Power, Race, and Higher Education
A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative
Kakali Bhattacharya and Norman K. Gillen

Power, Race, and Higher Education is a parallel narrative written by two scholars. Kakali Bhattacharya, who is a South Asian woman who immigrated to the United States to pursue her graduate degrees and eventually became an academic. Kent Gillen is a White man who focuses on completing his doctoral studies under Kakali’s supervision. Kent comes to a crossroad where he has to interrogate his sociocultural position, how he benefits from a White supremacist system, even if he did not ask for any of the benefits or had his personal plights. Embedded in the dilemmas are implications for cross-cultural qualitative research, understanding of how whiteness functions, and how we attend to our deepest wounds as we work to become allies and build bridges.

This book can be used in undergraduate and graduate courses in race and culture studies in the social sciences and humanities, qualitative methods courses, and graduate classes that help students with writing up qualitative research. Individual graduate students and professors who advise graduate students may benefit from this text.

“Riveting, courageous, innovative and brave! This spell-binding book not only holds your attention, it holds you to account as you read a beautifully integrated narrative that weaves theory, research, artistry and practice into an utterly compelling positioning of our power relations within society and the academy.” – Rita Irwin, Ph.D., Professor of Art Education in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, and Associate Dean of Teacher Education, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver

“It is a book that will inform scholarly conversations with both undergraduate and graduate students, and influence future qualitative researchers.” – Enrique Alemán, Jr., Ph.D., Professor & Chair, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, University of Texas at San Antonio

Kakali Bhattacharya is an associate professor at the Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.

Norman K. Gillen is an adjunct instructor, who teaches English and Industrial Communications at Del Mar College.
Power, Race, and Higher Education
TEACHING RACE AND ETHNICITY

Volume 5

Series Editor
Patricia Leavy
USA

International Editorial Board
Theodorea Regina Berry, Mercer University, USA
Owen Crankshaw, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Payi Linda Ford, Charles Darwin University, Australia
Patricia Hill Collins, University of Maryland, USA
Virinder Kalra, University of Manchester, UK
Marvin Lynn, Indiana University, USA
Nuria Rosich, Barcelona University (Emerita), Spain
Beverley Anne Yamamoto, Osaka University, Japan

Scope

The Teaching Race and Ethnicity series publishes monographs, anthologies and reference books that deal centrally with race and/or ethnicity. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate classes across the disciplines. The series aims to promote social justice with an emphasis on multicultural, indigenous, intersectionality and critical race perspectives.

Please email queries to the series editor at pleavy7@aol.com
Power, Race, and Higher Education

A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative

Foreword by Laurel Richardson

Kakali Bhattacharya
Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, USA

and

Norman K. Gillen
Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA
ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
POWER, RACE, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

“Riveting, courageous, innovative and brave! This spell-binding book not only holds your attention, it holds you to account as you read a beautifully integrated narrative that weaves theory, research, artistry and practice into an utterly compelling positioning of our power relations within society and the academy. PhD supervisors and candidates should use this book as a springboard for pursuing deeply reflexive and risky research that will surely be personally transformative and critical, all within a creative lenses.

Bhattacharya and Gillen have officially raised the bar on PhD research practices. Never before have I read an account that brings together the parallel narratives of a PhD supervisor working with a PhD candidate. A complex research study steeped in Chicano feminism and cross-cultural theories of engagement, pushes against privilege in ways that is often uncomfortable yet arguably essential. Choosing a structure of parallel narratives that employ script-like theatrical elements, Bhattacharya and Gillen masterfully craft a woven story that gradually reveals an awakening of male White privilege. Historically, the academy demands that we hold our research to a high standard of reflexivity, where we not only document and research the lives of others, but also interrogate our positionality and ourselves within our research. Bhattacharya models this high standard with increasing intentionality as Gillen progresses through his PhD. Practicing compassion in those moments when Gillen wonders if he can go on, Bhattacharya reframes her mentorship and encourages his next steps. To Gillen’s credit he accepted his supervisor’s call to self-reflexivity ever more deeply over time until his own awakening of positionality emerged. This book is a gem! PhD supervisors and their students often share research interests, and perhaps other professional interests, but seldom if ever take the immensely courageous step of examining their concurrent positions through rigorous theoretical practices and vigorous critically creative practices in a full length manuscript. This work is at once rigorous and vigorous. It is the best of what we all aspire to be in our PhD supervisor – student relationships and within our qualitative research communities. It is an inspiration to me and I am certain it will be an inspiration to others. May we all be so committed to our artistry, pedagogy and scholarship that we risk revealing our deep
engagement as a process of personal interrogation considered through a compassionate spirit.”
– Rita Irwin, Ph.D., Author of A Circle of Empowerment: Women, Education, and Leadership, Professor of Art Education in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, and Associate Dean of Teacher Education, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

“This book is filled with ghosts, of both the haunting and foreshadowing kind. The ghosts are former teachers, family members, mentors and fellow travellers. But there are also colonial ghosts, post-multicultural ghosts, and borderland motherghost Gloria Anzaldúa, who sounds a call to action throughout these pages.

Bhattacharya – a self-identified Brown woman – and Gillen – a self-identified white man – come together not only in intercultural, narrative, and pedagogical ways, but in political and personal ones too. Spanning the fields of race, ethnicity, multiculturalism, power, qualitative methods, and arts-based research, this book pulses with heartfelt and insightful thoughts for those interested in critical race and intercultural scholarship. It also, wonderfully, offers just plain powerful and ready-to-go teaching exercises that can be used by readers to start our own journeys of intercultural learning and teaching in all our classrooms. Buy it now!”
– Anne Harris, Ph.D., Author of Creativity and Education, Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

“This is a great book. Bhattacharya and Gillen jointly retell their introspective struggles with their professional and personal identities in this compelling confessional tale. Power, Race, and Higher Education intimately explores the sensitive and emotionally charged interpersonal dynamics between a dissertation supervisor of color and her White male doctoral student researching a Chicana’s life story. Through vulnerable personal narratives and ethnodramatic scenes, the co-authors reveal their respective journeys in academia with their sometimes challenging, yet always supportive, working relationship. Told in honest and straightforward language, this engaging book has much to say about scholarly responsibility, White privilege, and our necessary reconciliation toward equity and a deep awareness of self.”
– Johnny Saldaña, Author of Ethnotheatre: Research From Page to Stage, Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University
“I love this book! Writing with intellectual humility and great insight, Kakali Bhattacharya and Kent Gillen use story, self-reflection, ethnodrama, and other forms of dialogue to explore some of the most urgent questions facing twenty-first-century educators: How do we build commonalities without ignoring or sidestepping privilege, complicity, and other forms of desconocimientos (willed ignorance)? How do we assist students from a variety of backgrounds to self-reflect on the ways these backgrounds have shaped them? How do we work with students whose worldviews and life experiences are starkly different from our own? In short, how do we effect transformation? *Power, Race, and Higher Education* offers intertwined personal narratives, pedagogical suggestions, and deep reflection that perform vital bridging work for educators, students, nepantleras, threshold people, and other social-justice actors.”

– AnaLouise Keating, Ph.D., Author of *Transformation Now: Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change*, Professor & Doctoral Program Director, Department of Multicultural Women’s & Gender Studies, Texas Woman’s University

“In melding inquiry with creativity and critical consciousness, Drs. Bhattacharya and Gillen share how their evolving professor-student relationship developed into an innovative example of qualitative research. In *Power, Race, and Higher Education*, the authors demonstrate what is possible when academics, educators, and researchers confront their biases and interrogate the histories and perspectives that shape their identities. Bhattacharya and Gillen narrate their experiences of conducting research and share how critical self-reflection can enhance the presentation of stories of underrepresented communities. To their credit, they do not shy away from difficult and complex questions related to race, power, privilege, and representation. In confronting their personal life experiences, readers are able to read first hand the messiness and nuance one must embrace when designing research studies and delineating one’s research purpose, methods and epistemological framework. It is a book that will inform scholarly conversations with both undergraduate and graduate students, and influence future qualitative researchers.”

– Enrique Alemán, Jr., Ph.D., Executive Producer and co-writer of *Stolen Education, A Documentary Film*, Professor & Chair, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, University of Texas at San Antonio
“This book could not be more timely. In today’s cultural climate, in which the festering wounds of oppression are breaking violently open, Bhattacharya and Gillen invite all of us to interrogate our positions of difference. Through critical exploration of personal narratives, the authors demonstrate the complexities of addressing racism and colonization. There is nothing ‘easy’ about this work, which is well overdue. Yet they approach it with compassion and mindfulness. I will be using this book in my own courses as a model to delve into deeper conversations about the impact of power and privilege in society.”

– Jessica Smartt-Guillon, Ph.D., Author of Writing Ethnography, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Texas Women’s University

“Power, Race, and Higher Education is highly recommended for upper-division and graduate classes as well as senior administrators in universities and colleges because of its erudite exploration of how students and their professors ‘do’ power in academic settings. The book very skillfully peels off, layer-by-layer several things, including opaque films of socialization and ‘taken-for-granted’ narratives of everyday living, that obfuscate the nature, existence, and inevitability of power exchanges between professors and their students. The authors (one a white, male student and the other a brown, female professor) adroitly reveal their respective ‘stand-points’ of power and privilege, as well as their powerlessness and under-privilege. In so doing, the reader is drawn into the authors’ respective spaces of power, and made to participate, as it were, in their interrogation and deconstruction of the systemic artifacts that have shaped the outcomes of their interactions with each other. The book’s strategy of acknowledging the ‘anatomy of power’ but focusing, even ethno-dramatizing the ‘physiology of power’ and how it is ‘done’ between a white, male student with ascribed-status privileges and a brown, female professor with achieved-status privileges makes it even more engaging and illuminating. Power, Race, and Higher Education is indeed a primus inter pares.”

– Bilaye Benibo, Ph.D., Distinguished Faculty and Professor of Sociology, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi

“Amazing in its brilliance, the book attempts to humanize the perplexing themes of contemporary cross-cultural existence of our time. The authors take us on a scholarly journey riddled with self-doubt, with joyful exuberances and utter dubiety in leading lives that intersect multiple identities, chaotic flows of real and imaginative elucidations of being human in an enigmatic
and globalized world, work and life in a structured academic construct. We traverse the broad areas of academic imagination through lenses of resistance and adaptation, negotiation and celebration, and ultimately, that of survival and overcoming. Fantastically rewarding for students and scholars who want to immerse themselves in the very nature of inquiry that effectively leads to empathy and understanding of human nature. I can’t wait to adopt this book for my graduate Cultural Studies course.”

