day!” But they want to call you up and be like “hey, can I borrow 20 bucks” or, you know. “Can I get a gallon of milk?” or something like that.

How’d you describe Madison today? The woman that I have in front of me today, compared to who you used to be before experiencing homelessness?

I’m building myself, I’m working on myself. It’s a daily process. There is up and down days. Uh, no I’m still not, with being homeless, I’m still not sure of the place that we are at in. If, we are going to be there for a longer period of time or how long it’s gonna last but being homeless it’s making me see, can’t take life for granted and to have a home, you need a home. To have a life and when you have a home it makes it so much easier to not have the stress like bouncing around, wondering where you’re gonna lay your head and stuff like that so… And maintain my bills, I’m able to maintain my bills too now, so… A little bit more

What would be the message to women who are going through PTSD?

You can’t live your life in the past. Move forward and live for the future.
NORTH- THE PLACE OF INTUITION (METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK)

How can we move beyond colonizing/colonized (disembodied) research practices? What are theoretical and methodological paths already traced to envision possibilities to decolonize?

“Do you know what it means to be in the dark? You’re in complete dark and you’re trying to reach outside and you try to walk and it’s completely black and you don’t know what the ground is like. That is what it’s like. It’s being in a different place. I’ve never been before in the dark, there’s not flash, there’s not flashlight pitch light. You don’t know if someone’s gonna be around the corner, you don’t know if there’s someone in the bushes; you don’t know if there’s a black animal outside. It is like that being in a strange place. Someone just takes a car drives you in the middle of nowhere and drops you off. It’s like driving a car without the headlights. It’s like driving 60 miles away and you don’t know where you’re going.”

(Interview, Samantha, Nov 7, 2014)

After seven months of being placed in the back seat of that car, a new character that seemed to be taking control of Samantha’s life came into the scene. A power invested in me by being the researcher turned me into that driver taking her 60 miles back to painful memories and places. There I was on a winter’s Friday morning in Sojourner’s Alliance. As every Friday, I would come with my heart open and my mind eager to understand the complexities of a life stigmatized by society. Threatened is what homeless represents for some of Moscow inhabitants.

(Analytic Memo, Nov 14, 2014)
Let us dialogue…

For three years my interest has been to explore what homelessness feels like, what it entails, and reveals about Springfield’s values, beliefs, and socio-political reality. For three years, a constant self-reflective process questioning my authority to give others’ voice, to be the driver who takes people to an unstable ground, and to make sure I was not leaving houseless people in the dark in the middle of nowhere permeated my thoughts. Samantha’s words were and continue to be the bell resounding in my mind every time I listen to people’s stories attentively and respectfully. When Samantha shared her testimonio, she had one more request to make: “Can you make my story more scientific? My story is the only thing I own.” Our encounters were negotiated spaces where I took notes of what she wanted me to take note of, where I did not record, where I felt honored to keep deep and private conversations just for us, where I let go information from the printed page. Those spaces are just ours. Being aware of the value one story has for a person’s emotional well-being and being coherent with my philosophy of life including a politics of humility, empathy, and action, I have searched for methodologies that honor lived experiences and allow me to avoid the fragmentation and complicity that ‘rigorous’ colonizing/colonized research and academic environments can engender.

Western qualitative research, increasingly informed by neoliberal agendas, continues being a colonized/colonizing practice and space (Smith, 2012). For instance, researchers are expected to be the saviors and give voice to disempowered individuals; subjectivity is the evil ghost that diminishes the quality of research; ethical issues arise when you relate to your participant; and observing in a detached way constitutes the best way to collect data. This vision of qualitative research is troublesome for approaches like critical ethnography that intend to scrutinize “the hidden agendas, power centers and assumptions that inhibit, repress and
constrain” (Thomas, 1993). In this paper, I introduce a three-year critical ethnographic study on U.S. rural homelessness, grounded in Indigenous and Chicana/Latina Feminist notions of interconnectedness, healing, and activism (Anzaldúa, 2002; Fernandez, 2003; Smith, 2012; Sandoval, 2000). I elaborate how mindbodyspirits (Facio & Lara, 2014) may be decolonized by using an in-action, resilient, and revolutionary love framework when listening to and sharing stories with ‘the homeless’.

In this direction, I firstly, describe how critical theory and interpretive ethnography merged to create a liberatory methodology that would permit re-imagining the world while immersed in chaos and despair. Secondly, I illustrate how research continues to be a colonized/colonizing space and practice, and I describe how twenty first century neocolonial research impacts the agency, voice, and fragmentation of selves in relation (researcher-researched). Thirdly, I explain how Chicana/Latina Feminism and Indigenous methodologies account for notions of interconnectedness, holism, and relationality and how they can be used to decolonize the ‘self’ while being immersed in a critical ethnographic experience. The description of an activist decolonizing/decolonized research (research design) follows this discussion. This chapter ends with a conceptualization about the ethics of collaboration and care and further insights about my positionality.

The Ethnographic Voices: Issues of Agency and Representation

The notion of interconnectedness resurges every time a present condition reminds us of the historical, cultural, social, political, and economic traces that have influenced current states of being. However, ethnography is rooted in colonizing agendas where imaginaries of the ‘other’ emerged in a decontextualized way and there was no claim to interconnectedness (Anzaldúa, 1990; Smith, 2012). Some of the beliefs that guided the nineteenth century ethnographic studies
were “objectivism, monumentalism (accounts that render culture as museum-like display),
timelessness (primitives did not change) and a complicity with imperialism” (Noblit, Flores &
Murillo, 2004). Missionaries, sailors, traders, and colonial administrators are counted as the first
data compilers of colonized peoples (Hall, 2007; Said, 1978; Madison, 2012). The colonizers’
understandings of other cultures were represented through “conversation[s] by the Us (white-
man), for the Us (white-man) about the Them (Native)” (Trinh, 1989; Murillo, 1999). In the
search for more accurate and detailed descriptions of the ‘uncivilized’, ethnologists,
anthropologist, and sociologists like Malinowski in Britain, Boas and Mead in U.S. conducted
long term participant observation field work (Madison, 2012; Rose, 2015).

These initial ethnographic descriptions, analyses, and interpretations reinforced the
demonization of the other due to the cultural differences, beliefs, and values that were
unacknowledged at the time (given that they opposed the colonizers’ goals). One of the main
goals of colonization was the domination of natives’ (the first inhabitants in colonized territories)
mindbodyspirits and the usurpation of land. These facts speak of research as ‘an imperial tool’
and as one of “the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith, 2012, p. 1).
Therefore, in the twenty first century, a neocolonial time, there are debates in relation to the
voices in colonialist ethnographic reports and the roles and responsibilities of informal
(missionaries, foreign visitors) and formal researchers (anthropologists, ethno-methodologists,
sociologists) and colonizers in the writing of a bloody, merciless, silencing, and murderous
history (Anzaldúa, 2012; Rosaldo, 1993; Smith, 2012; Trinh, 1989). Likewise, there are debates
about how little researchers have moved away from the colonial origins of ethnography (Denzin,
Lincoln & Smith, 2008).
Socio-economic and political diachronic changes permitted the mobilization of the first ethnographic attempts into social justice oriented approaches. Critical theories offered that opportunity. The origins of critical ethnography resemble the transnational and cross-cultural dynamics conducive to re-imagining the world. Critical ethnography initially merged philosophical critical theories with the interpretive nature of ethnography (Anderson, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Noblit, Flores & Murillo, 2004; Madison, 2012). On one hand, interpretivists in anthropology were influenced by various traditions including phenomenology, semiotics, and structuralism which supported their deepened discussions about the nature of local knowledge and of negotiated meanings within everyday social life encounters (Anderson, 1989). On the other hand, qualitative sociologists used symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology to respond to the pervasive influence of positivism in the field and to legitimate ethnographic methods (Anderson, 1989). Anthropologists’ and sociologists’ focus on human agency and local knowledge opened the possibility to conduct studies that critiqued and analyzed, for instance, the role of American schooling in social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis in Anderson, 1989). As argued by Anderson (1989) this type of study started to complicate the relationship among human agency, power, and social structures.

The origin, use, and growth of critical ethnography have been permeated by socio-economic and political realities occurring in different time frames in Germany, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom. Firstly, the aftermath of World War I defied German Marxist scholars to mobilize their research agendas and respond to the urgent need of reinterpreting the world (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). The Nazis’ threat to the lives of Marxist critical thinkers like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcus forced them to migrate to a U.S. context where the American rhetoric of egalitarianism and the reality of racial and class discrimination
were contradictory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). The U.S. and Germany’s (among other countries impacted by the war) oppressive political, economic, and social realities shaped criticality of ethnography in the twentieth century.

Secondly, the Chicago School founded in the U.S. in the 1920’s incorporated the use of ethnography focused on U.S. urban settings. The Chicago school was “both an ideological reaction to the growing prominence of positivism and an intellectual response to the neglected underclass of Chicago’s ‘socially disorganized’ urban areas” (Thomas, 1993, p. 11). As stated by Thomas (1993) and Glesne (2011), ethnographic deviance studies included Anderson’s critical analysis of hobos (1923), Wirth’s study of ‘transition in ethnic ghettos’ (1928), Zorbaugh’s focus on ‘slums’ (1929), and Cressey’s research on ‘taxi-hall dancers’ (1932). Some other scholars focused their studies on urban landscapes (Park), pragmatism (Mead and Dewey), and symbolic interactionism (Bloomer and Becker) (Noblit, et.al.2004, Madison, 2012). Some of the contributions of this group of scholars at the time were: shifting the location where conventional ethnographic studies were conducted, ‘subverting the traditional value-laden view of cultural difference’ (Thomas, 1993, p. 11), and challenging conventional worldviews using the perspectives of marginalized communities (Noblit, et. at., 2004).

With the rise of functionalism in the 1940’s, a post- World War II socio-political environment, and the resurgence of positivism as ‘grand theory’ in the 1960’s, the creation of the “Chicago irregulars” reinvigorated and re-signified the conventional ontological and epistemological views of critical ethnography (Thomas, 1993). Many U.S. academicians adopted critical theory as a ‘method’ to free academic work from capitalist structures of domination (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Some of the evolving traditions of criticality include neo-marxism (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcus), genealogies (Foucault), post-structural deconstruction
Thirdly, some scholars attribute initial critical ethnographic studies to the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, UK (Carspecken as cited in Massey & Walford, 1999), a tradition that was later adopted by U.S. scholars. Studies conducted by theorists and historians at the time provided a ‘template’ for critical qualitative research (Carspecken as cited in Massey & Walford, 1999). *Learning to Labour* by Willis (1977), *Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity* by McRobbie (1978), and *Contradictions in Teacher Education and Society: A Critical Analysis* by Ginsburg (1988) have become iconic reference studies in the field of qualitative educational research and cultural studies. These studies created a ‘template’ that included four components: the investigation of marginalized populations, mainly in educational settings; the re-construction of the culture of the population studied; the interpretation of the emergent cultural themes acknowledging the agency of the participants to resist dominant cultural definitions and dominant social relations; and the examination of the role played by the re-constructed culture in social reproduction (Carspecken in Massey & Walford, 1999). According to Carspecken (Massey & Walford, 1999) this template was strong on value orientation and a neo Marxist view of society (realist ontology) but was short on epistemology and methodology.

Having roots in anthropology and sociology, critical ethnography: “most captured the imagination of researchers in the field of education” (Atkinson, Delamont, & Hammersley; and Jacob in Anderson, 1989). Carspecken (in Massey & Walford, 1999) argues the term “critical ethnography” was first used in the 1980’s to refer to “qualitative educational research informed by critical theories of education” (p. 30). Since then feminists, neo-Marxist, postmodern, and
post-structural theories have informed critical ethnography (Carspecken in Massey & Walford, 1999). These multiple theoretical perspectives have influenced the ways critical ethnography is defined and how it is conducted. For some other scholars, the origin of critical ethnography in education in the U.S. occurred during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s as a result of the importation of the British critical studies (Anderson, 1989; Noblit, et. a., 20014; Glesne, 2011).

Discourses defining the ‘scientific’ nature of research and the social justice agendas that critical ethnography advocates for have generated tensions among scholars with issues of validity and objectivity. In keeping the scientific status of critical ethnography, educators have systematized data emulating positivist paradigms and discourses (Anderson, 1989). In contrast, anthropologists have tried to infuse literary approaches to ethnographic work (Anderson, 1989). Critical ethnography’s trustworthiness has been grounded in member checking and triangulation (Anderson, 1989). However, after years of growth of the field of ethnography and critical ethnography there is not a consensus on whether critical ethnography is a method or a research approach that is epistemologically and, above all, methodologically informed (Carspecken in Massey & Walford, 1999). Is critical ethnography a method that informs critical theories (Kinchloe & McLaren as cited in Madison, 2012)? Is critical ethnography fulfilling Freire’s notion of social justice situated in action, and as such does it constitute one of the traditions that is closely related to feminist research which is also considered ‘critical research’ (Lather as cited in Anderson, 1989). Why has the dialogue about a post-critical condition in ethnography emerged? (Noblit, et. al., 2004). How do the voices of critical and Indigenous scholars (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008), educators, and feminists continue to be relevant in envisioning the field of critical ethnography and qualitative inquiry? “What is the critical in critical ethnography” (Madison, 2012). Has critical ethnography mobilized its research focus beyond colonizing
agendas of the first sociological and anthropological studies? Issues of agency, ethics of representation, voice, and fragmentation (mind/Body+Spirit) are still debatable in qualitative research in general and critical ethnography, in particular.

**Research: A colonizing/colonized space & practice**

Six centuries have passed since the first encounter between native and white cultures in America. After more than six hundred years, Western cultures have successfully secured the continuously evolving and sophisticated colonizing systems that have impacted worldwide communities in different ways. Socio-economic models, religiosity, politics, education, and research have created belief and value systems that maintain societal hierarchies and inequalities. Research remains a colonizing tool (Canella and Viruru, 2004; Demas in Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Smith, 2012), a metaphor of colonization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), and a practice that has neglected the holism of the self. In the twenty first century, qualitative researchers are still invited to “dismantle, deconstruct, and decolonize Western epistemologies from within” and to learn that “research is always already moral and political” (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. ix, 7). Communities have resisted cognitive/spiritual/body colonization though community organizing and reclamation of their agency. Indigenous and Chicana/Latina “scholar-activists-healers” (Carvajal, 2015) echo the need to embrace decolonizing methodologies that move away from dualist ontologies and epistemologies (Elenes, 2005; Kovack, 2009: Saavedra & Nymark, 2008); ‘objective studies of the other’ (Kovack, 2009), ‘the bifurcation of the mind and the body’ (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008), ‘the regurgitation of hierarchical, patriarchal, homophobic, and capitalist relations’ (idem), and the validation of one way of knowing, and the search for a ‘new truth to research’ (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008).
Both traditions, critical theory and ethnography, have been continuously critiqued. The ‘imperialist nostalgia’ that reflects the paradox of “[a] person [who] kills somebody, and then mourns the victim” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 69) seems to leave the cinema screen and take ethnography as a central stage. From this perspective, the researchers’ ‘innocent yearning’ for the disappearance of traditional ways of being of a colonized culture and their position as neutral and detached observers would not move ethnography away from its complicity with oppression and subjugation (Rosaldo, 1993; Murillo, 1999). Therefore, ethnography occupies a space one step away from constituting a violent and transgressive force “ripping through individuals as well as cultures in order to create units of preservable information” (Quintana in Murillo, 1999, p. 8). There is still a drive that leads Mestiza(o)/Latina(o)/Chicana(o) and colonized communities across the globe towards a decolonization of the mindbodyspirit as a way of survival.

Twenty first century scholars continue to critique the effects of critical ethnographic practices supposedly embedded in emancipation and liberation. Researchers’ complicity with colonizing agendas is manifested through misrepresentation/objectification of research participants (Murillo, 1999) and/or usurpation/ appropriation of minorities’ right of representation (Noblit, et al., 2004). Likewise, researchers’ ideologies may seem liberatory but may end up, indeed, perpetuating oppressive/colonizing systems, institutions, and relations (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). Similar critiques focus not solely on ethnographic methodologies but also of qualitative approaches in general.

Colonizing research practices and processes establish value criteria that searches for the supremacy of ‘some’ researchers, discourses, and studies over others. Debates about ‘soft’ vs. ‘hard’ sciences (Berliner, 2002) are the initial steps to devalue research practices that operate outside the norm. On one hand, as Swadener & Mutua (in Denzin et al. 2008) state:
“[w]ith colonization as a way of presenting, producing/inscribing, and consuming the Other through the silencing and denial of agency, the centrality and primacy of specific institutions in the validation of what constitutes research and knowledge extend beyond what are often constructed as the geospatial and historical epicenters of the experience of colonization [italics added]” (p. 34)

The subtle presence of the research colonizing agenda referred to by Swadener and Mutua (2008) inherently perpetuates the desire to control the mindbodyspirits of those engaged in research. This control is manifested in devaluing minorities’ research and not providing enough funding to qualitative approaches, categorizing researchers⁹, and making of research an individualistic process (Flores Niemann, 2012). McDermott and Madan (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012) argue social research reifies the colonial encounter when

“[r]esearch is ‘legitimised’ through funding and fundability, organizational property or ownership of the research, and status of titles (such us Ph.D. or P.I) of the individual researcher. Additionally, human ‘subject bodies’ are dissected according to the singular experience/phenomenon under research; this risks considerations of human subjects as ‘capital’ more than ‘humans’ with immediate benefit limited to the researcher and his/her field of research, along with insufficient reflexivity of relationships within the research process, from the inception through to dissemination, of research questions and findings [italics added]” (p. 240)

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⁹ COLCIENCIAS is the Colombian Institution that regulates the research practices of educators in higher education institutions.
The funding and fundability of research studies has been partially determined by discourses and conceptualizations in terms of the ‘scientific’ character of research. For instance, discourses of organizations like the American Educational Research Association (AERA) align with those from the National Research Council which advocates for the development of ‘scientific’ rigorous research. In improving education and serving the public good (AERA’s mission), AERA brings together ‘experts’ who embrace education research as a “scientific field” to “produce and disseminate knowledge” using the “full spectrum of rigorous methods […] and also the development of new tools and methods” (AERA, 2016). In the meantime, the National Research Council, the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) was commissioned by the United States Department of Education (DOE) to write the 2002 report Scientific Research in Education (SRE) (Baez & Boyle, 2009). This report conceptualized what constitutes scientific research in education. One of the critiques to the report is the understanding that “it is possible to describe the physical and social world scientifically, so that for example, multiple observers can agree on what they see” (Popkewitz in Baez & Boyle, 2009). The universalism evidenced in this statement puts into question the scientific nature of critical, qualitative, and educational research. At the same time, these discourses legitimize ‘a colonizing/colonized view of scientific’ research.

Research also becomes a colonizing space when such practices reinforce stereotypes and exploit specific populations. Swadener and Mutua (2008) and other researchers (e.g. Canella & Viruru, 2004; Kaomea, 2003, 2005 cited in Denzin et al. 2008) “recognize the colonization inherent in constructions of categories of people (e.g., children, persons with disabilities, English-language learners, Indigenous scholars, [“the homeless”], etc.)” (p. 32). For instance, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals that researchers reinforce ‘pejorative dominant
stereotypes of homelessness’ (Fopp, 2009). In depicting the homeless as ‘an epidemic’ (Fessenden, 2015, para 1; NCH, p.1), an ‘unhappy déjà vu’ (McKinley, 2009, para 3), and a ‘public nuisance’ (Medina, 2015, para 2) discourses in media and research reinforce and perpetuate hegemonic colonizing representations of the other.

The graph “Implications of 21st century Neocolonial Research Condition” (Figure 9) summarizes and portrays some of the implications of being a researcher and a participant in colonized/colonizing research environments. Colonized/colonizing studies expose both the researcher and the researched to a condition where their ‘selves’ suffer a transformation that denies a holistic view of who they are. When conducting research, the researcher/researched voices, value systems, and mindbodyspirits become part of a system that silences and erases some of the dimensions that make them fully human. Assumptions and value systems acquired as a result of experience or education place the researcher/researched in unequal relations of power where constant ethical debates emerge. This graph reflects how “Our [research] experience of ‘self’ is as an isolated entity, defining our uniqueness in the very suppression of our ties to others and the shared material conditions which others have determined for us” (Simon & Dippo, 1986, pp. 199-200).
21st Century Neocolonial Research Condition

Implications:

1. The Researcher's 'SELF':

   Voice: limited Agency/autonomy when conducting research
   Value systems: Embrace dualistic ontologies/epistemologies
   Fragmentation: mind/body+spirit
   Ethical/methodological debates on representation:
     'How much is enough'
     'Can you make my story more scientific' (Samantha, 2014)
   Status: "soft" vs. "hard" science (Berliner, 2002)
   Systemic oppression:
     ♦ scientific vs un-scientific research
     ♦ Othering: "US" vs "THEM" (Minh-ha in Murillo, 1999)

2. The Researched 'SELF'

   Voice: denial of agency erasure/silencing
   Value systems: re-construction of cultures under Western scientific expert lens
   Fragmentation: body/mind+spirit
   subject bodies= capital vs humans
   (McDermott & Madan in Steinberg & Cannella, 2012)
   Ethics: Misrepresentation/usurpation & appropriation of minorities' right of representation (Noblit, et al., 2004)
   Systemic oppression:
     ♦ Othering: "US" vs "THEM" (Minh-ha in Murillo, 1999)
     ♦ Labeling, stereotyping, exploiting

3. Critical Inquiry

   Who does research?
   What are research agendas?
   What values inform research practices/processes?
   What voices are heard/unheard?
   How are voices & stories interpreted and represented?
   How are methods/methodologies embraced?

   subjectivity = evil ghost
   Observation = detached
   What is the researcher's role:
   researcher = saviour
   Post-critical Condition (Noblit et al., 2004)
   Are we there yet?

Colonized/Dehumanized individuals

Figure 9: Implications of 21st century Neocolonial Research Condition.
Decolonizing the ‘Self’: Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological Re-envisioning of Critical Ethnography/Inquiry

Critical ethnography and Chicana/Latina feminism have both theoretically been informed by poststructural articulations of agency and identity politics. Therefore, critical ethnography does not provide a narrow set of strategies or procedures (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994); on the contrary, it invokes the researcher to ‘resist domestication’ (Madison, 2012) and move from ‘what is’ to ‘what it could be’ (Thomas, 1993). Similarly, Chicana/Latina feminism is not “not bound to any particular way of thinking but instead [it] welcomes multiple perspectives and epistemologies, allowing for mutations and transgressions to occur” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 262). In the spirit of the openness and non-prescriptive nature of critical ethnography and Chicana/Latina feminism, in this section I will explain how decolonizing the self may take place using notions of interconnectedness, relationality, and holism.

Although much research continues to be a colonized/colonizing space and practice that fragments individuals, Indigenous, post-structural, post-modern, feminist, and working-class educators have raised their voices critiquing critical pedagogies that inform ethnographic practices. The critiques have encompassed the tendency to diminish Indigenous concepts and sources of knowledge, privileging reason in the construction of knowledge, using elitist language, and avoiding “history, emotionality, sexual politics, gender and patriarchy” (Denzin et. al., 2008), among others. As previously acknowledged one of the limitations of critical ethnography is its inability to account for a distinctive epistemology or methodology (Carspecken, 1999). The intentions of this section are not to present prescriptive models to conduct ethnographic research. Nevertheless, I discuss how neocolonial research discourses and processes may be re-imagined by using methodologies, discourses, and practices conducive to
decolonize the ‘self’ (the researchers’ and the participants’ selves). As a critical thinker, I have been on a path to “resist domestication” (Thomas, 1993) and imagine what critical ethnographic studies could be if informed by Indigenous and Chicana/Latina feminist philosophies.

During this critical and reflective dialogue, I also respond to the invitation of critically analyzing “the implications of connecting Indigenous epistemologies, as well as theories of decolonization and the postcolonial, with emancipatory discourses, with critical theory and with critical pedagogy” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. ix). Chicana/Latina and Mestiza Feminists and Indigenous scholars carry intersectional (raced, gendered, classed) histories and memories of oppression in our blood. As a new Mestiza scholar, I have found that the voices of Chicana/Latina and Indigenous communities resonate with the need to reclaim ownership and unification of my own and others’ ‘mindbodyspirits’ (Facio & Lara, 2014) within Western higher education institutions and beyond. Discussing the ‘decolonial imaginary’ (Pérez, 1999), ‘methodologies of the spirit’ (Sendejo, 2014), and notions of interconnectedness and healing (Smith, 2012; Kovack, 1999) among other constructs will allow an ontological, epistemological, and methodological re-envisioning of critical ethnographic discourses and practices.

This dialogue of theories maintains the premise that research is a terrain where social justice and spiritual activism can be critically forged. As a critical scholar inspired by Freire’s critical stances of acting within communities, I have cherished the possibility of creating a community of critical thinkers who mobilize and transform research and the academy into a “potential means to reclaim languages, histories and knowledge, to find solutions to the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to an alternative way of knowing and of being [italics added]” (Smith quoted by Tuck & Fine, 2007, p. 158). Trapped in daily discourses and practices of hatred witnessed on the media, my classmates’ experiences, and international students’
experiences, I see the discourses of progress, success, nationalism, and safety have denied us the opportunity to ‘be’. Part of the social justice agenda of research and the academy lies in offering spaces of ‘being’.

