When being an “American” does not yield empowerment and acceptance, marginalized groups look for labels around which to proclaim identity and rally for political and communal purposes. The emergent theory of ethnic identity proposed by sociologist Felix Padilla in *Latino Ethnic Consciousness* (1985) suggests that ethnic identity is adaptive and evolving. It adjusts to the institutional and structural forces of the dominant culture. In the process, ethnic identity evolves in several ways. There is ethnic identity based on symbolic themes such as a common language, rituals, or shared worldviews. There is ethnic identification as historical consciousness, a sequence of events and struggles over time that reflects continuity from past to future. There is also ethnic identity as social consciousness, a seeking after communal or group acceptance. Finally, there is ethnic identity as strategy, a way of gaining political voice. Padilla’s focus is on the evolution of communal ethnic identity, but individuals also go through a similar process in understanding and coming to terms with their ethnic identity.

The individual process can be understood by examining the different terms or names persons use to identify themselves over the course of their lives. Each “name” is a rhetorical device insofar as it communicates a particular story. Walter Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm suggests that every person has life experiences that become his or her own “story.” According to Fisher, these experiences are biographical, cultural, historical, and moral, and they define the efforts of reasoning and valuing beings to conduct their lives in some semblance of order. Padilla’s definition of ethnic identity and Fisher’s focus on the narratives of our lives come together to help us understand the rhetorical impact of names placed on individuals and groups by themselves and by others. These names are “not merely a dilemma of self-identity, but of self-in-group-identity” (Rendon, 1971, p. 324). In this essay, I trace the unfolding of my own ethnic identity from Spanish to Mexican American, to Latina, and to Chicana by briefly examining the story behind each name. I also address the value of, indeed the necessity for, multiple names.

### Unfolding Ethnic Identity

Over the course of my life one question has been consistently asked of me: *What are you?* I used to reply that I was American, but it quickly became clear this was unacceptable because what came next was, “No, really, what are you?” In my more fervent moments I responded, “I am human.” I stopped when I realized people’s feelings were hurt. Ironic? Yes, but the motive behind the question often justified hurt feelings. I became aware of this only after asking a question of my own: *Why do you ask?*

The answers sometimes astounded me and almost always saddened me. I was astonished by outright
hostility based on the assumption that I am where I am today because of "an easy affirmative-action ride." My sadness resulted from a growing knowledge of the desperate need of students who timidly ask, "What are you?" in the hopes of finding a role model. The combined result of my responses to "What are you?" and others' responses to "Why do you ask?" has been an enlightenment. Confronting the motives of people has forced me to examine who I am. In the process I have had to critically examine my own choices, in different times and contexts, of the names by which I am "placed" in society. The names are "Spanish," "Mexican American," "Latina," and "Chicana."

"I Am Spanish"

Behind this label is the story of my childhood in northern New Mexico where I was born and raised. New Mexico was the first permanent Spanish settlement in the Southwest, and New Mexicans have characterized themselves as Spanish for centuries. My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents considered themselves Spanish; wrongly or rightly, they attributed their customs, habits, and language to their Spanish heritage, and I followed suit. In Fisher's terms, this was the biographical aspect of my life story. From Padilla's perspective, this would be considered ethnic identity based on symbolic themes such as rituals and practices. The rituals and practices included covering paths with flower petals for religious processions, speaking Spanish with some regional peculiarities, and listening to the religious ballads of the Penitentes. We never talked about whether we were really Spanish. Only in later years did I hear the argument that the intermarriage of Spaniards and Indians invalidated the use of the name "Spanish." Its continued use, according to Mario García (1989), communicates the idea that "racially and culturally they [New Mexicans] had to do more with Spain than with Mexico"; therefore, to be Spanish is to consider oneself "racially pure" or an "anglicized Mexican American" (p. 281). García's argument might or might not be valid, but, in my young mind, the story of being Spanish did not include concepts of racial purity or assimilation; what it did do was allow me to begin my life with a clearly defined identity and a place in the world. For me, the story of being Spanish incorporates into its plot the innocence of youth, before the reality of discrimination became an inherent part of the knowledge of who I am.

"I Am Mexican American"

When I left New Mexico, my sense of belonging did not follow me across the state border. When I responded to the question "What are you?" by saying, "I am Spanish," people corrected me: "You mean Mexican, don't you?" My initial reaction was anger; how could they know better than I who I was? But soon my reaction was one of puzzlement, and I wondered just why there was such insistence that I be Mexican. Reading and studying led me to understand that the difference between Spanish and Mexican American could be found in the legacy of colonization. Mirandé and Enríquez (1979) make a distinction between the "internal" colonization of the Southwest and the "classic" colonization of Mexico. A central consequence of internal colonization is that "natives are deposed from power and native institutions are completely destroyed" (p. 9). There is no formal or legal existence; it is as if the natives are reinvented in the conqueror's image. Therefore, behind the name "Spanish" is the story of internal colonization that does not allow for prior existence.