– Anantha S. Babbili, Ph.D., Former Provost and VPAA, Professor of Communication, Media Studies and Global Leadership Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
Dedicated to Caroline Sherritt

May we always see through the fog and ask fearless questions.
May we admit our ignorance.
May we have grace and forgiveness for each other when we make mistakes.
May we make friends with our shadows.
May we come together in our shared humanity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword \hspace{1cm} xv

*Laurel Richardson*

Preface: The Ghosts in Our Writing Spaces \hspace{1cm} xvii

Acknowledgements \hspace{1cm} xxi

Chapter 1: Meeting Differences \hspace{1cm} 1

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 2

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 13

Chapter 2: Breaking Tensions, Building Bridges \hspace{1cm} 35

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 35

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 52

Chapter 3: Finding Self in Ethnodrama \hspace{1cm} 73

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 73

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 85

Chapter 4: Dialogues within Dialogues \hspace{1cm} 105

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 105

Backstage Scene \hspace{1cm} 106

Front Stage Scene \hspace{1cm} 108

Backstage Scene \hspace{1cm} 109

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 114

Chapter 5: The Breakdown and Coming Together \hspace{1cm} 143

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 143

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 143

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 145

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 150

Chapter Five (From My Dissertation Draft) \hspace{1cm} 153

Kakali’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 155

Kent’s Narrative \hspace{1cm} 159
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kakali’s Narrative</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent’s Narrative</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakali’s Narrative</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent’s Narrative</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakali’s Narrative</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakali’s and Kent’s Narratives: Coming Together</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 6: Pedagogical Practices</strong></td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested Guidelines from Our Pedagogical Practices</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical Practices</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>About the Authors</strong></td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

It is not common for professors and their students to transparently discuss the process of mentoring, negotiating ideas while conducting dissertation research, and working through differences where difficult conversations of race, privileges, whiteness, and systemic oppression rise to the surface. More importantly, it is rare that one would get an insider’s perspective of what it could look like while there are deep value-based differences between a professor and her student and yet there are possibilities for caretaking and nurturing.

That is what Bhattacharya and Gillen do in this book, where they explore the ways in which power works in higher education and society as a whole and how they benefit, oppress, and suffer from various systemic networks of power structures. Bhattacharya identifies as a Brown woman, transnational academic of South Asian heritage. Gillen identifies as a White man, who mostly lived in Texas all his life. Bhattacharya has institutional privilege by being a faculty member. Gillen has the privilege of being a White man in U.S. They are committed to doing anti-racist and anti-oppressionist work, but in the process of mentoring and being mentored they discover how much they have to unpack their positionality, attend to deeply repressed wounds, and uninterrogated privileges that have shaped how they negotiate their roles within and outside academia.

This is a must-have book for anyone interested in changing the culture of unrecognized privilege and whiteness. If you want to open up classroom conversation about race, gender, and privilege, then here is the book that will do that – and more. This book helps students learn how whiteness and maleness translate into power and privileges in everyday interaction. And, it does this in a way that neither shames nor guilt-trips. Practical help is given to have the daunting conversations about culture, race, and gender in the classroom. If you want to build bridges over race, culture, and gender in your classroom, then this book will give you a secure footing.

I will never know the privileges of being a White man or the challenges of being a Brown transcultural woman, but I have had the privilege and challenge of immersing myself in this stunningly original co-authored book. As I was reading, I found myself interrogating my own privileges as a White middle-class American woman. The book’s invitation to recognize one’s unearned power and privilege really works and I highly recommend
this book for graduate and undergraduate classes in any courses where the professor wants to help students recognize how their unrecognized privileges give them power in their daily lives – and wants them to find strategies for leveling the playing field.

Bhattacharya and Gillen share their parallel stories of unpacking systemic challenges, whiteness, and privileges. Highly original in scope, organization, and writing style, this book exemplifies what it teaches: ways of recognizing systemic privilege and strategies for dismantling it. This book is breathtaking in its honesty, integrity, and openness. Bhattacharya and Gillen have modeled the difficulties in recognizing systemic privilege, the challenges of facing it, and strategies for changing it.

My eyes and heart have been opened by this groundbreaking book on how teaching/learning about race, power and privilege can be accomplished. The conversations that Americans need to have about race, power and privilege are in this book – and the pedagogy for taking care of all engaged in the conversations. This book is a gift to any academic who wants a pedagogy that can construct bridges between cultures, genders, and race. I highly recommend this book.

Laurel Richardson

_Distinguished Emeritus Professor and Academy Professor, Sociology, The Ohio State University, Cooley Book Award Winner, Lifetime Qualitative Researcher Award Winner, and author of Seven Minutes from Home: An American Daughter’s Story_
While there are two named authors in this book, there are others who have informed, invaded our thoughts, memories, and dreams of the past and the future, and stayed present in our writing. Some of these ghosts are what we understand to be the literal meaning of ghosts. They are those people who are no longer in this world, but once was. We share a relationship with them in spirit, even when their material form is not with us. Then there are people with whom we have journeyed in our lives. Parts of them are parts of the book. And then there are beings, ideas, and inspirations in our imagination, dreams, and fantasies that are integrated in this book. We have actively imagined conversations that never happened, as if we were “dreaming while awake” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 5), moving between fictionalized narratives, ethnodramas, realist stories, and desired narratives. We have used these narratives to make sense of the stories that unfolded for us, within us, and with each other.

Most importantly, we dealt with the ugliest part of our collective human history – White supremacy and its effects, not just in theory, but in material lived realities. And in doing so, we got into the messy territory of who is a friend or foe, who can we trust, and who do we look towards for inspiration. To that end, we revisited our histories of growing up, how we understood what it meant to be racialized. Unknown to both of us, our histories became perfect mirrors. Kent understood a racialized narrative at an early age, that taught him who he is in relation to Black and Brown folks. Kakali remained puzzled after immigrating to Canada when she was being treated with disdain, anger, and hatred as she did not know anything about discrimination at an early age growing up in a protected, privileged life in India. The ghosts of those memories shape our writing.

Caroline, who has passed away, but was a mentor and colleague to Kakali, and a mentor to Kent, has served as a mirror. Her presence is pervasive throughout the text. Some of the narratives with Caroline are realist with evidence from email records or direct conversations. But there are other narratives where Caroline’s presence becomes a call for looking at our pain, shadows, dialoguing with parts of ourselves that remained long buried, and attending to the wounds that became visible.
Kent is a White man. Kakali is a Brown woman. Kakali supervised Kent’s dissertation while he was a doctoral student. Kent worked with Angie, a Chicana woman, for his dissertation. This certainly is eyebrow-raising action in the world of academia, and especially within the context of anti-oppressionist work. This, then, makes us ask who can do what work? What is the role of someone who is interrogating his privileges? What bridges can be built if at all? We certainly agree that cultural insiders would and should narrate their stories, center themselves, and write themselves into existence in ways that no cultural outsider ever could. Therefore, Kent’s journey then becomes less about “telling the story” of some downtrodden Brown woman, and more about the understanding of his privileges, Whiteness, and ways in which he has benefitted from a White supremacist system, by reflecting on stories that Angie was willing to share, out of her sheer generosity. Certainly, one could imagine that the stories Angie might share with a cultural insider would be different than what she has shared with Kent.

We also carry the ghosts of fear, hatred, bigotry, and marginalization with us that divide us, make us want to stay in our own lanes when the thought of bridge building becomes a daunting task. This is when we have leaned on Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, who has passed away. Anzaldúa (2015) reminds us about our axes of differences but also about our shared humanity. Ghosts, as commonly understood, are shadowy creatures, perhaps figments of our imagination, who appear at night in spooky spaces like a graveyard or in old buildings or dark alleys. However, Anzaldúa’s presence in this writing is neither spooky nor fear-inducing. Instead, we worked hard to avoid putting a superficial framing of “let’s just all get along despite our differences” in our writing. We chose to dig deep into the differences and look directly at the wounds generated by those differences.

What we did was jolt our consciousness into waking up to the realities of our differences in our past and present and in the possibilities of our future. How could a woman of a Chicana background learn to dream that the world is her oyster when she is worried that her brothers, father, and uncles could very likely be in prison on any given day? How could a Brown woman in academia negotiate showing up fearlessly with courage and integrity and not worry about the consequences of retaliation, because she did not stay in her lane and know her place? Could the Brown woman only expect to implore those in the dominant group to hopefully become benevolent dictators aligned with her causes if she promises to stay in her lane? What would be the work of a critical White introverted ally, who, for the most part, is reluctant to deal with the social world, but has committed himself to
continuously interrogating his privileges? This is difficult work and bears the certainty that we will mess up. And when we do, our individual and collective wounds would surface, our histories would collide, our ancestors and those who came before us would become part of how we make sense of things. We would need forgiveness from each other. We would need to just keep trying, because bridge building work is messy without any immediate gratification.

Our willingness to challenge our belief systems, interrogate our privileges, and look at the messiness of our stories created a series of ongoing narratives of falling apart and coming together. It was as if we were breaking apart previously held belief systems, looking at them closely, experiencing our fragmentations, feeling the isolation, and being willing to remain open to “putting our fragmented pieces together in a new way” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 20).

We have not answered all of our questions. But we are making our way through the fog. Talking about race is difficult and brings up different types of pain for everyone. We cannot engage in oppression Olympics where we situate one person’s pain as superior to another’s. Nor can we dismiss the centuries-old systemic pain inflicted on minoritized populations, while benefitting mostly White folks. We need to hold both of these truths in the same space and perhaps begin to ask ourselves what might be the path forward towards healing. If we make friends with our shadowy wounds, we can then see how natural and self-preserving it has been for us to build up walls, create divisions between us, and how over centuries of doing so, we have isolated ourselves from each other. In this book we have taken our first steps to think of what lies beyond the wounds. We have deeply excavated our wounds, stayed with our pain, and dialogued honestly with each other when we hit divisive walls. At the very least we came to the following realizations.

