

# Nuestros Refranes:

## Culturally Relevant Writing in Tucson High Schools

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*Colonial narratives often characterize Latin@ culture and students as deficient with regard to education. These narratives persist through legislation like Arizona's House Bill 2281, which outlawed the culturally relevant curriculum of Tucson High School's Mexican American Studies program. This article argues that culturally relevant student writing that responds to a prompt about dichos or proverbial sayings in Spanish, illustrate rhetorical strategies of subversive complicity when analyzed through a decolonial framework. Written by students at multiple Tucson High schools during the controversy surrounding HB 2281, the student publication, Nuestros Refranes, serves as the site of analysis that demonstrates how students navigate institutions governed by subjugating policy.*

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*Rhetoric and Composition Studies integrally combined with Ethnic Studies that also focus on the literacy of not just Latinos/as but also of the indigenous folk in the United States, could significantly revitalize and change the colonialist nature of discourse and, more important, literacy studies in the Southwest and throughout the country.*

—Jaime Armin Mejía “Bridging Rhetoric and Composition Studies with Chicano and Chicana studies”

In the words of a high school student in Tucson, “Words of wisdom, from those who survived their grimmest days, speak in proverbs, or *dichos*, to live by” (*Nuestros Refranes*, p. 110). The knowledge transmitted in dichos is inseparable from the beliefs of the people who navigate life’s struggles according to them. Unfortunately, when the education of a people is continually policed and outlawed—as in Arizona, where this student writes—it should come as no surprise that knowledge represents survival in the face of grim opposition.

Latin@ scholars have challenged public and institutional rhetoric of cultural deficiency through the analysis of racist discourse and tropes (Martínez 2009; Nericcio 2007; Pimentel and Velazquez 2009; Villanueva 1993), projects highlighting the history of colonial struggle (Baca 2008; Pérez 1999), and the advocacy of culturally relevant curriculum (Cruz and Duff 1996; Mejía 2004). The recent legislation in Arizona of Senate Bill 1070 and House Bill 2281, which police Latin@ bodies and knowledge respectively, draws attention to the importance of scholarship that responds to oppressive rhetoric that has been reified into policy. By analyzing the writing of Latin@ students in Arizona through a decolonial framework, I examine the student publication *This We Believe/Nuestros Refranes* as a site of resistance and struggle for education, despite the efforts of ultraconservative politicians to uphold colonial narratives by dismantling programs that serve Latin@s. From the culturally relevant writing by Latin@ students, I identify rhetorical strategies of students for working within and against institutionalizing apparatuses such as the Arizona educational system.

## **TUCSON, RACIAL PROFILING, AND ANTI-ETHNIC STUDIES BAN**

During the spring of 2010, the student publication *This We Believe/Nuestros Refranes* (2010) resulted as a joint venture between the University of Arizona’s College of the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), working with both the Tucson and Sunnyside school districts. Because the student populations of these districts are predominantly Latin@, with

Tucson at 61%<sup>1</sup> and Sunnyside at 90%<sup>2</sup> respectively, the efficacy of culturally relevant writing for these communities should not be overlooked. Most importantly, *Nuestros Refranes* reflects the developing worldviews of Latin@s in the Southwest and their strategies for negotiating the enduring colonial legacy. In this discussion, the term “colonial” represents the romanticized narratives of the “West” and “frontier” Pérez (1999) refers to the colonial imaginary (p. 5). These fictional colonial narratives have become conflated with dominant views of history, which in turn authorize recent ultraconservative Arizona policy that continues the colonial subjugation of Latin@s in the Southwest.

Then, Superintendent of Education in Arizona, Tom Horne frames the dominant colonial narrative about culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy targeted by HB 2281 as “promoting ethnic chauvinism” and not teaching students “to be Americans and to treat each other as individuals” (“Arizona Legislature Passes Bill to Curb ‘Chauvinism’ in Ethnic Studies Programs”). Produced while Horne (2010) publically mischaracterized the culturally relevant Mexican American Studies (MAS) program, the culturally relevant prompt and student writing of *Nuestros Refranes* extend the work of Cruz and Duff (1996) who argue for the integration of dichos and cultural knowledge of Latin@ students. The following analysis identifies *Nuestros Refranes* as an example of decolonial resistance and constitutes what Licona (2005) describes as *sitios, lenguas y tecnologías de resistencia, y transformación*, or the sites, languages and technologies of resistance and transformation in the context of Arizona legislation (p. 105). In the contested space of Tucson, *Nuestros Refranes* serves as a site of resistance for Latin@ students because their struggle to become educated, challenges the colonial narratives in legislation that not only outlaw successful programs but also call the citizenship of Latin@s into question.

During the writing and subsequent publication of *Nuestros Refranes*, Arizona’s ultraconservative government enacted legislation targeting Latin@s as a part of the long tradition of subjugation

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1 According to Tucson Unified School Districts “Enrollment by Ethnicity” at [tusdstats.tusd.k12.az.us](http://tusdstats.tusd.k12.az.us).

