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Transnationalism, Xicanosmosis, and the U.S.-Mexico Border: An Interview with William Nericcio

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Dr. William Nericcio is Professor of English and Comparative Literature & Chicano/a Studies at San Diego State University. His book, *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the “Mexican” in America*, debunks stereotypes and representations of Latina/os in American popular culture. His forthcoming book, *Eyegiene*, is about visual culture in the 21st Century.

disClosure Collective (DC): How do you define social theory?

William Nericcio (WN): How do I define social theory? I think of it first as an intervention—there are so many camps of criticism within social theory, so many critical schools of thought nestled within the term that I’m going to answer the question as if you were asking me about my emotions: *social theory is always an intervention*. Social theory is what academics do when they are discontent. They want to change things, they want to improve things. It is not, for me, an objective process, I think of that pathway more as the true or the standard social sciences. For me, theory is an interruption, it’s an interception, it’s an opportunity to make things better for your students, but ultimately also for society. Social Theory is for activists, it’s not for “sit-on-your-butts” old school academics, whose silence merely reinforces the status quo.

Social theory, ideally, should be revolutionary. It should turn over the apple cart, make people pissed off—it should actually make students uncomfortable. I was telling my students the other day in my undergraduate class that confusion is a great thing, that unless you meet a point of confusion in an academic context, you’re having it too easy. That confusion is positive; it’s what happens when we are forced in our brain to rearticulate things that we thought we already know. It’s almost like the difference between ram and rom, the hard drive in your active memory on your computer. Many times we just go along with what is on the hard drive. Social theory is ram, it’s disruptive, it’s new, it’s now. It should make even progressive academics uncomfortable.

DC: Along those lines, how do you see our theme for the course “Transnational Lives” as fitting within social theory? What kind of knowledge can transnational lives produce?

WN: The knowledge a transnational approach to social theory brings is a sensitivity to frontiers and

borders. Even within social theory, even within the most progressive branches of academia, the tendency of academic culture is to mirror mass culture, and our mass American culture is filled with racism; it's filled with hate, neo-fascism and the like and there is no reason to believe that it doesn't sneak into our practice as academics. So the transnational approach forces you to admit that there are worlds outside your border, there are words (and worlds) outside the frontier that we are implicated in. I mean, the United States is an empire.

That's not a controversial remark. It's not even a political remark; it is a factual, historical, verifiable, empirical remark. So the consequences of empire are all these nasty liaisons with different countries and different peoples that the transnational approach in Social Theory forces you to come to grips with. Whether you want to be or not, when you are an intellectual within an empire, you are complicit with the system. The only hope for interrupting, slowing, displacing that complicity is to broaden your gaze, to include those domesticated properties, i.e. neighbors, whose nations your empire messes with.

My own focus in my research is Mexico and Latin America—that's the geographical, the national dimension of it; but I also am very interested in interrupting notions that are global, total; so I end up mashing up literature, proper, (the novel, the poem, the newspapers) with things like film, streaming media, Netflix, the Internet. That is, I'm interested in disrupting the autonomy of the literary world, its semantic guises. For me literature is semantic, it's semiotic, it's auditory. There are musical compositions that are literary; these kinds of mixtures are very interesting to me as a thinker. The transnational is also, in my mind, a reminder to keep things less parochial, less local, more international and more multimedia.

DC: In your book *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the Mexican in America*, you argue that, and I quote, "Latina/o Americans have represented a subject[ed] population – that is, until quite recently, they have not contributed to mainstream, mass cultural textual and cinematic representations of their own communities; even when they have contributed, said acts of art have not dominated gallery space at MOMA or rollicked box offices tills from Tulsa to Portland to Texarkana." Has your view regarding the literary or filmic productions by Latina/os changed in the nearly ten years since your book's publication? If so, how?

