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**CONSTRUIR Y NO DESTRUIR (BUILD AND DO NOT DESTROY):
TUCSON RESISTING**

On the evening of January 12, 2012 the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) school board voted 4-1 to eliminate the highly successful and quantitatively proven Mexican American Studies Program (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). Sitting in the school board meeting that evening with my then thirteen year old son, we watched in disbelief as board members stated their reasons for banning a program that had improved graduation rates, increased matriculation to higher education and even improved standardized test scores. My son had helped me write a three minute “call to the audience” statement and I was amazed at how much he had internalized about the struggle – the different teachers impacted, the politicians’ names, even the analysis that the elimination of this program was not based in fact, but was rather a race-based decision. After years of struggling to battle the neoliberal racism¹ embedded in Arizona’s HB2281 (now ARS 15-111 & 15-112), removing opportunities for Chican@² youth, and all youth for that matter, the Mexican American Studies Program was eliminated. My son turned to me in disbelief and simply said, “How can they *do* that?”

Not only did the state and school district “*do* that,” the following week TUSD representatives entered the Mexican American Studies (MAS) classrooms and boxed up the supposed “subversive” and “anti-American” literature that included works by Sandra Cisneros, Rudy Acuña, Luis Alberto Urrea, Ana Castillo and other highly acclaimed Latin@ and Native authors (Image 1).

Students watched while the stories of their *antepasados* were removed, rejected and banned. The message sent to the students was very clearly that their histories and cultures and identities do not belong in the public school system and need to be shipped off to the textbook depository in order for the classrooms to be safe.

One of the MAS teachers, Curtis Acosta, had been teaching Chican@ literature for almost two decades when his curriculum and the literature he taught were instantaneously forbidden. The very nature of his thoughts and the ways in which he structured his curriculum, were now illegal. Determined to continue to offer the curriculum, he began meeting with his students on Sundays at a local community center and developed what we then referred to as “Sunday School” (Image 2).

¹ Neoliberal racism is a strategy that rejects (and claims to be offended by) older forms of racism grounded in claims of white superiority. Neoliberal racism instead favors an approach that claims to be “racially neutral” in its insistence on assessing failure and success exclusively in terms of “individual responsibility.”

² The use of the “@” in Chican@ emphasizes gender neutrality and recognizes gender and sexual difference particularly within a very gendered history within the discipline of Chicano Studies.

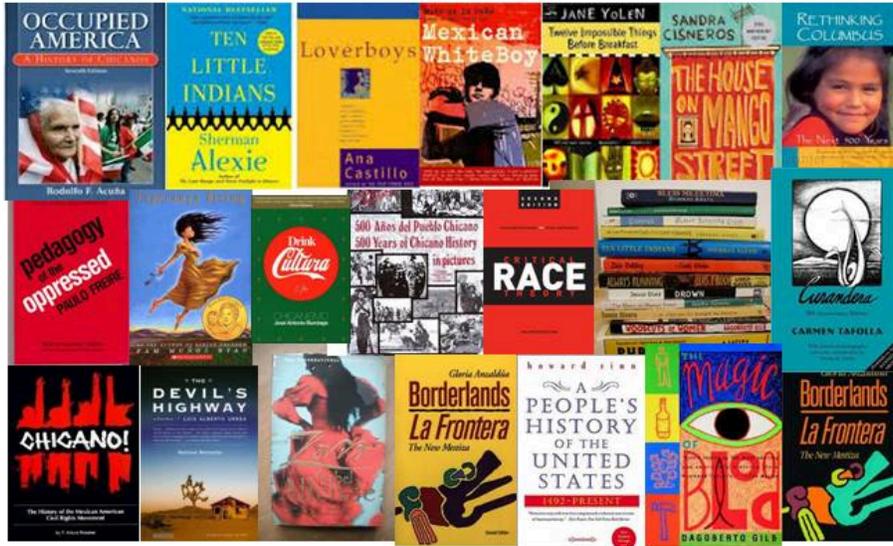


Image 1. Some of the banned books from the TUSD book ban.



