

**SPACES OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE:
UNDERGROUND LIBRARIES IN THE U.S. SOUTHWEST**

by

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Abstract

In 2012, Arizona state government dismantled the Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) after a long political fight against the local community. In the process, the books used by the program were boxed, and removed from Tucson classrooms. In the aftermath of the ban, a group of ‘Underground Libraries’ emerged with the intention to house the banned literature and assure it remained available to the affected community. Starting with the premise that education itself is a site of creation, dissemination and contestation of identity and belonging, my research looks at the role of the Underground Libraries as spaces of cultural resistance in the face of oppressive legislation. In particular, attention is given to the way in which spaces of resistance originate, multiply, and connect in order to create imagined geographies of belonging that can challenge the effects of cultural oppression at a local and regional level.

Preface

This thesis, including the design, analysis, and presentation of research materials, is the original work of the author. It was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate number H14-0280.

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List of Abbreviations

John A. Valenzuela Youth Center: JVYC

Mexican American Studies: MAS

Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan: MEChA

Multicultural Education and Counseling Through the Arts: MECA

Tucson Unified School District: TUSD

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the lives and legacies of Beatriz Del Pilar Mejia, and Ricardo Izquierdo, the greatest friends and parents a person could ask for. It is also dedicated to the communities of South Tucson, Tucson, and Houston, and to all youth in resistance against oppression across the world. Finally, it is dedicated to my beautiful wife Tara and my amazing Son Isaias.

Chapter 1

Introduction

It is the afternoon of March 16, 2012. A caravan makes its way up South Tucson's 6th Avenue, the barrio's main artery that carves the community right down the middle from north to south. The street is flanked by liquor stores and mechanic shops. The Arizona sun is beating on the convoy of vehicles bringing cargo collected throughout the Southwest. Over a dozen *traficantes* [traffickers] are on board and they have already hit five cities in the past two days. From Houston to San Antonio, El Paso, Mesilla, and Albuquerque. At each stop, crowds of suppliers and supporters gathered around the controversial contraband. The cargo has grown at each stop. As the caravan pulls into the heart of South Tucson, another crowd is waiting for the *traficantes*. The convoy pulls into the local youth center's parking lot. South Tucson police has been tipped off ahead of time and are waiting for the caravan. This is the end of the line for the *traficantes* and their cargo. The crowd cheers.

The delivery is a success and the smugglers are welcomed by the community. The Community, from the youth to the elders, had fought hard for and lost access to the cargo from Texas. Despite threats of interruptions and protests coming from as far as Phoenix, the police escort makes sure that the boxes with the precious cargo make it into the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center (JVYC), South Tucson's community hub and home to a free after-school care program. The cargo consists of over a thousand books, a veritable canon of literary production by Chican@s, the self-identified imagined community of Americans of Mexican descent. The majority of these titles come straight out of the curricula for the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD)'s Mexican American Studies (MAS) program, which was dismantled in 2012. The books had been boxed and removed from Tucson classrooms by school board officials

in the shocked presence of students. Now, the *Librotraficantes* (book traffickers) have brought them to the JVYC where they will be made available to the youth through a free, safe, and community-oriented Underground Library.

1.1 Why Underground Libraries?

This thesis examines the Underground Libraries that sprung up throughout the U.S. Southwest (and further beyond since) in the aftermath of TUSD's dismantling of the MAS program. The libraries aimed to re-establish safe and free access for Tucson's youth to all of the books used by the program's many popular classes. In an urban area suffering from underfunded libraries, in which many of the students cannot afford their own copies of the literature removed from their spaces of education, the Underground Libraries were wanted and needed spaces.

In the following chapters I use the Underground Libraries as entries into an exploration of spaces of cultural resistance. The research presented here connects the struggle against dismantling the MAS program in Southern Arizona to the cross-regional activism that led to the establishment of the Underground Libraries to a long-standing, deeply rooted tradition of educational resistance by *Chican@s* against national, regional and local climates of cultural oppression.

This research contributes to broader conversations about national belonging and identity by framing education as a crucial site of resistance where struggles over these ideas play out. Resistance is always spatialized. In the seminal book, *Geographies of Resistance*, Steve Pile emphasizes, "acts of resistance take place through specific geographies" (1997, 3). Pile argues that although much work on resistance frames it as an inevitable outcome of the exercise of power (*Ibid*); in line with Foucault's critique of power, there can be no one site of power and

therefore no one site of resistance. In other words, people are located in unevenly distributed relations of power and “more and less powerful people are active in the constitution of unfolding relationships of authority, meaning and identity” (Pile 1997, 3). Consequently, he suggests, “resistance seeks to occupy, deploy and create alternative spatialities from those defined through oppression and exploitation” (*Ibid*). This suggests that resistance is not determined by systems of oppression.

Pile uncouples resistance and oppression through a geographic analysis of the concept. In his words, that “resistance might happen under authority's nose or outside tightly controlled places implies that *resistance might have its own distinct spatialities* [emphasis mine]” (*Ibid*). Certain forms of resistance then can be uncoupled from oppressive power by virtue of their ‘distinct spatialities’ that provide what I call a crack in the matrixes of oppression from which resistance may be nurtured and developed. In relation to the understanding that emerges out of Pile’s formulation of oppression as never totalizing and all encompassing, my work highlights ways in which people create spaces in and through oppressive relations wherein they may pursue cultural practices of relevance to them.

This framing has significant implications; namely as Pile notes, resistance cannot be assumed to arise “from innate political subjectivities which are opposed to, or marginalized by, oppressive practices.” Relation to power does not determine the resistant political subjectivity. These also are constituted “through experiences which are not so quickly labeled ‘power,’ such as desire and anger, capacity and ability, happiness and fear, dreaming and forgetting.” (Pile 1997, 3). In *Geographies of Resistance* Pile pays attention to everyday struggles in relation to their spatial formations. Throughout this thesis, I attend to the everyday practices of people who work together to support their community, to follow their dreams of creating an imagined

Chican@ geography of belonging, to write beautiful stories, and to develop artistic and cultural capacities. The focus on such forms of resistance, however, shouldn't discount engagement in "formal" acts of resistance (as conventionally represented) such as going out in the streets and protesting, writing letters, among other acts that are also evidenced in this work.

To analyze the Underground Libraries and other geographies involved in the activist initiative that created them, I build from two questions Pile identifies as arising from a geographical analysis of resistance, namely "the ways in which geography makes possible or impossible certain forms of resistance" and "the way in which resistance makes other spaces other geographies- possible or impossible" (*Ibid*). Taking these queries into account, I elaborate my own regarding the spaces of cultural resistance involved in the events covered by this study. Through this thesis, I analyze how the Underground Libraries and the other spaces of resistance allowed Tucson's Chican@ community to formulate novel forms of cultural resistance in the face of exclusion and erasure. I also outline how the creation of the Underground Libraries was aided by a large network of previously-existing spaces of resistance and geographies of Chican@ activism. These other spaces and organizations were not explicitly connected until contacted by the *Librotraficantes*. I found that the creation of the Underground Libraries brought this network into being in ways that created an imaginary Chican@ community across the Southwest.

In the US southwest, where the Underground Libraries emerged, particular patterns of oppression and resistance were set in motion with the creation of the Mexico-U.S. boundary and the spatial incorporation of Mexico into the U.S. (Acuña 2000, 41). The establishment of the boundary produced a new category of people, Mexican Americans, who were marginalized through various legal and illegal mechanisms; denied full citizenship until Civil Rights era legislation. To this day, Southwest Americans of Mexican descent are excluded from narratives

of national belonging. For instance, former Harvard Center for International Affairs Samuel Huntington explicitly defines “America's traditional identity” as deriving from the religious, social, and ideological values of 17th-century and 18th-century white, British, and Protestant settlers, along with the Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians included in the 19th century (2004). Moreover, he positions ‘Hispanics’ as a problematic challenge to this national identity, giving credence to the discourse Leo Chavez identifies as the ‘Latino Threat Narrative.’ One that holds Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born citizens of Mexican descent as its “core foci” (2013, 25). Such narratives perform an erasure through a definition of U.S. culture that completely excludes the facts that Mexicans lived in the Southwest before Anglo-Americans, and that multiple languages and cultures have always been present in the United States.

As a consequence of their position in the nation, Southwest Americans of Mexican descent have faced various forms of cultural oppression including “segregation, inferior schools and education, the discrimination of IQ exams, poor teaching, a lack of Mexican [origin] teachers and a socialization process that condemned them to failure and conditioned them to accept it” (Acuña 2000, 171). I emphasize the notion of ‘cultural oppression’ to indicate the consequences of historical erasure and exclusion from the national imaginary as imparted through the school system. Exclusion from national imaginaries and therefore curricula is a particular strain of cultural oppression, which the Southwest’s Mexican-American population has fought against since 1900; next to labor it became “their most intense battleground” (Acuña 2000, 171). In the context of the events in Arizona that I will detail below, I analyze a form of oppression emanating from the political machinery of the state of Arizona, enacted through the Tucson Unified School District School Board. It is classified as cultural oppression given that it involves cultural erasure.

This chapter will now introduce the main terms, actors and issues involved in the research, provide a contextualization to the immediate sociopolitical milieu or Arizona during the time of the battle over MAS and its literature, and discuss my positionality and background as a researcher. It concludes with a short roadmap for the structure of the rest of the thesis.

1.2 Terms and Issues

The particular oppression at the center of this study consists of the dismantling of TUSD's MAS program, and the political maneuvering that was required in order to do away with what was a successful program by completion and college advancement standards, and beloved by its community. "At one point we had 3000 students," remembers Mr. Acosta. "It became so popular that students petitioned and we had to extend it to a senior program, the kids didn't want to go back [to the regular program]." The principal form of resistance explored in this study was aimed against a particular effect of the attack on said program: for a significant number of former and would-have-been MAS students and their families, access to books is a luxury beyond their means. As Gloria Hamelitz of South Tucson's JVYC "We don't have money for books. We barely have money to put food on the table, so that's a great luxury for our families." When the books were boxed in front of young students by TUSD staff, an episode narrated to me by both teachers, students and activists with a sense of trauma, they were also removed from the district's approved reading lists. This effectively cut off access to a Chicana@ literary canon that, as was repeatedly expressed to me as well, had a transformative power that should not be denied to the area's youth.

Principal among key terms used in this study that might require clarification is the identifier 'Chicana@'. In *Viva la Raza: A History of Chicano Identity and Resistance*, civil rights

activist and author Yolanda Alaniz writes along with Megan Cornish: “Like every oppressed group, Chicanas and Chicanos have demanded descriptions of their own choosing. They seek definitions that are sociologically precise and reflect pride in their origins” (2008, 27). Out of these demands emerged the self-designation for Mexican-origin, U.S.-born peoples. Alaniz speaks of the importance of the term: “Chicanas and Chicanos have a unique history as a people who resided in the region known as the U.S. Southwest since before U.S. conquest of the territory” (*Ibid*). To use the popular Chicano take on Malcolm X’s “Plymouth rock landed on us” quote (X and Haley 1992, 205), they are the people who didn’t cross the border, but were rather crossed by it. The U.S. acquired the city of Tucson through the Gadsden purchase after the U.S. war with Mexico and has a significant, historic, and proud Chican@ population.

I have chosen to use the @ symbol in an effort to address the gender-binary nature of the Spanish language and the sociological and cultural repercussions, a common practice among Latin@ communities within and outside of Latin America. The @ symbol aesthetically signals both the ‘a’ and ‘o’ endings that gender a word such as Chicana and Chicano as female and male respectively. Particular attention is given to this due to the historical role of gender divisions and tension from within the Chican@ movement that are still felt today, as expressed to me by young activists and adult supporters in Tucson. “That was part of our [activist] community being divided,” levels a MAS graduate active during the 2012 struggle; in her eyes a lot of women had their credit taken away by men, sowing separation. I do acknowledge that the very use of the @ still conforms to a gender binary that can perform an erasure over the range of genders that make up the community in question, something I hope to minimize through my acknowledgement of such linguistic politics.

The instances of gendered forms of the word are present to reflect the words of the people

I talked to, or the proper names of organizations and other similar examples of self-identification. By the same token, the terms ‘Mexican-American,’ ‘Brown,’ ‘Mexican’ and ‘Raza’ might all appear in the text analogous to the term *Chican@*. Again, my choice aims to reflect personal understandings of self and cultural identity expressed by the interviewees. This also applies to what is officially called Mexican American Studies in Tucson, but is also known in different localities and by different students and teachers as Raza Studies or Chican@ Studies. Throughout the text, Mexican American Studies will usually refer to Tucson’s particular program, and I will use Chican@ Studies to refer to the wider discipline. In Chapter 2, which delves into the historical roots of current Chican@ educational resistance, I use the term Mexican-American when addressing issues, events and actors preceding the coining and widespread adoption of the term Chican@ for historical accuracy.

Another term I use in conjunction with, although it is not interchangeable with Chican@ or any of its related terms, is Latin@. I am deploying Latin@ within the context of the United States to mean immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from all American countries south of Mexico. Alaniz and Cornish note how the term “is increasingly used as self-identification by Chicanas/os and others to express a solidarity of interests that crosses lines of national origin” (2008, 27). This was evident in the field mostly through the literature of some the organizations involved in the *Librotráfico* initiative. On an individual level however, the majority of the people I spoke to identified as Chican@s. There is an importance to this, as they pinpoint: “The Latina/o experience in many ways parallels that of Chicanas/os and mutual support is a necessity. However, Chicanas/os have a unique history as a people who resided in the region known as the U.S. Southwest since before U.S. conquest of the territory” (*Ibid*). Based on my experience in the field, the term ‘Brown’ seems to bridge the Latin@ and Chican@ communities

in a more inclusive manner than using the former to subsume the later, or referring to them separately.

Finally, I use the term ‘ban’ to describe the fate of the fifty-plus books. As Mr. Acosta, one of the architects of TUSD’s MAS program and Tucson High’s English Literature teacher (through the program) put it, the word ‘ban’ was heavily political in that it signaled “which side you were on.” The books *were* removed from the classroom, boxed and stored. The titles *were* also removed from the approved reading list for TUSD courses, and the teachers who kept their job after the program was shut down could no longer use them. Yet, the official TUSD discourse was that a ban never occurred in Tucson (Geresma 2012). Throughout this study, I will refer to the MAS books as banned.

1.3 Context: A ‘Toxic’ Political Climate Boils Over in Arizona

To examine the larger historical significance of the fight for Mexican American Studies in Tucson and the spaces of resistance that emerged during and after said struggle, I will now provide an outline of the sociopolitical climate in AZ, where this battle took place. In order to properly explore the nature of the Underground Libraries, it is necessary to understand why there was a need for them in the first place.

The book ban originates in a lengthy political battle brewing between Tucson’s MAS program, its teachers and students, and the state of Arizona as represented by then Superintendent of Education Tom Horne. While the dynamics of this Tucson-Phoenix tussle manifested themselves in a localized fashion in the southern Arizona town, much of the *Chican@*, Mexican and Latin American populations of the state were facing another legal affront, creating a volatile and culturally divisive climate Arizona-wide.

In late April of 2010, then-governor Jan Brewer (R) signed Senate Bill 1070 into law (State of Arizona Senate 2010). SB1070 is widely considered the strictest piece of so-called ‘anti-immigrant’ legislation in the U.S. It is colloquially known as the ‘show-me-your-papers’ bill due to its focus on local enforcement of the federal requirement of all so-called ‘aliens’ to have proper documentation proving their lawful presence in the U.S. at all times (*Ibid*). Arizona’s Chicana@ population frames SB1070 as an oppressive legal apparatus. It is considered discriminatory because enforcing it relies on racial profiling, excused by ‘reasonable suspicion’ clauses. The law’s passage points to the levels of xenophobia and panic politics plaguing Phoenix and the state of Arizona.

Under now-nationally infamous Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arapaio, enforcement of SB1070 has led to practices such as ‘tent city’ prisons, which inmates described as “concentration camps” where they are exposed to the desert heat, are forced to wear pink clothing items, and are fed only twice a day (Davidson 2013). Thousands of these inmates are undocumented migrants awaiting deportation. While in Tucson, I visited the weekly court session for Operation Streamline, a Fordist judicial process through which 70 people are sentenced to deportation (DeConcini et al 2014) in under two hours; eight or nine are paraded in front of the judge at a time, their wrists and ankles shackled. According to my calculations, the average jail sentence was 60 days, but they ranged from immediate deportation to 120-day sentences. This abominable practice feeds Arapaio’s Amnesty International-condemned camps (Amnesty International 1997). These geographies of oppression constitute horrific symbols of the legally mandated mistreatment of people of color in the state of Arizona and have been called by the Southern Poverty Law Center a “massive show of force...blatant and dehumanizing.” (Sanchez 2009).

On May 11, 2010, less than a month after SB1070 was passed, Governor Brewer signed Arizona State House Bill 2281 into law (State of Arizona House of Representatives 2010). HB2281 was directly targeted at state school curricula, and it prohibited all state and charter schools in Arizona from teaching any courses which could be interpreted as: “promoting the overthrow of the US government” (*Ibid*), promoting “resentment towards a race or class of people” (*Ibid*), having been designed “primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group” (*Ibid*), or courses which may be seen as encouraging “ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” (*Ibid*).

HB2281 is a state-level piece of legislation, and in trying to understand how the law was used to target a particular MAS program in Tucson, all roads lead to Tom Horne, a Canadian-born lawyer and career politician in the state of Arizona. After a stint in the Arizona House of Representatives, Horne was elected as the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Arizona Department of Education in 2003 (Arizona Attorney General 2015). It was from this post that in 2007 he issued an open letter to the citizens of Tucson calling for the end of TUSD’s MAS program (Horne 2007).

Horne’s letter was inspired after an incident in which Dolores Huerta, founding member of the United Farm Workers, gave a speech at Tucson high school in which she denounced Republican treatment of Chican@s in Arizona (Herrerias 2013). In response, Horne sent his deputy-superintendent Margaret Garcia to talk to the students about being a Republican Latina. The students staged a walk-out and Horne dropped his gloves. By late 2010, HB2281, which the Canadian had had a hand in crafting, was in the books. By early January of 2011, Horne declared Tucson’s MAS program, established in 1998 and successful ever since, as being out of compliance with the new law.

I was told the program had been under attack for years. Curtis Acosta, a Tucson High MAS English Literature teacher takes pride in the fact that the program graduated six generations of students while being targeted by the state and the school board. “A six-years struggle. It’s really a beautiful story in a lot of ways. When people say ‘there’s nothing I can do’, we can say ‘that’s funny’ because we got through six cohorts of students under that duress.” By the time the new law was thrown at TUSD’s program, however, the ethnic tension in AZ continued to increase.

Two other events in January 2011 give insight into the sociopolitical context of the time. First, Tom Horne became Attorney General for the state of Arizona, a victory many in Tucson interpreted as spurred by his attack on MAS. In a twist that exemplifies the compound legal attacks against Arizona’s Brown population at the time, Horne began his Attorney General tenure by defending HB1070 in a counter-suit against the federal government (Horne 2012).

Not a week later, Democratic House Representative Gabby Giffords was shot outside a Tucson Safeway in a failed assassination attempt that left six others dead (Grady and Medina 2011). At this point, even dedicated activists were feeling pressures never before felt. A now-University of Arizona MEChA [*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan*, Aztlan Chicano Student Movement (for more on this organization see Chapter 2.) leader said, “When Gabby Giffords was shot point-blank in the head...my parents freaked out.” At the time, her family begged her to take a back-seat in her activism due to fears for her life. Sheriff Dupnik of Pima County (which includes the city of Tucson) blamed the shooting on “the toxic political environment in Arizona” (Sutter 2011). It is worth noting that during these months large-scale, grass-roots organizing was widespread, spearheaded by current and former MAS students. While several people described the events of January 2011 as traumatic, Chican@ resistance continued strong in the face of unmasked hatred and danger.

As Horne made his way up the Arizona political ladder, he was succeeded as Superintendent by John Huppenthal, who ran on a campaign that included radio ads claiming “he would ‘stop La Raza’” (Biggers 2011). To back up these inflammatory campaign promises, the Department of Education ordered an audit of the MAS program at TUSD, which cost over a hundred thousand tax-payer dollars. This audit by the Cambium Learning Group reported that “during the curriculum audit period, no observable evidence was present to suggest that any classroom within the [TUSD] is in direct violation of [SB2281]” (Geresma 2011). Huppenthal ignored the audit and resorted to threatening cuts worth millions of dollars to the TUSD budget (a 10% reduction) (*Ibid*). Under this monetary threat, the TUSD board voted to cut the MAS program in January of 2012, during the middle of the school year. Classes were disrupted and school district officials the books were pulled from the shelves and boxed in dramatic fashion in front of the students.

1.4 Positionality and Methods

I was finishing my bachelor’s degree at the University of British Columbia in 2012, and through my undergraduate research into artistic forms of resistance and immigration reform activism in the U.S., I came across what was happening in Tucson. I found out about SB2281 while working on the dystopian HB1070. At that point, SB2281 had not only been passed, but the program had been officially dismantled by the TUSD School Board. Initially I was shocked by reports (if scarce) of the book ‘ban’, by the idea of such a large number of books being taken out of schools. I started trying to understand what was happening.

The more I learned, the more I came to realize that my interest in the subject was tied to my personal experience of the positive and transformative effects of culturally-relevant

education for members of minorities groups, who, as youths, cannot identify with the subjects of North American state-mandated education. I had emigrated with my father to the U.S. state of Florida as a teenager at the turn of the 21st century, driven out of Colombia by the politically and economically volatile and violent environment at the time. I dropped out of high school, where I didn't feel engaged educationally, despite my moderate grasp of the language. I've since learned that it was a pattern not uncommon for young male Latino immigrants, a pattern of dropping out more than double that of U.S.-born Latinos at the time of my immigration (National Center for Education Statistics 1999).

To me, Fort Lauderdale High in South Florida resembled a hybrid of factory and prison. I quickly became disillusioned because, in many ways, it was also run as a hybrid. In a low-income catchment zone, the majority of the students were recently-arrived Haitian immigrants, children of long-established African American families from the neighborhood surrounding the school, and a visible minority of Latin@ students from the Caribbean and the Southern Cone. Police patrolled the hallways and closed the school with lock and chain from start-of-class time until the last bell rang. As soon as I turned sixteen and my father could no longer be held legally responsible for my absence, I stopped going to school.

Too young to understand the consequences, I nonetheless took the opportunity I had for legal entry into Canada through my mother, who had since met and married a Canadian man in British Columbia. I migrated yet again and was urged to give school another chance. Through placement tests, I was able to make up for my lost time in Florida and join my age group. School on the outskirts of Greater Vancouver was a welcomed respite in that I was no longer being locked down and policed, but it was still mostly uninspiring. I had not been in the country long enough to find any meaning in the events mentioned in history classes or the issues in our

English courses. I graduated with the bare minimum requirements and eventually joined the labour force working a variety of blue-collar jobs.

Through the years, my mother continued to press me to continue my education in some form. In her family, her siblings and herself had been the first generation to go to university. My grandparents, neither of them with much education to their names, were able to get nine children through university. I gathered it was significant to her that I not be the first of the next generation to break this positive cycle. I made her a promise, and through the Mature Student track into the University of British Columbia, one based on life experience rather than the academic requirements, I found myself in a classroom once again in my mid-twenties.

I remember coming with tepid hopes into the classroom for the first time, not knowing at all what to expect. My first class was Latin American Studies 101. That day changed my life, and I knew it right then. By the end of the first class, all of my personal discontents with pedagogy and educational practices in North America and the apathy towards the process of learning and teaching through the classroom, had become meaningless. When I was able to glimpse my culture and my history being validated, I realized that not only could I *do* education, but I was charged with a passion for the process and the politics of it.

It was a feeling described to me years later as I embarked on this research project: Former MAS students present during the struggle for their program, community organizers who were able to help the youth through positions they secured for their communities inspired by their own experiences of culturally-centered education, and elders that were around before such programs had even been conceptualized. When education grants an avenue through which to come to a greater understanding of self, particularly in environments that have consistently denied identities outside of the dominant national narratives, it becomes a source of power for those

oppressed and erased by such narratives. To get a glimpse of the impact of events in Tucson, all I had to do is wonder what if someone dismantled the humble Latin American Studies program at my university before I had that experience?

As I made my way through what information I could ascertain from the Canadian Pacific Northwest about what was happening in Arizona, I came across an initiative that caught my eye. It was called the *Librotraficante* book caravan, *Librotraficante* translating to book trafficker or smuggler. The caravan was organized by three seasoned Chican@ activists out of Houston, and the idea was to collect as many of the banned books as possible, while raising awareness among the Chican@, and Latin@ communities of the Southwest about what was happening in Tucson. This thesis frames the Underground Libraries that were the end result of the caravan and its successful collection of thousands of books as spaces of cultural resistance,

The first stage of research for this thesis consisted of archival and historical research aimed at understanding how and why the ban was achieved, uncovering the steps and players involved. It became clear to me that the events in Arizona had to be analyzed within a larger context, in particular the resistance against the cultural oppression being applied by the state against a community eager for a relevant and truthful education,. I continued researching further back in time, following the intertwined histories of cultural and civil rights struggles by Mexican-Americans in the U.S. even prior to the conceptualization of a Chican@ identity.

