



Symposium on Community-Engaged Environmental Justice Rhetorics

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A Transdisciplinary Rhetorical Praxis of Pluriversal Co-Presence in the Urban Bird Project

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As world citizens we learn to move at ease among cultures, countries, and cus-toms. The future belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and who use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the "us" versus "them" mentality and will carry us into a nos/otras position bridging the extremes of our cultural realities, a subjectivity that doesn't polarize potential allies. (Anzaldúa, Luz en Lo Oscuro/LLuz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identit 81)

Opening Wor(l)ds

In Nahuatl, the name is *Chiltototl*, meaning chile bird. For the Cherokee, the name is *Totsuwa* (toh-joo-wah), a central actor in creation stories about the powers of the Sky World that shape all life (Teuton 152). For ornithologists, the Latin name is *Cardinalis cardinalis*. Today across México, the name in Spanish is el cardenal norteño, cardenal rojo, or just cardenal. For English speakers in the U.S., it is known as the Northern

Cardinal, or redbird. The root *cardinalis* “derives from the assumed similarity of the bird’s own tall red ‘hat’ to the Catholic cleric’s crimson garb and his bishop’s mitre” (Cocker 527). With settler colonial expansion into the U.S., the cardinal also expanded its territory further north solidifying its direct relationship to humans who have long found the bird easy to identify and feed, especially in Winter months when the bird takes on religious significance as a popular Winter solstice and Christmas bird. The Northern Cardinal is the bird emblem in seven states (more than any other bird), and it is symbolized across countless artifacts from garden accessories to stained glass windows to tattoos (529). Across cultures, humans have identified the Cardinal’s togetherness as couples often sing duets and feed one another during mating. For as long as we know, ten thousand years or more, the red bird has been co-present with human inhabitants across the Yucatán, Northern México (el Norte), the U.S. Southwest (el Norte también), and across the middle and eastern portion of what we call today North America. Each name, each word, opens worlds.

Naming is a rhetorical enterprise shaped by power relations that use symbols to call attention to some aspects of reality while ignoring others (Burke; Ore). Naming is also relational and cartographic—places take on names and naming places us humans into relationships that guide our everyday realities and practices through the folds of local and global forces (Stuckey and Murphy; Na’Puti; McGreavy et al., *Tracing Material Life*). Naming is a way of relating to space and positioning ourselves and our communities in time. Naming is also a site of struggle, of negotiation, that opens some worlds and not others, that legitimizes some forms of knowledge and not others, which can manifest as a form of gatekeeping. So, naming is also profoundly shaped by asymmetrical colonial power relations and their histories and presences well-established before anyone living today was born. Learning new names not lost to history opens worlds among worlds that were always present, but hidden, or ignored, until one is compelled to pay attention. Here, for example, are two short stories from our transdisciplinary environmental justice work with the Urban Bird Project (UBP). Diana Milagros Natividad, one of our project collaborators and a science teacher, shares her story with the redbird:

[The redbird] really took on a meaning for us. It’s been in my family about ... 18 years, 19 years since my sister has passed, and so [...] I’ve lost grandparents before, and you know it’s kind of like you expect to lose your older ones, so it’s a different passing when you lose someone who’s younger, and it’s not an expected passing. And so that’s when I first kind of really heard about the red cardinal story [...] [when] your loved ones passed on, and so when you start to notice them a little bit more, they take on that, that sort of connotation [...] they’re saying “hi” to you, or they’re giving you that like, “Hey, I’m okay.” And there is a lot of lore with that as far as like there’s little pendants that we, me and my mom bought. There’s little garden stones that you can buy, like to welcome little red cardinals. But it’s, it’s definitely something that I feel over the past few decades that it’s, it’s grown a little bit stronger in our family with the red cardinal, because my mom is super big with ... specifically getting cardinal food for the feeders to have them around.

(Diana, Interview)

The second short story about the redbird, as narrated by Author 2 (co-author), focuses on her experience with Lauren (M.S. student in Environmental Science) capturing and banding cardinals in one of our urban backyards:

I had the unique opportunity to join Lauren in one mist netting session for her field research. During these sessions, a mist net is set up to capture birds, which were then banded for movement and distribution data. For this session, we were attempting to capture red cardinals. I can admit I felt trepidation when it came to actively capturing birds. My reservations about capturing a red bird were heightened by the realization that if we captured it, the mystery of what that bird means to me and my family would dissipate. My trust in the project (UBP) was greater than my fear. The session turned into more than a data gathering session; Lauren and I connected on a personal level. We were co-constructing meaning with/in this dynamic spatial area. And/also, we were brought

into the cardinal world when one defiant cardinal sat on a branch nearby to observe us. We pointed in his direction, aware that he was watching us. He was well aware we were watching him. Almost as if to taunt us by proclaiming he would not be caught, the red bird radically upended the human (dominant) centered world to negotiate the space between the human and this more-than-human relative. The moment the red bird held our gaze and brought us into his world, the world became multiplicitous.

In both stories, we see how co-presence with cardinals open worlds in unexpected ways. For Diana, the cardinal was initially her and her family's vehicle for mourning and celebrating life. Then Diana's relationship with the redbird grew when she began to engage her students in backyard bird feeding while simultaneously opening space for her students to tell their own family bird stories. For Author 2, the worlds of science and storytelling were potentially colliding and in conflict until she realized those worlds could co-exist. Her engagements taught her how a multiplicity of worlds converge in the redbird with multiple points of entry and departure. This co-presence becomes an opening of worlds in multispecies fieldwork where the environment itself is its own cultural artifact that is usually left undocumented (*de Onís*). In each story, co-presence in fieldwork is always an engagement with non-human kin as portals to a plurality of worlds. Wor(l)ds are co-produced through co-presence.

