

In Search of Ethnic Identity in Selected Narratives: New Reading, New Meaning

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INTRODUCTION

“We are born with only one country,” said Martin Bautista, a Filipino doctor working in rural Oklahoma, in the recent PBS documentary “Searching for America.” This sentiment is also the theme of the winning speech delivered by Patricia Evangelista, a young university student from the Philippines, at the 2004 International English Speaking Competition in London. She said, “Nationalism isn’t bound by time and place. People migrate to different nations to create new nations, yet still remain essentially who they are.”

These words from my countrymen are poignant reminders of my strong ties to the homeland. They reassure me that though I am a thousand miles away, I am a Filipino in mind, spirit, words, and actions. But how can I stop assimilation or acculturation from divesting me and my children of our ethnic identity? Is it possible for an immigrant to maintain ethnic identity and prosper in the host country? At what price? At whose expense?

When I was growing up, my mother encouraged me to dream of coming to America. In a small town where electric power came on at six in the evening, this was a fantasy. Many Filipinos, my parents included, measured their family’s success by the number of children going abroad, particularly to the United States. Some call it ambition; others call it “colonial mentality.” But in the early 70s, when many Filipino doctors and their families immigrated to the United States, my best friend and her family were among them. Soon, she was sending me postcards of Disneyland and winter landscapes. I stared at those postcards for a long time and promised to visit those places someday.

I realized this dream in 1989 when I visited the States for the first time. I found the whole experience overwhelming. I panicked at having to speak English in an American setting. This reaction came as a surprise because I have studied the language for as long as I can remember. Moreover, I trained under speech coaches and participated in many public speaking activities in English. I was confident about my facility in the English language until the INS agent asked me a question at the airport—I froze. Suddenly, I felt awkward, conscious of my foreign accent, totally feeling inadequate in front of a native speaker. On my consequent visits, I made sure that my husband was always around to do the talking. I wouldn’t even answer the phone or call an automated system for fear of making a mistake. I was thankful that, unlike my college friends in Los Angeles, I didn’t have to deal with this stress everyday.

But in 1997, my quiet life was interrupted by unstable political conditions in Manila, the Philippine capital. I found myself embarking on a flight to Houston three years later as an overseas contract worker (OCW, in Filipino jargon). I was “fresh off the boat” and totally unprepared for the landscape that awaited me.

Where were the big ranches? The horses and cowboys? Instead, I saw *taquerias* beside Chinese, Thai, Indian, and Vietnamese restaurants. Business signs in Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic and English prominently displayed wares and services in different parts of the city. I was overjoyed to discover shops in Harwin and Bellaire that catered to the demands of every ethnic dish. Everything else, I could always find at Caninos or any Fiesta. I met many new immigrants, like myself, who were worried about making drastic lifestyle changes while living here. But it was clear that many local entrepreneurs wanted to make us, newcomers, feel at home, or so it seems. A lady from India soon found a video shop that rented out her favorite movies, and even a beauty parlor to do her hair, just like back in the old country. Moreover, the celebration of multicultural festivals honors the traditions of diverse nationalities that now call Houston home. Soon enough, I saw cowboys and horses during my first Livestock Show; listened to Irish folk songs on St. Patrick’s Day; danced to zydeco music at the Heights; savored Cajun cooking at the Crawfish Festival. At the end of my first year, I was reeling with happiness. At that time, I felt Houston was the best place on earth. Unconsciously, I began to develop a bond with the community. I now wonder if Houston will be my permanent home.

THE PURPOSE OF THE UNIT

Today my desire to go back has not waned. No doubt, working in Houston has been rewarding for my family and me, but only in material ways. I now live in a community that is predominantly white, northwest of Houston. As the months go by, I feel more and more different, more ethnic, more “Other.” The experience of being confronted with the “issues” of race is new because, according to Herndon, one “does not think of herself as raced, as other, until in exile Once abroad, race is forced upon her . . .” (Herndon 1).

However, I don’t feel that this “foreign-ness” is a malady in its entirety. In a way, it enriches my teaching. I like to think that it is something I share with my students, especially with those who belong to minority groups. When I have a chance, I talk about my own experiences with my students. Reading the story of Rosa Parks, for example, I recount to my students the days when I used to ride the bus around Houston: I boarded the Metro, one day, along with the other ladies on their way to work in Memorial, an exclusive residential area. There were a few people on the bus who came from big offices downtown. Most of them had their laptops and briefcases on the empty seats beside them. One lady, realizing that she had to give up the seat for other passengers, grumbled a derogatory remark under her breath, perhaps thinking that none of us “foreigners” would understand it. After listening to this story, my students become irate because I did not say anything. They feel very protective and I bask in their feeling of concern. At the end of the reading of Rosa Parks’ autobiography, my Hispanic-American students always ask

“where would we have sat in the busses in Alabama, Ms. Javellana?” Some of them wonder if Hispanics were treated as White during the Bus Boycott.

In general, my students’ knowledge of cultural diversity is limited. In school, I meet a new set of students and parents who, in the first cycle of the school year, feel uncomfortable around me, perhaps because they don’t know what to make of me. When asked about my nationality, I have to say “Asian” because most of them do not know about the Philippines. But then, they confuse me with the Chinese or Japanese and ask me questions about these cultures. My case is not an isolated one. There are many foreign teachers in the district who have, in one way or another, encountered situations where “ethnicity” becomes an issue with some students, especially with those who refuse to recognize the minority as an authority figure in the classroom. These few students will test your patience. Consequently, much time and energy are lost in managing their behavior, both of which could have been directed to teaching.

