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## Mexican American Identities and Histories in Children's Picture Storybooks: Thinking Critically, Thinking Diversely

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## Mexican American Identities and Histories in Children's Picture Storybooks: Thinking Critically, Thinking Diversely

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# Mexican American Identities and Histories in Children's Picture Storybooks: Thinking Critically, Thinking Diversely

## **Abstract**

Each year increasing numbers of Mexican-heritage students are served by teachers with little knowledge of the history and diversity of the Mexican American community. This article introduces teachers to Mexican American history and diversity while taking a useful and critical look at children's picture storybooks regarding Mexican-heritage peoples in the U.S. Ideas in the article regarding how to select, compare and contrast these picture books in the classroom will allow teachers to learn about their Mexican-heritage students, counter prejudices and stereotypes, and more effectively reach out to build academic and personal connections with these students.

## **Keywords**

Mexican-heritage, Mexican American, Children's picture storybooks, Culture, History, Politics

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## Mexican-Heritage Identities in Children's Picture Storybooks: Thinking Critically, Thinking Diversely

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**Abstract:** Latinos are the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States, and Mexican-heritage people are by far the largest portion of the US Latino population. Each day, thousands of schoolteachers face Mexican heritage students with little knowledge nor understanding of these students' backgrounds and identities. This article provides teachers with a critical primer on how to evaluate and use children's literature to reach out to Mexican American students and build understanding among non-Latinos. This analysis, from cultural, historical, and political perspectives, of a variety of high-quality, contemporary picture storybooks featuring Mexican heritage characters maps the diversity of Mexican American experiences and identities in a way that is both accessible to teachers and well grounded in theory and research.

### Vignette

*Jane Oglethorpe is a first year teacher in Georgia. She grew up in the largely white, upper middle class Atlanta suburb of Peachtree City, went to college at the University of Georgia, and is now starting her first year as an elementary teacher in Gainesville, Georgia near a large poultry processing plant. Looking over her class roll for the first time, she realizes that there are more Latino names in her class than she remembers in nearly all her undergraduate education courses combined! After a moment of panic over her nearly useless two semesters of college Spanish, she remembers an admonition from her Language Arts methods professor: "Use picture storybooks to reach across cultural, racial, and dispositional divides within your classroom. Telling a good story that connects with your students' experiences at home can break down barriers and bridge difficult gaps." Jane walks down to the school library. "Do we have any good picture books with Mexican-heritage characters?"*

### Demographic and Educational Context

Latinos are the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States (Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2002), and Mexican-heritage people are by far the largest portion of the US' Latino population (Durand & Massey, 2004). There are approximately seven million Mexican-heritage children in our nation's schools today and that number is expected to grow for the foreseeable future (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008). Nonetheless, across large portions of the US,

Mexican-heritage people are a relatively new phenomenon. This is particularly true in the Southern states like Georgia which has received one of the fastest growing Hispanic communities of the past two decades (University of Georgia BOS/SBDC, 2003; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002). All across Georgia, thousands of schoolteachers like Jane Oglethorpe face students named José Hernández and María Guadalupe Morales each day with little to no knowledge of the background of their students.

Some teachers are likely to turn to children's picture storybooks as resources in a three-pronged and well-intentioned effort:

- First, to connect with the Latino student's preexisting knowledge and incite their interest by presenting them with a reading that looks like home. Students do respond better to curriculum materials that connect with their home experiences. As Alma Flor Ada (1992) asserted,

All children have the right to have their language and cultural identity recognized by the school. They all deserve to dialogue with the books they read in order to recognize that protagonists live not only on printed pages, but in daily life - that all children are indeed valued protagonists, the protagonists of their own life stories. (p. xiii)

Such efforts are to be lauded and are supported by both multicultural theory (Nieto, 2002; Sleeter & Grant, 1988) and reading research (Martinez & Nash, 1990; Murray & Velázquez, 1999; Purves & Beach, 1972; Sims, 1983).

- Second, to explain the importance of José and María's background to the non-Latino classmates in the classroom. Classmates respond more supportively when they understand more about their peers and see the value in their diverse experiences. For example, an artful scattering<sup>1</sup> of *un poco de español* in an English text can have the tangible benefits of increasing student interest while providing *estudiantes bilingües* with an opportunity to showcase their talent to their monolingual peers. As award-winning author Francisco Jiménez explained:

Students who know Spanish are asked to translate those words for the non-Spanish speakers. In the letters I get, teachers indicate how valuable that has been in terms of creating a stronger sense of community in the classroom; because the Spanish speakers, who generally feel a little bit left out suddenly are recognized, and their native language is valued by the other students. (Barrera, 2003, p. 5)

By helping classmates and teachers move beyond ignorance and fear, a good children's picture story book can bridge difficult gaps and connect students and teachers who are struggling to work together.

- Third, to inform themselves as teachers about their students. As Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) have demonstrated, teachers can best support their students when they know the particular cultural funds of knowledge that their students bring to the classroom. These funds of knowledge are shaped by the social, cultural, economic, and

educational backgrounds of students and their families. The reading of well-researched and written, culturally authentic storybooks can never replace a thoughtful home visit or parent-teacher connection, but it can serve as a starting point. As Nina Nilson noted: "Factual and fictional works written by cultural 'insiders' may help teachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers gain greater understandings of the challenges children of diverse backgrounds experience" (2005, p. 535).

