

From a Whisper to a Shout:

Emergent Voice in Latino/Latina Literature

In schools across the country, the literary landscape in English/Language Arts (ELA) classrooms continues to be a whitewash; those of color are often still missing from the palette (Medina, 2004). This invisibility of people of color, Latinos/Latinas in particular, sends very powerful ideological messages to all of our students about the value (or lack thereof) of Latinos/as in our society (Medina, 2004). According to Rojas (2010), “Few educators and scholars attempt to develop a curriculum that is respectful of the varied traditions of U.S. Latino literatures” (p. 266), yet for the self-image of students of color, it is essential that they be represented in all forms of text. Additionally, Ford, Tyson, Howard, and Harris III (2000) stated that, “Many educators . . . have recognized the importance of books as critical sources of self-understanding and social understanding. Books have the potential and the power to help children to learn about themselves and others” (p. 235). Whether it be the fight for social justice (Acosta, 2007; Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado, 2011; Greenslate, 2007) or democracy (Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005), exploring racial inequity (Hinton, 2004), or finding one’s identity (Crawford-Garrett, 2009; Keis, 2006), the study of Young Adult (YA) literature can help students discover their own voices while reading novels in the classroom.

It is essential that in the 21st century, Latino/a students become vocal advocates for themselves in their fight against social injustice (e.g., racism, classism). Although “[t]here is no easy answer and by no means any quick fix to the plague of cultural inequality that exists in our country” (Woods, 2008/2009, p. 17), reading the appropriate YA novel can be of

great assistance. When actively engaging students with classroom texts, ELA teachers have the ability to prepare students with the necessary skills (e.g., to view the world critically) to help them become strong individuals who will stand up and fight against perceived injustices. Since there are “a multitude of inequities and biases that impinge on the lives, hopes, and dreams of [Latino/a] students” (Acosta, 2007, p. 36), it is essential that Latino/a youth begin to question the world around them in a critical fashion in order to become empowered to fight social inequities (Rodriguez, 2000) due to race, class, and gender. In order to accomplish this goal, ELA teachers must choose texts that reflect their students’ lives, communities, and shared history (Acosta, 2007). In particular, it is important to present novels that have protagonists who find their own voices while overcoming personal obstacles since, according to Roberts and Crawford (2008), storybook characters can be models for children.

Sperling and Appleman (2011) state that, “voice is an engaging metaphor for human agency and identity” (p. 70), and by overcoming great adversity and uncertainty in their lives, fictional characters find their own sense of power. In this textual analysis, I will discuss three YA novels that I teach in Latino/Latina Literature (a grade 10–12 English elective) in which the protagonists discover their voices through the course of the story. Voice, as it is used in this analysis, refers to the agency that characters find as they overcome various obstacles. I will be focusing on *CrashBoom-Love* (Herrera, 1999), *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997), and *Finding Miracles* (Alvarez, 2006). I will discuss how

each protagonist's voice emerges when presented with internal and external challenges and how the emergence of voice helps the protagonists gain a better understanding of themselves.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is presented from a critical literacy theoretical lens, which "is a process of analyzing a text for representation of power, gender, bias, race, or social class" (Sanders, Foyil, & Graff, 2010). Influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, critical literacy calls for a change in the way we think, rather than the use of specific teaching techniques in the classroom (McDaniel, 2004). In schools today, "Critical literacy is not simply being critical of texts; it is the practice of evaluating information, insights, and perspectives through an analysis of power, culture, class, and gender" (Lapp & Fisher, 2010). According to McDaniel (2004), "Critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world" (p. 474), and by thinking critically, students learn to question the world in which we live and work toward making changes they deem important.

Critical literacy theory also stresses the necessity for readers to analyze texts in order to enable them to question and challenge their position (or "status quo") in society (McLaren, 1988; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). Therefore, it is my goal that students begin to interpret texts via a critical literacy lens, just as I am doing in this textual analysis. When students learn to look at literature with a critical eye, it gives them strength and power; if Latino/a students are to be able to shift the power relations of race and class in schooling, as well as in their adult lives in this country, they need to be able to "detect bias and . . . think more critically about hidden messages in what they read" (Ford et al., 2000, p. 237).

