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## Los Intersticios: Recasting Moving Selves

Evelyn Alsultany

*Ethnicity in such a world needs to be recast so that our moving selves can be acknowledged. . . . Who am I? When am I? The questions that are asked in the street, of my identity, mold me. Appearing in the flesh, I am cast afresh, a female of color—skin color, hair texture, clothing, speech, all marking me in ways that I could scarcely have conceived of.*

—Meena Alexander (66)

I'm in a graduate class at the New School in New York City. A white female sits next to me and we begin "friendly" conversation. She asks me where I'm from. I reply that I was born and raised in New York City and return the question. She tells me she is from Ohio and has lived in New York for several years. She continues her inquiry: "Oh . . . well, how about your parents?" (I feel her trying to map me onto her narrow cartography; New York is not a sufficient answer. She analyzes me according to binary axes of sameness and difference. She detects only difference at first glance, and seeks to pigeonhole me. In her framework, my body is marked, excluded, not from this country. A seemingly "friendly" question turns into a claim to land and belonging.) "My father is Iraqi and my mother Cuban," I answer. "How interesting. Are you a U.S. citizen?"

I am waiting for the NYC subway. A man also waiting asks me if I too am Pakistani. I reply that I'm part Iraqi and part Cuban. He asks if I am Muslim, and I reply that I am Muslim. He asks me if I am married, and I tell him I'm not. In cultural camaraderie he leans over and says that he has cousins in Pakistan available for an arranged marriage if my family so desires. (My Cubanness, as well as my own relationship to my cultural identity, evaporates as he assumes that Arab plus Muslim equals arranged marriage. I can identify: he reminds me of my Iraqi relatives and I know he means well.) I tell him that I'm not interested in marriage but thank him for his kindness. (I accept his framework and respond accordingly, avoiding an awkward situation in which he realizes that I am not who he assumes I am, offering him recognition and validation for his [mis]identification.)

I am in a New York City deli waiting for my bagel to toast. The man behind the counter asks if I'm an Arab Muslim (he too is Arab and Muslim). I reply that yes, I am by part of my father. He asks my name, and I say, "Evelyn." In utter disdain, he tells me that I could not possibly

be Muslim; if I were truly Muslim I would have a Muslim name. What was I doing with such a name? I reply (after taking a deep breath and telling myself that it's not worth getting upset over) that my Cuban mother named me and that I honor my mother. He points to the fact that I'm wearing lipstick and have not changed my name, which he finds to be completely inappropriate and despicable, and says that I am a reflection of the decay of the Arab Muslim in America.

I'm on an airplane flying from Miami to New York. I'm sitting next to an Ecuadorian man. He asks me where I'm from. I tell him. He asks me if I'm more Arab, Latina, or American, and I state that I'm all of the above. He says that's impossible. I must be more of one ethnicity than another. He determines that I am not really Arab, that I'm more Latina because of the camaraderie he feels in our speaking Spanish.

I am in Costa Rica. I walk the streets and my brown skin and dark hair blend in with the multiple shades of brown around me. I love this first-time experience of blending in! I walk into a coffee shop for some café con leche, and my fantasy of belonging is shattered when the woman preparing the coffee asks me where I'm from. I tell her that I was born and raised in New York City by a Cuban mother and an Arab father. She replies, "Que eres una gringa."

I am shocked by the contextuality of identity: that my body is marked as gringa in Costa Rica, as Latina in some U.S. contexts, Arab in others, in some times and spaces not adequately Arab, or Latina, or "American," and in other contexts simply as *other*.

My body becomes marked with meaning as I enter public space.<sup>1</sup> My identity fractures as I experience differing dislocations in multiple contexts. Sometimes people otherize me, sometimes they identify with me. Both situations can be equally problematic. Those who otherize me fail to see a shared humanity and those who identify with me fail to see difference; my Arab or Muslim identity negates my Cuban heritage. Identification signifies belonging or home, and I pretend to be that home for the mistaken person. It's my good deed for the day (I know how precious it can be to find a moment of familiarity with a stranger). The bridge becomes my back as I feign belonging, and I become that vehicle for others, which I desire for myself. Although it is illusory, I do identify with the humanity of the situation—the desire to belong in this world, to be understood. But the frameworks used to (mis)read my body, to disconnect me, wear on me. I try to develop a new identity. What should I try to pass for next time? Perhaps I'll just say I'm Cuban to those who appear to be Arab or South Asian. A friend suggests I say I'm an Italian from Brooklyn. I wonder if I could successfully pass for that. Ethnicity needs to be recast so that our moving selves can be acknowledged.

