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Marco AG Cerqueira
Washington State University, marco.cerqueira@wsu.edu

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Cordel Corrido: What Are the Implications of Creating a New Narrative Voice for Education?

Abstract

In this article the author proposes queering the teaching of Brazilian and Mexican popular poetry, cordel and corrido, for students in high school or freshmen in college engaging with a curriculum of the brown bodies and aesthetic currere. The author criticizes the teaching of canonic literature in classrooms usually written by white, straight, and middle-class men, and proposes teaching popular poetry from Latin America as a project to interrupt that canon. Teaching and encouraging students to write poetry is a way to oppose the epistemicide in classrooms, and students of color (African descendants, Native peoples, and with roots in Latin America) have “sacred truth spaces” to be who they are.

Keywords

popular poetry, cordel, corrido, queer, currere, brown body curriculum, art, sacred truth spaces

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As a Brazilian with African and European descendance I was several times derogatively called *mulato* (a term that comes from mule, a hybrid of a donkey and a horse) in my home-country. My African heritage comes from my mother, whose surname “Gramacho” is derived from a Portuguese slave-trader who gave it to his slaves who came to Brazil, as this was a frequent practice in the Americas.

As a queer person of color, I engage with Anzaldúa’s project of “spiritual mestizaje” (1987) by making a cultural mixing of Mexican and Brazilian references to make it “subversive, as well as benign and practical. Mixing, if we are to understand colonial culture in the Americas, must be unsettling as the daily nature of things” (Dean & Leibsohn, 2003, p.26). I am emphasizing Anzaldúa’s conception of power to connect intersectionalities of people of color in the Americas to create opportunities of engagement and healing of the wounds caused by the epistemicide of white supremacy.

The reflection of opposing epistemicide in classrooms is that students of color (African descendants, Native peoples, and those with roots in Latin America) have “sacred truth spaces” to be who they are. My plan is to build a curriculum with students, including stories grounded in poetry, making “their stories central in their own education” (San Pedro, 2017, p. 112).

When those stories are heard with our ears and hearts, they create something sacred in the spaces between us; they create something truthful within those moments as we co-construct together not in spite of our differences, but because of them. Being able to see and hear that our stories and our lives resonate, and impact others provides the confidence to share the ways we are coming to view the world and how others view the world. (San Pedro, 2017, p.113)

My aim is to bring those embodied experiences to the classroom in which I allow myself to be vulnerable when creating a “safe space” for students to be able to also be vulnerable. San Pedro (2017) goes beyond “safe spaces” in classrooms and envisions them as “sacred truth spaces” building on Garcia and Shirley’s (2012) “sacred spaces” and Patel’s (2016) “truth space” (cited in San Pedro, 2017, p. 102) for students to have the “ability to share their realities and experiences that counter/challenge/correct standard knowledge that leads to painful silencing experiences in school” (San Pedro, 2017, p. 102).

Creating Sacred Truth Spaces in the Classroom

San Pedro (2017) builds “sacred truth spaces” on Paris’s (2012) “culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which is a call for educators, researchers, and community members to push beyond just responding to students’ languages and cultures to make them relevant (while curricula continue to center White middle-class norms)” (San Pedro, 2017, p.101).

Sosa-Provencio (2017) applies a “Chicana Feminist and Curricular Reconceptualist lens” to present “a resistant, healing, and regenerative school curriculum” (p.1). Curriculum is the embodied way of knowing/feeling/transacting that we engage in the classrooms and daily lives (Sosa-Provencio, 2017, p.1) and is a way to challenge the epistemicide of “whitewashed” education.

Sosa-Provencio (2017) emphasizes that “traditional curriculum is ingrained with white supremacy and global imperialism” (p. 1), setting apart people of color from the conscience of the world or *conscientização*, to cite Paulo Freire (1967).

I acknowledge that I am not seeking a monologue, to isolate myself, but rather to open my conscience of the world with dialogue with students:

Dialogue phenomenalizes and historicizes the essential human intersubjectivity; it is relational, and, in it, no one has absolute initiative [...] The constitutive movement of *conscientização* is opening itself to infinity, seeking to finding itself beyond itself. By becoming more intersubjective, the subject gains more subjective density. By reproducing it critically, one recognizes oneself as the subject who elaborates the world; in it, in the world, the necessary mediation of self-recognition takes place, which personalizes one and makes oneself aware of the responsible author of one’s own history. The world becomes aware as a human project: humankind makes oneself free. (Fiori, 1967, as cited in Freire, 2013)

I connect with a curriculum of the Brown bodies that engages “into a learning landscape wherein their expertise, histories, ways of being, thinking, learning, and loving are the bloodline of classroom practice” (Sosa-Provencio, 2017, p. 1). This embodied curriculum is “life curriculum for praxis” (Sawyer, 2017, p. 90) in which a creative tension emerges as a result of “struggle, ambiguity, and uncertainty” (Sawyer, 2017, p. 90).

