"Elephant in the Room": Navigating Ascriptions of Whiteness and Avowed Identifications as Latinx

Spencer Marguiles & Matthew P. Brigham

This essay offers a collaborative autoethnography wherein the authors draw on and seek to make sense of how they have been read as or presumed to be white, even as they understood themselves as Latinx. Situating the challenges that this identity work involves in scholarship surrounding Whiteness, passing, and hybridity, the authors provide a series of narrative "scenes" where important moments are recalled, examined, and put into conversation with each other's experiences without reducing either. The authors argue that 1) to be able to actively identify as Latinx (or not) is a form of privilege, but also that 2) as the Latinx population in the U.S. continues to grow, an ever-increasing number of individuals are likely to confront these challenges, thus making it timely and important to raise such questions, namely those relating to the challenges and implications of being read (or passing) as white yet identifying as Latinx.

Latinx[1] communities in the United States (U.S.) are, paradoxically, notoriously powerful scapegoats used in conservative political imaginaries and yet, are also seen as simultaneously "remaking America" by crafting and enacting positive visions of collective identity. A positive group identity emerges from the ever-present desire to exist in community, with/alongside others, in pursuit of authentic connection and belonging. Critical scholarship has successfully revealed many of the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which basic coordinates of identity (such as race, gender, and national identity), have historically been invoked to make both individuals and communities feel that they do not belong. Performers, activists, and scholars of performance studies (many of whom understand their performance, activism, and scholarship as overlapping) have attended both to the pain

[1] We define Latinx as a gender-neutral term that encompasses both Latino/a identities as well as individuals who identify within the LGBTQIQAP+ community. (For the purposes of this essay, we have also discussed the advantage and disadvantages of using said term, but since it is being used contemporarily, we have opted to use it).

of individuals and/or groups being told that they do not belong, but also the hope and even exhilaration of acting and existing in a way that responds, yes I/we do.

This essay's critical collaborative autoethnography examines the construction of Latinx identity through embodied textual performances of both of the authors' lives: as a light-skin Latinx individual who grew up overseas due to being a child of a former U.S. diplomat, and as an individual whose Latinx identification has long been complicated both by his immediate family (with one white Anglo parent and one Latinx person of color parent) and by having grown up closer to the U.S.-Canada border than the southern border and its influence on his familial Latinx story. Sparked by Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, discussion regarding the notion of "passing" by scholars including Marcia Dawkins, Allyson Hobbs, and Michelle Jackson, and Juan Flores' usage of hybridity, we utilize personal narratives to reflectively and reflexively negotiate our racial and ethnic identities across space and time.[2] Because of factors such as language use, light skin, and

---

Spencer Margulies, M.A., is pursuing a Ph.D. in Communication at the University of South Florida. His research is situated at the intersection of Critical Intercultural Studies, Latina/o/x Studies, and LGBTQIQAP+ studies. In an age of increased gender inequality, systemic racism, institutional racism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and violence against transgender individuals, specifically Black trans individuals and trans people of color, it is vital to analyze the injustices that continue to occur domestically and internationally. As such, in his work, Spencer aims to build on Julia R. Johnson's (2013) call to "trans" intercultural communication research by applying both transnational and transgender theories. In doing so, he continues to question how a transing framework can facilitate the exploration of ways in which domestic and international cultures, powers, and ideologies intersect to shape identity in media, specifically LGBTQIQAP+ and Latina/o/x identities, and how that affects organizational dynamics. sophiamargul@usf.edu. **Matthew P. Brigham**, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor and Graduate Faculty Member in the School of Communication Studies at James Madison University. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in areas including advocacy and rhetoric and in interdisciplinary programs in political communication, environmental communication, and sports communication. His research uses theories of rhetoric and argument to examine public and academic controversy and to examine how taken-for-granted notions about elements like temporality shape the worldviews of non-dominant marginalized/resistant cultures. brighamp@jmu.edu

[2] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Michelle Gordon Jackson, *Light, Bright and Damn Near White: Black Leaders Created by the One-Drop Rule* (Georgia: JacksonScribe Publishing, 2013); Juan Flores, "Latino

perceived participation in cultural traditions, we are scholars read as "presumptively white" by white and non-white (including but not limited to Latinx) audiences. In a country where Whiteness is still, by default and by active, ongoing efforts, granted primacy and privilege, our default ascription of Whiteness affords a particular degree of economic, cultural, and social capital. Accordingly, we have joined in to write this essay because, through the power of storytelling and reflection on our stories, we can decide not to simply accept this designation, but instead meaningfully articulate and perform our respective light-skin Latinx identities without erasing or minimizing the complexities and dilemmas that such identification raises.

