

Itzel Garcia

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SPEAKERS

Aysha Moneer, Itzel Garcia

- A** Aysha Moneer 00:01
Hello, this is Aysha with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm interviewing Itzel Garcia today. Today is March 16, 2021. Itzel, thanks so much for being here. How are you?
- I** Itzel Garcia 00:21
I am good. I'm very excited to be here.
- A** Aysha Moneer 00:25
Great. Just to start off, can you tell me something about your background, something - a formative experience in your childhood?
- I** Itzel Garcia 00:40
Well, I grew up in the border, en la frontera. I grew up in a farming community, also called ejido in Spanish. I grew up with my grandparents, I went to school in this rural community. My school was called Gral. Raul Garate. I loved it. And then my family, my mother and my father took us to cross the US. We were born in Texas, but as children, we just grew up in Tamaulipas with our grandparents, because my father and my mother were not established in Texas. They would always be crossing back and forth and so I feel that

there was a sense of instability. So I came to school in the US when I was around eight, and it was like, at the end of third grade.



Itzel Garcia 01:47

That was very formative for me, because I'd never really been within a structure that had like a different language and different values. I think that really shaped me as a person, because I feel that I was able to perceive two completely different types of educational systems and cultural structures, even though it's under the surface, right? Mexican structure in Tamaulipas, and then the American structure in the US, but under the surface is still the same community, separated by a river that was not supposed to be a separation, but a sense of unity, right? Because we share that body of nature.



Aysha Moneer 02:45

And you said, you moved in eight, that's a young age, but still an age where you're still kind of aware of your surroundings. How was the move for you?



Itzel Garcia 02:57

To me it was very difficult, because when I mentioned that I lived with my grandparents, I remember that my grandmother raised me. She was my main nurturer. She was what my mother was to me, because my mother was, like most Mexican mothers, very young and inexperienced, and I was her first daughter. She herself was like, the first daughter of my grandmother, and my grandmother is also the first daughter of her mother. And so it was just definitely a sense of - I felt the belonging within this matriarchal community that was symbolic of Mexico to me, so I didn't want to leave that.



Itzel Garcia 03:46

But my father and my mother, my father especially, he wanted us to receive an American education, which I think is really interesting. Because it wasn't that we were going to cross over into American society for the resources. It was mostly the education because my father perceived that as being the key to our destiny, and it was something that we really acutely idealize. And it was a lot of it was framed by the American dream. That was something that he really believed in. So when I went to school in Texas, or you know, the Valley, the Rio Grande Valley, south Texas, I felt like I needed to do really good, but there was this sense of homesickness, and nostalgia, and feeling like I didn't belong, and I was pretending to be something I wasn't really.



Itzel Garcia 04:54

And I mean, there was this level of coloniality growing up in Mexico because my community is mixed. But still I feel like our interaction as a community is indigenous, right, or at least indigenous to where we are existing in that moment of time and space and connection to the land. But there's a level of coloniality to that, that also frames that as a process of violence. But going over into the US was, I feel like there was another layer of violence that was colonial. It was more subtle, though. And I think it just was first being able to observe all these capitalistic behaviors, and ways of being that we're not really that develop, when it comes when it came to my upbringing in Mexico, capitalism, and this disconnection from nature, I think was the hardest process to adapt to, to process, to be able to make sense of.



Itzel Garcia 05:35

I think a lot of people don't make sense of it. A lot of children of immigrants, they go on living their lives with no sense of identity and self, because they don't realize that the process of colonialism is different. That is a different layer of dysphoria, I think, in some ways, but it's - I don't know how to describe it. I guess estrangedness from the body?



Aysha Moneer 06:55

In what ways did that show itself as a kid? What experiences as a kid made you kind of reflect on that as an adult as this?



Itzel Garcia 07:11

Yeah, definitely after we got to Texas, my father and my mother were living together for a little bit. And then when I was 10, my mother left my father. So my family split up, and it was due to my father's issues with drug addiction. But then months later, he was murdered by an American policeman. Okay, that I felt was a direct colonial violence experience. Even though I feel like society punishes individuals for being drug addicts, right. But drug addiction is still a system of oppression. My father went through the prison system in the US that is. There are specific, oppressive identities that we take on because of our family members, community members, experience a system of violence, too.



Itzel Garcia 08:23

So I felt like losing my father to an American policeman - and then also this policeman - my mother got two lawyers, we were really poor at that point. And she got two

different lawyers. And they they both - [train horn in background] sorry, the train - first one back-tracked from the case, he said he couldn't defend my dad because he was an illegal immigrant in the US. So that process of seeing my father's narrative within the American justice system, I felt alienated and I felt like, yeah, I may have been born in Texas, but I did not qualify for justice. I don't know how to put that really. I just didn't feel like I was accepted in a very internal way.

