

## PROYECTO CARRITO

# When The Student Receives an "A" and The Worker Gets Fired: Disrupting the Unequal Political Economy of Translingual Rhetorical Mobility

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## KEYWORDS

immigration, latin america, workers, janitors, translingual

## A NOTE ON INTERACTIVE FORM

We and the journal editors have designed this article as a hybrid of academic essay and multi-media narrative that combines written-word, video, song, photographs, 3-D renders and an interactive blog. Each of these elements are equally important dimensions of the narrative and mutually inform each other. This format invites readers to read in multiple ways and orders. For example, some people might read the written word text from top to bottom first and then click on the links to various multi-media dimensions. Others might read each item in order as it appears on the page, written word text, video clips, songs and images. Still others might want to read the multi-media blog first to see our context and then read this article which analyzes it. Please feel free to leave a video or written-word comment on our Proyecto Carrito blog. <http://proyectocarritoblog.mobility17.com/>

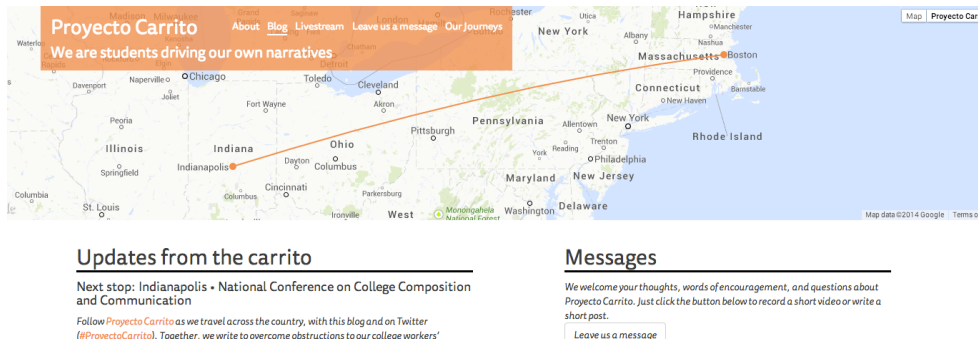


Fig. 1. See <http://mobility17.com/proyecto-carrito/donate/> for more information.

I think that all of this anti-immigrant movement has a lot to do with the education our children receive in school.

—Mario Osorio, *Emerson College Maintenance Worker*<sup>1</sup>

What does this have to do with Emerson College?

—*Editor of The Berkeley Beacon, Emerson College Student Newspaper on why he rejected our proposal to publish maintenance workers' writing.*

If I could change the world, I would change \_\_\_\_\_. *Proyecto Carrito* began, though we did not know it yet, with this prompt in our English-Language-Learning (ELL) writing class. It was Fall 2011, the second year that Tamera Marko and Eric Sepenoski were co-teaching this class at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> All of the students in this class were Emerson College maintenance workers (janitorial staff). All of them came to the United States because war, violence and poverty forced them to flee their homes in Latin America and seek a better life for themselves and their families. They range in age from 35 years old to 68 years old and have been working at Emerson cleaning toilets and dorms and shoveling snow for eight to twenty three years. To first come to the United States, most of them crossed three borders—on foot. Some crossed the final border between Latin America and the United States lying down with four or five others crammed in the trunks of cars. One man in our writing class, upon reaching his third international border, just minutes from crossing into the United States, was robbed of all his money and clothes. Naked in the street, he nearly died until a stranger took him into her house and lent him clothes and her phone to call his family back in his home country for help. A

woman in our writing class, now a mother of five children, also has a story of border-crossing violence and resilience. She and her mother and father had decided it would be best for her and her family if she would flee war and hunger in their home country and make a living in the United States. She



Fig. 2. Students for Rhetorical Mobility class in early planning stages for Proyecto Carrito. Conference room: Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Emerson College. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

was seventeen years old. She left her newborn baby behind with her mother until she could arrange to send for her. Upon crossing the desert on foot with a small group, the guide (a *coyote*) withheld food and water from her because she refused to have sexual relations with him. She found a piece of plastic in the sand and with this survived by drinking her own breast milk. Though they communicated through telephone calls, she and her mother never saw each other in person again. By the time she was able to return to her home village, her mother had been killed.

Mario Osorio, a student in our class, after five years of working closely together on immigrant rights to education in general, has just begun to tell us a few details of his own journey from his home in El Salvador to the United States. He has become the most prolific writer in our class. He brought in an essay he had written by hand. His essay proposed:

If I could change the world, I too would pass immigration reform for all immigrants who live in the United States. This reform would honor this beautiful country's family values by passing and enforcing a law that would keep immigrant families together so we can avoid all the suffering we are enduring, especially the most defenseless among us: our children.

As we can see in many media reports in the last several days, our children are suffering the most from the recent Alabama anti-immigrant bill HB-56<sup>3</sup> that a Federal Judge approved part of two weeks ago. Many terrified Hispanics have hidden themselves in their homes or have fled Alabama, a state where K-12 schools have reported high levels of absenteeism since HB-56 passed. This is because as part of this law, children are now required to present legal documentation of resident status of themselves and of their parents. Children who cannot prove their resident status can be detained by the police, and via deportation, children can be separated from their families. Many parents have signed documents granting permission from friends and other family members to care for their children should they be arrested or deported. Other Alabama residents are worried because their services to water might be cut off (Osorio, "WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY?" 1).

