

(Re)claiming Our Cuentos

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When I was 9 years old, I took a trip to Autlan, Jalisco, hometown of my father, and also of the famous guitarist Carlos Santana. He took me on a trip via horseback to a town nearby called *Villa de Purificación* where I met my Great Grandmother for the first time. I remember her white hair, long braids, and perfectly wrinkled face and hands. But most importantly, what I remember the most, was when she spoke to me in funny words that I did not understand, with every other word in Spanish. As an adult, I later learned that the funny words she spoke were in NAHUATL, an Indigenous language spoken by over 1.5 million people in Mexico. What I did not understand was why my Father or anyone else on that side of the family never told me or even attempted to speak it themselves. My parents separated soon after and I never saw my Great Grandmother again.

Well into my adulthood, I made an effort to relearn the language through the teachings of elders, Danza MEXICA (Aztec Dance), genetic memory, and even taught at a school where the language was part of the curriculum. Thereafter, when I started my MFA in the Theater Acting program at UCLA, as part of the interdisciplinary component of Playwriting, I was tasked to write a play, which I had never done before.



I decided to adapt a MEXICA oral tradition story to explain uncomfortable topics that my parents had a hard time talking about to me throughout the different stages of my life such as: menstrual cycles, pregnancy, predators, affairs, separation, and death. I wrote it in English, Spanish, Spanglish, and NAHUATL for that little tri-lingual Brown Indigenous Xicana that grew up in Inglewood, visited her maternal Abuelita every summer in Mexico City, and whose paternal lineage comes from one of the first Indigenous people of Jalisco. Lastly, I wrote it so that other Brown Girls could also feel that ancestral pride, relearn their native languages and embrace their Beautiful Brown skin. That is how my play, *The REAL Story of COATLICUE, And Her Children: The Moon, The Sun and All 400 of Her Stars*, was born.

The play made its world premiere at the Francis Ford Coppola One-Act Theater Festival at UCLA in 2014, where it was second runner up before getting produced. And in May of 2023, was presented at The Neighborhood Theatre Collective's Kid's Program - Community Cuentos, which was a free outdoor event at the Sunset Triangle Plaza featuring three plays performed by students from Los Angeles Unified School District's Micheltorena Elementary School in Silver Lake, California. The school itself lives in the heart of one of the communities that has struggled the hardest with gentrification in Los Angeles, yet according to the U.S. News and World Report, 66.8% of their students are of color, primarily Raza⁴. In the recruitment process, efforts were made

⁴ <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/california/micheltorena-street-elementary-245417>

to reach out to each classroom, as well as their afterschool program. And when auditions came about, only ONE Brown girl came to audition. Her name was Alegria Carrillo, a fourth grader. During her audition, she was very shy and soft-spoken, yet, when she began to say the Spanish, Spanglish, and NAHUATL words during the read-through, began to feel more comfortable and confident. She was cast in the lead role as COATLICUE, Mother Earth in the play, and at times, during the rehearsal process witnessed her resistance to take space or be the center of attention. When speaking with Algeria's mother Cynthia, I came to learn that she was in another well-known acting school, at the time, and was using the craft as a tool to build her self-esteem and discover her potential as a young Actress. However, she mentioned there was one thing missing in her training, the sense of cultural pride.

The day of the performance, the Sunset Triangle Plaza was hot and full of blankets, parasols and folding chairs. However, there were not too many Brown faces in the audience, with the exception of Alegria's family, *Señoras* and *Señores* walking to their jobs or Raza peeking from the back of the nearby Hipster restaurants. I witnessed Alegria nervous and soft spoken, yet excited to perform because her Dad was going to see her act. And finally, during showtime, shined bright throughout the performance. She mastered her lines, stage directions, props, and costume changes impeccably. Most importantly what Alegria demonstrated was the opportunity for a Beautiful Brown Girl to shine on stage in a lead role, speak different languages and take up space so that another Brown Girl watching in the audience can aspire to do the same.