

Our Knowledge, Our Heritage is Under Siege

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Editor's note: On Tuesday, September 13, 2016 the Texas State Board of Education held a day-long session listening to testimony related the textbook, *Mexican American Heritage*. Hundreds turned out to denounce the book for use in Texas Public Schools citing its racism and factual inaccuracies. The SBOE will vote on this book at their November 16-18 meeting.

With the rise of Trumpism the ugly face of the nation is unmasked, revealing the racism, sexism and xenophobia woven into the fabric of US society. However, the attack on Mexican immigrant and Mexican American communities through state policies and practices that funnel young men of color to prison, separate families, imprison women and children, and prohibit the teaching of Chicana/o culture and history in public schools have long predated this troubling presidential election—1848 to be exact. We live in a culture in which it is common, perhaps even expected, that government officials and political candidates will play politics with our lives casting “Mexicans” as anti-citizens, perpetual foreigners and threats to national unity and security. It is within this context that, *Mexican American Heritage*, a textbook written by two white conservatives, and published by a spurious publishing company, is on the market and up for approval by the State Board of Education (SBOE) in November.

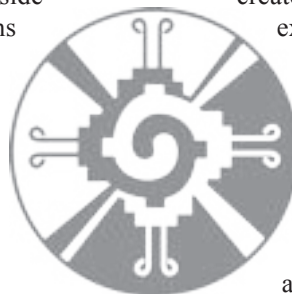
This text, the only one submitted to the SBOE for approval, is saturated with an overwhelming number of passages loaded with factual errors and interpretive errors—141 according to a meticulous review conducted by nationally recognized Mexican American Studies scholars in the state. Aside from straight up factual errors, historical distortions and complete omissions of significant themes in studying the Mexican American experience, this textbook perpetuates the same negative stereotypes of Mexicans that have been used by the white power structure to discredit and vilify people of Mexican descent—that Mexican workers of the 20th century were lazy compared to their white counterparts, Chicano activists of the 1960s were radicals who were out to destroy U.S. society, and Mexican immigrants are criminals and an imminent threat to this nation.

In the U.S., the struggle for Mexican American Studies dates back to the Chicana and Chicano Liberation Movement of the 1960s. Fueled by a decolonial philosophy for social change and a liberatory

vision for epistemic justice, Raza students set clear and concrete goals for implementing Chicana and Chicano Studies in institutions of higher education. Their manifesto, *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, now considered to be the birth of Chicana and Chicano Studies in colleges and universities across the U.S., called for the admission and recruitment of Chicano students, faculty, administrators and staff; an academic major with a program curriculum that is now accepted as a legitimate field of study; academic support programs; research centers; and publication outlets. While institutions of higher education across the U.S. have established prestigious and nationally recognized Chicana and Chicano Studies programs (especially in the West coast, parts of the Southwest and the Midwest), this field of study is virtually non-existent in prekindergarten through twelfth grade classrooms in public schools, even in states like Texas where an overwhelming majority of school-aged children and youth are of Mexican heritage. Of the 4.9 million students in Texas public schools, 51% are considered “Hispanic”;

the majority of these students are of Mexican-descent.

To date, Tucson ISD has been the only school district in the history of this nation to have successfully created a groundbreaking and pedagogically innovative Raza Studies program for high school students. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the program synthesized Freirian pedagogy, maya-nahua maíz-based epistemologies, critical race theories, and decolonial thought to create a unique pedagogy that would prepare students to excel academically and become agents of social change in their communities. The program was tremendously successful in reducing the persistent pattern of school drop outs (almost 50% at the time, reflecting a national average for Latinos), increasing school attendance, significantly improving academic test scores across content areas, and increasing college enrollment for Latino students. Despite its success and national recognition, the program was politicized by the far right as anti-American and was dismantled through one of the most vicious anti-Mexican campaigns that led to the legislation of House Bill 2281 in 2010. This bill ef-



fectively banned the program on grounds that it 1) promoted the overthrow of the U.S. government; 2) taught students to resent one group of people (i.e. Whites); 3) was designed with only one particular group of students in mind (i.e. Latinos); and 4) promoted ethnic solidarity rather than treating students as individual pupils. Following this extreme measure to eliminate ethnic studies in Arizona, students filed suit. After a five-year legal battle that challenged the constitutionality of HB 2281, the Ninth-Circuit Court of Appeals established that school officials did not have their right to ban books or remove material from the curriculum solely to advance their personal ideological agendas. As of now, the Arce case is in a U.S. district court to determine whether the state of Arizona violated students' First Amendment rights.