Mario also brought into class the Spanish language Boston newspaper *El Planeta*, which had published an article in its October 14-20, 2011 issue quoting an Alabama resident and mother of two little girls. This mother said that since the passing of HB-56, "Each time I leave [my home] I don't know if I will return. I can't stop working. My children need shoes and other things" (2). The title of this article, translated



Fig. 3. Students for Rhetorical Mobility Class at Emerson College. Photo by Tamera Marko.

into English, was “Demonizing Immigrants.”

On the cover of this publication is a picture of a little Latina girl holding a sign that says “Remember Robert Bentley, I am American like you and your grandchildren.” When Mario stopped reading, the eight class members seated around the table were silent, many with tears in their eyes. Then we erupted in applause. A year before, Mario had always come to class but without having done any of the writing homework. For a small book we published of our writing that year, Mario wrote no more than two sentences:

I have a very interesting story. Someday I will write it all down. Right now, I just want to dedicate this to my child. (Osorio, *English Conversation* 23)

Mario's classmates all congratulated him on doing the writing and research and expressed their amazement at how poetic and articulate his writing was. Mario then asked if this essay represented the class members' perspectives and what, if anything, would *we* add? Immediately the class came alive with conversation. In the last three years when Mario, Tamera or Eric present these points at academic conferences, many audience members there, usually academics, ask hard questions about why Mario chose to focus so heavily on “U.S. ‘family values’”? Why focus so much on “making the United States a ‘stronger country’”? Why not get angrier at the United States? Why not challenge the hypocrisy of U.S. “family values.”? Mario and immigrant workers on our panels explain that for them the chance to give their family a better life is the only reason they left everything behind to come to the United States. Mario also pointed out it was his strategy to “safely” protest the law. Mario in particular sees this rhetoric of family in his texts as “fighting fire with fire.” This is the same strategy the immigrant writers in our class say they often use to gently protest anti-immigrant sentiment and law in general. That is, they focus on something they believe all of us have in common and can care about, regardless of our politics and country of birth: protecting our children from harm and being separated from their parents. That day in class after Mario read the first essay he had written in his life, we filled two white boards full of ideas about how to change the world by changing our College. Specifically, a theme emerged—we sought to change our College in ways that would provide a more inclusive and humane twenty-first-century education. The worker writers in the room identified what they all agreed were the three most important changes we could implement as employees, students, parents, and teachers at Emerson:

1. Be more united among Latin@s<sup>4</sup> and Latin Americans.
2. Cultivate desire to learn about Latin Americans' culture, histories, and immigration contexts.
3. Say good morning to us. (Mario, “WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY? 2)

The last request is a deep and serious one. The immigrant writers often wrote about how the small moments in their daily lives working at Emerson College pained them because it was as if they were ghosts, *fantasmas*, cleaning the walls. They said they felt that way because people did not talk to them or look at them in elevators, in the hallways, in the bathrooms. This is very different than Latin American culture, in which a face-to-face greeting of hello is the minimum of respect for another human being, no matter their institutional status. This greeting is expected in the contexts in which the immigrants come from and in the Latin@ neighborhoods in Boston where

they now live. Tamera proposed that we revise Mario's essay into a group editorial (from Mario and our class members) and submit it for publication to the Emerson College student newspaper *The Berkeley Beacon*. When we submitted our final revision for consideration, we were told by the *Beacon* section editor that he did not understand "what this article has to do with Emerson."



Tamera Marko <seasalt17@gmail.com>

## Beacon Opinion Article Submission

1 message

tmako <tamera\_marko@emerson.edu>

Wed, Nov 9, 2011 at 1:54 P

To: [REDACTED]

Cc: Ernesto Osorio <ernesto\_osorio@emerson.edu>

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for talking with me a few minutes ago by phone about this Opinion piece we have attached to this email for your consideration. In ways similar to Occupy Boston, this Opinion article subject has strong and powerfully current connections with Emerson College in three main ways. 1) This piece is written by Emerson College staff members of the Facilities Department (maintenance workers) from Latin America. 2) Boston has the second largest number of Latin Americans and Latinos/as in any city in the United States. 3) This is one of the first public responses directly from Latin Americans in the Emerson College community directly affected by one of the most brutal anti-immigration laws just passed in large part in the state of Alabama. This law reverberates throughout the Latin American and Latino/a community in Boston and throughout the United States. Many of our Latin American and Latina/o Emerson College students, in fact, are impacted by this law. We are hearing about this law throughout Emerson College campus, in hallways, elevators, student lounges etc.

Fig. 4. Email from Tamera Marko to an editor at the Emerson College newspaper *The Berkeley Beacon*.

The *Beacon* never published our editorial. The week we submitted our piece, an editorial written by the same editor who rejected our submission, was published. It was a full-page spread on the Occupy Movement and the tent city set up in Boston. There was no question in any of our class members' minds that an article about the Occupy Movement should be published. What baffled us, however, is why the Latin American immigrant maintenance workers cleaning the toilets at Emerson College, where this newspaper's editors and staff members are also students and residents, did not count in their minds as part of the 99 percent who could share space and voice on his editorial page? The maintenance workers are certainly not part of the wealthy one percent. Again, this then resulted in the workers feeling invisible, ghosts, *fantasmas*. This story is one example of how some students find it difficult to see the people cleaning their toilets at College as potential teachers, let alone relevant to their daily lives as students. It also reveals ways that, to some members of the College, these maintenance workers' expertise, knowledge, and artistic production is invisible. This example also reveals ways that blockages in circulation of workers' stories, particularly stories of immigrant workers within the same College as students, faculty, and staff, reinforces and reproduces this invisibility. In our fifth year of class together, we have come to realize that the maintenance workers are indeed the teachers in this scenario and the undergraduates who are a core part of our group actively seek them out for advice on research projects about immigration but also in terms of life issues, like how to navigate the emotional pain of a financial crisis or losing a grandmother. It is because of our creative and pedagogical work and human relationships with each other and



the blockage of the publication of our writing about them that we came to call our class a collective and go by a new name: *Students for Rhetorical Mobility*. One member of our collective, Andrea Gordillo, who graduated last June and is now working for immigrant women's rights in El Paso, Texas, regularly signs off her emails with: "in peace, love and rhetorical mobility." Andrea Skypes into our Students for Rhetorical Mobility class every week and is an active part of our editorial board.

