

MOXI

~to~

Lettering

MY

SINGLE

MOTHERING

↙ JESSICA ROBLES ↘



Mi Madre
Felipa Margarita Yaya Palomino
Mis abuelas
Sabina Leonor Palomino Velarde
Rosa Irene Espinoza de la Calle

Dedicated
to

Mis hijas
Anita, Erica and Mariela
my favorite daughters

Parenting solo—just like any kind of human activity—means nothing is perfect: you make mistakes, you run out of energy, you ultimately have only yourself to depend on. Sometimes things get done halfway. None of that fits into the obsessive perfectionism that strongly underlies current parenting norms. Thankfully, though, it fits with our basic humanness, which means we can forgive ourselves, and accept ourselves (and our children) as we are.

Khadijah Queen, *Mothering Solo*



@ JESSICA ROBLES 2023

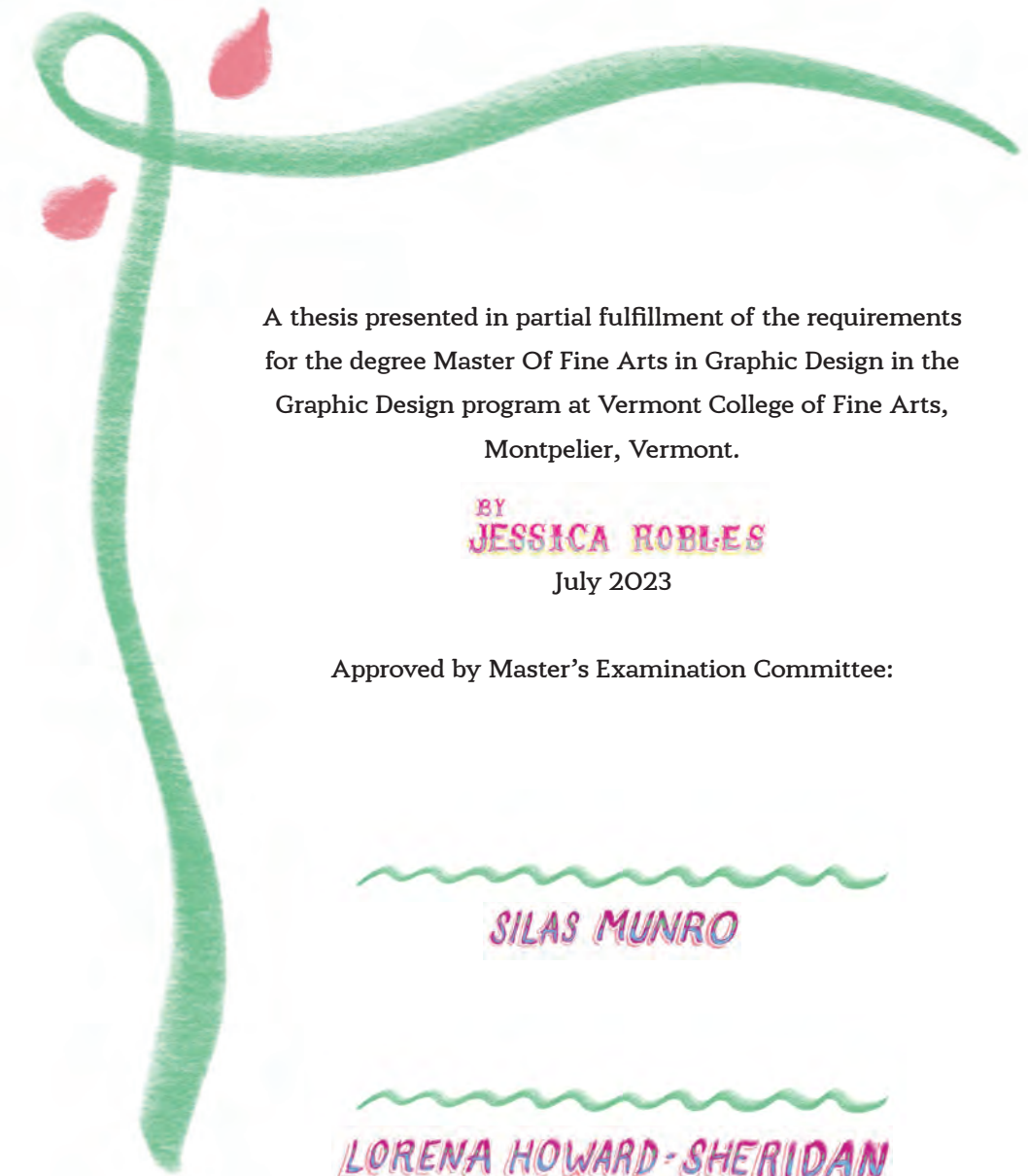
Written by Jessica Robles

Edited by Jolynda Burton

Designed by Jessica Robles

Illustrations and Photography by Jessica Robles

to find out more about Jessica, visit sumakkawsay.work or jessica@sumakkawsay.work



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BY
JESSICA ROBLES

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Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

~~~~~  
SILAS MUNRO