2 According to “Project Graduation: The Digital Advantage,” a case study by the Sunnyside School District.

in the Southwest.<sup>3</sup> HB 2281 is only the most recent attack on the education of Latin@s in Arizona, which has included segregation, renewed segregation through re-districting, and the dismantling of bilingual education programs despite empirical evidence to the contrary by Proposition 209 (Wright 2005; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass 2010; Morales 2012). In Tucson, educating Latin@s with culturally relevant education and bilingual education can be traced to the opening of the first public school in 1868, when instruction in Spanish was a necessity.<sup>4</sup> The historical struggle for education in Arizona parallels the broader national struggle against segregation in the U.S. Sal Gabaldon, a Language Acquisition Specialist for Tucson Unified School District (TUSD), notes the ripple effect of desegregation on the education of people of color in Arizona:

[i]n 1979, Tucson Unified signed a desegregation agreement and levied a special tax to fund the cost of desegregation—including the cost of Bilingual Education and Black Studies department. In 1982 legislature approves the Arizona Bilingual Education Act. By the 1990s, the tax accounted for a large part of the district's budget—more than \$50 million, nearly all coming from the state's coffers. (Morales, 2012)

By 1998, TUSD's Bilingual Education department piloted "Exitto en Progreso," a program that provided student services, tutoring, and mentoring; it would later serve as the model for what would become the Mexican American Studies (MAS) department, offering student services and studies and teacher training ("Mexican American Student Services Historical Background"). However, by November 2000, Arizona legislators proposed, promoted, and passed Proposition 209, after receiving 63% of votes, which in turn "severely limited schools in terms of the types of instructional programs they are able to offer their ELL[English language learning] students"(Wright, 2005, p. 663). Establishing an anti-Latin@ legislative-bias, Horne ran his campaign for Superintendent of Education in Arizona on the platform of enforcing Prop 209, which dismantled bilingual

3 See Jane Hill's (1993) article "*Hasta la Vista, Baby: Anglo Spanish in the American Southwest*."

4 For a more exhaustive discussion of bilingual education in Arizona, see Sal Galbando's lecture in D.A. Morales' video "History of Bilingual Education in Arizona" available on YouTube.

education programs that disproportionately impacted Latin@s. As a part of enforcing Prop 209, Horne changed the requirements for ELL students, based on the arbitrary average scores provided by test publishers, thereby cutting short reading and writing preparation for those students developing literacy in English (Rolstad et al., 2010, p. 45).

During the 2009-10 school-year, when *Nuestros Refranes* was produced, Senate Bill 1070 passed, which allowed the local police to question people suspected of being “illegal” for documents proving their citizenship (Soto & Joseph, 2010). From my standpoint as a Chican@, SB 1070 called for the legitimacy of all Latin@s into question, by permitting racial profiling and the heightened policing of brown bodies. Additionally, students with whom I interacted with at the South Tucson high schools, confided that SB 1070 would affect people close to them and would affect the families of friends as well. Soon after the passage of SB 1070, the Arizona legislature then passed HB 2281, a house bill written by Horne (2010) to outlaw courses designed to teach Latin@ students through the implementation of culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy. The reverberations of the colonial narrative in the ultraconservative policy grew louder because of the methodological solipsism that defied the rationale of the state. According to an empirical impact analysis of the MAS program prepared by researchers at the University of Arizona’s College of Education,

MAS students who failed at least one AIMS test initially were significantly more likely to ultimately pass all three AIMS tests (see Table 2). MAS students in the 2010 cohort were 64 percent more likely to pass their AIMS tests, and MAS students in the 2008 cohort were 118 percent more likely to pass....[Regarding] graduation rate, MAS participation was a significant, positive predictor for three of the four cohorts (2008, 2009, and 2010). Students who took MAS courses were between 51 percent more likely to graduate from high school than non-MAS students (2009) and 108 percent more likely to graduate (2008). (Cabrera, Milem & Marx, 2012, p. 5-6)

Even though graduation rates and state test scores serve as educational units of measurement, HB 2281 persisted despite the fact the MAS program had demonstrated

sufficient empirical evidence in analyses of two of the three outcomes (AIMS passing and graduation) to reject the null hypothesis (i.e., there is no significant relationship)...[t]hese results suggest that there is a consistent, significant, positive relationship between MAS participation and student academic performance. (Cabrera, 2012, et al. p. 7)

Actively ignoring the positive statistical data about the MAS program, Arizona legislators enforced HB 2281 through economic force leveraged against the entire school district. As State Superintendent of Education, Tom Horne wrote HB 2281 targeting the MAS program, and his predecessor John Huppenthal subsequently enforced the policy by threatening to cut 10% from TUSD's district funding if the MAS program were not dismantled (Cheers, 2010).

## THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURE IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

Like the culturally relevant curriculum taught in TUSD's Mexican American Studies program, *Nuestros Refranes* shows how writing that engages with culture, has the potential to improve the education of Latin@s. Unfortunately, there are still scholars who actively advocate against culture in writing classes, by arguing that the issues in discussions of cultural diversity and multiculturalism contain political agendas. In *Save the World on Your Own Time*, Fish (2008) explains that he begins a writing course by telling students "we are not interested in ideas...except how prepositions or participles or relative pronouns function" (p. 40). By Fish's definition, the rules of grammar signify the entirety of teaching writing; this definition drastically reduces the scope of the field of composition studies, while imposing an ideology that does not account for cultural difference. While Fish argues that his classes are content-free, he focuses on grammar as his heuristic for improving his students' writing; however, by emphasizing the rules that regulate and authorize language according to a Standard English ideal, Fish uncritically perpetuates hegemonic ideology. Simply stated, Fish argues "composition courses should teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else" (p. 44). Even

in Fish's inclusion of rhetoric, he ignores the ideologies and politics of choosing a rhetorical framework. For educators and rhetoricians, the desire to better educate Latin@ student writers is fraught with cultural implications, due to social and institutional inequalities that many educators must account for as a part of their rhetorical situation.

