

Words by Denis Mwaura
Studio Photos by
Cassandra Rodriguez

Across borders and oceans, food creates a bridge between cultures, ages, and history while clearing a space for dialogue. Sharing a meal with others is an intimate act of strengthening kinship within a community. Occupying a seat at the table is just as much about conversation and company as it is about food. Oftentimes, gathering at the table allows for open exchange between visitors, friends, and family as conversations shift from the humorous to the political to the personal. In Daniela Rivera's most recent project, *Sobremesa (Karaoke Politics)*, the table functions as an expanded platform for illuminating and understanding the translation and evolution of cultural traditions.

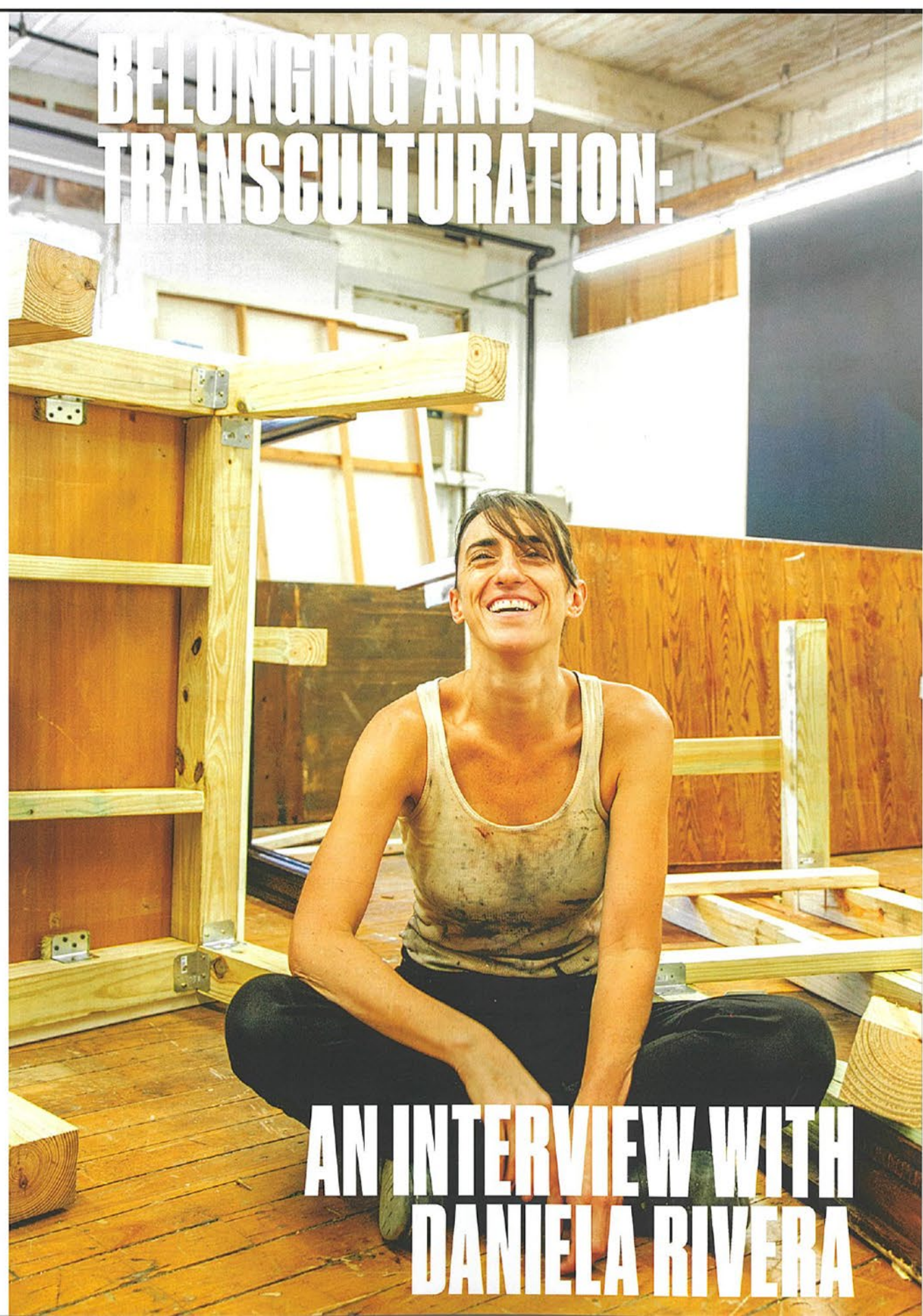
INTERVIEW

The word *sobremesa* means "on top of the table," and in Chile, it often refers to the time after dinner when visitors continue conversations despite the formal end to the meal. During this time, utensils, food, and drinks may accumulate on the table as conversations become prolonged. For *Sobremesa (Karaoke Politics)*, Rivera transformed a vacant lot at Grove Hall into an interactive communal site with colossal wooden tables she painted in a variety of colors. Assembled together, the tables' surfaces create a patchwork quilt of colors, shapes, and sizes. Situated between the communities of Roxbury and Dorchester, the tables host conversations and gatherings, serving as a territory for visualizing belonging and the merging of cultures.

