

Article

“Lucky Little Guy”: Unpacking Mixed-Family Privilege and Marginality through Critical Narrative

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of narrative as an avenue for critically unpacking family history. In this case, the narrative grows out of the preparation and performance of a one-person play, “A Conversation with Alana: One Boy’s Multicultural Rite of Passage.” Through continuously rethinking family history during the rehearsal and performance process, the intersection of marginality and privilege within a single life trajectory is analyzed.

Keywords: ethnicity; family; intercultural; intermarriage; intersectionality; marginality; mixedness; narrative; privilege; religion; segregation; surname

I grew up marginal. But I also grew up with privilege. How do I explain this apparent contradiction? Because my parents both blessed me and burdened me with their intermarriage—an intermarriage well before its time.

I came to this realization not by pondering and stewing about either my marginality or my privilege. Rather I have continuously explored and clarified these dual realities by creating and publicly presenting my family narrative—a constant reliving and rethinking of my past. In the process I have gained new insight into the concept of privilege and its function in my life.

Even at eighty-five I’m still peeling back the layers of my experience through this critical family narrative process. That is, not by merely publicly presenting my family story, but also by critically reexamining that story each time that I share my narrative and contemplate audience responses. Please accompany me on my journey.

1. A Marriage before Its Time

When it came to mixed marriage, my parents decided to be pioneers, although they never framed it that way for me. Yet I grew up with stories about the personal and family complications that it created.

A Mexican Catholic, my father was raised in a wealthy, land-holding Guadalajara family. Then, in 1913, my family became refugees. In that year the Mexican army deposed and executed Mexican Revolutionary President Francisco Madero. The military government also issued orders to arrest numerous prominent Madero supporters, including my grandfather (like me, also named Carlos Eliseo Cortés). He had been Madero’s jefe político (political boss) for the state of Jalisco.

As a result, my family had to flee to the United States. In the process they lost nearly all of their possessions. Yet they still benefited from my grandfather’s engineering education (the first Latino graduate of Stanford University), which enabled him to secure a professional position with Shell Oil in Martinez, California.

In contrast, my mother was born in Kansas City, Missouri, to meagerly educated, working-class Jewish immigrant parents from Ukraine and Austria. Starting with virtually nothing, my grandparents worked themselves up to middle class, mainly through my grandfather’s small but successful construction company. Rooted in Kansas City’s strong immigration-based Jewish community, my grandfather and others like him had to deal with omnipresent anti-Semitism, but not with

the rigid exclusion embodied in Kansas City's legal racial segregation. Granddad's financial success also enabled my grandparents to bestow on Mom the educational advantages they never had.

Mom and Dad met in Berkeley, California, while Mom was a senior at the University of California. At that time Dad was working as an auto mechanic. His B.A. in History from U.C. Berkeley could not buffer him from the economic dislocation of the Great Depression.

They got married in 1933, a time when most states barred interracial marriages. The majority of such bans focused on separating blacks and whites, so Mexicans often slipped through the cracks of America's oppressive racial/marital categorical system. Even today government agencies often seem baffled about how to categorize, identify, label, and count Latinos.

Ethnic compromises lie at the heart of most mixed-marriages. This certainly proved true for my family in racially segregated, religiously divided, class-conscious Kansas City, Missouri, where I grew up in the 1940's. I lived in a segregated white neighborhood, but Dad and I regularly attended events on the Mexican Westside. Mom raised me as a Reform Jew, but Dad secretly, albeit not consistently, took me to Catholic Mass. Dad taught me Spanish; my Jewish immigrant grandparents taught me Yiddish, the common language of Eastern European Jews and the language in which they had courted in Kansas City.

Growing up in such an intercultural crossfire provided little opportunity for me to develop a firm categorical ethnic identity, except for the constant realization that I was mixed. However, my family situation did create opportunities—make that, necessities—for learning how to straddle borders and to adapt to multiple settings. For some children, coming from mixed marriages creates identity confusion (Colker 1996; Cortés 1999; Rodríguez 2000; Cortés 2000). Not for me. My identity was clear. I was mixed, therefore existentially marginal with every group.

2. Conversations with Alana

Flash forward to the mid-1990's. I was around sixty when my daughter, Alana, first asked me to begin writing our family stories so that they would not get lost. I began doing so, mainly through memory. But I also drew on limited family correspondence, particularly the revealing, emotional letters between my parents during the two months between my mother's graduation from Berkeley in May 1933, and their marriage in Kansas City in July of that year. Before long I had written some five hundred pages.

