
Bringing a Burden to Bear: Resistance to Colonial Power in the Writing Classroom

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As a woman of color who is a teacher of writing, I carry the weight of Victor Villanueva's call in "On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism" to write frankly, sympathetically about matters concerning racism and about what matters to students of color ("On the Rhetoric" 358). Some days this burden, this compulsion, feels heavy, laden with complexity, complicity, and connections. I am a third-generation Filipina from Guåhan who has taught rhetoric and composition on a US territory that is my island home and in the US on both the West and East coasts. In these multiple contexts, I have considered my position as a multiply marginalized scholar teaching within vastly different spaces—in the colonial legacies of US unincorporated status, with a minority majority student population; in rural, land-grant, and predominantly White state schools on the West coast; and on a private urban campus in one of the original US colonies. I think deeply about my responsibilities, my complicity, and what it means to carry this weight, truly, across America, in order to confront the complexity of what "America" is.

Because of this burden, this compulsion, this responsibility, I looked to Indigenous and Amerindian rhetorics for language to articulate how the colonial condition relates to my own life and teaching across these geographic and ideological spaces of America. I am struck most by how this burden is configured through various historical moments in the Americas, how this legacy of burden is manifested and articulated, and how this burden affects how I teach in the American classroom. As Ellen Cushman affirms in her monumental work "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," I am particularly interested in the "need to take into our accounts of social change the ways in which people use language and literacy to challenge and alter the circumstances of daily life" (12). I am hopeful the languages and literacies within colonial systems can be used

Abstract

In this essay, I consider my position as a multiply marginalized scholar teaching within vastly different spaces—in a neo-colonized island territory of the US with a minority majority student population; then to rural, land grant, and predominantly White institutions on the West coast; to a private urban campus in one of the original US colonies. I think deeply about my responsibilities, my complicity, and what it means to carry this weight, truly, across America, in order to confront the complexity of what "America" is alongside my students. To address this complexity of contexts, I look to the ways Amerindian and American Indigenous rhetorics bear against colonial injustice through language.

Keywords

colonialism, global identity, multilingual rhetorics,

critically to both challenge and create. Damián Baca, in “*te-ixtli*: The ‘Other Face’ of the Americas,” explores how these rhetorical strategies are due to the burden of cultural resistance to colonial power (2). In turn, what do these rhetoricians bring to bear on history, on rhetorical theory, and on writing pedagogy? Indigenous and Amerindian rhetorics can be read in ways that reveal how this burden propels each rhetorician toward action and how this burden reveals interrogations of place, identity, and community. Christa J. Olson and Rubén Casas, in “Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s *Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* and the Practice of Rhetorical Theory in Colonial Peru,” put it succinctly: “[A]ll attempts at persuasion within the colonial context must clamor for something it cannot provide: a remedy for the endemic violence of colonialism” (473). Indigenous and Amerindian rhetorics, while burdened by colonialism, bring that burden toward some semblance of remedy, bring it to bear on colonial power in a multitude of shifting contexts.

An historical figure within Indigenous and Amerindian rhetorics who is quite striking to me is Guaman Poma. His story is a vivid example of the act of carrying this burden and bringing it to bear on an audience; he walked hundreds of miles sometime in 1615, carrying his 1,200-page *Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno*, a fully theorized transcultural colonial communication of the Americas, to deliver it to colonial authorities in Lima (Olson and Casas 459-60). Olson and Casas argue that the point of Guaman Poma’s rhetorical action was not to persuade those in power but to prove the necessity of the argument even within the impossibility of “questioned status, recalcitrant audience, imperfect forms, and almost certain failure” (478). Olson and Casas nevertheless claim that this “recursive act of making and repeating the argument is the fundamental work of rhetoric” (478), and something as “fundamental” is certainly not “failure.” Guaman Poma carried the burden because it was both inevitable and necessary; his act of carrying and bringing is what he thought might carry out change.

When I read Guaman Poma’s story—his imbrication within a colonial regime; his displacement due to colonial forces; the vulnerabilities of his community; his language and literacy affording him degrees of privilege and authority, as well as opportunities for resistance; his skepticism of this privilege and his own complicity in perpetuating colonial systems of oppression—so much of it resonated with my experiences. Like Guaman Poma, I too have traveled. My own communities are vulnerable. I, too, have a burden. Yet I wonder what I bring to this conversation and even what credibility I carry. When I come into the classroom, I feel the weight of the responsibility. I read my syllabi and assignments and look at the language, considering how my teaching of rhetoric and writing is less about forcing students to complete learning objectives and more about looking at how our work together within the classroom forces us to consider the inequities that bear upon how we think about and use language, and perhaps even to consider how our work acts as a force to resist unfair, oppressive power structures. I also consider my complicity in maintaining and sustaining these

power structures, even in my attempts to confront them. I do this in a variety of ways, but in my first-year and multilingual classes, I ask the students to use their own language to “define America” in order to define their positions and literacies within it.

