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For our children,
las uvas y las raíces de una raza universal.
Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Discourse and “Cultural Bumping,”
by Michelle Hall Kells and Valerie M. Balester, with Victor Villanueva 1

1. Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, and the Practice of
Transcultural Repositioning,
by Juan C. Guerra 7

2. Understanding the Rhetorical Value of Tejano Codeswitching,
by Michelle Hall Kells 24

3. Bridging Rhetoric and Composition Studies with Chicano
and Chicana Studies: A Turn to Critical Pedagogy,
by Jaime Mejia 40

4. Keepin’ It Real: Hip Hop and El Barrio,
by Jon A. Yasin 57

5. Valerio’s Walls and the Rhetorics of the Everyday,
by Ralph Cintron 70

6. No nos dejaremos: Writing in Spanish as an Act of Resistance,
by Daniel Villa 85

7. Visions of the City: A Classroom Experience,
by Sarah Cortez 96

8. Creating an Identity: Personal, Academic, and Civic Literacies,
by Diana Cárdenas 114

Tertulia: Commentary by Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés,
Linda Flower, Beverly Moss, and Marco Portales 126

Connections: An Afterword, by Victor Villanueva 140

Author Profiles 144
Acknowledgments

Our thanks and our enduring appreciation to Chuck Schuster for never failing to entertain our imaginative constructions with delight and interest. And to Lisa Luedeke for believing there is still much to say. Intellectual coalitions that spark, energize, and make new scholarship possible need bold editors. Thank you for supporting the work we do. We wish to acknowledge the vision makers who could see beyond what was and imagine what could be. Our gratitude goes to each contributor to this volume for the confidence, persistence, and leap of faith that spanned three years as we shaped this book together. We are especially indebted to our guest commentators who bring not only what they know to this conversation but also what they are learning. To Linda Flower, Beverly Moss, Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, and Marco Portales, thank you for showing us how to learn again.

We thank the ENGL 320 Technical Editing students at Texas A&M University whose careful copyediting helped us bring this volume to completion. To the graduate students at Washington State University who pushed and prodded new thinking and writing, thank you. We wish to recognize the members of the Discourse Studies Student Association at Texas A&M University who planned and organized the 2000 Literacy Symposium, “Literacies and Literary Representations: Posing Questions, Framing Conversations about Language and Hispanic Identities,” which served as the nucleus for this volume. Our special thanks to Diana Cárdenas and Susan Murphy (TAMU–Corpus Christi), Molly Johnson (University of Houston, Downtown), Dave Pruett (TAMU), and Laura Carroll (Abilene Christian College) for leadership and commitment to the issues that framed that event as well as this book; to featured speakers Juan Guerra, Jaime Mejía, David Montejano, Marco Portales, Jan Swearingen, and Joe Estrada, who stirred our thinking; to guest artists Sarah Cortez and Leonardo Carrillo and la Estudiantina Corpus Christi, who stirred our souls. Thanks also to the following at Texas A&M University for administrative and financial support: the Department of English, including their Writing Programs Office; the College of Liberal Arts; the Center for Humanities Research; the Center for Teaching Excellence; and the Race and Ethnic Studies Institute.

To our beloved families and respected colleagues who believe what we do is worth doing, muchísimas gracias por todo. And to our spouses, for all the unnameable gifts you give, Ross, Spiros, y Carol, mi mamí—te quiero.
Introduction

Discourse and “Cultural Bumping”

Michelle Hall Kells and Valerie M. Balester,
with Victor Villanueva

In October 2000, two of the editors of this collection, Kells and Balester, co-chaired the Texas A&M University Literacy Symposium titled “Literacies and Literary Representations: Posing Questions, Framing Conversations about Language and Hispanic Identities.” This interdisciplinary and interinstitutional event initiated a dialogue about language, literacy, and educational access issues of Latino/a college students to which the third editor was later introduced. The event underscored for us that compositionists can better serve ethnolinguistically diverse student populations by engaging in conversations with sociolinguists, literary critics, social scientists, and bilingual educators. What the symposium also showed is that the floor is full of good dancers making some good moves, but no one knows all the moves. It might be important to watch the moves from the sidelines, but we know that it’s more important to get on the dance floor and do some “cultural bumping” (Vélez-Ibáñez). And that is what we have done. As editors and contributors, we forged a team out of colliding interests and common concerns and found ways to keep bumping across the distance of gender, race, space, culture, and language.

Our first awkward moves were with labeling. We had adopted the term Hispanic for the 2000 Literacy Symposium because it was the term most commonly used in the region of the conference. But we realized that if we were to extend beyond local preferences, we needed to acknowledge the often highly negative associations the term Hispanic holds for some people. A residual British term to refer to all things related to Hispania, Hispanic has functioned more recently as the U.S. Census Bureau cover term for U.S. Spanish-speaking populations, making “Hispanic” an “outsider’s” labeling. So we finally settled on Latino for this volume, a term more widely adopted by U.S. intellectuals, artists, and other groups across the country. Yet in using Latino we are painfully aware of its own limitations, an association with Latinoamericanos that can be seen to exclude direct descendents of “New World” indigenous populations, Spain, and others. But naming all the nationalities and identities of U.S. Spanish-speaking peoples would be cumbersome—at best. And we recognize the different cultural-linguistic problems of gender, which compels us to add the feminine “a” to Latino/a.
Acts of labeling and naming tend to open conversations. ¿Cómo te llamas? Literally, “how do you call yourself?” ¿De dónde eres? From where are you? In Spanish, “to be” is not a temporary position but an intrinsic state of being, as the verb ser (in contrast to estar) denotes. These quintessential questions that define and place us in society form the central themes of this volume. But it is a lack of placement that brings us together as scholars, educators, and writers. Brilar uno por su ausencia, to be conspicuous by one’s absence. As our contributors illustrate, absence is the collective story of Latinos/as under the U.S. educational caste system. Moreover, the absence and alienation of Latinos/as from U.S. higher education is not just an English issue. It is an issue of linguistic racism.Parsed by language and a racialization (because Latinos/as encompass all races, all continents—all of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the indigenous Americas, and Asia, as in the former Peruvian and thereby Latino president Alberto Fujimori), Latinos/as have been historically denied place, as Victor Villanueva will underscore in the Afterword.

