
Listening for Stories in All the Right Places: Narrative and Racial Formation Theory

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“I will tell you something about stories, . . . they are all we have . . .
to fight off illness and death.”

—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

The editors of the *Law & Society Review* bestow a great honor in asking me to reflect on Professor Laura Gómez’s presidential address. They also provide an occasion for significant feelings of pride. I taught Professor Gómez when she was a student at Stanford Law School, and although I claim no responsibility for or influence on her brilliant, passionate, and courageous work, I do claim her as a longtime comrade and friend. I am proud that she is a “squeaky wheel” within your ranks, using the pulpit of the presidential address to remind you of your commitment to inclusion and racial justice, and calling upon all of us to recommit ourselves to serious engagement with race and racism in our research and scholarship. It gives me pride to watch her do this work.

Professor Gómez challenges her colleagues to do more to place race and racism at the center of our scholarly work. She points to several developments making this a crucial time for us to focus on issues of racial justice: a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse nonwhite population, a political retrenchment from the gains in antidiscrimination law achieved by the civil rights movement, and the rise of “postracial” discourse. Moreover, she calls on students of law and society to reconceptualize and “recalibrate” our work on race, and she devotes much of her paper to helping us begin to understand what this might entail and suggesting some first steps we might take in the right direction.

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Law & Society Review, Volume 46, Number 2 (2012)
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Professor Gómez places the theory of social construction at the center of her lesson on how we must adjust our conceptual and methodological frames. She observes coalescence among social scientists around the idea that race is socially constructed, but worries that this consensus around a broad theory of race has done little to change our approach to research agendas and design. If we agree that race is social construction and not biology—if we know that it is contingent, dynamic, and situational rather than fixed—why does so much of social-science research treat race as a readily measurable variable that affects law at various points? Why do we continue to measure race as an independent variable that shapes a particular legal outcome? If we embrace the social constructionist explanation of race, why not treat racism, or its construction, as the object of study—as the focus of our inquiry rather than as a background factor? These questions reveal our unthinking acceptance of biological notions of race. To help us see that empiricists can avoid this trap, Gómez points to several studies that demonstrate the efficacy of methodologies and research design that incorporate the scientific consensus that race is socially constructed.

So far so good, but I am not entirely satisfied with what appears to be Professor Gómez's explanation for the disconnection she observes between social scientists' embrace of social construction theory and their simultaneous failure to make racism the central object of study. Gómez suggests that we adjust our research methodology to incorporate the theoretical insights of Omi, Winant, and other critical race scholars, as if the primary limitation of the work she critiques lay in the design of the research, the choice of independent variable, or the treatment of race as if it were fixed rather than contingent. While this criticism of method accurately describes the divergence between theory and practice, I am not persuaded that it explains why so many skilled and committed scholars would "carelessly" ignore a rather obvious inconsistency between theory and method.

Rather, I believe the dissonance Gómez observes originates in our incomplete understanding of racial formation theory or, more likely, in our reluctance to embrace the full implication of what I take to be that theory's central lesson. Racial formation theory's fundamental insight is not just that race is a social and legal construction rather than a fixed biological phenomenon. Race is constructed for a political purpose. For this reason, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have given the name "racial projects" to the discursive and cultural initiatives that contest, organize, and explain the distribution of political and material resources along racial lines (Omi & Winant 1994: 56; Harris 1996). The ideology, practice, and structure of white supremacy construct race to subordinate and exploit people of color and to justify that subordination (Powell 1997).

The social meanings of race are complex and unstable because political actors create and contest those meanings (Omi & Winant 1994). As Gómez suggests, the increasing racial diversity of the United States may mean that old models of racial identity based on a white/black paradigm are ill suited to explain current racial realities. While progressive antiracist movements have resisted white supremacy's constructions, the project of white supremacy remains this country's dominant racial project (Winant 1994), and that project's paradigmatic narrative is the story of white superiority and black inferiority.¹ The meanings of *black*, *white*, *Asian*, *Latino*, or *biracial* may change, but they change within a history and politics of competing struggles to maintain or resist racial subordination.

