The other Mexico that we have created here is what always has been national territory. It is the [collective] effort of all of our brothers and Latin Americans who have known how to move forward.

—The Tigers of the North

Aztecs from the North

*Los Tigres del Norte (English: The Tigers of the North) is a norteño-band ensemble based out of San Jose, California, with origins in Rosa Morada, a sindicatura in Mocorito, Sinaloa, Mexico. They are still active recording and performing artists today.

Norteño, also musica norteña, is a genre of Mexican music. The accordion and the bajo sexto are norteño's most characteristic instruments. The genre is popular in both Mexico and the United States, especially among the Mexican and Mexican-American community, and it has become popular in many Latin American countries as far as Chile and Colombia. Though originating from rural areas, norteño is popular in urban as well as rural areas.

El otro México que acá hemos construido el espacio es lo que ha sido territorio nacional. Este es el esfuerzo de todos nuestros hermanos y latinoamericanos que han sabido progresar.

—Los Tigres del Norte

"The Aztecas del norte... compose the largest single tribe or nation of Anishinabeg (Indians) found in the United States today... Some call themselves Chicanos and see themselves as people whose true homeland is Aztlan [the U.S. Southwest]."

Wind tugging at my sleeve feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean where the two overlap
a gentle coming together at other times and places a violent clash.

Across the border in Mexico
stark silhouette of houses gutted by waves,
cliffs crumbling into the sea,

silver waves marbled with spume

gashing a hole under the border fence.
I watch the sea bombard
the fence in Border Field State Park
with its bursts of water

I hear the cry of the sea, the breath of the air

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer ball across,
run after it, entering the U.S.

I press my hand to the steel curtain—
chainlink fence crowned with rolled barbed wire—
rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego
unrolling over mountains
and plains
and deserts,
this "Tortilla Curtain" turning into el río Grande
flowing down to the flatlands
of the Magic Valley of South Texas
its mouth emptying into the Gulf.

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
plits me splits me
me raja me raja

dividing a people, a culture
or, dividing a town, a culture

It is breaking me, it is breaking me
(splitting) (splitting)
(ripping) (ripping)
(cutting) (cutting)
**Yemanja (Yemayá)** is an orisha, originally of the Yoruba religion, who has become prominent in many Afro-American religions. Yoruba people, from what is now called Yorubaland, brought Yemaya/Yemoja and a host of other deities/energy forces in nature with them when they were brought to the shores of the Americas as captives. She is the ocean, the essence of motherhood, and a fierce protector of children.

The Yorùbá religion comprises the traditional religious and spiritual concepts and practices of the Yorùbá people. Its homeland is in Southwestern Nigeria and the adjoining parts of Benin and Togo, a region that has come to be known as Yorúbáland.

An Orisha (also spelled Orisa or Orixa) is a spirit or deity that reflects one of the manifestations of God in the Yoruba spiritual or religious system.

The U.S.-Mexican border is an open wound where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.

**Los atravesados:** the ones who are caught in the in-between, [the border-dwellers]
who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.

In the fields, la migra. My aunt saying, “No corran, don’t run. They’ll think you’re del otro lado.” In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was fifth generation American. Sin papeles—he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. La migra took him away while we watched. Se lo llevaron. He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. They deported him to Guadalajara by plane. The furthest he’d ever been to Mexico was Reynosa, a small border town opposite Hidalgo, Texas, not far from McAllen. Pedro walked all the way to the Valley. Se lo llevaron sin un centavo al pobre. Se vino andando desde Guadalajara.

During the original peopling of the Americas, the first inhabitants migrated across the Bering Straits and walked south across the continent. The oldest evidence of humankind in the U.S.—the Chicanos’ ancient Indian ancestors—was found in Texas and has been dated to 35000 B.C.¹ In the Southwest United States archeologists have found 20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest, Aztlan—land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Aztecs.

In 1000 B.C., descendants of the original Cochise people migrated into what is now Mexico and Central America and became the direct ancestors of many of the Mexican people. (The Cochise culture of the Southwest is the parent culture of the Aztecs. The Uto-Aztecan languages stemmed from the language of the Cochise people.)² The Aztecs (the Nahuatl word for people of Aztlan) left the Southwest in 1168 A.D.

Now let us go.

