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## Composing Her Growing Identities as a Mexican American

Xiaodi Zhou

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [xiaodi.zhou@utrgv.edu](mailto:xiaodi.zhou@utrgv.edu)

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## **Composing her Growing Identities as a Mexican American**

### **Introduction**

This paper addresses the cultural positioning of a Mexican American girl from the rural Southeast via her literate experiences. Here, I describe how her adolescent ethnic cultural identity is constructed through and via her engagement with language, and how her bilingual bicultural compositions helped form that identity. There was a two-way manifestation of both her heritage Mexican cultural position and the southeastern U.S. culture. The engagements she had with literacy expressed a cultural identity that fluctuated and even at times expressed both simultaneously. The texts she read were mostly from English-speaking U.S. contexts, but the language of the stories she heard at home from her parents and other adults in her community was Mexican Spanish. These stories offered different cultural schema as well. Her language use, as well as the motifs and tone of her writing, conveyed her cultural affiliation that was complex and multidimensional.

For one year, Maria, the fourteen-year-old US-born Mexican American girl from an undocumented family in rural Georgia, and another middle grades girl in her community, had been involved in my pilot study investigating the writing behaviors of early adolescent Mexican American students. I conducted a year-long pilot study as preview to my full study, where I coded observations and our four transcribed hour-long interviews. I wanted to have a clearer understanding of the type and richness of the data I would be getting. As such, pilot studies in qualitative research can be utilized to test the research process and gather initial clear themes to delve further in the actual study (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002).

I found that literacy had been her source of escape and a coping mechanism for as long as she could remember. Two distinct languages and cultural contexts co-created her understanding

of the worlds of the texts even as those same books also influenced her own cultural beliefs (Cai, 2002). For, as she lived in a predominantly Spanish-speaking family, watched Univisión daily, listened to Mexican canciones de rancheros (Ranchera music), and was haunted by La Llorona, the Weeping Woman from Mexican folklore (Herrera-Sobek, 2012), her literate world was simultaneously made up of her English-speaking school context and the fictional persona from mainstream US pop culture.

### **Literature Review**

As the Latinx population steadily climbs in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), their education and acculturation play important roles not only with respects to addressing shifting demographics, but also in the cultural, political, and economic policies of this nation. Seventy-seven percent of English Language Learners (ELLs) are Spanish-speakers, now the fastest growing demographic of the K-12 population, with 40% of this population claiming Mexican heritage (Kim et al., 2011). However, the fact remains, Mexican American students perform markedly worse on reading and writing assessments than same-age peers. Although teachers at times encouraged and incorporated Mexican dimensions in the classroom, such as facilitating “multicultural learning by drawing on their [heritage] cultural contributions, such as Mexican *piñatas*” (Marrow, 2010, p. 190), there generally was not sufficient recognition of Mexican culture and heritage in school.

### **Mexican American Identity**

Mexican Americans, like other minority youths, may engage in dialogic interplay with their cultural identities (García & Gaddes, 2012). For instance, Mexican American girls to try to fit in at school, often experience “the tensions of trying to ‘act like White girls,’ and ‘trying to pass’” (García & Gaddes, 2012, p.152), trying to conform their behavior to some White

normality (Stevens, 2005). When they come home, however, they are immersed in the Mexican heritage cultures and languages of their families and home communities. So, we are apt to see dialogic instances of ethnic identity where youths may vacillate between ethnic identities and cultural memberships (Bakhtin, 1986; Schilling-Estes, 2004). García, López, and Makar (2010) researched the complex ways Latin American ethnocultural identities are constructed. They found both the cultures of the U.S. and Latin American nations to be heterogeneous and full of the eclectic “colonial and neocolonial categories of race and ethnicity” (p.355).

As many as 7,200 unaccompanied minors are arrested annually on their journeys to the U.S. from Central America and Mexico (Tota, 2010), and many of them are adolescents escaping poverty and crime. These adolescent Mexican American immigrants may encounter cultural difficulties after they have arrived in this society (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007; Stewart, 2013), as they manage their multiple indigenous cultural identities in this Anglo-American context (García & Gaddes, 2012; Orellana, 2009). This transnational population experiences the same developmental and academic stressors as their Caucasian American peers, and additionally they must simultaneously deal with the unique task of synthesizing a blended cultural identity while overcoming the trauma of such a harrowing journey. In the U.S. school system, however, currently, the voices of Mexican American students and funds of knowledge tied to these foreign frames of reference are largely ignored (Gonzales, 2005).

The Mexican American community, in addition, has unique cultural narratives and collective experiences, such as their journey over to the U.S. The transportation bridge between these two different geographical locations is fraught with danger and tribulation (Groody, 2014). Often, Mexican American children speak of the train carrying migrants across the border,

referred to as “La Bestia” (“The Beast”) or “El Tren de la Muerte” (“The Train of Death”) (p.20).

These labels connote a primal savagery that may accurately describe the harrowing journey, as many itinerants are robbed, beaten, raped, or tortured. Some of these migrants are kidnapped and their families extorted for ransom. In the most extreme cases, even murder and death can result. According to Stewart (2013), with such tales of these journeys, it is no wonder so many Mexican American adolescents cling to their existence in the States. These students’ identities are infused with a collective narrative of trauma, and perhaps such spoken recollections can later be depicted via writing (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Mexican American Writing**

Ethnic identity can be defined as “one’s overall identity focused on the values, attitudes, and behaviors of one’s ethnic heritage culture, and becomes particularly salient during adolescence as youth increasingly reflect on the meaning of their ethnicity and the role it will play in their lives” (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015, p.88). During adolescence, components of the Mexican heritage ethnic identity play a growing role in the overall development of a Mexican American adolescent. Cultures outside the West have long used life narratives to express their personal knowledge and shared their cultural and linguistic identities via writing, particularly the Mexican culture (Meléndez, 2007).

Currently, Mexican American students do generally perform below their mainstream culture peers in the U.S. on a wide array of literacy measures (Kim et al., 2011). For example, a quantitative research study conducted by Kim and colleagues (2011) has shown that “the poor reading and writing performances of (Mexican American students) in the middle grades persist through high school” (p.232). The researchers implemented the Pathway Project as literacy

teacher professional development that included cognitive strategies in using on-demand writing assessments to help predominantly Mexican American mainstreamed middle and high school students understand, interpret, and write academic essays. The efficacy of the program was tested in a multisite, cluster-level randomized controlled trial involving 15 secondary schools in the Santa Ana Unified School District in California. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies give these adolescent writers insight into their writing process, the thought patterns that gear their behavior, as well as offer strategies to sustain these endeavors.

