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Animal Artifacts and Narratives of the Mesoamerican Clay-Figurine Project

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Abstract

Animals and animal knowledge have played a significant role in helping to shape the health and well-being of humans since time immemorial. Animals provide food, important resources, and an allegory of lessons vital to our own Native way of existing. In this essay, we (Instructor Garcia and Curator Hernandez) share with readers an assemblage of clay-figurine artifacts in the shape of animals and their accompanying student narratives. We do so to demonstrate how life's trials and traumatic experiences find resolve and positive meaning through the animal spirit. Modeled as a living archive of intergenerational testimonials in a Los Angeles area community college—Rio Hondo College—this praxis-oriented and critical reflection essay situates human health and well-being, reverence, and sobriety as essential to the Ethnic Studies project.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies Narratives, Animal Knowledge, Mesoamerican Clay Figurines, Community College Teaching

Animal Artifacts and Narratives of the Mesoamerican Clay-Figurine Project

The Mesoamerican Clay-Figurine Project[14] housed at Rio Hondo College in Whittier, California, contains a living archive of student narratives and small-scale clay figurines made by Humanities and Anthropology students (Figure 1). In addition, the material is accompanied by a growing body of open-access essays that describe the teaching and research behind working with Indigenous students[15] of Mesoamerican ancestry (see Garcia, 2014, 2021; Garcia et al., 2018; Garcia & Márquez, 2021; Márquez & Garcia, 2021). The project came to life in 2014 in a Humanities "Introduction to Mexican Culture" class and later spread to Anthropology courses with the goals of: (1) cultivating a strong sense of Native identity in disenfranchised students of color, (2) equipping students with an awareness of contemporary problems, and (3) offering avenues for

[14] The official project website address is http://mesofigurineproject.org

[15] In this paper, we identify Indigenous students as those with ancestry in the regions of Turtle Island (North America, Mexico, and Central America). Commonly labeled Hispanic and Latinx by colleges and universities. An assimilated and detribalized group, though not entirely, we acknowledge the Native values in long-held diets, language, and ceremonial practices still not entirely lost. We experience liberation in the small but steadfast decolonization efforts of Indigenous students and teachers.

students and teachers to organize around just causes outside of the classroom. As a place of emergence, our praxis in the classroom follows a series of critical lenses and exercises designed to learn from the living realities of students, while pointing to the US colonial legacies embedded in our Western areas of study, which have historically silenced and harmed Indigenous peoples and people of color worldwide.[16]

In our push to archive living student knowledge with traditional knowledge, and knowledge we learn along the way, a humanizing model arises. It is an ethical approach, and according to the Chicana scholar and community college educator Silvia Toscano-Villanueva (2013), it is an intervention for students during their formative years of adulthood when their place in the world and values are being cemented. Through the clay-figurine project, we sought to reclaim the "I" in writing exercises, read literature compelling to the lives of students, and validate personal narratives as rigorous intellectual thought. Our clay-work component is unique for consulting with small-scale representations of the human body as a source of knowledge. Working with clay challenges us to re-think ourselves. Students often ask, "Is this piece worth making? Is this aspect of my life worth the effort? Wow, how did I, or did I not, come full circle? What was taken from my body? What level of responsibility am I sharing? Where is the meaningful story I am hoping to produce?" When taught and performed with a keen sense of responsibility for the self and community, clay-work emerges as a critical form of teaching, and in the process, generates a living material archive of student knowledge. In Garcia et al. (2018), we describe these critical teaching and learning points as part of a therapeutic experience:

> When students make their own figurines that promote positive health and well-being: 1) bodies reconnect with forgotten ways of being with the land, thus reconciling negative feelings toward the land; 2) the small-scale body is repeatedly shaped, destroyed, and built up in line with perceived ideas of wealth and happiness; 3) the body is symbolized alongside the departed and disenfranchised, assisting with feelings of guilt, bereavement, and reconciliation; 4) the body making the figurine shares the work with other figurine-makers, thus sharing stories and providing one another with emotional support; 5) heat-fired figurines serve as intimate gifts for the self, family, and community, thereby becoming an example of validation and hopeful resistance; and 6) clay figurines embody the ill-health and well-being of the body, and because of their materiality, sustain medical information for future inquiry. (pp. 143–144)

In the spirit of "Ethnic Studies Pedagogies as Living Archives for Social Justice, Resistance, and Transformation," this essay interconnects the themes of curriculum as archive, intergenerational testimonial, and place-based pedagogies of the greater Los Angeles (LA) area. What is equally important, is that the topic of "Animal Artifacts and Narratives" in the lives of students of color represents an area that is culturally responsive to and sustaining of the home values, ceremonial practices, and healing beliefs of Indigenous people. Animals live in Native art, architecture, temples, and in the storytelling of students of color. For thousands of years, the animal and the animal spirit, among Indigenous people of the Americas, have been their source of inspiration, liberation, and

[16] In early 2022, the project received a significant NEH/ACLS grant as part of the American Rescue Plan Act to support public engagement between students, teachers, and local community organizations around the issues of racial equity and social justice, community health and medicine, and Indigenous sovereignty. The project's website contains the recorded conversations that describe critical teaching strategies, community projects, and Native knowledge.

