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The Unravelling of Time and Place: Understanding the Development of Chicano Identity in the Southwestern United States

Introduction: Shedding skin, shedding story, starting anew

In Mexican culture, the snake represents many things—rebirth, transformation, wisdom. It serves as an intermediary between the cosmos and the lands. Snakes are extremely mobile as they are able to rapidly slither between terrains high and low, including those that are visible and those that are invisible. Most importantly, the snake represents a delicate balance between opposing forces and energies. If a snake wraps around itself too tightly as a means of protection, it can suffocate in its own flesh. If it cannot shed its old skin quickly enough, the snake can die, never transitioning into its new form. The snake may be caught forever between its old reality of what was certain, yet unusable, and what was unexplored but could have been experienced.

This striking analogy not only lays the groundwork for this paper, it is used very intentionally. What exists in the research was almost never documented. Due to a stressful, unexpected period of difficulty involving the initial research phase in May and June 2025, I completely scrapped my original thesis and went back to the drawing board. The perpetually blinking cursor on the blank laptop screen felt devastating as it echoed and ricocheted in my head. *Thump…thump…thump*. I did what I usually do when I feel overwhelmed, and the only place to

land is on my bed crying. I called my mom. During my conversation with her, the seed was planted for what would become this oral and embodied historiography of my community's Chicano identity.

My research aims to uplift the memories and experiences of people in my community in my hometown of Tucson, Arizona. Metropolitan Tucson is a city of one million people, many of whom–like my family–have lived there and in the Southwest for multiple generations. In the last 10 years, Tucson has taken a prominent role in political conversations surrounding U.S.-Mexico border security, migration, and the Mexican *and* American identity. This is not new for Tucsonans, nor is it new for the people who have direct ancestral ties to Mexico, calling themselves Mexicanos. As my research and interviews demonstrate, this new era of politicizing what is commonly understood as Mexican identity is now being acknowledged. What must be recognized is that this identity has existed and persisted in the darkness for decades and generations before. What is new, however, are the generations of Mexicanos—including my generation—that have begun to powerfully take hold of their own histories and identities en masse. In this research project, I utilize interviews that I conducted, historical narratives, and my own family history and memories to demonstrate how the human act of shedding a serpentine-like skin comprised of beliefs, stories, and values can make way for a new form, a new way of life. One will see in this paper that there is no individual identity, no one opinion, and no singular memory or experience that is dominant over another. They all exist within the shared history of Mexican identity and American identity. These identities have survived new and recurring phases of colonial violence and predominant narratives that are worn, outworn, or eventually shed to continue to exist and thrive today.

Understanding Chicanismo

"Chicano" is not a word, or an identity, that is known to many people who live outside of the West Coast of the United States or who are not familiar with Mexican American culture. Chicanismo is the cultural consciousness, or heart, of all Chicanos. This is interesting because, typically, one is not born Chicano. Arturo Rosales writes in his book, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*,:

"[A]lthough the origin of the term Chicano is debated, it is clear that it was developed because some individuals of Mexican origin found both the terms Spanish-American and Mexican American distasteful. The former was distasteful for it was a pretense masking the Mexican origins of much of the Southwest Hispanic population. The term Spanish-American was initially employed to distance individuals from "Mexicans" and to escape the discrimination applied to them. The term "Mexican American" was also shunned by Chicanos as it implied that Mexicanos in the Southwest were like other hyphenated Americans, namely, Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans who immigrated to the U.S.."

One question that is not clear is whether or not the hyphenation is viewed as a compliment or a degradation that some races and ethnicities were not seen as one hundred percent American. For clarity and continuity to support this paper's viewpoint, hyphenated descriptions will not be used unless they appear in cited work.