## FROM REJECTION TO A COMMUNITY

In the United States, maintenance workers are seen as ignorant, without any kind of education. For that reason we are invisible in their eyes. But they are wrong because many of us have a certain level of academic education. Some of us were professionals in our home countries, but for having immigrated and not knowing the language fluently, it is harder for us to develop our abilities. I personally believe that we all have the same abilities regardless of where we come from. But all of these difficulties don't matter to us, not as long as our families are well. (Mario Osorio, "Conference" 4)

At first, this student newspaper rejection devastated the Maintenance worker students in our class, especially Mario, who did not write another word for our class for another year and a half. As a teacher, I agonized over whether I had made a mistake in pushing our class to submit for publication. For a few weeks, our class morale floundered and I thought maybe some of the members might give up and leave our group. Then, a fundamental shift happened in the pedagogical approach and community membership of our class. The workers suggested we invite some undergraduate students to be part of our class. They knew that the undergraduates needed to know their stories, they needed to understand why they had to immigrate and why they chose to stay in their maintenance worker jobs in the United States, so far from their other country's loved ones and cultural roots. They knew Tamera was teaching translingual research writing classes to first-year students. They knew these classes required students to apply to be in the class and thus, choose its theme: immigration issues and perspectives in twenty first-century education. In the class, which has an official bilingual (Spanish-English) designation appearing on student transcripts, students focus mostly on immigration in the Americas. Tamera, reluctantly at first, agreed to invite a few undergraduates into the maintenance worker class. Tamera's concern, which she kept private to herself at first, was that the morale of the immigrant worker writer class might be further hurt by students' (understandable but real) inability to understand what was at stake with this class in terms of trust, commitment, and risk of a new kind of worker-student classroom space. It would require a depth and intensity of student engagement in texts, flesh and blood people, and issues unfolding in real time in ways that many of these young undergraduates might never have experienced in school. At first, it seemed that Tamera's concerns had been accurate. During the first fifteen minutes of the first class with the undergraduates and workers together, the tension in the room was palpable. The workers, usually lively and talkative in every class period, lowered their eyes and went silent the second the undergraduates walked into the room. This is partly because they had been trained to do this when cleaning dorms and bathrooms of the students. This was also because, as each worker later said when we debriefed about

this first meeting, the maintenance workers felt intimidated because they “did not have education” or “speak English well” like these undergraduates. They felt, in that moment, that the “real” students had arrived. Suddenly, Maria spoke. She is the eldest in our group. She herself had left her three young children behind in her home country and over the years, working two full time jobs cleaning, brought each one of them to the United States and is now a grandmother of six and surrounded by her family. Maria looked around the room and said in gentle voice, “I have been working here for 23 years. But, in all my time here, I attend your graduations. Each time I see one of you walk across that stage to receive your diploma, I feel so proud because I know that although I just clean your toilets, in some small way, I am part of your success too.” She cried as she said it and nearly everyone in the class cried too. Since this first student-worker encounter in our class, Tamera learned she could not have been more wrong about doubting the possibilities of consciousness and learning that could come from integrating (carefully selected) undergraduates with workers. A year later, Maria finally told us that nearly three decades ago she herself had graduated from university and had been a pharmacist in her home country.

## TOWARD A THEORY OF LABOR ACTIVISM AS STORY-TELLING

Our class has grown to include the same core group of seven workers and a core group of fifteen undergraduates, all of them no longer receiving course credit and attending our class even when they transfer to other Colleges or even graduate. This semester we have a new worker student who turns out to be from the same island in the Philippines as one of our undergraduate students’ grandfathers. These two students excitedly talked, in that now little spoken island dialect, about catching fish with their hands. Last semester three students remained in our class via Skype: one had graduated and was working for immigrant women’s rights in El Paso, Texas, another was in study abroad in Barcelona, Spain, and another was finishing her master’s degree and teaching in immigrant bilingual education in California. We have become a community inside the institution and one that transcends it. A Colombian artist, Marcia Cecilia Cardona Gaviria (Ceci), who had come to exhibit her work at Emerson College in 2011 through a project that Tamera founded,<sup>5</sup> has since graduated from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Medellín and wrote a grant to fund an artist residency in 2015 to work as a photographer and documentary filmmaker with our collective and Proyecto Carrito in Boston. She is motivated to work with Proyecto Carrito because she herself understands the invisibility workers can feel. In Colombia, her parents lived in a small town without much access to university education. So her parents made the painful decision to allow her to go live in the city of Medellín to study. She understands deeply the tension and sacrifice that comes with leaving, temporarily, at least geographically, sacred family roots to get an education. She also understands being forced to survive by doing low-paid jobs, including cleaning, in a context in which, to some extent, she has been invisible to those for whom she works. Ceci since has dedicated her art to working with story tellers whose stories are often not told, and rarely in their own words and images. She has worked with women who raise families on a former city trash dump and indigenous groups in the *Selva Pacífica*