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

autonomy, as this paper shows. Based on the significant presence of animals in our current collection (21/68), we assert that Indigenous students often seek their deeply rooted animal knowledge as a tool to generate positive health and well-being. Students intuitively choose to make animal figurines as their primary source of knowledge, challenging troubling Eurocentric notions that separate humans from nature, or that situate nature as an object of control and erasure. And so, "What role shall the animal and the animal spirit play in the critical instruction of our student communities?" is one question we ask ourselves while teaching and learning with an Ethnic Studies lens in mind.

Figure 1: Clay Figurines at Rio Hondo Community College

Note. Curation by Pricilla Yvette Hernandez. Photo taken by Santiago Andrés Garcia at Rio Hondo College, 2019.

In this praxis-oriented paper, we share the storytelling (handmade clay figurines and their accompanying narratives) of three students of color and how they experienced their trials and traumas through the animal world. The four parts of this essay represent a critical reflection practice (Toscano-Villanueva, 2013) as part of the commitment we share here in the greater Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley. In Raza studies (i.e., Ethnic Studies and Chicanx Studies), self-reflection serves as a mirror that cultivates critical thought and action. Like the revered Mesoamerican physician and intellect Tezcatlipoca, teachers of color carry mirrors to help ward off attacks on their lesson planning, teaching styles, and living bodies (Márquez & Garcia, 2021). And yes, critical educators constantly work under attack, such as the latest case (see Stutman, 2022, May 13) with the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, which was served with a federal lawsuit over claims that students in LA Unified were being taught an antisemitic agenda. Divine tools are needed in a learning era when the history and culture of Mexico and Central America is under-supported, whitewashed, and banned in places where it would most likely flourish (Arce & Montaño, 2022). With *mirror medicine*, educators of color remain grounded in dangerous times.[17]

In the first part of this essay, we share a guiding theory of the Mesoamerican student body (see also Garcia et al., 2018), the reflections of each author about their own position, and finally, how we engage our clay data. This part is followed by a presentation of three student animal artifacts and their transcribed narratives, which we find value in as a living archive of diverse human experiences (intergenerational testimonials). In our third section, we write about animals as a source of autonomy and liberation by citing and weaving passages from our student narratives, and cross-cultural understandings. Finally, our fourth reflection includes our final thoughts and conclusions concerning animal knowledge and learning. Our closing message entails one of reverence and sobriety of the human body and practice, in the spirit of Gloria E. Anzaldúa's (2012) Coatlicue State, where sobriety is seen as a disruption to the addictions that harm our personhood.

[17] Although we are not Ethnic Studies instructors, our teaching practices and values, public literature, and community work aligns with the goals of Ethnic Studies (see Acosta, 2007; Bonilla et al., 2021; Cabrera et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2011; Zepeda, 2020). As Tintiangco-Cubales and Duncan-Andrade (2021) noted, Indigenous peoples have been fighting and organizing in favor of a dignified life long before the institution of Ethnic Studies was built.

Our reflections and praxis stem from the greater Los Angeles area, but we see these applicable broadly across the Ethnic Studies project.

Guiding Theory, Author Reflections, and the Clay Data

Guiding Theory

Interdependence between humans and animals exists in diverse forms throughout Mesoamerica. The Early Olmec of the Gulf Coast (1200 BC–900 BC) often saw their bodies as anthropomorphic in nature. They carved themselves in stone with feline faces, jaguar paws, and talons. Even their writing script is represented by animal imagery. This tradition was followed by the Maya, who created a phonetic script dependent on human and animal symbolism. In the classic city of Teotihuacán (700 AD–300 AD), people were buried with wolves, pumas, and raptors. Teotihuacano's imagery is devoted to nature, fertility, and rejuvenation. Plant life was no exception, and we witness the Mesoamerican healthcare system in unique human sculptures, such as the Xōchipilli, which depict mushrooms and tobacco, among other medicinal plants. Our Wixárika relatives from Jalisco, Mexico (the Huichol), perceive no distinction between peyote cactus, deer, and maize plants. All three remain part of their daily life activities and lore, and all three provide nutrition, healing, and avenues for teaching and learning.

