

“Mayheeco” Meets “American Culture”: Contesting Prescriptions of Authenticity for the Border and Beyond

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The typical cultural strategy of dominant actors and institutions is not so much to establish uniformity as it is to organize difference. They are constantly engaged in efforts not only to normalize or homogenize but also to hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize, or marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal. By such means, authoritative actors attempt, with varying degrees of success, to impose a certain coherence onto the field of cultural practice. Indeed, one of the major reasons for dissident anthropologists' discomfort with the concept of culture is that it is so often employed in all of these ways by various powerful institutional actors—sometimes, alas, with the help of anthropologists. (Sewell 1999:56)

Culture. Many propose this has been the unifying concept in anthropology over the years. Today, however, “culture” is utilized in the domain of everyday life by myriad actors and with seemingly infinite meanings. The epigraph above suggests one of the most salient

This article engages a series of events that played out in El Cenizo, Texas, in recent years, surrounding the passage of an ordinance that called for the public use of Spanish in this city. The narrative serves to illustrate and analyze the ways in which notions of culture demarcate difference as they prescribe “authenticity” upon cultural actors as both “puros Mexicanos” and authentically “American.” It further suggests that our growing ethnographic understanding of (various) borderlands can work to destabilize hegemonic notions of cultural authenticity and contest engrained social hierarchies.

uses of the culture concept—as a tool that historically has been used to “other” as it differentiates and enlightens. In this essay, I will engage a series of events that played out in El Cenizo, Texas in recent years surrounding the passage of an ordinance that called for the public use of Spanish in the city. Through this narrative, I will illustrate and analyze the ways in which notions of culture demarcate difference as they prescribe “authenticity” upon cultural actors as both “*puros Mexicanos*” and authentically “American.”

El Cenizo rests on the northern banks of the Rio Grande River on the outskirts of Laredo, Texas, the most important trading port between the US and Mexico since the initiation of NAFTA. Although Laredo is the second fastest-growing city in the country, it is also the poorest, and affordable housing is in short supply. Responding to the region’s growth, El Cenizo was formed in the early 1980s as a “colonia,” a low-income peri-urban settlement devoid of the most basic of services. The community has grown over the years to become one of the largest and most well known of the Texas colonias, today claiming a population of over 5,000 residents. The people who live there have a long history of resistance and community-based organizing to meet their needs, and “social capital” abounds. They live each day with an acute awareness of society’s discrimination against them based on race, class, ethnicity, language-use, and geographic location, and since the founding of their community they have at times struggled with, perpetuated, and resisted these inequities. Incorporated as a municipality in 1989, today residents skillfully use their status as a city to their advantage by making collective claims to rights and resources through the system of democratic local governance.

My collaboration with the leaders of El Cenizo began in late 1999, when I volunteered for the city as a grant writer. My scholarly work on El Cenizo seeks to develop a critical theory steeped in praxis, and attempts to illuminate the complexities of this community’s struggles for rights and resources and their intersections with the state and civil society in light of the historical development of the colonia and city, focusing particularly on recent political organization taking place there.¹

My dramatic and unanticipated introduction to the community of El Cenizo came by way of an unimaginably racist, sexist, and nativist nationally-syndicated radio talk show known as “The Don and Mike Show.” The following excerpts of conversation from the show were

heard by radio listeners across the United States on August 17, 1999.² As the dialogue begins, Don is dialing City Hall in El Cenizo, Texas. Then—City Council member, Flora Barton, answers the call:

Don and Mike: [Here’s] a story about a city in Texas, El Sneeze-O. Somebody threw pepper in my face. I have to El Sneeze-O. A city in America where they have made Spanish their official language, and it’s just not right. I cannot be more pissed off. [*Dialing.*] Just a little update, it is truly inside of America, it’s about 15 miles south of Laredo, and it’s very tiny...They have made Spanish the official language of the town. Not English, even though they are here in America...[*Ringin*g.] Now, if it’s normal, they should answer in Spanish...Ola! Right there, right there, you’ve got your Mexican work ethic. They aren’t answering the phone. [*Using heavy accent.*] It’s siesta time...

