The Journey to Peace and Healing:
Discovering Identity through Culture, Tradition, and Indigenous Knowledge

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NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

[the] Mestizaje, Chicano, Xicano, Mexica

I use all of these terms interchangeably throughout the project because they are all synonyms for each other in the sense that they each carry notions and characteristics of the colonized.

[the] colonized

An explanation of who the colonized are is included in the introduction, but for further clarification, the colonized includes any displaced, oppressed or marginalized communities of the United States. Within the scope of this project, the colonized represent Xicanos, Mexicans, Mexican Americans and the indigenous.

Also, do not misinterpret the use of the term the colonized, oppressed, or marginalized. These terms are not used to victimize, but to remind broader society of the process of colonization that has caused the destruction of civilizations and communities that exists in the present as oppression and marginalization for minority, oppressed, or marginalized populations.

Italicization of the language of the Colonizer [i.e. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”]

I italicize the language of the colonizer because as these impressions are felt to be essential themes to the identity and lives of Americans, they have been foreign concepts to the colonized and have not represented our realities. Consequently, I do not italicize my language, words or concepts that might be foreign to the Westerner or person belonging to dominant society.

Additionally, I italicize concepts that are not of my original culture or natural epistemology (i.e the Diné philosophy of Sá’ah Naaghái Bik’eh Hózhó). This is to avoid acculturation or pirating of indigenous knowledge and also due to respect and humility in acknowledging that I am not an expert in the practice nor teaching of these philosophies.

The use of ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘us’

I use these terms because I am undoubtedly part of a colonized group and to speak in terms otherwise, I feel would be denial and counterintuitive to the purpose of this project. I do not want to further perpetuate the notion of the other and place my people apart from me; I am a part of them as they are me.
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ABSTRACT

An accurate account of U.S. history is that of imperialism and colonization that includes the systematic extermination of indigenous populations, development of capitalism supported by slavery, and the exploitation of labor of oppressed populations, all supported by racist ideologies and practices. These ideologies and practices have been perpetuated and continue to plague the current state of colonized peoples. History has perpetuated itself and colonized peoples remain in a state of siege in which identities have been lost and cultures, traditions, and knowledge appropriated—all contributing to the loss of peace and balance within our lives and communities. This has been my journey in discovering culture and self-determination and reclaiming my identity. In doing so, I explain identity as a process of action and self-reflection that contributes to the discovery of self-healing, peace and balance within our individual selves. This enables us to embark on the lifelong commitment to the struggle for true liberation of our oppressed communities and revolutionary change within the corrupt political, economic, and social structures that maintain our oppression. Artwork, community activism and dance reveal themselves as essential practices that contribute to the discovery of identity and healing processes which Identity(why caps) are the backbone to being able to make this commitment and “walk in beauty.”

Keywords: Identity, peace, healing, self-determination, colonized, cultural production, artwork, indigenous knowledge, culture, community activism
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Introduction: Colonization and Beyond

In the United States, the mainstream historical narrative includes the fantasized rhetoric of revolution for self-determination and independence, manifest destiny, and a eurocentric quest for man’s God given rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” A more accurate account characterizes indigenous genocide, African enslavement, colonization, white supremacy, and racism that expose the true corrupt, imperialistic nature of the United States (Criollo, 2010). In the scope of this project, it is important to realize this history is not only composed of historical blemishes that tarnish the master narrative of a country built on “democracy, freedom, and equality,” (Criollo, 2010, p. 847) and are events that have only occurred in the past, but are also events that contribute to a systematic process and hegemonic ideology that has created the toxic and self-destructive realities of colonized peoples.

As the United States was formed through colonization, the process was driven by a racist capitalist mode of development that was sustained through stolen lands, slavery, conquest, and the exploitation of the working class and oppressed nationalities (Criollo, 2010). Colonialism was not only based on exploiting the labor and land of the indigenous, enslaved, and gentrified populations of the U.S., but also depended on
displacing—or replacing—these populations from the land and history (Goldstein, 2008; Pérez-Torres, 1998). These violating methods had, and continue to have, devastating effects on the self-determination, identities, culture and well-being of these populations. Accordingly, colonialism cannot be conceptualized as an “event” or a static relationship between a dominant culture and a subjugated culture, it must be realized as a condition that remains formative while also changing over time (Goldstein, 2008).

As we realize colonization as a formative condition, we begin to recognize that the colonized remain under a state of siege by the colonizer (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). This state of siege is part of the ongoing process of colonization and has been perpetuated through racist hegemonic ideologies, cultural domination, oppression, and the attempted erasure of the true violent and imperialistic history of the colonized that benefit the anglo and ruling classes of U.S. society (Criollo, 2010; Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). These hegemonic ideologies classify the colonized as aliens, cultural artifacts, and drains on society and public resources. The ideologies also sustain us as the other giving dominant society the power to control and misuse our histories and cultures allowing for our identities and representations to be controlled by lies and misinformation (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007). As colonized peoples, we become part of marginalized society where internalized oppression becomes the norm and self-determination befits a foreign concept.

Colonized peoples is an umbrella term that has come to include many stratified communities and oppressed nationalities part of a worldwide community that are the marginalized sections of dominant society. These peoples are still affected by the insidious methods of colonization and continued imperialist undertakings of first world
countries; the Mestizaje, the Chicano, is undoubtedly part of this worldwide community (Criollo, 2010).

Chicanos are a colonized people. They have been since the initial contact of the Spanish conquistadores, the systematic murdering and genocide of the of the Mexica people, imperialistic endeavors of the United States to fulfill the eurocentric manifest destiny, and into present day where we are the other in our own land (Pérez-Torres, 1998). Our unique experiences include the juxtaposition of belonging (to a certain community that includes a colonized history but has its own unique characteristics) and alienation (from our original homeland that is occupied by the colonizer in which we are labeled as alien) that are the offspring of colonization. These conflicting positions contribute to loss of self-determination, culture, identity, and balance within our individual lived experiences and the history and experiences of our collective communities (Córdova, 2005).