~~~~~  
LORENA HOWARD-SHERIDAN

~~~~~  
TASHEKA ARCENEUX-SUTTON

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# GLOSSARY

Calligraphy An art form of writing letters by hand, based on penmanship, that uses specific strokes to form aesthetic words or symbols. Consistent qualities seen in calligraphy are the design of each letter, a connection of each element or word, some sort of ancestry preserving the heritage of each letter shape, material and techniques; and a repetitive pattern that creates a steady rhythm to the viewer.

Disruption The interference of problems in your timeline. Single mothers face issues like unsupportive children's fathers, unreasonable job requirements, outdated court systems, making it hard to sustain a stable life for their families including them.

Essential work The valuable labor involved in raising children. It includes the emotional upbringing, the logistics and the physical tasks to nurture children and prepare them to thrive as adults.

Flourishing Sweeping, decorative strokes to calligraphy and lettering adding more aesthetic to the overall design of the piece.

Handwriting It is the movement with one of our hands using a pen or pencil that prints our writing on a surface. No handwriting is the same, giving a particular quality that emphasizes some characteristics of the writer like the age experience and the mood intensity. There is cursive handwriting, an uninterrupted stroke for words; and script handwriting that draws each letter.

Interruption The breakup of a continuous process. Without systematic support, many women, when they become mothers, find interruptions in their professional lives, compromising their own wishes by adapting their motherhood to their jobs.

Invisibility The load of tasks a mother does that are not considered valuable until they are not done, e.g. if laundry is not done, there are no clean clothes for the family to wear.

Kinkeeping The invisible work of running a household, done mostly by women. It's the behind the scenes tasks that maintain family members' activities. It involves physical labor such as cleaning the house or doing laundry; mental labor like keeping track of home supplies, making doctors appointments, or coordinating celebrations; and nurturing the family's emotions, i.e., making sure a child is signed up for activities they're interested in.

Letras Chillantes/Chicha Peruvian lettering based on Tuscan lettering, with a fluorescent color palette, comes in a variety of styles, such as Cachito or Huesito. Chicha is the cultural expression of indigenous Peruvian migration to urban areas.

Lettering The act of drawing letters in a variety of styles, based on draftsmanship. Often it is hand-drawn with pens or brushes but it can be digitized. Letterforms are drawn freehand giving room to use perception because its main purpose is expression.

Quechua Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire and the most spoken indigenous language in America. One variety, Quechua or Runasimi, is the official language of Perú and Bolivia, and is spoken in the rural Andes areas. Efforts to make more people bilingual are not successful due to lack of written material, although through music, Quechua still remains relevant to more than ten million people in South America.

Quinceañera Coming to age parties for girls at their fifteenth birthday. Quinceañera parties are the equivalent of going to high school prom parties. Some are small gatherings with music and dance; others are elaborate events with DJs, puffy dresses and choreographed dances.

Maintenance labor The infinite domestic work that many women and mothers take on to run their households. Repetitive, mindless tasks that drain physical and mental energy. In the job market, this kind of work intersects with the white supremacy ideology that dehumanizes this labor with low wages, and poor incentives for professional development. Most caregiving jobs (nannies, daycare, and adult caregiver staff, hospitality employees, waste collection and landscaping companies) are held by women, people of color, and/or recent immigrants.



|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mother          | Women that give birth to children. The lack of structural support for mothers in our society can diminish a mother’s sense of importance, because their responsibilities are not valued as ‘productive,’ and their sacrifices to their own wishes are sanctified.                                               |
| Mothering       | The nurturing of a child by a mother. In addition to the basics of giving children food, shelter, and clothing, it is the caring aspect that mothers do to build an emotional attachment with their children.                                                                                                   |
| Motherhood      | the state of being a mother, according to societal norms. The mainstream idea of motherhood upholds a patriarchal system viewing the male as the only authority in the family unit within the context of a capitalist society.                                                                                  |
| Pachamanca      | Underground hot stone barbecue prepared by Andean people in central Perú. Pacha means “earth,” and Manka means “pot.” It offers at least three kinds of animal meat, steamed potatoes, tamales called “humitas”, and fava beans. Due to its complexity, it is a full day event only held for special occasions. |
| Telenovela      | Latin American TV series centered on fictional romantic couples’ love stories struggling to be together due to socio economic impediments and villain characters breaking the main couple apart. The series run for about a year, and it ends with the couple getting married, leading a happy life together.   |
| Typeface        | Set of letters, glyphs and symbols with the same design.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Typography      | The art of arranging typefaces in a variety of styles, sizes and spacing for a creative purpose.                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Visual Language | An arrangement of visual elements to convey a meaning. Its purpose is to communicate a message.                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Weaponized incompetence | An intentional behavioral pattern where one pretends to be unable to do a simple task to get out of it. It is prevalent in many family units, under the protection of a patriarchal society. Some men feign not to notice menial tasks so that women do it instead. Fathers’ incompetence is viewed with a comic and innocent undertone, illustrated in TV commercials and product advertising for house cleaning. However, it is a serious issue that harms women’s mental and emotional health by underscoring the feeling that they are not supported and carry the workload of a household on their own. |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



# ABSTRACT

**W**HEN single mothering abruptly entered my life, centering my lost identity was a crucial step in recovering from the male violence I faced and the vulnerability of a career interruption of more than a decade.

For single mothers, our time is regarded as unlimited; we are to prioritize our children's lives above our own needs as individuals. In my last semester of graduate school, my days are filled with studying, working, and maneuvering my children's activities. What comes first? pokes through the anxiety of my solo motherhood responsibilities. This loaded question may internalize the regret of being a single mother, surviving under the emptiness of a capitalistic system.

My intention as a graphic designer that draws letters is to acknowledge that being a mother leaks through all parts of me but it is not my core. I had to unlearn my preconceptions about parenthood and family units that were never serving me. I started relating my mothering with my individual sense. Instead of finding this work-life balance, I live my mothering through the art that I create. Working in this act of drawing letters allows room for what I aspire as a designer, to communicate my voice, and to always take up space.▶◀

## Note:

*My views and statements are written from my heterosexual single mother experience<sup>1</sup>. In addition, single parents are fathers. Abusive partners are not only male. Domestic violence happens in same sex and transgender unions<sup>2</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> Bureau, US Census. "National Single Parent Day: March 21, 2023." Census.gov, 8 Mar. 2023, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/single-parent-day.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "NCADV: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence." The Nation's Leading Grassroots Voice on Domestic Violence, <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS>.





## ★ INTRODUCTION ★

In the midst of the daily chaos of caring for my children alone and designing professionally, I find myself in this dance that is my needs and my responsibilities. The gaps from the interruptions and the tension of where I can give more are tangible. My status as a single mother seems to conflict not only to others but directly to me. There is always guilt that I am not doing enough for my children (themselves innocent bystanders in my journey), or to fill my own cup in my career as a graphic designer. Time is always limited and my mental and emotional bandwidth is dictated by mothering. Throughout the years living in this country, I learned to accept the disadvantages as a Latina immigrant, but as a single mother, my confrontation is more internal. This idea that I will find undisturbed time to create the work that I am called to create feels out of reach. In the transition to single motherhood, I had no structural support to guide me, nor could I find comfort in one of the most vulnerable periods of my life. Lastly, my identity as an immigrant mother adds another layer that highlights the fact that society imposes this unattainable version of motherhood on me without regard to my own life experiences.

As much as I try to fit serving others and myself into my daily schedule, I cannot be my best when creating my artwork when I am overtired and stressed out from the load of single motherhood. Flexibility is required to find this valuable time, pushing other aspects of my life to the side to create room for the best for me; that may translate to unusual moments when I am rested and alert, ready to release myself in a visual language. In my case, insisting on doing hand lettering serves me first, and is my rebellion to this single mother stigma. Finding fulfillment in my work is as important as raising my children to feel safe and balanced. I paint conflictive thoughts in words to express my daily frustrations. A lot of my time involves this household labor. As mundane as it is, it is maintenance work that all caregivers do when raising their children. Even so, it is hidden under a patriarchal culture that gives it no value. Since I am the only one doing this in my household, most of my daily routine is underappreciated to everyone else. My journey is to live this lifeline of creativity when doing this essential work alone, bringing up attention to its invisibility. I proceed with my single mothering taking into account that my design comes with unpredictable stops and no structural support in this cycle of cleaning, feeding, and caring for my children and myself.

My single motherhood is not welcome in our current societal structure set for families with two parents. The interruptions of my routine are visible, and not suitable to find stability in any kind of work outside of motherhood unless my and my children's own individuality lose priority. This patriarchal motherhood wants me to carry this social narrative of shame in the moments that led me become a single mother, and it is still present while I am one. Societal norms underscore this palpable emotion of I made this mistake and now I have to pay for it, which shows up in moments when I fail to balance my children's needs, my work, and my own needs, not doing anything 100 percent. Raising children is traditionally done by a whole community, but in these circumstances, I do it alone. The act of design promotes and protects my individuality, it encourages my self expression through understanding my status as a single mother. Hand lettering is my tool to find ownership of my thoughts and emotions, which are fighting to be seen in a society that works hard to hide me.









## LEARNING TO LIVE AS A SINGLE MOTHER BEGAN BEFORE I WAS BORN.

Abuela Rosa married at the young age of 16 with my abuelo Isaias who was only 18 at the time. She raised ten children mostly alone because abuelo worked traveling to remote towns as a land surveyor. Abuela Leonor was already a single mother of tio Segundo when she met my abuelo Lorenzo, who was just a few years younger. Both of my grandmothers' stories are central to defining single mothering in my life's circumstances.

Leonor grew up poor with a father and an abusive stepmother. She lost her mother as a child, and learned to cook from an early age to survive, eventually becoming a cafeteria cook for a hat making factory, where she and her family, in exchange, were given free shelter. Rosa grew up in a conservative, middle-class family in Huancayo, an Andean town with a colonized structure where Spanish lineage was favored over indigenous blood. Anything foreign, especially from the U.S. or Western Europe was seen as elegant and successful, and anything native Peruvian as cheap and chaotic. My most vivid memory of her is hearing her mumbling quechua words when she did not want to be understood, and her refusing to wear hair braids, which would have made her look too indigenous.

Rosa was strict with her daughters but not the sons, playing with them, caring for them as if they would always be children. My father told me that she played volleyball with him and his brothers; my aunts' memories were different. Their mother raised them with toughness, preparing them for surviving in a male-dominated world. Some of my aunts coped

better than others. They all agreed Rosa was a tough woman and wanted all her children to have a higher education, something that was taken away when she was married so young. Abuela Leonor had a different approach in raising her children. She was kind and sweet. When our relatives talk about her, their voices drop as if Leonor only whispered her words. She was nurturing not only her children but the poor community around her too. If her name was mentioned, it was followed by "su olla de cocinar no tenía fondo" – her kitchen pot had no bottom. Her voice was quiet; nobody remembered her upset, contrary to my abuelo Lorenzo who was known for his bad temper. All his kids have so many stories about his angry outbursts.

Despite their differences, both grandmothers had eventful marriages. They were filled with financial stress, infidelity, alcohol abuse, and all with the backdrop of a country in government turmoil on a daily basis. At times, both abuelas protested against their husbands for the injustice of their own lives. Leonor left my grandfather when my mother was a teenager with four younger siblings. She moved to southern Perú, found another man and became pregnant. My tia Nelida was the product of this affair. A year later, my grandparents reconciled and abuelo raised Tia as his own daughter. I remember abuelo Lorenzo's apologetic words when mentioning Leonor after her death. I often wonder about the pain he inflicted on my abuela Leonor.

Rosa suffered what I suspect was a debilitating depression that began during her perimenopausal years and ended when she took her own life – a last act of

control before the terminal illness she learned about would have done. After becoming a widow from abuelo Isaias' tragic death in a car accident, she found out my abuelo fathered several children with other women. Rosa opened a bakery shop to support her children on her own, and pushed them hard to advance in their education. She was a serious grandmother, not approachable, but her mothering took shape through the feasts she had at her house. Ducks, chickens, and guinea pigs from her own farm were sacrificed for our family style meals. All ten of her adult children with their own families gathered around, preparing pachamanca for a full day.

**MOTHERS' STORIES DO NOT FOLLOW STRAIGHT LINES.** Their timelines are broken with intermittent gaps reflecting the unsupported house maintenance, frustration, and trauma, while raising entire families. Motherhood is sold to women as the promise of an ideal life, even if it is not planned, women must make it work. Many women have children to solidify a relationship, to escape poverty, to avoid abuse, and other incidents that females may encounter in their lives. Aunts, sisters, cousins that suffered domestic violence, sexual assault, forced motherhood and single motherhood. Their lives took unexpected turns, questioning their worth in their molded identities, and not being able to articulate if they wanted to be mothers after all.

My story as a single mother that designs began when my grandmothers became mothers, and their selfless acts of mothering children when they knew nothing in return was coming to other sides of their individualities.

They sacrificed many parts of their identities to my current self – the single mother who is a designer – giving me the chance to search for my purpose and fulfillment in life.





(ENDLESS)  
FRUSTATION





**B**IRTHING a child makes a woman invisible. After long months of her body going through a physical transformation, creating another human being, and the traumatic experience of giving birth, the journey of motherhood starts with a baby fully dependent on the mother. The moment a woman becomes a mother, the attention goes to the child. She is immediately thrown to all the behind-the-scenes work that a mother does to raise children. Her role as a mother immediately takes all the room in a woman's identity, instead of transitioning to just one aspect of many in her individuality.

Contrary to the stereotype that all women are natural mothers, a woman is not born a mother, she learns to be one. Outdated sexist ideas are instilled in girls' childhood, making caregiving labor as part of our femininity. A woman does not instinctively know what the kitchen's pantry needs for tonight's meal, or organically tends to her children's needs. The institution of motherhood<sup>1</sup> begins by pushing women to become 'by default' parent for all the emotional, and domestic labor required raising small children. Consequently, other aspects of her identity slowly fade away, leaving her exhausted, defeated, and lonely. She can rarely find time for herself, and if she does, it is limited and ripe with guilt.

In this unattainable motherhood, a woman with children has it all. She has perfect children. A committed heterosexual male partner, who has a higher income than she. She is middle class, educated with a fulfilling career. This ideal mother is a dedicated caregiver with planned activities. A productive, beautiful, young, white female who is grateful, patient, balanced, present, and devoted to her children every minute of the day. According to this patriarchal mindset, mothers must always be and feel the best. This list of characteristics burdens all mothers, creating resentment toward their own mothering journeys.

The dimensions of motherhood are confined into these two boxes, married (good) or single (bad). There is a distrust in single motherhood. The single mother is seen as the one that broke this institution of marriage. Regardless of what caused the singledom – partner's abandonment, partner's death, divorce, domestic violence, or by choice – the stigma as a struggling woman, unprotected, unreliable, financially poor, and with the responsibility of raising children alone, plays into the status quo in single motherhood. Without their male partner's support, a single mother must suffer the consequences of doing it all alone.

<sup>1</sup> Brock, Sophie. "Motherhood Is Different to Mothering." Dr Sophie Brock, <https://drsophiebrock.com/about>.



Most mothers are overwhelmed by the expectations of running their household with little or no help, and the 'kin keeping'<sup>2</sup> responsibilities taking a toll in their emotional health. As a consequence, they may have a harder time engaging fully in other aspects of their lives. They may be more susceptible to losing their job or quitting for a variety of reasons, but the most common is due to insufficient pay and caregiving responsibilities. This motherhood penalty<sup>3</sup> presents in two ways: The ones that left the workforce for years and come back when their children are older, their timelines will never be the same as when they were childless. Those years are lost and have no monetary value. These mothers adapt to new journeys in their careers, not by choice but as the only way. For the mothers that never left the workforce, it is not an easy road either. Our family leave system in the U.S. is in shambles. Work productivity of mothers is compared to their childless coworkers. The working mother faces high childcare costs, antiquated school schedules that do not align to work schedules, and the guilt from a society that still sees mothers who leave their child's care to others as not being a good enough mother.