The researchers used the same pre and post-test on-demand writing assignments in the 50 test classrooms or those whose teachers attended the Pathway seminars, as the 51 control classrooms where teachers did not. There were marked improvements in the post-test on-demand writing quantity and quality by students in those test classrooms. They found these Mexican American students required more guided instruction of reading and writing to help develop deeper thinking and interpretations, as well as conveying those cognitions through writing while mastering writing conventions.

These scholars claim that metacognitive skills help develop meta-awareness about the text, domain knowledge, knowledge about text attributes, and procedural knowledge to engage in literate activities. In tandem, writing, along with reading, has “the potential to contribute in powerful ways to thinking” (Kim et al., 2011, p.234). These new mental activities facilitate “brainstorming, drafting, editing, and publishing (for writing)” (Kim et al., 2011, p.234), and so Pathway strategies may improve these Latinx students’ English writing ability.

Results from a follow-up study (Olson et al., 2012) show that treatment effects were replicated to an on-demand writing assessment, and data demonstrated evidence of improved performance on a standardized writing test for the students involved in the Pathway project.

These results provide substantiation for cognitive reading and writing intervention strategies for middle grade Mexican American mainstreamed ELLs. Their marked improvement in writing assessments, though insufficient alone as a gauge, does support the merits of such targeted programs in the literacy field.

The current research does make a connection between Mexican American youths' literacy development and their cultural outlook. This study addresses this phenomenon, specifically in relation to President Trump's anti-immigrant stance as a vocal aspect of the dominant culture. So, this paper seeks to describe the conflicted feelings of one adolescent Mexican American girl as manifested via her engagements with her social, cultural, and political world via literacy that utilizes elements of both the larger dominant culture in which she has grown and the heritage culture that encompasses her family and community.

### Gaps

Insufficient attention has been paid to Mexican American youths in undocumented communities and their engagements with language and literacy. Even given the current climate, this population still lives in the shadows of society where their voice is not sufficiently represented. As such, literacy practices of youths within this community may reveal the lived experiences of this marginalized population and allow educators to glean insight into how to effectively and securely address the educational needs of individuals like Maria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Bakhtin's (1981) notion of hybridity and double-voicedness and utilizes García and Li's (2014) concept of translanguaging to showcase that mixture through language use. These theoretical foundations frame Maria's life in an interstitial space, as there are multiple languages and cultures in her world. It is in midst of these interstices that an

intersubjective notion of national and personal identity is maintained. This hybrid prose is a mixture of two realities. In bilingual writing in particular, there are “two linguistic points of views, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.76). They are social and cognitive acts influencing both the script and the writer’s own subjectivities (García & Li, 2014). As Maria composed her writing, I saw a hybrid cultural identity expressed on the page.

Through Maria’s words, I saw  
the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living  
in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming  
together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference  
causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.51)

These multiple perspectives created in her composition a compounded double-voicedness that heralded a complex cultural frame of reference for understanding her message. In this double-voiced hybrid construction of self, she brings forth a particular perspective of the U.S., Mexico, English, and Spanish, and the conjunction of the four concepts. Translanguaging through both English and Spanish is how she enacts this hybridity via language usage in the writing she composed. Being double-voiced, however, goes beyond merely alternating language type, but also a fluctuation between US and Mexican cultural perspectives or frames of reference so that the resultant discourse merits a hybridity of consciousness yielding a duality of existence.

Such composition from multiple cultural and linguistic frameworks manifested as translanguaging between vernaculars. When authors or readers “are asked to alternate languages for the purposes of receptive or productive use” (García & Li, 2014, p.20), they activate alternating linguistic and cultural frames for understanding as well. Translanguaging in writing, particularly with Spanish and English, activates contingent cultural voices as well. In this

context, “reading and writing are not only individual processes of meaning construction but also processes of social and symbolic transactions through which people learn to use written symbols within particular sociocultural worlds” (García & Gaddes, 2012, p.146).

These languages and meanings dialogue with each other in the cultural context of their creation (Bakhtin, 1986). A hybrid reality is presented in these writings that necessitates understanding dual notions of the world. The writer’s cultural identity, or identities, is continually in the process of becoming and is displayed in the diction, format, and style of her writing (Bakhtin, 1981). For Latinx students, “[t]ranslanguaging gives back the voice that had been taken away by ideologies of monoglot standards” (García & Li, 2014, p.105). The reader, upon transaction with the text, is even privy to alternating subjective expressions. This relationship is heteroglossic and notions of reality multiple.

### **Methods**

I conducted a narrative inquiry as a single qualitative case study lasting three years (Reissman, 2005; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2001). I went to her community setting every two months to gather data. I used this methodology because I desired to prioritize the lived experiences of my participant and her own voice as she speaks and writes about her life. I believe such voice (particularly conveyed through literacy) elucidates much about both her cultural positioning and her literacy practices, as well as their intersection. In examining my participant’s stories as elicited from observations, interviews, and her writing, I looked for cultural affiliation and memberships throughout all these data. Certain instances of speech, behavior, and writing corresponded to either Mexican or U.S. perspectives, such as language use (e.g., Spanish, English) and activities (e.g., making tamales, carving a pumpkin for Halloween). Data from all three sources were entered into Microsoft Excel to map out intersections. I desired to uncover “a

multivocality and multiplicity” in her stories (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2001, p.109), particularly in her multilingual and multicultural texts, where her perspectives were plural.

### **Participant Selection**

I came to know Maria when I was serving as a counselor in her neighborhood as part of my assistantship for my doctoral program. The neighborhood clubhouse was an afterschool center for children which helped with homework, provided snacks, and offered books to borrow (Authors, 2016). I chose her because of her propensity to read and write, as well as her eagerness to talk about her literate activities and her life in general. At the clubhouse, she led a group of fellow club-members, known as Young Book Lovers, where they would all read a book together followed by discussions. She regularly participated in writing competitions at school, such as the one for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. She was also very eager to participate in my study to be able to tell her stories.

