Writing from the Heart: Historia of a Banned Book

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In Spring 2012, Tucson Unified School District suspended its Mexican American Studies program in compliance with the Arizona Supreme Court ruling The Court found that the program was in violation of Arizona HB 2281, popularly known as the "ban on ethnic studies programs" in K-12 schools. In order to comply with the ruling, the district immediately canceled all classes, reassigned faculty, and removed the curriculum and supplemental materials from classrooms. Suffer Smoke by Elena Diaz Bjorkquist was on the list of banned curriculum materials. Suffer Smoke is a collection of short stories rooted in Morenci, Arizona, the mining town where Bjorkquist grew up. This interview, conducted in the historia format, seeks to understand Bjorkquist's thoughts and perspectives about the events in order to position her personal experience as a writer within the current sociopolitical context.

Introduction

In 1997, the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) introduced the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program to its K-12 schools. MAS was intended to support the large Latino/a student population of the district by familiarizing students with Mexican American perspectives, particularly through history and literature in order to faciliate higher engagement in curriculum . The program positively affected student performance on standardized tests as well as high school graduation rates (Frenel 2012). One of the most significant components of the program was the inclusion of local history in its curriculum, and the development of activities that

aligned with the program's goals of fostering critical thinkers who are vested in their communities.

Since 2004, the Arizona state legislature had attempted to pass at least two laws outlawing ethnic studies programs (O'Leary & Romero 2011). During 2006, in the midst of an already hostile climate in which Mexican and Mexican American communities were arguably targets of state-enacted intolerance[1], Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union, told Tucson Magnet High School students that "Republicans hate Latinos" (Duda 2010). The backlash from her speech was almost immediate. Tom Horne, then-State Superintendent of Public Instruction, began investigating the MAS program to determine if the faculty, curriculum, or materials condoned or promoted values of separatism and racial division. He continued to work with members of the state legislature to establish an anti-ethnic studies law, and, in December 2010, Arizona HB 2281 passed into law. HB 2281 mandates that there shall be no state-funded educational program in Arizona public schools (K-12) that promotes ethnic solidarity, racial resentment, or unpatriotic sentiment (Arizona House Bill 2281). The MAS program was then terminated in February 2012.

When the MAS program ended, the classes were suspended, faculty was reassigned or dismissed, and all curriculum and supplemental materials were confiscated. The materials included at least eighty books, among them several award-winning titles and authors from many different ethnic and national backgrounds. According to the Arizona Supreme Court ruling, these texts promote—or were taught in such a way that they seemed to promote—unpatriotic values and racial dissent (Duda 2010). However, MAS supporters argued that the program (instead) fosters the development of critical thinking skills and social awareness. In a school district where

1. For decades, state legislators had attempted to pass legilsation criminalization of Arizona's undocumented immigrant population. Eventually signed in 2010, SB 1070 facilitates racial profiling in order to determine immigrant status, and mandates criminal charges against undocumented immigrants as well as U.S. citizens who knowingly provide transportation or shelter for them. The aspects of the law which promote racial profiling affect undocumented immigrants, but also any person that law enforcement determines to be "reasonably suspicious" based on appearance, language skills, and location.

over 60% of the student population identifies as Mexican American[2], the program offered multiple cultural perspectives and placed Mexican American ones at the center of the curriculum in order to help students understand that that their community has a place in local, national, and international dialogues (Cammarota 2012). Students, parents, educators, and civil rights activists continue to express their dismay at the disbandment of the MAS program and the seeming disregard for the TUSD Mexican American community by both the state and district administrators. MAS alumni have been some of the most active supporters of the program, staging public protests, walk-outs, and presentions both locally and nationally.[3] The MAS alumni emphasize the positive educational instruction they received, as well as how an instructional program that embraced and incorporated diversity raised their own levels of community, cultural, and social awareness, giving them a sense of empowerment and pride.

There was also an immediate response from educational and literary communities. A number of authors whose works were effectively banned[4] from instruction issued public statements.[5] Their comments reveal concerns that book-banning— as well as closure of ethnic studies programs like MAS— poses a serious threat to freedom of expression, equality in education, and respect for diverse perspectives (Reese 2012). But none of them spoke in-depth to the specific context of their own writings and the impact of the law on the function or purpose of their writings.

This research attempts to understand the significant positive role that literature in the MAS curriculum had for students and the Chicano/a community by examining the experience of Elena DíazBjörkquist, whose work has been deemed inappropriate for instruction through a Mexican American Studies educationalframework by Arizona HB 2281.

