Ink: A Study of Cholx Literacies

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INK: A STUDY OF CHOLX LITERACIES

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INK: A STUDY OF CHOLX LITERACIES

By

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THESIS

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In *The Book Thief*, author Markus Zusak writes, “I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right.” After coming to the end of my thesis journey, I have never felt more closely to a quote than this one. At times the journey felt impossible and I felt like my words were nothing but scribbles on a page, but ultimately, I am proud of the work I produced and the doors it opens for future study. More importantly, I am proud to be a voice for stories of humanity that often do not get a platform. Truly, the final product was well worth the struggle.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dr. Andrew and Lisa Pena, who instilled in me a lifelong love of learning that has carried me thus far and I know will continue to propel me forward. From reading books in my mother’s lap as a child, to seeing the joy on my father’s face when I was accepted into grad school, I truly owe my parents everything for making me the scholar, the educator and the woman I am today. I am deeply grateful to my husband, Fabian, who has believed in me and my dreams, often more than I believed in myself. Thank you for never letting me quit, even when times got tough.

I dedicate this thesis, also, to my participants, Benny, Jesus and Spooky, whose stories I was entrusted to tell. Thank you for being brave, authentic and allowing me to share your amazing life through words, I hope I have made them write. Also, to all the members of the Cholx, Chicanx, and Latinx communities whose stories never get told or whose voices are silenced, the path is being paved for you to step forward. To Dr. Rosenberg, thank you for your expertise, your light and your guidance throughout this process. Thank you for your confidence and enthusiasm in my work—you were truly a force and I am forever grateful for your support.
ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an exploration of what Cholx literacies are and aims to prove that tattoos are a significant and restorative literacy practice within Cholx communities. Because this is a specific area in the field of literacies studies about which little is known, this study works towards establishing Cholx literacies as a viable and recognized form of literacy and opens the door to further research on the topic. Although there is so much that is yet to be learned about the specific literacy practices of Cholx community members, this study opens a conversation about normative and non-normative literacy practices and how, in the field of education, we can adjust our pedagogy to accommodate all types of learners from diverse backgrounds. There are many facets of Cholx literacies that are yet to be discussed, but this study focuses on a deep analysis of Cholx tattoos and their role in Cholx identity, community, and intrapersonal communication.

Keywords: Cholx, literacy, restorative literacies, communal literacy practice, tattoos
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COPYRIGHT PAGE</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIERRA (THE GROUNDWORK)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAICES (ROOTS OF STUDY)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining literacy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy that heals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Cholx</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Cholx literacies</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding tattooing as a literacy practice</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEMILLAS (SEEDS WE SOW/METHODOLOGY)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Flyer created and shared to obtain participants in study.</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Photo of Benny’s chest, stomach, and arm tattoos from a front angle at brewery.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>View of Benny’s forearm tattoo.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Photo of the back of Jesus’s arm.</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Photo of the back of Spooky’s head.</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Alternative photo of the back of Spooky’s head.</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TIERRA- THE GROUNDWORK

On a typical April day, my ninth grade classroom, and my interests of study, were forever changed when a new student named Omar walked through the doors. Omar\(^1\) was robust and powerful--intimidating to the eye, to say the least. His presence made a large impression on the room and those who filled it. At fifteen years old, he towered above the average freshman boy by at least a foot and outweighed them by seventy pounds or more. Omar was wearing Dickie brand cargo shorts that were worn low so that they fell right between his ankles and his knees, a crisp, white cotton tee-shirt, white tube socks that covered the spaces on his shins that were left uncovered by his shorts, and a thick, gold chain around his neck. His hair was buzzed short (I learned later, due to his recent release from correctional school), his arm was covered with intricate tattoos and markings, and around his neck was an additional necklace of hickies that he displayed proudly. He walked into the room, halfway through the semester, carrying a lightweight backpack that held only a single composition notebook and a black Sharpie. Omar handed me his schedule and politely asked me where to sit.

A hush fell over the room. Although most of my students knew Omar from middle school, there was still something unsettling about his presence. My other students, even the rowdiest of the boys, were scared of him. I knew immediately from growing up in a predominantly Mexican-American city, Omar was a Cholo. As much as I tried not to make assumptions, there were certain signifiers that immediately gave his affiliation with the Chicanx group away--his dress, and his demeanor to start. Growing up in El Paso, it was obvious that this Pachuco-derived subgroup was still alive and well in the city. While I had never encountered,

\(^1\) Omar is a pseudonym the aforementioned student, chosen by the author.
nor held a conversation with a Cholo, there were certain negative societal connotations that were associated with the group that had stuck with me from my upbringing.

A flood of stereotypes came to mind: *Cholos are gang-bangers. Cholos are drug dealers and users. You do not want to be caught alone around a Cholo.* These preconceived ideas of what and who a *Cholo* was, made the presence of Omar in my classroom make my stomach churn. In many ways I felt unprepared, as an individual and as a teacher, for how to work with a student like this. I did not know how my pedagogy would need to adapt, nonetheless how I should even approach him. *What will parent-teacher conferences be like? How am I going to handle the impending behavioral issues that are going to result from him being here?* Aside from the unpreparedness I felt as an educator, I also felt physically inadequate. At five-foot-three, I had some concerns. *How would I break up a fight if there was one? How would I ever earn the respect of Omar or get him to see me as an authority figure?* Nonetheless, I sat him down in a desk relatively close to mine and asked him to take out a piece of paper and something to write with--we were copying notes on figurative language that day. To my surprise, he replied with a simple, “Yes, ma’am” and obliged. When I advised him he couldn’t write with a Sharpie, he kindly asked, “Do you have something else I could use?” I handed him a pencil and continued on with the lesson.

I feel like it is helpful to set the stage and to preface this anecdote with the background that exemplifies the reasoning behind why an exploration of what *Cholx* literacies are, is so necessary, and valuable, to the field of rhetoric and literacy studies. I teach freshman English at a local high school in El Paso, Texas. At my campus, I work with one of the highest English Language Learner (ELL) populations in the city of El Paso. More than eighty percent of our
students fall below the poverty line. Many of my students commute daily, or weekly between the United States and Juarez, just across the border. Because I was born and raised in the city, prior to this encounter with Omar, I felt like I had a good grasp, and understanding of the people and the culture of my community. I spoke English and Spanish, so I was able to easily communicate with my students, their parents and help forge a relationship between literacy and language within my classroom. I understood my students and their struggles which helped me to establish a rapport and culture of mutual respect and expectation. I looked like them, talked like them, and because of that, I feel, I was able to be trusted by them. Until I met Omar.

Admittedly, I was ashamed of myself for perpetuating the stereotype of what a Cholo was and the negative societal misconceptions of group. I had to step back and think about what brought me to those conclusions and why I assumed those would affect a child and his learning within the school setting. At the end of the day Omar was simply that...a kid. From that day forward, I made an extra effort to get to know Omar and both his school and lifestyle habits. I not only wanted to learn more about the intricacies of his literacy life but also about the social factors that created them. At the time, I wouldn’t have called them practices of literacy, but those were exactly what I was unknowingly inquiring about. I learned that Omar didn’t much care for formalized school, he felt like school would not help him within the “real world” and all that was to be learned in life was learned through experience or “the hard way.” Omar had just transferred from Delta Academy, the school for students within the juvenile delinquent system to serve their sentence while still keeping up with their schoolwork. He was only attending school now because it was part of his probationary agreement and any slip up could land him back at Delta or worse, could cause him to lose visitation rights to his one-year-old son. Omar worked construction, illegally, at night in order to provide for his baby, who he regularly and proudly
showed me pictures of.

Omar was mild in nature. He was soft-spoken and intelligent, beyond the scheme of classroom learning or state standard. He had a deep understanding of life and the human condition. When we read and analyzed a text in class and I asked probing questions of the students about the theme’s connection to life’s “bigger picture,” Omar was usually the first to answer. He had a poet’s understanding of the literal and the ability to interpret something truly metaphorical and beautiful. Most of the time, in the classroom, my goal was to just get students to comprehend literature, answer simple multiple choice, surface level questions, but Omar was able to read between the lines. He could take what was on the page and somehow find a personal connection to it--a deep level of cognitive ability that was rare in high school freshman. He had a kind of maturity that went beyond his years. He did not have an interest in reading on his own, nor did he see a purpose in it. Even though he could care less about the subject matter, and failed almost every state-curriculum multiple choice exam I assigned, nonetheless he participated in class with great enthusiasm. Omar liked to write, especially on free-writing days. He would often just write little verses down, in rhythm, about his “girl” or his son in the corners of his notebooks or assignments that I would notice when I picked up to grade. He enjoyed the assignment where he was able to write freely about himself for an entire period, pouring out pages of details about his favorite food, tacos, and other details about his life he was so openly willing to share. Omar wrote with descriptive language and a zeal that, in my opinion, cannot be taught.

