

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference and The Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion.

¡Malcreada! A Xicanista Rhetoric: Politics of Recognition and a Case for Incivility

Alejandra E. Ramirez
University of Arizona

Abstract

This project is a reconciliation with my *testimonio y mi pasado y presente*, however, my story is never out of the context of Eurocentric, settler colonialism. The story that I'm sharing demonstrates the effects that neoliberalism has had on me and my family, based on what I have seen and have learned from the stories of my mother, grandmothers, and father. This story in no way accounts for the stories of other Xican@s, Chican@s, Mexican@s, American@s, or any hyphenated or blending of these identities. Instead, the goal for this project is to share my story and identity, which is situated in a Xicana-Mexicana-Indigena context and understood through a lens of decoloniality and resistance. I was born in Eagle Pass, Texas, a border city with Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Out of necessity, my family moved from Mexico into the United States to work in the fields. Later, they moved to the Midwest to find better work. This story of migration is like many but is my family's and my own. My hope for this essay is that it contributes to shared experiences, as well as to the understanding of decolonial and postcolonial rhetoric.

Keywords: Education; Boarding schools; Incivility; Xicana; colonization; Resistance; Pedagogical violence

Alejandra I. Ramírez is a mother, budding scholar, writer, artist, and poet. Her intellectual and scholarly interests include decolonial praxis, student and social movements, transnational feminist logics, traditional medicine and healing. She loves to hike, go on long walks through the mountains, write and paint. A daughter of migrant and farmworker parents, her activism includes working with farmworker and student organizational efforts. She is also interested in institutional policy.

**¡Malcreada! A Xicanista Rhetoric:
Politics of Recognition and a Case for
Incivility**

*To talk about one's life—that I could do.
To write about it, to leave a trace—that
was frightening. – bell hooks,
Remembered Rapture*

*El Anglo con cara de inocente nos
arrancó la lengua. Wild tongues can't be
tamed, they can only be cut out. – Gloria
E. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera*

This project is a reconciliation with my *testimonio y mi pasado y presente*. Mine and my family's story is never out of the context of imperialism, patriarchy, and settler colonialism. The story that I'm sharing demonstrates the effects that these ideologies of power have had on me and my family on behalf of the state and because of patriarchy. The following is based on my experience and what I have seen and learned from the stories of my parents and grandparents. This story in no way accounts for the stories of other Xican@s, Chican@s, Mexican@s, Centro o Sur American@s, or any hyphenated or blending of these identities, and is instead a personal account of the violence of colonialism and modernity. This auto-ethnographic project is an attempt to clear blockages caused by the scars of sexual and racialized violence and trauma. In many ways, writing this is a part of my healing process. My story and identity, which is situated in a Xicana-Mexicana-Indígena context, can be understood through a lens of anticolonial thinking and a stride toward liberation. It is in the spirit of bell hooks's autobiography or Audre Lorde's "bio-mythography," wherein writing our stories has the potential to evoke the spirit of particular moments, something

hooks describes as the "scent of memory" (hooks, 1999, p. 82). Using a variety of scholarship and informational media (traditional and unconventional), I demonstrate that the experiences I've had, and potentially share with others, are part of a legacy of violence and oppression and continue to affect communities of Color and therefore must be resisted and our cultures preserved.



Image 1: Pense que te me ibas a morir – My mother's words when she tells me about my birth sequence.

I was born in Eagle Pass, Texas, a border city with Piedras Negras, Coahuila. My mother tells me that I was born blue, not breathing, and with the umbilical cord tied twice around my neck. "*Pense que te me ibas a morir,*" my mother, all these years later, recounts with fear in her voice, explaining how she thought I was going to die at my birth. Mom's pregnancy and delivery of me were especially difficult. It was a new moon, a Friday. Her whole body swelled toward the end of her pregnancy; she had high blood pressure, and I was breach and would not turn in the proper way to be born. I should be facing down, but my body refused. Maybe my mother's body refused, too. Even in the womb, I wouldn't do what was expected of me. I am a natural

rebel. However, my nature betrays me. In addition to me being breach, the umbilical cord, my life line, was wrapped twice around my neck. I wasn't breathing and was blue in the face when I came out of my mother. I either wasn't meant to live, or I was born to fight. The midwife slapped me and pinched me, *y nada*. Suddenly I cried out, and cried and cried, and haven't stopped crying.

I'm 33 now and only beginning to unfold the legacy of violence that preceded my conception and birth; the history of colonization and patriarchal violence my family and others like me would inherit—cultural, domestic, and personal. Both my parents came from violent households, which they passed on to me and my siblings.

