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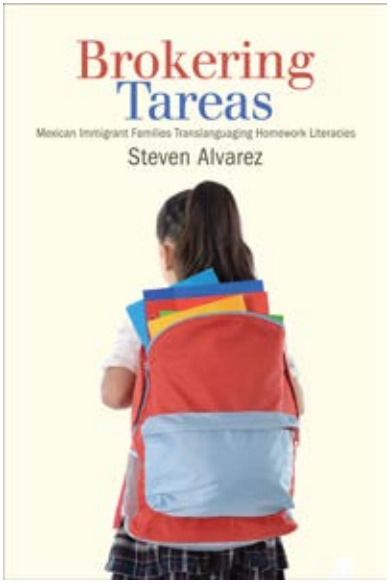
Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies

Steven Alvarez
State U of New York P, 2017. 182 pp.



Reviewed by Adele Leon
University of Arizona

When I teach students the genre of the literacy narrative, my favorite part—no matter what—is that moment when I can see it click for students that they possess their own unique forms of literacy. In that moment the special way they talk to their siblings, their parents, or their favorite auntie becomes more meaningful to them, and they get to write about it. I have been thinking about and teaching literacy as a method of communication that is dictated by the members of one's community, but Steven Alvarez's *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies* delves into the deep-rooted creation and expression of literacies through a translingual ethnography of the Mexican American Network of Students (MANOS). Before it consolidated with the New York City Mexican Youth Educational Foundation (NYCMY) and eventually closed, MANOS was a grassroots after-school program created to offer Mexican migrant and immigrant families in New York City access to homework help through volunteer mentors and a close-knit community wherein families could come together in a safe environment as a home-away-from-home. Throughout his time both mentoring and researching at MANOS, Alvarez became a part of the Foraker Street community—a big brother to the mentees, a confidant and advocate to parents, and a role model to the mentors.

Readers of *Brokering Tareas* will learn how translanguaging events, *superación*, and the immigrant bargain function for Mexican American students in U.S. education systems and at home. To gain a more concrete understanding of the lived experiences of child literacy brokers, it is important to recognize that the immigrant bargain is rooted in fluid power dynamics that are constantly negotiated between members of migrant families. One part of the immigrant bargain that contributes to the complicated identity constructs within migrant families is the concept of *superación* and how it changes generationally. Migrant parents' academic expectations for their immigrant children, and those children's negotiations of their own identities complicate each family's immigrant bargains. Within the context of MANOS and his

study, Alvarez defines the immigrant bargain as "a negotiation of bilingual learning, power, and identity" that all MANOS members go through (xxiii). Furthermore, the immigrant bargain is negotiated through feelings of guilt associated with how migrant and immigrant individuals' identities are created. *Superación* is the narrative of motivation, and it is enacted in many ways, some of which might seem illogical to the observer who has not become familiar with or respectful of the immigrant bargain. Alvarez explains *superación* as "literally, to surpass one's current state," and in its verb form translates into English as "a motivational work ethic narrative recognizable among immigrant families" (xvi). Thus, we can conceptualize *superación* as a culturally-specific sense of motivation to succeed beyond one's present state. Additionally, a translanguaging event is "a dynamic bridge-building action and practice—it is agency and bilingual repertoires enacted" (45). Translanguaging events occur when a bilingual immigrant, usually a child literacy broker, uses knowledge of Spanish and English to interpret and share information.

Blending both Spanish and English to introduce these concepts, *Brokering Tareas* creates an immediate emotional investment, for the reader, in the nine MANOS families at the heart of Alvarez's ethnography. This move illustrates what Carmen Kynard attributes to race-radical literacies, when she explains that such intellectual work "nest[s] with an assumption that you are working toward liberation such that your sole audience isn't whiteness, white teachers, white standards, white economies, but marginalized communities" (523). Alvarez did not write this book for the academy, he wrote it for people whose actions speak with the community so their words don't have to. For the people who seek new methods of community building and intellectual growth, this book offers honest insight. The book also could not have been better timed. With the current attacks on DACA and all things immigration, critical educators and researchers can use this book as another resource to help in the fight against systematic oppression and xenophobia. Key concepts are explained to readers in the introduction of *Brokering Tareas* that will supplement the ways we can empathize with and support students to navigate through the U.S. education system and their immigrant bargains.

