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## Reflections on Language and Identity: Ofelia García's Impact on one Latina's Academic Trajectory and Scholarship

### Cover Page Footnote

Dina López, EdD, Assistant Professor in the Bilingual Education & TESOL Programs at The City College of New York. Her research is located at the intersection of sociocultural approaches to language and literacy, the anthropology of education, and immigration and education. She has written extensively about bilingual education, immigration, and adolescent literacy both in Latin America and the United States. Most recently, her work has examined translanguaging as both a language practice and pedagogical tool in elementary bilingual education classrooms.

# Reflections on Language and Identity: Ofelia García's Impact on one Latina's Academic Trajectory and Scholarship

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**Dina López**

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This essay shares my own personal story of how—as a first-generation Latina academic—working with Ofelia García transformed my sense of self and trajectory as a scholar working with issues of language, identity, and education. Weaving personal anecdotes throughout, I trace the evolution of my thinking and research with a focus on the concepts of heteroglossic language ideologies, dynamic bilingualism, and translanguaging. I conclude the essay by reflecting on the importance and implications of first-generation Latina academics receiving mentorship from senior Latina scholars.

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**Keywords:** academia, academic trajectory, dynamic bilingualism, heteroglossic language ideologies, identity, language and identity, Latina, Ofelia García, scholarship, translanguaging

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It was my second year as a doctoral student, and I was attending one of Ofelia García's brown bag lectures in one of the stately conference rooms in Grace Dodge Hall at Teachers College. The room was full of graduate students and faculty, all eager to hear her talk on the shifts in US language policy over the past decade. Over the course of the next hour, we were all enlightened about what García called the "silencing of bilingualism", that is, the ways that historically the word "bilingual" had been eliminated from US institutions and policy documents and replaced with "English language acquisition", on the historical context of US language policy affecting emergent bilinguals and their families. As I listened, I thought about the fact that I had been involved with language education for over 10 years, but had never considered the broader policy context and how that might affect practice. I decided right then that I had to take a course with Professor García the following spring. Little did I know that this would be the start of such an important and powerful mentoring relationship in my life and academic career. As a doctoral student, I would go on to take her course and co-author a book chapter with her and, years later, work with her on a research project as a junior faculty member.

This essay shares my own personal story of how—as a first-generation Latina academic—working with Ofelia García transformed my sense of self and trajectory as a scholar working with issues of language, identity, and education. Weaving personal anecdotes throughout, I trace the evolution of my thinking and research with a focus on concepts of heteroglossic language ideologies, dynamic bilingualism, and

translanguaging. I conclude the essay by reflecting on the importance and implications of first-generation Latina academics receiving mentorship from senior Latina scholars.

### **Latinas in the Academy**

According to the most recent figures revealed by the National Center for Education Statistics, Latina women comprise 2% of the full-time faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). It is no surprise then that Ofelia García was only the second Latina professor I had in over 10 years of undergraduate and graduate studies. According to 2011-12 figures, Latina/o accounted for only 5% of all doctorates conferred (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015) and 7% during the 2014-2015 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). One of the most promising trends in the past two decades has been an increase in the percentage of Latina/o who attend college. The Pew Research Center reports that in 2014, “35% of Hispanics ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in a two- or four-year college, up from 22% in 1993” (Krogstad, 2016, para 5). However, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of these students have not been taught by faculty who look like them or can relate to their lived experiences. Latina/o constituted a mere 3% (2012) and only 4% (2016) of college and university faculty in the United States (DeLuca & Escoto, 2012; Myers, 2016). In an interview with Estrella Olivares-Orellana, García herself spoke to the importance of faculty mentors with whom one can identify:

When I thought about a doctorate, or when I became involved in graduate study, there weren't many Latinas in this. I want you to know that I don't think I would have ever pursued a doctorate if it wasn't because I had a Latino professor at Hunter College, I will never forget him, who actually said to me one day “you have to get a doctorate.” I was pursuing a masters degree because I was teaching, and he said I needed to get a doctorate. I said, “How do you do that?” and he actually brought me by the hand to the graduate center and I applied. I had no idea what I was getting into, but I was curious, I was interested in intellectual ideas, I had a big commitment to education, and I also had a deep interest in learning about who I was, as a Latina woman, and about the Latino community. (Olivares-Orellana, 2012, para 2)

In the above quote, García notes that “there weren't many Latinas” in academia, and unfortunately this has not changed all that much. Research has suggested a lack of mentors and role models for Latina graduate students coupled with additional barriers such as marginalization by departments, tokenization by peers, and low expectation by professors (González, 2006). This researcher showed that Latina doctoral students experience strong feelings of isolation and self-doubt, many times seeking mentorship outside of their program or department in order to overcome these crippling emotions. According to Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, and Galindo (2009), these issues continue once faculty of color secure tenure-track positions and must contend with racism, sexism, marginalization, and “often struggle with issues of developing personal and professional identity within the academy” (p. 313).

