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Latina Voice in Dialogue with Literacy

Xiaodi Zhou

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, xiaodi.zhou@utrgv.edu

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Abstract:

This study follows the literacy experiences of four Latina middle schoolers as they read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and compose home language narratives in their heritage voices. Both their vibrant ethnic cultures and other intersecting rays of identities are analyzed in the vein of their literate identities. Through analysis of their writing and speech, the girls present hybridized identities on the border between cultures and languages. Their position and identities in the social world of middle school is discussed and how transactions with literacy can dialogically influence those identities to enact critically conscious pedagogy.

Keywords: Latina culture, translanguaging, adolescence, critical pedagogy, hybridity

Jessica sat in her seat and stared down at her book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*TKAM*) (Observation 2, November 10, 2015). The classroom copy's worn pages were sprawled on top of her desk as she read silently, her mind busily constructing the classic narrative set in the Depression era United States. As the only Latina student in her class, she wondered if her ideas about the book and her own writing made sense to her classmates. She looked around at her peers and noticed them busily writing. But, her mind could not concentrate on Scout, Jem, Atticus, the Ewells, Boo, and the other characters in Maycomb. All she could think about was the Reggaeton concert she attended last weekend down in Miami, the music still blaring in her mind, functioning as the bass rhythm for her thoughts as she bobbed her head to the beat. She yearned to share the sweet sounds in her writing so her classmates could hear them too, but finally convinced herself that it was probably best to stick to ideas everyone was used to. She mostly kept those experiences, and those sounds and languages to herself. That is what she usually did when interacting with her language arts course. She admired Scout and Atticus' defense of African Americans in their world; Jessica herself was assertive and proud of her own Puerto Rican heritage as well.

However, the text *TKAM* is not without its share of shortcomings, particularly in its presentation of Southern racism as the result of a malevolent few, like the Ewells, ignoring the systemic injustices faced by African Americans (Ako-Adjei, 2017). This story is also told through the eyes of a White girl, who herself does not experience racism first-hand and presents African Americans as needing the help of White children to improve their lives. Despite this, the book does partially elucidate the lived cultural voices in the South during the Depression era, which was rare in its day, so we can note its shortcomings while also being mindful of presentist values that may compel our current judgments (Power, 2003).

The particular voices of Latina students bring a unique perspective essential to US classrooms. Specifically, their transaction with literature may bring novel angles about different texts. Our English Language Arts (ELA) instruction, however, at times neglects these voices and perspectives (e.g. Cummins, 1994, Edwards, 2014). Yet, it is precisely engagements with literacy that can help nurture and construct such minoritized identities and share them with the world (Rosen & Abt-Perkins, 2000). Words and language have the express purpose of exposing our clandestine inner selves, and in that process for Latina students in our schools, vocalize a special tenor for the U.S. audience.

The middle grades ELA curriculum can address important and relevant issues of race, gender and class, via novels such as *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2009), *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) and *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1999). These texts can be supplemented with writing assignments that aim at exploring students' own cultural and linguistic identities, helping them connect reading and writing with their lives. Such texts present minoritized experiences authentically told through a cultural insider's own words drawing from the author's world (Taxel, 1991). This paper studies the literacy experiences of four eighth grade Latina girls from one public middle school in the southeast. Their interaction with ELA assignments, such as the home language narrative, bring with them unique Latina perspectives that speak to the possibilities that literacy can initiate.

Literature Review

This research deals with the intersections of Latina ethnic cultural identity (García et al. 2010), adolescence (Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005), gender (A. García & Gaddes, 2012), and reading and writing (Canagarajah, 2011). I hypothesize a form of inter-writing, similar to a spoken inter-language (Egi, 2010), for these Latina students where their writing is reflective of

their morphing cultural positioning, as a dialogue between their two languages, grammatically, syntactically, and lexically.

Specifically, literacy is a powerful agent for identity affirmation (Kamler, 2001), especially for middle grade students of Latina cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Although most such students are familiar with Western cultural artifacts, like fairytales, few are cognizant of tales from their heritage cultures (Mirza, 2011). One middle schooler even commented, “When I’m writing about my own ideas, It’s easy to write” (p.118). Literacy can be conceived of as a cultural tool or “a particular system of symbols and signs whose mastery heralds a critical turning point in the entire cultural development of the child” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.106).

In the composition of bilingual and translanguaging texts (O. García & Li, 2014), student identities escape binary constructs of Latina vs majority culture, or child vs adult, or even girl vs boy, to a more fluid manifestation of identity. The use of two languages in particular, constructs a sense of the world and of students themselves (Norton, 2013). In a sense, “language not only defines institutional practices but also serves to construct our senses of selves – our subjectivity” (pp. 3-4). There is purposeful synthesis of distinct elements of their lives to construct a living hybridity. In this respect, writing using all their languages helps “promote bilingual students’ self-regulation of their entire linguistic repertoire” (Velasco & García, 2017, p.7).

Such composition from multiple cultural and linguistic frameworks manifests as translanguaging between vernaculars. When authors or readers “are asked to alternate languages for the purposes of receptive or productive use” (O. 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 fact, “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” (A. García & Gaddes, 2012, p.146).

In Ivey and Broaddus’ (2007) study, they evaluated 14 Latino seventh and eighth graders’ written products which were sometimes composed in both Spanish and English. For instance, a Latino writer used two languages as evidenced in this sample,

“El man esta inside the hause y hay one animal down the rug. The man queria kill the animal. He levanto the chair y throw the chair. The man curious. No sabia lo que happened. Get up the rug discover one scorpion” (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007, p.536).