The people of Mesoamerica, past and present, converted this awareness into scientific, medical, and mathematical practices not seen elsewhere in the world. Our students inherited this wisdom, and for that reason, our Indigenous lens of the human body follows a kinship principal that values the intergenerational testimonials and place-based teachings of students, their families, and their ancestors. In the essence of Mesoamerican archaeology, we *excavate* in the classroom to understand human behavior—past, present, and future. We acknowledge the borders we traverse, good and bad, both internally and physically. We judge no one. Together, we get through the teaching with empathy, with good intentions, and where all things created are sacred.

Author Reflections: Santiago Andrés Garcia

Rio Hondo College offers faculty multiple opportunities to engage students and reflect on the process. It sits in the homeland of the Gabrielino, Kizh, and Tongva Nations (Figure 2). There is a major cemetery next door (Rose Hills Memorial) where generations of ancestors rest. An abundance of energy lives here, and teachers and students are connected to the area in profound ways. Every semester, instructors are tasked with serving a diverse group of students with ancestry from the Mesoamerican region. A handful of Indigenous students still maintain their traditional values and speak their Native language. Occasionally, I get to serve students from the Gabrielino, Kizh, and Tongva Nations, who share unique heirlooms and experiences about living Native under the LA radar. In addition to the nuances of race and ethnicity, we serve large groups of dis-abled students, Dreamers, seniors, LGBTQ+ youth, the formerly incarcerated, and veterans of war from all parts of the world. This diverse group of backgrounds provides a wealth of insights and keen knowledge only found in community college classrooms.

Over the years, I have relied on keen observation, compassionate instruction, talking circles, and public engagement to get to engage students and build trust. This is in addition to constantly looking for ways to re-imagine the White-Eurocentric and male-dominated areas of Anthropology

and Humanities. My signature teaching practice involves the craft world of Mesoamerica and is further grounded in the daily life activities and philosophies of Native American practices—the ancestral and living. Anything small scale that can be worked with the hands (clay, stone, wood, paint, plants, feathers, etc.), I use in Humanities and Anthropology lessons to meet learning outcomes and mediate topics of health and medicine, language and culture, land and cosmology (see Table 1 for additional praxis details). Specifically, I use clay-work and clay figurines as a teaching tool to introduce students to a Native way of learning that involves the hands, elicits comprehension, and is therapeutic in value (Garcia, 2021; Garcia et al., 2018). The clay-work is partnered with writing assignments that describe every piece created. This is the "I" work I see as intellectually rigorous. As an Indigenous Xicano Educator, I strive to further students' knowledge of values native to them, which were lost during the US assimilation project, and encourage them to build capacity outside of the classroom.

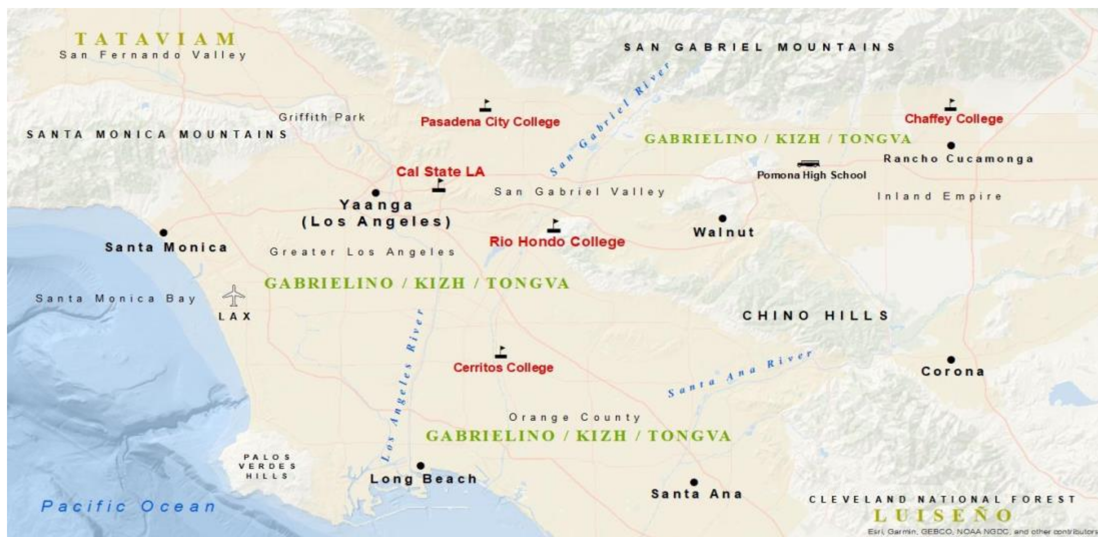

Figure 2: Map Showing the Site of Rio Hondo College, Major Regions, and Landmarks
Note. Map created by Santiago Andrés Garcia using ArcGIS Maps. Revised from Garcia (2021).

