

ENGRAVING EMOTIONS

Memory and Identity in the Quest for Emotive Scholarship

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The engraving commenced during my childhood. It was a painful inscription instructing me to live a life without feelings or emotions as a young boy growing up in a Mexican/Chicano family in southern California during the nineteen sixties. I recall numerous men from my family and community that were filled with deep feelings and emotions but lacking the time or signposts for guidance toward the emotive path. These men were too preoccupied trying to attract and accumulate the material and symbolic evidence that defined them as respectful and honorable men in the eyes of their families and communities. Their childhood inscriptions provided no guidance for decoding the symbols or exhibiting the courage to bare their hearts to each other, making them deeply conflicted individuals.

It was only during those weekly to monthly rituals of family gatherings and celebrations filled with food, music, and alcohol that the men could slow down enough to feel and express themselves. Propelled by the trumpet sounds of mariachi music mixed with the lyrical philosophies about life as told by the singer José Alfredo Jiménez, life became meaningful, providing men the strength and security to feel. Even if for just a moment, the words and music granted them permission to feel and the language to say what at other times was deemed off-limits. With a consistent stream of music, food, and alcohol, the stories began to flow. They were stories of winners and losers, of patriarchal chivalry filled with pride, of challenges and bravado, and about the ironies of life always resolved

with laughter and profanity. These were the brief moments where men actually expressed emotions to their brothers and sons; when men would have the courage to have visions and speak prophecies about their futures for their children. These were moments of boldness where they reached out and touched you as a symbol of pride. The awkwardly firm squeeze of your shoulder or the stroke of your hair made you feel the love that was rarely heard or felt in your life. Many times this would be followed by a physical pull towards them, while with their other hand, reaching into their pocket to give you a wrinkled dollar bill as a testament of their hopes and aspirations for your life. Feeling embarrassed and awkward, you grinned and quickly looked away reaching for the money thanking them while rushing away to rejoin your cousins who were playing outside.

These childhood experiences of growing up male and Chicano would impact my life in deep and profound ways. I continually sought out the missing pieces in my life from both internal and external cultural forces that contributed to living a fragmented life void of feelings and emotions. My incessant search was driven by the memories of my maternal grandfather who was very different from all the other men in my life because he possessed emotive love for his family and was never afraid to express it. Don Tony, as he was always referred to in the community, was a kind and caring man who regardless of the situation was always willing to express his love and care for you. His ability to feel came from his willingness to serve. His love and kindness were understood by everyone he came in contact with because he directed his love to you and nobody else. He too was a proud man who located his identity in his work, but what set him apart from all other men in my life was that he was never afraid to feel. His feelings of love toward you always came through a gentle touch or quiet smile. In retrospect, I often wonder if his feelings and wisdom came with his status as grandfather or because he lost his wife at such a young age. Whatever the case, he was the one man in my life who modeled for me how one loves emotively. It was something I desperately sought for my own life.

I was raised in a culture where the act of becoming an educated person requires one to incorporate the culturally based stories of struggle and triumph of life into the additional processes through which we acquire and decipher formal knowledge. Life experience guides our quest for truth and provides the context in which formal knowledge becomes real and meaningful. These experiences remind us that knowledge does not occur in a vacuum but instead is grounded in our everyday world where formal intelligence and wisdom is measured by its effective application in our lives. This human and intellectual land-

scape is broad and holistic, guided by an inductive form of reasoning where the majority of all epistemological questions are grounded in the experience. As a quiet and introspective young man entering college followed directly by graduate school, my quest for intellectual knowledge was all about finding a voice and history for my community. I simultaneously sought the words to combat the personal silence within me and set free the recognizable senses to expressively feel all of the emotions and ecstasies within me. My intellectual journey was about finding a new engraving and inscription that gave me permission to feel and express my emotions as an adult Chicano male without guilt or retribution.