To support teachers who seek to make such efforts, this article will map the basics of Mexican-heritage identities so educators like Jane Oglethorpe can be better informed in approaching both their Mexican-heritage students and children's picture storybooks about the Mexican-heritage experience.

### Stereotypes and Authenticity

Clearly, the answer to Jane's challenge is not as simple as grabbing the first book with a Mexican-heritage protagonist off the library shelf. A teacher needs to be aware that, just like all forms of cultural production, children's picture storybooks are products of the prejudices and limitations of their era, authors, and illustrators. Thus, some are based upon and reinforce oversimplified stereotypes. As Kathy Escamilla stated, books and curriculum materials have tended to "present [Mexican-Americans] in two extremes: ... superhumans, who overcame insurmountable odds to achieve greatness [or] ... as helpless victims of poverty and discrimination, who largely reside in urban barrios or rural migrant camps" (1992, p. 3). And, unfortunately, some stereotypes linger on far longer than one might hope. For example, the longstanding and inaccurate "dirty Mexican" stereotype (Gordon, 2005, p. 169) was the basis for Garrett's *Angelo the Naughty One* in 1944 was repeated over half a century later in Stevens' *Carlos and the Squash Plant* in 1999.

Some general questions for the critical analysis of children's literature have been outlined both by Apol (1998) and the Council on Interracial Books (1980). Other questions and critiques specifically relevant to Mexican-heritage children's literature have been forwarded by Rosalinda Barrera and colleagues (1993, 1997, 1999), by Murray and Velázquez (1999), and Nilson (2005). Taken together, these make it possible to compile a list of negative stereotypes and damaging misrepresentations about Mexican-heritage people to look out for in children's literature:

- Families that seemingly accept their oppression;
- Disproportionate numbers of dysfunctional families;
- The supposed hopelessness of lacking of English skills;
- Anglo-centricism that denigrates the Mexican heritage;
- The implication that Anglo saviors are needed for Latinos to succeed; and
- Over representation of Mexican-heritage protagonists as rural migrant farmworkers.

Since stereotypes like these reduce people to over-simplified caricatures rather than presenting them as complex individuals, books that present and perpetuate such stereotypes are likely to fail to serve the three purposes outlined above. When presented with under-informed books about Mexican-heritage life, Mexican-heritage children will likely see the slips and gaps in knowledge and therefore be less likely to engage in the text. Meanwhile, non-Latino students and teachers will not be presented with knowledge that could overturn their prejudices and give them reason to reach out to their Mexican-heritage classmates. Without an awareness of what

stereotypes need to be countered and a willingness to examine books for such problems, a teacher can just as easily alienate the student she sought to connect with – or reinforce prejudices that she sought to counter.

One of the first questions that needs to be asked of books that purport to represent the experience of oppressed groups regards the authenticity of the author's and illustrator's backgrounds because texts written and or illustrated by Mexican-heritage people tend to avoid problematic stereotypes of their community. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (1980) suggested that this should be considered as part of the author's and illustrator's qualifications to write or draw about a particular topic. Some critics have gone so far as to assert that it is impossible for a privileged person from outside a culture or class to authentically represent the experience of a racial or ethnic minority or oppressed class in a "culturally authentic" (Sims Bishop, 1993, p. 46) or "culturally conscious" (Harris, 1990, p. 179) manner. This position, when taken to its logical extreme though, can lead to an absurd denial of an author's ability and creative prerogative to write or paint about anyone other than themselves (Rockwood, 1982).

Nonetheless, the long debate over authenticity and cultural appropriation in children's literature (Banfield & Wilson, 1983; Fox & Short, 2003; Morrison, 1992) has clearly demonstrated that many pitfalls and stereotypes can be avoided when community insiders write about their own experience. For this reason, it is certainly desirable that Mexican-heritage Americans produce books about their own people. However, careful authors and illustrators who study, learn, and give voice to Mexican-heritage lives truthfully and appealingly should not be rejected simply because of their ethnicity.

### The Complexity of Identity

Just as complex as the avoidance of stereotypes is the necessity to take into account the grand diversity of experiences of Mexican-heritage people today. Although there are some things that most Mexican-heritage students have in common, there is at least as much diversity as commonality within the Mexican-heritage community. As María Eugenia Matute-Bianchi asserted, the Mexican-heritage population is made up of "distinct subgroups ... there are class differences, differences in cultural orientation, and differences in ethnic identification and consciousness, as well as differences between immigrants and non-immigrants" (1991, p. 209). Their experiences "range from that of a recent immigrant living in an urban *barrio* or rural *colonia* to that of the middle-class, third generation person living in the suburbs" (Martinelli, 2005, p. 24). Teachers like Jane Oglethorpe who seek to reach out to their Mexican-heritage students need to move beyond simplistic notions of a singular Mexican-heritage experience and look for the diversity within the community. This is particularly true with regards to the use of children's literature that purports to represent Mexican-heritage Americans. Just because a book is positive and stereotype-free and the protagonist is brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking, and named José or María is not necessarily sufficient to connect with a student.