After a while it occurred to me that—buried somewhere in those memories recounted for Alana in that sprawling, detailed family chronicle—there might be a book. But about what? To test the waters, I began giving public readings of selections from my chronicle manuscript. Because I had developed a robust career giving diversity lectures and workshops at conferences and on college campuses, I took advantage of these situations by offering to do intimate family history readings as “extras” during my visits.

Then came a life-altering evening in mid-July 2003. In 1996 I had become an adjunct faculty member of the Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication, which then operated for three weeks every July on the campus of Pacific University, just west of Portland, Oregon. Week-long classes ran all day, with special talks and events in the evening. I began giving annual evening readings about my family.

One 2003 evening a theatre director happened to be in the audience. Afterward she approached me, told me she found my story compelling, and suggested that I adapt it into a one-person play. While I had done some amateur acting, I had never before written a play. Yet the invitation was too tempting. I would give it a try.

Creating a one-hour play from those hundreds of pages of chronicle proved to be a daunting task. I first needed to identify a central theme in order to create a tight narrative line. As I discarded myriad reminiscences and peripheral material, I rediscovered my life core: the experience of living mixed. In the play I would focus on growing up mixed in categorically rigid, early post-World War II Kansas City.

Ultimately, I developed my story into a 62 min one-person play entitled *A Conversation with Alana: One Boy's Multicultural Rite of Passage* (Cortés 2020). The play consists of a conversation between me and my daughter, Alana, represented on stage by an empty chair. In the play I tell her my mixedness story and respond to her questions about my life. Drawing on advice from the director who had “discovered” me and later from a student director on my campus, the University of California, Riverside, I ultimately began to act out vignettes rather than merely narrating them. I even learned to adopt my family's varied accents.

The play has become unexpectedly successful, with more than 150 performances throughout the United States. It seems to help audience members reflect upon their own personal journeys, with post-performance discussions often running more than an hour. Maybe more important, giving those performances and contemplating audience reactions have continuously provided me with new critical insights into my family and my personal experience.

Moreover, the process of writing and performing *Alana* convinced me to make mixedness the narrative core of my memoir-in-progress. Performing the play helped transform my bulging family chronicle into a tighter, much more focused book. *Rose Hill: An Intermarriage before Its Time* (Cortés 2012) was born.

3. Critically Rethinking Family

Even after more than 150 performances of *Alana* and myriad public readings from *Rose Hill*, I am still critically rethinking my family experience. To inject freshness into the narrative, before each performance I rehearse by focusing on one element of my past. I then try to incorporate that new thinking as a personal sub-text when I perform the play.

For example, in one recent performance I focused on my Mexican grandfather Carlos, the only grandparent whom I never knew. He died in 1928, six years before I was born, and is referred to only once in the play. Yet my late grandfather continued to influence my family's trajectory, particularly because Dad constantly struggled to live up to his father's haunting demands and expectations.

I found myself staring at my grandfather's pictures and reading newspaper stories about him. His designing of steel structures for a number of new buildings during the reconstruction of San Francisco following the 1906 earthquake. His being an engineer with Shell Oil in Martinez, California, where he was also active in the community. I further grasped how this big, broad-shouldered hombre with a magnificent upturned ebony handlebar moustache had cast such a shadow over my father. Silently but powerfully, my grandfather spoke from the grave, driving my father to imbue me with pride in my Mexican heritage even while living far from the Mexican border in a Midwestern city with only a small Mexican community.

For another performance I revisited the lives of my unschooled Jewish immigrant grandparents, who rose from selling vegetables in the Kansas City market to forming a small construction company and investing in real estate. Along the way my grandmother managed apartments so that my grandfather could go to night school to obtain some basic engineering knowledge. Two years ago my daughter, Alana, and her three first cousins, my brother Gary's children, asked me to write a brief history of how, against all odds, my grandparents managed to create a real estate investing tradition that has carried down to my brother and me as well as to our children. As I composed that story, now fifty pages in length, I became even more critically aware of their vision and sacrifice.

This past June I performed *Alana* for more than one hundred college administrators at the Management Development Program of the Harvard Institutes for Higher Education. The performance followed my attending a session on patriarchy given by one of the other adjunct faculty members. By focusing on the idea of patriarchy as I prepared to perform the play, I discovered previously muted nuances in the relationships between my parents and grandparents.

Then came the opportunity to write this article for *Genealogy*. For this effort I decided to reexamine one line in the play. That line occurs on page 56 of the 61-page script.