In this excerpt, the writer fluidly meshes two languages lexically and grammatically, as with blended Spanish and English sentences, vividly mirroring dual linguistic identities. For example, there are the omissions of the verb in the fourth English sentence and of the subject in the last English sentence, which are ungrammatical in English.

Thus, literacy pedagogy targeting Latina adolescents necessitates a holistic paradigm that takes into account many dimensions of the student’s identity that influences reading comprehension and written productions (Kamler, 2001). Engagements with texts, as a personal activity and an academic requisite, taps into and manifests the reader or writer’s complex cultural identity, perhaps even assisting in forming it through verbalization.

Extant research has addressed the literacy experiences of Latina adolescents and their biliteracy as manifestation of the cultural identifications, yet, insufficient attention has been paid to the intersecting influences of Latina middle school girls’ multiple identities in relations to their literacy experiences in the dominant U.S. context. Specifically, how do their multiple identities,

such as gender and language allocation dialogically interact with the critical texts they read and compose?

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Hermans (2001) thinking, specifically their notions of identity formation and sociocultural influences on literacy. The act of writing can coalesce and synthesize these identities, or fragments of identity. Bakhtin (1981) alludes “to an organic double-voicedness and to the internal dialogization of living and evolving discourse” (p.327), which affects the identities of youths in between cultures. Living transnational lives (Vertovec, 2001), they embody two cultural consciousness capable of manifesting in tandem.

Furthermore, these young people can “simultaneously accept and reject their differences from the majority, being engaged in a ‘double-voiced’ discourse between their individual voices and the majority’s dominant voice” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p.34). This double-voicedness springs from dual cultural positioning characterizing their schema for the world, allowing them to attain “bipolar landscapes and localized identities” (Vertovec, 2001, p.574), as well as “multi-local affiliations” (p.574). Their existence is on the border of nations, races, cultures, and genders, their voices exemplifying this plurality of consciousness. For cultural and linguistic minorities, such double-voicedness can manifest in their translanguaging practices (O. García & Li, 2014).

Bakhtin (1984) conceptualizes this phenomenon within the thinking and planning writer as a hidden dialogicality, wherein the “second speaker is present invisibly, (and) his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker” (p.197, parenthetical in original). Writing connects ideas with

the spoken word, but gradually, the intermediate link of speech disappears, and so the written word assumes the same symbolic power. This relationship may beg the question of whether different spoken speech, as in distinct languages, imparts different writing styles and imaginations. The written word cannot escape the dialogic innervations of the writer's spoken language or culture (Bakhtin, 1986), which exists both as context, attributor of meaning, and inspiration. Then, when it is read by an audience, further dialectic transactions can occur, wherein the multiple cultural identities of readers interact with the multiple cultural orientations of text. Together Bakhtin and Hermans frame thinking on this issue by parsing the dimensions of adolescent hybrid sense of linguistic and cultural belonging (García-Sánchez, 2010; Vertovec, 2001). Their theories imagine a dynamic space to describe, conceptualize, and nurture adolescent Latina cultural identity and literacy development.

Method

This study was conducted as a narrative case study involving four participants over the course of four months in the autumn and winter of 2015-16 (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This type of research prioritizes the voices of the participants told in their own words. The current study followed four Latina girls in one Southeastern public middle school to showcase their literate and cultural identities, and how those identities influenced each other.

Data Collection

This study occurred in one eighth grade ELA classroom from October to January 2015-2016. During this time, the students read one major work of literature, *TKAM*, and were involved in four writing projects. One assignment was the *home language narrative*, which was a vignette of family life written in the vernacular spoken at home to produce authentic dialects.

I observed the girls in their classrooms, noting behaviors and speech to classmates and the teacher. Two girls were in the same class and the two others were in separate classes all taught by the same teacher. Concurrent with these observations, I also conducted four semi-structured interviews (Leech, 2002), which targeted the girls' cultural identification as well as their literate behaviors. These interviews occurred during lunch and after school in the cafeteria.

Lastly, I collected writing samples from each of the girls. All 55 pieces were digitally shared final drafts of assignments, like reading responses and the home language narratives. I also took digital photographs of class artifacts, like posters and worksheets. The girls made annotated bibliographies of the readings and drew body biographies where they illustrated certain characters on poster boards, labeling and drawing certain body parts to symbolize their significance in the story (see Appendix 1). I did this all to triangulate data to understand my participants' cultural relationship with literacy.

Setting

This study occurred in a laboratory school affiliated with a major public research university in the Southeast serving grades K-12. The student body totals around 1,150 students, with racial demographics that reflects the community (White 45.4%, African American 24.8%, Latino 8.3%, Multiracial 7.3%, Asian 3.5%, American Indian 0.5%, Pacific Islander 0.1%). Given its proximity and relationship with the university, there were often multiple research conducted at this locale. As such, the students at this school were generally accustomed to the presence of researchers in their classrooms. Additionally, the ELA teacher that the girls all had was someone who advocated a social justice stance both in her explicit classroom instruction and selection of course texts. For instance, after reading aloud from specific passages in the book and other texts that address race, gender, and class in conscientious ways, like *To Spoil the Sun*

(Rockwood, 1976) and *After Tupac and D Foster* (Woodson, 2008), she would express her own opinions on issues, such as the described injustices. She reminded students that even though things have gotten better for women and ethnic minorities in the United States, inequities still remain. In discussing characters like the Ewells and Scout, she dialogued with students about intersecting components of identity, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic class. She often asked students to reflect on their own identities and subjectivities.