Fish's argument is neither new, nor original. In 1992, a similar argument arose in rhetoric and composition studies, in response to the growing number of first-year writing courses moving away from the influence of literary studies to politically-oriented multicultural curriculums. In "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," Hairston (1992) attributed the influx of "higher purposes" into composition classrooms as a result of deficient training on the part of graduate teaching assistants (p. 185). Hairston explains that,

[t]oo often they [graduate students] haven't been well trained in how to teach writing and are at a loss about what they should be doing with their students. How easy then to focus the course on their own interests, which are often highly political. Unfortunately, when they try to teach an introductory composition course by concentrating on issues rather than on craft and critical thinking, large numbers of their students end up feeling confused, angry—and cheated. (p. 185)

While the professional development of instructors remains a perennial issue of higher education, Hairston dismisses politically-oriented issues of diversity as not critical thinking. Demonstrating reductive approaches to cultural diversity, she asks, "What about Hispanic culture? Can the teacher who knows something of Mexico generalize about traditions of other Hispanic cultures?" (p. 190). When Hairston advocates for craft and critical thinking, the student population she envisions, is no doubt, predominantly white, comforted by their reassuring knapsacks of privilege<sup>5</sup>. However, the demographics of student populations have changed in the last two decades; therefore Hairston's (1992) argument for teaching critical thinking without culture has less import for spaces like the Southwest.

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5 See Peggy McIntosh's (2003) "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack."

Like Fish (2008), even when Hairston preaches for an absence of politics, her argument reflects an ideology of privilege that does not anticipate the needs of the changing student population. When those in power advocate against culture in education, they further espouse the dominance of white culture, history, and ways of knowing. In the local context of Arizona, the case of House Bill 2281 demonstrates how the silencing of culture negatively impacts the education of Latin@s.

Prior to Fish, Bloom's (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind* made similarly reductive arguments about the role of higher education. Bloom squarely comes down against "cultural" texts; instead, he argues for focusing specifically on the "Great Books" tradition. Advocating for an "old, dead, white men" curriculum, Bloom (1987) argues that steps forward in racial desegregation in higher learning via affirmative action contribute not only to the deterioration of the university but also to "the relations between the races in America" (p. 97). By hedging arguments against affirmative action within claims about race relations, Bloom (1987) makes it possible to draw parallels between championing the "Great Books" curriculum and the colonial rejection of programs aimed at countering systemic inequality. Bloom's (1987) "Great Books" advocacy and Fish's (2008) "grammar and rhetoric" arguments, dismiss the generative heuristic culture and provides for underrepresented student populations, ignoring students who are disenfranchised by the kind of rote writing instruction that more often occurs in under-funded and over-crowded institutions where innovative instruction lacks support.

The narrow definition of composition that Fish (2008) outlines in *Save the World* dismisses developments in student-centered pedagogical practices that engage with the cultures of underrepresented student populations. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) trace the development and reasoning behind culture-oriented pedagogical practices, discussing the transition from responding to culture to the integration of material that reflects the culture of students. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) come to the notion of culturally-relevant pedagogy, following Au & Jordan's (1981) discussion of "culturally appropriate" pedagogy of teachers in Hawaiian schools permitting students to use *talk story* (as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995,



p. 466) and Mohatt & Erickson's (1981) "culturally congruent" focus on Native American and Anglo "mixed forms" (as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, p. 466). Discussing the different forms of curriculum and pedagogy, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain "culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, and culturally compatible—seem to connote accommodation of student culture to mainstream culture...culturally responsive appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture" (p. 467). Even though this discussion is framed by the term culturally relevant, the advocacy to be inclusive of culture stems from the need to better educate and retain diverse student populations—the "grammar and rhetoric only" paradigm that Fish (2008) espouses has already proven inadequate.

In rhetoric and composition, Latin@ scholars (Baca 2008; Mejía 2004; Villanueva 1993) have argued for more attention to rhetoric of the Americas and culturally relevant writing practices for Latin@ students. In his contribution to *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies*, Mejía (2004) advocates for the field's integration of culturally relevant material in order to benefit students of color. Specifically, Mejía (2004) argues that these materials possess rhetorical potential for bilingual and bicultural students from the region near the U.S.-Mexico border to reverse the negative effects of institutionalized education. Drawing on dichos as an example, Mejía (2004) asserts that the "truth, of course, is that corridos (ballads), dichos (proverbial sayings), and tallas (jokes) do exist; yet rhetorical studies of these texts remain to be conducted" (p. 175). To succeed in the "contact zone" of southern Arizona high schools, Latin@ students in Tucson deploy strategies of what Medina (2013) calls subversive complicity as they work within spaces of ideological opposition to their success. In a publication of essays written by high school students in Tucson, the purposeful inclusion of dichos in the writing prompt for the student publication follows what Mejía (2004) notes as the current lack of attention given to these kinds of rhetorical productions. Some students use culturally relevant dichos, or proverb-like sayings in Spanish, which represent discursive mantras and truisms that name the strategies they perform. In *Nuestros Refranes* (2010), the writing illustrates both the use of culturally relevant dichos, and the rhetorical strategies that students practice while overcoming educational barriers.

