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THE RHETORIC OF AZTLÁN: HB 2281, MECHA AND LIBERATORY EDUCATION
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The Rhetoric of Aztlán: HB 2281, MEChA and Liberatory Education

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.

We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent.

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner "gabacho" who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán. —Alurista, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán"

THE LEGISLATURE FINDS AND DECLARES THAT PUBLIC SCHOOL
PUPILS SHOULD BE TAUGHT TO TREAT AND VALUE EACH OTHER
AS INDIVIDUALS AND NOT BASED ON ETHNIC BACKGROUND.

—Arizona House Bill 2281

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves.

--Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47

In March 1969 at the first national Chicano Liberation Youth Conference hosted by the Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado, a young poet named Alurista read "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" which forged the ideas of "the bronze continent" and "Aztlán" (Anaya and Lomeli 1). This historical document, often deemed a manifesto of Chicanismo, or a militant ethosⁱ, advocated Chicano nationalism and self-determination for Mexican Americans. Today, it continues to be one of the founding plans of the student organization, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, or MEChA. MEChA, which "has been one of the more important student organizations to address the issue of education" (Vargas 378), focuses on the organizational goals laid out in the plan, including: Unity, Economy, Education, Institutions, Self Defense, and Cultural and Political Liberation. Included in this plan is the idea of "reclaiming the land of their birth," or the land annexed to the United States in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

In recent years, the idea of Aztlán has literally been defined as land reclamation by many Chicana/os, but as “homeland invasion” by conservative individuals, and has triggered much of the protest against MEChA and programs that frame community pride (brown or Chicana/o) and self-affirmation as an element of their educational goals. This is especially poignant, as the growing Latino population has become a reality, leading to the increase of Euroamerican anti-immigration rhetoric and the externalized and internalized colonialism many Chicana/o students face while in the American education system. Accordingly, this essay draws on the educational and political history of the Chicana/o student in the academy by focusing on MEChA as a student organization that has historically relied on the rhetoric of Aztlán as a tool for liberatory education.

The connection of Mexican Americans to land has been portrayed in literature by the use of territory as a central character in Chicano political movements, often referencing 1848 as a historical crux. Rafael Pérez-Torres references Aztlán as a place, not of reclamation, but of self-affirmation,² while Luis Leal describes Aztlán as a myth which, “symbolized the existence of a paradisiacal region where injustice, evil, sickness, old age, poverty, and misery do not exist” (8). Leal also recognizes that “Aztlán symbolize[s] the spiritual union of the Chicanos, something that is carried within the heart, no matter where they may live or where they may find themselves” (8). In the face of anti-Mexican sentiments in a globalized world, both Alurista and Leal reference the heart in the hand and the hand in the soil of where one lives. Aztlán, as an utopian idea of the mythical homeland, has empowered many student voices and student groups, and is used as a rhetorical technique to protect Chicano culture. As Pérez-Torres explicates, “Consequently, the transformation of the pre-Cortesian into fetish reinforces a type of cultural erasure at the same time that it seeks to articulate a vision of self-identity liberated from the models of Euroamerican dominance” (48). Despite this paradox, the idea that the rhetoric of

Aztlán can be used as a tool or mechanism for student empowerment as well as a way that confounds Euroamerican dominance is important to this argument.

With the intention of exploring indigenous histories threatened by state legislation and individual political agendas, I find it worthy to examine the ramifications of the political idea(s) that are modeled in Arizona's House of Representatives Bill 2281 (HB 2281),ⁱⁱ a bill which clearly illustrates an inability to listen to the voice of the *minor-ity*.ⁱⁱⁱ I use Trinh T. Min-ha's articulation of "minority" to clarify my stance that the term represents the political voice of the Mexican American population in the political system. I am not referring to a population count in any specific state. Throughout this discussion, I analyze the way conservative rhetoric has used the concept of Aztlán as a geographical space to silence Chicana/o voices and have defined it in direct opposition to an American value system in education that Sandy Grande explicates in *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*:

By the 1950s, liberal educators were championing the notion of cultural pluralism as the pathway to democracy, imbricating the constructs of national unity, multicultural harmony, and inclusion as the guiding principles of American education. Within this rhetoric, schools were to become an extension of the public sphere, a place where citizens could participate in the democratic project by coming together and transcending their racial, class, and gender differences to engage in "rational discourse." (33)