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2. TUSD is the largest school district in Tucson with over 51,000 students enrolled in 2012. The majority of the students are Mexican American , at almost 62% (Department of Accountability and Research, 2012).
3. Alumni engage in presentations at local and national conferences and events to bring attention to the on-going struggle to reinstate the program and defeat HB 2281.
4. The materials in question were removed from MAS classrooms and placed in storage in district warehouses. Some texts remain available in school libraries and TUSD classrooms, but it is illegal to teach them using the MAS theoritical framework (outlined further in this article).
5. Sherman Alexie; Luis Alberto Urrea; Sandra Cisneros; Bill Bigelow; and Rudy Acuña.

Björkquist's work has been guided by her belief in the values of cultural awareness, self-awareness, and community participation. Her goals have been to inform and educate, as well as provide opportunities for growth and healing. As a native Arizonan, Björkquist's primary work in question, Suffer Smoke, centers the Arizona Mexican American experiences in historical record. This research project explores Björkquist's historia through her own telling in order to better understand the impact of the banning of her book.

Björkquist's story was collected as a *historia*, a form of personal testimony, history, and story rooted in the oral tradition. *Historia, a*s a process,allows the storyteller great agency in determining the form and purpose of the storytelling (Broyles-Gonzales 2001). The performer is in charge of how a story is told, why it is told, and what is told. The performance of *historia* is thus defined by the interconnected roles of the performer, audience, and context. While a *historia* may be initiated through questions -- akin to an interview -- ultimately, it is the performer who "writes" the story. I chose to utilize the *historia* format because it would enable Björkquist to frame her own story, to determine what information to provide and how to relate it.

MAS curriculum materials

The MAS program at TUSD was grounded in the theoretical framework of educational theorist Paulo Freire and drew largely from "critical pedagogy, popular education, and the related participatory action research" (Mexican American Student Services 2012). Freire's model emphasizes that students should be contributors to their own education. As such, the model promotes an educational setting that nurtures partnerships rather than hierarchies in the classroom as students work towards academic, personal, and civic development. Freire argued that the ultimate goal of educational programs should be to stimulate students' awareness of social responsibility (Freire 2009). Towards this end, MAS implemented a transformative curriculum model, through which "the Chicano/Latino

voice, experience, perspective, and history are moved from the margin to the center of the curriculum" (Mexican American Student Services 2012). The MAS curriculum model consists of the following formula:

Culturally & Historically Relevant
+
Social Justice Centered
+
State Standard Aligned (Honors aligned in most cases)
+
Academically Rigorous
=
Mexican American Studies

The books that were utilized by the MAS curriculum included titles that have won prestigious awards and are considered foundational texts in various fields. Both non-fiction and fiction, they range from history books to novels to collections of poetry.[6] Despite variations in fields and genres, the texts have a more complex and diverse form of historical representation than traditional educational texts.

Suffer Smoke

Suffer Smoke (1996) is a collection of short stories that take place in the mining community of Morenci, Arizona. The stories are set in the early and mid-1900s, prior to the expansion of the Phelps-Dodge open pit mine that essentially swallowed the heart of the community.[7] The fictionalized experiences reflect the perspectives and experiences of the Mexican

6. Some of the most recognized titles include *500 Años del Pueblo Chicano/500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures* by E.S. Martinez; *Bless me Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya; *Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau; *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea; *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie; *Occupied America* by Rudy Acuña; *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire; and *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.
7. As the depth and breadth of the mine expanded, areas of the physical community were condemned and collapsed into the new mine boundaries. The neighborhood where Bjorkquist grew up was included.

American/Chicano[8] people in the community. Mining towns were abundant in Arizona in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants comprised the bulk of the labor force while Euro-American workers served in supervisory and administrative capacities. Similar to the agriculture sector, the laboring class in mining companies most often_lived in substandard housing, received less quality services, and was subject to racial prejudice and discrimination. Björkquist's stories reveal first-hand accounts of living under these circumstances, including the development of worker's unions, strikes, and lay-offs. The stories also speak to love, death, birth, hate, friendship, education, home and many other elements of daily life in this community.

