

Chapter 61

Masks and Acculturation

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[The author invites the reader to consider how culture and stories interweave in the lives of outsiders, now combining to create masks, now to "create new options for expression, personal identity, cultural authenticity and pedagogical innovation." She then continues as follows:]

I put on my masks, my
costumes and posed for each
occasion. I conducted myself
well, I think, but
an emptiness
grew
that no thing
could fill. I think
I hungered for myself.¹

One of the earliest memories from my school years is of my mother braiding my hair, making my *trenzas*. In 1955, I was seven years old and in second grade at the Immaculate Conception School in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Our family home with its outdoor toilet was on an unpaved street, one house from the railroad track. I remember falling asleep to the subterranean rumble of the trains.

Nineteen fifty-five was an extremely important year in my development, in my understanding of myself in relation to Anglo society. I remember 1955 as the year I began to think about myself in relation to my classmates and their families. I began to feel different and to adjust my behavior accordingly.

My sister, brother, and I dressed in front of the space heater in the bedroom we shared. Catholic school girls wore uniforms. We wore blue jumpers and white blouses. I remember my mother braiding my hair and my sister's. I can still feel the part she would draw with the point of the comb. She would begin at the top of my head, pressing down as she drew the comb down to the nape of my neck. "Don't move," she'd say as she held the two hanks of hair, checking to make sure that the

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part was straight. Only then would she begin, braiding as tightly as our squirming would allow, so the braids could withstand our running, jumping, and hanging from the monkey bars at recess. "I don't want you to look *grenudas*," my mother would say. ["I don't want you to look uncombed."]

Hearing my mother use both English and Spanish gave emphasis to what she was saying. She used Spanish to talk about what was really important: her feelings, her doubts, her worries. She also talked to us in Spanish about gringos, Mexicanos, and the relations between them. Her stories were sometimes about being treated outrageously by gringos, her anger controlled and her bitterness implicit. She also told stories about Anglos she admired—those who were egalitarian, smart, well-spoken, and well-mannered.

Sometimes Spanish was spoken so as not to be understood by Them. Usually though, Spanish and English were woven together. *Grenuda* was one of many words encoded with familial and cultural meaning. My mother used the word to admonish us, but she wasn't warning us about name-calling: *grenuda* was not an epithet that our schoolmates were likely to use. Instead, I heard my mother saying something that went beyond well-groomed hair and being judged by our appearance—she could offer strategies for passing that scrutiny. She used the Spanish word, partly because there is no precise English equivalent, but also because she was interpreting the world for us.

The real message of *grenudas* was conveyed through the use of the Spanish word—it was unspoken and subtextual. She was teaching us that our world was divided, that They-Who-Don't-Speak-Spanish would see us as different, would judge us, would find us lacking. Her lessons about combing, washing and doing homework frequently relayed a deeper message: be prepared, because you will be judged by your skin color, your names, your accents. They will see you as ugly, lazy, dumb, and dirty.

As I put on my uniform and my mother braided my hair, I changed; I became my public self. My *trenzas* announced that I was clean and well-cared-for at home. My *trenzas* and school uniform blurred the differences between my family's economic and cultural circumstances and those of the more economically comfortable Anglo students. I welcomed the braids and uniform as a disguise which concealed my minimal wardrobe and the relative poverty in which my family lived.

As we walked to school, away from home, away from the unpaved streets, away from the "Spanish" to the "Anglo" part of town, I felt both drawn to and repelled by my strange surroundings. I wondered what Anglos were like in their big houses. What did they eat? How did they furnish their homes? How did they pass the time? Did my English sound like theirs? Surely their closets were filled with dresses, sweaters, and shoes, *apenas estrenados*.²

I remember being called on one afternoon in second grade to describe what we had eaten for lunch. Rather than admit to eating *caldito* (soup) y *tortillas*, partly because I had no English words for those foods, I regaled the class with a story about what I assumed an "American" family would eat at lunch: pork chops, mashed potatoes, green salad, sliced bread, and apple pie. The nun reported to my mother that I had lied. Afraid of being mocked, I unsuccessfully masked the truth, and consequently revealed more about myself than I concealed.

