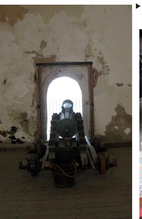
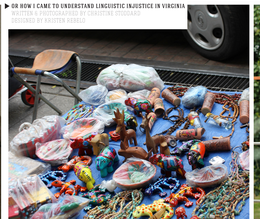
MIXTECO RVA

This project was funded in part by an emerging artist grant in photography from The Puffin Foundation in Teaneck, New Jersey.

Para la señora Marilyn Barrueta. R.I.P. November 4, 2010.





► GR HOW I CAME TO UNDERSTAND LINGUISTIC INJUSTICE IN VIRGINIA
WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRISTINA STODDARD
DESIGNED BY KRISTEN DERBY

UNO

HABÍA UNA VEZ–AUGUST 2010

Angloparlante. This word captures the privilege I have known since I learned to speak. I can pronounce all twenty Standard American English vowel sounds with the slight drop of my jaw, the pursing of my lips. English is my native language. It is not my mother's. Yet she is completely fluent in this tongue she first heard in rock songs on the radio as a girl in El Salvador, and therefore one of the lucky ones.

This was the summer I studied with my sister in Glasgow, Scotland, where social class seemed unmistakeably linked to one's ability to mimic the Queen's English. I also noted, perhaps with some bitterness, that the Spaniards I overheard in the Glaswegian streets and the cafes did not speak the same Spanish as my mother.

Meanwhile, in Virginia, the Arlington I knew as a child was disappearing and becoming increasingly multicultural, while my new neighborhood in Richmond was one of the many "hush-hush" segregated variety. Everything looked black and white. Where was the brown? The olive? In the shadows, on the fringes.

My heart started to pound like the non-diegetic sound effects in a horror film. The guilt of my privilege began to overwhelm me. Apparently it had been building up for years. I enrolled in my first translation and interpretation courses. I always had the keys; now I was learning how to open the doors.

