In this piece, the author discusses how The Panza Monologues was used in a high school Chicana/Latina Literature class to spark critical thinking and multilingual monologue writing around emergent bilingual students' lived experiences.

Writing from La Panza!: Exploring Monologue Literacies with Emergent Bilinguals

Teaching young people about playwrights who invoke a critical consciousness, ignite activism, and nurture the ability to name unabated injustices in society has always excited me. For years, my classroom has celebrated the tradition of activist feminist writers who advocate for social and political causes, using their narratives to educate the world and elicit social change. Today, perturbing social conditions (racism, misogyny, homophobia, and poverty) and educational challenges (high-stakes testing, zero-tolerance policies, Eurocentric curricula, and English-only mandates) are increasingly rampant in our nation’s schools. In this context, Maxine Greene reminds educators, “It is an honor and a responsibility to be a teacher in such dark times—and to imagine, and to act on what we imagine, what we believe ought to at last be” (“Teaching” 80). In response to these challenges, I have borrowed from the ethos of multilingual and activist Chicana/Latina feminist artists, writers, and playwrights to enhance my Mexican@/Chicana@ students’ abilities to question, adjudicate, infer, synthesize, and interpret their social and political worlds.

In the spring of 2010, I entered my twelfth-grade Chicana/Latina Literature class armed with numerous Chicana/Latina literary voices that have transformed the literary landscape in the United States. William Orchard states, “With the novel’s rise to prestige, narrative fiction has come to define the ‘literary’ within the traditional classroom (142). However, in Latin@ literature classrooms, fiction often proves more alive when accompanied by poetry or theater. For example, theater has historically rendered aspects of literary study more accessible by enlisting the creative energies of students to imagine as they read, understand, and ultimately stage written texts (Aldama). Furthermore, in oppressed Chicana/Latina communities, theater has long served as a potent means to privilege subaltern voices and as a collective form of problem-solving (Ybarra Frausto).

In this article, I discuss how I used Virginia (Vicki) Grise and Irma Mayorga’s The Panza Monologues to spark critical thinking and multilingual monologues around students’ lived experiences. As the teacher, I hoped to inspire lifelong writers and to push their thinking about gender and sexuality. Although teachers are often encouraged to teach scripted, standardized content and avoid all aspects of gender and sexuality in the classroom (Lesko), I illustrate the value of centering Chicana feminist queer cultural production in an English language arts (ELA) elective course.

Chicana/Latina Literature in ELA Classrooms

While I had the honor of creating and teaching an elective Chicana/Latina Literature course in my school district, students across the nation rarely access Chicana/Latina studies and other ethnic studies courses (de los Ríos). Although Chicana/Latina studies courses have been taught at the secondary level for as long as they have been at the university level (de los Ríos, López, and Morrell),
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limited research documents secondary Chican@/Latin@ studies curricula and instruction (de los Ríos), especially within ELA classrooms. Among existing studies, Curtis Acosta’s research on his Latin@ literature class in Tucson, Arizona, highlights a thematic inclusion of resistance through an epistemological framework rooted in Mesoamerican Indigenous intellectualism. Similarly, my own practitioner inquiry in California explores my Chican@/Latin@ studies course that centered border authors and cultivated a critical epistemic lens among students to better navigate their literary and social worlds (de los Ríos 67). Furthermore, Mary Alexandra Rojas’s content analysis on the presence—or rather, significant lack—of Latin@ authors and playwrights in mainstream ELA textbooks and anthologies conveys not only the limited representation of the largest and fastest growing school population in the United States but also the tokenizing of Latin@ authors. Similarly, the few Latin@ writers that do appear are too often relegated to being “additives” for an already homogenizing ELA curriculum.

Curriculum always “emerges out of an interplay among conceptions of knowledge, conceptions of the human being, and conceptions of the social order” (Greene, “Diversity” 216). Carol D. Lee asserts that youth of color often disengage from school when the instructional content is disconnected from their conceptions of knowledge or “does not serve the goals that are most immediate to them” (26). Yet youth of color often spend their time in ELA courses reading literature, poetry, and plays by and about people who are unlike them (Kelly 53). This has too often supported the de-Indigenization, miseducation, and perpetual foreigner status of Chican@s/Latin@s in US curricula. Centering counterhegemonic texts—particularly those rooted in non-Western understandings of the world and self—as worthy subjects of study, rather than relegating them as add-ons, enables youth of color to flourish socially, academically, and culturally.

