

MYTH AND MISGUIDED FAITH? WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN A LITERACY PROGRAM

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Abstract

This article portrays the contextualized experiences of five women of Mexican American heritage within a literacy program. In-depth interviewing and shadowing within an ethnographic, feminist perspective were used to collect their stories. From inductive analysis of these data a structure of myth framework emerged, which was then used to examine the women's stories of their ill/literacy journey, the terrains of magical consciousness, and naive consciousness toward possible critical consciousness (praxis).

Résumé

Cet article décrit les expériences contextuelles de cinq femmes d'origine mexicano-américaine impliquées dans un programme d'alphabétisation. Des entrevues structurées et des données ethnographiques vues sous un angle féministe furent utilisées pour constituer leur profil. Une analyse inductive de ces données a mené à la facture d'un cadre de référence qui fut ensuite utilisé pour examiner les profils de l'alphabétisation de ces femmes dans leur cheminement vers un nouvel épanouissement et un monde de découvertes et de pratiques.

In the late stages of my doctoral work, guided by Rudolfo Chávez Chávez, I found myself involved in the development of curriculum for an adult literacy program. The participants enrolled in the literacy program were women predominantly of Mexican American heritage. These women exhibited many of the characteristics from the dominant paradigm of an adult literacy student (i.e., high school dropouts, low socio-economic status, single with children, etc.). As I interacted with the participants blatant oddities took form. This paper is an inquiry into understanding the complexity of five

women's lives and the sophistication of their lived experiences as adult literacy students. A central component of this study is the delving into the polyrhythmic everydays and struggles of these five unique women—Rachel, Julia, Sara, Emma, and Sylvia—women who were struggling to understand themselves as they taught me to understand the role that myth plays in the everyday of one's life.

The Women

The descriptions that follow give a sense of the women's cultural and socio-economic locations. Although their anonymity has been protected in this article, the integrity of these women's personal stories has been carefully kept.

Rachel, a woman of 28 years, was born and raised in a border city of the American Southwest. She is the youngest of four girls. Although a self-described "good *chola*," she dropped out of high school and is currently a single mother with a young son she affectionately calls "Knucklehead."

Julia, a 43 year old mother of three children and grandmother of two, is a native of the American Northwest, where she spent half her childhood with her three sisters and one brother prior to relocating in the border area of the American Southwest. She is also a high school dropout, making the immediate transition to a border factory (a *maquiladora*) reminiscent of the factory-type schooling environment she left.

Sara, a woman of 34 years, was born and raised in a border city of the American Southwest. As an identical twin, she was rarely viewed as an individual throughout her schooling experience. She is a divorced mother of three girls and strives to gain the respect of her girls. Although funneled through the special education track in school, she received a high school diploma.

Emma, a woman of 34 years, was born and raised in an environment similar to Sara's. She also experienced the special education track in school, leaving her to ponder how or why she received a high school diploma. Emma was the middle child of six girls and one boy. Currently she is raising one daughter and one son on her own.

Sylvia, the eldest of the woman at 50, is a native of the American Southwest. Tellingly, Sylvia was "pushed" out of the educational setting (i.e., dropped out) to survive economically, and now she is "pushed into" an educational setting in order to survive (i.e., food stamps). She is the mother of one daughter and the grandmother of one grandson.

The Research Context

The research design and procedures I used to investigate the experiences of the women were collected within a mini-ethnographic framework. Ethnographic research is focused on notions of culture (Patton, 1990). This study focused on the ethnographic style of basic dialogue and interpretation, with a select number of participants from a target culture, which allowed for the generation of a continuous data base from a cross-cultural perspective (see Trueba & Wright, 1992).

I used two methods for collecting data: (a) in-depth interviewing and (b) the observational process of shadowing. This design gave the participants the authority to represent themselves (Johannsen, 1992). These ethnographic methods have proven more effective and informative in a multicultural environment than quantitative measures (see Guba & Lincoln 1981; Green & Wallat, 1981).

Data Collection

In-depth phenomenological interviewing enabled the participants to reconstruct and to reflect on the personal and social context of their stories as well as to contextualize their voices in their daily experiences (see Seidman, 1991). The data collected within the framework of in-depth phenomenological interviewing is that of "story." Carter (1993) examines the notion of story as a legitimate form for research as praxis. Her discussion examines the stories of teachers and discusses the concept of a story as a theory of something dependent on what is told and how it is told, based on what one believes. Thus, stories, as qualitative research, exist within a social context and become insignificant if decontextualized.