My father died in 1985, two years after my mother, from complications of Parkinson's. Four days after Dad's funeral, the resident priest at the Villa Ventura, a Kansas City senior citizens' home where Dad was living, held a commemorative mass in his honor to a packed room of residents. Afterward a group of Dad's Villa Ventura friends insisted that I sit with them to talk about Dad.

For twenty years, following Dad's severe brain surgery in 1965, our family had watched him go downhill physically and mentally. Yet these seniors, who had never known my pre-operation father, extolled Dad's charm, wit, thoughtfulness, agile mind, lively intelligence, and great memory. I realized that these old people had spotted things our family's eyes could no longer clearly see.

At that moment in the play I walk up to the audience and reminisce about my very special relationship with Dad. His ability to recognize my moments of more-than-usual loneliness and his dedication to spending extra personal time with me. The hours we would spend reading and talking about world literature. The nights we would go to boxing matches, where Dad would punctuate the action with ruminations about ethics, honor, and chivalry.

I then turn to my daughter and tell her: "Alana, sweetheart, it wasn't until that day, at the Villa Ventura, that your Dad finally realized what a truly *lucky* little guy he had been." I have uttered that word "lucky" in performance after performance. However, as I sat down to critically reconsider my family experience for this article, "luck" took on even more robust meaning. The "luck" of my parents' mixed marriage had fueled my adolescent marginality. But it had also contributed to my long-term privilege.

4. Marginality

Because of my parents' mixed marriage, I grew up marginal. Yet it took a number of years before marginality made its presence felt in ways that I could fully recognize. In elementary school, ethnic and religious differences did not seem to mean much. Protestants and Jews hung out together. On weekends we also played with neighborhood Catholics who attended the nearby parochial school. However, when I entered high school in 1948, things changed, radically.

Kansas City public schools were then racially segregated, by law. Legal segregation meant separating Negroes, the operative word in those days, from everyone else. This applied throughout Kansas City life: in public schools, swimming pools, and boy scouting, even seating at professional baseball games. In those situations, Mexicans became honorary white people ... well, maybe off-white.

Religion turned out to be more complex. At racially segregated Southwest High School, fraternities and sororities were a big deal. Make that, *the* big deal. Members always wore their pins, which publicly announced who belonged and who did not. At the beginning of my freshman year at Southwest, many of my old elementary school friends showed up wearing fraternity pins. Why not me? I wanted to belong, too. That is when I learned the truth. For the first time the differences in my parents' backgrounds had a significant impact on my life.

Because I was being raised as a Reform Jew, I was invited to a Jewish fraternity's membership party. Yet I got turned down. One of my friends later told me that several of his fraternity brothers had questioned how someone with a Mexican Catholic father could be a real Jew. When I asked my Protestant friends if I could be considered for their fraternities, they answered matter of factly, without malice, that Christian clubs did not accept Jews. The code word was Restricted, meaning no Jews. Because of my folks, I was religiously consigned to no-man's-land.

Fraternity practices had rendered me an outsider. Dating culture reinforced this marginality. While racial segregation was embedded in law, Kansas City's religious segregation was nearly as deeply embedded in custom. Once you reached dating age, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews stuck to their own kind. In that era boys would almost always pick up dates at their homes, where the boys would be introduced to their dates' parents. This provided an opportunity for mothers and fathers to monitor relationships and stand careful watch against cross-racial and cross-religious dating.

To cope with this marginality, I had to develop special skills for maneuvering my way through such social minefields. When it came to dating, I became adept at deciding what information I would

share with prospective dates and particularly with their parents. You might say that I turned half-truths into a personal art form.

Because of my Southwest High fraternity-imposed marginality, most of my social life gravitated toward neighborhood Catholics who attended Bishop Hogan High School. In this endeavor I was aided by my light skin and Spanish surname. I looked white and sounded Catholic, particularly if I could avoid mentioning my mother to parents of prospective dates.

By the time I graduated from high school in 1952, I had become accustomed to living on the margins and maneuvering my way through perilous situations. Although I did not recognize it at the time, marginality had become a kind of personal comfort zone. To this day I gladly remain on the social margins, with no particular desire to embed myself in any group. The repeated performing of my play reinforced in me how much I had actually grown to take a perverse pleasure in being marginal.

5. Privilege

In an ironic way, growing up marginal also became a source of personal privilege for this “lucky little guy.” I use the term privilege in the clear, precise sense proposed by Peggy McIntosh in her formidable and often misconstrued treatises on white, male, and straight privilege (McIntosh 2020). McIntosh’s framing of privilege refers to the unearned advantages that accrue to an individual as a result of belonging to particular societal groups. Those advantages are not inherent to the group. Rather they are created, reinforced, and reified by society, culture, and institutions. Insidiously, individuals may benefit from privilege even if they do not recognize the advantages they have gained without earning them.