**What may decolonizing encompass?**

Qualitative research practices still fall in the trap of colonizing and perpetuating ‘hierarchical, patriarchal, homophobic and capitalist relations’ (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 262). Similarly, Indigenous communities have critiqued colonizing/colonized views that “diminish and undertheorize the importance of Indigenous concepts of identity, sovereignty, land, tradition, literacy and language” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). However, Borderland-Mestizaje Feminism or Chicana/Latina Feminism “provides decolonial moments” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). Simultaneously, Indigenous scholars have invited non-Indigenous scholars to use critical frameworks that are informed by Indigenous epistemologies where issues of representation and research benefits are reconciled. By accepting Indigenous scholars’ invitation, the decolonial moments created in this conversation trigger a shift in denigrating ways of thinking and discourses leading to develop layers of understanding to honor one’s self and others’ existence. Decolonial moments allow a re-assessing of values that divide and finding one’s voice in theorizing attempts.

Decolonizing research does not entail totally rejecting Western theories and research practices and methodologies (Smith, 2012; Jankie in Mutua & Swadener, 2004). However, it implies questioning the role researchers’ hybrid identities and positionalities play in structuring their research agendas: roles assumed, languages used, and knowledge obtained-interpreted-represented (Jankie in Mutua & Swadener, 2004). It also invites analysis of how contextualized inquiries are, what values inform research agendas, and how those agendas impact participants
and communities (Smith, 2012). Decolonizing research calls for collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars where the voices of research participants not only tell but also problematize their stories (Jankie in Mutua & Swadener, 2004). As Samudzi states: “until marginalized communities are the storytellers of their experiences, history will be rendered partially complete but wholly privilege the knowledges and perspectives of colonizers” (March 05, 2016, para 3). Therefore, decolonizing the self is one more step to decenter dominant research narratives (ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies) and write history from a polyvocal and multicultural perspective.

Although Critical theorists have attempted to take action and hear the voices of their participants, there is still a concern embedded in Western higher education institutions of how to mobilize critical approaches that promote the pragmatics of decolonization. Self-reflexivity has not been enough to avoid the fragmentation most researchers experience when writing academically, making a presentation, or conducting research. Overvaluing the mind in relation to the body and the spirit hinders opportunities to decolonize the self. Colonized/colonizing research environments have hindered the efforts of researchers in envisioning themselves as whole within academic environments. Researchers’ minds have tried to conceptualize and theorize without listening to their bodies nor raising awareness of the spiritual paths built when in relation WITH others. The sense of the researchers’ fragmentation and their acknowledgement of the current state of colonization is evidenced in conference themes that question: ‘Where is the love?’ (AESA-2015), What are the “[…] remnants of Colonialism, Trauma, and Invisibility” (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social 2016), what is the status of “decoloniality” (National Women’s Studies Association 2016). Attending the 12th Annual Globalization Conference was an opportunity to listen to the voices of my colleagues in the Cultural Studies
Thinking of decolonial practices then involves re-signifying and eventually challenging/opposing the ‘colonized other’ role assigned by societal or institutional policies, discourses, and practices. Decolonizing otherness entails embarking on a project where the space in between the ‘colonist self’ and the ‘colonized other’, that resides in every human being, is minimized (Bhabha in Pérez, 1999; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). The in-between space (Nepantla), that separates the colonizer from the colonized, despite its tensions, may become a space of possibilities, re-encounters, and negotiation. For Pérez (1999) “one is not simply oppressed or victimized; nor is one only oppressor or victimizer” (p. 7). Pérez (1999) argues that multiple ‘kaleidoscopic identities’ may be constantly negotiated in a third space called ‘decolonial imaginary’. Saavedra and Nymark (2008) argue “[w]e must venture into the uncomfortable, perhaps disturbing espacios y cuerpos to engender decolonial possibilities” (p. 264). Welcoming a ‘decolonial imaginary’ in research in order to create a third space of oppositional consciousness where the colonized (participant-researcher) and the colonizer (participant-researcher) reconcile and put into dialogue their ‘kaleidoscopic identities’ opens the door to decolonizing the ‘self’. How can this notion of the decolonial imaginary be used to create that third space while at the same time resist the disembodied nature of Western research practices?

**Spiriting the Flesh: Towards a Decolonizing of the ‘self’**.

Reconciling historical oppression carried in their DNA has required Chicana/Latina feminists to confront familial entrenched Catholic religious beliefs, icons, and practices with their out of norm identities. The path to reconciliation has been painful. Travelling back to memories and
waiting for the voices to speak is a painful process. Facing discrimination, rejection, oppression even from the ones who are considered your family is painful. However, these painful steps towards reconciliation have become transformational towards healing and speaking up. Healing is not a finalized stage but a constant construction and negotiation. From the constant tension between pain and healing- the Nepantla state, “a painful transition between two or more states of being”, (Anzaldúa, 2002; Sendejo, 2014), emerges methodologies of the spirit. What are methodologies of the spirit? How do Chicana/Latina feminists conceptualize the spirit? What concepts inform methodologies of the spirit?

As a New Mestiza/Latin American scholar activist, I illustrate how I embrace Chicana/Latina feminism to decolonize research epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically by ‘illuminating and centering the body, sexuality, and subjectivities’ (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). Indigenous notions of self-determination, interconnectedness, community solidarity, empowerment, and healing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2012) constitute core pillars in sustaining a decolonizing/decolonized research agenda that avoids fragmentation and dehumanization of the ‘self’. In this section I explore ‘methodologies of the spirit’ (Sendejo, 2014) that invite researchers to move to a decolonial state to embody in-action loving, resilient, and revolutionary discourses and practices. Decolonizing the ‘self” means embracing and reclaiming a holistic presence of our ‘selves’ in academic environments. Decolonizing the ‘self” is an invitation to envision and embody love as a resistance tactic and political tool towards the development of an emancipatory and equitable oppositional consciousness.

Methodologies of the spirit are informed by borderlands mestizaje frameworks (Anzaldúa, 1999) where social justice, equality, and the bond between the academy and
spirituality are present. For Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) “methodologies of the spirit offer a model for doing ethnography inspired by methodologies employed by Indigenous scholars who acknowledge that the spiritual practices and worldviews of research participants are foundational aspects of everyday life” (Sendejo, 2014, p. 85). One of the foundational premises of ‘methodologies of the spirit’ is that both corporeal and spiritual experiences are key sites of knowledge production (Sendejo, 2014). This concept opposes qualitative colonizing non-transformational research agendas that demonize subjectivities demanding from the researcher a detached relationship with his/her participants. As argued by Cruz (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008), bodies represent “powerful sources and sites of knowledge and identity negotiation and production” (p. 256). For Cruz (2001) brown and lesbian bodies are “messy texts” that provoke normalcy and objectivity (p. 659). Therefore, “the contemplation of bodies” (Cruz, 2001) allows feminist scholars to enrich research, academic, and communal agendas where the personal is made political. Unfortunately, traditions of qualitative research have given more value to the cognitive dimension than to the emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual domains. For Chicana/Latina feminists “centering and listening to el cuerpo” (Sendejo, 2014) in an analysis contributes to the creation of a third space where not only decolonial discourses (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008) but also practices may emerge.

Bodies hold memories and stories of resistance, hope, reconstruction, and re-birth. Methodologies of the spirit are in conversation with ‘theories in the flesh’ that invite naming oneself and telling one’s stories (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). It conceives the body as “the basis for an intellectual knowledge that is inexorably rooted in politics of resistance and liberation” (Cervantes-Soon, 2014, p. 98). Theories in the flesh put into conversation theory and praxis (Cruz as cited in Cervantes-Soon, 2014), the emotional with the spiritual, physical, and
intellectual (Cervantes-Soon, 2014). Theories in the flesh become paths of auto-conocimiento - self-knowledge, self-care, re-encountering, reconciliation, and healing. For Sendejo (2014), methodologies of the spirit entail establishing spiritual connections, intimacy, and healing with the participants; it embeds conducting research with and on the other; it permits the construction of the spiritual self while immersed in decolonizing acts of collecting and telling stories. In this sense, testémonios, as recipients of lived experiences, constitute “the basis for theorizing and constructing an evolving political praxis to address the material conditions [of people]” (Acevedo quoted by Sendejo, 2014, p. 97). Therefore, embodied experiences represent sources of knowledge that illuminate the colonized/colonizer efforts to disrupt oppression, be hopeful, and be born again in a decolonial space; that is testémonios are key to re-signify and move away from imposed demonized identities and roles.

Spiritual activism (Anzaldúa, 2001) constitutes an important element in the development of methodologies of the spirit, in particular, and the enactment of Chicana/Latina feminism in general. For Chicana/Latina “scholar-activist-healers” (Carvajal, 2015) in Flesching the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina and Indigenous Women’s lives “spirituality becomes a decolonizing tool and a liberating practice when ‘[c]oncretizing our spiritual lives through words and image, and in turn, spiritualizing our material lives’” (Facio & Lara, 2014, p. 11). In this collection ‘s/Spirit’ “makes reference to the reality of the spirit as part of the self and life in general and ‘Spirit’ [is] suggestive of an immanent ‘God’ or ‘Creator’ or ‘Life’ itself” (Facio & Lara, 2014, pp. 15-16). In this sense, Chicana/Latina conceive spirituality as a lifelong process of growth, self-reflection, a way of relating to others and nature.

Spirituality is “a way of understanding someone’s (or a community’s) position in the world by trying to make sense of unfair economic conditions and gender inequality, and to do
something about it” (Elenes, 2014, p. 44). In other words, activist spirituality requires ‘actively engaging the world’ (Anzaldúa as cited in Facio & Lara, 2014). The pragmatics of decolonizing attempts of the ‘self’ involves the power of individual and collective efforts for social justice and transformation infused by spiritual activism. Spiritual activism has been present in my life as a researcher when creating spaces that using the arts, listening to one another, and dialogue that engenders a move away from assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes.

‘Self’ decolonizing pragmatics is also nurtured by researchers’ willingness to fortify a third space of possibilities where their value and belief systems are continuously re-evaluated, put into dialogue, and negotiated. Decolonizing the ‘self’ entails listening to the body when conducting analysis, that is, bringing the researchers’ memories and lived experiences into dialogue with the participants. In this way the researchers’ “mindbodyspirits” (Facio & Lara, 2014) do not have to debate with discourses of objectivity and do not have to neglect any of the dimensions that make them human. Therefore, as Sendejo (2014) states “the scholarly research and [one’s] personal ‘(re)search’ are not mutually exclusive” (p. 91). One example of how methodologies of the spirit may be enacted is introduced by Brenda Sendejo (2014). The scholar-activist-healer established a personal connection with Alma, one of her participants, and shared some of her lived experiences. For Sendejo (2014), navigating her identities as researcher and informant, and bringing her mindbodyspirit to interact with Alma elicited new knowledges and new ways of knowing. According to Sendejo (2014), personal connections and experiences are “powerful arenas of social action and social change that extend beyond western epistemological understandings of ethnographic research” (p. 96). Juxtaposing roles like
‘researcher’ and ‘informant’ and sharing similar stories led to the development of a sense of trust, honesty, and authenticity during the interview.

Methodologies of the spirit enlarge the scope of possibilities that traditional qualitative methods and methodologies provide. In envisioning oneself as a ‘self in relation’, the researchers can reject colonizing forces of objectivity and detachment. For Indigenous communities/scholars “[t]he knowledge that each person is responsible for his/her actions In-Relation to the larger community is a fundamental shared belief” (Graveline, 1998, p. 57). For Cree educator Madeleine Dion Stout (as cited in Graveline, 1998) an Aboriginal identity may be constructed by “challenging the imbalances between the cultural/structural divide of all peoples of the world” and “recreating self in solidarity with those who are, those who have been and those who are yet to be [among other components]” (p. 57). As a non-Indigenous critical, activist in formation, and Mestiza scholar, I find a transformative force in western researchers that see themselves as ‘selves in relation’. In doing so, researchers can reclaim ownership on their mindbodyspirits and debunk some of the hierarchical categories that isolate and separate them from other selves in relation (usually called ‘participants’). Researchers cannot erase the privileges and positions of power they may occupy in western educational institutions. However, being aware of those positions and acknowledging that one’s actions and discourses have an impact on the way others’ identities, truths, and realities are portrayed might motivate researchers to establish intellectual, humble, empathetic, and courageous relations.

Indigenous research methodologies are grounded in reciprocity, interconnectedness, and healing. Chicana/Latina/Mestiza feminism and Native American epistemologies “embody a critical politics of representation that is embedded in the rituals of Indigenous communities” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). In building a dialogue with Indigenous epistemologies,
Chicana/Latina/Mestiza, as well as non-Indigenous scholars may embrace a notion of interconnectedness that will unify humanity in times when diverse activists and critical scholars are inquiring “what does it mean to be a human being?” (McLaren & Farahmandpur; Vinay Lal; and Grace Lee Bogs in Dirlik, 2006).

Despite the various attempts of critical qualitative inquiry and critical ethnography to mobilize research agendas towards more tangible in-action and social justice oriented methodologies, these fields still rely on constructs such as representation, objectification, and positionality (Noblit, et. al., 2004). In approaching the field of critical ethnography, I respect, value, and am thankful for the knowledge, reflections, and the evolution of ethnography since its origins. However, the current turmoil of hatred and inequities in which multiple societies around the world are immersed urge us to imagine alternative ways to redeem the history of oppressive traces of research, and create spaces of dialogue to trespass geospatial locations or hierarchical categorizations that divide us.

The fine art print “Decolonizing the Self: In-action loving & Revolutionary Spaces of ‘Being’” (Figure 10) represents how different Chicana/Latina Feminist and Indigenous concepts discussed in this session may be put together to open the possibility to decolonize the ‘self’.
Figure 10: Decolonizing the “Self”: In-action loving & Revolutionary Spaces of Being.¹⁰

¹⁰ Fine Art Print. Visual Artist: Nancy Carvajal. Graphic design: Christopher Lavoie
An Activist Decolonizing/Decolonized Research Methodology (Research Design)

Disassociating methodology from theory and epistemology and reducing it to method solely, (data collection and data analysis), ignores the depth of knowing (Alford, 1998; Pillow as cited in Kovach, 2009). Indigenous scholars like Kovach (2009) embrace a holistic approach to research where no particular aspect of the research process is elevated or isolated. Within this holistic process, Cree Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are rooted in relationships established with nature, the cosmos, the land, and the communities (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Therefore, for Cree communities, knowledge is not an individual entity gained and owned by one person, e.g. the researcher; instead “knowledge is relational” (Wilson, 2008, p. 56) and every human being is considered a “holder of knowledge” (Kovach, 2009). In being accountable to these relationships, values like respect and reciprocity permeate researchers’ self-locations and decisions in regard to research questions, theories, methodologies, literature reviews, and representation (Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability reminds us that we are selves in relation, in other words “we are the relationships that we hold and are part of” (Wilson, 2008, p. 80). Thus, respect, reciprocity, and relationality invite the researcher to be a reflective non-judgmental listener, to be aware of the connections between logic of mind and feeling of the heart, and to acknowledge that s/he brings her/his subjective self to the study (Wilson, 2008).

This way of envisioning research differs from western research approaches which have historically told people to “amputate a part of themselves to be able to fit something that’s rigid, and not built for them” (Tafoya as cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 56). Similarly, Chicana/Latina/Mestiza Feminists have searched for ways to avoid the fragmentation of the self (researchers’ and researched selves) by emphasizing that the body is a source of knowledge (Cruz, 2001; Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008), that both scholarly and
personal research “are not mutually exclusive” (Sendejo, 2014), and that embracing mindbodyspirits is part of social justice agendas when “actively engaging the world” (Anzaldúa, 2002; Facio & Lara, 2014). Both Indigenous and Chicana/Latina/Mestiza feminist research decolonize the self by centering the mindbodyspirit. In this way, these approaches offer the opportunity for researchers to feel wholly human. As stated by Hampton (Wilson, 2008) “[h]umans- feeling, breathing, thinking humans – do research” (p. 56).

This three-year critical ethnographic research has been a visceral-ongoing process of investing emotionally; committing to raising awareness in the community, engaging in critical and reflexive ethical debates, being in solidarity, and being present. Throughout this process, I felt helpless when witnessing how federal decisions like cutting funding to transitional housing programs, negatively impacted the community I have been involved with. But, those sentiments of helplessness and frustration moved me to take small actions e.g. partnering with local artists to fundraise for the shelter and offer workshops to challenge discursive constructions of “the homeless identity” and demystify the houseless’ experiences.

I have used Indigenous and Chicana/Latina feminists’ values to inform my use of conventional ethnographic methods. I have used Indigenous ways of knowing to name the stages and people involved in this study. This is an effort to decolonize research methodologies at a discursive level. Thus, selves-in-relation (Sample Population), knowledge-gathering methods (Data Collection), interpretation of stories shared (Data Analysis), and authenticity and accountable relationality (Credibility and Trustworthiness) will be discussed as follows.

**Selves-in-relation (participants) and research context.**

This critical ethnographic journey started in fall 2014 after returning from a trip to Colombia in my initial attempts to conduct the research with displaced youth in Juventas. After
an initial google search about community service organizations in the area, I visited the two transitional housing programs in a rural town, Springfield (pseudonym). Since then I have had the opportunity to interact and learn from men, women, and children of different ages, ethnicities, and places of origin. Thirteen individuals shared their testimonios: seven women and six men.

Eighty five percent of the population in Springfield is white and 11.51% are Hispanic, Asian, Black, Native Americans, and mixed races. Springfield’s top five industries are state and local government, education, retail, food, and lodging. In 2006 and 2008 two *Summits on Hunger and Food Insecurity* were held to craft solutions to hunger and food insecurity in Idaho. According to the executive director of one of Springfield’s transitional housing programs, food insecurity and poverty are issues that affect the state and the town. Unemployment in the county increased from a 3 to a 6% between 1999 and 2009. In 2014, BBC Research & Consulting conducted a *Statewide Housing Needs Survey for Springfield*. Stakeholders identified unmet housing needs like homeownership opportunities for low-income residents and housing for homeless families. Homelessness is a reality in Springfield and decisions made by the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have impacted the community. In June (year), this federal agency cut funds to the shelter in which this study was being conducted.

**Knowledge-gathering methods (Data collection).**

Participant-observation, field notes, and semi-structured interviews were the “knowledge-gathering” methods (Kovach, 2009) used to understand the intricacies of U.S. rural homelessness.

*Participant-observation.*
Glesne (2011) argued that participant observation is a problematic term due to the variations in the type of involvement of a researcher and for it being an oxymoron. Some of the goals of this method are “to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange” (Erickson as cited in Glesne, 2011), to “learn from people” (Spradley, 1979), and “to learn the meanings, norms, and patterns of a way of life” (Hymes, 1982). When I started this journey in fall 2014, I was offered the opportunity to interact and sit in sessions held between Alex (pseudonym), the executive director of the shelter and clients. I participated in these sessions every Friday between August and December 2014, and between February and April 2015. I spent between four and eight hours on every visit. During these visits, I witnessed in-take processes and people moving in and out of the shelter, and I dialogued informally with children, men, and women. I also interacted not only with the executive director and people using the services of the program, but also with other members of the staff like counselors and the custodian/security manager. On Fridays, the staff and I made and shared food. During the sessions, I listened attentively and showed my respect towards people by not taking as many notes as I would have desired. One of the women in the shelter expressed her distrust and discomfort every time I looked down and wrote in my notebook. She questioned what I was taking note of and for what purposes. Early in the process I started facing ethical debates. I was constantly and critically analyzing the impact of my presence in some of the sessions, in particular, Samantha’s session. As she expressed it in an interview-dialogue we held afterwards, when trust had been built, “I am in a hard emotional and psychological stage and I do not want to have my life to be torn apart” (Interview, 2015).

This initial stage allowed me to start understanding how homelessness looks and how it is portrayed differently in urban and rural contexts. I started taking note of the location of the

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11 Term used by staff in the shelter to refer to people who were receiving/benefiting from their services.
shelter, to perceive the human dimensions that were affected and transformed when experiencing homelessness, to be thankful for the openness of every individual I had conversations with, even more when I was a stranger. Every Friday’s visit to the shelter felt like a bell ringing in my mindbodyspirit questioning whether what I was doing would make a difference to improve the quality of life of people in the shelter, and if so, how. I felt helpless in not knowing what to do, how to support, how to be present. But, I listened, and one of the voices in the room said, “I want to do something bigger, and I want you to use my name”. Chrissane’s bravery always surprised me. So, the Globalization Conference 2015 became the space where Chrissane and Alex could bring their voices to share different stories about their experiences as houseless people. I kept on feeling helpless and wanted to know more and kept on thinking about other actions I could get engaged in.

*From semi-structured interviews to testimonios.*

Qualitative interviewing is a practice “as old as human race” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 6) where individuals’ personal traits (e.g. gender, race, nationality, and age) and the nature of the encounters (e.g. topic discussed, time, and place) offer a unique experience for both the interviewer and the interviewee (Glesne, 2011). Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to discuss themes as they evolved during the dialogues. The seventeen questions of the interview protocol aimed at collecting knowledge, behaviors or experiences, understandings, values, and feelings (Madison, 2012). The interview protocol was piloted and used to collect stories about the impact of homelessness and the sense of belonging and identity formation (See Appendix A).

I interviewed thirteen people in different time frames: fall 2014, spring 2015, summer 2015, and spring 2017. The interviews took place in places chosen by the interviewee: the offices
of the shelter, the basketball court, the living room of the apartment (in the case of my roommate), the barbeque area, and a cafe. The dialogues lasted between thirty minutes and three hours. Some dialogues took longer because people wanted to dialogue more about themselves and their families and wanted to know more about me. During the dialogues, I consistently asked how they felt. I made sure people wanted to continue and were not forced to talk without desiring to do so. These gatherings became spaces of comadrazgo or compadrazgo\textsuperscript{12}– which means those intimate spaces where secrets, beliefs, dreams, expectations, and fears emerged. Thus, although planned as semi-structured interviews, the interview questions started to evolve as life histories. These dialogues then became cultural interviews that allowed the exploration of people’s “memories, experiences, and understanding of events in their lives” (Glesne, 2011). Through life history interviews, houseless people allowed themselves to travel back to specific times and places through which the notions of place, home, and belonging were explored. The journey was experienced differently for both of us—selves in relation (the interviewee and the interviewer). Through tears and laughter, we were “construct[ing] memory, meaning and experience together” (Madison, 2012, p. 28). This deeper level of “individual subjectivity” and “collective belonging” (Madison, 2012) was achieved with people I had built a relationship over a longer time period, e.g. with women I lived with. People shared their life testimonios and there was a political voice

\textsuperscript{12} In Spanish when you become the godmother or godfather or a child you become “comadre” (female) or “compadre” of the child’s parents. In this case “comadrazgo” and “compadrazgo’ are used to refer to the close relationship- family type of bond created with people experiencing homelessness. We became friends and family to some extent when they refer to me as their sister, daughter, or granddaughter.
latent in the ways they positioned themselves as citizens, relative members, members of a specific community, and houseless. The thirteen voices are heard below in the interpretations presented in the West- The place of re-signifying and re-routing.

In this experience of “mutual recognition or communion”, both selves in relation met as “sovereign equals” (Benjamin, 1988). In these exchanges, emotional investment was unavoidable, our humanities were reified and enriched when listening to each other’s perspectives, when showing our vulnerability and the potential to bond, support and learn together. For Ezzy (2010) “being human involves becoming active within relationships that are integral to human identity” (p. 164). In active human relationships, there is constant negotiation of spaces, discourses, silences, presences, emotions, and power relations. Thus, in this dialogic and intimate encounter, people with whom I interacted determined the times and places to meet, the time to finish the conversation, and the themes to avoid. Interviewing as communion (Benjamin, 1988) transforms traditional researcher’s control over the dialogue, humanizes them, and represents one more step to decolonizing the selves.

**Letting go: Field notes and other visual data.**

Living in the shelter for five weeks in the 2015 summer allowed me to connect to people and understand homelessness in day to day encounters. I shared an apartment with three women initially, then one of them moved out, the second one moved a week later as well and I ended up staying in one room with Sancnite (pseudonym) for those five weeks. I went through the entire in-take process, I applied for food stamps, and I tried to be on time at the food bank during my first day in the shelter. There was a range of emotions I experienced in that one day: frustration for not having qualified for food stamps, sadness, and helplessness for being five minutes late for the food bank and being blamed by a woman for not making it on time, tiredness from the whole
day running from office to office to secure food for the day without being successful, and gratitude for receiving the support of people of the shelter who fed me the first day at the shelter.

I kept a journal for the thirty-five days I was in the program. When writing notes at the end of every day to provide detailed descriptions of “the social and interactional processes that make up people’s everyday lives and activities” (Emerson, et. al., 1995), I experienced constant ethical debates about my authority to write, describe and represent others’ experiences. I kept on questioning my authority to portray in a few words daily snapshots of experiences that were informed by a complex myriad of past experiences, personality types, and levels of self-awareness and understandings, as well as the macro and micro structures that constrained the lives of those who are homeless. In order to avoid a colonizing and marginalizing lens, I invited people to start a dialogue with me through writing, by reading the transcriptions and responding to them, and by painting. Unfortunately, everyone in the shelter experienced diverse daily circumstances that led them to move away and not to have the opportunity to engage in these activities. However, some children, men and women drew, wrote, and painted what home meant to them. A second part of that project was developed during the 2016 fundraising for the shelter. The visitors to a silent auction were invited to do the same exercise: paint, draw or write on canvas what home meant to them. A third part of this project was developed as part of the “Under the Skin: An Introspective Look at the Self” series at WSU. The final stage of this

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13 *Under the Skin* was a series of art workshops I organized to develop critical understandings about labels, stereotypes, and ways of self-identification. Workshops were led by people from different walks of life including: Chicana/Latina/Mestiza, Native American, and Indian scholars and community members.
collective creation took place on August 2017 when Joanna Bailey from Neil Public Library offered me the opportunity to offer three workshops on houseless’ testimonios. All these pieces comprise one collective creation exploring the meaning of home. Some pictures, newspaper articles, and documents were also collected while being in the shelter.