<sup>2</sup> Teigen, Danielle A. "Blessed Are the Kin Keepers: Often Unrecognized Work of Remembering. Celebrating Relationships Can Take Toll." InForum, InForum, 8 Feb. 2019, <https://www.inforum.com/lifestyle/arts-and-entertainment/blessed-are-the-kin-keepers-often-unrecognized-work-of-remembering-celebrating-relationships-can-take-toll>.

<sup>3</sup> Correll, Shelley, et al. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty? | Gender Action Portal, American Journal of Sociology, Mar. 2007, <https://gap.hks.harvard.edu/getting-job-there-motherhood-penalty>.





Exploring this frustration of motherhood brings acceptance to my life as a single parent. My schedule is interrupted by raising young children. I am challenged every day to find this so-called healthy balance between my family time, as the only adult in my household, and my career progress. Some days are successful, and others, my failure is as heavy as my workload. Despite that, the next day is a chance to recover. I do not have anyone to rely on but me. Many times, I lose myself filling out school, doctor, or summer camp forms, buying groceries, getting dinner ready, washing and folding laundry, and the upkeep of a house of four, on top of all the emotional work of raising three daughters that still receive messages to uphold the patriarchy. In the busiest moments, I find myself questioning the chaos of mothering alone, and at the same time, my existence as a single mother gives room to unlearn this unattainable motherhood enforced by female stereotypes. Nurturing and honoring my creativity as a designer is the boundary that shows resistance to this failed idea that mothers must self-sacrifice their womanhood.

The continuity of from the preconceptions take notice of the pro-push a boundary, take a create thoughtful work a finalized product is cycle, I find this inter-my mothering and hand recreate again, in a circle.

The constant disruption gives me a chance see it from another angle. according to my limited physical bandwidth, give not lose myself in trying to achieve perfection. I am at ease with picking myself up and carrying on.

Designing from the single mother position is constantly making allowances for the limits presented in my life. Mothering alone is unpredictable. It is a switch of emotions in a short span of time. In one situation, I may feel lonely and overwhelmed, and next, there is a resilience built in me and the fortitude to handle this on my own. This emotional tension is noticeable in the painted strokes of my lettering. Some are firm, others display my shaky lines made by the hands of a mother that is always asking herself if her art and caregiving was enough. My training as a graphic designer wants a pattern and a grid to follow, to create a design hierarchy cohesive and clean, but the more experience I gain in hand lettering, I find myself adapting my design knowledge to be more expressive, breaking many patterns taught in design school and in my life as a mother.

YOU BECAME  
 YOU <sup>a</sup> LIFE NEVER  
 LIVED  
 WE CREATE  
 WHO WE ARE

drawing words liberates me of being a single mother. I cess, the development, risk to make a mistake. I while keeping in mind that subjective. In a repetitive dependence from both lettering. Create, adapt, and

tion of time and concentration to redo it, to start over, to My productivity fluctuates time and emotional and ing me a framework to







## DESIGN

I spent three hours working on signages for a recent holiday event. I used cardboard and an old metal sheet collected from my garage. I chose red, green, and gold colors and the lettering was a mix of thick brushes with small dots inside. The repetitiveness of lettering grounds me in an almost meditative way. My chaotic life from a few hours ago, when I was getting my children ready to go school, became past tense. Hand lettering is all about practice. The longer I work in it, the more my mind relaxes and filters out the noise from outside.

## MOTHER / ARTIST

When she was an established calligrapher, suddenly her world changed and she became a single mother when her two children were merely toddlers. Without time to contemplate her new status, she knew she had many long days ahead. She had to be a present mother during the time with her children. Her desire to be a mother was a lifetime wish, and she waited to find the right time to have children. Unexpectedly, she found herself without a partner's support. She worked any chance she could in her tight schedule, which meant late nights after kids were in bed, school hours, kids' father time. It wasn't about the quality of work as she had to get all kinds of work to support her family and to establish herself as a professional calligrapher.

Ten years later, she feels the harvesting time in her career has finally arrived. All that work to be financially capable to live, to find work that made her grow in

the calligraphy world. She is finally not chasing projects, able to reject those that are not fulfilling or pay poorly. She teaches and creates work that is challenging, leaving a legacy. Her children are both in college, and their dependency has lifted. It took ten long years, she militantly worked when she could, she was a fully present mother when she needed to be. She recognizes that the uncertainty and the vulnerability during those years were part of her growth in her profession. She seems satisfied with where she is now. She also seems tired; a professional woman has to do double the work to be on the same level as a man.

## ARTIST / MOTHER

She was a proud lawyer, she excelled at her career and loved being a court attorney. When she became a mother, it was impossible to meet the needs of a demanding job and be present as a mother. Her family lived far away leaving her no other support but herself. She practiced law in a court setting and during sessions, it was not professional to request a break, in case there was an emergency call from her children's school. Her husband was already an established business man with an income that could cover their spending. Her income was only paying their family's taxes. With a job that offered no flexibility for a young mother, and financially it was working against their family, she decided to become a stay at home mother. She now talks about law with passion – she believes everyone "should study law" because we all face legal predicaments. I met her in a calligraphy workshop and her artwork was not a hobby, but an extension of her professional life. With the same passion she had dis-

cussing law, she talked about her calligraphy studies. She knew all the calligraphers, workshops, and trends. Calligraphy was the hook on which she hung aspects of her identity beyond just a mother and a wife.

## DESIGN

In the middle of flu season with sick children, I created a logo design for a t-shirt, and billed five hours of work. At the end of the day, I ate cold leftover quesadillas and soup. All day, I was constantly interrupted by hunger, sickness, and bored kids: "Mommy, I am hungry." Many times, I replied with a simple "eat a snack." "Mommy, I am bored." I am always 'almost done' working (If only I could have a few more minutes.) My own deadline changes when others depend on me for their needs. Food. Health. Entertainment. My woman's superpower says that I can do it all and more, but my human side proves me wrong. Something has to fall short. Was the logo my best work? My sick children watched TV non-stop for hours. The guilt of being an absent mother shadows my conscience, but part of single motherhood is forgiving myself for all the things I did not and could not do.

## PRIORITY

One of my clients - a government agency - hired me to do a card deck about racial issues in Vermont. Today, I sent the first draft and their comments came back immediately; now, I am almost done making these changes. I am content with this progress. I'll just need another two hours for edits and it will be finalized. This perfect flow was interrupted by my daughter, she

wanted me to read a book with her. She has struggled with reading and speech. Together, we read a book called 'Walter, the baker' by Eric Carle. He bakes bread and when he makes a mistake, he bakes pretzels and all the town people were happy about his new invention. My child learned a few more words to add to her vocabulary. Pretzel, bake, woodfired oven. The story was a lesson of how valuable a community is. Hurray for Walter! I am still creating a community for us, the single mom with three small children. It takes time.

I would like a new invention that is a big PAUSE switch for life. It takes me another ten long minutes to get in the groove of what I was doing before being (constantly) interrupted.









**Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the the fucking time (lit.) the mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs=minimum wages, housewives \*no pay --**

*Mierle Laderma Ukeles, Manifesto! Maintenance Art*

**T**HE invisible household labor that was mine alone when I was married is still waiting to be done now as a single mother. Alone. Every day. Feeding, cleaning, and all the kin-keeping responsibilities. From keeping the house fairly clean, house laundry, grocery shopping, cooking, and driving back and forward from their school to their social activities. As the only adult in my household, my evenings leave me exhausted, never able to stay awake for even 30 minutes of TV. These obligations are constant with only the hope that they will fade away as my children become independent adults.

During the Covid lockdown, I realized that even among couples in happy unions, it is the woman doing this invisible work. Mothers become the default parent in a two-adult household<sup>1</sup>. Our patriarchal society raises male partners that are not innate allies to women. Statistically<sup>2</sup>, married mothers do more housework than single mothers. Men are taught that their time is more valuable, and can not be compared to the time their children's mother spends cleaning, making to-do lists, and multitasking the labor of operating a household.

When a task is not seen, its value is not acknowledged. If I calculate the cost of my house labor in order to focus exclusively on my career, the total of child care, housekeeping, food preparation, administration, transportation, and shopping would be unaffordable. And this does speak nothing of the mental and emotional energy that these activities drain from one person.

It is unfair to label this essential labor as a distraction in my day-to-day routine. This invisible work is necessary to keep the household working at a normal level, and making it work takes much of my time. The institution of motherhood comes into place, with the idealization of what a mother is, but only emphasizes that the role of a mother has not progressed much throughout the years in relation to partnership. This is not a gender issue, a woman is not more naturally inclined to master all the domestic work than a man. The conventional thinking about masculine and feminine roles protects sexist socialization, and unequal partnerships.

<sup>1</sup> Rodsky, Eve. "The Curse of the She Fault Parent." *Fair Play: A Game-Changing Solution for When You Have Too Much to Do (and More Life to Live)*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 2019, pp. 7-10.

<sup>2</sup> Scommegna, Paola. "Married Women with Children and Male Partners Do More Housework than Single Moms." PRB, *Gender Issues*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.prb.org/resources/married-women-with-children-and-male-partners-do-more-housework-than-single-moms/>.

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One person holding the majority of the mental and physical load creates resentment and frustration. In my case, after cooking a full dinner from scratch, that includes grocery shopping, meal prep, cooking, and cleaning, my body and mind immediately wants a break. In my daughters' eyes, this is just a meal. They may not like my fixed dinner much and eat a few bites. They are privileged enough to know there is an option to wait for the next meal. Meanwhile, I may react visibly upset as my children, the only other members in this house, did not appreciate my effort to prepare our meal. Instead, if I was remodeling a room in my house, I would get praised because everyone will see that finished project, physically there to be appreciated for years to come. Work is tangible. The remains of a spaghetti plate tossed to the trash is unseen. If a guest comes later, that person won't have any knowledge about my hours spent to fix a meal, the afterward cleaning, the thought to keep it healthy, while multitasking with the care of children. All that work is not clearly visible by anyone but the person executing it. Even then, I had to remind myself that labor meant time, skills and care because many times, I felt like I

did nothing all day. The same cycle happens all over again the following day.

Both of my grandmothers and mother's responsibility was the maintenance labor in their households, supported only by a misogynistic culture that thrived after the colonization of our country, Perú. They believed as part of their role as women and wives was to be in charge of the domestic labor, and the raising of children. Their housework was more strenuous compared to my usage of modern appliances. My abuela Rosa had a kitchen that is vividly stamped in my childhood memories. It was a small room with a hand made brick stove and a chimney. All the pots were covered with black ash. My mother Margarita experienced an era where she had to handle domestic labor in addition to her office job. She had the privilege to hire a housemaid for the weekdays. Even so, her resting time was spent grocery shopping for the upcoming week, laundry or any other countless domestic tasks needed that nobody could do but her. At that time, grocery store shopping was not a convenient quick task. It involved going to an outdoor market, purchasing, and negotiating prices from different vendors. Then, many hours were spent cleaning the produce, storing the meat, and planning the meals for the upcoming week. Laundry was even more time consuming, there was a water and electricity shortage. Clothes were left soaking in bleach or detergent for hours in an old washer that barely functioned, many times, to be washed again by hand.





In the past, domestic labor was done in a collective environment<sup>3,4</sup>. After the industrial revolution, these tasks progressively have become commodified and individualized. There is a black and white picture circa 1960's of my abuela Rosa with all her sisters by the river. At first glance, the impression is of an outdoor picnic in a country sight. They were all washing their clothes together. Growing up, there were always aunts, uncles and cousins in my house, visiting, having lunch or afternoon snacks with us, while my mother was doing something related to the house or her children. Under our current social standards, it is not acceptable to have an unannounced guest with a house that is always in the process of being clean. Washing laundry and attending guests would be strange too.

Our present lifestyles are divided into these compartments: work, house, school, leisure. All these aspects are divided and individualized thriving under the capitalistic work system. We are systematically exploited by the maintenance of each compartment that makes our existence whole, i.e., the only functional way my children can regularly socialize with their friends after school is if they belong to a paid after school activity. When the weather starts getting warm, I may take them to the playground, but that involves shortening my work hours, or fixing a quick dinner. Occasionally I arrange playdates, which involves another whole set of logistics.

Maintenance work becomes another service that we can hire others to do, if it fits in the family budget. It is common for the wife, or female partner to be the project manager of arranging these tasks to the paid service. Also, it is important to reflect how this distaste to all these tasks that nobody wants to do started in the first place. Attached to these tasks are this general idea of low, unskilled, devaluing the person assigned to it. That is this subordinate class, because historically<sup>5</sup>, in the US, all these tasks were done by enslaved populations, and currently the most vulnerable groups -women, people of color and immigrants- continue to be the majority holding these jobs. In Perú, indigenous women, or women in the lowest socio economic bracket, including poor single mothers like my abuela Leonor, have filled the domestic labor workforce. It reveals how white supremacy and colonialism has been centered in our households, making us a tool to defend an archaic division of labor that prevails at our present times.

Teaching my children how to start taking care of this labor is not an option but a necessity for our communal existence. Furthermore, having these fundamental skills is an important lesson for their adulthood. There is no shame in nourishing yourself by fixing a hot meal, or by sanitizing a bathroom. That is, the content of this labor is not to fulfill their roles as women in service of men. I was taught cooking to become a servient wife. They are learning how to cook to take good care of themselves. This entrenched patriarchy that I grew up with, will shift with my awareness and action against it in our house, and my wish for them to witness it in our lives together.

3 "Wash House." George Washington's Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/location/wash-house/>.  
4 Magazine, Smithsonian. "'Stunning' Victorian Bathhouse Unearthed beneath Manchester Parking Lot." Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, 11 Jan. 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/park-construction-project-uncovers-victorian-bathhouse-manchester-england-180976730/>.  
5 Simkin, John. "House Slaves." Spartacus Educational, Spartacus Educational, Jan. 2020, <https://spartacus-educational.com/USASdomestic.htm>.





*In a household of four people, laundry loads run unnumberable times, but the worse is the time and energy of me spent folding the mountain of clothes.*

Unfortunately, it is still prevalent in many households, a married working father's idea to balance work with family is by being completely absent during the working hours, receiving an increase in their wages<sup>6</sup>, and bluntly weaponizing incompetence to the maintenance tasks of their families. There are still too many fathers that expect a to-do list from the mother on how to 'help' in the household. Their lack of awareness about their children's preferences, mother's hobby, or the planning involved in events, makes their partners feel hopeless and alone.

There is no balance of family and career lives when one side overwhelmingly takes most of the room. Work is part of life as much as coexisting in a family unit, it is not possible to leave your family role at home waiting after you finish work. We live in this period when the subject of maintaining this labor challenges all of us in a variety of ways, at the minimum, questioning has begun to shake the ground. The system strongly agrees with the role of women continuing to be housewives and/or mothers first, and placing their jobs as their second priority. Consequently, many professional mothers are angry about the injustice of drowning in domestic work and the responsibilities in their careers.

In general, the lack of acknowledgement in our society of how demanding this kind of labor is what may break many mothers, single or married. Inflexible work settings, less earning wages, unsupportive partners, and the vanishing of an understanding, empathetic community are against all mothers that want to raise their children with a balanced lifestyle for themselves.

At home as a single mother, I have absolute control over what I decide to maintain and what to leave behind, I depend only on myself. The freedom to decide how to lead our lives is a valuable reflection of how I reason my own internalized misogyny about centering men as leaders in exchange of care and safety. I work constantly against the ideal of sacrificing, as a mother, as a woman and as a daughter. Instead, we share our communal existence, willing to care for each other by slowing down to listen to each other.

