



# La Voz de Esperanza

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## Children As Translators

by Antonia Castañeda, PhD



# Language and Other Lethal Weapons:

## Cultural Politics & the Rites of Children As Translators of Culture

by Antonia I. Castañeda

### Age 7: El Doctor<sup>1</sup>

*"Dile que no puedo respirar—que se me atora el aire. Dile . . ."*  
How do I say "atora"?

*"Tell your mother that she has to stop and place this hose in her mouth and press this pump or else she will suffocate."*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice?"*

*He is sitting behind this big desk, and my mother is sitting beside me and holding onto my hand very tightly.*

*I... what does suffocate mean? How do I translate this? I don't have the words.*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice?"*

*"I... uh... Dice que... uh... Dice que si no haces lo que te dice te mueres."*

*"Dile que cuando me acuesto por la noche que no puedo resollar." 'Resollar,' what does that mean?*

*Her gasps came out quickly and sounded so awful: a croaking sound that seemed to hurt from deep inside her throat. I sit in front of the big desk remembering, hearing her sounds, and feel again the terror of last night and every time I heard her and could not help. I do not have the words to help her. She will die. And all I could do was sit there and hold her hand and listen to her gasp and gasp for air—for breath that would not reach her, her eyes popping out—and watch her die. She called me her lengua, her voz. If she dies, it will be my fault.*

*I tell the doctor she cannot breathe and will die. And he says something I cannot understand about asthmatics and how there is little he can do except give her this pump and that I should be sure to tell her not to panic.*

*Panic. What does that word mean? How do I say panic?*

...

How does a seven-year-old girl, not yet in the second grade, translate the life and death words "atora, suffocate, resollar, panic"? How does she explain and interpret words she does not know in either language, while knowing at the same time that her mother's life sits on her tongue and on what she does with the words given her? Where in her seven-year-old knowledge does she find the meaning of words that hold the

life or death of the mother who calls her "mi lengua"—her tongue—the fleshy, moveable organ attached to the floor of the mouth with which words are made? What cultural rites are these in which children become adults long before puberty?

### Age 8: La Cuenta

*"Dile que no le podemos pagar toda la cuenta porque ha llovido mucho y no hemos podido pizcar. Pero que aquí están estos centavitos y luego luego se la pagamos tan pronto que trabajemos... y que queremos llevar una poca comida hoy—que si nos extiende el crédito un poquito. Andale, dile."*

*He looks at me from behind his counter and says, "What? What'd she say?"*

*"My mother said we can't pay all the bill today—because of the rain we have not been able to work—and we will pay the rest real soon, as soon as we work... and can we have a little more food on credit?"*

*He looks at me, then he looks at her, and we stand there in front of him. He starts to say something I cannot hear.*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice?" my mother asks. "Andale, dile que sí le pagamos—nomás que ahorita no hay trabajo."*

*I start to speak to him again. I look up to talk to him, and he stares down at me, and the look I see in his eyes tells me that he does not believe we will pay our bill. I have seen that same look on people's faces in town when we all get out of the back of the truck by the city park, and me and my friends walk down the street—in Toppenish—the people just stare at us and glare at us with eyes that tell us we do not belong there. It is the same look the man at the restaurant gave us—at that place where we stopped on our way from Texas—when he wouldn't sell us milk for the baby's bottle.*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice?" my mother asked.*

*"Nada mamá. No dice nada. Mejor vámonos. No nos van a dar más crédito."*

...

What cultural issues are at stake for child translators? How do they interpret for themselves the cultures they must translate for others? What are the politics they confront each time they translate cultures? How do they negotiate their

culture of origin, which cannot protect them and in which the roles of parent and child are inverted as children become the tongues, the lifeline, the public voice of parents, family, and sometimes communities. How do they negotiate the culture they must translate for their parents: the culture that assaults and violates them, their families, and their communities with its assumptions and attitudes about them as well as with its language and other lethal weapons?