In those days before the ecumenical reforms, Catholicism still professed great concern about sinning. Although elementary school children were too young to commit most sins, lying was a real spiritual danger. Paradoxically, we were surrounded by Truth disguised in myriad ways. Religious language was oblique and filled with multiple meanings: Virgin Mother, Risen Son, bread that was the Body and wine that was the Blood. Our teachers, the nuns, were completely hidden—women without surnames, families, friends, or homes of their own. They embodied the collapsing of the private into the public. Their black and white habits hid their breasts, waists, legs, hair color, and hair texture.

Our school was well integrated with “Spanish” students because it was located in a town with a predominantly Latino population. The culture of the school, however, was overwhelmingly Anglo and middle class. The use of Spanish was frowned upon and occasionally punished. Any trace of an accent when speaking English would be pointed out and sarcastically mocked. This mocking persisted even though, and maybe because, some of the nuns were also “Spanish.”

I remember being assigned to tutor another second-grader in reading. He wore denim overalls, had his hair shaved for some medical procedure and spoke mostly Spanish. I think of him now, and perhaps thought of him then, as being exposed—exposed by not being able to read, exposed by not having a uniform, exposed by not having hair, exposed by not knowing English. From my perspective as a child, it all seemed connected somehow—Spanish-ness, sickness, poverty, and ignorance.

By the age of seven, I was keenly aware that I lived in a society that had little room for those who were poor, brown, or female. I was all three. I moved between dualized worlds: private/public, Catholic/secular, poverty/privilege, Latina/Anglo. My *trenzas* and school uniform were a cultural disguise. They were also a precursor for the more elaborate mask I would later develop.

Presenting an acceptable face, speaking without a Spanish accent, hiding what we really felt—masking our inner selves—were defenses against racism passed on to us by our parents to help us get along in school and in society. We learned that it was safer to be inscrutable. We absorbed the necessity of constructing and maintaining a disguise in public. We struggled to be seen as Mexican but also wanted acceptance as Americans at a time when the mental image conjured up by that word included only Anglos.

Mine is the first generation of Latinas to be represented in virtually every college and university and in anything approaching significant numbers. But, for the most part, we find ourselves isolated. Rarely has another Latina gone before us. Rarely do we find another Latina whom we can watch to try and figure out all the little questions about subtextual meaning, about how dress or speech or makeup are interpreted in this particular environment.

My participation in the Chicano student movement in college fundamentally changed me. My adoption of the ethnic label as a primary identifier gave me an ideological mask that serves to this day. This transformation of my public persona was psychically liberating. This nascent liberation was, however, reactive and inchoate. Even as I struggled to redefine myself, I was locked in a reluctant embrace with those whose definitions of me I was trying to shrug off.

When I arrived as a student at Harvard Law School, I dressed so as to proclaim my politics. During my first day of orientation, I wore a Mexican peasant blouse and cutoff jeans on which I had embroidered the Chicano symbol of the *aguila* (a stylized eagle) on one seat pocket and the woman symbol on the other. The *aguila* reminded me of the red and black flags of the United Farm Worker rallies; it reminded me that I had links to a particular community. I was never to finish the fill-in stitches in the woman symbol. My symbols, like my struggles, were ambiguous.

The separation of the two symbols reminds me today that my participation in the Chicano movement had been limited by my gender, while in the women's movement it had been limited by my ethnicity. I drew power from both movements—I identified with both—but I knew that I was at the margin of each one.

As time went on, my clothes lost their political distinctiveness. My clothes signified my ambivalence: perhaps if I dressed like a lawyer, eventually I would acquire more conventional ideas and ideals and fit in with my peers. Or perhaps if I dressed like a lawyer, I could harbor for some future use the disruptive and, at times, unwelcome thoughts that entered my head. My clothing would become protective coloration. Chameleon-like, I would dress to fade into the ideological, political, and cultural background rather than proclaim my differences.

Academic success traditionally has required that one exhibit the linguistic and cognitive characteristics of the dominant culture. Until challenged by recent empirical research by Chicano social scientists, retention of traditional Mexican-American culture was believed to impede successful adjustment within mainstream American society. This "damaging-culture" model provided a rationale for advocating the complete assimilation of Latinos into the mainstream culture.

