

The Latino/a Condition
A Critical Reader

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Richard Delgado

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Jean Stefancic

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One ought never to forget that Hispanics and their siblings north of the border have an intimate, long-standing, love-hate relationship. Latinos are a major source of income for the families they left behind. In Mexico, for instance, money wired by relatives working as pizza delivery boys, domestic servants, and construction workers amounts to a third of the nation's overall revenues. Is this nothing new, when one ponders previous waves of immigration? Perhaps. Others have dreamed of America as paradise on earth, but our arrival in the Promised Land with strings attached underscores troublesome patterns of assimilation. Whereas Germans, Irish, Chinese, and others may have evidenced a certain ambiguity and lack of commitment during their first stage of assimilation in the United States, the proximity of our original soil, both in the geographic and metaphorical sense, is tempting. This thought brings to mind a claim by the Iberian philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, author of *Rebellion of the Masses*, among many other titles, in a 1939 lecture delivered in Buenos Aires. Ortega y Gasset stated that Spaniards assumed the role of the New Man the moment they settled in the New World. Their attitude was the result not of a centuries-long process, but of an immediate and sudden transformation. To this idea the Colombian writer Antonio Sanín Cano once mistakenly added that Hispanics, vis-à-vis other settlers, have a brilliant capacity to assimilate; unlike the British, for instance, who can live for years in a foreign land and never become part of it, we do. What he forgot to add is that we achieve total adaptation at a huge cost to ourselves and others. We become the New Man and Woman carrying along our former environment. Add the fact that we are often approached as traitors in the place once called home: We left, we betrayed our patriotism, we rejected and were rejected by the milieu, we aborted ourselves and spat on the uterus. Cubans in exile are known as *gusanos*, worms in Havana's eyes. Mainland Puerto Ricans often complain of the lack of support from their original families in the Caribbean and find their cultural ties tenuous and thin. Mexicans have mixed feelings toward *Pachucos*, *Pochos*, and other types of Chicanos; when possible, Mexico ignores our politics and cultural manifestations. . . .

Masks and Identity

Margaret E. Montoya

Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my "excuse me" tongue, and this nagging preoccupation with the feeling of not being good enough¹

Masking and unmasking ideas have been used to examine embedded truth and to expose ideas that lurk behind other more accessible and more conventional conclusions. Professor Mari Matsuda has written that "[t]he work of feminists, critical legal scholars, critical race theorists, and other progressive scholars has been the work of unmasking: unmasking a grab for power disguised as science, unmasking a justification for tyranny disguised as history, unmasking an assault on the poor disguised as law."²

Stories too can be unmasked to reveal their potential for challenging the dominant discourse. Personal narratives, and in this particular case Latina autobiography, are more than stories. They are an important site of resistance. Furthermore, they invent, reform and refashion personal and collective identity. The recounting of my personal stories in two languages is an individual exercise in resistance against cultural and linguistic domination.

In deciding to use an autobiographical narrative format, I am seizing literary space that has rarely been occupied by Latinas in either Spanish or English. Autobiographical works by Latino males have been published in the United States since the mid-1960s. There is, however, no significant body of contemporary autobiography written by Latinas in the United States. Autobiographical essays can be found in anthologies, but few autobiographical books by Latinas have been published.

That I am writing autobiographically as a Latina is unusual; that I choose to do so in the context of legal scholarship is even more so. My purposes resemble some of the goals ascribed to African-American autobiography. Autobiographical writing by

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“Western bourgeois ideology and hegemonic racialism with the metaphor of transculturation.”¹¹

As Latinas/os we, like many colonized peoples around the globe, are the biological descendants of both indigenous and European ancestors, as well as the intellectual progeny of Western and indigenous thinkers and writers. As evidenced by my names, I am the result of Mexican-Indian-Irish-French relations. I am also the product of English-speaking schools and a Spanish-speaking community. Claiming our mixed intellectual and linguistic heritage can attenuate the subordinating forces implicit in the monolinguality and homogeneity of the dominant culture. While I reject the idea that personal narratives can or should be generalized into grand or universalistic theories, our stories can help us search for unifying identifiers and mutual objectives. For example, the deracination of language purges words of their embedded racism, sexism, and other biases.