A

Aysha Moneer 09:34

Definitely. That makes complete sense. So sorry to hear that experience. And you said that was around the age of 10?

I

Itzel Garcia 09:45

Yeah.

A

Aysha Moneer 09:48

So moving past that, were you in the same town, living with grandparents still? Did you move for middle school, high school?

I

Itzel Garcia 10:00

Yes, when my father was murdered, my mom was also pregnant. So we were a family of my mother, me, and then my three siblings. And my mother, she basically relied on food stamps, and our government checks, support checks, to pay rent, and we were living in really small trailers in different towns in The Valley. But then she married my - I mean, she became together with my stepfather. They didn't really marry, but then that's when we settled in Progreso, Texas, which is a border town. Next to was Texas. So Progreso is where I went to middle school and then High School, and that's where I graduated.

A

Aysha Moneer 11:03

Okay. And so after graduation, you get to UT. And so tell me a bit about how that experience was.

I

Itzel Garcia 11:13

Yes, so again, I feel like there was structural violence when I was a child, and that manifests through my father's murder. So then when I leave my home environment, and I go to UT, I see that as another layer of awareness of a space where I feel that I'm being colonized again. Because I never lived in a city before, Austin was really - it shocks me. I experienced culture shock. I felt like it really depressed me, I had an eating disorder. And then there were, through my college experience, there were situations to do with sexual violence. At first it started - it started at home, this sexual violence, and then when I got to UT Austin, that was what I, again, was battling through. And so I felt that that divested from my competitiveness within an academic structure.



Itzel Garcia 12:34

Whereas in high school, I had managed to compete with my peers and to come to graduate valedictorian in my class, and be academically successful, and it was a small community. But in Austin, I did not feel the same way. It felt like my high school had not prepared me for academic achievement in Austin. I felt again, alienated. My community is very much Mexican American, it's the same ethnic group in that sense. So I'd never been in a diverse cultural environment, like UT Austin and that community.



Itzel Garcia 13:26

I did receive a scholarship to go to UT, which I felt really good about in the beginning. But then I realized, "Oh my gosh, capitalism is evil," because I have no financial knowledge. So my money just dropped out of my bank accounts because of consumerism, and because I didn't have financial literacy there. So I didn't know how to stop myself really, I saw that there was this indulgence in all the things to do with whiteness that I wanted to participate in, but again, I felt they were inauthentic. And and I didn't - and still - I didn't know, why is it inauthentic? To what am I lying to?



Itzel Garcia 14:17

Which eventually, as I became more self aware, I was able to come into a connection with myself and my spirit and my body and then realize, "Oh, all these all these issues that I'm having emotionally are related to my environment." And the way that I was raised to go through oppression systems and I just kind of adapted my emotions and my trauma and the eating disorder, the issues with my my ability to assert myself and to say "No" even. I was just adapting these as ways to cope with oppression. So that's what I realized in Austin.



Itzel Garcia 15:12

In Austin, I was able to also study abroad. So there was a positive and a negative. And I think that the negatives were a lot due to my sense of cultural shock, but also sense of comparing myself to my peers, my white peers, especially, and feeling inferior, and not knowing that was process or the power relationships between us. And so then in UT Austin, I was able to study abroad to Mexico City, which was very relevant to my journey of self awareness. Because finally, I felt like I was being taught in a language that I understood and that belonged to me. I'm saying "belong" in a way that I understand that Spanish is also a colonizer's language, and I understand that. I come from a community that has been whitewashed and has been colonized and has submitted itself to that coloniality. And not even that what the Spanish did onto this continent. That's such a complicated historic process.



Itzel Garcia 16:25

But anyways, that's all things that were coming to the forefront in Mexico City. And I felt like this was interesting, because it was this - I couldn't have gone from my community to Mexico City, I needed Austin as a bridge to land me into the space of where I was able to experience - even having friends in Mexico City, having friends was different than having friends in Austin. In Mexico City, I felt like I belonged with my peer group. We were all coming from different parts of Mexico. And I mean, I had this experience being from Texas and American and so they did see that part of me too. But they also like recognized something like my childhood and my - in this ancestral memory - being born and raised in the border space that is historically Mexican ancestrally, indigenous.



Aysha Moneer 17:29

What year in school did you study abroad?