We open this article with a few names and stories about co-presence with the redbird because pluralizing names and stories also compels us to pluralize knowledges and practices, which is an anti-colonial act that resists any insistence on one world, or one way to story worlds ([Quijano](#); [Lugones](#); [Mignolo](#); [Anzaldúa](#); [Escobar](#)). Embracing a multiplicity of names is an effort to reckon with colonial violence and renegotiate the legitimacy of minoritized forms of rhetorical knowledge and practice. As relations change, one may acquire different names. Multiplying our naming practices, and understanding the meaning behind these names, may offer a foundation from which to engage with cosmovisions that are not necessarily one's own but still happen together in shared practice and with shared concerns about the ongoing presence of the redbird. For some, multiplying names may simply be amusing. For others, multiplying names and questioning any one single name can potentially cultivate a hybrid consciousness. And for those who have cultural context, as Diana does, names can be portals into deep intergenerational stories and ancestral wisdom. We offer multiple names and stories of the redbird because we hope it compels you to reexamine your own relationship with this bird (or any other natural entity). We hope it stirs something inside of you that makes you question the singularity of how you have come to understand and dwell with the kin who share this planet with us humans. In the redbird, we want you to see rhetorical multiplicity. Even further, in the redbird and its rhetorics, we want you to see pluriversality—how many worlds can coexist through and against the power differentials of

coloniality (García and Baca; Escobar; Cushman et al., “Delinking”; Wanzer-Serrano; Walker). And we want to stir those possibilities in you so perhaps you too may come to a new relation to redbirds with us and/or without us.

Within the academy, embracing a plurality of worlds through our research and teaching is often called being interdisciplinarity, but here we want to suggest that doing interdisciplinary work with communities *beyond the academy* is one good definition of *transdisciplinary praxis*, a praxis with potential to further anti-colonial efforts in multiple spaces (see McGreavy et al., *Science on Indigenous Homelands*). So, one purpose of this article is to offer an example of how transdisciplinary projects open worlds and provide decolonial options through rhetorical praxis. More specifically, we argue that these projects might contribute a pluriversal sense of co-presence that suggests “pluriversality as a shared project based on a multiplicity of worlds and ways of worlding life” (Escobar 21). We accomplish this through experiences and stories from our ongoing work with the Urban Bird Project—a transdisciplinary environmental justice project that intentionally places ecology, Mexican American Studies, and Indigenous Studies into a relation through a community engaged research praxis. After briefly describing the Urban Bird Project, we situate it within a few relevant conversations happening across rhetorical studies and related fields to demonstrate our theoretical and methodological investments. In particular, we argue that transdisciplinary rhetorical-ecological projects (Druschke; McGreavy et al.; Pezzullo & de Onís) can be appropriately theorized through pluriversality and pluriversal rhetorical praxis (Sandoval; Mignolo; Cushman et. al; García and Baca; Walker). More specifically, we argue that Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of *nos/otras* provides a valuable methodological framework for the border crossing field work of pluriversal co-presence. To demonstrate, we offer three scenes from the Urban Bird Project that we suggest brings different wor(l)ds to life for the project’s participants in a differential fashion—wor(l)ds that were always present but missed; some wor(l)ds that are overrepresented; and some wor(l)ds that exist differentially through co-presence as an act of being with, together, albeit sometimes in different modalities. As Gloria Anzaldúa notes, this *nos/otras* position cultivates sensitivities to difference, transcends binaries, and perhaps can compel us toward a more coalitional rhetorical praxis (Anzaldúa; Chavez and Licona).

How We Hold Things Together (Part I): Weaving a Pluriversal Rhetorical Project

The Urban Bird Project

The Urban Bird Project started out as a transdisciplinary community science project that intentionally brought together Avian Ecology, Mexican American Studies, and Indigenous Studies in order to promote scientific and cultural literacies and environmental protection with minoritized urban youth in San Antonio/Yanaguana. We accomplished this through our ongoing deep engagement with youth, neighbors, and community leaders around local, migratory, and culturally significant birds. In one part of this project, and for two years, an interdisciplinary disciplinary team of professors, graduate students, and community leaders came together and offered events, workshops, field-trips, and ecological engagements through a project-based curriculum developed



Figure 1. A transdisciplinary model for the Urban Bird Project by *Paulina Hernández-Trejo*.



Figure 2. A few members of the Urban Bird Project team. Screenshot by *Amelia King-Kostelac*.

with community members. While the larger framework for these engagements was community-engaged research, what brought all these distinct disciplines into a relationship was its focus on the nature-culture of local and migratory birds.

