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Garcia, Mario T. & Castro, Sal. (2011) *Blowout!: Sal Castro & the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

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Reviewed by Aimee Herring
College of Charleston

Blowout!: Sal Castro & the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice is the oral history of Sal Castro, a pivotal figure in the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Castro's narrative concerning his formative experiences as a Mexican-American (Chicano) and his career as a teacher-advocate for Chicano students is skillfully shaped, supported and contextualized by historian Mario Garcia's analysis of Castro's significance as an historical figure and practitioner of critical pedagogy. In the Introduction, Garcia explains his use of the oral history format to document Castro's contributions to the Chicano struggle for social justice as based on the

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Twentieth-Century Latin American tradition of "testimonio" (witness), a genre common in documenting political conflict and embodying collective struggle (p. 19, 21). As a "testimonio", Castro's narration is meant to provide witness and also compel action on the part of those who hear his story. As the reader becomes involved in Castro's story, s/he gains an understanding of how one person's experiences and struggles for social justice are part of a collective experience and struggle for social justice. The reader is left with a sense of Castro's significance as an "everyman" who acted, and is empowered and challenged himself to act for educational equity.

Blowout! opens with an introduction by Garcia that places Castro's role in the larger story of social justice for Mexican-Americans (p. 13 – 18) and provides a pertinent summary of Mexican-American history and educational history (p. 9 – 12). In Chapters One and Two, "Born in East L.A." and "Veterano," Castro's narration begins and creates a portrait of a young Mexican-American whose personal experiences inform his career as an advocate. Castro's father is deported, he suffers discrimination from educators, witnesses violence against Mexican-Americans, and experiences racism firsthand as a military service-member (p. 28 – 41, 62). Yet his strong linguistic background and sense of cultural pride serve him throughout his school days and during his military service (p. 31, 34, 61), and he attends college on the G.I. Bill (p. 68). In college he discovers his love of history, contemplates teaching, and begins to challenge the Anglo narrative concerning Mexicans/Latinos (p. 68 – 72). He starts part-time work as an after-school playground director in a Mexican-American neighborhood, where he "learned from (students) about their problems in the schools and reflected back on (his) own experiences," (p. 71).

The third chapter, "Viva Kennedy," recounts Castro's early days as a political organizer for John F. Kennedy while in college, an experience which brought to his attention "the latent power" in the "developing political consciousness of Mexican-Americans" (p. 81). In Chapter Four, Castro describes his early work as an advocate, practicing in schools where he could help Mexican-American students (p. 86 – 93), including by helping the

students in his first high school placement to organize politically and run for student government (p. 96 – 99). His actions result in his temporary suspension from teaching, which affords him the opportunity to continue outside political work and to become involved in the annual "Camp Hess Kramer" with the Mexican-American Education Committee of L.A. County (p. 105). Formatted as a weekend retreat that would promote leadership and academic achievement among Mexican-American youth, Camp Hess Kramer focused heavily on discussion and the development of ethnic identity (p. 107). Castro's eyes were opened not only to the issues with which Chicano students were contending, but also to the possibilities in developing student awareness and empowerment (p. 105 – 109).

Chapter Five, "The Mexican Schools", describes Castro's early career at a predominantly Chicano high school, Lincoln High, in 1967, where discrimination against Mexican-American students was rampant (p. 110 – 118). Castro determines that "my classes and the students I could reach became a laboratory for awakening a new identity of pride and self-respect" (p. 127), and begins redressing the failures of the school, including by forming a Lincoln branch of the United Mexican American Students' Club (p. 130). The surrounding atmosphere of civil rights struggles, including those of the Black Power Movement and Mexican-American farmworkers led by Cesar Chavez, inspire Castro to begin contemplating more dramatic action to address the rights of Chicano students (p. 131 – 132).

Chapters Six and Seven, "Blowout Part I," and "Blowout Part II," recount the pivotal events up to and including the student walkouts from local high schools in the spring of 1968. The walkouts galvanized the Chicano community to demand educational reform and the L.A. County School District to take notice and act upon student demands for better educational opportunity. On March 5, 6 and 8 of 1968 about 20,000 thousand Chicano students and sympathizers walked out of nearly fifteen L.A. schools to demand an audience with the L.A. County School Board (p. 150 – 178), resulting in a series of meetings with the school board, including one held at Lincoln High School where students enumerated their demands (p. 182 – 193). Castro and the students turned over negotiations to an

Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), made up of sympathetic community members and Chicano parents, which began to work with the Board on reform demands such as bilingual education, culturally-inclusive and appropriate curriculum, more counseling of Chicano students towards college, and punishment of teachers and administrators for acts of prejudice (p. 186 – 187). Castro recalls: "The blowouts may not have changed the hearts and minds of the individual school board members, but more importantly it changed the students and the community. They glimpsed a sense of what power they had," (p. 192).

