IDENTIDAD RASGADO Y LA LENGUA PERDIDA:

THE IMPACT OF A TRADITIONAL LITERARY CANON

ON LATINO PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY

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Forward

The idea for my thesis topic, the impact of a traditional literary canon on Latino perceptions of identity, was born out of an activity my professor, Dr. Mencke, incorporated into his adolescent growth and development class during my junior year of college. He had placed pictures of famous of historical figures on the wall of the auditorium-style classroom and pointed to each picture as he read the name aloud, posing the questions, "How many of you have heard of this person? How many of you know enough to explain this person's historical significance?" We raised our hands to communicate our knowledge of a person and left our hands down to communicate our ignorance.

One of the historical figures was George Orwell, author of *Animal Farm* and other novels. Many students, including myself, raised their hands when Orwell's name was called, but many hands were left on students' laps when a Native American author's name was called. I began thinking about why this could be and reflected back on my own English education to find that I had not read any texts by Native American or Latino authors. Later that year I began to read Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and had never felt so passionate about a text before because I saw myself in it.

I became angry and frustrated that I had never read a text written by my people before in my education, and even more so that I had missed out on feeling this passionate about my culture before. And it was all because of a text. After that, I started seeing how ignorant I was about my own culture and became more aware of how it is hidden in everyday life by the actions of myself and others. From the details of how my name is pronounced without the "r" rolled, to wanting to marry a white man for a picture perfect

family, I realized that I was not proud of who I was, because I was never allowed to explore who I was. Now I am different. Now that I have read about my people, I make an effort to live my culture every day from the way I pronounce my name to the holidays I celebrate; I am not ashamed.

Identidad Rasgado y la Lengua Perdida:

The Impact of a Traditional Literary Canon on Latino Perceptions of Identity

Identity as we perceive it is how a person identifies themselves in comparison to others. Society as a whole contributes constantly to the formation of a person's identity through social interactions, categorizations, power structures, the media and so on. Through these interactions, a person tracks him/herself into a larger group and many subcategories. The institution of public education is a large factor in youth socialization from the ages of 4 or 5 to the ages of 18 to 21. Over the span of these years, youth are placed in a learning setting where they first encounter large amounts of diversity, complex power structures, social norms, and the world of professionalism. Depending on the district and amount of extracurricular participation, a student spends approximately a quarter to half of their lives in exposed to these socialization structures while in the school system.

Logically following, a quarter to half of a person's identity development from these ages is developed based on how they perceive themselves throughout their education. The other half of their development occurs in the person's home life including family, community, and isolated interactions. This area is where the credit for development of cultural and personal beliefs happen while the realm of education

remains a zone where peer expectations and academic habits are formed. Through a study of literature on the topic of identity development in the public institution of education, I have come to the conclusion that the production of a youth's perception of his or her cultural and ethnic identity is not separate from the current system of public schooling. Through methods of instruction, curriculum choices, and student-teacher dynamics, the school system plays a role in producing the ethnic identity production of youth.

In Luis Urietta Jr.'s two articles, *Figured Worlds and Education: An introduction to the Special Issue* and *Identity Production in Figured Worlds: How Some Mexican Americans Become Chicana/o Activist Educators*, he explains a concept of identity production, named "Figured worlds", developed by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain in their book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (1998). Their concept of figured worlds defines identity from a cultural perspective as "people's ever-changing perception of who they are" or in more brief terms "self-understandings with strong emotional resonances" (Urietta 118). The idea of a people's ethnic identity emotionally resonating with them stems deeper than a location on a birth document or a bubble on a standardized test or confidential tax credit survey.

Identity is a process of becoming, not a statement of being. Emotional resonance pertains to how people feel about their ethnic identity, not where they were born or the color of their skin. In the concept of figured worlds developed by Holland et al. the

institutions he establishes as figured worlds is where the production of an emotionally

resonative identity is produced. Figured world as Holland et al. defines are "socially

produced, culturally constituted activities where people come to conceptually and

materially/procedurally produce new self-understandings" (Urietta 108). To further

specify what exactly constitutes an institution or social structure as a figured world,

Urietta paraphrases Holland et al.'s elaboration of figured worlds into having four

distinct characteristics:

1. Figured worlds are cultural phenomenon to which people are recruited, or into which people enter, and that develop through the work of their participants.
2. Figured worlds function as contexts of meaning within which social encounters have significance and people's positions matter. Activities relevant to these worlds take meaning from them and are situated in particular times and places.
3. Figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced, which means that in them people are sorted and learn to relate to each other in different ways.
4. Figured worlds distribute people by relating them to landscapes of action; thus activities related to the worlds are populated by familiar social types and host to individual senses of self.

