Chicana Writers on Carmen Tafolla and Sandra Cisneros
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Corpus Christi, located in South Texas, is a predominately Hispanic multicultural community, with a population of about 300,000, of which I am a member. I teach at Del Mar College, a two-year college with an overall enrollment of approximately 10,000 students where my English composition classes consist of basic writers who are typical of the community population as a whole. They also fit Lynn Quitman Troyka's characteristics of nontraditional students who experience cross-cultural barriers as they pursue college educations. Troyka writes that not only are "basic writers ... a diverse group" but "conventional teaching methods do not work well with nontraditional students" ("Defining, 12).

Carmen Tafolla has written that "creative writing can be one of a teacher's more powerful tools in the validation of students' unique individual and cultural experiences, and in their simultaneous nurturance of self-esteem and of student empowerment" ("Empowering, 273). Both Troyka and Tafolla make valid points about the students I teach; therefore, I continuously seek effective assignments that will make the writing process more meaningful to them. I find it essential for students to bridge their personal experiences with what they read into meaningful writings.

At the 1998 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago I learned why it was necessary for my students to make such connections. Ira Shore explained Paulo Freire's theory that students need to identify their universe before the teacher can teach them. Teachers, Freire contends, must survey the "universe from how people read the world," and must become their students' students before they can become their teachers. If we, as teachers, understand our students and help them to discover a sense of self and culture, then, perhaps, we can be successful in our endeavors to teach writing. In my classes, Chicana basic writers had previously been given only limited opportunities to explore and/or claim their heritage and identification, so I created an assignment using works by Tafolla and Sandra Cisneros to help students identify their "universe" and to enable my teaching.

First, I familiarized students with Tafolla's book To Split a Human: Mitos, Machos Y la Mujer Chicana, She heralds an emphatic message and projects valuable information for persons unfamiliar with Chicano culture that my students admit they do not know. In one hundred fourteen Pages, Tafolla "documents, embraces, and celebrates the diversity of the Chicana experience" by providing historical data, philosophical views, statistical facts, analysis, and poems ("Introduction"). Tafolla's title To Split a Human epitomizes the notion that society has split the human race: simply men and women or the Anglo and Chicano. Por que? She questions why society has separated Chicanos from Anglos, women from men, and significantly, Chicanas from both Anglo women and Chicano men. Society, Tafolla continues, has clearly defined excellence and expectations for men and women by dividing a full, whole human circle in half. The left side of the circle characterizes the male as work objects, and the right side portrays women as sex objects:

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Even Hollywood's portrayals of Chicanos fall into the split. What we see in the movies is the hot-blooded, simple-minded cantinera with "her stereotyped counterpart, the 'Macho' bandido" or the "tall, good looking Americanos" (38). We, as educators, recognize these as simplistic stereotypes. Minority students are often not consciously aware of these labels or their impact. Tafolla primarily stresses that we need a conscious awareness "to make ourselves, as human beings, whole again" through an understanding of the effects the "split" may have on our lives (7).

Her fervent point is that 'We must, all of us, grow into our full human potential" by clarifying 'Who are we? ¿Quién somos?" (4). The answer for Tafolla: Hispanics/Hispano. From my personal experience I have found that many students do not know who comprises the Hispanic population. I must explain that Hispanics, according to Tafolla, can he divided "into at least three major ethnic groups: Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban -- and sixty percent of all Hispanics are Chicanos (6).

To further delineate the definition: 'Who are we? ¿Quién somos?" Tafolla. conveys that we cannot agree on even the term: the word Chicano. Some argue for using it, and others, against. Those who dislike it may associate it with "political activism or militance, pachuco street culture, loud social lower class," while others prefer it to the term "Mexican American" which renders a half-and-half image. But Tafolla chooses the term Chicano since it "also indicates a social consciousness of our uniqueness from Mexican and American cultures." Chicano to Tafolla denotes more than half-Mexican and half-American; it expresses a synthesis and transformation of a dynamic culture. Because the term is specific, Tafolla uses it throughout her book. But to some of my students, the term Chicano is seen as negative and some choose to disassociate themselves from it. I emphasize that it is a personal choice, that students can choose to call themselves by whatever term(s) satisf(y)ies them.

