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Never a Yellow Bird, Always a Blue Bird: Ethnodrama of a Latina Learner's Educational Experiences in 1950 - 60s South Texas

Norman Gillen

Texas A&M University, kent.gillen@gmail.com

Kakali Bhattacharya

Texas A&M University, kakali.bhattacharya@tamucc.edu

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Abstract

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Keywords

Arts - based Research, Ethnodrama, Performative Writing

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Never a Yellow Bird, Always a Blue Bird: Ethnodrama of a Latina Learner's Educational Experiences in 1950-60s South Texas

Norman Gillen and Kakali Bhattacharya
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, Texas USA

This article is a response to calls for more first-person accounts from researchers using narrative formats to interpret data. The authors examine the practice of ethnodrama as a means of exploring and analyzing the experiences of a Latina public-school student in a small South Texas coastal town during the 1950s and 1960s as she attempted to negotiate multiple ethnic spaces while resisting traditional behavioral expectations representative of that period. Through coding and synthesizing the participant's responses, the researchers established themes on which to base the composition of three dramatic scenes for purposes of data representation. In addition to conveying how the participant overcame challenges she faced as a young Chicana activist, we discuss implications surrounding current thinking on ethnodrama as a cross-cultural endeavor, a creative practice, and a potential emancipatory tool.

Keyword: Arts-based Research, Ethnodrama, Performative Writing

In recent years, performative writing has branched out into artistic schema as varied as poetry (Denzin, 2001; Pelias, 1998), theatre (Gallagher, 2007; Nimmon, 2007), music, (Daykin, 2004), photography (Bell, 2006), and documentary filmmaking (Woo, 2008). If we have become an “interview society” wherein dialogue is part of a moral community (Denzin, 2001), then interviews would appear especially suited for ethnodramatic adaptation. As Foster (2007) has observed, an arts-based approach to research enables us to “see the world from [the participants’] point of view and immerse ourselves in their stories” (p. 371). Ethnodrama is not just an accurate representation of data (Barone, 2002), but a translation of findings within narrative or poetic clarity; its primary purpose is to tell a story and tell it well (Saldaña, 2005). Attention is given to form and content and how those components combine to produce a successful treatment.

The trend toward theatrical presentation of data can be traced to anthropologist Victor Turner (1985), who saw performative ethnography as a means of “getting inside the skins” of those who are researched (p. 90). Turner theorized that ethnographers could better communicate the lived experiences of participants through the creation of narrative forms, which he initially referred to as *social drama*, and in the intervening years, Turner’s controversial suggestion that researchers write and play-act the more interesting parts of their findings has attracted an array of proponents (Conquergood, 1991/2006; O’Neill, Giddens, Breatnach, Bagley, Bourne, & Judge, 2002; Saldaña, 2003). Miller-Day (2008), for example, has endorsed performative writing’s provocative capacity to enable social change. Additionally, Madison (2005) has promoted the method’s inherent advantage of establishing a dialogic relationship between researchers and audiences. This dialogue can often occur within a public sphere where conflicts are played out for the community (Mienczakowski, 1997). In that sense, arts-based researchers may avail themselves of what Dewey (1934/1959) saw as “an idiom that conveys what cannot be said in another language and yet remains the same” (p. 116). In other words, like other art forms, theatre, can express abstract ideas in ways more effective than written text.

Gray, Sinding, Ivonoffski, Fitch, Hampson, and Greenberg (2000) noted that with the development of research-oriented theatre, it will be necessary “for more researchers to detail the process they go through, including their many (inevitable) mistakes and dilemmas as well as their resolutions” (p. 143). More recently, Ferguson and Thomas-Maclean (2009) concluded that, where arts-based methods are concerned, “documentation of researchers’ experiences is still scant, as are first person accounts” (p. 10). In this paper we seek to address that gap in knowledge through chronicling the processes involved in our attempt to transform a case study into a short series of interpretive dialogue scenes.

As O’Neill et al. (2002) observed, performative pieces expose “contested and multiple versions of reality, and the unheard voices and experiences of individuals who may consider themselves powerless” (p. 71). Often, ethnodramatists seek to interpret the experiences of those from disenfranchised communities from across various parts of the globe who attempt to accommodate the societal demands of two (or more) separate cultures. Accordingly, we will present a case study of a successful Latina academic who reflected on her struggle to negotiate the multiple gender and ethnic spaces that have historically characterized the South Texas region where she was raised and educated. Additionally, the participant’s spoken memoirs will be dramatized in dialogue scenes emphasizing the ethnic politics that became the basis for her determination to succeed within the repressive environment of a rural educational system during the 1950s and 1960s.

The first author of this paper, an Anglo-American male familiar with the dominant socio-cultural environment discussed by the participant, conducted the study; the second author, a transnational Indian professor of graduate research, served as methodology consultant, assisted in writing this study within the representation genres presented here. We will chronicle the process of a pilot project that would later expand into a larger study (Gillen, 2011).

These research questions encompassed the study: (a) how does the participant characterize the factors that influenced her educational goals and career choices, and (b) in what ways does the participant describe overcoming challenges she faced in achieving those goals? The results and findings of our study will be presented below in this manner: (a) a summary of the participant’s various remembrances as a student in a small town education system, (b) a data representation of the participant’s recollections in the form of a one-act play, (c) the participant’s comments on that play, along with Kent’s ideas for revision, and (d) implications of an ethnodrama within the larger scheme and purpose of qualitative inquiry.