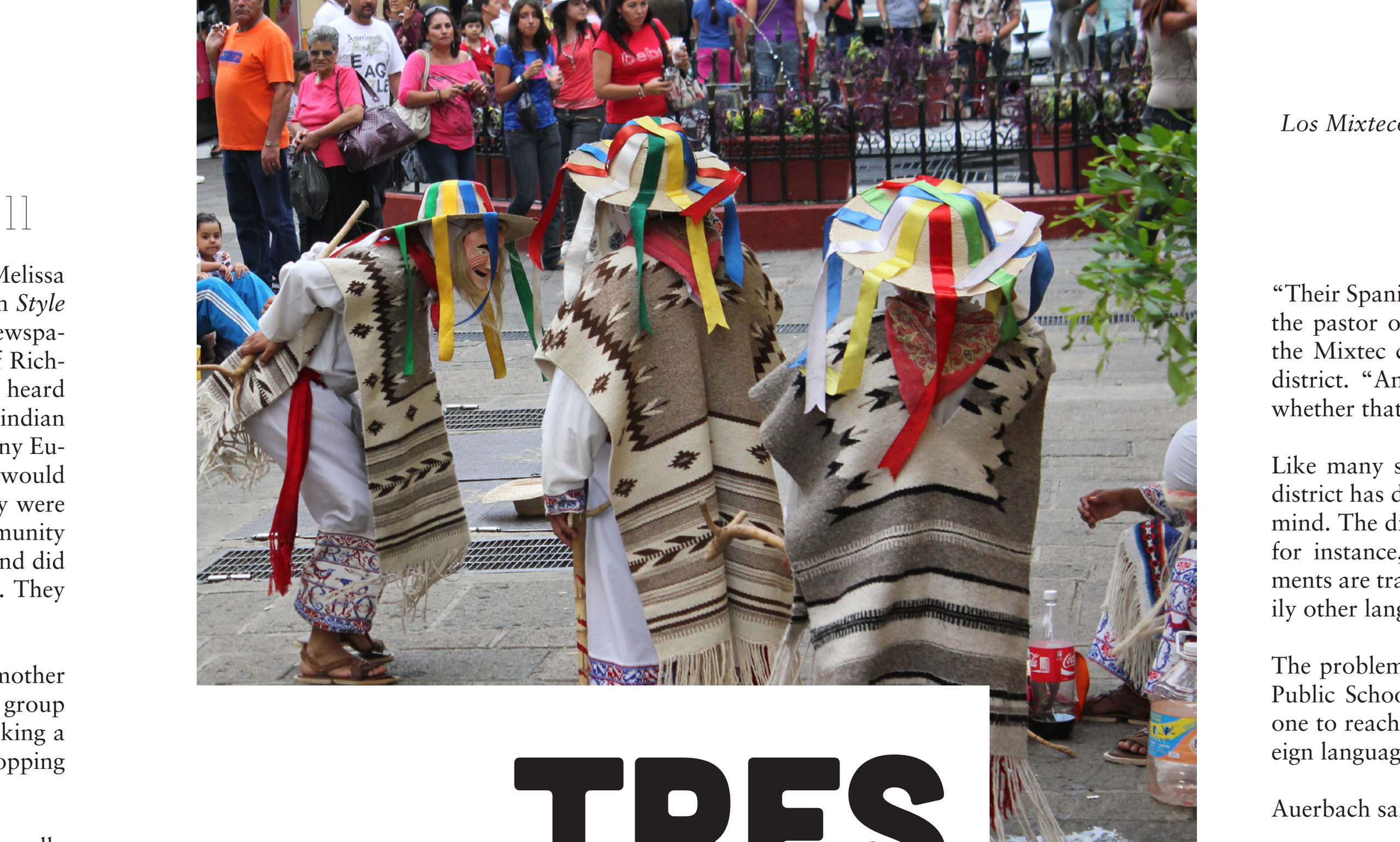
DOS

NEWSPRINT–AUGUST 2011

One newspaper article I will never forget is Melissa Scott Sinclair's "The Rain People." It ran in *Style Weekly*, Richmond's alternative weekly newspaper, and introduced the particular plight of Richmond's Mixteco community. I had never heard of Richmond having any significant Amerindian population, let alone one from Mexico. Many European-Americans and African-Americans would see Mixtecos out in public and assume they were Hispanic. But Richmond's Hispanic community ostracized them because they were Indian and did not speak Spanish as their native language. They were—and remain—othered by the other.

Shortly after reading the article, I called my mother to tell her about it. She said she had heard a group of people who looked Latin American speaking a language she did not recognize while out shopping in Richmond one day.

Throughout the fall, my mind would occasionally wander back to the Mixtecos, but my heart had other pulls and distractions.



TRES

THE WIRE–SPRING 2012

Mixtec Indians Face Language Barrier
By Zack Budryk and Christine Stoddard
Capital News Service
May 2, 2012

RICHMOND – In public education, the philosophy of doing the greatest good for the greatest number reigns supreme. The Richmond public school system illustrates this point in its English as a Second Language program.

In a school system where nearly 90 percent of students are African American and native to Richmond, serving immigrant communities – especially obscure ones – can be a secondary priority.

ESL resources are clearly targeted to the Spanish-speaking members of the city's 13,000 Hispanics. Indigenous Latin Americans, like the Mixtecs of Mexico, cannot reap the full benefits these programs offer because Spanish is not their native language.

In terms of language and culture, the casual observer might not notice much difference between Richmond's Mixtec community and any other Latin American immigrant group in the city. Neither would the average teacher, school counselor or education specialist. For both the Mixtecs and their allies, however, the distinction is all too evident.

Richmond's Mixtecs hail from the small, isolated village of Metlatónoc, in Mexico's southwestern state of Guerrero. They are pure Amerindian, not of Spanish descent, and speak their own Mixtec language, which belongs to Mexico's Otomanguean linguistic family.

This linguistic family represents a cluster of languages spoken by more than 500,000 Mexican Amerindians, though the number of people who speak the same dialect as Richmond's Mixtecs is much smaller.

