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Claremont McKenna College

Towards a Participatory Epistemology: Latinx Poetry in
US High School English Classrooms

Submitted to
Christine Crockett
and
Gilda L. Ochoa

By

Sarah Samantha Ceja

For
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Preface

The personal is political. I begin this project by relating my own educational experiences in order to interrupt ideas of what is typically considered 'academic'. I hope to disrupt white supremacist academic structures that would have me and others like me believe that our stories are not worthy of study.

My own experiences, as a Latina, as a first-generation college student, as a bilingual, bicultural lover of poetry, are what have led me to this work. I would not have declared a Spanish major if I felt that my studies in Literature truly satisfied my desire to find more authors, more words, that I could see myself represented in. Even then, my classes in Latinx/Chicanx Studies have been the only ones that have given me the opportunity to further pursue my academic interests in contemporary Latinx poetry as it relates to education.

I have been taught, both implicitly and explicitly, that the distinction between the poetic voice and author of any given work is one of the most important distinctions to make when it comes to analyzing literature, to totally separate artists' identities and even my own identities from art in the name of 'objectivity'. But I disagree; I do not think an objective approach to literature exists. Thus, I aim to be clear about how my own experience has informed my understanding of the topics and texts that I present to you.

My story is not unique; it is being replicated with other Latinx youths on a macro scale across the US. It is for this reason that this work is so important. Above all, this project aims to highlight the poets, poems, topics, and themes that are all too often ignored in mainstream literary academia. My thesis rests on the assumption that all of the work presented in it possesses great potential to spark transformative educational and personal experiences in students.

Introduction

This thesis project aims to explore how contemporary Latinx¹ poetry can be used in high school classrooms in the United States to: (1) foster Latinx student engagement and help them feel represented in the classroom, (2) create culturally responsive learning environments, and (3) teach students about the intersectionality of Latinx identities. While the focus of this work is primarily on inner-city students and poets, the analysis and suggestions that I present can also transfer well to other contexts.

Through exploration of the topics listed above, I formulate an argument that connects the fields of education, literature, and Chicanx/Latinx studies. I firstly argue that education should be empowering as opposed to passive, and that it should help students develop a critical consciousness that will enable them to come to think critically in and outside of academic settings. I also argue that the ideal educational environment should invite the whole student into the classroom to refrain from reinforcing the Eurocentric and white supremacist norms that have made literary education in the United States during the last century so reductive. Lastly, on the topic of education, I believe that educators should curate a positive environment for their students, which is why I cater my writing to English/literature educators.

Secondly, with regards to the field of literature, I argue that Eurocentrism in US literary education has long inflicted harm onto marginalized students, and neglecting discussion of the problem does not do anything to repair these harms. To address the negative effects in English/literature classrooms, educators need to do more than include Latinx authors into their

¹ For the entirety of this thesis, I will use the term Latinx to refer to the poets, students, and the communities that I center my work on. While there have been ongoing conversations about the use of terms such as Latino/a, Latine, Latinx, and more, I will be using Latinx as a gender neutral term to refer to people of Latin American descent. Additionally, the term Latinx is either used by each poet in their biographies, or the poems I share from them appear in the anthology, *The BreakBeat Poets Vol.4: LatiNext*, which reinforces my choice in terms when referring to them and their work.

curricula. They should engage in lessons and discussions that do not ignore poet identities in an effort to simply focus on ‘objective’ literary analysis. In order to solidify their understanding of concepts and texts presented in class, students should also be asked to apply the things they learn to other contexts through activities like creative writing.

Aligned with the field of Chicanx/Latinx studies, I hope to push back against monolithic representations of Latinx identities and argue that Latinx students should not only be able to see themselves in the literature they read, but that the literature should also expose them to the diversity within Latinx communities in the US. Students should be encouraged to bring their whole selves into the classroom and to rely on the various forms of knowledge they have to guide their understanding of class materials. Lastly, I argue that students should be able to understand and articulate the complexities of Latinx identities including their own; the Latinx authors I selected in the following chapters is a great place to start this process.

The first chapter of this thesis is a literary review that situates the aforementioned topics within ongoing, relevant academic conversations surrounding: Eurocentrism in literature and education, Freire's educational philosophy, multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and teaching poetry in the classroom. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this project, I use the first chapter to weave existing conversations together in order to guide readers to my specific proposal for teaching Latinx poetry in English classrooms across the US.

The poets I have selected to include in this thesis include: Yesika Salgado, Julian Randall, José Olivarez, Jasminne Mendez, Lupe Mendez, féi hernandez, and Yesenia Montilla. While they make up just a small sampling of the many contemporary Latinx poets that educators might present to their own students, I chose these specific poets for several reasons. Firstly, although many of them are rapidly gaining popularity, these poets are non-canonical in the genre of Latinx

literature. Works by Latinx authors such as Gary Soto or Elizabeth Acevedo can be found in select textbooks and even some ‘academic’ anthologies, but I wanted to center those who have not yet had extensive research or analysis done on their works. My hope is that selecting up-and-coming poets would further promote student engagement with these texts to produce original analysis of them, as opposed to encouraging them to rely on pre-established ‘meanings’ for the works of these authors.

These poets are also from across the United States and are located in places like Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and other large cities. Wherever possible, educators should consider having this added layer of identification between students and the poets that they introduce in class. This is one additional way that educators might to garner students’ excitement about the subject, poets, and the themes touched on in their work.

These poets are diverse in many ways; they differ in their definitions of Latinidad, in their nationalities, gender identities and sexuality, and in race. My hope in presenting them all is to represent Latinidad as it truly is: a complicated identity that is constantly in flux. Through this selection, I aim to challenge monolithic representations of Latinxs that have become so prominent today. Because each poem I use contains personal narratives from each poet about their experiences and identities to their audiences, I will not be making a distinction between the poetic voice and the author in any poem throughout this thesis.

Chapters 2-4 each center on one of three main subtopics: intergenerational definitions of Latinidades, gender and sexuality, and race (in that order). Each of those chapters begins with a brief introduction that situates the chapter within the larger goals of this thesis. They then proceed into more literary analysis and close readings of poems connecting to the theme of the chapter. The concluding section of each chapter contains recommendations for educators on how

to facilitate discussion on or plan class activities around the specific poems presented within a given chapter.

It is important to note that it is only for purposes of specificity that I have separated each chapter by subtopics of intergenerational definitions of Latinidades, gender and sexuality, and race; more often than not, these poets address all of these topics within a singular poem. Thus, educators facilitating class sessions surrounding these poems should be cognizant of these recurring themes and how they might all be worked into the discussion of an individual poem. Finally, I would like to point out that these poets, while exceptional, are by no means meant to give the reader a definitive representation of Latinidad, nor are they fixed indicators for which poems or poets should be used in every classroom in the US. Rather, I pose these poets, poems, and arguments to the reader as an invitation, a call for educators everywhere to consider the lives and identities of their own students before selecting course materials, in order to cater to their unique needs.

CHAPTER 1: Literature Review and Background

“Unless educational methods are situated in the students’ cultural experiences, students will continue to show difficulty in mastering content area that is not only alien to their reality, but is often antagonistic toward their culture and lived experiences.”

- (Lilia I. Bartolome 191)

1.1: Introduction

Before any discussion of these poets or their works, I will first discuss relevant scholarship on the subjects of Eurocentrism, Literature, Education, and the kind of educational model that I advocate for in this thesis. I will begin this discussion with a definition for Eurocentrism, showing how it has impacted the US Education System, and suggesting the inclusion of Latinx authors in English classrooms as a way to begin remedying some of the harms of Eurocentrism in literary education. Then, I will move to a discussion of Freire and outline how his ideas of the “Banking System of education” and “Critical Consciousness” are vital to understanding the problems with the current US Education System. This will proceed into a discussion of the role of educators in addressing issues of student passivity and critical thinking, and rely on Freire to help describe the ideal teacher-student relationship.

After this, I will then define the concept of Multicultural Education, showing how this tool can prove especially useful in helping educators learn ways that they might incorporate works that better reflect the diverse cultures of their students into the classroom. Alongside detailing the benefits of a Multicultural Education, I also argue that educators should do more than just include multicultural texts and prioritize BIPOC author representation in class to

promote student success². To do this, I rely heavily on the works of Laura Rendón to encourage educators to be critical of “deficit-based” evaluative frameworks and to attempt to include students’ various assets into the classroom. Then, I will relate these ideas about Multicultural Education and student assets to Culturally Responsive Teaching, defining the term as well as describing its relevance to Latinx poetry in US English classrooms. Finally, I will detail the benefits of using poetry in classroom spaces before introducing the chapters that follow.

1.2: Eurocentrism, Literature, and Education

The effects of Eurocentrism have been studied extensively in recent years, and many academics across disciplines have established that it has permeated the United States’ educational system (Burney, de los Ríos, Mendez, and Sleeter). As described by Burney, whose work focuses on applications of postcolonial theory to teaching praxis, Eurocentrism “represents an inherent belief in the pre-eminence of European culture, knowledge, and values. It is a way of seeing Western Civilization as the pinnacle of human progress...” (143). With Western Civilization positioned as the ‘pinnacle of progress,’ all other worldviews and perspectives become secondary, things that do not merit inclusion in standard education. Literature and English classrooms across the country are by no means immune to the centering of this worldview, which is demonstrated in the works that students are often required to read.

Much can be gained from widening the perspective of US students in their literature and English courses. Schipper, Dutch scholar of intercultural literary studies, recognizes the possibility of “[confronting] such a literary choice with a selection from what has been explicitly left out— for example, with works from counter-literature. This would sharpen our insight into

² For more research on how including BIPOC writers alone does not change Eurocentrism within classroom spaces, and education as the practice of freedom, see bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*.

the problem of assigning value” (86). Thus, by exposing students to works of ‘counter literature,’³ such as the works of contemporary Latinx poets, educators can lead students to question how value is assigned to literature under a Eurocentric lens. They could encourage students to question how this lens plays affects education, and what effect it has on their learning. Necessitating this level of questioning from students would, by extension, require them to be active participants in their own education, as Freire so heavily stresses in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

More recent scholarship in the fields of education and literature call into question our current, fixed approach for teaching the subjects; they propose that the standards by which English and literature are taught in the US should be more flexible to accommodate the shifting cultural, racial, and socioeconomic realities of the country. The roots of English Language Arts (ELA) classes in the United States can be traced back to The Committee of 10, a group of English Professors who met in 1892 to establish canonical literary works and the rules of “correct expression” in the language (de los Ríos). Thus, the ‘rules’ of the subject are inherently subjective; the subjects of English and Literature came first, and the standards used to study them in US schools came after. There is no logical reason as to why these standards should remain fixed and inflexible to the changing demographics of the country.

Some scholars, such as Schipper, emphasize the significance of what we see as literature, and who controls the creation of the canon in the field (86). Burney goes further; beyond just literature, she advocates for an expansion of our general worldview: “Indeed, it is the whole World's reality, culture, and aesthetics that can enrich curriculum, literature, and life, rather than

³ I use the term “counter literature” here to keep the language consistent with Schipper’s own words, but I do not mean to suggest that I agree with the use of the term. While it refers here to the work of those who fall outside of the typical Western literary canon, the term upholds notions of these works from more diverse authors as “other.” The description itself reinforces the idea that such texts are or should be marginal.

a narrow Eurocentric study of 'great works' that ignores Other great works" (164). The problem, then, is not a lack of great works that center other identities; the problem is the fact that these enriching texts are missing from our classrooms. In order to move past a eurocentric framework, we must problematize our ideas of what works are 'worth studying' in our educational system. In this thesis, I aim to do just that; in the coming chapters, I will introduce various works of 'counter literature' that will challenge our ideas about what merits academic analysis.

Eurocentrism does not just limit the scope of literature that is included in classrooms, it perpetuates further harm to marginalized students. Founding director of the Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Washington James A. Banks points out that "the Western-Centric and male-centric canon that dominates the school and university curriculum often marginalizes the experiences of people of color, Third World nations and cultures, and the perspectives and histories of women" (128). Through this eurocentric literary canon, people (especially students) of color, become further marginalized as they receive implicit and sometimes even explicit messages about whose stories are valuable. While Banks highlights the importance of Ethnic Studies as a meaningful attempt to 'reformulate the canon' that inflicts harm to marginalized students, I hope to emphasize the differences between pursuing an Ethnic Studies framework in non-required classes as opposed to incorporating these pedagogies into classes that are required of all students.

The harms of Eurocentrism and canons that perpetuate further marginalization of repressed groups in some US high schools, to date, has been addressed primarily through implementation of Ethnic Studies or Chicanx/Latinx Studies curricula and courses. These classes, generally, are beneficial ways of introducing students to alternative worldviews through education. Cati V. de los Ríos, Assistant Professor of Literacy, Reading, and Bi/Multilingual

Education at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Education and former Ethnic Studies High School teacher reflects on her time teaching Ethnic Studies to High Schoolers in "Curriculum of the Borderlands." She described her high school Chicana/Latinx Studies course as an "interdisciplinary course" that "investigated the diversity of Chicana/o and Latina/o culture as it is conditioned by the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, borders, regional variation, and power. Through a counter-hegemonic framework, the class provided a historical and political analysis of Chicana/o and Latina/o people's quest for self-determination" (63). At the core of this course, along with most Ethnic Studies courses, is the goal of posing challenges to the prevailing idea of Eurocentrism. Such classes often incorporate voices of academics of color, many of whom further criticize popular ways that subjects such as history and literature are taught. And while one should recognize the value and positive effects that Ethnic/Chicana/Latinx Studies can have on students, it is also worth questioning how we can implement these same anti-eurocentric, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist ideas elsewhere in our curricula. Thus, this thesis seeks to un-do some of the ways in which Latinx writers have been largely omitted from the literary canon in schools, effects that their inclusion might have on students, and explore methods for teachers to address this issue.

Ethnic Studies and Chicana/Latinx Studies classes are ultimately beneficial for students who take them (Donald). However, the lack of BIPOC and Latinx work in non-Ethnic Studies classes reinforce the idea that study/inclusion of minoritized groups can only be pursued in a separate academic space that is sometimes labeled inferior. Presented as optional, is not depicted as a vital element to students' educational experiences. While students might expect to see Latinx poetry in a Chicana/Latinx or Ethnic Studies course, seeing it in a required English class would demonstrate that study of non-canonical authors is/should not be limited only to

Chicanx/Latinx or Ethnic Studies courses. Additionally, Ethnic Studies classes are often offered as electives, and/or are limited in capacity, thus not giving all students an equal opportunity to access academics outside of the Eurocentric lens.

