

TESTIMONIO OF CULTURAL HOMELESSNESS: FINDING FLOW AND HARMONY IN NEPANTLA

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Abstract

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Shame No More!

I will no longer stand for the loud gasps followed by:
“*You don’t speak Spanish?*,” “*You should be aShamed of yourself.*”
They are **Hurtful** misperceptions about me.
You don’t know **All** of me; my story; by being
How dare you linguistically **Marginalize** me!
I no longer will feel shackled by your words, instead I am **Emancipating** myself from those
untruths you say to me.
You will **SHAME** me no more!

The current racial pandemic has triggered some painful memories, not only racialized trauma, but specifically of intracultural division within my own ethnic group. For a long time I experienced what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls cultural homelessness. I identify completely with my Mexican American heritage and I celebrate many of Mexican cultural traditions with my family. However, with the inability to speak Spanish fluently, because I never learned to speak the language, I cannot help but feel a cultural loss. Since I do not speak Spanish fluently, I am in a place of in-between. The dominant culture or the white world does not accept me fully, despite the amount of degrees I have earned and the amount of professional experience, education and knowledge I have gained over the years. Additionally, people in my own culture do not accept me because I am not fluent in Spanish. It’s been a challenging **and painful** journey and one that I continue to face today. Many times I hear, “*You don’t speak Spanish?*,” followed by, “*You should be ashamed of yourself,*” when someone asks me a question in Spanish, but I answer in English. This is ironic because in those moments, I am being shamed in English. Although I explain that I can speak some Spanish, but very little, and in broken Spanish (akin to broken English), it is **not** good enough. I am viewed as if something is wrong with me. There is a reason why I do not speak Spanish fluently but they don’t know my story. They don’t know that my parents witnessed and experienced physical and mental abuse for speaking Spanish in K-12 public schools in south Texas when they were young. As a result, they along with other parents at that time, made the difficult decision of teaching us English first when my siblings and me came into this world. The intention was to teach us Spanish at a later time because they feared we would experience the same anti-Spanish bias rhetoric in school, along with the harsh emotional and physical abuse they and their friends endured when they were in school. It was a matter of making sure we survive schooling; not to erase the Spanish language from our lives. When me and my siblings enrolled in public school, the system was still adamant on using only English as a spoken language. Consequently,

we were raised as English monolinguals. The plan to teach us Spanish later, never happened. Stories of Mexican American students being forced to sit on their knees on broomsticks, kneeling on rice, knuckles being hit with wooden rulers, and being paddled in front of everyone for speaking Spanish are visions I cannot get out of my mind.

The dominant culture and those who see Spanish as an inferior language continue to spread the message, “*This is America, speak English.*” We see it daily in both covert and overt ways, via various kinds of media. Videos of racist individuals telling racialized Americans “to go back where they came from” and “to speak English” have increased exponentially since the last administration and still continue today, despite the new leadership. Shaming me for a system underlined with white supremacy; where our language continues to be denied across the country is wrong. “You don’t know me or my story” constantly echoes in my mind.

Consequently, through self-reflective dialogue, critique and resistance, this writing is designed to dissolve the demarcations that divide me from others, and in turn create a common culture, while still celebrating the differences among the Latino/a communities. For me, I am living in the state Nèpantla; living in-between cultures (Anzaldúa, 2015). **Nèpantla**, a Nahuatl word meaning “tierra entre medio,” a constant state of transition **is how I feel as I try to negotiate my identity in context to my own culture and people. Differences defined by this in-between state, seen as abnormal, something wrong with me and not Mexican enough** is constantly highlighted and I am chastised for not conforming fully to the dominant culture **or to my own culture**. The goal is to unselfishly create a humanizing bridge for those living on each side of the normalized us/them binary that exists and, in some cases, invisible in Latino/a communities. This form of activism will create an opportunity for healing, transformation, and positive social change by building bridges over physical and psychological walls for all who walk the same path along with me.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA OF ENGLISH ONLY POLICIES

“English Only” policies are believed to be racially neutral policy, but they actually perpetuate institutionalized racism. Historical trauma that students of Mexican decent, like my parents, experienced with “English Only” policies in the 1950s through the 1960s has resulted in my current human condition and to the challenges I currently face when it comes to my language status and not only where I belong, but how I am perceived by people **from** my own culture.

Although “English Only” policies started in 1918, with the German population, they were also enacted with students of Mexican descent in Texas and continued through the early 1970s. School districts with large enrollment of Spanish speaking children adopted an implicit policy that promoted English assimilation and banned the use of Spanish in classrooms. This policy was called the “No Spanish Rule.” Districts claimed that Mexican American students needed to be fluent in English in order to be successful for employment and education (Hurtado & Rodriguez, 1989). As a result, there are many people who identify as 2nd generation or more, and who are of Mexican decent, who do not speak Spanish and **only** speak English.