The assignments she gave, such as the home language narrative, also sought to give voice to Latina, Black, Asian, and rural White cultures, encouraging multilingual, translanguaging compositions. For this assignment, the class studied the speech of certain characters, like Calpurnia and Bob Ewell, and used them as mentor texts to capture the candid speech of their own families. Students modeled the way Lee constructed the voices of her characters through diction, syntax, and abbreviations to adeptly capture their family's own nuanced speech and accents. The teacher thus connected the literate world with students' own lived realities, while asking them to critically reflect on and portray their own lives in the same manner as the novel.

Participants

The four girls I studied all were all of Latina background and in the same grade, socializing most often with each other. I decided to study them because my doctoral research focus concerned the literacy practices of middle grades Latina students, and the girls were identified by their teacher as suitable participants. One of the girls, Rebecca, was born in the US, but had parents from Puerto Rico and now lived with her divorced mother (all names pseudonyms). Mary, also U.S.-born, had parents of Chilean, Cuban, and Italian descent. Clare and Jessica were both born in Puerto Rico before moving to the United States. Jessica and Clare were fourteen, and Mary and Rebecca were thirteen years old. The girls all had siblings.

In the girls' grade, there was only one other Latina student, but she did not speak Spanish. Outside of Spanish class, the language was not used for communication at school by any of the students. Each girl had some Spanish ability, ranging from novice, such as the case with Jessica, to advanced, as with Clare and Rebecca. Each had parents who regularly spoke Spanish with them, but they all had something very American about them too. For example, the girls all spoke English, loved Chick-fil-A, and understood U.S. pop culture and politics. Rebecca and Mary were active members of the soccer team, while Jessica and Rebecca both adored music.

Data Analysis

The interviews, observations, and writing samples were coded according to preset codes found in the literature, such as *language* and *heritage culture*. Yet, others, such as *music* and *sports*, were discovered through iterative perusal of data. I listed recurrent themes from my literature review and used them as initial categories for my data analysis. When I noted novel salient themes in data, I added them as additional categories. I coded all three data types for these themes. I used a thematic narrative analysis of data codes (Reissman, 2005). This “approach is useful for theorizing across a number of cases – finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report” (p.3).

I found and grouped data from the three sources pertaining to specific themes using ATLAS.ti software and read over them again to determine connections and similarities. I also looked for commonalities between the participants across data types. I identified Culture/Race, Gender, Family, Friends, Developmental Age, Language, Reading, Writing, Food and Pop Culture as salient codes, and I looked for intersections amongst the various codes to determine themes.

Subjectivity Statement

As the sole researcher, my own position as an adult Chinese American male perhaps influenced my interpretation of the data. I tended to project my attitudes regarding being an ethnic minority in the United States onto my participant. Also, my gender perhaps led to negligence of the significance of their girlhood. Perhaps, the girls were also not as forthcoming with their responses. As a linguistic outsider, I did not pay sufficient attention to the nuances of language type and meaning.

I accounted for these shortcomings by member checking all of my data and analyses and being aware of my subjectivity. I built rapport by spending a month before the data collection getting to know each of the students. I have a basic understanding of Spanish, but also member checked my translations with the girls. There were a lot of similarities in the girls' experiences and my own as a cultural outsider growing up; I too felt this tension between my school and home cultures and languages. However, I made a conscientious effort not to allow my own experiences represent theirs.

Results

Through coding and analysis of their writing and interviews, as well as observations, I found individuals on the border of two cultures and territories. The result was in between borders and represent heritage values with dominant culture elements, presented here via culture, subdivided into language, food/celebrations, religion, and music, as well as via family/gender intersections. In the classroom during my observations, these four girls rarely spoke up. Even though they participated in group and paired work, they usually did not assert themselves (Observation 1, November 2, 2015). This could have been the result of their personalities as relative introverts, but they were noticeably more vocal with each other outside of class.

Culture

When I first came to the school at noon, I asked their teacher where the four girls sat, and she pointed to the corner of the dining space (Observation 1, November 2, 2015). The four girls all sat together when they ate every day, associating only with each other. In class, I noticed the same reserve. I asked the girls why they seldom spoke up except to each other.

Jessica answered, “Yeah, I feel comfortable with them, but it’s not because they’re Latina. I’m just more comfortable with them” (Interview 1, November 2, 2015). She went on to say, “Cause we’ve known each other for a really long time, like maybe more than others.” The other girls agreed. They claimed it was not really that they did not want to associate with cultural outsiders, but that they just happened to feel most at ease with one another.

At lunch one day, Rebecca told the others, “You know, someone thought I was Mexican yesterday” (Observation 2, November 10, 2015). I asked the girls if being called Mexican was considered derogatory for the Latino community. Jessica was quick to reply, “We’re not Mexican!” Rebecca added, “It’s like saying, ‘You’re Chinese right?’ ‘No, I’m Japanese.’ It’s not the same thing.” Her note of the nuances and mishaps in cultural appropriation was significant in how we name and label people different from us. In reviewing coding of my data, the most salient subcategories of cultural identity included: language, food, religion and music.

Language

These girls all pointed to the Spanish language spoken in their homes as a distinguishing quality in their lives. Though their parents were all native speakers of Spanish, the girls showed varying degrees of Spanish aptitude. For example, Mary told me that before eighth grade, her mom expected her to get A’s in all her classes, “but now she says B’s are alright since I’m taking Spanish Three. It’s a little bit harder” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015).