This paper will demonstrate that Chicanismo is the process of returning to one's cultural roots that lie in indigenous Mexican ways of thinking and being. The end result of developing a Chicanismo consciousness rids a person of the indoctrinated "colonial ways of being" and reinforces the notion of returning to who you once were allowed to be by creating that person and living fully in their new skin. While Mexican Americans are not born Chicano, they have always been Chicano in their soul and spirit. Anthropologist William L. Merrill writes, "[I]n [colonized societies], existing schemes of identity classification must be revised and the significance and implications of these classifications defined. Seldom do the colonized passively accept the classifications that their colonizers intend to impose on them, for important political and economic as well as psychological interests are at stake. More frequently, identities and the relations of inequality typically assigned to them are openly contested." There is much more to the history of Mexican Americans and Chicanos than this research addresses. Nonetheless, it is pivotal to discuss and understand the intricately woven history that Chicanos have endured in the United States and the paths that they have taken to return home to their identity.

Founded in 1325, Tenochtitlan was the capital of Mexica civilization in pre-colonial Mexico. Following the pillaging of Tenochtitlan by the Spanish conquistadores and settlers in 1521, the concepts of identity and specifically, Mexican indigeneity—which refers to being related to an indigenous group or tribe in Mexico with specific cultural practices and values—began to be shaped by the colonial structures of ethnic classification defined by Iberian and European concepts of identity. At first, the basic distinctions of identity were "Spaniard" and "Indian." As the Spanish continued their colonizing missions further north, these budding frameworks of identity were continually reshaped to fit the Spanish definition of an insider, one who belonged,

and one who did not, an outsider. The two categories were split further. A “Spaniard” was redefined to include someone who was born in Spain “pennisulares.” People were viewed as Spanish not only by blood but by the land on which they were born as well. “Criollos” were people who were born in the New World of colonial Mexico but were still Spanish by blood and lineage. The “Indian” identity was then fractured into four subsets: “barbaric” and “civilized” distinguished the behaviors of contacted indigenous groups, while “bautizados” or “conversos” were used to identify indigenous people who were converted to Christianity following contact with Spanish Catholic missionaries.

As Spanish colonial missions expanded in Mexico, the number of non-converted indigenous people significantly decreased. This included many indigenous people who were resistant to the Catholic faith and were converted by force. The expansion of the Catholic and Spanish colonial mission system in Mexico brought many changes to the construction of Mexican indigenous identity in the midst of Spanish colonization. The emergence of the *third* Spanish construction of identity, the mestizo, came less than 100 years after the destruction of Tenochtitlan by the Spanish. The mestizo identity appears in Catholic missionary records in Mexico beginning in the early 17th century, identifying someone who is born to a Spanish parent and an indigenous parent. Merrill explains that, “[I]n the Spanish scheme, Spaniards and other Europeans were located at the top… mixed people in the middle, and Indians at the bottom. In specific areas, however, Indians and in particular, ‘good Christian Indians,’ were considered by Europeans to be morally, if not socially, superior to certain people of mixed heritage whose libertine ways were felt to jeopardize the progress of ‘civilization’ on the frontier.” Today, a majority of Mexican Americans can be ancestorally and archivally linked to the mestizo identity classification. People

can have Spanish and indigenous heritage by blood but not by culture. Rarely does one identify as mestizo in 2025 in the context of their racial and ethnic identity. It is seen as an archaic term used by the Spanish in their colonial caste system and does not serve a purpose outside of the historical record on the history of Mexican identity. In this chapter, a clear idea has been established about how Mexican identity was constructed by Spanish colonial expansion and Catholic missions.

La Tierra: Returning Home

In early March 2025, I began researching my ancestry on both sides of my family. One story takes place in the United States in the midst of the transatlantic slave trade in the 16th century. The other story goes back to the 1600s in Spain, the Iberian Peninsula, and Mexico. Through my research into my dad's ancestral history, I discovered that my great-great-grandparents on my dad's mother's side were born in Durango, Mexico, and Silao, Mexico. They immigrated to the United States through a border crossing in Laredo, Texas, in 1916 before settling in New Mexico. Until I did this Ancestry.com research, I did not know what region in Mexico my dad's family were from, and five generations later, where I was from as well.