Using Spanish (or other outlaw languages) in legal scholarship could be seen as an attempt to erect linguistic barriers or create exclusionary discursive spaces, particularly among Outsiders with whom Latinas share mutual ideological, political, and pedagogical objectives. Personal narratives of alienation or subordination present additional challenges when used in the domain of critical legal writing. Being a member of the legal profession, even if one is a member of several traditionally oppressed groups, means having a significant amount of social and cultural power and privilege. Personal accounts of humiliation, bias, or deprivation told from within the academy may sound to some like whining or may be perceived as excessive preoccupation with the self rather than with the real needs of the Outsider communities. Optimistically, linguistic diversity will be recognized as enhancing the dialogue within the academy by bringing in new voices and fresh perspectives. For this reason, incorporating Spanish words, sayings, literature, and wisdom can have positive ramifications for those in the academy and in the profession, and for those to whom we render legal services.

So, towards this goal, I tell one of my stories:

I am seated in the back of the auditorium on the first day of a three-day conference in Mexico City. The conference, entitled “Encuentro Chicano Mexico 1993,” brings together Mexican and Latina/o academics to examine the conditions of Chicanos in the United States. The first roundtable is on historical issues and features a presentation on the history of Spanish-language radio in the United States. Toward the end of the question-and-answer period that is taking place in Spanish, I raise my hand. I want to discuss FCC v. Metro Broadcasting;¹² not only for its potential to expand license ownership opportunities for Latinas/os, but also to discuss how Justice Brennan’s opinion emphasizes that Latina/o licensees comprehensively change and enhance the business of radio broadcasting.¹³

As I begin to speak and faces turn to the back of the room, I hear myself. My Spanish sounds pinched; I’m fumbling for words; I hear the American intonations and the English constructions forcing themselves on my Spanish. It feels dreamlike; I am aware of two dialogues—one is audible; I am talking to an audience. The other is inaudible; I am talking to myself. I am “on stage.” What are they thinking behind

their faces? Only this time the faces look like my face. Still I feel different, tongue-tied, childlike. I leave the conference feeling disturbed and nervous. I am scheduled to present a version of this paper on the following day. But what language do I use? I want to speak in Spanish, so as to be understood by the largest number, but to do so puts me at psychological risk: using a limited vocabulary, fractured syntax, and accented tones.

Like my trenzas [“braids”—Eds.] and my grade school uniform, I have long adopted a head-to-toe mask, to help me become the person I am when I am functioning in an Anglo and/or male environment. I think of this sometimes as I stand in front of the mirror to put on my make-up (as I “make myself up” or invent myself anew), as I apply mascara. Our word mascara comes from the anglicized pronunciation for the Spanish word meaning mask. Mascara reveals another level of meaning if we separate it into mas cara, which means “more face,” as does mascarara, which separates into “more faces.”

In different situations, I have constructed my public face through make-up, clothes, vocabulary, and selective identification with my past. Ironically, this all seems even more relevant now as I am thrust into what should feel like home territory. The next day I apply my make-up and dress carefully. I wear a white suit, a cobalt blue silk blouse and matching suede heels.

I begin my presentation with a short introduction written in Spanish, but then I switch to English. I am compelled to switch. As a child I was forced to use English; now it is my language of choice. It has become my public voice—it lends me identity, authority, credibility. I deliver the narratives about my childhood and law school experiences. This is familiar terrain, my voice is confident. I continue with a short synopsis of the expository sections on masking. As I am standing there, I am aware of an internal voice urging me to listen to my own words; I am increasingly aware that my words spoken in English to this Mexican audience capture the very inauthenticity I am describing.

With great trepidation, I say: Masks can be sartorial, ideological, cognitive. Masks can also be lexicographic, rhetorical, or linguistic. I stand before you with my linguistic mask. Aquí estoy ocultada por mi mascara lingüística con sus aspectos sutentuales. Desde niña, he entendido el significado de acentos, vocabulario, pronunciación, sintaxis. En inglés estos elementos idiomáticos están relacionados con mi psique, con la persona quien soy. Por la primera vez entiendo que español tiene el mismo poder, a pesar de estar donde no soy parte de una minoría cultural o racial. Para mí, hablar español afuera de la casa me hace sentir vulnerable. Sobre todo, hablar español donde la mayoría lo habla mucho mejor que yo, tiene algún aspecto de como me sentía cuando era niña, cuando me sentía vulnerable antes de los griñanos. Por eso es difícil quitarme la mascara que me presta el inglés y hablarles en español. Así es la locura de la discriminación.¹⁴

The emotion could be heard in my voice. I continued into the next section, but now I persisted in speaking both languages, weaving English with Spanish, the personal voice with the academic.

