

*Re-imagining Education through Bilingual Poetry*

All children have the right to have their language and cultural identity recognized by the school. They all deserve to be encouraged to dialogue with the books they read, in order to recognize that protagonists live not only on printed pages, but in daily life—that all children are indeed valued protagonists, the protagonists of their own life stories. All children deserve also to be invited to become authors—of the stories born of their fantasy and of their experiences, of those received from their parents and relatives (Guzman and Perez xii).

In this preface to Guzman and Perez’s book, *Learning in Two Worlds*, Alma Flor Ada calls us to re-imagine and re-structure education, and inevitably society as a whole—to break down the barriers between languages and cultures. Ada’s argument is important—enriching children’s learning and experiences is obviously a valuable pursuit. The question, however, is not the importance of the argument, but rather how this can be accomplished—how do we completely invert the hierarchical nature which our country has relied on since its birth?

This is not an easy question to answer, and we, as citizens of the United States, would be the first to recognize that we have failed in the past. In my experience living and working at a youth summer camp on the Navajo Nation last summer, I noticed the effects of the Anglo-American belief of English as the dominant language—everyone must learn English and reject their native language to become true “American” citizens. Every week we heard the stories of Dave Tsosie, an elderly Navajo man who had grown up on the reservation and was the victim of assimilation, where Native Americans were literally shipped off their reservation lands and placed in English language only boarding schools. Dave taught us some Navajo words and told us traditional stories with a sense of pride, but he had not learned these stories in the oral tradition of the Navajo people. Dave had to relearn and re-appropriate these stories by attending the Navajo college on

the reservation; only then could he be relieved of the shame he internalized from not knowing the stories of his people.

After almost completely losing their language, to where the youngest generation could only speak a few native phrases, the Navajo people have begun to reclaim and re-appropriate their language. Two-way bilingual immersion programs have been implemented in some schools on the reservation, and McCarty and Dick have researched the effects:

‘When we went to school, all we learned was English and Western culture. We were never told the stories that Rough Rock [bilingual immersion school] children now are told and write themselves. We’re telling those stories now. We see both sides of it—and we’re helping children make connections through literacy to their own lives’ (McCarty and Dick 10).

The Navajo people see the importance of preserving their language and culture, in this increasingly Anglo dominant society. They recognize that if they do not take action, both their language and culture will be lost and they will increasingly become assimilated into “American” culture which does not value these differences.

The language loss of the Navajo people is a microcosm for what is happening today in mainstream American society. The United States is constantly becoming more diverse, and with this diversity comes a diversification of languages spoken, “amount[ing] to a staggering 35-40 million people speaking another language besides English” (Aranda 59). A majority of these speakers, 22 million, are English-Spanish speakers. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that, “between 2005 and 2050, the Hispanic population will grow from 13.3% to 24.3%” (White 3). However, despite this shift in demographics and language use, the discourse and litigation of English as the dominant language still persists in almost every corner of society. Viewing the Navajo nation as a

microcosm for our larger society, we can begin to deconstruct these binaries of languages which our dominant English language culture has created. We must begin by examining the roots of language usage, particularly in literature, where the switching of languages, or code-switching, has the most intentional purpose, and thus suggests a critical look at language relationships. Through deconstructing this binary of English and the “other” language, specifically Spanish, we can create a new hybrid language that does not enforce the hierarchical relationships which have been so detrimental to Native languages, and which threaten the inclusion of the Spanish language into mainstream American culture; we can produce a new society which draws on the richness of multilingualism which will lead to multiculturalism.