Every chapter speaks to issues of displacement and mestizaje, mulatismo, the various other mixes—the mixing of literacies and languages and localities. And every essay in this book speaks to intricately intertwined questions about place: social position, citizenship, origin, and belonging.

In the lead chapter, Juan Guerra articulates the dilemma of self-labeling, proposing the concept of “transcultural repositioning” as a way to help all of us (not just those of us with Latino/a origins) negotiate new cultural territories. For Guerra, we must understand the limitations of representation and abandon the search for an all-encompassing term.

The authors in this collection recognize—as we all do—that Americans of Spanish-speaking origin now constitute a new majority in many areas of the American Southwest and elsewhere. Americans of Spanish-speaking origin are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. We recognize, all of us, that Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language in the United States, with an estimated 24 million Americans speaking it as a native language, a historical linguistic contact zone of people talking with each other. According to the Associated Press, recent census data indicates that Latinos/as now comprise the largest “minority” population of the United States. Yet our literacy education, both in English and in Spanish, systematically ignores, devalues, stigmatizes, or marginalizes Spanish. Many U.S. Latino/as speak American regional varieties of Spanish (Tejano, Spanglish, mocho, slang, Tex Mex, vato, AmeRícan) and varieties of English that are stigmatized, ignored, and misunderstood—“tonto in both languages,” as Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera put it long ago (qtd. in Flores et al. 214). We know. We know of the Latinos and Latinas in our classrooms. We know of their linguistic complexity, but we haven’t yet found ways to translate this knowledge into classroom practices that aren’t still founded on an assimilationist set of assumptions.

Assimilation is psychological conquest. And “Latinidad” in the Americas begins with conquest. To historicize the cultural presence of Spanish-
speaking peoples in the “New World” is to trace a 500-year legacy of colonization, imperialism, displacement, and disfranchisement. This legacy endures today replicated through inequitable social configurations. Purity myths (based on the racial, religious, cultural, and linguistic features) have rationalized systems of entitlement in the Americas (north and south of the southern U.S. border) since early “Old World” and “New World” contact. Although the manifestations of racism may vary (discrimination based on color, language, religion, place of origin, or culture), the single central unifying tenet is the same—a claim of inherent superiority by those who enjoy certain privileges and the power such privileges entail. As teachers of historically disfranchised Latino/a student populations, we need not only to understand but to enact the understanding of the discourses our students weave together, unravel, and connect to a ganglion of myths, questions, and issues about civic identity and social access. The historical drama of the colonization of the Americas remains an unfolding narrative as our students map out not only the languages and cultures that continue to evolve in “New World” contact zones, but the implications of conquest and marginalization. The legacies of colonization are still with us.

The discursive practices, spoken and written, of traditionally excluded writers, situated in diverse sites, demand to be heard. We need to know more about the speakers of these Spanish-based varieties of English and the contexts in which Latino/a students use literacy; we need better descriptions of what they can do and what they choose to do with language. As Schuster has pointed out in A Right to Literacy, the literacy of many segments of our population is often misunderstood and mislabeled: “Literate at home, they become illiterate at work, illiterate in society at large” (Schuster 228). The essays in this collection explore how functional literacy practices—functional in the sense of being used for a purpose and also being aesthetically and intellectually satisfying—too often become misdiagnosed as illiteracy when evaluated from an English-Only, academically privileged point of view (Horner and Trimbur).

Contributors to this volume shift their frame of observation and interpretive stance to reflect on our prevailing assumptions about marginalized writers and marginalized linguistic codes. Ralph Cintron (Chapter 5) examines material culture and the private space of Valerio, a young Latino writer struggling with poverty and the stigmatization of a learning-disability label to illustrate the liminal conditions many Latino/as encounter within the U.S. educational system. Diana Cárdenas (Chapter 8) focuses on the conflict between the U.S. professional ethos and traditional socialization of Latinas. Kells (Chapter 2) reexamines the notion of codeswitching and complicates how we view it. This work, based on interviews with four Latino graduate students, also brings into question our understanding of cross-cultural research and the difficulties of really entering a discourse community as an outsider.

Some of the contributors explore the pedagogical implications of their findings and offer suggestions for classroom practice. Jaime Mejía (Chapter 3) calls for new approaches to literacy education of Mexican-origin student
Introduction

populations that bridge composition studies and Chicano/a literary studies to help us better understand how Mexican students actually go about collaborating when they compose. Writing from the perspective of a researcher and teacher of Spanish, Daniel Villa (Chapter 6) examines the value of biliteracy and recovering students’ heritage languages. In doing so, he reminds those of us in English composition that our students, often with English as their first language, still value their heritage languages and need ways to confront historical stigmatization to cultivate their sociolinguistic identities more fully.

Jon Yasin (Chapter 4) analyzes the use of hip hop as an effective medium for teaching entry-level college literacy practices. Sarah Cortez (Chapter 7) engages urban Latino/a students in the writing of poetry and blurs the boundaries between the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature. In her classroom, she also reconnects many students with their feelings about place and about Latino/a heritages. Cortez introduces some of these heritages to students unfamiliar with Latino/a cultures. These essays on pedagogy share a common theme: the richness and importance of the literacy practices, heritages, and discourse strategies Latino/a students bring to their educational experience.