(Jungle inland from the Pacific Coast) to map how *they* see their own surroundings, what they need and how they think they might meet those needs. She especially focuses on collaborating with people to tell their stories in the context of place and their experiences and feelings in those places (towns, countries, homes, rivers, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

The undergraduates become so invested in the maintenance class, they showed up all semester long and did several class research projects about it, including field research on janitorial English classes at Harvard. Our class has extended into the fabric of our College and daily lives, on and off campus. We eat lunch together, undergraduates attend church services with the workers, and we have dinners at each other's homes. When the undergraduate's suffer the death of a grandparent, they seek out the workers in our class, who are their elders and are adept at moving through loss. We text each other immediately when we learn of one of our members' pain and within minutes mobilize with messages of support. At each encounter, our consciousness deepens. It has taken each of us years of coming together and writing together to realize that developing consciousness is a core dimension of what we are actually doing. Tamera often internally struggled because we are not changing the unequal structural and material conditions of worker-student: we are not unionizing, bargaining for higher wages, or striking for workers to have a more equitable access to university resources. But, the workers in the class did not want to change the(ir) world this way.

There are four main reasons that the workers did not wish to fight for unionization or go on strike. First, they have already lived through so much war and violence that they do not wish to engage in more such struggle. Second, they know first-hand from their families, neighbors, and friends that one of the first things that happens when immigrant workers go on strike is that their family members might be inspected by government officials regarding their documentation that proves their legal status in the United States. In other words, one worker's, undergraduate's, or faculty member's activism can put at risk the deportation of several of the worker's family members, friends and co-workers. Third, the workers in our collective believe they have better salaries and working conditions than their counterparts at other local universities and colleges. Finally, many of them are close to retirement age and are putting their children and grandchildren through college in the United States. They say *this* work for their children—who to them are the future for all of us, immigrant and U.S.-born—is their activism.

This tension between what we consider the next activist step is a regular part of our class discussion and our projects. It is precisely this tension that reveals ways in which immigrant rights are (usually unintentionally) institutionalized much differently than student rights. In other words, access to educational institutional resources is drastically different for undergraduates versus the immigrant maintenance workers. To check out books at the library, to attend a conference, to enroll in a class all involve a series of processes that are considered a right for the undergraduates and often involve painfully difficult bureaucratic processes for the workers to acquire special permission. For example, when our panel was accepted to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (a National Writing Studies Academic Conference), we discussed how to navigate the faculty, undergraduate, and worker time off to attend. For faculty members and students, this was considered part of our professional development and even funded. The workers



had to choose to take vacation days off work and negotiate tensions with their bosses who then had to hire a replacement for those days or ask another worker to pick up the extra labor. One student said, “What if the undergraduates who stay behind clean the bathrooms while you are away giving a conference?” Immediately the workers’ vehemently declined the offer, saying “this work is not for you.” When a student proposed this to an administrator, he said, “Oh no! What would happen if the Board of Trustees or the parents hear that they are paying thousands of dollars for their kid to clean toilets! And they [the students] might get a disease!” When we recounted the response as we gathered together for class, we looked around the room blinking at each other. The border clearly bleeds into our classroom and the College as a whole.

This is precisely why we as a class decided to begin writing down our perspectives about immigration and inclusive twenty first-century education, starting with our own stories of immigration and education. It is also why we decided to auto-publish this writing. Throughout our years as students, workers, faculty and administrators working and socializing together we realized that what we had collectively done as a class, we wanted to duplicate in the larger arena of our classrooms, dorm rooms, faculty meetings, and professional conferences. That is, we wanted to widen and deepen a perspective in the ongoing and increasingly intense conversation at educational institutions nationwide about immigration and inclusive education. Furthermore, we want this perspective to be informed by and told through the stories of the immigrants who have among the most firsthand expertise with this subject: the immigrants working, often as janitors, inside the school itself. Many of these workers also have children who are now going to elementary schools and universities in the United States and who have benefited (or not) by laws, policies, and stereotypes regarding immigration, including the Dream Act, affirmative action policies, deportation and documentation issues. In the language of academic ethnographic research or documentary work, the maintenance workers at many universities, including Emerson, are insightful storytellers, anthropological “informants,” and rich case studies. This is why we are now writing our auto-ethnographies in historical, socio-political, economic, and institutional contexts.

We have also realized that our writing—which we all agree we want to do—is activist. By this, we mean that our writing is actually changing the structural and material conditions in which our group of faculty, undergraduates, and students form relationships with each other, off and on campus. Furthermore, this slowly but consistently deepens our consciousness about ways we are all involved in immigration issues. By carefully building and sustaining true relationships with each other over years, our work together extends beyond the institutional semester class structure of beginnings and endings and subsequent relational ruptures (such as summer, winter, and spring breaks). Telling and listening to each other’s stories has, literally, changed our lives. Sandra Lorenzano writes about this kind of complex rhetorical exchange in terms of “dialogue.” She writes:

If “another” is the chief of gifts, if it is what gives real meaning to existence, then dialogue is privilege, shared creation, the desire and possibility of inventing a universe with another, without giving up one’s own physiognomy; it is responsibility and at the same time play, reflection and provocation. In dialogue we are what is given: we give ourselves to ourselves and to each other, in order to show to others that we are here, that that they

interest us, that we need them.

