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## The canonical debate: Implementing multicultural literature and perspectives

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# The canonical debate —implementing multicultural literature and perspectives

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*A Chicano reading teacher analyzes the differences between multicultural and traditional literature, otherwise known as the canonical debate, for teachers who want to understand what issues emerge when they attempt to include multicultural literature in the classroom. Access to multicultural literature is a serious obstacle.*

■ The growing trend to address multiculturalism in the classroom has influenced the growth of multicultural literature from the publishing industry. However, the dilemma created by advocates of either traditional or multicultural literature, otherwise known as the canonical debate, has grown into what is now the most contested aspect of multicultural education. Conservative opponents such as Bloom (1994) and D'Souza (1991) have focused their argument on the importance of canonical knowledge for preservation of traditional Western society. Presently, the "demographic imperative," a term used by Banks (1994) to describe the growing diversification of the United States, is pressing forth issues related to the canon debate that in the past may not have been so forcefully addressed. Previously silenced voices now demand to be heard.

The publishing industry has picked up on this cue and is now marketing more multicultural literature than ever before—there is both an increased audience for the literature as well as new technology that facilitates this commercial enterprise. However, multicultural literature suffers from a commercial emphasis by the larger publishers who seek to attract more lucrative mainstream markets; also, administrative control within the publishing hierarchy is held by a relatively

small group of people whose interests and background largely reflect those of the mainstream (Harris, 1994).

Teachers who want to include multicultural literature in their classrooms have some practical concerns in light of the canonical debate. In this article, I will examine my personal teaching experiences and some recent research that has influenced my position within the debate. Implications for teaching practices will also be discussed.

## Nostalgia and misunderstanding

As a Chicano middle school teacher in the southwestern U.S., my experiences are a testimony to

Banks's demographic imperative. I taught at a middle school that consisted primarily of middle class White students and teachers. The middle school has recently undergone a significant demographic shift; approximately 80% of the current students are Mexican American. Some Mexican American teachers (myself included) had also been added to the mostly older, monolingual, White faculty who were tenured and at the higher end of the district's salary scale. My concern for literacy at the middle school level was also influenced by teaching older students at a local community college, my family's educational experiences, and my own learning experiences in the same school district. The only time during public school that I had seen any literature describing Mexican Americans was when my seventh-grade reading teacher, Mrs. Hadavi, lent me a tattered paperback entitled *Viva Chicano!* It was not until I attended the university that I began to encounter Chicano/a literature.

At the middle school where I taught reading, I remember Reading/English department meetings where I listened to many variations on the same topic: teachers describing how students were not as smart as they used to be and how much better the school was in the past. Teachers' complaints included not being able to teach Shakespeare or Longfellow because the "new" students were unappreciative. These discussions by the older teachers reminded me of what Rosaldo (1993) calls "imperialist nostalgia," or "a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (p. 70). They were recalling the days when it was accepted practice to marginalize the needs of the Mexican American community. Not that long ago it was common for teachers to physically and verbally condemn students for speaking Spanish at school. For many Mexican Americans, school represented a place of misunderstanding and humiliation.

Some of my close family members who attended school during those times never graduated. My father, who is presently a foreman and has worked at a local copper refinery for over 25 years, still recalls being tested on a poem he had analyzed literally that had actually been a metaphorical interpreta-

tion of a woman. He can still recall his confusion as if he had read the poem yesterday. I wonder if he would have remembered that test differently if it had included Chicano/a poetry or literature. Could this have helped change the other social conditions that constrained education for many Mexican Americans? These guiding questions motivated my personal commitment to include multicultural literature in the classroom, but there were also other factors related to my evolving perceptions of the past, present, and future status of education for Mexican Americans in my hometown.

