

# Drama and Cultural Differences in a Border Culture<sup>1</sup>

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## What is a Border?

A *border* is defined as “A line separating two countries; the area near such a line; frontier” (Morehead & Morehead, 1981, p. 69). When I think of a border, I am reminded of T.H. White’s book, *The Once and Future King*: In an effort to teach the young King Arthur, known as “Wart”, Merlin changes him into different animals so that Wart might learn about the world around him from different vantage points. At one point, Wart becomes a bird and flies high over the countryside. Merlin points out to him that from the air there are no boundaries, no borders. A border is a man-made construction.

How true that statement is. The idea that an arbitrary line separates one country from another is truly a concept only man could create. We are all separated by borders. These are not just the political borders described above, but also social and cultural borders which divide us by social class, age, ability, gender, religion, language, occupation, and so forth.

Arizona where I live, like other states in the Southwestern United States—California, New Mexico, and Texas—shares a border with Mexico. Many residents, in fact, move back and forth between the two countries and live on the frontiers of two cultures. While there are new immigrants from a variety of countries and cultures living in the American Southwest, this paper will focus specific on those from Latin America, primarily Mexico. I will also address issues that specifically pertain to drama/theatre education primarily in the US although some of these issues have relevance for others in North America and Europe.

## Border Culture in the Southwestern United States

### Definition of Terms

The U.S. government refers to both native born and immigrants from any Spanish speaking country (e.g., Spain, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean) as *Hispanic* (Jones & Fuller, 2003). The term *Latina/o* is often preferred when speaking of those specifically from the Americas. Among this population are an unknown number of undocumented immigrants who have entered the US illegally without a work permit or student visa.

### General Demographics

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In the 2000 U.S. census, Hispanics made up 12.5% of the population, an increase from 9% in 1990, and now are the largest minority population. At the present rate of growth, Hispanics will soon be the largest ethnic group in the US. Of this group, the largest number, 58.5%, are Mexican American (Guzman as cited in Jones & Fuller, 2003). Many Mexican Americans have lived in the US for generations, but one quarter of them are naturalized U.S. citizens. More than one-third of all the foreign born population currently living in the US is from Mexico or another Central American country. 16.1% of those foreign born live below the poverty level compared to 11.1% of those native born; those from Central America, including Mexico, had the highest poverty rate of all, 22.6% (Schmidley, 2003).

### **Demographics Relating to Schools**

Of significance to schools is that 35% of all Hispanics are under 18, compared to 23.5% in the general population (Guzman as cited in Jones & Fuller, 2003). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 39.5% of all U.S. students are minorities; furthermore, 7.9% of all U.S. students are English language learners. According to Jones and Fuller Spanish is the most predominant first language in schools with Vietnamese being second.

The Tucson Unified School District, the second largest school district in Arizona, reported that 49% of their student population was Hispanic compared to 39.6% white; 6.5 African-American; 4.0% Native American and 2.6% Asian (TUSD, 2003). The Sunnyside School district which serves South Tucson reported that 85.4% of their population was Hispanic; this number has risen steadily for the last five years (SUSD, 2003).

## **THE BORDER BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

While there are increasing numbers of minority students in U.S. schools, the teaching force remains 87% white and middle class; 74% of all teachers are female (Jones & Fuller, 2003). The numbers of minority teachers are actually declining as more employment opportunities open up elsewhere. Clearly, "when teachers and children come from different cultural groups, there is a good chance that they may have misunderstandings about everyday things they each take for granted" (p. 10). As one Hispanic mother noted, "Our children are worth a little care...they are uncut diamonds, but no one wants to bother to dig for them and polish them" (p. xi).

### **Students**

#### **Student Alienation and Failure**

Hispanic children do not currently succeed in school; only 25.9%, for example, complete high school (Tomás Rivera Policy Institute as cited in Jones and Fuller, 2003). Jones and Fuller believe that poverty rates would decrease for Hispanics if more Hispanic children completed high school and college degrees. The failure of public schools to be

successful with Hispanic children could lead to a permanent Hispanic underclass in the US.