This complexity was made clear by Karen Hale Hankins (1999) in her work with African American students in Athens, Georgia. In "Silencing the Lambs," Hankins, a well-intentioned and well educated classroom teacher described her own experience of trying to present 'culturally appropriate' children's literature to a group of African American second graders. She chose to reach out to her students by reading Stolz' heart-warming children's picture book *Storm in the Night* (1988). In this story, an African American child and his grandfather ride out a

thunderstorm and loss of electricity while sitting on their front porch and remembering a similar night from the grandfather's childhood. Hankins thought the story would appeal to her Black children because the race of the main characters. Instead, they responded with anger. Mystified, she struggled to understand why. Her urban-raised, drive-by-shooting conscious students could not get past the fact that the story was set at night, in the dark, on the front porch. They could only fear for the safety of the characters, as they would for their own safety if they were in front of their home, late at night, when a storm had knocked out the power. The students had brought much more to the reading of the book than Hankins imagined. They were not just African American children. They were much more complex sets of experiences and identities, most crucially here, contemporary urban children.

This example of the best intentions run awry reinforces the necessity for teachers to learn about the background of their students if they intend to find books with "characters not unlike" their students (Wiseman, 1992, p. 82). Furthermore, it also tells of the need for teachers to see beyond a singular category of race, ethnicity, gender or class when choosing books for the classroom. Thus, if Jane is going to make good choices to connect with her students and the versions of Mexican American *identidad* that they carry with them into her classroom, she needs to examine the social and familial connections that define them outside the school, and have a vocabulary with which to consider these identities.<sup>2</sup>

#### "The Battle of the Names"

Until this point, I have intentionally used the term "Mexican-heritage" because it is one of the few ways to refer to the diverse entirety of Mexican-heritage sub-groups in the U. S. without running afoul of long-running "the battle of the names" (Grebler, Moore, & Guzman, 1970, p. 385). Rosales explained:

Tracing Mexican American ethnic identity would appear a most difficult task because of the seemingly confusing maze of self identifiers which Mexican Americans have used historically, such as *californios*, *tejanos*, *mexicanos*, Latin Americans, Spanish, Mexican Americans, Chicanos and Hispanics. Mexican Americans have even distinguished those Mexicans that are seen as different from themselves, irrespective of how slight those differences might appear to non-Mexicans. For example, *cholo*, *surumato*, *guacho*, or *mojado* serve to identify those who have recently arrived from Mexico. (2005, p. 39)

These labels or identities battle within "the realm of semantic politics. Each name has its proponents and detractors, often from both within and outside the communities being named" (Beck, 1999, p. 10). For example, "the terms *Latino* and Hispanic are often used interchangeably in contemporary U. S. society, though there are those who will argue one or the other or both of those appellations are inappropriate." (Hamann, 1998)

The huge differences within the 'Mexican American' population belie any easy labeling. Mexican Americans can be the poorest of the poor or very well to do. They may be speakers of any combination of Castillian, informal Spanish, slang-filled *Caló*, Tex-Mex Spanglish, mainstream English, contemporary *Chicano*, AAVE-influenced English, and/or dozens of indigenous languages.<sup>3</sup> They may be literary stars or illiterate fieldworkers. They might be descendants of families that have lived in this land since before the Mayflower or 'mojados' who crossed the river yesterday. They be right-wing America-first xenophobes or radical advocates of



a Mexican American nation of *Aztlán*. Monica Sosa explained the historical roots of this diversity:

From the early twentieth century to today, several generations of Mexican-Americans have fought – at times successfully, at times unsuccessfully – for the possibility of becoming structurally and socially integrated into the mainstream while maintaining important facets of Mexican culture and identity. However, structural constraints, changing racial politics and ideologies, and shifts in the “common sense” aspect of racial identity for this group over time forced Mexican-American activists in different political generations to take on very different political strategies surrounding race throughout modern American history; over time, these struggles have resulted in deep historical and political meaning surrounding questions of racial identity for many Mexican-Americans in the United States. (2007, p. 1)

Thus, not surprisingly within this diversity there is great latitude for self-labeling. “Each of these labels suggests a significant difference in how Mexican Americans define themselves and how they wish to be perceived, both by other Mexican Americans and by *Anglos*, as well” (Losey, 1995, p. 286). In her oral history of the lives of three Mexican-heritage Texas educators, Delores Peña noted, “Each narrator used a different term to identify people of Mexican-heritage... ‘Latin Americans’... ‘*Chicanos*’ ... [or] ‘*Mexicanos*.’ ... These racial self-conceptions were constructed out of their own life experiences” (1998, p. 4). In a parallel study, Cinthia Salinas stated that her participant had “continuously redefined herself as a *Chicana*, *Latina*, Hispanic and Mexican American” (1998, p. 5). As Sosa commented: “For Mexican-Americans, choosing which box to check on a government survey or how to identify oneself in everyday interactions can be a very telling statement about how the individual perceives his or her own social condition” (2007, p. 11). Sonia Nieto explained that ethnicity is a process whereby “many people who are from the same ethnicity can manifest their identity in very different ways.” (Trueba et al., 1997, p. 176)

So what to do? As a means toward beginning to understand this diversity of identities in a way that is both approachable and practical for Jane and other classroom teachers, the remainder of this paper will use selected children’s picture storybooks as examples to map out and place within historical context some of the most significant and identifiable subgroups within the U. S. Mexican-heritage population:

- Hispanos of the Southwestern U. S. whose roots in this land can predate the arrival of the English in Virginia and Massachusetts.
- Chicanos, whose identities focus on political activism and cultural expression on behalf of *La Raza*, the Spanish-speaking people of the Americas.
- Assimilated Americans of Mexican heritage whose Mexican heritage may be seemingly limited to the proverbial piñata at a birthday party and tamales at Christmas; and
- Recent immigrants from Mexico, whose lives are dramatically different if they find their way to either:
  - Work as rural migrant farmworkers and food processors; or
  - Employment in urban factories, construction, or the service industry;

Although these categories are clearly not an exhaustive catalogue of the Mexican-heritage experience in the US, they can serve to challenge and guide teachers like Jane in balancing their book selections and in learning about the diverse backgrounds of their students. The children's picture storybooks discussed here are among the best at portraying the wide variety of Mexican American experience. All of these books are self-consciously Mexican American in their theme and focus upon at least one major Mexican American character.