Setting the Stage: Angie’s Story

Heretofore, I¹ had believed the framing of a participant’s story in the style of a narrative-driven synopsis (working within a Narrative Inquiry framework) for purposes of reporting data seemed a sufficient enough endeavor. Indeed, this more conservative approach was our original intention when Kent interviewed the participant for this study. Having conversed informally with her in the past concerning such topics as the “old-boy” network that ruled the administrative ranks when she first began teaching college, Kent asked if she would be interested in responding to him in a formal case study, to which she assented. He secured her consent in writing, ensuring both her rights as a participant as well as guaranteeing her anonymity, and filed the form with the Texas A & M University Corpus Christi’s Institutional Review Board, which subsequently granted approval. In our next meeting, “Angie” (a pseudonym for the participant) began by discussing her education in the

¹ The mention of “I” in this paper refers to the first author. Depending on the context, we will be using I or Kent to refer to the first author.

small Texas town where she was raised. Her stories were quite dramatic, a few episodes so riveting as to lend themselves to an arts-based approach. The idea was planted, and the more Kent considered the notion, the more irresistible the pull toward personal experimentation. Thus, we decided to attempt a theatrical adaptation of the findings as part of a final presentation.

Angie, the youngest of four children (two sisters and one brother), lived with their mother, a widow who cleaned houses for the wealthier Anglo-American families of the small town in which they resided. The children worked as well; Angie and her sisters, while in their teens, would occasionally wash dishes in those same homes where her mother worked, while her brother labored in the fields just outside of town.

Angie was not enrolled in a pre-K or Kindergarten program, her education beginning instead at the first-grade level. She pinpoints the year as 1957, and she further reports that at the time, her town's school system was "made up mainly of Anglo students. . .I would suggest, not even a third, maybe a fourth of the population was Latino. And we had just maybe a couple of students who were Black." She describes her first day of school as a linguistic weeding out process carried out by the school's staff among her and her peers:

I remember being put in a particular classroom with a lot of students that I remembered and recognized from church and [other social functions]. One particular boy was the child of the woman my mother worked for—an Anglo. My mother worked in houses. She was a housekeeper. So I recognized him. So anyway, that first, I guess maybe that first couple of days of first grade, we had tests given to us, and those tests determined, I guess, our ability to speak English.

However, before she began school, Angie's older sisters had given her a first-rate briefing as to the school's expectations. Neither of her sisters had been able to speak English when they started school, but what English they did learn along the way, they passed down to Angie before she attended first grade. As Angie says, "in a way, they prepared me for this." And the preparation paid off; Angie was assigned to a classroom of students the school labeled as "Group One," consisting of those children who were judged to be the highest caliber of learners. And from there, she struggled to remain among the "highest of the high." For as she recalls,

even in the classroom, they would divide us up into the different rows. You know, they had like the bluebirds, the redbirds, the yellow-birds. And again, having to do with the ability [to speak English], I guess. Skill. And I remember being in that first row, and they would move us *within* the row—you know, first chair, second chair, third chair. (*Laughs*) I remember going through these series of, okay, today you're going to move over here, just maybe you're going to move over there. . .it was very—very structured. But like I said, there were like a handful, maybe, of Latinos, and I remember seeing them. The yellow birds were the low birds, and so if you were a yellow bird, you were on the last row. And so a lot of times, I would see them. My goal was never to be a yellow bird. My goal was to always be a bluebird. (*Laughs*)

This stratification, based on students' ability to read and speak in a language that for some of them was a foreign tongue, resulted in an indoctrination into the American elementary school experience that was far from friendly. Witnessing the effects of immersion, Angie saw the emotional stress that certain of her classmates were forced to endure.

By that point, a lot of the students that I remembered seeing that first day were no longer there. So I was one of maybe, I don't know, five students who, of Latinos, who were staying in there. And later on, in the playground, I would run into those other students I remembered seeing. . . I remember one particular little girl did not speak any English at all. Her parents had been from Mexico. . . and she was always crying, and so I spoke to her. And I remember her telling me that nobody understood her, she didn't have any friends, and all this. So I kind of took her under wing, and it turned out that she lived down the street from me. So we became really close friends after that.

Angie's struggle to remain a "bluebird" was seriously threatened at one point. As a student who performed with consistent success throughout her elementary school years, there was a single instance where she registered a mark below her standard A or B. But it proved an occasion of sheer dread. As she explains,

the only time I made a 'C' was in third grade. And I was devastated. . . and it turned out it was because I needed glasses. I couldn't see the board. So once my mother took me to get my vision checked my grades went back up.

Afterwards, her grades returned to their customary level of excellence. Angie records, however, that with the exception of one middle school history teacher, a relative with whom her family seldom associated, the faculty who administered her education was all Anglo.

Angie's mother had always had one specific goal in mind for her youngest daughter – to not earn a living by cleaning houses; and this was a sentiment with which Angie strongly concurred:

I always knew that I didn't want to work as a housekeeper. And I didn't want to work outside. . . I did go wash dishes on occasion, like I mentioned. But to me, I was going to work in an office. To me, that was what success was—working in an office. Working with air conditioning, you know? Any office would have worked for me.

Ironically, the issue of housekeeping would later factor into her determination in high school to break through the ethnic barriers ingrained within her high school's extracurricular programs, some of which excluded students of color. This was during the social turmoil that characterized the 1960s—a time when Angie, like many others, experienced a social awakening of sorts, a feeling that she and her Latina classmates "could do anything." She thus embarked upon a mini-revolt targeting one of her school's social clubs, the local chapter of the Future Homemakers of America, which heretofore had included only Anglo females.

I had heard that group had never had any Latino girls. So I took Homemaking. You had to be enrolled in Homemaking to be in the club, so. . . I remember taking it and, uh. . . I didn't like the course. It was an elective, and I wanted to be in this club. So I talked to one of my friends—the one I talked about earlier that she remained friends throughout the years—and, uh, talked her. . . into joining this club so that we *could* be the first Latinas.

As exciting as the prospect of actually becoming the first minority member of the local FHA club sounded, it was not a comfortable process. As Angie recalls,

Usually when you join a club, the first thing you do is stand up and say who you are, and like that. And, uh. . . I remember the stare-downs we got. . . and I think the reason for that was that. . . it was exclusively for the ones, the members, who were in this group. . . and it was usually the girls with high income. And of course they were all White. And so we stayed through that. . . But I just wanted to prove a point. *They* knew we could join if we wanted to. We were not going to be held back.

