

Transcript for Episode 21: Reflections on Latin@ Rhetorics

Run Time: 24:17

AH: Allison Hitt (host, co-executive producer)
KS: Karrieann Soto (host, producer)
EM: Eva Moya (special guest)
GN: Guillermina “Gina” Nunez-Mchiri (special guest)
CM: Cruz Medina (special guest)
RG: Romeo Garcia (special guest)
CK: Cristina Kirkligher (special guest)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

Cue music: “The Afterlife (instrumental)” by YACHT

AH: You’re listening to This Rhetorical Life—a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Hi, everyone. I’m Allison Hitt—

KS: And I’m Karrieann Soto

AH: And for this collaborative episode, we’ve partnered with some of the contributors to the Fall 2013 special issue of *Reflections*: “Latin@s in Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service-Learning.” We wanted to talk with folks about how they define Latina/o rhetorics and why it’s an important issue for the field right now. As you’ll hear, we collected some perspectives that are reflected in the issue itself—about the importance of service learning, identity, and *la familia*—and also some new, complex, and sometimes competing definitions of Latina/o rhetorics.

KS: Because this is a field that includes such a broad variety of cultural backgrounds, so it’s important to feature a number of people with different perspectives and definitions. In this podcast, we feature Eva Moya and Guillermina Gina Núñez-Mchiri from the University of Texas at El Paso, Cruz Medina from Santa Clara University, Romeo Garcia from Syracuse University, and Cristina Kirkligher from Texas A&M University Corpus Christi.

First, you’ll hear from Eva and Gina about the importance of service learning.

Cue music: “Separate Ways Remix” by Willbe

EM: Service learning is a teaching method that combines both community service with academic instruction, which focuses on critical reflection, thinking, and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in organized activities to address the local needs of the communities, while they also develop their academic skills

and a sense of civic responsibility. It's also a wonderful demonstration of commitment to the community.

In community engagement, we talk about pedagogies, and the pedagogy of service learning combines learning goals with community service in a way that it enhances both the student as well as the community, and so therefore it's grounded in doing the common good.

En español, se le como el aprendizaje servicio y aquí esto tiene que ver con el servicio solidario que está destinado a atender las necesidades reales y sentidas de una comunidad, en donde los que protagonizan activamente el trabajo son los estudiantes pero en donde ellos y ellas también plantean la evaluación y articulan intencionalmente el contenido de un aprendizaje. Éste es un método por el cual los estudiantes pueden aprender y desarrollar a ser más activos a dar más servicios y hacerlo de manera organizado, cuidando de que siempre atiendan las necesidades de la comunidad que los invita a participar. Está coordinado por lo regular el servicio a través de alguna institución de educación superior o algún programa de servicio comunitario, y de nuevo, el trabajo con la comunidad yo creo que es sumamente importante.

AH: Gina builds on Eva's definitions, not only explaining her perception of service learning from an anthropologist's perspective but also connecting to the tangible gains students receive from engaging with—and critically reflecting with—their communities.

Cue music: "Readers! Do You Read?" by Chris Zabriskie

GN: What service learning means to me...it involves engaging institutions of higher education with local communities through student, staff, and faculty participation. Service learning speaks to a pedagogy of engagement that makes relevant what is being taught in the college classroom with the realities of our local communities. Our community partners thus serve as co-teachers and mentors to our students. Our students, in serving, become leaders and carry the realities of their communities with them upon graduation.

When I think about why service learning is important to higher education and to my field in particular, I think about how it helps provide an opportunity for students to gain valuable experiences and build their social networks in their fields of interests prior to graduating. I connect service learning with ethnographic research as an anthropologist. As students are engaged in service learning, they are able to gather field notes of their observations, their experiences, and their critical reflections. Thus, writing is critical for inscribing the social realities and the lived experiences of our students and the people and agencies the students partner with in the community. Writing and critical reflection are significant for chronicling the needs, priorities, and challenges of our contemporary societies. Students engaged in service learning are *not* simply volunteering to make a difference, they are also creating knowledge about their experiences through written and other visual accounts of their work.

