



SCCR

STANFORD CENTER FOR CHICANO RESEARCH
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

RACE AND THE BORDERLANDS IN ARTURO ISLAS'S MIGRANT SOULS

Working Papers Series, No. 37

by
Renato Rosaldo
Department of Anthropology
Stanford Ca 94305-2145

Paper read at "Critical Theory at Davis 1991-92 Conference,"
University of California at Davis, April 25, 1992.

The purpose of the SCCR Working Paper Series is to publish
works that significantly advance our knowledge about Chicanos and
other Latinos. We invite your comments and critique. Please
address your remarks to the author.

Stanford Center for Chicano Research, Cypress Hall, "E" Wing,
Stanford, CA 94309

When decision-making rooms suddenly include people who represent gender and racial diversity, they can produce discomfort for people who once worked in those rooms with a sense of entitlement. In contexts where the opinions of long-term inhabitants of decision-making rooms once went unchallenged, they now find that the new people in the room talk back. Professors, for example, find that new students do not laugh at their old jokes. Where certain individuals once enjoyed a monopoly on authority, they now feel threatened by having to share authority. Even when not recognized as such, privilege quickly becomes so habit-forming, rather like a vested right, that it is (mis)recognized as pure merit or the natural order of things which must be passionately defended.

Issues at the level of institutional politics derive in certain respects from those of the nation state where equality among citizens putatively is based upon their sameness with respect to such attributes as language, culture, and race. Although the nation state emphasizes its capacity to enfranchise certain citizens, it maintains a discrete silence about how it simultaneously disenfranchises others. Think of the popular slogan of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity. Who was not included in the national fraternity? Women, for beginners, and, in the United States, non-whites and non-property-holders. The late eighteenth-century egalitarian fraternity probably excluded more people than it included. Although the scope of formal citizenship has expanded, informal

matters (often addressed along the spectrum from full to second class citizenship) remain unresolved. In my view, our national contract is now in a process of renegotiation, with the eventual outcome still uncertain. Will a broader notion of the fully enfranchised citizenry emerge from the current crisis of the national? Can we uncouple the historically forged link between equality and sameness, and thereby find equality and strength, rather than threatening divisiveness, in our differences?

In the context of national debates about diversity, consider the concept of race. Arguably, race is a complex term that appears different from relatively subordinate positions than it does from relatively dominant ones. In considering the dynamics of race from both dominant and subordinate positions I'd like to explore a recent work called *Migrant Souls* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990) by the late Chicano novelist Arturo Islas who died of AIDS on February 15, 1991. Set in Del Sapó, Texas [Del Sapó, "from the toad," is a playful transliteration which adds an initial "d" and reverses the "p" and "s" of El Paso], his novel breaks a taboo and addresses matters we, as Chicanos, all know but don't talk about. It speaks to the dynamics of racial differentiation within the Chicano community as well as between Chicanos and Anglos. In making explicit what is presented somewhat obliquely in Islas's novel, I'd like to read selected passages of *Migrant Souls* against a dominant North American notion of race that anchors racial identity in biology or in phenotype. In this version, one that is

surely well-known to most of us and is too simple, perhaps, for any of us to hold uncritically, race is written definitively, once and for all, on the skin, and it is a binary, as in black versus white or Chicano versus Anglo.

What follows analyzes the dynamics of race in relation to the simultaneous conjuncture of such sources of inequality as class, caste, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. It will contest, first, the phenotypic view, that race is written plainly, simply, and only on the skin, and second, the binary view, that in all contexts one must be one race or the other, either Chicano or Anglo, and that is that. *I* will argue that social analysis must take into account, in local and specific contexts, a number of competing dominant and subordinate norms to which people adhere in varying degrees. Let me now try to unpack these analytical notions through a closer look at Arturo Islas's novel.

Let us begin at the beginning, with the novel's opening sentence. "In their mother's eyes, Josie Salazar knew, she and her sister Serena were more like the Indians than the Spanish ladies they were brought up to be (p. 3)." This is a curious sentence. The two sisters, Josie and Serena, were brought up to be Spanish, but they became more like Indians. Although Indian and Spanish are racial categories, they appear to be determined, not only by the seemingly dichotomous choice between heredity (whether biological race or phenotype) and environment (socialization), but also by a third factor. In order to register

its presence without defining it prematurely, let us call the third factor something more. In opposing Spanish and Indian, the narrator conceives them along a continuum differentiated by degrees (more and less) rather than as a dichotomous opposition (either/or). The two sisters can be more like one racially encoded heritage than the other and yet they can partake of both. Such, one supposes, is the nature of mulatto or mestizo notions of race.

