

# **(Re)Constructing Erased Narratives: Unearthing Strange Fruit**

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This article focuses on the artistic practices of Vincent Valdez, who (re)constructs hidden narratives regarding the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in South Texas from 1848 until 1928. Valdez counters the historical gaps and omissions of Latino history from textbooks as a form of failure which he addresses not as a historian, but as an artist looking at the past through a contemporary lens. The conceptual framework of this research references critical race theory and its relationship with culturally sustaining pedagogies to challenge exclusionary practices that selectively privilege the histories of some groups over others. Implications for confronting the master narrative in the classroom are shared to encourage students to (re)construct erased narratives relevant to their lives.

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Texas trees bear a strange fruit  
 Extraño fruto tienen ahora los árboles de Tejas  
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
 Sangre en sus hojas y sangre en sus raíces  
 Brown bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
 Cuerpos marrones se mecen con las brisa del Sur  
 Strange fruit hangin' from the pecan trees  
 Y de los nogales cuelgan frutos extraños

Forgotten scene of the gallant South  
 Una escena ya olvidada del galante Sur  
 The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth  
 Ojos saltados y labios tórridos  
 Scent of desert rose sweet and fresh  
 Dulce y fresca esencia del desierto  
 Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh  
 Y de pronto un olor repentino de carne podrida

Here is a fruit for the black birds to pluck  
 He aquí el fruto preciso para el mordisco de los  
 buitres  
 For the rains to gather, for the droughts to suck  
 Para que lo junten las lluvias y se lo trague la sequía  
 For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop  
 Para que el sol lo pudra y el árbol lo libriere  
 Here is a strange and bitter crop  
 Esta extraña y amarga cosecha

In this adaptation of Abel Meeropol's<sup>1</sup> poem *Strange Fruit*<sup>2</sup> the words have been (re)constructed and (re)purposed by artist Vincent Valdez to reveal the hidden history regarding the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in South Texas. Although Meeropol wrote his poem as a form of protest regarding the social injustices he saw being aimed towards Black Americans in the 1930s (Blair, 2012), this bi-lingual adaptation shifts the vantage point to focus on treatment of the "brown bodies" of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans impacted by racial violence in Texas from 1848 until 1928 (Carrigan, 2013; Martinez, 2013). I, like many U.S. citizens was unaware of how commonplace lynching practices in Texas were, but artist Vincent Valdez challenges the erasure of Latino history from textbooks as a form of failure. The failure becomes more apparent when we begin to recognize that representations of some groups are privileged in historical re-

tellings, while other groups continue to remain under-represented (Söderström, 2005). Similarly, when the cultural heritage of one group is prioritized over another groups' heritage, this too is an intentional act of controlling history (Atkinson, 2005). Rather than allow these erased narratives to remain silent, Valdez utilizes these omissions as a starting point to provoke conversations about historical gaps, not as a historian, but as an artist looking at the past through a contemporary lens.

As an art educator, sometimes I wonder if I too am unintentionally perpetuating master narratives, or stories of experience, by privileging certain perspectives in my curricula while omitting the perspectives of others. These concerns are not unlike those explored by Pérez Miles (2012), Sanders and Gubes Vaz (2014) and Ulbricht (2011) when working with university students. Regardless of the age group, navigating curriculum decisions and deciding upon appropriate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive of diverse perspectives is challenging (Buffington, 2014). Peralta (2010) reminds us that we all have stories to tell, and sharing them through art can help bring those stories back to life.

Though its purpose may change from culture to culture, a story is a way of conveying a personal truth or perspective. A storyteller uses a story to take the listener to a different place and time, and goes beyond mere entertainment. Stories have within them the ability to relay morality, judgment, history, life lessons, or cultural memories. Like art, stories can create a place where we can begin to understand or make sense of our world. (Peralta, 2010, p. 27)

When our stories of experience have been erased, controlled, obscured, or kicked under the rug to be forgotten, it can be an opportunity for open-ended inquiry-based learning to occur. This article seeks to examine the artistic practice of Vincent Valdez whose work (re)constructs erased histories of Latinos to counter historical omissions. It considers the educational implications of challenging metanarratives as a form of creative inquiry and expression to share with our own students in high school and beyond. As educators we work with diverse student populations, critical race theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy can assist our students in identifying and unearthing the strange fruit in our lives, or in our communities. Furthermore, how might we make meaning by unpacking what is known and unknown about this topic and allow stories that were once erased from public records to be (re)understood once again?

