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Cultura: El Mundo Entre Los Mundos **Culture: The World Between Two Worlds**

Denise Chávez

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Taos Journey

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Poet, novelist, and dramatist Denise Chávez lives in the borderland between New Mexico and Mexico. There, following in the footsteps of the women of her family, particularly her *Tía Chita* (who created a lending library in a small town in Texas), Denise is a founder of the Border Book Festival – creating a sense of community through books and writers. In visiting New Mexico, we wanted GIA members to experience the difference between its northern and southern regions. Chávez illuminates the battleground of the south – the border – and calls for deep healing of a fractured world through culture.

Cultura: El Mundo Entre Los Mundos

Culture: The World Between Two Worlds

Denise Chávez

In this time of great questioning, I have often reflected on the nature of Culture. You can say my life depends on the answers. What is Culture? Who possesses it and why? What does it mean to be a Cultured person?

The most Cultured person I have known was my Mother, Delfina Rede Faver Chávez. My Mother was born in the small Far West Texas town of El Polvo/The Dust to a Father who was a miner in nearby Shafter, Texas, and a Mother who was postmistress in that remote and forsaken outpost on the U.S./México border across from Ojinaga, Chihuahua, México. Despite the hardship and poverty of her early life, she knew the great gift of Culture because her parents had inculcated it in her at a young age. She was a strong woman who survived the tragic death of her first husband and endured a hard life with her second; she was a woman of faith and spirit who worked forty-two years as a teacher on battered varicose-veined legs advocating justice and love for all those she helped: Hispano and Anglo children, immigrant women, victims of domestic violence, as well as her large extended and adopted families. To her, no one was a stranger. One can speak of her great physical beauty that was only outshone by her gift of acceptance for all humankind. My Mother, like her Mother, Antonia Luján Rede, also known as Mamá Toña, believed in the power of education.

It is empowering to know that all seven of Mamá Toña's children went to college, graduated, and became teachers. They were the first Hispano graduates of Sul Ross State College in Alpine, Texas. If you go on the campus you will find a commemorative wall with all the cattle brands of the settler families placed on it. My Grandfather Eusebio Rede's inverted R is on that wall.

How is it that this family was able to achieve success in such a harsh landscape? Their Great-Grandfather, Francisco, was kidnapped by the Apaches as a child and grew up among his indigenous brothers, only returning to his family when he was a young man. He rose early each morning to chant his prayers to the sun. He was given a land grant

to settle amongst the mesquite and the untamed brush. "Vamos al Polvo/We're going to the Dust," the men used to say as they built their homes on those isolated hills. When they said they were going to the dust, they meant it. (Later on, El Polvo's name was changed to Redford, for a Colonel Redford, who was commander there at the nearby fort.)

From this generation of Mestizos came my *Tía Lucy*, Texas Mother of the Year, and her sister, my *Tía Chita*, recognized by various U.S. presidents for starting the first lending library in that remote part of Texas. Named the Madrid Grocery Store, it was owned by her husband, Enrique, and among the cans of Havoline Oil and men's pecheras/overalls, a library emerged. The first book was a Sears catalogue.

My *Tía Chita*'s house was full of books, each room filled from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, geological specimens, old metates/corn grinding stones, artwork, and more books. She taught at the nearby elementary school, which was across the sand-filled street. Books were her solace, her best friends, and her children. She also had three children, all of them brilliant in their own way, and she was the mentor who bestowed upon them the great love of books that set them off on their paths as linguists, historians, and artists. And yet, for all her book-learnin', my *Tía* was shy, her English halting and soft. She was a modest, self-effacing, and yet stubborn woman who fought for the rights of her children out there in that parched and remote land between sky and earth that seemed so removed from the United States. El Polvo was a place nearly forgotten by America, and to live there meant you had to travel far to reach the city, any city.

My *Tía* appeared on *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, and was featured in *Parade* magazine as a representative of what one person could achieve for the sake of literacy. For many years she continued to receive books from all over the world as she brought literature to her forgotten little nook of the world. Little did she know that her student, a talented reader, Ezequiel Hernández, would be killed by the U.S. Marines patrolling the border just above the Río Grande in Redford in later years, or that her son, Enrique Madrid, would be the leader of a contingent of Redford, Texas, townspeople to Washington, D.C., to ask the U.S. government to stop the Marine presence in their region, and that they would, in fact, achieve their goal.

