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**More Examinations of Invisible  
Labor**

# Performing My Latina Body in White Academia

## White Supremacy, the Wolf in Ally's Clothing

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*"Nothing is more vulnerable  
than the words in our mouth  
because nothing has more power."*

—Daisy Hernandez, *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, xii

We meet at the office of the Cisneros Hispanic Leadership Institute.

*I still cringe every time I see or have to say the name.*

We walk to lunch a block down and sit down to discuss how my performance was that summer. I taught the writing part of the 3-week pre-college program. I had 16 students I met with three times a week to work on their writing, prep their essays for college applications, and talk about being Latinx in 2017 in the United States.

"You need to not be so chummy with your students," she started.

*We are preparing them for the real world.*

"How could you not edit her speech for the graduation?!"

*I didn't want to change her voice. Of 16 students, 10 had voted for her to represent them at the graduation. I had already changed "the Caucasians"—yeah, she was sassy—to "those that continue to oppress people of color."*

"No, we need to be heavy handed with the edits. We need to teach them."

*We need to teach them how to pass for white, she means.*

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I want to tell you my story.

Speaking of this isn't easy. I was raised to be proper, to be civil, to not complain. I feel the sting of judgment as I prepare to write this, with a voice inside me saying, "Don't complain. Who wants to hire someone who makes trouble and whines? No one. Stop it. Be grateful. You're

trying to have a good job. You should be grateful. *Como te vas a poner a reclamar?* You're going to screw up your chances in the future if you air out all these ungrateful complaints."

And yet...

I have learned I have to. If I don't speak, if we don't claim the problems with the systems that keep Black and brown women laboring to the benefit of others but not ourselves, then the system continues, and we never get our due. I must write this. Because this is how I claim my space. Because this is how I claim my *value*. I *know* I am worth more than this. And that is what scares you. That I know this, and therefore, will ask more of you.

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Through this essay, I use performative writing to claim a space for Latinxs and women of color. Performance is where marginal voices get to claim a space in academia. Specifically, I am using this opportunity to write a performative piece that shows the extra labor Latinxs scholars and professors often are forced to engage in to be considered worthwhile in the academy, and how we are encouraged to enforce these demands on our own students of color.

Complicating further the already fraught and overexerted space we exist in is the narrative of how even within "our" communities of immigrants and allies, there are folks who buy into white supremacist ideals and demand white-supremacist-espousing pedagogy and behaviors from us. When we already must work harder than our white counterparts to be valued, how much harder does our labor become when fellow Others in the academy push us out with critiques, expectations, and demands that dehumanize and diminish us and our experiences?

With this performative writing piece, I explore narratives of experience as an adjunct professor at a Primarily White Institution (PWI) where I was asked to labor specifically to educate white folks on how to work and understand black, brown, and immigrant folks, where I was invited to take on extra labor—without getting any benefits—where one of these positions brought me to work with Latinxs students under the supervision of a Spanish-immigrant white woman who attempted to squash my ability to connect with students for the sake of maintaining whiteness as the standard.

As my story shows, our labor is often sought after as women of color in the academy because we can provide mentorship, service, teaching, and other duties that call for "diversity and inclusion" so desperately need. Our bodies within spaces of academia serve purposes that maintain the status quo, leaving us powerless and yet useful for this machine. What this labor doesn't consider is the challenges and extra toll this takes on us as graduate students, professors, and more. Writing this piece creates more space for our communities to see ourselves, to bring voice to the challenges we face in hushed tones and build strength to survive hidden in bathroom stalls and office corners with tear-filled eyes and frustrated rage. It participates in efforts to build community and foster conversations with Latinxs and other women of color on issues of labor (emotional, physical, mental, intellectual), solidarity building, and on navigating policy imposed against both our physical bodies and bodies of knowledge.