### **Coming to terms with the past**

I also taught basic writing at the local community college where classes were filled with working class Mexican American students who were recent high school graduates, single parents, or older students. On the first day of classes, we usually shared a reflective discussion so that I could gauge their commitment for improving their writing. Although I knew that many of the younger students were required to take basic writing as part of a remedial sequence, they also were tired of low-wage employment and viewed education as a way to better their existence. The older students mostly said that they returned to school simply to learn to read and write because they had never really learned that in school. During the course of the semester, as we got to know one another, I found that several of the older students had been classmates of my father, aunt, or uncle.

The preliminary writing assignment for this basic writing course implemented a process approach to writing reflective sketches. I wanted everyone to get comfortable with simply free-writing without concern about who was looking over their shoulder or about their work being slashed with a red pen. For many, this was a novel approach to learning English. The older students sometimes treated this assignment as a cathartic exercise for coming to terms with earlier negative experiences in public school. Peer discussions sometimes unfolded into a kind of group therapy, and I tried to guide students to temper their craft with passion.

I recall an older female student who was in tears when she revealed that she had to write about her

negative experiences in school because it was like removing a fallen tree that had always been blocking her path. I am always grateful to my students for instilling in me a sense of ethics for working in literacy. These experiences informed my rationale for introducing Chicano/a literature to Mexican American middle school students. I wanted their experiences in school to be very different from those of my older students.

### Support grows slowly

When I first mentioned my desire to emphasize Chicano/a literature at a faculty meeting, my ideas agitated the department head, who had been implementing a more skills-based approach toward literacy. Primarily, she was concerned with parents' being upset at their children reading Chicano/a literature and required that I have parents sign consent forms to avoid problems. Second, she wanted me to teach about other cultures besides Mexican American because she felt it would not be fair to emphasize instruction that was related only to Mexican Americans. There was also no budget for me to purchase trade books, so I had to purchase many of the materials myself. When I mentioned this to the department head, she suggested that I abandon the idea of Chicano/a literature. If I wanted to pursue multiculturalism at the middle school, she indicated that I could be in charge of a week-long international fair where students could do activities such as taste food from other countries.

I could understand the department head's concerns. I was asking her to undergo a paradigm shift at several levels: moving away from a skills-based orientation toward a literature-based reading pedagogy, implementing multicultural literature instead of the canonical works and mainstream young adult literature that had always been emphasized by the English department and reinforced within the reading program, and—most importantly—changing the popular and simplistic perception of multicultural education as being a brief tour of foods and festivals. After a while, I learned not to speak too strongly about multiculturalism during department meetings.

In the classroom, we began with Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* and *The Legend of La Llorona*, which

soon became favorites. The students were also especially fond of Mexican folk tales. We shared folk tales from their home life through journal writing, and we also read *Mexican-American Folklore* by John West (1988). Students began to see reflections of themselves in text, and this provided them with a familiar path for thinking critically and scaffolded their writing.

When we first began reading *Bless Me, Ultima*, I had a limited budget and had a hard time finding copies of the text because of its limited circulation. I purchased the few copies that I could locate and soon found a bookstore that was willing to get more. As we began reading, I knew the students were captivated by the story, but I had no idea that parents would also be interested. I would allow students to take home one of the books, or some of the copied pages, for their homework assignments. Many parents began reading this material along with their children. Soon I had several requests to send home copies of the book for parents, siblings, and other family members who showed interest. When I mentioned that some copies were available at a local bookstore where I had placed an order, I noticed an increase in sales at that particular Chicana/o literature section. Word was getting out, and some new Chicana/o titles began appearing on the shelves. I had the feeling that I had helped plant a seed.

In contrast to the department head's worst fears about parents' disapproval of Chicano/a literature in the classroom, the parents instead became staunch supporters who felt comfortable coming to my classroom during open-house visits. On some occasions, parents would bring a snack, and there were several parents whose children were not even in my class who also began to visit. In many ways, I felt like I was acting as a liaison between the Mexican American community and the middle school. The children would usually accompany their parents. If parents had a particular concern that needed to be articulated to the administration, we would ask their children to write it up on the computer. I would proof drafts for spelling and grammar, and the final letter was approved and signed by the parents.