We cannot deny the suffering of our fellow human beings when we benefit from the very same conditions that produce the suffering. Yet, we cannot deny the anger we feel inside when we experience suffering as individuals and as a collective. How do we then move beyond that which divides us to discover that which connects us in our shared humanity? Perhaps it is hypocritical to ask a question that even we cannot fully answer. But at least, we made an attempt in this book, with the help of every idea, every person, every inspiration, every emotional, mental, and intellectual breakdown that inspired and haunted us.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

KAKALI’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people who continuously fed our spirit, nurtured our well being, stimulated us intellectually, and pushed us out of our comfort zones, who need to be credited. First, I want to thank my mother, Sumita Bhattacharyya, who appears in the text and has approved my narration of her role. She has taught me to be open, direct, and honest, where people can trust that there are no hidden agendas behind my words beyond what is expressed. This has made me travel lightly in the world and accept the consequences of all my actions.

My partner Paul Maxfield and my most amazing furry companion, my miniature poodle, Gigi-Bhattacharya-Maxfield-the-first, have offered me unconditional love and support no matter what project I have taken on. Paul would take care of the house, meals, and even my spirit. Gigi would offer cuddles, become the best armrest one could expect, and allow me to love on her as I navigated the stress of handling demanding tasks. In fact even right now Gigi has her butt up against me as I write this. Paul has had the unenviable position of listening to every shitty first draft of writing that was intended for various parts of this book and offered strong critiques, lovingly – always lovingly.

My soul sister Rose Knippa kept me honest and in integrity throughout the process of writing this book. Bidisha Ray loved me ever since I was a little girl and continues to do so no matter what I do or how I do it. Kristen Kahler, who became a friend with whom I could talk with for hours after I moved to a new town called Manhattan, Kansas, listened to my stories with an open heart.

My contemplative practices family kept me uplifted every year with retreats, conferences, and general connection. I have met the most open-hearted people in this group and they inspire me everyday how to not put up walls even when it feels safe to do so while navigating social structures of oppression.

Several academic scholar friends helped my thinking along the way. Violet Jones asked me to decolonize my mind and methodologies when we were graduate students. Heather Adams has supported me in every idea I have had, no matter how premature those ideas were. AnaLouise Keating has offered
to the world her thoughts on post-oppositionality, which has pushed how I have thought about oppression and liberation and my deep gratitude to her for bringing forth unpublished works of Gloria Anzaldúa whose influence is paramount in this text. I remain grateful to Dr. Jude Preissle who asked Kent a difficult question, which prompted this book in the form of an answer. My mentors from University of Georgia, Kathleen deMarrais and Kathy Roulston continue to support me and help me proliferate my work to this day, decades after graduation. They exemplify the kind of mentoring that I aspire to enact in my relationships with my students.

Many thanks to Patricia Leavy and Sense Publishers for seeing the value in this work even when we were in the early stages of conceptualization and supporting us in our journey patiently, as we worked towards completion. Gratitude to Shalen Lowell for helping us get to the finish line.

Finally, deepest gratitude to Caroline Sherritt, who is no longer in this world, but I seem to continue to have a relationship with her anyway. Without her, I would have not met Kent, and this book would have not been written.

KENT’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As in the case with my co-author, many of those who have exerted significant influence over my career have been among those who immigrated to this country years ago in order to work toward successful careers in various American institutes of higher education. I would like to use this opportunity to acknowledge two of them. The first, Dr. Alex Lotas, was instrumental in, to use his very own words, “getting my hooks into you” and seeing that despite early setbacks, I would eventually obtain important personal and professional goals. Though I have neither seen him nor spoken with him in 20 years, I can still feel those hooks. He will not be forgotten. Nor will Dr. Vanessa Jackson, who was equally influential. Any success I have achieved thus far would not have been possible without her encouragement during earlier years. I salute both of you.

Further acknowledgments should also go to Dr. Enrique Solis, who assisted me in preparation for the interviews that I would eventually carry out with the research-participant Angie; Dr. Kamiar Kouzakanani, who before Dr. Bhattacharya’s arrival on the scene, offered as much helpful advice as anyone else in my early forays into dissertation-proposal writing; and Dr. Caroline Sherritt, the one major supporting player in this saga who was always there, for and with me, both before and after this story played out. In a certain sense, she is still there.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Additional gratitude to Mrs. Juanita Gillen Sloan, former business teacher and the late mother of a very contrary boy who wishes she was still here.

Finally, of course, there is Angie, whose narrative functions throughout this work as that of a third presence. Though the book contains parallel remembrances of the two authors, it is my witnessing of Angie’s story that results in generating most compelling insights. Without her, none of what follows would have mattered.
This is a text of parallel narratives. I, Kakali, write from the perspective of a Brown-skinned woman. Although I was born in India, I have lived in Canada and in the U.S. much longer than I have lived in India. Kent writes from the perspective of a White man born and raised in the U.S., who has spent most of his life in South Texas. As an educator of color, I mentor students and teach them about ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, within the context of designing and conducting qualitative research projects for doctoral dissertations. Kent writes from the perspective of being at the receiving end of such mentoring where he had to interrogate his privileges as a White man while he was conducting his dissertation case study of the educational experiences of Angie, a Chicana woman, in Corpus Christi, Texas, during the 1950s and 1960s. We do not claim that our voices are completely distinct or separate from each other’s as we understand how entangled we are in our relational existence. Yet at the same time, we do not claim that we are somehow representing Angie’s voice in truthful accuracy here. What we can claim though, is that by engaging with Angie’s story, we opened up this complicated space, where we had to negotiate some rough terrains about teaching and learning about race and power in higher education from our situated perspectives that culminated in this book.

The book is broadly divided into six chapters with Kakali introducing each chapter contextually with her experiences and Kent concluding with his perspectives. We explore the issue of how cross-cultural studies can be done, if at all, and if cross-cultural studies are really studies of the Other or if they are critical catalysts for situating self in relation to Other, understanding one’s position and unearned privileges in one’s cultural context. We focus on the challenges of mentoring by a woman of color of a White man who recognizes for the first time in his life social structures that benefit him without having to earn such benefits.

Highlighting tension-filled dialogues while creating an ethnodrama in Kent’s dissertation, we reflect closely on the implications of the ethnodrama where the researcher is a character and a disembodied narrator. Finally, we present a set of pedagogical practices relevant for undergraduate and graduate instruction based on our experiences of mentoring and being mentored. In
CHAPTER 1

this opening chapter we discuss the differences in understanding un/earned privileges with examples and associated struggles.

KAKALI’S NARRATIVE

I recall that day vividly, as if it were a scene from an action movie. The setting is Canada, 1987. I am sitting in the back of my stepdad’s brown Oldsmobile. My mother is sitting up front with my stepdad, who is taking us on a drive on the highway. Destination unplanned. I am 14 years old and have just arrived, now living with Mom and her new husband in Mississauga, Ontario – a place right out of the storybooks about foreign countries I used to read while still living in India. These past two months, while donning sweaters every morning and walking through the snow, marveling at the tall, sloping rooftops on houses – it has all made me feel as if I was living a storybook life, the kind my friends back in India never experienced. I even take pictures to enclose with my letters to them.

On this particular day as we travel down the highway, my nose presses against the cold back-seat window and my eyes watch the pine trees zip by. Snow pushes up against either side of the highway, where they fill deep ditches. Cars and trucks of every make and model pass by in both directions; I have never seen so many different types before. In Canada, I sometimes wonder if I have travelled into the future.

Then, a red pick-up pulls up on our left side. But unlike the other cars flying by us, they slow down. Inside the truck are three White men who appear to be in their early twenties. They focus upon us now, as if excited or surprised at discovering our sudden presence on the highway – and then they begin to laugh. Although my stepdad is determined to ignore them, I cannot look away from these men. Perhaps sensing an attentive audience now, one of them rolls down his window and looks directly at me. Shortly, another begins making strange noises like an animal. And then the others join in. They grunt and cavort for my amusement, sticking their necks out the window and making faces. They make fists with their hands and move them under their armpits. They bounce up and down in their seats, screaming “hoop, hoop, hoop,” laughing hysterically. Their actions remind me of excited little monkeys.

Now, the truck inches closer to our vehicle, and I feel that if I roll down my window and reach out, I can just touch them. My stepdad struggles to maintain control of the car as he swerves to the side of the road, bringing us dangerously near those snow-covered ditches. The more we swerve, the
I am puzzled by this sudden intrusion into our otherwise idyllic drive. Why do these men appear so amused? And what motivates them to drive their truck closer and closer? Another inch nearer, and we will surely wind up in the ditch. Finally, however, they ease the truck back into their own lane. They now stretch their hands out the window with their middle fingers upraised from within curled fists. This is a gesture I have never encountered. Then, another finger sprouts up from the driver’s window, pointing to the sky, while all of them continue their chorus of “hoop, hoop.” Then they drive away.

I wonder what to make of those middle fingers pointing to the sky. Is this a religious gesture? Were they pointing toward God and expressing how happy they are since Christmas is just two months away and they want to spread their joy? Or is there some other festival at this time of year about which I have no knowledge? God knows in India we have a festival for every damn thing and we were always celebrating something or other. I cannot help asking out loud, “What does that mean, that middle finger pointing up?”

My stepdad’s voice is stern. “Nothing for you to know or be concerned about.” And that being that, we turn around and head home in silence.

***

Cut to the year 2004. A city in the Deep South of the United States. I sit in a coffee shop, talking to Yamini, a participant in my dissertation project. I am exploring how women who are international students from India negotiate their experiences while in their first year of graduate studies. This study is motivated by reflections on my first year in Canada, where what stood out to me then has now become routine. The participants’ experiences may reveal how they perceive and understand their gendered and racial experiences in a new culture. I have decided to use conversations in place of traditional semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

“So how was your day?” I sip my coffee as I wait for Yamini’s answer.

Yamini’s facial expression changes. She frowns, her eyes look up to the ceiling. Then, she sighs and slumps down in her seat. “Something happened today that was not good.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I went out for a jog this morning.”

“Okay.”
“I was wearing a western jogging outfit. I got it from Old Navy. And I was jogging on one side of the road by Five Points. You know where they are doing all the construction and there is a deep ditch on the side of the road? Along there.”

I know that area well. If people jogging are not attentive, they could fall into the ditch and hurt themselves badly. “Then what happened?”

“Well, this hot red pick-up truck was driving by. It slowed down and started driving right beside me. And then it came so close to me that I thought I would fall into the ditch. I just don’t understand.” Yamini’s eyes well up as if she is holding back tears.

“What is it that you don’t understand?” I am not sure I want to hear the answer. Whatever it is, it is making her tear up and I can feel a growing knot in my stomach instantly.

