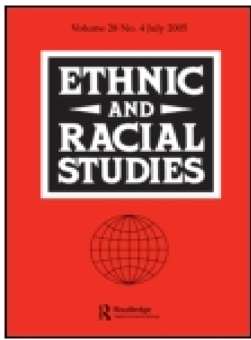

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Ethnic identity and Chicano literature: How ethnicity affects reading and reading affects ethnic consciousness

Jessica M. Vasquez

Abstract

This article interrogates the impact of readers' ethnicity (Latino and non-Latino) on meanings crafted from Chicano literature. This article addresses the effect of Chicano literature on ethnic identity and world-view formation. The data source is participant observation and interviews with eighteen students in a college-level Chicano literature seminar in the United States. Latino students found that the literature spoke to their experience as Latinos, inciting a sense of membership in a community that merits inclusion in a college course. This connection with the literature transmuted into ethnic validation for nearly all Latino students. Non-Latinos, hindered from relating to the course content on an ethnic level, discovered alternate entryways into the texts that allowed for identification on other particular levels. Non-Latinos ascertained how ethnic distinctions partially shape human experience and that this understanding is critical to cross-cultural appreciation and empathy. Non-Latinos additionally perceived that a common humanity tunnels beneath ethnic difference.

Keywords: Latino; Chicano; identity; education; literature; multiculturalism.

> *'You read a book and you are engaged in a life and story that isn't yours but that you are sharing for two-hundred-fifty pages and in doing so you kind of privilege the subject. You give the subject privilege in your life for however long it takes you to read it. And, just like [when] you watch a film, you see something projected in this enormous size and it takes center stage in your imagination and that does a lot for them.'*
>
> Rafael, Chicano student in the Chicano Narrative class

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Introduction and literature review

This article examines the impact of readers' racial and ethnic backgrounds in their experience of Chicano literature in an English literature college classroom in California, as well as how this literature affects readers' self concept, consciousness, and worldview. The fictions and realities of race and ethnicity[1] excavated in a multicultural education classroom[2] impact minority and non-minority students' understandings of themselves and the world around them. My research asks, primarily, how readers' ethnicity mediates textual interpretation. Secondly, this research analyses how exposure to ethnic literature or 'subjugated knowledges' (Collins 1991) impacts on readers.

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977; 1979) propound a theory of social reproduction that casts the educational system in the role of chief reproducer of the extant social hierarchy. Bourdieu and Passeron contend that students from privileged classes find their attitudes, tastes, and behaviours validated by the teachers, curriculum, and educational system at large, leaving non-privileged students to be cast aside or forced to play cultural catch-up. High status students find legitimation of, and academic rewards for, their knowledge and lifestyles. To the extent that race and class are often inextricably bound up with each other, it is the echelon of upper-class students from the dominant racial group whose cultural knowledge is validated by the school system. Thus, students hailing from non-dominant classes (economically, culturally, and racially) find themselves excluded or marginalized on campus in much the same way as their communities are devalued in society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; 1979; Giroux 1981; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Cummins 2001). Michael Apple (1996) agrees that educational institutions possess a tremendous capacity to perpetuate a stilted economic, social, and cultural hierarchy:

> Education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a *selective tradition*[.] . . . [T]he decision to define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society. (Apple 1996, p. 22)

Other contemporary scholars of race and education consider how school practices affect youths' sense of their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Davidson 1996), as well as how the politics of teaching

and the ethos of caring subtract cultural resources from minority students, institutionalizing 'social de-capitalization' (Valenzuela 1999). Furthermore, a statistically significant positive correlation exists between structural, classroom, and interactional diversity on college campuses and both learning outcomes (intelligent engagement and growth in academic skills) and democracy outcomes (civic engagement and living racially and ethnically integrated lives) (Gurin 2002).

Literary theory is germane to the discussion of how race contributes to readers' meaning-making processes. There is a long-standing debate on whether the nexus between literature and the creation of meaning lies embedded within the reader or is inherent within the text. Reception theory argues that 'interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing' (Fish 1980, p. 327). Reader-response theory concedes the 'dynamic character' of a text as well as the social location of the individual reader: texts offer stimuli that are secured and responded to by readers in a two-way process (Iser 1978, p. 107). Reading possesses the potential for self-discovery: '[W]ith every text we learn not only about what we are reading but also about ourselves' (Iser 1989, p. 29). Texts are multivocal. Meaning is not inherent in texts but, rather, constructed or 'fabricated' by the interaction of audiences with a social context and presuppositions and the cultural object (Griswold 1987). Further, reading can provide a 'compensatory function', providing readers with emotional sustenance (Radway 1984), and can yield consciousness-raising benefits (Stake and Hoffman 2001). Literature is a vehicle for mental and emotional travel which can produce learning, understanding, and even solidarity. Putting subordinated standpoints in conversation through literary consumption ('connective politics') may allow readers to see an overlap that can be turned into solidarity (Gwin 1996).

