

unity



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Curating Mexican American heritage through folklore

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Curating Mexican American heritage through folklore



"I've always been enamored with storytelling and its power," says folk-life specialist Camille Acosta. Photo by Sur La Lune Photography

Camille Acosta, a folk-life specialist at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, remembers her father sharing the Mexican American folklore story, "The Legend of the Weeping Woman," when she was growing up in El Paso, Texas.

"It is a story that instills fear, spookiness, or darker material such as death, loss or sadness," she explains. "In traditional folklore in Mexico, there are a lot of stories that involve monsters."

Acosta's interest in folklore as a career developed after she enrolled in a class called "Folk Studies in the Media." She earned a Bachelor of Arts in theater in 2017 and a Master of Art in folk studies in 2021 from WKU.

When Acosta researched folklore in the Chicana (Mexican American) culture, she learned why the stories, even horror, are important to her heritage. They aren't just ways to get children to follow rules and get to bed on time; the stories address emotions and the meaning of family and teach how to survive in complicated situations. They give people a safe space to explore themselves, Acosta says.

"I wrote my thesis about my dad's scary stories," she explains. "I've always been enamored with storytelling and its power and how it can connect communities and makes people feel closer."

Since 2023, Acosta has been coordinating the events and programs at the Kentucky Folklife Program, which is housed in WKU's folk studies and anthropology department. She brings folklorists to the area and teaches the community how to record,

transcribe and write about what's important to them. She also helps with Kentucky Folklife, a digital magazine for documenting cultural heritage.

Folklore is not just stories. It's also the art, food, music, narratives and songs of a group of people.

"The point of the Kentucky Folklife Program is to document, present and conserve the traditional cultural heritage of the Kentucky Commonwealth," she says. "That can be anything from folk and traditional arts to performance and everything in between. It's basically helping individuals tell their stories and put their art on a pedestal for other people to learn about."

It's also about connectedness: Suppose you taste a soup your mother made with your grandma's recipe, Acosta says. It may make you wonder if your great-grandma cooked this dish, used the same seasonings or shared the same palate.

"It makes you feel that much more in touch with people you never met before," she says. "Folklore makes you feel less alone. You are a piece of a cultural fabric that is never ending."

Acosta combines her love of performance art and folklore by hosting "Floaties for Krakens," a 90-minute podcast on Spotify and YouTube. The introduction of the episode includes quotes from an interview with her dad and original music by Acosta. The logo is a kraken (sea monster) swimming in a pool with a unicorn-shaped inflatable tube. The playful nature of the title and logo acknowledges how sometimes even monsters (and us) need help.

Acosta interviews people about the creatures who have played a role in their lives. They can be monsters from cereal boxes, movies, music or pop culture. Mental health and personal exploration are part of the conversation.

"We explore the folklore behind it and why it's so meaningful to them," Acosta says. "We learn a little bit more about the person and the stories they have to tell."



Camille Acosta reads to middle school students from El Sol Academy in Santa Ana, California, during a national tournament in 2019. Photo: Carolina Palacios, El Sol Academy

Master of physical storytelling crafts unifying narrative



Carlos Alexis Cruz earned a master's degree in physical theater in 2007. Photo courtesy of Carlos Alexis Cruz

When [Carlos Alexis Cruz](#) was an engineering student at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, he attended a theater show - an experience he'd never had growing up in San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico.

"I thought, 'This is so exciting, I've never seen stuff like this,'" Cruz says. "I decided to take an acting class the following semester."

Cruz was recruited to perform in a show which traveled to the Dominican Republic for a commedia dell'arte tour, an Italian theatrical form. The angst Cruz had already been feeling about a career in engineering combined with the excitement he felt acting prompted him to forge a different path. He transferred to the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras in San Juan and graduated in 2004 with a degree in theater and a minor in philosophy.

