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Emic and etic perspectives on Chicana and Chicano multicultural literature

Emic and etic perspectives elicit a dialogue on cultural differences and stereotypes. This dialogue can help teachers and students find common associations.

In this article, we employ emic and etic designations to examine multicultural literature for Mexican American students. Emic and etic perspectives elicit a dialogue on the differences inherent in oppositional systems, so we find this negotiation useful for bridging the distance between cultural differences. First, we define some key terms and concepts associated with students of Mexican background. Next, we critically analyze texts deemed culturally relevant for "Hispanic" students. Then, we describe our own emic and etic perspectives for negotiating our subjective differences related to multicultural literature. Finally, we discuss how Freire's (1990) critical literacy approach can widen the scope of an exemplary multicultural text through generative themes. Educators who are interested in using multicultural literature for a critical literacy approach may find these suggestions informative.

Pike (1954) first coined the terms *emic* and *etic*, which are growing in familiarity in anthropology, education, and cross-cultural research (Headland, 1990). Lett (1990) offered this basic definition:

Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied. (p. 130)

Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers. (p. 130)

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While emic is comparable to “insider” and etic is comparable to “outsider,” Harris (1990) argued that the terms differ because they refer to a dialogue that allows for a mutual understanding between contrasting positions.

García (1992) observed that an emic understanding is characterized as an ability to empathize with someone from another cultural group. An etic understanding may be useful for making predictions about another cultural group (Harris, 1990), but an emic understanding is more relevant for interpreting the cultural nuances of a particular community (Saville-Troike, 1989). Previous researchers have determined that an emic perspective is instrumental for understanding the cultural experiences of a particular community (García, 1992; Saville-Troike, 1989). Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) observed that emic perspectives are essential for teachers who wish to self-analyze their personal concept of learning and instruction.

Historical perspectives on Chicano self-definition and identity

Racial and ethnic descriptors can constitute a basis for misunderstanding. For example, the general terms of *Hispanic* and *Latino* have been used to describe populations that may share little more than a varying knowledge of Spanish (Arias & Casanova, 1993). People of Mexican descent are a major portion of the Hispanic/Latino category and represent about 15 of the 23 million Hispanics living in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). It's unfortunate that educational success has not paralleled demographic growth for Mexican background students who continue to drop out of school at a rate higher than that of Asian Americans, whites, and African Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

The term *Chicano* is a historically distinctive category among Hispanics and Latinos (Gonzalez & Fernández, 1998). *Chicano* generally refers to persons who recognize their indigenous Mexican ancestry and share a postcolonial social conscience through their awareness of a historically oppressive relationship with the United States and Mexico (Rendón, 1971). Chicanos are linked to a tradition of social activism, and they recognize a connection to their ancestral Mesoamerican her-

itage, such as through the homeland myth of Aztlan. However, Chicanos are also defined in different ways by different people.

Acuña (1988) described how some Mexican Americans find the term *Chicano* offensive because it refers to lower class Mexicans. Sánchez (1998) argued that *Chicano* can apply to Latinos who identify with the Mexican American community, but who may not necessarily share a Mexican origin. Guerra (1998) used the term to distinguish between assimilated, non-Spanish-speaking *Chicanos* and recently immigrated, non-English-speaking *Mexicanos*. In contrast, Anzaldúa (1987) described Chicanos as being capable of speaking a range of English and Spanish dialects.

In order to avoid gender bias, it is always appropriate to refer to individual males as *Chicano* and individual females as *Chicana*. Some writers combine the terms: *Chicana/o*. Similar gender shifts can occur with *Latina/o*, *Mexicano/Mexicana*, and *Cubano/Cubana*, but are optional unless addressing individuals. The term *Chicano* is still presently used to describe the general group; however, Chicana writers have emphasized the gender marker as a more balanced reinscription of female participation within Chicana/o identity (Chabram Dernerseian, 1993).

