

Rejection and Belonging by Luis Inoa

This is a tale of two stories, lived 23 years apart.

Part one.

It's Spring of 1993. I'm a 21-year-old undergraduate at New Paltz. Towards the end of the semester, I decided to run for the college's version of a pageant for men of color. There was one for Black Weekend and another for Latin Weekend.

I would be the first to run for both, Black Weekend King and Mr. Latin Weekend.

Black Weekend was first. I was so nervous. I was on stage with another five or so beautiful Black men. I do not remember the questions, but I know I answered the questions fine and represented myself well.

I did not win.

The loss was not significant. What mattered and what I remember most was how much love I got from Black folk for just being on the stage. For articulating a version of blackness and Latinidad typically caged deep in bloodlines, memories, and histories. I, we, saw each other anew.

Next up was Latin weekend. Flying high off of the previous weekend, I came into this competition feeling good/confident. We had to present a thesis on the Latino community to a panel of judges (admin and faculty), and mine was on Black and Latino unity. The panel, my elders, were not having it or hearing it. In the end, we agree to disagree.

They asked each contestant one final question. Mine was, "Who was Cantiflas?" I was a bit stumped as I knew very little. So I drew from context clues in my own life. My father watched Cantiflas. He made my father laugh. So I knew that he was an actor and comedian. My father was Puerto Rican, so well, Cantiflas was Puerto Rican. I said those things with conviction. How wrong could I be?

Well Cantiflas was not Puerto Rican. He was Mexican. And while he was a comedian and an actor, many of his films/skits contained political satire. He was a beloved Latin American icon and

He...

Had...

Just...

died.

Latinos worldwide were in mourning, and I...I knew nothing about him.

After my response, the panelists would go off to deliberate on the winner.

I should say that unlike Black Weekend King, where there were five contestants- Mr. Latin Weekend only had me.

The panelist came back in. They settled into their chairs.

Silence.

Their words shot slowly out of their mouths. "This year, we have decided NOT to elect a Mr. and Ms. Latin weekend, but a Latin Weekend spokesperson."

I, Luis Alberto Inoa. Generation 2.5. Born in Brooklyn to Dominican parents. Raised in Queens with a Nuyorican stepfather (my real father), with an English tongue and Latin Soul, I was not fit to represent SUNY New Paltz's Latino community. My elders could not see me.

The rejection shot straight through me. Post "The Decision", there was screaming, proclamations of a revolution, and lots of crying. Here the loss was significant. Why not me? What was I lacking?

But what was more important was that my peers, mi gente, called BS and rejected the decision by the panel and proclaimed me to be the "Peoples Elected "Mr. Latin Weekend" (I still have the sash). In the crowd, that day were three of my best friends, Milton, Chris, Rich, who are all still in my life. My future/current wife, Evelyn, was also there.

The wound from that day is still present. Now a scar, healed tissue, because in this moment of rejection, my friends and my peers saw me. I needed that.

Life does have a sense of humor though. In 2010, the Black Studies Department at SUNY New Paltz reached out to and offered me the opportunity to teach two courses (one on rap and poetry). I taught there for the next seven years. My relationship with my alma mater and the BIPOC community there intact and whole.

Part 2.

I pride myself on being a joyful and fierce student affairs practitioner. By 2016, I had been at Vassar College for 11 years. I held several roles at the college. I was at the time the Director of Residential Life and The Founding Director of Transitions (a program for first generation, low income, undocumented students). I also served as the Assistant Dean of Students for the past 8 years. I knew I was ready for more responsibility.

After 36 years of service, the Dean of Students at VC decided to retire. The college proceeded with a national search. I applied. I had over time received plenty of praise and recognition from students, faculty, and peers. To those I was close to, I seemed an obvious successor. The current Dean of Students (even his daughter) acknowledged this. Given my excellent work and commitment to the college, I felt confident in my chances.

I did not get the job.

I remember the then Dean of College coming into my office to share the news. Stunned, at the moment all I could think to say is that I understood and that I was ready to support the new Dean.

Eventually... shame...rejection..pain... all settled in nicely.

I walked to the bathroom on the first floor of Main. Near the Dean of Faculty. I sat on the toilet and then cried like have only a handful of times in my life.

So who is the antagonist in this story? Is it the search committee? Is it my colleagues? Is it my dear friend, the Dean of College?

I found it too difficult and taxing to continue to blame people for the outcome. Holding on to grudges or creating one was just not in my nature. But the weight of "The Decision" was still lingering. Why not me? What was I lacking? I thought Vassar was a perfect fit- what now?

Belonging had been disrupted. I struggled to feel whole again. Struggled to not feel haunted in every single space I entered- especially those where I interviewed.

More time passed. I needed to take stock of what was around me. Home was still only half a block away. It was filled with love and radiant energy. Evelyn, my best friend. Our four beautiful children. And recently, our first grandchild, Elliea Grace.

Vassar was a more complicated space for me now. The fit no longer felt exact. The sense of belonging, clouded.

I was still well compensated. The benefits (particularly for my kids' tuition) were phenomenal. Beyond that though I found it necessary to ask myself what was important about the work that I was doing here and how he was doing it. Could I still be the best version of myself personally and professionally?

While not as sure as I once was, I looked around and allowed myself to be loved. Loved by the students I have served over time. Loved by colleagues who stated their appreciation for the work I've done and the way I go about it. Loved by generations of young professionals who have served alongside me.

It was a reminder of what I found unique about my work at Vassar: Love. Not just simply the feeling. But the use of the word as part of my practice. Where else would I be able to use this word? Where else could I lovingly and unapologetically honor the gatekeeper tradition passed down to me by previous BIPOC mentors?

Where else could I incorporate the lessons of my mother and grandmothers on how to create affirming and familial spaces for those I cross paths with? The truth is that I would bring this love with me wherever I went. There are places that will stifle this and places that will nourish it. Vassar is still a place I believe will nourish it.

A few months after "The Decision," I found myself sitting in a circle of black administrators, faculty, and students. The group reflected on the rash of devastating shootings of black men and women by police. Note that this was 2017 not 2020. Individuals shared thoughts and feelings. They reflected on the written work of James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, the bible, and Maya Angelou. The space was sobering and affirming. An hour in, and the activity was over. One-on-one interactions ensued.

I found myself talking to a student that I had known for two years. She was struggling with the world, with herself, and with Vassar. She was feeling "heavy." She had reflected with the group that the world sometimes needed to send her reminders that she was wanted and that she had a purpose.

This kind of space and moment is what I come to identify as uniquely Vassar. I did not find these moments often at other places. I listened to her. I paused. And then simply let her know that she was loved, that I loved her. She let me know that she loved me. We held each other (appropriately) long enough to remind one another of our respective humanity. I was

not sure if this could happen in other places. What I know is that it continues to happen at Vassar.

The wound from "The Decision" still present. Now a scar, healed tissue, because in this moment of rejection, mi comunidad, my community, saw me. I needed that.

For a first-generation to college, the third generation in this country, cisgender, black Latino male from Brooklyn-Queens, who grew up seeing himself reflected where he lived - this is everything.

Life continues to have a sense of humor. In 2019, the same position became open. And I applied. I got it this time, chiefly because those that knew, saw, and loved me, championed for my return; my relationship to Vassar whole and intact.

This is a tale of two stories, lived 23 years apart. Stories about how belonging found me at moments of significant rejection. If and when rejection ever finds you know that you have what and who you need to get through.