After a short stint acting in a telenovela in Mexico, Cruz moved to Italy for a summer to train under Antonio Fava, maestro of Commedia dell'Arte. While there, he was reminded how he enjoyed the physical part of performance. He returned to school and earned a master's degree in physical theater at The Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California, in 2007.

While writing his thesis, Cruz trained in aerial straps and acrobatic ropes, ancient Chinese disciplines, under Master Coach Lu Yi at Circus Center in San Francisco.

"It was there I found the combination of theater and acrobatics," he explains. "(I developed) my own perspective on storytelling with both. I work from theatrical dramatology (the practice of dramatic composition) with acrobatic language. It's a physical art form that depends on the gesture,

more than the spoken word. Because of that, we can transcend the boundaries of the spoken language and communicate broadly to different cultures and communities."

In 2013, Cruz joined the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and now serves as a professor of physical theater. Cruz noticed how Black and brown people were underrepresented in the art community. In 2014, he proposed a project to a local art council and received funding to launch [Nouveau Sud](#) (New South).

The nonprofit uses dance, acrobatic and physical theater scenes to tell stories of struggles, histories, traditions and transformations, and visual images to explore the idea of being a citizen of the New South.

Cruz began teaching workshops all over the city and meeting dancers with various backgrounds, skills and disciplines. The first show in April 2016, brought together different communities to demonstrate what it's like to be a citizen of Charlotte and strive for unity.

The company includes six to eight performers and three musicians who present acrobatic language, live music and poetry multiple times a year. Cruz is the artistic director and the executive director of [Nouveau Sud Circus Project](#).

"Stories are best told in first person," he explains. "If we're able to bring a first-person voice to the table, the level of truthfulness is unmatched. It's impossible to duplicate."

In 2023, Nouveau Sud performed "La Bestia" to a sold-out audience at Aloft Circus Arts during the [Physical Theater Festival](#) in Chicago. The traveling show highlights immigration as seen through the eyes of the Latino community.

"When you're a grassroots organization that belongs to a community, it's hard to say whether the show will speak to other populations," Cruz says. "You don't know that until you enter other spaces. In Chicago, nobody knew us. It proved to us that this initiative is needed."



Carlos Alexis Cruz, executive director of [Nouveau Sud Circus Project](#), is seen here during a rehearsal for a performance of "La Bestia." Photo courtesy of Carlos Alexis Cruz

Stunning works of fantasy and realism

Dreams, gender and heritage are explored in the works of three accomplished artists.

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CONSUELO GONZÁLEZ AMÉZCUA

Consuelo "Chelo" González Amézcu, born in Piedras Negras, Mexico, was a self-taught artist who moved to the United States in 1913. Known for her intricate ballpoint pen-and-ink drawings, Amézcu's works are characterized by detailed, repetitive patterns that could take a month to complete. She dubbed these "filigree drawings," likening them to the Mexican-style filigree jewelry she adored.

She once said her art reflects her imaginative nature: "I was always a dreamer, and I am still painting my dream visions." Amézcu's subjects included

historical and biblical figures as well as abstract and autobiographical themes such as "Queen of Ability" and "America's Filigree Star."

Her creative process often intertwined drawing with poetry, with each medium deeply influencing the other. For example, Amézcu depicted "Abenamar the Christian" from "Romance of Abenamar," a Spanish poem that recounts a conversation between King John II of Castile and the noble Moor Abenamar, highlighting themes of loyalty, honor, and the intricate relationship between Christians and Moors in medieval Spain.

In works like "Untitled" and "Prince Abu Zabi y Su Jardin," Amézcu used her signature style of meticulously drawn patterns and lines to create fantastical scenes reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts created during the late antiquity period.

