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Introduction

À la fois espace de transition, espace frontalier qui marque la différence entre les deux territoires qu'il sépare mais aussi espace de mise en relation, d'échange et d'interaction, l'interlangue joue un rôle fondamental dans les dynamiques de construction identitaire et nationale. Conçue par Sélinker en 1972 comme un système linguistique transitoire entre deux systèmes linguistiques, l'interlangue se définit à présent comme la capacité permanente d'individus bi- ou plurilingues à fonctionner entre les langues et les modes de pensée qui les accompagnent. Le plurilinguisme, comme le souligne Claire Kramsch avec justesse, ne serait dès lors se concevoir comme la simple juxtaposition de plusieurs monolinguisms, mais plutôt comme la mise en relation d'un discours à un autre, d'une manière de parler et de penser à une autre. En France comme aux États-Unis, le plurilinguisme est de ce fait tout à la fois objet de convoitise et d'inquiétude dans les cercles éducatifs.

Cette réflexion sur l'interlangue s'inscrit dans un contexte plus général de multilinguisme/multiculturalisme avec une circulation de populations de langues et cultures variées qui se retrouvent à l'école. Celle-ci joue aujourd'hui un rôle important dans le processus de construction identitaire citoyenne. Lieu privilégié de construction des interlangues, lieu de rencontres de langues et cultures de plus en plus diverses, l'école constitue un terrain d'observation des enjeux psycholinguistiques et sociolinguistiques liés aux contacts des langues-cultures. L'évolution de la

Bad Subjects: HB 2281, Chicano Studies, and Assimilation

Catherine Ramirez

It is education that has altered my life. Carried me far.
I write this autobiography as the history of my schooling.
To admit the change in my life I must speak of years as a
student, of losses, of gains.

Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* (1983), illuminates Latinos’
 vexed relationship to the American school, a coercive, if not violent, mechanism
of assimilation, and at the same time, a catalyst of personal and social transforma-
tion. While United States educational institutions have helped reproduce exclusion
and inequality, they have also served as a vital platform for social reform and, in
some instances, radical change. A few important ways the school has helped usher
in social change are via desegregation efforts, implemented by legal decisions such as
*Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* (1931) and *Mendez v. Westminster School
District* (1946); also by the establishment of Chicano studies at high schools and
post-secondary institutions beginning in the late 1960s; and more recently, by activ-
ism around the *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minor* Act.

*Alvarez, Mendez,* Chicano studies, and the DREAM Act are part of a long,
vibrant, and ongoing struggle for social justice by and for Latinos in the United
States. Yet, the struggle for Chicano studies differs considerably from these other
efforts, in huge part because it aims to produce a very different kind of subject.
While *Alvarez, Mendez,* and the DREAM Act have called for the transformation of
Mexicans into Americans and the incorporation of “Mexican Americans” and undocu-
cumented immigrants in the American polity, Chicano and, increasingly, Latino
studies prompts students to trace the mutable boundaries of that polity and to look

beyond it. Often this field challenges official histories that uphold the United States as a peaceful and egalitarian meritocracy. And where the public school has endeavored to produce loyal and compliant citizens, however subordinate, Chicano studies strives to produce subjects with a keen knowledge of American legacies of expansion, exploitation, exclusion, and struggle. For the creators and supporters of Arizona’s House Bill 2281 (HB 2281), which Governor Jan Brewer signed into law on May 11, 2010, Chicano studies is a bad subject that produces bad subjects.