## Age 15: El Rifle

*"Ay tocan a la puerta. Trae rifle. Ha de ser uno de esos gringos que cazan faisanes. Anda ver que quiere."*

*I open the door to a man with a hunting rifle.*

*"Does Raaool Valhenzoola live here? Is he here? I want to talk to him."*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice? A quién busca? Busca a Raúl?"*

*"Si mamá, busca a Raúl. Quédate adentro. No, my brother's not home. He's working."*

*"Well you tell your brother that I came here to order him to stay away from my daughter. You tell him I catch him anywhere near Marilyn, or even lookin' at her, he'll be sorry. You tell him I have friends, and they know who he is. You tell 'im girly, you tell 'im."*

*I look past him, past the lingering swirls of dust his truck tires had stirred up on the dirt road, and know what the people in the camp meant when they told us stories about the Texas Rangers.*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice? Qué quiere con Raúl?" my mother cries from somewhere behind me.*

*I tell him to put the rifle down because he is scaring my mother and to please leave. I step back inside the house and close the door. What can I tell her that she doesn't already know?*

• • •

Who are these children who speak in tongues and live in fire? What happens to them as they move through the educational system—the system of which most of us are products, the system to which we send our children, the system that employs us, the system that does violence to our mental integration, and the system that historically has also done violence to our physical selves precisely because we spoke languages other than English? Although many Chicano/Latino children are pushed out of the public educational system in places like Texas and California, they and all children in the United States are steeped in lessons about rugged individualism, democracy, "American" nationalism, equality, justice, merit, and fair play. What do children of color, children of farmworker families, and other working class children, whose daily experiences belie the national myths, understand and know about these myths?

If we are to decolonize national myths, surely we must understand how different people have lived the American myths: the historical myths about inventing America that refer to invasion as discovery (as Angela Davis noted during her keynote address at the translating cultures conference held in Santa Barbara in 1992) and the ideological myths that sustain U.S. imperialism, genocide, racialism, and economic exploitation and have done so since the founding of this nation.<sup>3</sup> These myths, and the attitudes they foster, are intrinsic to the political, economic, social, and cultural values of the

United States and are the toxic particles that we ingest with every breath.

These myths include the notion that the United States, symbolized by "The West," is a classless, casteless society where equality and justice for all reigns supreme, where merit and hard work are rewarded, and where education—which is free and available to all children—is the key to success. Certainly children are vitally aware of the popular heroes and heroines of the western frontier, including every white-hatted cowboy who ever rode a horse across the vast expanses of the silver screen, dispensing even-handed justice with his faithful but rather dumb—sometimes ethnic—sidekick and greeted by a blonde beauty at the end of the dusty trail.

Those of us living in California know first hand how deeply rooted and pervasive are the national myths surrounding the "frontier" and "The American West." Not only is California the most romanticized, mythologized, and distorted of the Western states; but the West and how the West was spun, who spun it, how it is now being spun, and who is authorized to spin it, are among the most highly contested issues in the ideological—euphemistically called cultural—wars now being waged in battlefields across the nation: newspapers, popular magazines, academic journals, conferences, public school textbooks, the national Museum of American Art, and the National Museum of American History.<sup>4</sup>

These wars are about national myths, about ideology. They are about "The West as America"—to use the title of the bitterly contested exhibit at the National Museum of Art, site of one of the most acrimonious battles waged during the cultural wars of 1991.<sup>5</sup>

What is the relationship between those myths and the politics of translating cultures? What rites of passage are these that require children to conceive the significance of, construe, and interpret entire cultural universes for adults, universes that include every possible human experience: a nation's mythology and ideology, a sibling's arrest, pregnancy and pre-and post-natal care, an argument with a boss who refuses to pay the wages he agreed to pay? What rites are these in which childhood's boundaries are transgressed each time a child is required to translate—and thus mediate, negotiate, and broker—adult realities across cultures?