Maria was the oldest of five children, all of whom were born in the US to undocumented parents from Mexico. At the time, she lived with her mother, stepfather, two younger sisters, and two younger half-brothers. She was very close with her siblings, even though she admitted she sometimes quarreled with her younger sisters. She excelled in school, particularly in Language Arts, although she did need help with math homework at times. Her dream when I first met her was to be an attorney, but she later remarked that she wanted to be a translator for people like her parents to help them navigate their lives in the US.

### **Research Design**

To investigate Maria’s literate and cultural behaviors, I conducted a single qualitative case study lasting three years from March of 2014 to March of 2017 in her community in rural Georgia (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I collected data and coded them based on my study

parameters. The data I collected consisted of writing samples, both digital and hard-copy, observations from field notes, and twelve semi-structured one-hour-long interviews. The hard-copy writing consisted of stories she had written in her notebook at home, free writes at her summer camp, and rough drafts of school assignments. Digital writing were formal school assignments, like reading responses, and entries for writing contests, like the Martin Luther King Jr. Contest. The interviews followed a guided protocol that focused on her literate activities and cultural inclinations, but I encouraged Maria to discuss tangential stories as I desired rich meaningful narratives in the data (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011).

This type of research aims “to see what some phenomenon means as it is socially enacted in a particular case” (Dyson & Genish, 2005, p.10). I wanted to examine Maria’s literate activities in the sociocultural context of her world as an early adolescent Mexican-American girl living in an undocumented family in the rural southeastern US in a time of great political division and animosity towards unsanctioned others. This was a descriptive endeavor meant at identifying connections across different layers of variables and meanings. I investigated expressions of both majority and heritage cultural displays, at times via literacy.

Observations occurred in her home and in the community. They also were conducted when I went with her and her family to the local farmer’s market, Walmart, or at restaurants in the community. The interviews occurred in her home at the dining table where I recorded our conversations via Audacity software on my laptop. I sought to understand her cultural identification and attitudes via these interviews, as well as her lived experience of that culture and the ways she practiced and felt about literacy. Cultural identification in her work was coded by the language used, the themes discussed, and the style of writing. Spanish usage and Mexican motifs indicated a more heritage inclination, while English usage and U.S. cultural themes

represented dominant cultural trends. In the interviews, I looked for certain themes that related to her Mexican heritage identity and the dominant U.S. identity<sup>1</sup>.

### **Data Analysis**

I studied the written data for evidence of cultural and linguistic hybridity (Anzaldúa 1987; Bakhtin, 1986). I coded language, style, and content for both Mexican and U.S. elements. I looked for instances when certain themes crossed over to other contexts, such as writing about Mexican traditions for a school assignment where the intended audience was dominant culture peers and teachers.

I engaged in text analysis of her writing (Leki, 1991), analyzing certain writing conventions, such as “preferred length of sentences, choice of vocabulary, acceptability of using first person, extent of using passive voice...[and] the amount of metaphorical language” (p.125). Because she wrote at times bilingually in both English and Spanish, I also looked at how the two languages authored herself and her cultural affiliation through thematic coding of her writing (Reisman, 2005).

The codes developed for her writing included: Culture/Race, Gender, Family, Friends, School, Class, Developmental Age, Reading, Writing, Pop Culture, Geography, Border Crossing, Stress, Cultural Allusions, Tone, Metaphors, and Spanish Language Influences. I color coded all of her writing according to these themes. Cultural hybridity was operationalized as two or more Cultures/Race codes within a single piece of writing. Spanish Language with English in a single utterance was coded as translanguaging, whereas if two languages were separate as translations, it would be bilingual. The other codes present in the writing were analyzed in relation to the cultural codes that were also present (either Mexican, majority U.S., or another minority).

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Appendix 1

Certain diction that were synonymous in English and Spanish often had nuanced differences, so that they authored a different tone. Her literate world engaged in dialogue with her cultural one<sup>2</sup>.

### **Findings**

Maria's writing could often be a hybridized composition of her cultural and linguistic identities. Even the languages and cultures her writing was based on, English and Spanish, from the U.S. and Mexico respectively, are hybridized versions of European vernaculars and cultures. In the engagement of words, Maria's "two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis, two speaking subjects" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.76).

### **Growing Identities through her Writing**

#### **A Child's Fantasy World**

I collected Maria's writing composed from spring of her 5<sup>th</sup> grade through to the spring of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, spanning 2014 to 2017. I found when she was in her elementary school year, Maria tended to write a lot about Disney characters. I wondered about this as most of the Disney characters were White, and not Mexican (Streich, 2002). At this point, she used writing as an escape from her reality. For example, when interviewed on June 16, 2014, she articulated, "I also wrote stories about me being in Atlantis, like the underwater city. Yeah, I sometimes dream of it, and I wrote it." In her narratives she wrote and in most of the texts she read when she was younger, the characters are all non-Mexican, most of whom were White, such as Tinkerbell and Ariel.

Perhaps, she used literacy as an escape or as a means to experience something novel. Although she identified as Mexican, lived with a Mexican family, spoke Spanish at home, ate Mexican meals, listened to Mexican music and watched telenovelas, she also had a desire to leave

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to Appendix 2

her surroundings. She often used literacy to escape her context to experience a new culture, like the worlds of *The Hunger Games* and *The Little Mermaid*. The characters in those texts were mostly White, just as the characters were in her own writing.

When I asked Maria in the fifth grade about whether she wrote about her Mexican culture, she responded, “I don’t really write about my culture. Well, I’m Mexican, but I really write a lot of Disney stuff, and go into another world, like all underwater, or somewhere magical. But, it’s always about here, about being here” (Interview, June 16, 2014). For example, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* was in several of her pieces, such as this narrative composed on August 18, 2014. The crossed-out words in this writing sample were her own edits, as pieces such as this were hand-written on loose paper, and then copied in my field notes as they appeared:

”A Sudden Change”

Splash! Wow! did I just see a mermaid tail, ~~splash~~ in the water. Well, ~~does~~ ~~are~~ there is only one way to find out. So I dived in the ocean and swimed to where the mermaid was and I was right! It is a mermaid. Not only a mermaid but it is Airel the mermaid princess. Cool. So I followed her, and I caught up to her. Airel said “Nice to meet you.” I replied “Nice to meet you too.” Airel said “Hey, I like your tail”. What?! Yeah, oh, I have to leave bye! Airel said. Oh, well Airel left.