Table 1: Core Themes, Important Questions, and Activities That Define the Clay-Figurine Project

Core Themes	Important Questions	Activities
Land and Cosmology	Where was I born? Where was I raised? What relation do I have to the land, animals, and the cosmos? What duties do I share in caring for the land and its elements?	Clay-work, storytelling, self-reflective writing, video production, photography, drawing, giving and receiving, painting, trading, public engagement, stargazing, watching the sunrise,
Language and Culture	What language do I speak? Why do I speak this language? What language do	

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

	my parents speak, and why? What language shall our children speak? How do I express myself around people?	fire-keeping, daily exercise, cooking, sharing meals, learning new languages, tending the wild, sowing seeds, caring for gardens, practicing medicine, building shelters, guiding youth, caring for animals, working with elders.
Health and Well-Being	What is the current state of my body? Am I healthy? What is health and medicine? Is my community healthy? What do I eat and drink? What can I do to cultivate healthy practices?	

Author Reflections: Pricilla Yvette Hernandez

I graduated from Rio Hondo College in 2019. I spent four years at this campus completing courses and learning about just topics that would eventually lead to earning a degree in Anthropology. I took all the Anthropology classes available at Rio Hondo and met Professor Garcia in the Spring of 2019. At the end of one of his courses he asked the students if anyone was interested in joining the Mesoamerican Clay-Figurine Project that had recently received a major grant. I immediately thought what a great opportunity to gain valuable research skills before I transferred to San Diego State University. I then found myself interviewing with him, and after learning about the curation and research opportunities, I agreed to partake as the project curator; the work came with a significant stipend.

In the Summer of 2019, still enrolled at Rio Hondo, this time in Humanities 125-Introduction to Mexican Culture, I catalogued and curated the clay-figurines made by students, and then later, I transcribed the accompanying narratives; three of which we share in this essay. During this time, we read Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands, carefully citing her text on a nightly basis, and drawing inferences to our own living experiences. We also created an altar where students brought flowers and personal sacred items as ofrendas to reflect on. I contributed my own blue macaw feathers to represent the air and wind. These macaw feathers came from the exotic birds that I care for, they are a part of my Maya Guatemalan ancestry, and my family considers them sacred. Having a living altar in the classroom allowed us students to share deep personal experiences and family stories that had never been shared publicly among my peers.

The focus of the Mesoamerican Clay-Figurine project is the human body and ideology. How it changes through time, and place, and how it is healthy when one with the land, and the cosmos. As a teaching practice, creating clay-figurines to connect with our *testimonios* and our storytelling is therapeutic on multiple levels. To share without fear and judgment, came in a safe and timely manner for students that had been holding back. After receiving their clay-figurines fired and glazed for the first time, students reported positive understandings of meaningful work. Sharing these offerings gave students the opportunity to gain worthy insight from each other's lived experience, something that I had felt was truly grounding in a healthful manner. It gave me the courage to continue receiving therapeutic services outside of the classroom. Through my reflections, through this inaugural issue, and through the Ethnic Studies lens, I hope that we can all continue imagining and building non-traditional ways of engaging with students.

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

The Clay Data

In ancient Mesoamerica, people used clay figurines as gifts, toys, burial offerings, and healing tools (Figure 3). They also represent good indicators of social status and racial and ethnic identity. Since 2014, students at Rio Hondo have continued the tradition of making small-scale clay figurines with similar intensity and diverse benefits.[18] When students make clay figurines, they follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. They recover lost aspects of their identities and mediate real-life experiences, both good and bad. Working repeatedly with clay births critical learning moments and encourages a host of reciprocal behaviors: working together, sharing stories, and gift-giving. Clay-work in mental health therapy is a proven tool that helps to combat stress, anxiety, and depression. Students who work with clay absorb similar therapeutic benefits, and on various occasions, we have noticed intimate bonds form between students and their clay-work. For that reason, extreme care is taken when documenting and curating figurines and transcribing the written narratives that accompany each piece.

Critical educators of color find therapeutic value in the healing stories of students. Our second author, for example, has found meaning in working with sacred objects and finding new pathways for looking inward, acceptance, and forgiveness. Our first author too uses clay-work daily in his home to teach patience, lifecycles, and ancestral knowledge. The clay-work leads to discussions about migration, natural resources, human health, racism, and the common grounds we share as Indigenous people. When clay is present, altars nearby with elements (fire, water, earth, and air) help to mediate the unresolved. Both authors recognize students for bravely trusting the learning we created and for sharing their life experiences through the clay-work. The clay figurines made by students are kept for themselves, gifted, or donated to our standing archive. Occasionally, figurines are left behind and never claimed. Furthermore, we believe that no student narrative should lie in wait and go untold after being unearthed. In Garcia et al. (2018) and Garcia (2021), the therapeutic benefits of clay-work in the classroom are discussed in detail.