Itzel Garcia 17:35

What year? I studied abroad when I was a junior, so it was 2016. I was 23 or 22.



Aysha Moneer 17:48

Okay. And did you start your work at Academia Cuauhtli at that point, or was that after Mexico City?



Itzel Garcia 17:57

Yes, after Mexico City, I came back, I graduated from UT Austin. Then I went into working as a teaching artist. After that is when I started my work with Academia Cuauhtli, which wasn't until spring 2020. I first came into connection with Cuauhtli in December 2019, when I was interviewing for the position of program coordinator. And that that is when I came into connection with Cuauhtli they hired me as a program coordinator for the spring of 2020. And I was very amazed by the community, I felt like I belonged, and it was the first time I felt that in Austin.



Aysha Moneer 18:44

For those who don't know, because we're doing this interview, can you share a little bit about what Academia Cuauhtli is and what you did as a program coordinator, and then as a teacher there.



Itzel Garcia 18:58

Academia Cuauhtli is a cultural revitalization school. It focuses on bilingual literacy. So it's a Saturday cultural school - sorry, my words are kind of scrambled - but the program is given fall and spring, and it's every Saturday. In the fall semester, we have a program that orients more to social justice. We teach culture through social justice lenses, as well as social-emotional learning. Then this social-emotional aspect of Cuauhtli is expanded in spring semester, but the way that the program is run is through teaching the children about Mexica tradition, Mexica danza, Mexica religion. So Maestra Tupina who is the leader of a calpulli - a calpulli is a group of families that engage in the danza - and so Maestra Tupina teaches danza in the spring semester. Right now we are doing virtual learning, so it has really transformed our program.



Itzel Garcia 20:31

When I entered Academia Cuauhtli, which was spring 2020, COVID-19 happened. So that frames my interaction with Cuauhtli in that historical moment, because we were not able to have a graduation for the spring semester. And so though I got to witness Maestra Tupina teaching danza one on one in person, we were not able to complete that semester. And then we right away went into virtual curriculum. So my time with Cuauhtli as program coordinator has been a lot about transforming our in-person curriculum and these dual identities within Cuauhtli, social justice and then Mexica tradition into how do you teach that virtually.



Itzel Garcia 21:24

As opposed to when we were doing the program in person, program group coordinator was a position that was developed through the the families and then the students. And then just making sure that the program would run every Saturday, you had to make sure that the food was there, you had to pick up the students because we had a bus that would take us from the Mexican-American Emma Barrientos Center. And then we would go and pick up the students and we would go back to the Emma Barrientos, the MACC [Mexican-American Cultural Center]. So program coordinator was more about doing. When we went virtual I felt that that expanded the depth of our conversation and our roles philosophically.



Itzel Garcia 22:25

To expand on that philosophical idea is we had to come up with how our roles - we had to really invest in getting to know our roles and our functions within a community that was trying to come together, despite undergoing this traumatic historical process, which was COVID-19. Again, I don't want to make light of that, because I feel that experiencing how society - all these deaths and how the state handled human life within that process, I felt that we were having a lot of conversations about that, and also how that relates to the role we have as educators, and how educators are the bridge within the community, with our working class. So Cuauhtli, another angle that we that we take is that our families are brown, they're indigenous and they're working class. Within that, we understand that our students are facing not only racial disparities within the Austin ISD system, but also this class disparity because most of them are working class.



Itzel Garcia 24:01

During my time as program coordinator, the initial relationship that the coordinator position provided between talking to the families every Friday night to see if the children would attend the next Saturday developed into actually forming a connection with the families. And asking them how they were, how they were feeling, then what they needed from us, what they needed from Cuauhtli, and what they thought of what their children were learning, what they thought of our program that developed a lot more authentic relating. That really expanded my role and it also expanded this definition of education I think, or what I thought education was, how Cuauhtli is being part of educating the community. What I mean by like that expansion is that education is communal, and it relates to every single one of our families, and that our mothers and our fathers should be more accounted into defining what education is.



Itzel Garcia 25:30

I think that there was a lot of conversations with resources and how we could provide those resources. I think that also relates to the educational structures, and goes back to my own childhood, where my father thought, by us learning something, being in the American education system, we are going to be able to advance socially because of that relationship.



Aysha Moneer 26:02

This is something that you mentioned in passing, but wanted to go back on was the indigenous spirituality aspect of Academia Cuauhtli. What specifically is that? And how would you describe the indigenous religion or spirituality?