Regarding the issues surrounding ethnicity and identity of the colonized, and more specifically Chicanos, the long lasting effects of colonization and present day struggles of living within a dominant culture naturally arise. Franz Fanon said, “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip… By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (Goldman, 1990, p.169-70). For so long, the legacy of our ancestors has been distorted to represent them as “human-sacrificing savages.” Yet our own diligent investigation reveals astronomers, mathematicians, and artists that were part of complex communities that included a sense of collectivity and duality—of men and women, balance and harmony—much beyond what we see today in dominant society. Since
European contact, various forms of Anglo control have contributed to cultural repression affecting our identities and self-determination as a whole (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). Our peoples have been made to be and internalize inferiority, incompetency and otherness. Because of this internalized negativity, Ch/Xicanos have lost the ability to possess an identity that comes naturally that both honors their indigenous ancestry and asserts their place within American society. It is because of this cultural disconnection, we have lost balance and harmony within our everyday lives and greater purpose. Ultimately, this limits the ability to feel peace. Thus, for the colonized, a deeper balance has been destroyed (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2007)—one that goes beyond the superficial confines of condescending views that the colonized are merely victims of an unfair system and unable to fend for themselves (Córdova, 2005).

Albert Memmi explained that “the most serious blow for the colonized is being removed from history and from community,” (1965, p.10) and it is then that we become susceptible to defining ourselves through the eyes of the colonizer in which assimilation becomes a consequence. For so long we have been defined and our communities infiltrated by outside entities and forces because colonization has denied our histories and self-determination. Consequently, we are at constant battle with the negative self-images that the colonizer shapes for us in order to obtain our compliance and assimilation (Córdova, 2005). It is here that our first task in battling colonialism, capitalism and the polluted society they have created becomes clear.

Our first task must be to replace the colonizers definition of us with our own definition, so that rather than being candidates for assimilation, we are the sole dictators for determining our own history and identities (Córdova, 2005). This requires taking
back what is ours (Córdova, 2005). We must reclaim our histories, our cultures, our knowledge and the connections to our past and our ancestors. We do this by first being able to heal from the wounds of colonialism through a process of transformation that leads us back to our roots (Córdova, 2005).

It is here that my work and reflection begins. This has been my journey to connecting with my roots through Danza Azteca, socio-political awareness and protest, indigenous and ancestral knowledge, and cultural production. It has been the pathway to begin to heal from the tormenting effects of colonialism within my life experiences and connections to my family, community, purpose and responsibilities. My journey has been a cyclical process, which includes many difficult experiences and decisions that required much thoughtful and sometimes painful reflection. Yet together they enabled me to find peace and balance, the first step in being able to move forward and commit to the lifelong fight for true and meaningful social, political, and cultural change and justice. These are the natural responsibilities of the colonized as we recognize colonization as an oppressive force that is not only part of our histories, but also part of our present day realities and struggles.

*The Evolution of Mexican American Identity in the United States*

As a little girl, adolescent, and young adult, I longed for a strong identity. Yes my family and I were/are Mexican American; rather Mexicans living covertly, but overtly living as Americans—doing what Americans were supposed to be doing, acting how Americans act, and speaking like Americans speak. But when we got together as a family, the Spanglish came out, the Rancheras and Oldies played in the background, and
we would talk, laugh, cry, love and fight. At home I had a strong identity, but I never felt I knew how to act out that identity or carry it with me into the world where I didn’t have my family right behind me. I didn’t know that I was Mexika; I only knew that I was a mixture of Aztec and Spanish. I didn’t know about Chicanismo, or that my tias and tios, and even my mom and dad, were Chicanos. I just knew I was a Mexican trying to live as an American. I also didn’t know that there was a plethora of categories from which I would have to choose from when identifying myself.

There are many categories to place oneself in when one is Mexican American, but what characteristics comprise these categories remains extremely subjective, and where exactly Mexican American identity fits within U.S. society is not easily seen forcing Mexican Americans to construct their own identities. Often times, these identities that are so crucial to understanding us socially, politically and culturally, aren’t even recognized by mainstream society. One thing is for certain though, Mexican American is not Black, but it is not White either. It is because it does not fit in the white-black binary (Rochmes & Griffen, 2006) that Mexican American identity often becomes lost.

Among the many categories to place oneself in are Hispanic, Latino, Chicano/a and Xicana/o each with their own generational, social and even political orientations (Rochmes & Griffen, 2006). It is hard to say which of these categories came first, but we will begin with Hispanic. Hispanic was coined in the 1970’s by the government as an easy-to-use umbrella term for all people from Spanish speaking countries or regions that were previously occupied by Spain (Hispanic Americans, 2010). It was to imply whiteness, only recognizing European ancestry within these peoples rather than recognizing the more holistic reality of the mixture of indigenous and European ancestry.
creating an entirely unique race with a distinct culture. It is said by scholars that people who identify with and call themselves Hispanic identify with White society and are more assimilated than others who identify themselves differently (Rochmes & Griffen, 2006).

The term Latino is also an umbrella term, but a term that is more accepted and used among the Mexican American community (Rochmes & Griffen, 2006). This term represents the commonalities between peoples from Spanish speaking countries (Rochmes & Griffen, 2006). It was once told to me that this is also a colonizing term used by the French in trying to build coalitions because of languages (both French and Spanish deriving from Latin).

Chicano/a is a term that gained momentum in the late 60’s and 70’s during the Chicano/a civil, immigrant and educational rights movements (Rios, 2009). This is a term that was constructed by Mexican Americans for Mexican Americans as a statement of self-determination. It is a distinct political identity that called for unity in order to combat social, political and economic injustices (Rios, 2009). Chicano/a identity provides a space to refuse assimilation, and a space for belonging for people not welcome in the land of their birth, land that once belonged to their ancestors, and for those with no connection to the “motherland,” Mexico. The Chicano/a identity is supposed to serve as a utopian identity. Its philosophies and beliefs celebrate the best of Mexican culture (its connection to Indigenous roots, language, family, ideologies, etc.) but also eliminate the worst (machismo and homophobia) because it viewed women as equal to men and created a space that welcomed the LGBTQ community. However, this identity has been
viewed as a menace to society and the U.S. agenda not only because it completely rejects any form of assimilation, but because it combats the oppressive social and political structures of the U.S. and sought for the betterment of Mexican American communities. But because the outright discrimination that the Chicano/a movements combatted in the past, now are evidenced as institutionalized racism, the term Chicana/o has come to refer solely to Mexican Americans and has lost its political homage (Rios, 2009). Thus, we see the emergence of the Xicana/o identity.