Feminist pedagogies support the emphasis of in-depth interviewing in research that attempts to raise the consciousness levels of society by exploring ideologies grounded in the experiences of women (Snow, 1989). The threading of the levels of consciousness, feminist theory, and women's ways of knowing reflect a directionality that can be embodied in the *telling* of one's story. Through the practice of in-depth interviewing and shadowing, each participant was provided the opportunity to respond concretely, reflect internally, and examine externally social phenomena as it has effected her life (see Sullivan, 1992).

The in-depth interviewing involved each participant and me in a series of three separate 90-minute interviews, each 3 to 7 days apart. The interviews were thematically focused by the following three questions: (a)

What are the experiences and events that led you to becoming a literacy student? (b) What is it like being a literacy student? (c) What does being a literacy student mean to you?

The first interview was the process of allowing the participant to examine and to express her history to date. After initiating the interview with the above first question, I maintained the narrative flow primarily by probing with queries based on the direction the participant took as she told her story. The intent of the second interview was to have the participant reconstruct her experiences as a student in an adult literacy program. The final interview was designed as a means of self-reflection and meaning making of one's story. This methodology provided the participant the latitude to explore the experiences that define her world as well as to reflect on the meaning of these experiences. I sought to follow Seidman's advice to be an active listener, to create an equal relationship between the participant and myself, to be a note taker, and to formulate stimulative questions. I was in effect an instrument, guided by my experiences and knowledge bases, as in McCracken's (1988) metaphor.

Each interview for all participants was audiotaped. The transcripts were read, coded, and reread to identify and categorize emergent patterns. These patterns were categorized, collected, and reread to determine themes of interest. They were then marked off in brackets for further analysis.

Shadowing, as a form of participant observation, is the process of spending one day with each participant, shadowing that person in her or his daily routines. Shadowing, as a variant of participant observation, is a direct observation of activities separate from the interviewing. Shadowing is an overt form of collecting data on each participant. This observational data allowed me to further contextualize and, somewhat, begin to understand the lived experiences of the participants beyond their voiced words.

In my observational role as shadower, field-notes of activities observed, what people said, what people did, how they interacted, and the physical setting during each shadowing experience were documented. The participants determined the context of each shadowing experience. The participants were shadowed in their homes, or running about town, and one participant chose to make herself unavailable for shadowing. Repeated attempts were made to arrange an opportunity for shadowing to occur with her, but without fruition.

Field notes collected during the shadowing process were descriptive notes containing actions observed during the day of shadowing with each

participant. I documented factors advocated by Patton (1990): "where the observation took place, who was present, what the physical setting was like, what social interactions occurred, and what activities took place" (p. 239).

Storytelling and Myth

Story, the telling of one's everyday, permits an individual to maintain subjectification. As Carter (1993) elaborates, "story is a mode of knowing that captures in a special fashion the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs" (p. 6). Rosaldo (1993) speaks about Ilongot hunting stories. These hunting stories concentrate on a quality regarded as crucial for the Ilongot's ability to forage—that is, their ability to respond quickly to the unexpected. Rosaldo explains:

Because deer and wild pigs do not appear on demand, hunters say that they must be prepared to spring into action at any moment ... [Ilongot huntsmen] seek out experiences that can be told as stories [for] stories often shape, rather than simply reflect, human conduct. Stories shape action because they embody compelling motives, strong feelings, vague aspirations, clear intentions, or well-defined goals. (p. 129)

In a similar manner, Heilbroner (an economist) speaks to the power of story; Heilbroner mentions that when

theories fail to predict, economists try to explain what actually happened by telling one another stories about the motives or goals of corporate executives in Japan, Zurich, or England. Business [people] and bankers today, ... "like men [and women] of affairs of all ages" guide their decisions by just such stories—even when a workable theory is available. These narratives, once acted out, "make" events and "make" history. They contribute to the reality of their participants. (cited in Rosaldo, p. 129)

As nonconsequential as one's everyday may seem, hooks (1989) affirms women's human right to define collective histories, identify realities, and establish identities. For this reason, a format was established with the women in this study that yields to them an opportunity to become known through the unfolding of their unique stories in the context of their everyday events (see Paley, 1990). Stories compel the tellers to name their world and to illustrate their complexity rather than to be reproduced as a one-dimensional copy of human conduct by someone else.

Anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, and educators alike have examined the notion of myths and their roles in the everyday.

Myth is a diversion from historical and scientific “truth,” which is typically determined by hegemonic power structures in a society (Parenti, 1994). Common myths among women fall into what has become known as the Cinderella syndrome, whereby a woman will find a good man and they will live happily ever after. Another myth, a rather hot issue in the current political arena, is: welfare mothers don’t want to work. The domination of hegemonic myths in relation to gender, ethnicity, class and/or sexual preference influence the everyday. Debunking oppressive, restrictive myths then becomes a spiritual act—“a scholarly attempt to reconstruct an order of initiation that would result in spiritual revelation” (Campbell, 1988, p. 29).