Stylistic differences aside, we observe Chicana or Chicano to be a personal designation that connotes an interpretation of Mexican culture that can be very exclusive in comparison to other Latinos. Thus, a group of people may identify with being Hispanic or Latino, but may not necessarily identify with being Chicana or Chicano. We recognize that a similar contrast can exist between multicultural literature considered relevant for Hispanics and literature that is oriented along Chicana/Chicano cultural beliefs. We chose to foreground the emancipatory vision of the Chicano and Chicana civil rights activists who originally fought to better the education of Mexican American students. We orient the terms *Chicana* and *Chicano* through a specific recognition of Mexican culture:

The use of the term “Chicano,” derived from *mexicano* and formerly used disparagingly in referring to lower-class Mexican-Americans, signified a renewed pride in the Indian and mestizo poor who had built so much of the Southwest during the

Spanish and Anglo colonizations. While investigating the past of their indigenous ancestors in the Southwest, activist Chicanos rediscovered the myth of Aztlan and adapted it to their own time. (Chavez, 1984, p. 130)

We argue that Chicana and Chicano literature reflects a more relevant interpretation of culture for persons of Mexican ancestry because of the emancipatory potential of their postcolonial narratives.

Emancipation in Chicano literature

Chicana and Chicano writers have contributed to a body of literature, a Chicana/o literary canon, that documents the evolution of Mexican Americans within the United States (Albi & Nieto, 1975; Anaya & Marquez, 1980; Romano & Octavio, 1988; Zamora, 1981). The Chicana/o literary canon can be characterized as postcolonial because it critically responds to the evolution of a white/Mexican social structure. Chicana and Chicano authors offer educators a glimpse into what Cai and Sims Bishop (1994) viewed as "parallel culture."

Educators need to be aware of Chicana/o literature as a resource for culturally relevant instruction. The role of "emancipation" has not been strong within some of the literature presently deemed relevant for Mexican background students. In other words, many books seemingly affirm a Hispanic perspective, such as through the sporadic use of Spanish terms or names, but the frequent use of stereotypes does not inspire the development of a critical perspective. The interpretations of Latina/os in multicultural literature sometimes accommodates the popular discourses of predominantly white readers, such as *Journey of the Sparrows* (Buss, 1991), a novel that reifies the sordid experiences of illegal immigrant children from El Salvador who struggle to find any type of work in the U.S. Written in a predictable and tragic manner, the interpretation of Latino culture echoes conservative woes through its mostly etic viewpoint.

At times, the only relationship between multicultural literature and Hispanics is translation into Spanish without the modification of characters or culture. With the advent of a growing biliterate Spanish-speaking population, the practice of translating texts has become a commercially viable

strategy for publishers. Even though translated texts may be more accessible to second-language learners, they can be problematic when assumed to be culturally relevant material. A white teacher might have an etic view of Mexican culture and consider a translated text as culturally relevant literature, but a Mexican American may have an emic view of culture and recognize the inauthentic content of the text. An emic/etic negotiation may allow the participants to proceed with a more balanced analysis of the cultural dynamics found in classroom texts.

The "normalizing" discourse for minority representation in young adolescent literature contains themes that consistently present white culture as an assimilative model that reinscribes English fluency and suburban docility. Identity can be "essentialized," or otherwise represented in a generalized manner that neglects the wide range of differences marked by gender and class (McCarthy, 1998). The interrelationships of race, gender, class (and we would argue language), are "nonsynchronous" with one another because they self-disrupt generalized assumptions about cultural groups (McCarthy, 1988).

We can encounter the "colonizer in the colonized" (McCarthy, 1998, p. 25), where minority identity can be camouflaged within complex and, at times problematic, values. Thus, it would be a mistake to objectify cultural beliefs according to the color of one's skin or the dialect that lingers on one's tongue. To illustrate our point, we contrast the ideological positioning of two prominent authors deemed culturally relevant for "Hispanic" students.