This essay dwells on some of the subjects of Chicano studies. ‘Taking my cue from Louis Althusser8, I define subject not only as an object of study, but as a social or historical actor, a bearer of consciousness, and an effect – in other words, a producer and product of “social formations, language, political apparatuses,” and ideology9. The subjects that concern me include HB 2281, its history, and the fight against it. I touch on the history of Ethnic and Chicano studies, with a focus on the Mexican American Studies Department of Tucson Unified School District (TUSD), HB 2281’s primary target, and the ways in which Chicano studies overlaps with and diverges from previous and ongoing struggles around education. Furthermore, I examine the way this field reconciles these other struggles’ assimilative thrust by redefining and looking beyond the United States and Americaness. Yet rather than dismiss assimilation, I aim to show why it, too, is an important subject of and for Chicano studies. Like alledy, resistance, and agency – key subjects of Chicano studies and ethnic studies in general – assimilation can shed light on power. By examining power and the ways in which Mexicans, Chicanos, and Latinos have been subjects of it, my hope is that Chicano studies will show us how to transform it.

Without naming Chicano studies or TUSD’s Mexican American Studies Department, HB 2281 mandates “that public school pupils [...] be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people”. It bans “courses or classes that [...] promote the overthrow of the United States government[.] [p]romote resentment toward a race or class of people[,] [a]re designed particularly for pupils of a particular ethnic group[,] [or] [a]dvocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals”10. Districts that fail to comply with the law, which went into effect on December 31, 2010, lose ten percent of their state funding each month.

As Sandra Soto and Miranda Joseph have pointed out, HB 2281 contradicts individualism with Ethnic Studies linking the latter “to ‘resentment’ and ‘hate’; as though people who do not subscribe to individualism are necessarily prone to hatred?”. Yet what exactly is Ethnic Studies? And is it really motivated by resentment, hatred, and the desire to see ethnic solidarity topple individualism?

Without a doubt, Ethnic Studies is a vast and heterogeneous field, one that is not limited to a particular discipline, method, source, question, or institutional space. It is not easy to pin down, but at the risk of oversimplifying the debate, I offer the following definition: Ethnic Studies is, among other things, an intellectual project that foregrounds the analysis of race, a broad and mutable category in and of itself, and power. Contrary to assertions that it is divisive and un-American, it “very intentionally include[s] historically marginalized communities” in narratives about this country and our place in the world. That said, Ethnic Studies is not a celebration of people of color and our contributions to American history, culture, and society. It is not sensitivity training, nor does or should it guarantee a safe space for minority students. After all, the pursuit of knowledge can involve discomfort, if not pain. While it has the power to validate knowledge, Ethnic Studies, as an academically based project, does not set out to make anyone feel good or bad, but to inform and to empower. To do so, it teaches critical thinking via “a systematic analysis of power”. And Ethnic Studies is not, in the words of Gary Okihiro, “an intellectual form of [...] affirmative action for people of color,” but studies have shown that it often improves minority students’ academic performance. Christine Skeeter, the education scholar, notes: “Students of color experience racism; ethnic studies does not introduce them to that concept. [...] Rather, by taking racism and culture seriously, Ethnic Studies attempt[s] to give students the tools to navigate racially hostile systems, and these are tools that serve many of them well, both within and beyond educational institutions”.

Ethnic Studies arose as a rejoinder to Eurocentric curricula, their oversights, and inaccuracies, and the lack of students, faculty, and administrators of color in American educational institutions. Most 1960s narratives of this field’s origins and evolution begin with the 1968-69 Third World Liberation Front strike at San Francisco State and the establishment of the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley in 1969. By the 1990s, there were over 700 programs and departments all over the country. Yet, as Skeeter has observed, “Ethnic Studies has a much longer history [...] building on pioneering works such as the writings of Carter G. Woodson.

9.— C. Skeeter, op. cit., p.18.
11.— C. Skeeter, op. cit., p. 9.
13.— Ibid., p. 870.

