

Advocating for Ethnic Studies in 2017

Lessons from Ethnic Studies on Strategic Courage

By Andrea Romero and Michelle Téllez

On May 5 2011, a small group of faculty from the Arizona Ethnic Studies Network gathered in Tucson following a devastating Tucson Unified School board meeting where the Mexican American Studies program in the district was ended. It was a blow that was felt deeply by us all. We came together as scholars from universities and colleges across the state to publicly voice our support for Ethnic Studies. This was in the aftermath of HB 2281 that banned courses that “(1) promote the overthrow of the U.S. government (2) promote resentment toward a race or class of people or are (3) designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group (4) advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” (AZ House Bill 2281, 49th Legislature, 2010). This bill was used to target, monitor, and dismantle a successful Mexican American Studies curriculum, despite the fact that external auditors determined that the courses were academically successful and promoted positive group interactions (Cabrera, Millem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014; Cambrium Audit, May 2, 2011). In response, we worked as a network to ensure our critiques were made public and to support those teachers and students who were being directly attacked. It was from this source of collective action that we drew strength, and from these activities was born new research, new relationships, stronger students, and a highly aware and involved community.



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We find ourselves again at a point in U.S. history where higher education is under conservative scrutiny and new “watchlists” for “dangerous” professors are being created and used to threaten and intimidate scholars in the academy. We live in a country that has been shaped by a particular history

of exploitation, genocide, and exclusion. In this, Arizona is not an anomaly, but the norm. However, given the legislative battles we have had in in this state over the last six years, it seems important to comment both on our experiences and on what we imagine our role as Ethnic Studies scholars to be in the coming years given the emergence of what mainstream media is calling the “Alt Right” movement with figureheads who have been igniting racist, sexist, anti-immigrant and homophobic incidents across the nation all of which have been emboldened by Trump’s campaign and election. We suggest that this is a moment to move towards meaningful, transformative dialogue through our public scholarship in Ethnic Studies. Ethnic Studies academics have advanced scientific writing through the development of theoretical and empirical research on systemic oppression in the United States, as well as the resistance and resilience of marginalized groups. The existing 45-50 years of scholarship in Ethnic Studies has demonstrated the importance of not being silent in the face of oppression.

This is why we believe we have to be guided by strategic courage; strategic, because we must be committed to building alliances that draw upon our varying strengths, privileges and areas of expertise, and courageous, because we understand that the very communities we come from, write about, and work with are the ones under attack. In our Ethnic Studies Network work in Arizona, we learned that we had to organize and connect across and within different institutions in order to have impact.

Our training in comparative histories, decolonial methodologies, and critical cultural studies has prepared us for the work that lays ahead of us both inside and outside of the classroom. However, we know that our work itself will be criticized and undermined — as it has in the past — and that at times that attack may single out individuals. This is why our strategy is to be in solidarity, because as collectives of academics across universities and across disciplines we can leverage our impact to protect our fields, but also each other as individuals. This means we have to ask ourselves “How will we utilize our work collectively, How will we organize, and What will we focus on?” The tactical questions are as necessary as the shaping of knowledge production and must be rooted in “imagining the unimaginable” as educational philosopher, Maxine Greene (2000), used to say. We must build on what we’ve learned over time, but also not be afraid to re-imagine the possibilities that can be born out of these moments of courage.

Many of us work through participatory action research methodologies that fully engage with community members in equal, participatory processes that are inclined towards transforming existing inequalities. These are methodological ways in which we contribute to scholarship that other disciplines can learn from. Ethnic Studies has taken on the challenge of speaking truth to power as a means to dialogue and move towards social justice. These methodologies are used by scholars to ethically work in partnership with underrepresented communities for societal advancement. Ethnic Studies has been in the forefront of developing innovative methods for research and transformative knowledge that can lead us forward.

Ethnic Studies has developed effective non-traditional classroom teaching strategies that can be adopted by other disciplines in order to move our academic environments into the new political environment. These strategies move students to wake up to existing systemic problems in society and to develop action-based skills to work towards social justice. In particular, teaching about the critical analysis of history of ethnic groups in the United States can be illustrative of societal challenges and ways in which social justice has been arrived at through collective actions, strategic courage, and civic participation. In 2011, students from TUSD staged walk outs from their classrooms as administrators began to dismantle their curriculum; however, as they walked OUT of these schools they walked IN to educational spaces that were youth-led and ethnic-studies centric. We must remember these examples in the shifting political ecology of our times.



