

REMEMBERING OUR ANCESTORS THROUGH CONVIVIENZA, PLÁTICAS, Y TESTIMONIOS

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ABSTRACT:

The grave is the final resting place for our physical remains, yet in our culture, we continue to visit the grave to be reminded of our ancestors' spirits. *Coco*, *Encanto*, and *The Book of Life* stand as examples of how our customs and rituals have been exploited in mass media for the world to consume and misuse its aesthetics. This reflection is not about a particular holiday, but how our Xicanx Texanx ancestors passed down knowledge from generation to generation, keeping our stories alive, and shaping our future—it is autohistoria-teoria in praxis (Arfuso 2021). In three broad approaches we explore and explicate our constructions of value in the context of our borderland experiences (Anzaldúa 1987): Convivienza, Platícas, y Testimonios.

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The grave is the final resting place for our physical remains, yet in our culture, we continue to visit the grave to be reminded of our ancestors' spirits. *Coco*, *Encanto*, and *The Book of Life* stand as examples of how our customs and rituals have been exploited in mass media for the world to consume and misuse its aesthetics. This reflection is not about a particular holiday, but how our Xicanx Texanx ancestors passed down knowledge from generation to generation, keeping our stories alive, and shaping our future—it is autohistoria-teoría in praxis (Arfuso 2021). In three broad approaches we explore and explicate our constructions of value in the context of our borderland experiences (Anzaldúa 1987): *Convivencia*, *Pláticas*, y *Testimonios*.

CONVIVIR CON FAMILIA

Convivir con familia—defined in the context of our individual stories, become one (Bhattacharya and Keating 2018). It is the product of our familial influences and struggles against hegemonic ideals which surround us. Exposing and immersing ourselves and our children with extended family and sharing stories of our ancestors can happen in different forms (Parra-Cardona, Córdova, Holtrop, Villarruel, and Wieling 2008). *Privileging pláticas*, we discuss dream interpretations and *presentimientos*, *remedios caseros* and *curanderismo*.

Oias

En la madrugada of the start of the work week; the cold moist air clinging to the leaves, I
lay in quiet
En el nombre del padre, el hijo, y el espíritu santo
Peacefully watching mi abuela Connie before the oppressive heat of the day
The soft illumination of the lamp, a 30-watt yellow haze surrounded her
Creating a soft aura around her head, reminiscent of the images of saints
Decorating our church windows
She turned the soft worn pages of her bible and expressed the first joyful mystery
En el principio ya existía la Palabra; y la Palabra estaba junto a Dios y era Dios.
Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo She whispered
her inner hopes and fears, of her sons and daughters, carried away on the whisps of air
emanating from her lips
Dios te salve, Maria. Llena eres de gracia
Her fingers deftly and assuredly caressed the smoothed crystalline beads, minute by
minute more accurately than the hands of the kitchen clock
The hour of her watch fulfilled, breathing out her last message, *Ruega por nosotros*
the last words spoken to her late husband and begging for mercy from her *Jesusito*
the leaves blew across the grass as the sun warmed the earth and her soul rejoiced for
another day

My grandmother passed in the early days of COVID, succumbing to this virus contracted while in the hospital. Isolated from family, away from her bed at home; I did not get to pray with her, say goodbye to her, even attend her burial. I still converse with her though. Connie is every day present in my prayers, wishes for my sons and wife; she is in every memory of life; she is in every page I turn of the Bible, her soft fingertips gently guiding mine as we recall that His love, which she shared with me too, is with us both and that she is no longer of this world and that we should never have been.

