

# **PART 4**

## **The world in language**

**The world is richer than it is possible to  
express in any single language.**

*—Ilya Prigogine*

# The lost voice of a spic

by Gerson Sanchez



“I need some roofing done, how much would you charge me for that?”

“You Mexicans work so hard; you never get tired!”

“So when you graduate from high school, are you going to work in construction or gardening?”

“That’s all these damn spics are good for!”

I can still hear the echoes of these racist notions hurled in the hallways of Walter Hines Page High School. On a daily basis, denigrating jokes and comments like the ones quoted above, were promoted by my white peers and, consequently, internalized by my fellow Latino brothers and sisters. The demeaning opinions voiced by my classmates during this preadolescent stage began to create an emotion of inferiority within me. William Cross’s model of black identity development (Cross, et al., 1996) states that black children who constantly see patterns of negativity being demonstrated toward themselves or others who are black, are likely to develop a sense of internalized racism. If these assumptions are not challenged, as children reach the adolescent stage, racist and negative self-concepts will most likely be strengthened (Evans et al., 2010).

Even though I am not black, I am a person of color. More specifically, I am the son of Nicaraguan immigrants, and, therefore, Cross’s theory seems applicable to me. The constant xenophobic comments and jokes of bigotry voiced by my classmates served as an impetus to deracinate dreams of higher education from the young minds of my Latino brothers and sisters, and me; and, thus, further reminding us that our sole purpose as Latinos was to only do menial labor. Higher education, once a dream, had now become arcane and unattainable in our young minds. Experiences such as these remained throughout my undergraduate years and have now brought

my life to a menacing implosion. The vestiges of that implosion have caused me to reflect and ask: What can I accomplish as a Latino? What is my purpose in life? Am I capable? Is the American Dream a reality? Or is it called the American Dream, because you have to be asleep to believe it (Widmann, 2015)?

Reflecting on my dilemma of wrestling with the dominant culture's perception of me, and the impact on my psyche of that battle between who I am and who they think I am, I began to form a question about accountability. Who is responsible for my identity dilemma? Who needs to protect students from faulty notions of their place in the world? Do teachers have a civic duty to their students to openly discuss and combat faulty notions of "White Supremacy," no matter how often or where those ideas rear their ugly head? These questions have led me to research various scholars and practitioners such as Alicia Carroll, Lisa Delpit, Patricia Gandara, Bob Moses, Jennifer Simpson, Joan Wynne. My research has also led me to dig deeply into concepts of integrity, truth, and justice; especially how these ideals should be interpreted in the classroom and what they mean to students of color, in this case, Latino students.

The experiences I endured in that small high school of Greensboro, North Carolina caused me to question the integrity of my teachers. How could my teachers hear these daily condescending comments of their student in their classrooms and do nothing about it? In the words of the eminent scholar and activist, Cornel West, "The condition of truth is allowing suffering to speak regardless of popularity, where is your integrity?" (West, 2014) Did my teachers even have any integrity? Was this integrity/or lack of, exemplified by teachers, also hindering my peers and me from receiving a quality education? Why were they not addressing the suffering, happening before their very eyes? Where was the justice that I was longing for?

Throughout high school, questions such as these circulated in my head and further ingrained a sense of self-lament. The combination of constant noxious statements, as well as my parent's divorce, resulted in the continuous ebb of my grades. My minimum wage job of scooping ice cream became my safe haven, a place where I could temporarily forget school and home. In the eyes of my teachers, it may have appeared that my comportment was apathetic or lethargic toward my studies, but that was not the case. I did care; I just did not know how to succeed in a place that seemed to not care about their Latino students. They made assumptions without asking questions, which, I believe, mirrored their apathy and lethargy toward me. Did they think I was dumb? Did they think of my accent or my baggy clothes as a nuisance? Why did they treat me as a walking set of deficiencies (Nieto, 2010)? More importantly, did they think I had nothing to offer? Borrowing a metaphor from Robert Moses, Why didn't

they “slow the bus down” so that my talents and wisdom had time to flourish (Wynne, 2009)? Had they slowed the bus down, they would have realized that I had been playing piano since the age of five; or that I was a person of ethics and integrity; or that I was already part of America’s workforce at the age of 16; or that my parent’s immigrated to this country due to the civil war in Nicaragua; and, thus, I brought a different perspective to the classroom that might further enrich my fellow peers. But my teachers never slowed that bus so they could get to know me.