The following stage of my research involved fieldwork. I spent the last two weeks of October 2014 in Houston, tracking down Tony Diaz, Liana Lopez and Bryan Parras, also known as the *Librotraficantes*. I did multiple unstructured interviews with them, and spent the rest of my time in Houston doing semi-structured interviews and participant observation while volunteering at MECA, which stands for Multicultural Education and Counseling through the

Arts. MECA teaches Mexican Folkloric Dance, guitar, choral music, visual arts, and provides educational tutoring to low-income, mostly Chican@ youth in the city's Old Sixth Ward. It is the host organization of the Houston Underground Library.

I headed to Tucson afterwards and spent 5 weeks there, where I was able to conduct a series of long, semi-structured interviews with youth who were TUSD MAS students and activists before and during the ban, with former MAS teachers, banned authors, community elders, and with the director and coordinator at the John A Valenzuela Youth Center which hosts the Underground Library in South Tucson. The JVYC was also a central organizing place for the student activists, providing not only a safe place for their meetings once their school environments became hostile to their cause, but also the postboard, markers, glue and many other protest resources. I was also allowed to hang around the library a couple of times, and to attend an after-school program that was borne originally out of the youth center and which was attempting at the time to continue teaching some form of the dismantled MAS curriculum.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Spanglish with bilingual English/Spanish speakers. Lengthy quotations in Spanish have been translated by the author for the sake of clarity of prose. However I have striven to maintain as much as possible the occurrences of code-switching or single non-English words. Certain Spanish and indigenous-language words were not only used to convey concepts lost in the literary translation of the signifier, but have also been retained because it often seemed to me as an interviewer that certain words in other languages during articulations in English were often used as forms of inflection. Lastly, I interpreted the subject's choice of language use as a cultural aspect of Chican@ culture and linguistic resistance to Anglo-domination and the attempts to erase other languages oppression of languages outside of the dominant English in the U.S. Thus, I tried to stay as faithful to the original forms of

expression to represent the words of interviewees as accurately as possible, but also to acknowledge people's linguistic choices as lived culture and lived resistance.

1.5 Structure of the Study

This thesis is organized into 6 chapters. The following chapter, titled "A Long Fight: Historicizing Arizona's Assault on Mexican American Studies" reflects the historical and archival research detailed previously. The chapter traces the different forms of student and community resistance that took place in Arizona before, during and after the 2012 dismantling of MAS, and connects them to a tradition of resistance, along with its own autochthonous forms of organization, over a hundred years back into U.S. history. Furthermore, it connects Chican@ labor, cultural, and civil rights resistance as far back as U.S. expansion into the region now called the Southwest. After this chapter, the notion of what happened in Tucson as an anachronism or a political glitch gives way to an understanding of the struggle as part of an extended fight..

Chapter three is titled "Smuggling Books as Cultural Resistance: The *Librotraficante* Caravan and Activism Across Chican@ Geographies." This chapter traces the origins of the Activist's initiative that culminated in the opening of several Underground Libraries across the U.S. The chapter outlines how a group of three adults in Houston wound up crisscrossing the Southwest on behalf of Tucson's youth, and how along the way thousands of Chican@s felt compelled to participate and support the caravan despite the localized expression of oppression being rallied against. This chapter presents the first incursion into the concept of spaces of cultural resistance through the caravan's roadmap, and sets the stage for the following two chapters which delve into the Underground Libraries themselves and the idea of these spaces as being both product and producers of an imagined Chican@ community across space.

The fourth chapter of this thesis is titled “Underground Libraries and other Spaces of Resistance, Part I: South Tucson.” This piece tackles how the Underground Library in Arizona was conceptualized, brought into being and how it functions to this day. In the process, the locality of South Tucson is explored as what locals called “a banned community,” looking at the city’s separation from the larger Tucson, and the effects of this local geopolitical dynamic. Along with the Underground Library, I examine the organization which hosts it, the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center as a case study of a community-created space of cultural resistance against manifold forces of oppression.

The fifth chapter titled “Underground Libraries and other Spaces of Resistance, Part II: Beyond Tucson” opens with an exploration of Houston’s Underground Library and the organization that hosts it. In my concluding chapter, I connect the spaces of resistance involved with the *Librotráficante* initiative across the southwest, in a process of producing Aztlán as an imagined territory that is continuously brought into being in and through grassroots organizations that both reflect and produce identifications with Chicanismo and belongings as Chicanos. This is done in order to conclude with what I learned with respect to the function, creation, and multiplication of Chican@ spaces of cultural resistance, their ability to be deployed as geographic networks, and their connection threaded between them by the communal experience of the long fight for educational and cultural justice.

Chapter 2

A Long Fight: Historicizing Arizona's Assault on Chican@ Studies

Looking at the past is crucial in order to begin to understand the present situation in Tucson. Without proper historical contextualization, the ban brought about by HB2281 may be seen as an anomaly in this day and age. Dismissed as an anachronism, or maybe glossed over as a political glitch even in a historically 'conservative' region. However, the attack perpetrated on the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD)'s Mexican American Studies program (MAS) and on the institution of Chican@ studies at large could more accurately be portrayed as another round in a drawn-out fight over culture, history, identity, and belonging.

Those resisting HB2281 do not believe that piece of legislation to be the knock-out punch for Chican@ Studies in Arizona (Serna 2013, 42). As I delved into archival and historical research in order to contextualize the attack on the academic program in question and the literature it taught, I understood the root of this hopeful attitude in the face of a truly bleak situation.

As this chapter will show, Chican@ Studies (also known as Mexican-American or Raza studies) is a pedagogical program that emerges from and through a long history of Chican@ grassroots social activism. Chican@ Studies was borne out of a long fight for educational, cultural and civil rights. In Tucson, the ban does not signal the end of this fight any more than did the original success in establishing and institutionalizing the program in the '70s.

HB2281 and the way it has been deployed in Tucson signals new attacks in an old regional struggle over education. Chican@ resistance and mobilization around their own education against Arizona's bigoted political machinery can be traced back to a local, regional and national history of successful grass-roots activism by Chican@s that spans over a century

(De Leon 1974, 125). I will now attempt to do justice to this rich history, and to connect it to the present situation in Arizona by pulling out the threads of continuity that have developed through this lengthy struggle.

2.1 A History of Contests Before the Contesting of History

If the present which I am trying to contextualize is rife with social tensions, with complex power struggles along racialized lines, a look at Arizona's history reveals that the past was no different. The rugged terrain in question seems to derive its name from the O'odham indigenous language, the original being 'Alī ṣonak' (Bright 2007, 47). O'odham continues to be spoken in the land, and the indigenous presence in Arizona is significant. More than one-fourth of the state is constituted by reservation land (The Arizona Republic) and is third after California and Oklahoma in the number of U.S. Census-identified Native Americans¹, with said population estimated at 343,386 according to 2000 census numbers (United States Census Bureau 2012). Identification of Chican@s as the indigenous population of the land was in fact a cornerstone of the teachings of Tucson's MAS.

For thousands of years the territory now known as Arizona has been home to a diverse indigenous population representing nations such as the O'odham, Opata, Pima, and Yaqui (Acuña 2000, 107), among many others. The indigenous people remained a majority through Spanish colonial rule and into the period of Mexican state rule over the region that became known as Sonora. Despite demographic superiority, the indigenous peoples whose social systems

¹ I must acknowledge that census categories and state recognition of identities are complex subjects fraught with tension. Both are sites of political and cultural concern and contestation for all so-called minorities in the U.S., and as such the data should be read accordingly.

had been torn asunder by the rapacity of colonialism had by then been incorporated into an imposed global imperial economic system. As is implied in the act of imposition, the original inhabitants of the land came to occupy a “peripheral and subservient” role at the bottom of a strict racialized hierarchy “controlled by a few *hacendados* [land-owning elites] and a small class of *rancheros* [cattle farmers]” (Acuña 2000, 107).

The retreat of the Spanish crown (but not Spanish settlers) in 1821 didn’t signal a positive change for the indigenous inhabitants of modern-day Arizona. Not two decades after the shift of power, the thirst of U.S. settler society for gold led that expanding nation’s attention to Southern Arizona’s Mesilla (*Ibid*), and both the peoples and the land found themselves in the cross-hairs of capitalist interest. Hand in hand with the speculation over what lay under the region’s dry earth, and intense interest in building a railroad above it (Kiser 2011, 90) also served as motivation for the Gadsden Purchase, which was consummated in 1854, reestablishing the political boundary between the U.S. and Mexico. As the steel rails and wooden beams scarred the territory, the inherently racist ideology of Manifest Destiny made its way to Arizona alongside the tracks, and the burgeoning northerly empire claimed ownership over the land.

While the details of the purchase and the larger context of the United States’ take-over of Northern Mexico is beyond the scope of my thesis, it is crucial to take into consideration the effects of the philosophical framework of Manifest Destiny under which annexation into the U.S. took place. The already racialized communities of what became Arizona were annexed under a mentality of white racial superiority. As Laura E. Gomez shows in *Manifest Destinies, the Making of the Mexican American Race*, Washington’s main concern at the time was, in the words of then-Secretary of State “how we should govern the mongrel race” inhabiting the annexed territories (2007, 42). It was a mentality that saw Anglo-Americans as righteous

harbingers of civilization and the indigenous peoples of the land as uncivilized, and therefore subhuman. A mentality that ultimately served to justify and “fuel American imperialism and...the colonization of Mexico” (Gomez 2007, 42).

Incorporation into the union signaled a significant transformation of identity for the residents of the area, a transformation crucial to current understandings and struggles over the very power to craft one’s own identity. By ascription, the bulk of Arizona’s population became U.S citizens over night, but it was not a citizenship without caveats. They became Mexican-American, or Americans of Mexican descent. Incorporation and its consequences for identity and belonging also seem to have worked towards an erasure, or at the least an obscuring of the indigenous heterogeneity of the area. There is a disconnect in the literature, a crack in the published histories through which the specificity with which the several distinct cultural groups identified pre-annexation get lost and give way to a lumping of peoples into the category of Mexican-American.

The erasure of diversity may be connected to the foundational practices of settler-colonialism by which “white colonists attempted to extirpate the language[s] of native people while promulgating an extensive campaign of land seizure and labor exploitation” (Cammarota 2009, 120). The consequences of this erasure are still felt in the region, and were a topic of importance in TUSD’s banned curriculum. However, it is important to bring attention to the fact that the connections between the politics of representation and belonging are not only a historical theme for Chican@s in the U.S., but that the actual (mis)representation of Chican@s in the annals of U.S. history is itself one of the sites of social contest implied in the Tucson ban.

By 1870 another theme in this history of oppression and resistance emerges. The passing

of the Organic Bill may be one of the earliest pieces of legislation signaling the U.S.’ willingness to use its legal system as a tool/weapon with which to keep the racially-othered Mexican-Americans ‘in place’. The bill cemented the processes of erasure and lumping that began with annexation by effectively disenfranchising both people identified as indigenous or as having Mexican descent through the denial of political representation for so-called “Mexican areas in the state of Arizona (Vargas 2011, 152). Of great interest here is the early designation of geographies *within* the U.S. as ‘Mexican’, and the negative treatment and assessment of these. The production of such spaces are necessary for racialized regimes to physically regulate the ideology of hierarchy, as for the ‘Mexicans’ to ‘know their place’, they must first *have* a place. Such legislative machinations expose the early roots of a racialized second-class citizenship experience for Chican@s. ‘Mexican-American’ came to serve as a designation working to the benefit of a Euro/Anglo-centric U.S. in several ways: It demarcated the dominant (‘American’), separated the annexed ‘other’ (through the symbolic and linguistic power of the hyphen), erasing the indigenous cultural diversity of the area, and finally, it provided a language through which to enact a legal foundation for a settler-controlled system.

Along with the identity-based tension around the question of imposition or self-representation, and the quickly-established historical practice of utilizing legislation to the benefit of the white settler system and to the detriment of those brought under its yoke through the process of the colonial takeover of North America, a third theme emerges out of this time period: that of robust popular resistance to the establishment and growth of the unjust socio-legal order taking hold in the region.

Mexican-American resistance to systemic racism enters the history books as early as 1906, when anarcho-syndicalists such as the Magon brothers responded to deplorable work

conditions and dual wage-scales in mines with swift and strong organization, leading to illegal strikes that were eventually crushed violently by the Arizona Rangers and U.S. troops (Vargas 2011,154), setting a precedent for violent repression against Mexican-American social action. The miner strikes were illegal not due to contract stipulations or labour laws, but due to the fact that Mexican-Americans were not allowed into the white-only unions. This gives yet another glimpse to how the cultural and racial hierarchy that was congealing at this point of U.S. history worked.

Given these precedents, it comes as no surprise that neither Mexican-American educational experiences nor the communities' relations with educational authorities were constructive. The historical record shows subpar treatment by educational institutions at all levels. With compulsory laws enacted by Southwestern states as early as 1874 (Acuña 2011, 4), Mexican-American children throughout the region were sent to substandard, underfunded and segregated schools with dismal completion rates (*Ibid*). The historical record also documents a tradition of organized resistance to such educational conditions. A tradition of activism and resistance over a century old was included in the MAS curricula. As a MAS teacher would later tell me about this dynamic between teaching/learning the struggle and living it: “when you start learning your history, you start learning that...there is a collective struggle, and a history of resistance for *justicia*.” This history emboldened the students in his eyes: “it doesn’t seem so strange [to resist], it seems like what you do.”

As the first decade of the 20th century drew to a close, the educational concerns of Mexican-American parents in San Angelo, Texas came to a boil. It was 1910 when the community had enough and organized the first ‘blow-out’ to enter the historical record. Protesting both the segregation of the school district and the appalling conditions of the schools

Mexican-Americans were forced to attend, this blow-out led to an impressive five-year boycott of the school (De Leon 1974, 125). This lengthy action required a significant level of social cohesion and commitment, suggesting that this mobilization responded to truly inadequate and appalling schooling conditions.

No direct gains were obtained from this particular effort, which in turn gives a glimpse to the educational system's indifference to providing a standard service to Chicana@s in San Angelo. Despite the lack of gains stemming from this historic action, the stage was largely set for what was to come. The blow-out practice (now more popularly known as a walkout) would prove a crucial tactic in the struggle for educational justice for Chican@s across the U.S. In Tucson it has been a weapon of protest and civil disobedience in response to the ban, and beyond Tucson it has been used as a show of support for the affected students and teachers. Incidentally, a walkout was also at the heart of the events that have been portrayed as catalysts to the state of Arizona's public declaration of political war on TUSD's MAS (see Introduction).

Another early example of organization and resistance against the educational system was sparked by an issue that to this day continues to cause controversy: the language of instruction. During World War I, a push for stricter enforcement of English-only policies in U.S. public schools intensified the negative effects of academic segregation. While segregation had set the conditions for substandard education for hyphenated-Americans in the first place, it also inadvertently opened up spaces for addressing the needs of Spanish-speaking students in the neglected 'Mexican' schools, as teachers were able to use the children's home language.

In response to the crack-down on these linguistically-subversive initiatives, Mexican-American communities established organizations that ran "*escuelitas* (little schools) which offered reading and writing instruction in Spanish" (Acuña 2011, 8). The *escuelitas* reflect an

organizational response that is also being mobilized in the present situation in Arizona. Like the blow-out in San Angelo, the *escuelitas* may be seen as an historical anchor to some of the initiatives that remain in place today in the face of the MAS ban in Tucson (See chapter 4 for more on such initiatives).

If we go with a conservative date of 1910 based on the historical record, it took over three decades for the politically-active element of Chican@s to see legal victories in the field of education. This should not discount any undocumented victories that might have occurred at local levels, which may be uncovered through a longer historical study, in particular when taking into account that the veracity and depth of non-Chican@ compiled Chican@ history is itself a topic of contention. The mid '40s witnessed significant legal roadways towards educational justice. Continued mobilization on segregation, educational conditions and language issues led to two rulings in California on the *Mendez v. Westminster School District Case* (1946, 1947). The rulings “declared the segregation of Mexican children unconstitutional” [the '47 decision being an affirmation of the '46 verdict] (Acuña 2011, 11). Another case in 1945, *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* came to the same conclusion. Beyond the immense significance for Chican@s across the country, these three legal victories also became crucial precedents to the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (*Ibid*), which ruled educational segregation of African-Americans unconstitutional, and which is by far the more historically celebrated and known ruling.

These hard-fought advances pushed forward by decades of commitment represent instances of Chican@ activism forging U.S. educational history whilst fighting for the right to have their own culture, roles, and contributions acknowledged. The fact that *Brown v. Board of Education* is a widely-popular verdict while the *Mendez* victories are largely unheralded further

speaks to the peripheral place of Chican@s in the U.S. national imaginary. A periphery that continues to be challenged today, yet one that did not stop Chican@ activists from pressing on in the long fight in which they were fully engaged. Before “the insurrectionary 1960s burst out of the McCarthy epoch” (Alaniz and Cornish 2008, 181), the fifties carried on with the momentum of the Mendez, Delgado and Brown decisions: before the end of the decade “Mexican-Americans had filed 15 school desegregation cases” (Acuña 2011, 12). Chican@ educational activists would enter the next decade with a growing momentum on their side.

The social significance of the ‘60s in the United States should not be understated. This decade brought the many existing civil rights movements across the country to a fever pitch in their particular struggles against the many aspects of the violent system of social, political, and economic white domination being enforced by the U.S. both domestically and abroad. Mexican-American activist youth, while engaged with the greater political milieu of the time, largely galvanized around educational issues.

The youth movement carrying the torch for educational justice in the ‘60s was embedded in a rich milieu of social movement organizations at a national level. In the Chican@ community, inspiration was drawn from the African-American civil rights movement. As Alaniz and Cornish remark, “the Black upsurge, the spirit of liberation galvanized other people of color... Chican@s were particularly impacted because the conditions of their oppression were so similar to those of Blacks” (Alaniz and Cornish 2008, 181). It is worth mentioning here that the Chican@ movement also aided and influenced the Black civil rights movement, as evidenced by the legal push for desegregation discussed previously. Also, so as to not romanticize Black and Brown activist relations of the epoch, commonalities of oppressive experiences clashed at times with dissimilarities in both specific goals and general settings (Araiza 2014). This relationship is

as complex as it is crowded with differing actors and would be a fruitful subject to pursue in more depth elsewhere. What is clear is that it was at times symbiotic, in particular in the grand scheme of national politics, as despite their differences, both added to the numbers of a vocally-discontent and politically-active section of the population.

There also was plenty of inspiration and support to go around from within the Chicana@ community in the '60s. It is hard to compile all of the players who contributed in crucial roles to the work that took place during this eventful decade, but several organizations must be recognized. From within the Chicana@ community, three organizations emerged out the '60s that would prove to be crucial allies to the youth movement and led to educationally-focused actions. In a time in U.S. history characterized not only by large mobilization, but by strong and charismatic leadership, Chicana@s such as Dolores Huertas, Cesar Chaves, Reis Lopez Tijerina and Corky Gonzales spearheaded valiant organizations. In respective order, they founded and built into significant engines of change the United Farm Workers, *La Alianza* (Acuña 2011, 360), and the Crusade for Justice (Vigil 1999). These individuals-turned-heroines-and-heroes fought hard for farm worker rights, land rights, and civil rights. All of the while, they spread an awareness and analysis of the Chicana@ condition, and tilled a fertile ground for further activism.

But just like with Tucson today, more than experienced and willing social actors were needed. Spaces of resistance, welcoming to the tasks of organizing and cultivating an activist response to oppression, are crucial. The push-back to the forces of oppression generate a physical place which comes to both embody resistance and facilitate its advance. The John A. Valenzuela Youth Center in South Tucson hosts the Underground Library today, and as such it operates a space of resistance. But before the arrival of the Underground Library, before it was even necessary and MAS was still alive (though under threat), it was a space of resistance for TUSD's

aggrieved students during the process of organizing against the mounting attacks. Several people involved with actions before the fate of the program was sealed shared with me that as the political maneuvers unfolded, MAS students felt both intimidated and infiltrated as they tried to organize from within the schools. The youth center, fought for by previous generations of the community, became a space of resistance that allowed for guidance from adult activists and a place from which the youth could sprout its grass-roots efforts. It was here that sit-ins and walk-outs were planned, posters for events were made, and above all activist youths were provided with a safe haven.

The Community Service Organization (CSO) founded in 1947 in Los Angeles (CSO History Project 1997) and based largely on Saul Alinsky's organizational philosophy, provided such spaces for the parties invested in the creation of the original Mexican American Studies programs. The CSO not only helped train leaders such as Chaves and Tijerina (among many others), but its chapters also provided the locations in which these 'people's heroes' met and mingled with the youth groups that were about to surge into a significant social movement of their own. In these spaces of resistance provided by the CSO we also see a concrete integration of Chican@ generations, another strand in the traditional tapestry of resistance that is kept alive in Tucson today.

These spaces of resistance also were central to what could be interpreted as a process of radicalization by some, or as a new process of identity formation by others. It is out of involvement with the Community Service Organization, for example that the group known as the Young Chicanos for Community Action evolved into the Brown Berets (Acuña 2011, 361). It also was at the CSO that many of the youth groups organizing through the beginning of the decade had a space of communion and strengthening. Among these were the Mexican-American

Students Association (MASA), Mexican-American Student Confederation (MASC) and the United Mexican-American Students (UMAS) and the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). These moments of spatial coexistence would facilitate consolidation further down the road.

2.2 Boiling Point: The 1968-70 Blow-outs

“[O]n March 1968 close to 10,000 Chicano students walked out of five Los Angeles high schools...These schools were in East Los Angeles, with populations that were overwhelmingly Mexican [Garfield High School, for example, was 96% Latino]” (Acuña 2000, 362). Harkening back to the San Angelo blow-outs of 1910, and under the leadership of Los Angeles high school teacher Sal Castro, the participants in the L.A. walk-outs “demanded an end to discrimination, more Chicana/o teachers and administrators, bilingual education, and facilities and educational standards equal to predominantly Anglo schools” (Alaniz and Cornish 2008, 184). These events are not to be written off as simple civil disobedience, as they consisted of multi-sited actions with very specific demands cutting to the systemic core of Chican@ educational issues. Demands which, just like the methods employed to bring attention to them, can be traced back to the start of the century and the origin of the Chican@ condition in the U.S.

What started as a peaceful action was not well received by the city of Los Angeles. The mere *presence* of the Brown Berets, who were participating in a show of solidarity with their community’s youth, was used as a scapegoat, which led to “sheriff’s deputies and police react[ing] by treating the protest as an insurrection, beating students and arresting those who did not move fast enough” in a shameful display of police brutality (Acuña 2000, 363). The quelling

of this major march did not slow down the movement, and momentum seemed to now be on the side of the Chicano youth. If anything, the violent over-reaction on behalf of Los Angeles law enforcement inflamed the movement at a national scale.

On March 20, 1969, “solidarity walkouts *in every secondary school* in Denver’s barrios” (emphasis mine) took place, and it did not take long for the demonstrations to leave the ‘brown areas’ and become present city-wide (Vigil 1999, 81). Just like in California, the official response was swift and violent. The march degraded rapidly, earning the sad title of “the bloodiest school protests in Denver’s history” (*Ibid*) as police were quick to attack people with billy clubs and throw them to the ground, leaving a trail of injuries (Kosena 2009). Beyond these two infamous instances in the Chicano activism hotbeds of California and Colorado, the discontent and mobilization also spread to San Antonio, El Paso, and Abilene in Texas, Santa Clara, California, and Phoenix, Arizona, among countless other Chicano geographies (Acuña 2000, 363). A boiling point had been reached, and in the face of violent repression, the Chicano youth movement was about to reach a defining moment.

2.3 Turn and Aftermath of a Tumultuous Decade: *Plan de Aztlán, Plan de Santa Barbara*

Despite the violent reaction to the voicing of young Chicano demands, the battered students did not suffer from the brutality of the armed guardians of the status quo in vain. Out of the momentum of the organizing, ramping up to the blow-outs, and the added fuel of the brutal reaction came two events that marked the course of the struggle for the future. A course that would see the arrival of Chicano studies in nation-wide university and high school campuses.

March of 1969 in Denver marked both the blow-outs and the coming together of the activist community in the face of a surmounting push-back against Chicano resistance over

educational justice. Corky Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice hosted the first national Chicano Youth Liberation conference. This conference produced an enigmatic and poetic plan, the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*. This utopian plan advocated for a form of cultural nationalism “that joined Mexican Americans together by ties of history and culture in the service of liberation (Vargas 2011, 320).” The plan was not unproblematic, receiving in particular well-founded accusations of patriarchalism from the movement’s female and queer participants (Alaniz and Cornish 2008, 195). This is yet another thread that may be followed from the civil rights era through to Tucson and the aftermath of SB2281, as what was originally a diverse and united front of resistance encompassing a variety of generations and genders suffered from similar accusations.

Despite these divisions (but with no intention to downplay them, for they are not only well-founded but also historically influential in the movement), the *Plan de Aztlan* was crucial in the forging of a Chican@ identity, in the shunning of the hyphenated ‘Mexican-American’ with its qualifying implications. This galvanization of identity, this move from an imposed to a self-ascribed demonym, strengthened the movement, which rode the momentum of the Denver conference.