“There was about an inch left between me and the ditch. That’s how badly these White guys wanted to run me over. Then they gave me the finger and called me a sand nigger and told me to die.” Tears roll down Yamini’s cheeks.

Sand nigger? Racism is now distinguishing between shades of light and dark brown? I shake my head and reach over to offer Yamini a hug.

Yamini reaches out to me and we hug. Sobbing heavily in my arms, she struggles to find the words. “Why was I so offensive to them? I wasn’t doing anything Indian. Jogging is western, right?”

The painful innocence of that question is at once palpable and heartbreaking. Yamini has been in the U.S. for three months. She recognizes the possibility that White Americans may cause her harm if she behaves in ways that are perceived as “too Indian.” She believes she would be protected from such harm if she engages in western activities – like jogging. And she would thus not stand out as an outsider and invite danger.

Yamini sees me as her elder sister, even though our initial meeting was to discuss her role as a participant in my dissertation. Over the past few months we have become close and she looks upon me as a cultural elder, and we have developed a kinship relation. I feel now as if I am supposed to share some wisdom, some way to make her pain go away, some way to help her dismiss this event from her memory – or tell her that this was a one-time isolated incident that is rare, and in saying this I might erase what seems like a traumatic event imprinted on her psyche.

In the end, however, I cannot help Yamini. All I can think of is the loss of my own innocence when I first arrived in Canada, when I did not understand why a group of White men wanted to run us off the road, into a similar ditch, while imitating the sounds of monkeys and making obscene gestures. And
now, a near-identical incident happens, this time to someone else, someone I care about. That past event, the one my stepdad refused to discuss, remained repressed within me. But I am compelled now to face the ugliness of that event and the pain it caused me when I began to realize what it all meant. I must seek to understand that the presence of some – those like Yamani and like me – could be so offensive as to animate certain White Americans to cause us serious physical and emotional harm. And once I acknowledge the existence of such hatred and ugliness, I must then summon the courage to attend to a deep, 15-year-old wound – one that I must resolve to heal. Such a commitment is not an easy task.

***

Return now to the year 1987. I am enrolled in a Canadian high school. Tonight is parent-teacher night. Mom visits Mrs. Higgins, my 12th grade English teacher, a White woman in her 50s who has lived in Southern Ontario all her life. My mother is a woman in her late 30s, who has recently migrated to Canada from India. She was a science educator in high school in India, and she has been able to secure a similar position here.

Mom walks into Mrs. Higgins’ classroom, dressed in a long dark brown skirt, close-toed brown shoes, and a bright flowery blouse. Her dark black hair, messy at the end of the day, rests on her shoulder. Mrs. Higgins is sitting at her desk. She is wearing a crisp, clean White blouse and a knee-length grey pencil skirt with black pumps. Her golden hair barely touches her shoulder.

My mom knocks and peeks her head through the open classroom door, and Mrs. Higgins waves her in. “Come in, Sumita. Have a seat please.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Higgins. How are you?” Mom has learned to ask this how are you question as a form of initial greeting. She is still struggling with the notion that people do not want to know how you are really, but rather this is a way of saying hello. There were times when she tried to respond to this “how are you” question with how she really was. She started saying she was busy, stressed, trying to manage a crazy day, and before she had finished her first sentence, the questioner had already walked away and turned the corner. So now she throws out the question generously to see how people respond so that she can learn the best way for her to respond to others. Often she mirrors others’ response.

“I am fine, Sumita. Thank you for asking. And you?”

“Yeah, fine too.”

“So let’s talk about Kakali. She is a really bright girl.”
“Okay. So how come she is not getting 80s in her assignment? Is there something we can do to help her?” My mother is nothing if not direct. We need to receive at least 80 percentage points out of 100 as a final grade for university entry without having to take extra qualification tests to ensure that we are at competency level to handle our academic tasks in English.

“Well…let me see how I can explain this to you, Sumita. English is not your first language, is it?”

“No, it is not. But my daughter went to an English medium school in India. She learned English the same time she learned her mother tongue. So she has no problem with reading, writing, or understanding English.”

“Oh, that’s very good, Sumita! You were good to put her in a school like that. How nice of you! See, the thing is that your daughter does not speak English as her first language. Tell me something. Do you folks speak English at home?”

“No! Why would we?”

“I think that could help your daughter do better in the class. More exposure to English. I just think that this is still different and new to her.”

“Is my daughter getting the lowest score in your class, Mrs. Higgins?” Mom starts a line of inquiry, which immediately makes Mrs. Higgins forehead curve into wavy frown lines.

“Um, no, she is not. There are students who are doing much worse than her. Kakali is a bright, foreign student in my class. She has such a nice multicultural perspective.” Mrs. Higgins smiles and nods her head up and down repeatedly after she finishes her sentence.

“Mrs. Higgins, is my daughter the only person in your class whose first language is not English?” Mom continues her line of inquiry.

“Well, if I think about it now, well, yes, it is.”

“I see. Then all these other students must speak English at home, correct?” My mother should have been an investigative criminal lawyer.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“So how come English-speaking students are not doing better than my daughter in your class? Should it not mean that speaking English at home is not a determining factor for performing well in your class?” My mother goes in for the kill.

Mrs. Higgins realizes what just happened. She is trapped in her own argument. She doesn’t like it. Her face hardens. Her eyes stop smiling. Her lips get stiff. She locks her eyes onto those of my mom.

“Listen, Sumita. I will be honest here. I don’t think your daughter can do well in English the same way native speakers can. It’s just not possible. This
is not her language. She can try. But I don’t think it would happen. It would be good for her to take some qualifying tests before being admitted to the university.”

My mom stands up, reaches her right hand out to Mrs. Higgins, shakes it, and says, “Thank you for your honesty,” and walks away.

For the next few months, I put all my efforts into improving my English grade. I study around the clock, I speak English at home, and I write letters to my friends in India in English. I even start to dream in English. I read widely, deeply. On my final report card, my grades in all subjects show an A, with a numerical score of 90 or more points. For English, I have a 79 – one point shy of the 80 I needed to avoid taking the qualifying English test for university entrance.

I don’t know which is worse – that I was not seen as a good, civilized, colonized subject, or that I was made to earn that spot again even though I had already earned my good, colonized subject-position from my education in India long before Mrs. Higgins came into the picture. It was not until years later that I understood the messiness of wanting the colonizer’s approval as a good, colonized subject so that I could navigate the Master’s house better than the other colonized subjects, who might not be as good a subject as I could be.

***

I arrived in Canada from India in the late 1980s when I was 14 years old. My mom had divorced my father and married an Indian gentleman in Canada, which was the reason for my migration. Years before, while still in India, I had been in a boarding school whose superintendent, Mrs. Rosario, was an Anglo-British woman. I guess when the British left India, some Anglo folks chose to make India their home. Mrs. Rosario’s family was one of them. The boarding school operated like a convent so that the boarders would be seen as top students in the main school, which contained both day-scholars (who commuted to the school) and those who boarded there. I was placed there as a result of a custody settlement between my parents upon their divorce. This institution was known as an English medium school, which implied all our classes were taught in English. Excluding our native-language classes, we were assessed in English. On Sundays, Mrs. Rosario took us to church and taught us religious hymns to sing; moreover, we celebrated Christmas, even though none of the boarders were Christian. Our entertainment in the boarding school consisted of listening to an almost-broken radio during limited listening hours.
CHAPTER 1

Mrs. Rosario tried to teach us how to be western. She would insist that we have breakfast at 6:30 am on weekdays and 7:00 am on weekends, when we were allowed to have Indian breakfasts. But on weekdays, we had to have milk and cereal with a banana. This, Mrs. Rosario would tell us, is what civilized people eat for breakfast. Mrs. Rosario lamented that none of the cooks knew how to prepare other meals that her family enjoyed, like porridge or pancakes. Sometimes at night, before I fell asleep, I fantasized about sitting with golden-haired, White ladies of Mrs. Rosario’s family, eating porridge and pancakes – and how they would marvel at the way I would use a knife and fork, or the way I would gently take the White napkin from my lap and wipe the corners of my lips – and I would beam with pride over my adaptation of good western table manners.

Needless to say, I was incredibly naïve about the world, differences, or anything else. At that point in my life, all I cared about was how to have fun with my friends. Concepts of race, gender, class, sexuality or any other axes of difference were unfamiliar to me.

Yet, I was extremely privileged on multiple counts. My father’s income placed me in the upper middle-class, which allowed me to enroll in an expensive boarding school. I was born into a Hindu family, the predominant religion in India. While India embraces religious eclecticism, I never had to worry whether my religious views and needs would be preserved by the dominant group. In fact, I did not worry about religion on any level. That is what privilege does. It renders oppression invisible to those who benefit from it. I was also born into the priestly class, which falls into the caste system of India. My last name automatically identified me as a Brahmin, meaning that I have collected enough good deeds in my previous lives to land on the top of the caste hierarchy. At that time, discrimination against people based on their caste was illegal in India, but there were plenty of discriminatory practices against people of other castes (which continue today) that were also out of my awareness then.

Overall, during my first 14 years of life in India, not only was I unaware of my privileges, I did not even realize that people have different privileges from my own. In other words, I recognized no privileges whatsoever, in any form. I assumed we all had equal opportunities for the manifestation of our aspirations. I assumed that if I failed to achieve something, then it was because I did not try hard or I lacked the aptitude. And I assumed this to be true of everyone, regardless of his or her class or caste. But after crossing oceans to live in Canada, my privileges, my assumptions were all washed away, leaving me in a completely unfamiliar space.
Early 2001, an institution of higher learning in the American Deep South. For the first time, I am standing in front of students as a teacher. Well, I am not really a teacher. Just a teaching assistant. Instructor of record. I am a graduate student, recently moved from Canada to pursue and achieve a master’s degree, afterward remaining in the U.S. to enroll in the doctoral program here.

My first course is titled Multicultural Perspectives for Women in the U.S. I feel strange standing here, looking at the students. Me, a Brown woman from India, visibly different in looks and accent. They, mostly women from the South, from affluent backgrounds, White, blondes, some brunettes, visibly different in looks and accent from me. I am about to teach them their country’s history, atrocities committed by their ancestors, which continues in the present with the help of networked social systems of oppression against those who look like me or whose skin tone is even darker than mine. Why would they care for what I have to say? I wonder how long it would take for them to dismiss me as the angry minority teacher. What if they just stand up and walk away from the class?