This is the world my Mother came from. It was a vast and spirit-filled and remote land that offered little promise, and yet, from this place of wonder and dread, she and her

siblings were able to imagine and then become citizens of the world.

What has become of the world there now you ask? It is a battleground as immigration officers patrol the river where once people used to casually board chalupas/canoes to cross la leña/the wood from one bank to another to build a relative's house. If you needed to visit your grandmother or take food to a sick comadre, there was no anxiety of crossing the river or the land. It was all one world and it was familiar. No one ever thought of separation; it was all one land and that land

belonged to everyone.

There was no division for anyone who lived either here or there.

And in fact, there was no there or here. That place was dusty, hot, and godforsaken for all, no exception. And it was Home.

For those of you who don't know, a war is being waged on our borders. People are dying needlessly. They are my relatives. They look like me. They are my kin. It is on the borders of the world – those borders we all inhabit in one way or another, whether it is culturally, physically, or geographically – that the deepest healing can take place, healing that is necessary and overdue. And it is up to us, as artists of deep change and Culture, to enlighten and empower others in the profundity and sacredness of all creative work.

When I reflect on the great sadness of our fractured world, I think that one deep way to begin the healing is to commit ourselves to the expansive healing and transformation that art and true cultural understanding afford us.

Our lack of knowledge and consciousness is killing people. Our lack of Culture is killing people. Whose people? My people. Your people. Our people. They are dying in the deserts near my hometown of Las Cruces, and in nearby poverty-stricken colonias/neighborhoods in Juárez, México, not far from where I was born. This is a fact that will not go away. I dread the summers as immigrants hopefully cross that great divide seeking a better life or as ancianos/elders eke out their sad existence in the rocky hills not far from me as they struggle without the basic amenities: heat, shelter, food, water. These people are not strangers to me. I know their faces, understand their dreams. Once, all this land was ours. And it was México. Remember that.

In my work as a cultural activist, I have sat in a circle in the workroom of a sewing cooperative in Ciudad Juárez, México, in the Colonia Panfilo Natera, once the city dump, still a dump to many, where people live in devastating poverty and need, where there is sometimes electricity but no running water, where the gates of the homes are rusted box springs, where the animals are crippled and maimed,

where children have skin diseases because of their environment, where mothers and grandmothers have forgotten how to read stories to their children, have forgotten the intonation of wonder, the power of voice, the memory of songs sung, a place where twenty-five women of all ages come together to create a better life for themselves and their children as they work in a community to sell their shawls, tablecloths, purses, and their ponchos, not panchos. And on sitting and dialoguing with these women who have nothing, they asked our group of American visitors, "How can the U.S. government kill women and children

in Iraq?" There was no malice or anger in that question, only wonder. Our group had no answer to that question.

Our lack of knowledge and consciousness is killing people. Our lack of Culture is killing people.

I wonder myself. How can a Cultured person kill?

It has been my great gift as an artist and transmitter of image and word to have shared time and space with the women from Centro Santa Catalina and the Even Start Family Literacy Program in Las Cruces, New Mexico. I have worked with these two groups for various years. The Evenstart program works with mostly Mexican immigrant families who are learning English. It is our mistaken and arrogant stance that these immigrant, mostly Mexican people are without Culture. We have assessed what we perceive as their limitations from an overview that reinforces lack instead of strengths. Our glass of cultural expectation is always half empty when we think of Mexicans and other immigrants.

The women of Centro Santa Catalina and the families from the Evenstart Program are not what the transparent world would call Cultured, but who is the world and what is Culture? The other dominant world is a world of artifice, for it belies the true nature of the women and men who carry the traditions and customs of their Culture as best they can in the hostile environment that calls them dispensable refuse.

My family comes from these people and but for education and will, they too would be the dispossessed.

I often wonder how my Mother came to know Culture in the dusty town of her youth. And as soon as I ask the question, I know the answer. Culture was a family of seven with two parents reading a number of newspapers on Sunday mornings in both English and Spanish. Culture was a family knowing that to get ahead it needed to understand the complexities of their many realities. Culture was the way they dressed and ate and celebrated and loved. Culture was a living, breathing gift of possibility without denial of who they were or could become. Culture was life, in all its myriad forms, with the inherent knowledge that they were no lesser or better than anyone else.