With the decade closing, it became evident how along with the germination of the seeds of significant social change in the U.S, these years also had witnessed a meaningful change of identity. While the Gadsden Purchase and annexation to the U.S. effectively turned parts of a heterogeneous group of indigenous and mestizo peoples with a commonality of forced subordination to the Spanish crown and the Mexican government into ‘Mexican-Americans’ practically overnight, the ‘60s brought a change that emerged from *within* the community. The vocabulary for self-identification gradually went from Mexican-American, to Chican@, and the conference in Denver with its estimated 1500 youths in attendance gave this change a significant

push. With this change in identity came a renewed sense of pride and power, and a whole lot of mobilization.

The following month marked the coming together of Chicana@ teachers, administrators, students, and activists, who converged on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California for a symposium that culminated with the publication of the *Plan de Santa Barbara*. This document outlined problems and prospects for the Chicana@ educational movement brought to the table by delegations from across the country. The other greatly significant outcome of this symposium was the banding together of the majority of student associations under the umbrella of the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan* (Chicano Student Movement from Aztlan), or MEChA (Vargas 2011, 322). It is of great importance that most (if not all) of the organizations that banded together as MEChA had previously identified as ‘Mexican-American’. The coalition became exoterically powerful due to its large numbers, but also esoterically powerful by signifying the wide-spread adoption of a new, self-ascribed identity under which to fight together.

MEChA (the acronym spells the Spanish word for ‘spark’) outlined in its founding document, de *Plan de Santa Barbara*, “proposals for a curriculum in Mexican American studies, and community control of schools”, among other educational goals (*Ibid*, 323). The *Plan* is a fascinating document, a manifesto that would serve as a roadmap for the institutionalization of Mexican-American Studies programs across the specter of secondary and post-secondary schools. The effects of the symposium were immediate: “Guided by MEChA’s vision,” students and faculty worked together in a massive effort “to secure recruitment programs, financial aid, student support services and Mexican American studies programs” (Vargas 2011, 323). What in many campuses started as clubs, eventually turned into programs, then departments, and in many

cases full faculties that stand to this day.

These two large events at the close of the decade were of utmost significance to the movement. The national gathering in Denver may be interpreted as the symbolic cornerstone of Chicana@ critical consciousness, with the Corky Gonzales-led celebration of an almost tragic identity borne out of ethnic, cultural and class struggles. What I see as a sort of *Barrio Vasconcelos*. *Chicanismo* as a '*Raza Cosmica*' vision hard-boiled by life in the heart of the Anglo empire.

Denver also popularized the imagined geography of Aztlan, reflected in Santa Barbara through the moniker of MEChA. This added to the process of identity exploration and definition through the artistic manifestation of an alternative territory of belonging which contested the very existence and legitimacy of what Rodolfo Acuña would call 'occupied America'. The national gathering in Santa Barbara, on the other hand, can be seen as the official birth of what at the time was called *Raza Studies*, Chicana@ studies, or in its slightly more palatable to the general population version, Mexican-American Studies. The particular version of the program that was dismantled from the Tucson Unified School District and the bulk of MAS programs active across college and school campuses across the U.S. are all direct pedagogical and theoretical descendants of the *Plan de Santa Barbara* and the organizing and resisting that led to the watershed accomplishments of 1969.

MEChA chapters also remain strong and active across the country as student clubs and groups in colleges, universities and high schools. In fact, many of the actors on both the youth and elder sides of the resistance in Tucson are proud present and former *MEChistas*. Despite the attack unleashed against TUSD's MAS program, and the lived and symbolic consequences of this legal hit, Tucson activists resist against HB2281 and its ramifications with a source of

strength that emanates from a century-old tradition of educational activism, and the knowledge kept alive by those who saw victories as youths and now lend support as elders in the long fight for social, cultural, and educational justice for Chican@s in the U.S.

2.4 Defending the Legacy and the Importance of Intergenerational Resistance: The Fight Continues

“The events in Arizona have returned us to 1965.” (Acuña 2011, 210).

This statement rang loud in my head throughout the entirety of my research. It closed the book *The Making of Chicano Studies: In the Trenches of Academe*. An account of the program’s history from one of its founders, Dr. Rodolfo Acuña. One of the first things to become obvious as I started tracing back the Arizona book ban and dismantling of MAS, as I started trying to contextualize that which without a context seemed to make no sense, was the fact that the fight for educational justice in Arizona is not new. Just as HB2281 and the punitive and selective way in which it was used are the legacy of the legislative apparatus’ efforts to actively oppress and negatively impact the Chican@ condition, so too the forms and spaces of resistance employed against it are the legacy of over a century of resistance, activism, theory and study.

But if the statement about the affront to Chican@ educational and cultural rights in Tucson can sound like a cryptic description of a jump back in time, a jump backwards if you will, stepping back from the Eurocentric linear conception of time may give a slightly more hopeful reading. The ‘return’ to ’65 can be seen as an aspect of a cyclical interpretation of time, such as that of the indigenous civilizations whose histories the MAS program used to root its student’s sense of identity. Linearity would negate any future/past advance and affront, as they would only be doomed to repeat themselves in a Sisyphean fashion. Yes, the Tucson youth were

fighting a new battle in an old war, but they had more than the youth of '65 did at the time. The emotional fuel of past victories, the tactical and moral support of the veterans who helped achieve them, these all made for an outlook less bleak than a simple backwards-skip in history. It became evident in my fieldwork that generational dynamics were of significance to the resistance in Tucson, in no small part due to the rich and lived history of the struggle.

The extent of the long fight is reflected in the many intergenerational aspects that shaped both the attack on TUSD's MAS, and the resistance against it. As I was learning about the details of the process of dismantling MAS and removing the books from the classrooms, I heard a story that captured the different generational dynamics at play in Tucson. A graduate student at the University of Arizona who attended the TUSD school board meeting which brought down the vote to dismantle the MAS program recalled that it was a quiet and cold winter evening. This was intentional, he suggested, and the call to meeting had gone out late at a time of the year in which the pace is traditionally slower and Tucson more sparsely populated. This was a tactical move on behalf of the TUSD, as the original May meeting to vote on whether or not to uphold the MAS program in the face of millions of dollars of cuts threatened by the state legislature had been successfully derailed by grass-roots action on behalf of both young and old, veterans of the struggle, and new blood as well.

Three interviewees remarked on that May 2011 meeting, which sent the TUSD reeling and made the board wait until the following January to try again. Those who were there that spring night remembered it vividly. As I jogged peoples' memories during the interview process, the significance of that evening seemed to change tones, to create more introspection than other events. It makes sense. At that point in the state-orchestrated attack on Tucson's MAS, the vote was more of a formality, as everyone was aware of the way it would go. May's school board

meeting was very much like a death sentencing, yet the community managed to have the sentence postponed. The scene was described to me as rife with tension, which the presence of police in riot gear seemed to only heighten. One MAS supporter who managed to be inside for the attempted proceedings described to me how community elder and local Chicana@ Studies champion Guadalupe Castillo was arrested as she attempted to read from Dr. King Jr.'s *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. He said that while he turned to those around trying to digest what had just happened and what could be done next, the youth had already mobilized and blockaded the building, demanding the release of the elder.

The events of that May evening exemplify how resistance in Tucson was spearheaded by a brave youth, and backed by experienced adults. How it was and is a generationally multilayered affair. Guadalupe is a veteran activist and teacher, seasoned in the trenches of the fight to bring MAS to Tucson in the first place. She embodies the bridge between the youth of '69 (or '65), and the youth of 2012. Former TUSD MAS Literature teacher Curtis Acosta, described Guadalupe as mentor, and as everyone else who knew her, had nothing but admiration for her. She was arrested while standing up for the youth's rights. The youth, on their own behalf, organized with such strength of conviction and numbers that they were able to assure the release of the elder from custody (although with a citation nonetheless) (Lemons 2011). The youth were not acting with a lack of historical context, and in fact they were supported by some of those who forged the very historical context that enveloped this new stage of the long fight.

Despite the fact that the school board would eventually re-strategize their approach and cut the program in order to comply with the economic elbowing coming from the state capital, the events of that May evening are considered a success for the Chicana@ educational movement.

A small battle won, even if the only accomplishment was the figurative chance to live to fight another day. In the heat of the political struggle, the youth came to the elders' support, and vice-versa. The eras of Chicana educational activism were connected through action, a connection that proved to be powerful.

Tucson's activist community, vast in both the range of issues represented and depth of experience and activities, seemed fully aware of its intergenerational connections. Such awareness can only come with a self-contextualization within what is a historical movement, and an understanding (or in the very least a thoughtful consideration) of the forces that have shaped the existence of such a movement. A Choya High MAS graduate involved heavily in the defense of the program exclaimed to me passionately: "we've been fighting this shit since civil rights!" Another student activist, now a University of Arizona MEChA leader, remembered realizing at the time of the MAS struggle the importance of the classes themselves as spaces of resistance carved out of former landscapes of exclusion: "if [we] take for granted and...don't realize how difficult it was to get to these spaces, then history continues to repeat itself, because Ethnic Studies was already a fought battle here in Tucson in the '60s."

When Former Superintendent Tom Horne, the Arizona State Senate, and the voting majority of the Tucson Unified School District sought to do away with Tucson's MAS program, they sought to dismantle a profound program that encouraged critical thinking, applied to the pedagogical subjects of literature and the social sciences. "They were trying to take away our history" was something I heard both in interviews and casual conversations. As an interviewee put it: "Our identity feels like walking a tight-rope. Always cautious of proving how Mexican you are to the Mexicans and how American you are to the Americans." In the face of this inner

struggle, she experienced clarity through her MAS education and the connection with the past it provided: “that’s where you find yourself [and] feel that strong connection.” Thus, this ‘taking away’ implied a metaphysical history-as-thing which can be given or taken, shared or hidden. It also implied that the community was being threatened with losing (or severely hampering) their ability to know this history, to celebrate it, to be empowered by it, and to better understand their present through it.

A large part of the fuel for the mobilization of youth in Tucson was the desire to give future generations of students the life-affirming moments that a challenging pedagogy offers to a people disenchanted with the educational status quo. Consistently through my time in Tucson I heard about moments (different for each person) of what I would describe as a certain attainment of knowledge of self. Pieces of information that ‘made things click’, and made other things make sense. These foundational moments are not unlike what C.W. Mills described as the empowerment of having a ‘sociological imagination’ (2000), or the ability to utilize knowledge and information to connect personal troubles to public issues. For Monica, a young undergraduate student at the University of Arizona’s nationally-recognized MAS department, it was realizing that her people are indigenous to Arizona, rather than foreigners, immigrants, illegals, criminals, or whatever dominant narrative was upheld outside of the spaces of resistance that MAS classrooms were able to provide in Tucson. Becoming aware of the long history of Chican@s as the darkest member of a family that always seemed to exalt a Spanish-European cultural heritage, she said, “centers you.”

The passage of time, whether we conceive it as linear, cyclical, or in any other form, is of key importance to what has happened in Tucson. Activists are aware that they are fighting against things like political terms and cycles of election. That the struggle is, as it always has

been, enduring for the foreseeable future. In this regard, the youth fighting for what was at the time their program have now largely moved on in their life-paths. While many remain steadfast in their efforts to reestablish MAS as it was prior to HB2281, they and those whose paths have since gone elsewhere fought in 2012 for the generations coming after them. An interviewee remembers of the time: “I never felt so ready to go out there and say ‘I am a Chicana, I am educated, and I want to give back to my younger Chicanas so they can also learn they have an identity.’”

While it was very common for me to hear that the community’s history or culture was being taken away, it was also common for me to hear about a clear sense that once such transformative and foundational educational experiences were attained, they could not be taken away. “Once you feed somebody knowledge, you can’t take it back,” said an interviewee. Once the youth learned what they considered a true history of themselves and of their country, the effects on their understanding of life, and therefore their experience of life itself, would not be the same. And no one could take this away from them. The youth-led resistance to HB2281 went to work so that younger kids could accrue the life benefits of a relevant secondary education seen to completion (something that the MAS program was well-known for achieving), but also for the right of those going through the educational system after them to experience the consciousness-changing movements, the glimpses of a knowledge of self that might contextualize their lives and foster agency. By fighting for the rights of others to obtain the gains that many of them had already received from the program, the MAS students affected by HB2281 had become a link rather than an end in the intergenerational chain of Chican@ educational resistance and activism.

Some of the elders I spoke with noted the importance of the intergenerational transmission of history and tradition. Liz Salinas is the program coordinator at Multicultural

Education and Counseling through the Arts (MECA) in Houston. A staple of Chican@ culture in Houston, MECA provides after-school programs for kids of all ages, teaching Mexican folkloric dance, singing, violin and piano, along with graphic arts and academic tutoring. MECA is also home to one of the region's Underground Libraries, as detailed in chapter 5, and is itself a historical space of resistance against the erasure of Chican@ culture in the Southwest. Mrs. Salinas is an example of this generational consciousness. As we talked about what led her to open a space in MECA for the books banned in Tucson, she conveyed an understanding of the many acts of resistance involved in this long fight as being crucial pillars of Chican@ history, and as a part of the Chican@ legacy for its own community, country, and for the world at large. "Those books *are* our history," and through her position she was going to make sure the Brown youth of her city would have access to it.

Beyond the disheartening dismantling of TUSD's MAS program, Mrs. Salinas derived hope from an understanding of the power inherent in the banned books as receptacles of a history that she, like Guadalupe, embodied in life. Awareness that the texts would outlive her and her ability to impart knowledge, history and tradition, only heightened their importance. "I like to call myself a *seasoned* Chicana," she said in a light hearted acknowledgment of her age and of how much longer she can continue to work for the community. In her life, Mrs Salinas had felt validated when first reading fiction in which characters were forced to ditch Spanish names for Anglo equivalents, just like she had. She also remembered "when Sandra Cisneros' book first came out" the effect of seeing a name like that in print. Mrs. Salinas' given name is Esmeralda, but through her schooling she was forced to hide that jewel. She felt the transformative and hands during lunch out of shame, or to be chastised for using her mother tongue, her mother's tongue. She has an awareness of the power of published literature, interpreting the banned books

as a record of the cultural “evolution” of “Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, Mexican and Latino immigrants in the U.S.” She also has an awareness of the importance of the representation and voicing of those hidden from a national imaginary and a sanitized history, stating that the ability to see one’s self in a distinguished medium such as books, affected a person’s “ability to be one’s self.”

The kids in Tucson fought for their history to be freely taught and entered that very history through their agency in resisting the forces that tried to do away with it. Mrs. Salinas in Houston and Mrs. Gloria Hamelitz, host of the Underground Library in Tucson, both embody *and* guard the tradition of Chican@ educational history. All stood together to resist the state of Arizona’s push to dismantle what was a source of knowledge which could not be taken away from those who had attained it (that being one of its utmost beauties and strengths), but which a politically ambitious and savvy Tom Horne figured could be (at least) temporarily withheld from many who have did not yet have it through the physical removal of books and the alteration and removal of curricula and pedagogical practices.

Here I want to bring attention to another site of intergenerational dynamics of importance to the events of Tucson and their aftermath. That Tom Horne was born before school desegregation is not lost on those affected by HB2281. Mr. Horne’s fight against the MAS program was interpreted by various people interviewed as either a purely political gamble in a state in which loosely-veiled racism can lead to success at the ballot boxes, or as a quasi-religious undertaking by a republican zealot. “Once Horne got this between his teeth, it was on,” stated an interviewee. Despite disagreements on the true reasons behind his drive to shut the program down, there was an agreed upon recognition of an ‘old White man, telling Brown youth what to do.’ He also was seen as a foreigner enforcing the values of the colonialist state on

a population which identifies as the traditional occupants of the land. Gloria Hamelitz of the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center remembers: “our kids are aware of it [the disconnect between lawmakers and their community] and they realize so much is happening at the state legislative level, and it’s coming from out-of-town legislators and people who never stepped foot on our community.”

South Tucson is home to the area’s Underground Library, and was and is home to many of those student activists who found their classes threatened and eventually cut by Horne’s reactionary politics. The students were bused daily to TUSD high schools due to a lack of said institutions in South Tucson [see chapter 4 for more on the history of South Tucson]. Residents of the almost exclusively Mexican-American city are too familiar with a dynamic in which their state politics are significantly shaped by white, elderly ‘snowbirds’ from out of state [mostly East Coast and Canadian retirees looking for warmer climes during the winter months who claim residence in Arizona], as Mrs. Hamelitz noted.

Horne, while not necessarily a ‘snowbird’, embodied this dynamic. He embodied the status quo trying to do away with the hard-earned, history-altering victories of Chican@s with regards to their place in the national imaginary. “White, East Side, older adults, a lot of snowbirds, they vote. They got it together and that’s where we suffer,” said an interviewee with regards to fighting against a strong political machinery. For as much as the veterans of the educational struggle embodied the Chican@ activist tradition, Horne embodied the tradition of U.S. state and social institutions creating and maintaining an oppressive set of conditions for Chican@s since colonial expansion brought them under the mantle of Anglo-American power. “We know that some big people have crumbled like Huppenthal” [Horne’s successor as Superintendent, and the one in charge of following through with the MAS dismantling, who at

the time was going through a bizarre controversy centered around inflammatory comments he posted on several local blogs under pseudonyms during his Superintendent tenure (Creno and Faller 2014)]. Mrs. Hamelitz continues: “his credibility is gone. Tom Horne has moved on, but there’s always someone else to pop up in their place.”

“The city of Tucson has some famous racists and they are not afraid,” mentioned an interviewee. Politically, this translates into people like Horne acting on dangerous “political opportunism,” as another interviewee phrased it. There is a generational dynamic at the heart of the events in Tucson by which an old guard has continued to achieve political success by fighting for a return to a past time, a time of a more encompassing, and unapologetic racism. On the other end of the spectrum, the local youth fights for the preservation of present gains.

Toxic intergenerational dynamics did not only occur through interaction between oppressors and resisters, however. While the role of supporting elders cannot be stressed enough, tensions between generations did emanate from within the movement as well. Interviews with former student participants communicated the perception of a power struggle growing as the fight turned months and years long. An interviewee mentioned how some of the youth “didn’t feel validated, and these [feelings] were not addressed.” This is not uncommon in lengthy projects of protest and activism, and underlying divisions in the general social fabric eventually manifested themselves in what was initially a strongly unified activist community in Tucson. These divisions grew into near-fatal cracks through disagreements and frustrations from both outside and within: “there’s been some cracks in the movement and there was some definite controversy and splits,” recalled an activist.

This dynamic of growing separations was also expressed to me as gendered. The young women of the movement, tireless leaders and organizers sacrificing time and energy, many of

them during their final year of high school as they were trying to maintain grades and apply for schools (largely influenced by the pedagogical program in question), came to feel underrepresented. In more than one interview, There became “a huge divide between the [young] women and [the rest of] the movement,” recalled Gloria Hamelitz. This exemplifies problems within the Chican@ movement that can be traced back to the very days in which the identity and philosophy of the movement was brought into being. The young, female activists I talked to and heard about organized protests, sit-ins, walk-outs, and *barrio* runs since the threat of dismantling became clear. They had created literary and theoretical *zines*, and even organized alternative educational workshops that sought to uphold the spirit and pedagogy of the banned MAS program.

This leads me to state explicitly that in trying to understand *any* aspect of how the Tucson Chican@ community reacted to having their education utilized as a political target (whether from inside or outside of the community) there is no more important voice than that of the youth who organically and (to a degree) successfully took the traditional torch of educational activism and ran far with it. It is also worth noting that among that active youth, women played a pivotal role which might be currently underrepresented in attempts from the arts, activist and academic worlds of portraying and interpreting the Tucson book ban and pedagogical witch-hunt.

When I visited Tucson to understand what happened two years ago when the books were boxed in front of disturbed students and the program was officially cut, and has been happening since, these young women continued to play important roles in different functions ranging from educational activism, to actively trying to create a new curriculum from within the TUSD affected schools that can offset the loss of the MAS program.

2.5 Conclusion

In the midst of one more round in a long historical fight for cultural and educational rights, identity, and terms of national belonging, multigenerational dynamics became important because they anchored and contextualized the moment, provided reciprocal avenues of support and inspiration, and promoted and preserved a rich tradition of political activism. They also are important because they underlie many of the personal and political roots of the affront to TUSD's MAS program, and of the relationship between the Arizona state government machinery and the states' Chican@ population. Finally they are important because they serve as reminders that in a sustained social struggle, all dynamics of difference must be carefully observed in order to protect unity within the activist community.

To analyze HB2281 and its aftermath, a look at the past is required in order to properly understand the present and future. The history of Chican@ educational activism reveals three themes also evident in Arizona today. First, since (and before) U.S. annexation and legalized colonization, there has been a racialized power structure in the region that has created and strengthened a pattern of social exclusion by which second-class citizenship has been imposed on the original inhabitants of the area and those variously labeled (by either ascription or subscription) as Mexicans, Mexican-Americans or Chican@s. Second, this historically entrenched social, economic, and cultural oppression has been painfully reflected, among many other aspects of lived experience, in a segregated and subpar schooling system for Chican@s. Lastly, the Chican@ community has identified and mobilized against this educational disservice for over a century.

This 100-years-plus history activism signifies an autochthonous tradition of resistance that has not only greatly shaped the Chicana@ community through its pedagogical accomplishments, but should be interpreted as part of this community's cultural legacy to the United States. Historical legal precedents that allowed for significant transformations of U.S. society were accomplished by communities othered and erased by the national imaginary. And, a groundbreaking pedagogy was crafted and entrenched in universities, colleges, and secondary schools across the country. During the process, a self-assumed identity was popularized, and in the face of violence, the community responded powerfully and successfully.

History, whether in the classroom or in the making, is a source of power for a resistance that foments critical understandings of the present. The knowledge of similar victories achieved in the past serve as fuel for the victories that are needed today. The integral role of history in the current struggles gives the intergenerational dynamics at play in Tucson high importance. Elders like Esmeralda and Guadalupe serve as embodied historical bridges between generations, carrying both activist traditions and granting context to the present. The bridge role is of particular importance since the ban denied access to Chicana@ history through the educational system. Today, as the books removed from Tucson classrooms sit on the shelves of the Underground Libraries, they house within their covers the pedagogical lifeblood of the program, and the history and legacy of the Chicana@ population. They remain available (to a significantly smaller number of) the youth of Tucson and South Tucson.

There are many active members of the Chicana@ community in Tucson and across the nation who still embody the history of the MAS, institutionalized almost a half-century ago. The hope that refuses to surrender in Tucson is that before those bridges cease to exist within this physical reality, before the books sitting in the Underground Libraries become a

decontextualized installation, the successful curriculum will be brought back into TUSD schools. “There is still hope here in Tucson,” mentioned a student. “We won’t let it die away,” promised another participant. The hope remains that TUSD classrooms might yet again become spaces of cultural resistance against a historically consistent effort of Anglo-Eurocentric educational oppression.

In the meantime, a few industrious, passionate and acutely knowledgeable young veterans of the fight against HB2281 continue to act in a variety of ways, fighting for the coming generations entering state-controlled educational institutions. They are fighting for their rights to a personally-relevant pedagogy and its transformative effects, and attempting to provide a form of it whenever and wherever possible.

While conducting my research in Tucson, anti-MAS political platforms won the school board election once again, setting a somber tone for another election cycle for those fighting to bring the dismantled MAS program back. Even as politicians profiting on racist rhetoric might salivate at the idea of having set Chican@ education ‘back to ’65’, the resistance continues to work towards a new ’69, a new historical era of victories.

Chapter 3

Smuggling Books as Cultural Resistance: The *Librotraficante* Caravan and Activism Across Chican@ Geographies

Arizona state's House of Representatives Bill 2281 is a piece of legislation that was crafted with the intent to target the Tucson Unified School District's (TUSD) pedagogically sophisticated and educationally successful Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program. The brazen and public way (Horne 2007) in which the Canadian-born [a fact not lost on the community which further emphasized the divide between state lawmakers and the people of Tucson] Arizona career politician Tom Horne oppressed and eventually suppressed this particular program was met by countless grass-roots resistance initiatives, spearheaded by the affected youth of the TUSD and their community. The state won the battle it had created in 2012, economically strong-arming the school board into dismantling the program through the threat of significant budget cuts, leading to the spread of national outrage through the U.S. Chican@ and Latin@ communities over what was seen as a cultural affront. In the immediate aftermath of the dismantling and before the eyes of the educationally and emotionally affected students, all books utilized by the multi-class program were effectively boxed up and removed from the classrooms.

Today, as educational activists in Tucson continue to fight for the reinstatement of a MAS program that resembles the dismantled one, and continue to teach out-of-school programs inspired by it, the banned books sit on the shelves of several Underground Libraries which sprung up as spaces of resistance against the cultural oppression of Chican@s in Tucson. These Underground Libraries are the legacy left behind by a group of Chican@ literature activists called the *Librotraficantes* (book traffickers) and this chapter tells the story of how it was done.