Dialogue allows us to discover what makes us similar, but also what sets us apart. It is the supreme challenge of our capacity to accept, where **tension** and **contradictions**, **agreements** and **differences** are resolved in a **double gaze**, in a **common quest**. (2)



Fig. 5. Sharing dinner and stories between undergraduates and workers. This is in Maria Portillo's home in East Boston where her husband shared stories from his family album documenting his life in his home Latin American country. Photo by Tamera Marko.

In the case of our class, we have come to see our process as not just a “double gaze,” but rather a *prismatic gaze*. This sustained gaze, simultaneously inspiring and painful, allows us to see each other eye to eye—as workers, students, faculty and higher ranking staff—and face the constant tension of the drastic differences in our material conditions and institutional status at the same College, in the same city, in the same world. It is not in spite of this tension that our prismatic gaze is

necessary, it is *because* of this tension that we remain dedicated to each other and finding a way to articulate and circulate our stories to make our community's material conditions and social and institutional status more equitable. For us to be able to write together, we had to know each other. For this, we had to listen to and deeply contemplate each other's stories. Because of the differences in our material conditions and institutional statuses and through listening to each other's stories, we have also had to face another uncomfortable difference: how articulating and circulating our stories impacts us. First, there is a drastically unequal level of risk. Those most deeply impacted by violence and immigration take the most risks and receive the least benefits from sharing their stories about it. Second, in this context of unequal risk and circulation access, the storyteller's displacement from her own story of displacement poses the greatest challenge to grounding our project in research as academic contribution *and* activist social justice. In essence, we are seeking to disrupt *double desplazamiento*, double displacement. That is, when the storyteller becomes displaced from her own story of displacement.<sup>7</sup> We have to grapple with the reality in our case, that when an undergraduate student writes the workers' stories, the student author is often celebrated and receives an “A” grade. When a worker writes about his own story, however, he risks losing his job and in extreme cases, even being deported. He is not enrolled in any class and so a grade or other kind of academic recognition for his experience, perspective, and writing about it does not exist.

Through this process, we have come to realize and articulate three core pedagogical dispositions and practices.

1. First and foremost, we are writers writing. Undergraduate and faculty writers collaborate with maintenance worker writers. The undergraduates and faculty do this not in terms of social welfare, but in terms of bilateral collaboration on a writing project.
2. As students, faculty and workers, we come face-to-face, engage in a sustained prismatic gaze regarding ways that stereotypes and “worker invisibility” operate and how that impacts all of us as human beings.
3. We wrestle with a constant tension: What happens when two groups of students collaborate on a writing project about social justice and their writing gets inspected at the border between “undergraduates” and “workers” and between perceptions of being a “real class” versus “NOT a real class”? How do we negotiate the fact that for the same piece of writing, the undergraduate student receives an “A” grade, and the worker risks being fired? This is the **political economy of rhetorical mobility** our writing class seeks to name and disrupt.



Fig. 6. Mario Osorio and Bianca Padro in a peer review revision workshop. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

## PROYECTO CARRITO: FROM ONE VAN TO A 50-VAN CARAVAN

However, I think that all of this anti-immigrant movement has a lot to do with the education our children receive in school. Thus, if I could change the world, I would revise the educational system to adapt to the era in which we are living. If we adapt to technological advances day by day, why not also adapt to the reality of immigration that is a core part of our country's economic, social, political and cultural life force? ("WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY? 1)

We realized that for our stories to truly be seen, we have to overcome core rhetorical blockages. Immigration and immigrant rights, including the Dream Act and other issues of access to resources regardless of documentation, are a daily part of the United States media, politics, and school systems. Audiences not intimately affected by these issues are likely to have become saturated by this subject and begin to tune it out. Also, the workers make risks by publically sharing their stories and revealing that they have spent work time they are supposed to be cleaning, doing so. Finally, there is the issue of labor invisibility among some students, faculty, and staff in the same campus community. We knew we had to not only write about our work differently. We also had to inspire audiences to engage with our writing differently, too. It is in this spirit and rhetorical conditions that *Proyecto Carrito* was born. Our goal is to put into writing and rhetorical mobility what Mario describes here.

I would try to implement new curriculum whose purpose would be to give young people all the tools they need to survive in harmony and *compañerismo*, solidarity, in their community, independent of their nationalities. In this way, our educational system could inculcate respect for human life by granting more respect to parents' ability and rights to educate their children.

I think it is important for people to understand that we, the immigrants, are not the enemy. It is our own mind that, through history, has been manipulated with false information, making us seem like the reason why everything goes wrong in this country. However, certain studies confirmed by experts in the field of immigration policy show that immigrants contribute in a positive way to our society. It is important to change those myths that have no proof, that overshadow the spirit of the people who contribute to this country. This is a country that was built by immigrants. This is where we see the connection that it has with the education that we receive in our schools, because the children of we, the immigrants, are American, just like everyone else. (*Conference 2*)

In our effort to inspire people to read our words and engage with our stories, perspectives, and proposals for a more inclusive twenty first-century education, we knew we had to move our stories outside of the realm of traditional academic rhetoric where our submissions were being rejected or where our publications inspired fleeting attention. These traditional rhetorical spaces included the school newspaper and other publications, course syllabi and readings, and even academic articles. We decided we needed to disrupt worker invisibility by literally keeping the storyteller with her own story. We also decided we needed, literally, to drive our own narrative. So, we decided to wrap

a car, from roof to rim with texts we curated from the 500 written word, image, sound, and video documents we had produced over the last several years. Just weeks before we were due to appear at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, one of the workers in our class, Ramiro Soto, offered to donate his family's mini-van for our project. Then, eight of us—faculty, students and workers—drove 1,800 miles across country from Boston to Indianapolis to and from the conference in this van-text.