AH: Although service learning is an important component of *Reflections*, it also addresses public rhetoric and civic writing, and the Latin@ special issue in particular celebrates artwork and poetry that represents the Latin@ value and honor of *la familia*. In the following poem, “She Used to Say,” Romeo Garcia reflects on life on the U.S.-Mexico border and constructing a Mexican-American identity.

RG: This poem is entitled, “She Used To Say.”

She used to say...
Never forget the acento
It is part of your identity
Y como todos los Mexicanos
You need to keep your dignity

Say your first name proud
And your last name prouder
Throw a grito out loud
And represent who you are louder

Take pride in where you are from
The Rio Grande Valley is a curious space
The border separates some
Pero esta tierra has no singular name

Your reality is different from others
En la frontera the minority is the majority
But on the outside you are perceived as THE “other”
 They will set you aside with their authority....
 They will silence you because you are a minority...
 They will cut you down with all their might...
 But you must not let down—you must always fight.

Never forget the acento
Say your full name proud
With some Mexican might
Never forget where you’re from...
Always continue to fight!

This poem really is about all the women that have influenced me throughout my upbringing in the Valley, and so the whole idea of saying or writing my name with the acento speaks to my experience with my elementary principal who would always get mad at me for not signing my last name with the acento. And she’d sit me down and say, “You know, you need to remember that you’re not only American, but you’re Mexican, too.” And so when I talk about the Rio Grande Valley as a curious space and that the border separates, this is reflective of my grandma and how, you know, we used to go over to the border almost every week and come back and how Mexico was so close to the valley

that—even though it’s separated by a geopolitical border—the ground, the land, the territory that once belonged to Mexico is still part of the everyday of the Valley.

The next stanza that talks about how I am perceived as the other really speaks to my experiences in higher education—particularly my experience in my undergrad—and how I was part of this pool to diversify the university, and yet the university didn’t quite understand who Mexican Americans were, specifically from Texas. And so there was a struggle there between assimilating and maintaining who I was, and this experience really taught me to value my Mexican American identity.

And so the last stanza...that speaks to—it’s a culmination of the acento and fight and pride—just speaks to my experience as a whole in terms of maintaining that Mexican American identity.

- KS: Based on our interests in the practice of rhetoric, we wanted to talk to contributors about what Latina/o rhetoric means to the. Gina offers a clear, concise definition of what Latina/o rhetoric means for her.
- GN: When I think of Latina rhetoric—and Latino rhetoric—I think about it as a framework for us to communicate our individual and collective experiences through narratives, videos, and other creative mediums. By creating opportunities for us to represent our voices and experiences, we are able to craft narratives as scholars who are engaged in scholarship of everyday life.
- KS: The definitions we received, like the many definitions of rhetoric itself, are multiple and at times competing. Cruz Medina offers a definition that builds on Gina’s and focuses in particular on mestizaje and traditions of resistance.
- CM: Latina/latino rhetoric is a lot like all kinds of rhetoric in that if you ask what is it, I would answer everything. Still, Latina/o rhetoric is like many “minority” or multicultural rhetoric because many of the rhetorical commonplaces come about as responses to marginalization via education, politics, policy and media.

Current Latina/o rhetoric has a lot to do with mestizaje—or the post-colonial intermixing of bodies, language, histories, and culture. Gloria Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness has informed a lot of the ways of knowing and interpreting Latino rhetoric, especially since the nationalist, patriarchal rhetoric of the Chicano civil rights movement that made great strides for equality, though on the backs of women.

When there’s discussion of borderlands rhetoric—like Adela Licona’s *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric* or Damian Baca’s *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*—this rhetorical scholarship is a part of the genealogy of Gloria Anzaldúa and her work that was generative in terms of Chicana feminism, Pre-Columbian rhetoric, and many *topoi* regarding language, literacy, and mixed-race identity.

The ethos of Latina/o Rhetoric is embodied in many of the traditions of resistance that link back to first contact with Europeans in the Americas spanning across time and space to current moments and sites of resistance. Whether it's the colonialism of Columbus or the neocolonialism of states like Arizona, Latina/o rhetoricians are not lacking in moments of *kairos* or polemics in the polis that necessitate rhetorical invention to communicate and respond to dominant systems of power.

