

Review Essay

Arthur M. Schlesinger's Vision of America and the Multicultural Debate

by

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Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) 160pp., \$14.95 cloth.

In April of 1990, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., published an essay in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "When Ethnic Studies are Un-American."¹ The publication of that article followed, by about eight months, the release of New York State's Department of Education's now controversial report—"A Curriculum of Inclusion."² Interestingly, the publication of *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* also follows, by about seven months, the release of New York State's second and most current Education Department report calling for the development of a new multicultural social studies curriculum—*One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence*.³

What is most interesting about this second report is that Schlesinger, a member of that newly constituted Task Force, felt compelled to write a dissenting opinion in response to what many believed was a much more temperate report than the first. In his dissenting view, Schlesinger sounds a general alarm that is echoed in his book. He concludes his dissenting opinion by stating the following:

I would only beg them to consider what kind of nation we will have if we press further down the

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

road to cultural separatism and ethnic fragmentation, if we institutionalize the classification of our citizens by ethnic and racial criteria and if we abandon our historic commitment to an American identity. What will hold our people together then?⁴

This dissenting view forms the central argument and tone that is carried throughout his book. It is clearly alarmist and plaintive in tone and at times seems to distort or thoroughly misapprehend the intent of those interested in a revised historical and contemporary vision of America.

With the publication of *The Disuniting of America*, Schlesinger continues to be one of the most outspoken critics of the new multiculturalism. He, Diane Ravitch, and Dinesh D'Souza and a few others have been at the center of this national debate for more than three years.⁵

In his earlier articles, in his dissenting view, and now in his book, Schlesinger's apocalyptic vision of an America at the brink of ethnic and racial fragmentation sets the stage for an all-out assault on multicultural education reform, ethnic studies, and other discourses in the university and generally in the field of education. The publication of this book culminates several years of talks and articles (some with Diane Ravitch) warning America of the dangers of radical multiculturalism and "un-American" ethnic studies in our nation's schools and universities. The fact that Schlesinger is aware of his alarmist tone is clear from his comment, that he doesn't "want to sound apocalyptic about these developments" (18). That is precisely how he comes across, however, and it must indeed be conscious and intentional because he persists in his conjuring of images at home and abroad that speak of the horrors of racial and ethnic conflict. This is a tone that preceded his membership on the New York State Review and Development Committee, and certainly predates the publication of the book here under review. One does not have to go further than the title of his 1990 article mentioned above—"When Ethnic Studies are Un-American." Whether he demurs or not, Schlesinger certainly does come across as the harbinger of doom. The paragraph for which he is apologetic follows:

Watching ethnic conflict tear one nation after another apart, one cannot look with complacency at proposals to divide the United States into distinct immutable ethnic and racial communities, each taught to cherish its own apartness from the rest. One wonders: Will the center hold? Or will the melting pot give way to the Tower of Babel? (17-18)

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

Will the center hold? Indeed. Phrases like the "melting pot" giving way to a "Tower of Babel," and the image of an America "divided into *distinct immutable* ethnic and racial communities," [italics added] certainly do qualify as alarmist, and most certainly apocalyptic in tone, if not intent.

What he does, most deftly, is manage to turn on its head the entire edifice of American racism, marginalization, social and economic exploitation, and ghettoization of our nation's ethnic/racial minorities, when he suggests that,

pressed too far... the cult of ethnicity has had bad consequences too. The new ethnic gospel rejects the unifying vision of individuals from all nations melted into a new race.

"Gospels" and "cults" and a rejection of unifying visions of America are very powerful images. I wonder if he really believes this?

