

5-26-2024

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Mexican-American Literature Is American Literature

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Senior Thesis

Professor Jesse Donaldson

26 May 2024

Abstract

The main focus of this article is to show that teaching Mexican-American literature is an important part of teaching American literature, one that is often neglected. As of right now, Chicano Literature and American Literature are seen as two separate categories even though they are one in the same. Authors such as Rudolfo Anaya and Tomás Rivera allow readers insight into Mexican-American culture; the foundations they have set should be used in American Literature courses to help students view the wide variety that is American Literature, other than what the canon deems acceptable. *Bless Me, Ultima*, and *...and the Earth Did Not Devour Him* represent a part of literature and history that is left out of the canon. My paper addresses the lack of Mexican-American literature and history in the High school curriculum and how we can fill this gap with authors like Anaya and Rivera. Assimilation, identity, and communal voice are themes that will be examined, and used to express why these texts are important to incorporate within American literature. These novels should not be excluded from what we know as the canon and should not be put into an “other” category. The importance of including Chicano Literature into the high school curriculum is not only to help inform Mexican-American students of their past, but to inform everyone that there is more to American literature than what is being taught.

Introduction: Experience, Importance, and Need of Mexican-American Literature

Growing up Mexican-American in a predominantly white community did not allow me to learn much of my identity and history, while in primary and secondary school. I was always taught to be proud of my Mexican identity, but it was hard to be proud of something I hardly knew about. My father did his best to teach me what he knew, but it wasn't much, and my grandparents rarely discussed their story. In school when learning about American history and literature, the Mexican-American story was not included. Everything I had learned was from movies, shows, my father, and friends, which wasn't always the most accurate. Once I began my higher education, I started doing my own research, and was also able to take a class on Latino/a history in America. However, within my literature courses, I read about two or three Mexican-American authors in my five years. The reason why I am explaining my background and lack of education of Mexican-American identity is to give you a sense of why I am writing this essay. To allow you to learn about the untold story of Mexican-Americans and to open your eyes and see why incorporating Chicano Literature into our American Literature courses is needed.

The incorporation of Mexican-American literature into schools would create a space for children, who like me, didn't have knowledge of their culture and identity. This would allow an abundant amount of things to occur for students, especially at the high school level. Mexican-American students could feel included in their literature course by way of connecting to the novels that are being read. They will also be able to learn about their history, in a setting where they are able to discuss, analyze and think about how novels are depicting the Mexican-American story. Although each of the points above are significant, the most important is that by incorporating novels that students can connect to, they will be able to add their voice to the classroom and feel as though they can engage.

The Mexican-American story has been excluded from the literary canon for long enough. It is time we as a collective change it. Within this essay I will explain my reasoning as to why we need Mexican-American literature to be considered a part of American literature. Starting with the unfamiliar history of Mexican-American struggles, taking place from 1846-1970's. The essay will then transition to a deep analysis of two significant novels within Chicano literature, the first being *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, and the second being, *...And the Earth Did not Devour Him* by Tomás Rivera (translated by Evangelina Vigil-Piñón). Both novels will prove that by creating a space for them in the canon, American Literature will be gaining new themes, and adding to the already known themes that make the American story. The Mexican-American story is an American story, and with the inclusion of literature, we as a society will gain knowledge, understanding, and learn about the culture of Mexican Americans.

Literature Review: The Historical, Socio-political, and Literary Importance of Chicanos in America

To begin to fully understand the importance of Chicano literature and culture as a significant part of American History and Literature, we must first understand the larger history of Mexican-Americans; while my focus will be on the literature of the Chicano Movement in the 1960's, which encouraged and empowered young Chicanos to become politically and socially active, it is important to understand that the roots of the movement began much earlier. In "The Chicano Movement: Mexican American History and the Struggle for Equality" Carlos Muñoz, Professor of Ethnic Studies at University of California Berkeley, describes in depth not only how the Chicano Movement impacted Mexican-American communities in the late 1960's and 70's but also the full context around the earlier generations of Mexican-Americans that gave rise to

the movement. Muñoz makes clear that the US-Mexico war (known in Mexico as the US Invasion), which occurred from 1846-48, was a war of aggression. America wanted to expand its empire by taking Mexican land. Muñoz argues that when Mexico lost the war, the Mexican citizens living in what was suddenly America were treated as second class citizens at best, refugees who had sacrificed not only land but political power. The agreement that ended the war, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was supposed to allow Mexican-Americans rights pertaining to land, education, culture, and religion. However, America did not abide by this treaty, causing Mexican-Americans to become an oppressed minority group, seen as politically, intellectually, and socially lesser than white Americans (Muñoz, 32).