This literature leaves questions open for exploration: What is the effect of ethnic literature on personal and ethnic identity formation, for both minority and non-minority readers? Conversely, how does the ethnicity of a reader impact on the interpretation of text? I hypothesize that a reader approaches a text with a pre-existing personal and cultural background, training, mentality, and 'period eye' (Baxandall 1972), and that this 'interpretive backdrop' is the equipment used to build further meaning from pre-existing nascent textual meaning. I follow Pierre Bourdieu's notion that cultural competence colours perception of a cultural object: 'one can say that the capacity to see (voir) is a function of . . . knowledge (savoir)' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 2). I postulate that the racial and ethnic background of a reader helps to shape artistic valuation and literary interpretation in systematically patterned ways.

Research site and methodology

In the spring semester of 2001, I was a participant observer in the Chicano Narrative senior seminar in the English Department of the University of California, Berkeley. I situated myself in the Chicano Narrative class precisely because I wanted to hear reactions, from Latinos and non-Latinos, to the writings of a subordinated United States literary population. Ethnic and cultural studies programmes were inserted into the educational system because they were presumed to have counter-hegemonic effects, and so my study is an investigation of a particular empirical case. I specifically selected a class devoted to ethnic literature because I felt it was paramount to observe students read '"forgotten" histories' (Maher and Tetreault 1994, p. 216) and become witness to struggles over power, representation and muted voices of history. I conducted participant observation throughout the semester, sitting as a silent observer during the three-hour seminar that met once a week. The course materials, including books, *corridos* (ballads), poetry and short stories, dated from 1832 to the present.[3] All readings were authored by Chicanos, and dealt with topics such as immigration, acculturation, assimilation, migrant labour, poverty, urban oppositional environments, Catholicism, patriarchy/*machismo*, and Chicana feminism.

The significance of the book list is that it provided historical and contemporary visions of Mexican and Mexican American (or Chicano[4]) experiences in the United States, a segment of the population that, while substantial in California and the Southwest, is not awarded much attention in educational curriculum. Classroom discussions paid attention to what both aesthetics and content divulged about Chicano social history and the political, economic and social positioning of Chicanos vis-à-vis Mexicans and European-origin Americans. I read the required book assignments along with the class and after the conclusion of the term interviewed eighteen volunteers from the class (out of twenty-three students).[5] For the sake of analysis, I created two ethnic categories, Latino and non-Latino:[6] the 'Latino' category includes Chicano, Latino, and half-Latino half-Other, while the 'non-Latino' category includes Asian American, European American, and African American.

Like all social science research, my project relied upon the voluntary participation of respondents. This project has two potential sources of selection bias: the first is that all students elected to take the Chicano Narrative class and the second is that all research participants were volunteers. The students applied to be in the class, selecting it out of a list of thirteen senior seminars. As noted below, the students possessed varying rationales for selecting the class,[7] this internal variety tempering the critique of selection bias. Regarding the

potential self-selection bias that is concomitant with ethical research designs, I would add that over three-quarters of the students in the class participated, making it unlikely for me only to hear aberrant opinions. Given this high degree of participation, and the range of responses voiced, I am confident that my sample did not eclipse any major faction of student opinion. Prior to commencing each interview, I attempted to mitigate social desirability bias by underscoring my desire to hear honest reactions.

Findings on Latinos

A cultural unveiling: 'Filling in' history and increasing pride

Through a process of cultural mirroring, the Latino students identified on an ethnic level with the Chicano texts of the senior seminar. To varying degrees, all Latino students felt identification with the texts due to similar life circumstances that they saw depicted (such as Catholicism, patriarchy, traditions, food); some even went so far as to select specific characters who resembled their family members. Most of the Latino students cited their motivation to apply to the seminar in Chicano Narrative as 'relatedness' to the literature, whereas non-Latinos pointed to a desire to 'explore'.

Latino students mentioned that the literature helped to 'fill in' the gaps of their family biographies. The literature assisted them in 'looking back and contextualizing' their elders and added a realistic colour to a little discussed family history. Literature shed light on Angela's personal history by illuminating the lives of migrant labourers enlisted to work on the California railroads. Angela made the connection between the literature and her own family story:

> I don't know what it's like to be a migrant worker. My grandfather came from Mexico to work on the railroad system in California; that's how he came here illegally. I never got to talk to him about it . . . he would never speak about it. Very bitter about those days . . . . So, hearing these stories through these characters talking about not having food, having to travel to get to work, that really hit home to me because it gave me a reality that I had been missing.

The acknowledgement that the text 'gave [her] a reality that [she] had been missing' says that the knowledge a story yields is transferable to her real life.