Schlesinger also seems to put a great deal of stock in the words of Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French immigrant who settled in the American colonies in 1759: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of man" (12). With disclaimers regarding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usage of the terms "race" and "man," Schlesinger goes on to make his point about the Frenchman who was enthralled by the colonialist propensity for European intermarriage. The idea of English marrying Dutch, and Scotch marrying German, moved Crèvecoeur deeply. And in turn, for Schlesinger, it would seem that Crèvecoeur's words represent the very spirit of this new "race of man." Notice there is no mention here of Scots marrying Africans, or Germans marrying American Indians. This is critical because here again we see an idealization of European ethnic mixing and hear little, if anything, of non-European ethnics. Immediately following Crèvecoeur's commentary, Schlesinger's very next words are as follows:

E Pluribus Unum. The United States had a brilliant solution for the inherent fragility of multiethnic society: the creation of a brand-new national identity, carried forward by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new lives, melted away ethnic differences.....The point of America was not to preserve old cultures, but to forge a new American culture. (13)

This, in essence, is the underlying belief that propels so much of what Schlesinger sees in America's promise and past. But his view

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

of this nation, and this nation's treatment of those who somehow could not and would not be forged into this new American race, are images that are in direct contradiction to one another.

Aberrations like racism, slavery, the continued marginalization of people of color, the conquest of southwestern peoples and lands, the unrelenting genocidal practice and policies against Native Americans, the exclusionary immigration policies designed to keep Asians out, and other historical realities, which stand in marked contrast to Schlesinger's vision of America, are presented as a kind of embarrassing side-bar not in keeping with his American dream.

These departures from the ideal version of America that Schlesinger is so intent on presenting are seen and proposed as an anomaly, something that has gone terribly wrong with that dream. They are never presented as being part and parcel of the social, cultural, economic and historical fabric of this nation. They are never presented as an integral part of how this nation has amassed its wealth and guaranteed its hegemonic position in the region, and indeed, in the world.

Schlesinger's thoughts about racism are particularly revealing of this conflict. While he comments that "The curse of racism was the great failure of the American experiment, the glaring contradiction of American ideals and the still crippling disease of American life," he also suggests that "even non-white Americans ["red", "black", "yellow", and "brown" Americans, as he puts it] miserably treated as they were, contributed to the formation of the national identity" (14).

American racism notwithstanding, Schlesinger goes on to reaffirm that "the vision of America as melted into one people prevailed through most of the two centuries of the history of the United States" (14). But now, as Schlesinger suggests, the "eruption of ethnicity" (note the language) has challenged that two-hundred year-old myth. Schlesinger proposes that the mythology was challenged by the civil rights struggles and the many other institutional challenges of the 1960s and '70s. However, we also know that this mythology, and its consequent racist and ethnocentric practices, had been challenged on many occasions throughout America's long history. The challenges came in many forms of cultural and political resistance, uprisings, and armed rebellions. And many other forms of cultural and political reaffirmation persist today, in our communities and in our institutions. And of course, let us not forget to mention this nation's Civil War, where the notion of *e pluribus unum* was contested in the bloodiest of all conflicts fought on American soil.

More recently, those who challenge the *e pluribus unum* mythology have decided to do so in the place where this nation's myths are promulgated, nurtured and passed on from one generation

to the next: our schools and our universities. So the struggle has been joined over who will shape the curriculum, who will tell or retell our nation's mythology, and whose perspective or how many different perspectives can we consider as we begin to approximate historical truth. This is particularly critical, because as Schlesinger points out, "what students are taught in schools affects the way they will thereafter see and treat other Americans, the way they will thereafter conceive the purposes of the republic" (17). Up to this moment in history it would seem that the myth of inclusion has served some quite well. It would seem that most would agree when Schlesinger says that the "debate about the curriculum is a debate about what it means to be an American." And this is a debate that Schlesinger and the purveyors of the great American myth can ill afford to lose. Although Schlesinger welcomes, in some measure, what he calls the "eruption of ethnicity," he does so because he believes that the recognition of the achievements of "minorities subordinated and spurned during the high noon of Anglo dominance" (15), is long overdue.

I wonder whether—in this recognition—Schlesinger and others would look, in an age-appropriate way, of course, at the experiences at Mansanar and at Wounded Knee, at the medical experiments on African Americans and Puerto Rican women, at the exclusionary acts and the Jim Crow laws, and at a long, long history filled with experiences and conditions which belie his American dream. It is a truth made out of whole cloth that is sought after, not the simplistic half-truths and the incomplete remembrances of America's past. It is a truth that combines perspectives and intersections of race, class, gender, and culture, and not one which attempts to trivialize the American experience by simply constructing a laundry list of ethnic "contributions."