Omar was attentive to authority--never spoke back, always responded with “yes ma’am” or “no ma’am,” never engaged when other kids in the classroom acted up or roughhoused, and
consistently arrived at class on time. Arguably, he was one of the most kind and respectful students I had encountered. Although he verbally expressed how much of a chore school was, to me it seemed like he still made a great effort to show up. I often wondered how a kid like that, ended up in trouble with the law so often. To me, he did not seem capable of hurting a fly. I would not say that I wanted to change Omar’s negative connotations of school or the education system, but I certainly wanted to help remedy some of the damage that had been caused by it. I wanted him to see the world of possibilities that were available to him if he chose the path of schooling.

A couple months after his arrival, Omar stopped showing up to class, which was out of the norm. Truancy was in direct violation of his probation, and I knew Omar well-enough to know that he would not risk his good-standing in court because of that. This worried me, I had known enough about Omar thus far to know that skipping class was out of character. Even if he did skip other classes, when I checked attendance records, my class, eighth period English was one he religiously attended. I felt a special pride in knowing that my class was important to him. There seemed to be an unspoken rule, with Omar and other Cholx students I had since then, about reverence towards school. This was a curious detail about the Cholx community that I had never had the chance to inquire about. School was not a place where you got in trouble. A classroom teacher or a lunchroom debacle would not be the reason you end up with disciplinary action. You get in trouble on the streets, not in the classroom. You get punished by the cops not by a principal. I soon learned that Omar had been caught with drug paraphernalia and his number of strikes had reached an end. This time, there was no correctional school or Delta Academy--he would serve a real sentence in juvenile detention. At fifteen years old, a freshman in high school, the streets had caught up with him.
There are not many words to describe the feelings that followed this realization, one that comes to mind, however, is failure. Now I believe wholeheartedly that this was not a failure of Omar’s, but rather, this was the result of a failure on someone else’s end--the school, the system of schooling, lawmakers? This left me with questions: *Was this just an inevitable risk that came along with barrio life? Did Omar know that this could happen and just accept it as a fact of life?* Afterwards, I reflected more and more on Omar’s attendance record; eighth period English in room sixteen was flawless, while other periods (algebra, biology, etc.) were scattered with tardies, and unexcused absences. More questions came to mind. *Had I failed him? Why out of all classes was mine one he never skipped? Was there something that I, or the campus administration, could have done?* I would not consider my pedagogical practices “groundbreaking” nor out of the “norm,” but something I consistently prided myself on was the ability to make connections and establish a rapport with my students, even if this seemed like a daunting task. *Was this why Omar enjoyed my class?* He took great joy in being able to share stories, whether written or verbal. Though he would not identify as a writer, he was a natural storyteller. Despite content or test scores, he had a place where his knowledge was valued and the things he had to say were allowed to be heard. *Had this not been happening throughout the day?* If not, then it wasn’t Omar, nor I who had failed, it was the system by which campuses and school systems functioned. It was systems that deem some students as “smart” and some students as “lacking” without actually knowing them.

Years after, I still think about Omar often and the brimming and untapped knowledge that lay within him. I wonder about what his life is like now and what remained or changed within his relationship to literacy. I also wondered ow his affiliation as a Cholx and his community life influenced his relationship to literacy. This encounter with Omar, and the potential of other
encounters with kids and people like him, have led to the formation of this study. I believe there is an intimate relationship between community, culture and literacy. While community is the first instructor and driving force behind many individuals’ literacy practices, the culture within that community is the glue that holds the whole unit together. I wonder how Omar’s affiliation with, and identification as a Cholo, influenced his relationship literacy.
RAICES- ROOTS OF STUDY

The questions I had lingering in regards to Cholx literacies were driving factors to this study. There were so many things about my own relationship to literacy and pedagogy that I had learned from Omar, and I knew that there was a whole treasure trove more to discover. What were the deep-rooted literacy practices that were specific to Cholos and their surrounding communities? In order to begin to understand the complex, and intricate relationships to literacy that exist within Cholx communities, it is first necessary to situate the argument within larger theoretical frameworks. First, it is necessary to discuss and unpack the different types and meanings of literacy as I will utilize and lean upon them throughout this study. Secondly, and most importantly, it is important for me to unpack a deeper and clearer understanding of who a Cholo is, how they came to be and the long history of systemic oppression and exile they have faced within society. Lastly, it is crucial to examine the systems and uses of literacy that have been put in place to historically impede, shape, and influence Cholx communities’ relationship to and uses of literacy practices.

Defining literacy

I ground this study in James Paul Gee and Shirley Brice Heath’s definitions of literacy. I have chosen to utilize both Paul James Gee’s (1989) analysis of literacy as a careful navigation of discourse, as well as Shirley Brice Heath’s (2009) term literacy practices to begin with. Gee describes literacy as “control of secondary uses of language (i.e. uses of language in secondary discourses)” (p. 548). These two definitions serve as excellent guides towards how literacy extends far beyond the written page and is truly an integral part of societal functioning. Before we can understand this definition, it is helpful to explore how Gee discusses what D/discourse is,
how it is acquired, and later used. Discourse, according to Gee, is an “identity kit,” in which individuals are able to establish a unique set of characteristics and practices (not always related to literacy, specifically) that are gained through social interactions—both participating and observing (p. 538). “Primary discourse,” as Gee names it, is learned within the familial sphere and becomes the main vein from which all other discourses flow (p. 541). This primary discourse, this intimate interaction between reading, writing, speaking, and listening then influences the types of literacy practices individuals acquire and learn. Because discourse is so saturated with familial life, there is also a hefty influence of culture and community on an individual’s own discourse(s). According to Gee, because literacy is so heavily situated in discourse, then literacy must extend beyond the realm of simply mulling through with text. Literacy becomes a tool in which to understand and interact with the surrounding world. I will use Gee’s concept of literacy as an “identity kit” as I begin to explore Cholx Literacies. Through this lens I can further delve into the study of how identity and literacy are codependent and crucial components in developing a communal and societal culture and norms. Who you identify as, how you choose to present yourself, determines who you choose to associate with and how you choose to do it. I think this will play a huge role in the development of Cholx Literacies and understanding the significance of the practices within it.

In Shirley Brice Heath’s Ways with Words and her study of the children of both Trackton and Roadville (1983). Heath introduces her concept of “literacy events,” occasions within individuals’ lives that surround written texts that are fundamental to said individuals’ relationship and interpretation of literacy. She goes on to explain how significant literacy events for the children of both these lower/working class towns, such as storytelling in church and memorizing lines of the gospel, do not necessarily serve them within a school setting. However,
these moments, these acts of participation within the community are critical in helping the children establish an identity for themselves and within society. This disconnect between school and home works in a conscious juxtaposition with each other, each highlighting areas where the other is weak. It is almost as if the more school literate one becomes, the more disconnected to the community they become and vice versa. But this interesting dichotomy begs the question, why must there be such a stark contrast between community and home? Kirk Branch (2010) discusses how absences of literacy can also be considered significant literacy events.

Historically, tools of literacy have been kept or forbidden from certain societal groups as means of oppression and further alienation. Seen only as a “tool of the powerful,” many groups were targeted as undeserving of literacy because of fear of what would come from a literate population (p. 54). Historically, Denial of literacy for many groups, such as Blacks and Hispanics, lead to a long and perplexed relationship with literacy especially when the pushed for schooled literacy became the norm. From what I observed in Omar, and what I would learn from my study later, many members of the Cholx communities do not see a point in a formalized education, only attending because of familial values, or court mandated orders. However, some do not attend school all together as an act of resistance to a system that has long oppressed them and their ancestors. Paulo Freire (1970) discusses the many detrimental effects formalized and oppressive schooling can have on the oppressed, often stripping them of their power of critical thinking and consciousness in order to conform and regurgitate curriculum. “Words are emptied of their concreteness,” says Freire, “and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (p. 71).

The avoidance of these formal literacies become and active act of resistance. Branch says, “avoiding these schooled literacy events [is] itself a literacy event of profound consequence for many...and central to personal histories of educational underachievement and alienation” (p. 53).
The absence of schooled literacy practices within home and barrio life is present in *Angels’ Town*, Ralph Cintron presents an ethnographic study on the diverse community of a barrio he calls “Angelstown.” For many of the participants of Cintron’s study, school was a place where they were constantly combating negative stereotypes about Latinx people, and trying to find the middle ground between assimilating into American culture and maintaining their own heritage. One participant, Valerio, is even labeled with a learning disability because of his inability to articulate himself in the ways in which *American* schools demanded. Though his verbal and social discourses were on par with his classmates, his written skills were deemed below average by the school. To use Eric Pritchard’s (2017) concept of “literacy normativity,” Valerio’s use of grammar and syntax were considered “non-normative” in terms school standards for “normal” and age appropriate writing skills and therefore Valerio was stamped with a label that followed him throughout his whole life. Without even considering other impending factors to Valerio’s writing, the process of labeling someone as “not-normal” does lasting damage to an individual's perception of self and relationship to schooling. Pritchard (2017) says, “literacy [is] ultimately cast as [a] good [thing] so long as you do [it] in a way that is deemed acceptable or “normal” (p. 15). Because values of schooled literacy are often so far from the values of communal literacy practices of schools there is a constant grappling to blend both for students. Freire (1970) describes this as “the tragic dilemma of the oppressed” (p. 48). The uncomfortable, and often painful, dichotomy and juxtaposition of home and school life, American and Mexican that Cholx (and other marginalized groups) often face.