The deconstruction of language in both language and literature is accomplished through Code-switching, which begins to collapse these binaries by creating a relationship or discourse between different languages. Code-switching is used anywhere from speech, such as Spanglish or Calo used in borderland areas, to literature, where the switch is carefully planned out and implemented. This focus on the consequences of using two languages is defined by Callahan as emblematic or metaphorical switching. “Emblematic, or etiquette, switching and metaphorical switching are terms used to classify codeswitching on the basis of its pragmatic and social motivation” (Callahan 5). This emblematic code-switching is further explained through Carol Meyers-Scotton’s markedness model, which interprets the author’s intent in their use of code-switching. An excerpt is understood on its position on a scale from marked usage to unmarked, where unmarkedness is a more simple, general intention of the switch of languages while markedness is seen as a more complex, meaningful use of language switch (Callahan 19).

In their article, Mendieta-Lombardo and Cintron note the different levels of markedness depending on the extent to which the author uses code-switching, the intent, and the implied audience. “Linguistic choices are seen as more than skilled performance, they are considered a strategy for accomplishing something. In this way, speakers are creative actors who manage communicative skills according to what they want to accomplish” (Mendieta-Lombardo and Cintron 566). Thus, code-switching is an intentional act through which the speaker or writer, collapses the binaries between languages and promotes a new understanding and acceptance of both dominant and minority languages.

The deconstruction of language through code-switching, where there is a constant shift between English and Spanish, is prevalent on many different levels through bilingual poetry. The amount of code-switching, and the relationship between the dominant (matrix) language and subdominant (secondary) language signify different intentions and arguments from the poet (Callahan), but despite these different motivations, code-switching in general serves to mix languages together, and through this deconstructs these languages. In American culture, a distinct binary exists between the English language and the “other” language, namely Spanish. Due to this inevitably hierarchical binary between languages, there cannot be equality between these cultures until the binaries between languages have been deconstructed. The French theorist Derrida argues that only through this deconstruction can hierarchies be collapsed.

Derrida... deconstruct[s] the ‘stable’ binaries upon which structuralism, and indeed western philosophy in general, relies. He argues for the ‘undecideability’ of binary oppositions. In particular, deconstruction involves the dismantling of hierarchical conceptual oppositions such as speech/writing, reality/appearance, nature/culture, reason/madness, etc., which exclude and devalue the ‘inferior’; part of the binary (Willis 18).

Thus, code-switching in poetry is an intentional attempt to deconstruct this binary between languages—English/Spanish. Code-switching in poetry, where there is this “undecidability” between the “dominant” and “inferior” language serves to deconstruct language to the level where there is no matrix language and the two languages are working as one hybrid language.

Though many poets and writers employ code-switching in their poetry, the poets Alurista and Gloria Anzaldua, use code-switching specifically as a means to deconstruct the hierarchical binaries between languages and cultures in the United States, and this deconstruction creates a new hybrid language and identity which is the basis on which to imagine a new America.

Alurista, one of the revolutionary writers who changed the implications of code-switching during the Chicano Movement of the 70's and 80's, pointedly uses code-switching between Spanish, English, and the spaces between these languages to deconstruct the boundaries between the languages and suggest a new hybrid language. In reference to his own writing, Alurista argues, “our literature promises more than any of the literatures of Central or South America. We are the belt between Anglo American and Indohispanic America” (Keller xvi). Alurista exemplifies his claim regarding the United States as the link between these two different hemispheres through his code-switching between not only English and Spanish languages, but also through incorporating indigenous languages.

The use of multiple languages and dialects makes his poetry not only difficult for monolingual speakers to understand, but also does not lend itself to full comprehension by any group. This confusion reinforces the deconstruction of language which Alurista

creates, where his poetry cannot be clearly understood by any reader, yet can be interpreted through each reader's own understanding and culture. This does not set up the hierarchy that commonly creates power of one group over the other because no group has full command over the text. In his poem "Tuning Flower Tones," Alurista uses indigenous languages along with English and Spanish; although the words belong to different languages, they have similar sounds; "the thumping of a rhythm shoe/ tapping, tapping, taconeo/ y el latido de la sangre... el de cuauhtemoc, tezoc/ o el plumado moctezuma" (Keller ed. 21). The different languages give Alurista command not only over sound, as in "tapping, tapping, taconeo," but the combination of languages can also be appreciated for their contrasting sounds and accents since most readers would not understand fully all lines and words of this poem. Debra Castillo states, "Rather than bemoaning the impoverishment of fine classical Spanish, many of the new Latino/a writers find in the rhythms of the two languages rubbing against each other an exciting and vital potentiality for new poetic expression" (Castillo 11). Here Alurista creates a new space between the languages through new sounds and rhythms which can only be discovered through the combination of different languages. Through his use of code-switching, Alurista creates new sounds and options which are not available to the monolingual speaker. The boundaries, which before separated the languages, are now a new space, and they almost create a new language.