Juan, an immigrant from Mexico at the age of twenty, was stunned by how his natal country's food was celebrated in the literature, and this released him from feeling ashamed of his strong Mexican ties and tastes. Juan changed his perception of himself and his native Mexican

culture. I asked whether anything he read for class led him to value or reassess any of his characteristics or outlooks. He immediately gushed:

> I was able to not be ashamed of some of my traits of my culture . . . . I used to not invite my friends over because they would see the food that we were eating . . . . There was one time we went out to a restaurant to eat Mexican food and I thought, "Wait a minute! We didn't have to pay so much for something I could have offered you at home! But I didn't know." That shocked me . . . . After reading these books that those people were presenting themselves for who they are *(emphatic)* no matter what that . . . That was life changing . . . . I also adopted pride . . . . I didn't know people wanted to eat *frijoles* (beans), you know.

Juan's story was one of the most potent tales of transformation I heard, for how much more powerful could literature be than to lead to an epiphany that releases people from shame and reinvest them with pride?

'I am not alone': A sense of community

Many Latinos remarked on being familiar with the 'cultural tug-of-war' related to biculturalism that was depicted in many of the books. Others referenced poverty, youth gangs, and intermingling Spanish within the primarily English texts as mechanisms that inspirited a sense of identification with the texts. This recognition of similarity of hardships led the Latino students to feel as if they were 'not alone' in their position on the periphery of mainstream society in the United States.

Manny volunteered the feelings of frustration and the experience of racism as points of identification with the books:

> I remember right after high school my parents asked me to work and so you go to work . . . . I remember . . . meeting a lot of people who thought I was less-than-intelligent because I was just a little dark-skinned Mexican kid—at the time there was a lot of sun that summer. Being taken for granted or having those things said to you, it frustrates you at times.
>
> It helps to know that you are *not the only one*. It helps to know that someone else has thought about this and has written it down and that others are reading it now. It feels like you are maybe not going through it in vain . . . . It's comforting.

Manny was consoled by the realization that he was not alone in his trials involving racism. Recognizing his own struggles, questions, and marginal status in society in the content of a novel led to a comforting sense of community.

Through relating to the Chicano protagonists in the books, Latino readers were transported into an imaginary community of fellow Latinos. Through this reading experience, they discovered that the structural barriers they had faced thus far in life were not unique to them as individuals but were part of a larger social problem. Armed with this knowledge, Latinos recast what were previously considered personal problems as macro-structural issues. Still, there is texture within the Latino students as to the social problems with which they identified: the two immigrants in the class strongly identified with the woes of transplanting their lives in new national soil while second- and third-generation Latino students related to the process of acculturation and assimilation which more squarely matched their particular life experience.

'Ownership of the literature' leads to ethnic and personal legitimation

Latino students read the Chicano texts and discovered that Latinos do in fact have an abundance of cultural capital – just not the cultural capital reified by the United States educational system or the society at large. The Latino students referred to this overflow of cultural capital as 'ownership of the text', meaning that they were finally the ones with the inside knowledge, and this flowed into a new-found sense of ethnic validation.

Nations build 'cognitive insulation' (Cerulo 1995, p. 56) in order to ground their identity and clearly define their exterior limits, and language is one such marker of cultural territory. Nearly all the Latinos were Spanish speakers, and thus felt very comfortable with the code-switching in the texts. Familiarity with this code-switching technique likely supported their claim to ownership of the texts. Regardless of Spanish-speaking ability, the respondents believed that bilingualism expresses a bicultural identity: 'You're going to see Spanish and it's going to remind you that this text is not an English-only text . . . it tells the story of maybe a bilingual person or maybe only Spanish [-speaking person].' A native language recalls a native culture, and code-switching expresses a cross-cultural identity. Some words cannot be translated sufficiently, so there are also technical advantages of writing, untranslated, precisely the right word to express yourself, as observed by Estela:

> I can still see why certain words are in Spanish and why certain words are not, because some are just not translatable . . . . *Malcriada*

[bad mannered; literally: poorly raised], that's something you can't translate so you have to use that word. And there's a whole connotation with *malcriada*, [that it is] a really bad insult to call somebody that because you are not only insulting them, you are insulting their mother.

The ability to understand Spanish words inserted into a primarily English text is a way to delineate a linguistic in-group versus out-group, conjuring up a unique sense of community and ownership.

Latino students did not just uncover a literary community of characters and plotlines that spoke to their experience and rendered visible their trials; they also located a literature of which they felt a valid and valuable part, giving them confidence. 'Owning the literature' for these Latino students meant finally being the insider. It meant a different quality of inspiration than is lent by mainstream, non-minority authors. It meant seeing their own ethnic group at the centre of aesthetic attention and thus, momentarily if not forever, elevated in value. It meant that as their ethnic group was legitimized through classes at a major university, so too were they personally validated.

Estela, a Chicana from Orange County, California, explained what it meant to her to finally be the insider and see Chicano literature appreciated as legitimate:

> The idea that I can study Chicano literature as a valid course of study, that was really big for me because that is eventually what I want to study and teach at a community college: ethnic literature. That I don't have to teach Ezra Pound. I adore T.S. Eliot but I relate to him in a different way than I do to Jimmy Santiago Baca . . . . But, there is a sense of comfort and there is a sense of familiarity and home, just home, when I read Chicano literature. *I* get the joke. I understand what that means and I know what that is saying in a way that other people don't, and I like that.

