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ABSTRACT

Cultural studies courses offered to undergraduate students of foreign languages tend to rely on canonical works that avoid sociopolitical perspectives and present the culture of the "Other" within the dominant world view. There is an urgent need to move from these traditional curricula to more engaging programs that capture the challenging postmodern articulations between language, culture, and social narratives. However, some initial student resistance to the change is to be expected. The author reflects on the experience of teaching one class of Latin American cultural studies to a group of White, middle-class undergraduates who were upper-level Spanish majors. A cultural literacy pedagogy was used to stimulate a critical reflection on the crossing of cultures. As background to a discussion of U.S. interference in Chilean politics in the 1970s, students examined and interpreted Disney cartoons published in Chile at that time. The cartoons focused on initial encounters between Indigenous people and foreigners in a Third World scenario, characters' willingness to abandon idealism in exchange for pleasure or material goods, or the role of fun in education. Many students refused to see the hidden subtexts behind the cartoons' "innocent happy characters" or to recognize that Disney cartoons served as indoctrination in the American world view and advanced U.S. political and economic interests. Students' reactions are analyzed in terms of their prior educational experiences. (SV)

A REAL CHALLENGE: TEACHING LATINO CULTURE TO WHITE STUDENTS

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A Real Challenge: Teaching Latino Culture to White Students

I would like to begin this presentation by pointing out that foreign language education, at the undergraduate level, tends to view language as a neutral medium that passes freely into a speaker's psyche. As a result, language instruction has been predicated on the ideal native speaker by emphasizing the acquisition of five skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture. When culture is introduced within this framework, teachers or native speakers often present facts that may be accepted or disregarded by students without further interrogation. As a result of this approach, students have failed to understand that language learning is a semiotic process that entails understanding repertoires beyond grammar and vocabulary to include the critical agency of values, assumptions, and symbolic messages not often articulated through words. On the other hand, when students reach a higher level of proficiency, curricula in undergraduate programs tend to emphasize literature over other sociocultural discourses. Literature, in this context, is often stripped of its sociopolitical dimensions while canonical works tend to be privileged. Though departments

are beginning to broaden their horizons by expanding their offerings, the backbone of the curricula is still canonical in many institutions, and culture courses are adapted to meet this approach. Culture courses are not only marginal because of limited offerings, one or two at best, but also because they often present the culture of the 'Other' within strong ideological constructs that exclude "'different grammars and different syntactical and semantic representations that are conditioned and explicated by people in varying positions relative to forces of production.'" (Freire, 1987). For example, when dealing with the Spanish Conquest of Inca territories the majority of Latin American culture courses tend to read the phenomenon through Spanish chronicles, thus excluding from their analysis the important contributions of Guaman Poma de Ayala, for example. Guaman was an indigenous Andean who, in the early 1600s, desperately attempted a dialogue with King Philip III by writing eight hundred pages in a hybrid of Quechua and Spanish, and four hundred pages of captioned lines, denouncing the genocide of his people. Though some of the Spanish chronicles sympathized with the indigenous struggle they all aimed at engaging European voices in the discussion. Guaman,

on the contrary, produced a text that deliberately aimed at engaging Western and Non-Western readers.

Traditionally, undergraduate literature programs have focused on the internal structure of a piece of work; therefore literature has been the indisputable object of inquiry. As Russell A. Berman has pointed out, "'One can only agree with the objection that literature itself is a vehicle with which to teach about culture. But it is not the sole vehicle, nor is it necessarily the best,'" (Berman, 1997). As I see it, the meaning of a cultural object is not intrinsic to it. Meaning is not in the text but in the active product of a text's social articulation. "'What matters is not the intrinsic or historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in cultural relations.'"(Hall, 1981) Though I am far from advocating the dismantling of literature programs, I believe that there is an urgent need to move from traditional undergraduate curricula to more engaging programs thereby capturing the challenging (post) modern articulations between language, culture, and social narratives. We need to be prepared, however, to face some initial resistance from students not used to these approaches.