For nearly a hundred years, Mexicans living in the U.S. had to assimilate to white ways, they were often forbidden to speak their native language (Spanish) in school settings, which ultimately forced them to question their cultural identity. Ironically, further acts of American aggression helped change Mexican-American fortunes, but first they had to fight for their adopted homeland. When Mexican-Americans volunteered or were drafted into the armed forces during WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, it gave them the opportunity to become educated through the G.I. Bill. A college degree and access to higher education allowed many Mexican-Americans to become teachers, social workers, and attain other middle class office jobs. With this increase in recognition, a large number of Mexican-Americans became interested in the political aspects of America. Groups such as the Association of Mexican American Educators, the Mexican American Political Association, National Farm Workers Association, and more were established to organize and fight for Mexican-American rights and justice. These groups and many others helped Mexican-Americans create a better life for themselves in America. Muñoz states, “collectively these groups came to represent a new professional sector of

an emerging Mexican American middle class committed to supporting the Democratic Party” (35). Supporting the democratic party in the 1960’s meant aligning with progressive ideals pertaining to civil rights, and social justice for minority groups. However, the Chicanos who supported the democratic party were also overlooked and took matters of equality, justice, and education into their own hands.

During this time many Mexican-Americans were influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., including Cesar Chavez, who was a co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers of America. Chavez and Dolores Huerta founded the associations above in order to fight for better work conditions and wages for Mexican farm workers. Both activists followed MLK in supporting non-violent protests. However, not everyone felt that these non-violent protests were effective. Younger generations of Mexican-Americans wanted a change to happen overnight, while the older generation was willing to wait for change to occur. In “Chicano Movement Rhetoric: An Ideographic interpretation” Fernando Pedro Delgado, Assistant Professor in the Communication Studies department at Arizona State University, explains, “In the later guise Chicanos were interested in acceptance on their terms rather than accommodation or assimilation” (Delgado, 449). The younger, now educated, generations of Mexican-Americans, who called themselves Chicanos, didn’t want assimilation or accommodations but wanted change in a system that repeatedly made them give up a part of themselves, by forcing them to speak the language of their oppressor and forcing them to give up parts of their culture. Delgado further explains, “Chicanos, who had access to higher education, became politicized and enervated by various Marxist and critical theories” (449). This is supported by Muñoz who points out that many Chicanos joined the Communist and Social Workers Party, and also became an active part of Anti-War protests to fight against the

continuation of the Vietnam War. Muñoz gives one specific example. A man named Luiz Valdez, a student activist, who later became the founder of the Chicano Art Movement, joined the Marxist Progressive Labor Party, which went to Cuba to observe the revolution, and inspired the Mexican-American manifesto (36). Delgado argues that “The Chicano Movement was thus a hybrid of Marxist and nationalist thinking wedded to a desire to recapture a sense of cultural empowerment” (449). These college level Chicanos gained a sense of control while they fought for rights that were supposed to be implemented when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been signed.

The Chicano Movement also included more than college students, in 1968 the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) organization, which was formed by twelve University of Colorado students, became an influence to many high school students. UMAS was one of the largest protest organizations against racism in segregated high schools and helped students fight for freedom of speech, hiring Mexican-American educators and administrators, and trying to create courses on Mexican culture. This younger generation of Chicanos were fighting for their education, which ultimately helped high school students become politically aware. The movement would institute the student walkouts (also known as blowouts), some of the first mass protests by Mexican-Americans youth against racism. These protests “...ignited the emergence of the Chicano Movement”(Muñoz, 38). Sal Castro, a teacher in East L.A., helped thousands of high school students organize the walkouts. *Blowout!* by Mario T. García and Sal Castro, explains, “Castro concluded that a walkout—a strike—of Chicano students, or at least the threat of a walkout, was the only viable strategy to bring about educational change and justice” (García and Castro, 5). Although these strikes made history and did make an impact for Chicano students, the leaders of the strikes were also arrested (known as the East L.A. Thirteen),

including Castro. The East L.A. Thirteen were charged with willfully disturbing the peace and quiet and disrupting the educational process. The thirteen activists were put in front of the grand jury who characterized them as part of communist organizations or as “agitators intent on radicalizing Mexican American students” (38). These leaders who encouraged students to fight for better education and to fight for equality, were sentenced to sixty-six years in prison combined. García and Castro stated, “walkouts marked the commencement of the urban-based Chicano Movement, a major part of civil rights history, although still even today it is not fully acknowledged” (5). The Chicano Movement continuously gets overlooked while discussing the civil rights era of Americas History, which also implies that the literature is being overlooked as well. As a society, it is essential that we include Chicano arts and history into our high school literature courses. This is not only to gain knowledge of the hardships that Chicanos had faced, but also because abandoning this aspect of history would disregard the dedication and efforts that went into fighting for Mexican-American rights.

Before the Chicano Movement, most Mexican-Americans did not have ample educational opportunities. They were sent to segregated schools and taught the “American way of life” (Muñoz, 32). Meaning that they had to assimilate to the values and beliefs of white America, which was just one way the U.S. continued to act as a colonizer over the descendants of land that had once been Mexico. Muñoz states, “they were taught that Mexican culture was inferior and those who did not assimilate into the colonizer’s culture were often placed in classes for students with developmental and learning disabilities” (32). If they did not transition into becoming more American than Mexican, they were seen as intellectually lesser.