Narrative and Racial Formation

As I prepared to write this response I was not certain of what the *Review's* editors expected from me. In search of guidance, I read last year's presidential address and the responses thereto (Barnes 2010; Lempert 2010). I read President Richard Lempert's address with special interest. His speech explores the changing state of race relations during his lifetime and encourages sociolegal scholars to explore the subject in more meaningful ways. In the course of his speech Professor Lempert tells several personal stories, including one childhood tale about his own use of the *N* word in a game and another describing his family's relationship with a black woman his parents employed as a child-care provider and housekeeper. As a scholar who has frequently employed narrative in my own work, I was intrigued, if somewhat unsettled, by this use of personal stories about his own racial encounters, and I was grateful to find Mario Barnes's thoughtful and introspective response to those stories (Barnes 2010). "For those who have suffered because of their race, racial narratives almost always involve elements of threat and pain" (Barnes 2010: 479), writes Professor Barnes, exploring his own uneasiness with Professor Lempert's stories and the complicated relationship between the identity of the narrator and the meaning given to the story (Barnes 2010: 475–478). Professor Barnes's examination of the origins of his own

¹ Much of Iijima's discussion in "We Construction" responds to Asian-American scholars who have critiqued the black/white paradigm as an inadequate framework for analyzing racial issues in an increasingly multiracial nation (Almaguer 1994; Chang 1993; Crouch 1996). Iijima reminds his Asian-American colleagues that "Asian Pacific Americans have been taught about how to defend ourselves as a racialized minority by the experience of other racialized people, particularly that of the African American community," and argues that in deconstructing the paradigm we must be careful to keep our focus on the effects of white supremacist ideology at the core of the analysis (Iijima 1997: 56).

anxiety helped me understand my own uneasiness with Professor Lempert's stories and prompted me to think about whether what was bothering me about this year's presidential address might also derive from narrative's power to threaten, to hurt, or to heal (Lawrence 1986, 1987, 2005).

So when I returned to Professor Gómez's address I was looking and listening for stories, and I realized their absence at critical junctures. She told far fewer stories than did her predecessor, and I nearly missed some of the stories that were there. That is, I had neglected to see and hear the stories that are always present in the text and context of interracial encounters and conversations about race.²

Professor Gómez begins her address with narrative. She acknowledges her mother, her father, and her son. With each of these expressions of love and appreciation, Professor Gómez gestures to a rich narrative that speaks of family, race, gender, class, nation, profession.³ She then tells us the story of her own personal and professional relationship to the Law and Society Association. In invoking each of these stories, she engages in a project of racial construction, speaking to and against dominant narratives that race⁴ Mexican Americans as other, as inferior to white, as foreign to the nation, the academy, the intellectual enterprise, law, sociology, and science.

When Professor Gómez speaks at the podium she is surrounded by this narrative of brown inferiority. Her eloquent voice; the power and subtlety of her argument; and her ability to engender community, empathy, and trust with her audience must all stand in refutation of the surrounding narrative. I feel her treading carefully through a treacherous terrain where her performance

² In his response to Professor Lempert, Professor Barnes wonders whether Lempert's use of narrative signals that others will be encouraged to share their stories, or if the author's esteem and position (Barnes does not mention race) make space only for him. My own intuition was that the contrast between these two speeches had a great deal to do with the race of each presidential speaker as well as that of his or her audience. Moreover, I believed that by examining narrative, and its absence, in Professor Gómez's address, we might illuminate our understanding of the theory and practice of racial construction.

³ I want Professor Gómez to tell us more about these stories because they are stories we too seldom hear, and because we would hear in them the full complexity of the theory and the politics of racial construction. As the story is told we feel the shame, pride, fear, violence, empathy, and love that shape our images of others and of ourselves.

⁴ Professor Kendall Thomas describes the way in which racism is simultaneously speech (a socially constructed meaning or idea) and conduct by asking us to consider the concept of "race" not as a noun but as a verb. He notes that race is a social construction. The meaning of *black* or *white* is derived through a history of acted-upon ideology. Moreover, the cultural meaning of race continues to be promulgated through millions of ongoing contemporaneous speech/acts. Thus, he says, "we are raced" (Thomas 1997, quoted in Lawrence 1990: 443). In addition, Professor John Powell has elaborated that, "[b]efore someone can be said to possess a racial character or identity, there must first be a process of 'racing' in which the attributes that differentiate racial classifications are designated and signified" (Powell 1997: 104).

becomes part of the narrative that constructs race. She speaks knowing that her words are received against the stories and images of Mexican Americans that populate the master narrative (Ikemoto 1993; Espinoza & Harris 1997; Hernández-Truyol 1997; Valdes 1997; Yamamoto 1997), that whether her efforts to identify and articulate shared values are heard and understood will depend in part on her ability to counter the narrative that constructs her as other (Lawrence 2008).

