

Latino/a Literature in the Multicultural English Classroom

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### **Abstract**

In this research paper, the author examines the deculturalization of Latino/as in American education, discusses the importance of multiculturalism in the secondary English classroom and offers a selection of literature by Latino/a writers that are appropriate to use in a secondary English classroom. The author briefly discusses the educational history of Mexicans in the United States and colonized Puerto Ricans, as well as the processes of deculturalization that occurred. Noting that formal processes of deculturalization no longer occur, the author acknowledges that multiculturalism and cultural inclusion are still lacking in many U.S. classrooms. Focusing on secondary English curriculums, the author discusses how literature written by and about Latino/as can have a positive effect on both Latino/a students and non-Latino/a students. Lastly, the author provides a sampling of Latino/a literature that is appropriate to use in a secondary English curriculum.

*Keywords:* deculturalization, education, Latino/a literature

In *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*, Joel Spring explores the educational experiences of conquered peoples in the United States. He focuses one chapter on people of Latino/a heritage, particularly those from Mexico, which was first conquered by the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, and those from Puerto Rico, which was colonized by the United States in 1898 at the end of the Spanish-American War (Spring 87, 89). Spring recounts how white Americans treated Mexicans and Puerto Ricans and discusses the educational issues that were created by this treatment. This paper will examine the deculturalization of Latino/as in education, discuss the importance of multiculturalism in the secondary English classroom, and explore some of the many works of literature by Latino/a writers that are appropriate to use in a secondary English classroom.

### **The History of Latino/as and American Education**

Spring defines deculturalization as “the educational process of destroying a people’s culture (cultural genocide) and replacing it with a new culture” (Spring 8). This is achieved through various means. Mexican and Puerto Rican students experienced deculturalization when they were not allowed to speak their native language, Spanish, in school (Spring 97). Because Puerto Rico was a colonized nation and resistant to Americanization, the United States made additional efforts to win Puerto Ricans’ loyalty through deculturalization processes in schools (Spring 100-1). These deculturalization processes included the celebration of U.S. holidays, providing textbooks that espoused American viewpoints, having students pledge allegiance to the U.S. flag, and bringing in teachers from the United States to replace those from Puerto Rico (Spring 101). By the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement had accelerated efforts to resist the deculturalization of groups such as Latino/as in the United States (Spring 107). Mexican

Americans and Puerto Ricans were joined in this civil rights struggle by more recent immigrants from the Caribbean, Central America and South America (Spring 108).

But despite these efforts to resist, remnants of deculturalization can still be found in educational settings where multiculturalism and diversity are neither represented nor valued. In 2006, Fenice B. Boyd, et al. set out to create a vision for secondary English education that would embrace real diversity and accept all cultures. Boyd, et al. note that, just as with the process of deculturalization, modern education tends to promote one dominant ideology to the detriment of all students. They write:

In all domains of pedagogy, educators tend to embrace — implicitly if not explicitly — norms that promote the status quo of language, literacy, literature, and culture. However, when educators support unquestioned ideas and ideals that reflect a single, dominant view of society, the result is a marginalization of the contributions, potential, and capabilities of learners who come from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. (Boyd, et al. 330)

Boyd, et al. suggest that deculturalization does indeed still exist in U.S. schools, but in less obvious ways.

### **Multiculturalism in the English Classroom**

Spring notes that “language is an important part of culture” and the repression or prohibition of native language plays a large role in deculturalization (Spring 8). English classrooms — as the predominant educational site of language, literacy and culture — are thus an important battleground where deculturalization can continue or multiculturalism can flourish. Boyd, et al. state that teachers of English possess the power to promote either deculturalization or multiculturalism. They write, “The first step toward creating equitable literacy classrooms —

and to leave no student behind — is to acknowledge that English teachers and teacher educators are complicit in the reproduction of racial and socioeconomic inequality all across U.S. schools” (Boyd, et al. 331). Arlene L. Barry notes that the curriculums teachers and schools choose to use can have a large impact on how students from various cultures perceive themselves. She writes, “The knowledge passed on through the curriculum determines which groups are valued or devalued. Valuing one’s ethnicity allows one to value oneself, an important step in success anywhere” (Barry 630). In other words, if students do not see themselves and their cultures represented in school in a positive way, they will not only suffer academically, but personally. Curtis Acosta and his colleagues have attempted to directly address this issue through a Chicano/Raza Studies program they created at Tucson High Magnet School. Acosta writes:

The reality for many Chicano/a or Latino/a youth in our country is that school has rarely worked for them and they feel that it is not built for them to succeed. Our barrios and communities often perpetuate this feeling by claiming that academic success is acting ‘white.’ Having internalized their oppression and formed these attitudes, it is crucial for the students in the beginning stages of their journey to look within themselves and their history to discover their humanity and academic identity. (Acosta 37)

Taking steps to celebrate and promote the cultures of all students, however, does not necessarily require an entire program, such as the one Acosta describes. Many education and library science scholars suggest that the inclusion of culturally representative literature in traditional English classrooms can also have a profound positive effect on students from various cultures (Acosta 38; Barry 630-2; Boyd, et al. 333; Norton 38; Stewart Frankson 30). Acosta notes that literature that reflects students’ lives, families, and histories allows them to visualize

an academic identity for themselves (Acosta 38). Barry also emphasizes this idea, stating that if students' educational experiences have no relevance to their home culture, they may not view education as important (Barry 632). In a similar vein, Marie Stewart Frankson argues that it is important for cultural minority students to see themselves positively represented in good literature (Stewart Frankson 30).

Others have found that literature that reflects students' cultural experiences can be a catalyst for increased reading (Boyd, et al. 333; Norton 38). Boyd, et al. write, "Using literature that reflects the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of students from diverse backgrounds encourages them to read; their identification with the characters and communities within stories also enables them to make classroom contributions richer in depth and breadth" (Boyd, et al. 333). Not only does this literature encourage students to read by tapping into their interests, but it can also allow students to appreciate their culture's literary and cultural heritage, whether directly through literature or indirectly through the stories told in biographies and historical fiction (Barry 632). Similarly, cultural-specific literature can help students find solidarity in their unique cultural experiences (Acosta 38). Acosta writes, "Students discover that they identify with the characters or figures in the literature and that they have similar feelings of being marginalized by contemporary popular culture" (Acosta 38). In Acosta's Chicano/Raza Studies program, students not only read literature that deals with issues Latino/a youth face, but they also study some of these issues — such as machismo, youth violence and sexism — as sociological topics (Acosta 38). A final positive effect that cultural specific literature can have on culturally diverse students is that its inclusion in the curriculum demonstrates that teachers value all students' cultural experiences and viewpoints (Barry 630).

Education and library science scholars argue that multicultural literature not only positively affects cultural minority students, but that it can have a positive effect on white or dominant culture students as well (Jans-Thomas 33; Norton 28). Donna E. Norton notes that using literature from diverse cultures increases cultural awareness in all students (Norton 28). She writes, “They gain understandings about different beliefs and value systems. They develop social sensitivity to the needs of others and realize that people have sensitivity to the needs of others and realize that people have similarities as well as differences” (Norton 28). Susie Jans-Thomas echoes these ideas, noting how multicultural literature can be used to foster acceptance. She writes, “Through literature, teachers can develop a curiosity for differences, assist in breaking down walls of prejudice, and ensure acceptance of cultural heritage found in ethnic groups throughout the United States” (Jans-Thomas 33).

Utilizing multicultural literature in the English classroom can have strong, positive effects on cultural minority and majority students. Students who read literature by and about their culture become more academically engaged, may gain greater self-esteem, find solidarity in the characters and experiences they read about, learn about positive cultural and literary contributions from people of their own culture, and may feel that their culture is valued by their teachers and peers (Acosta 38; Barry 630-2; Boyd, et al. 333; Norton 38; Stewart Frankson 30). Additionally, multicultural literature can also have a positive effect on students who do not share that particular heritage by increasing cultural awareness and respect (Jans-Thomas 33; Norton 28).

### **Latino/a Literature for Young Adults**

Maria A. Perez-Stable and Mary H. Cordier, writing in 1997, note, “In the last several years there has been a publication explosion of young adult and children’s books about Hispanic

Americans. Previously overlooked, Latinos did not figure prominently in the children's book market. However, the books currently available from picture books through young adult novels are accurate and sensitive in their portrayal of one of America's largest minority populations" (Perez-Stable and Cordier 23). Writing in 2009, Isabel Schon praises an even greater increase in Latino/a young adult literature: "The variety of high-quality books about Latinos is a reason to celebrate" (Schon 44). Perez-Stable and Cordier explain that in addition to the books that represent the large population of Mexican and Puerto Rican people in the United States, much of this Latino/a literature also features writers from Cuba, El Salvador, Colombia, Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Perez-Stable and Cordier 23). The literature also ranges in form, from novels to short stories to poetry. This section will highlight some of these works that are appropriate for use in a secondary English classroom.

