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This is My Story of Language

Francisco Guajardo
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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this is my story of language

triptych 2.a– :: IN WHICH . . .

we meta about learning processes,
the haunts that fill the hanging fruit
& memories of the terroir taste
stale and new,
as a stranger's acquisition

francisco guajardo

"My summers spent in and with the land have educated me. I still deplore thinning peaches, but I have an understanding of life and nature that makes my heart race. Every day that I begin before the sun is to my benefit. With this teacher, I have become a better student, not only of school, but also of life"

This is My Story of Language

Francisco Guajardo

We were told not to speak Spanish in school when I was growing up in the '70s and '80s, though the "don't speak Spanish" in schools was complicated by that time.

Place and Context

The history of the US-Mexico borderland provides the context for my story of language. I was born in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas to Mexican parents who had only scant formal schooling. Still, Papi and Mami believed in the idea of school and encouraged their children to value literacy, education and learning. They left their home in Mexico and brought the family to Texas because they felt their children would find greater opportunities in the United States, and the greatest opportunity in their mind was education. My parents brought us to the rural community of Elsa, next to Edcouch, where we landed on the last day of 1968. We would settle there, as my father found gainful employment as an agricultural laborer and my mother as a baby sitter and school cafeteria worker.

When we arrived, the Edcouch-Elsa community was largely agricultural, and had been since its origins early in the 20th Century. A two-tiered economy had evolved, where Mexicans and Mexican Americans comprised the laboring class and Anglos largely made up the ruling class (Krochmal, 2016; Montejano, 1987; Zamora, 1983). Social and political institutions mirrored this bifurcated socio-economic and political system. The system did not go unchallenged, however. The month before our arrival, in fact, more than 140 Chicano students at Edcouch-Elsa High School staged a school walkout to protest the racial injustices they saw in the school, and even in the community at large. The resistance included a specific challenge to the language oppression Chicano students experienced in schools, where they were persistently forbidden from speaking Spanish. Students wanted to be able to speak their "mother tongue"; they wanted Mexican American Studies courses to be taught in school; and they wanted bilingualism to be given a higher value (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2004). In short, we arrived in a community where oppressive practices against Mexican Americans were in full use, but young people were similarly in a full out challenge of those practices.

That was 1968, the same year the United States Congress passed the historic Bilingual Education Act. A short time later, my parents would enroll me at Edcouch Elementary School, interestingly, a school that had been racially segregated until just

15 years before. The social system of the early to mid century in this community resembled the Jim Crow conditions of the Deep South. This was the context that my family stepped into. It was a complex, yet rich socio-cultural backdrop in which my stories of language would play out.

Method

The following stories are stockpiled in my treasure trove of stories, which I've been packing through the years. My father and mother were the chief inspiration for this, as they raised my brothers and me through a steady diet of *cuentos, parabolas, y anécdotas*. I've been a conscientious documenter of my parents' stories; I have an oral history collection of both Papi and Mami that spanned 20 years for Papi, and Mami and I are into our 25th year of capturing her oral history. I have learned a great deal from that experience, including growing increasingly conscious of my own story. Beyond my parents, I have found the great privilege of reconnecting with some of my grade school teachers, who I sought out when I returned home to become a teacher. I also consult an oral history project I have led during the past several years. I've found my stories, as I listen to how others reflect on their stories. My development as an educator has benefited from that process, as has my growth as a writer, and even my professional identity have been significantly guided by the exploration of my story.

The stories in this introduction also come from my review of certain documents, such as my "Pupil's Cumulative Record" (PCR) stored in the archives at Edcouch-Elsa ISD. It's the "report card" of sorts that contains my grades, test scores, and other personal information from the day I enrolled in Edcouch-Elsa schools to the day I graduated. The PCR includes narrative descriptions each of my teachers wrote as they described my performance and progress from Kindergarten to 5th grade—the other years only show grade scores and test scores. The descriptions present a snapshot of specific times in my life and provide a window through which I make meaning of my language development. Nicely nestled in my treasure trove, the PCR happens to be surrounded by an array of stories that I dust off and share, as I attempt to use my story of language to set up this special issue of *Crosspol.*

Elementary School

When I walked into Ms. Martínez's kindergarten class on August 31, 1970, the Bilingual Education Act was just beginning to make its way into South Texas schools. Edcouch Elementary had been selected as an experimental campus, and Ms. Martínez's classroom was one of the lab classrooms. As per guidance from the Bilingual Education Act, students who were not English speaking would be instructed in their native language. Fortunately, my kindergarten teacher had the language capacity to follow the dictates of this new education policy, and she taught most of my classmates and me in Spanish. Ms. Martínez was a sweet teacher, who greeted me in Spanish and as she told me many years later, she delivered instruction and facilitated class in Spanish, and in English, as the situation required. Ms. Martínez would set me on the right path. At the end of the year, she wrote in my permanent record: "Frankie is a dedicated, conscientious & bright boy. Was one of the best readers (Spanish) I had. Can do addition problems with ease. Did not know English at all, but is doing fairly well."