Our extended family lived on the Mexico side of the border in Piedras Negras, on a small patch of land until I was about five or six. We lived there with my father's parents and my aunt, her husband, and my cousins. My mother had family on both sides and being that she was a "naturalized" citizen, would sometimes find work on the U.S. side. One day, my family was forced off the land that had been in my family for generations. We didn't have a title or deed to the land, so it was easy for the government to create a false one and evict us from the property. While my tia, tio, cousins, and grandparents stayed in Mexico, my parents and my brothers and sister moved from Mexico to the United States. My parents didn't have much formal education, and since we mostly lived in rural southern Texas, there wasn't much work. My parents were forced to work in the fields—*las labores*, they called them. There were six of us and that became difficult for our parents, who hadn't made it to the sixth grade and did not speak, read, or write in English. My father was undocumented and,

like Mexico, in southern Tejas in the 1970s and 1980s there were few resources. These were all circumstances that set us up for misery and tragedies that would haunt us for the rest of our lives.

The historical past had constructed a belief that women, the poor, dark-skinned people, and small children could be treated as property. The present, with its accumulated past traumas, ordered that *we* have no self-determination. Our right over our bodies and minds continues to be denied.

Back then, my parents couldn't afford to keep us all together. There were eight of us; two parents and six children. My older brother, older sister, and I went to live with my aunt and her husband. I believe my youngest three brothers stayed with my parents. When I was younger, I always sort of knew something had happened to us and that my aunt and uncle had done terrible things to us, but I only felt it like some spectral memory—always haunting, always only a shadow. It is not until now that I can (still) only partially articulate, remember, and understand what happened. I learned that my brother was physically abused by my uncle. For a long time, I hated black pepper spice, and it would make me feel sick to my stomach. I also used to pee my pants in elementary school and pee my pants in public and pee in my bed until I was 12 years old. I knew we were abused in their home, but I didn't have the words or the awareness to process it. I began to understand that perhaps I had been sexually abused. Recently, my sister told me that my uncle would strip her and me naked and hit us with his belt. I have memories, or flashbacks, of our uncle making us sniff or snort pepper as a punishment, and I was so afraid of him that when he would yell at me, I would pee my pants. Most of these

memories have emerged only recently while in graduate school and while studying the psychological and physiological effects of colonialism.

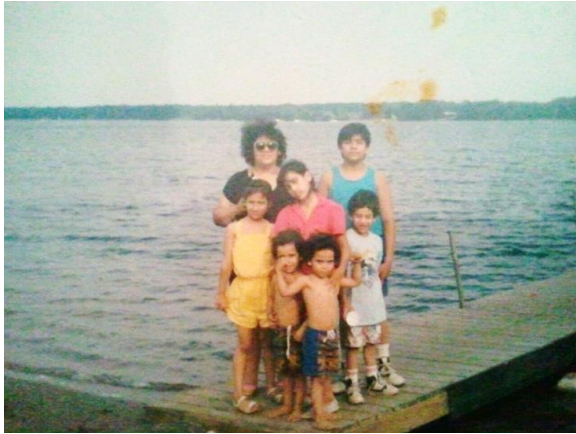


Image 2: *Y aún que la jaula sea de oro, no deja de ser prision – Los Tigres del Norte, La Jaula de Oro*

A few years later, while I was about 10 or 12 years old, Dad moved us to the Midwest to find better work in factory jobs. At first, my older brother stayed in Tejas but was reunited with us after a short while of living up north. We lived and were raised mostly in rural Minnesota, under the “land of the free, home of the brave” belief about the United States. My parents loved the United States for the opportunities and loved Mexico because that was their home, especially my dad. He reminded us to be *orgullosos de ser mexicanos*. I remember having both the Mexican flag and the U.S. flag in our house, and my brothers would wear them around their necks like capes. They were superheroes. I remember being excited about moving. We were a very traditional and religious family. We did not speak English, we were all very shy, and so it was no surprise that we were treated like shit in rural Minnesota in the early 1990s.

My parents found stable work in a turkey factory in Minnesota. Eventually, my parents and my older brother and sister would work there, too. The place was huge,

and it always smelled gross to me. My parents would come home smelling like it, with turkey flesh on their clothes—dressing as though they were going out into a storm of turkey flesh, insides, and shit. They had to wear plastic boots and thick gloves. They had huge knives that they brought home, too. That place was where most of the people in the city worked and so it was very central to the city culture. Because of the importance of it and its proximity to our home, many of those first memories are of the smell, the lights in the night, and the people going in and coming out of there. My ex-husband, who twice tried to kill me, would eventually work there, so did the man who raped me when I was 14, and the man who raped my sister worked there, too.

