

Plenary Address: Cultivating Resistance through Food, Language and History:

A New Mexico Love Story

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I am surrounded by seed savers. The people I work with, my chosen family, we save harvested seeds, but we also save the varied seeds of our many languages and the seeds of wisdom our elders softly and often silently pass on to us. For me, I think these seeds manifest themselves through my intense emotions and a deep, unrelenting drive to root myself in this land and in the messy, complicated history of my family. New Mexico, this place I'm from, is so very special. Colonization has never truly won here, though we are familiar with the taste. Through resistance and resilience, we've saved the seeds of our sacred culture, the seeds of our languages, and the seeds of our foods. I seek out the seeds of my history to plant in the hearts of my daughters, through reclaiming the words, recipes and traditions our colonizers were never able to erase.

I'll be the first to admit I have identity problems. I identify first and foremost as a Chicana New Mexican, but with a white dad, and with my light hair and blue eyes, I fight internally with intense feelings that my literal genetic makeup embodies the ripple effects of the attempted colonization of New Mexico. Growing up in Albuquerque, while all my cousins grew up in Santa Fe, my focus and most anticipated moments were family holidays where I got to be with my cousins and we got to run around free in the milpa behind the house my grandpa built on the land of my grandma's family.

Where I work at the Southwest Organizing Project, or SWOP, it's important to talk about where we come from. It's how we connect with people and begin building with them. So, for me, my mom's side of the family is from Santa Fe and Madrid, New Mexico. My Grandpa Antonio came from a family of miners and my Grandma Antonia's family worked the land in Santa Fe until my Grandma broke tradition to become the first female vice president of a bank in New Mexico. My great grandma Rivera was a curandera with one eye, who, until recently, I only knew as the oldest person alive. It was decades after she died that my Auntie Carmen told me stories of her sewing wounds and preparing medicina from her garden.

My cousin Bianca wrote about the women in our family in a poem she calls Los Sucros. She says in part:

We always develop wrinkles in our foreheads first
from furrowing our brows.

We feel
proud of this
ever deepening crease because it is
a mark
of our lineage. We who think so
hard and
worry so much it has left a
permanent mark between
our eyes. To furrow is to dig a long
narrow trench
in the ground especially for
planting seeds and
for irrigation like the acequias in the
field
behind our grandmother's house.

So in my family, I take great pride in the line of resilient women I come from. Tiny women, first out of bed and last to fall asleep, who make feasts out of scraps; who are driven, hardhearted and intense. The women in my family are resilient as a result of our history, a history that demanded of my grandmas, skills to endure

hardship and abuse while simultaneously nurturing, growing and healing our families through the food they made, the plantas they grew, and the stories they passed down to us. As a mama, I find myself desperately collecting little seeds of resilience rooted in my matriarchal history to save for my daughters Adelita and Rosie, to plant these stories for them in this fertile land we are rooted in, to teach them to cultivate our feminine resistance with pride.

Of all my grandparents, I was closest with my grandpa. My grandpa was the one who taught me how to make tortillas. The thing was, he taught me only once how to do it the long way using manteca. The rest of the times, he told me he just wanted to use Harina Preparada, “porque es mas facil,” and so that’s how I learned, by buying the bag of flour sold by the white Quaker man. This is another representation of my struggle to hold faithful to my roots but also to reclaim them. When I take my daughters to the store, I tell them when we buy this corporate bag of flour that even though it is not connected to the land, it IS connected to my grandpa, to the way he hummed and the way he taught me to make little bolitos, not too big, with just a pinch. But as I teach my daughters how my grandpa taught me, using the same wooden bolillos and the golden plastic Tupperware bowl, I will tell them that we need learn more about the tortillas of our ancestors because they didn’t come from the Quaker bag. I will tell Adelita and Rosie about how making these tortillas connects them to my grandpa whom they didn’t know, and how it connects me to my great grandma, whom I barely knew, and how our hybrid tortillas will serve as the masa that will connect these past generations of my family to our future babies.

