

A Curriculum of the Borderlands: High School Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies as *Sitios y Lengua*

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Abstract Drawing from a nine-month critical teacher inquiry investigation, this article examines the experiences of eleventh and twelfth grade students who participated in a year-long Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course in California shortly after the passing of Arizona House Bill 2281 (HB 2281). Through a borderlands analysis, I explore how these students describe their experiences participating in such a course, and in doing so, debunk some of the myths upon which HB 2281 was constructed. I find that these **classroom experiences served as *sitios y lenguas* (decolonizing spaces and discourses;** Pérez in *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998) in which high school students were able to reflect on the ongoing transformation of their social, political, and ethnic identities, and developed a relational ontological base. This article explores the physical and metaphorical borders (Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1987) that Chicana/o and Latina/o youth navigate and challenge while simultaneously working for social change in their communities. **Lastly, it conveys what we stand to lose if the decolonizing spaces and discourse constructed in Ethnic Studies courses become casualties of xenophobic policy.**

Keywords High school Chicana/o-Latina/o studies · Curriculum · Borderlands · Sitios y lengua

“The attack on Raza Studies in Tucson is real to *all* of us. What’s happening in Arizona isn’t just there...Folks could show up to Pomona and take away our classes, too...It’s our responsibility to fight with them and talk about what’s

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happening out there...cuz these classes are more than just powerful...These classes save lives.” - Roberto,¹ twelfth grader

Roberto, my former student in Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, astutely points out the dire need to not only combat the institutional eradication of Mexican–American Studies (MAS) in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD), but also to encourage a new world in which curricula are (re)invigorated, (re)conceptualized, and cultivated in communion with humanizing efforts. Roberto believes that these “classes save lives,” addressing the miseducation of historically dispossessed *barrio* (urban) youth and providing them with an axiology of ethical responsibility to navigate their worlds. Roberto’s participation within Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies equipped him with a critical epistemic lens from which to make sense of contemporary attacks on the MAS program in Tucson, Arizona. To explain why it is salient to maintain and proliferate K-12 Ethnic Studies, scholars must demonstrate what these classes can afford students. This [article begins to articulate the potential for Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies curricula to nurture a decolonial imaginary](#) (Pérez 1998) that buttresses a relational ontological base. In doing so, it demonstrates how Ethnic Studies courses help students to resist and counter the kind of cultural genocide that has been underway for centuries in U.S. schools. Above all, it conveys student voices and examples of student agency encouraged by Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, while demonstrating what we all stand to lose if xenophobic education policies, like those taking hold in Tucson, are allowed to prevail.

Specifically, this article reports on a qualitative investigation into a year-long Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course I taught at Pomona High School (PHS) in Pomona, California, a working-class Raza² community east of Los Angeles. In an effort to extend the research on Ethnic Studies in secondary schools, I anchor my critical teacher inquiry with the following questions: 1) How do students experience participation in a college preparatory Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course?; 2) What benefit do they derive from participating? In essence, I seek to document what precisely these courses *offer* students, and thus what book-banning and campaigns against Ethnic Studies like Arizona House Bill 2281 *threaten* to undermine (and even eliminate).

In service of this goal, in this article I first provide a brief history of curriculum as colonizer, I then delineate the conceptual framework I engaged and the methods that I used for collecting and analyzing data. I share, for example, my rationale for conducting a borderland analysis that explores the physical and metaphorical borders (Anzaldúa 1987) that Chicana/o and Latina/o students navigate. I contextualize my research by describing the high school context and the Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies curriculum I taught. To demonstrate students’ transformation, I feature students’ own voices when discussing thematic findings related to (1) their identities in the making, (2) their development in talking out and talking back, and

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the young people throughout this article.

² In this paper I use Raza to connote “a people” with similar social, cultural, and historical experiences tied to oppression. Raza alludes to the solidarity that exists between people who are the products of local and enduring struggles, and thus they respond with intensity to those struggles (Brayboy 2005).

(3) their community commitment. Finally, I discuss the potential for this work to inform practice and research.