Literature Review

Sperling and Appleman (2011) have stated that "the concept of voice is both ancient and contemporary . . . [and] although the concept of voice has guided both research and teaching in the study of literacy, theorists invoke the concept in different ways" (p. 70). Across academic literature, *voice* has many different definitions and functions and is often undefined. It

has been referred to as everything from the use of the spoken word to an author's narrative style in a text. It "is used frequently and freely both to stand for and to accompany such language and literacy concepts as writing style, authorship, language register, rhetorical stance, written and spoken prosody, the self in text and in discourse" (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 70). Voice, as it is used in this analysis, is a method of describing one's agency and identity in the world around us (Sperling & Appleman, 2011); therefore, it can be used to describe strength, recognition, and presence (Macias, 2005). Voice is something

. . . that can be given and taken away by teachers or others in students' lives. As writers and readers, students can lose or find their voices. As writers and readers, students hear and are influenced by others' voices—social, cultural, political, and personal—and these voices may be concordant or conflicting. (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 71)

Although the use of voice has been widely studied and assessed in academic circles, the study of the emergence of Latino/Latina agency in YA literature is still greatly underrepresented.

Although it is predicted that Latinos/as will comprise one-fifth of the US population by 2050 (Cart, 1996), it continues to be quite difficult for Latino/a-themed texts to break into mainstream US classrooms (Medina, 2004), which still maintain the traditional, White, Eurocentric literary canon. I believe that multicultural literature is beneficial to all students, not just Latino/as; we all benefit from being able to step into other people's shoes and walk around in them for a little while, or as stated by Woods (2008/2009), to "envision one's self within [another] culture" (p. 18).

In my Latino/Latina Literature course, my primary intent is to help students discover their individual and collective voices (agency) and be able to confront the inequities in our society due to widespread racism and discrimination. I believe that I am obligated to uncover the "ugly side of our history" by reading texts—both print and nonprint, fiction and nonfiction—to help students see racism and discrimination in American society. In other words, it is my responsibility to "stress the need for Latino students

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to understand the existence of bias and the manner in which it affects their life and the world” (Darder, 1995, p. 340). In that way, a student can begin to find a voice, both in and out of the classroom, as well as learn the importance of speaking up. As stated by

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learn to discover their own confident and determined voices as well.

The Novels

CrashBoomLove (2003), written in verse by Juan Felipe Herrera, is the story of César Garcia, a teenage boy who struggles with his family breaking apart. After his father leaves, César becomes despondent and follows his “friends” down the path of drugs and violence, both in and out of school. Written in the form of a narrative poem, this story shows how César and his mother discover their voices and learn to become advocates for themselves. Overall, students appreciate the flow of the story and its creative, poetic format.

Buried Onions (1997) is a piece written by Gary Soto, an author who is known for his children’s books as well as his work for adults (Medina, 2006). In this novel, Eddie is a 19-year-old from Fresno who struggles to find his way in life while avoiding the drugs and violence that plague his neighborhood. This novel, one of my students’ favorites, is written in a descriptive way that engages the audience but does not stereotype the lives of Mexican Americans.

The last novel that I will discuss is *Finding Miracles* (2006), written by Julia Alvarez, the well-established feminist Latina author (Medina, 2006). This novel tells the story of Milagros (or Milly, as she is also called), a girl adopted from a small, unnamed, war-torn country soon after her birth. After she meets a new classmate named Pablo, who happens to come from Milly’s home country, she goes on a journey

DeBlase (2003), “Transactions with literacy engage individuals not as passive recipients of culture but as coproducers of culture” (p. 625), and by my students seeing Latino/a characters overcoming obstacles and finding their voices in relevant and engaging texts, my hope is that they will

to “el paisito” to find her true self. Although Rojas (2010) found that Alvarez is one of the few authors so frequently identified in Latino/a literature that she could be considered overexposed, I think that this novel does a wonderful job of showing the emergence of voice and merits discussion in an analysis such as this.

CrashBoomLove

Protagonist César Garcia is a sophomore in high school. César says that, “Don’t know how it all started. The frozen feeling, / this fender inside wanting to crash against everything” (p. 2), but it appears that it all began when his father left him and his mother, Mama Lucy, for his new family in Denver. César feels abandoned and starts acting out at school, which gets the attention of Mr. Santos, the school’s vice principal, and Mr. Stanton, the school police officer. After getting beaten up by Jaíbo, a new student at school, César begins sniffing glue, drinking, and doing drugs with his friends Sammy and Carlos.

César is greatly influenced by Sammy and Carlos, and he doesn’t make many decisions without their negative influence. He allows himself to be manipulated by his “friends” and has little, if any, voice as a consequence. They mock César, call him “Sissy,” and pressure him to fight his classmates; each time, he follows their lead. Soon after getting beaten up by Jaíbo, Sammy says to César, “What are you going to do about Jaíbo *chavala*? / Are you going to let him beat you up? / In front of everybody hollering ‘You wuss!’ / They are laughing at you *chavala*, can you hear them?” (p. 46).

