Sites of Resistance: Responding to Stories as an Exercise in Dangerous Memory

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to examine the responses of six Hispanic women to a chapter from Cisneros’ (1989) book “The House on Mango Street (A House of My Own).” This story, about having a place of one’s own, was read to each of the women who were then asked to respond to the story. These women, who came from México and South America, were able to resonate with Cisneros’ account given its background. These responses were then analyzed from two perspectives: Rosenblatt’s (1978) reader response theory and from the perspective of Critical Literacy (i.e. Bourdieu’s, 1990, sociological model). These results served to provide an entry into future research with a larger subject population.

In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community (Metz, 1980, quoted in McDonald,, 2001, 259).

As McDonald(2001) states, “Sites of resistance are formed when sufficient people oppose the dominant culture, remember their cultural stories, and imagine a future toward which they are prepared to work” (p. 258). Coupled with this notion is the belief, as espoused by Boyd-Batstone (2002), that culture is a story with multiple authors. And in keeping with the theme of his article, when anyone reads stories, they respond to their reading with aesthetic images and sensations drawn the experiences of their cultural background (p. 131).

Boyd-Batstone’s (2002) paper dealt with a reflection of how culture affects reader response in terms of sharing power, negotiating culture, and giving voice. In examining this relationship, he calls upon the work of Erika, a Latina fifth-grade bilingual student. Erika’s response to The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros (1989) demonstrates three ways that reader response and culture connect: (1) plugging into another’s story, (2) telling one’s own story, and (3) connecting to a family story (p. 132).

Our paper, in turn, takes up the notion of sites of resistance and, in particular, connecting to the memories of a small group of Hispanic women who form an important link to the Hispanic culture of the Southern region of the state of Texas.
Taking our lead from the experiences of Erika in her response to The House on Mango Street we asked a small group of Hispanic women to respond to one of Cisneros’s stories (A house of My Own). The story was presented to each subject and the researcher simply asked each individual to engage in a response to the story once it was read to them orally by the researcher. All responses were tape recorded with questions asked throughout the session to probe for an understanding of each subject’s response to the piece being read. In keeping with ethical considerations, consent forms soliciting permission to publish results of this research were sought from each subject.

Given the limited size of this sample, no attempt will be made to claim that this is an ethnographic study; rather the claim is that this is a “single snapshot “ glimpse at a group of Hispanic women whose views on their situation is worth examining for the insights they provides. In a very limited sense, one might see this as a kind of pilot project leading to a more fully developed study based on the questions and insights gained from an examination as this one provides to researchers who are interested in the role of culture and its connection to one’s response to literature.

**Response to Literature**

Reader-response criticism (or theory) is sometimes best viewed within the context of American Literary criticism of the late 1960s when literary texts were seen as works which possessed “an organic unity”, a well-wrought icon, or verbal icon, and criticism was equated with a close reading or objective analysis of this artifact (Mailloux, 1990, 39) However, the basic tenets of reader-response criticism are to be found in writings of scholars such as Bleich (1975, 1988), Holland (1975), Iser (1978, 1980), Fish (1980), and Cullar (1975). In addition, there is the important work of Rosenblatt (1978, 1991) whose initial writings predate all of the foregoing authors.

Rosenblatt’s use of the term transaction describes what she sees as the fundamental aspect of what happens when readers encounter texts. Simply put, “a text, once it leaves its author’s hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work-sometimes, even, a literary work of art” (1985, p. ix). This evocation is what Rosenblatt calls a poem. In her view, the poem is the result of the transaction between the reader and the text. What this does is to place the reader back into the reader-text relationship.

In reading, the transactional process has to do with the dynamic relationship which exists between reader and text. For example, Sally, a grade five student, in her written response to Pigs Might Fly, comments, “it’s like when you start a new book; for a while nothing happens, and the BOOM. This book is taking too long for the boom” (Literature Log Entry, March, 27, 1992).

Iser (1987) takes a similar view, although the terminology he uses is different and, of course, his views of response to text are somewhat different despite the commonality of his views to Rosenblatt’s notions of response.

For Iser, the reader operates under the guidance of the text. Bruner (1986), echoing Iser (1978), talks about the reader text interactions as “something in the actual text triggers an interpretation of genre in the reader, an interpretation that then dominates the reader’s own creation of what Iser calls a ‘virtual text” (p.6). For both Iser and Rosenblatt, then, the reader assumes an important role in reader-text transactions. To paraphrase Boyd-Batstone (2002) here, given that the experience of understanding and interpreting a text
is primarily aesthetic and when children engage with stories, they respond to their reading with aesthetic images and sensations drawn from the experience of their background (p. 131).

