

Mexican American YA Lit:

It's Literature with a Capital "L"!

I met Bill Broz several years ago when he came to deep South Texas to interview for an English Education position at the university where I was teaching. As happens during these visits, Broz was expected to either teach a class or present his research to a group of colleagues. He did what many of us have done in that situation: he combined the two. In a classroom full of students whose space had been invaded by a job candidate and a handful of various faculty members—there to determine whether or not he would be an asset to the department, the college, and the university—Bill both taught the class and gave a not-so-formal-yet-obvious colloquium. He met with my children's and adolescent literature class, which was populated by all Mexican American and Mexican students, most of whom were preparing to become teachers.

Initially, I was apprehensive because my main concern in teacher training courses has always been less for my own students and more for theirs in the near and distant futures. Why? Because the academic successes or failures of those future students are tied directly to me. My teacher candidates' students are my own by association. Gay (2000) describes culturally responsive teaching as "a personal endeavor" (p. 183); in other words, I take teaching personally. Therefore, I better be in top form. And so should anyone else who's responsible for teaching my class, even for a day, even as part of the interview process.

So, on the day Broz stood before my class, I sat somewhere toward the back wondering whether this White professor from Iowa, the very middle of the

Midwest, would be similarly concerned with future generations of Rio Grande Valley students and their academic well-being. That he had been a teacher in the public school and university classrooms for decades helped to allay my fears, but only somewhat. Of course he cared about children; he'd devoted the majority of his life to educating them, and here he was, interviewing to take yet another teaching position. To me, though, he was still an outsider, so would he grasp how special our brown-skinned, Spanish- and English-speaking kids are? Could he identify with young people who have grown up on the Texas-Mexico border, for whom a trip three hours northward to San Antonio was more out of the ordinary than a trip three hours to the south? In those few moments that ticked by as we waited for the students to settle in and for Broz's formal introduction, I found myself wondering what, if anything, he could possibly bring to the deep South Texas table.

He spoke about the work he was presently doing with rural young Iowans, basing his research, in large part, on Luis Moll's "funds of knowledge" concept (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), that is, children's "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133), resources that will help educators to "organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (p. 132). The answer to my question: yes, Broz *got* our students.

Real Multicultural Education

At the time, I had only recently discovered Freire (2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987), who'd begun to inform my focus of instruction and to shape my list of required texts. For me, at the time, his literacy theory boiled down to perhaps his most-oft quoted statement regarding literacy acquisition: "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p. 35). I found Freire through the Freemans (2003, 2004), who were writing about the use of culturally relevant literature in traditionally underrepresented classrooms as an attempt to encourage non- and reluctant Mexican American and other Latino/a readers to take up the act of reading, to find their groove on their path to engaged interaction with books.

It came as no surprise, then, that my students connected with Broz and he with them, and less of a surprise that he was offered the job. Fortunately for our South Texas students and theirs in the future, he accepted the offer. Since his move to the Rio Grande Valley, he has shifted his attention from the fiction of the rural Midwest (Hedges, 1991, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*; Stong, 1932/1996, *State Fair*; Waller, 1992, *The Bridges of Madison County*; and other similar titles) to the fiction and poetry of Mexican American and other Latino/a writers for children and young adults. On his lists he includes, among others, the works of Viola Canales, Diane Gonzalez Bertrand, and Rudolfo Anaya, all Mexican American. Broz (2010) has found that when teachers include works that are representative of the local community, readers respond positively, with relatively few exceptions (p. 94).

Menchaca (2001) describes several reasons for using this sort of literature with Latino/a students: It "provides different examples from those presented in textbooks, counteracts current views placing Western males primarily as the hero in all events, and shows students and teachers from the majority culture that women and minorities have participated in many kinds of activities"; it "builds and strengthens the self-esteem of Hispanic students"; it helps to instill "in their hearts and in their minds" that their home or familial culture should remain at the fore; and Latino/a readers "will more likely relate to the examples, and thus make connections to the content being learned" (p. 18).