Castro has reflected on his time as a child in the American education system, explaining, “These early public school experiences exposed [me] to various forms of discrimination and

racism against students, like [myself], of Mexican American background” (García and Castro, 3). Similarly, History professor at South Texas College, James B. Barrera, describes how there was an unofficial no-Spanish rule in the South Texas public school system and that 66.7 percent of all Texas schools discouraged the use of Spanish in classrooms (83). García and Barrera both express how public schools, places that should have been encouraging all their students, places to learn and express themselves, Mexican-American students were to be silenced and treated as irrelevant.

Although segregation was occurring in schools across America, Mexican-Americans did not sit back and allow for their children to be separated without a fight. In 1946, the *Mendez v. Westminster* case took place, a legal fight against segregation of public schools, parks, movie theaters and restaurants in Orange County California. Sylvia Mendez’s parents sued the 17th Street School for not allowing her to attend, due to her brown skin color and last name. Unlike many cases before this, the Mendez's won and helped end segregation in California. It was a landmark case that eventually helped end segregation in the United States as the more often discussed *Brown v. The Board of Education* from 1954 relied on the Mendez case as a legal precedent. It is important to note that even though Mexican-Americans were victims of racism, they’re court cases fought for desegregation of language and national origins rather than race. They wanted to be able to speak their home language freely in school and have classes for Spanish speaking students.

Once the Chicano Movement ended, many school systems stayed the same, but Chicanos became an empowered group of people who stood up to their oppressors and fought for their educational and political rights. Slowly the Chicano Movement started to change curriculums. In many places, there were now classes for Chicano studies, bilingual education, and more Chicano

administrators, counselors, and teachers. This young generation of Mexican-Americans paved the path for visibility and a voice within a society that constantly treated them as second rate citizens.

The ongoing struggle of Mexican-American education is still not being integrated into the American story and canon of American literature. In present day America, the Chicano Movement's art, cultural, and socio-political importance is not widely taught. Many students are still fighting to learn about their history, but it is rarely implemented in schools. The article "Teaching Mexican American History" by Roberto R. Treviño, a high school teacher, explains, "A generation removed from the Chicano civil rights era, many of our high school students today have no idea who the really heroic César was....Latinos and non-Latinos alike, have little if any exposure to the history of the largest Latino group in the United States, Mexican Americans" (Treviño, 18). Although Treviño is discussing history classes, the same can be said for literature: most students do not know Chicano authors and the importance of Chicano literature. In this same article, Treviño explains that teachers should not try to reteach history for "political correctness" but to help students become more engaged in this ignored American story (18). He goes on to list books that could be taught in history courses to help get the discussions started before softening his rhetoric. He states, "I am not suggesting high school teachers assign these books to their students, although excerpts may certainly be appropriate for advanced classes" (18). Treviño is stating that high schools should be assigning Chicano history, but the same can be said for the literature. Chicano literature will allow for discussion, but also give students a better understanding about what has happened to Mexican Americans. It can also provide a feeling of being seen for Chicano students, while being able to discuss their culture and identity

in classroom settings. This could potentially make them feel more invested in a course, which would give them an active reason to focus on course material.

Even though adding Chicano literature would be beneficial for class discussion, it has not been included in the majority of high school literature curriculums. This is due to the concept of the literary canon. The canon, according to Clarence Green, who wrote “Introducing the Corpus of the Canon of Western Literature: A corpus for Culturomics and Stylistics,” is literature that exhibits “aesthetic beauty, profound ideas, themes, notable characters and language, and impressive artistic skill” (283). Green explains that Canonical works influence other literature as well, but still points out how “the canon overwhelmingly represents white male authors, character and viewpoints, suppresses the voices of women, the cultures of minorities, the spiritual beliefs of those not consistent with an era’s reigning (often brutally enforced) theology” (265). Green conveys how the canon only caters to certain demographics in America, but is still widely used to teach American Literature courses, and this is detrimental to minority groups who are not always portrayed positively in canonical works.

The Norton Anthology of American Literature is widely used to teach American Literature and is known to contain canonical works. The anthology, however, is also known for having author/text changes, by adding authors who are not white males. However, by adding minority groups and women authors, it is not actually changing the canon. Laura L. Aull explains, “canon revision is not a matter of simply ‘adding;’ marginalized writers and ‘stirring’ them into an anthology, but rather also challenging and rethinking values and structures that have excluded them” (497). Aull continues to explain that students should be able to create their own canons and revise the list into authors and texts that they think make up American literature. This is beneficial for students because it allows them to learn about minorities and women writers,

which allows them to create a better understanding of the world. Aull describes how books and characters can influence consciousness and actions (500). The article goes on to describe that because *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* is the primary text used for teaching, the inclusion of authors in the text are what is taught, and the exclusion is what is not taught. This pertains to Chicano literature and the teaching of it because Chicano authors and texts are heavily excluded from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

Upon my own research, I have found *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (the shorter 8th edition) includes only four Latino/a authors. Two out of the four are Mexican-American while the other two are Dominican. Three out of the four are female, which is good representation for women authors, but there are many male authors that have shaped Chicano literature and tell the history of Chicano culture that are not included in the anthology. Meaning that so many students are missing opportunities to learn about this part of literature due to *Norton* excluding many Chicano authors.