That idea of “not being held back” became a principle that transformed her generation’s political consciousness. Forty years later, Angie, the “activist homemaker” and a successful Latina academic, summarizes the changes that have since occurred in her small hometown: “Black and white. I mean, opposites. Total opposites. Day and night.” And she is quick to add,

I’ve had students now, Anglo students, who come to me and say, “Oh, I feel so out of place in [my hometown] because basically the boys don’t want to date us if we’re not Latinas.” And it’s the Latinas and Latinos who have, pretty much, the control of [my hometown]. I don’t know if it’s exactly. . . I think it’s more financial lately. It still is the richer ones, the well-to-do’s, who still have a little bit of control. But there are a whole lot more Latinos there than when I was growing up. *And Blacks....* But things sure have changed. Of course, it’s 40 years later. (*Laughs*)

Toward a Data Representation Piece

Saldaña (2003) presents the ethnographer/playwright with a sobering, lofty goal—to “create an entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative” (p. 220). This challenge might translate essentially as a writer demonstrating an ability to engage an audience in an interesting story, period. Assuming this is an accurate (albeit abbreviated) interpretation of Saldana, let us advance to the question of what dramatic components constitute an engaging data representation piece. Morgan and Dennehy (1997) have outlined the makeup of a good story in this manner: (1) setting: “time, place, players, context;” (2) build-up, or “a sequence of events that warns the listener that ‘trouble’s coming!;” (3) the crisis, or “highpoint” of the story; (4) learning, or “what the central character learned;” and (5) the ending, where we learn “how the world changed: the central character’s new behaviours and/or awareness as a result of the action, the moral of the story” (p. 498). Moreover, Yoder-Wise and Kowalski (2003) encourage audiences to recognize that stories “work best when they evolve from personal experience, ideas, and questions that relate to the issues at hand” (p. 38). They further believe that stories are “most effective when they focus on teaching, inspiring, motivating, and adding meaning” (pp. 38-39). However, for storytellers to adhere strictly to such criteria may eliminate what has been traditionally considered vital to a successful narrative—the exploration of thematic material or ideas, pursued to a certain extremity. This became a chief goal as drafting commenced.

Reflections on the Drafting Stage

Once we had decided to attempt a creative effort representative of Angie’s story, we focused on what ultimately guides the technique of composition (i.e., defining *audience* and *purpose*). In this case, the audience, while not particularly exclusive, was one nonetheless

cognizant of the fact that dialogue scenes demand a great deal of visual and aural imagination on the part of the reader. It would also be helpful if this imagined audience is acquainted with social conditions of a provincial American setting of some 40 to 50 years in the past, but ultimately this a mere side issue. Our chief purpose was to write something both creative and entertaining, even for those not well-versed in a 1950s-1960s rural public-school environment. As to the choices of anecdotes related by Angie, there were of course many to cull from for purposes of dramatization. Indeed, the “drama” and “conflict” were already there in her vivid descriptions of a past that seemed hers alone in the telling. Kent’s task was to transpose those very personal accounts into something to share with others—in short, to universalize those incidents of her past through various abstractions: short scene descriptions, directions for lighting and sound, contrasted with dialogue (particularly in the last scene) that might have emerged from a stage show of roughly the same era in which these scenes are set. Though such ingredients might at first appear an incongruent package of disparate elements, the results of that fusion are not altogether unpalatable for a play’s initial draft.

Table 1
Coding and Theming of Interview Transcripts

Dialogue (Q&A)	Codes	Themes
Q: What sorts of extracurricular activity did you, uh, participate in, in school?		
A: Well, um, I was in the pep squad. We had a pep squad. Not with the flags that they have over here. But a pep squad. Basically, whoever wanted to join that could join it. (<i>Laughs</i>). I was in the Spanish Club. Many of the Latinos were in the Spanish Club. We got to go on a field trip every year to Laredo. And that was like the draw. And, uh, and then, uh, there was one, uh, particular one that was the Future Homemakers of America that I joined – I think it was my freshman year, the ninth grade – because I had heard that group had never had any Latino girls. So, I took Homemaking. You had to be enrolled in Homemaking to be in the club, so I remember taking it and, uh, I didn’t like the course. It was an elective, and I wanted to be in this club. So I talked to one of my friends – the one I talked about earlier that she and I remained friends throughout the years – and, uh, talked her...into joining this club with me. So that we <u>could</u> be the first Latinos. I remember going the first day they met, and uh, the girls who were involved in that, uh, were very “standoffish.” I, they didn’t speak to us. You know, usually when you join a club, the first thing you do is stand up and say who you are, and like that. And, uh, I remember the stare-downs we got.	<p><i>Pep squad was for “everyone,” even those without “standing” or “position.”</i></p> <p><i>Spanish club: Also inclusive. Had its “draw” – the trip.</i></p> <p><i>School chapter, FHA – not inclusive.</i></p> <p><i>Club was a “draw” for Homemaking enrollment.</i></p> <p><i>Need for support. Could not have joined club alone?</i></p> <p><i>Felt unwelcome.</i></p> <p><i>Resentment.</i></p>	<p>EQUITABLE SETTING</p> <p>EQUITABLE SETTING</p> <p>INEQUITABLE SETTING</p> <p>SCHOOL-SANCTIONED EXCLUSION (?)</p> <p>“COMADRES” = COMRADESHIP</p> <p>INEQUITABLE SETTING</p>

Other than the establishment of various conflicts, however, there were other components we considered in putting the play together. One important question involved the exploration of various themes from Angie's remembrances. What methods would be most appropriately applied in discovering those themes? Charmaz (2006), for instance, advocates the use of *initial coding* and *focused coding*, including an incident-by-incident, line-by-line transcript analysis by the researcher. However, she also states that such a meticulous strategy "depends on the type of data [the researcher has] collected, their level of abstraction, the stage of the research process, and [the] purpose for collecting these data" (p. 53). Since the aim of this study is to examine how a successful Latina academic was able to excel within her profession, either because of (or in spite of) the repressive educational environment of a half-century ago, we decided to analyze the participant's responses in a less rigorous fashion. LeCompte (2000), for example, has characterized analyses of qualitative data as "taking things apart and identifying their constituent parts. Locating patterns involves reassembling them in ways that begin to resemble a coherent explanation. . .of the event. . .under study" (p. 150). Accordingly, Kent coded ("took apart") and synthesized the participant's responses in order to identify any broad categories stemming from the content of the dialogue with the participant (see Table 1).