Animal Artifacts and Their Narratives

Over the years, students have made animals relating to their own family traditions, creation stories, and individual identities. The animal figurines stand alone, alongside their human counterparts, or as one form combining human and animal characteristics. An abundant number of animal types exist. Horses, snakes, birds, raptors, fish, turtles, bees, butterflies, rabbits, mules, elephants, cats, and dogs are present. To the novice eye, the figurines appear unrelatable and childlike. However, the narratives that accompany the clay-work describe the daily hardships of students, beloved family histories, and healing journeys. Yet the storytelling is also jubilant. Students share their hopes and dreams, write highly of their families, and describe what it feels like to be in love. As critical students and educators, we realize the importance of self-reflective writing in keeping us grounded and creating new meanings and understandings. Telling stories, self-reflective writing, and making things with our hands are how we fight bigotry, misogyny, and racist policies.

[18] Student clay-work is on display in classrooms, but unlike curations of the "Other" that have troubled anthropological collections, the present work reflects a living archive of public contributions where students and teachers have collaborated, published together, and created living artifacts of their experiences and ongoing work.

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

With the permission of students, we felt strongly about our living assemblage, where sharing and telling the stories materialized in clay figurines – fitting of an Ethnic Studies archive. Collections of intergenerational testimonials (pictures, narratives, and videos) exist in Garcia et al. (2018) and Garcia (2021) and are published on the project's website. We em brace this place-based pedagogy as a revered, intuitive, and anti-racist act on the part of Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley students. As members of a historically disenfranchised group in the U.S. denied access to proper health, housing, and schooling, we seek to develop a critical consciousness in students as essential to building generational health and well-being. Our society's wealthy class, still majority White, sustains power on a platform that is well fed, healthy, rested, and has access to healthcare. In turn, we recognize a healthcare system embedded in the history and culture of Indigenous students, and those of color. By sustaining projects like the one mentioned herein, we strengthen our capacity to generate family and community well-being.

Figure 3: Mesoamerican Clay Figurines in the Olmec-Style of Once-Living People Showing Forms of Racial and Ethnic Identity, and Social Status

Note. Photo taken by Santiago Andrés Garcia at the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, MX, 2022.

We begin our focus on animals with the work of Nikka Mamaid, who was born in Bulacan in the Philippines, and now calls LA home. She created a vibrant "Tortuga Migratoria," with flowers, thorns, and swirling clouds (Figure 4). It is a turtle glazed in the colors of her country.

"Tortuga Migratoria"

Me and my whole family migrated from the Philippines 10 years ago. I chose to make the decorated turtle as my first piece. Just like the leatherback turtles who travel 10,000 miles in search of jellyfish, my family and I traveled 11,563 km in search of a better life. I was born and raised in the Philippines and spent 20 years of my life in a country that I love. My turtle piece is heavily decorated as a symbolism of my life back in the Philippines and my life here in America. Just like a turtle, I carry my "home" everywhere I go. I am proud of my country and culture, and it is something that I can never take away; hence, the turtle and its shell. The swirls symbolize the clouds. Why? Growing up as a child, I remember my parents sheltering me and

Figure 4: "Tortuga Migratoria"

Note. The clouds and thorns give rise to blooming flowers. Photo taken by Santiago Andrés Garcia at Rio Hondo College, 2019.

filtering out the bad in the world including violence, sadness, real-life struggles. The "thorns" sprouted when I was 12 years old. I was exposed to violence when I personally saw my aunt being hit by her abusive husband. My uncles were struggling with addiction and started hitting their sisters in the process. I urged my dad to let me study Taekwondo for self-defense because I do not want to be abused and want to learn to protect others. My father agreed, and I became a 1st-degree black belt by 18 years old—that's my "thorns." I learned discipline and built self-confidence in the process. The flowers symbolize my cultivation and growth from my early adolescent years to the present year. I will continue flourishing, growing, and giving myself as I get older. And finally, just like the sea turtles, after they migrate, live, and reproduce, they go back to their birthplace and die. That is my plan, and hopefully I will go back to my homeland and be at peace & rest in my country's soil.

Elizabeth Martinez from Pico Rivera created a figurine that she named "She Who Breathes for Many." It is a cobra with a coiled and patterned body (Figure 5). Although not shown here, Elizabeth glazed her final piece purple.