Freire’s (1973) examination of reading the word and the world critiques the continuation of a status quo system through the depositing of myths by hegemonic control structures. He cites several myths of domination:

The myth that the oppressive order is a “free society”; the myth that all men are free to work where they wish, that if they don’t like their boss they can leave him and look for another job; the myth that this order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem; the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur. (p. 135)

My Analysis of a Structure of Myth

The telling of the stories of Rachel, Julia, Sara, Emma, and Sylvia generated a framework I call a *structure of myth*. My structure of myth framework relates to how myths are played out in the lives of the participants of this study. It is the result of inductive analysis of the data, in which a theoretical foundation of critical and feminist theory provided the lens for visual insight into the dialectical nature of the study. A mythical perception of self and social status seemed to emanate from the stories. In his discussion on myth Campbell (1988) describes the desire to codify the mythical as an act of “seeking meaning for life” (p. 5).

An expressed desire that repeated itself among these five women was a tendency to “buy into” the dominant power structure for a believed outcome of economic security via a GED certificate and, eventually, a better job. This repetition allows for what I term *misguided faith*. My structure of myth framework (see Figure 1) illuminates the polyrhythmic realities of these women within a system of arbitrary power. In one of his last books, *Letters to Cristina*, Freire (1996) states “One of the results of arbitrary power is that people internalize fear and allow it to take over, thus policing themselves.

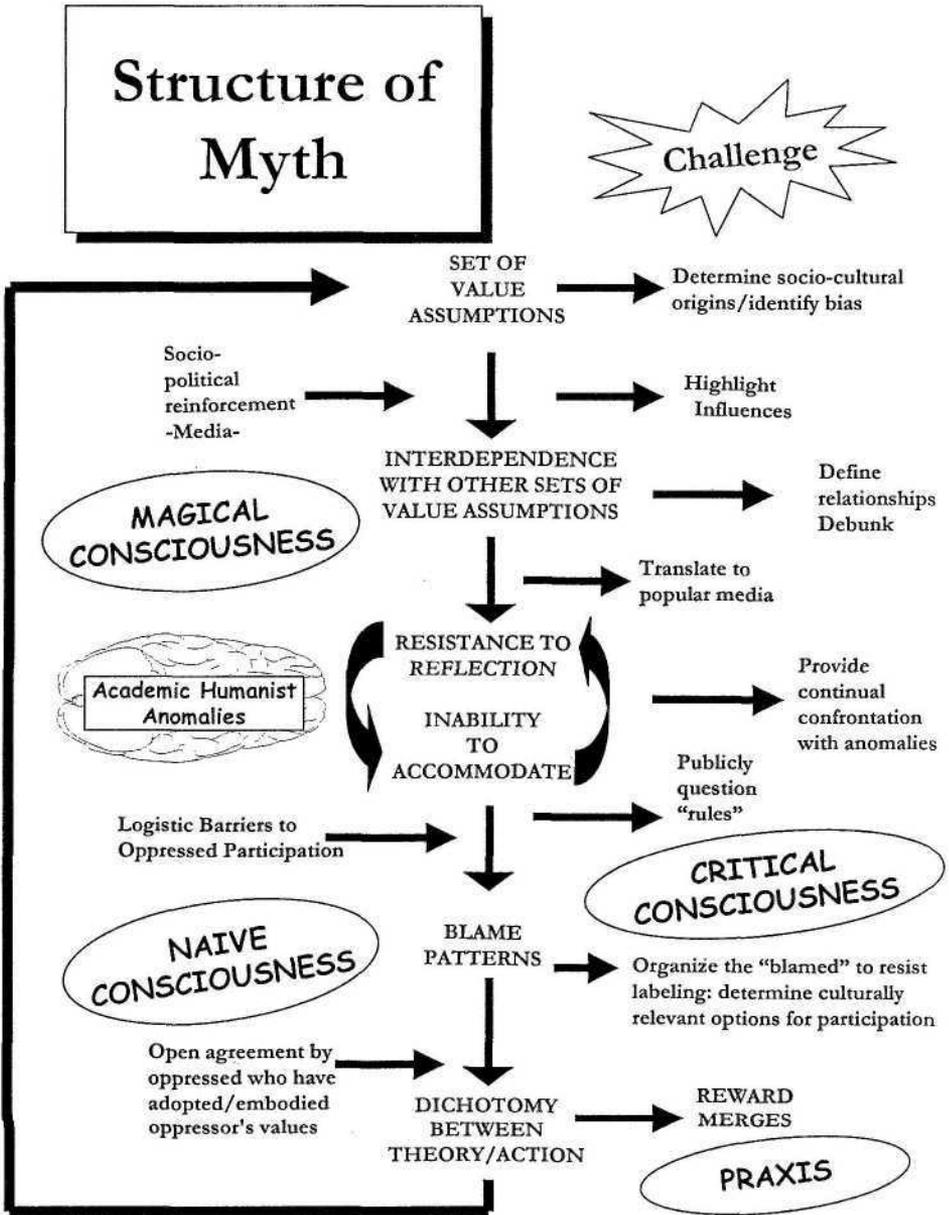


Figure 1. The structure of myth framework that emerged from my inductive analysis of the women's stories.

