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Retranslating Differences

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RETRANSLATING DIFFERENCES

AARON MONTY¹

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Racial identities are products of the environments that they are created in. They inherently have varying and interpretable definitions given the variety of environments, or communities, that exist. A community will always ascribe racial identities (or other forms of social-distinction) to its constituents in order to taxonomize, but it is not until these varying and interpretable “definitions of people” are embodied that they begin to take a more individual and distinct form. Once an individual has assumed the racial identity given to them by their community, they, in essence, become that racial identity. Accordingly, the voice with which they speak is not only perceived as coming from their personal perspective, but also from the perspective of their racial identity as a whole. The recognition of this aggregate perspective from which an individual speaks is essential in order to justly analyze issues of truth, morality, and the Law, because analyzing this perspective will allow us to recognize the commonalities among individuals within and outside-of socially constructed racial identities as well as identify the individual circumstances that gives an individual his voice.

The immense diversity among Latinos has begun to separate instead of unite us, making it difficult for the Latino “voice” to be articulated. The term Latino is unclear in and of itself. This generic category includes persons of many different national origins, immigration statuses, phenotypes, language abilities, social classes, races and cultures.² To ascribe a racial identity to the term is problematic in that the Latino community becomes one comprised of *different* communities. Latinos become reflexively and internally heterogeneous. A Latino from Guatemala is different than a Latino from Mexico. A Latino who immigrates to the United States is different than one who was born into citizenship. A bilingual Latino is different than a monolingual Latino. Differences in physical characteristics such as hair color, eye color, and skin tone even separate Latinos. A focus on difference not only perpetuates an indistinct group identity; it prevents homogenous connections from being made among the divergent people that comprise the Latino community. These homogenous connections are necessary in order for the truth about the Latino perspective to be understood: It is as diverse as the people from whom it comes.

¹Participant, Eighth Annual LatCrit Conference: City & The Citizen: Operations of Power, Strategies of Resistance.

²Kevin R. Johnson, *Some Thoughts on the Future of Latino Legal Scholarship*, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 101 (1997)

I. RETRANSLATING WHITENESS ON THE BORDER

Borders are established in order to separate “us” from “them.” They legitimize those within them and isolate those outside of them. It is estimated that nearly twenty percent of the population of contemporary Mexico now resides in the United States; this is clearly visible in a city like El Paso, Texas which lies on the border between the United States and Mexico. About seventy-eight percent of the near six-hundred thousand person population of this *border* town are of Mexican descent, while according to the 2000 United States census, about seventy-five percent of the citizens of El Paso identify themselves as “white.” In El Paso, to be a United States citizen is to be “white” and to *not* be is to be “black.” Nativistic racism fueled by ingrained “white supremacy” creates a frustrating social dichotomy between the *legal* citizens of El Paso and the Mexican nationals that also live, work, and buy goods in El Paso. While the two groups share a common ethnic origin, they are starkly different in that the citizens of El Paso who identify themselves as “white” dissociate from their ethnic roots and assume a hybrid racial identity whose foundation is grounded in a binary conception of race as either “black” or “white.” The idea of difference gets internalized so that material and hierarchical differences in power in society are bolstered and the new terms of difference are retranslated. Through identifying themselves as “white,” citizens of El Paso adopt the traditional privileges of being “white” in the United States, but at the same time multiply the shortcomings caused by a black/white hierarchical binary opposition within society.

El Paso, Texas can be described as a place where “First World” and “Third World” meet. *Frontera Chihuahua* and West Texas localize a community where borders are ingrained in everyday life. The Rio Grande River provides a visible, geographic separation between the two, but there is a sociological boundary that is equally as grounded. Growing up in El Paso, I had a first hand account of this distinction. “Fron-chee” was a commonly used nickname for a Mexican immigrant in El Paso. “Fron-chees” were the reason Wal-Mart was so crowded, “fron-chees” were bad drivers, ill mannered, and dirty, and “fron-chees” were *different* than me. I was raised in a community that taught me that an integral part of identifying *myself* was to identify as being a United States citizen. To be a “Fron-chee” was *not* to be a legal citizen; to be a “fron-chee” was to be something *less*. This train of thought is dangerous because it perpetuates a hierarchy that places the “American” identity on top and creates a salient border between American and *not American*.

