Personal Effects

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She is a contradiction in stereotypes, not to be pegged. He likes her right off. She wants to go to Belltown, the Denny Regrade, to take photos. He wants to go along. He does, feeling insecure and full of bravado, slipping into the walk of bravado he had perfected as a child in Brooklyn. Stop into a small café at the outskirts of downtown, at the entry to the Regrade. It’s a French-style café, the Boulangerie, or some such. To impress her, he speaks French.

“Un tas de café, s’il vous plaît. Et croissants pour les deux.” Don’t correct it. It’s how he said it.

He’s an English major, a senior, quite proud of having gotten this far in college. But insecure about what this will lead to (since he had only gotten as far as deciding to stay in college till he’s finally in over his head), he tells her of a novel he will write some day. His description goes something like:

I’ve been thinking about a novel about a white Puerto Rican kid who buys into the assimilation myth, hook, line, and sinker. He does all the right things—learns the language, learns how to pronounce “r’s” in words like “mother” and “water” and how not to trill the “r” when he says “three,” and he does well in school. He’s even a war hero. Does it all, only to realize that assimilation just can’t happen. Yet he can’t really be Puerto Rican. And he isn’t allowed into the Assimilation Club. So maybe he goes to Puerto Rico to find out who he might have been and what he is tied to. I don’t have it all worked out.

The plot line might not have been worked out, but this was the impulse nevertheless—to keep alive the memory of assimilation denied, a truism turned to myth, to try to hold on to, maybe even to regain that which had been lost on the road to assimilation.

In some sense, the impulse gets worked out some years later with Bootstraps, the assimilation myth explicit in the title; the story told then elaborated upon
with research and with theory. It’s an attempt to play out a kind of Freireian pedagogy: the political explored through the experiential. And it does more. It’s an autobiography with political, theoretical, pedagogical considerations. The story includes ethnographic research. The story includes things tried in classrooms. The story includes speculations on the differences between immigrants and minorities, the class system and language, orality and literacy, cultural and critical literacy, Freire, ideology, hegemony, how racism continues or the ways in which racism is allowed to continue despite the profession’s best efforts. And in so doing the story suggests how we are—all of us—subject to the systemic. This is the personal made public and the public personalized, not to self-glory nor to point fingers but to suggest how, maybe, to make the exception the rule. (xviii)

Now some part of that first impulse re-asserts itself, fictionalizing, telling the story, reaching back to the heritage that is at risk of passing away quickly.

Remember to call your grandpa “abuelo.” He’ll like the sound of that, since none of my sister’s kids have called him that. If you let him, he’ll just watch baseball day and night and not say much. Push him for the stories of Puerto Rico during his childhood. Ask him about catching shrimp with his hands, and the stories of how the neighborhood boys got a Model A Ford, about the revolutionary who hid out in el Yunque, about his time in the Army. Ask about my grandfather, Basilio, and gardening, and working as a groundskeeper and gardener for the University. And ask about Tió Vicente, the tall farmer, inland, on the coffee hills. “Inland” is important about knowing about being Puerto Rican, about Puerto Rico. I remember when I met him. A tall PR Man, that was very cool. And he gave me sugar cane from his farm, and a coffee bean, and a lemon that he had cut a hole on the top of. And he told me to chew on the been, squeeze lemon juice on the tongue, and chew on the cane. I wish I could give you that memory, mi’jitas. Now, Mom is easier. She loves to talk. But she’d rather forget the past. And I don’t want the past forgotten, so press her too.

The fiction, the bootstraps retold and fictionalized would have to begin back then, not quite a generation after the change of hands, when the Spanish colony was handed over to the U.S., the changes seen by three generations—Boricua to Nuyorican to the middle class of color far removed from the cultural soil of either of the generations, maybe even a wheatfield in Eastern Washington. It’s important. The memory.

So many have said this so well, that it’s hard for me to reiterate without breaking into the academic discourse of cite-and-quote—Adell, JanMohamed
and Lloyd, Omi and Winant, Saldívar, E. San Juan, Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan, Smorkaloff, and the “standards” like Anzaldúa or hooks—all have written about the connections between narratives by people of color and the need to reclaim a memory, memory of an identity in formation, constant reformation, the need to reclaim a memory of an identity as formed through the generations. And, I’d say, the need to reclaim and retain the memory of the imperial lords, those who have forcibly changed the identities of people of color through colonization.

Nelly, the department’s graduate secretary, hands me a flier for a meeting of the Pacific Islander’s group, inviting me to join the students, staff, and faculty (which includes two department chairs I work with often). We smile at each other. Her cultural ways—Filipina—and mine are so different really—except that we have two out of three imperial lords in common: Spain and the US. It binds us. Our first were before the world got large, more local: the Japanese and the Caribes. We laugh, while others look and listen on with looks of wondering. It’s not their memory.