## Transgressions in Performative Writing

Engaging with what scholars like Frederick C. Corey and D. Soyini Madison tell us, there is power in the personal narrative and in getting to tell our stories. Given that specifically, these moments I reflect on here are stories of the silencing, Othering, and exoticizing I experienced in my labor as a Latina in a PWI, using this academic space to speak these experiences, with critical reflections on their larger significance, is my way to claim power and space in a white-dominated environment. I want to do the work that Gloria Anzaldúa describes of women of color who write to survive: “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you” (1987, p. 169). Now, here, I feel I must write this essay because, while this PWI gave me chances to grow and develop as an instructor, these narratives evidence the ways in which the white space tried to erase me, rewrite me, change, and diminish me.

Coming from a rhetoric-focused master’s program, performance studies seemed, like Bernadette Calafell describes, an “intoxicating” pleasure-giving lover (2013b, p. 431). It is a space that allows me to exist in my fullness, honors that, celebrates that, encourages it, and needs it to be fed. As Della Pollock writes, “performative writing is an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” (1998, p. 75). Through these studies of performance, I have understood the importance and need for performative writing not only in the field of rhetoric, but as a transgressive force engendered by and filled with possibility. In fact, from reading and studying performance, I have come to understand that this performative intervention in rhetoric is vital to keep rhetoric relevant and having continued value in communication. After all, “Performance enriches rhetoric through embodied purpose, heartfelt empathy, and symbolic action while rhetoric politicizes performance through contested assumptions, discursive power, and critical publicity” (Madison, 1999, p. 111). One must exist with the other for both to continue to function powerfully and transformatively. Performance is then a site of possibility that has transgressive power in the academy and in society at large.

Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones note that “writing is an act of performance” (2016, p. 2). What Harris and Holman Jones highlight here is that writing itself is an “embodied and spatial practice” (p. 2). This helps us to understand how performance exists in the intersection and interaction between the writer, the audience, and the performative act/written text. It is there that change can happen. Something happens in the act of performance—in the act of me writing this essay—that makes us feel something and changes our own experiences. In fact, even the preparation for writing this has been an embodied, almost-painful experience. Researching and remembering takes a toll as I prepare to relive the moments that hurt me.

Similarly, Ronald Pelias writes, “Performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective... Performative writing attempts to keep the complexities of human experience intact, to place the ache back in the scholars’ abstractions” (2005, p. 418). It is, thus, the embodiment and connection of lived experience and meaning-making through body knowledge that exist in

performative writing. And I feel this ache even as I dig back into the recesses of my memory—and my email inbox—to relive and retrieve the memories and moments of my work with this program and my work at this PWI. However, this process of reflection and reflexivity, while painful, is fruitful. I am working to contextualize my story to larger significance as we think of power and brown bodies in academic spaces.

This is the power I find in performative writing: the value given and abstracted from the body. In fact, this connection to the body is how “Performative writing often evokes identification and empathic responses. It creates a space where others might see themselves” (p. 419). Indeed, these moments of identification (and disidentifications that José Esteban Muñoz writes about), are constitutive of life-giving possibilities for the Othered. This methodology for theory-making through performance studies in rhetoric honors our lived experiences and sees the body as a receptacle of that experience. As a rhetorical methodology—or one that challenges and expands traditional rhetorical methods—performance is life-giving because it creates a space for me to exist. It creates a space where my lived experience has meaning beyond just mere occurrences of everyday life. They become more than *just*.

Performance, thus, gives me the opportunity to create a space that allows “me to safely oscillate between my two worlds” (Abdi, 2014, p. 16). This allows us to ““embrace the Otherness in myself,” which has made me long for stories of other marginalized bodies that have been silenced and forced to live on the hyphens of their dueling identities” (Calafell, 2013a, p. 7, qtd. in Abdi 16). In fact, this is why writing these moments is vital for my own survival—in my reading of others, I have found myself. In my writing, I hope to create spaces for other Others to find themselves. Like Muñoz tells us, through performance of disidentifications, we are recycling stereotypes lobbed against us “as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation” (1999, p. 4). It is in this opportunity for Otherness that a huge part of the value of performance exists because it creates a space for and invites more representation and possibility for marginalized bodies to exist in. Ultimately, I find that narrative “is a literary form ideal for lives governed by silence,” which leads to performance’s transgressive power (Corey, 1998, p. 249).