I first met the *Librotraficantes* at Houston's Pacifica Radio headquarters. It was a large,

old house in what seemed to be a very hip, trendy, and expensive area of town. Pacifica Radio being a famous bastion of ‘liberal media’ in the U.S., the activities and folks inside the house stood in stark contrast with the affluence of the surroundings. The place was buzzing due to the fact that it was pledge week, and as one of the oldest listener-funded radio network, volunteers, producers, hosts and managers were all preoccupied. When someone finally noticed me in the lobby, I said I was there for the *Nuestra Palabra* broadcast, and was guided to a small studio on the first floor.

It was clear to me that this funky house in the middle of the ‘creative’, ‘revitalized’ (read gentrified) Montrose neighborhood is one of the many spaces of resistance involved in the Chican@ response to the culturally oppressive educational climate in Arizona. The KPTF house is one of those spaces carved in an act of resistance, which in turn allows for a break in the geographies of power, a place from which further resistance may be planned, deployed, supported and defended. I was told later by the *traficantes* that the station’s transmitter had been bombed off the air by the Ku Klux Klan at some point. Further investigation revealed that the station has been bombed twice in its history (Shey 2010), and that a few years ago, precisely during the hectic pledge-drive week, the “sometimes-controversial” station was shot at from outside, narrowly missing the head of someone within (Moran 2007). The house is soaked in a history of cultural resistance, and has withstood violent repression.

It is out of this house that Tony Diaz, Liana Lopez and Bryan Parras have been taking to Houston’s airwaves for years now, with the Latin@ and Chican@ literature-based program *Nuestra Palabra* (Our Word). The three Chican@ activists represent the foundation and core of the *Librotraficante* movement. They would eventually lead a caravan through six Southwestern cities raising awareness about HB2281 and collecting book donations with the goal of making

available the Chican@ cultural treasure (along with non-Chican@ texts used by the program) that had been removed from TUSD's MAS Government/Social Justice Education, History, Art, and Literature classrooms to Tucson's youth again.

It had not been easy to reach the *Librotraficantes*. After months of sporadic email exchanges with a *Nuestra Palabra* account run by all three, and a couple of date changes in my fieldwork plans, I made my way through the buzzing KPFT house and finally got to meet the trio in a small broadcasting booth. After quick and friendly introductions, for air time was upon us, I was promptly put to work on the station's phone lines. At some point they bussed me on air for a quick plug on my research, and without skipping a beat, they continued on with their program and pledge-drive. I saw firsthand how these three individuals are incredibly industrious and consistently busy. Besides the radio show and *Librotraficante* activism, Tony teaches Latin@ and Chican@ literature at Lone Star State College, writes for the *Huffington Post*, and is active in 'Dreamer' immigration activism. Liana is an award-winning artist, a media consultant and, along with Bryan "The High-Tech Aztec" Parras, a full-time environmental activist.

On the afternoon I met them, *Nuestra Palabra* consisted mostly of a pre-taped interview with writer and director Hernan Vilchez regarding his documentary *Huicholes: The Last Peyote Guardians* (2014). By the time it all wrapped up and we attacked what is left of the food brought by and for the many people involved with the fundraiser, which at that point is mainly a batch of delicious *tamales*, it is dark outside. The *traficantes* finally had some time to breath and talk. We drove away from Montrose and its hip restaurants, and found a place to sit. For the next few hours I heard the story of the *Librotraficante* initiative and the resulting Underground Libraries. I recount the tale of this creative direct action using my interview and communications with the *Librotraficantes*, along with archival research.

3.1 *Librotraficante* Origins: The Inspiration

The underground libraries that today stand as literary repositories of Chican@ and Latin@ culture in the United States are the tangible and most successful legacy of the whirlwind of activism that was the week-long *Librotraficante* caravan of 2012. It was the aftermath of the dismantling of TUSD's MAS program and the forced removal of over 50 titles from the classrooms of the affected students, and from the district's approved list of literature. The core idea was to collect as many of the censored texts around the Southwest, while raising awareness of what happened to the youth in Tucson.

The caravan stormed through six Southwestern cities with multiple actions planned for each stop, and it packed venues all along the route. It was successful in achieving its core goal and beyond. While on the surface it seemed as though the action was almost spontaneous, this belies the truth. While they found out about the book ban, organized the caravan, and delivered the books all in under six weeks, the *Librotraficante* grass-roots initiative stood on a strong foundation laid through years of hard work. This solid foundation was crucial in allowing such a response to what they saw as step towards a process of cultural genocide.

Bryan Parras, known in the activist community as the High-Tech Aztec, sees it this way: "We've been here before. We remember the codices."² His statement speaks to the historical legacy of resistance against cultural oppression that has taken place in this region since the advent of the colonial invasions. It was Bryan who initially found out about the woes of the kids

²Parras was referring to the burning, looting and suppressing of Aztec and Maya codices, richly crafted bound books representing all aspects of life for these cultures, by the Spanish crown and the Roman Catholic Church. Parras this paralleled to the literature removed from Tucson classrooms.

in Tucson. Liana, his partner, remembers that night. “We totally didn’t think it was going to happen.” Very savvy with new media and deeply immersed in the underground Chican@, Native and Latin@ grass-roots and community journalism scene, the High-Tech Aztec was sparked into outrage and action immediately. “Very quickly I tweeted to Tony and [author] Lalo [Alcaraz] and I said ‘let’s take the Librotraficantes and lets smuggle the books to Tucson’, and they were like ‘what the fuck are you talking about!’ so I sent them the link to see what was going on.”

Outrage and disbelief were the clearest emotions expressed by the *traficantes* as they recounted the beginning of the activist adventure that culminated in the Underground libraries just weeks later. “We were angry,” remembers Tony of the moment when they realized what had happened. They had no idea at the time what was going to happen, but they knew they would not sit idly by. Initially, both the disbelief and the anger were inspired by, and directed towards the culturally-oppressive political machinery that descended upon Tucson’s MAS program, its literature and youth. In addition, they noted the coverage (or rather lack-thereof) by mainstream media on the issue. As Chican@ multimedia literature activists, it made complete sense.

“The big news outlets in the area” says Bryan, referring to Arizona, had perhaps a couple of stories. “It pissed me off.” He found out what had happened through Brenda Norrell’s community reporting published through the aptly-titled *Censored News* blog out of New Mexico, as well as David Morales’ *Three Sonorans* blog. Interestingly enough, just like the Underground Libraries came to exist as a response to the censorship of pedagogy and literature instigated by the state’s legislative and judicial powers, so too did *Censored News* come to exist as a response to Norrell’s termination from *Indian Country Today* after repeated instances of censorship (*Censored News*). In similar fashion, Morales’ *Three Sonorans* blog was dropped from the *Tucson Citizen*’s online collection of local bloggers in 2012, after he

had posts removed (censored) by the site (Smith 2012). The removal of the *Sonorans* blog was presented as a difference of understanding with regards to conflict of interest, and came after the *Citizen* received complaints against Morales' partiality from TUSD board president and members, anti-ethnic studies activists (*Ibid*).

"We had to step up because the kids were stepping up and they were doing things way better than anyone [but] no one wants to listen to them." "Because they are kids," Bryan says, "it's easy for the media to dismiss them." Over the course of the caravan Tony used his writing in the *Huffington Post* as a voice for the cultural resistance against HB2281. An explicit goal was to take whatever national attention there was at the time "to the next level." I myself became aware of what was happening in Tucson post-MAS dismantling through the writer-activist work of Diaz.

Beyond the anger and disbelief at the poor media coverage of what had happened in Arizona, those emotions extended the political machinery that created the situation. With regards to one of the *Censored News* reports, Bryan said: "Just hearing the details of what happened that day... the kids having the books taken away from them and reacting to it, crying..." Liana chimes in: "I still, when I talk about it, I get all teary-eyed." "It just pisses you off," adds The Aztec. "How do you take something away when kids are excited about learning? When does that happen!"

The disbelief and anger didn't end there. As soon as they started digging in, making contacts in the area, scouring any source available, the passion increased. "What they did to those kids was the worst," says Liana. "That was before we found out they had been fighting for two years. These kids that aren't even eighteen are going to school board meetings! They were already civically engaged and they were doing it on their own." Even with engaged and

embedded citizen journalism pumping information out of Tucson, there were realities that geography blurred. Bryan added: “That whole community [the Chican@s of Tucson and South Tucson] had been so subjugated for so long, we didn’t know until we got there how bad it was.”

The *Librotraficantes* had been struck deeply by the dismantling of TUSD’s MAS program and the censorship of what was basically a Chican@ canon. They had been pushed to action against what they saw as cultural violence censoring the education of Brown youth, but also working towards its silencing. In addition, they were deeply touched due to their direct relationship with many of the authors or books removed from the MAS classrooms sprinkled throughout Tucson’s high schools. “All these writers getting banned, we knew them” Tony said. He mentioned Dr. Roberto Cintli Rodriguez, now a MAS professor at the University of Arizona who I would later interview in Tucson. Bryan noted that for years, “we had been working with those books and with the authors.” Tony added something of interest: the banning started before HB2281 gave the state the teeth with which to rip MAS out of Tucson schools. Two of Dr. Cintli Rodriguez’s books had been censored by TUSD a year or two before it all came down. “Manuel Muñoz,” added Tony, with a hint of fire in his voice, “had his books banned across the street from the college that he was teaching in.”

From the day they found out about the attacks against Chican@ culture in Tucson, the *Librotraficantes* trio knew they were doing something. They were driven by the atrocious political power-moves against the local youth, but also the valiant ways in which the local youth had resisted for years against such a formidable force of oppression. What they interpreted as poor coverage of the situation, along with their personal work, and activist relationships with both books and authors from Tucson’s banned list further compounded the drive to action that made them decide that, one way or another, they were going to, as Tony said,

“smuggle those books back to Tucson.”

3.2 What’s in a Name? The Coining of ‘*Librotraficante*’

Librotraficante translates literally to ‘book trafficker’ in English and originate at *Nuestra Palabra*. *Nuestra Palabra* is not only a radio show. It started as a reading series imagined and spearheaded by Tony while he was working toward his MFA in creative writing, with the goal of showcasing Latin@ and Chican@ literature in Houston and bringing it closer to the people, to *la gente* (see section 3.3 for more on NP) . When Bryan found out about Tucson and rallied his closest allies, the *Librotraficante* moniker had already been simmering in his mind. “I remember Tony had used the term before, *Librotraficantes*, because we used to sell books at the events because the book companies didn’t want to bother to come to a community center and sell books, even when we had 300, 400 people coming in.” The *traficantes* are proud to be *barrio* people, with the cultural and class identities that this represents. The book shows were in part to bring literature to the *barrios* because they were places ignored by the Anglo-focused literary powerhouses that were controlling the book-show circuits at the time. “Tony was packing community centers in the neighborhood,” says Bryan. He was promoting Latin@ literature often overlooked by ‘Big Book’ [the large chain stores], and he was doing it in geographies often ignored by ‘Big Book.’

This first iteration of *Librotraficantes* was successful and the shows grew in scope and ambition. At some point the *traficantes* were counting on over two hundred young volunteers and moving into larger venues, garnering the attention of different cross-sections of Chican@ and Latino@ communities in Texas and the rest of the country. The reading series that started in 1998 in the party hall of a Mexican restaurant eventually made it into downtown’s George R.

Brown convention center. After this particularly successful and ‘glamorous’ event, Tony recalls, “the name *Librotraficante* came up.” After the bright lights went out and the crowd dissipated, the *Nuestra Palabra* core was still hard at work. “All the glamour’s over, we’re helping a book vendor load their books, but I remember, it’s like midnight dark. I’m putting these boxes in the truck, and I’m like: if a cop pulls up right now, it’s like [slides effortlessly into a great cop on loudspeaker impression] ‘Everyone pull over, what are you guys doing?’” He responds with great gusto to the imagined police officer: “We’re *Librotraficantes!* Check out our stash!”

Bryan adds: “We understood what it meant. Pushing books on people, whether they like it or not. They get hooked! For life.” There is a lot to the *Librotraficante* name. There is the immediate image of books as drugs that can a) change lives and b) create habits. There is also the aspect of smuggling the literature into spaces where it had been either absent or underrepresented for a myriad of reasons. “Tony smuggled a lot of authors into school over the years, so it had been happening.” They reminisce about taking Luis Rodriguez into school back when he was seen mostly as a former gang-banger with a book. Rodriguez, author of *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*, is now known as Los Angeles’ Poet Laureate for 2014, the same year in which he ran for the office of governor of California. Back then, he still had to be clandestinely snuck into school events. “The librotraficantes had been around for years” concludes Bryan.

The term also is a play on preconceived identities ascribed to Latin@s, Chican@s as well as Mexican, Central and South American immigrants in the border regions of the Southern United States. A villainous symbiosis between social spheres of power such as (but not exclusive to) the media and all branches of government have popularized and naturalized a narrative of ‘Latino Threat’ which owes a lot of traction to the criminalization of brown bodies and cultures

(Chavez 2013). The ‘threat’ narrative is fully present in Tom Horne’s public justification of his *vendetta* against TUSD’s MAS program, his ‘Open Letter to the Citizens of Tucson’ (2007). The criminalization of Latin@s is put on its head by the idea of trafficking in lawful, uplifting cultural objects rather than socially-destructive substances.

This criminal role that has been repeatedly pinned on Chican@s is mocked through the original aesthetic portrayed in the short video crafted by Bryan and Tony to announce the *Librotraficante* book caravan to the world. The video depicted Tony in a tan leather jacket and aviator sunglasses standing in front of the trunk of his truck, loaded with books, warning the authorities in Arizona that the *Librotraficantes* were coming, “smuggling wetbooks” (*Wetbooks*) [a pun on the discriminatory term wetbacks ascribed to brown folks in the Southwest]. At one point in the video, *traficante* Tony holds up a book wrapped in saran-wrap, as are cross-border drug shipments: It is *Woodcuts of Women*, an award-winning Chican@ collection of short stories. “There’s a lethal dose of Dagoberto Gilb coming at you, Arizona!” exclaims Tony (*Ibid*).

But while the *traficante* part of the moniker represents a creative appropriation of Chican@ criminalization of the narco-trafficking narrative in the borderlands, it is the other word, *libro* [book], that symbolizes the passion of the activists and the power of the book. While recognizing the legion of issues compounded by events in Arizona, Tony says: “My thing is still the books. I believe only art can save us, but I think it is the books in particular that get people fired up, inspired.” .

The High-Tech Aztec, Bryan Parras, expanded on the power the books removed from Tucson classrooms might have on a Chican@ youth: The books convey the “context of what it means to live on the margins... These books were things that were valuable in that they could

make you feel different about yourself.” Given the deep influence of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical philosophies in the TUSD MAS program, the ability to contextualize one’s own reality through education was there by design.

Bryan explains: “What these books are doing is *teaching folks to think outside of the paradigm under which we are all colonized here*, and that’s the real *threat* to American society. We have to allow everyone to think differently and look at the world and interpret it through the lens of their own culture, and that is what they don’t want us to do [emphasis mine].” It was precisely to fight this form of modern-day colonialist cultural oppression that the *Librotraficante* term grew from inside joke between local Houston activists, to a successful, creative, nationwide initiative.

“What is interesting to me,” says Bryan, “is that the term *Librotraficante* came out of the book fairs, but it didn’t gain cultural currency until the books were actually banned.” While the three core activists had always seen themselves as smuggling their culture and their *literatura* into spaces from which they were formerly and typically absent, “no one saw it that way until there was this backlash to where the kids [In South Tucson and Tucson] don’t even have access to these books.” This lack of access is particularly acute for the youth of South Tucson, as their city boasts close to thirty liquor stores, no high schools, no book stores, and only one small, under-used and under-funded public library.

Now the term *Librotraficante* has gained notoriety and affection among Chican@s and Latin@s in the U.S. concerned with the educational and cultural plights of their own people. It went from a term that Liana heard Tony bandy around the radio program for a while, to [at some point] a movement bringing hundreds of bodies and minds into the fold. “We saw the phrase get coined,” says Tony with a smile on his face. Bryan, quick with humor, adds in a mock-conceited

tone: “It was printed in the *New York Times!*” In a day and age of rapid, massive consumption of information, the name *Librotraficante* must be given recognition as a culturally and intellectually creative example of social movement branding that gave the initiative traction across many geographies (physical and virtual). The term captures the idea of books as cultural objects both borne out of, and able to generate passion and as a source of power that both threatens established patterns of social control, and invigorates the fighting spirit of those oppressed by the upper echelons of such an establishment.

The title *Librotraficante* also captures the history of a dedicated group of culturally active citizens insistent on spreading Chican@ and Latin@ literature in the spaces which ‘Big Book’ traditionally ignores. As the discourses of illegality, threat, and criminality so often pinned on U.S. residents and citizens with origins below the Rio Grande grew to the point of physically removing books from the classrooms of engaged young Chican@ students, to the point of encompassing Chican@ culture itself, *Librotraficante* came to signal defiance of these forces. An opportunity to actively create spaces of resistance in which access to the blacklisted literature could be re-established for the affected communities in Southern Arizona.

3.3 Infrastructures and Networks: Keys to the *Librotraficante* Caravan Success

Only six weeks elapsed from the moment Bryan Parras informed his fellow cultural workers and activists about the removal of books from Tucson classrooms, to the moment that thousands of dollars’ worth of literature arrived at the doors of the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center in South Tucson, where they would be housed, displayed and circulated through an Underground Library. “I knew caravans were a thing, and I heard Tony use this word, it was like ‘we got it!’ This is how Bryan recalls it. But the success of the caravan and the eventual

establishment, growth, and maintenance of several Underground Libraries did not come solely out of the efforts of those six weeks in what Liana described as a living-room-turned-planning central. The success was possible thanks to a wide, deep, and complex set of infrastructures and networks crucial to the entire initiative.

Perhaps the greatest infrastructure that was firmly in place before the *Librotraficantes* decided to take to the road and deliver the banned books to South Tucson's youth, was the organization *Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say*. The organization, now entering its twelfth year of action, started as a reading series of Chican@ and Latin@ literature in Houston, spearheaded by Tony. It has since grown into a show run by the three *traficantes*, which boasts the title of the "leading literary radio show in Texas" (Diaz 2014). It also outgrew its restaurant-party-room origins, growing with each reading, advancing to book fairs, first in modest *barrio* community centers and any spaces that were both economically accessible and culturally relevant for Houston's Chican@ and Latin@ community, and eventually to events as large as the *Latino Book and Family Festival*, which at the time (2004) was the largest book fair in Texas history (Dias 2014). In the words of Tony, "*Nuestra Palabra* got us ready for whatever the *Librotraficante* movement would become."

Nuestra Palabra has been keeping the *traficantes* busy for a long time now. "We did a big book fair with initially no funding, and 200 volunteers from the community." It forced them to learn about event planning and strategizing with virtually no economic support. Through the reading series, the activists were "training ourselves to do this without even knowing it," in the words of Tony.

While the showcases, book fairs and reading series gave them much of the organizational experience that allowed them to take on the caravan initiative as quickly as they did, the radio

show aspect of *N.P.* also pushed them towards this. “The radio show was going on weekly throughout all of this,” said Liana. This continuity, the *traficantes* think, gave them “social credibility.” In its many incarnations, *Nuestra Palabra* stands as a strong foundational infrastructure, grown from the grass-roots level into a national phenomenon. It not only gave them credibility and an audience, but through the process of promoting Latin@ and Chican@ literature for close to two decades, it forged invaluable networks of personal relationships with authors, publishers, academics, and other like-minded, literary-focused folks.

This would prove crucial once the caravan was abruptly announced. For example, Tony remembers an early moment of doubt with regards to the actual ‘cargo’ to be ‘smuggled’. While the doubt lasted very little time, and he eventually decided to go “even if all we have is five books,” it proved unfounded. The activation of their network made sure the *traficantes* would arrive in Tucson with a surplus of the banned books, enough to start several Underground Libraries. In some instances, authors sent their books. In addition, *Cinco Puntos Press* in El Paso re-printed one of the banned books, which was out of circulation, just so that Tucson’s youth would have access to it.

This network of cultural workers also had a strong influence in charting the roadmap for the caravan. Sandra Cisneros, author of the award-winning banned book *House on Mango Street* hosted the *traficantes* while in San Antonio at the *Casa Azul*, the blue house that serves as headquarters for her literary social activism through the Macondo Foundation. The aforementioned relationship with *Cinco Puntos Press* dictated a stop in El Paso, and similarly, their personal relationship with banned author Rudolfo Anaya of *Bless me, Ultima* fame meant a personal invitation to bring the caravan to Albuquerque, where over 400 people gathered to support the caravan. When looking back at the size and success of the events along the caravan

route, Bryan exclaims: without “all of our friends and contacts we couldn’t have done all of that.”

The networks forged through years by the *traficantes* provided another key element: access to solid and supportive infrastructures across the border region. Once the plans were envisioned, these quickly came into the picture; “there was a lot of infrastructure in place already,” recognized Tony. “Like MECA.” MECA, a Chican@ cultural treasure in Houston’s Historic Sixth Ward, would eventually host one of the larger and more frequently-used Underground Libraries. But before things grew to that point, MECA provided a space from which to mark and celebrate the caravan’s departure from Houston. MECA utilized its vast network of students, student families, volunteers and alumni to give the *Librotraficante* cause a powerful start.

As previously mentioned, Sandra Cisneros’ *Casa Azul* is a well-established space of cultural resistance with a focus on Chican@ literature. Another such space is The Southwest Workers Union, a strong local worker’s rights and environmental justice organization that emerged almost thirty years ago out of the city of Hondo, Texas, and now operates out of San Antonio. It now hosts an Underground Library in what Tony sees as one of the best examples of creating spaces for the literature outside of mainstream institutions of education and commerce. The stop in Albuquerque, which was a huge success with over 400 people *traficantes* and donating towards the ‘contraband’, could not have happened but for the type of cultural environment that the city’s 50-acre National Hispanic Cultural Center has fostered in the city’s Barelas *barrio*. Finally, there is the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center, a space of resistance created by and for the South Tucson community.

Despite the formidable networks and infrastructures the *traficantes* were able to tap into,

the activists knew their resources paled in comparison to those amassed by their foes. Those led by Huppenthal in the attack against TUSD's MAS and the program's literature, Tony remarks, "have a whole state machine, and they were very clever." This state machinery functioned from the governor's office on down. The *traficantes* remembered how Arizona had tried to pass similar legislation, but it had been killed on its feet by then-governor Janet Napolitano. When Napolitano moved to the post of Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, she was replaced by Jan Brewer, who brought with her a virulent 'anti-Mexican' approach. Weeks before the passing of HB2281 to the dismantle Tucson's MAS program, she put ink to paper and signed into law SB1070, the most draconian legislation aimed to 'control' illegal immigration seen in recent U.S. history.

Despite facing the Arizona state Republican machinery, the *Librotraficantes* tapped into several existing networks and infrastructures of Chican@ cultural production and resistance to score a minor victory to re-open access to the banned literature for the youth of Tucson and South Tucson. This, however, has not been enough for anybody to rest on their laurels or circulate pats on the back. It was personally gratifying for me to see the *traficantes* reflect with a just sense of pride upon what they accomplished against HB2281 and its cultural repercussions as we talked. They were all, however, fully aware that victory could only be celebrated when the Chican@ youth thirsty for cultural knowledge and context is able to learn its own history from within the classrooms of their own schools, on their own terms again.

3.4 On the Road: Stops and Actions

After five weeks of planning, starting from the day Bryan found out about the book removal from Tucson's classrooms, the caravan departed Houston after the kick-start event

in Houston's Chican@ cultural jewel, Macario Ramirez' 'Casa Ramirez Folk Art Gallery.' Liana remembers: "We did this [the caravan initiative] in a span of six weeks. Five weeks of planning, and on the sixth, we were on the road." By the time the *traficantes* reached their destination in Arizona, they had snaked their way along the I-10 highway, covering almost 1500 miles across three Southwestern states. "We did Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Mesillas, Albuquerque, and Tucson," she recalled.

If the number of cities they planned to visit in the short time span seems daunting, the fact that most cities hosted several events adds to the magnitude of the initiative. "We must have done like seventy interviews during that time," adds Tony. Although the *traficantes* started "with no funding to begin with," they were initially fueled by their belief in "pulling it off," thanks to the skills honed through years and years of cultural activist work. Beyond the three core *traficantes* I met, two others helped see the caravan through. "There were five of us, and we all had full-time jobs," remembers Liana. Most of the five weeks of "planning central" in Liana and Bryan's dining room were spent trying to create activities for each of the stops: "We had to create activities!" remembers Bryan, "because the caravan is just getting from city to city." And activities they planned.

By the time the caravan left Houston on 12 March 2012, over twenty people took to the road in the '*Librotraficante* bus' and three accompanying vehicles (Acosta 2012). After departing from the Casa Ramirez, and with full awareness of the significance of place, the caravan's first stop was a local symbolic of the cultural struggle the *traficantes* were engaged in: they hosted a press conference at The Alamo. For this first event on the road, Tony was joined in addressing the media by then-Texas state legislator Joaquin Castro and authors Carmen Tafolla and Lorna Dee Cervantes (Sandhu 2012). Later that evening, the second Underground Library,

(as MECA Houston had unofficially opened theirs already) was inaugurated at the Southwest Workers Union, a hub of Chican@ labor, cultural and environmental activism, followed by a concert by a local band, talks by local authors, and *Librotraficantes*. Tony remembers the two days spent in San Antonio as some of the busiest: In several events , they saw around two to three hundred people.

