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Narrative Reflexivity in Raced and Gendered Spaces

By Terri L. Rodriguez

This article explores the reflexive narrative positioning in which I engage as a White woman, a secondary English teacher, and an educational researcher inquiring into the experiences of Latino/a teacher candidates in a Midwestern teacher education program. As a narrative inquirer, I believe that the research journey is a collaborative and self-reflective process. Inquiry into the professional experiences, beliefs and identities of preservice teachers compels me to also excavate the ways that dominant ideologies, assumptions, and beliefs permeate my work. I argue that critically reflexive narrative positioning enables me to embrace a stance toward equity and social justice for linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse students in U.S. public schools. My aim is to engage those who teach and conduct research for equitable purposes to partake in similar work – to examine how they have been socially and historically positioned to do such work, and what this brings to one’s teaching or research, particularly for White educators and researchers, but also regardless of one’s race or ethnicity.

In this article, I share three narrative vignettes through which I position myself in relation to the Latino/a preservice teachers with whom I collaborated in the research project. Although I believe that narrative construction is itself an interpretive and reflective process, I distinguish between narration and reflection within each vignette through the use of italics to emphasize how each story is re-visited. First, I share a story entitled “Gringa: Teaching English in Puerto Rico” in which I considered my motives for pursuing research into the cultural resources Latino/a preservice teachers bring to their

teaching. I wondered why I was interested in this work and how I might conceptualize “culture” in a way that would help me better understand how it is made visible and enacted in one’s teaching practice. I came to be a *gringa* teaching English in Puerto Rico when my husband, a native of Puerto Rico and a U.S. service member, was stationed there. In the narrative, I position myself as an ally to Spanish-speaking colleagues and students and seek to understand how political and historical contexts shape my teaching practices.

Gringa: Teaching English in Puerto Rico

I was the only *gringa* teaching at San Juan Christian Schoolⁱⁱ, one of several private K-12 English language schools located in Las Flores, Puerto Rico, a town known for its majestic and rugged beauty where black volcanic cliffs jut majestically out into the Caribbean. A two hour drive around the tip of the island to the north and east brings you to the bustle of San Juan, with its never-ending flow of tourists who come pouring out of cruise ships to shop, eat, and play. Few hotels crowd Las Flores’ pristine and isolated beaches, though, and it is easy to imagine what it must have looked like to Columbus and his men, until you notice the chain link fence edging the top of the cliff at the boundary of the U.S. Coast Guard base. *My admiration of the coastline’s pristine beaches reveals a naïve and romantic dominant narrative about the discovery and conquest of the Americas that I carry within me. I purposefully engage irony by contrasting this colonial ideology with my emerging awareness of Puerto Rico’s conflicted status as a commonwealth of the U.S. The chain link fence is both a figurative and physical boundary that preserves the island as a military outpost behind the curtain of a tourist economy.*

At San Juan Christian School, the official language of instruction is English, but most students and teachers are native Spanish speakers. Here, English and Spanish mix and mingle unabashedly in classrooms, in casual conversations on corridor balconies, in parent-teacher conferences, in faculty meetings, in school assemblies, and in the morning faculty lounge prayer ritual. I, however, am not fluent in Spanish, and I often struggled to understand the conversations going on around me. I pretended to laugh at jokes whose punch lines didn't quite make sense to me and smiled and nodded at all the right times. I felt like I stood out in many ways, from the way I dressed (*casual khakis and cotton tops*) to my hair (*which was constantly windblown and slightly frizzy*). My softly southern-accented English (*from having lived in Georgia and Kentucky for eight years*) marked me as an outsider as well.

The other *gringo* in the building was the director, a White man who represented the school for the Southern Baptist Convention in the U.S. whose mission partly funded it. *I see this now as another colonial legacy -- the historic and continuing imposition of missionaries upon the island.* Although he had lived in Puerto Rico for at least 10 years and made great pains to begin every address to the school in halted, broken Spanish, he inevitably switched over to English after the obligatory opening comments, always encouraging light-hearted laughter at his ineptitude with the language. *I wondered why this was acceptable -- and funny -- every time?*

Like the director, and lucky for me, I was dominant in the "right" language, English. In all of my interviews for an English teaching position in Puerto Rico, it was clear that my native-English-speaking ability was my biggest attribute; it didn't seem to matter that I had a master's degree in secondary English education and six years of

teaching experience, or that I wasn't bilingual, even in a commonwealth where bilingualism is the official policy. *I occupied a privileged position, but I eventually became aware of the negative connotations associated with the label for my identity. Literally, “gringa” means "White woman/girl," but in Puerto Rico, as in most of Latin America, it is a word loaded with the social and political connotations of colonization, discrimination, and oppression* (Nieto, 1998).

