



# SAN ANTONIO'S HYDROSOCIAL LANDSCAPE

An interview with Gianna Rendón of the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center in San Antonio (part I of II)

Gianna Rendón is a community organizer at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas. She is a proud Westsider and sees herself predominantly as an advocate for justice for—and with—her community. We asked Gianna to share her thoughts on San Antonio's hydrosocial landscape. This interview is part of the catalog for *'Blue Star Ice Company,'* an exhibition by **Works Progress Studio** and collaborators in the project space at **Blue Star Contemporary** in San Antonio, Texas. *Blue Star Ice Company* is open March 3-May 8, 2016.

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*Gianna, what is the mission of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center?*

The people of Esperanza dream of a world where everyone has civil rights and economic justice, where the environment is cared for, where cultures are honored and communities are safe. The Esperanza advocates for those wounded by domination and inequality—women, people of color, queer people, the working class and poor. We believe in creating bridges between people by exchanging ideas and educating and empowering each other. We believe it is vital to share our visions of hope... we are esperanza.

*How did you find yourself organizing around water? What's your personal connection to water?*

I remember being a small child when the vote around putting fluoride in our water was a big thing... I remember [my dad] going to community meetings...coming home and speaking to me about the importance of protecting our aquifer. My dad's favorite slogan—that he created—was "SAWS: Stealing All Worker's

Salaries." It was a real honor to make that into a sign and present that to city council during November's struggle. I am really grateful to all my grandparents who taught [us] about conserving everything. My grandmother is Italian and was in Italy during



WWII and her house was destroyed in the war. Harsh wartime conditions as well as being raised by a single mother...caused her to know the importance of not only the earth but everything she had. She never wasted anything, food, old clothes, water—nothing. Same thing goes to my other 3 Mexican-American grandparents. My dad's dad was a farm laborer. My other grandfather

## — Spanish Summary of the Hydrosocial Landscape —

**Extracto** de la entrevista a Gianna Rendón, organizadora comunitaria en Esperanza Peace & Justice Center en San Antonio, Texas. Gianna pertenece orgullosamente al Westside y está comprometida con la justicia para y con la comunidad. En esta ocasión habla sobre el panorama hidrosocial de San Antonio. Esta entrevista está incluida en el catálogo de la exposición *Blue Star Ice Company*, de **Works Progress Studio**, que estará abierta al público del 3 de marzo al 8 de mayo.

Según la platica, Gianna en Esperanza defiende a los afectados por la dominación y la inequidad, como mujeres, personas de color, homosexuales, trabajadores y gente en condición de pobreza. "Creamos puentes entre las personas", dice, "mediante el intercambio de ideas, la educación y el fortalecimiento de unos y otros"

Gianna comenta que su conexión personal con la defensa del agua surge cuando era niña y sus padres participaban en reuniones comunitarias en las que se hablaba sobre el floruro que estaban poniendo en el agua; después su papá llegaba a casa y le hacía ver la importancia

also... This generation did not have the privilege of just tossing things aside. They taught me how to catch the rainwater and how much better it is than the water from the hose. They taught me how to grow food, and how [it] is much more alive than the pesticide rich food at HEB. ...growing up [with] the mainstream consumerist culture could not compete with the culture around me...

I remember one year when there was a really bad drought. Everything was dead. Water restrictions were really high so no one watered...much. Talking to some of my neighbors especially the viejita...next to my grandma, they were all heartbroken that their gardens died. Each plant had a story, "that was given to me by my mother-in-law," and their gardens' deaths killed a piece of them. On the northside when there's a drought they can just paint their grass.

My neighbors know about climate change. They know how the weather used to be...it used to snow more. They know that it hasn't always been this hot or this dry. They can remember life events depending on weather, "Oh that was the year it flooded," or "That was the year of the worst drought, and all my roses died."

My family's history and their relationship with water...has shaped the way I view the interconnectedness of my life and others and the earth. In our story circles, some... elders remember growing up without running water and...their grandmothers bathing them in large metal tins. They remember their mothers washing clothes by hand either in a tin or down by Apache Creek. These are the stories...that people don't hear. These are the same stories people will give to explain why they will fight for our water.

*From our experience in Minnesota, and from what we've seen here, it seems like women are often on the front lines of fighting for clean, affordable water and environmental justice. Do you*

de proteger el vital líquido. Se siente agradecida con todo su núcleo familiar por enseñarle la disciplina de la conservación; le inculcaron que no debía desperdiciar absolutamente nada. Gianna es de ascendencia italiana por parte de su madre y méxicoamericana por parte de su padre.

Recuerda de manera especial un año en que la sequía fue realmente grave y las restricciones sobre el consumo del agua eran bastante estrictas. Todos en su vecindario se sentían impotentes al ver morir a sus plantas y jardines, "Cada planta tenía una historia". Sus vecinos están enterados del cambio climático, y han creado conciencia respecto a ello. Los antecedentes familiares y la convivencia con sus vecinos han formado su punto de vista sobre la conexión que existe entre ella y los otros, y entre ella y el planeta.

Gianna asegura que en los movimientos para el cuidado del agua son las mujeres quienes más participan e incluso



*have any thoughts on why this may be and can you talk about how women are fighting for water in San Antonio?*

...for this answer I can only speak through experience. In the Summer when I went around getting signatures to try to tell city council that [we] were opposed to the SAWS Rate Structure and the rate increases that would pay for the Vista Ridge Pipeline and the pipeline itself—it was mostly women who'd get excited and not only sign the petition but get their entire family and friends... to sign the petition as well. Although I did get some signatures from men, they would ask me 50 questions...and often wouldn't sign anyway. The women (mostly Mexican/Mexican-American) would usually interrupt me...and ask to sign. They did not like the idea of having to pay more for water... Some of them knew how it felt to have their water turned off...or they knew friends... who would be affected by the rate hike.

...it has been hard to try to convince men to care about someone other than themselves or their immediate families. For me, when I see someone in my community hurt, I hurt. And that is why I'm a community organizer and an activist. I can see the connections between oppressions of people and my own oppression. I can see how when we mess up the earth it has real effects.



Photo: Local activists protest the Vista Ridge Pipeline carrying a representation of a pipeline that reads, "Water is Life."

In my area there was a chemical dumping ground and there have been many cases of liver and kidney cancers in that area. My grandma died from kidney cancer. ...it was my first encounter with environmental racism. We live in a working class Mexican/Mexican-American area and I learned from a young age that we don't matter as much as other people—that it's ok to contaminate our ground and poison our water because our lives are less important. And I think from that come three options: you can ignore this reality, let this reality—that you are worthless—eat you up inside, or you can fight back. I decided to fight back...

involucran a sus familias y amigos. Los hombres cuestionan más antes de enrolarse y en muchos casos deciden mantenerse al margen. El asunto del agua también genera un incremento en su costo y no todas las familias pueden afrontarlo. "Las mujeres cercanas a mi, en mi familia, mi vecindario y en mi trabajo, tienden a ser más cuidadosas respecto a sus familias y su comunidad, que los hombres". Ellos se llegan a preocupar pero solo por su entorno familiar. Para Gianna, si algo afecta a su comunidad, le afecta a ella; esta es la razón por la que es activista y organizadora comunitaria. Ella percibe la conexión entre la opresión de los otros y la propia. Conoce el racismo ambiental, sabe que hay quienes creen que unas vidas son menos importantes que otras. "Puedes ignorar esta realidad, puedes permitir que te trague, o puedes luchar contra ella", dice. Ella decidió ser luchadora.

—Beatrice Macín, buena gente de Esperanza