While issues such as the media's fixation on stereotypes and deficiency rhetoric in public discourse about Latina/o culture are certainly necessary, there's so much more on work that's being done and deserves recognition. Much of the work in Latina/o rhetoric continues to parallel a lot of the work their fields in terms of medical rhetoric policy epistemology alternative ways of knowing feminist epistemology popular culture education literacy.

Latina/o rhetoric is best understood when read and studied as an epistemology and body of knowledge that is created in parallel, at alternate locations of enunciation. It's the rhetoric of the metics and migrants, the activists, the campesino laborer, the professor, and my grandfather the jardinero.

AH: While Cruz's definition focuses specifically on what a Latina/o rhetoric can be, what it values, and why it's important, Romeo's definition focuses more specifically on the possibilities and importance of defining a Texan Mexican American rhetoric. Like the poem heard earlier, Romeo contextualizes this definition through his Mexican American identity.

RG: Before I go into what I call Texas or Texan/Mexican American rhetoric, I want to talk about how I came to identify with Mexican American. I was born and raised in Harlingen, Texas—a city part of the lower Rio Grande Valley or, as many of us call it, the Valley or el valle.

My environment had always been one of Mexican origin or Mexican descent. My grandma was from San Luis, and her parents were from Mexico. My grandma when she crossed the border and came to the United States, you know, she got married and had children, got remarried to my grandpa who was also from Mexico. Long story short, my family was Mexican before it was ever American--before we ever identified as being American.

And NPR recently published a piece that covers what people refer to themselves along the U.S.-Mexico border, and I felt that this conversation was really reflective of *Texas*—more specifically, the Texas-Mexican border where *Latino* and *Chicano* is really not part of my vocabulary or my family's vocabulary. Many of the families in the Valley, if you ask them, "What are you?" most of us would say Mexican or Mexicano.

In 2005, I found myself leaving the Valley for various reasons. This was an emotional transition for me, geographically, socially, culturally, and academically. And so I sat on this bus with one suitcase, which I think is really telling of 1) where I come from and 2)

my situation at the time. We stopped at the Sarita checkpoint, which is what I call the last line of defense where the border patrol comes on and checks for papeles. This was a time where I realized from there on out, I'd be "checked" for mis papeles in higher education.

My experience at my undergraduate school taught me a couple of things: 1) that I wasn't Latino, Hispanic, or Chicano, which were identities that were attempted to be grafted upon my body, and 2) that I referred to my identity as Mexican American as an ideological and political position signifying my positionality within two cultures, languages, and tradition. So since then, I've advanced a Mexican American identity and a Texan/Mexican American rhetoric. This really was constructed as I sat in classes where teachers would try to tell me about the Mexican American from Texas and the border and how my border is one way when, really, you know it's quite different. They'd try to tell me that Mexican Americans were Chicano, but in 16 years of growing up in the Valley, I never heard that word. They'd try to tell me that I was something that I was not, and I grew up a certain way that taught me that I needed to take pride in both cultures.

Currently, I'm part of the Latino caucus, and I understand the rhetorical move and gesture towards filtering the identity term Latino, and I believe in many of the values attached to the caucus. But for me, there always needs to be a point of difference. For me, it is critical to advance the Texan/Mexican American identity and the Texan/Mexican American rhetoric.

The Texan/Mexican American rhetoric really speaks to 1) the particular border that I was born and raised in and 2) the intimacy between U.S. and Mexico that translated into the everyday interaction that informed identity, rhetoric, language, and literacy. Now some refer to Mexican American rhetoric as this construction of hybridity or whatever, but for me it speaks to more the unity and separation, echoes the historical conflict between the U.S. and Mexico, is a cultural code that reflects the tension of my ethno-racialized and diverse linguistic upbringing within a national context, and is a cultural response to both the constraints of borders and neoliberal logics. Although Texan/Mexican American rhetoric and Latino rhetoric share similarities, it's quite different when you grow up in a region where the minority is the majority, where the lingua franca is not English, where white people must speak Spanglish to get around, and where the history and traditions of the Mexican culture is so entrenched. You know, that really informs one's positionality, and so for me the Mexican American *language* is a native language of the Valley, and this is why I advance a Mexican American rhetoric that's situated within a Texan context.