Curriculum as Colonizer: (IL)Logics of “Government Overthrow”

History informs us that public schooling has been used to “Americanize,” categorize, and deny access to those perceived as “different” from the racial, ethnic, and linguistic mainstream (Anderson 1988; Tyack 1974). Curriculum represents one of the primary instruments for maintaining the legacy of hegemony in U.S. schools. Traditionally understood as a neutral activity that is concerned with what is to be taught, to whom, by what methods, and how these are interrelated (Kliebard 1989), curriculum development involves far more than mere subject matter, content, and instructional practices. Numerous scholars have argued that curriculum and its development serve as instruments of social control and reproduction (Apple 2004; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Pinar 2004). Thus curriculum—as a tool for acculturation and a conduit for whitestream epistemologies and values (Grande 2003; Urrieta 2009)—has historically promoted the de-Indigenization and the assimilation of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os to the dominant culture. The decolonial possibilities of MAS represents a potential threat to this institutionalized “Americanization,” perhaps informing the (il)logics of “government overthrow” as written by HB 2281.

Equitable curricular innovation includes a reconceptualization of subject matter and the active recovery, (re)imagination, and (re)investment in indigenous paradigms. Such innovation cannot merely involve additive approaches overlaid onto an already existent curricular framework that homogenizes, erases, and alienates. As a comparative and interdisciplinary field of study, Ethnic Studies bears eminent pedagogical and intellectual merits and distinctions, and actual engagements with grassroots communities (Okiihiro and Tsou 2006). Ethnic Studies works to recover and restore counterhistorical narratives as well as the epistemologies, perspectives, and cultures of those who have been historically marginalized and denied full participation within traditional discourses and institutions (Butler 2001; Hu-Dehart 1993; Yang 2000). Therefore, Ethnic Studies emphasizes the reclamation of erased histories (Okiihiro 1981), not the “resentment towards a race or class of people” as imagined in HB 2281. The rhetoric “resentment towards a race or class of people” only affirms the historical whitestreaming of curriculum where challenges to the objectivity of existing curricula are interpreted as a challenge to white supremacy. Ethnic Studies programs like the MAS program under attack in TUSD represent pillars of possibility—gateways to self-determination, cultural restoration, humanization, and counternarration (Romero et al. 2009). Such programs are essential given the ways that school curricula have historically been used as tools for colonizing Chicana/os and Latina/os and rendering them as perpetual foreigners by divorcing them from their ancestral ties to the Americas.

The legislative dismantling of MAS in TUSD under HB 2281 serves as a symbolic attack on Ethnic Studies more broadly. It is an assault on humanity as it advocates for the colonial restriction of historical memory, the perspectives we make available to our students, and indigenous approaches to teaching and learning.

Through reflexive teacher research, I explore the possibilities of one high school Ethnic Studies course, and in doing so, debunk some of the myths upon which HB 2281 was constructed. Given the proximity of both Arizona and California to the physical U.S.-Mexico border and the ways in which metaphorical borders are constructed within school contexts (Bejarano 2005), I employ a borderlands theoretical framework to further illuminate my research questions.

Borderlands, Chicana/o Border Pedagogy, and Sitios y Lengua

Given my own identity and the content of the course under study, I looked to Chicana/o cultural studies for theoretical constructs that would help me honor and center my students' voices and experiences. Chicana/o cultural studies scholars have adopted the notions of *the border* and *the borderlands* (Anzaldúa 1987; Pérez 1998; Saldívar-Hull 2000) as forms of cultural expressions and as a critical means to illuminate race relations in the Southwest and highlight the structural inequality and cultural hybridity that has an impact on Latinas/os (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009). Chicana/o educational scholars utilize a borderlands paradigm as a counter educational theory to examine educational discourses, structures, practices, and experiences that identify and acknowledge the depth and wealth of knowledge production by Chicanas/o, Latinas/os, and other people of color from their perspectives and lived experiences. Furthermore, it provides a theoretical perspective for conveying “how physical and symbolic boundaries between groups, especially groups that are hierarchically organized, affect the material conditions, sociopolitical realities, and hybrid identities of those at the bottom of the hierarchies” (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009, p. 565). Chicanas/os and Latinas/os live in a hybrid condition as their histories, cultural practices, and identities have been (re)negotiated and (re)created within the context of forced migration, assimilation, segregation, patriarchy, and survival (Anzaldúa 1987; Elenes and Delgado Bernal 2010; Pérez 1998).