**Critical Literacy**

There are several ways to reflect on the teacher’s role in teaching children (and adults) to read. One important and relevant goal is to help the reader understand how texts work, including such elements as story structure and how sounds and symbols relate. Another goal is to help children understand that texts are open to a variety of readings given their different histories, backgrounds and experiences. Making meaning, therefore, is central to the reading process. A third goal is to ensure that children experience firsthand how useful texts are in helping us see the world in a new light and accomplish work in a more efficient and effective manner. Finally, a goal that generally receives much less attention focuses on encouraging children to think critically about what they read - to pay attention to what a particular text is doing to them, how it is positioning them, and whose interests are being served by how the text is written.

This brief summary leads us into a deeper discussion of the role of that recent understandings of “difference” pose to language and literacy from the perspective of gender and cross-cultural studies, history, adult and school education, and corporate and policy studies (Freebody, Muspratt and Dwyer, 2001, abstract). As we stated earlier, such a discussion of the role of Critical Literacy is beyond the scope of this paper. Our aim, therefore, is to highlight a few key points as they relate to our discussion of the role of these Hispanic women who talked to us about their experience of being ‘on the outside’ of mainstream literacy matters.

Carrington (in Freebody, et al., 2001) argues that literacy forms one of the constitutive myths of Western society. From her perspective literacy is neither one definitive concept nor one specifiable practice (p.265). Rather, what we see of literacy is that it is made up of families of literate practices. Literacy, then, is constituted by a series of of “contextually located social connections [which] determine the payoffs of particular practices (ibid.).

In this respect, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1991) provides valuable insights into how literacy and the literate individual may be viewed as sociohistoric constructions (Carrington, 2001, p. 266). In particular, Bourdieu’s sociological template provides us with a rich terminology for examining how it is that individuals who are on the borders of literate practice establish “sites of resistance” through their ability to recall or release their memories of response to texts that resonate with them (McDonald in Freebody et al., 2001).

**Fields**

According to Bourdieu, the social world is a multidimensional space, composed of semiautonomous, structured social spaces called fields (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Fields define areas of social activity that are characterized by the generation and use of a shared discourse (symbolic system). In our case, it is the discourse shared by these Hispanic women which represents their social world. Fields are characterized by dominant and subordinate roles played by participants.
Habitus

For Bourdieu, situating the individual within the social dynamic called habitus, is tied to the “particular environmental conditions experienced by the individual within fields, whether material, emotional, or social” (257). In our interviews with our subjects, discussion of the differences in English and Spanish between ‘house’ and ‘home’ became important distinctions which could best be teased out by discussing what these words meant depending upon your grasp of their nuances, particularly in Spanish where the linguistic distinctions permitted a much richer understanding by our subjects.

Capital

Within this conceptualization, Bourdieu envisioned a theory of the economics of practice that would extend economic consideration to “all goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation” (Bourdieu, in Carrington, 2001, 269).

Economic capital, for Bourdieu, is constituted by material, quantifiable wealth. Social capital consists of the connections and social networks on which an individual may draw in order to establish credibility or social influence. Symbolic capital refers to the social potency and credibility that accrues to the other forms of capital when recognized and legitimated within fields and social groups; without this validation any capital has little worth. (Carrington, 2001, 269).

Cultural capital has three unique forms: institutional, objectified, and embodied. As Carrington explains, children come to school with varying degrees of cultural capital. They arrive with the “correct” attitude to school and institutional authority. In the case of these Hispanic women and their children, they come to schooling with a firm belief in the American dream but with a worldview that is infused with all of those traditions that are part and parcel of their linguistic and cultural heritage. In other words, they possess “dangerous memories” because their understandings are, in many cases, at variance with the cultural capital most schools expect.

Symbolic Violence

As Carrington (2001) argues, “The imposition of Eurocentric curricula, learning styles, and behavioral norms, and sanctions against the use of nonstandard English acts as a powerful form of symbolic violence against indigenous and migrant students through processes of exclusion and silencing” (270).

Mrs. Benita’s response resonates with Cisnaro’s account for she, too, recognizes “someone wanted this, I wanted that, but you can’t tell your parents because they don’t have the money therefore, you don’t say anything. If one has a party and wants a stylish dress or a pair of shoes, usually one makes do with what they have” (Interview, July, 2003). Here, this comment also reflects both social and economic capital in that it highlights the lack of important social resources.

This lack of social resources is highlighted in Mrs. Benita’s disclosure that she dropped out of school early in order to go to work and help support the family, “I began to work at a very young age. I didn’t finish my studies and I got up to the fifth grade. Fifth, yes? Yes, I got out before I finished the fifth grade, before I finished out the year I dropped out and went to work. My teacher came to my work and told me that I had passed grades
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and I didn’t go. I didn’t got to the school and one regrets it, one regrets it, but you have to help out the family (Interview, August, 2003).

