

agua bendita

Jessica Aguirre

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Recommended Citation

Aguirre, Jessica () "agua bendita," *CouRaGeouS Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives*: Vol. 6, Article 66. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/courageouscuentos/vol6/iss1/66>



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agua bendita
Jessica Aguirre

You have to harbor a good amount of trust within you to let yourself float on a flowing river. It took me years to build that confidence. This thought crossed me as I lay afloat the Mad River. I looked over at my coworker that I invited to spend a river day with me, and wondered at what age did she learn how to swim? I'm brought to my senses when she splashes me and challenges me to competition. She beats me across the river, and as she pulls herself out of the water in a celebratory chant, I plunge underneath the water in joy because that was the first time I gracefully swam without any fear or anxiety. I've signed up for swimming classes that I never showed up to, I've had every excuse in the book written out in a doctor's note for P.E. classes, I've skipped out on many river days to avoid being swept away by a current. I refused to voluntarily enter any body of water until I was 21 years old.

I like to blame my lack of water placements in my birth chart for an explanation to my fear of water. In reality, there may be two reasonable answers to the apprehensiveness I swim through—generational trauma and climate change. I was born in Ogden, Utah. It's this little ghost town that I existed in for two years. We then moved 12 hours away to the hot Central Valley of California. My father wanted to be closer to his mother, my grandmother, who may rest in peace. Without any context, I grew up an only child even though I had four older siblings—until I was 7. My parents both came from broken marriages when they decided to elope and escape from their lives in Utah. This resulted in a strained relationship with my older sisters from my dad's side and a distant connection with my brother from my mom's. The only sibling living with my parents and I was my sister, Beatriz. We're ten years apart, so we were never close growing up. Our first years in California are a blur to me; my three core memories consist of my 5th RBD birthday party, my sister moving out at 16, and the small kiddie pool my mom bought at the local Foods CO.

Living in Tulare, California is not a thrill for all. Like any 17-year-old moving away from their hometown I vowed to never return. There was nothing that can bring me back, especially after experiencing more

welcoming communities. This was my mentality leaving. My thoughts have definitely matured after reflecting on my relationship with my mother and father. My reluctance in returning back home boils down to my stolen childhood. When my sister moved, my mom and her both ended up pregnant around the same time. I was getting ready for school one winter morning. December mornings in Tulare are foggy and dense, you can barely see past six feet. I was running to our living room to check the PBS channel just in case my school bus route was canceled. Before I was able to turn the TV on I heard a loud yell coming from the kitchen. Concerned, I slowly walked into the room thinking someone was robbing us again but all I saw was my mom bent over the sink, clutching her stomach. There is this clear liquid running down her legs. She's yelling at me to call my sister so she can take her to the hospital because her 'water broke'. What water? I thought she was carrying my baby brother in her stomach? I was so confused but my mind went into autopilot and the rest was a blur. Within the next hour I was in my classroom taking my spelling test and all I could write was water. I was scared and upset; I didn't see my family for a week. I was being taken care of by my mom's coworker Rosa. The week spent with Rosa I learned so much about babies. She taught me how to change a diaper using my stuffed teddy bear and I was able to properly make a baby bottle. Rather than learning how to swim or ride a bike I was preparing to take on responsibilities meant for adults. I didn't realize all of this preparation was going to dictate the rest of my childhood.

Upon this specific reflection I can no longer sit here and hold resentment towards my parents. It wasn't their fault that they had to work long hours and had no one to look after their new born. My mom had to return to work after two weeks. Which is insane to me! Her poor body, she JUST gave birth. I respect the solitude she chose when she would get home. I respect the long hour baths after work. Suné Woods' "Landscape and Memory" photo collection reminds me of my mother. My mother deserves to properly heal her body after giving life. Denying brown and black bodies a way of living that is fulfilling is damaging in so many aspects. We deserve to feel whole with ourselves and nature. Reimagining my mother in a space where she can be playful and a place where she can rest and heal is a sequence, I wish she could fully envelope herself. It's something I'm working to give to her, and I can only do that by returning home.

I spent half of my summers with my cousins in Utah; it was a good break from the scorching heat of Tulare. My brother would take us hiking to beautiful waterfalls and spring waters. Thankfully the ponds in these areas were shallow and the deeper ends were kind of a struggle to get to. Regardless, my brother always insisted on taking a dip in the waters and I always fought with him because I did not want to get in. Everyone, including the adults, would gang up on me and shame me. *You don't know how to swim? Don't you live in California? Aren't there beaches where you live? You're not a real Californian...* I wasn't having fun. I turn to my sister-in-law and see her rocking my niece side to side. I walk over to them and ask to hold her so my sister-in-law can join everyone in the water. I play with my niece and protect her from the water. A role that will remain with me every time we go to the rivers (Fig.1).

Although my hatred of water was well understood among my family members, they would still invite me to river days. Majority of the drive to the river included threats of being thrown into the water because everyone in my family 'learned' how to swim by being chucked into the water and choosing to swim instead of drowning. Which seemed so illogical to me because how will I *know*, how will I *choose* to swim back up? How can I trust my family members to save me if I do start drowning? What if we both start drowning and it's all because of me? The pressure was too much. I rather choose to sit back with my mother who told me the horrors of water currents. As she tells me about her experiences of drowning-very morbid, I know- I admire how silly her descriptions can be. But I just laugh and promise her I won't go in without a life vest.

I kept the promise I made to her. No matter how ridiculous I looked with floaties. The rare times I did join my friends to the river I didn't feel ashamed knowing that I couldn't swim. They made me feel comfortable and even promised me swimming lessons. Yet I was unable to shake my mom's promise even when I was missing out on all of the fun. That all changed when I suffered from a traumatic pelvic injury that strained my lower back. My physical therapist recommended I swim at least twice a week to alleviate back pain. I refused for two years. I'm still in disbelief that I chose agonizing pain over a swimming lesson. My friends watched as I struggled with an exaggerated bent back and

decided to confront me and my fear of water. With their help I learned how to comfortably hold my breath underwater, without obstructing the airflow in my nostrils, which caused me to swallow all of the water. I thank them every day for their patience and kindness.



A trip to the Wild Waters waterpark. I watch over my nieces and nephews as they eat fruits and snacks.

Central Valley heat is no joke. The valley has been suffering from historic drought for decades. Tulare was once the largest freshwater lake in the west, but due to greedy irrigation and climate change the area has been left empty and open for farming made possible through the groundwater still available. This water crisis affected our day to day lives. Like many other areas of California, Tulare had strict water usage laws to preserve water. Communities were allowed water usage on certain days based on the last number of your street address. My address ends with an odd number so we were assigned Tuesday and Thursday to use our water. Although every house in the neighborhood I lived in was granted specific watering days, my father took notice of certain privileges our counter-white neighbors held when he was cited for a leaking hose and the vecina next door was watering during the weekends. My father understood, not in these specific terms, that moving his family to this suburban adjacent community was not got to be his American dream but instead how Jose Esteban Muñoz

describes the way our “brownness can be known by tracking the ways through which global and local forces constantly attempt to devalue and diminish their verve” (Muñoz, 1). Either way, his flores were going to be the brightest on the block.

As I see things, our relationship with waterways, land, and other forms of nature can be spiritually and physically healing. Putting in work to understand yourself and the world surrounding you can bring much harmony and a sense of peace we seem to be missing today. Our own fears and anxieties can limit beautiful connections that may bring forth a fulfilling life.

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