Alurista also juxtaposes words that sound either the same or very similar in the different languages which deconstructs sounds into different inferences. This deconstruction creates more options and power for the speaker. His poem "Eran, He Ran" sets up through the title similar sounding words that carry no similarity in the literal

meaning. The poem follows, “eran, he ran/ irán i los dias cesar” (Keller ed. 102). Here he uses, eran <<they were>>, he ran, and irán <<they will go>> strung together one after another; this shows how three words that sound almost the same, carry completely different literal meanings. If this line was completely translated into either English or Spanish, the lines would lose the richness created by the sounds and fluency of the poem. “Such translations could speak to the reader only in a very limited sense, since they would inextricably dislocate the doubleness of the language into an unacceptable version of the monolingualism against which these writers are defining their entire poetics” (Castillo 12). Alurista celebrates the differences of these languages, and in using them not only to signify meaning, but also poetic devices and sounds, suggests that the bilingual speaker actually has more power and command over language than the monolingual.

Alurista also uses other dialects and language facets, such as slang, in his poetry to further create this new hybrid language and through this hybrid language a hybrid identity. He even draws on Caribbean dialects of English, which suggest the combination of pre-Columbus America’s indigenous languages and the English language brought through colonization. Speakers of the Caribbean dialect both adapted their own version of English and drew on languages from their own roots. In “Fire and Earth,” Alurista writes primarily in a Caribbean dialect, yet begins with a Spanish word; “trono where I gonna go when the volcano blow/ mon u better wach your feet” (Keller ed. 128). Later in the afore quoted poem “Eran, He Ran,” “la venta de armas candled/ pendiente/ con jazz, sin monk/ jimmi ain’t no/ bautista boy, no peanut/ beheaded bow tie” (Keller ed, 102). This selection signifies language as a mode for change; the sale of arms was stopped

because of Jazz. Then the poem draws on some of the language of jazz to signify the group that this art form represents with, “jimmy ain’t no bautista boy,” yet it still incorporates his identification with Latino culture through “bautista boy.” Alurista uses aspects of these different cultures to describe one person representing this new hybrid person living in between the cultures and borderlands. Thus, through art—including music (jazz)—and poetry, “Poesis... can be constructed as the *making* of a resistant (and simultaneously permeable) hybridity, the making of a border sensibility” (Damon 481). This notion of a “border sensibility” gives a home for this newly emerging hybrid language and situates it in a new culture which Alurista and other writers and poets are creating in their literature.

Gloria Anzaldua takes this hybrid language, created by Alurista through his deconstruction of the binaries of languages, and gives it its own identity and people hood in the borderlands between these cultures. Anzaldua describes Chicano or borderland Spanish as, “A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither espanol ni ingles, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” (Anzaldua 77). Anzaldua connects the new hybrid language with Chicanos, where language becomes a signifier for who they are as a people. She recognizes that this signifier does not invoke pride, but rather this borderland language or identity often has negative connotations with both audience and speaker. In the section, “Linguistic Terrorism,” in her book *Borderlands*, Anzaldua describes the negative view of Chicano Spanish. “Deslenguadas. Somos los del espanol deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of



your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically *somos huerfanos*—we speak an orphan tongue” (Anzaldua 80). While Anzaldua promotes this new hybrid language and identity which are radically progressive movements toward re-imagining a new culture, she also understands and even identifies with Chicanos’ feelings of confusion and their position as the “other”—essentially orphans living in between cultures.