Rafael, a Chicano from Southern California, explicitly related how a sense of ownership of the literature validated his own personal existence. In answer to the question of how the books altered his perception of the Chicano people, he said:

> [Chicano literature] was something that I had a say in. It wasn't something [where I had to] go ask someone in my co-op if this explains their experience. This is something where I could raise my hand and say, "no." And it's funny because one of my teachers . . . taught *Bless Me, Ultima*, [and] . . . it was then when most of the Chicano kids in class finally raised their hands and spoke . . . .

> I don't think we [Chicanos] have that sense of owning the literature. We don't own the literature ... it doesn't really reflect where we've come from or what we've experienced. So ..., being able to read something where the Chicano is the main subject, it's empowering. It's empowering.

Empowerment, here can be interpreted as a renewed sense of ethnic equality. A Chicano literature course at the university level 'proves' its aesthetic equality with culturally dominant literature. Rafael's comment that it was only when the instructor of another course taught the Chicano text *Bless Me, Ultima* that 'the Chicano kids in class finally raised their hands and spoke,' evinces a sense of personal and group confidence based on ownership.

While I cannot comment on Latino students' patterns of participation in other classes, they did comprise a sizeable portion of the core group of discussants in the Chicano Narrative class. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of how social orientation plays out in a person's bodily posturing and vocal presence is valuable in recognizing the importance of classroom participation. Bourdieu establishes a connection between how much space and time people occupy as an unconscious signal of how they perceive their social value:

> One's relationship to the social world and to one's proper place in it is never more clearly expressed than in the space and time one feels entitled to take from others; more precisely, in the space one claims with one's body in physical space, through a bearing and gestures that are self-assured or reserved, expansive or constricted ('presence' or 'insignificance') and with one's speech in time, through the interaction time one appropriates and the self-assured or aggressive, careless or unconscious way one appropriates it. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 474)

Latinos' active participation in class discussion can be seen as expressing their sense of social value. In the context of discussing a Chicano text, Latinos felt socially valuable, personally justified and were therefore inclined to claim space and speech.

How does this process of identification, community, and validation function in the concrete lives of various Latino readers? An abundance of cultural capital stimulated personal and ethnic validation. Victor, born in the United States to parents who emigrated from Guatemala, willingly claimed the label 'American' as a result of the Chicano Narrative class. Previously, he had felt uncomfortable and unwilling to announce himself as an American — despite his constitutional birthright — because of his family's immigrant and ethnic status. I

asked if the literature affected how he viewed himself, and he decisively responded:

> Definitely. As far as identity, who you are. Before I would say that I wasn't sure if I was American, like I could say, 'I'm American.' Even though I served in the [United States] Marines for four years and put myself in a situation where I could die for this country, I couldn't really say, "OK, I'm American" because I didn't have the confidence. In the way that Latinos are so marginalized .... We are Americans, and we have to get recognized, and we're not going to change.

Victor made a vociferous call for cultural visibility and accommodation that issued from recognizing his own tenuous (as a minority) and contradictory (as former U.S. military personnel) position in U.S. society. For him, the Chicano literature had a formative force in reworking his emotional understanding and mental commitment about his place in United States society.

Rafael's testimony involved desiring for family members to reach a similar plateau of self-understanding as he did. Author Sandra Cisneros's work greatly improved Rafael's ability to see through some of the painful part of his history and unearth some of the buried treasures of his youth. In answer to how he would alter any of his outlooks after reading the course texts, he said:

> Value. Value the experience of it [his life]. By reading it in a work of literature that describes it, expresses it, so beautifully, which is *House on Mango Street* for me, you do come to look back and want to find the beauty in those smaller things that you didn't always appreciate at the moment. One of those things being working-class culture, poverty, difficulty, having to wear the *chanclas* [flip-flops, worn-out shoes used only at home] .... It's kinda funny now, you look back and you think, it wasn't that big of a deal. Being able to remember it and hold on to it makes you a strong person I think.

House on Mango Street illuminated part of Rafael's history that had been shrouded by struggle. Rafael's biography remained unchanged, but his perspective was rotated to recall memories that were previously overshadowed. Rafael commented that one of his 'sisters ... when [people] ask her, says she's Italian. Her last name isn't even Mexican any more, she's married .... She's able to pass'. Rafael wished the same kind of positive revaluation of family history for his sisters that he experienced, wanting them 'to evaluate their experience, to take pride in how they've lived'.

Victor's and Rafael's testimonies demonstrate ethnic literature's potentially potent and direct influence in how a person orders the world and personal experience. Multicultural curriculum content encouraged a revaluation of Chicano culture and upwardly adjusted many Latino students' sense of group and self-worth.