**Interpretation of stories shared (Data analysis process).**

**Investigator and methodological triangulation.**

Being engaged in an activist feminist and Indigenous research process where respect, reciprocity, and relationality are core values, making meaning not only involves description, analysis, and interpretation (Wolcott cited in Kovach, 2009), but it also entails clarifying “whom the research is going to benefit, recogniz[ing] the implications, and accept[ing] the responsibilities of the knowledge that one is constructing” (Potts & Brown cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 130). In assuming this responsibility, triangulation will be used as a tool to provide contextualized descriptions and critical, nuanced, and intricate analyses about the structural conditions that impact homelessness in one rural area in North America. Traditionally, triangulation has been used to compare and contrast information from multiple data sources leading to a supposedly more accurate singular representation of data (Denzin in Conrad et. al., 1993; Mathison, 1988; Wilson, 2008).

Within an Indigenous and feminist critical ethnographic study, different types of triangulation are still problematic. The motivations behind triangulating information are problematic when triangulation is meant to: prove or disprove hypothesis (theory triangulation); remove biases and ensure reliability (investigator triangulation) and improve validity (data triangulation) (Denzin as cited in Conrad et al., 1993). Thus, *positivistic bias* or principles are at the core of these types of triangulation (Silverman as cited in Conrad et al., 1993) and it is
present at a discursive level as well when words like “evidence” (Mathison, 1988) are used to refer what is expected from triangulation. I used investigator triangulation in different stages but not to find a unique interpretation of homelessness but “to expand [and critically nuance] the interpretive base” (Denzin in Conrad et al., 1003) of US rural homelessness thanks to the multiplicity, uniqueness, and richness of perspectives brought by every individual. In this three-year critical ethnographic study, slices of testimonios were shared in classes like Critical Discourse Analysis and Qualitative research where initial ideas emerged as a result of the exchange and dialogue with professors and peers. Another attempt to gather and dialogue about the testimonios was made during the summer 2017. Unfortunately, summer was a busy time to gather. Methodological triangulation was also used to allow “different pictures” (Denzin in Conrad et al., 1993; Trend as cited in Conrad et al., 1993) and “slices of reality” to emerge (Conrad et al., 1993) so that meaningful propositions about that reality could be shared (Mathison, 1988).

**First cycle of analysis: Learning from the houseless’ voices.**

With the intention of honoring and respecting the lives and experiences of houseless people, participant-observation notes, life histories, testimonios, or interviews, and the journal were analyzed in different cycles and with varying degrees of participation of peers. As mentioned above, slices of testimonios were shared in two academic environments where professors and peers offered valuable initial insights on the testimonios. In January 2017, I started re-connecting with the stories of every one of the thirteen selves in relation participating in this study. The process became a ritual. I placed white posters on the walls of my room, lit a candle, sat on the carpet in front of the posters, and started reading every transcript (ten to thirty pages each). Every testimonio took me into a different direction in terms of reflection and
emotions. Thus, there is not a way to specify how many hours per testimonio I invested my energy and time in listening. Some stories required more of my attention, so I spent days sitting with every one of them. I usually read one per day and sat with it for days, thinking through the ideas, knowledge, and experiences shared. Afterwards, I listened to the testimonio and came back to the notes I had previously made. While reading and listening to every testimonio I took notes (drew, made maps) on the posters and in a notebook, used color coding to identify themes in the printed transcript, and used in-vivo coding to identify themes. My goal during this period was to listen to people’s voices and follow my intuition in terms of what I heard them saying or wanting to say. After this initial exercise, I wrote four to six-page testimonios. Four testimonios are presented before every chapter of the dissertation.

In-vivo coding entails identifying words or short phrases that honor selves in relations’ voices and accounts for their understandings of a specific culture or reality (Strauss as cited in Saldaña, 2016). The in-vivo codes identified represent the titles of every one of the testimonios written. Those same codes were used in the introduction of this dissertation as a way to engage and make present the mindbodyspirits of the selves in relation of this study, since the beginning of the document. Some of the in-vivo codes identified were the statements made by Samantha, “My story is the only thing I own”; Sophia, “I don’t have an outside story. I essentially lost everything overnight”; Lawrence, “Peace is the American dream”; and Chrissane, “Don’t tell me slavery is dead”.

*Second cycle of analysis: Analytic memos and narrative coding.*

As part of this second cycle of analysis, I drew from analytic memos I wrote (notes and drawings) about the participants, homelessness, and the research process since 2014. Clarke (Saldaña, 2016) conceptualizes “[m]emos [as] sites of conversation with ourselves” (p. 44) and
with the reality explored. When writing analytic memos, questions were asked to generate further insights in relation to a specific area/theme of concern about the reality studied, homelessness in this case, the people involved in the study, or the research process per se (Saldaña, 2016). One of the guiding questions for writing these memos was “reflect on and write about how you personally relate to the participants and/or phenomenon” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 46).

These analytic methods have nurtured my theorizing, the art work presented throughout the document, the schemes and charts used in every chapter of this dissertation, and the interpretation or dialogue with the slices of life- pedacitos de vida (data analysis) of houseless people. Thus, the writing, theorizing, and analysis presented in this document are the result of evolving ideas and notions that have matured over the course of three years. None of those processes has been meant to be linear and or finished at a specific time throughout the three years. Instead, writing has been organic and has come to me when some understandings have been developed and when my mindbodyspirit has felt there is some insights to be shared. As can be perceived, this three-year process has been permeated by moments of silence, deep and empathetic listening, multidirectional reading, visceral writing, and deep self-criticism and reflection. Self-doubt and hesitation have appeared in a more persistent way when I have attempted to interpret houseless’ lived experiences.

Narrative coding was initially meant to be used as part of this analysis. But, after engaging in memos writing and considering the depth and length of every testimonio, the journal notes, and the observations, I decided narrative coding could take place as a follow up of this study. Researchers can use narrative coding to “explore[e] intrapersonal and intrapersonal participant experiences and actions to understand the human condition through story […] as a legitimate way of knowing [italics added]” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 154). In narrative coding data are
divided into stanzas and “prosaic, poetic, and dramatic elements are used as codes” (Saldana, 2016, p. 155). This means data can be analyzed by identifying literary elements like: story type (survivor narrative, confessional tale, testimonio), point of view (first-person, third person, omniscient, witness), and theme (moral, significant insight, theory) among other elements (Saldaña, 2016). Narrative analysis offers the possibility to represent “storied lives in storied ways, not to represent storied lives as exemplars of formal categories” (Clandini & Conelly in Saldaña, 2016, p. 157). This type of analysis would “leave the reader with evocative closure and provocative questions rather than fixed answers” (Barone; Poulos in Saldaña, 2016, p. 157).

**The rituals.**

Every part of this process has been a ritual. Listening to the testimonios, writing, analyzing have been ways to re-connect and maintain lively memories. Before every stage of this process I assigned every piece of material (transcripts, audios, journal) a space and a time. When I entered into the life of every person I sat down on the carpet in front of a white paper I had previously hanged on one of the walls in my room. I took notes on the paper. After, I walked for twenty minutes minimum while I asked to myself What is the story this voice wants to say? What matters to her/him? What am I supposed to listen? What am I missing? What is the lesson to be learned? After three years and until this day I cannot stop the water in my eyes when I connect to the stories, when I am in front of the white paper, when I type in the computer, when I talk about this project. I sit down with every story and give each the time they demand from my understanding and care. During the analysis, I spent days or weeks trying to listen to the voice of one story.

*Being Present: What has it entailed? (Timeline Research Study)*
Since 2010 when I started collaborating with a non-profit supporting displaced youth and Children, Paulo Freire (1993, 1994, 2013) informed my stances as a critical and social justice oriented human being under construction and the multiple identities I hold onto: daughter, aunt, sister, educator, friend, researcher, community organizer, learner, dreamer, utopian, believer, spirituality seeker, imperfect human, and more. Therefore, Freire’s idea of grounding social justice agendas in action are omnipresent throughout this research process. Action is at the core of this study. The figure 11 “Being Present: An On-going Critical Self-reflective Process” visually represents the actions and some of the stages lived in this study.
Ethics of Collaboration and Care: Authenticity and Relational Accountability

Denzin (Conrad et al., 1993) agreed with Fielding and Fielding (Conrad et al., 1993) that the goal of interpretative analysis is neither pursuing objective truth nor achieving validity, rather it is to develop a deep understanding of a reality. Furthermore, in “An Ethics of Postcolonial Ethnography” De Le Garza (Madison, 2012) alludes to four types of research ethics:
accountability (telling our story), context (open-eyed mindfulness), truthfulness (seeing the invisible i.e. to see under the surface of a reality), and community (acknowledging relationality). From an Indigenous perspective, research should be authentic or credible rather than valid, and relational rather than reliable. Being authentic means that the research must “reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and the participants” (Wilson, 2008, p. 101). Following the principles of relational accountability (respect, reciprocity), theory in the flesh, and oppositional consciousness stories are ways of being responsible to others’ lives, acknowledging the indissoluble relationship among mindbodyspirit, interactions, and reality. The varied ways of analysis used as well as the participation of my chair and peers throughout the process permitted a nuanced, not generalizable portrait of U.S. rural homelessness. Thus, authenticity and relational accountability inform trustworthiness and credibility.

Towards a Construction of a Positionality: Part III

As an international student immersed in U.S. North American socio-cultural, political, and academic environments, I consider myself a “between”, that is a mindbodyspirit “experiencing life in and between two cultures” (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, p. 19). Once the plane landed in Pullman, the socio-cultural reality of this country labeled me ‘woman of color’, my voice in the classroom led my classmates to frame me as a ‘feminist’, my clothing was read as reflecting ‘fascist’ political views, and my physical appearance and accent made people question my place of origin while assuming I was a drug addict or knowledgeable about its production, types, and qualities. Had I ever thought of myself or been labeled in those ways in my home country? No. Had I ever experienced discrimination due to my gender and class in Colombia? Yes. Do both views encapsulate who I am? I do not think so. As a self-in-relation, my positionality is determined in relations with others and in the type of decisions I make to affect
those relations (Glesne, 2011). Still, I have had to navigate other in between spaces. I am placed in the in between spaces of activism and research when activism, as I embrace it, as taking action is what gives meaning to the research I conduct. I am positioned in the in between spaces of a “foreigner” conducting research on a US reality. I am in the in-between space of being labeled and resisting constraining labels. In my first class at WSU I identified as a “human being under construction”. It means I have lived experiences from which I have learned some lessons. As a human being under construction, I am an imperfect, unfinished, and messy project that is in constant growth and developing of understandings. My actions and discourses speak about the nature of my humanity. No label can tell you who I am, what my values are, what my story is, what my vision of the world is. No label can fully contain the complexity and fluidity of my identity. No label can define me as a daughter, a friend, a partner, a sister, an aunt, a teacher, a researcher, a utopian, a believer, a soul in search of spirituality. No label can speak to the nature of my being without excluding pieces of the stories who make me who I am and how I see the world. As a human being under construction I empathize, I listen non-judgmentally, I develop different layers of understanding, I fall and I have been able to stand up so far.
Sophia- I don’t have an outside story. I essentially lost everything overnight.

There weren’t any stereotypes that I would fall under that you would think my morning would be like that.

*What are some of the most vivid memories you have from your childhood?*

Dinner was a community hour for us all my life. It started because my parents would be working and so we had a parent that would always miss dinner. Since the whole family wouldn’t be able to eat together and my parents never wanted to feel that they were coming home to eat alone, they would invite neighbors and family, and friends and community. Everyone was invited. Neighbors would bring dishes over, family would come into town. My parents always said that nobody should have to eat alone. So, that’s very traditional, I suppose for us…(laughs)

*What was your first reaction when you realized “ok this our condition now: homelessness…”*

Survival, you’re just going to do what women need to do. I started thinking of my last paycheck as not all thinking I just could give my landlord a of portion of this, because I knew that there was not going to be a portion ahead of that., even if I got a job that the moment, if I was hired that moment it would still be two or three weeks before I saw any kind of income coming back to me and so you just go into survival mode, you just start thinking. I thought of blankets for the winter time, uh… transportation costs so that we can stay in vehicles, so that we had some sort of shelter. It was still summer so we could have a tent. It’s amazing the things that you think of and the ways you are able to survive like you just… because it’s either that or you just give up or just you give up and you have nothing and you just then you know, you start using or something…
Considering your experience with homelessness, would you like to share any other ideas with the communities?

I’d really like to stress the idea that it literally can happen to anyone and any situation overnight, I was not high on drugs, and making bad choices that led me to get here. I was not living a life of crime, and fleeing and stealing, I was just a working mom who lived in a two-parent household with small children. I went to work the day before this happened, just the same as everybody else, you know, a regular seven to five, you know… whatever… regular full-time job…there wasn’t any stereotypes that I would fall under that you would think my morning would be like this. I mean it just can happen to everyone and as far as myself, I have become a better person and grown my children. If I had a story that said that my mom used, my dad used, my sister used, and everyone used… and so, you know… then it’s no wonder, stereotyping again, that I ended up like this. I don’t have an outside story like that. It was just, us in this situation through that. The children are so very resilient and can take all of this. I feared for them that they have had to experience so much so quickly. They are more humble and they’re more respectful. In school, they’d be the first ones to give their own gloves away in a cold day. In the long term, I am going to be able to look back and say that I taught them this and that. They learned that! There’s still a part of me that hurts and aches for them as a ten-year-old, and an eight-year-old, as a six-year-old that you have to learn those lessons. I didn’t learn those lessons until I was thirty you know. I didn’t know anything, I didn’t need to care in the world, I didn’t care or know where gloves came from when the snow came. I just had them in the glove basket at the door on a cold day. There weren’t any stereotypes that I would fall under that you would think my morning would be like that.
Today, Sancnite, [my roommate], and I sat down to see the movie called *Life as a House*. This movie impressed me for the way in which George, the main character, spoke about his life. I was intrigued about what he meant. So, I asked Sancnite if I could rewind the VHS video to capture some of the words from this character. Here are some of the lines George said:

“I always thought of myself as a house. I was always what I lived in. It didn't need to be big. It didn't even need to be beautiful. It just needed to be mine. I became what I was meant to be. I built myself a life. I built myself a house. With every crash of every wave, I hear something now. I never listened before. I'm on the edge of a cliff, listening. Almost finished. If you were a house, Sam, this is where you would want to be built: on rock, facing the sea. Listening. Listening.”

(Shelter Journal, May 15, 2015)

In the movie *Life as a House* (2001), George saw his life not as a static physical space but as an ongoing process of construction of who he wanted to be. In his adulthood, a circumstance led George to a different type of awareness; in that moment George decided to take control and position himself as the owner of the house that was his life. As the owner, George decided the design and characteristics of his house. As a viewer, I present one possible interpretation to George’s experience. In stating: “[i]t didn’t need to be big. It didn’t even need to be beautiful”, I see George literally challenging pre-conceived notions of prosperity grounded on values of size of a property and its beauty (whatever that means for every person). In a figurative way, seeing his life as that property, George seems to challenge principles like competition (being bigger...
means being at the top) that are engrained in capitalist and neoliberal economic models and discourses. While George defied these notions and principles, he also shared his understandings for the construction of a life: listening to and re-connecting to nature. George stated: “With every crash of every wave, I hear something now. I never listened before.” George arrived at the realization that he needed to be the owner of his life and that his values could change in a specific non-predetermined point in his life. We can say there may be a moment in our own existence in which we can reclaim ownership of our lives as a result of constant confrontation, negotiation, and the determination to change the course of our lives. At the end of the movie, George acknowledged that even beyond death, his life was an unfinished project where he strived to listen. “I'm on the edge of a cliff, listening. Almost finished” George said.

From a Chicana/Latina perspective, identity is conceived as a “process-in-the-making” where “nepantla”, an ongoing stage of conflict, realization, and transformation, is experienced as part of the process of identity formation (Anzaldúa in Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). Thus, inspired by George’s vision in the movie, I will use the metaphor of an under-construction-travelling-house to represent the subjective spaces (encounter with the self and others from our mindbodyspirits and within our mindbodyspirits) where identity formation occurs. In this analysis, every room of the house will represent an area of analysis. Houseless people are introduced as partial architects (i.e. with some but not complete freedom) of their houses-identities-mindbodyspirits. They are partial architects since identities are co-constructed through relationships established with their inner selves, others, nature, and dominant discourses. Hence, institutions like religion, family, education, society-communities, politics, and judicial systems also shape a person’s identity construction process. From birth until adulthood, the individual constantly confronts these institutions to negotiate: self-image versus others’ image of oneself;
who one desires to be versus who one is expected to be; and who one wants to be versus who one must. Thus, the self finds her/himself navigating the subconscious spaces of being and identity negotiation.

Testimonios are sites of knowledge. Therefore, the stories’ interpretation (data analysis) is considered an opportunity to develop new understandings. This process might allow you, as a reader, to re-signify the imaginaries you have about the houseless and re-route your actions and discourses. Using the metaphor of the house to represent houseless’ lives, I use the metaphor of the rooms as spaces where the analysis is presented. Thus, I developed the analysis in three interstitial rooms. The first two rooms offer a nuanced discussion about the American Dream and the houseless identity construction. The third room is not intended to be presented as a thematic analysis but rather as a space of self-reflection about two concrete actions to build bridges between academia-research and communities. I offer an overview of the three rooms of analysis and the subthemes that are identified with the word “corner”. I also offer a visual representation of the three rooms in Figure 12.

**Interstitial Room/Space 1: Unweaving/Weaving the threads of the American Dream**

**Corner 1:** Constructing/Achieving the American Dream.

**Corner 2:** Re-envisioning the American Dream: Redefined/New values and possibilities.

**Interstitial Room 2:** Living in the borderlands/Unframing “the homeless” identity.

**Corner 1:** Under the Skin. Facing and Confronting the “shadow beast”

**Corner 2:** How is the homeless’ body read? “Haciendo Caras”

**Interstitial Room 3:** Embracing Spiritual Activism. SO WHAT?

**Corner 1:** The story behind “Under the Skin”

**Corner 2:** “My story is the only thing I own”
**Figure 12:** Under-construction- travelling-house. Data Analysis rooms.
WEST-INTERSTITIAL ROOM/SPACE 1: UNWEAVING/WEAVING THE THREADS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Entering the room

The west, as one of the sites of resignification and re-routing, offers some insights in relation to the ideological construction/achievement and common-sense of the American dream. In this direction I also discuss how unhoused people position and redefine the American Dream. I start contextualizing what the American Dream is and how it defines U.S. national identity.

U.S. citizens and immigrants interpret and experience the American Dream in different ways. But, what is the American Dream? How did it become the ideology that continues to rule and/or inform the present and future of people inhabiting U.S. lands? How does neoliberalism relate to the American Dream? The term “the American Dream” was originally coined by an amateur historian James Truslow Adams (1931) in the book The Epic of America (Lee, 2006). For Adams (1931), the American Dream was the dream of “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man” (xvii). This notion of the American Dream started shaping an ideological construction that became “a defining characteristic of American culture, aspirations, and- ostensibly, at least- institutions, against which all competitors must contend” (Hochschild, 1996, p. xii). Despite the multiple definitions and interpretations of the American Dream, success as “the attainment of a high income, a prestigious job, [and] economic security” (Hochschild, 1996, p. 15) has been at the core of the societal common-sense construction of the American Dream. In addressing the tenets of success, some questions must be considered:

Who may pursue the American Dream? In what does the pursuit consist? How does one successfully pursue the dream? Why is the pursuit worthy of our deepest commitment? (Hochschild, 1996, p. 18)
The rhetoric employed by politicians and media has shaped U.S. citizens’ mindset where value is placed on a mainstream “standard ideology” in which everyone regardless of class, gender, race, or religion may succeed through an individual’s commitment to work hard and playing by the rules; an attitude that would speak to her/his virtue (Hochschild, 1996; Winslow, 2017). Thus, the tenets of success: equality, hard-work, and virtue are the frame to an ideology where economic success is the measure of an individual’s social well-being (Hochschild, 1996; Vega, 2003; Winslow, 2017) that feeds “a sense of entitlement [and] control over events and even nature […]” (Vega, 2003, p. 99). The competitive nature of success, greed, and selfishness lead to one’s or other competitor’s failure (Hochschild, 1996) and to a “myopic self-absorption” where care about other(s) different from oneself is non-existent (Primeaux, 2000). As stated by Primeaux (2000) “we [Americans] give to others because it does something for us, because there is return to the investment […] because giving boosts [our] images, and because it brings [our] names […] into prominence” (p. 21).

The individualistic ideology of the American Dream has shaped neoliberal political and economic formations in the U.S. (Winslow, 2017). The rhetoric of equal opportunity and individualism has been normalized and used as a narrow lens to depict the experiences of those standing on other steps of the economic stratification ladder. Thus, while the rich are perceived to be at the top of the ladder because of their “work ethic, character, or morality”, the poor are made responsible for not taking advantage of the opportunity to advance economically (Winslow, 2017, pp. 77-78). Citizens whose mindsets take for granted these assertions and adopt them as part of the logics of nation building may lack empathy and support towards the poor.

In this study, houseless people shared their positionalities in relation to the American Dream and success. Apart from deconstructing the American Dream, some unstably housed
redefine it. Others ratified their political views in terms of democracy, the role of politicians, and how class, gender, age, criminal record, and ability make a difference when attempting to achieve or construct the American Dream.

**Corner 1: Constructing/achieving the American Dream.**

In sharing their experiences about constructing/achieving the American Dream, houseless people evaluated the U.S. neoliberal-capitalist economic system and how it impacts renting policies, the labor market, and the judicial system.

Mathew, Ethel, and Samantha all self-identified as “pretty successful” white upper middle-class individuals:

*We [my wife and I] earned those [degrees] and we had the American Dream. We owned boats, cars, trucks, a quarter million-dollar house. You know… we were buying everything, and we got to be pretty successful.*

*(Interview, Mathew, June 8, 2015)*

*I bought my house when I was 20. I got my Associates degree. We [my children and I] had accomplished the American Dream. We were pretty successful.*

*(Interview, Ethel, December 5, 2014)*

*In one of the sit-on sessions Alex [the shelter’s counselor] and Samantha were speaking about the American Dream. Samantha said being successful which was part of the notion of the American Dream, meant “being in your own place and having an income” which was a “socially accepted and politically constructed value”. Samantha expressed: “I accomplished the dream. I was pretty successful”*

*(Observation, Samantha, Dec 5, 2014)*

Mathew, Ethel, and Samantha associated their personal and professional success
with their ability to accomplish everything they were societally expected to: obtaining a degree, having an income, and owning assets. Neither Ethel nor Samantha explicitly address how they achieved the dream. Mathew described how he progressively constructed the American Dream by making decisions to get an education while forming a family and getting into the labor market. Mathew intentionally worked to reach a class status that would allow him to be free of judgmental perspectives:

I used to do a lot of that success, just to get the freedom to do what I liked to do so I didn’t get the judgment, people just leave me alone and well… “Look at me, I got the nicest house in the block and the nicest yard and the nicest cars.”

(Interview, Mathew, June 8, 2015)

Mathew’s motivation of working hard to achieve the American Dream was to “get the freedom to do what [he] liked to do” and in a sense to be who he wanted to be without being judged negatively. However, Mathew’s dedication to get his “individual freedom” (Padover, 1956, p. 404), implicit in the construction of the American Dream, led him to build a lifestyle where he felt imprisoned. A degree and economic stability did not actually represent the freedom he was searching for:

I’ve already gotten enough money and it was like prison. My day… there was no adventure, there was no freedom. It got to the point where I felt like I was just in prison, because there were no new experiences. It was just every day I didn’t have time to do anything new. It was just maintenance. I did not like waking up because I knew exactly what the day was about. I just got into a prison. And then I started getting an ego and the only way I could deal with that was thinking I was better than the next person and then I got stuck into that and I didn’t like that mentality.
Mathew spent years of his life constructing a dream rooted in core values of individual freedom, hard work, and playing by the rules. Nevertheless, Mathew’s reiterative description of a life of wealth as a “prison” denotes his dissatisfaction with a lifestyle that was monotonous and led him to adopt a competitive mindset he did not like. Mathew realized that he fed his ego by constantly comparing himself to others. Similarly, Samantha described the dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and frustration an individual could experience if s/he did not get used to the demands of a lifestyle conducive to progress and success:

Part of the issue nowadays with someone who’s trying to get ahead: you have financial aid, you have loans, you have three jobs, and you get stressed. Unless you’re happy with it the rest of your life, you will have issues. It is just the way it is in the world. The economics in this country is broken and there’s rich people who are sucking poor people. If you end up being healthy at my age without any medical problem, then you get the other stuff to do. I just got lucky up until now I have not had a broken leg or something

Samantha described how economic systems are broken and are manufactured to exploit the world’s low income, working class, and middle-class citizens that follow ideologies like the American Dream (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011; Hochschild, 1995). But, how does the U.S. broken economic system manifest? And what does it look like? Samantha, highlighted the fact that people who want to be successful need to adjust to a stressful lifestyle where debt and overwork are a constant. At the same time, Samantha’s insights not only depicted the emotional labor of surviving a capitalist economic system but also the existing inequities that enlarge the gap between the rich and the poor. This gap as a result of low minimum wages that are not
enough to pay for rent, lack of jobs, and lack of affordable housing which is “reaching almost epidemic proportions” (National Low Income Housing Coalition [NLIHC], 107, p. iii). Lack of affordable housing has its historical roots in the 1980’s, when the Reagan administration cut low-income subsidies from $30 billion in 1980 to $7.5 by 1988 (Kozol, 1988a; Kozol, 1988b). Furthermore, Jeff Bridges, founder of End Hunger Network, argues that in the 1980’s, it was very common to find people who used to have three jobs, had children, and suffered from a medical condition; for Bridges, the reality experienced in the twenty first century is not that distant from the reality he witnessed in the 1980’s (Silverbush et al., 2011). In the past, when the U.S. neoliberal government decided to listen and act to prevent children’s hunger, they have taken money from those who are already poor (Silverbush et al., 2011). In 2010 the Congress passed The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act which represented a $4.5 billion increase over ten years (a six-cent increase per meal) and cut food stamps for the act to be enacted (Silverbush et al., 2011). According to Bill Shore, chairman and CEO of Share our Strength, “the great temptation of Washington is always to take something away from those who frankly can’t defend themselves” (Silverbush et al., 2011).