Yet, I came to quickly discover that scholarship and emotions were never to mix in the North American academic milieu. A subjective analysis or interpretation of my research was constantly discouraged by the majority of my professors and colleagues. Instead, I was trained to keep such things at bay as I strived to distill the purest form of objective scholarship deemed the best scholarly answers to any questions. This academic declaration was complicated and magnified by the fact that my personal and scholarly quest for truth required that I reflect upon issues of race and class. This made my teachers reluctant and/or unskilled to address such issues. With the exception of educators like Jorge Huerta or my mentor Julian Samora, I was prohibited from discovering myself through my research and scholarship. Professors Huerta and Samora advised and influenced me to put forward an inductive model for understanding and interpreting Chicana/o experiences in the United States. This perspective was guided by unanswered questions or a research problematic rather than by a specific discipline or theory since few if any paradigms existed for scholars interested in Chicano and Ethnic Studies. This scholarly void represented a starting point and foundation of methodologies and theories that legitimized and validated what would become the emerging paradigms in Chicano and Ethnic Studies. This discovery required us to draw from and awaken our emotive selves in order to derive insight and perspective into our scholarship that focused on our history and identity. What emerged was an interdisciplinary scholarly vision simultaneously internal and external informed by a range of disciplinary models grounded in the lived experiences of a specific community.

This has shaped my scholarly and pedagogical vision as I continually strive to clearly articulate the methodologies and theories of religious and ethnic studies within my specific research that focuses on the intersectionality of racial identity, religious expression, and community formation. It has placed me on the path toward awakening those feeling and emotions that had gone numb as

a result of the inscribing that took place during my childhood. My present journey is about crafting an emotive scholarship through affirmation and recognition. It is about affirming the experiences and expressions of marginal communities and recognizing them as real and true experiences that must be told. This project is about crafting what Ronald Takaki refers to as a “narrative history” for communities that have been historically and systematically silenced or ignored by the powers that be; where we discover the experiences, feelings, adjustments, imaginings, hopes, uncertainties, dreams, fears, regrets, tragedies, and triumphs that compose our past.¹ Furthermore, it is about subverting or reinscribing the master narrative with new and different stories.²

I have written on the *Hermanos Penitentes* of New Mexico in an attempt to capture the history of a religious community that emerged in northern New Spain during the 18th century who are known and recognized for creating and sustaining a unique form of regional and ethnic-specific Roman Catholicism in North America. Yet, a review of the official record speaks about a *penitente* community comprised of “blood-curdling” flagellants that chose to crucify people during Holy week in the Christian calendar. These exoticized and racialized Indian/Mexican communities were always the curiosity of “*penitente* hunters” arriving to northern New Mexico looking for blood running in the streets as they crafted their vagabond narratives à la Indiana Jones, pith helmets and all, seeking to unmask and expose these “strange, weird, and queer” citizens of America.³ What are continually left out of this historical narrative are the *penitente* brotherhood’s contributions toward creating and sustaining community through *caridad* or charity, *oración* or prayer, and *el buen ejemplo* or the good example. My objective in this project was simple: to tell a different story or counter-narrative to the master narrative being told about the brotherhood by listening to their stories and narratives. It was about shifting the assumed power-laden paradigm for understanding American religion from an east-to-west narrative to a southern-to-northern perspective that originates in Mesoamerica and travels north to the present day American southwest. My *penitente* research is about affirming the existence of this living religious brotherhood and by recognizing and acknowledging their existence as part of the American religious experience. It is all about affirmation, recognition, and reinscription.

A major outcome of my *penitente* research was my working relationship and friendship with Hermano Juan Sandoval, an elder or *hermano mayor* of the *penitente* community in New Mexico. A few years ago, Brother Sandoval revealed to

me that he was a woodcarver of religious scenes that tell the story about his sacred tradition as a Roman Catholic and member of the *penitente* community. He sought my assistance in publishing his carved religious scenes accompanied by sacred vignettes offering an interpretation of each scene from Hermano Sandoval's perspective. This collaboration has set me on the path toward recognizing and uncovering an emotive form of scholarship. The project has taught me the significance of recognizing feelings and emotions in our work.