These questions are guiding my current research on a social history of Tejana farmworkers. How did Tejana farmworking families who migrated between Texas and the State of Washington live this nation's national myths? Based on interviews with women who lived in five labor camps in different parts of Washington State, this work examines various generations of women during the two decades after the Second World War, from about 1945 to 1965.

These were the decade of the Bracero Program, which recruited more than 4.5 million Mexican men to work in agriculture and industry in the western/southwestern United States, and of Operation Wetback, which in 1954 alone deported a million "aliens."<sup>6</sup> These were the decades of aggressive anti-immigrant sentiments, expressed in national efforts such as the McCarren-Walter Act, which aimed to tighten immigration laws and to intensify the screening and deporting of "aliens."

The calls for immigrant labor coincided with the economic booms that began with the first World War and accompanied

all major wars in this century. Anti-immigrant laws and eaves of deportations were symptoms of the economic downturns that inevitably followed. The first laws restricting immigration were enacted in 1922, after the end of the First World War. In 1930-33, during the Great Depression, three hundred thousand Mexicans and Mexican Americans were forcibly "repatriated" to Mexico; in 1953-54, Operation Wetback deported more than twice the number of Mexicans contracted under the Bracero Program during the same period.<sup>7</sup>

These were the decades in which New Deal spending and subsidies to agriculture—including the building of monumental dam—provided agribusiness with cheap water for irrigation and electric power.<sup>8</sup> Irrigation transformed arid western wastelands into verdant, fertile agricultural valleys with undulating fields of row crops, fruit orchards, and hop yards endlessly stretching out under liquid blue skies. Twentieth-century agricultural corporations required massive armies of seasonal, mobile manual labor, which they obtained not only through the public recruitment of braceros from Mexico but also through the private recruitment of Mexicano/Chicano families, especially from isolated rural communities of South Texas where racism, segregated schools, the hated ranches, and "no Mexicans or dogs allowed" signs at the front doors of restaurants were the norm.

During these decades, entire Tejano families, both nuclear and extended, began an annual migrant work cycle from Texas, to Arizona, to California, to Washington, to Oregon, to Idaho, and back to Texas. The children of these South Texas communities, where earlier generations of native-born children had often been refused even rudimentary education in English because the town had "no school for Mexicans," were the girls and boys who scrambled onto the beds of tarp-covered flatbed trucks to migrate to *las piscas*, to live in labor camps, and to labor alongside their parents, older siblings, and other relatives in the row, field, and orchard crops of the Yakima, Skagit, and Wenatchee valleys. Some of these families settled out early on land, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, began to form the nucleus of Chicano communities in the Pacific Northwest.

Most of the families lived in labor camp—some of which had communal showers, outside toilets, and communal laundries that consisted of large steel tubs with built-in washboards; others had neither showers nor laundries. Located at the end of long dusty roads set far beyond groves of trees that hid the ramshackle structures from view, the labor camps were not visible from the highway. Thus the camps, and their inhabitants, were rendered invisible to the local citizenry. ostensibly, migrant farmworkers did not exist.

What existed instead were inflammatory newspaper headlines, which decried the threat "illegal Mexican aliens" posed to local resources, and McCarthyism and anticommunist hysteria, which denounced as subversive and/or homosexual anyone even remotely suspected of harboring radical political sympathies and posing an internal threat to national security. Historically defined as racial, sexual, and political threats, people of color were now at even greater risk. What also existed were Hollywood's countless renditions of the West as American, which Chicano, Amerindian, Black, and Anglo children could see on Saturday afternoons at the segregated Liberty Theater in Toppenish, Washington—the heard of the Yakima Indian Reservation. Above all, what existed were the myths.