Two specific texts that should be included within the American canon are Tomás Rivera's *...And the Earth Did not Devour Him (Earth)* and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, both of which openly discuss migrant childhoods. *...And the Earth Did not Devour Him* contains stories that discuss the struggles of migrant workers, including men, children, and women. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a coming-of-age story, about a young boy who is finding his identity. The concepts of assimilation, identity, and faith are all included within both novels. To get a better understanding of both texts, we will discuss what others have to discuss about the importance of these novels.

Beginning with Tomás Rivera's *...and the Earth Did not Devour Him*, two Professors at Georgia Southern University, Scott A. Beck and Dolores E. Rangel, wrote, "Representations of

Mexican American Migrant Childhood in Rivera's *...y no se lo Tragó La Tierra* and Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*," the article explains how literary critic Joseph Sommers views the book from a historical-dialectal, formalist, and culturalist points of view (15). According to Beck and Rangel, Using the historical-dialectical approach, which Sommers describes as the "social context of the writer at the time of his/her writing" (17), is important when examining Rivera's novel. We need to understand the history of the Mexican-American story in order to understand the novel. Beck and Rangel go on to explain Rivera's background of being a Mexican-American migrant worker and how the 1960-70's social movements were the influence of *...and the Earth Did not Devour Him*, because the movement through the novel is as hopeful as migrant activists who are fighting for better rights. Rivera's novel depicts the issues that led up to the Chicano Movement, which makes it an important text to read in order to gain a better understanding of Chicano culture and literature.

The culturalist approach is a framework of elements used in Chicano Literature such as, "including pride in a glorious indigenous past, anguish regarding the tragic present, separation of Anglos and Chicanos, close-knit families, hard work, and high educational aspirations" (16). The pride in their Mexican heritage helps buoy the community members in Rivera's novel when they face racism, oppression, and when they are seeking guidance in navigating life in this new country. It is what creates the community voice of the novel and gives readers a different element of a story, other than the well-known American story, that values independence rather than community voice.

The last approach employed by Sommers is the formalist viewpoint, which is when "a book [is] understood in the terms of its aesthetic and literary relationship to canonical authors" (15). We have discussed the canon and canonical texts, and through this formalist lens, Earth

should be related to a previous “canonical” work, however Beck and Rangel point out that this viewpoint does not work due to this “approach to literature (being) particularly unfulfilling in the case of narratives of migrant childhood” (15). There are not many canonical texts that discuss migrant childhood or something similar to a Mexican child's experience, which is why such books are left out of the canon. However, this is flawed thinking Books such as Rivera’s need to be incorporated into the canon *because* they are different. There is no novel like his, which is why it needs to be taught and discussed in our high school and college classrooms.

Rivera's work touches upon each of these concepts and is discussed by many other critiques as well. For example, Lupe Cárdenas explains how the separation between Anglos and Chicanos is one of “exploitation/oppression” (132). In “Growing Up Chicano—Crisis Time In Three Contemporary Chicano Novels”, Lupe Cárdenas goes on to express to the reader that the relationship between exploitation and oppression is not only seen in the separation between Anglos and Chicanos, but also between Chicano/Mexican culture and one's self (132). The article shows that exploitation/oppression extends to government, church, and education. Beck and Rangel acknowledge that *Earth* doesn't “depict much interaction between the Chicano migrant world and the Anglo world” (16), but the interactions they do have are almost always negative.

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, also portrays the separation between Anglo and Chicanos throughout the novel. In “Positioning Analysis of Intercultural Information Processing in a Multicultural Borderland: Rudolfo A. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*” Zoltán Abádi-Nagy describes, similarly to both Cárdenas and Beck/Rangel, how the borderlands of New Mexico are “encompassing both Hispanic/Mexican and US/American elements.” (16). Abádi-Nagy goes on to explain that the story centers on “the spiritual growth of Antonio Márez, on his spirituality, his

sense of cultural identity, as well as his skills of cultural communication are shaped by the multicultural environment of the *Borderlands/La Frontera*" (16). Although both environments are shaping Antonio, throughout his growth he is seen to assimilate to the "Americanization" of the world he is surrounded in. The article then focuses on intercultural and multicultural themes within the text. By stating, "the theme of multiculturalism leads to reconciliation for the obvious reason that this is the conclusion the novel itself overtly arrives at, by way of closing Antonio's development" (16). Abádi-Nagy essentially believes that Antonio's growth is what brings the people in his life together, although their beliefs differ from one another. Antonio's character is absorbing the beliefs of the people around him and finding himself through what he has learned.