"She Who Breathes for Many"

On the snake's left side, there is a symbol of a climbing staircase leading to a line turning in on itself to form a square. This is an ancient symbol representing the stages of life and life's relation to the stars. All life comes from stars; humans contain the same matter found in stars, or so my ancestors believed. This link evolves with women, who birth new people to make up for the people that are dying or returning to their origin. Recently, I have associated my femininity with snakes. Snakes have long been known as divine and worthy of veneration. I am so proud to align myself with such a beautiful creature. The image of the snake alongside my femininity challenges the modern image of a snake being a vile, evil, melancholy, and destructive figure by uniting two precious ideals. My feminine body is powerful; I can create life within myself. Bleed intensely without dying and withstand sexism proudly. I take pride in being my mother's daughter and carrying on the strong convictions. My ancestors believed in snakes birthing life, often referring to snakes as caves in reference to the cave of life. Similarly, a cave bears a strong visual link to the birthing canal. I emerged from my mother's body, her cave, her snake; she gave me my form and a cave of my own. I am forever grateful. I created this piece to not only represent my own identity and relationship with my ancestors, but also to challenge conventional thinking in order to encourage free thinking. The snake is colored purple to honor the animal's divine link, and red to represent passion and love for my culture and past. I believe I carry the memory of every single person that combined their genetics

Figure 5: "She Who Breathes for Many"

Note. Cobra with a coiled body and cosmic symbolism. Photo taken by Santiago Andrés Garcia at Rio Hondo College, 2019.

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

to let me have been brought to creation. I am honored to have been given an opportunity to live in this life and be educated and connected to this life.

Kristen Salazar created a hummingbird (Figure 6), whom she describes as "with me all the time" and that "lives in my soul." It is named "The Spirit of Margarita," and the narrative follows.

"The Spirit of Margarita"

Figure 6: "The Spirit of Margarita"

Note. Hummingbird relative (grandmother). Photo taken by Santiago Andrés Garcia at Rio Hondo College, 2019.

This hummingbird symbolizes much more than the animal itself. As a little girl, my grandma (Margarita) and I were incredibly close, but she passed away after only a few years with her. As little time as I had, I still have always felt an unimaginable and unexplainable closeness with her. Even after her passing, I always thought it strange to miss someone so dearly from a time in my life I shouldn't even remember. It wasn't until I was about 10 years old that my mom once told me she believed that the souls of our loved ones carry on into creatures of the earth. We both have faith that my grandma watches over us as a hummingbird. My family home has always had a hummingbird that nests just under my bedroom window. Even when I'm not at home, I have seen a hummingbird at times of need, or just when I feel I would have made her proud. I know my grandma is always with me in my heart, but it means the world to me when I hear the flutter of a hummingbird flying by, watching over.

Animals as a Source of Autonomy and Liberation

Working with clay leads to a host of transformative moments, with an onslaught of themes that surface from deep aspects of the human body and practice. We have materialized the sexualized naked body, the morbid body, the praying body, queer bodies in divine-like states, and the maternal body. It is also important to note that we are not creating art. In Garcia et al. (2018), we explained it as follows: "Sculpting the body became ritual, as we all partook in forming new understandings of what it meant to be Native considering trauma to the flesh, self-determination, and good health. Student figurines surfaced from a place of ancestry, memory, and Native land" (p. 47). Members of the Gabrielino Nation who identify as Tongva say they are people of the Earth; rightfully so. Clay teaches this, and when we touch it, we go back to our place of origin and birth.

To add to this, animals, since day one of the project, have served as a source of autonomy and liberation. Why, one asks? Animals provide inspiration and companionship and stand as a basic tenet of our healthcare system. Nikka, for example, witnesses her traveling body in the migratory body of a sea turtle. In her work, there lies an appreciation for the natural order of living things and a yearning to return to her Native homeland. She says, "That is my plan, and hopefully I will go back

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

to my homeland and be at peace & rest in my country's soil." In other parts, she writes that her turtle bears colorful clouds and sharp thorns, both as a symbol of safe times under her parents' care, and of moments of violence when her family members would hit each other. Physical abuse and addiction and joyful thoughts of returning to one's Native land characterize Nikka's clay-work. Similarly, Elizabeth calls attention to the likeness of serpents, caves, and women, and of the birthing knowledge that is passed from mother to daughter. There is an interconnectedness here between generations and the teaching and learning that ignites healthy and positive thoughts. Elizabeth says, "The snake is colored purple to honor the animal's divine link, and red to represent passion and love for my culture and past." In the "Spirit of Margarita," Kristen tells us that her mom once explained how the spirits of their ancestors lived in the animals of the earth. That her beloved and dearly missed grandmother lives in the hummingbirds of the family home. Animals mediate our thoughts and understanding of life in positive ways.

