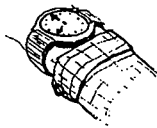


# I DON'T THINK A LATINO SHOULD TEACH ABOUT WHITENESS: A STORY ABOUT ESSENTIALISM AND LATINO/A MULTIPLICITY

By José Sisneros, Ph.D., University of Denver

*In this narrative the author, a professor of social work who teaches a course on multiculturalism in a Graduate School of Social Work, is shocked when a student tells him that he shouldn't teach about Whiteness because he is Latino. This leads to a period of reflection and clarification which occurs through a dialogue with Sandra a professor of philosophy. Sandra helps the author understand the concepts of "essentialism" and "Latino/a multiplicity." This dialogue enables the author to respond to the student's comment.*

I looked at my watch; it was 4:45 p.m., almost time to end the class I was teaching, Multicultural Social Work Practice. It was the summer quarter and the classroom was located in the basement of an old building where the air conditioner never worked as it should. This was the first year that I was teaching this course, which was still controversial among faculty and students and new in the curriculum. The class was developed by a committee of professors who had taken about nine months to develop a syllabus. This process incorporated many different ideologies and ideas on how a multicultural class should be taught. For the students, it was controversial because many felt that since they had taken courses on multiculturalism in undergraduate school, they did not need another one.



Today the topic was Whiteness and what it means to be a White person in this society. The class was difficult and the students defensive. One student verbalized that in classes such as this, Whites were blamed for all of the social ills of society. Another student pointed out that the textbook that we were using, *White by Law*, had a "finger pointing" view. I was feeling irritable and wished that

the clock would move faster. I also sensed that the students were irritable. After I dismissed class and the students were leaving the classroom, I began erasing the chalkboard when one of the students, a young, early twenties, White female approached me. I looked around as she blurted out, "I don't think a Latino should teach about Whiteness!" The comment took me by surprise, but before I could answer she made a quick spin, and walked out of the classroom. I finished erasing the chalkboard and put my notes into my briefcase while thinking, "I really don't need this; I have other options."

Walking to my car, which was located about three blocks from the school, I continued to think about the comment and became even more irritable as I began the one-hour commute to my home. As I drove from the ramp onto the freeway, the afternoon sun forced its way into the car and it felt pleasing. I began to relax and think about other things. At about 5:45 p.m. I entered the outskirts of the community where I live. However, I stopped by the side of a mountain where a trail led to a spot where I would go when things were troubling me or where I would go to write when the weather permitted. I locked my car, put on my favorite cap, stuffed my writing notebook in my backpack where I had some articles I planned to read, and started hiking up the mountain.

As I began the walk, I noticed the combination of colors from the mountain jumping out in interesting mixtures. I found my spot, which was located a little off the trail, a large rock with a crevice that looked like a chair. I sat down, stretched my arms, closed my eyes, and drifted off for awhile. I think I was even starting to dream. Then I heard a voice, "José, José." I opened my eyes and standing before me was Sandra, whom I had met two weeks previous at a community function. She was wearing a bright blue jogging suit and carrying a small backpack. She was Latina, lived in the same community that I did but worked as a professor at a different university than I, and was doing some writing around Latino/a identity. I found her conversation to be stimulating. I have always been interested in philosophy and was now interested in how it related to social work and multiculturalism.

"Sandra," I said with excitement in my voice and shook her hand. She said she had been jogging, but she wasn't even breathing hard, and I asked her if she wanted to sit for awhile. She sat down on another rock and took off her backpack as I offered her half of an apple. Talking about our lives for awhile, I learned more about her; she was from Texas, born to a poor migrant family from Mexico, and was now a professor of philosophy in a major university. She was one of a handful of Latina/o professors in philosophy in the United States, if not the world.

Our conversation drifted to the classes we were teaching at our respective universities and in our respective disciplines and we began to share some of our experiences in the classroom. Eventually, I told her about my experience in class that day and the student's comments. After listening to my tirade for awhile, she said, "Wow, that's a good example of essentialism." I had recently been introduced to the word after reading some critical race theory (Delgado, 1996). However, I still was not clear on the concept

so I asked her, "Tell me about your understanding of essentialism."

