

REVIEWS

Kirklighter, Cristina, Diana Cárdenas, and Susan Wolff-Murphy, eds. *Teaching Writing to Latino/a Students: Lessons Learned at Hispanic-Serving Institutions*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Victor Villanueva

Shattering Stereotypes

I have no stomach for spicy foods, more accustomed to sauerkraut (on hot dogs from the pushcarts of New York) than to picante. I remember Earl Shorris having written in *Latinos: A Biography of the People* that the reason Americans don't know much about Puerto Rican (and I'd add Cuban and Dominican) foods is that there are no finger foods—like the sandwich or the taco. But he's wrong: bacalaitos, alcapurrias, rellenos de papa, mofongo, surrullitos, tostones—all are finger foods, as handy as a taco or as hum bao (insofar as rellenos and mofongo are encased balls of meal), available in any PR barrio. And pasteles are as handy as tamales or burritos. Americans tend not to know about Puerto Rican foods (and Shorris knowing nothing of Puerto Ricans beyond reinforced stereotypes) for two reasons. First, our numbers are fewer than Mexican Americans and Mexicans in the U.S. Puerto Ricans number close to four million in the United States (with about the same number on the Island). Mexican Americans number closer to twenty-two million. Second, much of what is the current United States was once Mexico or New Spain. Take over a people and their land, move into that land, and the cultures will bleed into each other. Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic form old-fashioned colonies, foreign spaces, removed from the imperial center, Manifest Destiny Phase II.

Although there are Puerto Ricans in all fifty states, folks know us mainly in New York, Chicago, and Miami (and maybe

Boulder). When I was growing up, folks tended not to realize that the actor José Ferrer was Puerto Rican, or, later, Erik Estrada, or Geraldo Rivera. I guess there was Rita Moreno, but she came to us as a New York stereotype (albeit wonderfully) in *West Side Story*. Freddie Prinz was the first “out” Puerto Rican of show business I can remember, though he became famous playing a Chicano (just like Erik Estrada had). Today we know of a few: Jimmy Smits or Benicio delToro, J-Lo, Ricky Martin, Rosie Perez. And there’s more to us than just showbiz.

I belabor this to voice my two initial disappointments with *Teaching Writing With Latino/a Students*, edited by Cristina Kirklighter, Diana Cárdenas, and Susan Wolff-Murphy. The first is the lack of Puerto Rican presence in the collection. The editors recognize the lack, stating that they wished to have heard more from Puerto Rican HSI teachers (8), but they skew statistics on HSIs by sticking to states within the continental US, noting that more than half of all HSIs are located in California and Texas but failing to note that the second largest geographical concentration of HSIs is in still-US-owned Puerto Rico. And I wish they had made an effort to contact folks at Boricua College in Brooklyn or Florida International University in Miami. Beyond these mentions in the Intro, there is only a mention that there are more Dominicans in higher education in New York than Puerto Ricans (124). And I have to wonder what that says, politically, economically, maybe even psychologically. Number two in population; number two in geographical concentration of HSIs; zero in representation. It troubled me.

My second disappointment concerned the politics of our presence—and in this case I mean all of our presence, all of us who are Latino, Latina, Hispanic, Latin American, Spanish ancestry, Chicano, Boricua, Cubana, Nicaraguense, Honduran, and on. All those labels have political import to us—radical, conservative, and on both sides of the liberal middle. Our very being within the continental US and its colonies (Guantánamo and Puerto Rico and the Panama Canal Zone) is political and economic. The book’s very existence is political, of course, and Freire’s name is invoked

throughout the book, but I still would have liked more overt discussion of the political implications of HSIs, and the ways the politics could be compromised when compared with Tribal Colleges or with Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The differences to me are telling, the overtly political in the Tribal and HBCU, a matter of recompense. We remain more a demographic fact than a historically conscribed people, in terms of the status of the HSI. But that's enough grousing. What is good about this book far outweighs the parochial dispositions of one displaced Nuyorican (who is himself well represented in the collection).

