

Nelhuayotl [Roots/Beginnings]

~By Vladimir Herrera Alcantara[©]

Roots within a malnourished and nutrient deficient soil do all they can to accumulate the little available. Life always tries. Unable to find what's necessary to live, a full uprooting and transplanting could be necessary. This, however, will always be an arduous process. Death forms are inevitable. With proper planting, however, there is an opportunity to access a network of mycelium underneath to revitalize, revealing connections and access to nutrients from community.

Me

Emergence [Acocui]

The earliest memory that I am able to access is one of miscommunication and exclusion. Whenever I try, what I conjure is an out of focus classroom with a white girl in front of me. Unable to hear what she says or my response, the only perceptible information that is transferred to me is a state of confusion and disinterest. A contortion of the face, the raising of an eyebrow, a shrug and a turn away, her blond hair grazing the tip of my nose. I am not even sure if this really happened but that is how I internalized my first day of elementary in the United States.

My maternal family moved from Mexico City to McAllen, a border town on the most southern tip of Texas, in the late 90s. As many other immigrants do, my mother wanted a better life for her child and, at the age of 19, decided to cross the border with a visa in order to deliver me as an estadounidense, granting the gift of a social security number. However, due to the nature of the visa, we had to move back to Mexico City for a time. I later was told as an adult by a paternal cousin around the same age as I that as newborns we slept on a yellow foam pad on the ground in a room with our parents nearby. The next morning, we were discovered covered in various insects due to sleeping on top of dirt and soil. Coatlicue welcomed us to her realm. Phantom tarsi disturb my skin at times now.

My family had no background in McAllen, no long-time family friends and no one to depend on apart from each other since only very few of us knew

a little English. My parents were a part of the punk scene in Mexico City, meeting at a show through mutual friends, and embodied the style and radical anti-fascist views. Dark clothing with obscene signs, dreaded and dyed hair (oof, though Mexica priests did dread their hair, so maybe some leeway? not for me to say), and piercings and tattoos when those were indicative of a genuine counterculture. We were still loved by our extended family as far as their actions were concerned, helping with jobs and extending a hand if we hadn't eaten for a while or needed a place to stay as our section 8 was taking time to be renewed. We were, however, at times the butt of cruel "jokes" that reinforced a notion of otherism, which fed into the passing of a large period of time in the 2010's where my mom complained and did her best to stay at family functions for moments if she did attend. As far as the effect on me, I understood my immediate family as outcasts within outcasts. We were otherized within those who were already others.

At some point, who knows when or how, I learned English and excelled past the rest of my class. In 1st grade, I remember helping my teacher teaching my peers math. In 3rd grade, I remember my teacher bragging to my parents about how I'd read a passage once, push the page away, sit up with my arms crossed and a cocky expression, answering all questions about said passage correctly. I don't remember many friends from that time apart from some of my closest in 5th grade, whom I've had the pleasure of connecting with in the past few years. I'm not sure what it was, it could've been my intelligence, my accent, or my perceived femininity, that led those boys to pin me down and attempt to sodomize me. To this day, I am afraid of anyone coming near and have difficulty with restraint. Though I learned the

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language, maybe it was learned too well and that granted me a target on my back. Boys will be boys, always attempting to overpower and control that which has the ability to affect the sense of self.

Identity [Tlaccatl]

My body and face never felt very traditionally masculine to me, with love handles making me feel curvy since I was young. My face takes more from my mother's face than my father's, and due to a series of changes in family structure with deportation and separation, I was forced to spend a lot of time inside. I believe my body wasn't provided the chance to develop through play as most boys are. Though I grew up in a family of women, I had to laugh at misogynistic jokes said by fellow male friends or family members that later, as an attempt to become a man, became my own. I have a vivid memory at 14, sitting around the dinner table during Christmas and proudly proclaiming to be a feminist. I think I had recently discovered that Nikola Tesla was one and wanted to be like him due to his intelligence and declared my allegiance without truly knowing what it meant. This was met with deep belly laughs from my uncles, "No es posible ser un hombre feminista." I had to make a choice, creating a deep confusion about my being.