Race is a social construction that can separate people just as much as it can unite them. Race is undeniably a social and legal fabrication; it is not biological. It is a social assent rather than a pre-legal, natural declaration. Accordingly, any racial category finds its definition not by what it is comprised of, but by what it is *not* comprised of. Juan Perea, a University of Florida law professor, defines race as “a composition of a set of traits including national origin, ancestry, language, religion, shared history, traditions, values, and symbols that contribute to a sense of distinctiveness among members of the group and engender a perception of group distinctiveness in persons not members of the group.” Ian Haney Lopez similarly asserts that races exist only as local facts measured in terms of community attitudes and the material inequalities such attitudes have built up. Since the United States is dominantly constructed as “white,” discrimination against Mexican nationals by El Pasoans (despite their own Mexican roots) is feasible because in a binary view of race, Mexican nationals are not “white.”

Whiteness functions as a social organizing principle.³ There are an array of privileges, assumptions, and benefits that are joined with the idea of “whiteness.” Historically, whiteness prevented a person from being an *object of property*. Today, a “white” identity provides one with greater social, economic, and political security in the United States.⁴ Within the *community* of El Paso, Mexicans assume a negative (“black” in a binary view) racial identity because they are *not* United States citizens, so they are *not* “white.” Whiteness is equated with traditional “Americanism,” and with that, whiteness is subject *to* having property in the United States, paying taxes to the United States government, and *traditionally* contributing to the United States economy. Whiteness in El Paso is defined relationally in opposition to Mexican identity.

Whiteness becomes an “American” ideal as well as a social and economic privilege in society. In a motherland of dollar profits and consumerism, El Pasoans cling to their white identity because it enables them to psychologically separate themselves from the images of poverty and impotence that they see every day. Two-thirds of the citizens of Juarez live below the poverty level. El Pasoans are easily reminded of this by the view of the shacks that are positioned within two hundred feet of a high-traffic section of the Interstate freeway or by seeing the floods of Mexican nationals who come across the border every day in search of work. Mexicans dwell in the shadow of the most *powerful* people in the world, and that is not easy for either side of the border to forget.

The distinction of Mexican-Americans living in El Paso as “white” is not only a personal one, but one that has been legally validated by an array of court decisions and other political processes. In George A. Martinez’s summary of *In re Rodriguez*, he states:

In *In re Rodriguez*, a Texas federal court addressed in an immigration context the question of whether Mexicans were white. At that time, the federal naturalization laws required that an alien be white in order to become a citizen of the United States. There, the court stated that Mexicans would probably be considered non-white from an anthropological perspective. The court noted, however, that the United States had entered into certain treaties with Mexico. Those treaties expressly allowed Mexicans to become citizens of the United States. Under these circumstances, the court concluded that Congress intended that Mexicans were entitled to become citizens. Thus, the court held that Mexicans were white within the meaning of the naturalization laws.⁵

When it was established by law that a person had to be “white” in order to become a United States citizen, the law was used to marginalize “black” people, African-slaves who were people of property. In the Rodriguez case, that same law was referenced to show that only “white” people could become citizens of the United States, but since the United States and Mexico had signed immigration treaties that allowed Mexican immigrants to legally become citizens, Mexican-Americans were *legally*

³RICHARD DELGADO, *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE* (1995).

⁴Cheryl Harris, *Whiteness As Property*, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1707, 1709 (1993).

