

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

“Yo, Ken! Alfonso Here ...”

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7xd678t8>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 22(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Lincoln, Ken

**Publication Date**

1998

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## COMMENTARY

### "Yo, Ken! Alfonso Here ..."

#### KEN LINCOLN

---

*Alfonso Ortiz suffered a fatal heart attack at his Santa Fe, New Mexico home on January 28, 1997. Born in San Juan Pueblo, Professor Ortiz taught anthropology and Native American studies at the University of New Mexico since 1974, where he received an undergraduate sociology degree in 1961. He earned his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Chicago and taught at Princeton, with adjunct positions at the University of California, Los Angeles and Stanford. Ortiz was a MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow who chaired the Advisory Council of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History at The Newberry Library in Chicago. He was president of the Association on American Indian Affairs and served on the governing boards of the Ford Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and Cultural Survival, Inc. Among his many publications stood the pioneering study, *The Tewa World*. Alfonso Ortiz was a tireless advocate for Native American rights, an academic of international distinction, and a friend to many, from reservation to Congress, across the country. The anniversary of his death calls for a spirit releasing ceremony, according to tribal custom, addressed in the following eulogy.*

---

Ken Lincoln is professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. His most recent book is *Men Down West* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1997).



Alfonso Ortiz

Al Ortiz liked to eat and talk, and so did I. He was a connoisseur of local cuisine, one of the best storytellers around. He had a big heart, a global brain, and an infectious, *base barrel-tone* laugh, as the Irish say. Al wore his long black hair tied back in a *chongo*, red twine wrapped at the base of his broad neck. His face was moon-round, walnut in complexion with wide ears, and his eyes sparked like embers through dark-rimmed glasses, resembling a Great Indian Horned Owl, or so-called winged tiger. Al's body was barrel-shaped, too, and when he entered a room booming "Yo, friends!" or laughed in that jolly, yet serious way, people took note. "That man reeks of royalty," whispered my holocaust survivor friend, Hal, after joining us for fajitas at the Old Mexican Grill in Santa Fe. So, too, Alfonso loved language, literature, and ideas. He carried Eliot's *Four Quartets* in his pocket everywhere he went, and that included a lot of territory and people.

I remember him best when we were picking ripe tomatoes and green apples at Anna Sopyn's roadside fruit ranch, tossing them into a field milk pail by the dark green river. "Try her red chile powder, Ken," Al said with a big-toothed grin, "it will bring tears to your eyes and wash away all your troubles." Anna chuckled, "Ah, thot chile powder, thot's a real gud wun, better than anyt'ing we had back in Roosha." Anna had escaped the 1917 revolution as a teenager and come to settle in northern New Mexico with her husband. She had big-knuckled tractor hands and milky eyes the blue of Arctic snowbanks. Anna's Dixon fruit market was one of those roadside delights that Alfonso spotted by instinct. He was an anthropologist who loved original people and places, a gourmand of local color. Al knew when to stop, when to keep driving, where to turn off.

So we moseyed on down the road to Preston's micro-brewery, smokehouse, and river cafe along the Rio Grande at Embudo Station, an old railroad house shaded by elm and grand cottonwoods. We drank home-brew ale and nibbled smoked salmon, ordered and split a Thanksgiving smoked turkey, jawed with Preston about pulling brown trout out of the river from his porch. We stopped yet again for fat roadside cherries down the highway through the Española Valley, passing the Roadrunner Cafe truck-stop, where Al mentioned

casually, "The Breakfast of Champions, menudo that will stay until you go to bed smiling." Driving around the Rio Grande Valley with Alfonso was better than a Michelin guide through Provence. Back in town, we'd meet Richard Erdoes and his family for tostadas and sangria at La Tertulia, the old convent for the Guadalupe Santuario on Agua Fria, four hundred years ago the Camino Real from Mexico City, or we'd have breakfast at the Tecolote Cafe on Cerrillos, across from the old Indian school. "The blue cornmeal pancakes with piñon nuts," Alfonso announced like a Pullman conductor, "start the day just right." He knew the King's Rest Court Motel back into the 1950s.