Thus, for people of Mexican descent, whose historical communities had existed under a state of siege since the end of the U.S. war with Mexico in 1848, the repressive politics, policies, and culture of the 1950s were a postwar manifestation of historical patterns of repression, now further justified by nativist as well as racist arguments that Mexicans were foreigners. For the migrant farmworker families of the Tejanas interviewed for this study, the "keep America pure" ideology, the economic and political policy of containment, and the cultural and political repression of the 1950s conveyed the clear message that people of Mexican descent were un-American, subversive, and unwelcome.

During these decades, the women whose stories begin and end this chapter translated for their families and their communities. During the decade of the 1950s, in particular, Cold War politics and the gender, racial, class, and sexual politics of containment further converted these women of color—and, in fact, all people of color—into "the enemy within."

As children, women I interviewed translated for parents, family, and community, and the question of how they experienced the national myths is a critical political, and thus cultural, question. Their oral histories reveal that the act of translation is informed by unequal power relationships. Translation usually occurs under conditions of conflict and stress. It is frequently traumatic, and the trauma is long-lasting. Children are often at the center of the process of translation, and they experience that trauma more strongly than adults. What, then, do we make of children translating cultures? How do we assess, analyze, theorize, and interpret this experience, which in most cases continues into their own adulthood and generally until their parent's death?

The current body of knowledge and literature on translation largely focuses on the translation of written texts or seeks to teach businesses how to train workers to be translators and thus to digest "unassimilated diversity," to quote Angela Davis again. It yields little of value for studying child translators.

Recently, however, social science scholars and practitioners—most particularly linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, and social workers—have begun to examine and debate issues pertinent to children as translators.<sup>9</sup> Generally, however, these scholars have cast the experience as a recent phenomenon specific to immigrant children and their families. They have centered the debate on the psychological or linguistic "costs and benefits" to the individual child.

One side argues that translating for parents and family is harmful to the child's psychological development and that, because children play an adult role while they are translating, they may grow up too quickly and resent or lose respect for their parents.<sup>10</sup> This perspective is exemplified by Richard Rodríguez's undernourished *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1981).<sup>11</sup> Rodríguez accepted and internalized the tenets of a racist, classist society that deemed everything about him—the color of his skin, his language, his physiognomy, and his working-class origins—as wrong, unacceptable, and un-American. He internalized these notions and relinquished his Mexican self, choosing education over family, erudite English over Spanish, a "public" Euro-American life over a "private" Mexican one. In rejecting his Mexican self, Rodríguez has, in fact, been accepted by America

and become the darling of certain segments of the white intelligentsia.

The other side of the debate argues that translating can help children develop language skills and understand American institutions. In 1991, Lowry Hemphill, a specialist in language development at Harvard University, stated that translating is not necessarily something that should be discouraged because it is "part and parcel of the whole experience of being an immigrant child. People do what they have to do to get by."<sup>12</sup> Ernesto Galarza, author of *Barrio Boy: The Story of a Boy's Acculturation* (1971), learned very early—in a remote, mountainous village in Mexico and in a multi-ethnic, working-class barrio in Sacramento—to see himself in relation to his family, his community, and his class and to understand and interpret the world in terms of power relationships and class differences.<sup>13</sup> Galarza embraced and transformed the experience of translating into a powerful tool with which to give public voice to the struggle for the rights of industrial workers, including farmworkers, throughout the world. Within that framework, translating was a powerful, positive, and valuable skill to be used and shared with others.

Most scholars ignore, however, the global history of imperialism in general and the history of U.S. imperialism in particular. In so doing, they reify one of the pivotal national myths that still undergirds U.S. imperialist ideology: the myth that the American continents were largely unpopulated, or only partially inhabited, when Europeans landed on these shores. For California and the West, this reaffirms the myth of the "bloodless conquest" and ignores demographic studies of the last two decades that debunk this myth, provide new data confirming high population density, particularly in Mexico and California, and describe the genocide and demographic holocaust wrought upon native peoples by the European conquest and colonization. The myth of unpopulated continents has not only served to rationalize genocide of Amerindians but also enabled scholars to ignore the need that Europeans had to communicate with the people living here. Europeans did not initially speak indigenous languages: somebody had to translate, and that somebody was often a child.