The system of high school education shares characteristics with Holland et al.'s

characteristics of a figured world in the following ways. Firstly, the public education

system is indeed a "cultural phenomenon" which students enter. The American K-12

system of education is specific to the American culture and students are required by law

to enter. The system continues to develop through their participants: teachers, students,

alumni, angry parents, etc. Continuing, the school system functions as a context of

meaning within which social encounters hold significance and people's positions matter

because it is an institution which offers opportunity for students to discover what is important to them through practice in multiple content areas and extracurricular activities.

On characteristics 3 and 4of Holland et al.'s definition, education requires students to be a socially organized and reproduced entity in which people are sorted and learn to relate to each other in different ways. Firstly by being an institution created by man, for man, and continues to be shaped by man. Secondly, through the school system, students are sorted into subcategories of people based on performance, disability, race, gender, and age. Students then learn to interact with their peers of a similar or different prescribed category. Lastly, students respond to their categories and opportunities to take positions in their likes and dislikes. Their actions lend them to a certain social type within their school system which contributes to their individual sense of self.

Given the characteristics of a figured world, Luis Urietta conducted an interview based study researching the opinions of people involved in the education system about the factors which influence identity development in their figured world. His research consisted of conducting interviews with undergraduate students, graduate students, K-12 teachers, and college professors on the themes of "experiences in K-12 schooling, Chicana/o identity production, practices of educational activism, and negotiating and strategizing change in white stream schools". His results found that identity production was impacted by four life history experiences: "The influence of religion, past experiences with oppression, the importance of family relations, and the importance of

time and space" (Urietta 127). For the purposes of my study I will focus on the education system as a time and space for identity development.

Students learn about who they are through the processes of learning who other people are. Women learn how to put make up on from their mother's instructions, by being criticized by their peers for their misapplication of their eye liner, and from YouTube tutorials. People learn socially acceptable ways of dressing in the winter by reading fashion magazines and by looking through store windows at the clothes placed on mannequins. People learn how to be through the influences of what they see, hear, and read. When put into the perspective of education it becomes crucial to pay close attention to the content students are exposed to, for this will influence what a student views as a normal way of being even if not directly intended to do so. Introducing a student to a reading or scientific principle is at the same time introducing a student to the person who authored the reading or discovered the principle. Through content we expose students to people who exemplify ways of being. In each discipline this is relevant, but more directly so in disciplines where ideas are presented in more obvious ways such as by visual representations, writings, or audios. A person's ideas about a way of being are harder to interpret behind a mathematical equation or scientific theory, but appear clearer in characters of a novel, news articles, and written histories.

In today's education culture students are undoubtedly exposed to similar content year after year in their English Language Arts courses. This is not to claim that every

classroom in every state reads the exact same news pieces, novels, or nonfiction on the

same day of every year. There is though, a variety of works repeatedly read in a certain

range of texts. This range of texts is the English Literary Canon. In the broadest sense, a

literary canon refers to a widely read group of woks deemed to hold a high level of

authority or importance at a time. In her book, *Confronting Our Canons: Spanish and

Latin American Studies in the 21st Century*, Joan L. Brown discusses what we consider,

the literary canon, and what factors are used to determine what goes into the literary

canon. She offers this answer to the big question "What makes a work canonical?" when

she writes, "Today's experts think it is in the canon. A literary canon is a shared belief –

an abstract sanctioned list of superior works and authors whose existence is taken on

faith" (131).

Brown addressed the valid concern about what makes a work superior to others

and why in her statement, "Value is subjective and valorizations are mysterious. There

are no objective standards by which to distinguish a masterpiece from a lesser work"

(131). This is where they mystery of a canon starts and concern sinks in. If value is

subjective then what real grounds are the works students read chosen on and whose

values do the works represent?

Brown offers the idea that canonical works are chosen based on two factors which

both contain many subcategories. The two factors are extrinsic and intrinsic factors.

Extrinsic factors according to Brown being, "contextual factors" which "are not rooted in

a text, though they may be seen as textually determined to some degree." While, intrinsic

factors are "text based, though they may also be partially or wholly determined by

external forces" (Brown 132). The following factors discussed are extrinsic factors in the

distribution of the canonicity attribute.

The first of the factors described by Brown is the idea of tradition and inertia.

