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Mux Critical Praxis in Creative Writing and Literatures

Claudia Morales, Dominican University of California

Abstract

The piece explains the coinage of "*mux* critical praxis" as an example of how critical ethnic studies approaches open possibilities of incorporating indigenous philosophical methodologies to our mentorships and within our classrooms, serving as an axis to teaching Latinx Literatures and Creative Writing. I suggest there is a pitfall in the idealized belief that the study of literature and the act of writing *per se* and in and for themselves, create forms of resistance to racial capitalist projects of erasure. Frequently, this idealization of literature and the practice of writing fail to interrogate how the effects of colonization and racism limit and erode creativity itself. The creative essay departs from a creative autoethnography where I explore my own growth and configuration as a Mexican writer and the ethnic recooking that transforms my own wiring. I posit the *mux* critical practice as a method of re-rooting and a pedagogical tool, I suggest that as we restore, re-root, and remember, we develop students' creativity and allow them to liberate their capacity to imagine and transgress.

Keywords: Re-rooting, Creative Writing, pedagogical tools, indigenous philosophical methodologies

1. Mux

I walk to my classroom carrying my cup of green tea, my computer and the books I will teach. I feel an emptiness in my stomach, and I struggle to hold the marker because my hands are sweaty and cold. I feel insecure teaching literature because I generally get asked when my novels and fiction books will be translated to English.

In the anglosettler stolen land I am not yet a writer.
In anglosettler stolen land I am sometimes a ghost of myself.
If my book is not published in English, it's "less of a book."

Those who ask, never fail to make a gesture of disappointment when I say my books are published in Spanish and I don't plan to write one in English. I wonder why it has never occurred to them that they could, in fact, learn Spanish. I pause. I imagine I am back in the river where I learned to swim. Tiny fish swim around me, silver threads floating in the water. The river holds me. I find my *mux*, my secret path, back to my center.

I didn't always want to be a writer, but I always wanted to tell stories.

I was born in the late 1980s in Chiapas, southern Mexico, during a turbulent time of economic hardship and political conflict. As the daughter of a communist teacher and activist who was a member of the Chiapas teaching union CNTE, an organization that was in open confrontation with the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), we lived like many other families from the union, surviving and navigating political persecution. During those years of hiding and forever moving, oral stories were my safe place.

Back then, I had no role models in female writers, but I did have role models in women telling vivid stories. Before bedtime, my grandmother would narrate stories from the Afro-Zapotec tradition that she would wrap up by saying "*Colorin, colorado el que no se duerma se queda pegado.*" My favorite story was *tío conejo y tío coyote*[1], where *tío conejo* constantly outsmarts *tío coyote* showing how wittiness and planning can outwit force. My first literature emerged from a plurality of cultures, in dialogue throughout centuries, it emerged from local knowledges alive in the south of Mexico that trained my awareness to the world in the plural, but I could not see it at the time, because I was trained not to see it, nor taught to evaluate it or name it.

I am a "Ladina" and was raised as a mestiza in a middle-class family in Tuxtla, Gutierrez, a modern capital city. I have campesino roots, ethnically Afro-Zapotec and Mam from Guatemala, but shaped by the privilege of not being racialized as indigenous in a hierarchical and often cruel society like the south of Mexico.

I do not officially belong to a contemporaneous indigenous nation or share their collective pains and straggles, and I do not intend to profit or benefit from naming myself as part of an indigenous group when my own upbringings as a mestiza is built over their othering and suffering. Yet I am a Ladina, *hija de la desindianizacion*, a daughter of the painful and violent process of erasure and des-indianization, and I walk as such, I name it, I sit with it. I stand on these muddy waters on the riverbank, my weight pushes my heels down, the warm water surrounds my ankles, subtly and possessively.

Historically, in Central America, "Ladinos" are the product of a colonial society in which west Africans and the heterogenous indigenous nations were brought into contact, and they integrated, loved and shared life, forming vibrant and thriving communities that later, under the homogenizing umbrella of mestizaje erased the multiplicity of their origins. Mestizaje in Chiapas is rooted in a desired and fictional Hispanization. Historically the Hispanic population in the region was minimal (Chiapas was geographically challenging and mostly inaccessible), but the emerging Mexican identity founded on the mythic union between Spain and the Mexica was imposed on local populations and bore few, if any, traces of African or local indigenous ancestry such as Zapotec, Mam or Zoque. This complex societal context shaped me and to be able to write I had to name and decipher this method of settler colonialist violence.

My journey as a racialized writer is what inspires me to theorize about the radical possibilities of ethnic studies approaches in the study and praxis of literature. However, this clarity did not come naturally, it was a journey, a challenging and sometimes painful search for meaning and belonging.

[1] This story was illustrated by Francisco Toledo and published by Fondo de Cultura Economica in 2016.

In my early beginnings as a storyteller, my love of stories led me to write my own, which people began to call "cuentos" or short fictions. I took these stories to literary workshops at the local public library. There, I was fortunate to study with renowned writers who came from Mexico City to Chiapas, as part of cultural campaigns that emerged from peace projects following the Zapatista uprising in 1994.

These writers from *Gran Tenochtitlan* not only guided me with expanding my reading portfolio but also trained me with social, cultural, and symbolic capital. For example, they taught me not to constantly apologize, they seemed annoyed by my overpoliteness. They would ask me not to say "*mande*" or to address them as "*usted*." All these habits were considered "provincial." During my female upbringing in Chiapas, I was inculcated with an extremely accommodating, even ceremonial manner of treating others, which I still retain by choice, but which I now understand were undesirable traits for what a writer is supposed to be: a mestizo intellectual, a *letrado*. Mestizo intellectuals don't apologize or address their peers as "*usted*."

Inspired by the male writers I admired and desired to emulate, I arrived at *La gran Tenochtitlan* in 2006, or as my writing mentor referred to the capital: "the inhabitable but inevitable Mexico City," he said, while also adding that "studying literature would not make you a writer, Claudia, but living, *really* living will" he promised.

I thus arrived with the goal of studying Hispanic Language and Literature at UNAM and the desire of living, *really living*, and despite my own insecurities I thrived in that magnificent city, I became one with its chaos, the rainy days, the cold mornings. Yet in my own writing I often felt lost. Before, in the world of oral storytelling I never felt confused or frustrated, I knew the sounds and rhythms of my collective stories. But it was not only in my own writing that I felt confused; it was also in my understanding of literature as a scholar in training.

At UNAM, the literature curriculum is clearly organized in the milieu of *mestizo* founding myth. We began our studies with Pre-Hispanic Literature and its counterpart, Medieval Literature; during this period, we spend an insane amount of time studding the Cid Campeador (a favorite of Franco, the dictator who revitalized the study of the manuscript in Spain during his ruling).

Pre-Hispanic Mexican Literature was studied as equally important to Spanish literature, but there was a lack of curricula engaging with contemporary indigenous literature, despite its vitality and growth. After this initial stage of training, we moved on to 19th-century literature and concluded with Contemporary Mexican and Spanish literature. This cemented an overview of an official literary canon in Mexico, which is closely aligned to the *mestizo* founding myth.

During my first years I aimed to be a *letrado*, a mestizo writer and by the end of my life in Mexico City almost seven years later, I managed to blend in and in many ways thrived within the literary environment of young promising writers trained at UNAM and supported by highly selective institutional writing fellowships. I learned how to move, how to talk, how to laugh. Yet I could feel my writing suffering from it. I was aware that I needed to craft a language that would allow me to tell the stories within me, the real ones, the ones that mattered to me. Yet I could not find the language to do so. I was hurting, mentally and physically.

Literature has the power of revealing your most intimate personal shortcomings.

To be able to tell the stories I was craving to share, something had to change.

Following my inner voice, I decided to return to Chiapas to study Anthropology. It was during this time that I returned to my father's hometown in the highlands of Chiapas. My decision shocked city friends but not my family. My family explained it simply and clearly: "she is finding her *mux*, she is in search of her *mux*" and they supported me, they knew I was going back to our center/home because I needed to.

In Hoja Blanca, a small rural enclave in the Sierra Madre of the Soconusco, with no more than 300 inhabitants, most of them elders, I learned to listen with my whole body and flesh. I had no running water and spotty electricity, yet I had a waterfall in my grandfather's land next to *la milpa* that his own grandfather harvested when he came from Guatemala. I would follow the stream, and I would take long walks in the cafetales, alongside the workers. We would walk and talk for hours, harvesting *pacayas*, and *mazorcas*, we would then gather around the *fogón* to tell stories and drink *atole*. I learned to walk in the mountains bending the knees slightly but firmly and I also learned to sleep accompanied by the sounds of the mountain and the hauling of the spirits.

The *Mux* called me, and I responded to its calling.

In literature, the most important advice any writer would give you is to write with honesty and from a place of honesty, for racialized writers from Latin America that necessarily means to excavate how racisms and patriarchy impacted our bodies and our ways of perceiving the world and shaped our own stories and literary legacies.

In the search for my *mux*, I was confronted by the violence of forgetting. I was confronted by our family history of hiding and mutilating essential parts of our memory. I was also challenged by our own violence to others and to ourselves. In Hoja Blanca in communion with our stories of violence and survival, I was able to see past and present with clarity. I realized that without knowing it I had been running. We had been running, escaping, hiding, surviving, and in that running we forgot. But we always kept the key close to our hearts:

El Mux es el ombligo, el centro, el hogar
The *mux* is the center, what ties you to earth, home.
It pulls you back to your mother's womb.

One day after walking in the mountain, I came back to my grandfather's house and took a cold shower with the fresh water from *la pila* that contains the water from the waterfall. My body came to life as never before. I was back in the space of no time, the space of the stories from my childhood, from there I was able to *see* what I had never seen before, beyond my historical wounds, beyond the never-ending fear inoculated in my bones for centuries. For the first time, I was able to *see* beyond the fog, and I was able to write the stories I needed to tell.

In the historical clarity of my own being, I found my most honest writing. It was through an ethnic reckoning with my own history that I was able to locate myself within my literary legacies and was able to craft the language I needed to evoke to conjure the stories I wanted to tell. I had to

deconstruct who I was taught to be; I had to challenge what I was raised to aspire to, and I at last had an answer to the calling of my blood and spirit.

2. *Mux* Critical Praxis as a Methodology

This opening text of this essay in the form of an autoethnography, examines my literary process as shaped and transformed by the "*mux* critical praxis" with the aim of describing and highlighting the possibilities that critical ethnic studies approaches offer to the study and practice of literature. I propose an approach to writing as a way of being and knowing.

Mux in the mam/maya language means *ombligo* in Spanish or belly bottom in English. Across the cultures of Mexico, anthropologists and scholars (Gonzales, 2012; Rosales, 2007) have documented the importance of the umbilical cord and different rituals and ceremonies to connect the newborns to the land and the community. For the mam people of Guatemala and Chiapas in Mexico, the connection is conjured through the ceremony of *awal mux*, "siembra del ombligo" o "siembra del niño" meaning the ritual of "sowing of the child."

In this ritual, the family and the community plant the child's *ombligo* to the land; this could be to a specific tree or water stream with the guidance of the *chiman* or elder. My family's sacred place was under a *ceiba* tree marked by crosses made of *ocote*. Growing up the concept of the *mux* was passed down to me in a casual yet persistent way: through memories of these rituals practiced by my grandparents. My parents did not perform the ritual for us; they were at the time young college graduates and felt alienated from these practices. But they talked about them and constantly referred to "finding your *mux*" as synonymous with finding yourselves or finding balance. Through my creative autoethnography, I attempt to center my experience as an author trained in Mexico, and the legacies of colonialism in my own body to show how the concept of "*mux*" allowed me to write from a place of equilibrium and connection with my own history.

3. *Mux* Critical Praxis: Tools for the Classroom

To ground Mux critical praxis in the classroom, I found it essential to embrace plurality and polyphony in all their forms. One of my first steps was to suggest a change of course title at the university where I taught the course: instead of *Latin American Literature*, we adopted *Latinx Literatures*. For this change to be possible, I must highlight the openness and willingness of the institution, they not only facilitated but encouraged any changes I believed necessary, trusting in my insight and expertise. This shift signaled to students from the outset that the course engages with a plurality of visions and voices. The syllabus incorporates film and scholarship alongside literary texts and traditional oral storytelling, and it requires students to take a hands-on approach to their learning. For example, I ask the students to document *leyendas* or *testimonios* from their relatives, and we engage with them as literary sources.

While teaching Latinx Literatures one of the biggest challenges is locating compelling translations and up-to-date reading materials, it is difficult to find translations of contemporary works written by authors who write in Spanish or Portuguese and are not in publishing conglomerates. This combines with the fact that bilingualism does not translate into biliteracy, thus, Hereditary Spanish speakers might struggle with reading in Spanish even if their speaking and listening skills are strong and fluid.

It is important to emphasize that the decline in bilingualism and literacy is not because of a lack of interest or individual responsibility, but the result of racism and racist policies. As the authors of *Language is Not the Problem*, *Racism is the Problem* eloquently state: "Bilingualism is perceived as a talent for white students and a deficit of students of color" (Flores et al., 2024). According to the authors, the classrooms become microcosmos where elitism and racism are enacted to privilege whiteness.

Racializing the use of Spanish is not arbitrary but a conscious choice aligned with settler colonial projects of "enclosure" to use Sanchez and Pita's coinage (2021). This is not only an attempt to erase Spanish, but also an attack on the speaker's identity, as well as a project against the polyphony and multiplicity of languages and worldviews spoken in the Americas, including *languas originarias* and Native American languages. Hence the plural becomes othered, and the plurality of ontologies as well as the historical exchange among cultures, which has been a natural part of the history of humanity, is reframed as a threat. The project of erasure is not new but a key element of colonialist ideology, that according to Berta Cáseres form the "triad of domination": capitalism, patriarchy and racism. As teachers and scholars of Latinx literatures, it remains important to understand the importance of our work in nourishing a space where students engage with the plurality of their own worldviews, fostering a sense of belonging.

In practice, we must navigate these limitations with creativity, using films as a source. For instance, during the first two weeks of class, students read a range of texts, including selections from the *Chilam Balam* and the *Popol Vuh*, the introduction and first chapter of *Indigenous Intellectuals*, Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Lati*, *Lust for Gold*, *Lust for Silver*, and two poems by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. They also engage with two films: *I, the Worst of All* (a biographical film about Sor Juana) and *Embrace of the Serpent*. To conclude this unit, students collaborate in groups to write and perform a short play that incorporates one character from each text. For instance, the *tlamatini* from *Indigenous Intellectuals* alongside Sor Juana herself. Their performance must respond to the guiding question: What is Latin America?

By incorporating theater as a pedagogical tool, I draw on long-standing traditions of performance and corporeality in learning, rooted in Indigenous practices across the Hemisphere. This embodied, dialogic approach allows students not only to read and analyze the texts but also to inhabit them, embodying and grounding knowledge.

Finally, I use creative autoethnographies with ethnic reflections in the classroom, prompting them to examine their own histories through a critical approach to the study and practice of literature. The final essay consists of a 3-page creative autoethnography, which can be presented in either written form or performed, where students reflect on their own life journeys and approach Latinx literature as a way of being and remembering.

Patrisia Gonzales (2012) proposes the term "Post-Indian Stress Disorder" to describe the embodied experiences of historical trauma among mestizos and indigenous peoples who through the effects of racialization were willingly or unwilling disconnected and alienated from their ancestral "cosmo-logic." The trauma resulting from erasure is a shared experience among racialized writers who, like me, might struggle to find their most "honest" writing, simply because while excavating within ourselves, we are faced by voids in our sense of being and belonging.

In this context I posit the *mux* critical practice as a method of re-rooting and a pedagogical tool that confronts the pitfall of the idealized belief that the study of literature and the act of writing *per se* and in and for themselves, create forms of resistance to racial capitalist projects of erasure. Frequently, this idealization of literature and the practice of writing fail to interrogate how the effects of colonization and racism limit and erode creativity itself. As we restore, re-root, and remember, we develop students' creativity and allow them to liberate their capacity to imagine and transgress.

To finalize, I evoke the words of my writing mentor: "studying literature would not make you a writer, but living, *really* living will." To his words, I add that "really living" for racialized writers starts by naming the process of erasure as a mode of colonization.

What I call the "*mux* critical praxis" serves as an example of how critical ethnic studies approaches open possibilities of incorporating indigenous philosophical methodologies to our mentorships and within our classrooms, because, for literature to be a transformative praxis, it requires deep deconstruction, a becoming that ties writing to the collective and is rooted in the radical fire of honesty. Only then, the act of writing becomes a dialogue with the past and present and a path for liberation.

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