### **Racism**

There is little doubt that Hispanics, especially first-language Spanish speaking Hispanics and new immigrants, are the victims of racial prejudice in the US. According to Jones and Fuller (2003), this attitude may extend as far back as Elizabethan times when England and Spain were rivals for exploration and domination of the so-called "new world". California, New Mexico, parts of Arizona and Texas were first "colonized" by Spain and then became Mexican territories after 1821. As each area was acquired by the United States, the Spanish speaking land-owners were displaced and discriminated against.

McClaren (1999) suggests that racism is inherent in the culture of the US, a legacy of the institutions of slavery, imperialism, and capitalism. Furthermore, in McClaren's opinion, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the immigrant, especially the immigrant of color, has become the new hated "Other". He notes: "It is the monolithic, monocultural perspective of the White Anglo majority population that is responsible, in large part, for the current state of Latina/ophobia and demonization of people of color in general" (p. 26). From the discussions of other participants at the recent UNESCO arts education conference, it seems likely that negative racial attitudes pervade for new immigrants of color throughout Europe as well. The lone exception appears to be Canada which has an open door policy regarding immigration.

### **Teachers**

Generally speaking teachers are well intentioned individuals drawn to the profession by forces outside themselves. Pre-service elementary/primary teachers, for example, report entering teaching because they want to make a difference in the lives of children, while secondary pre-service teachers are often motivated by a love for their particular subject. Unless they have significant experiences during teacher education and their first few years of teaching, these teachers are likely to unconsciously reinforce the dominant hegemonic culture they experienced. The poet Adrienne Rich used the term *culture of passivity* to describe how old systems, such as the patriarchal, often racist, culture of American public schools, are perpetuated "by not asking questions, by accepting a situation as if it were a natural order of things" (McKenna, 2003, p. 436).

A 20 year old pre-service teacher from a suburban, middle class background can be unprepared for the difference between herself and the students she may teach finding herself on one side of a cultural border and her students on the other. How does a new teacher learn to live in the borderlands, the frontier between two cultures? Gloria Anzaldúa described this space between two cultures as a *crossroads* (as cited in McKenna, 2003). McKenna elaborates,

Being a crossroads does not imply a denial of difference; rather it promotes an articulation of difference. It means living without borders, but it also means living as an intersection of all the border spaces that define: race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity. (p. 435)

To survive, McKenna suggests further, the pre-service teacher and her students must learn to tolerate ambiguity, which is not a trait of the dominant culture, I might add. She must create a new community with her students drawing from the student culture—"their interests, needs, speech and perceptions—while creating a negotiable openness in class where the student's input jointly creates the learning process" (Shor, 1992, p.16).

While the crossroads of the borderlands is characterized by ambiguity, there is another metaphor now being discussed in the multicultural literature. This is the notion of a *third space* created when two cultures come together in a shared experience (Greenwood, 1999).

Creating a third space at the crossroads of the borderlands, is the goal of *critical pedagogy*. Critical pedagogy recognizes that the classroom is a "politicized space" where "cultural and political hierarchies are affirmed and denied ... authority and ... patriarchy are replicated" (McKenna, 2003, pp. 435-6). Classrooms, however, can be a "creative space in which students and teacher alike work through their subjectivity to achieve an externalization of the intersecting elements of race, class and gender." Teacher and students work together as a community to inform, teach and expose (p. 436). Developing critical, transformative educators is the goal of many teacher education programs in the US and elsewhere.

## TEACHING HISPANIC CHILDREN

Before looking specifically at both the challenges and possibilities for drama/theatre education in a border culture, it will be helpful to look at some characteristics of Hispanic children and how they learn in their own culture. Drama/theatre educators will recognize immediately how typical drama practices, especially, are quite suitable for Hispanic communities.