### *Hispanos, Californios, Tejanos, and Nuevo Mexicanos*

Over one hundred years before the Mayflower landed on Plymouth Rock, the conquest of Native peoples and lands by Spaniards during the early 1500s in what is now the southwestern U. S. formed the beginning of the *Hispano* identity. The often-times violent mixing of Spanish and Indigenous blood gave birth to a community, culture, and economy that was part of New Spain and then Mexico for nearly two and a half centuries. However, during the mid 1800s, the U. S. took the more than half of Mexico –through the incorporation of the state of Texas, the Mexican-American War and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the Gadsden Purchase. Through these actions, 80 to 100,000 *Californios, Tejanos, and Nuevo Mexicanos* found themselves living in the United States (Rosales, 2005, p. 40). As they have frequently said, “we did not cross the border, the border crossed us” (Villenas, 2007, p. 419).

Thus, the historical experience of *Hispanos* has been one of a colonized, rather than an immigrant people. And for this reason, their identity is very different from that of Mexican immigrants who crossed the river yesterday, or even three generations ago. They do not look back across the border to Mexico for the roots of their cultural identity. Their roots are firmly planted in the lands of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas – even if those lands have been taken from them by unscrupulous speculators and violent racists in the intervening century and a half (Moquin & Van Doren, 1971, p. 251-254).

Interestingly, one book for children that begins to explain this history is part of The American Girls Collection: *Welcome to Josefina's World – 1824* (La Pierre, 1999). Created as a non-fiction companion to the popular historical fiction books and Josefina doll, the book uses illustrations and vintage photographs to show how fully developed the *Hispano* culture and economy of Santa Fe region was well before the arrival of *los norte americanos*. However, as might be expected for a book intended to support the marketing of an expensive doll, it does not linger on the injustice of the U. S. invasion of Mexican lands. And, although the Spanish cruelty that led to the Pueblo revolt of 1680 is described, the cultural genocide of the land's native peoples by the U. S. since the mid 1800s is not mentioned. Another historically-based book that depicts the experiences of *Hispanos* is Joan Sandin's *Coyote School News* (2003). Set in southern Arizona during the Great Depression, this book based upon actual school newsletters written by the predominately *Hispano* children from the ranches of that region. Unfortunately, the book's artwork and episodic plot line may not capture the interest of many children. Both of these books include a scattering of Spanish words that are generally easily understood in context.

The *Carlos* series of books by the late Jan Romero Stevens provides a more contemporary look at the life of a *Hispano* boy growing up on his family's ranch in northern New Mexico.

Carlos and his family lived in the fertile Española Valley in northern New Mexico. Their home, with its thick adobe walls and high-pitched tin roof, was next to a large field that Carlos's father planted each spring in rows of sweet yellow corn. How Carlos loved corn! He loved hot corn tortillas, spicy corn tamales at Christmastime, and corn on the cob, shiny with butter and sprinkled with salt. (Stevens, 1994, n. p.)

Although, as I have mentioned earlier, *Carlos and the Squash Plant* unfortunately reinforces a negative stereotype, the other four books in this parallel bilingual series are charming tales that gently teach about the life of today's *Hispanos* through the youthful misadventures of a believably overconfident young boy. The artwork of the series is colorful and evokes the southwestern milieu. Finally, *Lucas and his Loco Beans* by Ramona Moreno Winner (2003) teaches the science of Mexican jumping beans through a tale of a boy visiting his *Hispano* grandfather's ranch. The short story is in English with a scattering of Spanish words defined by bilingual glosses on each page. The book concludes with a fully parallel bilingual section explaining the life cycle of the moth and plant that together create the intriguing "jumping beans."

### Cultural and Political *Chicanos*

After the U. S. takeover of the northern third of Mexico, the cultural, familial, and economic ties of the preceding centuries did not disappear. Although the border had been moved, people continued to transit north and south with little regard to the boundary, leading to the growth of the Mexican-heritage population in America. Political instability and violence during the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s drove hundreds of thousands north of the border to seek safety (González, 1999). At times when the U. S. economy was booming or labor, especially agricultural labor, was in short supply, Mexican immigrants were welcomed across the border, only to have that welcome withdrawn when the economy slowed. The cycles of the American economy thus brought in Mexican workers during the Roaring 1920s, only to have them deported in large numbers during the Great Depression. Labor shortages due to military deployments during World War Two reversed the flow again, while the post-war slowdown and return of the troops prompted calls for stricter regulation of immigration from Mexico (Samora & Vandel Simon, 1993). Mexican-heritage Americans occasionally fought back against mistreatment during this time via labor organizing and legal actions such as the first successful school desegregation case in the U. S.: *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove*, 1931 (González, 1999). Nonetheless, for most part, the constraints upon their lives were little improved until the 1960s. By the end of the 1960s, the population of Mexican-heritage people in the U. S. had grown to at least 4.5 million (Samora & Vandel Simon, 1993).