My grandmother was a strong woman, widowed with two boys at home still in the 1970s. She taught faith to me more than religion. She was not going to sink away from a belief in her abilities or her rights. She opposed the priests in her parish, reminding them that this was her community, and they were visitors passing through. She was a Valley Interfaith worker, reminding the politicians that they too were transient practitioners of power in the community where her influence held power. Never one to back away from what she believed to be proper action she offended because of her straightforwardness. I have taken her examples and applied them to success and detriment in higher education. Failing to obtain a PhD because I did what was right, reminding certain academics that what was important to study and what was of value to know were what comes from the researcher, not the popularity of journal articles. I lost academic positions fighting for the rights of students and community rather than bowing to the system and its self-aggrandizement. I have lost research and prevented others from conducting “research” holding them not just to ethical compliance but to moral and just causes. All because Connie modeled approaches to life passed to her from generations before, the whispers she delivered were those also emitted in Las Rusias of her parents Hilario y Fidela Trevino, and her grandfather Hilario.

NUESTROS HIJOS

We use arnica to alleviate bruising, and sangre de chango to sterilize wounds. They understand that mama’s medicine can come in the form of pills, but also a walk on the beach or a cup of coffee. They understand that sometimes we are doctors, and at other times we need to rely on other doctors to help us. They have learned to recognize the northern winds moving through campus by the smell of the maize from the Maseca plant north of town. They understand humility as hand-me-down clothes, sharing meals with the homeless, and knowing that we at any time could be asking for help from our community.

Our sons watch and analyze our habitual patterns of everyday life, and we live life knowing we are watched by them. Every action was scrutinized and questioned. We carefully craft our words and actions. They understand that our work is not contained in an office, but it is dynamic—work occurs in different settings, meetings, and formats, and we include them at every opportunity—conferences, protests, marches, poetry readings, lectures, social functions. We talk about injustices in terms they understand—and we limit their access to first world entitlement. We function without internet access at home, without televisions, without electronics—instead, we teach them to rely on newspapers, radios, books, cuentos/stories, and letters to communicate.

Testimonios—we (re)tell our stories of struggle in the academe and the conflicts which arise and privilege because of femininities/masculinities, standing as güera/prieto, advantaged / disadvantaged, and the realm of Mexicanidad/Latindad/Xhicanidad (Orelus 2020; Saldana, Castro-Villarreal, and Sosa 2013).

TESTIMONIOS DE PRESENTIMIENTOS

Having been raised by a family who rejected and moved past our Indigeneity in public, a hallowing shadow cast upon the many rituals, beliefs, and stories of our ancestors was very much present in our private lives. My family, nuclear and extended, were converts of a protestant, Christian fundamentalist group, Church of Christ, during the 1960s in the Borderlands of Texas and Tamaulipas. The rules of this conservative denomination governed our behavior—complete abstinence of alcohol, foods cooked in blood, and all religious and mystical paraphernalia amongst other things. The people of the Borderlands are prevalently Catholic and partake naturally of the undertakings that were forbidden to me. I consumed and thrived upon any access to the culture and knowledge of my ancestors and their traditions. The repressed curiosity and yearning were placated, but not satisfied, with the stories passed down, the remedios and sobadas that I learned for healing, and the paraphernalia I kept hidden in my mind. Hierbas, crystals, twigs, twine, egg-things of the everyday—manifested in my mind the paraphernalia I could not hold or touch, and much less own.

Because I could not hold the things I wanted, my mind held on tighter to every word and ritual of Indigeneity and culture. I was raised as a single child in my formative years in a multigenerational home, and this gave me much space to become a wanderer of my own cognitions and psyche—but also, a voyeur to the uninhibited behavior of my family and the muscle memories their minds and bodies created prior to their conversion to this nouveau morale. My maternal great-grandmother, the mother of my mother's mother had the greatest influence and gave the greatest insight. She was the matriarch of her ten living offspring, their children and their children's children. She was the original convert to this new way, but I learned many of the old ways from her.

I learned the art of her matriarchate, the power of her influence. I learned the harmless, palatable recipes of the malleable maize—the sustenance of our ancestors. The many traditional dishes of our people. I observed and learned the science of healing with hierbas: arnica, marijuana, manzanilla, romero, cola de caballo, pelos de elote, estafiate, y mucho más. I learned how to release bolas during a sobada using a pulling technique with the wrist, index finger and thumb, also tronar anginas. I also learned in sobadas about empache, pulling up the skin on the lower back with olive oil to cure indigestion, abrir la cadera—to align the spine. I learned cranial and sinus massages; I learned how to release toxic energy with ramas, the pirul, and eggs during a barrida or limpia. I learned so many things that my hands and digits can still replicate to this day.

