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Mexican American Studies in Pre-K-12 Texas Schools

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INTRODUCTION

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This special issue centers the historic and continued grassroots organizing by Chicana/o/x communities in Texas, specifically related to education. While there is growing scholarship on the movements for Mexican American Studies (MAS) in schools focusing on California and Arizona, less attention has been paid to the organizing done in Texas. Because of its history as a white supremacist and conservative state, activists in the MAS movement in Texas, many of whom are centered in this special issue, have created innovative strategies to build the kind of liberatory education our community has been envisioning and demanding for centuries. This special issue showcases a network of scholar activists across Texas, many of whom have organized and testified in front of the State Board of Education, alongside each other, at the Texas capitol, or who have strategized together at the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies Tejas Foco conferences. Through their scholarship, they offer what approaches they have used to sustain and build Mexican American Studies at their respective institutions and in educational spaces. This special issue centers these strategies and approaches, documents these histories of activism, leaving a blueprint for future generations of MAS students, scholars, educators, researchers, and supporters.

The special issue begins with UTSA MAS program director and scholar activist Dr. Lilliana P. Saldaña. The MAS program at UTSA was originally collaboratively built by multiple faculty and was eventually sustained and co-lead by now retired Drs. Josie Méndez-Negrete and Marie “Keta” Miranda. Before retiring, Miranda had the foresight to envision and build a MAS Teachers’ Academy as a way to prepare future educators to teach MAS in schools, and thus, develop a pipeline of students from secondary schools into higher education. Dr. Saldaña currently co-directs the UTSA MAS program and MAS Teachers’ Academy with Dr. Gloria Vásquez Gonzáles. Through retrospective memory, organizational notes, expert testimonies,

and photos, Saldaña's powerful essay documents the development of the MAS Pre-K-12 movement in San Antonio and across Texas, showcasing the collective organizing efforts of parents, students, teachers, scholars, and community workers invested in creating liberatory education for Chicana/o/x communities. Further, she identifies this movement as one of epistemic justice, particularly in the face of a history of coloniality within this region.

Focusing on the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Dras. Maritza de la Trinidad, Stephanie Alvarez, Joy Esquiedo, and Dr. Francisco Guajardo outline the development of their professional development program titled, *Historias Americanas: Engaging History and Citizenship in the Rio Grande Valley*, which prepares K-12 social studies teachers in South Texas to teach MAS. The authors share their process of applying for federal funding to support this innovative program, as well as the objectives and structure of the program that utilizes culturally relevant pedagogies, contextual interaction theory, and a place-based framework to center students and develop critical literacies. *Historias Americanas* speaks to the importance of integrating MAS in the professional development of social studies teachers across Pre-K-12 grades, particularly in the South Texas region where the majority of school-age children and youth are of Mexican descent.

Similarly, Josue Puente and Dr. Stephanie Alvarez document contemporary efforts in the Rio Grande Valley to grow MAS in public schools. Their article, "Texas Resistance: Mexican American Studies and the Fight Against Whiteness and White Supremacy in K-12 at the Turn of the 21st Century," chronicles various mobilizing efforts across the state to support public school teachers, from grant funded university projects like *Historias Americanas* (of which the second author is a part of), to university-teacher-community collaborations like the MAS Teachers' Academy, and student-led community efforts such as The Grand Narrative. Their article focuses on one particular grant funded project—the Social Studies Through Authentic Relevant Content (SSTARC) project, which provides K-5th grade teachers with opportunities to engage in self-reflexive, anti-racist perspectives as teachers learn local and regional Mexican American history. Their work points to the importance of cultivating these professional development spaces that actively resist white supremacy. While there is some overlap in the work of each of these spaces, Puente and Alvarez's article reminds us that working across our respective spaces is critical in a state that continues to reinforce white supremacy in education.

Dr. Nicolas García's and Anthony Gonzales' article, "Cinco Dedos: A Mexican American Studies framework," describes a conceptual framework developed by the second author and Keli Rosa Cabunoc to assist educators in creating a multidisciplinary curriculum that addresses the needs of students enrolled in the State Board of Education approved MAS high school elective course. Their five-pronged approach is rooted in a Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) that 1) centers the knowledge and cultural production of Chicanas/x/os in curriculum development; 2) promotes an interdisciplinary approach to teaching MAS; 3) engages students through art and expressive culture; 4) takes a student-centered philosophy that honors the knowledge students bring to the classroom; 5) and cultivates community involvement as part of students' personal and social development.