Mrs. Benita elaborates out how one continues to “have the dream of making my home, well not luxurious or nothing, but for everyone to have their own room” (Interview, August, 2003).

The “linguistic market value” (Carrington, 2001,270) of Mrs. Bonita’s discourse speaks to Bourdieu’s (2001) notion of symbolic violence. Mrs. Bonita’s mode of discourse, her use of language, highlights the fact that this person’s nonstandard dialect works against the norms established by a Eurocentric model of appropriate discourse.

Mrs. Benita from San Luis Potosí, México

In examining Mrs. Benita’s response to A House of My Own (Cisneros), one is truck by the powerlessness of her position., In her reaction to the story, she responds by saying, “Well, I thought about when I was small, well one has dreams when she likes to have things, a house, different things, and well you know that can’t be done.” Here, there is no real site of resistance. In this case, Bourdieu’s notion of Field is raised because it serves to highlight the relationship of dominance to subordination that exist when there is an unequal balance of power between the dreams of Mrs. Bonita and the larger cultural domain of society that is dominated by a white, middle class values.

Susie from Nuevo León, México

Susie’s response to A House of My Own (Cisneros) is not unlike Mrs. Bonita’s account. In Bourdieu’s terms, both accounts lack the capital that is inherent in the lives of mainstream families so that the dreams they have are very much like the account that Cisneros writes about. Susie has dreams and these dreams include their children. As Susie states,

Like many, speaking from experience, like also my father, they put all their dreams into a lottery. It is when they play the lottery that all their dreams come out, ‘I’m going to buy me this, I’m going to buy me that, for my children this, for my wife this and that’ (Interview, August, 2003)

Susie’s response is not unlike Erika’s response to the same story. Susie plugs into the story when she states that the child in the story felt rejection from the people. They knew her economic position, where she lived, and this, says Susie, is very common amongst Hispanics. At the heart of this response is the underlying sliver of hope that underscores her response, “When parents can’t give their children the best they can, there is usually hope. Like that of buying a little house, but at the least it is already theirs, understand? So the hope of continuing ahead is what is usually never lost (Interview, August, 2003).

Tere from San Luis Potosí, México

Tere’s response to Cisneros’s story is very much like Erika’s idea of “Telling Her Own Story”. Here she states,

I also thought about a house, a two-story house with bedrooms upstairs and .... for all the children and to continue to live with my sister, two bedrooms upstairs with everything” kitchen, dining
room, everything in order to live together with my sister and with all the family, to be more comfortable and to live a little better also (Interview, August, 2003).

What seems evident here is that the language used by Tere aptly describes her condition. She readily identifies with Cisneros and with Erika. This is a discourse which does not talk about social advantage; it is a language which reflects a highly politicized social practice in which indigenous and migrant individuals can only dream about economic conditions which the mainstream culture takes as its natural birthright.

Letty from Corpus Christi, Texas
In her response to the story, Letty’s comments are instructive when she states, It so happened that I was living it. Why? I was living more with more ah, who? She doesn’t say the name. Like the person who is retelling everything that she lived, well, what she remembered. When she was a child and then continued growing, correct? She kept growing because she went on remembering about everything her parents wanted for her, correct? For he siblings because afterwards the family continued growing and they wanted a bigger house where they could live better with more space . . . something beautiful (Interview, August, 2003).

In this response, Letty reflects on the background that is evident in what Cisneros brings to the story. Here, she is able to adopt a deeper perspective than the others. Not only is she able to do this, she lives the story. In Rosenblatt’s (1989) hers is a lived-through experience in which she is able not only to live through the experience of A house of My Own, she is able to connect with Cisnero’s experiences when she wrote the story.

Magda from Guanajuato, México
Magda’s response to The House on Mango Street reflects her inability to react in a meaningful way to this text. What seems evident is her lack of understanding of the story which was read to her in English. From a schema theoretic point of view Magda’s grasp of the story is limited to a few details; she has only a simple story schema to work from and any depth of response is not there because she doesn’t have the linguistic competence to delve deeply into the implications of the story. Thus, when she is asked to recount, in her own words, the implications for having a house of one’s own, she can only say, “Well, I think to say it’s like a family, the father, the mother, and the children. They rented, but they wanted their own house, they wanted their own bedroom, bathroom where everyone could bathe, they also wanted a house on Mango street. What is street?” (Interview, August, 2003).