## DECOLONIAL STRATEGIES OF SUBVERSIVE COMPLICITY

In Tucson, colonial narratives framing Latin@s as anti-American and ethnocentric, subjugate and dismiss the accomplishments of students. Still, programs like the New Start summer bridge program at the University of Arizona, a six week academic course with peer-mentoring classes and resident hall activities, represent a model at the programmatic level that serves underrepresented student populations and first generation college students. For more than 40 years, the predominantly Latin@ summer bridge program has helped familiarize students with the university and build confidence by creating classroom and peer communities that continue throughout the school year. Summer bridge programs create decolonial spaces where lessons and discussions among students, peer-mentors, and instructors about issues of race, gender, and class privilege in the university reflect the realities of students more so than during the regular school year when there are few students of color in a given classroom. In this discussion of Latin@s and education, I speak of decolonial theory, writing, and practices as those which work against hegemonic institutions and policies that support colonial assumptions of white supremacy.

In her *Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Pérez (1999) discusses the writing of history as little more than the transcribing of fictional narratives that validate and are authorized by colonial power. Breaking away from the colonial histories that omit the agency of brown bodies, especially Chicanas, Pérez (1999) theorizes her decolonial imaginary as a method for re-reading and re-writing history in the “time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (p. 6). As a theory for re-writing Chicana agency into the history of Mexico, Pérez’s (1999) decolonial imaginary provides a generative framework for recovering agency in textual data amid colonial narratives. In terms of the decolonial imaginary, the writing by Chican@s can be seen as the “silences” in response to the dominant, colonial narratives of Horne, Huppenthal, Brewer, and other ultraconservative opponents of Latin@s in Arizona. Pérez argues that “these silences, when heard, become the negotiating spaces for the decolonizing subject” (p. 5). As culturally relevant writing outside the control of legislated curriculum, *Refranes*

*Refranes* (2010) creates a discursive space where Latin@ students reflect their cultural identity while writing in a context apart from discourses and apparatus that frame them as educationally deficient. *Nuestros Refranes* possesses rhetorical potential while subverting the expectations that are transmitted in colonial narratives about communities with Mexican heritage. By analyzing *Nuestros Refranes* through the framework of Pérez's (1999) decolonial imaginary, the rhetorical strategies of Latin@ students can be identified outside of the colonial context created by ultraconservative policy.

For the analysis of culturally relevant writing by Latin@ students, Pérez's (1999) theoretical framework of the decolonial imaginary makes it possible to identify strategies of resistance to dominant narratives and historical fiction about Latin@s in the Southwest. The publication of *Nuestros Refranes* by a third-party grant separate from school, functions as the interstitial space that "can help us rethink history in a way that makes Chicana/o agency transformative" (Pérez, 1999, p. xviii). The decolonial imaginary also facilitates the evaluation of discursive productions that challenge dominant deficit narratives about Latin@s and writing given that "writing, for most school children, is nearly always school sponsored and inevitably, therefore, reflects the culture of the school system and reproduces culturally preferred discourse styles" (Leki, 1991, p. 124). As a theoretical framework, the decolonial imaginary applies a method for interpreting and re-imagining the agency of students facing obstacles. The analysis of *Nuestros Refranes* also provides the space to illuminate strategies of subversive complicity—which I describe in more detail later, though can be described as the practices and approaches for working from within, while working against oppressive systems.

In *Nuestros Refranes* (2010), one of the main strategies that breaks from writing authorized by colonial standards is the use of code-switching. Code-switching has been defined as "the use of two or more languages in the same conversation or utterance" (Gardner-Chloros, 1997, p. 361). Bridging students' home culture with school assignments, including the use of home languages, builds confidence, while representing a validation of linguistic diversity that has been previously framed as a deficiency. Discussing the use of code-

switching in literature, Torres (2007) explains the complexity of the strategy and the variety of access it allows:

Through strategies that range from very infrequent and transparent use of Spanish to prose that requires a bilingual reader, Latino/a authors negotiate their relationships to homelands, languages, and transnational identifications. The strategies they use lend themselves to multiple readings and differing levels of accessibility. (p. 76)

For this reason, code-switching can be seen as a subversive performance of Latin@ culture in a discursive production, especially within an academic institution that schools students in the dominant culture. In the historical context of Proposition 209 and the dismantling of bilingual education, the Spanish language in Arizona has been shown to threaten the cultural superiority of whites in Arizona; therefore, the weaving of Spanish words and phrases within writing in English reinscribes important threads that inter-stitch the conflict of colonial and indigenous languages in the Southwestern linguistic tapestry.

Code-switching is not only something that I advocate for students. Many of the rhetorical strategies of Latin@ students that I identify are in fact terms in Spanish that other Latin@ scholars have re-appropriated from different contexts. One such term that embodies a will to survive while appropriating resources at hand is *rascuache*. Spener (2010) describes *rascuache* as, “the sensibility of *los de abajo* (the underdogs), whose resourcefulness and ingenuity permit them to overcome adversity by stitching together the tools needed to survive from whatever materials they have at hand” (p. 9). Working from within academic institutions not valuing culture, students require the ability to survive, often needing to “make do” with available resources. While Spener (2010) looks at the strategy of *rascuache* during the journey of migrants, Ybarra-Frausto (1991) demonstrates the applications of *rascuache* when describing the repurposing of what is at hand and appropriation by artists. As with the other strategies, *rascuache* fits within the performance of subversive complicity, by appropriating from dominant ideologies in order to challenge the hegemony.