For now, my domestic labor intersects with my work as a hand lettering designer. Both tasks bring experience and familiarity in my life. My design process is constantly adapting to my time restraint, discovering more from the interruption and recognizing the impact caused to the overall solution. It may be scattered, and the focus starts with writing the words, evolving to place the words' meaning secondary, and the shape of the letters take precedence. It is also calculated, done by phases and planning ahead. Although it is created from a repetitive skill, each hand lettering piece is unique.

Hand lettering elevates a vernacular language, it breaks molds and it is in constant innovation due to its flexible nature. The maintenance labor goes repetitively in cycles. It is an act of love and care to your family and yourself. The privacy of my domestic life as a mother, and the public display of my hand lettering entwined in my life as a woman. To both tasks, I apply my intellectual effort, my time, and my resources in developing them because they play in the same field level of my single mother's life ><

<sup>6</sup> Yu, Wei-hsin, and Yuko Hara. "Motherhood Penalties and Fatherhood Premiums: Effects of Parenthood on Earnings Growth Within and Across Firms." *Read.dukeupress.edu*, 1 Feb. 2021, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/58/1/247/167586/Motherhood-Penalties-and-Fatherhood-Premiums>.











Accept  
(The DISRUPTION)

I DON'T WANT TO LOOK LIKE A  
**MOM**  
WITH A HUSBAND



*Conscious love, metaphysical meaning of love in everyday life*

*-bell hooks, All about Love*

**I**N this notion of life, we find ourselves with a roadmap, expected to follow this path dictated by our society. A delegated order is the way to success, that is 'normal.' We are raised to check every box on the way: education, partnership, household, and parenthood. But it offers only a false sense of life; most of our journeys are complex paths in which our identities, which are always evolving, dictate the direction taken in our lives.

The act of serving others is instilled in girls – to put our needs last, with the sacrifice of our wills for the well being of the rest. As teens, girls are pushed to go through their days without considering painful menstruation side effects. Bleeding, bloating, and sometimes acute abdominal cramps can not disrupt their routines, all the while being hyper-conscious not to leak and stain their seats. Biologically, female bodies have an expiration date to reproduce, enrolling women in this race to become mothers. They should find partners, get settled, and without questioning the responsibilities and toll of being a mother, follow the assumption that motherhood is a natural process in our timeline as women. The chance to explore our selfhood may be limited and shortened. In contrast, motherhood has an infinite timeline, with not much of a break (an experience that fathers don't usually have – they are allowed to have their own time). A successful professional father is viewed as taking care of their families, in contrast to a working mother that is viewed as taking time away from their children and home.

Mothering three daughters alone is like raising myself all over again. I am aware of my own ignorance of the effects on a woman after becoming a mother. I was always submissive, ready to go with the flow, adapting and not making a fuss, to avoid the label of a bad mother. For me, being a single mother is embracing the discomfort of my previous ideas of being a mother colliding with my current reality. Cobbling together what I need with what is available at that time, with constant interruptions, feeling the frustration that I need help but it isn't always available. *My two favorite things in the world are to be with my kids, and to not be with them.* Most importantly, I defend these contradictory emotions to everyone. And yet, with all that, being a single mother does not define me. It is only another tool creating movement in my life. I am a woman that is exploring graphic design and using it to connect my mind to my world. This process of making art digs into my own self, finding curiosity in the environment, and fulfilling parts of my identity that were unknown.

Our identity is attached to who we are, to our past stories. We lose ourselves defining who we should be in the future, keeping us stagnant, thinking about all the reasons we



strayed from our path. The disruptions in my life caused by traumatic experiences attempt to keep me in this mindset to justify the bad times. I would not be who I am today if I did not go through this trauma. Nevertheless, it romanticizes the pain. My wish has always been to have the opportunities to use my found tools without experiencing pain.

Being interrupted directs our minds back to the process, and with many interruptions, the focus shifts away from the end of a project. It is a coping mechanism protecting from the frustration of losing control. A spiral question, *Why is this happening?* continuously victimizes the situation. *If I would have never gotten married, or stopped working, or getting a better job, or divorcing, or raising children alone.* Regret is internalized creating this stagnancy, fogging our passion that ignites life.

The well being of the mother impacts the well being of the children. My kids are not the center of my life, that would be an unfair and heavy responsibility to them. Loving my children pushed me to make decisions for our welfare. Loving myself is writing our story from the moment I decided to make these changes.

Gaining knowledge about what I need as an individual, led me back to my identity, a woman that designs. Instead of numbing myself to what caused the pain, I allowed myself to feel anger and frustration. I accepted the disruption of a failed marriage caused, and worked by forgiving my own guilt. Choosing myself created connections that offer safety in the mayhem and helped me take action. A shift from giving to others to centering myself in my own life. I chose again to become a graphic designer.



BEING  
TO TEACH  
OTHERS

In hand lettering, my purpose is to connect with this message – one that offers acceptance and compassion. Both lettering and calligraphy find a safe place in the chaos of my routine raising children alone. Their creative process takes more of a central role than their final result. Working in a creative field is the comfort from mothering alone. When you are mothering, you care for others first, and done alone, can be overwhelming. I may feel that I failed in my parenting skills, but there is no time to dwell. My children’s constant growth helps me move on. In both mothering and working, there are always gaps during a day, a month, or years. *What is a priority?* I accept that the answer varies with the context of my story.

I avoid sliding into despair under the perfect motherhood standards. I ensure my mothering comes from a place of self knowledge and community-based. My acts of resistance to motherhood are single mothering and my artistry. Being a single mother was a necessary step regardless of what society expected of a wife with three children. My creative skills and development is the space to release my emotions, for now, of being a single mother. Incorporating the mother part of my identity into my work as a graphic designer causes the self growth that gradually lights my autonomy as a woman. ▶◀







**IT IS SNOWING OUTSIDE**, the first snow of the season in Vermont. The whimsical, dreamy snow against the pink alpenglow with blue tones making the landscape magical and shiny.

In my house, snow means acquiring the right winter clothing for four human beings, three of whom need my help for that. Waterproof, insulated jackets unpacked from the containers labeled 'winter gear.' Heavy winter boots, long wool socks, snow pants and matching water resistant gloves for both hands. Vermont winters are not to be taken lightly, and the first snow is the beginning of long, cold, and windy months, and the many layers of clothing we all must wear.

Searching for all the winter gear is a monumental task. I had to find all that gear early in the morning before my three kids left for school. In the best scenario, I could have done this a few weeks ago and not at the last minute before we walked out into a snowstorm. My car needed to be cleaned from the snow. In an ideal world, my driveway had to be shoveled. But in our world, I just prayed that it was the snow that I could get away without shoveling. *Leaving in a rush*, because we are already late to school and work, I packed some bread rolls to eat in the car, balancing four smoothies in two hands. That is how it is when you are the only adult with three children trying to get out of our house, in the mornings.

It took me a good year to give up on this idea of not being late, and not being in a rush. I had to let go of the need to hide that my current status as a single mother was not affecting me. I think I was hiding it to make other people more comfortable. I worked as a clerk for

a state office, and my morning routine after becoming a single mother was to literally run from the parking lot to my cubicle. The reason was, back then, my youngest kid was only four years old, and she was dropped off at a daycare before I headed to work. The daycare building had the longest driveway, and it took forever to get her to the classroom. She said hi to every rock and toy encountered in this two minute walk, but my daughter took at least fifteen minutes. Then she came to the classroom and greeted the teacher and sometimes cried as I tried to leave her there. Other times she wanted me to see her latest art work, or the sensory table, or how she washed her hands alone. Then, of course, I was late to work. *Leaving home earlier* was even more hectic because none of my kids wanted to wake up earlier. I tried.

Nobody at my work cared if I was late, but I didn't want to share my personal life with anyone. I did not want to seem unreliable and risk losing my job. It was complicated to explain my new status as a single mother. I carried shame and was grieving a failed marriage. It took a few days for my boss to have a talk with me. His mother had become a widow when he was young and he remembered clearly how she did all the work and was overwhelmed by it. He shared the story of his mother, making snow angels after cleaning the car in a rush school morning, because she was just so damn tired of doing all of it alone. He saw me clearly with my struggle as a new member of the single motherhood club. He told me that being late was not the job's priority, and made sure if I was mentally ok with working and being the only adult for my kids. I told him that I was, but in my head, all I wanted was

a break. I did not want to work, and not parent alone. I just wanted to sleep all day.

Covid lockdown came a week after my kids and I moved out of our former house to a two-bedroom apartment. Then, when we learned the kids' school closing dates, my job told me to stay home. I was relieved. No morning rushes, no after school activities, no pretending our lives had not changed. In a strange turn of events, a worldwide pandemic gave my kids and I space to heal. We created a schedule that worked perfectly for all of us. In the morning, we had breakfast together without rushing. My two youngest children met their online classes for an hour or so. My oldest had longer online classes until noon. I worked from 7am till noon without much interruption. Then we took walks, rode bikes, and walked to the park for lunch. We came home mid afternoon. They played, or watched TV. I worked for a bit longer and then prepared dinner, walked the dog, with or without them, and watched movies, or read before going to bed. Summer came, and they went to outdoor summer camps, and late afternoons we spent near a lake, having cold meat sandwiches for dinner. During this time, we saw only a few people, due to social distancing. We were able to adjust ourselves gradually to life as one adult, three children, and a big dog in a small apartment. This lockdown gave me room to realize that I did not like my job as an office clerk. That I wanted to be a graphic designer after all. I had been one before I even met him.

Therapy and group support from other domestic violence victims were my lifeline to understand what actually happened to me during all those years of being

abused in my marriage. Even with the exhaustion and loneliness of single motherhood, I was able to recover my mental stability. My first sign of recovery was finishing reading a whole book. I have always been an avid reader but during my marriage I could barely go past a chapter. No matter how interesting the subject was for me. My mind was always anxious and in panic mode.

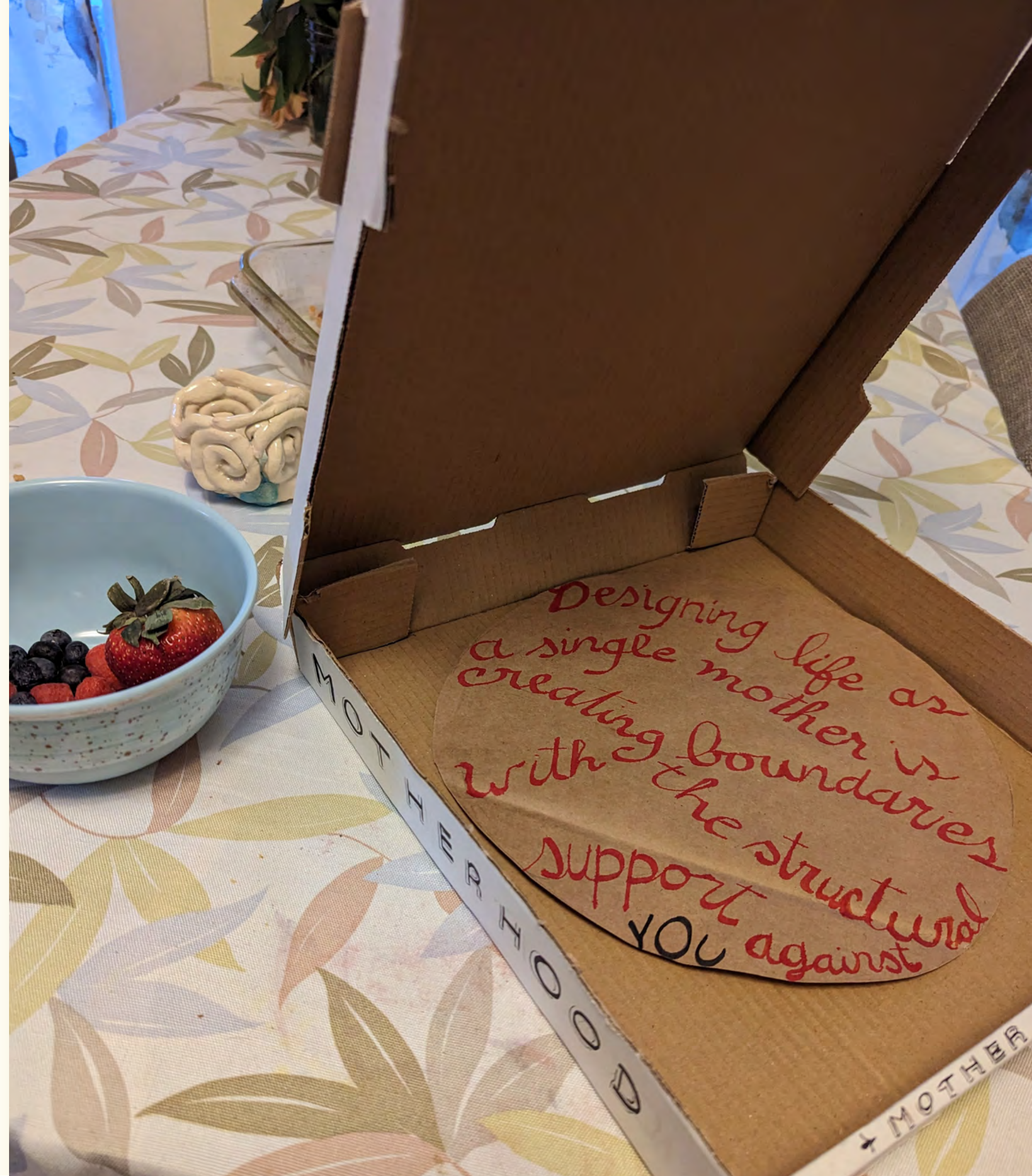
Meditation came to me after a yoga teacher invited me to stay after our weekly class. My first experience was awful. My mind was racing in many directions and I was not able to calm myself down. The next sessions were a mix of my body unloading the trauma and physically releasing it. My body was achy after these sessions as if I had worked out. Sitting still was transformative. I felt the regret for losing myself in an abusive marriage physically; and processing my self forgiveness created space for where I am. Single motherhood was not my choice. No, I am not grateful to be a single mother of three small children. Yes, I am thankful for the journey I chose to own this kind of single motherhood, because it took me to a mental and physical safe space. After decades, I was able to connect to my body and mind.

By the time I finish graduate school, I have been a single mother for four years. As with any major life change, it has been a transition. I am exhausted in the evenings from driving my children to their different activities. I cook alone to a younger crowd who are not pleased with my healthy dinners. Despite this, our peaceful house is designed by me, the single mother that keeps fighting against a system that undervalues my role as the only adult in the household.





# DESIGN to Recover







*The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled*

*- John Berge, Ways of Seeing*

**O**VER the past twelve years of my life, I have gradually blocked part of my core identity as an artist and designer. I lost myself in raising children with no support and in the stagnation of an abusive marriage. I eventually dropped reading altogether. I moved many times during these years, and in each move I shedded books from my pre-marriage life, until the last move to Vermont when I realized there were no more books to pack. My energy was devoted to riding the cycles of emotions in being abused, and I had no energy left to do anything else but survive during that period.

Drawing has been a practice I kept throughout the years. In each place I lived, I found life drawing classes to attend, until my life became too intense and those would be dropped from my schedule. A friend of mine from my previous school hired me to do all the graphic design work for a project that dealt with the struggle of DACA<sup>1</sup> students; I was able to keep that job for two years. I also kept it private, almost sacred. I was offered a job as an art youth advocate in the same program for families with DACA students but I declined due to lack of childcare, and the interrogation I would hear at home about something so time consuming for not enough money.

Designing to recover my identity started painfully slow. It was peeling layers of regret and shame. I think of it like sitting in a hard chair for a long time and when you get up, your limbs are numb. But with time you stretch them and they become agile and stable again. It was a process of gradual recollection of my previous self and of slowly updating that to my current self. It is understanding, accepting, and adapting to what I am now: a designer with a higher education degree that does not have steady experience in the industry, and who is actively training in hand lettering.

My life now is different from twelve years ago. My responsibilities as a single mother take most of my day and energy. If I am not taking care of my children, I have to work to sustain myself and them, and that can spin you to projects that are rewarding financially but not creative. It is a balance of being selective and financially sustainable, a dilemma that other designers in my field know, too. It is building my portfolio as I am a new designer, to prove myself to others. Having had this motherhood disruption, my view as a graphic designer has matured. The design that I favored twelve years ago is not interesting to me

<sup>1</sup> "What Is DACA and Who Are the Dreamers?" ADL, 9 Sept. 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/what-daca-and-who-are-dreamers>



ACHORATE  
Y  
LUCHA  
LUCHA

Left: Achorate y lucha. 'Get feisty and do the fight.'

now. Not only because twelve years ago different aesthetics were in trend, but my sensitivity has also changed due to a period in which my visual language as an artist was silenced. Years passed and my emotional growth has continued, especially because the designer in me accepts (and integrates) the trauma and the time spent exploring its impact. A newfound empathy leaks into all parts of my life, including my work.

My daily routine is rushed, pulled by single mothering and designing. What I am and what I do. At times, I am literally stretched to the max because both sides of me are in demand of attention. It is a daily exercise, the need to define what needs attention: my teenage daughter who wants my time (and which is crucial for confidence at her age); or the work deadline with a paycheck attached. It's like moving forgiveness from one side to the other when time is found to design between caring for my children, and caring for my work.

The cultural narrative of being a single mother within a patriarchal and capitalist society is of my vulnerability, pitying me for this hardship. The challenges of having too little time, too little support, too little financial power, means the assumption is that my voice is uncomfortable to the rest. The discussions about the motherhood years are centered on the wellbeing of the children. There isn't much value placed on the emotional effects of being a mother. Mothers are individuals with feelings and an inner life, but this is not discussed because our society conditions us to see motherhood as the ultimate goal in a woman's life. This ideology, deeply seated in women for generations, accepts the terms of being a mother, the one that sacrifices herself for her family. If one becomes a single mother, she is doomed – either working too much and therefore neglectful, or only caring for her children and nothing more, and therefore lazy.

It is hard to find the language to express motherhood in all its facets. Women who admit regretting motherhood are “regarded as an object of disbelief—meaning that its actual existence is denied—or as an object of rage and distortion—meaning that mothers who regret are branded as selfish, insane, damaged women and immoral human beings<sup>2</sup>.” This reinforces that as a female, a mother is all we should be, diminishing our individuality. In my single motherhood, my journey has been to build my life and intentionally center my own compassionate, accepting version of motherhood, where my individuality plays a big part. Rediscovering my artist self has come hand-in-hand with this process, and hand lettering has been the visual language for this work.

In the past years, my version of motherhood had been built by others. I married with the hope of being a partner. I became a mother because I was a woman in a marriage expected to have children. I lost my identity in the chaos of an abusive dynamic. I could not question any of these steps because the repercussions would be greater than I could have imagined. I took action and single motherhood came into my life to push my boundaries, but this time I am the one constructing my life with eyes open to the good and the bad.

The act of pausing when I design forces me to reconsider my next steps. It is the accountability from these gap years, and my daily interruptions, that makes me more decisive in graphic design solutions. I trust my intuitive side but it is more complicated than that.

<sup>2</sup> Donath, Orna. "Introduction." *Regretting Motherhood: a study*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, 2017, pp. 11.



The pause forces me to observe and then shift to put my creativity and strength in place. My stimulus comes from my 'ordinary' environment, my domestic life. Mothering becomes the focus in these gaps. Instead of denying its existence, my design eye centers it, and keeps it near.