Others would add a few more rationales for advocating for this literature's implementation in underserved classrooms: for instance, Banks (1993), addressing multicultural education, from which culturally relevant or responsive teaching stems, argues that a "major goal of multicultural education . . . is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality" (p. 3). He also writes (2008) that an additional goal of multicultural education, and by extension culturally relevant teaching, "is to provide students with cultural, ethnic, and language alternatives" (p. 2). These alternatives would help relieve some of the negative effects marginalized students experience when exposed to a chiefly Anglo-dominant curriculum. These negative effects include "find[ing] the school culture alien, hostile, and self-defeating" (p. 2).

The alternatives don't apply exclusively to the student of color, though; they also serve White readers, according to Webster (2002): locking horns with a text by the *other*, about the *other*, aimed at the *other* can bolster a White student's "ability to question the status quo" and can help him/her in developing the wherewithal to take "a critical stance toward the social, political, and economic systems that influence our daily lives" (p. ix).

The use of culturally relevant texts undoubtedly benefits the disenfranchised students. As a published Mexican American author of young adult fiction, I have heard stories from both teachers and students over the years about how one story or another of mine has had positive effects on reading lives, especially for young Latino/a readers. I'm grateful for the reaction. "They were non- or reluctant readers," teachers have said of certain students, "until, that is, they read your novel *The Whole Sky Full of Stars*"; or, "They'd never been passionate about reading and then they picked up a copy of *The Jumping Tree*, and they so identified with your story. You may as well have called the main character by my student's name." The tenor of most that teachers have shared with me about how my fiction has transformed their Mexican American

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and Mexican students has almost exclusively followed in that same vein—the work as it applies to a student through culture.

Literature with a Capital “L”

Using works by Mexican American writers in the ways described above, hoping that students of color will somehow experience transformation, is a starting point, but “good intentions” are not enough (Gay, 2000, p. 13). When implemented at this superficial level, there is the danger of Mexican American litera-

ture being relegated to a secondary position in the literature classroom. (The same can be said of works by all minority authors.) Gay (2000) writes, “Goodwill must be accompanied by pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as the courage to dismantle the status quo” (p. 13).

It seems, though, that novels, collections of short fiction, and books of poetry by Mexican Americans exist in the class-

room almost exclusively either to teach the dominant community about the *other’s* culture as it is portrayed by someone from within and therefore authentic, or to prompt the Mexican American non- or reluctant readers into the act of reading by introducing them to writing that they should share an obvious connection with. This is problematic—from the standpoint of the author, definitely, and for the multicultural educator—because students, especially the ones who benefit from the use of this literature as a cultural resource, will inevitably understand the purpose of this literature’s existence as solely that. In other words, they may take it to mean that Mexican American titles serve a more culturally therapeutic function instead of serving as straight-up literature, as do their Anglo counterparts.

Though it might exist, I have never read an article dealing with the work of Viola Canales or Benjamin Alire Sáenz as Literature, capital “L,” though I have read articles that speak to their cultural usefulness. By no means is this an attempt to undervalue the incred-

ible work undertaken by Banks, Broz, Gay, Nieto, the Freemans, and a great many more similar voices who know intimately the field of multicultural and culturally responsive education. I could not agree more with them that multicultural education, when implemented system-wide as a guiding philosophy and practical matter in the classroom, will most assuredly prove beneficial: students will be transformed into participating and contributing citizens globally, and the world, from the local classroom to its farthest reaches, will be enriched, as well.