The Arizona ethnic studies ban spurred a nationwide movement for ethnic studies in public schools with majority students of color. In Texas, Mexican American Studies' students from across the state (UTEP, University of Houston, Lone Star College, UTSA, Palo Alto College), MAS professors, and prominent organizations like the *Librotráfico*, which emerged from the Arizona ethnic studies ban, mobilized the first statewide effort to implement MAS in public schools. Their goal: to legislate policy that would require high school students to take a Mexican American Studies course for graduation. This effort came in response to the pervasive whitewashing of Mexican American Studies content in social studies and language arts curricula in a state with a 50% Latino student population. Never in the history of this state, since the incorporation of Texas into the U.S., has Mexican American Studies been an official area of study in our public schools (and it still isn't).

In the spring of 2014, after more than a year of mobilizing around this issue, the overwhelming conservative SBOE shot down our demands. Some of the more conservative board members like Patricia Hardy vehemently opposed this idea, stating that students needed to learn "American" history and values. While the SBOE did not completely crush the possibility of MAS in our public high schools, they took a passive approach, leaving it up to local school districts to implement Mexican American Studies, African American Studies, Native American Studies, and Women's Studies under a Special Topics course in Social Studies.

This was seen as a victory for those of us who advocate for the inclusion of Mexican American Studies in public schools. However, those opposed to this effort took it upon themselves to hijack and essentially whitewash the curriculum. The situation in Arizona was instructive. Conservatives lost the legal battle to exclude Mexican American studies courses in the public schools, but they could still impose their ideological views on course content. The question of how and what should be taught in the

classroom continues to be at the forefront of these epistemic battles, particularly in a state where curricular decisions are made by a majority White (and conservative) school board for a school population that is largely Mexican.

To be clear, the publication of *Mexican American Heritage* is not an isolated incident. It is part of a broader anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican agenda that has emerged and surged along with the post-9/11 national security state. Therefore, it is no accident that attacks on Mexican American Studies would accompany racist legislative assaults on immigrants in Arizona and other states, including Texas. The textbook, produced by a makeshift publisher under former State Board of Education member Cynthia Dunbar, a Trump supporter and graduate of televangelist, Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, was written by non-experts (bloggers to be precise), Jaime Riddle and Valarie Angle—without consultation from historians or scholars in the field of Mexican American Studies. This move was intentional and strategic. The textbook is replete with factual errors and blatant ideological bias by design. In response, Mexican American studies professors and community members interested in the issue have organized to block the SBOE's adoption of the textbook. Led by MALDEF and the Texas Freedom Network (TFN), the Responsible Ethnic Studies for Texas



Coalition, has been organizing a statewide action to reject this textbook and launching national visibility of this issue.

Ruben Cortez, Jr., State Board of Education Representative, District 2 organized an Ad Hoc committee of scholars to examine and produce a comprehensive report on the textbook using clearly defined methodology focusing on specific categories of errors. The committee identified 141 passages of errors. Of these 68 are factual errors, 42 are interpretive errors, and 31 are omission errors, all of which are outlined in a 55-page appendix of errors. Some of the errors include:

- The use of the terms "nomadic" and "civilized" in the first chapter on Indigenous civilizations. The authors define civilized in terms of being like Europeans and defined exclusively in terms of having writing. The authors reproduce the primitive/civilized dichotomy that is rooted in racist assumptions about Indigenous peoples being savage, uncivilized, and backward or behind Europeans. The idea of the inherent savagery was used as justification for genocide and ethnocide against the indigenous peoples of the continent (Interpretive error).

- "Just like Europeans or Asians, there were racial similarities between Indians, but there were also countless differences. Some Indians from tribes like the Waorani in Ecuador or the Yuki in California were typically very short, while the Arapaho and Iroquois Indians were known to be tall. The Inuit and Cheyenne had lighter skin, and many Amazon Indians had black skin. The Caddo pierced their noses, while the Tlingit inserted ear plugs that stretched their earlobes over time..." (Factual and Interpretive Error, p. 8). No actual cultural com-

parisons are being made. The authors use an antiquated and essentialist concept of race as division of human species based on differences in physical features defined by heredity. This view stems from 19th century ideas known as scientific racism. There is only one human race and diversity in physical features is the result of adaptation to local environments over time. In sum, the paragraph is promoting racism—the idea that human cultural differences are biological and physical characteristics can be grouped as indicators of discrete racial groups.

