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Review of *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies*

By Steven Alvarez. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2017. 212 pp.

Marlene Galván

Texas Tech University, on land of the Comanche tribe.¹

This story begins with thirty-three-year-old María Cruz’s emigration from Morelos, Mexico to Southern California, where she married and had four children. Ten years later she and her family moved to New York City, where through complex networks of neighboring families, school and religious events, after-school programs, and the ability to broker languages by María’s eldest daughter, Gina, María and Gina found themselves in the MANOS community – the Mexican American Network of Students, a grassroots educational mentoring program organized by volunteer mentors and Mexican mothers. MANOS offered free after-school and evening tutoring to families, primarily Mexican immigrant families in New York City. María’s is just one of several mothers’ stories included in Steven Alvarez’s *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies*. But it is through María’s story that Alvarez introduces his book’s main goal: to “confirm the importance of collaboratively gained family literacy for cultivating positive attitudes toward echándole ganas in schooling and brokering the immigrant bargain” (p. xviii). Alvarez’s premise requires readers to consider “how the immigrant bargain offers a space for intergenerational dialogue...with rather than for children, even despite the standardized academic power of English literacy” (p. xxiv).

In reading this book, it is important to understand “the intergenerational narrative of echándole ganas,” a term Luis Urrieta, Jr. (2009) argues has no clear English equivalent because “it is a term embedded in emotion and struggle, but would

most closely be translated to ‘giving it your all’” (qtd. in Alvarez, 2017, p. xvi). Equally important are *superación* narratives, which Alvarez asserts “articulate stories about quality of life, security, and economic well-being” (p. xvi). Together, narratives of *echándole ganas* and *superación* form part of the immigrant bargain, a common, but nonetheless complicated history of first-generation parents and their hopes for hard working, academically successful second-generation children.

Because of Alvarez’s work as a MANOS mentor, his research is situated within five years’ worth of involved documentation. Thus, his research provides a comprehensive study that is divided into six chapters and shares the work of seven mentors, nine first-generation Mexican-origin immigrant mothers and their twenty-one children as they navigate, or *broker*, socio-linguistic interactions at MANOS.

Chapter 1, “Mexican New York City: Making Community at MANOS” contextualizes family navigation, particularly for mothers, of educational opportunities in Mexican New York City and describes a flexible and strategic blueprint used by MANOS to successfully engage literacy mentorship. Alvarez explores the history of the larger Mexican-origin community in New York City beginning in 1990 when New York experienced an influx in the population of Mexican immigrants caused by financial crisis in Mexico and shifts in New York City’s economic circumstances that increased demand for low-wage labor (p. 6). While Alvarez describes the changing landscape of the city, he zooms in on Foraker Street, one of New York City’s Mexican immigrant barrios and the site of his fieldwork. MANOS was located in the basement of the San Juan Bautista Catholic Church on Foraker Street. Like the city, the barrio experienced an influx of Mexican immigrants and thus an increase in student enrollment and “community desire for educational support” (p. 8). This increase sometimes strained MANOS’s resources, requiring a collaborative and communal effort to keep MANOS going. Alvarez details both the layout and structure of MANOS’s mentoring, documentation of grants, applications, and report cards of mentees, mentorship time and space allocation, and available resources such as a library of donated books in multiple subjects and languages. Through his introduction of the MANOS families and mentors, Alvarez asserts that mentors “brokered literacies, opening spaces for shared power relations and social interaction among mothers and children when doing homework” (p. 23). These relationships were established between mothers, mentors, and mentees and constructed a uniquely mutual and negotiated translanguaging learning community experience.

Chapter 2, “Translanguaging Events: Homework Literacies at MANOS” establishes the book’s theoretical framework, a theory that re-constructs translanguaging events as a “methodological approach for coding and narrating literacy

activities in situated contexts” (p. 42). Alvarez asserts that the promise of opportunity and social mobility inherent in the immigrant bargain is also present (though not always articulated) through increased bilingual opportunities. It is in this chapter that Alvarez explicitly defines *a broker* (the noun) as “the mediating participant who establishes or destabilizes the link of communication among communicants” (p. 43) and *to broker* (the verb) as “[serving] as a liaison with influence in exchanges between individuals” (p. 43). Both mentors and mentees functioned as brokers with mothers in homework situations at MANOS. Alvarez describes the mentoring at MANOS as “brokering between audiences and embodying shifting and dynamic positions of power”; this problematizes monolingual assumptions through a translanguaging framework which allows communities to “better...understand the nuances of literacy practices” (p. 41-42). These nuances of brokered performances, however creative and critical, are not without the added complexity of disrupted or redistributed power dynamics between children and their Mexican immigrant, language-minoritized parents which Alvarez continues to discuss in the latter half of his book.

Chapter 3, “Translanguaging in Practice: Homework, Linguistic Power, and Family Life” offers a detailed look at the day-to-day translanguaging occurrences during homework and mentoring sessions at MANOS. Alvarez reintroduces readers to Gina and María and discusses the substantial amount of language responsibility Gina carried not just for her mother, but her entire family. Alvarez also analyzes two translanguaging events in a case study that reveals how translanguaging functions to circumscribe monolingual constraints and helps to develop an “understanding [of] how language excludes but also includes agents within discourses and communities” (p. 81). These agents include the significant contributions of language-minoritized parents in homework sessions and their children’s overall academic progress.

Chapter 4, “Brokering the Immigrant Bargain: Negotiating Language, Power, and Identity in Mexican Immigrant Families” and Chapter 5, “Brokering Communities: Community Superación and Local Literacy Investment” describe in more detail the immigrant bargain at MANOS and examine how MANOS worked to establish trust among mentors and immigrant families while translanguaging English language homework. Alvarez explores how MANOS mothers served as powerful agents in their children’s formulation and perception of the immigrant bargain narrative as well as how MANOS mentees perceived and were affected by this parental influence. More specifically, the rhetorical power of immigrant parents both motivated their children, but at times conflated academic aspirations and success with pressure to assimilate and distance themselves from their parents. In efforts to ease this tension, Alvarez notes that “[t]he support that MANOS provided...reflects a community effort

to engage with the dominant institutional language while maintaining the integrity of the home language used to communicate in personal relations” (p. 108). MANOS’s support for this type of engagement came through the sustained, nurtured trust of care and commitment, creating a safe space for brokered performances and translanguaging events that addressed the immigrant bargain.

Chapter 6, “Tareas, Community, and Brokering Care: Mentoring Local Languages and Literacies” concludes Alvarez’s research with a call for the use of a plurilingual model for K-12 schools, university teacher education programs, and grassroots organizations to practice collaboration in ethnographic fieldwork, creating a group community literacy specialists Alvarez refers to as educator-ethnographers. This model, according to Alvarez “[derives] generative themes, crafts, and vocabularies reflective of the linguistic repertoires of local communities” as well as teaches educators to be aware of and attentive to “subtractive policies that blame students’ languages and families by characterizing them as shortcomings (p. 143). Alvarez’s time at MANOS concludes with the book; however, he finishes with suggestions for educator-ethnographers to continue the work of meaningful community literacy cooperation. Alvarez’s final claim explicitly points to the importance of community and academic partnerships, a claim that supports one of the book’s underlying assertions, an assertion Alvarez acknowledges is not new...that bilingualism is a civil right.

Through *Brokering Tareas*, Alvarez offers an in-depth ethnographic study of MANOS that broadens public understanding of translingual communicative acts, foregrounding the complexity and richness of such acts. Informed by his positionality, his in-depth involvement in the community, the book’s methodology noticeably possesses a deep sense of respect and responsibility to ethical and reciprocal research within this community. While Alvarez acknowledges that his book does not address the gender dynamics of these brokered translanguaging events, his work certainly opens the conversation to these contributions. Overall, Alvarez constructs a sophisticated, well-sequenced examination of community and literacy that grapples with the recognition that “the force of academic English’s legitimacy to dominate certainly does not necessitate believing in a mainstream way of speaking, reading, or writing” (xxi). Rather, Alvarez argues, “ideological dispositions and preferences communicated through discourses that sanction the immigrant bargain are instilled in individuals over long, slow processes” and his work seeks to “focus [on] these dynamic contributions aimed at advancing immigrant families’ emergent bilingualism” (xxii).

Endnotes

1. Land acknowledgement – Lubbock County, Texas. (2020). Retrieved April 03, 2020, from <https://www.co.lubbock.tx.us>

References

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About the Author

Marlene Galván was born and currently resides in the Texas Borderlands. She is the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants, daughter of Mexican American parents, and mother to one beautiful boy. She is a lecturer in the First Year Writing Program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and Ph.D. student in the Technical Communication & Rhetoric program at Texas Tech University.