Schlesinger believes that those who promote ethnic and multicultural studies, those who denounce the melting pot, are also the ones who will "protect, promote, and perpetuate separate ethnic and racial communities" (15). Schlesinger turns the myth on its head. He points an accusing finger at the victims of racism and white ethnocentrism, and then concludes that what the proponents of multiculturalism really want is to "perpetuate separate ethnic and racial communities." It is as if the barrios, ghettos, and reservations of America had been established, sustained, and perpetuated by those who have been consigned to these communities, and not by those who espoused and invented the American mythology of *e pluribus unum*. However, now Schlesinger asks his readers to accept the notion that those separate "colonies" (ethnic and racial communities) in America will be preserved and "perpetuated" by those who favor educational reform of its social studies curriculum. This stretch

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

of the imagination is much to ask of any reading audience, but some will buy it, hook, line and sinker.

There is something interestingly paradoxical in this idea, however. It is ironic that separation into “colonies” has in many ways produced a sub-cultural isolation that in many instances guaranteed and nurtured the continuity of language and distinct cultural patterns. Contrary to Schlesinger’s understanding of these “enclaves,” they produced their own brand of ethnic politics, ethnic churches and temples, and voluntary organizations which sought to raise funds from and for their own communities. Note that these efforts were not seen as inimical to the American dream—they were a vital part of that dream.

Moving beyond multicultural education, Schlesinger turns his attention to the proponents of bilingual education. Here, he distorts the assumed hopes of those engaged in the civil rights struggle and decries the scholarship of those exploring the Afrocentric model. In fact, Schlesinger believes that it is hard to “imagine any form of education more likely than Afrocentrism to have a `terribly damaging effect on the psyche’” (94). Interestingly, he uses the words of Arturo Schomburg, renowned Africanist archivist and scholar, to support his attack on current Afrocentric research. He notes that Schomburg “expressed his scorn long ago for those who ‘glibly tried to prove that half of the world’s geniuses have been Negroes and to trace the pedigree of nineteenth-century Americans from the Queen of Sheba’” (94). This section in the book is unquestionably an all out assault on the proponents of Afrocentrism. This is a most heated section, and one certainly worth reading.

His failure to understand bilingual education as pedagogy and not as a political movement is evidenced by his resurrection of Richard Rodriguez, one of the key Latino anti-bilingual education standard bearers of more than a decade ago.⁶ Even Rodriguez, in the heat of the US English Only Movement a few years ago, forcefully rejected the idea of legislating an official language for the United States.⁷

Schlesinger sees maintaining literacy in one’s native language as a way of encouraging fragmentation, instead of as an opportunity for broadening and enriching one’s view of the world, and of maintaining America’s multilingual literacy. His regressive arguments against bilingual education take us back fifteen years. He is simply unfamiliar with the literature of second language or even third language acquisition and its impact on cognitive and social development. His arguments against bilingual education are as patently political and ideological as are his arguments about the teaching of America’s racial and ethnic history. And his comments about the “political correctness” debate are designed to feed the frenzy and the distortions of the popular press.

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

Arthur Schlesinger's preeminent stature as an American historian has enabled him to enter a national discourse that has been ongoing for many years. What is astonishing about so much of this book is that Schlesinger, as a faculty member at the City University of New York, seems to be blind to what is present in his own environment. For example, his ethnic studies arguments fail to acknowledge the worthwhile presence of dozens of multi-ethnic studies departments and programs throughout the C.U.N.Y. system, and in particular the existence of centers and institutes for the study of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Italian Americans, Jewish Americans, and Greek Americans.