So that is a little about my blood family. Now I would like to tell you some stories about my chosen family. I am so very thankful to work for SWOP, which was founded by young activists of color in 1980. These young activists worked out of the Chicano Communications Center here in Albuquerque at what is now known as the Harwood Art Center. The father of our current Executive Director was one of those young Chicano activists. His name is Joaquín Luján. And he is one of my most cherished mentors. To me, he embodies the great pride we at SWOP take in our history of resistance and resilience.

Our book, *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, was first published by the Chicano Communications Center in 1976 as *450 Years of Chicano History*. This

book was carried out on the shoulders of fierce Chicanas, with compañeros like Joaquin taking their place in supporting these chingonas with a vision. I've been told the making of this book was dramatic. And I believe it without a doubt, because we at SWOP are passionate people. We have been taught storytelling as a way to communicate and organize. My predecessors made sure that this book of our history was told in pictures, in English and in Spanish, because they understood the complicated history of the colonizers trying to rob us of our languages. Our book is popular with our incarcerated brothers and sisters and that is a point of pride for us at SWOP. We have worked to make our history accessible because we believe the people most affected should have the loudest voice at the table of solutions. The beautiful thing about it is that these SWOPistas who came before me carved out a space to tell their stories on their terms, and now thanks to them, here I am, with a space all my own to share my own story with you all.

In 2010, our book was banned in Arizona as an attempt to silence our stories. We reacted by sending thousands of free copies of *500 Years* to Arizona students who wrote to us about why learning their history is important to them. It was clear that the students who wrote to us inherently understood resistance. They flooded us with their desires to access their history through the language of the photos of those who came before them in this struggle.

At SWOP, we also cultivate our culture through food. We grow food as an organizing tool, stacking our compost enchilada style as my compadre Travis would say. Our food justice program is called Project Feed the Hood. It's intergenerational, based in traditional New Mexican agricultural practices, informed by the wisdom of our elders, and fueled by the energy and dreams of our young people. Joaquin has worked arm in arm with Lorenzo Candelaria, Rodrigo Rodriguez, Travis McKenzie and Stefany Olivas over the past decade to build Project Feed the Hood. They've grown it from one community garden to 10 school programs, a paid summer internship, and a transformative justice program model that uplifts the healing power of putting your hands in la tierra.

Through this work of my heart, I have learned from my elders, peers and young people so many lessons in resilience. Lorenzo likes to remind me: "We plant many plants, Marisol, but we harvest consciousness—the ability to understand our

connection to mother earth.” Stefany has taught me to use the term Food Apartheid and to resist the term food desert because we live in a beautiful, thriving ecosystem called a desert here in New Mexico. Travis embodies resilience, digging literal and metaphorical trenches to grow and inspire hundreds of young leaders in our community. Rodrigo has shown me the transformative power of men mentoring young men with palas as organizing tools. And every season, I have watched young SWOPistas grow fruitful like our plants.

The garden is also a space for healing, which my comadre Beva has taught me so much about. To me, Beva’s embraces communicate novels. She has taught me that we belong to nature and our roots are the stories and experiences of our ancestors. When we grow medicine in our gardens, we heal our hearts as we dig and weed and nurture. She taught me that Patriarchy, Colonialism and Capitalism are the root causes of the destruction of our Mother Earth and of violence and poverty in our community. Beva has reminded me of the indigenous teachings of our sisters in community—that the blood that runs through our veins is like the water that runs through our acequias. Beva credits Esteban Arellano when she teaches me how we heal through resistance, we keep planting, we roll with the hail storms, we keep growing and coming back to plant more of the seeds we saved for the next season.

I come from a long line of women who dig acequias in the land and in our brows; women whose unpaid labor has sustained our communities for centuries. And I work with people who link arms with each other to dig trenches, save seeds, plant consciousness, and fight fiercely to make space at the table for the voice of our communities. Resilience has been part of my culture forever. I could have been born anywhere else in this world, but I was born here, in this incredible, sacred land. My love for New Mexico overpowers me. And every day I get to work on saving the seeds of resilience in my family’s history and of our Chicano History, and planting these seeds with my peers so we can grow them with our elders and with our children. And we will be unafraid for the storms that are sure to come because they will bring us water y agua es vida.

Further Reading:

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