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Antigona: A Voice Rebuking Power

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Travel to Ciudad Juarez on the U.S.-Mexico border and you will find a city of contrasts—in the people, activity, noise, and visual stimuli. We are arriving by air at the El Paso airport and will cross the border in a van provided by the university, becoming part of two rivers of people that flow continuously—into Mexico on one side and back into the United States on the other. The border was once an imaginary line drawn by the Rio Grande demarcating the boundaries of the two countries; today it is a heavily policed and barricaded two-way funnel that permits the border guardians to scrutinize each individual border crossing. It may just be me, but as our van approaches the toll booth with its armed guards, mechanized gates and ubiquitous cameras, my heart rate increases and as I become conscious of my heart beat, my autonomic responses seem to be signaling some possible danger. We pay a fee according to the vehicle's number of axles and wheels and Mexico's border guards wave us into another universe. Ciudad Juarez lies just four hours away from our law school in Albuquerque, but it is much farther psychically, politically, economically, socially, and legally.

Over several semesters we have been building a faculty and student collaboration with Lic. Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson, a professor of labor law at the law school of the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez (UACJ). I am traveling with a group of nine law students from my employment discrimination class, my oldest daughter who plans to apply to law school, two visiting professors from Madrid, Spain, and another faculty colleague. Officially, we are here to explore the possibility of a collaboration among three U.S./Spanish/ Mexican law schools; unofficially I am here to have the students experience the intellectual and social energy of the borderlands. I hope to redirect their attention, even for a short while, southward and outward.

Our plans are to check in to a hotel, clean up, and eat a quick lunch before heading to the law school. We will have a short introductory meeting with UACJ's Rector and other officials, tour the law school, and have dinner at a local favorite restaurant featuring Mexico's varied cuisine. The students plan to attend a *baile folklórico* and visit the club scene as they get to know their Mexican hosts.[1] The next day will include another round of administrative meetings before we head back to Albuquerque.

Our visit will begin with Professor de la Rosa's students staging a reading of *Antígona*, the Spanish language version of *Antigone*. The University of New Mexico (UNM) students and I briefly discuss our blurred memories of Sophocles' play. We don't remember too much more than that Antigone was the daughter of Oedipus; mostly we recall the fateful tale of a son who kills his father and marries his mother. We drive towards the law school and I wonder whether this reading will hold the attention of the students. *Antigone* seems abstract,

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[1] *See, e.g.*, Ballet Folklorico Alma de Mexico, http://members.aol.com/NinoCanela/ (last visited Jan. 23, 2007).

remote, literary, and it's being delivered in Spanish, a language that is not spoken well by most of the students.

We mill around a courtyard surrounded by one and two-story buildings with backpack-laden students hurrying in and out of doorways. I notice that most of the students look like younger versions of myself—dark hair, dark eyes, with shorter and slighter physical builds. In this setting I feel average, neither tall nor short, neither dark nor light-skinned.

We are shown into an auditorium and we take our seats; we the faculty members take the seats at the front of the room. There is a raised platform and the performing students begin filling the stage. They are young; as in other civil law countries, Mexican students study law as part of an undergraduate program and finish with a degree called a *Licenciatura en Derecho*. As professionals, they will use the *Lic.* abbreviation, a title of great respect in a country marked by social inequalities (like the United States) and one that is overtly hierarchical (unlike the United States). The performers are dressed in black with a few touches of red which I assume designate specific characters.

Quiet falls in the room and we hear a woman's voice: "*Hermana de mi misma sangre, Ismene querida, tú que conoces las desgracias de la casa de Edipo . . . .*"[2] Antigone is answered by her sister Ismene and then a narrator enters; later comes the voice of a senator, and then King Creon. One doesn't have to understand Spanish to notice that the voices are clear and commanding; each speaker carefully enunciates the words, punctuates and emphasizes them with pauses, inflection, and volume, delivering the complex passages with emotion and meaning. We are witnessing a practiced and perfected performance.