I decide that I need this job, so I should not rock the boat too much or let the students know my stand on things – although my perspectives are difficult to hide, given the reading list I have put together. One of the first readings I have assigned is Peggy McIntosh’s essay (1989), White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. I have asked everyone to come up with at least 10 unearned privileges in their lives and ways they might unlearn or extend those privileges. I have offered an example from my own perspective. My unearned privileges include those I enjoy as an able-bodied person, privileges that are inaccessible to those who are not. I use disability as an example because I consider race too sensitive a topic for us to address right away without establishing trust and rapport. Nonetheless, I worry that the students might complain about me. We do occasionally discuss race, but only when students bring up race-based topics or ideas. In this way, I feel I might create as safe a space as I can before focusing more on social-justice issues connected to ethnicity, class, and/or gender.

Fast forward to a decade later. I am now teaching at a research institution in another part of the U.S., working with predominantly White students. In my class, students are asked to perform their subjectivities in some artistic manner, connecting intersected narratives from their subject positions to their desired topic of inquiry. Usually this activity allows students to develop
awareness of the personal beliefs, values, and assumptions that inform their
research agendas. After all, research interests do not generate in a vacuum;
instead, they grow out of a contextual narrative.

One of my students, Gail, a White woman in her late 20s, talks to the class
about her interest in women of color in science, based on her career interest
as a science educator. Sonja, a Chicana student, also in her late 20s, responds
by asking Gail, “Have you considered intersectionality in your work?” Sonja
has a strong theoretical foundation as a result of several previous classes,
and she now generally speaks using theoretical tenets. This class, however,
is Gail’s first ever in her graduate career, and has publicly confessed about
her lack of prior exposure to theory. Gail looks visibly embarrassed as she
struggles to answer Sonja’s question.

“Well, I know some of them could be poor, but really I just want to know
how to help women of color in science.”

Sonja prepares to respond, and I anticipate that she may offer a strong
theoretical argument. I worry about how unsettled Gail would feel in front
of her peers if she is being interrogated about her theoretical knowledge,
something she has already confessed as her weakness. So I interrupt the
dialogue by announcing to the entire class, “We will discuss theory in
another class. So let’s table that discussion for now.” Then I turn to Gail and
say, “Gail, intersectionality is a complex issue and we have to explore your
relationship with intersectionality meaningfully before being able to answer
the question thoughtfully. So let’s have that conversation when we discuss
theory later in the class.”

After class, Sonja and Gail both approach me, but separately. I speak
with each one in private. In my conversation with Gail, she reveals that she
neither appreciated Sonja’s question nor my interruption. She feels she was
ganged up on, and our actions made her feel like a victim of reverse racism.

I let those words hang in the air. Reverse racism. I could almost see the
words floating in big block bubble letters, like those on the cover of Gail’s
binder, but without the purple color or the glitter. Suddenly the words grow
larger, darker, almost smoky, making it difficult for me to breathe. I gulp.
My entire body stings. My tongue threatens to become wild. A restless spirit
inside me wants to jump out and really go into a diatribe about how inane and
fictional the notion of reverse racism is and what it might possibly indicate
when a White woman is being asked to defend her work academically, that
she would fall back into the role of victim.

Somehow though, I silence what my restless spirit nudges me to
say. Instead, I ask Gail to consider the possibility of defending her work
academically, as that would be an expectation no matter what theoretical home she finds herself in, and to consider what could potentially be some opposing arguments, to make her work stronger and to demonstrate that she has read widely and deeply. Gail nods at my suggestions, packs up her bags, and exits the classroom. I do not ask what Gail’s thoughts were as a result of the conversation because I could sense being emotionally drained, with limited capacity to address anything else with the kind of open-hearted compassion required for bridge-building work.

In my private conversation with Sonja, she reveals to me her frustration at the ways in which she has been silenced in her other classes and how that pattern has followed her throughout her education. She shares a hallway conversation she had with Gail trying to explain her position, and how it did not go well, leading to more tensions between the two. My heart breaks for Sonja, and I try to tell her that I understand her position and that I have been much more subtle, rather than overt, in my own resistance. I tell her that this strategy has worked well for me in academia. She nods respectfully. I silence Sonja and myself.

Inwardly, I debate my decision to engage students in discussing their unearned privileges in future classes – because with each week, the tension between Sonja and Gail becomes more transparent and palpable. If there are any racial issues raised by the readings assigned or the videos we watch, Sonja and Gail take opposite positions. I question whether making space to discuss this tension would further divide the class and damage the learning experiences of the students. The truth is, I do not think I have the necessary courage or the tenacity to entertain the volatility of conversations centered on unearned privileges and their consequences. Perhaps such a session would derail the class. I question whether it is my role to yank someone from their position if they are unwilling to do so themselves. Maybe I would cause visible factions in the class. Maybe the students would incorrectly perceive me as someone who hates White people. I fear the class might then become more explicitly divisive, where it would become clear who agrees with me and who does not. Can I really take the time out of teaching the course’s content to deal with something far more fundamental and necessary in order for the students to engage the content with more authenticity and intellectual honesty? I feel paralyzed.

***

In higher education I carry this shuffling between being a good colonized subject on the one hand, while on the other, rejecting the position of being
a colonized subject. I think of how I am still in the Master’s house (Lorde, 1984a), even in my resistant critical work. I interpret perhaps some of that resistance as knocking down the walls of a room in the Master’s house. I have been in this house since birth, so I do not know what it could be like on the outside. I try to read in my native language. I keep up with literature, music, and poems in Bangla. But I know my generation and the next that came after me no longer value native language-learning as much as I do, entirely for the purpose of economic survival, since knowing English makes one more employable than knowing one’s native Indian language, even in India. And I cannot help but think of the loss one experiences when one loses language. And yet I do not know where I would want to be, or if there ever could be a pure decolonized space, away from the Master’s house.

Project colonization is so pervasive that I am using English to critique the dominance of English and its asymmetrical power structure. I am attempting to show the Master that I am just as good as he is – while at the same time trying to locate another space. As an educator, I try to bring my Otherness into the classroom because I am already Othered before I even speak. I cannot identify being Indian the way someone in India would. I cannot identify being a Canadian fully. And I cannot identify being fully American either. I think of myself as this nomadic world traveler, who Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) calls a *nepantlera*, one who travels through multiple worlds without the need to belong in any. They are threshold theorists, moving in and out of many worlds while living on the borders. Our conflicting desires in these messy spaces leave us vulnerable to become brutally honest with ourselves, in terms of imagining what freedom might look like, with our mind, bodies, and spirit in action. For me, there seems to be this deep call for accepting the fact that I author myself through dominant and resistant discourses simultaneously; and perhaps that might not change – as long as I am in the Master’s house as a self-aware subject. So I look to Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987/1999) magic when she says:

On that day I say, “Yes all you people wound us when you reject us. Rejection strips us of self-worth; our vulnerability exposes us to shame. It is our innate identity you find wanting. We are ashamed that we need your good opinion, that we need your acceptance. We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses and fences sprout around us. We can no longer withdraw. To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves. We can no longer blame you, nor disown the White parts, the male parts, the pathological
parts, the queer parts, these vulnerable parts. Here we are weaponless with open arms, with only our magic. Let’s try it our way, the *mestiza* way, the Chicana way, the woman way.” (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999, p. 110)

This need to move in-between worlds, in-between emotions, in-between struggles and accomplishments lands me in precarious positions as a mentor to people in a dominant group. How do I teach people who enjoy enormous amounts of privilege, that most of them are unearned, and that their posturing, their way of knowing the world and living their lives is all a result of the invisibility of those privileges (McIntosh, 1989)? How do I motivate White folks to empathize with people who are oppressed on a daily basis? How do I interrogate their position, and become a critical ally, especially when teaching with this Brown body while occupying a predominantly White space?

**KENT’S NARRATIVE**

It is neither a clear nor hazy day. As my dead mother drives me to school in her convertible, she turns toward me and smiles, but only faintly. She says nothing; she simply exists. In a short while, she pulls off the road and into a large parking lot, and I notice a huge stadium looming up before us. I realize we have arrived at school, and I then remember why. Dr. Bhattacharya’s class is due to begin soon, and I know I must be there.

The classroom is situated somewhere the other side of the stadium. I decide to walk through the structure in order to get there. Once inside, however, I see the place is absolutely packed with people, waiting expectantly for something to happen. There are fewer environments I detest more than crowded ones, so I decide to traverse the outer circumference of the building, using a deserted concrete walkway. It may take longer to reach class, but at least this way I can avoid the commotion.

Then at this point, I realize this is all a dream. None of it is real. Yet I desire the dream to continue because I am curious what will be discussed in class. I reason that if I can experience a tactile situation, I will remain asleep and the dream will not be over. I therefore decide to reach out to my right and touch the gray, painted concrete wall that lines the walkway. And as I do, I can feel the cold, unyielding texture.

Then, the dream ends, and I reluctantly open my eyes. Sadly, I now conclude there will be no class. As consciousness overpowers my relaxed senses, I wonder what will be missed. And then I am reminded that I have
finished all classes. There is now only a dissertation to complete. But not even that remains because yesterday, I gave up—and an important objective I began pursuing over four years ago is now lost. Dead and nonexistent. Perhaps in mulling over a lost goal, I should return to sleep and forget the challenges I have failed to confront. Challenges just like the one below:

From: Bhattacharya, Kakali <Kakali.Bhattacharya@tamucc.edu>
To: Kent Gillen <kent.gillen@gmail.com>
Date: Fri, Oct 22, 2010 at 8:55 AM
Subject: Some thoughts

Kent,

There is something that has been bothering me deeply from the onset of this project. It is your refusal to identify the privileges that you carry with you as a White man. [You must] identify unearned privileges that people have as part of the subject position(s) they occupy in our social structure. White male ranks at the top of the list. Yet nowhere in your dissertation that I have read so far have you unpacked your privileges in relation to the participant’s. I am not sure if you didn’t understand that you needed to do this or if I have been unclear or if you are simply resisting this to dismiss this idea as irrelevant to your work. However, if you do not identify the privileges with which you carry yourself and construct knowledge about this world, you are situating yourself as ahistorical, value-neutral, acultural, in the context of the participants’ experiences. Therefore, you would automatically fall into the trap of the colonizing White gaze that describes the exotic other...