The main purpose of this unit is to study ethnicity using personal histories (beginning with the students’ and the teacher’s). Along with the study is the hope that both teacher and students will re-examine and set aside their preconceived notions of one another—the stereotypes that they have acquired—and keep an open mind.

Another purpose of this unit is to read literary genres that will effect changes in my students’ image of themselves, so that they may value their heritage and ethnicity, and be comfortable in their own skin. It also seeks to teach middle school students from diverse backgrounds about one another, so that they may examine their cultural differences and find connections that they can build upon.

It is also my intention to change the negative perceptions of immigrants in the community through writing. These negative images stem from stereotypes—pictures in our heads about a category of people and positive or negative sets of beliefs about the characteristics of a group (Mindiola 19). Stereotyping drives prejudice and justifies racism (20). In order to expose myths that produce negative stereotypes, new stories must be told, new voices must be heard, new representations must be written.

In this Language Arts unit, which may last from four to six weeks, students will be expected to read, write, listen and speak. They will be required to keep a “Writer’s Notebook/Journal/Portfolio” where they will record their daily responses to literature. They will have a chance to read from these notebooks during small group sharing. A recent discussion on the Natural Approach, a theory on teaching a second or foreign language, emphasized increased support of more reading and writing for cognitive development (ESL Handbook 14). Integrated activities, such as small discussion groups, also create “an anxiety-free environment” where there is “opportunity to engage in meaningful use of language” (Crandall 42). The content, culturally diverse literature, is something familiar and students will be encouraged to share authentic experiences (Walter 28).

ETHNICITY AND THE NEW GENERATION

At Hamilton Middle School, I teach 6th grade students of mostly Hispanic descent (75%). But walk into my classroom any day and you will see and hear mostly mainstream juvenile America: rap artists, like Eminem and Nelly, are heroes, and “fly” (translation: stylish, cool) fashion statements are made with Sean John’s (rap artist/designer P. Diddy’s apparel line), Jordan’s (shoes by Michael Jordan), and “bling-bling” (glittery jewelry popularized by hip-hop artists). It is apparent that diversity, much less, ethnic difference, is absent in this neutral setting. Given this state of affairs, I continue to face the daunting task of bringing in cultural awareness to my Reading classes. But how can one compete with the message of mass media?

Carola and Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco observe that through new information technologies, the American ethos dominates youth culture, influencing language, street fashions, and music worldwide (Suarez-Orozco 88). Both scholars say that compared to their parents, children of immigrants have always been drawn to the new culture: they quickly pick-up the new language, blend in by wearing the latest fashion, and become aware of acceptable behavior in the host society (89). As a teacher and a parent, I find this picture very disturbing. I strongly believe that my own children should be connected to their country of origin through language, values, religious beliefs, and traditions. Apparently, I am not alone. The Orozcos confirm that immigrant parents “fight to ward off the corrupting influences of the new society (89).”

This finding is also supported by a study made by Alejandro Portes: parents from all national backgrounds and all socioeconomic levels see the principal danger to their children’s well-being in the alternative role models provided by street culture and an external environment fraught with consumerism and permissiveness (Jacoby 161). As a result, immigrant parents today opt for “selective acculturation,” as opposed to the idea of “Americanization,” preferred by parents a century ago (162). Selective acculturation is the process of learning unaccented English and American cultural skills while retaining the parental language and elements of the associated culture (163).

Portes’ study also recommends the retention of strong connections with the parents’ nationality through strong family and community bonds (157). Though “you can’t go home again,” according to Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and, indeed we may never do so, there is always the need for a “soul-home” which, like turtles, we carry on our backs wherever we go (Lanza 1).

In a discussion of *So Far From God*, a novel by Ana Castillo, Lanza reiterates the importance of home using Bell Hooks theory: “the place where all that really matters in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls” (2). She observes how the main character’s daughters leave home, much like immigrants do, in pursuit of the American Dream. Eventually, they find infertility, sterility, and deception in mainstream white culture. They then try to return to

their origins, their mother's house, but because they can only view their mother's culture as a source of embarrassment and pity and not "in all its complexity," they can not find their way back. In the end, they are unable to reconnect and grow spiritually (7).

In this unit, students will read about the varied experiences of second-generation immigrants: their struggle with identity, with language, with poverty, and their conflict with the first-generation, their parents. We will also study the writers' ethnicities because I want the students to realize that inscribing their experiences is helpful, not only academically, but also spiritually. Through writing their stories, they are remembering, explaining, and exploring their ethnicity for themselves and for the next generation.

APPROACHES TO READING THE TEXT

I chose the multicultural authors for this unit based on the works' reflection of the theme of ethnicity. I should also mention that I have evaluated some of the texts for the last three years based on my students' enthusiastic reviews. In order to understand the relationship between the text and ethnicity, I will introduce two frameworks which the students will use to analyze the texts: the psychoanalytical approach and cultural criticism.