The first part of the book establishes the historical and contextual information that guided Alvarez's study. Chapter one begins, as many do in this book, with a short story about one of the MANOS families, Linda Fernández and her daughter Alma, with an image of Alma's handwritten notes to visually supplement the emotive story. Continuing on, Alvarez broadens the scope of the narrative to MANOS's location within New York, and elaborates on the families and mentors he got to know over six years of volunteering and researching there. After leading readers through a detailed description of MANOS and its members, Alvarez discloses some of the more shocking details he discovered in his initial investigation into the Mexican-origin population of New York City. Through his research, Alvarez quickly saw a deficit-oriented mentality inscribed on the immigrant families he befriended at MANOS, and versions of this type of oppression were continuously recirculated in the rhetoric surrounding immigrant school children's success in public schools. Alvarez cites one *New York Times* article as an example that claimed a staggering 41% drop-out rate for

Mexican children between the ages of 16 and 19 in NYC, and blamed this rate on "the problem of legal status and *lack of parental involvement*" (32). Alvarez immediately corrects the demeaning language and misleading logic of the *Times* contributor, but the stigma against immigrant children succeeding in school nevertheless remained, influencing parents like Linda Fernández to both seek out places like MANOS, but also struggle with their ideas of *superación* in negotiating their immigrant narratives. That same biased language also motivated Alvarez's research and informed his approach, which is undergirded with respect and reciprocity. While his research focuses on translanguaging events and literacies, a primary question that Alvarez explores is that of the role of immigrant parents in their children's educations.

Presented as a methodological framework, chapter two begins with an exchange between Nico, a mentee, his mother Evelyn, and Alvarez. The three are looking over a spelling test that Nico brought to MANOS to review and have his mother sign. An image of Nico's test is shown, taking up almost the entire page, confirming visually the reality of how immigrant children are marginalized by the education system. The chapter continues, classifying moments like these as "translanguaging events" that can be reframed as narratives so that the researcher can analyze them. Methodologically, documenting translanguaging events through homework mentoring can help researchers more fully see the language brokering that happens within immigrant families. For Alvarez, a translingual ethnographer also needs to become intimately familiar with how the immigrant bargain impacts each generation's values and losses and how those factors are negotiated through power dynamics. At the same time, researchers must also find ways to gather information about and understand how sociocultural expectations—outside of the safety of the migrant community—construct the ways literacy functions for bilingual individuals during translanguaging events. An interesting data point that Alvarez noted about the social capital of translanguaging was the trend of immigrant mothers often limiting their search for homework help to the immediate and extended family of the child. However, it is important to note that these homework networks can grow with support from the local community, especially when both the community and researcher mutually value translingual literacies. In closing chapter two, Alvarez transcribes various conversations into narrative form. Specifically, he focuses on how MANOS mother Lupe Rubio has instilled in her children an appreciation and practice of bilingualism and their Mexican culture. These transcriptions serve as a reminder to translingual ethnographers that despite generational priorities and the pressures of *superación*, a goal of singular fluency in standardized English is not always the only language ideal for bilingual children or their primarily monolingual parents.

The latter half of *Brokering Tareas* shifts Alvarez's discussion from the theoretical background of his ethnography and time at MANOS to the practicality of how MANOS and other community investments can address educational needs for translingual families. Chapter three, "Translanguaging in Practice," includes a case study of two translanguaging events that show educators and ethnographers how rhetorical authority belongs to the language broker, and how to frame these events as opportunities for learning both in the classroom and at home. The case study includes

images of MANOS mentees' brainstorming notes and drafts of a writing assignment, but more importantly explores how bilingualism is used nonverbally in translanguaging events. The chapter also delves deeper into topics of power dynamics in bilingual households with monolingual members. Monolingualism allows for more honest and sincere conversations when language brokers are present to aid in communication. These events do not restrict single-language speakers to their elementary knowledge of other languages, so they are not forced to simplify their message, but instead are able to fully express their ideas and feelings during a conversation with the assistance of a broker. At the same time, emergent child language brokers are benefitting from events, as well. Because child brokers are participating in multitudes of translanguaging events with their parents, they are learning from direct experience how to negotiate rhetorical situations and participate in the confusing performances that are situationally dictated in everyday life. Alvarez brings readers back to an emotional investment with the MANOS families through eleven-year-old Felipe Rubio's account of language brokering for his mother one day on a shopping trip. Felipe recounted the event to Alvarez, and elaborated on his own contribution to the situation, saying, "It made me feel like I know more Spanish. It felt like . . . I helped my mom with something. It makes me feel proud because I'm doing a good thing" (81). *Brokering Tareas* is rich with transcriptions of translanguaging events like these, all of which offer readers a new perspective for learning about and being able to empathize with migrant families and their immigrant bargains.

In chapter four Alvarez discusses the power dynamics of the immigrant bargain in conjunction with language and identity negotiation. Because second-generation migrant children at MANOS typically had more bilingual knowledge than their parents, the power dynamics would shift whenever Spanish-speaking adults needed a translator outside of MANOS. This unique balance plays a significant role in the immigrant bargain, and Alvarez contends that these instances are integral parts of each translanguaging narrative. When negotiating their own immigrant bargains, MANOS mentees, especially those who had never been to Mexico, spoke about their parents' *echándole ganas* narratives—narratives about "giving one's all to overcome obstacles" (84). Child immigrant recognition of their parents' struggles with migration into the United States is the basis for our own recognition of the struggles associated with the immigrant bargain. In working to support immigrant children's education and by acknowledging their *echándole ganas* narratives, mentors, counselors, and educators can accomplish three goals that Alvarez contends will have a significantly positive impact on migrant families. Through our earnest recognition of these struggles and negotiations, we will be able to build the empathy needed for minority children to trust their educational authority figures, we will support the movement toward a more transnational ideal of literacy through direct conversation with the families who experience translingual lives, and we will solidify a respectful recognition of how *echándole ganas* are tied to individual merit in families and communities. Woven throughout chapter four, Alvarez presents these goals and shows how they are creatively met at MANOS, and how other community organizations and leaders can share and adapt these same objectives. In every translanguaging event, when a mentor's mentality is