Thus, the issue of translating cultures, and specifically the experience of children as translators, is a historical as much as a contemporary issue and experience. It is by no means solely or even principally an immigrant experience, at least not historically. Beginning with Malintzín Tenépal, or *la Malinche* as she is also known—a fourteen-year-old girl who was given, with nineteen other young women, by the Chontal Maya of the Tabasco coast to the Spaniards in 1519 and became translator, lover, and tactical adviser to Hernán Cortés—the experience of translating cultures has been lived by native-born children and adolescents, including Tejana farmworkers.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the Spanish-Mexican periods, both Indian and mestizo children and adolescents captured in war, raids, and slaving expeditions in the northern frontier of Mexico could find themselves translating cultures, as in the case of boys and young men who worked for the military as scouts, horsebreakers, or herders and in that of young servant girls who worked in the homes of soldiers and settlers. Indian children, in particular, were often captured, traded, or sold into

slavery by Spanish-Mexican military forces and, after the Euro-American conquest, by settlers and paramilitary groups.<sup>15</sup>

On another level, but also in terms of culture, children were at the center of the strategies employed by Spanish-Mexicans as well as Euro-Americans to detribalize native peoples. Both Franciscan missionaries and the Euro-American educational system went to great lengths to "denaturalize or deculturalize" native peoples through their children: in missions, in the case of the Franciscans, and in Indian boarding schools, in the case of Euro-American educators.<sup>16</sup> This is fundamentally what the contemporary English-only movement is all about. Historically, the effort was to subvert the authority of the parents and the community by inverting the parent-child relationship and making the child the authority in certain realms, including the ability to communicate with whoever represented the ruling colonial authority or power.

Although Malintzín Tenépal's narrative relating her experience is not available, we know that her acts of translation, as well as her sexuality, earned her the opprobrium of a Euro-centered, patriarchal Mexicano/Chicano history and culture, which portrays her—symbolic mother of the mestizo peoples—as a traitor and a whore. In the past decade and a half, however, Native American and Chicana writers and scholars have reinterpreted the documentary record and inverted the spurious sexualized and racialized image of Malintzín, claiming this Indian woman as our own, even as lesbian.<sup>17</sup>

Reinterpretations of Malintzín Tenépal by Chicana and Native American scholars Adelaida del Castillo, Norma Alarcón, and Inés Hernández center on issues of subjectivities, translation, and agency. Del Castillo interprets Malintzín as a gifted linguist, a young woman who made well-considered choices based on her realities and those of her people. Alarcón examines *La Malinche* as a paradigmatic figure of Chicana feminism. Hernández draws upon the syncretic ceremonial dance tradition of the Concheros of "la Gran Tenochtitlán, in which *La Malinche* is the path-opener—the front(line)—the vanguard," to discuss how in the contemporary period we can choose to be *Malinches* in a political, social, and intellectual context.<sup>18</sup>

The *Malinches* of today, she states, are "all of the women who have accepted their role as 'tongues' and demanded that their voices be heard."<sup>19</sup> Including especially Rigoberta Menchú, who learned Spanish—the language of the oppressor—and made it her own, just as she learned and used the Bible as an organizing text and tool in her community, these women join their voices and their skills in the global struggle to end exploitation and oppression in all their forms.

With these very few exceptions, and linguist Frances Karttunen's most recent work, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (1994), which discusses the young translators Malintzín and Scajawa within a global context and experience, scholars have yet to focus on the spoken word and the act of oral translation across unequal relations of power based on age, gender, race, class, and culture. Centering gender and the experience that women have had as child translators and examining the pressures, conflicts, and contradictions that arise when they must translate in a context of unequal power raises critical epistemological and theoretical

questions for feminism, and for feminist scholars seeking to theorize history, politics, and culture.