I knew it wasn’t neat and orderly: my greñas [“untidy” or “messy” hair—Eds.] were showing for all to see. I shrugged off my mother’s concern about how others

might judge me, and there I stood "sounding grenuada." But this new identity, this contradictory and ambiguous identity, was my own. I felt authentic. My public persona, like my private face and private speech, no longer reflected only those who had dominated me and my people. I found my voice, mis voces.

New discursive formats, including the use of Latina autobiography in legal scholarship, enable us to reinvent ourselves. We can reject the dualistic patriarchal masks that we shrank behind and seize instead our multiple, contradictory, and ambiguous identities. As we reinvent ourselves we import words and concepts into English and into academic discourse from formerly prohibited languages and taboo knowledge. The disruption of hegemonic tranquility, the ambiguity of discursive variability, the cacophony of polyglot voices, the chaos of radical pluralism, are the desired by-products of transculturation, of *mestizaje*. The pursuit of *mestizaje*, with its emphasis on our histories, our ancestries, and our past experiences can give us renewed appreciation for who we are as well as a clearer sense of who we can become.

Our conceptual *trenzas*, our rebraided ideas, even though they may appear unneat or *grenudas* to others, suggest new opportunities for unmasking the subordinating effects of legal discourse. Our rebraided ideas, the *trenzas* of our multicultural lives, offer personally validating interpretations for the *mascaras* we choose to wear. My masks are what they are, in Santayana's words, merely "arrested expressions and . . . echoes of feelings," the cuticles that protect my heart.¹⁵

NOTES

1. Lorna D. Cervantes, *Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War between Races*, in *EMPLUMADA* 35 (1981).
2. Mari J. Matsuda, *Voices of America: Accent, Anti-Discrimination Law, and a Jurisprudence for the Last Reconstruction*, 100 *YALE L.J.* 1329, 1394 (1991).
3. Jerome M. Culp, Jr., *Autobiography and Legal Scholarship and Teaching: Finding the Me in the Legal Academy*, 77 *Va. L. Rev.* 539, 542 (1991).
4. Eliana Ortega & Nancy S. Sternbach, *At the Threshold of the Unmamed: Latina Literary Discourse in the Eighties*, in *BREAKING BOUNDARIES: LATINA WRITING AND CRITICAL READINGS* 2, 14 (Asuncion Horro-Delgado et al. eds., 1989).
5. Gloria Anzaldúa, *BORDERLANDS/La Frontera: THE NEW MESTIZA* (1987); Sandra Cisneros, *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET* (1985).
6. Renato Rosaldo, *CULTURE & TRUTH: THE REMAKING OF SOCIAL ANALYSIS*, 216 (1989).
7. Mike Gonzalez & David Treece, *THE GATHERING OF VOICES: THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY OF LATIN AMERICA*, xv (1992).
8. *Id.*
9. Gita Rajan, *Subversive-Subaltern Identity: Indira Gandhi as the Speaking Subject*, in *DE/COLONIZING THE SUBJECT: THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY*, 196 (Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson eds., 1992).
10. Anzaldúa, at 77.
11. Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender Self-Portraiture* 15-16 (1989).
12. 497 U.S. 547 (1990).

13. See *id.* at 581-82.

14. Here I am, obfuscated by my linguistic mask with its subtextual aspects. Since I was a child, I've understood the meaning of accents, vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax. These linguistic elements of English are related to my psyche, to the person I am. For the first time I understand that Spanish has the same power over me, even though here I am not part of a cultural or racial minority. For me, speaking Spanish outside of the home makes me feel vulnerable: especially speaking Spanish where the majority speak so much better than I. All of this has some aspect of how I used to feel as a child, when I felt vulnerable in front of *gringos*. For this reason, it is so difficult to take off this mask that English lends me and to speak in Spanish. This is the craziness of discrimination. (The unease of this experience is recreated in the effort of writing in Spanish and not knowing where words are accented or whether the vocabulary is exact. I am painfully aware that my written Spanish reveals my assimilation in the same way as my spoken English does.)

15. Santayana writes:

[M]asks are arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feelings, at once faithful, discreet, and superlative. Living things in contact with the air must acquire a cuticle, and it is not urged against cuticles that they are not hearts; yet some philosophers seem to be angry with images for not being things, and with words for not being feelings. Words and images are like shells, not less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation.

George Santayana, *SOLILOQUIES IN ENGLAND AND LATER SOLILOQUIES* 131-132 (1924).