The things I learned from my Mama Coco go beyond the nurturing and healing of the body. I learned the need for convivio with our family, also the need for pláticas. Pláticas go beyond just conversing. There is so much art in the embodiment of plática, the power dynamics that occur

during the plática, and the empowerment that the members receive from the dynamic interaction. There was a special connection I felt with the pláticas I had with her—they were often with 2 other women—my mother and grandmother. We were all the oldest daughters born 20 years apart from each other: 1931, 1951, 1971, and 1990, las cuatro generaciones. We would talk about our insecurities, our dreams and presentimientos, and the history of our family.

The sueños and presentimientos were always the pláticas that gave you chills down your spine. Interpreting dreams that foreshadowed death, pain, longevity of life, tribulations, and chismes never failed to amaze me when they became real in just a few hours or weeks. I learned to observe the color of death on a person's countenance, the sudden twisters of dust and butterflies which meant death was near, and the distinguished sounds of the chariot that could be heard at night—a donkey drawn cart with the sounds metallic clinking on asphalt stopping in front of your home to knock on your screen door at the witching hour.

As a child I often suffered from fever-induced seizures and hallucinations, and I also sleepwalked regularly. Mama Coco would always listen receptively to the description of the people I would meet and talk to in these other worldly experiences. To this day, I have many of those meetings through vivid dreams. For the past several years I have managed to suppress these encounters through prescribed anticonvulsants.

Growing up, I was never ashamed of my culture, but I lived in a narrative that told me that my culture was subpar and had to be hidden. Academia has been very much like religion for me—painting the same narrative—hiding behind the third person and peer-reviewed articles. Things fell into perspective for me when I began reading about my culture from outsiders claiming to be the experts, academics who claim to be the experts. I understand that there are many layers of colonization that exists between me and Indigeneity, and I acknowledge them openly—colonized primary, secondary and postsecondary schooling, religion, growing up conditioned that my Indigeneity was not valued, my language—English and Spanish being the colonizers' languages and very few indigenous words that have managed to survive genocide—making everyday choices, from food to clothing, that help me assimilate with white Academics because I want to advance my career. I am also a wife, a mother of two young boys—being raised in academic circles—furthering removing them from the fountain of Indigenous sources. My sons, however, are being exposed openly to our culture, values, and beliefs. I refuse to hide behind white masks, I acknowledge the parts of my life that have been whitewashed and bleached, I do my part in reparations—I connect community to academia and acknowledge my community as a knowledgeable source, participants, but also co-researchers.

Pláticas—as parents, a mother and father, we interrogate our relationship in the light of our faith, culture, and levels of colonization. We do this as BIPOC members of a community in the borderlands of the Rio Bravo attempting to navigate both academia, family with its own struggles of occupation, and raising two boys to know how to treat people (Hurtado and Sinha 2008).

CAMINANDO CON LOS ANCIANOS

Walking is my life and gives life. A gift I learned to ignore in this western dominated existence I have had for too long. When I was young, I walked with my grandmother in the yard, making thousands of little circles as I lifted fallen leaves from her tree and petals of the rosebush. I carried each with the reverence one is taught as a child for all living and gentle creatures. I carried them to the wheelbarrow and laughed, cheered, and cried. I knew, both from the gentle urges presented in her teachings and from genetic memory, that with the quiet and peace of nature came the opportunity to converse with our creator.

Just a few blinks later, I walked to school, enmeshing with the coal dust and sulfur of the industrial market. Warned to stay away, I did the opposite. I always ventured toward the unknown, the dangerous, the ignored. It offered me the opportunity to be me. Feeling alone in a dangerous world, ignored as a foreigner in a foreign land. The same feeling granted me back home because of language barriers. *Netito habla Inglés bien; ¿pero que quiere, esta pidiendo por Chicharras con huevo?* I began to learn not to hear, because I was incapable of listening. They spoke to me here too, but I failed to listen. Thus began my run away from family values. I heard the stories but failed to listen to them at all.

