

# More than *Precious Knowledge*

## A Critical Review of *Precious Knowledge*

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*P*RECIOUS KNOWLEDGE (2011; DIR. ARI PALOS) IS A DOCUMENTARY FILM that follows the debate in Arizona over ethnic studies (ETHS). In particular, it chronicles the last few years of Mexican American studies/Raza studies (MAS) at Tucson High School, including the social and political climate surrounding House Bill 2281--the bill that eventually dismantled ETHS. The film weaves together elements—contemporary and historic---to contextualize the debate over ethnic studies and to elicit support for the campaign to retain the programs in the district. Through interviews and footage of classroom dynamics, the documentary shows how that the program has transformed students' personal and educational experiences. For instance, *Precious Knowledge* notes that, although the dropout rate among Latina/o is close to 50 per cent nationwide, the graduation rate for students enrolled in MAS is 93 per cent. The film situates its narrative in the context of a longer history of ongoing assaults against immigration and the persistence of racial conflict between the school system and students of color.

Despite its broader political intentions and rhetorical strategies, the film leaves itself open to questions regarding how ethnic studies programs and their supporters can analyze racism, anti-immigrant policies and practices from a critical race *and* feminist framework. While the documentary highlights the racial tenets that undergird anti-Latino/a and anti-immigrant efforts including HB 2281, its narrative neglects the constitutive relationship that *gender* and *sexism* have to race, racism, the state, and its institutions. At the same time, disarticulating race from gender obscures the role that gender and sexism have had throughout the campaigns to both dismantle and defend ETHS/MAS. Further, the film also raises concerns about how to effectively address an important paradox. While it is meant to build support for ethnic studies programs that serve marginalized students, the documentary's attempt to disprove conservative accusations that ETHS/MAS teaches anti-American revolutionary ideologies unwittingly reifies the state and its institutions as legitimate guarantors of recognition. This undermines a critical component of ethnic studies programs, which is to teach students how to challenge the state, its institutions and ideologies.

*Precious Knowledge* links the development of ETHS/MAS to the long history of racial discrimination and exclusion in Arizona. Featuring archived photos and interviews, the film shows images of Chicana/o students from the 1960's leading and participating in student protests

against tracking systems, prohibitions against speaking Spanish in school and racially disparate rates of corporal punishment. Decades later, in the late 1990s, community activists organized and lobbied for the creation of MAS classes in order to address the large dropout rate for Latino/a students.

Within the past decade, state officials have waged several campaigns to dismantle ETHS/MAS. At the same time, there have been numerous legislative efforts to police immigrants in Arizona including SB1070, the law that mandates individuals to carry and provide proof of legal residency. The film depicts these attempts as a part of the broader anti-Latino/a climate, one that has long existed but has been exacerbated in response to the growing Latino/a population.

Using a combination of interviews, footage of classroom exchanges between teachers and students, and scenes from students' lives outside of school, the film highlights the experiences of three MAS students. It examines students' experiences with social inequalities including the impacts of immigration policies, poverty and violence. For instance, Gilbert, one of the students featured in the film, links his experiences with schools, poverty and state repression; saying in an interview that in addition to his friends and family being either "locked up or dead," school "was against [him]." The stories about students' difficulties are also captured in Crystal's narrative, a young Latina whose duties included helping her single mother to raise her siblings.

The narrative of the film indicates that MAS and its teachers provided supportive spaces for students, equipped them with tools to better understand the social forces that shaped their lives, and encouraged them to engage in community activism. Students are filmed creating community service projects based upon their research about their peers' needs. Students are filmed creating community service projects based upon the research of their peers' needs. They are also shown at public hearings and in classrooms confidently debating state officials about the merits and importance of ethnic studies classes. By the end of the film, students are leading protests to defend MAS and graduating from high school.

The film also features two male MAS teachers, Curtis Acosta and Jose Gonzalez, who create a learning environment based upon what they call "social justice pedagogy." Gonzalez explains that they teach students to "seek the root of the truth, [and] in that truth there is a greater justice." They emphasize the importance of *cultura*, politics, and commitment to community and social activism—factors that contributed to the transformation of students' lives.

According to producer Eren Isabel McGinnis, the film, among other things, sought to inspire dialogues about race, ethnicity and identity and to promote the importance of ethnic studies (Sargent, 2011). Given the conservative backdrop of Arizona's social and political climate, and given the producer's objectives, the film accomplishes its goals. It has circulated nationwide, winning multiple awards and critical recognition. While the film may have helped to promote the campaign to retain ethnic studies in Arizona, and defends well the importance of these programs, how it framed the value of ethnic studies may have limited the program's actual potency, or at the very least undermined the radical underpinnings of ethnic studies writ large.

