

Always Been “Inside”

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A note from the author

This essay represents a project of decolonial disobedient conservatism.² Beginning with a particular rhetorical partnership and expanding to academic, public, and personal realms, this essay functions as a meditation on the theme of rhetorical recovery and transformation in naming, self-identification, agency, and voice beyond the logic of coloniality embodied in the terms Hispanic and Latino. The idea of the “pluriversity and truth” upon which decoloniality operates defines this meditation (Mignolo, 2017, p. 41). For this essay, pluriversity and truth involves a foundational recognition of Latinx as “complex, heterogenous people” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 77). I narrow focus of this meditation to a particular segment of Latinx of which I am a member: generations of individuals in the United States removed from our roots physically, epistemically, culturally, and linguistically by the machinery of racism and coloniality; a population deemed not assimilable, branded as minorities, and faced with what comes with, and after, the realization that we have “always been inside” the multiple spaces called America. The style of the essay reflects influences from the genre of the personal essay, the genre of critical autobiographical employed by Victor Villanueva, writings on critical race theory, and the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa. Thus, five interwoven episodes comprise the structure of this essay. For reference, I describe the episodes as follows: the two episodes entitled “Mary” and “The False Mirror” establish central concerns regarding naming, self-identification, and agency through a public rhetoric partnership; the episodes entitled “Where Consciousness, Conscience, Comfort Converge” and “Towards an End” explore the deeper issues of coloniality and racism within the first two episodes and suggest theories and approaches to these issues in and beyond the writing classroom; and the final

episode "Voice without a Language" addresses concerns about the limitations of these theories and approaches.

Mary

Mary Ulloa has been on my mind for months. Everything I know about her comes from a few paragraphs written by Laurie Grobman in her 2015 article entitled "(Re)Writing Local Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Histories: Negotiating Shared Meaning in Public Rhetoric Partnerships." In the article, Grobman (2015) examined community-based projects that promoted the partnership between various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to show that teacher-scholars and students can participate in "purposeful, impactful public work" (237) and to identify challenges of power and control in such partnerships and their resulting product. One young Dominican American student involved in the partnership described herself as "the only Hispanic/Latino from the *cuidad de* Reading (Pennsylvania)" (qtd. in Grobman, 2015, p. 246).

Yet more than 250 "rhetorical citizen historians" and "citizen-scholars"—titles only bestowed upon the participating undergraduate writing students who appear to be neither citizens of Reading, Pennsylvania, nor historians of rhetoric—worked with Mary and other residents of Reading, who rhetorical citizen historians and citizen-scholars identified as "partners." Despite the equitability that such a title connotes, partners were "wholly dependent on collaboration" with rhetorical citizen historians and citizen-scholars (Grobman, 2015, p. 244); throughout the intellectual labor, administration, and oversight of the six-year partnership, rhetorical citizen historians and citizen-scholars were entrusted to uncover, recover, and preserve local racial, ethnic, and cultural histories (Grobman, 2015, p. 237). From this labor, administration, and oversight came work that was disseminated to the public, including "approximately 6,000 books and booklets on local African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Jewish history" (Grobman, 2015, p. 237).

"Hispanic/Latino"? This framing caught my eye as unusual.

A question arose between Grobman and "community partners (first Jonathan Encarnacion, then executive director of Centro Hispano who initiated the project, followed by Yiengst, followed by Toledo)" (Grobman, 2015, p. 246): which moniker, "Hispanic" or "Latino," should be used throughout the book and for the title. "Our

decision to choose the name ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino’” Grobman wrote, was challenged by Mary (p. 246).

The decision?

Hispanic/Latino.

The reason?

“...Mary powerfully and comfortably spoke as an insider with and for her own, othered community, ‘giving them significant control’ over naming and identity,” Grobman (2015) noted (p. 246).

A small part of me, I acknowledge, desires to tell you that Grobman’s decision and reason must represent her recognition of *la facultad* de Mary. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2012) defines *la facultad* as a “latent” and “unknowingly cultivate(d)” capacity possessed by those individuals who are caught between two worlds (p. 61). This capacity permits one “to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (p. 60). For these individuals, *la facultad* develops as a “survival tactic,” according to Anzaldúa (2012) against oppressions (p. 61). This tactic is strongest in “the females, the homosexuals of all races, the dark-skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 60).

Now, nothing in the text in Grobman’s article supports my own desire, and *mi propia facultad* tells me that my desire comes from conditioning, both as an individual of color living in the United States and a scholar of color producing scholarship in the field of rhetoric and composition studies to give comfort to White fragility and to be complicit with White privilege.

From the little that I know of Mary based on Grobman’s text, *la facultad* de Mary seems obvious: she questions the either/or binary formed by ethnic terminology for Latinx codified by the federal government of the United States; her knowledge of a cultural identification and naming seems to go beyond this binary; she has the courage not only to challenge Grobman’s leadership about this binary but also to confront Grobman and community leaders about their presumed authorial and cultural agency for Latinx.

Then, *mi facultad* screams at me. *We can see that Grobman’s decision and reason represents a larger rhetorical trope of Whiteness about roles of authorial agency and cultural agency in auto-ethnography, a logic of coloniality towards Latinx in the United States about conditional cultural naming, permissive identification, and probationary agency, a re-enforcement of a subject/object binary rooted in the power dynamics of race in the United States. We know; we have seen it through the eyes of those before us. We know; we have seen it through our own eyes. We moan, for we will know we*

will see it through the eyes of our children. And, I re-center myself, taking a step back with *mi facultad*.