I begin here, to try to unravel a potential history of a person, wrapped social identities and deterministic experiences, to share what has happened in my life to explain the types of experiences that someone who grew up poor, brown, migrant, and isolated like me might have had. What influence might the history of imperialism, colonialism, conquest, and patriarchy have on an individual of today? I currently identify as a Queer, Xicana mother and survivor of trauma and abuse at the hands of family, “friends,” and strangers. But these identities are also a manifestation of the very topics I’m discussing, particularly “colonization” and “patriarchy” as general terms to help describe the experiences our families might live through and survive. They are unique to my family, but similar in many ways to many others.

(De)Construction of the (Un)Civilized

Que era una marimacha because I fought physically with my siblings, or because I got suspended when I gave a White boy a bloody nose in school. *Era un*

animal. I couldn't control myself, because by the time I was getting into fights in school, I had already been stripped and beaten with a belt by my uncle and kicked and beaten with a belt by my drunken father. Recently, a boyfriend said I was "out of control." "More like out of *your* control," I thought.

I likened myself to many animals, sometimes a bird, sometimes a snake. But when it came to my free spirit, I was a horse—one of the wild ones you can imagine running through the open fields with their manes flowing, galloping into the sunset or some ridiculous, beautiful image like that. I was the wild, beautiful horse that no one could tame or even get close to, for that matter. I was loud, distrustful, and capable of hurting anyone if they got too close.

If I was a plant, I would be a cactus. A saguaro.

Whenever I would yell, or get angry, I was labeled *crazy*. Even now, when I sit in meetings with "professionals," if I challenge them or contradict them, they don't say it, but I can see in their all-too-familiar gaze that they're wondering (consciously or unconsciously) what someone like me is doing in a room like that.

I was a *salvaje*. I still am.

All the words that my mother, father, and elders would label me with were funny to me, but I had no idea the degree to which these words and their associated emotions would affect me. They were defining exactly who I was and how I would recognize myself, and (by extension) how others recognized me. I was a *malcreada*, a *traviesa*, *cabrona*, and many other detrimental adjectives to those who were

supposed to love me. Family is where we learn who we are and how to love. It happens first through family social structures that have been already constructed through a culture and a history of gendered expectations, and they are galvanized by the larger culture that further attempts to discipline our minds and bodies.

Although the horse analogy is a coincidence, Robert A. Williams, Jr., identifies this similarity and anthropomorphism of savagery that is often associated with Indigenous people. Greece, being the "cradle of western civilization" is particularly relevant to these discourses of dehumanization. Williams associates savagery and wildness defined in Greek mythology as: "an *unruly* beast of nature, roaming *free* and *unrestrained*" (my emphasis) (Williams, 2012, p. 17). The Trojan Horse story told of an interesting defeat of the Greeks, because they were attacked and destroyed by the very thing they categorized as *savage*. Williams recounts histories where people are associated with animals and the qualities of animals. The impact of this dehumanizing process is still seen today and functions under forms of *civility codes* and respectability politics.

The term "savage," as we know, has been used to label human beings throughout history, but specifically Indigenous people. This process of comparing a person with an animal has allowed some to dominate physically and brutally over others. The processes of colonization are both physical and pedagogical, or managed through violence and ideologies. Violence like slavery, rape, and other forms of physical abuse are based in ideas and beliefs, as are ideologies like imperialism, Christianity, nationalism, and capitalism. The combination of these two forms over time,

and in the minds of the oppressed and oppressor, creates what Jack D. Forbes (2008) terms the *wétiko* (cannibal) psychosis. The effect of this *wétiko* or colonial virus, Forbes identifies, is rape, greed, brutality, arrogance, and deceit. It is easier to consume the other, and abuse them, if you see them as less than human, or less human than you.