WN: Wow! Thanks for the reminder, 10 years! God, I'm getting old, the book is old. The first thing to say is that my views have certainly evolved—keep in mind that the last two academy awards have been won by Mexican nationals, Cuarón and Iñárritu. It's the Mexican Golden Age redux—the neo-golden age of Mexican cinema, 21st century version. And certainly we've seen progress with the advent of sitcoms and the life-focus on Latino/a characters like *Jane the Virgin* and *Cristina* (just recently cancelled!). And, this fall on Fox, of all networks, *Bordertown* will premiere, a joined project by Gustavo Arellano, the editor of *OC Weekly*, and Lalo Alcaraz, who does the nationally syndicated *La Cucaracha* comic strip. This is going to be like *The Simpsons* at La Frontera, so I guess my attitudes are much more positive than they were in 2006 when the last touches were being made on the *Tex[t]-Mex* manuscript.

That said, we've also "enjoyed" (huge scare quotes) in the last 10 years, a resurgence of anti-Latina/o declarations/"infotainment," I was lecturing about this yesterday here in Lexington, of the rise of neo-fascist, racist hate.¹ Specifically against immigrant bodies, allegedly diseased Mexican bodies, thank you Lou Dobbs.

So the mass media, especially right-wing talk radio, became obsessed with distracting us away from what would've been a very progressive Obama agenda, and they were successful. The issue of race is now front and center. It's not accidental. The rise of xenophobic racism is going down on the watch of a biracial president. Obama's body, his presence, his being, is an instigator to this resurgence. It's almost like a digital lynch squad, lynch mob.

So though I am very hopeful and happy that there is more Latina/o representation in American mass media, you also have to counter that enthusiasm with the realization that hate has never been more in vogue and that a lot of that hate is directed at brown bodies, people who have a Spanish language accent. It's almost like the sound of that accent perturbs people, that the idea that the other mother tongue is so alien. That notion of the sound of Spanish being a trigger for hate, I haven't studied much as yet, but I am curious about it.


DC: In the same book, you speak about the idea of “visual indoctrination” attendant to Latina/o stereotypes. Specifically, you propose that “Mexicans and Americans of Mexican descent in U.S. popular culture have often resembled ugly marionettes in the service of mercenary puppeteers.” When did you first become aware of these stereotypes and what circumstances compelled you to study them in depth?

WN: Wow. Well, I do talk about this a little in the book, but it's worth repeating. I was trained as a Latin-Americanist, 20th century Latin-American fiction and culture, but particularly fiction. I mean, I should've gone off into the world and written books about Elena Poniatowska, Remedios Varo, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, maybe Manuel Álvarez Bravo because I was interested in photography as well. But my first job was at the University of Connecticut, and in 1988 I'm teaching a class called *The Modern Novel*; no, *Approaches to Modern Fiction*, something like that, maybe it was on modern novel and I'm teaching a section on essays, and I'm teaching *El laberinto de la soledad*, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, by Octavio Paz. It's a book I have huge problems with, but I also merit it, credit it with being a singularly important 20th century piece of intellectual history.

I was talking about Mexican intellectual history, and this asshole in the back of the room laughed—not a broad laugh, more like a snicker, but definitely a laugh. Something about the conjunction of the words “Mexican” and “intellectual” or “Mexican intellectual” history triggered an uncontrolled response, sort of like someone fainting or vomiting. It was at that level, it was at the level of the unconscious. The student was not bored, (I mean, maybe they were a little bit bored), but they didn't purposely set out to do anything wounding. But me, I was wounded to my core. The chuckle, the laughter, would not leave me, and I became obsessed with understanding the origin of the laughter. What would create that oxymoron? That triggering oxymoron for laughter? “Mexican intellectual”?