Many rhetorical-ecological projects organize around notions of citizen science (Kelly & Maddalena; Wynn), but as Caren Cooper notes community science is distinct in a number of ways in that projects: (1) are linked to social action and measurable improvements toward environmental justice; (2) include community-based participatory research; (3) elevate local experts and place-based issues above academic experts; and

(4) [commit] to social action and antiracist, decolonizing research praxis aim at elevating multiples ways of knowing, engendering trust, and sharing power (Cooper et. al 1387). So while the center of the Urban Bird Project is community-based research, it also aims for a decolonial research praxis through social action, community participation, elevating local experts and local ways of knowing, and sharing power. Indeed, the main intention behind holding together three distinct components of the project through community-based research is to allow each disciplinary area to be co-present and potentially co-productive with the others—what we have come to understand as a *nos/otras* positionality. We anticipated that holding together these forms of praxis would be a transformative experience for all of us—the researchers, the neighbors, the teachers, the youth, the community leaders, and more. And indeed, through a plethora of events and experiences, this community science project has taken on multiple lives well beyond what we could have even imagined.

In this work UBP had two main field sites of co-production: local schools and the neighborhoods adjacent to them. The UBP team prioritized three specific sites in the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) neighborhoods—areas that were historically redlined, but also proudly Mexican American and Latinx—which lends itself to the content and ethics of our transdisciplinary project. Every two weeks UBP team members would meet students and community participants after school for community science meetings or workshops. Through the Avian Ecology workshops, students learned how to use binoculars to identify birds, how and why all kinds of people capture and band birds, and how they might contribute to ornithological research through backyard bird projects. During MAS workshops, students learned about birds in *Méxica* codices, Chicana bird-based art production, and local environmental justice movements or “barrio-based ecologies.” The Indigenous Studies workshops focused on feather keepers, the use of feathers in ceremonies, and the cultural importance of specific birds like the golden eagle, red-tail hawk, and the red bird. During the monthly community science meetings, students created storymap projects that wove together these diverse knowledges and practices. Several neighbors/community members also opted to host digital nodes that helped the ornithologists track the movements of Northern Mockingbirds and Northern Cardinals. Through these engagements, we all shared experiences, knowledges, and stories about birds, and in this way all of us—the schools, workshop leaders, project team members, neighbors and students—hold the project’s ecology together.

To begin to conceptualize how pluriversality helps us theorize the transdisciplinary work of UBP, we first offer this drawing by Nasser Mufti, titled, “Multispecies Cat’s Cradle,” which we first encountered in the work of Donna Haraway (Haraway). For us, the drawing captures interspecies co-presence in the sense that in order to create something together all those involved must show up, be present, and take response-ability for holding a strand. As Haraway mentions in her analysis, there is something at stake for each member—they are at stake with and for each other—but they are also in the act of creating something together beyond what any one individual could even conceptualize. In this sense, creating worlds where many worlds exist is as much about world-building with nonhuman kin as it is with human communities. And this is something we have learned through our engagements—birds are bridges across different worlds of practice, and as bridges they expand our capacities for relational accountability and

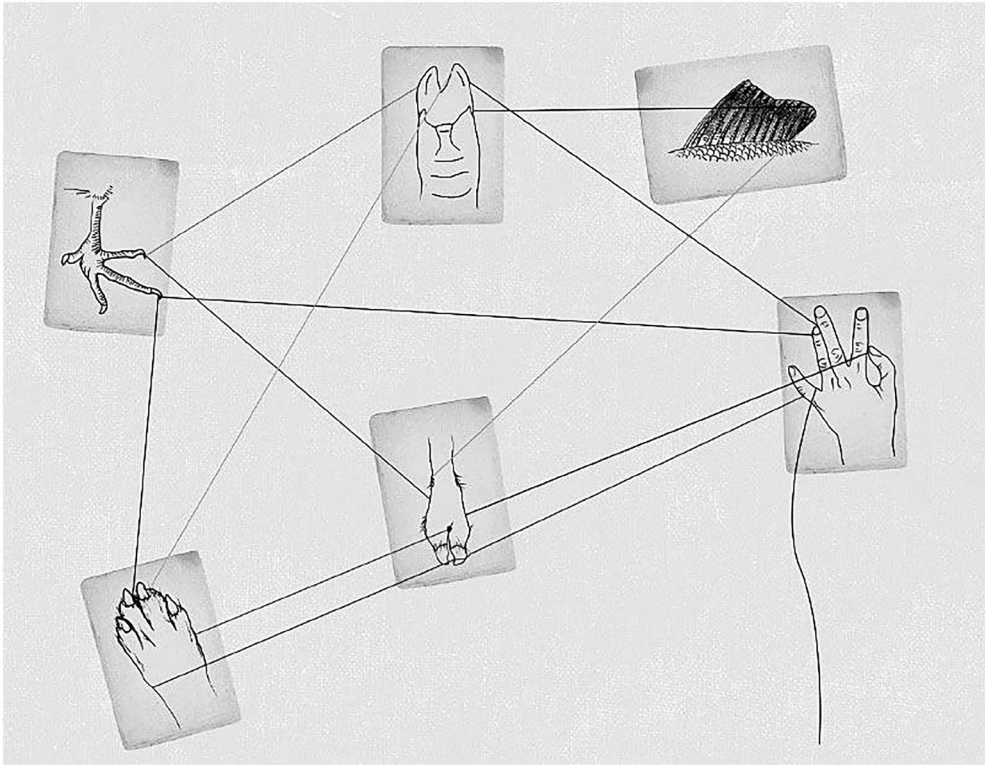


Figure 3. *Multispecies' Cat's Cradle.* Drawing by Nasser Mufti, 2011.

pluriversal co-production (although what exactly the productions are are always in question and multiple).