***“If you work with your hands, you’re a laborer. If you work with your hands and your mind, you’re a craftsman. If you work with your hands and your mind and your heart, you’re an artist.”***

*- Saint Francis of Assisi*

Art transforms. I find an immense freedom in the interpretation of letters and fonts when practicing hand lettering. It is an implicit agreement of an art form that is not schooled, it is not imposed by the rules from higher education. It pushes my design skills to explore the connections between drawing them and how I learn, think, and carry my cultural heritage – a Peruvian immigrant. It gives a visual language to the angst of being a mother who was not born in this country, and accepts that it is still overwhelming to raise them alone. Hand lettering design reconciles the motherhood I recreated with the designer that I am now.

Recovering from a motherhood interruption is accepting it as part of one’s growth, but this so-called inaction is only because our society does not see motherhood as a current action in a woman’s life. Mothering years are intense, emotional, and vulnerable periods. As a mother, there is a real sense of losing control because there is a strong dependency on a partner, and a community to help with the frustrations of motherhood. There is no room to admit that parts (or all) of motherhood is not enjoyable, without being labeled a bad mother. This cycle of guilt may cause stagnancy in a mother because it is a cyclical questioning of how valuable she is in this role. At the same time, there is a huge amount of flexibility in adapting and recreating.

In the graphic design world, I found hand lettering to be this artistic tool. My domestic labor wants to be noticeable. It is elevating the ordinary task of caring for others. My intention is not to be the super mother everyone expects from a single mother, it is about mothering while I create art – showing my conflicting feelings and my caring to my children and myself. It is about empowering a voice that I kept under wraps because it was unclear to me. Bringing up the discussion of how hard this society continues to shame mothers for questioning parts of their mothering ><









**THE FIRST TIME I READ PARENTING BOOKS,** I understood that a routine is important for your baby's well being. As a new parent, knowing ahead of time when your baby will eat, play, and sleep brings comfort in unknown territory. Now, I see routines as a way to adapt your motherhood to the daily life of a capitalist society, where either one caregiver works full time and is unavailable to help the other caregiver, or both are working full time and their non working hours is to care for their babies, which can mean losing valuable sleep hours (along their sanity).

*Long after those baby years, raising my children can still be filled with unpredictability. I set routines and calendars but my support is only me. I do not have a partner as back up for the uncertain times. Being a good and present single parent is full time as all the time of your day. There is not much wiggle room for anything else after that. This frustrating idea is my lonely companion when I crave alone time and instead, I end up watching an episode of kid's TV to bond with my children.*

When I stopped working as a designer, many years ago, it was a decision that I came to gradually. I was laid off but was hired back as a contractor. Shortly after, I got pregnant and my job was not accommodating of my pregnancy. Without the support of my partner, I kept postponing my return to work full time, and then the delay snowballed from there. Socially, it is hard to ask for help. Our current structure of support is oriented toward the individual. Without help, one feels a deep isolation which can be so difficult to come emerge from.

Forgiveness is a central force in my life as a single mother. I am learning to accept that many events in my life happened because our society normalizes gender social norms or stereotypes that open paths to abuse. The driving forces of Capitalism dehumanize much of our own experiences. Victimization to avoid confronting issues that break us down. *Deconstructing our pain.* My graphic design journey is about recovery, accepting my life won't be as it was before, and not coming from a point of complaint but compassion. I take responsibility in my decisions and I acknowledge the many external situations that oppress our individuality.





# PRODUCTION

in commotion



BAR'S!!

SINGLE MOTHERS  
Can tell their own  
STORIES

Crave? Meet here.  
I wanted to make  
something I felt GOOD  
about giving my kids,  
so I created these guilt  
free cereals. We moved  
from Australia to share  
them with you.  
Enjoy! *Hall*

| Nutrition Facts                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| About 6 servings per container |     |
| Serving size 1/2 cup (30g)     |     |
| Calories 140                   |     |
| Total Fat 7g                   | 14% |
| Saturated Fat 2.5g             | 5%  |
| Trans Fat 0g                   | 0%  |
| Cholesterol 0mg                | 0%  |
| Sodium 220mg                   | 5%  |
| Total Carbohydrate 15g         | 3%  |
| Dietary Fiber 2g               | 4%  |
| Total Sugar 10g                | 20% |
| Includes 10g                   | 20% |
| Includes 10g                   | 20% |
| Includes 10g                   | 20% |
| Includes 10g                   | 20% |

MOTT'S  
Nutrition Facts  
About 13 servings per container  
Serving size 1/2 cup (30g)  
Calories 80

Oats & Honey Blend  
Nutrition Facts  
About 13 servings per container  
Serving size 1/2 cup (30g)  
Calories 150

MOM'S BEST cereals  
Simple Goodness Promise  
No artificial flavors  
No synthetic colors  
Made with real cinnamon  
Made using renewable wind energy  
We purchase wind energy credits to offset 100% of the electricity used to make the cereal in this bin.  
This cereal is made from 100% recycled paper (except for the 3% post-consumer content). Please recycle again!  
BE SOCIAL WITH US!  
Mom's Best Guarantee

KOCHITZ  
Totoposte Maiz (corn chips)  
Mexican Style  
We invite you to try our Thoron de Maiz (corn chips) with any of our salsas, and experience the ancient flavors that have been carefully recreated from Aztec and Mayan recipes.  
"Totoposte", maize flower in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec.  
Made and enjoyed the traditional way.



**M**Y mother has beautiful cursive handwriting. Her M is distinctive and curvy. I recently saw her handwriting. Her beautiful M is shaky from her aging, but still with so much character. Her name is Margarita, like a flower (a daisy) in Spanish and like the cocktail in English. Shortly after she married, she quit her job as administrative assistant for the only phone company in Lima and became an engineer’s wife. Our family was sent to reside at campsites in remote areas of Perú as my father started his career as a hydrologist engineer. In the zigzagged, unpaved roads of the Andes Mountains, she learned to drive. She said the wife of an Italian or Swiss engineer was her driving teacher. After a few years, my parents moved to Lima, the capital. They began a mine consulting business during one of the worst political climates in our country’s history. I often wonder how they were able to run a successful business in those circumstances.

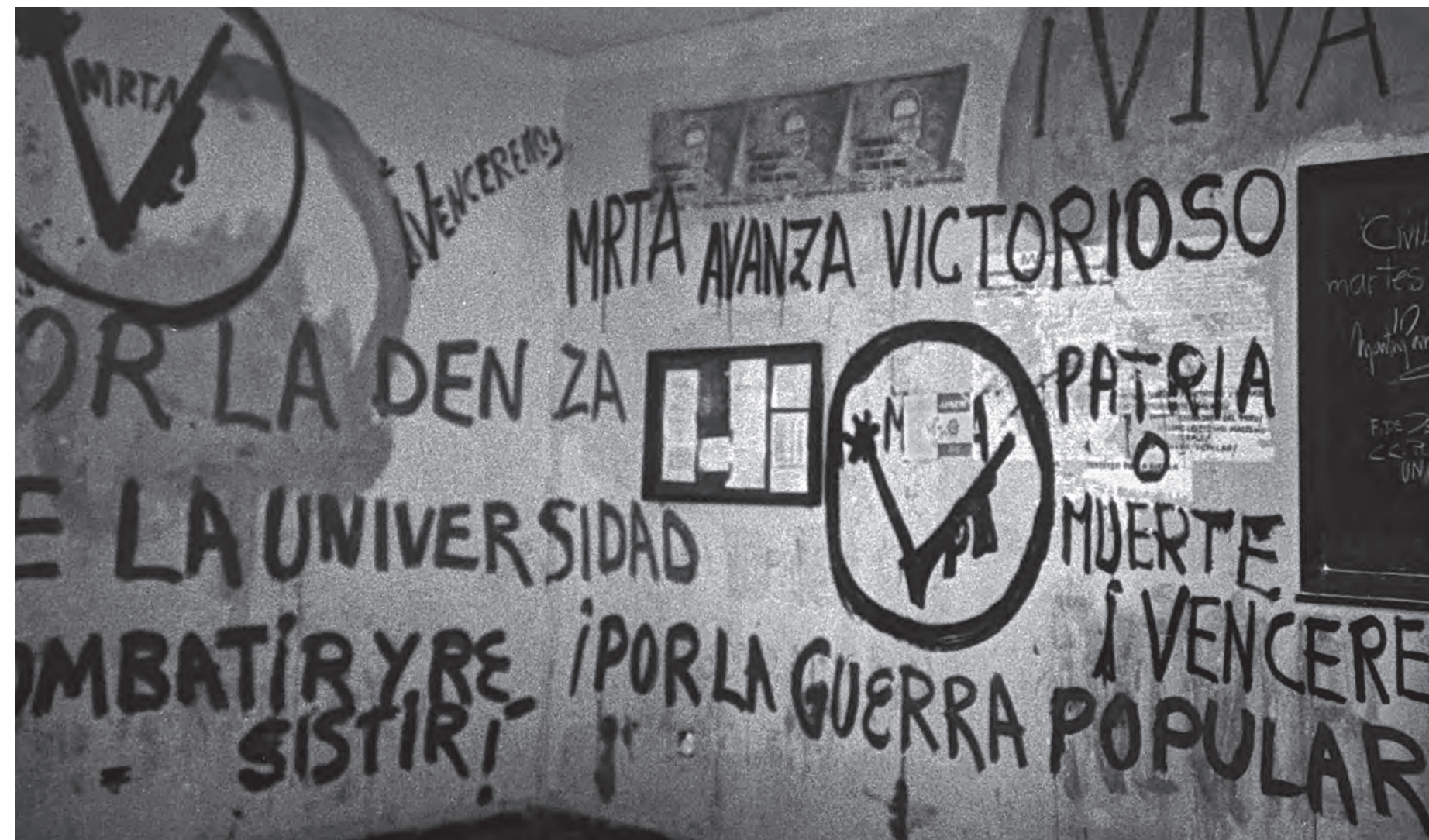
Cursive was an important learning tool for reading and writing class during my elementary school years in Perú. The popular “Coquito”<sup>1</sup> was a cursive notebook that was used – almost ritualistically – as a first and second grader. When you finished your Coquito, that meant you graduated as a reader. You were encouraged to repeat the words out loud while writing. Phrases that rhyme. ‘Mi papá me ama.’ *My dad loves me.* ‘Mi mamá es linda.’ *My mom is beautiful.* You had to trace the broken lines of the word for the first half of the exercise. Handwriting was hard for me. My brain instinctively tried script writing, and I really had to concentrate whenever I tried handwriting. After hearing my frustration, my mom would say: work slow, your muscle memory will kick in soon. My goal was to have her handwriting. Her a’s are a perfect oval, the connections are perfectly spaced out and there was always a flourish at the beginnings and ends of her words.

Starting in the early 80s, at the height of the political turmoil in Perú, the Shining Path movement<sup>2</sup> – Sendero Luminoso – started a revolutionary war against the government, retaliating with violence by using the military forces. Shortly after they emerged, another radical revolutionary group, MRTA<sup>3</sup>, began operating by kidnapping and killing politicians and business owners. The Peruvian population was caught in the middle of these attacks.

1 “Acerca De Nosotros.” Coquito USA, 2020, <https://coquito.us/pages/la-historia-del-libro-coquito>.

2 “Shining Path.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 11 Jan. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shining-Path>.

3 “Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tupac-Amaru>.



Graffiti made by the terrorist groups found in one of Universidad San Marcos’ classroom, Lima Perú. Circa 1980.

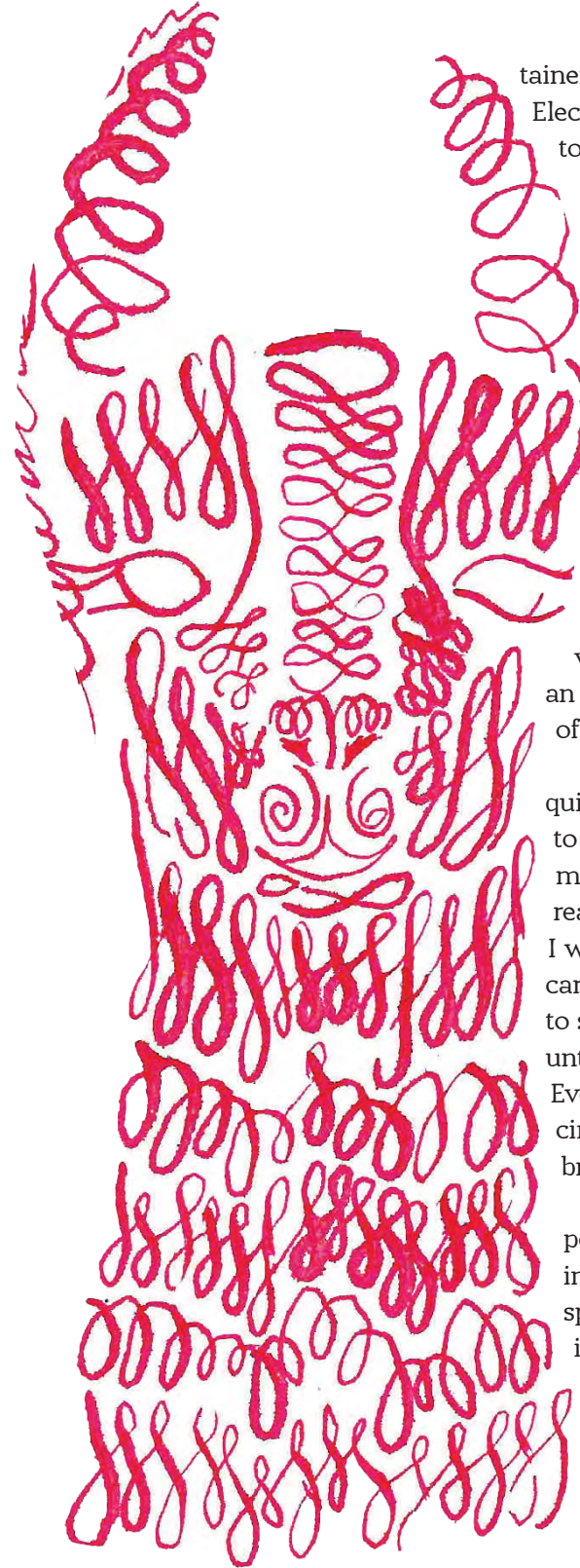
People from the Andes suffered the most because entire towns were terrorized by either the military or the terrorist groups. For the first few years, these attacks happened in remote areas, until it moved closer to Lima, where we lived. Car bombs exploded near hydroelectric stations which were followed by power outages; the instability of a corrupt government created economic inflation. Despite all the external chaos around us, my parents were surprisingly stable working parents that provided us with a comfortable house in a middle class neighborhood. My family went on weekend trips to many places in Perú. We regularly had family gatherings with both sides of my family. After school, I had piano lessons, gymnastics, art camp, and I was about to start ballet when a car bomb happened in the same block as the dance studio. I remember clearly working on my Coquito by candlelight. The focus was on tracing the line. You repeat the phrases in your head as all the chaos of the attacks fade.

We strangely got used to the sound of a car bomb and its aftermath. Then, the power would go out immediately after the sound of a car bomb, and most of the time it was followed by a water outage too. We were told to start filling buckets, bathtubs, or any con-









tainer with water. Water! It was so precious. Electricity was back on hours later, but water took time. Days would go by and still no water. We warmed water on the stove, took luke showers, and washed our hair in buckets. We recycled the dishes' water to flush the toilet. When the water was restored, you could hear the neighbors clanging their cooking pots. This was our car bomb routine and we all lived like that for about a decade. As children, it didn't cross our minds that people were dying from these series of events. Violence was normalized and as the ones "not affected," our only control was to create our own routine in the wake of the destruction, a predictability for an out-of-control world. Stay safe in a limbo of numbness.

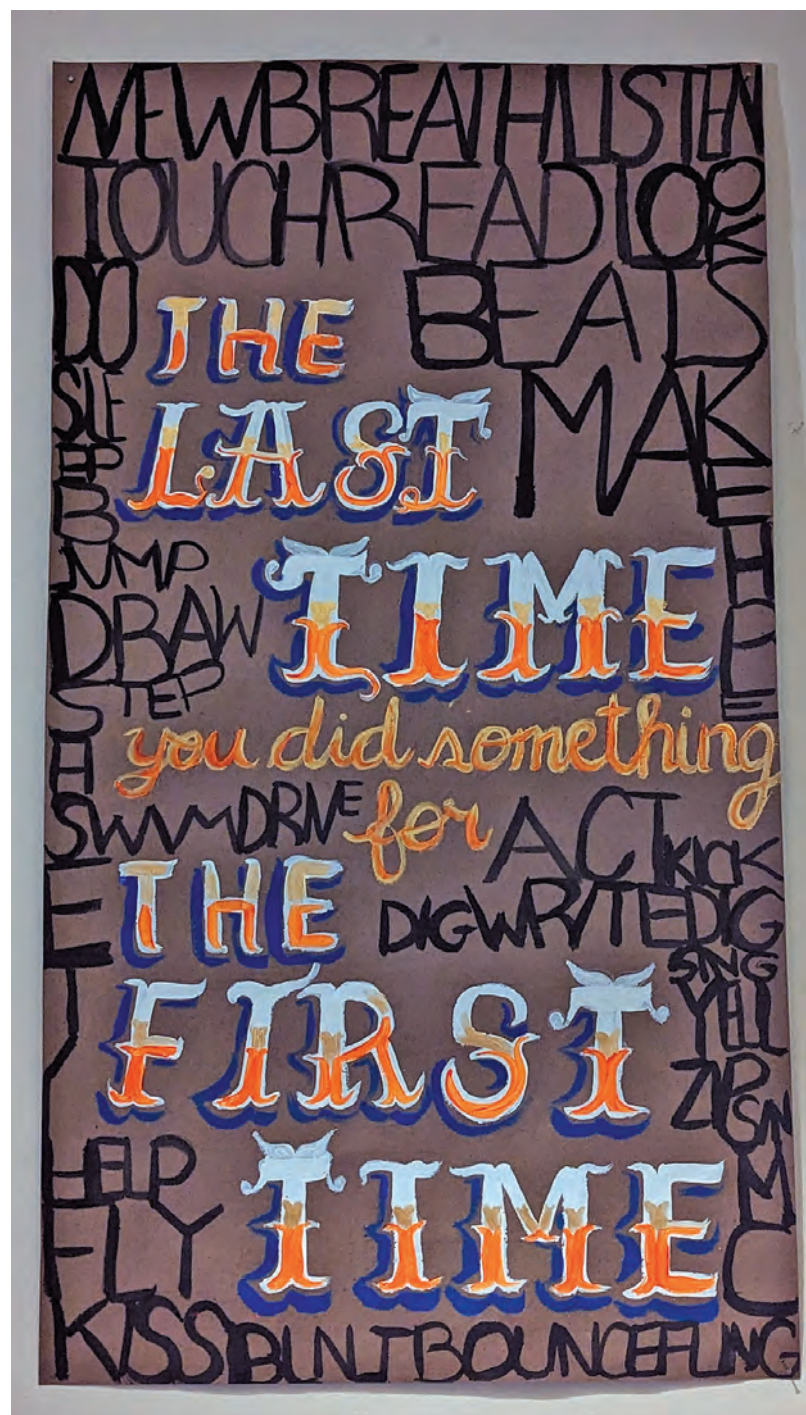
Routines went on. As a teenager, I had quinceañera parties to go to, though I had to be home the next day, because of the military curfew. One time, I had an allergic reaction to a spider bite and my mom and I were caught by the curfew in the urgent care clinic. There was no choice but for us to sleep in our car in the hospital parking lot until morning. School was never canceled. Ever. We adapted to these extraordinary circumstances and school and homework brought an awkward normalcy.

With handwriting, you do not lift the pen off the paper and it is more free flowing. Calligraphy is drawing the letters using specific strokes for the purpose to make it aesthetically consistent. A calligrapher achieves the same thickness. It is time consuming, even when you are a master, you have to "warm up" your hands with exercises before doing a final piece. A good calligrapher's hand should not

get tired because you exercise your whole arm. When you practice, you also create this mental pattern, or "muscle memory." You read, out loud or inside of you, in repetitive mode what you write. I started with my name, *Jessica Jessica Jessica*, I was doing it for hours, and I started thinking why my parents chose that name (my mom loves french names). Then I thought about how I like the J. Its form. It can be magestically drawn, or just two sticks. *Jessica Jessica Jessica*. Then, my mind started jumping to the questions. Did I sign up to graduate school to make more money, to find a career that I cut too short? Or to find a status to feed my ego? Check to all.

Working in calligraphy brings me back to childhood memories of learning cursive in school, living in a stable household with loving parents, siblings, and fun parties, and with car bombs exploding close enough to remind us how unsafe it was outside of our little bubble. There was a privilege of growing up in a family that was emotionally and financially secure and able to manage the mayhem just outside our house. When I learned cursive, it was a part of moving through fear during Perú's terrorist period. I can only recall the despair of those years with a child's view. Now, calligraphy is a technical skill that helps my hand lettering and uses my graphic design expertise to move through my daily frustrations as a single mother.

Practice repetitively to recondition patterns, to redo something in improved ways. It is about gaining control in my life. Putting the ink on a blank paper. Warming up with circles and lines is an exercise for my mind before entering the meditation of creating the final product. Mastering calligraphy is filling this room with a love for drawing words, giving room to experiment with it, and finally marking my existence. ✨





## STUDY OF PERUVIAN HAND LETTERING

**A**n eight-hour car ride on a bumpy, dusty road through the Andes mountains led us to my grandmother's house in Huancayo city, 10,659 feet above sea level. There were six people in a car meant for five. As the youngest in the family, I had to fight for room among my siblings or have my mom's lap. I entertained myself by reading all the hopeful phrases painted on trucks and buses driving past. They were a variety of funny love declarations, how much the truck drivers miss their hometowns, love triangles, and prayers for guidance to patron saints. A common theme was the near death experience one is about to embark on working this way.

Up and down in an orange Lada Niva truck on a zigzagged, two-lane highway, each gear change felt rough. Comfort was not even a concern, and safety was more of a wish. We wished to be safe but new circumstances may bring surprises. Huancayo, my father's hometown, is located in the center of Perú. It is the first stop for the fruits from the rainforest on the way to be sold in Lima. This area is also fertile ground that grows the main staple of Peruvian food: potatoes. In our trips to visit family, we shared the roads with produce delivery trucks that were speeding along with buses full of new migrants that were either coming to the city or going back to visit their hometowns. The possibility of encountering death was a part of taking these roads, and these jokes or prayers written on buses and delivery trucks told of the fear of losing your life.

The neon colors that filled the hand lettering on these vehicles always matched the intense blue sky of the Andes Mountain. It created a sinister contrast with the white crosses laid in the curves of high cliffs, as a reminder of how near death could be along this journey. On separate occasions, my own grandfather and a close uncle found death traveling these roads. To this day, car accidents on the current roads (now paved) are still alarmingly high. The memorable phrases painted on these trucks and buses were filled with prayers for those making these risky journeys: *Prohibido dormir, peligro de no despertarse*, It is forbidden to



Letterist painting 'These Sunflowers' in a restaurant, Huancayo, Perú.



My siblings and mother posing in front of our trusting Lada Niva Truck. Photo taken by my father, circa mid 1980, peak of the terrorist period in Perú.





Left: Huancayo, 10,771' elevation

fall asleep, it's dangerous to not wake up. *Dios me protege, si no regreso es porque estoy con él*, God protects me, if I don't come back the reason is because I am already with him.

Researching the origins of these colorful hand lettering styles, an artist named Caracortada – Scarface – created all the signage for the weight, height, and maximum capacity of the trucks for the main outdoor produce market of La Parada, in Lima during the 1950's. His apprentice was Rodolfo Ponce, El Caribeño –the Caribbean man– who was the unofficial father of Peruvian hand lettering signage, expanding his art to small business advertisements. Both of these artists were inspired by the Casual Font used at the time by American and European cargo ships, bringing foreign magazines full of advertisements and fancy foreign printed fonts.

When I left Perú in the late 1990's, this style of hand lettering was considered flashy and unsophisticated. The colors were thought to be tacky. It was created by artists whose studios were in shady neighborhoods near truck repair shops. It should be said that Peruvian cultural identity was going through a transition from the past political turmoil, and what was thought to 'look Peruvian' had a shame of being cheap and uneducated.

Still, this hand lettering was used in small business signages all over Perú. Soon after, screen printing became popular and posters were mass produced to advertise 'chicha' singer concerts, a cumbia music style favored by Andean migrants living in the capital. The bright colors with the black background were eye-catching, regardless of whether there was any interest in the subject. The information was always clearly placed with a perfect graphic design hierarchy. Performer, location, date and time.

El arte también es funcional. Art can also be functional, Alinder Espada told us. He was part of the artist group Carga Máxima; the other partner is Azucena Cabezas. Both teach workshops about Letras Chillantes – hand lettering – in their studios in Lima. No previous experience as an artist or designer is required to take their classes. At the end of a two-hour workshop, the student will finish a beautiful sign in black background with an inspirational phrase of three words or less. Alinder makes the student practice for one hour and explains in great detail the curves and thickness of the stroke – it starts with a brush stroke dragged slightly to the side, then grows thicker and ends with a tail. Rudolfo Ponce taught Alinder, and they only did this with acrylic paint because it was done in wood sheets for signage, and that is how it is taught during Alinder's class but instead sheets of paper were used to practice. He is a skilled artist with a fine arts degree, and has traveled all over South America to study with a variety of lettering artists from other countries. His workshops were Peruvian history lessons and his own conclusions about how the story filters through the art. The second hour of the workshop is with Azucena – a sweet contrast to her partner's seriousness. Her professional background as a graphic designer comes through as she discusses the subjects of our phrases. Her manner made me feel I could become an expert hand lettering artist during her hour. She told students not to be afraid to put it on the canvas; she said "mistakes are good, because you can hide them."

In the next hand lettering workshop, it was an advanced lesson of history and skills. Alinder told us to research the Tuscan typeface. Each Latin American country has a vari-



ant of hand lettering based on this typeface. To his knowledge, there was a good deal of academic research and books written about Argentinian and Chilean lettering. We learned two kinds of lettering: Letra Cachito and Letra Huesito. The diminutive -ito at the end of the lettering's name is to show love, to make it 'peruvian.' Both letterings are meant to be all caps and used in three to five lines at maximum. The purpose is using catchy phrases to advertise services or goods, or life's quotes.

It takes time to master the thickness of the strokes with acrylic paint. The only way is practice repetitive strokes. After getting a good handle of it, there is room to be flexible and create your own version. Alinder told us that as long as you make it legible, there is room to make modifications to make it expressive and your own. However, they were more strict with the colors. These fluorescent colors are traditional in this lettering's identity. Azucena said to practice with all the neon colors, because black paint would be boring. Play cumbia music, practice with a magenta that blinds your eyes.