Barton: El Cenizo City Hall, may I help you?

Don: This is the Don and Mike radio show. We’re doing a live national radio show, right now, and you’ll notice the language that I’m speaking to you in. What’s the language that I’m speaking to you in right now?

B: It’s in English.

D: It’s English, right? American. What is this nonsense I’m hearing about your city making Spanish the official language?

B: It’s not nonsense.

D: It’s total nonsense. How come it took you so long to answer the phone?

B: Because I was on the other line.

D: Oh. Are you sure you weren’t having a siesta?

B: No. We’re not having no siesta. We’re in the City Hall.

D: Ha, ha. I’m calling you because I am pissed that El Sneeze-O has made Spanish their official language. That’s a disgrace. You’re in America! You’ve got to speak American! American is your official language! American.

B: Everything is in English. We just speak to the people that do not understand English in Spanish.

D: If those people do not understand it, [*again using heavy accent*] they should get on their burros and go back to Mayheeco.

B: No, no, no. You have to understand that only because

- somebody speaks Spanish does not make them un-American or any less of an American...
- D: Honey, this is one country. This is America. You Mexicans have your own country... Why are you trying to ruin our language? Do you have glowing neon underneath your car, on your lowrider?
- B: You know what? I want your name.
- D: My name is Señor Donnie. And I'm an American. And I want all your people to speak American...
- B: Why do you say "Señor Donnie" if you don't like Spanish? Tell me your full name.
- D: Señor Donnie! You don't see me going to Mexico and trying to get your people to speak American.
- B: Well let me tell you, they do.
- D: I know they do, cause it's a great language. But you don't see me down there making it their official language!
- B: There's parts in Mexico where they do speak only English.
- D: That's good. That's wonderful. We should annex that part of Mexico and make that part of America and then send you to the other part to go live there...
- B: If you would be here with us, you would be proud.
- D: You know how come I don't have to learn to speak Spanish? Cause this is Goddamn America! I'm going to give you some commands now, ok? I'll show you how good I know Spanish... Eat me. *Come me! Come me!* I'm just trying to learn your official language. These are our language tapes.
- B: I'm going to find out where you're calling from.
- D: Ok, listen to this. Eat shit and die. *Come mierda y muérete.*
- B: You're going to be in big trouble.
- D: How am I going to be in big trouble?
- B: I'm going to find out where you're calling from.
- D: This is a great country. This is the United States of America. It's a free country. I'm telling you that I don't like the fact that you made Spanish the official language.
- B: Then how do you say it's a free country if you don't show it?
- D: It ain't *that* free, honey. Go back to your own country! Oh, I believe she's gone. [*Laughter.*]

The disturbing exchange above, though widely reprinted in news stories across the country, was just one of hundreds of phone calls and letters received by city officials in El Cenizo in the months

following the passage of their highly controversial Predominant Language Ordinance on August 3, 1999. The main paragraph of the ordinance states:

Understanding that English is the predominant language of the United States of America; the City Council nevertheless has determined a need to conduct all official City meetings and functions in the predominant language of the members of the community. Any translation needed shall be provided by the city. All ordinances shall be written in English. (City of El Cenizo, Predominant Language Ordinance, no. 1999-8-3[a])

Due in part to the economic, geographic and social marginality of the community, people in El Cenizo felt shocked that their government’s decision to speak Spanish at city meetings could cause such uproar throughout the US. The media’s attention to their story, in many aspects cursory and inaccurate, helped propel the community—and the language right they were asserting—to the center of the ongoing debate over the meanings of being “American.” This event and the narrative that follows serve as a powerful example of one of my principal encounters with the culture concept in my research and personal experience.