Since the beginning of time, animals have provided Native people with nutrition, and they remain part of our creation stories. Northern Plains relatives, for example, cultivated an ingenious, adaptive, and nutritionally successful daily life by following egalitarian principles and hunting animals (Prince & Steckle, 2003). Although now existing in low numbers, the wide-roaming American bison, "the buffalo", was once a source of food and sustainable supply for everyday life. Today, the buffalo serves as a source of sacred learning and motivation for young adolescents in search of their Native roots. We came across this passage in a 100-page school curriculum on the buffalo (see Buffalo, n.d.) archived by the South Dakota State Historical Society, their Museum Education section.

> One of the most important stories in their culture is that of the Buffalo Calf Woman. Buffalo Calf Woman appeared to the Lakota and presented them with the sacred pipe. She showed them many important spiritual things, including how to pray. As she walked into the sunset, she rolled over four times and turned into a black buffalo, brown buffalo, red buffalo, and then finally a white buffalo. The Lakota believe that the mighty buffalo herd came about and allowed itself to be killed so that they might survive. The white buffalo is a sacred Lakota symbol.

Humans have lived alongside animals for so long that their visions and dreams, their most profound thoughts and actions, evolved as intimately tied to the animal world. As mentioned previously, our Huichol relatives of Jalisco do not distinguish between the peyote, the deer, and the maize. It has long been known that Huichol families travel long distances (just as their ancestors did repeatedly) in search of food and medicine. They follow the deer tracks for miles because that is where the peyote grows. Where they find the green buttons is where they plant their wishful arrows, deposit gifts, and leave their corn seeds. It is also said that after the morning hunt, a large buck will lift the Sun with its antlers. This place of origin, where all life was created, is called Wirikuta, and is seen and revered from the Cerro Quemado. According to archaeological evidence, peyote was in use seven thousand years ago in the Texas and Mexico borderlands area. Today, it is the sacred sacrament of the Native American Church.

The theme of traveling long distances as an act of liberation and autonomy commonly surfaces during clay-work among students; and, in a recent paper on Quetzalcoatl and Venus cosmology (Garcia & Márquez, 2021), interregional interaction is seen as a stage for giving and receiving, establishing networks, and legitimizing corridors of learning where healing often takes place.

Transient behavior and the supernatural remind us of Gloria Anzaldúa's (2012) version of Coatlicue—a mother with a serpent skirt who wields eagle talons as weapons of life, love, and war. Anzaldúa tells her readers that Coatlicue lives in our people, and that she upholds qualities vital to developing a critical consciousness. We Chicanos and Chicanas "blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 67). We are hurting, and we suspect daily that something is fundamentally "wrong" with us; we stand accused and pending trials. When we legitimize our knowledge, those with power sue us, fire us, or they do not hire us. Those close to us ignore us, quickly shame us, and attack us. To cope with fear, we focus on addictions: drinking, smoking, popping pills, and aligning with hurt people who harm us.

Although Gloria Anzaldúa's work is over three decades old, current research (Valdez et al., 2022) points to a steady and growing rise in alcohol, marijuana, and opioid addictions tied to a series of social and mental health problems. A non-sober lifestyle for generations has amassed in internalized colonialism, external oppression, and violent acts of physical and sexual abuse (Holleran & Jung, 2005), oftentimes, within our own organizing communities. Anzaldúa warned us, the *atravesados*, people of color fighting for liberation that if addictions go unchecked and stick around, we become possessed. This is Coatlicue theory. She tells us that we need to be arrested. Coatlicue needs to slow us down so that we can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes. Anzaldúa (2012) stated in her own words:

> Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. The soul uses everything to further its own making. Those activities or Coatlicue states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. (p. 68)

Through this project, we have seen that the storied experiences of students and animal relations play a crucial role in shaping positive responses to human hardships and traumatic events. To develop a significant understanding of their own lives and experiences (to develop a critical consciousness), students often equate their perseverance with the instinctual behaviors of animals and the animal spirit—for their autonomy and liberation. Like Kristen did, who wrote, "I know my grandma is always with me in my heart, but it means the world to me when I hear the flutter of a hummingbird flying by, watching over." Or Nikka, who said, "Just like the leatherback turtles who travel 10,000 miles in search of jellyfish, my family and I traveled 11,563 km in search of a better life." And Elizabeth, who tells us, "I created this piece to not only represent my own identity and relationship with my ancestors, but also to challenge conventional thinking in order to encourage free thinking." Other equally meaningful animal artifacts and narratives existed that we have not detailed here, such as the story of *canta ranas* (singing frogs), oldies, and sexuality in the barrio. Or the one student who morphed into a donkey after receiving treatment for a life-threatening disease. There are even stories of make-believe animals developed to mediate *susto*, broken heartache, and aspiring love. This paper advises that animals, animal knowledge, and the animal spirit be incorporated into Ethnic Studies teaching materials and be part of critical learning archives.