After over a century of oppression and inequality, Mexican-heritage Americans took inspiration and courage from the African American Civil Rights movement and began to seek access to the American dream of opportunity for themselves and their children. As part of this political project, many Mexican-heritage people, especially activists in California and Texas asserted that they were *Chicanos* – Mexican-heritage Americans who were proud of their mixed background and willing to fight for their rights as U. S. citizens (Rosales, 1997).

Out of this assertion came the desire for distinctively Chicano forms of art and culture, a tradition that continues today. However, many Mexican-heritage Americans, even ones with a

history of progressive politics, have been uneasy with the Chicano Identity Movement. For example, labor organizer Bert Corona “was never comfortable with the ethnic nationalism that arose in the late-1960s. He questioned the use of Latino-centrist terms like ‘cosmic race’ and rejected Reies Lopez Tijerina’s anti-white rhetoric” (Rodriguez, 1995). Thus, even today, over 40 years after the Chicano identity label entered common usage, it provokes mixed reactions both within and outside the Latino community (Martinelli, 2005, p. 25).

Some of the most interesting children’s books written by Mexican-heritage authors have been created as part of the Chicano cultural project, such as the self-consciously Chicano new folktale *The Adventures of Connie and Diego* by Chicana Maria García (1987). This parallel bilingual English quest story starts in a slightly veiled *Atzlán* or Chicano national homeland and includes the standard mythical elements of departure, talking animal helpers, transformational self-discovery, and return to home (Campbell, 1972). The protagonist twins are born into a Chicano farmworking family “with many colors all over their little bodies.” In this way, their mixed cultural identity is explicitly marked, making them the objects of derision. The twins run away, only to find that they belong to their homeland and it belongs to them.

For many, the definitive symbol of Mexican-heritage *Chicanismo* is the life of activist and icon, César Chavez, which is described in two recent picture storybooks. *César: ¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes We Can!* by T. Bernier-Grand (2004) explains the unionization struggle of the California’s farmworkers through a series of short, free-verse poems. The poems allow the reader to understand how an apparently unexceptional young boy developed into an inspiration to all Americans. *Harvesting Hope* by Kathleen Krull (2003) covers much the same ground as *César*, but in a more traditional narrative form. Mexican-born Yuyi Morales’ surrealist paintings complement the text beautifully. Unfortunately though, *Harvesting Hope* falls prey to the oversimplified “great man” syndrome of historical biography. Whereas *César* acknowledges the important roles of Chavez’ allies, Krull’s text fails to mention any of them, leaving Chavez as the primary mover behind important social progress, a problematic pattern deconstructed by Kohl in his examination of representations of Rosa Parks.<sup>4</sup>

A non-political and more contemporary representation of *Chicanismo* is to be found in Chicano poet Gary Soto’s delightful *Chato* series. Soto’s use of language is remarkably evocative of contemporary urban Chicano life:

Chato, a low-riding cat with six stripes, was slinking toward a sparrow when he heard the scrape of tiny feet coming from the yard next door. ... ‘*No problema*, homeboy,’ Chato said to himself, and followed his nose to the fence. (Soto, 1995)

Thus, within a few words we are in ‘East LA,’ the definitive *Chicano* barrio of the United States. Chato, the “Cool Cat of East Los” and his friend Novio Boy codeswitch and *Caló* slang their way through a linguistic tour of cultural *Chicanismo*. These books have the potential to bring peals of laughter from most readers, although some assimilated Mexican Americans might reject him for supposed “impurity” of his language and urban hip hop demeanor.

## Assimilated Mexican American Suburbanites

During the past century, but especially during the past two generations as the Chicano Civil Rights movement opened new opportunities for Mexican-heritage Americans, increasing numbers of Mexican Americans have found a route into the middle class. According to Sosa,

It is estimated that approximately forty percent [of Mexican Americans] have now made it into the ranks of the American middle class, and these people appear to be integrating in ways earlier Mexican-American political generations could not. [For example,] Mexican-Americans, and especially its middle class segment, have significantly higher rates of intermarriage with whites [than] black Americans. (2007, p. 9)

In this process, some Mexican Americans have set aside many elements of their heritage in order to enjoy the privileges of membership in the predominantly Anglo middle class in the U. S. Some of them have gone so far as to stop their children from learning Spanish, altering the pronunciation of their family name (i. e.: *Jiménez* as JIM-en-ez, rather than hee-MAY-nayz), or naming their children Ashley and Reed. This is the sort of identity bargain encouraged by Richard Rodriguez in his frightening memoir *The Hunger for Memory* (1983) and celebrated by English-only advocates across the country. Of course, economic success and entrée into the local country club are not guaranteed by assimilation, but many argue that such sacrifices are necessary if one is to have a fair chance.

Thus, it is intriguing that *Chato's* creator Gary Soto also provides us with one of the best-developed portraits of assimilated Mexican American life in *Too Many Tamales* (1993). Soto quickly tells us that we are not in East L. A. anymore with his first word: "snow." The first illustration is of a large and elegant home outside Chicago or another northern city. The characters are clearly well-to-do suburbanites who happen to be of Mexican heritage. They have little in common with *Chato* beyond a hankering for Mexican food. *Chato* is most definitely not this family's cat, and he and his ilk are not likely to be welcomed as suitors for the upper middle class Mexican American girls of this story. There is no indication of any code switching out of mainstream English or use of slang and most of what remains of their Mexican-heritage is dark hair, Catholic names, and penchant for tamales at Christmas. This type of elite Mexican American lifestyle could be a bit disorienting to *Mexicano immigrants* working in the fields or *Chicanos* caught in the barrios and might prompt some skepticism. Nonetheless, this is precisely the goal of many *Mexicanos* – a chance to live the American dream.