The degree to which an Indigenous person is “othered” and dehumanized is the same degree to which they are the enemy; the higher the possibility of being controlled, the lower the risk they are to Euro-white supremacy. Roberto Cintli Rodríguez, in his book *Our Sacred Maíz Is Our Mother*, in Chapter 3 titled “The Aztlanahuac Maps,” clarifies that the U.S. “master narrative” is that, like other Indigenous people, “Mexicans stand between a God-chosen people and their divine purpose of spreading freedom and heaven on earth over the entire continent” (Rodríguez, 2014, p. 82). The Indigenous, Mexican, native, Indian, woman, and Queer is the biggest threat to the neocolonial, neoliberal United States. The current discourses on national security are, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (as quoted in *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Empire*) explains, “deployed in response to a perceived threat of invasion and dispossession from Indigenous people” (Byrd, xviii). Jody A. Byrd (2011) adds that “in the United States, the Indian is the original enemy combatant who cannot be grieved” (xviii).

I mention this, because my grandmother on my father’s side is Kickapoo from what is now northern Coahuila, Mexico, and southern Texas, United States. Indigenous identity and recognition politics are important to me because Mexicans and Xican@s are not

viewed as being Indigenous for their subjectivities and relationships to colonial Spain. Also, based on colonial nation lines of division, many Xican@s do not belong to a tribe but have a clear relationship to tribes and cultures. For example, my grandmother practiced her medicine in her home for her family but also others in the area. I remember her *barridas* of myself, my siblings, and our neighbors. She also taught my mother. My grandmother also tells me that my great-grandfather communicated with the owls. They were called *brujos* or witches, often by people in their own family. They were accused of *brujería* or witchcraft, instead of being recognized as healers.

“Fuck Civility”

Within a climate centered around civility politics, determining who is “civil” (both locally and globally) has become a practice to further disenfranchise and delegitimize resistance movements. Being labeled as *uncivil* is more than just being resistant. It is a term that is linked to the term “civilization”. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) tells us that the noun “civilized” means “at an advanced stage of social and cultural development, usually marked by the existence of organized communities and an adherence to established conventions of behavior; highly developed; refined and sophisticated in manner or taste; educated, cultured.” It continues with the sub note “in early use often contrasted with *savage* or *barbarous*.” “Uncivil,” according to the OED is defined as “not civilized; barbarous; unrefined” and “irresponsive to culture.” As I break down these terms and identities of “uncivil,” the politics of naming and recognition emerges.

A revolt is very simply a means to an end to the litany and state-sanctioned violence in the United States against Black,

Queer, and Indigenous people—women and children primarily. However, when the term “uncivil” is used against those who resist and revolt, the term delegitimizes the experiences of oppressed peoples and measures their actions (not their motivations) against a reconstituted definition of “culture” and “civilization.”

A White man in my graduate program tells me I need to be more civil if we are to have better conversations—after he tells me that my tears are a form of manipulation and that he is the only White man he knows who acknowledges his privilege. Oh, and after that he tells me that I’m privileged for being in graduate school. After that two professors tell me that I “*have to assimilate*” if I want to make something of myself in the field and that “assimilation is inevitable.”

Assimilation to me is death.

Uncovering and articulating the histories of trauma demonstrate the wholeness that constitutes a collective, colonial, and neoliberal past pain. From the moment of utterance, our words are lifted from the imagination into the real; we begin to reimagine and remake our worlds and concrete experiences. This process of sharing of trauma is one step that Laura E. Pérez (2007) in her book *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Alterities* identifies as “a politics of the will to remember”:

to maintain in one’s consciousness, to recall, and to (re)integrate a spiritual worldview about the interconnectedness of life, even if it is fragmented, circulating as its pieces have, through colonial and neocolonial relations. (p. 23).

This remembering and talking process of (re)invoking the past can also be considered Emotional Justice, as termed by Esther Armah. In the article, “Emotional Justice: What Black Women Want and Need,” Armah and *Guardian News* editor Dalila-Johari Paul explain that Black women’s lives and particularly the violence against them is “a legacy of intergenerational trauma” due to “cycles of violence” and that creating language to describe the trauma and articulating it into reality creates a counternarrative capable of creating a space to explore and heal. Scholars and activists see the need to understand a personal and cultural history to create a stronger community in the present.

Women of Color are traumatized by a toxic patriarchal and colonial culture and are not often afforded a space to voice the violence they have faced, including deadly domestic violence, rape, police brutality, and economic injustices. This gendered lens from which to understand processes of justice and healing provides an image of the victims in which to be “seen and heard.” Particularly, women of Color and LGBTQ communities are often part of all areas of social movements of resistance and yet face gendered, sexualized violence and are often silenced and overlooked within the movements themselves—a double oppression, or triple.

Voicing and giving a face to victims is one way to begin healing. Art and other forms of cultural production of communities of Color can also be considered resistance movements; that healing through art and writing can be considered a form of resistance. One of the first things we must do is speak up and listen, and we must create.