Now I had time to figure out, how I grew a tail.

I coded this piece as popular culture and developmental age, as well as dominant culture due to the Disney reference. In this piece, she escaped to a magical underwater world. Not only did she see the redheaded mermaid princess, but she also became a mermaid herself at the end of the piece. The story ends with her growing a tail, adding a narrative cliffhanger. She expressed to me

that she often employed such plot twists at the end of her stories because she knew her intended readers, her two younger sisters, would be hooked.

In this monolingual English piece, I saw her also composing her cultural identity (García & Gaddes, 2012; Kamler, 2001). In these fictional literate activities, she incorporated many of the fantasy stories she had consumed, mostly of White characters and White narratives in English, because that was what made up her literate world.

### **Writing Cultural Bridges**

However, as Maria got older, I noticed that her writing focus started to shift. Those vestiges of Disney princess stories had receded to the background, and she began to develop greater personal agency and heritage voice in her life, as well as a more explicit manifestation of her family's cultural identity and story. Through her writing, Maria often captured the cultural activities of her family. For example, in an assignment for school composed in the sixth grade, she wrote about Christmas at her house:

Christmas is finally here! Have you ever celebrated Christmas? Well if you haven't, read on and find out why Christmas is so important.

One part of Christmas is having family traditions. The first detail about having family traditions is having everyone in your family united or together. You might also have a special dinner for your family. The last detail about tradition are presents for members of your family.

Second part of Christmas is having food. One thing you might eat are tamales. Have you ever tasted tamales before? Well I have. They're as soft as a soft and puffy as a marshmallow. You might also have a special fruit punch for

your family, it is as sweet as a bowl full of ice cream. Mmm...One last thing you might each are creamy, soft mash potatoes.

Finally the last part of Christmas is having a little family time. One activity you might do is dance with your family members. One thing about Christmas is being joyful with one another. That's what Christmas is all about! One last activity you might do is open presents at midnight.

Christmas is a fun holiday! I hope you have fun! Christmas is as fun as kids riding a rollercoaster! (December, 2014)

In this Christian holiday, I could see her dual cultural identities expressed simultaneously in this bicultural piece, as both heritage culture and dominant culture traits were presented. There were elements of heritage traditions, like eating tamales and opening presents at midnight before Christmas day instead of waiting until the next morning. Family was another code here. I noticed that the language and style of writing she used in this piece was indicative of her schooling in the U.S. (e.g., five paragraph essay).

She spoke only in English to me and to the other teachers, and conversed mostly in English with her sisters and with her friends. But, she also spoke mostly Spanish with adults in the community and with her two youngest brothers, because they could better comprehend Spanish. When I asked her about how she felt about writing, she answered, "Writing is really, *really*, really easy for me" (Interview, January 28, 2015). As Maria had gotten older, I have seen shifts in the voice and tone of her writing. Perhaps this was due to her developing awareness of current events. The perspective of her writing had also shifted, from that of White Disney characters to an embracing of her heritage culture and race. She seemed to yearn to venture beyond writing fictional narratives, to author her own story as well, to assert her place in her

world. In her later writing, Maria displayed these coexisting dual linguistic and cultural references. In this bilingual poem she wrote in sixth grade for the Martin Luther King Writing Contest, her position within two cultures and languages was intentionally composed by Maria in two different font colors digitally on a computer:

When will  
I live A Better  
Life?

Quando Vivere  
Una Vida  
Mejor?

I have a dream  
That one day  
I will get to cross  
The Border  
Here I am  
Every day  
It gets worse  
The worst thing  
Is that  
In the train  
“The Beast”  
There is nothing  
To eat or Be warm  
When will the President  
Barack Obama let us  
Mexicans cross  
The border  
And let us live  
A better life  
That is my dream.

Mi sueño es  
Que un día  
Pueda crusa  
La Frontera  
Aqui Estoy  
Pero cada dia  
Esta Peor  
La cosa mas peor  
Es que  
En el tren  
“La Bestia”  
No ai nada  
Para comer o Para esta caliente  
Cuando sera que el Presidente  
Barack Obama los dejara  
Nosotros Mexicanos Crussar  
La Frontera  
Y dejar que vivamos  
Una Vida Mejor  
Ese es mi sueño.

February 17, 2015

Geographical place and language were dominant codes here, as well as culture, specifically cultural perspective, and language, as well as border crossing, both literally and figuratively in her language and cultural transgressions. When she read this piece to me, she read one complete English phrase over multiple lines, and then the corresponding Spanish.

By composing texts as a system of both English and Spanish, she “combine[d] and juxtapose[d] scripts as well as explore[d] connections and differences between their available writing systems in their text making” (García & Li, 2014, p.67). Maria utilized the nuances in language to compose different tones, particularly in lines 3-4, where she wrote “I will get to

cross/The Border” in English, and “pueda crusa/La Frontera” in Spanish. Although “frontera” may be translated to “border,” there was also the added meaning of “frontier.” If viewed from a Mexican migrant’s perspective, the border separating Mexico and the U.S. could indeed be conceived of as a frontier. So, with this respect, her language use also positioned her culturally, and changed the context for interpreting the piece’s meaning and tone, to manifest a heteroglossic piece from two voices (Jaworski, 2012). There was clearly a double-voicedness (Bakhtin, 1981) in both the languages she employed (Spanish and English) and the perspectives she depicted (Mexican and U.S.).

But her U.S. cultural and English linguistic identities were also evident. First, the structure of this piece was modeled on Dr. King’s *I Have a Dream* speech, with the opening phrase, “I have a dream that one day.” In fact, her social studies class in her Georgia public school was studying the U.S. Civil Rights Movement at the time, and this particular speech in the historical context of the era. She wanted her teacher or her classmates to understand also the struggles of Mexican immigrants.

