

*The Journal of
Multimodal Rhetorics*
Volume 4, Issue 2



Invisible Labor in the Academy

“*Se Tienen Que Poner Listas*”

Testimonio of an (In)visible Truth

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Your early years were spent speaking and swaying to the cadences of Spanish. Then, in the English-only classroom, your presence seemed more ethereal than earthly. You were slow to learn to read, as your attachment to words was insecure. As a young Latina, you knew that you would have to labor twice as hard to catch up. You also learned early on that your relationship to academia required a level of bravery and conciencia to face the darkness of internalized oppression.

In 1966, my parents emigrated from Nogales, Sonora, Mexico when my oldest sister was about to enter kindergarten. My parents never questioned that the hardships they had faced as immigrants in this country would translate into resilience, into a state of being *lista*, in their five daughters. To be *lista* includes being ready for anything, with an ability to not only recover from adversity, but be transformed by it. In our blood, my sisters and I carried the tacit knowledge that with our two wings, two cultures, we were destined to aspire to a future unique from that of our parents.

My elementary-through-high school years were difficult. I found little joy in the classroom, as I felt lost in the hollow that existed between my school environment and my home culture; yet I yearned to learn. Then my inner curiosity slithering within landed me in college, where I began to sense that I was on a journey toward intellectual and spiritual healing. For the first time, I studied Latino authors with Dr. Robert Cantu, at California State University Los Angeles. It was in these Latin American and Chicano Literature courses that for the first time as a student I felt the squeeze inside of me subsiding. I read Latin American testimonios, and as I heard the voices of my ancestors, I learned that the personal is political. I learned to self-reflect, critically think, and theorize about *mi cultura*, in various contexts. It was here that I began to examine the world, to develop the critical consciousness that was inspiring me to ask questions about my identity, of *mi familia*, my countries, my dreams, my world, including my education. I was living what James Baldwin called the “paradox of education—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated” (1963, p. 1).

Consequently, it was during these years that I finally came to know the mentorship of a Latino professor who finally saw my intellectual capacity as earthly and creditable. My education then blossomed into a way to prepare myself for a liberated life, as I pursued my longing for knowledge to mend my Mexican-American heart.

But there was a risk to this new consciousness.

Nonetheless, I went out into the world, *lista*, equipped with navigational capital, comprised of inner resources, and with the hard-earned linguistic capital gained throughout the years moving alongside my father, interpreting a bilingual world (Yosso, 2005). I entered academia to be among students who also sought to individuate through higher education. Here, I took a vow to be a mirror for my students.

Fast forward two decades, and I still labor to understand, how is it that as part of the 15% of professors of color that make up the two-year college system, the systemic racism that marginalized me throughout my education could still render invisible both my intellectual contributions and my being? I know the answer.

Yet, the hidden strains tugging at my brown female existence, as one of two in an English Department with 20 white full-timers, are still enumerable. The countless and near daily microaggressions amount to a dire need to cultivate an inner state, an intimate space within, where the interior conversations that I am prompted to have *with myself* could live. The effort and time that it takes to process the microaggressions that unfold as I walk through the hallways and sit through meetings, demand labor that constitutes an unwavering and obstinate part of my experience as a Professor of English in the academy. However, the constant effort required by the psychological need to interpret oppression, remains invisible to those around me.

In “What is Internalized Oppression, and So What?” E.J. R. David and Annie O. Derthick (2014) note that the effects of microaggressions produce “equally distressing psychological consequences as overt oppression and discrimination, perhaps even more so, because of the lack of a distinguishable target to which one can direct anger” (p. 5). The anger, confusion, and sense of hiddenness that lingers from an inability to confront the source of subjugation, is instead turned inward, causing a state of self-questioning, costing excessive emotional exertion.