Nevertheless, multicultural education must be treated as “reform movement” (Banks, 2008, p. 39) or as true “curriculum *transformation*” (p. 19). If instead, it is regarded as a mere strategy or “curriculum *infusion*” (p. 39), or worse yet, a genuine way of learning that is outright disregarded as rubbish, anti-education, or anti-Western, then it is wasted for the most part—especially as it pertains to Mexican American students. Subconsciously or otherwise, these students will understand that Mexican American literature takes a backseat to the dominant culture’s literature, the one most often studied in the classroom, analyzed carefully, written about critically. They will perceive that the *other’s* work continues to be relegated to a secondary position, which will be accepted as further proof that the student of color is not a full citizen in the classroom and without.

To prevent conveying such perceptions to these students, we educators must recognize when and with whom to use Mexican American literature as a literacy acquisition tool that will assist this select group of students in moving from non- or reluctant readers to actively engaged readers; we must know also when to use it with White and other non-Mexican American students to help dispel prevailing stereotypes; and we must understand when to use it in the same ways we do the novels of Chris Crutcher, John Green, Gary Paulsen, Graham Salisbury, and Terry Trueman—that is, as Literature, capital “L.” We don’t deny Mexican American works’ cultural value—we will even bring it up in class—but we don’t treat it as a lesser literature (lowercase “l”) by assigning it *because of* its cultural significance. It *is* that, of course, but it is also more, just like the books by the above named authors. When Mexican American students see their literature positioned in the same space with the dominant culture’s, they will begin to see themselves as members on par

with the tradition; no longer *other* or *lesser*, they will acknowledge that they are equal and equally different, sharing this space in which we celebrate the differences not at the infusion level or superficially, but as a lifestyle, a core philosophy, as true reform.

Teaching Multicultural Books as Literature

Following is a short, annotated list of Mexican American titles that are well known to educators and are widely used in our nation's classrooms, but that have suffered from mere curricular infusion. The annotations include sample alternative classroom approaches, strategies, or projects for use with these books. Of course, we educators know well how to come up with our own ways to make Literature come alive for students, so don't take these suggestions as anything else but that.

Bertrand, D. G. (1999). *Trino's choice*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press.

Bertrand, D. G. (2001). *Trino's time*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press.

When readers first meet Trino, he is running away from a certain beating by Rosca and his thuggish cronies for having witnessed a crime they committed. From deep poverty and fear, Trino learns to survive by relying on his real friends, his family, and his pursuit of knowledge. Without them, he is not the man he can be. With them, he is well on his way to true manhood.

Teachers can use this book to study the theme of enjoying or suffering the consequences that result from making choices. Students will analyze hypothetical or actual situations and how to predict probable outcomes. Using Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" as a model, they will write an "if-then" dramatic monologue in which they place their character in a situation that they must resolve.

Burciaga, J. A. (1993). *Drink cultura: Chicanismo*. Santa Barbara, CA: Joshua Odell Editions.

In this collection of essays ranging in topics from the very personal to the more historical in nature, Burciaga writes in a very eloquent yet simple way about subjects with which students will identify, no matter their race or ethnicity. In one chapter, he deals with mixed marriages in which he describes his marriage to

a Mexican American woman, mixed because he's from Texas and Cecilia's from California. He also addresses Mexican and Mexican American history, culture, and language in sometimes witty and other times more somber ways.

Students who read these essays will discover several approaches to writing essays. Not one of Burciaga's entries follows the five-paragraph format, so teachers can introduce young writers to his more organic method of communicating ideas clearly. Teachers and students can attempt to map or outline a few of the essays, which usually are more circular or winding than straightforward, then have students overlay these maps onto their own essays; then they can attempt a revision in which they mimic Burciaga's formats and see where it takes them.

Carlson, L. M., & Hijuelos, O. (1994). *Cool salsa: Bilingual poems on growing up Latino in the United States*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Carlson, L. M., & Hijuelos, O. (2005). *Red hot salsa: Bilingual poems on being young and Latino in the United States*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Though not composed solely of Mexican American poems, these anthologies by one of the foremost anthologists of poetry by minorities includes pieces by some of Mexican American literature's strongest voices. Among them Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Abelardo B. Delgado, Luis J. Rodríguez, Trinidad Sánchez, Gary Soto, and Gina Valdés.

