



of Mexico, which included Nuevo Mexico where much of the land was organized into land grants with collective and individual sectors. The reasoning behind the taking of the land was that these vast territories were in inferior Mexican hands, and because of this, were an underdeveloped, mismanaged wasteland. Such territories, they reasoned, would be better off in the hands of the superior Anglo race that would bring civilization to the area, an enterprise sanctioned by Providence. So thought a number of U.S. politicians and businessmen—and this was the message spread by the press. This message became an incentive to instigate the Mexican-American War, ending with the infamous Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, and later the Gadsden Treaty of 1853. Together, these treaties took about half of Mexico. Manifest Destiny also motivated mass Anglo immigration into the former Mexican territories; a movement bolstered by government acts encouraging and rewarding settlement. The years after 1848 saw rampant capitalism, land and resource grabbing, erection of fences, the denial by U.S. courts of numbers of Mexican land grant claims. Such acts were supported by collusion among business entrepreneurs, lawyers, and government officials in the ultimate illegal acquisition of land. It also saw the betrayal of poorer Mexicans by rich Mexicans who collaborated with Anglo counterparts.

The greatest injustice of this era was the murder of Mexicans and the dispossession from their lands that included the placing of non-adjudicated land grants, some with thousands of acres, into the *public domain*.

Under this status, land grants could be disposed of, at will, by the U.S. government. It was this status that in later years placed land grants under the *protection* of the Forest Service. It was *this* placement that underlined the struggle by la Alianza Federal de Mercedes, spearheaded by Tijerina that unfolded in Tierra Amarilla, Nuevo Mexico in the 1960s. Central to this political drama was that the taking of the land by the government was directly connected to the death of small Nuevo Mexicano rural communities. In the past these communities relied on the natural resources of the area to not only maintain their livestock and crops, but also to build homes and secure other natural products

A La Memoria de Reies Lopez Tijerina, el Tigre del Norte

by Yoly Zentella

On January 19, 2015 Aztlán lost a powerful champion and symbol of the Chicano struggle for land justice.

As we reflect on the death of Reies López Tijerina (1926-2015), we remember the legacy and lessons he left us: he dedicated his life to a struggle to regain the lost land grants of el norte de Nuevo Mexico; he modeled commitment and organized against the victimization of our Raza; and he encouraged an activism that yields the best change—that which comes from the grassroots! Tijerina's death has left a void in our hearts and our political horizons; we are wanting of a true fighter, of a tigre for el norte. Now, we search for the best way to pay him tribute.

The backdrop to Tijerina's activism is centuries old, one that began with the overarching European colonization of the indigenous American continent. One thread of this colonization was 19th century Westward Expansion in the U.S. This was a push toward the acquisition of territory west of the Mississippi, supported by Manifest Destiny—the Anglo philosophy that condoned the violent *taking* of what is now the southwestern and western U.S. At that time, these were the northern territories

from the environment for a variety of needs. The historical dispossession of Nuevo Mexicanos and state laws that appeared to be designed to strip them of their remaining lands when seeking public assistance is described by a Las Vegas, Nuevo Mexico resident: “*It’s really like a holocaust that happened to our people, and how do you deal with a holocaust, how do you deal with the fact that here you are in New Mexico, you’re on welfare, but you no longer have access to ancestral lands.*” (Zentella, 2006, p. 198)

With land loss came a loss of independence, a loss of the power and wealth that comes with the ownership of land, and loss of a survival base. In turn, loss brought a dependence on paid employment or government assistance. Loss of land also meant the disintegration of family and community ties and collaborations necessary for life on the land. A resident of Springer, Nuevo Mexico described the ability of Tijerina to see these connections:

“He had a broader picture of how the families were being broken up, [how] the culture, religion was tied together, it was not just the loss of the land but [that] land loss led to the breakup of the family.” (Zentella, 2006, p. 193)

The complex consequences of land loss were at the *heart* of the restoration of the land grants to the descendants of the original owners. La Alianza organized protests on the disputed land during the years 1965 to 1967 and carried out the infamous raid on the Rio Arriba courthouse on June 5, 1967. The raid resulted in the injury of several employees and, consequently, a manhunt by law enforcement for Alianza members including Tijerina. While what followed was government harassment, arrests, charges, convictions, and prison time, the issues that were the basis of the protests did not die and continue today, as does admiration for Tijerina. A resident of Las Vegas, Nuevo Mexico says of Tijerina: “*I think that just in the awareness that he [Tijerina] raised was really good. There’s always been the feeling that the Forest Service, maybe even the American government . . . took over Mexico in the interest of Manifest Destiny.*” (Zentella, 2006, p. 207)

Awareness and becoming politicized as an outcome of the Chicano Movimiento and the activism of Tijerina is described by

a resident of Springer, Nuevo Mexico: “*I think I learned . . . in college reading [about] the rise of the Chicano Movement [and] the courthouse raid in Tierra Amarilla, I became more interested in it, did some research in it and attended conferences.*” (Zentella, 2006, p. 207)

An impressive perspective of land seen through the eyes of a politicized *child* is recalled by a resident of Ocate, Nuevo Mexico: *She was a little girl and she explained to me what had happened when all this stuff was going on with Tijerina and the police had come. She was very, very adamant about why we had to fight for our land and not let the land go and that it had to go on for generations and generations.* (Zentella, 2006, p. 207)

Reies López Tijerina’s activism had a tremendous impact on el norte de Nuevo Mexico. La Alianza and the Movimiento are directly responsible in contributing to the politicization of numbers of people. Land activism coincided with the Chicano Movimiento in this part of Nuevo Mexico, particularly in Las Vegas, an area familiar with historical uprisings. Political activism in the 1960s extended a tradition of resistance and rebellion, with roots in Las Gorras Blancas (1889-1891), El Plan de San Diego (1915-1917) and smaller uprisings and individual stands against invasion and colonization taking place, particularly after 1848. Today, activism continues as Hispanos-Chicanos resist gentrification through the preservation of their culture, language, music, and traditions for future generations. Keeping el norte safe for our children includes fighting to keep oil and gas out of the area, a daunting task because of the money and political muscle wielded by these corporations, and the support of business by a Republican state government.

Tijerina reinforced the idea that land is basic. Fighting to retain one’s territory, to be able to control one’s ancestral places, as is Aztlán for La Raza, is a natural human instinct. But this is not unique to el norte; consider what was once apartheid South Africa and the current situation in Palestine. Both are examples of the consequences brought about by the colonial severing of the most basic connection that can occur between a group, an individual, and the land. Activism and resistance to this severance is also a natural outcome. Such are the concepts that are embodied in the person of Tijerina and are part of a universal struggle. The best tribute that we can make to him and those that went before him, are the words attributed to Joe Hill before his death, *don’t mourn, organize.* And, remember! ♦♦

—Que en paz descanse. ¡Reies López Tijerina, presente!

Bio: Yoly Zentella is an independent researcher, writer, psychology faculty and licensed psychotherapist living in el norte de Nuevo Mexico. Email: yzentellnm@yahoo.com. | Contact lavoz@esperanzacenter.org for article references.



Left: Protest burning of a park sign at the Santa Fe National Forest . Ctr: (LtoR) Chief Beeman Logan, a leader of the Tonawanda Band of Seneca Indians from NY, Reies López Tijerina and Rev. Ralph Abernathy of the SCLC at the Poor People’s March, May 17, 1968. Right: Tijerina, El Tigre, continued to be an activist as an elder.