I met Alfonso more than twenty years ago in Los Angeles with a group of UCLA scholars, Charlotte Heth among us, looking for an Indian studies director. We ate fresh halibut at Gladstone's on the beach, and he wanted to hear all about Carlos Castaneda. "You bet, Ken, there's a lot of hooey in his writing, but ... he's caught something about those old medicine tricksters who ran me around the hills when I was a boy, fetching up, and down, and around the Jemez Mountains. I felt like a fool, getting tricked and hoodwinked into matrices of solar ceremony and Pueblo custom. The only way to survive that staggering power was through a sense of play. Otherwise, the medicine would overwhelm you. My grandfather was blind, and as a kid I'd lead him around the rain puddles in the plaza, or *through* them, when he pinched my ear too hard. People don't think Indians laugh much, Ken, but they're dead wrong, absolutely fooled, as you know from your Plains friends." Al loved to joke, and he liked to play for high stakes. He knew the everyday humor, the delight of the sacred, that so few non-Indians ever suspect is going on behind that cigar-store Indian mask. "If you come to San Juan," he said with a wink, "don't miss the Tewa Indian Restaurant just south of the plaza. I know the old woman who runs the place—the best Indian tacos you've ever eaten, ground beef, refried beans, lettuce and tomato, cheese and chile sauce on fry-bread. If that doesn't satisfy your campfire taste buds, nothing will."

That was 1974, twenty-three years ago, and today Alfonso's ashes have been scattered in the Jemez Mountains above San Juan Pueblo. Here in 1939 he was born "poor, but rich in intellect and culture," as Keith Basso eulogized Al at the Pueblo rosary, "and he never forgot the sting of poverty." Poinsettias splashed red across the altar, and the old women in the choir

sang San Juan rattle songs and "Amazing Grace" in Tewa. Alfonso goes to his rest with the dignity, humility, and power of a "great trailblazer," as Dr. Basso said, an epic man with a deep core of compassion, a twinkle always in his eye, a story or joke that held our attention. "Alfonso refused to lose," Keith Basso said. We all miss him deeply.

Alfonso came back to Los Angeles many times, for conferences, for an Indian Center review, to visit his sister in East Los Angeles, to talk at the Southwest Museum, mostly to schmooze. He brought his wife, Margaret, and sixteen-year-old daughter, Elena, to talk about college and poetry, and we ate fresh sand dabs, a Southern California ocean delicacy, at Pelican's Catch in Venice. Seafood was high on his list, having grown up in the intermountain desert of northern New Mexico. I once picked him up from a conference at the university faculty center in my red Fiat Spyder convertible. Al was a large man with large bags, and it took some doing to get him comfortable in my small sports car, students and scholars hanging about. We put down the rag-top and drove through the Southern California sunshine, trees and shrubs blossoming on all sides, to The Lobster on the Santa Monica pier. Al had the "best" fresh sea bass, he said, he'd ever eaten. And we talked personally, deeply, about our lives as scholars and fathers, down-home boys and urban professionals, Indian from New Mexico and redneck from Nebraska.

Once at an American Anthropologists Association annual convention in downtown Los Angeles, twenty-some years ago, we met outdoors in the California sun for late breakfast from a street vendor he had befriended, as he always did—doormen, maids, secretaries, street workers, students, congressmen, scholars, poets, deadbeats—Al was absolutely without bias, except when it came to ignorance or airs. "You know, Ken, I got to dancing with these crazy Brazilians last night," he laughed and blushed, "and we made a conga line that snaked through the entire Hilton Hotel until four in the morning." He hadn't come just to hear conference papers.

That morning in bright sunshine we walked from the Hilton Hotel to Pershing Square, with legless Vietnam vets selling pencils, early morning hookers retiring from Sixth and Main, poor Indians, Hispanics, and Blacks milling about the Alexandria Hotel, a flophouse near Greyhound Bus Lines Depot, the Indian Conestoga wagon of western America. Al spotted human-hair wigs on a street stand, proctored by an

elder Guatemalan: "The 'Skins' are out scalping," he roared, "here in downtown LA!" Pershing Square filled with Alfonso's barrel-tone laughter.

Al came back to UCLA, winter 1977, as a guest professor to give a course in Native American images. With a mix of Indian and non-Indian undergraduates, I took his course, wrote down everything I could, and left each class deeply in thought. I found myself, as suspected, in the presence of native genius. The range of his intellect, from polished literary turn of phrase, to historical insight, to anthropological synthesis, was breathtaking. The ideas rolled off his tongue—concise, original, heartfelt—and the information hung in the air like a thousand coyotes and birds singing all at once in the Jemez Mountains. Al's intelligence, all in itself, was graduate school in American Indian studies. Here was my homeboy model for re-education in American thought, Native American grounding, mainstream scholarly finesse.