Anzaldua shares in the section, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” her experiences and struggles growing up Chicana and attempting to come to terms with her “orphan” language. “Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (Anzaldua 81). Anzaldua seeks a time and place where she can speak her own language, be comfortable with her gender, and truly be herself in this borderland which meshes together different cultures and metaphorically different hemispheres. As the poet Edwin Torres describes in an interview, “I break borders by changing languages in the middle of a word. What I try to do is break language down, make it a level playing field, then build it back up’ (personal interview)” (Damon 484). The “building back up” of language is what we must focus on now; how do we create this new language and culture where all representations of identities are included? Gloria Anzaldua looks to the future with some optimism. She believes that this hybrid culture will someday emerge, but in the meantime charges individuals to work at deconstructing the hierarchical binaries deeply rooted in American culture. “Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality

still. One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place” (Anzaldua 85).

To answer the question of how to rebuild, re-imagine, and recreate a culture based on a new identity which exists in both the physical and metaphorical borderlands, we must shift our focus to educating the new generation; they must experience this hybrid culture and grow up within it for a change to be realized. Children spend a majority of their lives in education systems, forming much of their consciousnesses and identities in these contexts; thus, a shift towards integrating bilingual education, specifically biliteracy, into schools must be enacted. Perez and Guzman argue for the importance of bilingual education in developing an individual’s identity.

Developing a cultural repertoire in a bilingual situation refers to enabling each individual to participate in cultural practices of more than one group, in more than one language, while maintaining, negotiating, and creating his or her identity at multiple levels... One of the major tasks of the development of a literacy program is to enable individuals to critically assess their world and to entertain the possibility of a different future (Perez and Guzman 15).

This different future is what we must strive to create through deconstructing monolingual education to include bilingualism, biliteracy, and through this a new multicultural approach to education.

To truly integrate bilingualism into the education system, much greater attention needs to be placed on biliteracy, specifically bilingual books that incorporate code-switching. This integration will hybridize language and make this switch smoother and more quickly accepted. If students see code-switching, which they may already use in their own speech, in a written document, they will accept their own language identity and understand the agency and possibilities which they possess in this skill. However, Pang and Kamil note a “shortage of multicultural children’s literature in English, Spanish, and

other languages” (e.g.g., Alok, 1993; Nieto, 1993; Pang and Kamil 19). “The lack of such models [of code-switching in adolescent literature] may also cue the students as to the ‘inappropriateness;’ of code-switching in writing” (Perez and Guzman 46).

Although there is a lack of bilingual texts for children and adolescents, some authors have seen the need for such texts, and they have answered this need through their writings. The adolescent book *Wachale* by Ilan Stavans, a collection of Spanish and English short stories and poetry, exemplifies this slowly emerging genre of bilingual texts for adolescents. This text represents as a cultural form, through the overall structure of the book, the deconstruction of the opposing hierarchical binaries of these two languages. The text is set up with no dominant, or matrix, language, which would serve to control the structure and punctuate the languages in respect to the dominant, typically Anglo-American, culture. There exists Spanish, English, Calo, and even some code-switching in the text, and each story or poem is translated into the other language completely. There is no dominance in the order of which the languages and translations occur; the language the text was originally composed in is placed first, followed by the translation.

In her introduction to her collection of stories and poems entitled *Wachale*, Stavans uses code-switching to convey her purpose for writing this book, both through her actual word meanings and the overall structure of her introduction. “Un gringo I knew in my mexicano days used to say to me: llancho mi guero, cada persona is born with a limited amount of cuentos. What a lastima if they are never let out!” (Stavans x) Through her switching of codes mid-sentence, as well as the more simple word and sentence constructions, both languages feed off each other, thus making her anthology accessible to speakers of both languages. Using code-switching in her introduction

acknowledges to the adolescent the importance of both languages and their speakers.