### Characteristics of Hispanic Communities

#### Strong Families

According to M.L. González (2001), "Latinos are generally family centered and believe that they should spend as much time as they can with their children" (p. 14). The family is virtually a small community as parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins are all important supportive members of the family unit. In their family practices, Latinos exhibit an organic view of life, one that sees the basic interconnectedness of the individual to the family, to God and to the community (Heyck as cited in Huerta-Macías, 2001).

### **Educating Children within the Family**

Huerta-Macías (2001) notes that certain styles of interaction are prevalent within the Hispanic family. Primarily, the family focuses on cooperation rather than competition. Mexican-American children, especially, learn through observation and practice. When learning tasks around the home, family members provide guidance but do not give verbal explanations nor ask questions of the kind typical in mainstream Anglo culture. *Respecto* or respect, particularly for adults is highly promoted within the family, as are patience, responsibility, cooperation and interdependence. Huerta-Macías notes that new immigrants of all ages need a greater use of modeling and hands-on experience as they adapt to the more verbal style of learning: “Rather than talking about science, history, or writing, for example, we need to actually engage students in scientific, historical and writing processes” (p. 33).

### **Implications for Classrooms**

**Group work.** Huerta-Macías (2001) advocates using group work, “Working in groups provides a structure that promotes more effective interaction and communication among students and that also draws on a learning pattern that is familiar to Latino families” (p. 35). Recent immigrants will also look to friends for helping them adapt to their new world (Igoa as cited in Huerta-Macías, 2001).

**Cross-age tutoring.** Another strategy that works well for Hispanic children is the use of cross-age tutoring. This builds on the family structure where older children are asked to be responsible for helping and caring for younger siblings. In a K-2 project to study the Arizona Sonora Desert, for example, the children understood that every member was responsible for ensuring that each person in the group felt safe and included (Espinosa, Moore & Serna, 2001).

### **Hispanic Families Have Alternative Ways of Knowing**

Ada and Smith (2001) observe that certain types of knowledge are systematically devalued by schools especially that knowledge which arises from experiences, lives, and the reasoning of many Hispanic students and their families. They challenge educators to create projects which parents’ knowledge will be valued in and out of class and will then become an integral part of the curriculum. Huerta-Macías (2001) suggests using the community and family as instructional resources. Teachers, for example can ask students as a part of a social studies lesson to go home and ask their parents about their childhood memories (a favorite story, activity, family/home descriptions) or about their activities at work and report back to the class. Children and parents can also participate jointly in co-authoring a book on a subject of mutual interest. Books in which the children are the protagonists using information from their parents’ e.g., how I got my name, the day I was born, my autobiography, can also be written (Ada, & Smith, 2001). These activities give both voice and value to the activities of Hispanic families.

### **Build on Hispanic Culture**

Culture includes the customs, beliefs, values, religion, and patterns of behavior of members of a given society (Delgado-Gaitán & Trueba; Heath & Mangiola; & Trueba as cited in Huerta-Macías, 2001). Sociocultural knowledge is constructed beginning at birth through social interactions with members of a group. Students need to be involved in reflection and appreciation of the culture within their own communities. These projects involve a great deal of peer group interaction Huerta-Macías (2001).

Huerta-Macías (2001) notes that the Latino culture is rich in different genres of oral and written language, all of which constitute part of a student's sociocultural knowledge. Among these forms are the following:

- *Cuentos* (stories in the oral tradition)
- *Dichos* (proverbs) told and retold within the families and through the generations, often to reinforce a moral lesson both for children and adults
- *Corridos* (ballads) very popular form of song lyrics—telling tales of romantic and tragic
- Games, for example, *Secretos y Voces* (secrets and voices)—how language can be distorted in the oral communication process & involves a form of metalingual analysis as players

It is important to find books and other resources which reflect the Hispanic community. M.C. González (2001) laments that

books in Spanish are difficult to obtain, especially those written about Latino children in multiple settings—rural, urban, and from different ethnic identities. It is not enough to simply buy or select books that have pictures of brown or black faces, but rather, the story lines and their implications to the unique cultures represented in the classroom must be considered. (p. 94)

Huerta-Macías (2001) maintains that when children see themselves and their parents in books, they begin to see themselves as part of history, and in doing so, connect their struggles to the struggles of others, and thus find the strength, inspiration, and courage to live as protagonists of a transformative process.