In the transcript excerpt shown in Table 1, Angie describes both the equitable and inequitable conditions that existed within her school's extracurricular organizations. She resented the fact that one club in particular had never invited the inclusion of Latinas, and she became determined to put an end to what she considered an injustice—one that may have been implicitly sanctioned by those who administered the school's operations. Angie's decision to break through the ethnic barriers of the FHA's local chapter would become the basis for the third and final scene of the ethnodrama that appears later in this article.

Converting Themes to Scenes

One theme developing from the rest of Angie's responses during our sessions was that of *regimentation*: the constant seating and re-seating of students on a day-to-day basis, the division of rows as to the color of birds, with the color blue taking precedence over all others, and the participant's struggle to remain a creature of an artificially superior color. In the play's first scene, the idea of enforced uniformity is apparent from the moment we see the teacher, the way she is dressed and the way she acts—constantly on guard against chaos. A sense of confusion is remote but still present and the sounds of children conversing discreetly in a different language are those with whom the teacher in Scene One will always feel discomfort. She battles this sense of unease in the manner she presents herself and in the uncertain way she speaks to her students.

Following from the concept of *regimentation*, there appears that of *division* in Scene Two, with the appearance of a fence that separates school from the rest of the world, or the strange from the familiar. To many, the fence may act as a concrete representation of the division between the two characters—one child, Angie, who is conversant in both Spanish and English and the other (or Other) child, identified as Linda, who is not yet "Anglicized." In a more abstract sense, that fence might also suggest the two-layered, reinforced barrier that many American political leaders have urged be erected on the border between Mexico and the U.S. to curb illegal immigration. In the play, however, the fence serves as an object of decreasing significance as the scene progresses.

The third scene was the toughest to write. As that portion of the play has been drafted, both Angie and Linda are new members of the homemaking club. However, Angie's character has been nearly overshadowed by Linda. But since it is Angie who reminds Linda that they are "crashing" the club so that they will "not be held back," we feel the story is still

her own. In this scene, both girls are ninth-graders, and in the abrupt chronological stretch between the second and third scenes, the audience will sense a stark change in Linda, who is now a self-confident young woman with a verbal quickness to match. The all-Anglo homemaking chapter—here, blithely commemorated with the abbreviation, “F. H. U.,” which could mean just about anything. (An audience might feel that multiple interpretations are encouraged and welcome.) Indeed, this duo, seated apart from the rest of their fellow students during the third scene, might visually represent those referred to and addressed by Audre Lorde (1984) when she wrote:

Those of us who stand outside the circle. . . know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish.
(p. 112)

Just as Lorde was verbalizing her emotions regarding patriarchy and feminism over 2 decades ago, Angie and Linda are actually fellow conspirators reacting against the ideological *patron*-system with which the Future Homemakers organization was seen as complicit—with all the implications inherent of an upstanding young woman’s expectations (i.e., to remain subservient, “barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen”).

Before presenting the three scenes on which Angie’s remembrances are based, we would acknowledge that since this article chronicles the process of a cross-cultural study, the question of research as a colonizing experience inevitably comes into play any time the researcher is of a different gender and/or ethnicity from those who are being researched. Thus, we would emphasize that the following presentation of findings is filtered through our consciousness and can never be that of anyone else, including the participant. In other words, this ethnodrama is our interpretation of another’s lived experience and is not meant to be understood or perceived as an attempt to “speak for the other.”

What follows is still a work in progress, one that never stops being or becoming but always evolving and shifting.

Play: “Episodes from a Homemaking Project”

Scene One: *A classroom, painted green, that includes a chalkboard, bulletin boards, rows of student desks, and a teacher’s desk. Suspended from the stage ceiling is a rectangular projection screen that displays a map of South Texas and Northern Mexico. The classroom’s lone occupant is a White middle-aged female with black pleated skirt, white frilly blouse, dark graying hair, wearing horn-rimmed glasses. As she writes her name, “Mrs. Lubitsch,” on the blackboard in large block-print letters, 15 children of multiple ethnicities, mostly Anglo, file in from the door (stage left) and take their seats. MRS. LUBITSCH picks up a long wooden pointer. She rarely uses it to point to anything in particular. Her voice is extremely high-pitched. The students converse among themselves, some in English and some in Spanish, while waiting for something to happen. It soon does...*

MRS. LUBITSCH: Children, my name is Mrs. Lubitsch. That is what you will call me at all times. You will not call me anything else. Remember that. (*Pause*) Now (*rapping the pointer sharply against her desk*), today you will be tested for your skills in speaking English. Most of you should have no problem with the questions you will be asked. *Some of you...*(*Here, she lowers her timbre somewhat*)...and I can tell just by looking—*some of you may be leaving us for another classroom and another Group—a Group whose skills in communicating*

in our own language is, well, not exactly up to standard and really quite undesirable at the level of my class. But if that turns out to be your situation, don't ask why and don't complain. Never complain... Because why you will be leaving is none of your concern.

FEMALE STUDENT: Ma'am? How can they ask us anything on the first day of school? We haven't learned anything yet.

MRS. LUBITSCH: The questions you will be asked have nothing to do with schoolwork.