I always expected the automatic question, "Where is your family from?" when I told people I was Mexican. A cold, yet familiar, flood of shame would wash over me when I would respond with, "I don't know." Perhaps through projection, I assumed the nods in response were also nods of judgement. Through my research, however, I discovered that my dad's father's family had lived in New Mexico since the 17th century. I also found the Indian Census rolls that identified my great-grandparents as enrolled members of the Acoma and Isleta Pueblo tribes. This

information about my family that I found on my own, in my dorm room, was never told to me for 14 years of my life while my dad was still alive. The information was never shared with me by his family.

The emotional overhaul that I experienced was something akin to the sky cracking open and releasing thunder in my chest. Illuminated on my computer was the history I was never told and the history that finally allowed me to make sense of not only myself, but my dad and his family. Their collective and unspoken traumas and ill-fitting identities became a space for compassion and empathy. It also motivated me to look further into my own community to better understand the twisted history that we as Chicanos* have inherited and disenherited. The following is a combination of researched and archival history of the Southwest from a Chicano perspective, along with a collection of oral history interviews with Tucsonans with Mexican ancestry. This section discusses the connections between land and identity.

Tucson became a territorial capital in Arizona after the state separated from New Mexico following *Venta de la Mesilla or "La Mesilla sale,"* more commonly known as the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. The United States acquired southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico from Mexico. It was here that the thriving nature of Tucson as a bordertown began to take hold as economic activity between the United States and Mexico depended on trade with the Mexican state of Sonora, which is an hour south of Tucson. Francisco Rosales continues in *Chicano!*: "[I]n the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. territorial aggrandizement separated many Hispanics who remained in the conquered territories from their political and cultural roots by an invisible and, for a time, unpatrolled boundary line." There is a saying in Chicano culture: "*We* didn't cross the

border; the border crossed *us*." This phrase also reverberates throughout other cultures that are in the process of decolonization, tearing down the subjugation and territorial definitions of identity and ethnicity that dictate privilege. In migrating across the border, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were traveling north within land that was their home country. By the time the Southern Border was established, many families were forced to stay in place on one side of the Border or subject themselves to intense military surveillance while traveling between Mexico and Arizona.

María Del Barrio, Sophomore, St. Joseph's University, studying nursing)

I was born in Tucson, Arizona - born and raised - and that's like a bordertown, basically, so I went between there and Nogales my whole childhood. [On the differences between Nogales and Tucson] *Because it's a bordertown there's a very clear wealth gap leftover from the Mexican American war. So I grew up knowing the privilege that I had being born on the American side of the border, but [Noogales] was also very homey over there.*

Preston Campbell-Cueva, Junior, Arizona State University, studying film:

I think there is a very clear distinction between the other side. [Being in Mexico versus being in the U.S.] the other side of the border. I think being American living in America, living in the not-so United States anymore, I think that was the distinction. I think it was that when we were in American culture, we were Mexican in American culture, you know, but there's places for you and there's places that aren't for you.

Maasai Gonzalez, Educator, Tucson High Magnet School, Culturally Relevant Mexican American Studies Program

I'm from Nogales. Nogales is a bordertown, right? People usually think of it as there's a U.S. side, there's a side in Mexico, but I always thought about it as one piece of land. I never thought about it as a separation. My dad's from Nogales; my mom's from Hermosillo; and then my grandparents on my mom's side, they're from Pitiquito and Caborca in Sonora. My dad's side—my grandmother's side—are from Nayarit. They migrated here in the late 1800s, and my grandfather's side are also from Sonora.

Dr. José Gonzalez, Retired Practitioner of 34 years, Culturally Relevant Master Teacher, Tucson Unified School District, my former Mexican American History teacher:

There was always this tension, this pull [in Mexico] between, "You're not Mexican enough," and if I was [in the U.S.], it was, "You're too Mexican." That's something I've always contended with.