May 12, 2010 photo by Oregon State University of march against Arizona legislation. CC BY-SA 2.0

Our work as scholar-activists requires strategic courage across, within and beyond institutions of higher education. We need to build relationships between faculty and students to not only support each other in academic settings, but also to be prepared to support the work of the many grassroots organizations already defending marginalized communities who will come under more scrutiny. We recommend that faculty and students begin with teach-ins over the next few months. We have also found that youth or community-led forums have been essential to sharing knowledge and generating dialogue. Developing our public voices through writing op-ed articles, blogs, and through the use of social media are also influential means through which to move our scholarship beyond the ivory tower. Ethnic Studies faculty are constantly generating new published research that speaks to current issues. They have also served as expert witnesses when relevant for pressing policy and legal cases. Our work is fundamental to dismantling inequitable systems, to uncovering unspoken histories and to developing transformative pedagogies. This is the kind of work we must continue to do.

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Ethnic Studies and the Bogeyman of “Bias”

by Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo

Bias is seen as an impediment to science, and thus, an impediment to truth. As the antonym of objectivity, bias is also seen as a liability when “doing” science, and academic teaching. But if we are to be honest and objective about it, we would have to recognize that everyone has biases. I

remember arguing with a colleague at a university-wide committee about his assumption that certain humanities classes (and only humanities classes) were biased. His point was that scientists had the scientific method to correct for any biases, and the humanists did not. But is that really so? The scientific method (just like any method of inquiry) is only as objective as those using it, and as we know from history, scientists have, on many occasions, done science in a way that fits their own biases and sensibilities (e.g., skull measures; treating homosexuality as a mental disorder; testing contraceptives on specific populations, etc.). So it seems that even with a methodology specifically aimed at correcting biases, science is the result of human perceptions, understandings, and perspectives.



February 2012 Photo by Jaime Puente. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

I would like, then, to question the premise that biases are an impediment to research and academic work. If you were to ask a cancer research fellow why she is studying cancer, she may have a personal story about it (a relative died of this specific type of cancer, for instance) and thus she is determined to find a cure for the cancer that killed her relative. Her personal reason to study the disease and determination to eradicate the disease is a bias, but it does not necessarily affect her ability to study cancer effectively. In fact, we could argue that her biases helped her become the researcher she is. Similarly, an art history professor may find a particular art movement enticing or affecting, and that allows him to study the movement thoroughly, learning about its techniques and exponents to a point that he becomes an expert and someone who is able to teach students about that particular expression of art.

I am an ethnic studies college professor. If you were to ask me whether I have biases, my response would be very simple: I'm human, of course I do. When it comes to ethnic and race relations in the U.S., I am biased against racial inequality and biased toward building a society that values people's racial and ethnic backgrounds, whatever those may be. Those biases got me to where I am professionally, just like the researcher's own experience with cancer got her to her lab, and the art historian's sensibilities got him to the museum and the classroom. But when I teach, the biases are my impetus, not my data and not my framework. When I teach, I avail myself of different frameworks and methodologies, including science and history, to make my students understand that a society that knowingly and purposefully hurts groups of people is ultimately hurting itself in its totality. The history of humanity has repeatedly shown this to be a fundamental truth. Regardless of my biases.

Author Biographies

Dr. Michelle Téllez, an Assistant Professor in Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona, is an interdisciplinary scholar trained in sociology, Chicana/o studies, community studies and education. Her research, creative projects, and teaching seek to uncover stories of identity, community formation, resistance, and gendered migration. She is a founding member of the Arizona Ethnic Studies Network and the Entre Nosotr@s Collective. In her twenty years of community engagement and activism, Dr. Téllez has been involved in multiple projects for change at the grassroots level utilizing critical pedagogy, principles of sustainability, community-based arts, performance, and visual media. Dr. Téllez has published in several book anthologies, and in journals such as *Gender & Society*, *Feminist Formations*, *Aztlán*, and *Chicana/Latina Studies*; and in online forums such as *The Feminist Wire*.

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