

A VISION TOWARDS LIBERATION

LESLIE ESPINOZA†

In May 1997, I attended the LatCrit II Symposium held in St. Mary's University Law School and participated in a panel discussion concerning the oppression of Latina/os. There were two main themes that linked the presentations of this panel. The first theme is that of identity. When we, as "outsider" scholars, talk about identity it is important to remember that we begin with a self-aware and self-proclaimed identity as "oppressed." Be it intuition or analysis, this recognition that we belong to a group that is linked, is our foundational identity. The group may not have clearly defined parameters, we may not agree on all identifying criteria, yet we have a commitment that we belong. We are aware that we live in the "Master's House."¹

The other side of oppression is liberation. That day's panel discussion had a second theme, an optimistic theme—that of change. However, we are challenged in our hopefulness not only by the pervasiveness of oppression, but also by the way our efforts for change always seem to boomerang back to us. We live in the master's house; the master defines our realities—and our possibilities. We confront the problem of how to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.² We try to work ourselves out of this bind. We take what we have and try to fashion new tools, little tools that are not exactly the master's tools. Whether reformists or revolutionaries, we recognize that we are trying to dismantle something. We are trying to change. Nonetheless, I continue to have this sense that we dismantle the master's house thinking that we are moving ahead, only to find that we are part of a much larger urban renewal project that the master has in mind. Painful as it is, we need to articulate

† Associate Professor of Law, Boston College Law School, 1992-present; Professor of Law, University of Arizona College of Law, 1987-1992; J.D., Harvard Law School, 1977. This is a commentary on a panel discussion at LatCrit II, St. Mary's University Law School, May 1-4, 1997.

1. Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, in *THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR* 98, 99-100 (Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa eds., 1981).

2. AUDRE LORDE, *SISTER OUTSIDER* 110-11 (1984) ("What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.")

our perceptions of futility and the seeming intractability of racist oppression.

All of the panelists acknowledged the master's power to construct identity. This power is not exercised solely as an external force. We cooperate in the construction of our oppressed identities. Margaret Montoya spoke of hegemony. Hegemony is about rule. One way to rule is by coercion. However, there is a more powerful way to rule. If one wants to rule over the long term, it is crucial to obtain the consent of the ruled.

The dominant society acts in two ways to obtain our consent. First, the dominant class will distribute goods to us to get us to cooperate. We are given a stake in the system, even if our interest is marginal. Second, the dominant class creates a discourse of domination. This results in the mental attitude of the subordinate class that being ruled is natural. We develop a consciousness that is the consciousness of oppressed people. We are fearful of disrupting the system of domination because we might lose the little that we have, and we cannot conceive of ourselves as empowered.

Racist oppression has the horrific beauty of masterful, hegemonic domination. LatCrit theory and LatCrit II panelists force us to explicate racism's intractability. Racism is intractable because it is unknowable. What is race? Certainly, it is about color. Color lines are imposed by the dominant society. They are also imposed, as Kevin Johnson noted, within the communities of the oppressed. We know race is about color, but then, it is not always about color. LatCrit theory reveals the exceptions that course through all Race-Crit theory. LatCrits know that racism is also about language differences and suppressions. However, within the dominant discourse, racism is not always about language differences. Race markers vary from color to language to national origin to culture, including religion, food and apparel.

The race markers, and the lines they draw between the powerful and the oppressed, are not solely imposed by the dominant society. We consent to being ruled. We contribute to our own oppressions. We integrate racist/language differentiations in our own communities. Latino/as define ourselves by language and we divide ourselves by language. In Mexican American communities there is a word for Mexican Americans who have lost their language. They are "Pochos." Likewise, as Ana Novoa points out, our culture is one where there are strongly genderized roles and sexualities. These roles are understood as being components of the identity "Latino/a." Whether phobia of homosexuality or worshipful imposition of female domesticity, our Latino/a identity binds us and breaks us. It gives us power and it subverts us. Likewise, we are a culture of immigrant identity. We both embrace and scorn this identity. Im-

migration issues bring Latino/as together as a community and immigration issues fracture us as a community. The immigration discourse not only fractures us, but also breaks us in a way that keeps any piece from seeing the whole. The immigration discourse reinforces an immigrant identity that simultaneously blinds us from claiming our status as the colonized. It is our Southwestern Aztlán that has been overrun by Anglos. Latinos/as are not the interlopers; we are the indigenous mix.

Despite the way our identity and the markers of our identity shift and change, we find that the identity of being oppressed is operational and real—even when we are blind to it. Racism is an effective system of oppression because every time we try to put our hand on it, it escapes us. But it never goes away. The politics of hegemony are particularly troublesome for those who try to catch, to name racism. Who are we, the theorists? We are law professors. We are comfortably in the master's house about to eat some of the master's food. People of color traditionally experience the double consciousness of seeing the world as the master does and as the servant does.³ Our consciousness is again split. We have become part of the dominant society by virtue of our status as law professors. We live a shifting persona that has many masks. We go in and out of multiple roles, as teachers in our own schools, as scholars in critical communities, as activists and as family members.

There are very few places that we do not feel "dis"integrated. We find comfort in this group of scholars because we share the experience of multiple consciousnesses and maskings. The problem is that we only have a few places where we can be integrated. We are all here to reconstruct ourselves in ways that are healthy. Yet, even as we warm to this project, I am finding a new division within this group. I have experienced a generational division. I feel that it is between law professors hired within eight to ten year eras. As we talked about what occurs in law schools during the conference, I had to sit back and listen. I had not understood how much of my own consciousness had been captured by fear. It is not only a fear for my survival in the institution, and my own psychic survival, but also my fear for our young, outsider, critical colleagues. I am worried that their new ways of dismantling the master's house are going to undermine them. But, I have no special patent on effective methods of liberation. Indeed, with each challenge, I am recommitted to critiquing my own way of viewing the world. Fear is not an effective way to change.

3. W.E.B. DuBois, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* 5-6 (Penguin Group, 1989) (1903).

What is an effective way to change? Can we change the hegemonic oppression? In his book, *Race Matters*, Cornell West offers an insight on survival.⁴ Nihilism is the road to destruction. When we stop caring about anything, when we feel there is no future, when we have no hope, this is the dead end. How do we keep our will to struggle? I found, in the presentations at this conference, a commitment to narrative. Narrative presents an opportunity to share and to reconstruct our shattered selves. We can use narratives, or tales of our worlds, and ourselves to transform our ways of thinking about ourselves. Every time we tell a tale that is subversive, we suddenly find out that we are both liberated and entrapped. We can bring change by understanding that we will always be part of the divided and dominated world and that we will always have our survival strategies that subtly undermine the oppression. I will end with three thoughts. The first is that we must bring faith to our work. We must have the faith to act against oppression. Second, we need hope. Without hope, we have no vision. Lastly and most importantly, we should bring an unabashed, unashamed notion of love to our work. We do not want to lose the love and the caring that motivates us to work for liberation.

4. CORNELL WEST, *RACE MATTERS* xi (1993).