3.— Paul Smith, Discerning the Subject, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. xxi.
5.— www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2c/bills/hb2281s.pdf
6.— Ibid.
Bad Subjects: HB 2281, Chicano Studies, and Assimilation

Rather than recognize Americaness as yet another group, solidarity, or at times, chauvinism, HB 2281 and its advocates privilege this category as a given. They assert that those who dare to relativize Americaness by studying other groups are disrespectful, if not downright treasonable. In 2008, two years before HB 2281 became law, Ethnic Studies opponents introduced SB 1108, a Homeland Security bill that would have prohibited Arizona public schools, including universities, from offering classes that "denigrate, disparage or overly encourage dissent from the values of American democracy and Western civilization". Additionally, this bill sought to ban student organizations "based in whole or in part on race-based criteria," namely, MEChA. Although SB 1108 never made it past the House, it set the stage for HB 2281 and State Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal's March 2012 threat to dismantle Mexican American studies at the university level.

Finally, even though Ethnic Studies has long been concerned with the international and the imperial, scholars "working within diasporic, transnational, and postcolonial frameworks [have been] steadily globalizing Ethnic Studies in ways that distinguish it from international affairs or area studies since the 1990s." Scholarship here tends to emphasize the movement of people, things, and ideas and the limits of the nation-state via concepts like diaspora, the Black Atlantic, and the border.

Located roughly 100 kilometers from the US-Mexico border, TUSD is the only school district in the United States to boast a "full-breadth" ethnic studies program, of which African American Studies, Native American Studies, Pan-Asian Studies, and Mexican American Studies are departments. By 1998, in part as a response to a 1978 federally mandated desegregation order, in 1974, African American and Mexican American students success-


23.- Ibid.


fully sued TUSD for intentional segregation and discrimination on the basis of race and national origin. The district remained under the supervision of the federal court desegregation agreement until 2009. This controversial court order "included an emphasis on expanding '[TUSD's] Ethnic Studies departments". Ironically, given their proclaimed demands for fairness and colorblindness, opponents of the Mexican American Studies Department are not only defying this court order, they are also attempting to undo a response to and remedy for a long history of inequity in TUSD.

In his defense of Mexican American Studies, Congressman Raúl Grijalva of Tucson aligned that department with Americanesses, particularly multiculturalism, in a May 15, 2011 op-ed piece in the Arizona Daily Star. According to Grijalva, this department has done

a very American thing: it's taught students to value themselves, to value their families, to value who they are, to know who they are, and to be proud of that heritage. This country celebrates and acknowledges its diversity — in this respect, Mexican Americans are no different than Italian Americans or Polish Americans. We're all Americans, and our families all come from somewhere.

Grijalva's assimilationist strategy is reminiscent of that of Alvares v. Lemon Grove School District and Mendez v. Westminster School District, two legal cases that emphasized Mexican Americans' Americaness. In both, Mexican immigrant, Mexican American, and Latino parents in southern California underscored that the vast majority of students denied admission to so-called "white schools" and redirected to patently inferior Mexican ones were nonetheless US citizens. In 1931, the court ruled in Alvares that Mexican pupils were not only US citizens, but "Caucasian" ones as well. As such, they couldn't be segregated under state law. This case successfully challenged the practice of segregating Mexican Americans, but fell short of defying the institution of segregation. Hindsight (or what historians call


presentism) reveals a painful irony: while Alvares most certainly represented a blow to segregation, the insistence that Mexicans were Caucasian and not, in the words of the court, "Oriental," "Negro," or "Indian," maintained white supremacy.

Fifteen years later, the segregation of Mexican-American children in California's public schools would be challenged again when Gonzalo Méndez, a naturalized US citizen from Mexico, and his wife, Felicita Méndez, a Puerto Rican (and, therefore, a US citizen), initiated a lawsuit after their children were denied admission to their neighborhood school in Orange County and subsequently redirected to the more distant "Mexican" school. In 1946, the court ruled that the segregation of Mexican pupils amounted to a denial of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The following year, Governor Earl Warren repealed all school codes mandating segregation in California. In 1954, Mendez would "assume [...] national significance" as a precursor to Brown v. Board of Education.