*They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.*

—Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Prieta" (205)

*This Bridge Called My Back* revolutionized how we saw ourselves as women of color. Our experiences—unacknowledged by the dominant culture and by feminist, ethnic, and/or queer movements—were finally named. *This Bridge* insisted on a theory of the flesh through which to bridge the contradictions in our lives: "We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words" (Moraga, 23). *Bridge* authors powerfully addressed the multiple displacements women of color often experience, or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "los intersticios: 'Alienated from her mother culture,' 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (*Borderlands*, 20). Many multiethnic women identify strongly with this experience of being alienated in different ways from our various communities, trapped in a space of dislocation. Our complex selves can't be acknowledged as unified and whole.

When we're not acknowledged as complex unitary subjects, we become caught in los intersticios, haciendo caras to get by. Lisa Suhair Majaj, born to a Palestinian father and a white American mother, growing up in Lebanon and Jordan, has spent much of her life in los intersticios: "I learned to live as if in a transitional state, waiting always for the time that we would go to Palestine, to the United States, to a place where I would belong. But trips to Iowa and to Jerusalem taught me that once I got there, 'home' slipped away inexplicably materializing again just beyond reach. If a sense of rootedness was what gave life meaning, as my parents' individual efforts to ward off alienation implied, this meaning seemed able to assume full import only in the imagination" ("Boundaries," 71). Majaj's lived experiences are not mapped out; there are no ready frameworks to understand her identity as complex and simultaneously Arab and American. She never felt like she fully belonged anywhere and found herself searching for "home," a space of belonging. Yet she recurrently experienced belonging as deferment: "In my experience cultural marginality has been among the most painful of alienations. My childhood desire, often desperate, was not so much to be a particular nationality, to be American or Arab, but to be wholly one thing or another: to be *something* that I and the rest of the world could understand, categorize, label predict" (79, author's emphasis).

We carry this pain with us as we live in los intersticios. To "belong," we must fragment and exclude particular parts of our identity. Dislocation results from the narrow ways in which the body is read, the rigid frame-

works imposed on the body in public space. At the end of the day, I'm tired of wearing masks, being misunderstood, projected upon, otherized, erased. "I am tired of being afraid to speak who I am: American and Palestinian, not merely half one thing and half of another, but both at once—and in that inexplicable melding that occurs when two cultures come together, not quite either, so that neither American nor Arab find themselves fully reflected in me, nor I in them" (Majaj, "Boundaries," 68). Identity must be reconceptualized so that we can speak our own identities as we live and interpret them in multiple contexts. But how can we create a space for the articulation of multiethnic identities as unitary and whole rather than fragmented and dislocated?

If we change the reading/framework/lens, we can transform dislocation into location. We must reconstruct "belonging" to embrace the experiences of all human beings. As Adrian Piper (a light-skinned African-American woman who grew up in los intersticios, alienated from the black community for her light skin complexion and alienated from the white community for her blackness) has stated, "the racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately. But then, accuracy was never their purpose" (110).

Racial categories' purpose has usually been geopolitical. In "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew," Ella Shohat discusses how today's dominant frameworks do not account for her identity as an Arab Jew and illustrates the ways in which these categories have been recently constructed as antithetical. Such frameworks have a political function. For her grandmother's generation and for hundreds of prior generations, Jewishness was inextricably linked to Arabness; they were not binary categories but logically linked: an Arab could be Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or any other faith. It was when she arrived in Israel from Iraq (as a refugee) that her grandmother had to learn such imposed constructed distinctions. New cartographies were created within which her identity became dislocated: "For Middle Easterners, the operating distinction had always been 'Muslim,' 'Jew,' and 'Christian,' not Arab versus Jew. The assumption was that 'Arabness' referred to a common shared culture and language, albeit with religious differences." In the U.S. context this binarism between Arab and Jew operates, allowing for the narration of "a singular Jewish memory, i.e., a European one."