The fact that I come from an unincorporated territory and that my claiming of it as home, despite being Filipina, is an acknowledgment that generational complicity in the violences of colonial settlerism is never far from my mind or heart. “Where are you really from?” “What is Guam? Is that America?” “Do you have a visa?” “How is your English so good?” “What makes you think you can teach me English?” The answers are just as complicated as my thoughts and feelings about these questions that are both heard and felt. I think of my own vulnerabilities, limited energies, and stretched capacities that make more tiresome the burden of responsibility to enact the types of changes and movement I want to see in the reading, teaching, and applications of English in composition classrooms. How can I teach a language that was used to subjugate the Filipino people of my ancestry and justify their oppression? How can I uphold the knowledges of imperialism that continue to colonize my own people and Indigenous peoples all over the world? How can I even work within a system that has historically seen people like me as different, deficient, and less deserving? This work is complex, requiring me to think deeply about the different rhetorical practices that interplay in the expression of who I am, where I come from, and what I do. I remain critical of who is speaking, what is being spoken, for whom, and at whose expense. Moreover, how can I effectively and ethically guide students in doing the same? How can I allow students to see for themselves that learning a colonial tongue is for the purpose of delinking and dismantling colonial systems, rather than a measure indicative of the linguistic differences and disadvantages that they have been disciplined to believe? Then, there is the complexity of thinking through issues of inequality alongside students who come with their own burdens that look different and do not have the same weight as my own. What lands and waters have they crossed? How much do they carry? How is this burden expressed in their languages and literacies? What empires do they want to confront? Because I am a Filipina from Guåhan, living through the legacies of Spanish imperialism and US imperialism are burdens I share with Indigenous and Amerindian rhetoricians. Together we acknowledge that Guaman Poma is not alone in this responsibility of speaking and acting.

The burden of Guaman Poma and contemporary Indigenous and Amerindian rhetoricians attests to the lasting effects of colonialism on how cultures confront, collide, and communicate within and across borders. Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, portrays the burden as tension of the borderland experience, gripping those within like a virus with ambivalence, unrest, and death (4). This tension prompts her desire for “an accounting with all three cultures,” and she in turn brings this burden to bear by claiming that if denied, she will construct her own space and culture in *una cultura mestiza* (22). Anzaldúa expresses the

complications of cultural collision, of bringing multiple burdens together and sharing the weight of pain. She also carries agency and insistence in her colonial condition within her borderlands. While she admits that the clash of cultural voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity, insecurity, and indecisiveness, she also says the result is a restlessness—one that is not disempowered but that sustains contradictions and is compelled to turn the ambivalence into something else (78-79). I know from my own experiences, however, that borders are not just geographical; they are also ideological. In “Indigenous Environmental Perspectives: Challenging the Oceanic Security State,” Tiara Na’puti and Sylvia Frain discuss how discursive representations of Oceanic borders, such as “ocean nation,” “archipelagic state,” and “Insular Pacific America,” rhetorically function to territorialize the ocean, impose colonial concepts of *terra nullius*, or empty land, and use the language of manifest destiny to convey that the oceans, cultures, ecosystems, and peoples of the Pacific are empty space for the United States’ possession (115).

My identity as a colonial settler often speaks to how I move through and manage issues of erasure in the spaces, places, and languages I inhabit, including those within the writing classroom. Moving beyond representation, I think of how reading writers of color must move beyond simply including and instead must involve challenging the linguistic and ideological mechanisms that wish to sustain silencing and erasure. Ralph Cintron’s *Angels’ Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday* is epideictic rhetoric that still bears the burden of responding to a lack of visibility. Cintron’s treatise uses writing as one of many kinds of attempts to come into consciousness or self-consciousness, to interrupt, shape, and map these *topoi* before they are externally interrupted and a shape is imposed (231). Cintron displays the ways the Mexican Americans of Angels’ Town create “respect under conditions of little or no respect” through their daily speech and actions, countering the invisibility with real, palpable narratives of colonial resistance. In this way, Cintron brings the Mexican American “rhetorics of the everyday” to bear on the consciousness of people who do not see or acknowledge them. When consciousness and self-consciousness are combined with solidarity, new shapes are formed. In “Ti Siña Ma Funas Ham: Shapes of CHamoru Erasure in Guam,” Kenneth Gofigan Kuper describes community writing work I did with my organization, Filipinos for Guåhan, as the type of rhetoric wherein change takes shape: “When I first heard this particular program, I knew there was something special about it . . . non-CHamorus being completely comfortable imagining a future for the island that does not neatly fit within the political family of ‘America’” (215). Kuper affirms that critical conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are “respectful responsibilities [that] need to continue, and to be amplified and multiplied.” While the collective burden is heavy, we can begin to see how it can be shouldered in solidarity and community. Getting people to see is Karma R. Chávez’s burden in *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*, as they carry the load of the predominant form of LGBTQ politics being profoundly normative