Culture has to do with abundance, not what we view as monetary wealth. My Mother, Delfina, was a Cultured woman because she possessed the spirit of inquiry, a conscious delight in the world in all its colorful mosaic of difference and diversity. She was not afraid to explore – to appreciate the world that surrounded her in that dusty, windswept desert landscape and to dream herself beyond the confines of her own background and roots – to open the door to the richness of life in all its multiplicities – without fear, without a benevolent or arrogant tolerance – without judgment and with an open heart.

It is our great blessing to live among many Cultures in New Mexico, and this on-going push and pull,

this creative tension and balance, is what I bring to mind today to you, global citizens of Culture – the absolutely irrefutable specialness of New Mexico. Let us embrace it and celebrate the uniqueness of this special world that has many lessons for all who seek to understand the concept of connection – let’s call it Familia – as we become aware in every action and thought of the bedrock of creative life which is Culture. Let us challenge ourselves to live in the deepest harmony of our chosen place.

It is always surprising to me that someone can live in a place for fifty years and still be unable to pronounce the names of its mountains, people, and traditions. Juárez is not Wuuaaarez. Santa Fé is not Sannafey. I cringe when I hear someone say caseeta, sol-suh, jalapeenies, and chili ray-anos. My name is Chávez, think cha-cha, not Shhhh-vez, and yes, I am a Chicana. Do I want to go there? I can tell you why I’m not Hispanic but a Hispana, why I’m a Latina and a proud Mexicana and why I honor Our Lady of Guadalupe more than La Conquistadora. I am a frontera/border woman and my border begins at Albuquerque. I never had a quinceañera, my Mother never taunted and haunted us with La Llorona and El Cucuy, but I knew what sustos and limpieas were because the Devil lived in our attic. My language was a troche moche of English and Spanish and Spanglish, and everyone in my family spoke the way they spoke when they needed to speak the language they needed to be understood in with the person who needed to understand. My Mother could as easily address the president of México as a cleaning woman from Juárez. She knew the inside of cardboard shacks in the colonias of our nearby sister city, Juárez, where she took used clothing, as well as she knew the fanciest of houses on Avenida Diez y Seis de Septiembre, where all the mansions were. She knew intimately this side of the border and that side. And to her, there was no El Otro Lado; they were the same and she loved them both equally.

We forget who we are and where we are. We are unconscious about what earth we are standing on, and an illusion

of otherness and separation bring misunderstanding and confusion.

A Cultured person would know that you don’t put the Zia symbol on the rug in a hotel lobby like you see at the Radisson Hotel in Santa Fe. Who would walk on the sacred and defile the ancestors? No right-minded Mexicana would be caught alive or dead with a votive candle to Our Lady of the Parking Lot, and certainly ni lo mande Dios, Our Lady of Menopause.

What then is a Cultured person? Who holds the rights to Culture?

A Cultured person is an explorer, someone constantly alert, aware, involved. That person knows his or her place, really knows their place in that place and what that place means to its people. There is a deep respect for language, for tradition, for customs, and for the living essence of what resides in that place. What animals live there, large and small? What are the names of its plants and trees? What are its rivers and the names of its mountains? Who called this place home before we came to inhabit it? Who are the people who carry the living spirit of the place? Who are its artists and word-makers? Who paints the skies of their land and knows the cries of her people? Who knows who Rudolfo Anaya is or N. Scott Momaday or Simon Ortiz? These are our storytellers and we hold them up to you because they speak truth.

A Cultured person knows that sometimes a luminaria is a farolito, that sopa isn’t always soup, that an arroyo is a wash or a draw, and that once, all of this state was México, still is to many people, and that really, all the Spanish people in northern New Mexico are a mestisaje of lo Mexicano, despite their insistence otherwise. Can’t we end the struggle between your North and my South? Isn’t it time?

To know is to understand the hearts of all people, not only kin, and yet I have to say in New Mexico most of us are kin or kin of kin. Did you ever worry that you might be dating a cousin? Did your mother ever caution you with a hissing whisper and the dreaded words, “Es tu primo”? Then you are likely a New Mexican.