I still hear Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1999) words reminding me that “[a]s a person, I, as a people, we Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something ‘wrong’ with us, something fundamentally ‘wrong.’ Woven into the fibers of this internalized oppression is fear that holds one petrified, frozen in stone” (p. 67). To become conscious of internalized oppression, to “see” it, I must first call it to consciousness.

Ethos of Indiscernibility

“Latin American testimonios fall under slave narratives.”

When you create a new course for the English department titled, “Introduction to Literature,” you want to include Latin American Testimonios as one genre on a list of many possible that could be taught in the course. It is your effort to expand the definition of “literature.” Your white colleagues object. One colleague whose emphasis is British Literature, voices her disapproval by explaining to you that “Latin American Testimonios fall under slave narratives.” Her justification, despite the fact that your Master’s thesis is on Latin American Testimonios as

a literary genre, is used against your advocacy, and Testimonios are omitted from the course description, even under the heading: “Optional Genres to be Taught.”

When you insist on keeping “Latin American Testimonios” on the list of “optional” genres to be taught in the course, a second white colleague again challenges you and your choice by indicating she does not want to be held accountable to teach a genre she does not know, in the event that she may one day decide to teach the course. The voice in your head asks: Does the word “optional” not phase her?

“You’re the face of equity.”

You decide to lead a Faculty Inquiry Group (FIG) on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. It’s joined by interested faculty, and you meet once a month to discuss pedagogy, read articles, books and discuss your experiences with race in the classroom. Upon exiting the first meeting, a colleague pulls you aside to say: “You’re the face of equity.” Which one of your faces is she referring to?

“Thanks for being here. I know these spaces are difficult for you.”

You are invited to a meeting about an HSI grant where you are one of three POC at a large conference table seating 33 individuals. Utterances melding equity and equality occupy the room. You speak up against the misleading equation. At the end, an administrator approaches you, and in a soft voice says, “Thanks for being here. I know these spaces are difficult for you.”

You know she heard one of your colleagues of color say at last week’s meeting that spaces on campus are uncomfortable for POC. Is she equating your experience with another woman’s experience, because all POC have the same experiences? Does she realize that you have occupied a minority seat at meetings the entirety of your 18-year career?

“I have been teaching for 16 years and have never had to have these conversations about race before. I noticed that all the articles discussing this topic are dated recently.”

“Do you think conversations about race in the classroom are new?” you want to ask her as you stare straight at her, sitting directly across from you. But you don’t ask, because you believe words are better saved for a more sensible endeavor. The next day, when you see her in the hallway, she smiles, and you’re reassured that not saying anything at yesterday’s meeting was, indeed, the right thing. But then you doubt yourself, and you ask: “was it, really? Is collegiality about mere poise and the appearance of peace?”

Year Two.

Another POC is hired in your Department. Before she starts, you are repeatedly assured that “you’re going to love your new colleague.” For the next six years colleagues insist on calling you by her name, and her by yours. Together, your and her uniqueness vanish into the hyper-visibility of your brownness. The two of you laugh at the cliché and tell each other that their inability to tell the two of you apart is due to your mutual, lustrous beauty.

Monologue 1. Location: Copy room.

"I attended the HSI grant meeting. There were representatives from student services at the meeting. They have good ideas, you know. The grant writer was there.... We talked about our concerns. We felt listened to. I was the only one there from our Department."

She has self-designated as the Department lead of the project despite the fact that you, not she, was asked by administration to lead it. You tell her you already heard about how the meeting unfolded, but she doesn't bat an eye at the sound of your voice.

Monologue 2. Location: Hallway on the way to your office. Time: 1 minute later.

"There were representatives from student services at the meeting. They have good ideas, you know. The grant writer was there.... We felt listened to because we talked about our concerns. I was the only one there from our Department."

Why is she repeating herself?

"People in the meeting were requesting research as you have been. I think that's a good idea. You know, student services people have good ideas. I have meeting notes. Would you like me to send them to you?"

Is this an honest inquiry? "Yes," you hear yourself say. She pauses for the first time in 10 minutes. Her meeting notes never arrive.