In the final section, we bring together voices of commentators Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, Linda Flower, Beverly Moss, and Marco Portales in a tertulia. A tertulia is an informal gathering of intellectuals, a discussion of art, politics, literature—a circle of free-flowing wine and conversation, a Latino/a version of the French salon. Each commentator was asked to read and comment on the essays, overlapping a bit in roundtable fashion. Flower and Moss foreground a theme contained in all the essays: literacy as an empowering and identity-forming activity, questioning our use of those terms, empowerment and identify (or self). Rodríguez Milanés and Portales bring to this discussion a very personal note, again foregrounding identity as they identify with the successes and struggles our contributors describe. All bring to our tertulia their understanding of literacy as significant to personal, social, and cultural life, their understanding that as symbol-makers we all participate in meaning making (although we may not always have equal access or equal privileges). Our tertulia is a discussion and an intellectual dance with the other contributors to this collection.

In Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States, Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez offers the metaphor “cultural bumping” to depict cultures in contact. “Cultural bumping” is a useful way to talk about the kind of work we intend to initiate in this volume. Vélez-Ibáñez argues:

All human populations move from one area to another for the same basic reasons, both in the past and in the present: to subsist. In so doing, they bump into each other and the way in which these processes unfold becomes crucial to understanding the formation of a regional and subregional identity. (5)
The challenge we face is that, while we are bumping into one another, we don’t body slam our students. As Vélez-Ibáñez observes, “sometimes the bumping process is so onerous that it eliminates much of the bumped” (5). This seems to be the case for Latino/a students in the U.S. educational system. Before we can understand the performance of identity in our students’ writing, we need to relinquish the myth that Vélez-Ibáñez describes as the “mistaken idea that human populations somehow are culturally ‘pristine’” (5). When it comes to language and culture, there is no “purity.” Culture is alive and dynamic—and changing. Our students will be changed in the academic cultures they join, and in turn our academic cultures will and should change to reflect their presence.

Some time ago the anthropologist James Clifford also observed:

“Cultures” do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship. (9–10)

Certainly, these warnings complicate what we do—as researchers and as teachers. Yet we can do research, as long as we understand that the act of “writing culture” (Clifford) is an artificial construction subject to the frailty of perspective; as long as we remain mindful of limitations and aware that there are other ways to write the same events; and as long as we invite the interpretations of those we study. When we interrupt the power of the ethnographer’s gaze, Clifford writes, “it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices of positioned utterances” and “the writer’s voice pervades and situates the analysis . . . objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced” (12). Pushing that a bit further, it becomes clear we need both research done with sensitivity and care from the outside as well as research done, with equal care, from the inside.

The editors and contributors to this volume represent a diverse group: Black, White (Irish American and Italian American), Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, and a host of others who bring an array of experiences and insights to issues facing an equally diverse group of students in our colleges and universities. These are not exclusively “Latino/a” issues. The themes addressed in this book are collective issues. We’re all on the dance floor doing the cultural bump.

Note

1. Although problematic and politically charged, the “term” Hispanic is growing in prevalence among Mexican-origin peoples in Texas and the Southwest. A more detailed discussion about issues of Latino self-labeling is offered by Guerra in Chapter 1.
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Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, and the Practice of Transcultural Repositioning

Juan C. Guerra

After more than thirty years of struggling with the important task of naming ourselves, of finding a term that best describes the rich diversity our community embodies, we are no closer today to a shared sense of an all-encompassing self-identity. Some among us bemoan the fact that we are still quibbling about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Some among us believe that until we agree on a term that best describes us to ourselves and to others, we are doomed to wander aimlessly in the wilderness of self-misrepresentation. Ironically, those among us who are most disturbed by our inability to locate ourselves through the use of a term that everyone in our community will accept as a label of self-designation are often the same people who decry the existence of master narratives in the tales we tell about ourselves. For years I counted myself among those who believed that unless we could secure a definitive label connected to our foundational roots, we would never achieve the degree of unity that members of any community must attain to establish their presence in the conflicted terrain of the culture wars of our time. No more.

There was a time, in the days of my youth, when I thought of myself as puro chicano. Having served proudly in affiliation with Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado, no other label of self-identification made sense to me. But times have changed, and so have the ways that I describe myself. In Chicago, most of the time but not always, soy hispano o latino. In Texas, soy tejano. In Mexico, soy mexicano americano. In Washington state, soy chicano. When I am out of my element, I refer to myself as Mexican or mexicano. And when I am around Anglos who are not quite sure what all of these words ending in “o” mean, I tell them—and yes, I admit that I still grit my teeth and bite my tongue before I speak this phrase—that I am Hispanic. At this point in my life, I want to believe that whatever singular label I may prefer to use to define myself in theory is no longer as important as the multiple labels I must choose to identify myself in practice.
In the course of the next few pages, I want to speak from the position that I have demarcated for myself in the preceding paragraphs as someone in search of a better understanding of how our multifaceted self-representations and our multiple ways with words can be used to enhance rather than restrict our ability to move fluidly in and out of the porous communities that currently comprise our nation. First, I want to discuss how we have been represented or have represented ourselves as a people in demographic, artistic, historical, but especially in ethnographic terms. In so doing, I want to emphasize that no single representational term has the power to portray a community as internally diverse and complex as ours. Second, I want to discuss the concept of situated literacies as a set of social practices that members of our community have developed in the course of crossing the borders that separate many of us from one another. In this second section, I will trace the shift from the great divide and continuum theories that shaped our earliest discussions in literacy studies to the multiple and situated perspectives that most of us currently promote.