Cue music: "Tea Top" by ROW

CK: Hello, my name is Cristina Kirklighter, and I'm here to talk about Latina rhetoric. I'm the editor of *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*. I'll preface this by saying I'm not known for being a Latina rhetorician scholar in the field, like we might think of Victor Villanueva, Damián Baca, Adela Licon, Jaime Mejía, Cristina Ramírez, Kendall Leon, Cruz Medina, Elias Serna, and others. However, maybe I'm known for being a rhetorician in my different leadership positions over the years with NCTE and CCCC and the caucuses. Maybe that's important, too, in our field

to make necessary changes. So maybe I'll discuss what I've learned from Latina rhetoricians in the present and what still needs to be done with Latina rhetoric and composition for the future.

I'll first discuss how my mother's Honduran influences shape why this podcast may take this format. The indigenous cultures of Hondurans have a strong influence on the Honduran people. For such a small country, we have seven indigenous groups, and the vast majority of Hondurans are either fully or partially indigenous. We are less tied to norteamericano cultural and rhetorical influences than other countries. Our closest norteamericano ties—both historically and culturally—would be New Orleans, which is more historically Caribbean and Latin American than anything else as the former gateway to Latin America.

Humility and building communal experiences shape Honduran rhetoric, along with a deep historical weariness of imperialism. Why do I go into detail about my Honduran background? Well it's because there are no Honduran rhetorician scholars in rhetoric and composition. There are gaps in Latina rhetoric that need to be filled, and I believe this constitutes the future in rhetoric and composition—to find those gaps, focused on place, and work on filling those gaps. Although I admire the many scholars devoted to studying rhetoric in Mexico, Texas, Mexico, California, Puerto Rico, we need to push our emerging Latina scholars to go beyond these places and explore other rhetorical territories.

That said, I want to say that I've learned from these Latina rhetoricians. Victor Villanueva as my mentor greatly influenced me to explore personal rhetoric that ultimately led to my book *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay*, where I trace the essay, or ensayo, from France, England, the U.S., Latin America, and back to the U.S. with Latinos. He also helped me rhetorically navigate the muddy waters of the rhetoric of NCTE and CCCC—to make some changes and to make a difference. Damián helped me to look at my indigenous roots and see how these roots shape my rhetoric and especially the way I lead. Adela Licona, with her focus on gender and rhetoric, helps me understand those powerful women on both sides of my family who defied fixed gender roles in their oppressive environments. Cristina Ramírez and I share our love for the Latin American women rhetoricians and journalists of the past: I with Victoria Ocampo and Gabriela Mistral, she with Mexican women journalists. Kendall has given me a renewed appreciation for archival work in studying organizations, especially Chicano organizations, and what makes them unique and effective. Cruz Medina and Elias Serna show me why rhetorical activism is so important—that we must walk the walk. We must get on the bus as those civil rights activists did so many years ago, but now it is the Latinos who must take activist stances in Arizona and California. Eva Moya and Gina Nuñez help me see that Latina rhetoric is a framework for us to communicate our individual and collective experiences through narratives, videos, and creative mediums as they say. And as they say, by creating opportunities for us to represent our voices and experiences, we are able to craft narratives as scholars who are engaged in the scholarship of everyday life.

KS: As a Puerto Rican, I really appreciate all of the work of the scholars who were featured in this episode, as well as those who were cited. I realize that the term Latin@ rhetorics is a coalition-building effort for those who feel like they are not represented fairly, or at all. Following Chandra Mohanty, in my work I aim to enact a feminist solidarity that is better afforded by the work of Latin@ rhetors. Keeping in mind that solidarity has to build from similarities, but also acknowledge difference, I take comfort in Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland rhetorics, even if I don't necessarily share her Chicana cultural background.

It is also quite significant to have had a component of service learning, as the work that we do should not stay within the confines of the so-called ivory tower, but we should build more and better community partnerships that acknowledge the necessities of the community and assesses what is the best way for scholars to contribute. I hope that this area of scholarship keeps growing in the future. I know that I will do my part to do so.

Cue music: "Walking All Day Long" by Willbe

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.