One evening at an impromptu potluck in our Navajo librarian's apartment, Al was asked to bless the food; lacking pollen, he used Vee Salabiye's kitchen cornmeal and a Camel cigarette on the front step. That was his genius, as an anthropologist, as a Native teacher, as a human being: to make use of what he had to bless our gathering, to receive by giving of himself and his vast bicultural understandings. It was distinctly Pueblo, originally Alfonso. "I made drums and sold them in Albuquerque," he told me when we were discussing MacArthur fellows, "to help pay my way through UNM as an undergraduate." He said this on a recent trip to Cochiti with a Persian friend of mine, Havva Houshmand, exiled by the Khoumeni revolution to Santa Fe. We rolled southwest across the *bajada* in my used Lincoln Towncar, which Al said looked like an "Indian limo," since Japanese imports had driven the Detroit gas-hogs out of the market. "You know, Ken, every fourth Navajo hogan in the Four Corners area has a used Lincoln parked outside." Whether it was true or not, it made a good story. We were looking for Steve Herrera, a drum-maker for the Pueblos, to order a large ceremonial drum for the Chicago Quincentennial Indian Exhibit. "Look for an American flag in front of his house," Al said, as we drove around the ancient adobe village, due west over Tetilla Peak from my La Cieneguilla home. When we finally found Steve, out back carving the heartwood from a rotted aspen, the old man was most cordial, inviting us into his home for coffee. When we left, he gave Havva a big hug and a drum. "Ain't no Arab woman ever

come to visit me before," this Indian drum-maker marveled. Steve Herrera had been a paratrooper in World War II and parachuted into Iran in 1945 when Havva was a child.

Havva, Al, and I went on over to Tent Rocks to see the weird sandstone formations, carved out by wind and water, but our hike was cut short when Alfonso began breathing hard and perspiring. He didn't say much about it, only that he had stopped jogging for health reasons. I suspected then something to do with his diet and heart, but didn't pry. That was six years ago. He never complained again, until last week on the phone, when he was coughing hard and having to catch his breath. "It's this damn Asian flu, Ken, I can't seem to shake it." I advised him to visit my Chinese acupuncturist at the local clinic and get some root-and-bark tea mix. "Yes, I'll do that, Ken, and get my health back in shape for classes, starting up soon. But more importantly, we'll sit down and talk more about your new book. I want to tell you how much I like it." Al was like that: He gave you the best of his admirations, whether toward the work, a fine meal, an attractive woman, or a wildfire joke.

Alfonso brokered my early days in Indian studies. In the early 1980s, he sanctioned my monograph for the Modern Language Association's first publication on ethnic writing, *Three American Literatures*. With stunning clarity and convincing power, he was an outside reader for *Native American Renaissance*, and so my first book was dedicated to him, "sending a voice." Alfonso called me a few years later, when the University of California Press asked him to review *The Good Red Road*. "Guess what I've got here, Ken!" he chortled. "Margaret and I have both read the manuscript, carefully and with great interest. We think it's a crucial document to Indian affairs, from the university to the reservation. You've caught an essential moment of the mid-1970s in this book, Ken. Bravo!" Alfonso wrote the foreword to *The Good Red Road*, finally published by Harper & Row in 1987, after UC Press decided it wasn't scholarly enough (the professorial editors said they'd retract the Castaneda books, if they could, and regretted publishing *Ishi*).

Alfonso loved jokes. The idea of *Indi'n Humor* tickled him, and he passed on many howlers during our drives around the Rio Grande Valley. "You know why MacDonald's went out of business here," he mentioned, driving through Española, a Hispanic town on the edge of San Juan Pueblo. "The speaker phones wouldn't reach the low-riders." He chortled in a soft voice to himself. "Look over there at JoAnn's Ranch-O-

Casados," Al said, driving along the main drag, "that was a Kentucky Fried Chicken place. The kitchen had a grease fire, so they gutted it and turned the joint into a local Mexican restaurant. The rellenos are the best in town." This was no small talk. Green chile rellenos were our test of a good Southwest restaurant. Alfonso's favorite bumper sticker in this land of the Milagro Bean Field Wars was: "Honk if this car belongs to you!"

Al traveled a lot, all over the world, and his favorite airline joke was about an Indian AIMster flying to Washington in the late sixties. An attractive blond was sitting next to the man, so he tried to strike up a conversation. "What kind of men do you like, pretty lady?" the Pueblo man asked.

"Well, now that you ask," she smiled and said, "I like doctors because they know so much about the human body."

The Indian gulped and grinned shyly. "But they can be coldhearted, you know, real clinical."

She blushed and said, "On the other hand, I like Indian men—they are so manly, so strong and caring."

The Pueblo man beamed, adding a note of caution. "But they get a little macho sometimes, especially those Plains types."