As a result, MEChA and Ethnic Studies programs that teach the history of Aztlán and resist blanket assimilation are often juxtaposed against "rational discourse." This neutral and rational discourse is purported to be found in the textbooks schools adopt for an American/U.S. education curriculum, thus I will explore aspects of those texts monitored by school boards because of such bills as HB 2281. Those texts held suspect by the authors of this bill are Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy*

of the Oppressed and Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America*; both incorporate aspects of liberatory education for Chicana/o students. Concurrently, because HB 2281 directly references Mexican and Chicano students, I examine these legislative and curricular actions, action that has historically restricted students of color from gaining social capital. I conclude with a call for a new orientation among those who study and teach students of color. It is also a call for educators to examine the systems students must negotiate in order to achieve an outlook that can further their education.

The Minor-ity Perspective

The rhetoric found in HB 2281 is consistent with the persistent propensity by state government to further devalue the *minor-ity's* voice in the classroom and the academy. The bill also reflects how the rhetoric of Aztlán is listened to and interpreted by the general public, who is unaware of the history behind this concept. Trinh T. Minh-ha defines the social constructs influencing the way we approach the language of the “minor-ity” through a Euroamerican dominant lens when she states, “Remember, the minor-ity’s voice is always personal; that of the major-ity, always impersonal. Logic dictates [...]d stereotypes deriving from well-defined differences (the apartheid type of difference) govern our thought” (28). White privilege scholar Tim Wise adds to this conversation when he discusses this phenomenon: “I think many folks of color are understandably upset to a degree by the fact that a white man can say things they've been saying for years and be taken more seriously in the process” (Hines). Here he points to the existence of the social inability to listen to the voices of people of color in the academy. Constricted by procedure and legislation, it is even more difficult to build the bridges that many scholars have called on education to build because along with a variety of other restrictions, exclusions and legal inclusions, the House bill targets “pupils of a particular ethnic group,”

specifically Chicano/a students. The rhetoric which focuses on only the negative attributes of the Ethnic Studies programs being targeted in this bill (specifically the Mexican American Studies Department in the Tucson Unified School District or MASD), reflects the major-ity perspective of the minor-ity's voice and viewpoint. As a consequence, this major-ity perspective does not take into account the body of knowledge Chicana/o Studies has developed, often leaving it out of a school's curriculum.

Political Idea(l)s in History and Texts

Paying attention to the textbooks that are used in the classroom is a way to revisit how history shapes our understanding of social meaning and power structures—creating an avenue for allowing the minor-ity voice into textbooks and the classroom. Negationism draws on the apprehension the American public has about revisiting the annals of people of color in the United States. Slavery and internment camps hold rhetorical power and are well known, but other less-known histories are not considered possible because they are framed within a different perspective, whether through another language, historical memory, or because the oppressed group is still under current rule. In Richard Delgado's essay, "The Law of the Noose: A History of Latino Lynching," he discusses the large numbers of Latinos (about 597 or more) that were lynched during "the same period when black lynching ran rampant" (299). Delgado uses the rhetorical power of the lynching of Blacks in his argument because he concedes that the dominant group understands this historical moment as possible. He continues, "*Latinos and the Law*, after reviewing the evidence, concludes that Latino lynchings are a relatively unknown chapter in United States history and part of a worldwide pattern of shaping discourse so as to avoid embarrassment of the dominant group" (303). This is a rhetorical move on Delgado's part in order to align history with a past that is already understood and perceived as correct by the

dominant group in the United States, giving symbols, such as the noose, which represents racism through a segregationist and violent lens, a stronghold on the social imagination.