The wide-spread acceptance of assimilationist thought fueled social and familial pressure on Latinos to abandon traditional values and lifestyles in order to achieve educational and economic upward mobility. Acculturation into the dominant culture is a concomitant of education. Virtually all Latino students with a college-level education appear to be highly assimilated into Anglo culture.

To support their academic progress, Latinos have encouraged their children to speak English well and have tolerated other aspects of acculturation, such as changes in friends, clothes, and recreational preferences. Students learn to adopt masks of the dominant culture which avoid the negative values ascribed to traditional Latina/o culture. Latina/o history is replete with stories about those who changed their names, lost the Spanish language and with it any trace of a Spanish accent, or deliberately married out of the culture. In short, some did whatever was necessary to be seen as not different by the majority.

Some Latinos, like other Outsiders, move away from their ethnic communities and want nothing to do with those they left behind. Many others, however, see education as the only ladder for themselves and for their community. Academic success does not come without costs, however. Latinas/os who pursue higher education often end up feeling doubly estranged because of the socialization process: estranged not only from their ancestral roots but from the dominant culture as well.

Feeling masked because of ethnic and racial differences is directly linked to the process of cultural assimilation, and to the pervasive Latina/o resistance against

assimilation; against being seen as *agringada*, of becoming a *gringa*, of being taken for something one never wanted to become. Assimilation has become yet another mask for the Latina/o to hide behind. I have a clay mask made by Mexican artisans that captures this idea but from a different perspective. The outermost mask is a white skeleton face wearing a grimace. The second layer shows a face with an aquiline nose and a goatee suggesting the face of the Spaniard, the colonizer of indigenous Mexico. This second mask parts to show the face of a pensive Aztec. This clay sculpture suggests the indigenous Indian preserved behind the false masks, the death mask, the conquistador mask. In other words, the sculpture represents all of us who have been colonized and acculturated—who have succeeded in withholding a precious part of our past behind our constructed public personas.

Belonging to a higher economic class than that of one's family or community and affecting the mannerisms, clothing styles, or speech patterns that typify the privileged classes can strain familial and ethnic bonds. Families, even those who have supported the education and advancement of their children, can end up feeling estranged from them and resentful of the cultural costs of their academic and economic success. Accusations of *vendida*, "selling-out," forgetting the ethnic community, and abandoning the family can accompany academic success.

Even when family or friends do not recriminate, internal doubts plague the student about what one has given up in order to achieve academic success. Concerns about ethnic identity and personal authenticity are imbedded within the question "Who am I really?" We have been told, "You don't seem Latina," or have been asked, "How Latina are you?" Such comments, when made by Anglos, imply that we have risen above our group. We are special, better, acceptable. When made by Latinos, however, the question carries an innuendo of cultural betrayal and the threat of cultural excommunication.

The public environment in which we live our professional lives can be profoundly different from the homes we came from. The details of our lives bear little resemblance to the culture in which we once were immersed. We feel ourselves moving between different worlds, putting on one face and taking off another.

There are times when the strands of our lives resist being woven into a neat braid. Recently I happened upon an autobiography, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*, written by Luis J. Rodriguez. I found the book while on a trip to Cambridge as an elected director of the Harvard Alumni Association. I had attended a long day of meetings in the rarefied seclusion of the Harvard Faculty Club, where I always feel like a spectator rather than a participant. The building evokes the "clubbiness" of its name: dark wood paneling, well worn rugs, rooms called libraries. I can never seem to dress well enough or choose words, accents, or voices carefully enough to feel that I belong there. Occasionally, I can give voice to my experience—to one Latina's experience.

After one such day, I wandered into a bookstore in Harvard Square. I leafed through the Rodriguez book. Suddenly, I focused on my cousin's name, Rodolfo "Sonny" Gomez, listed among those to whom the book was dedicated. Rodriguez didn't state it explicitly, but it was, presumably, a list of his homeboys and homegirls

who didn't survive *la vida loca*. I knew that but for the grace of God . . . Sonny could have had my fate and I, his.