She told me when I asked the girls if speaking Spanish was hard for them, “Yeah it’s pretty easy speaking” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). Rebecca added, “But, I still get nervous for presentations because the different countries speak different kinds of Spanish. Some words in Puerto Rican mean something else in Mexican. And, I’m scared I’ll say something bad to the class.” There was apprehension in saying the wrong Spanish words that may cause misunderstandings. The girls mostly stuck to speaking in English at school, which may also be because English is connected with greater cultural capital in the US.

The girls all had some Spanish-speaking ability, though Jessica admitted she was the worst of the group. In fact, while the three other girls were in Spanish 3, she was in Spanish 2. But, she did regularly listen to music in Spanish and could understand spoken Spanish, so perhaps she did not meet the academic requisites for mastery, like grammar, but understood the parole of the language (de Saussure, 1986). Although Spanish was each of the girls’ first language growing up, English had now become their first language because of the larger language context of their lives.

In their writing, especially the home language narratives, there were sometimes Spanish elements. In Jessica’s recount of her family taking her sister to college in Tallahassee, she parses speech between Spanish and English:

Ingrid has been packing for three days straight. Her room is empty and quiet. My mother is getting Isabel and Ian ready.

“¡Ingrid, tenemos que ir a Tallahassee ahora! ¿Estas empacada?” my mother says.

“Si, mama,” Ingrid said in a toneless voice.

I have been in my room the whole time. It seems like yesterday when Ingrid and I were playing Just Dance at two in the morning. Now she’s moving to Tallahassee, which

in reality is not that far away, but I'm scared. I'm scared of her living in Tallahassee and how I will live the next four years with her in college. My mother, Ian, and Isabel will miss her around the house, but not as much as me. Ingrid and I are inseparable. We tell each other everything and we barely fight. I am not ready to let Ingrid leave.

“Hey Ingrid, do you want to play music in the car?” I ask.

“Sure, you can play my music, if you want” Ingrid replies.

“Ian, te vas conmigo. ¿Vas a poner Pandora?” my mother asks Ian.

“Yeah, whatever.” Ian answers.

Here, in Jessica's retelling of this family narrative, we hear her mother's voice in Spanish, her sister and brother's partial usage of Spanish, and Jessica's thinking and utterances in English. I found in all of the girls' writing that Spanish was used mostly by the parents, whereas the children seemed inclined to utilize English.

Mary told me when I asked if it was difficult to write in Spanish: “Spanish, we really don't know much vocabulary, you know great use of diction. In English I know a lot more vocabulary than I know in Spanish, so I'm a lot more general when I write in Spanish” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). Because of Mary's proclivity in word choice in her writing, she felt confined to blander expressions when writing in Spanish due to her limited lexicon.

Rebecca added, “I'm good at talking in Spanish than reading and writing, because I've grown up here in the States. Well, Spanish is the first language I learned because my mom never learned English. So, when I went to school, I started learning English, and I started writing in English” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). In fact, all of the girls spoke only in English with each other, except when discussing heritage celebrations or artifacts. Jessica continued, “If people speak to me in Spanish, then I'm more comfortable speaking in Spanish back. But,

everyone speaks English here, so like that's what I speak too. It's easier to speak because I think in English." The girls all agreed.

The way they parse their realities between Spanish and English (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007), connecting with their heritage and familial roots versus the sanctioned vernacular in schools, is reminiscent to how language is leveraged in *TKAM* as well. Calpurnia, who adeptly maneuvers between dialects, states on page 126, "You're not going to change any of them by talkin' right...there's nothing you can do but keep your mouth shut or talk their language." Language is power in mitigating how you present yourself to the world and how you feel culturally.

Food and celebrations

When I asked the girls if they felt more Latina or more American, Clare responded: "I always say I'm a little of both. We eat American food. But, we also eat a lot of Latin food" (Interview 3, December 3, 2015). In fact, I found food to be indeed a very distinct aspect of culture for these young ladies, as each brought their own lunch to school. Eating their heritage food seemed to connote a connection with their cultural identity. Being bicultural, their acumen and familiarity with food from both their heritage roots and the United States was represented by dual ways of knowing. In *TKAM*, Southern and African American cuisine, such as crackling bread, scuppernongs, lane cake, is explicitly referenced. These instances give the reader gustatory connections to the culture being described, presenting that culture's nuances.

In Clare's home language narrative, she wrote about her grandparents visiting her family in Boston from Puerto Rico:

My grandma made arroz con gandules con platano, and it was basically rice and beans with plantains. I ate happily to have my aunts and grandparents there. That day we took them to a Cuban restaurant El Oriental de Cuba. We had shredded beef, white rice,

and black beans, plantains, and so many other delicious foods. We went to Quincy Market, where me and my brother got hot chocolate and showed our grandparents and aunt around Boston.

In this narrative, she translanguaged and transculturated between her Caribbean roots and her present life in Boston in both Spanish and English. She described her grandma's food in Spanish, "arroz con gandules con platano," a very typical Caribbean dish (Lopez, 2008). She also described the shredded beef dish from the Cuban restaurant. Yet, there was also a northern U.S. orientation manifested in the hot chocolate and the tour of Boston for her grandparents.

A heritage celebration the girls all recounted was quinceañera to commemorate when girls in Latin America turn fifteen (Alvarez, 2007). Rebecca wrote about her sister Darinelle's mark into adulthood:

We flew into Puerto Rico to celebrate Darinelle's entrance into womanhood with our family.