These efforts are all around him. His colleagues have engaged in years of important research on these and many other groups. If you add women's studies centers and programs, culture studies programs, and more recently gay and lesbian studies programs, what you have is a formidable array of scholarship and curriculum. However, these are all for naught in Schlesinger's accounting; or perhaps, they are simply seen as contributing to his vision of a fragmented America. These varied centers and programs are the result of the work of scholars who, having seen the gaping holes in American history and the story of contemporary society, set out to fill these gaps with the stories of Americans never told by the traditional historian and other social scientists. Schlesinger states, "by all means in this increasingly mixed-up world learn about those other continents and civilizations. But let us master our own history first" (136). Further along on the same page he admonishes us to focus first on "our" history:

Belief in one's own culture does not require disdain for other cultures. But one step at a time: no culture can hope to ingest other cultures all at once, certainly not before it ingests its own. As we begin to master our own culture, then we can explore the world. (136)

Let's face it, if we had been doing this all along there would not have been the great uproar in the late sixties to establish ethnic studies, and now again, to revamp our curriculum. Traditional departments were absolutely bankrupt when it came to telling the full story of America. As many young men and women who were Latino, African American, Asian American, and Native American sat in university classrooms in a pre-ethnic studies America, listening to their professors expound on the glories of America's past and present, there was a growing awareness that their own realities were simply missing from that same history that Schlesinger insists we master before moving on to other cultures and continents. Schlesinger's quarrel with the "ethnic ideologues" erroneously leads readers to

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

believe that everyone interested in exploring any aspect of the racial and cultural history of America is one of those “zealots” hell bent on establishing separate “ethnic enclaves.” I believe that the following passage amply demonstrates the depth of Schlesinger’s anger and considerable distortion:

But even in the United States, ethnic ideologues have not been without effect. They have set themselves against the old American ideal of assimilation. They call on the republic to think in terms not of individual but of group identity and to move the polity from individual rights to group rights. They have made a certain progress in transforming the United States into a more segregated society. They have done their best to turn a college generation against Europe and the Western tradition. They have imposed ethnocentric, Afrocentric, and bilingual curricula on public schools, well designed to hold minority children out of American Society. They have told young people from minority groups that the Western democratic tradition is not for them. They have encouraged minorities to see themselves as victims and to live by alibies rather than to claim the opportunities opened for them by the potent combination of black protest and white guilt. They have filled the air with recrimination and rancor and have remarkably advanced the fragmentation of American life. (130)

What can one say after one reads such potent distortions of what multiculturalists and ethnic studies proponents are trying to do? The Schlesinger passage just quoted reminds me that ethnic studies practitioners continue to be sidelined in any discussion about race and culture in American society.

Not too long ago, this reviewer wrote an essay on the struggles of ethnic studies practitioners in the academy. In it I attempted to shed some light on the breadth and depth of the scholarly preoccupations of researchers in the field of ethnic studies. Far from being the ideologues caricatured by Schlesinger above, they are toiling in the fields of research, directing their efforts at telling the incredibly complex story that is America. And I might add, these researchers and teachers rarely if ever get their pieces published in the op-ed sections of great cosmopolitan newspapers, nor are they interviewed for

morning talk shows. America is accustomed to hearing the outraged responding to the outrageous, and this is what viewers get with their morning coffee. But they rarely hear and understand the following:

Critics like Schlesinger, Ravitch—and now D’Souza—and others never mention the abundance of social scientific and humanities studies that are, perhaps for the very first time and with alternative theoretical frameworks, exploring how poverty, ethnicity, and race interact with other societal and cultural variables to produce distinct education, health, political, psychological, and linguistic patterns. These critics never mention the fact that ethnic studies scholars are engaged in sociolinguistic studies, migration and immigration studies, second language acquisition research, the exploration of ethnic voting patterns, the epidemiological studies that might bring to light health problems limited to certain ethnic communities, labor market studies that look carefully at employment and underemployment patterns among distinct ethnic communities, the psychological research that examines the stress related to relocation and immigration, the studies that examine the oral and written traditions of particular ethnic communities, and so on. In essence, the arguments leveled against ethnic studies and the scholars who carry out these studies are for the most part superficial, simplistic, and manage to steer away from what is really being done in the field.⁸

But this is not what captures the attention of the media. Schlesinger would much rather talk to the “ideologues,” whoever they might be. Make no mistake about it, there are ideologues on all sides of this complex issue.