⁵George A. Martinez, *The Legal Construction of Race: Mexican Americans and Whiteness*, HARV. L. REV. 321 (1997).

construed as “white.” This case provides a paradoxical foundation of the legal establishment of Mexican-Americans as “white” and importantly shows how racial categories can be fabricated and socially legitimized through the political process and law. Law established that United States citizens had to be “white;” the law was then used to say that Mexican-Americans were legally considered to be “white.” Ironically, the immigrant roots that El Pasoans separate from and view in negative (or black) context helped provide a legal validation of their whiteness.

The American Census Bureau also provides validation of Mexican-Americans as being “white.” The first United States Census in 1790 provided four racial categories: free white males, free white females, slaves, and “others,” a category that included free American Indians. Today, the racial categories on the United States Census exist as such: white, black or African-American, American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and “other.” An objection by the Mexican government and the United States Department of State to the classification of Mexican-Americans under the rubric of “other races” (which at the time also included Indians, Blacks, and Asians) on the 1930 census prompted the re-classification of Mexican-Americans as “white” on the 1950 census. Mexican-Americans are therefore not a racial “other,” they are not un-American, and they are not black. They are “white,” so the law says.

Historically, Mexican-Americans have strived to be legally defined as “white.” They have done so because they believed that if they were defined as “white” they would receive the rights and privileges traditionally associated with being white.⁶ They would not have to face the systematic discrimination that was associated with being *non-white*, because whiteness is equated with inclusion and opportunity in the United States. Along with those ends, though, they have internalized “white-supremacist” ideals and prejudices. Mexican-Americans have taken on a “white” racial identity that internalizes and perpetuates the idea of white supremacy through the marginalization, stigmatization, and dispossession of those who do not possess the same socially constructed “white” identity.

The people who live in border communities, like El Paso, can be viewed as having a hybrid racial identity formed in a hierarchy that regards nationalistic ideals above ethnic roots. Although the citizens of El Paso who identify as “white” are ethnically similar to their neighbors in Mexico, they are separated *by society*. Mexican-Americans in El Paso identify themselves as “white” because their conception of “white” is equated with the conception of being American. While this may blur traditional racial lines, it establishes a dangerous border between “American” and *not “American.”* It is fundamentally the same reprehensible racial separation that has cast a dark shadow on our country’s history *with new terms*. People will always notice their differences with one another, but it is not until those differences separate them that their society becomes endangered.

II. RETRANSLATING THE LATINO

Ediberto Roman, in his essay *Common Ground: Perspectives on Latino-Latina Diversity* states, “We should feel compelled to appreciate the critical need to search for a common ground in order to respond to a race-conscious society and in order to

⁶*Id.*

promote changes in that society which will positively affect our people.”⁷ Our differences need to unite us instead of separate us. We, as Latinos, need to articulate our voices by revealing our individual personalities through scholarship and storytelling. We need to strengthen the sound of our voices in society. We need to hear each other’s stories, because through identifying *with*, a person is better suited to cognizantly identify *as*.

One of my closest friends, Gabriel Alfredo Tarango, was also born and raised in El Paso, Texas. We met each other in fourth grade at the pricey, Southern-Baptist private school that we attended through eighth grade. As people, we are different in many ways and alike in many others. Gabriel’s father is a physician and mine is an apartment contractor. Gabriel’s parents are married, while mine were divorced when I was three years old. Gabriel (or Gabb, as I call him) has a dark complexion and eye color, and he is short (about 5’ 2”). I have a lighter complexion, green eyes, and stand about six feet tall. Gabb has two older brothers while I have one younger. Both of our families do not have an established religion, but believe in a “higher power,” nonetheless. We are both bilingual, and we are both Latinos.