Some of the Spanish washes over me. Even though I am comfortable in Spanish, I know that I am missing whole phrases. But I understand that Antigone's and Ismene's two brothers have died in combat. King Creon orders, on pain of death, that Polynices, his rebellious nephew, is to be left unburied and unmourned. Antigone tries to persuade her sister to disobey the order. Ismene answers: *"No, hay que aceptar los hechos: que somos dos mujeres, incapaces de luchar contra hombres que tienen el poder, los que dan órdenes, y hay que obedecerlas—éstas y todavía otras más dolorosas. . . . "* [3]

> [We must remember we are women born,
> Unapt to cope with men; and, being ruled
> By mightier than ourselves, we have to hear
> These things—and worse. For my part, I will ask
> Pardon of those beneath, for what perforce
> I needs must do, but yield obedience
> To them that walk in power; to exceed
> Is madness, and not wisdom.][4]

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[2] Taken from an adaptation of *Antigona* by Sófocles prepared by Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson for a Seminar on Juridical Culture given at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez in November 2006, at p. 1 (hereinafter "De la Rosa adaptation") (copy on file with author).

[3] *Id.* at 5.

[4] SOPHOCLES, ANTIGONE 3 (Dover Publ'n, Sir George Young, trans.) [hereinafter "Dover version"].

Prof. de la Rosa interrupts to provide a context for the reading: he describes his pedagogical objectives and exposes the jurisprudential background of the play. He asserts that the spoken word is the lawyer's tool, especially when used to advance social justice; therefore, the voice is an instrument to be trained and mastered. Prof. de la Rosa points out that many UACJ students come from humble backgrounds and are unaccustomed to hearing their voices in public space; they arrive for their studies hushed and socially timid; so, using the classics like Sophocles, he creates an environment in which the students can train their voices and begin to form their public identities. He goes on to explain that Creon's order that Polynices' corpse is not to be buried has been lawfully promulgated. Specifically, it is a decree or edict that has been issued by an authorized official with the necessary formalities and publicized in the required manner. No other law supercedes it; the sanction of death has been ordered for transgressions, and the responsible agents have been ordered to guard the body and punish those who would disobey the order. Consequently, we have a law that is formally valid and obligatory.

One of the UNM students and I stand and translate for the non-Spanish speakers. I am at pains to have the students understand both the text and the subtext of this reading. Sophocles provides an interrogation for us of the legal versus the moral. He questions the moral right of the king to enforce his laws. Imperial power with its formalities and requisites may be legitimate, he posits, but is it consistent with the unwritten law of the gods? Sophocles simultaneously promotes the equality of women as political subjects using rhetoric that is resonant of contemporary feminist analyses. Prof. de la Rosa provides a pedagogical subtext as he asks us to listen to the voices along with the words. This skills exercise to train young lawyers to speak on behalf of justice has a poignancy to it given our location in the borderlands, a site in which privilege and privation slip and slide one against the other. Speaking truth to power, as Antigone does, is a tall order in the borderlands. It would take the genius of a Sophocles to discern the parameters of justice where the structural nature of social inequality in both the United States and Mexico is masked by hegemonic narratives about such classic concerns as democracy, the common good, and honor as a necessary trait for those who would govern.

The readings continue and Sophocles extends the theme of the legality of the laws. There are the laws of the gods, laws that are superior to those of men. Antígona speaks: *"Y no creía yo que tus decretos tuvieran tanta fuerza como para permitir que solo un hombre pueda saltar por encima de las leyes no escritas, inmutables, de los dioses. . . ."*[5]

> [. . .nor did I deem
> Your ordinance of so much binding force,
> As that a mortal man could overbear
> The unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven;][6]

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[5] De la Rosa adaptation, *supra* note 2, at 12.

[6] Dover version, *supra* note 4, at 17.