Building on these ideas, I will reflect on an experience I had teaching one class of Cultural Studies to a group of white,

middle-class, undergraduates enrolled in a traditional literature program at a small, Liberal Arts College. Students in the group were Spanish Majors, mainly juniors and seniors, taking a Spanish American Theatre course. I was invited by their regular instructor to provide some cultural background to the work of Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean playwright. Students had studied one of his plays: *Death and the Maiden*, a dramatic thriller centered on the relationship between a victim and her former torturer in a post-dictatorial Latin American country. I was initially attracted to this challenge because Dorfman's production has been vital to the construction of my own identity, intellectual and political, and because I was eager to explore its reception by these students. Given that pedagogy refers to "the production of and complex relationships among knowledge, texts, and desire"(Giroux, 1994) I used a cultural literacy pedagogy to motivate students to get involved in a critical reflection on the crossing of cultures. My aim was, first, to engage students in approaching the voices of others, such as Dorfman's voice plus other narratives from Chile and the United States and, second, to stimulate a critique of students' responses.

I began my class by giving a brief background of the sociopolitical structure of Chile at the end of the 1960s. I was hoping to provide a framework for a video I wanted students to watch. I felt that screening a film would be helpful as students tend to get more engaged with visual input than they do with the written word. The video was important because it addressed several issues I wanted to discuss. For instance, it showed the American intervention in Chile as well as the United States' effort to fight communism. At the same time that the video gave voice to the poor in their struggle for survival, it also gave voice to the rich who engaged in resisting that struggle to legitimate their own power. In addition, victims of torture narrated experiences that were very close to those of the protagonist of the play that the students had read. After the video clip was over, I asked straightforward questions about the viewing. Though all the students succeeded linguistically and cognitively in producing responses, I noticed that a small group was culturally disengaged with the material. Several scenes, that myself and most of the students had considered provocative and defining to *Death and the Maiden*, seemed uninteresting to that group. Why were those students resisting? Was the visual input too alien to stimulate a

dialogue? Perhaps, when confronting the material, some of the students felt as disempowered as new immigrants feel when viewing a television program in a new country. As a Latin American, I was surprised and a bit disappointed that only one student expressed outrage about the issue of the American intervention in Chile detailed in the video. I could have explored those circumstances further, but I had other plans for the group and time constraints did not allow me to continue in that direction.

As a teacher, I felt it was important for participants to recognize that violence, the repressive form of domination addressed by the play, is not always expressed as explicitly as in the contexts they had analyzed. What I had in mind was to explore students' reactions to less obvious instances of violence. I had reasons for choosing this option. First, I wanted to see if I could move away from some of the constraints I had faced in the past. In my experience, when students were confronted with issues of explicit violence in Latin America some tended to feel pity, while others expressed fear of situations they perceived as impossible to overcome. Their arguments often ended by claiming that they were fortunate to live in a country where those horrible situations never occurred. When I look back at those pedagogical encounters, I see

my own limitations in the cross-cultural space. Perhaps, I could have enhanced students' understanding of violence by exploring with them how issues of memory, identity, and writing may become powerful strategies of resistance in Latin America. In the new context, however, I was eager to look into what I considered were violent examples of American culture different from *Death and the Maiden*. I aimed at enhancing the students' reading of violence by examining the supposedly 'innocent' images of Donald Duck studied by Dorfman himself in the early seventies. I wanted students to understand how images of mass-produced culture offer "subordinated people a dominant sense of subordination, that is, a sense that serves the interest of the dominant."(Fiske, 1989). I believe that resources such as television, songs, clothes, video games, comics, and language, overly speak to the interests of the economically dominant. As a result, industrially produced media have become one of the primary shapers of our desires in the twentieth century. We are not only taught about fashions and lifestyles, but we are also taught how to have fun, and how to conform and/or dominate. Dorfman, on the other hand, also believed that the American intervention of Chile in the early seventies had to be interpreted beyond political

influences, military decisions, or economic resources. Cultural expressions, he argued, were also in foreign hands as the majority of Chilean people were massively subservient to films, soap operas, comics, advertisements, and other TV products manufactured in the United States. Many Chilean citizens, however, did not agree with this position as they dreamed their lives with easily digested stories that, instead of compelling them to question their society, rather tended to demand their acceptance of it. For Dorfman, foreign narratives usually ridiculed solidarity, penalized rebellion and reduced social conflicts to easily resolved psychological dilemmas. As a result, consumers were easily seduced and willingly invaded by stories that covertly indoctrinated them to consume more without realizing what was being done to them.