Gary Soto and Rudolfo Anaya. Gary Soto, a popular writer of young adolescent literature, began his career writing Chicano poetry, but presently writes stories that reflect a mostly white perspective. Despite Soto's gratuitous integration of colloquial Spanish language and Mexican cultural artifacts, the Mexican American students he portrays in the majority of his novels are English-speaking, assimilated, and unaware of their sociohistorical origin. Soto's interpretations of Mexican culture are adumbrated recollections of a stereotyped Mexican origin. Soto exists within the comfortable space of what Foley (1990) described as "social amnesia," or the purposeful unwillingness to confront historically problematic racial relationships.

Soto's characters remain as puppets within mundane preoccupations of eating too many tamales (1993), locating a missing skirt (1992), or having a crazy weekend (1994) evading bungling criminals. Soto's inability to inject a critical dimension to Mexican identity is evident in the limited portrayal of a Chicano activist. In *Crazy Weekend*, a young nephew discovers a picture of his uncle in college:

"That was you, Uncle?" Hector asked in disbelief. "Wow, you look like a criminal." "Hey, man, I was radical. I was a heavy-duty *Chicano*. Still am, *ese*. I even got a Mexican flag hanging in the bedroom." He had to laugh at his nephew's comment. He had to laugh at himself. He did have long hair and an angry look on his face. "Come on, let's eat." (Soto, 1994, p. 9)

Soto employs the Chicano stereotype of a long-haired student activist in a manner that trivializes the emancipatory role inherent in Chicana and Chicano social consciousness. He also favors a more normalizing discourse that remains comforting to white mainstream teachers and publishers, as well as Hispanics attempting to assimilate and distance themselves from more problematic social discourses. Turning away from Chicano history becomes as simple as turning toward the refrigerator.

In contrast, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, first published in 1972, is a coming-of-age story told from the perspective of a 7-year-old protagonist, Antonio "Tony" Marez. In his rural southwestern U.S. community, Tony struggles to understand his shifting identity within the turbulent expectations of his family and his conscience. Tony encounters a source of profound spiritual understanding in Ultima when she moves in to live with his family. Ultima is an elderly *curandera*, a traditional Mexican folk healer.

She took my hand, and the silent, magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home. (Anaya, 1972, p. 1)

This coming-of-age novel is a narrative of emancipation and evolving spiritual consciousness, and is an effective multicultural text in the classroom (Klein, 1992; Ostrowski, 1997). Teachers who recognize the value of this text may

do so for various reasons; for example, its ability to facilitate culturally relevant instruction for Hispanics, and, more important, its literary merit.

Other notable Chicana writers, such as Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldua, maintain a critical verve within multicultural literature. These Chicana authors explore, foreground, and confront uncomfortable spaces unique to Mexican American culture. For example, in *Friends From the Other Side* (Anzaldua, 1993), a primary-level children's book, a young Mexican American girl faces inner conflicts resulting from immigration and the pariah identity of "wetback." Sandra Cisneros's (1989) *The House on Mango Street* faces the tensions of white flight and problematic gender norms among Mexican American females.

For many Chicana and Chicano writers, "emancipation" is located within critical literary narratives that merit examination. In our opinion, emancipation is more vaguely defined within assimilationist models in Gary Soto's work. The Chicana and Chicano emancipatory narrative interprets the world, but does not nicely blend into it through a "colonized" imagination (hooks, 1990, p. 150). But how can an emancipatory model serve Mexican background students who are compelled to fit into white/mainstream ideology through monolingual English/white teachers? Our next section grapples with that challenge.

Etic and emic collaborative context

Before we could tap into the potential for multicultural literature to inform a critical literacy perspective, we first had to check and reflect upon our own subjective positions for reading *Bless Me, Ultima*. The process of checking subjectivity allowed us to analyze our hidden assumptions about essentializing differences associated with reading a text on Mexican American culture.

Godina, a Chicano reading teacher from the southwestern U.S., was already familiar with the potential of *Bless Me, Ultima* in the secondary classroom (Godina, 1996). McCoy, a white preservice teacher from the midwestern U.S., first encountered *Bless Me Ultima* in a high school reading methods class. The evolving understanding of *Bless Me, Ultima* occurred within this teacher/student relationship. Despite our differences, we both wanted to further understand the

role of multicultural texts within an effective literacy classroom. We also shared a strong interest in the use of critical literacy for engaging students in dynamic interpretations of culture and literacy. The following sections describe our positions for using multicultural literature.

