Giving Form to Black and Brown: The Art and Politics of Solidarity

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Figure 1: Nipsey Hussle Mural by Danny Mateo, Hyde Park Los Angeles 2019. Photo Credit: Susy Chávez Herrera

"It wouldn't be the USA without Mexicans/if it's time to team up shit let's begin/ Black love, Brown pride on the sets again."

YG & Nipsey Hussle, "FDT"

In the historical moment following the Minneapolis Police lynching of George Floyd, talk of abolition is in the air (Kaba 2021). The conspiracy between law enforcement, immigration enforcement, border patrol, and the rhetoric of the "War on Terror" has been laid so bare with the repression and surveillance of protestors

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by the homeland security state that even those privileged sectors of the population who had not felt its collective knee on their necks have been shaken out of their slumber (Polini 2020; Rambo 2020; Vladeck and Wittes 2020; Walia 2021). As the existing political establishment and the social institutions that reproduce it scramble to try and usurp, moderate, repress, criminalize, and otherwise destroy Black Lives Matter and the networked movements mobilizing against antiblack racism and state violence, organizers and activists refuse to limit their demands and visions to mere reforms (Speri et al. 2020).

Moreover, politicians of all stripes and mainstream media distract from the matter at hand— antiblack state violence— by obsessing over looting. Robin D.G. Kelley takes on this tired sleight of hand in his provocative essay in the *New York Times*, "What Kind of Society Values Property Over Black Lives?" (Kelley 2020). The answer he points to is the kind "built on looting — the looting of Indigenous lands and African labor." The moral clarity of today's organizers who demand nothing less than abolition of the police state and its carceral logic has exposed both political parties' inability to match the radical vision and humanity driving the historic Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 (Maldonado-Torres 2020).

Artists, on the other hand, are masters of making such visionary futures seeable and knowable. Whether through visual art, music, or dance, artists reveal the contours, sounds, visions, choreographies, and ways of relating that might help usher in an abolitionist decolonial world. Political rhetoric is ill equipped to capture the interlinked struggles around Black Lives Matter, antifascism, immigrant and refugee rights, Native American sovereignty, QTBIPOC liberation, and allied causes. Critical scholars develop theoretical frameworks and analysis in an effort to capture the nuance of mutually constituted yet distinct modes of domination and struggle. The problem is making this knowledge seeable and knowable beyond the paywalls, jargon, and prerequisite readings. In my own academic work, I examine how young people experiment with novel ways of enacting more just and liberatory futures in the present, most often by combining social movement organizing and cultural production (Magaña 2020b; 2021).

In my first book, *Cartographies of Youth Resistance: Hip-Hop, Punk, and Urban Autonomy in Mexico*, I study how urban and migrant Indigenous youth in Oaxaca, Mexico weave deep family and community histories of organizing together with anarchist, autonomous, and decolonial politics (Magaña 2020b). Activists combine these influences with hip-hop and punk cultures to innovate new ways of doing politics, transforming urban space, and imagining new kinds of social relations. More recently, I have looked at how Black and Brown artists and activists co-produce a politics of solidarity that uproot the white supremacist logic of the existing racial and spatial order. This is a legacy that stretches back at least to the post-WWII era, when Black and Brown communities came together to carve out spaces of congregation, and joy through shared cultural expressions in cities like Houston, Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York City (Alvarez 2009; Johnson 2013; Kelley 1996; Márquez 2014; Steptoe 2015).

Figure 2: Nipsey Hussle Mural by Vanessa Prado aka Nessi Arte, Mid-City 2019. Photo Credit: The artist.

Multiracial formation and political solidarities take form in murals, find expression in hip-hop lyrics, and produce new visual poetics in music videos. In his 1996 song "To Live and Die in L.A.," for example, 2Pac celebrated the potential of a Black and Brown solidarity politics, "Black love, Brown pride on the sets again." And in his 1993 song "Last Wordz," he declares: "United we stand/Divided we fall/They can shoot one ni**a but they can't take us all/Let's get along with the Mexicans and we can all have peace on the sets again." When read together with histories of activism, community formation, and the political landscapes of their time, these lyrics become even more powerful and telling. "To Live and Die in L.A." came on the heels of a slew of racist and xenophobic laws in California such as the infamous Proposition 187 and California's three strikes law, which 2Pac gestures to when he charges that then-governor "Pete Wilson tryin' to see us all broke." "Last Wordz" came in the aftermath of the 1992 L.A. Uprising, which the late rapper also evokes together with the scourge of police violence.