As I move towards a clearer definition of what *Cholx literacy* is, the work of Eric Pritchard, *Fashioning Lives*, becomes a pillar in understanding the relationship of literacy to the Cholx community. It is first crucial to understand Pritchard’s concepts of “non-normative,”
practices and “restorative literacy practices,” these are terms I will use consistently throughout the study. By non-normative, I mean modes of behavior, literacy practices, and use of language that deviate from the socially dominant norm (i.e., school, workplace, culture). Non-normative practices often lead to stereotype, generalizations and bias when looked at from the normative culture. Non-normative literacy practices, however, are normal for disenfranchised and socially othered groups such as the Cholx community. So, by using the term non-normative literacy practices, I am referring to literacy practices that are regularly used within the Cholx community, but viewed by society as out of the norm.

Pritchard’s work will be instrumental because of his concept of “restorative literacy practices.” As I stated before, many of the literacy practices used within Cholx communities (in theory) were born out of a need to establish an identity within a society that consistently tries to diminish it. Pritchard describes these literacy practices, often, as a social statement that there are elements of one’s culture, self and pride that deserve to be seen and deserve to be heard. These literacy practices are a way to maintain a sense of self and challenge the social norms. It is my assertion that the Cholx community regularly practices restorative literacies throughout their daily lives as they use their literacies to help rewrite tainted narratives about themselves, communicate within their barrio, and heal from both personal and societal traumas.

**Literacy that heals**

There are, as Eric Pritchard (2017) terms, “restorative literacy practices” that are regularly occurring with barrio communities that are both communal and personal. As I have discussed already, there are various types of oppression and marginalization that regularly targets Cholx communities, but there are also certain literacy practices whose primary goal is to help heal and repair damages that have been done by those mainstream systems. Eric Pritchard’s
term, *restorative literacies*, will be a grounding term throughout the rest of my argument. Certain literacy practices used within Cholx communities are derived or stem from those practices that center the larger Hispanic literacy community; such as religious literacy practices and certain social/familial literacy practices. However, the term *Cholo/a* and its roots in Pachuco/a culture, was born out of a need to separate and challenge societal norms and racialized stereotype. Because of this, it is my assertion that as I begin to understand what Cholx literacies are, it is important to understand the personal and societal needs that created them. As I begin to study and observe the literacy practices themselves, this is something I would like to ask, but it is my assumption that because of this initial fight against societal othering, literacy practices were created in order to aid in that. Though these practices might have morphed as time passed into modern day, they are still an essential part in helping Cholx communities establish an identity both individually and communally.

When I think back to my encounters with Omar, I think about the subject of one of the first conversations that helped me foster a relationship of trust between the two of us: tattoos. Omar was impressed that I was able to be a teacher while having a half-sleeve of tattoos that decorated my right arm, amongst others that were visible on my ankles, wrists and calves. Omar expressed his agitation at the fact that mine were considered, by most, as ornamental or *dainty*, while his were looked down on as gang affiliated (which some were) or distasteful--often telling me how teachers looked at him and treated differently because of his sleeves and neck tattoos. He complained to me that people rarely asked him what his tattoos meant or what deeper significance they had. Decorating his body was an elaborate “scrapbook,” to again quote Pritchard, of text, image and mementos from his life that he felt helped symbolize his “intersection of identities” (p. 21). Although Pritchard doesn’t specifically talk about tattoos, the
stories that were being told by Omar through his skin seemed to correlate to his theories quite nicely. Omar had tattoos memorializing passed family members and loved ones, others to pay homage to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, some to show his allegiance to his barrio, and one dedicated to his son. These were all small parts of his carefully pieced together identity as a Cholo, a father, son and, as I now learned, a Catholic. As Pritchard states, Omar’s tattoos were “different pieces [that came] together to represent the plurality of his identities...Thus, literacy functions as a metaphor for identity; even as identity invites us to further (re)define what one means by literacy” (p. 21).

My study aims to unpack and clearly define what Cholx literacies are, and specifically how tattoos operate as restorative literacy practices within Cholx communities. I believe, for many Cholx community members tattoos are a literacy practice that soar far beyond gang affiliation and markings. Many choose to honor their first community, their families, by having certain images, quotes, Bible verses, or names permanently engraved into their body. They display them as one would a photo in their wallet as a way to share a common thread of humanity with others—a love of family. Many Cholx choose to demonstrate their ties to their Catholic faith by having religious regalia and images tattooed on their body. Portraits of *la Virgen*, the Virgin Mother of God who appeared to a humble Mexican farmer, Juan Diego, as a beautiful and brown figure, represent both the connection to Catholicism and pride in nationality and in his community. Other religious markings include tattoos of rosaries, praying hands, or even sometimes full depictions of Christ as a reminder of the temporary pain and the everlasting glory. Even so, although the tattoos of most Cholx have other meanings and contexts, many are markings to show affiliation to certain gangs. These gang affiliated tattoos are used as a form of pride in one’s barrio—pride in the place that raised you. They are used as markings of
brotherhood, allegiance and honor. They are used as a way to establish pride in oneself in contrast to systems of government, education and society that have previously taught them otherwise.

Beverly Moss (1994) emphasizes the acknowledgement and value of literacy practices and events in non-academic settings and produced by traditionally “non-academic” communities. Though typically through nonmainstream functions, disruption of literacy normativity is an essential function and grounding for Cholx literacies. The marking of ink on skin is a public display of community pride and demonstrates a larger and often, subconscious, dig at authority as well as an active form of restorative literacy. Tattoos can be center for community members to identify and connect with other Cholx people. They are a powerful public display of a disregard for larger societal norms. Lauren Rosenberg (2015) in The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners, stresses the critical and humanizing importance of giving credit where credit is due. Rosenberg suggests that by validating the previously considered “practical” and “commonsense knowledge” of individuals as real and working practices of literacy, we also validate the individual as an intellectual who has valuable things to add to the larger discourse (p. 83).

**Defining Cholx**

Of course, now it is important to understand, or attempt to understand, that which Elvira Carrizal-Dukes (2020) calls the “Cholx.” I will use the term Cholx to refer to the larger, inclusive community. It is needed in order to understand the roots and origins of the many literacy practices which will be unpacked in further sections. Research shows that the term “Cholo” dates as far back as the year 1609 from Spanish texts and records. “Cholo is a word from the
Windward Islands that meant “dog, not of the purebred variety, but of very disreputable origin; and the Spaniards use it for insult and vituperation”” (p. 60). Following the same train of derogatory connotations, most of the common synonyms that come along with the word “Cholo” in the United States resemble terms like delinquent, criminal, hoodlum. Yet most of these titles, and the actions that warranted them, come as reactions to constant systems of societal oppression, stereotyping and injustice that the Cholx communities combat on a daily basis.

Though this has been a social group that has existed for decades, it often flies under the radar of societal attention—both intentionally and not. In “Towards a New Cholx Consciousness: The Visual Rhetorics of Cholx Artistas as a Method for Social Justice Movements,” Carrizal-Dukes details the rise of the Cholo from its roots in the Pachuco culture. The Pachuco, was a fun loving, socially aware group of Chicanx youth that arose during the 1930’s in the United States. Pachucos and Pachucas used their “Spanglish”, bright clothing, friend groups, and interactions with authorities to both resist and navigate societal norms. Though the bright colors and sharp dressing of the Pachucos later evolved into the simple, more demure style of the modern Cholo, much of the same resistance and reformative ideology remained, and even strengthened.

There is a constant struggle that Dukes (2020) expands upon from W.E.B. DuBois, “double consciousness” that has to be grappled with Cholx communities as well as many other cultural groups that have also been “othered” by the societal mainstream:

Cholx are American by origin. They are American yet seen and treated as Un-American. The Cholx double-consciousness means always looking at one’s self through the eyes of a racist white society understanding that, historically, there has been a nation that looks
back in contempt. They are proud to be American by origin and at the same time they resist the American culture that systematically oppresses them. They live a double consciousness as experienced by other racially disadvantaged communities and discussed by Dubois. A Cholx is always aware that they are Cholx (p.60).