As a means to remedy the effects of Eurocentrism on ELA for all students, de los Ríos proposes incorporating an “Ethnic Studies approach” to the subject, striving towards a “restorative English education” (359). She describes this Ethnic Studies approach as being:

not simply about the inclusion of literature by writers of color or the celebration that people of color also have/had “heroes and ‘great’ civilizations” (Okiihiro, 2016, p. 150). Rather, these approaches foreground anti-colonial perspectives of US literature, history, and culture, highlighting processes of (anti)imperialism and (anti) racism in and through literacy instruction (363).

Mere representation of writers of color in the classroom is not enough to repair the harm that Eurocentrism has caused in our educational system and students. An Ethnic Studies approach to ELA courses encourages and requires students to question larger ideas of imperialism, racism, and Eurocentrism, all of which manifest into their educational journeys in various ways. Building off of Schippe’s idea of introducing ‘counter-literature’ to the classroom and increasing representation of marginalized groups, de los Ríos advocates for a more intentional introduction of works that center anti-colonial perspectives. By taking these anti-colonial, anti-Eurocentric ideas beyond Ethnic Studies courses and implementing them into traditional, required ELA courses, we can begin to repair the harm that Eurocentrism has inflicted upon students for centuries (de los Ríos, “Upending Colonial Practices,” 365).

1.3: Freire's Educational Philosophy

In the previous section, I have detailed the ways in which Eurocentrism has permeated the US educational system and perpetuated harm to the learning of marginalized students. Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and educational philosopher, also outlined common issues with

educational systems and advocated for restructuring that would benefit students in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing on his idea of a “Banking System of education” to identify the ways that US education systems fail students, and narrow in on his idea of “Critical Literacy” to propose a new educational approach aligned with his philosophy.

At the root of this paper lies my belief that education should be a contributing factor to equity for all students. It is a tool that should be used to endow students with critical thinking skills, to empower them to understand, question, and ultimately transform the world around them. However, as soon as they begin a formal schooling experience, students are rewarded for obedience and their ability to regurgitate information that their teachers, and by extension, the State, deems important. As a result, we limit students’ schooling experiences to what Freire calls a “Banking Concept of education” (72). In this Banking System, students are treated as mere “containers” or “receptacles,” present only to be filled with knowledge by an all-knowing, inflexible, and authoritative instructor (73). Receptacles are passive, unable to produce their own knowledge, and must rely on the knowledge of their teacher for learning. Not only do these dynamics reinforce the unjust systems that oppress marginalized students outside of the classroom setting, they necessitate student passivity (76). When students are taught not to think on their own, but rather to absorb and regurgitate information, their education merely serves to stifle positive change as students are unable to think critically about the world around them.

Cammarota and Romero write about Freire’s “critical literacy” approach, explaining that it “establishes a process for reading educational, social, and economic circumstances to identify the problems that lead to limited possibilities and potential while maintaining the status quo within the social and economic order” (5). This critical literacy is a stark contrast to the Banking

System of education, because it requires students to see themselves not as merely being *in* the world, but as being *with* the world (Freire 75). By extension, good educators realize that “The Banking approach to adult education... will never propose to students that they critically consider reality... From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization” (74, 75). Teachers play an important role in the development of students’ critical thinking skills, which are vital in and outside of the classroom. Realizing the importance of the teacher’s influence is key. Through being intentional in the works that teachers introduce to students and the kinds of conversations that they encourage surrounding this literature, teachers can help students develop their critical thinking skills. Educators should encourage students to question what they consider to be reality, and in order to do this, they must integrate opportunities for such challenges into the curriculum. More specifically, introducing Latinx poets and writers to students in predominantly Latinx classrooms could easily be used to guide students towards exploring intersectionality, identity, and Latinidad.⁴ By extension, these topics lead students to meaningfully question why works by Latinx poets are often neglected in academic and literary contexts, and what effect this could have on their learning. The positive effects of this intentional rejection of the Banking Concept of education are twofold: (1) students will feel represented in their education and likely feel more inclined to engage as a result, and (2) students will be able to further develop a critical consciousness that will serve them in and outside of classroom contexts.

⁴ It should also be noted that inclusion and discussion of this kind of content benefits all learners, not only BIPOC or Latinx students. For more on the power of literature to enhance the lives of all, see Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche’s “The Danger of a Single Story” and/or Larry Ferlazzo’s *Representation Matters in Classroom Libraries*.

1.4: The Role of an Educator

For many, it is a common belief that the job of educators, high school or otherwise, is not to be ‘social justice warriors,’ but rather to endow students with knowledge on their respective subject(s).⁵ Laura Rendón, an educational thought leader who focuses on student success, has explored the role of educators at length in her book *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation*. As Rendón puts it, for any teacher who works with underserved students and seeks to “liberate [their students] from past invalidating experiences... in order to transform them into powerful learners,” the theme of “social justice” is automatically present (92). The question for teachers, then, is not whether acknowledging Eurocentrism and identity would be too political for their classroom; omitting discussion of these issues, or neglecting them all together, is inherently political. In her Medium article “The Fault in Our Fiction,” Ameema Saeed describes the effects that this lack of representation in young adult literature had on her:

[I was] trying to immerse myself in new worlds, imagine myself in these stories — and that’s where the problem lies... It’s hard to imagine yourself in a world that’s not written for you... Growing up brown in a white-dominated culture has led to years of internalized racism, as well as what will probably be a lifetime of unlearning harmful attitudes and ideas about beauty and race.

As Ameema put it, there is a great deal of unlearning about harmful attitudes, ideas about beauty, and racism that she’s had to undertake as an adult as a result of the lack of representation in the literature she read. Thus, by nature of the lived experiences of underserved students and students of color, these themes of racism and Eurocentrism will manifest in the classroom setting in one way or another. Ignoring the harms that Eurocentrism has had on marginalized students will not

⁵ For reference, this perspective is exemplified in the writing of political commentator Evan Siegfried in his piece titled “Social Justice Warriors Harm Education of Our Kids with Latest ‘Victory.’” To read the full story, visit:

www.evansiegfried.com/2017/03/social-justice-warriors-harm-kids/.

undo its negative effects. While teachers' main goals should not be to simply take a stance on the problems revealed through classroom literature, they should provide tools that enable students to form their own opinions and thoughts on them.

Educators can and should, whenever possible, employ a "participatory epistemology" to teach literature, one that focuses "on the connection between the experiences of the students and the topics they [study] in class" (Rendón 95). Therefore, using Latinx poetry for Latinx students in the classroom could be a useful means to free students from past invalidating experiences. Moreover, it has the strong potential to "[connect] students to the learning experience, eliciting greater awareness about the subject matter and about themselves as learners" (96). This greater engagement will lead to the stronger development of the critical literacy that Freire advocated for, which students need to help them maneuver and impact the world.

It is also the role of a good English educator to, wherever possible, try to predict how their students will respond to the material covered in class. Professors Christine Sleeter and Peter McLaren address this subject in their book titled *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*. Sleeter is well-known for her work on Multicultural Education and education activism, and McLaren is a Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies at Chapman University. On the role of critical educators, they write: "[critical educators will] analyze the mediating role played by race in the social construction of gender, sex and class identities.... [and] be attentive to how popular culture shapes the categories of racial meaning that students construct when interpreting their experiences, therefore prefiguring how they produce and respond to classroom knowledge" (106). More than just changing the curriculum, they suggest that educators themselves should be more proactive in anticipating student responses to class materials/activities and cognizant of their student's various backgrounds. Seeing as much of

contemporary, non-canonical Latinx poetry includes rich references to popular culture and identities, inclusion of and engagement with these kinds of works into the classroom would be an excellent way for critical educators to engage students, using works that speak to them in a way that encourages a broader discourse about racial formation.

Finally and most importantly, the role of an educator is not one-dimensional or one-sided; teachers should strive to learn from their students, combating the power dynamics that Freire criticized heavily in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire states that “education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (72). When educators make it clear that they are also learning from their students, it could likely create more student inclination to participate and share their ideas with the collective. And while the educator may have more technical knowledge in their subject of expertise, they should also be cognizant and accepting of the various kinds of knowledge that students bring to the classroom, which will be explained further in the following section.

1.5: Multicultural Education

This section will introduce the concept of Multicultural Education to show how inclusion of Latinx poetry in curricula can be used to help create supportive classroom environments. However, it will also advocate for more than just inclusion of diverse authors; it will highlight the ways in which ‘deficit-based frameworks’ used to evaluate students need to be rethought in an effort to incorporate students’ diverse assets to the classroom. Through normative methods of instruction in classrooms, including literary ones, students are “rarely encouraged to examine the assumptions, values, and nature of the knowledge they are required to memorize or to examine the ways in which knowledge is constructed” (Banks 125). Undoing this standard is at the heart

of a Multicultural Education, thus enabling students to develop the critical consciousness that Freire advocates for.

Christine Sleeter, renowned scholar on Multicultural Education, provides her insights on the history and definition of the concept along with McLaren in their *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*. They write:

Multicultural education initially referred to demands for school reform articulated first by African Americans... we do not consider either critical pedagogy or multicultural education to consist simply of a set of methodological formulations. Rather, both refer to a particular ethicopolitical attitude or ideological stance that one constructs in order to confront and engage the world critically and challenge power relations (Sleeter, McLaren 7).

At the heart of this concept of a multicultural education, lies the reformation of our schools, educational system, and perspective of the world. Literature and English teachers can implement these strategies by including and encouraging critical discussion surrounding works from authors who are generally omitted from the canon in the field. In addition to “the classics,” teachers can also look into how to make it a habit of including diverse authors and works into their syllabi. Looking beyond mere inclusion or representation, teachers should be intentional in who they select and the strategies by which they actively teach this work (eg. asset-based, student-centered, collaborative, anti-racist, etc.). For teachers looking to increase Latinx literary representation in their class, this might look like deliberately including Black, Indigenous, Queer, Trans, and radical authors to show the genuine range of Latinidad, as well as make important distinctions between identity-based terms like race, ethnicity, nationality, etc. They should look beyond reductive methods of instruction, focusing not just on literary devices used, but engaging in conversations like these along with the complex identities of the author and work at hand. In this way, educators can use Multicultural Education and inclusion of diverse authors as *one*

possible tool, to ‘confront and engage the world critically and challenge power relations,’ as Sleeter writes.

Different from Ethnic Studies, Multicultural Education “does not offer an in-depth study of a racial or cultural group” and “goes beyond a content base” (Foerster 124). According to Foerster, Associate Professor and Chair of Elementary Education at Texas Tech University, Multicultural Education is “an orientation which has its inception in the teacher's mind and permeates the entire curriculum. The implementation is accomplished by a sensitive and perceptive teacher who is alert to possibilities for "multiculturalizing" the existing curriculum on a day-to-day basis” (124). The differences between Ethnic Studies are made clear here: while Ethnic Studies is a type of class where one might expect to learn more in depth about a particular group, a Multicultural Education has the goal of introducing students to a wide variety of literatures in the classroom.

However, even this arguably progressive concept of Multicultural Education has its limits; it does not critically question the traditional ways in which student success is evaluated. Sleeter and McLaren write out a lengthy list of barriers that often lead to what they have called the “underachievement” of marginalized students in schools.⁶ Some of the barriers they list include: “cultural conflicts between the school and home”, “language differences”, “insufficient role models for students of color,” and “curriculum that is not connected to the student's lives nor reflective of their cultural values, beliefs, and practices” (321). While there were several other barriers listed that entail much larger fixes, the ones selected here are all treatable, to an extent, by the inclusion *and meaningful discussion* of Latinx poetry in the classroom. Many Latinx poets

⁶ Referring to the “underachievement” of marginalized students is problematic for several reasons, the largest of which being that it ignores the institutional factors that often play into evaluating and teaching these students. Since this work by Sleeter and McLaren was published in 1995, education theory has rightfully been slowly moving away from these kinds of terms.

often talk about navigating different cultural contexts, using various languages to communicate their ideas. Thus, presenting these poets to students, especially if they are from the same city, can not only bring up these important conversations, but they can introduce Latinx students to new role models with similar backgrounds as their own.

As previously mentioned, mere inclusion of Latinx poets/authors into the standard US English classroom is not enough; thus, while the concept of Multicultural Education is useful to a certain extent, I urge educators to push for more meaningful ways of seeing and assessing student learning. More is called for to truly address inequitable learning environments and consequent inequitable outcomes. Simply including Latinx voices into the curriculum without changes to actual teaching and grading practices do not produce significant strides towards social justice aims or promote learning across different backgrounds. Thus, educators should also consider how a Multicultural Education framework may still rely on “deficit-based” frameworks and neglect the many assets that marginalized, specifically Latinx students, bring to class settings.

In *Ventajas/Assets y Conocimientos/Knowledge: Leveraging Latin@ strengths to foster student success*, Rendón heavily criticizes these traditional “deficit-based” frameworks in classrooms when it comes to Latinx students, highlighting how Latinx students actually possess “experiential ways of knowing that [they] employ... to excel in education” (4). Although focusing on college-level Latinx students, Rendón highlights the assets that many Latinx students possess that are not accounted for in traditional discourses, including: Linguistic, Familial, Social, Resistant, Perseverance, and Ethnic Consciousness (5). Building from Tara Yosso’s Asset-Based Theoretical Framework of Community Cultural Wealth, Rendón names and details each of these assets that Latinx students may bring to the table. According to her, “these

forms of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts are utilized by Communities of Color to survive and to combat oppressive circumstances” (17). While these kinds of assets help students navigate their worlds, they are not welcomed in most traditional classroom settings. The central idea here is that in order for educators to highlight these typically ignored assets, they must value the lived experiences of their students. But what does this look like in high school literature classrooms?

In line with these ideas, Rendón stresses the importance of a classroom curriculum that “allows [students] to understand the influences of culture on them and the contributions of members of their cultural/racial/ethnic group to society” (Rendón and Hope 161). Seeing members of their own diverse cultural/racial/ethnic groups contribute to the literary world through poetry is just one way that educators can inspire further student involvement in the classroom; having students trained to be able to understand the ways they are influenced by these cultures and identities is another. The benefits that this kind of approach beyond Multicultural Education can have are layered: students may feel represented, be more likely to engage (thus more successful in the classroom), be introduced to role models with similar backgrounds as theirs, possibly engage in conversations about identity and power, and might even be able to effectively question and think critically about the world around them as a result.