Dominican American novelist Julia Alvarez has written a number of books suitable for young adults, including *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (Algonquin Books, 1991) and *In the Time of Butterflies* (Algonquin Books, 1994) (Day 38). Her more recent novel *Once Upon a Quinceañera* (Viking, 2007) is likely to engage students due to its blend of memoir and exploration of the quinceañera, the fifteenth birthday celebration of Latina girls (Schon 46"). In this book, Alvarez frankly discusses her own experience as a teenager and analyzes the romantic clichés and underlying sexism of the quinceañera tradition (Schon 46).

Chicano (Mexican American) author Victor Martinez's first novel *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* (Harper Collins, 1996) is the semi-autobiographical story of Manny, a Mexican American teen living in California, who struggles with poverty and his father's alcoholism (York 19). The winner of the 1996 National Book Award for Young People's Fiction, *Parrot in the Oven* tells a compelling story about loss of innocence and the struggle to find an identity (York 19).



Chilean author Isabel Allende's writing is noted for its blend of magical realism and social and political issues (Day 29). Her memoir *Paula* (Harper Collins, 1994) holds appeal for upper level secondary students who are capable of handling mature material (Day 35). The book began as a letter to her comatose daughter Paula, recounting the tale of her turbulent life after the 1973 military coup in Chile. Blending political and personal history, *Paula* has much to offer mature young adults (Day 35).

Chicana (Mexican American) author Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (Arte Publico Press, 1984) is a collection of related short stories that is often used in secondary English classes (Day 83). It features forty-four vignettes that tell the coming-of-age story of Esperanza Cordero, a teenager growing up in Chicago (Day 85). Esperanza navigates both her Latina and American cultures, eventually creating an identity for herself that reconciles both (Day 86). Students are likely to enjoy Cisneros' strong and descriptive voice, as well as the informal language of collection (Day 86).

Puerto Rican American Judith Ortiz Cofer's *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (Orchard, 1995), contains twelve short stories about a diverse group of Puerto Rican American teenagers living in New Jersey (Perez-Stable and Cordier 25). Each story focuses on a different character from the same apartment building, all likable and unique people experiencing relatable adolescent issues (Perez-Stable and Cordier 25). The experience of living in two cultural worlds, Puerto Rican and American, is explored throughout the stories (Day 90).

Chicano writer Ray Gonzalez's *From the Restless Roots* (Arte Publico Press, 1986) is a short collection of simple poetry influenced by the Southwest United States and his Mexican heritage (Stewart Frankson 34). Young adults will be able to easily comprehend Gonzalez's poetry, but will also be able to explore Gonzalez's use of symbolism (Stewart Frankson 35).

Featuring imagery of Southwest landscapes and the indigenous people of Mexico, Gonzalez's poetry offers approachable writing and a unique perspective (Stewart Frankson 35).

As Perez-Stable and Cordier note, these works of literature illustrate the distinct histories and traditions of Latino/a people, yet they also demonstrate how the Latino/a experience in the United States creates many commonalities for Latino/as (Perez-Stable and Cordier 23).

### **Conclusion**

The U.S. domination of Mexico and Puerto Rico and subsequent processes of deculturalization occurred well over a century ago, yet vestiges of white America's attitudes of "racial, religious, and cultural superiority" are still evident in many classrooms across the United States (Spring 91). As the population of Latino/as in the United States grows and expands to include more people from South America, Central America and the Caribbean, it is important that their cultural experiences are valued and prominent in schools (U.S. Census Bureau 1). In English classes — which deal with language, literacy, and culture — it is perhaps even more important that students see themselves in the texts that they read. As this paper has discussed, there are multiple benefits to having students from cultural minority groups, such as Latino/as, read literature of their own culture. Fortunately, there is a wide variety of Latino/a literature available for young adults. These works of literature are written by authors from a number of Latino/a nations and encompass all genres of writing. Introducing these texts into English courses can contribute to a multicultural classroom in which all cultures are valued, explored, and sought to be understood.

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