Pluriversal co-production is deeply rhetorical in an ecological sense because it “considers qualities of relations between entities, not just among humans, that enable different modes of rhetoric to emerge, flourish, and dissipate” (Stormer and McGreavy 20). In this sense, rhetoric is “a set of capacities and not a fixed agency” and “[an affordance [or not] of a set of capacities, given systemic adaptations in the face of changing conditions” (Stormer and McGreavy 20). So, as a team of transdisciplinary academics active in community-engaged work with our nonhuman kin, one of our central concerns is the quality of relations among entities that build capacities for different modes of rhetorical praxis. But of course, relational qualities are first dependent upon a commitment to show up, be present, and take response-ability for holding a strand of the project.

Another modality for how UBP holds things together is through conceptual and practical methodologies that weave together informal nature-culture engagements in spaces of co-presence. To meet the need for more educational research exploring the influence of informal learning with minoritized communities, we have adapted the Strands of Learning Framework (Bell et al.) to conceptualize transdisciplinary co-presence. Whereas the source model focused on operationalizing scientific learning in informal environments, Dr. King-Kostelac’s Strands of Engagement Framework (see Table 1) provides an integrated model for analyzing co-production of scientific and cultural knowledge across more-than-human experiences. Each strand reflects broad strategies of

engagement—understanding, reflecting, identification, interpretation, etc.—which are inclusive of the different types of expertise, positionalities, and praxes within the UBP community. For example, Strand 4 (methodological perspectives) captures our approaches to exploring, observing and making sense of our work, as well as for tracking power differentials between disciplines. The Strands of Engagement Framework seeks to provide a mechanism for both interpreting data gathered through the project as well as understanding and navigating these kinds of internal and external power dynamics, which can have powerful ramifications for long-term collaboration. The Strands seek to account for the dynamic, fluid nature of collaboration and foreground contextuality in the formulation of knowledge and relationality.

In other words, each of these strands can be conceptualized as the strands within Mufti's Multispecies Cat's Cradle. As our context changes, relationalities shift, leading different strands to bear more weight, to break, or to entangle in unpredictable ways. While some of these strands may rupture, others can also represent novel forms of relationality and commitment that are woven across collaborators.

Commitment and engagement with rhetorical-ecological projects that attend to the quality of relations among entities can also account for and respond to the most forceful systemic set of relations we all co-labor within—namely, extractive colonial/modern relations grounded in a global system of racialized capital. While ecological rhetorics are a critical element of our project, a pluriversal sense of co-presence helps us attend to those ever-evolving colonial/modern forces. As a political concept first developed by feminist Zapatistas to describe a world in which many worlds coexist through and against the power differentials of coloniality, pluriversality marks a decolonial political vision that inherently resists and seeks to transform western binaries: human/nonhuman; mind/body, material/spiritual, subject/object, and so on. (Sandoval; Anzaldúa). In political ecology, pluriversality also marks a turn away from modern/colonial one-world development models toward civilizational transitions and cosmovisions grounded in depatriarchalization/decolonization, the liberation of Mother Earth, and the flourishing of multiple paths toward a world of many worlds for multispecies coexistence (Escobar 30). While these are broad socio-political cosmovisions, specific projects, like the Urban Bird Project, that attempt to renegotiate the power relations among worlds may be models for how this decolonial and coalitional work can happen in specific places through pluriversal contact zones (Cintron et al.; Cushman et al.; Escobar; García and Baca; Wanzer-Serrano). In this sense, pluriversality is our theoretical apparatus that helps us explain why we hold things together across disciplines and with multispecies

Table 1. Strands of Engagement by Amelia King-Kostelac.

Strand 1 – Cultural Knowledge and Positionality
<i>Understanding how collaborators background, experiences and current positionality impact their work and perspectives.</i>
Strand 2 – Axiology and Critical Consciousness
<i>Engaging with the nature of values, and how different axiological approaches can center or marginalize others.</i>
Strand 3 – Reflective Ontological Dimension
<i>Reflection on ways of knowing; on processes, concepts, experiences and institutions, and on one's processes of learning about phenomena.</i>
Strand 4 – Methodological Praxis
<i>Approach to exploring, predicting, questioning, observing, and making sense.</i>
Strand 5 – Ecological and Cultural Praxes
<i>Lived practice and application of values, perspectives and investigative approaches.</i>

communities. But the how—the methodology—is perhaps best explained here through *nos/otras* as a framework for understanding our experiences with pluriversal co-presence.

How We Hold Things Together (Part II): *Nos/Otras* as a Third Space for Co-Presence

Looking at the epigraph that starts this article, we note how Gloria Anzaldúa’s *nos/otras* framework from *Luz en lo Oscuro: Light in the Dark* marks a position both through and beyond identity labels and binaries of insider and outsider; it is a position that forges a hybrid consciousness and transcends the us-versus-them mentality to create a third space (79; see also *Licona*). In Spanish, *nos* means us, *otras* means them, and the slash represents a border where a bridge should exist. As Anzaldúa notes, one future of moving from borders to bridges critically depends upon the cultivation of cultural sensitivities and a hybrid consciousness that is able to bridge extremes. While Anzaldúa posits the removal of *la rajadura* (slash) between *nos/otras* to create a kind of third space, it is the dwelling with *la rajadura* that creates “a position of being simultaneously insider/outsider” (81). A third space is a both/and feminist consciousness (*Licona*), which Chicana feminist (re)appropriate to disrupt the binary of us/them duality via borderland rhetorics (Anzaldúa; *Licona*; *Lozano*). Therefore, *nos/otras* as a framework for our community engagement with youth demands that we put “certain aspects of our identities backstage,” otherwise we are too preoccupied with asserting our own identity, and we’ll “miss what’s really going on, miss the opportunity to become or gain allies” (Anzaldúa 77). For us, *nos/otras* is a kind of analytic, a tool, a method of border thinking that demands a dwelling with colonial wounds. *Nos/otras* demands that our own identities become blurred and move beyond fixed identity categories as we navigate worlds with extreme power differentials and use the resources of transdisciplinary research to create bridges, not borders. *Nos/otras* accepts that *la rajadura* exists, but it pushes us to work against existing power dynamics in a way that is coalitional, co-productive, and non-extractive, even with nonhuman beings like local and migratory birds. Indeed, as the stories that open and close this article attest, one of our primary takeaways from the project is just how much birds can co-produce a *nosotras* position without the slash, even if only temporarily.