(From the class, there emanates whispering—some in Spanish, some in Tex-Mex—as some students attempt to translate the teacher's words for their friends.)

MRS. LUBITSCH: Now. I will send some of you across the hall where other teachers await you. Just answer their questions when you are asked. From there, it will be decided what Group you will be in during this, your first year of school. Listen as I call your names: Tina Carmona, Eduardo Gonzalez, Enrique Hernandez, Angie Lara, and Sylvia Garza. You five will now proceed to the room across the hall where Mr. Whitehead and other teachers will be waiting.

Here, the lights fade, and the stage becomes dark. Then, we hear distinct sounds of adults holding conversations with students, partly in Spanish, partly in English. We hear questions addressed by adult voices and answered by children's voices. We catch snippets now and then from the soft steady drone of dialogue...

ADULT: What did you have for breakfast?

MALE CHILD: Que?

ADULT: *(enunciating slowly)*: What...did...you...have...for...break...fast?

MALE CHILD: Fuss? I no make fuss. I do what you say, okay? Sí?

ADULT: Sí. I mean, yes....

While the above dialogue is spoken over the drone of other voices, we see a series of still images, in black-and-white, emerge on stage, projected on a huge white screen, center-stage. They are photographs of the poverty-stricken neighborhoods and colonias of the American Southwest. As the series of images continue to pass across the screen, we hear more...

FIRST ADULT: See this pencil? What color is it?

FEMALE CHILD: Sí, senora. Es muy caliente.

SECOND ADULT: How's it coming, Mona?

FEMALE CHILD: No me gusta esta escuela.

SECOND ADULT: What's she saying?

FIRST ADULT: You got me...Maybe we can get one of the others to translate...

(The conversation fades. Then another set of voices emerges above the hum.)

MALE ADULT *(Spanish with a slow Texan drawl)*: ¿Co-mo se lla-ma, senior-ita?

CHILD: My name is Angie. I can talk in English if you like.

MALE ADULT: That'll be fine, girl.

ANGIE: Or I can talk in Spanish. Either way is okay.

MALE ADULT: To tell you the truth, honey, "Como se llama" covers all the Spanish I know. That, along with "chili beans" and "frijoles." And "cervezo." *(Laughs)* No, ma'am, that's one word I shore cain't afford to forget!

The screen darkens and then shows once again the map of the Borderlands. But this time, the word, "AZTLAN," has been emblazoned across the map diagonally in big red letters. The stage is lit to reveal...

Scene Two:

...a playground divided in two by a high fence. On the one side is a young first-grade Latina with short dark straight hair and a pink dress she has worn many times since the previous Easter. She is crying and sniffing. Another girl, also a first-grader, enters from the right and approaches the crying girl. We recognize this second girl by the sound of her voice. It is ANGIE.

ANGIE: What's wrong?

GIRL: *(Starts to cry louder)*

ANGIE: Can I help?

GIRL: Vayase de aqui!

ANGIE: *(in Spanish)* Please, not until you tell me what upsets you?

GIRL: *(Crying has turned into annoying sniffing)*

ANGIE: Well, all right...*(She turns to leave)*

GIRL *(in Spanish)*: They say they cannot understand me.

ANGIE *(in Spanish)*: Who says they say they cannot understand you?

GIRL *(in Spanish)*: Them. *(Pointing in a direction where other children are playing.)*

(From here, all dialogue is spoken in Spanish unless otherwise designated.)

Anything I say, they laugh at me. They call me names. "Wetback." "Chuca." One boy said in Spanish, "Go back to where you come from." *(Pause, then continues)* I think that is what he said. I could barely understand him.

ANGIE: Forget it. That is gringo-talk. Gringo-talk from coconuts who think they are better, and all because their families swam across the Rio Bravo before the others. Do not let it bother you. *(Pause)* You should hear my older sisters when they sass back to the pochos. And like typical coconuts, they understand none of it...Oh, and some of the things they say to the gringo boys. *(Laughs suddenly)* It is well that the gringos cannot understand a single word they say to them – otherwise *(and here, she makes a motion with her finger as if slitting her throat.)*

GIRL: *(Laughing too)* I would like to have been there.

ANGIE: *(after a pause)*: I am called Angie.

GIRL: I am called Linda. *(pause)* But my mother calls me Florecita, after the girl in *Los Gavilanes*...

ANGIE #1: Ah, the Pedro Infante movie. My uncle took us to see it at the drive-in last summer. I *adore* Pedro Infante.

LINDA: What is a "drive-in?"

ANGIE: A huge outdoor parking lot where people stop their cars at night and watch movies.

LINDA: They show movies here from Mexico?

ANGIE: Not here; but in the city. I heard our mother once say, "Herd enough of us into one place, and they cannot but help to find new ways to take our money."

LINDA: I think I would like to go to a drive-in...

ANGIE: *(in English)*: Tough luck, kid. You'll need a car first. And driving lessons... *(And then, in Spanish)* Now repeat the words I have just spoken... *(In English, slowly)* Tough luck, kid.

LINDA: *(also in English)*: Tough...luck...kid.

ANGIE: You need a car.

LINDA: You...need...a car.

ANGIE: That's swell. *(They resume their conversation in Spanish)*: What does your father do?

LINDA: He fixes things. Automobiles, lawn mowers. Anything with motors in them. What does *your* father do?

ANGIE: He passed away when I was two. My mother takes care of us. She cleans houses. She is a housekeeper.

LINDA: Is that what you want to be when you grow up?

ANGIE: Never! I will work in an office. With air conditioning.

LINDA: Really?

ANGIE: Yes. I will never clean houses for the Anglos. Not for anyone.

LINDA: Then I will not clean houses. Never.

ANGIE: Good. Now say it in English: "I will not clean houses."

LINDA *(in English)*: I...will not...

ANGIE: Clean houses.

LINDA: Clean...houses.

ANGIE: Good.