Initially created in the 1960s and at the university level, ETHS was a part of ongoing analyses of US racial capitalism, exploring the integral relationship that institutional and structural forms of violence against communities of color play in maintaining the state. One of the critical components of ETHS was that it held the potential to not only highlight structural inequalities, but also to counter the state, its institutions, laws and ideologies as instruments and products of US racial capitalism. According to Ferguson (2012), the institutionalization of ethnic studies has helped to neutralize the radical tenets of its political commitments. He argues that

state institutions are predicated on the management of difference (e.g. racial and gender differences) and upon the discipline of political discord.<sup>1</sup> Although the film provides an important analysis of ethnic studies at the high school level, approaching it primarily from a framework that seeks to preserve the institutionalized versions of ETHS, belies the initial aims of the discipline. The strategy also misses an opportunity to highlight Ferguson's critique of the inherent role that state institutions play in disciplining communities of color and their political dissidence.

Although the students and teachers are initially seen emphasizing the academic merits of ETHS/MAS classes and their abilities to prime students for college through critical thinking, the tactic eventually fails them. The program was still dismantled despite the evidence that it supported students' learning experiences and in spite of reports that disproved conservative anxieties, which were that the programs taught sedition and anti-American ideals (Cappellucci et al., 2011). The film's emphasis on the academic merits of MAS classes as evidence of the program's legitimacy, overshadowed some of the more compelling scenes that included students actively challenging the state. In those key moments, students are shown becoming more disenchanted with public institutions, as they participate in a sit-in at City Hall with police surrounding them, denounce the campaigns against ETHS as racist, and express their demand to claim rights to their education. During the sit-in, Crystal exclaims, "Arizona is becoming a racist state."

In light of the ongoing attacks against ETHS and students of color at large, Crystal's assertion encourages ethnic studies programs and their supporters to re-center a political and pedagogical project that challenges the racism of the US state, its institutions and ideologies. According to ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez (2012), the US state and its institutions are predicated upon and reproduce the logic of white supremacy, settler colonialism, chattel slavery, and ongoing forms of racial and gendered violence. The film's emphasis on the importance of institutional (e.g. school and legislative systems) recognition unwittingly reifies the logic of the state and the dominant ideologies embedded within it. Given Rodríguez's analysis of the state, the film's narrative provides a limited critique of the discourses surrounding the campaign to end ethnic studies program.

For instance, the film's omission of a gendered critique of the debates around ethnic studies obscures the relationship between the state, its institutions, racism and sexism. Incorporating if not centering on an analysis of racism from a critical race and feminist perspective (Crenshaw, 1991; Roberts, 2012) could have meant highlighting the role of female or feminist teachers and their perspectives around the importance of ethnic studies. It may have deemphasized the paternal role that the male teachers played in students' lives, and examined the effects and implications behind why most of the students' in the film lived in single mother households. Furthermore, centralizing a critical race and feminist approach may have helped to explore the role that gender played in the white male led campaigns to dismantle the ethnic studies. The joint framework could have also elicited an analysis of the racial and gendered forms of violence that purportedly took place within conservative *and* progressive movements.<sup>2</sup>

The film's narrative, while useful in its efforts to highlight the anti-Latino/a, anti-immigrant culture of Arizona, limits the value and potential of ethnic studies. Instead of seeking to integrate or demonstrate that ETHS/MAS and its students are a part of the fabric of America, supporters of ETHS may better serve the needs of students of color by facilitating an abolitionist pedagogy—one that does not try to ground its claims for recognition in the U.S. state, but instead intends to disrupt the state and its institutions, because they are purveyors of violence. More

directly, the film, *ETHS*, and its students might benefit from intentions and strategies that are “not beholden to the state” (Bierria, 2012), but seeks to dismantle it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ferguson (2012) explains, “From the social movements of the fifties and sixties until the present day, networks of power have attempted to work through and with minority difference and culture, trying to redirect originally insurgent formations and deliver them to the normative ideals and protocols of the state, capital, and academy” (p.8).

<sup>2</sup> At the time that this article was written, it was brought to the author’s attention that there were news reports accusing the past director of Mexican American Studies, Sean Arce, of domestic violence against his ex-wife. In addition, there were developing accusations that the director of the film was involved in at least one sexual harassment case.

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