"If one believes in the logic of essentialism, then the student was correct." I was startled. She saw my reaction but continued, "The concept has its roots in the concept of essence. If you remember from your undergraduate days some of the Aristotelian doctrines of essence and substance, where 'things are what they are because they contain the essences of the kinds of things to which they belong: essences (somehow) in individual things that are substances; and the essences of substances support their accidental attributes. Words that refer to kinds of things have definitions that describe the essences of those kinds'" (Zack, 2000).

I think she sensed that I didn't clearly understand what she was talking about. "What I mean," she said, "is that when we as Latinos/as share an identity within this concept, it is indiscernible and it means we share every property." She continued, "This concept is used when we describe different groups and different group identities. It is what Young (1990) calls 'a logic of substance'. Under this logic a 'group is defined by a set of essential attributes that constitute the identity of a group. It is grounded in a fixed set of shared characteristics or experiences of members of an identity group. An example of an essentialist view is the often-used example of the self-help text, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. This book essentializes gender emphasizing the difference of men and women to the relative exclusion of internal distinctions within either category'" (Henze, 2000).

"So," I said, "in this way of thinking Latinos/as have an essential core that defines us as a group."

"Exactly," she said. "We are often seen as having similar properties based on a common essence, a set of attributes such as the Spanish language, extended families, Catholic religion, and so forth."



"This is interesting," I replied. "You know, I spent 20 years working in community mental health, and in those 20 years I was always expected to be an expert of Latinos/as. I think I understand now. It is because of my essence and this presumed understanding that I share similar properties with all other Latinos/as; therefore, I'm an expert on Latino/a life. What a set up!"

She smiled and said, "Yes, you were an 'essence' expert" (Sisneros, 2002). She continued, "However, this doesn't mean that you wasted your time or that you gave out bad information; you offered a 'minority perspective' and I'm sure your audiences learned a lot about Latinos/as."

"Maybe," I replied. "In those days I wasn't fluent in the literature and most of what I presented was from my own experience. I was no expert on all Latinos/as!"

Sandra continued, "A problem with Aristotelian essence is that it has been used against us. The dominant group perceives the essence of Latinos/as as inferior or 'less than' and it then justifies the oppression. Essence is seen as natural so that's the way it is. It's simply the way things are, have been, and will be."

"Yes, the natural paradigm," I blurted out, proud of myself for remembering that. I pulled out an article that I had thrown in my backpack because I'd wanted to spend more time thinking about it. I took a few minutes looking at the article and said, "Let me read this to you: 'Underlying all racism and sexism is the notion of a natural or biological difference alleged to separate the groups in question in a fundamental, inevitable and irreversible way'" (Rothenberg, 1990). I continued, "Don't you think that what Rothenberg and you are talking about is a biological essentialism? I thought that there was general understanding, at least in academia, that biological essentialism has been discredited."

She smiled, then almost broke into a laugh and asked, "Well, what about the book, *The Bell Curve*?" At this point, we both laughed and gave each other the 'high five.'

She stated, "I do think that in academia we're beginning to discredit biological essentialism. However, let me see the article; I'm familiar with it." I handed her the article and she spent a couple of minutes glancing over it. As she was glancing over the article, there were some moments of silence. Suddenly, I became aware of the noises from the mountain – birds chirping and a sound like crickets from the bushes. She said, "Here it is, let me read you this quote:"

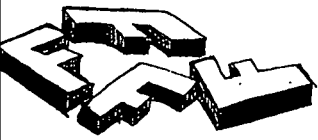
*"While the nature/biology paradigm is often portrayed (and even dismissed) as crude and unsophisticated it has never been entirely replaced or supplemented. In fact, additional paradigms have been generated at different historical moments to meet the changing economic, social and political conditions and their attendant needs, but these new paradigms always function within the context of the nature/biology paradigm; they never replace it"* (Rothenberg, 1990, p. 45).

"This makes sense," I replied. "One thing that we have done is create another paradigm using culture instead of personal attributes. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) discuss the idea that the mainstream way of looking at difference is what they call pluralist multiculturalism. This is where we define the difference of groups by using cultural activities. Sometimes we do this to the point where we exoticize different groups, a form of cultural essentialism," I continued, again very proud of myself.