Heriberto: An emic Chicano perspective. I hear a familiar argument when I present the use of *Bless Me, Ultima* to preservice teachers. A white, middle-class female in her early 20s plausibly inquires, "Why should I teach a novel intended for Mexican students if I am probably going to teach mostly white students?" Challenges to the reading of multicultural literature are echoed by Harris (1997): "Sharing multiethnic and multicultural books seems so logical, but it is an ongoing struggle that will continue as long as society stratifies individuals and groups on the basis of differences" (p. 489). One basis for these challenges is the inability of students to connect multicultural texts beyond their essentialized identity, or, rather, beyond the interpretation that minority texts are valid only for minority readers.

I want preservice teachers to realize that exemplary multicultural texts are relevant for all students in the classroom, and not necessarily directed toward the particular category of difference being portrayed in the text. I want to share with future teachers my emic perspective for interpreting culturally relevant material for Mexican background students. Still, the validation of culture and language within the mainstream classroom is sometimes an awkward negotiation. Educators who become mired in conventional wisdom eventually fall victim to their own "well-meaning" misinterpretations and stereotypes.

For example, a consistently misinterpreted aspect of culture is the association of Spanish with Mexican American students. When I attended Spanish class, I was always reminded how my Chicano dialect was inferior to the Castilian Spanish taught by the white teacher who spent a summer in Spain learning to roll her R's, even though no one in my barrio spoke like that. Other researchers have noted the irrelevance of Spanish instruction for Spanish-speaking "Hispanics" in the United States. Padilla (1997) recounted how Puerto Rican students "have been targets of constant ridicule and scorn for speaking in the tongue

of their grandparents, parents, and other family members and friends" (p. 25). Similarly, Anzaldúa (1987) observed the "linguistic terrorism" of Mexican Americans who are denigrated for speaking their own dialect of Spanish (p. 58). Some teachers may be able to speak fluent Spanish, but may still maintain an etic perspective for understanding the Mexican American dialect of Spanish. I believe that the recognition of emic and etic differences is an important step toward the "relevance" of culturally relevant instruction.

Still, the promise and academic potential of bilingualism, Mexican culture, and emancipation within Chicano philosophy is overshadowed by mainstream perceptions of culturally relevant instruction. Just recently, I encountered a well-meaning teacher who revealed how she had taken her students on a field trip to Taco Bell so they could become more sensitive to Mexican culture. Educators need to move beyond the corporate trivialization of culture and language by first examining their own subject positions within cultural interventions.

Rachelle: An etic white perspective. Although I strongly believed *Bless Me, Ultima* to be as relevant for white students as it is for Mexican background students, I brought to the text a certain level of ignorance about Mexican American culture. In fact, I chose to read it because of that ignorance. I wanted to learn more about the growing population of Mexican American students that I would likely encounter in my classroom. Even in the midwestern U.S., as I was becoming more aware, numbers of Mexican American students are increasing rapidly.

I grew up in a suburb of a large, extremely segregated, midwestern city where I can remember just two Mexican background students in my high school. The only other members of a Hispanic community I had contact with were gang members from the urban "south side" of the city, solidifying in me a stereotyped perspective. Like many of us who come from segregated communities, my perception of an entire race was formed from a few experiences. Especially as a future teacher, I needed to question and reevaluate those impressions, adopting the objective to encourage my future students to do the same.

Bless Me, Ultima helped provoke this process in two ways. First, I discovered Rudolfo Anaya's abil-

ity to portray elements of the common human experience within his description of Mexican culture. Perceptions that alienated me from an entire people were transformed as I explored the human elements that irrevocably connect us. I felt close to the main character, Tony Marez, whose struggles with personal identity, destiny, and spiritual beliefs mirrored my own. Using the text to inspire this process of introspection could unify students of all backgrounds who share a common human experience, as opposed to using texts that do no more than emphasize differences and endorse a sense of separation.