The tendency to view the relationship between ethnicity, text, and author is one of the oldest premises of psychoanalysis (Davis-Undiano 1). Stories gain "legitimacy" if the reader assumes that the author's own voice and personal experience are echoed in the work. This theory also supports the idea that the art originates in the experience of the artist. Consequently, the literary text is a product of a personal strategy derived from the experience of the writer (1). For instance, when I read literature, such as the works of Virginia Woolf, I don't separate author from work, though theoretically, I am aware of the "persona" or narrator in the text. I recall reading her fiction as a college freshman, and again later on as a graduate student. In both cases I never felt that the author and I were separated by time, geographical distance or different cultures.

The power of the text comes from believing that the author knows first-hand about the experience she is writing. I observe this among my students, as well. The question "Did this really happen?" interrupts our readings of engaging texts many times. When it is time for students to write their responses in their journals, I notice that they can better connect the experience they read about to their own lives. To find the connection between author and text I will let students predict if the events in the narrative happened in real life. After they make predictions, the class will read the author's biography and check for themselves the similarities between literature and real-life events.

Another approach to reading and analyzing the text is cultural criticism. Clifford Geertz defines culture as "a semiotic (that is, based on signs and symbols) system" (Huntley 68). He claims that culture is not an experimental science but an interpretive one in search of meaning (68). Likewise, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, an Asian literary critic,

points out that race and ethnicity are among significant cultural constructs that affect all individuals and the points at which those constructs intersect form some of the most interesting controversial subjects of cultural critique. When approaching the literary text using cultural criticism, “the critic visualizes the social and cultural structures embedded in the work, to understand the narrative and artistic practice that shaped the work, called into being and given it voice”(69). Cultural criticism makes it possible to study how the following are reflected in the texts and give them their unique flavor: values, beliefs, language, ways of doing things, and traditions. It should be noted here that using cultural criticism ties in the unit with the Social Studies curriculum.

WRITERS ON WRITING THE ETHNIC EXPERIENCE

Maxine Kingston, best-selling author of *Woman Warrior*, once said “I have no idea how people who don’t write endure their lives” (Chiu 35). Her remark can partly be explained through psychoanalytical theory, which explains the relationship between author and text (Davis-Undiano 1). The rest of us can only suffer in silence, hoping that somewhere-sometime someone will find the words to express our pain. Gloria Anzaldua who wrote about the “new mestiza” in *Borderlands* likens writing to “an endless process of inflicting pain on the body and relieving it” (Bloom, *Hispanic* 202). Still others feel the need to write their own histories in order to avoid “erasure and distortion.” Edwidge Danticat observes through the eyes of one of her characters, “You tell the story and it’s retold as they wish, written in words you don’t understand, in a language that is theirs and not yours” (Herndon 5). These words imply that there already exist texts that need rewriting.

For Amy Tan, writing fiction did not come easily. She was miserable in her career as a writer for top corporations (Chiu 12). She knew there was something more for her. She recalls finding her “unique” and “irresistible” writer’s voice after reading Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (13). She identified with writers who were “outsiders.” She realized that growing up “on the border between cultures,” allows her to confront many questions regarding ideas and values “that appeared contradictory” (Huntley 17). Her writings document the intricacies and nuances of the ethnic experience, and more importantly, organize and “transmit” them to others. (17)

Rodolfo Anaya says he “felt alone as a writer.” Anaya was referring to the “voice” and “worldview” in Anglo-American literature (Olmos 6). Though he read classical works and was well-versed in contemporary authors, he felt that they did not completely “express his American reality of his particular heritage” (6). This dilemma led Anaya to write in order to discover his “creative voice” and his “Hispanic/Indian/New Mexican identity.”

Sandra Cisneros was compelled to write stories that have not been written and populate them with different types of Latinos, so mainstream America can see the diversity of the ethnic group (Raso). She also wrote *The House on Mango Street* to create a model for young people, in order that they may “gain power and determination to have

a better life” (Raso). She also wants them to see, through Esperanza, that they can confront lies, deconstruct myths, open new horizons, and “create houses of their own,” “house” being a metaphor for story-telling (Raso 15).

In *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, Walter Dean Myers talks about the relationship between reading and writing. Myers grew up poor in Harlem. Though money was scarce, he had access to a lot of books. He found a public librarian who led him to good books and English teachers who encouraged him to read and write. “Books . . . provided a dialog between me and the authors who had written them. They spoke to me, and I responded, not in words but in appreciation and consideration of their thoughts. More and more, I would respond with my own writing” (127). Myers writes that literature allowed him to see things differently, “like a real writer would have seen it, full of magic and marvels and breathtaking beauty” (78).

With this brief discussion on writing from the authors, I intend to show my students that apart from fulfilling academic requirements, writing can save their lives. They have to realize that writing is part of remembering their stories. Without it, personal histories will be “erased from memory.” I will tell them that as an immigrant, I feel that a better image of my homeland and its people should be projected in texts. I am compelled to write my story so that my children will always remember their roots, their heritage. We (Filipinos) are more than the domestic helpers in London, Hong Kong, and the Middle East; more than just international mail-order brides or entertainers in Tokyo. There are many other Filipinos overseas in key professions such as engineering, technology, and health care, but sadly their stories don’t make the news. Unless new stories are written, stereotypes about ethnic groups will remain. As part of the author study, I will ask students to pick an author whose voice can speak for their own experience/s. They have to explain the reasons for their choice.