Findings for non-Latinos

Chicano literature as world-travel[8]*: Reading sameness and difference*

Pamela Perry (2002) argues persuasively that being in a school environment where students consort within a racially and ethnically diverse population makes white students more racially aware. A multicultural school environment allows for an understanding of 'racial others' as well as a 'racial self'. Whites are more prone to be cognizant of race when they are a numerical minority or engage with people across racial borders (Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2003). Additionally, having personal relationships across colour lines makes whites vulnerable to an experience of 'rebound racism' (Frankenberg 1993), heightening whites' awareness of commonplace racism against minorities. Personal interaction is crucial to breaking down barriers:

> [W]hen youth [in racially and ethnically mixed settings] had opportunities to interact with one another under conditions of equal status participation in joint projects, those boundaries became porous and subordinate to lines of sameness and cross-identification. Porous boundaries also allowed students to discuss racial issues openly and undefensively, hence creating opportunities for personal growth and deeper understanding of different perspectives (Perry 2002: p. 67).

My evidence corroborates the notion that cross-cultural learning, whether the vehicle is course curriculum or personal interaction, edifies the non-minority population and prompts understanding.

Chicano literature as world-travel for non-Latinos, with the potential for enlightenment and empathy, was touched upon during non-Latinos' near unanimous citation of a desire to 'explore' in order to 'know about other people's backgrounds, not just my own' as a primary motivation for enrolling in the course. Regarding Spanish code-switching, non-Latino non-Spanish speakers[9] acknowledged that they were implicitly being educated by being exposed to the bilingualism that often accompanies biculturalism. Crossing the cultural-language border was not necessary; merely seeing the border and acknowledging its significance was enough. Non-Latinos felt that inclusion of Spanish in the texts lent an overall feeling of

'world-travelling' (Lugones 1987) and let them peek into a different culture, not substantially interfering with their comprehension of the texts:

> In some ways I think [code-switching] added to the text . . . to the perspective of being Mexican American. It gives you a one-hundred-eighty perspective of you're the outsider, looking in. Maybe that's how the characters might have felt . . . they're Mexican but they're American.

Being a linguistic outsider looking in was not disturbing, but an eye-opening way to convey the potent meaning of non-ownership and cultural difference.

While the ethnic barrier did not impede non-Latino's *access* to the texts, it did inhibit their *authority* over the texts and curbed their confidence in their subjective interpretations. Some non-Latinos experienced an uncomfortable feeling of displacement, cognizant that they became the 'other' in some ways. So, being the outsider came with the uneasy programme of non-Latinos interrogating their own white (or Asian) privilege.[10] The previously positive sense of being the 'outsider looking in' turned unnerving as some non-Latinos became reticent in class due to lack of ethnic affiliation and a mismatch of cultural capital. Yet this distanced attachment incited at least one student to 'interrogate [her] own white privilege', and turned her reticence into a learning experience of what it means to be 'othered'.

This ethnic boundary made non-Latinos cautious in their interpretations. Samantha, a white woman from Marin County, California, reflected:

> I was afraid of misinterpreting it or thinking the wrong thing . . . . I don't think it was hard to read across the ethnic differences, but it was definitely a different experience to read a set of novels by a group of people from a different ethnic background than what I've been reading in other classes which is, you know, the white dead males.

Like Samantha, Trinika, a black woman, felt she could easily read across the ethnic barrier but not necessarily talk across it publicly. Her fear of misinterpretation is especially interesting because she, an African-American woman, did not quake at speaking assuredly about Shakespeare. Perhaps this is due to Shakespeare being an unquestioned part of required curriculum, such that high-achieving students of all backgrounds must become competent in European culture in order to be accepted as a legitimate scholar. Trinika mused, 'I'm

usually not self-conscious about because I could . . . easily talk to you about Henry James or Shakespeare and not be white, and not be English, or any of those things. When it came to this . . . I was definitely a lot more self-conscious'. It is more disquieting to voice intellectual opinions on minority art forms if one lacks a personal connection to the culture at hand because students are not trained to cross the minority divide the way they are trained to traverse the Atlantic ocean when discussing English canonical literature.

Non-Latino readers were presented with the task of constructing meaning out of texts to which they were not ethnically related. Viewers of a cultural object who are differently equipped vis-à-vis training and cultural context will draw different conclusions and judgements about the object: 'But each of us has had different experience, and so each of us has slightly different knowledge and skills of interpretation' (Baxandall 1972, p. 29). This coincides with my finding that Latinos often, but not exclusively, related to Chicano texts on an ethnic level, whereas non-Latinos related to the texts on various other particular levels, such as family structure, adolescence, or religion.

Interpretation is sensitive to the kinds of skills the mind brings to the product such as training, schooling, and societal background which compose an 'interpretive backdrop'. While non-Latino readers' ethnic backgrounds were not in concert with the Chicano texts, non-Latinos apprehended the narratives on the grounds of *other particular* elements of life experience. Non-Latino readers were not exempted from resonating with the texts due to their ethnic dissimilarity, they merely found other channels of relevance. Once engaged, non-Latinos found stories strikingly similar to their own — in terms of family dynamics, adolescence, romance plots, religious practices (both tribal and institutionalized), and questioning authority — despite their limited experiences in the areas of immigration, migrant labour, and discrimination.