Tradition often connected with the idea of holidays or habits collectively practices as a

culture is defined by *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* as: "an inherited,

established or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior" (1305). Just as certain

holidays are valued by certain cultures, certain texts are valued by educational

institutions. Depending on what holiday a culture celebrates, families create traditions out

of the details. Similarly, in the world of literary studies, the holidays America's public

schools celebrate are the works in the literary canon and each branch of the institution

chooses which details they will emphasize. This later becomes how a work is taught, but

more importantly for this subcategory of Brown's extrinsic factors, like holiday

traditions, canons are passed down. This is where Brown's inertia clause rolls in. Brown

points out, "Tradition is self-perpetuating: works that have been sanctioned by one

generation are transmitted to the next. Academics tend to teach what they have been

taught" (134-135). With this statement Brown establishes the scientific theory of inertia's

presence in the tradition of the literary canon. An original canon was set in motion and

will stay in motion unless an unbalanced force acts upon it. The monotony of repetition and complacency in accepting common student outcomes will continue to happen unless educators acknowledge there is a problem and make an effort to change it.

Brown's second extrinsic factor is "Recognition: attention by scholars, prizes won, and marketing." In bookstores and libraries, there are hundreds of books on the shelves. In order for a book to have a private shelf at the entrance doors, a book has to have received recognition as being superior. Works in the canon follow the same trend. They are works which have had heightened recognition bestowed upon them continuously. Brown describes different ways in which canonical works receive this recognition, through attention by scholars, winning prizes, and marketing techniques. The first, by attention by scholars, she describes as "a pressure point for opening the canon, because it both embodies and engenders critical esteem" (134). Attention according to Brown is comprised of "scholarly studies" expressed in texts such as conference papers, books, article, and reviews as well as the work's appearance in teaching guides and course syllabi. This notice by scholars, in the words of Brown, "amounts to an official testament to a works quality" (135). The continuation of this attention plays a role in keeping works in the "canon corral" overtime. In this way, works endure.

The second form of recognition Brown claims contributes to a work's canonical survival is that of literary prizes. Book awards of the wide variety according to Brown,

serve the same function as beauty pageants – "each feature a new cohort competing for distinction of being the best" (136). Once a work receives recognition it is granted publicity which leads to increased recognition, which leads to more prizes. Lastly, marketing becomes a form of recognition for canonical works as authors can sometimes become brands, just as likely to be marketed in mass media and catalogs as a popular pair of sunglasses are marketed heavily. Consumerism in itself then helps keep a canonical work in circulation.

The third extrinsic factor Brown asserts as having a part in the choosing of a canonical work is the importance a work holds for groups and individuals. The importance that a work holds members of a society in any given time period is crucial to determining canonicity. Since the definition of a group can be subjective, Brown's definition of a group is as follows:

A group can be as large as the set of all who identify with a gender or speak a language or believe in a religion or live in a country, or it can be as small as the faculty in a university department, which strictly speaking would become a group as soon as it had two members (139).

Thus, a group can speak for the collection of multiple people in a certain societal structure or only for a few individuals. Brown continues asserting that despite that of these groups' social class being "the most analyzed group" which influences canonicity, they are not the group associated with making changes to the canon. According to

Brown, the groups who are the most "influential canonizing communities" are scholarly

organizations such as "elite MLA divisions." In addition to scholarly communities, a few

famous individuals also have the power to generate their own canons. However, the ideas

of individual influence are not so individual. Brown explains:

> Because of the way that academic departments are constituted, with one or at
> most a few individuals in each area that is perceived as important enough to warrant
> educational coverage; local individuals can represent entire fields of study (142).

Thus, a large extrinsic factor in the determining process of canonicity is the importance a

work holds to groups of high social class or a scholarly elite.

The fourth extrinsic factor described in Joan L. Brown's chapter, "Factors that

Make a Work Canonical," is availability. Availability is a powerful determining factor in

everyday operations such as picking clothes to wear or deciding who to hire at a place of

employment. When picking an outfit for the day, first options are the clothes hanging

ready on hangers in the closet, not those lying in the dirty hamper which still need to be

washed. When deciding upon employment candidate, those with the availability to work

a greater amount of hours during a variety of times in the day usually receive a more

extensive application review than those who have a more limited availability. The same

concept applies to determining canonicity. In agreement Brown states, "Logic dictates

that a work that is available will be disseminated more than one that is not" (145). She

argues this is true for this reason:

> At present, printed materials still dominate in American universities. If a work is out of print, it cannot be assigned for students to purchase, so it cannot be distributed and taught without substantial effort and possible legal risk. Visibility in the literary market place is taken as evidence that the work and its author are worthy of respect (145).