Finally, I will discuss a rhetorical practice that has become increasingly salient in recent years and that many in our community are poised to develop more fully: the ability to engage in what I call transcultural repositioning. (For a discussion of how transcultural repositioning manifests itself in the codeswitching practices of a group of four Mexican graduate students from South Texas, see Michelle Hall Kells’ chapter in this volume.) This rhetorical skill is one that members of our community must self-consciously regulate and not simply enact intuitively, if they wish to move back and forth with ease and comfort between and among different languages and dialects, different social classes, different cultural and artistic forms. If enacted critically, transcultural repositioning can open the door to different ways of seeing and thinking about the increasingly fluid and hybridized world that is emerging around us. Moreover, it can help us develop a better understanding of the society we are actively transforming through our sheer numbers and community practices. By invoking the power and authority inherent in our literacy practices, and especially in the strategic rhetorical ability that more and more members of our community are developing as we learn to navigate our way through the perilous social and political waters of a nation in upheaval, we may yet chart our own destiny and ensure that everyone among us is granted the right to personal agency and self-determination.

Ruptured Representations of a Life World That Will Not Stand Still

For some time now, many of us who traffic in the discursive representations of others have been caught in a postmodern web of ironic entanglement that George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer refer to as the “crisis of representation” (8). In my own experience, this moral dilemma has sometimes created conditions under which I have become so concerned about the work
I do that I have experienced varying degrees of paralysis. Maybe, I have wondered, it would be better not to attempt to represent the complex lives of research participants. Then I wouldn’t have to be constantly on guard about having unknowingly violated some ethical principle that could lead some of my colleagues to count me as a member of a group I find reprehensible: the neocolonialist scavengers who appropriate, then misrepresent, the lived experiences shared by members of marginalized communities. Fortunately, over time I have persuaded myself that the work I do is worth this risk because it is of some value to our community. More recently, I have come to terms with this conundrum by shifting the focus of concern from the “crisis of representation” to what Gregory Jay calls “the struggle for representation.” In Jay’s view:

[It] includes struggles over the theory of representation as well as over the actual cultural and political distribution of representation. The questions we face might be put this way: Who represents what to whom, for what reasons, through what institutions, to what effect, to whose benefit, at what costs? What are the ethics of representation? What kinds of knowledge and power do authorial forms of representation produce? What kinds of people do such representations produce? Who owns or controls the means of representation? What new ways of representation might better achieve the goals of justice and democracy in the overlapping worlds of education and politics? (10)

In an effort to come to terms with some of the questions Jay raises, let us look briefly at a number of current representational scenarios involving Latina/os in this country.

According to Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, who has published an edited collection titled *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, the “new immigrants” of the post-1965 era are in the process of transforming the demographic and cultural foundations of this country. In 1945, he notes, only 2.5 percent of the U.S. population was Hispanic. By 1995, that number had grown to 10.2 percent. Both the U.S. Census Bureau and immigration scholars currently project that by the year 2050, 24.5 percent of this country’s population will be Latina/o. While our community’s actual and potential growth is having an obvious impact on those who are its members as well as those who are threatened by it, Hispanics—as Marco Portales demonstrates in *Crowding Out Latinos: Mexican Americans in the Public Consciousness*—are still relatively invisible to the mainstream conscience served by the print and visual media. But if current trends are any indication, even here our presence is beginning to be felt more than ever because of the growing representation of Latina/os in both literary and artistic circles. In literature, the presence of Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Julia Alvarez, and Isabel Allende have forced literary scholars to come to terms with the growing influence and representation of our community, especially its cultural and linguistic practices. In television and film, Jimmy Smits, Edward James
Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, Transcultural Repositioning

Olmos, Esai Morales, Jennifer Lopez, and Elizabeth Peña are beginning to appear in both Latina/o-based and mainstream storylines that demonstrate their crossover potential.

With the increasing range of channels on cable and satellite services, we have also experienced the growing presence of Spanish-based television networks like Univision and Telemundo in markets that did not carry them until very recently. Not surprisingly, the greatest impact has come from the varied musical genres produced by members of our community. Selena’s crossover a few years ago, as well as the more recent switch from Spanish to English represented by Marc Anthony, Shakira, and Paulina Rubio, all signal a dramatic shift that has become increasingly salient at the beginning of the new millennium. Carlos Santana rocked the mainstream Grammy Awards in the spring of 2000 by tying the record for most Grammys won by a single artist, and in September 2000 CBS telecast the first annual Latin Grammy Awards. Unfortunately, no matter how many Latina/o musical acts manage to cross over, as was true with Cuban and Puerto Rican music in the 1950s and Black music since the 1930s, their work is likely to have a limited impact in terms of lessening the racism experienced by most members of our community in their everyday lives.

In our own profession, the relatively small number of Hispanic students pursuing graduate study and thereafter a career in academia is still cause for concern. Nevertheless, we are fortunate to have a growing list of book-length studies produced by Latina/o scholars who have committed themselves to constructing, and sometimes reconstructing, different aspects of our community’s rich heritage and cultural practices. In Mexican American Studies, David Montejano’s Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986 and Juan R. García’s Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900–1932 are but two of a number of regional studies that reorient our sense of the difficult path that generations of Mexican-origin people have traveled in the course of contributing to the building of this country’s social, cultural, and material infrastructure. Other important works that attempt a more panoramic view of the same kinds of conflicts and struggles—David G. Gutiérrez’s Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity and Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez’s Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States—have helped to rectify the myopic views that some of us possessed for different reasons about the impact that people of Mexican origin have had, and continue to have, on U.S. history, culture, and society at large.

For those of us interested in the more specialized areas of cultural, educational, and literacy studies, the growing presence of Hispanics in the arts and the important demographic and historical research undertaken by Latina/o scholars have provided us with the tools we need to build a firmer basis for contextualizing the critical role that spoken and written discourses play in the everyday lives of Latina/os and—in the more specific case that I am considering in this section—of people of Mexican origin. In recent years, for example, stunning works such as José E. Limón’s Dancing with the Devil: Society and
Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas and Ralph Cintron’s Angels’ Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday have granted us special insights from a postmodernist perspective into the cultural practices of Chicanas/os and Mexicano/as. Each in its own self-reflective way has implemented an interpretive stance that provides us with a poetic and inspired reading of the “ways with culture” of working-class members of our community. More prosaic, but just as useful in helping us understand the life world of Mexican-origin people, is the recent publication of a series of ethnographic studies that examine issues of gender, educational attitudes, and language and literacy practices among members of a group that has experienced a growing presence in our community: the Mexican immigrant. Among the more widely recognized are Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration; Guadalupe Valdés’s Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances Between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools; Olga A. Vásquez, Lucinda Pease-Alvarez, and Sheila M. Shannon’s Pushing Boundaries: Language and Culture in a Mexicano Community; and my own Close to Home: Oral and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexicano Community. These works provide us with an understanding of the highly situated lived experiences of mexicana/os residing near the Texas/New Mexico border, the San Francisco Bay area, as well as rural Mexico and the inner city of Chicago.