Isabel Muñoz' hilarious parallel bilingual *Eric & Julieta* book series also appears to portray an economically comfortable Mexican heritage family, this time through the eyes of a mischievous young boy much like Carlos in Stevens' series. Other than the inclusion of a parallel Spanish text and the representation of Eric and Julieta as brown skinned and black haired, the books could be about Anglos. Nonetheless, the books are lively and fun peaks into the twisted logic of boyhood. In an indirect presentation of the unhealthy and sometimes dangerous silliness that assimilation can prompt, the Latina child protagonist in parallel bilingual *I Wish I had Freckles Like Abby* (Heling & Hembrook, 2007) longs to look like her red-haired and freckled Anglo friend. After multiple futile attempts, she realizes how foolish she has been and that she has her own unique beauty.

Most interesting of this genre, *I Love Saturdays y domingos* by Alma Flor Ada (2002) presents a happy and healthy child of a mixed Anglo-Mexican marriage whose parents and

grandparents are clearly working together to balance assimilation with heart-felt pride in one's cultural heritage. The protagonist compares and contrasts her two sets of grandparents all the while celebrating and benefiting from the differences between them. The child's Mexican heritage has not been set aside, but is remixed into a new American blend. The artwork clearly supports the message of multi-ethnic tolerance while the text includes a large number of Spanish words, some of which a non-bilingual reader would need some help to decode.

### Recent Mexican Immigrants

During the past three decades, the number of Mexican immigrant entering the U. S., both with papers and undocumented has reached a new crescendo. Since 1980, millions of Mexicans have crossed the border seeking opportunities unavailable in their homeland. Many, if not most, of them came with the intention of building a nest egg to build a house or start a family or business back in Mexico – goals that cannot be easily fulfilled at home due to low wages and weak credit markets. However, many stayed on, especially as stricter immigration enforcement and the militarization of the border effectively made the possibility of transiting the border to return again more and more difficult (Durand & Massey, 2004).

Historically, the bulk of Mexican immigrants to the U. S. had previously come from the northern border states and the west central states near Jalisco and Michoacán. However, this has also changed during recent years as increasing numbers of Mexicans from other regions of that nation have sought opportunities in *el norte*. Significantly, this has brought the diversity of Mexico to the U. S. Many authors have written of the persistence of local and regional allegiances above national identity in Mexico (Rosales, 2005).<sup>5</sup> In addition, these increased diversity of the immigrant stream from Mexico has brought many of speakers of the dozens of indigenous languages of Mexico.<sup>6</sup> For all these reasons, although people in the U. S. look for such oversimplifications, it cannot be assumed that the identity that a family carries across the border from Mexico was simply Mexican, or that they will be received as brothers by other Mexican-heritage people in this county

*Friends from the Other Side* by the late Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa (1993) mapped out the grim tensions that can result from this diversity within the Mexican heritage community. Having just crossed into the U. S., Joaquín and his mother face many difficulties in South Texas. His mother says,

We had to cross the river because the situation on the other side was very bad. I couldn't find work and Joaquín was in rags. It's the same on this side ... If only we could find real work instead of an occasional odd job in exchange for food and old clothes. (Anzaldúa (1993, n. p.)

Joaquín's trials also include harassment by *Chicano* boys, INS raids, and poor health. Sainly protagonist Prietita stands up for Joaquín and his mother and helps them avoid beatings, arrest, and sickness. This book clearly depicts the divisions within the Mexican heritage community while asserting the possibility of a common identity based upon some shared elements of heritage and the tolerance of difference. This book demonstrates the very real, daily fear of many immigrant children that they will return home from school to find that their parents have been picked up and deported.<sup>7</sup>

### *Mexicanos: Rural*

With Prietita's help, Joaquín and his mother may be able to avoid deportation and either stay in the border region of South Texas, move to an urban center, or join the rural poor *Mexicano* migrant farmworkers of this country. The difficult life of migrancy is brought to life in a number of children's books depicting children struggling to understand and cope with the terrible disruptions of movement and place-less-ness.<sup>8</sup>

Most notable amongst these with regards to issues of identity is *Going Home* (1996) by the Caldecott Medal-winning, *Smoky Night* (1994) team of author Eve Bunting and Mexican-heritage illustrator David Díaz. In this wonderful book, the puzzlement of narrator Carlos and his sisters over their parents' choice to leave both Mexico and their extended family in order to live difficult lives in the U. S. is explored. Like many adult immigrants to the U. S. (Bayley et al., 1996), the parents in this book are strongly Mexico-identified. As they cross the border for a Christmas visit to their parents' village, Carlos is a "little nervous":<sup>9</sup>

Are you sure that they will let us back, Papa? I ask.  
Of course. Do not worry. We are legal farm workers. We have our papeles. ...  
Now we are in Mexico. I see no difference, but Mama does.  
Mexico! Mexico! [She says as] she blows kisses at the sun-filled winter sky. (Bunting, 1996, n. p.)

Later, Carlos' older sister asks him

Carlos? ... Do you know that Mama and Papa are saving money? They plan to come back someday and live in Grandfather's house and work his land ...  
Good [says Carlos] It will be after our opportunities.

