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Published online: September 2018

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Volume 6, Issue 2, pp. 82-89. (2018)

To cite this article: Arenas, S. J. (2018). I am Not a Taco: Using poetry to negotiate students' identities. *Texas Education Review*, *6*(2), 82-89. http://hdl.handle.net/2152/68274

I am Not a Taco: Using Poetry to Negotiate Students' Identities

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For secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in the era of standardization, the idea of establishing a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) – one that seeks authentic representation and offers students curricular opportunities to explore the realities of their own lives – can seem daunting and, in many cases, non-existent. In fact, many teachers suggest that students' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities serve a supplemental role in the curriculum or even that these identities have no place at all in the ELA classroom. I, however, argue for a pedagogical stance in which ELA teachers place students' diverse identities at the center of the curriculum. Therefore, this editorial encourages secondary ELA teachers in urban schools to seek out and employ literacy practices that explores students' cultural, ethnic, and socio-linguistic identities.

In her commentary on the possibilities of poetry, Jocson (2011) argues that "identity and cultural politics" are central to poetry, and it also allows "individuals to mobilize different identities (sometimes collectively), and norms of identification to play out" (p.1). In an attempt to extend Jocson's view of poetry, this editorial reflects on a teacher research study. I use Santino Rivera's poem, "I am Not a Taco," to invite students to view writing, specifically poetry, as a method of claiming and navigating varying identities. This work, therefore, attempts to draw connections between poetry and Latinx literature in a secondary urban ELA classroom. Furthermore, it is necessary to contextualize this work in a limited view of relevant literature on Latinx students. The relevant literature referenced in this editorial identifies the influx of Latinx students in U.S school and notes various asset pedagogies that researchers and educators have employed to better serve Latinx students.

Latinx Students and Academic Achievement

According to recent census data, there are 54 million people of Hispanic origin who call the United States their home. Comprising 17% of the national population, Hispanics are the largest racial and ethnic minority group in the country. Current projections predict that by 2060 Hispanics will constitute 31% of the U.S population (U.S Census Bureau, 2013). Nowhere else is this data most reflected than in our public schools.

In Arizona, for more than a decade, White students have made up less than 50% of students in public classrooms. Since the 2012-2013 school year, however, Latinx students have represented the largest ethnic group in Arizona public schools; 43 percent of K-12 students are Hispanic while 42% are White (Arizona Department of Education, 2014). While there continue to be conversations about using the labels Hispanic vs Latinx (Steinmetz, 2018), for the purpose of this editorial, I will use the term Hispanic and Latinx interchangeably. Thus, these terms are used to identify students who adhere to one of the following: native Spanish speaker, parents are from a Latin American country, or they themselves are from a Latin American country.

This influx of Latinx students in public schools or, as Irizarry (2007) called it, the "Latinization" of schools suggest that one in five children currently attending school is Latinx. Although Latinx students have a long-standing history and legacy of activism in pursuit of educational justice (Garcia, 2011), current research suggested that Latinx students suffer low educational achievement with regards to standardized assessments in comparison to White students (Irizarry, 2007; Irizarry, 2011).

Similarly, Yosso and Solórzano (2006) explored the lack of educational attainment with Chicano/a students. Their work here builds on census data that provided disconcerting educational statistics for Chicano/a students: Given 100 Chicano/a elementary students, less than half, 46, will graduate from high school and roughly 26 will move on to some form of postsecondary education. Of the 26, only 8 will matriculate to earn a baccalaureate degree. And finally, of those eight, two will earn a graduate degree, and less than one will earn a doctorate. Compared to White students, 84 out of 100 graduate high school, 26 receive their baccalaureate degree, and 10 will earn a graduate degree (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). This disparity in educational attainment has largely been related to gaps in opportunity (Irizarry, 2011).

There has been, however, a resurgence of Chicano/a scholars who have adopted themes from a framework of cultural responsive teaching to challenge deficit approaches and dominant epistemologies by building on students' home experiences and "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Building on the groundbreaking theoretical work of Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa, Delgado Bernal (2001) examined the ways in which Chicana college students have employed "strategies of resistance" (p. 626) to successfully navigate the educational system. She argued for educational policies and practices that "value and build on pedagogies of the home in order to enhance Chicana academic success and college participation" (Delgado Bernal, 2001, p.636). Furthering pedagogical approaches and theories aimed to provide an equitable education for students of color, Yosso (2005) has adopted Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal; 2001 Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to "challenge the way race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourse" (p.74). In addition, she has coined the concept of "community cultural wealth," (Yosso, 2005, p.77) which argues that Students of Color possess varied forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities they developed in their communities.

These important critical race theoretical approaches are necessary as they challenge two dominate narratives around Latinx schooling and education. They first call to question the idea that Latinx students are deficient. Instead, they urge educators to learn and understand which forms of capital their Latinx students possess and then find creative ways to incorporate these skills into the ELA classroom. Secondly, they challenge the role of students' racial/ethnic identities and histories in the classroom. Too often, Latinx students are indirectly told that to be academically successful, they must forgo their cultural and linguistic identities in exchange. These pedagogies, however, seek to provide Latinx students with access to necessary academic skills while at the same time maintaining their cultural and linguistic identities.

