

## Beyond the Polite Smile

JANICE PANG



*WRITER'S COMMENT: As a graphic designer, I spend a lot of time thinking of ways to creatively communicate a message. As a writer, I do the same – searching for sweet spots between playful and smart, novel and familiar. In both fields, I've learned that the most successful works have messages rooted in simple human truths; and the most impactful means of communicating those messages serve to reinforce these truths. With this essay, I attempted to dislodge truth from the question: How does an inability to speak for oneself complicate one's self-identity? My writing distills my views about language and identity into a narrative around culture, family, and personal growth. Alternating between action and reflection, this essay depicts the very tangible constraint of language on human thought and behavior. I am grateful to Professor Milton, who encouraged me to use storytelling as a vehicle for literary liberation.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Janice wrote "Beyond the Polite Smile" for her first paper in UWP 1021: Writing in Ethnic Studies. The assignment asked students to write about about language and identity after having read essays by Amy Tan, James Baldwin, and Gloria Anzaldua. I encouraged them to think about how the essay would function as a way to introduce themselves. Janice chose to take a more creative, inductive approach and wrote a rich, powerful essay about how moving between languages involves much more than translation.*

– Heather Milton, University Writing Program

“You were an easy baby.”

Over tea, my mother tells me that I came out smiling. I had held my contented expression for three minutes until the doctor firmly patted my bottom, eliciting a shriek and an avalanche of tears. This, the doctor ensured my parents, meant I was normal.

Over the ruckus of the restaurant – chopsticks clinking against porcelain, high-pitched howls of Cantonese – my mother coolly explains the origin of my Chinese name: Pang Jing-Ling. A quiet spirit; a series of syllables lodged in my throat.

Bringing the cup to my mouth, I blow on the tea and wonder whether I embody my name or my name embodies me. Brown rice swirls in a pool of dark leaves. I gulp, swallowing my thoughts.

When my parents introduce me to friends and relatives – Pang Jing-Ling, the quiet spirit – I don my polite smile: the one I use with Cantonese-speaking elders whose sentiments I cannot fully understand, but to whom I must demonstrate extreme agreeability. A polite smile does not reveal any teeth but ever-so-slightly crinkles the eyes and curls the lips. A polite smile is practiced, perfected over 21 years.

“She’s very good,” adults observe. They do not speak to me, but about me. Over me. “Hoh guay.”

I do not question the validity of their statements – that I’m quiet, that I’m shy. Rather, I accept them. Internalize them. Smile.

My parents speak Cantonese to scold me and to gossip with their friends, mouths shifting to accommodate native tongues. I know to listen.

In this language, I have never learned to respond or to speak for myself. I have, however, become competent in obeying, in declining and thanking. Unable to translate more complex thoughts, I reduce Cantonese to a language of submission.

English, on the other hand, is a language I command. My public education taught me to stick with five-paragraph formats; to use semicolons sparingly; to write in complete sentences. After years of practicing these rules, I learned to break them.

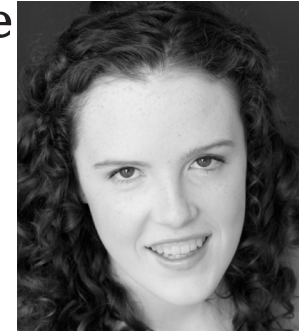
With thoughts and the agency to voice them, I have the privilege of playing with syntax. I complicate sentences with en dashes; I dismantle every subject, object, and verb.

In the spaces where I communicate in English – at work, in class, with friends – I wrangle hellish clients, I challenge problematic texts, I correct everyone’s grammar. Anything but quiet, my voice refuses to be passive.

Understanding that I grew up with a repression of language, and a language of repression, I now have a greater appreciation for language that affirms. I use English to make sense of Cantonese, dissecting the language I have such trouble speaking beyond single syllables. I explore each character’s meaning – its intricate shape and sound. Familiarizing my tongue with this language, I feel the corners of my polite smile relax.

## Languages of Resistance in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*

SARA PHELPS



*WRITER’S COMMENT: When Professor Marian Schlotterbeck announced that we would be analyzing the role of testimonies in Latin American human rights, I immediately knew I wanted to study Rigoberta Menchú’s riveting testimony of Guatemalan state violence. Menchú gained widespread international attention, and her use of language inspired a new literary tradition of testimonies in post-Cold War Latin America. These have proven to be invaluable artifacts of memory in the struggle for human rights. In addition to revealing the complex gray areas of unimaginable human rights abuses, these powerful documents represent a new form of indigenous resistance that synthesizes the power of ancient oral traditions with the written word. By highlighting the influence of indigenous oral storytelling on the form and content of testimony, I hope to demonstrate the value of indigenous systems of knowledge in understanding historical repetitions of horrific atrocities.*

*INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: One of the most challenging aspects of a course on Human Rights in Latin America is to consider state terror – that is the decision to employ a policy of political violence against civilians. To understand this history on the level of an individual, students selected different autobiographical accounts by Latin Americans living through periods of intense repression. Their task was to reflect on both the narration of those experiences and the nature of individual responsibility and accountability. Sara chose to write about the controversial classic, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning author. Sara deftly sidestepped the 1990s cultural war debates about the validity of Menchú’s account by instead focusing on the genre of testimonio. In providing a close reading of the text’s organization and the author’s motivations, Sara makes an impassioned and incisive appeal for the ongoing relevance of Menchú’s call for justice and the testimonio narrative form.*

– Marian Schlotterbeck, Department of History