With the country's continued demographic transformation, it will soon have majority-minority status, including a substantial Latinx population. Furthermore, Latinx communities are at this time, even against the political odds, articulating Latinx identity with pride and positive affect. Based on these factors, we imagine that there likely already are and will no doubt continue to be (and likely ever more over time) many individuals who pass as presumptively white but seek to recover and articulate their Latinx connections. In writing our respective narratives, we realize that we are both in a continuous process of understanding our Latin roots. We use these vignettes to reflect on language and feelings we had that we knew existed yet did not have words for. In examining our experiences, we explore varied forms of code switching for "presumably white" Latinx individuals in myriad environments. We seek to understand how to check the box on endless amounts of paperwork while reflexively and reflectively maneuvering through the battleground when these moments of tension occur. As an act of collaborative autoethnography, we explore moments ranging from the mundane to the exceptional and dramatic, examining not just where our stories, experiences, and reflections converge, but also those elements that point in differing and potentially opposing directions. We believe that our collaboration illuminates some of the cartographies of contradiction pertaining to white passing and Latinx self-identification. While our experiences may not be identical to others in our shoes, they are also not so radically particular or idiosyncratic as to only illuminate our own experiences.

Whiteness, Passing, and Hybridity

In performing and interrogating ideas of identifying as Latinx but passing as white, we draw on and seek to extend important scholarly conversations. We begin by distilling trends and insights regarding how Whiteness has been constructed and understood by scholars of rhetoric, performance, communication, in general in critical race scholarship, and particularly in critical Latinx race scholarship. Then,

---

Studies: New Contexts, New Concepts," in *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, ed. Juan Poblete (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 191-205.

we examine current understandings of race, passing, and hybridity, generally and in Latinx scholarship particularly.

Whiteness

As Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono note, "Whiteness studies have become one of the most vibrant areas of communication research."[3] Increasingly, scholarly attention has focused on problematic racial structures and rhetorics that cannot be fully understood through the tradition of studying black and white as archetypal: "scholarship regarding the U.S. racial structure has reinforced the notion of a traditional black/white binary that does not adequately address brownness."[4] Indeed, in delineating histories of scholarship on rhetoric and race, Mark Lawrence McPhail argues that, in recent decades, "rhetorical scholars have expanded the conceptualization of race well *beyond the boundaries of black and white identity*."[5] By more thoroughly examining how racial logics and rhetorics operate outside of a black/white binary lens, and for this essay, centering the particular operations of Whiteness in relation to Latinx identities, we might identify otherwise untapped potential resources for resistance, "positioning Chicana/o identities as a resource of intervention into the invisibility of Whiteness."[6] One broad interventional

---

[3] Michael G. Lacy and K.A. Ono, "Introduction," in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, ed. Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 1-17. As an example of recent work by critical communication scholars that aims at interrogating Whiteness, see "Forum: The Future of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*," ed. Kent A. Ono, special forum, *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2020): 56-110.

[4] Anjana Mudambi. "The Construction of Brownness: Latino/a and South Asian Bloggers' Responses to SB 1070," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 1 (February 2015): 46. DOI: 10.1080/17513057.2015.991079.

[5] Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Rhetoric and Race," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 4331.

[6] Chad M. Nelson, "Resisting Whiteness: Mexican American Studies and Rhetorical Struggles for Visibility," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 1 (February 2015): 65. DOI: 10.1080/17513057.2015.991080. Regarding terminology and conceptual categories, Juan Flores argues, "With all the caveats, and fully recognizing that the very terms 'Latino' and 'Hispanic' are first of all imposed labels, ideological hoodwinks aimed at tightening hegemony and capturing markets, the Latino concept is still useful, if not indispensable, for charting out an area of contemporary intellectual inquiry and political advocacy." Flores, "Latino Studies," 195. That being said, a number of new proposed (self-) identifiers/labels have emerged in recent years, from Latin@ to Latinx to Latina/o, to name but a few, yet complexity attends to this debate of possible alternatives. With regard to the need to avoid either easy acceptance or easy rejection of the turn toward "x" (such as Latinx), see, for instance, José Ángel Maldonado, "Manifestx: Toward a Rhetoric Loaded with Future," in "Forum: The Future of *Communication and*

resource, suitable across a range of group difference and oppressed positionality, is the use of storytelling:

> Subordinated groups have always told stories…Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation. Members of out-groups can use stories in two basic ways…as means of psychic self-preservation; and…as means of lessening their own subordination…The storyteller gains psychically, the listener morally and epistemologically.[7]

Race, Passing, and Hybridity

Drawing on the contingencies and complexities of Whiteness in United States history, including how some but not all Mexicans were considered "white" at the 1849 California State Constitutional Convention, Tomás Almaguer insists that scholars understand and attend to "The unique meaning of race for Latinos/as in the United Sates."[8] The artificial and even arbitrariness of racial categories, and their slippery and unstable (contingent) existence, have led to the well-documented features of performing race such as passing and hybridity. Passing is a phenomenon that has been explored frequently in scholarly and popular presses.[9]

Critical/Cultural Studies," ed. Kent A. Ono, special forum, *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2020): 104-110, DOI: 10.1080/14791420.2020.1723799. Similarly, for a recent conversation about the challenges of options like Latinx and Latin@, see Bernaette Marie Calafell, Karma R. Chávez, Fernando Delgado, Lisa A. Flores, Michelle A. Holling, Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, Stacey K. Sowards, and Angharad N. Valdivia, "Conclusion: The Futures of Latina/o/x Communication Studies: A Plática with Senior Scholars," in *Latina/o/x Communication Studies: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, ed. Leandra Hinojosa Hernández, Diana I. Bowen, Sarah De Los Santos Upton, and Amanda R. Martinez (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 371-92.