One danger of speaking of *la facultad de Mary* and *mi facultad* this way is the danger of misinterpretation; that, by speaking this way, I am enacting that which Cherríe Moraga (1981/1983) warned against, “ranking the oppressions” (p. 29). That is not my intention. My intention is to emphasize the uniqueness of *la facultad* to each individual and, in this uniqueness, the specificity of oppressions and the complex collective experiences that inform our *facultad*. Think of *la facultad*, in an individual or as a concept, beyond the reductionist lens of Whiteness, of racism, of coloniality that attempt to corral the “complex, heterogenous people,” as Anzaldúa (1987/2012) describes, that is Latinx to some singular essentialized classification (p. 77). As a complex and heterogenous people, we can learn and grow and heal from the sharing of common collective experiences, like the struggle of naming, self-identification, and agency. One thing learned from this struggle comes from our “ethnographic observation of white people,” something Krista Ratcliffe (2005) spoke to in bell hooks’ work: a “survival mechanism throughout history” for African Americans to understand the functionality of Whiteness and racism in cultural tropes (p. 115). I add that this mechanism can also extend to Latinx in our efforts to understand the functionality of that which underlies Whiteness and racism in cultural tropes, coloniality.

To start, Grobman’s decision and reason to use Mary to name an entire community in an auto-ethnographic rhetoric partnership, given Mary’s objection to the either/or binary of self-identification, smacks of a cultural trope that Paulo Freire (1996) identifies as false generosity:

Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. (p. 26).

This false generosity speaks to an assumed, overarching authority that Grobman exercises over both the choice of names and the extent of permissive cultural, authorial and discursive agency for Latinx in Reading which is represented through her public rhetorical partnership. Moreover, this false generosity speaks to a larger cultural trope of Whiteness and racism beyond the function, execution, and product of her partnership that presents a false mirror to not only cultural naming, but also to

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intricacies and intimacies of naming, self-identification, and cultural agency beyond coloniality.

For Mary, for Latinx, and for me the struggle of naming, self-identification, and agency requires us to recognize and re-exist beyond false generosity and the false mirror.

The False Mirror

The painting entitled *The False Mirror* by French Surrealist Rene Magritte comes to mind as an analogy. If you have not seen *The False Mirror*, then here is a description: the central image of the painting is a single, lash-less eye of a White male, with a round black pupil set at the center of a clouded blue sky of the iris. Although the eye reflects an image of the heavens in the natural world, the eye is not a mirror *per se*. Here, the painting suggests that the eye is subjective and selective. Such selectivity stems from an ongoing negotiation by so-called “Man” with his conscious, unconscious, and collective conscience. Though representative of an art movement that explored the reality that underlies the mind, *The False Mirror* reveals to its audience that the eye of this universality still is raced and gendered and Western. *I have yet to see an art history book acknowledge this point.* Thus, *The False Mirror* serves as an analogy to the mind’s eye to the unexamined positionality, terminology, and agency granted by coloniality through which we see and are seen—the selectivity and subjectivity of a raced and gendered and Western gaze reflected as universal for humanity and civilization.

Perhaps it is common not to question that reality we think our eyes reflect until we are presented with a situation that challenges not only what we see but also the notion of how and why we see what we see, as Magritte’s *The False Mirror* attempts to do in questioning the positionality of authority. The questioning of this positionality centers on a duty of reasonable care, not intentionality. The intentionality of [add name here] as a good person is a common cultural trope of Whiteness used to evaluate accountability and recourse for a failed duty owed to people of color. With respect to Grobman’s public rhetorical partnership, I believe that there are grounds to question the reasonable care that she took to counteract particular dysfunctions of Whiteness—the false reflections of Hispanic and Latino as either/or binary of naming and self-identification and the appearance of permissive cultural agency for Latinx—in order to ensure auto-ethnography for Mary and her community.

From her statement, Mary may not have been convinced that Hispanic / Latino is one term. Her answer—the part that Grobman (2012) quoted—seemed

contradictory: Mary maintained, "...so let's put the words together and reach out to three communities within one... let's reach out to the Latino, Hispanic, and Hispanic/Latino community" (p. 246). Mary identified Hispanic / Latino as one of three communities, the other two being Hispanic and Latino. Then, she suggested that words be put together. This contradiction seemed natural, not surprising to me, for it speaks to the inherent nature of racism with terms like *Hispanic* and *Latino*. Apparently, Grobman and community leaders failed to address this contradiction. Instead, their discussion centered on the control of naming and identity politics after Mary "challenged" them (Grobman, 2015, p. 246).

Let me speak generically for a moment. One student challenged figures of authority on concepts affecting an entire community after these figures of authority posed and addressed the question, *which should be the use of throughout the book and for the title, Hispanic or Latino?* So the authority figures decide which of these concepts is acceptable based on the opinion of one student deemed "an insider" who spoke "with and for her own, othered community," and the authority figures were persuaded into "giving them" significant control over naming and identity by following this one insider despite the "important lesson that each student will respond differently" (Grobman, 2015, p. 246). Interesting, no? But what I find more interesting is the shift in the scope of control over naming and identity given by the authority figures: "Mary persuaded us to use the term Hispanic/Latino in an article included in the book" (Grobman, 2015, p. 246). *Naming and identity in an article included in the book*, not naming and identity throughout the book and for the title, which was the question between community leaders and Grobman that Mary challenged.

