

The Fight over Mexican-American Books

Latino-rights activists are challenging Arizona's ban on school books and courses that provide students with information about Mexican-American history and culture, as Dennis J Bernstein describes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Arizona's resistance to allowing school books and courses that teach Mexican-American history and culture has generated resistance, both in underground efforts to provide the books to students and to challenge the ban on courses in courts as discriminatory.

The Librotraficante Caravan, co-organized in Houston Texas by writer, teacher and activist, Tony Diaz, headed back to Arizona this month with a new shipment of banned books. According to Diaz, Houston activists made the 1,000-plus-mile ride once again to draw attention to Arizona's decision to remove from classrooms books mostly dealing with Mexican-American culture.

The journey also included the restocking of the underground libraries they formed during their 2012 Caravan, and updates on the advancement of Ethnic Studies in each state they pass through. According to the group's press release, "With their 2012 Caravan, the Librotraficantes joined a nationwide movement to defy Arizona's ban and to keep it in check."

There is also a federal court case, which commenced on June 26, contesting the book ban and the ban on ethnic studies in Arizona, that the caravan was organized to call attention to. According to Diaz, the court case will be reviewed again with new evidence consisting of studies proving that the outlawed Mexican American Studies courses in Tucson increased student success and learning power at many levels. The case had been reviewed by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, which sent the case back to the Arizona Supreme Court to be considered with the additional evidence.

"We were in the courtroom when a Federal Judge told America that if you have proof that a course helps a particular group of students succeed, yet you outlaw the course, that looks like discrimination," said Tony Diaz. "We hope that the upcoming Arizona Supreme Court ruling will drive a stake in the heart of this un-American law that tramples on Intellectual freedom."

The six-city caravan departed from the Casa Ramirez Folk Art Gallery in Houston on June 21, and made stops in San Antonio, El Paso, Las Cruces and Albuquerque before culminating in Tucson, Arizona.

Dennis Bernstein: Why don't you remind people all about what this caravan and what it was meant to do.

Tony Diaz: Thanks for all the work that you do for freedom of speech. And, really, that's what the first caravan was about. When our crew here in Houston, Texas heard about students lamenting that books had been yanked out of their hands from Tucson classrooms, it perked our ears. We looked into it.

That's when we found out that Arizona had passed this draconian law that prohibits courses that promote the overthrow of the government. Which is basically what they have accused books of poetry, literature, you know, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Critical Race Theory*, *House on Mango Street*. You know what that is – that's straight up fascism and oppression. So, we said, "If you're going to ban the books, we're going to smuggle them back."

And the students wanted the books back. So we started an 1,100 [mile], six city caravan, and we started underground libraries, basically tracing the Chicano literary history of the Southwest and making stops in each of the cities along the way. If people go to librotraficante.com they can see the original map, and it really does trace the legacy of literature in the Southwest. This time around was really powerful, Dennis, and I really want to share this with your readers, is that we revisited all the underground libraries, and we stocked them with banned books. And each of them is thriving. [...] So it was really powerful, to not only convene with our communities again, but also ... get all the way to Tucson for the Arizona Supreme Court hearing.

And it's beautiful to see our community defy that ban. I'm hoping the rest of the country catches up. But people should know that right now [week of June 26], at the Arizona Supreme Court, the ban of Mexican American Studies is being tested. We hope it will get overturned. If not, people need to know, if that is not overturned, that will be the law that suppresses African American Studies, Mexican American Studies, Asian American Studies, LGBTQ Studies, Women's Studies, in every corner of the land. So it's important that we keep an eye on this. And that we all work really hard to keep spreading all this knowledge, right now.

DB: Say a little bit more about how the banned writers have participated, what their reactions have been. It is really incomprehensible, shall we say, in 2017 that the folks in Tucson, and other places, are afraid of extraordinary, beautiful books that have been the mainstay in many libraries all over the country.

TD: No, it's shocking, it's depressing. At the same time, we gotta remind folks that it's our communities that edify us, inspire us. Because, yeah, it is

troubling to know that there are forces at work that want to stifle these beautiful books, such as *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya. But we are in a Chicano Renaissance when someone who is from a Mexican American background can read those works and wind up convening with Mr. Anaya, himself.

It was wonderful because the caravan passed through Albuquerque, and we stopped at Rodolfo's house. We took some tequila shots with him just one more time to be edified spiritually and physically, but on top of it he said "Occupy Arizona." He donated books, he donated some funds to the cause. He gave us shelter and fired us up.