It turns out I could read in Spanish when I was in kindergarten. Ms. Martínez noted that, but she more importantly facilitated the development of my literacy by building on my existing Spanish language abilities. My parents were my first literacy teachers. Papi was a steady consumer of *El Mañana*, the regional Spanish language daily, and often read sections to us. He also read to us from books he kept from his grade school days in the 1940s. The story of Pablito, the Mexico boy who grew up *en el campo*, was a favorite of his (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2017). My mother read from her *Bible* daily, and often recruited us to take part in her daily *rosarios*. The readings and the rosaries comprised my early literacy experiences. Ms. Martínez simply built on those experiences and provided even greater advantage by teaching me in Spanish.

My 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Waggoner, also commented in her end-of-year qualitative assessment of me by writing: "classwork far above average. Speaks and writes Spanish." I had built a literacy foundation in Spanish. My English would follow and then catch up. The foundation had been laid, but it could have easily been slowed, if the Spanish instruction was not supported the following year, when my 1st grade teacher Mrs. Longoria continued to teach me in Spanish. In a personal testimony some 20 years after my 1st grade experience, Mrs. Longoria shared with me that she simply followed the methods prescribed by the new Bilingual Education approaches to teaching. "They just made sense to me," she said, "because it's how I raised my own children, and they grew up proficient in both languages." Indeed, Mrs. Longoria and Ms. Martinez set me up for success, just as my parents ensured that literacy and care and love were amply supplied at home.

Ironically, Ms. Martínez also assigned to me the name "Frankie," her attempt to Anglicize me, as she did for "Joe," "Mary," and "Terry," all kindergarten classmates. José, María, Teresa, and I grew up together, and we benefited from the love and care of our elementary teachers. As they helped us build literacy skills, they also encouraged the process of cultural assimilation. While they taught us in Spanish, they really preferred that we read and write in English. "I'm thankful the new bilingual practices came in," recalled Mrs. Longoria, "but we all believed in the way we were taught—that English was more important. We believed our primary duty was to teach you to read and write in English." There was a cultural and linguistic complexity in our elementary education, even if as young kids we probably were not thinking about issues of identity—were we Mexican, American, or what? But we were thinking about issues of language, because that was at the core of how we communicated with family, friends, teachers, and coaches. These were (and continue to be) issues we dealt with growing up along the border. These issues are the crux of Anzaldúa's borderlands analyses. She expounds upon them in a nuanced borderland language. She writes in English, in Spanish, and in a combination of the two. Therein, she encourages us to forge our own linguistic and cultural identities and to own our own language (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Coming Home

I left home at 18, enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, and declared as an English major. I became immersed in literature, mostly American and British. I fancied Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Twain, the Bronte sisters, and even studied at Brasenose College in Oxford. While abroad I experienced an epiphany and found my course of study. Even as I appreciated English literature, I also longed for something more familiar. I searched for deeper meaning, and a closer connection between lived experience and literature. Homesick and forlorn, I longed for the stories of Papi and Mami, the *cuentos de mis tíos y tías, y familiares*. When I arrived at JFK Airport on my return connecting flight, I called my father from a pay phone. I asked him about the stories he and my mother had raised us with, and asked him if he had written them down. He said no, and when I asked if he would, he began at the age of 52 a six-month process of penning his autobiography. To this day my father's collection of stories is the most meaningful piece of literature I have thus read, and the most life-changing writing assignment I have thus given. The act of asking, the act of writing, and the process of making meaning of my father's autobiography have been among my most formative language development experiences. After I completed an undergraduate degree in English and a graduate degree in History, I came back home to teach at my alma mater. More important than my time at Oxford and better than graduate seminars at UT, the lessons I learned from my father provided the most relevant training, as I began my tenure as an English teacher at Edcouch-Elsa High School. I was inspired.

