

The Eagle Meets the Seagull:

The Critical, Kairotic & Public Rhetoric of Raza Studies Now in Los Angeles

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“(Chican@ Studies) will help in creating and giving impetus to that historical consciousness which Chicanos must possess in order successfully to struggle as a people toward a new vision of Aztlan.”

—*El Plan de Santa Barbara* (1969)

“When your education is under attack, what do you do?! Fight Back!!...”

—UNIDOS chant at April 26, 2011 Tucson School Board Take-Over

On July 14, 2013, a group of education activists in Southern California held the 2nd annual Raza Studies Now Conference at Santa Monica College and presented a draft of the *Plan de Los Angeles* (PLA), a manifesto for spreading Ethnic Studies in local high schools.¹

1 Razastudiesnow.com



RSN logo/arte by Raul Gonzalez/Mictlan Murals.

The Raza Studies Now (RSN) group represents a cross section of Raza education activists in Southern California: some are veteran college professors, adjunct faculty, K-12 teachers, teachers from Semillas del Pueblo charter school in East LA, local community college MEChA students, PhD students, parents and community members. Most joined RSN or attended the conference in response to the struggle to defend the high school-level Mexican American Studies Department (MAS) in Arizona and united to spread the message that Chican@ and Ethnic Studies could create unique experiences with positive results for high school and community college students in Southern California.

This essay looks at rhetorical strategies evident in the civic writing of the RSN group and its connections to the ongoing struggle in Arizona to defend the Mexican American Studies Department (MAS). By drawing parallels and distinctions between California and Arizona, I argue that distinct rhetorical strategies are emerging, which are connected to a Chican@ activist rhetorical tradition, and that these circulate in the realm of *nomos* (habits, customs). As Susan Jarratt explains, *nomos* unhinges the privileged rule of *logos* and “determines behavior and activity through convention.” These uses, strategies, and expressions reflect a Chican@ activist rhetorical tradition in the way they “foreground the perception of shared interests necessary for rhetoric to work” (Jarratt 41).

For this reason, my essay also makes connections to Cruz Medina's essay in this collection, "Nuestros Refranes: Culturally Relevant Writing in Tucson High Schools," which revisits Arizona's House Bill 2281 and theorizes on the rhetorical strategies active in culturally relevant education, particularly the use of *dichos* in *Nuestros Refranes*, a Tucson student publication. Medina makes important observations about the simultaneity of effects of right wing, anti-Latino discourse - SB 1070 and HB 2281 - that "polices brown bodies and minds." His use of Emma Perez' concept of the decolonial imaginary to frame culturally relevant education and student writing is innovative, especially his clear explanation of how colonial narratives restrain Raza students within a deficit model. By challenging dominant deficit narratives about Latin@s and writing, "*Nuestros Refranes* 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" (Medina). This rhetorical strategy of working within, yet against oppressive systems, is what Medina calls a "subversive complicity" (Medina). Toward the end of my essay, I compare and distinguish between subversive complicity and what I have termed *pleito* rhetoric, a sort of Chicano *parrhesia* (fearless, dangerous speech). These rhetorical strategies will continue to be relevant as Chican@ Studies and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy increasingly become national issues.

These reflections on the 2012 and 2013 Raza Studies Now Conferences highlight the civic writing and rhetorical tools we sought to exploit in spreading the word and moving the masses. The conferences highlighted key concepts currently circulating in Chican@/Latin@ and Ethnic rhetorics. Like Jaime Mejia's work that bridges Chicano Studies and Rhetoric/Composition, the RSN conferences - from press releases, digital media, programs, and speeches - also circulated in spaces where rhetoric, education, literacy and the public converge. Like Damian Baca's concept of *mestiz@ rhetoric*, we invented from different ways of knowing towards a decolonization of education. Organizers in particular consistently dealt with issues of *kairos* (the opportune moment, the suitable), *logos*, and *nomos*, especially, as we moved to maximize mass collective participation in our mission.