Growing up in Kansas City, mixedness had consigned me to a frustrating and often-depressing social marginality. What this confused and lonely high school student had no way of anticipating was that this very marginality—generated unintentionally by family and imposed by society, culture, and institutions—would in the long run become a source of privilege. I did not *earn* my marginality of mixedness, but in the long run I benefited from it. To go back to the line that I have repeated so many times in my play but did not fully unpack until writing this article, I was *lucky*. So, what types of privilege luck did I benefit from?

I benefited from white privilege and male privilege. I grew up with the unearned advantage of light skin. I still benefit from it. Regardless of the fact that my father is Mexican, I have never been stopped by a police officer for driving while brown or by an immigration agent to prove my citizenship. And, regardless of other aspects of my background, I was a man, with all of the unearned advantages that this automatically conferred on me.

I enjoyed multilingual privilege. At home my father taught me Spanish and my Jewish grandparents taught me Yiddish. I was the only member of my family who became somewhat adept at both languages. While I no longer speak Yiddish and my Spanish is often shaky, that unearned advantage of growing up surrounded by home language variety has helped me become comfortable in most language situations, even in circumstances involving languages I do not know. I have also learned to speak three languages, read six, and play online trivia in eight.

I benefited from class privilege. While my family was poor during the early years of my life, both of my parents were college graduates. Even when we had little money, they raised me with the expectation that I would follow in their educational footsteps. My father, who came from an upper-class Mexican tradition, insisted that I view the world as one of possibilities regardless of our often-precarious financial situation.

I benefited from surname privilege, although here it was a mixed blessing. In high school, my Spanish surname restricted some of my social options, but it also helped me with parents of Catholics. Moreover, when I began my university teaching career in the late 1960’s during the birth of the Chicano Movement and the initial development of ethnic studies, my surname gave me a degree of initial credibility that would not have occurred had my parents’ ethnicities been switched and had I grown up as Carlos Hoffman (my mother’s maiden surname). Starting university teaching in 1968,

I immediately plunged into Chicano activities, including serving as Chair of my campus' Chicano Studies Program for seven years. I never had to explain why a Chicano had a surname, Hoffman.

In retrospect, might my life trajectory have developed differently if my parents' ethnicities had been reversed and had I therefore grown up as Carlos Hoffman? Might such surname privilege have helped me find a more secure place among Kansas City Jews? That is a counter-factual hypothesis that I can merely contemplate.

Finally, in the long run I benefited from religious privilege, meaning mixed religious privilege. My mother raised me as a Reform Jew. My father, however, took me to mass, surreptitiously, always insisting that I should not tell my mother. Yet my father gave up this religious effort by the time my brother Gary, nearly six years my junior, entered his formative years. Maybe partially because of this, Gary became a Conservative Jew and even president of his Kansas City synagogue, while I ultimately developed into what is now referred to as being religiously unaffiliated.

Yet my mixed religious privilege seems to have helped me. I take great pleasure being around multiple faiths and have served as a diversity consultant and speaker for numerous religious institutions. I must add, however, that one of my deeply committed Southern Baptist friends rejects this privilege notion, arguing that my mixed background contributed to the misfortune of my not growing up with a firm faith tradition.

6. Conclusions

In other words, as I continue to revisit my play and reconsider my personal narrative, I think even more critically about privilege as being a form of personal luck enhanced by institutions and cultural practices. Yet that privilege may take its time in manifesting itself. Indeed, in my case the very factors that were a source of marginality in my youth would ultimately grant me privilege.

Raised in a mixed home at a time when intermarriages were relatively rare, I grew up in a city characterized by legal racial segregation and culturally erected religious barriers. In the short run these societal features consigned me to continuous social isolation and imbued me with a pervading sense of marginality.

Yet in the long run these very features of my early trajectory helped me to develop the insights, skills, and self-confidence to deal with the complexities and challenges of living in a constantly changing world of diversity. Some of the very factors that had previously contributed to my pain and marginality ultimately provided me with numerous advantages as I embarked on a diversity-focused career of working for equity and justice.

Uncovering one's own family past is not a simple, static analytical process. It is developmental, involving thinking and rethinking throughout your life. In my case I have been able to continuously revisit the past through my play performances.

This has afforded me the opportunity to critically reconsider my family with regularity. That process has enabled me to continuously discover new things about myself, including the complex interplay of privilege and marginality in my life. In short, the public narrating of critical family history can become a never-ending, continuously revealing personal journey.

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