Also, another similarity was the salience of geographical place in both texts. Whereas Dr. King referenced the red hills of Georgia, and the sweltering heat of Mississippi and Alabama, Maria described the U.S.-Mexican border, emphasizing the in-between-ness that she felt nestled between and within these two geographies. In fact Dr. King was also presenting dichotomous cultures in his piece: that of Black and White cultures and of Northern and Southern cultures, perhaps emphasizing the double-voicedness of the identity of African Americans. Thus place and culture were also tied, as with Maria’s own text; these dual perspectives was also related to her multiple cultural, linguistic, and geographical identities. Geographical place had such deep meaning for her, as often times, she wrote with the theme of place, whether it was escape, or

certain contexts that were also laden with dimensions of power and identity. So, while translanguaging, she was also have engaged in “transculturation” (Smith, 2003, p. 476) between and among different cultures within the U.S.

But her U.S. cultural and English linguistic identities were also evident. First, the structure of this piece was modeled on Dr. King’s *I Have a Dream* speech, with the opening phrase, “I have a dream that one day.” Also, another similarity was the salience of geographical place in both texts. Whereas Dr. King referenced the red hills of Georgia, and the sweltering heat of Mississippi and Alabama, Maria described the U.S.-Mexican border Geographical place had such deep meaning for her, as often times, she wrote with the theme of place, whether it was escape, or certain contexts laden with dimensions of power and identity. So, while translanguaging, she was also have engaged in “transculturation” (Smith, 2003, p. 476) between different cultures within the U.S.

The diction Maria used to describe this journey aboard “The Beast,” of an expedition rife with “coyotes,” connoted a dehumanizing tone, indicative of the experiences upon this trek (Groody, 2014). The fact was that people migrating through the southern borders were subject to primal savagery and made to endure unspeakable tortures. This was another connection with the experience of slavery, as those African people were abducted on ships as cargo across the Middle Passage, prompting her empathy for U.S. slaves. Her own focus on the dehumanizing aspect of her family’s and others’ in her community crossover corresponded then to what she learned in her school, from the history of slavery in the U.S. to Nazism in Germany during World War II. She immediately attached to the theme of humanity, as she repeatedly asserted her humanity and the humanity of many of her characters in her writing, from mermaids to oppressed peoples.

This utilization and ownership of distinct languages did correspond to disparate cultural historical orientations and global psyches (Blommert & Rampton, 2011). Each language conjured an entire collective past, with shared memories and experiences. By bifurcating this piece by language and by meaning, she was in fact transposing her dual linguistic consciousness, where her two languages presented and represented distinct aspects of her cultural identity (Ortega, 2009). Yet while these two cultural positionings were at odds in her daily life, in this piece, they conjoined to incite social activism, to take a critical stance against the injustice she saw in her life. Also, the themes of space and geographies, of the inaccessibility of places, also undergirded her writing (Iqbal & Starr, 2015). These two spaces were given different identities, purporting different power standings in each locale.

Additionally, she often expressed her anxieties and social discomfort in writing, specifically free-verse poetry. For example, she wrote another bilingual piece on June 22, 2015:

I am one	Yo soy alguien
Who feels	Quien se Siente
lonely and scared	Solitaria y espantada
But even though	Pero
I feel those emotions	Cuando siento esas emociones
I always stand	Siempre me levanto
Up for myself	Por yo misma
Never letting	Nunca dejando
Anyone push me	Que alguien me empuje
From my Hopes	De Mis Emperanzas
Or dreams	O mi suenos
And I am one	Y yo soy alguien

That even though	Que a pesar de que
I might be poor	Soy pobre
Economically	En la economia
But	Pero
Rich in my heart	Rica en mi corazon
And	Y
I will <b>always</b> have	Yo <b>Siempre</b> tendre
My head raised	Mi cabeza elevar
Up	Ariba
Not Down	No abajo
'Cause I am one	Porque Yo soy alguien
That has pride	Que tiene orgullo
In my heritage	En mi Herencia
Not shame	No verguenza
And	Y
I am a	Soy una
Human- being	Ser-Humano

Here, the theme of being human, or “ser-humano,” was again explicitly articulated. However this poem had a tone of defiance and resolution, which reached its apex in the eleventh to last line, with the bolded word “always,” as she “always” has her head raised high. She decided to bold this word to add extra emphasis to her efforts to sustain her pride. The line prior, how she “might be poor economically but rich in [her] heart,” was another juxtaposition she felt. Along with being Mexican and American, a child and an adult, she was also materially poor, but spiritually

or emotional rich. I found this fullness to be from the love of her family, and the tremendous bond she felt with them.

For example, in her composition, the story of *La Llorona*, or *The Weeping Woman*, was used as impetus for her writing of frightening narratives. The tale originated in Aztec legends and was about a native woman falling in love with a Spanish man who drowned her children in a lake to be with him (Herrera-Sobek, 2012). The man then refused her love, so in her devastation she drowned herself in that same lake. The grief-stricken mother was stopped at the gates of Heaven and was forced to wander the banks of the lake searching for her children's souls, crying out for them in vain.

When she wrote for a school assignment during Halloween about the mystery of the haunted house in her neighborhood, an abandoned building on the edge of the neighborhood covered with broken windows and sprawling vines that crawled up the brick facade, she utilized the folklore of *La Llorona* to create the ambiance and tone of fear. The abandoned building had its own legend, a tattered brick and wooden tenement with broken windows, dark green veins of slithering vines, and a creaky wooden staircase that ascended the back, nestled lonesome on the northern edge of the neighborhood:

What I am Afraid of...

One thing I am afraid of is the "Hauted House". One reason I scared about it is it's legend. They say that someone used to live there and disappeared. Another reason is it's appearance. How it looks like. It is freaky. Well, the windows are broken and you can barley see the house from all the weeds. Oh. If you try to take a picture of it you hear some-one tapping on the window and you hear like the house come alive! Freaky! Well that's a haunted house! The hauted house is

scariest place in the community. It is the legend that makes it scary. The legend was that people used to live there, then poof! They disappeared. There is a black cat that guards the house. (October, 2014)

This text was coded as heritage culture, yet the language and geographical place was aligned with the US. One influence from *La Llorona* was the legendary aspect of the abandoned abode being passed orally down and among residents of a gruesome murder of a family who once lived there. The fact that a family disappeared corresponded to La Llorona's children's spirits disappearing as well. Still another influence from the Mexican folklore was the auditory aspects of Maria's story. She described how one could "hear" someone tapping on the windows and "hear" the house come alive. These aural aspects related to the story of *La Llorona*, and the eerie sound of her weeping for her children. She had hybridized the space of the U.S. neighborhood with Mexican stories.