Memory simply cannot be adequately portrayed in the conventional discourse of the academy.

I am grateful for the acknowledgment of perceptions that academic discourse provides, for the resources the conventions of citation make available, for the ideocentric discourse that displays the inductive or deductive lines of thought, a way to trace a writer’s logical connections. But the cognitive alone is insufficient. It can be strong for logos. It can be strong for ethos. But it is so very weak in pathos. Academic discourse tries, after all, to reach the Aristotelian ideal of being completely logocentric, though it cannot be freed of the ethical appeal to authority. Here: A demonstration. Agustín Lao, in “Islands at the Crossroads: Puerto Ricanness Traveling between the Translocal Nation and the Global City,” writes that

Puerto Ricans (as other racialized diasporas) function within multiple and ambiguous registers of race and racism. As colonized subjects, all Puerto Ricans are “colored” by colonial discourses. On the other hand, differential processes of racialization can either nominalize Puerto Ricans as “ethnic” and/or allow some light-skinned Puerto Ricans to “pass” as “white.” . . . A single Puerto Rican “transmigrant” can be classified as trigueña on the island, black in Ohio, and Latina in New York. (178-79)

Now consider the rhetorical effect of Professor Lao’s assertion (though with qualification) and a couple of stories from a light-skinned Puerto Rican. Both take place during the Summer of 2000. First story:
He was picked up at the registration desk of the hotel in Iowa City. The limousine (really a van) driver walks up, a man in his late fifties or early sixties, buzz cut, thick build, surely one more accustomed to hard physical labor, a farmer, one would imagine given the locale. Says at least the guest is on time, kind of to the person behind the registration desk, kind of to himself, maybe even to the guest. He goes on to say that the last guest he’d picked up had been fifteen minutes late then didn’t pay the fare.

Once in the van, the story of the deadbeat develops. It was a family of four, including an infant. No car seat.

“I coulda had my license pulled, with no car seat for the baby. Then he tries to pay me with a $100 travelers’ check, like I carry that kind of money at five in the morning.”

“Were they foreigners?” assuming the passengers would have over-estimated the fluidity of travelers’ checks.

“Who can know these days. The guy wore a turban. What are you?”

Internal soliloquy: He didn’t say “rag head,” so maybe this is more the condition of the international seaports flowing into the middle of America, the in-migration of the newest immigrants and those new immigrants from the 1930s, a land no longer completely owned by those of Scandinavian and German ancestry. But 1898 and 1917 really should mean something in a situation like this. [NB: 1898: the US acquisition of Puerto Rico; 1917: US citizenship conferred on all Puerto Ricans].

“Me? I’m American.”

“Coulda fooled me!”

“Yeah. I’m from New York.”

The conversation ends. The next passenger turns out to be a black man with a crutch coming out of an upper-middle-class home in the suburbs of Iowa City. Kind of felt sorry for the driver and his comfortable assumptions.

Second story:

It was another one of those receptions produced by the dean of the graduate school. This one was to welcome Doctoral Fellows in Residence. Most were persons of color. I was there as a department chair and as one of the mentors to a couple of the fellows.

The scene: Back porch of the house, clusters of folks with drinks in hand or paper plates with guacamole and chips, talking, smiling, over-
looking cows grazing in the valley below, and green soft rolling hills nearby, maybe 300 yards away, where there will soon be wheat, blowing beautifully in the wind.

A conversation ensues with one of the fellows, a woman who grew up in the black area of Boston, Rockport (CH). Listening in is an associate dean (MT), originally from Central Asia, overtly happy to be away from Russian bureaucracy. The conversation turns to race in the wheatland.

VV: “Around here folks don’t know if I’m Spanish, Jewish, Italian, from the Middle East, or from South Asia.”

MT: “I would have thought you were Italian”

CH: “I don’t know. He looks pretty Portorican to me.”

Sure, she knows the hue, she sees the “niggerlips,” one of those names I endured as a child, just like Martín, Martín Espada:

Niggerlips was the high school name for me.
So called by Douglas
the car mechanic, with green tattoos on each forearm,
and the choir of round pink faces that grinned deliciously from the back row of classrooms, droned over by teachers checking attendance too slowly.

Douglas would brag about cruising his car near sidewalks of black children to point an unloaded gun, to scare niggers like crows off a tree, he’d say.

My great-grandfather Luis was un negrito too, a shoemaker in the coffee hills of Puerto Rico, 1900. The family called him a secret and kept no photograph.
My father remembers
the childhood white powder
that failed to bleach
his stubborn copper skin,
and the family says
he is still a fly in milk.

