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COLLOQUIUM PROCEEDING: Gender, Race/Ethnicity and Language

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SUMMARY: ... Last night, with co-panelist and friend Professor Angel Oquendo, I was discussing the "different" perspective of Critical Race Theory acquired after having spent a year back in Puerto Rico. ... The study of how race, ethnicity, and culture join ranks with gender and sexual orientation to erect hierarchical social barriers must be central to Critical Race Theory scholarship if inclusiveness is to be achieved in its project of social transformation. ... In moving it beyond the "negative" critique which has exposed the essentialism of a significant body of feminist theory, I am attempting to develop theoretical ways of thinking about race, ethnicity, and gender for Latinas. ... How do bilingual women who are forced to speak English feel cultural devaluation through monolingual rules, or how these women, as assimilation forces gain strength, experience Spanish as the language of the "private," the very gendered "private. ... Children, educationally exposed to the dominant culture and with little or no access to Spanish, come home everyday with a monolingual world-view. ... In his reading of assimilation, Richard Rodriguez offers a contrasting perspective of the construction of the public and the private. He presents a Chicano perspective on the politics of assimilation and its impact on the "public and private self." ... I hope you enjoy my island, la isla flotante/the floating island. ...

[*49] Buenos dias. Welcome to the island.

Last night, with co-panelist and friend Professor Angel Oquendo, I was discussing the "different" perspective of Critical Race Theory acquired after having spent a year back in Puerto Rico. This is a homecoming of sorts since many of us, through the alchemy of a three hour plane ride, maintain our professional and existential ties with the Island while residing in the US. Through the air bus we change cultural stations. In the Island we acquire "majority" status--at least numerically--and speak Espanol.

Professor Oquendo and I shared our perspectives on Critical Race Theory and recognized the importance of its much needed critical approach to civil rights law. It has given a voice to our stories and our challenges of racial subordination. At the same time, it has exposed the limitations of liberal legalism by opening up spaces for critiques which center on structural rather than individual components.

As Critical Race Theory has concentrated on white-black racism, we discussed how to apply its methodology to other non-white groups. Can we "export-import" Critical Race Theory insights to groups that are similar yet different to African Americans in their experiences of race subordination? I am thinking particularly of Latinos, whose experiences of migration and cultural difference shape their notions of race and subordination, how those that "enter" the US must grapple with the interplay of racial-ethnic subordination and rhetorical notions of citizenship.

Puerto Rican colleagues have pointed out how North-American I sound when I talk about Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory, by virtue of its geopolitical base, the cross-cultural character of its primary

insights, and the social construction of race, is primarily of a "local character." This localism is potentially diminished by its North American face, a face that--in tune with its historical genesis--underscores a US centered version of white supremacy.

My own situation illustrates what I mean when I say "North American Face." When I explain in Puerto Rico that I am a "woman of color," my perplexed interlocutors ask me, "Of color? What color?," thus raising my awareness as to the complexities of positionality. I suppose that for my Puerto Rican friends and colleagues I am offering a "gringa" version of race hierarchies. When I try to explain to my North American friends of color about being a mulatta, an accurate description of at least 90% of [*50] the Puerto Rican population, again I swim the murky waters that require translation, given the US historical meaning of *mulataje*.

Critical Race Theory must not only go "international," but should also expand its discourse to properly address the multifacetedness of racism. My affinities with Critical Race Theory do not prevent me from recognizing its relative detachment from the multicultural realities of a diverse nation. A critical perspective must be sufficiently open so as to make room for the multiple ways through which white supremacy shows its "whiteness." Moving beyond the black and white framework in an effort to articulate a more comprehensive theoretical and political account is an important first step. The study of how race, ethnicity, and culture join ranks with gender and sexual orientation to erect hierarchical social barriers must be central to Critical Race Theory scholarship if inclusiveness is to be achieved in its project of social transformation.

I have raised the "ethnic-race-cultural" banner in some Critical Race Theory seminars I have attended and have realized that there is not enough knowledge about otherness. Sharing Latino stories has been illuminating and enriching. Issues of language and stereotypes as well as reflections on the construction of divisions brought about by a "shrinking economic pie" have been put on the table in a constructive manner. The experience has been positive. Critical Race Theory gatherings have been safe spaces for me, where I can have these conversations.

Such conversations have stimulated my current work in progress. In tune with my interest in feminist theory, I am interested in moving the intersection approach and methodology into a "positive" insights mode. In moving it beyond the "negative" critique which has exposed the essentialism of a significant body of feminist theory, I am attempting to develop theoretical ways of thinking about race, ethnicity, and gender for Latinas. I am doing it from the perspective of a Puertorriquena (a clear recognition of the heterogeneity of the Latino community and hence of Latinas) who wishes to seize commonalities among Latinas while respecting the differences.

Identity, language, and culture form the tripod on which my analysis rests. After examining how the civil rights struggle waged by Latinos has centered around language rights and cultural resistance to Anglo assimilation, I critique its male dominant character. I then proceed to examine the ways in which victimization and resistance to Anglo-assimilating forces is gendered; the gender specific character of racial, ethnic and cultural devaluation.