An underlying common humanity: 'We're all the same, and everybody's got a story'.

Non-Latinos connecting with Chicano literature in other-than-ethnic ways worked in a surprising way: to reaffirm that majority and minority peoples are basically 'all the same'. This recognition of commonality did not erase distinctive cultural features. Non-Latinos read these texts as offering a glimpse into Chicano culture while concurrently reaffirming a common humanity, a human link which bonds all cultures at the most fundamental human level. How did non-Latino readers deploy the educational information or personal perspectives advanced in Chicano literature? Samantha, for one, replied; 'It helps me to keep a more open mind . . . . It's given me a

better . . . appreciation of different backgrounds'. Another simply said: 'I just look at people differently than I did before. Everybody has a story'. This notion that 'everybody has a story', a plain statement that ratifies diversity, implicitly assumes equality of individuals and races.

Derrick echoes this statement in his answer to whether he would recommend any of these books to a friend: 'If I had a friend that was pretty racist, I'd hand him one of these books, to clear up misconceptions. Because these books let you know that these people are just like you'. So, these texts produce a dual reaction that works in the complementary fashion of appreciating different backgrounds while realizing a common human link inextricably binding all ethnic groups. Recognition of this human link, or fundamental sameness, provides an inclination to empathy. The commitment to keeping an open mind and knowing that 'everybody has a story' reaffirms cultural uniqueness, while recognizing that different ethnic groups are 'just like you' serves to tunnel beneath the differences and form a cross-cultural bond.

This movement of grafting commonality between two seemingly disparate groups is rooted in a growing American social tendency of highlighting sameness and eschewing difference, a tendency likely born from multiculturalist ideology. Sociology of culture scholarship notes that Americans in fact share a common cultural code, despite specialized subgroups whose existence appear to contradict the survival of a common framework (Varenne 1977; Bellah 1986; Sikkink 1998; Wolfe 1998). American individualism in fact implies community in that the struggle for groups to differentiate themselves occurs within an environment of jostling against and interrelating with other groups (Varenne 1977). The very effort of stressing group independence and uniqueness, then, is done within the context of a community. Further, despite rhetoric of a 'culture war' that is splitting the American middle-class, the vast majority of middle-class Americans fall in the centre of the liberal-conservative spectrum on social issues, preferring to find 'common good things' they share than ferreting out differences that cement boundaries (Wolfe 1998, p. 62). Driving the point that tolerance is a valorized virtue, David Sikkink (1998) demonstrated that religious identities are personalized just as divisive religious labels are skirted in order to avoid offending other parties. Tolerance is increasing in the realms of public opinion and musical taste, as well, marking the entrenchment of American cultural isomorphism (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). Steeped in this cultural perspective, it is not surprising that the non-Latino students were inclined to search out the commonality that backgrounds, and in fact undergirds, the cultural distinctions they encountered in a class explicitly devoted to the aesthetic productions of an American subculture.

Delineating distinctions: Difference does matter.

Non-Latinos' ability to vicariously connect with Chicano literature along multiple particular lines of similarity worked to underscore in their minds a sense of basic humanity that underlies ethnicity. The mismatch that the non-Latino readers saw as they compared the literature with their own life experiences fostered the countervailing notion that difference does matter. Variations in ethnicity correlate with variations in some categories of life experience such as subjection to racism, trials of immigration and settlement, engagement with cultural traditions not shared by mainstream American society, and so forth. The Chicano history and perspectives that the literature supplied was the catalyst for a process of consciousness-raising. The classroom equipped non-Latinos with both factual information and subjective views of Chicano experience with which to re-evaluate their pre-existing perceptions or stereotypes of the Chicano people.

Catrina, a mixed-race Asian woman, remarked of the historical literature: 'I saw how [Chicanos] came here. Those [historical books] helped a lot, they gave a background so I understand more of the Chicano people, and in the [contemporary books], I saw they live here and they're just like us, only they have a different background'. Ethnic literature extracts the marginalized group from its constricting place in the social hierarchy and reconstitutes it in the mind of the reader. As sociology of race theorists contends, interacting across racial or ethnic boundaries helps to crumble stereotypes and fosters mutual understanding. For white students, this means breaching their 'white habitus', or primary networks with other whites that grows racial solidarity among whites and reinforces the racial order (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

My findings on non-Latinos are complex: on the one hand they apprehended commonality, and on the other hand they comprehended difference. The American code of multiculturalism and tolerance does not readily supply a language with which to discuss structural differences. Race scholars argue that whites and minorities have different languages to discuss race. Minorities claim that racism has historically and in fact continues to pervade the underlying structure of power in society. Oppositely, whites tend to view racism as historical, and if a contemporary concern, they view racism as an inter-personal rather than an institutional problem (Blauner 2001). There is a debate as to whether recognition of diversity (i.e. 'colour consciousness') indicates the presence of racism or its absence (Frankenberg 1993; Blauner 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2003). Since it is unclear whether colourblindness is a positive objective, or whether it masks racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003), it is understandable that American

students of English literature would approach the touchy subject of race and ethnicity with equally forked tendencies. All students had a propensity for uncovering commonalities between themselves and the Chicano characters so as to bond with them and make the story meaningful. On the other hand, non-Latino students had an equally strong penchant for noting dissimilarities, taking to heart how Chicano culture is distinct from mainstream American culture.