With that theoretical framework in mind, I brought to my students several Disney cartoons published in the Chile of the early 1970s. The first two strips addressed the same topic: a welcoming encounter between natives and foreigners in a Third World scenario. The remaining two, however, focused their attention on the American context. In the first sample, Aztecs appeared to be celebrating Christmas as they cheerfully stocked the ducks' ship

with 'yellow material', an act of giving they promised to repeat the following season. Initially, I decided to refrain myself from asking questions in order to see where the analysis would lead. Without exception, students viewed the ducks as the Spanish conquistadors who emptied the Latin American continent from its natural resources. Their responses, however, were produced in a matter-of-fact tone as most of the participants noticed, and enjoyed looking at, the expression of happiness in the Aztecs' faces. Students concurred that the point of the strip was to confirm Disney's message, that is, to celebrate entertainment by cheating the Aztecs in the process. One of the students, however, interpreted the cartoon in a different way. She saw the Aztecs as victorious in the story because, in her opinion, they had surprised the Spaniards with their wealth, an important symbol that she associated with progress and development.

At that point I realized other questions were needed to enhance their analysis. I asked participants if the 'conquerors' in the strip could be interpreted differently. Though they initially doubted, they substituted their first reading with a selection of European conquistadors. Suddenly, I found myself struggling against my students' resistance. I did not want to obscure the

relational nature of how meaning is produced, that is, by the gradual interaction between subjects, objects, and social practices within specific relations of power. Students, however, resisted a reading that went beyond the intrinsic meaning of the text as they refused to see behind the 'innocent happy characters' a hidden agenda of a multinational corporation that aimed at reproducing American worldviews. As we continued the dialogue, I insisted on guiding, or perhaps forcing students, into their discovery of American assumptions concealed in the story. Inquiries led them to see the historical errors manufactured by the cartoons, such as showing pre-Columbian cultures not only celebrating Christmas but also adopting the American custom of gift giving. At that point, I could sense the huge gap that existed between my world's view and that of my students'. As I dissected the cartoon, I became more fascinated with its subtextual messages. Some students, however, though they seemed to be gaining a cognitive understanding of the material were not impressed by the findings. Perhaps, some of them were disappointed with me for dispelling the 'innocence' in Disney.

Next I moved to analyze the second example, which also presented an indigenous man welcoming Donald Duck with a "My

home is yours". Donald, on the other hand, sarcastically responded to the invitation by adding, "You wish it were. All this belongs to Uncle Scrooge." The final scene of that strip showed Donald privately celebrating the financial success that the sale of a tonic to the natives had afforded him, as another native childishly cheered the arrival of the drink by uttering in broken Spanish his desire to buy all that merchandise. It was evident to my students that these characters came from no other world but Disney's. However, they continued to perceive the ducks as children engaged in an innocent business enterprise. They admitted the invasive presence of Uncle Scrooge's power in that faraway land, but their interpretation did not move outside the story line. That is, they found Donald Duck's response to be mischievous and perhaps arrogant, but they did not detect the scene of colonial power. When we explored the construction of indigenous people in the two examples, participants began to understand the differences between the representation of the ducks and that of their Third World counterparts. The first group was portrayed as intelligent, confident, and successful, while the second was naïve, submissive, and easy to deceive. In other words, in those two contexts

indigenous people appeared as noble savages without an opportunity for historical agency.

As mentioned before, the remaining two cartoons were located in an American context so students quickly analyzed the content of that narrative without much difficulty. Participants arrived at the conclusion that political ideals can be easily overthrown by life's temptations when they interpreted the first cartoon, of this second group, divided in two scenes: the first scene showed a crowd demonstrating for peace as Donald Duck sold delicious fresh lemonade on the side. In the next scene the same demonstrators seemed to be throwing away their banners and giving up their ideological struggle in exchange for the refreshing drink. Students found the cartoon very funny. At this point I would like to observe that for some students 'entertainment' is understood as light reading completely divorced from any form of systematic analysis of the sociocultural space. Also, when students reflect upon their educational experiences they tend to consider 'entertainment' an important component in a course. Since my arrival in this country, I have noticed that learners tend to evaluate their pedagogical encounters often within this view. For example, when writing their course evaluations some students narrow their

analysis to the ability of the instructor to entertain and make students laugh. Given this, I selected the last cartoon because it addressed the topic of 'entertainment' in an educational space. I wanted to see if my assumptions were also true for this particular group of students. The cartoon was preceded by a brief narrative which indicated that the reason why the young ducks loved school was because it was fun. Following that introduction, a female teacher appeared in the strip actively engaging her students in a game of free trade. Ducks in the narrative cheerfully became real estate brokers trading international territories without any restrictions. In their responses to these materials students pointed out that the ducks' educational project promoted capitalism. At the same time they confirmed with their observations their support for similar educational spaces that emphasized fun and games. In my view, however, when educational projects privilege only action and light entertainment they fail to provide participants with opportunities for careful thinking.