[7] Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* (August 1989): 2435-2437, http://ssrn.com/abstract=1577362.

[8] Tomás Almaguer. "At the Crossroads of Race: Latino/a Studies and Race Making in the United States," in Poblete, *Critical Latin American*, 207, 211. Similarly, see Josue David Cisneros, *The Border Crossed Us: Rhetorics of Borders, Citizenship, and Latina/o Identity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014).

[9] Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*; Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*; Jackson, *Light, Bright*; Gail Lukasik, *White Like Her: My Family's Story of Race and Racial Passing* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017); Brando Skyhorse and Lisa Page, ed., *We Wear the Mask: 15 True Stories of Passing in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017); Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). While passing is often attributed to those in marginalized communities who are/are not able to pass, Eric King Watts has explored how Eminem proudly refused to try to pass (through the lead character in his film *8 Mile*) as a way of demonstrating authenticity,

While passing might suggest, at some level, conceptually distinct categories, scholarship surrounding hybridity points to situations where any either/or is misleading and untenable. For instance, as Tina M. Harris observes, "Cultural duality is a common and quite apparent phenomenon. For the thousands of people like me who come from a multiracial background but whose features do not reveal such a lineage, a search for a cultural identity can be a lifelong and tumultuous journey."[10] While notions such as hybridity animate scholarship surrounding a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities and formations, they are especially relevant for Latinx scholarship and identity. As Juan Flores observes, "reflections on questions of 'hybridity,' 'liminality,' 'transgressivity,' and the like, and the new intellectual horizons they signal, are clearly germane to any contemporary work in Latino studies they complement, and add philosophical range to, what has been the guiding metaphor of Latino studies: 'la frontera,' the border."[11] Similarly, Bernadette Marie Calafell and Fernando P. Delgado observe that "Borderlands thus fits within a conceptual field of other spaces that includes hybridity, *mestizaje,* and the Black Atlantic."[12] Indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* has, since first appearing in 1987, served as a foundation, inspiration, and agenda-setting piece for a substantial body of scholarship that has emerged, including in Latinx communication and rhetorical studies.[13]

Recognizing the essential "in betweenness" that characterizes much of Latinx identity and rhetoric about such identity, scholars have also pointed to how, as we manage and attempt to account for our identities, a multiplicity is needed rather than any singular, definitive answers.[14] As Dolores V. Tanno has argued, "In this

---

revealing other ways that passing and Whiteness are able to interrelate. Eric King Watts, "Border Patrolling and 'Passing' in Eminem's *8 Mile*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005): 187-206, DOI: 10.1080/07393180500201686.

[10] Tina M Harris, "'I Know It Was the Blood': Defining the Biracial Self in a Euro-American Society," in *Our Voices: Essays in Culture, Ethnicity, and Communication*, 3rd ed., ed. Alberto González, Marsha Houston, and Victoria Chen (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing, 2000), 185.

[11] Flores, "Latino Studies," 198.

[12] Bernadette Marie Calafell and F.P Delgado. "Reading Latina/o Images: Interrogating *Americanos*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 1 (March 2004): 8.

[13] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Regarding scholarship that has emerged from Anzaldúa's writings, see for instance, Robert Gutierrez-Perez and Leandra Hinojosa Hernández, ed., *This Bridge We Call Communication: Anzaldúan Approaches to Theory, Method, and Praxis* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019); Hernández et al., *Latina/o/x Communication Studies*; and, as one of the original essays to apply Anzaldúa's borderlands to critical communication/rhetoric scholarship on race, see Lisa A. Flores, "Creating Discursive Space Through A Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82, no. 2 (1996): 142-156.

[14] While this statement refers particularly to the use of hybridity by Latinx individuals/communities, other communities organized around ideas of race, ethnicity, and/or

essay, I will trace the unfolding of my own ethnic identity from Spanish to Mexican American, to Latina, and to Chicana by briefly examining the story behind each name. I will also address the value of, indeed the necessity for, multiple names."[15] In this way, Tanno exemplifies a mode of thinking and writing that Mark Noe associates with a broader Latinx tendency, "In opposing Anglo individualism, Latino/a writers sidestep an individualist/communitarian exclusionary binary that demands a single ethnic allegiance. According to Gutierrez-Jones, 'Communities are thus understood not in terms of purifying consensus (the assimilation model) but rather in terms of conflictual renegotiations (ongoing migrations).'"[16] Because of this multiplicity, "Latina/o identities and communities are always in a process of making and unmaking."[17] This recognition, if taken seriously, points to the need to consider varieties of identity and experience including, for instance, the idea that while some Latinx scholars are comfortably bilingual and ought to be given greater recognition for their ability to make use of such skills (for instance, in being able to translate meaning), many other Latinx scholars may not possess a potentially assumed fluency in Spanish: "the expectation of multilingual fluency is complicated by the sociopolitical, cultural, and familial norms and practices in which Latinx students and scholars may or may not acquire English/Spanish language fluency."[18]

---

culture have similarly found ways to make use of something like hybridity as well: Diane M. Kimoto, "Being *Hapa*: A Choice for Cultural Empowerment," in González, Houston, and Chen, *Our Voices*, 190-194; Richard Morris, "Living In/Between," in González, Houston, and Chen, *Our Voices*, 195-204.