At first, the growing involvement by Mexican American parents raised eyebrows among admin-

istrators who had grown accustomed to their silent deference to authority. However, this parental support came at a time when the district office was pressuring schools to emphasize parental relationships as a requirement related to eligibility for federal Chapter I funding for remedial programs. After a while the administration grew supportive of my efforts indirectly related to multicultural education, but initially I could not count on such support.

When I requested funding for a Chicano/a activist to teach the students about Danza Azteca and Mexican culture, I encountered opposition from the principal, who could not understand why the school had to pay even a nominal honorarium for someone who did not have any educational credentials to teach children about their culture. After much discussion between various committees, it was finally agreed that I could have some funding.

The presentation was held over a few days at a gym that soon filled with students from other classes. Interest about this dynamic presentation intensified, and the event was a success. During the same week, the principal was undergoing an annual review by the district office, and some of the officials saw parts of the program. The principal received high marks related to the cultural sensitivity the school was promoting between students and the Mexican American community.

The administrators, especially the principal and the department head, who had most opposed or misunderstood ideas related to multicultural education eventually gained from it through student motivation, parental involvement, and an improved reputation with the district supervisors. When the administration understood that multicultural education had something to offer that served their purpose, they began to be more supportive of these efforts.

### **The limits of essentialism**

Two positions related to multiculturalism could be examined through these events. Both reflect forms of "essentialism"—the tendency in current writing on race to treat social groups as homogeneous entities (McCarthy & Crichtlow, 1993). Members of racial groups are discussed as though they possess some innate characteristics that set them apart.

The middle school administration was reflecting what Gilroy (1993) terms "strategic essentialism," a position that affirms ethnicity—in this case Mexican American culture—mostly to suit a strategic gain (p. 32). On the other side, the motivational speaker, a community-based Chicano activist grounded in teaching Aztec culture to children, represents what Gilroy (1993, p. 31) would define as "ontological essentialism." Ontological essentialism assumes that, for example, all Mexican Americans share a similar desire to learn about notions of culture such as Aztec dance, but ignores the fact that many Mexican Americans participate in other forms of dance, such as country and rap. This centered notion of culture is hard to understand when examining the influence of popular culture and cultural contacts across different groups and settings.

These dialectical positions can also be examined within the publishing industry, where publishers' strategic representations of Hispanic multicultural literature seek wider audiences and commercial gain, such as through a basal serialization, but usually sacrifice the more authentic, or ontological, representations of culture. These more authentic representations have usually been the vanguard of smaller publishing houses, such as Cinco Puntos Press, Tonatiuh-International, Just-Us Books, or MARCH/Abrazo Press.

Although Gilroy's (1993) observations relate to pan-African identity, they also have unique implications for understanding the use of multicultural literature for other groups. The strategic essentialist perspective is exemplified by mainstream publishers, whose emphasis on financial profits leads to uniformity and homogenization of final products. Underlying dangers include stereotyped representations of culture that reflect White misconceptions (Harris, 1994a) and a "willful critical blindness" that does not acknowledge intellectual criticisms related to multiculturalism (Morrison, 1992).

Stereotyped representations of African Americans have been perpetuated by the popularity of such texts as Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*. They are the only multicultural, non-canonical texts to consistently appear in school libraries across the U.S. (Applebee, 1989), yet both

convey popular stereotypes related to African American identity. *Invisible Man* is a rite of passage tale that retells the migration of postbellum Blacks to the northern U.S. cities, and *Black Boy* describes a youth's coming of age in the midst of racial oppression and poverty. Both novels contain stereotyped characters and implement Black English Vernacular. However, in contemporary school settings, these texts have become representative markers of identity for African Americans. Though both texts have literary merit, schools and students are constrained by not being able to read other representations of African Americans—such as Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*, which are more inclusive of women. Integrating multicultural and canonical readings expands otherwise narrow perspectives for the reader.