Latinx Literature and Identity

Prior and recent research indicates the literary contributions of Latinx authors have been historically underrepresented in secondary ELA curriculums. There are, however, pockets of school districts and communities across the country who have begun to offer a variety of ethnic literature courses as a part of the multicultural education movement (Acosta, 2007; Cabrera et. al, 2014).

In her study, Rojas (2010) explored the ways Latinx literatures are situated in high school literature textbooks. She asserted that a narrow and generalized compilation of Latinx works in these textbooks affects the "knowledge produced about US Latino cultures and identities" (Rojas, 2010 p. 264). In her analysis of commonly used English textbooks in high school, she noted that Latinx works highlighted issues of identity and cultural conflicts, family situations, and issues of womanhood. The publishers, however, failed to stress these themes; instead, the "activities and the suggested questions address particular skills or literary terms" (Rojas, 2010, p.269). Not only does Rojas's scholarship point out the need for greater representation of Latinx literature in the secondary curriculums, it also implies that simply including Latinx literature offers a generalized narrative of

the Latinx experience. Rojas contended she does not have an ideal approach for teaching Latinx literatures; however, she urged a reading of U.S. Latino literatures that "considers the influence of social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts, discourse, and identities in the process of making meaning" (p. 275).

Martinez-Roldan and Heineke (2011) provided the implications of Latinx literature in a graduate-level teacher preparation course. Working within a sociocultural framework, they concluded that "Latina teachers learned about the power of their own identities" (Martinez-Roland & Heineke, 2011, p. 257) and some, for the first time, discovered that their stories and experiences could be valid sources of knowledge at the center of the curriculum. This sense of cultural validation is also noted in Vasquez's (2006) research in Chicano literature course at the college level. The implications of her work suggest that literature has the power to "shift readers' behaviors, outlooks, self-conceptions, self-title, and attitudes" (Vasquez, 2006, p.919). Although this research has proven useful in understanding the ways Latinx literature and racial and ethnic identity affect readers' consciousness, there appears to be a gap within this research paradigm. There seems to be a need for more scholarship that studies the connection between Latinx students and various modes of writing. In this editorial, I hope to extend the conversation on the ways in which Latinx student use writing to make meaning of their lives and themselves.

Resisting Anti-Latinx Sentiment in Arizona

Since adopting English only polices in 2001, my native state, Arizona, has continued to be the epicenter for anti-Latinx legislation, specifically with regards to education. Most recently in Tucson, former Superintendents of Public Instruction, Tom Horne, his successor, John Huppenthal, and the state legislature crafted and signed House Bill 2281 which dismantled the nationally renowned and highly effective Mexican American Studies (MAS) program (Acosta, 2007; Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). Acosta (2007), a former MAS literature teacher, argued that his Latinx Literature course built academic identity through self-reflective narratives while also improving students' reading and writing abilities through literary analysis.

It is within this socio-political climate in which it becomes essential to provide students with authentic opportunities for students to explore their identities. ELA classrooms should celebrate students' identities thereby celebrating the whole student. Students need to feel like they matter in their education. They need their home knowledge and experiences to be validated in the classroom. At the same time, this lesson begins to shift the canonical tread and move closer to an inclusive multi-cultural space. Therefore, as a Chicano/Latinx ELA teacher in Arizona, I believe it is my job to consciously resist Arizona's anti-Latino sentiment. By using Latinx literature, paired with students' own experiences, I am creating an inclusive classroom space where students can celebrate, negotiate, and challenge their multiple identities.

Methods: Exploring Identities and Building Classroom Community

I believe it is necessary to point out that I first implemented this lesson during the Central Arizona Writing Project (CAWP) Summer Institute. I make this point because I acknowledge my experience with CAWP as a catalyst for the way I now approach writing instruction.

Santino Rivera's poem "I am Not a Taco" exemplifies a powerful counter-narrative to racial and ethnic stereotypes. At the same time, his simplistic form and word choice, yet forward assertions, provide an accessible text for students to model their work after. Each line of the piece begins with "I am not," followed by a stereotype or generalization of the identity the poet is trying to explore. In the final lines, the speaker asserts his identity as Xicano.

I begin my lesson with students in groups. I provide students with several pieces of lined paper and a blank piece of copy paper. I then introduce the term "identity" and ask students to raise their hands if they have ever seen this word or have any experiences with this word before. To help students understand the complexity of the term, I share three of the seven dictionary definitions of the word. I go on to explain that contrary to what they have been taught, the dictionary definition does not always help us truly understand certain nuanced words. By this point, students realize identity is one of those words. A student named Robert (pseudonym), who was particularly engaged in this lesson, explained, "I know what identity is but it doesn't really fit with the definition you gave us."