consistent with the goals set forth in this chapter, the struggles of the immigrant bargain can be reframed and experienced as a powerful experience of identity brokering, through which migrant children inform their immigrant bargains with an increased awareness of support and autonomy.

I consider the overall message of chapter five to represent the entire message of *Brokering Tareas*, at least if MANOS can be momentarily accepted as a metaphor for any place of learning in which one believes. Victoria Rico, a mother of one MANOS mentee, explained how she felt about the role of literacy for her son Marcos: "Y conocer algo es una forma de defenderse." (And to know something is to be able to defend oneself) (131). Victoria's words make visible her own multifaceted immigrant bargain and how her experiences have shaped her expectations for her son, and further, how those expectations are being met by MANOS. Of every powerful and motivating transcription in this book, I think Victoria's has the most impact. This quote is only part of a longer transcription toward the end of chapter five, which discusses community investments in building literacies. Lessons from this chapter show readers that the immigrant bargain does not have to be won or fought in isolation, and that with support from the community, negotiating that bargain offers migrant parents and children a sense of relief, resilience, and home. Within this chapter, readers can also gain deeper insight into the motivations associated with *superación* and its role in shaping the immigrant bargain. As a community, the MANOS families—and other immigrant families on Foraker Street—personify their local environment and give their community a sense of *superación* that they work toward achieving collectively. It takes a community of care to make lasting changes, and values learned from migration narratives like *superación* and the immigrant bargain are direct ways to create supportive, reciprocal, and sustainable literacy communities.

In his final chapter Alvarez focuses on the shared responsibility of brokering care, which sustains a community. His unique take on translanguaging events is that when they happen, it is for the welfare of the family. This time, Alvarez begins with a homework assignment brought in by Luis Gómez. Luis is writing about MANOS, and the image accompanying the transcription shows the fourth-grade handwriting filling wide-ruled lines with reasons why MANOS is "a place he liked to go" (193). Alvarez explains that this specific translanguaging event is unique because during the mentoring session, he was able to observe the rhetorical listening necessary for making educational gains. We can ensure success during these types of translanguaging events, because what Alvarez described happening during the session is a "demonstrable form of care" (142). The threat against literacy is commonly reinforced through both the expectation of standardized English and the resistance to encouraging multiliteracies. Reinforcing sole linguistic authority to standard English delegitimizes learning, alienates cultures, and works against inclusive education. At MANOS, children are the primary literacy brokers because their lives and experiences have left them with this responsibility. Their knowledge however, is twofold: on one hand, it affords them the power to choose what information their parents receive on certain occasions, but on the other, they are forced into adulthood far sooner than children in the United States typically expect to be, which further isolates them from their peers

and teachers outside of MANOS. But *Brokering Tareas* points to the opportunities for advanced learning that child literacy brokers are already encountering. Through these translanguaging and brokering events, there is always an opportunity to encourage learning in these children's lives. Bringing the chapter to a close, Alvarez laments over the future of MANOS and the changes it was going through while he was there. As a whole, though, *Brokering Tareas* ends with Alvarez making direct calls to action—for educators, for researchers, for K–12 school organizers, and for community leaders. He shares his questions about the gender roles of MANOS parents and urges a research team to explore those dynamics. But overall, "The goal, in the end, should be to extend the connections between college students learning to be teachers and their potential students and their families" (153). Thinking back to my own students' literacy narratives, particularly those written by students who grew up in Tucson with Spanish-speaking parents and abuelos, I consider about my students differently—they are also literacy brokers and teachers, and their families are learning alongside them.

For me, Alvarez's study offers immediate classroom application. For literacy researchers, his work can offer a new framework for connecting literacy to agency. For practitioners, *Brokering Tareas* adds another tool for engaging students with the power of multilingual students' unique literacy roles within their families and in the wider world. In many ways, the MANOS families' struggles with literacy extend to the recurring themes in literacy scholarship, and Alvarez portrays these struggles well for a range of audiences. Alvarez's investment in the people and work that he describes in *Brokering Tareas* provides the groundwork for new forms of community-engaged teaching and research, which is why it is easy to recommend to educators, literacy mentors, community leaders, and academic researchers alike.

Works Cited

Kynard, Carmen. "Stayin Woke: Race-Radical Literacies in the Makings of a Higher Education." *College Composition and Communication* 69.3 (2018): 519–529.