

Voices of Color

When I was invited to be the Latino voice at the Women of Color Day Awards Celebration, I felt an immediate attraction to the title of these talks: “Voices of Color.” I will try to tell you what the two elements of this synaesthesia mean to me. I come from a land of bright sun, spicy sauces, violent colors, sharp flavors, and strong women. If you have ever been to an open market in Guadalajara; if you have seen the murals of Diego Rivera, the watermelons and mad dogs of Rufino Tamayo, or the epic struggles of Pedro Coronel, then you know what color means to the Mexican. But today I want to focus on the voices. In Mexico, they vary from the shouts of the fiesta to the murmurs of the dead in Juan Rulfo’s Comala. In the rest of Latin America, they range from the exuberance of the Caribbean tones mixed with African rhythms to the Chilean softness tinged with Araucan melodies. But what happens when Colombians, Venezuelans, and Nicaraguans move north of the Río Grande, or as we call it, Río Colorado? For the U.S. Census Bureau, university admission offices, and the press, we acquire the megalabel of “Latinos” or “Hispanics.” When we invite our gringo friends to dinner, we learn to put less jalapeño in our tacos. Our dress becomes less colorful. Alas, our aesthetic sensitivity becomes infected with the greyness of a Philadelphia winter sky. But the voice—the voice becomes richer and stronger. The Argentinian learns that the words for bedroom, chatting, and swimming pool (*recámara*, *platicar*, and *alberca*), brought to the new world by the conquistadores in the 16th Century and forgotten long ago in Buenos Aires, Asunción, and San José, are still used every day in Mexico City. Everybody learns that in Puerto Rico a *pantalla* (lamp shade, screen) is an earring, that a *naranja* is called a *china*, and that *guagua* means a bus in Puerto Rico and a baby in Chile. We all learn

that the words that denote a delicacy in one country connote an obscenity in another, e.g. *cajeta* in Mexico and Argentina and *papaya* in Mexico and Cuba. But the most important thing we learn is that even though we come from 21 countries, including the U.S., we can identify each other, see color, hear melodies, taste our soul food, and feel warm in our common language. We learn that even though our ears are used to hearing merengue in Puerto Rico, rumbas in Cuba, corridos in Mexico, and tangos in Uruguay, we all feel like dancing when we hear Spanish. We learn that the fact that our faces are black, white, brown, yellow, and pink, sometimes all in the same family, is one of our greatest strengths, for we are proud of being multiracial, multiethnic, and polycultural. Our *mestizaje* did not begin when Cortés fathered the first Latin American with la Malinche, his Indian mistress, for the Spaniards who arrived in the new world were themselves the *mestizos* of Europe, and this long tradition of intermarriage has endowed us with the ability to accept change, appreciate diversity, and embrace ambiguity. I will end by repeating a joke that made the rounds in New York City in 1990. Two Tibetans were standing at the corner of 48th Street and Madison Avenue speaking their native language when a New Yorker passed by and chanced to overhear them. “For chrissake,” he said, “you guys are in New York now: speak Spanish.”