Along with my masculinity, I believed that I was white for a long time. Well, I am technically white according to a piece of paper but was never granted any of the benefits. My family were the first to instill this, attempting to distance me from Mexico as I was born in the US and have a social security number. My school peers would further reinforce this notion of my identity. Whenever I'd be compared to anyone by them, I was only ever compared to white people. YouTubers like danisnotonfire or celebrities like Dylan Sprouse are the ones I remember most vividly. Ridiculous. I didn't know many white people who would let me know otherwise. You can imagine my shock when I arrived at Boston University and was immediately questioned about my accent, imperceptible to me, and where I was from (not Texas of course.)

My perception of myself was immediately skewed in Boston, unraveling it and creating massive questions as to who I am. There were various explicit revelations of this due to my girlfriend at the time and her friends, who happened to be white. During my first July 4th together in Massachusetts,

we went to a party with her old high school friends. Immediately upon entering, I felt like a deer in headlights. The only person wearing jeans, skinny jeans at that (thanks dad), with not a single person of color there. While I was introducing myself, I said my first name the American way, which has always left my lips strangely that often people mishear me. I assume my background had been mentioned at some point or maybe they sniffed it on me, but they asked for my last name, Herrera. I never learned how to say it other than to roll my r's, not that there is another way to pronounce it. One of the boys (whom my then girlfriend used to have a crush on as she had once told me) mocked it by staying on that ⟨r⟩ phoneme an excessive amount of time. Everyone around laughed and I turned to see my then girlfriend laughing almost the hardest. I feigned a chuckle and had to leave soon after. There was another party where one other Latino man happened to be invited. For no perceptible reason at the time, it seemed as we avoided each other during the beginning of the party. It became clear why the moment we started to speak to one another, as I recall a feeling of inevitability for that encounter as I heard her say "Look they're talking" or something along those lines. Another time, her mother was kind enough to attempt and make me feel included during a thanksgiving by including Mexican meals. She, unprompted, decided to make enchiladas and some white rice. I don't like enchiladas, though of course I couldn't tell her that. I did, of course, devour that rice. Another time, she reminded me we were an interracial couple, of which I certainly hadn't seen that way. Micro-aggressions I believe they're called. I don't want to paint her in the bad light, she is merely a white American and didn't know any better. Thanks to these and other experiences in Boston, I realized that I would never be embraced by White America's bloody arms. (Mashallah)

Discovery [Ixtilapohuiliztli]

In order to survive, I developed a sense of pride in my perceived intellect that had been reinforced through years and years in excelling at school and attached that to my masculinity. My pride kept me afloat by supplying me with the belief that no matter what thanks to my intellect, I would be able to have a good, successful future. Success has meant many different things throughout my life, assimilation or even an out of the necessity of assimilation. Nonetheless, success had always been the goal with its ever-changing form. My pride, however, eventually developed into a sense of self

that was too perfect for me to ever live up to. Maybe, in some alternate version of history, I would have been able to become this person. However, my uninformed, ignorant, and structurally reinforced reactions towards the contradictions between my sense of self and my reality impeded those thoughts to ever fully flourish into reality.

A part of my pride is due to my intellect, which allowed me to exist in this belief of having the ability to do anything and be anything, including having correct analyses of situations. Of course, I often didn't, and my behaviors constantly betrayed me, throughout college and past it. After finding drugs at the end of high school, which seems to happen sooner or later for many of those in situations similar to myself, I would self-medicate to the point of not properly reflecting on my actions and how they affected my sense of self. Pride, in my opinion, is not something that is inherently bad if approached without attachment towards a perfect vision of oneself. Pride can save one's life as it did mine. However, it also has the ability to open the door for shame to rear its ugly head. I had become incredibly ashamed of myself.

As I dealt with my shame, I realized I was not living an authentic version of myself, the version that my pride was based on. Due to my difficulties with masculinity, I lied about meaningless stats, like body-count (ew), or pretended to be a kind of man that made me feel gross. Performance in its worst aspect. This shame is what caused me to lean heavily into self-medication, freezing me and forcing me to tilt into the lies. In college, if I missed a day of class, I would be so ashamed and embarrassed that I wouldn't return. Necessarily, this led to flunking various classes which I would have otherwise possibly aced. I lied to my ex, ruining our relationship and leading me to a point of not recognizing the person I had become. A psychiatric hospital after suicidal thoughts was the first step I was forced to take towards denouncing this performance that I came to loathe.