Perez and Guzman further note that in addition to students accepting their own language, the structure of multilingual texts also creates understanding and acceptance of other cultures.

Children must come to understand that language is arbitrary and that there is absolutely nothing wrong when Pepe writes *chiringa* [kite], where Sara writes *huila* [kite], and Carlos writes *papalote* [kite]. They are not only all legitimate ways of expressing the same concept; they are also a manifestation of the richness of the cultural traditions they come from (Perez and Guzman 7).

Stavans' book juxtaposes English and Spanish languages and cultures to help adolescents tolerate, learn from, and appreciate another culture. In the introduction to her anthology, Stavans defines the title of the collection: "Wachale (WA-tcha-leh), interj.: Spanglish for look out, be aware, watch out. The action of watching or looking out for something." (Stavans xi). In addition to highlighting the hybridization of Spanglish, Stavans acknowledges that language and cultural relations are changing, and society should be ready for this change. In her rationale for using code-switching texts, she argues; "For Spanglish, a hybrid, is a way of communicating that arises out of life as we live it now... This is our duty, for full mastery of both languages is a necessity in order for us to succeed" (Stavans xiii). Bilingual literature and education for adolescents will aid in the re-imagining of America by shifting the understanding of language and culture relationships.

Instead of having adolescents read only the traditional English literary cannon, which emphasizes a cultural link of the United States to England and Europe, we should focus more directly on our literary and language relationships to our bordering countries and the borderlands that lie between them. Debra A. Castillo's solution to incorporate the

growing number of Spanish speaking Latinos into this country is to look at the United States as a Latin American country. She is calling upon us, as citizens of “America,” to look at our country in relation to geography—*North America*, *Latin America*, *South America*—rather than to colonial ties to European countries, specifically England.

Between these two easily cast types emerge understandings of a U.S. imaginary seen differently, seen as the heterogeneous grouping of a multiplicity of national origins and ethnicities, of highly diverse peoples and identities. ‘What is different here ‘is our proposal to shift the tradition enough that it can respond to a transnational framework... that yokes together North and South America instead of New England and England (Castillo 7).

The integration of texts from bordering *American* languages and cultures—which are much more prevalent in the United States than are European countries—into the literary cannon, will give adolescents a new definition of our culture and literature; this will help us to begin to rebuild our language from the bottom up.

Focusing on the education of the new generation before they have become part of these hierarchical binaries through bilingual and multicultural texts, will help create a hybrid language which draws on the roots of the multiplicity of cultures in our society. The structure of bilingual education which appears to have had the greatest success in educating students of both the “dominant” and “other” language, is the two-way bilingual immersion program, where education is *equally* conducted in both languages. This structure of education, as previously noted, has already had success in re-integrating the Navajo language into Navajo society and has had proven results with respect to Latino youth. This structure allows children and adolescents to reclaim native languages and also encourages English speakers to integrate other languages and cultures into their education.

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Imagining a different future, however, will only begin with this next generation, through design and implementation of bilingual immersion programs; teachers, writers, and other adult role-models must help in the realizations of these new changes.

Bilingual education and the incorporation of texts which employ code-switching resulting in the hybridization of languages, will help to redefine America and the hierarchical relationships which create a dominant culture in our society. By beginning with the most basic constructions of communication—language—we can strip away the other implications of culture, and begin to rebuild society based on inclusion rather than exclusion. The new language which will result from bilingual literature and education will promote the new culture which Alurista, Anzaldua, and the many bilingual educational researchers are calling for. The physical borderland between the United States and Latin America, where these binaries between languages have begun to be realized, represents the metaphorical borderland which we as a nation need to break down in order to move forward. In her poem “To live in the Borderlands means” Anzaldua states, “To survive the Borderlands/ you must live *sin fronteras*/ be a crossroads” (Anzaldua 217). This is what America must be: a crossroads where different cultures and languages can exist together and be recreated, re-imagined, and reworked through each other to create a new *American* identity and culture.