The rhetoric used in HB 2281 is an artifact of the public's ignorance of the history of Mexican Americans in the United States. The bill targets members of the Latino population, and in particular, students. This bill makes it evident that the authorship of a text and the ethnicity of the author can be questioned in the educational system. Minh-ha and Wise's premise that the minor-ity's voice is not given precedence or even a small advantage over the oppressor's voice is very apparent in the negative attention being paid to Freire's and Acuña's texts. Acuña's *Occupied America* is particularly interesting because it incorporates the obscured history of Mexican Americans in the United States—and it is this history that is being targeted. In an article in the *LA Times*, superintendent Horne is described as having

[...] been trying to end the program for years, saying it divides students by race and promotes resentment. He singled out one history book used in some classes, "Occupied America: A History of Chicanos," by Rodolfo Acuña, a professor and founder of the Chicano studies program at Cal State Northridge. "To begin with, the title of the book implies to the kids that they live in occupied America, or occupied Mexico," Horne said last week in a telephone interview. (Cruz)

According to Horne, his focus on Freire and Acuña's texts stem from his wish for students to value individualism, which promotes an understanding of global events from an individualized locus. Unfortunately, thinking locally allows for the individual to maintain a "symbolic cultural activism" and to feel self-contained (safe). Through individualism, the oppressor is able to maintain the status quo by segregating students from developing a community, from understanding history from a perspective that is culturally significant to them, and from experiencing education from a perspective that is usually unavailable to a Chicano/a student.

Delgado gives insight into the importance of voice, narrative and storytelling told from a distinctive cultural group (Black and Latino). He equates English-Only orthodoxy to that of lynching when he writes:

We should emphatically reject any such laws and practices. Moreover, scholars should unearth other laws and customs that operate on distinct minorities the way language regulation operates on Latinos. Otherwise, marginalized groups will find themselves in a condition similar to that which the postcolonial scholars describe—alienated from themselves, co-opted, and unable to mount serious, concerted resistance to illegitimate authority if not dead. (312)

Thus, by reading Acuña's text, Freire's text, and the Plan of Aztlán as historical documents, MEChA members and students are pushed to connect the present with memory—to understand the paradoxes of present culture.

In contrast, Diana Hull, a former conservative member of the Sierra Club's Population Committee and the Southern California Demographic Forum, explains what she considers the role of Acuña's text to be in her essay, "Rodolfo Acuña: A Chicano Warhorse Goes to Court":

Inventing a new ethnic brotherhood called Chicanos was no more brazen than inventing a new religion in the manner of Joseph Smith. Raza leaders were classical mythmakers with self-righteous energy and contagious ideas. The goal of Chicano Studies was to maintain identity, language and culture in the interregnum, while Chicanos grew their numbers and trained to retake Professor Acuña's "occupied America." (204)

This perspective has carried into the national debate regarding the use of this text in the MASD curriculum. Hull condemns the use of this text by her use of the slogan, "retake [...] America" as her method of argument. In Freire's text, he addresses this use of slogans when he differentiates

the distinction between dialogue and monologue. He writes, “But to substitute monologue, slogans, and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with instruments of domestication [...] to treat them as objects which must be saved” (47). Because of the way cultural myths work, Hull is able to equate Raza leaders with Mormons—a group whose history has been defined as anti-American and anti-democratic by both conservative and liberal media standards. Then she quickly categorizes Mexican American students as blank slates needing to be saved and taught values consistent with the status quo. Consequently, Hull’s (and Horne’s) critiques fail to reflect on the disconnection between a historical consciousness from a minor-ity perspective and that of the status quo, major-ity or mainstream population.

The Rhetoric of Aztlán

In *Chicanismo: Forging a Militant Ethos among Mexican Americans*, Ignacio M. Garcia understands this disconnection as untranslatable because terms like self-affirmation, liberation, Brown Power, and Aztlán are “foreign terms and [have] no translatable application to the American political system” (141). Consequently, it becomes easy to dismiss education programs that focus on ethnicity and liberation politics because the commonplace rhetoric encourages attitudes that segregate according to nationalistic slogans and manipulation.^{iv} The terms that are used, such as “liberal,” “communist” and “victimhood,” become myths that are difficult to unravel. Because of such media/social myths, Hull’s commentary—on Acuña’s text and the students who read it—is able to gain momentum, even among conservative Mexican Americans. She expounds: “MEChA members hawk the message of victimhood and seed the movement by recruiting for Chicano Studies classes. They do most of the protesting, the marching, the fasting and the taking over of university buildings. There are MEChA chapters in 90 percent of California high schools and in colleges and universities all over the nation” (203). This statement

defines MEChA members as predatory “hawk(s)” that “take over” and prey on young students to recruit other students into “victimhood.” This rhetoric, which incorporates Aztlán as the reason for a “homeland invasion,” is used to target MEChA, and to solidify the shift toward apathy in student perceptions and attitudes as a whole, promoting the internalization of racism.