Centering Chicana Feminist Cultural Production: The Panza Monologues

Although Chican@/Latin@s have been historically excluded from mainstream institutions that produced theater for mass audiences, they have successfully built their own institutions and responded to the political needs of their regional audiences (Orchard). Rasquache theater highlights how grassroots artists remain creative despite limited resources and how they bilingually confront “the world from the perspective of the downtrodden, the rebel, the outside” (Ybarra Frausto 52). Specifically, during the last two decades of the 20th century numerous Chicana/Latina artists have created bi/multilingual grassroots theater and monologue-driven performances that center the intersecting oppressive forces affecting Chicanas/Latinas (e.g., Adelina Anthony, Las Ramonas, Yadira de la Riva). The power of such work derives from the ways these women “embody and perform political identities that bridge the private into the public sphere” (Herrera 207).

Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa advocate the necessity for “women to act in the everyday world . . . [and] perform visible and public acts” (217). From this tradition emerges The Panza Monologues, a play-off and critique of Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues from 1994. This bilingual collection features Chicana/Latina women’s thoughts and experiences surrounding their panzas. While la panza refers to the belly, this metaphorically alludes to the corazón (heart), the center of the body, and the center of life. The production makes visible the ways in which political, economic, sexual, and cultural oppression traverse and play out on the bodies of women of color. By locating la panza as a complex site of pain and exploitation, the text’s Chicana queer protagonist transforms her “panza power” into a site of resistance and interrogates ideas of home, generational poverty, sexuality, and transnational belonging (Cuevas).

The Chican@/Latin@ Literature Course

Ofelia García describes translanguaging—a key concept for this classroom research—as a pedagogical practice that views languages as interacting in fluid and complex ways in the minds and practices of multilingual people, instead of separable and countable phenomena. The term translanguaging derives from Welsh scholar Cen Williams, who coined the term trawsieithu to refer to a pedagogy that involves the hearing or reading of lessons in one language, and the development of the work (oral discussions, the writing of passages, performances)
in another language or vice versa (García). This pedagogy intentionally uses two languages flexibly in a bilingual arrangement to promote bilingualism and biliteracy (Bartlett and García 17). My course was a year-long ELA elective offered at La Feria High School, a predominantly Latin@ and working-class high school in Pomona, California, which is approximately 25 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The class met daily for 55 minutes and had 35 students, all of whom were of Mexican descent. All of the students were emergent bilinguals (García) and most were recently classified as Redesignated Fluent English Proficient. Positioning students as emergent bilinguals rather than as English language learners reorients language standardization from deficit models to robust linguistic abilities and creative practices (García and Kleifgen). The students and I employed translanguaging throughout the course.

**Developing the Teacher’s Translanguaging Stance**

Creating a translanguaging classroom is not easy because it contrasts the instruction of most teacher education programs (García, Ibarra-Johnson, and Seltzer). Ofelia García argues that preservice English and ESL teachers are often taught that emergent bilinguals are “lacking literacy” and “limited” and that their role is to teach content solely in English. A translanguaging stance refutes this and reflects a teacher’s belief that a bi/multilingual student has one linguistic repertoire that includes all of the features from each of the specific languages/varieties as resources to draw upon (García, Ibarra-Johnson, and Seltzer). Similarly, effective instruction requires teachers to draw on or leverage the different language practices together. Toward this end, I drew on a translanguaging stance to create an instructional design that mobilized students’ bilingualism and accelerated their content in fluid ways. I established this practice at the beginning of the year and reflected these priorities in the design of the course. Because I knew that all of my students were emergent bilinguals and of Mexican@ descent, I often incorporated bilingual texts that reflected Chicano/Latin@ culture and literary genres.

Both teachers and students generate knowledge of practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle), deriving conceptual understandings based on our own experiences living and learning in urban and multilingual neighborhoods and schools. Within the lexicon of teacher research, this mode of inquiry is necessary to understand the depth and breadth of what occurs in today’s increasingly diverse classrooms. As such, this qualitative classroom reflection represents work conducted by my own practice, and therefore both benefits from and is constrained by my emic view.