The conferences were also a collective meditation on public schooling and the purpose of education, culminating in the writing of the *Plan de Los Angeles* (PLA), a sort of manifesto-guidebook for establishing Raza/Ethnic Studies curriculum at high schools and community colleges. Like the authors in *Nuestros Refranes*, the RSN group harnessed the power of customs, collective representation, and self-determination. RSN public rhetoric also sought an equilibrium in the dialectical relationship between self-determination and the public (democracy). Through various means - the writing of press releases, facebook posts (and re-posts!), letters to the editor, designing the program, and of course, drafting the Plan de Los Angeles (PLA) - RSN members participated in a civic writing and social gathering that enabled necessary meditation on what writing and education means for Latin@s in the U.S..

BEGINNINGS: STRANGE RUMBLINGS IN ARIZONA

As a result of solidarity work with Tucson's struggle to bring back its Mexican American Studies department after a hostile Republican anti-Latino political campaign², the Raza Studies Now group (RSN) was formed a year ago to help *spread* - instead of simply "defend" - Ethnic Studies in high schools (and recently added, community colleges) throughout Southern California. A first conference in 2012 gathered over 100 participants, featured Tucson students and MAS teachers, banned books authors such as historian Rudolfo Acuna, and symbolically if unofficially, continued a tradition of Tucson's MAS - namely, the Raza Studies Institute for Transformative Education conference (discontinued since the program was dismantled in January 2012). In coalition with Tucson activists, the Bay Area network for Ethnic Studies and others nationwide, the RSN group, centered activities on spreading Ethnic Studies through the conference and the drafting of *El Plan de Los Angeles* (PLA). This document is currently going through final drafts. Modeled after the historic 1969 *El Plan de Santa Barbara* and considered a blueprint manifesto for

2 Many educators and activists nationwide and especially in Southern California have rallied around the Tucson Mexican American Studies Program, officially dismantled in January 2012. The statewide AMAE and Association of Raza Educators (ARE) dedicated journals and conferences to the struggle, as have other groups. For an example of Tucson-influenced pedagogical activism see *Urban Review* (2013) vol. 45, issue 1, dedicated to Ethnic Studies and Banned Books in Arizona, especially Silvia Toscano Rivera's article "Teaching as a Healing Craft." See also official website saveethnicstudies.com.

establishing Chican@ Studies at universities across the country, the *Plan de Los Angeles* also aims to spark a movement and become a “toolkit,” or a field manual for illustrating how to implement Ethnic Studies curriculums in high schools. The 2012 program quoted from the 1969 document:

“The role of knowledge in producing powerful social change, indeed revolution, cannot be underestimated... it is equally important to recognize that *research* will not only provide Chicanos with action-oriented analysis of conditions,... it will help in creating and giving impetus to that *historical consciousness* which Chicanos must possess in order successfully to struggle as a people toward a new vision... (of liberation).” (my italics) (*Plan* 78)

I believe the term “research” in the above quote can be replaced with “rhetoric.” Ultimately the RSN conference was about developing this consciousness and restoring a *critical vision* about education and the role of Raza and people of color in their schools. A critical rhetorical vision, as rhetoric scholar Douglas Thomas explains, looks back critically at history, looks at the present for dangers as well as resources, and looks reflectively/flexibly to the future with an eye for ideal visions, dangers and possibilities. I believe this spirit of critical vision was strong throughout the day and continues to guide this movement, as it joins with efforts throughout Southern California and nationally to expand the teaching, content, and pedagogy of oppressed peoples of color in the U.S., institutionalizing Raza and Ethnic Studies in public K-12 schools.

LOGOS & KAIROS IN EDUCATION ACTIVISM

The RSN worked on multiple fronts, and in Aristotelian tradition, was always looking to identify and exploit the available means of persuasion. The press release for the 2013 conference alluded to the logical arguments in a Santa Monica Intercultural district Advisory Committee (IDAC) report, which local RSN members helped write. This *logos* was reproduced, word for word - as is common with well

written press releases - in several local newspapers.³ A paragraph quoted the report at length:

The IDAC proposal explains in one section: “Traditionally, students of color are viewed from a deficit perspective in public schools. This historically took the form of Indian boarding schools, segregated schools, Americanization programs, corporal punishment, language discrimination, and exclusion of People of color histories and contributions. Under these conditions, Ethnic Studies evolved from 1960’s student movements demanding a more inclusive, culturally relevant education ... tenets include: (a) Self determination (b) Intersectionality as lens to examine the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, and immigration status (c) the central role of the student (d) utilization of assets-based approaches to pedagogy, curriculum, and instruction—Community Cultural Wealth. In other words, Ethnic Studies in public schools is grounded in critical consciousness, critical thinking, is authentic, and is responsive to local communities.