Similarly, Debra B. Black discusses *Bless Me, Ultima* in comparison to acculturation, which is described as "the contact of at least two autonomous cultural groups, and some form of change within one of these groups must result from the contact" (146). Black states that acculturation occurs between Chicanos and Anglo cultures, which can be seen in *Bless Me, Ultima*. The setting of the novel after WWII allows for many examples of acculturation to be discussed within the article even though the Anglo and Chicano communities are often separated by neighborhood, economic opportunity, and local politics. Antonio's brothers, who assimilate to Anglo ways, and the public educational system are two examples that are described in depth by Black, showing both the positives and negatives of acculturation and how Anaya uses these themes as a way to depict the family dynamic of Mexican-Americans in the 1940's. Black explains that the education Antonio gets forces him to learn English, which is the first stepping stone into "Americanization". This is important to note, due to previously discussing the colonization of Mexicans, which started in segregated schools that had "no-Spanish" policies. The policies are oppressive to students whose only language is Spanish. Although it is needed for

these students to learn English in order to communicate and live in the U.S. The “no-Spanish” rule forces them to discard their native language, and often pushes them into assimilating to American culture.

Significance of adding *Bless Me, Ultima* and ...and the Earth did not Devour Him to the Literary Canon

Thus far we have come to understand the history and context of Chicanos, and learned about how they fought for their civil rights as a community. We have also discussed the American literary canon, and background on two important novels that need to be included in the canon. Within the remainder of this essay, I will explain why Chicano literature is important for students to read and analyze. The seminal Chicano novels *Bless Me, Ultima* and *...and the Earth did Not Devour Him*, although different, both explore central themes of assimilation and identity, which are essential to American literature. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a traditional bildungsroman with a central protagonist, whereas *...and the Earth did Not Devour Him* is a compilation of stories in novel form. Additionally, they both provide the narrative of community voice. A narrative that expresses how a community can help a child navigate finding himself within a complex world, like in *Bless Me, Ultima*, or a community that uplifts one another through oppression, by fighting back, as in *...and the Earth Did Not Devour Him*.

Beginning with assimilation; according to American sociologist Robert E. Park assimilation is “the processes by which diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence” (Gordon, 63). The idea of multiple cultures and races living in one geographical area in many ways defines America. The U.S. as a whole is made of different

identities and cultures. However, immigrants who are new to the U.S. are made to assimilate to the Anglo-American culture that dominates, by obtaining the language, and learning the societal norms. Through literature we are able to read about assimilation that occurred in the U.S. and how it has affected many ethnic groups. In many ways assimilation *is* the American story, from when the colonizers established a white-dominated rule, to our current debates about immigration. Within Mexican-American literature, the two novels express how difficult it was for Chicanos to live in a society that pressured them to leave behind their heritage, and adopt the North American culture and ideology. This is relevant to my argument because the lack of focus on Mexican-American assimilation in the high school curriculum means that students often overlook it, despite its significance. As stated above, assimilation stories make up a large part of American literature, and without the Mexican-American perspective, students are missing a vast opportunity to learn about different cultures through novels. Though both novels take different approaches to the theme of assimilation, both tell the tale of generational Mexican-American stories. By reading, discussing, and analyzing these texts we are able to grow what is known as American literature.

Within both novels assimilation is not only occurring to the immigrants who have moved from Mexico to the U.S. In families of migrants, their children, many of whom are born in America, have to assimilate to the Anglo-American culture from the time they start elementary school. The majority of first generation Mexican-American children learn Spanish as their first language, but they acquire the English language when starting school. This happens in *Bless Me, Ultima*, a coming-of-age story, about a young Mexican-American boy, named Antonio Márez y Luna, who struggles with finding a balance between American culture and his Mexican beliefs, after being exposed only to the culture within his home. Upon his arrival to school, he begins the

process of assimilating to American culture, by way of language, influence from friends, and through questioning his mother's Catholic religious values.

Although *Bless Me, Ultima* is written in English, Anaya lets us know that Antonio only speaks Spanish and understands little to no English before going into elementary school. This is important to note because Antonio is developing solely within his Mexican identity, but his surrounding world, outside the household, will cause him to question his familial and religious beliefs, and begins to think about the world in a new way. In the novel Antonio, who is six-years-old, begins elementary school, and is told, by his mother, "Go immediately to Ms. Maestas. Tell her you are my boy" (57). Once Antonio arrives, readers begin to witness the complexities around assimilation by way of language. Antonio, abandoned by his sisters, is confused about where he is. When a boy named Red taps him on the shoulder, Antonio states, "I turned and looked into the eyes of a strange red-haired boy. He spoke English, a foreign tongue. 'First grade', was all I could answer" (60). The significance of this scene resonates with many first generation Mexican-Americans, many of whom, like Antonio, only speak Spanish and are forced to grow into an identity that is not within their culture. Assimilation through language is often the first step within cultural integration, Antonio is a prime example of this, for Mexican-American students.

Within Mexican immigrant households Spanish is the primary language learned for children, and English is learned by force, through immersion at school. We see this during the introduction of Ms. Maestas to Antonio, "¿Cómo te llamas?" She asked... 'Antonio Márez' I replied... She smiled. 'Anthony Márez' she wrote in a book" (61). Here we see the change in name that Antonio is forced to take. Changing one's name, although slight, by Americanizing it, does not only express assimilation, but could potentially change one's identity, which is why we

should be teaching novels, such as this one, within our high school literature courses. Many students at the high school levels are finding their own identities. The novel provides an example of the journey it takes to find oneself, which allows them to learn through the novel, ways in which they could find themselves. This is especially important for the Mexican-American students, because many can relate to the journey Antonio takes.