The question asked, the generosity of control given, but nowhere was there a genuine dialogue that explored the intricacies and intimacies of naming, self-identification, and agency for Latinx, which should be the basis of the duty of reasonable care in such a partnership. Instead, this type of question has a singular objective: to confirm the presumptive answer of people who project a privilege of authority. This type of question reflects a power dynamic within rhetorical situations and represents a *doxa* and *kairos* that involves race and racism in the United States. *Doxa*, "the Greek word for common or popular opinion" (Crowley & Hawhee, 1999, p. 9), results in the conflation of Hispanic or Latino as racial markers, which are terms of ethnicity, not race, according to the federal government of the United States, as well as cultural markers, which are intended to be markers of origins outside of the United States, but are markers of meaning in racially-focused American culture. *Kairos* means the context of an issue, referred to as "time and place" or "circumstances" by Quintilian and is the second of two Greek concepts of time that addresses a "kind of

time—quality, rather than quantity” (Crowley & Hawhee, 1999, p. 31). *Kairos* affects the choice, meanings, uses, and interpretations of terminology related to the United States’ system of race, like the terms Hispanic and Latino. Such terms come to exist and evolve with and within time, place, and circumstance; for example, Hispanic and Latino have taken on social and political connotations (often negative connotations) amid anti-immigrant rhetoric under the Trump Administration.

Outreach programs exist within a *doxa* situated in a *kairos* that extends well beyond theories of the classroom and the perimeter of a university, which is visible in Grobman’s partnership. While Grobman (2015) describes her partnership as “purposeful, impactful public work” (p. 237) and focuses on challenges of power and control in the partnership and its resulting product, Grobman portrays local racial, ethnic, and cultural histories with a palatable, almost combative, tension and a paternalistic slant: partners as “partial and interested, argumentative, vying for legitimacy and control, privileging one reality to diminish another” (p. 243) and the argumentative discourse as leading to “dependency” and “subservience” because of struggles between constituencies and participants in “third spaces” (p. 244). These themes of dependency, subservience labor, authorship, and privilege suggested pronounced inequality in the community’s role in the partnership and, likely, the history shaped with their narratives for the public.

In her question to Mary, Grobman made the rhetorical choice to describe the question without an explanation of *doxa* regarding Hispanic and Latino and to ignore *kairos* in the history of the living definition of these terms or other terms that may overlap or precede Hispanic and Latino. Should the onus, then, fall on Mary, if the humanistic stage of the pedagogy of the oppressed were applicable, to not only challenge Grobman and community leaders on the use of Hispanic or Latino to suggest a third option in using those terms, but also object to terms *per se* and demand a dialogue about naming, self-identification, and agency for Latinx as acts of authentic thinking?

“Authentic thinking,” Freire (1996) argued, is “thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in an ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (p. 58). To what reality was Mary to speak? The reality of the partnership? The reality of her culture as a subject? As an object? The reality in a negotiated identity? The reality of identity beyond such negotiations? To what extent could Mary speak to any one of these realities? How? If she did, if she found language to capture these realities, would Mary be truly heard?

In this conundrum, Mary reminds me of myself: a strong sense of self; an identity forged through public and personal experiences examined in institutions

removed from both a challenge tempered by the answer for which permission is conditionally granted and a place where confirmation is implicitly demanded. Mary was a college-aged student, Dominican American, in Reading, Pennsylvania in 2015. I was a college-aged student, Mexican American, in segregated Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1995—the year that Mary was born, possibly, or two years before. I also see myself in Mary because of changes to agency as well as to my thinking about naming, identity, race, and national origin. I was the Mexican kid from the ghetto that graduated from college and law school. I was a Latino lawyer who practiced law in Chicago, Milwaukee, and conservative Central Illinois for twelve years. Now, I am a doctoral student in the Southwest. True today as it was in 1995, *Hispanic*, to me, represents the concoction of a racist Nixon and the United States Office of Budget and Management to separate Latinx from the racial classification of “White” through “ethnicity” as a qualifier as well as the contempt of my parents toward that term and the imposition of that term on them. *Latino* didn’t exist in my mind until 1997, when the United States Office of Budget and Management codified it as an ethnicity.

Nonetheless, Latino carried a more personal connection for almost twenty years of my life. In spite of the use of Latino by the American Bar Association, my roles in organizations like the Latino Law Student Association, the Professional Latino/Latina Allstate Network, and *Conexiones Latinas de McLean County*, and my self-identification as Latino for years, I had not been aware of the academic distinction between Latino and Mexican American until my second month at the University and, thus, I was not Latino—or, at least, not in the Southwest. Once aware of this distinction, I declared that my identity was mine and not a matter of race or politics—sort of. After my father passed away, I wanted to honor his memory and my heritage through dual American and Mexican citizenship. A lack of critical thinking overall or a myopic attachment to the legal recognition of duality underscored my discovery through the application process for dual citizenship that I already was a Mexican national by blood.

Now, I self-identify as an American citizen and a Mexican national, identities that are not synonymous with Hispanic and Latino. Hispanic and Latino reflect a facet of American identity in a country defined by interlocking systems of domination and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, to borrow bell hooks’ two terms. But the expectation exists for me, as for Mary, to speak of Hispanic and Latino apart from personal experience and knowledge, terms fixed in time and space and subject to their *doxa* in a particular *kairos*. My agency, like Mary’s, is permissive and probationary, regardless of our assertiveness, regardless of our *ethos* and *logos*.