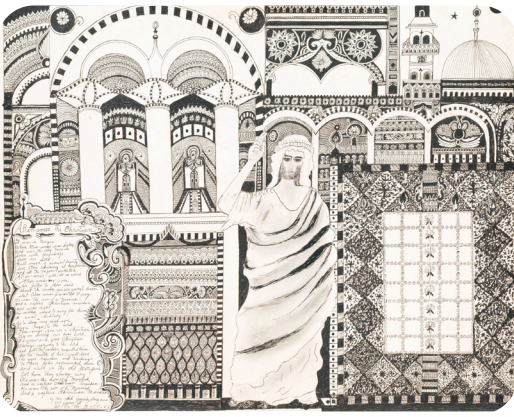
Although Amézcu passed away in 1975, her work lives on through placements in collections such as in the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Menil Collection.



Consuelo González Amézcu, Prince Abu Zabi y Su Jardin, 1970s, ink on posterboard, sheet and image: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Karol Howard and George Morton in honor of Shirley and Ramon Howard, 2013.84, © Estate of Consuelo Gonzalez Amezcu



Consuelo González Amézcu, Untitled, 1967, colored pens on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., 1998.84.3, © Estate of Consuelo Gonzalez Amezcu



Consuelo González Amézcuca, *Aben-amar the Christian*, 1966, ballpoint pen and ink and pencil on paperboard, sheet: 22 1/8 x 27 in. (56.3 x 68.6 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Amy Freeman Lee in memory of the artist, 1991.153, © Estate of Consuelo Gonzalez Amezcua

CONSUELO JIMENEZ UNDERWOOD

Consuelo Jimenez Underwood grew up in California, the 11th of 12 children born to a Chicana mother and a Huichol Indian father. She was the first person in her family to finish high school, and went on to enroll in religious studies and art at San Diego State University. She started as a painter but became interested in fiber art while in college. This interest led to her sole focus on weaving as a way to honor her maternal ancestors.

Underwood imbues her pieces with powerful messages about her Chicana heritage, creating images that call attention to the dangers that Mexicans face trying to cross the border into the United States in search of a better life.

"I've almost gone full circle," Underwood says. "When I first began the walk as an artist, the impetus was the form, that needle and thread: How can I make weaving and fiber cutting-edge art?"

She continues this quest through her "Borderlines" series. Using fibers, paper, wire, paint and beads, the artist explores the difficult journey many Mexicans take to enter the United States across Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and California. She represents the beautiful natural landscape of these states through the inclusion of their state flowers to contrast the manmade boundaries in the borderland states.

Underwood's powerful weaving demonstrates that by embracing and expressing their authentic voices, girls from any background can overcome challenges and contribute to creating a better world.



Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, *Virgen de los Caminos*, 1994, embroidered and quilted cotton and silk with graphite, 58 x 36 in. (147.3 x 91.4 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1996.77



Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, *Mayflower Borderline*, 2018, mixed media wall installation, Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, MA



Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, *American Border Charge. Power Wands and a Basket*, 2018, mixed media wall installation, 108 Contemporary, Tulsa, OK

Crafting a 'love language,' one dish at a time



"At the end of the day, I let the food tell my story," says Chef Jessica Tiffany Luevano. Photo courtesy of Jessica Tiffany Luevano

When Chef Jessica Tiffany Luevano moved from an East Los Angeles neighborhood to Montebello, California, during junior high school, she felt culture shock for the first time. Even though it was only a few ZIP codes away from where she grew up. "I felt displaced," she says. "Kids dressed differently, talked differently."

Luevano leaned into basketball and volleyball and ended up meeting people from different backgrounds. She learned she didn't have to be one thing - a philosophy that has driven her cooking career. Although her dishes reflect her Mexican American heritage, she pulls in personal experiences with travel, other cultures and foods to create something new.

After graduating in 2013 from Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Los Angeles, Luevano worked at the University of Southern California's members-only club and gastropub. Following a visit to Mexico in 2014, where Luevano tried birria, a meat stew traditionally made with goat in Mexico, she cooked her own version for an upscale private event, adding an Italian twist. She stuffed handmade pasta with birria. Seeing the guests' favorable reaction motivated Luevano to continue combining styles of foods.