Phrases on the trucks and buses reveal things about the clients that hired these artists. The Spanish grammar used hints that these drivers or their parents were mainly quechua speakers. Most likely, the religious phrases were from older, experienced drivers – the ones that have seen too many accidents and were still alive. The Saint that they asked for guidance from was their patron saint or the virgin mary from their hometown. If only Christ was mentioned, that meant that the driver was a born again evangelical since Catholics are the only ones that venerate saints. The phrases about broken hearts, cheating partners, or sexist comments about one's sister or mother meant that the driver was young and inexperienced. The combination of colors and motifs could tell you their hometowns, and the more ornamental or the more color meant they paid the artist better, giving an indication that those drivers were accumulating wealth.

Peruvian hand lettering is still very much in use today. Only now, it identifies in a prideful way. Alinder and Azucena are hired to do murals for restaurants and Peruvian products backed by big corporations, such as liquor and food conglomerates. This lettering finally has recognition in the art schools. Azucena teaches two classes in a popular art school in Lima. The students I took the beginner's class with were high schoolers that were toying with the idea of being graphic designers and I assume this workshop was another step to get there.



Agua Bendita, 'Blessed water' church in Lima, Perú

Right: seafood restaurant lettering menu signage







Elliot Tupac's work found at J. Chavez airport in Lima, Perú.

There is a wave of mural artists recognized worldwide that incorporate a variation of this style. Elliot Tupac<sup>4</sup>, one of the most famous lettering artists, uses a mix of calligraphy and Peruvian lettering with the neon colors and the motivational phrases. Monkey<sup>5</sup> is a well-recognized poster designer for the chicha musicians, with his work displayed in art galleries.

I was curious and asked Alinder and Azucena when this hand lettering made the jump from being seen as commercial and distasteful to a real Peruvian brand identity. Each had their own answer. Alinder believes that after the terrorist period of the 1980's, Perú was in search of an improved brand identity. By then, the biggest wave of migration of Andes people to Lima was over. These families were raising their children in this city, and they did not speak quechua, did not live in the mountains, and most likely not traveled to these distant hometowns often. These children were the diaspora from these andes towns. Chicha music became popular, which is a fusion of huayno, andes music from their parent's hometown and cumbia style. Their concerts were posted with screen printed posters with neon colors in a black background. This style of music and its advertisement exploded in popularity during the last years of the 1980s. Neon colors were popular in American pop culture at that time. Alinder believes these lettering styles are the product of the aesthetics of that decade, that flashy color palette, and this norm that everything from the United States was newer and better, disguising colonialism and white supremacy culture. Most of our pop culture in my childhood was coming from this country, and/or a Peruvian adaptation of it.

<sup>4</sup> "Elliot Tupac, Artist Muralist and Typography from Perú." Elliot Tupac, <https://elliottupac.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Exhibición Virtual – Monkey, Pionero De Los Carteles Chicha - UPC Cultural." UPC, <https://cultural.upc.edu.pe/galeria/monkey>

Work from Carga Máxima, Peruvian handlettering duo Alinder and Azucena.



Azucena had a slightly different answer. She said the colors are similar to the flowers that grow in the Andes, this neon color palette is seen in the textiles and bright embroidery worn by Peruvians from this area long before the 1980's. Her experience working with lettering shops, she found a link between American and European advertising and their Peruvian counterparts. The artists that made this lettering by hand were illustrating European fonts with American colors to make it sophisticated in their local environment.

It is important to mention that during the late 1990's, there was a wider, international recognition of Peruvian gastronomy, and the usage of this lettering as peruvian brand identity in upscale restaurants made it mainstream in all peruvian goods and services from then on.

The history is captivating, the legacy of a country developing during a period of turmoil. The phrases are intrinsically involved with the hand lettering. History was formed with phrases, colors, and motifs, a visual language. All created by artists with no background in graphic design, using an impressive balance between artistic expression and commercial functionality >><



Right: Prohibido hacer pintas, 'Forbidden to make political graffiti'  
Huancayo, 10,692' Elevation

## ONE OF THE REASONS I DO HAND LETTERING MY PERUVIAN IDENTITY

It all began with a fake Barbie doll. My mother traveled to Tacna, a southern city that borders Chile and was a duty-free zone to purchase cars for my parent's company. She brought me a Barbie as a present, but the doll's legs and arm joints were visible and her face was slightly different. I immediately knew it was not the real Barbie, that it was a boot-leg version. One of my friends' fathers went on a trip to the U.S. and brought her a Barbie nicely packaged with bubblegum pink cardboard and English writing. Mine came in a thin plastic bag with a piece of paper inside written in Spanish. I realized then that mine was a fake, although I was young enough to not care.

Throughout my childhood, we idealized the United States as a dreamland, a perfect place for a perfect life. We were heavily indoctrinated by the closed-captioned television shows and movies, the presents that relatives that immigrated there brought back in their suitcases. The goods from the United States were symbols of prosperity, a life portrayed as peaceful, stable, with sunshine and perfect cookie cutter houses, like the beginning of the show "Full House." My brother and I watched it every day while doing our homework. Our TV time was often disrupted by power outages caused by the communist organization, Sendero Luminoso, "The Shining Path," who launched an internal conflict that lasted for more than a decade.

As much as I loved watching these sitcoms translated to neutral and unfamiliar Spanish, I religiously watched Peruvian and Mexican soap operas with my parents, siblings, and school community. In 1988, this Mexican soap opera, Amor en Silencio, "Love in Silence" broke all viewing records except in the United States. I probably did not understand these intricate love stories as an eleven year old, but when Marisela, the main character, was shot during her wedding with Fernando, it was discussed in detail with my classmates before class the next morning. All the telenovelas had the same narrative: a rich man married a poor woman (or vice versa) breaking all social barriers. I remember being amazed when the characters were shopping at the supermarket or the mall. In contrast, Perú was going through a major financial crisis. There were street vendors selling everything imaginable in the street. Shopping was not fun, my mother held my hand tight; it was crowded and vendors barked loudly to sell their goods. We had to hide money, jewelry, and watches for fear of being mugged. Peruvians, more often women with babies, from rural areas begging for money, food, or jobs, wrote their stories about living in this unwelcoming city, in small cardboard signs. Many Indigenous Peruvians were displaced from towns in the Andes<sup>6</sup> attacked by the Peruvian Military with the idea these populations were part of the terrorist movement, or by the Shining Path group for not joining them. I remember the vibrant colors in their clothes: red, pink, purple, and green all knitted together with a layer of being worn too much, sitting hopeless by the bus stops or sidewalks, ignored by all of us.

<sup>6</sup> Rex, Hudson A. "Peru." Peru - the Andean Highlands, US Library of Congress, 1992, <https://www.countrystudies.us/peru/25.htm>.





The telenovelas are wrapped in plastic with glitter shining in our new color TV's, their phony stories so far from our own stories. The successful characters' skin color was light, even if they were poor, because a happy future came to people considered beautiful under the western beauty standards. It was a society with no political turmoil and loads of personal drama. Each character had its place in the social hierarchy. The rich characters had drivers and a housekeeping staff, who were the poor characters, that were brown, indigenous people. They were uneducated and widows or single parents. In contrast, the rich ones always had a set of parents and siblings but somehow were all evil. We were fed this utopia that felt closer to us because all the characters spoke Spanish but lived in an orderly society that we thought resembled the United States.

During this time, my family often drove to my father's hometown in the Andes mountains to visit my grandmother. Sendero Luminoso members painted in red paint on the buildings facing the highway, "Soplones" which means "traitor." "Viva el Presidente Gonzalo," and "Viva Sendero Luminoso." Hail to President Gonzalo<sup>7</sup>. Hail to the Shining Path. Houses in the Andes were the billboards for these messages. From the car window, I was distracted by this political graffiti and by the wild llamas in the background, barely visible with their camouflage fur. This graffiti was sharing space with the chicha music signs. Neon-colored posters advertising concerts. All these signs and posters were breaking rules. They were plastered on houses without permission, and most importantly, they were the signs of the profound disruptions that our society was going through, changing the landscape of Perú.

Polished, finished work looks out of place where I grew up. Commercial billboards on the highways are this imposed ideal that our cities must look like the cities from the American movies, because that may bring order to our chaos. The hand lettering signs splashed on trucks or houses are a reminder that what my roots know is messy, complicated, a visual language showing the impact of our oppression. It is expressive, colorful, and breaks the rules loudly, because our voice has always been rebellious. It displays the frustration of what we are taught as the norm, the United States lifestyle, dismissing what we are, an ancestral culture forced to recreate themselves under colonization.

I have lived in the US longer than I lived in Perú now. *Mi Perú* is discontinued; now it is a country somewhat stabilized, with many political and social issues but there is no civil unrest, no regular killings.

Doing hand lettering is to embrace the imperfections of a line, the improvisations, the doubts that the space is not evenly divided. One of artist Margaret Kilgallen's<sup>8</sup> quote was "...my hand will always be imperfect, because it's human. If I spend a lot of time going over the line and over the line trying to make it straight, I will never be able to make it straight. You can always see the line waiver, and I think that's where the beauty is." She made work that showed evidence of handling, an intimate intention and her vision was flexible to make

<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, Colleen. "Abimael Guzmán". Encyclopedia Britannica, 28 Feb. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abimael-Guzman>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "Margaret Kilgallen." Art21, <https://art21.org/artist/margaret-kilgallen/>.



Screen printing signages advertising Chicha music concerts found in the streets of Huancayo, Perú.

it work with what was available for her. My words found a visual medium that brings me back to my identity as Peruvian and the origin of my design choices. In Perú, lettering is done with what is available. Signs made of cardboards, wood, and metal scraps. I am drawn to unpolished (imperfect) design solutions that tell a story with not only words but the materials used. I want to show vulnerability in my work and get some discomfort from the audience.

Signs are important communication tools. They inform us, warn us, sell to us, educate us. They connect us to our present surroundings. Hand lettering signs, in my case, displayed the history of a struggling country, indicating to me how to find safety in the middle of chaos. The story behind these signs are told with phrases, the colors and materials. A visual language formed by the fusion of this imposed false norm, western culture equals superiority; and the reality of a country that is exploring their cultural identity ><<



## MY AGENDA OF HAND LETTERING AND MOTHERING ALONE

**L**ATE at night, I sit alone in my chair feeling exhausted by caring for the young people in my house. Early in the morning, I alone get them ready for school. And as any healthy child interacts, they do not stop until they are in bed sleeping at night.

Children need clean shelter, clothing, and food to thrive in this world. The mundane tasks of cleaning, washing, feeding are repetitive, it is time consuming and tiring. I used to think that an analogy for parenting was caring for and watering the seed before the plant grows and blooms. Now, I believe these young humans are already full grown flowers, blooming, shedding petals with the seasons of time. And my responsibility as their mother, is to make sure their ground is stable, fresh with water, and with air circulating in their lives that cleans the static gaps. I am their gardener – growing flowers that can live far beyond my own life.

Maintenance is not glamorous; it is monotonous. The constant grind of one person maintaining a home pushes your boundaries and sanity. The kitchen sink is always full with so many plates, pots, and utensils. Food may still be fresh or it may have expired in the fridge. Healthy meals are mixed with junk food because the only adult is too tired to handle every day's dinner. Laundry baskets are in constant rotation with dirty clothes or clean clothes not folded. Pet hair is everywhere on the forgotten floor that should have been dusted days ago. Although cleaning irritates me because I can be doing many other tasks that are more fulfilling to my soul, I find great satisfaction seeing all the dirt in a corner to be picked up after sweeping my revolving kitchen floor.

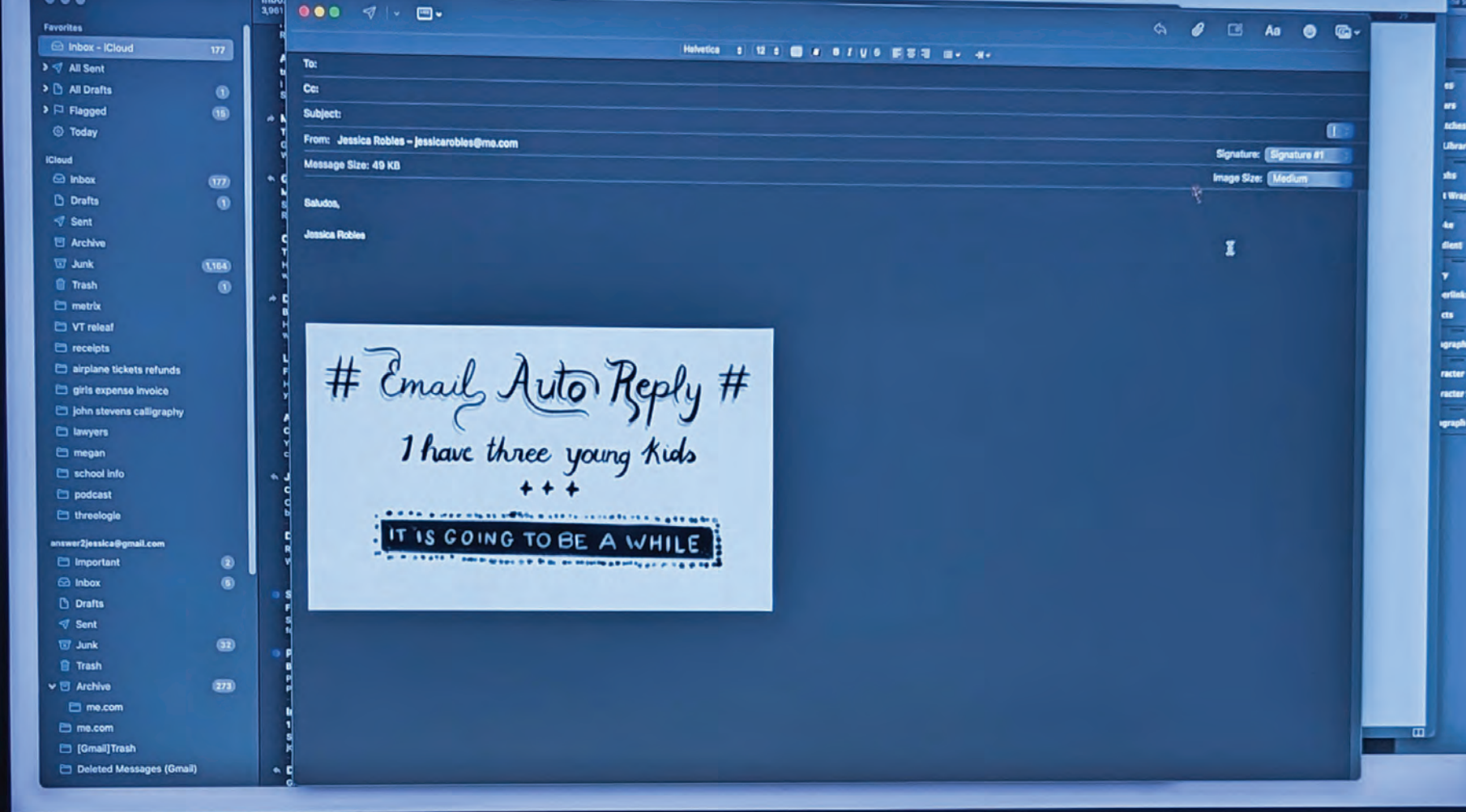
Mentally, my children rely on my answers to questions that they ask and the ones that they don't ask which I have to figure out intuitively on my own. Their complaints are about going to school, not doing much, or opposite, friends that are nice, and the mean ones, their micro societies that coexist in their social circles. I encourage them to think about their actions and their consequences. I always tell them that they are not alone, we live in a community, and the moment we are up in the morning, our actions affect each of us. I order them to get dressed quickly and for once be on time to our daily events, to eat their vegetables, and to behave "decently" in a restaurant (many times I don't know what I mean by that). Pushing and pulling. Making sure to build confidence in their voices, and at the same time, teaching them to trust the community we find ourselves in.

The labor of single motherhood affects my design practice. In hand lettering, it shows my imperfections, my doubts appear in the wobbly lines, or the asymmetry in lines. Sometimes the words I write are intimate, a feeling finding a way out. I use available material, such as pieces of scrap wood, metal, cardboard. Walls can be filled with painted words. This kind of artwork is flexible. It can be done anywhere, with any material available. They can teach history or political views, or share motivational quotes, or market a brand.

As a designer and a single mother, my life is broken into time slots. My thoughts are scattered: I think about how expressive calligraphy is, and then I immediately think of the water bottle my daughter forgot again to bring to her soccer game. Adapting to a solo parenting situation is not feasible many times. I fight for time with myself. Do I cook dinner

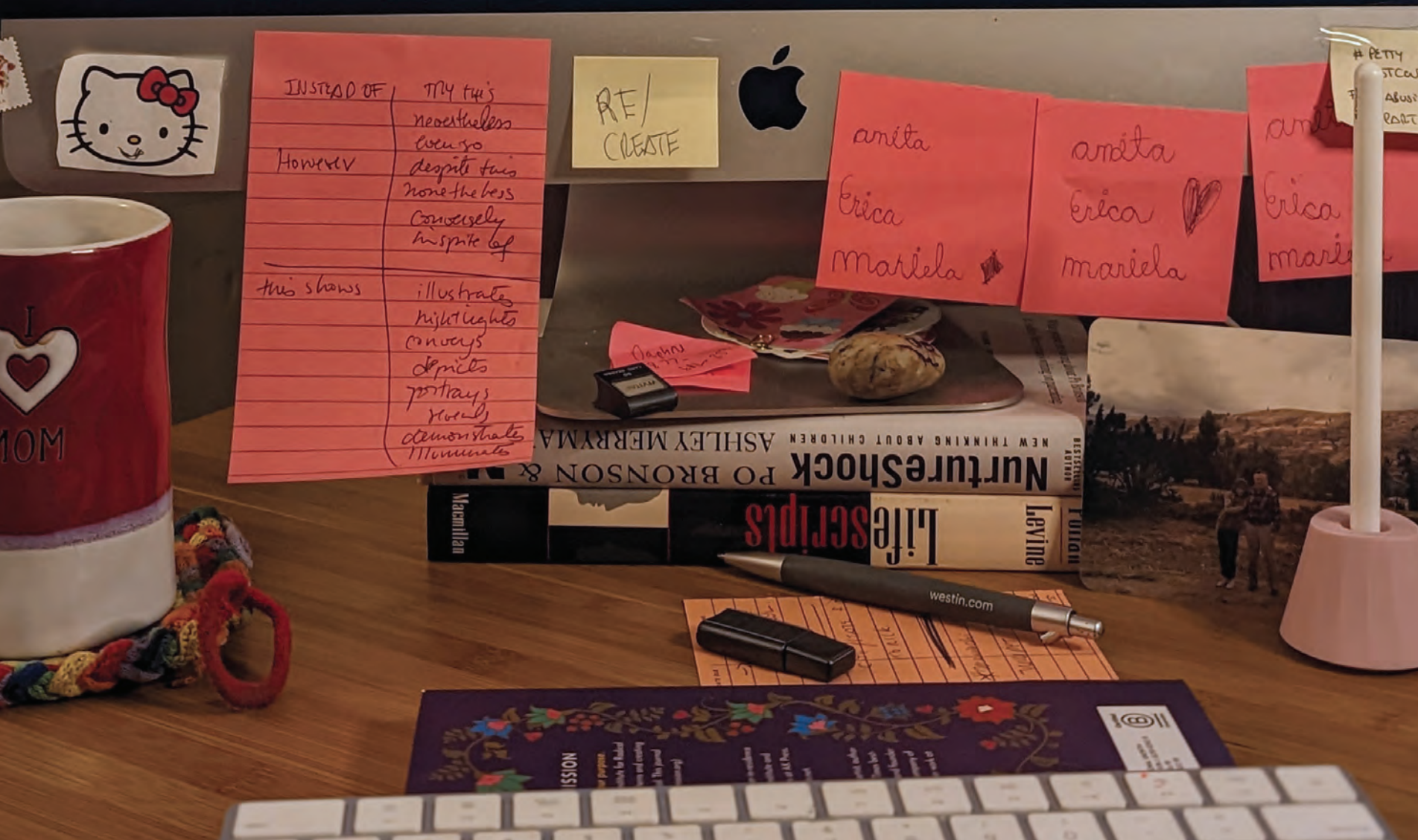
MOTHER  
WOMAN  
DESIGNER  
> IN NO ORDER <





tonight, and as a result feel tired afterwards? Or have something I can warm in the microwave and eat while we watch TV because I am too tired from parenting, giving me time to rest and get back to my art projects. Caregiver duties change constantly, and some days, I have the most self-sufficient children in the world. Other times, my children need me now, at that moment. Knowing I am the only one that is raising them is a mix of frustration and total empowerment.

Hand Lettering emphasizes the flexibility enforced in my daily life. I can have sketches, and trace them on the canvas, but the final product may change at the last second. I can always start again by painting the canvas with another layer. The room to make changes lessens my anxiety as a single parent. It is the process of adapting, recreating, and using what I have, mentally and physically, available at that moment. Design in and for progress. Working in hand lettering while taking care of my children made me more sensitive, and sometimes insecure. *I get overwhelmed often.* My narrative is the opposite of an I-can-do-it-all mother. I finally own my emotions about mothering alone, reacting the way I need to, not what society expects of a single mother 🌈









## The Question

why I stayed

I had nowhere to go.

I couldn't leave my kids.

I couldn't afford a lawyer.

I was ashamed.

I didn't realize it was that bad.

I still loved him.

I stayed because I was more afraid to leave.



INTER  
*Admit*  
RUPT  
ION

20 Show  
HUSKY  
DURO  
DUBL LIFE  
100% Recycled Paper

THERE  
ARE SOME  
\* THINGS  
WORSE than  
\* GHOST





## BRAND IDENTITY

**T**HIS recognition of my single mother status came before I finished processing the motives that brought me to it. The separation was abrupt and violent, not only from my children's father, but the legal process was demeaning, I repetitively had to justify myself against victim blaming laws. Domestic violence must not be viewed only as a crime of one party inflicting harm to another. The abuser is more than just the individual; all sides of society that give the power and entitlement to embolden this kind of behavior. The status quo to ignore these acts, to not hold them accountable because if it is bad enough, why don't they just leave? The worst happens after a victim leaves an abuser<sup>1</sup>. My situation's outcome proved that theory.

*Who am I?* It is a struggle to identify myself as a domestic violence survivor. In the years after my separation, I completed so many legal forms that left me more confused about how the world sees me. These situations brought up a load of systematic social issues that affected me directly. A person, statistically men<sup>2</sup>, uses either physical, verbal, emotional and/or all violence to solve issues, and we give men permission to act out violently as part of their 'nature,' expecting women to repress their reactions. In general, I am more likely to be called a victim, pigeon-holing me as a "broken human." If I am labeled a survivor, all these recovery expectations come into play, harming my healing journey, because recovering from trauma is not a linear process.

*Where am I from?* Part of my ancestry was annihilated, including my culture and native language, bringing up conflicted feelings about our own current identities. Who is a Peruvian? Peruvians have been fed with this idea that anything foreign, especially if from the United States or Western Europe, is superior to our ancestry. The Colonists' legacy. After being colonized by Spain, our history has been a fight between what we were, an ancestral Inca empire and what was forced upon us: colonized Spanish culture. The violent result of one imposing the other is us, the current Peruvians. And, identity will always be our weakest link. Our political system is often at the verge of a major disruption. Political scandals,

<sup>1</sup> "Why Do Victims Stay." The Nation's Leading Grassroots Voice on Domestic Violence, <https://ncadv.org/why-do-victims-stay>.

<sup>2</sup> "Violence against Women." World Health Organization, World Health Organization, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.



