

Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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The Death of Artemio Cruz, A Censorship Challenge at Bakersfield College

By Gilbert P. Gia

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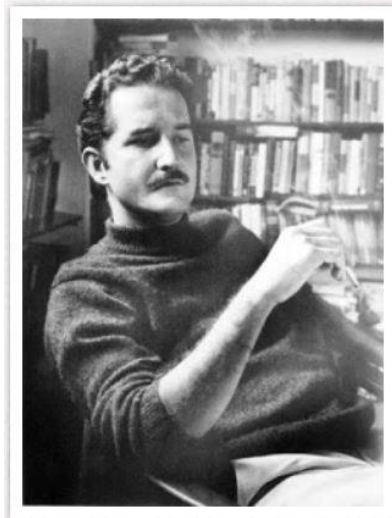
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After weeks of wrangling, would the board censor a BC book? ¹ The controversy had erupted over public objections to a novel about a young Mexican who joined the revolution, battered his way to success in business and politics, and ended his life with tormenting visions of social inequality and the people he had abused and conquered. Carlos Fuentes' *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* in English translation is instructive, colorful, vulgar and violent, but BC parents had focused only on the pages flecked with obscenity and profanity.² To students in instructor Ramon Melendez' English 31 class the work was a window into raw reality of Mexican culture and history, but to parents it was a college administration gone wrong. Dr. John J. Collins later characterized the event as the most important defense of academic freedom during his time as President of

¹ Renegade Rip, Jan 12, 1973

² First published in 1962 when Fuentes was 34

Bakersfield College.³ The storm over the *Artemio Cruz* was also part of a larger civil rights awakening.



32 year-old Carlos Fuentes in 1960⁴

Challenges to book arose unexpectedly at a college trustee board meeting on December 7, 1972 when a Lamont second-hand dealer named Otis Turk, whose daughter was in Mr. Melendez' class, read a page to trustees and said the same obscene words had been read aloud in class.⁵ Mr. Turk alleged that the average mother and father would not want their children reading or hearing such vile words, and he added, "You're brainwashing our youngsters with this kind of filth."⁶

Present that evening was Christian minister James King, who selected other passages smeared with blasphemy, and he promised to enlist religious and minority groups to have the book removed.⁷

Not everyone agreed. Apostolic minister Doyle Dollaride of Lamont was against all censorship, and BC English teacher Lowell Dabbs championed students' rights to read freely. After all, he said, they are adults, not children.

³ John J. Collins, President Emeritus, Bakersfield College, letter to Bakersfield College Archives, Oct 3, 2003

⁴ <http://resliteraria.blogspot.com/2013/05/carlos-fuentes.html>

⁵ San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, Jan 7, 1973, Sec 1, p 13

⁶ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1972

⁷ Ibid.

In 2003 Dr. Collins recalled the passage that Mr. Turk had read before the board. "The community had gotten upset at the book's 'bad language,' which culminated in a page that simply repeated a short, blunt Anglo-Saxon word, well known to army sergeants, over-and-over for the entire page."⁸

Fuentes indeed had sprinkled-in profanity that even today would offend some readers. In 1972 when Instructor Melendez introduced the book he advised students that if they found the book offensive they could either drop the course or choose another book to read.⁹ Dr. Collins underscored that to the board, but few in the audience thought it mattered very much.

As is the case with many English vulgarisms, the word *chingada* in Spanish conveys different meanings depending on where and when and how the word is used. Dr. Collins, in addressing the board, alluded to that cross-cultural fact by quoting from Joseph Sommers' *After the Storm*, in which Sommers referred to Octavio Paz' *Labyrinth of Solitude*. In that book Paz explained the "mythical conception that all Mexicans are sons of *la chingada*—fruit of the violation of a suffering mother by a brutal, anonymous father." The word *chingar* -- *to fuck, to knock down* – can have the same sexual meaning as in English, but it also can mean "violate your fellow man or be violated yourself."¹⁰ The following *chingada* page from *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* shows that Fuentes had more to say about that word.

⁸ John J. Collins letter of Oct 3, 2003, op. cit.

⁹ Renegade Rip, Jan 12, 1973

¹⁰ John J. Collins, *Board Presentation*, op. cit.