Only in Albuquerque, New Mexico, did radio listeners protest what they heard. Don and Mike’s appalling characterizations of El Cenizo residents as ignorant, lazy, monolingual Mexicans (who all drive lowriders, take siestas, and came North across the border just yesterday) wanting to break apart the “unity” of America fell on largely uncritical ears as they inscribed difference onto the community of El Cenizo. Don and Mike, along with many people across the US, were frightened by El Cenizo’s actions because this “cultural other” was claiming the right to speak Spanish in a public, governmental arena. As Richard Flores recently wrote in a piece on this very topic:

The horror for Don & Mike stems from [their belief] in an America of singular identity forged from ideological and cultural uniformity. There is little room, if any, for the interpellation of difference; there is little room for dissenting-Americans, cultured-Americans, and need I say, Mexican Americans. Their social vision is rooted in conformity and

acquiescence to a monolithic social order that requires the exclusion of cultural markers of difference for the privilege of inclusion in American democracy. (Flores 2002:111)

Constructing “America” in the Media

The ordinance was largely publicized by the media as a “Spanish-only ordinance” (San Antonio Express-News 1999b), an “all-Spanish policy” (Baro Díaz 1999), a “rejection” or “banning” of English (Whitworth 1999), and a “snubbing of America’s language” (San Antonio Express-News 1999a). Furthermore, most stories included criticisms of El Cenizo by extremists of English-only groups, such as US English. Tim Schultz, spokesperson for this group, was often quoted accusing the city of perpetuating the “linguistic ‘ghetto-isation’ of the country [*sic*]” and “dropping out” of the nation (Whitworth 1999). The overall portrayal of the city’s actions was that the people of El Cenizo were a group of decidedly political revolutionaries. The sense that El Cenizo had chosen to threaten or challenge national unity prevailed in public opinion.

A few newspaper articles and opinion columns, however, expressed pride and support for El Cenizo’s actions. Most of these shifted to an opposite extreme, uncritically portraying El Cenizo as a “model” for all marginalized people defending themselves against oppression. One article claimed that the passage of the ordinance was a decidedly political move with the sole purpose of asserting a borderlands identity (Schiller 1999). Another, an editorial, celebrated: “at last the sleeping giant awakes. El Cenizo is in control of its destiny. By implementing the *no ingles* policy, El Cenizo has announced that this land was stolen from Mexico and now it wants it back” (San Antonio Express-News 1999c). Few sources offered news coverage that did not either condemn or glorify the City’s actions.

In reality, few people writing on this event had visited El Cenizo, and an even smaller number took the time to get to know the community or even learn the “facts.” News coverage was replete with assumptions and factual errors. One source affirmed that “speaking Spanish is now an obligation” (KXLN-TV 1999), while another declared that this action was illegal in the US, “where the official language is English” (Arizona Republic 1999). Not only does the United States have no official language; in August 2000 President Bill Clinton defended the

existence of a multilingual America when he signed into law an Executive Order mandating that entities of the federal government provide services in the native languages of those people with limited English proficiency (Executive Order 13166). Still another newspaper incorrectly suggested that parents in El Cenizo are actively discouraging English fluency among their children (San Antonio Express-News 1999d). The city was said to have anywhere from 1,200 to 8,000 residents, depending on the source. The list of errors goes on and on. An El Cenizo resident criticized the news media by saying, “*Si tú les dices ‘a lo mejor,’ ellos le ponen ‘no’...Lo ponen a su manera, no escriben lo que tú les estás diciendo, y malinterpretan las palabras* [If you tell them ‘probably,’ they write ‘no’...They write it in their own terms, they don’t report what you are telling them, and they misinterpret your words].”