### **Critical Race Theory and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

Critical race theory (CRT) points out failures in educational policies that privilege the experiences of some groups over others. According to Trevino, Harris, and Wallace (2008):

At its core, CRT is committed to advocating for justice for people who find themselves occupying positions on the margins—for those who hold 'minority' status. It directs attention to the ways in which structural arrangements inhibit and disadvantage some more than others in our society. It spotlights the form and function of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and discrimination across a range of social institutions, and then seeks to give voice to those who are victimized and displaced. CRT,

therefore, seeks not only to name, but to be a tool for rooting out inequality and injustice. (p.8)

Researchers who examine textbooks using a CRT lens (Brown & Au, 2014; Brown & Brown, 2010) state that repeated omissions and gaps in curriculum textbooks too often silence select stories and oversimplify perspectives on racism, which intentionally distorts history. A common theme of CRT discourse is the need to counter metanarratives which exclude and discriminate against minority students (Cerezo, McWhirter, Pena, Valdez, & Bustos, 2013; Darder, 2011). Disrupting distortions in order to support a more dynamic and “emancipatory vision of education” (Darder, 2011, p. 110) opens up possibilities to connect the concerns of CRT with pedagogical practice.

Ladson-Billings (1995) raised concerns that education programs need to prepare new teachers to embrace the cultural diversity and assets that children bring into the urban classroom; a theoretical approach she termed *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP). Yet, as time has passed and institutions have oversimplified her thoughts, she barely recognizes her own theory anymore (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Chapman (2007) is also critical of teacher preparation programs as new teachers often experience anxiety when trying to incorporate multicultural education approaches because of lack of training. Esposito and Swain (2009) agree that while it is important and necessary to promote culturally relevant pedagogy in order to solicit to students' voices that have been silenced by master narratives, schools are also faced by constraints such as following strict curriculum guidelines.

*Culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP), a term coined by Paris (2012), also resists educational attempts to promote a

monocultural or monolingual society. CSP, like CRP, embraces “cultural pluralism and cultural equality” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Ladson-Billings (2014) agrees that it was time for a remix of her original theory where, “pedagogy shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normality—that is, that they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects” (p. 76). While it sounds pretty basic to celebrate the diversity of our students who comprise our classrooms through curriculum decisions that are inclusive of perspectives rather than exclusive, the reality is that the educational landscape is full of obstacles.

Teaching and learning through the lens of CSP in places like Tucson, Arizona or Washington, D.C. has been problematic, as noted in popular media (Demby, 2015; Manuel-Logan, 2015; Narvarrette, 2012; Robbins, 2013; Smith, 2011). CSP challenges teachers to encourage our students to question policies and practices that directly impact their lives and their communities. However, deviating from the scripted curriculum and challenging the status quo may involve a certain amount of risk. Take for example the events that have unfolded at the Tucson Unified School District or TUSD. The TUSD is predominantly Hispanic, and they successfully developed and implemented a Mexican-American curriculum studies program. However, in 2010 the program was shut down and then (re)introduced and radically modified into “culturally relevant classes” in 2013 (Robbins, 2013, para 1). But, Lorenzo Lopez, Jr., who serves as the Director for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Instruction in TUSD, clarified that changes were made as mandated by a federal court order. While there is a Mexican-American student services

program that helps provide tutoring and other personal assistance to students, “this department does not provide any academic instruction of any kind” (L. Lopez, personal communication, February 18, 2015). Or, perhaps we might consider another turn of events that occurred at a middle school located on the campus of a historically Black university. Three African American teachers were presented with pink slips in front of their students, 90% of whom were African American and Black, for allegedly teaching controversial information that went beyond the middle school’s African American history curriculum guidelines (Demby, 2013; Manuel-Logan, 2015). Another obstacle to furthering the aims of CSP was addressed by McCarty and Lee (2014), when they examined a charter school working with students from 60 different native nations and 16 non-native ethnic groups. The researchers noted that although the community valued the charter school’s educational programs because they reflected and promoted the communities’ interests in sustaining their indigenous languages, cultural identity, spirituality, and connections to the land, external state assessments based on “the monolingual, monocultural norms ” were used to rate the school programs (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 110). The reality is that while CSP advocates for the need to continue challenging anti-democratic policies and practices in their various forms (Paris & Alim, 2014), how might we as educators move towards (re)negotiating metanarratives full of omissions and distortions of history with our students? Where might we begin?