Consequently, there is a need to examine the way students within MEChA and those outside of this group respond to anti-immigration and anti-Mexican sentiments that are found on school campuses. Rhetoric affects how individuals think critically about local and global issues, with one end result being how internal and external colonialism affects student group interactions on campus. One of the sub-questions needing examination in this process is why some students feel compelled to identify with a political group, such as MEChA, and why other students find that identification difficult to accept for themselves, and consequently for others as well. This moment of self-affirmation is vital in understanding why some students are timid when expressing their personal political views, while others feel empowered to share their histories. This lack of self-affirmation for Chicano/a students is what Acuña understands as the “deconstruction of the Chicano identity” (*Occupied America* 272). In *Occupied America*, Acuña gives the act of redefining terms a great sense of power. He writes, “In order to change the common sense of the American public, words such as *racism* and *victim* were redefined” (272). As Acuña outlines how this redefinition occurs, he focuses on how the government legitimizes racism by concerning itself with the poverty, education and migration patterns of Mexican Americans through the act of lawmaking. He also notes the sparse numbers of Latinos in government positions throughout his text. As noted in the history Acuña provides in his text, Mexican Americans specifically have been a target of legislative oppression at the state and national level for many decades, and this history has affected students and student groups in the U.S. education system.

Living in the Duality of Legislative Oppression

To further understand the idea of self-affirmation for Chicano/a students, I return to a historical perspective of Chicanismo, defined as a militant ethos within MEChA and its tie to identity formation for students. Since the mid 1970s, there has been a downward shift in the political consciousness of student groups, especially with the loss of the Black Power Movement and other political student groups on campuses across the nation. In “Epoch of the Viva Yo Hispanic Generation (1975-1999),” Edward Navarro describes the events that led to the demise of the Chicano movement in general. He describes the factors that “contributed significantly to the demise of [Chicano] movements [as] law enforcement’s use of espionage, infiltration, subversion, and judicial litigation against its organizations and leaders. From the police to the FBI’s COINTELPRO, law enforcement agencies sought and in most cases succeeded in destabilizing and neutralizing their effectiveness” (402). Movements that were targeted by our government’s gate keeping practices were the Raza Unida Party (Jose Ángel Gutierrez), the Crusade for Justice (Corky Gonzalez), and the Brown Berets (Carlos Montes and David Sánchez) (Navarro 402). A culture of fear came to influence how political organizations were perceived, and this in turn led to a movement away from joining “militant” or “radical” political groups, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. On many campuses, MEChA found itself competing for members with groups like MASA, OELA, AMAS, and other groups that focused on promoting cultural awareness, while strategically avoiding (though not entirely) political and controversial issues.

In addition to the societal debates MEChA members were having with other Mexican American student groups, in “The Chicano Experience in Contemporary America,” Zaragosa Vargas reminds us of the backlash against difference in the 1980s: “Reaganism exacerbated

racial hostilities, which further eroded the gains made by minorities. The so-called white backlash and the rightward turn in national politics led to the suspensions of affirmative action efforts” (440). The 1980s and 1990s retrenched to abolishing bilingual education and creating an environment that persuaded adults and children into believing that class was the only basis of their oppression. Such conservative political rhetoric encouraged them to believe that their race could be ignored if they believed in Reaganism. Such politics erased the history of their Mexican ancestors, promoted assimilation, and blurred cultural, political and personal identity to the point of erasure in order to achieve individualism. This rhetoric gained fuel as “Racial minorities and women earned the attention and disfavor of the New Right spokespersons whose charge of ‘reverse discrimination’ became their main ideological weapon” (Vargas 440). Many gains were lost and government programs such as Affirmative Action were attacked.

In recent decades, Mexican American students have been affected by a variety of legislation, including the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act which punished the worker and not the employer who continued to hire undocumented workers, the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993 whose affects are deeper than this essay can cover, Proposition 187 in 1994 which denied undocumented workers from using social services, Proposition 209 in 1996 which amended the state constitution to prohibit public institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity (Vargas 440), the Civil Rights Initiatives in California and Michigan, the various bills to adopt English-Only laws, and those bills meant to abolish bilingual education in states across the nation (Colorado, Prop227-CA, Prop 203-AZ). This legislation affects individuals directly and socially by sending a message of blame to the Mexican and Mexican American population—students included. Added to this list are AZ SB 1070, which requires immigrants to carry proof of citizenship, and AZ HB 2281 (2009-present) which is treated in this essay and is central to education.