Today’s media have great power to distort the “facts” and present versions of “reality” which the American public all too quickly accepts as “truth.” Whether this misrepresentation occurs unintentionally, due to carelessness, or deliberately remains to be seen. Jean Franco suggests that it tends to be the latter, writing that, “the struggle for interpretive power is now played not on a level playing field but on a terrain dominated by conservative media who push their own clamorous narrative” (Franco 1998:278). Whether or not the press had a political agenda in misportraying El Cenizo to the world can be debated. Conservative groups who read the news, however, certainly did. They were quick to accuse El Cenizo of anti-Americanness. Sonia Alvarez et al. remind us that:

When we examine the impact of movements, then, we must gauge the extent to which their demands, discourses, and practices circulate in weblike, capillary fashion (e.g., are deployed, adopted, appropriated, co-opted, or reconstructed, as the case may be) in large institutional and cultural arenas. (Alvarez et al. 1998:16)

In the case of El Cenizo’s predominant language ordinance, the media, and to a greater extent, supporters of the English-only movement, succeeded in appropriating, reconstructing, and assigning alternative meaning to the city’s actions. Thus, whether or not leaders in El Cenizo considered their actions to be oppositional, the larger society perceived the assertion of the right to speak Spanish as counter-hegemonic and

anti-American. I will never forget the postcard I came across one afternoon in City Hall; dated October 28, 1999, and addressed to the mayor, it said simply:

SIR—
PLEASE DISCONTINUE YOUR ACTIONS. DOES A 3
OR 4 YEAR OLD PERSON HAVE TO READ THIS TO
YOU?

Still the question remains: Why is language-use such a delicate issue in the United States today?

In short, because language, as the principal medium through which human beings communicate, plays a critical role in establishing group identity—affecting cultural cohesiveness, empowering minority groups, and making itself an integral part of the nation-building process. Benedict Anderson, a leading scholar of nationalism, proposes that “there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests” (Anderson 1991:145). Thus, in the US today, where over three hundred languages are spoken, language policy emerges as a critical issue in the maintenance or deconstruction of social relations of power. Language, both as a tool enabling communication within a group and as a marker of culture and ethnicity, has long been an integral component of nationalist movements.³

The English-only movement’s main argument, that preserving our “common” language is the only way to maintain national unity, appears to many to be a thinly veiled attack on the ethnic and racial differences of the United States’ internal minorities. By attempting to restrict the public use of all languages other than English, proponents seem to be arguing that speaking English is a condition of full membership in American society. In an attempt to avoid being labeled as intolerant nativists, leaders of US English encourage minorities to maintain languages other than English in the home (Schmidt 2000:32). The issue at hand for peripheral groups in society is not, however, whether or not they are permitted to speak their native languages in private. On the contrary, their struggles coalesce around the *public* recognition of the right to use languages other than English and express other cultural particularities. Movements such as the one in El Cenizo threaten this private/public dichotomy by breaking the taboo of speaking Spanish in public life.

Toward a Participatory Democracy: Claiming Rights through Cultural Difference

Having explored the largely uninformed public reactions to the predominant language legislation and the motivations behind them, it is important to take a closer look at the ordinance itself and the rationale behind its passage. Contrary to what the media would have us believe, nowhere does the legislation proclaim Spanish as the city’s official language. Rather, it states that all city meetings will be held in the predominant language of the residents, which was determined by an “official survey” to be Spanish. Patrick Train-Gutiérrez, a law student who interned as a legal clerk in Laredo during the summer of 1999 and who, in his own words, “helped El Cenizo a little bit over the summer,” explains that:

There is no official language in El Cenizo. Rather, there is a predominant language, and the ordinance says that business will be conducted in that language. Laws will still be written in English, and translations, which aren’t legally binding, will be provided in Spanish. If, in the future, the predominant language ceases to be Spanish and becomes English or even some other language, this ordinance ensures that city business will be conducted in that language, whatever it may be.⁴