Dominant Anglo white supremacy rarely bothers with the fine points of mestizaje. The narrator describes in the following terms the context of domination where crossing racial borders becomes a sign, less of their permeability, than of their status as a fixed boundary between Anglos and Mexicans:

Crossovers from one group to another were noticed and talked about later, for each race guarded its own and had been taught to fear the consequences of mixing cultures. An undeclared borderline existed between Mexicans and Anglos that only a few dared to cross in the name of love (pp. 67-68).

Aside from occasional courtship and marriage, the line between Mexicans and Anglos appears hard and fast. In the most encompassing context of domination, the two races comprise distinct worlds, each bent on maintaining a kind of purity not accidentally reminiscent of a nation state determined to maintain

an equality which derives from a condition of purity--that is, linguistic, cultural, and racial sameness.

Yet the bifurcated vision of Anglos versus Mexicans, each striving for racial and cultural purity, does not exhaust the novel's semeiotics and politics of race. The most succinct challenge to the purist phenotypical view of race is voiced by Josie's mother who, speaking in exasperation, scolds her daughter as follows:

"She's simply acting like an Indian, that's all," their mother said. "Everyone knows they don't talk and can't answer politely when someone asks them a question (P. 5)."

Far from the genetic fatality of being Indian, race in this passage becomes a form of conduct. Such behavior usually is encoded by parents or other adults with Spanish pretensions who reprimand children for failing to conform with the norms of a distinctive set of religious convictions and class aspirations. Consider the mother's admonitions in the following:

"Serena, get that braid out of your mouth. Do you want to be taken for an Indian?" Or, "Josie, how many times do I have to tell you that a young lady does not cross her legs like an Indian (p. 3)?"

Indian demeanor in the novel consists of putting a braid in one's mouth, not talking, having stringy hair, not answering questions politely, crossing one's legs indecently, being late, and wearing loud or immodest dress. Such behavior is regarded as Indian, that

is, rustic and uncouth, rather than Spanish, that is, polite and refined. Being Indian thus derives as much from behavior as from phenotype.

The analysis just sketched must be located, however, in relation to the position of the speaker. It derives, not from the culture in general, but from a particular putatively high status category of person, *la gente decente*, the decent people. Late in the novel the narrator describes *gente decente* (or at any rate their class aspirations, though probably not their socio-economic reality) in the following terms: "Manuel and Ricardo knew that the phrase "decent people" meant middle-class Catholics (p. 201)." Ascent into the category of decent people in the novel, one should add, often involves the deliberate concealment of personal history and past identity. Concerted efforts to pass (one passes up, not down) reveal both the existence of a social boundary and personal insecurities about a lifetime of negotiating which side of the line one stands on. Even racial identities can be multiple, unstable, and painfully contested.

The mother of the two sisters, Josie and Serena, is described as a woman who once was "a small child with dark eyes, a prominent brow, and cheekbones she learned to powder later on in life so that she might appear as light-skinned as her sisters Jesus Maria and Eufemia Maria (p. 36)." On a daily basis she alters her phenotype (or at any rate she powders it every morning) because she has inherited the racialized class and religious aspirations of her family, the Angels. In the novel,

the Angels epitomize Spanish social and racial pretensions. They set the standards with which the two sisters, Josie and Serena (who are Angels through their mother), fail to conform. The mother's mother is similarly described in the following as having risen through marriage and baptism to her elevated status as a person of Spanish descent, an Angel [a bilingual pun on the word angel in English]:

The girls' only surviving grandparent--Encarnacion Olmeca, or Mama Chona as she instructed them to call her--may have had the Indian origins her maiden name suggested, but she had married Jesus Angel. By this act, as well as by her baptism into the Church of Rome, Mama Chona felt herself and her children to have been elevated into civilization for all time. (p. 8)."

The story goes on to describe shifts in racial status, not only for the in-married women, but also for the male bearers of the Angel family name, that derive more from culture than from phenotype. The family myth long ago elevated her husband, Jesus Angel, into being more Spanish than Indian in blood. And then, by a few short steps of mythic revisionism, his ancestors were said to have arrived with the first army of Spanish conquistadores, or shortly thereafter. A range of strategies, from powdering one's cheeks through intermarriage and baptism to rewriting the past, appear to be the price of admission into the sometimes contested category of gente decente or decent people.

Passing into a higher status world can, alternatively,

involve efforts to become Anglo rather than Spanish. One character, Ricardo, tried to assimilate and, as the narrator says, "brought up his children to ignore their Mexican heritage and to live according to the myths of North America (p. 204)." His hopes for the next generation were conditioned by Anglo prejudice and by Anglo efforts to keep Mexicans in their place as indicated by the following:

"Ricardo's dream was to be a respected member of the middle class on the north side of the river. He was determined to see his children enjoy lives free from the prejudice against Mexican Americans who rose too high above their place in the second largest state of the Union (p. 202)."