They begin to control themselves and become dual and ambiguous beings in whom the oppressors live" (p. 8). My framework provides a visual hook to a processual development that is unidirectional and multidimensional. The direction is through the stages of consciousness, from the magical through the naive to the critical (and praxis). The multidimensions include values, assumptions, and challenges that inhibit movement, but which can be used as learning within a literacy program to promote movement.

Telling Their Stories

Stories have the capacity to make events and to make history. The women in this paper name their world through their stories. They display their intellectual richness via their life-stories that embody their motives, strong feelings, vague aspirations, and clear intentions within their goals for socialization, consciousness, and social-communicative literacy.

Socialization

In the auspices of public education, a hidden curriculum saturates the standardized, textbook curriculum (Giroux, 1983, 1990). Embedded within the hidden curriculum is a potential conflict between what is valued in societal everyday—secondary socialization—and what is valued in one's individual everyday—primary socialization (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This can be connected to the "two totally different orders of mythology" (Campbell, 1988, p. 22) that link one to nature and the natural world and link one to a particular society. Similarly, the voices of the participants in this study portray a struggle between what is valued (and validated) in these two realities in the context of the women's everyday lives.

For example, Rachel speaks of the influence on her primary socialization of how her father wished to raise his girls. "I guess he grew up in a different atmosphere than us cause he's from Chihuahua, [Mexico] ... It's like he wanted us to grow up *así*, real good girls ... When he found out I smoked he read me the book [sic]." His desire was to have his girls act according to the primary socialization demands of his culture. Rachel's adept ability at enmeshing her familial and societal socialization left her pondering where she learned the languages she speaks. "I think they always spoke to us in Spanish, I think we just picked [English] up. I don't think none of our parents showed us how to speak in English. I think going to school we just picked it up."

In contrast, Emma expressed a confidence in the values assumed by her primary socialization. "I always thought I was just going to be a mother and, being of Mexican parents, stay home to have babies and take care of them, and I never thought I had a vision in my life." Through this assumption, Emma saw herself following in the footsteps of her female ancestors; therefore, school became an entity of little importance. "It wasn't interesting for me because I didn't have a goal. My goal was to be a mother, have kids, and stay in the kitchen all day ... because I knew I couldn't do anything else. I thought I couldn't do anything else."

The technical instillation of "rules" through secondary socialization becomes a means of power and control of "the other." An attempt to fit into the rules by "the other" is evident in Sylvia's intent to feel proud of herself as a good student. "Like I said, to be a good student, to feel proud of myself I can learn so I can finish my changes, so I can get the diploma. I feel good ... No [I have never felt proud of myself before], but now [that] I come to school."

What can be heard in the voices of Rachel, Emma, and Sylvia is the conflict between what one may value due to influences of primary socialization and that which is valued by secondary socialization. An attempt by the educational system to internalize the values of the dominant society often leaves an individual searching for authenticity in a world where denied. Valuative consensus has evolved into an everyday regularity in school life (Apple, 1990). Without political analysis their dreams are stunted, as Freire (1994) points out: "The new educational pragmatism embraces a technical training without the political analysis, because such analyses would [quickly] upset the smoothness of educational technicism" (p. xii). Rachel, Emma, and Sylvia's secondary socialization are three examples of status quo hegemonic constructs based on Eurocentric myth. Secondary socialization has influenced the unidirectional yet multidimensional journey these women have taken through levels of consciousness as illustrated in the structure of myth.

Consciousness

The influences of socio-political, socio-historical, and socio-cultural forces on role expectations, self, and society facilitate the maintenance of a magical level of consciousness affecting change—or the resistance to change and the inability to accommodate (Smith, 1976). A movement from the magical towards a critical consciousness is the act of challenging boundaries

that have either been marginalized or silenced in the individual. When hooks (1990) speaks of making the margin a standpoint of resistance she stipulates the need to challenge oppressive boundaries: "For many of us, the movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination. Initially, then, it is a defiant political gesture. Moving, we confront the realities of choice and location" (p. 145). This movement towards critical consciousness becomes an act of debunking the perception of self as object of one's reality and redefining oneself within a subjective reality.