For Rivera, the project is not about the final installation, but the process along the way. Rivera acknowledges that, in her role as artist and facilitator, she had to reciprocate the level of participation and vulnerability provided by the community during the development of *Sobremesa*. For weeks leading up to the installation at Grove Hall, Rivera sought to connect with the community by hosting art-making workshops, drawing sessions, and karaoke events at the BCYF Senior Center.

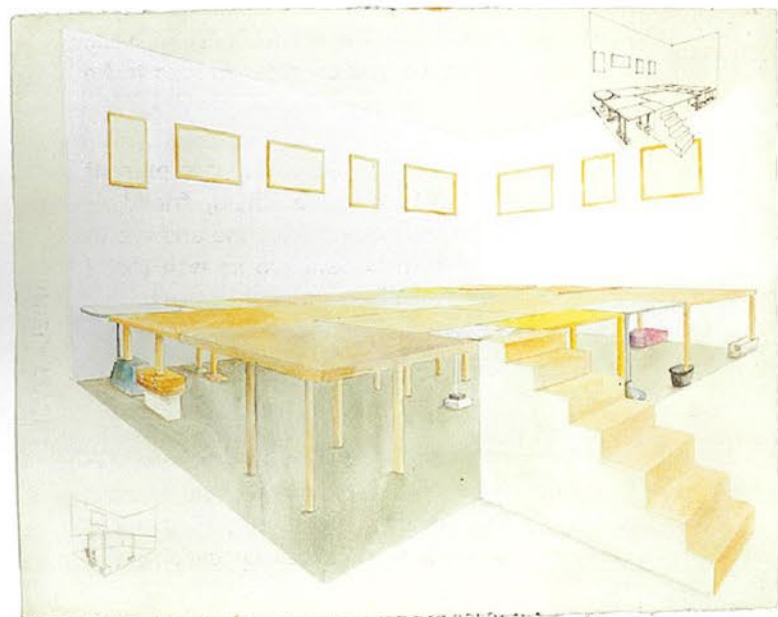
Trained as a painter, Rivera often employs imagery and objects that illuminate nuanced cultural contexts that are rooted in the global effects of migration and political power. Her recent installation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston employed a large copper-point drawing to locate the formation of identity within immigrant life and the geographies of displacement generated by copper mining in Chile. This year, Rivera is the recipient of the prestigious Rappaport Prize from the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum—a prize that will allow the artist to create new work of her choosing. In the meantime, Rivera is working locally on *Sobremesa* happenings continuing through the fall and a forthcoming exhibition at the Fitchburg Art Museum.

I met with Rivera on a humid day in Wellesley, where we discussed belonging to a community, converging cultures, and stipulating ethical practice for her first public artwork at Grove Hall.





"This piece, in a way, represents how I feel about Boston. I wanted to introduce the possibility of openness—being vulnerable together and sharing that space."

