

Children from the Groves

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Recommended Citation

Alvarado Reyes, Jaqueline () "Children from the Groves," *CouRaGeouS Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives*: Vol. 7, Article 65.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/courageouscuentos/vol7/iss1/65>



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Children from the Groves

By Jacqueline Alvarado Reyes

I begin this essay similar to Christina Sharpe's piece "In the Wake," "to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction" (8). Before arriving at San Pasqual Academy, my prior bedroom window faced the Mexico-US border. During the day, there wasn't much to see but at night during clear skies Mexico's city lights illuminated so vibrantly that it never went unnoticed. Some nights when I wasn't able to sleep, I would often imagine what life would be like if my mother hadn't migrated to the United States of America. Maybe then she wouldn't have lost parental rights over my siblings and I. The house from where I was able to see the Mexico-US border every day for six years of my life was not a home to me, it was my first foster home placement. I was later sent to San Pasqual Academy, the 'first-in-the-nation residential education campus designed specifically for youth in foster care' located in Escondido, California.

San Pasqual Academy was very promising for my future, at the time. But I'll never forget accidentally setting off the house alarm when opening the window to say hi to my new housemate, whom I had met earlier that week during my campus tour. That was the moment I learned that we weren't allowed to open the windows because students would often go AWOL. This was my first day in my new 'home' and was until I aged out of the system at eighteen. The looming lights at night were no longer visible because I was now surrounded by mountains and orange groves deep in the valley with no escape. Very aware of the external factors that governed my life, I always wondered what if life could be different for all of us.

Instead of leaning on staff for moral support, I found friendship and understanding among my fellow peers in the institution. It was at San Pasqual Academy that I experienced and witnessed first-hand, systemic racism, prejudice and unconscious biases

from staff, especially towards my Black friends. This unsettling reality forced me to confront the harsh truth articulated by Christina Sharpe in their essay "In the Wake." Sharpe argues "that rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*" (14). Thus, "Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically, and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased" (15). Historically, Black and Brown bodies have been commodities to systems of oppression and yet are often blamed for our own suffering.

The social construction of race has a violent history; historically serving as a tool for colonization, and white supremacy which still persist today. In "Whiteness as Property," Cheryl I. Harris states that "although the existing state of inequitable distribution is the product of institutionalized white supremacy and economic exploitation, it is seen by whites as part of the natural order of things, something that cannot legitimately be disturbed" (288). I've learned that in order to dismantle systems of oppression, critical analysis, counter-perspectives and language are needed to achieve true liberation. Sharpe describes this as 'wake work' which is "to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18). Within this wake work, it is important to acknowledge that coloniality continues to shape our current paradigm of life through capitalism and modernity but resistance is the unwavering commitment to rewrite narratives thus challenging systemic racism.

In reflection of my memory, current reality and future aspirations, I find solace in the interconnectedness of being and life as described by Jose Esteban Munoz in his essay "Brown Commons." Munoz explains that "the brown commons is

not about the production of the individual but instead about a movement, a flow, and an impulse to move beyond the singular subjectivity and individualized subjectivities" (2). While our current capitalist system thrives on individualism, brown commons is a theoretical framework that provides a collective alternative, emphasizing a shared existence and interconnectedness. Munoz highlights that "the brown commons is made of feelings, sounds, building, neighborhoods, environments, and the nonhuman organic life that might circulate in such an environment alongside humans, and the inorganic presences that life is very often so attached to" (2). The brown commons in short is about collectively, harmony between people and the environment, not about conquest. I was able to be part of a brown commons at San Pasqual Academy when I joined the Step-Team led by my friends on campus. Stepping celebrates African dance culture and it was in our practices where I found a sense of belonging and community. Now when asked, Why Brown? Munoz asserts that "the world is and has been brown and has been so despite the various blockages that keep us from knowing or being attuned to brownness" (5). Therefore, it is important to mention that San Pasqual Academy which was built about 1949, resides on indigenous Kumeyaay land and houses predominantly Black and brown foster youth from the ages of 12-18. It was there where I found my chosen family, who will live with me forever.



Image 1: San Pasqual Academy in Escondido, California (Kumeyaay territory). Source: San Pasqual.Academy (website)

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