As a Latina speaking before a mostly white audience, Professor Gómez cannot speak on the subject of race without also participating in her own racial construction and that of other Mexican Americans, as well as of other people of color. Nor can she avoid joining either the antiracist project or the project that rationalizes and justifies white supremacy. By employing even a brief gesture toward her personal narrative, Professor Gómez challenges her position as an object of racial construction and becomes a speaking subject (Benveniste 1971; Gates 1987) who participates in the reconstructive project. Her attention to and concern for narration and performance teach social formation's central lessons: that racial construction is a political project and that narrative is a method of that politics.

Critical race theorists have often used narrative in our scholarship. We tell our stories because other scholars have not told them, leaving us largely invisible in the discourses of law and social science. Stories express depth and complexity, and allow for ambiguity and multiple interpretations. They inspire feelings of commonality, connectedness, and empathy among tellers, listeners, and the subjects of our stories. Our stories convey experience and feeling. They create space for imagination and reveal the intersubjectivity of legal and social constructions (Lawrence 1992; Montoya 1994). But mostly we tell stories to "fight off illness and death"—to oppose and talk back to white supremacy's stories;⁵ to recover, or foreground, stories of violence, degradation, and exclusion that others cannot or will not tell; to tell the world and ourselves that we are whole and fully human, that we are you, that our stories are yours (Matsuda 1987, 2000; West 1988a).

Robert Cover writes of the centrality of stories to the prescriptive functions of social institutions and law: "We inhabit a *nomos*—a normative universe. We constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void. . . . [T]he formal institutions of law and the conventions of social order are . . . but a small part of [this] normative universe" (1983: 4). Cover tells us that our narratives, the stories we are told, shape our

⁵ "Personal narratives . . . are more than stories. They are an important site of resistance. Furthermore, they invent, reform and refashion personal and collective identity" (Montoya 1994: 210).

nomos and give law meaning. Every narrative is prescriptive—has a moral—and every legal text finds its origin in the communal narratives we tell. The communal character of our narratives defines our nomos and shapes normative behavior (Cover 1983: 10). When outsider racial groups tell stories, when we engage in the project of racial reconstruction, we seek not only to change the pejorative meanings assigned to our races, but also to transform the communal narrative that defines the nomos of the larger social world in which we live.⁶

On the Racial Construction of Science as White and Narrative as Colored

I hear another story in Professor Gómez's speech, another lesson about racial construction. I recognize this story from my own experience as one who has often stood where she stands, as a token person of color speaking to white colleagues about race and racism. As I have noted, she begins with narrative—stories about her parents and about herself that engage quite directly in the project of racial reconstruction.⁷ She then makes forthright charges to her colleagues to make the membership of the Law and Society Association more racially inclusive and to include the work of more scholars of color in the pages of the *Law & Society Review* (Gómez 2012: 221–245). In these charges, she is clear in her belief that our first and essential task is to commit ourselves to the politics of diversity, inclusion, and racial justice.

However, when Professor Gómez turns to law and society scholars' failure to incorporate the insights of social construction theory into their research, her critique and the remedies she offers focus on methodology rather than on political choices.⁸ Knowing that the work of social scientists has political consequences, Professor Gómez asks her colleagues to recognize and embrace the politics of racial

⁶ Professor Robert Cover uses the term “redemptive Constitutionalism” to refer to the positions of associations, such as the abolitionists whose sharply different versions of the social order require a transformational politics that replaces the old order or *nomos* with a new one (Cover 1983: 34–35).

⁷ Even her brief references to the lives of her mother (an oncology nurse and a veteran of many LSA meetings) and her father (among the first cohort of Chicano and black PhD students admitted to Berkeley's top-ranked sociology department) offer a counternarrative to the images of Mexican Americans conjured by the dominant story.

⁸ Law and society scholars have conceptualized race narrowly as phenotype and measured it crudely via self-identification. They have treated race as if it were readily measurable and dichotomous. Professor Gómez suggests more sophisticated measures and gives examples of several exemplary projects that have sought to “better measure race . . . in ways that reflect our theoretical understanding of race and racial dynamics as complex and rooted in historical and social processes” (Gómez 2012: 221–245).

justice in their work. “Many of us are interested in race because we are antiracist,” she says. “Ultimately, this means that we must more frequently study *racism* rather than race and develop ways to study racism as process” (Gómez 2012: 221–245). By encouraging us to study racism rather than race, Professor Gómez reminds us that our scholarship must examine ideology as well as law and culture. Yet, when she asks us to study racism as process, I hear the objective scientist’s voice. I worry that her colleagues may forget that this process does political work and that our scholarship participates in that politics. Gómez writes, “[r]acialization refers to the social process by which a racial group comes to exist and to understand its position in the racial hierarchy as superior or inferior, and by which others in society come to understand that racial hierarchy as natural” (Gómez 2012: 221–245). I hear a passive voice in this sentence. I wonder whether it reflects more than stylistic choice, whether social scientists have come to think of racialization as the process whereby race “comes to exist” and “comes to be understood.” I fear that perhaps we have moved from treating race as biology, as in “Blacks are just that way,” to treating race as process, as in “Blacks have come to be that way.” Social scientists once studied race as biology to determine the essential attributes of a fixed phenomenon. Now it seems we will study race as process to discover how the process of racial construction happens. However, racial construction is more than process. Racialization does not just happen. The process of racial construction has purpose, direction, and consequence. The process represents struggle. It is a liberation battle.