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN ANAYA’S *BLESS ME ULTIMA*

In “Uno” (Chapter One) of Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima*, Antonio Marez recalls being at the crossroads of change at the age of six (Cortina 100). He is anxious about entering school for the first time, leaving home and the carefree days of childhood. On the other hand, he is excited about the arrival of Ultima, a *curandera* (healer) and old family friend, who will spend her final days with Antonio’s family. She had been there at his birth and settled an argument between the Lunas and the Marez families. The Lunas wanted to bury the afterbirth and cord in the farm, to symbolize the boy’s ties with the land; but the Marez relatives wanted to burn the afterbirth in the *llano* to signify the boy’s freedom (104). Ultima finally intervened and said she would take care of the business as she wished.

The events surrounding his birth often come back to Antonio in a dream. This dream is a source of confusion for Antonio. After his three brothers go off to war against their father’s will, the heavy responsibility of pleasing his parents rests on Antonio’s

shoulders—should he honor his father heritage by becoming a *vaquero* or make his mother happy by becoming a farmer or a priest (107)? The rest of the novel focuses on Antonio’s “self-realization . . . quest for personal and cultural identity” (Olmos 39). He also must “reconcile the opposites in his life” (40). Anaya uses these conflicts to explore the influence of culture on identity. In the end, Antonio chooses to accept all aspects of his heritage. He overcomes his negative attitude towards school. Though he does well there, he realizes that it will not be the only place for his education. He retains the knowledge he gleans from Ultima (Black 7).

I chose this story because I would like my students to analyze the character of Antonio Marez. His perspective is a refreshing change from the contemporary protagonists of juvenile fiction. He epitomizes the ideal young boy, who is unspoiled by a consumerist world. I will ask students to infer from the text Antonio’s attitude towards his parents and Ultima. They will compare their own attitude towards their elders. I will also ask my students to comment on the idea that Maria and Gabriel have decided their son’s future. I will ask them “If you were Antonio whose wishes will you follow?” They need to elaborate on their answers. The class will also spend some time discussing the “dream” of Antonio about his birth (Cortina 104).

Another element of the story that we will study closely is the culture in New Mexico. We will try to imagine how the community looks, the relationship between the people in the community and the way of living there. We will note that in the story, most of the villagers are ready to help one another in every way. We will then analyze our own communities/neighborhoods in Houston in the same way, then compare it with the community in the novel.

There are other cultural aspects in the story that the class can discuss: the family history of the Marez clan and the end of the *vaquero* way of life, the Lunas’ ties to the farming tradition of the Southwest, the recurring image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as patron saint, and the practice of folk medicine that Ultima imparts to Antonio (Olmos 28). I will ask my students if any of these look or sound familiar. I have observed in the past that many of my students wear the medallion of the Lady of Guadalupe. They can share some facts about La Virgen Guadalupe. We can also discuss folk healing ways in relation to Ultima’s knowledge of plants and remedies. I will share my knowledge about Filipino *albularios* and relate this to the Spanish word *yerberia*, (*yervas* meaning herbs, and so the former is a person who uses herbs to cure). This assignment will require some research with the help of older family members and students can come back another day to share their findings with the class.

On the other hand, students who have experienced life on a ranch or a farm can share their knowledge in this area and point out the differences between the two. I believe this discussion is important because some students travel regularly between Houston and locations south of the border, while others never get a chance to leave their neighborhoods. By doing this I am giving importance to my students’ experiences and am

also reinforcing the idea that their background knowledge is important to their learning. I remember a Social Studies teacher who was amazed at the number of his students who had not seen a mountain or hill. Therefore, a discussion of landscapes, in relation to the setting of the story, will be valuable.

In another activity, I will ask my students to discuss these questions in smaller groups: Do you believe Antonio's family, community, environment, and heritage contribute to his identity (who he is)? Can all of these factors influence his future (or what he can be)? Do you believe that your family, your past, and your environment define you and your future? This discussion will lead to the creation of a web organizer. The web should show the effects of all factors mentioned to Antonio's character. Then students will create their personal web organizers showing the influences of family, school, friends, environment, ethnicity and cultural heritage to the formation of their character. As an example, I will create a web about me and show the factors that help shape my character. The web they create will help students write their own personal stories entitled "All About Me/This Is Me." This is a project that can be shared with the English classes, with the teacher guiding students in their writing with the rubric. The storybook should contain the student's family history, photographs, important events, short compositions about traditions and practices that are important to the student. They can also write about their goals and about people who serve as their role models.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In this section of the unit, the class will read stories by three multicultural women. They are grouped here based on the theme: a person's sense of comfort/discomfort with his/her name. I can almost assume that many immigrants who come to the United States have stories to share about Americans mispronouncing their names. Before we read the stories, I will share my own anecdote to my students and they can write and share their own later. Before coming here, my husband was considering the idea of changing our last name to "Grau," my mother-in-law's maiden name. He said that it would be easier for people to say than "Javellana" (ha-vel-yana). I wouldn't hear of it, of course, worried that we would offend my father-in-law.