Next, I comment on Tafolla's historical survey. Since Tafolla believes that "history is not there for history's sake; [but] there to help describe and decipher the present," she explores some events detailing 3000 years of Chicana heritage (Gonzalez 257). Tafolla tells stories of the bicultural and bilingual Chicanas whose ancestors originate from the Republic of Mexico (13). I briefly share Tafolla's anecdotes of powerful women: La Malinche, who symbolically bore the first mestizo, thus creating /a raza/; La Capitana, who raised an army; La Corregidora, who supported la independencia de México; Dofia Chipita Rodriguez, who was the only woman hanged in Texas; las soldaderas who fought la revolución; and Ernma Tenayuca, who prompted pecan-shellers to strike in San Antonio (16, 27).

Historically, the attainment of an education has been denied to some Chicanas. Many of my Chicano students are curious as to why their grandparents or even parents were not allowed to speak Spanish in school. I illustrate with Tafolla's explanation of the "No Spanish' school mandate throughout the Southwest during the 20th century, of which many students are unfamiliar. Her words reveal her despair:

'Americanization' by eradication of home language and culture was the principle behind many student regulations and punishments regarding use of the Spanish language. . . . Between 1917 and 1969, any child caught speaking a 'foreign' language on school grounds in Texas was transgressing state law. (63)

I also share this portion of Tafolla's poem and when I dream dreams" which reflects on her personal experience,

(You'll never get to high school speakin' Spanish," I was told) (nice of them, they thought to not report me, breakin'
Finally, students begin to understand their own parents, their universe, for previously they did not know that for their parents there was no choice not to speak Spanish in school. Chicano students begin to question themselves, ‘Why don’t I speak Spanish now? Why didn’t my parents teach me?’ They wonder, ‘was it because they did not want me to ‘suffer’ as they did?’

In 1965, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act attempted to resolve this language issue. Tafolla insists that education is still the answer “to correct present injustices” (70). She affirms that knowledge and skills are the tools that will allow a Chicana "to be able to bring herself, her ethnic group, and her nation to a situation of health and fairness."

Tafolla concludes To Split a Human with a strong recommendation about human liberation: Chicanas must attain self respect and “realize that achievement of our personal goals is not synonymous with depriving others of their rights” (109). We need not feel guilty by achieving our goals at the expense of our families or, for that matter, anyone else. Students in my classes feel guilty about furthering their education at the expense of other priorities in their lives; however, they also realize that an education is the key to future success, and they must live through current hardships and sacrifices to attain an education.

After this brief review of Tafolla’s book, I encourage Chicana students in my basic writing classes to read several of Sandra Cisneros’ stories, to examine the characters, and to write a short essay. I selected Cisneros because her writings and personal life echo Tafolla’s ideas and because “Cisneros surveys the woman’s condition -- a condition that is both precisely Latina as well as general to women everywhere” (Prescott and Springsen, 60). I hoped that by doing this assignment, my students would begin, as Freire suggests, to explore their universe and connect their own experiences with Tafolla’s reasoning and Cisneros’ stories. And indeed they did. Two women in class, Gracie Gonzales and Rose Lopez, particularly identify with the Chicanas in Cisneros’ narratives “Boys and Girls” and “Only daughter,” and their personal interpretations reflect Tafolla’s description of the split in the humanity circle.

Gracie writes in her essay “Growing Up with a Shadow” that “Cisneros’ story “Boys and Girls” must have been plucked from my own memories.” She describes the story as being “so familiar and similar to my own life and I feel a connection with this story.”

First, Gracie derives similarities between “Boys and Girls” and Tafolla's To Split a Human. She notes Cisneros’ title parallels Tafolla’s notion of society splitting genders. Gracie contends that Cisneros, a “Hispanic literary author[,] describes how boys and girls live in separate worlds.” Gracie's explains that in her own “universe” her mother observes traditional Chicano cultural mores Gracie’s always had her younger sister as a chaperone, while her brothers had no chaperones. Gracie explains that her mother explained “[t]hey did not need chaperones, ‘because they are boys and you and your sister are girls.”

In “Boys and Girls,” Gracie finds “how a girl in the story feels about having the responsibility of a little sister,” and how the girl compares the two brothers’ relationship to each other to “the almost forced relationship” of the girl and her younger sister. [In Cisneros’ “Boys and Girls”] the girl says, “Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friends. . . . Nenny is too young to be my friend. She is just my sister. . . .” In contrast to the sibling relationships described in the story, Gracie has formed a special bond with her own younger sister. Even though her younger sister appeared as “the anchor tied to me” early in her childhood, Gracie realizes their intimate closeness later in life. Her younger sister has become the only one Gracie can tell “secrets to, hang around with, be myself with, laugh and cry with.” Gracie admits that this assignment helped her discover that she has been “a most unsuspecting role model” all of her life.