While the non-Latino tendency to find an underlying commonality may elide structural differences for some readers, for others, Chicano literature can be consciousness raising. If so, do readers act differently based on the literature they encounter? In addition to 'keeping an open mind', one stellar example of a white student's change in interpersonal dealings indicates that, indeed, literature can be a powerful agent of change. I asked Shelly how powerful she felt the literature was in terms of shaping her opinion or perception of Chicano culture. She stated her newly acquired knowledge of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo changed her perception of California and its Mexican or Chicano residents. She drew the link between book-learning and family life in this detailed and thoughtful response:

> My parents were down from Oregon for my graduation. They all wanted to go out to dinner and there's this Mexican food place down from my house so we went in there, a family-owned restaurant, by a local family .... Most of the staff speaks Spanish only. So we go in there and my dad was sooo rude. Sooo rude. He was talking loud to [the waitress], just all the things that you just learn not to do: "If you talk loud, she'll understand." *(laugh)* ... It was so infuriating. I just sat there mad and my face was all red ... and I just started going off about the war and the treaty and ... then I was glad .... I can definitely disagree with [my parents'] behavior now, whereas before I'd go, "yeah, I know that's kind of wrong but I don't know why it's wrong". So that's affected my life.

The knowledge of history gained through literature helped to chip away at prejudice and prepared Shelly to counter ethnic discrimination in an informed and emphatic way. Shelly's reaction to the books converted her into a fierce advocate for cross-cultural tolerance and respect. Shelly, as a member of a dominant social group, perceived the hierarchy — even as embedded in her own family — squelching a minority woman's self-respect and she defended the woman thanks to empathy that grew out of her recently acquired familiarity with the Mexican woman's historical burden.

Conclusion: Multicultural education as a means to promote social justice

The Chicano Narrative class is a testament to the power of literature to shift readers' behaviour, outlooks, self conceptions, self-titles, and attitudes. Readers' ethnicity has been shown to contribute to the interpretation of literature in a multicultural education class and readers' sense of self and environment subsequently shift due to this exposure. Latino readers' sense of ownership of the texts flowed into a feeling of personal and ethnic legitimization, and non-Latino readers' sentiments of cross-cultural empathy led to an understanding of the unfairness of the stilted social hierarchy. Ethnic literature serves an important social function in breaking open antiquated curricula and infusing readers with refreshing perspectives that celebrate diversity while still stressing some commonality. The Chicano Narrative class also provided an opportunity for students to cross and think beyond traditional power lines. This expansive, or subversive, thinking enlightens readers and indeed has the capacity to trouble the social status quo on a micro-level, as readers question the basis for predominant patterns of inequality, under-representation, and muted voices. In a sense, 'multi-directional cross-cultural acculturation' (Moya 2000) was taking place in the classroom as students learnt about the Chicano culture in an educational space that did not uphold white, middle-class American values as the pinnacle of achievement. In stripping the classroom of these presumptions, students enacted Giroux's conception of 'critical literacy', that is, a 'language in which one speaks *with* rather than *for* Others' (Giroux 1992, p. 245).

While studying counter-hegemonic literature in a heterogeneous setting can produce misunderstandings, anxiety over misreadings, and defensiveness, my data show support for marginal literature as a valuable tool for the educational system and its students.[11] The impact of exposure to marginal literature is a heightened appreciation of cultural diversity and an overarching belief in a basic human commonality that underlies distinction. These consequences of engagement with peripheral literature echo Nancy Fraser's argument for cultural justice:

> The remedy for cultural injustice . . . is some sort of cultural or symbolic change. This could involve upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups. It could also involve recognizing and positively valorizing cultural diversity. More radically still, it could involve the wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication in ways that would change *everybody's* sense of self. (Fraser 1997, p. 15)

This demand to 'change *everybody's* sense of self' is exactly the transformative capacity that multicultural education classes can help engender. While Latinos and non-Latinos read the texts differently based on background, training, and interests, all students open to learning through an imaginative dialogue with the text and an open discussion among peers effectively altered their sense of self. Cultural justice and critical literacy were carried out in the Chicano Narrative classroom as the social hierarchy was temporarily inverted and Chicano art forms were deemed worthy of critical attention and placed centre-stage. Readers learnt not only factual history, but were alerted to the obscuring mentality of dominant history. Furthermore, students actively re-deployed in the world lessons accrued through coursework, broadening their mental and emotional imaginative spaces and heightening their cognizance of the roles that race plays in contemporary society.