The women in this study speak of themselves as "object" and of a struggle for subjectivity. Rachel, for example, shared her experiences in high school, such as the notion of being a good *chola*. The categories of "good *chola*" versus "bad *chola*" objectified Rachel's reality within the dominant society in an acceptable fashion by discrediting her need for membership in a world where she felt denied:

I'm not blaming all on the *chola* group but I guess nobody forced me to be what they were but I could have forced myself to sit down and pay attention and listen and I didn't. So, maybe it was just myself that I didn't want to learn at the time.

Rachel has only recently achieved membership in the dominant "gang" as a student in the literacy program. She speaks affectionately of her ability to fit in with "the others" in an educational environment.

Fitting in takes on many forms. For Sara, desires to be "regular" are central to her notion of self. The prevailing effect of being labeled with a disability in her childhood becomes the point of definition for her current educational goals. "I've always wanted to be like another student, like a regular student. ... I want to see if I can become a regular student." The dominant power by the surveyors of Sara's initial educational boundary has caused her to question the idea that "I think what happened is that I got brain washed about myself. People tell you you're stupid, you're dumb, you don't know anything, [and] you're selfish. I started to believe that about myself."

The concept of boundaries or borders as restrictions to passage from object to subject nurtured a doubt in Sara of her abilities.

I thought that I would never, never learn to read but now, with this program, it's teaching me that I can and that thing in my mind that [says] you cannot read is going away, because this other side of my

mind says you can read, you can read and you can see it in your tutoring ... so it's like taking over and that's what I want.

As Sara develops towards a critical consciousness of her reality that "thing" in her mind is being dismantled. The walled border is coming down.

Sylvia objectifies her cognitive abilities by devaluing them. "Yes, I know, but I didn't get it the first time, I'm sorry. It doesn't go through my head." Her head as an object to get through discredits her mind as a tool to subjectively defining her reality. For all the participants, the process of debunking the status quo objectification by reclaiming part of the humanity that was stolen from them—their minds—is in motion. The subjective remapping of their humanity by all the participants is the externalization of the *I don't know* to the internalization of the *I know*.

Moving through the structure of myth framework becomes cyclical as an individual maneuvers into the dichotomy between theory and praxis. Reading the word and the world as an act of meaning making allows individuals to define their subjectivity in the everyday as the means for which myth can be shattered (Freire, 1970). The histories of the women have been caught up in the cycle within the structure of myth framework through what is popularly known as a cycle of illiteracy (see Freire & Macedo, 1987; Kozol, 1985; Lind, 1990). A cycle of illiteracy, as dominantly defined, can be observed in the formal educational level of the women's parents, which range from zero to 10th grade, *secundaria*. This lack of formal education is often perceived as a lack of reading the *word* when one's ability to read the *world* is evidenced in one's daily survival.

A quiet, yet ravenous desire for transformation emerged as the women's stories unfolded. Anzaldúa (1990) speaks of theory as the mental plan for action and an understanding of the formulated principle of a certain phenomena. The women in this study speak of their mental plans, their theory for change; yet, they struggle with the movement towards it. Anzaldúa argues that such personal theorizing "produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world" (p. xxv). Unfortunately, there is a dichotomy between thought and action: as tantalizing as their reflective theory is, their reflexive action as praxis continues to be unreachable.

In Rachel's story this dichotomy is revealed by her desire to establish independence from her family. Although her familial structure has been a source of strong primary socialization, Rachel desires at the age of 27 to become physically autonomous from them. Her struggle for independence though is enmeshed with her desire for their approval and support:

I said nobody give me the benefit of doing something for my own ... I said, well, I'll just go ahead and take it. I pretended I wasn't [scared] but when I was sleeping I was tossing and turning. I was kind of scared and stuff. So, I went and everything is okay.

In contrast, Emma's push for independence is driven by too many people having a say in her everyday:

I'm tired of people taking care of me, feeling sorry for me. I don't want nobody else to call me a dumb shit and a stupid shit. Because I'm not. I know I am someone. And if I [had] kept on believing that I am a dumb shit and a stupid shit, I wouldn't be here. That's why I'm here to get better, building that hope. I don't know, Susie, I really believe I can see myself being someone.

Determination rings loudly throughout Emma's story, the hope in her voice is evident. Yet, the bridging between thought and action becomes a day-by-day struggle for her.