The IDAC report borrowed insights from the previous conference, and panelist Cati de los Rios’ insistence that Raza Studies classes be localized in order to connect to and empower local communities. These organizational “short cuts” brought regional struggles into the RSN orbit and reflected a political urgency. The credibility of the education report above alongside a photograph of the first conference, converged with a situational momentum to have a kairotic effect on the press and public discourse.

The first conference in the summer of 2012 was organized in two months and proved to be an effective educational and organizational event. Over a hundred participants interacted with three panels and engaged in multiple workshops that corresponded with chapters of the PLA. The most ambitious parts of the conference were the breakout sessions. Aimed to directly involve participants in the articulation of a collective document, not unlike the Plan de Santa Barbara (in goal

3 See Santa Monica Mirror, digital edition. <http://www.smmirror.com/articles/News/Raza-Studies-Now-Conference-At-Santa-Monica-College-This-Saturday/37985> . Many articles and documents are also available on the official RSN website razastudiesnow.com.



Raza Studies Now 2012, held at Santa Monica College. Photo by Paulo Freire Lopez.

and impact), we sought to consolidate a common language (*nomos*) in order to provide unity and impact, to spur a social movement to expand Ethnic and Raza Studies in K-12. The seven break out groups – Curriculum, Pedagogy, Ancestral Knowledge today, Role of the Student, LGBTQ and Allies, Xicana Studies, and Introducing Raza Studies to Schools and School boards – identified special topics to which the conference participants contributed directly (Dreamers and Raza Studies at Community Colleges were added later). This integral process made the conference meaningful and the PLA a profoundly organic, community-involved and broad-based Raza document. As in Santa Barbara over 40 years ago, discussions were moderated, recorded, and incorporated into early drafts of the PLA. RSN meetings continued throughout the year — drafting, discussing, expanding and building a solid plan.

Being anxious, idealistic, and having high expectations, we ran into roadblocks as months went by, and a final product languished. Soon, the next summer was upon us, and we decided a conference was needed to continue the movement and present a draft. This time we started planning *four* months in advance!



The Eagle meets the Seagull: LA and Tucson educators gather at Freedom Summer 2012. Attending from LA: Aztlan Underground, People's Education Movement, AMAE SM-West LA, Raza Studies Now, UCLA, UC Riverside, PYFC (Santa Monica) among others. Photo by Gregorio Duron.

I have long felt that the Tucson struggle to “Save Ethnic Studies” and bring back the recently dismantled, highly successful Mexican American Studies department, is not only a local struggle. While the malicious attack on the program by Arizona republicans caused a crisis of national scope (still due to surface in the 9th Circuit Federal Court of Appeals in the near future), the Tucson struggle is significantly an ideological battle over the future of Chicano Studies as a discipline.⁴ Dr. Cintli of the University of Arizona goes as far as calling it a “civilizational war.” And as in 1969, 1993 and 1999, the role of the students, community and kairos are once again determining factors that will shape the politics, pedagogy, stability, epistemology and style of Chican@ and Raza Studies in the future.

⁴ Critical race theory scholar Richard Delgado places the struggle in a civil rights history context. Delgado, Richard. “Precious Knowledge: State Bans on Ethnic Studies, Book Traffickers (Librotraficantes) and A New Type of Race Trial.” *North Carolina Law Review*, Vol. 91, June, 2013. Pp 1513-1551.