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Authentic thinking brings me to the importance of the question, *why?* *Why* as a question should precede all other questions. Think of Grobman’s partnership beginning with *why* from Mary’s perspective and that from the people in her community. *Why are we presented first with an either/or binary of the Othered? Why do you seek to reduce us to one of these terms? Why are we Othered in our home, in our community, in this partnership, in your mind? Why the presumption of authority, of affirmation, of arrogance? Why not ask us, ask and understand our naming, our identity, our negotiations as we live life here? Why not let us lead since this is our history? Why do we need your help anyway? Why don’t we just lead? Why do we speak of ourselves in the different ways that we do?*

I cannot help but to think of the oft responses to *Why?* A polite withdrawal. A prickly silence. A pointed apology. I think of Freire (1996): “No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why?” (p. 67). Freeing one’s reflection from the false mirror, getting oneself to questions on why speaks to the role of consciousness of, and of one’s positionality in, contradictions and oppression in naming, identity, and agency. It also speaks to a concern about the point where consciousness, conscience, and comfort converge.

Where Consciousness, Conscience, and Comfort Converge

“While only a revolutionary society can carry out this (problem-posing) education in systemic terms,” said Freire (1996), “the revolutionary leaders need not take full power before they can employ the method” (p. 67). This sentence proceeds the sentence about an oppressive order’s prohibition on the question, *Why?* The challenge of reaching revolutionary leadership, I think, is the revelation that the critical consciousness that makes—and keeps—authentic thinking separate from false generosity begins with a consciousness of who is the oppressed and who is the oppressor. “Who” is hard to determine in some instances when we, like Laurie Grobman and Mary Ullao, are people attempting to employ thought, effort, and action toward a constructive end.

A pedagogy of the oppressed involves a critical consciousness of contradictions and oppression, as well as the implementation of praxis. Praxis means transformative action and reflection toward authentic existence, humanization, and liberation in the process of being. Dialogue is a definitive element of praxis, according to Freire (1996). Transformation and liberation come from realizations by the oppressed and the oppressor, the former, of its duality and its initial, misplaced objective to become the oppressor or “sub-oppressor” (p. 27) and the latter, the

anguish in the discovery of herself or himself as oppressor, the resistance to solidarity with the oppressed, and yet rationalizing guilt through the continued dependency and paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, according to Freire (1996).

This is where I struggle.

Must the oppressed complete the first humanistic stage to enter the second liberation stage? Is it until then and only then that the oppressor can be liberated? Can a revolutionary leader employ the problem-posing education effectively if the answers to the preceding questions are “no”?

Naming and identity come with agency and authority through humanity, yet the struggle for this agency and authority stems from dehumanization, which is reflected and reinforced by language that names and identifies me within systems of oppression and politics of domination designed to promote the agency and authority of a dominant people. One major system and politics of oppression and domination is racism. As Mignolo (2017) identifies, racism stems from the logic of coloniality but shifts with nation-states and, in these, the shifting rhetoric of humanity as defined by citizenship status (p. 42). For Latinx in the United States, the struggle of racism exists as one of multiple realities. Latinx have to reconcile positionality as individuals, as members of communities, and by status in nation-states through the realities of racism by our presence in the United States as well as by the presence of our territories or nations of origin in our lives, even if the latter presence is just generational legacy.

These realities of racism come from the histories of colonialization and the presence of coloniality. Then, truer to the concerns of these realities is this question of communication in authentic thinking that involves naming and identity: What if the oppressor and oppressed had each posed the question of *why* to themselves and each reached critical consciousness of contradictions and oppression for themselves, but each decided to value their own interests over the interests of humanization and liberation? This is not a novel question. Freire addresses it: isn't the tension between anti-dialogical action and dialogical action, between false generosity and authentic thinking, between activism/verbalism and praxis, at core, because of individual interests?

For those individuals with a *possessive investment in Whiteness*, to borrow a phrase from George Lipsitz (1998), the assimilationist concept of American identity creates and fosters social, economic, and political attitudes and benefits from systematic domination and oppression through racism. For them, maybe critical consciousness of contradictions and oppression exists, but, because of their positionality, they can pass or they found a path or they seek a peace and they value that which brings them

comfort through their investment over all else. This is where consciousness, conscience, and comfort converge.

Movement toward an end beyond this investment, beyond coloniality, could be propelled by a deeper exploration of the role of racism, the potential of epistemic delinking and *conscientização*, and the capacity to think otherwise about naming, identity, agency, and difference.

Toward an End

A. On Racism

Recognizing the role of language and discourse in racism, Iris D. Ruiz (2016) argued that racial classification and hierarchies operate as discursive constructs that distort the life experience and long history of oppression of certain racial groups and foster inequality in material realities to maintain current power structures of dominance and oppression. W.E.B. DuBois’ defines the contradictory nature of race and its history, according to Ruiz (2016); race has “all sorts of illogical trends and irreconcilable tendencies” (p. 10) and “[e]ventually, he decided that race might not be a concept at all but rather, as, ‘a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies’” (p. 10).

Sociologists Edward T. Telles and Vilma Ortiz (2009) identified common misconceptions about race, issues of agency based on race, and the power of social perception of race regarding Hispanics and Mexican Americans that lead to social, economic, and political inequalities and attitudes. Race, despite *doxa*, is not a fixed set of racial categories applicable to everyone, according to Telles and Ortiz (2009). Yet, they insist that categories, like Hispanic and Mexican American and Latino, among others, are arguably conflated with race or interpreted as racial designations. Thus, race and racial designations involve agency and authority in naming, identity, and mobility as well as access to opportunity, property, and legal right, as Telles and Ortiz (2009) discussed. Hispanics and Mexican Americans elect their race—that is, self-identify, even on matters with the federal government of the United States—but, as Telles & Ortiz (2009) pointed out, the social perceptions of others determine the race of Hispanic and Mexican-Americans.