To Google-Image President Barack Obama is to find telling testimony that this battle is far from over, and that those who fight for white supremacy’s racial project continue to fight with relentless, intentional, and clear political purpose. One photographic image of Obama depicts him as an African medicine man squatting on a wooden stool, dressed in a loincloth and a wild-feathered headdress, with a bone in his nose and a primitive totem in his hands. The caption reads “ObamaCare,” and the *C* is written as the Soviet hammer and sickle. Under that caption, in smaller type, a subcaption reads, “Coming to a clinic near you.” This image tells a story that racially constructs not just the president but all African Americans. It tells a story that derives its power from the multitude of narratives that compose America’s constitutive texts. Each time I stand before an audience, each time I give a lecture, teach a class, or begin a conversation with a stranger at a cocktail party, I am aware that this image and the too-many-to-count images it references stand with me. I feel their presence in my gut, an “uneasiness,” an “anxious moment,” not unlike what Professor Mario Barnes reports he felt as he listened to President Richard Lempert’s stories about his family’s black maid and the academic performance of black

students at Michigan (Barnes 2010: 475–478). Yes, the racialization we experience is process—it is dynamic, contingent, and always changing—but I do not experience race as something that “comes to exist,” that just happens. I experience the Obama image as something that someone does to me, and I must fight back.⁹

If social scientists see ourselves as objective and neutral observers of the process of racial formation, we contribute to the illusion that race is natural, not in the sense that biology is natural but in the sense that it just happens.¹⁰ If we study racism and racialization as if we do not participate in the process, as if our work does not contribute to the narratives that shape our normative world, we tell a story that supports white supremacy’s claim that racial hierarchies just happen. We join the racist construction project.

I am certain that none of what I have just said is news to Professor Gómez. So why does she speak to her colleagues in a different voice when she turns to the subject of the substance of our scholarship, to “the core of what we think and write about” (Gómez 2012: 221–245)? My guess is that this change in voice reflects her awareness that when her audience looks at a Latina they do not see her first a scientist. I believe she understands that science is also a political notion—that science is constructed as white and male while stories are constructed as brown and female. I believe that she knows what her colleague and fellow Law and Society Association trustee Margaret Montoya so eloquently describes as “feeling masked”:

Presenting an acceptable face, speaking without a Spanish accent, hiding what we really felt—masking our inner selves—were defenses against racism passed on to us by our parents to help us get along in school and society (Montoya 1994: 190).

Montoya uses the words *masking* and *unmasking* to capture the dialogic process of cultural assimilation and resistance against assimilation engaged in by those of us who have been colonized and acculturated—who withhold precious parts of our past behind constructed public personas. Montoya notes that we often do and

⁹ Michael Shapiro contrasts the Hegelian view of self as a product of a continuously more edified form of self-consciousness with the genealogist view where “knowledge of the self is not a process of accretion but rather a form of power, a way of imposing and interpretation or, within Foucault’s figuration, of imposing topography on the body. It is a form of subjugation rather than part of a process of enlightenment” (1992: 52).

¹⁰ For example, I have written elsewhere of how the racial essentialist construction of African Americans as biologically or genetically inferior has been replaced by a narrative that constructs blacks as culturally inferior: “Those who tell the culture story say they do not blame black genes, but neither do they believe that environmental conditions alone can account for the achievement gap. The culture story is a story about individuals whose behavior is determined by the beliefs, values, norms, and socialization of the families, groups or communities to which they belong” (Lawrence 2012: 247–258).

discard these masks unconsciously. We alter our language, our clothes, our food to accommodate, to camouflage ourselves in the company of the Master, but we also wear our masks to resist—to subvert oppressive forces, ideologies, and constructions.¹¹ Because we are racially constructed as a group, the masks we wear—our personal public performances—represent and construct the race as well as the individual performer.