Elenes (1997) asserts that the struggle for Chicana/o education includes the construction of an alternative identity and subjectivity. She argues that the (re)production of borderlands discourse within the field of education speaks a language of hybridity, migration, postcolonialism, and displacement of subaltern identities. The notion of the borderlands attempts to create spaces for new theories and conceptualizations of a revived world. Thus, I sought to construct critical spaces that pedagogically supported students' social navigation and their building of bridges with the greater world. Elenes (1997) advances a Chicana/o Border Pedagogy—a central pedagogy in the course I taught—as an amalgamation of critical and feminist pedagogy with Chicana/o understandings of the borderlands. A Chicana/o Border Pedagogy integrates processes of dialoguing, reflecting, posing problems, and position-taking as central knowledge production, understanding the ways in which borders have been used to exclude and silence (Giroux 1992). This approach requires the creation of spaces where people communicate and learn from one another in subject-to-subject relationships. Through critical dialogue and position taking, students analyze their own hybrid identities, acknowledge the

complex identities of their classmates and teacher, and examine the socially constructed identities of their communities. Hence, by applying the notion of borderlands and Chicana/o Border Pedagogy to historical narratives, students and teachers can decenter Eurocentric curricula and epistemologies, deconstruct the problematic essentialist notions of identity, culture, gender and difference, enact counter-hegemonic identities, and create spaces for synthesis and renewal within the classroom.

Pérez's (1998) decolonial imaginary can encourage educational researchers to reexamine how we recognize hybrid identities, practices, and histories in and out of the classroom as well as how we theorize the physical, social, and discursive spaces of contradictions and possibilities (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009). Drawing upon Bhabha's (1994) theories of translation and negotiation, Pérez refers to the decolonial imaginary as a third space—that in-between space—where multiple realities are conferred. It is a place where systems of domination, patriarchy, and racism are negotiated alongside possibilities of rupture, change, and the (re)writing of our narratives. The idea of the decolonial imaginary has allowed me to explore how my high school students' hybrid identities are shifted and were recreated within physical, social and discursive spaces and allowing them to disrupt dominant narratives that often pathologize young people of color in classrooms, society, and their communities. Pérez (1998) posits the importance of *sitios y lenguas* as those spaces (*sitios*) where decolonized discourse (*lenguas*) can emanate and flourish. In my study, *sitios* refers to the social and discursive spaces within the Chicana/o-Latina/o studies course. *Lenguas* refers to the discourses in the classroom and how they were taken up in different spaces to disrupt majoritarian narratives of Chicanas/o and Latinas/os and to challenge normative ways of thinking about race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status. Pérez's understanding of space and language grounds itself in a rejection of colonialist oppressions and in the valuing of multiple worlds; thus, *lengua* also refers to students' bicultural, bilingual form of communicating while engaging with the course and others outside of the classroom (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009).

Methods and Meanings

To speak of my methods I must start with myself. My strong familial ties to Pomona inspired my desire to become a teacher in the PUSD. I was raised on the North-side, my mother and *abuelita* (grandmother) were both former teachers in PUSD, and countless relatives have either graduated or have been pushed out of PUSD schools. Therefore, I do not attempt to divorce my own history from the research. Instead, true to Ethnic Studies' disciplinary commitment to social justice, my approach is decidedly value driven. Reflexivity is autobiographical by nature; thus the exploration of one's "place" within the borderlands has power to illuminate oppressive structures in society (Delgado Bernal 2001). While there has been a call for self-reflexivity in critical inquiry (Lather 1986), Villenas (1996) poignantly asserts that Chicana researchers, like myself, grapple with our own identity as scholars of color who cannot be easily described as a "privileged" researcher in the

same way that white scholars define their role as privileged. Hence, in my analysis of student narratives, I drew from my cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal 1998), my 6 years of teaching, and my investigation of the literature. This knowledge informed both the creation of the course under study—a course I designed and implemented for youth in my community—as well as the methods used to document the meaning for and impact on the youth themselves.

Guiding Principles

As someone who commits herself to the transformative education of people of color, I made efforts to honor research principles grounded in *cariño* (Duncan-Andrade 2006), decolonizing methodologies (Smith 1999), and Darder's (1991) concept of coming to voice. *Cariño* is an “educational research approach [that] focuses on forming relationships that pay attention to the special needs of a particular school [and] translates into a greater emphasis on producing real change in the schools where the research is taking place” (p. 454). Decolonizing research acknowledges that oppression is entangled in the history of colonialism and “writing back” serves as “a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (p. 7). Darder (1991) emphasizes the importance of this process—in what she calls “coming to voice”—and, like Freire (1970) contends that the development of critical consciousness through authentic dialogue is central to human emancipation. Research, then, should entail and document authentic dialogue that fosters a human process during which people come together to discuss who they are and who they would like to become.