Together, this legislation and the history it supposes push students to “live in the duality in which *to be* is to *be like*, and *to be like* is to *be like the oppressor*” (Freire 30). This in turn leads to “symbolic cultural activism” (Navarro 498) for students who are (to use a well known slogan or cliché) “afraid to rock the boat.” The boat is an internalization of these issues and a move away from true political or social activism. This choice could be due to a variety of factors, including the need to feel safe on campus, feel included in classroom conversations and “communities,” and above all, make sense of the internalization of years of oppression. It is not difficult to see why Freire’s text, which advocates oppressed beings participating “in developing the pedagogy of their liberation” (30), is a target of the oppressor (HB 2281 proponents), because “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves” (Freire 47).

In order to continue the language of the oppressor, there are cultural myths at work in HB 2281. There is an image of what the oppressor looks like and what the oppressed look like. The question of who is a proponent of this bill and who is against this bill delimits those categories; often, “White Arizonians” agree with the bill while “Mexicans” do not. This sets up false borders—by nationality and consequently race. In addition, living through the duality of legislative oppression causes ethnic self-identifications to shift as assimilation occurs. It is this duality that targets students—and it is this duality that Ethnic Studies programs attempt to deconstruct. These laws caricaturize the Mexican as criminal and uneducated, and vilify those that are phenotypically dark-skinned, while socially forcing an individual to make a choice for themselves between assimilation or keeping their caricatured culture. This advances the concept of “individualism” as a mode of *American* “success” for students.

In 1969, the members of the Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education focused on the connections MEChA could make between the community and higher education—the campus and the barrio. In this document, they remind students that “MEChA must bring to mind of every young Chicano that the liberation of his people from prejudice and oppression is in his hands and that this responsibility is greater than personal achievement and more meaningful than degrees, especially if they are earned at the expense of his identity and cultural integrity” (384). Within this discussion, they also focus on the ideas of supportive groups, sympathetic administrators and community. They end their written statement with the idea “Of the community, for the community. The spirit speaks for the Race” (Vargas 386).

It is apparent that student voices tied with community voices are a strong mouthpiece for the Mexican community. In 1967, Los Cinco was formed. Within this group were five Chicano activists who began the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO): Jose Angel Gutierrez, Juan Patlan, Willie Velasquez, Ignacio Perez, and Mario Compean (Navarro *The Mexican American Youth Organization* 393). These young men “were cognizant of the contributions made by Chicano organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the GI Forum, and the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO), [but] they were [also] critical of their conservatism and saw them as not doing enough for Chicanos [...] They felt that these organizations were neither committed to nor capable of providing advocacy for the Chicanos in the barrios” (Vargas 392). It is this connection to the community, while maintaining a Chicanismo element, that MAYO has had and which helped it gain momentum through Aztlán. MEChA members remember this political activism and understand Chicanismo as being that of reclaiming the homeland of Aztlán—of “consecrating the determination of our people of the sun,” and of declaring “that the call of our blood is our

power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.” Aztlán is about working with the community, for the community, and not just the individual.

In *LULAC: Mexican Americans and National Policy*, Craig Kaplowitz writes, “Chicanos derided LULAC leaders as ‘Tio Tacos’ who rejected their cultural and racial heritage. Chicanismo celebrated a culture and racial status different from Anglos, and for them la raza was utterly distinct from whites” (130). What is interesting is that Chicanos and LULAC, much like MEChA and other Mexican American Student Groups, do make “similar demands on civic culture” (Kaplowitz 130). Therefore, how do students perceive MEChA and its membership? For some students, the choice is an either/or relationship—be a Tio Taco or a Reies Tijerina, who in 1966 was arrested for occupying the San Joaquín del Río de Chama, a land-grant park in New Mexico. Because students think they must choose either assimilation or Chicano/a activism, there has been a move away from confrontational student politics towards an *individual* study of issues, sometimes considered apathy. I use the term individual, rather than independent, because many of the arguments rallied against the Mexican American Studies Department in the Tucson Unified School District push for individualism and not community centered politics (hence the redefinition of “community organizer” by the conservative media). In many ways, individualism maintains segregation and allows for what Freire describes as “Divide and Rule” (122). Assimilation through nationalism married with patriotism is utilized as a way that “de-Mexicanize(s) them but fail(s) to Americanize them as a group, allowing them into the mainstream as individuals, not as a community” (Garcia 10). MEChA, which focuses on community politics, opposes this plan to divide and assimilate. Even so, there are individuals that move away from community-centered politics, leaving a fissure in a dialogue that could move toward a more inclusive idea of community in America.