and inclusionary in aim (6) and endeavors to reveal the interlocking oppressions of LGBTQ individuals who must speak against several systems of power at once (98). Chávez brings queer migration politics to bear on LGBT politics by challenging normative, inclusionary perspectives at the intersection of queer rights, immigration rights, and justice (6). Differences are then used as resources, and activists draw these resources together toward building rhetorical imaginaries and possibilities of livable lives (9). Just as these works inform how I see language and literacy as holding the burdens of the colonial condition, writing classrooms and community practices can uphold the responsibilities of respectful communication, connect our understanding of cultural resistance to real lived experiences, and bear out the complexity of colonial power working historically in and through language.

These rhetorics and the kind of work in self, in communities, and in classrooms that they inspire illustrate Donald C. Bryant’s definition of rhetoric as “the function of adjusting ideas to people and of people to ideas,” with the act of rhetoric as a coming to, a bringing to, a relating to, and a mobilizing (413). While the ideas have been shaped by colonial power, through these rhetorics, colonial power is confronted with new shapes and new ideas. I think of Guaman Poma and his bold staging of confronting King Philip, which he illustrates in *Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (Olson and Casas 472). In one hand he is holding his words, his ideas, his burden. With the other, he points, recounts, instructs, even condemns the colonial power that caused this burden to be. His posture, while seemingly reverent, positions him directly in front of the colonial power, facing the King, seeing him face to face. At the same time, Guaman Poma’s own face, his desperation, his indignation, his *te-ixtli*—face of the Other—stares unflinchingly right back at the colonial power, to be clearly seen. This posture is memorialized in and through his manuscript. As a scholar and teacher, I am also struck by how his responsibilities are held within his two hands: his responsibility to write in one hand and his responsibilities to teach in the other. This is a posture I hold as my own, and we stand as a challenge to an uncertain future and are resolute in response to silence and erasure. We both see “colonial exchanges as symbolic action with world-making intentions . . . negotiating, usurping, and reimagining the power of colonial discourse, but also theoriz[ing] rhetoric by conceiving the possibilities for symbolic action within colonial contexts” (Olson and Casas 460). The rhetorical strength is in the interplay, the bringing, the moving, and the holding fast. Together, though we bear this burden as the result of colonialism, we bear it out in and through our languages and literacies to expose it. This bearing is an act of resilience, showing the ability to not just endure but to overcome.

This all bears out Villanueva’s assertion that we must break from the colonial mindset and recognize there is worth in learning from these thinkers of our own hemisphere (“On the Rhetorics” 659), such as in my own defining of “America” as I have carried the writing of my community across its borders of land and ocean. Breaking from colonial discourse entails interrogating the attitudes

that we revere and that are woven into the discourse we inherit (Villanueva, "On the Rhetorics" 362). If "breaking away from an ideology begins with words" (Villanueva, "Lecture: September 28"), then what place holds more possibility and promise for engagement with words that will break colonialist ideology than the rhetoric and writing classroom? This engagement moves beyond ensuring students are simply exposed to texts and discourses of different cultures. Engagement means actually helping students to see the ways these cultures speak in order to be heard so students, particularly those of color, are not themselves silenced: "We teach students to notice racism by allowing them to look at other places [to] allow them to see patterns of what is happening" (Villanueva, "Lecture: September 28"). This is how they question what the burden is, how it is shouldered, and what it reveals about cultural resistance to colonial power. This is how they begin to craft language that responds to and challenges power in a variety of contexts. By guiding students to engage with rhetorics across the Americas, writing teachers can cultivate a critical consciousness that invites students to see how a burden is brought to bear and also to question, "Why do we bear it, and how long should we have to?" This critical consciousness brings a new perspective, a new lens that examines the multiplicities of rhetorical practices and reveals the competing yet inextricable histories from which these rhetorics emerge. Students can begin to see, as Baca in "Rhetoric, Interrupted: *La Malinche* and *Nepantlisma*" explains, the "multiple histories and memories coexisting" within rhetorics that emerge from the Americas but do not follow the Western trajectory. Maybe students can then begin to surmise and imagine an America that is more dynamic, more pluriversal, more connected, more complex, and therefore full of possibilities. The need to persist against oppression, I believe, matters to students of color, who are affected by the lasting legacies of colonialism. They bring this burden to the classroom along with them, as I bring my own. Teaching these rhetorics to confront ideas of "America" brings students to experience more fully the magnitude and responsibilities of this burden, to witness the potentials this burden lays bare, and, most importantly, to imagine futures their burdens reveal and bear out.

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