

Women of Color in Legal Education: *Representing La Mestiza**

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Writing a personal essay to be published in a public journal is a peculiar enterprise. It is that much stranger when you are a black woman law professor, asked to reflect on “the distinctiveness of our contributions to our students, colleagues, and institutions.”¹ My computer screen is blank, the cursor blinking amber. The color of caution and danger. What should I write about? Which self should I (re)present?

Maybe this is an opportunity for a piece of autobiography: a chance to use the personal *i*, not the universal unmarked *I*. A chance to write a narrative, not abstract and boring like the usual law review article but an authentic and pure account of experience, pregnant with real live truth.

Oh no, not another collection of essays of women “coming to voice.” (I am woman; hear me roar.) The feminist trope of silence and voice has always bugged me. At best it is disingenuous: as bell hooks points out, black women have always talked back.² At worst, it is parasitical on the myth of speech as pure unmediated experience, some-

* Gloria Anzaldúa argues that the figure of *la mestiza*—the woman of mixed blood and dual cultures—is an appropriate image for people seeking transcendence of the oppressed/oppressor split “that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.” Gloria Anzaldúa, *La conciencia de la mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness*, in Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* 377, 379 (Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990). “The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.” *Id.*

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¹ Call to Meeting, August 23, 1990 letter (on file with the Berk Women’s L J) (one of the common concerns expressed by the members of the Northeast Corridor Collective of Black Women Law Professors).

² bell hooks, *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black* 5-9 (South End, 1989).

how closer than writing to transcendental truth.³ But when women of color trade on this myth, we do so at our peril. Remember that men do, women are. Remember how anthropology began: collecting authentic narratives of experience from the natives (childlike, preliterate, close to nature) so as to document Man's ascent up the Great Chain of Being to the civilized Western World; so as "to confine non-Whites in their status as non-Whites, in order to make the notion of Whiteness clearer, purer, and stronger."⁴ Remember, finally, Phillis Wheatley, a young slave called to a Boston courthouse where eighteen white pillars of the community were gathered to determine whether in fact she was the author of her poetry.⁵

No, I have not come to testify.⁶

If storytelling is not revelation but rhetoric, then why not use my lawyer's training and write a brief? I can see it now: bristling with research, dazzling in its logic, elegant (yet spare) in style, designed to irrefutably justify my existence in this institution. The results, unfortunately, are a foregone conclusion. At most, I get to prove my specialness

³ One of Jacques Derrida's projects has been to isolate and debunk the assumption in Western thought that speech, as contrasted with writing, represents a privileged access to mind.

The presumption has been that speech provides a privileged access to mind; that speaking and thinking are co-present; that speaking is in immediate rather than mediated presence with consciousness and being. . . . Derrida's aim is to reveal how the presumption that speech occupies a privileged place vis-à-vis mind and consciousness is in error because speech is *always already* inhabited by writing and hence is mediated and derivative. . . . Derrida sees this [privileging of speech over writing, presence over absence] to be the master illusion of all Western thought. He likens this privileging of speech to the quest for an absolute center, an origin, a beginning, a transcendental signified: that is, a source which itself has no source other than its pure being, pure spontaneity, pure presence; a source that serves as the ground for truth itself.

Edward E. Sampson, *Deconstructing Psychology's Subject*, 4 J of Mind & Behavior 135, 148-49 (1983) (emphasis in original).

⁴ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* 224 (Harvard U Press, 1983). bell hooks notes that in undergraduate feminist theory courses, too often the writing of women of color and working-class white women is represented as "experiential," while the writing of white women represents "theory." hooks, *Talking Back* at 37 (cited in note 2).

⁵ See Henry L. Gates Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* 7 (U of Chicago Press, 1986). Gates reports that Wheatley's book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773, included a two-paragraph "Attestation" from these worthy gentlemen, which read in part:

We whose Names are underwritten, do assure the World, that the poems specified in the following Page, were (as we veribly believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

Id at 7. Compare Anita Allen's article elsewhere in this volume of the Berkeley Women's Law Journal (discussing how she was suspected of plagiarism).

⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw has described the process of "subjectification," in which minority students are expected to "testify" to their racial experience in order to provide raw data for legal problem-solving by the class as a whole. "To the extent that the minority student can participate in this debate, she is viewed as a biased or specially interested party and thus, her perspectives are probably regarded as being too subjective to have a significant bearing on the ultimate solution." Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *Foreword: Toward a Race-Conscious Pedagogy in Legal Education*, 11 Nat'l Black L J 1, 6-7 (1989).

once and for all.⁷ (I don't know about all you other people . . . but *I belong here.*) The price of specialness is the gilded cage of the token.⁸ And I am so tired of justifying my existence.

So this essay is to be neither whispered confessional nor amicus brief to the Supremes in The Big House.⁹ What is its purpose? And who is writing?

Discussing Harriet Wilson, Zora Neale Hurston, and other black women who have written their lives in autobiography or fiction, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notices a common thread: an adversarial relationship between the woman and her audience—"mixed emotions toward [her] probable and intended (white, female) readers."¹⁰ In the absence of an authentic truth accessible through experience or logic, in the presence of both familiarity and distrust, let me tell you some lies.¹¹

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When I was a kid in school, I was always younger than everybody else. I was an echo of their immaturity: awkward, vulnerable, eager to please. I was an easy target for the precise and murderous hatred of girls for one another and the casual derision of boys. At school I followed my idols with the determined patience of an imprinted duckling. At home in my room, writing stories, I resurrected the thousand I's that died every day at school.

At college I resolved to leave myself for dead and become the private I's I had sketched. What had started as survival I vowed to make my livelihood. In college, writing gave me identity and arrogance. The intellectual world gave me sanctuary. I loved the brick and ivy, the seminar rooms smelling of books and chalk. I loved the privacy and freedom of creating I's unmarked by gender or race. My stories had very little color in them.¹²

I didn't really start to feel black until I went to Chicago, several years later. I lived in Hyde Park and went to graduate school and was constantly run off the sidewalk: by undergraduates in safety pins and neon hair, deep in angst-ridden conversation; by hard-eyed business school women in pinstripe suits; by blond young men in shorts going to

⁷ See Trinh Min-ha, *Woman/native/other* 86-88 (Indiana U Press, 1989) (describing the competition for "specialness" among women of color in predominantly white institutions).

⁸ See Linda Greene's article elsewhere in this volume of the *Berkeley Women's Law Journal*.

⁹ Professor Dwight Greene of Hofstra University School of Law coined this phrase.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women*, in Henry L. Gates Jr., ed, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* 176, 192 (Meridian, 1990).

¹¹ See Françoise Lionnet, *Autoethnography: The An-Archaic Style of Dust Tracks on a Road*, in Gates, ed, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* 382, 385 (cited in note 10) (discussing "lies" both collected and told by Zora Neale Hurston).

¹² Compare Gayl Jones, *Your Poems Have Very Little Color in Them*, in Gayl Jones, *White Rat* 17 (Random House, 1971).

or from sporting activities. Again and again I would approach a group, expecting it to part as I walked into it; again and again I would end up in the February mud or be jostled aside. I was furious at my invisibility. Too lady-like to protest,¹³ I would direct angry stares at their disappearing backs. But I envied them too.

I liked watching them at play on the Midway, that long wide stretch of green between 59th and 60th Streets. I envied their carelessness, their unselfconscious, well-bred ease. I was fascinated with the way privilege marked their bodies: the mirror of the way underprivilege marked the bodies of the hard-eyed children a few blocks away in Englewood, the poorest and blackest neighborhood in the city. White children of the affluent, gazing at me round-eyed and blank, innocent as cats.

I liked seeing them on the tennis courts, dressed in sparkling, dazzling white with arms gracefully outstretched, hearing the tiny *thwock* as ball met racket. The purity of their tennis whites complemented the intense green of their parents' golf courses in the suburbs: acres of manicured velvet behind long country club fences. You could hear the sprinklers at night, thousands of gallons pumping away in the darkness. All to maintain that intense pure endless green.

Their unselfconsciousness was the unselfconsciousness of the perfect object, the thing created from desire simply to be desired: the icon of the market. On a poster in the el train there is an airline advertisement. A white languorous female body reclines on a yellow raft in blue water. The black bodies in poverty just down the beach are outside the frame. The lifelines of money and dream that connect them have been airbrushed out. The pure innocence of the white body, the yellow raft, the blue water. The American dream, pure whiteness in the heart of darkness.

I admired and desired that innocence. What would it be like for your world to be all of a piece with yourself, for all the advertisements to be not just for you but about you? What would it be like to be a disembodied self, living in a world of perfect free choice? To not notice the vast machinery holding your body on that raft?