[15] Dolores V. Tanno, "Names, Narratives, and the Evolution of Ethnic Identity," in González, Houston, and Chen, *Our Voices*, 25.

[16] Mark Noe. "The *Corrido*: A Border Rhetoric." *College English* 71, no. 6 (July 2009): 602.

[17] Calafell and Delgado, "Reading Latina/o Images," 18. For some examples/exemplars of the kind of writing toward hybridity and multiplicity from Latinx writers, see, for instance, Aimee M. Carrillo Rowe, "Women Writing Borders, Borders Writing Women: Immigration, Assimilation, and the Politics of Speaking," in González, Houston, and Chen, *Our Voices*, 207-219; Elizabeth Lozano, "The Cultural Experience of Space and Body: A Reading of Latin American and Anglo American Comportment in Public," in González, Houston, and Chen, *Our Voices*, 228-234; Maria Rogers-Pascual, "Traversing Disparate Cultures in a Transnational World," in González, Houston, and Chen, *Our Voices*, 242-251.

[18] Stacey K. Sowards, "Linguistic Capital: Latinx and English/Spanish Language Fluency," in Hernández et al., *Latina/o/x Communication Studies*, 74.

On the Possibilities of Collaboration and Autoethnography[19]

Autoethnography allows for both a narrative and poetic means of understanding one's sense of self within a culture, with the goal "convey[ing] evocative and personal stories and…orient[ing] to acts of artistic self-representation as a principle means of research."[20] As Kathryn Hobson notes, "autoethnography, as a qualitative method, is tied to the body in material ways that account for overlapping iterations of identities."[21] Further, the method offers a space where myriad experiences, positionalities, and standpoints can come into conversation in an effort to foster understanding and possibility.[22] Although autoethnography is predominantly seen as an individual mode of scholarship, collaborative permutations have emerged, such as duoethnography, co/autoethnographic, and collaborative autoethnography.[23]

---

[19] In articulating our approach, we recognize the significant work already done in embracing similar scholarly practices. For instance, significant scholarship has articulated similar trajectories though the frame of the memoir. Shane T. Moreman, "Memoir as Performance: Strategies of Hybrid Ethnic Identity," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (October 2009): 346-366. DOI: 10.1080/10462930903242855. Other similar work has characterized this scholarship that foregrounds the author as *testimonio*. Shantel Martinez, "Lessons from My Battle Scars: *Testimonio's* Transformative Possibilities for Theory and Practice," in Hernández et al., *Latina/o/x Communication Studies*, 355-370. More broadly, Latinx communication scholars are increasingly attending to the range of possibilities that performative writing may offer. See, for example, Robert Gutierrez-Perez, "Theories in the Flesh and Flights of the Imagination: Embracing the Soul and Spirit of Critical Performative Writing in Communication Research," *Women's Studies in Communication* 41, no. 4 (2018): 404-415, DOI:10.1080/07491409.2018.1551695. For a recent instance of the use of collaborative autoethnography in the context of Latinx communication scholarship, see Rebecca Mercado Jones and Bryan Muñoz, "Vernaculars of Nos/Otros: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Mentoring," in Hernández et al., *Latina/o/x Communication Studies*, 333-354.

[20] Keith Berry and C.J. Patti, "Lost in Narration: Applying Autoethnography," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 43, no. 2 (2015): 263-268.

[21] Kathryn Hobson, "Performative Tensions in Female Drag Performances," *Kaleidoscope*, 12 (2013): 35-51.

[22] Amber L. Johnson and B. LeMaster, *Gender Futurity, Intersectional Autoethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[23] Norris J. Sawyer and D.E. Lund, *Duoethnography: Dialogic Methods for Social, Health, and Educational Research* (California: Left Coast Press, 2011); Lesley Coia and M. Taylor, "Co/autoethnography: Exploring Our Teaching Selves Collaboratively," in *Research Methods for the Self-Study of Practice*, vol. 9, ed. Linda Fitzgerald, Melissa Heston & Deborah Tidwell (Netherlands: Springer, 2009): 3-16.; Colette N. Cann and E.J. DeMeulenaere, "Critical Co-Constructed Autoethnography," *Cultural Studies <--> Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 146-58; Heewon Chang, F.W. Ngunjiri, and KA.C. Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography* (New York: Left Coast Press, 2013).

We utilize the collaborative autoethnographic approach: we have collectively engaged in the gathering of our respective narratives for interpretation and analysis in order to "gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena" these stories reflect.[24] Like autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography is a relational practice that has us look at the other as much as the experiences of the self. It allows for one to be both reflective and reflexive as to why both researchers experience and respond to the world in the way that they do. Despite this, the approach challenges the critique that autoethnography is self-absorbed by comparing and contrasting multiple experiences.[25] According to Chang et al., collaborative autoethnography can involve either "'full' collaboration, in which researchers work together from the beginning (data collection) to the end (writing), or …'partial' collaboration in which researchers work together at selected stages of their process."[26] Collaborative autoethnography also capitalizes on the opportunity to engage discursively regarding each other's stories, experiences, and provide support.[27]

For this essay, we engaged in 'full collaboration,' sharing responsibilities throughout and keeping each other accountable, albeit virtually (in the developmental stage, our communication occurred primarily through e-mail and Google Meetings). In our first discussions, we agreed that our project would generally focus on our experiences being light-skin and Latinx. With this broad area and minimal other pre-prescription, we wrote and exchanged our respective narratives, looking for places of similarities, differences, and overlaps. After writing the narratives and being in frequent communication, we started to weave together our individual episodic short stories and began seeing the rough contours of broad, overarching themes: Whiteness, race, passing, and hybridity.

