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Jaelyn deMaria
University of New Mexico, jdemaria@unm.edu

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Abuelita's Hands = Justice

by Jaelyn deMaría

Justice occupies space, mentally and physically and is the result of multiple, constantly evolving struggles for balance in Xicanx communities. It is not a one-dimensional conceptual theory of law, but, rather, it is visible, tangible, and experiential movement. To me justice resides in my grandmother's hands. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Jaelyn deMaría, "My *Abuelita's* Hands Are My Strength, Martineztown, New Mexico," 2011

The seeds that were given to us by our ancestors, who developed a relationship with them over time, allows us to put those seeds in the ground and watch them grow. However, the muddy handprints on the walls of the abandoned adobe in the Sangre de Cristo Land Grant in New Mexico clearly communicate presence, existence, and a connection to the earth, but also tell the story of a betrayal. The muddy hands of the land grant heirs make the betrayal of the U.S. government's promise under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo visible. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Jaelyn deMaría, “Muddy Marks of Existence, *Sangre de Cristo* Land Grant,” 2009

The symbol of the hand communicates something entirely different when it is severed from its spiritual and physical connection to home. It is because of the stories our grandparents have imprinted in the Xicanx landscape, that we want to know more about how spaces are claimed for the seeds that they gave us to grow. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Jaelyn deMaría, “Sofia’s Hands Show Continuance, Wagon Mound, New Mexico,” 2012

Human beings have left evidence of their existence in the form of muddy handprints all over the world. It is a signature that suggests power in presence. My research advocates for community defined justice and I make photographs from that perspective. I choose to focus on projects that make human connections to place visible. (Fig. 4)

The purpose of the submission of photography is to show connection to a Xicanx homeland in New Mexico. Human connection to place is intense and intricate. Its intensity is strong enough to attach people to a conceptual homeland and its intricacy finds its power in the multiple manifestations of community and personal identity associated with place. Keith Basso (1996) suggests,

Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one’s position in the larger scheme of things. Including one’s own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person (p. 34).



Figure 4. Jaelyn deMaría, “Planting Seeds in My *Barrio*, Martineztown, New Mexico,” 2007

Several theorists have explored knowledge of self and community in connection to place as culture in various ways. Each offering a slightly different perspective on the ways in which physical places in the universe and mental spaces in the mind connect to communicate cultural identity. Edward T. Hall (1959) suggests that, “Literally thousands of experiences teach us unconsciously that space communicates. Yet, this fact would probably never have been brought to the level of consciousness if it had not been realized that space is organized differently in each culture” (p. 161). Emotional attachments and physical necessities bond people to their homeland so deeply that place becomes part of the core being of humanity as is expressed through the cultural landscape. “Places, we realize, are as much a part of us as we are of them” (Basso, 1996, xiv). Humans alter environments in ways that allow those who share the same environment to develop a sense of shared identity. People have, and continue to, construct their surroundings in ways that communicate about who they are and about where they find meaning. By grasping subtle elements of place one can begin to read environments like texts and uncover clues about the culture of the people and the communities that live with these places, and how they have acted to create environments that mirror their own identity and, equally, how natural and built environments shape conceptualizations of Self and Other. This is a photographic contribution that makes these concepts visible.

Jaelyn deMaría is a Xicana researcher and multimedia storyteller, originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her research interests are centered in the intersections of intercultural communication, justice studies, and de-colonial studies through a lens of visual communication and media justice.

She is a photographer and faculty member in the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of New Mexico. She approaches teaching and research through a service learning and community engagement model. Art, culture, and identity in New Mexico are links between past and present generations. Photographs are symbolic vehicles of connection over time, making the past and present visible. The images allow existence to be remembered and make survival strategies visible in the seeds yet to be planted. This work is an attempt to make generational connections visible through a collection of photographs that reach back and forward in time.