Over the lady on the raft someone has scribbled a jagged tag¹⁴ in red Magic Marker. The el train takes her body, still unconscious and unaware, deeper into the South Side.

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What drew me to professing law was the dream of freedom to write. Writing as play: the game of inventing selves, speaking in tongues: turn-

¹³ Compare Patricia J. Williams, *On Being the Object of Property*, 14 *Signs* 5, 23 (1988).

¹⁴ Among graffiti artists, a "tag" is a stylized signature.

ing the i's of the self into the authoritative I of prose or the sensual i of poetry. Like a ventriloquist, I can write like a woman, like a man, like an intellectual, like a lawyer, like an illiterate. I try on voices as I try on selves, turning in the mirror, admiring and critical by turns. It's like talking on the radio, whispering words into a microphone in a booth to be listened to in a hundred different private rooms. Read my words and try to guess the timbre of my voice, the place I grew up, the shade of my skin. The pleasure of seducing the reader with the I.

But this pleasure is no longer innocent. No longer invisible, I am now peculiarly, horribly, constantly visible. I am The Black Woman Professor, a public figure: a screen for student and faculty fantasies, a subject for private discussions, an object for their assessment, veneration and contempt. When I first started teaching, I always asked students to call me Professor Harris. I loved it that they had to call a young black woman Professor. Now I love the title because it keeps alive the illusion that I still have private i's.

A colleague approached me once at a faculty dinner. He had read an article of mine in which I quoted both Jorge Luis Borges and Toni Morrison. He described the article as "literate." Then he shook his head. "I didn't think you could do it," he said. I didn't know what to say. Amused by his innocence, disgusted by his honesty, triumphant about my virtuosity: grateful for his attention.

No, no longer innocent. You get used to being The Professor. You get used to the small catch in their breath at parties. The private elevator key. You get to like the power even as you see it inscribing itself in your body: your posture, your carriage, your tone of voice.

This body. I keep poetry and drawings on my wall to remind me of physical pleasure when I forget, which is nearly every day. These days remembering my body is a conscious act of subversion. It is so easy to retreat into one's head, professing law, and forget the curves and color of the body. This body that inscribes my race and gender. Sometimes I long to leave it behind. Why not be Cartesian about this? Let's all be talking heads.

we deal wit emotion too much
so why dont we go on ahead & be white then/
& make everythin dry & abstract wit no rhythm & no
reelin for sheer sensual pleasure/yes let's go on & be
white/we're right in the middle of it/no use holdin
out/holding onto ourselves/lets think our way outta

feelin/lets abstract ourselves some families & maybe
 maybe tonite/i'll find a way to make myself come
 witout you/

— Ntozake Shange¹⁵

This intellectual self threatens to cannibalize my physical self. So I had my hair braided so I could flip it around behind me and pull it through my fingers (just like the white girls I envied in grade school). Short skirts and tight belts to remember my body, to embody me. Kick off my shoes and go barefoot in the faculty library. Suffer under school-girl crushes. Tiny acts of rebellion against the life of the mind.

But this pleasure is also no longer innocent. The obscene phone calls on my answering machine, the fumbling touches at luncheon, remind me that this body is not only mine.

But I still haven't explained why black women law professors have a distinctive contribution to make.

iv

The *mestiza's* dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness. — Gloria Anzaldúa¹⁶

Loudly my colleagues proclaim their innocence. They have never discriminated. They have always been nice guys. They are victims. Loudly my students proclaim their innocence. They have been brutalized by the whitemale system. They are victims. *La mestiza* is no victim, though she has been hurt and is hurting. She knows the part of herself that likes power and violence and pain.

She is not that floating signifier of desire, white flesh on yellow raft on blue water.

Quietly my students and colleagues claim their invisibility. They resent a world that gives them gender, race, class, sexuality. They wish to be talking heads. They wish we could all just be individuals.

La mestiza dances at the funeral of the individual in a red dress.

What is *la mestiza's* distinctive contribution to her students, colleagues, and institutions? Restlessness, ambiguity, disruption. Creative chaos. And also, maybe most important: Her refusal to be either innocent or invisible.

¹⁵ Ntozake Shange, lady in blue, in *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* 47 (Bantam, 1975).

¹⁶ Anzaldúa, *La conciencia de la mestiza*, in Anzaldúa, ed, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* at 377 (cited in note *).