

OUR EDUCATION WILL NOT SAVE US: A Testimonialista's Tale of the Violence of Value

Shantel Martinez

I am a testimonialista.

Here to let loose my wounded tongue and to share my story as I know I am not alone in these experiences. Here to triage the lacerations enacted through the violence of value. Here to (re)claim conversations on the shifting terrains of our bodies. To illuminate the words of Trinh Min-ha from *Woman, Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*: “The story is older than my body, my mother’s, my grandmother’s. For years we have been passing it on so that it may live, shift, and circulate” (1989, 137).

I have shared this story a hundred times, and each time I search it for evidence of my fault. The evitable words from my mother, what *did you do* to get treated like that? The internal colonialism trying to flex its muscles through guilt, shame, and the sprinkle of doubt. Maybe I am just being sensitive, like they are saying? Maybe I am just making this a bigger deal than it really is. Maybe, just maybe. But we all know it’s bullshit. Just like it was bullshit when she, the white tenured female faculty member, asked if I was the nanny and if I could also pick up her children. Yes, it was bullshit.

See, it all started out with a favor. A well-intentioned favor that we all know paves the roads to hell. Another Latina faculty friend of mine had recently experienced a devastating car accident and asked if I could please help her by driving her daughter to a tutoring session. As her neighbor and friend, I happily obliged, knowing that if I were in the same position with a broken

arm and bruised ribs, she would easily return the favor. And so on that sunny July 2015 day, I arrived in my black-and-white striped sundress and strappy sandals to pick up her daughter. Walking through the kitchen, I greeted my friend and the strange white woman whom I had met before, helping her type up article revisions. I asked my friend how long the session was and where to take her daughter. But the conversation took a quick turn for the worse, when the white woman excitedly asked the dreaded words: “Aren’t you the nanny? Do you mind if you also pick up my children?” Not ready for those racist and presumptive words to be shared in such a moment, my tongue froze in shock. Luckily, my friend, even in her exhausted state, immediately reprimanded the white tenured faculty member: “THAT IS DR. MARTINEZ—How dare you speak to her in such a way?” The white woman’s eyes quickly lowered to the ground and she mustered the most embarrassed, “I am sorry.” I took my friend’s daughter to tutoring and later dropped her off after the session, still reeling from the experience.

“What should I have said?”

“Why did you think that of me?”

“Why did my friend have to distinguish me with the PhD in order to have value in her eyes?”

Over and over again, I asked myself these questions. And of course, my mother’s words, *What did I do to be treated in such a way?* But the answers all came back to one source—my body.

It was then that the flood of memories broke open the gates of silence and shame. Three days prior to that event, while at a Banana Republic shopping for my own clothes, a cup of coffee and my car keys in my hand, having a

different older white woman asking me to open a dressing room for her. A case of mistaken identity, she remarked. Another “I’m sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

The incident on a flight from an interview for a deanship at a select liberal arts college. Sitting and talking to fellow woman of color who also worked at the institution. Us laughing and sharing our experience, only to be interrupted by the white woman sitting in 3A. “How do you know each other?” I respond that I am in town interviewing for an assistant dean of students position. Her eyes grow suspicious. “You don’t even look old enough to have a PhD.” The fellow woman of color goes silent—sending the “you got to be kidding me” look. “Well, I obtained my PhD when I was twenty-nine.” The white woman still in disbelief, “Oh, I’m sorry.” Another coded moment entrenched in the politics of my not looking like someone with a PhD—not looking like a professor. *What was it about my body?*

The numerous times during my twenties being asked while at Sephora and other retail shops to go fetch lipsticks and clothes for white women. I have learned to never wear black while going there. More mistaken identities. More “I am sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

The time in graduate school when a landlord mistook me for the house cleaner instead of a tenant and then asked me if I would like a job as his house cleaner. Another case of mistaken identity.

More “I am sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

The time when I was sixteen at a grocery store with my little brother who was five, when two white women very loudly exclaimed, “Hispanics be having children younger and younger these days.” Another case of mistaken identity.

Another “I am sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

The numerous times in high school that I was required to show proof of my enrollment in honors and AP courses. That it was not a registration mistake and that I belonged in those classes. Another case of mistaken identity. More “I am sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

The various times in my childhood when my white father’s friends asked if I was some other man’s child since I didn’t possess the same blonde hair and blue eyes. Another case of mistaken identity. More “I am sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

Where even two weeks ago a male Latinx student tried “putting me in my place” by bringing up my recently graduated undergraduate white female program coordinator, whom he assumed was the faculty member and not me, with the PhD behind the name—why was it easier for him to assume she was the faculty member and not I? Another case of mistaken identity. Another “I am sorry.” *What was it about my body?*

What was it about my body? This body. This ambiguously brown body.

Since I was young I have known that our education will not save us. When I walk down the street, people do not know or assume that I am a doctor. No, they see this body and do not know what to think of it or where to place it. My students assume I am a senior in college. Other faculty also assume I am a student. Although many times people say *oh, it is a simple mistake and they didn’t mean any harm*, the truth is there is intent and there is harm. If you did not think I was the help, you would not have approached me. You intended to be *helped*.

But with this conversation regarding “the help”, I am not here to further the divide between the “educated” and the “uneducated”—the “us” versus “them.” To articulate that MY labor constitutes more than my mother’s or father’s who work with their hands. No. These are just artificial borders that keep us “protected” when in fact we are not. That when we walk down the street, people just see our “bodies,” not our lives. This is not an argument to assign asinine socially constructed value to bodies. To produce the same violence to other bodies as those do to my own. No. This is not my intervention. Not the purpose of this testimonio. I am here to question your assumptions. To say no to your sorrys. Because if we are not taken seriously in public space—how are our bodies read within the classroom?

I know this is not a case of mistaken identity. Even if I cannot prove it.

Keep your apologies. I don't want them.

References

Minh-Ha, Trinh. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