In El Paso, it is common for American teenagers to venture Ciudad Juarez to “party.” Because of different drinking age laws in Mexico, eighteen year olds swarm to the array of discotheques nightly to get a taste of Mexican “culture.” It was on the way back from one of these excursions to Ciudad Juarez that I began to realize and analyze the differences between Gabb as a Latino and myself as a Latino. As Gabb and I approached the U.S. Border Patrol agents who were stationed on the Santa Fe Bridge that connects Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, Texas, I quietly said “American” and passed through, back into the United States. Gabb was walking behind me and followed with his utterance of “American,” but did not pass through as I did. The agents at the crossing stopped him and began to question Gabb about his national origin and “what exactly his business was” in Mexico. They required him to show identification so that they could verify that he was a *legal* citizen. After about ten minutes, they handed Gabb back his Texas Drivers License and finally allowed him to pass through, back into the United States.

After the incident, a conversation erupted between Gabb and me about racial discrimination in El Paso. He told me that this was not the first time he had been discriminated against or *profiled* because of the way he looks. He recounted a similar situation in which he was stopped by an El Paso police officer while walking in downtown El Paso. He was questioned about his nationality and *legal* citizenship. He also told me about how even in casual social settings sometimes people ask him if he is a “chuke”(a contextually derogatory nickname for a Mexican-national). His physical characteristics are much more similar to those of the typical Mexican-national than mine, so although I had always thought of us as both being Latino, I had never analyzed the visible *differences* between us as Latinos. His perspective as a Latino is influenced by his experiences with discrimination. Because I have never been discriminated against based on my physical appearance, those types of experiences are not part of my perspective as a Latino and as a person for that matter. Because it is not something I have directly experienced, it is not something I can

⁷Ediberto Roman, *Common Ground: Perspectives on Latino-Latina Diversity*. 2 HARV. L. REV. 483 (1997).

totally *understand*. Because Gabb and I do not possess the same physical characteristics, we become *different*.

But there are differences between Gabb and I that go beyond the physical: I am homosexual. I “came out of the closet” when I was seventeen years old. My sexuality is not an encompassing part of who I am, but it exists as part of me, all the same. In the course of my life, I have never experienced any direct discrimination for being *gay*. Unlike many homosexuals, my parents did not react negatively and have never viewed my sexuality as “shameful” as it is in *popular perspective* in the United States. Gabb, my friend of twelve years is *not gay*. Just as I can only try to empathize with his experiences of being a Latino who has faced discrimination based on the way he looks, he can only try to empathize with my experiences as being a Latino who is also a homosexual. We are still both Latinos. Our lives are different.

This basic truth that exists between all people is commonly misunderstood. It is because of that misunderstanding that people begin to focus on their differences rather than their commonalities. It is forgotten that a person’s perspective, their outlook, comes from *their own* eyes. Within the context of my relationship with Gabb, our differences do not separate us; they merely distinguish us, but within the context of the Latino community *as a whole*, diversity and resultantly diverse perspectives have begun to complicate the idea of a collective Latino perspective.

It is not until Latinos *as a whole* begin to venerate the diversity that unites us that the true Latino perspective can be constructed within society. After the Latino perspective has been recognized and understood in society, it can coalesce with the Black perspective, the White Perspective, the Asian perspective, the Gay perspective, the Male perspective, and the Female perspective in order to *deconstruct* borders and prove that we as people will always be just as much *different* as we are *the same*.

III. RETRANSLATING THE INDIVIDUAL

Social identities are inherently based in culture, region, and society and are resultantly eclectic and multi-layered. An individual not only speaks from the perspective of a racial identity but also from that of the ethnic identity, national identity, gender identity, and sexual identity ascribed to them by society. It is directly from within this intersection of various social identities that an individual’s identity is understood by them, but it is this intersection of identities that makes it difficult for society to understand that individual. The aggregate parts of a person’s identity do not only intersect; they blend and mutually constitute each other’s meanings. In society’s search for a common identity, a search to construct identities *with* others, the aggregate parts of an individual’s identity become marginalized and the intersection of those aggregate parts becomes problematic.