On the other hand, classic colonization "allows for more continuity between the pre- and post-conquest societies" because "native institutions are modified but retained," allowing formal and legal existence of the natives (p. 9). Thus, behind the name "Mexican American" is the story of classic colonization that allows for prior existence and that also communicates duality. The name itself signifies duality; we are, as Richard A. García (1983) argues, "Mexican in culture and social activity, American in philosophy and politics" (p. 88). As native-born Americans, we also have a dual historical consciousness—the history of America and the history before America—that we must weave into the narrative of our lives to create a collective "biography." We have dual visions: the achievement of the American dream and the preservation of cultural identity. To be Mexican American means "navigating" precariously between both worlds, inhabiting both in good faith, and finally ... forging a span between ... original
Mexican and ... acquired American enculturations” (Saldivar, 1990, p. 168).

“I Am Latina”
If the story behind the name Mexican American is grounded in duality, the story behind the name “Latina” is grounded in cultural connectedness. The Spaniards proclaimed vast territories of North and South America as their own. They intermarried in all the regions in which they settled. These marriages yielded offspring who named themselves variously as Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Mexicans, and so forth, but they connect culturally with one another when they name each other Latinas.

Rosaldo (1989) argues that culture encompasses “the informal practices of everyday life” (p. 26). One of the most fundamental practices that unites those belonging to the Latino culture is religion, probably because Catholicism was another Spanish legacy. The Virgin Mary is appealed to in the course of daily living; the title by which she is known changes, but her importance is never questioned. For example, she is La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico, Nuestra Señora de la Carenidad del Cobre in Cuba, La Virgen de la Macarena in Colombia, and La Conquistadora in New Mexico. She symbolizes the deep spirituality that is a definitive characteristic of the Latino culture. To use the name Latina is to communicate acceptance and belonging in a broad cultural community. This is ethnic identity as a type of consciousness that addresses the cultural aspect of Fisher’s conception of the life story.

“I Am Chicana”
This name suggests a smaller community, a special kind of Mexican American awareness that does not invoke others (Cubans, Puerto Ricans, etc.). In Chicano Manifesto, Rendon (1971, p. 320) argues that “to be Chicana means that a person has looked deeper into his/her being.” To appropriate the name for oneself signifies the most intense ethnic identity, because, as Trejo (1979) suggests, “Chicana/a” is “the only term that was especially selected by us, for us” (p. xvii). Padilla would define this ethnic identity as a strategy, and he would be right; the name was the primary political as well as rhetorical strategy of the Chicano movement of the 1960s. Mirande and Enriquez (1979, 12) argue that a dominant characteristic of the name “Chicana” is that it admits a “sense of marginality.” There is a political tone and character to “Chicana” that signifies a story of self-determination and empowerment. As such, the name denotes a kind of political becoming. At the same time, however, the name communicates the idea of being American, not in a “melting pot” sense that presupposes assimilation, but rather in a pluralistic sense that acknowledges the inalienable right of existence for different peoples (Trejo 1979).

The Worth of Multiple Names
What, then, am I? The truth is that I am all of these.

Each name reveals a different facet of identity that allows symbolic, historical, cultural, and political connectedness. These names are no different than other multiple labels we take on. For example, to be mother, wife, sister, and daughter is to admit to the complexity of being female. Each name implies a narrative of experiences gained in responding to circumstance, time, and place and motivated by a need to belong. As such they possess great rhetorical force. So it is with the names Spanish, Mexican American, Latina, and Chicana. They reveal facets of complex cultural beings. In my case, I resort to being Spanish and all it implies whenever I return to my birthplace, in much the same way that we often resort to being children again in the presence of our parents. But I am also Mexican American when I balance the two important cultures that define me; Latina, when I wish to emphasize cultural and historical connectedness with others; and Chicana, whenever opportunities arise to promote political empowerment and assert cultural pride.

It is sometimes difficult for people to understand the “both—and” mentality that results from this simultaneity of existence. In To Split a Human, Tafolla (1985) traces the theme of duality that gave rise to the “both—and” mentality. Beginning with pre-Columbian civilizations, the mythic polarities of life-death, half male-half female, and the Mother-Father god represented dual natures. In contemporary times, this duality manifests itself rhetorically as “otherness,” which González (1990) defines as “expressions of the [Mexican American] cultural identity ... that includes simultaneous themes of separation and desire for inclusion” (p. 276). Although some might
lament this duality, Tafolla finds joy in it. Chicana
comen women expressed to Tafolla their feelings about living
in the midst of two cultures: "What is most exciting ... is the constant thought in my mind that I am
actually two"; "Being bilingual and bicultural has
sensitized me ... I can then live intensely and not
merely exist."
"There are several words that we can
use to describe a feeling, thing, etc. that cannot be
translated into English ... and some that cannot be
translated into Spanish. We have both" (pp. 93–94).
We are indeed enriched by belonging to two cul-
tures. We are made richer still by having at our dis-
posal several names by which to identify ourselves.
Singly, the names Spanish, Mexican American,
Latina, and Chicana communicate part of a life story.
Together they weave a rhetorically powerful nar-
rative of ethnic identity that combines biographical,
historical, cultural, and political experiences.

ENDNOTE
1. Name is the term I use to describe the confluence of
historical, cultural, biographical, political, and sym-
bolic themes that express membership in a particular
group.

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