Sawyer (2017, p. 90; Pinar 1975; 1994; 2012) proposes *currere*, as “life-history curriculum with which people (e.g., teachers, students) engage in an embodied deconstruction of the past to reconstruct the future through wide-awake study in the present.” Sawyer (2017) envisions an aesthetic *currere* that uses resistance art to ask “viewers to deconstruct both the normative political context of the art, as well as their own positionality (and self-accountability) in relation to it” (p. 91). He envisions that resistance art should be used as a transformative process, in which *currere* provides “an existential platform for movement from an original state to a qualitatively different state” (Sawyer, 2017, p.91). Furthermore, Sawyer (2017) emphasizes the creation of third spaces as the result of the dialogue of different counter storytelling. Bhabha (1990), cited in Sawyer (2017), points out that third spaces are created as the result of:

The act of cultural translation...[which] denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture...[with] a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211, as cited in Sawyer, 2017, p. 91)

Challenging and Disrupting Epistemicide in the Classroom

My way to create a third space which is aligned with the creation of a sacred truth space is by developing a teaching-and-writing curriculum centering Mexican and Brazilian popular poetry, *corrido* and *cordel*. *Cordel* and *corrido* are written to tell sagas of popular heroes in Brazil and Mexico. In *El corrido mexicano, su técnica literaria y musical* [The Mexican *corrido*, its literary and musical technique] by Vicente T. Mendoza (1954) there are several *corridos* about Emiliano Zapata throughout his life, 1879-1919, praising his deeds as the main leader of the Mexican

Revolution, which ended dictatorship in Mexico and established a constitutional Republic, culminating with his assassination soon after that.

In *Lampion and his bandits: The literature of cordel in Brazil*, Young (1994) focused on Lampião (1898-1938), the “Brazilian Robin Hood,” a historical outlaw character who became a symbol of fighting oppression among the deprived population of the Northeast of Brazil and is the subject of several *cordels*. Lampião was killed and decapitated by the police of my home-state (Bahia) in 1938. His head was put on display along with the heads of the members of his group in my hometown (Salvador-Bahia).

As I am queering the teaching and writing of *corrido* and *cordel*, I want to make sure that this is not the only possible way of teaching or writing them. It is important to note that these popular narratives are historically not queer friendly, even though it does not diminish its importance as ways of engaging in anti-oppressive struggles. My experience as a queer multi-racial person is not *the* queer multi-racial one, but a way to make students engage in their own positionalities and to make people see their own privileges if they are not the oppressed ones.

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) go in the same direction by criticizing the teaching of canonic literature in academia usually written by white, straight, and middle-class men. My idea of teaching a course about popular poetry from Latin America is a project to immediately interrupt that canon.

However, based on Borsheim-Black et al.’s (2014) Critical Literature Pedagogy, I am queering the teaching of the genres to make the students “read with and against it” to interrupt the explicit homophobia of some of the texts. Almost all the *corrido* and *cordel* poets are cis men. My aim is to encourage students to use “counter stories” to break the cycle of “normative power dynamics” (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125) and to “integrate Otherness throughout the curriculum” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 33), while at the same time not essentializing these experiences.

My inspiration to connect *cordel* and *corrido* came after my fourth trip to Mexico on January 2020, when I was able to see for the second time the *corrido* (song and poetry based on Mexican popular narratives) painted as a mural art by the artist Diego Rivera, 1886-1957. The mural was installed with his team in the Mexican Ministry of Education in the *Zócalo* area, central neighborhood of Mexico City, between 1930 and 1939.

In the *Corrido de la revolución* (“*Corrido* of the revolution”) on the third floor of the rectangular building in the south wall of the ministry Diego leads us through step by step on how to engage in a Communist revolution in Mexico. Diego Rivera’s *corrido* revised for the first time the historical importance of Zapata, who became the inspiration of fighting oppression in Mexico, and in the world, up to this day, including to the Zapatistas Movement in Chiapas, Mexico (EZLN- CCRI, 1994). On my last trip to Mexico City in 2020 I also went to the exhibition about Emiliano Zapata in the Palacio de Bellas Artes Museum and saw the painting of Zapata as a queer *guerrillero*, created by the artist Fabián Cháirez in 2014.

In 2017 Cháirez made a mural art version of the painting in the bar El Marrakech in the historic center of the town. Luckily, on the day that I went to that *antro* [bar] in January 2020 there was the launching party of the book “*Dragas en rebeldía*” [Drag queens in rebellion], written by Antonio Marquet (2020) about the *draga* [drag queen] scene in Mexico City. Drag queens who were interviewed for the book, which has a painting of Cháirez on the cover, made performances and read excerpts of the publication.