Similar to the philosophies, beliefs and roots of Chicano/a identity, Xicanismo has come to represent a state of mind and lifestyle that represents social and political awareness rather than an ethnicity. The new Xicanismo recognizes more the intersections of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc. and is elastic enough to include the undocumented as well as South and Central Americans (Rios, 2009). It also provides a more holistic view of problems that are faced by Latinos today recognizing the interconnectedness of social and political, and cultural and economic issues affecting all of these communities (Rios, 2009).

Since there are so many ways to categorize ourselves, it is hard to find a single, holistic identity that incorporates the intersections of our unique space within the dominant U.S. culture and that all Mexican Americans can relate to. All of these categories and terms have different political and social implications, and choosing which category to identify with is often based on their own beliefs, sense of self and purpose within society. What is interesting is that Mexican Americans go through such effort to establish and distinguish their own identity, and yet the government disregards all effort
or progress and regards Mexican Americans the same as other Latino groups and categorize them as such.

Why we might ask: are more and more Mexican Americans choosing to forego identification with self-determination or making a social and political statement, and more willing to accept the term Hispanic, the term of assimilation? Sociologist Jessica Vasquez offers that there are different types of assimilation, and certain types of assimilation may not be undesirable if it means a better place in society (2010). These different forms of assimilation include structural assimilation (assimilation of education and occupation), linguistic assimilation (assimilation of language), and identification assimilation (assimilation of identity) (Vasquez, 2010). The evolutionary and generational evolution of the types of assimilation allow for flexibility in identity. For example, one may speak English and very little Spanish (being linguistically assimilated) and be educated in the U.S. with a job that allows for a middle class lifestyle (structurally assimilated), but still choose to identify as Mexican, rejecting the identity of being fully American (Vasquez, 2010). This may be because they still identify with their Mexican culture, and they may reject the imperialistic history of the United States because of the imperialistic experiences they may have been exposed to (Vasquez, 2010).

Vasquez also offers that environment dictates virtually who one is and how one acts (2010). As we see a decline of Mexican Americans choosing to identify with social and politically aware identities and more with identities of assimilation, it may be valid to say that this is happening because of the current social and political environment currently in the Southwest which are extremely anti-immigrant, criminalizing the color brown (Parker, 2010). Perhaps because of this intensifying hostile environment toward
immigrants— and thus Mexican Americans, because the distinction is rarely if ever made— more efforts are being made to assimilate. But this is problematic, whether it is a conscious or sub-conscious decision, in the time of growing hostility and overt racism, is this the time for reluctance and silence? When outright discriminatory laws are being enacted, is this the time to strive for assimilation rather than justice? These are ever ensuing questions that I feel can only be answered with time and more research. But as we watch these anti-immigrant and anti-brown sentiments manifest themselves, our rights may be pushed too far for comfort. Vasquez does make one thing clear though, that assimilation is not the answer to creating meaningful identities and gaining real political inclusion. She makes clear that as long as Latinos think they are white, there is no hope for them (2010); the search for self-determination in the United States must be predicated on the dismantling of whiteness, not the welcomed infiltration of it (2010).

Self-Determination: Beyond the Western Lens of Identity

It is because of these ambiguous and confusing categorizations of Mexican identity that self-determination becomes an integral practice for the colonized Xicano. Self-determination is in and of itself ambiguous in the sense that “no one quite knows what the right to self-determination means—or worse, everyone knows what it means to them” (Miller, 2007, p. 344). However, in the context of healing and finding balance, we must work toward self-determination with a collective vision, as unified communities, rather than individualistically.

I use the definition of self-determination from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The declaration defines self-determination as the
“right to determine political status and freely pursue economic, social and cultural development” (Miller, 2007, p.343). Self-determination involves the imperative necessity for self-realization and self-identification through collective consciousness and work. It is a deep devotion to the community that rejects what is foreign and involves a consciousness that is historically developed and has culturally transmitted values and assumptions concerning the community and its members (Gómez-Quiñones, 1982). All of these components of self-determination are translated through specific verbal and visual symbols whose power stems from recognitions of the work, love and sacrifice on behalf of group survival by past and present generations (Gómez-Quiñones, 1982). Thus, issues and struggles surrounding self-determination and identity are not simply about self-definition and being able to verbally express those notions of the self; they become part of the emotional and physical parts of the self—they become lived, experienced, and maintained; they are active, not dormant, parts of the self.

This discussion of self-determination and identity is different from the common Western notions of identity and self-determination as manifestations of the individual. Through the perspective of the colonized, there are no identities describable as self-contained and a-historical essences; self-determination is part of a collective practice and experience of a community (Fowler, 2007). Since self-determination is connected to self-realization and thus self-identification, we begin to challenge the white-settler lens of individualism and action based on self-gain. Accordingly, for the colonized, identity becomes active; it must be practiced and maintained. It manifests itself in the ways we serve our communities, practice culture, and use the knowledge of our ancestors to resist the infiltration of the dominant culture. Identity becomes a holistic way of looking at the
world and living life that incorporates what is most important to us: self-determination, culture, our history, community, and individual translated into collective experience. These worldviews are integral to understanding this project in the context for which it is meant: to express identity as a process of action and self-reflection that contribute to the discovery self-healing, peace and balance within our individual selves which enables us to embark on the lifelong commitment to the struggle for true liberation of our oppressed communities and revolutionary change within the corrupt political, economic, and social structures that maintain our oppression.
Identity: Making the Choice for Self-Determination

It is human nature to want to belong, to find others we can relate to, and to want to find a niche where you feel comfortable as well as a contributing part of society. From a very young age we long for an identity, something to define who we are and where we fit within our families, our communities, and society as a whole. For many of us however, identity isn’t something we can easily define. The Navajo believe that to have identity means to have balance and harmony, to have identity means to know your background, your traditional beliefs and your culture (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). Our relationships with and within a meaningful behavioral environment—to other people, to cultural traditions, to spiritual beings—are integral to our self-orientations and thus to our identities (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). As these relationships change and we experience new things, our identities change; and as we fall behind in nurturing our traditional beliefs, our sense of self may be thrown off balance.