The next day, after sniffing a marker with Carlos in class, César goes straight into the hall and attacks Jaíbo. He is caught immediately by Mr. Stanton and suspended for three weeks. If found causing any more problems, César will be sent to Sunway Continuation, the alternative high school. César eventually gets sent to Sunway for throwing rocks and assaulting another student, where he joins Sammy and Carlos, who have been there for a semester already. This is where César begins to discover his own voice and stops allowing himself to be silenced by the influence of others.

Ms. Steiger, César’s new teacher at Sunway, helps him in ways that he never thought possible. She forces César to make himself stand on his own two feet. Ms. Steiger asks her students, old and new,

to form a circle by holding hands tightly, and says to César that, “If you want to get inside / the circle you have to break in, do not expect / people to let you in nice and easy. You’ve got / to push and make yourself known. / Come on / César, try” (p. 93). Breaking into the circle of students is César’s first step toward finding his inner strength, his sense of agency and identity (Sperling & Appleman, 2011). César struggles “to find [himself] within the group, to be accepted . . . but also to [be able to] assert [his] own individuality” (MacBeath, 2006, p. 200).

He is soon introduced to classical music by Ms. Steiger, and he begins to find a great appreciation for it. César is asked to join the school choir, and after some thought, says, “Maybe I’ll join the choir. I’ll stand up / alone. My hair shooting up each syllable / until my voice spins / out of my mouth / like a comet, like a blue green fire / I have never heard sing” (p. 103). César becomes less concerned with what others think, which ultimately allows his voice (in both a physical and metaphorical sense) to grow and flourish.

The ultimate turn for César is when he is in a major car accident with Sammy. Sammy dies and César is left in a coma, on a respirator, and with a badly broken leg. While lying in the hospital bed, César asserts his voice and shouts, “I am here! / I am alive! / I want to shout / through the tape across my mouth / . . . Will I live? Will I survive? / Will everything be different? / . . . Who / will I be?” (p. 132). Instead of rolling over and dying, César shows his inner strength and fights to survive and take control of his life.

While healing for seven weeks, César reflects on who he is and who he is becoming (MacBeath, 2006), and a newfound voice emerges; César returns to Sunway Continuation with new strength and an inner peace. He shows this when, soon after his return, a classmate confronts and threatens him and calls him “Sissyer.” César responds by saying, “My name is César – / César Garcia. OK? Start with that” (p. 137). César knows who he is now and will not let anyone belittle him ever again. He begins to journal extensively in class and writes about “being buried / alive in a coma, . . . about coming back, / steel rods in my right leg, I write about / absence, about my father who never calls, / my father who has left me” (p. 142). Through the process of journaling, César continues to

discover his own voice while analyzing why he has the strong feelings that he does.

César’s mother, “Mama Lucy,” also finds her voice in the process of César’s recovery. She begins to take English-speaking lessons, and she tells César that he must pay a visit to his old high school and that he must speak up for himself. Mama Lucy “[becomes] more aware and [gains] a sense of [her] capacity to control [her] own [life]” (Keis, 2006, p. 14). César watches how his mother confronts Mr. Stanton and Mr. Santos about how he was singled out at school, why he was searched, why she was never called about

any concerns with César, etc. It is a defining moment when César and his mother both reclaim their power.

The story ends with César singing a solo in his graduation ceremony from Sunway, and he thinks to himself, “I am standing tall with my *voice* growing / out of me, a flame, a spark, a corn plant in green gold. / the twists and turns, the fights and screams, / the nights alone and the days lost in sad dreams. / I am singing out” (p. 155) (italics added by author). By César singing at graduation, he himself identifies that he has begun to overcome his feelings of sadness and depression; has found his inner strength and finds his voice emerging, both literally and metaphorically. He stands up, in front of others, and testifies to his emerging, newfound agency. César will never be the same person again.