In order to better understand my brown perspective, it is imperative to address the demographic of my institution. Half of the school was white, with middle-upper class students, and the other half was composed of poor white, black, Latino, and Montagnard students. Additionally, we had a small population of poor immigrant students. From a geographic standpoint, the structure of the building separated the wealthy side and the poor side of Greensboro. The more affluent part of Greensboro was on the west side of the school facing lush greenery. The eastern side of the building, which housed the courses for the poor students, faced a palpable decay of businesses and housing infrastructures. I remember my senior class had to visit a school for autistic children that was on the east side of the school; however, none of the white students knew its location, but all the students of color knew exactly where it was. The dichotomy between the white students and the students of color was clearly and physically evident. Despite the fact that many of us were raised in Greensboro, we all understood and interpreted the city in different ways.

The school reflected the divisions that often occur in cities and towns with a growing Latino demographic. During the 1990s in North Carolina, as in many southern states, Latino populations grew by more than 300 percent. Specifically, the population of foreign-born Latinos grew by 1050 percent in North Carolina (Winders, 2005). If we are the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (Gandara & Contreras, 2009), why do we not have a higher number of Latinos graduating from high schools and attending institutions of higher education? The sad and harsh reality is that about half of Latino students fail to attain a high school diploma. Other ethnic minorities, including African-Americans have seen increases in college graduation rates, but my Latino brothers and sisters have yet to see such progress in the past 30 years (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Understanding these realities allows me to ask once again, if my teachers heard the vehemently pernicious comments aimed at my Latino brothers and sisters, why did they not say anything? What was their duty as teachers when they saw the brown kids not returning to school the following day? What was their role as educators in those specific moments?

Urban educator, Joan Wynne (2012), explains what seems to be not only North Carolina's school dilemma, but also that of the nation. She explains that "Approximately 84% of teachers in public schools are white and mostly female. With all of this power and access to public education, why have we failed to effectively educate black and brown children, especially those forced to live in poverty, including the white poor?" She questions white educators' resistance to challenge those who "make tons of money from a school-to-prison pipeline?" Wynne also confronts the failure of teachers to instruct "white children about their civic responsibility to become agents of social justice and equity?" (p. 6)

This indictment of schools, taken from Wynne's book, *Confessions of a White Educator: Stories in Search of Justice and Diversity*, suggests that same call for justice that I have longed for since I was 12 years-old. She speaks from the perspective of a white teacher who was raised in the southern state of Georgia, and her premise is simple, where is the justice?

Not only has my story led me to interrogate the notion of justice, but it has also pushed me to meditate on the insidious actions of institutional racism that thwarts the everyday lives of the disenfranchised. Were my teachers being racist or were they just blind to what was happening? I remember one of the few times someone brought up the issue of racism in class, the teacher brushed it off. She said, "I don't see color, and neither should you. We should all be color blind." Was she right? Should my high school classmates and I have embraced color blindness?

From the perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT), racism is regarded as normal and ordinary, not aberrational. CRT scholars understand that racism is a pervasive part of the U.S. culture and is so engrained in the body politic that it seems invisible to anyone who isn't victimized by it. From that stance, the reason racism is not redressed in society is because it is not acknowledged. Therefore, even though color blindness can sound ostensibly good, it also can be egregious when it stands in the way of "taking account of difference in order to help those in need" (Delgado & Stefancic (Eds), 2012, p. 26). By definition, it wants to blot out difference, making sameness superior to diversity. Color blindness, unconsciously or not, tries to make the visible invisible. Thus, Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow children would become invisible to a dominant culture.

So it's been a long journey to learn that my teacher was doing me and my peers a disservice by attempting to persuade us to be color blind. But, just as big an issue within that framework, is that whites who embrace color blindness, when faced with evidence of discrimination, "acknowledge its occurrence but label the episodes as 'isolated incidents' and proceed to blame minorities for playing the 'race card'" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 303). A study,

conducted in North Carolina in an effort to analyze how school actors construct and respond to racism, nailed this propensity to label racism as an aberration or to ignore it altogether (Hardie & Tyson, 2013). Looking at different racial tensions between black and white students at a local high school, the researchers found that despite all the racial issues and riots occurring in the high school, teachers and administrators did not discuss the issues in their class. In fact, “Teachers appeared reluctant to discuss the incident in front of students” (Hardie & Tyson, 2013, p. 92).