While the strength of *rascuache* comes from the actions of an individual, Urrieta's (2009) *Working from Within: Chicana and Chicano Activist Educators in Whitestream Schools* focuses on strategies deployed by groups. Looking at collaborative exchanges of power, Urrieta (2009) defines *transas* literally as transactions, "which in Mexican folk knowledge are strategic and commonly known, but usually clandestine, practices used by people with less power to subvert, or get around, the system" (p. 11). Perhaps more salient to this discussion than *transas* is the strategy that relies on collaboration among like-minded people, a *movida*. Urrieta (2009) discusses *movidas* "as 'moves' rather than movements, because moves emphasize the active nature of a *movida* to carry out a carefully strategized plan" (p. 170). Implementing a culturally relevant writing prompt for *Nuestros Refranes* was achieved by multiple people working together on the grant, all of whom were actively engaged with the lives, languages, and cultures of the Latin@ students in Tucson. By asking for Spanish *dichos* in the writing prompt, the grant employees enacted a *movida*, subverting hegemonic expectations of what student writing should entail.

Urrieta's (2009) *transas* and *movidas* draw attention to the exchanges of power, pointing out the role that instructors can play in helping students who experience marginalization. Similarly, the strategy that perhaps occurs the most in *Nuestros Refranes* is what Valenzuela (1999) identifies in *Subtractive Schooling* as the support networks of Latin@ students with "pro-school ethos" (p. 28). Valenzuela characterizes the education of students in underfunded and overcrowded schools as "schooling," much like the institutionalizing effects of Prop 209 and HB 2281. These students are able to navigate schools that work against them because the students are like-minded about succeeding academically and support one another. All of these strategies reinforce the subversive complicity of those who choose to 'play the game' while subverting and working against it.

For Latin@ students, maintaining a pro-school ethos is important in the face of deficit discourses that undergird the colonial narratives about white superiority. In a critical analysis of media, Yosso (2002) notes the desire of her students to prove stereotypical media representations wrong. Yosso (2002) notes a strategy of resistance

when “students verbalized the drive to ‘prove them wrong,’...[and] *show* that Chicanas/os can succeed, and *overcome* ignorant ideas that Latinas/os are inferior to whites” (author’s emphasis p. 56). Proving them wrong names a strategy that motivates students to respond to apparatus of oppression, whether it comes from legislation or other misrepresentative symbolic action. While policy such as HB 2281 portrays Latin@ students in the MAS program as anti-American or ethno-centric, media representations of Latin@ students as bandito gangbangers and sexualized Latinas reinforce similar assumptions about Latin@s as educationally deficient (Yosso, 2002, p. 55).

In this article, one of the assumptions and central arguments for analyzing Latin@ student essays is that writing originating from a culturally-relevant prompt about dichos includes rhetorical strategies for succeeding in school. In Tucson, researcher and educator MaryCarmen Cruz has worked for many years in TUSD, teaching and overseeing projects related to bilingual education and culturally relevant writing, including dichos. An active member of NCTE Latina/o caucus and contributor to *English Journal*, Cruz continues to mentor teachers early in their careers at TUSD. More than a decade before the writing of *Nuestros Refranes*, Cruz and Duff (1996) explains that the use of dichos to write “touches on students’ funds of knowledge but also enriches their language skills” (p. 116). I argue that these strategies reflect the consciousness of students who work within while working against institutions governed by oppressive policy; these strategies possess the quality of what I call subversive complicity or the rhetorical performance of “conformist resistance” discussed by Valenzuela (1999), Yosso (2002), and Cammarota (2004). Dichos, as a genre of proverbial sayings and expressions, transmit advice or insight from the speaker to the audience. For the student publication discussed below, students were specifically asked to write about the dicho they thought about or represented their mindset when they experienced obstacles.

## NUESTROS REFRANES

In addition to the analysis of *Nuestros Refranes* (2010) using Pérez’s (1999) decolonial imaginary, I write from a unique role of having served on the grant sponsoring the publication of the student essays and from having participated in the editorial process once the essays

had been written, revised, and submitted. While I did not work with students during the writing process, which created the essays found in *Nuestros Refranes* (2010), I had opportunities to visit many of the participating schools and to interact with different cohorts of students during the academic year when the book was published. Even though students were aware their essays would become a part of a published collection that is publically displayed<sup>6</sup>, I refrain from using students' names because of their ages. Also, I purposely avoid the use of the students' gender with students so as not to reinforce any socially-constructed assumptions that the marking of gender that could potentially be implied.

Because rhetorical strategies can be performed by students and complicit educators, I begin with the writing of an adult "college coach" because she acknowledges how writing with dichos relates to education. In the introduction to the school, college coach Karen Rosales writes, "*Dime con quién andas y te dire quién eres,*" "[T]ell me with whom you hang around, and I will tell you the kind of person you are]...[t]he people you surround yourself with have an impact in your daily life" (Rosales in *Nuestros Refranes*, 2010, p. 67). Using a dicho that addresses community and importance of aligning oneself with others who share similar stances towards succeeding, Rosales (2010) advises using the strategy of support networks of like-minded students (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 28). As an adult in a position of power relative to the students writing for the collection, the college coach recognizes her agency and ability to inspire pro-school ethos and movidas among students at different points in their academic careers. Considering the different levels of power within a network and community, it should be noted how these strategies and practices apply to people at different levels of power. As both visible and invisible, participants in movidas support networks working together, to accomplish a task that benefits an individual within the movida or the community as a whole.