One of the first assignments I gave my Edcouch-Elsa students was to write an autobiography. I recall sitting in my study at home reviewing their work, and weeping. My students' stories moved me emotionally. Their use of language moved me. I felt a sense of connection with them. They wrote experiences familiar to me, they were descriptive, they were honest, and they were authentic. They wrote about things they knew: family, immigration, work, struggles, and triumphs. A few students wrote more eloquently than others, but they were all real—raw, genuine, and fresh. Their stories had meaning, even when they were often lacking grammatically and in structure and organization. But I felt I could address the technical issues of grammar and structure and organization—in due time. The power of the student work was in the development of authentic student voice, just like my father expressed his authentic voice in his autobiography. My father's work provided the appropriate guidance for my work as a teacher. As my students explored their lives through writing, they demonstrated authenticity, and I had tapped a source of veritable student power.

I used this approach to teaching writing, reading, and other life skills to launch a college preparation program at Edcouch-Elsa High School. Beyond helping students with SAT scores and building their academic records, students' most important skill set focused on finding the language through which to craft their own story. As students built that skill set, their life stories would forge pathways into higher education. Working with teachers, students, and parents, we built a college preparation program that helped hundreds of students gained admission into the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA). Our students found power in their stories as they competed for scholarships and admission into rigorous programs at UTPA. Students also gained admission into the big state schools in Austin and College Station, and some even found admissions into very selective universities. Several dozen students from E-E HS—all autobiographers—gained admission into Ivy League and other highly competitive universities across the country. Our students emerged as strong candidates because they were smart, but also because they came to understand themselves through a course of study that placed their lives at the center of the learning process. They became community based researchers, investigators of their family stories, and curious about their own identities. When one student, a migrant farmworker named Myrta, submitted her admissions essay to Brown University, she wrote, "My summers spent in and with the land have educated me. I still deplore thinning peaches, but I have an understanding of life and nature that makes my heart race. Every day that I begin before the sun is to my benefit. With this teacher, I have become a better student, not only of school, but also of life" (Guajardo, 2005). In my letter of recommendation, I said to the Brown Admissions Committee, "You cannot afford to reject Myrta's admission, because she will enrich your student body like few others can." Myrta was admitted to Brown and graduated four years later, as a writer.

Language and Culture in Higher Ed

My first year in graduate school at UT Austin I took a course on Chicano Narrative with professor Ramón Saldívar. It was the year Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, and the year my father wrote his autobiography. Reading Anzaldúa next to my father's writing helped me make sense of my stories. My father modeled descriptive narrative and a storytelling form that made his prose vivid and accessible. Anzaldúa offered an expansive critical framework informed by history, race, culture, gender, and language. Both provided inspiration and utility. Both were also important intellectual and instructional guideposts, particularly as I thought about how I used language, and how I would be as a teacher.

Anzaldúa's Chapter 5 especially provided a historical context for language, politics, and education in South Texas schools. When I read the "How to Tame a Wild" chapter, I was provoked just like when I read Acuña's *Occupied America* (1972) or Paredes' *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1959), historical and anthropological works that placed South Texas and South Texas people in a different light than how they had been depicted in the mainstream historiography. In these works, Mexican American people were described as proud, hard working, and dignified people, much like how I understood my parents, my brothers, my relatives, and my neighbors. Anzaldúa similarly problematizes perceptions and practices relative to language use, specifically the language of the US-Mexico borderlands. When Anzaldúa describes the infamous "speech test" administered to her and to Mexican American students who enrolled at Pan American University in the 1960s (a practice that began well before the '60s and persisted well into the '70s), she asserts that language oppression was part of the institutional policy of the university. The case is confirmed by the historiography and the research on schooling in this borderland region (Blanton, 2004; San Miguel, 1987; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2004). Anzaldúa's "Wild Tongue" argument as a symbol of language injustice is also triangulated in compelling ways by a range of oral histories conducted with elders from the region that tell stories of being punished and demeaned for speaking in Spanish in schools. "I got punished for speaking my mother tongue," (Guerra, 2013) said one elder, "*Me pego la pinche vieja cuando me pescó hablando español*," (Billescas, 2013) said another. It's a consistent story that elders tell of growing up Mexican in South Texas.