However, assimilation by language is not the only form of assimilation occurring in these novels. Religious assimilation, which occurs when the predominant religion influences others to follow their beliefs, appears in *Bless Me, Ultima*. Antonio is taught, by his mother, María Luna y Márez, the beliefs of Catholicism and the power of the Earth. Throughout many sections of the novel, we view the family praying to the statue of la Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin Mary), placed in their living room. Her belief is that “salvation of the soul [is] rooted in the Holy Mother Church, and she said the world would be saved if the people turned to the earth” (31). This belief is pushed onto Antonio and his siblings, which is seen when Antonio performs his first communion, a religious event in Catholicism where you drink and eat the body (wafer) and blood (wine) of Christ. However, throughout the novel the reader begins to view the shift in Antonio’s beliefs as he begins to question his faith.

This begins with Antonio’s father, Gabriel Márez, who is a man of the *llano* (land); Gabriel considers himself a Vaquero (cowboy), but once the family begins to live in New Mexico, where the land has become increasingly urbanized, he has to provide for them, and is forced to get a job as a railroad worker. Antonio’s father does not share the same religious beliefs as Antonio’s mother. In one section, Antonio states, “Then there was the thing about religion. My father was not a strong believer in religion. When drunk he called priests ‘women’, and made fun of the long skirts they wore” (31). The conflict between his mother’s and father’s beliefs puts

Antonio within the middle and forces him to choose which parent to follow. Even though Antonio is caught between his parents beliefs, he comes to find his own identity and faith, by way of religious assimilation. Once elementary school begins and he integrates into American culture, he also learns about an indigenous story, the golden carp, from a classmate. This tale forces Antonio to question both his mother's beliefs, which he holds close, and his father's beliefs, which he still is unsure about.

The story of the golden carp is a traditional belief that Samuel, Antonio's friend, tells while they're fishing after school. The golden carp was once a god, to the people who had lived on Earth. The people had one rule from the Gods, they were not allowed to eat the fish called the carp. Within the tale, the "forty years of the sun-without-rain"(83), occurred and the crops were destroyed, this resulted in the people eating the carp. Because of this sin, the people were turned into the carp of the river and their god became the golden carp, to protect them from predators. After Samuel finishes the story of the golden carp, Antonio thinks, "if the golden carp was a god, who was the man on the cross? The virgin? Was my mother praying to the wrong God?"(85) The correlation between faith and identity are two themes within the novel that allow for great discussion to occur in classroom settings and will propel students who can connect into being a part of the discussion. According to the article "Reader-Text Connection: Reporting the Engagement of High School Students with Culturally Relevant Texts" by Dannah Tan and Ma. Joahna Mante-Estacio, explains, "Reading materials that directly tap into the cultural background knowledge of readers, or culturally relevant tests, are among the most effective materials to increase reading comprehension"(343). The importance of novels that reflect a student's identity allows for more engagement. In *Bless Me, Ultima* Antonio's experiences can compare to first-generation Mexican-Americans. Allowing them to add their voices to classroom discussions.

After learning about the golden carp, another school friend, Cico, takes him to view the golden carp and is shocked by the proof of the indigenous deity “I knew I had witnessed a miraculous thing, the appearance of a pagan godand then a sudden illumination of beauty and understanding flashed through my mind” (119). Tangible proof of existence like the golden carp is what Antonio had been expecting from his God during his first communion. The communion did not give Antonio knowledge he wanted. Anaya writes, “I closed my eyes and concentrated. I swallowed Him, He must be there! I thought I had felt His warmth, but everything moved so fast” (233). There was no connection or questions answered for Antonio after eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. This vital event in a young Catholic's life is supposed to be a turning point in becoming closer to God, but this is not the case for Antonio, who says that he was able to discover more when watching the golden carp than while performing this Catholic ceremony (233). Mexican-American teens that have grown up within a religious house-hold, tend to find themselves deviating from their parents' religious beliefs once entered into the world, outside their homes. These outside influences, as stated above, hold the power to change and shape the identity of a child, and religious struggle is a fundamental human and American story. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a beautiful portrayal of this struggle of faith and is needed within the curriculum. The new perspective that the novel gives students unfamiliar with Mexican-American backgrounds or traditions, allows for cultures to be shared and allows thematics to be learned in new ways.

Antonio's journey of self-discovery is majorly influenced by Ultima, a curandera (healer) and grandmother figure to Antonio, who within her curanderismo believes that “success or failure in healing a patient depends on God's will” (Pabón, 258). The use of curanderismo in the novel allows for Antonio and the readers to think about spirituality, and why it is important when

figuring out your faith and identity. Although a traditional curandera has faith in God, the novel makes it seem as though Ultima's beliefs are more in the realm of spirituality. Within multiple sections within the novel Ultima is needed to save someone from a type of evil. For instance, Antonio's uncle Lucas, was cursed by brujas (witches), and the priest was not able to save him. This caused Antonio to question the power of a priest and God himself, thinking, "why doesn't the priest fight against the evil of the brujas. He has the power of God, the Virgin, and all the saints of the Holy Mother Church behind him" (88). Antonio, already questioning his faith in Catholicism, is led by Ultima into the world of spirituality, by beating the curse set on his uncle. Ultima uses herbal medicines, chanting, and understanding of the body and Earth to heal Lucas. The physical proof of the powers of a curandera is shown with the line, "green bile poured from his mouth and finally he vomited a huge ball of hair. It fell to the floor, hot and steaming and wiggling like live snakes" (107). The power that Ultima has forces Antonio to think about the role spirituality might have in his life and how that contradicts the faith his mother wants him to believe.