### **Writing as Advocacy for Her Own People**

Over time, Maria's sociopolitical world was changing. Perhaps there was also a fundamental shift in her existence as well where she was also entering a new reality, one which caused her to reconceive of her identity as she entered adolescence (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015). Her contextual issues of adolescence also came with the rise of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, and his xenophobic, anti-immigrant stance (Giroux, 2016). I never saw her accept those deleterious accusations, as she still strove to take pride in her heritage through her composition.

Maria and her family had always been skeptical of Trump's rise. When first asked to express her feelings regarding the business mogul turned politician, she wrote:

Donald Trump says one stereotype of Mexicans is that they're kidnappers, rapers, criminals. Well, there is some Mexicans like that, but not all Mexicans are like that. Some Mexicans work, like day and night like my dad to be able to help their families, to be able to maintain them. (September 14, 2016)

Maria took on a more thoughtful argument, by admitting that some Mexicans are indeed criminals, but not everyone. Also, she connected personally with his rhetoric by describing her stepfather, whom she calls "dad" in her composition, as defying those characterizations, constructing a bridge between her personal world and the political one.

Her passion even made her compose an essay on July 29, 2015, just as Trump's campaign was beginning. She explicitly detailed much of Trump's statements against "illegal" immigrants: that they stole jobs, committed rapes and murders, while bringing drugs into the US.

Figures 1 & 2: Prewriting notes of Maria's essay opposing Donald Trump's presidential candidacy:

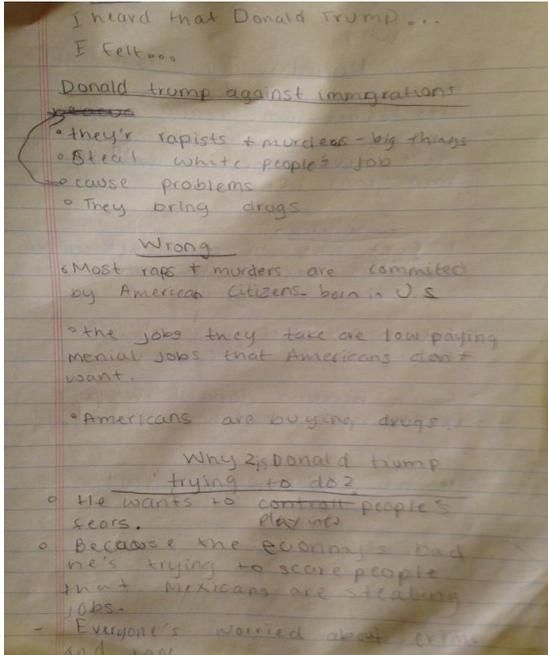


Figure 1: Page 1 of Prewriting Notes

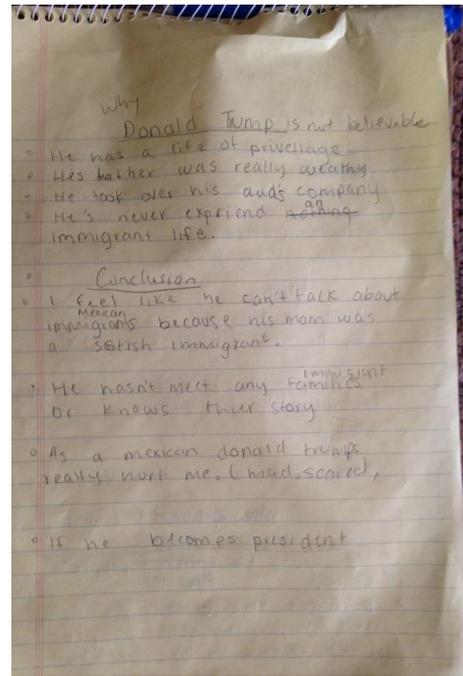


Figure 2: Page 2 of Prewriting Notes

We discussed these issues, and she decided on the essay format as the best means to argue against his presidency. I gave her an assignment of composing an essay from our conversation, and in the ensuing piece, she sought to erode all of Trump's anti-Mexican rhetoric.

Recently, there has been a debate about Immigration from Mexico to the United States, and whether there needs to be more border security. At the center of this issue is Donald Trump, the real estate billionaire now running for president.

Donald Trump believes that Mexican immigrants are rapists, murders, and cause big conflict. He also believes that they steal white people's jobs and bring drugs to the U.S.

Although, he claims these beliefs are fact statics will prove him wrong. Most rapes and murders are committed by American citizens born in the U.S. Also the

jobs immigrants take are low paying menial jobs that Americans don't want and Mexican immigrants take to support their family.

Lastly, if Americans wouldn't buy drugs then why will immigrants bring them to the U.S? In addition, there are different groups dedicated to bringing drugs in the United States are separate from families that just want a better life.

Although, Donald Trump's statements are incorrect he has good reasons so he will get more voters. His strategy to get more votes is to play into people's fears and them that immigrants are bad people. Since the United States economy is not in a good condition currently, he's trying to scare people that Mexicans are stealing Americans jobs which will continue to hurt the economy. He also knows that The Americans are going to believe him because they think Mexicans are causing crime and sexual assaults, due to his remarks about them.

Donald Trump has been very successful in the business field he lacks the credibility to make negative statements about immigrants. He has lived his whole life in privilege as his father was wealthy and more. He's never had the experience to apply for a job or look for one because he took over his dad's company. He has had no close personal interaction with immigrants or get to know their stories so he does not know what they've been through to coming the U.S.

While Donald Trump to feels he is qualified to become president of his business experience, his comments about immigrants raise concerns. He can't talk about Mexican immigrants because his mother was actually an immigrant herself. He's never met any Mexican families or know the reasons they came to the United States. As a Mexican I can say that his comments hurt families and makes them feel like outsiders. If he becomes president it might make it difficult for Mexican families to live the American Dream. (July 29, 2015)

This piece was coded as culture, stress, and class. It was clear that Maria's sentiments regarding Trump was formed after discovery of the disparaging remarks made by the mogul regarding Mexican immigrants to incite a xenophobic, anti-immigrant base of supporters.