Beyond the press conference and the library inauguration, a ‘school board review’ was held at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. For this event, community research was encouraged in order to present reports on “number of seats....names of the people who hold [them,]... when their seats are up for election” (*Librotraficante* 2012) and other such information with the aim of devising voting strategies to take control of community school boards. This activity, which was encouraged of local groups in all stops, was strategically designed in case ‘copycat bills’ were introduced in other states or municipalities. This strategy is notable in that it not only empowers through knowledge, but aims to reverse the dynamic in which Chican@ activism reacts to oppression by encouraging preemptive action and political engagement.

There also was a ‘teach-in’ at the community-based Bihl Haus Arts gallery aimed at local educators to address ways to incorporate Chican@ literature into the classroom. Lastly, San Antonio saw the first of the ‘Banned Book Bashes’ at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. The ‘bashes’ were essentially book fairs held at all stops at which local authors, *Librotraficantes*, and Latin@ and Chican@ literary personages mingled with the public while raising awareness, selling books, and collecting donations for the Underground Libraries.

From San Antonio, the caravan made its way to El Paso, the last stop in Texas. El Paso provided a much less stringent schedule and the only activity planned for March 14th was a successful ‘Bash’ in the city’s *Mercado Mayapan*, which drew an estimated 400 folks. The

following day saw the *Librotraficante* caravan make two stops as it made its way to and through New Mexico. The first stop consisted of a breakfast gathering at Casa Camino Real in Mesilla hosted by the bookstore's owner and award-winning author Denise Chavez. From Mesilla the caravan made its way two-thirds across New Mexico to Rudolfo Anaya's house in Albuquerque.

Rudolfo Anaya is widely considered the 'godfather' of Chican@ literature due to the impact of his celebrated *Bless Me, Ultima*, a novel not only renowned for the quality of its prose but also for its unapologetic depiction and exploration of Chican@ life and identity. *Ultima* might be the first book in the Chican@ canon, and its presence in high schools and public libraries has been challenged for a long time. Anaya is by all means a veteran in the fight for Chican@ literature, education, and culture in general. Besides awards and praise, his debut novel has put him on the American Library Association lists for: Most Frequently Challenged Authors of the 21st Century, Most Frequently Challenged books of 1990-1999, Top Banned/Challenged Books of 2000-2009, and most recently, and surely connected to the Tucson ban, Top 10 Most Frequently Challenged Books in 2013 (American Library Association).

From Anaya's house, the *traficantes* made their way to the imposing National Hispanic Cultural Center. At the NHCC, the *traficantes* held a press conference with banned authors Anaya and Dagoberto Glib. Albuquerque's event seems to have been the largest Banned Book Bash of the caravan with the 500-seat theater packed to standing-room only. It was now time for the caravan to complete the last leg of the journey and make their way to Tucson in order to deliver the *traficante* 'payload' which by that point in the journey consisted of well over a thousand books with an estimated worth of \$20,000.

The caravan arrived at the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center on March 16. It was spring-

break Friday, and, as described in the first chapter, the scene was tumultuous. South Tucson's police department mounted guard among the hundreds of young Chican@s, students-turned-activists. Supportive parents and community members completed the scene. Another press conference was held, and a teach-in took place, as a small caravan arrived with more books for the John A. Valenzuela Underground Library from Los Angeles. This solidarity caravan was organized by the Association of Raza Educators - Los Angeles, and was inspired by the Houstonian's initiative. The following day's schedule was perhaps the journey's busiest.

March 17 marked the last day of events for the *Librotraficante* book caravan. As with the rest of the journey, as much activity as possible was planned for that Saturday. The day kicked off with a breakfast with students held at Tucson's StudioONE, a gallery and performance space with a focus on social justice issues. The studio, which bills itself as "a space for art and activism" (StudioONE), also hosted a school board review. Given the specifics of how the state of Arizona dismantled TUSD's MAS program through the local school board, this workshop was of particular importance in Tucson. On the *Librotraficante*'s original web posting of the caravan schedule, this event listing reads: "Two seats open in November. We will win them." (Librotraficante).

Despite such democratically-focused initiatives, the school board of the Tucson Unified School District remains anti-MAS in its large majority. When I visited Tucson in 2014 for my research, two emblematic seats on the board were up for election. One had belonged to Adelita Grijalva since 2002, and the other to Michael Hicks since 2010. Grijalva came to be known as the only TUSD board member to vote to preserve the MAS program, while Hicks was to gain some national notoriety shortly after the *Librotraficantes* left town over comments made in an interview with Al Madrigal for political satire television show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

In the segment, Hicks describes how he came to his oppositional stance without ever having attended a MAS class. “Why even go? I based my thoughts on hearsay from others.” (The Daily Show With John Stewart, 2012). Both candidates emerged victorious out of the 2014 election, and while Grijalva, board president, received the highest percentage of votes (Pima County Elections Department 2014), the board remains steadfast on its MAS stance. This is something that all activists I met with were well aware of, and a reason for the organization of initiatives and actions that don’t rely on the school board’s approval.

After the school board review, more actions took place back at the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center in South Tucson: The ‘teach in’ at Valenzuela consisted of two separate workshops: the High Tech Aztec led one for the affected students using exercises and concepts derived from Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, another initiative of creative cultural resistance inspired by MAS pillar Paulo Freire. While the youth engaged in these exercises, TUSD affected MAS teachers Sean Arce and Curtis Acosta, along with Tony Diaz and other educators from California lead a workshop for teachers on best practices for engaging Latin@ and Chican@ literature both inside and outside of the classrooms. Among the issues discussed at the workshop was the compilation of a ‘supplanted books list’ aimed at circumventing the TUSD ban with texts which, while not themselves prohibited, were written by banned authors. The ‘Ultimate Teach-In’ concluded with a workshop that gathered the youth, educators, authors, and activists together in a forum established for those who wanted to share their stories and experiences with Mexican-American Studies and Chican@ literature. The last event of the caravan was a literary show case at the University of Arizona. After that, it was back to Houston for the *Librotraficantes*.

Direct resistance against HB2281 is taking place through the court system in the case

Maya Arce, et al. v. John Huppenthal, et. al. Maya, former MAS student and daughter of former MAS teacher Sean Arce, represents the students in the suit questioning the constitutionality of the bill in question. John Huppenthal, as detailed in the first chapter, succeeded Tom Horne as Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state's Department of Education. It was Huppenthal who was left to force the pulling of TUSD's MAS' plug, despite his department's inquiry findings that the program did not violate HB2281. The case was presented before the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco on January 12 of 2015 (Freedom to Read Foundation 2015). It has not been resolved, and a new date for early 2016 has now been set (Huicochea 2015).

The *traficantes* sought to resist the repercussions of HB2281. When *Librotraficante* went from inside joke to movement, from three outraged literature activists to a caravan with over twenty people who in turn engaged politically with close to (or more than) two thousand people across the southwest, there were two clear goals. The first was to establish a safe space where the youth of Tucson and South Tucson can have access to the books that the state machinery took out of their classrooms and hands, and which both their socioeconomic conditions and those of their neighborhoods make hard to access. Second, the *Librotraficantes* vowed to increase awareness about what had happened.

Speaking to these goals, the Underground Library in South Tucson continues to provide access and encourage use of the banned literature among the TUSD's Chican@ student body. Furthermore, three other Underground Libraries were founded through the caravan, and their number continues to grow, turning Arizona's plans to obscure the literature in question on its head. The caravan's three press conferences, the interaction with close to two thousand supporters along the way, the number of interviews given by the *traficantes*, and the visual and written journalism by the core of three published in local, regional and national outlets all make

the *Librotraficante* movement successful in its goals as a creative front of resistance against cultural oppression against Chican@s in the U.S.

3.5 Navigating Resistance Across Chican@ Geographies

Looking at the 1500-plus-mile journey of the *Librotraficante* caravan, and spending time in Houston, Tucson, and South Tucson, my attention was drawn to the different scales of geographical belonging for Chican@s in the U.S. When considering that the *Librotraficante* response to Arizona's attack on Chican@ literature came from two states over, I got the sense of Chican@ communion, a shared national experience, and in particular a shared borderland experience in the region covered by the caravan. I asked the three core *traficantes* if there had ever been any ambivalence with regards to their place as 'out-of-towners' and 'out-of-staters' getting involved with such a localized issue.

Bryan understands the consideration of whether it was their place to act or not. "I think for a long time people from outside of Arizona wanted to do something, but they didn't feel like they had the right to because they didn't live there. They passed these draconian laws in Arizona [referring also to SB1070] but I can't do anything! I can tweet about it, write about it..." But for the *traficantes* the effects of the attack against Chican@ culture and education in Arizona were not contained to Tucson. As self-described veteran 'cultural workers' with a focus on literature, they not only saw a chance, but an obligation to act. Bryan continues: "This [the removal of the books from the classrooms and curricula] allowed us a direct intervention because we had been promoting these books and this literature for so long, and it impacted our world. That wasn't just specific to Arizona."

For some people, Tony acknowledges, "it might have been like, 'why are these

Houstonians coming here?’.” He is aware of the ways their involvement has been interpreted: “Sometimes people think we’re from Arizona, or sometimes people are like ‘why are Texans helping Arizonans?’.” During my fieldwork in Tucson I indeed became aware of a tension with outsiders among a section of the young activists involved in the fight with TUSD and the state over their MAS program. I was able to gain access through acquaintances and time spent involved in participant-observation, but I was made aware once access was gained that they had seen many people come and essentially exploit the situation for personal gain. For those who became aware and felt affected by this dynamic in Arizona, the tension surged and peaked with the ‘Tucson Freedom Summer’ events that took place a few months after the *traficante* caravan left Arizona. While the caravan is remembered fondly by the community members I spoke with, further, less collaborative projects that came to town after it are not seen in the same light.

Tony, Liana, Bryan and the rest of the caravan came to Tucson with the support and approval of the U.N.I.D.O.S. (United Nondiscriminatory Individuals Demanding Our Studies) Youth Coalition of TUSD students and alumni that emerged as a direct response to HB2281. U.N.I.D.O.S. spearheaded all actions leading up to the eventual dismantling and continue to work actively and creatively to maintain the pedagogical spirit of the MAS program alive. They also were welcomed with open arms by Gloria Hameltiz, director, and the entire community of the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center. As they planned, they “talked to the community, the students, the teachers,” Tony recalled. “We still do it too!” adds Bryan, underlining the continued commitment and strength of the bonds of resistance formed through the initiative.

The good standing amongst the Chican@ literary community earned by the *traficantes* through many years of hard work and multiple successful ventures of *Nuestra Palabra* had a lot to do with this. The set of skills, and the confidence in those skills that

those experiences bestowed on the core three activists both worked towards their welcome in the affected community in Arizona, but also propelled them to take such quick action. Liana believes it was clear on all sides that the *Librotraficantes* were not out to “save Arizona.” Rather, they felt an obligation because they saw themselves as being able to secure free and safe access to the books for the youth of the community “because we know all these people [authors, publishers], and we’ve run caravans before.” Bryan adds with a laugh: “And we were crazy and stupid enough to do it.”

The sense of obligation was also fueled by an interpretation of what happened to Tucson’s MAS program not as an event contained to a particular locality, but as a personal affront to all Chican@s with a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. The way Tony felt about the censorship of the literature used by the program was centered around a particular understanding of the books, which echoed what I had heard in an conversation with Mrs. Salinas, program coordinator of MECA and ardent supporter of the Underground Library initiative. For Mrs. Salinas, the stories in the books not only represent the history of the Chican@ experience, but the actual history of the books as objects also was part of that Chican@ experience. There was struggle to get the first books published. There was and is a struggle to be able to teach them. For Tony, the literature “talked about our moms, our dads, our grandparents, our *antepasados* [ancestors].” It seemed to me as though this was the initial reaction to the ban, and the biggest reason why the commonality of the Chican@ experience overcame questions of physical geography and activist jurisdictions. Tony grew up in the *barrios* of Chicago, and the books in the curriculum represented depictions of Chican@ life in its many geographies across the U.S. Ultimately, the attack on Chican@ literature and history was experienced as an attack on their very identity. “We were enraged and mad,” recalls Tony. “It was personal.”

When asked, the *traficantes* reflected on the particular places they visited. The journey was not only based on the previously existing networks and institutions to which the *traficantes* had access, but also by the very immediacy of logistics and the constraints of time and money. “We thought of cities that were significant, like Crystal City [epicenter of the ’69 walkouts in Texas], but the logistics didn’t make it possible,” Bryan remembers. “Austin wanted us to go, same with Crystal City but it was all very far from I-10.” Tony adds: “I think it’s interesting that it was the I-10.” There is something symbolic to the Interstate 10 highway as a concrete artery running through the heart of the U.S. Southwest. “If you follow that map,” Tony says, “that’s our [Chican@] literary legacy. That’s the history of our literature.” Of course the I-10 cannot contain nor connect all of the history of Chican@ literary contributions to the world, as these have come from all regions of the U.S., but when the stops of the *Librotraficante* book caravan are taken into account, there is something to what Tony is saying. The ground they covered was all crucial to the development of Chican@-lit as a genre.

The long journey of the *Librotraficantes* across six Southwest cities highlights a commonality across different scales of Chican@ geographical belonging. A sense of shared experience, one very much reflected by the literature the *traficantes* wanted to ‘smuggle’ back, seemed to override difference of space and place and connect Chican@ geographies. These commonalities of experience should not be employed towards an erasure or denial of tensions between local community and activists, and concerned (whether selflessly or selfishly) outsiders. I suggest the *traficantes* navigated these tensions first, by acknowledging the dynamics of cross-local activism; second, because of their experience, reputation and networks, and third and most important, by acting in concert and with the consent of locals.

3.6 Conclusion

The *Librotraficante* book caravan of 2012 represented a successful, creative form of cultural resistance consisting of many events within a short period of time. It was an impressive multi-locale activist enterprise that was able to connect geographies of Chican@ identity across the Southwest and the U.S. at large. The *traficante* movement succeeded in its original goals of reestablishing access to the banned literature for TUSD youth, and spreading awareness of their fight as far and wide as possible. A great component in the measure of success with regards to book access are the Underground Libraries that were established along the caravan's journey in Tucson, San Antonio, Houston and Mesilla. The books that the *Librotraficantes* collected along the Interstate 10 and delivered to the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center are actually making their way back into TUSD classrooms as youths are encouraged to engage with them for class reports and other such projects. The following chapter will look in depth at these libraries as spaces of cultural resistance, but it is consequential at this moment to consider that the libraries still operate and have expanded to other locations in the U.S.

The *Librotraficante* movement and the subsequent Underground Libraries were inspired by what the activists saw as a step towards cultural genocide. A cultural genocide with historical precedents which, incidentally, Arizona's Department of Education sought to obscure through the banning of critical history works such as *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*. They were further spurred into action by what they perceived as conspicuously weak mainstream media coverage of the cultural attack against a relevant Chican@ education. Finally, they were inspired by the tenacity of the student activists, and by anger at what they saw as a petty

dismissal of the youths by the minimal corporate media coverage of the situation.

The organic branding of the movement and its participants as *Librotraficantes* emerged from the group's self-identification as Chican@ and Latin@ literature activists dedicated for years to bringing reading clubs, showcases and book shows to the *barrio* community centers, schools and anywhere they could gather as *Nuestra Palabra*. The name, originally a commentary on the criminality with which Chican@s are profiled in the borderlands and the Southwest, only gained traction and depth of meaning as the books that they had been dealing with for years were actually banned and removed from Tucson classrooms and approved literature lists. It's satirical nature and the proud use of Spanish itself as a form of linguistic resistance contributed to the success and spread of the initiative in virtual spaces of activist and literary production. The idea of 'pushing' 'wetbooks' throws 'Latino threat' discourses into disarray through creative appropriation. The concept of the movement, as well as much of the support it quickly garnered is tied to a feeling that created a kinship amongst those involved with the *Librotraficante* caravans: the transformative power of books. At the center of the whole enterprise was the denial to access this power that was being imposed on Tucson and South Tucson's youth.

Beyond inspiration and an attention-grabbing name, the *traficantes* were backed by a complex of social networks and existing infrastructures, starting with the fruit of their own work, *Nuestra Palabra*, and extending outwards from that base. The *traficantes* counted with experience and skill, a weekly space through which to vocalize and reach a steady audience, a small army of volunteers, and they were connected to an array of authors, publishing houses, and well established cultural and community centers across multiple Chican@ geographies. It was a web that paled in comparison to the strength and complexity of the state machinery to which they were reacting, but in activist terms the *Librotraficante* caravan exemplified an

amazing coming together of forces in a short time, which speaks to the credibility of the core of cultural workers.

This set of conditions aided in navigating through the potential pitfalls of geographical difference and scalar politics of activism. A conscious awareness of said politics and the consideration to plan actions in concert with the local youth and other community members leading the fight against HB2281 and all of its effects also minimized potential frictions with a community experiencing the trauma of cultural oppression in many ways. While the *traficantes* were conscious of this being a local community's burden to bear, they were largely moved to action by a feeling that the cultural offense implied through the dismantling of TUSD's MAS program and the removal of the Chican@ literary cannon from the classrooms was not locally contained. In fact, the scalar containment of the issue is blurry from the outset when we consider that a Canadian-born lawyer with a *vendetta* against Tucson's MAS program machinated political moves in Phoenix that ultimately lead to the cultural oppression of the youth of South Tucson, and the removal of books written across the United States.

In sum, when the *Librotraficante* caravan returned to Houston after a spring break on the road, Tony Diaz, Liana Lopez and Bryan 'The High-Tech Aztec' Parras had put close to 2000 miles behind them. They had visited six vibrant Chican@ communities across the Southwest, given close to a hundred interviews, and engaged close to 2000 people through the almost twenty events that made up the caravan, including school board reviews, banned book bashes and educational workshops. Through this whirlwind week of activism, Houston's *Librotraficantes* accomplished their goals of first, establishing free and safe access to TUSD's youth to the Chican@ cannon, and second, utilizing their networks and media presence to spread awareness

of the plight in Arizona. In the process, the caravan both crossed and weaved together several Chicana@ geographies, connecting different localized expressions of the Chicana@ condition through their common cultural birthright.

The following chapter will delve into the ongoing legacy of the *Librotraficante* movement through an exploration of two of the Underground Libraries founded during the 2012 caravan. The libraries in the *traficantes*' hometown of Houston, as well as the one in South Tucson will be explored as spaces of cultural resistance.

Chapter 4

Underground Libraries and Other Spaces of Resistance, Pt. I: South Tucson

The Underground Library in South Tucson is the visual centerpiece of the large community room which houses it. It is surrounded by visual art based on protest pictures, and the signs crafted at the center by the youth, and used during the fight for Tucson's Mexican American Studies program. Above the shelves, a large and colorful painting depicts ants working together, a living stone Olmeca building, a pyramid, a corn stalk sprouting humans, and in the corner a brown child smiling in awe at these cosmic landscapes contained within the book in his hands.

The community room belongs to the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center (JVYC), a buzzing hub of the South Tucson community which offers free after-school care and educational programs for the largely economically impoverished, primarily Chican@ population of the city. When the children and youth arrive, JVYC is vivid, full of energy and activity. As I lock my bike outside of the center on an early weekday morning, however, the place is very quiet. The only signs of life in the area emanate from mechanic garages and liquor stores, where early-bird drinkers are already intoxicated.

I am here to meet Gloria Hamelitz, a product of the South Tucson community and the center's multiple-hat wearing director. She comes out to greet me and wants to make sure I locked my bike properly. Despite her concern for my property, I do not feel any less safe in the South Tucson *barrio* than in many of the places my life has taken me. It was not an intimidating geography, despite statistics that rank it as the most dangerous city in Arizona (City Data). Mrs. Gloria is eager to talk to me about the Underground Library and I am eager to learn why, in the

face of death threats, she opened the doors of the youth center to the controversial cargo brought to South Tucson by the *Librotraficante* caravan.

4.1 Spaces of Cultural Resistance and Cultural Spaces of Resistance

In chapters four and five, I explore the concept of spaces of resistance through its different incarnations during the *Librotraficante* activist enterprise which sought to restore access to the Chican@ literature that was banned along with the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican American Studies (MAS) program. I will look at the resulting Underground Libraries in South Tucson and Houston as case studies of spaces of cultural resistance, along with other activist geographies that played crucial roles in the journey of the banned books across the Southwest, back into the hands of the youth from whose school shelves they had been removed.

There was no velvet glove to the iron fist that stamped out TUSD's MAS program in 2012. The political processes employed in order to stop the program developed in plain sight of the citizens of Tucson and South Tucson, starting with the publication of Tom Horne's *Open Letter to the Citizens of Tucson*. While in the field, some described the dismantling of the program and the boxing of the books as "cultural genocide", and "open racism", while all saw evidence of cultural oppression. These interpretations stem from the lived experience of the educational affront spearheaded by the state against Tucson's Chican@ youth.

I am deploying cultural spaces of resistance as physical and virtual geographies in which community resistance is crafted, nourished, or welcomed in an environment geared primarily towards the study, preservation, or creation of culture. An excellent example of a cultural space of resistance in this study is Houston's MECA art school in the city's 6th Ward, discussed in

chapter 5. A Chican@ cultural hub in the city, MECA's primary focus is on youth counseling through Mexican folkloric arts. The school opened its doors to the *Librotraficantes* and continues to house an Underground Library today. Spaces of cultural resistance are incubators and havens for resistance against cultural forms of oppression. Being that the Underground Libraries were borne out of resistance to the culturally oppressive deployment of Arizona HB2281 against one particular school program in Tucson, the libraries and all of the other activist geographies that played a part in this particular struggle are spaces of cultural resistance.

Most of the geographies involved in this case study, from the virtual to the physical, from temporary to permanent, may be seen as cultural spaces of resistance *and* spaces of cultural resistance. It is the goal of the following two chapters to describe and assess how the Underground Libraries have functioned as spaces of resistance, and determine common characteristics among all activist geographies involved in this initiative. My goal is to illuminate the way in which spaces of resistance work against cultural oppression in the U.S.

The spaces of resistance in this study are spaces created by social push-back to oppressive forces. They are borne out of a resistance strong enough to generate a physical space which, as said in chapter 2, becomes an embodiment of said resistance and facilitates the growth and advancement of further forms of resistance. The Underground Libraries and the places that host them were all spaces carved out against different forms of oppression (cultural, economic, geographic), and they've all continued to be shaped by different forms of oppression as they strive to fulfill their different mandates. The Underground Libraries that defy what was perceived as a cultural affront, a censoring of both education and conceptualization of existence, are humble in both size and reach. However, they offer a glimpse of the organic creation of

spaces of cultural resistance within a regional context of cultural oppression.

4.2 Case Studies: The *Librotraficante* Underground Libraries

As discussed in Chapter 3, The Underground Libraries were the brainchild of the core of activists that steered the *Librotraficante* caravan into existence: Tony Diaz, Liana Lopez, and Bryan ‘The High Tech Aztec’ Parras. Prior to the developments in Arizona, they had functioned as the core of *Nuestra Palabra*, a literary-activist enterprise anchored by a weekly radio show, which cut its teeth in the Southwest by bringing book shows, reading clubs and author showcases to Chican@ communities easily overlooked by the book industry.

As the book donations for Tucson’s youth grew in number, it became evident that housing them would become a crucial issue. For Diaz, the community in Tucson would need access independent of local government. There was also the group’s common experience of the ephemerality of literature events without a physical anchor. Despite taking the *Nuestra Palabra* book shows from a restaurant party room to events with the literary weight of Hecho en Tejas (Southwestern Writers Collection 2007), most of the energy and intention created by the events would “evaporate” after they wrapped up. Tony explained: “the idea was to leave a base in some way, shape or form. In the course of planning [the caravan] we decided to create Underground Libraries.” According to the activists, the overriding hope was that one day the battle for the program will be won, but spaces were needed because “first we have to survive this.”

On the move, the *traficantes* started developing some guidelines for the Underground Libraries. Bryan Parras shared the most basic premise: ‘we thought there was a need for a place where we don’t need to rely on the school district for the kids to have access to these books.’ Tony added that along with schools, the Underground Libraries should not be housed in

bookstores. “We are going to where Borders didn’t go, where Barnes & Noble didn’t go, where MFA programs won’t go.” This meant they were going directly to the Chican@ communities to host them without dependence on commercial or local politics.

The remainder of this chapter will now look at the Underground Library in South Tucson, Arizona, as a case study for spaces of cultural resistance, and the Houston Underground Library will be addressed in chapter 5.

4.3 The John A. Valenzuela Youth Center and Underground Library: South Tucson, Arizona.

The youth center is large. Along with its parking lot, it occupies a whole block along the west side of South 6th Avenue. 6th splits South Tucson into two almost-perfect halves, it runs north to south, and no matter which direction you drive away from the JVYC, it will take you back to Tucson. “We work in a really rough neighborhood,” says Gloria Hamelitz, the center’s director. The center functions primarily as an after-school program, as well as running full-time programs during the summer for South Tucson’s youth. Informally, it seems to function as a hub of help for the community at large.