Sara's internal struggle to assert independence is part of reclaiming her voice. "I couldn't find the words so that was one of the ideas that I got they couldn't understand. I couldn't explain how I felt, so he wouldn't understand how I felt." The ability to get others to understand her is the direction she desires to take to establish legitimization. "I want to do it on my own ... I don't want to depend on anybody else, I want to depend on myself. That's important to me now and I'm finding out that I can now if I really want to."

Inability to express her voice in written form has gone to the extent of causing Julia physical pain: "Sometimes it gets me so mad I even get headaches, trying to write everything down and I can't. I have it up here but when it comes down here, forget it, I can't write it." The yearning to express voice in written form is a matter of pride for Julia. "I would be proud of myself cause I did that by myself. I didn't need nobody's help." A sense of desirable pride in self is also heard in Sylvia's story. She shared her want and need to learn: "I want to learn ... Because I want to be better myself, I want to be more better ... I want to be proud of myself."

Smith (1976) defines the consciousness-raising processes as "largely internal, psychological processes; changes in how individuals perceive their world, or at least the socio-political aspects of their world" (p. 9). Everyday reality as common-sense knowledge is a transmutable entity that allows one to examine the structure of society in an attempt to transform it (Freire, 1970). The women in this study illustrate a desire, a hope for transformation.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a restricting force that immobilizes them and, in turn, keeps them from critically examining the societal structures in which they live. Their movement through the levels of consciousness in my structure of myth framework is being inhibited by some confusion, disorientation, and anxiety; such inhibitors are innate in the process of making problematic situations into the unproblematic.

Social-Communicative Literacy

The women spoke of an expanded notion of literacy as they shared what they valued as participants in their current literacy programs: community membership. The fostering of community membership through a social-communicative literacy, dialectically constructed, is the arena in which the individual's voice is valued and legitimated. For this program the operational definition of literacy was:

Literacy is the individual fluency to critically communicate in one's reality with the goal of synthesizing and integrating information into and from a socio-cultural and socio-historical framework. Literacy is complex and individual as well as a socially constructed phenomenon.

Understanding literacy as a complex phenomenon that is more than an acquisition of specific, disparate skills is expressed by the unique and complex voices of the women in this study. Each of the women spoke of the social-communicative aspects of literacy—as a means for community membership—as one of the more beneficial aspects of their participation in the literacy program. For example, Rachel expressed pleasure at the opportunity to belong:

It's nice having other friends, somebody you can talk to, share your work with and stuff like that. ... Yea, but coming to school we're talking about the same subject, we sit down and talk about so and so and we know who we're talking about. ... I think the people in my group, we're on the same level and I don't feel left out because, what I don't know, they don't know either and what they don't know, I don't know.

Emma likened her membership in the literacy program to a miracle: "It will be a miracle for me to know how to read. I can go to classes and go to school and keep going and if I learn how to read, let me tell you, I won't be doing what I'm doing now." Therefore, literacy becomes the tool for which her miracles will be realized.

Although Sara's experiences in the literacy program were predominantly limited to one-on-one interaction, she did have an opportunity

to belong to a class where she expressed a level of membership. "I like it. ... The students was a lot of them, about 14 ... we were talking, having fun." Sara's membership nurtured a sense of self-love and respect:

I just hated myself and now, finding out that there's other people like me, I don't feel so bad about myself. ... It's a very happy time. It's like getting a new toy, it's that type of thing, kind of. ... That's how I felt and it's a good feeling knowing that you can get the help. It's a very, very good feeling. ... It's like getting a new toy. ... You're getting it where people agree with you not people that are against you. That's how I feel. ... It's an exciting toy.

As well, Julia's notion of membership through social-communicative literacy is expressed when she tells of her belonging:

Sometimes it gets kind of fun being around with all these people the same age I am; some of them, not all of them. ... Well, we all get along with each other. There's no remarks like the last time when I was over here with Anna. ... *Pues, los llevamos, bien, todos, todos.* ... We would all get along with each other and everything and there was nobody that would say, you don't belong here and that.

Hence, social-communicative literacy is an important facet and goal for the women as participants in the literacy program. Literacy in a larger context also allows a literacy program to go beyond traditional goals and to incorporate social-communicative literacy, by which the needs and desires of participants can be met. "Imposing conventional *literacy* as the ability to read and write fails to recognize the principles of cultural relativism and the conditions under which communication takes a variety of forms" (Browne & Neal, 1991, p. 163). Social-communicative literacy is the manner of communication and the conditions under which they occur for an individual. In relation to women's ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) social-communicative literacy is an avenue for validation and legitimization of women's styles of communication and interaction.