PHS Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies

With its origins in the anti-immigrant climate of 2006, our Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course is a year-long social science elective that aligns curriculum with California State standards in U.S. History and English Language Arts. It explores Chicana/o and Latina/o experiences from pre-Columbian civilizations to the present and reflects many university level Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies courses in rigor and scope. As an interdisciplinary course, it investigates the diversity of Chicana/o and Latina/o culture as it is conditioned by the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, borders, regional variation, and power. Through a counter-hegemonic framework, the class provides a historical and political analysis of Chicana/o and Latina/o people's quest for self-determination. The philosophy of the course is rooted in maize-based indigenous concepts that promote truth seeking, interconnectedness, respect for others, critical consciousness, and love (Rodriguez 2012). The eleven units within the curriculum all seek to tap into the disengagement of *barrio* youth in a way that will continue to develop the type of critical consciousness necessary for socially transformative action.

Beyond helping students acquire powerful literacy skills, Paulo Freire believed that educators should also prepare students to deal with the real material conditions

of their everyday lives. Our course pursued this goal through two noteworthy community-organizing partnerships. Working with Suzanne Foster, Director of the Pomona Economic and Opportunity Center (PEOC), every winter students organized an annual “Social Justice Community *Posada* for Immigration Reform” in conjunction with Day Laborers from the PEOC. Utilizing a non-hierarchical and asset-based approach to unite Pomona Day Laborers and PHS students, this collaboration was unique in that it brought together two marginalized communities that are usually kept separate—the grassroots labor community and the public K-12 sector. Students studied the history of immigration as a global phenomenon, agricultural labor, wage discrimination, and heard first-hand testimonies from Day Laborers in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. Rooted within the framework of community organizing, students partnered up with Pomona Day Laborers—many immigrants from México and Central America—for a five-week community organizing project, a *Posada*, that ultimately sought to promote awareness around current state and federal policies affecting immigrants, particularly undocumented youth.

Secondly, our academic partnership with Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies Professor, Dr. Gilda Ochoa, of Pomona College exemplifies our interest in linking **theory and praxis to help solve some of the inequities in our educational system today**. During the spring semester, students collaborated with Dr. Ochoa’s *Chicanas/Latinos and Education* course and spent a semester co-creating a community-wide *encuentro* (gathering), involving family, teachers, and administrators in critical discussion. As part of their collaboration, students conducted action research projects on racial segregation in Pomona, identity development, and undocumented students. Additionally, students also created and performed art, theater, and poetry about Latinas/os and education, labor struggles, combating patriarchy, identity formation, and social justice. These research projects and collaborations have been presented as exemplary forms of critical pedagogy at national academic conferences, including the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS).

Participants

This article focuses specifically on the thirty-five junior and senior self-identified Chicana/o or Latina/o students who participated in the Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course at PHS during the 2010–2011 academic school year. Although over half were born in the U.S., the remaining students indicated three Latin American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and México) as their birthplace, with the greatest number (five) born in México. During class discussion, interviews, and personal conversations several students disclosed their undocumented status. Students used a variety of terms to describe their ethnic identity, including identification with their country of origin (i.e. “Mexican,” “Guatemalan,” “Salvadoran”), and umbrella terms such as “Hispanic,” “Raza,” “Biracial,” or “Latina/o.” Although several had older siblings who had matriculated to college, none of my students had parents who were graduates from four-year universities. All but one student were classified as an English Language Learner.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected my data under a framework that viewed the youth with whom I worked as the chief informants of their lives (Freire 1970) and, likewise, I have endeavored to present my findings from their vantage point. More specifically, I collected my data as part of a larger longitudinal critical teacher inquiry investigation (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008) into the educational affects and identity development of students participating in this course. For this study, my data collection strategies included collecting weekly written reflections that were built into the course syllabus, digitally recording socratic fishbowl seminars, and conducting in-class and out-of-class (in)formal discussions and observations. A subset of six students volunteered to participate in one-on-one in-depth interviews during the end of the 2010–2011 academic year. I then read through the data multiple times, taking notes as I went. Based on those notes, I returned to the data more strategically, coding for key issues, trends, and ruptures. Moreover, using critical teacher inquiry to guide my analysis, I engaged in a process of continual problem posing, data gathering, and analysis while involved with the curriculum development and teaching of the course. I identified three themes discussed in the next section.