"Rebecca, te tienes que poner este traje! [Rebecca, you have to put on this dress!]" said Keisha. "Keisha, no quiero. Me puedo poner unos pantalones bonitos y una blusa? [Keisha, I don't want to. Can't I put on some nice pants and a blouse?]" I said. "No niña, se supone que tu te pongas un traje! Te vez muy bonita con esa traje con tus ojos. [No child, you're expected to wear your formalwear. You look nice in these clothes. They match your eyes.]" Said Keisha. After a long time arguing, I put on the dress and left for the party.

Evident in this vignette is the bond between the sisters. Yet, contingent with the cultural and linguistic factors was also gender roles, as Rebecca preferred not to wear the dress, but rather pants and a blouse, confirming her self-ascribed tomboy identity. This text also demonstrated

Rebecca's superior grasp of Spanish, in her ability to use the subjunctive tense of *poner* (*pongas*) when using the verb as a wish or insistence. Through writing, these girls also conveyed their growing adolescent identities. In *TKAM*, some of the younger characters also come of age. Although Scout is a bit younger than the girls, her views of the world changes throughout the book. Her brother Jem *is* an early adolescent who comes to terms with an unjust world as exemplified by Tom Robinson's trial and Walter Cunningham. Adolescence is associated with this search for identity (Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005), in which these girls participate within the intersections of their own lives.

The girls and their families also celebrated other heritage celebrations, such as Noche Buena, which Rebecca described as, "like right before [Christmas] we get a box, and we get grass, and in the morning, more presents. Like it wouldn't be a stocked as Christmas, but sometimes I'd get twenty dollars" (Interview 3, December 3, 2015). In her description, she made the comparison between Noche Buena with Christmas, a holiday most in the majority culture know. These celebrations, in addition to and in conjunction with food, describe vivid aspects of their culture. Holidays are present in *TKAM* as well, as Ewell's attack on Jem and Scout was when they were walking home from a Halloween pageant.

Religion

Spirituality was also an important aspect of the girls' lives, except Clare, whose family did not attend church regularly. "We only go a few times a year on special occasions," she told me, "like for Buena Noche and Easter" (Interview 3, December 3, 2015). The other three girls' families however followed strict Catholic traditions. They went on to discuss their changing relationship and attitudes to their family's religion. "I used to hate it," Jessica told me, "when my mom would make me go. But, now she is not as strict about it. So, I can miss a service once in a while."

Mary had the same attitude, and would go only when ordered by her family. “It’s actually not as bad now,” she added, “Because I’m starting to understand the message more. I mean, it’s just more relevant now.” These more mature spiritual attitudes also corresponded to their growing maturity in adolescence.

Rebecca was the only one of the girls who enjoyed church and Catholicism. This was perhaps because her uncle was a pastor, whom she wrote about:

Then my uncle, who is a pastor, read a couple of passages from the Bible. “En este pasaje, nos muestra Job que no hay que dars por vencido y que siempre debemos permanecer fieles a la palabra de Dios, incluso cuando nos está poniendo al prueba. Darinelle, al igual que Job, siempre debes permanecer fiel a la palabra de Dios, incluso cuando te sientas como él te ha fallado o se ha olvida de ti. [In this passage, Job shows us that you don’t have to give up and that we must always remain faithful to the word of God, even when we are put to the test. Darinelle, like Job, you must remain faithful to the word of God, even when you feel like you have been failed or forgotten.]” said my uncle, followed by a couple of Amens.

In this passage, Rebecca was able to depict her uncle’s spiritual message to her sister during her quinceañera in Puerto Rico. She conveyed the importance of being faithful to God and not abandon Him in times of trials.

Religion, specifically Southern Baptism, is omnipresent in *TKAM*, evident in the White and Black churches, further exemplifying the racial divide of Maycomb, as well as in expressions of the characters. For instance, Miss Maudi declares on page 237, “We’re so rarely called onto to be Christians, but when we are, we’ve got men like Atticus to go for us.” Faith

bolsters the cultural veracity in this text. Even though the girls were Catholic, they could empathize with the significance of Christianity in the novel.

Music

The girls also connected with their heritage through listening to music, and Reggaeton music was a favorite genre. Although music as a specific component of culture is not explicitly referenced in *TKAM*, the mockingbird in the title correlates with song. Jessica could be seen bumping her head, twirling her wrists to the beat in her mind, singing and swaying during group work time in class or at lunch (Observation 2, November 10, 2015). Reggaeton is a musical style which originated in Puerto Rico, and is influenced by American hip hop, Latin American, and Caribbean music (Negrón-Mutaner & Rivera, 2007). Jessica recently attended the iHeart Radio Fiesta Latina in Miami, where such music was featured.

“Most of my classmates like Hip Hop or Pop, but I prefer Reggaeton,” Jessica reported (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). “It’s like Pop and Hip Hop together. It just sounds better because you have that beat, like music you can move to. You gotta have that rhythm! Daddy Yankee’s probably my favorite.” As a musical genre, it is hybridized by many different musical influences, making its sounds unique and distinct, as the music reverberates from its multiple inclinations, with roots in the Puerto Rican underground. The hybridity and heteroglossic nature of such music speaks to the multiple voices within its listeners, like Jessica, who have multiple frames for understanding the world.

Rebecca’s favorite music was Bomba, and she described dancing and singing this percussion-heavy style during celebrations in her family language narrative:

We danced the Bomba after my sister’s Quinceañera. The whole family was dancing and singing to the beat...bom, bom, bom...bomba! Bom, bom, bom...bomba! Bomba!

Bomba music, similar to Reggaeton, has roots in Puerto Rico, but also has African slave influences (Cartagena, 2004). The name actually means “barrel,” referring to the wooden barrels used to store rum, which were also used to create the rhythm of Bomba music. It is the music of agitation and has maintained its popularity among Puerto Rican youths who identify with its rebelliousness.