Antonio deviates from his mother's Catholicism by the end of the novel. He does not fully let go of his faith in God, or certain beliefs within the Catholic religion, but adds to his beliefs within the realm of spirituality. Although Antonio is seen to have chosen his faith, the question of who he is, still floats at the forefront of his mind, even at the end of the novel. The influences of family and friends around him have shaped who he is becoming, though he still feels the need to choose to be a Márez, and follow his father, a man of the llano, or a Luna, and become a man of faith. Antonio sits in the car with his father, while on their way to the Luna farm. Gabriel gives Antonio advice about life, by explaining that it is time to give up certain aspects from the past, such as being a man of the llano. He essentially explains that the world is

changing, which allows for more freedom from being confined to one identity or the other. (261). “Then maybe I do not have to be just Márquez, or Luna, perhaps I can be both” (261). Gabriel then states, “Ay, every generation, every man is a part of his past. He cannot escape it. But he may reform the old materials, make something new” (261). This quote is the most important in the novel, as it pertains to generations of Chicanos now. It is not only a turning point for Antonio, but it shows just how important it is for Chicano students to learn about their past and how it influences the present and future.

Students, within classrooms, that are not being taught Chicano literature, are being further removed from a part of Mexican-American identity. Anaya wrote a novel that expresses how within each new generation of Mexican-Americans, we lose a part of Mexican identity. Jessica M. Vasquez would agree, as she explains that within the book, *Mexican Americans Across Generations*, three generations of Mexican-Americans, lose Mexican identity more and more. Vasquez uses a metaphor of soda, “the Coca-Cola’ generation...are rich in tradition and hold on to it in their new context.... the ‘7-Up’ generation...are more acculturated to the United States...The ‘Evian water’ [generation]...has lost...cultural vibrancy, and has wholesale become a part of the U.S. society” (Vasquez, 1). Assimilation both through language, religion, and identity is why we are losing so much cultural identity. What Anaya is stating within his novel and what Vasquez has stated within her book, are exactly why we need to make space for Chicano literature within the canon of American Literature.

The novel *...and the Earth Did not Devour Him*, is a novel similar to *Bless Me, Ultima* in the sense that they use similar themes. Such as, assimilation of language, religion, and identity. The novel is made up of fourteen short stories and thirteen vignettes, which is different from your traditional novel. Each short story is written from the perspectives of different unnamed

narrators. Meaning that perspectives change from one story to the next, but are all connected by loss, pain, and fear shared between each experience.

This approach allows for a variety of assimilation stories to be told. One short story that tells assimilation in a different way than *Bless Me, Ultima*, is “It’s That It Hurts”, which uses language to belittle the child protagonist when the father points out the lack of assimilation through language. He states, “Don’t tell me you don’t know how to speak English yet” (Rivera, 23). The child, who speaks only Spanish, is not only pressured by outside forces, but by his own family to learn the Anglo-American language. Even when external assimilation is not occurring, first generation Chicanos may feel pressured by their parents to learn English, in order to become the translator. If it was not for the linguistic abilities of first generation Mexican-Americans, immigrant parents and grandparents, would struggle within the U.S. society. Students, who have grown up in an environment similar to the protagonist, are able to connect and feel seen inside the classroom. Not only would this peak interest in the novel, but also allow students who are unfamiliar with this experience, to ask questions pertaining to the topic of language assimilation.

Thus far, we have focused on assimilation through language and religion, but there is one aspect within Chicano literature that is important for students to learn, the narrative of communal voice. The communal voice is used by getting the opinions of your family members, although not always constructive, everyone's input is important or at least worth listening to. Take Antonio, he was influenced by his father, mother, friends, and Ultima, to make sense of who he is in a culture unfamiliar to him. However, the communal voice is also portrayed in a different way. It can be seen in coming together as a community and telling a story, or it could be fighting for rights as a group, such as the Chicano Movement. Communal voice adds to American

literature as we know it. The narrative will enable students to gain a better understanding of Mexican culture and compel them into wanting to further their knowledge of Chicano literature.

In *...and the Earth Did not Devour Him*, Rivera uses the communal voice to tell the stories of migrant farm workers. Having firsthand experience as a migrant worker, Rivera used his memories to create a novel dedicated to their experiences; although a work of fiction, the stories are all situations that could have happened. The characters within the novel change from one story to the next, but they are all connected by loss, pain, and fear shared between every narrator. The stories themselves discuss the experiences of racism and discrimination, mental health issues, religion, unfair working conditions, and war. As one voice they come together to show the reader the intense conditions that migrant workers and their families went through.