Train-Gutiérrez brings up an interesting point to consider. Because the ordinance dictates that city meetings be held in the predominant language of the community, in the future the language of official business might change. Many immigration scholars subscribe to the “three generation” framework, which suggests that first generation immigrants speak only their native language, the second generation is bilingual in the native language and English, and the third generation tends to be monolingual English speakers (Estrada 1980, Schmidt 2000). With this theory in mind, a few of my colleagues have speculated that the future predominant language of El Cenizo might be English. Although this may be the case, I believe this assertion is short-sighted. Yes, young people in El Cenizo tend to be fluent in English. Will they choose, however, to stay in the community once they grow up and have greater opportunities for social mobility than did their parents? Furthermore, might not El Cenizo continue to receive a steady flow of Spanish-speak-

ing migrants from Mexico? Vélez-Ibáñez suggests that in the borderlands there is a “constant movement of the population from the south, replenishing, reinforcing, replacing, and reproducing” cultural traits, values, and behaviors (Vélez-Ibáñez 1996:271). Finally, doesn’t the *espíritu de la frontera* (spirit of the borderlands) influence the purposeful retention of cultural traits such as language among individuals of Mexican descent? These questions complicate the simple assertion that the next generation of adults in El Cenizo will conduct meetings in English. The ordinance seeks to validate the predominant language at the public level, whatever that language may be.

When asked to clarify the rationale behind the passage of the ordinance, El Cenizo leaders offer simple, pragmatic responses, such as this one by former mayor Rafael Rodríguez:

La semilla fue la misma comunidad. Ya petición de la gente se buscó la ordenanza por la vía legal de que se adoptara esa ordenanza para no tener problemas [The seed came from the community. And upon their insistence the ordinance was passed by legal means so that we wouldn’t have any problems].

The administration explains that the ordinance was enacted in order to encourage residents’ participation in local government, as well as to protect their future political involvement. Although the vast majority of residents are fluent in Spanish and many (mostly children) are competent English speakers as well, those who did not speak English were excluded from the decision-making process.⁵ According to the Webb County Planning Office, approximately sixty-three percent of residents speak little or no English (Mclemore 1999). Rafael Rodríguez argues that all residents “have the right to participate and understand what is being said...In the past, other administrations spoke only in English and they decided everything while the community had no idea what they were doing.”⁶ In his opinion, this ordinance is largely symbolic, as meetings were already being held in Spanish. Nevertheless, the 1998–2000 administration did all it could to be a representative government, and one such way of incorporating residents into the political process was to accord them a voice through the acceptance of their native language. “*Ahora tienen la plena libertad de hacer uso a la palabra, preguntar, comentar [Now they have the simple freedom to speak, ask questions, and make comments].*”⁷

Residents and leaders of El Cenizo, when defending the predominant language ordinance, stress the importance of establishing a participatory democracy in order to encourage community participation in collective decisions. C.B. Macpherson suggests that “participatory democracy” as a model originated as a slogan of the progressive student movements of the 1960s and then in the 1970s expanded to include struggles over class politics (Macpherson 1977:93). In essence, the term is grounded by the theory that “low participation and social inequity are so bound up with each other that a more equitable and humane society requires a more participatory political system” (Macpherson 1977:94). People in El Cenizo argue, then, that validating the speaking of Spanish in public business will encourage participation and thus move one step closer to social equality. Along even more pragmatic lines, using Spanish in meetings is understood to be more efficient, and it will enable city leaders to better communicate with their constituents.

El Cenizo’s predominant language ordinance, then, responds to an expressed need, is a pragmatic solution to an identified problem, and is defended through a language of equal rights. On another level it asserts a cultural identity, a claim to difference, and a declaration that these differences, embodied here in the Spanish language, should be publicly recognized and accepted. This assertion is an example of cultural citizenship at work, as it “seeks to implement a strategy of democratic construction, of social transformation, that asserts a constitutive link between culture and politics” (Dagnino 1998:50). This conception of citizenship recognizes the right to have rights and to have *new* rights; right to equality *and* right to difference. “It also implies that difference shall not constitute a basis for inequality” (Dagnino in Benmayor et al. 1997:208), which, in turn, “specifies, deepens, and broadens the right to equality” (Dagnino 1998:50). In this sense the leaders of El Cenizo are transcending liberal notions of citizenship and basing their practices and claims to rights on their sense of belonging and community membership “rather than on their formal status as citizens of a nation” (Silvestrini 1997:44).