Family and Gender

The girls’ recount of mealtimes and savory foods, including Goya brand hot chocolate during Christmas, always involved their families. It was as if family and meals were intimately linked. When I first asked them what connected them to each other, Rebecca immediately responded, “Our parents!” (Interview 1, November 3, 2015) The other girls concurred in unison, “Yeah!” I wondered what their parents were like. Rebecca responded, “You know typical Hispanic, cleaning around the house and harping about: ‘Clean your room or I’ll give you a chanclaso.’” Upon this word, the others all giggled. I asked what “a chanclaso” was, and Rebecca replied, “It’s when they shoot you with the sandals.” Chanclas are flip flops mothers would wear, and kick at children who were misbehaving (Zamudio-Garcia, 2019).

The girls also found strength in their families and sharing their families with their majority culture peers. Jessica told me when I asked what she liked to write about:

I like writing stories about that my family went through. Like, not a lot of people know how Hispanic people go through, like stuff that goes on in the house. Like, we have to deal with our mom, yelling at us about cleaning. [giggles] Like, I don’t think a lot of American families have to deal...not deal...go through that. (Interview 1, November 3, 2015)

Their shared family experiences connected the girls. Family was also the most salient connection with *TKAM* for them. Rebecca connected with Scout having a single father, as she said, “Scout only has one parent, like my mom is at home. So, I can definitely feel her” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). Additionally, the ways they interacted with their siblings connected with how Scout interacted with her brother Jem. For instance, Mary shared, “Like I feel more attachment to Scout. Maybe ‘cuz I have an older brother, and he treats me like boys. I only have brothers, and our relationship is kinda rough” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). Clare added, “I also have an older brother. He’s like, ‘Oh stay at home, because he’s too old for you.’ Or ‘Boys are different.’ So, I have to stay at home-do nothing.” Explicit in this exchange is also the theme of gender which was also a pronounced motif in the girls’ lives. There was the older brother interacting with the younger sister, like Jem with Scout.

So, two of the girls had an older brother like Scout in *TKAM*. Rebecca and Jessica were self-reported tom-boys, and Mary recounted, “I learned to be a little tougher around [my brother]. That’s kinda like Scout” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). Thus, these three girls’ gender identification paralleled Scout’s, being tomboys, and Rebecca and Mary were active members of the Varsity soccer team. However, Clare’s brother can be less than supportive than Jem for Scout. When I asked if he was helpful with her writing, she replied, “I try not to show him my writing. He’s not that supportive. He’s always trying to make fun of it, so I usually try to stay *away*” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015).

Jessica connected with Scout in terms of sibling dynamics as well, as she told me, “I identify with more Scout. Like I have an older sister, but we’re not girly girls. We play tough. Like my [younger] brother, we play the same things” (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). The

sibling relationships described in *TKAM* rang true for three of the girls, who could empathize and feel the shared sentiments as the narrator.

Mary felt strongly towards Atticus Finch, and his caring, judicial character. For her body biography, for example, she drew Atticus with a scale of justice in his hand, and Scout and Jem in his heart (refer to Appendix). She depicted this fatherly care in her narrative about her grandfather, Jose, as a young man in Cuba as well in her home language narrative:

They were relatively poor, leaving the children to have to care for themselves and one another. He blinked, regaining his attention when he saw one of his brother almost literally fall into the unfinished boiling hot stew. He ran to his little brother's aid, and set him down at the table. "Corre por ahora, [Run along now]" He gave a mischievous little grin, but nonetheless sprung off the table and ran outside. Just as everything seemed well off, he heard a faint voice behind him, "Jose, tengo miedo, no quiero que te vayas hoy. [Jose, I'm scared. I don't want you to go today]" The young man just chuckled weakly and gave his sister a small smile, that showed pure sadness and pain. Jose picked her up and kissed the 6 year old on the forehead before putting her down gently. "Te quiero, Cabecita [I love you, little one]". Jose then grabbed his hat, and headed to the bus station.

Her grandfather's independence and love for his family was evident in this descriptive family vignette, which correlated with Atticus' role in the *TKAM*. I was struck by Mary's descriptive language in writing about her grandfather. She told me, "I just love writing, because my dad's a poet, and my brother loves writing too. So, I dunno, I kinda take it on" (Interview 2, November 10, 2015).

Jessica told me when I asked about her family, "All my family's in Puerto Rico. I haven't been able to go to Puerto Rico since I was living there. I miss them a lot" (Interview 1,

November 3, 2015). This estrangement for some of the girls caused them to feel strongly about connecting with relatives, retelling family narratives passed down from elders and those everyday stories etched with siblings and parents in their literacy engagements.

Discussion

The girls' engagement with the majority U.S. culture and their language arts curriculum intersected and modulated, while also being changed by, their personal cultures and languages. The girls were all bilingual and bicultural, privy to two locales and languages. It is in this dual consciousness that they engaged with their language arts class, and with studying *TKAM* in particular, a text about race, gender, and social justice. As ethnic minorities adolescent girls living in the South, their identities partially intersected with some of the major characters in the novel. There were other similarities as mentioned by the girls in the sibling and parental dynamics, but there were also a lot of distinctions. The book mainly discussed Black and White races, with no mention of Hispanic people. And, aside from this home language narrative assignment, they were rarely encouraged to use Spanish in their writing for school. Thus, the Spanish language was not valued in their school context.