In this composition, I saw Maria standing up for her heritage, for her family. She felt a need to push back against the dominant culture and a culture to her partially exemplified by Trump, which in her mind was uncaring, cruel, and affluent. So, the crystallization of her heritage cultural identity was a defiant reaction to the negative societal forces rampant in her life, and Maria depicted her Mexican culture using Spanish in some of her work.

After Trump's election victory, I came to see how she, her family, and her community were doing. When I asked her how she felt, she told me:

I'm very upset that he won. I was really hoping Hillary would win, but things happen. We're gonna wait and see what happens. I think they're joking about it, but they said we might move to Canada. They were just joking about it. My dad had said to not panic, because we don't know what's gonna happen. (Interview, November 16, 2016).

Maria's response was mature and pensive, reflective of her stepfather's calm. But, I also saw tense anticipation and anxiety amongst residents in her community. These families indeed began thinking about very real and life-altering options for their futures.

### **Becoming Biliterate**

When she was younger, her writing was most always set in the dominant culture, full of Disney and other popular culture allusions. But, as she matured, her life began dialoguing with her dominant culture realities (Bakhtin, 1986). She was in-between two cultures, the dominant culture of Southeast U.S. and her heritage Mexican culture, straddling both perspectives and

realities through her texts (García & Gaddes, 2012). For example, in this piece, Maria composes a poem about her neighborhood over two years later, using both English and Spanish. The turquoise font was Maria's own selection in this digital piece:

I am from the bright sun in the early mornings  
To the loud explosions from fireworks.  
From the bells of the *paleteros* (ice cream cart)  
ringing in the afternoons, urging kids to buy the *paletas* (popsicles)  
to the sizzling meat on the grill.  
I'm from the red clay river under the bridge where nothing goes  
to the spice of candy made from *tamarindos* (tamarind).  
From having social anxiety  
to the savory taste of *chicharones* (deep-fried meat),  
I'm from the sizzling paper igniting fire  
to the sweet drink of *ochettas* (sweet drink).  
I am from nature where I'm free and wild,  
to society where I'm small and quiet. (September 8, 2016)

Geographical place was a dominant code, as well as dominant culture and heritage culture elements, with Spanish language as well. The format for this poem was based on George Ella Lyon's *Where I'm From* poem, with the repetitions of the phrase "I am from." Similar to Lyon's piece, Maria described her childhood and the cultural artifacts that composed her world. One noticeable distinction is Maria also added the prepositional phrase "to..." to offset the phrase "I am from..." Maria was depicting the double-sidedness of her identity, of one context and another, or a double-voicedness (Bakhtin, 1981). There was also a sense of movement and progression, even though the destination was bleak, as in "to society where I'm small and quiet."

For instance, her double-voicedness is evident in her use of the word *paleteros* or "ice cream cart" in English. However, *paleteros* also have cultural significance (Tester, Yen, & Laraia, 2010), having first emerged in the town of Tucumbo in the state of Michoacán in Southern Mexico, from where Maria's family hailed. The *paletas*, or popsicles, were distinctly Mexican in taste. Neighborhood fireworks and the bells from the *paletero* carts added an aural

dimension to the piece. In this free verse poem, Maria constructed her home and the double-sidedness of her personality. Language, particularly written language, was thus an important and vivid manifestation of her cultural identity, and she also engaged with the historicity and cultural contexts of the languages (Back, 2013).

### **Discussion**

The simultaneous presence of the distinct language and cultural codes depicted a hybridity in Maria's world. The means with which she navigated among and between these identities was via translanguaging between English and Spanish (García & Li, 2014). Perhaps in this way, "the author utilize[d] now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving [herself] up wholly to either of them; [she made] use of this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages at every point in [her] work" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.314). Or, in some occasions, one perspective prevailed over another, and in the next, a different one prevailed. What was evident in Maria's literate transactions and behaviors was a complex cultural and linguistic identity with multiple influences.

Thus, Maria's literate activities, the way she read and wrote, manifested her complex cultural identity (Anzaldúa, 1987). That manifestation, in both English and Spanish, with both Disney and majority culture elements as well as heritage Spanish Mexican factors, can be conceived of as a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986). The middle school years are a tumultuous time for social interaction and identity negotiation (Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright, 2011). When she was younger, she seemed to embrace both cultures: the U.S. culture and her heritage Mexican culture. But, as she had gotten older, she learned to advocate for her heritage identity, for her community and for her family. So, as she matured, her cultural affiliation as expressed in her writing shifted towards her heritage Mexican self.

From interviewing, observing, and interacting with her in various spaces in the past three and half years, I saw Maria grow and mature, both in terms of literacy and in terms of her cultural identity. Whereas at the end of elementary school, she was still drawn to U.S.-specific cultural artifacts, such as Disney characters and princess fairytales, over time, she came to explicitly identify more with her Mexican heritage. Even though Mexico was never far from her in her childhood, from the Spanish she spoke at home to the numerous heritage artifacts that adorned her home, her cultural identity as expressed in her writing and reading choices when she was younger was more in line with White American attitudes.

Now as an eighth-grader however, no longer was she just composing texts for her sisters to enjoy, for herself to escape, or indulge in her fantasy; she now wanted to foment social change. Even though she could not describe Mexico first-hand, she would often recount her mother's journey from Mexico with the utmost urgency. The bilingual, bicultural perspectives in her writing was quite literally "double voiced" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.326). The stratification of her identity, as the first-born and U.S.-born daughter of undocumented Mexican parents, as an English-speaking parentified-child (Orellana, 2009) and older sister to four siblings, as a student and liaison with the outside English-speaking world, and as an early adolescent girl with expectations beyond her years, partitioned her being into distinct realities (Núñez, 2014). Maria's cultural orientations were not just hybrid, but also built atop of each other (McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg, & Soliani, 2007), exhibiting a "multilayered identity" (p.299) of a multicultural Southeastern U.S. adolescent identity on heritage core Mexican values.