The “Culture” Concept: Constructing Difference

Anthropology has changed much since the objectivist, Enlightenment era of modernity, during which “culture” was most often used

and understood as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (E.B. Tylor in Bohannan and Glazer 1988:64). While this essay cannot attempt to outline all the concepts and critiques of “culture” that have emerged in Tylor’s wake, a few of the principal ones are important here. William Sewell successfully summarizes the main critiques of the culture concept found in anthropological discourse today. He suggests that it has become “a suspect term among critical anthropologists—who claim that both in academia and in public discourse, talk about culture tends to essentialize, exoticize, and stereotype those whose ways of life are being described and to naturalize their differences from white middle-class Euro-Americans” (Sewell 1999:38). In addition, difference nearly always translates into hierarchy (Brightman 1995:526) and conflict. That the naturalization of difference and “othering” into hierarchies of “Americanness” is a critical result of investing in the “culture” concept should, through reflection on El Cenizo’s experiences, be painfully obvious.

Another important critique summarized by Sewell is the “culture as shared, fixed, bounded, and deeply felt” theme (Sewell 1999:47). This has been recognized and refuted by many anthropologists, including James Clifford (1988), Lila Abu-Lughod (1991), and Robert Brightman (1995). As such, Abu-Lughod has argued that the culture concept cannot adequately represent the realities of “contradiction and heterogeneity” (Brightman 1995:533). Still others suggest that “cultural” explanations within analyses of dominance and inequality should be avoided because they tend to gloss over the roots of “structural social problems” (Lipsitz 1998). In sum, in today’s “postmodern” moment in which we tend to think of “worlds of meaning as normally being contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable,” the traditional concept of “cultures as coherent and distinct entities” is widely disputed (Sewell 1999:53). In response to these important critiques, many social theorists have countered that all cultures are, in fact, hybrid (Narayan 1993; García Canclini 1995; Gómez-Peña 1996; Anzaldúa 1999; Eagleton 2000). In the ethnographic section that follows, Flora Barton’s testimony illustrates one way in which hybridity plays out through lives in the borderlands.

Don and Mike Revisited—Questioning and Contesting Authenticity

In August 2000, one year after Don and Mike’s phone call to City Hall, I sat down with Flora Barton while she reflected on the experience. We had talked about the event more informally on a number of occasions, but this time I tape-recorded her thoughts. In a bakery/coffee shop near El Cenizo one weekday morning, we sat across from each other as she recalled her humiliation:

It was close to six in the evening. It was a workday, but we had already closed inside [City Hall]. But sometimes, you know, you just stay there longer because you have extra paperwork to fill out or whatever, and that was one of those days that I stayed there a little bit longer. And I wasn’t even going to answer the phone because it was after five, but I decided to answer because maybe it was important because it kept ringing. I was on the other line and I was actually asking my husband to come and pick me up, because it was already late and all this, and I said, “Wait just a second.” I even left him on the other line for this call. [The whole experience] was just terrible. It was just terrible. I felt that I wasn’t defending myself the correct way.

At first I thought it was someone playing around. I thought it was a prank call because I couldn’t believe they were really on the air. Other stations that wanted interviews would call us in advance and get permission to call back live on the radio. No one had called before this one. Rafael [Rodríguez], Gloria [Romo] and I (all city council members) were prepared for press interviews, but not for something like this. But I had in my mind that if they were really, for real calling from a radio station, a lot of people were listening to what I was saying. So I felt as if I had tape on my mouth. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing and I felt, like, glued to the seat. I felt belittled, completely! I was completely helpless! I wish I had responded differently. I don’t know, maybe more aggressively? But I didn’t want them to hang up at the time because I wanted to find out exactly if it was really from a radio station or what! I felt terrible.