[...] So people know the far right can try and defy that book. It's going to be in February, an opera. This may be the first Chicano opera. So ... they can pass all these racist bills, we're still going to fight it. The underground libraries will flourish. They're flourishing in every place that they [exist]... they've taken on lives of their own. It's beautiful. And people can see the addresses if they go to librotraficante.com, they can see the addresses.

But, *Bless Me, Ultima*... we were at a farmers' market in Los Habanos, spreading word about the underground library, the ban, and a mom said, "You know, I took my son to see the play version of *Bless Me, Ultima*. My son didn't want to go. He hated school. But he was crying at the end of it."

And he said "I know what this is about, I see that, that owl is [...] us, it's my family, it's all of us." And that's what Arizona wants to prevent us... from having—that powerful experience. But, you know, what's great is they can't stop us. It's too late. The genie is out of the botella, and it's never going back in. It's time for a renaissance, right now.

DB: What is the proof? What is the power of these programs?

TD: Oh, man, so, even now they will be used in court. For example, Nolan Cabrera has written the definitive research that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Tucson Unified School District Mexican American program, kindergarten through 12th grade, not only helped students do better in Mexican American Studies courses, but that transferred over to reading and writing scores, graduation rates.

Stanford had a study that also proved the power of culturally relevant courses. But, on top of it, the court case has had at the top of it, Curtis Acosta, one of the original MAS [Mexican American Studies] instructors, Maya Arce, one of the students, who is the daughter of one of the founders of the program.

DB: A well read fellow, of course.

TD: By the way, it really is mind blowing, on top of it, what we heard as evidence is that this far right-winger, whose out of office, by the way. So, I'm not even sure why he keeps coming back and haunting America. He won't go away to... I guess the Devil doesn't need him right now. You know, basically he keeps citing Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, who, you know, it's a powerful book. He claims he read it. So, evidently even if you read it, you may not turn to social justice.

DB: We're speaking with Tony Diaz, a teacher, an activist, a visionary, one of the founders of El Librotraficante. And they are smuggling books, can you believe it? They're smuggling books back into Arizona because there, in Arizona, which you could say is still Texas, people say it is, they say that these are dangerous books. These are books, you all are smuggling books that are going to overthrow the country, they are going to corrupt the minds of students.

But, you know, we would broadcast from Arizona and we spoke to a bunch of the students who were in these programs, that were counting on these books. And these students talked about, and I don't exaggerate, they say they called them, the programs and the books, "life savers." We spoke to kids who were contemplating suicide because they had so little self worth. And then here comes these programs that transforms their lives. You want to talk about that?

TD: By all means, and here's the other part of it. Obviously Arizona doesn't... Arizona officials don't care that their youth are telling them that these classes influenced their lives. Obviously, Arizona officials don't care that we have evidence. Luis Rodriguez, his life was saved from gangs by literature. Obviously, they are deaf to those stories. But guess what? Now, they've got research that proves it.

But here's the scary thing: they're not going to listen to the students. They're not going to listen to the teachers. Day one of the trial, the Arizona attorney was grilling a former math teacher in the program because of a poem he wrote. They were grilling him because he wrote a poem, that he never performed in public; it was for a conference that was outside of class. And he was angry, so perhaps he ridiculed some public officials. He also spoke Spanish in class, called the people [who shut down the program] "mentirosos" which means liars.

People should know that the lawyers for Arizona are persecuting teachers who wrote poems. That's it. The poem was not used in class. It wasn't in any of these dangerous books. It wasn't in the curriculum. They really want all of our freedom of speech, and imaginations, to be controlled. It is mind-boggling.

DB: Imagine, calling a politician a liar! Oh, my gosh, it's like a shocking thing. Have you ever heard a politician lie? Are you laughing?

TD: I'm laughing, and I'm crying.

DB: Crying.

TD: And, I'm trying to get a lawyer ready because if I... okay I've written a lot of poems now. Do we all have to lawyer up, now? Is that what we have to do?

DB: Well, I heard that some lawyers use the law as a legal excuse to lie. And we see that quite a bit. But, we're talking about truth tellers, we're talking about books that are full of profound truths, visionary thinkers who help to change history. These are folks, the books you're smuggling back into Phoenix, into Arizona, these are the books that not only don't lie but they help create a new language, for a new way of living. That's the nature of the poet.

