

# On the power of observation



Publisher and educator Estrella Bonilla on the importance of observation, understanding the multiplicity of all things, and being at peace with simply learning, making, and surviving.

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As told to Charmaine Li, 1349 words.

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**You've said before that you're a "socio-cultural anthropologist at heart." What initially sparked your interest in trying to understand how people relate to the environment and the systems in which they interact?**

It wasn't until a couple of years into my bachelor's degree at UC Davis that I decided to pursue sociocultural anthropology. Before that, I hadn't known much about it. But as I learned more about the subject—and about myself—I realized that I've always been observing people and the ways they interacted with each other and the world around them. So, it wasn't a hard decision for me to major in sociocultural anthropology. In my final years of university, I was feeling more connected to my Latin American roots and curious about Indigenous people in Ecuador, where my mom comes from, and I spent those years honing in on indigeneity in Latin America. I ended up studying in Ecuador to finish up my last credits. Also, related to that, I think I've always been a curious person, and sometimes it feels like my curiosities govern my way of being. I constantly want to learn about and pursue things—and so I do that with many things.

**Has your socio-cultural anthropological lens shaped the way you approach your professional roles as a teacher and magazine-maker?**

Definitely. One of the main things I do professionally—and also my main source of income—is my work with children. I've been around kids since I was a kid myself because my aunt had a daycare in our home growing up. It wasn't until many years after I started working with children that I realized that this might be tied to why I like working with kids. But also, when I started working at a bilingual kindergarten here in Berlin, I tried to think about how this could relate to my academic studies in socio-cultural anthropology. I mean, it was pretty easy to make the connection. Observing these small beings in the first phase of their life in the world was basically what socio-cultural anthropology was for me in the past two years: It was understanding the multiplicity of all things. To observe a child is to see them interact with many small worlds within this larger world we live in—and these small worlds are significant, powerful, and influential. My work with children has helped me look back on my childhood in a different light, taught me a lot about myself, and enabled me to tap into my creativity in new ways. And one thing I've learned is that it's important for me to hold what I make.

**One of the tangible objects you make is [Rabbel](#), a feminist print publication for children aged 7-12. Can you talk about how you got involved with it? What are some things you've learned about building up an independent niche magazine so far?**

[Rabbel](#) is a print publication and community formed with preteen girls in mind. It was founded by photographer and designer [Julie Comfort](#) in 2017 because she was observing a lot of changes in her daughter, who was in this age group at the time. Since social media is reaching girls at a younger age, this formative stage is when many begin

comparing themselves with others because of what they see online and start to have feelings of insecurity. Many messages to young girls from media and society focus on their image or getting external validation of some sort. I know this from my own experience, too. With *Rabbel*, we want to offer a different perspective and share stories of women and girls who have navigated through their fears and doubts, even using them as tools to create. By creating inspiring and uplifting content, the aim is to boost the creative confidence of preteen girls.

I came across *Rabbel* at a time when I had a strong desire to enter into children's literature and also realized that as a kid I wanted to become a children's book author. In 2018, I joined Julie and started working as a social media manager. I've learned so much since then. Eventually, I worked on the third issue of the magazine—currently, I'm the new publisher and editor of the mag since Julie stepped back from the project. One thing I'm seeing more and more through this work is how we don't give children enough credit for their capacity to comprehend. Although the idea of *Rabbel* is to be accessible to women and girls of all ages, the aim is to have young girls feel connected to the material to the stories. Because I was so used to writing academic papers, or writing for adults in general, it was tricky learning how to write articles in a style and tone for this specific age group that didn't dumb things down—while also making them appealing to their parents who would be purchasing the magazine. And I'm still working on that...

I'm also learning a lot about all the business stuff, like profit margin, etc., that I never had any idea about before as well as trying to sustain a community. It's hard because the moment I decided I wanted to do more in-person events is also when COVID happened. Since *Rabbel* isn't the only thing that I'm doing, I give it my time and effort when I can. And I guess that's not always the effort it deserves.

**On that note, how do you balance your creative work alongside the work you do to make a living? Do you think they help or hinder each other?**

I definitely have an issue of not being able to find one thing to focus on entirely. As I mentioned before, I feel like there are so many worlds within each world that we can explore. There's so much to learn. It's challenging to balance all the work that I do but in some ways, I think they do support each other. For example, I learned a lot about using online tools, such as InDesign, working on *Rabbel* that I'm now applying to market my own tie-dye business, [soltees](#), which I started during the lockdown. So, a lot of small things like that. To be honest, in terms of making a living, I've joked with you before that I often feel like triple B: Busy But Broke [laughs]. But I'm managing right now, which is nice... I feel sort of at peace with just making and learning and surviving—I don't need the excess at the moment.

**Looking at the different kinds of work that you do, it seems to me like you're conducting a socio-anthropological study of sorts with each one. For instance, teaching at a kindergarten you focus on children aged 3-6 in a particular environment. Meanwhile, working on *Rabbel* you examine how girls aged 7-13 interact with the world.**

Now that you say that, it makes me think that maybe my different professional roles have also helped me investigate my own evolution through these different stages. When I started working with children at the kindergarten, I learned so much about myself at that age. And I forgot to mention this before, but I also teach yoga to children aged three to 10, and that was the beginning of me branching out into a practice that was more specific and aligned with my values. Then there's the magazine, so I mean, next is probably something for teenagers or adults.

#### **Estrella Bonilla Recommends:**

[Kokoro by Natsumi Soseki](#) - an exploration of loneliness and peace, a favorite novel of mine

[Living, Thinking, Looking by Siri Hustvedt](#) - my favorite collection of essays that explores memory, imagination, art, and emotion

An acupuncture mat (e.g. ShaktiMat) does wonders for tension release

[Navy Blue by Hasani](#) - a sensual tune that gets me feeling all connected with myself

[Real Talk with Artists](#) - a live talk show where my talented sister engages with artists to tap into the magic

that makes their craft possible

Name

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