[In the days following the phone call] I felt embarrassed. I only told people in the office and my husband about the call. I actually went to the doctor the following day ‘cause

my left arm started falling asleep and I had a lot of chest pain. I was feeling terrible. [The doctor said] that my [blood] pressure was going up, because at the end of the phone call I was very upset. I was very upset. All of my feelings got mixed up. Everything that a human being feels, they were just mixed up. I was sad, I was disappointed, I was angry, everything. Everything happened at that time.

[After I hung up] I just put my head down right there on the table and said, "I can't believe I didn't find out who they really were!" But, Angela, when I get nervous or afraid or angry, for that matter, I just put my head down and I start praying. And I said "Oh, Lord, if there's anything, anything that I have asked for, I want to know who they are." And two days after that, it happened. [Someone] called and said that he had recorded the whole thing and I said "Are you serious?" He said yes. "Really?" I just couldn't believe it. And then he sent me a copy. And he sent it to me written, too. And we put a complaint.

Recounting her experiences through a tape recorder, my fingers, and a computer screen onto a two dimensional sheet of paper inescapably flattens the frustration and humiliation Flora felt in those days. The complaint she mentioned, put forth against the radio station by Flora in conjunction with an individual who had heard the program broadcast on the radio in Albuquerque, New Mexico and the National Latino Media Council, charged Don and Mike with broadcast of "indecent material and other activities contrary to the public interest."⁸ Months later, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) fined the radio station (WJFK-FM, Manassas, Vermont) four thousand dollars. Flora says there were many aspects she couldn't go into with the complaint, because "they have their rights and we have our rights, and they were protected in many ways." The rights of the radio station that she refers to here are those of "freedom of speech." This constitutional right is bolstered by the conservative public backlash from political correctness, in which "people are encouraged to be politically *incorrect* and to demonstrate their freedom, particularly on radio talk shows, by using the very hate speech that political correctness was intended to curb" (Franco 1998:278).

Flora seems little concerned with the insignificant monetary amount of the FCC penalty, however. Her one concern, she says, was for the public to know that she pursued action against the "shock jocks"

and that their exploits were unacceptable. Nevertheless, from the complaint there was little recognition that anything unusual had taken place that afternoon in August. The Don and Mike Show was taken off the air in only one city—Albuquerque, New Mexico—following public protest against the program’s intolerance. Members of the Latino community in this city joined together and fought for their local station to discontinue broadcast of the show. In fifty or so other cities across the country, however, there was virtually no acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Looking back on the phone call, Flora ponders how ironic the whole incident was. Born in Alabama to a Mexican mother and an Anglo father, Flora has struggled with her Spanish fluency over the years. In her home today she almost always speaks English with her children. She explained:

We grew up with a different language, not just English or Spanish. It was kinda like a Tex-Mex. You know, we [kids] would understand everything in Spanish but we wouldn’t be able to say it. The way [our mom] saw it was that we had to learn English because it was so important as we grew up. English was first, always. We never grew up, for example, thinking that Spanish was a horrible language, like a lot of people do, but it wasn’t always easy. Sometimes we would try our best to say something in Spanish and it would come out in English. I actually didn’t really learn to speak Spanish well till I was thirty-two years old.

Flora is only thirty-seven today. She finds more than a slight incongruity in Don’s telling her to learn to speak English. Furthermore, she says, they’re completely missing the reality of life in the borderlands:

If you go up north, then everybody learns to speak English, and other languages. But close to the border...you *have* to know Spanish. I mean, the *majority* speaks Spanish. You *have* to be bilingual. It’s not that no one knows how to speak English, but this is how we all grew up. We’re on the borderline, okay?

Even more ironic for Flora is the fact that Don repeatedly told her to go *back to her country*: “You know, I was thinking, ‘Gosh, I don’t even *know Mexico!*’ You know? I’ve been there, but just across the border

[to Nuevo Laredo], that's about it. So that part was very weird for me."