Itzel Garcia 26:26

Yes, so Cuauhtli is developed through being able to realize de-colonialized imagination, or the decolonial imaginary. What I mean by that is that the way that we try to engage with our students highlights indigenous epistemologies, in our practice, and in the philosophies and the epistemologies, I would say, the wisdoms of our indigenous ancestors that are still present within indigenous communities, through North America through Latin America, but that our children as immigrants, most of the families that we work with, are immigrants, or have been immigrants to the US at some point. So because of that movement, there is this divorcing from our families' original community, and therefore, awareness of indigeneity.



Itzel Garcia 27:48

I feel like it was very complicated for me to even come to terms with it because of identity politics, I would say. I think that when you are raised in Mexico, you are told that you should be white. And if you're not white, or if you don't look white, then you are rejected, but you still want that identity, that sense of identity. And this is obviously everywhere, in the world, mostly everywhere in the world, this white lens of perception, and so when it comes to Cuauhtli, we, we try to erode that. And we try to transform that coloniality by allowing the students to engage in indigenous imagination, which comes through danza, through Mexica danza.



Itzel Garcia 28:56

Maestra Tupina as I said, she teaches the students the religion, the indigenous religion and

practice that she has, and that she belongs to, again, she is part of a calpulli. She often allows the calpulli members to come and showcase who they are to the students. They teach the students where they come from, their own practices and their own relationships, and how they found out and were able to claim "Oh, I am indigenous, and there are communities that I can be part of. There are communities that I do belong to historically." They talk a lot about the land that they lived on, and how that relates to indigeneity and how that is being claimed. And this is not to indoctrinate the students to tell them "Oh, you're Mexica, you are -" no, we understand that our families come from all over Latin America, and our families are very unique in their process of that historical transformation, because European colonial violence onto Latin indigenous America was extremely violent but also just displacing. So there is a sense of not knowing and loss.

I Itzel Garcia 30:27

So what we're trying to do is show the students an example of indigeneity through indigenous teachers. Maestra Tupina is a master at what she does, at danza, at tradition, at being able to teach. I don't know how else to explain it. Cuauhtli also began through Dr. Angela Valenzuela. In the beginning, I am not sure of the details, and I don't want to speak for her. But I have read her essay about her meeting Maestra Tupina and the idea of the circle and so they wanted, yes, to create a bilingual literacy program, but they also felt that the education system was subtracting resources, cultural resources from our students. And this where indigeneity comes in, and having this awareness - sorry, the noise.

A Aysha Moneer 31:40

No, you're good. I couldn't hear it.

I Itzel Garcia 31:43

Having that awareness that, "Hey, you belong in this earth and this land, and there are options to European epistemologies." And it's not even that there are options, there are other worlds, there are other lenses, connections, perceptions, values, systems of values that are more authentic. And what I mean by authentic is that they resonate with your soul with who you are. And I think that that's what the students are getting through Cuauhtli, being able to forge this, again, bridge, I'm going to use the word bridge, to allow Maestra Tupina to teach and be able to share that wisdom and indigenous epistemologies, tradition, religion, with the children. It's also a different development of spirituality, whereas I think European religions - anyway what Christianity has become, for example, that has been adapted towards systems of oppression. Indigeneity has always

been rebellious, because it is still struggling against that colonial struggle that has lasted for over 500 years. And I think it is still alive. And it is very much in a resurgence.

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Aysha Moneer 32:08

So I want to be mindful of our time. But before we go, I wanted to ask if there's anything that you want to share that you didn't get an opportunity to, to go back on anything. Anything else you want to say about your experience, whether it's on the border town, or social justice, or indigenous practices, just give you a chance, before we close for anything else.

I

Itzel Garcia 34:05

I guess I would just say is that the more I live my life with resonance of that decolonial imagination, the more it makes sense to me that the future is to nurture life. And I think that comes through nurturing the Mother Earth and I think that that extends beyond Cuauhtli but it is also something that indigenous spiritualities as well as epistemologies and ways of knowing have brought into this world, into into this dimension. And I think Cuauhtli is one of the many organizations in Austin that are still doing this labor, and not only Austin but all over the world. I think we need to recognize our indigenous communities that are still advocating for life and for Mother Nature. And I think this is a value that we are trying to give to our students because this is something that is going to help them survive the machine of capitalism. There's no other way to put it. Events like COVID-19 where death is widespread and it is collective and it is also felt collectively I feel. I feel like this just emphasizes that our efforts to support life and to nurture the planet as well as nurture the connections with each other that we have. I think there should - they should be backed by resources and they should be illuminated, centered. And that we should reshape the way power structures can support that value.

A

Aysha Moneer 36:15

That was beautifully put, thank you so much. I will stop recording.