In writing our narratives, we considered the implications of language as noted by Gloria Anzaldúa in relation to linguistic terrorism – where English is considered the oppressor and other languages are the oppressed.[28] As Anzaldúa questions,

---

[24] Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography*, 23.

[25] Carolyn Ellis and T.E. Adams, "The Purposes, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research," in *Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 254-276.

[26] Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography*, 111.

[27] Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez and F.W. Ngunjiri, "Relationships and Communities in Autoethnography," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (New York: Routledge, 2016): 262-280; Mary E. Weems, C.J. White, P.A. McHatton, C. Shelley, T. Bond, N.R. Brown, L. Melina, A.L. Scheidt, J. Goode, P. De Carteret & J. Wyatt, "Heartbeats: Exploring the Power of Qualitative Research Expressed as Autoethnographic Performance Texts," *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 5 (2009): 843-858.

[28] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

> For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? [29]

Building on these provocations put further by Anzaldúa, we view language (English, Spanish, Spanglish, etc.) as one possible form of creation or codeswitching. Another form we explore with our narratives is how the bodies of those who are presumably viewed as white self-present in different ways in a variety of spaces/contents. Our narratives go back and forth between being in a liminal space of coming to terms with both our light skin and our avowed Latinx identity. Our experiences go back and forth, showcasing our respective constant code-switches. Our border tongues developed themselves naturally, for one in Spanglish, and the other primarily in English, both that we analyze and taunt within this paper – allowing for being validated within monolingualism and multilingual Latinx selves.

As our narratives came to fruition, we wondered how to perform the tension (both physically and internally), the exhaustion that results from continually explaining our identities and explaining these experiences. For the purpose of delivering and unpacking stories, we use dramaturgical language (not to mimic a form of theater drama art) but instead as a way to feature a conversation of moments. As we look back to our pasts and our own subjectivities, we especially build on Lorraine Hedtke and John Winslade's notion of re-membering.[30] We become both reflective and reflexive. In making memories into words, we realize that we must go about writing "honestly, introspectively, reflexively, and without fear" so that the audience gains access to the individual's perspective, putting themselves in the author's shoes.[31]

---

[29] Anzaldúa, "*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 77.

[30] John Winslade & L. Hedtke, *Remembering Lives: Conversations with the Dying and the Bereaved* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[31] Jeanine Marie Minge & A.L. Zimmerman, *Concrete and Dust: Mapping the Sexual Terrains of Los Angeles* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Scenes and Stories

Scene 1: Awkward "Me" Defers

Latinx Coach?

While a graduate student assisting with a college debate program, issues of race, Latinidad, and Whiteness played a central role in the competitions happening around the country. As a team, there was an effort to account for dimensions of diverse identity that were present among our coaches and debaters. This resulted in, as part of the materials, an indication that one member of the coaching staff was Latinx. I had not specifically had these discussions with the debaters before. When they saw this detail, they started asking who was the Latinx coach. I indicated that I was, and because we had other work to complete, this never really was discussed or talked about as a group, or even 1 on 1 with particular debaters, ever since. And so it always felt awkward, and has since, that it was just put out there, and it seemed so completely incongruous with my passing Whiteness, yet no one (myself included) really moved forward with it to the point that it might have been a more productive part of the team's encounters with these arguments about identity that continued to arise for them in competition.

White and Latinx?

Skin touched the paper fingertips tracing through the options provided

in the box

Hey papá what do I check regarding race and ethnicity?

White and Hispanic.

Wait really? You can be both?

Yeah, look at you, light-skin and you're Paraguayan.

But it says Hispanic/Latina what's the difference between Hispanic and

Latinx?

There is none.

He was wrong. But I wouldn't learn that till much later.

SCENE 2: Elephants in the Room

The Imposter-Officer?

While completing my Ph.D., I was nominated by members of a major disciplinary Latinx academic unit to become an officer. Honored by the nomination, and seeking to get my feet wet in academic networks, I happily accepted. But as I did, I wondered whether, for those within the unit, they may wonder how/why I was there, and for non-Latinx scholars outside the unit, they too may have had similar questions. Responses from colleagues (fellow graduate students and faculty) in that unit were overwhelmingly positive and accepting and inclusive, and it became an opportunity for me to better prepare and articulate how my Whiteness and Latinx identity interact to inform my research/scholarship, teaching, and service activities. That being said, by the end of it, I wasn't really sure that I had adequately comprehended and accounted for myself. Thus, my continued hesitations about my role(s) in this unit and this part of the academic community offer yet another variety of the classic "impostor syndrome."

Can I Join You?