As a result of the Bilingual Education and Training Act (S.B. 121) enacted by the sixty-third Texas Legislature, the “English Only” policy was abolished. This law dealt a serious blow to the notorious “No Spanish rule.” For decades Texas teachers had used “English Only” laws to sanction punitive actions against Mexican-American students who violated the “No Spanish” requirement (Rodriguez, 2020, par. 1). Despite this change, Latino/a students continue to be subjected to deficit ideologies that ignore the assets of our unique culture and history.

BEATING THE SPANISH OUT OF MEXICAN AMERICANS

“You are to only speak English in this classroom?” or “Spanish is not a good language; do you hear me?” were the words my parents and their friends heard over and over and on a daily basis. Schools, state sanctioned instruments, attempted to de-Mexicanize people of Mexican descent indirectly hoping to lead to a cultural de-identification (Valenzuela, 1999, 161). Schools in the United States have historically Americanized minority groups via assimilation practices, such as removal of language. The Indian Boarding Schools in this country and the stripping away of Tribal Nation’s cultures, is proof of the practices of the erasure of language and other parts of students’ cultural identities (O’Gara, 2019). In my case, the education system attempted to beat the Spanish out of my parents. The impact of this colonization and the pressures of assimilation has resulted in me not being able to speak Spanish fluently. Fond memories of hearing Spanish spoken by my tías (aunts) and tíos (uncles) my abuelas (grandmothers) and abuelo (grandfather) has resulted in my consciousness of how vital our language is in the continuance of Mexican American culture and identity.

Growing up as monolingual English speakers was a result of my parent’s experiences in K-12 public schools; where they were discriminated, physically and emotionally abused, and publicly shamed for speaking Spanish. The trauma from these experiences trickled down to four generations that followed. Years later, our language is still not being used among my 3rd and 4th generation nieces and nephews. Fortunately, my parents still speak the language. It is important to me that I find as many opportunities to hear it. As a result, I often ask my parents to speak to me in Spanish so I can hear it and learn it. I don’t want to lose what comprehension I currently have of the language. My students, who know my story, speak to me in Spanish as well as encourage me to respond in Spanish, even if it is broken Spanish, as they call it. They do not shame me. They also know I am not trying to play the role of a victim. That is not my purpose for sharing my story. There have been times where I have been accused of being a victim. It is during these times those who accuse me of playing victim, do not allow me to share my story. Instead, they immediately dismiss my attempts and continue to chastise and shame me. Internalizing this shame is their goal. No more.

These are the realities of my situation. Those who shame me, refuse to allow me to share the reality of what can happen when white supremacy ideology is embedded in our educational policies and practices, like “English Only” policies. My parents didn’t know what they didn’t know. All they knew was that emotional and physical trauma was synonymous for speaking Spanish in K-12 public schools in south Texas. This was their experience and they did not want

my siblings and me to have those same experiences. An unfortunate consequence of growing up monolingual in south Texas is that for many who do not speak Spanish, we are viewed as “not Mexican enough.” Although I attended diverse schools with other people who looked like me, what I have learned is that it is not uncommon to get the “look” from those who look like me, who learn I do not speak the language fluently. The look of shame, disgust, and disappointment is unfortunately a look I often get from people who are from my own culture.

A LINGUISTIC NEPANTLA

I have been pushed outside of my comfort zone many times and experience the contradiction of these spaces. Transformation starts to take place as I search for change in perspectives so I no longer come up against the world’s dictates; a linguistic Nepantla. Being in Nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015) allows me to recast the relationship between the center and the margins, and to reverse it completely by making it the center of political action. This position permits me to return to forgotten histories and a questioning of dominant narratives of oppression, specifically “English Only” laws that are still prevalent today. It allows me to undertake a subversive process that is inherent in claiming back my origins, my differences and my history. It allows me to qualify my position and subjectivity as political, to become visible within different movements by claiming a specific position and difference, and to question the modern political canon, which has sought to push people like me, specifically woman of color, out of history by identifying them as natural and apolitical subjects (Brown, 2020 as cited in Nassar, 2021).

As I continue to experience negative reactions for not speaking Spanish, I have learned to deal with such negativity. It is not easy; in fact I am exhausted from people making these outrageous assumptions based on one interaction at one time, with no background context. They believe they are teaching me a lesson when they shame me for not speaking Spanish. Yet, I am given no credit for understanding our language or speaking some of it, albeit broken. They only see that I am responding in English and not in Spanish. Instead they publicly shame me as if that will make me all of a sudden start speaking Spanish.