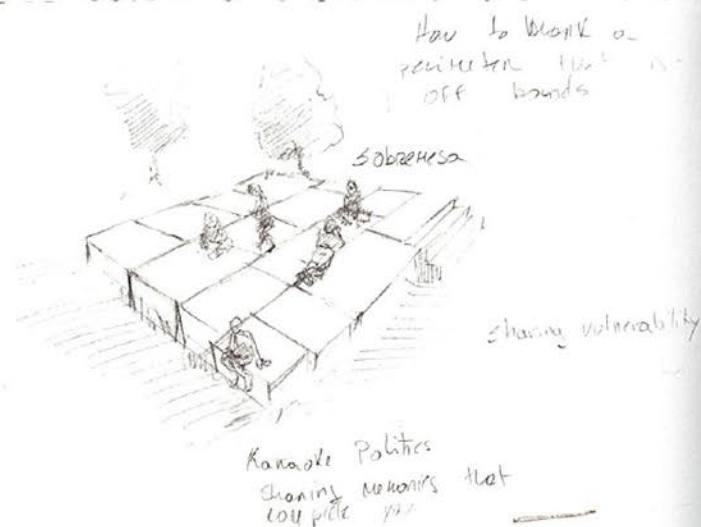


Daniela Rivera, colored sketch for *Sobremesa (Karaoke Politics)*, 2019. Watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper and yupo. 28" x 38". Photo by Natalia Leginowicz.

Daniela Rivera, project drawing for a Mass MoCA dream, 2006. Watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper. 24" x 36". Photo by Natalia Leginowicz.

Daniela Rivera, sketch for *Sobremesa (Karaoke Politics)*, 2019. Pencil on paper. 10" x 15". Photo by Natalia Leginowicz.

Sobremesa / Dessert (not really)
OVER THE TABLE
one word



Denis Mwaura: In your work, you explore ways of belonging by combining elements of nature with cultural artifacts. What initiated your practice of exploring identity in non-figurative ways?

Daniela Rivera: The first rug I painted was my cultural self-portrait and a digestion of post-colonial theories. When I came to the States, my work went through an earthquake. It's the best thing I can equate it to because, in many ways, being born in Chile during the year of the coup and growing up throughout the dictatorship was normal for me. There was a curfew and once every week you're going to have a moment where the whole city has no electricity because someone put a bomb somewhere. I got used to it because I was born in it. I started making work inside and through that moment of transition. A lot of the Chilean artists were asking "Who are we?" because everything that had been made before was resistance art. All over a sudden, you don't have to resist anymore. We asked ourselves, "What are we doing?"

DM: So, the transition of political power shifted what your work would entail?

DR: Yes, I was in Chile when that was happening. I began grabbing onto things that I felt were lacking. During the dictatorship, we didn't have identity politics because media on television was imported from Chile and copied specifically from the U.S. There were no self-referential images on the street and media. You lose your identity when you can't recognize yourself anywhere. That's when I started painting the body and making fleshy work. There was always this question of painting in European tradition, particularly with the School of London. Artists were thinking about responding to the dictatorship and the political situation in Chile. When I moved to Boston, that wasn't present. I remember painting a self-portrait in a very forward manner, and I realized, this doesn't work here.

DM: How has the migration from Chile to Boston determined your relationship with the city?

DR: My relationship with Boston was tough at the beginning and now it's very different. I have a life here and being in education, I'm giving back to Boston for being extremely generous to me in many ways. I had a life in Chile—my son was born there—but Boston is where I have found myself as it has made me who I am today. In terms of this project, I thought, I'm not from here. Each place I've lived

in Boston has not been by choice. I initially landed in Cambridge and now I'm in Wellesley because a job took me here. I've never chosen the community I have lived in, but in a way, I've been a part of the Boston area in artistic communities.

DM: With migrating from Chile to Boston, what has "belonging" come to mean for you?

DR: I feel belonging when my productions are not only seen through the veil of being Latin American. The labels digest you before you can speak. I want my work to have all the layers of signification embedded in them rather than being limited by precedence.