Samantha states that to get ahead you need to have three jobs which makes sense when agencies like NLIHC (2017) report that:

[a] full-time worker earning the minimum wage needs to work 117 hours per week for all 52 weeks of the year to afford a two-bedroom rental home or 94.5 hours per week for a one-bedroom rental home (NLIHC, 2017, p. 1).

As argued by Samantha, desiring to succeed represents physical and emotional labor where aging and being healthy is a privilege and a matter of “luck”. The neoliberal state aligns with the ideology of the American Dream in the sense that it promotes “individual responsibility
as a cultural and governmental axiom” (O’Malley, 2014, p. 90) and preaches values like freedom, choice, and rights (Harvey, 2005). Even though Samantha justifies the U.S. ruling economic system by expressing “It is just the way it is in the world”, she identifies the patterns of an oppressive and broken economy where the “rich people […] are sucking poor people” through hard labor, debts and loans, and the lack of accessible medical services. Chrissane addresses the same issue by associating the current U.S. mentality and economy to slavery:

I don’t consider politicians part of our country, they are their own country, they are getting richer and bigger. They’re happy. They are fat, they don’t worry about their housing. They have fun at our expense and we can’t wipe our ass some days. Don’t tell me slavery is dead! It just has a different pace. We’re too happy with our TVs and our cars, the ones of us that have TVs, cars, vacations, whatever. As long as we got that, everybody else can do whatever they want. We know things don’t work and those of us who get off our ass and try to fix it just end up tasting jail or not listened to.

(Interview Chrissane, Nov 7, 2014)

Calo (2016) argues that “the United States is a constitutional democracy, founded in a context of skepticism about governmental power and the tyranny” (p. 33). Chrissane’s statement is a sample of that skepticism. Furthermore, Chrissane states that consumerism may offer some comfort but at the same time seems to have numbed U.S. citizens’ consciousness which makes them unable to oppose, or at least identify, the patterns that maintain inequality in the forms of houselessness, unemployment, poverty, and hunger. Chomsky (Hutchison, Kelly, Scott, & Chomsky, 2016) argues that the U.S. society has been historically built on “manufacturing consent” where consumers’ beliefs and attitudes can be controlled through advertisements. The goal of advertisement is to “turn the whole society into a perfect system” with perfect pairs like
you and your TV set (Hutchison et al., 2016). Thus, advertisements, in particular, and media, in general, construct a world informed by a rhetoric of individualism, consumerism, and lack of solidarity and sympathy (Hutchison et al., 2016).

Chrissane’s concern about having some U.S. citizens’ unable to leave their comfort zones and fix a broken economic reality is a valid one. Poverty and lack of jobs have led to hunger and food insecurity which have indirectly impacted obesity and children’s cognitive-physical-emotional development (Silverbush, Bridges, Skoll, Weyermann, Lurie, Lurie, Colicchio, Goldman, & Harrington, 2011). Thus, politicians have designed a neoliberal economic system that continues to enslave worldwide citizens and threaten their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing.

But, what happens when you raise your voice and protest? From Chrissane’s perspective, outspoken people either go to jail or are ignored by governments. For critical criminologists like Wacquant (2008), a neoliberal state profits when social disorders result in a penal rather than a social solution. In other words,

the welfare sector pushes its clientele onto the peripheral segments of the deskilled job market creating a reserve army of labour ‘that can be super-exploited at will’ […] the penal sector [then] expands to absorb a troublesome and unemployed population”

(Wacquant as cited in O’Malley, 2014, p. 90)

Imprisonment is one of the tools used by neoliberal states to control the wealth and perpetuate oppression and segregation. Alexander (Alexander & West, 2011) highlights that having a criminal record allows discrimination in terms of “employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service (p. 141). Even more, when you are charged with a felony and
the charge is dismissed, you continue to be institutionally penalized. That is Chrissane’s experience.

Chrissane is in her sixties. She has worked all her life. She managed to pay $800 monthly rent in a hotel but since there was not a formal lease, Chrissane, her husband, and her grandson did not receive assistance when the facilities were damaged. They had to eventually leave the place before the month ended. In 2010, Chrissane “got too sick and couldn’t afford the cash to get to work” (Interview, Chrissane, Nov 7, 2014). Since then, Chrissane and her family experienced housing instability:

It was not that I was totally broke. It was because of stupid rules, stupid regulations, and stigmas, what people think. Over-priced rent for crap, I do have my limits. The American Dream has never been a reality for me. Affordable housing and deposits and requirements and then you’re paying for something and people don’t want to give you what you’re paying for. I was sick and I had no home. [...] I applied for housing, subsidized housing, I didn’t even get to look at anything. One place I got to look at in four months and I put in applications all over town. I kept getting rejected because I had a criminal background history. I had charges that were dropped. I was not guilty, and they were dismissed but the people around these places told me it was because of my violent criminal background history and even though I took in the court document, showed them it was dismissed, I still couldn’t get housing.

(Interview, Chrissane, Nov 7, 2014)

Among the challenges Chrissane experienced were her multiple attempts to apply for subsidized housing. When she was fourteen years old, she ran away from an abusive home. She was on probation for being unruly. When things went wrong at home again, she notified the
parole officer and was sent to a maximum-security girls’ school for thirteen months. This event prevented Chrissane from being eligible for subsidized housing. Thus, back in the 1970’s and between 2010-2014 Chrissane “had done what [she] was supposed to do: following the rules of the judicial system and the laws of subsidized housing” (Interview, Chrissane, Nov 7, 2014). Chrissane was not condemned by the judicial system, but “the stigma of criminality lingers” in her attempts to rent a place to live (Alexander & West, 2011, p. 141). Despite being rejected multiple times, Chrissane continued to apply to subsidized housing until we lost contact in 2016. However, the application process consisted of following regulations, filling out “piles of paperwork and stuff”, and facing people’s biases:

They’re kind of biased. It’s up to them who they help. I just begged you, I’m at the meeting, I filled out the paper work. I was the one working, looking for more employment, looking for housing, trying to figure out how I was going to stay out there, I knew it was limited, but I did not want to be homeless when it was over. But, then I met all those walls with that. I know those. I knew that those subsidized apartments couldn’t keep me out on a background history that was dismissed.

(Interview, Chrissane, Nov 7, 2014)

Chrissane had to face the walls of public assistance housing bureaucracy that would criminalize her for a dismissed criminal record. Chrissane bumped into the walls that stopped her from getting a stable job due to her physical disability. She worked for “fifteen companies because the merchandising companies in the last two years, they only had little bits. You have a job here, a job there” (Interview, Chrisanne, Nov 7, 2014). Additionally, Chrissane faced the bias of administrators who assign houses. The American Dream “has never been a reality” for Chrissane.
Sancnite has run into similar walls. For Sancnite, a former elementary school teacher who was “preparing for the professional level teaching”, it has been impossible to become a “full citizen” after leaving jail:

I have like 80 college credits but I’m missing like three classes to have a degree in psychology with emphasis on drug and alcohol education and special education. […] Schools don’t hire felons. […] Section 8 or private renters don’t take felons. […] I make a thousand dollars a month and I must pay back money to the state for being in jail. A thousand is not enough even if I could rent a place.

(Interview Sancnite, May 27, 2015)

Sancnite is in her late forties and works in a fast-food restaurant and the only places she can consider living are shelters and motels. As a felon, she experiences housing and employment discrimination. Sancnite uses her income to pay the “debt to society” (Alexander & West, 2011, p. 154) by making payments to court agencies. Thus, policies that rule governmental agencies like subsidized housing are part of a system that is set in order not to allow felons to succeed. Isi, also experienced struggles applying to Section 8 housing. She said:

I went to sign up for those Section 8 housing and I can’t do it, me and the boys can’t get low-income housing because my husband had a bill when I was in prison but for 897 dollars and I was in prison and I didn’t even know I had it. My husband made a bill. I had to pay it and I can’t get on low-income housing until that’s paid so I said I was in prison, why I do I have to pay it?

(Interview Isi, November 9, 2014)

Once being released from prison, felons become houseless, unemployed, are in debt, denied access to education, removed from their constitutional rights, and experience hunger
(Alexander & West, 2011). The message sent by the government is clear: “they are not wanted and not even considered full citizens” (Alexander & West, 2011, p. 158). With a legalized system of discrimination in place, the achievement/construction of the American Dream for felons is a wall too high to be climbed.

Yet, finding a job is a hard endeavor for elders, women with physical disabilities, and felons. Samantha and Mathew had a hard time finding a job in their areas of expertise. Despite holding a master’s degree, Samantha had spent a year unemployed. Samantha’s analysis of unemployment was tied to lack of jobs offer, the country’s political dynamics, and her lack of access to social capital:

With the profession I studied, there’s two jobs and twenty people. I think that part of the problem is the political situation which is more Republican. If you’re in a group maybe you can get a job, but here you have to have the professional glassy edge resume and maybe you get a job if you know somebody in the position to help you. I have healthy social fabric in the urban cities where I’m from. But, here we have been here for years and we don’t have a friend.

(Interview, Samantha, Nov 7, 2014)

Samantha argued obtaining a graduate degree would not guarantee people getting a job in a university. For her, politics and social capital are key to get a job. After a year being unstably housed, Samantha decided to move to LA where she could find a place to rent for $500 and where she was exploring job options. Similarly, Mathew had a degree and used to work as an analyst for NASA defense department; although he applied to some engineering positions in the area, he did not find a job and had to work as a construction worker. Mathew injured his back and had to go through surgery because of his job. Sociological studies reveal that poverty has
increased in rural areas due to industrial restructuring that motivates young generations to migrate to big-cities labor markets (Burton, Lichter, Baker & Eason, 2013). For Fitchen (1992), local employment has been altered in rural areas due to “loss and downsizing of manufacturing and the shift to the service sector” (p. 176). This shift has generated “low-paid, part time, temporary jobs” (Fitchen, 1992, p. 176). Additionally, the migration of low-income people to small towns diminish the number of jobs available and raise the price of rents (Fitchen, 1992; Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006).

The lack of material conditions to cover a family’s basic needs may push people to extreme measures to survive:

I personally wouldn’t do it, but people will prostitute themselves to pay the rent, whatever. I’m pretty bullhead, I have my values. I have things I have to respect about me […] But who’s to say I wouldn’t have got pushed to that because I’m responsible for a kid that I’m trying to help, I took him out of homelessness and now I can’t be responsible. I could’ve been pushed to something, I probably could have. I didn’t want to be a hypocrite, saying you can’t have a child in a homelessness center because I didn’t have one and then here I am.

(Interview Chrissane, Nov 7, 2014).

Chrissane points out a reality in which people may be “pushed” to use their bodies to survive. Although Chrissane initially associates prostitution with lack of values, she positions herself in somebody else’s shoes by commenting on her own experience as a grandmother trying to raise a child. She acknowledges she made assumptions and had judgments about people raising children in transitional housing shelters, and actually she called herself a “hypocrite” for doing what she used to say she would not do: raising her grandson in a shelter.
However, even those who had a job, experienced struggles with their bosses. Just like Mathew and Samantha, Sophia had been living the American Dream before the night her husband came home under the influence:

I essentially lost everything overnight. I had this great job in the morning (short laugh). When I went to bed that night, certainly, it wasn’t that way the next morning. I woke up in a domestic violence protected shelter that had eh… curfew and locked windows, and no telephone access and things that they had available for women safety, but I was unaware of the situation, altogether. I went to bed with my children and talked to them in their own home and this is what I woke up to.

(Interview, Sophia Nov 14, 2014).

When Sophia was slowly making sense of where she was and what had happened, she had to figure out how to contact her children. She eventually learned that her husband had run away and that her children were “scattered” with family. She also communicated with her boss who told her she could take the time she needed to recover. However, Sophia decided to work on Monday morning, after having spent the weekend in the women’s shelter and:

I went into work Monday morning and I was fired, I was fired for not showing up to work that Friday morning when this happened. It was their reasoning and I was devastated. It was not the impression that they gave me the weekend before that. I was the victim this whole time and I had already lost so much and I lost my job which was I was paying for everything that we just literally we just purchased one month before that, at a rental home that we were living as a rent your own home, so within five years we would be owning this house. It was five bedrooms. So, all the children had a room and
there was room to grow and it made sense; everything was how it should have been, and so quickly it was over…

(Interview, Sophia Nov 14, 2014).

A domestic violence situation unrooted Sophia from the dream she had been building for herself and her family. Not receiving support from her employer and losing her job made a difference between being housed and building a career and becoming houseless and struggling with having access to a place to live, to medical services for her children with disabilities, and to time for physically-emotionally-psychologically healing.

Since the 1970’s media has “progressively” changed the language used to portray housing instability from “vagrancy” to “homelessness” (Campbell & Reeves, 1999). The use of the word “homeless” in the 1980’s was associated with “the lack of individual choice” which represented a “rupture in the fabric of middle America” (Campbell & Reeves, 1999, p. 23). This idea was reinforced by news that portrayed the houseless as mentally ill (Kozol, 1988). However, there is a body of research on housing instability that highlights homelessness as a social issue rooted in an economic problem (Kozol, 1988a; Min, 1999). As these houseless testimonios have evidenced, governmental agencies serving neoliberal agendas turn low income, working class, middle class individuals, and felons into controlled/malleable “reserve armies” (Darder, 2012; Wacquant, 2014) from which economic profit is secured. In this way, the neoliberal economy has made sure that “[t]he various so-called pathways out of poverty [seem] more like labyrinths and mazes rather than any reasonably negotiable, albeit tortuous, routes.” (O’Malley, 2012, p. 117).

It can be argued that “a complex confluence of individual and structural factors determines whether you end up being rich or poor” (Winslow, 2017, p. 76). However, the
individual is not to be made responsible for his economic situation when the American Dream becomes a “fantasy” (Winslow, 207) reinforced by a neoliberal economic system that criminalizes the poor. The houseless testimonios analyzed depict some of the contradictions between the ideological principles of the American Dream and neoliberalism and the U.S. government’s lack of the political will to put them into practice. In practice, neoliberalism is “a system of cruelty” (Couldry, 2008, p. 3) that negatively impacts the labor market, manipulates the penal system, and creates policies that not only legalize discrimination (Alexander & West, 2011) but also neglects U.S. low-income, working class, and middle-class citizens the opportunity to rent/own a place in rural areas.

The construction/achievement of the American Dream is not to be taken for granted. The American Dream is not solely constructed/achieved through hard work and self-efficacy when the economic system is broken and impedes felons, differently abled people, elders, professionals, people in their thirties/forties/fifties/sixties, diverse families (single parents, grandparents and grandchildren, divorced men and women); white people, Indigenous people, Christian people, and agnostic people from being embraced as full citizens.

Corner 2: Re-envisioning the American Dream: Redefined/New values and possibilities

The common-sense idea that every American has a “reasonable chance” to succeed in U.S society is a belief that not all Americans, immigrants, and members of a minoritized group share (Hochschild, 1996). Analyzing how the neoliberal economy operates in the U.S. and how it impacts rural areas has been key to understanding why rural people experience housing instability. This analysis is also important in recognizing the challenges faced when formerly unhoused individuals seek their own housing after they leave homeless shelters. The reasons why people become unhoused vary and are multilayered. Sophia’s reality changed overnight due to
domestic violence and job loss. Chrissane and her husband lost their jobs and could not afford to pay for rent. Chrissane does not qualify for subsidized housing due to her dismissed but permanent criminal background record. Sancnite’s record also prevents her from even renting. Mathew and his family made the decision to move to a different town to secure safety for his daughters who experience physical and cognitive disabilities. Mathew’s family made this decision after the “the gentleman that sexually assaulted my older daughter was getting out of prison and it caused a lot of tension in the house. He was a younger gentleman so, you know, I had a hard time putting him in for a long time.” (Interview Mathew, June 8, 2015). Samantha realized she had become co-dependent on her husband and she decided to leave her home.

Whether the American Dream was accomplished or not, the houseless people I interviewed re-conceptualized the American Dream while experiencing housing instability. In re-conceptualizing the American Dream, unhoused people proposed a set of redefined and new values where living with dignity is still possible by developing a different sense of freedom, approaching money and materialism differently, establishing a different relationship with nature and one another, and adopting a critical position with media. In this section, I analyze how the American Dream Ideology has shaped the definition of “home” and “freedom”. I discuss how these definitions influence an individual’s sense of self and collective perceptions of the value of an individual (her/his morals and virtue). I also illustrate how these definitions generate attitudes like judgement; the unhoused find this behavior constitutes a barrier for those who want to participate in communities and build their homes. Houseless people contest mainstream definitions of “home” and “freedom” and use their lived experiences and understandings to redefine them.

I’ll find my way home!
“Home” is usually associated with a physical space that is idealized as “safe” (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Wardhaugh, 1999). It is also understood “as an expression of social meanings and identities” (Wardhaugh, 1999, p. 94). Informed by the ideological construction of the American Dream “home” in the U.S. has become “a consumer item, a measure of success, and an avenue for spatially and socially differentiating [themselves] from others” (Hill, 1991, p. 298). Thus, the American Dream is used to explain economic stratification by ordering and categorizing people (Winslow, 2017). Taking for granted the belief that anyone who works hard can succeed, diminishes the interest or energy people may invest to “know the real reasons one person is really rich while another person is really poor” (Winslow, 2017, p. 132). This common-sense is used as the ground on which morality and non-normalcy are measured and judged.

Socially, in their testimonios, Sophia, Mathew, Ethel, and Samantha established a clear distinction between “home” and “house”. They used “success” as a starting point of analysis to define home. Before becoming unstably housed, the four of them had lived by the logic of the American Dream. For Sophia, for instance, “everything was about brands, and money, and vacations and I just worked and worked and worked and worked, so that Saturday, the one day off, we can go to do something outrageous like a big amusement park.” Sophia was “successful”. She was a productive member of a neoliberal economic system where hard work constituted her ticket to success manifested in consumerism and excess. When Sophia lost everything (material assets, her job, her house, relationships, the respect of her children, her self-esteem), she valued money differently and success represented “just being able to go to bed at the end of the day with my family and to wake up with my family. And anything that happens in the middle of it is just something we have to do”. Throughout the year Sophia had experienced housing instability, she valued money and relationships differently.
For me relationships are important. Small relationships are built even if you don’t see them. Even if they are not a part of your immediate …uh…. even if they’re just like an assistant person in the office. They’re so friendly. There’s still the relationship that you see on a weekly basis and that feels like home…”

For Sophia relationships where she felt comfortable with herself and felt human represented home. When we spoke about where she might live in the future she said, she wanted “just a house with a front door and a fenced yard. That’s it. Because we make everything else home”.

The tenets of the American Dream promote individualism and the idea that freedom is achieved once attaining the desirable or desired wealth. But, how does that freedom feel and manifest when material assets are obtained? There are “mixed effects of success on communities” (p. 35) and individuals. Mathew, thought of success as the path to get the freedom “to be” who he wanted to be and “do” what he wanted to do without being judged. But, housing instability pushed Mathew to revise his perspectives on success and freedom. Being in an unknown terrain, Mathew started exploring his former lifestyle. He was “pretty successful”. He had accomplished a wealthy socio-economic status. However, Mathew felt “money was a prison”, his life had no “adventure”, he was used to a pre-established routine, and he started feeding his ego. He “didn’t like that mindset”. He realized he had not really achieved the freedom he thought he would find while ascending on the ladder of success. While being in the shelter Mathew refused to work for a return to a luxurious lifestyle. “I could be rich if I wanted to […] but that’s not what I’m going to do for me.” But, it is difficult when you live in an environment that praises that mentality:
But you still have to do the daily grind … I know for sure if I keep trying hard I will get to another spot where I’m like “Wow! I understand it.” But where I’m at right now… I won’t understand it until I get through it. I’m trying to understand enough every day but you forget you know? You don’t have like the nice cars, you don’t have the feeling driving down the road like, look at me. Some of that success, because I used to do a lot of that success just to get the freedom to do what I liked to do so I didn’t get the judgment.

After a couple of weeks of being in the shelter, Mathew was trying to negotiate his notion of freedom with the ideas promoted in the socio-cultural environment he was participating in. In that sense, Mathew expressed “freedom [was] extremely hard” for him. He knew that if he got into the “working mode” lifestyle he used to have he would not be free, i.e. his morality and good citizenship would continue to be judged based on his economic advancement. But, he had been there before, and he did not want to lose himself in a mindset that did not reflect his human nature. Still, being part of a society that praises success, Mathew would continue to be viewed as a failure, and he was already feeling “less than a man”.

Mathew had already had “a quarter million house” and that did not represent home to him. Mathew though of “home” not only as a “physical space” but also as “relationships”, a “feeling”, “a mental space”, and “a spiritual space”. For Mathew having peace in his mind was important to feel at home

I do a lot of meditation. I do a lot of work as far as… I don’t know how to explain it but I work really hard to get my mind to where… It is like this morning I was irritated, I had to really take deep breath and go “ok, it’s ok to be irritated, but that is not ok” So I spend a lot of time “ok, well that might be what’s causing it. OK” Because I know at this moment
and time, if I get angry and if I start, it is going to be a nightmare. So, and I don’t want to be fake either, so it makes it really hard for me to keep it good.

When Mathew shared his testimonio, he wanted to build his physical home but without having the economic resources to do so, he worked towards building his mental and emotional home. The wellbeing of his family was at the core of that construction “I will give everything I got to make sure that their hearts stay full.” Home was being able to appreciate “the beauty of a picture or of my grandparents’ stuff, the beauty of colors or the beauty of gardens”. Although Mathew was still searching for freedom, developing understandings, and building his mental and emotional home, he was certain about one thing:

I’m back to ground zero and I’m going to try again. So, and I’ve accomplished and that’s one thing that gives me faith is I’ve accomplished a lot in the past. Whether that was perfect or right or wrong that’s for other people to judge. For me that was the best I could do.

Home may be partially associated with a physical space but “it is more a state of being” (Wardhaugh, 1999, p. 95) and an expression of being-in-the world (Dovey, 1985). Most of the houseless referred to home as the ways in which they felt embraced and accepted. This notion of home is the result of social interactions. It can be argued then, that “home is a social construction reflecting a set of social obligations that legitimize and protect ‘housed’ families; that is home provides ‘moral shelter’” (Sharam & Hulse, 2014, p. 306). Therefore, when people lose their “home”, conceived as the material asset, their trait as moral beings is also lost or put at odds. Thus, judgement, that comes with the fact of losing a house, hinders the possibilities to, collectively and individually, construct a sense of home where people can be or express their individualities in the world. Alex captured the sentiments of Sancnite, Mathew, and Lawrence in
one sentence: “judgement doesn’t make it feel like home”. For Isi, life “is not about judging people”. Isi highlights that life is about accepting others for who they are. Isi also says: “I’m a human being and I’m a person who has been having struggles in life and I need help, but judgement makes it hard to go on.” The multiple labels society has imposed upon Sancnite’s humanity and the stigma that each of them hold have impacted Sancnite’s sense of self and sense of belonging.

_Nancy:_ Where do you belong to when you think about it?

_Sancnite:_ That’s what’s sad. I don’t think I belong anywhere. I don’t believe I really have a home, a home to go to. I don’t have a place to. I don’t have a community to go to.

_Nancy:_ If you had one, what would that home look like?

_Sancnite:_ Ideally if I could just pick it? It would be in the middle of my reservation in a tipi teaching with children.

Sancnite’s dad, one of her sons, and her Indigenous community blame her and judge her for all the wrong decisions she has made that have taken her to the shelter. Sancnite continues exploring ways to communicate with her family and be forgiven. Sancnite emphasized that judgment also comes from your working environment where in her case, she would rather not mention the name of the shelter where she was staying “because there are stigmas […] and I don’t need that.” For Mathew, his family and friends’ judgment came from a place where they “just don’t understand what I was doing so that made me feel like I was doing wrong and I don’t like that, I really don’t. I didn’t do anything wrong […] I might have failed materialistically but I haven’t failed spiritually, as far as who I am”. Mathew’s sense of self was also impacted by judgment coming from his closer social network. From Ethel’s perspective “judgments can be made of just the way people dress too, or the things they’re into even if they’re not into them.
And, it’s funny because a lot of my friends that were the wilder ones or had the crazier hair have done well for themselves throughout life. So, it depends.” The thirteen-people interviewed maintained that stigma is one of the biggest challenges they face. Lawrence invited the community not “to judge a book by its cover.” Lawrence said that “the biggest problem people have is judging before they even get to know the person”.

Judgement derived from the idea of failure of an individual in accomplishing the American Dream, influences the emotional wellbeing, self-worth, confidence, and sense of belonging of an individual. The unhoused people interviewed shared “nature” represented home for them. For instance, whenever Mathew felt judged or when life got “too complex” he went to nature. He said he has “experienced a lot of learning in nature”. Apart from learning from nature, Mathew felt he could find honesty there. “I couldn’t learn from people because I never got the truth. I never got to the deep core of the truth. They were just telling me stuff what they see on TV or, they were protecting themselves.” Truth was hard to find in human interactions.

