

Ciriac Alvarez: On poetry, activism and pursuing dreams from that third country

By Brooke Adams, La Chicana Theory, University of Utah, April 2019

“Todo lo que tengo” by Quezta! playing, background noise

Narrator: It’s a Tuesday evening in late March and the auditorium at the Sorenson Unity Center in Salt Lake City is slowly filling up. In just a few moments a panel will discuss “Utah’s Invisible Workforce” and share their perspectives on how undocumented residents are being exploited here.

They will delve into the many ways undocumented people in Utah live in the shadows, in the gaps, in what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as the “borderlands”—a place of in-betweenness, of belonging neither here nor there but to a “third country,” struggling for a foothold even while filling critical jobs in the state’s bustling economy.

Among those taking a seat at the table is Ciriac Alvarez, who understands intimately what it feels like to be suspended between two worlds and yet fully part of neither one.

Tonight, Ciriac is going to share her personal story of living as an undocumented person in the U.S. She also will perform her spoken word poem, “I Am.” And that is specifically why I am here tonight—to listen to Ciriac’s remarkable poem about identity.

Narrator: I met with Ciriac a week before this event at a local coffee shop to learn more about her life, her activism and her poem.

Activism by Latinx people like Ciriac may be picking up where the Chicana Movement of the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s left off; today, the new movement is for rights of undocumented residents of the United States, particularly people who were brought here as children. They are now truly living in that third country Anzaldúa spoke of. Here is Ciriac.

Ciriac: I grew up here in Salt Lake City my whole life. My parents and I immigrated to the United States back in 2001, when I was five, so I was fortunate enough to grow up here my whole life.

Narrator: In her senior year of high school, Ciriac decided she wanted to go to college. A counselor suggested she apply for scholarships. One problem: Ciriac did not have a social security number and she found she couldn’t apply for any of the scholarships.

Ciriac: From that moment on, I realized how my life would be shaped from being undocumented.

I was fortunate enough to have DACA come out the year before and I was able to apply to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals—DACA—program in 2012. And then when I graduated in 2013, I started working.

I got connected to a bunch of really great people when I was a senior in high school that taught me that even though they were undocumented they were in college, that they were pursuing their dreams, and because of them, I was able to see myself following my dreams.

And when I was in college I decided to fight for other students so their story wasn't like mine. While at the U, I decided to, you know, fight for other students and make sure that their stories weren't like mine, that they had something and that they could believe they could go to college and that they had a space.

Narrator: Ciriac joined forces with other undocumented students at the University of Utah to create the group SOMOS Dreamers. In her final year at the university, received funding for the Dream Center and scholarships for other undocumented students. After graduating from the U, Ciriac first worked for the Mexican Consulate in Utah, where her eyes were opened to other struggles immigrants face, including access to health care for children regardless of their immigration status. That's the cause Ciriac is now focused on through Voices for Utah Children.

Ciriac: That is a different fight than fighting for a pathway to citizenship but it is still something that I've realized that is just as big, is just as important, because while we may not have immigration reform we can do other things that help our immigrant family.

Narrator: Ciriac has channeled some of her activism into creative writing. She has written about 40 smaller poems and perhaps five epic, spoken word poems. Spoken word, she says, has the emotional power to convey personal stories and narratives in a way that is more impactful than just telling stories or speaking.

Ciriac wrote the first lines of the poem she'll perform next week, called "I Am," while a sophomore in college. She continued to tinker with it over the years, weaving more experiences and observations into it. She is engaged in what Laura Pérez describes as "a gesture of yearning and an 'ofrenda' toward greater personal integrity, empowerment and social justice."

Ciriac: You know, the poetry and the writing, I've always done throughout my life, but it wasn't until, like, senior year, first year in college, that I started to share it. It was a way for me to encompass all of these things and something that I could say, something that I could write, and keep to myself or share if I want to.

Narrator: What's the idea behind it?

Ciriac: I think it is just, like, what I am besides, you know, school, besides. . . . You look at me and you're oh, you're a student, you're . . . you automatically assume who I am. And it's just like I am a lot of things that encompass me and there is a lot of things that people don't necessarily know about me or wouldn't know just from looking at me.