Beginning with a short story that represents the children workers. Rivera, shows us the conditions they were put in. "The Children Couldn't Wait" explains how in some working environments, bosses wouldn't allow their workers to take water breaks, even as the hot sun burned down on them. In the text the child states, "I'm very thirsty, Dad. Is the boss gonna be here soon?...My throat feels real dry...Should I go to the tank?" (Vigil-Piñón, 14). The tank the child refers to is a water tank for animals. The only water the workers were allowed to drink came when the boss arrived with a bucket of water. Although the looming fear of being fired for drinking water, hung over them, the children could not wait. One boy went to the tank repeatedly, the boss knew so he made a plan. "He thought then of giving him a scare...What he set out to do and what he did were two different things. He shot at him once to scare him, but when he pulled the trigger, he saw the boy with a hole in his head" (15-16). Although this is the extreme, the story represents what it was like for the children who had to work in the fields, in order to survive in the U.S. They not only had to deal with oppression in school but had to suffer

through the intense working conditions that no person should have to live through. Rivera is revealing the reasons that lead to the National Farm Workers Association that was mentioned above.

Continuing with the experiences of Mexican children, we also see discrimination and racism that they had to face. Going back to the story “It’s That It Hurts” shows how the young protagonist is being bullied and fights back. The bully stereotypes the protagonist by stating, “Hey, Mex...I don’t like Mexicans because they steal. You hear me?” (26). The bully continues to say that same line over and over again. Eventually the bully hits the Mexican boy, and they begin to fight. Upon being caught by the janitor, he explains to the principal, “The Mexican kid got into a fight and beat up a couple of our boys” (27). The discrimination within this story will allow for conversations about what was happening in the 1940’s and compare it to what life is currently like for minority groups. Although discrimination and race issues have progressed since the Chicano Movement for Mexican-Americans, there is still stereotyping, unequal access to resources, and discrimination that occur in schools. Chicano students are still widely underrepresented within the school systems, and adding Mexican-American Literature can be the first step we take to improving this issue.

Migrant farm workers went through so much more. The title short story “And the Earth Did Not Devour Him” reveals how hard Mexican farm workers pushed themselves in order to live in the U.S. In the beginning of the story every member of the family was working in the field, besides the mother. The heat was extreme, and the father pushed himself too far, causing sunstroke. The eldest son (the narrator) grew angry and angrier, the previous loss of his uncle, aunt, and now the sickness his father has, caused him to argue with his mother about why they push themselves to work. “Why us, burrowed in the dirt like animals with no hope for anything?”

You know the only hope we have is coming out here every year...And like you yourself say, only death brings rest” (54). He then goes on to say to his mother, “Don’t say it. I know what you’re going to tell me— that the poor go to heaven” (54). The religious questioning that occurs is similar to Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima*, in the sense that both characters are questioning the faith that their mothers want them to believe. The story continues with the family, going to work in one field, and then having to rush to another. “At four o’clock the youngest became ill. He was only nine years old, but since he was paid the same as a grown-up he tried to keep up with the rest” (57). This further caused the narrator to question not only why he works so hard, but why God is adding pain into their already stressful lives. The cruelty of the world is shown throughout this story, and how beliefs in religion are tested. At the end, the father and youngest brother get better, but only after the narrator curses God (58). Cursing God is not taken lightly within any religion, but within the eyes of the narrator the sin he has just committed saved both his father and his younger brother, and also confirmed that for his sin, the earth would not devour him.

These stories and the others in the novel, are allowing students to gain knowledge of the communal voice through the text. This creates a space for students to gain a new cultural perspective that will expand their ideas and beliefs about Mexican-American literature, history, and culture. Community voice is an important narrative, it teaches that coming together as one creates a space that is powerful within a community. It creates and shapes the identity of many to help them find who they are. As stated above the novel itself is much like the Chicano movement, by coming together to create a community that resists the oppression Mexicans face daily. Rivera created a book that allows validation to be felt by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as a whole, which is why it needs to be included in the curriculum for high school

students. As Dannah Tan and Ma. Joahna Mante-Estacio stated, culturally relatable texts are more likely to engage students, and will allow for better discussion about countless themes in American literature.

Conclusion

After learning about the history and two important pieces of literature, I hope you are now able to comprehend why Mexican-American literature is American literature and why it should be included in the upper secondary education curriculum. If put into the Western literary canon, Mexican-American novels, such as *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, add the narrative of communal voice, which is needed to show how groups come together to form a united front against adversity, how immigrant communities survive, while novels such as *Bless Me, Ultima*, allow for the coming-of-age story to be told from a non-Anglo perspective, both of them touching on important themes related to assimilation within American culture. Both novels add missing perspectives to the classroom and allow students to become more involved in discussions about and analysis of the texts related to Mexican-American identity, communal voice, struggles within assimilation, and cultural beliefs. The point of this essay was to reveal that by adding the voice of Mexican-Americans to the genre of American literature, we are only furthering our knowledge and understanding of the American story.

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