

NEWS FROM THE FRONTS

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Photographer and multimedia artist Daniel Ramos poses a young couple on UANL's statue which students have papered and saran wrapped in protest. / Photo by Jorge Luis González Balleza; courtesy of Hafizah Augustus Geter (*Women & Weather*, 2022).

NO LIST OF DEMANDS: QUEER AND TRANS ORGANIZING IN MONTERREY

HAFIZAH AUGUSTUS GETER

As part of their project *Women & Weather*, writer Hafizah Augustus Geter and photographer Daniel Ramos recently spent time talking and visiting with queer and trans inhabitants of a small tent city installed on the UANL campus in Monterrey. Hafizah shares with us her impressions of that space of radical possibilities.

March 2022: From the rooftop of Daniel Ramos’s late abuela’s house, the morning sun is done rising. Daniel points to a mountain in the distance where Coca-Cola’s Topo Chico factories run despite the historic drought plaguing Monterrey, one of Mexico’s wealthiest cities. It’s early. The heat of the day has yet to hit. Like those around us, we fill up empty buckets with water as the entire city braces for the coming rationing, which will deny certain neighborhoods running water.

In 2021, I approached Daniel about *Women & Weather*, a project that for me, has been years in the making. Over the coming years, from Latin America to Asia, Africa, and the U.S., we’ll make a full-length photo-essay, a “memoir” of the collective that shows how freedom struggles reverberate across communities by centering racialized peoples, women, queer, and trans people, and how our lives and activism intersect with the climate crisis.

Here, in Monterrey the Presa de la Boca is dry. My second day, we visit the once full reservoir. Where there was once water, people rollerblade and dance. They take pictures leaning against formerly sunken boats now exposed and cracking like the ground beneath them, dried by the sun. Daniel’s parents and grandparents were born in Mexico. This city, poised to die of thirst is, like the U.S., also his home.

But in this moment, this day one of *Women & Weather*, on his abuela’s rooftop—me, a Nigerian born, U.S. raised queer Black woman and writer; Daniel, a straight Mexican U.S. photographer, and artist raised between Monterrey and Chicago—the two of us set our pens and cameras down. We talk about what it means to be at a “beginning,” and how much they require knowledge of the past. As artists, how do we ethically engage with liberation through linguistic and visual narrative?

What does it mean to witness, to record, to report, and to translate everyday practices of liberation from inside political and cultural systems designed to kill us, to oppress, to sow chaos, deprive us of our access to beauty, knowledge, each other, and to waste our time? Together, Daniel and I are trying to figure it out.

Beginnings, to me, are a fundamental part of how I think about the work of abolition. Prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition organizer and activist Mariame Kaba describes it as “a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more. Things that are foundational to our personal and community safety.” The courage *and* imagination to begin *again*, is one of the many requirements when facing a system that, since its inception, has failed to deliver justice, reform, or safety.

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Queer and trans students have been camping out on the campus of the Autonomous University of Nuevo León (UANL) for over six months since March 2022. When Daniel and I arrive, it buzzes, vibrant. What began in response to the dismissal of Loren Daniel, a transgender faculty member in the psychology department, became “Plantón Trans,” a tent city where queer students and queer young people from all over the city came for refuge, a place where they could find others like them.

We’ve come to be witnesses, but something predictable happens. Daniel and I fall—just a little—in love with everyone we meet, but especially with Gabriel and Lucas, a trans couple in their early 30s. Lucas is called “Cookie” by everyone who loves



Fig.1

him, and so he is Cookie to everyone who meets him. Gabriel, trained as an industrial designer, is charismatic in all the ways you want from someone who loves to talk. Gabriel and Cookie voraciously seek and create community wherever they go. Together, they embody the spirit of beginning over again, again and again, in the name of safety and care.

For months, Gabriel and Cookie have gone back and forth between the Plantón and their home, which they call “The Twentieth.” “The Twentieth” refers to the Mexican expression *Te cayo el veinte*. “It means that you came to a realization,” says Gabriel, “so, our intention is to discover things and learn together so we can understand our reality.” The Twentieth is a refuge, not just for them, but for other trans young

people who’ve been kicked out of their homes. In a few days, we will visit them at the Twentieth, where almost all the furniture has been retooled from items others have thrown out—the kitchen table, the chest that holds their dishes, the metal shelves that hold their TV... A penchant for strays, cats run the duplex with free reign. Dogs bark in the backyard. The house’s current residents come and go. Gabriel does most of the talking while, next to him, Cookie blushes listening to the tears in Gabriel’s voice as Gabriel tells us how Cookie’s love saved him. Ever since, the two of them have transformed that love into radical acts of care for others.