Narrator: How do you go from "I Am" to the end?

Ciriac: It starts off saying I am more than your tacos on Tuesday, right, I'm more than what you think a Mexican person is, more than Frida Kahlo, more than machismo, which is very prevalent in Mexico and in Latino cultures, and then it keeps going on to say, like, 'I Am,' reclaiming this identity of illegal, of undocumented, saying I am undocumented, I am illegal, but I am still somebody.

And that I am the cries of protests and rallies, from the experiences of going to rallies and being uplifted from other activists and other people who are willing to stand up and say they are undocumented, say that we deserve rights regardless of documentation.

And then it keeps going on to talk about how in miche lamé, this idea that I and you are connected, you are my other me, whatever I do to you, it comes back to me. And that no matter what I do, I finish the poem, that I am enough, because I think a lot of times I felt like I haven't been enough, like nothing ever could be enough to accomplish my dreams, or I could never do enough to help my community. No matter what I do or don't do or what I become or don't become, at the end it's still enough.

Narrator: Okay, now you have some good background about the poem, about Ciriac, about why she's doing what she's doing. Let me take you back to the Sorensen Unity Center. Ciriac has just taken the stage for her performance. Here she is with her poem, "I Am."

Ciriac: I wrote this poem about three years ago, four years ago. It's called "I Am" and I wanted to write something beyond what people see me as when they look at me, who they see me as.

I am more than your tacos on Tuesday.
You see, I am more of a Frida Kahlo on Friday
Selena Quintanilla on Saturday, with an amor prohibido,
The prohibited love that might have something to do
With the machismo I come back to on Monday.

You see, I am the X in Chicanixia
I am reclaiming a name, a history, that wasn't always told to me
The X that doesn't always listen
to what the white dominate narrative has to say

And if I may,
I am more than your gringo, I mean, Cinco de Mayo, watching you laugh in Sombreros,
Margaritas & ponchos.

Okay?
Okay.

I am the "I" in illegal.
As in, I am somebody. I am somebody.
And I deserve full equality.
I am the cries during protests and rallies that scream,

“Undocumented, unafraid. Undocumented and here to stay.”

I am the humanity when you build a wall
And at 4 foot 11, I still stand up tall.
I stand against the hate
that tries to penetrate
into my community.

Because I am Mechistas, Zapatistas
I am the farmworkers’ clap that tries to bring unity.

You see, I am Luis Valdez
writing in Lake Esh
because you
are my other me.

Tu eres me otro yo.

And if I do harm to you
Si you te ago daño A TI
Then I do harm to myself
Entonces me hago daño a mi misma

I am Espanol y Inglés
A tied-up tongue that can’t decide to speak
Uno
I mean one.

You see,
Today?
Today, I am.
And today, I believe that is more than enough.

Narrator: The poem reminds me of “I am Joaquin” by Rodolfo Corky Gonzales, in which Gonzales pays tribute to his Aztec and Mayan ancestors, decries the terrible damage of colonization and asserts claim to an identity that resists assimilation. He says:

*I am the masses of my people and I refuse to be absorbed.
I am Joaquin.
The odds are great
But my spirit is strong,
My faith unbreakable,
My blood is pure.
I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.
I SHALL ENDURE!
I WILL ENDURE!*

Narrator: To get a little context about Ciriac is doing in her poem, I visited with Theresa Martinez, a sociology professor at the University of Utah, who has examined artistic expression of social activism, particularly through music. Professor Martinez traces this kind of artistic expression back to union activism of the 1800s and 1900s on through blues music, folk and rock and roll, as musicians shared their personal stories and stories about their sexuality into the 1960s, with Woody and Arlo Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and so many more. And poets in American history all along the way, right on down to the rap and hip hop of today.

Theresa Martinez: Today, in this very post-modern kind of epoch, strange times, really, really strange and unnerving times, where spoken word has become the poetry of these kids, it's become who they are.