It had to be something about the cultural history of the United States. So I started obsessing over what I would call my students' steamer trunks—you know those old ginormous steamer trunks people would take on ocean cruises back in the day? It had occurred to me that every student who walked into my Connecticut classroom was walking in with this existential steamer trunk filled with preset ideas about what a Mexican was, what a Mexican looked like. And a lot of those triggering beasts that were lurking in that steamer trunk were emotional, they were fearful and any place you have fear you don't have intellectual capacity because you revert... you revert to a kind of primordial human, you know, that terrified creature by the cave getting attacked by a mountain lion or saber-toothed tiger. And so it occurred to me that before I could teach about Octavio Paz, before I could sing of Fuentes, Poniatowska, and the wonders of Latino/a literature, I was going to have to address the steamer trunk, the monsters (and monstrous stereotypes) these kids were dragging into my room. I was going to have to do work with stereotypes, and so that's where *Tex[t]-Mex* was born.

DC: The next question relates to what you just mentioned about discussing stereotypes. I noticed that a lot of your work, especially in *Tex[t]-Mex*, focuses on discussing stereotypes in film, but it extends past that, past media and technology, to incorporate material items, and cultural artifacts, especially on your *Tex[t] Mex* gallery blog. Could you expand on the importance of including real tangible artifacts in your

	<p>3.26. Classic, historic, and ubiquitous representations of African-Americans: a “Negro chef dressed in white coat and cap holding a steaming bowl” is the The Cream of Wheat Corporation’s description of its trademark lackey; and, Aunt Jemima, in her mid-century incarnation—an illustration of the African American, Nancy Green.</p>	<p>State Archives African American Initiative, Missouri Secretary of State, Robin Carnahan, http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/africanamerican/guide/image005.asp (17 May, 2005). The Aunt Jemima ad is an original undated advertisement in the private collection of the author, circa 1950–54. The smiling Porter, brace yourself, is the “property” of The Cream of Wheat Corporation of Minneapolis, Minnesota, filing #6117 Cream of Wheat, 30, June 1930, with the United States Patent and Trademark Office, an agency of the United States Department of Commerce.</p>
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A detail from a manuscript print-out of instructions to the University of Texas Press for the first edition of *Tex[t]-Mex*—circa 2006.

Figure 1. Original photography © William A Nericcio, 2006.

work, and more specifically, how do cultural artifacts allow you to expand the concepts you present in *Tex[t]-Mex*?

WN: That was an outgrowth of actually of the social justice work I do alongside of being a professor. I have always done community work in school. I’ve always believed that one of the things that limits our range as communicators is that at the highest levels of academe we become professors—which would be fine, but a lot of these amazing (and self-aggrandizing) “professors” stop being teachers. As a teacher (and a teacher who focuses on mass culture), I know the most effective tool you can use in the classroom is a prop—a toy, an artifact, an object. So the fact that my research focuses on artifacts is actually a strange outgrowth of my pedagogy—I’ve always used props, and I jokingly call myself the Gallagher or the Carrot Top of academe because I bring in these suitcases filled with demonstrative artifacts like my talking Mister T doll; I’ve got all kinds of things like my Dora the Explorer doll and a bunch of regular Barbies and little Barbies, and they do war over a Mexican flag; I do all kinds of shtick with these marionettes. And I use these artifacts when I’m teaching, not just young children, I used them in the college classroom because people never get tired of artifacts. I bring in an old Aunt Jemima pancake box when I’m talking about African American figuration. The Cream of Wheat porter dude, I bring in that box, too (see Figure 1).

I have this great white shoe polish box that I bought in San Diego in the late 80s; no, late, early 90s. It’s called Hollywood Sani White Nurse Shoe Polish and it has the strangest Caucasian you’ve ever seen on the box cover, because it’s not just African Americans and Mexicans who would look freaky when they are turned into shields for products, semiotic selling objects, avatars for products—white people do, too. And so I’ve always found that carrying these props around enables me to connect at another level with people who get turned off by jargony terms. With props, it is different—they will look and think about a prop I pass around, even when their face goes blank as I speak of deterritorialization or deconstruction. But I have to be careful because sometimes the little kids, the fourth graders, try to steal them. I have a Speedy Gonzalez doll—this Speedy doll almost got stolen three times.