Entering a Coatlicue State

To escape the threat of feeling inadequate by the entanglement of microaggressions and my own internalized oppression, I found myself planted at the feet of Coatlicue, in "the state of Coatlicue," as Anzaldúa outlines in *Borderlands: La Frontera. The New Mestiza (1999)*. In this state of being, Anzaldúa marvels:

Coatlicue is one of the powerful images, or "archetypes" that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche. For me la Coatlicue is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche. Coatlicue is the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb. Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes. (1999, p. 68)

For me, Coatlicue represents a calling to take time out for soul-making change. She is about taking a pause in life for deep listening to make soulful, and embodied, sense of my world. Enveloped in Coatlicue's embrace, this pause occurred for me as soon as I received tenure in the teaching institute in which I saw myself growing roots, while residing in a town that sits nestled between a cordillera and the sea. It was a time when I felt insatiably eager to return to graduate school to pursue a long-standing dream of mine: a Doctoral program in Comparative

Mythology and Literature, with an emphasis in Depth Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute, a small institution that focuses on Jungian and Comparative Mythology curriculum.

Pursuing a Ph.D. at Pacifica involved another risk. It meant my education would not be valued when judged by the standards of a traditional R1 institution. Despite my dream, my perceived rejection that I believed would come from colleagues who value the R1 institution as the sole beacon of intellectual wisdom, mattered enough that I questioned whether or not I was doing the right thing. I was in the familiar territory of laboring, alone, with my own fear and feeling that something was “wrong.” Yet the forces that propelled me toward the work were fortunately even greater. And so, in many ways, this quest to get my Ph.D. in a subject toward which I felt a deep soul-calling has been my heart's journey, because pursuing my educational goals was also about learning how to not betray myself. It was by reaching into the depths of Earth Mother consciousness, while paying heed to Coatlicue's call, that I was learning to trust my inner voice—not the naysayers both in my head, as well as in my environment. I allowed myself to be guided by the tripartite intellectual, creative and spiritual search driven by what Anaïs Nin calls the two needs of our existence: “one is a human need to be intimate with experience... Then there's a second need in human nature which is to create something that has more permanence, which is the myth of our lives, the symbolic spiritual significance of our lives” (1975, p. 190). Nin believed that, in order to move beyond the personal, we need the mythic (collective), to transform our experience through a well-crafted medium into something that has permanence.

From Invisible to Indivisible

A critical question that dominates this moment in my academic career is, how do I want to make myself visible? Where do I want my personal voice to resound? I yearn to live a life grounded in what bell hooks (1999) calls an intellectual life as opposed to academic careerism. The two are distinct in that an intellectual life inspires writing that constellates from the multifarious voices that live inside of us; it becomes writing about all subjects that casts a wider network outside of the academy, to decolonize subjectivity. Academic careerism, instead, according to hooks, requires, in some disciplines, homogeneous thought, which is “judged usually from a conservative stand point, that academia is often less a site for open-minded creative study and engagement with ideas and more a space of repression that dissenting voices are so easily censored and/or are more likely to be subject to a quality of scrutiny that curtails freedom of speech and thought” (1999, p. 140). As a daughter of immigrant parents, my intellectual, creative and spiritual yearning have always been nourished by numerous epistemologies and voices.

My role in the academy is the same as it is in life: to develop a meaningful relationship between my personal work, as I learn how to better face life's vulnerabilities, and the experiences of others who too seek self-liberation. I want my students to know that to shape one's own destiny involves laboring, often times invisibly, and tirelessly to create and re-create consciousness, to better “see” oppression in all of its guises, not just the internal kind. I want to support my student's whose longing for healing and knowledge is the life line to expand their

critical consciousness as they too individuate. I stand *lista* to remind them of the words my father shared with me—as he prepared me for a life in which he knew I would struggle: “*Se tienen que poner listas y listos.*”

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