While 2Pac used his sizeable platform to shine a light on Black and Brown mutuality, unequivocally calling out police violence, dominant media and political narratives focus on racialized conflict and inner-city violence to, in effect, obscure and sanitize police violence. Returning to Kelley's interrogation of what "looting" means for the United States, mainstream media and politicians have long obsessed over tropes of criminality to avoid state-sanctioned forms of looting. The list of examples is too long to name here, but mass incarceration and migrant detention centers are two of the most visible forms that require our collective imagination and energy to dismantle.

With racist and xenophobic politics resurgent at the national level in 2016, South L.A. rappers YG and Nipsey Hussle joined forces on the track "FDT," which is a scorching critique of the Republican nominee in that year's presidential election. Nipsey Hussle raps, "If you build a wall/we'll probably dig holes" and "It wouldn't be the USA without Mexicans/if it's time to team up shit let's begin/ Black love, Brown pride on the sets again." The lyrics referencing the politician's promise to "build a great great wall" and to 2Pac's lyrics from "To Live and Die in L.A." Throughout the video Nipsey and YG are surrounded by young Black and Brown people proudly waving Mexican, Honduran, and Salvadoran flags, together with upside down U.S. flags, and blue and red bandanas.

When asked about his motivation for creating the song, Nipsey reflected on feeling solidarity with members of his community that were under attack:

> Him being so vocal and one-sided on how he feels about Mexican people as far as categorizing [them] as illegal immigrants and that they make no positive contributions to the country. Number one, I'm from L.A. so I grew up with Mexican people and number two, I see Mexican people at all my concerts that really support. I felt like they needed somebody to ride for 'em. (Platon 2016)

After Nipsey Hussle's tragic murder in 2019, artists with last names like Rodriguez, Mateo, Ponce, Prado, and Zermeño went to work creating murals in his memory all over Los Angeles (Pineda 2019). In my work I look at such cultural productions as expressions of shared experiences of historical and contemporary discrimination, state violence, and activism that have shaped the racialization of Latinxs in Los Angeles in relation to African Americans and other marginalized groups. My interlocutors in Los Angeles articulate and mobilize the racial category of Brown, which encompasses non-white Latinxs, as well as other racialized groups such as Filipinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Brown is most often articulated as part of a Black and Brown multiracial formation, which challenges whitewashed notions of Latinidad, the erasure of Indigenous and Black Latinxs, and disrupts the dominant black/white racial binary.

Black and Brown political solidarities are also given form in the work of Indigenous Mexican artists who contribute their highly skilled creative labor to their transborder communities through elaborate murals and musical performances in places like South Central, Watts, Koreatown, and Boyle Heights (Magaña 2020a). These artists refuse antiblackness and assimilation as the cost of U.S. belonging for Mexican migrants by visualizing alternative social relations based on solidarity and mutual recognition.

Figure 3: Nipsey Hussle mural by Bobby Z. Rodriguez aka Z the Art, Hyde Park 2019. Photo Credit: Susy Chávez Herrera.

Black and Brown opens up social and political possibilities, yet is also fraught with the potential to slip into racial analogy, which anthropologist Savannah Shange poignantly argues, risks "cannibaliz[ing] Black suffering" (2019). Understanding race through a relational formations of race framework helps us not lose sight of the ways that "racial difference is consti-

tuted through... distinctive yet mutually imbricated modes of domination" (Molina et al. 2019). Establishing and nurturing the kinds of horizontal relations made possible through Black and Brown imaginings requires us to make connections while carefully attending to difference and privilege. Artists help us envision and enact such liberatory antiracist horizons in the present— if we pay attention.

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