Teachers will be able to generate several topics based on their reading of these poems. Students could respond to them in the form of narrative quick-writes. Once they've composed several responses, they can divide the lines of prose into lines resembling poetry, add figurative language and poetic devices, and subtract that which keeps the pieces from being poems. Then publish a class anthology of original work.

Jiménez, F. (1997). *The circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Jiménez, F. (2001). *Breaking through*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Jiménez, F. (2008). *Reaching out*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

In his three-part memoir, Jiménez recounts the sometimes tragic, other times hopeful story of one

family's journey across the border from their home in Mexico to California where they become primarily field laborers. Beginning with *The Circuit*, Jiménez introduces the idea of how vital education is to attaining success in life. To that end, Panchito, the narrator, begins school until he is uprooted due to the plight of migrant families. In spite of these difficulties, his love for acquiring knowledge serves as the catalyst for his continued efforts to seek it out. Along the way, he learns how to appreciate home and family. In the final installment, Panchito leaves home for college, a dream come true.

One of the more attractive parts of Jiménez's books is his use of photographs that help to document these years. Student writers can create photo essays using 3–5 family photographs that, when placed side by side, tell a story; then they will write that story.

Martinez, V. (1996). *Parrot in the oven: Mi vida*. New York: HarperCollins.

In Martinez's tragic historical novel, 14-year-old Manny is in danger of filling his father's shoes, problematic because his father is a no-good drunk who is verbally and physically abusive, at one point aiming a rifle at Manny's mother, making "a shooting noise with his lips *Kapow. Kapow*" (p. 60). Life is tough enough for Manny, and there is not a mountain in sight, much less greener grass on the other side. Manny will come to a crossroads where he must decide to step into his father's shoes and head down that tragic path or chuck them and find his own pair.

Leading up to reading *Parrot*, small groups of students could research different aspects of the story and present them to classmates. Digital presentations would be at least three minutes long. Examples of research topics include, but are not limited to, the *bracero* movement, educational inequity as it pertains to Latinos at the time the story takes place, health care for minorities during the 70s, pop culture of the times, etc. When reading the book, students will understand more deeply many of the issues that may previously have gone unnoticed.

This next list includes other titles that students are sure to enjoy. They also fall into both categories previously mentioned—multicultural and/or culturally relevant literature and Literature.

- de la Peña, M. (2005). *Ball don't lie*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.
- de la Peña, M. (2008). *Mexican whiteboy*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.
- Jaramillo, A. (2006). *La linea*. New Milford, CT: Roaring Brook Press.
- Lopez, D. (2009). *Confetti girl*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Martinez, C. G. (2008). *The smell of old lady perfume*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Mora, P. (2000). *My own true name*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press.
- Rice, D. (2003). *Crazy loco: Stories*. New York, NY: Speak/Penguin.
- Rice, D. (2011). *Heart-shaped cookies*. Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press.
- Sáenz, B. A. (2005). *Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Soto, G. (2000). *Jessie de la Cruz: A profile of a United Farm Worker*. New York, NY: Karen and Michael Braziller Book.
- Soto, G. (2006). *A fire in my hands*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.
- Stork, F. X. (2010). *The last summer of the death warriors*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.
- Tafolla, C. (2001). *Sonnets and salsa*. San Antonio, TX: Wings Press.

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- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.
- Saldaña, R. (2001). *The jumping tree*. New York: Delacorte.
- Saldaña, R. (2007). *The whole sky full of stars*. New York: Wendy Lamb Books.
- Stong, P. (1996). *State fair*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Webster, J. P. (2002). *Teaching through culture: Strategies for reading and responding to young adult literature*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press.
- Waller, R. J. (1992). *The bridges of Madison County*. New York: Warner Books.

ALAN Foundation Research Grants

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