Within this kind of social and professional context, it makes my relationship with Ofelia García as mentor that more special, and I feel privileged to be able to share this

story and experience. Through a testimonio as a method of inquiry approach (Castillo-Montoya, & Torres-Guzman, 2012), I pay tribute to an incredible scholar and human being.

### **Ofelia García's Impact on My Identity and Scholarship**

In the spring of 2008, I took García's graduate course at Teachers College entitled Language, Societies, and Schools. It was here that I first examined language from a sociological perspective, and it was here that I began to examine and explore the concepts of monoglossic and heteroglossic language ideologies, dynamic bilingualism, and translanguaging as well as the imposition of language standards and language hierarchies. In her course, García challenged us to expand our notions of language by eschewing dominant and parochial views and considering the complex, evolving, and contextual nature of language and language practices.

I remember how profoundly I was impacted during one of Ofelia García's lectures. She was discussing Bourdieu and symbolic violence and elaborated on how particular linguistic practices are seen as normative and how societies create an illusion of a *standard language*. At that time, I was able to reflect on the ways Standard English was promoted as *the* language of prestige and marker of intelligence during my own educational experience. The language we use is an expression of who we are, and when we are told it is not good enough, it is a veritable assault on our voice, our sense of self. This is something that I went through as a freshman in high school and it was to have long-lasting implications. I had immigrated to the US from Guatemala as a young child and grown up in an exclusively Spanish-speaking household but had been schooled in exclusively English monolingual settings. I reflected on my high school experience in my first Double Entry Journal assignment for García's class as I responded to a 2006 reading by Elana Shohamy.

I was having a difficult time with my English teacher that year who considered my writing sub-par and unscholarly. She continuously scrutinized my essays and provided long-winded comments about my lack of structure and unimpressive vocabulary. These comments were always quite lengthy, but never helpful. I thus began to doubt myself and develop an imposter syndrome complex: Maybe I don't belong in honors English? Maybe I'm not smart enough? Maybe it's because I speak Spanish at home? It was at this time that writing transitioned from being an enjoyable form of expression to an excruciatingly painful experience. In order to address my writing woes, I looked for examples of "good" writers and tried to emulate *their* style and use *their* language. It seemed to work. Throughout the year, the comments on my essays got shorter while my grades showed significant improvement. It seemed as though I could pick up Standard English after all. The problem is that as I acquired this legitimate way of communicating my thoughts, as I became versed in academic conventions, and as I maneuvered my way through this privileged discourse...I lost my *own* voice. And I've been struggling to find it ever since. (personal communication. López, Double Entry Journal (DEJ) #1, January 25, 2008)

As is evident in this journal entry, I was able to relate to the theoretical concepts of language hierarchies and symbolic violence in a very personal way. It was both

liberating and empowering to be able to deconstruct these past experiences and put a name to what had been the source of crippling self-doubt about my intellectual capacity, my writing abilities, and my bilingualism. It was this process of reflection that allowed me fully understand how language ideologies functioned in society, and *why* it was necessary to have a critical lens as both language educator and education researcher. The emergence of a critical lens in my perspectives about language is seen in another journal entry where I describe my newfound understandings about the relationship between monoglossic language ideologies and deficit perspectives of bilingualism:

In her lecture this week, Professor García argued convincingly that this is an urgent concern in the United States, a country which though bilingual and multilingual, “refuses to acknowledge it.” Indeed, the dominant language ideology in the US is one that is monoglossic and one that views language as a problem rather than resource (personal communication. López, DEJ#4, February 1, 2008).

García’s lectures were powerful in that she used relevant personal and social examples to make sophisticated theories about language and language policy accessible to her students. Her lectures were enjoyable, engaging, and often used humor to drive in an important point or insight. Later on, in the semester García introduced the concepts of dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging—concepts that would not only change the way I thought about language and language practice, but would have a lasting impact on my teaching and scholarship. The idea that we should understand bilingualism “from the bilingual speaker/user’s perspective” was revolutionary for me.