Through similar family dynamics and gender identity, they connected strongly with the text's vivid descriptions. Yet, the narrator despite these similarities, was still a White girl living in the Deep South, and so did not experience firsthand much racial, cultural, or linguistic othering. Perhaps the reason the girls identified more with Scout was because she was the narrator and revealed more of her inner world to the reader. Her social justice sentiments and tomboy attitudes may have appealed to the girls.

Though the girls had different interests, with different backgrounds, and different language aptitudes, they connected with each other through shared experiences of family,

Spanish language, celebrations, music, and food, which were all distinct from the mainstream. But, what I saw was a dialogic innervation of cultures and languages that precipitated their engagement with literacy. In other words, their understanding of *TKAM*, specifically of the family dynamics between Scout, Jem, and Atticus, the gender identity of Scout, as well as language flexibility of Calpurnia, connected their personal cultural and linguistic worlds with that of the book.

In Rebecca's voice, I heard insecurity in how her cultural identity is perceived. She reminisced being mistaken for another Latino heritage and was careful not say the "wrong" words as deemed by other Spanish-speaking vernaculars. Clare's time in the north gave her another level of complexity in her cultural identity in that she also is privy to a subculture within the United States. Jessica's reticence in the classroom belied a commotion of sounds infused with her heritage culture in her mind. Finally, Mary's poetic language captured tempered nuances in her world as she navigated life learning to be tougher because of her brothers. The girls were proud of their cultures, immersing in Latino traditions and the Spanish language. Yet, they all spent most of their lives in the United States, spoke adolescent slang, ate American fast food and had English as their most proficient language.

Double-Voicedness

Their Spanish, though not sanctioned in school, was used to achieve power in their world. The language can be a tool for the girls to communicate with linguistic insiders privately. For example, Rebecca told me, "Me and my sisters speak Spanish all the time in public. You know, like 'She has sandals, and they're really ugly' [giggles]" (Interview 2, November 10, 2015). So Spanish ability, though not valued in school, can give them hidden agency in their lives. This

bilingual ability mirrors Calpurnia's character in *TKAM* as she adeptly utilizes both Southern White English and African American English to achieve power in her life in Maycomb.

Thus, these girls typified a double-consciousness, much like Calpurnia, in both the two languages of their lives and their two cultural frames, for instance their intimate knowledge of Buena Noche and quinceañera celebrations. Their Latin roots seeped out in the stories of their lives told through the experiences of family. The story of Mary's grandfather as a young man in Cuba, the quinceañera celebration of Rebecca's sister in Puerto Rico, Jessica's sister moving to Tallahassee for college, and Clare's description of her grandparents visiting her family in Boston were all told in two voices and two languages, imparting dual consciousness. Not only did the girls empathize and take on the psyches of family members in conveying their speech, they also encompassed dual linguistic and cultural references. Their literacy showcased that flexibility.

The Spanish language gave them agency in their lives in furtive conversations and connected them with family memories. Their depictions of parental speech in Spanish in juxtaposition with their translanguaging utterances link their personal familial positions with their language identities (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007). Spanish represents the language of their childhoods and family gatherings, and as they translanguague, they make connections to that part of themselves. As they translanguague in their writing and conversations, they also traverse across time, spaces, and cultures. Yet, classrooms typically do not sanction such diversity in language and dialects, and translanguaging in the curriculum can allow students to engage their entire linguistic repertoire for expression and thereby share themselves fully (O. García & Li, 2014).

Non-white students need to see themselves in the ELA curriculum, so they can connect more intimately with the words they read and compose. Yet, too often, the unique language(s) they wield are ignored inside the classroom. Translanguaging and bilingual writing give students

the capacity to represent the full palette of their expressive repertoire to engage and transact dialogically with their world (Velasco & García, 2014).

It is with this duality that they also negotiate their language arts curriculum. Literacy instruction became a way their hybridity was elucidated to the world. Their interactions and transactions with reading *TKAM* developed their complex senses of both the novel and their own lives. So, not only were their lives hybridized between the two cultures of the United States and their heritage cultures, their engagements with school also was hybridized between their course materials and their lived experience. Experiences in the language arts classroom, when they involve critically conscious texts and innovative writing assignments, can help develop students' ethnic cultural identities.

Intersectionality

All of the girls' multiple points of reference, from their cultures, languages, gender roles, developmental age, and pop cultural references form intersecting points (Núñez, 2014). Their intersectionality gave them varying degrees of memberships in distinct social groups simultaneously. For example, their developmental age of adolescence influenced their spiritual inclinations, as some of the girls became more connected with their religion. Additionally, nuances within identities gave the girls different degrees of affiliation. Mary's active participation on the soccer team afforded her a certain athletic identity, whereas Rebecca's professed lackluster abilities caused her to identify less with this identity. Rebecca's deeper spirituality contrasted with the others' spiritual inclinations. Clare's interests connected with others in her school into northern culture and trying different foods. Jessica's interest in music and going to concerts connected to other music aficionados, especially others into Reggaeton. Their writing manifested that intersection.

What I found was a hybrid identity that consisted of distinct aspects of different cultures, and those artifacts that drew them had heterogeneous traits as well. Both Reggaeton and Bomba are musical intersections from multiple distinct influences. Their food preferences had elements of their Caribbean heritage and majority U.S. culture. Their translanguaging negotiations in their lives articulated a hybrid reality as well. Those disparate rays of identity conjoined to a set of alternating allegiances, wherein the girls were able to choose the more appetitive in particular contexts. Yet, even though they could have chosen more whitestream inclinations to fit more with the majority culture, each girl often chose their heritage culture and found strength in each other for carrying on this tradition. Literacy can be an explicit manifestation of their intersecting cultural identities that may activate through assignments that also engage these facets (Kamler, 2001). Of course, their identities also intersected in their common friendship.