Mathew associated calming his mind through nature with the possibility of being honest and being a “good man”. He still struggles with binary and judgmental ways of thinking, which he was trying to understand. “I feel caught up in this thinking and I feel guilty but not guilty” Mathew argued “home”, as both the “physical space” and the “mental state” is something “people work hard to earn it. “You have to put time. You have to create it for yourself. I don’t know if other people have a home like, I don’t know if anybody else could just say “Well, I’m here, I’m home”. For Mathew it feels like home when he “tr[ies] to be there and not to judge”. But “not judging” is something he finds difficult to do. “That’s a real hard conflict for me in the environment I live in as far as the social structure in the city but I understand why it has to be there, that daily grind too.” Mathew was socialized in a social structure where a person’s worth is
measured by the level of success accomplished. If that level of success is not achieved, s/he is placed in the boundaries of abnormality. Still, Mathew somehow justifies that kind of perspective.

Freedom is a value that unhoused people associated with the possibility of being, healing, and getting on their feet again. So, what are the alternatives to judgment and what is the result?

My therapist was never judgmental, never confrontational. And by him just saying those two words “I understand” made all the difference. He was always very positive and supportive and nurturing and dwelling on the positive aspects of who I was and reminding me how the growth that he’d seen. If he didn’t have the answers from his own life he’d say, “Alex why don’t you go talk to so and so, because they have a lot more experience in that area than I do” and so I trusted him, trusted him.

(Interview Alex, Feb 2, 2017)

Listening, understanding, and caring are alternative emotions to judgement; they make a big difference in a person’s life. As argued by Sancnite, every action or word that comes from a place of love and understanding may prevent the fact that a person’s soul be “damaged”. As she states it,

I think that if you stay on the right track, the American Dream can be achieved, but I think once too much damage is being done in your life, your body, your soul, I think the American Dream is not obtainable.

(Interview Sancnite, May 27, 2015)

Sancnite emphasized that assets can be obtained. However, for Sancnite, the American Dream has to do with an embodied experience. If the pain inflicted in the body and soul are not addressed, you may be the wealthy but you would still be missing one part of the American
Dream. Thus, nurturing your body and soul and healing the brokenness in them is the path to an American Dream that not necessarily resided in economic wealth.

For Lawrence, the sense of home, was also associated with relationships and family. Therefore, he questioned the use of the word “homeless”. He said he had a home, that is “the love and support of my family. No judgment” but he did not have a stable place to stay. For Lawrence the use of the word “homeless” was problematic due to the imaginaries people hold of people they see on the streets. Lawrence’s statements reflect that housing stability is both an individual and a structural problem. He is critical about pedestrian attitudes towards the homeless. He invites people to “not to judge”, to give people “a second chance”, and to acknowledge the “humanity” of those in the streets. As an agent, he urges himself and the community to talk to city halls about exploring ways to support the houseless.

**Nancy:** How do you feel about that word homeless?

**Lawrence:** I don’t like it very much. It’s not homeless. It’s houseless as we call it. You know, people always think that “homeless people” are bad, that all they do is ask for money so they can get drunk and they’re living off people’s money. It is not true. A lot of people that are homeless, ended up homeless in different situations. Everyone has their own differences. For me, it was stealing from my family, drugs. Other people, it could be they lost their house or their whole family got murdered and they ended up homeless because of it. So, don’t judge a book by its cover. Not all homeless people are bad people, there are some out there, I’m not going to lie. I’m not going to say that there is never any bad people out there but you need to get to know the person before you judge them for the way they are. Yes, they look nasty and dirty but that is because no one else wants to help them. I was there for four years, nobody helps the houseless, nobody does,
everybody just kind of looks at them and walks away. We need to talk to some city hall or something about saving up money to help the houseless. Cause it’s not fun. Everyone needs a second chance, second or third chance... Everyone needs a second chance because if you got in trouble for something and you ended up losing your house, you’d want a second chance. It is a human nature. It is human nature, so homeless people need second chances. I got one and I learned from it.

(Interview Lawrence, April 7, 2015)

Re-constructing the American dream

Understanding the role of material things and money in unhoused people’s lives has been key to re-envisioning the American Dream. And developing that understanding has required awareness of the mechanisms behind the construction of the American Dream and how it works day to day. For instance, just like other houseless’ people, Alex also questioned the idea of the tangible nature of the American Dream. When I asked him about his perception of the American Dream, Alex said:

What dream? [Laughing] I think for most of us it’s an illusion that’s not obtainable. Unless you’re making big money, which is the tax stuff, I just, I think if anything the American Dream is just to be able to have enough to live on. I mean, it’s not a lot about having two cars, two kids and your own house I don’t think. I don’t see that. You know now, it’s just, the American Dream is just to have a roof over my head and food in my belly. You know, I’m fortunate, fortunate to be able to buy this duplex that we’re in but that, that dream was long gone on my side, really. I owned a house once, way, way back, but after the divorce lost it of course and never really thought I’d own one again. I
haven’t got a retirement, my retirement’s going to be so screwed, so I have to work until I’m 70. So, the American Dream would be retiring and whatever that is.

(Interview Alex, Feb 2, 2017)

For Alex, the American Dream of living an ostentatious reality surrounded by luxury and wealth, has been an illusion for most people inhabiting the U.S. Alex expressed that the cost of living is too high. Since the American Dream is unattainable. Alex’s dream is to have a roof over his head, food in his belly, and hopefully, retire after age seventy. In a similar way, Ethel rethought the value of money and how to spend it:

I don’t… I can’t really even explain I had just never… a dollar wasn’t a dollar, a dollar was: “What can you buy with a dollar? How many… how many dimes are in a dollar?” and “What you can get with the dime?” […] you just think about everything different.

Everything has a value. You never realize before and it has a value, not only as it is coming in, a personal value too and appreciation for it, but everything around you that’s materialistic becomes worthless. And you don’t even think “Oh this was my Christmas present last year.” You’re literally looking at your house, thinking how much can I get for getting this to get us to the next step and so your life changes drastically.

(Interview Ethel, December 5, 2014)

Ethel changed her spending habits and understanding of the value of money as a result of her houseless condition. Changing her mindset included changing her priorities and the meaning of material things that are tied to celebrations like Christmas. Ethel said celebrations are more commercialized than one that “has real value for families and children”. Ethel also developed an appreciation for everything she had access to: “a piece of bread, a medical service, a conversation without feeling guilty, donations, money”. Ethel used to spend money before
without “even thinking about saving”. When we dialogued, Ethel had realized materialism is worthless, and money could be spent on things that would allow her and her children to get their house.

Madison’s perspective on material things aligned with Alex, Ethel, and Sophia’s. Madison said: “We are very attached to material things. You can’t take them to your grave but, you know, still you got to learn to let go of them sometimes.” Samantha, also thought that material things were a distraction and that the commercial value reinforced through media made it harder for people to reject consumerism:

We have so much distraction from what’s real and important. Part of it is commercial, getting things to survive, spending money. I learned to trust myself and not to depend as much on other people; to be careful and not spend so that I can have money in the future; knowing the limits; embellish life; make it look better than it really is or reality check. (Interview Samantha, November 7, 2014)

Samantha’s statement reveals the need to develop skills to analyze media critically. Previously, we heard Chrissane argue that U.S. citizens are “too happy with our TVs and our cars, the ones of us that have TVs, cars, vacations, whatever. As long as we got that, everybody else can do whatever they want.” These “distractions” as Samantha framed the need of consuming material things, or this sense of comfort as described by Chrissane, is the result of “manufactured consent.” As argued by Chomsky (Hutchison, Kelly, Scott, & Chomsky, 2016) U.S. society has been historically built on principles like “manufacturing consent” where consumers’ beliefs and attitudes can be manipulated through advertisements. The goal of advertisement is to “turn the whole society into a perfect system” with perfect pairs like you and your TV set (Hutchison et al., 2016). The concern expressed by Samantha and Chrissane about
the impact that media, advertising specifically, has on citizens’ shopping habits, and more importantly, their conceptions of their lives, is a valid one since media celebrates values like individualism, consumerism, and lack of solidarity and sympathy. These values solidify in people’s mindsets and are “hard to take back from their heads” (Hutchison et al., 2016). Thus, approaching media critically may enhance individuals’ understandings of consumerism but also help develop other values like solidarity and empathy. In that way, Samantha’s suggestion to embellish life could be attainable.

_Nancy:_ What does the American Dream mean for you?

_Lawrence:_ Peace.

_Nancy:_ Peace?

_Lawrence:_ When you hit rock bottom…. It is different for everyone. For me it was when I hit rock bottom when I started to try to make the American Dream. I mean everyone does it in their own different ways but me it was when I hit rock bottom, when I hit rock bottom. I can’t say for everyone else. Peace is… peace would be great, but honestly, I don’t think that is ever going to happen. Peace, no war. Just no more crime, no more drugs. That’d be great, but it is not going to happen.

_Nancy:_ What do you think would need to happen for that to be possible?

_Lawrence:_ (Laughs) I don’t know. I don’t think it will be possible. Drugs have been around for so long that they’re just never going to go away. War, I don’t know. A real cool president, a smart president, not Obama. And being homeless that’d be one thing we can change. Someone needs to go out there and actually put an effort into building. Cause… see they got millions of dollars to build casinos and office buildings and stuff.
But, why don’t they put some of that money into housing for homeless to help them get on their feet

**Walking out into Interstitial Room/Space 2 (Summary)**

What is the purpose of being a U.S. citizen, beyond being “hunters and gatherers” of wealth? Mathew shared some insights and ideas: making sure that the hearts of those you hold close to you and are important to you “stay full” and working hard (again, maybe?) to develop new understandings that may take you to a place where you may feel fulfilled (getting to a “spot where I’m like wow! I understand it.”). Mathew finds the search of freedom challenging due to the constant self-reflexive processes that generate understandings that lead to other understandings. Mathew says: “every time I learn something different, it opens up a whole set of ideas or things.” However, when the interview took place in 2015, Mathew was adopting and perfecting attitudes like: giving, being there for people, following his heart, building a home, and not being judgmental.

The values of a re-envisioned American Dream are: freedom; following your heart and not being judgmental; “learning to let go of material things: Embellishing life”; nurturing your body and soul, honesty and connection to nature; and peace. In their deep self-reflection, houseless people articulated these values. These values may allow us to create an ideology where an embodied sense of community and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing are at the core of the construction of the American Dream. The American Dream could be re-envisioned as a communal effort where owning a house is feasible while raising awareness of the responsibility to support one another. In this American Dream, there is no room for judgment and dialogue will lead to demystifying misperceptions of one another. American Dream There are possibilities to construct an inclusive, fair, and equitable American Dream by: changing
citizen’s mindsets, embracing the whole self (mindbodyspirit); acting upon re-signified values, and developing empathetic listening.

The American Dream may be envisioned as the constant attempt to continue questioning and find answers without imposing universal truths. A humanizing and embodied definition of the American Dream invites individuals to feel and not merely to make thoughtful deliberations. The concept of the American Dream may have removed U.S. citizens’ ability to dig deep in their hearts and face what they don’t want to see: their fears. The re-envisioning of the American Dream may dismantle external fears that shield the ones that represent true menace and may make of social, economic, and environmental justice a reality. This new ideology of the American Dream would allow us to attempt to answer the question: What would it look like not to just survive but to live?
SOUTH-WEST-INTERSTITIAL ROOM 2. LIVING IN THE BORDERLANDS/
UNFRAMING “THE HOMELESS IDENTITY”

The houseless’ body is defined by political and economic forces. As previously addressed, neoliberal economic models align with the American Dream ideology where material success is the measure of a person’s worth. Thus, the houseless is perceived as that body unwilling to strive for an economic status that reflects her/his virtue as a member of U.S. society. Once “homelessness” was associated with the lack of a stable place to live (Lee et. al., 2010; Moore 2007; Shlay & Rossi, 1992). However, the connotation of the term historically evolved, and now “the homeless” is associated with behavioral traits such as being lazy, drug addiction, criminality, or mental-illness. Every label ascribed to the individual who experiences housing instability constitutes a denigrating mark on their mindbodyspirits. Making the houseless responsible for an economic reality that politicians have not been willing to take responsibility for positions the houseless, unfairly, as second-class citizens. Furthermore, governmental criminalization policies towards the houseless and those offering help perpetuate stigma. Additionally, demarcating the houseless’ body with a limited set of behaviors and characteristics, negates the possibility of acknowledging that these individuals possess spiritual, cognitive, and emotional dimensions.

Throughout three years of study, I have been interested in challenging the discursive construction of “the homeless identity”. I have argued that there is not “one way of being homeless”. Houseless’ mindbodyspirits are sites of knowledge and struggle. In the following pages, the houseless position themselves as political citizens and critical thinkers of their own reality and national politics. In this second room/space of analysis, the houseless also embrace spirituality and forgiveness as a major step towards healing. The voices of mothers, fathers,
grandparents, sons, daughters, engineers, therapists, construction workers, and artists are heard. As houseless, they have resisted and responded to prejudice, judgement, stigmatization, and everyday challenges. Houseless’ discourses, actions, and inquiries, not only reflect the process of growth of their consciousness but also, their willingness to take action and be advocates for other houseless or oppressed people. Testimonios are the houseless’ resistance tool against the compartmentalization of their identities. Testimonios represent the third space in which they self-reflect and embrace their whole selves to understand the complexities of housing instability and the intricacies of being. In that third space, the houseless turn down the voices that fragment them and allow themselves to be.

Drawing from Chicana/Latina feminisms, I use the constructs of nepantla, shadow beast, framing, borderlands, and theory in the flesh to discuss the process of identity construction of people who have experienced housing instability in Springfield, a rural town in the U.S.

In Corner 1 I discuss the double consciousness the houseless experienced. Through the discussion of “home” under the dominant discourse of the American Dream, I deconstruct how the houseless is societally perceived and treated and how they see themselves. I use the concept of “nepantla” to allude to the in-between or liminal space of identity construction. I also use “shadow beast” to portray the ways in which unhoused people faced their inner voices of self-doubt and how they survived and resisted stigmatizing voices. In the second corner, I argue the homeless’ body is usually read as a “messy text” (Denzin, 1991), and most of the times is misinterpreted, misread, and misunderstood. I conceptualize possibilities to approach the unstably housed as a multidimensional-intricate-nonlinear text. In this corner, I also establish relationships between microaggressions and individual and societal surveillance. In the third corner, I continue exploring how unhoused people unframe their identities by positioning
themselves as political and historical beings. This positionality is one of the ways in which they continue demystifying the imaginary of the homeless and creating their own identities. This is how this section of the analysis is structured:

Corner 1: Under the Skin. Facing and Confronting the “shadow beast”

Corner 2: How is the homeless’ body read? “Haciendo Caras”

- Microaggressions as surveillance
- Forgiving and resilience as “a politic born out of necessity”

Corner 3: Testimonios as sites of knowledge: Houseless as political agents and historical beings.

**Corner 1: Under the Skin: Facing and Confronting the “shadow beast”**

The world knows us by our faces, the most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the body. When our caras do not live up to the “image” that the family or the community wants us to wear and when we rebel against the engraving of our bodies, we experience ostracism, alienation, isolation and shame. (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xv)

Othered individuals “change faces […] to become less vulnerable to their oppressors” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xv) and to survive. Although “bleeding behind their masks” (Crystos quoted by Anzaldúa, 1990), women of color teach us how to remove the masks imposed by others and “how to become subjects in our discourses” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xvi). In confronting oppression and exposing our “multilayered inner faces […] we begin to acquire the agency of making our own caras [faces]” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xvi). In losing the material conditions that made them full citizens, the houseless are automatically placed in the borderlands of abnormality. In this room, unhoused people share what the shadow beast looks like and how they confront it. They also
navigate the terrains of “Nepantla” and start sharing the ways in which healing and transformation may occur.

“Home” is a core concept with which to understand the process of identity construction of the houseless. The notion of home is intricately connected to the ideology of the American Dream. An individual who does not “pull from [her/his] bootstraps” (Crenshaw, 1995) is characterized as an individual with “low intelligence, low ambition, or morals” (Wright, 1993). Thus, home represents a “source of identity and belonging […] an abstract state of being” (Moore, 2007, p. 145). The concept of home implicitly structures diverse parts of an individual’s identity. Therefore, home is conceived as the physical space that constitutes a marker of success that would make an individual virtuous under the lens of the American Dream ideology. Home, as the physical structure, becomes the identity that defines the worth of an individual. Following this logic, when people lose their homes (physical space), their value as human beings disappears as well.

The fact that an individual cannot afford to rent or own a home, positions her/him in the lands of non-normalcy. In Anzaldúa’s (2000) words the houseless occupy the borderlands:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live there: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the “normal” […] ambivalence and unrest reside there, and death is no stranger (pp. 25-26).
There are two important concepts in this definition which are “border” and “Borderlands”. The term “borders” as the “dividing line” to distinguish a safe from an unsafe place, is also used to separate “us” from “them”. The use of this stigmatizing discursive border demarcates the homeless’ body within a limited set of behaviors and neglects the possibility to acknowledge her/his cognitive, spiritual, ontological, psychological, and emotional dimensions. Implicitly, the use of this expression is already marking a discursive boundary between those who are moral and hard-working and those who are not. It can be argued then that the power of language, in this case, is reflected in how the homeless are sent to the borderlands of deviance and non-normalcy.

_Nancy_: So, what’s the stereotypical image people have when they think of shelters, houseless shelters? What do they think of?

_Sancnite_: hmm, what I… I think they think of people who are… were lazy. I think they think of people who are alcoholics. I think they think of people who are drug addicts. I think they think of people who don’t want anything for their life. I think they think that it’s something that they could get out if they wanted to. And that’s not necessarily the case. I don’t have another option right now. I couldn’t be out of here if I wanted to and I work my ass off every day at work and I still don’t have an option of being somewhere else (crying)

(Interview Sancnite, May 27, 2015)

During the three years of this study, I have heard every descriptor of the homeless mentioned by Sancnite. As a felon who cannot rent a place, Sancnite does not “have another option”.
Once in the “borderlands” people excavate their double consciousness (Dubois, 1903). The houseless navigate their subjectivities through their own and others’ eyes while they make sense of their experiences. In this process, the unhoused faces and confronts the “shadow beast”.

For Anzaldúa (2012) confronting the shadow beast entails standing in front of the mirror and seeing oneself from a different angle:

I was afraid it was in plain sight for all to see. The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with the evil inside (pp. 64-65)

The houseless feels alien. Being aware of the homeless stigma generates a sense of “shame for being abnormal” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 65). The unstably housed is already exposed when walking into a shelter or living in a car in the woods. “The food in the car and the clothes in the back seat and they know” (Interview Samantha, November 7, 2014). Knowing oneself as houseless “does mess up with your mind” (Journal May 12, 2015). Ethel wondered if the stigma was just in her head or if it was how people viewed her. “It’s probably a combination of how I feel myself and how people can view you and kind of talk down to you” (Interview Ethel, December 5, 2014).

Mathew experienced “a lot of doubt and fear. It is in your mind but it is like, it’s hard to be a solid guy” (Interview Mathew, June 8, 2015). Mathew struggled with the images of his multiple selves reflected in the mirror. He felt his masculinity was being questioned. He felt his brothers, wife, and children did not see him either as a “solid guy” or a “role model” who “led by example”. Mathew questioned his identities as a man, a father, and a brother and felt like a “failure”. “My identity as a husband and a father is all I’ve known for 22 years. Didn’t feel like a man. That was really hard for me to deal with”. Under the lens of the American Dream, Mathew
thought his material assets were the ones that defined him. “I lost everything that made me who I
was”. Still, he resisted those images in the mirror by emphasizing that housing instability had not
changed his values. “Hey, I’m still who I am, I still have my morals, I still care about things
[…]”. This insight reflects how Mathew struggled and battled with this notion of the discursive
border “the homeless”, i.e. he was trying to convince others that he did not fit into the societal
stereotype of the deviant and amoral. During his testimonio, he constantly challenged himself
and his own bias. As a man who had worked towards the construction of the American Dream,
he was judgmental of others. But, by interacting with some of the men in the shelter, he saw
himself questioning his own prejudices and assumptions. In his testimonio Mathew also battled
with the word “dysfunctional”. He did not identity as dysfunctional. But, when he thought of the
reasons why he was in the shelter, he thought some of that dysfunctionality might be real.

It has been up and down. I mean right now we have some decent people here. You know?
Once you leave it is going to be even worse. It is like, I wish there was healthier, not
healthier. See, I’m judging but I don’t know how to… I don’t like seeing people that are
not helping themselves. It makes it dysfunctional for me. I don’t want my mind set to be
worrying about everybody else’s stuff. just because I’m in a shelter doesn’t mean that…but it does mean it too. It does mean that there is a dysfunction, or something happened
so that’s where I have to really have work hard to…

Self-doubt was a faithful companion to Mathew. “It gets dangerous. I mean because you
start… I don’t know how to explain it, but you start doubting”. Mathew, like some other
unhoused people, confronted the shadow beast, i.e. he saw distorted images of who he used to be
and how he saw himself while in the shelter. He entered “Nepantla”. The Nahuatl word Nepantla
is that in-between, liminal space, or “tierra desconocida” [unknown land] where dislocation,
disorientation, (Anzaldúa, 2015), fragmentation, spiritual anxiety, isolation, fear, anger, and paralysis are experienced (Anzaldúa, 2002). In “Nepantla” people are “in a constant state of displacement” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 243). However, when the shadow beast is confronted in this unknown terrain “spiritual transformation or re-birth occurs during visionary states of consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 29). In other words, nepantla may be conceived as that stage in which e.g. paralysis and fear occur before transformation is possible. Thus, nepantla is a place of both confrontation and possibility. In the following paragraphs I continue discussing what the shadow beast looked like for the houseless and how they developed understandings and/or raised their consciousness.

For Sophia and Ethel, who had never experienced housing instability, asking for help and going to food banks was shameful. Both expressed that there is a societal stigma associated with those lining up to get free assistance. Historically, the “social welfare system in [the U.S.] has placed blame on the poor for being poor and/or homeless” (Torino et al, 2017, p. 154). Therefore, Sophia and Ethel, like the other houseless people, grew up in a socio-cultural, political, and economic environment where social assistance is offered to those who were not skillful enough to provide for their families. For Sophia, for instance, home was a “safe” environment where everything was provided. But, Sophia’s idealization of home shifted overnight. A domestic violence situation prevented her from going to work and she was fired. After being treated at a hospital, Sophia woke up in a domestic violence shelter. She did not want to see her children. “I didn’t want to see them… yet. Until my wounds were healed or at least until the swallowing had gone and I could face my children. Looking in the mirror was hard enough…” She started
going through divorce without ever legally being married. I not only didn’t have a
house… I didn’t have the foundation or the luxuries we had before that. And my
relationships were nothing of what I thought I had six years ago […] I went to bed with
my children and talked to them in their own home and this is what I woke up to. I
essentially lost everything overnight.

Sophia experienced “many stresses all at once.” She had four children to provide for,
including “a disabled daughter and an infant son”. Initially, Sophia experienced mixed feelings
when she went to the food bank both shame and gratitude. But, Sophia had no time for shame.
She confronted it in the mirror and “got on survival mode”. “It’s amazing the things that you
think of and the ways you are able to survive… because it’s either that or you just give up and
you have nothing. And you just… start using or something to feed that…” Stepping on the
moving grounds of nepantla, Sophia experienced confusion and dislocation, among other
feelings. She had two choices: giving up or surviving. As a mother who went in survival mode,
she became “hyper-vigilant”, i.e. she did “anything necessary to protect and provide for [her]
children” (Hilton & Trella, 2014, p. 455). As soon as she left the domestic violence shelter, her
survival mode went on. “I thought of blankets for the winter time, uh… transportation costs so
that we can stay in the vehicle, so that we had some sort of shelter. It was still summer, so we
could have a tent. It would still be warm so that we could sleep outside for another month.”

In a year Sophia constantly experienced self-doubt, fear, depression, and still she was
remained strong. Looking at the “shadow beast” was not an easy process. Sophia saw a woman
betrayed and taken advantage of. She saw a mother who was trying to build new relationships
with her children while securing a place to live and putting food on the table. As a professional,
she was trying to find a job that might allow her to get the independence she used to have. This
process of self-reflection and facing the everyday struggles of housing instability enabled Sophia to redefine parenthood and “home”.

I was just doing what society teaches you to do. I thought the best parents took their kids to Disneyland. And if you don’t make it to Disneyland then you must have had a bad childhood because you know that’s the mentality that I thought. But, even better parents take their kids to Disney world and I really did. Our goals were summer vacations in Mexico, in Florida, and not camping in our back yard. That’s not fun! Children can’t tell you how many restaurants and different kinds of foods they’ve eaten or different amusement parks they’ve been to or video games they have. They are unable to have any of those memories. But, they can tell when you went on a drive, when you went fishing or just when you walked down to the park and collected leaves and colored with leaves. It’s so simple!

Sophia, on one hand, critically analyzed the ways in which she was socialized into ideas of “good” parenthood that did not allow her to “build memories” that could stay not only in her children’s minds but also in their hearts. Sophia said that the “humble things”, the “simplest things” were the ones she grew up valuing. But, as an adult, her mentality changed and she thought “the goal” would be taking her children to Disneyland. On the other hand, Sophia’s association of home with safety was challenged through her domestic violence experience.

Samantha also listened to her inner voices of doubt, fear, and isolation. Living with her husband was also an unsafe place. The fragment below captures Samantha’s nepantla state:

Do you know what it means to be in the dark? You’re in complete dark and you’re trying to reach outside and you try to walk and it’s completely black and you don’t know what the ground is like. That is what it’s like. It’s being in a different place. I’ve never been in
the dark before. There’s not flash of light. You don’t know if someone’s gonna be around the corner. You don’t know if there’s someone in the bushes. You don’t know if there’s a black animal outside. It is like that, being in a strange place. Someone just takes a car drives you in the middle of nowhere and drops you off. It’s like driving a car without the light. It’s like driving a car 60 miles away and you don’t know where you’re going.