Going back to our original question, "What role shall the animal and the animal spirit play in the critical instruction of our students?" Animals model the diligent spirit and work ethic of our ancestors, so we consider them sacred relatives. Their often-short-lived lives provide an allegory of important lessons that are central to our storytelling. In egalitarian societies, animals provide nutrition, tools, and companionship and are used in ritual and ceremony. When rooted in ancestral

knowledge, animals such as the buffalo, the deer, the serpent, the turtle, and the hummingbird may lead us into following a more positive path, building healthier communities, and improving our view of how the Earth sustains itself. For our historically disenfranchised students of color, this would promote positive thoughts, restore Native values, and may support healing outcomes. In his "Stalking Words," the late Juan Gómez-Quiñones (2012) writes, "studying the intellectual heritage of Native Americans expresses appreciation of a particular legacy and deepens our understanding of other human societies" (p. 64). In an Ethnic Studies curriculum, animal topics may involve conversations about ecosystems, conservation practices, human health, and Indigenous land ways. Learning about animals should involve advocating for and protecting their habitats. They surely belong to part of the LAND BACK initiatives. The topic of animals should be taught keenly, considered sacred, and, when possible, learned from elders who work with animals. When we de-center "the human" from animals, we relate better to life and others.

Final Thoughts and Reflections

On December 17, 2022, it was announced that P-22, the celebrated Griffith Park Mountain lion, was euthanized after 12 years of life (Natural, 2022). Wildlife scientists determined that he was severely ill and suffering after a recent collision with an automobile. Shortly afterwards, P-22 was taken to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles after tribal members from various Southern California Native American communities (Chumash, Shoshone, Luiseño, Tataviam, Gabrielino, Kizh, and Tongva) requested their relative puma be laid to rest in a good way and not put on exhibition. It was later reported by the museum's social media accounts that *Tokoórōt* (mountain lion) (McCawley, 1996) was received with reverence and songs by Native American voices and wildlife officials, who had tracked his movements over the past twelve years. Tokoórōt was born in the Santa Monica mountains, survived crossing the 101 and 405 freeways (the site where relatives of his were killed), made his home in Griffith Park, and endured episodes of starvation, poisoning, mage disease, and contact with scientists that disturbed his body.[19] Despite these hardships, the puma persevered in the most urbanized and dangerous part of California. Native American communities of Southern California buried their relative in a private ceremony in the Santa Monica Mountains. The story of Tokoórōt also exemplifies one of our greatest responsibilities as critical educators working to restore a balance between humans, nature, and the destructive effects of the colonized world. What role shall people play in the restoration of Native habitats? How do we become one and learn from our animal relatives so that they do not fear us? How do we continue to honor the animal for all that it has given us? These questions stand for us to sit with and act upon them with greater capacity.

To that end, the topic of animals strikes a serious chord when critical educators consider the sacredness behind such teachings and its importance to our own health and well-being. The life of Tokoórōt remains a local lesson of all that is good and bad living here in the greater Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley. Our way of existing, our way of responding to neo-colonialism and White supremacy, our way of responding to one another all begs for constant self-reflection. Let us not forget that Ethnic Studies arose from a need to free ourselves from physical and psychosocial violence. In the process of organizing for our liberation as a people, we neglected our own selves and families. We cultivated forms of stress, illness, and conditions unique to the people involved

[19] A full-length documentary on Tokoórōt is published on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQ1PDsNRfTk).

in the struggle. No Ethnic Studies project stands to thrive if we ourselves are not thriving in practice. How do we generate good health, wealth, and medicine? The wrath of the COVID pandemic exposed a lack of readiness in housing security, health outcomes, and emergency responses (Chang et al., 2021; Pedraza et al., 2022; Riley et al., 2021). During the ensuing chaos, large groups of Southern California activists, organizers, and educators scrambled to care for the severely sick, the vulnerable, and for themselves. Under COVID, the poor health resulting from generations of chronic stress and disease, substance addictions, homelessness, and illness unique to the movimiento worsened; we rapidly lost relatives young and old. COVID taught us that the major questions of our era are about human health, housing, and medicine. If Ethnic Studies are about building power, saving lives, and developing a critical consciousness, then we must all learn how to be cured by the serpent and not killed by it.

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