LOGOS VERSUS NOMOS: *PLEITO*, THE DISCOURSE OF MEASUREMENT, & THE *PLAN DE LOS ANGELES*

Several differences in the political environment, hegemony, and rhetorical strategy exist between the rhetorical strategies in *Nuestros Refranes* and the *Plan de Los Angeles*. While the subversive complicity which Medina theorizes worked for students in the toxic environment of Tucson schools, RSN activists in Southern California opted for a more dangerous speech (parrhesia), a *pleito* rhetoric at times, which is unapologetic in its address to educational institutions. This speech was more in line with examples of community action that Medina mentions towards the end of his essay: Tucson Freedom Summer, the April 26, 2011 school board take-over by UNIDOS, the Chican@ Literature class at Prescott Community College. Part of the logic of *pleito* rhetoric is the unwillingness to compromise the collective's dignity, the refusal to comply with repression, or to teach this compliance to the next generation (the students). In the face of injustice, *pleito* rhetoric recognizes that if logic (logos) fails to persuade, there is always a Chican@ tradition of resistance (nomos) one can put into play.

Numerous studies including an empirical study by Nolan Cabrera et al and the state-authorized Cambium Report, showed that students taking MAS classes not only closed the achievement gap but surpassed it; MAS students attained higher test scores, g.p.a.'s, and higher college-going rates than *all* students (including White students). Still, the state shut down the MAS department. This teaches us that logos (logical arguments) is not enough. Ida B. Wells, fighting against lynching of Blacks in the late 19th century, for instance, reminded readers constantly that there often existed something more powerful than law, and that was public sentiment.

Although institutions live and die (usually) by effective statistics—what Ralph Cintron calls a “discourse of measurement”—RSN organizers were well aware that in spite of logical proof, programs like MAS, Semillas del Pueblo (East LA), and community centers like the local Pico Youth and Family Center, were being simultaneously attacked for political reasons, in spite of their success. Our answer to this was community involvement, an un-apologetic rhetoric, and heightening an awareness of historical struggle, which we felt could

be harnessed for political power. This Chican@ *nomos* is reflected in passages from the PLA:

We Raza Studies Now, as indigenous peoples, strive to advance and strengthen Raza Studies nationwide. We declare the integrity of our ancestral knowledge systems as a dignified academic journey... The chief influences shaping Raza Studies today are concepts applied from ancestral knowledge, community cultural wealth/capital, Freirean critical approaches, creativity, connection to land, community, self, and diversity... The foundational affective construct that Raza Studies pedagogy is built on achieves humanization through authentic caring. Es una educacion de corazones primero y despues de mentes.⁵

While a discourse of measurement belittles other knowledge systems⁶, the rhetoric of the *Plan de Los Angeles* answers with a *nomos* that harnesses the revolutionary concept of self-determination, as well as Raza collective memories and legacies of struggle including the Tucson struggle. This *pleito* rhetoric is perhaps best captured in the anthemic chant inside the April 26, 2011 Tucson school board meeting that was heard across the nation: “When your education is under attack, what do you do?? Fight back!!...”

DICHOS, KAIROS & RHETORICAL VISION

In the late afternoon after the 2013 conference ended, a group of participants walked to their cars and to the bus stop. My friend Quimichipilli, “little Mouse” announced that the verdict had just come in finding George Zimmerman not guilty in the murder of Trayvon Martin. Shock and maybe some fatigue set in that night. Protests began the next day, as did social disturbances. The phrases “No Justice! No Peace!” made popular during the 1992 Los Angeles

5 The first draft of the Plan de Los Angeles was handed out at the July 13, 2013 conference. This draft is available on the official RSN website razastudiesnow.com. The final draft is expected by the Fall of 2013.

6 Cintron, Ralph. *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and the Rhetorics of the Everyday*. Pp. 213. Upon reading this amazing text for doctoral exams I connected it, via civic writing, to the struggle to defend the PYFC, a local community youth center, which was put on the City's chopping block but saved by community protest. See my letter to the editor: <http://smdp.com/letter-not-a-fair-measurement/122595>.

Uprising, began circulating on facebook in mass media and on the streets. The world began talking again, if tentatively, about race and social justice.