Suffer Smoke historicizes the experiences of Chicano/as in Arizona (Palacio 2012). These stories are often underrepresented or excluded from written historical record. Hence, these experiences and perspectives rarely make it into classrooms. The inclusion of texts such as *Suffer Smoke* in school curricula can fill gaps for Chicano/a students, making them more culturally and historically relevant. Relevance is a key component in student engagement in the curriculum, increasing the likelihood for academic success (Mexican American Student Services 2012). The inclusion of the culturally relevant information helps foster pride in self, community, and culture. This, in turn, yields students who are more likely to have a strong sense of ethnic identity. O'Leary and Romero argue that the development of a positive ethnic identity helps diminish the "negative effects of minority stress on mental health" (O'Leary & Romero 2011, 18). Legal policies and social practices that facilitate discrimmination and intolerance based on ethnicity may impact individuals' attitudes about themselves and their communities, causing mental, emotional, and spiritual stress. Consequently, dissolving ethnic studies programs like MAS, and limiting use of curriculum materials such as *Suffer Smoke*, jeopardizes academic and personal well-being among Chicano/a students. Björkquist surmises that the banning of the program and its curriculum materials means that "These

8. Björkquist identifies herself and her community as Chicano/a I use the terms Mexican American and Chicano/a interchangeably.

kids are being robbed of their right to know their heritage….once you learn your history, you're proud" (Palacio 2012).

The Historia of Elena Díaz Björkquist

The town, the town was haunting me

It was - I think - 1990. I was going through a really bad depression and was on medical leave from my job teaching History and Spanish. As I'm recuperating, I started dreaming and the dreams were all taking place in Morenci. The town, the town was haunting me. My husband said, "Well, why don't you start recording these dreams?" So I started writing dreams down. I also remembered that when I was a kid, we had been living in a company house - a little adobe house, a living room, bedroom and kitchen, that was it. The heater leaked gas and my dad woke up to see me foaming in the mouth. He got up to see what was wrong with me and just went down again. Then he figured out it must be gas cause it rises. He stayed down there where it was clear and just reached out and pulled me and dragged me. He crawled, dragged me outside and then went back in and got my mom and my brother. But that memory came back really strong because I died… I must have died. It was going through this darkness and then at the end of the darkness this light and it was my great-grandmother and she had been dead for awhile. She was telling me that I had to come back, that I had to go back to write. That really came into focus for me; that I was to write. I was putting it together with my dreams about Morenci and I had to write about Morenci, those stories needed to be told.

I started being haunted by other people. Like "The Hershey Bar Queen"—it's been in, let's see, five different collections. So it's a very popular story about Reyna, who's fat and what happens to her in the school system and then it gets kind of weird at the end, but that's the way she wanted the story told. I had no idea about any of it; I just woke up one morning and, 'Ah! This woman wants the story told this way 'cause

she came and told me this story'. So I wrote it down immediately so I wouldn't forget it. The story is essentially the way that I heard it that morning. I always say she woke me up at 4 o'clock in the morning to tell me her story.

Suffer Smoke is like regaining my childhood

When I was a kid I remember standing on the playground looking down at the road holding a chain linked fence thinking, 'one of these days I'm going to be on that road that leads out of town and I'm never coming back here.' Though it was a very secure place, I knew my future was not there. I did not want to be a miner's wife. That's what the Chicanas were going to be because they encouraged us to take Home Ec—I never took Home Ec. I was going to go to college and not be a miner's wife. That was the important thing. Though I loved Morenci it was just not as I saw my future, because I wanted more.

Once I chose that goal of going to college I also realized I had to do well in school. If you were a Chicana or Chicano, you had to fight to get the classes that you wanted. There's story in

Suffer Smoke called "You don't need College Prep" and that's exactly what the men were told. The women weren't even told, just kind of geared towards Home Ec. You learned to sew, you learned to cook, and take care of babies. The boys were geared towards things like Machine Shop, Wood Shop, Auto Shop and all those things that were trades for the mine to hire.

What's fascinating is that after *Suffer Smoke* came out, we went back to do a reading in Morenci/Clifton. The Vice Principal took me on a tour of the high school and darn if they didn't have the best Home Ec department! They had the whole thing set up so that there was a living room and there were kitchens and a sewing area! He was so proud of that and then he took me to the shops. They had this huge, big barn-like thing for all the different shops. I was just incredulous! Blown away. I didn't say anything, but they're still training the people - the kids - to feed into this mining operation.

That's why it was selected by TUSD

There have been books written about Morenci, but not from the experience of the miners and their families. *Suffer Smoke* was the first in that sense. And that's why it was selected by Tucson Unified School District Chicano Studies. When I moved here, the guy that was the head of the program at that time and then another guy who was part of the TUSD administration, called me in for a meeting. He knew about the book, and he said that he wanted the book.