When examined within the framework of the questions Jay raises in his discussion of the struggle for representation, the various representations I have described inevitably lead us to speculate about why there are so many of them at this point in history and who they benefit the most. Without question, the increasing presence of Hispanics in the mass media is a direct outcome of the growing number of potential consumers that the corporate powers in charge of selling commercial products want to attract. As I am sure most readers would agree, the decision to expand the representation of Hispanic life is not the result of some altruistic motive on the part of profit makers; clearly, they are both able to interpret the demographic changes as effectively as we are and also to exploit them. The organic artists who have emerged from our communities and who have an abiding interest in representing it in discursive, aural, and visual terms are generally not as crassly driven by profit motives, but they are often just as exploited by profit-seeking corporations as are the consumers whose needs these corporations create and then fulfill. Along the way, many Latina/o artists, especially those in the film and music industries, have become complicit by exploiting their ties to a community that identifies with them and their status as mass-produced cultural icons. As Raquel Cepeda notes in her recent critique of hip hop artists in an essay titled, “Money, Power, Elect: Where’s the Hip-hop Agenda?”: “Rap is now a sample-heavy, benjamin-raking, crudely individualistic pop-culture phenomenon that is very far from its earlier counter cultural and activist impulses” (118).

As members of academia—piecemeal workers in one of this country’s main knowledge-making industries—we are in no position to escape this type
Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, Transcultural Repositioning

of scathing critique. After all, the scholarly work that we do—no matter how deep our collective ties or how cherished our activism—almost always grows out of the twin desires to do our community a service and to do well for ourselves professionally and economically. While most of us are committed to the task of producing scholarship that depicts what we consider more relevant and respectful representations of our communities, we, too, are without question complicit in the same system of exploitation and beneficial recipients of the tainted fruits of our labor. As Genaro M. Padilla points out in *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*:

I believe that we must . . . question the current practice fashionable among critical anthropologists of calling their own imperial practices into question, many of whom are shaping powerful academic careers for themselves by speaking in a confessional mode, a self-reflexive narcissism that further displaces Third World people by making them the objects of theoretical speculation. Although this kinder, gentler anthropology calls for collaborative, dialogic ethnographic exchange, it is in my estimation just another strategy for focusing attention on the anthropologist rather than on the people whose lives are confiscated in one way or another by strangers. (240)

In the end, any representation of the communities we portray is always already ruptured, not only because it is incapable of containing a complete picture of a community’s everchanging nature, but also because all of us—Padilla and myself included—are invariably complicit in a system of oppression that benefits those who already have and continues to disadvantage those who still have not.

**All Literacies Are Not Created Equal**

As challenging as the issue of self-representation has become for members of the Latina/o community, it pales in comparison to the number of alternative ways in which scholars have represented the concept of literacy over the past thirty or so years. In my dissertation, for example, I identified forty-three relatively different definitions of literacy. In *Close to Home*, I shifted my interest from literal to metaphorical representations of literacy and identified sixty-two ways in which scholars in our field have represented literacy to one another. Each of these definitions and metaphors, of course, represents a slightly different ideological stance on the part of its conveyor; together, they dramatize the ongoing struggle among scholars in the field to frame the concept of literacy in ways that pinpoint their theoretical stances and lead to sets of recommendations about its uses in all kinds of educational and everyday contexts.

To better understand the nature of these competing ideologies, we first must recall that what began among anthropologists as the notion that there are vast differences between “primitive” and “civilized” cultures has in time transformed into an analysis of the differences between “nonscientific” and
“scientific” cultures and, finally, into a discussion about the differences between “oral” and “literate” cultures. This latter dichotomy, often referred to as the theory of a “great divide”—a metaphorical representation used by theorists who champion a deficit model to explain away the differences of a marginalized people—was first introduced in the 1920s by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who put forth the notion that there were differences in cognitive capacity between members of different cultures (Street, *Literacy* 29). The controversy surrounding Lévy-Bruhl’s theory eventually pushed a number of anthropologists “to the point of denying that the distinction between non-literate and literate societies [had] any significant validity” (Goody and Watt 28). In an effort to correct what they saw as an increasing shift to a relativistic perspective, Jack Goody and Ian Watt changed the focus of the argument by claiming instead that what was involved were differences not in cognitive capacity but in cognitive development (Street, *Literacy* 29). In their view, because nonliterate people have “little perception of the past except in terms of the present” (Goody and Watt 30) and are consequently unable to distinguish between myth and history, they remain mired in an eternal and concrete present. Walter Ong developed this idea further by arguing that the nonliterate members of what he and others call a “primary oral culture” can easily lose information or ideas that are “non-formulaic, non-patterned, or non-mnemonic” because they are difficult to maintain in one’s memory and are easily and readily reshaped by “situational” events (35).