Itzel Rosales, Junior, Harvard University, studying women, gender and sexuality, and ethnicity and migration rights *There's just so much erasure of history that it's literally impossible to be like, "Oh, this is my land, this is your land, this is their land, this is that." It's like…what does it really matter? Like, does it really matter? I think that's something that I struggle with, I am an indigenous person, and even though I'm part of an indigenous community, I still feel very reluctant—not even reluctant—I feel like it's hard for me to explain my indigeneity to people because it's not validated by like the colonized state, which is the United States. And so people don't really understand. To be indigenous, you have to, like, prove it and*

you know, even at the U of A [University of Arizona] you have to prove that you are Yaqui or whatever. You have to have that membership. How ridiculous is it that you have to prove that you're indigenous. We are all a part of an institution and then it's like, "Oh, so I have to prove to the oppressor that I'm from this land, and you took my land in the first place. Now give me a discount." We live on reservations where there's literally no running water and food deserts and our rates of alcoholism and domestic violence and drug use [are disproportionate to the rest of the U.S. population and increasing], *and that's all on purpose. We were never supposed to be here and yet we are.*

La Lengua: Shedding Silent Shame

The sound of a snapping ruler against brown skin is something that rings in the ears of many Chicanos, whether you have nursed the sting yourself or have just seen the invisibly deep scars left on your family. My dad, for example, could only speak a little Spanish—at most, a few words tossed in sentences every once in a while despite having parents who were fluent in the language. It was the same for his six brothers and sisters. The one time that I heard my dad's father speak Spanish was at a traditional Mexican chain restaurant when I was eight. I did not understand what he was saying to the waitress, but I could recognize the shock that went through my body. It was the only time I ever heard anyone in my dad's family speak Spanish beyond a a two-word sentence. When my dad was asked by people if he spoke Spanish, he would often respond that he didn't because he "grew up in a good neighborhood." When I tell non-Mexicans about this fact, people react in horror and gasp. They question how my dad could think like that, let alone say it with laughter and humor in his tone.

It is, however, not shocking to many Chicanos who did not grow up speaking Spanish. It is living proof of the impact of colonizing media campaigns from the United States that have taught us to resent the language for preventing us from succeeding and moving up in American society. That was the fear that my dad's family had when they moved to the small mining town of Oracle, Arizona, one hour north of Tucson. My dad told me that his parents did not want him and his brothers and sisters to speak Spanish because they feared that they would develop an accent. They could and would be judged on how they spoke English. That did not prevent my dad from being called *spic* and *wetback* at the majority-white and wealthy high school that he attended in Oro Valley, the town that was an hour-long school bus ride from where he lived. I remember reading the 1986 yearbook messages from his junior year at Canyon Del Oro High School and seeing that a classmate's note began with, "Hey Mex!" I cannot blame my father for the feelings he had speaking Spanish. His pain is more than I can understand, even now. He told me about the times his teachers would bring out the long yardstick to smack a child's hand when they said something in Spanish rather than in English. I saw him disappear into these childhood memories, presumably haunted by the wails that followed that smack of the wood hitting skin. Corky Gonzales, the founder of Denver's Crusade for Justice, explained it this way: "[what the education system accomplished was] how to forget Spanish, to forget my heritage, to forget who I was." In my experience, not knowing Spanish has only created more pain, trauma and heartache that has trailed me for generations before. Rather than moving me forward, not knowing Spanish has held me back.

Massai Gonzalez: ***I went to a school called Little Red Schoolhouse. I think it's on Patagonia Road. And they weren't very accepting of Mexicanos. They weren't very accepting of people***

speaking Spanish. They had an English-only policy. So there's a lot of erasure there with kids, you know, struggling. I remember I'd get in trouble for speaking Spanish. And then after being discriminated on, [my parents] moved me to a school called Mexicoytl, Mexicoytl Academy in Nogales. The whole curriculum, the whole purpose you can say, is to re-indigenize, to indigenize Mexicanos. To reintroduce them to their culture, to reintroduce them to what has been lost. So their curriculum was exactly this curriculum here at Tucson High, the culturally relevant classes, ethnic studies courses followed exactly that. And they were the first kind of example of implementing those teachings. So in that school, we had several classes. had math, of course all the basics. We had science, but then we also were taught English. We also had mandatory Spanish and Nahuatl classes.