And so I’ve found that these props act as ice-breakers between me and my audiences, but they also remind me to be a teacher, that great teaching is also great performance, great theater. Don’t get so caught up with your smartness, your Ph.D. You know in Texas “Ph.D” stands for “Piled Higher and Deeper.” That’s sort of a Texas attitude: Piled higher and deeper, pile of shit. And I guess that keeps me grounded, you know, because I never want to be alienated from potential students. Our students are



Figure 2. Original photography © William A Nericcio, 2010.

everywhere.

DC: When talking about stereotypes of Latina/os, we see that a lot of them are also advanced by social media and technology in general. In your work, though, you use these same tools to try to unravel stereotypes. Do you have any advice for anyone who would like to also use technology and social media as mechanisms that help untangle these stereotypes?

WN: Yeah, don't read a book. Don't read a "How to guide." Just start doing it. I try to tell my undergraduates that, because, you know, we hear that these are students who are digitally native. I say, NO!, they're digitally ignorant. Half of my students don't know how to do a Tumblr post. They don't know where to find the submit button—a third of them are not on Facebook; they're on Snapchat or Instagram. And so what I would tell a budding electronic scholar who was interested in pursuing the study of stereotypes is to just begin. That's how I did the *Tex[t]-Mex* galleryblog (<http://textmex.blogspot.com>). I just started posting things I would run across that were related to the ideas of the book and that I didn't get to talk about in the book. And at the beginning there was extensive commentary. I mean, the first two years of *Tex[t]-Mex galleryblog*, if I were to publish them, it'd be a 3 volume book, because I was writing about these phenomena.

Nowadays I don't have time for extensive posts on the *Tex[t]-Mex* blog because I'm moving on to my new project, *Eyegiene*. And so I'll post stuff maybe once every fifteen days, ten days, on the blog related to the book, but I don't have that time to put the extensive commentary. But a 'youngin', a new person, who is just starting, you know, maybe you want to carve out your own particular phenomena.

The beauty of the web is that it's collaborative; people will write in, they'll send you stuff. You know, I get the most amazing submissions—things I have never seen before from folks I know and from complete strangers on Facebook. My career was changed by Facebook, in fact I probably owe Zuckerberg, he's already a billionaire, but I owe him about ten percent because I get so many invitations, so many new ideas from now a cluster of correspondents on his damned web—you know with over four thousand 'friends' sending me things they find, I don't have to do much digging anymore. They become my correspondents, you know, like contributing editors.

And so my big advice is don't think about it, just start. Give it a name that encapsulates what you think is your idea so you have a good hook, you do need a hook. *Tex[t]-Mex* is a good hook, *galleryblog* is not. I wish I just had named the blog *Tex[t]-Mex*. Just keep it clean.

So keep it simple and stupid, like they say, and just do it. And the thing about blogs, for the first year you have to be, you have to work it. It's like raising a crop, you have to go and post and re-post, and if someone comments you have to respond to it, so that you develop a body of co-conspirators who assist you with your work.

DC: I want to go back quickly to the idea of Mextasy and your blog. It's turning into documentary project. How did you come up with this word? Can you tell us more about this project in general and what it focuses on?

WN: Yes, here we are talking about a metamorphosis, a transition to TV. "Professors on TV"—the mind reels, all of this scary shit, all this potential for catastrophe! "Mextasy" was the name I gave to the traveling museum exhibition version of *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the "Mexican" in America*. It's a pop up gallery and it's also a standard museum exhibition based on the book *Text[t]-Mex*. I didn't want to call the museum exhibition *Tex[t]-Mex* because in my own mind I associated that term only with the stereotypes: the bandit Mexican, the rapist Mexican, the Latina bombshell femme fatale, not that there

is nothing wrong with that, or the Latino bombshell home fatale.