As a Mexican American, Xicana, the journey to finding and being able to assert my identity has been an especially confusing, yet enlightening experience. As a Mexican American in the United States, you are a stranger, an outsider in your own homeland. You are neither welcome in the country, which you were born, nor the country from which your ancestors derive. You have a feeling of emptiness because you cannot win either way: if you adhere to your culture and language, you are an outsider, a traitor to the country in which you live. In the same light, if you give in and assimilate, you are an outsider and traitor to yourself, your community and your ancestors. It becomes evident that the issue of Mexican American identity in the United States is extremely complex.
and involves many different intersections of U.S. social, political and economic spheres, and also many intersections of the self. These intersections of the self include the solid reality of nationality, where one was born, the abstract ideas of ethnicity and identity, which are nurtured, maintained and practiced, and the inner struggle in which all of these present.

Nationality, ethnicity and identity are all inter-connected parts of the self and when it comes to the curiosity and exploration of these parts, the lines between them are extremely ambiguous. However, although the lines may be fine, they are of great importance. Nationality exists by virtue of birth in a particular place or country and is concrete enough not to be questioned (Goldman, 1990). More specifically, a national group is considered when it is politically independent belonging to a sovereign state or nation (Goldman, 1990). Ethnicity, however, is not an individual construct but the residue of societal processes that may have taken generations to evolve (Goldman, 1990). What is important about ethnicity is that it must be consciously maintained especially as it is immersed in a dominant national culture that threatens to overwhelm it (acculturate or completely assimilate), while simultaneously being separated by years or generations from its national source (Goldman, 1990). Consequent of the heterogeneous culture in which the colonized exists, identity becomes hybridized (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). Composed of nationality, ethnicity and a constant state of inner struggle, the mestiza exists in a state of inner war (Anzaldúa, 1987). Cradled in one (Mexican) culture, sandwiched between two (Mexican and Anglo) cultures and straddling all three (Mexican, Anglo and Indigenous), their value systems, issues and struggles surrounding self-determination and identity become ambiguous. Because all of these conflicting
ideals are so present within the ways we conceptualize ourselves, we learn to exist in a pluralistic mode accepting these ambiguities and conflicting parts of the self. Nevertheless, we are always ready for change and constantly prepared for analytical reasoning to be able to make sense of our experiences and place within our own communities and dominant culture (Anzaldúa, 1987).

In choosing to maintain our ethnicity and thus find and nurture our own identity, we risk being marginalized and labeled as the other because we still live in a society where it is made clear that having and maintaining cultural traits that differ from that of the dominant culture is to be deficient (Goldman, 1990; Córdova, 2005). This stratification can have one of two effects: 1) the triggering of ethnic consciousness and thus resistance to assimilation or 2) the heightened desire to assimilate so as not to be viewed as the other. However, it remains crucial to recognize and establish our right to self-determination and self-identification. We must not let our identities be defined by the government, society or the institutions that we are a part of. Our identities must be defined by us and us alone; and the way in which we choose to express those identities is also at our discretion. It is because of this that I chose to fight.

Coming to Cal Poly as a colonized student of color, one goes through a series of new experiences good and bad. The same, I believe, can be said for any student of color entering a predominately white institution (PWI) as a young man or woman trying to make something of themselves for their family, their community. When entering a PWI, students are forced to develop an identity fairly quickly—meaning, one must be able to recognize and assert what ethnicity they identify with, what culture they practice, and what community they are a part of. At 18, away from your family and your cushion of
support, culture, and community for the first time, students are expected to make a
decision which can be best summed up in two choices: assimilate or fight. Assimilation
is characterized as accepting the infiltration of dominant culture into your life, affecting
your will and ability as a whole to continue to remain connected to your ethnicity, culture
and community. As the university is a colonizing institution, assimilation becomes a real
threat and if we’re not careful, the loss of connection to our community and thus
ourselves could become a reality (Córdova, 2005). If a student chooses to fight, they
must fight to create an identity that enables them to relate to others, while maintaining
what’s important to them (your culture, language, sense of community); an identity that
enables them to stand strong and stay true to who they are and where they come from.
But the point is not to enter the university blindly and assume the qualities of academia
but enter and adopt the ideology that we are “soldiers engaging in the ideological battle
over the construction knowledge” (Córdova, 2005, p. 223-24). This battle over the
construction of knowledge gives us the power to refuse colonial definitions of our
identity and redefine ourselves while simultaneously embracing our communities and
recognizing the importance of research as being connected to political action (Córdova,
2005). In this sense, Cal Poly, a PWI and colonizing institution has provided me with the
tools to understand the complexity of my presence and the power to determine my actions
from that knowledge.

Identity then, becomes not simply about self-definition and being able to verbally
express those notions of the self; it becomes part of the experienced emotional and
physical parts of the self. It is the manifestation of the experiences unique to our state of
struggle as a peoples and how we choose to apply these within our everyday lives and
actions, our relationships, and most importantly, in protest to the infiltration of dominant culture.

The process of maintaining my ethnicity and finding my identity has included resistance to assimilation, and the need to fight for my right to self-determination and self-identification. In choosing to fight to find my identity when coming to Cal Poly, I was able to learn the culture, traditions and knowledge of my ancestors. Through Danza Azteca, Native American beading traditions, and a process of decolonizing my mind, I found a process of healing that is crucial to establishing an identity not of the colonized, but an identity based in liberation—a liberation that will contribute to the healing from colonization and enable me commit to social justice and change, be a contributing member of my community, carry on my cultural traditions and knowledge, and ultimately, be able to “walk in beauty” (Lewton & Bydone, 2000, p. 493).
M.E.X.A. and Protest: Self-Reflection and Discovering the Healing Process

When coming to Cal Poly I chose to be a part of M.E.X.A. It wasn’t until I came to Cal Poly and found M.E.X.A that I found a name for what I was, and a philosophy that came with it. I had an inherent connection with the idea of M.E.X.A. and its philosophies.