The pressure of double-consciousness is ever present in these situations--the juggling of being a minority student while simultaneously trying to find their place within academia, society and more. Because of this double-consciousness, Cholx communities perpetuate their deep sense of pride and resistance to societal norms through their art, dress, graffiti, cars, and more. Paulo Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, discusses the need of oppressed individuals and groups to reject the image of themselves that has been created by the oppressor (p. 47). Similar to their Pachuco ancestors, Cholx community members use these forms of expression to simultaneously resist mainstream ideologies for men and women while also calling attention themselves as an established and fully functioning societal group with its own culture, fashions, and norms that exist alive and well outside the mainstream. “Cholx resist hegemony by portraying their own identity, beliefs, and culture through their own body. We see their visual rhetoric through their tattoos and arts. In doing so, they demonstrate decolonizing methodologies for navigating oppression and their subaltern experience” (p. 42).

Though the title “Cholo” has previously been looked at as term of societal othering or as a means of alienation within larger Latinx communities, it is common knowledge that the term is revered and celebrated within Cholx household and communities. It is an aspiration and badge of honor for young men to admire and a culture that is deeply rooted in tradition and cultural history. Becoming a Cholo or a member of the *barrio* is not as simple as paying dues and gaining
membership, but rather a process and commitment that require many skills and a lot of learning and growing that cannot be taught within the formal educational system. Though many dare to, or are even allowed to enter the often private world of *el barrio*, there is an intricate and beautiful system of reading, writing and speaking practices that I believe offer a wealth of knowledge to learn from. Though, as I quickly learned when doing the groundwork and literature review for this study, besides the work of Carrizal-Dukes, there is very little written or published on Cholx literacies, and a large part of my study aims to fill in those gaps of knowledge within the discourse. Within this study I hope to unpack the ways in which relationships with literacy propel and obstruct *barrio* communities within the social, academic and economic spheres. My aim is to unveil and understand the variety of literacy practices that are regularly utilized within Cholo communities and how those literacy practices promote a sense of unification and community. I hope to unpack and understand what role the educational system plays in the broader scheme of what I will call *Cholo literacy*, and how Cholx communities use their literacies to combat negative stereotypes perpetuated by society, promote social change and raise awareness about social and economic discrepancies and injustices that are thrust upon and impact the community. These literacy practices are essential in helping Cholx community members find value and worth inside a system that consistently tries to devalue their existence.’’

**Defining Cholx Literacy**

A main goal of this project is to arrive at a definition of what *Cholx Literacies* are. I theorize that Cholx literacies are literacy practices and relationships to literacy that aid Cholo communities and members in asserting and establishing an identity for individuals and communities. These literacy practices are a way to counter a more derogatory narrative that
society perpetuates about them. What would make a literacy practice uniquely Cholx is the idea of a literacy practice being created out of the need to survive (and eventually flourish) in a society that constantly keeps this community on the outskirts. Though I am entering this study with an idea about the types of literacies that I will encounter, there are still gaps within the field of literacy studies about this specific subculture. Although there is much to be read about Chicanx, Latinx and Hispanic literacies, there is little written about Cholx culture and literacies. A larger goal of this project, and future work, will be to gain a better understanding of the specific personal and communal literacy practices of the Cholx subculture.

**Understanding tattooing as a literacy practice**

Of the many literacies that Cholx community members engage with, this study will focus primarily on the art of tattoos and tattooing. Through this understanding of tattoos and their significance and symbolic meaning within the Cholx culture, I hope to gain a better understanding of the tattoo’s role as a literacy practice. I assert that tattooing and being tattooed are, Eric Pritchard (2017) terms, “restorative literacy practices” that are regularly occurring with barrio communities that are both communal and personal. It is my assumption, from my classroom encounters, that tattoos help heal and repair damages that have been done by mainstream systems that have regularly oppressed and marginalized Cholx communities. Yet tattooing and being tattooed can also be a way for individuals to establish a sense of self and take pride in a sense of communal belonging in a society where they often don’t belong. They are used as a way to establish pride in oneself in contrast to systems of government, education and society. I would like to delve deeper and unpack the significance of tattoos to the community and to individuals and how they operate as restorative literacy practices.
A large goal of this project is to help further explore tattooing and being tattooed as a literacy practice all in itself. My argument is that tattoos are a literacy practice in the sense that they are a code and way of communicating all by themselves. They express meaning, history, culture and one's own narrative, often in ways that do not require verbal communication. In the same sense they are often their own sort of language, helping members of the same barrios or familias understand they are encountering one of their own by just viewing and interpreting the ink on their skin. When you view someone’s tattoos, oftentimes it is like you are reading into their personal diary. You are unpacking someone’s life all while viewing the art on their skin. Through a person’s tattoos we are able to get a glimpse into their pain, their victories, their love and loss just by inquiring about the significance behind the piece. Tattoos are larger communicative symbols for a person’s autobiography. They tell stories without words, and oftentimes, open the door for a continuing dialogue to occur.

David E. Kirkland’s article “The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and a New English Education” examines tattoos as a literacy artifact in the life of a young Black man. Kirkland (2009) argues “This story, told in the workings of ink and flesh, illustrates a young man’s use of texts and tattoos to revise a shattered self-portrait. At the same time, this story posits a powerful critique of the words and worlds that surround him” (p.375-376). Kirkland argues that tattoos extend communication and literacy skills in a way that is not always possible through text alone. Kirkland writes that tattoos “connect personal stories to larger social ones. This literate act...is also connected to a larger process of reclaiming an identity that is blurred in the public messages” (p.376). Much like Pritchard, Kirkland views the process of inking as restorative in nature. Tattoos are often used to reclaim an identity narrative that is often tainted in the public eye. They are a way to combat the negative stereotypes perpetuated by society and take pride in
an identity that is uniquely their own.

Throughout this study I also assert that there is a social literacy practice that occurs within the process of tattooing and being tattooed. I theorize that there are specific rationale for the placement of tattoos on the body that express a type of communication or message that the individual wishes to share with the world or keep hidden. Through my research, I hope to better understand the significance of the nonverbal communication that is expressed through reading someone’s tattoos and being read.
SEMILLAS- SEEDS WE SOW/ METHODOLOGY

My goal with my research was to explore the relationship between community, culture and literacy and to better understand how affiliation with barrio communities influenced individuals’ literacy practices, and largely, the culture within that community. I want to work to help Cholo literacies, but seen as a viable and well establish literacy practice. I feel that by recognizing the value that these forms of practical and cultural literacies, not only are we acknowledging the valuable contributions made by members of Cholx communities to the larger discourse, but we are also attempting to repair damages and exclusions previously done by society by providing a space for which Cholo literacies to be further explored.

To explore the idea of tattooing as a restorative literacy practice, I conducted my research through interviews with three, self-identified, members of the Cholx community that have significant tattoos and regularly get tattooed. The questions that I discussed with the interviewees explored the significance behind tattooing and tattoo art on both personal and cultural levels. My study, and my time with the participants, helped me to better understand the roots of tattooing and their significance in Cholx culture. It also helped me to further pursue the idea of tattooing as a literacy practice, and put into words the nonverbal communications in which the tattoos express on behalf of the body they sit on. For many people, a tattoo parlor is an escape, it is a remedy. I say this out of my own experience and the experience I have gathered from my own personal time within a tattoo parlor, but most importantly I gathered this from Spooky, Jesus, and Benny. The most valuable and telling information on the topic of Cholx literacies was found directly from within the community itself.

First and foremost, I am trying to be actively conscious of the fact that I am not a member
of the Cholx community and I, myself, do not identify as a Chola. I do not want my work to seem inauthentic nor like some sort of specimen study. I am anxious about how I will be received by the community; however I move forward with the best intentions. But through my work as an educator in a lower valley school, where I worked with Cholx community members on a daily basis, this Cholx literacies are a topic that I feel strongly about and feel the need to be recognized more actively within academic discourse. Through my experience as an educator, and my work with Omar, I noticed a unique and intricate system of literacy skills that extended far beyond school based literacy practices. This sparked my curiosity and drove me to want to learn more about the specific literacy practices of the Cholx community, as I felt that there was a treasure trove of undervalued, but equally as rich literacy practices to be recognized within them. My larger goal with studying Cholx literacy is to open a dialogue about the unique literacy practices of our community, that often deviate from the norms of schooled literacy, but are crucial into understanding our students and serving them to the best of our ability as educators. There are gaps in what scholarship considers valuable and what is not. By not acknowledging the potential contributions of Cholx literacies we are ultimately denying and ostracizing a population of people within our community and potentially denying people their perspective and cultural ways of using language.
LABRANZAS- ENCOUNTERS

The interviews that I conducted were both very different in subject, location and overall style. Inquiry questions were organized into three categories: defining Cholx identity, tattoos as an expression of Cholx identity and culture, and personal interest in tattoos. The inquiry questions that were discussed with the participants are listed below.