So I didn't want to call it *Tex[t]-Mex*. I wanted to call it something positive, something exciting, something sexy; and so I thought of ecstasy one day. It was probably in the shower, TMI right? And it just hit me, Mextasy, and I wrote it down, and I didn't know how I was going to spell it. You know. Then I finally found the spelling, M E X T A S Y, that I thought worked, and the rest is history. The exhibition has been a huge success with 25 to 30 exhibitions all over the country; actually, internationally, in Canada as well.

And then the next metamorphosis, from gallery to the boob tube! What happened was about 2 years ago I had a student in my class, an older student, his name is Gerardo Juárez. His nickname is Bola. It was a large lecture, 200 students in an introduction to literature class. Bola was a graduate student, but he wanted to sit in because we had met at a Latin American Studies party, and he thought that I was curious, like "who is this Nericcio character?" So he sat in the class and at the end of the class, he turns out to be an entrepreneur, an early investor in Facebook, from Mexico City, a lawyer who didn't want to be lawyer any more, he wants to be a writer. And he says: "Nericcio," that's what he calls me, "Nericcio, we have to make this into a TV show, what you are doing is important." Turns out he works for Blindspot TV, which is an international multinational television production company based out of Mexico City. Long story short, long story long, they made me an offer I couldn't refuse. They invested close to three quarters of a million dollars in the pilot and six episodes. We finished filming the first episode and it's debuting on May 3rd at UCSD, at a film festival.

DC: Your recent work has centered upon a concept you term Xicanosmosis. How do you define this concept, and how might a transnational approach inform your work here?

WN: I'm always feeding off the work of other people, right? And the definitive works on the border that I've run across when I came up with the word Xicanosmosis were Carlos Fuentes and Gloria Anzaldúa. And both of them spoke about the border between the United States and Mexico as a wound, *una herida abierta*, or something like that. My Spanish is horrible. And this idea of an open wound or sutured wound is very poetic and very powerful and it reflects a lot of what you find at the border. The actual war between the US and Mexico, occupation forces through Veracruz, three times in the last, what, 150 years? Marines have occupied Mexican territory, and oh Jesus, I lost my train of thought....

.... Oh Xicanosmosis! So I wasn't content with the idea of a wound, though, because I'm from Laredo. For me, the border was every day, not every day, but we would cross the border and it was no big deal. You put a dime in a turnstile, you walked across and a Mexican agent on the other side would nod at you, you go across, you'd hang out, you'd party, you'd drink, you know, we buy cheap booze, we bring it back. The border was just an alternative space where for a teenager you had full freedom. You know, no one was going to card you, the clubs were great, cigarettes were cheap. It's where all your friends went. It's like Cheers, to go to Nuevo Laredo from Laredo, Texas, in the 70s was like an episode of *Cheers*. Everybody knew your name, if they didn't, they pretended to. It was great.

And so *una herida abierta* doesn't capture my experience of the border. For me the experience of the border was always about transfer. And I always think a little salaciously, I like this idea of osmosis. Osmosis for me is intercourse, it's communication, it's exchange, strictly speaking. I was a bio major. I was going to be an oncologist until I turned nineteen and flunked out of organic chemistry. So I was pretty familiar with biological metaphors, so the idea of a transfer of vital substances through semipermeable fabric or membrane—I like the idea of fabric more than membrane—but semipermeable membrane, that for me was *La Frontera*. So I took the word Chicano, because, you know, progressive left-of-center Americans of Mexican descent, me; and then "osmosis," and what I got was Xicanosmosis—what a

mouthful!

What I began to unravel were these dozens of writers, and performers and actors and painters, whose work was inflected not just by traditions that were largely American, traditions from the United States and England. No! These peoples' work was informed by Mexico and Latin America, and in a lot of cases *both simultaneously*. That is, their influence was both Latino and good old Uncle Sam. And so I wanted to talk about that. Sometimes you have to invent terms, neologisms to account for phenomena that are not chronicled, so I came up with that term. I hope it sticks. It's a mouthful, it's hard to pronounce: CHEE KAHN OSS MOE SIS, something like that!