"Yes, I agree with that," she replied, "the four F's."

"What?" I blurted out.

"Well," she continued, "according to Kanpol (1997), at times we look at social



groups such as Latinos/as using fairs, food, festivals, and folktales. The four F's." I laughed as she continued, "Let's look at essentialism from a political perspective. There seems to be an assumption that all Latinos/as have the same interests and agree on the values, strategies, and policies that will promote those interests (Alcoff, 2000). Therefore, if we share an identity then we will be political allies."

"Is this a bad thing?" I asked. "Could we Latinos/as really trust someone who is White to represent our interests?"

"This is where we need to be careful," she replied quickly, "because someone is Latino/a doesn't mean that they will share our interests. I think we have learned this from history. Someone's essence does not make them an expert on Latino/a life. However, as a social group we do have broad shared interests. As a group we still have high poverty rates, and could we really say that racism and ethnicism doesn't occur anymore? With these broad shared interests we have a concept called strategic essentialism, which means that we strategically use these broad interests to make demands."

"So," I said, trying to understand, "we use essentialism politically, but the mistake comes in when we try to describe Latinos/as, for example, in setting up clinical programs."

"Yes," she replied, "when we reduce the entire Latino/a population to some single criteria held to constitute its defining essence and character" (Calhoun, 1997).

"Could you give me examples?" I asked.

She replied, "I think the idea that Latinos/as use folk healers; certainly that's true for some Latinos/as, but many Latinos/as even from Mexico don't use them."

"Okay, that helps," I said. At this point, we both became silent. She stood up and stretched. I stood and again became aware of the magnificent mountain that I was on. The sun was starting to set and the brilliant color was pouring through the trees. It was a

remarkable sight. I apologized, "I guess you were going to go jogging and we spent all the time talking about essentialism."

She replied, "What we just accomplished was a rigorous exercise for the mind."

I asked her if she wanted to continue this at another time. We agreed to meet in two days, and then started down the mountain together. She gave me the names of Young, Alcoff, and Hames-Garcia to read before we met again, then started running up the trail. At this point, I had a fantasy that she could race a deer.

The two days passed rapidly. Not sleeping much, I spent most of my time reading. When I arrived at her office about 10 minutes early, she was working at her computer, and without turning around she said, "Hola, Jose, come on in. I will be done in a minute." Her office was small and all four walls were covered with books. Looking at the titles, I saw Foucault, Sartre, and many of the philosophical giants.

She turned from the computer smiling, and I realized that she is always smiling. "Tell me Jose, what do you want the multicultural class to do?"

I knew how to answer this question. "I want to help them to be able to understand difference without stereotyping, to be able to conceptualize more than one difference at a time, to be able to talk about difference without talking about sameness."

"I think," she said, "the first thing we need to do is to get out of the conceptual trap we are in and get away from the idea of 'cultural purity' and 'cultural totality.' These are both enlightenment ideas that contribute to the essentialism."

I asked, "Does this mean that we have to get rid of the concept of essence?"

"Well, not necessarily," she answered. "There is an argument in favor of Locke's concept of nominal essences that places essences to be contingent on language and thus variable (Zack, 2000). This makes the

concept more workable, but," she continued, "I think we should follow Young's (2001) advice to see different groups as relational rather than defined by substantive categories and attributes. She recommends that rather than using attributes, we use the concept of a social group. I have it right in front of me":

*"What makes a group is a social process of interaction and differentiation in which some people come to have a particular affinity for others. My 'affinity group' in a given social situation comprises those people with whom I feel the most comfortable, who are more familiar. Affinity names the manner of sharing assumptions, affective bonding, and networking that recognizably differentiates groups from one another, but not according to some common nature." (p. 399)*

"I like this," I said. "It allows flexibility in thinking."

She continued, "There is another close concept called 'linked fate' that signifies a felt connection to others of one's identity group based on the belief that their fate will impinge on one's own, operates to tie individuals together on the basis of being subject to a certain type of treatment" (Alcoff, 2000).