From here, I invite students to write for approximately one minute. I encourage students to keep their pencil moving the entire time. Students are the asked to respond to the following questions: "When you hear the word identity, what comes to your mind?" and "Based on your own experiences, create your own definition of identity.

Once students have shared their responses with their partners and with the class, I walk students through an identity mapping activity. I want students to understand that we are never just one thing or one identity, rather we have intersecting identities that work together at the same time (Crenshaw, 1994). While "I am not a Taco" focuses on racial and ethnic identity, I also help my students to understand that their racial and ethnic identity, although profoundly important, is not the only form of identity. To help students begin to brainstorm multiple identities, I ask students to create a T chart. On one side they create a list of things they like to do in school and things they like to do out of school.

Students then write their first and last name on the center of the provided blank printer paper and circle it. To give students a better idea of the identity maps they will create, I show them my own identity map and talk briefly on my multiple identities. For example, I explain to students that I recently became a father and how that has totally reshaped who I am and how I think. I mention that I just earned a Master's degree, so I am still a student and learner. And finally, I talk about my experiences as a Chicano male. My only rule for the identity map is that students first and last name must be in the center and circled: I even encourage students to create images that reveal their identities. Students take the time remaining in the period to create their identity maps.

Day two of this lesson begins with students sharing their identity maps with their group members. Students are then encouraged to share any new identities or familiar identities with the class. To begin narrowing down their focus for the sake of the writing to come, I ask students to select only three identities that they most currently identify with. I remind students that I am asking them to do this simply for the writing activity that is to come. This is the part in the lesson that students struggle with the most. However, this part in the lesson provides a great teaching point as I ask students why narrowing down three identities is so complicated.

As we finally arrive at our mentor text, I put forth a mild disclaimer. I warn students that there is some offensive language in the poem; however, if we look closely, we can see how the author used these words intentionally. This leads to a powerful conversation on language and "bad words." After students have silently read the poem to themselves, I invite students to write their initial reactions to the poem in the margins. I encourage students to write down honest initial reactions to what they read. Next, students listen to a recorded recitation of the poem created by myself and my significant other. This interaction with the poem provides students an opportunity to gain greater insight into the word as the oral delivery adds to the overall tone of the work. From here, I lead students into a brief discussion about the content of the poem and the simplicity of the overall structure. I want students to understand that the contents of the poem are all stereotypes and generalization of a specific ethnic identity.

Now that students have read and heard the poem and have had an opportunity to discuss the piece, I introduce the writing assignment. Using "I am Not a Taco," students are asked to return to their identity maps and select one identity they would like to use for their own "I am Not" poem. Students need to know that for this assignment there are two rules: (1) each line must begin with "I am not," and (2) the final two lines must read "I am none of these things, I simply am …".

Before I set students free to create their poems, I let them know that I too have created a poem that I am willing to share with the class. In my own poem, I assert my identity as a teacher and include stereotypical assertions and generalizations of my experiences as an ELA teacher. For example, I write, "I am not a born adult/ without any sense of meaning Hip-Hop/ like Nas, Jay-Z Tupac, Wale, Wu-Tang/ and Kendrick." At this point, kids understand the expectations and are eager to begin creating poetry.

The third and final day of this lesson is focused on celebrating students' final product. I begin the day with sharing my own poem and inviting students to share as well. After several students share their work, I invited all students to share their favorite line from their poem. As they are doing so, I type out their line on the board. At the end of this process, I show students that we have a class poem that showcases each one of our own identities. Finally, I read the new class poem to students and allow them to brainstorm both a title and ending line for this their class poem. "I am none of these things, I simply am…" (Appendix 1).

Pedagogical Implications

Reflecting on this work with urban Latinx students and Latinx poetry, I draw on Kinloch's (2005) assertion that "honest meaningful poetry and writing that make use of language to unveil hidden truths. . . can have significant implications for classroom teaching practices" (p. 98). Throughout this lesson, students were not only engaged in the writing process but empowered by the writing process. One student commented, "This is kind of cool. I can tell everyone who I am without even talking." This young man's comment builds on Jocson's (2006) notion that poetry can help urban youth make meaning of their lives. I argue that students' "I am Not" poems not only foster a literacy opportunity to make meaning of their lives but also enact a pedagogy of critical literacy (Cammarota & Romero, 2006). This framework of literacy "renders both students and educators as subjects of knowledge [and] collaborative creators of knowledge" (Cammarota & Romero, 2006, p.18).

I believe the strength of this lesson is the simplicity. That is not to say, however, that culturally relevant teaching is simple. Instead, it is a nuanced and delicate endeavor. I caution educators to not fall into the idea that representation of Latinx literature and other ethnic literature constitutes culturally relevant teaching. Considering Latinization, public schools should have the resources to provide an unbiased approach to literacy instruction. I am arguing for ELA teachers in urban settings to work towards creating a literacy curriculum that disrupts the status quo of the traditional ELA classroom.

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