In resisting the dominant narrative's racial construction of her as soft, unscientific, irrational, biased storyteller, Professor Gómez feels compelled to adopt the hard, scientific, rational, objective mask (Montoya 1994). Her intention is not to "pass for white" or to assimilate, but to say to her audience, "A Latina can talk your talk of hard data, independent variables, controls, and regression analysis." By speaking in the traditional scientific voice of quantitative analysis she reconstructs the racialized and gendered construction of scientist. Paradoxically, by attempting to counter the narrative that constructs her as Latina/not-a-scientist, by speaking the language of science, Professor Gómez reinforces the related narrative that constructs science to exclude narrative, imagination, and politics.¹² By focusing her critique of our scholarship on needed adjustments in quantitative methodology, she constructs science as neutral, rational, and without a language, race, or politics—as separate from our imagination and our stories.

The story that portrays science and scientific method as neutral draws upon and contributes to a central claim of the contemporary dominant racial narrative: that we are color-blind, that we are "postracial," that we are no longer influenced by the racial constructions of white supremacy (Lawrence & Matsuda 1997). The story tells us that scientific method ensures that the racial texts that surround us do not influence the meaning we give the data and the texts we gather. It draws a dichotomy between scientific knowledge and narrative. It treats the former as objective, as evidence relevant to and worthy of the interpretive work of discovering truth and seeking justice, and the latter as partial, as prejudiced, as a source of distortion rather than a resource for understanding.¹³

This dichotomous construction of science and narrative does more than devalue stories. It excludes them from the "text" that is

¹¹ Montoya notes that for outsiders these strategies of masking and unmasking have been historical necessities that are passed from one generation to another. We engage in these strategies both consciously and unconsciously (Montoya 1994: 197)

¹² Frantz Fanon describes how by adopting the language and performance of the European, the African educated in France reinforces the narrative that Africans are without civilization (Fanon 1967: 34).

¹³ "Today, social scientists face increasing doubts about their neutrality and objectivity . . . [as well as] growing resistance to the notion that [their] expertise provides a proper foundation for legal decision-making" (Moran 2010: 515).

science. As Robin West has noted, the intellectual and moral project of interpreting cultural and legal texts is constrained and stunted by the way in which those texts are constituted. West refers here to the constraint caused by the exclusion of outsiders: those whose stories are not heard, whose lives and humanity play no part in the constitutive and defining text (West 1988b: 138).

Among other examples of research that incorporates racial construction theory, Professor Gómez offers her own study of how the structure and ideology of the law positioned 19th-century Mexican Americans “as legally white and, simultaneously, as socially nonwhite and racially subordinate” (Gómez 2012: 221–245). She uses this example to demonstrate that race is socially contingent and historically rooted, and the study illustrates well the importance of examining racial meaning in particular historical and social contexts. Yet, the power of this research also lies in what it teaches us about how white supremacy deployed legal and social constructions of Mexican Americans as a political project and about how Mexican Americans, in turn, resisted and internalized those constructions (Gómez 2007). Here Gómez speaks about racial construction in the active voice. Law “positioned” Mexican Americans. Gómez’s choice of subject is likewise significant to understanding her study as a model for research that engages in the antiracist reconstructive project. By placing her study in a particular historical setting, Gómez necessarily introduces a narrative—a story of her people, untold before this study—of the violence inflicted on their bodies by racist constructions and of their resistance to that violence. As with the introduction of her family at the beginning of her address, her research may not speak in a voice we recognize as narrative. Nevertheless, it tells an outsider story that joins the reconstructive project.

Progressive social scientists must do more than understand and embrace a theory that accurately describes race as the product of history, ideology, narrative, representation, and politics. We must choose sides in the political battle that constructs race. We must join the project of antiracism to fight the still dominant project of white supremacy. We must understand that when we choose what to study, what data and stories to collect, what questions to ask, and how to interpret those stories, our research and scholarship become part of the narrative that constructs race.

I hear Professor Gómez challenging her colleagues to take sides in the fight against white supremacy. I hear her asking them, “Which side are you on?” Her personal narrative recounting her own history in the Law and Society Association, her gentle but firm criticism of the dearth of scholarship dedicated to the subject of race and racism, her expressed alarm at the political retrenchment from civil rights laws, and her unmasking of the false claims of

“postracialism” speak in an explicit political voice. I want her and us to make the politics of “what we think and write about” explicit as well, because too often we are seduced by the claim of neutrality in scholarship and science.

Our stories construct race and constitute community. We give meaning to the texts of law and social science, and we understand those texts and ourselves, in the same way that we understand race: through the stories we tell. We must know that the work of social scientists and lawyers participates in the construction of race. We must choose sides in this battle and flood the world with our stories. Our stories are all we have.

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