As happened in my high school, these teachers resisted addressing the issue of racism, but instead unconsciously promoted color blindness. In her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) addressed issues such as self-segregation in schools and how we as educators can get past our reluctance to address racism. In Tate’s experience, students have come into her classroom having learned that there is a taboo against speaking about issues of race, especially when in ethnic or racially mixed settings. Therefore, she believes that one of her duties as a teacher, although it may be challenging, is to create a safe environment in her classroom to overcome that taboo. In her book, she relates times where she has heard white students refer to someone as black in hushed tones, whispering to each other as to not be heard. In her words, “When I detect this behavior, I like to point it out, saying it is not an insult to identify a Black person as Black” (Tatum, 1997, p. 37). She embraced these opportunities to eradicate the taboo of explicitly recognizing color, of speaking about race in classrooms. That, she believed, was her civic duty as a teacher. Believing that her responsibility is not to keep quiet, but to speak openly about these issues that affect all students, not just students of color. After all, racism is a disease that impacts the victim and the perpetrator in a multicultural nation and world. As Sonia Nieto (2010) said, “Multicultural education is not about political correctness, sensitivity training or ethnic cheerleading. It is primarily about social justice” (p. 270).

As I look back at my story, I acknowledge that my life has been influenced and affected by poverty, inability to speak the dominant language of the United States, discrimination, and by a myriad of other factors. However, those other factors also include love, mentors, and prayers from friends and family. Borrowing the words of Cornel West, “I am who I am because someone loved me” (West, 2014). Nevertheless, the lack of justice and integrity exemplified by my teachers in high school and college, along with the condescending epithets directed at my Latino brothers and sisters, contributed to my development as an individual. The seeds of the imposter syndrome, an identity as a fraud, that often marginalized high achievers internalize (Parkman & Beard, 2008, p. 32), were first sewn in me upon my arrival in high school and have lingered. Even though, I am now pursuing a

Master's degree and currently exploring possibilities to enroll in an eminent doctoral program, the syndrome is still deeply rooted in me. Although my friends and family congratulate me on my zealous drive, unfortunately, the memories of an arduous journey inflicted by hegemonic teaching are still enmeshed in my mind.

Malcolm X once said, "Tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today" (Shabazz, 1970), and that is what I aspire to do. Today, I am preparing for tomorrow because I understand that the knowledge I seek needs to be mobilized to eradicate the insularity of marginalized people. I hope to seem not cantankerous or divisive, but to provide insight from a first-hand perspective on a harsh reality that many of our children face due to educational hegemony, a societal abuse that has left many of us mentally exhausted and scarred. The unjust, pernicious, and dominating system that has led to the physical, mental, and spiritual demise of too many of our children can no longer be tolerated. As the novelist James Baldwin said, "Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise" (West, 1993, p. XXIII).

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# Naming, walking, and magic

by Carlos Gonzalez



*The words you speak become the house you live in.*—Hafiz (Ladinsky, 1999, p. 281)

**B**razilian lyricist and novelist, Paulo Coelho, says that magic is a kind of bridge between the visible and invisible (2014). My work as a teacher and my students' experiences in the learning spaces I help create sometimes reflect Coelho's definition. In class, I often make the argument that language is the ultimate form of magic. Without it we don't really understand the world about us. It is that bridge between what is known and what wants to be known or is currently invisible.

In our sessions, because most of my students are familiar with and culturally rooted in the Bible, I mention a passage where God tells Adam to name the animals in the Garden of Eden. For me, this story works as a powerful reminder that the impulse to name is an integral part of what it means to be human. The naming of the animals implies that the way we relate to the world has something to do with our ability to name what is in front of us.

The challenge comes when we don't have language for what we are confronting. In such instances, our names or vocabulary often fails us. Over the past 13 years or so, we have collectively struggled to properly name the violence that flows from the margins and often hits the very centers of power that we think are immune to challenge. Personally, naming is especially difficult when it comes to matters of the heart. Sometimes during times of testing, we are left speechless and voiceless, confronted with what at the moment is nameless and terrifying. At these times, it is the role of the magician to name, particularly in these times of uncertainty and gloom. Proper naming can open possibilities other than fatalistic violence.