*Sin ti, soy yo -- Without you I am me*

*(spaniard slogan in a domestic violence awareness campaign)*



Don't Make  
\*EXCUSES\*  
for horrible  
BEHAVIOR  
EVER

coups, presidents abruptly leaving their positions, and the population inequality is about 40%<sup>3</sup>. Peruvians are encouraged to adapt to the standards of 'normalcy,' as defined by white supremacy and colonialism, leaving our ancestry as the primitive indigenous culture that barely survived. Classism is ingrained in the societal structure, leaving many Peruvians with bleak outlooks for the future. In my immediate circle of family and friends, more than half have emigrated to other countries. I have now lived longer in the U.S. than Perú, and going to Perú now is a reminder that I am not Peruvian anymore. This part of my identity froze the day before I started my life in this country. Now my identity is as an immigrant; it is the only space that recognizes that I am not Peruvian or American. It is the plane flying high that brought me here to live my life, that allows me to see both countries from afar, to be able to comfortably criticize and love them at the same time. One of the perks of being an immigrant.

*In what order does my identity as a single mother come?* From early on, my identity as a wife was the most prevalent in my life. I had my first child and could not go back to being a graphic designer. I embraced being a mother, disguising the failure of a marriage. Now, every task in my daily life is influenced by my single motherhood. My experiences as a single mother have changed the way I handle my life. I make choices in all aspects of my life accepting that I am a single mother of three children. However, I work against the tendency to centralize my role as a mother, that takes a lot of me and minimizes my individuality as a woman and artist. I let both intermingle, finally finding peace in that.

*Why did I stay this long with someone like that? Was this my fault?* Those are the wrong questions. I accepted emotional and physical violence to fit into a complacent society that in return would keep me safe. Back then, I believed that I was in a bad marriage with hints of abuse, but not that I was a domestic abuse victim. After many domestic violence support group sessions later, I finally understand that abusers have the same basic profile, and my case was no different. Abusers share the same tactics, and their actions are predictable, it would be easier to hold them accountable. However, victims who are exhausted, living confused and unsure of what to do next, without any financial and emotional support, are the ones holding the responsibilities to heal their lives, to protect their children and to remain safe, because the most dangerous time is when they leave the abusers.

*What is my brand identity?* Divorced, alien, illegal, battered, single mother, unmarried woman, unemployed, stay-at-home mother, these are the identities given to me, but the knowledge I took from them became my brand. My domestic violence victim and survivor experiences, my immigrant life, my single mother role.

In her book *Designing Brand Identity*<sup>4</sup>, Alina Wheeler, my professor and mentor, wrote the following questions to brainstorm a successful brand identity: "Who are you? Who needs to know? How will they find out? Why should they care?" In recovering from this period of my life, I found my brand identity. I am a designer that leads her life as she wishes. My strength comes from being a single mother, and not from the past trauma to become one. My mothering abilities are utilized in my thoughtful hand lettering work. As a single mother, graphic design gives me the opportunity to learn, rethink, listen, and finally reflect on the social construct of our current oppressive and tedious version of motherhood.▶◀

3 Chaparro, Amanda. "In Peru, Half the Population Lacks Food Security." *Le Monde.fr*, Le Monde, 22 Jan. 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/22/in-peru-half-the-population-lacks-food-security\\_6012540\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/22/in-peru-half-the-population-lacks-food-security_6012540_4.html).

4 Wheeler, Alina. "Identity." *Designing Brand Identity*, 2nd ed., Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, 2006, pp. 3.

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Interruption



## THE MIND DURING AN INTERRUPTION

- I. Our moves from home to home were impulsive. In the first three years we lived together, we moved four times in the same neighborhood. At the beginning, abusive behaviors are subtle, leaking slowly into the air. We moved to the first house but it did not take long for him to sell me another idea that I followed. His decisions were my only choices. With each physical move, my power diminished, and my voice lowered. I did not make enough income to have a voice. Every new place brought more isolation from my community of friends and relatives.
- II. After graduating with a BFA in Graphic Design in 2003, I obtained an internship in a boutique studio owned by two male designers. The shyness of one was compensated by the chattiness of the other. They only gave me a stipend for the bus and to buy lunch for the three of us. Their biggest perk was using a museum pass for places in the city. That summer, I stayed at my aunt's house in Union City, NJ, and worked as a waitress in a trendy latino restaurant in midtown Manhattan, where all the customers were not latinos. I worked all the time, and to save money I walked from 42nd Street to the studio on 18th Street. I literally burned through the bottoms of two sets of sneakers from these walks. Then I got an interview at one of my favorite magazines, 'Jane.' During the interview I learned that if I was selected to work there, I would be in a 3-month long trial period and my salary would be so low that I wouldn't be able to afford living in such an expensive city, unless I kept the restaurant job. Because of that, I decided to move in with my boyfriend, who became my children's father. My gut knew it was not the time yet in our relationship to live together, but I wanted so badly to work for that magazine. Shortly after I moved in with him, the magazine job position went to another candidate with prior experience in publishing.
- III. Becoming pregnant only put me in an even more vulnerable position. Without child-care or immediate family nearby for emotional and other support, it was not feasible to continue my career as a graphic designer. Time was passing by and my inertia was the only feeling that was steady. There was no room for my identity as an independent woman and artist. I couldn't read. I couldn't draw. I couldn't design. I couldn't find a job. I started cooking. That was the only activity that gave me a sense of accomplishment. Homemade meals became a room to hide the shame that I felt for living through this trauma. There were times that the anxiety was so high that it took over my own self and I exploded. After an angry outburst, the shame was heavy as I could not recognize myself. But those feelings had to hide somewhere else, because by that point, I would be ignored for days, like I did not exist. Eventually, we'd speak again pretending nothing had happened. These mental games would sink into my mind and body, making my emotions foggy. I was waiting for a dialogue that never came, intentionally done to distort my reality, leaving me with self doubt, judging my intuition.

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HOW



-77-

Interruption





IV. Working as a junior designer in the Marketing Department for a renowned science college in Philadelphia sounded like a good step in my career. The job was dreary, the commute tiring. The public transportation in that area was not reliable and driving was a nightmare of one-hour each way, although it was not even 15 miles. At work, all projects had to be revised multiple times by the hierarchy of school administrators in each college department, and those meetings were the longest, with meandering, gibberish discussions. The art director explained the brand identity of the school, and everyone else did not take her seriously. Once, I overheard one of the deans calling us “the design patrol” because we crashed their shortsighted marketing ideas. All our design work was following strict brand identity guidelines, but any innovation to the brand was regulated by too many directors. I regretted working in a place like that. Their cafeteria resembled what I imagined a jail cafeteria to be: sterile, cold, floor-to-ceiling metal walls, and we had to sit with our department staff. For fun, I took Psychology classes at this school after work, because at times, I thought maybe Design wasn’t my path. The marketing director (and my boss) was caught embezzling money from the trips she took to market the college programs.

V. Over the years, my marriage transformed into a nightmare with what felt like no way out. Everyday was the same inside of me, even at the peak of a fight. I learned to ride the cycles. The four stages in an abusive setting are: building tension, an incident of abuse, reconciliation (finding an excuse to justify), and the calm (or honeymoon) stage. I did not think about the future or the past. I was presently miserable and full of guilt for staying. Despite the abuse, I found comfort in knowing what to expect. Divorce was a risk of the unknown, and that was beyond terrifying. Trauma inhabits a part of your body, disrupting and distorting your safety. It dissociates the feelings to keep you safe. Witnessing the interaction of an older retired couple where the husband was clearly emotionally abusive made me react. The wife was a successful professional but was worn out by his reactive lashing comments. A glimpse broke out, my mind began looking for evidence in other post divorce situations, if my children and I were going to be ok. I wanted to find validation, to get rid of this paralyzing fear, because I well understood that I was going to regret wasting all these years living this way.

VI. In art school, I became good friends with one fine art student. We were the very few latinas in the whole school, but our closeness was due to our issues with the art history professor, who failed us once due to our grammar and essay structure showing that english, indeed, was our second language. We commiserated together and learned by deconstructing other students’ essays. She was one of the few married students, and went to school part time. As a mother, she always brought snacks to feed all of us, poor tired art students. We saw each other many years later after graduation. This time was right after her divorce, and she was thriving. Funded by an Ivy league school in the area, she got a grant to open an art center that give mental and emotional support to latino kids – part of the wave of Mexican and Central American immigrant families that changed



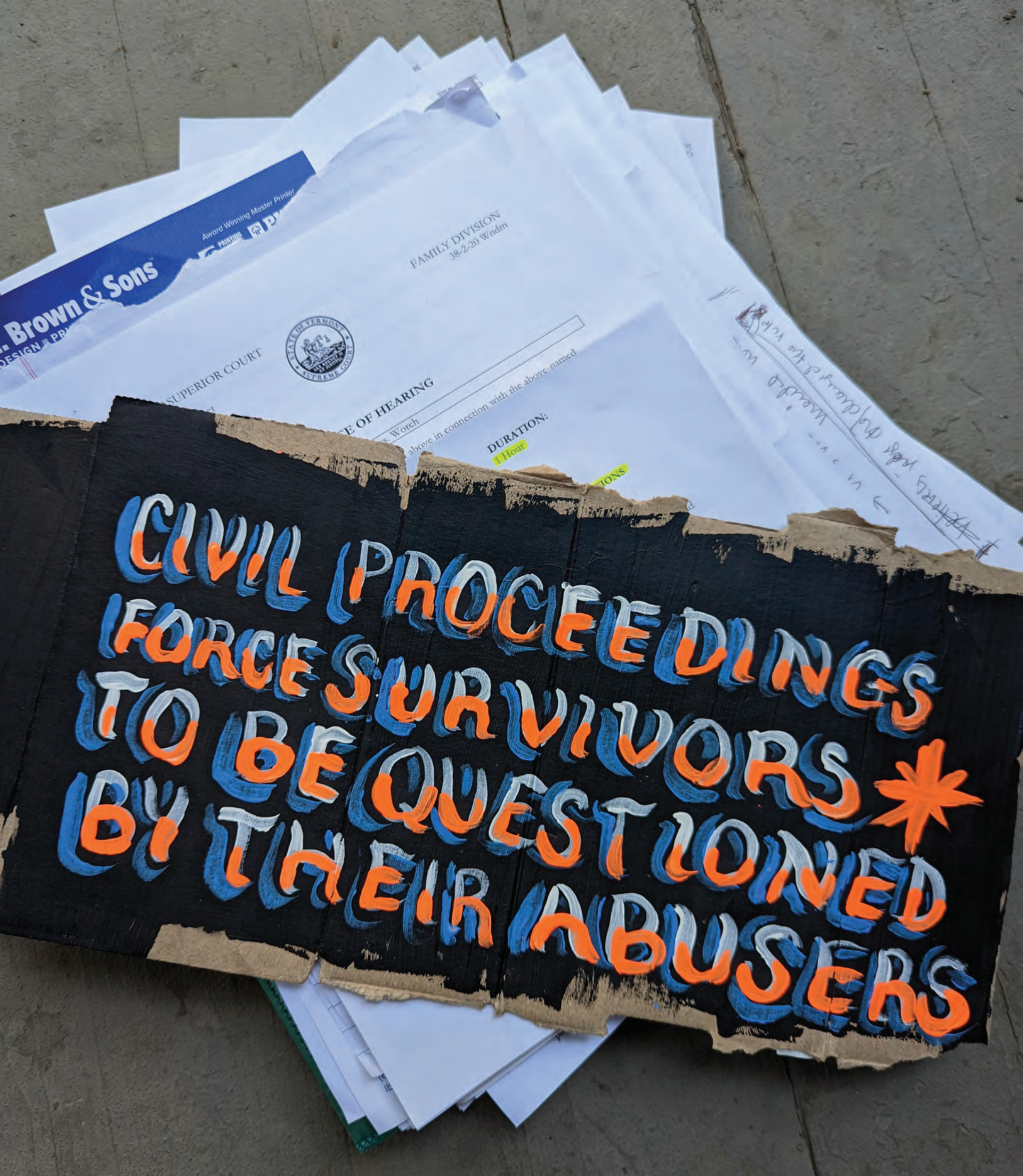


the feel of the old Italian neighborhoods in South Philadelphia. I was hired to do the presentations of these children's artwork in galleries and exhibitions, because the number of participants kept growing and there was a need for more grants. It was rewarding to be a part of this, seeing the immediate change this art center had in the community. I started going every Wednesday and Thursday with my toddler until I became pregnant with my second child. After that, the hopeless feeling from not working was too intense that it paralyzed any enjoyment I had outside of being a mother.

VII. It was courageous to leave an abusive household, and yet it bothers me that this act is considered brave. All I wanted was to have the freedom to remove myself from a bad situation. I knew that I was not in a healthy marriage, and there were still valid reasons to stay. After leaving, the patterns were unveiled. A subtle form of emotional abuse was the need for my immediate response after being bombarded with intense information. I was never told what I did wrong. Intentional forgetfulness about meaningful celebrations caused pain to my value as an individual. The patronizing affection along with the love bombing acts, created this ambiguity feeling of the status of our relationship. These conflictive thoughts are forms of manipulation and emotional abuse. For these reasons, as a domestic violence victim, nothing is clear. It takes time away, mental health care and the will to see yourself beyond the trauma experienced. Afterwards, I became intentional in my pursuit to have ownership over myself again. Finding safe emotional boundaries, the freedom of handling my life my way, and the role of hand lettering to alleviate my current frustrations as a single mother, intentionally defined what it means to be a woman ▶◀







## SURVIVING SIGNS

*With domestic violence, often there is no end date for the victims. Women who do manage to break free of their abusers still spend their lives negotiating with them if they share custody of children.*

*-Rachel Lousi Snyder, No Visible Bruises*

**T**HE Duluth Post Separation wheel<sup>5</sup> was created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. They also developed the Power and Control wheel, both are widely used to explain the dynamic of a domestic abuse case.

In general, the burden is placed on the domestic abuse victim with a “they should just leave” perspective as if the abuse would automatically stop. The reality is that it is even more dangerous and emotionally exhausting after the abuse victim leaves the abuser.

My current single mother’s life involves legal battles. There is a heavy emotional impact of attending a court hearing and being questioned by a judge (a stranger with no relevant background other than knowledge of laws), who makes final decisions with long lasting effects on my family.

The only place that I find solace is in the weekly support group meetings with other survivors. I can speak freely with no judgment about these ordeals.

Family law cases run long – often years – and a lawyer is expensive and inaccessible to survivors who are trying to rebuild their lives. I have a legal advisor that specializes in domestic abuse cases, one who tells me the legal terminology to be used in these cases. I have to represent myself, and I deal with my own vulnerability and regret after these hearings alone.

Sitting in a court setting, the survivor must act according to what this role plays in a domestic violence case. My legal advisor’s most important recommendation is to rephrase the bad behavior as ‘this is not in the best interest for our children.’ The abuse is obviously targeted towards me. I have to refrain from showing emotions that make the members in court uncomfortable. I am responsible for the reactions of others, which puts me right back, many years ago when I had to control the environment in my house to make it safe for all of us.

I wish we could have big signs posted in this new space as a survivor, warning how long, complicated, and exhausting it is to leave an abuser and live after domestic abuse in your life. The purpose for the signs is not to scare people that are contemplating leaving, but to better understand and be mentally ready to confront the reality of our legal system in domestic violence matters. These signs would be for victims and survivors to validate themselves – that we are not deficient people with emotional issues dependent on abusive relationships. We are imperfect human beings free to do what we believe is best for our lives.

<sup>5</sup> Verney, Claire. “The Post Separation Abuse Wheel.” Dvact.org, Dvact.org, 23 Sept. 2022, <https://www.dvact.org/post/the-post-separation-abuse-wheel>.



These signs would have to be mobile, not to be posted permanently in one place. Painted words on flexible surfaces as a warning that the system is not there to protect me, that it will have doubts about my past and future decisions. The current family court legal system is set up as if it was only my responsibility to fall into this abuse. There is no recovery process, no emotional support, no recognition of the complexity of each case. My experience is not the same as the rest, it is not identical to other cases, and it should be treated like that. The lack of acknowledgement creates more rivalry between both sides, and if children are involved, it inevitably places them in the middle of a battlefield with no winners.

Domestic violence statistics<sup>6</sup> showcase that what is in place victimizes the most vulnerable. This “private violence affects nearly every aspect of modern life<sup>7</sup>.” It is not a sensitive topic either. It is the rotten root that thrives a violent society. A public matter that is a product of an individualistic, patriarchal, misogynist, and capitalist culture. Survivors do not owe any explanation of their trauma, that is personal. What must be addressed is all the pieces that caused victims to feel trapped with not good options in the aftermath.

My continuation in post-separation life is a work in progress to recognize this past period, but not to stay stagnant under shame or regret. At the end of a court hearing, I would put away these signs because my current life does not relate at all to the pain from those years. ><

6 Snyder, Rachel Louise. “Shadow bodies.” No Visible Bruises: What We Don’t Know about Domestic Violence Can Kill Us, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, NY, 2020, pp. 275.

7 Snyder, Rachel Louise. “Preface.” No Visible Bruises: What We Don’t Know about Domestic Violence Can Kill Us, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, NY, 2020, pp. 15.









**IN THE MOTHERLINE JOURNEY OF MY ABUELAS,** their duties as wives and mothers took away the opportunity for finding their voice as women. Their marriages were transactions of their times. Their womanhood was comparable to the servitude of their men and families. In their final days, they relied on the love and care from their families and were grateful their children returned to them with more affection. My unanswered question will be who they were besides wives and mothers.

Both abuelas died of illnesses caused by the effects of being women and mothers. Abuela Leonor had uterine cancer after having ten children and one still born. She was 59 years old when diagnosed and it took three years for her health to decline and died in pain, because at the time morphine was not easily found. I vaguely remember my mother rushing to find this medicine in many places, until one day she picked us up from school with swollen red eyes because my abuela had lost consciousness. Few days later, she peacefully passed away with family and friends surrounding her bed.

My abuela Rosa suffered an intense hormonal imbalance during her perimenopause period, but nobody had the knowledge of her predicament. She became isolated with all symptoms affecting her emotional state of mind. The stories vary with each of her children, the common fact was that abuela cried, was angry and went in silence for days. After being diagnosed with diabetes, she could not bear the idea of strict diets and medicine. It was evident she purposely went on a binge, eating sweet foods, until she shortly ended

up hospitalized. Doctor told her children to take their mother home to die there. The day before she died, she baked sweet goods and left all the dinnerware ready for her funeral, with a detailed note about sitting arrangements for her guest and how her casket was going to be placed in the living room. Many years later, all her daughters suffered menopause symptoms that impacted their mental health, but they were able to get treatments to take care of themselves.

Uncovering their lives is to see the effects of patriarchal systems in women, still prevalent nowadays. My abuelas were treated as second class citizens, as destined to be mothers, living in survival mode because any wishes of their own were considered selfish. They accepted their fate. Their hopes went to their children. Rosa wanted her children to gain access to higher education. Leonor wanted her children to have peaceful, communal living.

At the beginning of my parents' relationship, my mother Margarita earned more money than my father who was in the last year of engineering school. She only finished trade high school with an accounting apprenticeship and found steady work as an assistant for the only public phone company. Before getting married, she spent typing my father's engineering thesis, speeding his graduation six months ahead of his cohorts. Her responsibility has always been to support her large family of siblings, and she found success in building her subcontractor company. I doubt her innate passion was on heavy equipment and engineering services, but she found a learned accomplishment by gaining financial stability.