We were told not to speak Spanish in school when I was growing up in the '70s and '80s, though the "don't speak Spanish" in schools was complicated by that time. Students at Edcouch-Elsa High School challenged overt language oppression practices in 1968 when they staged their historic walkout, in part to protest "don't speak Spanish" practices in schools. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was being implemented when I entered kindergarten in 1970, and socio-cultural and linguistic changes were set in motion as school districts across South Texas adopted Bilingual Education as a program to help Spanish-speaking children succeed in schools. The new bilingual education practices purported to treat Spanish and bilingualism with much greater respect, rather than to marginalize Spanish in the interest of a language and cultural assimilationist program. It was the dawn of a new era in South Texas schools, and in many parts of the country.

On the other hand, there was also vigorous resistance to new approaches of language learning in schools. Pan American University continued with its "speech test" well into the early 1970s. Former University of Texas Brownsville President Julieta García tells the story of the first job she found out of graduate school, when she was employed by Pan American University in the Speech Department. Part of her job, she said, was to administer the dreaded speech test, an instrument effectively instituted to dispatch Spanish-speaking students to remedial Speech for the purpose of rehabilitating their speech patterns (García, 2016). Other factors contributed to the resistance, including the impact the "don't speak Spanish" experience had on Mexican Americans who suffered from those practices in previous generations. Many of them made deliberate decisions to raise their children as English-speakers only, and often kept them from becoming Spanish speaking, or bilingual. New teachers and school administrators who would lead schools in this new era were directly impacted by the historical trauma of language oppression, and in the name of protecting children from being victims to language oppression, these teachers and principals would side with English only, assimilationist practices. So as bilingual education was being rolled out, there was stiff resistance. There continues to be resistance almost half a century later (Billescas, 2013; Guerra, 2013).

Nevertheless, the forces of change had gained traction. As Pan American University phased out its speech test, it also ushered in a new Bilingual Education program in the College of Education in the early 1970s (González, 2013), and through that program thousands of bilingual teachers would be trained, a process that continues in earnest until the present day. Today, the same college is a leader nationally in training teachers prepared to engage in bilingual classrooms at all levels. And the most startling change today is that the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley—formerly UT Pan American and UT Brownsville—is in the process of transforming itself into a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate public university. The origins of this development are found in the pioneering work of UT Brownsville President García, who led an effort throughout the 1990s and into the new century to build bilingualism and biliteracy into the fabric of that university. As that experiment gained vibrancy, the University of Texas System made a decision to merge UT Brownsville and UT Pan American, but the momentum built to transform higher education through linguistic and cultural work carried over. It's a bold and perhaps even revolutionary declaration to posit that the same university that instituted a "speech test" in order to fix the "wild tongue" of Spanish-speaking students would be the same university that would embrace and purport to become bilingual. The contours of history are indeed compelling.

As UTRGV commits to modeling itself as a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate institution, the B3 Institute is charged with facilitating that transition and has developed a set of strategic priorities to realize its work. The strategic priorities call for (1) collaboration work faculty to provide coursework delivered in Spanish or bilingually and through culturally relevant and culturally appropriate approaches; (2) incentivize research focused on issues of bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy; (3) and engage internal and external constituents to promote the value of bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy. The three strategic priorities address the issues important to the purpose of Crosspol, as writing, language development, and finding voice for young students can be areas of focus through teaching, research, and service. The goal of helping students find their voice can be elusive, so B3 developed a series of learning exchanges through which we explore specific learning modules to help students find their writers' voice, and hopefully find greater success as writers.

The B3 Institute worked with undergraduate students and faculty members to create a training manual comprised of a series of professional and personal development exercises that will explore with faculty members a series of strategies and pedagogies to help students find their stories and voice. One module, for example, focuses on understanding the history and culture of the Rio Grande Valley, a region uniquely situated as a contested space politically, economically, culturally, and in a perpetual search for meaning. This module guides faculty members and others through an inquiry process intended to find one's place in the Valley. A second module focuses on "your story of language," an exercise that asks participants to engage in a process much like what I am doing with this essay—to search for the episodes in my life that inform my language development. Another module challenges faculty members to know their students. Through this training, the B3 Institute encourages faculty members to participate in at least one home visit to a student's home. This is a bold experiment in higher education, as home visits are typically practiced only through the K-12 educational process. But this action is not without precedent. B3 has participated in this process through its partnership with UNIDOS por RGV, a consortium of nonprofit organizations that span the Valley. University faculty and staff have found the home visits as a critical learning experience where UTRGV faculty are able to build relationships with students, and to learn how to best approach teaching, learning, and research with their students.