Walking into the new school. New country. Shaky breaths emit from their lungs as they pull their valise full of their notebooks and books. Their parents didn't have enough time to get them a backpack. Head down and fast paced they walk to the band room. Throwing the valise onto the ground, they quickly grab the stuff for the day and jog to class. As they enter the classroom eyes stare at them once again. Scanning the room, they find a seat. They can feel the eyes of everyone burning through them. The life cycle of a diplo-brat.

Recess comes around and they try to reach out to people. They walk to a group of people speaking Spanish but before they can utter a word, the group turns away muttering

Que hace la chica nueva? *What is the new girl doing?*

I can understand you; you know.

Sighing they go towards another group of white students.

Can I join you?

Do you know the Jonas Brothers?

No. The group leaves.

Leaving them alone hands bone white clenching books ever so tight holding in the tears

this doesn't get any easier

INTERLUDE

Undeterred

As my body sinks in the seat of the bus, my body jostles due to the uneven
roads Undeterred I kept practicing the few words I'd learned.

Hola, ¿qué tal? Estoy aprendiendo el español

Hi, how's it going I'm learning Spanish

I repeat and repeat and repeat the phrases in my head

I understand Spanish Solo necesito practicar

Granted, I picked up what I did learn from listening in to conversations between my relatives and papa.

My mouth enunciating each syllable in a whisper so no one would hear

The bus stops and

Raising my head to look out the window uniformed kids swarm to fill the aisle

My eyes glance at my blue sweatpants and white polo too big for my small figure
Shoulders shrug I'm in no rush as I watch them flood out towards the stairs leading down to class
New school jitters keep me frozen

Legs force body to move and clutching my bag I follow

Criss-crossed on the floor, legs aching to change positions their hands mindlessly play around with the carpet beneath them.

Clase hoy temenos un nuevo estudiante – *Class, today we have a new student.* Eyes dart to me full of curiosity, mouths hesitant to make the first salutation.

I long for my body to be a mirror to reflect their eyes onto something else
someone else

I looked down to see what they saw me, a tiny, light-skinned appearing white human with my hair cut by father who placed a bowl on my head as an outline. He did that since I can remember. My fingertips touch the edge of my glasses pushing them up a bit to prevent them from falling.

I wonder if they see my fear if they can smell it, because right now, they are staring at me like wolves do when they see their prey

The words "Hola, que tal?" whispered out of my lips and into existence. Gasps filled the air. A quizzical look came about their faces, I didn't understand why because wasn't the teacher speaking Spanish –

was the word I've been practicing said incorrectly –

They Moved Right Along

I was tired. Helping my old high school's speech and debate team at the national tournament, that year held on the University of Oklahoma's campus, was fun, but it was time to return to the present. To everyday life. And I was in an intensive, month-long summer class, so I was tired, and a little overwhelmed at the schoolwork to which I would be returning. Not owning a car, I waited. On a Greyhound bus. On a dark night at what seemed like an abandoned building. Fortunately, it showed up, and I boarded, awaiting movements expected and unexpected.

Before I knew it, our movement stopped, at the border. Not *that* border. But the Texas-Oklahoma state border. Looking back, I'm not sure why I didn't expect it, but I didn't. Law enforcement came on board, not apparently looking for anything in particular, but just checking things out, seeing who was on board. My movement stopped. I hadn't done anything wrong, but it still tested my nerves.

My command of the Spanish language (then, and now) was limited, despite formal coursework, but I could tell that they were asking a series of questions for

many on the bus who appeared Latinx and spoke Spanish (it seemed like those at customs at an airport- where going, what purpose, etc.). When they got to me, they spoke in English, offering just a friendly courteous "hello sir, how's it going"- not any intention to ask me where I was going, for what purpose, etc. And then they moved right along.

At that point, my understanding of my identity moved: it became crystal clear that, however I might identify with my Latinx roots, a quick visual inspection by those trained to draw such inferences leaves no doubt that I will be read as white. This moment has served as a guide to my thinking/acting about my Whiteness and Latinidad ever since: not to attempt to claim the space of those who are immediately and unambiguously read as Latinx, but also as a reminder to be aware of what may be assumed of me (and possibly then moving to what I may do to confound such assumptions).

SCENE 3: Getting It?

A Spectrum?

A Hispanic Caucus for faculty was established at my university recently. From the start, I felt
welcomed/included. They asked me about my ability to speak Spanish, and I sheepishly admitted
my major limits. That never stopped them from embracing me, nor did my lack of a Latinx name
or accent or visibly white skin color. At a recent annual banquet, one fellow caucus member
explained that she felt like I was like one of her sons, who appeared white but in ways of
thinking/seeing evinced a sense of "getting it," her other son may have looked more Latinx but
was not seeking that view of the world. I relayed to her my Greyhound story to convey
concentric circles of "getting it" and of which conversations I needed/didn't need to be a part.
Much like men can play a role in some conversations about sex, gender, equality, feminism, and
patriarchy, they also don't and shouldn't be in some conversations, and to me, those who are on
the "front lines," so to speak, of Latinx identity challenges, are in a better position to tell me

when I can be usefully in the conversation and when they can make clear that another
conversation isn't one for me, at least at this time. Maybe "getting it" is more of a spectrum, and
despite my colleague's support, I regularly feel like I don't "get it" in so many ways.

Between Two Worlds?