DC: You said that you understand this term as an exchange of elements. Are there restrictions of what could be exchanged between these two sides of the border?

WN: Restrictions? Absolutely! It's a *semipermeable* membrane. Oh yes, especially since 9/11. The semi permeability of the border—it became less permeable in some respects. But this also coincides with the rise of the, you know, the Twitter-sphere, social media and digital media. So now, ironically, the border itself is harder to cross but communication and collaboration cross borders is easier. Borderlines are uncomfortable. I mean US special forces, the Border Patrol, the agents, the National Guard in some counties....everybody makes you feel criminal. It's not like in the past where it was kind of a naturalized for me. You know, *cruzar la frontera* was like breathing. Now it's like going through Checkpoint Charlie, strip and search.

So existentially, to move between borders is now more difficult, but because of mass media and social media, we, at least those of us that live along the Mexican border, we are even more bombarded now by Latino/a culture. Investment bankers are not stupid people. They make money for a reason. Investors have decided that Spanish, Spanish language, Spanish dominant Latino communities are a source of profit. So in Southern California we are entering this brave new world: Latina/o high density, high saturated popular cultural and so I feel even more immersed. So in some respects, the border is more highly policed, in other respects it's more chaotic now. It's more Latino/a than it's ever been.

DC: I'm curious as to how stereotypes regarding brown bodies have changed either since your childhood, or when you began your academic career? And kind of piggybacking off of that question, what do you see as the most prevalent or dangerous stereotype today regarding Latino/as?

WN: I will answer the first questions first and then you can remind me of the second question because it's a complicated question. The difference between when I was coming to consciousness and now is that stereotypes are more aware of themselves. I will explain with two examples: Robert Rodriguez' *Machete* films and Sofia Vergara on *Modern Family* but also with what happened at the Emmys (2014), where Sofia Vergara placed herself up on a rotating pedestal, basically as a statue, as like Pygmalion's wet dream of the Latina bombshell.

In both cases you have very self-aware Latino/a artists, fully trafficking in some of the most obvious Latino/a stereotypes that exist. In both cases though you don't have some Caucasian puppet master, you have the Latino/a artist themselves profiting off ironic and non-ironic re-depictions of classic images. In Danny Trejo's case, in *Machete*: the scary Mexican, the scary bandit Mexican with the big knife, you know, who is prone to ultraviolent acts. Trejo in person is a sweetheart, I mean, he's incredible, a really really nice cat. And so what you have here is a pretty self-aware, smart director: Robert Rodriguez, you know, Quentin Tarantino's collaborator, making films about scary Mexicans, about Mexican-US conflict that are almost outsized cinematic allegories of fear and progress at once.

And sometimes, in my argument, it gets the best of him. I think Robert is one of the most progressive filmmakers we have, who happens to be an American of Mexican descent, but I think sometimes it's show business. He wants to make a cool profit and he does. He's a filmmaker. He's a Hollywood star. And that's bound up with the economics of the traditional. Don't push it too much because your product won't sell.

Vergara is more interesting, a little more interesting to me. People were outraged at her scene at the Emmys where she placed herself on a pedestal as a kind of, I don't know, Latina Emmy award. She was a statuette. The base was rotating so that she became a kind of mock statue. That's smart. I actually think that's funny. She's a savvy woman. She's a very smart woman: head of own her own production company, multimillionaire, one of the biggest well-paid stars in Hollywood. So the difference between the past and the present is that people who are in the biz are self-aware and aware about the stereotypes and they are reshaping them for fun, profit, and sometimes just for irony, for being smart. What was the second part?

DC: The second part was: What do you see as the most prevalent or dangerous stereotype today regarding Latino/as?