Racism is woven into the concept and language of assimilation and American identity, visible throughout the legal and socio-political history of the United States. Here are just a few examples: the Naturalization Act of 1790, the first naturalization law in United States, restriction on citizenship by naturalization to free White persons;

Benjamin Franklin's anti-immigration position towards Germans; Theodore Roosevelt's position on the ideal assimilated American; the use of the English language for assimilation and as the *de facto* official language of the United States; and, Trump's anti-immigration politics and racial politics toward people from Latin America. The concept of "White" and citizenship in the United States has changed over the history of the nation. "Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity" (Lipsitz, 1998, p. vii).

People whose descendancy traces back to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the countries of Central America, and the countries of South America may be allowed to assimilate and to become "American." While gender, sexual orientation, and religion were social and legal factors for assimilation and citizenship at different points in American history, the racial construct of White has always been the definitive quality. Those who could "pass" as White, by color, physiognomy, and the adoption of cultural norms, could become American in the eyes of the public and the law. Those who could not pass were marginalized as hyphenated Americans by social perception, affecting their status in the social structure, access to employment and education, and marriage, be it because of social discrimination or, for a time, if applicable, anti-miscegenation laws. Hispanic and Latino, arguably, is a conceptual extension of hyphenated American. Re-appropriation and cultural identity, I think, is where debate about *doxa* about Hispanic and Latino occur intraculturally.

In response to social perceptions and *doxa* of Americans, the adoption of hyphenated-American identities may represent an act of political unification against racism. One example:

Today racial movements not only pose new demands originating outside state institutions, but may also frame the "common identity" in response to state-based racial initiatives. The concept of "Asian-American," for example, arose as a political label in the 1960s (Omi & Winant, 2013, p. 89).

Whether it is an imposition by others or a reaction to being *Othered*, Hispanic and Latino have a common culture. "The Latinoist movement (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Spanish-speaking people working together to combat racial discrimination in the marketplace) is good but not enough," Anzaldúa (1987/2012) wrote: "Other than a common culture we will have nothing to hold us together" (p. 109).

The common culture is racism.

B. *On Epistemic Delinking and Conscientização.*

Epistemic delinking, a concept of decoloniality attributable to Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano, is a process of clearing a distinct conceptual space for decolonial approaches to ethics and politics, a “space for ‘thinking otherwise’; that is, for thinking of writing, literacy, and discourse apart from traditional (i.e., Greco-Roman) histories and theories of rhetoric and apart from traditional (i.e., classical, liberal) notions of race and ethnicity” (Ruiz & Sánchez, 2016, p. xiv). These traditions extend from the applicable colonial matrix of power: coloniality,³ a concept important to epistemic delinking and, in this, decolonization and decoloniality.⁴

After political independence is achieved, the country or territory in question still relies on the former colonizer or “the colonial matrix of power” for its knowledge and resources of knowledge, that is to say, “the ongoing (and thoroughgoing) system of epistemological, ideological, economic, and cultural hegemony that was established, developed, and maintained through European expansion across the globe” (Sánchez, 2016, p. 82). Addressing translanguaging, but applicable more broadly, Steven Alvarez (2016) spoke to the liberating potential of delinking across languages in rhetoric and composition studies because “(d)elinking entails the ability to re-read the world and the opportunity to re-write it” (p. 27). Mignolo (2017) identified this ability to re-read and re-write the world through the concept of decolonial disobedient conservatism. Decolonial disobedient conservatism seeks to delink from the logic of coloniality in order to re-exist, both of which involve “civil and epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2017, p. 41). Re-existing, for Mignolo (2017), “implies relinking with the legacies one wants to preserve in order to engage in modes of existence with which one wants to engage” (p. 40), but re-existing “depends on the place of the individual in the local histories disavowed, diminished and demonised in the narratives of Western modernity” (p. 41). Mignolo (2017) saw re-existing as distinct from resisting, the latter being “trapped in the rules of the games others created, specifically the narrative and promises of modernity and the necessary implementation of coloniality” (p. 41).

Epistemic delinking identifies the problem of coloniality, conceptualizes the source from which epistemic colonialism is bred through the colonial matrix of power, and proposes an epistemic, discursive, and rhetorical separate from Western tradition through re-existing. To me, epistemic delinking from coloniality and re-existing are essential to dismantle racism, along with reaching other objectives, but my question is, *Toward what end?*

If racism is delinked epistemically, what episteme takes its place? Delinking does not mean a romanticized recapturing of indigenous knowledge, which itself is varied, complex, the subject of *kairos*, and must acknowledge that some people are impacted negatively by coloniality. Yet, they do not have indigenous roots (a few examples come to my mind: Mexicans of Africans and Chinese descent; people like me who have visibly dark skin but complete Spaniard roots from migration to Mexico in the late 1800s and early 1900s). A series of questions about practicing epistemic delinking and re-existing arise naturally. How? What should and shouldn't be delinked? Who decides? What if two or more colonial matrices of power are involved? What does delinking and re-existing beyond Hispanic and Latino involve for individuals, communities, and a large society? These questions are not posed to belabor a point. Epistemic delinking and re-existing are complex theoretical concepts that, if placed into practice, raises a complex series of problems of the mind, the heart, and morality.