After a few months in Houston, I realized that my husband made sense. I have never met so many people who had trouble with my name than when I lived here! I went from Ja- (j as in jar) ve-la(long a) na to Ha-ve-ya-na , to Havelina (I learned later, to my dismay, that a javelina is a wild boar) and finally, plain Ms. J. As if that wasn't enough, my name is now "Maria" (I sign my name as Maria Theresa), though all my life I have always been "Theresa" or "Tess" (from my second name). I have to explain that in the Philippines, girls who are baptized in the Catholic Church had to write Maria (after the Virgin Mary, the country's patroness) before their names because the Church mandated it. Now all my mail reads "Maria Javellana," and I accept that only as my identity "for the record."

Julia Alvarez narrates a similar experience in “Nombres,” a personal essay I found in McDougal Littell’s *Interactive Reader*. She recounts how coming to the States from the Dominican Republic, her family’s name was “changed almost immediately.” In New York, “Alvarez” went from “Elbures,” to “Alburest,” to “Alberase,” losing the original “orchestra of sound” (Alvarez 28). As a young girl, the author was called “Judy” or “Judith” and at one time, “Juliet.” In high school she was “Jules” or “Hey Jude.” She considers herself lucky because her older sister, Mauricia, was having a hard time, her name “did not translate in English” (29). She was either “Mooreesha,” “Maria or Marsha” or “Maudy” (30).

The tone and mood of the essay is candid in most parts. Alvarez does not seriously take offense from her experience. It helped that, during her college years in the 60s, it was fashionable to pronounce ethnic names correctly. But then, there came a point when she wanted to fit in: “I just wanted to be Judy and merge with the Sallys and Janes in my class” (31). She suffers most when she has to explain her “foreign” name that is “as chaotic with sounds as a Middle Eastern bazaar or market day in a South American village” (32).

In “My Name,” the fourth chapter of Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, the reader meets Esperanza, the narrator. The reader also learns that this name means “hope” in Spanish. Esperanza explains that she was named after her great-grandmother, and that they share the Chinese birth year of the horse (Cisneros 10). She expresses a desire to have known her great-grandmother, who, according to family stories, was a wild woman until she was literally carried away to marry her great-grandfather. Esperanza expresses her conviction to avoid the fate of her ancestor before her—a life wasted in sadness waiting by the window (11). She also compares the beauty of her name to Magdalena’s ugly one. Esperanza expresses a desire to give herself a name that reflects her true self—“Zeze the X” (11).

The meaning of Esperanza’s name is a series of metaphors and similes. She feels it’s too long, too ordinary. So, too the metaphor “muddy color” indicates that Esperanza sees no beauty or distinctiveness in her name. Esperanza’s name is also related to the past, like “the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday morning,” she says (10). She explains how her name is linked to her family’s country of origin, and the sense of sadness that is caused by a longing for that far away land and its traditions.

The narratives of Alvarez and Cisneros are appealing to young readers because the theme is familiar to them. My students’ ages range from eleven through thirteen and this is the stage when they begin to assert their own identities. In some cases, their names are a source of conflict. Like Esperanza in the story, some of them would like to change their names to one that sounds more American. When I was a new teacher, I made the mistake of reading aloud some of my students’ names in their Spanish pronunciation. I later realized that Roberto wanted to be called Robert; Ramon was Raymond, and Jesus, “Gee-sus.” Jose writes his name as Joe, and Victoria prefers Vickie. I have a hard time with the

last names because I have not learned to Americanize Vasquez (into Vas-kwez), Ramos (into Ray-mos) and Lopez (into Low-pezh). These are similar to Filipino last names and I always say them in the Spanish way. As much as possible, I make the experience positive by pointing out that the Spanish pronunciations are very musical and so are the names. So I tell them that I feel more comfortable with “The-re-sa’ (both short e sounds) than “The-ree-sa or The-reese,” because I grew up answering to the former. Perhaps, like Alvarez, my students’ need to fit in is stronger than honoring their heritage, but I will take this opportunity to remedy that situation. After reading the stories in this section of the unit, the students will have a writing project that will allow them to reflect on their names, its meaning, its history, and its connection to their identity. After this, we will read Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” focusing on “Dee/Wangero,” the character who changes her name.

The story is about a young woman who goes back to visit her rural home. During the visit she discovers some fine old quilts that have been set aside for her sister’s dowry. “Dee Johnson,” has changed her name to “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo,” declaring that she can’t bear the English name because it’s in the language of her oppressor (Coward 2). Wangero despises her sister, her mother, and the church that helped to educate her. Maggie represents the many black women who must suffer while the occasional “lucky” sister escapes the “ghetto” (3). Scarred, graceless, and uneducated, Maggie is the underclass that has been left behind as a handful of Wangeros achieve their independence.

The quilts that Wangero covets link her generation to prior generations, and thus represent the larger African American past. She now dresses herself according to the dictates of faddish Africanism. In her name, her clothes, her patronizing speech, Wangero declares a degree of alienation from her rural origins and family. She reproaches others for an ignorance of their own heritage, but is herself disconnected from it. It is clear that Wangero’s flirtation with Africa is only the latest in a series of attempts to achieve racial and cultural autonomy, attempts that prove misguided (Coward 2). She is manipulated by the style-makers in the American media who say “black” is currently beautiful” (Gates 313). To an outsider, Dee/Wangero is symbolic of those who appropriate ethnicity for selfish gains. She wears her ethnicity in the way a costume is “put-on” to be discarded later.