WN: Oh, the most dangerous stereotype, and thank you to Fox News for this, is that of that of the undocumented diseased immigrant and then it's the immigrant that would steal your job. It's the idea of the alien without, who comes within and displaces your economy, and not just your economy, sort of your soul because they speak a different language. They are from a different tradition. And so this idea of the undocumented immigrant as one who not only steals your job, not only is sick with leprosy, or whatever disease Lou Dobbs, Jobs, Dobbs, asshole, blue asshole says (his Mexi-loathing drives me to blather!). But they are also alien, they are strange, they are frightening. You know, scary ... foreground fear and you get people on your side. That's how the fascist mind works and they are good at it. I've been trying to puzzle together, I mean, this is part of Mextasy. How someone who is from the left and progressive can capitalize on that. Obviously, it works, you know. I don't want to foment fear, but could we foment fear of the fascist in just an effective way? You know, I think of John Heartfield's montages during the Second World War of the rise of fascists and the fascists. I love Heartfield's cut-up/collage style. You know, I want to do the same thing: Limbaugh, the Koch brothers, and Hitler, why not? They do the same thing. They paint with a wide brush. We should be able to do the same things ourselves in a way that is engaging, fun, but a little bit more thoughtful.

DC: Many describe you as a public intellectual. How do you define that role and how have you tried to engage a wider audience by incorporating elements of pop culture related to the U.S./Mexico border?

WN: Scary! We don't have Chicano/a public intellectuals. We have too few. I mean, we need more Gustavo Arellanos, we need a dozen more Maria Coteras, we need a thousand more Frederick Aldamas. We need these people. I guess it hit me about fifteen, oh how many years has it been? Wow, twenty-four years ago!

One of the first things I did when I came to San Diego State is I was asked to keynote a Chicano high school conference. Every year MEChA, the Chicano student group at San Diego State University, brings high school students from across Southern California to San Diego State for a one-day fair. You know the idea "be at the university" as a guest, you'll be bound to come back as a student. And they are all high school students. So they asked me to keynote and I got up on stage. It was the first time I addressed such a mob, it was about twenty-three or twenty-four hundred people, huge audience, and it was exhilarating and as I was talking, you know, I was talking about the need for more Cesar Chavezes.

And I remember putting it to the audience, haranguing the rowdy throng with “which one of you people is going to step forward if Chavez falls and is going to take his place? Who’s going to be the face of progressivity and political action and social justice for Mexican Americans?”

And, I guess it occurred to me sometime after that, that I might have to do some of that. That some of that role was going to have to fall on me because for whatever reason, I was Mexican, but I didn’t have a Mexican accent. I was raised by television: *Captain Kangaroo* and *Gilligan’s Island*. And so I can speak with a very, you know, I’ve done radio so I know I have a voice that translates as, not Tom Brokaw, but middle of the road.

But I’m also *mexicano*, *puedo hablar español*. Not well, but you know, *entiendo y ...* I can communicate. And so if I have this linguistic shape shifting ability, I better damn well do something with it. And I’m educated; I’ve got a Ph.D from an Ivy League college. I’m just going to stay in the Ivy League, I mean university classroom? No, I had to share it. I had to go back home.

My dream was to go back the University of Texas. Boy, Texas could use me now, I think. I think Texas is on the brink of change, but man, it’s gone through fifteen years of horror, just horror. And it’s the source of a lot of hate across the United States. And other states, like Kentucky, followed Texas’s model, which is a bad model. It’s not the country, you know, my father fought for in World War II. This is not the nation that a whole generation fought for to defend. This is a scary brave new world of neo-fascism. So I guess the public intellectual dimension is a strange word because I guess it should just be like a public thinker because I don’t want to be an intellectual when I talk to the public. I just want to be someone who is relatively well educated, who might be able to bring a different perspective to things in a way that engages with a broader audience.

Notes

1. **WN:** Since this interview was recorded, anything that was subterranean about this anti-Mexican hate has surfaced in the rise of Donald Trump’s naked fascist hate speech.