Reappropriation of a pejorative term or rhetorical tropes, inclusion of silenced or diminished voices, identifying the colonial matrix of power, these approaches are some examples to move toward epistemic delinking and re-existing in rhetoric and composition studies. Yet, from my readings, there is no clear-cut analysis as to the agency and invention necessary to create new knowledge through language and discourse. Consider the idea of clearing space to “think otherwise” about terms like Hispanic and Latino and questions like that asked of Mary. Consider the ability to re-read and the opportunity to re-write, consider voice, consider feelings. All of these would demand “conditions under which knowledge at the level of *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of *logos*,” as Freire (1996) identified, to address the colonial matrices of power involved in race and racism in the United States (p. 62). With racism, the ongoing negotiations of *doxa* and *logos* are intertwined with *kairos*.

Critical consciousness—*conscientização*—provides a complimentary means for epistemic delinking and re-existing consistent with decoloniality. Critical consciousness is “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality,” as Freire (1996, p. 17) notes, and “by means of which the people, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical Subjects” (p. 14). Praxis, authentic thinking, and dialogical action all serve critical consciousness through epistemic delinking and re-existing, but epistemic delinking and re-existing need to be, individually and culturally, a process of discovery with the understanding that individuals and cultures are in the process of becoming—“unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire, 1996, p. 84). An important

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reminder for critical consciousness and decolonial disobedient conservatism is to consider that

[t]he truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals,” are not people living outside society. They have always been “inside”—inside the structure which made them “being for others.” The solution is not to “integrate them into a structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so they can become “beings for themselves” (Freire, 1996, p. 55).

C. To Think Otherwise

My students gave me something that made think about them, think about *doxa* and *kairos* in thinking, think about the application of critical consciousness, epistemic delinking and re-existing to Hispanic and Latino, and to think about Jonathan Alexander’s and Jacqueline Rhodes’ (2014) call on advocacy for difference in the classroom.

Each student in two sections of English 102 had the same canned assignment: identify three additional solutions to help those affected by lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, with the audience of your solutions being officials from the State of Michigan, Flint residents, and entrepreneurs. With a design based, in part, on writing assignments from my first year legal writing courses at the University of Wisconsin and a crisis role-playing exercise that was done with me and 25 other students in a nine-month Multicultural Leadership Program, this assignment sequence as the last of three argumentation papers would be where I emphasized critical thinking the most in their writing. The last project was the last of four major steps in more autonomy and accountability. I was somewhat surprise, I am ashamed to admit, that the majority of my students identified the issues of class, race, color, and age in the context of the Flint Water Crisis.

On the last class, one student surprised me with a class card, signed by all students with notes written by most. I was humbled. So many warm and heartfelt comments. Even after so many years, the sentiments stuck with me. Sentiments along the lines of *thank you for caring* and *thank you for emphasizing our betterment*. But in these sentiments was a reoccurring theme: gratitude for “teaching” students to think critically. These comments came out after spending fifteen weeks together. In their eyes, I proved myself trustworthy and invested in their good. They could open up to me to the extent that they felt comfortable, not to the extent that I demanded it of them. I emphasized my commitment to their agency and to fostering an environment

of dialogue. Our discussions dealt with examples of *doxa* in *kairos*, at first, removed from them. A speech by Nelson Mandela, portrayed by Morgan Freeman, in the film *Invictus*. A talk by Susan B. Anthony on women's suffrage. Opening statements and testimony from the film *Philadelphia*. A speech given by Robert F. Kennedy in Indianapolis on April 4, 1968; the day Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. Failures of humanitarian efforts in Sudan. Health decisions and body image in an Op-Ed article from the *New York Times* by Angelina Jolie. An article from the *New York Times* and a response published in the *New York Times* about the Native Lives Matter movement. Environmental Activism displayed through photography by Sebastião Salgado. The list goes on. All of these involved narratives, but none of them were narratives *per se*—narrative was taught as one of many rhetorical strategies for argumentation.

My premise was simple: for them to think critically about themselves, I needed to establish the comfort in them to approach issues that they may have never thought about and that they feel comfortable to discuss. They began to associate the examples for their projects to themselves and their lives, yet they identified with larger abstract concepts of humanity and liberation, but not simply through their identity. Their willingness to bring their lives and social justice issues into the classroom changed with steps toward an understanding of difference.

Alexander and Rhodes (2014) emphasize the importance of difference in student narratives and in texts assigned for class reading. Multicultural pedagogy compromises substantive engagement of difference through a focus on an understanding of identity that reduces it to a shared humanity concept and to “somehow *identical to (or identifiable with)*” one's own identity (Emphasis in original, Alexander & Rhodes, 2014, p. 438). This focus creates a flattening effect, according to Alexander and Rhodes, from “the unexamined assumption that ‘understanding’ and then ‘tolerance’ or even ‘respect’ are predicated on ‘identity’” (p. 438). As aides to writing narratives, students, argued Alexander and Rhodes, should be exposed to difficult texts that directly “challenge the blind spots of dominant culture” and “an audience's ability to make radical alterity coherent and tame, texts that enact the impossibility of unknowable difference” (p. 446). Alexander and Rhodes' (2014) argument raises practical concerns about dialogue.

Dialogue is the basis of critical consciousness, authentic thinking, praxis, and epistemic delinking. For dialogue to occur, Freire (1996) identifies the importance of “conditions under which knowledge at the level of *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of *logos*” (p. 62). Mary Louise Pratt (1991) proposes the application of contact zones to open teaching as a cultural mediation that would

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embrace “safe houses” and “a rhetoric of belonging” (p. 40). The notion to ask students to write about difference, like Alexander and Rhodes suggested, after being challenged by difficult texts is an opportunity to raise questions of agency, authentic thinking, and generosity of naming and identity, much like those in Grobman asking Mary about Hispanic and Latino. Without trust and a sense of comfortability, I am concerned about the narratives that students choose to share. Will that narrative reflect difference or be flattened by the question asked of the student, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student in the assignment, and the student’s desire to appease the teacher for a good grade?

