

Adolescence and Literary Heritage in the Borderlands

by Trevor Munhall

Gloria Anzaldúa ends the first poem in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “This is her home / this thin edge of / barbwire.” This image reflects where my students live, both metaphorically and physically. They exist between spaces they did not choose or create, and they are defined by the struggle they experience as they make sense of the real and imagined borders around them. In watching them navigate this, I have realized that my role is to engage my students with the narratives that honor their Latinx identity and history and to help them build a deeper understanding of how the Chicano experience on the border fits into the larger narrative and legacy of the Americas and find ways to convey this knowledge to my Latinx students who are hungry for their cultural birthright.

Since, in many ways, young people exist on the “thin edges” of their world, they are naturally inclined to test the social, political, physical, and moral borders around them as they make sense of their identities and power; they are more naturally at home in the borderlands. By nature of their burgeoning sense of self and their place in society, young people are what Anzaldúa calls “the prohibited and forbidden [who] are [the] inhabitants” of the borderlands. As their teacher, I have the unique opportunity to witness as my students define and break the borders around them and to act as a guide for how they choose to live in the borderlands of their world.

I first came to Gloria Anzaldúa a few years ago while researching for a survey unit I teach on the legacy of Latin American writers. While traveling in Colombia I heard about and saw the literary legacy of Gabriel García Márquez everywhere I turned. As a white man and English teacher who grew up in the U.S. education system, I was personally struck by a literary tradition that had little resemblance to the one I knew. Moreover, I thought of my students and the literary traditions they left behind when they moved from their home countries to the United States.

For the past six years I have taught eighth grade English at a public middle school in Lawrence, Massachusetts. All of my students identify as Latinx or Hispanic; most have Dominican or Puerto Rican heritage, and nearly all of them were born outside of the United

States. Although the prevailing ideas about English curriculum in the U.S. education system is still largely rooted in antiquated assimilationist-era or neo-colonial ideas about “the canon,” my time in Colombia helped me recognize that I have an ethical responsibility as a teacher of bilingual Latinx students to share with them their literary and artistic birthright.

While I had always included many writers and protagonists of color in my curriculum, I realized that representation is not enough. My students from Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and El Salvador had rarely been exposed to the rich literary legacy of their homelands or of their people. Furthermore, as first generation students in the U.S. school system, they have little chance of encountering this heritage. Alvarez, Neruda, Martí, Medina, Cortázar, Piñera, Thomas, Asturias, Esquivel, Ortiz Cofer, Anzaldúa, and García Márquez simply are not taught, and most bafflingly, might be considered *too advanced* for language learners and students reading below grade level; nearly all of my students fit into one or both of these categories. And yet, when I went to work assembling this curriculum – this head-first dive into my students’ own ancestral literary history – the texts brought my students to life. Suddenly they saw in these narratives their own struggles and passions held up like a mirror in front of them. They were devouring texts written three or four grades above their reading levels.

While I acted as their literary guide through the richness of the language and technique of the writers, my students were my cultural interpreters, describing how Victor Hernández Cruz perfectly captures the cognitive dissonance of bilingualism in his chaotic poem, *Lunequísticos*, or how they viscerally feel the historical and contemporary “paradox of brownness” Richard Rodriguez describes in *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. They hotly debate Rodolfo Gonzáles’ *I Am Joaquín* amongst each other: how can he be Joaquín and Cuauhtémoc and Cortes? And they extend this question to themselves: how can I be Spanish and Taíno and African, the conqueror and the conquered? How can I exist in this borderland between my identities?

Although, notably, few of the students in my school have known Mexican or Chicano ancestry, the symbol of the border has become a central image for my students as they make sense of all Latin American writing. They also viscerally feel as if they are caught up in the

national dialogue about the U.S.-Mexican border; while most of them are unabashedly proud of their Dominican identity, they all share the experience of being seen as brown-skinned and heard as Spanish-speaking, and many people they encounter in the U.S. assume these equate to Mexican. So my students are curious not only about the symbolism of borderlands, which they feel intuitively in their own way, but the plight of the people who live in the real borderlands, with whom they are frequently conflated. Since the context of Chicano culture is relatively distant for both my students and me, expanding my understanding by immersing myself in the narratives and customs of its people has had a profound impact on my classroom and my ability to make the borderlands and Chicano history a more salient aspect of Latinx identity for my students.

The deeper I am able to immerse myself in this field of study, the more effectively I will be able to teach from a place of understanding and empathy. While I will never fully experience the world in the way my students do, ultimately, as best as I am able to, I want to see and feel “this thin edge of barbwire” so that I can better comprehend the lived experiences of my students who make their own homes in the borderlands of the world around them.