

Mario T. García and Sal Castro. *Blowout!: Sal Castro & the Chicano Struggle for Education*. UNC (University of North Carolina) Press, 2011. 384pp.

Niamh Mc Namara*

University College Cork

The publication of *Blowout! Sal Castro & the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* arrives at a critical juncture for those interested in the U.S. education and political systems. While the text deals with events concentrated in the late 20th century, *Blowout!* provides historical context to issues pertinent to the contemporary relationship between politics and education in North America. Inequities regarding teaching salaries and resources combined with student drop out rates and disciplinary actions are, today as then, frequently aligned with issues of race and ethnicity. In recent years the media has intensified its focus on the topic of education, especially in relation to Latino and black students. The attempt to introduce the DREAM Act through Congress has underscored the indelible links between immigration and education in the U.S. in regard to Latino students.[†] With community and political pressure in border states such as Arizona, Texas, and California, politicians are using their stances on educational issues to reflect or reinforce their position on illegal immigration.[‡] The closures of Chicano/a Studies in secondary level education, and the media concentration on immigration issues pertaining to the U.S.–Mexico border, has

* Niamh Mc Namara is a PhD Candidate at University College Cork where she studies Chicana/o Literature. She can be contacted at n.mcnamara@ucc.ie

[†] The DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act) is a bipartisan legislation that attempts to provide an avenue for the children of undocumented immigrants to attain full U.S. citizenship. If passed, it would require the applicant to either enroll in an institute of higher learning or enlist in the military for a minimum of two of the six years of the “path to citizenship”. (<http://dreamact.info/>)

[‡] Arizona senator Jan Brewer signed HB2281 in 2010, effectively banning ethnic studies in the state.

immediately racialised the discourse on education, and Latino residents – legal or illegal – bear the brunt of the political and social fallout.

The story is not a new one. *Blowout!* articulates similar issues that were faced by the Chicano community of 1960s and 1970s Los Angeles when 15 high schools walked out in protest against many of the same grievances. Moreover, as the first official biography of Sal Castro, the educator and activist who initiated the walkouts, it is also the first attempt to fully incorporate him into Chicano history. While Castro has been included within narratives that deal with the high school walkouts, including textbooks, an HBO film, *Walkout* (2006), and various short YouTube documentaries, up until now the discourse has primarily centred on the stories of the students. *Blowout!* marks the first attempt to place the narrative of Sal Castro centre stage. Presented as a *testimonio*, it provides new insight into the lead up to and aftermath of the walkouts.

As an experienced and respected biographer of leading figures in the Chicano movement, it is fitting that García is the first to catalogue the life of Sal Castro. In his introduction, García provides a detailed account of the ten years of initial oral recordings, the transcription method used and the compilation of the final draft. Throughout Castro's *testimonio*, García inserts secondary material including interviews with students, newspaper articles and the transcripts of the East L.A. 13 trials (when Castro and 12 others were indicted for conspiracy). However, these additions never dominate the narrative, but complement the sense of community involvement frequently espoused by Castro in the main text. They also provide a fascinating contextualisation of the effects of Castro's actions in 1960s Los Angeles on local communities, his peers and the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The walkouts themselves are dealt with in two chapters: *Blowout: Part I* and *Blowout: Part II*. These two chapters give the most detailed description of the organisation and orchestration of the blowouts in publication to date and provide scholars with a new and vital perspective on one of the largest Chicano acts of non-violent protest in U.S. history next to the Chicano Moratorium. The contributions by former students such as artist Harry Gamboa, film producer Moctezuma Esparza, as well as Paula Crisostomo and Vicky Castro, both of whom went on to serve in prominent positions within the school system, highlight the central role Sal Castro played in helping the students fight for educational reform.

García calls Castro a “muckracker” and a “subversive teacher”; one who “produce[d] questioning and independent-thinking students.” (16) In his afterword he reinforces the connection between the Brazilian pedagogist, Paulo Freire, the concept of *concientación* or “consciousness raising”, and the leadership camps that Castro initiated. (307) Castro’s priority to instil confidence and pride in his students also expresses itself in the classroom through the development of what is now called Chicano Studies, the very area of study currently under attack by U.S. education and political authorities.

Sal Castro is hailed as “a major figure in U.S. educational history, in U.S. civil rights history, and in Chicano history”. (6) Garcia makes a compelling case for his inclusion, claiming that “[h]e deserves his place in the pantheon of key Chicano Movement-era figures such as César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, [and] Ruben Salazar”. (6) As student, teacher and political activist, Castro is uniquely positioned to describe and critique the democratic processes that have perpetuated the racial discrimination within the Californian education system. His story sheds light on the power dynamics at play during the Civil Rights era that had direct consequences on the education of

Latino students. The influence of his teaching methods and the walkouts resonate today, underscoring the importance of this publication in Chicano and U.S. history.