And it's so activist! It's so activist. It's like they've taken poetry and kind of like this spirit of activism in hip hop and spoken word is obviously a fledgling of that. It's poetic rhymes and sometimes not even rhyme schemes but this fluid motion of [makes swooshing sound] I'm telling you about my life and my history and my people. So pacific islander kids and black kids and Latinx kids are taking this up as kind of like this mantle that really is based in hip hop, that was based in soul music, right, R&B and all the way down to blues, and it really is related to Dylan, it really is related to all that music in the past . . .

Theresa Martinez: Very much so. If you look at people, and I'm talking about activists, in even some of the most critical ways, like Emiliano Zapata, you know, like fighting for the indigenous people of Mexico, or . . . It's that same impetus, it's Padre Hidalgo and El Grito de Dolores, you know, Mexican Independence, we are free of Spain's imperial rule.

It's decolonization, fighting colonization and in the southwest, we have Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, we have this activism that has centered around the land—the lettuce boycotts and the grape boycotts of Cesar Chavez. We've centered around the land.

And he was also, there were always chants, right? *En pueblo unido, Hamas XXXX*. Those are all chants that are part of our culture. There's "Cielito Lindo," which is this beautiful song, Mexican folk song, which often used to be sung before revolutionaries, in rebellion, you know, it was about Zapata and Pancho Villa. They were called bandits, but they were just fighting for their people! You know what I mean? And, please, isn't that the Boston Tea Party? Isn't that what the U.S. in the American Revolution? It was!

Theresa Martinez: So, yes. And she also comes from a long line of Chicana, Chicana and Latinx poets, like, everybody from Sandra Cisneros to—names are escaping me, what's her name? There are so many exquisite Chicana poets and Chicana writers, like Ana Castillo or [intelligible], Gloria Anzaldúa, who are just so important to our understanding of who we are and people who were willing to—Cherríe Moraga, Pat Mora, Yvonne [x], Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, Maria Herrera Sobek, Alma Lopez, Mary Helen Thorstein, there is so many. Denise Chavez.

There's so many, and I'm not even naming them all. Just the beauty. Lorna Dee Cervantes. I loved her when I was growing up.

Just these women talking about how . . . the revolution in our communities was male centered and we were supposed to cook the beans in the background and, you know, be great sex partners, but we weren't supposed to be the activists.

These women who stood up and said no, you know, "This Bridge Called My Back" with Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, who said, "Oh, hell, no! We're not going to sit back and make beans for you, we're going to be who we are and that's queer, too, you know, we're going to be queer women, too."

So, yeah, when she stands up it's like with the power of all that history and all that Chicanisma and that Latinada.

She talks about "I am not your taco Tuesday." I love that beginning. "I am not your Cinco de Mayo." I am not your stereotypes. And I love her, she says, "undocumented, unafraid, undocumented, unafraid." And: "Okay?" she says. "Okay!" And, "I am enough, I might be 5'2," you know, but "I am enough."

It's just an empowered message. It's also a message of pain, anguish and horror, and the way people are treated. But it ends strong.

Narrator: Ciriac says the most memorable reactions she's received to her poem are from other young Latina and undocumented students who share how it made them feel, the recognition they experience listening to her words, and the understanding they gained in realizing they are not the only ones living in that third space.

Daphne Taylor-García has said there is a contradiction between the American concept of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and the lived experience of racialized communities. That is even more so for people who are undocumented, who are living in-between.

Ciriac: For immigrants, I guess, it's a little different, where it's the betweenness of you are here and you are adding to the economy, you are doing all this but we still don't recognize you, we don't recognize your labor, your existence, you know, you don't have a status here. Even with DACA, you don't have an immigration status.

Narrator: Given all this, what is Ciriac's hope for her poem?

Ciriac: I hope I can inspire other students to know that regardless of their status, regardless of where they come from, regardless of what they look like, they can follow their dreams and they are allowed to dream.

I've worked at a lot of different places and I've met a lot of students who don't necessarily know how to pursue their dreams or how to even, you know, understand the idea that you don't have to be these certain things, that you can go out be an activist, and then it can become something, you can pursue something passionately and it could actually become something, even if you not necessarily sure of what you are going to do or what you're going to do.

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