"Their Spanish is not very good," said the Rev. Shay Auerbach, the pastor of Sacred Heart Church, where most members of the Mixtec community attend Mass in the city's Manchester district. "And some of them don't read and write, period – whether that's Spanish or anything."

Like many school systems in Virginia, the Richmond school district has designed its ESL program with Spanish-speakers in mind. The district's Office of the Bilingual/ESL Parent Liaison, for instance, ensures that school documents and announcements are translated into Spanish for parents, but not necessarily other languages.

The problem extends to the suburbs as well. Henrico County Public Schools, for instance, employ a Latino liaison but no one to reach out to children and parents who speak other foreign languages, particularly Amerindian ones.

Auerbach said illiteracy exacerbates the language gap.

"Mixteco is a written language, but many of them may not know it," he said. Only some schools in Mexico teach indigenous languages, Auerbach noted.

Mary Wickham, director of the church-affiliated Sacred Heart Center, said the language barrier varies throughout the Mixtec community.

"The children speak beautiful English," Wickham said. "I don't know how their Spanish is, but they probably speak better Mixteco English than Spanish."

Paradoxically, learning English at school could be both helpful for the Mixtec children and detrimental to the communication gap between their parents and the schools, Wickham said.

"Kind of the pattern is, whether it's Spanish-speaking people or Mixteco-speaking people, that the children are learning English faster than the parents because they're in school," she said.

"And so they become the translators, which can be good but also can have a downside, because it puts a lot of responsibility on children, and can put them in situations that they shouldn't really be involved in."

Such responsibility may also weigh down on children whose parents speak other foreign languages.

The Richmond Public Schools have 21 ESL teachers. This year, the district reported serving about 1,000 students with limited English proficiency. Those students speak about 30 different languages, from Afrikaans and Arabic to Vietnamese and Yoruba. The vast majority – more than 770 of the students – speak Spanish.

The number of limited-English-proficient students has grown dramatically in Richmond and across Virginia in recent years. Eight years ago, for example, Richmond had fewer than 400 students needing ESL services.

Los Mixtecos de Richmond encuentran una barrera de lengua
Por Zack Budryk y Christine Stoddard
Capital News Service
May 3, 2012

RICHMOND – En la educación pública, la filosofía de hacer lo mejor para el número mayor de gente reina supremo. El programa de inglés como segunda lengua (ESL). del sistema de las escuelas públicas de Richmond es un ejemplo de esta filosofía.

En un sistema escolar en que casi el noventa por ciento de los estudiantes son afroamericanos y nativos de Richmond, servir a las comunidades inmigrantes—especialmente las pocas conocidas—sería una prioridad secundaria.

El grupo meta para los recursos de ESL son claramente los hispanohablantes de los 13.000 latinoamericanos en la ciudad. Los indígenas como los mixtecos de México, no pueden cosechar todos los frutos que ofrecen estos programas porque el español no es su lengua natal.

Quizás el observador ocasional no notaría la diferencia entre la lengua y la cultura de la comunidad mixteca en Richmond u otra comunidad latinoamericana inmigrante en la ciudad, ni tampoco ninguna maestra típica, ni consejera escolar ni especialista de educación. Para los mixtecos y sus aliados, la distinción es muy evidente.

Los mixtecos de Richmond provienen del pueblo pequeño y aislado, Metlatónoc, en el estado sudoeste de Guerrero enMéxico. Son amerindios puros, no de descendencia española, y hablan su propia lengua mixteca que pertenece a la familia lingüística Otomanguean.

Esta familia lingüística representa un grupo de lenguas que hablan más de 50.000 indígenas mexicanos, aunque el número de gente que habla el mismo dialecto de los mixtecos de Richmond es mucho más pequeño.

"Su español no es muy bueno," dijo el padre Shay Auerbach de la parroquia del Sagrado Corazón, donde la mayoría de los miembros de la comunidad mixteca asiste a la misa en el distrito de Manchester. "Y algunos no pueden leer ni escribir en español y punto."