Second, the text inspired me to critically evaluate my own social structure as it affects other cultures. From a historical perspective, I began to interrogate how "white" culture has oppressed minority groups specifically through colonization. *Bless Me, Ultima* demonstrated this through the tension between Catholicism, the religion of the Spanish European colonizers, and the indigenous Mexican spirituality from the southwestern region of the U.S. The main character, Tony, struggles to negotiate between these two contradictory worlds, which are present within the belief system of his mentor, Ultima, as well as that of his mother and friends. It is easy to take for granted how our actions, and the actions of our people, affect others; yet it is necessary to inspire the type of reflection that develops a critical consciousness in our students.

As Willis (1997) argued, "multicultural literature should not be limited to use with traditionally underrepresented groups. The use of multicultural literature can be empowering to all children since it offers a more expansive context for students than the traditional literary canon" (p. 139). As a white teacher, however, I am unable to contribute an emic perspective myself and therefore am at risk of overshadowing diverse perspectives with mainstream perspectives. I can, however, incorporate texts that reflect an emic perspective and inspire emancipation-related discussion. According to the *Standards for the English Language Arts* put forth by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996), students should "read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States" (p. 27), as well as "develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in lan-

guage use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions and social roles" (p. 41). In light of this, a text such as *Bless Me, Ultima*, with its ability to transcend cultures and promote a critical consciousness, is highly recommendable.

Educational implications

In the process of interrogating our subjective etic and emic differences, we began associating common themes to interpret the text. We shared familiar topics that allowed us to bridge differences through discussion. Within critical literacy, our dialogue encapsulated what are known as "generative" themes. The notion of a generative theme in literacy instruction originated from Paulo Friere (1990) who implemented generative words and themes to elicit critical thinking among marginalized indigenous populations in Brazil. Other researchers have tapped into the potential of generative words and themes to cultivate critical literacy, inquiry, and dialogue within the classroom (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Macedo, 1994; McCaleb, 1994).

Given the paucity of authentic multicultural literature for Hispanics (Barrera & Cortes, 1997; Barry, 1998), exploring an exemplary multicultural text through generative themes is a strategic negotiation between this limited availability and the abundance of canonical books (Applebee, 1989). As a result, multicultural texts become more accessible and effective within the classroom, serving as a foundation for both literacy instruction and critical literacy that moves beyond a tacit audience and scope. Generative themes are opportunities for students to search out and incorporate primary and secondary sources for the reading of a text. In the process, students can break down stereotypes by exploring an element of the culture through a shared understanding of a particular idea or topic.

It is tempting to offer a grocery list of themes, but generative themes are driven by context and can be determined only through dialogue between readers and text. The themes that we offer here were the result of our own reading of *Bless Me, Ultima*: identity, culture, colonization, language, folk beliefs, folk medicine, and religion (to name but a few). These themes generate other subtopics that can be interwoven in discussion

and intellectual investigation appropriate within the academic content of the classroom. In distinguishing the emancipatory stance of Chicano literature, it would be beneficial to discuss how ethnic affiliation is distinguished between the various "Hispanic" groups. More important, identity as a generative theme could facilitate an engaging analysis of subtle and more complex influences, such as ideology and corporate marketing.

These interpretations should be mutually beneficial. For Rachele, *Bless Me, Ultima* expanded her understanding of the colonization of the southwestern U.S. by Europeans. She gained a certain amount of expertise for working with the students of Mexican background she would soon encounter in her classroom. For Heriberto, the emancipatory vision inspired by early Chicano social activists was important to share with future teachers who would soon encounter a culturally diverse classroom. Both established their subjective emic and etic differences in relation to a multicultural text that avoided the trap of "essentialization." We hope that coming to terms with shared experiences can serve to deconstruct implicit stereotypes associated with multicultural readings, as well as help to resolve the myriad of cultural clashes between a mostly white, middle class, female teacher population and a growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

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