**Creating Monologues with Vicki Grise**

The unit lasted three weeks and was guided by questions of nuanced identity development in the borderlands. Upon reading and then watching a DVD of *The Panza Monologues* as a class, students engaged in a fishbowl Socratic seminar and discussed various themes that arose from the text. In this space, students were free to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, often engaging both English and Spanish. Students discussed how Vicki applied figurative language to convey an idea or an emotion in her monologue. One student, Agustin, shared, “Usaba rima y ritmo que ilumina los sentimientos de vivir en la frontera . . . ni de aquí, ni de allá” (She used a rhyme and rhythm that illuminates the sentiments of living on the border . . . not from here, nor there). As my class began to unveil powerful images
represented in the play, students made broader associations between the content of the play and their lives. For instance, Catalina was so passionate about the text she affirmed, “I know what Vicki is saying. Our bodies carry pain and need to be free.” When I probed Catalina to clarify, she added, “You know free to be who you are, who you want to be without fear. I have dreams but sometimes they controlled by society, by men.” Furthermore, small groups of students worked together and researched themes from the play online from both English- and Spanish-medium websites. These themes included obesity in the Latin@ community, body image, LGBTQ struggles, anti-immigrant sentiments, and the lack of access to organic grocery stores, farmers markets, and recreational parks. Ultimately, students created online Prezi presentations on these topics and presented them to the class.

Earlier in the semester, I personally wrote to and invited Vicki Grise to our class, informing her that we were using the play. She graciously agreed to visit us, and in April 2010 she provided us with a class workshop titled Writing from La Panza. In her presentation, she shared that all young people receive subtle and not-so-subtle messages about their bodies and roles in society. For Vicki, the play disrupted the myriad stereotypes about Latin@s in society.

Drawing from the play, Vicki provided students with various writing prompts to generate their own monologues and encouraged them to use their full linguistic repertoire (see Figure 1). She instructed students to draw from their senses and bi/multilingualism, and to create their own rhythm, cadence, and musicality. Below I share excerpts from three students’ monologues that exemplified unwavering cultural and linguistic pride.

The following are excerpts from Patricia’s Monologue, “Mi Trenza/My Braid”:

De niña mi amá me hacía la trenza. Me gritaba desde la panza, “hijaaaas vente pa’ peinarte!” De vez en cuando, mi trenza me hablaba. Me decía, “I carry generations of stories of our ancestors. I carry los años de lucha, las gotas de tristeza, y la belleza de la vida. I’m as thick as a rope and estoy aquí pa’ protegerte.” Mi trenza is the one thing I have always felt was powerful about me. It’s thick and strong. La trenza de mi mamá le llega a la cadera, igual como mi abuelita. It’s a symbol of the strength, storytelling, and sabiduría of the mujeres en mi familia. Y ahora, yo misma me hago la trenza. Y como lo hacía mi mamá, me lo hago con el mismo detalle y cariño.

As a child, my mom would make my braid. She would yell from the depths of her stomach, “daughterrrr, come here so I can comb you!” Once in a while, my braid would talk to me. She would tell me, “I carry generations of stories of our ancestors. I carry the years of struggle, the tears of sadness, and the beauty that is life. I am as thick as a rope and I am here to protect you.” My braid is the one thing I have always felt was most powerful about me. It’s thick and strong. My mom has a braid that to her waist, just like my grandma. It’s a symbol of the strength, storytelling, and wisdom of the women in my family. And now, I braid my own hair. And just like my mom, I braid my hair with the same detail and affection.

Patricia decided to write from the perspective of what she identified as the most powerful part of her body, her braid. She first chose to write her monologue primarily in Spanish, and then translated it into English. She takes great pride in her trenza, and similar to the play, she connected it to the intergenerational storytelling of the strong women in her family.

The following excerpt is from Miguel’s Monologue, “Mi Amá”:

My family is the most important thing to me. My amá is an immigrant from Michoacan, Mexico. She’s sacrificed her entire life for her family. She’s raised all six of us alone. We all work to help her pay the bills. My pa’ died in a car accident as a truck driver when I was eight. My mom’s experienced a lot racial prejudice and sexism her whole life for being an undocumented immigrant. Last year, somebody called la migra (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) on her factory and there was a retene (raid) and many of the workers were
sent back to Mexico. She was almost deported too, but fortunately, she was able to get away just in time. The injustices and sadness of my mom is heavy on all of us. Mi amá will always be the most important thing to us, even when we get married and have our own kids.

