

# Sembrando Ideas / Sembrando Acción

By Norma Cantú, Trinity University

Editor's note: *This was the keynote address to the NACCS Tejas Foco Conference held in Houston Texas, February 17, 2019.*

I begin by acknowledging the spirits of this place now called Houston, Texas, honoring the Karankawas and the Akokisas ancestors. I thank The *Tejas Foco Annual Conference* committee for the invitation to speak today.

As is my wont my words will meander through poetry and testimonio musing on the theme of this gathering—*Semillas de Poder: Chicana/o/x Movements & Mapping 21st Century Resistance*.

I'd like to begin in **1325** with the founding of Tenochtitlan ...folio 2 of the Codex Mendoza shows the establishment of the Aztec empire in what is now Mexico City. The Aztecs had come from Aztlán south honoring their God Huitzilopochtli's urging to establish their kingdom when they found the eagle perched on a nopal with a snake on its beak, thus planting the seeds of our layered mestizaje—for there were other people already there and the Empire built upon it.



Photo: The Codex Mendoza circa 1541

The next key date I underscore is **1492** the year of one of the most violent and intense encounters in history. The codices chronicle the devastation. The seeds of injustice and of colonization planted remain over 500 years later in the remnants of the colonizing enterprise. The Spanish Empire clashed with the Aztec Empire and the seeds of resistance were planted then, too. In *el Lienzo de Tlaxcala* we have a chronicle of the devastation and of the characters in the story—La Malinche, the Aztec kings, Cortes and the warriors and soldiers...the anonymous authors of this crónica documented the violence and the roles of the key players like Malintzín—La Malinche. The next major year I focus on turns to a spiritual encounter: **1531**, the year of the apparitions—yes there were 5 total—of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. The event that December in the *Valle del Tepeyac* sows the seeds of a folk Catholicism, a religious and spiritual shift that remains until today in, oh, so many forms. The image of our powerful fierce indigenous Christian image was the impetus at the *Grito de Dolores* in **1810**, as Mexico fought for Independence from Spain, and again as an emblem during the Mexican Revolution of **1910** and with Cesar Chavez as the farmworkers marched for justice in the **1960s**. But before we jump ahead, there is another figure who planted seeds that are still bearing fruit.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, *La decima musa*, the 2nd femi-

nist poet of the Americas—**The 1st was an indigenous poet, Macuilxochitzin who was writing about women being out on the battle field in the mid 15th century before the Europeans set foot on the Americas, on *Abya Yala* as the Guna call this continent.**

Her poem concludes with these lines:

*Axayácatl* exclamó:

“¡Que venga el otomí  
que me ha herido en la pierna!”

*El otomí* tuvo miedo, dijo:

“¡En verdad me matarán!”

*Trajo entonces un grueso madero*

y la piel de un venado,  
con ésto hizo reverencia a *Axayácatl*.

*Estaba lleno de miedo el otomí.*

*Pero entonces sus mujeres*

por él hicieron súplica a *Axayácatl*

(translation: Miguel León Portilla, 2003)

The last two lines are what makes this a feminist poem, in my view, as it is the first instance where women are mentioned. In fact, I see these women who are present at the battle between *Axayacatl* and the Otomi are instrumental in the outcome. And, they are the precursors of *Las Adelitas* and the fierce Chicanas working in the *Movimiento* and beyond. *Herederas del legado de nuestras madres y abuelas*. Sor Juana planted seeds for feminism, for the value of the intellectual pursuit, seeds that are still bearing fruit as we engage in the spiritual activism that Anzaldúa so aptly invoked.

The seeds of political change had remained dormant for centuries until Mexico declared its independence from Spain. The *Virgen de Guadalupe* was part of the story as I mentioned earlier.

We already know the next critical date—February 2, **1848**—when the *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* was signed and made us a doubly colonized people in what is now the U.S. The seeds were planted for our status as part of the U.S. So many stories of heroism and of survival including stories of women at the Alamo.

**1910** brought the seeds that swept through the country as the Mexican Revolution expatriates migrated north and infused the Mexican community in the U.S. from California to Chicago and to Kansas City, and of course, the Southwest, all over what Américo Paredes called *Greater Mexico*, with new ideas and new blood. Tejanas like Jovita Idar and Leonor Villegas de Magnón along with others were



Photo: Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

intimately involved in the Revolution even as they worked for the community in the U.S. The situation in the early 20th century *iva de mal a peor* and so a gathering called; *El Primer Congreso Mexicanista*, met in Laredo from **September 14 to 22, 1911**. The Congreso's motto was "*Por la Raza y Para la Raza.*" Clemente Idar, whose family owned and published *La Crónica de Laredo* had a daughter, Jovita Idar, who was the leader of several initiatives such as the *Liga Femenil*. The 400 delegates planted seeds for the *escuelas*—I attended one of these little schools in Laredo in the early 1950s.

