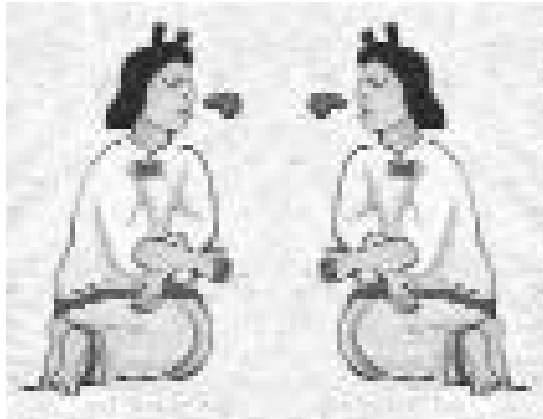


The revisioning of history es una gran limpia: Teaching and Historical Trauma in Chicana/o History

by Yolanda Chávez Leyva, Ph.D.



I begin this essay with a poem by Leslie Marmon Silko because her words encapsulate my message.¹ History is powerful, but a history that is confused, forgotten, or taken away hurts us, leaves us vulnerable, and keeps us living in the trauma of our past. The trauma of our past, historical trauma, is an historical event or process that shocks us out of our state of balance, as individuals or communities, often leaving us with long lasting emotional, physical, and mental effects. Historical trauma, like a physical trauma, wounds us.² However, just as history can be the weapon that wounds us, it can also be the medicine that heals us.

Intergenerational historical trauma, like history itself, is passed down from generation to generation. Its effects are felt over time, although not always understood explicitly by those experiencing/re-experiencing the trauma. Clinical studies have demonstrated that future generations do not have to remember an historic trauma consciously in order to be affected by it. Psychologists Bonnie Duran, Eduardo Duran, and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart point to studies of Jewish Holocaust survivors and their descendants to confirm this.³ According to Brave Heart, Duran, and Duran, intergenerational trauma occurs "in reaction to multigenerational, collective, historical and cumulative psychic wounding over time—over the lifespan and across generations..."⁴ Such insights from scholars, rooted in the fields of psychology and social work, have much to teach those of us who practice and teach history.

In the past twelve years that I have taught in university

*I will tell you something about stories
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off illness and death.*

*You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.
Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that.
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then.*

— From *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

classrooms, I have learned that healing is a crucial and legitimate pedagogical function. Moreover, I have realized that the Chicana/o history classroom has the enormous potential to create a place where our students can confront historical trauma in a productive way.

At the 2002 Gender on the Borderlands Conference, Dr. Inés Hernández Ávila of the Native American Studies Program at U.C. Davis gave a moving plenary presentation pointing to the force of history. In fact, her comments provided the title for this presentation when she told the audience, "The revisioning of history es una gran limpia." I was elated to hear her words because they reinforced what I have come to believe with increasing commitment over the past decade of teaching. Histories, especially histories framed in a postcolonial context, have tremendous powers to heal.⁵ In traditional Mexicana/Chicana healing practices, a *limpia* is a cleansing where body, mind, and spirit are brought into balance, as the negative is removed and replaced with that which is healthy.

In this essay, I call for a community wide dialogue that explores historical trauma and the relationship between history and healing within Chicana/o history. I know, from my experiences as a student and teacher, that the relationship is strong, although often unacknowledged, especially within the discipline of history itself. In calling for a deeper examination into historical trauma and its consequences, I am not advocating a history of victimhood, however. The Chicana/o community has a

history of creative resistance and resilience to oppression, as do other communities of color in the United States. It is essential that in exploring historical trauma, we strike a balance between understanding how history has injured our communities and the ways in which our communities have struggled to survive. We must understand both.

Although historical trauma is evident in the classroom, it is the community outside of the academy that has more readily recognized the connections between history and healing. In recent years, for example, communities of color have begun finding ways to reclaim and use history in order to restore our humanity and to recover from the devastation of our traumatic past. Activists, artists, healers and others have incorporated traditional healing ceremonies to heal from the wounds of the past.

Articles in the American Indian media regularly reference historical trauma and community ceremonies intended to deal with its aftereffects. Remembrance of ancestors is an essential ingredient of community healing. For example, the Santee people of Nebraska have conducted ceremonies remembering 37 Santee who were hanged in 1862 during land disputes with white settlers.⁶ The Lakota have also remembered their ancestors through memorial rides. The 1992 film, "Wiping the Tears of Seven Generations," tells the story of a 1990 Washigila or traditional Lakota wiping away the tears ceremony. Three hundred Lakota rode 250 miles in sub-zero degree weather in December of 1990, commemorating the loss of their ancestors during the Massacre of Wounded Knee a hundred years earlier. It was the beginning of moving their community out of mourning into healing.⁷

Since the 1970s, Native American psychologists and social workers have joined with traditional elders and healers to employ time-honored healing modalities and ceremonies, including sweat lodges and vision quests, in addressing historical trauma and its devastating after effects.⁸ Ceremonies such as the Wiping of the Tears ceremony and the 1991 traditional burial of 31 Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux whose remains had been held by the Smithsonian for over a century have helped heal the wounds of history.⁹

The African American community, too, has recognized the connections between historical trauma and contemporary healing. A 2001 PBS documentary, "Freedman's Cemetery Memorial: A Place of Healing," document records the healing ceremony that accompanied the opening of the Freeman's Cemetery Memorial in Dallas. The cemetery, burial ground for former slaves and their descendants, was in danger of destruction until the community came together to demand that their ancestors and the history represented by the cemetery be respected. The documentary depicts a moving healing ceremony, which draws in part from

traditional African ceremonies, in which the African American community comes together to remember and honor its dead.¹⁰

In her study of historical trauma among the Lakota, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart concludes that education about traumatic events leads to an increased awareness of the effects of the traumas. Furthermore, sharing these effects "with others of a similar background and within a traditional Lakota context leads to a cathartic sense of relief."¹¹ In other words, we can only heal from the pain of history if we have the historical knowledge to recognize that historical events have wounded us.

The remembrance of history

In the modern period, the production and teaching of history have been integral to the creation and maintenance of modern nation states. Although historians sought to employ standards of objectivity into the discipline, the writing of history worked to justify unequal power relations as well as the economic exploitation of peoples of color. As the profession of historian increasingly sought "objectivity," official or academic histories clouded or even made invisible the histories and experiences of marginalized groups. The remembrance of our histories, almost non-existent in the classroom until the 1960s, became the domain of the home as parents and grandparents shared their memories.¹²

While history, as an academic discipline, has its roots in the 19th century, cultures worldwide, and across time, have recognized the importance and power of history. The necessity of passing down history from generation to generation is recognized almost globally. In some cultures, there are individuals who are charged with remembering the group's history, developing the ability to recite hundreds of years of history by memory.

Cultures honor those who remember the histories. Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, an indigenous Mexican historian born at the end of the 16th century, wrote in eloquent terms of the histories left by "our great-grandfathers, our great-grandmothers." He chronicled the importance of history in this way, "Their renown, their history, their memory/ Thus in the future/Never will it perish, never will it be forgotten/ Always will we treasure it/ We, their children, their grandchildren/Brothers, great-grandchildren/Great-great-grandchildren, descendants/We who carry their blood and their color/We will tell it, we will pass it on."¹³ Remembrance of history is fundamental to human societies.

This essay constitutes a portion of a larger project in progress, titled *Heart Knowledge: History, Memory and Trauma in Chicana/o History*, that explores community memory, intergenerational trauma, healing, and pedagogy. The author invites comments, stories, or responses. Please email Yolanda Leyva at