Walker’s story introduces a fresh perspective that has not been seen in the other stories already discussed: a comment on how we view artifacts related to ethnicity and its connection to identity. The quilts were not made to be hung, but for “everyday use.” In the same manner, ethnicity and its artifacts should not be displayed on walls, and behind glass cases. Nor should it be draped on our bodies, shouted loudly on mountaintops, or photographed. Living and appreciating ethnicity should be done in ordinary ways: in what we do, say, think, feel, how we relate to one another, every day of our lives.

My students may need more time to infer the paradox in this story, so I will help them by giving examples they will recognize. I'll ask students to look around, among friends, classmates, community members, and see if they can find someone who exemplifies the personality of Dee/Wangero. They can probably create Venn diagrams to show similarities between the person they named and the character. For small-group discussions, I will ask students to compare "Dee/Wangero" with "Esperanza" and Alvarez using a three-column grid. Students will work and decide with a partner the criteria for comparison. They can compare appearances, age, family backgrounds, race, attitude towards their names, and so on. Students may also choose to compare the three women in the story: Maggie, Wangero, and their mother based on their attitude towards heritage or family history. Students need to cite text evidence to support their claims. I will also ask students what they think about Dee/Wangero's attitude towards her family. Another possibility is to divide the class into two groups: those who think Dee should have the quilts and the group who thinks Maggie should have them. Students will also be asked to support their claims.

Walker's consciousness is epitomized by the mother who carefully notes the contrasts in her two daughters. Like "Ultima" in Anaya's novel, the mother here is the guardian and bearer of heritage. She also stands up for the oppressed daughter when she would not say a word. One is reminded of "Ultima" doing this for Antonio's family when they were in danger. The mother here is the adult figure who ensures that the younger generation passes on their traditions. Maggie, the other daughter, is a character who values her heritage and ethnicity so deeply that she was willing to give away the quilts because she "can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts." Her rootedness in her culture is her ability to make patchwork quilts, the way her ancestors had done (Gates 314). Later when students write their family histories, I will connect the quilt making and the act of writing, explaining how both are ways of keeping traditions and values alive.

IF THE SHOE FITS . . .

In Laurence Yep's "Chinatown" (an excerpt from his autobiography *Lost Garden*), he relates his struggle with "not fitting in" within his Chinese American family. First of all, everyone excelled in sports, except him. He felt that he let everyone down by being a "disgrace" (Yep, *Interactive* 87). When his school offers Chinese lessons, he gets upset because he has to learn a "foreign" language and the nuns assign him to the "dummies class" (Yep, *Literature* 81). The young Laurence then goes out of his way to memorize a pattern of sounds and pictures (82). He eventually passes without learning to speak Chinese.

Unlike other Chinese Americans in San Francisco, Yep did not get out of Chinatown to discover new places. He did the reverse. He went into Chinatown "to explore the streets and perhaps find the key to the pieces of the puzzle" (Yep, *Interactive* 82). His alienation is worsened by the fact that he is not accepted among the white sector of the community either because of "invisible barriers" between whites and ethnic minorities.

The Chinese could see and touch the good life, but they could not join in (Yep, *Interactive* 82).

The sum of his “alienation” can be seen in one incident when he had to put on a Chinese costume. He and the other children were supposed to sing Christmas carols in Chinese and he couldn’t. Suddenly, even the costume made him uncomfortable. In the end, Yep says that he learned to juggle mentally. He calls it the “grace of balancing” in the “borderland between two cultures” (Johnson-Feelings 121).

Yep’s story will appeal to my students who trace their origins to Spanish-speaking countries, yet don’t speak the Spanish language. These students have assimilated into mainstream culture, at least, through the language. This is true in the case of one of my 6th grade students whom, for anonymity’s sake, I will call Abe. Abe is very proficient in reading. He is a wide-reader of advanced level books and is a deep thinker. He is also very inquisitive and articulate. Like a typical pre-teen, he likes Japanese anime characters and enjoys listening to alternative rock music. Abe is Hispanic, but does not speak Spanish. He finds it amusing that his bilingual classmates have to teach him some Spanish vocabulary. I hope someday, Abe will make an effort to discover his Hispanic roots. In the meantime, I can open a window for him, and hopefully on his own, he will open the door to the past.

Walter Dean Myers has a similar experience to Laurence Yep growing up in Harlem. The chapter which I have included here, “Being Black,” is part of his memoir *Bad Boy*. Myers reflects on the question of race. When asked by one psychologist in school whether he likes being black, he replied, “Of course, I do.” But later, he confessed, “The truth of the matter was that I really did not know what being black meant” (Myers 174). Myers grew up poor in Harlem. However, poverty was not totally an obstacle to his formation because he was nurtured by family, by neighbors, by teachers, and by the church community. He remembers that, as he was growing up, “Career and maleness were clearer to me than the idea of race” (174). Then, he saw that the careers of black men were limited to muscular work, reminding him of the days of slavery. Myers concluded “There is no advantage to being black.” He refuses to be categorized and limited to this one group of people. He writes, “Being Afro-American or black was being imposed on me by people who had their own ideas of what those terms meant” (177). He decides to adopt the identity of the “intellectual,” because his “white teachers” have often told him “race didn’t matter if you were bright” (179).