So Niggerlips has the mouth
of his great-grandfather,
the song he must have sung
as he pointed the leather and nails,
the stubbornness of a fly in milk,
and all you have, Douglas,
is that unloaded gun.

Professor Lao, I would contend, is not quite right. Those of us who are light-skinned don’t pass for white; we’re just not automatically sorted into the appropriate slot. But more to the point is that Lao’s academic discourse (complete with scare quotes and nominalizations) is insufficient, lacks emotional appeal. And though Aristotle thought it not right to sway with emotional appeals, he knew that the greatest impact on listeners is emotional. The personal here does not negate the need for the academic; it complements, provides an essential element in the rhetorical triangle, an essential element in the intellect—cognition and affect. The personal done well is sensorial and intellectual, complete, knowledge known throughout mind and body, even if vicariously.

And for the person of color, it does more. The narrative of the person of color validates. It resonates. It awakens, particularly for those of us who are in institutions where our numbers are few. We know that though we really are Gramsci’s exceptions—those who “through ‘chance’ . . . has had opportunities that the thousand others in reality could not or did not have”—our experiences are in no sense unique but are always analogous to other experiences from among those exceptions. So more than narrating the life of one of color so that “one creates this possibility, suggests the process, indicates the opening,” in Gramsci’s terms (Cultural Writings 132), we remember the results of our having realized the possibility, discovered the process, found the opening, while finding that there is in some sense very little change on the other side. This is what Ellis Cose describes as The Rage of a Privileged Class.

As I’ve written before (“On Colonies, Canons, and Cose”), Cose explains, mainly by way of anecdote, the reasons why African Americans in particular continue to be angry even after having crossed over to the other side. He
explains the ways in which little slights continue to display the racism inherent in our society. Those “Dozen Demons” are

1. Inability to fit in.
2. Exclusion from the club.
3. Low expectations.
4. Shattered hopes.
5. Faint praise.
7. Coping fatigue.
8. Pigeonholing.
9. Identity troubles.
10. Self-censorship and silence.
11. Mendacity.
12. Guilt by association.

I haven’t been called a “spic” in many years (except by others of color). Yet little things happen that betray the underlying racism that affects us all, no matter how appalled by racism we might be. I read Anzaldúa or hooks or the poetry of Espada or Cruz or Esteves or any other writing of color, and I know I haven’t become clinically paranoid. I know that I’ve been poked by one of the demons, a little triton to the ribs. Some of the slights signified by Cose are self-imposed, Fanon’s internal colonialism. Some are imposed. All can be laid bare through the personal made public.

There’s the story of the academics of color who wrote about the subtle ways in which they find themselves victims of some of Cose’s demons—exclusion, expecting less, presuming failure, pigeonholing as “brown-on-brown” research rather than disinterested research (read: white and classical-empirical). Someone far away reads the essay once published and files suit for slander. The authors had never heard of the person. This is a very funny story to people of color who have heard it—the laughter of verification and white-guilt gone awry.

The converse:

“Man, I loved your book [or article or essay]. I could relate. The same things have happened to me,” told to the author time and again wherever he travels. Identity minus troubles among Cose’s demons, association guiltless, a new club formed.

Somehow, the spic does remain, despite all the good fortune and accolades, not only within me, but from without. While a good academic piece would help me to remember, rich narrative does more for the memory.
And the precedent is old. *Memoria* was the mother of the muses, the most important of the rhetorical offices. Now rhetorics of writing seem to go no further than invention, arrangement, and style, when delivery is still there, the matter of “voice,” and memory is tied in as well, surely for people of color. It’s as if we have accepted Plato’s prophecy that literacy would be the downfall of memory, leading only to remembrance, so that memory in the rhetorical canon seems all but forgotten, except as an historical artifact. And the canon of rhetoric only seems to note the contradiction that a prolific writer would write against writing (Kennedy 42,58). But Plato’s writing is significant because of its genre, an attempt at representation of dialogue, of story telling, of the play. Plato’s literacy took shape not as logocentric discourse but as a representation of discourse in action. Though folks like Volosinov have shown that all discourse, written as well as spoken, is dialogic. Plato is maybe the coolest [yes, coolest] of the philosophers because of the resonance of the dialogue, the possibility for humor, the clear presence of all three points in the rhetorical triangle and the unspecified (at least by Aristotle) dimension which is context. I don’t mean to wax Platonic here, really, only to suggest that there’s something to Plato’s notion of memory as more than recollection and to his leaning on a written discourse that approximates orality as a means toward arriving at that big-m Memory. The narratives of people of color jog our memories as a collective in a scattered world and within an ideology that praises individualism. And this is all the more apparent for the latino and latina, whose language contains the assertion of the interconnectedness among identity, memory, and the personal. There is a common saying among Puerto Ricans and Cubans: *Te doy un cuento de mi historia*, literally rendered as “I’ll give you a story about my history”: me, history and memory, and a story.