What did a Tejanita of seven summers know and interpret as she broke through multilayered power differentials to translate for a mother facing racist male creditors, doctors, police, or school authorities? What did a teenage Mexican girl of fifteen understand about sexuality, race, and violence when she had to translate her family's needs to a store owner who made sexual overtures to her every time she came into the store in the same town where a white man with a hunting rifle came to threaten her brother away from his daughter. How did these young Tejanas negotiate translating across two patriarchal cultures during the 1950s—their own, which sexualized them, and another, which sexualized and racialized them while disparaging their class origins? How did these working-class Mexican girls live and interpret the cultural politics of the Cold War, of which one central ideological tenet, feminist scholars have concluded, was a domestic revival that centered the family, prescribed traditional gender roles, and prized marital stability.<sup>20</sup>

How did these girls and young women assimilate, accept, and/or resist this experience? What did they change, and how were they changed by the act of translating cultures across space, time, and circumstance? Although still in its very early stages, this study of Tejana farmworkers reveals that the act of translating, and the corollary rites that working-class womanchild translators passed through, challenges current feminist theories about consciousness, identity, choice, power, and the politics of culture.

## Age 10: La Escuela

*"Dile que venimos con Doña Chelo para averiguar porqué espulsaron a Mariquita."*

*"Si, y dile que..."*

*The door opens, and the principal comes out, asking "Who is Mrs. Rodríguez?"*

*I touch Doña Chelo's arm. She looks at me and steps forward with her hand outstretched.*

*"We can't have all these Mexican kids disrupting our school."*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice?" Doña Chelo asks.*

*"If this is Marrria Rodriguez's mother tell her that her daughter bit the school nurse, and we had to expel her."*

*"Dile que Mariquita no tiene piojos. Que soy muy limpia—cada noche caliente tinas de agua y baño a todos mis muchachos y los mando muy limpiecitos a la escuela. Y a Mariquita le hago sus trenzas cada mañana. Por qué le echaron todo ese polvo tan apestoso? Dile que la asustaron y la humillaron."*

*"Doña Chelo says her family is very clean. She heats water every night for baths and sends her children to school clean every day. She braids Mariquita's hair every morning. Why did you pour that ugly powder on her? You scared Mariquita and hurt her."*

*"Tell her that we do this every year in March when all you kids from the camps start coming in. Tell her that the lice powder is not harmful and that the school nurse tries not to get it in their eyes or mouth. There was no reason for Marrria to cry and scream like she*

*did. And then when the nurse tried to hold her down, she screamed even louder and bit and kicked and hit our poor nurse. Tell her she should send her children to school clean and neat. And she should teach her children to behave, to respect school authorities."*

*"Qué dice? Qué dice? Cuando puede regresar Mariquita a sus clases? Cómo puede aprender si me la espulsan? Yo no quiero que se queden burros como nosotros, que no nos admitían a las escuelas en Tejas. Dile Nenita. Dile."*

*"Les estoy diciendo, Doña Chelo. Les estoy diciendo."*



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**Voz editor's note:** Complete footnotes are cited throughout the article and are available through the Esperanza office upon request for interested readers. Space constraints do not allow us to print them in this issue of *La Voz* as an accompaniment to Dr. Castañeda's writing.

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Chicana feminist historian Antonia I. Castañeda was born in Crystal City, Texas, was raised in farm labor camps in the State of Washington, and now lives in San Antonio. She became interested in history as a child when she realized that the history of people like her family and her community, Mexicans and farmworkers, were not included in the history books she read in school. Castañeda, who received her Ph.D. in U.S. History from Stanford University, has taught in the Chicana/o Studies Department and the Women's Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and in the Department of History at the University of Texas at Austin. Currently, she is completing a book manuscript, a social and cultural history of mestizas in colonial Alta Californianas, working in a bilingual edition of nineteenth-century Californiana narratives, and a cultural history of Tejana farmworkers.

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