I ask Gloria about the center, which was entering its 20th year of programing in late 2014; we start with her role: “I’ve been here for about ten years. I started out as a social worker and case manager. Now I’m the director, the plumber, the grant writer.” She speaks with humor and enthusiasm about the large collection of proverbial hats that she has to wear daily at the center. “We work with about two-hundred and fifty kids year-round. We provide free programing including after-school and out-of-school time activities like tutoring, homework, sports, dance, drama, art, cooking, just about everything.” I enquire about the youth attending the

programs: “The majority of our children are from this neighborhood. We have a really high drop-out rate. There is only about 4 out of 10 kids in my neighborhood that actually make it through high school.” The grim statistics stand out against the bright mood and happy children I get to see on a different visit, vibrantly and positively participating in an art class. “Our demographics, the families are about 99% Hispanic/Latino that we serve.” When I ask further about the demographics she lets go of the census-sounding category; they are mainly Chican@ families, she says, with a small number of recent immigrants from Mexico, but with a clear majority of U.S.-born citizens of Mexican or indigenous cultural heritage.

Despite the ‘youth’ in the title, JVYC’s reach goes deeper into the community: “South Tucson has deep cycles of poverty within our families. We help them through their D.S. [non-immigrant visa] applications for family, through their food stamps applications.” Gloria sees these cycles as impinging on the youth she serves: “We have a lot of generational families that have lived here for years that have been able to overcome a lot of their challenges.” Despite the success stories, “there is this systemic approach to keep you in poverty that punishes you for working, so many of them [heads of household] give up.” While she understands the hopelessness that leads to this, she can see the consequences: “Then they are role-modeling that to the kids. The systematic oppression is there and it is real, and I think the kids are more aware of it than the adults sometimes.

Role modeling is a theme in my conversation with Gloria, and it is evidently a guiding principle of the JVYC. “We have a very clear mission to be as youth-led in our programs as possible. In our activities the adults are more facilitators. A big part of that is to get our kids in leadership. Here, it is not about talking, it is about doing.” Exposure to life pathways that may not be too familiar to some of the youth is another part of the center’s approach, one that sees

the JVYC functioning as a space of cultural resistance against the different oppressions experienced in a low-income, low-educational-achievement, high-crime-rate *barrio* in a notoriously right-wing Southwestern state. To this extent, the center makes sure the “kids get to constantly have interactions with college students, so that it can become a norm, become an expectation.”

Through initiatives aimed at creating that role model connection, the children have engaged in several programs including mapping liquor stores in South Tucson: “we found out there was twenty-six liquor establishments in one square mile, and no schools.” I would talk to a participant of that study later. The scope went beyond liquor stores: “[we] mapped all the smoke shops, liquor stores, all the Section 8 [housing], the lack of bookstores and daycares,” shared a former MAS student who participated in the initiative. Further proof of the JVYC as an active space of resistance can be found in the fact that local youth were able to organize and present the results of the mapping program to the city, successfully lobbying for the denial of new liquor licenses. “Through those programs we also look at theories like the school-to-prison pipeline, and they start to connect with the children of the city of South Tucson,” Gloria mentioned with pride.

I was taken aback at her mention of South Tucson as a city. Looking back at my transcripts, I noticed that Gloria did use the word neighborhood or community a lot to refer to the area, so I asked about the city designation. I expressed surprised to find out that South Tucson is not a *barrio*, but that it is a fully-independent city. It is also not South of Tucson, as the name might imply, but it is completely engulfed by the city of Tucson. I need to hear more about this history.

4.4 The City of South Tucson: A ‘Banned Community’ With a Culture of Resistance

“South Tucson is its own separate city from Tucson. It is one square mile smack-dab in the middle of Tucson. We have our own government, mayor, council, police, fire, and with that comes some pretty unique benefits for our kids.” While I am interested in hearing about the benefits, I first inquire further into the story of South Tucson, and Gloria immediately connects that history with the cultural oppression the city’s youth experienced first hand with the book banning: “If we want to talk about banning, we are a whole banned community. Years ago [a quick visit to the city’s website reveals that 2015 marked the city’s 75th anniversary (City of South Tucson)] it was unincorporated because the crime rates in this neighborhood were actually bringing down the city.” Digging into records for reasons why the *barrio* was effectively kicked out of Tucson proved harder than I imagined.

The official city-redacted history tells that the ‘Pueblo Within a City’ [official motto] was originally incorporated in 1936, only to lose city status during the years of ’38-’39. “The city of Tucson annexed South Tucson for almost a year, but incorporation was returned” (*Ibid*). Interestingly enough, no mention as to the reasons why the city was incorporated in the first place, why it was annexed again, and why eventually Tucson ‘returned’ incorporation. A poorly-referenced Wikipedia entry mentions the incorporation as occurring “chiefly to take advantage of provisions in Arizona statutes of the time that permitted an incorporated city to have more alcohol licenses than comparable county areas and to permit dog racing,” (Wikipedia) although the information is sourced to a dead link on the Arizona Commerce Authority official website.

Despite the difficulty locating academic sources on the origin of the Tucson/South

Tucson schism, Gloria provides an educated account of how the separation plays out in the lived experience of the South Tucson community: “We don’t have any local bookstores. The nearest bookstore for our community is about fifteen miles away.” I asked about libraries, as I was pretty sure I had seen one on the east side of 6th as I came in. “We do have a library right across the street but it is the smallest within our county, so it has very limited space, hours, and collections.” I understand the state of the library given that the tax-pool for South Tucson may not stretch very far, but am floored by the lack of bookstores. But there were more things lacking in South Tucson.

“We don’t have a school within our community at all!” This is why South Tucson’s youth were so affected by TUSD’s dismantling. “Our kids are funneled. Their two main high schools are Tucson High School and Pueblo High School.” This meant that the high school students who organized the fight for what they considered *their* education were removed from the source of their oppression by virtue of it emanating out of Phoenix, and by virtue of the attack being focused on the schools of a city that was not even theirs. Tucson’s MAS program was eventually neutralized by the school district’s board, despite the fact that the forces nudging them towards this decision through budget-cut threats came from the state capital. The fate of the particular curricula which was being taught in TUSD high schools rests largely in the hands of that school board, and while South Tucson citizens might have a vote, it is the much larger city of Tucson which really gets to decide the makeup of the board. “The city of Tucson has some famous racists, and they are not afraid,” says Gloria when I ask about the larger city’s political landscape.

“We are definitely a community in South Tucson that has been historically oppressed and we are always fighting. There is definitely that consciousness [of resistance] because we

constantly feel under attack.” The differences in the landscape bear physical witness to the power dynamics between Tucson and South Tucson. While Tucson has sizable low-income areas, it also boasts of very wealthy zip codes. South Tucson is all *barrio*. The ride along 6th, the city’s main artery, reveals sparse businesses and it lacks the staple stores of the U.S. capitalist blueprint. Not only are there no bookstores in South Tucson, there are no Starbucks either. But the South Tucson community has gone beyond the consciousness of resistance Gloria talks about. The city of South Tucson has actively gone against various forms of oppression experienced by its Chican@ community, and the JVYC has been a part of this.

In the very room that today hosts the Underground Library, South Tucson’s youth organized of their own accord when, weeks prior to the passing of the bill that lead to the MAS dismantling, SB1070, the immigration enforcement bill later condemned by the federal government, was clearly making its way down the political pipe in Phoenix. The program’s youth “were here making signs for the protest. We’re their Michael’s [art supply] store. They need posters, paint, board, markers this is where they get it.” The youth center, in this respect was a space nurturing resistance against SB1070 by providing the material resources necessary for the actions. “They don’t have the money to go to the store and pick up supplies, so they come here, make their protest signs, and are supported.”

The role of JVYC goes beyond providing a safe space and materials for protest. This is best exemplified by the aforementioned victory in refusing the approval of new liquor licenses within city limits. Through that victory, the youth of South Tucson’s Chican@ community were able to play a part in the physical shaping of the city. Another example comes from a tile mosaic program with a G.E.D. component aimed at addressing the educational effects of cultural and economic oppression. Gloria tells of the fact that the community was dealing with “a lot of kids,

teenagers that were not in school or were not planning to go to school.” The reasons behind the kids’ relationship with formal education are deeply tied to the consequences of poverty: “some of them were trying to support their families, some had their own children that they had to support.”

Along with the perpetuation of the traditions of Chican@ tile mosaic construction, this G.E.D. program became so successful that it eventually branched out of the John A. Valenzuela and into its own space. The JVYC was the incubator for an initiative that addressed low-educational attainment much like the MAS program had before HB2281, using the tools of cultural relevance and fostering identity creation. This initiative in turn became a space of cultural resistance: *Las Artes* Arts and Education Center moved into its own facility, a couple of blocks away from the youth center and had the savvy to attain a contract with the state highway department. *Las Artes* is the closest thing to a high school in the city, and is another manifestation of the South Tucson community’s ability to create spaces out of their resistance to the conditions of life in the small city, the ability to shape the very physical makeup of the city. The inclusion of Chican@ artistic themes into public spaces such as highways through the tile work of *Las Artes* represents a powerful physical manifestation of cultural resistance in the ‘toxic’ sociopolitical context of Arizona.

In fact, the JVYC is itself another example of a space of resistance created by the South Tucson community. The center is named after a slain local cop. As the center’s director guided me through the facilities, she showed me officer Valenzuela’s degree from the University of Arizona, along with his picture and a few more mementos. I gathered two things from Mrs. Hamelitz-Lopez’ words: that the community’s attachment to the slain cop went beyond the dedication of the center, and was closer to a sense of devotion towards a local hero. I also gathered that the center was not a top-down addition to the city, but rather, after officer

Valenzuela's death, the community (including its youth) demanded that such a place be built, and that it be named after the local hero. Subsequent archival research revealed the reasons behind both the devotion to the police officer and the demand for a space for the youth.

The details behind the death of officer John A. Valenzuela reveal a man dedicated to his community along with some of the darker aspects that life in a city rife with crime can produce. According to the *Tucson Citizen*, Valenzuela was working as the school resource officer for Ochoa Elementary while with the South Tucson Police department. It was there that in 1993 Valenzuela was approached by several school girls who "told him they had been molested by a man living nearby." (Kimble 2006) Valenzuela secured a search warrant. It was during the warrant's execution that the suspect emerged shooting, killing Valenzuela; the suspect was subsequently killed by the other officers present (*Ibid*). According to Gloria, the neighborhood has turned things around some, yet not enough: "this is probably the one city in Arizona next to perhaps Guadalupe with the highest crime rate." The JVYC, with its free programs and open doors to youth during the statistically high crime after school hours, is there to be a safe space for the youth of South Tucson.

Gloria's thoughts on South Tucson as a community both oppressed and conscious of such oppression are given weight by what the city's community has achieved. Readiness for activism and action have been displayed through the community's response to SB1070, their addressing of educational problems, and when the safety of the city's children was in question. It came as no surprise to hear that when the anti-MAS public discourse started building, both the community and the JVYC were ready to get involved in one more round of the historical fight over Chican@ educational rights.

4.5 South Tucson's Reaction to the Attack on TUSD's MAS Program

South Tucson's youth must travel outside of its city limits and into Tucson to attend TUSD's high schools. Gloria sees in this strategy part of the oppression of living in the small city: "Instead of fixing or investing in some of the problems" among which she mentions hunger, the effects of crime on families and households, and the separation of youth from over-worked and under-paid parents, "they [the school district] decided 'let's just take them out of this neighborhood, shut down the schools [and] move them up to the east side.'" South Tucson's involvement in the struggle for educational justice and JVYC's role in said struggle have a strong recent history.

It was not long ago that South Tucson was fighting for the right to be educated within the confines of their own community. "A lot of our kids got their first taste [of both oppression and resistance] when we were trying to save our schools. We were doing a lot of organized protests, contacting our elected officials." The spirit of resistance against cultural and educational oppression was being honed and tested before HB2281 affected the community, and the youth center was a crucial space of resistance for their endeavors. The youths "were going to board meetings, and writing their speeches, designing their protest signs. We [the community and the youth center] had started to raise a really strong group of kids that had no problem doing that." Out of this local social context was borne a bulk of the fight against the consequences of HB2281's passing.

"We started working with the MAS program because so many of our kids were attending Tucson High School and Pueblo High School. A lot of our students were in MEChA" and

attending the targeted courses. “That’s kind of what led us to a lot of the work with MAS. It was affecting our community... so when this hit [the dismantling of MAS and the removal of the books], the first inclination was to fight!” The center director remembers those days, and the sense of anger that filled the youth. Being “part of the program, it was devastating to them to know that this was happening. So many of the kids were in the class when the books were literally boxed up in front of them.” The moment of the book removal appears to be one of the most traumatic events of the entire Tucson MAS mess. A former student referred to it as “psychological warfare.” Another MAS graduate added: “With [the book removal] it all went to a whole different level. They [the books] gave us our voices. I saw myself in those books.”

The removal of the books and dismantling of the curriculum hit the youth hard, as Gloria remembers: “They realized what was being taken away.” Awareness of the oppression coming out of Phoenix and impinging on the TUSD school board spread quickly throughout South Tucson and beyond the students enrolled in the MAS program. “Kids who were not in the program started asking what was going on, and then it carried over to a lot of *their* parents, and to their families and other community members.” Soon enough a large chunk of the city was involved. “That’s how it got started: that oppression that they were feeling at their schools.”

There are several dynamics between the two cities and their spaces for education. TUSD’s high school system can be seen as a space of exclusion in that all schools are outside of South Tucson. The MAS classrooms, physically, and the curricula, educationally, both represented cultural spaces of resistance *and* spaces of cultural resistance until the TUSD board decided to do away with the program, and inclusive sites that it created. The climate of oppression and exclusion that South Tucson’s [and Tucson’s] youth experienced increased as the fight over HB2281 ramped up, to the point for the youth felt threatened and unsafe.

At school, the kids from South Tucson “were feeling all these constraints: of meeting times, or if MEChA [the student club most invested in the MAS curriculum] would meet, all of a sudden there had to be an administrator there reporting on what the kids would talk about.” The level of distrust became toxic, and a dynamic of administrators vs. students, or more specifically administrators vs. MAS and MEChA students developed in TUSD schools. “Our kids really wanted to get off of the campuses and away from the administrators to feel open enough to actually discuss their issues,” remembers Gloria. Tensions even spilled outside of school, as Mr. Acosta remembers of the initial public protests: “It was dangerous for students. To go to protests with militia folks there, threatening. Brandishing weapons. It was *locura* [craziness]” That is when the JVYC’s community record as an inclusive space of resistance came into play. “They started to meet here at our site and they started to bring all their teachers and hold their meetings.” As the youth center provided alternatives for the environment in the schools, further lines became evident between South Tucson and Tucson, between students and school board, between young Chican@s forging knowledge of self and Phoenix career politicians with vested interests in taking that away.

Despite Gloria’s view of South Tucson’s original incorporation as Tucson’s way to deal with the ‘Mexican problem’, she is quick to point out that the community’s city status has been of great aid when it came down to the fight over MAS, and even the installation of the Underground Library once the dismantling took place and the book-boxing debacle hindered the youth’s access to their literary cultural heritage. “Being our own separate city helped us in so many ways.” The size of South Tucson and the tight-knit aspects of its community allowed the city’s infrastructure to be responsive to anything affecting the small constituency at large. “I was able to just call the mayor and say ‘hey, this is going on and we need your support.’”

In a city where the last mayoral election drew 342 votes (Diaz 2015), this kind of community-government relationship is not outlandish, although it still speaks to the weight of the youth center as community stalwart. At the time of the MAS fight, South Tucson “had a very progressive mayor by the name of Jennifer Eckstrom.” Eckstrom passed an ordinance stating that the city of South Tucson was “welcoming to Mexican American studies and in full support of ethnic studies.” It was a symbolic political initiative spearheaded by TUSD MAS director and teacher Sean Arce, who tried to get cities across Arizona to show support. “A few cities were able to do it, but [South Tucson] was the first one to do it, so that people would know clearly this was a safe haven.” At this point, the city of South Tucson itself emerges as a space of cultural resistance. That the exclusion from the larger Tucson community was of benefit to the poverty-stricken small city was an interesting turn.

As it turns out, the declaration went beyond symbolic support. “We needed that piece of paper,” says Gloria. It helped, for example, with the feelings of intimidation and fear experienced by the resisting youth: “they did not feel safe at their own school. They knew they were being infiltrated and that people were reporting.” But the need for a safe haven, for a space open to the activities of resistance, went beyond the children. “When the *Librotraficantes* came I received so much hate mail and threats from outside [of South Tucson], even from out of state. That support at the top level was great because it carried down to the police coming to keep them at bay so that we could proceed with our programing without all of that negativity.”

The days of fighting for the life of the program were not easy on the community. “They were stressful times.,” remembers Gloria. Different individuals and families were affected differently by the attack on the MAS program and its literature. “One of our kids was so heavily involved with the fight that it consumed his life and he ended up failing one of his classes. He

forgot what he was in school for.” The irony abounds, a child so involved with saving an academic program he loses sight of his own academic goals. A community starved for local high school graduates losing one to the fight over educational rights. “He had to go back to the same school board that he was fighting to ask for permission to take a summer class, or walk the stage with his classmates.” The fight that that young man, along with the South Tucson and Tucson Chican@ youth lost against HB2281 was a sour local defeat in a prolonged and historical struggle over educational and cultural justice by Chican@s.

4.6 *Librotraficantes* and the Underground Library: Banned Books for a Banned Community

The loss of the beloved MAS program was not the end of the story, as the community that came together to retain the program did not give up entirely. “We definitely still want it [Mexican American Studies, but in particular the curricula being used in TUSD schools] but that doesn’t mean the community will let it go by the wayside.” For example, former MAS teacher Curtis Acosta, who was able to keep his job but ended up quitting the TUSD due to what he interpreted as his only choice other than “doing malpractice, or breaking the law,” attempted to utilize the JVYC as a space of cultural resistance from which he ran an out-of-school version of his literature course. “He was doing classes here every Sunday with his kids, doing everything TUSD wouldn’t allow him to do,” confirmed Gloria. “He was doing it on his own time, but it gets hard to recruit.” The out-of-school program did not last.

It wasn’t long after the deflation of losing the battle with the school board, and by proxy with the state of Arizona, that the *Librotraficantes* came into the picture. With the program effectively off the school campuses and the literary lifeblood of the courses sitting in sealed

boxes somewhere within the TUSD, there was a curiosity and a desire to see what the fight was all about. An interest in the banned books spread throughout the community and beyond those who had had the luck of taking the classes. “We don’t have bookstores and when the book banning hit the roof, all the libraries within our county did not have enough books to meet the demand.” The way in which economic and cultural oppression intertwine for the citizens of South Tucson is highlighted by both a scarce public library, and by the absence of book stores in the community. “People were having to go on Amazon [online retail] to order the books, or [outside of the community] to bookstores to order the books, but the problem with our community is that we don’t have money for books!”

A vicious cycle by which economic demands draw youth away from schooling, and affect the ability to excel of those who have the privilege of formal education is at play. The South Tucson community has had the strength and commitment to manifest physical spaces borne out of resistance, and thus participate in the shaping of their physical and lived community. I see the lack of bookstores, and the way this multiplied the negative effects of the culturally oppressive ruling over TUSD’s MAS program as drawing my attention back to the powerful forces against which the South Tucson community has had to resist in order to achieve what it has. Economic oppression is unveiled by the lack of bookstores in the city and the lack of disposable income to buy books. “We barely have money to put food on the table” says Gloria, “so that’s a huge luxury for our families: *our* books.” The cultural oppression of dismantling a program *designed* to resist the depressive academic trends of the community is compounded by the lived experience of economic oppression in a *barrio*-turned-city.

It was to this dearth of access to a desired literature that the *Librotraficantes* responded. Once it was evident that the MAS program was no longer going to be taught in Tucson high

schools, access to the books that made up the curricula became the lifeline to a legacy of what the educational program had once been. Gloria found out about Tony through the *Youtube* video that announced the caravan to the online world (*Wetbooks*), committing to bring the books to Arizona before any planning of how, when or where had taken place. “I sent him [Tony] a message asking where in Arizona he was coming to, told him I was the director of this youth center and offered it as a landing place for the caravan.” At the time, neither knew what would become of the books, or how many there would be.

Mrs. Hameltiz understood personally the power of the books in question and their importance to the youth of the community. “They are life-changing. I know it changed my life and I’ve seen personally the way that certain books will affect certain kids.” Hameltiz ended up as director of the JVYC and as advocate-at-large for the community surrounding the kids she cares for in large part due to Mexican American Studies classes, and particularly to one of the books boxed by the TUSD. “Rudy Acuña’s book *Occupied America* changed my life course. It took one Chicano Studies class and his book.” Gloria credits coming to an understanding of the “systematic oppression that was happening in the [school] districts,” which she achieved through *her* MAS experience, with her desire to work directly for the community. “I went for social justice and children and families.” The entire HB2281 fiasco seemed to give her pivotal educational moment validity, as she was able to aid teachers and students in resisting against the very oppressions that dissuaded her from a career as an educator. It also resulted in several visit by Rudy Acuña himself to the JVYC, along with his California students. “That really drove home the national importance of what was happening for our kids.”

Access to the MAS books would afford the JVYC youth a chance of experiencing the kind of life-changing power that had led to Gloria’s current position and abilities. It was this that

led to the connection between the youth center and the *traficantes*. “That’s how I met Tony and Liana and Bryan. I was assuming they were going to give out the books or something.” But, as the *Librotraficantes* had learned through their years of literary activism, a tangible, physical *something* is necessary for the results of the efforts to not “dissipate” with the events and fanfare. “When they said they wanted to have a library here,” remembers Gloria, “we were all for it. We knew it was going to benefit our kids specifically, our youth who had been so involved in all the fights, and our families.”

It took a while for the space to take the shape it has today in the JVYC’ main room. “When they first donated the books we didn’t know what to do. We were getting all this hate mail, people wanted to steal the books, adults wanted to come by and take them!” These further manifestations of cultural oppression had an effect on how the center initially dealt with the books . “I first thought, I’ll put them in the back office where they’ll be locked up and safe. I entertained that thought for a good few minutes; but how would that be any different from the [TUSD] putting them in a box? That’s what they want!” She realized quickly enough that her initial reluctance was based on fear. “The hatred is real, and it even infiltrates good minds.” The threats and hate-mail poured in once it was public knowledge that the banned literature would be housed at the youth center. “Luckily a lot of people were just talk. Very few actually made it to the site.” But for a youth center even a couple of such visits is a serious affair.

On occasions in which the safety of the youth and the center was threatened because they chose to provide access to the books affected by HB2281, the city status of South Tucson again proved to be of help. “There was a person who demanded to come in here and take all of our books and read them for appropriate content.” The person’s demand was based on “being a proud tax payer” wanting to “make sure we weren’t militarizing children.” The close relationship

with the city's government and the MAS support ordinance was enough to keep them at bay. "I was able to just forward [the demands and threats] to our city manager, who would send them a copy of the declaration" from an official email address. In most cases, this sufficed to discourage the individual making the threat.

Once the books finally settled in the main room and the wave of cultural vigilantes receded, South Tucson's Underground Library began to serve the city's youth and larger community. "We've systematically incorporated [the Underground Library] into our programming and it is also part of our staff training: we have a whole section on why it's here and what our motivation is to do it." Through this approach, the JVYC is maintaining alive not only the literature at the core of MAS program removed from TUSD schools, but also the memory of the lengthy struggle against the forces of cultural oppression that brought about the changes to the community's educational experience.

Once the *Librotraficantes* did good on their promise to bring the banned books back to young Chican@ hands in Arizona, the day-to-day running of the Underground Library has been completely up to the JVYC. "We have a check-out system, but it is very loose." When the goal is for the books to be used, policing their use through rigid policies becomes less necessary. "Half of [the students] don't fill out the form, we've had some books that have been out for a year, and some of them have not returned at all, and I am fine with that!" For Gloria, to see the center's kids excited about having books with them, even enough to keep them, is a victory for the library and the community. "Some of the kids that do want to keep the books, we ask them to find something else to replace it. Some of the books have meant so much that the kids want to share it with their family, which is great." The Underground Library then, is reaching beyond the school-aged youths to parents, siblings, and other community members.

One of the more interesting and subversive uses of the Underground Library actually involves getting the literature back into the school system, back into TUSD classrooms. “Our library is *really* popping when it comes time for book reports,” said Gloria. In a community with no bookstores and tight family budgets, book report time has proven a perfect opportunity to get the kids reading from the Underground Library, and it ties in well with the center’s mission to help the academic performance of the youths it cares for. However, Gloria has made strides for the library to ‘pop’ during the whole year. “We’ve really tried to change the mindset that reading is just for book reports. We are trying to get them to do more reading for fun and enjoyment which is not something that is being role-modeled in our community.” For Gloria, the missing books out of the library shelves represent a step in that direction. “With the high dropout rate, we have a lot of our kids whose parents never graduated high school, so there’s not a lot of structure giving importance to books in our community.” The Underground Library here can be seen as a space of resistance against the historical cycles of educational struggles that continue to affect Chican@s across the U.S.