Anzaldúa’s *nos/otras* position is also a spatial and embodied praxis akin to pluriversal co-presence as a form of engaged fieldwork that facilitates “feelings of presence that would otherwise be impossible through other research approaches” (de Onís 104). As Catalina de Onís notes, co-presence is an approach to working collaboratively in the communities with whom we conduct research. Co-presence is commitment and labor put forth in service to, with, and beyond any given research project and its funding. To be present within the field and sharing the same environment where we do our studies draws out questions of who counts and what counts when in the field. De Onís explains: “Co-presence facilitates the study of otherwise undocumented cultural artifacts and communities by charting rhetorical practices of oppression and resistance” (102). For Author 2, being co-present with Lauren and the redbird created a pluriversal worlding and an undocumented cultural artifact from that space. The spatial/cultural artifact served as a

bridge between *nos/otras* (us/them), de-centering the human and creating the bridgework between human and more-than-human. In other words, through pluriversal co-presence we have entered the redbird's ontology—their space, their relationship to space, and their ways of worlding always happening in those sacred/mundane urban backyards. But it took “being there” (Rai & Druschke 3) in co-presence to hold relations in this way that dispels the binary of us/them and human/animal, even if the slash is a bridge for only a moment.

Through pluriversal co-presence, we've asked ourselves myriad questions, including: How do we ethically engage and work alongside community? How can we form coalitions that last beyond this project? Whose voices are marginalized, and whose are prioritized? Who and what is at stake when working coalitionally? We came to find that relationships that would not have otherwise been merged were grown and reciprocated through the UBP's commitment to our youth and educators, to the birds themselves (re-storying birds), and of course to each other as collaborators on a transdisciplinary team. As *de Onís* notes, while some of our *compañerxs* (companions) were striving to live like a local, others were privileged to be both locals and researchers in this project (*de Onís*), and there are differential spaces for the depths of engagement when one is “a local.” In disrupting binaries that reinforce relations of subordination and dominance, we bridged (and are bridging) co-presence with *nos/otras* to cultivate positions of being simultaneously insider/outsider, inter/external exile—a form of *compañerismo*. While we recognize the woundings that research can press upon communities, we also recognize that the negotiation of these relational spaces carries a capacity for new identities that are formed in the interstices of weaving strands to foster a pluriversal sense of co-presence.

Strands & Stories of Pluriversal Co-Presence in the Urban Bird Project

In the stories that follow, we offer three scenes from the Urban Bird Project that demonstrate how a *nos/otras* position facilitates a multispecies and pluriversal sense of co-presence through and against the power differentials of coloniality (Powell et. al). Additionally, to demonstrate the value of co-production with ecological and cultural knowledge in multispecies worlding, we identify specific strands of engagement that become relevant through these experiences. We hope to show how these stories blur the boundaries of identity through relational accountability, and create a capacity for minoritized worlds to emerge and flourish with human and more than human kin.

Avian Portals in Urban Schools (Author 3)

I was a Language Arts teacher at a San Antonio school (Longfellow Middle School) before starting my Master's degree program in English, where I bridged my university and community worlds through the Urban Bird Project. In this *nos/otras* position, I helped organize workshops and meetings, but it was Diana Milagros Natividad and *Eliza Vela*, our two veteran teachers, who really gave life to the project at this school. Diana, born and raised in San Antonio, is a science teacher and has been working at Longfellow for 24 years. Eliza, who is also a science teacher, is from the border town of Rio Grande City, Texas.

As the story that opens this article demonstrates, Diana and her family have a profound relationship with the redbird. It symbolizes a timeless bond with Diana's sister and celebrates her life. This type of relationship between a family and the cardinal, one that many families in the community share with their departed loved ones, is an example of multispecies co-presence (Strand 1: Cultural Knowledge). For Diana, as for many families in San Antonio, a *nos/otras* position already exists between humans and non-humans (such as the redbird) within the community. These intimate and deeply personal relationships with the redbird open avian portals towards developing a pluriversal sense of co-presence.

