

Fueled with the proximity to Mexico and influx of recent immigrants, South Texas provides the opportunity to forge a life and living while speaking only Spanish. My 77 year old, American-born-Mexican-educated father never felt the need to learn English despite living and thriving in the U.S. for at least 62 years. For this reason, I spoke Spanish first and learned English at the age of four when I started school. Because I learned to read and write Spanish at the same time as I learned to read and write English, I absorbed the grammar in both languages simultaneously, which created a morphed syntax in my speech and writing—an ambilingualism and franken-grammar. In the fifth grade, I was accepted into the gifted and talented program, and I left the security of my mostly Mexican-American school for the non-Mexican-American school in the nice part of town. I changed from an extroverted, eager-to-show-off-in-class student to a student that was reluctant to speak up. I stopped asking my teachers questions, opting to figure things out for myself. My parents stopped going to open houses or any other school events because my teachers no longer spoke Spanish. Suddenly, I was left to fend for myself in this new environment. I began living a dual existence. I spoke only English at school and enjoyed studying an all-American curriculum, but at home I spoke only Spanish and lived in a one hundred percent Mexican culture. Rarely, if ever, did my two worlds collide. Compared to my classmates and teachers, I deemed myself atypical, but instead of exploring my uniqueness or trying to use it to my advantage, I tried to mask it and desire to be “white” in my academic skills. As one of the few students who actually did the summer reading, my high school English teachers loved me. I embraced the canon with fervor. But, no matter how universal the message in the writings of Shakespeare and John Steinbeck, I was never an equal participant, nor did I ever engage in a meaningful dialogue with the text. I could only ever be an audience member, admiring from afar. Inside of me, as a young student, I had the makings of a scholar, yet I never knew that it was ever an option because I didn’t know any Mexican-American scholars existed. Fortunately, this changed when I took Bill’s class. The first day of class, he passed out copies of the first two chapters of *The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales and had us add reader response comments to the margins. Set in my hometown, *The Tequila Worm* reflected my culture. The Mexican American, Harvard graduate, who grew up where I grew up, had won national awards for her writing. My mind was reeling! I finished reading the book rather quickly and called my parents to tell them all about it. I bought three extra copies and mailed them to my friends, insisting they read it. And, this strategic move by Bill to engage his students from the start opened up a floodgate for me. Not only did I look forward to every single class and put my heart and soul into every assignment, but I started to explore outside the classroom for more Mexican-American literature. The first author I found was Gloria Anzaldua, a UTPA graduate, and after reading her book *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, I felt anger towards my parents, my teachers and anyone who had any part in my upbringing. No one told me that two worlds converged in me, creating a border existence. My formal education had been in English and my informal (home) education had been in Spanish. I couldn’t merge the two into an acceptable self. I constantly had to choose between the two and always felt inadequate, guilty and incomplete. Anzaldúa says, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white...I will overcome the tradition of silence (81).” I judged the way I spoke and wrote as unnatural, but my speech and writing was a product of my borderland. This realization allowed me to fully express myself, and value myself enough to eventually write. I wanted to know more about this Chicanismo that could free my tongue (and pen to write). I found Jose Antonio Burciaga’s *Drink Cultura*, which further encouraged me to pursue my voice. Burciaga says, “Our bilingual, bicultural, binational experience is a form of schizophrenia, rich and poor, sun and shadow, between realism and surrealism... These cultures cross each other not to assimilate one another but to ‘transculturates’ (Burciaga 66).” Others like me existed and that empowered me. Bill had no idea the impact his class had on my life. Having an academic discussion about *The Tequila Worm*, a Mexican-American text, with my peers and then writing a scholarly essay independently about the text, triggered an awareness in me that became integral to my success. This awareness is that someone like me, a Mexican-American female, can be a scholar, can be a writer, has something important to say, and has something to say that others want to hear. Why did I lack this awareness before? The books I read and was taught at school weren’t about me or anyone like me culturally, socio-economically, or physically. This changed when I examined Canales, Anzaldua’s, and Burciaga’s Mexican-American texts through a scholarly lens. Now that culturally relevant texts had empowered me, I realized that I too had stories inside me that others might like to read. During my first two years of teaching high school English, I completed an MFA in creative writing. For my thesis, I wrote a collection of short stories that later became published. I made my students participants in this process. I named some of my characters after them, and I imitated some of their speech patterns for some of the dialogue. They even chose the cover. Shortly after its release, Bill included my book as one of the required texts in an Intro to Literature course at The University of Texas Pan American. And guess what? Students were having scholarly conversations about my writing. Students were writing essays about my book. I received emails from students saying, “What I found after reading your book, *Combustible Sinners*, was that it gave me a sense of pride in being a Hispanic, even more than before.” And, “I must say I loved the Mexican American language, ‘Tex-Mex’; it made me smile a couple times because it sounded like conversations that I had heard before from friends and family. It felt personal like I could relate to the language...This book really is like real life, it shows the struggles that many people face, especially here in the Valley.” Today, as a PhD student in literacy education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, I strive to promote the use of culturally relevant texts in the classroom. And, all of this started because I read *The Tequila Worm* in Bill’s class. Every new group of students I teach has the same reaction, “I never knew these books existed. I never knew that individuals from my cultural group wrote books. This is the first book I’ve enjoyed reading.” Students need to see academic examples of their culture. Otherwise they’ll feel alienated in their school life.

I Try to Write Myself