So, despite my anxieties and hesitations, I know I must write this essay. I hear how Anzaldúa urges us on: “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures,” a place I understand and exist in constantly (1987, p. 80). This performative writing methodology asks that we be reflective and be willing to take risks. In fact, Dwight Conquergood calls for “a politics of the body deeply in action with Others” (Madison, 2007, p. 826; see also Conquergood, 2003a, and Conquergood, 2003b). In telling this story, I feel the fear and anxiety of revealing my true feelings about these experiences, of calling out oppression even in ally and supposedly brown-inclusive spaces. Hence, performative writing can be “an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” (Pollock, 1998, p. 75). These claims of the value and importance of performative writing provide further reasoning for the value and need for this piece to be performative and self-reflexive as I tell these stories of my experiences as a professional in white academia.

Madison writes that “co-performative witnessing is to live in and spend time in the borderlands of contested identities” (2007, p. 828). So, I must situate myself here because I believe I must participate in this decolonial project of defixing the master narratives by giving space to the Othered, the marginalized, the non-colonial, non-white. I want my story to shift the locus of power to the voices most often labeled strange. By doing this, and by my own practice participating in this decolonial project by writing my own performative writing and even by my very existence, we are shifting and decolonizing the work of rhetoric and oppressive structures.

### ***Frameworks & Contextualization of Narratives***

As noted for this work, I am engaging with work by Bernadette Calafell, D. Soyini Madison, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, Bryant K. Alexander, Della Pollock, Shadee Abdi, Haneen Ghabra and others as they work to name, understand, and challenge the ways in which faculty of color are mistreated, marginalized, tokenized, and limited in their roles as teachers and scholars. These scholars developed tools I can now use to further challenge the voices of white supremacy and patriarchy that dominate the limited opportunities and negative welcome I receive in certain spaces. Work from Alexander and Calafell in particular speaks to the ways in which traditional, white academic spaces and norms silence the stories and lives of people of color. In telling my stories working with the “Hispanic” leadership program, I can situate myself in this place where my loud, Latina, “chummy” character did not fit with the white standards the leadership of the program wanted to espouse. I can speak to what Alexander describes:

We all exist between the lines of our narrated lives, the stories we tell and the stories that are told about us. We all exist between the lines, the unsaid thoughts in the other’s description. We also read between the lines, adding our hopes to the unspoken dreams and the dailiness of our shared existence. I approach ethnographic, autobiographic and autoethnographic research as a way of reading between the lines of my own lived experience and the experiences of cultural familiars-to come to a critical understanding of self and other and those places where we intersect and overlap (1999, p. 310).

And I invite you to join me in this process. The scholarship of these authors provides me with methodologies I use here for sharing my own stories of my experiences in academia and how I find myself “between the lines of [my] narrated [life]” (p. 310).

Through this writing, I tell of my own pedagogy to challenge the standards that white and white-passing faculty buy into by liberating these stories from the confines of civility and propriety. In so doing, I follow Tracey Patton’s example of using these methodologies to look at the “inferential sexism and racism endemic to U.S. higher education” since these are just as dangerous as overt sexism and racism because of their subtlety (2004, pp. 60, 81). In fact, Patton makes the claim that civility is used to disguise this racism, squash difference, and silence Others. While we may be monstered in academia, I tell my students to embrace the Othered monstrosity of their/our identities (Calafell, 2015). Embracing that is itself a transgressive acceptance that breaks with the colonial mind-control efforts of whiteness in academia.