The slow changes that the center’s staff have noticed in reading attitudes, Gloria believes, are in large part owed to the literature being “tied to *our* culture.” The young staff, some of them former students, have played a part in the role-modeling that has been missing in South Tucson. “We’ve been getting our staff to read more and more of the literature,” so that the children see the young adults they look up to and develop relationships by physically interacting with the Underground Library and reading within the environment. Staff familiarity with the literature sets more than an example. As the staff becomes familiar with the banned MAS texts, they also learn ways in which to guide the kids towards the books: “When we see a kid struggling we can be like ‘Hey! Look at this, there’s someone who is really similar to you in

this book, you can see how they struggled with it.” With the book list being heavy on fiction by, about, and for young Chican@s [what a former MAS student called “Brown boy and Brown girl stories”], this has been another successful tactic of integrating the Underground Library into the youths’ lives.

The Underground Library at the JVYC has also emerged as a space of cultural resistance from which new voices are being given the place, confidence, and tools from which to start expressing themselves. It is something that has started to develop as the Underground Library has become a staple of the center. When speaking with the youth about why the books are housed there, something crucial has come up. “We talk about: ‘If they are banning our books, who is going to tell our stories?’” It is a question borne out of one of the most powerful aspects of the books boxed up by the school district. “Some of our kids will say: ‘Well, no one wants to hear my stories’, but now we are able to say, ‘Oh really? There’s like twenty books that were published right here [points at the shelves] that talk exactly about struggles [like yours].” Mrs. Hamelitz speaks passionately: “We need those revolutions of the mind.” Those radical changes in understanding of self, contextualization of circumstances, and self-worth that relatable literature can provide. The very inner revolutions that Arizona wanted to stop, from the Governor’s office down to the local school board, as a student activist recognized: “those books gave us our voices, and that’s why it was so threatening [to the state].”

4.7 Conclusion

When I ask about the near future of the Underground Library, I ask also about the near future of the fight over Mexican American Studies in Tucson high schools. “We are still not in a winning position by any means. I don’t see it changing any time soon. The same [school] board

that was there when the book ban occurred have all won their seats back. The entire same board has been retained for another four years.”

As for the future of the Underground Library, as long as the JVYC functions, it will remain a focal point. The Underground Library is something the community at large has come to hang on to. Thanks to the efforts of the *Librotraficantes*, all of the people and places involved in the caravan, and the participation of the South Tucson and Tucson activist communities, “we have our books. We can continue to use them. We don’t need the district’s permission, the city [of Tucson’s] permission, or anybody’s to share that with our kids, and that’s really powerful,” said Gloria looking at the packed shelves.

The economic, legal and cultural separation between Tucson and South Tucson continues to influence the situation. While it factors into the reasons why the community does not see much hope for regaining what was once lost, it has also inadvertently allowed for the memory and the literary lifeblood of the MAS program to remain alive and relevant. As Gloria points out, “if we [the JVYC, but more specifically the Underground Library] existed within the city of Tucson, I think the pressures of racism would have caused our demise.” However, the outlook is by no means bright at the moment.

Despite the fact that the books might remain accessible, and the people at JVYC, and the other spaces of resistance through which some form of the banned curriculum is being transmitted, the impact is nowhere near the same. “The exposure in the schools, the teachers making the books come to life for the children, that’s gone. Teachers and administrators have had their hands tied so tightly and their mouths sealed in order to preserve their jobs and their careers.” It is important to understand that as powerful as the books are for any one of the youth, without the work of the professionals whose lives’ work was to know how to make them

accessible for young minds, the texts don't have the same effect. In particular, Gloria mentions how the more theoretical books do get picked up, but are put back on the shelves rather quickly.

Beyond the cultural and motivational benefits of retaining the books and the memory of what happened, it is clear that any further cultural or educational victories will require fighting. When it all happened, "the kids were the ones starting the fights, doing the organizing, collecting donations for water bottles, contacting media. They were the ones really in charge of those protests." The biggest issue now is that time works against social resistance and in favor of established, structural power. "We've cycled out. The kids that were in Tucson high schools are in college now, so we have this new crop of kids that never heard of those classes." Beyond that, those who *did* fight and are still around have not fully recovered from the toll the resistance took on them and their community. As one activist put it: "Our community [was] divided, and it is in healing because we have been in struggle for... at least six years of constant struggle and resistance against the TUSD."

It is evident that the primary fuel for resistance, which is people willing to resist, has decreased significantly since 2012. Several factors have contributed to this: There have been fissions within the movement that were exacerbated into large, divisive cracks. There is also the burnout of fighting for years in a battle that was eventually lost. As local activists say, the resisting community is still in a healing process from those years. Thirdly, beyond the on-going legal battle that is still raging over the constitutionality of the original ban, and taking into account the re-election of the entire school board that did away with the MAS program, there is no promising avenue through which to pursue the restoration of the program and a return of the beloved books to Tucson classrooms. Lastly, the lack of exposure to the MAS classes means new fighters are few and far between.

Gloria notices it in the community and the center: “The fire has definitely died down. There’s sparks here and there, mainly for the siblings of the [former MAS students], but it has died down.” At one point the fire raged far and wide, making waves nationally, and commanding the attention of much of the Tucson and South Tucson Chican@ communities. As few sparks still crack, Gloria sees the importance of the Underground Library, but also its limited power. “It’s even more critical now that as a community we pick it back up, but we are just one youth center trying to make a difference.” While the JVYC Underground Library has made the crucial difference of re-establishing free, safe, and public access to the Chican@ literary canon boxed by the TUSD, dim and unclear hopes are what remain. “We won’t let it die away,” says Mrs. Hamelitz, “I would love for it to catch fire again, but you know, we’ll get there someday. It takes time.”

It is hard not to think that time, in many ways, is working against those hoping and fighting for the reinstatement of the program that opened Tucson’s youth’s minds to the wealth of knowledge contained within the banned books. But all hope was definitely not lost for the people I talked to during my time in Arizona. A large part of this has to do with the ability to contextualize what happened to TUSD’s MAS program within the larger, contested history of Chican@ cultural and educational rights. “History repeats itself in funny ways” mentioned a research participant, noting that this wasn’t the first Ethnic Studies battle in Tucson. This capacity was attained by the community elders through participation in struggles to bring Mexican American Studies to Arizona in the first place, and by the youth who stood up in resistance through those very courses.

As an outsider, it was hard for me to connect with the deep-seated, if cautious hopefulness of the community. This hope, however, helped me understand one of the most

important function of the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center Underground Library as a space of cultural resistance: the library functions as the symbolic embers to the fire of resistance described by the center's director as well as former TUSD MAS teachers and students. Embers can sometimes be as hot if not hotter than the fire that sparked them, and if not extinguished properly, embers can rekindle that fire. There has been no lack of attempts to extinguish the embers kept alive in the JVYC's Underground Library, yet the banned books are still available to the community's youth.

As symbolic embers, the books and the library itself function as spaces of cultural resistance against the corrosive effects of time on social movements, in particular after a significant loss. Through the cycling-out of students educated by [or at least exposed to] the MAS program, the length of school board terms, and the drain on activists, time works against the cause of Ethnic [and Chican@ in particular] Studies in Arizona, time works towards an erasure of the fire that was the resistance against HB2281 and its consequences. Safekeeping the books that fueled the dismantled program works to resist time by embodying the memory of the fight, and denying the oppressive forces that denied the fight a complete victory.

The fact that the Underground Library is still functioning in South Tucson is a testament not only to one more historical round of struggle for Chican@ educational and cultural justice that took place in the community. It also is a testament to the deeply rooted culture of resistance that has helped the impoverished city of South Tucson find ways to shape its own physical and lived geographies. Without the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center, built by demand of the community, there very possibly could have been no permanent place for an Underground Library for the communities affected by HB2281. The JVYC already functioned as a space of resistance against multiple forms of oppression experienced by its community, such as the lack of safe

spaces for children, and the struggle to obtain an education while navigating cycles of poverty and crime. It also provided sanctuary, guidance and resources to those who lead much of the educational resistance.

Now that the fight is against complete erasure of the memory of the dismantled MAS program and the book list at the program's core, the Underground Library at the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center in South Tucson stands as a powerful symbol capturing the memory of HB2281 and its consequences in the face of historical erasure. It also stands as a reminder that there is still fighting to be done. Finally, the library holds the books that so many describe as life-changing, giving the community tools with which to continue the struggle for the right to an inclusive, empowering, and effective education.

Chapter 5

Underground Libraries and Spaces of Cultural Resistance, Part II: Beyond Tucson

The Underground Library in Houston is housed by Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts (MECA), a cultural staple for the city's Chican@ population, and a standing testament to the recent *barrio* roots of Houston's historic Old Sixth Ward. The MECA after-school program has occupied the heritage Dow school building in the Sixth Ward for decades, after outgrowing its original quarters a couple of blocks away. The residential neighborhood is bordered on the east side by the imposing skyline of downtown Houston, a bustling and prosperous city center largely fueled by global resource extraction, yet surrounded by pockets of poverty.

The bus ride from downtown to MECA reveals how the historic neighborhood is flanked on the north end by a Houston Police Department building, a very large warehouse labeled 'Houston Police Department Property Room' and a parasitic bail-bonds business 'district', all peppered with small and medium-sized evangelical Christian churches. To the west lays the massive Glenwood cemetery, and to the south, one of Houston's many large highways carves the Sixth Ward's final border. I walk through the neighborhood, noticing several abandoned houses in a row. Down one of the streets I cross, however, I see two big renovated houses with expensive cars on the front yard. The Sixth Ward shows clear signs of demographic changes including displaced and rapid gentrification.

I reach Kane Street and I can't miss the MECA building. Flanked by its outdoor stage on one end and a small park on the other, it occupies an entire city block. I make my way up the stairs to MECA's main entrance. I've arrived early, so I walk around a little, taking in the *Dia de*

los Muertos altars that have been built by families of MECA students to honor their deceased ancestors and youths. I'm waiting to meet program coordinator Liz Salinas, but she is running slightly late as preparations for the busiest weekend of the MECA calendar year looms ever closer. She apologizes profusely and makes sure I can wait a little longer, because she definitely wants to take time to talk about why the school opened its doors to the *Librotraficantes* from the moment they were approached.

I take the opportunity to check out the school's library, the room that hosts the Underground Library. The Underground Library consists of a shelf custom-built for MECA's century-old library. The colorful shelf has metal handles on either end so that it can be "carried like a Chicana@ ark of the covenant," in *Librotraficante* Tony Diaz's words, to any Chicana@ literature-related events in town. Its side panels display wonderful airbrush art, a staple form of Mexican-American *cultura*, depicting on one side a regal brown eagle with a bright green snake in its beak, and some desert vegetation on the other side. The middle of the art installation/shelf is covered in pictures of protests against the dismantling of the MAS program in Tucson, and hand-written messages of support for those leading the struggle from young folks all over the country. To top it off, the whole shelf is decorated with bilingual reading pledges from local children. The regular school day has not ended and that means there are not many people at MECA at the moment. It is just a young Brown mother and myself in there at the moment. She is reading Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, one of the many books banned from Tucson classrooms.

5.1 MECA and Houston's Sixth Ward: Cultural Traditions and Demographic Changes

The city of Houston was the first stop of my field research. I wanted to track down the

Librotraficantes and explore the city's Underground Library. While the former proved a hard task due to the hectic schedules of the literary activists, my intentions to spend time at the Underground Library at MECA were welcomed with open arms by the art school's administration. Shortly after landing in the most populated city in the southern United States, I was invited out for dinner by MECA's founder and director. Without a real grasp of distances in what is a sprawling urban and suburban hub designed for cars and structured by a series of concentric highway rings,, I managed to negotiate public transit and arrive on time.

Mrs. Alice Valdez has been right at the center of MECA since the art school's inception. The art school itself, coincidentally, is virtually the geographical center of Houston's Old Sixth Ward. It started as a multicultural festival celebrating Houston's diversity housed by the city's First and Sixth Wards (MECA 2014). After a meeting over a meal in the Montrose neighborhood, Mrs. Valdez asks me if I want to check out the school. It is closed at this time of night, she says, but she has a couple of minor housekeeping duties.

There is a stark contrast driving into the Sixth Ward from dinner in the hip, entertainment-filled Montrose. The Sixth Ward is quiet and dark at night. Save for a stretch of bars along the neighborhood's northern limits on Washington Avenue, there is no night-life in the Ward. The current and founding executive director of MECA, Mrs. Valdez' formal training is in musical education, and her instrument of choice always was the violin. To this day, she still teaches the Susuki method at the school, from where young aspiring musicians can then move into the school's award-winning and internationally-touring Mariachi program. She has also been a long-time community activist and organizer.

After the success of the 'Old Sixth Ward Fun and Food Fest' she organized almost four decades ago, then-St. Joseph's church Father Rosales encouraged Mrs. Valdez to develop a

program that could carry over the community spirit that the celebration had catalyzed (MECA 2014). She organized parishioners and Sixth Ward community members with the intention of creating a year-round program centered around arts instruction as a vehicle to address juvenile delinquency in the ward, drop-out rates and the common list of issues that affect the academic engagement and performance of economically-disadvantaged and culturally-oppressed minorities in the United States public school system.

At that point in time, the Sixth Ward was a *barrio*. Mrs. Valdez remembered there were at least twenty countries represented in the '77 festival; however, she said, “this was predominantly at that time a Latino community, mostly Mexican-Americans and Mexicans.” It was the tangible presence of Mexican and *Chicano* culture that originally drew the El Paso native to the ward and it’s community. “My husband and I were drawn to that parish because they had a Mariachi band. We lived in the Southwest, in Bel-Air, which is a very gentrified area now,” a pattern among Houston’s *barrios*. “We read about this parish, and we were missing our culture. Our area was predominantly white. That’s how we got involved with this area and then we stayed.”

For many people, the Sixth Ward became a geography of cultural freedom and pride. The type of place where the community could hold a Mariachi mass. But the Ward had not always been a Mexican *barrio* at the heart of Houston. “There’s always been a lot of migration here,” says Valdez, who has witnessed changes through several decades of working with and for the Sixth Ward. She tells me to look out for the pictures on either side of the main stage in the basement of MECA’s building when I get a chance. “Those are photos of the community in 1914. It was predominantly a white neighborhood, but at some point Mexicans started moving in.” It will become clear later that the building played a role in that particular

demographic change.

Jose, the award-winning dance *maestro* gives me a short tour of the basement of MECA , as Alice makes sure everything is locked and turned off. I remember hearing during my process of establishing communication with Houston's Underground Library that Mrs. Valdez' work hours were basically 10:00 am to 10:00 pm daily. After getting to see the striking and colorful traditional dresses for the many dances taught at MECA, and getting a glimpse at the indoor stage that Mrs. Valdez had mentioned earlier, Alice comes back and offers to drive me home. As we leave the Ward she points at a dark park. "This is the park that we've been responsible for, for the last 26 or so years. We created this park and are responsible for it." Behind the park a small church building is visible. "We started here next to the parish in this little house, in the gazebo." It was Saint Joseph's, the Mariachi mass church.

While MECA taught many of its after-school classes out of the Dow building which we had just left, it operated as a program for 15 years out of the humble space I had just barely noticed in the darkness of the park. The space was open to MECA through the sponsorship of the Liberation Theology Jesuits who ran the church at the time. As for the park, it was the direct result of community work and talent channeled through MECA, one of the geographic legacies of the art school for the Sixth Ward. "In 1988 we created this park [as] a construction, architecture and engineering project for...students of ours." Leasing the park from the city helps with funding for the program, and to this day MECA still cares for it for the city of Houston. "It had been a dumping ground, an eye-sore, and we created this park with the students, supervisors, artists and professionals." This is the type of organization that MECA is and was, one of direct impacts both for its students, and its community.

Through the decades, MECA grew in size and scope, and the neighborhood continued

to experience changes. One of these changes stemmed from a change in church politics that led to MECA's departure from its original location. Father Rosales was replaced by a priest from New York "who didn't have a sense of Liberation Theology." The spaces of resistance that had been allowed to grow in the Sixth Ward suffered from the ideological shift away from the class oppression-conscious Liberation Theology. "We had all kinds of non-profits working in there [like MECA does now] and they ended up pushing us all out." This set the stage for MECA's move into the historic Dow building, a significant increase in space after decades in the "little house by the parish." The move gave MECA a greater scope as a program. Out of the heritage building, MECA is now able to offer culturally-centric arts education annually to an average of 3400 of Houston's Chican@ youth (pamphlet). Back in 1977, the program originally started with thirty students.

The Dow School has a rich history in Houston. It has long been central, both geographically and socially to the Sixth Ward. The school was built in 1912 to serve as a model educational building for the state of Texas (MECA 2015). Today, the Justin E. Dow Elementary School can be found on both the U.S. and Texas' registers of historic buildings. As a school, it belonged to the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Due in part to the large amount of rehabilitation work needed on the building, [which is still pending and hangs threateningly over the existence of the program with an estimated 6.1 million dollar cost] the HISD closed the elementary school in 1991. MECA moved in in 1993.

Mrs. Valdez tells me in passing that the school was purchased from the HISD and given to MECA by an organization called the Old Sixth Ward Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ). Subsequent research revealed the TIRZ is a mechanism available to municipalities in the state of Texas, aimed at subsidizing redevelopment and community improvement projects.

According to the city of Houston, once established, TIRZs enter into an agreement with the city by which “property taxes due to the city based on the current valuation of [a] zone [are] ‘frozen’ for the life of the zone” (City of Houston 2005). From that point forward tax revenue based on revaluation of property goes back to the community as it is all directed towards “public improvements within the zone” (*Ibid*).

The Old Sixth Ward and its community continues going through changes, today through a process of gentrification that started to displace the ward’s Chican@ community towards the end of the 2000s. On the ground, this now prevalent dynamic of urban movement by which former white-flight areas become gradually recolonized by wealthier Anglo-European Americans was visible as a patchwork of stately houses with top-brand vehicles in the drive ways, and small-to-medium bungalows, many in varying states of disrepair or abandonment. While TIRZs seem to be able to offset to a degree the negative economic effects of gentrification (namely revaluation of property rented by long-time, less wealthy residents), it is questionable whether the benefits of the reinvestments will be enjoyed by the communities being displaced, or if the fruits of the TIRZs’ efforts will be enjoyed largely by those who gentrified the areas in the first place.

The Old Sixth Ward is only one among at least two dozen areas awarded TIRZ status, but it presents an interesting example. Having purchased and donated the building to MECA back in 1993, the Sixth Ward TIRZ was able to provide what was at the time a largely Brown community with a large-capacity, non-profit, nationally recognized cultural institution run for and by local Chican@s. If the effects of gentrification were truly not felt in earnest in the Sixth Ward until the tail end of the millennium's first decade, then the TIRZ was successful in improving the living conditions of a low-income, minority population for at least a decade and a

half. It was, however, unable to prevent the economically-enforced rapid demographic change that is gentrification.

Today, due in large part to such urban dynamics, the youth that attend MECA come from as close as blocks away, and from as far away as hour-plus commutes from different *barrios* in the Houston and Greater Houston area. This has turned MECA, and the Dow School building into a significant cultural node connecting different Chican@ geographies in the city, but has also physically dispersed the community. But the role of the Dow School building as a place of Chican@ gathering and communion pre-dates MECA's move. Mrs. Valdez talks of how the school "was also used as a[n informal] community center." Once the Sixth Ward became primarily a Chican@ and Mexican barrio, the building attracted more Spanish-speakers. "A lot of Latino clubs would meet here, and eventually the area became a Latino neighborhood." MECA'S move into this culturally significant building didn't only bring to the program increased capacity to pursue its mandate, but it also cemented the art program's importance and visibility for the Chican@ community of Houston.

One thing that has not changed in the decades of MECA's involvement with the Chican@ and Latin@ communities of the Sixth Ward and Houston at large, is the organization's mandate. According to their literature, MECA is "committed to the healthy development of under-served youth and adults through arts and cultural programming, academic excellence, support services, and community building" (2014). The program was initially geared towards using traditional Mexican arts education to give a young at-risk community something to do, somewhere to be, and a sense of self, very much like South Tucson's John A. Valenzuela Youth Center. Parents I spoke to still seek this in the program, and the presence of several Day of the Dead *ofrendas* dedicated to youths as young as seventeen who lost their lives to gang violence.

Beyond the benefits of arts instruction, the academic needs of the community quickly forced themselves into the equation. “We were an arts organization that due to the needs of the community, we had to take on other roles,” explains Mrs. Valdez. “So we have support services: education support, scholarship, [we] prepare them for auditions [mostly for magnet arts high schools, but also college music departments].” At the moment, this is done with a range of 10-15 teachers, and a staff of “about seven full-time” employees, including Mrs. Valdez, and program coordinator Mrs. Salinas, who would talk to me about the school’s connection with the *Librotraficantes* and the Underground Library.

MECA’s number of teachers has decreased. Mrs. Valdez recounts that not long ago they employed at least 25 teachers at any given time. During my subsequent visits to MECA to spend time in the library I noticed that while all parts of the school’s mandate were being fulfilled, it took everyone playing several roles to achieve this. Front office staff doubled as academic tutors, for example. With an estimated cost of 6 million dollars in required renewals to the Dow building, the staff reductions make sense. “Our budget went to about \$800, 000 from about \$2 million, so a few of us are wearing many hats.” It has been a struggle to keep the program running with the large reach it has now, but they have managed to do it despite the funding changes that Mrs. Valdez attributes to the 2009 U.S. economic recession: “we have just been trying to stay alive for the last four or five years.” The future of MECA seems economically challenging. *Librotraficante* Tony Diaz, reflecting on the significance of MECA and its building to the Chican@ culture in Houston, lamented, “they need a lot of help.”

I interviewed the mother of a young student who gave some insights into why MECA is so dependent on donations. Given the art school’s non-profit status and its mandate to target the needs of ‘under-served’ youths, what comes into the program from student fees is minimal. “A

lot of parents will volunteer for their children to take classes here. Cleaning toilets, whatever is needed,” she said. I met the father of a student in the library who asked to remain anonymous. He was reading Barack Obama’s biography and had just finished two books from the Underground Library shelf. He expressed concern about the discrepancy between enrollment prices and the needs of the institution: “the classes are so cheap I don’t think they are enough.” He worries, because the positive effects of the school on his daughter and his family have been noticeable quickly. Maiaz, an outgoing mother whose young daughter was enrolled in traditional Mexican dance and visual arts, attributed the willingness of parents to pay either with limited monetary resources, or with their time and labour, to how transformative and valuable enrollment was for their children’s personal and academic lives.

A lot of this is attributed by Maiaz and other parents to active role-modeling, also mentioned by staff at the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center: at MECA there are violin teachers with doctorates and young staffers currently enrolled in college from the same neighborhoods as many of the students . MECA alumni stay connected to the program and provide stories of success through participation in the very programs that today’s students participate in, and out of social contexts very much like theirs. There are second and third generation students as well. Maiaz drives an average of an hour each way several times a week. As we wrap up our conversation and step out into a hallway, classes are letting out. The sense of community is clear as Maiaz relays messages to students about where their parents are waiting.

Along with exposing the children to the possibilities of higher education, academic tutoring is also an important reason for the parents to bring their children to MECA. As Maiaz reasons, with a little bit of help any of the kids around us could achieve at least a ‘C’ grade average: “A ‘C’ will get you into *some* college.” Doors open to a youth not used to having many

opportunities. Beyond an exposure to school there is also an exposure to culture for everyone involved with the program. MECA estimates that, counting family members, the school impacts the lives of over 5000 people annually. While many of the families that come have been able to overcome the socioeconomic constraints of growing up in the Brown *barrios* of Houston, many are still living the realities of the economic margins of the city. “A lot of the parents are *yarderos, y cosas asi* [yard workers and things like that].” The parents, *yarderos* and professionals alike, are enriched by exposure to the arts through MECA’s calendar. For example, the program put on 15 events throughout the school calendar year 2014-15. These included politically charged projects such as the ‘Children’s Prison Arts Project,’ and art performances celebrating the past and present of Chican@ art in Houston, such as a *Fiesta Guadalupana*, or the youth-written play ‘Speed Killed my Cousin.’

5.2 Cultural Pride, and the Chican@ Ark of the Covenant: MECA’s Underground Library

As I spent more and more time in the MECA building, I came to understand it as an important space of cultural resistance to the oppressive forces of displacement through gentrification, and to economic constraints on educational and cultural life. When I got to speak with MECA program coordinator Liz Salinas about how the Underground Library ended up as the centerpiece of the school’s library, I understood that it was most importantly a site of cultural resistance against the forces of erasure. Cultural erasure that Señora Salinas had experienced personally, that the students in Arizona were fighting against, and even the Sixth Ward as a geography was experiencing.

I met *Señora* Salinas as Liz, but during our interview she that her name was Esmeralda.

She had become Liz within a Texas educational system that prohibited the speaking of Spanish in schools and instilled in Mexican and Chican@ students a sense of cultural shame. It was the personal experience of this cultural oppression, of this erasure of cultural value, that Mrs. Salinas opened the doors of MECA's building widely for *Librotrafiante* organizers Tony, Liana, Bryan, and their 'stash' of books banned in Arizona. For *Señora* Salinas, much like for Mrs. Gloria in Tucson's Underground Library, the books had meaning beyond the ban in Tucson, and attained added meaning *because* of the ban in Tucson. Esmeralda spoke about the events in Arizona as ironic in the sense that, through the dynamic of White settlers taking offense at the history being taught in Tucson and trying to "hide the ugly parts of history", they were harkening back to those 'uglier' pasts by banning books and dismantling educational initiatives.