Dr. Elizabeth D. Rivas, who is also affiliated with the MAS Teachers' Academy, shares her research on social studies teachers in Texas who are up against an institutionalized master narrative embedded within public institutions. Inspired by her experiences as a social studies teacher for twelve years, curriculum coach, and scholar in a district that is majority Mexican American, Rivas reflects on a memory of one of her students asking her, "Where were the Mexicans?"—a question that points to students' awareness of the pervasive invisibility of Mexican Americans in the curriculum. Through a socio-transformative constructivist framework, Rivas investigates how Latina social studies teachers in her district disrupt parameters set forth by local school districts, board members, and the Texas Education Agency. Rivas' essay is instructive as she emphasizes the need for educators to disrupt master narratives in the social studies curriculum, either by covertly teaching unwritten and unofficial histories of communities of color in social studies or teaching ethnic studies courses like MAS, which center the perspectives of Mexican Americans. As she notes, teachers' pedagogies and how they respond to restrictive policies will impact students and their communities.

In "The future of middle school education-Chicana maestras and vignettes," Dr. Alexa M. Proffitt, Antonia Alderete, Megan Villa, and Violetta Villarreal offer an interdisciplinary research framework that weaves anticolonial theory and Chicana feminist epistemology in middle level teacher education. As the authors note, the experiences of Chicana teachers are often silenced in educational research. This is more so the case of Chicana middle level schoolteachers. The authors—Alexa Proffitt, who served as instructor with pre-service teachers—and clinical teachers—Alderete, Villa, and Villarreal—worked together, first in a

Service Learning in Social Studies course with a strong emphasis in anticolonial theory, and then in a clinical teaching course. Having created a community of trust, the maestras wrote and shared vignettes that highlight a number of themes that were critical to their growth as Chicana maestras. Through this anticolonial methodology, Chicana maestras interrogated what they were learning in colonized spaces and unearthed new knowledge critical to dismantling coloniality in middle level classrooms. Their collective knowledge is relevant to this special issue on MAS in K-12 Texas schools as the authors shed new conocimientos on the importance of anti-colonial research approaches and Chicana feminist epistemologies in teacher education, and the possibilities of subverting colonial ways of thinking and being through collective learning in clinical teaching. These epistemic spaces are critical more than ever in teacher education programs that are preparing future educators to challenge settler colonial and white supremacist laws like HB 3979 and SB 3, the latter which will have greater repercussions for students in public schools.

This special issue also includes two book reviews. Kristel A. Orta-Puente offers an excellent review of Philis M. Barragán-Goetz's most recently published book, *Reading, writing, and revolution: Escuelitas and the emergence of a Mexican American identity in Texas* (2020). Puente-Orta outlines the book's historiographical narrative of *escuelitas*—community-organized and funded schools that emerged at the turn of the century as a response against the cultural and linguistic assimilationist practices of U.S. public schooling. *Escuelitas* served as a form of cultural resistance against the segregated Mexican school system and cultivated children's ethnic identity through culturally responsive curriculum that parallels what Mexican American studies teachers do in their classrooms today.

Alpha Martínez-Suárez reviews *The Undocumented Americans*, a National Book Award Finalist written by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, one of the first undocumented immigrants to graduate from Harvard. Martínez-Suarez's review reminds us of the divergent yet connected plight of undocumented communities and the importance of learning about and understanding their experiences from these communities directly. In her review, Martínez-Suarez asks us to sit with the intimate realities undocumented communities encounter in K-12 schools, higher education, and within elderly populations, however in a way that does not diminish these communities to sound bites or tragic stories. Cornejo Villavicencio makes clear the necessity of undocumented communities sharing their own stories, as opposed to being written about in

ways that deny them nuance and a full sense of humanity. These are themes that are central to the Mexican American Studies movement, and Martínez-Suarez's review is a reminder of the importance of communities representing themselves and the existence of intersecting oppressions within our communities.

We want to express our gratitude to the contributors of this special issue for their activism, labor, and commitment to the movement, and for documenting and sharing their expertise here, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. We also want to acknowledge the fact that so many other voices and actors are a part of this movement, too many to possibly include here. We look forward to the movement for Mexican American Studies continuing to grow and creating more opportunities to share and document our histories and knowledges from multiple perspectives. We are grateful to the lead editors of the *Association for Mexican American Educators* journal, Drs. Patricia Sánchez and Lucila Ek, and managing editor, Christian Fallas Escobar, for his superb editorial guidance. Thank you for creating this opportunity to document the movement for Mexican American Studies in Pre-K-12 Texas schools.

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