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny. We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent.

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner "gabacho" who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán. (El Plan de Aztlán, 1969)

As one of the founding documents, El Plan de Aztlán speaks to the experiences of the colonized student living in a dominant society, and pulls on our heartstrings with a
refreshing sense of urgency, truth, anger and empowerment. The aspect that attracted me was this idea that we are all indigenous; we are Mexika; we are the people of the sun. And although we have been colonized, it is important to be in touch with our roots and where we come from in order to form a strong identity and keep our cultures alive. Second, we are here for an education, but not just for ourselves, for our communities and for our people; as we climb, we bring our roots up with us and stay grounded and connected to these roots. Third, we are political; there is no way that you can be a minority student in a predominantly white institution and remain socially unaware and apolitical. It is not only a responsibility, but a duty that we as Xicano students use our position of privilege to try and cause awareness of the inequality and social and economic stratification that exists within our communities and society as a whole. These ideas of working toward bettering our communities, bringing awareness to problems within our societal structures, and staying in touch with our indigenous ancestral roots are what made me stay, and what made me give so much of my college career, but also what contributed to establishing my identity.

Taking these ideologies and committing to social and political awareness on the Cal Poly campus proved to be more difficult than I would have ever imagined and contributed to most of my dilemmas during my experience as a student. I didn’t know the scope of the existing apathy, ignorance and cultural disconnection of the Cal Poly students, faculty and administration; and even worse, I didn’t have peace with my internal struggles of being a colonized student trying to exist in a bubble where the dominant culture was the only thing tolerated and accepted. Yet despite all of these obstacles, I continued headfast on my mission to achieve change within the Cal Poly
community. I was met with life threats, mockery, and failure but with all of that, surprisingly, I never wavered. What was the most challenging, hurtful and what forced me to stop my endeavors and begin a process of self-reflection was the lack of support I received from my peers and community, termination of faculty integral to my purpose and personally dear to me, destruction of personal relationships and strains on my family relationships. I had no balance and no peace with the work I was doing and it became self-destructive.

In choosing to commit to social and political awareness on the Cal Poly campus, I was naïvely volunteering to bear the weight of the oppressive forces of the university as a colonizing institution on my shoulders. For the colonized, it becomes a responsibility to stretch the boundaries of our education to make what we learn and experience directly useful to confronting the exacerbated problems colonization has brought to our communities (Córdova, 2005). But it is not our sole responsibility to ignite change; it is the responsibility of the campus, the administration and the university system as whole—and even more broadly, the responsibility of society—to address these issues and become active participants in creating change. But because of the blatant disregard for collective responsibility of the dominant society, I felt the need to take on the battle that I had neither the knowledge nor the resources to do successfully. It was because of this that I lost peace within myself—something that happens to so many of us—and I made the decision to go on a quest for my identity in hopes of attaining balance and harmony.

*Learning to Heal: Są’ah Naagháí Bik’eh Hózhó*
According to Navajo beliefs and practices, the journey of finding one’s self and identity is important for health, well-being and balance and harmony (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). This journey is undergone through a philosophy called sá’ah naaghái bik’eh hózhó (SNBH), a complex system of beliefs that provide a holistic approach to teaching and learning of human existence in harmony (Diné, 2000). Although there is not a direct translation, SNBH best translates to mean “according to the ideal may restoration be achieved,” in old age walking the trail of beauty,” and “long life and happiness” (Lewton & Bydone, 2005, p. 479). It incorporates the inter-connectedness of identity, cultural representations and themes of the self, and healing—all factors that contribute health, well-being, and harmony (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). Within the scope of my research and also my journey to find peace and healing, it is important to realize that SNBH is not just a set of abstract principles and notions of the self, but can be translated into lived experiences of individuals and reflect peoples’ relationships with and within a meaningful behavioral environment (Lewton & Bydone, 2000, p.478-479)—it requires the living and active participation of the self.

Within lived experience, SNBH incorporates the process of think, plan, live/do, and assure/reflect (Willeto & Slick, 2010, p. 176) that provides a process for the “affirmative action of thinking, planning, learning, becoming experienced, expert, and confident to adapt” (Diné, 2000, vi). This process organizes all aspects of the teaching and learning of individuals and allows for the guidance and protection from the imperfections of life and also reflects the principles for the well-being of and being a whole person (Diné, 2000,vi; Willeto & Slick, 2010, p. 176). Therefore, SNBH becomes
a transformative process—a journey—in which one is able to gain affirmation and wholeness through lived experiences, identity, culture, environment and relationships.

As SNBH is a central philosophy in Navajo and Diné traditional knowledge and culture, Lewton and Bydone (2000) also describe it as a therapeutic process. It is described as a process in which seeing is a learned, revealed, ever-changing, transformative process whether through the mind, eyes, heart, or spirit (2000). During this process it is necessary to move away from conceptualizing the self as an entity and toward constructing the self as an orienting process (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). For example, the self must be viewed as a capacity for reflexive engagement with, and orientation in, the world; thus the self can be understood as a conjunction between cultural surroundings, situational specificity, and embodied experience (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). Through this view of self and on the journey to find identity, culture plays a constitutive role by providing basic orientations that structure the behavioral environment of the self (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). These basic orientations provide interpretations of events, a conceptual framework for location and action, ability for moral appraisal, a sense of continuity, and patterns for relating to other beings in the environment (Lewton & Bydone, 2000). And these cultural orientations have become a natural part of my journey to finding my identity and thus peace and healing.