Image 2. Curtis Acosta collaborating with youth during Sunday CLASS in South Tucson.

Sunday School became the sole remnants of the MAS program as Curtis Acosta and I began to discuss the need for some kind of mechanism to continue this offering for the community's youth, while also adding an additional incentive (college credit) for these academic warriors. Through our collaboration together, and using the resources I had at my college, we developed a mechanism for Chican@ Literature and Social Studies, or CLASS, which students could attend on Sundays and receive free college credit for a course that was no longer available in the public school system. As a result of CLASS, and Curtis Acosta's commitment to the students and to culturally responsive teaching, CLASS was labeled as the new MAS Freedom School.

CLASS was really the impetus for us, several MAS teachers and myself, to develop a larger structure under which to house our Freedom School. As a result, the Xican@ Institute for Teaching & Organizing

(XITO) was developed in direct response to the attack on Mexican American Studies and the removal of the decolonial barrio pedagogies³ that had brought such acclaim to this high school Ethnic Studies program. We realized that there was an urgent need for activist-oriented pedagogy and community organizing skills, which also drove our creation of XITO as a structure to go beyond just the pedagogy and philosophy of MAS and to consciously develop an urban education institute as a direct form of resistance and liberation.

As our collective built XITO with the determination to continue our work as liberatory educators, a vibrant grassroots institute steeped in love blossomed out of insidious, angry hate from the state. XITO's mission to support the Xican@/Latin@ community through teacher preparation, social justice pedagogy, and community organizing was framed in the context of addressing the implications of neoliberal legislation while continuing the legacy of the MAS program. The "X" in Xican@ emphasizes the Xican@ indigenous, decolonial pedagogy XITO offers as well as how our collective tackles all aspects of the organization. *Indigenismo* is at the core of XITO and while we recognize that the spaces in which we teach are in themselves colonial structures, we attempt to rethink and reclaim those spaces with a decolonial lens. This can be seen in how we structure curriculum, hold meetings, make decisions or even recognize the land on which we are gathered and making conscious efforts to bring that awareness to our students and participants.

The indigenous epistemology at the root of XITO came directly from the now banned Mexican American Studies Program. While other effective urban educational programs utilizing effective pedagogical/curricular frameworks that directly address the needs of Chican@ youth exist throughout the Southwest (and throughout the country for that matter⁴), there were (before the State of Arizona outlawed MAS along with TUSD dismantling the department in 2012) some significant distinctions of Tucson's MAS program, curriculum, and pedagogy. The following characteristics that set MAS apart were: it was the only K-12 comprehensive Chican@ Studies program that was fully integrated into an urban public school system that served thousands of students over a 14-year period; it was the only urban public school program that came under full attack from the State (via state legislation – AZ HB 2281 now ARS 15-111 & ARS 15-112) and its school district – TUSD (in collision with the State through its elimination of MAS); its teachers were demonized and dehumanized via slander and libel in the mass popular media by TUSD officials, right-wing political zealots, and supposed Democrat sympathizers; personal law suits were filed by State operatives (funded by State officials) against MAS teachers⁵; the daily harassment of all of the MAS teachers by TUSD administration and State officials; its own district's (TUSD) banning of books written by Chican@, Black and Native authors that were utilized in its curriculum; three independent audits/studies on the program that demonstrated unprecedented success and efficacy for Chican@ youth in an urban public education program; the firing of the MAS director and an MAS teacher for standing up to and contesting the State of Arizona, the TUSD administration and governing board to preserve MAS; and most importantly, the utilization of a Chican@ Indigenous-based de-colonizing pedagogical framework that we refer to as a *Barrio Pedagogy* (Arce & Fernández, 2014).

The prominent de-colonizing and culturally affirming components of *Barrio Pedagogy* that the MAS teachers utilized within their comprehensive K-12 daily pedagogical practices were: *Tezcatlipoca* (memory, self-reflection), *Quetzalcoatl* (precious and beautiful knowledge), *Huitzilopochtli* (*la voluntad* – the will to act), and *Xipe Totec* (transformation). These four principles are represented in the center of

³ Decolonial barrio pedagogy was the teaching model for the Tucson Mexican American Studies Program. See more details on the following pages.