**Tihueque**: Nahúatl word—“let us go”

**Vámonos**:Spanish—“let us go”

“Un pájaro cantó”: Spanish—A bird sang.
With their eight tribes they emerged from the "cave of origin." the aztecs followed [their] god Huitzilopochtli.

In 1521 a new race was born, el meztizo, the mexicano

**conquistador: conqueror—Spanish Explorer

**mestizaje: mixed race

Huitzilopochtli, the God of War, guided them to the place (that later became Mexico City) where an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/feminine/male. The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the “higher” masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico and, with the help of tribes that the Aztecs had subjugated, conquered it. Before the Conquest, there were twenty-five million Indian people in Mexico and the Yucatán. Immediately after the Conquest, the Indian population had been reduced to under seven million. By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pure-blooded Indians remained. The mestizos who were genetically equipped to survive small pox, measles, and typhus (Old World diseases to which the natives had no immunity), founded a new hybrid race and inherited Central and South America.5 En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el mexicano (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings.

Our Spanish, Indian, and mestizo ancestors explored and settled parts of the U.S. Southwest as early as the sixteenth century. For every gold-hungry conquistador and soul-hungry missionary who came north from Mexico, ten to twenty Indians and mestizos went along as porters or in other capacities.6 For the Indians, this constituted a return to the place of origin, Aztlán, thus making Chicanos originally and secondarily indigenous to the Southwest. Indians and mestizos from central Mexico intermarried with North American Indians. The continual intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater mestizaje.
And so the blood runs
the indian does not know what to do
they are going to take [his/her/their] land,
and [they/he/she] must defend it,
the indian falls, dead,
and the outsider stands.
rise, Manquilef.

Arauco has a sorrow
blacker than his trousers
it’s not the Spaniards
that make him cry,
today it is the chileans
those that take his bread.
Rise, Pailahuan.

—Violeta Parra, “Arauco has a sorrow”

El destierro/The Lost Land

Entonces corre la sangre
no sabe el indio que hacer,
le van a quitar su tierra,
la tiene que defender,
el indio se cae muerto,
y el afuérnido de pie.
Levántate, Manquilef.

Arauco tiene una pena
más negra que su chubas,
yo no son los españoles
los que le hacen llorar,
boy son los propios chilenos
los que le quitan su pan.
Levántate, Pailahuan.

—Violeta Parra, “Arauco tiene una pena”

In the 1800s, Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, in greater and greater numbers and gradually drove the tejanos (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands, committing all manner of atrocities against them. Their illegal invasion forced Mexico to fight a war to keep its Texas territory. The Battle of the Alamo, in which the Mexican forces vanquished the whites, became, for the whites, the symbol for the cowardly and villainous character of the Mexicans. It became (and still is) a symbol that legitimized the white imperialist takeover. With the capture of Santa Anna later in 1836, Texas became a republic. Tejanos lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners.

¿Y la mitad del terreno
les vendió el traidor Santa Anna,
con lo que se ha hecho muy rico
la nación americana.

¿Qué acaso no se conforman
con el oro de las minas?
Ustedes muy elegantes
y aquí nosotros en ruinas.

—from the Mexican corrido,
“Del peigro de la Intervención”

Half of the land
was already sold to the traitor Santa Anna,
with which he made
the American nation very rich.

What cannot be settled
by the gold in the mines?
You, so elegant
and here, we are in ruins.

—from the Mexican corrido,
“The Danger of the Intervention”
In 1846, the U.S. incited Mexico to war. U.S. troops invaded and occupied Mexico, forcing her to give up almost half of her nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California.

With the victory of the U.S. forces over the Mexican in the U.S.-Mexican War, los norteamericanos pushed the Texas border down 100 miles, from el río Nueces to el río Grande. South Texas ceased to be part of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Separated from Mexico, the Native Mexican-Texan no longer looked toward Mexico as home; the Southwest became our homeland once more. The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land. The land established by the treaty as belonging to Mexicans was soon swindled away from its owners. The treaty was never honored and restitution, to this day, has never been made.

The justice and benevolence of God will forbid that... Texas should again become a howling wilderness trod only by savages, or... benighted by the ignorance and superstition, the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule. The Anglo-American race are destined to be forever the proprietors of this land of promise and fulfillment. Their laws will govern it, their learning will enlighten it, their enterprise will improve it. Their flocks range its boundless pastures, for them its fertile lands will yield... luxuriant harvests... The wilderness of Texas has been redeemed by Anglo-American blood & enterprise.