A thousand years before the first Europeans arrived on Puerto Rico, the native peoples of the mainland and the lesser Antilles migrated to Puerto Rico, where they could live in relative peace, able to fish and live off the fresh vegetation—pineapple and varieties of tuber that have no name in English. We don’t know the names of the first inhabitants of Puerto Rico. Our history is the history told by the Europeans who, conferring their values on the land, took the language of the local imperial lords. We only know the names given the first Puerto Ricans by their first colonizers, the first to raid them, the first to enslave them, the ones the Europeans honored by naming the region after them. These first colonizers were the peoples of Carib. And they named the people of that island Arawak and the culture of the Arawak was called Taino. And their island was named Boriquén. Then came Columbus (or Columbo or
Colón—I’m glad we’ve stopped translating people’s names, or I’d have to walk around with the name Conqueror Newton). And then Ponce de León. And then the priests. And we don’t really know what happened when they spoke, what transpired between the priests of Spain and the Boricua Arakwakas of Taino Ways.

So, to the analogous:

*The scene is Peru. It’s the end of the fifteenth century. Father Valverde, a Franciscan, is speaking to the Incan philosopher-rhetorician about the ways of the world. The Franciscan intends to be instructive, an attempt to raise the indigenous from its ignorance. The Incan doesn’t recognize the developmental mindset and enters into dialectical interplay. Having heard of how things work according to Father Valverde, the Incan responds:*  

You listed five preeminent men whom I ought to know. The first is God, three and one, which are four, whom you call the creator of the universe. Is he perhaps our Pachacámac and Viracocha? The second claims to be the father of all men, on whom they piled their sins. The third you call Jesus Christ, the only one not to cast sins on that first man, but he was killed. The fourth you call pope. The fifth, Carlos, according to you, is the most powerful monarch of the universe and supreme over all. However, you affirm this without taking account of other monarchs. But if this Carlos is prince and lord of all the world, why does he need the pope to grant him concessions and donations to make war on us and usurp our kingdoms? And if he needs the pope, then is not the pope the greater lord and most powerful prince of all the world, instead of Carlos? Also you say that I am obliged to pay tribute to Carlos and not to others, but since you give no reason for this tribute, I feel no obligation to pay it. If it is right to give tribute and service at all, it ought to be given to God, the man who was Father of all, then to Jesus Christ who never piled on his sins, and finally to the pope. . . . But if I ought not give tribute to this man, even less ought I give it to Carlos, who was never lord of these regions and whom I have never seen.

The record of this meeting at Atahualpa notes that,

The Spaniards, unable to endure this prolixity of argumentation, jumped from their seats and attacked the Indians and

And when the slaves of Puerto Rico rebelled, slaves from Africa were brought in, and the Boricuas ran inland, away from the forted walls of El Morro, and the rebels acquiesced to the Spanish while trading with Dutch and English, French and Italian pirates who would find other ways to enter the island. This subversion became jaibería. And I understand Angel Rama, when he says that it is in the Caribbean that “the plural manifestations of the entire universe insert themselves” (qtd in Smorkaloff vii). My mother’s name is Italian (the line is never lost in the Spanish tradition, my mother becoming María Socorro Cotto de Villanueva, and my becoming Víctor Villanueva y Cotto until I was Americanized as Victor Villanueva, Jr.) My mother’s name: Italian. The memory of that first Italian? Lost.

Centuries later, I am Puerto Rican—a product of the first migrations of Puerto Ricans to New York in the late 1940s, though my mother arrived through what was euphemistically called “indentured servitude,” what others called “white slavery,” as if somehow more barbaric than the slavery of Asians and of Africans. And I assimilate. And I don’t. But I know how to seem to be—jaibería—and the memory provided by stories told. Memory does hunger. And it’s fed through the stories told.

I’m trying to figure this out, somehow: who I am, from where, playing out the mixes within. It isn’t a question for me, whether public or private discourses. I am contradictory consciousness. The discourse should reflect that. I am these uneasy mixes of races that makes for no race at all yet finds itself victim to racism. The discourse should reflect that. I am, an American (from the Americas), an academic, a person of color—and organically grown traditional intellectual, containing both of Gramsci’s intellectual formations and not quite his new intellectual. The discourse should reflect that. And I am in a wheatfield, attempting to pass on a memory as I attempt to gather one. Personal discourse, the narrative, the auto/biography, helps in that effort, is a necessary adjunct to the academic. No binary. No contradiction. Just the key to remembrance.