### **Challenging Omissions**

Henderson (2013) explained, “I encourage students to look beyond the surface and spend more time exploring and discovering unknowns in order to fill gaps in history books with information about

individuals whose stories had not made the mainstream” (p. 33), and I could not agree more. As a Hispanic educator living in South Texas for most of my life, I too have had high school students share how frustrated they were to discover how Mexican-American contributions to our state were barely even mentioned in our state adopted history textbooks (Leake, 2010). As the students learned more about the social, cultural and political contributions of Mexican-Americans beyond information presented in the textbook, the more aware they became that specific omissions are obstacles to learning, and only privilege historical (re)tellings for certain groups.

Working to counter social inequalities takes courage and means questioning the status quo. Kraehe and Acuff (2013) express gratitude to scholars who have “commendably, offered literature that attempts to counter these insular, controlled histories. Their writing has articulated invisible histories and silenced narratives in art education” (p. 301). Dr. Ricardo Romo, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio and his wife<sup>3</sup> share a similar admiration towards artist Vincent Valdez because his work continues to open doors to past histories through a fresh set of eyes. They both believe that Vincent’s work “makes us more aware of our community concerns and the profound issues affecting our country” (R. Romo & H. Romo, personal communication, June 19, 2014). On May 7, 2014, I sat down with Vincent Valdez the day before his opening of *The Strangest Fruit*, to gain insight into what has motivated the development of this body of work, as well as prior works, as a way to better understand his artistic practices and contemplate pedagogical implications.

### ***The Strangest Fruit: About the work***



Figure 1. Reproduced postcard showing Texas Rangers posing with a person they had lynched. Making and selling postcards of lynching victims was lucrative in South Texas from 1848 until 1928. Photos courtesy of Artpace San Antonio. Photo credit: Mark Menjivar.

A few years ago, Vincent encountered the book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* by Allen, Lewis, Litwack, and AIs (2000) that includes scanned images of actual lynching postcards of black Americans. Part of what captured Vincent’s interest was that both the front and back of the postcards were included in the publication. The front images were photographs taken by amateur photographers who attended lynching events, and on the back, were handwritten notes to families and friends that provide readers with insights into the types of messages and sentiments people were sharing on these cards.<sup>4</sup> Studying the layout of the images and text raised many red flags for Vincent, as he explained to me. Looking at them was ‘such an interesting, fascinating and hypocritical spectrum which displayed a brutally violent image on one side and then a note on the opposite side that says, “Dearest mother, Miss you! Love you! This was a great lynching today!”’ (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2014). Vincent says that as he continued to stare at the images, he noticed the backgrounds seemed to fade away and what remained was the image of the hanging body becoming the sole focal point. As he continued to look at the images,

the bodies looked “almost as if they are just gliding in the air, levitating” (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2014). After further examination of the book, Vincent then realized that there was no mention of Latinos being lynched in the book, which prompted him to seek out other sources of information to address this gap. His subsequent searches on the Latino experience with lynching were highly limited thus propelling him to ask further questions, and find alternate avenues for answers.

Vincent reflected on the underrepresentation of Hispanic people on television and other forms of popular media, and how they were misrepresented in stereotypical roles such as gangbangers or families stuck in poverty. Vincent recalled it was sometimes difficult to relate to his own history, not because he did not want to, but because no one on screen ever seemed to look like him or tell the stories of people like him. One of the few times he remembered seeing a young Latino male presented positively was in a military recruitment commercial. Vincent recalled looking at images in history books featuring the Battle of the Alamo, and felt like he identified more with the Mexicans shown lying dead on the battlefield, than the Texas settlers who were supposed to represent “our” side of the battle. As Vincent told me,

I grew up associating my social identity with the politics of the Chicano American, the Mexican-American, and as a Latino; all of the above. Yet I was more aware of the plight and the historical events of Black Americans than I was about Latinos because it was not covered in the school textbooks. That is how easily convenient it is to be excluded in America’s history. So what happened to everyone else? (V.

Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

As part of his research process, Vincent found the dissertation research of Monica Martinez (2013), who spent six years conducting inquiries into state violence against Tejanos and Tejanas, incredibly insightful. In fact, her insights were so helpful that Vincent invited her to speak at his opening of *The Strangest Fruit* when it first opened at Brown University in 2013. William D. Carrigan (2004, 2013) further expanded Vincent’s understanding of the mob mentality that led to such a longstanding dark period in Texas history by uncovering acts of violence and civil right oppression of Blacks from 1836 until 1916, and later against Mexicans in the United States from 1848 until 1928. One of the archival images Vincent discovered while studying archives relating to this period of history (see Figure 1), is made available for visitors to keep. This well known image is of Texas Rangers dragging the bodies of Mexican “bandits.” In reality, “many of those hanged were Mexican-American farmers who owned land that others coveted. It was relatively easy to accuse them of a crime they did not commit, hang them, and acquire the property” (Browning, 2014, para. 27). In his images, Vincent (re)imagines normal Texas events, such as, when families would go on picnics and take their children to see lynching events. Initially, the figures appear to be contemporary young male figures in a state of suspension (see Figures 2-7), yet the images are much more complex.

Each male figure in the paintings is a close friend of Vincent and together they (re)stage scenes of the past, along with a studio assistant, a tall ladder, and rope. Knowingly, and willingly, each figure is suspended by rope in the artist’s studio, while the artist captures their physical

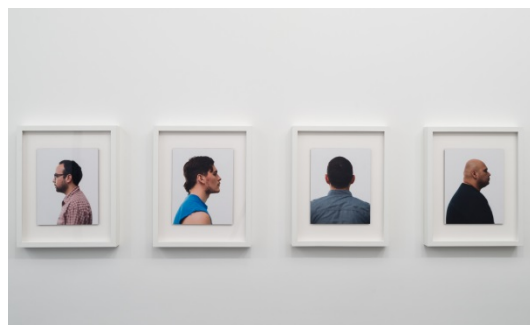
responses on film, which he then converts to paintings. One of the participants, Vincent's brother Daniel, shared that in order to be "honest" about (re)staging the past, he asked for the rope to be pulled even tighter around his neck (D. Valdez, personal communication, May 8, 2014). Through this form of collaboration, Vincent (re)visits and (re)creates the past with the intent of creating a "new history" (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2008). The practices of this artist seem to align with how Baldacchino (2013) realizes the educational potential of artworks to (re)present subjective stories of everyday life allowing them to be "continuously re-invented" (p. 426). Through the social (re)construction of past events, Vincent's work counters the metanarratives by questioning and challenging social, cultural, and political norms (Page, Herne, Dash, Charmann, Atkinson, & Adams, 2006). Rather than merely accepting the (mis)representations of this period in history, Vincent counters history through the (re)creation of new images, an approach favored by Jocson and Rosa (2015).

I love that idea of the paintings expressing such a fine line, between living and dying. It is a symbolic view of how we measure things in America—that we are that close to being on the wrong side of the line at the wrong time and that it can flip so easily. (V. Valdez as cited in Browning, 2014, para. 33)

From Vincent's perspective, taking on an ambitious project like, *The Strangest Fruit* is "important to link the past with the present because it gives us all a sense of not only how we got here, but also a sense of our own existence, and where we go from here" (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2014). Vincent's intentions to

broaden discourse and public awareness of hidden agendas have not gone without criticism<sup>5</sup> (Cook, 2013; Fisch, 2014; Ventura, 2013), but inviting an exchange of ideas is a central component of Vincent's artistic practice.





Figures 2-7. Installation views of *The Strangest Fruit*, 2013/2014, by Vincent Valdez. Photos courtesy of Artpace San Antonio. Photo credit: Mark Menjivar.

### **(Re)constructions and Learning**

Learning is a process that unfolds, it reveals, it conceals, it (re)invents itself dependent on local contexts, shifting points of view, and is without fixed or finite outcomes. Baldacchino (2008) describes this concept of learning as a form of “groundlessness” that “requires continuous engagement with ever-changing cultural and contextual grounds that are constantly reconstructed with art and through learning” (p. 243). Learning through the exploration of contemporary art challenges viewers to disrupt our current ways of knowing and understanding by being “able to handle states of uncertainty as new knowledge and new competencies begin to emerge” (Atkinson, 2012, p. 10). In fact, Atkinson (2012) suggests that learning and teaching are understood to be a political act where “that which was previously invisible

becomes visible” (p. 12) when the teacher is no longer positioned as the distributor of knowledge. With the artistic practice of Vincent Valdez, this groundlessness of knowing and simultaneously not knowing allows his inquiries to self-perpetuate. While this could be viewed as a limitation to learning in the eyes of some, it is an emergent and transformative form of learning embraced by others who seek to “accept otherness and difference” (Irwin, 2013, p. 211). According to Atkinson (2012), Baldacchino (2005), and Rogoff (2008), real learning unfolds when educational practices encourage the exchange of subjective truths between individuals beyond prescriptive forms of knowledge. The role of discourse designed to better understand self and others is helping to facilitate the on-going process of challenging notions of truth in learning.