A hybrid genre, *cordel* and *corrido* mix the picaresque and the chivalric genres from colonial era Portugal and Spain (Echevarria, 2015). I am bringing to the classroom a queer

version of the *pícaro*, the anti-hero of this type of writing. It is ironic prose, with genuine and funny details of the misadventures of a marginalized person, surviving as a shapeshifter in a shameful society. In my queer version I am seeking for healing and building communities around marginalized identities, but I am also having a lot of fun teaching and writing it, because queer resistance is also about celebrating life.

On the other hand, the chivalric hero is the romanticized champion that follows a sense of duty and is deeply religious (Echevarria, 2015). In my queer pagan version, I am bringing my beliefs in my own paganism combining forces/energies of nature embodied as hybrids of African orishas, Catholic and Mesoamerican deities, such as *Quetzalcóatl*, the Mexica deity of the wind, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. In my poetic inquiry in the classroom, I am seeking for several “I” whose marginalized voices are not heard. My “I” seeks for a “We” and “Us” to build communities around similar intersectionalities seeking for healing. My eyes are revolutions yarning *corrido* and *cordel*. I call it *Cordel Corrido*.

The ultimate hybridization goals of my proposed teaching can only be achieved with freedom of expression and creativity through a rich combination of languages capable of revealing different points of views. I am performing a reflection of the historical hybridization that took place through the merging of Mexican and Brazilian cultures. This performative poetic inquiry is political, seeking engagement in the Americas that goes beyond racial identities avoiding essentializing ways of knowing. Urrieta (2003) emphasizes that Latin Americans should not be worrying about a “pan-Latino identity.” And I agree with that. It is easy to essentialize and create binaries when you engage with a broader vision of Latin American.

Conclusion

Letting students engage with the anti-oppressive healing effect of delving into and writing popular poetry (*cordel* and *corrido*) following the metrics of the genres or not (the students are free to decide) is my main goal as a professor. Narratives are historically written to reinforce heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, and binaries.

Queer people have been reacting to oppressive narratives that have been harming us for centuries. One of the greatest examples is the American poet Emily Dickinson, 1830-1886. I read her poetry translated into Portuguese when I was an undergraduate student in Brazil. My reaction to her poetry, which breaks the molds of metrics, gave me epic epiphanic discomfort.

I could never forget her poem “I heard a Fly buzz” (Dickinson, 1961). I started writing poetry because of Emily. The projection of the soul in her own death made me see an image, giving me a feeling that only poetry can evoke. The poem creates a gruesome futurity that made me experience trans temporality.

When I read Emily’s poem¹, I experienced for the first time a third space where you can be present but invisible. You are the focus, yet you are not there. Isn’t it what queer people

¹ I heard a Fly buzz, when I died.
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air,
Between the Heaves of Storm.

The Eyes around, had wrung them dry,
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset, when the King
Be witnessed, in the Room.

among other marginalized identities experience when they walk in life? We can be invisible ghosts, yet our very presence creates discomfort and reactions of exclusion from white people and people of color who reproduce oppression.

Dickinson was white and born in a wealthy family, and therefore privileged. But her being a woman and a closeted queer person in the 19th century in the USA was a perfect example of intersectionality. She could not be published properly because her father did not let her.

Intersectionality argues that multiple aspects of identity - gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, global position, age, sexuality, religion, language, historical moment -, converge and interact to create actual or perceived social positions, meanings, experiences, and representations in a world patterned by structural inequalities. (Lanser, 2015, p. 27)

I am engaging in different generative ways with intersectionalities in the classroom. Hearing and sharing my voice and the students mixing our past, future and present experiences is a queer project to “dismantle the myth of transcendent time and sequential time that had shaped humanist criticism for a generation” (Moffat, 2015, p. 211).

This non-normative desire is in its essence paradoxically a way to avoid essentialization. I do not see/feel a linear past/present/future with a happy conclusion and a conclusion that put a stop in my inquiry or the student’s engagement in the classroom. I am defying myself not to be superficial and not being afraid of exposing myself too much or the students. In a sacred truth space decisions are made collectively with the group.

To be able to have a space in which students are welcomed to be themselves is a good start to fight the epistemicide of the ways of knowing, feeling, transacting of people of color. Breaking white supremacy paradigms is breaking binaries of what matters when our voices are silenced. Popular poetry in its essence disrupts narratives and names oppression. Let the poetry slam begin!

I willed my Keepsakes; Signed away
What portions of me be
Assignable, and then it was
There interposed a Fly.

With Blue, uncertain stumbling Buzz,
Between the light, and me,
And then the Windows failed, and then
I could not see to see. (Dickinson, 1961)

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