What I take from these two past generations is to cultivate a picture of life bigger than what experiences bring to one's life. I stood up to a version of myself that I thought there was no value. The graphic designer that was disrupted in this linear career path, the wife that decided to get divorced and the single mother raising three girls alone. The, real or perceived, negative judgments, intentional or not, from others, affected my confidence and caused temporary blocks or stalls. The skepticism, and even disapproval about my path has helped me re-evaluate the definition of success. Everything has a price. The lost time that I was stagnant, the violence experienced, and the period of recovery. After taking into account all of these, success has come learning what I want as an individual. It has redefined the kind of work I do as a graphic designer. The search for time and resources to be a present mother for my children. And a gained subversion against a patriarchy that has crushed our humanity.

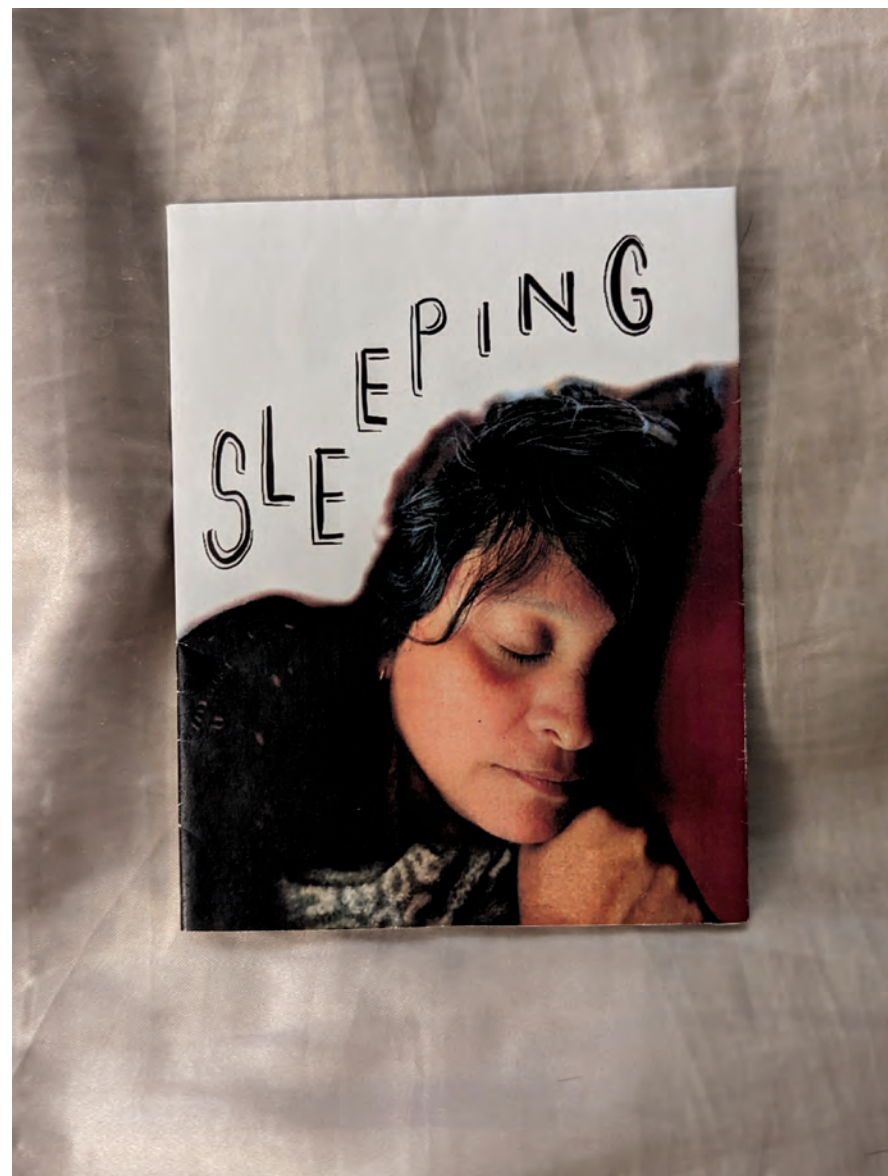




Legacy of  
a  
Single Mother  
& Designer







## NOTHINGNESS

**A**NXIETY fills my cup of dark coffee on summer mornings with my children. As much as I try to take it slow, as a freelance letterist and graphic designer, I have been bombarded with unexpected work. Summers are hard for any parent. Now that my children are bigger and choosier, it is not as easy to keep them occupied as when they were younger. I want them to rest, to take a break from scheduled activities but I have to work to sustain us. Nonetheless, as the only adult in this household, last summer I decided to let life come to us with no specific plan in mind.

We managed to disconnect and do nothing productive. An easy task in Vermont, our rural state with many no cell phone reception spots. One Monday night, I spontaneously decided to go camping the next day. We found a spot not far from our house, and played UNO cards and counted rocks for fun the next morning. Author Jenny Odells' advice in her book, 'How To Do Nothing,' is to disengage from the 'attention economy.' As the solo financial provider for my family, the choices I decide in work hours, and quality time with my family can be problematic. Hence, the kind of project I do as a designer must connect with something meaningful in me and will bring me a sense of balance in my individuality.

Mom blogs are full of advice on increasing productivity while mothering, because as mothers, multitasking – both at home and work – is a requirement. In order to fulfill your

*I want us to have time not only to stop and smell the roses. I want to look at them, touch them, and appreciate them.*

needs as an adult, you must plan ahead. Put your children on a schedule. I struggle with that. Mothering is full of unpredictable times: kids get sick, tired, bored, or just do not want to cooperate at that moment. I can plan in detail every step on the way but there is no guarantee at the end it will go as planned. The more I try to control things, the more frustration intensifies because it is not only my needs at play, but theirs, too.

I am the mother that signs up kids late to activities, and am always begging for a spot in a full program. Along with filling out another form, waiting to be chosen, and spending money, my biggest discomfort with these paid after school activities, or summer camps, is to realize the lack of community in our society. It replaces the village to raise a well-rounded child. Now it seems that it is only accessible to the families that have the time and money to afford these activities.

Our society does not embrace the idea of mothering in a community. Isolation in the family unit is almost a source of pride, but it confirms that this kind of capitalist version of motherhood is damaging. It makes mothers vulnerable to despair, because a woman working, that does all of the caring for the family burns both ends of the stick, handling all the emotional, physical, and professional labor.

Some days my mind runs high with anxiety about 'wasting' time. In one of these instances, my oldest daughter had an out of state soccer tournament split in the middle of the other two daughters' ballet recital and gymnastic meet. I had a potential freelance work



meeting, and my legal advisor needed to discuss parental custody matters. As if that wasn't enough, I was about to travel to Perú for my father's memorial (with all the household and pet to-do lists that come with traveling). My mind was going so fast with all the juggling. I kept thinking, this trip was taking place at the worst time. I snapped myself out of that horrible thought, *couldn't I make time for having a memorial of my loved one? Why is life so rushed? ALL THE TIME.*

As with most things, nothing went the way it was supposed to. My daughter's tournament was suddenly canceled due to weather, but at that moment, sunshine was radiating against our car window on our drive back. As we were passing the shore area, the kids saw blue ocean and sand on one billboard on the highway and we decided to check out the beach. Of course, I told them we were going to stop only for an hour, because I had a long list of things to do at home.

We sat there wearing tight and old, smelly bathing suits that stayed in the car from last summer. No chair, no towels. It was cold because it was still spring on a New England beach. All of a sudden, my youngest grabbed sand in her fingers, started doing a funny walk, and just laughed. She was there, enjoying the cold ocean with the wet sand stuck between her toes. For a full hour, she just danced while the rest of us watched and laughed and breathed in the fresh ocean air. We stayed for the whole afternoon.

Instead of trying to find this balance between work and life, I think that work is life, and instead of finding balance, I want to mix both together. It is a work mode simply about



contemplating more, and producing less. How hard it is to do either while we operate in a capitalist system. Maybe our resistance is staring at birds outside our windows, eventually learning about them but not by researching in books, just by watching them. As Author Odell did, ultimately becoming an avid bird watcher.

We live in extreme times in many ways. For most, life and work do not complement each other – they are divided, and stand in opposite corners. Many are miserable, working to survive or to earn more money but with no time to enjoy life or live without financial worries. Most single parents (and all parents) need more income and less work hours to raise their children with a healthy state of mind. Enjoying life is reserved for the weekends, when



one catches up with all the maintenance of daily life. Maybe make room to visit friends or family. Trying to fit a life in two days.

Our capitalist world wants to perpetuate the notion that the only responsible way to be a capable mother is to be exhausted, oppressed, and numb to one's wishes. As a single mother, I have little support, raising my children alone and working full time, pretending to be childless. Mothers require flexibility in their professional lives, and for more resources to support the mothering part. As now, being a mother is a liability to a woman, proving again that the act of mothering is not valuable in our society, unless it's the sacrificial form of motherhood as in a patriarchal family.

-90-  
HOW

-91-  
Legacy





Resisting the grinding work culture is my revolt against the way that white supremacy culture has regarded my identity as a latina immigrant single mother. Working until I am exhausted, otherwise I would not be a valuable member of my new country, and would seem ungrateful for living here. I had to prove twice or more my value as a competent worker, carrying this imposter feeling that my pay should be less because of my identities as a woman, single mother, and latina immigrant, all mashed together in the lowest wage bracket<sup>1</sup>.

Living in this intersection of immigrant, single mother, and graphic designer leaves me in a place of being excluded from the world around me, making me an outsider. As an immigrant from Perú, working hard is expected. As a single mother, sacrificing my individuality is required. As a graphic designer with an unconventional career path, proving my worth is necessary. But every day, what I want most is to rest, and not only to physically lay my body down, I want to rest my mind, to find time when staring and contemplating does not come with guilt. One accomplishment in my daily design practice is to rest when I am not tired. My creativity flows without interruption, and it becomes a regenerative force that can apply to all aspects in my life.

Resting helps me recognize what is best for my family, including me. If it means no scheduled calendar to bring some unpredictability to our lives, my rested mind and body can deal with it in a calm way. Doing nothing brings the silence I need to hear what I need.

Observation has helped me become an intuitive mother and designer. Doing nothing is daunting, especially with children. Recently, my boundaries about my graphic design career and raising children have been purposely fuzzy. I do not get flustered when these lines are blurred. My children influence what I do and how I do it. I am a working single mother, and most of the time I am forced to choose only one side of me. It feels rebellious and right to bring both at the same time.

Working is living. At times, productivity takes priority, stunting our humanity. But those times when I can do nothing, they enable me to listen to what I am – a real person – and to contemplate where I am in my world of mothering and design.▶◀



93-  
Legacy

<sup>1</sup> Hegewisch, Ariane, and Eve Mefferd. "The Longest Time to Equal Pay: Latinas and the Wage Gap." IWPR, 3 Dec. 2021. <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-publications/fact-sheet/latina-women-equal-pay-2021/>.



## I LOOK LIKE MY MOM

**M**Y children look more like me as the years go by. I laugh because sometimes their facial expressions scare me! They are so familiar. I do see my features in their faces, and it's strange to notice that.

The physical likeness is a reminder of the generational trauma that is passed on. It is dormant until a spark ignites it which can make you lose a sense of yourself, or maybe it tries to reclaim your identity and background.

Abuela Leonor traveled as a teenager from one town to another selling dried figs. She slept in the streets and barns learning to be extremely intuitive with danger. Abuela loved traveling and right after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Leonor traveled for months with very little money to northern Perú, her best pictures are from that trip. My abuelo went along but was confused as he thought the little time they had left was going to be in the hospital.

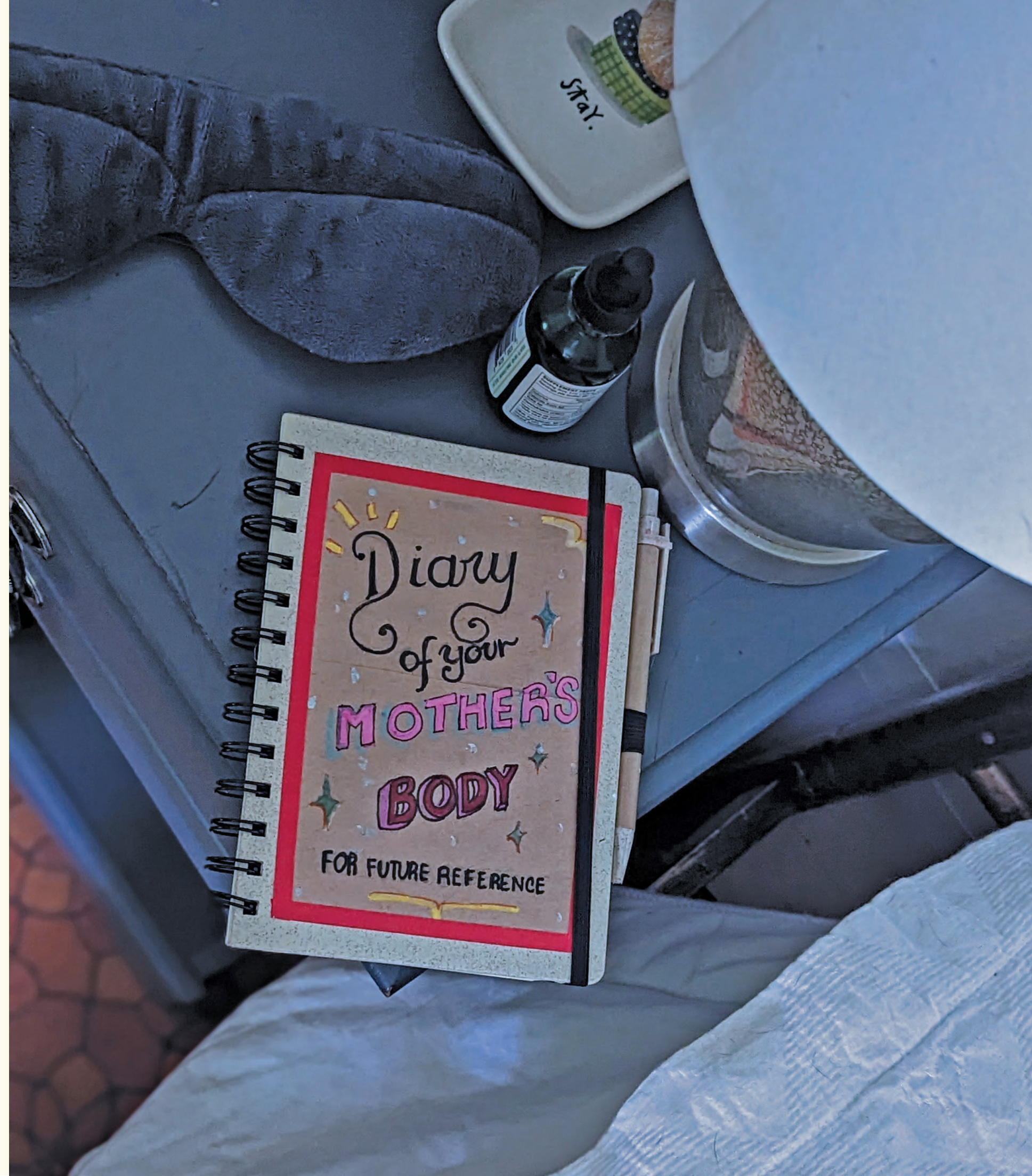
I believe she passed to me her joy of traveling. I always jumped at the opportunity and didn't sweat the financial side of it. I have traveled with my children since they were babies, and that was the only activity in which I had broad freedom. I learned to travel with very little money and the grace of many friends living in exciting cities. So far, all my children have enjoyed uncomfortable airports with the sights of cities and sounds of different languages.

In each of my daughters' pregnancies, I was asked about my mother's pregnancies, as part of the family medical history. Now facing the years of perimenopause, the gynecologist asked me how my mother handled that period of her life. My mother becomes stoic with bad news and I do the same. I have noticed my oldest daughter has this way, too. Our bodies carry the DNA and the stories of our ancestors. It is passed from generation to generation.

The part that is fascinating is which of those attributes help us to survive to another generation. My abuelas faced violence as women living in a misogynistic society. Their bodies were treated as incubators for babies, discarding the rest of their identities. How they were able to handle their environment and their experiences made them survive, and passed those emotions and learned skills to the next generation.

My mother's refusal to stay at home was commendable, but now with my lens as an adult woman, I wonder what she had to experience to be taken seriously, to stay on track with her professional development in a hostile patriarchal world. At the same time, I believe the obstacles made her more passionate about her growth. My memories at her desk managing a medium size company are that she was actively living, being present in the world she constructed for her.

As women that became mothers, we grew up with the message that we owe our lives to the husband and to the children. The patriarchy works hard to exhaust ourselves, blaming us for being tired, and consequently making us untrust our instincts, questioning our judgment, not seeing clearly that there is a lack of supportive systematic structure diminishing women's journeys.

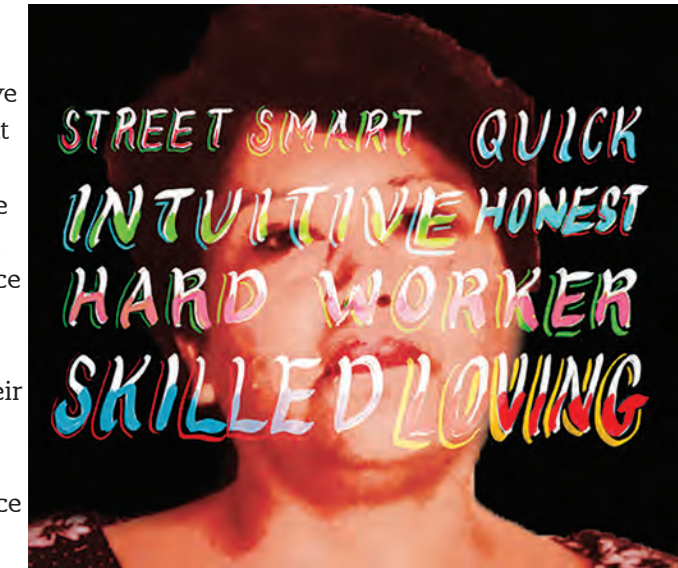






In order to center my story, I had to understand my abuelas, and my mother's lives. They were girls, teenagers, and there was hurt inside of their female bodies. My abuela needed more support than my mother, and never got it. They were all able to achieve what they had in their barriers than I had. way they could have ly. Placing judgment in all of our lives harm. My existence their survival skills, emotional endurance joy of living. My may be less than is a relief to me, their

As a designer mother, the hope daughters experience as spectators but as main characters. Re-career paths they choose, if they become mothers or not, if they have partnership with others, my legacy for them is their ability to make higher decisions for themselves, trusting their instinct that has developed through my abuelas, through my mother, and through me.



lives with more There was no done it different- and expectation causes more is because of and part of my came from their daughters' load mine, and that mother. that is a single is that my their lives not the subjects, the gardless of what







MOM, I AM HUNGRY.

I have to cook a healthy, balanced dinner, with no cheese and more veggies but I don't have time. Pizza for dinner! My kid broke a record, she has eight cavities and she is only seven years old. This is the last time I will buy that much ice cream. They have to eat more fruit! Don't eat all that Halloween candy. Why did your aunt send a huge bag of easter chocolate? I've just fed them lunch and they already want snacks? Tomato is a fruit and a vegetable. I don't like pizza anymore.

MOM, I AM BORED.

I wish none of them watched this much TV and that they read more books. Well, the weather is cold and it's TV time for now. It is a bad idea for seven year olds to watch PG-13. This month, I watched Encanto for the ten-thousandth time, and I do talk about Bruno now. I hate that they have a tablet; I am thankful they have one. They are bored. Life can be boring at 13, 9 and 8 years old. Yes, we will go out today, I have no idea where. I know they hate Vermont because there is no fast food restaurant and it is cold. They like skiing because that is all there is in long winters. I would like to watch a movie without falling asleep within fifteen minutes. They just want to be alone but with me nearby. I am always here with them.


MOM, I AM SAD.

They are frustrated with their friends. I'll discuss with the teacher, that kid was aggressive to them. Yes, they are disappointed we live far away from your tias and primos. I agree, people in this part of the country are not too warm as a community. Yes, people here have no idea what 'pollo a la brasa' is. I heard that before, it's not ok when they confuse Puerto Rico with Perú, and yes, we speak Spanish not Portuguese. This past week, the only adult conversations were in my sleep.


MOM, I AM BUSY.

When is their birthday party? Oh, today we are invited to two birthday parties for kids that I don't know. Don't stress out, I will sign them up for that special afterschool class, that includes filling out forms with the same information, even if I have to beg the program director to get them in the class, in addition to a scholarship. I forgot today they start ski/ballet/soccer/camp. I hate pretending Santa did all the Christmas wrapping work. It was me, only me and me! There is a school talent show this week? We have no time to practice now. Their clothes shrink on their bodies, and we have to go to the store to find new clothes every other week. Great, I have to pick them up from school at 3pm and then drop them off at the same place at 5:30 for soccer practice, and cook dinner in between. And answer emails.





What did  
HAND  
LETTERING  
do to a  
SINGLE  
MOTHER?



It taught me to accept interruption as an integral part of the creative process. It recognized the gaps of a marriage, motherhood, divorce, and the healing period and the accountability needed while raising children alone.

My womanhood has been molded in a patriarchal world, and at the beginning of my quest to understand this discomfort throughout my life, I was filled with guilt and shame for questioning a failed marriage, a disrupted profession, and single motherhood. Choosing to reactivate my graphic design career opened this path to explore the oppression of motherhood – subjected on all mothers – and generationally lived by my grandmothers, my mother and myself.

In a single mother's life, the feeling that one is not doing enough is constant, while juggling the priorities of children and herself. The non-stop act of caring for others is not one continuous task, it is a group of tasks that breaks one to start another in an endless cycle. The habit of bypassing us is to benefit this selfless motherhood ideal, making us invisible to the rest. The decision to raise children alone comes with uncertainty, and simultaneously it can offer the most authentic version of ourselves, because it is the time that we can (and must) be first in line.

In learning hand lettering, I was acquiring something new but familiar. It became a visual language for my fears, self doubts, and ambiguity about my identity. One of the purposes of graphic design is to creatively problem solve in order to communicate a statement. In making hand lettering, drawing a word redefined a pattern in my single motherhood. Serving everyone else's needs in order to preserve the sanctity of a single mother, felt like it was going to push me to the brink of hopelessness. Instead, I evaluated my mothering, and found a way to foster my whole identity as a mother, an immigrant woman, and a graphic designer. I created a new grid to follow in the lives of a community of three daughters being raised by one parent. In this structure, there is a hierarchy of our boundaries to preserve our identities as evolving human beings. Creativity helps to delete the societal expectations placed on women. Instead it flourishes our emotions and experiences of womanhood.

Mothers' emotional and physical labor is forced to stay invisible, not disrupting the needs of a society that views us first as caretakers. Working when not mothering exhausts us. This world is designed for men, who are not attached to their parenthood as mothers. As single mother graphic designers, we create visual languages to represent our world of mothering and working, disrupting this outdated idea of a family unit, bringing a genuine discussion of the heavy load caused by parenting alone. Redefining parenthood with our own identities may bring equality and humanity to this important role ><



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# COLOPHON

## Argumend Light

A humanistic slab serif typeface with discretionary ligatures, small caps, oldstyle figures, tabular figures and true italics. Designed by Ayca Atalay, an independent typeface designer based in Istanbul, Turkey. It is a versatile slab serif typeface with a wide range of Opentype features.

## Karbid Text Pro Italic

German type designer Verena Gerlach created this sans FontFont in 2011 and published by FontFont. It provides advanced typographical support with features such as ligatures, alternate characters, case-sensitive forms, fractions, super- and subscript characters, and stylistic alternates.

## HELVECHICA REGULAR

## HELVECHICA DAMBA

DESIGNED BY AWESOME CREATIVE HUMAN BEING VIC RODRIGUEZ TANG

BOTH FONTS ARE INSPIRED IN PERUVIAN LETTERING OR LETRAS CHICHAS

## Metaphysica Medium

An unorthodox futuristic typeface that provides otherworldly zest without overly compromising typographic aesthetics. Combining weird angular beams and junctions with soft and round forms, Metaphysica finds the middle ground between sci-fi futurism and friendly legible sans. Designed by Ayca Atalay and published on 2020.

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