

The Great Crocodile

A Primordial American Migration Story

Written by Rebekah Crisanta de Ybarra for Penumbra Theatre's My America Project.

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I am as Minnesotan as anyone else I know; half Scandinavian (Norwegian) and half Indigenous (Maya-Lenca tribe of El Salvador). Immigrants on both sides, my roots come from the country sides of the Midwest and the Balsam coast, from the waters of the blue Pacific and the fjords, from the Bigfoot bluffs and the volcanoes. I grew up cruising to football games with white kids in pick ups in Austin MN, Spamtown USA; a meatpacking town where Indigenous Mexican immigrants processed pork for engorged American appetites. Where, on a hot windy day, the air is so thick you can taste it, pig's blood and excrement and the sweat inside tears inside of brown dreams, living somewhere in the throat, an itch you can't scratch. Where you hear the pigs' screams as the trucks roll in, like Edvard Munch, like they already know their fate. My family cried when immigrant friends went home to Oaxaca with unidentified pig brain encephalitis. "Para ver al curandero," they said. To see the healer. At home, and then come back, home. To be an immigrant is an in-between unknown. The Aztecs called it Nepantla, the in-between haziness between one and another, like the horizon at dusk and dawn, the tremble between poverty and hope.

I spent some time traveling to meet my relatives in Latin America. I'd get the customary question, "Where are you from?" And I'd answer, "America." I was always met with a fight that I was unconscious to as a 2nd generation immigrant. "Of course you are American, so are we all," they'd say. "But where are you *from*?" And I didn't know, because I certainly wasn't the blond-haired blue-eyed barbie I saw on tv, and I didn't know all the words to Las Mañanitas either. When I was exhausted or fell down and scraped my knee, I didn't say oofta *or* hijoles, but a combination of the two! I'd say, "Ooftale." I was somewhere in the middle, on the border, battling inside of the biracial frontera. A microcosm of white supremacy, violence, oppression, and neglect inside of one body. One soul. Lost. A spiritual warfare unseen. No, I didn't claim the USA and it didn't claim me either.

My family was always nostalgic about their home countries, and wherever we lived just seemed like a stop on the way to somewhere else. See, on both sides of my immigrant history, there was no American Dream to get to, more like a nightmare to get away from. My Norwegian grandmother shipped back to the fjords from homesickness. Even now, President Trump, my cousins visit the Midwest every year and swiftly return to Norway because there is *no way* they would stay here. Why would they give up all they have there for the uneasiness of the USA and an uncertain future? Covert, unruly, unreliable to its citizens... My father had no choice but to leave El Salvador as a refugee. A country torn apart by US imperial greed; fed a million dollars a day in war crimes and School of the Americas torture techniques. A country of orphans left behind, like Lord of the Flies. The same ones used today with twisted faces to describe "shithole countries" (...Ooftale...) A place where Indigenous rebellion meets quietly in the night, or else,

be silenced in broad daylight. Divide and conquer, conquer and divide; but just survive. Just survive. When I'm not sure where I'm from anymore, after all this time, it's the land itself that calls to me from my ancestors.

This is a story my ancestors used to tell... a long time ago water covered the whole world and giants roamed the earth. There were giant turtles, and giant fish, giant birds, and giant crocodiles. But there was no place for small animals, or flowers, or humans. One day a council in the sky said, "Our creation is almost perfect but we are missing something. We need a place for the small animals, plants, and humans. Who will build it?" One great grandmother crocodile stepped forward to volunteer. So she laid down into the water and rose up with her back. And the bumps on her crocodilian back turned into mountains and islands, and the cracks in-between turned into valleys, rivers, and streams. Her skin turned to mud and out of the mud grew the first precious flowers. Her whole body stretched from the top of North America to the tip of her tail at the bottom of South America. And on her back lived the People. We remember her name as Imix, Waterlily Crocodile, the great grandmother who gave her life to give us earth. And we call her Las Américas.

Today the land of the Caiman is ripped in half and she bleeds. And I'm somewhere in the middle, sewing the wound, covered in blood. Crocodile tears, smothered in lies that we have somehow not been here before. That my ancestors didn't know these stars. It's a Truth lying in wait, that we are *NOT* immigrants to this land. We are relatives. Waiting for reconnection, recognition. No somos inmigrantes, somos indigena. We. Are. Indigenous. We are *already* American and the *land* is free!

It comforts me to know when I'm feeling stuck in the belly of the beast, that my family somewhere in the entrails of the crocodile looks up at the same moon I see from somewhere in her heart. That my people knew a long time ago of nations not fractured by borders but connected by friendships. North and South, in the sacred 4 directions, in *all* directions, across humanity. Guancasco. Eternal fraternity of royal jaguars and resplendent birds, tongues out, dancing together in the in-between.

– Rebekah Crisanta Soltvedt de Ybarra