—William H Wharton

The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. Con el destierro y el exilio fuimos desnudos, destroncados, desripa-
Drought hit South Texas,” my mother tells me. “The land became very dry and the animals started dying of thirst. My father died of a heart attack, leaving mamá pregnant and with eight children, with eight kids and one on the way. Yo fui la mayor, tenía diez años. The next year the drought continued and the herd got hoof and mouth disease. They fell in droves in the pastures and the brushland, white bellies ballooning to the skies. El siguiente año still no rain. Mi pobre madre viuda perdió dos terceros de su ganado. A smart gabacho lawyer took the land away mamá hadn’t paid taxes. No hablaba inglés, she didn’t know how to ask for time to raise the money.” My father’s mother, Mama Locha, also lost her terreno. For a while we got $12.50 a year for the “mineral rights” of six acres of cemetery, all that was left of the ancestral lands. Mama Locha had asked that we bury her there beside her husband. El cementerio estaba cercado. But there was a fence around the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. We couldn’t even get in to visit the graves, much less bury her there. Today, it is still padlocked. The sign reads: “Keep out. Trespassers will be shot.”
In the 1930s, after Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of *mexicanos* to pull out the brush, chaparral and cactus and to irrigate the desert. The land they toiled over had once belonged to many of them, or had been used communally by them. Later the Anglos brought in huge machines and root plows and had the Mexicans scrape the land clean of natural vegetation. In my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared; saw the huge pipes connected to underwater sources sticking up in the air. As children, we’d go fishing in some of those canals when they were full and hunt for snakes in them when they were dry. In the 1950s I saw the land, cut up into thousands of neat rectangles and squares, constantly being irrigated. In the 340-day growth season, the seeds of any kind of fruit or vegetable had only to be stuck in the ground in order to grow. More big land corporations came in and bought up the remaining land.

To make a living my father became a sharecropper. Rio Farms Incorporated loaned him seed money and living expenses. At harvest time, my father repaid the loan and forked over 40% of the earnings. Sometimes we earned less than we owed, but always the corporations fared well. Some had major holdings in vegetable trucking, livestock auctions and cotton gins. Altogether we lived on three successive Rio farms; the second was adjacent to the King Ranch and included a dairy farm, the third was a chicken farm. I remember the white feathers of three thousand Leghorn chickens blanketing the land for acres around. My sister, mother and I cleaned, weighed and packaged eggs. (For years afterwards I couldn’t stomach the sight of an egg.) I remember my mother attending some of the meetings sponsored by well-meaning whites from Rio Farms. They talked about good nutrition, health, and held huge barbecues. The only thing salvaged for my family from those years are modern techniques of food canning and a food-stained book they printed made up of recipes from Rio Farms’ Mexican women. How proud my mother was to have her recipe for *enchiladas coloradas* in a book.

*El cruzar del mojado/Illegal Crossing*

"Now I finally have a grave to cry over", says Conchita,

"Ahora si ya tengo una tumba para llorar,"

dice Conchita, upon being reunited with
La crisis. Los gringos had not stopped at the border. By the end of the nineteenth century, powerful landowners in Mexico, in partnership with U.S. colonizing companies, had disposessed millions of Indians of their lands. Currently, Mexico and her eighty million citizens are almost completely dependent on the U.S. market. The Mexican government and wealthy growers are in partnership with such American conglomerates as American Motors, IT&T and Du Pont which own factories called maquiladoras. One-fourth of all Mexicans work at maquiladoras; most are young women. Next to oil, maquiladoras are Mexico’s second greatest source of U.S. dollars. Working eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of U.S. autos or solder minuscule wires in TV sets is not the Mexican way. While the women are in the maquiladoras, the children are left on their own. Many roam the street, become part of cholo gangs. The infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life.

The devaluation of the peso and Mexico’s dependency on the U.S. have brought on what the Mexicans call la crisis. No hay trabajo. Half of the Mexican people are unemployed. In the U.S. a man or woman can make eight times what they can in Mexico. By March, 1987, 1,088 pesos were worth one U.S. dollar. I remember when I was growing up in Texas how we’d cross the border at Reynosa or Progreso to buy sugar or medicines when the dollar was worth eight pesos and fifty centavos.