A first requirement in order for teachers to truly value the lived experiences of their students would be to listen to students when they share pieces of themselves and their stories with the class or the teacher. This would encourage students to make connections between themselves and the works they’re reading by allowing and *creating opportunities* for these connections to be made. Activities that align with this goal include but are not limited to: written reflection on poems/themes before and/or after reading them as a class, quick writing exercises/responses to poems, creative prompts inspired by the subjects or literary devices used

in specific poems, and more! Asset-based pedagogical practices in English classes would require dedicated teachers to intentionally carve out opportunities for students to have their many assets welcomed and incorporated into the classroom. One of the most impactful ways educators can do this is for Latinx students is through the inclusion of *and meaningful reflection on* Latinx voices in poetry in the classroom.

1.6: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

In the previous section, I discuss the benefits of Multicultural Education and how it can be used as a tool for inclusion of Latinx authors into English classrooms. I also detail the shortcomings of it, seeing as it relies on deficit-based frameworks and does not advocate for students to bring in their full range of assets to educational settings, as Rendón emphasizes. Multicultural Education is a first step to having students engage with a wider range of literatures, but works by others such as Geneva Gay and Jason Irizzary have moved the conversation more towards advocating for Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Whereas Multicultural Education suggests an approach that is advocating for forming curricula differently, CRT centers educators in a way that requires intentionality, action, and accountability. This section will outline the benefits of CRT for students, and outline recommendations for and describe some characteristics of culturally responsive educators.

Geneva Gay, Professor of Education and multicultural education at the University of Washington-Seattle, describes culturally responsive pedagogy as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming” (29). CRT goes beyond mere multicultural learning strategies to meet students where they are— there is a different, deeper

kind of engagement with diverse student and author voices, and materials. Gay also explains that [CRT] has the following characteristics:

It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum; It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities; It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles; It teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages; It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (29).

Educators who employ CRT in their classes seek ways to relate student experiences with academic topics, and try multiple methods of teaching to engage as many students as possible. This way, they fold in, so to speak, the methods of Multicultural Education with other teaching strategies to welcome students whole selves into the classroom. When CRT is used, students have more of an opportunity to become active participants in their education because their cultural heritages are positioned as worthy content to be taught in the classroom. Evidently, then, CRT works past Multicultural Education to seek ways to not just validate students' identities through literature, but to welcome their knowledge gained from lived experiences.

Culturally responsive teachers should, to the extent possible, heed Irizzary's advice to "[allow] for the culture of the classroom to be socially constructed and negotiated by all of the participants." Irizzary, Professor of multicultural education, culturally responsive curriculum development, participatory action research, and urban education at the University of Connecticut, suggests here the perfect combination of Multicultural Education, Freire's educational philosophy, and Rendón's ideas of asset-based frameworks. No classroom is the same, to say the least. Hence, there is no single 'correct' way to approach CRT; it requires an understanding of one's own context, and the various backgrounds that students are from. By taking these things

into consideration, and allowing and encouraging students to be actively involved in the creation of the classroom environment, educators can effectively use CRT in their classrooms.

Muñiz, research fellow and former policy analyst with the Education Policy program at New America, makes the connection between the “first Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework” in New York state with culturally responsive educators who aim to “connect home and school cultures, engage students in rigorous learning, and empower students as agents of social change.” These more broadly are the goals of culturally responsive educators. She also outlines the benefits of CRT for students, citing various studies that suggest that “culturally responsive teaching practices promote the social, emotional, and academic development of all students by:

1. Facilitating brain processing
2. Motivating and engaging students
3. Cultivating critical thinking and problem-solving skills
4. Strengthening students’ racial and ethnic identities
5. Promoting a sense of safety and belonging (Muñiz, New America).

Evidently, implementing CRT practices in the classroom can have lasting benefits for students, especially those from minoritized backgrounds. It creates safe environments for students to learn, and can by extension make it easier for them to practice help-seeking behaviors that can follow them to adulthood. Moreover, CRT can help strengthen the same critical thinking skills, or the critical consciousness that Freire outlines.

There is still the question, though, of how teachers can best address the needs of their students in a way that they can relate to and that they are engaged by. The simple answer? Through stories! Levin gives the example of how their students were “excited and angry when they read interviews with former slaves, but they couldn’t read Zinn’s chapter on slavery” (146). There seems to be an all-too-common disconnect between the theories we ask students to read, understand, and discuss, and their lived experiences outside of school, not contained to Levin’s

classroom. It was only after experiences like these that Levin learned that “kids need primary sources that are vivid and authentic” in order to become truly engaged with the significance of the texts and ideas they present (146). Given the scope of this thesis project, I will focus on the experience of Latinx students in high school grades and present Latinx poetry as a tool that teachers can use to be able to foster these levels of genuine engagement with the text through ‘vivid and authentic’ sources. The use of this kind of literature to supplement learning of both the technical and sociopolitical contents of these works, as well as to facilitate the development of student critical thinking skills, is perhaps one of the most useful resources that culturally responsive teachers have at their disposal.

1.7: Why Latinx Poetry?

In this chapter so far, I have traced the progression of ideas regarding how to better cater our education system to minority and marginalized students. Focusing specifically on Latinx students, I intend to demonstrate that this new approach focused on achieving these ends through poetry is the ideal. My proposed approach integrates the benefits of previous frameworks such as Freire’s educational philosophies, Multicultural Education, CRT, and more, and brings with it additional gains for students. Though stories are an easy way to engage students productive in class discussions rooted in lived experiences, I will be focusing solely on poetry for this thesis for several reasons. While other forms of storytelling, such as memoirs or novels could be used, poetry’s generally shorter length would enable the inclusion of more stories and the unpacking of more language to present students with a wider array of Latinx voices from different backgrounds. Teachers could also anticipate how their students might react as the audience of these works, consider the spaces their students traverse daily and who else is walking these spaces with them and relating similar experiences as poets! With poems, there is generally more

room for discussion regarding larger questions of authorial intent and/or the central message of the poem, as well as minute details such as literary devices used and their effect on a poem. For class activities where students are asked to take inspiration from a specific work and reflect through writing, poems would be simpler and require less time for students to write after/about.

Regardless of which literature is used in the classroom, Latinx or not, identity and cultural politics are central to poetry (Jocson 2011, Arenas 2018). Past inclusion of Latinx poets and literature in textbooks and classrooms have vastly overlooked these identity-related and cultural elements in favor of using them solely to speak on matter-or-fact, technical aspects of poetry (Rojas 2010). Such (re)presentations of Latinx poetry, without acknowledging their underlying themes, become reductive in their approach to teaching students holistically about poetry's importance. In order to teach Latinx poetry effectively while gauging student interest in the topic, good educators must do both: teach students key terms and ideas in poetry/literature, while being intentional about not silencing the voices of poets and students by neglecting to have meaningful conversations surrounding the context and themes that arise.

Generally when teaching poetry, it is ideal and even "critical" for teachers to select poems that students can understand and connect with (Ramirez). The inclusion of multicultural poetry naturally paves the way for students to make connections between their own lived experiences and what they are reading. Teachers should also select poets that enable them to keep the poetry as geographically close to the students as possible. Introducing ideas of space and place, this dimension could add yet another layer of identity affirmation, relatability, and readability for Latinx students. Ramirez, Professor at Arizona State University who researches multilingual education, writes from their experiences observing classrooms, "it was essential for youth to listen to, dialogue, and learn from community members that share common writing

interests and a passion for creative writing... The poets demonstrated to youth that poetry is beautiful and can inspire hope and imagination” (Ramirez, *Multicultural Perspectives*). More than adding this relatability factor or allowing students to see themselves represented in the works they read, they will be able to see, question, and learn from real world examples of poets from their own communities. It may inspire some to pursue similar creative avenues, but it will certainly invigorate a great majority of students to enjoy their learning and remain active participants in it.

By now I have established that teachers play a key role in fostering student engagement. I propose a new and engaging way of folding these Latinx voices into the classroom—the use of non-canonical poets. English/Literature teachers are able to select many of the poems that will be studied in class, and therefore (according to Somers, author of *Teaching Poetry in High School*), they should “all be talent scouts for poetry” who “*discover* and *develop*, except here the discoveries are raw and unknown poems, poems with potential, gems; and the development is the act of creating ways to make them work in the classroom” (Somers 20). Aligning with this methodology and approach, this thesis project will purposely explore the work of non-canonical Latinx poets, some of which may be more well-known than others, but who all get significantly less recognition than ‘big name’ contemporary Latinx poets (ex/ Elizabeth Acevedo, Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, and more). Keeping the literature in flux, relevant to the lives of the students who read it, will not only foster student engagement with the texts, but will also demonstrate to students the commitment that their teachers have to making class exciting for them.

In his article for the Poetry Foundation, Lupe Mendes, an educator and one of the poets I will be highlighting in the next chapter, reflects on how teachers can incorporate Latinx poetry in

particular to the classroom. Rather than dedicating a specific unit to “cover Latinx People” in a class, Mendez advocates for teachers to “[thread] Latinx literature through a yearlong curriculum.” He explores the teaching of Latinx poetry in traditional, required settings (such as standard English or Literature classes), as opposed to restricting Latinx literature to elective courses that not all students can take. He also argues that for educators who teach poetry, it is best practice to “continue to be students ourselves... [and] continue to explore Latinx counter narratives,” similar to Somers’ idea of English teachers as ‘talent scouts’ for poetry. In line with Freire’s call to end the teacher-student contradiction by saying that teachers need to commit to being students as well, Mendez states that the process of seeking the perfect poems for a given class is an ongoing one. The set of Latinx poems used is never going to be exactly the same for every class or year; it should rely on the way classrooms, students, poetry, and the teacher themselves change.

1.8: A New Model for Teaching Latinx Poetry

Thus far, I have established the harmful effects of Eurocentrism on the US education system and showed how inclusion of Latinx poetry to the standard English curriculum can potentially mitigate some of those harms. I use the educational philosophy of Freire to advocate against the banking system of education that is prevalent today and relying on his idea of critical literacy by posing it as one of the central goals of education. I outline the role of an effective educator as it relates to literature, and show how Multicultural Education and Culturally Responsive Teaching can be used as tools by educators to not only include diverse voices into their classrooms, but to allow students to bring their whole selves into class discussions and learning. I advocate for the use of asset-based frameworks for evaluating students, using Rendón

and Yosso as references. Lastly, I propose a new way of implementing CRT into classrooms through the use of poetry by non-canonical Latinx poets.

Through use of Latinx poetry, educators can do more than teach students the technical devices used in each work; they can help students explore their own identities, empower students to question the world around them, and ultimately inspire students to create change. The following chapters will introduce works from various Latinx poets, highlighting the ways in which these poems might be used in high school English/Literature classrooms in order to facilitate inclusive discussions around Latinx identities. Each chapter will be centered around one facet of identity in relation to Latinidad, use various poems to develop that subtopic/category, and conclude by putting my own poetic analyses in context with recommendations for educators on how to teach the material and facilitate discussion around it.

Chapter 2 will focus on the differences between inter-generational definitions of Latinidad, exploring how the roles of language, co-optation of indigeneity, nationality, and intersectionality, have changed in our definition of Latinidad over time.⁷ Chapter 3 will delve into gender roles/identity and sexuality within Latinidad, further examining the ‘traditional’ role of women, gender nonconformity and nonbinary identity, and queerness. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to exploring race within Latinidad, centering the Black Latinx experience, addressing anti-Blackness, and highlighting the ways in which Latinidad often co-opts popular Black culture. The concluding chapter will resurface the main ideas that I hope to present in this thesis, as well as provide recommendations for educators and future research.

⁷ Throughout this thesis, I will be using the analytical framework of intersectionality proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who originally coined the term to describe how “traditional feminist ideas and antiracist policies exclude Black women because they face overlapping discrimination unique to them” (Perlman). For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term to refer to an interconnected approach to looking at Latinidad in a way that accounts for the ways that gender, race, class, and other identities intersect.

I now call back to the words of Bartolome, Professor of Applied Linguistics and expert in immigrant/minority student experiences in school and critical pedagogy, that were used to open this chapter. Through this thesis, I aim to encourage educators to deliberately seek out and implement the kinds of educational methods that are “situated in the students’ cultural experiences” so as to prevent the harmful effects of relying on content that is “alien to [students’] reality” and “antagonistic toward their culture and lived experiences” (Bartolome 191). More than simply encouraging or justifying these critical approaches, though, I aim to *show* how educators can implement them, beginning in Chapter 2 with poems that show how the definition of Latinidad has shifted over time.

CHAPTER 2: Inter-Generational Definitions of Latinidades

2.1: Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the importance of developing students' critical consciousness through education and explored some ways in which the incorporation of Latinx identities and poetry into class materials can contribute to that development. Past literature on the topic has tended to lean more towards either the literary field through analysis of written works, or to the education field with respect to culturally responsive pedagogy. However, in this thesis, I aim to not just tell educators what they should strive for or why, but to show *how* these things can be done in a classroom setting. Thus, the chapters that follow will further explore the literature itself, providing both analysis of various works by contemporary Latinx poets and recommendations for educators on how to center class activities/discussion using these poems. Given my focus on Latinx students in this thesis, it is worth further exploring how definitions and perceptions of Latinx identities in the United States have shifted over time within Latinx communities.

This chapter will explore the aforementioned theme of inter-generational definitions of Latinidad, centering the conversation around how the theme is treated in the literary works of contemporary Latinx poets. The poems I will introduce in this chapter are: "Tesoro" by Yesika Salgado, "Translation" by Julian Randall, "Mexican American Disambiguation" by José Olivarez, "Frijochuelas" by Jasminne Mendez, and "Abijoles" by Lupe Mendez.⁸ The chapter will also conclude with some remarks on how analysis of these poems can be related back to the

⁸ Each of these poems, including those that are used in following chapters, tend to merge the poet's voice with the narrator's. Whether this is intentional on the poets' behalf or not, I chose to prioritize poems rooted in the lived experiences of their authors; I believe that this proximity to real, lived experiences make it easier for students of any age group to relate to them on a more personal level, and by extension, become more engaged with class materials.

classroom, and provide tips for teachers who hope to incorporate these poems into their learning spaces.

The term inter-generational definitions of Latinidad, for the purposes of this paper, is meant to capture the shifting ways in which Latinx identities have been perceived, understood, and postmarked; this chapter aims to explore how these perceptions tend to differ between generations in the US within Latinx communities. In the first section of this chapter, I will focus on language as a marker of Latinidad, paying close attention to the use of the Spanish language in the poems in the section and how this has changed with newer generations in the US. I will use the works of poets Yesika Salgado and Julian Randall to illustrate these ideas in an effort to dispel notions of Spanish as being central to all Latinx identities. The second section will use the works of José Olivarez to address how newer generations tend to emphasize the differences between key terms such as ethnicity, race, hispanic, Latinx, and more. The final section will focus on previous generations' definitions of Latinidad, using the work of Lupe Mendez to show the nationalistic, mexican-centered vision of Latinidad to compare it to that of newer generations, who take on more of an intersectional lens. By ordering these sections in this way, I attempt to disrupt chronological approaches and refrain from centering discussions of Mexican-centric definitions of Latinidad in my analysis. Thus, I begin with a topic that is complicated by and that widely applies to many younger Latinx communities: the use of the Spanish language.