I was sitting in AP Spanish, lead scribbling down as fast as my muscles could muster. Homework ready to submit next to me, memories come in from the night before.

¡Mira es casi las diez de la noche y no vas a dormir hasta lo termines!

Look, it is almost ten o'clock and you are not going to bed unless you're done!

¡Pero no sé qué escribir! ¡Creí que entendí que el libro estaba diciendo, pero parece que no!

But I don't know what to write! I thought I understood what the book was saying but I guess not!

¿Como vas a pasar esta clase si no puedes entender que está pasando?

How are you going to pass this class if you don't know what is happening?

The torment of writing this paper took everything in me. A constant back and forth between my papá and stepmom. To the point where it was almost mid-night. A reminder that I wasn't a native Spanish speaker. That although I was quite fluent, this class was a constant reminder that I wasn't a true Paraguayan. Nor was I a true American. I didn't know the lingo; I just was passing by. Who was I to the Latinx community if I couldn't understand a simple short story without a Spanish to English dictionary? Who was I to the United States if I mispronounced words and did not understand their idioms? Who was I to the Latinx community if I was just a light-skinned American citizen who might've lived their whole life in Latin American countries yet was a disgrace to them all at the same time for not keeping up with their culture(s)?

A tug between two worlds.

SCENE 4: A Long Story

That Wall?

Preparing for a simple move across town, I happen upon a box of memorabilia, including a set of ballcaps. One of those caps reads "U.S. BORDER PATROL." My mom has three brothers, one of whom spent his professional career as a Border Patrol agent. Growing up, I never made these connections. And perhaps, because unlike my mother, whose skin color clearly marked her difference, my uncles could pass as white. But in the current moment, of family separation, ever-heightened border law enforcement, the never-ending clamoring for BUILD THAT WALL, and given that I am not in frequent communication with my uncles, I don't know where I would even start such a conversation.

What Is Ready?

"Arriving in Asuncion in 15 minutes"
Leg itches up and down as hands wipe down on sweatpants – hoping to fold up and disappear. *It's too late now* –Eyes stare into the dark sky the lights underneath flicker like little candles beckoning me closer. Goosebumps emerge as the lights become buildings and individual cars can be located. Muscles clench praying that the harder I do so, the more I repel the seemingly magnetic pull drawing us in.

I'm not ready.

Will I ever be ready?

I can't be ready.

When is ready?

What is ready?

I mean, I hadn't seen my mom's side of the family in over fifteen years. And here I was, closer to them than I ever was, ever had been.

Their existence was known yet unspoken. Unspoken by me. Unspoken by dad. Yet tarnished by my step-mom. Whenever I got in trouble, their names were used as bullets targeting the skin to see bleed. I willed my mom to emerge to wipe the stains away begged my father for stories yet all I got in return was silence. Growing up I knew my body was the elephant in the room. A reminder

of my mom's existence. A reminder of my dad's past. A reminder of a different time. A past that I never was a part of yet a product of.
So, here I was. A couple of minutes to touching down on the land of my ancestors. The land my mother walked on. Breathed on. Laughed on. Land where she rests. Land that could unsilence that of my silenced family. A family I never really knew, a family that didn't know me. I came here to learn more. To know more. Yet

I wonder if the bullet residue can ever be exhumed.

Curtain Call

In attempting to make sense of these stories and the experiences they represent, we do not aim at neatly or tidily harmonizing our respective explorations of Latinx identity. Instead, we paired the stories offered above as scenes providing glimpses of insight into an ongoing play. Such depictions explore moments in our lives, moments that have left an impact on how we articulate and come to terms with this particular intersection – that of being light skin Latinx. In featuring four scenes and an interlude, our stories play off one another, giving each of us space and time to re-member, reflect, and reflexively come to terms with our ascribed Whiteness.

Our first scene, "awkward 'me,'" suggests the difficulties of classifications. Specifically, it explores the implications and impacts of marking one's demographics in questionnaires, forms that end up reducing/erasing a range of identities by their limited number of boxes to check. The vignettes themselves were not perfectly symmetrical. Whereas the moment of asking one's parent was an opportunity to question who/what one was, an opportunity missed since it was not until much later that the differences between Hispanic and Latinx became known to Spencer. In the case of the coaching staff's demographics, there was not a lack of internal understanding [from Matt] but rather an internal anxiety or hesitation about how others would/might respond. Either way, it meant that the question of identification just sat there, in the air, and would remain so indefinitely after that. We both, whether intentionally or not, ended up deferring more systematic explorations of our identities as Latinx. That is, until now, in collaboratively developing this essay.

In our second scene, "elephants," we become the 'elephant in the room.' Our bodies were put under heavy fire as our experiences showcased where we felt like we stood out and instantly did not belong. In such situations, we felt like we were on a tightrope, uncertain as to whether or not we had the right, if we could, claim ourselves as Latinx. Where we felt like imposters to our own heritage. For instance, in reflecting on the imposter-officer situation, it became clear that the

feeling of not being accepted, or having to prove one's self, was largely a conjuring up of Matt's, and the actual experience proved to be one of welcoming and encouragement. In "Estados Unidos," though, Spencer clearly had external evidence, in how others reacted indirectly toward and directly with, that suggested a lack of acceptance/welcoming from others (at least without having "proven" one's self-worth). One essential similarity is that, whether internal (imposter syndrome) and/or external (interactions with fellow students), such "elephant" status may never "get any easier," even when those around us are actually accepting and supportive.