The two girls have come to be on the same side of the fence. They go off together stage right. The image of the map of Aztlan fades out on the screen and gives way to school photos of Angie and Linda taken in elementary school, followed by school photos of Angie and Linda taken in high school.

Scene Three:

From stage left, two teen-aged Latinas enter. As they speak, we perceive who they are.

LINDA: Angie, you've always said you would never clean houses to earn a living.

ANGIE *(now wearing glasses)*: That's right. Never.

LINDA: Right. So why do you want to join a club for future housekeepers?

ANGIE: Homemakers, not housekeepers--as in making a home for oneself, not others.

LINDA: Other Anglos, you mean.

ANGIE: Check.

LINDA: Then why do you want to be in a club that has nothing but future Anglo homemakers?

ANGIE: Because that's the way it's always been.

LINDA: And that's the way it will always be.

ANGIE: No! *(pause)* Look, Linda, up till now, the FHU has allowed only Anglos. And it's unjust; it's like one of so many ways that Chicanos have been held back—held back from joining this, held back from joining that. Well, not this time. They can't keep us from joining if we sign up for Homemaking. That's the rule. And if we enroll, the club has to take us. Then, and only then, will they realize that *we* can join their exclusive little all-White club any time we want to!

Pause.

LINDA: They can make it pretty rough for us.

ANGIE: I've made up my mind.

Here, the lights illuminate the rest of the stage to reveal...the screen projects the following words: "Welcome New F. H. U. Members, Spring 1966." We discover that the two Latinas are in a den inside someone's home. There is a cushioned recliner in the middle of the stage, and on each side of that are two long sofas. A dozen ANGLO TEEN-AGED GIRLS now enter,

chatting and giggling with one another as they find their places on either sofa, all the while ignoring LINDA and ANGIE. The faculty sponsor of the club, MRS. MANNERS also enters and sits in the recliner. Taking their seats on the floor on the extreme right side of the stage, LINDA and ANGIE neither chat nor giggle with anyone in the room, including each other. Instead, they are posited comfortably on huge beanbags and throw-pillows, seated with their backs straight, their knees folded. The meeting comes to order.

MRS. MANNERS: All right, girls. Now that we've dispensed with the tea and cookies...

JUDY (*one of the Anglo girls*): Not "we," Mrs. Lubitsch. Just Big Bertha over there...

WANDA: Hey, cut it out. I may be big, but I'm not a "Bertha."

Giggling among the other girls seated.

MRS. MANNERS: I should say not. Now stop that, ladies. (*Pause as quiet is restored.*) We will now ask our new members to introduce themselves to the club. (*Looking around, before settling on one of the Anglo girls.*) Ah, yes. You there. Tell us your name and a little about yourself.

ANGLO NEWCOMER: (*standing tentatively*): Well, uh, my name's Deborah Ann Paulson. But you can call me Dee Dee. And, uh...well, what do you wanna know about me?

JOHNNIE JO: Oh, you know. The usual stuff.

JUDY: Yeah, like have you got a steady?

More giggling.

DEE DEE: Well, no. You see, we just moved here.

MRS. MANNERS: Oh? From where?

DEE DEE (*coughs nervously*): Arizona.

MRS. MANNERS: What does your father do for a living, Deborah?

DEE DEE: Well, my Old Man... Dad, that is... He's a deputy policeman. But he used to be a prison guard back in Yuma.

SHERRY: Hey, did your Old Man ever shoot anyone trying to escape...?

MRS. MANNERS (*shocked*): Oh, really!

DEE DEE: (*relaxing a little, enjoying the attention*): Well, yeah, once. He shot a Mexican who tried to run from work detail.

JUDY: Wow! Did he kill him?

DEE DEE: No. He just lamed him. Got him in the knee. Dad just wanted to make sure he'd never run again. From what I heard, he'll never walk again either.

KIM: Gee, what was he in for?

DEE DEE: Stealing a loaf of bread. He was a migrant. We had a lot of those where we lived. Anyway he claimed his family was starving, and that's why he had to steal. But the judge threw the book at him anyway. Twenty years.

SHERRY: Hey, Dee Dee, can I give your dad the address of an old ex- of mine? 'Cuz if *anyone* deserves to be plugged, he's it!

Laughter among the sofa contingent.

MRS. MANNERS: Girls! Girls! Now, Deborah, you just ignore that. And, uh, thank you for your introduction. Welcome.

(DEE DEE sits down as she receives a long round of applause from the ANGLO GIRLS.)

MRS. MANNERS: Now, let's see...Oh, yes, of course! Young ladies, we also have before us two other additions to the club...

Here, all of the ANGLO GIRLS turn to stare at the Latinas seated on the floor.

MRS. MANNERS: ...and they will now proceed to tell us all about themselves. Now, ladies, which of you would like to go first?

ANGIE and LINDA give quick glances toward one another, before ANGIE slowly steps up to the occasion. She does so modestly, but with a faint smile, for breaking the color barrier of the school's homemaking club was a major objective. Now, the time has come to claim victory.

ANGIE (*standing self-consciously*): Good evening, Mrs. Manners, everyone. My name is Angie Lara. And I'm happy to be here. (*Pause, just long enough to take in the stone-cold silence and stare-downs before continuing.*) Some of you already know me from school and everything, so I won't take up too much time telling you all about me when...

MRS. MANNERS: Not at all, Angie. And I'm well aware of your excellent reputation as a scholar. You've made quite an impression over the years...But tell me something. Just why *did* you decide to join the F. H. U.?

ANGIE (*nervously smiling at LINDA seated*): Well, uh, right now, that's a little hard to say.

MRS. MANNERS: Oh, come, come! You must already know how to sew and cook. Your mother is known hereabouts as an excellent seamstress. Didn't she ever teach you?

ANGIE (*stiffening slightly*): Well, you see, Mrs. Manners. She really doesn't have time to do that. She works pretty hard...