For Brother Juan Sandoval, carving has really transformed his life. It all began around 30 years ago when a coworker introduced him to carving by sharing with him a pocketknife and a piece of wood. This friend taught him how to use the knife and from there Sandoval just kept on going. It was during this same period in his life that he began to search for answers from "Father God" about his life and began to study and meditate heavily upon the word of God. As a *penitente*, Brother Sandoval was studying the "passion of our Lord" in depth and it was through his studies and meditation along with his newly discovered gift of carving that it all came together for him. He set out and successfully carved the last twenty-three hours of Christ's life with the intent of sharing it with the brotherhood. Through his wood carvings, he was able to meditate on the central role the sacred played in his life. Grounded in tradition, the works by Juan Sandoval would provide new meaning to the act of woodcarving in contemporary New Mexico.

What emerged for Sandoval is what he refers to as his "vocation" where he offers a total of twelve missions or *misiones* a year throughout the state of New Mexico. Through his carvings, he has become a teacher who is able to teach and educate people on the life of Christ. As a vocation, his work is directly related to his *sentimientos* or feelings associated with him being a member of the *penitente* brotherhood. He describes his actions as a *penitente* who teaches through woodcarving as guided by "a deep feeling inside where you have to feel words and actions beyond just words."⁴ He believes that his feelings and sentiments are required for being a *penitente*. He describes how his emotions are tied into purchasing a piece of wood that will become part of his *dibujo* or religious scene that he is carrying around in his imagination. "I have in mind what I want to do," he states, "and then I actually go and study the wood and see how it speaks to me in terms of what I want to do."⁵ It is not uncommon for him to spend numerous hours looking for that perfect piece of wood that will assist him in achieving his pedagogical objective. "It is like a book," he claims. "When you are reading about a man who is riding a horse, you can almost tell in your mind the

color of the horse and how old the man is. It is the same here. From a block of wood, I can tell more or less what I am going to do."⁶ With the chosen wood in hand, he then begins to meditate and study it in order to reinforce and clarify within himself what he wishes to carve. Feelings and emotions play a central role in the creation, production, and interpretation of Juan Sandoval's work. Through his act of carving, he has modeled and impressed upon me a new inscription for embracing and accepting emotive scholarship. It was through this specific scholarly and research project that I had made a complete circle in my personal and professional development. The objective scholarly enterprise could not provide me with answers. Instead, I was taken back to my childhood search and recognized that I had to depend on my feelings and emotions to get at the intellectual truths I sought to distill and uncover in this project. This was the only way I could interpret and explain.

The emotive scholarly project that draws from my scholarly emotive self in order to derive insight and perspective in my own history and identity is reflective and introspective about our lives, stories, and collective memories. The emotive scholarly project seeks answers to experiences that on the surface appear to be hidden and concealed because of hegemonic and historic forces in North America. As a result, we are required to imagine a scholarship outside the box of traditional scholarship as we strive toward developing new and creative models of knowledge where our feelings and emotions are validated as an integral way of knowing. It brings forth a third space where we imagine innovative and ingenious methods for interpreting our work. It provides for us the path that we must follow as we move toward transforming our scholarship and ourselves. The emotive scholarly project is about discovering ourselves in and through our work. I encourage all scholars to incorporate it into their scholarly and personal quests for truth.

Notes

1. Ronald Takaki, *A Larger Memory: A History of Our Diversity with Voices* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998), 4.
2. Alberto López Pulido, "Chicano Religions through Chicano Literature: Reinscribing Chicano Religions as a Hermeneutics of Movement." In *Religion and Literature* Volume 35, No.2 (Summer 2003).
3. Alberto López Pulido, *The Sacred World of the Penitentes*. (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).
4. Juan Sandoval, personal interviews, July 1, 1997; March 31, 1998; July 26, 1998.
5. Juan Sandoval, personal interview, February 21, 2001
6. Juan Sandoval, personal interview, February 21, 2001.

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