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Notes

1. There is a debate around where to draw distinctions between race and ethnicity. Prevailing usages of the terms conflate the two. OMB Directive 15 of 1977 described four races (i.e., American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and White) and two ethnic backgrounds (of Hispanic origin and not of Hispanic origin) (American Anthropological Association 1997). Under this definition, Hispanics are an ethnic group of any race.
2. I define a 'multicultural education classroom' as one whose course curriculum and pedagogy is committed to showcasing scientific, artistic, traditional, and/or cultural knowledge that derives from historically or contemporarily subordinated populations.
3. See Appendix A for a list of the required reading in the Chicano Narrative class.
4. Originating within the context of the civil rights movement of the late 1960s, the term 'Chicano' was fashioned by and for Mexican Americans who identify with the socio-political project of empowerment centering on a claim of being brown (as opposed to white) and aiming for increased respect, civil liberties, and civic participation (Haney-López, Ian. 2003. *Racism on trial: the Chicano fight for justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press). A decidedly political label in the late 1960s and grounded in the largely working-class Chicano Power movement, the title 'Chicano' has been popularized since its inception.
5. See Appendix B for a complete list of respondents. Out of the eighteen interviewees, six were male, twelve were female, seven were Chicano or Latino, four were half-Latino half-Other, two were Asian-American, four were White (of European descent), and one was

African-American. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted one to two hours, and I took fieldnotes immediately following all interviews. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

6. There is much variation among individuals encompassed by these wide categories; thus, these categories are not meant to be airtight, homogeneous, and fully explanatory, but rather are intended as a heuristic and analytical tool.

7. Latino and non-Latino students sought to connect with their cultural roots ('relate') or encounter a multiculturalist perspective ('explore'), respectively.

8. Credit goes to Minrose Gwin for this term. (Gwin, Minrose 1996 'Space Travel', in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 870–900).

9. The majority of non-Latino students had some formal Spanish training but deferred from calling themselves proficient.

10. Here my Latino versus Non-Latino categories break down. I placed Trinika, the one African-American respondent, in the Non-Latino category, yet she has no 'white privilege' to question.

11. While the effects of reading multicultural literature reported to me were overwhelmingly positive, they ranged in type and intensity. Only one interviewee complained of not wanting to read Chicano literature in the future, issuing grievances against the literature and the professor's teaching style.

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Appendix A: *Required Reading List for the Chicano Narrative Class*

The Squatter and the Don, Maria Ampara Ruiz de Burton
My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography, Genaro Padilla
Border Matters, Jose David Saldivar
Chicano Narrative, Ramon Saldivar
The Adventures of Don Chipote, or When Parrots Breast-Feed, Daniel Venegas
Cuentos: Tales from the Southwest, Rudolfo Anaya and Jose Griego
Bless Me, Ultima, Rudolfo A. Anaya
Pocho, Jose Antonio Villareal
"*... y no se lo trago la tierral ... and the earth did not part*", Tomas Rivera
Martin and Meditations on the South Valley, Jimmy Santiago Baca
Loving in the War Years, Cherrie Moraga
House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros
Woman Hollering Creek, Sandra Cisneros
Locas, Yxta Maya Murray
Handout selections of *corridos* (ballads), cuentos (short stories), folklore, and poetry.

Appendix B: *Characteristics of Respondents*

NAME*	GENDER	ETHNICITY	COUNTRY OF BIRTH (age at U.S. immigration)	AGE	MARITAL STATUS
Manny	M	Chicano	U.S.	28	Single
Estela	F	Chicana	U.S.	21	Single
Rafael	M	Chicano	U.S.	22	Single
Patricia	F	Latina	U.S.	32	Married
Kathy	F	Chicana/ White	Canada (7)	22	Single
Iris	F	Native-American/ Mexican-American	U.S.	22	Single
Debra	F	Mexican/ Egyptian-American	U.S.	21	Single
Angela	F	Mexican-Swedish	U.S.	21	Single
Juan	M	Mexican-American	Mexico (20)	24	Married

APPENDIX *(Continued)*

NAME*	GENDER	ETHNICITY	COUNTRY OF BIRTH (age at U.S. immigration)	AGE	MARITAL STATUS
Victor	M	Guatemalan-American	U.S.	25	Single
Roberto	M	El Salvadorian	El Salvador (5)	25	Not reported
Samantha	F	White	U.S.	21	Single
Shelly	F	White	U.S.	27	Single
Nina	F	White	U.S.	40	Single
Derrick	M	White	U.S.	21	Single
Kiki	F	Asian-American	U.S.	21	Single
Catrina	F	½ Chinese, ¼ Japanese, ¼ German	U.S.	21	Single
Trinika	F	African-American	U.S.	26	Single

*All names are pseudonyms