The blonde lady rolled her eyes and agreed. "Yes, well, I also like Hispanic men, especially, because they're so romantic, singing and laughing all the time, you know, they understand women." She turned fully toward him in her airline seat, stretching the blue seat belt sideways. "And what is your name, sir?"

"Dr. Tonto Martinez, ma'am," the Pueblo man said with a big smile, "at your service."

Al and I would meet at the Pueblo ceremonies, a Comanche honoring dance at San Ildefonso where the great cottonwood shades the plaza center, a Turtle Dance at San Juan where his sister and uncle lived, a Christmas deer dance at Tesuque just north of town. "I'll bet you're wondering about that freckled guy out there dancing," he said with a wink last year. It did cross my mind that the redheaded boy stuck out among the Pueblo deer dancers, all clothed in white cotton breeches, spruce branches, coyote skins, and eagle feathers, imitating deer with dance sticks in their hands. "That boy's grandmother was Irish, married to the Pueblo cacique, adopted into the village. Among the eight grandchildren, seven are dark-haired and dark-skinned. That boy got the recessive Celtic genes. He's known to be the best deer hunter of the lot."



Some fifteen years ago, we drove north of San Juan to the basalt petroglyphs on a hill just west of the county blacktop road. The kids were off playing in the rocks, my daughter Rachel smearing peanut butter in Nico's hair. Al and I stood under an old friendly cottonwood talking about my need to leave LA and find a more civil, settled place to raise my daughter. "You ought to come here, Ken," Al said thoughtfully. "This valley has the right blend of cowboys and Indians for your plains soul, with some culture and art and outdoor sport thrown in." I nodded and wondered how I'd find a job in New Mexico. "Let me ask around at UNM," he said cryptically, "maybe we can get you there." We turned around to face the Rio Grande, and there hung a sign on the fence-wire: "Twenty acres of river-front property for sale."

Maybe it was a sign. I left LA in 1991 and moved permanently to La Cieneguilla, twelve miles southwest of Santa Fe along the river. "There was a Keres village here, you know, Ken," Al said at my housewarming, as Nico was wolfing down the posole and honeyed sopapillas. He liked to eat, like his father. "There are Kokopelli petroglyphs all over those basalt overhangs to the west. Now, if you start acting funny from drinking the water, we'll know why. This place was known for its springs and *koshare* clowns." Two years later Oxford published *Indi'n Humor*, sprinkled with Al's Moccasin Telegraph jokes. "What's four feet high and three miles long?" he quizzed me. I had no clue. "A Pueblo Grand Entry."

Years before those talks, back through the 1975 good red road trip, I'd roll into Santa Fe by car, once in a beat-up old Buick La Sabre with my daughter and a young lady, and meet Al in one of his downtown Plaza offices. He'd load me up with manuscripts to read—his uncle's creation stories, a piece on the Tewa language, a thesis by one of his graduate students on Kokopelli petroglyphs, a tape of San Juan Turtle Dance songs. At noon we'd stroll over to The Shed for *rellenos* and beans. Or he'd invite me home for a cookout. "Bring Rachel and your girlfriend," he'd smile and say, "we'll do hamburgers in the backyard by the coyote fence. This is the season to roast green chiles on the charcoal. You've never tasted a chile so sharp and sweet at the same time." And we'd sit around, eating and talking for hours as we loved to do, telling jokes, gossiping, trading stories, figuring out where Indian studies was going this time.

Over the years, our kids grew up and moved out. Alfonso went through a painful divorce. Resettled in Santa Fe but still

teaching, I got caught up in commuting weekly to UCLA, sorting out my mid-life, redeciding the future. We saw each other occasionally, but Al sometimes didn't show. He'd always call, as on my fiftieth birthday: "Ken, I'm up here in the Taos Mountains, and the deer tracks are running every which way. I'm sorry to miss your party, but I can't give up the hunt right now. Anyway, happy birthday old friend." I knew he was tracking some new love to fill the ache that never seemed to leave him after the marriage came apart. I realized, slowly, that Al's health wasn't good. He gained more weight, missed meetings, seemed fatigued. Scott Momaday came to town one summer, and we all talked after his reading about getting together for dinner. The call never came. At a San Ildefonso Easter dance two years ago, Al stood wrapped in a tan raincoat by the old cottonwood with Nico and Elena. There was something wrong, but he didn't talk about it.

