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St. Helena, CA

Maria Ortega-Partida
Humboldt State University

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St. Helena, CA

By Maria Ortega-Partida

In the heart of the famous wine growing region Napa Valley, CA, lies my little home town named St. Helena. This little town is as cute as small towns get. We have a Main Street running through town full of businesses owned by people who have more or less lived in St. Helena forever. Because of the prestigious wines that are cultivated from the most beautiful vineyards, this town is the definition of a millionaire hub of people. Everyone you see in town drives a Mercedes, BMW, Range Rovers, or some other overly glorified European sport car. The houses all over town are picturesque and quite literally grand. I grew up running around various houses with enough space to ride a bicycle in and play tag in with my two siblings. A rich lifestyle describes my childhood. The only difference was that this lifestyle happened to be lived through going to work with my mother where she cleaned houses for rich old people. The lifestyle that I had with my parents growing up was the polar opposite quality of life surrounding me in the town. Because I was surrounded by privilege, I was ashamed to speak of my situation at home being poor and having undocumented parents. I never shared my experiences of being trapped in two different worlds in fear that I would be ridiculed for being different than everyone around me. My parents, who are both immigrants from Mexico, living in low-income housing, and were raising three kids in place surrounded by unobtainable wealth, taught us valuable life skills and wisdom.

The schools that I went to growing up in town were always made up of kids being about 50% White and 50% Hispanic. These schools had state of the art facilities with all resources provided including big expenses such as field trips and guest speakers. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a town that had these facilities and programs because, had it not been for the town's wealth, I would not have been able to experience these things through my parents. I learned to do many forms of art, partake in cooking classes, swimming lessons, and many other privileges that kids like me would not have been able to access otherwise. Like Ana Serrano, a Mexican-American artist who makes little cities and worlds out of cardboard, I became interested in art and pouring my experiences and emotions into the art that I make. From a young age, I incorporated aspects of what it was like growing up less fortunate than others within a very wealthy neighborhood. When my teachers would see my art they would be taken aback by the meaning because they were not experienced in a life of

struggle. Through these art projects, I explored my own identity as a Chicana, which in turn strengthened my bicultural aspect of myself.

These schools and facilities in which programs were held hold a soft spot in my heart and childhood. Experiencing these privileges allowed me to become bicultural, verbally and non-verbally, from a small age. I lived in a very traditionally Mexican household that only spoke Spanish, while going to school speaking only English and getting to experience activities and ideas outside of my parents' experience and knowledge having come from Mexico not long before. The majority of my personality and skills in life come from these schools and facilities and I am eternally grateful for all of them. Through classes and programs in town, I learned how to be mindful of others' situations and experiences through seeing the lack of mindfulness and awareness that the wealthy and privileged kids had while partaking in these programs. The people in school, more than the activities and trips we had, impacted who I am today and how I view the world. I grew up unaware of the division between the wealthy and the poor, but through growing up getting to experience both, I eventually began to critically think about these ideas.

The town and community norms/cultures were and still are financially driven. A positive result of the economic power of the town, schools and programs within schools have been very well funded to provide activities and classes for kids that might otherwise not be able to access them on their own. The schools in town have extremely passionate and well-educated teachers who care fully about each and every student, resulting in a great education through development of knowledge and life experiences. Unlike a lot of parents and community members, teachers at all of the schools always promoted critical thinking and forming one's own opinion on issues and ideas. When I was younger I viewed St. Helena as a small oasis of happiness and peace in a scary and cold world. I always thought that nothing could ever go wrong or be wrong because everyone was kind and because of that, everyone saw everyone else as equals. In junior year of high school, we had a lesson on the Chicano Movement and for the first time, I saw how poorly Mexican people are treated in California throughout history. This lesson in the moment and even now struck a chord in me. I started seeing the power dynamics and class division within the seemingly equal and peaceful area. Looking into my upbringing and childhood, I reflected on the loss of identity that I had as a result of my work outside the home. I started thinking deeply about the loss of culture experienced by

many Mexican kids at a young age in schools. I reflected on my own, as well as my family's, loss of connection to my Mexican culture. This made me think about the lack of knowledge that I have about Chicana/Latinx history regarding California and America; this history was slightly taught at my school, mostly skimmed over and warped. This lack of history and education inspired groups like The Latino Student Union Club at St. Helena High School to form, in search of connecting with others with similar experiences to them in terms of their Chicana/Latinx roots. The club has pushed for more reading of Mexican-American authors, more education of Mexican-American history, and discussions on race dynamics and how they affect us.

The Chicana/Latinx voice in St. Helena is slowly getting louder. Road signs, PSAs, News, and most services in Napa County are translated into Spanish and provided in both languages automatically. Days like Día de los Muertos, Mexican Independence Day, and various other celebrations of the culture are held in public spaces for the entire community all throughout the year. Although there is a long road of conversation and understanding, small changes and celebrations motivate people to make changes. What my family has done to keep our own voice alive has been telling stories to keep people alive and passing down heirlooms as a form of storytelling. Growing up, my deepest connections to my Mexican heritage always came through my art work. My family, specifically my mom, have always told their stories and experiences verbally, but also through painting and drawing. My mom has vocalized her childhood and how that translated into motherhood. Her story is full of aspects of being trapped in an unfamiliar environment, such as St. Helena, and having to persevere through it without fully understanding that environment. Juan Herrera, a poet and writer who discusses Chicano Identity, inspired me to develop this story telling into a work of art with lessons and symbols to pass on. In one of his writings titled "Spatializing Chicano Power: Cartographic Memory and Community Practices of Care," Herrera says, "Social movements mobilize to make changes in actually existing places. To understand the impacts of social movements, we must therefore think about changes in community spaces, and how those impacts continue even after the alleged decline of movement" (p.50). In developing my "cultural story," composed of experiences from my family and my own experiences, I must begin at square one and understand the impacts of movements on my own community. With the protests earlier in 2020, the town of St. Helena began to have a shift in

mindset and began rethinking race and the effects of racial disparity in the community. Through this, more conversations are happening between the white and non-white people of the town so that more of an understanding is had on what people need to be successful.

One day, I hope to see this town speaking more about the differences in experiences of one another in hopes of connecting on a deeper level. Once we begin to see one another on a deeper level, we learn to appreciate all aspects that a person brings to the table. By knocking down the norms of divisiveness and xenophobia in this town, the community can begin to understand and embrace everyone. Through the sharing of stories, celebrating cultural diversity, and talking about systemic issues, I believe that St. Helena can truly become a place of change and progression.

Work Cited:

Herrera, Juan. "Spatializing Chicano Power: Cartographic Memory and Community Practices of Care." *Social Justice*, vol. 42, no. 3/4 (142), 2015, pp. 46-66.