(Re)constructing learning through discourse and inviting multiple voices into



the conversation, helps level the playing field. Shin (2011) advocates for informal learning, or learning that is unplanned and not follow an officialy format, and says that “creating positive intergroup discourse is essential for understanding and respecting others and must remain an important educational goal” (p. 73). Shin (2011) clarifies that when members of minority groups are given the opportunity to share to share their insights and perspectives, it encourages more authentic and democratic learning experiences to unfold. Similarly, challenging existing power relations by inviting multiple voices to engage in dialogue encourages diverse ways of understanding self and others. During the opening night of the exhibition, I had an opportunity to hear an example of the type of shared discourse that Shin (2011) advocates and found myself understanding the work from the perspective of other audience members that were different from my own.

### Contextualizing the Double-Edged Sword



Figure 8: Vincent speaks with audience about *The Strangest Fruit* on May 8, 2014. Photo courtesy of Artpace San Antonio. Photo credit: Mark Menjivar.

Vincent’s artistic practice involves sharing and contextualizing his work with audiences through a fluid process of interactions. Naturally, tensions arise when people disagree about how a topic is approached and (re)constructed by the artist. The following paragraphs capture the an

exchange between an audience member and the artist on opening night (see Figure 8).

This question is for Mr. Vincent Valdez. At the beginning, when you started on this work, was there any ambivalence for you or the models? Did you have any doubts about what you were doing here? I have read the book and seen the images in *Without Sanctuary*. Lynchings are a crime against humanity; a crime against nature! What is the difference between somebody making postcards and then somebody making these? (Unknown audience member at opening, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

Vincent responded to the question as follows:

It is a very valid question and that idea did creep into my mind, but I think that in creating these, when you ask anyone, a regular citizen about “lynching,” they immediately are going to think of the black plight.<sup>6</sup> But most people don’t know about this history of (Mexican/Mexican-American) lynching, so I felt it was important to depict this series for educational purposes –awareness. But in terms of creating the visual spectacle, sure, it also walks a very fine line, but I think that the difference is that the images of lynching are purely in its entirety a violent spectacle, right? But in this case, it’s important to realize that it can be interpreted either way, and I felt the interactive aspect of the work—the social practice of forcing the viewer to be interactive with these images is important. *You* get to decide. *You* get

to take a stand. *You* get to decide which way you see it. Do you see the possible violence in it, or do you see the violent spectacle as something in the past and these individuals are rising above and beyond this past, in search of a glimmer of hope? I think that this really lends itself to the idea of America as an experiment. It's a double-edged sword and there are also a lot of hidden truths underneath our foundation. America is still a place where change and democracy is consistently evolving and at times—regressing. So, I love that the context between these ideas are worlds apart, but separated by a mere hair-line (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

Vincent elaborates on the fine line that separate past racial tensions with current tensions between individuals in Texas. One Hispanic model wore a t-shirt printed with the phrase, "Dirty Mexican", as a social response to an insulting comment made by a sports radio broadcaster after the San Antonio Spurs basketball team beat the Dallas Mavericks. The announcer, Mike Bacsik, tweeted, "Congrats to all the dirty Mexicans in San Antonio" (Bacsik, as quoted in Heinz, 2010, para. 2). Rather than San Antonio citizens protesting angrily to being referred to in this derogatory manner in a public forum, an unauthorized Spurs t-shirt was created that portrays a cowboy hat dangling from the letter "D" of "Dirty" and putting the Spurs logo at the bottom of the text. Humor rather than anger was the communities' preferred response to counter the insult. Apparently, numerous fans wore the shirts at the subsequent game between the Mavericks and the Spurs as a form of self-empowering social protest acknowledged by local citizens (Ayala, 2010); an act admired and respected by

Vincent. As Vincent shared with the audience that night, his response to the turn of events was as following: "What a form of protest, to embrace it, and say... you can't bring us down" (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 8, 2014).