But not everyone is interested in magic. For some there's little interest in exploring the unknown or invisible world. The dark crannies of our lives, the marginal parts of ourselves and communities, for some, are better left off reach. The reasons for this are many. There may be a vested interest in keeping the terror of the nameless alive. Terror sells all sorts of things, makes marketing destruction more palatable. And some are scared of naming for fear of what may become visible. The bottom line is that it seems to take energy, effort, skill, and most of all, courage to live a magical life.

But there are some who thrive when walking to the edge and groping for the name of that which at the moment is nameless. The people who do this well are the poets, scientists, and mystics. How they do this is an amazing process. It seems that it often comes in a moment of quick realization. But frequently, the breakthrough in naming comes as a result of a lifetime of arduous exploration, experimentation, and perseverance. While saying this, I also want to point out that before you and I cede our rightful desire to name to only the few, it's important to remember that we each can develop or grow a bit of the poet, scientist, and mystic in us. That's what most of us were before we started kindergarten. Just pay attention to children playing and interacting with one another, and you can see that the inhibitions that come with a desire to look and sound just right and professional are not there. Children are fantastic magicians. By the way, they are also excellent teachers. If we want to rediscover our magical abilities, we should spend some time with four-year-olds!

As I write this, I realize that my class can be an opportunity to see how close we can come to the edge, how willing we are to explore and to name what we don't know, and play with the possibility of co-creating the reality we want to live. This sounds like a huge undertaking, but when we look at it carefully, we see that it's what we do on a daily basis but just don't notice. Unfortunately, I don't have the kinds of magical powers that can make any of us want to move in this direction. All I can do is invite and entice. It's up to each of us to want to move closer into the shadows and begin our own apprenticeship with intentionally naming.

I ask my students early in the semester to begin writing their first set of essays for the term. These first texts may start with what they can see easily. Over time, students may become aware that the themes they chose to write about may move closer to the shadows, those places where it's not completely clear what they are exploring or knowing. Before that happens, they will need to grow courage and also curiosity. Maybe the word curiosity is not the right one here. The association of curiosity and cats is an unfortunate one. I think the word I'm looking for is something like wonder.

To live in wonder and in awe is a stance that draws us from the familiar and seemingly safe to the place where we contact mystery. I can't forget Rabbi

Abraham Joshua Heschel's dictum regarding this stance: "Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge" (1976, p. 11). Heschel helps us understand that what often happens to both students and teachers as they walk into the classroom is quite the opposite of wonder. Students get discouraged by what feels like, and often is, meaningless work. Educators lose their courage, become disheartened, when what they offer students is superficially acknowledged and not seriously explored, and all too often we focus on the institutional requirements and ignore or suppress the possibility before us, the opportunity to do magic, make and walk bridges.

## **The Classroom as a Magical Arena**

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At our best, you and I, student and teacher, we work creating bridges every time we enter a classroom. There, when I'm at my best, I invite and nudge students into that place where they can tap into their innate wonder and desire to know what is at the moment not seen. I never quite know how to do this. I don't have access to an easy formula. The intention itself is an invitation for me to come to my own edge and rummage for what creates the bridge.

Fortunately, the kind of teaching I do has to do with language. I and most of my students are bi-lingual Spanish/English speakers. Magic seems to be an ingrained part of the curriculum. As a teacher of that curriculum, I often need to work through some of the barriers that we each bring; otherwise, we may not see the potential of our time and work. For many students, writing is seen as a one way mode of communication: writer to reader. What may not be so obvious is that writing is also a means of personal exploration, of figuring out, of knowing. We write to name what we don't know. (This is happening in this short reflection right now.)

I've meandered through the question of agreeing or not with Coelho's definition of magic. This meandering has allowed me to hear his voice anew, to see his words paint new dimensions to the teacher/learner process. By taking the time to wonder and wander through his words and definitions, my sense of what I try to do in the classroom crystallized. I am an alchemist, a magician, and bridge maker in training. Though, I am not the only one with this identity. I envision my students as alchemists, magicians, and bridge makers. Together we often co-reveal what, at the moment, seems invisible; and we do so in the common day-in and day-out of conversation, learning logs, essays, and Twitter updates. Alone or together, we interrogate our individual views of magic. As we examine texts, we sometimes build together the bridges that are pure magic.

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