MRS. MANNERS: Oh, yes, yes. I can imagine. I can see that she certainly does... (*She pauses, allowing her remark to sink into Angie like a knife*). Well, thank you, Angie. And we're ever so delighted to have you with us. You may be seated.

There is no round of applause for ANGIE as she sits. Only silence.

MRS. MANNERS: Now (*indicating toward LINDA*) it's your turn, I believe.

Here, LINDA rises partway, but appears frozen in a half-stance. But she asserts a determined look on her face, continues rising, and stands before the club.

LINDA (*smiling most warmly to all*): Buenas tardes, Senora Manners y todos. Me llamo Florecita y tengo algo que decirles. Todos ustedes apestan como puercos. No se dan cuenta lo que ha sucedido...²

LINDA pauses very briefly and notices the shocked look on ANGIE's face. She then proceeds.

LINDA (*still smiling*): Oh! I do apologize! Just a habit, I guess. Forgive me. My name is Linda. And I am so pleased to be here, Mrs. Manners...I remember when I first came to this country. I had no friends at all—no one to talk to, no one to play with. But now...Well...All I can say to you is this: I look forward to getting to know (*pointing to the girls*) all of my new friends. (*She performs an exaggerated curtsy to each sofa.*) Thank you, Mrs. Manners. Thank you, amigas. Muchas gracias.

She sits down, then reclines leisurely on her bean bag, like a model posing. Long pause.

² Good afternoon, Mrs. Manners and everyone. I am called Florecita, and I have something to tell you. All of you stink like pigs. You do not even realize what has happened...

MRS. MANNERS (*clearing her throat*): Gracias to you. I mean, thank you, Linda. A pleasure.

The club's faculty-sponsor appears dumbstruck, yet she begins to applaud, though the effort is somewhat half-hearted. Eventually, two of the other girls also clap, yet they are not quite certain why. Reluctantly, other ANGLO GIRLS join in. And continue applauding...

CURTAIN.

Reaction of the Participant

While this play has enjoyed the attention of neither an audience nor readership, there *was* someone whose sensibility and taste was necessary for critical rigor and trustworthiness—Angie. So, for purposes of a member-check, Kent showed her the work in progress. Kent met in Angie's second-floor office, located in the college classroom building where she has taught English Composition and Mexican-American Literature for the past 20 years. Before handing over the play, Kent presented a portion of the transcript of the interview containing her description of many of the events on which the scenes were based.

We anticipated that Angie would object to the work as not being naturalistic enough for conventional tastes. Admittedly, Kent had taken license with many of the details of her educational experiences. Imagine, therefore, our comfort when Angie registered her first encouraging reaction to the physical description of the teacher. Angie commented: "Yes, that's her to a 'T'...you've really gotten inside my head." As she reached the part where the Hispanic first-graders were asked what they ate for breakfast, she supplied some rather surprising information: "The thing is, they *did* once ask me what I ate for breakfast. I told them I had bacon and eggs. But I lied." She explained that she wanted her teachers to be pleased with her, so she responded with an "Americanized" meal rather than the tortilla-and-bean breakfast, which she had prepared herself before embarking upon her first day in school.

When she began reading the third scene, she made no objections, even offering this comment after reading one line her character speaks: "I wish I could have said that!" Kent expressed his intention of rewriting portions of the play, incorporating some of her reactions. Thus, for example, the dialogue in Scene Two will later be amended to include Angie telling Linda about the lie she told the Anglo interrogator regarding her breakfast. However, the third scene, we fear, communicates only a perfunctory impression of the conspiratorial camaraderie and the necessary chutzpah required of Angie and Linda to have underwritten their uprising against the well-established social convention of an all-White homemaking club—an artistic shortcoming, to be sure, but one which, if nothing else, confirms the adage that no process of reportage, old or new, is foolproof.

Dismantling the Stage: Reflections on Ethnodramatic Appeal

As playwright Moss Hart (1959) observed, when an outline for a comedy or drama is translated into a play, "it shifts mercurially under one's fingers, and the emphasis of a scene or sometimes a whole act will twist out of control, taking with it large parts of the carefully plotted scenario that follows after" (p. 317). In this case, however, there was no outline to slavishly follow; the dialogue itself dictated the direction of the storyline as the conception began to change forms, just as Hart describes above. Our current misgivings center around the abrupt 9-year jump between Scenes Two and Three, and the use of the large screen with

projected images seems now an archaic device when one considers its presence in the Broadway premiere of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945.

As for the change in Linda's character, from that of the crying monolingual first-grader to the wisecracking master-of-the-American-idiom teenager, such wide disparity in behavior may be viewed as a successful transition in the character's confidence. Yet, if one interprets Linda as "victorious" only *after* she has polished her use of a language that is, practically speaking, the province and tool of the Oppressor, wielded historically against those it seeks to assimilate or destroy, then one must also question her linguistic acquisition as representative of anything other than an angry sort of negotiation with a hostile Anglo-American popular culture that she (and we?) have come to find as both attractive and repellant. As Angie revealed in a second interview,

It was after the Beatles had arrived. I remember there was that sense of freedom in the air, where, I don't know, it wasn't just the Beatles that gave us that sense, but it was, now looking back, I think it was the Civil Rights Act went into play. And as a kid, I didn't realize there were other things going on socially in the U.S. to help us feel this sense of "Oh, I can do anything!"

This sentiment, if applied universally as a summation of what we may experience, suggests liberation of the human spirit. However, such liberation did not come into consideration when reflecting about Kent's presence in Angie's story. Despite the circumstances Angie and Kent share in common, it was the difference in our ethnicity and culture that determined my decision to limit my role to researcher/storyteller. Kent appears nowhere in the play as a physical character. Perhaps the primary reason for this is that Kent is a non-Hispanic male. As such, Kent might thus be classified, according to Banks' (2001) *typology of cross-cultural researchers*, as the "external-insider"—one who "was socialized within another culture and acquires its beliefs, values, behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge" (p. 175). Yet because of experiences both within and outside Kent's community, Kent harbors an empathy and an affinity with those whom he seeks to acquaint himself through research. However, Kent might differ from Banks's category in the sense that he has not sought to become an "adopted member" of the community he investigates. In that sense, therefore, Kent may be more "external" than at first admitted.