Como muchos sistemas escolares en Virginia, el distrito escolar de Richmond ha diseñado su programa de ESL tomando en cuenta a los hispanohablantes. La oficina de enlace bilingüe para los padres con niños de ESL, por ejemplo, asegura que los documentos y los anuncios escolares estén traducidos al español para los padres pero no necesariamente a otros idiomas.

El problema existe en las afueras, también. El sistema escolar del condado de Henrico, por ejemplo, tiene un oficial de enlace para los padres hispanohablantes pero no hay nadie para incluir a los niños y padres que hablan otros idiomas extranjeros, particularmente las lenguas amerindias.

Auberach dijo que el analfabetismo agrava la falta de un idioma común. I don't know what exactly the original sentence is, but perhaps this is the essence of what you are trying to comunícate: Sin un idioma común compartido entre todos los inmigrantes, el analfabetismo aumenta el aislamiento de los que pertenecen a una minoría lingüística. (don't forget the umlaut over the u)

"Mixteco es una lengua escrita, pero muchos de los mixtecos no lo saben," dijo él . Solamente algunas escuelas en México enseñan las lenguas indígenas, declaró Auberach.

Mary Wickham, la directora del Centro del Sagrado Corazón que está afiliado con la iglesia, dijo que la barrera idiomática varía en la comunidad mixteca.

"Los niños hablan un inglés bello," dijo Wickham, "No sé como hablan el español pero probablemente hablan mejor inglés y mixteco que español."

Paradójicamente, aprender el inglés en la escuela sería a la vez útil para los niños mixtecos y perjudicial a sus padres, porque entre ellos (los adultos) y las escuelas sigue/existe/ hay la barrera comunicativa, dijo Wickham.

"La pauta normal si son hispanohablantes o hablantes de mixteco, es que los niños aprenden inglés más rápido que sus padres porque lo estudian en la escuela," dijo ella.

"Y pues llegan a ser los traductores y esto puede ser bueno pero también tiene un lado negativo, porque les da mucha responsabilidad a los niños, y esto puede ponerlos en situaciones en que no deben estar involucrados."

Esto sería un gran peso de responsabilidad para los niños con padres que hablan lenguas extranjeras.

El sistema escolar de Richmond tiene 21 maestros de ESL. Este año, el distrito anunció que ayudó a 1.000 estudiantes con competencia limitada en inglés. Estos estudiantes hablan aproximadamente 30 lenguas diferentes, desde africaans y árabe a vietnamita y yoruba. La inmensa mayoría (más de 770 de los estudiantes) hablan español.

El número de estudiantes con competencia limitada de inglés ha crecido dramáticamente en Richmond y en todo el estado de Virginia en años recientes. Hace ocho años, por ejemplo, Richmond tenía menos de 400 estudiantes que necesitaban los servicios de ESL.

CUATRO

JALISCO–JULY 2012

During my last three weeks of college, I spent two weeks in Guadalajara, Mexico and one week in Richmond, Virginia studying public health and medical translation and interpretation from English to Spanish and Spanish to English.

I met a doctor in the desert country outside of Guadalajara who said there was a pregnant woman in the area who had to ride a horse for hours in order to get to the nearest hospital and have her baby delivered. Americans did not want to go there and yet 8 out of 10 men in the town left for the United States at some point in their lives. Usually, these men would work in the U.S. for a few months, possibly a couple of years, and then come back to Jalisco for a spell to spend time with their families. Then they would leave their wives and children once again to earn money in the U.S.

These men of modest means had to learn English on the fly since their rural Mexican schooling hadn't taught them much, if anything, of the language. The Mexican government would not build a hospital closer to their desert town. There were no factories, only farms, and jobs were virtually non-existent. Coyotes lured these men to gamble their lives on the chance to be a dishwasher or a truck driver or a construction worker or something of the like in the United States. At least, many of these men reasoned, they could uphold their dignity by doing honest work to support their families.

One of my classmates said that at the Richmond clinic where she interpreted for patients, the doctor treated her rudely, often ignoring her, and gave his monolingual Spanish-speaking patients even less respect. He thought the interpreter a nuisance and the patient somehow inferior for not knowing English.