As an educator, Diana's relationship with the redbird flourished further when she observed how her students learned about their local ecology when feeding the birds and telling their own family's bird stories. During our *plática* (conversation), Diana reflected on cultivating attachments, specifically cultivating relationships with cardinals and other birds and how that engagement cultivated protection: "When you don't have that attachment to it, and you don't feel that connection. Then you don't have that desire to want to conserve and save [the birds], and that's with anything with conservation, right?" (Strand 2: Axiology) (Fierros & Delgado Bernal). Outside her classroom, Diana has a feeder she and her students would observe from their classroom to count and identify birds. Every week or so, the feeder needed refilling by the group. Diana reflected on students informally talking to her about the types of birds they would identify in their own backyards, and why those birds were culturally significant to them (Strands 3 & 5: Reflection and Cultural-Ecological Praxes). Through these tangible mechanisms, Diana observed how her students developed attachment, which is a form of *nos/otras* that temporarily exists without the slash since Diana notes that without truly being conscious of it, students are "stakeholders now. They're stakeholders in their community and ... in their environment. And now they're trying to see it like that, [the birds are] part of us, and we have to save this part of us" (Strands 2 and 3: Reflection and Axiology). Diana's words here signal how the *nos/otras* position between the birds (most especially all the redbirds they would see and feed) and the students facilitated pluriversal connections, multiple ontological worlds that blurred the lines between us vs. them. Diana believes that once students have this connection, no matter how small, it cultivates a sense of mutual responsibility, or what we might call relational accountability. This is true even when the students start by simply "[pushing] for a feeder in their community" or something bigger like "[signing] the petitions or [joining] protests" toward conservation efforts. (Strands 4 & 5: Methodology and Cultural-Ecological Praxis). San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD), our schools' district, is a product of segregation and historical redlining in San Antonio, and it primarily serves minoritized students. Thus, it is even more evident how this kind of praxis that opens a space for cultural validation with avian ecology resists the historical and systemic effects of coloniality in this specific place.

During my *plática* with Eliza, the conversation steered toward her own transformation during the project. I resonated deeply with Eliza when she wondered "how many times would cardinals come [her] way, and [she] didn't even notice. But now, [she notices] them all the time" (Strand 3: Reflection). The act of knowing the redbirds' many names, their mnemonics, and their coloration forged a deep relationship because it represented relational acknowledgement. Both Eliza and I learned about intergenerational

cardinal stories through our project's students and Diana. In this way, Eliza and I were now being educated by our students. *Nos/otras* here symbolizes the student/teacher hierarchical relationship that is heavily instilled by our Western pedagogical norms, yet through redbird stories, we blurred that *rajadura* (slash) and hierarchy (Strand 3: Reflection). Additionally, Eliza also reflected on her cultural transformation through birds, specifically because the redbird story reminded her of *Día de los Muertos*, a celebration that Eliza is trying to reclaim for herself. Eliza acknowledged that she is still exploring her heritage, knowing that her ancestors are from México, she is reclaiming many elements from the culture that she feels were lost (Strand 1 & 2: Cultural Knowledge and Axiology). Without the passing down of stories, she contemplates that “you don't necessarily know exactly where you come from without stories, and especially if there's a significance in a bird or a tree, or a type of flower, like anything that has some kind of meaning to your family or to you, I think, should be passed down, because that helps build the identity of people” (Eliza, Interview; Strand 1: Cultural Knowledge). In reclaiming and sharing stories as a community, and in doing cultural and ecological work together (Strand 5: Cultural-Ecological Praxis), we build upon a pluriversal sense of co-presence that enables us to share and proliferate cultural praxis amidst an environment that attempts to erase Mexican American and Indigenous ways of knowing. Together we began building relationships with the birds and with each other in ways that enriched our cultural identity and responsibility toward our ecologies (Strand 5: Cultural Ecological Praxis).

In the field with Redbirds (Author 2)

I do not remember the first time I saw a red cardinal. However, it was the mascot of my formative years at Southside Independent School District in rural Yanaguana/San Antonio. Memories of a bright red bird singing in trees elude me. However, their presence has always accompanied me whether I noticed or not (Strand 1: Cultural Knowledge & Strand 3: Reflection). Seeing a red cardinal was and is a blessing; as I write these words, my little brother passed away almost a year ago. I know that the afterlife of his soul lives in a red cardinal. The first time I heard that our ancestors were reborn in red cardinals, or *chiltototl* in Nahuatl, my mother explained that my father liked visiting me as a cardinal (Strand 1: Cultural Knowledge). He had transitioned when I was two years old, so every time I saw a red cardinal, it reminded me of him. *Chiltototl* is always a mystery, collecting afterlives in the belly of its crimson body like a heart circulating blood through our arteries, and it circulates lives from tree to tree, so if we happen to see one, we are reminded that our loved ones are near (Strand 1). We trust the red cardinal to hold these stories of the afterlife. The cardinal, you see, is an intelligent relative who resists the stereotypes of a meek and docile species (Strand 1).

As a doctoral student on the UBP, my role challenged me to move between theory and praxis in tandem (Strand 3: Reflective). I sought to balance the humanities and ecology by interrogating my positionality within the community and being physically present in the field alongside a community-engaged scientist (Strand 5: Cultural & Ecological) because “being there is fundamentally defined both through the presence of the rhetorician's body within a field site ... to gather data and/or effect change” (Rai &

Druschke 5). I joined a mist-netting session with Lauren, and I was worried that the mystery of the cardinal would be lost for me as I watched her attempt to capture northern red cardinals for her research. If anything, the mystery held steadfast and made me proud that our ancestors chose the red cardinal to store the afterlife of our stories. This capacity to hold the mystery was fostered by being there, participating in, and ethically engaging in ecological fieldwork (Strand 5). We did not catch any red cardinals with the mist net, though we did catch a Carolina Wren and a Warbler, both gently taken from the net and released unharmed. I intentionally use the word “we” because I implicate myself and hold myself accountable in this site of being there. My witness, assistance, and presence were co labor-active (Strand 4: Methodological). I hold these tensions “tenuously together” and always “take seriously the physicality of relationality, but not only” (**Druschke**). The red cardinal is a consciousness beyond what science and the humanities can describe (Strand 3: Reflective). It is aware, skillful, often unpredictable, and precocious.