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Fig.2

Come August 2022, the Local Board of Conciliation and Arbitration of the State of Nuevo León, will rule in Loren Daniel’s favor, but at the time of our arrival in March, the Plantón has become a community all its own. And being a community, like all communities, they grapple together as they try to organize, on this small patch of land, the kind of world they want to create. They come to each other bearing their own traumas and exiles. Members come and go, and among them, they have varying ideas on their paths to liberation. But what they have come to the Plantón seeking is each other.

At the Plantón, one of the first things Gabriel wants Daniel and me to know about he and Cookie’s ethos around protest, is that there is no “list” of demands. What they want changed, is everything: all the conditions that make life for trans and queer people and women in Mexico deadly. Gabriel points to a giant flame statue that sits raised on concrete. The ground bears the school’s motto: “*Alere Flammam Veritatis*” (“Feed the flame of truth”). As high as the human hand can reach, posters cover the giant

monument that holds the flame. The posters bear the name of the murdered, missing, or abused young women, or the pictures of the men who assaulted them. One by one, Daniel translates the posters for me. And he translates again, but more quietly, as two male students stand next to us, pointing to the pole in anger. “What would you do if a girl put your name up there?” one asks the other who responds without hesitation, “I’d kill her.” In Mexico, gender is especially deadly, and men commit acts of femicide with impunity. “*Alere Flammam Veritatis*” is a statement that the young women and queer students of UANL take more seriously than the school that holds the monument that bears the posters that stare back down at the motto that claims to defend the truth, while ignoring it. Gabriel asks Daniel and I to consider what it means that these posters can exist in the center of the school on *this* monument, and for the school to pay so little attention. What Gabriel and Cookie desire out of protest, is permanency. To continuously object to the conditions of life, until those conditions begin to address our collective needs.

At the Plantón, students and non-students leave their dead names behind. Inside tents, they change out of the clothes they are forced to wear by their families, and into the outfits that match their gender expressions. A printer is hooked up to a solar powered generator, which also runs the audio equipment where the Plantón sometimes streamed dispatches from the tent city. Using a leaky outdoor faucet that UANL refused to fix despite the serious drought, Gabriel provides the tent city running water to wash their dishes and bathe in. He talks about the possibilities of planting seeds, food that can grow year-round. He talks about the conditions of the janitorial staff, and the importance of creating coalitions across demographics. “Our oppressions,” he tells any and every one, “are connected.”

A young student and comrade named Uziel, offers a talk on how to recognize abuse and interrupt it. Evenings, the Plantón hosts movie nights and voguing lessons where the courtyard breaks into a crowd of dancing, music, and laughter. Once a week, an art market springs up. I buy a hand painted picture that straddles the appearance of a cut open lemon and a vagina from a young trans student named Avery. I also buy a set of photos from Ana, an adult cosplayer. The following evening, Daniel and I visit Ana and her mother at their home.

A psychologist, Ana’s mother is her manager, sews all of Ana’s costumes, and tells us that she wants her daughter to live in a world where she can be proud, free, and safe in her sexuality. Ana’s mother describes herself as part of the generation of women who fought for their daughters to have access to abortions, which have been legalized in Mexico in 2021.

At the Plantón, Miriam, a former engineer turned musician describes the struggles she faces trying to form community in Mexico’s music scene as a trans woman. Miriam moves from rock to jazz in a way that makes it hard to believe she hasn’t played the guitar all her life. But no, she tells us that she taught herself to play just a few years prior. It was during the difficult days of her transition, and she tells us that she learned guitar to prove to herself she was still alive. The following day at a concert she puts on with the city of Monterrey for queer and trans people. That is exactly what sings from her guitar: new beginnings. Rebirth.

Rebirth, I think, has abolitionist possibilities. Like abolition, rebirth is about new beginnings. The belief that we can start again. We are just at the beginning, but already, *Women & Weather* is

showing Daniel and I how necessarily messy the work of liberation can be. We’re learning how to tell stories by the way our separate struggles to live and thrive knits our narratives together.

Everywhere we go, the dispossessed begin again, again, and again.

Though the tent city will eventually dwindle, the Plantón allowed queer and trans people to find each other, and that’s a spark that cannot be undone. Daniel and I hope that if we listen close enough, we can harness Audre Lorde’s “chaos of knowledge,” and document all the ways that the future is still ours to (re)invent. ■

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Fig.1 Students Mara, Fer, and Ka gather at Plantón Trans for a night of voguing lessons and community.
Fig.2 Students pose for the camera for a night of dancing and solidarity. Both photos by Daniel Ramos (2022).