TD: Exactly. And, now, this is a chance for the American imagination to expand in ways that we all need to have happen. But let me tell you what's going on in that courtroom. The judge threw out the possibility of introducing evidence we have about [former Arizona State Senator, John] Huppenthal's involvement in other related legislation.

The Judge essentially said "I'm not going to let you admit the evidence where Huppenthal supported English-only laws [because] there's a lot of evidence that says a country that allows too many languages is also becoming weaker." So, the judge basically sighted white-supremacy literature as balancing out the ability to make any connections between English-only laws.

So, what I'm terrified about, is all the precedents that will be set in this court case, if it is upheld. Because it's going to curtail the imagination. And, you know, hey, *The Tempest* [by Shakespeare] was cited. You gotta get your summer reading list together. Buy all the books that are cited in the Arizona Banned Court Trials. So you can add *The Tempest* to that.

Maybe *The Tempest* will save Mexican American literature. Because it was an extended conversation about *The Tempest* where Chris Acosta used it in his classroom, and you had the Arizona lawyers arguing about what it could mean. And it basically shows how, in the hands of people with no imagination, they can try and... basically, deport William Shakespeare, from the curriculum!

The sense this makes is nonsense, Dennis.

DB: Alright, well, it is an extraordinary situation, banning books... Librotraficante is so far on the edge, ahead of its time, in the middle of its time, more important now than ever.

Let's just come back for a moment to the court case. Again, just briefly remind

people what's happening in court? The caravan went to the courtroom, there are actions. There's probably a break in the court right now. But what's at the heart of the matter, at this court case?

TD: Sure, and so, right now [week of June 26] at the Arizona Supreme Court, this [was] the first week of what could be up to three weeks of testimony, where the court case is being reviewed. It is in place, right now. So, right now there is a law in Arizona banning Mexican American Studies. This is the first week, of course. There's about a six lawyer team, working pro-bono. They are New York lawyers that have come in, and they are doing a great job.

Richard Martinez is the legal eagle leading the team, but Arizona has made it very difficult. So, we came in to spread awareness, to show support, because the Tucson [educator] family should have been... they should have been extolled for this curriculum that they had in place for several years. Instead, they've been maligned, fired, sued. And the Arizona officials placed the first week of proceedings, this week, in one month it will be the second week, and two months later, there may be a third week.

So, that already is difficult to deal with. But what people need to know is that if this law is upheld, it can spread just like the Anti-Immigrant Bill [SB 1070] that Arizona has spread. And that's the real issue that people should be concerned about.

[...] I'm also happy that when El Librotraficante joined the national movement, to keep this law in check, which was enforced in 2012, it has not spread. And it's like here in Texas, we always look at the same language that was out there, that's been out there, to sniff out any similar laws and we've done that.

Likewise, we need people to pay attention to what's going on here in the court, because they have to make sure that other right-wingers or anybody who wants to oppress freedom of speech doesn't copy the language. And that's what we're listening to in the courtroom, is how in the world is this wretched discrimination going to keep in place, right now?

I'm not sure why this is going in place, as your listeners know, racist former sheriff, Joe Arpaio's tent city was torn down recently. Jan Brewer is no longer in office. She is the former Arizona governor who signed this law into place, as well as the show-me-your-papers law. Why are their legacies, of their racists laws, still in place? You know, it would be wise for Arizona to drop this case. And I'm hoping we can still believe in the courts. I'm hoping this can be overturned. I'm hoping they can implement it.

But here's the good news, in the course of that time, in Texas, I've actually

submitted a textbook for Mexican American Studies in Texas. In California, as your listeners enjoy, now some major high school districts require students to take Ethnic Studies before graduating. And [in] Hawaii they've implemented Ethnic Studies.

So, it's time for Arizona to foster a curriculum that promotes a multicultural [view]. That's what's at stake in the Tucson courtroom right now. And people need to pay attention to it. I think it's going to be several months before they come up with a decision. But it's going to be a few months where they actually go over all the details, and all the evidence.

DB: Alright, well we're going to leave it right there. But how do people get more information about Librotraficante, what you all are doing, maybe they want to participate.

TD: That would be beautiful. If they go to librotraficante.com, they can see, if they click on the tab that says "Banned" they can get a list of all the books that were on the curriculum. I'm sure some of their favorite authors are on there. They can also click on Underground Libraries to find out where all the underground libraries are. There's actually even more underground libraries, but they are so underground that they're not listed on it. These other ones are at communities centers that people could volunteer at. Keep the books too. And then on Facebook, we will be posting updates on what's going on in the courtroom.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