When I reflect upon the reception of these cartoons by the group, several ideas come to my mind. On the one hand, I see that the students' resistance to position the cartoon within a space of social articulation is the product of their educational experience.

As I discussed at the beginning, participants in the group had been exposed to a curriculum that emphasized the intrinsic analysis of literary texts. As a result, their class experiences often tended to treat characters in stories within the framework of individual psychologies. With that consideration in mind, it was not surprising that many participants privileged understanding these characters exclusively in their individuality, while I insisted on exploring them as derived from social relations that include multinational companies committed to massive commercialization of its products beyond borders and languages. Perhaps, for the same reason, the group rarely saw the conquistadors and the Aztecs as historically and socially constructed. By insisting on viewing Disney as a source of entertainment, they could not help being amused by natives portrayed as ahistorical children who never grew up, or by conquistadors who, without any understanding or respect for cultural differences, engaged in a civilizing project that did not go beyond a business deal. At the same time, our differences in understanding the world of Disney led us to different readings of childhood. When I noticed cruelty in the attitude of visitors to the Third World, students disagreed with me. They viewed the visitors as children acting out typical

behavior for their age. That is, their interpretations continued to privilege the internal structure of the story, while my interpretation saw it differently. If children are supposed to love and trust other people, these characters, which are part of the world of children, did not address other children's needs. In my view, they conformed to certain adult expectations more interested in patronizing, cheating, and repressing those from below than in developing children's imagination, creativity, and capacity for love.

It was evident from the experience that some students wanted to cling to their universal dreams of innocence, beauty, and purity as much as children and their parents did in the Chile of the 1970s when they demonstrated against Dorfman because he dared criticize Disney's cartoons. Only a few of my students shared with me the pleasure of discovering the underlying ideological mechanisms in these mass media products. In spite of our differences, all but one student found the pedagogical experience 'entertaining.' As I left the room one female student told the regular instructor that she had totally disliked the class, for she could not see any connection between the course content and the use of cartoons. Though her instructor thought that the student had missed the point, I believe she provided a telling assessment of her

educational experience. Her classes in that institution had emphasized the study of canonical works completely decontextualized from social relations. Undoubtedly, that student experienced discomfort at having to deal with a less prestigious form of culture on an equal footing with canonical literature.

The two most important lessons I learned from that encounter were, first, that obviously my students and I position ourselves in relation to reality in very different ways and, second, that I need to better understand their imaginary if I want to insist on the incorporation of cultural studies to their Spanish curricula. We come from different worlds. I am the product of an experience where community practices and ideals often clashed with the world order as constructed by multinational media. As a result, I could not react passively to the 'happy' encounter between Disney and the Latin American 'Other'. Personal experiences, from the sixties and seventies, have taught me to resist what I consider cultural indoctrination. Also, during that time we did not rely on the presence of television to construct our myths: oral and written narratives operated as sources of meaning and *jouissance* in the search for a national identity. In discontinued forms, young people in South America began to construct their subjectivity by

expressing themselves in the public space more actively. They incorporated words, gestures, customs, and actions that had no relation to dominant discourses. The deconstruction of mass media artifacts and the production of alternative cultural forms were carried out in an effort to redefine the discursive parameters of what was understood by citizens as a shared national culture. Some young people resisted what they considered a violent and normalizing educational system that repressed alternative voices, taught one version of history, and ignored the culture, interests, and language of the majority.

The world in the nineties, however, has become a more complicated scenario. Neo-liberal economic policies are affecting the cultural spectrum at large leaving cultural productions to the dictates of a "free" trade economy. Since students in the group have been raised under these sociopolitical assumptions, they failed to share with me the idea that multinational media products offer consumers hegemonical versions that tend to erase memory and history from local scenarios around the world. Though our encounter was brief, it was revealing. Something meaningful was at stake in that scene of discourse production. It was the confrontation between two competing definitions of identity: my

own that struggled to privilege collective identities and regional agendas, and my students' identity constructed around fragments of media consumption. In the struggle, I have had to accept that political referents have been redefined, and that notions of collective identities have been replaced by the new narratives of a postmodern global market. At the same time, I have learned that I need to be able to work within that framework to restore in some measure an interest for the public space, regional agendas and plurality in a postcolonial environment.

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