

TORTILLAS Y CUENTOS: Grabbing My Two Worlds with My Own Two Hands

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This testimony was originally a plenary presentation for the 2004 MALCS Summer Institute and Conference in Seattle, Washington. The author's narrative concerns decolonization and both the cultures in which she grew up and the one in which she lives.

I grew up in an environment where being Native and Chicana wasn't a bad thing, but in the process of my education I found out that being both is anything but easy. I understand a few things about what it is to be Native, and a few things about what it is to be Chicana, but I fully understand what it means to be Comanche/Apache y Chicana. It is those like me, who identify themselves as Native and Chicana or "other" and Chicana, who have become invisible. I am the extension of both my Native ancestors and my Chicana ancestors. I am self-identified and I will not be thought of as invisible.

I was asked to participate in the 2003 MALCS Summer Institute in San Antonio, Texas. Before agreeing, I read the position statement drafted over a decade ago at the Laredo, Texas, MALCS Summer Institute. It states:

Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS, Women Active in Letters and Social Change) is an organization of Chicanas/Latinas and Native American women working in academia and in community settings with a common goal: to work toward the support, education, and dissemination of Chicana/Latina and Native American women's issues. Chicanas/Latinas and Native American women from a variety of institutions gather at this yearly Summer Institute to network, share

information, offer support and re-energize. The MALCS Summer Institute is one of the few places Chicanas/Latinas and Native American women can come together without the influence of male and/or Euro-American consciousness or opinion. While some charge that this is separatist, the MALCS reply is not one of apology. This is our space. The dynamics of this Chicana/Latina and Native American woman space are worth guarding, even in the face of criticism from those we respect and work with in our home institutions. (Laredo, Texas, 1991)

That statement alone was enough to convince me to participate.

Pero it was difficult to differentiate the Native American voices at the San Antonio MALCS Institute in 2003. So it was during the business meeting that I asked, “Where are all the Native women?” Then I met two fantastic young women. One spoke up, “We are here. I have been waiting for you.” Of course, I was shocked. Why was she waiting for me? We talked for a long time, the Comanche/Apache/Chicana—an Indigenous woman from Mexico, and the Thai/Indigenous, a Tarhumara. We talked about our differences, and about our similar experiences as self-identified women. We spoke about how the dominant culture’s language, even though the oppressor’s language was and in some ways is still used against us. We concluded that our differences made us the same. We walked away hermanas.

Being Comanche/Apache/Chicana represented something pure, ideal, and beautiful. My father taught us the way of being Native; my mother taught us how to speak Spanish. My father gave us beads to wear, told us stories of our ancestors; my mother taught us the lyrics to “Little Joe y la familia” and made us tortillas. Before attending Catholic school, we were taught to say *Marauwe*

and *udabko*, “hello” and “thank you very much” in Comanche. But we were also taught to say *gracias a dios* and *con permiso*. I think we were the only family who had taquitos de papa con huevo wrapped up in tin foil at the powwows. Our lives were easy.

I remember the first year we went to Catholic school. We had to learn a new language. The other students made fun of our long hair and beads and our accents. Las monjas and the black suits tried to assimilate my brother and me. My mother was told we had a learning deficiency. We were put in “special” classes to “combat” our language problem. I didn’t understand what the problem was: we knew two languages, Comanche and Spanish. What else did we have to know? The nuns and priests “just” wanted us to fit in. Ah, fit in—I should have that tattooed on my forehead instead of this nopal.

I remember the day we thought Pop, our father, was going to punch Father John in the nose. We were out of school for Thanksgiving. We did not celebrate the holiday because of my father’s political beliefs. Nonetheless, my brother and I heard our classmates talk about turkey stuffing and pumpkin pie with whipped cream and wondered what it tasted like. We usually had tortillas con mantequilla. On that day, Father John showed up at the door with a full-fledged Thanksgiving dinner. “Oh no, thank you, Father John, but my husband...” and my mother was stopped in the middle of her sentence by Father John as he walked into the apartment with all the fixings of a traditional white Thanksgiving. You can imagine our reaction. “Finally, we get to taste pumpkin pie with whipped cream! Groovy!” Then Pop came into the kitchen. We thought we were all going to hell next without a taste of that pumpkin pie. “Pero Pepe,” my mother started. While our eyes were fixed on the pumpkin pie, Pop and Father John stepped outside. I didn’t know what was going to be more exciting, watching the black suit get punched out by our father or shoving

that pumpkin pie into my mouth. In the end, the pie wasn't all it was made out to be, and we didn't go to hell, and Father John did not get his nose punched out.

Just when my brother and I got a handle on how to deal with the black suits and nuns, our parents told us we were moving to my mother's homeland: Texas. We did not like the idea. We had grown up in Illinois, surrounded by different cultures: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Cubanos. My father finally sold us on the idea after he told us that in the new place there were going to be people like us: Chicano/a and Native. Mom packed up her tortilla mixing bowl and comal and Pop packed up his stories. My siblings and I packed up our hopes.