La travesía. For many mexicanos del otro lado, the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live. Dicen que cada mexicano siempre sueña de la conquista en los brazos de cuatro gringas rubias, la conquista del país poderoso del norte, los Estados Unidos. En cada Chicano y mexicano vive el mito del tesoro territorial perdido. North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion.

“A la cueva volverán”
—El Puma en la canción “Amalia”

***No hay trabajo”: There is no work.

“The crossing.” For many mexicanos from the other side, the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live. They say that every Mexican always dreams of the conquest in the arms of four white blondes, the conquest of the powerful Northern country, the United States. In every Chicano and Mexican lives the myth of the treasure—the treasure that is the lost land. North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion.

“They will arrive at the cave”
—The Puma in the song “Amalia”
Today we are witnessing the migration of the Mexican people, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán.

The return to the promised land first began with the Indians from the interior of Mexico and the mestizos that came with the conquistadores in the 1500s.

Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer to Virgen de Guadalupe on their lips: Ay precious Brown [or dark, brunette, sun-kissed] virgin, my dear mother, give me your blessing.
Isolated and worried about her family back home, afraid of getting caught and deported, living with as many as fifteen people in one room, the *mexicana* suffers serious health problems. *The worry and anxiety makes her ill, the high blood pressure makes her ill.*

The female wetback, the undocumented woman, is doubly threatened in this country.
"I want you to speak English. In order to find good work, you have to speak English well. What is all of your education worth if you still speak English with an 'accent', my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican.

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. "If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong."

"I want you to speak English. Pa'ballar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si
Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. The Anglo, with a face full of innocence, cuts our tongue out.

Drowned, we spit out darkness. Fighting with our own shadow the silence buries us.

It shows a lack of respect to talk back to one’s mother or father.

Even our own people, other Spanish speakers want us to put padlocks on our mouths. They would hold us back with their bag of academic rules.
Hear its bark: the language of the border (Listen to its howl):

[S]He who has a tongue is also mistaken.

—rough translation of a Mexican saying

But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, evolution, the enrichment of new words by invention or adoption have created variants of Chicano Spanish, a new language. A language that corresponds to a mode of living. Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language.
From the recently arrived, Mexican immigrants, and braceros [A Mexican laborer allowed to work in the US for a limited, seasonal amount of time], I learned the North American dialect.

My “home” tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are the last five listed, with 6 and 7 being closest to my heart. From school, the media and job situations, I’ve picked up standard and working class English. From Magán’s Los Llanos and from reading Spanish and Mexican literature, I’ve picked up Standard Spanish and Standard Mexican Spanish. From los recién llegados, Mexican immigrants, and braceros I learned the North Mexican dialect. With Mexicans I’ll try to speak either Standard Mexican Spanish or the North Mexican dialect. From my parents and Chicanos living in the Valley, I picked up Chicano Texas Spanish, and I speak it with my mom, younger brother (who married a Mexican and who rarely mixes Spanish with English), aunts and older relatives.

With Chicanas from Nuevo México or Arizona I will speak Chicano Spanish a little, but often they don’t understand what I’m saying. With most California Chicanas I speak entirely in English (unless I forget). When I first moved to San Francisco, I’d rattle off something in Spanish, unintentionally embarrassing them. Often it is only with another Chicana tejana that I can talk freely.

Words distorted by English are known as anglicisms or pochismos. The pocho is an anglicized Mexican or American of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish with an accent characteristic of North Americans and who distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English. Tex-Mex, or Spanglish, comes most naturally to me. I may switch back and forth from English to Spanish in the same sentence or in the same word. With my sister and my brother Nune and with Chicano tejano contemporaries I speak in Tex-Mex.

From kids and people my own age I picked up Pachuco. Pachuca (the language of the zoot suitors) is a language of rebellion, both against Standard Spanish and Standard English. It is a secret language. Adults of the culture and outsiders cannot understand it. It is made up of slang words from both English and Spanish. Ruca means girl or woman, vato means guy or dude, chale means no, simón means yes, churo is sure, talk is periquiar, pigionea means petting, que gacho means how nerdy, ponte águila means watch out, death is called la pelona. Through lack of practice and not having others who can speak it, I’ve lost most of the Pachuca tongue.
They brought their slang, their dialects, and their regionalisms.