TÚ la pronunciarás: es tu palabra: y tu palabra es la mía; palabra de honor: palabra de hombre: palabra de rueda: palabra de molino: imprecación, propósito saludo, proyecto de vida, filiación, recuerdo, voz de los desesperados, liberación de los pobres, orden de los poderosos, invitación a la niña y al trabajo, epígrafe del amor, signo del racimiento, amenaza y burla, verbo testigo, compañero de la fiesta y de la borrachera, espada del valor, trono de la fuerza, colmillo de la marrullería, blasón de la raza, salvavida de los límites, resumen de la historia: santo y seña de México: tu palabra:

- Chingue a su madre
- Hijo de la chingada
- Aquí estamos los meros chingones
- Déjate de chingaderas
- Ahoritita me lo chingo
- Andale, chingaquedito
- No te dejes chingar
- Me chingué a esa vieja
- Chinga tú
- Chingue usted
- Chinga bien, sin ver a quién
- A chingar se ha dicho
- Le chingué mil pesos
- Chinguense aunque truenen
- Chingadentas las mías
- Me chingó el jefe
- No me chingues el día
- Vamos todos a la chingada
- Se lo llevó la chingada

In loose translation it says, "You, the speakers of Spanish, it is your word, it is mine. It is a word of honor, a word of the workplace, and it is a curse. It is a greeting, a protector of life and a guardian of parentage and memory. It is a voice of the desperate and a liberation for the poor, a voice of the powerful, a word of children, and a word of work. It is an inscription of love, a insignia of one's birth, and it is a threat and a ridicule. It's a verbal witness, a companion at parties and drunkenness, a symbol of courage, a throne of force, a fang of flattery, "blason de las raza", an abstract of the Latin race, a preserver of limits, an image of history, and a symbol of Mexico: Thy word."

In 1965 Raymond J. Gonzales was hired as a BC instructor. He was advisor of the Lambda Alpha Mexican-American Club¹² and involved himself in social and academic issues that challenged Mexican-American students. Around the end of the spring semester 1969 he added *Death of Artemio Cruz* to the

¹² Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1969

reading list of *Historic Literature of the Americas*. But Gonzales never used the book because he soon left BC to pursue his doctorate.

In December 1972 *Death of Artemio Cruz* had been on the reading list for some time, and by then Gonzales was a state assemblyman.¹³ In an interview some months after the *Artemio Cruz* controversy had died away he commented that he was "mildly surprised" that the book's critics attacked it solely on the basis of its obscene language; they could just as well have attacked it on the basis of its "leftist" leanings.¹⁴ Carlos Fuentes was an admirer of Fidel Castro and a critic of the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party,¹⁵ which for many decades had ruled the country via electoral fraud. In the early 1960s Fuentes was a member of the Mexican Communist Party, and he had been denied entry into the US under the McCarran-Walter Act.¹⁶

BC's board of trustees was initially sympathetic to citizen complaints. "How this got to be a part of the course is a good question," said Trustee M. Glenn Bultman, and he added, "I'm as incensed about this as you are." Trustee Loren Voth of Wasco said portions of the book were "reprehensible and vile,"¹⁷ and he agreed that the board "needs to know these things."¹⁸

Parents wanted Mr. Melendez disciplined, or better yet fired.¹⁹ Present at the meeting was Bakersfield College President Dr. John J. Collins, who had been in that position for six months. When he assured the audience that his office gave utmost attention to citizen complaints, hecklers grouched that the only action they had seen from administration came after controversies were made public.²⁰ Trustees reminded the public that board meetings were not the proper venue for complaints against faculty, and, moreover, such complaints had to be submitted in writing.

¹³ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 5, 1973

¹⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 23, 1973

¹⁵ Partido Revolucionario Institucional

¹⁶ Its official title was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. Congress passed it over President Truman's veto. The law excluded entry to foreign nationals deemed unlawful, immoral, diseased, or politically radical.

¹⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1972

¹⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 8, 1972

¹⁹ John J. Collins letter of Oct 3, 2003, op. cit.

²⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 8, 1972

That statement was a red flag, and some present accused the board of violating their free-speech rights.²¹ Part-time radio talk show host Charles Reed said he doubted the ruling's constitutionality, and he believed that the public, in general, did not trust BC administration.²² Trustee Voth replied that the guidelines were fair and were more liberal than the regulations enacted by other public bodies. When Trustee Bultman commented that it was impossible for the board to screen every book, the noise level rose again. Voth banged his gavel.²³

Otis Turk's backers demanded the creation of an independent citizen panel to screen educational material and approve all books read by students.²⁴ To which Bultman observed, "The college is open ... citizens can read any book they want." Board trustee Mark Raney reflected, "I fear that if we appointed a committee.... it would find many things that have been used in courses for many years... that are objectionable. And that's not going to resolve this problem."²⁵

It was obvious that the board would not endorse such a book committee that night and perhaps never would. Trustee Voth refused to create a book-burning office: "I'm not ready to start a campus gestapo agency to pass judgment on what's being read."²⁶ Further discussion was tabled, *Artemio Cruz* was bound over to the next meeting, and Dr. Collins was directed to collect information about the book.