Texas was not what he had described. The first week in school, I got into a fight with a boy because he held my brother by his long hair and called him a *joto*. We were not familiar with that type of language, but we knew it meant something bad. After that incident, the principal told my parents that my brother's hair had to go. He was sent to a barber.

Junior high school was not any different. It was fight after fight. Both my brother and I knew the principals' names and they knew our parents well. We kept our hair as long as the schools would allow. At home, our father pitched a ball and told stories about thunder and wind, or about the stars and buffalo. We loved his stories.

It was when his stories stopped that I stopped "being Native." The day after we put my father in the ground, I cut my hair, tore my beads off, and stole a pair of my cousin's jeans. I knew beads do not make you Native, but without the stories, the beads had lost their meaning. I was not Native anymore. I was

Chicana. Laredo, Texas, is a predominantly Chicana/o town and claiming anything other than “Mexican” as your heritage was tough. Claiming only my Chicana roots was how I survived high school.

In college my Chinese professor asked, “What tribe?” I looked away and said that I did not know what he was talking about. He replied that I looked Native. As the semester rolled on, I realized how much I missed my ancestors, the stories, and my heritage. After my father’s passing, I did not want to be Comanche or Apache. I wanted the fights and the teasing of my youth to go away. “Yo soy Chicana,” I kept telling myself. After a while, I realized that to deny my indigenosity was also to deny my Chicana roots. I went back to organizing powwows and teaching the community how to bead and dance. All the while, I gave the instructions in Spanish and wore my huipiles.

As an undergrad student, I relearned the importance of heritage, culture, and community. When I went to grad school in the Midwest, I was again Comanche/Apache/Chicana. I attended school in Indian Territory. I was proud to be myself again. Nonetheless, the experiences in grad school left a scar. That scar is gone now, but the different pigmentation still remains: brown and a lighter shade of brown. On campus, the Natives asked what rez did I come from, and was I registered with a tribe. Of course my answers were no. They asked me if I was landbased, if I knew who my people were. I responded with pride, “I am from Texas.” They said, “Texas doesn’t have any Natives.” Then what was I? John Wayne hadn’t killed all the Comanches, I was sure.

In one of my classes, we discussed the term *privilege*. Some of my classmates told me that a person no longer had to look Native to be Native. Then, did I look Native? Did I need a mug shot? Other Native students told me that we do

not speak Spanish. If so, why do we all speak English?

It has been a struggle to be who I am. When I was growing up, it was clear, "I am my father's daughter and my mother's *mija*." In grad school I felt like I was living in exile: I did not belong with the Natives, I did not fit in with the Chicana/os, and I did not fit in white academia.

Now Natives tell me I need to choose, and Chicanas/os tell me that too. How can anyone choose? How can you tell your father you do not want to listen to his stories? How can you turn down a flour tortilla con mantequilla made by your mother's own hands? It seems as though the more schooling I get, the more I need to choose one heritage over the other. Is this a narrowness of intellect or an insatiable desire for status and prestige?

Now I am learning to decolonize myself from the forced indoctrination of the patriarchal church. I struggle daily to break from being completely institutionalized by white academics, and I fight against assimilation. I am again learning the language of my Comanche ancestors, but I am also learning the language of the white institution, the same language that is turned around and used against me.

I come from Comanche/Apache/Chicana blood. My people have been fighting for generations. They fought the white man and the Spanish colonizers. Soy Tejana, I'm from Texas, where Natives live because they refused to be locked up on some reservation. They refused to live by others' orders. My identity comes from people who are survivors: the Chicana and the Native.

I hope that I, as well as others who are self-determined, can be part of a community without having to choose a culture. Every one of our cultures tells

us what things mean, and what is important. We have experienced years of forced acculturation at the hands of the dominant society that has altered our identities. We need to reevaluate our processes to find again the path to self-discovery. We need the past to move ahead and imagine the future.

I struggle to stay who I am. I fight to be linked to the people who made me. I hear the voices of the Native women, and I read the words of Chicana writers: their cries are all the same. We all fight the same oppressors, but have some of us chosen their ways? We sweat the same, we bleed the same, and we want the same: to be recognized. But at the forefront are the Chicanas while our Native sisters are, as Norma Alarcón puts it, in oblivion.¹

We need the inclusion of both Native and self-identified women. If we deny the Native voices, are we not ourselves colonizing? And isn't colonization something Chicanas try to defeat? Our identities are bound up by the cultures that surround us and that raise us. To call myself only a Chicana is to deny my Native voice. I refuse to toss that voice into oblivion.

Note

¹ Personal communication, July 2002.