Because of the tendency to read and teach what is easily available, a "vicious circle" forms in which "publishers tend to focus on works which are required books in secondary education while instructors are forced to teach what is widely accessible in paperback edition" (145). Brown's explanation of availability makes clear that it is easy for a cycle to ensue, keeping works once long ago given merit still in circulation due to their increase recognition and accessibility.

The viscous circle Brown identifies deepens past being just a repetition of texts but also a repetition of values – the same values. The repetition although in vague description is simply an instructor passing out a ragged paperback copy of the same books he/she read in high school, when looked at deeper this practice has much greater effects than a student already knowing the ending. By limiting the variety of texts students read we limit what they learn to a specific set of events, characters, settings, values, and emotions. And worse, when texts are analyzed with the same perspective repetitively, students learn only one perspective.

The problem with the repetitive teaching of the same works is that a certain set of values continues to be taught hand in hand with the novel, excluding other issues which may not be included in that novel, such as multiculturalism or social issues between ethnic groups today. If novels such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's racy *The Scarlett Letter* or

Scott Fitzgerald's elaborate *The Great Gatsby* were being taught in a way which created a

space for students to explore the identities of themselves and their peers, then a canon

would be sufficient. But this is not happening in the majority of public high school

classes today. In his article "Culture or Canon? Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of

Literacy," Peter McLaren explains the tendency for instructors to teach the works of

canon in way as repetitive as the use of the texts themselves:

> Those in favor of teaching a canon of prescribed works rarely draw attention to
> the importance of understanding the ideological dimensions of such works – an
> understanding which challenges the interests and values of the societies in which
> these works are generated (222).
> Instead, the approach typically taken to teach a novel focuses on the mechanics of

reading and writing. Although these are important skills which students need to acquire,

this mainstream approach does nothing to ignite student's critical thinking about a novel.

By simply teaching figurative language or punctuation use in a novel without a providing

larger context, students learn about figurative language or punctuation but do not delve

into anything the novel has to offer past that point. McLaren describes the consequences

of this approach to the instruction of a novel when he writes, "Mainstream approaches to

literacy, which too often concentrate on the sheer mechanics of reading and writing, fail

to take seriously enough the learner's socio-cultural context – his or her own social

reality – in which meaning is actively constructed" (222). Further, McLaren writes, "All

too frequently the social reality of the learner is assumed to correspond to reality as it is

defined by the dominant culture" (222). The vivid argument in these two quotes and

throughout McLaren's article is that in teaching a certain set of skills or a certain set of

values present in the novel repetitively, instructors fail to acknowledge the student's interests or possible relation to the novel. In doing so a world is created within a classroom where the values and skills that are present in a small group of novels become a set of commandments for what writing, educational discussion, and textual value needs to be in a classroom. The problem with this is that they represent the narrative of the dominant culture which is still to this day, middle class, white, and male due to the constant re-use of texts written in times when the privilege of publishing a text was restricted to middle class white men.

The continuous focus on this narrative, despite the intentionality, communicates the inferiority of any persons belonging to a narrative outside of the dominant narrative and this affects students whether it be subconsciously or consciously. When in a position of inferiority students do not feel capable of success and only few excel past their fears of failure. Students need to acquire the mechanic skills of reading and writing in their high school courses in order to be able to complete tasks necessary for gaining entrance to college and the workplace such as writing resumes, cover letters, application essays, etc. McLaren reiterates this fact when he writes, "Student's success in the North American marketplace depends upon their successful entrance into the academy" (215). Yet, despite the direct correlation between students' future success and the reading comprehension and writing skills they are supposed to develop in high school, the current practices of teaching a canon which places a large group of students in a position of inferiority, continue. McLaren explains the negative affect this has on minority students

when he writes, "Linguistic and racial minority students are the hardest hit by the educational system, which has systematically evaluated their school performance and revealed to be inferior to that of mainstream students in English" (221). Minority students who do not see themselves, their cultures, values, beliefs, languages, or ways of speaking in the words of the canon are left with the choice to conform the way they communicate to that of the dominant culture or fail.