Woven through my rhetorical fieldwork and community-engaged science is an ecology of practices that shape identity formations. Emerging from this ecology of practices is a co-labor-active initiative that induces an intricate design toward shared and many possible futures (**Stengers**). Science and the humanities meet and emerge from the red cardinal and create new possible futures. Who am I in relation to animals, plants, bacteria, constellations, and beyond? Who are we in relation to and with the red cardinal? Anzaldúa urges us to think beyond identity categories because “they don’t contain our entirety, and we can’t base our whole *identidad* on them. It’s not ‘race,’ gender, class, or any single attribute but the interaction of all these aspects (as well as others) that creates identity” (72). Anzaldúa acknowledged that prescribed identity categories could/should not encapsulate identity. She shared a kinship with a mesquite tree in Tejas and a cypress tree in California. This *conocimiento* (consciousness) led her to articulate and experience identity as a relational kinship: “As our bodies interact with internal and external, real and virtual, past and present environments, people and objects around us, we weave (*tejemos*), and are woven into, our identities” (69). As we interact with our communities and the red cardinal, we are “consciously and unconsciously ... in the process of creating” ourselves (69).

Nos/Otras as Homecoming, Through Difficulties (Author 1 & 4 with Masauki)

Nos/otras as pluriversal co-presence can mean the fraught process of bringing Indigenous elders to public spaces where practices with feathers as living entities and portals to other worlds are deemed threatening to institutions. For a transdisciplinary project like UBP focused on restoring Mexican American Studies and Indigenous praxis to schools and neighborhoods through birds, we started by learning from **Kim Tallbear** who helps us ask, how do we build relationships among these divergent practices with birds in non-extractive ways? How could we make indigenous land and life not metaphorical, but rather a matter of restorative practice? (**Tuck and Yang**). What kind of indigenous land and life could be restored through this transdisciplinary project? And



**Join Us for a Workshop Demonstration
on Indigenous Relations to Birds**
Led by...

Masauki Zepeda and Lupita Lagunes Jimenez

Masauki Zepeda, who is of Coahuiltecan Indian descent, studied the shamanic path with Huicbol masters for 14 years in Mexico. Masauki is licensed to create fans made from the feathers of many birds in the services he conducts for the benefit of people all over the world.

Masauki is joined by his partner, **Guadalupe Lagunes Jimenez**, who is an expert in Indigenous practices and does outreach services through La Casa de las Mariposas in Toluca, Mexico. In this workshop, Masauki and Lupita will be drumming and signing to demonstrate how birds and bird feathers are understood in traditional Coahuiltecan practices.

When & Where

Longfellow Middle School
1130 E Sunshine Dr, San Antonio
Tuesday, October 26th, 4:00-5:30
&
Woodlawn Academy
1717 W Magnolia Ave, San Antonio
Thursday, October 28th, 2021,
3:30-5:00pm




USDA Funding for this project has been provided by the USDA Hispanic Serving Institutions Education Grants Program.
This research is being covered by the UTSA Office of Human Subjects Research (OHR #20-252).

Figure 4. Indigenous Relations to Birds Workshop Flyer by [Amelia King-Kostelac](#) & [Kenneth Walker](#).

how could we possibly avoid reinforcing the very forces we were trying to work against?

We first came to know Masauki Celso [Zepeda](#) when we asked friends if they knew anyone who might be interested in joining the Urban Bird Project. Masauki identifies as a healer, a shaman, and a feather keeper; he conducts healing ceremonies for people all over the world, including for those who find themselves incarcerated, those nearing

a life transition, and those seeking spiritual guidance in their work. As you can see from [Figure 4](#), Masauki has studied the shamanic path with Huichol/Wixárika elders for over sixteen years and each year he joins them in their annual pilgrimage of approximately 250 miles. But before Masauki became a healer, he was a Westside San Antonio barrio boy who survived poverty until he went into the military at age 18. His main contribution to the project was a discussion of feather keeping, a showing of his ceremonial fans, and demonstration of these fans in drumming ceremonies at each of our community school locations (Stand 1: Cultural Knowledge). To do this work, he suggested a variety of protocols: that we visit each site and honor it before the engagement; we proceed through the ceremonies with deliberate intentions about the living-status of feathers and drums; and more. At that time, Masauki wrote to me, "... [the workshop] will be a tribute to my own backyard. As a boy I hunted these creeks. Home coming you might say. This was my backyard [deer symbol]." And later... "Never in my path of 40 years did I imagine it would bring me home. A homecoming indeed. I welcome the filming. Thank you [deer]." We went through these various protocols before the engagements with the youth because of the importance of relational accountability—that one must be in good relations to the other and be accountable for giving back. These experiences also told us that while restoring land was beyond the scope of this project (in Texas), perhaps what we were doing in bringing Masauki back home was restoring Indigenous lifeways and (re)connecting them to the youth through their own backyards. And so in mid-October when Masauki and Lupita invited us to join them at one of our schools, as a preparation for our Indigenous workshop, Masa mentioned it was to show me "how they make their way" and a kind of "theory to practice to ask permission and honor the site." He wrote: "We'd like to go and look at the setting and ask permission from the spirits there." When we got to the school, one of the administrators showed us the courtyard where we would hold our workshop demonstration. In the courtyard, Masauki and Lupita set up their altar with drums and feathers; they burned sweetgrass and politely asked if the administrator and I would be willing to be smudged. We agreed and Masauki and Lupita were drumming around us, asking us to close our eyes, and feel the sound of the drum and the feathers that surrounded us. When the drumming and feather demonstration was over, the school administrator was in tears. Lupita embraced her and talked with her about what she experienced (a healing through some difficult family issues). We all left the site with a much better sense of how the demonstration would go, even as Masa later wrote to me, "We intend to bring the energy down for the workshop." The next day we received a message that the indigenous workshop at this particular school would have to be canceled. One of the school administrators had taken a photo of the demonstration and claimed it couldn't happen at the school because it was a religious ceremony. Fortunately, one of our team members—Dr. Claudia [García](#) Louis, a Chicana whose lineage descends from Huichol peoples—contacted the district superintendent to bring the indigenous workshop back to the school. In our arguments we had to make careful distinctions amongst religious ceremonies and drumming/feather ceremonies and the fact that these were workshops, not necessarily full ceremonies. Masauki also brought his own politically powerful people into the mix. During the event, we brought even more for the altar—drums, food, gifts, incense, and more. Masauki and Lupita shared the different fans Masauki created and