I can already foresee the enthusiastic response of my students to this piece. They will certainly ask questions about the narrator’s rejection of his ethnicity. I have to explain that this work is just a phase in the author’s life. Exposed to the literature of “white Europeans” in his teens, Myers emulated their style in his early writings (Simmons-Hodo 300). Later on, he learned to appreciate his ethnic identity. According to Rudine Sims Bishop, Myers came upon the works of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin whose works, according to him, “freed me up . . . Their work said to me you can write about

Black life” (Simmons 300). I will tell my students that there are new immigrants who feel this way upon arriving in the host country. A friend of mine did just that during his first year in Houston. He felt that everything was great about America. It got to a point where he isolated himself from his fellow Filipinos because he says he didn’t want to be reminded of his people’s ways. But when he experienced a crisis in his life, he had to turn to his countrymen for help. My students should realize that acquiring identity is an ongoing process. Not everyone feels comfortable with their ethnicity right away, especially if they are newly arrived immigrants being confronted by a new culture. In the homeland, we take our ethnic identity for granted. As immigrants, we come face to face with a mainstream culture that makes us aware of our differences.

Our first assignment for this text will be to answer the question “Do you believe that in today’s world, race doesn’t matter if you are bright?” Students should support their answers with at least two evidences. They can name people who have been successful in spite of their race. Another question that we will answer for this text is the importance of community, family, church, and school in the shaping of Myers character. I will also ask my students to create a three-column chart to record their comparisons of ethnicities, focusing on similarities, rather than differences. Finally, students will choose a perspective—to balance between two cultures (Yep), or reject both and choose your own (Myers). They will write their responses in their journals.

THE COMMON THREAD THAT BINDS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES

A common thread that runs through these stories is the identity crisis that the characters experience. Antonio’s conflict is multiple: he is torn between his mother’s and his father’s family; he is also torn between old and new traditions. Esperanza’s conflict is both internal—an alienation from herself, her family, and her extended family—and with the ethnic community. This is also the experience implied in the narratives of Myers and Yep. All three figures want to be judged based on their own merit. They want to make their own choices and live their lives based on their own dreams, not the ethnic community’s.

Another common factor is the presence of adult characters who are significant to the lives of the young characters. “Ultima” becomes Antonio’s bridge between the new and old cultural traditions. The horse-woman great-grandmother inspires “Esperanza” to be strong and independent-minded. But some of the grown-ups are powerless and voiceless under the conditions in the story. In Anaya’s novel, Antonio’s mother is marginalized by her gender and has no influence beyond the boundaries of her home. She has to consult a priest or ask her brothers before making important decisions regarding Antonio’s future. On the other hand, the father is marginalized by his lack of education and his *vaquero* background. Consequently, he is unable to influence his older sons to move with him to California. In Cisneros’ stories, Esperanza’s immigrant father is marginalized by his

inability to assimilate into mainstream culture, unlike his daughter who has a strong desire to assimilate.

In comparison, the mother in “Everyday Use” assumes the consciousness of the author as she carefully notes the contrasts in her two daughters. Like “Ultima” in Anaya’s novel, the mother here is the guardian and bearer of heritage. She also stands up for the oppressed daughter when she would not say a word. We are reminded of Anaya’s “Ultima” protecting Antonio’s family from danger. The mother in Walker’s story is the adult figure who sees that the younger generation passes on their traditions. Maggie, the other daughter, is a character who values her heritage and ethnicity so deeply that she was willing to give away the quilts. Her rootedness in her culture is her ability to make patchwork quilts, the way her ancestors had done (Gates 314). Her character is similar to Antonio in Anaya’s *Bless me Ultima* who plots a course from past to present without sacrificing one over the other.

The stories above present the ethnic experience in a new light. The young characters struggle especially with a biracial culture. Some characters are shown to have a strong desire to learn the new language (“Panchito” and “Antonio”); others are already fluent in the new language. Most of the characters believe in getting a good education in order to have a better life. Though some are assimilated into the host culture, others don’t want to be alienated from their parents’ roots (Antonio). This “in-between” space causes the characters’/authors’ psychological dilemma which is remedied by reading of good books, and eventually, writing out their stories of pain, so that others may read it and realize they are not alone. I will not fail to point out the reading-writing connection to my students so that they see the relationship between their learning and their lives.

We have seen in our study that literature is an ideal medium to give voice to the sectors in society who have been marginalized by poverty, ethnicity, gender, and illiteracy. Through the texts, their personalities come to life, and we see them not as flat images in space, but human beings whose spirit can be broken or fortified. Additionally, the stories should not show ethnicity as a reference point, different, “exotic,” but rather as a vehicle for universality (Ling 20). Amy Ling alludes to Ralph Ellison’s words: “Though novels are about certain minorities, the universal is reached through the depiction of specific themes” (Ling 20).

At the end of their study, students should realize that one’s ethnic identity cannot be encased in a box. It is continually redefined by constant changes that immigrants face in the new culture. Consequently, the face of America is diverse, multifaceted, a combination of colors that add texture to American society. My students should also realize that they are accountable for one another’s image of him/herself. Therefore, if they hold up a mirror that shows a positive reflection of the other, the same will be done for them. The activities, especially the sharing and listening in small groups will help encourage a positive atmosphere and respect for diverse ethnicities.