From my experience, narrative is often taught as a three-week project during one semester of first year composition. Critical consciousness is forged through praxis over time. How comfortable will a student be to address difference, especially difference that involves race and racism, through dialogue beyond the narrative in the classroom in the political, public, and personal realms from which difference stems? Perhaps we in the field of rhetoric and composition need to ask ourselves this question first. I think of race and racism in particular. Scholars identify the importance of race and racial ideology to writing and rhetoric, yet race and racial ideology since 2009 are defined vaguely, according to Jennifer Clary-Lemon (2009), and discussed through metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, and aporia in the classroom and scholarship. If we flatten the realities of race and racism through the identity of Whiteness, if we are reluctant to engage a dialogue about race and racism with one another, what can we ask of our students realistically?

Our reluctance may have a lasting impact. Our reluctance may do harm to our students when the writing in our classroom today becomes the basis of their attempts at dialogue in political, public, and personal realms tomorrow. In our classroom, students have a presumptive right to their own voice—one of many privileges packaged with University life. In political, public, and personal realms, the same people may not, for reasons that contradict the ideals of thinking otherwise, of engaging difference, of promoting dialogue. A quote from Jacqueline Jones Royster (1996) comes to mind:

Although the systems of voice production are indeed highly integrated and appear to have singularity in the ways that we come to sound, voicing actually sets in motion multiple systems, prominent among them are systems for speaking but present also are the systems for hearing. We speak within systems that we know significantly through our abilities to negotiate noise and to construct within that noise sense and sensibility (p. 38).

The realities of racism in political, public, and personal realms limit students' negotiation and construction of sense and sensibility within systems of speaking and hearing, starting as early as memory will allow. Voice with a language and with listening, they learn, is a privilege, granted by the performance of master narratives and, in this, granting naming and identity. This leaves some to discover that their own voice—their authentic voice—begins without a language.

Voice without a language

But choice hardly entered into most minorities' decisions to become American. Most of us recognize this when it comes to Blacks or American Indians. Slavery, forcible displacement, and genocide are fairly clear-cut. Yet the circumstances by which most minorities became Americans are no less clear-cut. The minority became an American almost by default, as part of the goods in big-time real estate deals or as some of the spoils of war. What is true for the Native American applies to the Alaska Native, the Pacific Islander (including the Asian), Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans.

Victor Villanueva, 1987, p. 18

Generations of Americans, whose descendance can be traced to Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the countries of Central and South America, have adopted the binary in the assimilation/straddling-two-world story. I find that “straddling”—the notion of the two mutually exclusive worlds brought together by an individual’s conscious efforts—has become a common trope for those who identify as Hispanic or Latino. This binary relates to another binary: the assimilation/minority binary.

Both binaries use rhetoric of “home” as the source of their non-American culture. Yet, for these generations of Americans I speak of, “home” was not only a haven for culture but also a “contact zone” for American racism. The assimilation/minority binary entered the home over generations and through different forces that penetrated home life.

Assimilation is promoted upon entry to the strata of post-secondary, four-year undergraduate study. This promotion is reflected in the popularity of the early work of Richard Rodriguez. Victor Villanueva (1987) identified the inherent problem in the assimilation/minority binary by addressing Rodriguez’s popularity:

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But what is it, really, that has made him famous? (Rodriguez) is a fine writer; of that there is no doubt. But it is his message that has brought him fame, a message that states that the minority is no different than any other immigrant who came to this country not knowing its culture or its language, leaving much of the old country behind to become part of the new one, and in becoming part of America subtly changing what it means to be American (p.17).

Rodriguez’s popularity reflects a *doxa* rooted in racism and allows him a voice to be the voice of the assimilation for the Latino and the Hispanic. His voice rang in my ears.

Rodriguez became “Richard” to me because I was “Jesse” and not “Jesus.” Jesse was told about Richard because Jesse, the Marquette student with the Writing Intensive English Major from a ghetto of the nation’s second-most segregated city, could do but didn’t do and wouldn’t do—and, apparently, struggled with the exact same issues in the eyes of some of his teachers—what Richard talked about doing and did at the 1986 annual conference of the NCTE:

“Listen to the sound of my voice,” [Rodriguez] said. He asked the audience to forget his brown skin and listen to his voice, his “unaccented voice.” “This is your voice,” he told the teachers (Villanueva, 1987, p. 20).

Listen to the sound of my voice and find that, despite my bronzed skin, my voice is “unaccented” like Richard’s voice. But my teachers’ voices, like Richard’s voice, was not my voice. And, as Villanueva (1987) notes, “[Rodriguez] spoke more of the English teacher’s power than the empowerment of the student” (p. 20). Their voice is not my voice; I have a voice of my own. This should be simple to understand. *But*. But who would want to hear my voice? Who would want to know about the role of American racism in my name and my accent? “Jesse” received his name after his grandfather because his grandfather “hey-SOOS” couldn’t be “GEE-sus” according to the naturalization agent who worked with my grandfather as the first of many newly allowed to naturalize under the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952. So, he became “Jesse”—Jesse Paul Romero. Jesse, the grandson, had his mother Elizabeth’s accent because, linguistically, he just learned it from his mother, and, protectively, she wanted to ensure that his skin color, physiognomy, and surname could be drowned out by the sound of his voice so that I wouldn’t face the same problems she did, like getting beat in school by teachers, bullied by students, and enduring discrimination

because of her color, physiognomy, and surname.