The B3 Institute is building working relationships with specific schools districts such as Edinburg CISD, Brownsville ISD, and PSJA ISD through which it engages Social Studies and Language Arts teachers in a series of similar learning exchanges. Public school teachers and school leaders engage in similar professional development as they delve into the history and culture of the Valley, as they think critically about their story of language, and as they engage with students' family through home visits. B3 has also forged significant partnerships with community-based organizations such as UNIDOS por RGV, where these training modules have thus yielded noteworthy results. Participants in these learning exchanges have been exclusively mothers of children enrolled at all levels of the educational pipeline, and they have engaged in the process with deep enthusiasm. In one session, a mother even penned a letter to UTRGV President Guy Bailey, and several months later, she recited from her letter when the President attended an UNIDOS/B3 event. She said, "Presidente Bailey, you quiero que usted nos proteja a nuestros hijos y hijas. Mi hija es DACA student, y yo me preocupo mucho por ella." The President responded graciously, and thanked the mother for displaying such strength and confidence. The B3 Institute will continue to build on its professional development work with both internal and external partners, and we expect to grow the network of participants.

Making Sense of the Stories

My story of language is a work in progress. I probably code-switch a little less than I used to, though not when in conversation with my brothers, or with old friends. I learned Spanish first, then learned English in schooI, and then strengthened my English simply by being immersed in the culture. I learned English from listening to baseball games on the radio, watching football on television, watching sit coms on school nights—at least after we bought our first television set in the 1970s. I developed language with my brothers through a bilingual modality, so we moved in and out of English and Spanish, and even produced coded language that only we understood. I often felt like writing in that same way, but that was not really encouraged in school.

Through the work of the B3 Institute we encourage teachers and university professors to dive deeply into their own stories, because it can help them guide their students go through similar processes. When Ladson Billings developed her theory on culturally relevant pedagogy more than 20 years ago, she argued that culturally relevant teaching is nothing more than good teaching (Ladson Billings, 1995). It happens when teachers link principles of learning with the lives of children. Through her ethnographic work, she found that students wrote with a greater sense of purpose when assignments were connected to their life experiences (Ladson Billings, 2014). I taught at Edcouch Elsa High School, my alma mater, for a dozen years and like Ladson Billings, I found that my students felt more empowered with their use of language—in public speaking, in writing, or through their art work—when what they wrote had personal meaning (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2016). As I've engaged in teacher training in different parts of the country, the lessons of culturally relevant pedagogies speak to teachers, parents, and students. The challenge they often find, however, is that the standards often conflict with employing these approaches. But creative teachers figure out ways to connect with students and still produce outcomes deemed successful by the state.

I feel a deep sense of privilege to have grown up in a place where I developed as bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate. Even if my parents were fluent only in English, they still supported our development as bilingual children. They also needed that, because we often were responsible for negotiating wages with the English speaking Anglo farmer in Keeler, Michigan who could not communicate with my Spanish-speaking parents. My older brothers did most of the translation, mediation, and negotiation, a potentially humiliating circumstance my parents dealt with by keeping their head up and showing us there was no shame in figuring things through the assistance of their children. We gained great agency, as we helped our parents find their way in English speaking environments, even as we also saw our parents rendered relatively helpless. But they always kept their head up and exemplified dignity and integrity in everything they did.

My parents loved words. My father was a storyteller, while my mother loves to recite her rosary, and often offers side commentary to enhance the experience of the rosary. They helped my brothers and me to appreciate words, to love language, and they encouraged us to communicate in ways that made sense. To this day, my mother challenges us to "*no le hagan como los gringos; hablen en español!*" Most importantly, my parents modeled language intended to raise children in respectful and dignified ways. They saw language as an honorable process, and encouraged us to use it well, *con respeto y dignidad.* That was important modeling for me as I became a teacher, and it is modeling that I continue to follow as I work in higher education, and as I help to transform my university into a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate institution. I have learned language from the best teachers: my kindergarten teacher Ms. Martínez, who placed her faith in a new bilingual program; my first grade teacher Ms. Longoria, who thought that raising bilingual and biliterate children in schools was a good thing; the intellectual prowess of people such as Anzaldúa, Paredes, and Acuña. But the most important intellectual mentor for me was my father, José Angel Guajardo. He and my mother took good care to ensure that we were well fed, well cared for, that we appreciated words, and that we understood our stories. It turns out that was the best training for language development, but also for life.

> *The challenge [teachers] often find, however, is that the standards often conflict with employing these approaches. But creative teachers figure out ways to connect with students and still produce outcomes deemed successful by the state.*

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