By coming to Cal Poly as a minority student and choosing to participate in culturally, socially and politically involved extra-curricular activities, I was able to experience the idea of reflexive engagement of the self with my surroundings, my actions, and reflect upon the orientating process that I was going through in order to find my identity and thus balance. I was able to realize the conceptual framework for location
and action. The location, Cal Poly, a predominately white institution, enabled me to make the decision to resist assimilation, maintain and nurture my ethnicity and consciously and deliberately combat inequalities and feelings of otherness that I felt (action). Included in these actions were the participation in Movimiento Estudiantil Xicano de Aztlán (M.E.X.A.), organizing of demonstrations and protests, the process of becoming a Danzante (still ongoing) and beading. Moral appraisal came naturally after being involved in socially and politically heavy extracurricular activities. I was able to ask questions of myself that evaluated what I was doing and what my purpose was. This self-evaluation and reflection gave me a sense of continuity because although I had not found total balance and harmony, my identity was becoming stronger every time I danced, every time I created something beautiful with my beads, and every time I held a sign in protest. It became clear that finding my identity was a complex process in which active participation and reflection are integral aspects and so then finding peace and balance was too.
Therapeutic Cultural Production

For the colonized, artwork can be seen as a form of resistance as it “socially-engaged,” created not only for aesthetics but to act as medium to represent current events and struggles of a community (Nagam, 2006). The artist then becomes an agent for social change as their work is engaged in current political performance and dialogical discourse (Nagam, 2006). It is here that the idea of dialogical aesthetics emerges. Dialogical aesthetics is a method in which we “interpret and understand artwork through conversations and dialogue based aspects, instead of focusing solely on an object created by the artist” (Nagam, 2006, p.50). This idea supports the belief that the materials we use and artwork we create aren’t inanimate objects, but are connected to us as living beings and serve a purpose—whether that purpose be to maintain culture and identity, or in the case of dialogical aesthetics, create space for conversation and spark for social change, these materials become part of us as artists.

Furthermore, dialogical aesthetics incorporates the principle that art is a collaborative process in which the artist’s perceptions are informed by his or her own lived experience within a community that is “characterized by its own unique constellation of social and economic forces, personalities, and traditions” (Nagam, 2006, p. 50). In this sense, artwork becomes an important outlet and catalyst for colonized communities to discuss the unique struggles they face and also resist assimilation and infiltration of the dominant culture.

As the American Institute of Indian Arts (1992) explains,
[the colonized] express themselves through art because the social, political and religious education received at the hands of Euro-Americans has not always allowed them to be themselves… it is perhaps their last hope to retain individuality in a country that promotes uniformity… [the colonized] create art as an act of defiance to thwart subjugations, to protest assimilation… (Mitchell & Lloyd, p.59)

Artwork becomes the means in which we not only resist dominant culture that is ever present but also a process in which we actively practice culture and maintain identity, a central theme of maintaining a sense of self and finding peace and balance. The artist becomes a part of this process, not merely just the creator of a disconnected piece of artwork, and is engaged in the process of self-determination and expression, cultural connection and political statement.

Danza Azteca and beading have been the artistic mediums that have allowed me to embark on my journey to peace and healing. They have been the traditions that have allowed me to establish and maintain my cultural connections and commitments to self-determination and the cultural treasures that will forever be a part of me.

*Finding What Was Already Mine: Danza Azteca*

Danza gave me an identity—the one that I have been searching for since I was little, one that I know that I will be able to go out into the world and stand strong with. There are many reasons why I do Danza Azteca, and many of those reasons are very hard to compile in full understandable thoughts, much less try to explain in words.

I’ve always wanted to do Danza, ever since I was a little girl when we would go to Chicano Park in Downtown San Diego, or La Plazita Olvera in Los Angeles. Each
time I went, it seemed there were dancers everywhere, adorned in their beautiful trajes and grand headdresses with feathers that reached the sky. The sound of the drum always caught my attention and drew me closer, and as I got closer, I would hear the pieces on their ankles making a sound for each step they took. I just remember thinking that those dancers were so beautiful and wondering if I would ever get the chance to be a part of that. I also remember being filled with an indescribable feeling of happiness, familiarity, sadness, excitement, and pride all mixed into one. It was always so overwhelming, but I would express all of these emotions with a huge smile on my face. Since I knew that part of me was Azteca, I hoped that one day someone would recognize that in me and pull me in.

It was my third year at Cal Poly when the opportunity presented itself to become part of a Danza Azteca grupo and to become a Danzante. I was so elated words cannot describe the feeling I had and the light that began to shine inside of me. One of our elders, Cuauhtli Galindo had offered to teach Mexistas about Danza Azteca if we wanted to learn. He wanted to expand his grupo, and he respected us as people and as Mexika students trying to find our identity. We established a time and place, and it was history from there.

At our first practice I remember there was five of us, all standing in a circle, smiling from cheek to cheek looking at each other in disbelief as if it was too good to be true to be so close to the weh-weh (drum), the copal, the sonajas (rattles), the cha-chayotes (the ankle instruments), and the feathers. For our first practice, our Capitan, Cuauhtli, dressed in his full traje with his cupilli (headdress) and everything. I almost felt ashamed that I was dancing with someone dressed so beautifully and me in soccer shorts
and a t-shirt. I had so much respect for what we were learning, and I was incredibly honored that someone would want to teach something so sacred and a part of his life to me. I felt embarrassed that I had nothing to give back, and embarrassed that at 20 years old I was learning this for the first time.

When we learned our first dance, the most crucial, Permiso in which we are asking the four directions, Tonantzin (mother earth), the sacred fire, for permission to dance, I felt something inside of me come alive. When the weh-weh started beating hard, so much that my heart would go to the beat of the weh-weh (it is said that the weh-weh is our heart beat), and my feet started moving to that beat, a euphoria came over me, one that I cannot explain. This euphoria lasted for the entire night after our first practice. I felt that I was connected to something that I longed for all my life; something that I knew was there, but didn’t awaken until that moment. It was like the Salt Songs of the Paiute Peoples’ that guide the lost spirits back home. I felt like the beat of the weh-weh and the steps of my feet were guiding me back home, they were guiding me to something I knew has been, and would be part of me forever—something that no one could ever take away from me as long as there is an earth to walk on and the beat of the weh-weh for my steps.