In our interlude, we offer a pause within our play for readers to join us on our voyage of coming to terms with our Latinx identity. Forced to acknowledge our ways of adapting – in both silence as well as trial and error. How in both cases our attempts to survive were futile? Judged in their own proximities. Blows to our very sense of belonging. A belonging we start to wonder if we will ever feel. A belonging we wonder if we are meant to understand. But nevertheless, one we want to continue to unpack. In both cases, the presumptive Whiteness is such that both individuals could be read as completely white or non-Latinx. However, in the case of practicing Spanish, Spencer opted to mark themselves as Latinx even if that would not have otherwise been inferred by the class. Matt, riding on the Greyhound, however, opted to be allowed to be read as white. Clearly, significant differences were also no doubt present. For instance, in getting ready for class, Spencer would have prepared on the assumption that they would be required to participate in-class, without a clear option to stay on the sidelines, whereas on the Greyhound there would not have been such an expectation, and indeed the expectation for everyone on the bus was understood to be not speaking unless spoken to by the enforcers temporarily on the bus. Similarly the stakes of defying expectations would have been different—in one case, perhaps going to the principal in the light of day if they refused to participate, whereas in the other a defiance of law enforcement at a state border in the middle of the night could have led to any number of punishments including at a minimum getting kicked off the bus with no way to get back their university. Nevertheless, these occasions raise, without attempting to answer, the question of how one read as presumptively/apparently white and non-Latinx may choose to respond and with what positive and or negative consequences. Our later scenes then go onto discussing the uncertainty of claiming ourselves as Latinx. We felt like imposters to our own heritage. Our own bloodline. That regardless of where we were, we were outsiders. Outsiders who hid under the safety of privilege. In order to "fit in" in some ways, but potentially at the expense of demonstrating belonging with our Latinx identities.

Scene 3, "Getting it?," raises the question of whether and how someone who passes as white rather than as Latinx is able to comprehend the experiences of those for whom presenting in a multiplicity of ways is not optional but instead imposed by immediate markers – skin color, name, command of English and/or

Spanish languages, and performance of cultural practices, for instance. In important ways, the impetus for the reflecting and questioning was different, one in the case of directly articulating a concern about being able to understand to a Latinx faculty colleague and the other being much more of an internal set of self-questioning. Similarly, the reason for the reflecting was different—in one case, faced by a specific difficulty about degree of proficiency in an AP Spanish class, the other in articulating one's self in relation to a campus caucus centered on Latinx identity. However, both raised questions of belonging, and both questioned whether one could be somewhere on a spectrum of getting it, regarding cultural understanding, language use, or both.

Finally, scene 4 comes full circle. If scene one relayed a deferral, whatever the cause, of exploring one's Latinx identity, in this fourth scene, we explore the proverbial can of worms that we have opened in this storytelling in trying to account for ourselves, to ourselves and to those in our family. Clearly, if such opportunities even exist, they exist in necessarily long-form, as no combinations of 140 or 280 characters are going to illuminate our experiences as Latinx yet passing/existing presumptively as white. Thus, in addition to the question of whether, for instance, family would listen to or believe us if we tried to explain ourselves, we would also need to believe that we had enough time to unpack the challenges. Again, meaningful differences arise. For Spencer, this interaction with one's extended Latinx family was happening either way, and the challenge is how to navigate it, where for Matt, the unnerving hat is a reminder that, even if such a conversation were possible, Matt's uncle would be unlikely to understand their own self-identity as Latinx, much less Matt's.

Concluding Remarks

In concluding, we offer two contributions. On the one hand, because of the cultural, institutional, economic, social, and interpersonal privileges afforded by being presumed to be white, we understand that the decision of whether to seek out one's Latinx roots, and whether or not to share them with others in a way that subverts their expectations that we are Latinx, is already itself privilege. In a time when looking and/or sounding Latinx may already render someone as suspicious or as an alien body, most Latinx community members do not have the luxury of choosing whether or not to assume such risk. On the other hand, because of the continued substantial growth of Latinx populations living in the United States, there are likely to be many others who will share, though not identically, some of the challenges we offer here, and for whom this essay may offer at least some potential resources for, if not a usable pathway forward for them, at least a reminder that they are not going through this on their own. Furthermore, though we do not want to map too precisely this framework onto other experiences, it seems like there are a number of other racial/ethnic identity categories, as well as

any number of other potentially marginalized identities, where individuals may face similar challenges. In such cases, those who might otherwise "pass" by default may also be exploring how they can articulate their identities in a way that resonates with how they see and understand themselves. In writing this, we are not trying to make our voices paramount to non-white Latinx voices. We just want it to be known that we are out there. We are here in solidarity. And we are working to untangle the safety net we have entrapped ourselves in. To be with you. Our work is not done. It will never be done. We may never truly get it. We may never truly understand. *Pero estamos aquí*. We are here. *Y estamos tratando*. We are trying. *De etender*. To understand. *Como podemos estar aquí para vos*. How we can be here for you.