Prof. de la Rosa importunes his students to think about the executive exercising his power in violation of natural law as well as the poet exercising his power to illuminate these legal issues with a story told in the distant past. I translate this for the U.S. students but as I am contrasting the law of the king with those of the gods, I am struck by another connection.

The narrative ends with the gods extracting their revenge on Creon through his son and his wife. Upon finding the hanging corpse of Antigone, his betrothed, his son Haemon kills himself with his sword as he faces his father. Creon, hoping to find solace with his consort Eurydice, carries Haemon to the palace only to find that, once word has reached her of her son's death, she has killed herself with a blow to her heart. Creon exits.

The chorus intones: *"Con mucho, la prudencia es la base de la felicidad. Y, en lo debido a los dioses, no hay que cometer ni un desliz. No. Las palabras hinchadas por el orgullo comportan, para los orgullosos, los mayores golpes; ellas con la vejez, enseñan a tener prudencia."*[7]

> [Wisdom first for a man's well-being
> Maketh, of all things. Heaven's insistence
> Nothing allows of man's irreverence;
> And great blows great speeches avenging,
> Dealt on a boaster,
> Teach men wisdom in age, at last.][8]

Allow me a looser translation of the Spanish: "In many things, prudence is the basis for happiness. And not even a small slip is allowed in what is owed to the gods. No. Words swollen with arrogance will mean the worst blows for boasters; and these words with age teach men to have prudence."

With the extraordinary talents of his students, Professor de la Rosa gave us a demonstration about voice in legal story-telling and story-listening. We traveled to Ciudad Juarez to experience the border, to view the exotic, and to learn about the exploited. While those aspects are always there, we saw something more. Antigone turned our gaze back on ourselves. Antigone is not an abstraction, and Sophocles' words are not remote and dated. Antigone speaks to the current reality being lived—specifically in the United States (and perhaps also in Mexico with its contested presidential election and charges of electoral fraud). In the United States, a president with his minions has constructed himself as king-like, with few restraints on power, blatantly disregarding congressional mandates, and flagrantly violating international norms. I urge the students to see that in Sophocles' words we have an indictment of Bush's expansion of executive power.[9] Some questions are for the courts: Is torture constitutional?

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[7] De la Rosa adaptation, *supra* note 2, at 37.

[8] Dover version, *supra* note 4, at 52.

[9] Nicholas D. Kristof of the New York Times editorial page also chooses Antigone as a classic that is pertinent to President Bush. He writes:

> So Mr. Bush should resolve that for every hour he spends with Mr. Cheney, he will spend another curled up with classical authors like Sophocles. "Antigone," for

Are detentions and renderings of the so-called enemy combatants legal? Antigone prods us that some questions are for all of us: whether legal or illegal, are these laws and enactments *moral*?

The U.S.-Mexico border is undergoing abrupt and convulsive changes so there is something unexpected about traveling to Ciudad Juarez to hear Greek classics. The border with its own dynamics of inequality seems an odd vantage point for considering power within the imperial center, but the border actually brings the questions about executive power into greater relief. Antigone's rebuke of Creon's power rebukes us too for our silence and thus our complicity in the concentration of executive power that today is exercised in the name of the people of the United States.

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example, tells of King Creon, a good man who wants the best for his people—and yet ignores public opinion, refuses to admit error, goes double or nothing with his bets, and is slow to adapt to changing circumstance. Creon's son pleads with his father to be less rigid. The trees that bend survive the seasons, he notes, while those that are inflexible are blown over and destroyed. Americans today yearn for the same kind of wise leadership that the ancient Greeks did: someone with the wisdom to adjust course, to acknowledge error, to listen to critics, to show compassion as well as strength, to discern moral nuance as well as moral clarity. Alexander the Great used to sleep with the "Iliad" under his pillow; maybe Mr. Bush should try "Antigone."

Nicholas D. Kristof, *Under Bush's Pillow*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 4, 2007, at 4-17.