They sowed what would be harvested 50 years later in the Chicano Movement and the fight for civil rights. These seeds and many more planted over the years in our cellular memory flourished in the **1950s & 1960s** as the struggle that had been forged over decades of actions yielded a rich harvest—of sorrow but also of joy. We are the inheritors of the Legal cases like *Del Rio ISD v Salvatierra* (1930), *Mendez v Westminster School Dist.* (1947), *Hernandez et al v Driscoll Consolidated ISD* (1954), the subject of a wonderful film by Enrique Aleman, *Stolen Education*, and *Delgado v Bastrop ISD* (1957). These are only a few...but significant because EDUCATION is the key—the one significant factor that provides a way for La Raza. I was the beneficiary of the decisions in these cases—in fact we all benefited from the struggle and the seeds planted through these legal actions.

In the **1960s** and **1970s**, the Movement took off; I found I was a Chicana in 1976 at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. So many other dates—the Grape Boycott of the **1960s**, The Chicano Moratorium of **1972**—But more recently, **2016** was one more blow, one more storm that the seeds patiently waiting to sprout forth must weather. We must not allow despair to set in, in the face of calumny. We deserve better...those children ripped from their mother's arms deserve better. Those who have died in detention centers deserve better. And while we know the destruction the policies bring, **we must resist**.

How do we resist? With our words, with our work and with our passion. We owe it to all who came before us and to all who come after us. Yesterday's events made me sad...and angry...we must carry on and we must remain ever vigilant. Just like Jovita Idar and Sara Estela Ramírez and like so many other brave ancestors who stood steadfast for what is right, we, too, must carry on and do what Anzaldúa urged us to do—*Work that matters*.

I am here to tell you that your work matters. The struggle to get Mexican American Studies into the Texas public school curriculum matters, the countless hours and days working to register voters—that matters; the insistent and never-ending struggle to protect our communities from gentrification—that is work that matters. When you write a paper and deliver it at a conference such as this one, that is work that matters because you transform yourself and others in doing that work. As I write this, I am telling myself that it matters that I write those letters of recommendation, it matters that I grade that stack of papers, it matters that I write a poem, it matters that I acknowledge who I am with all my faults and limitations, with my broken wrist, with my absent minded professor syndrome that's why I forget to eat sometimes!

Yes, in acknowledging who we are we recognize that we are human and that we have a role, a mission if you will. Ask your-

self why are you on this earth? What is the work that you came to do? I try hard not to judge anyone's path. Or choices. We are all doing what we must. And I know I am here to work in academia and to be an activist for social justice. Just like I know I must write and I must teach; It's who I am. I can't tell you how many times I've heard that what we do in academia in higher education

is not enough, that we who are scholar activists could do more! In typical Capricorn fashion, I listened and so I did some serious self-reflection and two main lessons came to me: ONE it doesn't matter if you change the world—it matters that you try! And TWO—what you do is beyond what you can comprehend. In other words, it may be that your *granito de arena* is what was needed to make the major shift, that what you thought was not enough or not good enough was EXACTLY what was needed to persuade others or perhaps just one person to do what matters. To live honestly and with kindness towards others.

My grandmother Celia Becerra de Ramón was not famous or of noble birth, her ancestors came to south Texas and northern Mexico. She

had several children but only two survived to adulthood—my mother and Tia Eloisa. It was not an easy life in the 1920s and 30s in Texas. But, she managed. She survived. Her life mattered. She taught me to read and taught me to be confident and independent. In their own ways, all our abuelas teach us to be who we are. They planted the seeds that we are. Our abuelas gave us more than their genes, they gave us their love and our parents. And so we will not just survive, but thrive and live lives that make a difference, lives that matter. I leave you with a challenge. Figure out what it means to do work that matters and then **Do It!**

Muchas gracias!



Photo: Jovita Idar, leader of Liga Femenil

## 2019 NACCS Tejas Foco Premio Estrella de Aztlán



The **2019 NACCS Tejas Foco Conference** presented Graciela Sánchez with the *Premio Estrella de Aztlán* recognizing her as someone whose work has contributed towards the betterment of Chicanas/os in Tejas through her work at the **Esperanza Peace and Justice Center** in San Antonio, Texas. Pictured are Graciela, at left, and Antonia Castañeda, one of the persons who nominated Sánchez for the award.