At San Juan Christian School, I wondered how my racial, cultural, and linguistic identities influenced classroom interactions and the ways that I taught English to Puerto Rican children as I gradually came to see my teaching practices as "different" from those of the teachers around me. While the students were *bien educado*, or well-behaved, and did not question me, I thought my teaching style was too impersonal, too time-on-task oriented, and even individualistic and competitive. I had just come from teaching in a public high school in Kentucky, where rules were posted; behavior contracts were often negotiated with "problem" students; assigning detention was the norm; and my value as a teacher was measured through student time-on-task and scores on the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). At San Juan, I was addressed as “professora,” students never talked back, and they always turned in their homework. *My previous teaching experiences had not prepared me for what I felt here. When I began my teaching career in a predominantly Black high school in Georgia, I was told that as a White, female teacher from up North, I would have to earn the respect of my students. In Puerto Rico, respect is not earned; it comes with position and age. It seemed that the tactics (instructional strategies) that I had employed and that informed the crafting of my teaching seemed oddly out of place in this new context.*

How did I become a *gringa* teaching English in Puerto Rico? Were it not for my marriage to a military service member and our experiences living in Europe and several states as a military family, I think that I would be the tourist who comes to San Juan "to shop, eat, and play," and perhaps, like many White, middle-class consumers, return to the suburbs unaware of the often oppressive and exploitative effects of my presence in the world. I grew up in suburban Minnesota, the great-granddaughter of German and Austrian immigrant farmers in a White, working-class family. My parents were born and raised on farms in Minnesota and northern Wisconsin. When they met in the Cities (*I call it "the Cities" to indicate my insider status. "The Cities" is the term used by Minnesotans for the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul*) where my dad attended vocational school and my mom worked at a bank, they both felt that escaping the farm meant the opportunity to create a better life for themselves and their children. Although they didn't attend college themselves, they helped to make it a reality for me. College opened doors for me and provided opportunities that my parents never had, especially the opportunity to study, to travel, and to experience living in diverse cultures. *And of course, the opportunity to engage in this reflection, which I now see as a way of positioning myself in relation to "them," my parents, who I saw as confined by what I am calling their "lack" of opportunity. Nationalist ideologies of meritocracy and the idea that diversity should be celebrated are evident in my story* (Bloemraad, Korteweg, & Yurdakul (2008).

The second vignette, "Jellow," reveals my experience of feeling in between Puerto Rican and Anglo cultures as I explore my conflicting identities. I am an English teacher in a colonized commonwealth and wife of a native-born Puerto Rican Spanish

speaker. I am also daughter-and sister-in law to three Puerto Rican teachers and neighbor to White families on the military base where we lived, a two-hour drive from my husband's birthplace and family home. In this vignette, my personal and professional identities merge as I call upon professional knowledge as a literacy teacher and experiences in an extended Puerto Rican family to talk back to the racist discourses I felt permeated interactions between parents and teachers at the base school.

Jellow

"You know, she says 'jellow' for 'yellow.' I'm worried. He's having a hard time with reading. I'm thinking about home schooling him," Mary confided to me one afternoon as we lazed by the pool watching the kids swim. *Mary and I were the only two Army wives living on a coast guard base near Las Flores, a picturesque town on the west coast of Puerto Rico. Las Flores was a two-hour drive from the busyness of city life and tourism, and we felt privileged to live there. We all sent our kids to a school operated by the federal government for us in Las Flores. Mary's son, Jason, had just begun kindergarten and was learning to read in school.*

"No, don't do that. He would miss so much!" I replied. "I wouldn't worry. You don't say 'jellow' at home, do you? You read with him at home, right? Have you ever heard him say 'jellow' instead of 'yellow'?"

"No..., but I think he's all confused," Mary paused. *I could tell she was hesitant. I wondered if she felt awkward talking to me about this – knowing I was an English teacher and also married to a native-Spanish speaker who also pronounced "y" as "j" at times.* "What if he thinks the 'y' sound is 'j'? Won't he just be mixed up?" she continued.