This isn’t an issue of identity politics, which you have argued in your dissertation. It is an issue of identifying that you too, as White man, carry with you values, assumptions, beliefs, epistemologies, and privileges that shape the way you see and process the world...If you do not unpack that in your dissertation, you are leaving [out] a key part out of your dissertation and as such it would be incomplete. If you resist identifying and acknowledging any of this, then you [are] claiming that your subject position has no influence on how you have constructed knowledge or understanding in this research...

KB

As I drift back to sleep now, I feel the pressure of the deadline that approaches. I am visited now by a specter, the ghost of a new knowledge that
fails to fully materialize. Yet rather than confront the intrusive, mysterious White mass, I turn away. And in doing so, I avoid all admissions of privilege and persist in a stasis of denial, the result of which looms more ominous with each passing day and threatens the survival of all that I have heretofore accomplished. And with each protracted delay in confronting these hard truths, I realize the sudden stroke of the executioner’s axe swings nearer.

All the while, the spirit remains unseen, elusive, and impenetrable. On all occasions where I sense its presence, I succumb to an obsessive desire – the irrational yet tempting urge to dig a deep, dark hole and hide away from all responsibility, all new enlightenment. Countless times, I have been offered the keys to unlock the secrets that others wish me to discover. Such tokens often take the form of advice from those who would endorse my release into the outside world…

You must identify the privileges that you carry with you as a White man.

… But it is I who must insert these tokens, open all locks, and claim my own freedom. To do so, however, I must pen my reluctant signature at the bottom of a confession, the content of which I am not allowed to read because no one has set forth the conditions. The lines written in this contract are, I am told, my responsibility alone…

What baggage do you carry with yourself?

It is I who must author my own confession. Yet I have failed to oblige the warders. I have just received a communiqué from one of them. She states that she would have me prostrate myself before the community and admit to all of which I am oblivious, ignorant, unaware…

Unpack your position and the privileges with which you process the world.

These verses, repeated often, have become a hellish litany – a series of demands, requested no doubt with the best of intentions. But like the prisoner who has spent nearly a lifetime accommodating his own loss of freedom, I have refused her gift of release.

Think beyond the drama, beyond hiding behind the curtain.

The chants are ceaseless now. The drama has become a long nightmare with no end in sight. Why? – Because I refuse to awaken. Because I know the unseen specter that lurks on the other side of that curtain beckons me forth to confront a new knowledge that has eluded me since childhood.
CHAPTER 1

***

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. (Peggy McIntosh, 1990, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”)

***

Figure 1. Kent, the dissertation researcher, at age four

In northeastern Texas during 1960, I attended an elementary school located just a few blocks from home. My mother had deemed the streets safe enough for me to walk through alone every morning. Mom was unaware, however, that on some days, I was accompanied to school by an African-American woman, a maid for one of the neighborhood families. She was the mother of children approximately my age, so I guess she felt maternal and protective toward me, an 8-year-old kid, walking by himself. Soon, those walks alongside her became a morning ritual. She was friendly, and I found her presence comforting. As we ambled side by side, I would tell her about the second grade or what I did at home; and she would listen, always making a kind observation here or there as any good mother would.

One morning, after arriving at school, I was accused by one of my schoolmates of having been seen walking with a “n_____ woman.” I told him, “So what?” I saw nothing wrong with that. To me, she was just like anyone else. But my school chum judged that answer insufficient; further, he informed me it was forbidden to go around with a Black woman as if she were my equal, as if she were as good as those of my color. Soon, word got
around class, and I was chastised on and off throughout the day by every kid in the second grade. It was humiliating.

The next morning, when I encountered the woman halfway to school, I told her I could not walk with her anymore. I cannot recall if I told her the reason, or whether I hesitated to give her a reason, or if I assumed she would automatically accept such a decision, as if it were a command to a recruit from a superior. If I did not volunteer a rationale as to my shunning her presence, she must certainly have asked – because what I do remember is this. I told her what the kids at school had told me. At first, she insisted it was all nonsense, that what they had said meant nothing, nothing at all. But I had to keep her away from me, so as not to be seen with her. Indeed, I did not want to risk being seen with her. The criticism from my peers at school had been enough to persuade me that they must be right, and that she was wrong, that it was not all nonsense. So I did what I had to do. I insulted her – not once, but repeatedly. I just stood there and unleashed every kind of epithet I knew. After a minute of this abuse, her quiet protestations ceased and she finally gave up and walked on. I could sense by her posture that she was dejected, perhaps even devastated, but also angered by the things I had said. She continued on, while I remained standing there, watching her figure recede down the street, further and further distancing herself from me, until I thought it was “safe.”

And then I continued to school. I felt only anger and shame – at myself, at her, at everyone else I knew. I felt confused, as if at war with myself. I had said those things to her because I had been made to feel that I had to do it. I had chosen to obey the instructions of my friends. I had succumbed to peer pressure. Their desires had taken priority. After all, they must have known better – I did have no business being seen on the streets with her. And in acquiescing to their ideas of what was wrong and what was right, I had rejected a good-hearted woman based solely upon her skin color. Indeed, I had told her this in so many words, expressions that boiled up from the irrational. Yet, a part of me argued, the kids at school had to be right. They seemed so confident in their convictions. So in order to get along with them, I felt obliged to go along with their prejudices. Anyway, how could I enjoy school without any friends? I certainly did not want to be labeled the classroom outcast. I wanted to fit in. That was how one survived. Without friends, I reasoned, I was nothing.

Thus, as a young White boy, raised and schooled in Texas (see Figure 1), I was indoctrinated into what McIntosh (1989) referred to as “a damaged culture,” the tragic product of a dysfunctional, collectivist mindset: “Stay
away from them,” I was warned. “They’re not our kind. Don’t go near them. Don’t even talk to them. They don’t belong in the same neighborhood as us. Don’t even touch them. You never know what will rub off. Otherwise, you’ll wind up looking like them. Being like them.” The message was clear – that those who looked like me were superior to those who did not.

In this small, quiet college town of Denton, where my mother was a graduate business student and teaching intern, I was enrolled in her university’s lab elementary school. It consisted of an all-White student body, taught by an all-White faculty. One morning, our second-grade teacher took the class on an excursion – a “field trip” – to the local jail. We were herded upstairs to the holding cells where the inmates were locked up. Every prisoner in there was young, Black, and male. It was a subtle way of reinforcing the same lesson we were taught everywhere else. “They” were to be kept separate from “us” – and it was part of the White police force’s implicit duty to see this was done. Separateness, therefore, appeared in the guise of a legal mandate.

When we asked the jailer what the prisoners were fed, he replied that their menu consisted of bread and water – pretty much the same diet we gave our pets. Nothing sweet or enjoyable – just bland, as if they deserved nothing nutritious or tasty. We were told the prisoners were kept there because they were “bad.” We did not ask or wonder why they were bad. We, as White children, understood the point of our visit – “they” were not like “us.” They were doing penance for having been born the wrong skin color. It did not matter what they had done or not done, or what they had been accused of doing. Simply, it was their not being White that had earned them their imprisonment.

From within their cells, they regarded us with disinterest. We could only imagine what was going through their minds. Probably, they felt embarrassed. Not a word was spoken, either by them or us. I remember the tension, and I also recall the immense relief when we were finally told that we would now return to school...End of lesson.

After school was dismissed that afternoon, I sprinted across the college’s practice field and through the smoke-filled confines of the expansive Student Union building, where a beat jazz combo (piano, stand-up bass, and drums) entertained a hundred or so college students as they sat at tables conversing and indulging in their snacks and late-afternoon colas. Once I arrived inside the business building, I located my mother (see Figure 2) in the first-floor office she shared with another teacher. I told her about school, beginning of course with the field trip to the town jail. She listened, but she said little in response. From her muted reaction, I drew the inference that this was indeed
the way of the world – that Whites were meant to run the affairs of our
existence and those who were people of color were destined for a lifetime
of bread and water and incarceration. There was no need to question why.
Simply, that was the way things were designed. It was therefore assumed
by many of us privileged White kids that this was “their” destiny. We were
to remain on the outside; they were doomed to a life on the inside – hidden
away, made invisible to the rest of us.

Figure 2. Kent’s mother

On one occasion, during summer vacation from school, my mother and I
took a trip to West Texas to visit friends she had known from earlier days in
college. We spent much of the time on two-lane rural highways, listening to
eclectic Top 40 AM radio stations that played everything from country and
rockabilly to rhythm and blues. At one point, Sam Cooke was introduced
by a disc jockey, and the interior of our new Ford Galaxie was filled with
the sounds of “Having a Party.” Sam Cooke, I knew, was one of my mom’s
favorite performers. Every time his mellow voice was transmitted through
the small speaker of our car’s radio or the larger, more elaborate high-fidelity
system back home, she sang endless praise of him, his voice, his music, his
talent. As far as my mother was concerned, he was aces – much more so
than Elvis, whom she regarded as nothing more than a hip-swiveling, young
pretty-boy.

I knew that Sam Cooke was Black. Why did my mother celebrate
African-Americans as entertainers and reject them in any other role? I never
commented on this, and I would not allow myself to dwell on the apparent
discrepancy between what I had been taught about those who were not of
my color and my mother’s worshipful attitude toward Sam Cooke, a non-White signer. It just didn’t do to contradict Mom. I was just grateful she was enjoying herself.

My mother suffered from mood swings that were surprisingly quick. I would be taught, for example, not to use certain words during conversation, and I was careful to follow her instructions. Then on other occasions, because of apparent frustrations or events I knew nothing about, she would let rip with an obscene interjection. She was by no means a physically abusive parent – though I did receive the sudden slap on the bottom when the situation warranted it. Five years earlier, when we were living further south, in Corpus Christi, she had been widowed at age 26, when my father (see Figure 3) contracted polio and was confined to an iron lung the final months of 1955, passing away the following January. Years later, I learned from my great-aunt that after my dad died, my mother was convinced she could not go on living. Her family had to constantly remind her that she must stay alive – because she had something important to live for. That something was me. Had it not been for that, according to her aunt, my mother would have taken her own life. As far as she was concerned, my father had been the source of everything worth living.

For my own part, the loss of Dad took a different toll. I was only 3. Before his death, older relatives had discussed with me the likelihood that my father would go away permanently. I recall dismissing the notion as silly. I could not envision it. Yet, when death finally came, I was so traumatized by his

![Figure 3. Kent at age two with dad](image-url)
disappearance that memories of the first three years of my life vanished. Wiped away like a freshly cleaned slate. I am told I was actually present at his funeral. I was reported to have been standing beside his open grave as his body was interred. Yet I can never remember being there.