Stories of hope

It comes back to my great-grandmother and the sense that I had to write those stories. Way back when it happened - when I was a little girl - we didn't talk about it anymore. My mom said, "Oh, you were dreaming," but my grandmother said, "Okay, mi'ja. You just remember what she said and it will come back to you someday." So I just put it away. But now, I could share it and my intent wasn't to share it with the world but it was to share it with other Chicanos. There I was in Chicano/a Studies classes and doing these readings with MeCha and these other kids and I realized that they understood, they were going through what I had gone through, they were still going through it. The stories as I wrote them were stories of hope. It wasn't this 'hey, yeah, I'm gonna get back at those gringos or whoever wants to hold me down.' No, these were stories of hope and resilience of strong people, of people who just wanted to be respected for who they were.

What's really fascinating is that when I was doing readings, people would show up with connections to Morenci. I think it was in Mendocino and I was doing a reading on one of the worst stormy nights and the lights went out. There were two old ladies in the audience and tears streaming down their faces. They had been born in Morenci, they were in their late 80s, and they were living in Fort Bragg.They were widows. They told me that their dad had been a supervisor in the mine and there had been people from New York out and they went into the mine and it collapsed. That's what brought them to tears, they'd been thinking about their dad. They were white women. That was a defining moment for me, thinking that the gringos - the Anglos - would appreciate my stories. My stories are

universal. They are capturing the human experience. It doesn't matter what race or culture you're from - it's human. That's what I had striven for, that they would be humanizing.

It's a dishonor to have that book banned

Alice Walker, the author, was my neighbor in Anderson Valley. One time she told me, "Elena, you are the memory of Morenci." I collect and preserve the history of the people about this town that is not there anymore and that's what the book is. My family, my grandparents and parents and aunts and uncles, we all came from this town that is not there anymore. The circumstances are not there, but those circumstances were prevalent throughout the Southwest.

There were other towns in Arizona that learned about that when I would do the readings. People would come up and say, "You wrote about Bisbee, you wrote about Douglas, you wrote about Ray." I realized that I was giving voice to these people that had not been able to do it.

It makes me feel very sad about the voices being silenced in TUSD. It makes me think about my cousins and the rest of the Chicanos that didn't have opportunities in Morenci. There are other Chicanos who are not being given opportunities. Opportunity to see what a *raza*[9] is capable of, what others have done to overcome barriers, and that's what the book was about. It was about people who were not treated very well, but had not lost the sense of who they were. And eventually I saw that was it - we wanted to have respect.We wanted to be honored. And it is a dishonor to have that book banned.

Definitely a healing process

It was definitely a healing process. I think I was coming into my own when I first started writing those stories and I put those two people together who were in me—Elena and Helen—and Elena won. I guess it started at Travis Air Force Base.[10] I could not go on being Helen anymore. I returned to being Elena.Everything went back to Elena, my driver's license, everything. Except my birth certificate, that stayed Helen, because

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9. Raza implies a people or community.
10. Björkquist served 18 months in the U.S. Air Force. She was stationed at Travis Air Force Base, where she received training as a lab tech. She also met her husband, Kurt Björkquist at Travis.

that's what they did back then in our town—they anglicized everything, but at home I was Elena and Cuci, that was my nickname. It definitely affected me. I remember there were these stairs. The school was at the bottom of the stairs and home at the top. By the time I made it to the top, I was Elena and Helen had stayed down there. It [writing *Suffer Smoke*] was like, bringing together those two. And Helen, I'm not gonna throw her out. Helen has all those skills and it's like she's a bridge between two cultures. I've selected for myself who I am and it's a mixture of both. Being able to say I understand where the Anglos are coming from and they're scared—I think so many of them are scared because they're seeing the menace of the so-called illegal aliens coming over, they're running scared and looking at us like "well, you look like them too" and that's what's causing all these stupid laws. That's the only explanation I can think of. That's the thing, books like *Suffer Smoke* break down those barriers and get people to see Chicanos and women. We have a perspective.We have validity.We have honor.The same as everybody else and we should be respected.

The thing with change

The thing with change is you can't just go in and say 'Okay, now we're going to do this, now we're going to do that!' You can't treat people like what they're thinking and doing is bad and wrong. If you go in there like that, you're not going to affect any change… It's working a little bit at a time to institute change, it's not going to happen overnight. It's just like with getting the books back into TUSD, it's not going to happen overnight. You know, they're relenting a little bit each time, because they're in the wrong and they know they're in the wrong. But you can't just go saying "You're in the Wrong!" you were wrong you did such a stupid thing, because it just entrenches them in what they're doing. And you can't go back and say you shouldn't have done that. Now, we can only go forward, one step at a time. We can do what we have to. My parents raised a fighter, but you have to know when to let the ire come up. The other way you can't institute change. You have to keep moving forward.