As Calafell argues, white academic spaces often make women of color into monstrosities. Our affect, our supposed-wild, exotic nature, must be “tamed” to exist here because our “presence

in this space is conditional” (p. 19). So, writing this personal narrative is my act of resistance. And this is “what performative writing offers that more traditional forms of scholarly writing do not” (Pelias, 2005, p. 417). In using my privileged access to this education to write this performative piece on the impacts of the labor demands of academia on my Latina body, I am challenging the expectation that I am here complete a degree and teach and fulfill an expendable capitalist goal. We do not simply exist to become a “prostitute, a servant, and a customer service representative” as is often the case for Latinas in higher education (Lugo-Lugo, 2012, pp. 40-41). Carmen Lugo-Lugo tackles these moments of microaggressions and exaggerated expectations by analyzing the three elements that operate in these circumstances: being a woman of color, teaching subjects some do not value, and teaching at a time when universities are viewed as corporate entities providing a service. These three elements come together to set up the troubling expectation that women in academia, and specifically Latinas, are expected to do certain things, and seen as expendable in other ways. So, instead of allowing myself to be used and be expendable, I am using this space to call out the damaging expectations put on women of color in academia and transgress them with this narrative.

*You will not get away with this abuse of my multiple identities  
without being called to task on it. It is overdue.*

My aim for this piece is to illuminate the voices of these “monsters,” “prostitutes,” “servants,” and “customer service representatives” in order to make space for our real lived experiences, to demonstrate how these demands imprint upon our bodies, and to show how we transgress them by creating systems of solidarity. Allowing Alexander and Warren’s (2002) work to inform my own praxis of performative writing, this writing process gives me a place to engage this narrative performance to make sense of my own experiences in institutional spaces that aim for diversity and inclusion, and yet continue to fail the bodies of color. Calafell’s “Mentoring and Love: An Open Letter” (2007) is particularly instructive because, in her letter, she processes the expectations put on her as a woman of color in the academy, and the ways in which her pedagogical, mentoring methods disrupt these expectations and empower her experiences and her students. Furthermore, this letter gives me language for experiences I lived that I write about in this project, giving me further context in which to situate them as moments of silencing and limiting of me as a Latina whose affect is often thought inappropriate or too much.

To tell this story and situate it in broader social, cultural, as well as performance studies contexts, I narrate moments of my professional academic career as an adjunct at a PWI in Washington, D.C., interspersed with connections to critical theoretical frameworks that allow for further meaning-making. The key moment I narrate here focus on my experiences working for a Hispanic leadership program at a PWI and the feedback I received from the white Spanish woman who directs the program and supervised my work. The telling of these stories in the broader context of the monster-making of Latinas in the academy, the limiting roles provided to POC, and continual silencing and Otherizing that occurs will dually participate in efforts of decolonizing the academy and creating space for my own academic and pedagogical work that is not as white-passing as my skin-tone.

## **A Latina Surviving in Academia: When Your Kin Don't Have Your Back**

Let me take you back to the start. I began this essay with a moment. In 2017, I taught the writing part of a pre-college program for a "Hispanic" leadership institute at the PWI I worked in. I had trouble with the name of the program, but early on, I didn't want to take on that battle.

*Do they realize that "Hispanic" was imposed on us by the federal government as they tried to categorize us into an Other they could understand?*

*This term is not preferred by most of us and it is erasure in action.*

*It is painful.*

The term was problematic and has been for decades. In fact, as many note, "The Hispanic othered-self is, through its implicit homogenization, a denial of the diversity of national, linguistic, social, historical, cultural, gendered, racial, political, and religious experiences of at least 25 million people" (Oboler, 1992, p. 22). It is common knowledge that the insult "spic" is derived from "Hispanic," which only makes sense when we consider that "the term Hispanic can have the effect of denying [people] their sense of self" (p. 22). In fact, as Alfred Yankauer wrote back in 1987, "[w]hat distinguishes the "Hispanics" is that they are lumped together as a single group without even the dignity of being assigned to a country of origin" (p. 15).