But current Euroamerican rhetoric continues to separate. The idea that “being political” is “militant” or “confrontational” stems from some of the history I have outlined and the internalizing of governmental and media influences. This rhetoric is widespread in popular media channels. Terms such as “socialist,” “community organizer” and “liberal” are often associated with organizations that are based in a historical and political consciousness. Certain images in the media represent biased politics and MEChA is often targeted as being a militant voice on campus, with photos of Brown Berets or stereotypical representations of undocumented workers as poster children. Flyers, advertisements and editorials in newspapers mirror the national rhetoric heralded against Chicano/a student groups and the larger Latino population—specifically undocumented workers, unethically noted as “illegal aliens” and/or “invaders” in the media and used as a method of dehumanization. One example of this sort of advertisement came in the form of a flyer distributed by the College Republicans on the campus of Boise State University. It stated: “Win a Dinner for two at Chapala’s Mexican Restaurant! Climb through the hole in the fence and enter your false ID documents in the food stamp drawing.”^v In an Associated Press release, Ed Keener, the board chairman of the Interfaith Alliance of Idaho, described the effects of this unwarranted rhetoric and stated, “It certainly singles out a particular segment of students at the college and I’m pretty sure if you ask Hispanic students, this is beyond the realm of humor [...] It’s trying to hurt somebody” (Forester). These flyers prompted MEChA students and other student groups to protest the particular event, but once the event was over, the students’ activism dissolved. Armando Navarro defines this transient activism as “symbolic cultural activism” (Navarro 498), which generally ties into the “ethos of their parents,” what he terms the “Hispanic Generation” (498). I see it as much deeper than a generational issue and want to draw attention to the educational system that legislates acceptance of the status quo—the oppressor’s version of history.

Freire's and Acuña's texts are used in the classroom because they work well to unravel the racial and economic attitudes found in state legislation and in such a flyer, many examples of which can be found on campuses across the nation. Freire writes, "Conditioned by the experience of oppressing others, any situation other than their former seems to them like oppression" (39). In other words, because of global influences, immigration is perceived by the oppressor as the "taking of American jobs and freedoms." There is a two-fold approach to understanding this widely used phrase. Acuña's text lays out the history of the Bracero program and other worker programs created by the government to bring workers to the United States, and Freire's writings help to theorize this phrase by pointing out its use of blatant stereotyping and misleading as *manipulation*, where "the dominant elites try to conform the masses to their objectives. And the greater the political immaturity of these people (rural or urban) the more easily the latter can be manipulated by those who do not wish to lose their power" (128). This flyer and other artifacts similar to it illustrate the manner in which the oppressor and the oppressed are simultaneously dehumanized by this system of thought. Liberatory education attempts to move both groups outside of this system and to inspire "true reflection," which "leads to action" (Freire 48).

Negotiating the dialogue

Freire asserts that "to achieve praxis [...] it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason" (48). Achieving this trust is where his text and Acuña's text could help lead people to praxis, where reflection leads to action. Minh-ha and Wise both acknowledge the mistrust of the minor-ity's voice and ability to reason and Attorney General Eric Holder perceives this lack of trust as an issue related to our inability in being able to talk about race across the color line. In his February 18, 2009 lecture at the Department of Justice regarding the African American History Month Program, he stated:

Simply put, to get to the heart of this country one must examine its racial soul.

Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of *cowards*. Though race related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race. (Justice News, itals mine)

Dialogue about race often begins with a cowardly statement filled with stereotypes, inconsistencies, and negative overtones that are uninformed politically and economically but are almost always subliminally influenced by the history of the colonized that is not taught in our education system. This is the case with Arizona's House Bill 2281.

