

Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College, by Todd Ruecker. Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. 219 pages.

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I picked up Todd Ruecker's *Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College* because two years ago I served an AmeriCorps term as a college access counselor, and several of my language minority students were struggling with writing in ways that their language majority peers were not. As a cohort of access counselors, we were provided with myriad trainings and materials on the education gap, including the particular needs of the student population we were trying to reach. But for some reason, these Spanish-speaking students were overlooked in the pamphlets and PowerPoint presentations. In many situations, I resorted to re-explaining content to these students in Spanish (which I speak as a second language), or just overlooked egregiously poor English syntax or style despite worrying that the ACT writing graders would not be as accommodating.

In *Transiciones*, Ruecker undertakes a two-year ethnographic study of nine students entering their senior year at Samson High School, a public school in El Paso where Spanish-speaking language minority students dominate. Ruecker's pool of subjects winnows to seven as the students matriculate at Borderlands Community College and Borderlands University in El Paso, and he then thoroughly catalogues each student's writing tasks, noting triumphs, tribulations, developments, and regressions along the way. Ruecker provides a framework for understanding the challenges that Latina and Latino students face when transitioning from high school to postsecondary education, while also emphasizing the sources of their success in this transition, especially when it comes to developing college-level writing skills. This intentional focus on capital, rather than deficit, is what makes Ruecker's two-year study particularly compelling.

The book begins with methods and study design and then quickly moves into descriptive data of each of the seven students' background and living situation, as well as each student's writing experiences from their senior year of high school and first year in college, with an emphasis on writing in first-year composition. These in-depth descriptions are broken into chapters based on the success of the students' transitions: "Struggling Transitions" (Daniel and Joanne), "Difficult but Successful Transitions" (Bianca and Yesenia), "Smooth Transitions" (Carolina and Mauricio), and "An Unexpected Transition" (Paola).

In his summaries and evaluations, Ruecker emphasizes the aspects of life in which students hold advantages and capital, and Tara Yosso's critical race theory of community cultural wealth strongly influences his study design.

Yosso rejects the deficit view of students of color, and outlines forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth, including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. In *Transiciones*, Ruecker's diagrams of each student's sources of capital at the end of each chapter serve as accessible, if necessarily simplified, summaries of whole lives, and make for easy comparison between each individual's assets and challenges. Ruecker strives to highlight the varied and ample sources of capital in the lives of students who face significant economic and cultural challenges, offering a counter-narrative to the standard assumption that Mexican and immigrant families act as barriers to college success by encouraging or forcing children to continue living at home, or work minimum-wage jobs to take up economic slack. In the case of Carolina, for instance, her stereotypically large, single mother-led family proves to be an invaluable asset to her first-year college experience, and Ruecker breaks down all the ways in which nonmonetary wealth added to her success.

Ruecker eventually provides the practical advice I could have used when working with my Latina/o students, but he first balances in-depth accounts of the students' curricular writing experiences with observations of their extracurricular lives. With access to drafts of almost all of his subjects' assignments, Ruecker is able to reproduce sentences and paragraphs as exemplars of style, skill, and expression, adding color and dimension to student writing in an educational climate that too often focuses on student deficit.

That certain students' more profound struggles were not dramatized or fetishized as the sole indicators of failure is a strength of his writing—Joanne's pregnancy, for example, is given less discussion space than her concrete struggles in first-year composition. There are times when outside circumstances beg more explanation, however. We are told that Mauricio's grandfather *and* girlfriend died in separate car crashes midsemester, but it is unclear what support network or personal characteristics of resilience allowed him to finish that semester with an improbably impressive 4.0 GPA.

Ruecker's methodological approach to his research is closely tied to the way he frames his results. In keeping with Brenton Faber's theory of ethical ethnography as described in *Community Action and Organizational Change*, Ruecker does not just observe the students at work in their high school English classes, but involves himself as a classroom assistant of sorts, providing one-on-one and group help to all students (not just the study's subjects). When the students transition to college, he communicates and meets with them frequently, falling into the simultaneous roles of advisor, counselor, tutor, and even editor.

Ruecker acknowledges the impact he has on the students' outcomes and succeeds in his effort to provide quality research while interacting closely and compassionately with his subjects. While reading *Transiciones*, I was reminded of a very different approach taken by the makers of the critically acclaimed

2011 documentary, *First Generation* (Fenderson and Fenderson). In this film, documentarians record the lives of four high school students as they apply for college and attempt to become the first in their families with postsecondary degrees. As they film, however, the producers and crew strive not to influence the students' decisions or knowledge in any way, and this approach leaves in its wake some major, potentially avoidable student failures, including a late Free Application for Federal Student Aid submission that amounts to thousands of dollars in unclaimed grant money. At first for me as a viewer, these were simply cringe-worthy screen moments: upon reflection, however, I began to question the filmmaker's methods. Fortunately, Ruecker leaves readers with no such foul taste in their mouths and is careful to note when and how his influence shaped a student's trajectory, even in small ways.

Yesenia, for example, struggled with a professor who penalized heavily for mechanical errors and a shaky grasp of closed-form features. Yesenia was in the habit of using Ruecker as a resource, and he was inclined to help her in ways that writing centers might not. About one of Yesenia's procrastinated papers he writes, "When she came to me a few hours before the final was due, she still needed help with drafting an introduction, for which I provided ideas. In addition, so that she would not be penalized excessively for grammar and mechanical issues, which were still numerous, I quickly copyedited the final draft" (91). Ruecker admits that such copyediting might have been taking his involvement a bit too far, but he stands by his choices to aid the study's subjects when he believes they are being evaluated unfairly.

After presenting several chapters of comprehensive and compelling data, Ruecker uses his research to formulate plans and solutions for teachers, institutions, and communities who support language minority students in pursuit of postsecondary education. I appreciate that he dedicates two chapters to concrete solutions and achieves a depth of analysis that ethnographies sometimes lack. Though his proposals to recenter Spanish as a language of instruction may seem radical to some, I found his calls to action to be refreshingly aligned with the needs of the Latino and Latina students I have worked with.

Ruecker proposes modifications to first-year composition curricula that would support language minority students *and* push language majority students to learn a second language, including rhetorical analysis prompts that ask students to compare and contrast English-language coverage of an issue in the U.S. with Spanish articles on the same subject across the border. More radically, he recommends a complete overhaul of postsecondary education into the established two-way bilingual structure used commonly in K-8 schools. His most immediately feasible proposal is to have administrators and directors of first-year composition programs rethink and redesign their training modules for new teachers, making the implementation of an inclusive pedagogy the main

goal of teacher preparation. Programs should require composition teachers to take at least an entire class focused on multicultural praxis, he writes, instead of offering a single unit or chapter on reaching language minorities and other underserved students.

Ruecker succeeds in painting vivid portraits of students graduating from an underfunded border high school with an almost 100% Spanish-speaking demographic, and gives them the credit they are due for their triumphs while describing their deficits in constructive ways. His results may not be entirely applicable to students located elsewhere in the U.S, but many of his recommendations could (and should) be adopted by university, community colleges, and writing programs everywhere.

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Works Cited

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