2.2: Latinx Linguaging

In this section, I will argue that for younger Latinx voices, Spanish-language skills are becoming less necessary than for their predecessors⁹. In order to begin further investigation of

⁹ It should also be noted that Spanish is not the primary language spoken in all Latin American countries, and that Spanish is spoken in other countries outside of Latin America. In fact, as this

the role of the Spanish language for second and third-generation Latinx-identifying poets, I will provide a textual analysis of “Tesoro,” a poem written by Los Angeles-based Salvadoran-American poet Yesika Salgado. In it, she intentionally blends English and Spanish to make a larger point about how she identifies. On page 59 of her poetry collection *Tesoro*, she writes:

me pregunta mi amigo
were you born in El Salvador?
 y le digo que no
 he says, *then you are American*
 y le digo que no
 I write this half in Spanish
 mitad en Inglés
 to show him I’m not really
 una americana
 or completely anything at all

These lines alternate between Spanish and English in a way that subverts reader expectations. For instance, instead of saying ‘escribo esto mitad en español / and half in English,’ Salgado gives readers more surprising lines. The juxtaposition between languages here give the poem a nearly joking tone as Salgado intentionally gives readers the opposite of what they expect. In a similar way, she realizes that the way she identifies might not be what others expect. She speaks Spanish, but this is not what makes her Latinx; she was not born in El Salvador, but this does not make her “American” either. Interestingly, this pattern of one line in Spanish and one in English is a constant throughout the entire poem. This form of the poem reinforces the closing idea of Salgado not seeing herself as being ‘completely anything at all.’ Because of her refusal to accept one identity (American) over the other (Salvadoran), she feels that she cannot be both. Her use of

becomes more well-known amongst Latinx youths, I feel that it serves as one of the reasons for which Latinxs in the United States view Spanish fluency less and less as an indicator of Latinidad.

Spanish does not make her any more Latinx, just as her use of English does not make her “una americana,” either.

In that final stanza, we also see the ideas that others may impose of what it means to be “American” or “Latinx.” Firstly, there is the idea that the two identities are mutually exclusive; this is best demonstrated by her friend’s words, which are signified by italics in the text. He asks her if she was born in El Salvador, and when she responds that she was not, the only logical assumption for him to follow is that she is “American” even if she says she is not. Secondly, ideas of nationality and citizenship come into play when she explains that she wants to show her friend that she is “not really una americana.” Through this, Salgado distances herself from the United States and shows her preference for her Salvadoran culture. She counters her friend’s stringent idea of nationality and identity in the end rejecting any formal labels, saying that she is not “completely anything at all”. Thirdly, there is the underlying idea that Salgado’s use of Spanish is, to her, a way to distance herself from an “American” label. Through this, Salgado implicitly suggests that for her, Spanish is a part of her Latinx and Salvadoran identity. As a second-generation American, Salgado embodies the popular sentiments of U.S Latinx youths who feel that Spanish contributes to and is a part of their Latinx identities (Karen, et al.). Many of said youths may be fluent, some are not, and some fall anywhere in between, but the central idea remains: for newer Latinx generations in the United States, knowledge of Spanish can be a marker of Latinidad.

However, this is by no means the case for all Latinxs. Karen et al. make it this clear in “Negotiating Spanish: Linguistic Boundaries and Transculturations,” explaining that “Spanish has been (erroneously) assumed to be one of the unifying identity markers of Latinidad” and that “the linguistic landscape of US Latina/os is much more complicated” (103). Self-identified

queer, Black, Chicagoan poet Julian Randall exemplifies the other side of this ‘linguistic landscape’ that Karen et al. mention in his poem “Translation.” In the poem, which can be found in *The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 4: LatiNext*, he explores the role that Spanish plays in his own Latinx identity and compares it with that of first and second-generation Americans such as his grandmother and mother. The second stanza of the poem begins: “I speak no Spanish / My mother is the translator / of the dying / My family is always the dying” (137). Randall does not leave room for nuance: he does not speak Spanish. The idea of ‘dying’ serves as a literal image, but also as a metaphor for language, as it is developed throughout the poem. Importantly, Randall states how he relies on his mother to serve as a translator, a mediator between him and his family through language. The fifth stanza emphasizes the generational difference between Randall and his mother:

An inventory of my tongue
yields nothing
that looks like my mother
the resemblance stops at the mouth

We see here a generational disconnect between Randall and his mother due to the fact that Randall does not have Spanish fluency and his mother does. While Randall implies a sense of disappointment in himself for not being able to speak Spanish, fluency in the language is clearly not a requirement to claim a Latinx identity for Randall and many Latinx youths like him.

Randall takes these ideas to the next level in the third stanza, where he writes: “My abuelita was a ricocheting ghost/ She died once and I forgot / an entire language” (137). Randall extends these ideas to not just one, but to two generations before him. In line with the image of ‘dying,’ he describes his grandmother as a ‘ricocheting ghost’ to provide an image of her movement, in a bouncing back and forth motion. In light of the strong ideas of language present in the poem, this image seems to suggest that there was a kind of fight between his

grandmother to keep the Spanish language alive within her family; that expectation, that tradition, died with her.

In the sixth and final stanza, Randall uses this language barrier to symbolize a metaphorical barrier between himself and his grandmother. The stanza reads: “She is fluent in a language / I am only ever ugly in / She falls asleep in front of the TV / her show muted / I wonder if in her dreams / I can speak” (137). Here, we see the poet wondering how this language disconnect has affected not only traditions, but his elders’ views of him. He wonders if in his grandmother’s dreams, he is able to communicate with her in the language that she prefers. Through this experience, Randall exemplifies how knowledge of Spanish does not have to be a marker of Latinidad for all Latinxs.

Through these two poems alone, readers can uncover much about the implications that language carry for Latinx youth. Salgado is able to slip seamlessly between both English and Spanish. She merges the two to fit a bilingual, bicultural Latinx identity that is her own. She navigates these identities and languages in her daily lived experiences, and makes a conscious effort not to choose between them. Randall, on the other hand, explores how his unfamiliarity with Spanish affects his ties to culture and family as a Latinx person. In a very literal sense, it limits the way in which he can communicate with his elders, thus giving readers a sense that Randall feels dejected, as though he has inevitably lost part of his Latinx traditions due to this gap. In spite of this being the case, Randall does not negate his Latinx identity, which suggests that for him (as is the case for many others), Spanish is not a requisite to claiming the identity.

2.3: Latinx Terminology

This section will concentrate on how contemporary Latinx poets’ works can be used to distinguish between identity-related terms and complicate popular monolithic narratives

surrounding Latinidad. There has been controversy when it comes to the collective titles applied to Latinx people; likewise, poets have grappled with these terms in their own ways.¹⁰ Younger generations of Latinxs are now beginning to emphasize the important and layered differences in terms of class, race, gender, and more that exist amongst Latinx-identifying individuals.

The poem I will look at in this section is “Mexican American Disambiguation” by José Olivarez from his poetry collection titled *Citizen Illegal*. It is very important to note that this poem, according to Olivarez, was heavily inspired by Idris Goodwin’s “A Preface,” which explores the definition of ‘Black’ in all of its complexities.¹¹ In the interview with Habitat Magazine, he said that this poem was “one of the first times that I saw an artist treat race and class with complexity and humor,” which evidently influenced the tone and complexity of his own poem (EnYart). He begins the poem with the following lines:

my parents are Mexican who are not
to be confused with Mexicans still living
in Mexico. Those Mexicans call themselves mexicanos. white folks at parties call them
pobrecitos. American colleges call them international students and diverse.

These three sentences, in sum, explore the positionality of people like Olivarez’s parents, who immigrated from Mexico to the United States. They are Mexicans, but no longer considered Mexicanos. While they might be in a more privileged position than the Mexicans still living in Mexico that Olivarez refers to, within the U.S., they are regarded as ‘pobrecitos’ by white people, suggesting that they are to be pitied for their identities and the implications that come along with them. There’s an evident satirical tone that emerges at the onset of the poem, as Olivarez expands on the very stark differences between groups of people that might otherwise be

¹⁰ For more on the subject of collective terms applied to the Latinx community, see Yara Simón’s “Latino, Hispanic, Latinx, Chicano: The History Behind the Terms.”

¹¹ Goodwin’s performance of the poem is accessible at: “Idris Goodwin Performs A Preface.” Available Light, 8 Aug. 2013, avltheatre.com/idris-goodwin-performs-a-preface/.

lumped together in mainstream US discourse. It ridicules the way Mexicans are often lumped together through use of the same terms in order to provoke readers to question what they think they know about being Mexican in the US. This tone is not only intriguing, but it both critiques the way these differences have been ignored and suggests that the reader should be familiar with these obvious differences so as to find the humor in the way they are described here. On a larger scale, this poem demonstrates how difficult it is to categorize Latinx people through the use of titles related to nation of origin; said titles are not expansive enough to encompass various meanings embedded within Latinx identities.

Later in his interview with *Habitat Magazine*, Olivarez talked about the struggle of identity and how it has impacted his work:

I tried to avoid having to write poems in which I was a character with the power to oppress... Now I'm trying to face myself and all the ways in which my position changes. That means writing poems that name my cis manhood, my straightness, my light-skinnedness and so forth. It's been freeing to not have to run from any of my identities but to dive into them instead and to really take ownership of the fact that I am capable of hurting people.

Through this poem and his writing in general, Olivarez has named his identity and positionality within Latinidad as an area of great concern to him. He has described it as something that is not static, as can be seen in the previous paragraph. Much of this positionality within identities changes depending on gender, sexuality, class status, and even physical location in the world; context is truly key. Thus, while there may be an automatic sense of marginalization that comes from simply being a Latinx person in the U.S., he complicates this monolithic narrative by exploring his own privilege in terms of race, sexuality, gender, and documentation status.¹² The layered approach that he takes can be immensely useful for using poetry to teach students about

¹² This kind of internal reflection, aside from being a characteristic of Olivarez's work, can also be seen as the result of much larger phenomena. Growing Latinx heterogeneity, various social movements, and shifts in public awareness have all helped pave the way for authors like Olivarez to incorporate these kinds of reflections into their works.

these simultaneities, as he suggests that his own writing can and should be used to explore different positionalities.

Olivarez goes on to discuss documentation status, as well as how his experience in the U.S. differs from that of his parents. Lines 30-33 read: “my parents were / undocumented when they came to this country / & by undocumented, i mean sin papeles, & / by sin papeles, i mean royally fucked” (41). Here, we again see the humorous delivery of a very complex and disheartening lived experience. Olivarez explores how this added layer of documentation status might complicate Latinx identities for some, like his parents. While immigration is not just a Latinx issue, he acknowledges that status may bring additional obstacles for Latinx immigrants. In this sense, it can be yet another form of identity that one could add to the list of positionalities that one occupies within Latinidad.

He later mentions that “colleges are not / looking for undocumented diversity”, a statement that calls back to the earlier line of the poem that states “American colleges call [Mexican students] international students and diverse.” Olivarez humorously points out that “American,” or colleges in the US, are looking for ‘diverse’ students, but do not necessarily look to fully support undocumented students who qualify as ‘diverse’. Thus, he implies that they might look for students like himself, who are descendants of Mexican immigrants, hence classifying him as ‘diverse’ enough to improve their diversity stats, but not so diverse that the college will actually go out of their way to fully support the needs of these students. Thus, Olivarez highlights the differences between his lived experiences as a Latinx person in comparison to his parents. Through detailing these differences, he also shows that there are strong generational differences when it comes to perceptions of Latinidad. While older

generations may feel more closely attached to a collective term that tends to ignore differences, younger generations embrace a more intersectional vision of Latinidad.

While gender, sexuality, and race will be further discussed in future chapters, it is important to note how poems by contemporary Latinx authors such as Olivarez show the expansion of vocabulary that Latinx communities now have at their disposal to further complicate hegemonic narratives of Latinidad in the United States. While these intersecting identities have existed long before the creation of the Latinx label, these poems show how a prioritization in emphasizing different lived experiences within Latinx communities.

2.4: The Shifting Lens of Nationalism vs. Intersectionality

The final section of this chapter will detail how past representations of Latinidad, especially in popular media, have been depicted through a nationalist, often Mexican-centric¹³ perspective, and how many now emphasize the importance of an intersectional lens when looking at Latinx identities. For the duration of this section, I will focus on the poetic interaction between Jasminne Mendez in her poem “Frijochuelas,” and Lupe Mendez’s response poem to the piece, titled “Abijoles.” Framing the two poems as representative of each poet’s respective generation’s outlook on Latinidad, I aim to show: both that harmful Mexican-centric rhetoric from older generations as an example of the Nationalistic lens for framing Latinx identities, and how concepts within Latinidad, specifically Chicanismo, have been used to play into concepts of pan-indigeneity that have contributed to indigenous erasure. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how

¹³ While there has not been much academic research done on this term or phenomenon, recent works by Central American scholars such as Leisy Abrego in her article “On Silences: Salvadoran Refugees Then and Now” call to attention the need for Central American Studies that center these important and often silenced experiences. This is not a term that Abrego uses, but rather one that I use here to point out how Mexican narratives and experiences are often centered in discussions of Latinidad.

younger generations are pushing back against these ideas to create a Latinidad that is more nuanced and complex.

Jasminne Mendez is an Afro-Latina poet of Dominican descent, and her poem “Frijochuelas” was published online on *La Galería*, a magazine that aims to amplify voices from the Dominican diaspora. In the poem, Jasminne addresses the way in which Mexican hegemony¹⁴ has affected her experiences with her Latinx identity. The opening lines read: “Dear Texas, little Mexico, please don’t take / my Spanish away. *Yo hablo español*. I speak / Dominican”. Interestingly, Jasminne does not provide a literal translation for the Spanish phrase ‘yo hablo español’; rather, she shows its real meaning by translating it to ‘I speak Dominican,’ suggesting that this version of Spanish is fundamentally different from Mexican Spanish. She opens up Spanish, so to speak, to encompass other Spanishes other than this ‘little Mexico.’ When she asks Texas, or ‘little Mexico’, not to take her Spanish away, she is really pleading for Mexican Spanish and culture not to alter or erase her Dominican identity. She recognizes the Mexican hegemony present not only in the state, but within Latinx communities generally; the poem envisions Mexican Spanish as an erasing force that shores up Mexican hegemony while eroding other forms of intra-Latinx identities and languages.