The last time I saw my friend Alfonso was at the San Juan dances standing by his son Nico. My daughter Rachel had come to town with her fiancé, and there was a muted sense of homecoming, with a shadow over things. Al was dodging the striped *koshare* clowns in skirts, who were out with their willow whips and mock handshakes, picking street-dressed Pueblo men out of the crowd to join the dancers. San Juan men considered it a humiliating honor to be singled out like this, forced to join the ceremonial dancers, dressed in skivvies. Alfonso, shy and proud, wanted no part of the public display. The village was proud, too, but somewhat confused about his international reputation as a Pueblo anthropologist who had written *The Tewa World*. Al told me that when he came home for summer his first year in graduate school at the University of Chicago, the elders met him at the old village perimeter and touched his shoulders with eagle feathers, then marched him directly into the kiva without even acknowledging his relatives. There the elders spent hours debriefing this young Native scholar, making sure he wasn't bringing contaminant information into the village. "It was like coming back from outer space to them," Al said deferentially. "I realized way back then that I was crossing dangerous boundaries, but so be it. I don't think isolation or essentialism has done much good for Indian people, even though I understand, fully, their fear of white acculturation. The pop music and motorcycles have invaded in a way nobody can yet measure. This little village has been here over a thousand years, and they don't like

changes beyond their purview.”

So with a mixture of eagle feathers and graduate sheepskins, Indian-Hispanic-and-Old-Boy-Politics and MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships, local tour guide (to pay for his kids' college) and government Indian lobbyist, Alfonso negotiated the differences between peoples, as a Native visionary, skilled diplomat, and highly respected social scientist. He was a Pueblo boy who became internationally known, a mediator between the U.S. government and militant Indians occupying Wounded Knee in 1973, a drafter of the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, a spokesman pushing legislation to restore the sacred Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo, a ramrod for the Tonto-Apache reservation in Arizona, and president of the Association on American Indian Affairs for some two decades. He fought his entire life for Indian recognition at federal and local levels, based on tribal sovereignty and mutual honor across racial and cultural barriers. Al understood the Buckskin Curtain, and he sought, with respect, to find permeable dialogue across it.

“Yo, Ken! Alfonso here,” came the call on my message machine a few weeks ago. “I got your new book, *Men Down West*. What fine new writing, this time plumbing your own material—probing, personal, honest—I’m very much moved by it.” Al knew when to lay it on, and he knew a writer’s innermost need to have a respected reader like his work. “This is a book to read carefully, Ken, a chapter at a time, not like some Tony Hillerman potboiler. So I just called to say thank you, a job well done. Let’s get together soon. This is your old pal, Alfonso, signing off.”

UCLA’s “Turbo-Prof,” I had just flown in from another round-trip mission to Los Angeles, and I called him back. Al was coughing badly from the flu and “some other health issues,” he said with consternation. “These doctors, you know, have their own regimens, but it doesn’t seem to help.” Chinese remedies had made my flu better, so I gave him the information on the Panda Clinic, and he wrote it down. Then he went on, thoughtfully. “You know, Ken, our lives have been parallel. My dad drank a lot too, but like yours, he was a sweet drunk. I had two sisters, like your two brothers. It’s funny how things work. We’ve come along similar paths in our lives. And San Juan was a village, not unlike yours in Nebraska.” I felt complemented and knew that his sense of old coyote friendship was lasting, even when we didn’t meet a lot. “Get yourself feel-

ing better," I told him, "and call me. We'll take a drive and talk and have a meal somewhere. I've got some new jokes for you."

"OK, Ken, and in the meantime I'll read the rest of your book. Thanks for thinking of me."

Dwight Youpee's call came into my UCLA office the next Tuesday, January 28, 2:30 p.m. "Ken, a message came over the Indian Internet that Alfonso Ortiz died last night."

So Alfonso was eulogized in the Pueblo, his true home, where he would jump off the San Juan River bridge as a boy, he told me, for a quarter from a carload of white tourists. The brownstone Catholic church was filled, mostly with Pueblo elders, for his wake. Al was dressed in a deep red Pueblo blouse, crossed with a colorful shawl, his large brown hands joined. In the old Pueblo tradition, cotton would be placed over the head of the departed, to bring him back as a healing rain cloud, showering life on the high desert.

"My nephew Alfonso is up there," his uncle said, after praying in Tewa, "blessin' us for comin' together this night in his honor." I saw Al smiling down as a big cloud of healing rain, laughing deeply, telling a good story, helping some younger colleague through the hoop dance rings. I will always remember him as a friend who loved quick language, heated talk, heartfelt laughter, and impassioned intelligence, not to mention a good meal. *Holá, Alfonso, see you at the Turtle Dances. Watch out for those striped clowns!*

*For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

—St. Francis of Assisi

Eulogy for Alfonso Alex Ortiz, 1939-1997  
San Juan Pueblo, 30 January 1997