As innovative research by scholars such as Ruth Finnegan, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, Shirley Brice Heath, and Brian V. Street began to seep into the conversations about the relationship between orality and literacy, some theorists challenged the implications inherent in the metaphorical entailments of this new and improved great-divide perspective and introduced an alternative metaphor—the concept of an oral/literate continuum. According to Deborah Tannen, none of the previous theorists and researchers who had done work in the field of literacy studies could argue that literacy replaces orality when it is introduced in a culture. What happens instead, Tannen contended, is that “the two are superimposed upon and intertwined with each other” (3). Based on her work in an African American working-class community in the Piedmont Carolinas, Heath immediately challenged the inherent limitations of Tannen’s oral/literate continuum. Because she thought it impossible to “place the community [she was studying] somewhere on a continuum from full literacy to restricted literacy or non-literacy” (“Protean” 111), Heath instead recommended the use of two continua, the oral and the written. In her view, the points and extent of overlap and the similarities in structure and function of the literacy events and their patterns of use in Trackton may follow one pattern, but will most likely follow other patterns in communities with different cultural features (111). We must, Heath concluded, move away “from current tendencies to classify communities as being at one or another point along a hypothetical continuum which has no societal reality” (116).
More recently, Brian Street—a leading member of the New Literacy Studies Group, a group that arguably has done more than any single group of scholars to promote a multiple-literacies perspective—also challenged Tannen’s position and took it a step further. In his view, Tannen’s use of the term “continuum” “remains closer to traditional, and narrower aspects of linguistic theory and method and does little to detach her from the autonomous model of literacy” (Social 168), a model, Street argued, that its proponents believe facilitates “logic, rationality, objectivity and rational thinking” (76). It is, moreover, an apolitical view that represents literacy as a set of decontextualized skills that do not change from one social setting to another. In opposition to the autonomous model, Street presented what he calls an ideological model of literacy, a model that James Gee contends is based on the view that reading and writing, which “are always embedded in power relations” (Social 133), “only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political and economic) practices of which they are but a part” (Gee 180).

While this latest shift has complicated our understanding of literacy in ways that make our work more productive, members of the New Literacy Studies group recently insisted that the concept still needed a bit more tweaking. Multiple literacies, Street noted, do not take us much further than the notion of multiple cultures has done in some manifestations of cultural studies. Yes, the “notion of multiple literacies is crucial in challenging the autonomous model,” Street argued, but “once you slip into the notion of multiple literacies you then begin to move towards culture as a listed inventory.” In other words, it becomes next to impossible to avoid “recreating the reified list—here’s a culture, here’s a literacy; here’s another culture, here’s another literacy” (Social 134). It comes as no surprise, then, that members of the New Literacy Studies Group have proposed a new term that addresses some of these shortcomings: the notion of situated literacies (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic). This reorientation clearly makes sense because there is always more than one literacy being practiced by members of any community at any given time. This stance also highlights the importance of distinguishing, not between a standard language or literacy and a nonstandard one, but between a dominant language or literacy and a marginalized one.

For any one of us who has internalized the language (Delpit) and the literacies (Macedo) of power in this country and who is expected to teach them to our students, at the very same time that we want to honor the “funds of knowledge” (Moll 17), that is, the range of experiences with situated literacies that they bring into the classroom, this challenge raises a number of serious questions. How do we usefully acknowledge the existence of the situated literacies that our students have experienced outside the classroom? How do we get our students to value both the situated literacies they practice in the ever-changing circumstances of their lives outside of school and those they will need to enact in school to fulfill the expectations of teachers who believe students must learn the language and literacies of power in the United States? Finally,
because “every literacy is learnt in a specific context in a particular way” (Street, Social 140), how do we do all this without having our students succumb to the socialization and acculturation inherent in the learning of dominant literacies to the point where they begin to deny the legitimacy of their experiences with other situated literacies? Before I address these questions in my closing remarks, I want to examine how our never-ending (mis)representations of community and our ever-shifting conceptualizations of literacy play themselves out in the formation and representation of a self that emerges from such a community and the subsequent need to locate that self in the turbulent social spaces that it increasingly occupies in a postmodern world. My goal here is to assert that we as educators need to do everything we can to encourage all of our students, but especially those who come from marginalized communities, to expand their intuitive horizons and engage in the practice of transcultural repositioning from a strategic site of power and agency that requires a critical and self-reflective attitude. Because I want to give this abstract concept some flesh and bone, I will use myself as a case in point.

The Changing Awareness of Shape Shifters

Some fifty years ago, I was born in a labor camp on the outskirts of the South Texas town of Harlingen to a Mexican immigrant woman who had made her way across the border with two young daughters in tow. A few years later, we moved into a brand-new, highly segregated housing project where my stepfather and six other siblings joined our family over the course of the next several years. Like everyone else in our barrio, my siblings and I went to the local public elementary school where, from the first grade on, all of our teachers were forced by state law to teach us English without ever using the language or dialect that we children held in common. Long before I knew who Michel Foucault was, I learned the meaning of his phrase “discipline and punish” to suggest the ways in which institutions structure our behaviors, often by force. In sixth grade, for example, my male Anglo teacher took us all out to a nearby thicket on the first day of class so that we could cut tree branches, which we then took back to the classroom and stripped free of their bark. After we attached name tags to them to identify our individual switches, our teacher had us put them in an umbrella stand where they remained until we misbehaved. As if that weren’t enough, every morning our teacher would have us all stand by our desks and announce whether or not we had done our homework. Those of us who hadn’t would have the palms of our hands slapped sharply with a wooden ruler. Without anyone ever saying a word, I learned right away that if I were going to thrive and not merely survive in such an environment, I was going to have to learn to engage in the practice of transcultural repositioning, of shape shifting in cultural, linguistic, and intellectual terms.

In middle school, I was exposed for the first time to the embodiment of European-American culture in the form of my peers. While my Japanese-
Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, Transcultural Repositioning

American, Anglo³, and four Chicana/o teachers had exposed me to the histories of Texas, the United States, and western civilization over the course of my elementary school years. I had never sat with a non-Chicana/o or non-Mexicana/o student in any one of my classes. We like to talk about how porous communities are in this day and age. No doubt the communities many of us grew up in had the potential to be just as porous, but back then, not so long ago, the powers-that-be made every effort to smother the multiple languages, cultures, and social practices present in our varied communities so that they could not mix. Moreover, because my family did not own a television set during most of my elementary school years and we always tuned our radio to border stations that played música norteña, we remained isolated from the world at large in a way that many children today, even those who live in highly segregated communities, do not experience.