Conclusion:

Elena Díaz Björkquist carried her great-grandmother's directive to write from her heart throughout her life and relied on it to guide her in her writing career. Those words called to her when the town of Morenci began to undergo the dramatic expansion of the Phelps Dodge mine in the 1960s and 70s. As the open pit mine was increased in size, the community was lost to the gaping hole in the earth. Björkquist felt the urgency to record the stories of the people of Morenci and *Suffer Smoke* was born. Chicana author and scholar Alicia Gaspar del Alba argues that many Chicana writers share this sense of responsibility, and are "endowed with the ritual and spiritual responsibility to keep the culture, the memories, the rituals, the stories, superstitions, language, and the images of their (specifically Mexican) heritage" (as cited in Rebolledo, 1995, 159). Like Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Pat Mora, and Aurora Levins Morales,[11] del Gaspar developed the concept that women (as mothers, poets, and historians) are the caretakers of cultural knowledge, responsible for its preservation and deliverance to future generations. As such, they are able to form and transform living and written historical record, as well as the way that individuals relate to it. For the Chicano/a writer and reader, this means being able to find themselves represented in a story. Chicana poet and educator Andrea Mauk writes, "Elena Diaz Bjorkquist grounded her tales in the land of my grandparents//and Stella Pope Duarte[12] showed stories set on the same ground I romped//over as a teenager. It was then I knew that my words, too, had possibilities" (59-61). The recognition of herself and her own history in works by Chicana authors allowed Mauk to imagine what Björkquist referred to as "Opportunity to see what a *raza* is capable of, what others have done to overcome barriers." The ability to imagine such opportunity is, in itself, empowering, because it permits the individual to see their self reflected in the history of the community, and to imagine their place in it. The MAS curriculum was developed with this very goal in mind, arguing

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11. Guillermo BonfilBatalla, Mexico Profundo; Pat Mora, "The Poet as Curandera"; and Aurora Levins Morales, "The Historian as Curandera".
12. Stella Pope Duarte is the Arizona Chicana author of Let Their Spirits Dance, and the award-winning If I Die in Juarez.

that through such cultural and historical relevance, students are more able and willing to become invested in their education and engage as active participants in the classroom as they move towards academic and personal success (Mexican American Student Services 2012).

As a transformed historical record of the Chicano/a experience, Björkquist's *Suffer Smoke* becomes part of a healing process for Chicano/a readers (and even non-Chicano/a readers), because they are able to identify themselves, their families, and their communities in the stories. While some of the experiences relayed in the stories may be painful and difficult to digest, they are grounded in real-life occurrences, from sexual abuse to anti-Mexican discrimination to access to education for Chicanas. Chicana scholar Tey Diana Rebolledo asserts that, for Chicana writers: "Oppression, pain, alienation, and disappointment are first suffered in silence, then expressed in language, and eventually transcended through writing" (Rebolledo 1995, 128). Björkquist explains that the writing of *Suffer Smoke* became a healing process for her as she suffered from health issues, depression, and the trauma of losing her homeland, as well as the experiences of her childhood and community. For many, the book is able to provide a healing process and a transcendence of experienced hardships, for both the author and the reader.

While Suffer Smoke is a widely enjoyed text, it is more than its likability that makes it a powerful teaching tool.Through programs like MAS, *Suffer Smoke* brings stories to the classroom that are often neglected or omitted by Western-oriented curriculum. It offers the experiences and perspectives of Chicano/as, and detailed accounts of how their lives were impacted by social issues, political events, laws, and policies that affect all people.

According to Björkquist, the most important theme of *Suffer Smoke* is its lesson of resiliency. The stories collected in the book, its creation, and its purpose serve as a process of healing. They emphasize the message that despite the difficulties of these particular experiences, the Chicano/as of Morenci had a strong sense of their cultural identity. Regardless of the barriers they might encounter, they survived and thrived. In fact,

in all of the stories, the characters seek solutions or ways to overcome the obstacles they face. The men work to unionize the miners, one male student insists upon his right and ability to pursue college prep courses when a high school counselor tries to enroll him a vocational education track, and a young Chicana fights for her right to speak Spanish on school grounds when a school principal disciplines her for doing so. Their stories do not attempt to criticize or explain the position of Euro-American society, rather they center the Mexican American experience so that it may have a place in historical record. This was the primary message that the MAS program sought to teach its students, rather than a message of anti-American sentiments. The banning of this important program and the accompanying curriculum materials, such as *Suffer Smoke,* only cheats students of these empowering lessons.

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