Pedagogical Death is Epistemological Death

I have mostly been thinking through physical violence in my above writing. I mentioned that there are two approaches to coloniality: physical and intellectual violence. Below, I would like to think through how education has been used as a mechanism of control and violence. One, which I argue, continues to be one of the most effective tools of colonization.

Boarding schools were one of the most effective ways that colonization divided families, cut bloodlines of ancient cultures and practices, and killed Indigenous people's tribes across the United States. This aspect of colonization attacked the people and their history and irreparably and violently dismembered their future. This practice continues today with rigid school classrooms, times, and bells constantly ordering students when and where they should be. Because institutions have locations in other countries, we can understand them as a global colonial project.

My siblings and I were placed in "special ed" classes because we initially did not speak English. Even after we were fluent, the school administration continued to place us in these classrooms up through high school. In my current PhD program, there is turmoil regarding the definition of "discourse" and "rhetoric," in particular. The challenge here is that the Greeks founded rhetoric as a science of persuasion, and that is all that rhetoric is. However, as Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, in *Woman, Native, Other* (1989): "The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rife with paradox does not qualify as 'clear' (paradox is 'illogical' and 'nonsensical' to many Westerners), for its intent lies outside of the realm of persuasion

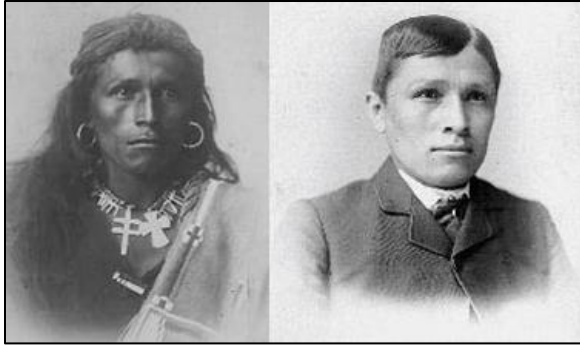
(p. 16). Rodriguez (2014) also identifies a similar Eurocentric ideology and epistemology in the context of European colonial pedagogies and practices. He writes "Westerners purportedly have history and knowledge and the ability to critically analyze and interpret, while Indigenous peoples simply have the ability to recall and spin myths/fables, legends, and folktales" (xxiii).

The entire continent has been victim to European colonization. The schools, educational system, and religion have been one of the most insidious attacks on humanity that continues today.



Image 2: "Kill the Indian, save the man." – Richard Pratt, U.S. Army lieutenant (1879), founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial Boarding School, Carlisle, PA





“At boarding schools, Indian children were separated from their families and cultural ways for long periods, sometimes four or more years ... forced to cut their hair and give up their traditional clothing ... give up their meaningful Native names and take English ones ... only taught to speak English, [and] were punished for speaking their own languages ... traditional religious practices were forcibly replaced with Christianity ... taught that their cultures were inferior ... teachers ridiculed and made fun of the students’ traditions ... humiliated the students and taught them to be ashamed. The boarding schools had a bad effect on the self-esteem of Indian students and on the well-being of Native languages and cultures.” – Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways.

Essentially, the boarding schools were a means of control and dehumanization, as well to sever the people from their culture; violence on an ontological and epistemological level, possibly never to be able to be fully reconciled. From the violent and philosophical processes of colonization, I understand my own positionality as a Xicana, as having a similar history to American Indians who have developed into the complex identity of who we are today, as both the colonized and the colonizer. The history of Mexican@s is the same.

Historically, religion and education have been the means through which Eurocentric ideologies were communicated and enforced, always and still, violently. The U.S. Carlisle boarding school was representative of *all* boarding schools meant to *civilize* the people. This leaves us with scars that never seem to heal, specifically because of the continuation of coloniality through the U.S. educational systems. Primarily, the schools served to “kill the Indian, save the man.” Kill the uncontrollable spirit, control it, and shape it into the ideological figure of *European* civilization.

Imposing the term “civilized” on an Indigenous student suggested that now the Indigenous person was suited for life amongst the rest of European *civilization*, as demonstrated in the image above. The term was used against me to convince me that I was only a “civilized” human being if I were like my White classmates and behaved the way my teachers expected. Other than that, I was a wild, “uncivilized,” savage and not able to be part of society—the society that the colonizers have prepared. I recall being seated outside of my English class several times in high school for not listening. My family was the only family of Color in the whole town. That is a sad fact. When I would be excluded, the entire White student body was not just excluding me, they were excluding my family, my people, and everything I stood for, represented, and what they *mis-recognized* me as.