DM: An attribute to belonging in a community is feeling a sense of comfort and familiarity with the physical landscape. Do you consider Boston to be home?

DR: Yes and no. All the people that were present in my life—my mom, sister, brothers, friends—are not here. They define home for me and are in an invisible place. I know Santiago so well that I don't need to process it. Because of this, I've had to negotiate my relationship with Boston. It is the place that made me look at myself and my own life, voice, work, and role.

DM: *Sobremesa (Karaoke Politics)* involves producing work that relies on the Roxbury and Dorchester communities to ultimately activate it. What were some concerns you had while conceptualizing the project?

DR: When I was selected by Now + There, I was nervous. I wondered how I was supposed to make work when I don't belong to this community. Is it ethical if it's an art piece for the public? In the beginning, a lot of the conversations were about community and how to engage them in this project. It felt like an unethical imposition. The only way I could do the project was as a foreigner. I've lived here for sixteen years and I began to think about notions of transculturation and the relations of things. Rather than introduce a cultural object, I thought, maybe I can share a cultural practice that could be absorbed. I wanted to work with the movement of cultures and Grove Hall appeared as a place of possibility. I started reading about the history of the neighborhood; in the mid-20th century, there was a large Jewish community. Now there's a lot of Cape Verdeans, Jamaicans, Dominicans, Cubans,



and African-Americans. I'm not making work about the community because I'm not a part of it, but I'm making work for the community. Once the piece is installed, it's open for the public to use in whatever way and I'm just responsible for preserving it.

DM: I'm interested in the concept and history of *sobremesa*. The element of food is vital for the tradition, yet you've decided not to include food as part of the artwork.

DR: Historically, the *sobremesa* was a Spanish tradition and was brought by colonization. It has been completely adopted in Latin America. Each *sobremesa* has different characteristics, but we all share the experience in Latin America. *Sobremesa* happens after the meal is over. It's when you are digesting the meal, and everything from conversations, wine, and coffee begins to accumulate. When I was talking about the project, I was asked if I was going to have food, and I said no, there's conversations! It's just being vulnerable and having agency.

DM: How did you approach the physical landscape of Grove Hall?

DR: This piece, in a way, represents how I feel about Boston. I wanted to introduce the possibility of openness—being vulnerable together and shar-

ing that space. The community could talk, and the practice gets incorporated and twisted, making it their own so that they embody it in different ways. It's similar to translation; a lot gets lost and gained. The idea of cultural migration can be clear and physical in *Sobremesa (Karaoke Politics)*. Grove Hall has a dilapidated vacant lot with an old basketball court, a ruin that was a community space. It's in the middle of the public library, school, and senior center. Because it has been vacant, the project is a promise for a space of potential.

DM: Karaoke originates from Japan and is popular globally at social events. What aspects of karaoke did you find necessary for this project?

DR: I was at the Vermont Studio Center and they would do karaoke every Saturday. I did one session and I was fascinated by it because it is the same idea, a social construct of failing in public. There's no way of succeeding unless you're a professional karaoke singer, and if not, we trust the failure. Everybody loves failing because you are completely exposed, so rather than criticism there's only care and love. That's when I decided to incorporate karaoke into this project. I have already begun doing some karaoke with the senior center, and it has been hilarious. This might be a failure, but in the next couple of weeks we are taking little postcards door to door with information about

the project and as a way to submit songs. For the first karaoke event on the tables, I will have all the songs requested by the community. The idea of cultural migration will be physical and clear. I'm hoping that because of the diversity in the population we're going to have some merengue, reggae, hip hop, and mixes happening on top of this surface.

DM: Sound is an important element in experiencing and translating the communal relations of the Grove Hall. How are you incorporating speech and sound?

DR: I've been meeting people and I want to start recording conversations to bring them into the tables. I'll be collaborating with Jenny Olivia Johnson, a composer, and we've worked together with *The Andes Inverted* at the MFA, Boston. All of the conversations will be coming from speakers underneath the tables, so it becomes a resonance box. Jenny will use that as a material to create a music composition, which may have an opera singer and flutist on top of the table. Whether this will work is all a question mark, but that's the risk of doing public artwork.