- “Indians in North and South America also lacked the technological advancements of the wheel and domesticated animals, which had wide ranging implications... The lack of horses, oxen, and carts meant that Indians could not carry heavy loads of goods or people. This limited their ability to trade and migrate” (Factual Error, p. 12). Native American agricultural systems ranged from complex systems that helped sustain communities in Mesoamerica in the millions to smaller urban communities in North America. Native American trade networks extended from Mesoamerica to the Southwest, and within North America.

- “In mit’a there was no private economy, trade, or occupation to produce goods that could be paid as taxes. There was instead a centralized economy where Indians paid their taxes through labor, or working for the collective. It mirrored, most closely, European socialism” (Factual and Interpretive Error, p. 39). No, the Peruvian mit’a system is nothing like European socialism. First, European socialism did not exist until the 20th century. The reason this comparison is being made is purely ideological. Again, casting socialism as a backward and cruel system like the one the Peruvians are claimed to have established.

- Chapter Two on Spanish Colonialism - Only from six pages, 87-92, was there devoted coverage of Spanish Borderlands from 49 pages of text. The omission of the Spanish Borderland scholarship (a hundred years old with thousands of books, chapters and articles) represents one of the gravest errors within this textbook. The only coverage for the Spanish Borderlands was the California mission system. Indeed, a proposed Mexican American history textbook for Texas schools that excludes Tejano history is shocking.

- On the Mexican Revolution: “Before his run for president, Franco Madero had associated with a revolutionary group called La Regeneración, or ‘The Regeneration.’ This group was inspired by a radical Russian philosophy called anarchism, and called for total overthrow of the Mexican government” (Factual Error, p. 272). “Franco Madero” is an obvious mistake. Also, Francisco Madero did not align his group with an anarcho-syndicalist group that the authors fail to name. Furthermore, there

is no “Regeneration Movement” in the literature of the Mexican Revolution, nor was there a group called La Regeneración, or “The Regeneration.”

- Section titled “Mexican American Immigration” (p. 324-353): The authors repeat the views of restrictionists without questioning them: “The first deportations of Mexican laborers occurred to offload the overabundant labor supply, especially those who worked for the cheapest wages.” Restrictionists also said that Mexican culture threatened national identity and accused them of being disloyal and a political threat to national unity. The authors also fail to take into account the voice of the Mexican and Mexican American community on immigration, deportations, inequality, discrimination, and poverty, including the articles and editorials appearing in *La Prensa* (San Antonio: 1913-1955), the WWI diary by José de la Luz Sáenz, the two-volume work by Alonso Perales, and the article by Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks. The authors also fail to acknowledge Mexico as an important wartime ally, the 15,000 Mexican Nationals who served in the U.S. military, the diplomatic work of Ezequiel Padilla in support of the Good Neighbor Policy, the Bracero Program as a wartime measure that contributed over 500,000 workers to the U.S. labor market, and Mexico’s permission to set up radar installations along its coasts. Also, the authors overlook the work of Mexican consulate offices and Mexican American leaders in combatting discrimination in the United States, all with the



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blessings of the State Department (Omission Error).

- On the Chicano Movement: “Chicanos, on the other hand, adopted a revolutionary narrative that opposed Western civilization and wanted to destroy this society. Two sets of Mexican American activists, with similar hopes for their community, were pursuing two different approaches” (p. 415, Factual and Interpretive Error). While differences existed between Chicana and Chicano and Mexican American organizations concerning political tactics and senses of identity, Chicano civil rights organizations did not oppose “Western civilization and wanted to destroy this society.”

- “For the last two decades, 80–85% of Mexican immigration has been illegal, which, in addition to 2.5 million unauthorized Central Americans crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, has been increasingly tied up with an illegal drug trade. This is affecting security and well-being in in the United States” (Factual and Interpretive Error, p. 442-443). The authors commit a serious error when they posit that immigration from Mexico and Central American nations “has been increasingly tied up with an illegal drug trade” and “is affecting security and well-being in the United States.” This offers teachers and students a superficial and incomplete treatment of the subject. Moreover, they make these highly questionable observations without citing scholarly sources.