Rosales' (2010) writing demonstrates subversive complicity as she praises the writing of students, while at the same time acknowledging the obstacles students face. Rosales (2010) explains that, "[t]he entries you find in this book demonstrate their dreams, motivations,

6 *Nuestros Refranes* has been archived at the University of Arizona's Special Collections, where it is available to the public.



and struggles” (p. 67). The performance of subversive complicity can be seen in the epideictic rhetoric Rosales (2010) employs to garner recognition for the writing, although the inclusion of “struggle” following the positive signifiers of “dreams” and “motivations” alludes to the necessity of resistance. In the rhetoric of the Chican@ Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, also referred to as *El Movimiento*, the term “struggle” signifies the numerous individual and collective acts of resistance to oppression in white institutions, as discussed in Rosales (2010). Whether the use of the term “struggle” by the college coach was a conscious decision, the term nonetheless echoes the subversive message in the tradition of *El Movimiento* and alludes to contemporary issues.

For Latin@ students in Tucson, struggle can refer to the individual student’s experience with survival in and out of academic institutions. A South Tucson student in *Nuestros Refranes* (2010) engages with a dicho which takes on a more literal discussion of survival:

*La vida es muy corta. La vida no se termina...Tu la terminas!* [Life is very short. Life doesn’t end...you end it yourself!] This is the dicho that my mom always tells me. She tells me this when I make bad decisions and when I expose myself to danger...[my cousin] is involved in gang[sic] and everyday he is a danger to himself. Last month my Tia, my cousin’s mother, went to my mom’s work pleading for help. My Tia asked for some money to send Juanito to another state because there were people looking for him to assassinate him. (p. 36)

For this student, survival is much more tangible than the more abstract notion of succeeding in school. However, the linguistic shift into Spanish in the beginning demonstrates a conscious code-switch. Because the writing prompt from the publication is primarily in English but asks students about the culturally-relevant Spanish term dicho, the potential for the presence of code-switching in the students’ writing increases significantly. However, the presence of code-switching plays an important role in the cultural allegiance and engagement demonstrated in *Nuestros Refranes* (Ferguson 1971). The students’ rhetorical choice of dicho draws parallels between becoming educated and acknowledging the agency of self-determinism. At the



same time, the use of the cousin as a precautionary tale reminds readers not only of the obstacles that students face outside of school but also of the systemic inequality that perpetuates when education is not a priority of those in power.

For migrant Latin@ students, culturally relevant writing also creates a space for students to write literacy narratives with the subtext of crossing cultures. In “Receiving and Sharing Kindness,” a student recounts the difficulties experienced when moving from Mexico and not being able to speak English. In a demonstration of the ability to write complicit in *Nuestros Refranes* (2010), the Mexico-born student responds entirely in English:

[W]hen I first moved here from Mexico; I didn't know any English and I was scared that I would never be able to learn it. School was a scary situation, but I soon found all those kids who, like me, needed a friend to carry on. We all stuck together and hung on to each other as if we were drowning...During my loner years in middle school...I thought that if I talked I would be punished. (p. 81)

When the student writes about sticking together with other recent migrants to “carry on,” the student identifies the strategy of participating in support networks of students with a pro-school ethos described in Valenzuela (1999). The writer identifies “those kids who, like me needed a friend” (p. 81) as the support network who shared the same experience as the author, continuing in school despite perceived peril in an unwelcoming environment. As in the movida strategy, the students rely on the collective action as a survival strategy for negotiating and successfully overcoming the foreign academic institution.

The experience of “Receiving and Sharing Kindness” in *Nuestros Refranes* (2010) addresses the topic of immigration in the U.S., a highly politicized subject in light of SB 1070, despite the tradition of migration through the Americas pre-existing colonial presence (Baca, 2008). Language serves as an ethnic marker that Arizona law officials can use while participating in state sanctioned racial profiling. The use of language to police Latin@s is a central issue

raised in Anzaldúa's (1987) "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," when she explains, "speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler" (p. 75). Even though the student from Mexico is not physically punished as Anzaldúa was for speaking Spanish in school, the fear of punishment persists decades later as a side-effect of the colonial narrative's ideology. The impact of SB 1070's ideology on Latin@s cannot be easily dismissed, especially when Arizona's Superintendent of Public Education John Huppenthal describes of the effects of immigration as a "nuclear blast of illegal aliens" (McGinnis, 2011).