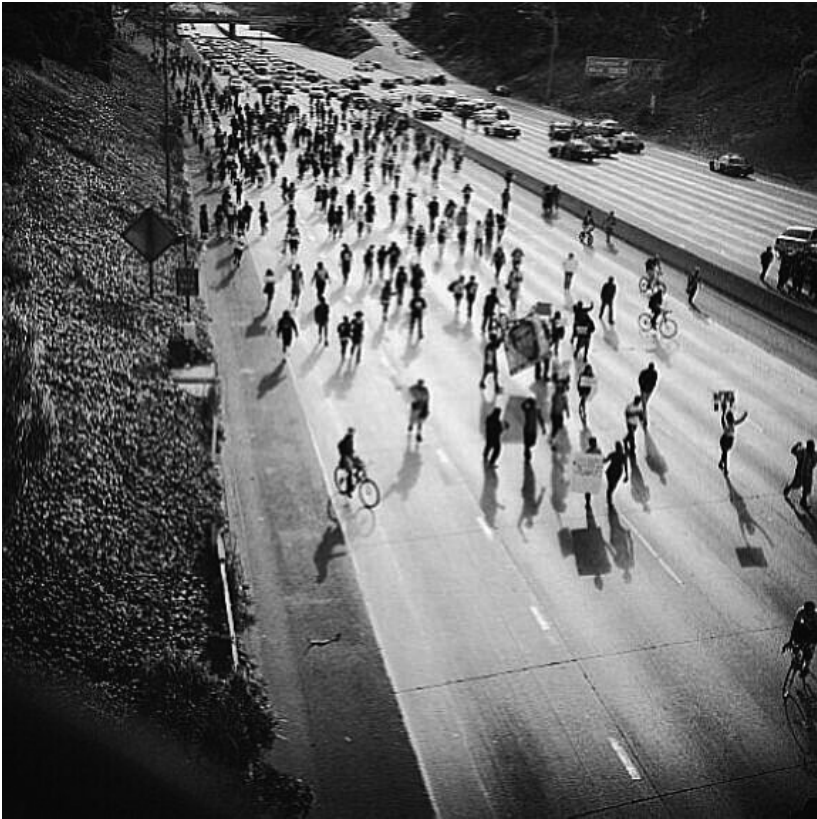
Alongside protest marches were the chants, replete with *pleito* rhetoric. Here is an appropriate moment to connect back to Cruz Medina's attention to *dichos* (sayings, proverbs) in his earlier essay. His inventory of Chican@ rhetorical strategies – which include *dichos*, code-switching, *movidas* (clandestine moves), *rascuache* aesthetics (a Chican@ do-it-yourself), and subversive complicity – is for me, an acknowledgement of *nomos* and commonplaces operating within a Chican@ rhetorical tradition. His reference of Mary Carmen Cruz and Ogle Burks Duff's article "New Worlds, Old Wisdom" explains why the use of *dichos* in classrooms works to enrich thinking and writing skills:

“... it creates the transition from home culture to school culture. *Dichos are the moral teachings of a community.* They express the values of a culture and say much about the character of a people. When our students make connections between those values and the work of school, their learning is meaningful.” (my italics) (Cruz, Duff 117)

Insights like these cannot be lost, because in times when communities face crisis', they must go to rhetorical strongholds, commonplaces found in *dichos* and protest chants, expressions capable of bringing people together, reminding them of who they are, the struggles they've gone through, and the direction they must continue to follow. In moments when logic is manipulated, fabricated or ignored, Raza activists can draw from the well of customs and traditions in order to harness a rhetorical vision that looks back critically and looks forward with hope towards possibility. This is a vision of culturally relevant Raza and Ethnic Studies curriculum in all high schools and a vision of the return of the Mexican American Studies Department in Tucson.

The future work of Raza Studies Now involves harnessing the *kairos* around social movements calling for related social justice, while not losing sight of specific goals. And maybe the goals may broaden. The

movement for justice for Trayvon Martin is the same as the recent ones for Oscar Grant, for the several Chicano and Anglo males killed by police in Anaheim (and Oxnard, Hawthorne and other parts of LA and the nation); and this should be connected to Raza and Ethnic Studies. Soon after this, nine undocumented Latino students crossed the border from Mexico into the US and were promptly arrested and locked in immigrant detention facilities in Arizona, kicking off the Dreamer 9 protest. Raza Studies now begins to envision a field of knowledge beyond borders, still becoming, still rooted and relevant, vital in fact to democracy. The undocumented students are a critical mass that Raza Studies needs to center on as it seeks to articulate a vision of what social justice looks like — a world where many worlds fit. It will envision this world, in part at least, rhetorically.



Self-Determination: Justice for Trayvon Rally on 10 Freeway July 20 2013.

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