The idea in the minds of Chicano leaders at the start of the Chicano Rights Movement was that the hallmark of resistance was the maintenance of the Spanish language in younger generations. The connection between language and identity is persistent between generations and cultures alike. One of my college professors once shared the wisdom of her mentor: "Each language is an entire world." Each time I was questioned about my Mexican heritage, the immediate follow-up question would always be, " Do you speak Spanish?" Their follow-up responses would never stray from: "Oh, so you're not *really* Mexican." In those moments, even English failed me. When I was 18, I began learning Spanish with the goal of achieving fluency. In the process, I also began to learn more about Chicanismo. I was able to forgive myself and my dad for not being fluent in Spanish. What matters to me is what I can and will do now.

Itzel Rosales: ***There's a generation of people who don't speak Spanish and don't have any ties to their Chicanidad, or whatever it may be because you were beaten in school with a ruler. And that was intentional —to purify the blood of lineages. And I think about the shame in Mexican communities where it's like, "Oh, you're like, pocho, or you don't speak Spanish well. You can't even understand anything." People don't realize that that was an institutional thing to make sure we couldn't communicate with each other. To make sure we didn't have any more roots to our mothers. I'm like, let's not shame the oppressed, come on. Be proud of the way that you speak Spanish because like, that was the same thing for me too, like Spanish was my first language but I feel like I lost a lot of it over time. When I speak Spanish now with my friends, I get really weird looks, but it's like that's a way to, like, reclaim my power out of PWI*** **[private white institution].** ***Speaking Spanish and being like "pinches pendejos" to people walking by, I'm like, "You can't understand? Great." That is the only thing that I can hold over you, which is that I have that tie. And I never look to shame people who are reclaiming that for themselves because of how difficult it is to keep that when that side is broken off. How else are you supposed to know that side of you if not through language first?***

In the beginning when I first began learning Spanish, I felt the scalding sensation of shame traveling up and down my throat. *Why was my voice so high and then so deep? Why does my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth instead of roll when I pronounce the letter R?* All of these questions had whirled around my head for 15 years. I felt shy, insular, and reserved; adjectives that I would never use to describe myself when I speak English. What I felt this time was safety, shelter, and pride in a re-discovered identity. My voice shakes the way you shake dust off an old book in order to read it. But my quivering voice never persists, it only gets stronger and louder.

When filling out documents when I was younger, I would often find the only label to identify me as Mexican or Latino was “Hispanic.” For years, I checked that box without feeling like it represented me. My dad checked that box and would sometimes even check the *White* box too, arguing that “they’re going to check it anyways.” Or that Hispanic and White were very close to the same thing, synonyms to one another. But my father did not look white with his brown skin and Mexican features. I didn’t look white with my curly hair or brown skin that was darker than his. For me, checking a box was more than what was said on paper, but rather what we confirmed to ourselves through documentation. We were never treated as though we were white, so how could my dad check a box that said he was? It felt bigger than a checkmark next to a word. Officially, *Hispanic* refers to “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.” But what does that mean for people like me and my Chicano community, whose culture cannot be flattened into a census box because we refuse? What does it mean to identify with a word that centers a colonizer’s language and heritage? Sociologist Marta Gimenez critiques the term precisely for this reason, writing t “this Hispanic label (and a Latino one sometimes alternatively used) imposes minority status on a very diverse population who have little in common [culturally]... Although some may find this minority status labeling acceptable, it allows any person regardless of class to claim ‘Hispanicness,’ thus preventing group solidarity.” In other words, “Hispanic” is a category that simultaneously erases difference and obstructs meaningful collective identity. Chicanismo, on the other hand, is a direct confrontation with the colonial identities we were handed. Margarita Melville describes “Spanish-American ethnicity” as a colonial ethnicity, one in which “the subordinate group values the outgroup

more positively than itself." Chicanismo pushes back against that self-erasure, representing what Melville calls confrontational ethnicity: a form of identity that unapologetically values the in-group, refuses white assimilation, and insists on the right to define oneself. In a society that has demanded silence—of our language, of our indigeneity, of our complexity—Chicanismo speaks clearly and proudly.