"If you say 'yellow,' he will, too," I tried to reassure her. "He'll figure it out. He'll hear her say 'jellow' and know that she means the color 'yellow.' I wouldn't worry about it. Phonics is not the only method of reading instruction used at the school; it's just one way of teaching kids how to read. I'm sure he'll be fine."

Mary didn't sound too convinced, though, and I wouldn't have been surprised if she joined the group of White parents who were pulling children out of the government school and home-schooling them. From what I understood, many White families had been home-schooling their children even before coming to the island, but many more began here. *I thought it was partly because it was such a closed, tight-knit community, almost like a walled city.* Many of the other wives never left the base, and when they did, they came back with stories about people staring at and talking about them. *Never mind that these women were monolingual English speakers – how could they know what these "others" were saying, I wondered?* Some refused to buy local produce for sale on the side of the road, or chicken and rice from vendors in trucks with no running water. "How do they wash their hands?" one asked. "I would never eat there."

Some parents refused to send their kids to school even though it was well funded and employed highly trained, highly paid, certified teachers, the majority of whom were Puerto Rican. Some of these parents had children in kindergarten, like Mary, and they were worried about "mixed up" phonics instruction from bilingual teachers, while others were parents of upper elementary and middle school aged children who wanted a more rigorous curriculum than they thought Puerto Rican teachers could provide. *I felt offended by Mary's questions. I had applied for a teaching position there myself, and I knew it was a great school. I knew it had more financial resources than the rural public*

schools in which I had previously taught. My interactions with my children's teachers had been wonderful. I saw them as caring and highly competent. As I listened to Mary's complaints, I thought about the racist prejudices and stereotypes that I had seen permeating interactions between *gringos* and Puerto Rican teachers. For example, when I interviewed for the English teaching position at San Juan Christian School, the director asked me how many days I normally needed to take off from work. *I realized this was an odd, and probably illegal, question, but I wanted the position, so I answered that as a military spouse, I was often the only parent available for our three children when they were sick.* I replied that I normally took all of my allowed sick leave. The administrator warned me not to miss Fridays and Mondays, as the "Puerto Rican flu" was a problem at his school. *I am ashamed now that I didn't say anything back to him and that I took the job.*

The final vignette, "Why Do They Dress Like That?" portrays my struggles to understand and make visible the racist and sexist ideologies, assumptions, and beliefs that I carry within me as the granddaughter of German-American and Austrian-American Midwestern farmers. In it, I share a remembered conversation with a fellow-teacher at San Juan Christian School. I position myself as a cultural outsider and reveal a concealed story, a racist and sexist performance, in which I judge other women's attire. This story is an important part of my research narrative. It emerged when Patricia, a Latina teacher candidate, was reprimanded by her White, female principal for dressing "provocatively" (the principal's words) in the 5th grade classroom where she completed her student teaching. Patricia resisted the principal's interpretation of her attire and wrote a letter in her defense to her supervisor and to the chair of the elementary education department.

Her White, female cooperating teacher confirmed Patricia's interpretation and did not find her attire to be inappropriate for school. In her article, "Seduced by Images: Identity and Schooling in the Lives of Puerto Rican Girls," Rolon-Dow (2004) describes "the power that images created by and about Puerto Rican girls hold in shaping their schooling experiences." She finds that White teachers are unable to see middle school Latina girls as academically successful, in part, due to the teachers' overriding emphasis on the girls' sexuality, as perceived by the teachers to be expressed in their ways of dressing (p. 8). Rolon-Dow draws upon the intellectual work of feminists of color who assert that images and representations about women of color are powerful forms of domination and control. As I reflected on Patricia's experiences in light of the article, I felt the imperative to uncover and examine my own assumptions and biases as a White female teacher.

Why Do They Dress Like That?

"I think I figured out why Puerto Rican women dress the way they do," I stated matter-of-factly to Maritza, a fellow teacher at Las Flores Christian School, a private English language school in Puerto Rico where I taught for one year before returning to the Midwest to pursue graduate studies. *While Maritza was a Puerto Rican woman, I knew she had grown up and lived most of her life in New York – I thought she was an "outsider" here, like me. I probably thought that this gave me permission to say such things out loud to her. I wanted an ally and a friend; one who I thought might better help me understand why I didn't feel like I would ever fit in here.*

"Really? Why?" she asked.