I responded to her statement: "These concepts—nominal essence, affinity and linked fate—they help in understanding. In this way of thinking one can be a Latino/a and not understand the Spanish language or practice the traditions, but yet have a connection because of our 'linked fate.' I think this is important because over the last 20-some years, I have seen Latinos/as who don't have certain attributes excluded from certain situations."

"Yes," she replied, "the other danger of essentialism is that it leads to who is 'authentic' or who has the credentials to belong to a group. I've seen how some middle class

Latinos/as and some biracial Latinos/as felt left out of the Chicano/a movement."

"Ok!" I blurted out, "How do we teach about Latino multiplicity?"

Sandra then asked, "José, how many identities do you have?"

"Well, I'm Latino, male, 52 years of age, heterosexual, have an illness that could turn into a disability, and I'm a professor, a father.... I could go on. What's your point?" I think I sounded irritated by her question.

She stated, "Your identity as a Latino is only one identity of many, but it is politically salient. Let's hold the idea of political saliency for a little bit here. Our individual experiences are raw materials whereby we construct identities. Thus, all of our experiences are different. Look, Jose, I'm from Texas, my parents are from Mexico, and I think you told me that your parents are from New Mexico. Our experiences are different."

"But, but," I said mumbling, "I feel a bonding with you for many reasons, but one is that you are Latina."

She looked at me and softly replied, "Remember the concept of a social group, and even though we have had different personal experiences, we have both been oppressed. That in itself ties us together. We are held together as a 'structural social group.' We grew up in different parts of the country, were treated as we didn't belong; it is not that we shared the same cultural attributes. Gracia (as quoted in Young, 2000) proposes that

*"There are many people in the world rightly associated with the group 'Hispanic/Latino' but not because they share a particular set of attributes—whether race, nationality, language, or religion. What defines a group instead is the relation to its members have to the long and determinant history of Iberian colonization of the Americas." (p. 154)*

"Ah! Another example of linked fate," I said. Mohatny (2000) discusses the idea that identity constructions provide narratives that link our historical memories of social groups.

"Ok, now are you ready for understanding political saliency? Listen to this metaphor from Garcia-Hames (2000)." She picked up a sheet of paper and again smiled, "Think of a photograph," she said.

*"Photographs can portray endless shapes and variations of hue and contrast. While one album may contain hundreds of photographs, no two are even remotely alike. All of the photographs contain combinations of three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. Each of the photographs may contain yellow, yet the yellow may be present in different densities and shapes and combine with red and blue in different densities and shapes. Thus no two photographs contain yellow in the same way. In some photographs, the yellow may not be visible; there may be only some green or orange. What the yellow looks like depends not only on its own shape and density but also on the shape and density of the red and the blue and their position in relation both to the yellow and to each other. Thus yellow next to red looks different from yellow next to blue."* (p. 103)

"Wow! You are really getting abstract with me."

"Hang on," she said. This time she wasn't smiling. "Think of the self in relation to this conception of a photograph. Think of the colors as groups. If we think of being conservative as red and being gay as green, those two colors put next to each other stand out brighter than if left alone. Memberships in various groups combine with and mutually constitute one another. You said you were Latino, a professor, a male, and a heterosexual. Each of these identities mutually constitutes one another. For example,

membership in the group maleness means something different in the context to simultaneous group membership (Latino). All of your identities blend together. They expand and constitute each other's meanings. The subjective experience of one's group membership depends on and relates to memberships in other groups."

"I like this, but I'm still confused," I confessed.

She continued, "Of all of your identities some are salient, for example, you being a Latino professor. My guess is that when you walk into the classroom the first thing that students notice is that you are Latino. Of all of the identities that you've talked about, your identity as a Latino becomes reduced or restricted. If you were gay, then you would have two identities that were restricted because of political saliency."

"I think I'm starting to understand. If none of the identities are politically salient then they remain in the background. The reason that they are politically salient is that they are based on social movements."