*We are more than this.*

But I was an adjunct. Someone was excited to have me working with them. They invited me to teach the writing part of this pre-college program. It sounded both easy and fun and would supply me some of the necessary extra income I would need during the summer. I wasn't going to take on the battle of challenging the name of the institute because of its messed-up, racist history. At least it was a space that was giving brown, immigrant, DACA students opportunities they wouldn't have if this program didn't exist.

*So, we take what we get and are grateful, verdad?*

*Que le vamos a hacer.*

*It's our immigrant story.*

*It's the brownness in our bodies, however invisible.*

*We learn to make do.*

*We learn to be grateful for opportunities, even though opportunities are shaded in oppressive, racist colors of generosity and benevolence.*



That summer, we began preparing for the 3-week program. We met a few times to plan out the lessons alongside the activities they had scheduled for the students. I shared my lesson plans with the Director, the Spanish immigrant who led the program for the college students and the pre-college program. I was excited to work with her, a fellow immigrant, heavily accented, somewhat-neurotic. But something felt strange with her. We have those vibes. We have those feelings. We just know. And then...

*We read through my materials for the lessons, looking over the readings I've selected:  
"Introductions and Who are Latinxs?"*

- ✓ *Revisit group and teacher introductions*
- ✓ *Discuss Latinx representations and our own voz/voice*
- ✓ *Review aim of writing part of the Caminos Al Futuro program.*
- ✓ *Review homework instructions for Friday's 1st Workshop session*

*"Ugh, I won't use that term."*

*"Which one?"*

*"Latinx. Que ridiculo. I just hate those silly, academic fads," she says to me and the gay, Latino man coordinating the summer program with her.*

*In my head, I'm boiling. A FAD?!*

*Identities are not fads!*

*What is wrong with this woman?*

I wondered, at first. But it also landed so quickly. Deeply, in my bones, I understood. They may want it to call it "folks of older generations" and "more traditional people," but I see it clearly. Whiteness is preferred by the colonizer. Whiteness, as Ghabra defines it, is the "system of power that privileges performances of Western civility through a White/Anglo-Saxon learning" (2018, p. 3). This definition is particularly useful because it speaks to the "racial superiority" that whiteness espouses, such as "favoring philosophies and performances of both the white people and those who re-perform and re-secure it adequately" (p. 3). Whiteness, as in not the Other. This whiteness that this supervisor performed, re-performed, and attempted to re-secure with her feedback to me and my work. The civil. The proper. The one that fits.

It was a small, tiny moment, this one. Still, I wondered what my fellow young, Latinx person thought when he heard her dismiss it. Maybe he didn't even care. Maybe he didn't believe in the reclaiming and transgressive power of the Latinx.

*But I did.*

I think I knew in that moment. However, a job is a job and I needed it. So, we forged on. We planned the summer course. I taught. She gave me her instructions and expectations—teach, ask them to vote on a representative to speak at graduation, get them to draft personal statements, and so on.

Then, graduation day arrived. Earlier in the week, the student the class selected—one of the two DACA students in the program—emailed me her draft of her speech. It pained me to edit it, but I knew by now that the Director would want things a certain way. While I loved the sassiness of her words—a reclamation of power taken from us—I knew that these words could not be said as they were written. Trained in my work at the Writing Center and with my own research and experience working with multilingual writers, I knew that my imperative was not to take away her voice (see Severino, 2009). I hated doing it, but I did it. I edited out “the Caucasians” and replaced it with those who oppress us. The message was there. Her point was left clear. I violated her righteous sass so the Director would not lose it over this powerful detail. I hated the negotiation, but I tried to find a middle ground. It did not do much good.

*“Did you even edit this?!”*

*“How could you not look at this?!”*

*“We were editing at 6am today!”*

*“She can’t say that!”*

Every admonition cut little slits into my warrior shield.