Standing in the bookstore, my eyes filled with tears. We both stood with a foot in two worlds. I remembered Sonny; he drove a yellow MG convertible, introduced me to the music of Bob Dylan, talked about Karl Marx and Chicanismo.

My multiple identities do not usually clash as violently as they did at that particular moment. Those moments set me apart from the privileged majority, the experience of being yanked back unpredictably into powerlessness. Throughout the last decade, Latinos and others have challenged the efficacy of the assimilationist model, pointing out the heterogeneity of orientations and experiences among Latinos. They have demonstrated that "integration with one's ancestral culture is conducive to success and adjustment in American society."³ Sociocultural adjustment is now understood as a multifaceted process that depends upon complex variables rather than a unilevel process whereby the customs of one culture are merely substituted for those of another.

Latinos have long exhibited bicultural behavior and values, but until recently no discourse or body of literature established the validity of such cultural integration. Contemporary Latina/o poetry and fiction exhibit this bilingual and bicultural character. Latina/o public discourse increasingly mirrors private speech.

As Latinas/os begin to construct our varied identities, we can still feel caught between the traditional understanding of what "real Latinas/os" are like and the strategies we invoke to respond to novel situations. Resolution of these issues need not be an isolating, individualistic, or secretive process, alienating us from our families or our communities. Despite important historical, ethnic, and linguistic differences, stories of assimilation told from the various perspectives of subordinated groups have strains of similarities. In addition to the personal and collective pain that we experience because of societal pressures to assimilate, Latinas/os face the disquietude of being masked for some of the same reasons as other Outsiders.

Being masked may be a universal condition in that all of us control how we present ourselves to others. But a fundamental difference marks feeling masked because one is a member of one or more oppressed groups within the society. When members of the dominant culture mask themselves to control the impressions they make, such behavior is not inherently self-loathing. But when we attempt to mask immutable characteristics of skin color, eye shape, or hair texture because they historically have been loathsome to the dominant culture, then the masks of acculturation can be experienced as self-hate. Moreover, unmasking for members of the dominant culture does not spark the fear or depth of humiliation that it does for the subordinated, for whom the unmasking is often involuntary and unexpected.

For Outsiders, unmasking is a holistic experience. I do not have separate masks for my female-ness and Latina-ness. The construction of my public persona includes all that I am. My public face is an adjustment to the present and a response to the past. Any unmasking resonates through the pathways of my memory. For Outsiders, the necessity of unmasking has been historical. Strategies are passed on from one generation to another to accommodate, to resist, to subvert oppressive forces. Invo-

untary unmasking is painful, it evokes echoes of past hurts, hurts one has suffered, and hurts one has heard stories about.

Outsiders are also faced with the gnawing suspicion that the public identities available to them are limited to those reflecting the values, norms, and behavior of the dominant ideology. Through my cultural disguise, I sought to mirror the behavior of those who mattered more than I. As a child, I altered or denied my language, my clothes, my foods. My *trenzas* helped me to fit in, to get by, to move up. As an adult, I still alter or deny my self/selves, both consciously and unconsciously.

A significant aspect of subordination is the persistence with which we mimic the styles, preferences, and mannerisms of those who dominate us, even when we have become aware of the mimicry. Lost to the Outsider are those identities that would have developed but for our real and perceived needs to camouflage ourselves in the masks of the Master. Lost to all are the variety of choices, the multiplicity of identities that would be available if we were not trapped by the dynamics of subordination, of privilege.

NOTES

1. Alma Villanueva, *Mother, May I?* in CONTEMPORARY CHICANA POETRY 303, 324 (Marta Ester Sanchez ed., 1985).

2. *Apenas estrenados* is a Spanish concept that has no English equivalent. *Estrenar* connotes wearing something for the first time and conveys the special privilege that attaches to the first wearing. We had few opportunities to *estrenar* new clothes.

3. Raymond Buriel, *Integration with Traditional Mexican-American Culture and Socio-cultural Adjustment*, in CHICANO PSYCHOLOGY 95, at 97 (Joe L. Martinez, Jr., and Richard H. Mendoza eds., 2d ed. 1984).