I was intrigued as she declared, "If none of your identities are politically salient they are transparent. You don't see them. Lopez-Haney (1996) talks about the transparency phenomena when it comes to Whiteness. To be White is not to have to deal with it on a daily basis. However, your Latinoism becomes opaque, or as some have called it, 'thick group membership.' The transparency is the norm that designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definite human beings. Young (1990) states, 'One group occupies the position of a norm against which all others are measured. The attempt to reduce all persons to the entity of a common measure constructs as deviant those where all attributes are implicitly presumed in the norm.' Young (2001) continued, 'The norm becomes a universal subject position and the theory of privileging begins where only the oppressed



and excluded groups are defined as different. Whereas, the privileged groups are neutral and exhibit free and malleable subjectivity, the excluded groups are marked with an essence, imprisoned in a given set of possibilities' (p. 397). The closer one fits this, the more transparent one is. The further one moves away from the norm the more opaque one becomes. The problem comes when people 'try to fit the description in the same way that Cinderella's stepsisters attempted to squeeze their feet in the glass slipper'" (Thompson, 1997, p. 8).

"José," Sandra said, "I have a meeting across campus. Do you want to walk with me?" I got up as she gathered some papers and we walked out of the office. She closed her door and it locked automatically. We started walking. The day was beautiful; since it was the summer quarter, the campus was quiet, yet there were students sitting in the grass reading, talking, eating. Then all of a sudden we heard, "To your right," as a student on a skateboard flew past us.

"José," she asked, "What are you feeling?"

"I don't know. I feel my mood changing. Everything we have been talking about makes sense. I think that the student's comments were very important. I think a Latino/a could teach about Whiteness, and I think people who are White should teach multiculturalism. But, you know, I've heard some faculty say that a person of color is the one who should teach a multicultural class."

"Maybe they're right," she said.

"No, I don't think they are. I think what we've done is to simplify something very complex and in doing so, we've fed into essentialism." I continued, "We're complicated human beings in a complicated world. I was going through some literature that stated that about 36 percent of us Latinos/as now have married outside the group. I heard it's the same for some of the other groups. However, I was surprised to hear that

75 percent of Native Americans are now married outside their group. What this tells me supports what you were saying about cultural purity. It's gone, but it doesn't mean that we don't have differences. We need a new language to talk about all of this stuff. I think I'm ready for class tomorrow."

We stopped before she went into the building. She extended her hand, which I shook tightly, not wanting to let go. She looked directly into my eyes and said, "Buena suerte, Jose." I was speechless and watched her as she went into the meeting.

After looking at the door for several minutes, I started walking home. I only lived a few blocks from the campus. At first I walked briskly, and then, all of a sudden, I felt exhausted, having not slept well for a couple of days. Walking into my living room, I turned on the TV, sank into my couch, and promptly fell asleep, awaking suddenly and looked at my watch, it was 3:36 a.m. I staggered off to bed and entered into a series of dreams about identities and colors all merging together with different combinations emerging. When I woke up around 9:00 a.m., I realized that I had only a couple of hours to prepare for class. I remember a colleague telling me that sometimes students present individual concerns but are really speaking for the entire group, and I think that is what this student was doing. I also remember some advice from another colleague who said that I had to remember that I was well read in multiculturalism and most of the students were not. The advice was to go slower.

As I entered the class, I realized I had forgotten to shave and probably looked a little disheveled. I opened up a dialogue with the students, addressing the issue of essentialism and asking them what it felt like to take a multicultural class from a Latino professor. This discussion went well, but one student said she felt if she said something to offend me that I might label her as a racist.

Afterwards, reworking the class syllabus, I focused on the concepts that I learned from Sandra. The rest of the quarter went well. I learned some valuable lessons from Sandra, who in reality is myself, my alter ego. Delgado (1996), author of several books about affirmative action and other issues around race, uses an alter ego named Rodrigo. I chose Sandra, a Latina, as an alter ego since she represents the influence of feminist thinking, especially from Latina writers and philosophers, on my current thinking and growth on multiculturalism.

I am pleased to state that the class has continued and is a requirement for all of our entering students. It has gained credibility among our faculty, which was evidenced in a recent faculty meeting where some decisions had to be made concerning some of our courses in the curriculum. It was clear from our declining enrollment that some courses had to be cut. One of the suggestions was that we cut the multicultural course for advanced students. The faculty almost unanimously rejected that idea and voted to keep the course as it is. The students continue to provide feedback that the course has been helpful and that they enjoy the class. The students also report that they are able to use the concepts learned in the multicultural class in other courses in the curriculum.

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