The Latino community is comprised of a diverse people. Our diversity can be physically accounted for by differences in things such as hair color, eye color, and skin tone as well as psychologically accounted for by differences in opinion, ideologies, and lifestyle. An important issue for discourse within the Latino community is the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, specifically homosexuality among Latino males. A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during 1998-2000 revealed that young gay Hispanic men are being infected with the AIDS virus at a rate of about four percent each year. Of the estimated 15,603 AIDS-related deaths in the United States in 2001, about

eighteen percent were among Hispanics.⁸ In order to understand why these numbers keep rising and to promote a diverse conception of the male Latino homosexual in society, his social construction within the bounds of family as well as his social construction within American society must be examined.

A central idea in the construction of the male within traditional Latino culture is the idea of *machismo*. *Machismo*, parallel to the modern meaning of “macho,” is a term that has come to outline the roles, status, responsibilities, influences, moral positions, and rights of men and women in Latino culture. Stella Clark, Professor of Foreign Languages at California State University in San Marcos describes machismo as a deeply rooted tradition that has historical origins and that hinges upon the roles people play within the family structure.⁹ The roles assigned have become the accepted norms within Latino culture and deviations from these norms are a departure from popular opinion and therefore become a departure from the definition of the male Latino within a culture that accepts these norms. *Machismo* has negatively come to be parallel with a concept of hyper masculinity according to which men are powerful, aggressive, and dominant and women are weak, submissive, and self-sacrificing.¹⁰ Because within traditional Latino culture part of the definition of a male requires that he possess these traits, a man who is not domineering and aggressive is viewed as being weak and is assigned preconceived feminine qualities of that culture. It is culture that transmits these ideas of what a man should be to members of that culture and makes these predefined ideas unimpeachable. Culture is formed by those in power. Historically, the “white” male has been in power in The United States, and because oppression is structural and systematic that power cannot be undeveloped. Gloria Anzaldua views *machismo* as “the result of hierarchical male dominance.”¹¹ She argues that it is an adaptation by the Latino to oppression, poverty, and low self esteem imposed upon them by the white male who views Latinos as “different” and who has had the power to perpetuate these views because of American society’s male-dominated hierarchical scheme.

A white-male dominated social scheme then allows preconceived notions of the roles and attributes of men and women to be passed within and between cultures. The way these ideas are perpetuated is first through the manifestation in the beliefs of the traditional family, which is the root of cultural norms. Within the traditional Latino family, the male is macho, heterosexual, and masculine, in contraposition to the preconceived notion of the female as subservient and feminine. Since the “macho” quality becomes an essential part of being a male, men who do not fit into the definition of “macho” begin to be assigned traditional feminine attributes. This is important in the construction of the homosexual male in traditional Latino culture. There are two conflicting and coexisting definitions of the male homosexual within it: the masculine or effeminate man who sexually desires other men and the man who

⁸Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report 2001*, at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/stats/hasr1301.htm> (last modified Feb. 22, 2002).

⁹Stella T. Clark, *‘Machismo’: Friend or Foe?*, transcribed lecture.

¹⁰Diana Palaversich, *(DIS) locating masculinity in Latin(o) America*, *GLQ: A JOURNAL OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES* 7 (2001).

¹¹GLORIA ANZALDUA, *BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA* 105 (1997).

desires to be a woman by taking on feminine attributes. While both of these definitions automatically negate any notions of being “macho,” the latter is especially damaging to the acceptance of homosexuals in Latino culture because through the stigmatization of males who desire to be females, male dominance is perpetuated through the negative view of the female.

It is our current society that perpetuates the allure for Latino men to be hyper masculine, powerful, aggressive, and dominant. These elements become points of attraction to Latino males by both males and females. The Latino male becomes a mysterious, dark, assertive, and masculine figure. With this comes a sexual attractiveness. Latino men emulate and desire the socially constructed model of attractiveness in order to fit into society. Accordingly, the desire for *machismo* qualities in society enables such traditional Latino “family” values such as the prohibition of birth control and the resistance to safe sex practices to also be emulated. This can be viewed as a link between the image of *machismo* and the rising rate of Hispanic AIDS patients in the United States. The refutation of the negative *machismo* image will aid in the cognitive recognition of a diverse Latino people as it will protect Latinos from this image that inevitably puts them in physical danger through an inherently dangerous mindset.