Coming Full Circle

Literacy is a dynamic, multifaceted, relative, multilingual, and contextual force. The complexities of literacy affect individual lives as well as collective lives. In my structure of myth framework, the movement towards a level of critical consciousness and praxis becomes the literacy educator's challenge indentured in demythologizing the everyday. This movement calls for a change of lenses in order that an individual may look at

her or his everyday reality, as determined through socio-cultural origins, and thereby identify biases. With this focus in place individuals can define their relationships and debunk those that are contradictory to self. In my view (and that of Rudolfo), this occurs only when learners are provided continual conformation with anomalies which allows them to publicly question "rules" as a means to organize one's victimized status. Once named for what it is, the learners empower themselves to determine through their own conscientization culturally relevant choices for social-communicative participation. All of this is enveloped in the contours of empowerment and self-identity by the praxis decisions they, as transformed learners, make.

Meaning-Making for the Women

Praxis, defined as the integration of reflection and action, becomes the manner in which the learners can make meaning of their world. Meaning-making is a continuous process whereby constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing meaning occurs based on what has previously worked but is no longer contextually relevant for the present (Conle, 1992). For the participants of this study, meaning making of their presence in a literacy program generated conflict between self and social goals. The recorded stories of these women consistently repeated a tacitly instilled behaviourist focus of what a literacy program is: What are you going to *do* after this program? A Chicana feminist with a deep sense of a post modern multiple identity for learning about self, Anzaldúa (1987) articulates well a social-communicative literacy:

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have a voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence (p. 59).

Paradoxically, do the five Mexican American women in this study reflect an overtly "male" career-dominated focus that silences and subordinates home, family, and parenting goals? Rachel, Emma, Sara, Julia, and Sylvia are in the process of examining the meaning making in their everyday reality and to determine how it fits with male-dominated meaning making imposed on their present.

For example, generally speaking, homemaking is perceived as a valid goal for educated White American women with money (see Faludi, 1991); there exists a contrast for poor Mexican women (Anzaldúa, 1987). Pesquera and Segura (1998) argue in their study that the general oppression of women

proposed by American feminists quickly unravels “as we consider class, race/ethnicity, and culture, as well as gender interests. A Chicana’s perspective is influenced by the combined effects class, race/ethnicity, and gender on Chicana’s life chances” (p. 530). This realization brings the concept of American feminism full circle. hooks (1984) speaks of the origination of American feminism and the plight of American women as a synonymous entity. However, American feminism arose out of the frustrations of White upper-middle class American woman attempting to break the bondage of subservience to her man. American feminism arose out of the desire by the White upper-middle class American woman to become more than “just” a mother and a wife. American feminism as the opposite of chauvinism has only served as a reciprocal force of domination. The everyday reality of the “American woman” is not unidimensional; “women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices” (hooks, 1984, p. 44). It is a false assumption to believe that the goals of one group of women (i.e., White) can speak for the goals of all women (i.e., Black, Mexican/Mexican-American, Asian, etc.) (see Pesquera & Segura, 1998).

The movement to critical consciousness for Rachel, Emma, Sara, Julia, and Sylvia is unidirectional and, at the same time, multidimensional. This being so, the montage of experiences presented in this study reflect varying moments of questioning rules and struggling for praxis. Nevertheless, the dominant levels of consciousness reflected in the stories of the women are found within the magical and naive realms. The magical level of consciousness is typified in silence, simplifying relationships to fit into an unproblematic everyday reality. The action words at this level of consciousness are acceptance, waiting, and dependence (Smith, 1976). The acceptance of everyday reality as out of their control disenfranchises the women, resulting in disempowerment. The naive level of consciousness as found contextually in the experiences of Rachel, Emma, Sara, Julia, and Sylvia results in self-victimization that encourages the habits of dress and life style of the oppressor (Smith). This concedes to the duality where to be self is to be like the oppressor (Freire, 1968).

For literacy to become a process towards critical consciousness, academic humanist anomalies must continue to be confronted honestly, whereby the dualistic dichotomy between theory and action can be bridged. In this bridge building, voice becomes a language of possibility via stories embedded in cultural and personal histories (Conle, 1992; Giroux, 1992).

Thus, cultural and personal histories are embedded into the context of what literacy in all its manifestations may become.

Faith in the Metaphor of the Il/Literacy Terrain

Reading the word and the world as perceived by Freire (1970) and then distorted by traditional dominant practices has evolved into the myth of the world as an open book, waiting to be explored. "I'm excited about learning to read more and more. It's like opening a whole new world for me in reading" (Sara). The exploration of the world follows many paths in many different means of conveyance. "I'm like a little girl, what do I want to be when I grow up?" (Emma).