Say something in English, a woman asks me, and everyone is quiet, waiting. I don't know what to say.  
It is good to be here, I stammer at last. They laugh and clap.  
Imagine, Consuelo! Your son – and all your children – speaking English. So smart.  
(Bunting, 1996, n. p.)

To their Mexican relatives, language is the most remarkable aspect of the transformation that Carlos and his siblings have undergone since their move to the United States, a perspective that has the potential to reinforce an assumption of English language and Anglo cultural superiority. Bunting's prose is able to evoke the cadence and thoughts of a child reflecting on his life. Meanwhile, Díaz's distinctive cubist /surrealist illustrations are supported by his creative font and use of colorful background photos.

*Gathering the Sun* by Alma Ada Flor (1997) also contains remarkable artwork. Former migrant farmworker Simón Silva's richly-colored, black-lined illustrations evoke the expansive modern Mexican muralism of Diego Rivera. The book is based upon a series of short, beautiful Spanish-language poems that form an alphabet book celebrating migrant farmworkers and Mexican American heritage. Ada's Spanish poems have been capably translated into English and printed side-by-side. However, this book's largely positive references to the work, when coupled

with Silva's happy workers, well-furnished homes, and beautiful landscapes has the potential to allow non-Latino readers to believe the life of a migrant is one of contentment and acceptance of one's place. The mythology of the happy farmworker has deep and troubling roots in the American consciousness<sup>10</sup> and similar romanticization of contemporary migrant fieldwork is powerful and problematic in that it can reinforce politically destructive stereotypes that Mexican-heritage people are destined to this work, welcome it, and are content with their station in life.

Antidotes to such misperceptions can be found in two books based upon Francisco Jiménez' award-winning collection of short stories *The Circuit* (1997). Both books are based upon the author's own migrant childhood and find the difficult balance between romanticism and reality. *La Mariposa* (1998), also illustrated by Simón Silva focuses on Jiménez' first year in school in 1950s California and uses the metaphor of a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly to help explain young Francisco's struggles learning English and fitting in. After a painful misunderstandings and mistreatment, Francisco's abilities as an artist allow him to find a place in the classroom amongst his peers. *The Christmas Gift* (2000) carries a hard-hitting message about migrant poverty as the narrator's parents tearfully deal with their inability to buy anything but a small bag of candy for their children's Christmas presents. Living in a cold tent and sleeping on one mattress laid on the ground, it is clear that the family is desperately poor. Nonetheless, the power of familial love and hope helps mitigate, although not relieve, their circumstances. The resolution of this story calls for fruitful comparison with O. Henry's classic *The Gift of the Magi* (1906). Claire Cotts' acrylic paintings clearly evoke the distinctive Mexican Realism of Frida Kahlo, with the inner feelings of the characters externalized through gestures, facial expressions, and painted text.

### *Mexicanos: Urban*

While many recent Mexican immigrants find their first work in the fields of rural America, many others settle in our ever-expanding cities to work in construction, landscaping, food services, or dozens of other low wage forms of labor. For most of a century there has been Mexican immigration directly into the big cities of California, Texas, and Chicago, but during the past generation, Mexicans have arrived in increasing numbers in new urban destinations on the Eastern seaboard previously dominated by Latinos of Caribbean descent (Smith, 2006).

A book that can help contextualize the long history of Mexican immigration and contribution to American society and culture is *José! Born to Dance* by Susanna Reich (2005) with rich, beautiful illustrations by Raúl Colón. It tells the story of José Limón, a boy whose family fled the Mexican Revolution and found their way to Tucson and eventually Los Angeles. Through hard work and inspiration rose from poverty to prominence as one of the premier dancers and choreographers in the U. S. during the 1900s. This biography provides a much needed counterweight to misperceptions of Mexicana immigrants as limited to wage labor in the fields and construction sites of our nation.

Another book regarding a prominent Mexican heritage artist is Sandra Cisneros' *Hairs* (1997), excerpted from her classic, award-winning novel about her childhood in Chicago, *The House on Mango Street* (1984). This parallel bilingual illustrated text is particularly effective in describing the fact that Mexican-heritage people do not all look the same, making the point via the various types of hair all within Cisneros' family. As the original novel makes clear, despite the financial struggles of her family, the love within their home kept them together. A similar chord is struck by another autobiographical tale, Mexico-born Amada Irma Pérez' *My Very Own*



*Room* (2000). This parallel bilingual story follows a girl, the eldest and only daughter in her family, as she seeks to escape sleeping in the same room with her five younger brothers. The story makes clear, in terms that a child can identify with, the struggles of working class immigrants seeking to provide for their children and their extended family. The illustrations are bright, lively and engaging and make it clear that this is a family that loves each other deeply.

Finally, the challenges of languages and translation are central issues in three other stories that depict urban *Mexicanos*. In *A Day's Work* (Bunting, 1994), *Pepita Talks Twice* (Lachtman, 1995), and *I Speak English for My Mom* (Stanek, 1989), the three child protagonists all have adult responsibilities thrust upon them because of their bilingual abilities. All three children are first or second generation Mexican Americans whose older relatives speak only Spanish. The children must repeatedly intercede in adult situations simply because of the necessity for translation.

Pepita was a little girl who spoke Spanish and English.

Come, Pepita, help us, people would say. Everybody called on Pepita to talk for them in English and Spanish. And she did what they asked without a grumble. Until today. (Lachtman, 1995, n. p.)