But there is another issue to consider – what some have designated the primary purpose of ethnodrama within an academic context. Denzin (2003), while acknowledging the legitimacy of data-representation, has objected that "[t]oo often missing from the dramaturgical model is any sustained consideration of the politics of gendered, global capitalist culture" (p. 29). Therefore, he has advocated a philosophical "turn" from the "dramaturgical" to the "political" and, finally, the "pedagogical," which, for audiences, will ideally result in "epiphanies" and "liminal" recognitions of societal injustices and civil wrongs in urgent need of amelioration. Flannery's (2009) five-act "(Ac)knowledging Eating, Loving, Living," as accessible an examination of globalist culture as one can imagine, would appear to do just that. Our first two sections posit the idea of eating as an amusing metaphor for "commonly held assumptions about race, gender, class, and nationality" (Flannery, 2009, p. 439). However, the balance of the play targets contemporary geopolitics and culminates in a vision of a future where "the experts no longer rule" (Flannery, p. 446). With the exception of the second act, the work consists of a series of lectures delivered by actors to other actors and/or the audience. Thus, Flannery succeeds in transforming the dramaturgical into the liturgical – ethnodrama as straight pedagogy.

Saldaña (2005), on the other hand, explains his position on ethnodrama with the following proclamation, and the emphases are his: "*Theatre's primary goal is to entertain—to*

entertain ideas as it *entertains its spectators*” (p. 14). All other considerations, including those rooted in the pedagogical, may as well play second-fiddle. As Nimmon (2007) has observed, a successful ethnodrama “is meant to stir the audience emotionally [and] to prompt critical thinking about the social and lived realities presented” (p. 392). Bhattacharya’s (2009) “Neerada’s/Yamini’s Informal Academia,” for example, uses an unorthodox visual technique of staging dialogue scenes to advance ethnodrama into a deeper, more personal realm. In narrating the experiences of two Indian female graduate students in America, she explores the phenomenon of “de/colonization” within a “front-stage/back-stage” framework, capturing the “complex and intertwined nature of the participants’ experiences” (p. 1082). This strategy explores each student’s negotiation with identity and cultural perception, while referencing the inevitable condescending queries from their American counterparts regarding boyfriends, arranged marriages, exotic cooking, even their “sweet-sounding accent[s]” (p. 1067). Bhattacharya (2009) reflects on her conscious choice to “quell any liberatory urges” and control any “knee-jerk need to be the well-intentioned liberatory researcher” (p. 1078). Intentionally or not, the counterbalancing of a binary stage design with two participants’ stories asks us, as readers and audience, to ponder the implicit disparity between form and content, and how such a stylistic set-up mirrors the author’s reflexive views regarding her work as researcher/dramatist.

Flannery (2009) and Bhattacharya (2009) demonstrate a flair for flaunting conventional theatricality; their pieces suggest that ethnodrama demands more than a story in which characters deliver lines or go through motions on stage. Instead, such works elicit what Bagley (2008) called “the potential power of arts-based processes. . .to provide stories which engage with . . . multiple meanings and multiple voices” (p. 57). This venture required the situating of the researcher (first author) in relation to the participant and her version of those experiences described and dramatized earlier in this article. Just as in a conventional study, the interpretation itself was dependent upon the ways in which the data provided by the participant was filtered through my own consciousness, my own set of subjectivities, and ultimately the decisions as to what would count as evidence from the data collected. Thus, one might ask, “Is an arts-based representation so radically divergent from what many researchers consider a more accepted standard of reporting one’s findings?” And when considering that the theatrical structure used here facilitated a deeper examination of Angie’s remembrances by allowing us to attempt an interpretation from the point of view of the participant herself, then we would reply in the affirmative—and this should infer no comparative drawbacks. The “multiple meanings and voices” to which Bagley (2008) referred would not, we feel, have become as apparent within a more customary scheme. If Angie’s insurrection against the Future Homemakers’ local chapter was the result of an emancipatory surge of emotion characteristic of the 1960s, then why should there not exist today a concomitant liberating quality involved in actually adapting her story and those of other participants within a narrative framework? Naturally, it is for the reader/audience to observe the process and results that, in the end, comprise a different sort of participant/researcher collaboration, while at the same time reflecting on the necessity felt by researchers to make meaning of life-stories by placing the same emphasis on “stories” as they do to life itself.

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Author Note

Norman K. Gillen holds a Doctorate of Education from Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. He is currently an adjunct instructor of Industrial Communications and English at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas. His research interest encompasses cross-cultural studies, particularly in the South Texas borderlands region. He may be contacted at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi, Educational Administration and Research, FC 217, 6300 Ocean Drive, Unit 5818, Texas A & M University Corpus Christi' Corpus Christi, TX 78412-5818; Email: kent.gillen@gmail.com

Kakali Bhattacharya is an Associate Professor at Texas A & M University, Corpus Christi in the department of Educational Leadership and Curriculum and Instruction. Her research interests are in de/colonizing methodologies, transnational feminism, and technology-integrated learning and social environments. Of late she has been integrating contemplative practices in her teaching and research and exploring a new research area focusing on inspired learning. When not in the academic world, she can be found zumba dancing, or doing the downward dog yoga pose in her body flow class, or just simply enjoying a marathon of the TV show, *The Big Bang Theory*. She may be contacted at Educational Administration & Research, FC 217, 6300 Ocean Drive, Unit 5818, Texas A & M University Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, TX 78412-5818: Email: kakali.bhattacharya@tamucc.edu; Phone: 361-825-6017

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