Chapter Eight, "The East L.A. 13," describes how the community at large took over the struggle for Chicano educational equity. The EICC meets regularly with the L.A. School Board (p. 194 – 195), and when Castro's arrest and indictment on conspiracy charges result in his suspension from teaching (p. 208), a cross-ethnic group of community supporters rally behind Castro, staging a sit-in at the School Board offices that leads to Castro's reinstatement (p. 213, 220). Chapter Nine, "Reprisals and Struggles," covers the several years following Castro's reinstatement as a teacher, during which he still contends with hostile administrations and school transfers, but has opportunities to develop bilingual education materials for the L.A. school district, and produce a television series on Chicano history (p. 221 – 234). His indictment on conspiracy charges is overturned in 1970 (p. 231).

In Chapter Ten, "All My Children," Castro describes his 1973 return to Belmont High, the location in which his teaching career began and ends. He finds conditions similar as to when he arrived there in 1963 (p. 251), although somewhat balanced by better academic support and opportunity for Chicano students (p. 252 – 259). Castro describes his focus on drop-out prevention and mentorship towards higher education (p. 254 - 262), as well as the new challenges of drug use and a highly impoverished community of recent immigrants (p. 258, 265). Chapter Eleven, "Education Today and Legacies," concludes Castro's narration of his teaching career. He enumerates the problems he believes to be affecting the education system today (p.282 – 284), and describes his decision to retire and focus full-time on developing cultural pride and political awareness in Latino students by

recounting his "testimonio" and revitalizing the Camp Hess Kramer conferences (p. 288 – 292). Castro concludes his personal narrative modestly, saying his legacy is that he "encouraged the kids," (p. 302).

Garcia's Epilogue resumes a narration Garcia begins in the Introduction. It describes the impact of involvement with Camp Hess Kramer and Castro's acquaintance upon Garcia himself (p. 303 – 304), and suggests that readers should come away from reading Castro's narrative with a sense that "individuals can make a difference," (p. 305). The Afterword is an academic analysis of the process of Castro's development as a practitioner of critical pedagogy; it examines Castro's "consciousness-awakening" (p. 321) and inspiration to political action. Garcia postulates that Castro's conversations with students were in the tradition of Paolo Freire's dialogical education (p. 309), and concludes that these conversations took Castro and his students from "being objects to becoming subjects," empowering them to confront an unjust educational system (p. 322 – 324).

Castro's earthy and engaging narration, interspersed with other source material and interview excerpts, creates a vivid and sympathetic first-hand account that allows the reader to gain a familiarity with and understanding of the motivations behind the walkouts of Chicano students in 1968 and perhaps even to identify with them. Over the course of *Blowout!* the personal becomes political for Castro; for the reader, what may have been distant political conflict becomes personally understandable. Castro's "testimonio" to his agency and that of his students may also serve to inspire similar action on the part of the reader: as Garcia notes, this oral tradition is meant not only to pass on knowledge of political struggles, but to encourage them (p. 19). The Introduction and Epilogue provided by Garcia greatly assist in contextualizing Castro's narrative in Mexican-American history, the Chicano Movement, and within the contemporary movement for educational reform in the United States. Written in first-person, they also become a "testimonio" on the part of Garcia. The Afterword, "Pedagogy of Chicano Power: Sal Castro, Paulo Freire, and the Mexican American Youth Leadership Conferences, 1963-1968" also places the Chicano Movement within a greater international context and

intellectual continuum, and may spur the reader – as Garcia intends – to "reflect today on how we are approaching education and whether our praxis is also liberating and humane" (p. 308).

It is possible that the reader may come away with a disproportionate understanding of Castro's role in the walkout events of 1968: although other primary sources are used to recount the events of late February and early March, heavy reliance upon Castro's narration does not create a complete portrait of collective community action or, indeed, of the centrality of student leadership in the walkouts. While some may argue that high school-aged students are too young to organize and articulate demand for reform, the reader may wonder what the Chicano public school walkouts of 1968 would have looked like had they been, or if in fact they were, more student-led than *Blowout!* suggests. Garcia does include short excerpts from student interviews providing details that flesh out Castro's recollections of the walkouts (p.148, 150, 151, 156, 157, 160), but the narrative thread is entirely that of Castro: this may lead to an overly strong impression of Castro's directive hand in nearly every aspect of the student walkouts. By including more primary sources that capture the voice of the students involved, Garcia might have better illustrated the agency and leadership the students demonstrated in partnership with Castro.

Blowout! tells the story of an individual whose personal experiences were at once emblematic and unique. Castro's family circumstances, school experiences, and professional experiences were similar to that experienced by many Mexican-Americans in the mid-Twentieth Century. What makes his story unique is how those experiences compelled him to take action. One might get the sense that *Blowout!* is an attempt at beginning Freirian dialogue, at developing "critical consciousness" (p. 321) within the reader to help address the "ghetto education" of minority students in this country (p. 14). Castro comments towards the end of his narration that one of the most important things the students who participated in the walkouts realized was that "they had the power to change not only their lives but society as well," (p. 298). His narrative is an invitation and challenge to other educators to take action towards addressing the inequities in education to which they are witness.

About the Reviewer

Aimee Herring is a Master's in Education candidate at the College of Charleston (SC).

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Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Editors
David J. Blacker
blacker@edrev.info
Gustavo Fischman
fischman@edrev.info
Melissa Cast-Brede
cast-brede@edrev.info
Gene V Glass
glass@edrev.info