I believe that the goal of the curriculum on any level should be to examine the shared experience between text and real world experiences of students. In “Teaching Multicultural Diversity,” Jesse Valdes strongly supports the idea of integrating “self-awareness, critical reflection, and reconstruction of previous assumptions that will contribute to transformative learning” (Valdes 157). Moreover, in “Building Bridges Between Cultures,” Marta I. Cruz-Jantzen points out that one conflict between the new mainstream culture and Latino culture is the perception by immigrant parents that formal education distances their children from their families and culture (4). Likewise they think that being educated in the new culture focuses on individuality, personal/private ownership, and competition, whereas, the home culture values loyalty to family and community values, such as sharing and cooperation (Potter 2). The classroom teacher can help create an atmosphere of openness that will extend to the parents of her students. By teaching this unit, teacher, students, and parents can work together towards a better understanding of a multi-ethnic/multicultural society.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: Strategies for “Nombres” and “My Name”

Julia Alvarez’ essay “Nombres” and Cisneros’ “My Name” from *The House On Mango Street* are so similar in their theme that I would teach them together. Students can read the selections and compare Esperanza’s attitude, mood, and tone with that of Alvarez. They may extend their analysis to other aspects in the narrators’ lives such as inferring facts about the home, family, socio-economic background and school environment. Students may use organizational tools such as Venn diagrams to show similarities and differences, or T-charts to show evidence from text and the inference being made.

Another activity that goes well with the reading of these stories about names is to ask students to write acrostic poems with their names. This type of poem consists of adjectives that begin with the letters of the name and appropriately describe the personality of the bearer; they may turn to a classmate and write similar poems for each other. They can write these poems in bookmarks to give away to friends and family members. Another option is for the teacher to use diamante poems, a poem of seven lines that from the shape of a diamond using adjectives, synonyms and antonyms in relation to their own personalities or personal history. The idea is to appreciate the uniqueness of their names.

The teacher can also invite the students’ parents or guardians when teaching this lesson. I will also assign my students a mini-research project to be completed with the help of their parents/grandparents/guardian. They will answer the following questions: Why were you given your name? Who decided to give you that name? Is there anyone in your family with the same name as yours? Do you know of anyone famous who bears the same name as yours? Do you know the meaning of your name or the country or language

of its origin? If you can change your name, what would you like to name yourself and what are your reasons?

Lesson Two: Biased Words/Neutral Words

Another lesson that I would like to do is one on Biased Words/Neutral Words, which I will do in the beginning of the unit. I will modify the charts from Chapter Two of *Black-Brown Relations and Stereotypes* (Mindiola 33). Before I show them the chart, students will brainstorm using the “rally-robin” activity. They will think of adjective pairs that are neutral and biased (negative). Before the activity, the teacher should first say that in the English language, words have a connotation and denotation. The teacher should give examples: rose—flower (denotation) and affection/love (connotation); yellow is a color (denotation), and connotes sunshine. I will also teach tone and mood at this point.

For this exercise, students will take lines/dialogue from the story read and change the tone or mood using biased words or neutral words. For example, they will use the scene between mothers and daughters in Walker’s “Everyday Use.” In our role-playing, students will use the necessary gestures and tone of voice that they believe is necessary to convey the mood to the receiver of the message. Students should be able to give Maggie and the mother a voice to express their disapproval of Wangero’s attitude.

After teaching this, I will show students the chart without the headings. I will inform them that the words were used to describe groups of people in their community. Students will write the words in a T chart and indicate if they are neutral or biased. If the words are biased, they have to change the words to a neutral one. A teacher who knows her class and is comfortable with the idea can take this lesson one step further by asking the class to think about the circumstances surrounding the use of these labels. Students will have a chance to prove or disprove the words in the chart by supporting their answers with evidence from common knowledge, personal experience or research

As a culminating activity for this lesson, students will walk around with a tag behind their backs. Each one will get a chance to write a positive description of the person on the sheet. They may or may not sign their names.

Lesson Three: All About Me/This Is Me (Personal History Book Project) – A Celebration of Ethnicity

I mentioned this project earlier, but it can be introduced to the class as a culminating project for the unit. The first thing that students need to do is to create a web-organizer to outline the ideas or sequence of their pages. The theme of their book is ethnic identity so they have to show the factors that contribute to their identity. They can include the short composition about their name, include photos of their family, write about traditions that their families observe, such as celebrations, family recipes, or religious holidays. They can include essays and photos of extended family, write the *dichos*, or sayings, that they

cherish, passed on from one elder to another. They can also include a section about people who are their role models and are a great influence on the shaping of their character. Students should have fun with this project and they can be as creative as they need to be. An option for the Reading teacher is to bring in the English teacher (to help introduce the writing rubric) and the computer teacher (for a digital version of these books).

The students should be given two weeks to work on this in the classroom. Writing assignments can be sent home. At the end of the second week, students can display their works in a Book Fair where students from other classes can come to the class and view the finished product. If the whole team of teachers works together, the Book Fair can be extended to an after-school activity where students can present work to their parents.

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