### **Translanguaging through Cultural Spaces**

Maria's current world consisted of the primarily English-speaking context of her eighth grade classroom and her larger societal backdrop, and the predominantly Spanish-speaking realm

of her home, as well as the bilingual space of the neighborhood. These intersecting domains created “an interdependence among all components of the system” (García & Li, 2014, p.25). In this sense, physical space also had particular significance for her life (Iqbal & Starr, 2015), as geographies took on a critical aspect tied to notions of economy and power. Her bilingual words made her unique cultural voice “stronger and louder,” and empowered her in an outside world that did not give her much agency.

Translanguaging refers to actually “leveraging” a linguistic semiotic repertoire to engage in dialogic meaning making (García & Li, 2014, p.69), so that the entire system of languages creates a new meaning and tone. Maria professed that her bilingual abilities was what distinguished her and some of her school friends, as she once told me, “Sometimes, it’s harder to talk to them [outside culture peers], because sometimes you probably bring up your other language. I know that the culture we’re in, how you speak is how you express yourself about who you are” (Interview, June 16, 2014). So, as she translanguaged in her speech and writing, she also shifted in cultural perspective and voice. Furthermore, as she crossed languages, she also transculturated to bring forth another frame of cultural reference (Comas-Díaz, 2001; Smith, 2003), accessing another reservoir of cultural meanings.

In her writing, as she translanguaged and negotiated between these two vernaculars (García & Gaddes, 2012), between these two perspectives of the world (Blommaert, 2010), she expressed her dominant language, English, along with her heritage tongue, Spanish. In reading her bilingual pieces, even as she expressed her world more descriptively using English, her Spanish diction always articulated an important theme or central idea. For example, in writing *paletas* instead of *popsicles*, Maria activated a different cultural and linguistic acumen to describe her world in the culture and language of her home and community. Even as she

regularly engaged in translations between English and Spanish, as a link between the two languages and cultures, she knew also when to retain a word in its original tongue, for words sometimes lose their essence via translation (Aranda, 2007). The language she used carried just as much weight for the writer in constructing her reality as for readers when they read it. Her life had always been synthesized by both English and Spanish.

### **Bridging Her Worlds**

Even though Maria had never set foot inside Mexico, Mexican culture, in its religion, its foods, its music, and its folklore was forever an intricate part of her. This was perhaps why she responded, “I’m Mexican,” when I first asked her about how she would describe herself. It was also possible that this was how she identified her culture to cultural-outsiders in the U.S., but I did also see many elements of Mexican culture in her daily life from the Ranchera music emanating from her parents’ room to the prickly pears on the dining room table, in her conversations about her day-to-day experiences, and also in her composition. Simultaneously, there was also something very “American” about her, from her fascination with U.S. popular culture, to her fluency in American English slangs, and to her celebration of U.S. holidays, like Independence Day and Halloween. In our most recent interview, she told me when I repeated my initial question about her cultural identity, “Mexican....well, maybe Mexican-American” (Interview, November 16, 2016).

She engaged in alterities in her cultural affiliation between the dominant southeastern U.S. culture and her heritage Mexican culture (Sánchez, 1993). Perhaps the means she navigated among and between these identities was via translanguaging between English and Spanish (García & Li, 2014). By assuming these two linguistic consciousnesses simultaneously, she further elucidated that double-voiced sense of the world. Perhaps in this way, she made “use of

this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages at every point in [her] work” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.314). Or, in some occasions, one perspective prevailed over the other, and in others, the other prevailed. What was evident in Maria’s literate transactions bridged complex cultural and linguistic identity with multiple influences.

### **Conclusion**

So, although Maria once professed to be Mexican, her literate activities painted a picture of an early adolescent girl that has dual cultural and linguistic positionings. In her poetry and narratives, and her selection of reading texts, her complex, multicultural, multilingual identity was poignantly expressed. Did her bilingual, bicultural writing reveal an identity that was also fluidly translanguaging, transculturing, and transnationing?

Perhaps because she lived in a heritage community enclave with predominantly Spanish-speaking parents and neighbors, she felt very connected with her heritage self. Yet, her literate transactions and engagements with school had been mostly in English in the Southeastern U.S. Her notions of place and context, the climate and the sounds of English were typical to the South. But, deep within her, the progenies for her concept of the world may have always been heritage Michoacán Mexican.

Speaking to her, being with her, I got the sense that Maria did assert her Mexican self, her Spanish self, yet also tried to distance herself from the actual place of Mexico. The U.S. was a space she had claimed, a space with a different dominant language and aura than her community. In her engagements with language, Maria crossed these domains and authored an identity that was at times multivoiced and heteroglossic, one that defied traditional cultural parameters. Just as her mother courageously crossed the physical border between Mexico and the U.S., Maria also crossed invisible linguistic and cultural boundaries every day.

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Appendix 1

Data Type	Unstructured Observations	Semi-Structured Interviews	Writing Samples
Data Quantity	182 pages of fieldnotes	104 pages of transcripts	96 pages of writing
Data Format	Behavioral notes in heritage culture and dominant culture settings	Recorded in Audacity and transferred to Express Scribe	66 digital 30 hardcopy
Examples	“Flea Market, April 10, 2016, with entire family”	“Mother’s border crossing”	Free-verse poetry
	“px looks @ purses at stalls”	“And she just ran, and they didn’t caught her”	“When will I live a better life?”

Appendix 2

Thematic Codes Identified in Writing

Codes	Culture /Race	Gender	Family	Friends	School	Class	Age	Reading	Writing
Example	Wrote from White view as a child, Mexican as an adolescent	Strong heroines in her stories	Wrote about fam celebration	Conflicts “True friend”	Wrote about Language Arts class	Poetry about material lack	Life as parentified child	fan-fiction based on books	writing about writing: “Write to document the stages in my life”
Culture	both, now more Mexican	more U.S.	more Mexican	more U.S.	more U.S.	both	more Mexican	more U.S.	more U.S.

Codes	Pop Culture	Geography	Border Crossing	Stress	Cult Allusions	Tone	Metaphors	Spanish Language Influences
Example	<i>The Little Mermaid</i> -based fan fiction	Poetry about neighborhood	“When Will I Live a Better Life” poem about Mexican immigration	Writes about anxiety from family separation	Mexican & U.S. cultural tradition: holiday, songs, movies, etc.	Anxious, joyful	Describing Christmas at her home	Spanish text connoting different tone
Culture	more U.S.	more heritage	more heritage	more heritage	both	more heritage	both	heritage