My experiences tell me I do not fit in any particular space. In this in-between space I have experienced chaos, anxiety, pain and loss of language. Some may think, “why do you care?” I care because I want to make sure I leave my mark in this world as someone who knows who I am, where I come from, and where I am headed. I am proud of the woman and the human I have become. I want to leave a legacy for those who come after me so they know they can stand on my shoulders, regardless of not being able to speak Spanish fluently. It is okay if someone of Mexican descent does not speak Spanish, despite what some members from my culture think and believe.

FINDING COURAGE

“Language is at the core of people and their cultures and is the vehicle for people to share their ideas, strengths and dreams for a better world” (Highlander Research Education Center, n.d., par. 1). To be of Mexican descent means we are not part of the dominant culture in the United States. If our lived experiences consistently align with our Mexican heritage and

culture, aren't we still Mexican? Ogbu (1991), as cited in Valenzuela (1999) identifies the term Mexicanidad (Mexicanity) as the experiences of ethnic minorities that have evolved (and continue to evolve) in relation to the dominant culture (p. 169). "The loss of language results in hearing painful words such as "gringa (derogatory epithet for white American), pocho (Mexican-American who can speak little or no Spanish), americanizada (Americanized), or agringada (like a gringa)" (Valenzuela, p. 169) from people in our own culture.

Language is an asset. Instead of seeing me as Spanish deficit, why don't they see me as a human who happens to speak in English. Knowing how to speak English has helped our 2nd and 3rd generation family members obtain an education at a variety of levels and jobs that are keeping us fed, clothed, healthy, and housed. **We broke the cycle of poverty. We didn't lose our cultural identity.** I may never be fluent, but I understand the language and I continue to learn it. However, without my language, there is a sense of cultural homelessness; living in-between; living in Nepantla.

This American experiment to assimilate students to speak English has detrimental effects for many children. Form many, these policies, both overt and covert, has led to a loss of language and a loss of place. I do not know where I fit, I am constantly in a state of Nepantla.

Shamed for speaking Spanish
Shamed for not speaking Spanish
Shamed for speaking "imperfectly"
Shamed for not being taught
Shamed for having an accent
Shamed by your own, by others
Shamed for trying

You don't have to prove your Latinidad (various attributes shared by Latin American people and their descendants without reducing those similarities to any single essential trait),
to anybody.

We exist.

Punto (period)
(Frohman, 2019).

Perhaps instead we interrogate a culture of white supremacy and "English Only" spaces that shame people who speak a second language. Perhaps we expand bilingual education. Perhaps, we don't fetishize about speaking Spanish. Perhaps we tell Latino/a (used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina) youth they always belong despite being bilingual, trilingual, or monolingual (Frohman, 2019).

Reflecting back on feeling a sense of cultural homelessness, it is aligned with "in-between" or "third space." There are times when I feel like I am "in-between" cultures; a disconnection from any culture. When I am shamed because of my lack of fluent Spanish, my identity is questioned (you are not Mexican enough, you are too Americanized, Pocho, etc.). In most cases I am not given

the opportunity to share my story. As Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal and Solórzono (2001) state, stories such as mine and many others are legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in systems like education.

It is important to note that historically, Spanish is not our native language. In fact, the Nahuatl language is the original language of Mexico which was once the southwestern parts of the United States. It was during the Spanish conquest when Spanish became the official language of Mexico. This is an example of how colonization can influence the indigenous languages of those colonized (del Castillo, 2012). In this case, it was the Mexicans who were colonized by the Spanish empire. I wonder if Mexicans who speak Nahuatl shame or chastise Mexicans for speaking Spanish.

Bhabba, identifies an “in between” or “third space” as a space of “resistance, negotiation, and articulation of new meanings in the face of ambivalences, normalization, and hegemony” (1990, as cited in Karanja, 2010, 5). In this space, hegemonic practices, such as the ones practiced in our schools, like “English Only” policies are challenged. Like Anzaldua (1987, as cited in Nassar, 2021, par. 3), I strongly believe this is an opportunity for my identity to be constructed and reconstructed on my own terms, resulting in new identities and possibilities. In fact, by living as an outsider in political movements and in different social realities, I have come to understand the alienating effects of the chaotic intertwining of different systems of oppression, belonging and allegiance, and I have been able to theorize the risks and the opportunities for my political and personal emancipation.

I know who I am. Non-Spanish speakers, like me continue to participate in many possibilities. The inability of not speaking the language fluently does not make me any less Mexican or any less human. I am who I am because of my culture. I am still able to identify with other aspects of my culture. Many of us, including myself, have become conscious of how vital Spanish is in the continuance of my Mexican culture and identity. What I decide to do is up to me, but I should not be discounted because **I am Mexican Enough** and no one can take that away from me.

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