To be a Cultured person in New Mexico is to know the following:

What Christmas means when you ask for it in a restaurant. (Answer: A combination of red and green chile, spelled with an e. Anyone spelling chile with an i is not from here or has taken on some aberration of language that came from somewhere else, usually California or Texas.)

Who the first Latino U.S. Senator was. (Answer: Senator Dennis Chávez. Yes, I am related to him; he was my Padrino, my Godfather, and baptized me. The Spanish language is a language of relationship, something the English language will never be. And yet, I love English as my Grandmother Antonia, Mamá Toña, did. To her, English was so beautiful. “¡Ay, el inglés tan bonito!”)

¿Quién te parió? Who gave you birth? Or, put another way, who are your people? (Answer: Many who don't know who their people are feel rootless. Who were your grandparents on both sides? If you didn't have grandparents and grew up in an orphanage, you can still have some sense of who you are in the context of where you live and how you grew up. One of the deepest sorrows I see when I travel as a writer and teacher is that young people across the U.S. are struggling to find out who they are. Many of their parents and grandparents have denied from whence they've come. And they've disallowed their offspring the balm of their mother tongues, their customs, and their traditions.)

What are your Mestizo roots? All of them: Spanish, Mexican, Anglo, Native American, Jewish, etc. (Answer: We should never be afraid to be a child of many worlds. I know I have Sephardic Jewish roots in the state of Chihuahua. To be a Mexican Jew is a great honor and pride. I am equally honored to be a Chicana from Chiva Town, my Father's barrio in Las Cruces, New Mexico.) We should never discount the sacredness of our ancestry, no matter what it is.

It is important and healing to know and love the South as much as the North, the West as much as the East, to not denigrate or demean the otherness of our Other. (Answer: Our mandate as Cultured people is to educate, empower, and transform the lives of our fellow life travelers, all of them nuestra familia/nuestra sangre/our family/our blood.)

To be a Cultured person is to embrace the gem life is – to see its myriad facets and colors, to turn each one to the light and see in it value and brilliance, and to look inside to the precious heart of all sentient life and know it must be protected and loved.

To be a Cultured person is to lay down the sword of fear, pick up one's lifework, whatever it might be, and know it is necessary, vital, and transcendent. And work it is, never doubt that. For me, my work is through pen and ink. It is the work that reveals my deepest and most honest self. I know, truly, in my heart, that the pen is mightier than the sword

and that ink is my weapon of choice. And I know that Cultured people do not kill.

I offer a challenge to all who are here, to all who read, listen, and connect with these words.

To become a Cultured person is our goal, our mandate, our responsibility.

As Clarissa Pinkola Estés says in her essay “Letter to a Young Activist”: “In troubled times do not be afraid. We were made for these times. As only the most seaworthy vessels go out to sea, so it is we are sent out. We were made for these times.”

My friends, compañeros en este camino de arte y cultura, never doubt that we are Cultural Warriors and that our time is now.

Cultured Citizens of All Places, All Times, it is with understanding, curiosity, joy, acceptance, creativity, and love that we will follow our course, stay that course, and in doing so, bring peace to our troubled world and blessings to our ancestors, those whose lives course within us, those who have set a charge to us, and who lead us with the greatness of their knowing. This is our gift to the generations, the steadfast path we set as we embrace our creative life without fear.

Let us see, not only look.
Let us hear, not only listen.
Let us embrace, not merely tolerate.

And in doing so, we will find the deepest Culture of all – that of our true essence. We are blessed to be here together in the heart of the Earth Mother, Taos, New Mexico. To those who read these words: You are with us. We are one and the same. To those who understand these words: Never doubt the power of Culture to heal and transform lives.

Mesilla and Las Cruces, New Mexico

Denise Chávez is a novelist, playwright, actress, teacher, and the artistic director of the Border Book Festival, a national and regional book festival based in Las Cruces and Mesilla, New Mexico. Chávez is the author of the novels Loving Pedro Infante and Face of an Angel, the short story collection The Last of the Menu Girls, and most recently, A Taco Testimony: Meditations on Family, Food, and Culture. Chávez was the 2003 Hispanic Heritage Foundation Award Honoree in Literature. Her recent honors include the 2004 Distinguished Alumni Award from the College of Arts and Sciences at New Mexico State University, the 2004 Governor's New Mexico Distinguished Public Service Award, and the 2004 Literary Award from the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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