The problem with my voice was Jesse didn't have a language beyond that which embodied the very thing that he stood against. Others with a voice didn't have a language either, like bell hooks (1994) noted:

When I came to Freire's work, just at that moment in my life when I was beginning to question deeply and profoundly the politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the kind of domestic colonization that takes place in the United States, I felt myself to be deeply identified with the marginalized peasants he speaks about, or with my black brothers and sisters, my comrades in Guinea-Bissau. You see, I was coming from a rural southern black experience, into the university, and I had lived through the struggle for racial desegregation and was in resistance without having a political language to articulate that process. Paulo was one of the thinkers whose work gave me a language. He made me think deeply about the construction of an identity in resistance. There was this one sentence of Freire's that became a revolutionary mantra for me: "We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects." (p. 46)

The experiences of Jesse during his college and law school education in Wisconsin, of Jesse Paul during the practice of law and in his published writing in Illinois, and of Paul (just because I always hated the sound of my first name) the doctoral student in Arizona all have something in common. These experiences, along with other experiences, observations, and readings, all gave my voice a language.

This leads me to think about Mary, especially in this passage by Villanueva (1987):

Better that we, teachers at all levels, give students the means to find their own voices, voices that don't have to ask that we ignore what we cannot ignore, voices that speak of their brown or yellow or red or black skin with pride and without need for bravado or hostility, voices that can recognize and exploit the conventions we have agreed to as the standards of written discourse—without necessarily accepting the ideology of those for whom the standard dialect is the language of home as well as commerce, for whom the standard dialect is as private as it is public, to use Rodriguez's terms (p. 20).

I also think of Ricardo, my son, who turned the age of ten in 2017, as a fourth and

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first generation American: the son of a father who is an American citizen and a Mexican national and a mother who is Mexican and a naturalized American citizen. I think of my son and his voice. I think of bell hooks. I think of 1987, the year Villanueva wrote those words and when I turned the age of ten that May.

... ..

I sit at a small white iron table shaded by an awning of the Student Union Memorial Center from the noon Sun that bleaches the University of Arizona Mall. My son sits at a table a few yards away, revising his paper about Juan Ponce de Leon on his iPad while I revise this essay.

Two days ago, I had asked him, *Why Ponce de Leon?*

“Because our teacher wants us to write about the explorers that discovered America.”

He told me about what he learned about Ponce de Leon, about the friends that helped Ponce de Leon—the slaves.

The thoughts I shared with him that day—those come to mind. Those thoughts, like so many thoughts before it, have been on my mind. Those are the thoughts that weigh like lead in your stomach. Thoughts that leave you choosing your words carefully, concealing your feelings well (you hope), weighing your silence as a stay you cannot and should not sustain. Thoughts that leave you besides yourself, questioning critical consciousness, authentic thinking, epistemic delinking, re-existing, racism, naming, identity, voice. Thoughts that engulf the work you do toward an end you fear you will never see.

I sit with my thoughts and look across the Mall.

The white campus police truck comes to a stop then leaves as a student in a gym red tank top and navy track shorts jogs passed my table in the opposite direction, the magenta band that holds her ponytail in place slowly slipping away from her blonde mane. Students stop on the Mall lawn for different reasons. Over the years, students stopped to kick the soccer ball around with my son. I watched him play, laughing, happy to be included in this world. My son does not really know my work or the worlds that it touches. And he does not know the depth of my discussions with his teachers in his world: Ponce de Leon’s “discovery” and “friends”; the annual celebration of colonial days, complete with the requirement for students to dress up as colonizers and the master narrative that erases Indigenous and African people of “America”; their refusal to use words like *smart* and *gifted* and *leader* to describe my son despite their knowledge of his accomplishments at his elementary, at the University of Arizona, and

in many communities throughout Tucson. I remember that delinking “is a long process, at different levels and with different needs and preferences,” like Mignolo (2017) said (p. 40), as I stare at the white spots that the sun has bleached into the bronzed skin of my hands.

I sit in silence, thinking.

Endnotes

1. Land acknowledgement – Native American Student Affairs. (2020). Retrieved February 26, 2020, from <https://nasa.arizona.edu/>
2. Argentine sociologist Walter Mignolo (2017) describes decolonial disobedient conservatism as follows: “the energy that genders dignified anger and decolonial healing, and its main goals are delink (from the colonial matrix of power, a concept described later in this essay) in order to re-exist, which implies relinking with the legacies one wants to preserve in order to engage in modes of existence with which one wants to engage” (p. 40).
3. Mignolo (2017) provides a short overview of the term coloniality as follows: “This term – in short – refers to the Colonial Matrix of Power. I understand the CMP as a structure of management (composed of domains, levels and flows) that controls and touches upon all aspects and trajectories of our lives. If one looks at the transformations of the CMP since its formation in the sixteenth century, one sees mutations (rather than changes) within the continuity of the discursive or narrative orientation of Western modernity and Western civilisation: from, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christianity (Catholic or Protestant) to secularism, liberalism and Marxism (in other words, from the Christian to the civilising mission); and from ‘progress’ in the nineteenth century to ‘development’ in the second half of the twentieth” (p. 40).
4. Mignolo (2011) viewed decolonization as “a complex scenario of struggles” of a period in time where the elite sought to govern themselves and expel “the imperial administration from the territory” (qtd. in Sánchez, 2016, p. 82). Decoloniality, in contrast, addresses an aftermath of the elite’s self-governance—an “imperialism without colonies” (qtd. in Sánchez, 2016, p. 82) that bred epistemic colonialism, coloniality to use Mignolo’s word.

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