In 2016, she served in various positions at three restaurants in Whittier, California, for two years. From 2018 to 2021, she was the demi chef at Disney's Club 33, a private club inside the park. "It nurtured my ideology for storytelling in food," she says.

Now, Luevano incorporates ingredients, recipes and techniques from various parts of her life to create a dining experience. "All those experiences make up

who I am," Luevano says. "At the end of the day, I let the food tell my story."

Luevano's favorite dish to cook is the one that makes someone smile. She strives to make someone's day better - even if it means working hard in the kitchen. "Cooking is the greatest love language," she says.

Since 2022, Luevano has been the chef de cuisine at The Bourbon Room in Hollywood, California. She runs the day-to-day operations from staffing, monitoring costs, scheduling, and purchasing produce and proteins. "I run the kitchen during service," she says. "I jump on the line and work with the guys when it gets a little dicey, and they need extra hands in there."



Chef Jessica Tiffany Luevano's food reflects her heritage, her travels, and her experiences with other cultures and foods. Photo courtesy of Jessica Tiffany Luevano

Peach Butter

Servings: 20

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup organic honey
- 1 cup white verjus (unripe wine grape juice)
- 7 white peaches, cored and diced large
- 1 lemon, zest and juice, use to taste
- 1/2 pound unsalted butter
- Salt to taste

Directions

In a pot, bring the honey and verjus to a simmer. Add in the peaches and cook until the peaches can be cut with a spoon. Strain and reserve the liquid in a bowl. Blend the peaches in an upright blender and slowly add in the zest, juice and butter. Add salt to taste and use the liquid as needed to keep the blender moving. Strain the mixture through a chinois, a fine mesh strainer, and chill. It should be smooth, bright in flavor and spreadable. Serve over toast with berries or savory pancakes.

Stunning works of fantasy and realism

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DELILAH MONTOYA

Delilah Montoya is a prominent Chicana photographer and multimedia artist, born in Fort Worth, Texas. Her work, deeply rooted in the cultural and social dynamics of the Southwest, explores themes of identity, gender and borderland experiences. Montoya earned her MFA from the University of New Mexico, where she further developed her visual language blending traditional and contemporary techniques.

She is celebrated for her powerful portraits and documentary photography that capture the resilience and spirit of marginalized communities, particularly focusing on Chicano and Latino cultures.

Montoya's "El Grito de la Gitana" vividly captures the impassioned and dramatic expression of a flamenco dancer, embodying the fervent spirit and cultural heritage associated with southern Spain in her series of photographs titled "El Sagrado Corazon." This series of collotypes portrays Albuquerque's Chicano community, exploring the "Sacred Heart" as a cultural icon rooted in Chicano religious fabric. Montoya's research and Mestiza perspective reveal that this Baroque symbol reflects a syncretic blend of European Catholicism and Aztec philosophy, resulting from the historical clash and fusion of these cultures.

The use of the heart becomes literal in the portrait of "Teyolia." The fabric background features spray-painted images of anatomical hearts while the subject holds a model of a heart tightly in her hands. Montoya refers again to Catholic ideology in "Pasión" as a shirtless man turns away from the audience to physically lean on the imagery of Jesus Christ.

Her work has been exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Through her lens, Montoya challenges stereotypes and brings to light the nuanced narratives of underrepresented groups, making significant contributions to contemporary art and social discourse.



Delilah Montoya, *El Grito de la Gitana*, 1993, collotype, image: 10 x 8 in. (25.4x 20.3 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, 1998.88.3, © 1993, Delilah Montoya



Delilah Montoya, *Teyolia*, 1993, collotype, image and plate: 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, 1998.88.4, © 1993, Delilah Montoya



Delilah Montoya, *Pasión*, 1993, collotype, image: 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, 1998.88.1, © 1993, Delilah Montoya