Teaching Writing With Latino/a Students underscores time and again the ways in which we are a multitude: some able in Spanish; some not—even within the country's largest HSI on the Texas-Mexican border. Isabel Araiza, Humberto Cárdenas Jr., and Susan Loudermilk Garza provide the linguistic demographics of their students, noting that their students—right on the Gulf of Mexico—are 56% monolingual in English with another 27% using Spanish or Tex-Mex (a regional Spanglish) less than 10% of the time (89). Still, there is that 44% more, when it comes to Dominicans in New York. So it is that Sharon Utakis and Marianne Pita argue for, demonstrate, and finally provide materials for a composition classroom that can embrace the bilingual, the variations of dialects within English, different registers—while students gather confidence with literacy in general on the way to confidence with academic literacy. Robert Affeldt demonstrates the uses of narrative—theoretically conceived broadly—in this gaining of linguistic confidence. And all of this confidence, Cárdenas and Baca tell us later in the book, is a matter of attitude—a bilingual attitude, one that can be encouraged through engaging students in service learning.

Beatrice Méndez Newman tells us of the cultural conflicts that the students experience, as economic circumstance and old-world gender roles cause students to feel tugged by family on the one end of a rope and the possibilities provided by higher education on the other. She tells us of the problems with writing that students

encounter, problems that fit more squarely within the basic writing category than ESL. And we meet the students through their writing. We meet students throughout the book. And they're familiar to us, even those of us in overwhelmingly white or Anglo schools. And Méndez Newman tells us, like Lisa Delpit once told us, that our hands-off approach to conferencing might not be appropriate here, that being directive about the processes of writing and revising actually leads to independence. Students prefer to be shown. Once shown, they know. This is similar to Cathy Berkenstein's and Gerald Graff's argument in the 4 April 2008 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and in their rhetoric, *He Said/She Said*, that formulaic pedagogies do have a place in teaching composition. They arrived at this conclusion from teaching in an inner-city university, a minority-serving institution where poverty (and the inequities that obtain thereto in education and educational funding) produce students not all that different from those that comprise an HSI (where the designation is conferred upon schools comprised of 25% Latino y Latina students, over 50% of which must be from below the poverty line).

Dora Ramírez-Dhoore and Rebecca Jones, writing of the same students as Méndez Newman (students at the same institution) also invoke Delpit, bringing home the point that what matters is for the students to enter the interstitial, those spaces where neither home discourse nor academic discourse resides, or where both reside, so that students can acquire metalinguistic awareness, an awareness of language as language, and gain the confidence to play, as their alumna, Gloria Anzaldúa had learned to do. Barbara Jaffe writes to us, the teachers, about how we can come to understand and create a pedagogy of the familia—at once recognizing and working with and through the students' tug-o-war, removing the rope that pulls by making the classroom itself a kind of family, familiar.

Jody Millward, Sandra Starkey, and David Starkey take us to the community college. The chapter is set as a polylogue (well, more than a dialogue). We read again about the complexities of

the lives of students of poverty, torn between family and the classroom. We read again about the degree to which the teachers—the vast majority of whom are not culturally akin to the students—are often unaware of the challenges the students face, or at least the magnitude of the challenges. But what I found most helpful in reading this chapter is the suggestion for multiple media to compensate for the trials posed by circumstance. Rather than assume the digital divide, David Starkey notes that his students, no less than most, know how to gain access to different media. And so he provides ways for students to combine online instruction and submission with classroom, arguing for a flexibility that doesn't compromise academic rigor, but which does acknowledge circumstances beyond the classroom.

Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students is filled with hands-on stuff—syllabus excerpts and potential handouts, exercises and strategies. It's a great resource to all of us facing students of various linguistic and cultural languages, all somehow tied under the label "Latino y Latina." But my favorite chapter in the book is the final one, in which Cristina Kirklighter joins with her students in explaining an event surrounding the reading of a memoir by Evilio Grillo. The event is Author's Day at her campus, engaging faculty and staff and students from the local high school to recognize the points of convergence—and the possibility (the reality, I should say)—of a Black Cuban, a Latino who is a Black Man in the U.S.—along with multiple obstacles. It is rich, this chapter, with possibilities, with opening doors to broad conversations that will engage the constraints and the complexities, the challenges and the potential victories. And all my complaints about the political and Caribbean fade, as Kirklighter (a Honduran) and her students bring to the fore the politics of literacy and the Latino and Latina.