Conclusion: El Cuerpo y El Espíritu

"In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward."
- Gloria Anzaldúa, "A New Mestiza Consciousness"

The Chicano body has long been a site of negotiation between belonging and exclusion. An ever present question exists within our bodies of whether we resist in order to survive or assimilate to prevent the violence from meeting our bodies. In the early 20th century, many Mexican American activists sought to avoid legal segregation by lobbying for recognition as white as stated by this quote by author Francisco Rosales "[a]n essential goal of many Mexican American activists was to be classified as white. It became obvious to U.S. Mexicans, even in the immigrant era, that if they were to be classified as colored, it could subject them to de jure segregation." Records found within U.S. census data show that as early as 1932, the U.S. Census Bureau designated Mexicans as "colored," subjecting them to institutional segregation alongside Black Americans. In response, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) began a campaign to have Mexicans classified as white in 1935, after the Social Security Board denied them full benefits under their non-white designation. This campaign for whiteness was never universal for all Mexican Americans, it was reserved for a select few that could rise to the

challenge of upward class mobility through education and labor. Therefore, it was exclusionary and deeply internalized within its own community of Mexican Americans. LULAC membership was limited to middle-class, U.S.-born citizens. Its then-president Manuel Gonzalez openly encouraged racial mixing with Anglo-Americans, who he described as members of a "vigorous and masterful race." In my home state of Arizona, Club Vesta was an elite social organization of college-educated Mexican Americans that prized the performance of whiteness: fluency in English, American university degrees, and professional status. The idea was clear: respectability and education could cleanse the Mexican body of its "foreignness." But historian Mario Barrera argues this is the logic of internal colonialism—a process where colonized people are trained to reproduce the very structures that marginalize them, often by disassociating from their own histories, languages, and skin. This whitening and Anglicizing of the Chicano body through collectives like LULAC and Club Vesta were not just about race. More importantly, it was about the spirit of the Mexican American that needed to be changed. These programs emphasized what needed to be erased in order to be accepted. This brings us to the deeper and more enduring violence: the coloniality of power. As scholars Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano describe, coloniality did not end with political independence and the creation of a state or country; instead, coloniality embedded itself in how power, identity, and even rationality are structured today. The idea of "race" became a global organizing principle, establishing a Eurocentric hierarchy that not only defined who was civilized and who was not, who could be seen in the system as human and who was not. In the case of Mexico after Spanish colonial rule, it existed in the caste system. In this system, individualism reigned. The body became an object, measurable and ranked. The subject of a person became an isolated figure, supposedly capable of achieving success if they simply followed the rules of assimilation.

The fracture between body and spirit is at the center of the Chicano experience. While some pursued education and English fluency as tools of liberation, many discovered that the promise of assimilation was false—no degree, no diction, no proximity to whiteness could fully erase brownness in America. The psychic toll of this pursuit has been immense. As I learned in my own family's history, these assimilative efforts often resulted in silence: the silencing of language, the silencing of trauma, and the silencing of memory. No matter how many boxes my dad checked, no matter how many times my grandparents chose not to speak Spanish, they were always and forever seen as Mexican.

I was so deeply broken by the words of my peers in middle school that I wasn't Mexican because I didn't look Mexican that when I was ten years old, I bought a bar of skin bleaching soap online and lathered it on my body one night in the shower. I let it sit on my body for so long that it started to burn not only my skin, but my nose and my eyes with its harsh smell. I rinsed it off only to see a red rash forming and growing – turning my Brown skin that my parents had spent so much time comparing to honey, to peanut butter, to mocha – the skin that was a perfect combination of both of them – an alarming red. The soap didn't work and with an oatmeal bath and a Benadryl my skin calmed down. Recently, when I told my mom I was going to write about this memory here, she told me she remembers that moment vividly.