Subsequently, the next step is to have a dialogue about the issues found in this bill, but as long as political power is used to oppress another group, the conversation is merely a monologue. Thus, whose responsibility is it to begin a dialogue about race and racism in education? Proponents of HB 2281 have stated that Jan Brewer's signature on the bill began this dialogue while simultaneously making the argument that the left has ulterior motives in maintaining Ethnic Studies programs in order to perpetuate the Democratic party's base. Such comments negate the power structures at work in the entire political system and fail to reveal how the MASD student voices are silenced.^{vi} Thus, a first step would be in listening to the voices of the students and teachers that participate in the MASD program and other Ethnic Studies programs across the nation.

Unfortunately, in attempting to achieve a dialogue, Freire would concede that "It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education" (36). To realize the possibility of the oppressors actually implementing a

liberating education will be a long process; as is noted in the case of HB 2281, Superintendent Horne's attempt to implement his version of education is done by restricting the use of texts that do not mirror the status quo and by asking for Ethnic Studies courses to be videotaped for later use in the courtroom. Thus, it is important to note that the oppressed are hindered by the texts and procedures that comprise the education process. If, as Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is up to the oppressed to lift the veil of oppression, the oppressed then need the tools and access to do this. In order to implement a liberating education, it is essential that textbooks which include an inclusive and comprehensive history are not censored from the curriculum as a whole.

There has been an historical nationalistic push for the assimilation of othered groups and the reasons why the Mexican American population is being targeted is what needs to be revisited in this discussion. Grande illustrates a possible reason through an indigenous lens:

Indian education was never simply about the desire to “civilize” or even deculturalize a people, but rather, from its inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources. Therefore, unless educational reform happens concurrently with analyses of the forces of colonialism, it can only serve as a deeply insufficient (if not negligent) Band-Aid over the incessant wounds of imperialism. (19)

The United States is indigenous land. The concept of Aztlán, immersed in the idea of an indigenous homeland, is wrapped in myths for both Chicana/os and Euroamericans. Whether it is seen as a land of self-affirmation or as a land that will be reconquered, Aztlán embodies racial attitudes and hostilities found between these two groups. Grande's notion that education and colonialism should both be analyzed simultaneously needs to be taken into account, especially when it is the Mexican labor force being targeted by Arizona's Senate Bill 1070^{vii}. There is a

push for a cheap labor force without the commitment to treat those workers through a humanitarian lens. Although there isn't space in this essay to fully make this connection, it is important to realize that social factors make their way into both of these laws.

Ethnic Studies programs teach how systems work, providing knowledge that is important to the governance of this country. Thus, students in MEChA ground themselves within the mythical homeland of Aztlán as a place to negotiate the racial dialogue and as a place to reclaim self-affirmation, by having a voice that is heard, and an education that includes their history as part of and not outside of American history. In this way they become part of the American school system, a belonging which has been outside of their grasp for decades. To give an example of how HB 2281 will uphold the status quo by keeping Chicano students at arms length from knowledge, Herman Garcia describes how young Mexican American students are viewed in his local high schools of Las Cruces, NM and in communities across the country: students are defined as “being held suspect.” He states that these young people are always viewed as guilty in our society until proven otherwise. This guilt is prevalent and can already be felt through the absence of Chicano/a history in textbooks, the lack of respect for bilingualism in the school halls, and the anti-Mexican attitudes espoused on television and the internet which are then translated into comments by individuals “at school.” Any question as to why some students do not enjoy school should be viewed through those lenses, which the ethnocentric nature of HB 2281 will only make more difficult to manage.

There is no doubt that racism is prevalent in the education system today. This needs to be discussed, while the success of the MASD program needs validation because of the sense of respect felt by many of the students within the curriculum. This is about teaching an inclusive history in order to understand how globalization works and to better illustrate the interconnected

nature of race in the United States. David Gergen, professor and director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard, illustrates that the achievement gap must be closed, stating:

If we have a country, as we do today, with 44 percent of the people under 18 who are black or Hispanic - and that number soon is going to grow to 50 percent and higher its vital for the country that we end these injustices and end these disparities and bring people up. We've got to have educated African-Americans and Hispanics at the same rates as whites. It's hugely important for our future.