The Ad Hoc Committee also pointed out numerous fallacies and ideological bias in the sidebars, images, discussion questions, and glossary. At the September 13th rally and public testimony to the SBOE, Dr. Christopher Carmona from UT-RGV, offered clear examples of the troubling discussion questions at the end of each chapter in the textbook. “Discussion questions are supposed to promote critical thinking skills. These questions are based on rhetorical tactics that lead people to answers that are incorrect” or that lead towards one particular view (the view of the colonizer, rather than centering the views of the colonized). Some of the blatantly biased questions in the textbook include:

- “Explain how Christopher Columbus was feeling when he wrote his 1493 letter to King Ferdinand.”
- “Which explorer do you believe to be most successful in creating alliances and/or settlements in the New World?”
- “Find an example to illustrate how universities and curriculum strategize and radicalize to promote counterculture movements.”
- “Why do you think there continues to be an enduring frustration and focus on cultural and racial differences in modern society? What is your advice for restoring a positive emphasis on such differences in order to celebrate them instead of feeding into a fear submission or elitism based on race and culture? Is it possible to celebrate historical heritage, culture, and traditions while not judging one another on the basis of bloodline “purity” or variations? If so, how soon or distant do you believe that it can occur.”
- “Are Chicano Studies beneficial to Mexican-American culture? Explain. How did César Chávez challenge this vision?”

While students would no doubt be miseducated through the factual, interpretive, and omission errors in this textbook, the discussion questions at the end of each chapter are worded in such a way as to completely ignore the perspectives of the silenced and subjugated (which is what Ethnic Studies works to rectify), while discrediting the value of Ethnic Studies in general, and Mexican American Studies/Chicano Studies, in particular.

In their report, the Ad Hoc committee concluded that, “Jamie Riddle and Valarie Angle failed to meet the professional standards and guiding principles for the preparation of a textbook worthy of our teachers and youth in Texas classrooms. They failed to engage in critical dialogue with current scholarship and, as a result, presented a prolific misrepresentation of facts. This means that the proposed textbook is really a polemic attempting to masquerade as a textbook.” Taken together, over half of the information included in the textbook is simply wrong. While the very existence of such a textbook intended to teach Mexican American history is sickening and offensive in its own right, we need to understand the larger issue here. The textbook is a political project that promotes the perspectives of the ideologically conservative white dominant group in order to strip Mexican American Studies of its decolonial and transformative potential. It is almost completely devoid of the perspectives of Mexican Americans and it is certainly devoid of the voices of women (only 7 references to women can be found in the entire text). The perspectives of the

colonized, the enslaved, and the vanquished are missing.

(The complete review by this Ad Hoc Committee is available through: <https://masteducationdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/ruben-cortezs-ad-hoc-committe-final-report.pdf>)

What is really at stake in the Mexican American textbook controversy? Ultimately, it is our cultural memory and educational success. *Mexican American Heritage* is a textbook produced by individuals who have no connection to our communities and have willfully excluded the many excellent scholars in the field. The fact that this right-wing political project was intended for classroom use reveals that the struggle for educational equity, recognition, and rights has not ended. It also proves that Ethnic Studies scholarship continues to be cast as illegitimate knowledge. This book is not just a textbook. It is an affront to Mexican American Studies as a legitimate field of study. It is also an attempt to reverse all the work that cultural workers and Ethnic Studies scholars with PhDs in History, Anthropology, Sociology, Art, Cultural Studies and other disciplines have done to recover the missing, the erased, the marginalized, to history; to document and publish works that offer more nuanced, diverse and enlightened perspectives on the experiences and cultures of Mexican Americans and other minority groups in the United States.



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This textbook is propaganda produced by imposters who are peddling a shoddy, racist product that slights over 40 years of scholarly research and study. Our students deserve better. They deserve to know that the experiences, stories, struggles and triumphs of their communities are valuable and worthy of study in school. Mexican American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies were all born of struggle precisely because these perspectives were (and continue to be) marginalized and excluded. When the knowledge and perspectives of ethnic and racial minorities are ignored or erased we all lose. It limits our understanding of the broad scope of human diversity, hinders our ability to think critically about the history and future of our nation, and more importantly, it erodes our ethnical responsibility to each other as members of a shared multicultural society and global community. As scholars in the field of Mexican American Studies, we urge the SBOE to reject this book and we urge everyone to join this quest for epistemic truth and justice in our public schools.

ODE TO LA TORTILLA

La tortilla
mestizo bread
comfort food of my ancestors,
puffs and rises on the cast iron comal
blisters with little brown clouds,
snuggles in a dish towel, soft and hot.
I reach for one steamy circle of solace,
juggle between my hands until it cools.
Con frijoles, un poco de chile,
I open my mouth and devour my history—
mis raices.

—Sally Gaytán-Baker

