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## **Become History: Learning from Identity Texts and Youth Activism in the Wake of Arizona SB1070**

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The title of this article comes from a poster in Pedro's Arizona classroom. The poster read, "The only violence in schools should be the kind you read about in history classes. Be smart. Don't become history." This message became increasingly salient to me while investigating Pedro's engagement with literacy. Using critical theory and contextualizing his work in the policies and shifting demographics of Arizona, I offer vignettes of Pedro's participation in classroom and protest literacy. Pedro's participation calls out a different message from the poster: his action and reflection through literacy is about becoming history.

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I spent the 2009-2010 school year doing social literacy case studies with a small group of Latina/o and African American students at Desert High.<sup>1</sup> Desert High is a large urban high school in Arizona serving a Latina/o student majority and smaller African American, European American, Indigenous American, Asian American, and African immigrant populations. Building off my previous research with youth of color in multiethnic and multilingual contexts (Paris, 2011a), work which continues to be informed by my own identity as a Black/White biracial scholar and as a classroom English teacher of many years, I was interested broadly in how students challenged and reinforced notions of ethnic and linguistic difference and offered revisions of literacy and the teaching of literacy through their participation in *identity texts*. Identity texts are youth space texts inscribing ethnic, linguistic, local, transnational, and political affiliations on clothing, binders, backpacks, signs, public spaces (e.g., walls and benches), youth authored rap lyrics, and electronic media (e.g., cell phones, Facebook). These texts are not traditionally assigned or officially evaluated by school and they work to claim voice, power, and dignity in situations of cultural and linguistic marginalization (Paris, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

## Understanding Identity Texts through the Scriptural Economy, Literacy Events, and Praxis

I have come to see the power and possibility of youth-authored identity texts through a conceptual framework joining De Certeau's (1984) notion of the *scriptural economy*, Heath's (1983) methodological work with *literacy events*, and Freire's (1970) vision of *praxis*. In what follows, I will sketch out this framework as it informed my social literacy methodology and, ultimately, as it allowed me to learn with students at Desert High about the texts they read and wrote inside and outside the classroom in the face of Arizona state policies that they felt were unjust.

De Certeau's (1984) scriptural economy offers a particularly helpful lens for understanding the work of youth identity texts. De Certeau theorizes that the power of "writing" has been subsumed by institutions and capitalist class structures to create and sustain the haves and have-nots. This economy functions by stratifying individuals and groups through systems of recorded text with clear, dominating social purposes. On the micro-institutional level of a high school, such textual records include files of academic and social evaluation, report cards, and demographic summaries of race/ethnicity and language proficiency. De Certeau's scriptural economy also maintains its power by defining who is literate, educated, and productive given the set of institutional records and policies, thereby reinforcing power inequities. In schools, legitimated text participates in this scriptural economy as students' school writing and reading is regulated, evaluated, and translated into the systems of power that determine their worth and advancement. On a macro-institutional level, these legitimated school texts are themselves regulated by local, state, and national policies about what languages, literacies, and cultures should and can be fostered in classrooms. In my research at Desert High, I looked at youth-authored identity texts as a *counterscriptural economy* that in many ways resisted and offered possible revisions for the dominant economy of school and state sanctioned reading and writing.

In order to understand this youth counterscriptural economy and its potential for teaching and learning, I conducted social literacy case studies (SLCS) with a small group of students at Desert High. SLCS build off the work of Heath (1983)—particularly her notion of *literacy events* as interactions where written language is central to social and cultural activity—and Haas Dyson and Genishi's (2005) more recent discussions of case study methodology in critical sociocultural literacy research. Researchers enacting SLCS hold a commitment to understanding literacy events as situated and based in the valued meanings people and cultural communities attach to the written word and its relationship to power and access across contexts. The goal of such case studies is to explore and illuminate the social and cultural meanings, educational realities, and educational possibilities of written language as it is practiced by individuals, classrooms, and communities. Like most qualitative case study inquiry, SLCS

rely on the traditional data sources of fieldnotes from participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and researcher-collected documents (Merriam, 1998). What makes social literacy case studies different from general qualitative case studies is the focused collection and analysis of literacy events and the meaning participants make of them.