Following this recourse, Gilroy (1993) advocates a mediation between both ontological and strategic perspectives for addressing each other's shortcomings. This balancing of differences is similar to Said's (1993) notion of reading both canonical and noncanonical works for a greater breadth of critical understanding—in what is termed "contrapuntal analysis" (pp. 66-67). Kaywell (1993) offers useful approaches for engaging students in such analysis. For example, Reed's (1993) contrapuntal analysis of *Romeo and Juliet* would include the introduction of plot structure related to teenage lovers through a contrapuntal reading of Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*, or the theme of the tragic hero could be discussed by reading Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*.

It is mostly within a dialectical framework that conservative advocates try to establish a strategically essentialized notion of Western identity that does not thoroughly address intercultural differences related to class, gender, ethnicity, and other markers of difference. This position obfuscates the essentialized representation of identities that stand in direct contrast.

Recently, Shannon (1994) problematized White identity within the canonical debate by assuming that all White people were excluded from it. He observes that only people from diverse backgrounds can write about multiculturalism and that as a White male his choices are to protect his privileged position or remain on the sidelines of the debate. He

criticizes Harris (1993) for narrowing multiculturalism to issues of race. Shannon (1994) reflects what Harris (1994b) describes as "willful critical blindness" (Morrison, 1992) by neglecting the sophisticated level of work done by contemporary multiculturalists.

In response to Shannon, Harris (1994b) also states that authors of multicultural literature do not necessarily have to belong to the group they describe. She refutes Shannon's claim that she reduces multiculturalism to issues of race and lists several of her writings that integrate gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, language, and geographical location.

If we assume essentialized differences related to a particular ethnic group (such as all Mexican Americans have poor literacy skills in English), these assumptions condemn educators to work with students of diverse backgrounds at simple, unsophisticated levels of understanding.

### **Overcoming obstacles to using multicultural literature in the classroom**

Related to this is the misconception that noncanonical works detract from eliciting a fluency in literacy from students, or that these works have no academic value. However, students can be taught to engage in examining literary forms in different types of literature besides canonical works. Lukens and Cline's (1995) *Critical Handbook of Literature* provides some clear and helpful descriptions of how to approach both canonical and noncanonical literature from a perspective that examines the works' literary merit—not their political affiliation. Examples include examining organization features of text such as character development, plot, theme, setting, point of view, style, and tone. Nurturing a critical consciousness in the classroom that analyzes works for their literary merit, while at the same time integrating contrapuntal analysis, should allow students to experience the best of both sides of the debate.

Access is another obstacle to implementing the use of multicultural literature. Availability of multicultural literature, as well as the funding necessary for purchasing books, may be limited for public school teachers. These were certainly obstacles in my own teaching experience. In contrast, canonical

works enjoy an ensconced status within public schools. Applebee (1989) found that the most consistent titles appearing in different schools across the U.S. were canonical works such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Thus, while books such as these may be easy to obtain, teachers may encounter difficulty related to availability, resources, and information about how to acquire books from lesser known writers and publishers.

Also, I have found that programs such as RIF (Reading Is Fundamental) that distribute free books to children and adolescents provide mostly canonical works to students at the middle and secondary levels. However, once a ready market is established, such as when Chicano/a literature became more available for parents and students at the local bookstore, access also increases along with the publisher's ability to lower costs because of expanded sales volume.

Perhaps the canonical debate is occurring without good reason. In a speech in 1993, Henry Louis Gates described the debate as resembling homeless people discussing wallpaper—an analogy on how the low literacy rate in the U.S. should dispel concern over what students are *not capable* of reading. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, most students read at only a basic level of understanding, less than half of the student population can read at an intermediate level, and Black and Hispanic students have the lowest reading levels of all (Mattson, 1993).

The benefits of canonical knowledge in the public schools may only be shared by a relatively small group of students and advocates. Canonical knowledge may be playing upon the paranoid sentiments of a population that views the demographic changes in the U.S. as an encroachment upon an established hegemony.

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