The language used by policymakers reflects specific ideologies that uphold colonial beliefs about racial supremacy while dismissing the history, knowledge, and culture of non-whites. Comparatively, the language used by Latin@ students and their choice of dichos draw attention to more complex histories of language and diversity within a culture. In *Nuestros Refranes's* (2010) "You Can't Whistle and Eat Pinole," a student responds to the culturally relevant prompt with a dicho that provokes analysis into the historical trajectory of Spanish in the U.S. The student writes, "*No puedes chiflar y comer pinole* means that you can't be doing twenty things at a time" (p. 104). This dicho, which incorporates the coarsely ground flour pinole, could be read as embodying the pro-school ethos strategy—it recommends focusing on doing what's necessary, foregoing extraneous, and even pleasurable, distractions. Beyond the surface message, the code-switching that takes place in this particular dicho does not possess an exact English translation. The inclusion of "pinole" adds a layer of meaning due to the linguistic *mestizaje*, the mixing of Spanish and Indigenous language, performed in this dicho. Pinole can in fact be traced to an Aztec or Nahuatl root word. According to the book named *Pinole*, "[t]he Native Americans gave the Spanish a gift of a ground foodstuff made of acorns, seeds, and grain, which Father Crespi recorded as pinolli, an Aztec word for flour meal" (Marriotti et al., 2009, p. 13). The integration of Spanish dichos in writing assignments reveals added complexities about etymology, indigenous language, and histories of colonialism; additionally, these kinds of hermeneutic practices reinforce lessons about language to students through cultural reference points with which they are already familiar.

The topic of language frequently surfaces in the writing of Latin@ students experiencing difficulties in school. In *Nuestros Refranes's* (2010) "Manifest," a student describes trouble with English while demonstrating a 'prove them wrong' rhetorical strategy. The student writes,

I used to struggle speaking English. I felt as if I was a nobody, as if I was the red vase that screamed to be recognized in the all white room...They would make fun of me and tease me, saying that I would never be able to speak English. I knew I had to find a technique or method to catch up to them and that was my goal. So I started by going to tutoring and putting my free time into studying...I did everything in my power to show them I had a great mind and I had the capability of speaking English. (p. 86)

From the outset, the student's description mirrors what Anzaldúa (1987) calls linguistic terrorism when writing that "if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language" (p. 81). Unfamiliarity with the English language causes the student to feel like a "nobody," which is indicative of institutional cultures, where those with the greatest need often receive the least attention. In spite of marginalization, the students' decision to seek out tutoring despite negative experiences performs subversive complicity; by demonstrating a willingness to work within the system, the student acquires "power to show them I had a great mind" (*Nuestros Refranes*, 2010, p. 86).

By acquiring linguistic abilities, the student proves wrong those who teased or made the student to feel deficient about cognitive abilities. Challenging expectations, the student overcomes linguistic terrorism by seeking out resources and performing the *rascuache* strategy that makes use of available resources for survival. In an acknowledgement of success, the student explains, "I'm bilingual and I'm not shy about it. In fact, I see it as a benefit to my education and career...Knowledge makes life easier" (*Nuestros Refranes*, 2010, p. 86). The student contests the colonial narrative in policy, such as Proposition 209 that frames the bilingualism of Latin@s as a deficit, while embodying the pro-school ethos of subversive complicity that works with others in a *movida* to become educated.

The resilience of the students in *Nuestros Refranes* (2010) deserves recognition not only because of the life obstacles that they recount. These students also deserve recognition for their ability to navigate the underfunded and overcrowded academic institutions in a state where legislators and voters actively work to subjugate Latin@s. One student personifies this sentiment when noting that the important thing to do in life is to take risks “and learning to improve. Push yourself for goals to be reached and always remember never to back down from success. If you never take a risk, you will never grasp on to what you are aiming for” (p. 61). The student’s message of encouragement to succeed serves as a reminder of what is at stake in the struggle for Latin@s to become educated. If successful programs continue to be outlawed and dismantled, then students will imagine fewer and fewer possibilities beyond the limited options that ultraconservative policy outlines for them.

In many ways, *Nuestros Refranes* (2010) would not have been possible were it not for the transa (transaction) strategy. This publication came about as a result of necessary transactions with administrative power. Serving on the grant funding the student publication, I worked within the institutional systems, performing the transa of volunteering my time, effort, and leadership to co-edit the text with the intention of producing a collection that represents the culture of the students. Up until that point, the grant administrators had been prepared to cut the project of the student publication. For the grant and school administrators, the trade in cultural capital for the production of the book outweighed the allotment of funds for printing and dedicated class periods.

As a complicit collaborator with Tucson high schools, the GEAR UP grant subverted existing controversies about culturally relevant class work by trading in cultural capital of the university and the U.S. Department of Education, which funded the GEAR UP grant. Collaborating with grant colleagues possessing similar viewpoints about integrating Latin@ culture in the publication of student essays, I helped craft a prompt with bilingual Latin@ and non-Latin@ colleagues. Together, the work of my colleagues characterized a movida of working against Arizona’s anti-Latin@ sentiment while serving as complicit representatives of the higher education system.

## 'ILLEGAL' KNOWLEDGE

In a state where HB 2281 outlaws the culturally relevant curriculum of the Mexican American program and Prop 209 dismantles bilingual education, the struggle for knowledge by Latin@s cannot be ignored. In an interview with Lunsford (2004), Anzaldúa explains that knowledge is considered dangerous because of the consciousness it creates:

[O]ne of the ideas that I'm working with is *conocimiento*, the Spanish word for knowledge, for ways of knowing. Those ideas come to me in Spanish and in visuals. So when I think 'conocimiento,' I see a little serpent for counter-knowledge. This is how it comes to me that this knowledge, this 'counter-knowledge,' is not acceptable, that it's the knowledge of the serpent of the garden of Eden. It's not acceptable to eat the fruit of knowledge; it makes you too aware, too self-reflective. (p. 53)

HB 2281 demonstrates all too well Anzaldúa's claim in Lunsford (2004) about the self-reflection and awareness that takes place in *Nuestros Refranes* (2010), which could be perceived as dangerous for Latin@s by those who benefit from subjugating people of color. HB 2281 shades this discussion of culturally relevant writing because of how the bill effectively frames the MAS program as "illegal" curriculum and pedagogy. Subsequently, this bill and similar legislation reaffirm the necessity for the rhetorical strategies of subversive complicity that students perform while gathering necessary skills and information for the strengthening of local communities. Unfortunately, the academic success of Latin@s in Arizona has to remain subversive, without overtly challenging narratives of those in power that police the knowledge about non-white languages, cultures, and histories.