I followed these tenets of social literacy case studies in my work at Desert High, visiting classrooms 1-2 times per week over the year and spending time with youth outside classrooms (e.g., school benches, the library, the state capitol, neighborhood restaurants) for interviews, further participation and observation, and informal conversations. In this article I focus on my learning from one case study, drawing on fieldnote data from weekly visits to an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class as well as on photographs, interviews, texts messages, and audio recordings gathered outside the classroom. One further note on methodology: Along with SLCS methodology, I was committed throughout this study to a *humanizing research* stance (Paris, 2011b; Paris & Winn, in press). Humanizing research is concerned with dialogic consciousness-raising about problems of mutual interest and, as well, with the development of relationships of dignity and care between researchers and participants. I hope you see evidence of both of these commitments in the description that follows.

I spent September through May at Desert High documenting and discussing the counterscriptural economy of identity texts with Latina/o and African American youth and the ways these texts interacted with school sanctioned texts. In the remainder of this article, I use my case study work with Pedro, a Mexican American eleventh grader who was born in Arizona to Mexican immigrant parents, as a window into the question: *What role did texts—those Pedro was asked to compose and consume in schools, those that surrounded him, and those he authored and consumed in youth space—play in Pedro’s reading and writing of the world?*

I am working here from the contributions of many scholars of sociocultural approaches to language and literacy, but Paulo Freire’s (1970) notion of the twin processes of reading the word and the world and of the ontological vocation of human beings as change agents upon that world is most relevant to my framework.<sup>3</sup> Freire writes that “To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it... Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action and reflection” (p. 69). For Freire, the process of reading and writing must be coupled with an increased critical consciousness of the world in order to make positive change upon that world. The only literacy for Freire is a literacy used in action toward positive social change.

Together, the conceptual contributions of De Certeau (1984), Heath (1983), and Freire (1970) allowed me interrelated lenses and associated methodological commitments that revealed, in significant ways, how Pedro and his peers navigated literacy and justice in the context of a changing Arizona and in the midst of the firestorm surrounding the passage of Arizona State Bill 1070.

## Researching Identity Texts, Reflection, and Action in the Context of Arizona

My inquiry into the relationship between Pedro, texts, and his reflection and action upon his world inside and outside school takes on increased importance in the context of Arizona, a state that is quickly shifting toward a majority of color and one that already serves as many students of color as European American students in public schools.<sup>4</sup> These shifting demographics, coupled with a state policy climate that seeks to narrowly define how ethnicity, language, and literacy are taught, learned, and lived, have made understanding the language and literacy experiences of youth of color in Arizona a top priority. Such understanding can help students, teachers, researchers, and policy makers to push back on policies like SB1070, HB2281, the “Heavily Accented English Initiative,” and English Only laws that fly in the face of decades of research-based evidence and have been widely decried by professional research and practice organizations as well as human rights and Federal agencies.<sup>5</sup>

Let me share two vignettes of my learning with Pedro that, I hope, offer some insight into joining with students to name the world in work, in action and reflection toward more *culturally sustaining* and just language and literacy learning in Arizona and beyond. I use the term *culturally sustaining* rather than “culturally responsive” or “culturally relevant” as our pedagogies need to be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—they need to support young people in sustaining heritage and community cultural and linguistic practices while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural and linguistic practices.<sup>6</sup>

### Vignette #1: Do Not Become History

Here are a few snapshots representative of many months of my weekly visits to Pedro’s 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class. I am not interested here in leveling critiques of the teacher in this class—she was a qualified and dedicated teacher facing many constraints on her curriculum and pedagogy—but rather I am interested in thinking about the opportunities we often miss in the reading and writing we do with young people and the types of reading and writing we might do in the current moment of demographic change and troubling immigration, language, and education policy.

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It is mid-December, just before winter break. The class has been reading two poems from Langston Hughes (collected in Rampersad & Roessel, 1984), “I, Too” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The teacher begins explaining her interpretations and tells students to think of the narrator of the poems as African

American culture itself. She asks the students to find details in the poems that relate to the elements of the 1920's African American literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance that she has written on the board. I look over at Pedro who is texting with one hand and copying notes from his neighbor with the other. I am sitting at the back of the room near Pedro, who sits in his customary last row. He turns to his neighbor and begins an impromptu flow.

"I'm a rapper... Battling everyone, throwin' 'em down, you dis my mom, I dis your mom, you come at me, I come at you." I wonder at Langston Hughes' voice in the poem as he states—"I, too, sing America... I, too, am America"—and I wonder what else Pedro sings about his America.

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It is February now and the class is in the computer lab printing biographical and critical information for an essay on William Faulkner. I wander around the computer bank talking to students. After he prints off his notes, Pedro is looking at some websites about his parents' native Sinaloa, Mexico. He shows me a corrido band on the computer called Los Cuates de Sinaloa.<sup>7</sup> According to the band, corridos are stories taken from real life put into song. In their music, explains one band member, they report the news about drug cartels, violence, and police corruption. Pedro and I watch a few links of performances the band has done here in the metro area. Pedro's friend, Carlos, shows us what he is looking at on his computer screen: footage of fights and photos of tattoos from notorious Mexican gangs. And I wonder, then, about the stories of corridos and what stories Pedro knows and wants to tell.

Sitting on a bench interviewing Pedro near the school library, I ask him about reading and writing in English class.

**Pedro:** Reading, it never gets to me. I think it's boring... I don't hate reading because it depends on what I'm reading. Like right now I'm really interested in the Mafia and all that... I go and Google what's going on... I don't read books specifically but I just read the articles on Wikipedia and everything. When I go on there to learn about the Mafia and how it's going in Mexico and all this, how the people are getting left and everything and what they do....(2/19/10)

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We have reached mid-March and today students are to do a story map of Lorraine Hansberry's (1959, 2002) play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The teacher has projected major elements of the play on the screen at the front of the room:

**Setting:** South Side of Chicago

**Conflict:** Working class black family struggles against economic and racial prejudice.

**Theme:** Value and purpose of dreams, need to fight racial discrimination, importance of family

**Symbols:** Eat your eggs = be quiet and accept adversity one faces in life

Plant= mama's care and dreams for her family

Beneatha's hair= antiassimilationist desire to shape her identity by looking back to African roots

Some students begin copying the information into their notebooks. Pedro seems to take little notice of the screen. He is texting under the table. Ten minutes, then fifteen minutes later, Pedro is still texting. Twenty-five minutes later, Pedro has placed his phone inside his textbook and is still texting. Thirty-five minutes, Pedro still texting. The class begins to listen to the play on tape. Forty minutes into class, the tape is playing. Pedro is texting. He has been writing continuously all class. And I wonder what we as teachers can use this contemporary youth writing for and, as important, what Pedro uses it for.

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During all these months there has been a district-sponsored poster on the wall beside Pedro's desk. It reads:

***The only violence in schools should be the kind you read about in history classes.***

***Be smart. Don't become history.***

*(On the poster, there is a picture of a history textbook opened to a page titled "Civil War.")*

Be smart. Don't become history. Leave history in books. History is in the past. Violence is in the past. The Civil War, that violent battle for, among other things, human rights, is in the past. Leave it there. Such struggles are not a part of school.

The poster in many ways captures Pedro's engagement with the language, literacy, and literature work offered in his class. Pedro's reading and writing the word and the world—about corridos, mafias, immigration, rapping, texting—the various sorts of identity texts he participates in are not meaningfully connected to the important works of Langston Hughes, or William Faulkner, or Lorraine Hansberry, and these school texts, for him, are not connected to his own struggles or the struggles of his community. Despite the deep themes of injustice and the struggle for rights at the heart of the literary works in his curriculum, reading them and writing about them are not about becoming history.<sup>8</sup> These school texts have not become the sorts of problems Freire (1970) writes about, the sort that demand the attention of teachers and students as problems in need of effort and change and critical engagement.



## Vignette #2: “We Walk at 11”

In April, State Bill 1070 was passed by the Arizona Legislature. The bill, aimed at immigrant and migrant populations, primarily Latina/os, would make it a state crime to be undocumented and would require police to check the papers of those they have “reasonable suspicion” of being undocumented. What ensued in Arizona and in Pedro’s texting of identity, in his reading and writing the word and the world, can inform how our classrooms might offer students support in becoming change agents in history through reading and writing in action and reflection.

Some days after the law was passed, Governor Jan Brewer was set to sign the bill into law. I continued my research into identity texts with Pedro and his peers and had scheduled an interview with Pedro at the school.

I text Pedro before I drive over to the school:

**Django:** We on for after school at the frnt gate?

**Pedro:** I left to march

**Django:** Thats right... life in la lucha!<sup>9</sup> Where u at?

**Pedro:** Haha hell yeah n on my way downtown (4/22/10)<sup>10</sup>

I decide to meet Pedro and his fellow student protestors at the state capitol. There are hundreds of students marching in from all directions when I arrive. Texts of protest cover signs and shirts. One young man holds a sign demanding, “Veto SB1070!” There is a likeness of Adolf Hitler stenciled onto the sign below the message. Another young man raises both arms up to hoist a plywood sign with “Fuck SB1070” spray-painted in bright orange letters. Chants of protest fill the air. A collective “¡Si se puede!” (Yes we can!) echoes across the youth gathering (audio recording, 4/22/10).

I wander a bit, asking groups of students which high school they are from as I try to locate the Desert High group. Pedro and I text a few times and I finally meet up with him and his crew. Pedro has brought a megaphone his mother gave him for the protest. “Don’t get deported,” she told him when he mentioned the walkout. “We’re doing this for you,” Pedro responded (interview, 5/6/10). A friend of Pedro’s has written “Veto SB1070” in permanent marker across Pedro’s shirt. Another friend has written “Stop Racism” on his own shirt. I understand these inscriptions as fierce identity texts, texts of praxis, of reflection upon relevant problems embedded in action to solve those problems. Pedro and his friend hold up a sign together that reads, “Arizona Stop SB1070.” Pedro, megaphone in hand, joins the crowd in chanting, “¡El pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido!” (audio recording, 4/22/10).<sup>11</sup> These spoken claims of justice in the face of injustice join with identity texts to create a mosaic of the written and spoken word—together communicating what I hear as a most basic and necessary message: we are here, we are human.

I ask Pedro how all the students knew to walk out of class today from so many different urban schools. Pedro tells me that a friend of his, a Latina at Desert High, had sent out a text message the night before. He shows me the text on his phone:

WALK OUT! ALL SCHOOLS thursday april 22, Fuck Bill SB1070! Stop the racial profiling, Stop this injustice! We walk at 11am and were marching  
(4/21/10)

The text message had reached many hundreds of students in several area high schools through vast networks of phones and peers. As teachers we so often think of texting as simply social talk in print, as a hindrance to the sorts of literacy we are after in school, but text messages are writing for real social purposes full of lessons about language, audience, and purpose (Paris, 2010; Paris & Kirkland, 2011). Here it was a text message that organized and galvanized youth to leave school in search of voice, power, and dignity in the face of a state policy which they and their communities viewed as offering little of either.<sup>12</sup>

In an interview I asked Pedro about his experience marching that day:

**Pedro:** Remember the time that Martin Luther King and them were marching?...They got sprayed with water and everything, they still didn't care. They still fought for their rights... I think that if they're trying to racial profile us and nobody does nothing about it, someone has to step up. And the people that stepped up for us, it was us, the students. We're the ones that stepped up because we were the first ones that didn't move, not the adults or nothing. We were the ones that took our choice and we started marching downtown to make a difference. (5/6/10)

Pedro saw his participation as connected to a longer struggle for civil and human rights, as part of a history of social protest that has sustained cultures and communities in the face of injustice. And he saw the activism of his youth community as an attempt to make a positive difference in that history.

### Joining Youth Engagement with Text and World

What seemed in my time with Pedro like disconnected scriptural economies, the texts he often attended to in the classroom—text messages, corridos, raps, news about cartels and immigration—the texts he was assigned to read and write about in the classroom—Langston Hughes, William Faulkner, Lorraine Hansberry—and the texts he participated in as an activist—signs, shirts, text messages, chants—should and can be joined in a common purpose for reading and writing the world.

This will mean seeking to make critical, relevant, and sustaining connections from the characters and themes in classroom literature to issues that matter to students and communities. It is not enough to include literature like Langston Hughes or Lorraine Hansberry that explores the struggle for human



rights for communities of color in the United States; we must connect the struggles in literature and other classroom content to continuing struggles. Joining youth reading and writing in a common purpose will also mean expanding the sorts of texts that are read and written to include youth space identity texts like raps, corridos, news media, social networking, and text messages. Put simply, joining youth literacy in common purpose means teachers must work with students in confronting political issues through reading and writing as these issues confront our communities.

For Pedro, such a joining might mean studying state and local policies and his family and community's response to those policies alongside Hansberry's play about an African American family's individual and collective response to American racism and residential segregation. It could also mean linking Hughes protest poems about American racial injustice and the possibilities for a more equal America to the protest literacy he and his peers produced through text messages, signs, and chants. Such meaningful connections are, indeed, calling out for pedagogical attention much as Pedro himself looked to see his own action through the lens of the civil rights movement.

For teachers and teacher educators, we must look to successful examples of joining youth language and literacy in a common purpose for reading and writing as we fashion our own classes. Although there are many excellent examples of pedagogy with youth of color that connects the study of literature and writing directly to contemporary civil and human rights struggles,<sup>13</sup> we need to go no further than Arizona to find an exemplary program that has embodied these commitments. It is a profoundly cruel irony that what Pedro and his peers were calling out for in their engagements with reading and writing the word and the world was indeed a part of the successful Mexican American Studies Program two hours south in the Tucson Unified School District. In that program, Latina/o, Indigenous American, African American, and Asian American literatures along with dominant canonical literature were taught and learned with a focus on historic and continuing struggles and with a focus on solutions to contemporary issues facing students and their communities.<sup>14</sup> In the spring of 2010, just weeks after Pedro marched with his peers in protest of SB 1070, HB 2281 was also signed into law. This law, commonly known as the "Arizona Ethnic Studies Ban," was invoked in January 2012 to close the Mexican American Studies program, including the removal of books from classrooms and instructions to teachers that they must not teach remaining literature from ethnic studies perspectives (Acosta, 2012).

The current situation in Arizona has reminded us in no uncertain terms that our work as teachers and researchers is not about language and literacy learning or educational experiences in a mythical political vacuum. Our work as teachers and researchers has always been about struggles for language and literacy rights and human rights. This work and this struggle continue for Pedro as they do for all of us in Arizona and beyond. The stakes could not be higher.

In our interview about the walkout, Pedro told me that his activism reached back through the decades to Cesar Chavez:

**Pedro:** We're just trying to take what we already know about, since Chavez left.

**Django:** And keep it going?

**Pedro:** Keep it going... (5/6/10)

Pedro's participation in social protest and the many possibilities for connecting his identity texts with his classroom texts in reflection and action suggest a revision of that poster on his classroom wall. "Be smart. Do not become history." advised the poster. Pedro's participation calls out a different message: "Be smart. Become history." In the face of policies like SB1070 and HB2281, we must seek to become the kind of history we need in our work with the young people we share our lives with.

### Acknowledgments

My deepest thanks to Pedro and his peers for allowing me to learn with them in action and reflection. Many thanks as well to Rae Paris for her thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this article and for the opportunity to read this piece with *Arizona Writers for Justice* in support of the TUSD Mexican American Studies Program. I alone am responsible for any faults herein.

### Notes

1. Desert High and the names of students are pseudonyms.
2. I should note that my use of identity text is quite different from Jim Cummins and his collaborators (2005) who, in important research independent from and contemporary to my own, used the term to describe certain school assigned and evaluated texts of pre-school ELLs.
3. See Collins and Blot (2003) for a review of seminal sociocultural literacy research and Gutierrez (2008) and Morrell (2004) for more recent contributions with increasingly transformative goals for students and communities.
4. See (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006) for a discussion of the changing demographics of schools in the urban West and Southwest. Urban districts in Arizona already serve more students of color than European American students and districts on or neighboring Indigenous American reservations also serve majority populations of color.
5. State Bill 1070, aimed at immigrant and migrant populations, makes it a state crime to be undocumented and requires police to check the papers of those they have "reasonable suspicion" of being undocumented. House Bill 2281 bans teaching what the bill terms "ethnic solidarity" in K-12 schools, making it

illegal to teach courses that center on the pasts, presents, and futures of historically marginalized ethnic groups. A separate initiative from the State Department of Education restricts teachers who speak with “heavily accented” English from working with ELL students. This is coupled with English Only laws already in place that make it illegal to use Spanish or other heritage languages during classroom instruction. (Indigenous American languages are mainly excepted from state English Only policies due to Federal policies, though these languages have been under attack for centuries and many are already lost or need serious community-based revitalization efforts to survive, see McCarty, 2008.) Although all of these bills and initiatives have been broadly criticized by scholars of education and language, SB1070 has received the most severe, broad, and aggressive reaction. AERA and NCTE made statements against the bill and have boycotted the state for business meetings and conventions. Lawsuits are currently pending from the U.S. Department of Justice and the ACLU (among others). The law’s most troubling facets are currently under injunction by a Federal Judge and were in April 2012 being heard before the Supreme Court. I should also note that in January 2012, AERA passed resolutions denouncing HB2281, the “ethnic studies ban,” after the bill was invoked to close the successful Mexican American Studies program in Tucson Unified School District. Finally, I thank Kris Gutierrez for suggesting that I historicize the current policy climate in Arizona toward Latina/os as stretching back through the centuries for Indigenous Americans, Latina/os, and African Americans in Arizona. Although I have some knowledge of this history from the excellent work of Arizona-based justice scholars (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Whittaker, 2003; Moll, 2010), it is an area I need to more fully investigate.

6. I build off the seminal contributions of Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay (2000), Carter (2005), Alim (2007) and many others in my thinking about culturally sustaining pedagogies. I have further elaborated on the term, stance, and practice of culturally sustaining pedagogy in Paris (2012).
7. The band name *Los Cuates de Sinaloa* translates into English roughly as “The Homies/Friends of Sinaloa.” Sinaloa is a state in northwestern Mexico.
8. See Gutiérrez (2008) for a discussion of historicizing literacy with youth, something Pedro was not offered in his school reading and writing.
9. “La lucha” is Spanish for “the struggle.”
10. I represent text messages with original capitalization, spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
11. “¡El Pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido!” is a protest chant which translates into to English as “The people, united, will never be defeated!”
12. I am indebted here to Cintron’s (1997) organizing question, how do people create respect under conditions of little or no respect?
13. See Cammarota (2007), Gutiérrez (2008), Kinloch (2010), Winn (2011), and Irizarry (2011) for contemporary research with Latina/o and African American youth that explores examples of such pedagogy and curriculum.
14. See <http://www.tusd1.org/contents/depart/mexicanam/index.asp> for links to the curriculum of the now closed Mexican American Studies Program.

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