Buried Onions

In *Buried Onions* (1997), Eddie, born and raised in Fresno, California, is a recent high school graduate. He begins taking air-conditioning classes at the local community college . . . that is, until his cousin, Jesus, is mysteriously stabbed to death in a nightclub restroom. Eddie becomes greatly depressed and despondent and jokingly attributes all of life’s problems (for him and those in his poor community) to the onions buried deep beneath Fresno. Eddie describes how the “black asphalt would shimmer with vapors . . . which were not released by the sun’s heat but by a huge onion buried under the city. This onion made us cry

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... that remarkable bulb of sadness” (p. 2). The onions are the cause of everyone’s pain, and from the beginning of the story, Eddie’s “voice is inevitably shaped, informed, and mediated by social and cultural factors” (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 73) in which he lives, such as poverty, violence, crime, and hopelessness. Eddie’s voice is silenced due to his anger and frustration over his environment; his voice is further stifled by his inaction. Although Eddie complains continuously about his position in life (both financial and social), he does little, if anything,

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to make changes for the better.

Eddie seems to be “plagued by a series of ill-fated incidents” (Franzak & Noll, 2006) over the period of a few months. Mr. Stiles, a man who Eddie does yard work for, has his truck stolen right in front of Eddie’s apartment. Instead of talking to Mr. Stiles directly, Eddie “hurried back to [his] own apartment, where [he] hid in the doorway and [his] own cavernous shadows” (p. 31). For his own reasons (e.g., lack of faith in the police, embarrassment, shame), Eddie keeps silent and wallows in his misfortune. Once again, Eddie allows his power to be taken from him. Due to his silence and inability to make choices to improve his life, his agency cannot yet begin to emerge; instead of (re)claiming his voice, he chooses to hide.

Trying to balance avoiding Angel, a local gang member, and getting his life on track, Eddie is going absolutely nowhere. On advice from a mentor, Eddie eventually decides to visit the local naval recruiting center as a way to leave Fresno for good, but that visit is not what helps Eddie find his agency. Ultimately, Eddie discovers his voice by deciding to speak with his fists. After wallowing in his misfortune and running from gangsters, Eddie decides that now is the time to take a stand. He makes a statement, and a strong one at that, by violently attacking Angel—attack before being attacked. Battered and bruised from the fight, Eddie makes the choice to move forward with his life and escape from his barrio. Two days later, “with a cardboard carton of clothes and a half-empty cereal box in [his] arms, [he] walked the three

miles to [his] *nina*’s house” (p. 142) on his way to Lemoore Naval Air Station and his impending future.

Eddie spends a great deal of his post-high school life running (from pain, from misfortune, from people) and hiding (literally and figuratively) from the troubles that surround him. He finds his voice, his agency (Sperling & Appleman, 2011), almost reluctantly; Eddie becomes embroiled in a violent predicament and, feeling hopeless and frustrated, is forced to take stock of his life. He discovers his own voice in the last scene of the story when he “[sees his] palms bloodred from all the city wars—those in the past, those now, and those to come” (p. 146), and realizes that he is in control of his own destiny (Keis, 2006). It is then that his “eyes filled and then closed on the last of childhood tears” (p. 146). He finds the strength to stop running away from his problems and begins looking toward new hopes and possibilities.

Finding Miracles

Finding Miracles is the story of Milly Kaufman, a 15-year-old high school freshman who lives with her family in a small town in Vermont. Milly was adopted at the age of one in her unnamed home country (which will be referred to as “el paisito” from here forward, as it often is in the novel) while her parents were serving in the Peace Corps. Milly knows that she is adopted, and whenever she thinks about it, her hands begin to itch. Compared to the rest of her family, Milly’s

... eyes are the only unusual thing about me—they’re this golden color with brown speckles in them like pieces of amber with fossils inside. The point is: I totally pass as 100 percent American, and as un-PC as this is going to sound, I’m really glad. (p. 12)

Milly does not want people asking about her background; she just wants to fit in and fly under the radar, so to speak. She is shy as well as afraid of what her classmates might think about her if they knew that she was different from them.

This all changes when Pablo Bolívar and his family move into town from “el paisito.” Pablo immediately recognizes Milly’s distinctive eyes from the town of Los Luceros in “el paisito,” so Milly avoids him like the plague for about two months. Pablo is the one person who can expose Milly’s secret, which she has kept from everyone except for her best friend, Em.

Unfortunately, Milly's father hires Pablo's father for carpentry work, and the two families start spending an increasing amount of time together. Milly begins to learn about how the US "had helped some general to take over or start a civil war or something" (p. 49), and there is now a revolution party in "el paisito" trying to remove the dictator from power.