Samantha was in a difficult emotional and psychological place when she decided to share her testimonio. As a woman who had to live in the woods, she felt “disempowered” and “vulnerable”. “I have a lot of fear. Being a woman is different than being a man. Living in a trailer was not safe. Going to poop in the yard like a dog and with the cameras outside. They are everywhere. Women get raped.”

Housing instability made Samantha feel she had no control of her life. She was driven 60 miles away into the borderlands of non-normalcy. Samantha felt her body was an object that could be taken advantage of at any time. She could not easily trust a person. “I learned to trust myself and not do depend as much on other people”. She was afraid and felt non-human. “I can survive like a rat (starts crying). Sorry…It makes me sad. It’s like being a non-human being because I can survive like a rat. I can go and dig in garbage cans.” Apart from looking at her fears in the mirror, Samantha was experiencing “a state of mind” where she questioned her own and others’ humanity. She was also critically analyzed gender roles and an American culture where it is normal for men to have weapons. “All the guys have weapons but a girl does not. Weapons are a part of American life as well. The guys are stronger and they can overpower you” She heard a story of “a girl who had a gun in the car and the police took the gun from her and…” For Samantha, guns were “protective devices” especially for those women who are alone sleeping in their cars.
Nepantla is also “states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews and shift from one world to another” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 248). Samantha was redefining her humanity, recovering her dignity, and using her creativity to rebirth:

Now the light has come. Now the light is here. Everything is fine. It’s not that kind of fear that you’re in the car even if someone’s in the back seat. You’re going in a car someone opens the door pushes you in the car and you don’t know who’s in there or where the key is and you’re going 60 miles an hour.

![Figure 13: Samantha’s Home. Painted by Samantha.](image)

**Walking out into corner 2: (Summary)**

In this first corner I discussed how the word “homeless” is a discursive border that encapsulates the identities of an individual. The societal use of this discursive border led unhoused people to confront their “shadow beasts” or distorted images of who they are. In exploring their double consciousness, people conflicted with their gender identities, felt non-
human, and excavated their own prejudices and judgement towards other people living the same circumstance. In this room, houseless people shared what it feels like and what it looks like to navigate Nepantla, that is the in-between space of uncertainty and dislocation. In Nepantla the unhoused experienced emotions like shame, self-doubt, fear, gratitude, hope, and determination. Although some of these emotions continue accompanying the houseless, some transformations occurred.

**Corner 2: How is the homeless’ body read? “Haciendo Caras”**

As a frame, the label “homeless” imposed by society, media, and policies “demarcates”, “stereotypes”, “blames”, “isolates”, and “punishes” (Gaspar de Alba, 2014) houseless’ bodies. Once, the discursive frame becomes part of society’s common-sense, people feel entitled to respond to the stereotypical representations captured through microaggressions and judgment. Thus, apart from dealing with their own subjectivities, emotions, and disruptions to their identities, unstably housed people must deal with communal, societal, and familial stigma and judgment. In this section, I explore the dynamics and relationships people established with different communities. I discuss the complexity of being both visible and invisible, and an insider and outsider within those communities.

**Microaggressions as surveillance.**

Houseless people had diverse experiences with communities. Some of them found supportive nets. Some others were stigmatized and experienced microaggressions. What is the impact of both realities on the houseless’ mindsets? For Sophia, different members of the shelter and the community “became family”. What started as “mandatory appointments” transformed into “social interactions”.

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And physically and emotionally it does something good for me. If I don’t go to the meetings I can’t verbalize what’s going on. Every time I open my mouth it’s literally… they just branch out where if “it wasn’t anything we can do right here let me show you somebody who can.

As a mother of four children, and a fifth child on his way, Sophia had a difficult time securing help from a service provider. Sophia had a disabled daughter and an infant son which added to the complexity of finding a place to stay. Furthermore, “age wise we couldn’t go into every program. Some places have childcare for six and under. Well, I have children that are six and under and above six. So, that was a barrier”. Thus, the counselors of the domestic violence shelter and the transitional housing program were crucial for Sophia to find a place and start healing. Despite the regulations that Sophia had to comply with, she felt that the willingness of the counselors to share their personal experiences and wisdom made meetings feel “human”. “I can’t wait till my following meeting, it’s an environment that’s comfortable. Sharing my story with you was my therapy today.”

Communities represented hope for Sancnite. Sanctine was a felon. She worked, but she also knew there was not a landlord in town who would take her. However, Sancnite continued being engaged with the community as a survival tactic. Despite suffering from schizoaffective bipolar disorder and being, in her words, “a creature of habits”, she was willing to leave her comfort zone to socialize and branch out. But, in getting involved with the community” Sancnite, a woman in her fifties, expected to meet somebody that might rent her a place so that she could keep on breaking the cycle: streets-houseless-crime-jail-street-houseless.

It’s just really scary and annoying that you don’t have a place to live. Like… even knowing that I don’t have forever here is scary because I know a lot of renters don’t take
felons. I have huge fears about being homeless in the future and it’s even to the point where I’ve just conceded to that fact that I’m gonna be homeless and just try to accept that that’s in my future. so that I can quit worrying about it.

Sancnite lived with the constant fear of being literally in the streets. Sancnite left the shelter after a year of receiving staff support. As a former educator, Sancnite will never be able to teach again due to her felony. So, she will have to continue working in fast food restaurant chains. She continues to work “her ass off” and to seek stability.

Daniel’s experiences with some members of the community have not been positive. He has experienced “various microaggressions”. Torino et al. (2017) state that the blame placed on poor/homeless people by the U.S. social welfare system is a potential venue for “microaggressions” or other “subtle forms of discrimination”. One day, Daniel entered a café in Springfield. He approached the counter and ordered some coffee. The cashier looked at him top to bottom and refused to assist him. Daniel insisted he would pay for the service. Suddenly, he felt he was being observed, so he decided to leave the store. When I asked him what he thought could have been the reason for the cashier’s reaction. He said: “look at me. I’m scary” and he smiled.

Daniel’s answer speaks to the correspondence between his physical appearance and the way he was treated. His body was read, by the cashier as a “brown body” (Cruz, 2001) judged by color, appearance, and class. In Daniel’s mind his height and appearance might be “scary” to others. This circumstance illustrates that not only Daniel’s but also other atravessado’s bodies could be read as texts that disrupt society’s normalcy. Denzin (1997) states that a “messy text” is the one that is untheorized, dismissed, and unread. Therefore, overlooking the houseless’ bodies or lived experiences would turn them into “messy texts” i.e. untheorized,
dismissed, unread. Unfortunately, houseless’ bodies have not only been unread but also misread, misinterpreted, and misunderstood. Listening to the voices of unstably housed people in academia is a way to challenge their status as messy texts and acknowledge them as thinking-feeling-breathing- spiritual agents. Therefore, the houseless’ testimonios are one more step towards the re-birth of their mindbodyspirits and their transformation into multidimensional- non-linear texts. This change implies that reading houseless’ mindbodyspirits, as opposed to reading “homeless’ bodies”, represents a challenge for a culture that embraces a binary lens to make sense of the other.

Cruz (2001) beautifully and sharply states that “[n]othing provokes the custodians of normality and objectivity more than the excessiveness of a body” (Cruz, 2001, p. 659). I argue that, on one hand, the excessiveness of a body, a homeless’ body in this case, may manifest in the resistance to ascribe to a single constraining label making her/him in this way hard to decipher. Mark would rather define himself as “a man in a transitional housing program”. Society had imposed many labels upon Sancnite (felon, drug addict, ex-convict, disabled). She avoided labeling herself, but she mentioned she did not like people using the expression “homeless shelter”. She preferred “transitional shelter” or “transitional housing.” Lawrence would use the expression “houseless” since he does have a home but one that is not necessarily a physical setting. On the other hand, the houseless use their bodies “as the ground[s] of thought” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. ix) of their experiences and use their voices to understand their cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth. Thus, I would argue their mindbodyspirits constitute a rich and holistic ground of thought. This is what the “excessiveness” of the houseless’ body may look like. For these reasons, the label “homeless” is too limiting to capture people’s identities. Although, “houseless” might be constraining as well, people experiencing housing instability use
it to reclaim their dignity. In the processes of identity construction, people struggle with “naming without fragmenting, without excluding” (Anzaldúa, 1998 in Trujillo p. 266). When the people interviewed heard the word “homeless”, they felt sad, fragmented, non-human, and less than human. The reflection they saw of themselves in the mirror when confronting their shadow beast portrayed distorted views but none of them made them feel or look like “homeless”.

As multidimensional-non-linear texts, the houseless and their testimonios and actions disrupt both the discursive construction of the “homeless identity” and the imaginary ascribed to that label. But, throughout this research Chrissane and Alex took one more step to demystify their identities and experiences. Chrissane and Alex presented at an Academic Conference. The room was full of academics: high school teachers, graduate students, researchers, and university professors. Chrissane and Alex shared pedacitos de su vida [slices of their lives]. Chrissane was invited to visit some primary school classrooms to share her story. Months after the conference, Alex also presented his story in a course on Hunger at a university and at a Springfield local community event. Because of his presentation, the students of that course organized a BINGO to fundraise for the shelter. Thus, Chrissane and Alex’ bodies became bridges between lived experiences of housing instability and theoreticians and researchers. Lorde (2007) argues that members of objectified and oppressed groups live a “constant drain of energy” due to the bridges they have to build between “the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor” (p. 114). Thus, until we “redefine ourselves” and “devise realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (Lorde, 2007, p. 115), the minoritized will invest their energy in not being erased.

Communities play a key role for the transformation of judgmental environments. That is why it is important to address what the impact of microaggressions is and how they may
constitute individual ways of surveillance. I briefly discuss what occurs when individuals and communities surveil others and attempt to impose one-sided truths and values. The microaggression Daniel experienced where he felt “sub-human” that is, he was treated in a disrespectful and non-dignified way (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017) may be one manifestation of individual surveillance based on race, gender, and class. Surveillance is usually conceived as “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (Lyon as cited in Richards, 2013, p. 1937). Surveillance is an endeavor commonly associated with governmental agencies, private entities, and individuals conducting “big data” analysis (Richards, 2013). This kind of surveillance is used as a tool of control (Barnard-Willis, 2011, p. 559). Concepts like the panopticon (Foucault, 1977, 1995) and Big Brother (McGrath, 2004) have been useful to understand the operationalization of surveilling and disciplining systems. The surveillance of the twentieth century uses technologies (e.g. electronics, social media) to “scrutinize” an individual’s or a group’s existence in “more comprehensive, intensive and extensive” ways than in the past (Marx, 2005).

In the “liquid surveillance” of the postmodern times, “the watchful gaze of the government” is deeply intertwined with the surveillance by companies and individuals (Richards, 2013, p. 1941). The de-institutionalization of surveillance has made it possible that entities like schools not only train docile children but also supervise parents and collect information about their morals, among other things (Foucault, 1977, 1995). In 1994, de-centralized surveillance led the U.S. government to empower civilians to participate as volunteers to prevent and control legal transgressions of undocumented populations in California (Walsh, 2014). Thus, a portion of
U.S. population has been voluntarily “provid[ing] extensions of law enforcement and state surveillance and security” (Walsh, 2014, p. 246).

Marx (2005) wonders if we “are we moving toward becoming a maximum-security society where every one of our behaviors is known and subject to control” (The New Surveillance section, para. 17). For Marx (2005) a maximum-security society has six features. Two of those features are: “an engineered society in which choices are increasingly limited and determined by the physical and social environment [and] a self-monitored society, in which auto-surveillance plays a prominent role” (The New Surveillance section, para. 18). Conceived in these terms, one of the risks of societal surveillance is “that of self-censorship, in terms of speech, action, or even belief” (Richards, 2013, p. 1949) where individuals choose to comply with mainstream expectations (Mitrou as cited in Richards, 2013). In this case, when societies like the U.S. have adopted the mainstream ideology of the American Dream, it makes it justifiable to measure others through a lens of success where anyone who does not comply to it is suspicious and undeserved of being treated compassionately.

Thus, a “self-monitored” society (Marx, 2005) will adopt roles usually granted to government or the police. Surveillance is usually justified on the grounds of national security and safety. Therefore, if any of its members sees her/his life or the security of their communities in danger s/he will do anything possible to protect it. Daniel’s experience is one of the examples in which self-monitoring may operate at a minor scale in everyday interactions. Other houseless people, like Madison and Ethel, expressed that they had been “talked down to” with pejorative language when visiting some food banks. I experienced this myself. On my day of intake for the shelter, I tried to secure food for myself. But, there was a lot of paper work for me to do before I could head out to the food bank. I arrived five minutes after the time the bank closed. There were
two women coming out from the food bank and one of them did not even allow me to say a word when she said I should have gotten there earlier if I “really” wanted to receive the support. She made me feel irresponsible and guilty for not having made it on time. Thus, at times, communities and families work as regulatory entities that attempt controlling the humanity not only of the houseless.

Racism, “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others” (Lorde, 2007, p. 115) is one of the lenses commonly used in the U.S. to surveil others and build communities. Communities that surveil engineer a society that may become exclusionary and discriminatory. Individuals who disagree with the values and views of those communities, experience dissociation and fragmentation. I present one experiences in which a communities’ values and questioning made one of its members both visible and invisible and insiders and outsiders.

Federal policies have regulated Indigenous identities (Brayboy, 2005; Smith, 1999) and influenced the way Indigenous communities determine “who” may be a member of the community, “how”, and what it involves.

People ask, “Are you an Indigenous from the Inlands [pseudonym]?” I say, “Yes, I’m an Indigenous from the Inlands. I’m full blood Indigenous from the Inlands.” They say, “Where are you from? Are you from North Ville [pseudonym]? Are you from Winchester [pseudonym]? Are you from the reservation?” I say, “No, I’m not from North Ville. I’m from Greenville [pseudonym]. I was born in Greenville. I was raised in Greenville. I’m not, in a sense, from the reservation, I’m from Greenville. I’m not a res, I’m not a res Indian.” I was born in Greenville, but I wasn’t born on the reservation. I lived all my life in Greenville. I’m a full blood an Indigenous from the Inlands but I’m a Native American full blood an Indigenous from the Inlands, born and raised off the reservation so they
have their politics. So, I’m an outsider too, so I don’t get the same benefits as other people would. Like I’ve applied at casino jobs, I’ve applied for housing, they told me it would be 9 years before I can get on the housing list. People think that we get free housing, we get free medical, we get free this or that. They have their own politics. If you weren’t born and raised on the reservation, then you’re not welcome either. So, I wasn’t born and raised in the reservation, so I’m an outsider too and so are my children. So, we are not…

(Interview Isi, November 9, 2014)

Isi has experienced the results of federal policies in the Indigenous from the Inlands community. The state’s “surveillance gaze” was transferred to Native American communities through a policy that served the government’s purposes. Smith (1999) highlights that:

legislated identities which regulated who was an Indian and who was not...who had the correct fraction of blood quantum, who lived in the regulated spaces of reserves and communities, were all worked out arbitrarily (but systematically), to serve the interests of the colonizing society (p. 22).

In the eighteenth century, European Americans created the “Indian Blood Law” or Blood Quantum laws to determine the benefits that the government would give to Native American communities. Most of the Indigenous communities implemented the law until the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act was released. According to Isi, her community is not federally required to abide by blood quantum, but the tribe still has in place that regulation. Isi is full blood Indigenous from the Inlands; still people in general and members of the Inlands Indigenous community question her place of birth and origin. Even though her mom and grandmother are full blood Indigenous of the Inlands, and her uncle is a minister in the community, the
community does not completely embrace Isi and her children. She does not have the benefits those who were born in the reservation have access to. Isi and Lawrence ask to be treated in dignified and respectful ways. Thus, they use discourse as a tool of resistance and survival. They use la palabra [the word] to name themselves, and validate who they are and how they want to be seen. Isi’s voice, for instance, resists to erase her ancestry and her “ways”. Isi unframes her identity and resists “self-censorship” in her speech and beliefs (Richards, 2013), one of the mechanisms of surveillance, by naming who she knows she is:

  I’m a full blood Indigenous from the Inlands. So yes, I know my spiritual side, I know my heritage. Yeah, I know about the sweat lodge, the pow-wow’s, the dancing, yeah, I know my heritage.

**Forgiving and resilience as “a politic born out of necessity”**.

The world knows us by our faces, the most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the body […] *haciendo caras* [making faces] has the added connotation of making *gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures, the piercing look that questions or challenges, the look that says, “Get out of my face.”

(Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xv)

Houseless people have experienced dislocation, disorientation, (Anzaldúa, 2015), fragmentation, spiritual anxiety, isolation, fear, and paralysis (Anzaldúa, 2002). Nepantla for houseless people has been that psychic, intellectual, and emotional space where they have heard the judgement of their inner voices and the voices of communities. Unstably housed people’s double consciousness has held self-doubt and lack of self-worth as a result of those judgmental attitudes, discourses, and behaviors. However, houseless people’s testimonios are a multiplicity
of voices that shout, “Get out of my face”. They have raised their political, critical, empathetic, and humble voices to make their faces or make their identities (Anzaldúa, 1990).

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings- all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience.

We are the feminists among the people of our culture.

[We are the houseless in the land of opportunity]

We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our words.

(Moraga, 2015, p. 19)

Houseless’ “politic born out of necessity” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015) is informed by their desires to have a second chance, survive, and heal. Unhoused people’s politic is to imagine and reclaim a third space, that other side, where they embrace the failure of the past and envision possibilities in the present. Houseless’ future is informed by a present where healing and spirituality are possible. The unhoused walk the spiritual and healing paths guided by forgiveness and resilience. What has it meant to forgive and heal? How have the houseless experienced resilience?

Isi’s story of becoming homeless began many years ago with sexual abuse and addiction. It was not easy for Isi to navigate the judicial system as an Indigenous woman at the age of thirteen:

*Isi:* I’ve been dealing with addiction since I was 13 years old; my best friend’s dad raped me. After that he got 6 months’ probation. And like I said my aunt was an attorney. So, we went against him, but he was rich, white, and powerful and he got 6 months’ probation and I drank over it for 18 years.
Nancy: And how do you feel now?

Isi: I forgave him, like I said I drank over it for a while, but here he probably doesn’t even know my name or anything and here I let him have that much, you know...

(Interview Isi, November 9, 2014)

Some of the houseless people were physically abused when they were children. Some of them experienced multiple oppressions that left their spirits desiring escape. Isi spent years visiting her mindbodyspirit’s wounds, aching and escaping. She spent years trying to face the shadow beast (Anzaldúa, 2012), that is, the fears and demons that accompanied her after the sexual abuse. After eighteen years, Isi was ready to forgive. Forgiveness has been the tool used by unhoused people interviewed to heal. For Alex forgiving himself “for the things he did to [himself]” and forgiving others were important parts for his healing:

Healing? Well, there’s phases. A big piece was being able to heal from not having my buttons being pushed by my parents or the lack of rejection from them. So, there is no more blaming my folks. It was just taking responsibility for the things that I did.

(Interview Alex, February 2017)

For Alex, pain represented “buttons” that were triggered, the ones he learned to control by doing various exercises. One of his mentors invited Alex to share his experience with a class:

So, I begin to tell my story and I start crying, and this is like “shit this isn’t healing.” So, I came back the next year. I did it for fifteen years, talking in this class and the next year I worked with my therapist. Somebody asked me a question about my family, but it was engaged in a way where I could see how it was healing.
Sanctine also experienced healing when she could express her feelings to her mom through letters. As an adult woman, she understands her mom and she believes that some of her personality traits, values, and behaviors resemble her mom’s.

I used to be really resentful towards my mom because I didn’t think that she was very nurturing at home. I didn’t think she taught me how to deal with my emotions very well. I just finally decided that even although that was the case, she did the best that she could. […] she taught me a lot of good things: work ethic, kindness, giving to be part of a community. Things that sometimes when I was teaching at school I would think: “I am my mom, I’m doing exactly what my mom is doing (laughs)” And I would think: “wow she’s… she has given me a lot of good things” I just… I think I just got older and started being thankful and started appreciating the fact that there was a roof over my head when I was growing up.

Samantha firmly believed healing, during the year she had struggled with her divorce and lived in the shelter, had come from the people she had built relationships with:

Samantha shared with me that in a couple of weeks, she will become a migrant worker just as her father used to be. She is moving to LA because she found a place she can rent for 500 a month. She does not have a job secured yet but she said she is going to start a new stage in her life now that she has reconnected with herself. She thinks the love of people who surrounded her during these months experiencing homelessness and the family she could build with those she interacted with in places she reached out allowed her to heal and move on. As she kindly shared with me in our walk-conversation today, part of that healing process involved a spiritual growth.

(Shelter Journal, June 2nd, 2015)
Unstably housed people’s resilience manifested in different ways. For Grady Johnson, (2003) resilience “is an attempt to shape and claim an identity within very difficult personal, tribal, social, and economic systems” (p. 195). In the previous corner, houseless’ pedacitos de vida [slices of life] reflected some of the ways in which they engaged in unframing their identities. Sancnite had medical issues but had difficulties in seeing her doctor due to the high number of patients. Apart from dealing with medical issues, Sanctine was a felon and was having a difficult time “to come to terms with the fact that [she] would be homeless [her] whole life”.

Even though she was earning money, no one in Springfield would rent to her because she was a felon. However, Sancnite continued being engaged with the community as a survival tactic:

Part of the reason I think it’s important for me to get involved with the community is because hopefully I might meet somebody that might have an answer for me, that might be allowed to help me when the time comes to that point, that might know somebody or might have a room for rent or something. I just know that I need to prove myself for a job so that I’m more involved in the community so that hopefully my community will be able to help me when I come down to there.

(Interview, May 27, 2015)

Moving away from her comfort zone and socializing was a way for Sancnite to resist the cycle of street (houseless)-crime-jail-street (houseless). Sancnite has also resisted believing that that is her fate. She continues to work and to seek stability.

For Lawrence, who experienced housing instability for five years in various cities, survival consisted of making assumptions about other people and trying to guess what he could or could not expect from them. However, he mentioned he was once deceived by the looks of a friend of his who appeared to be menacing but he was a teddy bear. Lawrence adds that although
following this rule of “going off looks” might get him “in trouble” “you gotta be that way, you gotta act tough, when you’re really not, to survive”.

Transportation for those who experience housing instability in U.S. rural areas is a “major issue” (Hilton & Trella, 2014). The public transportation system in rural areas is not as developed as in urban areas which makes it difficult to move around town or to other towns; furthermore, seasonal weather can be a challenge:

Chrisanne came to the office at 2 p.m. […] She mentioned she got a job in Greenville but did not have car to mobilize.

(Shelter Journal, June 4, 2015)

Chrisanne is in her sixties and has a physical disability. She has worked all her life but experiencing a disability makes it difficult to be employed. After a month, she finally found a job in Greenville which is 218 miles from Springfield; it is a five hours drive. She had a car but it broke down by the time the job opportunity came. Thus, Chrisanne started to figure out her transportation while getting her car fixed. Sophia expressed that owning a car made a difference when being houseless and moving to a rural area. She could easily take her five children with her and have access to food banks, medical centers, and the shelter. However, getting money for gas was always a challenge.

Houseless’ people have survived and resisted societal stigma by being “active, striving participants” (Grady Johnson, 2003) who continuously resist denigrating representations of who “they are supposed to be”. Sancnite has used as survival tools her willingness to continue working, engage with the community, and create opportunities to continue with her physical and spiritual healing. One of Lawrence’s survival tools in the streets has been to make assumptions
about other people although he also acknowledges they are deceiving. Chrissane and Samantha have figured out ways to get gas for their cars so they may work.

**Corner 3: Testimonios as sites of knowledge: Houseless as political agents and historical beings.**

Periodista: ¿La historia…para qué Diana?

Diana Uribe: La historia para entender la vida y la vida para entender la historia.

Journalist: What’s the use of history Diana?

Diana Uribe: History is meant to understand life and life to understand history.

(Dias de Gloria, 2014)

As historical beings, we occupy specific geopolitical locations that shape our material conditions: cultural, social, and political capital, and individual and collective identities. In looking to the past, humanity has an opportunity to re-signify paths traced: present-day experiences; the sense of self; and the possibilities in writing the present history. Memories are inscribed in our hearts, our minds, and our bodies. Historical trauma resulting from systemic oppression is passed down generation to generation (Burstow, 2003; PBS documentary, 2015). However, individuals and communities have reacted to massive group trauma, what Brave Heart (1999, 2003, 2011) calls “historical trauma response”. For instance, the strength and resilience of colonized Indigenous individuals and communities are reflected in powerful stories, songs, and histories, among other strategies, that “are often present behind the realities of inequality, injustice, and poverty” (Denham, 2008, p. 392).

Similarly, since the 1950’s, Chicana/Latina feminists have center-staged their “mindbodyspirits” (Lara & Facio, 2014) to historicize the multilayered oppression and marginalization within their communities and in academia. Chicanas/Latinas have offered their
bodies “to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge a gap” (Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xxxvii). In using our bodies as bridges that are walked over and over and over again (Moraga in Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. xxxvii), Chicanas/Latinas have attempted to reconcile an oppressive past, exclusionary and rigid religious structures, the un-rooting of familial and communities’ values, and the devaluing of selves. *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1980) and *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s Lives* (Facio & Lara, 2014) echo third world women’s testimonios in different times and spaces.