In sum, this methodology allowed me to weave together my personal, cultural, and professional identities with my intellectual, political, and spiritual work (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009). Like my students, as a teacher with strong ties to the Pomona community, I was (re)defining my own identity as a young Chicana *maestra*. It is a methodology born out of my own cultural intuition; my way of knowing, learning, and teaching (Delgado Bernal 1998). It is a methodological approach of *trenzas y mestizaje* (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009) that incorporates “the braiding of theory, qualitative research strategies, and sociopolitical consciousness for interacting with and gathering knowledge” from Chicanas/o and Latinas/o students (Godinez 2006, p. 26).

Sitios y Lengua: Shifting Identities and Decolonizing Discourse

In this section, I present three interrelated themes: identities in the making, talking back, and community commitment. Within each theme, I offer quotes and excerpts in which students narrated their experiences throughout reflecting on their evolving ethnic, social, and political identities. In participating in the course, all students found themselves navigating among tensions of both the physical and figurative borderlands represented in the print, visual, and popular media within which their identities were denounced, affirmed, and/or contradicted. They described the skills that they developed through the course, allowing them to name their worlds and talk back in ways that disrupted normative discourses about Chicana/o and Latina/o young people.

A Safe Space for Identities in the Making

Locating the myriad tensions and contradictions that permeate my students' lives, I address the hybrid and reconfigured spaces that youth constructed through their

participation in the course and I theorize the multiple identities that were brought into these spaces (Delgado Bernal et al. 2009). Manuel, a self-identified “Blaxican,” has a mother of Mexican descent and an African American father. He described himself as someone who is not completely accepted as Black or Mexican. “People look at me and think I’m just Black. They think they know who I am. But see, I was raised mostly by my mom, and she Mexican. So, culturally, I’d say I more Mexican.” He expressed how difficult it was to navigate the young Black community at PHS as he was often given a hard time for “hanging out with all the Mexicans.” He equally struggled with the young Latina/o community as he did not speak Spanish and was considered “Black” by many. Manuel recalled his experience in the following way,

I never Black enough for the Black folks or Mexican enough for the Mexicans. I always felt like I had to choose one culture, one people to align myself with more. And cuz I’m racialized as a Black man, I’m Black. But, in Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, I been able to look at and analyze stuff like the Puerto Rican Young Lords alongside the Chicana/o Civil Rights movement. I’ve read chapters from *The Autobiography of Malcom X* and been able to make connections to Corky Gonzalez’s “Yo Soy Joaquín.” This class disproves that both sides of my people didn’t do nothing good or great in America. There’s a powerful history of Black and Latina/o people working together for social change. I realized I don’t have to choose one, ‘cause I’m both. I’ll always be...and that’s real. My veins carry both *Africa* and *México*.

In a state of liminality, Manuel initially described the tension he experienced being a young person of both of African American and Mexican descent—pushed to the margins in a White society and often socially constructed as inferior (Bejarano 2005). Traditional K-12 curricula continue to push students of color, like Manuel, to disown their cultural and political histories and to internalize a sense of subordination (Valenzuela 1999). Throughout the length of the course, Manuel’s hybrid identity shifted and evolved. He recalls initially rejecting much of the content of the course, but realizing over time that he could indeed apply the knowledge gained from the course as a mechanism to recognize the cultural wealth of his communities, to self-define, and to navigate his greater social and academic worlds.

Similarly, Reina, a self-identified *Guatemalteca* (Guatemalan), during her interview reflected on and shared the painful memories of first crossing the physical U.S.-Mexico border at age nine while hiding in the trunk of a Buick automobile.

I came to live with my *tía* (aunt) cuz my *amá* wanted me to come here for better school and opportunities. I came alone...in the trunk of someone’s car. It was hot and dark and I was sweaty. When I got here and started school, I felt bad to be from Guatemala City. I was embarrassed to be who I was, to be Guatemalan, you know? I didn’t feel like people thought very good things of people from Guatemala. I used to look in the mirror and wish I wasn’t as dark skin as I am, like I wished I were just from here, born here, como una gringa [like a white American]. Things would be so much easier, I thought. I felt

embarrassed about my story... But these classes teach you how to accept yourself and to find [beauty] in all things that [come from your community].