Once, I had to put my middle finger up to a teacher who felt he could put his hands on me to drag me out of class. No one has the right over my body or spirit. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out that this concept of “civilized” was doused with ideologies of European humanism and liberalism, which

allowed the moral claims relating to the concept of civilized ‘man’ (Smith, 2012, p. 27). Indeed, according to the colonizers, the human, ontologically speaking, could only be a *civilized* one, and according to their standards, the only race that “is” human (essentially “being” human, or a human “being”) was the White European race with their language, their skin color, their bodies, their mannerisms, their hair, ideologies, and motives.

Homi Bhabha, in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man” (2000), explains that the imposed American systems want to recreate the same “man,” essentially a person who philosophically and ontologically believes what the European believes. However, Bhabha reiterates that these systems only reproduce a less-human European mentality. Never can the “other,” Indian, or any person of Color ever truly be equal to the European American. It will only be a mimicry, a rough photocopy, of what Europeans want, desire, thirst for, and ultimately dominate. Colonization insists that people of Color cannot access their past, and as Bhabha concludes, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 2000, p. 114).

As a person of Color, and thus part of a community of oppressed people in the United States, I began to internalize the beliefs and practices of colonization. I had become too afraid and too misinformed to question my own subjugations, and thusly, I came to revile the “White angel” the symbol of White European “manifest destiny.” This process of unconscious mimicry prevents resistance. It instills fear of violence and physical pain and death; we are too fearful to challenge the physical invaders. As victims of colonization, the people are educated and thus engrained with the

beliefs, values, and language of the colonizer, and only the world view of the colonizer is viewed as civilized, human, and capable of reason. Although this seems like an inevitable downfall, in fact it can be a point from which the process of decolonization can begin.

However, this process of colonization that produces mimicry in the colonized subject has profound effects on the colonizer as well. Mimicry, as Bhabha explains, is:

a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary powers. (p. 114)

That language, being primarily English or another European, western language, was based on ideologies of manifest destiny, of domination, of colonization, etc., and was not for the colonized subject. However, in so imposing the language upon the Other, the colonizer endowed the colonized with what Bhabha calls “double articulation.” W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (in the chapter titled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”) termed a “double consciousness” or “second-sight” and is what Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2012) calls “mestiza consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*... a consciousness of the Borderlands” (p. 99). This “double” vision is in fact the *ambivalence* Bhabha refers to; the doubt and paranoia caused by the process of

colonization that infects the colonized and colonizer. In many ways, this permits the colonized to understand the consciousness of the colonizer and with their language, the colonized subject has the power to *rearticulate* and transform both their realities. This, the consciousness raising, or Paulo Freire's (1993) *conscientização* is an educative, critical pedagogy, developed and informed with this "double articulation" in mind (p. 35). It is the process to make aware of both sides of the colonizer/colonized duality to place the conscious subject in the center; no longer an object of his or her circumstances but rather an autonomous agent able to determine his or her own circumstances and revolt against his or her oppression and the oppression of *the people*. Colonialism is not the only thing that someone like me has had to endure. Patriarchy is the dark shadow that my family refuses to encounter, and many of our liberation movements still struggle with. Women, children, and feminized knowledge are *still* victims under this ideology.

Invoking La Serpiente: On Decolonizing Art and Epistemologies

*Se pasea por mis sueños.
Se protege bajo los Palo Verdes y
Mezquites.
No la he visto en este mundo, solo me
previenen que la escuche;
Que a lo que le temo, no es a
ella, pero a mi propio destino –
Alejandra Ramírez, Soñando Serpientes*

La víbora, la serpiente venenosa, the evil snake. I've only seen them in dreams, but in this essay, I interpret them much differently. Here I would like to think about what has happened to me and ways that I have tried to undo it, heal, and resist through art and scholarship.



Image 3: *El Abrazo Infinito*

Historically, women have often been negatively related to the snake as venomous, sneaky, and deceitful. This negative representation of women, as well as the mythical past of Mexican@s, has interested me especially, considering the powerful relationship snakes have with the earth, as well as a feminine principle to which it is often linked to. The negative perception of women has affected me personally. I cannot remember, but my family has told me of the abuse in what sounds like whispers, as if no one should hear the recounting. My mother tells me, as if in code, that she was sexually abused when she was young. I have seen when my father would hit and knock my mother to the ground. I have been the victim of several attacks by men, who were family, boyfriends, husband, father, brothers, strangers, and I pray that my sons not be added to that list in the way that my mother's sons abused her. In the path to understanding this abusive, hetero-patriarchal lineage, I have been empowered to think through the feminine powers and feminine principles present in the universe, and it has appeared to me in the form of a snake.