Shohat's experience points to the political nature of categorization. Meanings attached to identities shift not only over time and space but also according to political circumstance. That such meanings change indicates that we can alter them. We can create a new cartography. An inability to conceptualize multiethnic persons reflects a colonial ideology of categorization and separation based on a "pure blood" criteria—a system con-

structed for the white colonists to maintain power. Rigid racial categories keep us separate. Multiethnic identity comes as a surprise and a danger within this framework as people attempt to place us, to make sense within the schemas available for understanding people and the world. Our identities transgress the constructed categories and become threatening. As Piper explains, "These incidents and others like them had a peculiar cognitive feel to them, as though the individuals involved felt driven to make special efforts to situate me in their conceptual mapping of the world, not only by naming or indicating the niche in which they felt I belonged, but by seeking my verbal confirmation of it . . . [an attempt to] locate me within the rigid confines of [their] stereotype of black people" (83).

I seek to decolonize these essentialized frameworks, so that I can move through public space without strategizing a performance, selecting a mask for each scenario. I want to expand los intersticios, creating a space for us all in our multiplicities to exist as unified subjects. It is a nonessentialist way of relating that creates a space to articulate multiple identifications and unlimited interpretations of those dimensions. This new space begins with a question: Ask me who I am. Don't project your essentialisms onto my body and then project hatred because I do not conform to your notions of who I'm supposed to be. There is no essentialized blueprint. Opening up the possibility of articulating the variety of ways we experience and negotiate our identities benefits everyone, not just the multiethnic. Recasting our moving selves begins with an openness and a willingness to listen, which leads to dialogue.

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1. Although such episodes are not exclusive to "public space," I will not be dealing with the complex dynamics of "private space" in this piece.

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## Gallina Ciega: Turning the Game on Itself

Leticia Hernández-Linares

*In the large lot full of weeds and dust, where the tree that sometimes gave us shade watched us play, we would spin. ¡Gallina! ¡Ciega! ¡Gallina! ¡Ciega! When my friend from down the street would tie the scarf around*

*my eyes, all I could see were patches of dust on the sides of my shoes. Hands stretched out looking for an arm, the edge of a shirt—not knowing exactly where I might step, I learned early that if I tried to lift my lids, purple and black spots would poke through my lashes and map out the darkness in which I had to find my friends.*

You have to lunge toward the sounds. When you play Gallina Ciega (Blind Hen), you are blindfolded and spun around, and then you try to catch the other kids singing out "¡Gallina! ¡Ciega! ¡Gallina! ¡Ciega!" Behind the noise of the Hollywood freeway, I remember, girls, boys, running around me, light, dark, black hair, red hair, migrants, speakers of more than one language. We saw our differences, but more important to us as children were the things that brought us together: escaping the day, the neighborhood violence, and the economic struggle around us. Close your eyes and learn to see through your mind, through your other senses.

I later played this game as an adult during a summer of bilingual recreational activities with girls from migrant Mexican communities and working-class white families. At a K-6 community center in Santa Barbara, these girls ran with me in those same circles. Barely aware of the categories "migrant," "Mexican," "bilingual," "monolingual," "white," into which they were being molded, these girls broke out of their familiarity to learn new words and games, and make new friends. This game that urges us to look for each other's voices, to seek others in their words and not simply in their color, culture, gender assignment, helped these girls move toward a bridge, a common meeting ground. As for myself, the game's simple lessons have been difficult to appreciate. I am still trying to open my eyes in the purple darkness of my blindfold and my steps are slow and unsure.

### La Gallina Ciega Plays Hide and Seek

In 1994, while I worked with the girls in Santa Barbara, I was living a huge contradiction. I played a different kind of game with myself, and tried to fit into a mold that made me just like everyone else. I mainly interacted with Mexican and Chicana/o communities, and my work was exciting, but difficult, as I was often silent about my Salvadoran-ness for fear it would change people's attitudes toward me. Only when asked, which was almost never, did I explain that no, I was not Mexican. I dreaded the confusion, surprise, suspicion, alienation which claiming that difference often unleashed. Too many times I had been forced to contend with folks entangled in the cracked mirror games of "who is the most authentic of them all." I didn't care to fight about identity issues, but I did allow the narrow-mindedness of a few to keep me silent. It was important for me that the Santa Barbara community know that shared experiences had