After Dad’s death, my mother decided to go back to work to earn money while a baby-sitter looked after me. Years before, she had been a substitute typing teacher in one of the only two high schools in Corpus Christi, where my parents had initially decided to settle. While pregnant with me, she had been the private secretary to a hard-working Baptist merchant, who was building one of the largest food-store chains in the Southwest. But after I was born, she had quit, devoting herself entirely to raising me.

Now that Dad had passed on, Mom decided to combine her past two jobs—teacher and secretary—into one. Her goal was to move north to Denton, where she had first met my dad, and earn a master’s degree in business education. In the fall of 1957, she was accepted into the business department’s secretarial-training program, where she took graduate classes in addition to teaching shorthand, typing, and business mathematics. Our years there included the earliest events I am able to recall. And though it is often observed that we remember only the good things that occurred in the past, I have little trouble recalling the bad. Such memories relate to the kind of instances that most others might never reveal. Yet, for me, it no longer makes a difference…

During the summer of 1957 when my mother was packing our belongings for the move up north, there lived a 6-year-old girl in a small town just outside of Corpus Christi. She was entertaining a group of neighborhood kids in her back yard. Like me, she had also lost her father early on and had only her mother to depend on. Unlike me, however, she was part of a large family, consisting of a 7-year-old brother and two older sisters. Their mother
earned money as a housekeeper, cleaning and cooking for the more well-to-do households in town while the girl’s grandmother watched over the kids.

The girl’s name was Angie (Figure 4). She was a Latina-American who spoke only Spanish. What little English she knew were phrases she picked up from listening to popular songs on the radio. She was to start school in less than a month and would be attending first grade in a district controlled and run by an Anglo administration and faculty. Ironically, in neighboring Corpus Christi, where I had spent my earliest years, bilingual education had been successfully implemented during the 1940s (Buzbee, 1942); but in the small outlying town in which Angie lived, the powerbrokers had continued delivering an education that was taught exclusively in English by an all-White staff.

In preparation for her initial schooling experience, Angie’s sisters taught her as much of the new language as they could. She hosted backyard Kool-Aid parties for her neighborhood friends, where one of their favorite activities involved play-acting to music that contained English lyrics. Angie and her guests would take turns singing “silly” novelty tunes, with words that were easy to remember, from songs like “Along Came Jones” by the Coasters or the Everly Brothers’ “Wake Up, Little Susie.” The rope-and-board swing that was suspended from a tree branch behind the family’s house would serve as the “stage” from which each child would perform. It was a pre-teen Amateur Hour, nothing more. But it was also an effective linguistic tool. By the time school started, Angie had mastered enough rudimentary English to correctly interpret a teacher’s instructions to other Latino classmates who were still Spanish-only speakers. These efforts, in fact, would be Angie’s first act of teaching – which in itself is part-interpreting – in a lifetime in which she would be rewarded a successful career as a tenured professor at an institution of higher learning.

However, such a future was difficult to imagine back then. Angie’s mother had set a goal for her youngest daughter – to work in an office, preferably air-conditioned – an objective totally unrelated to the kind of unskilled labor she performed daily for the various high-income Anglo swells who ruled the town. In 1957, the population of Angie’s community consisted mostly of Whites; perhaps one-fourth to one-third were of Hispanic descent. There were very few African-American families; indeed, Angie would encounter no more than one or two Black students during her stay in elementary school, grades one through six.

The same year that my second-grade class in Denton was experiencing the tension of a rare encounter with the Other in the town jail, Angie’s
neighborhood was the scene of nightly visits by the White constabulary, which ceased upon various Hispanic men with frequent regularity. It was not unusual to hear her sisters discuss which of their friends might have been snatched up by the law during the previous evening. Angie often feared the same fate might await her older brother.

There were times when Angie found school uncomfortable. Once, during a first-grade session when the White teacher asked everyone in class to stand up and tell the class what they had for breakfast, Angie, a self-described “church girl,” felt compelled to invent a small lie in order to save herself from embarrassment. Perhaps this instance can be best illustrated in dialogue form.

Imagine you are an audience member in a theatre, anticipating a play that is set over 50 years ago. The playbill you were issued in the lobby informs you that the first scenes are set in a 1950s coastal village in South Texas. As the curtain rises, you observe the following:

* A typical classroom of around 20 first-grade students: boys with crew cuts, done up in Butch wax; the girls wearing dresses of varying colors and patterns, most of them clad in White socks. A young woman, MISS CARTER, is perched on a stool, center and down stage, facing slightly away from the audience and directly toward students who are in chairs upstage. We join the scene as MISS CARTER has already begun speaking...

MISS CARTER: ...and I think it might be a good idea if we go in order by the first letter of your first names. All the way from the letter A to the letter Z. Well, Angie, I guess that means you will be the first. Would you like to please stand and tell us what you had for breakfast this morning?

ANGIE (hesitantly and looking down): Uh, I had oatmeal.
Long pause.

MISS CARTER: Okay. Anything else?

(Shorter pause)

MISS CARTER: I see. Well...uh, did you have it with sugar? Butter?
ANGIE: No, Miss Carter. Just oatmeal.

(Muffled laughter from one or two students)

MISS CARTER: Oh. Well…what did you have to drink with it?

ANGIE: Oh, I can’t remember. Milk, I think.

(Laughter from the children. Angie tenses, tightens her fists)

MISS CARTER: I see. Well…

(Lights fade to dark on classroom stage.)

Instead of revealing the truth – that she had actually eaten a taquito – she reported that her morning meal had consisted of oatmeal, a plain food that suggested no cultural overtones. “Why not tell a lie?” she reasoned inwardly. “It’s what they want to hear, isn’t it? So that’s what I’ll tell them.” Angie’s schoolroom perjury was testimony to how quickly she learned to negotiate the cultural divide that was (and is) a part of growing up in the borderlands of South Texas.

***

In Denton, Texas, where my mother and I lived during the late 1950s and early ’60s, there was virtually no Hispanic presence in the classroom or anywhere else. The university’s lab school was a totally homogenized environment. We of the privileged White faction were an exclusive but large community, and we felt nothing would ever change that. While attending the third grade, I joined a Cub Scout pack that was all-White. Our den-mother was White. We met in her house each Wednesday afternoon after school for milk and cookies, dressed in our dark blue uniforms and bright yellow neck-scarves. We proudly displayed our accomplishments in the form of animal-badges, along with rows of silver and gold arrows that lined our chests like a medal collection. We started a campfire by rubbing two sticks together. For that feat, we were awarded another arrow for our moms to sew on. We taught ourselves to cook our own breakfast. For that, we were awarded another arrow. Joining the Cub Scouts was just another way for me to fit in, to dress up as they did every Wednesday for school. Besides, I thought the uniforms looked splendid.

One afternoon, our troop hiked along a creek bed and plundered what was once the hunting ground of Native-American tribes, digging up old arrowheads – savage reminders of the “bloodthirsty scavengers” of the past who had often pillaged and massacred innocent, peaceful White communities.
by the hundreds. How did we know this? Our culture, with its cowboys-and-Indians mystique, had told us so. It was a faux history lesson that was played out time and time again in Saturday-afternoon matinees at the downtown movie theatre – or on TV-western serials, where in each episode the wild treachery of the tomahawk-wielding red heathen was conquered and tamed by the brave, “pale-faced” cavalry soldiers who also wore dark blue uniforms and sported bright yellow neck-scarves. We were the good guys who had conquered and tamed a nation of sub-human hostiles.

Figure 5. 1957 appointment book, used by Kent’s mother for listing items, prices

While being indoctrinated into White privilege, I was not aware that my mother’s stressful behavior was the result of her inability to sustain us financially. Even writing down her purchases in a small notebook did not keep her meager budget balanced (see Figure 5). Thus, she would be forced to borrow money from her parents, who owned and worked 125 acres of cotton just outside an agricultural community located 30 miles east of Dallas and about an hour’s drive from where we lived. My grandparents gladly parted with whatever money they could in order to make certain their oldest daughter and grandson were reasonably solvent. As a teaching intern in a small-town college, my mother was often urged to attend as many
out-of-town conventions for business educators as she could afford. She
must have enjoyed going to these functions because there were many times
when I was left with my grandparents, due to one convention or another.

My grandparents swore by the Pentecostal faith, a belief that included a
suspicion of all things Catholic, including Presidential candidates. In 1960,
Granddad and Grandma would refuse to vote a straight Democratic ticket
for the first time in their lives, all because John F. Kennedy was a “papist.”
And Catholics were just one of many segments they despised. But while I
stayed with them, they took good care of me and kept me well-fed and well-
indoctrinated.

One summer evening around twilight, my grandparents and I were
returning from a church meeting. Granddad was driving us in his Pontiac
the usual way home – by a street that bordered a rural shanty-town of dirt
roads lined with unpainted, rickety old shacks. It was the segregated other-
side-of-the-tracks existence of East Texas Americana. As we skirted the edge
of this desolate area, I noticed a group of young black men, some of them
carrying sticks. I could barely make out the figures in the dying light of that
summer’s evening. Feeling the safety of distance and four wheels beneath
me, I rolled down the back-seat window of the car and began screaming,
“Hey, you n_____s!”

My granddad, yelling at me to shut up, floored the Pontiac in the direction
of the farm-to-market road to take us back to the farm. I kept looking through
our speeding car’s rear window as Shanty-town’s occupants ran after us.
When we arrived home safe, my bare legs received a painful lashing,
administered by Grandma with a flyswatter. I then sat through my second
sermon of the night; it was based on that oft-quoted Biblical verse: “Thou
shalt not do a dumb thing like that ever again!” And I swore I never would.

***

Throughout her pre-school years in the South Texas community where she
was brought up, Angie never intermingled with White children or Anglo
families. Her first up-close exposure to the son of one of the parents her
mother worked for was in class during her very first day of school. That was
the moment she realized she would be learning beside the children of those
who employed her mother to clean their houses.

Angie resented the White authority that compelled her to assimilate by
telling lies, as she had done when asked what she ate for breakfast. She
objected to the necessity of committing such an act in order to survive in a
community ruled by a people different from hers. And if a condition exists
where it is not advisable to be true to others (or even to oneself)…well, if this is not a subtle form of colonization, then what is?