*Am I in middle school again? Did I fuck up?*

*Am I getting detention—wait, fired?*

*Fuck.*

*Are they still going to pay me?*

*Will she tell other faculty in the university?*

*Are people going to not want to hire me?*

*Wait, is she even right?*

*No! I wasn’t going to take away her voice. She received a mandate from her peers, and it was not my place to take that away!*

*“But the donors...”*

*“We are here to educate them. To prepare them for the real world.”*

*"I expected a heavy hand. You should've done more"*

Patton's (2004) analysis of the use of civility across campuses is useful here as well because it helps to see these conversations with my supervisor, and the way in which she called for civility, to train students to pass and learn how to "be in the real world," in her words. I believe these words and actions fit what Patton describes as the endemic inferential sexism and racism that exists in higher education.

It's ironic, really. One of my biggest lessons with the silencing powers of whiteness came from a white Spaniard. A "friendly" reminder that we can't forget they were our colonizers. They may speak my languages, they may live immigrant lives, and carry accents on their tongues, but they are not my kin. They uphold white supremacy. They ARE white supremacy. They believe they hold the right, the truth, the good. We are the loud, the brown, the bad, the unshapely, the out of place, the exotic monsters, and we must be tamed.

She wanted me to shift. She did not want me to relate to students as equals, making "homeplace" to survive in academic spaces that are racist and continue to Other us as WOC in these fields (hooks, 1994). No. While director of this program, her job was to create white-robots out of brown bodies. She didn't see her role as support, but a whitening.

That is not how I see my job. In line with Calafell's descriptions of mentorship in academia, my work is about survival and care. And love. My work fits more with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of Hope*. As Freire writes, this is "written in rage and love, without which there is no hope. It is meant as a defense of tolerance...and radicalness" (2014, p. 4). In their same vein, work of others like Holly Hungerford-Kresser and Amy Vetter (2012), and Gloria Kersey-Matusiak (2004) support the importance of that faculty of color can have for students of color, especially in these PWIs. This is why Calafell's work to me is so life-giving. It speaks to the importance that faculty of color, and WOC specifically, can have for students of color. She highlights how important these relationships between faculty and students of color are for both parties, and how they are built and guided by an ethics of love. In fact, "love is very necessary," she writes (Calafell 2007, p. 436). Calafell's letter to her student in "Mentoring and Love" gives me language for the experiences I have lived that I reflect on in this project. It gives me further context in which to situate my stories as moments of silencing and limiting of me as a Latina whose affect is considered inappropriate or too much.

*"Don't be so chummy with your students," she said to me.*

*Her words are burned into my heart.*

*She tried to diminish me.*

*But I am not letting her.*

In the spirit of Muñoz, I am recycling her attacks to my pedagogical philosophy and burning them into my heart as points of pride. You will not diminish me. You will not shame me into

hating my affect because you cannot handle or understand it. I *know* my students see it, receive it, and need it. They respond in kind and feel seen in ways they haven't. Your critique will not break me into submission. Instead, I will rise with pride to meet my students where they are and use my pedagogy as my weapon to fight your white supremacy.

## Conclusion

The telling of these stories in the broader context of the monster-making of Latinas that Calafell discussed in *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture* (2015). It also engages in naming the limiting roles provided to BIPOC that Lugo-Lugo writes about in *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012) This testimonio challenges the continual silencing and Otherizing that occurs in academia while dually participating in efforts to decolonize the academy and create space for my own academic and pedagogical work that is not as white-passing as my skin-tone.

By speaking, by writing, by owning these truths of my experiences, I claim my space. The space that was not given to me then. By calling out universities and their capitalist, corporate tendencies of extracting labor from people, and naming the real, physical, financial damage that this creates in us, I challenge calls for civility and invite the truths of black and brown bodies to be centered. I was raised not to cause a fuss or make trouble. But now, I see the damage that not making this fuss has caused. And so, I speak. And I write. And I call to task the whiteness that surrounds and suffocates us, attempting to erase and destroy us.

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