Aware of the socially constructed nationalist discourses about what it means to be an “American,” Reina traced the tension that she experienced in the borderlands, belonging from neither here nor there. It is within these borderlands that Reina took up colonial discourses that oppressed her and her classmates. This colonial mind-set led her to believe that her bicultural, bilingual being was made “other.” Internalized oppression can permeate the lives of people on the borderlands (Bejarano 2005). Pérez’s (1998) conceptualized “the dialectics of doubling” to describe the notion that the oppressed mimic the behaviors of their oppressors and assimilate into a colonial mind-set exercising colonial practices. The “dialectics of doubling” believes in a normative and dominant language, race, class, gender, citizenship status, and sexuality. During the second semester of the Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course, Reina reflected on her “dialectics of doubling” and stated that she had “pushed away a lot of things that we had first talked about in our fishbowl seminars [on class, gender, and immigration reform]” because she did not want to be reminded of her daily reality and would rather align herself to the dominant perspective. She shared that it was the Social Justice Posada Project with the Pomona Day Laborers that allowed her the initial space to openly reflect on the contradictions in her life, to understand how her identities had been denounced, and to wrestle with her undisclosed undocumented status.

Antonio, a self-identified Mexican–American, was born and raised in Pomona. He also explored issues of liminality as a young brown male. In one of his reflective journals he shared the ways in which he had internalized racial oppression and denied Mexican (popular) culture by believing it was “lower-class.” He wrote,

I used to clown on the *paisas*. You know, like the Mexicans that just got here and act all *chunty* [culturally Mexican] and listen to *corridos* and stuff like that. Man, I’d always clown ‘em. I always thought that I was better than that because you know I wasn’t like that, I didn’t dress like them and I liked cars and rap music. I realized later that that was me hating myself and my *cultura*. [Ms. de los Rios’] unit on the commonalities of Hip-hop and *corridos* helped me see that *corridos* was at one time like the *poesía callejero* [street poetry] of the people in times of revolution. *Corridos* are music of social change. I saw that they had so many things in common with the birth of Hip-hop in the Bronx and I actually learned to appreciate *corridos*...and stopped clownin’.

In a society that racializes and hierarchizes, Antonio believed that he was superior to his *Mexicana/o* (immigrant) comrades at school because he saw himself as acculturated to the dominant culture. Bejarano (2005) articulates the power of “identity construction and social capital invested in certain national citizenships and residency statuses—particularly U.S. citizenship at the top—often leads to social hierarchies” (p. 8). Consequently, according to Bejarano, “othering” can run rampant in whitestream schooling environments. As such, Antonio talked about making use of *sitios y lengua* to better understand the subjectivities of our communities and the tense relationships existent within and between them. He

shared his newfound realizations about the tension among *Mexicanos* and Chicanas/os, for example, that U.S. born Raza are often taught to denounce so much of who they are, or as Antonio stated, to “hate ourselves.” Antonio talked about how he had to become more attuned both to the lack of interaction between these two communities and to the potential of Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies to help youth “learn from each other and understand that we all have multiple identities.” Upon completing the course, Antonio shared that he felt more equipped to disrupt dominant narratives about “undocumented Raza, U.S.-born Raza, and other minorities”—some of the very groups he entered the course “clowning.” The social and discursive spaces in Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies were places to better understand students’ hybrid identities and unravel the ways in which current day colonialism affects one another’s lives.

Chicana/o Latina/o Youth Talking Out and Talking Back

While some students employed *sitios y lengua* to “find themselves” or to assemble fragmented identities, others argued that they had already known who they were. González (1995) reminds us, “It is not true that [Chicanas] do not know who we are” (p. 43). While she specifically addresses the complex struggles within Chicana queer identities, she reveals that queer women—who live with multiple oppressions—often know too much of who they are, and that they have too much an identity. This idea was echoed in the words of one student. Xaime, a self-identified Chicano, shared “I wasn’t so much searching for ‘myself’ or my ‘identity,’ but for the words, space, and community that could speak and understand my experience of [sexual, gendered, and racialized] difference. I know who I am...” Xaime shared that he had wrestled with his sexuality for as long as he could remember but that he was very much aware he was gay in elementary school. He said that reading poetry and prose by Gloria Anzaldúa, an author currently banned in TUSD, was “like a fresh breath of air” as it allowed him to “feel humanized” and “connect with someone else that ‘gets it.’” Over the course of his participation in the course, he constructed both a space and a language in which to articulate his uniquely queer self-determined Chicano identity. Furthermore, Anzaldúa’s metaphorical use of borderlands helped Xaime further solidify his understanding of gender and sexuality and propelled him to start writing regularly short stories about queer Chicana/o youth with hopes to publish one day.