### **Responding to Failure**

For artist Vincent Valdez, responding to failures that have allowed historical gaps and omissions to go largely unnoticed is what inspires him to keep unearthing stories that have been buried.

I think it is an important time to address subjects like this with audiences, especially when the threat of erasure seems imminent. We see it in public schools' efforts to eradicate Mexican-American and other cultural studies from the curriculum. We see it in the nations' immigration hysteria and the ignorance and denial of immigrants' role in American society. We see it daily through media manipulation and censorship, whether overlooking the numerous plagues of America's unending wars against the terrorists abroad or against police violence here at home. And so it goes on and on. I think audiences want to be challenged. Audiences are yearning for this! I think this series helped me to piece together these uncertainties about what we *think* we know, to question what we have been taught, and to rethink what we uphold to be the truth. This work allows me to find my own conclusions on my role as an individual, as a citizen, and as an artist today. (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Without a doubt, Vincent takes intentional risks in revealing the hidden truths of

history, but it is a risk he embraces because he is passionate about these topics.

My only goal as an artist is to look back and say...I did what I wanted to do. I said what I felt needed to be said. I feel fortunate that I have not abandoned these principles. I'm not afraid, but I think that can be a very difficult thing for artists and others to understand. (V. Valdez, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

As an artist, Vincent is willing to take this risk in his work to reveal the sometimes uncomfortable truths, but what about educators who work for larger institutions who have their own set of external constraints informing all decisions? What can we gain from embracing the unknown and unearthing hidden stories for the purposes of education?

### **Putting Theory into Practice: Confronting the Master Narrative in the Classroom**

What are the implications for confronting the master narratives in the classroom, or choosing to remain silent? According to a history professor at UT Austin, "We do our students a disservice when we scrub history clean of unpleasant truths and when we present an inaccurate view of the past that promotes a simple-minded ideologically driven point of view" (J. Jones as cited in Weissert, 2014, para. 4). Exposing failures of representation and revealing untold stories is what drives Vincent Valdez's passion to create and share art with others. Educators may be taking a risk, when taking action and incorporating CRT and CSP into their classrooms, like getting a pink slip delivered to you in front of your students (Demby, 2015; Manuel-Logan, 2015). However, these considerations also open up limitless

educational potential to promote critical thinking. Gude (2013) contends that fostering open-ended, student-centered exploration of personally meaningful art experiences increases the likelihood of providing learning opportunities with intrinsic value for student engagement, but what might those opportunities look like? Although Ladson-Billings (2014) reminds us that a singular prescriptive approach to enacting CSP is neither effective nor desirable, in the next section, I present some possibilities inspired by this inquiry process.

**Analyzing Current Events.** I wonder what kinds of discussions and subsequent artistic responses might be generated by having students analyze and dissect multiple media responses to the Mexican-American Studies ban in Arizona (Narvarrette, 2012; Robbins, 2013; Smith, 2011), and then compare and contrast these events with the controversial decision to dismiss teachers who incorporated topics beyond the prescriptive African American curriculum at a middle school in Washington, D.C. (Demby, 2015; Manuel-Logan, 2015)? Al Madrigal (2012) uses humor to call attention to how Mexican-American teachers are accused of using subversive techniques, like bribing students with burritos to attend class on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps counter that narrative with more traditional and academically in-depth reporting from news outlets like NPR<sup>8</sup> and PBS.<sup>9</sup> Might we encourage students to search online for further exploration of media coverage of omissions and gaps in historical representations of minorities in educational institutions? How might the process of (de)constructing and (re)constructing the same story from different vantage points help students question the information they are receiving. How might they, like Vincent, dig deeper? What else is hidden? Is there

more? What happens next? How will they respond—with words—with art?

**Conducting Literature Reviews.** What if students were asked to analyze literature in the school library, and in their textbooks? Might they identify topics or representations they find problematic, and what might the learning implications be? Rutledge (2013) is of Miami Indian decent, and she speaks about the importance of breaking stereotypes. Teachers could share information about how Native Americans are portrayed in books and the media, and then discuss why this is relevant? What might be accomplished by asking students to look beyond stereotypes of Native Americans? How can teachers continue to bring concerns about stereotyping and (dis)respect into the conversation? What are the global implications of perpetuating stereotypes and silencing the voices of select groups?

**Revising Dominant Histories.** Telling stories is a powerful tool for reaching across boundaries of time and space. What if we encourage students to look at illustrated books as material to inspire their own artistic responses to gaps and omissions in the master narrative? The work of Carmen

Lomas Garza (1990; 1996; 1999) comes to mind as she illustrates the memories of her childhood growing up in Kingsville, Texas along the border with Mexico. Carmen recounts her childhood through detailed imagery and contextualizes the images in brief written passages written in Spanish and English. Her first-hand narratives serve to counter any master narratives of “her” story as a Hispanic woman growing up along the Texas—Mexico border. Similarly, artist Terry Ybañez collaborated with Carmen Tafolla and Sharyll Teneyuca (2008) to create a bilingual book that shares the story of Emma Tenayuca, a sixteen year old girl who drew national attention to unfair wage discrimination practices against pecan shellers in 1938. Their book (re)visits a local story of discrimination and contextualizes the work for new audiences. What other topics or themes might inspire students to write and illustrate their own revisions of dominant histories?

Challenging silence, addressing gaps, and moving towards educational interactions that foster on-going dialogue is the common thread I see between CRT, CRP, CSP, and the artistic practice of Vincent Valdez. Collectively, we have the potential to unearth and sustain a healthy and unexpected crop of fruit in and out of



Figures 2-7. (Optional selections for consideration.) Paintings from *The Strangest Fruit* exhibition by Vincent Valdez. Photos courtesy of Artpace San Antonio. Photo credit: Mark Menjivar.

the classroom. Embracing opportunities to listen to the voices of students whose history and culture has been (mis)represented through distortions and silences can be countered through our efforts not to privilege any singular narrative of history and help our students realize their role in the creation of a more democratic educational landscape.

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- <sup>1</sup> The story and inspiration behind Abel Meeropol's original poem and lyrics can be found at <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>. Blair (2012) reveals Meeropol, was a Jewish high school teacher who wrote the poem using the pseudonym Lewis Allan. Meeropol's friend shared the poem with singer Billie Holiday, who made the song famous. To view Billie Holiday's performance, please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>
- <sup>2</sup> Vincent Valdez adapted select lyrics from the original version of *Strange Fruit*, such as changing the word from "black" bodies, to "brown" bodies and from "poplar" trees to "pecan" trees to relate to Texas' lynching victims.
- <sup>3</sup> Drs. Ricardo and Harriett Romo are avid art collectors of Latino art, including multiple works by Vincent Valdez.
- <sup>4</sup> To view sample images and excerpts from the book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000) and find out more about the lynching of blacks in the United States between 1882 and 1968, please see: <http://withoutsanctuary.org/>
- <sup>5</sup> Vincent shared with me that when he was completing his undergraduate work, he was told by one of his instructors that he would never make it as an artist if he kept pursuing art that dealt with Hispanic/ Latino political themes and topics (V. Valdez, personal communication, June 30, 2015). Fisch (2014) seemed to reiterate those concerns in her article, elaborating on how she feared Vincent was branding himself as a Chicano artist. Cook (2013) raised concerns about the use of "troubled symbolism" in Vincent's work, while Ventura (2013) points out that the context is missing when viewing the bodies depicted in the paintings, which seems to imply that the art perpetuates in presenting intentional omissions.
- <sup>6</sup> For more information about the lynching of blacks in Texas, please refer to William D. Carrigan's (2004) book *The making of a lynching culture: Violence and vigilantism in central Texas, 1836-1916*.
- <sup>7</sup> To see and hear an excerpt from Al Madrigal's (2012) segment on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart addressing Mexican-American Studies ban, please see: <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/ovmyo9/tucson-s-mexican-american-studies-ban>
- <sup>8</sup> To see and hear Ted Robbins' (2013) NPR story addressing the Mexican-American Studies ban, please see: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/07/24/205058168/Tucson-Revives-Mexican-American-Studies-Program>
- <sup>9</sup> To see and hear Ray Suarez's (2013) PBS piece on Mexican-American Studies ban, please visit: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/video/need-to-know-february-15-2013/16294/>
- To view Ray Suarez's (2010) PBS story questioning whose version of history is taught, please see: [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education-july-dec10-arizona\\_12-30/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education-july-dec10-arizona_12-30/)