Through the use of literary voices, I am attempting to document the particular ways in which patriarchy's construction of the public and the private intersects with white supremacist forces to devalue Latino culture and language. The workings of the welfare state and the power disparities which fan the debate around its elimination have manifested themselves along gender lines. In the context of domestic violence, how are Latinas muted by shelters which do not respond--even minimally--to their cultural and language needs? How do male Latino batterers negotiate the public and private world of Latinas who don't speak the English language. How do bilingual women who are forced to speak English feel cultural devaluation through monolingual rules, or how these women, as [*51] assimilation forces gain strength, experience Spanish as the language of the "private," the very gendered "private."

Motherhood is also constructed through the monolingual English narrative. The public narrative of inferiorization infiltrates home and impacts the interaction between mother and child, as when the child becomes her mother's translator in the public world. Children, educationally exposed to the dominant culture and with little or no access to Spanish, come home everyday with a monolingual world-view. This monolingualism inserts a narrative of inferiorization in the mother-child interaction, creating an identity that is taught to be despised. Consider the embarrassment a child often experiences when she presents to the public world a mother who cannot speak English or who speaks it with a heavy accent. Language gets to be a central piece of the male-female dynamic of a couple, as observed by the child. The Spanish-speaking subject of Pat Mora's poem, "Elena," can relate to such complex intersection when her oldest son reminds her of a husband that wants to keep her monolingual. "Mama he doesn't want you to be smarter than he is." n1 Elena speaks:...embarrassed at mispronouncing words, embarrassed at the laughter of my children, the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take my English book and lock myself in the bathroom, say the thick words softly, for if I stop trying, I will be deaf when my children need my help. n2

The work of Richard Rodriguez provides yet another example of a gendered construction of identity, filtered through language. In his reading of assimilation, Richard Rodriguez offers a contrasting perspective of the construction of the public and the private. He presents a Chicano perspective on the politics of assimilation and its impact on the "public and private self." The private is the realm where the Spanish language can flourish while English is the language of public or full individuality, the world of "those who are able to consider themselves members of the crowd." Rodriguez became a member of the crowd at an early age when he dropped Spanish from his education. Only then, he claims, was he able to think of himself as an "American," no longer an alien in gringo society, where he sought the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality: The social and political advantages I enjoy as a man result from the day that I came to believe that my name, indeed, is Rich-heard Road-ree-guess. It is true that my public society today is often impersonal... Yet despite the anonymity of the crowd and despite the fact that the individuality I achieve in public is often tenuous--because it depends on my being one in a crowd--I celebrate the day I acquired my new name. Those middle-class ethnics [*52] who scorn assimilation seem to be filled with decadent self-pity, obsessed by the burden of public life. Dangerously, they romanticize public separateness and they trivialize the dilemma of the socially disadvantaged. n3

The private world of family life, women's locus of victimization and resistance confirms the ravages of assimilation. In a manifesto of denial and obliteration, Rodriguez buries those ravages in his psyche; ravages whose origins lie in the "betrayal" of parents who strictly followed the instructions of his Catholic teachers to speak English at home. The nuns were "unsentimental about their responsibility": Is it possible for you and your husband to encourage your children to practice their English when they are home? Of course, my parents complied. What would they not do for their children's well-being? And how could they have questioned the Church's authority which those women represented? In an instant, they agreed to give up the language (the sounds) that had revealed and accentuated our family's closeness... "Ahora, speak to us en ingles," my father and mother united to tell us. n4

Although Rodriguez narrates how his mother grew more publicly confident, there was a "new quiet at home": The family's quiet was partly due to the fact that, as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents. Sentences needed to be spoken slowly when a child addressed his mother or father. Often the parent wouldn't understand. The young voice, frustrated, would end up saying, "Never mind"--the subject was closed. After English became my primary language, I no longer knew what words to use in addressing my parents. The old Spanish words (those tender accents of sound) I had used earlier--Mama and Papa--I couldn't use anymore. They would have been too painful reminders of how much had changed in my life. n5 As a revealing non sequitur, Rodriguez states how his awkward childhood does not prove the necessity of bilingual education, how his story "discloses instead an essential myth of childhood--inevitable pain." n6

In an attempt to see the commonalties with the work of Chicana [*53] feminist theorists such as Gloria Anzaldua I relate the parallel roads that the mestiza consciousness and the Puertorriquena of the floating island share, particularly when traveling the spaces of language and mulataje.

The floating island is las fronteras de la mestiza which Gloria Anzaldua describes:because I, a mestiza, continually walk out one culture and into another because I am all cultures at the same time, alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio, Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan simultaneamente.

Finally, I also attempt to show how in the realm of legal discourse a gendered critical race discourse helps to illustrate the links between identity, language, culture and national origin discrimination.

Angel y yo estamos de acuerdo en que las diferencias no pueden ser obstaculo para un trabajo politico que requiere coaliciones. n7 Telling each other our respective stories especially in the "intra-world" is as important as telling the stories to the 'external' world.

I hope you enjoy my island, la isla flotante/the floating island.

Gracias.

FOOTNOTE-1:

n1 PAT MORA, WOMEN OF THE WORLD 61 (19__).

n2 *Id.*

n3 RICHARD RODRIGUEZ HUNGER OF MEMORY: THE EDUCATION OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ 27 (1982).

n4 Richard Rodriguez, Aria, in Harold Augenbraum & Ilan Stavans, Growing Up Latino: Memoirs and Stories (1993) 305, at 313-14

n5 *Id.* at 315.

n6 *Id.* at 318

n7 Angel and I agree that differences should not impair the political work which precedes coalition-building.