I found myself wanting to dance for hours, multiple times a week. Danza gave a new balance to my life and became the place I went to forget all of the stresses and troubles of life. I was focused on something much bigger and much more important. Each time I danced, I got the same euphoria, and fell in love with the knowledge I was gaining and steps I was learning. Danza became incredibly special to me and I found a new treasure, one that I felt I was undeserving to have.
I felt undeserving because I felt it was so sacred. How could I pretend to know the extent of it? I also felt like a fake, posing as a Mexika, wanting to learn the culture, but not worthy of it, almost like an infiltrator. Despite these feelings, I kept dancing. I continued to receive the knowledge that was given to me. I remember talking to Cuauhtli about how I felt, especially about feeling selfish because I had nothing to give him in return for giving me this treasure, and he said that Danza wasn’t about that. He said,

You teach people who are deserving, people who you know won’t take these values and traditions and take advantage of them, and who won’t change them into petty little hippy gatherings. I’m teaching you because you deserve to learn this, you are Mexika, and you repay me by teaching future generations and continuing our culture and traditions, that’s how you repay me. [Personal communication, 2009]

When I heard this, I was speechless. I felt honored that he saw me as deserving and wanted me to help carry on our traditions.

To this day, I don’t feel quite worthy of Danza Azteca and all that we do. But I do it because it makes Cuauhtli happy to see that we care, and it makes me feel good and gives balance to my life that can be overly stressful. This gives me peace because I know I have this entire support system that will always be there, and no one can take away. For this, I am forever grateful to Cuauhtli, my grupo, and Danza Azteca.

Through this journey of learning and discovering Danza, I began to be able to practice and live what I considered to be part of me. Danza in some way, gave me an identity—one that I cherish, one that I can teach my children and they theirs. I am no longer wandering around lost. I found what was always and will forever be mine.
Beading: The Physical Manifestation of Think, Plan, Do, Reflect

Beadwork has been an important artistic outlet and therapeutic process in my journey to discover and maintain my identity and also to resist assimilation. It has been a means for learning, reflection and creative expression. It has allowed me to create beautiful pieces of work that not only have aesthetic appeal, but have personal value and reflect the significance of an identity that is not just my own but that incorporates the knowledge and culture that has been passed down to me from my mentors and my ancestors, an identity that is practiced, an identity that is active. All of these aspects of beading have allowed me conceptualize the idea that indigenous art forms [or art forms of the colonized?] aren’t just expressions of the individual, but are ways of practicing culture and maintaining identity, ways of engaging social awareness and change, and ways of engaging our communities (Nagam, 2006; Kramer, 2004).

Beading for me has been a learning experience and a hobby, which calms. As one indigenous artist describes, “Beadwork…teaches patience to observe, the ability to see things as a whole or multitude of parts; how things are connected and what gives them life” (Fowler, 2007). The artist is explaining two very important aspects of beading that are also integral parts of indigenous artwork. The first is that beading allows us to conceptualize and understand that the works that we create and the materials that we use aren’t merely inanimate objects but are things that are connected to their creator and their identities and have a life of their own. Artwork pieces that the colonized create aren’t merely objects that don’t do anything, but are significant factors that enable communities to practice their culture and therefore aren’t just inanimate objects but living pieces that serve to preserve culture (Kramer, 2004).
When I was first learning to bead, my professor and mentor taught me that the beads have a life of their own, and sometimes they are easy to work with, and sometimes they are stubborn. It was interesting to think of beads this way because growing up, beads were just colorful plastic pieces there for our own pleasure, for our own creations. But as I matured and learned more about these indigenous art forms, I learned that the tools we use to create our work have a life of their own, and they must be dealt with and worked with in that manner— with care and respect, and they will come together somehow, although, not always how we envision or want.

Through this concept of being part of a process of working with materials that have a life of their own, the second aspect of beading is learned— patience and being able to observe and conceptualize. Through beading I have learned to become extremely patient, to take my time and to realize that everything I take part in is not always under my control. During the daily hustle of life, we get lost in being fast and efficient in getting shallow daily tasks done, but with beading, it is important to find a pace, which you’re comfortable with, and fast is not always best. You must be able slow down your thought process and let go of the outside stresses and troubles to conceptualize what you envision for the end result. In these ways, beading is a holistic practice, which also incorporates one of the processes of SNBH: those of think, plan, act/do and assure/reflect. It starts with choosing colors that appeal to you and come together for a harmonious feel, then choosing or creating a design and deciding on a plan of action, creating the piece and reflecting on the end result. In Figure 1, there is evidence of what creating a plan of action means.
So then the works I create are part of the active process of maintaining identity and being socially active in the struggles of my colonized community in hopes that end result will be balance and harmony. Figures 1, 2, and 3 exemplify of how the objects I create maintain these active processes and serve as the physical manifestation of the Diné Navajo philosophy SNBH.

[Insert Figure 1: Porcupine earrings given to my tia]

I gave these earrings to my tia in celebration of the last chemo-therapy treatment that my cousin received after battling stage four Leucemia for three and a half years. In the beginning stages of creating these, I did not know what purpose they would serve, but as the earrings came into fruition they became hers. The beautiful and calming indigo blue represented healing, the different shades represented the stages she went through in being a mother and dealing with such a difficult obstacle, and the porcupine quills represented strength.

[Insert Figure 2: Gift to show appreciation of strength and safety]

This lighter I made with a specific purpose. A close and dear friend was incarcerated while participating in the Occupy Oakland general strikes and marches. This lighter took several hours to complete, from the planning stages to the actual working with the beads. The time I spent in creating served as small testimony of the respect and appreciation I had for my friend in going through that experience and also my gratitude that he was safe and out without any major charges. He had been serving his community and taking action in fighting against the corrupt structures of capitalism and U.S. society as a whole.
and I wanted him to have something to remember and represent that. I gave the sage so that he could cleanse and potentially begin healing from the experience.