## PROYECTO CARRITO



### A TRANSLINGUAL INTERGENERATIONAL EXHIBIT BOSTON SPRING 2013

Fig. 7. Initial render for Proyecto Carrito by Michael Sepenoski

Our *Carrito* is a text. Our *Carrito* is also our mechanism of circulation. The car is also a literal representation of mobility. Many workers crossed the U.S. border hidden in trunks of cars. So, the car becomes a textual elephant in the room. Not just figuratively, but literally. It is an aesthetic and three-dimensional spatial form of disruption of the ways that the workers' writing and their identities as writers circulate at Emerson College. We also wanted to literally embody (by traveling in a van) the idea of a storyteller crossing borders—in this case institutional and academic conference borders—with their stories.

We decided that the text we curated on the van would focus on a theme of both immigrant struggles with education and also resilience. To frame the tone and theme of our van text, we published Mario's story on one of the doors:

The reason why I decided to immigrate to the United States was to give my family and myself a better future, and thanks to this decision, today my family has food on the table. And that makes me feel proud that I made the right decision. I think I am like any other immigrant,

an example of sacrifice and courage because it is very hard to leave behind everything you love: your family, friends, some of us leave wives and kids, friends and family members that many times we will never see again, because for different situations, they die in our absence, and even knowing that we can lose our own lives in the journey, it all requires a lot of valor knowing that we come to an unfamiliar country with a different culture and no one to give you a friendly hand. But thanks to God, I can say it was worth it. (Students for Rhetorical Mobility)

The workers also wanted to be sure the tone we included was one of joy and even love. Tone has become a dominant theme in our writing workshops in which the immigrants insist they want to tell their hard stories of suffering with love and that love is part of the perspective they wish to express. When I ask them what they mean by “love” in this context, Maria Portillo wrote this, which we also published on the van:

What I think I brought with me was the joy of knowing that I would be able to give a better future to my three children who I had left when I came here. I also brought with me pain, knowing that I had left my mother, to whom I thought I would say a final goodbye to because I knew I would never be able to see again. It was a big decision to make. One, I could stay where I lived or starve. Or two, I could also die on the road. It was a nightmare that journey, but nevertheless a journey of triumph that was worth taking. Regarding my story, I would say that the most important thing in life is not what or how much you have suffered ... but what you do and what you can still do. (Students for Rhetorical Mobility)

The undergraduates also wanted to emphasize that the workers are their teachers by writing what they have learned from them in the process of our class. One student wrote:

And that is what you have taught me. The stories of your lives are an inspiration. They have made me see that neither the language I speak, nor a document in my hands make me the citizen of a country. It is the humanity, the efforts, the *ganas*, the humility and the sacrifices that make you a citizen. That they give you the right of sharing the soul of this country and the values that it was founded on. (Students for Rhetorical Mobility)

Finally, we published on the van large photographs of ourselves as community and as writers. So when we piled out of the van, passersby and audiences would connect the stories we published on the van with us as the storytellers.

As our project evolves and we drive our *Carrito* to other conferences and exhibitions and school presentations to which we have been invited through the United States, we are coming to realize that the way journalists and students are writing about Proyecto Carrito is also different from traditional journalistic and academic practices. Our most recent surprise was that Proyecto Carrito is now circulating transnationally. In July 2014, Tamera and Ryan Catalani were teaching a translingual writing class in Medellín, Colombia at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The second week of class, a man appeared in the doorway of the classroom. It turns out his daughter was a student at the Nacional and she had told him about the class where Tamera had shared the video about Proyecto Carrito at the 4Cs conference. This man, who introduced himself to us as Señor Rodrigo Zuluaga Jiménez, told us he was immediately inspired by it because he drives a taxi with a concept he created



called: “Taxi de la Felicidad” or “Taxi of Happiness.”<sup>8</sup> He created this as a way to build moments of happiness into everyday interactions between people in his city of Medellín that had, in 1992, once been considered the most dangerous city in the world, based on the number of homicides per year.



Fig. 8. Workers and undergraduate writers in Students for Rhetorical Mobility class map out our 1,800-mile route to and from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

Tamera invited him to come tell our class about his work and what he thought of Proyecto Carrito. He opened his bag and pulled out a full-color picture of our van. He had found this image on our website, printed it out and laminated it. He now carries the image with him everywhere.

Zuluaga Jiménez asked if he might make his own Proyecto Carrito with the taxi he drives in Medellín. He also asked if he could ask the small fleet of taxi drivers he works with if they also want to wrap their vans with Proyecto Carrito-like messages. Specifically, Zuluaga Jiménez asked to reprint our Proyecto Carrito poster on *his* taxi, in a public show of transnational solidarity. He also wanted to wrap his taxi, roof to rim, with his own ideas about why his Taxi of Happiness concept is important to him in the context of his city where people live through violence. To this end, he also asked to include what some of his customers have written in the comment books he carries in his car at all times. Zuluaga Jiménez described his proposal in this way:

In solidarity with Proyecto Carrito, which I see as in solidarity with my Taxi of Happiness, happiness is revolutionary, too. Daring to be happy, even in the most brutal and violent circumstances is sometimes the best way to get people to see you as a person and then help you do what you need to do. We do not just suffer from a crisis of poverty or violence. We suffer from a crisis of perspective. (Personal interview)

In the span of three weeks since we returned from presenting at the 4Cs conference, young people, mostly students, have published more than six articles about us. Our audience has expanded outside the academic academy and includes Kevin, who owns *We Wrap Boston*, the commercial company that wraps logos for companies on buses, cars and trains. Considering this business name in another context—a rhetorical re-vision of the stories we tell and circulate throughout the streets

of Boston about immigration and education—could be a very powerful shift in the political climate.