Chicana Spanish

Chicanos, after 250 years of Spanish/Anglo colonization have developed significant differences in the Spanish we speak. We collapse two adjacent vowels into a single syllable and sometimes shift the stress in certain words such as maiz/maz, cobete/cuete. We leave out certain consonants when they appear between vowels, lado/lao, mojado/mojaio. Chicanos from South Texas pronounced j as j in hue (fue). Chicanos use “archaisms,” words that are no longer in the Spanish language, words that have been evolved out. We say semos, truje, baiga, ansina, and naidon. We retain the “archaic” j, as in jalar, that derives from an earlier b, (the French balar or the Germanic balon which was lost to standard Spanish in the 16th century), but which is still found in several regional dialects such as the one spoken in South Texas. (Due to geography, Chicanos from the Valley of South Texas were cut off linguistically from other Spanish speakers. We tend to use words that the Spaniards brought over from Medieval Spain. The majority of the Spanish colonizers in Mexico and the Southwest came from Extremadura—Hernán Cortés was one of them—and Andalucia. Andalucians pronounce ll like a y and their d’s tend to be absorbed by adjacent vowels: tirado becomes tirao. They brought el lenguaje popular, dialectos y regionalismos.

Chicanos and other Spanish speakers also shift ll to y and z to s. We leave out initial syllables, saying tar for estar, toy for estoy, bora for ahora (cubanos and puertorriqueños also leave out initial letters of some words.) We also leave out the final syllable such as pa for para. The incervocalic y, the ll as in tortilla, ella, botella. gets replaced by tortia or toriya, ea, bota. We add an additional syllable at the beginning of certain words: atocar for tocar, agastar for gastar. Sometimes we’ll say lavaste las vacías, other times lavates (substituting the aste verb endings for the astes).

We use anglicisms, words borrowed from English: bota from ball, carpeta from carpet, máquina de lavar (instead of lavadora) from washing machine. Tex-Mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English word such as cookiar for cook, watchiar for watch, parkiar for park, and rapiar for rape, is the result of the pressures on Spanish speakers to adapt to English.

We don’t use the word vosotros/as or its accompanying verb form. We don’t say claro (to mean yes), imaginare, or me
emociona, unless we picked up Spanish from Latinas, out of a book, or in a classroom. Other Spanish-speaking groups are going through the same, or similar, development in their Spanish.

Linguistic Terrorism

Deslenguadas Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huérfanos—we speak an orphan tongue.

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other.

Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time I couldn’t figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there. Pena. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives.

Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper.

If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. Often with mexicanas y latinas we’ll speak English as a neutral language. Even among Chicanas we tend to speak English at parties or conferences. Yet, at the same time, we’re afraid the other will think we’re agringadas because we don’t speak Chicano Spanish. We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the “real” Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience. A
monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan or Chicago or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

By the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the U.S., a country where students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more “cultured.” But for a language to remain alive it must be used. By the end of this century English, and not Spanish, will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinos.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code...
—Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

“Vistas,” corridos, y comida: My Native Tongue

In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was City of Night by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and could get published. When I read I Am Joaquin I was surprised to see a bilingual book by
a Chicano in print. When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the
first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we
really existed as a people. In 1971, when I started teaching High
School English to Chicano students, I tried to supplement the
required texts with works by Chicanos, only to be reprimanded
and forbidden to do so by the principal. He claimed that I was
supposed to teach "American" and English literature. At the risk
of being fired, I swore my students to secrecy and slipped in
Chicano short stories, poems, a play. In graduate school, while
working toward a Ph.D., I had to "argue" with one advisor after
the other, semester after semester, before I was allowed to make
Chicano literature an area of focus.

Even before I read books by Chicanos or Mexicans, it was
the Mexican movies I saw at the drive-in—the Thursday night
special of $1.00 a card—that gave me a sense of belonging.
"Vamonos a las vistas," my mother would call out and we'd all—grandmother, brothers, sister and cousins—squeeze into the
car. We'd wolf down cheese and bologna white bread sand-
wiches while watching Pedro Infante in melodramatic tear-jerk-
ers like Nosotros los pobres, the first "real" Mexican movie (that
was not an imitation of European movies). I remember seeing
Cuando los hijos se van and surmising that all Mexican movies
played up the love a mother has for her children and what
ungrateful sons and daughters suffer when they are not devoted
to their mothers. I remember the singing-type "westerns" of
Jorge Negrete and Miguel Aceves Mejía. When watching Mexican
movies, I felt a sense of homecoming as well as alienation.
People who were to amount to something didn't go to Mexican
movies, or bailes or tune their radios to bolero, rancherita, and
corrido music.