Another part of this project is you expose your guilty pleasures. I would sing "Maldita Primavera," which narrates how spring goes by too fast and it's the only moment you have to fall in love. It's almost a hymn that is so romantic and super cheesy. Another song I would sing is "Under Pressure" by David Bowie and Freddie Mercury. What would your song be?

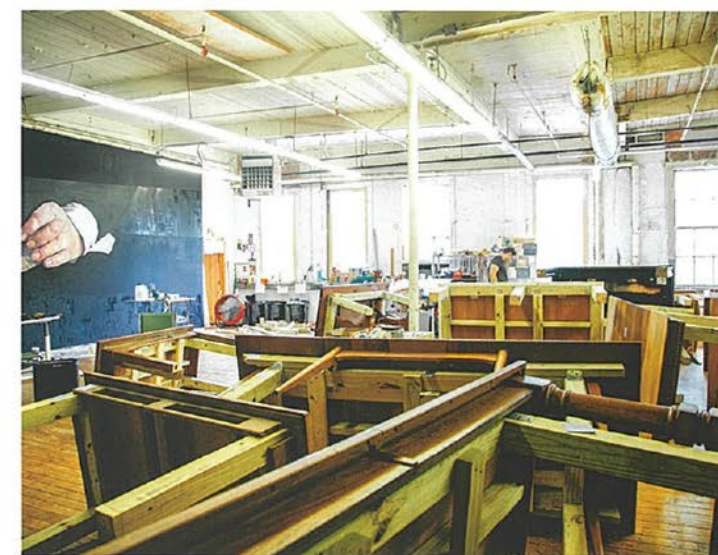
DM: I would perform a traditional Swahili song titled "Subalkheri Mpenzi," which means "Good Morning, Beloved." It's a dialogue between two lovers, a man and a woman, that starts with morning greetings and progresses to confessing their affections. It's a very beautiful song, and I see myself performing both parts. How do you envision the trajectory of this project?

DR: I would like the work to be installed for perhaps six months for it to be used with different types of events with mark-making happening on top of the tables. Permanency is part of the notion of *Sobremesa*. Since it's an outdoor project, I would love to see it indoors in an enormous space. I'll be honest here: I went to MASS MoCA for the first time ten years ago and I envisioned this work in the Building 5 gallery. I had created a sketch for the project's space, yet I wasn't examining cultural practices. I stored the sketch away, and when the practice of *Sobremesa* came to me, I found the sketch.

Back then, it was in a completely different context and meaning.

DM: You are a faculty member of the art department at Wellesley College. How does teaching influence your artistic practice?

DR: I cannot be an artist without teaching. My practice feeds my teaching and vice versa. One of the beauties of being in the academic world is talking to students who fill you in on gaps that could be possibilities. I'm thankful for that. Another important part is since I don't depend economically from my work, I can change it as much as I want to. I've been able to move from figurative painting to installations. The independence of practice and not having to marry a particular idea of making is a blessing.



DM: Locating home is often referenced in your previous work, particularly defining and describing home as an immigrant in another land. You are currently preparing for a solo show at the Fitchburg Art Museum. Can you tell me about the paintings you are working on?

DR: During conversations with relocated habitants of the now buried town of Chuquicamata, they tried to convey the experience of living in that place. Through attempts at getting to descriptive language they tried to share with me the weather, the dryness, the colors and scents of the space, but language was never enough. It was through body language that the descriptions were complemented and the space was brought to life, and it was through our bodies that we formed part of a place. That is why for the pieces at the FAM, I tried to link space to body, and instead of traditional painting landscape paintings I decided to paint the gestures that conveyed space in those conversations. The body language is painted larger than life, preserving a horizon line and taking over the exhibition space. //



In recognition of the collaborative efforts for the project, Rivera would like to thank Natalia Leginowicz, Ingrid Henderson, Juyon Lee, and Jonathan Jacobs for their contributions.