In sharing multilayered historical and institutional oppressions, both Indigenous communities and Chicanas/Latinas, who also carry Indigenous blood through our veins, have imagined ways to decolonize the mind, the body, and the spirit (Anzaldúa, 1980; Facio & Lara, 2014; Brayboy, 2005, Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous and Chicana/Latina scholars have resisted western epistemic colonization by using our world views to know, understand, and produce theory and research (Anzaldúa, 1980; Anzaldúa, 2000; Ortega, 2016; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Smith, 2012). Our research and theorizing agendas have been informed by deep respect for mother earth and an ongoing development of spiritual activism rooted in critical self-awareness of our responsibility to one another, i.e. our collective and communal thinking and acting. Both stories and testimonios are two of the projects that have informed such agendas, and offer truths different from mainstream truths inscribed in history textbooks or politicians’ rhetoric. The truth offered by testimonios are the result of individual and/or inherited and/or embodied experiences put into dialogue within a specific community.

Testimonios are sites of knowledge that contribute to collective-communal memory building and the writing and re-signification of past, present and future histories. In the previous
sections, testimonios of people experiencing homelessness in a U.S. rural have been introduced to deconstruct the notion of the ‘homeless identity’ by using lived experiences as sources of knowledge (Anzaldúa 1987; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Facio & Lara, 2014). Nevertheless, as Stone-Mediatore (2003) highlights, experiences are not indubitable evidence, rather they are a “resource for critical reflection” (Ortega, 2016), “a resource for confronting and renarrating the complex forces that constitute experience” and “a creative response to socially situated multilayered, only partly ideologically constituted experiences” (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 123-124). Therefore, sharing contextualized narratives of oppressive histories or experiences are important for individuals in the sense that they offer understandings of one’s relationship with sociocultural, political, economic, and historical environments. They are also important to deconstructing ideologies and understanding the values that define who we are as members of a community or a nation.

Three houseless women, share slices of life that speak to their political agency and the recovery of their voices. We listened to their voices in the interstitial room 1 when they deconstructed and redefined the American Dream The women are ten years apart in age. Chrissane is in her early sixties, Sancnite in her early fifties, and Ethel in her early forties.

When I started the research on U.S. rural homelessness, Chrisanne was the second woman with whom I dialogued. When I shared the purposes of the study and explained confidentiality protocols, Chrisanne expressed her desire for her name to be mentioned in the study.

N: […] your name will never appear in any public setting, on any paper, in any presentation that I may do in the future.

Ch: What if I wanted to?

N: Well, if you want to…
Ch: I think I want to. I’ve always wanted to be a part of something bigger than me. I want to be known for it. That’s like my goal in life.

N: That would be great because in that case I could invite you to come to talks and conversations. We have a presentation in January in Spokane so I would like to invite you to a panel to talk about this if you agree.

Ch: I do.

N: That’s one of my goals to have your voices heard by academics…

Ch: And nobody has ever listened to my voice and I have some good things to say. I just want the world to work right and people shouldn’t have to be homeless. So, thank you for giving me the opportunity.

(Chrisan, Nov 7, 2014)

Testimonios consist of sharing what we know best, “familia, barrio, life experiences” (Rendón, 2009, p. 3). Chrisanne expressed her interest in sharing her story and in exploring ways for the ‘world to work right’ and prevent homelessness; “people shouldn’t have to be homeless”, she says. When sharing her testimonio not only with me but with a larger audience, Chrisanne offered a different perspective of what it means to be unstably housed and who a houseless person may be. Chrisanne put a name, a face, and a story in the forefront of the negative label: ‘homeless’. Presenting at the Globalization conference in 2015 allowed her to connect to school teachers who wanted her to talk in their classrooms. Chrisanne’s testimonio is a manifestation of theory in the flesh (Moraga, 2015) in the sense that Chrisanne was sharing her bodily experience as a pedagogical tool (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) to enlarge academic communities’ knowledge about the reasons why a person cannot rent or own a house, the challenges faced while being in a
transitional housing service provider, and her qualities as a human being. Chrisanne was using her testimonio to teach about what she knew best: her life experience as a houseless woman.

As the eldest in her family, Chrisanne was responsible for the care of her siblings. She earned money to bring home and she believed that she had the right to share her opinions. However, she was a still a child, nine years old, and her parents used to tell her to “quit whining” and do what she was told:

I am not a drama queen. I have some good things to say. When I was a child I loved the arcades, I loved playing games. I learned that I can keep kids alive. But there was never anybody that listened to me, never anybody there for me and never anybody caring about how all this stuff made me feel. I always remember being “quit whining, quit whining. Just do what you’re told”. I wasn’t whining. I had an opinion. I’m responsible for this, I’m not allowed to have an opinion? And if I’m responsible, then you don’t believe me. It was difficult.

As a nine-year-old, Chrisanne learned how to care for her sibling and how to “keep [them] alive”, but as she points out, she was not whining. She had an opinion. Even today, Chrisanne considers what she has to say of no value:

I’ve been told that [I should go into politics] all my life, but nobody likes what I have to say. Let’s talk about the pot ban on Oxford. Thousands of people voted marijuana into law and five people are managing to keep people that comply with the law from opening their business. Irregardless if you’re for pot or not, we have a democracy. That’s it! The majority rules. I don’t know my math from my definitions because five people are ruling over thousands of people. How is that a majority?”
In this excerpt, Chrisanne exemplifies how neoliberalism controls the market in such a way that economic profit is secured for a few members of U.S. society. Despite people complying with the law, the monopoly of the marijuana business is in the hands of those who align with specific political agendas. The example provided by Chrisanne is a critique of neoliberal ideology under which “citizenship […] has come to be constructed around market exchange and consumer power”; therefore, those who “funnel money into the economy are those who are considered full members of society and entitled to all the privileges of citizenship” (p. 13). Thus, for Chrisanne the fact that profit and job opportunities are in the hands of a few is a contradiction for a democratic nation. In interstitial room 1, Chrisane analyzed the ties between neoliberalism and the construction of the American Dream. She depicted the existence of two Americas- the one of the wealthy and powerful- and the one for those outside the economic elite. Politicians are their own political reality- “they are their own country”. She sees a country that is divided by socio-economic status. She associated the disparity between the richness of politicians and the conditions of houseless people as a modern manifestation of slavery. “Don’t tell me slavery is dead! It just has a different pace.”

Chrisanne’s description of the greedy condition of politicians speaks to Klein’s (2017) analysis of the results of U.S. 2016 presidential campaign:

The [forty fifth president’s] administration far from being the story of one dangerous and outrageous figure, should be understood partly in this context- as a ferocious backlash against the rising power of overlapping social and political movements demanding a more just and safer world. Rather than risk the possibility of further progress (and further lost profits), this gang of predatory lenders, planet-destabilizing polluters, war and ‘security’
profiteers joined forces to take over the government and protect their ill-gotten wealth

[italics added] (p. 21)

For Klein (2017), the presidential elections represent a movement towards a continuation of profitable, unfair, and unsafe style of governing the U.S. Chrissane’s description of politicians as a minority making profit at the expense of the majority aligns with Klein’s depiction of U.S. forty fifth president and his cabinet. Political and ideological power is secured through economic wealth that is prone to perpetuate neoliberal agendas that are rooted in competition and individualism.

Moreover, the analogy of the U.S. political system with a different kind of enslavement has implications in terms of how the exploitation of labor and bodies continues and offers insights about how neoliberal governments treat impoverished populations. According to Oliver (2013), “[n]eoliberal governments and policies have played a significant role in undermining public support for those living in poverty” (p. 11). Thus, U.S. neoliberal government has set a “war against the poor” where sweeps of houseless encampments are routine and policies that criminalize sitting, lying, or sharing food with the houseless are still in place (Hellegers, 2011; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2016). Neoliberal governments see the houseless as disposable (Hellegers, 2011). But, what needs to happen for this reality to change? For Chrisanne, it entails moving away from a consumerist and alienating culture, consolidating with others’ struggles, and then acting.

Sancnite feels that the unheard voices of houseless people who are felons could offer insights on how to make structural changes in relation to housing instability:

I think there needs to be something that accommodates them [felons] that would help them because we’re out there you know and we’re just not being heard [italics added]
Sancnite’s account raises a question in terms of whose voices are being heard by governmental agencies offering services to houseless people. Certainly, the voices of the felons who experience homelessness are not heard. Still, similarly to Chrisanne, they also have good things to say. Sancnite’s slice of experience, apart from offering a solution to homelessness experienced by felons, portrays the complexity of recovering her location as a U.S. citizen:

[...] I think there should be government programming that accommodates felons because there’s just an incredible amount of felons out there and a lot of them are homeless or stay with a family being a burden on them. If there were some felon programs that help us with housing even if it were just apartment buildings just for felons if they’re worried about putting felon with people who haven’t committed crimes.

One of the first elements highlighted by Sancnite is the large number of felons present in Springfield. When asked about the reasons why she considered those numbers increasing, she answered:

I don’t know what the numbers are but a lot of people in town are on probation and parole. Drugs is the main reason, I guess. It’s easy to get. You have to kind of know people but you don’t have to know very many people. I mean, you can have a job, a part time job and just ask around at your job and you can eventually find what you want [...] I talked to my doctor about it a little bit and she told me that methamphetamine and heroine, which surprised me, abuse in this town is out of control, there’s a lot of it.

Sancnite’s perception about the numbers of people on probation and parole coincide with studies that report “a dramatic escalation of the numbers of drug offenders in prisons and jails- a rise from 41,000 persons in 1980 to 500,000 today [2007]” (Mauer, 2009, p. 10). Therefore,
there is a historical precedent for this reality, and it partly has an explanation in the implementation of a neoliberal economic system. Since 1980, the year when neoliberalism is thought to have started,

prisons have increasingly served as one of the largest purveyors of publicly subsidized housing in the United States for low-income people, and people of color, with a corresponding massive transfer of wealth to corporations that increasingly serve as the cornerstone of the prison industrial complex (Herrevel & Wright, 2007, p. 45).

In this way, federal funds have progressively been invested in the prison industrial complex and the military which represent profitable enterprises (Hellegers, 2011). Imprisonment of targeted low-income and people of color created a “new racial caste system” (Alexander & West, 2011, p. 16) where ex-offenders would continue to be punished symbolically and materially. In this “parallel universe”, legalized discrimination operates through the exclusion in “employment, housing, education, public benefits, […] jury service” and the right to vote (Alexander & West, 2011, p. 141). Sancnite states:

There’s a federal program called HUD and… section eight Housing… and section eight housing won’t rent to felons. And then it’s the policy of the individual apartments as well because they feel like it makes their other renters feel secure if there’s not felons in the building.

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 and the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act 1998 granted public housing agencies the autonomy to exclude drug offenders and felons and to “bar applicants believed to be using illegal drugs or abusing alcohol-whether or not they had been convicted of a crime” (Alexander & West, 2011, p. 145). Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) reinforced these policies by creating the “One Strike Guide” which, among
other things, exerted pressure on housing agencies whose ratings and funding would be determined by the agency’s willingness to implement screening of applicants’ criminal records (Alexander & West, 2011). With these renting policies in place, it is impossible for a felon to get a place of her/his own despite having an income:

It’s just really scary knowing that you don’t have a place to live, like even knowing that I don’t have this shelter forever is scary because I have a felony and not a lot of renters take people with felonies. So, I have a lot of… I have huge fears about being homeless in the future and it’s even to the point where I’ve just conceded to the fact that I’m gonna be homeless forever and just try to accept it, that that’s in my future so that I can quit worrying about it. I don’t want to be homeless. I want to leave the cycle but I only make about a thousand dollars a month and all the places that do sliding scale rent, they don’t take felons. So, I don’t know where I’m gonna find a place that I’ll be able to afford to live unless I may be moving to a hotel or something like that maybe if I can find a cheap motel or I don’t know [italics added]

Sancnite is in her fifties, still visiting her parole officer every week. She has employment, but still she cannot rent a place. Renting policies and federal regulations constitute legalized forms of discrimination where ex-offenders are not offered alternatives to find a place for themselves, which ends in this case, in shelters, living in the woods or in their cars if they have one (Sancnite does not have one at present), or committing a crime to survive when they are denied a job.

Once in prison, individuals’ voices are neglected. Ethel acknowledges her privileged position, discusses the role that race plays in relation to the judicial system, and addresses her desire to become an advocate for incarcerated people:
And I think, well I have a benefit, I don’t have a felony, I don’t have a criminal record. I see people, friends from back in the day to friends I have now that do have felonies on their record, they can’t vote. Well that concerns me for a whole other political reason but I mean those are barriers that I don’t have, so I’m very fortunate in comparison to, I guess, people in their situation, a lot of them have parole, probation and there’s a lot of hoops you have to jump through. I mean every week they’ve gotta remember… I don’t know…I mean I’m lucky, I know how lucky I am not to have that over my head but, so that’s the only thing. That’s kind of where I want to go back to school. I’m glad the program didn’t work for Union University because I do kind of want to do some advocacy work for I think the corrections system is really, really in a terrifying state right now. I do and I don’t think it’s healthy for… And I also feel bad for people with mental health issues, some much worse than mine, that have to go through all of that. The most abused population in the prison system and there’s not a voice there too so, I don’t know, that’s another one of my passions. (Ethel, March 6, 2015)

Ethel suffers from a mental disability and drug addiction; still she benefits from not having a criminal record so that she can use her political rights. She has a say in the political present and future of the country. She attributes her lack of felonies to luck. Experiencing a “mental disability” herself, Ethel acknowledges the challenges faced by felons who are differently abled and the fact that they do not have a voice within the system. Ethel sees in education an opportunity to become an advocate for disabled imprisoned people. Ethel continues to speak about her fortune of having family support and of being White:

Umm.. I just think, I mean it’s so easy for people to look at people that are on the street or who can’t get a job. Well I’ve been really fortunate in my life with the family I have,
the opportunity I have, my race, I’m a white female, female’s not the best but being
white. I mean I have all of these, umm, things that make my life easier that other people
don’t have.

Thus, Ethel acknowledged how being white benefits her in comparison to people of color
who are felons. Although Ethel does not provide further analysis about her gender condition, she
alludes to the fact that being female places her at a disadvantage in relation to her male
counterparts. Ethel continues to discuss some of the obstacles for felons and emphasizes the fact
that a “a lot of felons” are “really good people”. Her comments demystify individuals imprisoned
who are perceived as a threat by policy makers, renters, and other members of society:

There are people I know that don’t have family that are not white and they are felons or
they have a lot of looming court dates or whatever, that are really good people, there’s a
lot of them that are really good people, but I’ve seen a lot of really good people that
through having to jump through a lot of hoops and kind of not feeling like a legitimate
part of society have kind of given up.

In this case, Ethel acknowledges there are certain physical traits or markers that may be
challenging for certain people to feel “a legitimate part of society”. Not being “legitimate”
positions non-white people in a second-class citizen status due to their race and criminal record.

It’s easy to do, I could any time go either way and I think most people could, I just think
people that, you never ever ever know and it could happen to anybody I think, I know
that. Old people, young people, every race, but they can also come out of things, you
know, you don’t have to be in some flop house with a needle in your arm. You can come
out of that, everybody can, but it’s hard, it is rare but it’s the climate of compassion that’s
missing I think with drug addiction and mental health. Well, a lot of things…
This excerpt invites others to avoid generalizations on who the felon is, to acknowledge that anyone at any age, race, or class can experience circumstances that may lead her/him into prison. A person may be imprisoned not necessarily for being a drug addict. Ethel self-identifies as a white-female-heterosexual-Christian U.S. citizen and whose discourse “acknowledges racism as a system of privilege conferred on whites [which] challenges claims of universalism” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 59).

For further dialogue.

As argued by Hellegers (2011) “the voices of homeless people are rarely heard in public, academic, and mainstream media representations” (p. 3). In the process of history writing and memory building, these three female unstably housed people are critical, political, and self-reflective agents who “make themselves possible” (Diaz, April 20, 2017). The slices of experience of these political female U.S. citizens invite us to understand the impact of neoliberal economic and judicial systems and renting policies in their position as second-class citizens. These short fragments portray the double consciousness of being part of a consumerist system and wanting to disrupt it to make possible that “nobody should have to go without food or shelter ever. That should be in the bill of rights” (Chrisanne, Nov 7, 2014). Another voice explored the double consciousness of being aware of crimes committed and of being unable to rent a place despite earning income (Sancnite, May 27, 2015). The third voice explored the double consciousness of acknowledging her white privilege and wanting to use education for solidarity with non-white disabled felons (Ethel, March 6, 2015).

The lived experiences of these three women demystify and re-write erased histories and stories that perpetuate the demonization of “the homeless”. The label ‘homeless’ “misrepresents the heterogeneity of the population and often leads to one-size-fits-all decision-making” (Oliver,
These people put their experiences into conversation with concepts like democracy, citizenship, neoliberalism, and legalized discrimination. The political agency of Chrisanne, Sancnite and Ethel is reflected in sharing their testimonios as pedagogical tools (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) to dignify their identities, envision and/or create change, and disrupt common sense ideas associated with who the houseless is.

While dominant narratives are repeated, endorsed, and made part of common-sense knowledge, the narratives of the marginalized are resisted by systems when they contradict that common sense (Stone-Mediatore, 2003). This dissertation presents houseless’ testimonios to counteract oppressive systems, processes, and practices that silence their voices and create a rhetoric that portrays them as immoral and deviant. The political agenda of this critical ethnographic research has been to offer a space for those whose voices have been ignored, neglected or unheard. Listening to the testimonios of houseless people constitutes a social justice agenda by itself.

Although told in first person, testimonios are critical, political, and collective accounts of embodied experiences of marginalization (Elenes, 2000; Beverly, 2008; Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Testimonio is in Jara’s words a narración de urgencia- an emergency narrative “involving a problem of repression, poverty, marginality, exploitation, or simply survival in the act of narration itself [italics added]” (as cited in Beverly, 2008, p. 572). At the same time, testimonios inform individual and collective processes of identity formation (Yúdice, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2012) while serving as historical documents that inform the future and re-signify the past. Marginalized and minoritized communities have used testimonios to heal, be resilient, produce knowledge, and explain the world through their point of view. Beverly (Smith, 2012) argues testimonio has become a literary method “for making sense
of histories, of voices and representation, and of the political narrative of oppression” (p. 145). According to Smith, the story connects “the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story” (p. 146). Leeper Buss (Elenes, 2000) argues:

   Listening to the stories of many women, I have come to the conclusion that memory itself is a political event. Social structures are often so powerful that they actually format memory into accepted boundaries, denying the validity of experiences outside the parameters of accepted social interpretations and distorting and fragmenting experience. Consequently, creating spaces for memory may be a profoundly liberating and energizing experience (p. 109).

   Preserving memory by listening to testimonios that offer nuanced understandings of a specific reality within a system constitutes an act of resistance and survival. Testimonios constitute a political tool that confronts imaginaries of otherness of minoritized and dispossessed individuals. In destabilizing longstanding truths on homelessness, in this case, testimonios depict a truth coming from lived experiences and not from theorizing and policy making processes alienated from subjecthood and reality. In telling their testimonios houseless people challenge the inherited discursive construction of the “homeless identity” originating in mass media, research, and policies. In this sense, houseless speak as subjects that make use of their right (reclaim their right) to be heard and “to carefully craft truth-telling that is polyphonic in its voice and political in its intent” (Cruz, 2012, p. 98). Houseless people use their voices to dignify their experiences. As political beings they deeply analyze and critique notions that are paramount for the construction of an individual and a national identity.

   **Walking out into interstitial room/space 3**
In this second room, houseless shared their slices of life to dismantle stereotypical portrayals of their identities. They have navigated the terrains of nepantla. They have faced their shadow beasts, created a politic born out of necessity, and theorized or developed understanding from within their flesh and under their skins. The houseless raised their voices to name, unframe, reclaim, and analyze. Through their testimonios unhoused people created a third space of dialogue, forgiveness, resilience, and healing. Unhoused people gave an introspective look at their selves and developed understandings about housing instability; this was one of the steps they gave towards making their faces. As argued by Anzaldúa (2012):

The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads (p. 109).
SOUTH EAST- EMBRACING SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM. SO WHAT?

Corner 1: The story behind “Under the Skin”

How the idea might have been conceived!

Once I landed in Pullman on August 2013, I realized my body was read differently. In the classroom some of my male peers made assumptions about my ideologies and politics, and doubted my place of origin. All their assumptions were grounded in how I looked, how I talked, and how I dressed. In one of the first courses I took, I was asked to introduce myself. While I listened to my peers’ introduction I started thinking who I thought I was. I recalled the subtle pain in my stomach every time people imposed a label upon me. Back then and still today, the way in which I see myself is as a human being under construction. The time passed, and I listened to my peers speaking about self-identification and labels as a political tool to make coalitions and survive. I wanted to understand their realities and understand how labels represent survival for minoritized communities. When I started conducting the study with houseless people in fall 2014, I saw other ways in which labels and ways of self-identification worked. After three years, I had been attending to different spaces to listen and understand. I participated in cultural and academic events and supported diverse people’s rallies (Indigenous communities, Latina/o communities, undocumented students, immigrants).

Although I cannot linearly trace what process of thought occurred first and led to an action, I can mention some of the ideas that had been nested in my mindbodyspirit that might have led to the creation of a space. While I was conducting my research on housing instability, I was taking courses with Dr. Linda Heidenreich on Chicana/Latina feminism and Dr. Susan Finely on arts-based researched. Thanks to my friend Carolina Silva, I was introduced to an opportunity to take a two-week intensive course on arts in her former institution Westminster
College. I had participated in a photovoice project with Dr. Edmundo-Eddie Aguilar and Dr. John Lupinacci. During those three years, I had collaborated with different local artists, including my now friends Danica Wixom and Janellie Pruneda, to offer a space for the houseless and people from one of Springfield’s recovery centers. So, I think ideas were maturing during those three years. In the year 2016, I heard a lot of pain due to the political campaigns. My friends from Iran were aching, my undocumented friends were aching, my LGBTQI friends were aching, my Native American friends were aching, my African American friends were aching, I was aching. It was hard to breath. In June I had left the shelter and I decided to call my friend Alexandra López. Sharing aloud my thoughts and emotions with Alexandra allowed me to pose the questions I had. Somehow, the words “Under the Skin” were crafted as part of that conversation.

**What is the purpose of “Under the Skin”?**

When I started working for the Mestizo Center in fall 2016, and without knowing what would happen within the space, I received full support of Dr. Brian McNeill to organize a series of workshops called “Under the Skin: An introspective Look at the Self”. The goal of the space to speak about identity and use arts to tell “real” stories of who we are. What I conceived as real, were the stories that came from the emotions and lived experiences attending the workshops. The purpose of this space, as announced on the website, has been to:

Have critical conversations about **labels, stereotypes, and ways of self-identification** and to build a critical and dialogical community where we learn from one another.¹⁴

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¹⁴ [https://education.wsu.edu/events/undertheskin/](https://education.wsu.edu/events/undertheskin/)
At the end of the first series in Fall 2016, I decided to dialogue with people about their thoughts and experience in the space. People described the space as “home” and as a place where they could be themselves without feeling guilty. When I heard Faith Price say: “you can’t hate someone once you truly know them as a human being”15, I thought there are ways out of hatred and discrimination. The challenge is how to get us both oppressor and oppressed talking in the same room and listening in empathetic ways. How to be willing to acknowledge that my facts may be mistaken and there are other ways to tell certain stories. After seeing the impact of the space I decided to keep it open and since then people have volunteered to guide workshops.

What about the exhibit?

To honor every one of the workshop collaborators and the participants I invited my friend Janellie Pruned to curate the exhibit “Under the Skin: Dismantling Borders within Borders”. With the support from professor Reza Safavi from the Fine Arts Department, who gave us an affirmative response to use Gallery three for the exhibit, I started thinking out loud with Janellie. “Under the Skin” workshops and the exhibit are informed by Chicana/Latina feminism and Indigenous ideas of reciprocity and relationality (Wilson, 2008). One of the ideas that I also used in this dissertation and that Janellie and I could materialize is the one proposed by Gaspar de Alba’s (2014) “frames”. As seen in the picture below (Figure 14), labels are contained in a frame with a black background, and from its borders there are strings from which the stories of people attending Under the Skin are hanging. People are unframing their identities through story telling.

15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJyvkqhn0oM
What have I learnt?

People need to be listened in non-judgmental ways. People appreciate spaces where they can be themselves. Arts are a space of healing and connection. The things that may bring us together as a people are more than the ones that divide us as human beings. With this space I confirmed that passion and conviction may spark an idea, but community support and other believers and utopians are the ones who make spaces possible. My gratitude is with every one of those believers and utopians. Ah, by the way, homemade food is always good to build bridges 😊

What is the future of Under the Skin?

Hopefully some seeds are carried by people attending the workshops and they will be able to replicate similar ideas in their classrooms and work environments. I am taking the lessons I learned with me to Colombia to generate the same or similar spaces in my

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16 Photograph taken by Matthew Vaughn.
country. People in our region and beyond are doing great things already to disrupt dominant discourses of hatred and discrimination. My respect to those educators like professor Melanie [pseudonym] who is engaging her students into insightful conversations:

**Figure 15**: Teacher Melanie’s email [pseudonym]. October 5th, 2017.

**Corner 2: “My story is the only thing I own”**

“…the past is at its best when it takes us to places that counsel and instruct, that show us who we are by showing us where we have been, that remind us of our connections to what happened here” (Chapman cited by Basso, 1996, p. 4)

This present will become a past where selected memories will be built for me to understand who I may become in the future when I read these lines with a new awareness. The awareness I achieve, the way I see existence will be informed by experiences I live in this present. After seven days in the shelter my mindbodysoul, in this present, urges me to continue moving away from a theoretical, cold, detached, big wordy academic environment. How would those big words, apart from making me sound
articulate enough to be considered an expert, allow me to contribute to the transformation of the lives and realities of those around me, of those nobody believes in, of those stigmatized, of those who have been put down by a society that neglects the existence of the weakest? How can I support the lives of those who are dying and asking not to be resuscitated because death seems to be the place that truly feels like home? How to be there for those who have already gone in search of that home being too young to have departed? I do not think four years of studies can turn me an expert in any topic. I do not want to be an expert with my dissertation. I just want that more people realize that when we commit to one another every day little changes can happen. Working together we can reach the shore in the middle of the storm.