I have had several dreams in which a male figure had chased me, and often caught up to me to kill me. I cut his head off and he

never returned. However, the snake has been there since I can remember. In my first dream, the snake was outside of my childhood home, coiled up with its head ready to attack. It bit me in the first dream, and I awoke suddenly. In other dreams, the snake has danced up my leg and into my shirt as I stood motionless, too afraid to move. Another time, I got brave and decided I would try to catch it. I caught its head, dropped it, and ran away. In the most recent dream, as the snake drew near, I put my finger to its back and felt the scales as it moved across the ground. I never destroyed it, only lost fear of it in the dreams. It hurt me once, as if to scare me. Ever since, I've been enchanted by the elusive snake in my dreams, and I've since interpreted it as a sign to listen to the feminine principle in the universe.

It was not long ago that I could call my grandmother and mother and tell them about my dreams and we would interpret them together. My mother still calls me to tell me she had a dream about me, and as if she could hear my cries, we talked about whatever pain I was experiencing.

This spiritual connection and relationship I have with the image of the snake might be mis-interpreted through what Roberto Rodríguez (2014), and others, call *spiritual colonization*. As I mentioned before, Xican@s are a complex identity in which Indigenous Mexican roots are intermingled with European blood; we are colonizer and colonized. We have suffered grave injustices, much like our relations who have also been colonized around the world. This hybridized identity is a complex enmeshment of a desire to be recognized and respected within a Eurocentric system of beliefs and practices.

I've started a painting to reflect the dreams and feelings I have about the serpent so that I can transition from the world of dreams to the world of the real. I call it *El Abrazo Infinito*. I believe that the dreams of the snake that have been tormenting me have been a message that, at first, I couldn't bear to listen to and understand, but as the time went by, I became more aware and braver enough to let it get near me and feel its presence on my body and in my spirit. As I painted this, I felt as though I could reach into my dreams and was invoking the snake that had been there, and I coiled it, so that we could travel a path together. *Las Seite cuevas* of *Chicomóztoc* is the place where the serpent ends and begins; where all life, after traveling the labyrinth, ends and is born again.

The "*tilli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de sus códices*" symbolizes *escritura y sabiduría*, writes Anzaldúa. The ancient Aztecs believed that "through metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth, communication with the divine could be attained" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 91). According to Anzaldúa, the symbol of the Mexican flag, of the eagle dominating the serpent, is a reflection of the masculine overpowering the feminine. Additionally, it is representative of Coatlicue (*falda de serpientes*), Tonantzin, succumbing to her son Huitzilopochtli, who ushers in a new masculine, patriarchal future for the Aztecs and Mexico. Roberto Cintli Rodríguez, in his book *Our Sacred Maíz Is Our Mother*, identifies a similar motif and blending of two cultures. He writes that "Maíz is the story. La Virgen de Guadalupe is the counterstory! She is alien, and yet she is also native: Tonantzin...Guadalupe triumphs over the serpent..." (Rodríguez, 2014, p. 39). These are examples of the blending and blurring of cultural divisions; the liminal spaces in which we find so much tension to

try to define ourselves due to colonization, and a part of the history of Xicanxs/Chican@s. However, these uncomfortable spaces from which so much confusion erupts, is where the most potential can happen.

A Triple Articulation: Recognition and Representation

The Chicano Movement gained momentum because of the will to represent and determine one's own community, education, and political and economic futures. The same is still true today for Chican@s and Xican@s. I have since my first memories and experiences always felt *Indigna*, not because of where I was born or who I was born to, but because of the ways in which I was raised. Before coming to the United States, my grandmother, who belongs to the Kickapoo of Northern Coahuila, taught me the importance of cleansing as *ceremonia*. *El barrer tu casita* was to clear the space of congestion of spiritual energy. Once the house was swept and clean, our spirits were as well, and they were prepared for *una limpia*. I've received *limpias* in many ways, with flowers, *yerbas*, and the smoke from sage, copal, or another incense. *La Abuela nos pasaba un huevo cuando nos enfermabamos, por si nos habian hecho "ojo," o "mal de ojo."* When we would get sick to our stomachs, or *nos empapachábamos*, or there was an unexplained stomach illness, *nos sobaba o nos llevaban un un sobador*.