¹⁴ I struggled with whether or not this term was the right one to use for this analysis. I recognize that in the larger scope of things, whiteness is still centered above all else. I also do not want to erase the long struggle for Chicano/Latino Studies (CLS) that was led mainly by Mexicans, as they were the largest Latinx subgroup in the South West. Rather, I use the term to point out Mexicans’ persisting control over the discipline, and how this often overshadows the narratives of other Latinx communities within CLS. The only other context in which I have seen the phrase used has been on Twitter, where the people using it have been predominantly Indigenous and/or Latinx youths as opposed to older Chicanx activists who might argue that they are still not included in typical narratives. Lastly, I also note that it is worth considering how the use of this word and the spaces in which it appears relate to this larger topic of intergenerational definitions of Latinidades.

Later in the poem, Jasminne goes into detail on how the Spanishes she refers to are different, and expands these ideas by talking about the ways she has accommodated Mexicans in her performance of identity. Stanzas 4 and 5, which consist of enjambed statements, read:

¿que dijiste? What did you say? As if a

Mexican and a Dominican spoke two different tongues. So I've learned to adjust for you.

Slow down for you. Elongate the vowels, articulate accents, and staccato every consonant like a mariachi

trumpet for you.

The repetition of 'for you' in these lines emphasize the uneven labor involved in accommodating hegemonic languaging practices. They carry within them a sense of resentment almost, an annoyance at having to accommodate for other groups even under the umbrella term of Latinidad. The repetition Jasminne talks about how she has had to change the way she speaks Spanish for Mexican audiences, thus pushing back on monolithic ideas about Latinxs; she does this by showing how oppression exists even within these communities. She names mariachi, one of the most mainstream markers of Mexican culture, and says that she has altered her speech to fit the rhythm of a music that is not hers.

This critique of intra-Latinx hierarchy comes through most strongly in the ending of the poem, where she carves out a niche for herself within Latinidad and claims it as home. The final stanzas read:

Because their Abuelita Rosario will cook arroz con

habichuelas and call it kindness. And their Mexican Grandpa Mendez will stuff frijoles in a tortilla and call it love. While their

father and I will invent a new, decolonized, virgin language, put it in a pot, name them "frijo-chuelas,"

and call it home.

In this passage, Jasminne is talking about her future “Do-Mexican” children (children of Dominican and Mexican descent). She says that they will grow up around both cultures, and talk about food and grandparents from these two different countries to show how the two will come together to create a new identity. Instead of picking between the habichuelas of their grandmother or frijoles of their grandfather, Jasminne creates a new name for this dish that is symbolic of this hybrid identity, ‘frijochuelas’. There is no room left to question it; she refers to this new dish as home, signifying the comfort found within it. Clearly, Jasminne shows how Latinx identities have no single mold. Oppression exists within the identity, and there are layers to it as well as complexities that are introduced when one considers multiculturalism even within Latinx communities. Latinx cultures vary greatly by region, country, language, and more; the key to understanding these variations, as Jasminne shows through this poem, is by looking at them through an intersectional lens, by combining the different parts of oneself to form one’s own definition of Latinidad. Jasminne exemplifies the stance that many Latinx youths are now taking when it comes to Latinx identities; as opposed to relying on a fixed and inflexible definition, there seems to be a growing preference for a lens that accounts for differences among those who identify as Latinx.

“Frijochuelas” does a phenomenal job at showing the usefulness of intersectional approaches to Latinidad, especially as it is used by younger Latinx generations to negotiate their own Latinx identity in conjunction with other facets of themselves.¹⁵ In his response poem, “Abijoles,” Lupe Mendez, longtime Texan educator and poet, exemplifies the ways in which

¹⁵ This inter-generational shift is also likely due to the theory of intersectionality itself as described by Crenshaw, whose work is discussed more in Chapter 1.

older Latinx generations might push back on these more progressive ideas by reinforcing Mexican hegemony within Latinidad. The poem begins:

Dear morenita, dominicana,– joven victima. I am sorry
you feel out of place. Join the club. We live in muscle memory

in these parts. We forget our indigenous names, have to reference
Guardian articles to know we are Yaqui, Karankawa, Huichol, Azteca.

From the onset of his message, Lupe takes on an almost patronizing tone. He describes Jasminne as a *morenita*, meaning dark-skinned women, and *joven victima*, or ‘young victim;’ these terms contribute to his patronization of Jasminne and suggest that the apology that follows is sarcastic at best. Albeit any good intentions surrounding the message Lupe hopes to give Jasminne, the third sentence inviting her to ‘join the club’ suggests that she is not unique in her struggle. It replicates the reductive approach to Latinidad that was critiqued by Jasminne, eliding differences and almost ordering Jasminne to conform. By narrowing in on how he feels this oppression too relative to society at large, Lupe unproductively eludes conversation about and even reinforces the Mexican hegemony that Jasminne originally characterized. As opposed to addressing the issue of Mexican hegemony, however, Lupe turns the poem around in an exercise to ‘regroup’ Latinxs under the umbrella term. Even more notable, though, is Lupe’s reference to ‘forgotten indigenous names’ of Mexican descendants. As opposed to referencing ties to indigenous communities that still exist in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, Lupe (consciously or not) contributes to the erasure of indigeneity by playing into popular nationalist Mexican ideas that all Mexicans are of indigenous descent and therefore can claim the identity that many indigenous peoples still alive today are discriminated against for (Gutiérrez 157). The lack of community connection is key here, as Lupe mentions having to rely on ‘Guardian articles’ to be able to forge a connection between himself and this alleged indigeneity that is a part of his identity.

Lupe expands his response to Jasminne, reusing Mexican-centric ideas of unity in stanzas 5-7, which read:

You are new here, and didn't you know? If you look brown,
 even Black, you Mexican. They'll treat you like us. Everyone who isn't white,
 in Tejas, en el Norte, is a Mexican. You are as inmigrante as us – Dominican Mexican,
 Central American Mexican, next to a Pakistani Mexican and they want
 us all against the outside of this border wall. Its ok, we'll get bullied for you.

On the surface, this well intentioned message promotes unity of all 'brown' people— that is, non-white non-Black people— by suggesting that they are all subjugated and oppressed.¹⁶ This is shown especially in the way that Lupe adds “Mexican” after other identities like Central American, Dominican, and even Pakastani. He says that all of these ‘othered’ groups are wanted outside of the border wall. While this may be true, such messages of unity are also at times more harmful than they are productive. They are often used as a convenience to evade conversations of how anti-Blackness, racism, colorism, and other forms of oppression can and do persist even within these ‘othered’ groups of people, such as Latinxs. This is why statements like “if you look brown, even Black, you Mexican” and “Its ok, we'll get bullied for you” are problematic. Messages like these re-center the Mexican identity within Latinidad and totally ignore the ways in which people of Mexican descent can be and at times are the ones doing the bullying.

¹⁶ It is important to note here that use of the term generations in this poetic interaction is more complex than simply referring to time in the US. With this poetic interaction, educators should also consider the construction of generations based on age or cohort as opposed to length of time in the US. Although they are similar in age, Mendez likely came of age when the predominant Latinx population in Texas was Mexican Americans. Thus, for him, to be Latinx *might* mean being Mexican. Educators can point out that Jasminne Mendez, whose lived experiences differ from Lupe's, may not know the full context for Lupe's words. It might ultimately be more helpful for the curriculum to acknowledge the disjunctions that exist within Latinxs, and explore how this misunderstanding can further perpetuate hierarchies within Latinx communities. It is vital for teachers to use poems like these as points of critical discussion to help students understand the complexities of Latinidades.

Recalling the words of Olivarez, it is crucial that conversations surrounding Latinidad now can address these nuances of how positionality within Latinidad changes, and that we encourage our students to think not only about how they are oppressed, but how they are capable of harming others.

This poem brings up some very important ideas about Latinidad that demonstrate the difference between inter-generational definitions of Latinx identities.¹⁷ It exemplifies the Mexican-centric rhetoric regarding Latinidad, the harmful impacts that the term ‘brown’ can have in its ambiguity about lived experiences and layers of oppression within the Latinx community, and shows how appropriation of indigenous culture has served as a basis for chicanismo which has heavily influenced popular perceptions about Latinxs both in and outside of Latinx communities. The conclusion section of this chapter will put the ideas presented in these sections into conversation with one another, and use them to explain how these poems can be used effectively in high school classroom settings to engage students in productive discussions and practice critical thinking regarding Latinx identities.

2.5: Conclusion

The poems in the first section of this chapter centered around language, namely Spanish, as a potential marker of Latinidad. Both Salgado and Randall have different outlooks on what Spanish means for their Latinx identities, and they reveal how these outlooks differ from those of generations who came before them. Salgado’s “Tesoro” shows how Spanish, in her experience, has been just as much a part of her Latinx identity as English has been. Students should be

¹⁷ Though I have explored a couple of key differences between generations of Latinxs in the US and their views on Latinidad in this chapter so far, by no means do I mean to collapse or perpetuate erasure of any nuances within each generation. Instead, I hope to acknowledge the trends that I have observed while simultaneously making it clear that not all members of a single generation are the same; there are always, in the case of any generation, exceptions.

encouraged to examine how Salgado switches between the two languages throughout the poem, and the effect that this technique has on the delivery of the message. They should also, if possible, be challenged to consider the larger implications behind the message of the poem: while the piece is an exercise for Salgado in defining her own Latina identity, each person can do this kind of negotiating and defining for themselves.

Julian Randall, on the other hand, shows through his poem “Translation” that for him, Spanish fluency is not a necessity to claiming a Latinx identity, although it does impede his understanding of some cultural aspects of his heritage. He conveys this message through heavy reliance on metaphors and imagery related to dying and the generations that came before him, and students should be asked to further explore the implications of these metaphors and images in the poem. Putting these literary devices into context with Randall’s central message about his identity will not only help students better understand poetry, but can also serve as a useful introduction to a conversation about students' own identities. They can be asked to think or write about how they may relate to Randall’s thoughts or not, and how this poem has or has not affected the way they see their own identities. Whenever possible, students should be given time to free write their ideas about such topics in order to process the information they get from poems, class discussion, and teacher remarks about these poems.

The following section on Latinx terminology focused solely on the words and work of José Olivarez, who explores complexities within Latinx identities in his poem “Mexican American Disambiguation.” In the poem, he complicates what it means to be Latinx within his own Mexican identity, showing how his position differed from that of his parents, how his parents differ from Mexicans still living in Mexico, and more. Perhaps the most important literary devices used in this poem are the satirical tone and light-hearted mood. It is important to

ask students to think about how that unique tone shapes not only the message of the poem, but how the reader receives it. Does it imply that these ideas are actually simple to understand? Or does it show that they are more complicated than we will ever know? If possible, students should also be able to put this poem into context with Idris Goodwin's "A Preface," along with Olivarez's own words on his work and exploring his privileged positionality within Latinidad. Aside from introducing students to satire and humor as tools used in poetry, it will also prove useful to educators to have students think about and/or discuss how they have seen these topics talked about in the past, and whether this poem was successful in its use of satire or not. Students can discuss with one another in groups or as a class who they think the intended audience of this poem is, considering its tone, and briefly write or talk about how they think Olivarez catered the content of the poem to this intended audience.

Lastly, in regards to this poem, teachers may also use it as a vehicle for students to discuss their own positionality given their unique identities and the changing contexts through which they exist. Ask students how they navigate different spaces and why in order to reflect on the same ideas as Olivarez, considering not only the ways in which they may be oppressed but also how they are capable of perpetuating the harms detailed in the poems above. Anytime students are asked to expand on the ideas presented in class by applying them to their own experiences or other contexts, they are being trained to use the critical consciousness that Freire argued would help empower them to enact change where they deem necessary.

The poems in the final section in this chapter showcase the nationalistic perspective that older generations have used versus the intersectional lens that younger generations use to understand Latinidad. Jasminne Mendez's poem "Frijochuelas" shows how popular perceptions of Latinidad affect members of marginalized groups within the identity. It would be helpful for

teachers to emphasize her description of language and how accents differ, asking students what this does for the poem sonically. They might also explore the use of mariachi and food in the poem as markers and literary symbols for culture and identity. To take these ideas further than poetics, teachers may ask students to reflect in some way on the following questions: In what ways, if any, do you feel out of place? How does this apply to you and your various identities? How do they feel about the ending of this poem? Did it surprise you? How do you feel about the fact that she combines these identities in the end? Why?

Finally, Lupe Mendez's poem serves as an example of how messages of unity, specifically 'brown unity', can at times be used as a way to perpetuate erasure of the differences and layers of oppression and marginalization that occur frequently within Latinx communities. It should also be noted that Lupe Mendez is one of the authors whose work is referenced in the first chapter; he is especially helpful in suggesting that Latinx poetry be woven throughout a yearlong curriculum as opposed to bulked together in one unit and then forgotten shortly after. He encourages educators to explore Latinx counter narratives in their curriculum, many of which I present in this paper as potential poets to use in classroom settings., his poem "Abichuelas," for instance, can be a very useful lesson for students on how to engage in critical questioning about what they read. Students can be asked to interrogate his portrayal of indigeneity and promotion of Mexican-centric perceptions about Latinidad. Ask students not only to identify how Lupe does this, but also to describe how they feel about it. Have they thought about these issues before? What, if anything, is the benefit of looking at things from the intersectional lens that Jasminne or Olivarez showcase in their poems? Ask students to draw a comparison between how Latinidad has looked in previous generations, what it looks like now, and most importantly, what they want it to look like in the future.

CHAPTER 3: Gender/Sexuality

3.1: Introduction

In chapter two, I detailed how contemporary Latinx poetry can be used to highlight some of the common differences in definitions of Latinidad for various generations of Latinxs in the US. I also included recommendations based on each poem for how to cater class discussions to the poem in a way that not only discusses literary devices used, but that also looks beyond poetics in order to have students apply their learning to other contexts. In this chapter, I aim to further explore another variation within Latinx identities through the work of contemporary Latinx poets: gender and sexuality.