There were multiple “aha” moments in our discussions about bilingual language practices and the differences between the concepts of code-switching and translanguaging. Again, this was incredibly empowering for me, as I understood my own bilingual language practices in a new light. I had always had the *balanced bilingual* (a monoglossic perspective) as the ultimate standard for *true bilingualism*. As previously mentioned, I had grown up speaking Spanish at home and considered myself fluent, but had never been schooled in Spanish. This meant that in my interactions with my friends and colleagues who were educated in Latin America, I often felt clumsy and ill equipped, as my academic Spanish was clearly not up to par. These moments often produced feelings of shame and inadequacy, but the concepts of dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging allowed me to appreciate my linguistic repertoire by disrupting the monoglossic ideal of the balanced bilingual.

My explorations of these constructs had further implications for what I saw happening in schools and how educators perceive the bilingualism of their students. In one of my last journal entries for the course, I reflect on a fellow colleague’s struggle to connect with her students and how this was based on false assumptions about their bilingualism and their specific language practices.

My colleague’s teaching experience harks back to the need for educators to understand the relationship between identity and language learning and the way in which language is *used* among students’ discourse communities. As Professor García constantly reminds us, it is critical and fundamental “to build on the

(linguistic, cultural, discursive, academic, social, etc.) strengths of our students.”  
(López, DEJ#7, March 14, 2008)

By the end of this course, I had an entirely new conception and appreciation of bilingualism, language ideologies, language practice, and language education. The knowledge that Ofelia García shared in class transformed the way I thought about language and provided me with a much broader and vertical perspective of language policy and how it manifests at the local level. Though she was not on my committee, I did meet with her several times about my ideas for research, and the contours of my dissertation project changed as a result. My decision to study a national English Literacy/Civics Education language-in-education policy was largely a result of taking this course and García’s teachings.

At that point in my doctoral studies, I was unsure of whether I wanted to pursue a career in academia or whether I would return to working with community-based nonprofits. Specifically, I did not see myself in academia, since I was not at all confident in my abilities as a researcher or writer. Imposter syndrome<sup>1</sup> was something that I had always dealt with since my undergraduate years in an Ivy League institution. However, I felt it most acutely as a doctoral student where the expectation was that I contribute something new and original through my dissertation project. García’s course lectures made clear that my bilingualism was a resource. It was not just an academic interest, but it involved serious and critical reflection of my own identity and experiences and the role that bilingualism had always played in my life (Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzmán, 2012). This changed the way I saw myself and the way I approached my research.

However, I was still taken aback when, toward the end of the semester, Ofelia García invited me and another friend/colleague, Carmina Makar, to co-author a chapter on language and ethnic identity in Latin America. As a first-generation college graduate, I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that I would go on to pursue a doctorate or career in academia. The Gates Millennium Scholarship that I received my senior year as an undergraduate changed the scope of opportunities as it fully funded my masters and doctoral degrees. However, upon starting my doctoral journey, my vision had been to go back to working with non-profit and community-based organizations and use my doctorate as leverage for funding. I am convinced that it was this invitation to work on this book chapter with García that began a process of transformation in the way I viewed myself as a writer and an academic.

Working on the book chapter with Ofelia García was an introduction to the practices of academic writing, and as Carmina and I navigated the process of co-authoring, we also got to know Ofelia García better and more intimately. Through this process, we were not only able to experience her brilliance up close and personal, but also her warmth, strong work ethic, and extremely high expectations. We had been tasked with updating an earlier version of the book chapter from a 2001 edition of the *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*. At some point during the writing process, García sensed our hesitation to make changes to the original manuscript and called us out on it in an email where she included very detailed instructions on how to move forth with revisions on the chapter. With a tough love tone, she implored us to take

ownership over the writing process and to not be shy about making edits, “Cambien!!! Para eso son co-autoras!” [*You have to revise the writing!!! That is why you are co-authors.*] (Personal Communication, February 13, 2009). That’s right, I’m a “co-author”, I had thought to myself. This idea of writing for publication was still so new to me, and working with Ofelia García had helped demystify it.

Prior to working on this book chapter, I had made several false assumptions about academic writing and the scholarly publication process that were challenged by my experience as García’s coauthor. First, I had assumed that one had to be well known in the field in order to be invited to work on a writing project. As someone who is now more familiar with the workings of academia, I realize how naive and silly this idea was, as someone can only become well known through publishing their scholarship. Second, I had assumed that academic writing was simply a process of transferring brilliant, well-formed intellectual ideas into writing, and that this was to be mainly a solitary process. Yet this experience was far from this. It was a messy, dialogical process with a lot of back and forth, writing and re-writing. In email correspondence and in-person conversations about the chapter, we spoke in English, Spanish, and everything in between.