(Cox)

Under such circumstances, closing the achievement gap means respecting the history of other groups in the United States, which means that educators must teach history in a thorough and inclusive manner. HB 2281 is focused on eliminating textbooks that teach this type of history.

For example, reading the Plan of Aztlán as a historical document pushes MEChA members to connect the present with memory—to understand the paradoxes of present culture. In “The Homeland, Aztlán/El Otro Mexico,” Gloria Anzaldúa describes this same paradox in terms that could reference SB1070 and HB 2281:

Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano barrios in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as a criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S..

(Anaya and Lomeli 203)

These words are a reality that cannot be ignored for many Mexican American students. HB 2281 wishes to deny those realities—wishes to shut down any chance of a dialogue. In an interview on NPR, Maria Hinojosa stated, “There is, for the Latino population, a sentiment, if you just turn on

the Spanish language media, you see it and you hear it, you feel it in all - there's a sentiment that right now this is a population that is under attack" (Cox).

In conclusion, Hinojosa's sentiment reminds students that they are tied to a relationship between their history and one that is being constructed for them. Students must negotiate such narcissistic public systems, which include the political, racial and economic biases that influence the United States education system. Texts such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* can be seen as mechanisms that draw on the rhetoric that incorporates aspects of liberatory education for all students that can lead our society away from creating and passing bills such as HB 2281. To not think critically about HB 2281 would be to further an ideology of individualism as defined by the mainstream, the denial of Mexican American history in the United States, and the racist nativism in our education system.

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ⁱ For a definition of militant ethos, I refer to Ignacio M. Garcia's definition as "that body of ideas, strategies, tactics and rationalizations that a community uses to respond to external challenges." Garcia points to the "collective defensive and offensive mechanism that the Mexican American community uses to combat racism, discrimination, poverty, and segregation, and to define itself politically and historically" (4).

ⁱⁱ In "From the Homeland to the Borderlands, the Reformation of Aztlán," Rafael Pérez-Torres writes, "One can no longer assert the wholeness of a Chicano subject when the very discourses that go into

identity formation are themselves contradictory. It is illusory to deny the nomadic quality of the Chicano community, a community in flux that yet survives and, through survival, affirms its own self” (61).

ⁱⁱⁱ To review the entire House Bill 2281, visit:

http://www.azleg.gov/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/legtext/49leg/2r/summary/h.hb2281_03-18-10_houseengrossed.doc.htm. For this essay’s purpose, I focus on the section that states that the Legislature finds and declares that public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people. I also focus on the section that prohibits a school district or charter school from including in its program of instruction any courses or classes that:

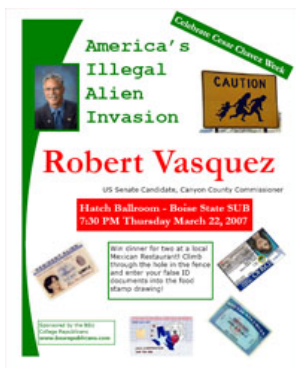
- Promote the overthrow of the United States government.
- Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
- Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
- Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.

^{iv} Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, pg. 28.

^v Freire defines manipulation as “another dimension of the theory of antialogical action, and, like the strategy of division, is an instrument of conquest” (128).

^{vi} This flyer was distributed and posted across the Boise State University campus. This flyer can also be found at:

http://mountaingoatreport.typepad.com/the_mountaingoat_report/2007/03/dinner_for_two_.html.



^{vii} 15 students were arrested for civil disobedience when protesting HB 2281. For a look at the treatment of the students who protested HB2281 at the State building in Tucson and their interpretation of this event, see “Tucson Youth Rise Up- Voices From The AZ Struggle” videotaped on Saturday 05/15/2010 by Pan Left Productions. The website address is: <http://panleft.net/cms/taxonomy/term/601>.

^{viii} Arizona’s SB1070, was authored by state Senator Russell Pearce. Part of the bill states that “a law enforcement officer, without a warrant, may arrest a person if the officer has probably cause to believe that he person has committed any public offense that makes the person removable from the United States” (<http://www.courthousenews.com/2010/04/16/AzSB1070.pdf>).