[Insert Figure 3: Earrings of comfort and strength]

These are earrings that also didn’t start with a purpose. I originally was attracted to the design because of the beauty and classic traditional look of the colors together. These earrings remained mine, but they came to represent something more. The colors incorporate all the different colors of skin of the peoples of this earth and there is balance between the cool turquoise and the warm yellow, orange and red. I wear these earrings when attending demonstrations, special events or situations where I know I might be viewed as a representative of my community. I do so because I feel they make a bold statement because of the aesthetic appeal but also because of what the colors represent, they incorporate what I want my work to do, serve as a statement, and thus serve as a source of strength and comfort because of that statement.
Conclusion

This project came to completion much like the process of a beading project. It began by thinking about my project: I remember I wanted to create a senior thesis that contributed to the Cal Poly community, specifically the students, faculty and staff of color—something that would contribute to the spark for change. In planning for this project, I didn’t feel I would achieve my high, but misinformed expectations of making a real impact on the climate of the Cal Poly campus. But as I began researching and writing, and with the support, guidance, and encouragement of my advisor and dear friend, it began forming into a cohesive project in which everything seemed to fall into place by themselves; as if it was all planned out and already done by the spirits and my ancestors, and I was just part of the process of how the concepts and ideas manifested themselves. However, through countless conversations and hours of contemplation and reflection, concerns began emerging, ones that couldn't be ignored. I worried that I was beginning to convey the wrong message about what I have learned, experienced, and what I would do with my newfound peace.

These worries and concerns included anxieties that the project was becoming too idealistic, that inner-peace and self-healing was all that was needed to combat colonialism and oppression. I was also concerned that although I was able to find my identity and peace within a PWI and colonizing institution, I was sending the message that Cal Poly was a conducive environment to fostering these integral parts of the colonized, when it was—and remains—one of the worst environments to do so. Finally,
I struggled with the academic pieces that I was writing because they do not represent the language or epistemology of my community and they may act as contributors to the wrongful yet justified self-consciousness and inferiority about all of the invaluable knowledge and culture that my family, community, and colonized relations have to offer. For these reasons, I must discuss and clarify the following.

Though dance and beading proved to be determinant factors in maintaining identity, practicing self-determination and combatting the hegemonic and oppressive ideologies of dominant culture. Yet I am not suggesting that self-healing and identity are the stopping points of our struggles for peace and balance; they must not be viewed as the answer or key to the true liberation of our communities. Nonetheless, they are the first step in the lifelong journey of fighting for justice, being able to commit to the needs of our communities and advocating for, and creating, revolution. What I am suggesting is that without inner peace and being able to realize our positions as the colonized and the oppressed, we are unable to accept our responsibilities for addressing these issues because we are distracted with a constant inner war. Thus, the state of colonization becomes perpetuated. As we understand our history of colonization is in the present we realize that resistance is critical and justice is essential (Córdova, 1992). The concepts of identity discussed in this project, such as identity as active and artwork as collective engagement within our communities, along with the intimacy of shared experiences, are ways in which we participate in the process of breaking free from the destructive remnants of colonization and continued oppression of imperialism and begin to move toward self-determination.
As we understand dynamics of power and knowledge, we recognize that each society has its regime of truth that is tied to dominant class interests (Córdova, 2005). The university acts a principal location for establishing knowledge and thus upkeeps the power structures that maintain oppressive socio-economic conditions (Córdova, 2005). Understanding these concepts, it becomes apparent that the university itself supports the colonizing forces of U.S. society. Cal Poly is undoubtedly part of this system and proves to be toxic to the growth and maintenance of identity and culture. I must make it very clear that it is only because of the explicit understanding of the political function of the university (Córdova, 2005), the will and self-determination, the support of faculty and peers, and the upbringing and continued sustenance of love and backing of my parents, grandparents, family and community, that I have been able to stand so strongly for what I believe in and refute what is so explicitly, yet covertly corrupt and oppressive. Others have not been as fortunate as I have in finding their identity and healing; and the ones who do, don’t find it in the same ways. I have shared my personal journey and experiences in hopes that other colonized students or peoples may be inspired to embark on their own journey to peace and healing by discovering their true identities through culture, tradition, and indigenous (or ancestral) knowledge. It is important for the reader, and more specifically, readers belonging to the dominant culture, to understand that my reflections are unique in the ways that I process my thoughts and conceptualize and reflect upon myself and the colonized state of my people. They cannot be uniformly applied to the experiences or sentiments of the colonized as a whole.

During the creation of this project, everything—my experiences, my research and my artwork began coming together and connecting in such complex, yet perfect ways that
it has been hard to translate into writing without losing some of the thoughtful and intimate meaning. There are no Western ideals, worldviews, or words to fully and accurately explain the intricacies and interconnectedness of the lived experience of the colonized, how we resist infiltration of the dominant culture, maintain our own culture and collective identities, how we assert these within dominant society, or how all of these are connected in a cyclical, not lineal, sequence. Yet, all of my scholarly training is through Western institutions and so I have been forced to create work that satisfies euro-centric standards. Consequently, the soulful profoundness of these concepts and experiences become blurred, and with them goes the ability for my community to relate and connect to my writing and work—and so the oppressive dilemmas of the colonized scholar trying to make a place for him or herself within Western academia become exposed. The struggle for maintaining identity, culture and traditional knowledge remains an ongoing process.

Finally, it is important to understand what an identity connected to community, culture, traditional knowledge, and self-expression will do for the colonized. A Navajo woman explains,

[We are able to] walk in beauty when the person knows themselves, knows their traditional beliefs, their culture… Once you know [your] whole background, that can be your backbone. That’s your self-identity, that’s your background, your backbone to growth, and from there… you won’t get discouraged. You won’t get disappointed. A lot of the negativity that one must feel won’t be with you forever, ‘cause you’ll know how to deal with it, once you know your self-identity.” [Lewton & Bydone, 2005, p. 482; interview by the authors]
Identity becomes the backbone and the first component to being able to “walk in beauty.” This entails the celebrating of our ancestors, our culture and who we are as a collective. Once we find our identity, we are able to hear the drums that summon warriors for justice and ancestors for protection, and remember our dreams that will show us the way (Córdova, 2005).
References


Figure 1: Porcupine earrings given to my tia
Figure 2a: Gift to show appreciation of strength and safety

Figure 2b:
Figure 3: Earrings of comfort and strength