*Inquiry Questions:*

1. Defining Cholx Identity:

- Do you identify as Cholo/Chola/Cholx?

- How would you describe the Cholx culture?

2. Tattoos as an expression of Cholx identity and culture:

- Do you connect tattoos and tattooing with Cholx experience and identity? If so, please explain.

- Do you feel connected to your culture and community through tattooing?

- Is there a significance to the placing of tattoos on the body?

- How do you think tattoos are unique to Cholx culture?

3. Personal interest in tattoos:

- Who and what influenced you to become interested in tattoos?
Tell me about the experience of getting your first tattoo.

What do you think tattoos communicate about Cholx culture and community?

The first with two younger gentlemen named Benny and Jesus (pronounced Gee-zus) was in an area of town that I was unfamiliar with and the location, a bar named Old Sheepdog Brewery, was dark and loud yet the conversation was filled with laughter, curse words and beer. The two men were warm and jovial in tone and quickly opened up to me about their past, their personal histories and did not hesitate to show off their ink and allow me to photograph, even allowing me to use their actual names within my research. The second interview, however, was in a setting that I often found myself frequenting: a busy Starbucks on a Saturday morning. The coffee shop was busy with a much different crowd and the interview felt more formal and structured. Spooky, a man in his early fifties, who chose to go by a pseudonym, was not as open about himself as my first two interviewees. He was careful in his wording and often stopped to contemplate what he was going to say next or whether or not he should reveal the meaning behind his tattoos. Although he was much more intimidating in stature and ink than my first interview, the conversation was remarkably passionate and heartfelt. I could tell that Spooky was truly letting me peek into his world and this was a special honor.

Figure 1: The flyer that was created and shared through social media and posted in local bars in El Paso, TX.
Benny & Jesus

I knew that finding participants for the study was going to be one of the most challenging parts of my research process. I designed a flyer, see Figure 1, that I shared through my personal social media accounts that had almost no response from potential participants. So, I decided to choose a particular area of town, Lincoln Park, that was known for being the location for several car shows and car club meetings in El Paso. I knew of a brewery that I had been to, on occasion, that was just down the block from the heart of the area. I was nervous, to begin with, because this was an area of town that was completely foreign to me. I did not grow up anywhere near this side of the city, I didn’t have any friends who lived in the neighborhood, and, to be frank, this seemed like a sketchy area of town. Driving in graffiti adorned the giant concrete pillars that hold up I-10 East, a visual piece of culture that represents people, places and identities of the border region. Just being there challenged my comfort and my assumptions of what I considered a safe area of town. People adorned the streets playing basketball in the park, loitering on street corners, and in small cramped bars, working on cars or smoking a joint. This was not a particular crowd I would normally surround myself with socially, but nonetheless, I parked and walked in to a brewery on Rosa Avenue.

I had met the manager of the brewery a couple of times and I was relieved when he was working the day I chose to drop off the flyers. I asked if I could possibly leave some with him and on the walls in hope of finding someone who was willing to talk with me. He said he actually knew of someone who might want to be interviewed, a spray paint artist who went by NK Art and rented the space above the bar as studio for his work. The manager gave me their card and I reached out via Instagram and we had an interview scheduled within the week.
I planned to meet with Benny on a Thursday after work at the brewery for beers and conversation. I arrived about 6:00pm and quickly scanned the room for Benny, not knowing what to expect, with only a vague picture from Instagram to locate my interviewee. When I found him, I was immediately taken aback. Before me was a 6-foot-something, probably well around 250lb pound man with thick rimmed black glasses, a black flat-billed baseball cap and joint, still smoking, tucked neatly behind his ear. He had a full black beard and wore a thick gold chain around his neck. My stomach churned, I suddenly felt small and helpless. I don’t know what I expected to see or how I expected to feel so this was a very new feeling to me. *I can’t do this, never mind, I will just go home,* I thought to myself. But a thought occurred to me, that if I allowed myself to be frightened of this HUMAN BEING, if I allowed myself to let the stature, the dress, the tattoos, *scare* me…I would be completely backpedaling on the exact point in which my research is trying to challenge. I would be feeding those negative stereotypes that I was working to disprove. So, I introduced myself, we shook hands, which seemed like the proper gesture in a research setting, Benny offered to buy me a beer and we got to talking.

The room was dim and we walked over to plush velvet couches in the back corner of the bar. To my surprise, when we arrived at our seats, there was another man sitting and waiting for us to return. This man, however, was a stark contrast to Benny. “Jesus the Messiah,” was the name he preferred to be called, although later he would explain to me his many names and their meanings. Jesus was tall, though not as tall as Benny, but stick thin. He was lanky and awkward, and stood with his chest puffed out, proud, yet seemingly timid in nature. He was confident on the outside but was very hesitant to talk to me at first. Jesus was fidgety and I watched as he looked me up and down, when I realized he was probably staring at me doing the same to him. I quickly realized that he was nervous. He was uneasy around me and my notebooks, laptop and
paperwork. At the time, it hadn’t occurred to me that this man was afraid of me. Well maybe not me as a person but me and what I represented, who I could tell, what I was going to do with the information. Benny asked me if Jesus could be part of the interview and I said absolutely. Not wanting to let the silence and polite small talk linger too long, I had them both fill out the IRB paperwork and we began. Soon, all of the weird nervousness from before went away.

The two men were loud and completely themselves. They were blunt and hilarious, and I honestly felt like I could’ve sat there and talked to them all day. The walked me through what would emerge as the first theme to come up within the study, the concept of Cholo as a way of being. Being and identifying, I will use the terms interchangeably, as a Cholo/a is not simply a category that one falls under but is much more complex. It is not a box that is checked off but rather a central part of someone’s sense of self-their personality, their character choices, their thought process, their actions. “The Cholx culture is a way of life. It's a way to live. It's not just a culture, it's a way of life.” Jesus explains.

As the guys talked about their lives, talked about my students, and the high school I used to work at, and it turns out that we had much more in common than we could have anticipated. Benny went to Bel Air, the high school that I taught at. He lived and grew up in the same area that my husband did. He even knew my husband’s autistic uncle who stands on the street corner every day and waves to passersby, because he sees him as he drops off his homie on the same street. Both men were funny and bright and had so much to say and so much to share with me. They were beaming when they spoke of their cultura, their heritage, their familias. From my conversation with Benny and Jesus, several themes came up that would carry me through the rest of my analysis. I will describe them below.
SURCURSALES- BRANCHES/THEMES

As I began to unpack the literacy skill of tattooing and its significance within Cholx communities through my conversations and research, I have arrived upon five themes that emerged from the conversations: Cholx as a way of being, performance of the Cholada, cultura, viaje, and social consciousness of non-normativity. I will discuss how each of the five came to be from the conversations that I had with Benny, Jesus, and Spooky and how each theme builds off of or works as an extension of each other.

Cholx as a way of being

Benny and Jesus were not afraid to do or be who they wanted to be. They had an admirable disregard for what others thought of them, which is a clear theme between both of my interviews. Benny was eager to show me his collection of ink, see Figure 2, proudly standing up and taking off his shirt in the middle of the crowded bar to show off what he had on his chest. It was clear from conversations with them that being/identifying as a Cholo/a is not simply a category that one falls under but rather is much more complex. It is not a box that is checked off but rather a central part of someone’s sense of self—their personality, their character choices, their thought process, their actions. Being a part of the Cholx community is deeply personal and rooted in long histories of familial participation. I asked if the two men identified as Cholx themselves, to which they both clarified they identified more as a “Cholo-thug.” Yet the Cholx culture was a lived experience that they felt daily. “But it's still in my blood I grew up around, around all that I grew up around Cholos
you know what I mean? … That's, that's my culture growing up in and that's what I was like not taught, but that's what I wanted,” said Jesus. Although he did not subscribe to the singular term “Cholo” he still very much felt himself immersed in the culture. Cholx was not just a term but rather a way to live, a generational means of participating within society. From their language, their clothing, their tattoos, these complex literacies become the framework to a social identity and culture that extend far beyond Gee’s concept of literacy as an identity kit. They push the boundaries for what we consider literacy by inviting us to explore the complex systems of discourse that exist within the Cholx community in non-mainstream, non-normative ways. As Benny points out being/identifying as Cholx is “a lifestyle, straight up. You cannot fake the funk.” There are literacy practices that are unique to Cholx communities that extend far beyond that realm of what we know as literacies now.

**Performance of the Cholada**

The following themes that emerged from my conversation with Jesus and Benny all stem from the idea of Cholx as a way of being, a way of existing in the world in a way that is unique to the Cholx community. The Cholada, how I understood based on Benny and Jesus’s remarks, is an extension of the earlier theme. It is the word that most closely can encapsulate that specific way of being whether it is through clothing, art, tattoos, speech, etc. It is an abstract concept that can be materialized with tangible thoughts and actions. Performance of La Cholada is a way to assert a presence within social situations—that presence could be good or bad.