I never wanted to not be Black. From my memories in my childhood, I loved the magic I found within my Black identity when it wasn't policed or picked at. At the same time, when my Mexican identity was policed or ridiculed, I resented how my Black features were dominant on my body – feeling as though they were masking or obstructing my Mexican ones. In this way, my own body became a sight of war and conflict and I was on both the offensive and defensive fronts. When my peers told me I didn't look Mexican, I took that to mean I looked "too" Black.

This resentment and anger towards myself caused a deep fracture and oozing, infected wound that only began to heal when I began identifying as Chicana and unpacking the trauma and pain that I and others had unleashed on my body.

Dr. José Gonzalez: ***But mi'ja, when they attack you like that, again, you're biracial. You have two very beautiful ancestors, right? The African continent and the American continent. Don't let anyone ever get to you, just keep your calm. Say, you know, "you don't have the right to tell me how I can identify" right? "I am indigenous. I have connections to this land through my father, right? And his ancestors." And so always think back to Gloria Anzaldúa. You're in nepantla, right? Our identities are always going to be challenged, lean into it.***

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness offers a path to Chicanismo that helped me take the first step in identifying as Chicana in my junior year of high school when we read her book "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza." She writes "[l]a mestiza is in a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning to be torn between ways." Being in nepantla is not a weakness; it is a site of potential. The chicana exists at a cultural and psychic crossroads, where she must develop what Anzaldúa calls a "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity." She does not simply choose between her inherited cultures—she synthesizes them. She transforms the fragments into something new. This mestiza consciousness is the work of reuniting el cuerpo y el espíritu—the physical body and the spiritual self fractured by colonial definitions, violence and generational trauma. The chicana juggles her identities, she shapeshifts and most importantly, she survives. And more than that—she creates. "That third element," Anzaldúa writes, "is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion." This is evolution, not erasure. In identifying as a chicana, I have created a new world for myself. A world in which my dad can

be at peace, my mother can be proud, and one in which I can call out to my ancestors - on both sides of my family - and know they will answer. I am full of contradictions, malformations, and historical impossibilities. And yet, through the sheer hope of one ancestor, then two, then dozens and finally, my parents - I am here. One of the friends I made in my Afro-Native Experience class my sophomore spring semester once said "I am an ancestor in training." I am an ancestor in training.

To be Chicano is not simply to reclaim an ethnic label—it is to undergo an embodied transformation, a shedding of imposed skins. The Chicano body carries histories of racialization, silence, and survival. But it also carries the tools of rebirth. Like the snake from the opening of this work, we are reminded of the dangers of stagnation. A snake that cannot shed its old skin suffocates. Anzaldúa writes of the chicana:"[r]igidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically." A people who cannot remember who they are risk becoming prisoners of who they were told to be. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have experienced it in my own skin. Yet if the skin is shed too quickly—without memory, without mourning and without anger—the past lingers in unhealed wounds and infects the body and its memories. They cannot heal in this life. The shedding must be intentional – it must include parents, ancestors, community members, love and hope for a new world. The chicana, like the snake, stretches. She flexes and fractures. But she does not break. Her movement is not linear; it spirals. It is in this motion, this constant becoming and shedding exists the future of Chicano identity. Not in assimilation, but in reclamation. Not in silence, but in shouts. Not in purity, but in complexity. I am reminded one final time of the words of Anzaldúa: "Soy un amansamiento—I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of

light and dark and gives them new meanings." When a body holds tension and remains in a state of trauma – the fight, flight or freeze response – it creates adhesions and knots in its muscular structure. In order to release them, you have to press – maybe a little hard, perhaps sometimes you just have to hold your body kindly and breathe – and release. In order to let go, you have to trust yourself to know you can let go of your old self. This is what it means to return to the serpent—not as a symbol of danger or fear, but as a being of transformation. A keeper of medicine that has always been inside yourself.

This paper is not a full story. It is a fragment of many stories, told in many voices, shaped by many hands. But it is also a declaration: the Chicano body is not a blank slate to be written on by dominant culture. It is a sacred vessel of resistance, memory, and rebirth. When we move, we do not move alone. We move with our ancestors. We move with our communities. We move with the snake, shedding what we were never meant to carry and stepping into what we have always been.

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