Another reinforcing aspect of my shame was that I didn't feel like I was allowed any leeway with mistakes. I found it difficult to recover and escape the cycle due to the imposed feeling of being an outcast and as an outcast, you already have one foot out the door. Any push or balance misstep was met with eviction. My reality doesn't have essentials that I hoped it would include by now. I hoped to have some sort of stability and the reality that I

don't, shaped the environment for me to continue relying on drugs. I already have a propensity to addictive behaviors due to the situation in which I was raised, and I found myself easily leaning into them for a moment of sanity in a place I believed I should have been in. I strained relationships, which reinforced the shame and continued the feedback loop that is all too common among people of color in the US.

I am at a place now where I can recognize my many internal contradictions and begin addressing them, synthesizing them into something that I am able to work with in a healthy way. I am so grateful to have been able to foster such meaningful relationships, I still am not sure what I did to deserve them. They say that I am a good person and for now, while I form the confidence necessary, I'll blindly believe them. They have provided me with such a beautiful and loving soil to be able to realize and confront what has been steering me across this road that ends in death. I am happy with my pride, as through my unknowing of being, it has persevered and kept me alive. I have to relate to it differently, shame can no longer be its counterpart. I'm ready to welcome the insects again and show them the compassion they showed me.

Flows [Teōtl]

I was gifted a book, *Anti-Oedipus* by Guattari and Deleuze, a critique of psychoanalysis and leftist analysis of a theory of self in the capitalist world. I haven't been able to parse through it at, not even the first 100 pages as my dialectics are not up to par quite yet. Yet, one term sparked my interest, *enregistrement* — a recording process. Recording here I will define abstractly as a transference of information.

Information I will very loosely define as an entity that is able to be transferred. Within this definition, we can state that it is everything that exists is information, the states of matter, the rotations of electrons, the orbiting of planets, waves crashing, wind sailing, beings breathing and filling space. All of these are able to be expressed in various forms, abstracting themselves and creating bits from information that are then able to flow through a medium of transference to a receiving substance that in itself is also information. Both of these ends and the medium are affected in a calculable way. If one is able to learn the language, then they can decipher the bits and reach the information that has been transferred. This

transferring, the flow of bits from one to another, is what I would define as God.

My shame has forever been etched on my body and can be seen in my dark, tired eyes, my body which has been distorted due to wearing tight fitting underwear that wouldn't fall off as I walked, my lungs through the inhaling of smoke and vapor daily. We carry our lives, trauma and happiness, on our bodies. We carry our emotions in our hearts. Our beings shape the world around us and it will forever remember our presence as it has already been, and will continue to be, recorded. Coatlicue welcomed me to this world and imprinted upon me the legs of her most innocent creatures. I am ready to welcome the ghosts of the past, let them inscribe their being in my heart, and work with them to understand how I am to move forward.

I fear the state of the world, many write with no understanding of what the process entails. How it connects us and is a way of willingly performing a holy action. It has become too easy to state lies and have them inscribed. Coatlicue and other Teōtl will always make sure that the truth is somewhere, ready to be found. I hope to look back in the future and realize that I did not allow myself to be fooled into believing a fascist and imperialist story through these unholy inscriptions. The connections amongst all of us outcasts can be fostered and strengthened through collective action and connectivity through writing. I will never be ashamed, for example, of raising funds for Palestinian people and sharing their pain. As James Baldwin once said

“Every bombed village is my hometown.”

I write this to share a story I hear is quite common in hopefully a digestible form. I also write to record my understandings of myself unto someplace where it can stay alive and easily continue transmitting this information. Storage is an amazing mechanism for the transference information, but I believe it holds little value if no one is allowed to interact with it. Everything everywhere is recorded on to something else. Tree rings, erosion lines, genetic code, entanglement. Witness, record, make sure your voice and story are transcribed. No matter where one is in time and space.