Their partitioning of language and generation presents the Spanish language as the vernacular of their past, such as when Mary wrote about her grandfather's youth in Cuba. In describing their own thoughts, they articulated English; in writing their parents', they composed Spanish. They simultaneously enacted two perspectives that intersected in their daily engagements, coloring them with different hues and generational realities. In this writing assignment, the girls spoke and wrote in two languages, translanguaging while also transculturing and transnationing across two different frames of reference (A. García & Gaddes, 2012). Via this dual, hybridized notion of their world, they negotiated their literacy experiences. In their writing based on the style of *TKAM*, they composed a hybrid world of intersecting dual consciousness (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007). As the girls encountered their own cultures, and those of other minorities, they did so in reference to the majority culture in which they lived. Thus, their cultural concepts, whether it be their own, or any other, is done through the refraction of the

dominant U.S. culture. In this intersection of hybridities, whether it be their spiritualities, their music, food, celebrations, or notions of texts, they may find a fluid notion of self that is more adaptive and resilient (Nuñez, 2014).

Other classmates wrote in White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2017), rural Southern English, and African American English in describing their family narratives. In connecting with *TKAM*, those students connected more with the Southern culture, the language, cultural behaviors, and the racism tied to this locale. Many of classmates' home language narrative mimicked the dialect of *TKAM*, either African American or rural Southern English, in describing their own families' speech. The four Latina girls, however, selected and presented their personal experiences for the sake of the novel, conjuring a hybrid notion.

In this way, their experiences resembled Calpurnia's, the African American maid to the Finches in the *TKAM*, because they needed to cross over between majority culture English in one context and their heritage dialect in another (Baker-Bell, 2017). Perhaps this is what non-White students need to do in our ELA classrooms to better connect with the texts we study. When we personalize our understandings and enact specific connections to texts that mirror our own lives, those texts become more meaningful. This double consciousness results in hybrid understanding via their unique transactions in their multiple languages. Thus, just as the characters in *TKAM* were intersections of histories and dialects brought to life via writing, so too were the girls' multivoiced lived realities given breath via their own compositions.

Classroom Implications

In our evermore diverse and eclectic middle grades classrooms, students' distinct ways of composing their worlds need to be validated. Translanguaging in writing needs to be valued, where students' diverse languages, perspectives and voices are leveraged and incorporated as a

resource for writing (Fu et al., 2019). In these girls' bilingual translanguaging writing, the authentic voices of their lives are expressed (Velasco & Garcia, 2014), unaltered by translation. In this way, participation in their heritage language can coincide with their English development, and with it, preservation of their cultural and linguistic selves.

These girls, in interacting with class readings, had to connect with characters from outsider cultures and rarely brought their own heritage cultures into their comprehension. I wondered if these students were exposed to other texts regarding Puerto Rican and Latina experiences, such as Nicholosa Mohr's *Nilda* and Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon: A Novel*, they would more intimately connect literacy with theirs and their families' lives. But, there was something essentially American about the cultural crossover in their literacy, for as cultural outsiders in one context or another, we often need to borrow the voices of others to champion our own (Anzaldúa, 1987). In reading about the lives and struggles of others, we realize more about our own. We develop a hybrid consciousness in the context of the dominant White-centric curriculum.

Through studying these girls, observing, interviewing, and reading their writing, I gained a more intimate look at a segment of the U.S. population. I do not want to generalize to other Latina students or communities, but what I found studying this group was an active proliferation of their unique heritage cultures that transacted with their language arts experiences. Literacy, both reading and writing, reflected and articulated their own search for identity during early adolescence. Through language arts, they found a template; through writing, they found a voice.

This is not only positive for these youths' identity development, but also for peers to gain a glimpse into the lives of Latina classmates. Those non-Latina students gain a perspective of another culture from a cultural insider. Yet, I do not want to present all writing about lived

experiences done by cultural or gender outsiders as inauthentic. For instance, *The Outsiders* is a novel about teenage boys written by S.E. Hinton, a female author, and *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* is about a Black protagonist written by a White author. These texts maintain authenticity because the authors stuck to their own experiences and understandings, not branding others' realities with their own takes.

By engaging in texts that explored the experiences of young girls with motifs of gender, adolescence, ethnic identity and culture, these girls were able to construct their hybrid selves, as they were encouraged to showcase the multiplicities and heteroglossia in their lives. However, I wonder about their futures in this country that seems more and more unwelcoming of differences. Would they retain their resolve to participate in their heritage identities, or would they, like me, give in to the whitestream culture, relinquishing most ties to the heritage one? Can their engagements with reading critical diverse texts and composing their family voices precipitate their growth in literacy, and also their personal ethnic identities?

Conclusion

Sitting in my car at the end of each day, I reflected on what I had heard, seen, and read. I recalled their reticence in the classroom, their communal lunch, and their rich stories. I saw four intelligent, sensitive, loving girls, each faithful to theirs and their family's past, while also confronting their incoming adulthood. In their language arts classrooms, they were encouraged to make personal transactions with the texts, and at times compose personally meaningful and relevant writings.

I saw tremendous power in their stories and engagements with language. Each learned to wield the English language as a medium for constructing their worlds and themselves. I learned so much from studying these girls, but also much about my own experiences as a minority

growing up in the United States. I felt myself rooting for them, because it seemed to me that their success was also my success. In their voices, I also heard my own.

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Appendix 1

Body biographies of Atticus and Scout:

