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How to Tame a Wild Tongue Language Rights in the United States

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Abstract: The call for a “common language” and a “shared identity that makes us Americans” not only hides a more pernicious social and cultural agenda but it is also part of the present attempt toward the ‘reorganization of a ‘cultural hegemony’ as evidenced in the conservatives on the multiplicity of languages spoken in the United States. This ultimately guarantees that these groups will remain repressed, marginalized and cut off from the wealth of resources that the dominant group has full access. As a result, the current debate over bilingual education has very little to do with language per se; the real issue that under-girds the English-Only movements in the United States is economic, social, and political control of a dominant minority over a largely subordinate majority that no longer fit the profile of what it means be part of “our common culture” and speak “our common language.” Along these lines, cultural difference is not simply the mere existence of different cultures but a particular constructed discourse at a time when something is being challenged about power or authority. It has to do with the ways economic and cultural goods are distributed, with questions of access and with maintaining power relations (Bhabha 1999). The attack on languages other than English denies immigrant children a basic human and civil right, namely the right to learn in their native language.

I would like you to know that we did not all come from Mexico. That hurts our feelings when you call us wetbacks. We do not all steal from you. We do not all stare at the television for hours. We are not all lazy. We are not all immigrants. We are not all in gangs that jump people for their money nor do we do drugs. We do not all drop out of school when it gets difficult. We are not dirty because of our skin color. We are not all poor. Most of us know English so don't talk about us like we don't understand. Our parents mostly come here for a better life and mostly it turns out to be the other

way around. Some of our families are not always perfect. I know mine aren't. But we all have families and friends that love us. These are the facts.

—Diana Reyes, 7th Grade

BORDER CROSSINGS

It seems like a heresy to hold a conference on borders and border crossing at a time when the public discourse centers on how to secure these borders, with \$20 mil-

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lion spent over the last 10 years in the US on fences, chains, patrol guards and with new legislation providing another 139 million¹ to further upgrade technology and strengthen border enforcement. While we struggle to transcend cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic borders, those physical and material borders are growing stronger and increasingly difficult to cross. A conference on human rights and borderlands could not be more timely given the current debate on immigration legislation in the US Senate.

The President of the United States claims that “Securing the Border is essential to securing the Homeland.” “The US Mexican border *es una herida abierta*” counters Gloria Anzaldúa. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*,” she insists.² A White House press release takes pride to the fact that since the current president took office “he has increased funding for border security by 60 percent. Border agents have apprehended and sent home more than 4.5 million people coming into the country illegally including about 350,000 with criminal records.”³

The obsession with illegal immigration becomes all the more interesting considering that the social state is, according to Henry Giroux, gradually turned into a “garrison state.”⁴ It is a state that increasingly protects the interests of global, transnational corporations, “while stepping up the level of repression and militarization on the domestic front.” Social problems are increasingly criminalized. For instance, according to the proposed immigration legislation, people who enter the country illegally will be treated as felons to be deport-

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/immigration/>.

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera*. (Aunt Lute Books, 1999), p.25.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Henry A. Giroux, ‘Global Capitalism and the Return of the Garrison State’, *Arena Journal*, 19, 2002, pp. 141-160.

ed. “Repression increases and replaces compassion.”

Modernization, “economic progress” and globalization, are major production machines of immigration (illegal or not). These people, illegal immigrants in particular, are now perceived as just bodies, disposable labor entities, they become, according to Zygmunt Bauman “human waste.” Bauman powerfully argues that “there are always too many of *them*. ‘Them’ are the fellows of whom there should be fewer—or better still none at all. And there are never enough of *us*. ‘Us’ are the folks of whom there should be more.”⁵

An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the US right now. They have crossed physical and metaphorical borders but for most of them it will be very difficult to cross these borders back again. Borders as state institutions work for those who have passports. Not for the illegal, or for the ones without papers. What does it mean to get a passport then? What does it take to get a passport? Many will argue that in return for a “passport” you need first to learn English. You can’t bring your native tongue to the other side. You will only get a temporary pass until you prove that you are or have the potential to become a truly good American. “In return for freedom and opportunity, [immigrants] need to learn English”⁶ claims Gerda Bikales once English-Only group’s executive director.⁷

Different tongues are brought “illegally” to the other side through the border, 350 of them currently spoken on American soil, according to the 2000 Census—wild tongues, that talk back, that break the harmony of Standard English and generate suspicious looks to those who don’t speak

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004).

⁶ James Crawford. *Educating English Learners: Language Diversity in the Classroom*. (Bilingual Educational Services Inc. 2004), p.134.

⁷ Crawford, *Educating English Learners*, 133.

or don't understand them. "*How do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?*"⁸ wonders Gloria Anzaldúa?

Allow me to answer Anzaldúa's question by bringing this issue back home. In 1971, Massachusetts became the first state in the United States to enact a law mandating bilingual education for linguistic minority students. On November 5, 2002, Massachusetts was added to the states (including California in 1998, and Arizona in 2000) that decided (with the overwhelming percentage of 70 per cent) against the continuation of bilingual education programs. The irony was that the vast majority of immigrant parents whose kids would attend such programs at school were not able to vote because of their visa, citizenship status, language barrier or access to information. In this respect, a largely Anglo majority decided about the fate of linguistic minority children. One-year all-English immersion programs were suggested to remedy what bilingual education opponents called "failure of the immigrant children." The result of the state-wide referendum hardly came as a surprise given not only the intense lobbying and financial support from multimillionaire Ron Unz, but also given an increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in the American society. This sentiment becomes all the more problematic as the racial and ethnic profile is rapidly changing in the United States with the influx of immigrants reaching its highest level. According to the 2000 Census, one in five students in U.S. elementary and secondary schools is an immigrant or a child of immigrants. In the same census report, between 1970 and 2000, Asians and Pacific Islanders accounted for an increase of 592 percent while Hispanics accounted for 268 percent and blacks for 54 percent. In other words, one in six Americans was Asian or Latino in the year 2000.⁹

The new philosophy on language policy, a tongue-taming policy, moves a step ahead from what has been the case so far. True there was never an official language policy in the United States, but never before, after the civil rights movement has the legislative narrative been so blatantly exclusionary and racist in terms of languages other than English.

By consistently avoiding to legislate an official language policy, regulated by legal and constitutional declaration, the United States has been the envy of many nations that aggressively police the language use within their borders through explicit language policies that are designed to protect the "purity" and the "integrity" of their national language. I say envy to the extent that without a rigid overt language policy, the United States has managed to achieve the highest level of monolingualism where, speaking a language other than English constitutes a real liability. English monolingualism and linguistic nationalism are part and parcel of an assimilationist ideology that practically decimated the American indigenous languages as well as many languages brought to this shore through various waves of immigrants. As the mainstream culture felt threatened by the presence of multiple languages which were perceived as competing with English, the visceral reaction on the part of the mainstream media, educational institutions, and government agencies was to launch periodic assaults on languages other than English. This was the case with American Indian languages during the colonial period and with German during the first and second world wars.

The covert assimilationist language policy in the United States has been so successful in the creation of an ever-increasing linguistic xenophobia that most educators, including critical educators, have either blindly embraced it or have remained am-

⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 75.

⁹ Crawford, *Educating English Learners*, 4.

bivalent with respect to the worth of languages other than English. The assumption that English is a more viable and pedagogically suitable language has so permeated the U.S. educational discourse that more often than not, the notion that English is the only viable language of instruction is a given. This is due, in part, to the fact that most educators embrace a strictly communicative and neutral function of language. That is, they fail to take into consideration how language producers and interpreters draw upon the socially available resources that constitute the order of their discourse, how meaning-making is inextricably related to specific cultural practices and identities and the relationship between language, ideology and power. Many well-intentioned critical educators in the field of multicultural education have focused their work on border crossing and saw immigrant students as border crossers, living between two cultures. However, such a perspective not only romanticizes life in the borderlands, it also fails to acknowledge the asymmetry of power contained in the concept of border crossing. As I mentioned earlier, border crossing, whether physical, linguistic, or cultural, works well for those who have passports, for those who can go back and forth, in and out. It does not work for those who cross the border leaving everything behind them, including their native tongues. Immigrant children can hardly go back and forth since most of the times they have to cease to be who they are in order to become "American." On the other hand, students from the dominant group can cross these borders easily because they can always return to the comfort of their dominant culture and language. They will always be and feel at "home."

So, what is a border for somebody who does not have the resources to transcend it, to go back and forth? Where do you return to when you want to go back? What is the reality of people who experience a sense of geographic, cultural and linguistic home-

lessness? What happens to native tongues in the process of border crossing?

To talk about language rights in the United States means to open the Pandora's box. Language is so intertwined with power, both symbolic and material and there is a general avoidance to talk about the real threat that comes from sharing this power. In many countries such as Canada, India, Switzerland, South Africa, or Australia there are established language policies that regulate government operations, set educational priorities and express a vision for the future of multi-ethnic & multicultural societies. In the United States there is no language planning and no organized effort to address the reality of multiple languages spoken and the ways these shape the multi-ethnic, multicultural fabric of the US society and economy. Proposition 2 in Massachusetts, like Proposition 227 in California and 203 in Arizona are symptomatic not only of the increasing intolerance to languages other than English and to their speakers but it also points to the non-negotiable character of power concentrated in the hands of a white minority, a power that this dominant group is not ready to share or give away. The new laws emanating from these propositions do not aim at taming wild tongues but at cutting them out. Schools remain one of the most ardent battlegrounds for the English language policy debate and the sites that have witnessed most of the linguistic repression as evidenced in the next section.

LINGUISTIC REPRESSION: HOW TO TAME A WILD TONGUE

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks in the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do

was tell her how to pronounce my name. "If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong."¹⁰

Gloria Anzaldúa's painful memories of linguistic repression at school resonate with many similar testimonies from adults who found themselves in "No Spanish Rules" schools in the Southwest in the two decades following Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954. "No Spanish Rules" meant that "the use of Spanish in the classrooms, at lunch time, and on the playgrounds was strictly prohibited."¹¹

A report of the U.S. Commission on Civil rights (1972) noted various instances of physical punishment as well as verbal admonishments and disciplinary measures that were reported by Mexican American students. A man named Edgar recalls stark memories from his school years:

I mean, how would you like for somebody to come up to you and tell you what you speak is a dirty language? You know, what your mother speaks is a dirty language...A teacher comes up to you and tells you "No, no. You know that is a filthy language, nothing but bad words and bad thoughts in that language."

Another woman, Claudia recalls public humiliation for speaking Spanish:

I remember one day when I needed to go to the restroom so bad, but I did not know how to ask in English, so I said "*Maestra me da permiso para ir al bano?*" [Teacher, will

you give me permission to go to the bathroom?] Right away she went up to me and asked me to put my hand out. I did not understand what she was saying and just stood quietly looking up at her. She got so upset that she grabbed my hand and hit it once very hard. She then told me that if she would hear me speak Spanish again she was going to whip my hand twice and harder. Other than hurting me, she humiliated me in front of all my other classmates.¹²

According to Patricia Mendoza, among the most frequently reported forms of corporal punishment were students' being smacked on the hand with a ruler, paddled, pinched, pulled by the ear, having their mouths washed out with soap, or being forced to engage in some test of physical endurance. Today, we don't have cases of corporal punishment but linguistic hegemony does not need the use of physical violence to impose itself anymore. An inevitable question emerges here; where does this backlash come from? What is the threat that comes from speaking another language?

In the dominant public discourse the assumption is that it is "our" common language that's threatened. Samuel Huntington is blunt in his apocalyptic rhetoric, immigrants, especially those from Mexico, are undermining the "Anglo-Protestant creed, destroying the shared identity that makes us Americans. These immigrants do so by refusing to assimilate, to learn English, and to become American citizens and by maintaining a segregated society centered on un-American values."¹³ Huntington insists that, if Mexican-Americans learn English but maintain Spanish as their second lan-

¹⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 75

¹¹ Patricia Mendoza, "Aquí no se habla Español: Stories of Linguistic Repression in Southwest Schools." *Bilingual Research Journal*, Fall 2000, p. 334.

¹² Mendoza, 339.

¹³ Amitai Etzioni, "The Real Threat: An Essay on Samuel Huntington". *Contemporary Sociology*, 34, 5, 2004, pp. 477-485.

guage, it is an indication that they are refusing to become good Americans.

In essence, the call for a “common language” and a “shared identity that makes us Americans” not only hides a more pernicious social and cultural agenda but it is also part of the present attempt toward the ‘reorganization of a ‘cultural hegemony’ as evidenced in the conservatives on the multiplicity of languages spoken in the United States. This ultimately guarantees that these groups will remain repressed, marginalized and cut off from the wealth of resources that the dominant group has full access.

As a result, the current debate over bilingual education has very little to do with language per se; the real issue that undergirds the English-Only movements in the United States is economic, social, and political control of a dominant minority over a largely subordinate majority that no longer fit the profile of what it means to be part of “our common culture” and speak “our common language.” Along these lines, cultural difference is not simply the mere existence of different cultures but a particular constructed discourse at a time when something is being challenged about power or authority. It has to do with the ways economic and cultural goods are distributed, with questions of access and with maintaining power relations.¹⁴

IT’S THE LANGUAGE OF THE OPPRESSOR, YET I NEED IT TO TALK TO YOU

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguis-

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, “Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha’s Critical Literacy in Race Rhetoric and the Postcolonial,” in G. Olson & L. Worsham (eds) *Race, Rhetoric and the Postcolonial*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

tic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.¹⁵

The attack on languages other than English denies immigrant children a basic human and civil right, namely the right to learn in their native language. According to Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child¹⁶ “the education of the child should be directed to [...] the development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.” Along the same lines, Article 30 states that “a child belonging to an [ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority] should not be denied the right [...] to use his or her own language. Access to education in one’s native language should be intimately connected with the question of democratic practices. No individual, social, cultural or ethnic group can start the struggle for self-affirmation without the use of their native language.”¹⁷ For oppressed and marginalized groups the need for self-determination is crucial in the shaping and reshaping of their identities as they struggle to negotiate the new realities of the host country and to position themselves in the distribution of cultural and economic goods.

Granted the need for students to maintain their first language and preserve their cultures, they will still need to build English on these. It is, therefore, vital to reinvent English. In this sense, English will work in more directions than simply trans-

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 203.

¹⁶ United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, 1989.

¹⁷ Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1985).

lating meanings from one language to the other. It will enable students as members of traditionally oppressed and marginalized groups to translate their private troubles into public issues. It is the oppressor's language, as bell hooks suggests, a language of conquest and domination, a weapon that can shame, humiliate and colonize, silence and censor yet I need it to talk to you. In this respect, how will the power of the word redefine the power in the world? How do we redefine and/or reinvent the oppressor's language? How do we make it a counter-hegemonic discourse? How do we liberate ourselves in language as Gloria Anzaldúa tried to do throughout her work? The re-appropriation of the language of the oppressor together with preserving our native tongues should come along with the redistribution of wealth and power in the US society. This means equal participation of immigrants to the US society, educational opportunities and resources; a sense of citizenship that they belong here, opportunities for involvement in public affairs and representation in the government and other sectors of public life.

At the same time, public discourse around the issue of educating linguistic minority students should switch terrain to include questions about access to cultural, social, and economic goods, language hierarchies, ideology and power. The consensus around language that monolingual ideologies promote is hypocritical and undermines the very foundations of democracy. Beyond the important issue of denying linguistic minority students their human rights, the present common sense discourse perpetuates economic and social inequalities. By questioning monolingualism as the inevitable common good, we can start to recognize the limits and social costs of linguoracism in the American society. Consequently, there is a vital need to break the continuity and consensus of common sense that currently dominates the language debate in the United States. This is particular-

ly important given that the struggle takes place in schools that are deeply political spaces. In these pedagogical spaces students should be able to understand how power works within schools to legitimize some languages and some forms of knowledge, namely westernized knowledge, at the expense of other subjugated languages, knowledges, histories, identities, and discourses. They should be able to treat knowledge as a contested field and part of a project of politics and emancipation.

Ultimately, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the question of language is a deeply political one and it should always be understood in relation to economic, social and cultural hierarchies. June Jordan's comments are a propos here:

I am talking about majority problems of language in a democratic state, problems of a currency that someone has stolen and hidden away and then homogenized into an official "English" language that can only express non-events involving nobody responsible, or lies. If we lived in a democratic state our language would have to hurtle, fly, curse, and sing, in all the common American names, all the undeniable and representative participating voices of everybody here. We would not tolerate the language of the powerful and, thereby, lose all respect for words, per se. We would make our language conform to the truth of our many selves and we would make our language lead us into the equality of power that a democratic state must represent.¹⁸

¹⁸ June Jordan quoted in bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the practice of freedom*. (London: Routledge, 1994).