Milly's only records of her past are kept in her parents' bedroom in The Box, as she calls it. She decides to open The Box one evening with Em's support, and inside finds an old coin, a locket of hair, some pictures of Milly and a nun at the orphanage where she was found, and a slip of paper with her name, Milagros, on it. She is pressured by her friend, Jake, into running for class senator at the same time that "el paisito" is having its country's elections. The Liberation party wins, and Milly feels a great sense of relief. The next day, as her hands itch immensely, Milly approaches the podium for her speech; standing up there in front of her peers, something just clicks inside of her. When she looks down at her notes:

the words began swimming around the piece of paper. In a panic, I glanced up and my eyes found Pablo. He was beaming me his intense look as if he was drawing out some native courage I didn't quite believe I had. (p. 118)

Milly adlibs her speech, mentions the successful victory of the Liberation Party in "el paisito," the importance of voting in free elections, admits that she was adopted from "el paisito," and finishes just when her "courage gave out" (p. 119). Not only does Milly win the election thanks to her powerful and honest speech, but she also discovers that "Schools are places in which voices carry, and carry in differing bandwidths. There are voices which demand to be listened to by virtue of their status. Some are strident voices while others speak softly but with inherent authority" (MacBeath, 2006, p. 203). Milly's behavior changes, much as César's does in *CrashBoomLove* (2003), as they both find the courage to be their true selves in front of others. Standing before a crowd, almost as a testament to their change of character, they put into words their newfound agency and express their personal thoughts, no matter what others might think or say about them.

Very soon after the election, Milly is invited by Mrs. Bolívar to visit "el paisito" that coming summer. Milly's voice continues to develop and grow during

that trip, as she attempts to retrace her family history. Her old orphanage had burnt down years earlier, but when Pablo's family returns to the town of Los Luceros for a funeral, she meets Doña Gloria, the town elder and history keeper. Doña Gloria informs Milly about three couples who could have possibly been her parents, but there is no way of knowing for sure. She tells Milly that it is her job to "'bring harvest of what we have planted!' Just hearing her say that made [her] feel trembly all over.

Not only [her] hands were tingling now. It was as if Doña Gloria were lighting [a] flame inside [her]" (p. 224).

After Milly's family joins her in "el paisito," she proclaims that she is now going to be referring to herself by her birth name, Milagros, as well as Milly. Milly finds her voice in her home country and takes courage from the freedom fighters around her. She is Los Luceros, and she always will be. Milly goes from being ashamed of who she really is to embracing the truth of where she comes from. Even though she is still unsure of her past, she knows her family—in Vermont and in "el paisito"—are both her present and her future. Milly better understands herself and has discovered her voice; she is not afraid to speak out any longer. Unwilling to go on hiding and trying to fit in (Zambo, 2011), she has become her own confident person.

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Conclusion

The emergence of a Latino/a character's voice, as defined by both identity and agency, is presented in the three books that I have discussed in this textual analysis. Ford et al. (2000) asserted that, "The images children glean from books have a powerful impact on their sense of self and their view of others" (p. 236). For successful teaching and learning in our schools, it is vital that ELA teachers understand the needs of our ever-increasing multicultural population (Ford & Dillard, 1996) and provide novels that present protagonists who discover their voices. Specifically, for Latino/a students, this is essential because it enables

“our students to develop consciousness that will allow them to be critical of the constraints in their lives, in order to develop projects that address these issues and offer real change in our community” (Acosta, 2007, p. 41).

Latino/a students will continue to have difficulty finding their own voices if they do not see themselves

in the texts that they read in class. Since “[f]ew educators and scholars attempt to develop a curriculum that is respectful of the varied traditions of U.S. Latino literatures” (Rojas, 2010, p. 266), ELA teachers have the obligation to continue to expand their text selection to include more than the same few Latino/a voices; these additions to the curriculum can help Latino/a students feel

a greater sense of presence and importance.

While some Latino/a texts portray struggles with issues of identity (Clark & Hiraldo, 2004), such as in *Finding Miracles* (2004), others deal with more gritty stories of violence (Franzak & Noll, 2006) and the struggle for survival, as in *Buried Onions* (1997) and *CrashBoomLove* (2003). It is essential that those, and the other myriad voices in Latino/a YA literature, be heard in all ELA classrooms. According to Godina and McCoy (2000), “exemplary multicultural texts are relevant for all students in the classroom, and not necessarily directed toward a particular category of difference being portrayed in the text” (p. 176). Although Latino/a literature offers a great deal to all students, no matter the race or color, its presence in today’s schools is still minimal (Medina, 2004). If we are to stop the silencing of Latino/a voices, this must be changed in ELA classes across the country. By seeing these main characters find their own agency and inner strength, it will help Latino/a youth realize that their voices can grow from a whisper to a shout, both inside and outside of the classroom.

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