When talking Benny and Jesus about what exactly being a Cholo was, the word “Cholada” came up often. “You know, you cannot go around wearing Dickies and some chucks looking like a Cholo, its [that type of clothing] what you earn its like, like a like a uniform,” said
Benny. He held out his arm, see Figure 3, for me to observe and photograph. Benny continued, “You got to earn that style of… of… of how you dress, how you talk, dude, how you perform, the style, the hand gestures, the uh the again like you said, the style, you talk in everything.”

There is much to unpack in this statement. The concept of style of dress as a “performance” was intriguing. If dress is a performance, who is the audience? Is it other members of the Cholx community, or for the general public? Eric Pritchard writes, “literacy is also a way to create identity, critique discourses that deny possibility of intersectional and complex personhood and create community, as well as ways to make and participate in culture” (p.21). By consciously choosing to dress in a certain way, to put on a certain item of clothing, the person who chooses to don that specific item is making a conscious choice to communicate something to the people that view them. This concept of styles of clothing as a uniform, something that is earned as if heading to war, was especially interesting. Like a military general wears certain regalia to note his status to other soldiers, the clothing that is worn by members of the Cholx community works in the same fashion. Clothing is an invitation or a sign of comradery between individuals from the same barrio or hood, or it is a warning to stay back or to pursue with caution. Perhaps the audience to which the performance is catered to is the outside public. This concept extended to more than just clothing, but also to tattoos.

This embodiment of the Cholada is evident in Jesus’s recollection of his first tattoo.
**Jesus:** Like growing up there in the hood, in Sherman, to earn it [your tattoos] or like, to, to let yourself know that you were from the hood you had to get tattooed. And it was a black widow. Everybody, everything, all my primos, everybody I grew up around me that was that was the mission. Try, to try to get that tattooed on your body. Once you got that, you gangsta you know you already made you know, no matter you were 11, 12, 13 years old once you got that tatted on you, that's your first tattoo that everybody was made. I'm a man now…

**Lauren:** and you felt more like part of…

![Image of Jesus's arm with tattoos](Figure 4: Photo of the back of Jesus’s arm. Amongst other tattoos, most prominently depicted is a cross between a Shure 55sh microphone and a skull. This was designed to represent music until death.)

**Jesus:** …more, more, more and more part of belonging like yeah, like untouchable. Untouchable Ain't nobody gonna fuck with me no more. I'm re-solidified with the streets.
Because the performance of the Cholada is complex, there have to be certain identifying factors to ensure someone or something is an authentic representation of what the Cholada is. This is called cultura and it is the understood system that connects the Cholx community to each other. Cultura takes the ideologies of la Cholada and uses it to create specific artifacts: music, art, tattoos, etc. Yet, sometimes that specific item of cultura can also work in the opposite way, meaning that that specific artifact is what influences the Cholada.

When beginning to talk to Benny and Jesus about their tattoos, the concept of cultura was one that was brought up frequently. In many cases, cultura refers to specific symbols, art, regalia that is tattooed or worn by members of the Cholx community that is unique and specific to the culture. Most of the items, artifacts, and symbols are rooted in Native history and culture such as the Mayan, Inca, and Aztec cultures. When discussing cultura, the concept of tattooing as a literacy practice becomes more concrete. There are certain symbols and specific elements of cultura that are universal within the Cholx community, although each can be taken and interpreted to suit the individual that gets them. For example, a common tattoo that is seen within the Cholx community is the Virgen of Guadalupe, however Benny chose to interpret the image of the Virgen with her holy glow, crown and altar of roses at her feet, as a can of spray paint (see Figure 3). “They [Cholx people] could put the Aztec calendar um, and, and pyramids and anything I mean tattoos they like represent, like Cholo and the Cholo culture has to be meaningful. But then there's a lot of people that get cultura like that as tattoos because it signifies their cultura of being Mexican or Hispanic,” begins Jesus. “Their pride,” Benny continues, “Yeah, cuz a lot of those mean, there are like badges, badges of honor, maybe tells a story.” The concept of cultura as badges of honor reemerges. By tattooing something on your body, whether
it be a spider web, prison bars, a clock, etc., all specific tattoos to the Cholx culture, a member of the Cholx community is deliberately sending a message to those around them. Although the styles and symbols can be easily accessed by the “civilian” population, they mean specific and unique things to members of the Cholx community. The word “civilian” is a term that is used by all of the participants in my study that refers to non Cholx people. I will use the term throughout the study in the same way. Benny explains, tattoos are like “[memories,] like a lot of them do like, prison bars with four bars, that's four years, or let's say he if has four windows with four bars, that's eight years of time, or a clock. You know, there's different, there's different different um symbols exactly as symbols to represent again. Like you say, to a regular civilian, because like a regular civilian will, let's say, he gets a cultura one. And in the eyes of a gangster, it's, it's, again, it's disrespected, because you didn't earn that.” Cultura tattoos are a language that is written on skin that tells a story to those who are able to read it. Although not what we would consider a literacy in the normative sense, reading of one’s tattoos is a complex skill that requires a bank of knowledge that is only acquired through specific lived experiences or full immersion into the culture. This suggests that such reading of tattoo’s is not a literacy that can be easily obtained by civilians, much like the discourse of rhetoric is not as easily interpreted by outsiders to the field.

Benny and Jesus detailed their run-ins with other Cholos from different barrios, encounters with teachers and authority figures at school, as well as experiences with law enforcement. Both men were artists of different crafts– a spray paint artist and a musician-- and the art they produced was a direct reflection of the experiences they had lived. At times, it was hard to get them to move on to the next question because the constant ping-pong of stories and memories filled up the time and air. The conversation was extremely enlightening and would
provide more insight as I approached my second interview and would bring me back to it with new themes and perspectives to explore.

**Spooky**

As I mentioned, my second interview was much different in context and setting than the first. I met with Spooky on an early Saturday morning at a Starbucks in the Northeast area of El Paso. The setting was livelier and brighter than bar where I met Benny and Jesus, which was a stark contrast to my guest that was covered in tattoos on every visible inch of his body. I was startled by his appearance. Spooky was a large man, towering at what I would guess is 6 feet, he was bald headed and broad and wore a crisply pressed flannel shirt that was buttoned up to the neck. In this scenario, I offered to buy his coffee and we made small talk as we waited for our order. It was hard to not be intimidated by him because of his height, his overall demeanor and his blanket of tattoos. When he blinked, his left eyelid flashed the word “Fuck” while the right read “You,” in faded Old English script with a. His neck, his cheeks, forehead, skull, and chin were painted with intricate designs and phrases that completely covered his entire face. It was hard not to stare, mostly because I was trying to decipher all of the markings that were in front of me (see Figure 5). I was uncomfortably aware of the other patrons in the shop, I could feel their eyes upon us as we grabbed our coffees and made our way to the table.

![Figure 5: Photo of the back of Spooky’s head. Pictured is a pair of eyes that are peering between latticed prison bars, the word “Mexicana,” the LA Dodgers logo and the word “Florence” in all caps.](image-url)
Spooky was older than Benny and Jesus, and did not disclose his actual name, but rather his street name. Unlike Benny and Jesus, he was not born and raised in El Paso but rather came from various parts of California, ultimately settling in Florence before he moved to El Paso. He was married and had daughters, and agreed to meet with me as a favor to a mutual friend. This friend, was a former El Paso Police Department Sheriff who later became a detective in the gang unit task force. She was a family friend of mine and had met Spooky when he was still heavily gang affiliated and remained close to him as he found his way out of the gang life. Spooky was surprisingly soft spoken, he was kind and patient with me as I fumbled to get my phone set up and pull out the IRB paperwork. He had daughters around my age, he told me, and his wife was leery of him coming to meet with me. But, he did nonetheless, and I am grateful.

Much of my conversation with Spooky resonated with the themes that had developed during my meeting with Benny and Jesus. While the two previous men preferred to be called “Cholo-thug,” Spooky preferred the title of “Homie.” I would say perhaps the difference in associations (Cholo-thug vs. Homie) came as a result of generational differences, as well as where all three men grew up. To Spooky, the term Cholo had negative connotations in California, so I addressed the Cholx culture as the Homie culture for the interview.

I asked Spooky how he would describe the culture, curious to see if there were any stark differences between what Benny and Jesus shared with me. “I feel like it's, it's something you live, you know, it's not. It's not something you grew up and you say, hey, I want to be a Homie. No, it's something you're born into. You know, you're, you see it with your older homies, the oldies, the getting together Sundays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays,” Spooky explained, “The, the sense of family, the sense of family, you're growing up a sense of family that, you know, belong to somebody to belong to, to a family. You fit in, you know.” I was could clearly hear
Benny’s catchphrase “You cannot fake the funk,” echo through my mind. During my conversation with Spooky the idea of tattoos as what Pritchard terms a “restorative literacy practice” was prevalent. Tattoos were not only a way to heal but provided a standard for adulthood and manhood for little Homies, Spooky explained. Tattoos were a way to claim ownership of the title Homie and to secure a position within the family. This was fascinating and still Spooky had much more to share. As a result, in addition, to the three themes contributed by Benny and Jesus, my conversation with Spooky provided a fourth and fifth theme that served as extensions of the previous.