In his contributions to his edited book, *Symbolizing America*, Hervé Varenne speaks to "those who are at work on America as a culture" (Varenne 1996:16). Although searching for "culture" in "America" is not one of the aims of my research, I believe Varenne makes some important points. First, he declares that "an anthropology of America must be an anthropology of the center" (Varenne 1996:37). Second, he correctly asserts that "to do the anthropology of the center of America is to do something that has immediate political implications" (Varenne 1996:37). I would expand upon these ideas to suggest that an anthropology of "America" must be an anthropology of the center *in dialogue, conflict, or negotiations with its peripheries*.

The US-Mexico borderlands are one such periphery. A number of scholars have noted that the transgressive, transnational, and transcultural paradoxes and challenges inherent in life in the borderlands are the very features that make it such a critical area of study in contemporary US society. Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez suggests that "borders are danger zones...[and] those who live in the borderlands are a threat to 'official' culture. It is on the border that the notion of a homogeneous national identity is rendered an illusion" (Vaquera-Vásquez 1998:119). The hybridity of borderlands subjects, then, as Flora suggests, contests the constructed purity or authenticity of "American culture" as posited by Eurocentric actors such as Don, Mike, and the proponents of the English-only movement.

Some anthropologists, such as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, have even argued that the borderlands might be better conceived of as a space that represents "normality" in our increasingly transnational world:

The borderlands are just such a place of incommensurable contradictions. The term does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject. Rather than dismissing them as insignificant, as marginal zones, thin slivers of land between stable places, we want to contend that the notion of borderlands is a more adequate conceptualization of the "normal" locale of the postmodern subject. (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18)

This position has empowered residents of the borderlands as well as activists seeking to re-humanize this population in the eyes of dominant society, as it attempts to bring to the center what has for so long been considered marginal. In this sense, then, one might interpret Varenne’s call to study the “center” as political as a call to focus on just such areas as the borderlands. Ethnographic inquiry in this liminal, hybrid area of increasing centrality reveals struggles that actively contest fixed identities and the existing disparities of rights and resources in this country. Such work can serve to destabilize hegemonic notions of cultural authenticity that, in their rigid definitions of Americanness or *Mexicanidad*, ultimately reinforce engrained social hierarchies. In conclusion, if scholar and activist Robin Kelley (1997) is correct in suggesting that the “intellectual” can serve to champion a local perspective, aid in the redirection of history or redefining of society, actively participate in social movements, help articulate to a larger audience what folks are living and theorizing, and challenge traditional academia, then these are some of my goals in participating in this endeavor known as anthropology.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more lengthy discussion of my approach to “activist anthropology” and my personal and political positionality, see Stuesse 2001.

2. These are excerpts from a phone conversation of over ten minutes in length. Thank you to Joe Torres of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists in Washington DC for providing me with the recording from which I made this transcript.

3. I have written in other contexts about the role of language in creating nation, and more specifically about the ways in which English has been used historically in the US to construct Americanness. See Stuesse 2002.

4. I and others highly value the efforts that Patrick Train-Gutiérrez dedicated to the development of El Cenizo’s ordinances during the summer of 1999. It is imperative to note, however, that he played no “official” role in their implementation. He prefers to highlight the agency of the residents of El Cenizo in the drafting and passage of the ordinances. Quotes are taken from a personal telephone interview conducted in English on November 21, 1999.

5. Leobardo Estrada demonstrates the significance of age in language use among the Latino population in the US in his table, “Spanish-English Language Usage among the Hispanic Population by Age.” He summarizes that “English-language-only usage increases as age decreases and, conversely, Spanish-language-only usage increases as age increases” (Estrada 1980:16). This is closely linked to the “three generation” framework I outlined above.

6. This quote comes from a personal telephone interview conducted in Spanish on December 2, 1999. All translations provided by the author.

7. Quote taken from tape-recorded interview with Rafael Rodríguez, July 2000.

8. Quote taken from page one of the complaint. Thank you to Joe Torres of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists in Washington DC for providing me with a copy of the complaint.

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