During my middle and high school years, the porosity of communities finally became a reality that I could experience. As I entered middle school, the world around me changed. In school, I was suddenly surrounded by as many Anglo students as Chicana/o and Mexicana/o ones. And because our family could now afford a black-and-white set, television provided my siblings and me with glimpses into idealized, middle-class Anglo lives through such programs as “el Andy Griffith Show,” “Leave it to Beaver,” and “Father Knows Best.” At about the same time, top forty radio literally shook the ground that I stood on by introducing me to los Beatles, los Rolling Stones, los Temptations, los Miracles, and las Supremes. Enthralled by the idea that someone who could write and sing songs in English that had the power to touch the hearts and minds of adolescents, I started carrying a small notebook and a pencil so that I could write my own song lyrics at home, when cruising around, or hanging out on street corners with my friends.

My first three years at Harlingen High School expanded my horizons by increasingly complicating my sense of the world, but it was still a confining environment in which I had to know my place. Despite my being un guërito (a light-skinned Chicano who could pass for White), my name, my first language, and my social and cultural upbringing prohibited me from interacting with Anglo students outside the classroom. As had been true in elementary and middle school, our teachers were still on the look-out to make sure that we didn’t accidentally slip into the language or dialect of our homes. Whenever we did—something that happened fairly regularly since the continuing, in-school segregation reinforced our relationships with our barrio peers—teachers would take us to the principal’s office where we would be reprimanded and given after-school detention for doing what for us was an integral part of our daily lives: speaking Chicano Spanish and codeswitching. Although I didn’t know it at the time, all that would change in the summer before my senior year of high school when I moved to Chicago to live with an older sister.

Like the peasants that Freire sometimes quotes in his work, I was submerged in ways that limited my opportunities to interpret the oppressive...
conditions that we faced in our South Texas schools and barrios. Like them, I would occasionally experience epiphanies, brief moments of clarity when I saw the world for what it was. Unfortunately, those epiphanies were fleeting moments at best and would quickly degenerate into sustained periods of self-doubt or, worse yet, into bouts of self-loathing that often led me to question my place in the world. Is it possible to think of these transient epiphanies as hints of an emerging critical consciousness? I think that we can indeed see them as the earliest glimmers of a self-awareness on the verge of blossoming into what I’m calling the practice of transcultural repositioning: a concept that builds on Vivian Zamel’s work on how second language writers enact transculturation and Min-Zhan Lu’s work (“Writing,” “Conflict”) on the important function of repositioning in the discursive lives of basic writers. But I also think that Stanley Fish adds something to the conversation in his critique of self-critical consciousness when he argues that it may be enough to call these instances examples of a continuously changing awareness.

Carl Schurz, the Chicago high school that I attended during my senior year, enrolled only a scattering of Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latina/os. Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that I decided to venture out of my once segregated existence and began to cultivate—for the first time in my life—intimate relationships with my Anglo peers. At the television factory where I worked the evening shift after school, I also befriended working-class African American and Puerto Rican men and women whose lives were certainly more similar to mine than the lives of my Anglo peers at school. Although my awareness of the social contradictions in the larger society were beginning to take shape, I was still muy tapado (very dense), as my mother used to say. For example, one day when the school principal made an announcement about scholarships available for Mexican American youth, I totally ignored it. No doubt my prior experience in South Texas had taught me to assume that a scholarship could not be meant for someone like me. Fortunately, the announcement was not lost on Mr. Piper, my chemistry teacher. Because he repeatedly ordered me over a period of several days to apply, I finally broke down and did it. To my surprise, I was awarded one. The summer after I graduated from high school, when I was still working at the television factory, Mrs. González, a member of the scholarship committee, called me to find out what universities I had applied to. “Applied to?” I asked naïvely. “What does it mean to apply?” Although the start of classes was mere weeks away, Mrs. González’s counsel managed to help me get into the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).

My four years in college, and everything that came afterwards, again accelerated my need to practice the fine art of transcultural repositioning. As the only Latina/o student in all of my English classes, I often felt implicitly dismissed by most of my peers as someone who didn’t belong. Fortunately, yet again, a number of my professors, always White and male, always young and leftist, would devote large chunks of their time to working and talking with me about the possibilities for the future. Consequently, when Professor Stern
encouraged me shortly after I’d graduated to apply for a job as a writing teacher in an educational opportunity program (EOP) at UIC, even though I had only a bachelor’s degree, I finally understood the meaning of possibility. My experiences over the next fifteen years in EOP classrooms populated overwhelmingly by students of color from poor and working-class, inner-city communities in Chicago helped me to understand the degree to which many of them were, for the first time in their lives, exercising particular rhetorical muscles and beginning to engage more regularly in the critical practice of transcultural repositioning.

Since then, my life has followed a path that has provided me with rich opportunities to continue the practice of transcultural repositioning. After I married an African American woman, who like me was born and raised in poverty and whose parents and siblings all lived in the heart of one of Chicago’s largest and most segregated African American communities, the need for me to enhance my ability to reposition myself transculturally increased dramatically. What made this act of repositioning even more difficult was that everyone in both our families also had to adjust to the realization that she and I were the first in our families to marry someone outside of our racial and ethnic communities. Still, the experience provided us all with a chance to learn from one another about different ways with words and ways with culture. My decision to pursue graduate studies and later attain a professorship also impressed upon me the need that all of us—especially the students in our classes who face an accelerated pace of cultural change that many of my peers and I didn’t have to face until later in life—have to learn how to self-consciously engage in the practice of transcultural repositioning.