Mainstream academic knowledge consists of the general core curriculum in high schools and what material is covered in these courses. In her article, "Acquisition of literate discourse: Bowing before the master?" Lisa Delpit defines mainstream academic knowledge as consisting of "concepts, paradigms, theories, and explanations that constitute traditional and established knowledge in the behavior and social science" (8). Basically, mainstream academic knowledge is the meat and potatoes of all the core class dinner plates we feed students. It's the five paragraph essay, basic arithmetic, the one sided version of the Mexican – American war. Delpit describes this knowledge as being a reflection of "the established, Western, oriented canon that has historically dominated University research" (8-9). But the meat and potatoes from the West side of the world are not what everyone is used to eating. The knowledge from the western world should not be the only knowledge we teach. For international students, our condensed knowledge is exclusionary and for students whose roots grow out of North American soil, receiving only knowledge about the western part of America inhibits how much they grow.

The study I conducted consisted of surveying two Latino college students, one female and one male, who participated in the public school education system. One a college graduate and one a college freshman. The purpose of the survey's the participants were given was to reflect on their high school English education in regards to its effect on how they now perceive themselves ethnically – their ethnic identity. The survey consisted of five questions and follow up questions formed based on the participants' answers to the original questions.

The first question that was asked in the survey was in regards to how each participant ethnically identified and what the ethnic identification meant to each of them. The male participant ethnically identified as Hispanic. When asked why he identified as such, his response was, "I have grown up and been told that I am Hispanic and my whole family is just Hispanic." When asked the same question the female participant seemed perplexed and responded initially in a joking manner, "What are the options? You know how like in scantrons they have options?" After gathering her laughter, the participant settled on the title of "Mexican-American" which she described as "being of Mexican descent but being born in America."

I went on to ask about each participant's experiences about the texts they read in their high school English courses, both participants included the texts, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *1984*. The male participant described the readings as "cool", having no significant derogatory or positive

reflection about how he felt about the texts he read. The female participant showed an appreciation for the controversial issues the texts reveal. Interested in how the female participant's instructors encouraged investigation of the controversial issues these texts handle such as race, power dynamics, social class, justice, etc, I asked the female participant if there were any activities or discussion she remembered which dealt with these issues but all she could recall were worksheets where they analyzed how "metaphor conveyed a certain theme."

I then inquired into whether or not the participants were able to find a connection between the texts they read and their own cultures through any characters, events, or issues the novels introduced. When asked this question the male participant took a minute to think and then shook his head and said "no". The female participant said the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* reminded her of "the racism in anti-immigration politics". I asked her if she was given time in class or an assignment, which allowed her time to further her curiosity and passion about the issue of Mexican immigration, and she also, shook her head "No."

I then asked how their ethnicity and their experience in their high school English courses have affected them in a university setting. Neither student expressed any difficulty in excelling academically but both participants expressed that they felt the need to hide their accents with a tendency to need to explain their cultural traditions. The female participant voiced the necessity to "conform to those words" of the predominantly Anglo population of the university. She reiterated, "You cannot be the way you were

back in your hometown". The male participant expressed a similar experience describing, "I felt obligated to change my accent" when discussing how he tends to say "San Marcos" with a Spanish accent.

Overall throughout the survey, the participants revealed to know little about their ethnic identity more than where they and their ancestors were born, but not in offense to them. They were not allowed time or encouraged by their academic circumstances to realize the importance of their ethnicity or to be curious enough to explore it. The academic system of both participants failed to educated them about their identity by familiarizing them instead with a cookie cutter information set and a variety of types of scantrons, where they can bubble in their ethnicity.

Due to their lack of knowledge about their own ethnic identity, both participants ethnically identify in ways that do not link to how they perceive themselves but instead only link to where somebody was born, a location. Gloria Anzaldua explains these ways of identification to equal a cop out from developing a personal resonation with one's ethnicity:

> We call ourselves Hispanic or Spanish-American or Latin American or Latin when linking ourselves to other Spanish speaking peoples of the Western hemisphere and when copping out. We call ourselves Mexican-American to signify we are neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun "American" than the adjective "Mexican" (and when copping out). (Anzaldua 43)

If reading is the way we learn, then we are not reading enough about culture if Latinos themselves do not know how to identify, do not know the "variations of Latino", and do not even know that there is more to ethnicity than the city on a birth certificate.

The solution is not to obliterate every text written by a white middle class male to be replaced by a group of texts written only by Latinos. The discrimination would just change its focus, not disappear. The solution is to create a space where students can explore their identity in English courses. Whether it be through incorporating a text by Gloria Anzaldua, Tomas Rivera, or Sandra Cisneros or whether it be continuing to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* with a focus on how it is similar to today's social and racial issues, educators need to encourage students to explore and embrace their ethnicities. If students begin to take pride in who they are ethnically, then maybe then educators will see the importance in rolling the "r" in our names and maybe students will stop changing their accents to conform.

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