In the first section of this chapter, I will focus on the opposing roles of women and men that are prominent in many Latinx cultures and how heteropatriarchal gender roles are preserved through traditional nuclear family structures. I will be using poems from Yesika Salgado and José Olivarez to exemplify how these roles can be further deconstructed through the use of Latinx poetry. Section two will focus on sexuality through the lens of Julian Randall's poem "On the night I consider coming out to my parents" to highlight how family structures in Latinx communities can serve as further vehicles of oppression. The final section in the chapter will focus solely on gender as a concept and construct, as opposed to discussion of gender roles, using the work of féi hernandez, who puts their nonbinary identity into conversation with other facets of their Latinx identity. For more detailed instructions on how to use the following poems in a classroom context, see the concluding section.

3.2: Patriarchy and Gender Roles

To begin this chapter, I will focus on the work of Yesika Salgado in her poem "Molcajete" and José Olivarez in his poem "Mexican Heaven." Through further analysis of both

of these pieces, I hope to show the ways in which each poem addresses or characterizes patriarchal standards and gender roles that are prevalent within many Latinx cultures.

Interestingly, Salgado's poem reveals most of these ideas about gendered expectations and Salgado's own observations about them through her parents, using the symbol of food as a vehicle to describe them. After three stanzas filled with instructions and imagery on how to make salsa using a molcajete, the fourth stanza reads:

My mother would make the salsa verde for my father.
 serve it to him during dinner. as if to say *here, this is what
 my heart looks like*. He would spoon it onto his tortilla. a
 taco full of her. eyes watering between bites.

There is a saying in my family when someone's food comes out too spicy. With watery eyes and itchy throats, the rest of the family will often ask "*¿estabas enojada, o que?*" (were you mad, or what?). Jokingly, they suggest that the more angry the cook was when they were making the food, the more spicy it will end up. The final verse of the stanza, describing Salgado's dad and how his eyes are watering between the bites of the salsa, may allude to this saying. Through this, she suggests her mother feels anger and even resentment because her husband expects so much from her as a woman. It hints that she might even be angry at the duties she is expected to fulfill for them, but that she complies with them anyway out of love. Thus, we see imagery of her heart being consumed by her partner; the salsa, then, becomes a representation of her pain.

Salgado notes the underlying gravity of something seemingly simple as her mother cooking food for her father, which is a painful expectation for many women of Latinx households. The italics of what Salgado imagines her mother would like to say to Salgado's father show that Salgado can see, or even more so feel, her mother's pain, suggesting that she puts her metaphorical heart into sustaining her husband only for him to mindlessly consume the fruits of her labor daily. Consumption functions at two levels here: (1) there is the literal action

of cooking (woman) and eating (man) that seems to be tiresome and thankless on the part of the woman of the household, and (2) there is the metaphorical consumption of the mother herself. Her heart is in the salsa she makes for her family; it represents her duties to her family. She is sacrificing parts of herself to provide for her husband, feeding into the popular belief in many Latinx cultures that women should cater to their man. And not only is it a thankless job, but readers also get a sense that she wastes away with each bite through the image of this “taco full of her.” Essentially, Salgado observes how her mother, as many Latinx women may also do, expends an unequal amount of energy to keep Salgado’s father happy, while he passively reaps the fruits of her labor.

The implications of these gender roles do not end with Salgado’s parents. The last three stanzas explore Salgado’s own perspective as she applies these same metaphors and salsa-related images to her own love life. The fifth stanza reads: “when you loved me I didn’t know if I was the stone or the / hand / the tomatillos or the garlic.” This shows how the themes that Salgado saw come up in her parents’ relationship, seeing those gender roles at play, also affected her way of seeing her romantic life. She tries to decipher what is what in her own relationship, not knowing if she is the hand that does the guiding and takes control of the process of this metaphorical salsa-making, or the stone that is controlled by the hand. She struggles against the gendered power dynamic she has witnessed her whole life, and tries to distinguish what it means for her.¹⁸ In the final stanza, it becomes clear that society’s gender roles seep into her love life in

¹⁸ While I use this poem to reveal gender roles through the ways that individuals, such as Salgado’s parents, enact gender and/or gendered expectations, I also want to acknowledge that an analysis of solely gender roles does not address patriarchy as a larger institutionalized system that impacts the lives of Latinx and other communities. This institutionalized patriarchy can be seen in schools, religion, workplaces, and many other facets of daily life. I do not mean to suggest that if we simply change the way we enact these roles that patriarchy would cease to be. What I do want to focus on here is the individual account of how gender roles in a Latinx family are enacted.

the same way that she saw with her parents. The final couplet says, “I sat my heart before you. watched you eat. waited for you / to tell me it tasted like home. you didn’t.” After all of that confusion about where she fit in her own relationship, it turns out that Salgado was still affected by patriarchal gender roles. She ‘sat her heart before’ her partner in the same way her mother did for Salgado’s father, and hoped that it would be enough to convince them to build a ‘home’ with her. She played into these standard gender roles for women in an effort to find a life partner, and even then, it was not enough. Through this poem and metaphors about food, Salgado reveals a lot about Latinx cultures and how patriarchy finds its way into interpersonal relationships. Women are at times expected to sacrifice and change and accommodate the needs and demands of men; the majority of the time, men have the option to choose and leave when they are unhappy because their worth is not tied to their relationship status.¹⁹ Salgado shows readers the role of women in many Latinx cultures, which in some cases is limited to food/cooking, love and relationships, and familial responsibilities.

José Olivarez examines these gender roles, too, although he does so through a cisgendered male perspective in his poem “Mexican Heaven”. Olivarez, like Salgado, addresses the issue of gender roles through further examination of familial responsibilities and especially through talking about cooking. The third stanza of the poem reads as follows:

all the Mexican women refuse to cook or clean
or raise the kids or pay bills or do anything except
watch their novelas, so heaven is gross. The rats
are fat as roosters & the men die of starvation.

Again, although Olivarez caters his poems to his experience as a Mexican-identifying individual,

¹⁹ Such gendered expectations are further explored by Blackwell in her book *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. Additionally, while I want to be analytical about the dynamic revealed in these poems, I also want to stress that I *do not* want to make generalizations about the vast diversity of Latinx cultures.

much of the ideas about gender roles can be applied more broadly to other Latinx cultures.²⁰ The relationships between heterosexual Latinx males and females are further explored in the poem, as Olivarez lists the expectations for women that he has seen play out in his own community: cooking, cleaning, raising children, and paying bills. But in his imagined heaven, women refuse to do any of these things. Women's heaven is watching novelas or soap operas, which is a creative way of saying that in José's mind, these women are simply yearning for rest and relaxation. When they finally get this rest in heaven, the place becomes inhabitable, leaving men to die due to either their inability to perform basic tasks for their survival or their refusal to do them (or both). Olivarez criticizes the shortcomings of a machista, or male chauvinist masculinity and shows how in spite of demanding subservience from others, these kinds of men are often unable to do the things they expect others to do for them. Olivarez implies through these images that many men, specifically Mexican men, quite literally rely on the labor of the women around them to survive. Thus, whereas Salgado's poem is about the damage done to women's psyches in patriarchal cultures, Olivarez's poem shows how men often simply reap the benefits of women's labor.²¹

²⁰ For more information on gender roles and Latino Culture(s), please see Alfredo Mirande's *Hombres Y Machos: Masculinity And Latino Culture*; Anzaldúa, Gloria, and Cherríe Moraga's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*; and Córdova, Teresa, Norma Cantú, Gilberto Cárdenas, and Juan Garcia's *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender*.

²¹ While I narrow in on how patriarchy and gender roles affect those in Latinx communities for purposes of specificity and relevance to the subject of this thesis, I want to also clearly state that these dynamics do not only exist in Latinx communities. The larger dynamic of patriarchy is not confined to any singular culture, even though cultural deficiency frameworks have long perpetuated beliefs about Latino/a families in binary ways. For an example of how these cultural deficiency narratives play out in academia, see Evelyn Stevens' "Machismo and Marianismo."

3.3: Latinx Sexuality

This section will focus exclusively on Julian Randall's poem "On the Night I consider coming out to my Parents" in order to talk more about the subject of sexuality as it appears in Latinx poetry. This is not by any means to suggest that this is the most important, or the only text in which the subject of sexuality comes up in relation to Latinx identities. However, by narrowing in on this single text, I aim to provide an in depth analysis that can help educators understand the importance of the poem and others like it when selecting which poems they will use in their own classrooms.

In his poem, Randall details his own experience as he tries to decide whether or not to come out to his parents. The poem is characterized by distractions and tangents that all lead back to the one thing on Randall's mind: his sexuality. Near the end of the poem, Randall states: "Somewhere, my mother is gripping a rosary to pray for men who look like me." Whether it comes as a result of religious, societal, or familial influence (or a combination of these), Randall makes it clear that his own mother would not accept his bisexuality. This is evidently a source of anxiety for him, hence the title of the poem. But this poem does not stop at the desire for familial acceptance due to his sexuality. Going beyond this, Randall depicts this internal conflict he has with his own identities as a struggle to survive. The third line of the poem begins, "There's blood on the ground; no time remains so I'll say it flat: I am Black and / Dominican and Bisexual. There. If I die now, you'll have a hint for which god to / petition." In previous lines, Randall mentions that he was born an exile yet still fears banishment. In light of these lines, Randall adds on to the layered reasons behind why he sees himself as an exile and is in constant fear of death. It's a combination of his race, nationality, ethnicity, and his sexuality that make him feel like a

target. The violence, both physical and not, that has already been inflicted on him is captured by the blood on the floor that he describes in the third line.

Another very important aspect of the poem is the war-related imagery and diction sprinkled throughout it. Beginning with the image of blood on the floor in line three, Randall continues this extended metaphor in line five, saying “Sometimes, I look at a man and my hands are already digging into the / small country of his back.” The image of hands digging into this ‘small country’ of another man’s back alludes to his desires by likening them to a common motive of war, the ‘digging into’ another country's resources. While it is not developed further than this, the continued use of this imagery turns war into an extended metaphor in the poem. Lines 8-10 read: “I am afraid to belong to another / thing, to become a no-man’s-land. I am a trench; nobody comes to / clear the dead”. Randall refers to himself as a trench, in which death is likely, and says that no one ‘comes to clear the dead’. He contributes to the extended war metaphor by clearly alluding to World War I with “no man’s land,” which was a term used to refer to the area between each side’s trenches. Evidently, Rendall sees his struggle with his identities as a literal matter of life or death. More images of blood come near the end of the poem, which further emphasizes violence and omnipresence of death in Randall’s mind. The heavy reliance on war imagery tells the reader that for Randall, coming out is not and has never been as simple as telling his parents; he is quite literally at war for his own life. Exposing himself, as he strongly suggests, is bound to end in his death.

This prose poem helps highlight many of the complications that arise within Latinx youths who struggle with their own sexuality. From the title, readers can imagine that the words of the poem are the thoughts going through Randall’s own head as he tries to decide whether or not to come out to his parents. Coming out, in and of itself, can often be made more difficult for

the reasons that Randall describes: religious influence on family members; putting this identity in context with race, ethnicity, and the expectations that come with them; fear of rejection; and potential threats of physical and institutional violence. The poem contains desire, confusion, fear, and anxiety as Randall considers what it means for him as a Black, Dominican, Latinx man to label himself as bisexual. Characterizing heterosexism as a byproduct of patriarchy, “On the Night I consider coming out to my Parents” elaborates on the harms inflicted upon Latinxs by hyper-patriarchal structures.

3.4: Gender as a Construct

Finally, we arrive at the section of this chapter that combines previously mentioned topics such as gender roles, patriarchy, and sexuality. Using the poem “(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)” by Inglewood-based Latinx poet féi hernandez, this section will examine how hernandez describes their²² lived experiences and focus on how their non-binary identity shapes these lived experiences. In the poem, which was inspired by José Olivarez’s “(Citizen)(Illegal)”, these identities, which are found in parentheses, become inseparable from one another. Seeing as hernandez’s poem directly imitates Olivarez’s, readers see how hernandez is intentionally connecting their Latinx identity with gender identity in “(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)”. As is the case with José Olivarez’s “(Citizen)(Illegal)”, the frequent use of parentheses intentionally disrupt the flow of the poem, in a similar way that hernandez describes their and their mother’s pursuit of the American Dream being interrupted by obstacles that are brought upon them due to their identities as Latinx migrants.

²² féi hernandez’s pronouns are they/them. As such, I will refer to them using these pronouns throughout this thesis.

In the 28th couplet of the poem, hernandez touches on themes of their mothers perception of them as a trans person, and how her ideas may align or create tension with her Latinx identity. The lines read as follows: “If Mexican woman accepts Mexican trans as her child, is she more / American (citizen) than Mexican (illegal), or is she more undocumented (illegal) and unworthy of her / citizenship (American)?” More than simply considering whether their mother would accept them or not, hernandez wonders whether their mother’s acceptance of their trans identity would align her more with the values of an American citizen than an undocumented Mexican and Latinx person. Her acceptance of hernandez, then would mean that she, too, would take on a different kind of “trans” identity, in terms of culture. Through this line of questioning, it is almost as though hernandez is trying to decide for themselves which culture is more accepting of trans and non-binary identities: United States culture or Latinx (more specifically, Mexican) culture. This leads back to hernandez’s attempt to navigate their multifaceted identity through relaying their lived experiences in the poem, which is continued in the following lines.

The 29th-31st couplets of “(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)” reveal hernandez’s internal struggle with their identities outside of their mother’s perspective.

They read:

... If Mexican trans keeps their beard (non-binary), but wears

Mexican woman’s blouses (queer) are they lying about about being “trans” (American)?
If Mexican trans /
(hood)(non-binary) is scared to strut the night streets of Inglewood (hood) in heels

is Mexican trans more American (citizen) than resident (illegal)? Or are they not “hood”
enough (white)? /
Are they stuck in limbo between borders within and outside of them (non-binary)?

hernandez touches on many key points relating to their identities: their physical appearance, their style of dress, their documentation status, their race, and considers how these layers of their

identity position them in the world. In the final line of the excerpt, hernandez says that they are ‘between, within, and outside’ of borders all at the same time; it is their complex identities that position them in this way given their current context. The parenthetical insertions of words such as ‘queer’, ‘citizen’, and ‘illegal’, are hernandez’s way of *translating* these identities to their audiences. It shows not only their own difficulty in navigating both ethnracial and sexual identities, but shows how that is further complicated by the need to explain these things to others. And although the poem consists of hernandez’s thoughts and experiences navigating their identities, it is written entirely from the third person perspective. The effects of this choice are multiple and encourage readers to ponder hernandez’s intention. On one hand, perhaps hernandez wrote from this perspective in order to distance themselves from the sentiment behind it. Or, it could be that hernandez wanted to suggest how widespread experiences like this are, allowing readers to generalize and even find more personal ways to relate to the experiences and questioning contained in the poem. Finally, and most likely, it may be that hernandez is looking at how others view and try to categorize them in binary ways.