Fig. 9. The founder of Taxis de La Felicidad, Rodrigo Zuluaga Jiménez, is in the blue shirt holding up the color picture of the van. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

These articles are in the form of multi-media online mixes of written word, video, photograph, and sound. More than once, actually publishing their articles in these forms required them to seek editors' permission to override the traditional rhetorical structure in which their respective publications had been designed. Probably our most innovative form of publication design and circulation has been a series of tweets that an

Emerson professor, Angela Cooke-Jackson, published in real-time as Tamera was giving a presentation of *Proyecto Carrito* in her classroom. Ryan Catalani, a few minutes after serendipitously seeing the tweets about the talk he did not know was happening, curated the tweets in combination with images and video he possessed in his own archive. Ryan then published his curated series in a new online multi-media story form called Storify.



Fig. 10. Video of Kevin Bergin, as he wraps the van with text and images, reflecting on why he believes the Proyecto Carrito is important. Video by Ryan Catalani. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy2bB2UEx1w>



Fig. 11. The Storify series of curated tweets and images and the complete video of Mario's 4Cs speech circulated in dozens of classrooms at Emerson, all within days. By Ryan Catalani. <https://storify.com/ryancatalani/markotamera-at-drcookejackson-s-health-and-narrati>



Fig. 12. Video of Mario's Speech (the point of this Proyecto Carrito journey). Video by Ryan Catalani. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACboL6UZxLE>

What remains to be seen is the final result of all of this. Will writing in this new way and asking readers to engage with our texts in a new way translate into genuine change that helps create more equitable material conditions and social and institutional status between students, faculty, staff, and workers all at the same College and in the same city? So far, what Proyecto Carrito has accomplished, itself possible because of nearly five years of community forged from our community writing class with undergraduate and worker students, is a series of packaged texts that we can show to administrators and others. This, in turn, helps us inspire people to include these same undergraduate, faculty and, most innovatively, janitorial workers at the table. By this, we mean that members of the janitorial staff who are part of Proyecto Carrito are now on committees regarding Human Resources,

Admissions, and making Emerson College a Dream School. This, it seems to us, is a major step toward creating campus conditions to build a more equitable campus. To embrace as a College the



Fig. 13. Behind the scenes short documenting Proyecto Carrito. Video by Ryan Catalani. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8uk\\_IxhBLk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8uk_IxhBLk)

objective of working for immigrant rights requires not only engaging in the admission and retention of immigrant students. It also requires listening to and enabling the dreams of the immigrants who have been working and living among us in the same campus for decades.



Fig. 14. Movement in support of the Dream Act. Tremont Street in downtown Boston, a few blocks away from Emerson College. Photo by Tamera Marko.



## COMPOSITION, RHETORICAL ACTIVISM AND INSTITUTIONS

Through Proyecto Carrito, we seek to circulate our stories to strategic target audiences through what Tamera calls *rhetorical inflection points*. That is, places where dominant narratives about anti- and pro-immigration and education happen. Proyecto Carrito then seeks for the circulation of our stories and our story tellers and our audiences to engage in a strategic intervention in this rhetorical flow in specific spaces: academia, activist rallies in the community, online venues, and, literally, on the road. We have received dozens of phone calls and emails asking about how we did Proyecto Carrito. So, now we are in the process of creating an advisory board that consists of workers, undergraduates, faculty, and administrators to create a call for applications from schools and other institutions who want to make their own Proyecto Carrito. In February 2015, we will publish a call for applications for schools, institutions, and groups nationwide to apply to make a Proyecto Carrito and join our 50-Van Caravan. In 2016, we will drive this caravan from Boston, across the country and then cross the Tijuana-San Diego border. The theme of this Caravan of cars-as-text is possibilities for immigration and inclusion in twenty-first-century education in the United States. To participate, there are only two requirements: (1) Each group must apply, explaining how they plan to collaborate with immigrant workers, young people, and elders in their institution to write the texts for their Carrito. In schools, this will most likely mean a collaboration between janitors, students, teachers, and administrators. (2) Before they wrap their vehicle with their texts, they must submit to our board their final design. If we approve the final design, then they become part of our Caravan.

We believe that perhaps of all the academic disciplines in the U.S. academy, Composition, Writing Studies and Rhetoric have the most potential to ally and partner with Mario's description of a more inclusive and accurate twenty-first-century education. This is because these disciplines work with undergraduates who, in this moment, have a lot of power inside their respective colleges and universities. It is because composition and rhetoric studies have a history of fighting to include students from diverse backgrounds, and many programs emphasize teaching students how to write their way into power, academic or otherwise. There are powerful parallels between this and what John Trimbur and others refer to as "the birth of Modern Composition" in the 1960s, when in 1969 Black and Puerto Rican students shut down the campus of CUNY City College and issued these demands:

1. An admissions policy that would guarantee that the first year class at City College reflected the racial composition of NYC public high school graduates;
2. A separate first year orientation program for Black and Puerto Rican students;
3. A student voice in governance, and in hiring and firing faculty in the SEEK Program;
4. Immediate establishment of Black and Puerto Rican Studies to be housed in an autonomous School of Third World Studies, and;
5. Requiring all education majors to study the Spanish language and to take courses in Black and Puerto Rican history (Trimbur 4-5).