The road one travels weaves the patterns of interaction in one's everyday reality, venturing down various pathways through metaphoric one-way streets, dead-ends, cul-de-sacs, onto the chosen roads for educational success. Some roads saturate one's sensory capacity with frivolous curbside information on where to go, where to eat, where to sleep, what to buy, where to get help, and so forth. If the traveler is not acculturated (labeled illiterate) to this bombardment of information, these roads can become inaccessible avenues entered with fear and anxiety. "Everything I have learned, I haven't learned too much but the little bit I learned, I want to keep on practicing so I won't forget it cause I'm having problems with my math, my time table and I learned them here but as soon as I stopped coming I forgot them" (Rachel). The traveler may blindly invest in the misguided faith provided by mapmakers. Freire (1998) points out, "even if illiteracy does not wipe out the socially created relationships between language, thought, and reality, it is a handicap that becomes an obstacle to achieving full citizenship" (p. 2).

The mapmakers of the il/literacy terrain are those in a position of power and control; those in whom these women put their faith. However, rarely do mapmakers find themselves traveling down the roads they lay out. Map-making can be viewed synonymously with policy making in adult literacy programs; traditionally it is concerned with what should be (*which road to take*), rather than what is and what potentially might be (Ryan, 1990). A bridge must be built critically weaving the complexities of the travelers (students), the navigators (educators), and the mapmakers (policy makers) of the il/literacy terrain.

The traveler as map-reader attempts to follow the prepared maps mythically, believing that they are in control of their destiny. They are the drivers. "I just gotta know how to read, for me it's very important to survive"

(Emma). They are the students. As they travel down the roads they are led on; they notice what others are driving and begin to covet a new vehicle. "I'm tired of feeling that way ... if I would read up to the 12th grade level, the difference is the words would be a lot easier for me to pronounce and plus, I would be reading faster" (Sara). For Rachel the new vehicle equates to a better self. "But I'm coming to school for myself, I'm not trying to please nobody. I just want to better myself, be able to get a good job, be able to support my child." On their paths to transformation (literacy) the women act as counselors defining issues illustrative of their female conditions. The self-representation of the unity practiced through the literacy process by Rachel, Julia, Sara, Emma, and Sylvia may serve as a vehicle for the demystification of the structure of myth. As Anzaldúa (1987) confirms, "the act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy" (p. 169). This transformation has the potential to demystify the engagement between the women and the literacy process.

The traveler does not venture down the road alone. She travels with a navigator as teacher, co-piloting her. "How can I be a student when there [is] no teacher over there [at home]?" (Sylvia). In Rachel's experience the navigator is advice giver. "She gave me pretty good advice." Julia's co-pilot was one she expressed true affection for. "I used to love that teacher a lot cause she showed me how to sew, she was so nice, a real nice teacher, I remember her. ... She would always explain everything." However, Freire (1970) has challenged the notion of teacher as depositor of knowledge, the banking concept, by encouraging teachers to engage dialectically with their students as a means for teacher and learner to critically develop. With a dialectical synergy between language, learning, the everyday, and social expectations the journey can be a creative one. I am encouraged by Freire's (1998) words, "the more we experience the dynamics of such movement, the more we become critical subjects concerning the process of knowing, teaching, learning, reading, writing, and studying" (p. 2).

The launching of the journey to explore one's world through a dialectical interaction with the word becomes an adventure affected by innumerable entities. For the actualization of what Sara describes as "a new world" opening up to her through her engagement with the literacy program, the defining of literacy *must* be grounded within its dynamic, multifaceted typography. As Sara describes:

You open up the books and you're opening them to read maps, you're opening to other people that want to help you to learn to read and write,

they're opening up to all sorts of things. ... It's that better job that I want. Better future for me and my girls. That better home that I want to see, that bedroom that I'm dreaming about all the time for my girls, with the ruffles.

Sara's right (as well as all the women's right in this study) to arrive at the final destination of their journey is one that must no longer be denied, invalidated, minimalized, or ignored.

Final Reflections

Rudolfo and I have traveled with these women both literally and figuratively. Our critical engagement of the literacy process has been broadened through the stories of Rachel, Julia, Sara, Emma, and Sylvia. The act of becoming literate is an act that transcends all paradigmatic groupings and reroutes one's journey, as depicted in my structure of myth framework. The women in this study illustrate the embodiment of a belief in an educational system that will provide for them access to the printed word and beyond. The structure of myth illustrates the grounded theory that arose from our engagement with the women. Examining the journey through this structure provides a more critical understanding of the journey these women have taken. It is a journey founded in the respect for differences mutually understood, constructed, and immersed in the dynamic agency of the other. It is a journey "seeking [the] experience of being alive" (Campbell, 1988, p. 5). It is a journey of faith intent on transforming the terrain. It is a journey that is open to them; now may the barriers, boundaries, and borders begin to fade.

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