⁴ See Mexicayotl Academy in Nogales, AZ; Cuahuhtli Academy in Austin, TX; [Anahuacalmecac International Preparatory High School](#) in Los Angeles, CA or the Legacy Youth Project in Napa, CA.

⁵ "MAS teachers" refers to teachers who taught specifically in the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican American Studies Program. These teachers were public school teachers who helped to build and facilitate the MAS program.

what is commonly referred to as the “Aztec Calendar,” signifying the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) and the four elements of life (earth, wind, fire and water) (Image 3).



Image 3.

The indigenous epistemology of barrio pedagogy is the root of XITO’s educational training that has grown in its offerings from small workshops of eight to ten educators, to our most recent institute attracting over fifty teachers, professors, community organizers and administrators from across the country. By offering these professional development institutes, our collective work is based on a conscious reframing of Arizona’s strategy of exporting anti-immigrant practices to one of exporting critically conscious, culturally responsive pedagogy along with organizing skills necessary to battle the neoliberal attacks that teachers will undoubtedly face. This direct action of resistance allows CLASS to be offered to high school students for college credit, free of charge, by applying the fees participants pay for an institute to the tuition costs for CLASS.

Grounding XITO’s institutes in the indigenous based framework of MAS in itself has been a form of resistance to the traditional hegemonic structure educators are normally exposed to in their training further creating a counterstory to the Eurocentricity of our educational system and practices. By practicing these traditions in an educational/learning space, we are reclaiming and recentering indigeneity within the context of teaching, learning and organizing. The gathering of XITO participants under one roof generates a learning energy that I have not experienced before – it is a humbling, invigorating energy that comes from young people and elders together learning and sharing through an epistemology that is innovative while familiar and familial. Having scholars in the room who many of us studied in graduate school, together with young Chican@ activists transforming their communities through grassroots organizing in dialogue with a cohort of Brooklyn College undergraduates determined to create their own Hispanic Studies Department (as just a few of the groups represented in one cohort), creates a spiral of knowledge and stories that are overlapping and informing one another yet all coming together in a sort of collective consciousness. The power of this collective consciousness can be felt not only in XITO institutes, but has also been palpable throughout the movement to save Ethnic Studies in Arizona.



Image 4. Participants from across the country dialogue at XITO’s Summer Institute, 2014 in Tucson, AZ.

Exactly three years after the TUSD board meeting during which the MAS program was banned, we all gathered once again – this time in the San Francisco 9th Circuit Court of Appeals courtroom. Allies and colleagues had traveled to hear oral arguments in the appeal against HB2281 – in essence we were in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals to witness Mexican American Studies on trial. As I looked around I realized that the faces in that courtroom were many of the same faces from January 12, 2012. This time it was my daughter who was with me, the same age as my son had been in 2012. That morning we had all participated in a sunrise *ceremonia* in front of the courthouse, copal smoke burning as the circle of supporters grew, danzantes Aztecas offered a blessing, and the weight of the long struggle was evident on the faces of the MAS teachers and their children. It struck me that with our children and some of our parents present, we were collectively living and learning how struggle and resilience take time and the commitment to seven generations before us and the seven to come after us was heavy in the air.



Image 5. Former MAS Director, Sean Arce, gives thanks to supporters at the opening ceremony in front of the 9th Circuit Court in San Francisco, CA.

We left the 9th Circuit courthouse with cautious optimism after hearing the arguments of the legal teams on both sides of Maya Arce v. John Huppenthal case. Arizona’s attorney seemed to struggle and in the end some of us felt victorious though we will not know the results for some time. Others of us, carrying the

historical trauma that is always present in colonized communities, felt doubt that justice will prevail – history has a way of repeating itself and resistance takes time, so we wait. We all, however, carry the knowledge that our children will continue to fight for the humanity of all young people and for an education that reflects true histories and mirrors love and respect back to every student who steps into a classroom. This is what gives us hope and this is why we know in the end, we will win.

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AFFILIATIONS

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