(Journal Shelter, Day 7, May 18, 2015).

The future is present now and here I am looking at the past. “SO WHAT?” has been a latent question in my study since day one. You might remember Samantha, the woman whose words are a bell ringing in my consciousness: “My story is my work of art. It is the only thing I own”. Being aware of the stigma towards the houseless, I felt I needed to share some of the testimonios to start the dialogue with the local community about who the houseless may be. Joanna Bailey, director or Neill Public library was familiar with my work and she offered a space for me to conduct three workshops.

I felt nervous while I was planning every workshop, during the workshops, and before the next workshop. I did not know how people were going to respond to the invitation to listen to these stories. I had other people’s lives in my hand and the responsibility to share them in respectful and thoughtful ways. Not knowing for sure who the audience would be but assuming people in the room might have a unidimensional idea on the houseless, my goal was to plan a
series of exercises through which we could start empathizing. Ambitious but without expectations I started planning the three workshops called “My Story is the Only Thing I Own” Houseless’ testimonios of survival & resistance.

The selection of the stories to be shared and the ways to address the conversation were carefully planned. My advisor Pamela Jean Bettis, offered her ears, heart, and mind to listen to my ideas, and listen to the first six-minute story I was planning to share. I was insecure about what I intended to do, and Pam allowed me to think aloud and continue crafting the first workshop. The day I offered the first workshop, Pam’s presence was important since I would have a person who could have intervened if needed and with whom I could process thoughts afterwards. I made a carrot cake for day one of the workshop. Joanna brought fruit and sandwiches. We arranged the room to host twelve people. People started coming into the room. I was greeting everyone. Suddenly, we had to pull some more chairs in. And suddenly, the room was packed. I was trying to focus on my ideas, while greeting people and trying to be welcoming. I did not see myself, but I am pretty sure I was walking in all directions.

When Joanna walked to the front of the audience to introduce me. She looked at me, and she must have perceived my nervousness and said: “Breath”. I looked at her and said: “Yes” with a serious expression while still trying to focus and get into that place in my brain where the information was stored. Once I started talking I became more confident. Once the workshop was over, the nervousness stayed until the next workshop. Those stories are the most precious possession to the houseless people I had shared with. I know them. I have memories with them. I lived with some of them. We planted a garden together. We laughed. We played basketball and created our own dining area in the basketball court. In the mornings, I heard five-year-old Missy’s (pseudonym) voice calling my name while she walked in front of my window before
going to school. Sancnite and I had an early thanksgiving. May was the month of our thanksgiving. Just because the universe conspired and some people donated some turkeys that were about to get wasted. I know them, and I could not fail them.

**Towards a critical pedagogy of empathetic listening.**

Paul and Elder (2006) argue our thinking “is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced” (p. 4). Although they do not intend to set a “value free” criticality, they revised the intellectual and affective traits proposed by Bloom (1979) in the *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. In the revision they created eight intellectual traits of virtues. One of them in intellectual empathy (Paul & Elder, 2006). Being empathetic entails to “reconstruct accurately the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own” (The Critical Thinking Community, 2014, para. 3). So, how do we get people from diverging views to consider acknowledging others’ grounds of thought?

In the three workshops I tried different strategies. In the first workshop, I invited participants to engage in a conversation about one of the values most U.S. citizens live by: the American Dream. After, I wanted to know what people’s assumptions on the houseless were. But, I did not want them to feel exposed or judged. So, in advance I had left color cards and markers on the tables. I asked people to write the assumptions, prejudices or stereotypes they held about “the homeless”. I told them to keep the cards until the end of the workshop. Then, I introduced a six-minute audio clip of Sophia’s testimonio. In order to guide the conversation, I asked questions like: How would you have felt if you had been in Sophia’s position? I realized that when the questions were asking the participants to imagine themselves in Sophia’s situation, in this case, to explore their own emotions, attendees avoided answering the question. They kept on answering about the emotions they perceived from Sophia. When I prompted for a second
time: how would you have felt? Would you have felt angry like Sophia? A woman replied: “She is angry, but I don’t know what she is angry about.” Throughout the whole session there were some who wanted to know the why’s and why not’s of Sophia. “Why didn’t she reach out to family?”, “did she have a degree?”, “was she educated?” People in the room kept on being judgmental and questioning Sophia, despite all the facts she had already shared with us. She talked about her new job, her domestic violence situation, how she lost her job, and how she was in survival mode as a mom, how she learned to value money differently and what home meant to her.

After we listened to the testimonio I asked attendees to look at their green and orange cards where they had written the words that portrayed their imaginary on the houseless. I asked them to look at them and analyze if Sophia’s story had challenged any of those stereotypes or prejudices. Then, I asked attendees to put on the board the stereotypes that were challenged. A few of them did. At the end of the workshop, I collected the labels left on the tables, and this is what I found:

![Image of cards with words]

**Figure 16:** Workshop 1. Demystifying the houseless.  

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17 A Workshop part of the series Fall 2017: “My Story is the Only Thing I Own”. Houseless’ Testimonios of Survival & Resistance. Photograph taken by Nancy Carvajal.
At the end of the first workshop, I realized that unless the life of the houseless be scrutinized from different angles s/he has a minimum chance of being treated with compassion. In the second workshop, a white Christian woman said there was nothing else to do about housing instability because there was one Christian led center in town getting in charge of the issue. I started asking more questions to understand what led her to think in those ways, but she decided to end the conversation when I was asking maybe too much. In the third workshop, I was surprised to notice that there were people in the room who had attended the whole series. Apart from listening to one more testimonio, the last session invited us to discuss about little actions in which we would be willing to engage. One of the women said she would be interested in talking more to people and listen to their stories. Another volunteered to support one of the local shelters to make food for people in the shelter. One more woman said, she had learnt about the use of the word houseless.

When the third workshop was over, a woman came to me and said. “I know I came with my prejudices in the first workshop, but, after that workshop during that week I came across two families who had a similar experience to the one of Sophia.” Then she said, “the fact that we listened and discussed Sophia’s story allowed me to empathize with them”. I could not believe what she was saying. She used the word “empathize” and that for me is a good sign since most people in the U.S. are used to use the word “sympathize”. But, rarely, I hear “empathize”. Another woman came and told me, she was driving and saw a man who she thought could make use of a ride. Initially, she passed him by. Then she decided to give the loop and return. She offered the ride still with the fear he might harm her in some way. As she kept on driving, through the conversation she found out that this man was from California. He was wealthy and had farms. But, a cow bumped him in the head and since that moment all his money was spent in
medical bills. I missed the part of the story of how he got to Washington State but what this woman started to reflect about was how prejudices work and the fact that you never know when it is safe to act in certain ways. I know it is hard to navigate those grounds of safety and unsafety.

Having this interaction with members of the community, left me thinking about the act of listening. What do we listen to when we walk into a space? From what places do we listen to the other. I also started thinking what it needs to happen for university reporters to listen and decide to use a different discourse when referring to the houseless. A reporter came to the last session. He listened to the testimonio and then I talked to him for about two hours about the purpose of the space. The following day, he published some news where he referred to the houseless as “an epidemic”. Furthermore, he was inaccurate in the stories he wrote about the houseless. I wrote the editor asking for a correction. But, the correction was a brief comment in small print in one of the corners of the paper. That act made me think again about the act of listening. The reporter had decided to use some discourses that continue to stigmatize the houseless. I understand there are time constraints to write news at the university. Still, he could have made different choices in terms of the language used.
Mark- It’s just circumstances, some circumstances that will just take you to the streets or a shelter.

I was born in the hills of Dover. We had 40 hectares of wood to run through. We used to ride bikes with friends. I remember just walking with friends to the school, back and for. The school was just down the hill. Mr. Winchell, we called him, used to fix bikes for us, put bikes together for us and he used to give us candies. He was nice. Mr. Winchell. I don’t really know what his real name was. Where we lived there was a driving theater across the freeway. We used to stay up in the hill and we could watch some movies and relax. I lived in Ashland. I was an underground miner for fifteen years, working in the mines. Dover is more beautiful than anywhere else cause of its woods, the trees, the animals, the lakes. I moved to Dover two years ago cause my sister got killed in a car accident. I came back to view of nephews and nieces. I came up here was for myself and I tried to help my niece and nephews as much as I can. Then my girlfriend decided she wanted her space and stuff so that time I became homeless. Then my little brother died. So, I got a lot of not so good stuff either happening. Then my mother and father died of course. I got not… not brothers and sisters here but I got a daughter that lives in Rural Town and that’s a close start. I still get down about these deaths. That’s not easy you but you got to work to solve problems and things like that. Everybody has lost somebody and you got to work through the time, so I mean… it’s hard.

How did you find out about this shelter?

I went to a medical center ‘cause I had depression so I wanted talk to them about my depression issues. I didn’t have a place to live so I came to the shelter four weeks ago.
Any lessons that you have learnt from the process?

Yeah, I try to save money so that I wouldn’t be homeless you know, cause I’m the kind of guy that likes to help people out, and if I got money I’d give it to whoever needs it. Then I’ll be right here. That’s what my dad was like. He made sure people received his support. He didn’t… he never did no wrong. He was just too nice. I can never not be nice. I am 51 and I have never had a place of my own. Just rented some nice places. I would like to own my own place, buy me my own place and have a good property. I don’t wanna buy… I don’t care about having a lot of things you know, the American dream. If I have a home, a roof over my head, a place to live and, you know, just to be… what you call it, comfortable but not, I don’t care about to have a lot of money or if I’m rich. I’d live in the mountains in a cabin. That’s my dream, living in a large cabin down the hills. My dad always told us stories about living in the mountain somewhere we didn’t have to worry about having to go to a store or nothing to get food cause you had your own food from out there by killing your own stuff, no having to pay bills like you have to do now. In the mountains, you have water to drink. You do all you want to do. Just being on your own, taking care of yourself.

What is the American dream for you?

Just to be comfortable, have a home, just have a little money, and not have any worries. The American dream for society, for media is… they want money, so, I’m money for them.

How do you feel about the use of the term “homeless”?

For some people, the homeless is the druggy or the criminal, you know. There’s a lot of them, but I’ve never done it you know. I don’t drink, I have never got drunk, I’m not a druggy, never smoke, never cheat. I am as clean as people out there, you know.
SOUTH. THE PLACE OF RE-BIRTH (CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS)

Who can we be and become? In the final part of this journey I attempt to answer the "So What?" question of research. What does the analysis teach us about how this social "problem" has been understood and defined by those who live this condition and those who do not? What does it entail to decolonize a critical ethnographic study? In this section, I challenge dominant discourses that shape how the houseless are understood. I also discuss the role spiritual activism plays when decolonizing the self and critical ethnographic studies. I then suggest some community actions and alternative policies that local, state, and federal governments might consider for integrating the houseless into our society. Finally, I consider my own future as a decolonizing researcher and what my future research trajectory might entail as I return to Colombia.

Conclusions

Societally and discursively, rural homelessness has been rendered invisible compared to urban homelessness (Cloke, Johnsen & May, 2007). First, rural “morphologies” which are the areas of concentration of homeless people are hidden (Cloke et al., 2007). Second, the socio-cultural values that inform the practices, thoughts and discourses of rural and urban dwellers lead to the idealization of the rural setting and therefore, to the neglect of the existence of homelessness (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2002). Third, the “standard conceptualizations of rurality (as space) and homelessness (as a social problem)” suggests that the latter is a “transgression of socio-spatial expectations” (Cloke, et al., 2007). These last two discursive practices lead people experiencing housing instability in the rural areas where they were born and raised, to choose to be invisible and seek housing or shelter elsewhere (Button as cited in Cloke et al., 2007).
Homelessness is a structural and political problem that is commonly pathologized in research and criminalized through policies in the U.S. The testimonios interpreted in the first two interstitial rooms of this study raised critical analysis from two perspectives. First, the houseless people, as critical thinkers, deconstructed the American Dream and redefined it. Second, the “pedacitos de vida” [slices of life] presented demystified negative and universal discursive constructions of the identities of unhoused people. The unstably housed in this study navigated their double consciousness to understand their experiences and analyze their evolving process of identity architecture. They named their multiple identities and used expressions like “houseless” and “a human in a transitional housing” to define who they are.

The houseless’ mindbodyspirits in this study used forgiveness and resilience as tools of survival and healing. These mindbodyspirits challenged the ways in which their bodies were read. The houseless testimonios constitute historical texts to build collective memory on houselessness that manifests in the present and will continue to be latent in the future if politicians do not have the political will to change economic models. Just as Hoggart described the culture of an unrecognized working class in Britain, houseless are “people making a life, giving their life meaning” (Hall, Slack, & Grossberg, 1983, p. 21). And that is one of their ways to resist the denial of their multiple identities.

Implications for Research and Practice

Decolonizing the Self: Theorizing and Living in the Flesh.

Chicana/Latina feminism created alternative ways in which Mexican American and other mestiza women found value and worth in their selves. Self-identifying as a ‘feminist’ entailed being demonized and rejected by many members of the Chicano community and by institutions like the church and family. Chicana feminists have found their voices in using their lived
experiences to critique communities ruled by heteronormative values. Oppositional or differential consciousness and framing theories depict the complexities of ‘being’ in current neoliberal socio-economic and political societies. Those same theories constitute possibilities to resist further exploitation and discrimination by building communities of solidarity, understanding, and action. In doing so, a politics of decolonizing the ‘self’ takes the stage by “being present” within academic and research environments. Being present means embracing our mindbodyspirits to listen empathetically in our interactions. It means not having expectations of the other and using our emotions, thoughts, and actions as sources of knowledge, understanding, and possibility.

Decolonizing the ‘self’ then entails individual and collective action informed by a revolutionary love that leads to healing. Healing comes from a belief that does not “[let] the rest of this oppressive society dictate our behavior, devour our energies, and control us, [mind], body and soul” (Davenport, p. 86). Therefore, Chicana feminism may be conceived as an activist methodology. This methodology “raise[s] awareness, to effect social change, to represent, to give voice, to make visible, to expose, to problem-solve, to bridge community needs with academic resources” (De Alba, 2014, p. 4). I argue objectivity has fragmented the mindbodyspirits of researchers by turning subjectivity into a non-scientific and illegitimate practice. Chicana feminists challenge this notion by using “spirituality [as] a decolonizing tool and a liberating practice when ‘[c]oncretizing our spiritual lives through words and image, and in turn, spiritualizing our material lives’ (Facio and Lara, 2014). Anzaldúa’s constructs of *nepantla*, *borderlands*, and *shadow beast* allow us to explore the depths of subjectivity and identity construction by embracing our mindbodyspirit. Moraga’s *theory in the flesh* permits us to see the possibilities of naming our contexts and realities and “making our faces” (Anzaldúa, 1990), i.e.
unframing our identities, by naming ourselves and sharing our testimonios. In this journey, the researcher and the participant are positioned as “selves-in-relation” and embarked on a journey of knowledge, understanding, and solidarity.

Spirituality may be conceived as “a way of understanding someone’s [or a community’s] position in the world by trying to make sense of unfair economic conditions and gender inequality, and to do something about it” (Elenes, 2014, p. 44). The pragmatics of decolonizing attempts of the ‘self’ involves the power of individual and collective efforts for social justice and transformation infused by spiritual activism. In the Interstitial Room/Space 3 entitled Embracing Spiritual Activism: So what? I shared two concrete examples that speak to my attempt to embody and put into practice spiritual activism.

The ‘self’ decolonizing pragmatics is also nurtured by researchers’ willingness to fortify a third space of possibilities where their values and belief systems are continuously re-evaluated, put into dialogue, and negotiated. Decolonizing the ‘self’ entails listening to the body when conducting analysis, that is, bringing the researchers’ memories and lived experiences to dialogue with the participants’. In this way the researchers’ mindbodyspirits (Facio & Lara, 2014) do not have to debate with discourses of objectivity and do not have to neglect any of the dimensions that make them human.

Epistemologically and ontologically, decolonizing the self in this study, allowed me to embrace my own and other selves in relation to our “minbodyspirits” (Facio & Lara, 2014) as sites of knowledge, resistance, and survival. In this case, the exchange of our lived experiences encouraged unhoused people and myself not only to build trust but also to create relationships where honesty, respect, and care permeated our interactions. Acknowledging the houseless’ cognitive, ontological, psychological, spiritual, and emotional dimensions has been key to
explore the subjective and complex realms of identity construction. Sharing my spiritual understandings and emotions permitted me to create spaces of “mutual recognition or communion” where we (researched and researcher) met as “sovereign equals” (Benjamin, 1988).

Methodologically, knowing my own stories and identifying with similar struggles or visions of the world, has enabled me to avoid judgment and challenge assumptions. As a researcher, I learned to let go. This means I learned how to avoid surveilling houseless’ people’s lives and honor our encounters. There are memories and conversations that will remain in us and for us. Decolonizing the self has involved being present without questioning or expecting anything in exchange. In three years I have been present by listening, crying with them, respecting silences, walking together, cooking together, fundraising, offering spaces for creative expression free of judgment and expectations, hugging, and creating spaces to raise awareness (conferences, art exhibits, fundraising). Doing decolonizing/decolonized critical research is an embodied-visceral, organic, emotionally invested- practice rooted in real life actions and in a deep listening to or own and others’ voices. Decolonizing/decolonized research is infused with knowledge that comes from the places we have been to, the places we inhabit, and the places we envision. Decolonizing the self becomes meaningful when individuals listen to the sound of their own voices and explore their own paths and negotiate ways of being inside and outside communities. Decolonizing the self invites us to move away from the position of the ‘know it all expert’ and sit down and listen, reflect, learn, and act.

Every action I have taken as a decolonizing human being under construction and New Mestiza scholar is grounded in an ethics of care and collaboration. Wilson’s (2008) notion of “authenticity” informs this ethics in which I have “reflect[ed] and [built] upon the relationships between the ideas and the participants” (p. 101). The relationships I have established with the
selves-in-relation (participants) and the communities, where I have presented this study, have been also part of my ongoing critical and self-reflective processes. In this ethic I have also been aware of the responsibility of having in my hands other people’s lived experiences and I have tried to treat them with the same respect and love with which houseless people shared them with me.

**Further research**

Hellegers (2011) argues houseless people have been studied “to death” yet their voices “are rarely heard in public, academic and mainstream media” (p. 3). As argued by Somerville (2013), one of the lessons to be learned from research on houselessness is that:

First, we must pay more attention to people’s life stories; second, we must set these life stories in the context of the life stories of those with whom they come into contact, including the life story of those who listen to these stories; third, we must reflect on the meaning of these life stories in the construction and maintenance of different cultures, seeing cultures as interactively and discursively constructed across a number of dimensions; and fourth, we must analyse the relationships between different cultures, thus building up an overall picture of how homelessness is produced (pp. 408-409).

In this sense, unhoused people’s lived experiences challenged the building blocks of the “homeless identity”. These experiences allowed us to navigate the subjectivity of identity construction processes and embrace a wholistic view of the houseless. These testimonios spoke to the ways in which national identity and social identities are constructed and how they impact an individual’s identity formation process. Testimonios of houseless individuals are key to understanding the ways in which neoliberal economic models, social welfare systems, renting policies, and judicial systems work to maintain subjugation of working and low-class
individuals. Housing instability “has meaning and implications beyond access to housing” (Aviles de Bradley, 2015, p. 11) that need to be further explored to build sustainable and empathic communities. The testimonios of the houseless reveal important insights on discrimination and stigma that also need to be further studied as highlighted by Torino et al. (2017).

Often “theory becomes a bodiless entity, a concept and a framework whose interests lie outside our social environments and that is unaffected by the workings of our everyday material realities” (Cruz, 2001, p. 659). In cultural studies, theory may be used to produce “theoretical knowledge as a political practice” (Barker, 2008, p. 5). In my understanding of political practice lies the responsibility to share knowledge with communities and explore ways in which exclusionary or divisive dynamics of interaction and/or language use may be transformed. As a critical and social justice oriented English as a Foreign Language educator, my political responsibility also takes place in the classroom. Due to the understandings developed throughout this study, I will continue to educate pre-service teachers with a reinvigorated social justice lens.

**An invitation to the communities**

Dear members of communities: You are the key to social justice and transformation. Let us undo the borders between one another.

As a minoritized and oppressed, and objectified body, I include myself in this group, I invite us to ruminate on Lorde’s (2007) questions:

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and will die of them still in silence? (p. 41)
As a member of a societal privileged group I invoke you to ask: From what place do you listen to others who are different from you? How do you listen to others’ stories? What stories that are different from yours have you listened to in the past week and how have you responded to those stories? If you listed the aspects that separate you from others who are completely different from you, what could be an alternative list of things that could bring you close to them? Why should you do it? Why not?

**Implications for Policy**

“God bless you and God bless America” is a common statement made by U.S. political leaders. Whose rights and interests is the U.S. government serving? Referring to the McKenney Vento policy, Aviles de Bradley (2015) emphasizes the need to move from a “charitable” to a “rights” approach to policies that may not only “reframe our understanding of the policy” but also create “a strong system of accountability for individuals, schools, and districts responsible for enforcing the rights of students experiencing housing instability” (pp. 20-21). Although, charitable acts serve the immediate needs of unstably housed people, those actions do not “address the conditions that give rise to homelessness” (Somerville, 2013, p. 403). The 2016 report “Housing. Not Handcuffs”, prepared by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), denounces policies that criminalize houseless people such as evictions, orders to move on, trespass and banishment, and enforcement of criminalization laws by private security personnel (pp.28-32). Equally, if not, more important, the report offers alternatives to criminalizing policies and practices in three areas: “constructive solutions to homelessness and policy recommendations” (pp. 40-43); “preventing homelessness by strengthening housing protections and eliminating unjust evictions” (pp. 44-45); and “end[ing] homelessness by increasing access to and availability of affordable housing” (pp. 46-49). Furthermore, the report
offers a “Housing Not Handcuff Model Policy” (p. 72). As argued in the report, studies on homelessness in Central Florida and Seattle reveal that providing housing is more cost effective than criminalizing homelessness. The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, for instance, estimates that chronic homelessness, costs the public between 30,000 and 50,000 dollars per person every year (NLCHP, 2016).

Housing instability is a reality where both individual and structural factors play an important role. Deficit rhetoric around homelessness portrays the individual at the beginning of a cycle where crime-drug-addiction-jail-streets-unemployment follows one personal decision. However, critical scholars and this research show that there are structural factors like a neoliberal economic model that must inform a different logic for understanding homelessness. In this case, the government is at the beginning of the cycle orchestrating the material conditions to reduce affordable housing, increase renting costs, write criminalizing policies, and use a rhetoric of deviance and blame. In this cycle, working and middle-class citizens are pushed into the streets at risk of developing mental health issues and being at the mercy of societal stigma and shame.

Homelessness criminalizing policies are dehumanizing. Therefore, affordable housing is a human right that needs to be procured, even more so when homelessness and poverty are intricately connected to hunger and food security. It is important to remember that children and youth are also impacted by this reality that represents a burden in their educational and growth processes. Jeff Bridges, the founder of “End Hunger Network” states:

Patriotism. Can there be a more patriotic thing that making sure our kids are strong and healthy. It’s not what celebrities can do but what everyone can do. Look into your heart and see what you can do” (Pink the Truth, 2017).
Figure 17: 6-year-old Massey planting in the shelter’s garden.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Photograph taken by Nancy Carvajal.
Collective Creation made between 2015 and Fall 2017 in different spaces. A hundred people wrote, drew, and/or painted what home meant to us. Among the creators are houseless people, community members of the Palouse, and international students, among others.

*Figure 18: “Home”*¹⁹

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¹⁹ Collective Creation made between 2015 and Fall 2017 in different spaces. A hundred people wrote, drew, and/or painted what home meant to us. Among the creators are houseless people, community members of the Palouse, and international students, among others.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education
Study Title: Homeless Adults’ Voices on Identity and Belonging
Researcher: Pamela Bettis, PhD. Associate Professor
Department of Teaching and Learning
338 Cleveland Hall, Pullman, WA 99163
509-335-2653 bettis@wsu.edu

Briefing:
Thank you for giving us the opportunity to learn from your experience and understand how homelessness has shaped your life and social/work /family relationships. I will audio-record our session as you consented in the form you signed. Is it correct? I remind you that all information that may identify you will remain confidential at all stages of this process.
Do you have any questions before starting the interview?

1. Let us start by talking about where you were born. Could you please describe the place where you grew up?
2. What was it like to live in that place?
3. How important was family to you while growing up in that place?
4. What is one of the most vivid memories you have from childhood? (Probe for place if necessary tell me about the place or where this event took place)
5. Growing up what did home mean to you?
6. Tell me about other places you have lived in your lifetime. Which of the places that you have lived feel like home to you? Why? Why not? How did you become homeless?
7. How did you respond to being homeless?
8. How did being homeless shape your family dynamics/relationships? (immediate family: kids, spouse; extended family)
9. How did being homeless shape your relationships with people outside of your family such as: friends, co-workers, or church members?
10. What other dimensions of your life were affected by homelessness?
11. How is Sojourner’s Alliance like a home/unlike a home?
12. What have been the biggest challenges you have experienced for being homeless?
13. What do you think are some of the lessons you have learnt from being homeless?
14. How would you describe the woman I have in front of me now? (What have you learned about yourself? Do you see a different woman from the one you used to be before being homeless?)
15. Describe the place that you would like to live after you leave the shelter?
16. Do you have anything more you want to mention in terms of how your experience as a homeless?

Debriefing: Thank you for your openness and honesty. I hope we can continue sharing more insights on your experience.