The so-called Chican@ Ark of the Covenant, the colorful and well-adorned shelf that is the physical incarnation of the Underground Library sits in a room that has been a library since the Dow building was an HISD elementary school. The room is used consistently during MECA class hours, mainly for waiting purposes: both parents and children dot the tables every afternoon as they prepare for class, or are there for a sibling or child. It is also used for tutoring. Every time I visit the library, there are folks, young and old, reading. Beyond the Underground Library books, the room is very well stocked with literature. The shelves cover three of the large room's four walls, and include by my count the following well-stocked categories: History, Politics, Health, Environment, Psychology, Science, Sociology, Music, Fiction, Reference, Teacher Resources, Photography, Mythologies, Biography, Self-help, Cooking, Sports, Non-Fiction, and a particularly plentiful (and well-used) Kids section.

There is a turn of phrase in the MECA mandate that is reproduced on all of their literature that captures the real reason why the Underground Library today has a permanent house in

Houston's Old Sixth Ward. The institution aims to help instill in its students a "sense of "discipline, self-esteem, and *cultural pride* [emphasis mine]" (MECA 2014). The sense of cultural pride is evident throughout the building, in particular during the last two weeks of October, the time of my visit. The *Dia de los Muertos* decorations drove home the point visually. Altars lined the walls of both the first and second floor main halls, each one about six-feet tall and two-feet wide. I interpreted the time, effort, and resources put into each altar as a testament to the significance of the community bonds created by participation in MECAs programs for the Chican@ and Mexican families converging here. I also interpreted it as a communal display of cultural pride, continuing the traditions of *ofrendas* for the dead that pre-date colonialism.

For a self-described "seasoned Chicana" like *Sra. Salinas*, whose education pre-dated the idea of Mexican-American Studies, whose brothers fought U.S. wars only to be denied the ability to vote based on their Mexican heritage, the ability to express cultural pride has significantly changed through her life journey. From the days when she had to cup her hands around her tacos in school from the shame that burdened Mexican heritage in the educational system, to her ability today as an elder to touch the lives of thousands of youths who will not suffer losing parts of themselves (like their names, or language, or cuisine) to the forces of cultural oppression in the United States.

Perhaps influenced by the ability to look back at her own personal experiences, and the defining times for Chican@s that she witnessed throughout her lifetime, *Sra. Salinas* framed the books that travelled with the *Librotraficantes* throughout the Southwest, the books that Arizona's political-educational machinery targeted for removal, were both record and embodiment of Chican@ history. That's why she saw the mission of the *Librotraficantes* as completely complementary to MECA's mandates and philosophy. Esmeralda's take on the books

echoed that of Jennifer, the Tucson MAS graduate and activist: for culturally-othered Chican@s, exposure to stories of people like them within a cultural structure that tries to erase them, is a very powerful thing.

MECA, an established, respected cultural institution aligned with Houston's *Librotraficantes*, established solidarity with the youth of Tucson's Unified School District who were suffering from what [on the surface] seemed like an anachronistic expression of cultural oppression. Esmeralda understood that the books had power in that they told what a former TUSD student called "Brown girl and Brown boy stories." Through the social significance given to published literature, and through the chronic underrepresentation of such stories in mainstream literature, access to them has a transformative power.

She also framed the books themselves, as objects, and record of Chican@ history. They served, in her mind, as a chronology of Mexican-American published thought that started with a trickle in the early second half of the twentieth century and has since grown exponentially. She knows that the right to write, the right to publish, and the right to validate the existence of a cultural identity through its representation in art had been earned through dogged resistance and against many forms of oppression. She saw the fact that there is today a Chican@ literary cannon to defend in the first place represents victorious steps in the intertwined, long struggles over Chican@ cultural and civil rights discussed in chapter 2.

Given their awareness of past and present struggles and their understanding of the positive effects on identity formation that relatable narratives have on youths, it was clear to Esmeralda and Mrs. Valdez that hosting the Underground Library could only enrich MECA's ability to aid in "the healthy development of under-served youth and adults through arts" (MECA 2014) and instill in its community a sense of cultural pride. After a couple of years in MECA, the

library has been woven into the organization and its community.

The Houston Underground Library was being used every time I visited MECA. Having visited the site close to a dozen times over a two-week period I calculate that on average, one Tucson MAS book is being read every day in Houston. In contrast to the JVYC, MECA's library is primarily used by adults, the student's parents, who often wait from 45 minutes to several hours (many parents have several children enrolled in different classes). One of the parents wanted to show me a book he read from the Underground Library, although he couldn't find it. We got to talking and figured out it was Rudy Acuña's *Occupied America*, both one of the literary building-blocks of Mexican-American Studies as an academic discipline, and one of the most divisive books during the Tucson MAS struggle. This particular parent was an avid reader with an interest in history.

The rest of the books I saw being read during my visits were all fiction like Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, and Dagoberto Gilb's short story collection *Woodcuts of Women*. Twice, I saw teenagers take their time exploring the shelf's books, pledges, messages of support for Tucson, and images of the struggle. As far as the younger users of the library room, they were kept occupied by the large Children's Literature section of MECA's shelves. Perhaps due to the economic circumstances of most MECA families, there was a disproportionate number of readers compared to people using technological devices. When I was finally able to talk to the *Librotraficantes*, they were happy to hear that the Underground Library was being well-used.

After a couple of years, the bright yellow shelf with the protest pictures, the reading pledges and the banned books is now part and parcel of the Dow Building, MECA, and it's mission with low income Chican@ families all over Houston. In a city that has recently experienced the breakup of Brown communities, MECA now stands in a rapidly gentrifying

neighborhood as a space of cultural resistance through which community is forged despite physical distance, and cultural pride is instilled by members who are conscious of the processes of erasure that American culture deploys towards its minorities along with the importance of cultivating cultural pride in the face of such conditions.

Houstonians talk to me of the local political trends as making them a ‘blue dot in a red state’, not unlike South Tucson. In the time since HB2281 was passed and consequently used against Tucson’s MAS, the Texas Chican@ community has been forced to organize and mobilize against more than one culturally oppressive bill attacking ethnic studies in the state university system (Hart 2013). Taking this context into consideration, I interpreted the Houston Underground Library as a space of cultural resistance imbued with symbolic significance. This is not to say that its symbolic significance is greater than the daily readings from the banned book shelves. It is not of larger importance either than the library’s ability to further MECA’s mandate of instilling cultural pride not only in its students, but also their family members.

The symbolic significance of Houston’s Underground Library is different from that held by South Tucson’s John A. Valenzuela Youth Center. The JVYC Underground Library serves its community as a reminder of what was taken away from them, and as symbolic embers to the fire of cultural resistance with which the area’s youth defended their education. It is a symbol of an immediate past that must not be forgotten, and of the work still to be done to recover what was lost. Meanwhile, Houston’s Underground Library serves symbolically as a warning of what could be a near future. Sitting in the heart of a long-established cultural gem of Chican@ Houston, a space of resistance from the forces of cultural erasure that marked the lives of its elders, MECA’s Underground Library is a reminder that those same forces have been shown to reemerge in Texan, Southern, and U.S. discourse time and again. The community must not only

sustain its cultural traditions, but be ready to defend them against an oppressive legal apparatus.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Spaces of Cultural Resistance and Geographies of Chican@ Belonging

The Underground Libraries are the outcome of an activist initiative aimed at re-establishing access to the Chican@ literature taken out of Tucson Unified School District classrooms. As such, they are entry points into an exploration of spaces of resistance aimed at combating culturally oppressive forces and historical erasures. Throughout this study, spaces of cultural resistance have been understood as geographies (whether physical or virtual) which craft, nourish, or welcome community resistance against cultural forms of oppression. The majority of spaces of cultural resistance explored during my research can also be considered cultural spaces of resistance. The main difference is that the latter encourage resistance from a space primarily focused on the study, preservation, and/or creation of culture.

This distinction is important. Cultural spaces of resistance highlight the power of artistic traditions in conserving, transferring, re-creating and exercising culture. On the other hand, spaces of resistance that do not fit under that rubric highlight that a cultural focus is not necessary for organizations to resist against culturally-targeted attacks. This greatly strengthens the latent power of any resistance against cultural erasure by acknowledging nodes of activism outside of the cultural realm.

In the one-mile-square city of South Tucson, a predominantly (if not completely) Chican@ geography, the JVYC hosts the Underground Library that successfully re-established access to books removed from the schools. The JVYC is a free-of-charge after school program that doubles as a community center and *liaison* between the community and the city. In Houston, home-base to the Chican@ literary activists who wrangled thousands of the banned titles from

across the country, the Underground Library is hosted by MECA, the symbolic and physical center of a former historical *barrio* now in the process of gentrification.

As spaces of cultural resistance, both MECA and the JVYC are unapologetically proud Chican@ geographies. In Houston, despite the rapidly changing demographic makeup of the Old Sixth Ward, Spanish was the main language spoken in MECA, and when I was introduced to an Anglo-European-American visual arts teacher during one of my Underground Library visits, she quickly and in an unprompted manner made light about being the only White person at MECA. In South Tucson, given the history and demographics of the tiny city along with cultural pride of the center's leadership, it was no surprise that both staff and youth were predominantly if not exclusively Brown.

I interpret the demographic makeup and the cultural environment hosted by these geographies as one aspect of the cultural resistance enacted from these places. Resistance against the forces of cultural assimilation and erasure that have plagued Chican@s since their (limited) inclusion into the U.S. territorial boundaries. One of the mothers at the Houston Underground Library said MECA provided a place to counterbalance her daughter's predominantly Anglo-European-American neighborhood and school, an environment in which the mother expressed a fear of her daughter "losing herself." It was the alienating nature of White-dominant spaces that drew Mrs. Valdez to the Old Sixth Ward in the first place, resulting in the birth of MECA. It was in order to further whiten the city of Tucson that South Tucson was removed from its fold, creating the set of conditions that today continue to plague South Tucson and led to the absolute necessity of a space like the John A. Valenzuela Youth Center.

6.1 Multiplication of Spaces

While the reach of the Underground Libraries does not compare to the reach of the dismantled MAS program that graduated several generations of Chican@ youth from a community suffering from low educational achievement, they both do achieve their goals and impact their communities. For this, the Underground Libraries have to thank the two well-established organizations that opened their doors to the *Librotraficantes*. Both the JVYC and MECA were spaces carved out of their respective local geographies by Chican@ community organizations pushing back against different oppressive forces. While the JVYC was demanded by the South Tucson community out of a justified fear for the physical safety of their youth, MECA was created to address juvenile delinquency and low educational attainment in what was then a Chican@ Old Sixth Ward neighborhood. Both are testaments to community organization and resistance so strong, that they were able to generate lasting physical spaces.

Both of these long-standing organizations point at a dynamic by which spaces of resistance not only become embodiments of the activism that created them, but they in turn facilitate the growth and advancement of other forms of resistance. While some of these might address temporal issues and thus dissipate eventually, others address constant concerns and are at times able to grow to the point of justifying and sustaining their own spaces of resistance.

This multiplication of spaces of resistance, very much in line with Pile's proposal that "resistance makes other spaces -other geographies- possible or impossible" (1997, 2) is exemplified in Houston through MECA itself: What started as an art program for thirty kids run out of a small house behind the local parish now occupies an entire city block and reaches over 5000 community members every year. Beyond out-growing its original host space, MECA has

reached the point at which it can itself host other organizations, like a *Chicana* immigration law firm active in immigration reform activism. In South Tucson, the JVYC has been the incubator space for the GED-granting *Las Artes* Arts and Education Center. Not unlike MECA, this program started as a small initiative utilizing Mexican tile-mosaic techniques and themes as a vehicle to address the educational struggles of the area. Beyond these newer spaces of cultural resistance borne out of pre-established ones, the park designed by MECA students and the *Las Artes* tile installations commissioned to brighten the South Tucson landscape are further examples of the geographical impacts of successful spaces of resistance in oppressed communities.

The Underground Libraries and the places that host them are all spaces carved out against different forms of oppression ranging from cultural, to economic and geographic, among others. This is not to discount the strength of the oppressive forces; it is worth noting that these spaces of resistance are continuously shaped by multiple oppressions as they strive to fulfill their mandates in climates of scarce funding and cultural tensions. Regardless, the ability to affect the physical makeup of their communities is a point of triumph for both MECA and the JVYC.

There is an interesting temporal pattern that emerges when looking at the different organizations involved with the *Librotraficante* effort to address the book ban in Arizona. The majority, if not all of the organizations able to create and sustain new spaces of resistance, new cracks in the matrix of oppressions facing the Chican@ community in the Southwest, are between thirty and forty years old. This suggests that the history of the ‘Long Fight’ has had its mark on the creation and multiplication of Chican@ spaces of cultural resistance.

These places, like MECA and San Antonio’s Guadalupe Cultural Center for example, represent the fruits of a significant point in time for Chican@s. These organizations, started from

the mid-seventies through the mid-eighties emerged out of the victories of the Chican@ civil rights *movimiento*, victories including the very theorization and implementation of Chican@ studies as a discipline. In this light, the Underground Libraries can be interpreted as a part of a new generation of spaces of cultural resistance. Through this temporal lens we can also understand the process by which spaces of cultural resistance multiply themselves. The different generations of spaces discussed in this study stand as a geographical chronology of Chican@ accomplishments, very much in the manner that *Señora Salinas* describes the books in the Houston Underground Library.

6.2 Beyond Networks: Imagined Geographies of Chican@ Belonging

Through the histories of both host institutions, it becomes evident that spaces of cultural resistance can function in an independent fashion, as stand alone initiatives for long periods of time. Through the symbiotic relationship between the Underground Libraries and their host spaces it is also evident that given certain conditions, stand-alone spaces of cultural resistance can function as nodes that may be weaved into an activist network across geographies. The idea of the Underground Libraries themselves as a network would be worth exploring but would require the ability to work the multiple sites that are spread out as far as Kentucky (Diaz 2013).

Within the confines of this study, the ability of Chican@ spaces of cultural resistance to form a network is evidenced by the one the *Librotraficantes* were able to tap into during their travels across the U.S. Southwest. In fact, the *Librotraficante* caravan's itinerary reads very much like the map of a Chican@ network of spaces of cultural resistance. *Traficante* Tony Diaz' interpreted their map of caravan stops as evidence of a Chican@ "literary legacy."

In order to accomplish the goals of the *Librotraficante* caravan, the initiative was aided

by a network of spaces of resistance that could be grouped into three categories. The majority of sites in the network that was activated in solidarity with Tucson's youth is comprised of Chicana@ cultural centers very much aligned with MECA's mission of community improvement through cultural pride and the arts. A smaller set of geographies of activism and resistance that hosted the caravan are focused mainly on labor/economic issues, yet still operate under the rubric of Chicana@-identified organizations. Finally, there is another subset of spaces that were crucial to the success of the *Librotraficante* initiative. These are mediatic and virtual spaces of cultural resistance.

The many cultural centers involved in the network activated by the *traficantes* range in size and capacity, but are all tied together by the drive to preserve and nurture Chicana@ culture. The smaller spaces are comprised by Houston's Casa Ramirez Folk Art Gallery, from where the caravan departed, and author Denise Chavez' Casa Camino Real, a hybrid bookstore and *Museo de la Gente* (People's Museum, a historical archive of Chicana@ literary history curated by Chavez) in Las Cruces, NM (Ellington 2015). Similar in size, but with a larger scope and mission was Sandra Cisneros' *La Casa Azul*, the small house in San Antonio out of which the author (celebrated in particular for her articulations of *Chicana* identity and whose *House on Mango Street* was boxed and put away by TUSD authorities) grew and nurtured a writer's workshop into what is now the multiple-grant provider Macondo Foundation for Chicana@ authors (Idealist).

Also in San Antonio, and bearing the most striking similarity to MECA, is the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Founded over three decades ago, the Guadalupe Center promotes "Latino, Chicano and Native American Arts" in the Texas city through its six-building campus in the historic Westside, anchored by the Guadalupe theater (Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center). The

center represents a space of Chican@ cultural resistance started by a group of artist-activists concerned that “cultural traditions were disappearing” (*Ibid*) The artists were successful in securing municipal funding, and thus another substantial Chican@ space of cultural resistance was created. Interestingly enough, through my research I became aware that the Macondo writer’s workshop born out of Sandra Cisneros’ kitchen has now grown so much, that it is hosted by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. This illustrates the pattern of spaces of resistance growing to a point at which they invariably become hosts for other initiatives. It also attests to the dynamic by which these spaces, tied by cultural identity, may be joined into a network when necessary for the advancement of the culture they actively preserve and create.

Another San Antonio foundation that opened its doors to the *Librotraficantes* is The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center which, “through artistic creation and cultural expression” (Esperanza Peace and Justice Center) aims at addressing cross-cultural barriers, as well as fostering community organization towards causes such as fracking and militarization (Goodman, 2014). Finally, the impressive network of cultural centers includes the imposing National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The large cultural compound, with its stylized Mayan pyramid architecture and world-class theater that took *Librotraficante* Liana’s breath away, represents the largest and most mainstream of the cultural spaces. It is fueled by successful capitalists (NHCC) rather than improvised communities; it self-identifies as ‘Hispanic’, a controversial term charged with asserting superiority to the European aspects of what I identify as Latin@ culture, while semantically erasing Indigenous, African, and even Asian contributions. Lastly, it is honorarily presided over by King Felipe VI the head of the colonialist Spanish royal family, a monarchy grossly enriched by the pillage of the very lands the center lies on, and the murder of many of its original inhabitants. Despite these seemingly

disparate political and cultural stances between the NHCC and the rest of the network, the Albuquerque institution opened its doors with warmth to the *Librotraficantes* and was a willing participant in a network of Chican@ cultural spaces actively resisting the oppressive conditions facing Arizona's youth.

In stark contrast to the NHCC's polished aesthetics and the ties with industry leaders, the only two non-culturally based organizations that participated in the *Librotraficante* network are related in their class-based mandates. San Antonio's Southwest Workers Union and El Paso's *Mercado Mayapan* both represent organizations that while proudly Brown, are concerned with the plight of the Chican@ worker. The *Mercado Mayapan* presents a very interesting case of a space of resistance, both cultural and class-based. It was conceived and realized by *La Mujer Obrera*, a *Chicana* worker's collective that was founded in order to address the oppressions caused by the U.S. garment' industry's move away from the Northeast and Midwest and into "cheaper and non-unionized regions," which included "foreign cities, but also Southwestern cities with large Mexican-origin work forces" (Zapata 2013).

The grassroots organization's focus turned from worker's rights to the need to actively create labor as NAFTA's implementation syphoned what was left of the industry in El Paso south of the border. It was to address the unemployment left in the wake of the free trade treaty that the organization was able to convert a 40,000-square-foot former garment plant into an economic center that includes "a local farmer's market, artisan booths, and a large stage for the performing arts" (Zapata 2013). It was here that the *Librotraficantes* held one of their successful 'Banned Book Bashes'. Sadly, since the *traficantes* went through town. *La Mujer Obrera* has since had to downscale the venture and has moved into what is now *Cafe Mayapan* (*Ibid*).

The final form of spaces of cultural resistance that participated in the *Librotraficante*

network, although in a more indirect manner, are mediatic and virtual spaces of resistance. These non-physical spaces are represented firstly by *Nuestra Palabra*, the weekly Latino-Lit radio show ran by the trio of activists that started the initiative. I interpret the show itself as a space from which Chican@ and Latin@ literary activism has been given room to develop and grow in exposure. In the tradition of many of the spaces here mentioned, it is hosted physically by a larger organization, Houston's Pacifica Radio affiliate KPDF and its firebombed and shot-at building from which the local arts and activist communities benefit greatly.

Beyond the airwaves, I identified two blogs that were crucial to the dissemination of information about the Tucson struggle throughout Chican@, Latin@ and Indigenous networks of independent, community-centered journalism. These virtual spaces of cultural resistance were the original source of information for *Librotraficante* Bryan Parras, and the spark of inspiration for the mobilization that shaped up as a caravan and left the Underground Libraries as legacies. These blogs are Brenda Norrell's *Censored News* blog, and Tucson's *Three Sonorans* blog. As detailed in chapter 3, Norrell's blog came as a response to continued censorship of her work on the *Indian Country Today* media network's website. Norrell had reported for the outlet since its print-paper origins. Also detailed in said chapter is the fact that D.A. Morales' *Three Sonorans* blogs was also effectively banned and removed from the *Tucson Citizen's* online collection of local blogs due to disagreements over the dismantling of Mexican American Studies with the editorial boards.

Given the mandates and philosophies behind the many different activists, cultural organizations and other geographies involved in this study, I believe that knowledge, awareness and experience of the historical struggles of Chican@s were conducive to the readiness with which all of these independent spaces and organizations united for a very localized cause outside

of their jurisdictions. However, I would like to complicate this idea and propose that, beyond an activist network, the coming together of geographies of resistance evidenced through the *Librotraficante* initiative also represents the active re-creation of an imagined geography of Aztlan, what Lee Bebout calls the Chicano movement's "Mythohistorical Intervention" (2011).

Aztlan entered the national Chican@ discourse in 1969 after the unveiling of the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* at the Chicano Youth Liberation conference in Denver. *The Plan* is a poetic and mystical manifesto that rallied the community around a mythical homeland for Chican@s named Aztlan and located across the U.S. Southwest [for more on the plan and the Denver conference see Chapter 2]. Bebout interprets the plan as a "response to U.S. psychological aggression" (*Ibid*, 2), and Aztlan as a "counternarrative, asserting historical precedence and cultural citizenship" (*Ibid*, 14). I would add that this was done not only in response to psychological aggression, but in the face of cultural erasure and denial of national belonging.

The mythological nationalism of the Chian@ movement and its enduring influence on the community today exemplifies the process of nations as imagined communities as proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983). The *Librotraficantes* and all of the spaces and allies that participated in the creation of the Underground Libraries were not dissuaded from organizing because of the localized impact of HB2281. As Tony Diaz would say on a few occasions, "it was personal." This should not discount the weariness of 'outsiders' that began to ferment in Tucson months after the *traficantes* had been welcomed by the community after the divisive effects 2012's 'Freedom Summer.' The coming together of communities and organizations across the Southwest (or Aztlan, depending on who you ask) and the resulting Underground Libraries represent an instance of active creation of imagined territory, what Arturo Escobar calls "the construction of region-territory" through the setting in motion of cultural politics on behalf of

social movements (2008).

6.3 The Underground Libraries as Symbols

I used the Underground Libraries of South Tucson and Houston as entry-points into an exploration of spaces of cultural resistance. During my research I came to understand these particular spaces as having a power expressed in their ability to both symbolize and actively create memory about the current stage of the historical long fight for Chican@ educational justice. Together, the libraries represent battles lost and won by different Chican@ communities. In the JVYC, the Underground Library functions as the symbolic embers to the fire of community resistance. They also warn of what the elders and (young) veterans of the long fight expressed as a cyclical aspect to the dynamic of cultural oppression and resistance by which the past can quickly become the present for those marginalized by the dominant Anglo-European society. This is the case for Houston's Underground Library, as Texas already attempted to defund ethnic studies in the state university system.

The libraries were helped into existence by a large network of Chican@ spaces of resistance which was rapidly activated through the effort of the *Librotraficantes*. This network represents the multiplication through generations of such spaces, and is bound together by awareness and experience of the trans-local and continual history of cultural, social, political and legal attacks against Chican@ education, sense of self, place in history and national belonging in the face of an exclusionary U.S. imaginary. Beyond a network, this collection of spaces can be seen as the active construction of region through cultural commonality, a resisting Aztlan.

Beyond the immediate goal of finding a way to re-establish free and safe access to the

MAS program literature for TUSD's youth, the Underground Libraries now also act as small spaces of resistance against the forces of cultural denial, erasure, and assimilation. Whether it be South Tucson youths 'borrowing' literature for more than a year, or culturally-proud working-class parents in Houston spending their spare hours with and amongst the banned tomes, the libraries create a small space through which the Chican@ canon removed from Tucson classrooms can continue to plant seeds of cultural identity, agency, and pride in their readers.

The long fight for Chican@ civil rights and cultural justice is not over. Former MAS student Maya Arce's judicial challenge of HB2281 has been extended and given a 2016 trial date after going before the 9th circuit court of appeals (Huicochea, 2015). During my time in Arizona, a Chican@ victory in Los Angeles making Ethnic Studies a requirement for graduation brought much joy to the Arizona MAS activists. However, as I craft these final words, California Governor Jerry Brown [back for another term after his virulently anti-Mexican, anti-immigration stint in Sacramento during the late Seventies and mid-80s] has vetoed a state bill calling on "the California Department of Education to form an advisory panel to develop the Ethnic Studies curriculum, which would then be approved by the state Board of Education and made available for local districts to adopt if they wished to do so" (Ceasar, 2015). In the face of this continued erasure from spaces of education, which greatly shape imaginaries of national belongings, the Underground Libraries and the network of spaces of cultural resistance that helped bring them into existence signal that the Chican@ community is well aware of the state of affairs, and ready to continue resisting.

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