"Because they can," I answered knowingly, as if those three words held some deep significance that Maritza might understand. *I have been thinking about this story*

ever since I put it into words on a page. I am afraid to publish it. I cringe at the memory of these thoughts, this conversation. I examine the title, my use of "they" as a referent for "Puerto Ricans." Clearly I am placing myself outside that category; clearly I am using my own "particular sex, culture, and experience as the reference point or yardstick for the 'evaluative judgment' of different cultures, standards, and practices" (Moghissi, 1994, p. 227). If racism is about how we perceive difference, my story is one of racist performance. Further, racist performance is complicated by gender positions. In other words, I must have thought that being a woman somehow gave me authority to talk about dress and what is appropriate or not for (other) women.

Maritza looked at me sideways, barely turning her head in my direction. She didn't say anything. I leaned forward with my elbows on the cool concrete edge of the balcony facing away from the classroom door behind us. Judging by the numbers of students still out in the open-air corridor instead of in the classrooms, and the clumps of them standing around on the grass and pebbles of the yard below us, we still had several minutes before third period. I took Maritza's silence and puzzled expression as a sign of interest and continued explaining my theory. *As I read bell hooks (1989), I finally begin to see and feel some of the tensions around whether or not (and how) I can or even should speak or write about my perceptions, assumptions, and experiences as a White woman. How arrogant of me to turn to Maritza and unload my "stuff," just put it all "out there," as if it belonged in the bright hot sun (hooks, 1989, p. 2).*

"Yeah, I notice how differently I dress from other women here," I continued. *There it is again, the "other" women "here." Positioning myself. Positioning the Other.* "First of all, it is just too hot to be wearing polyester and nylon, especially that tight

stuff.” Is “tight stuff” an evaluative judgment? Even if it is not, “that” certainly implies a subtle critique. “I’ve been sweating ever since I got here and those polyester tops and sundresses make it worse.” Another pronoun (“those”) distances me. The polyester tops I have in mind are brightly colored and silky-shiny-smooth, often baring skin in places that to me seem odd, like a smooth, bronzed shoulder or a bared back or midriff. “No way could I get nylons on in this humidity,” I added, appealing to my own (and my mother’s ideas) of “sensible” attire for hot summer weather. Yes, talk about the weather. It is the way into any conversation for a blonde, Midwestern farmer’s daughter from northern Minnesota. People bond when they talk about the weather, don’t they? Doesn’t it give us room to size up the situation (and each other)?

“You know what else?” I went on. “I think if I wore tight clothes like that, my mom would kill me. I think it was a Catholic guilt trip. That’s why she didn’t let me wear a two-piece swimming suit. She said they weren’t modest enough and she always pointed out girls in bikinis to tell me how unattractive they looked. She said it was better to ‘leave it to the imagination.’” What I wonder now is how do I get past her voice, and those of other Midwestern farmer’s wives – grandmothers, aunts, cousins, neighbors -- whose voices shaped me and continue to define my world view? One is the voice of my Catholic grandmother, whose life was geographically circumscribed by the small Wisconsin farming community where she was born, lived her entire life, and died. She once visited a son graduating from basic training in Alabama and another retiring from the Air Force in Alaska. They were the trips of a lifetime for her and my grandfather, who had to arrange to have all of the chores done and the cows milked twice a day by his brothers for the weeks they were gone. Another is the voice of my mother “talking back” (hooks,

1989) to my grandmother when she all but disowned her for marrying “that Lutheran,” my father. And I think I can hear my grandmother talking back to her parents, too, as my mom tells me the story of how my grandmother ran off into the woods on her wedding night at the age of seventeen, young and frightened of marriage.

Maritza still didn't say anything, but she was half smiling now. Maybe she was trying not to laugh. I turned to check out her expression, trying to gauge her response to my proclamations, but all I could see was her profile against the bright blue corner of the building. I noticed she was wearing a polyester blouse and skirt with nylons. Still, because I knew she was a “New Yorican” who had grown up on the mainland and was here to work for a year or two before going back to her job with the federal government, I decided it was safe to keep testing my hypothesis on her. “You know, I was thinking that maybe there's different expectations here, you know, for gender roles. Maybe girls can dress like that here because everybody knows there's a husband or a father or a brother standing right over there ready to protect her or fight anyone who tries to touch her,” I said. I plowed ahead unabashedly, “...like she doesn't have to worry about giving the wrong impression. Guys would know she's some other guy's sister or cousin or daughter. Where I'm from, if a girl dresses like that, people think she is loose or that she's ‘asking for it.’ They would say she deserves it if she gets sexually harassed or raped or something, you know?” *And here I lay out in the open the cultural mores and the sense of guilt that I have associated with the female body ever since I was nine years old and was embarrassed by my mother who said, in front of my father and my brothers, that it looked like it was time for me to be wearing a bra. I can still feel the flush of shame that crept*

into my cheeks at her pronouncement as I looked down at the front of my white cotton shirt. I have felt ashamed of my body ever since.