My grandmother would also tell us things about the air, and the *sereno*. She would tell us about the owls, snakes, and rabbits and the spirits they carried within themselves. My father, having traveled all of Mexico when he was a young man, reminded me always that I should be proud to Mexican because we came from an

ancient lineage thousands of years old. We came from warriors, fighters, people of medicine. How could I not be Indigenous, Mexicana, Chicana? We moved to the United States when I was 12 and we left our family behind. Much of my identity is shaped by a White culture, but I have always had a yearning to return and practice those roots. It calls to me, and when I listen, when I listen to my spirit, amazing things happen. The universe and I dance to a similar, balanced, rhythm.

I understand that there are concerns and critiques of Chican@s and especially Xican@s, those of us who define ourselves as having an Indigenous ancestry and would like to practice traditional medicine, dance, language, etc. *Que no somos realmente Mexicanos*. That we are not Indigenous, is one critique, that we are not Mexican, is another, and that we are not fully U.S. Americans is one many of us get. If Indigeneity is defined as the tribe you are a part of and that has been designated for you by the U.S. government, is that self-determination or self-defining? This is what is called the politics of recognition; the game that the U.S. government plays with Indigenous people in the Americas, and possibly the world, to dispossess people of their land and their sovereignty. In the book, *Red Faces White Masks*, author Glen Sean Coulthard (2014), proclaims that:

in situations where colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous people to identify, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed or granted to them by the settler state and society. (p. 25)

Quoting Frantz Fanon, Coulthard writes of Hegel's term "reciprocity," that "here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work" (as cited in Coulthard, 2014). It is far too easy to get caught up in identity and recognition politics. Xicanism@ to me represents the struggle and will to move beyond terms, borders, and markers that define us out of our control and self-determining labels that are only imposed on us by the colonizer to control our bodies and who we think we are, or how we see the universe. When the governments like Mexico, which only recently in 2017, added African, or Afro decent to their census, or the United States, which designated their African slaves as three-quarters human—when those governments kill and steal from their own people, why would we allow someone else to identify us? Additionally, the colonial politics of recognition, has a history of delegating land, and then taking it back, or pushing us further to smaller and smaller places like reservations, or forcing us out of our homes into places where we see higher rates of poverty and violence. This land displacement continues to happen today and is like what many communities consider gentrification; the modern form of colonization. It happens when governments and corporations, much like we see going on globally, move in and build high-rises, raising taxes and rents on people who can't afford them. Either the government wants land or resources, or corporations want the same and a high-rise expensive condo or business. It displaces communities and relegates them to a part of town, country, or world—namely the south side.

I want to be sensitive to the politics of identity, because it matters and there are material consequences. I do not, however, believe that anyone ought to use their

privilege to self-identify to gain, either economically, socially, politically, etc., from claiming an identity that has been historically marginalized, brutalized, and disenfranchised. My children, who are half White, identify as Mexican American and Chicana@s, but they benefit from light skin, so they shouldn't write and publish something and claim that they are persons of Color. That isn't their reality. At this point, I don't think they could identify with Indigeneity because they haven't been exposed to it as I was.

My intention with this project and this brief analysis is not to write about anyone else's experiences, only my own, as a person with Indigenous roots who continues to practice what she knows in hopes that it adds to an ongoing scholarship in these research areas of Xicanisma, art, healing and medicine, and resistance. I also tell this story as a Mexicana Xicana, willing to defend herself and her culture by any means necessary.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2012). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. (25th ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bhabha, H. (2000). Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. In P. Essed & D. T. Goldberg (Eds.), *Race Critical Theories*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Byrd, J. A. (2011). *The Transit of empire: Indigenous critiques of colonialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of black folk*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Forbes, J. D. (2008). *Columbus and other cannibals*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (30th Anniversary Ed.) (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum International. (Original work published 1970).
- hooks, b. (1999). *Remembered rapture: The writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Oxford University Press, January 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/33588. Accessed 19 February 2018.
- Paul, D.-J. (2015, December 3). Emotional justice: What black women want and need. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/03/emotional-justice-what-black-women-want-and-need>
- Pérez, L. E. (2007). *Chicana art: The politics of spiritual and aesthetic altarities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rodríguez, R. C. (2014). *Our sacred maiz is our mother: Indigeneity and belonging in the Americas*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous people*. (2nd ed.). New York: Zed Books.
- Williams, Jr., R. A. (2012). *Savage anxieties: The invention of western civilization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.