*Viaje*

A *viaje*, literally translated means “a trip.” However, Spooky explained, when used in the Cholx community it is a term used to describe one’s journey to their present selves. To memorialize or commemorate one’s *viaje* members of the Cholx community use tattoos as human memory books detailing specific memories that make that person who they are. Spooky explains:

> They [civilians] don't realize that, you know, we've been through a lot, you know, a lot of us where I grew up in California, in Florence. Almost all of us came from broken homes. All of us. I mean, I would say all of us came from broken homes. They're [the other homies] not going to judge me because I don't have a mother. They're not going to judge me because I'm poor. You know, they're gonna accept me and they're gonna, you know, in a sick way, they're gonna be there for me.”

From Spooky’s anecdote, the strong sense of community that is created within the Cholx culture is clear. Although the means by which they are connected to each other are not always socially acceptable (i.e. gang participation) they still create a strong bond for members when they feel
abandoned. When Spooky spoke about tattoos and tattooing it was not as light and jovial as it was Benny and Jesus. A lot of his stories were not associated with happy memories but rather dark times in his life or the life of his family. “Uh huh, they're badges of, you know, honor. Some are just some are just, you know, remembering certain homeboys that passed away. Some just remembering the time you did, you know?,” he says. He describes the tattoos that cover the back of his head:

What I have in the back of my head, they see that and they'll like, okay, that's who he is, or who he was. The spider webs that I got, you know, you can, you can see them. And you can tell how many years I did. Certain, certain tattoos that I have, you know, I got spiders. I got black widows here. I got roses. And you know, some butterflies, people that come from there they know, like, people say "Oh look you got a nice butterfly." But people that have been to they know, they'll like, no, that's... That means something else. I've got, actually on my legs, I've got the number on my legs… You know, I just, I think like I say, to me, it's just, it's a way of telling people, you know, hey, this is where I come from. This is what I've been through….People understand, people see that, people can tell like "Aww bro, you were going through that at this time and that's why this. This, this means this, this means that.

Spooky’s words were salient and raw. With an outside, civilian perspective, his tattoos look like the symbols that they are at face value: a rose, prison bars, an LA Dodgers logo. But the history, the pain, and the personal traumas that proceeded them are heartbreaking and very real.

New tattoos were what Spooky called “blessings,” and I immediately think of the juxtaposition that poses: pain for pain, blood for blood, something holy for an act that often was
not. In the way that Spooky describes them, tattoos not only are used as a tool to communicate a message to other Homies, often warnings, but on a much more personal level, tattoos were used as an avenue towards healing. Tattooing and tattoos are a way to acknowledge the trauma of the past and to never let that memory fade. Where most would think of death and trauma as something one would want to move past, Spooky describes the act of tattooing as a way to constantly remember—the things you did, the people you’ve hurt, and the loved ones you’ve lost.

Tattoos, as Spooky describes them, are also a way to distinguish the Homie and Cholx culture from the general population. When I said earlier that I was trying my hardest not to stare, Spooky confirmed that oftentimes that was the point. There is meant to be a clear distinction between him and every other person in the room, a distinction in which Spooky was obviously aware. This conversation with Spooky on normativity, blending in and standing out, lead to the fifth and final theme that emerged from the study.

Social consciousness of non-normativity

I think there is something to be said about the awareness of stereotypes and societal judgment within the Cholx community. Cholx people acknowledge that they do not fit in, they are outsiders to society, but there is a conscious decision that is made to ignore it and carry on. There is a struggle between the idea of normativity and non-normativity that creates the social consciousness of unbelonging. This was immediately evident in my conversation with Spooky.
He had a disregard for what people thought of him, yet at the same time still wanted people to think of him. Several times in the conversation, he mentions not wanting to look “normal” which I assume could mean a variety of things—normal could mean the un tattooed population of society or the civilian, Spooky’s way to refer to the non-Homie population. This awareness of non-normativity also supports the idea of tattooing as a literacy practice. It is meant to communicate to the civilian public that the person who wears those tattoos does not want to blend in, they want to stand out.

I asked Spooky about what he thought tattoos communicate about the Homie culture to civilians and to each other. He responded:

Okay to civilians. I think, it tells him that you're, that you're an outlaw. That you don't fit in. It tells them hey, there's somebody new, be careful. He's an outsider….But within the community that I grew up in. To them, it's viewed as respect. They know how to read your tattoos…And the people in the community I grew up in, they'll read it, and they understand. And they understand.

This balance between normativity in one society and non-normativity in the other, is a perfect example of WEB DuBois concept of double consciousness, specifically the way that Elvira Carrizal-Dukes uses the term to actively describe the Cholx community. Duke’s writes:

The Cholx double-consciousness means always looking at one’s self through the eyes of a racist white society understanding that, historically, there has been a nation that looks back in contempt. They are proud to be American by origin and at the same time they resist the American culture that systematically oppresses them. They live a
double consciousness as experienced by other racially disadvantaged communities and discussed by Dubois. A Cholx is always aware that they are Cholx (p.60).

Being tattooed within the Cholx community “also keeps people away from you,” Spooky tells me, it says “I'm not part of your society. I'm not part of...." how do you say? "I'm not part of the norm. This is me. I'm something else.” Tattooing to Spooky is a way to tell the civilian public that he will not conform to their ways, he is conscious of his unbelonging and he accepts it.

However, within the Homie culture, being tattooed is the norm. He describes seeing his people without tattoos:

That's what, that's what I grew up seeing it to me like, oh, this, this is normal. This is normal. You know, to me, like, you guys [civilians.] Like that, no tattoos. To me? That was like, weird. Like, how come they don't have a tattoo? you know, that was weird. When I was, like my grandfather, you know that he didn't have no tattoos, my mom's mom, my mom's dad he didn't have no tattoos. normal, normal, normal man. No tattoos.

There are interesting contradictions in what Spooky was describing to me. This awareness of what is normal within the Homie community and what is not “normal” outside of it is moving. At the same time there seems to be a sense of longing for a sense of “normalcy” as it is known on the inside of society. Although he is proud to be an outsider there are still consequences of being on the outside, and Spooky knows this. Yet, there is still great joy and satisfaction that come with defying main steam ideals and practices. This defiance is the standard with the Cholx community. It is a way to assert a presence that cannot be ignored. It challenges the norm in
ways that may make the normative society uncomfortable, but perhaps that is the point. By acknowledging that there are other realms of normativity outside of what we know we open the door to new possibilities of literacy practices that may not have been accepted or validated.
From my conversations with Benny, Jesus, and Spooky, I learned so much about the Cholx community and the literacy practices that exist within the. The three men showed me that tattooing and being tattooed are, as Eric Darnell Pritchard (2016) terms, “restorative literacy practices” that are regularly occurring with barrio communities that are both communal and personal. Restorative literacy practices, in this context, are practices that work to help mend, heal, and repair individuals, relationships, and communities from traumas and damages that are often caused by mainstream society. From my conversation with Benny, Jesus, and Spooky, it was clear that tattoos help heal and repair damages that have been done by mainstream systems that have regularly oppressed and marginalized Cholx communities. Yet tattooing and being tattooed can also be a way for individuals to establish a sense of self and take pride in a sense of communal belonging in a society where they often don’t belong. They are used as a way to establish pride in oneself in contrast to systems of government, education and society that have previously taught them otherwise. In many ways tattooing and being tattooed can be seen as a literacy practice, being that in many instances they are a code and way of communicating all by themselves. They express personal meaning, history, culture and one's own narrative, often in ways that do not require verbal communication. In the same sense they are often their own sort of language, helping members of the same barrios or familias understand they are encountering one of their own by just viewing and interpreting the ink on their skin. When you view someone’s tattoos, oftentimes it is like you are reading into their personal diary. You are unpacking someone’s life all while viewing the art on the surface of their skin. Through a person’s tattoos we are able to get a glimpse into their pain, their victories, their love and loss just by inquiring about the significance behind the piece. Tattoos are larger communicative
symbols for a person’s autobiography. They tell stories without words, and oftentimes, open the
door for a continuing dialogue to occur, and in this way they are very much a literacy practice.