Akin to the protagonist’s struggles with identity formation in this play’s borderlands, Miguel illustrates a powerful loyalty for his mother while acknowledging the vast sacrifices his mother has made every day as an undocumented immigrant. Miguel’s ongoing identity development is embedded in the seeds of his migrant mother’s dreams and her steadfast resilience.

And the following is an excerpt from Gloria’s Monologue, “Ella/Her”:

I loved her so much and she loved me. I first fell in love with her in 10th grade geometry. She sat in front of me and I’d stare at her big black curly hair. We were together for four months then she told me she was scared her parents would find out and think something. She was scared of them finding out she liked girls. She broke up with me cuz she was ashamed of me, ashamed of us. Me vendió. (She sold me out). Andaba quebrada (I was broken). I felt betrayed. I was full of coraje (rage). How could she do this? The next year she moved to Riverside. We never saw or spoke again. But I still think of her.

Lastly, Gloria’s monologue explored heartbreak and forbidden love, echoing themes not only from The Panza Monologues, but also of students’ daily realities as bilingual, bicultural, and transnational young people.

The text offered a learning space that trained students’ imaginations, encouraged robust reflection through monologue writing, and promoted a community of literary resistance. Our classroom became a collective of writers, dreamers, and advocates for social change. Given the community in our classroom, students employed their translanguaging literacies to write monologues brimming with a range of topics, from cultural empowerment to relationships. Students also provided feedback for classmates who needed to add more ganas, or passion, to their writing. I scaffolded students’ performances of their monologues by sharing my own monologue first. While not all students chose to share their monologues aloud, all were encouraged to share with at least one other classmate and become part of a literary community that advocates for social change.

It is imperative that in our conversations about literacy instruction we continue to incorporate curriculum dedicated to youth empowerment (Morrell), especially for emergent bilingual and LGBTQ youth. As English teachers, one of the most powerful things we can do is incorporate literature, poetry, and plays that not only reflect the communities we teach, but also speak truth to power (Ife). After all, to write from la panza has the potential to encourage students—especially those whose voices are often silenced—to wield a pen and critical mind as powerful tools.

Suggestions

Recognizing and honoring students’ linguistic and epistemic privileges entails taking their claims about the world seriously. Within the shifting demographics of schools, teachers must not only reframe the manner in which texts are selected, discussed, and analyzed in literacy classrooms (Morrell), but also develop a translanguaging stance if they work with and commit themselves to emergent bilinguals. The practices documented in my classroom draw attention to how ELA courses can incorporate bi/multilingualism. A translanguaging stance—and at its core, a philosophical toolkit—can be employed whether a teacher is bilingual or not. Moreover, while in many regions of the country the state of being bi/multilingual may not be as common, many places have literacy educators who are indeed bilingual and able to employ both a translanguaging stance and classroom design. There are epistemological implications for teaching and researching in students’ bi/multilingual critiques of their worlds via nondominant playwrights that center experiences of racial, ethnic, gender, linguistic, and class marginalization.

Emergent bilinguals vacillate between their rich linguistic and cultural experiences in and outside of school using a dynamic set of meaning-making repertoire that span multilingual, visual, audio, spatial, gestural, and more (New London Group). Yet these same young people rarely encounter practices and pedagogies inside the classroom that draw on, validate, and sustain the cultural and linguistic productions of their communities (García, Ibarra-Johnson, and Seltzer). Chicana/Latina feminists advance scholarship that is accountable to social problems and that aims to dismantle injustices and expose methods of
exclusion (Grise and Mayorga). Greene reminds us that 21st-century educators must "be initiators of new beginnings" of social justice efforts ("Teaching" 80). Students like Patricia, Miguel, and Gloria have demonstrated that counterhegemonic forms of curricula can indeed "train the imagination" (Greene, Releasing); enacting these imaginations through critical reflection can also go far in "training the imaginations" of English teachers.

Note

1. I use the symbol "@" in the words Mexican@, Chicano@, and Latin@ to avoid the masculinistic term Mexican and binary notions of gender in Mexican@.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In what way do culture, personal experiences, and history influence a poet’s work? In this multisession lesson, students choose a Latino/Latina poet and poem to analyze. Students use online resources to gather background information about the poet and integrate that research into an analysis of the poem’s meaning, literary devices, and themes. After posting their analysis to a class blog, students then refine their writing skills as they respond meaningfully to their peers’ poetry analyses. http://bit.ly/1YiYOIw