As Trimbur's work points out, it was in this above context that what he calls the birth of modern composition happened. That is, many faculty members teaching composition and writing in general had to begin grappling seriously with what meaningful writing from diverse populations looks like and how to incorporate more voices, including those in writing, into the university contexts. On one hand, the fact that our Proyecto Carrito was welcomed in writing studies in Emerson College's First Year Writing Program reveals an openness to this kind of inclusiveness. On the other hand, the fact that we had to work so hard to come together as writers and have to focus on what inclusion of the workers as writers might look like and why it is important for twenty first-century education, reveals how far we still are from reaching some of those 1960s Open University proposals for more inclusion.

We find it striking that the content of Mario's talk at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in March 2014 resonates so strongly (in terms of inclusion of those of other races, countries, and languages within the educational system) with what students spoke about at CUNY City College in New York in 1969, nearly half a century ago. Our approach to circulating our ideas, however, is much different than that of the CUNY context. The CUNY students organized a public protest and took over an administrative building. Proyecto Carrito chose to use public performance art at a National Conference as a form of protest and proposal. We did not seek to disrupt the conference, but rather, to be an integral part of it. To do so we did find we had to temporarily "take over" some parking spaces in the four-star conference hotel parking lot where we brought a group of faculty and student audience members for a few hours of a scheduled panel discussion. This was only so we could keep the van (the story-text) with the speaker (the story teller). Being in the presence of the van and not just seeing photos or a video of it was, we believed, essential to a deeper audience understanding of what we were saying and doing. What Proyecto Carrito members believe is at stake is also similar to what the CUNY students might have argued. As Mario said in his talk at this 2014 National Conference:

All of our children will be the future mayors, governors, congressmen and women of our country. If they are not intellectually prepared with the education they received to face the future challenges of our country, then the United States would not move forward.

This is why I think we should change the education system by implementing new subjects that give our children a more responsible way of understanding the reason why people immigrate.

They should be taught the truth in a dignified and respectful way, so they can better understand the *convivencia* between people of all nationalities, and the importance of diversity for the growth of this country.

We need to recover our humanity that for the moment we have lost.

In conclusion, I want to say that we have the power to change the world, our country, our cities, our neighborhoods. But first, we need to change our minds. (*Conference 2*)





Fig. 15. Mario Osorio in our Students for Rhetorical Mobility class after delivering his first practice of the talk he gave at the Conference for College Composition and Communication in Indianapolis. Photo by Ryan Catalani.



Fig. 16. Sandrayati Fay, an undergraduate in our Students for Rhetorical Mobility class and the songwriter and singer who wrote the original music for our Proyecto Carrito videos, “blesses” our van with joy minutes before we begin our 1,800-mile round trip journey to the Conference for College Composition and Communication. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY?” 1.

<sup>2</sup> This class is supported by the following entities at Emerson College: the First Year Writing Program, the Facilities Management Department, the Department of Writing, Literature and Publishing, the Office of Service Learning and Community Action, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, the Elma Lewis Center for Civic Engagement, and the Office of the Dean for the School of the Arts. We wish to give a special note of gratitude to two people at Emerson College, who in the last two years since they have come to this College, have especially facilitated Proyecto Carrito to soar: Dr. Sylvia Spears, Vice President for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and Emerson College President Dr. Lee Pelton.

<sup>3</sup> The Alabama state legislature passed a controversial new immigration bill on June 9, 2011 that requires public schools to check students’ immigration status, criminalizes giving an undocumented immigrant a ride, requires employers to use E-Verify to check potential employees’ status, and instructs police to check the immigration status of anyone they stop if they suspect the person of being an undocumented immigrant. See full Act in State of Alabama.

<sup>4</sup> In Spanish, the masculine term is used when there is one man present in any group of people. This is true regardless of whether there are 100 men and one woman or 1,000 women and one man. Yet, the “o” in “Latino” literally only refers to men, as in mankind instead of humankind. To include both women and men in the word “Latino,” we use the now commonly used term among academics, journalists and activists: Latin@. (This “@” denotes both women and men).

<sup>5</sup> This project is called Proyecto Boston Medellín (PBM). Tamera choreographs transnational collaborations among writers in her classes at Emerson College, Duke University, the Punahoe School in Honolulu and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Medellín doing the kinds of translingual writing necessary for storytellers to cross borders with their stories to engage in person with diverse audiences. PBM focuses on working with story tellers, primarily artists and community leaders, who have the least access to cross borders but who, through their lived experience and education, have the most to teach us about some of our most pressing twenty-first-century local and global crises and possible solutions to them. See <http://mobility17.com/pbm/pbmd-2013/> and <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6jG7cKdVAGcHfFuYVM5bzAtN2tGU3k2b01nbTRzUURoMT hF/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>6</sup> For her specific community art projects and her work with Proyecto Carrito specifically, see her portfolio <http://www.mariaceciliacardona.me/>.

<sup>7</sup> I have written about this theory of *double displacement* elsewhere. See Marko, “Doble Desplazamiento” and Marko, “We Too Built The City of Medellín.” This article about Proyecto Carrito is the first time I link the immigrant workers from Latin America in the United States as part of this *doble desplazamiento* spectrum.

<sup>8</sup> For more about Rodrigo Zuluaga Jiménez’s “Taxi de la Felicidad,” see the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4---ApAM6k>

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