The historical moment that overshadows the authorization of Latin@ identity and education in Arizona informs my experiences as an educator and scholar. Decolonial frameworks create liberatory spaces where student texts can be read apart from colonial narratives that serve larger myths undergirding the subjugation of people of color. While scholars like Fish (2008) argue that writing classes should be without "ideas," researchers and educators who integrate culture actively contest the schooling and institutionalization that

frame students of color as falling short of colonial imitation. Mejía (2004) reaffirms the liberatory potential of culturally relevant writing assignments: “[b]y introducing readings and topics these students can more readily identify with, compositionists can offer students a set of problematics which unquestionably have the potential of empowering them” (p. 194). Additionally, culturally relevant material supports students in “negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence... [and] provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 476). The conscious implementation of culturally relevant writing practices enables subversive complicity and the rhetorical strategies that demonstrate the agency of Latin@ students as they navigate academic institutions.

## **CRITICAL HOPE**

As important predecessors in this continuing struggle, the past efforts of Latin@ educators should not go unacknowledged. The work of Tucson educator María L. Urquides, often referred to as the “mother of bilingual education,” along with Adalberto Guerrero and Henry Oyama established TUSD’s Bilingual Education program, thereby making the very creation of TUSD’s MAS program possible. At the university level, Roseann Dueñas González established multiple programs serving underrepresented student populations while becoming the first female Mexican American full professor at the University of Arizona. Founding the NCTE Rainbow Strand, serving on the NCTE executive committee, and serving as Latina/o Caucus chair, González received the NCTE Distinguished Service Award in recognition of her leadership that provides a model for coming generations.

Since Huppenthal declared TUSD’s MAS program in violation of HB 2281, there has been community action in the form of Tucson Banned Book Club and Tucson Freedom Summer, a series of events and protests at TUSD board meetings during the summer of 2012. In addition to the journalism of Biggers (2012) that covered Tucson and the MAS program, scholars including Soto and Joseph (2010), Ramirez-Dhoore (2011), and Rodriguez (2011) have issued critical responses to the ultraconservative rhetoric of Tom Horne, HB 2281, and SB 1070. In the realm of public policy, there has been cause for

optimism. Near the end of 2012, the 1978 federal desegregation order was found to have culturally relevant classes at its core<sup>7</sup>, prompting members of the TUSD school board to change their position on the MAS program. At the same time, former MAS English teacher Curtis Acosta continued to teach students in an after-school program in Tucson, for which Prescott Community College plans to offer college credit.<sup>8</sup> In TUSD, the Lee Instructional Resource Center continues to provide instructors with access to 30,000 items available for use by TUSD educators, including books, journals, artifacts, exhibits, sculptures, art prints, costumed figures, textiles, and videos.<sup>9</sup>

## AN ONGOING DECOLONIAL NARRATIVE

The claims and supporting data about the outcomes of TUSD's MAS students, represent an educational oasis for Latin@ students experiencing institutional oppression. In the New Start Program, I have taught many students from Tucson and South Tucson; in my opinion, the MAS graduates in my classes have been extremely well-prepared and critically conscious, though continuing to experience frustration and sadness over the effects of HB 2281. The perspectives of these students echo Pérez's (1999) reminder that culture has the potential to inspire "the emergence of a Chicano/a historical imagination that constructs a specific consciousness" (p. xviii). The writing from Tucson at the time of HB 2281 represents the resistance of Latin@s to the rhetoric and policy, framing them as not wanting to learn as they continue to work within and navigate the institutions governed by oppressive ideology. Unfortunately, my students from South Tucson schools reported no personal knowledge or publicized increases in graduation or college enrollment rates, despite the fact that the grant on which I served specifically targeted their graduation year. Still, these students express the same resilience and determination to become educated as the students I taught from those schools in prior years. For many students and educators in Tucson, the effects of texts like *Nuestros Refranes* (2010) can appear ephemeral—like mirages in an unrelenting, ultraconservative

7 "Could MAS Program Return? TUSD Passes Unitary Status Plan." *News 4 Tucson*. KVOA.com. 11 Dec. 2012 Web. 18 Dec. 2012.

8 See Jeff Biggers' "Freedom College: Prescott School Grants Credits to Outlawed Mexican American Studies Course in Tucson."

9 See TUSD's Educational Materials Center website at <http://www.tusd1.org/contents/depart/emc/aboutus.asp>.

landscape—especially when Latin@s are marginalized for the sake of fictional narratives of the colonial frontier. Yet, the history of Latin@s and education in Arizona and the U.S. is one of struggle. And it is a narrative that continues without an end, continually rewritten through the work of activists and scholars and the teachings of educators who resist rhetoric of deficiency in the lives of students, families, and the communities they serve.

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