Similarly, María, a self-identified Salvadorena (Salvadoran) shared that through Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, she gained the confidence to “speak out” against patriarchy. As a child, she saw the unequal gender dynamics in her household and how her mother lived under the reign of an abusive husband (her stepfather). She knew that she never wanted that for herself. She wrote, “I always knew that I was never gonna be that type of *mujer*, you know. [I knew] that I wanted to fight for women as equals. But I know that my *amá*, a poor immigrant woman, had limited options.” Anzaldúa’s (1987) poetic elucidation of mestiza consciousness calls for a “massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” and emerges from a space of multiple intersections that present the possibility of new modes of being for women. As we

read about feminism and agency during second-semester, specifically the *testimonio* of Salvadoran activist, Rufina Anaya, young women like Maria were able to ground themselves in a discourse that valued many worlds, including the worlds of marginalized women of color. In my interview with Lucila, she shared,

I feel very confident about going to college next year and speaking up for women's rights. As a Chicana feminist, I feel like I have the power to organize for what's right in this world. My Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies class provided me with the tools and theories for me to say the things I already knew, but never knew how to say them, and has encouraged me to fight for Latina immigrant rights. I have been exposed to women writers like Pat Mora, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana *teatro* groups like "Las Ramonas" and groups like L.A. indigenous Chicana group "In Lak Ech." I know that there's a community of support out there waiting for young *mujeres* like me.

Being able to draw on the *sitios y lengua* provided by her experiences in Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, María and Lucila both articulate a sense of confidence in disrupting traditional roles for Latina women. As a result of participating in the course, both women felt that their ability to "talk back" to oppressive forces and negotiate political and social dilemmas "became stronger." All the students in this class experienced tensions and possibilities as they talked back to and interrupted dominant narratives found in their classrooms, in society, and in their families. Yet, the process of *sitios y lengua*, which addresses spaces in which people of color are able to establish decolonizing discourses, allowed for students to critically remap their own educational identities and trajectories.

Fostering Community Commitment

Rooted in self-determination and pride of self, community commitment here refers to the social responsibility one feels towards their community (Delgado Bernal 2001; Urrieta and Méndez Benavídez 2007). Nearly every student that participated in the course shared that it was a "safe space." One student, Armando, shared "Walking into Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies felt like home." Another student, Chela, shared that Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, was a place where people could "check their egos at the door and just be real." Students articulated that their hybrid identities were "accepted" there and that the classroom community fostered a sense of agency, participation, and self-love, and love of one's people. Luis, a self-identified Chicano, shared in his interview,

This learning environment makes you feel like you have an obligation to your community, an obligation to help better your *gente*, like we all have to do something, you know? We have the responsibility to graduate from high school and also college, and then to come back and help others in our community.

At the close of the course, Ana, a self-identified Chicana, shared a similar sentiment, "I'm an activist. We're students and it's our duty to be revolutionary and

involved in community-organizing. Especially at a time when Ethnic Studies is under attack in Arizona.” For all students, the legislative dismantling of MAS in TUSD was of paramount concern. They saw their stories of critical consciousness intimately tied to the young people fighting for their liberation and freedom in Tucson. Furthermore, the human rights ethos foregrounded in maiz-based indigenous concepts and curriculum (Rodriguez 2012) allowed my students to perceive the erasure of Mexican–American history and literature in TUSD as a threat and injustice everywhere.

As Roberto’s opening passage reminds us, “What’s happening in Arizona isn’t just there... It’s our responsibility to fight with them and talk about what’s happening out there...” During our social justice *encuentro* with Dr. Gilda Ochoa’s students at Pomona College, students felt an ethical responsibility to collectively raise money for the national Save Ethnic Studies campaign. As one high school student, Citlalic, put it, “We’re raising money to protect our future... to protect our education.” Furthermore, during the *encuentro*, students wrote and performed a powerful play on the historicity and significance of Ethnic Studies. Students delineated a historical trajectory starting with the 1968 strike led by the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State University (a movement that resulted in the establishment of the first College of Ethnic Studies in the country), to modern day curricular cleansing in TUSD with Arizona House Bill 2281, to the economic disinvestment, gang violence, and push-out rates in their local Pomona neighborhoods. For many *barrio* youth, they avowed, the kind of identity development that Ethnic Studies programs support is a matter of life and death.