The long-winded, train-of-thought style conversation that hernandez hosts between their different identities ultimately culminates in an empty feeling. This feeling is developed strongly in the final lines of the poem, which read as follows:

If Mexican trans doesn’t celebrate their passed Citizenship test (American) is it because they’ll always feel like / a resident (illegal),

mitigating their American culture (Black)(hood) and their trans (American)(non-binary) identity and their / light skin (white) self only to never feel enough (American)(citizen)?”

After a long line of questioning, hernandez leaves readers with the conclusion that hernandez comes to: there is no answer. These identities all live in flux. No one of them is key for hernandez to truly understand themselves; in the end, even after a process of coming to terms with

these identities, hernandez still feels that they will never be fully American. They list the reasons why: their documentation status, the fact that much of American culture is actually stolen from (Black)(hood) culture, their status as a white Latinx in the city of Inglewood, and their status and presentation as a trans, non-binary identity. Through third-person narration, consistent use of parentheses, and frequent use of questioning in the poem, hernandez extends their ‘trans identity’ far beyond gender or sexuality; they broaden the identity to include other forms of social identity such as nationality, ethnicity, and race.

3.5: Conclusion

My analysis of the first set of poems presented in this chapter center discussion of patriarchy and gender roles in the work of Yesika Salgado and José Olivarez. In Salgado’s “Molcajete,” we see a creative discussion of women’s roles that she has inherited from her own nuclear family. Students should be encouraged to analyze how food serves as a symbol or metaphor for these roles in the nuclear family, and what this literary device empowers Salgado to imply about them. Students should be asked to identify how Salgado describes herself being impacted by them, and ask themselves where their ideas about gender roles have come from, considering these especially in relation to their various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. If possible, teachers should also ask their classes to brainstorm and/or write about which symbols or metaphors they might use to represent their own ideas about gender roles or patriarchy.

The subject of gender roles is expanded on through Olivarez’s “Mexican Heaven,” in which he uses different literary devices to stress similar ideas about the role of women in many Latinx families. When discussing this poem, educators should emphasize how the use of hyperbole functions in the poem, both in reference to this imagined heaven, but mainly in regards to the idea that all men would die in this heaven without the presence of women. It may

be useful to pose the following questions to students: *What effect does Olivarez's use of hyperbole have on the poem? What was your reaction to it? Do you see similar gender roles play out in your life? Why or why not?*

Secondly, the poem uses imagery to give readers a sense of disgust at this 'Mexican Heaven' for being so dirty as a result of women refusing to do the gendered responsibilities that patriarchy has assigned them. Students should be able to identify how this imagery subverts readers' expectations of heaven and the effect that this subversion has on the poem. If time constraints allow for a more creative exercise, I propose doing one of two activities: (1) students can creatively think up their own heaven in terms of ethnicity, race, nationality, gender, or another identity of theirs that they'd like to explore further, using Olivarez's "Mexican Heaven" as inspiration, or (2) students can attempt to write a piece that attempts to deconstruct cis-hetero-patriarchy and white supremacy within the institution of religion by drawing on this poem. In regards to the latter, it is also worth considering how such an approach might differ from more liberal discussions of gender roles.

The following section on sexuality focused exclusively on Julian Randall's "On the Night I Consider Coming Out to My Parents," which uses extended metaphor and war-related diction/imagery to endow the poem with a sense of violence. Encourage students to look for ways that Randall turns war into a recurring metaphor through his diction, and how these relate to the main themes of the poem (life, death, and violence). Another theme worth exploring through class discussion is that of religion, as Randall makes several references to it. Ask students to identify how these literary devices shape the poem, but also how the poem itself relates to ideas of intersectionality. For a creative exercise, have students free write and reflect after discussing the poem either creatively or analytically and consider why reading these kinds

of texts are important. Discussion of this poem might be more fruitful in small groups, with each group being asked to focus on one element of the poem (imagery, multiple theme(s), and structure) and share their insights with the whole group at the end of their small group discussions.

The final section of the chapter narrows in on gender itself as a kind of combination of the subtopics that precede it in the chapter. fēi's "(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)" is an exercise in looking at how all of these identities and ideas come together, through the lens of one individual trying to decipher what it means for them to be so many things at once. When facilitating discussion of this poem, be sure to stress the importance of interruption in it, especially through the use of parentheses. Ask students how the use of the third person perspective affects their reading of the poem, and who they think fēi was writing for. Were they writing for themselves? For other people who might struggle with the same kind of internal conflict? Or, could it possibly be for both? Use this poem as an opportunity to get students to have this conversation with themselves about their own multifaceted identities. Have them work through a similar process, modeling a brief poem after fēi's that emulates the same line-of-questioning style. This poem presents a perfect opportunity for an exercise that helps students forge their own sense of self, while also bolstering their understanding of poetic devices to help them communicate these identities to others, and more importantly, themselves.²³

²³ I would also like to remind educators here that given the potential sensitivity of topics such as gender and sexuality, that students should in no way be pressured to share information about themselves with the entire class or even with the instructor. Rather, they should be encouraged to talk only about the parts of their identities and experiences that they feel comfortable and safe sharing with others. They should not be pressured to 'come out' in any way during these exercises, and with regard to any activity that requires a personal reflection of these identities, sharing their work should be 100% optional.

CHAPTER 4: Race

4.1: Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed Latinx gender and sexuality as it is described and constructed in the works of Yesika Salgado, José Olivarez, Julian Randall, and féi hernandez. For the final chapter of this thesis, I would like to center discussions of race within Latinx identities and use contemporary Latinx poets to complicate narratives of what it means to be Latinx in terms of race. In the larger context of this thesis, the subject of race is crucial to teaching students about the complexities of Latinx identities while also modeling how their own positionalities can shift and change within different contexts. While I have incorporated the work of Black Latinx poets into other parts of this thesis, I want to be intentional in providing narratives that center Afro-Latinidad as well. It is crucial for educators who wish to adopt the goals of this thesis to do all they can not to exclude Black Latinx narratives while trying to provide Latinx students with a holistic education that develops their critical consciousness. Therefore, this chapter centers the topic of race as it is represented in contemporary Latinx poetry, highlighting various texts to develop this theme. For more detailed instructions on how to use the following poems in a classroom context, see the concluding section.

In the first section of this chapter, I will focus on Blackness in Latinidad and how this affects lived experiences of individuals within Latinx communities. Although there are many contemporary Afro-Latinx poets, I will only use Yesenia Montilla's work to exemplify how the topic of race can be developed through the use of Latinx poetry. Again, I would like to emphasize that my work here is not meant to be definitive. Rather, it is an invitation for more scholarship on and centering of Black Latinx poets in discussions of Latinx literature. Section two will focus on whiteness within Latinidad, using the work of José Olivarez to show how this

racial identity is developed in his works. Through his work, I describe how he shows the complexities of white Latinx identities and how they differ from Afro-Latinx experiences. His work also depicts layers of conscious and subconscious bias within non-Black Latinx communities. Finally, the third section in the chapter will focus on the appropriation of Black cultures in Latinidad through the work of non-Black Latinx poet féi hernandez.

4.2: Blackness in Latinidad

In this section, I rely solely on the work of Afro-Latina poet Yesenia Montilla to show how she hosts a conversation between her Blackness and her Latinidad, complicating the definition of both in the process. The two poems I will be using are “Muse found in a Colonized Body” and “Dendrology.” Through use of a narrative poem in the former and an extended metaphor in the latter, Montilla details her unique perspective and experiences as an Afro-Latina and complicates the definition of both Blackness and her Latinidad in the process.

Montilla contextualizes her daily lived experiences as an Afro-Latina woman with the history behind her identities in her poem, “Muse found in a Colonized body.” The poem describes a scene after a white woman cuts in line ahead of Montilla at the grocery store. The final stanzas of the poem read:

paying attention; behind the glass
counter are three Dominican
newspapers on display. One
of the captions stops me—

Exclusivo, ¿Quién era Cristóbal Colón?

In an instant I am giggling
uncontrollably. I have no idea
who he was, but I know at the very
least he was the kind of human
that landed in a place some called
paradise & instead of enjoying the view

he asked for organic eggs & cut the line—

On the surface, this encounter reveals much about white entitlement and racial dynamics in Montilla's hometown of New York City and in the "New World." However, Montilla also draws a very direct connection between this white woman, who cut in line without acknowledging Yesenia, and Christopher Columbus. Through this comparison, Montilla suggests that the race relation issue presented here is not a new one, but rather one that is rooted in centuries of history, racism, subjugation, and power dynamics. The white woman's entitlement in cutting the line without fear of consequence is only one layer of the issue that Yesenia describes. Additionally, Yesenia suggests that this woman's presence in New York City - the "paradise" referred to in the poem - is a new kind of colonization: gentrification. Instead of 'enjoying the view', this white woman's demand of resources from the community is aligned with the actions of Columbus upon his arrival in the Americas. Montilla's giggle in the poem is more than just a reaction to this coincidence. Her laugh is one of frustration, of familiarity. It endows these stanzas with a great sense of irony at the repetitiveness of history. Thus, through this poem, Yesenia ties the politics of her Blackness to a legacy of colonization, racism, gentrification, and depicting how these play out in modern-day contexts.

Montilla further details her lived experiences as an Afro-Latina, this time through the symbolic and literal significance of her hair, in "Dendrology." Lines 2-5 set up the poem, saying "I learned the Spanish phrase: *pelo malo* / when my aunt announced / that I'd never be loved by a white man / con ese pelo malo". Immediately, the reader is hit by the significance of hair in discussions of race, and how these dynamics play out specifically within Latinx contexts.

Yesenia's experiences with men, as shown here, were in a way predestined; her family coached

her from a young age, before she even fully understood what race was, to seek approval not just from men, but from white men specifically.

It is also just as important to note that the word dendrology refers to the study of trees or wooden plants, as imagery of the former appears throughout the poem. The final four lines exemplify this imagery:

shading my unruly hair reminding me that once
I was told there would never be an arboretum
in my future. That I'd never have the gift of choices:
bonsai, white birch, redwood -

The trees mentioned in the stanza are evidently a metaphor for the romantic options that Yesenia would not have open to her as an Afro-Latina. This is clear when she mentions that she'd never have the gift of choices, and that there would be no arboretum in her future. The types of trees, then, are metaphors for partners that she was explicitly told she would not have access to as a result of her unruly, 'bad' hair. On the surface, this is about hair and beauty standards. But as one begins to question these standards, there is an underlying element of race that highly affects barriers of desirability not just for Yesenia, but generally. Latinx communities are not immune to racist beauty standards, as we see when Yesenia's aunt is the first person to teach her what *pelo malo*, or 'bad hair' is. According to this saying, the curlier the hair, the less desirable the woman is. Thus, this poem exemplifies the exaltation of white features, proximity to them, and how they have affected Yesenia and women like her who learn to navigate Blackness within Latinidad.

Future explorations of Afro-Latinidad in contemporary Latinx poetry should include a wider array of Afro-Latinx poets and detail the differences of individual experiences based on proximity to whiteness. It is vital for me to note here that within Latinx communities, and even Afro-Latinx communities, the institution of racism, colorism, and discrimination all persist, and that all of these complexities merit further explanation than I can give in this thesis. Regardless,

as these themes appear in poems presented in class, educators should in all cases acknowledge their presence and allow students to engage with these ideas.

4.3: Whiteness in Latinidad

In this section, I will further discuss how contemporary Latinx poet José Olivarez has acknowledged their whiteness and positionality within Latinx communities to complicate predominant monolithic depictions of Latinidad. While I use his work as an example, I also recognize that he is not the first or last Latinx poet or author to address this theme; rather, the poem I use is meant to be a starting point to initiate classroom conversation on the topic. To begin, I will take another look at “Mexican American Disambiguation,” which has been used in previous chapters to talk about inter-generational definitions of Latinidades.

Olivarez begins this discussion, or ‘disambiguation,’ of his race by talking about his parents’ respective statuses before migrating to the US in lines 12-14 of the poem, saying “[my mom] was white in Mexico & my dad was mestizo / & after they crossed the border they became / diverse. & minorities. & ethnic. & exotic.” The act of migrating changed, and to a certain extent equalized, his parents’ status as they were no longer identified as ‘white’ or ‘mestizo,’ but as ‘other’ after crossing the border. Additionally, even though Olivarez’s mother’s physical appearance would still denote her as a white woman within the United States, Olivarez acknowledges that this status was further complicated by her ethnic background in a new country. Through the example of his mother, Olivarez shows how race is socially constructed by the cultures and countries that an individual navigates. Olivarez’s ‘disambiguation’ only gets progressively more and more complex as he layers on these identities and labels throughout the poem, as shown in describing his parents as ‘diverse, minorities, ethnic, and exotic’. Thus, while

he names his mother's whiteness, Olivarez remains clear about the complexities of her Latinx identity by adding layers to it and pointing out how it is socially constructed.

The act of disambiguation can refer to the clearing up of a confusion, but it can also suggest which definition of a word is being used in a specific context. Using disambiguation as a tool, readers especially find this contradiction with Olivarez's repeated use of the term 'gringo.' Roughly translating to 'white person' and often carrying a negative connotation, the term can be used in several ways: (1) literally meaning a person who is light-skinned or white, (2) someone who is foreign to a Spanish-speaking or Latinx perspective, (3) or someone of Latinx descent who is out of touch with their culture. Olivarez toys with this word to deepen the complexities of race and how experiences differ, as is demonstrated in lines 17-19 of the poem: "those Mexicanos might call / my family gringos, which is the word my family calls / white folks & white folks call my parents interracial". Here, Olivarez is referring to Mexicans who still live in Mexico and how they might call his family 'gringos' due to the privileged position they hold while living in the United States. On another level, Olivarez complicates this by explaining how his family has another group of people, namely white people, whom they would apply the term 'gringo' to. Evidently, these definitions of what makes somebody 'white' rely heavily not just on skin tone, but on privilege and socioeconomic status. Interestingly, though, the whiteness described here does not come with significant stigma. One might compare this lack of stigma with the 'unruly hair' in Montilla's poem, which she received shame for from even her own family. Overall, through this exercise in disambiguation, Olivarez reveals that with regards to whiteness and proximity to it, socioeconomic status plays a key role in the way many Latinxs perceive each other racially. Additionally, he reveals that even in spite of factoring in socioeconomic status, the

same levels of stigma and judgement are not present for white Latinxs as they are for Black Latinxs.