If they could do this to her, make her invent lies for teachers and strangers with lighter skin than hers, she was determined that those who represented authority in her small town would never see her cry. No matter how hurt, no matter how embarrassed she felt in front of others, no matter how ridiculed or degraded – no one would ever bear witness to the shedding of her tears. A six-year-old Mexicana could weep alone; but never in front of others. And certainly not in the presence of the White teachers and children in her school.

One day, Angie’s class was practicing reading skills. Her teacher had instructed that if they ever encountered an unfamiliar word, they were to sound it out, syllable by syllable, and eventually they would be able to figure out just what the word was. Learning by phonetics. One by one, each student was asked to read aloud from her/his class reader:

**SCENE TWO:** Miss Carter’s first grade class, Spring 1958.

**MISS CARTER:** Now children, open your books and turn to page 14…Angie, would you please read aloud while the rest of us follow along?

**ANGIE (slowly):** “Dick and Spot will meet Jane at the beach. Run, Dick, run. It is getting dark. Dick and Spot will go to…to…to…”

**MISS CARTER (interrupting):** Say aloud each syllable of the word, Angie.

**ANGIE:** To. Get. Her.

*(Laughter from the class)*

**MISS CARTER (who, in spite of herself, cannot stop laughing either):** No, no, no, it’s “together.”

BLACKOUT of stage right as the children’s laughter abruptly stops. ANGIE emerges quickly from the blackness, appearing to be on the verge of tears. But she is determined to hold them back. Her voice trembles but only at the beginning of her next speech.

**ANGIE (addressing herself):** Never let them see you cry… Then, I will go home and cry. Or on the way home, I will cry. But they are not going to see me cry. *She walks offstage, as the lights fade...*
For Angie, the risk of making herself appear foolish in school was just one of many hardships. The house she lived in had no running water and thus in order for her and other family members to obey the call of nature, they had to attend to such needs in an out-house located behind their residence. Occasionally, her friends would invite her into their homes; and Angie would be overcome with envy and resentment that they lived in a house with hot and cold running water, not to mention two parents at home, while she had none of these things. She found it difficult to accept that those items her friends took for granted were also the ones that seemed a luxury to her.

However, Angie’s mother was able to maintain enough credit to buy clothes for her family from a national mail-order vendor, who shipped them from out of state. She no longer wished to shop in any of the stores of her town because the White owners frequently watched and trailed her to make certain she did not exit with anything unpaid for. Although the money she made as a housekeeper was a paltry sum, she managed to save enough to buy a set of encyclopedias for the children to augment their learning at school. Thus, whenever she assisted them with their homework and her son or one of her daughters asked, “What is this?” or “What does that mean?” she would simply tell them, “Well, let’s look it up in one of those books, mija. That’s why we got them.”

As a youngster, Angie thought of her contemporaries as belonging in one of two categories. Hispanic boys were either “wild boys” or “passive boys.” And when girls were referenced, they were cataloged as either “wild girls” or “church girls.” Angie was a church girl. The Catholic religion provided her with a solid spiritual foundation. It was the Church that facilitated Angie’s self-discovery later on in her teens. It also gave her the opportunity to interact with many girls her own age. Her best friend, however, was one she did not meet at church, but at the place that provided her much discomfort – school.

SCENE THREE: Elementary School playground, fall of 1957.

A small section of playground divided in two by a high fence. On the one side is a young first-grade Latina with short dark straight hair and a pink dress she has worn many times since the previous Easter. She is crying and sniffing. ANGIE enters from the right and approaches the crying girl.

ANGIE: What’s wrong?

GIRL: (Starts to cry louder)

ANGIE: Can I help?
MEETING DIFFERENCES

GIRL: ¡Vayase!
ANGIE (In Spanish): Please, not till you tell me what upsets you?
GIRL: (Crying has turned into annoying sniffing)
ANGIE: Well, all right... (She turns to leave)
GIRL (in Spanish): They say they cannot understand me?
ANGIE (in English): Who says they say they cannot understand you?
GIRL (in Spanish): Them. (Pointing in a direction where other children are playing.)

From here, all dialogue is spoken in Spanish.

GIRL: Anything I say, they laugh at me. They call me names. “Wetback.” “Chuca.” One boy said in Spanish, “Why don’t you go back where you came from?” (Pause, then continues) I think that is what he said. I could barely understand him.

ANGIE: Forget it. That is gringo-talk. Gringo-talk from coconuts who think they are better than others and all because their families swam the Rio Bravo before the others. Do not let it bother you. (Pause) You should hear my older sisters when they sass back to the pochos. And like typical coconuts, they understand none of it... Oh, and some of the things they say to the gringo boys. (Laughs suddenly) It is good that the gringos cannot understand a word they say to them – otherwise (and here, she makes a motion with her finger as if slitting her throat.)

GIRL (Laughing too): I would like to have been there.
ANGIE (after a pause): I am called Angie.
GIRL: I am called Linda. (Pause) But my mother now calls me Florecita, after the girl in Los Gavilanes...

ANGIE: Ah, the sombrero movie. My uncle took us to see that one at the drive-in last summer. I adore Pedro Infante.
LINDA: What is a “drive-in?”
ANGIE: A huge outdoor parking lot where people stop their cars at night and look at movies.
CHAPTER 1

LINDA: They show movies here from Mexico?
ANGIE: Not here; but in the city. I heard our mother once say, “Herd enough of us into one place, and they cannot but help to find new ways to take our money.”

LINDA: I think I would like to go to a drive-in...
ANGIE (in English): Tough luck, Linda. You’ll need a car first. And driving lessons...
(And then, in Spanish) Now repeat the words I have just spoken… (In English, slowly)
Tough luck, Linda.

LINDA (also in English): Tough luck, Linda.
ANGIE: You need a car.
LINDA: You need a car...

Angie and Linda soon discovered they lived just down the street from one another. And though they did not share the same classes, they maintained their friendship. With Angie’s help and Linda’s own diligence, she overcame the linguistic divide of a borderlands existence – learning and speaking English at school during the day, then switching back to Spanish when she came home. If there was one overriding characteristic shared among nearly all of Angie’s Latino classmates, it was this constant navigation, back and forth between two languages, two cultures. Years later, Angie would look upon her multi-lingual experience as something to be not simply acknowledged, but celebrated.

Angie’s marginalization at school and in town was not one of her own choosing. Mine was. Sometime during the third grade, I noticed I was more comfortable when isolated from others. As the son of a widowed mother, I felt different. Like Angie, I knew of no one among my contemporaries who did not have both a mother and a father at home. Even with the few I considered friends, I felt distanced. Slowly, I withdrew from everyone at school or at the church we attended. Unlike Angie, religion was never a heavy consideration in my life. I desired neither to suffer from hurt nor to inflict suffering on others. In so doing, I became my own best friend and my own worst enemy.

Angie could depend on Linda, her family, and many others from church; I relied on my mother and no one else, but I found I preferred it that way (see Figure 6). During the summer between the second and third grades, I often walked alone from our house, located just off campus, all the way down to where the freeway from Dallas intersected with our street. I then proceeded north along the frontage road for a mile or so to an underpass beneath the
highway. There, I sat beneath the bridge and held conversations with an imaginary friend who rode an imaginary bicycle. Thus, at the age of 8, I was creating dialogues in my own head with another boy who did not even exist. I found it less stressful than having a real person to talk to or someone who might respond with words I had not thought up or with a verbal comeback I had not anticipated. It felt safer than actually coping with someone who might suddenly become angry should I say or do the wrong things. I not only avoided confrontation; I hid from it. So instead of having conversations with others, I made them up with an invisible boy. In other words, I was conducting dialogues with myself.

It always seemed an easy model to copy, this business of dialoging. One entity talked, the other listened. There was no overlap. And no instance where one person asked the other to repeat himself. It was a little boy’s dream – completely unreal. Years later, I would find that I was most attracted to readings in dialogue form, whether they appeared in the plays of Shakespeare in high school or an Oriana Fallaci interview with a political figure in one of my mother’s magazines.

***

From the time of my childhood in Denton, a life of distant observation was all I ever desired. Over the years since, I have socialized with others on occasion, watching sports on TV with a small group of acquaintances or participating in bowling leagues and so forth. Yet, the friendships never last long. No real bonds are felt. Part of the reason is internal – if I begin to feel close to anyone, I back away. The possibility of commitment to anything
or anyone still causes me considerable discomfort. It always has. I could explore this condition, probe it, rationalize it, intellectualize it — but to what avail?

However, I discovered in my early 40s that I could commit myself to the idea of education. Before she passed away in 1980, my mother had predicted repeatedly that I would become a teacher. I resisted the notion. Me? A teacher? Yet here I am, over 30 years later, almost 20 of which I have spent as an adjunct instructor of college English. Teaching is something I do well. I enjoy it increasingly with each passing semester, and I feel as though I will never burn out, as many others do. It is the only productive endeavor in which I have been involved. I consider teaching my reason for living.

The profession of education was also the locus at which the life of Angie and my own intersected. At the time, I had just moved into a faculty office almost directly across the hall from hers. We hardly spoke to one another during that time. For years, we knew each other only in passing. Until I began our series of audio-recorded dialogues in the spring of 2009, we never carried on any meaningful conversation. Until then, education was the only thing we shared in common. The fact that we could tick off the same cultural reference points was of little consequence; we could do that with almost anyone of our generation. We were both born in the same geographical region. Angie was schooled there; I was too, beginning in 1964 (grades 7–12) when my mother was offered a teaching position at the college where Angie and I currently hold classes. Yet apart from those commonalities, we are different in every imaginable way.

In reflecting on Angie’s childhood experiences in relation to my own, I am struck by the differences in the directions our lives took. In high school, Angie became an activist and a supporter of causes for which she still feels a passionate commitment. She took an interest in the widening multicultural environment that South Texas has evolved into since the 1960s and today she continues to transform the lives of many college students, regardless of their gender or ethnicity. She is a soft-spoken crusader for new, innovative cultural-affairs curricula, yet she remains under the publicity radar. Angie, unlike me, was committed.

What will follow in subsequent sections of this story will include an interweaving of the following components: (1) excerpts from interviews that I, the researcher, conducted with Angie; (2) reflective pieces by the researcher and his graduate-school mentor on the subject of cross-cultural
research in general and on the intersections between the researcher and the researched that resulted from this collaboration; and (3) excerpts from a two-act ethnodrama that seeks to interpret the data from my interviews with Angie through the consciousness of me, the researcher and the play’s author.

NOTE

1 Go away!