Rose, on the other hand, responds to Cisneros “Only daughter” and confirms that “the roles of males and females from Mexican Americans have structured the Hispanic heritage.” Again, the split. Cisneros writes in one of her 'wicked’ poems, “An unlucky fate is mine/to be born woman in a family of men” (Sagel 74). The only daughter of seven children to a Mexican father and a Chicana mother, Cisneros signifies her “unlucky fate” by not capitalizing the second word in the title “Only daughter.” Like Cisneros, Rose acknowledges being an only daughter in a family where
second word in the title "Only daughter." Like Cisneros, Rose acknowledges being an only daughter in a family where fathers differentiate their expectations for their sons and daughters. Rose writes that "Cisneros' father raised six sons to achieve a college degree and Cisneros, his only daughter, to marry well (Lopez 1). Similarly, Rose's father "feels that women should not succeed like men in society [and] believes [she] should become an accountant or secretary. Fortunately for Cisneros, going to college, even if it was to find a husband, "meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English" ("Sandra Cisneros" 100). Rose's father thinks this way as well. Rose is an art major, and her "father does not believe that art can become a career."

Just as Tafolla articulates the idea that Chicanas have a choice of expanding, growing, and blossoming into full human beings, Cisneros, Gracie, and Rose embrace that concept. But development in any fashion is difficult and carries sacrifices. The first step is to clarify 'Who am I?' ¿Quién soy?' Even for Cisneros, this was a challenge.

Imagining Cisneros doubting herself empowers students who have their own doubts. At one point in her career, Cisneros was embarrassed with her life (Sagel 75) According to Telgen and Kamp, "[f]ocusing on her early poverty made her doubt herself. What did I, Sandra Cisneros, know? What could I know? Who was Sandra Cisneros compared to [those] children of privilege from the finest schools in the country?" (100). Thank goodness, her self-doubt did not discourage her; instead, it determined who she was. The revelation that she was truly distinct led her to her acquisition of her writing voice. She remarks,

I knew I was a Mexican woman, but I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, my class! That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about. (Sagel 75)

Gracie and Rose are empowering themselves by discovering and voicing their places within the realm of the humanity circle. Through the assignment both have authenticated a segment of their identity. In their essays, both sanction their culture and traditional upbringing and call themselves Hispanic. Gracie has realized that she is a "big sister, college student, step-mother of three, wife, [and] daughter." She aspires to be an elementary teacher. Rose is determined to become an artist, and knows and that she will always remain as her father's only daughter.

Cisneros and my students pursued an education, taking the essential steps to evolve into full human beings. At Loyola University Cisneros found her profession: writing (Telgen and Kamp 100). Enrolling in the poetry section of the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop "the House on Mango Street was born and [she] discovered what she terms her 'first love,' a fascination with speech and voices" (Sagel 75). As Gracie and Rose proceed, they will need self directed strength, much as Cisneros did, to continue. Only then can their education nourishes and promotes their development into educated accomplished women.

Gracie and Rose are fortunate. Since I, too, am still evolving as an effective instructor, I am proud that I took the opportunity to introduce them to Cisneros and Tafolla in an effort to connect them with their universe. Because of their assignment, my students focused on themselves while learning about two dedicated Chicana authors. Undertaking their writing professions so ardently, Cisneros and Tafolla are our role models. To us, Cisneros has become a "representative of [our] ethnic group, [and] Cisneros does not mind the label" ("Sandra Cisneros" 101). She "do[esn't feel any sense of self consciousness about [her] role as a spokesperson in [her] writing," instead, she views it as a responsibility, an honor and a blessing. And Tafolla writes "because [she] want[s] others to ask questions and to see the insides of other people's lives ... [and] thinks art ... brings us closer together and closer to the meaning of our lives" (Acosta 256).

Works Cited


Carmen Tafolla was born in 1951 in San Antonio, Texas, and received a bachelor of arts degree in Spanish and French and a master of arts degree in education from Austin College in Sherman, Texas. By 1981, she had received a doctorate in bilingual education from the University of Texas at Austin (“Carmen Tafolla” 395). She is an educator, a poet, and a writer.

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