

Our Connection

Maria C. Rodriguez

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Our Connection

By Maria Citlalli Rodriguez



When I was a child, my parents would regularly take me to Jalisco, Mexico where we would indulge in the culture and the beautiful connections with our friends and family. I attain memories of myself being taken to the local community binario, feeling full of love as I slip down the little water slides into the arms of my father. Being there with all my aunts, uncles and cousins, it's wonderful to be in that space surrounded by family as the sweet sensation of the water presses on me while the sun acts as mediator. This is what I knew to be true about my community, that it is everything to us and when I am in the comfort of my hometown, it is almost like I never left, like my family never had to migrate. I see in my great aunts and my estranged cousins how they really connect to me and I connect to them and the world around beneath us. I know that as a child, I was safe to fling myself down a water slide and know that my father was at the bottom ready to catch me from the water and save me.

I learned about the various ways that communities connect to each other as well as their environments. Representation very much matters when we live in a patriarchal capitalist society and it's so imperative that we

can connect to each other in meaningful ways that disrupt everything we are “supposed” to act or be like. It was great to learn about the *Secret Gardens* and the history that comes with that. Rachel Aima does a deep dive on the *Seeds of Change* installments that Maria Thereza Alves put together of different indigenous plants found all over the cities, stranded by a New York shipping past that isn’t one we can forget. “Like people, seeds can unexpectedly find themselves far from their homelands”, which is what happened to the people forced to come into this so-called free country (Aima, 99). These seeds that laid dormant for many years started springing up and to me, this symbolized colonized populations and how they too, had to withstand and endure oppressive forces. The plants flourish like how people do and the ballast flora serves as a reminder towards the unjust and violent history that comes from the “pre-colonial period that shipping and transport infrastructure effaced” (Aima, 100). The point is that the seeds remember, they know that the land was stolen from the Lenape peoples and they know that Wall Street is built on a historical African burial ground. The seeds remember.

Exploring the idea of having a space where Brown people are valued and listened to is very important, there are many ways that communities tend to come together. Laura Aguilar is exceptional and revolutionary because she allowed me to place myself in an unapologetic lens living as a Latina who has internalized a sense of shame for being plus-sized. I know in my heart that this shame stems from years and years of western beauty practice being shoved down my throat. It’s refreshing to see Aguilar in her element as someone who can represent me and others who feel like me. She had difficulty expressing herself verbally because of auditory dyslexia but was able to take comfort in photography. She is known for using herself as a subject to confront and rebel against the subjected Mexican American female identity. Her nude self-portraits are re-imaginative of photography because she is able to place herself in a landscape and feel free from the bonds of a disempowered large brown female body while embracing the ruggedness that nature has to offer, allowing herself to surrender.

Raquel Gutierrez highlighted the importance of Rafa Esparza’s art which broke through the bounds of what revolutionary artists can do. One of his projects *Bust, a Meditation on Freedom* was achieved by

using a single sledge hammer and a small chisel to “bust” himself out of a concrete wall to further convey the marginalization and assimilation that communities are forced to go through. Each hammer bang “became an ancestral homing device aimed at the masculine utterance of self, starved for airspace inside the state’s impervious walls” (Gutierrez, 1). The exhibitions and performances by this man were used as an instrument to carve out space that wasn’t there for people of color in the first place. The use of gender in his work challenged the social constructions of Mexican masculinity while also adhering to the oppression he feels in the States as a Hispanic person. With this type of spatial art for Brown people, there’s this concept of subverting power and therefore allowing us to envision a future where we all can coexist or at least thrive under the pressures of hetero-patriarchal dominance. As Gutierrez states, “Power- like energy, either static or kinetic-always assumes different positions” (2016, 2). I can rationalize a future where there is space carved out for Brown and Black people, despite all that this country has done for their marginalized communities.

For too long, I learn about the hardships that my friends and family have had to endure as Brown people and all the nastiness that comes with the imperialism of the world. It was my first year in Humboldt and I experienced what is known as “culture shock” by the amount of White individuals around me. More so seeing how some people acted when coming from a place of privilege and shelter. As a Brown person myself, I found comfort in being able to surround myself with people who are more like me, a place where I can feel safe and seen. That feeling came from being able to use some of the few resources like the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP) and from the Critical Race, Gender and Sexualities Department. The community that came from these resources made me feel like I belonged there and I deserved to be here. Jose Esteban Muñoz was able to channel this idea of carving out space for Brown folk in *The Sense of Brown* when explaining the topic of *The Brown Commons*. We all have environments from which we thrive better and Munoz understands that, given the violent history of the United States towards Brown people. A space for people of color is a great deal as it allows the community of otherwise devalued people to find themselves in something greater than themselves. The Brown Commons is significant because it was born out of the radicality of Black power and student movements who collectively refuse to be subjected

to “dominant logics and systems of thought” and move towards understanding that we all have more in common than we think (Muñoz, 3). Knowledge production in areas like Ethnic studies is nothing to take lightly because many people are finally starting to see themselves in history and therefore uncovering this manifest destiny for what it truly is, which is a system meant to favor those in power. There is an urgency in the air to dismantle a system that has done nothing but cause harm to the planet and its inhabitants. Muñoz argues, “that the world is and has always been Brown and has been so despite the various blockages that keep us from knowing or being attuned to brownness” (2020, 3), revitalizing that the Brown commons is an attempt to bring people together to find a commonality in our struggles of having to withstand various oppressive factors in their environments. In a sense, showing Brown people that they are not alone and they never will be.

Connections to the land and to yourself are essential to the diaspora of having to assimilate. A commonality that comes from these attempts of reconnecting to the land is the creative emotionality that comes with wanting to be free. Activists are artists in their own right. A few years back, I traveled back to that little town in Jalisco where my dad grew up and visited the *binario*, which was that waterpark that I loved so much as a young girl. I went with my cousins and some aunties on a summer day where there was probably just one more family out enjoying themselves. My senses were all warm since I was in a familiar place and I felt safe. I can relate this to being in a Brown commons as we found each other as a community in this location that held many years of fond memories. Looking back, I can see it was because I *was* in a familiar place, a place where I had been many times before, only I hadn't recognized it. The feeling however, was refreshing as I was able to feel like I was a kid again, somewhere where I used to play. It's in these spaces filled with ancestral love that I feel the most connected to myself and to the earth that I walk on every day.



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