Instead of bringing new light to this highly complex and volatile issue, what this book too often manages to do is to fan the flames of distrust between those who may have genuinely legitimate positions on how one reads the history of America and its present direction. Schlesinger’s entry into this debate, however, seems to have raised the stakes for curricular reform in American education. Those who are the gatekeepers—and Schlesinger certainly has positioned himself as one—seem to be worried about the shifts in

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

thinking about race, ethnicity, class and gender in the academy. And, they are also worried about the demographic shifts predicted for the turn of the century. In fact, Schlesinger is sufficiently concerned about this issue to suggest (with some statistical support, I might add) that predictions of the emergence of a “minority majority” (people of color) in America are greatly exaggerated. But the point is that he is concerned, and that he does want to allay the fears of his reading audience. He suggests that if anti-assimilationist trends continue to threaten the unity of America, there is always the option of closing the door:

No one wants to be a Know-Nothing. Yet uncontrolled immigration is an impossibility; so the criteria of control are questions the American democracy must confront. (121)

He reminds us that we’ve changed the admission criteria before, and we could simply do it again:

The future of immigration policy depends on the capacity of the assimilation process to continue to do what it has done so well in the past: to lead newcomers to an acceptance of the language, the institutions, and the political ideals that hold the nation together. (121)

His language is quite unambiguous here— Close the door, if things get too threatening! The fact is that immigration policies have been driven by racial and ethnic preoccupations and have shaped race relations, practices and laws since the passage of the Naturalization Law of 1790.⁹

The discourse about race and ethnicity has spread well beyond ethnic studies and is now gaining ascendancy as a “legitimate” field of study in other academic disciplines. More than a bellwether, Schlesinger’s book represents an excellent example of the social and historic polemic which surrounds the continuing mythology of race, ethnicity, and the power that comes with being able to tell a nation’s history. But it is much more than this; it is Schlesinger’s vision of what America is, has been, and should continue to be. It is also a work that is typical of a new conservative genre in that it relies heavily on alarmist images, even apocalyptic ones, and a language that effectively supports this foreboding imagery and ideological bent.¹⁰

To support his argument, Schlesinger uses some of the most inflammatory language I’ve seen in years in the social sciences. The following sample words and phrases are used quite effectively and

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

frequently to bring home his message: "cult" of ethnicity, ethnic "gospel," multiethnic "dogma," the "militants" of ethnicity, multicultural "zealots" and "ideologues," "tribalism," "ethnic upsurge" and "global fever." These and many more language devices seem designed to cast fear into the hearts of white middle-class America.

Of course, the use and abuse of language is critical in this debate as it is in any intellectual exchange. Most notable in this debate is the use of the term "multicultural." It is probably the most misused word in the lexicon of the cultural debate in American society. It can and is frequently used vaguely and euphemistically. However, if we attach the word "education" to it, we then enter the vaguest of domains. There is a "safe" kind of multiculturalism, one that is a "touchy feely" kind of cultural awareness and recognition, and there is a "radical" multiculturalism which seeks to transform not only the institution but the society that surrounds it and nurtures it. Lest we forget, there is also the rapidly spreading concern for the establishment of multicultural "curricula" in the university. And where there were minority affairs centers, and directors of these centers, our universities are now searching for administrators to lead and direct newly formed "multicultural" centers. Are these distractions somehow moving us further and further away from the continued problems of American education, and indeed American society? Are they a well designed distraction which redirects our gaze from some of the more pressing problems in these institutions? In fact, the way some administrators are currently redefining the meaning of multiculturalism may result in the demise of many ethnic studies programs and departments.