When asked how the girl in the story felt about her situation, Magda replied, “I think she felt sad, didn’t she? Because she wanted to be alone, have her privacy. That is, she had her here mother, her siblings and everything” (Interview, August, 2003).

In sum, Magda could not seemingly move beyond feeling sad and, in the end, she failed to connect this story to her own life and this, it would seem, is linked to her lack
of facility with the English language. In this respect, it is not unusual that Magda fails to respond at a deeper level. If the story had been read to her in Spanish, she may have been able to respond at a deeper level. This, therefore, points to one of the weaknesses in this set of interviews.

Alicia Mendoza from Argentina, South America

Alicia, who came to Corpus Christi, Texas from Argentina appears to have a more sophisticated grasp of this story than that which was offered by Magda. Her response clearly shows a deeper grasp of the story line and implications for Alicia’s life,

Well the story in summary deals with a girl who recounts how her life had been in the past when her parents just started off and they were a big family, she had three brothers. They lived in a small, modest apartment, on a third floor in which the building was very run down. Her mother always dreamt along with them in having a better house and she would tell them how it could come to be. They dreamed together that the house they could have in the future would be similar to the house they saw in the movies or on the television. But the reality was that if they could move, they would move to a very small and modest house, whereby the reality of life was another life totally different (Interview, August, 2003).

This elaborate response, filled with detail and with what Langer (1988) would call “envisionment building” displays Alicia’s ability to plug into another’s story and to be able to tell one’s own story. Throughout this and along with her other comments, we can see Alicia’s ability to deal with the vision Erika had and to connect with her own understanding of how important it is to dream about a place of one’s own.

In looking at Alicia’s comments from the perspective of Bourdieu’s framework, one is struck by the fact that Alicia’s world is, like Erika’s, is one constructed by dreams. It is as though Alicia, like other borderland subjects, lives outside the field of discourse as it is envisioned by the mainstream culture. Alicia. Like Erika, can only view the possibility of a house from a distant perspective and, even when that dream is fulfilled, it is a substandard one which entails a small house on Mango Street. If there is a dream, it does not contain a vision of a two-car garage with three or four bedrooms and multiple bathrooms. Such discourse is the province of the mainstream world of Americans who come with higher expectations.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the responses of six Hispanic women to The House on Mango Street (Cisneros), in particular to a story in the book entitled A House of My Own. The story was read to each of the women who were then asked to respond to the story from their own background.. The women who came from México and South America (one subject) and had settled in the Corpus Christi area were asked to briefly respond to the story and to retell that story in light of their own experiences as Hispanic women who had recently moved to Corpus Christi. Their responses were then examined and analyzed from two perspectives, namely, response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978 and Iser, 1978) and from the perspective of Critical Literacy in which elements of Bourdieu’s (1990) sociological model provided a framework for this dual analysis.
Rosemblatt’s (1978) model of response applies here where the emphasis is on encouraging these women to deal freely with their own feelings about the story. In the bulk of responses one finds these women, not only retelling the story as they heard it but also connecting with it from their own personal experiences. For them, A House of My Own is a familiar experience and one can feel the sense in which these women were able to identify with Cisneros when she writes about the need for one’s own personal space, where, in the past, women who lived on the margins were forced to live in substandard housing where little or no privacy was the central concern of all the respondents.

Where the responses lacked a personal voice could be linked directly to the lack of proficiency with the English language and where respondents could not identify with the main character in the story simply because they lacked the language or linguistic proficiency necessary to engage with the text.

At the second level of analysis, we were struck by the evident imposition of what Bourdieu (1977) called cultural arbitrary because the structure and functions of culture cannot be deduced from any universal principle. In other words, these women were outside looking in”; they had no power and could therefore only dream of a house of their own. Now while there is a shared discourse, it is a discourse which is limited because the women in this group are situated outside the mainstream culture of the home and the school. Symbolic violence is perpetuated by the dominant classes in that the women feel no sense of empowerment; they are pawns in the game of housing and we are sure that sense of powerlessness extends to the school as well.

Not only is there a sense of isolation evident in these responses, there is also the division evident in the gender bias that exists in the lives of these women. Men are not here because they are probably even more dispossessed than the women. They have no voice because they may be unemployed and uneducated. At the very least, the women have come to the fore with their desire to become educated.

In sum, what originally surfaced as an interesting exercise in responding has surfaced as a major issue in Critical Literacy. For it is not until we provide these women (and their children) with the literacy tools that will enable them to function as participating in mainstream culture, we will always have citizens who citizens on the borders; they are borderland subjects. Obviously, the road to emancipation lies directly in path of creating critically literate citizens whose voices can and need to be heard both at home and at school.
Reference