After a moment of silence, I continued, "I think maybe the rules are stricter here for what's appropriate for women, like, I can't even go for a walk alone here because my husband thinks it's not right for a woman to walk alone on the side of the road. And when he walks with me, he has to be on the same side as the traffic. At first I thought it was romantic, you know, like he was protecting me in case a car got too close to the edge and hit us or something. Then he told me that if he let me walk on that side it would mean I was available. Then, he got mad at me the time I asked my sister-in-law to take me to the cock fights where his brother and dad spend so much time." *Obviously a symbolic event and a metaphor for "men only need apply."* "I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about." *Why do I couch my rebellious act in a plea of innocent curiosity? I remember now that the one who was really mad most of the time was me -- for feeling left out, for being left behind, for not understanding the language, for not fitting in. Defining myself as "not Puerto Rican" meant, in my eyes, being able to do the things that the women in his family didn't do, like traveling alone or going to the cock fights.* "When my husband saw me walk in, he wouldn't even look at me. His brother came over to greet us, but my husband and his father didn't move from their side of the arena. He just turned away, and I could see the anger in his jaw. Later he told me that was 'no place for women.' So I was thinking about that and how women dress here." *At least I didn't say "those" women; but I qualify my intent with "here," invoking positionality anyway. Why do I focus on women and the way they dress rather than dig deeper into the real issues about patriarchy and machismo which I feel I have been fighting at every turn of my life both here and there?*

Then I asked Maritza, “Why is it okay to dress like that, yet not okay to do things like go for a walk alone? I think where I come from women have to take care of themselves. I wouldn’t depend on my dad or my brother to ‘defend my honor,’ you know? I go out walking by myself all the time, even at night sometimes.” *I can feel the child's quivering jaw and the tilt of her head as she asserts herself.* “I moved to California on my own when I was only nineteen.” *Years later, with my own daughter preparing to leave home for college, nineteen sounds at once too old to be a child and too young to be an adult. As I assert my independence, I again differentiate myself from "those" Puerto Rican women against whom I am defining myself. I am not one of those who stay home and knit and do everyone else's laundry and cook like my mother taught me -- like her mother taught her.* “So that’s why I think they dress like that. Because they can.”

Maritza turned toward me and kind of nodded her head a bit, a half-smile on her face. She still didn’t say anything. *You see, it's not about her. This story about “the other woman” is really about me – and also about my mother and her mother and her mother. It is about the complex interrelatedness of our sexist and racist ideologies and beliefs and how they are embodied in our talk and actions.*

Only one or two students remained in the corridor, so Maritza and I turned to our classroom doors, smiling and waving our good-byes. *I wonder what she thought about my Lutheran-Catholic gringa theories and me. Looking back, I see how I was just putting my stuff right out there in the bright hot sunlight. I see how my cultural frame of reference was influencing the ways I was interpreting the social world and how limiting*

that frame can be at the same time that I realize I can never really get out of it. I am thankful that Maritza did not laugh out loud at the narrow confines of my gringa-ness.

Conducting narrative research with Latino/a preservice teachers has led me to think carefully about social positioning and the relationship between researcher/researched in raced and gendered spaces. As I generate research stories with participants, I recognize that I cannot speak for them and that each research narrative represents a limited view of another person's story (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). I agree with Fernández (2002) that stories are mediated communicative events and that "there is no pure, complete story out there waiting to be recorded" (p. 49). I embrace narrative inquiry because it calls me to be explicit about ethical responsibilities in relation to those with whom I engage in the research puzzle. My own life story is folded into the stories of others. Through narrative reflexivity and the writing of these vignettes, I have envisioned myself as in-between social worlds. Being both insider and outsider, I carry the weight of conflicting ideologies and the grander stories we tell about each other and ourselves. Through this writing, I hope to locate myself as an ally and advocate for the subjects of my research -- *perhaps too heroically--but we are all the heroes of our own stories, aren't we?*

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