When I was small, Mom helped me do everything. Now that I am older, I have to help my mom because I can speak English, and she can't. At school I use English all the time. At home Mom and I speak Spanish together. And outside our home, I speak for her. (Stanek, 1989, n. p.)

In this way, bilingualism is instrumental forming these children's identities by forcing upon them a great deal of maturity and responsibility - more than most monolingual children would likely be afforded at the same age - and a modicum of power that can have negative consequences for the normal dynamics of a family. Parents who depend upon their children as "language brokers" in this way frequently find traditional roles and relationships uncomfortably reversed (Love & Buriel, 2007; Morales & Hansen, 2005).

### Conclusion

Clearly, no single book can cover the multiplicities of the Mexican-heritage experience in the U. S. As Nilson stated, it is important to recognize "that a single book cannot possibly convey all the complexities of a culture, authorities on children's literature recommend exposing students to multiple books" (2005, p. 546). Thus, is it essential to read these books, even the best amongst them, in complementary pairs or groups. For example, *Nuevo Mexicano Cornfield* Carlos's life and identity are leagues away from the experiences of many other Mexican Americans. It is important for 'cool cats' like Chato and migrant children like Francisco of *La Mariposa* to understand the life of *Cornfield* Carlos, and vice-versa. But the gap in their respective Mexican American identities is very large. Thus, a teacher who seeks to engage Chato in the Carlos' and Francisco's stories must make a conscious effort to build a scaffold or bridge across that gap, rather than naively assume that all Mexican Americans can relate to each other.

Identity is complex and dynamic. It cannot be boiled down to bi-partite black and white categories and singular elements. Teachers need to seek, understand, explain and celebrate the complexities and contradictions of identity questions in the Mexican-heritage community in

order to provide their students with the scaffolding necessary for engagement in the wonderful stories described here and understanding of the wonderful classmates in their own classrooms. Hopefully Jane Oglethorpe can return to her classroom with a pile of diverse, high-quality books about the Mexican experience in the U. S. to inform herself, teach her non-Latino students, and reach out to José, María, and all their Mexican-heritage classmates.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> An artful scattering of Spanish in an English text should allow monolingual English readers to read the book without loss of enjoyment or basic comprehension, while sounding natural to bilingual readers such that they do not feel that everything is being awkwardly repeated and defined. However, as Barrera, Quiroa & West-Williams (1999) demonstrated, some English language picture storybooks awkwardly spiced with Spanish words lose much of their literary value when the text is disrupted with bilingual repetitions to define terms. Thankfully, most of the code-switching books named in this article move between the languages artfully and naturally.
- <sup>2</sup> It must be noted here that the concept of identity, and specifically Mexican American identity, is a contentious topic. Various academic fields have tried to pin down what it means to be a Mexican American. Social psychologists have developed positivistic definitions of identity as part of the structure of an individual's personality (Martinelli, 2005, p. 22). This approach tends to atomize who a person is into a number of quantifiable elements and measurable, observable behaviors such as the frequency of piñatas at birthday parties (Knight et. al., 1993, p. 105). Poststructural theorists and discourse analysts such as Heras have at times pushed aside the concept of identity to focus upon micro-level, interactional 'positionings' or moment-to-moment 'performances.' Although all these approaches are well-grounded within their fields, they have little to say to Jane Oglethorpe as she scans the shelves in her school's library. However, the framework of anthropologists and educational anthropologists such as Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) can help guide Jane toward a more informed choice. This perspective has tended to focus upon family conditions and roles and peer networks as the loci of identity formation (Martinelli, 2005, p. 23).
- <sup>3</sup> Academic research demonstrates the centrality of language use to the formation and definition of Mexican American identities (Gallindo, 1995; Mendoza-Denton, 1999). How a child chooses to speak, which slang or dialect an author chooses for his or her characters, and which book a teacher chooses to present to a class are all acts of identity. They all define, for the audience, who is speaking and thus help define the nature of the interaction that will follow (LePage & Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Norton Pierce, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> As an iconic figure, César Chavez is the subject of many biographies for young readers and has become the token Latino nearly always included in "Famous Americans" series for school libraries. Chavez' story certainly deserves telling, but as Escamilla (1992) and Kohl (2005) have pointed out, overemphasizing one hero leads children to overlook many others whose achievements deserve attention also.
- <sup>5</sup> These provincial identities frequently travel across the border to be reflected in the gathering of *Veracruzanos* in one U. S. locale and the proud application of San Luis Potosi stickers to *Mexicano* owned trucks and cars here in the U. S.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, the small town of Metter, Georgia has long been home to a substantial community of Tarascan speakers from the Paracho, Michoacán region.
- <sup>7</sup> Incidents of children left orphaned and stranded by immigration raids have occurred with regularity for years, but are becoming more frequent during the current immigration crackdown.
- <sup>8</sup> See Beck (2009) for a more extended discussion of a larger number of children's picture storybooks

regarding migrancy

- <sup>9</sup> Another book that portrays a child's nervous visit to his parent's home in Mexico to reconnect with his family is Rene Colato Lainez' *Playing Lotería* (2005). Such travels are an essential part of the Mexican-heritage experience, with seemingly empty rural villages in Mexico suddenly springing to life each Christmas and summer.
- <sup>10</sup> This myth extends back through revisionist justifications of slavery, such Yates' infamous young adult novel *Amos Fortune* (1950) and Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind's* (1936) to Biblical justifications for slavery invoked by Jefferson Davis (1850) and others.