The whole time I was growing up, there was norteño music
sometimes called North Mexican border music, or Tex-Mex
music, or Chicano music, or continu (bar) music. I grew up listen-
ing to conjuntos, three- or four-piece bands made up of folk
musicians playing guitar, bajo sexto, drums and button accor-
dion, which Chicanos had borrowed from the German immig-

ants who had come to Central Texas and Mexico to farm and
build breweries. In the Rio Grande Valley, Steve Jordan and Little
Joe Hernández were popular, and Flaco Jiménez was the accor-
di

sitores—songs of love and death on the Texas-Mexican borderlands—reverberated
out of cheap amplifiers from the local cantinas and wafted in
through my bedroom window.

Corridos first became widely used along the South Texas/
Mexican border during the early conflict between Chicanos and
Anglos. The corridos are usually about Mexican heroes who do
valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors. Pancho Villa's song,
"La accaráchua," is the most famous one. Corridos of John F.
Kennedy and his death are still very popular in the Valley. Older
Chicanos remember Lydia Mendoza, one of the great border
corrido singers who was called la Gloria de Tejas. Her "El tango
negro," sung during the Great Depression, made her a singer of
the people. The everpresent corridos narrated one hundred
years of border history, bringing news of events as well as entertai-
ning. These folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural
mythmakers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable.

I grew up feeling ambivalent about our music. County-
western and rock-and-roll had more status. In the 50s and 60s,
for the slightly educated and agringado Chicanos, there existed
a sense of shame at being caught listening to our music. Yet I
couldn't stop my feet from thumping to the music, could not
stop humming the words, nor hide from myself the exhilaration
I felt when I heard it.

There are more subtle ways that we internalize identifica-
tion, especially in the forms of images and emotions. For me
food and certain smells are tied to my identity, to my homeland.
Woodsmoke curling up to an immense blue sky; woodsmoke per-
forming my grandmother's clothes, her skin. The stench of cow
manure and the yellow patches on the ground; the crack of a .22
rifle and the rick of cordite. Homemade white cheese sizzling in
a pan, melting inside a folded tortilla. My sister Hilda's hot, spicy
memudo, chile colorado making it deep red, pieces of panza and
hominy floating on top. My brother Carito barbecuing fajitas in
the back yard. Even now and 3,000 miles away, I can see my
mother spicing the ground beef, pork and venison with chile. My
mouth salivates at the thought of the hot steaming tamale I
would be eating if I were home.
**Nosotros**: We

We distinguish between Mexicans from the other side and Mexicans from this side.

If you ask my mom, “What are you?” She will tell you, “I am Mexican [female gendered].” My brothers and sister say the same. I sometimes will answer “I am Mexican [female gendered]”, and at other times I will say “I am a Chicana” or, “I am a tejana.” But I identified as “Raza” before I ever identified as “mexicana” or “Chicana.”
I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. Sometimes I am nothing and no one. But until I am not that, I am that. OR But until I am nothing, I am something.

In the meantime, we have to fight the good fight. Who is protecting my people's ranches? Who is trying to close the fissure between la india and the white [man] in our blood? The Chicano, yes, the Chicano that walks like a thief in his own house.

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness.

I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.

When not coping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; mestizo when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; Raza when referring to Chicanos; tejanos when we are Chicanos from Texas.

Chicanos did not know we were a people until 1965 when Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers united and I Am Joaquin was published and la Raza Unida party was formed in Texas. With that recognition, we became a distinct people. Something momentous happened to the Chicano soul—we became aware of our reality and acquired a name and a language (Chicano Spanish) that reflected that reality. Now that we had a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together—who we were, what we were, how we had evolved. We began to get glimpses of what we might eventually become.

Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still. One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place. In the meantime, tenemos que bajar la lucha. ¿Quién está protegiendo los ranchos de mi gente? ¿Quién está tratando de cerrar la fisura entre la india y el blanco en nuestra sangre? El Chicano, sí, el Chicano que anda como un tadrón en su propia casa.

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us.13 We know how to survive. When other races have given up their tongue, we’ve kept ours. We know what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant norteamericano culture. But more than we count the blows, we count the days the weeks the years the centuries the
...we count the eons until white laws and commerce and customs will rot in the deserts they've created, lie bleached. *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos*-Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain.