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Sometimes It's Necessary to Break a Few Rules

A Virtual Interview with Yalitza Aparicio

ABSTRACT In October of 2020, the University of Arizona's College of Social and Behavioral Sciences hosted a lecture series called Womanpower. The final lecture was an interview between Michelle Téllez and Yalitza Aparicio—an Indigenous woman, actress, and activist. This interview transcript (originally conducted in Spanish) discusses Aparicio's childhood, her experiences with discrimination, her role in the groundbreaking film *Roma*, and her activism on behalf of domestic workers and Indigenous peoples. In this interview, Téllez highlights issues of Indigenous rights, recognizing how Aparicio's platform can bring visibility to the O'odham land defenders fighting for their sacred lands today, but also to Indigenous peoples fighting for their territories in Mexico, as alluded to in *Roma*. Téllez wanted to recognize the power that is ever-present in the bodies and minds of women workers who create possibilities despite their circumstances, and who maneuver between space and place, languages and cultures as they center homes, both their own and others. She points us to Aparicio's role as a domestic worker to remind us of the silent but ever-present power of women. Téllez connects the interview with her own research and personal experiences growing up along the U.S./Mexico border in the cities of San Diego/Tijuana - where she was witness to the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics of power and exclusion. **KEYWORDS** domestic workers, Indigenous communities, *Roma*, Semilleros, Tlaxiaco, Mexico, Tohono O'odham people, Yalitza Aparicio

Growing up along the US-Mexico border in the cities of San Diego and Tijuana—where I was witness to the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics of power and exclusion—sharply defined who I became as a scholar, writer, teacher, activist, community member, and mother. In my work, I argue that the actual US-Mexico border should not be seen just as a site of passage or crossing but also as a site for exchange, transformation, and possibility. I've observed this possibility in my research about the autonomous community of Maclovio Rojas in Tijuana, Mexico, where transnational community formation and women's leadership are evident in the commitment they have to constructing for themselves what the state would not—their own schools, homes, health centers, and cultural centers. I've also witnessed this in projects of cross-border labor organizing where workers on both sides of the border practice solidarity and mutual support beyond the state and in opposition to the multinational companies that attempt to dictate the conditions of their lives. Their actions demonstrate that power isn't totalizing.

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I see my work as invitation to disrupt normative discourses about the US-Mexico border and to instead offer an alternative framing—one that differs from the rhetoric of invasion, crime, insecurity, violence, and illegality that is popularized in the media. For Indigenous peoples, for example, the border has been an apparatus of genocidal warfare that might be most apparent on the Tohono O’odham nation [located in what is now known as the states of Arizona and Sonora]. O’odham ancestral lands have been cut in half, leaving their families and ways of being divided.

In this interview, as with my own research, I want to bring attention to everyday practices of border crossing, and ask how these differ from the information we are pummeled with in the media—news bytes that render migrants as criminals and border residents as non-existent—a language that is directly tied to a culture that supports increased border enforcement at any cost and with any consequence, including the kidnapping of children and the separation of families. How do we recognize the capacity and will of the human spirit to be defiant in the face of imposing boundaries? How do we show how intersecting *culturas*, geographies, and histories of the borderlands produce realities and experiences that must be named, understood, and recognized? These questions, for me, reflect ways in which we can challenge knowledge production as we democratize knowledge by shaping whose stories are told, how they are told, and what counts as knowledge.

I thought a lot about these issues and this paradox as I was preparing to have a conversation with Yalitza Aparicio. She has been a “first” several times over—educator turned mega movie star, the first Indigenous woman to appear on magazine covers that cater to white and elite audiences, a nominee for an academy award for her first role ever. I think her multiple breakthroughs help us think about power—and womanpower—in a direction a little bit less predictably than one might assume.

INTRODUCTION

Michelle Téllez (MT): Hello from O’odham territories. I am honored to have been offered the closing slot in what has been a wonderful series on womanpower—how it is imagined, contested, wielded, spoken, and today we will think through how it is represented. Learning from so many scholars and how they explore the multiple dimensions of power and its intersections to women’s lives has been illuminating.

I Showed a Somewhat Different Mentality

MT: Yalitza, it is an honor to meet you and to have a conversation with you; someone who has broken several barriers of representation, the first Indigenous woman nominated as Best Actress for an Academy Award in Hollywood, and the first Indigenous woman to be on the cover of several popular magazines. In addition, you are a new Goodwill Ambassador for Indigenous People for UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization]. Your impact has been global.

I remember well when your face began appearing in social media; many in the Chicano/a, Latino/a, and Indigenous communities in the United States saw themselves in you. Something they had never seen before. I love your perspective as a teacher, educator, and now in your role as actress and activist; you continue to educate people about the rights of women and Indigenous people. Even though we are speaking virtually, I welcome you to the territory of the Tohono O’odham people here in Tucson, Arizona.

YALITZA APARICIO (YA): Many thanks for this welcome.

MT: No, [thanks] to you. To start, tell us a little bit about your childhood: where you are from, where you grew up. What memory from your childhood has been your greatest life lesson?

YA: Well, I think of my childhood as completely normal, as it would be for anyone in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. At times we experienced economic hardships or faced difficulties to access certain privileges, or even things that would normally be someone’s right, like education. But, I always felt supported by my parents and I felt the motivation they gave me to continue moving forward, and most of all that they were there, keeping me company along the way. It was a childhood centered around playing games, those that used to be more common among children then. Learning to live among and with other children.

People tell me that despite my young age, I showed a somewhat different mentality about things because I was never that child who loved to watch TV or watch movies. I felt those experiences were somewhat alien to me for the simple fact that I never saw on screen people who looked like me. I believe that feeling led me to focus on my studies and what, for me, felt “real,” such as books, activities among my own people, things that I felt were really accessible, and not things that I would see on screen that made me feel they were unattainable, that I would never be there. This is why they tell me I was a very mature child, not [having] the kind of thinking you typically see among children this age. And this carried through to adolescence as well.

LANGUAGES ARE DOORS TO WISDOM

MT: At what age did you know that you wanted to be a teacher?

YA: I wanted to be a teacher from a very early age. It was one of the games that I always played, to teach a class to my dolls. I liked dolls, they were one of the toys I always had. My dream of teaching began because I had teachers during my school years who inspired me to be like them. I remember very well a teacher in elementary school, and I used to think to myself, “When I grow up I want to be like her . . . I want to give classes, I want to be in front of classroom.” When the time came for me to choose a career, I realized that the inspiration from my teachers had influenced me and I made that decision.

MT: I have also read that during your childhood your parents didn’t teach you Triqui or Mixteco [Indigenous languages of Oaxaca]. How do you think your educational trajectory would have been different if you had learned those Native languages from an early age?

YA: I think it would make it easier for me to move across two languages that are so important to me [Spanish and Native tongues]. I would have had a broader knowledge of two cultures that are so different but yet each one contains its own wealth of knowledge. I understand the conditions why my parents didn't teach me the Native languages, and that was for a reason that still exists today: discrimination. I also know they were overprotective of me, and the reason they did this was to protect me so I would not suffer from this discrimination, that I would have more opportunities. The mindset of many people [in Mexico] is that if you command the Spanish language you will have better employment opportunities. But once you are dominant in Spanish then another expectation is that if you command English then you will have better opportunities. I see all languages as opportunities for growth. Many of the [Indigenous] languages in the various regions of Mexico remain stagnant and sadly people do not see in them as "opportunities for progress." When in fact, these languages are doors to wisdom, to vast sources of knowledge that can help you at a personal level.

MT: Very well said. Could you talk about access in Mexico to bilingual education for Indigenous communities? I understand this was one of the rights guaranteed by the Mexican Constitution since 1917. What does it mean for Native communities to have access to bilingual education? Does it exist or not?

YA: Well, the reality is that in Mexico opportunities for bilingual education [Spanish-Native tongue] are limited. We lack enough curricular materials to teach children in their own Native languages. I have always thought that if it is already complicated for children to grasp certain concepts, then to learn in a language [Spanish] that is not their spoken tongue adds a complication. I think we have a lot of work to do in this area. But of course we know that in the case of Mexico we are talking about a large number of Indigenous languages, and in some cases there are variants within the same language, so that Mixteco, for example, has more than 500 variations. So, I understand that big difficulty, but then again, we would also need to understand the big need to recover these Native languages. In the state of Oaxaca there are situations where the classes in school are 100 percent in Spanish, but the children, outside the school, speak 100 percent of the time in their Native language. We should not have the [school] door or [fence] become the line of this separation. We should find the link between these two worlds and in this way elevate the potential of the children to achieve. But we are far from meeting this goal. My hope is that we continue advancing toward this goal and recognizing the value of these [Native] languages and that we can move from "integration" of [Native] children into the educational system toward a goal of "inclusion."

I Always Dreamed that My Skin Would Become Darker: Racism in Mexico

MT: Very well. You wrote an op-ed that appeared in *The New York Times* in May of this year where you talked about the discrimination you have faced as an Indigenous woman and the lack of representation in movies and media in general. At what age did you realize that the color of your skin affected your experience as a person?

YA: Curiously, I learned it at an age, maybe around eighteen, when I had to rely on supporting myself. When I was applying for jobs to support myself through college.

Up to that point I had just accompanied my mother or father in their jobs. I had not had to seek employment directly. When I was younger, as it turns out, I always dreamed that my skin would become darker . . . because in my childhood I had contact with friends who would come from Mexico's [Caribbean] coast and their skin was darker and their hair curly, and they played amazing basketball, and I wanted to be like them. As a child, I didn't see any disadvantage in having a darker skin color or that it would in any way take away chances for advancing. For me, darker skin was a compliment! I recall an anecdote, maybe I was around six years old, when I thought that by eating chocolate, drinking coffee, or consuming foods that were dark, I would be able to darken my skin. As a child, I was not satisfied with my own color, I wanted it to be darker. I never questioned that it was a good thing.

Sadly, when you leave this bubble of family and childhood, where you feel cared for, and confront social norms, then you realize there are people with many ideas that discriminate against you. As I mentioned earlier, having the experience of applying for a job and being told, "No, because you are too dark, or your appearance is not right," was very hard for me. I looked around and saw people with characteristics that were not very different from mine, same skin color or height, and I would ask myself, so what is the right profile I need to have to sell a product to people who pretty much look like me? It is complicated . . . to realize that even though you are [in Mexico] in this society and in this context with people with similar physical characteristics, that you can't aspire employment because of your physical appearance.

MT: Yes, and the fact is that many people would argue that for the reasons you mention, "racism" as such does not exist in Mexico. But your own success has underscored the prevalent racism against Indigenous people or people of African descent. All legacies from colonialism. Now that you have access to a global platform, through UNESCO, how do you handle this as an opportunity and frustration?

YA: I manage it more as an opportunity to demonstrate to people, my own people, the importance of valuing where we come from. I always try to demonstrate, to change the script, that it is no longer a barrier toward your growth. The fact that you can know one culture and manage yourself in other cultures opens the door for more opportunities. I always try to share this message, and in front of cameras or social media I always try to portray a sense of confidence and the pride I feel for my roots. I try to say, "I am here because I never forgot who I was or where I come from." This has helped me reach this point and it is something all [Indigenous] people should do.

When you learn about your cultural roots, it helps you grow as a person. And I know it is hard to do; you have to confront huge criticism, things that break your heart, but you have to take it as a learning opportunity. Each one of these harsh critiques have taught me something or they have been a motivation to realize we have a way to go to change certain ideas in our society, and all we can do is continue, and continue, and not abandon this effort.

Indigenous Rights and Domestic Workers' Rights

MT: Changing the topic a little, I am also the daughter of a domestic worker, or homemaker. My mother came to the United States in the 1960s from a town called Tomatlan, in the state of Jalisco [Mexico]. Growing up with these experiences helped

shape me in many ways. Tell me how the experiences and wisdom you acquired from your mother helped you play the role of Cleo [in the film *Roma*]:

YA: I believe the character of Cleo helped me understand the work of my mother.

Sometimes as a child of your parents there are many things you miss, maybe because you never experienced them directly. But once I got to study this character and learned about her life, I realized certain things my mother had lived through and understood certain feelings . . . I understood why she loved so much the children she was taking care of, loved them as her own. I understood why she dedicated so much time to that family. I also understood her own needs. Cleo was a character who taught me a lot, left in me a great deal of memories and longings that I will always treasure. And the fact that my mother had been at one point a domestic worker helped me reach a level of sensitivity. It helped me understand why it is required at certain times to face certain things. It was all about learning.

MT: And as an activist you have been able to shine the light on the inequalities that domestic workers face. So much so that in 2019 the Mexican Congress approved unanimously a law that grants rights and benefits to the two million female domestic workers in the country. Could you tell us about these campaigns that you have been able to influence and highlight?

YA: I have had the good fortune to be able to support a number of campaigns. It makes me happy to know that I have not used this platform only to play roles and attend events, but also to raise my voice on behalf of those with less opportunity to be heard. In the case of domestic workers, I have worked really close with Marcelina Bautista, who has been the leading voice on this issue in Mexico. Each time I have had the chance to travel with them, it is interesting to hear how they had spent years trying to win some basic rights and it is now, motivated by this film, that they can finally be heard.

We have also been working on the rights of Indigenous communities, inclusive of education. I try to find any opportunity where I can speak about the needs of these communities that many people just don't know about. I make it a point to study these issues. Now with the pandemic we see that the public response is not addressing all social sectors equally. Many Indigenous communities have no electricity; there are strategies being implemented that do not take these factors into consideration. In both the matter of Indigenous rights and domestic workers rights I have been raising my voice. And in the case of the female workers, I have been making the case to men as well, that it is not a matter of gender war, but about finding equity for all to have rights. These are social movements that while they may appear to address different things, they all have in common the goal of finding a balance to deal with inequality. Everywhere you turn you see examples of discrimination and lack of opportunities.

MT: Coming back to this idea about the work you do with Indigenous communities, you have talked in several interviews about how you obtained this important role of Cleo in the film *Roma*, without formal training as an actress. I would like us to talk about a scene in the movie when your friend Adela asks you if your mother has been displaced from her land, giving us a hint about disputes between the state [Mexican government] and Indigenous communities in Oaxaca. But the movie does not offer

more information, only touches on it. Given the fact that *Roma* has helped to make visible the conditions of Indigenous workers in urban settings, do you have any artistic project or other projects that similarly helps to make visible the struggle of Indigenous people in defense of their lands; for example, the struggles that are taking place against the Mayan Train or Trans-Isthmic Corridor?

YA: Well, we have been trying to learn more about these issues. I have always said that it is not easy to speak about these matters as an outsider. We need to learn more, what are the customs and traditions in these communities, what do they think about these projects, what constitutes support for them, and what doesn't. I read an article about historic sites created by Indigenous communities where unfortunately access is restricted to those same communities. You have to pay to access sites in your own homeland, sites that are not created for their own enjoyment. Learning about these issues is taking up a lot of my time. I recently launched a channel dedicated specifically to study Indigenous life and culture, for example the case of Indigenous textiles—the value and importance of this. These are activities that entail great time and effort by the makers.

There is another project called Semilleros [Seed Planters] that was already in existence that I was able to bring to my own community in Oaxaca. It is for children to learn and pursue their dreams through acting lessons. Nothing like that existed in Tlaxiaco. And at the same time, we are rescuing the use of the Indigenous language; in my region that would be Mixteco. Local teachers are engaged in this effort to preserve the local culture.

MT: How can we learn more about the Semillero project?

YA: Yes, the program exists in various parts of Mexico. In our case it is called Semilleros Tlaxiaco. It is a program that originates from the Mexican Ministry of Culture. In each area the workshops are different, be it music, dance, acting, the focus of each one is based on the resources available in that community, but the goal for all is cultural preservation. A while back, can't remember how many months back exactly, there was a concert that featured all the children from Semilleros from all over Mexico, that demonstrated all the skills the children have acquired and how they have grown over time.

MT: And have you been able to travel to these communities—well, not now—but have you been able to get involved and work in these projects?

YA: Unfortunately, the project launch in Tlaxiaco coincided with the present situation [COVID-19]. We had just gotten started, I visited at the start and then, due to the pandemic, it has become somewhat complicated to visit these sites.

STORIES, MIGRATION, AND BORDERS

MT: Here in Arizona, the US-Mexico border traces a violent line across the Indigenous nation of the Tohono O'odham people, destroying an ancestral crossing point that involves not only families, but also the natural environment, animals, water. From your position as UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Indigenous People, what signs of hope do you see as possible for an immigration policy that is more humane and more in line with the reality faced by those who are displaced?

YA: The topic of immigration, I have always felt it is a very sensitive subject because what we lack as a society is empathy. When I hear comments or see the comments people make on social media, I realize many people do not understand the circumstances that led someone to leave their home in search of opportunities. Fortunately, there are several projects, in terms of films, several movies that put in evidence these stories. When you do not live this experience, of course it would be hard to comprehend. But I feel stories help sensitize people to these realities and to show respect, which is what is needed—to be sensitive about these stories and not judge others without knowing the reasons that led them to leave. I believe before judging or criticizing, and I'm not talking about only those who migrate, but also government officials who make decisions about this. Sadly, many of these stories are heartbreaking. When you hear them, you understand why someone would leave everything behind to start from zero. I wish society at large would show more empathy.

MT: I believe the right to migrate should be understood as a human right. Maybe it would be good to start a campaign that can center that idea. Not only to have empathy, which is very, very important, but also as a right that has existed forever.

YA: I believe many of us have experienced this. I am originally from Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, and now reside in Mexico City. I, too, had to leave the life I had there to seek new opportunities. Everyone, at one point or another, has had to move. I think in some way then we are all migrants.

There Will Be More and We Will Keep Growing

MT: To conclude, I want to ask you, for the students and people watching this interview, for Indigenous young women with dark skin, what hopes or suggestions can you offer so they can move forward? Even though we are living in difficult times, where racism and discrimination have not slowed down, what hope can be offered?

YA: What I can say is you must trust yourself, you must trust the teachers, and physical appearance must not be what limits you. The greatest barrier sometimes is our lack of confidence in our own projects. No one else can do it for you. Sometimes it is necessary to break a few rules or push through barriers. Sometimes you have to keep trying more than once. You must fight for your dreams, and if it turns out you are the “first” in achieving something, there is nothing wrong with that. To the contrary, you must feel happy to be the one. I can say it from experience, being the first Indigenous woman nominated for an Oscar, it can fill you with dread, but on the other hand there is the happiness of knowing that after you, others will follow, and then there will be more, and we will keep growing.

MT: How wonderful. I have learned much from you, Yalitza. Thank you for your time, for your work, and for being that example we all need.

YA: Thanks to you, and to everyone for their time and allowing me this opportunity.