We created a space in which I felt that I belonged, and I have now come to think that our translanguaging only strengthened our ideas and the final written product. Thirdly, this experience taught me a lot about my own abilities as an academic writer. García modeled for us how to engage in rigorous scholarly work. Through the writing, rewriting, and revising, I gained confidence in my ability to sustain this kind of work and began to envision myself as a researcher/writer. I felt that I had somehow gained entry into what Oliva and colleagues call “the figured world of academe” (2013, p. 102). As I reflect on this experience years later, I believe that this experience was a crucial ‘counter-space’ for myself as a Latina doctoral student. According to Critical Race theorists Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), “counter-spaces serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70).

Though García moved to the CUNY Graduate Center midway through my doctoral program at Teachers College, we remained in touch, and she never ceased being an important mentor and source of inspiration. After receiving our doctorate from Teachers College, Carmina and I went on to secure tenure-track positions at the City College of New York. As colleagues at City College of New York, we aimed to build on her work on dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging by examining how bilingual teachers used translanguaging strategies in the era of the Common Core (López & Makar, 2015). This was partly accomplished when in 2015, I joined the research team of the CUNY-New York State Initiative for Emergent Bilinguals led by Principal Investigators Ofelia García and Kate Menken (Queens College). Through this project, I was able to work with schools in the Bronx and Peekskill, NY and lead professional development sessions aimed at leveraging the bilingualism of their students and creating multilingual school ecologies. The work with schools helped me gain a more nuanced understanding of translanguaging, the challenges that public schools face in making changes to their structures and practices, and many creative ways in which

teachers and administrations are working to better serve emergent bilingual students and their families.

I consider myself incredibly privileged to not only be able to draw on her published scholarship, but also on countless face-to-face conversations throughout the past 10 years. As I move forward with my own research projects, I will continue to examine practices and pedagogies in bilingual education contexts. The questions that intrigue me and that I examine through my research have been inspired by Ofelia García's scholarship, particularly her work on dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging (Espinosa & López, 2017; Kley, López, & Makar, 2015; López, 2018; López & Makar, 2015; López & Makar, 2017).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I would like to conclude the essay by discussing the difference that this kind of mentoring can make for a first-generation Latina academic such as myself. In many ways, my relationship with Ofelia García, the way it began, and the context in which it has developed, is much too unique to generalize. However, I believe there are some larger implications that may be drawn from my story and experience.

To begin, research clearly indicates that, for Latinas and other faculty of color, mentoring facilitates our emotional, cultural, and social adjustment to institutions in which we often face alienation and isolation (Diggs et al., 2009). Thus, it is imperative that institutions of higher education provide more mentoring opportunities for both graduate students and faculty of color, so that stories such as mine are not the exception, but the rule.

Another implication is that senior faculty of color, particularly women, can learn from Ofelia García's example and reach out to junior faculty of color to engage in mentoring, scholarly collaborations, and the creation of a mutually beneficial counter-space. Castillo-Montoya and Torres-Guzmán (2012) describe a kind of authentic collaboration

where the junior scholar has the opportunity to learn about the funds of knowledge that have helped the senior scholar succeed in teaching, research, and service. This form of mentorship cultivates an intergenerational transfer of knowledge that could be valuable to the junior scholar as she proceeds with building her own career. The mentorship becomes a new relationship that feeds the human spirits of both participants (p. 556).

Finally, it would be easy to say, "just be more like Ofelia García!" But that would be a foolish recommendation. Ofelia García is one of a kind. We need not imitate, but be inspired. However, we can all learn from her and strive to be better teachers, better faculty, better mentors, and better people. I am currently teaching an undergraduate course at City College on the foundations of Bilingual Education. Of course, García's scholarship figures prominently in my syllabus. But I would also like to think that I am paying it forward, as my class is predominantly first-generation Latina college students. I strive to be a dedicated teacher—one who cares about them, challenges them, and uses their cultural and linguistic resources as the basis for my instruction. Also, like García, I try to do so with generosity, kindness, and laughter.

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### **End Note**

<sup>i</sup> This is a term coined by Clance and Imes (1978) to describe the psychological experience of feeling like an intellectual fraud and consistently doubting one's accomplishments.