Tattoos are often used to reclaim an identity narrative that is often tainted in the public
eye. They are a way for Cholx, Cholo-thug, and Homie communities to combat the negative
stereotypes perpetuated by society and take pride in an identity that is uniquely their own. In my
conversation with Benny and Jesus, this acknowledgement of non-normativity was a recurring
theme to the literacy practice of tattooing within the Cholx community. Jesus told me:

Yeah, we're stereotypes, somos malias, we're gonna fuck shit up we're just
scandalous. We're gonna fuckin, it's gonna be fights, stabbings, shootings. There's
got to be drugs involved and shit you know what I mean? Nah it’s just the way the
way a lawyer, a lawyer dresses, is the way a Cholo dresses. They dress in suits we
dress in our Dickies in our clothes, our tattoos, you know, creased up, lined up,
whatever.

This acknowledgement of the temporary discomfort this assertion of self may cause to society
and the blatant disregard of it in order to preserve one’s identity is precisely why I assert that
tattooing is a literacy practice within the Cholx community. While a restorative literacy practice
in many ways, it extends far beyond that. It is a call for acknowledgement on a much larger
scale. It is a reminder that although certain literacy practices might exist outside of the realms of
what we know and are taught in school, it does not mean they are any less valuable and intricate.
WORKS CITED


Cambridge University Press.

Kirkland, David E. (2009). “The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and a New English Education”
English Education. National Council of Teachers of English.


The University of Texas at El Paso IRB has approved your submission. This approval is based on the appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This study has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation. Based on the risks, this project requires Biennial Verification by this office on a biennial basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure. The renewal request application must be submitted, reviewed and approved, before the expiration date.
This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required. Other institutional clearances and approvals may be required. Accordingly, the project should not begin until all required approvals have been obtained. Please note that you must conduct your study exactly as it was approved by the IRB. Any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject. All serious and unexpected adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all Non-Compliance issues or Complaints regarding this study to this office. Remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document. Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted the IRB office. You should retain a copy of this letter and any associated approved study documents for your records. All research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the project. The IRB may review or audit your project at random or for cause. In accordance with federal regulation (45CFR46.113), the board may suspend or terminate your project if your project has not been conducted as approved or if other difficulties are detected. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at irb.orsp@utep.edu or Bernice Caad at (915) 747-6590 or by email at bcaad@utep.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lorraine Torres, Ed.D, MT(ASCP)
IRB Chair
University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Title: Ink: A Study of Cholx Literacies
Principal Investigator: Lauren E. Uribarri
UTEP English Department

Introduction

You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. You are encouraged to take your time in making your decision. It is important that you read the information that describes the study. Please ask me to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this project is to complete my Master’s thesis in Rhetoric and Writing Studies. This project aims to gain a better understanding of the specific personal and communal literacy practices of the Cholx culture. Specifically, I am interested in finding out how tattooing can be a way of asserting and establishing an identity for members of the Cholx community. In addition to my thesis, I may publish the results of this study in articles, book chapters, books, or non-print formats. I may present the results of this study at professional conferences and meetings.

Approximately 4-8 subjects will be enrolling in this study at UTEP.

You are being asked to be in the study because you identify as Cholo/a/x and/or belong to the Cholx community and have tattoos. Individuals who are not tattooed but still identify as Cholx, are invited to participate regardless.

Participants’ age will be referred to but only by a pseudonym.

If you decide to participate in this study, your involvement will consist of a single 45-60 minute interview. I may also ask you follow-up questions via email, Zoom, or phone. Your participation will continue through December 31, 2021, at which time data collection ends.

What is involved in the study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview, either face to face or via Zoom, approximately 60 minutes long. The interview will be audio and video recorded using Zoom’s recording feature and back-up audio recorded using my password-protected iPhone, that is if participants choose Zoom. If they choose face to face, I will record the conversation using my password protected iPhone. During the interview, you will be asked to reflect on your experiences as a member of the Cholx community and your experiences with tattooing.
Possibly have your tattoos photographed. These photos will be used as part of my research. If you
• happen to have face tattoos, please note that no photographs will be taken of your face to ensure
your confidentiality

• Participate in any informal follow-up conversations as needed that may take place via phone, Zoom, or
email. Follow-up conversations may be requested up until December 31, 2021.

Please note that your participation in this study involves remote and/or virtual research
interactions with Lauren E. Uribarri, the principal investigator. You will be audio and video
recorded by the web conferencing system (Zoom), if the virtual option is chosen. Otherwise,
all reactions will be face-to-face with Lauren E. Uribarri. As a backup, you will also be audio
recorded by a device that is separate from the online conferencing system. Therefore, privacy
and confidentiality are not guaranteed due to the nature of the research environment and the
conferencing system that will be used.

What are the risks and discomforts of the study?

The risks associated with this research are no greater than those involved in daily activities.

One potential risk I can foresee involves being confronted with interpretations of the data you
may not like. Another potential risk is that you may reflect on experiences that cause you to feel
discomfort or embarrassment. As a way to keep you informed of my intentions for the research,
I will share relevant findings with you during our follow-up conversations and consider your
interpretation when I analyze data. If you feel distressed or uncomfortable, you may withdraw
from this study at any time without penalty.

If you choose a Zoom interview, another potential risk is the loss of confidentiality due to the
nature of the electronic conferencing platform (Zoom) that will be used. Due to the use of
Zoom's online conferencing system for the interview, your privacy and confidentiality are not
guaranteed.

If you consent to have photographs of your tattoos taken, your identity may be revealed by
recognition after publication. Photos will not feature an individual's name, unless the
individual has given consent.

Are there benefits to taking part in this study?

You are not likely to benefit by taking part in this study. A potential benefit you may receive is
the opportunity to reflect upon your experiences as a member of the Cholx community or your
relationship with literacy as it pertains to tattooing and communal literacy practices such as
tattooing. This research may help us to better understand the significance of Cholx literacy
practices and may be of societal or educational benefit to teachers and researchers in
rhetoric and writing studies.
contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-6590) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

What about confidentiality?

Your part in this study is confidential. The following procedures will be followed to keep your personal information confidential.

I will take careful steps to keep your information confidential by referring to you by a pseudonym. All identifying information will be removed from the data. There are no confidential records identifying you that are part of this study. Audio and video recordings will be used for the purposes stated above only. At your request, I will offer you access to copies of written transcripts of your interview and digital or printed copies of your photos taken.

All records will be secured on my password-protected computer and in my password protected Microsoft OneDrive until 5 years after the final publication of any data. When the study is finished, I will destroy everything that can link information to you personally by permanently deleting relevant files from both my computer and my Microsoft OneDrive. Only I will be able to use the data collected in this study. I will share relevant drafts of the project with you and work to incorporate your interpretations with my own, should they differ.

If the data are used for publication in a scholarly journal or book, or for teaching purposes, I will refer to you by pseudonym. I will offer you copies or access to anything I publish based on this research via email.

Authorization Statement

I have read each page of this paper about the study. I will be given a copy of the form to keep. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study.

Participant’s Name (printed)

______________________________

Participant’s Signature Date

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please
I consent to have my tattoos photographed and used within study.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I would like to be referenced by a pseudonym (made up name)

☐ YES  ☐ NO

The pseudonym I would like to use in this study is: __________________________

________________________  ________________
Signature of Principal Investigator  Date
Photo Publication Release Form
IRB No.: 1808613-1
Title of Research: Ink: A Study of Cholx Literacies
Date of IRB Approval:

PARTICIPANT CONSENT
I am 18 years of age or older and hereby grant the researcher designated below from the University of Texas at El Paso permission to photograph my tattoos for the above titled IRB approved research only. Participants will be addressed under a pseudonym therefore my name will not be used in any publication. Only tattoos will be photographed and no photographs will be taken of your face. I will make no monetary or other claim against UTEP for the use of the photograph(s).

Printed Name: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Signature: _________________________________

______________________________

UTEP RESEARCHER
Name: Lauren E. Pena Urribarri Date:

Address and Contact Information:
lepena2@miners.utep.edu
915-867-7782

Signature:__________________________________
CURRICULUM VITA

Lauren Peña Uribarri received her Bachelor’s in English with a minor in secondary education from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2017. During her time with the English department she had the opportunity to study abroad in London and Paris, she served on the University of Texas Quality Enhancement Plan Committee, and while in her undergrad, Uribarri was on the Dean’s list every semester since she began her degree in 2014. She completed her degree in three years and graduated magna cum laude. In the fall of 2017, she began her career as an educator teaching English and Language Arts at the high school level, where she would continue her passion for education through a whole new avenue. She is trained by the National Math and Science Institute’s program for advanced English, as well as College Board Advanced placement training, and is certified in English as a Second Language Education. During her time in the English classroom she has had the opportunity to work with a diverse range of student groups and expand her knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum.

Uribarri began her Master’s program in Rhetoric and Writing Studies in the Spring of 2019 as a way to continue her growth as an educator and as a writer. She is currently the Student Activities Director at Eastwood High School, and can be reached at laurenpena23@gmail.com.