he spoke to the significance of each bird; we sat and listened to the drum in an effort to feel and connect with the drum and our own bodies; and later Lupita shared a Zapotec song about connection to ancestors and birds. In short, it was a workshop on Indigenous relationships to birds and how their feathers are living entities used in ceremonies to make us feel co-present with birds, with spirits, and with each other (Strand 1: Cultural Knowledge & Strand 4: Methodology).

In this short story about our experiences in hosting an indigenous bird workshop at local schools, we want to remember Maria Lozano's call to stop "romanticizing the field". In seeking to restore indigenous practices to educational spaces, of course there will be some who drive a slash between our attempts to be *nosotras*. Yet, in the process of Masauki's homecoming, the preparations, the cancellation, and then the restoration, we had created a community through the difficulties and disruptions of co-presence—a *nos/otras* positionality. Through the living feathers, we experienced another version of multispecies co-presence with the community in attendance that night. If decolonization is not just a metaphor, but a material happening through coloniality, then perhaps for a moment we restored a kind of material praxis, a kind of education, a kind of ontology that the students, families, and project leaders may not have engaged otherwise. Co-presence lasts longer than any given situation, however difficult. The relational bonds we built, and the ways we all held a strand of engagement together, wove an experience that placed us all in a *nos/otras* positionality together.

Notes

1. All interviews were conducted with the approval of UTSA's Institutional Review Board ID 20-252.
2. A mist net is a very thin net made of nylon that is almost invisible and does not intend to harm birds. A bird is unraveled from the mist net, banded, and released.
3. In multi-disciplinary projects, knowledge workers may contribute separately on a project, but interdisciplinarity requires a level of relation and working across disciplines in order to realize a set of capacities for the project to emerge and flourish. Transdisciplinarity, then, as a form of working across and beyond (trans) disciplinary ways of knowing and being in the world, is a characteristic of community-based projects (Klein; McGreavy, et al.). So, while we do consider ourselves interdisciplinary and community-engaged, we understand transdisciplinarity as a characteristic of teams and projects. This is how we understand ourselves as rhetoricians who do interdisciplinary work and the Urban Bird Project as a manifestation of transdisciplinary praxis.
4. Cooper and her colleagues argue against a simple rebranding of citizen science as community science since "a name change alone for citizen science, not accompanied by altering underlying practices so that projects bring about structural change, is akin to false marketing" (1387).
5. Even in this bird story, there is debate about whether the 'eagle' was truly a Golden Eagle or a Cara Cara. This complexity was discussed among students, workshop leaders, community members, etc. in order to further push back against absolute knowledge and truths in knowledge-making spaces.
6. Dr. King-Kostelac's publication on the strands of engagement is currently under review for *Qualitative Research*.
7. See the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch.
8. Masauki often leaves messages with deer as a sacred symbol of the Huichol people.

Notes on Contributors

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Response

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What is the work of environmental justice and rhetoric moving forward? The contributors provide us with some ideas that relate to theorizing accountability, designing just spatial experiences, co-presence with non/human others, becoming different together, and learning with the local and material and discursive complexities of land. I want to use this space to gather and engage deeply with questions that resonate profoundly among the symposium's contributors; each passionately dedicated to the work of environmental justice. For me, these questions should guide critical conversations and inspire our action, forming the backbone of our collective exploration. In a sense, I hope with this response and the theorizing that precedes, you are inclined to see this as an invitation to do more and do more differently.

What is Relational Accountability Within the Context of Environmental Justice?

Anushka asks us to consider the essence of relational accountability within the context of environmental justice. I hear her asking us to consider how our relationships with each other, with communities, and with the land shape our responsibilities and actions. This inquiry must prompt us to reflect on the ethical bonds that connect us and the ways we can honor these connections in our work. Anushka asks: "Who is actually invited into this sub-field and what are the consequences of participation?" I want to ask this question in a modified way, because this sub-field was created by the bodily commitments of people beyond academia. And I'm not sure