Without question, high schools—especially urban high schools—can be alienating, dehumanizing, and culturally denigrating spaces for youth who are pushed to the margins (Valenzuela 1999). Validating and honoring the lived experiences of youth, which is a hallmark of Ethnic Studies curricula generally and the course featured here specifically, can help students recenter themselves as strong and intelligent students of color and as student leaders on campus. For many of my students, their sense of commitment to community and to their *gente* was deepened (and in some cases initiated) by the *sitios y lenguas* that allowed them to create bridges with their peers and their communities. They used the social and discursive spaces of Chicana/o-Latina/o studies to (re)imagine and (re)enact interactions that humanize, uplift, and honor others.

Discussion

This article provides a portrait of just some of the ways young people of color experience and benefited from a high school Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies course. In doing so, it reveals some of what we stand to lose if Ethnic Studies programs and the texts on which they rely are pushed further to the margins. The work of critical historians (Acuña 1988; Zinn 1995)—some of which have been banned already in Tucson—highlight the pervasive shortcomings and gaps within the U.S. storytelling process in schools. Their work asserts that the centralizing of whitestream knowledges and practices in schools has led to the alienation and disengagement of

Chicana/o and Latina/o young people. Thus, this study tells a related but different story about the thirst of students for a high school curriculum that is culturally relevant, presents a counterhistorical narrative, values and comprehends the (physical and metaphorical) borderlands they navigate, and provides them with the necessary tools and skills to address the material conditions of their everyday lives.

The students' voices loudly and compellingly speak to the complexities of educational experiences at the intersections of oppression. Their experiences illuminate the layered borders, and contested meanings of race, immigration status, class, and gender in dominant public discourse, and the ways in which Chicanas/os and Latinas/os are socially constructed in schools and curriculum. While each student's trajectory is unique, the themes as presented represent intersubjectivities—common threads woven across students' lives and perspectives. Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies served as a space for eleventh and twelfth grade students to move between their colonized and decolonized sensibilities and to shift into a third space—a decolonial imaginary—that encompassed both tensions and possibilities. As advanced by Pérez (1998), the decolonial imaginary helps us reconceptualize how we honor students' hybrid identities, multiple identities, and collective histories in and beyond schools. Within the decolonial imaginary, students wrestled with their contradictions between their lived experiences and the challenges posed to majoritarian ways of thinking about identity, community and education. Understanding classrooms as potential *sitios y lenguas* and imagining curricula and teaching practices as vehicles in the service of such potential opens up new possibilities for youth, teachers, curricula, and community.

Implications

Although Ethnic Studies courses—like the one described here—have recently been described as “divisive,” “un-American,” teaching sedition and racial separatism, and even the overthrow of the U.S. government (Sleeter 2011), nothing could be further from the truth. These courses are academically rigorous, historically relevant, based on content standards, grounded in a love of self and others, and often designed to reengage historically disenfranchised youth. Of course, curriculum has never been politically neutral (Pinar 2004), and thus neither is Ethnic Studies; to the contrary, Ethnic Studies intentionally allows for multiple voices—including long silenced ones—to enter the dialogical process of teaching and learning. As shown in this article, the PHS Chicana/o Latina/o Studies course's centering of TUSD's maize-based concepts offered students a whole new knowledge infrastructure, a relational ontological base, and an axiology of ethical responsibility to self and to community. Furthermore, it has proven to be a space where re-humanization is cultivated and where curriculum and pedagogy affirm, fully, who students are as human beings—a classroom community of Mexicana/o, Chicana/o, and Latina/o heritage peoples with thousands of years of culture, history and philosophy on this continent. This critical approach cultivates *sitios y lenguas* for acceptance, decolonization, and agency.

To date, Ethnic Studies courses and departments have existed mostly at the postsecondary level, implementation of and research on K-12 Ethnic Studies courses remains limited (Tintiango-Cubales et al. 2010). That said, the existing research on the academic impact of Ethnic Studies curricula at the K-12 level, although not voluminous, conveys that such curricula, when designed to help students grapple with multiple perspectives, produces higher order thinking skills and a heightened commitment to racial and cross-cultural understandings (Sleeter 2011). The recent dismantling of MAS in TUSD, urgently requires careful documentation for the purposes of Ethnic Studies curricula and practice as well as more extensive research into the efficacy and outcomes of Ethnic Studies based pedagogy in K-12 classrooms. My own experiences and those of my students represent only a few of the many not-yet uncovered classroom narratives; these are the narratives that must come to the fore.

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