He appears determined to liberate his children from the effects of prejudice at the same time that he risks the contempt of certain family members who do not approve of his attempts to deny his heritage. The difficulties of Ricardo's position suggest a further complexity.

The world of the novel is governed by multiple and competing norms. By no means everyone directs their energies toward the same official version of status mobility. Contrary to many theories that view social norms only from a top-down perspective, not everyone wants to assimilate. The goal of becoming gente decente, whether Spanish in conception or Anglo in aspiration, fails to move a number of characters in the novel. The failure to

conform with Spanish or Anglo norms of status mobility can be viewed, not only from a high-status vantage point, as a failure to achieve, but also from a putatively lower status position, as a positive effort to pursue alternative norms. The father of Josie and Serena, for example, loves to hunt and fish in Mexico where, as the narrator says, "his Indian blood came to life and made him feel at home with the land and sky (p. 4)." Described in positive rather than in negative terms, the two sisters and their father enjoy a yearning for Indian norms of behavior.

The alternate norms entail race, not in isolation, but as it interacts with other dimensions of inequality and identity, such as religion, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, Josie, whose behavior so often is coded as Indian, violates gender and status expectations by returning to Del Sapo as a divorced woman with two daughters. Her sister, Serena, who also appears Indian, loves and lives with another woman. Their cousin, Miguel Chico, was once one of Mama Chona's favorites (that is, he was regarded as Spanish when he was a child), but he becomes socially defined as more Indian in adulthood as it becomes evident to others that he is a man who loves men. Family members know about the sexual orientation of their gay and lesbian kin but, following the code of the public secret, they rarely speak about such matters. Miguel Chico shows, however, that being gay, often recoded as being Indian in Del Sapo, is a game that those subordinated by the local, official pecking order can knowingly play back, as suggested by the following:

"It is our duty to be late," Miguel Chico said. "The Angels expect us to be rude and we mustn't let them down. It's all part of the ceremony (p. 206)."

Miguel Chico deliberately delays his arrival for Christmas dinner by taking his cousin Josie and her daughters to a sleazy strip joint. Through his excessive conformity, by seeming to live up to (or, rather, down to) the expectations of his gente decente cousins, Miguel Chico flaunts their norms and actively asserts his own. In its own self-conception, the Angel family sits in judgement of their less than respectable (their "sinning") family members, Miguel Chico and Josie, but they appear oblivious to how severely they are judged in turn. Miguel Chico sees the gente decente of the Angel family as small-minded, uptight, and pathetic. His canons of pride and respect are at least as fierce and demanding as theirs.

By way of brief conclusion, I'd like to reflect for a moment about the political implications of doing a social analysis of race as a complex category which varies with different positions of dominance and subordination as well as in relation to other sources of inequality.

One immediate implication is that it will not do for people in relatively dominant positions to embark on processes of social change by self-righteously engaging in self-criticism. People speaking from positions of privilege often live in socially determined ignorance of how the world looks, feels, and is lived

from subordinate positions. Thus challenging white supremacy and changing related hierarchical relations which *do* so much damage in everyday life requires that people in positions of relative privilege behave not unlike ethnographers and listen attentively in order to try and learn the particulars of other people's lives.

Social analysts and other relatively empowered people must recognize that relatively subordinated people's apparent failure to conform with dominant norms may result, not from moral turpitude, but from their desire to follow other norms. The code of race may shape and in turn be shaped by other forms of inequality, such as caste, class, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus when it becomes evident that Miguel Chico is gay, homophobia inhibits talk about sexual orientation and becomes receded in his becoming more Indian and less Spanish than he was as a child. By the end of *Migrant Souls* being more or less Spanish, Indian, or Anglo involves a complex and painful adjudication of phenotype, behavior, class, religion, being divorced, being gay, and being lesbian. The novel can be read as a parable of variegated Chicano efforts to survive under white supremacy without having to give up being who one is. The characters face pressures to become decent people, both Anglo and Spanish (itself, in this complex social space, often a simultaneous Mexican-style denial of Indian heritage and a determined anti-assimilationist refusal to become Anglo). Some people attempt to rise along the official social scale while

others navigate other trajectories with compromises and resistance born of a conviction that, if the price of admission to higher social status is that one's identity must be left at the door, they will refuse to enter the room and struggle to create other spaces within which to survive and perhaps thrive.