The current struggle to establish a department of Chicano Studies at UCLA, after years of administrative neglect, is a case in point. University administrators there see the peppering of Chicano studies courses scattered throughout the curriculum as a preferred multicultural form of ethnic studies.¹¹ Their use of this concept is obviously diametrically opposed to the expressed interests of the students, faculty, and members of the community who support the establishment of an autonomous department of Chicana/o Studies, with its own budget, faculty and staff. So, how is it that we define the multiplicity of cultures and races that have always existed in American society? And, how is it that we set the boundaries for its study in education? And how can we argue intelligently about it if each of us continues to generate her/his own definitions of "the real issue." Ultimately, what we see in Schlesinger's book is *his* vision of America, and *his* vision of what's gone wrong, and *his* fears of how the entire American experiment can be undermined and at any moment shaken to the core. I am by no means proposing a relativistic argument; I am simply suggesting that Schlesinger's argument and

Explorations in Sights and Sounds, No. 13 (1993)

the power of his historical sweep are both compelling and misleading at the same time. His decision to use the word "disuniting" in the title is what propels much of the argument in this book, from beginning to end. The main title establishes the tone from the start.

At moments he feeds into the many distortions and confusions of this highly charged discourse, and at other moments he eloquently lays out his own ideological beliefs. It is a book to be reckoned with because Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., continues to be one of the preeminent voices in American history. Because of his stature, and because he brings a message that echoes a missive of social and cultural decline that is so pervasive in so many other arenas of American life, the reading public will listen attentively to what he has to say on this subject. There is little doubt that *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* is an important addition to an ever-burgeoning literature on the culture wars in American education. Whether one agrees with its central thesis or not, there is much to consider in this slender volume.

For all of these reasons, students in ethnic studies, history, political science, sociolinguistics, culture studies and anthropology should be encouraged to read this work as a supplement or as a main text in their courses.

NOTES

¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "When Ethnic Studies Are Un-American," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 1990, A14.

² "Report of the Commissioner's Task Force On Minorities: Equity and Excellence," *A Curriculum of Inclusion*, The State Education Department/The University of the State of New York, July 1989.

³ *One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence*. The report of the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee, June 1991.

⁴ From the *One Nation* Report, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "A Dissenting Opinion," 28 May 1991, 47.

⁵ See Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991); Diane Ravitch, "Diversity and Democracy: Multicultural Education in America," *American Educator* 14 (Spring 1990); "Multiculturalism Yes, Particularism No," Point of View Column, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 3 (24 October 1990), A44; and Ravitch & Schlesinger, "Unity not Disunity is the Real Story: Remaking New York's History Curriculum," *New York Times*, 12 August 1990, E7.

⁶ Richard Rodriguez, "Memories of a Bilingual Childhood," *American Educator* 5 (Spring 1981), 12-21.

⁷ George Will, "In Defense of the Mother Tongue," *Newsweek*, 8 July 1985, 78.

⁸ Jesse M. Vázquez, "Embattled Scholars in the Academy: A Shared Odyssey." *Callaloo* 15 (1992), 1039-51.

⁹ Ronald Takaki, "Reflections on Racial Patterns in America." In *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America*, ed. Ronald Takaki, (New York: Oxford, 1987), 26-39.

¹⁰ Jesse M. Vázquez, "The Public Debate over Multiculturalism: Language and Ideology," *California Sociologist: A Journal of Sociology and Social Work*. [A special issue edited by Gloria J. Romero & Lourdes Arguelles] 14 (1991), 11-32.

¹¹ A series of articles have chronicled the rise of the inherent contradictions between the popularity of multiculturalism and the rebirth of the desire for autonomous ethnic studies programs and departments: See Anthony DePalma, "Hard-Won Acceptance Spawns New Conflicts Around Ethnic Studies," *New York Times*, 2 January 1991, B7; "Upgraded Status Urged for Chicano Studies (UCLA)," *New York Times*, 10 February 1991, 47; Denise Magner, "Push for Diversity in Traditional Departments Raises Questions About the Future of Ethnic Studies," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 May 1991, A11,13; "UCLA's 'No' on Chicano Studies Dept. Brings Violent Protest," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 May 1993, A16.

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Dr. Vázquez, a regular contributor to NAES publications, is currently Vice President of the Association. In addition to his work on the NAES Executive Council, he is also a Council member of the Puerto Rican Studies Association. His most recent publications include writings on the multicultural education movement in the university, the complexity underlying the multicultural discourse, and the struggles of ethnic studies practitioners in the university of the 90s.