A year earlier, an acquaintance from France stayed with me in Richmond for a couple of weeks to learn English. She was only eighteen and had never traveled by herself before. Naturally, she had forgotten her medication and developed an infection that had me terrified. Where could I take her that wouldn't cost her family thousands upon thousands of dollars? She was a foreigner and had no health insurance. She came from a country where medical professionals were obligated to help her no matter her social or economic class.

After several frantic phone calls, I found an international clinic that would take her, no questions asked. She ended up being fine, but that's because she had me, a native English speaker and American citizen. Might she have died from kidney failure otherwise, simply because she did not speak the language of Shakespeare and John F. Kennedy? The fact that American medical professionals lacked the same obligation baffled her.

CINCO

WAYSIDE–SEPTEMBER 2012

This is not an infomercial, but three days at the non-profit Wayside Center for Popular Education near Charlottesville allowed me to meet the goals outlined in all their promotional materials for their workshop, "Interpreting for Social Justice":

• To build a cadre of skilled social justice interpreters in the Southeast and Appalachia who can empower immigrant communities by providing language accessibility to promote social justice

• To encourage local leadership in immigrant communities through sharing skills by training other community members in social justice interpreting

• To create multilingual spaces in social justice communities where language is used democratically as a movement—building tool of power

I was surrounded by fellow bleeding hearts who also knew how to think and act. More than ever, after the workshop, I wanted to act. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hold hands. I wanted to cry. I wanted to come forth, unite, and insist on change. Language is social glue. Language is a weapon. Language can be love and language can be pain. Language is the past, the present, and the future. Language makes problems, but it also solves them. I wanted to be a problem-solver.

SEIS

PIURA–SEPTEMBER 2013

My experiences in Mexico, at Wayside, and in South Arlington in an area full of immigrants where I lived shortly after graduation slowly prepared me for the shock of poverty I later saw during my week in northwestern Peru. Piura was a city where the most prosperous worked at a fish processing plant or for the Catholic Church. At the time of my spiritual retreat at the local parish, Santísimo Sacramento, the unemployment rate was 50%. Most people lived in houses made of bamboo and mud, though plenty could not afford such a home. Thousands of people depended upon the Catholic Church to feed and clothe them. Alcoholism, cataracts, lung infections, and a general lack of access to medical care added to Piuranos' struggles. Yet let it be known that I wasn't there to "save" or convert anybody. I was there to observe faith, grace, and happiness even in destitution, and reflect upon my own way of life.

In my group of eight missionaries, only two of us could speak Spanish. So on top of the tasks of distributing food from American sponsors, chopping bamboo for a new house, shaving a blind man during a home visit with a nurse, etc., I had to interpret between the parish workers and the other missionaries. Add the desert heat, the constant travel, and the aching muscles that follow a 30-mile pilgrimage (yes, on foot) for Our Lady of Mercy, and I was exhausted.

But even at my crankiest, I tried to remember that this is how overwhelmed children of non-English-speaking immigrant parents living in the United States feel everyday. They have chores, they have schoolwork, and they often have to face the challenges of poverty on top of that. Yet these children must also serve as the brokers between their parents and the outside world—a world that speaks English, demands documents, and isn't always welcoming to "different" cultural practices.

Rosetta Stone makes it look so easy. Pop this CD into your computer and, before you know it, you'll be fluent in English. My early journey in understanding linguistic injustice in Virginia, however, has taught me at least this much: Perfecting your English vocabulary and conjugation is only part of the battle as a non-native speaker. You have to push yourself to lessen your accent. You have to familiarize yourself with Virginians' regional idioms and accents. You have to be literate. You have to assimilate culturally. You have to hide your browness, your blackness, your otherness. You have to sacrifice so much of your identity in return for a modicum of compassion, courtesy, and appreciation. You have to study. You have to fight. You have to pray. And, most importantly, you have to be who you are while still finding a way to be what society expects you to be just to survive.