Walking became a task, a chore to accomplish the goal of arriving at a spot. I walked through the blinding and freezing snows of the mile high city in the aftermath of two blizzards. I walked among the barricades, entrenchments, and bunkers of the coastal artillery in the jungles of the isthmus of Panama. I walked in the red clay of the south Georgian pine woods, staining my shoes and pants. I walked among the stone embankments of the Hudson River valley with ice floes as my companion. I walked with the rolling tumbleweeds on the hardpan floor of the Chihuahuan Desert in the shade of the Franklins.

While walking I saw the shadows of violence carried in the winds of the dark woods. The branches spoke to me of the bodies strung from their limbs. The dirt clung to me as it desperately sought a listener to understand the blood that it absorbed out of pity for victims of other men. The rocks bore witness to me of the bodies smashed against them in war and crimes. The wind, ever present, danced with nature to carry their words to my heart and soul, but my ignorance and depravity led me to only feel the cold chill of these deaths or the warm humidity of their last breaths and to ignore them.

It was the chilly wind of the April north, the last of the cold evenings, that brought the news to me. I had not paid any attention to this wind. But it spoke to me, the chills on my neck and arms spoke to me. The eeriness of the light spoke to me. But it was the words released from my mother's mouth that passed my ears. My grandfather had died. I was wounded, though the blade that entered did so with the precision of a scalpel. It carved out the malice of my heart and reinvigorated the cry for justice and mercy which I had abandoned as a child.

The stories flooded my memories of the man who listened to AM radio in the dead of night, to hear of the people's plight for equality and justice. My name given to me through his influence, his adoration of Ernesto Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Memories of the man who had as a child come to the Frontera for work. The stories of his hardness and loving appreciation for his son came

to my heart. Memories of his letter writing to my own father came back to me. Memories of my callous approach to him and the fact that I had only seen him four times in my conscious memory haunted me.

I see the mariposas and feel my grandfather there, returning to Mexico each spring as he so desperately wanted to do in life. Crushed in the oblivion of life centered in work and survival, he was buried in the inner city of Houston while still alive. But he has spoken to me, and I have learned to listen. His wishes and dreams carried on the gusts of wind that I can now appreciate and relate with. Rushed to move beyond the countenance of existence they drive us and motivate us. When we listen to them, we are emboldened by the spirit of our maker. We are made humans again as He has created us, master and grateful respecter of life.

I now walk with my sons, carry them as much as I can with the intent do so for as long as I can. To map within them the spirit of our ancestors and the value of the steps we take. To converse with them without words in a way that only their body and soul can know together. I walk with my sons to demonstrate how it is done. The way my father did with me. Now four generations speak together as my grandfather's plight and my father's sacrifices come to my mouth and shape my every deed—how I can now understand what was told to me and appreciate the steps each of them took walking. I can now feel their steps, those of my grandfather nearly 100 years ago as he came here to work and live, to walk along the canals as he struggled in his employment and to watch for his children's illicit attempts to swim in the flowing waters. I can feel the steps taken in lugged boots from my father's drafted service to the army and those he took to plant a new path before me. I can feel the innocence of the first steps my sons have taken, toward greater heights than I can imagine or ever hope for myself.

Walking is my life and gives life. A gift I have finally come to accept in my rejection of the western-dominated existence I have enjoyed for far too long. *Esta es nuestra autohistoria-teoria en praxis; nuestras experiencias son nuestro testimonio vivo.* Our only hope is to be to our children what our ancestors were to us and do all in our power to encourage them to pass down this knowledge.

CONTRIBUTORS:

Ernesto is of and in the borderlands; his poetry interrogates life en la frontera and privilege in the academe - he is the Rascuache Academic.

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