Today, the struggle for equal opportunity in education continues via the DREAM Act. By legalizing those who are illegal and transforming aliens into citizens, this legislation has more than a little in common with Alvares and Mendez. If we define assimilation as the opposite of segregation or as integration, incorporation, or acculturation, terms that are sometimes used as synonyms in the United States, then all three efforts share assimilation as a goal. By rejecting Mexican Americans' status as alien citizens — US citizens "presumed to be foreigners by the mainstream of American culture and, at times, by the state" — Alvares and Mendez sought to assimilate Mexican Americans as full citizens, individuals with access to the state's resources, including its protection. And while DREAMers are not Americans in name (that is, they lack US citizenship), two justifications for their formal incorporation are their participation in the mainstream and their acculturation — in other words, their Americaness.

Likewise, Grijalva's strong defense of TUSD's Mexican American Studies Department invokes assimilation in its emphasis on минесis, the blurring or disap-
pearance of a boundary distinguishing "us" from "them". In the Congressmant's own words: "Mexican Americans are no different than Italian Americans or Polish Americans". Ethnic Studies therefore does show us that, yes, Mexican Americans do have much in common with Italian Americans and Polish Americans. And sometimes they do not, and that should be acceptable in a diverse and tolerant society.

Grijalva's plea for Mexican American Studies also invokes assimilation by bringing into play ethnicity and whiteness. His comparison of Mexican Americans with Italian Americans and Polish Americans, two ethnic, as opposed to racial, groups, is, in all likelihood, strategic and warrants scrutiny. Since the 1940s, the ideologies of pluralism and multiculturalism have allowed some Americans — namely, white ones — to assimilate into the mainstream; first, as so-called ethnic Americans and then as Americans, plain and simple. As scholars in critical Whiteness studies have shown, erstwhile "temporary Negroes" and "provisional" whites, such as Italian Americans and Polish Americans, became bona fide (that is, white) Americans by actively distancing themselves from and defining themselves against people of color, particularly blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese. This process of whiteness, what Matthew Frye Jacobson terms "racial alchemy", is assimilation in the United States.

What if Grijalva had likened Mexican Americans to a non-white group, not to Italian Americans and Polish Americans but to, say, Haitian Americans and Korean Americans? Would his words have had the same meaning, intention, or effect? If his goal was to coin Americaness for Mexican Americans, then the answer to this question is probably no, given the longstanding link between whiteness and Americanness, a connection going back to the Naturalization Act of 1790, which limited naturalization "to free white person[s]." Until the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, blacks, even those who were free, were noncitizens. And although the Naturalization Act of July 14, 1870 made "aliens of African nativity" and "persons of African descent," along with "free white persons", eligible for naturalization, blacks were still "seen as anticitizens, as enemies rather than the members of the social compact", in David Roediger's words. Jim Crow, the era of de jure and de facto racial segregation in the United States (1876-1965), followed by high rates of incarceration and disenfranchisement — what Michelle Alexander


41. —Matthew F. Jacobson, op. cit.


44. —D. Roediger, op. cit., p. 57.
struggles as "a messy and continual struggle over power", an ebb and flow of progress and retreat (think, for example, of Reconstruction, the era following the US Civil War during which blacks were emancipated and granted US citizenship and the right to vote, and Jim Crow, of the institutionalization of bilingual education and the backlash against it).  

And while Alavez, Mendez, and the DREAM Act set their sights on changing, however slightly, the United States and the conception of the so-called category "American" – a courageous, admirable, and necessary pursuit – Ethnic Studies, and in particular transnational Ethnic Studies, does not limit its scope to the nation-state or formal citizenship. Instead, many scholars in this dynamic field examine nations without states and dare to explore a multiplicity of citizenships (formal and informal alike). Some of the most exciting scholarship calls for, in the words of Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "rights beyond citizenship [...] to honor the membership of migrants in US society, and to recognize our bonds of community beyond the limited borders of the nation". By providing a space for heterodox explorations, troubling questions, and unpopular proposals, Ethnic Studies recognizes and envisions alternate subjects, those that fall outside familiar, albeit contested categories, such as "American", "citizen" or "individual".

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