This is not to suggest, however, that Olivarez ignores the racism and colorism that exists within Latinx communities. He addresses this issue using his own family as an example in lines 22-24, which read: “I point out that all the men in my family / marry lighter-skinned women. That’s the Chicano / in me.” He puts his college-education in context with his familial interactions to show how his privilege of attending an ‘American’ university has equipped him with the tools to analyze how racial dynamics play out, even in his own household. The fact that all of the men in his family have married lighter-skinned women could be overlooked as coincidence, but instead, Olivarez uses it to point out that not all forms of racism or bias are conscious. They can be subconscious, which makes it all the more important to analyze how they manifest in individual ‘preferences.’ In identifying this phenomenon in his own family, Olivarez exemplifies how colorism plays a role in many Latinx communities, even though these couples might have similar ethnic backgrounds. He acknowledges that race and colorism do not disappear in Latinx communities, that they are not immune to perpetuating the same kinds of harm that predominant United States culture has for centuries.

4.4: Black Cultures’ influences on Latinidad

This section will focus exclusively on the poem “(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)” by féi hernandez in order to show how they acknowledge the contributions of Black cultures not just in the United States, but specifically Latinx communities within the country. In the poem, hernandez describes how foundational the predominant Black culture in their city of Inglewood is on their identity formation. The poem opens with the following lines:

Mexican woman (illegal) and Mexican boy (illegal)
arrive to Inglewood (hood) from Mexico (illegal) and meet

American (Black) culture. Mexican woman (illegal)
scrubs toilets for rich white women (American) with her Mexican (illegal)

brown hands, while Mexican boy (illegal) learns African American Vernacular
(Black)(American) in a public school (hood).

Interestingly, the phrase ‘American culture’ here is interrupted by the word in parentheses, ‘Black’; this suggests a kind of equalization of the two, as though hernandez were trying to say implicitly that Black culture is American culture. They go on to elaborate on this in the last couplet, which explains how hernandez learned African American Vernacular (AAV) in public schools in Inglewood. AAV is presented, through the parentheses as being both Black and American, which suggests that while it originated from Black culture, it has been popularized as a part of American culture generally. hernandez goes on to describe the importance of Black culture in their country and identity in lines 8 and 9, asking the question “If the boy doesn’t remember the old country and claims Inglewood (Black)(hood) his country / does that make him more citizen (American)?” Here, we see féi’s very strong affinity for Inglewood and its ‘(Black)(hood)’ culture, so much so that they claim Inglewood as their country. féi’s status as an immigrant comes into the conversation, as they say that they do not remember Mexico, their country of origin, and instead would prefer to name Inglewood, this small subset of America that has been heavily influenced by Black culture, their home.

While the importance of Black and/or ‘hood’ culture in identity formation is something that hernandez shares with many Latinx youths throughout the country, by no means do I mean to suggest that this experience is universal. I do, however, think it is absolutely necessary to emphasize how hernandez’s poem acknowledges the ways in which Black culture has been exploited by and used for the development of popular culture, especially in the United States (though this is a global phenomenon) and within Latinx communities. Whether it is through

learning AAV in public schools as hernandez mentioned, or through popular music, trends, and appearances, Blackness and whiteness do not exist independently from each other for many contemporary Latinx poets. The categories of race persist even within Latinx communities, and Black culture has had (and will continue to have) a grand influence on both American culture and Latinx cultures worldwide.

4.5: Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed both Blackness and whiteness in the context of Latinidad. I first did so separately in sections one and two, and then put them in conversation in section three by looking through a cultural lens, acknowledging Black contributions to both US and Latinx cultures. In Montilla's "Muse found in a Colonized Body," she contextualizes her Blackness with violent histories and modern realities through poetry. Considering that she does this through a narrative poem, it would be ideal to emphasize how this technique affects the poem, and perhaps have students try writing a short narrative poem of their own. Be sure to point out how Montilla's narrative story functions on multiple levels of meaning, and encourage them to do the same with their own writing.

In "Dendrology," Montilla explores many important themes: hair as a symbol, proximity to whiteness, and colorism vs. racism. As the class studies it, emphasize the use of extended metaphor and what it does to and for the message of the poem, how it gives each detail more meaning. For a more collaborative exercise, have students work in pairs or small groups of 3 to co-write something that uses an extended metaphor. If you'd like to give more guidance, you might also assign groups the metaphor they will be working with, but leave it up to them to distinguish its meaning and elaborate on it through their poems.

To explain and provide an example of whiteness within Latinidad, I have included Olivarez's "Mexican American Disambiguation." Before reading the poem together as a class, it may be helpful to have a group discussion on what students think the term 'Mexican American' means, and if there are any other identity-related terms that confuse and/or interest them. If they are comfortable, they might also share identities of their own that others might confuse or that are more complex than they initially seem. After reading, have them work in small groups to identify which literary devices Olivarez uses to 'disambiguate' this term. Potential answers might include: use of lists, enjambment, stream of consciousness, and more. Try to guide students to show how these devices are key to the message of the poem. Time permitting, it may also be useful to have students individually write their own poem of disambiguation for one of the identity-related terms that were listed in the beginning of class to apply their understanding of these concepts to a different context. Or, you might instead have them do a more brief reflection on whether or not their ideas about race and ethnicity have changed after reading the poem, explaining why or why not.

The final poem in this section, "(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)" presents a perfect opportunity to explain to students the concept of intertextuality, or the relationship between two literary texts. Have students put this poem in conversation with Olivarez's "(Citizen)(Illegal)," which inspired it; ask students to identify in what ways the poems are similar as well as how they differ (in form, literary devices, message, and tone). You might also ask students which poem they prefer and why, citing examples from each text to back up their claims. These exercises are a great way to get students to think about intertextuality and how one text can influence another great work of literature. Aside from this, the poem also explores how ideas of home play a key role in identity formation. Thus, it would be worth asking

students not only *how* hernandez describes this process, but also how students would write these processes for themselves.

Conclusion

Summary

In this thesis, I have centered Latinx poetry, detailing the positive effects of including this literature into US high school English classrooms and analyzing how it relates to the lived experiences of Latinx students. I argue that as opposed to relying on ethnic studies as a space to incorporate Latinx poetry, educators should seek out ways to incorporate the literature into required English classes. Inclusion and meaningful discussion of Latinx poems, I propose, will increase student engagement with class materials and help especially, though not exclusively, Latinx students meaningfully negotiate their own identities. Most importantly, I argue that the incorporation of Latinx poetry in standard English curricula will help repair some of the harms that Eurocentrism has inflicted on marginalized students for centuries by demonstrating to students that their cultures are worthy of being studied (de los Ríos, “Upending Colonial Practices,” 365).

In my literature review, I situate my work within the context of three main fields of study: education, literature, and Chicana/Latinx Studies. Detailing my arguments pertaining to each of these fields, I rely heavily on the works of academics such as Paulo Freire, Laura Rendón, and Cati V. de los Rios to develop these arguments. Beginning with the field of literature, I define and show ways in which Eurocentrism manifests in the study of literature and also highlight the value of what are commonly called “counternarratives.” I show how Eurocentrism in the discipline has perpetuated harms against marginalized and BIPOC students by insinuating that their stories do not merit serious academic consideration. I then discuss how Ethnic Studies classrooms have often been used to undo some of these harms while emphasizing community connections; I differentiate my proposal by advocating for the inclusion of Latinx poetry in

required English classes that most students have access to. Thus, I resolve that educators should do what is in their power to both address these harms and avoid reductive approaches to Latinx literature; I propose that they use Latinx poetry to go beyond teaching the grade standard to address the importance of the themes presented in each work.

Secondly, I outline the purpose of an education and detail what I believe it should instill in students. I begin by detailing two important concepts from the work of Paulo Freire: the Banking Concept of education and critical literacy. Aligning my own views with those of Freire, I explain his criticism of the Banking Concept of education, in which students are trained to passively regurgitate information that is instilled by an ‘all-knowing’ teacher (Freire 73). In this system, which is common for US classrooms today, students are not taught to form their own opinions or apply classroom knowledge to the real world. Thus, I agree with Freire that it is the purpose of education not to fill students with ‘objective’ knowledge on a subject, but rather to help students develop their own critical literacy, consciousness, and thinking skills that will aid them in understanding the world.

After this, I detail the responsibilities of a good educator, primarily regarding those who work with marginalized (especially Latinx) students. I explain that educators need to make conscious decisions about how they will address themes such as race, ethnicity, and social justice, and argue that ignoring these themes further perpetuates harm towards students. Good educators should try to connect class materials to students’ lived experiences wherever possible; therefore, they should actively search for relevant materials to bring into the classroom. Through these actions, educators will help free students from past invalidating experiences, and employ a participatory epistemology in their classrooms (Rendón 92, 95). Lastly, I suggest that the role of

a teacher is also that of a learner; thus, they should seek to produce class knowledge collaboratively with their students (Freire 72).

Finally, I explain the differences between Multicultural Education and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and show how the two can be employed to create optimal learning environments. Multicultural Education, at its core, advocates for the inclusion of multicultural texts into classroom curricula. While this is helpful, it is only half of the solution I propose. Educators need to do more than just include Latinx poetry; they need to engage with the poems in a way that avoids reductive analysis. They also need to allow students to bring in alternative ways of knowing to classroom discussions (Rendón, Yosso). Thus, I pose CRT as a way to accomplish all of these things, accommodating multicultural Latinx students, facilitating meaningful class discussions, and allowing students to bring their whole selves to class.

Relating to the field of Chicana/Latinx studies, I hope to push back against monolithic depictions of Latinxs in the United States by centering a diverse representation of Latinidades. Latinx students should see themselves represented as well as be exposed to different Latinx identities through literature. This way, students will be encouraged to bring their identities into the classroom as opposed to being removed from what they read. I also emphasize that classroom construction is not objective; teachers must be intentional about the ways they co-create classroom spaces with their students. They must make informed decisions about which works will be most beneficial for their students, and aim to help students negotiate and articulate their own identities. Ultimately, they should help students develop the needed skills to articulate and understand the complexities of Latinx studies and how they show up in these poems.

After outlining the multi-faceted purposes of this thesis, I then separate my discussion of the poems I present into three main categories: intergenerational definitions of Latinidades,

gender and sexuality, and race. Centering each chapter on one of these three topics, I begin each one by situating it within the scope of this thesis before providing detailed analysis of the works found within it. I also conclude each chapter with recommendations and suggestions for educators who wish to incorporate these specific poems into their curricula.

Chapter two explores inter-generational definitions of Latinidades as they appear in the following poems: “Tesoro” by Yesika Salgado, “Translation” by Julian Randall, “Mexican American Disambiguation” by José Olivarez, “Frijochuelas” by Jasminne Mendez, and “Abijoles” by Lupe Mendez. Through analysis of these poems, I address and complicate themes of Spanish as a marker of Latinidad, how Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality has affected younger Latinx generations to see and name the complexities of Latinidades, and compare nationalistic views of Latinidad with an intersectional lens.

Chapter three narrows in on themes of Latinx gender and sexuality in: “Molcajete” by Yesika Salgado, “Mexican Heaven” by José Olivarez, “On the Night I consider coming out to my Parents” by Julian Randall, and “(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/(hood)(non-binary)” by féi hernandez. I use the poems to explore how gender is performed in some nuclear Latinx families, sexuality and how it can further complicate Latinidad, and gender as a construct within Latinidad. While I acknowledge that all of these themes can be applied on a broader societal scale, I contextualize them within Latinidad not to further perpetuate cultural deficiency narratives about Latinxs, but to bring analysis of these themes closer to Latinx students’ lived experiences.

Finally, in chapter four, I discuss race in Latinidad, analyzing how the topic is developed in the poems ““Muse found in a Colonized body” and “Dendrology” by Yesenia Montilla, “Mexican American Disambiguation” by José Olivarez, and

“(resident)(illegal)/(trans)(American)/ (hood)(non-binary)” by féi hernandez. Discussing how Blackness is described by Montilla alongside her Latina identity, I emphasize how she situates these identities in history. After this, I discuss Olivarez’s exploration of his positionality within Latinidad as a white man, and how he describes colorism within white Latinx families. Finally, I use féi’s poem to acknowledge how Black cultures have been largely influencers of and appropriated by Latinx communities in processes of identity formation, using their experiences in Inglewood as an example.

Recommendations for Future Research

While I have spent the majority of this thesis focusing on Latinx poetry as it relates to the goals of education and producing positive learning outcomes for Latinx students, future studies should center student perspectives and outcomes. If allotted more time and resources, I would have conducted case studies in English classrooms where this kind of pedagogy is already being implemented, and prioritized the inclusion of student voices as a metric to gauge the effectiveness of the curriculum. Additionally, it would be beneficial to include student narratives on (1) the difference they think it makes for teachers to include Latinx literature as a standard part of the curriculum, and (2) the effects that exclusion of these literatures has on their learning, if any.

In regards to the role of educators in this kind of work, future studies may wish to explore different methods and techniques for handling discussion of Latinx literatures than those presented in this project. Aside from this, educators might also benefit from more guidance on how to effectively search for and find new works that reflect the diverse identities of their students. Considering my recommendation to educators to spread out the use of Latinx poets throughout the year as opposed to a singular unit, it would also be helpful to conduct further

research on potential differences there are, if any, in student outcomes when either of these approaches are taken. When continuing research on the poetry, I believe that educators should not seek to establish a standard or find a correct ‘answer’ to the literature they find. Rather, I propose that the aim of future research should be to further complicate Latinx identities and narratives.

Generally, future research related to this thesis should aim to survey a wider range of contemporary Latinx poets; through inclusion and analysis of additional Latinx authors, students and educators can be familiarized with a wider range of Latinidades. Additionally, it would be helpful to conduct case studies in predominantly Latinx high school English classrooms that compare how levels of student engagement vary in classes where Latinx literature is used versus in ones where canonical English literature is used for instruction. These studies might also narrow in on specific geographical locations to emphasize the unique Latinx makeup of the classroom and account for any differences in student outcomes across the country. Furthermore, any future case studies must clearly articulate a metric for evaluating the effectiveness of using Latinx poetry on student outcomes. Possible qualitative indicators of success may include: student remarks on their class materials and growth, student participation and engagement in class, and/or teacher evaluations of students’ collective progress.

Finally, to broaden the scope of this research, future studies should evaluate how effective this inclusion of Latinx poetry is beyond predominantly Latinx classrooms. Drawing comparisons between three types of public schools (predominantly white, predominantly Latinx, and predominantly non-Latinx minority students), future studies could gauge the value of Latinx poetry for students across the US.

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