Even though the overwhelming majority of the students in my classes today are Anglo, I still make use of every opportunity to alert them to the ways in which the process of transculturation plays itself out in all of our lives. In the context of my professional role as a scholar, I share what I’ve learned in the course of my ethnographic research among Mexican immigrants caught in the midst of a massive social and linguistic transition as they leave their rural communities and adjust to urban life in Chicago. In tandem with the observations related to my own work, I have students read excerpts from publications such as Rosaura Sánchez’s *Chicano Discourse* to familiarize them with the code-switching practices of Chicana/os. While selections from the work of David Wallace Adams and K. Tsianina Lomawaima acquaint them with the U.S. federal government’s attempts throughout history to assimilate American Indian children by taking them from their families and enrolling them in boarding schools, selections from Geneva Smitherman’s work alert them to the ways in which the educational system stigmatizes the language practices of African American children. Finally, passages from the work of scholars like Rosina Lippi-Green and James Crawford provide my students with an overarching sense of how the “language subordination model” works in each of these cases to demean the language and literacy practices of groups of people who refuse to succumb to forms of socialization that disregard the tremendous power of their hard-earned funds of knowledge (Lippi-Green 67–69).
In an effort to highlight the political implications of such restrictive and racist language policies, I also have my students read selections from a number of autobiographies in which the authors grapple with the consequences of their hard-won identities. The critical and multigenre autobiographies of progressive writers who embrace transculturation—Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Luis J. Rodríguez, and Victor Villanueva among them—provide students with intimate insights into the contradictory and potentially devastating forces that members of marginalized communities often encounter. The narratives also demonstrate how these writers have managed to transform many of their experiences into opportunities for personal and collective growth. Because it's important for students to appreciate the ramifications of the choices that the aforementioned writers have made, I also have students read the more traditional autobiographies of neoconservative minority group members—such as Richard Rodríguez, Shelby Steele, Stephen Carter, and Linda Chávez—who argue that assimilation is the only appropriate response to the circumstances that some of us face as members of marginalized groups. In the course of talking and writing about the competing perspectives represented in these readings, students in class gain a better understanding of the options available for using language and literacy within the vortex of transculturation.

Finally, whenever it seems appropriate, I share some of the personal experiences I described in the autobiographical section of this chapter and ask my students to delve into their own personal experiences in ways that will encourage them to reflect on how the practice of transcultural repositioning has played or can play itself out in their own lives. The concrete examples I provide students from my own lived experience illustrate the abstract theoretical ideas we often encounter in our assigned readings and demystify their notions of the kind of people their professors are. Although it's difficult for some of my students to delve into their own experiences—especially when many of them have lived fairly privileged and mainstream lives that haven't exposed them to the rich possibilities of transculturation—most take advantage of the chance to explore the range of dialects, registers, and styles that they and members of their families have often suppressed in the course of their desire to assimilate. In the process of reading and writing about the professional, political, and personal takes on transculturation to which they have been exposed in my classes, students often come to value the multiplicity of voices and situated literacies available to anyone willing to operate outside the constraints of imposed standards.

Because I don't want my students to assume that engaging in the practice of transcultural repositioning is some sort of panacea, I also make every effort to acknowledge just how difficult it is. Even after teaching for almost thirty years in university settings, I point out to my students that there are times I feel like an interloper in the academy. Transculturation, I want them to remember, is not a process we go through to feel connected and whole once and for all. I am also careful not to let my students assume that our goal in the class is to read a social scene and adapt to it in the way a chameleon is genetically programmed to adapt to its physical environment. I don’t want my
Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, Transcultural Repositioning

students to become what Lu calls “discursive schizophrenics” who write “alternately as an ‘academic’ and a ‘black’ or a ‘suburbanite’ as one ‘moves’ in and out of the academy” (“Writing” 20). Like my colleague Anis Bawarshi, I believe that we need “to teach our students how to become more rhetorically astute and agile, how in other words, to become more effective and critical readers of the rhetorical and social scenes within which writing takes place” (19). And if by chance they learn how to expand their repertoire of rhetorical strategies through the practice of transcultural repositioning, in time my students may come to realize that it offers them more creative and productive possibilities than assimilation ever will as they read and write their own lives.

Notes

1. This essay is based on a keynote address I delivered at the “Literacies and Literary Representations Symposium: Posing Questions, Framing Conversations about Language and Hispanic Identities” held at Texas A & M University on October 6, 2000. My thanks to Michelle Hall Kells and Valerie M. Balester for their efforts in organizing the symposium.

2. The question of identity and its relationship to what we should name ourselves as individuals or members of a larger community continues to generate provocative discussions among scholars. In Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective, Jorge J. E. Gracia contends that, after all is said and done, “Hispanic” should be our term of choice. In Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles, Paula M. L. Moya—who self-identifies as a Chicana (41–42)—offers an alternative to essentialist and poststructuralist views on identity in the form of a postpositivist realist perspective. Two recent edited collections—Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race and Rights (Gracia and De Greiff, eds.) and Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism (Moya and Hames-Garcia, eds.)—add other voices to the conversation.

3. When I was growing up in South Texas, members of my highly segregated community used to refer to the Anglo residents of my hometown as gringos, güëros, gabachos, and bolillos—all slightly derogatory terms with varied histories. As an adult, I have regularly used the terms “White,” “Anglo,” and “European American” to identify this same population. Each of these three terms has its strengths and weaknesses as a descriptor, but I have decided to use the word “Anglo” in this essay because it is still the term that I continue to use most frequently. Terms of identity, as I tried to demonstrate at the beginning of this chapter, are consistently problematic across all racial/ethnic groups residing in the United States.

4. The term transculturation was originally coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940. According to Ortiz, “the word transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. In the end, as the school
of Malinowski’s followers maintains, the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them. (103)

Works Cited


Emerging Representations, Situated Literacies, Transcultural Repositioning