But what about the male who takes on the positive conceptualization of *machismo* in opposition to the negative, the man that cherishes honesty, modesty, loyalty, and standing up for one’s rights?¹² What if this man is masculine and homosexual? Is a person still a Latino if they deviate from Latino “norms?” How does a variation from cultural norms inhibit someone from being recognized as part of a social group?

Satya P. Mohanty states that identities are valuable in that they enable us to read the world in specific ways. In them, and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments; we give texture and form to our collective futures.¹³ Social identities allow us to view the complexity of meaning within a culture through the examination of its variation from subject to subject. Memberships in various social groups combine with and mutually constitute one another. Membership in one group (being “male”) thus means something different in the context of some simultaneous group (being “Latino”) than in others (being “homosexual”).¹⁴ This requires individuals to be understood not simply by their aggregate parts individually, but by the fusion of their aggregate parts since these aggregate parts cooperatively construct each other’s meanings. Social identities only intersect in society; within the individual, they are part of each other.

My parents were not opposed to my declaration of being a homosexual; they were shocked. In the long discussions with my father after he received the news, I remember him repeatedly telling me that it was not me being a homosexual that he didn’t understand, but what he did not understand was that if I was a homosexual, why I did not fit into the “typical” mold of a homosexual. He did not understand how

¹²Palaversich, *supra* note 10.

¹³SATYA P. MOHANTY, *LITERARY THEORY AND THE CLAIMS OF HISTORY: POSTMODERNISM, OBJECTIVITY, MULTICULTURAL POLITICS* (1997).

¹⁴Michael R. Hames-Garcia, “Who Are Our Own People?”: *Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity*, in *RECLAIMING IDENTITY: REALIST THEORY AND THE PREDICAMENT OF POSTMODERNISM* 102 (Paula M. L. Moya & Michael R. Hames-Garcia eds., 2000).

I could not “act like a fag” and still be a homosexual. His view of homosexuality was influenced by the traditional view of the homosexual as being effeminate. His grounds for this reasoning are based in the traditional Latino idea of machismo. To my father, I displayed masculinity in physicality and demeanor therefore I could not possess homosexuality because of its traditional equation with effeminacy. Furthermore, since I was raised in my mother’s home, any attachment to feminine qualities were ruled as being part of the Latino image of a “momma’s boy.” This image positions the male as having a strong attachment to his mother and is interestingly an element in the construction of machismo within traditional Latino culture. In order for my family to accept my homosexuality, they had to eclipse it with the fact that I fit into traditional cultural depictions of being masculine. They eventually understood that I was still influenced by Latino culture but it was that Latino culture that shaped my possession of homosexuality. As more family structures accept male homosexuals as being able to possess masculine and *machismo* characteristics, culture will show the reflection and society at large can be incited to recognize that the most interesting people do not fit into boxes.

IV. RETRANSLATING OUR STORIES

Gloria Anzaldua states, “An image is a bridge between invoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up that bridge.”¹⁵ It is through communication that the images of unity and diversity that are in our heads will be translated to and internalized in the “real” world. Our words become our stories, and our stories constitute our personalities. Our shared experiences can then become our common interests. It is necessary for us as Latinos to share our common experiences in order to build bridges among the divergent groups of people that constitute our community. In order for this to occur we must make our voices be heard in society through activism in issues that are of interest to us as Latinos. We can initiate political change in the United States by engaging our communities in issues that affect our individual lives, because the most successful human collectives are the product of synthesis, not segregation.

¹⁵Anzaldua, *supra* note 11, at 91.