The arts too are important aspects of Hispanic culture. Successful schools promote after school programs; for example, one school recently obtained a grant for enrichment through the arts in an after-school program which integrates learning activities through the arts with lessons stimulating creativity. The program included chess, drama, video, painting, drawing & music.

### **DRAMA/THEATRE AND HISPANIC CHILDREN**

Current research by educational psychologists, teacher educators and education theorists, as well as the accumulated experiences of the international drama/theatre education community, suggest that the use of drama/theatre in the schools and elsewhere supports diverse cultural approaches in the classroom as well as multiple

dimensions of learning, exploration, inquiry and ethical life lessons (e.g., Wagner, 1998). There are differences, however, between what is thought of as *drama* and *theatre* or *theatrical production*.

### **Educational Drama**

“The goal of *educational drama*,” according to Wagner (1998), “is to create an experience through which students may come to understand human interactions, empathize with other people and alternative points of view” (p. 5). In the US, educational drama is still often referred to as *creative drama* and revolves around the enactment of stories. Elsewhere in the world, the terms *drama in education* and *process drama* are preferred although this practice can also be found in the US. McCammon, Schonman, and Warner (2004) note that drama in education/process drama involves an extensive range of complex activities where students take on expertise roles, encounter challenges, solve problems, and inquire into the unfamiliar. For example, the players may explore the anti-slavery movement in the US in role as abolitionists or they may work in role as scientists or historians studying phenomena or events. Students who engage in drama as a teaching methodology begin to generate their own knowing embedded in aesthetic context. Because it is improvisatory, students focus on that which makes drama—tension and conflict—rather than on the ancillary processes of theatre such as the memorization of a script.

### **Educational Drama and Hispanic Children**

Virtually all the key factors, noted earlier, that should be in place to successfully educate Hispanic children are also key factors in educational drama practice:

**1. Working interactively in a strong classroom community.** Many of us who teach educational drama and educational drama methods emphasize the value of community building in our classes. Early on we concentrate on name learning activities, ice breakers and simply structured games and activities which teach students to work together cooperatively. Students must know one another and must feel free to take risks supported by their peers. Educational drama also relies on reflection and peer feedback. Peer feedback is especially helpful to facilitate a sense of interconnectedness in classrooms as students take responsibility for their work and that of their classmates. Noted drama educator Dorothy Heathcote said recently that drama helps to bond participants together—the most important thing is this bond.

**2. Reliance on social interaction and group work.** Educational drama is student centered. Students work together in small groups solving problems or developing improvisations to share with their classmates. Through this work, they improve their social and language skills and they also learn to use language that is situation appropriate; for example, a scientist will speak and write differently than students ordinarily do (Verriour, 1995; Wagner, 1998). Students develop a strong sense of ownership in and responsibility for their own learning (McCammon, 2002a).

**3. Use of stories to promote literacy and language skills.** Story is at the heart of all drama practice. Just as more books are now being written depicting Hispanic daily life and folklore, more teachers are finding these stories and using them for story dramatization or as pre-texts for process dramas in their classrooms. More important for Hispanic children is the value of drama to promote literacy on many levels—reading, writing, listening and speaking (Wagner, 1998). Story dramatization, for example, helps teach story structure which is a precursor to literacy (Wagner, 1998). When students write in role, they are learning to write authentically (Verriour, 1995). Drama also helps students learn another language (Wagner, 1998). A first grade teacher illustrates:

I'll translate for them, but they're able to see a lot of things that are acted out and they many not understand what they might be saying in English, but they understand by their movement or their gestures what they're trying to get across. (McCammon & Betts, 1999, p. 40)

**4. Drama builds self-confidence.** Teachers and students like report that participation in drama builds a student's self-confidence. A fourth grade teacher described how a Hispanic boy in her class was at first reluctant to participate in drama activities. Gradually, he participated more and more until he demonstrated both leadership and creativity (McCammon & Betts, 1999). This same boy later said of his drama experience, "A lot of people say, I don't like school, school is boring. People should do drama at school, so kids could say school is fun..." (p. 87).

**5. Drama creates empathy for others.** When students take on roles within a drama, they learn to see and understand the points of view of others. This is perhaps how drama benefits the participants the most. Provided with the appropriate drama experiences, they can learn to listen to many cultural voices including their own. As McKenna notes, "we can create an empathetic moment in which the classroom participants feel what it might be like to cross into the borderlands" (p.437). In a university production of *Calabasas Street* by José Cruz González, it was important that the largely Anglo cast understand the Mexican folktale of *La Llorona*, the weeping woman. In the story, La Llorona drowns her children and now wanders the world searching for children to replace them. Mexican-American children fear La Llorona with the same intensity as any boogey man or monster. Using drama strategies, the cast came to understand both the story and the stigma that could become attached to an old women the children on Calabasas Street feared and called La Llorona (McCammon, 2003).

## Theatre

Just as it is important to have stories from the Hispanic culture represented in books, it is also important that stories told in theatrical productions by both educational and professional companies reflect the all the children in the audience. As one Mexican



American elementary student recently observed, "All kinds of people write stories that are about one religion or about just white people, and I haven't seen that much stuff about Mexican-Americans" (McCammon & Whitehead, 2004, p. 27). Marín (as cited in McCammon & Whitehead) suggests that when children identify with characters in a play, there can be "a powerful impact on the way children see themselves emerging into the world. . . . How we present a multicultural society onstage can change the way a child thinks and acts" (p. 6).

Seeing diverse stories depicted on stage can also help erase stereotypes and promote better understanding across cultures as this comment from a non Mexican-American girl indicates: "I just think that we need different cultures in the world and everyone should learn a little something of every culture and not just say right away that they are stupid and they can't do anything" (McCammon & Whitehead, p. 28). Garcia (in press) feels that the study and production of a play like *¡Bocon!* by Lisa Lomer can "provide a context for an introductory discussion of immigration and related social issues". Fortunately, a number of new plays for young audiences have been published recently which depict the Hispanic experience (McCammon, 2002b).

Doyle (1993) and others maintain that students are not likely to feel ownership of a previously scripted play. Transformative education, in their view, can be achieved best when students create their own plays. Unfortunately, while most U.S. university theatre programs prepare future teachers to direct and produce plays, few programs include play building experiences.

If there are enormous possibilities in drama and theatre pedagogy to find the third space for the growing number of Hispanic young people in the United States, there are also endemic barriers which prevent the spread of these practices. First, there are currently few teacher preparation programs which prepare elementary or secondary drama/theatre teachers (McCammon, 2002a). Despite emerging research demonstrating drama's learning potential, neither Colleges of Education nor Theatre Departments show much interest in educating future teachers. Furthermore, the theatre practices in most universities largely reinforce the dominant Western tradition of plays; consequently, most secondary theatre programs still rely on Shakespeare, musicals and large cast plays by largely white male authors (McCammon, 2004). Many drama programs conducted by teaching artists both in schools and elsewhere are short term. While these programs report significant results at the time, the concern, especially for those attending the UNESCO conference in Helsinki, was for after the end of the program. How can these "interventions" become long term and sustainable?

Both the problems and the possibilities for drama/theatre education to promote cultural understandings in a climate of racism in North America and Europe will be our challenge in the new millennium.

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