Dr. John J. Collins

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1972

²³ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 8, 1972

²⁴ John J. Collins letter of Oct 3, 2003, op. cit.

²⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 8, 1972

²⁶ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1972

Pat Collins, who was Mrs. John J. Collins, was also a career reference librarian. She and her husband read the novel and found what they judged to be crude and seemingly unnecessary vulgarity, but they also found merit.²⁷ Collins also called on three staff. Assistant to the President Dr. John P. "Jack" Hernandez, Dean of Instruction Dr. James P. Chadbourne, and Assistant Dean of Instruction Frank Wattron, helped him gather information about what other institutions were doing with the Fuentes book.²⁸

The ferocity of the parents might have alarmed Dr. Chadbourne more than the others. Six months before the hullabaloo surfaced, BC had hired him out of San Jose City College, and in an interview just one month before the attack on the book, Chadbourne said, "The role of the two-year college is changing. It has to if it is to serve the needs of its community."²⁹

Years later, Dr. Hernandez voiced what the committee found. "I recall that Jim Chadbourne and I met one late afternoon to discuss the issue, and that once we had discovered, probably through the library and the professor who taught the course where it was assigned, that the author of the *Death of Artemio Cruz* was a renowned Latin American author and that the novel was considered a classic, we knew that those who objected had no case."³⁰ Further reading convinced the team that they could defend *Artemio Cruz*.

At the board meeting of December 21, Dr. Collins announced that the Fuentes book was appropriate teaching material, that the offensive passages had not been read aloud in class,³¹ and that the course was not required for graduation. Continuing on a more general tack, he said, "By reading of violence we do not say we condone it, but it is nonetheless true that people do commit murder, and people do use offensive language. Authors simply chronicle the acts of their characters. We do not have to agree with or approve of these characters –what they say – what they think

²⁷ John Marshall Collins and Charles F. Collins, "The Death of Artemio Cruz and the Fight for Academic Freedom at BC", *Bakersfield College Archives Newsletter*, Fall 2011. These men are Dr. Collins' sons.

²⁸ John J. Collins letter of Oct 3, 2003, op. cit. Nov 4, 2013 email from Dr. John Hernandez

²⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Nov 5, 1972

³⁰ Nov 4, 2013 email from Dr. John Hernandez

³¹ John J. Collins, *Board Presentation*, op. cit.

– or what they feel.” When the noise level in the room rose, Mr. Voth cautioned, “I don’t intend to let anarchy reign at a board meeting.”³²

What Dr. Collins did not say that evening was even more important. Explained Dr. Hernandez, “John wanted to make sure that the board understood the faculty’s right and responsibility to select books for their courses. This, we all knew, was the fundamental issue at stake, and John got the board to understand and accept this.”³³

The final vote was postponed until the next meeting, and in the next days Dr. Collins met with the “self-appointed minister” – as Collins called him – and asked him “to explain in detail what his qualifications were for evaluating Carlos Fuentes’ great work.”³⁴ The outcome of that meeting was not documented.

In the standing-room-only board session of January 4, fewer disgruntled voices were overheard, and the meeting started quieter than expected. But what had begun weeks earlier as a demand for bad-word-housecleaning had now devolved into racial slandering. Two speakers branded the Chicano movement a “revolutionary force” and conspiracy to foment revolution and complained to trustees about the *Bakersfield Californian’s* coverage of earlier board meetings.³⁵

Opposing them was Mathematics instructor Shirley Trembley, who praised Mexican-American students, calling them “positive contributors ... with a philosophy of helping each other.”³⁶ How many Chicano students then attended BC? According to the Renegade RIP “the minority student population” was 13.3% and the minority-faculty percentage was 5.5%.³⁷

Trustees Loren Voth, Cecil J. Bailey, M. Glenn Bultman, Mark G. Raney, Edward B. Cornell, Angus Marchbanks, and Albert S. Gould listened attentively as Dr. Collins spoke. His research on *The Death of Artemio Cruz* crowded fifteen, single-spaced typewritten pages, and among the many accolades for *Death of Artemio Cruz* was one that showed that the book was

³² Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1972

³³ Renegade Rip, Jan 12, 1973

³⁴ John Marshall Collins and Charles F. Collins, op. cit.

³⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 2, 1973. Renegade Rip, Jan 12, 1973

³⁶ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 2, 1973

³⁷ Renegade Rip, March 2, 1973

used at Harvard and Notre Dame.³⁸ Collins concluded, "Literature is full of acts that we do not approve of. We read of violating others by assault, murder, and other more subtle but less destructive acts. We read of dishonesty -- of discrimination and of persecution of the weak and helpless. We read of attacks on some of our most cherished values, or on our long held ideologies and traditions. Literature can be abrasive."³⁹

Trustees voted to retain the book but not without personal reservations.⁴⁰ Decades later in an interview Dr. Collins recalled, "The Board backed me seven to nothing, but I have to say without naming any names, the president of the board afterwards privately said to me, 'John, I voted with you, but you ought to take that book out and burn it.' Is that on tape? Yeah. That's okay."⁴¹

The board unanimously passed all of the administration's recommendations: Selection of school material was solely the responsibility

Faculty backed in BC book choice

Kern Community College District trustees Thursday adopted a four-point resolution reaffirming support for faculty and administration selection of textbooks and other materials used on the district's three-college campuses.

Trustees, thus by unanimous vote, refused to ban a Chicano literature book which was under fire recently from politically conservative taxpayers who object to the volume's strong language and some of its themes.

"The book will be kept in school," said trustee President Loren Voth of "The Death of Artemio Cruz," authored by Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes. "This doesn't say we approve of the language . . . but by the same token, the educational system is involved here."

Fuentes' novel is a nonrequired book in a Bakersfield College English class taught by Ramon Melendez. BC Presi-

dent Loren Voth said the book is one of those that are given high ratings by authorities . . . just because they contain words that might be offensive to some."

Students who objected to the book's contents re assigned alternate material. Profanities were not read aloud in class. The book has been part of the course reading list for a number of years and was selected by former BC faculty member Ray Gonzales, now 28th District assemblyman.

Thursday's resolution covers four areas:

—Text selection is responsibility of colleges' professional staff.

—The board of trustees retains the right to raise questions but citizen complaints should first be directed to administrations.

—Alternate reading selections should be available in cases where "excessive use of language" might offend in-

³⁸ John J. Collins, *Board Presentation*, op. cit.

³⁹ John Marshall Collins and Charles F. Collins, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Renegade Rip, Jan 12, 1973

⁴¹ Apr 17, 2002 interview of John Collins by Bob Allison, Randy Beeman and Greg Goodwin at Bakersfield, California

of the college staff, alternate texts would be offered where “excessive use of language” might be offensive, staff would take student maturity into account in choice of texts, and objections from the public must go to administration before going to the board.

When the book was first contested in December 1972, protesters might have suspected the board’s eventual decision, and when that decision came, many did not accept it willingly. Joe Gonzales, a Navy vet attending BC on the G.I. Bill, had taken pictures during the meeting, and afterward a woman confronted him on the sidewalk and objected to his camera work. The conversation’s tone escalated, police were called, and a photo of the row appeared in the RIP. Brief days later, a caller to talk-radio KGEE accused Joe Gonzalez of being an outside agitator.⁴²



Joe Gonzales, left⁴³

Local grievances slipped away, but civil rights bloomed. In the days following, Bakersfield College’s Mexican-American Club disbanded, reformed

⁴² Renegade Rip, Jan 12, 1973

⁴³ Ibid.

as MECHA, and united with MECHA groups on other campuses.⁴⁴ The club retained its social aims but now embraced the economic, educational and political advancement of Chicanos.⁴⁵ That spring when MECHA boycotted the BC cafeteria, Spokesman Rogelio Sanchez explained that MECHA wanted BC to buy union-harvested lettuce. To help the effort, MECHA set up informational tables in the student union and offered free sandwiches, donuts, coffee, and punch to students.⁴⁶

At a trustee meeting two months later, a parent asked the board to create a cross-cultural, ethnic studies program "in German, Lithuanian, Swedish, and Jewish, or any other such subject." In fact, BC had recently required students to take a class in cross-cultural awareness, and the board was unwilling to expand it. Addressing the request Dr. Collins said, "The very purpose of the use of the term 'cross cultural awareness' takes this out of the concept of saying that students must take two units of black studies, German, or ancient Greek. What we have in mind is to acquaint our students with the problems, life styles, and contributions of other cultures and subcultures. And there are many admirable cultures and subcultures we ought to be acquainted with to permit us to live together a little more successfully than we've lived in the past."⁴⁷

Late in March, MECHA's Rogelio Sanchez attended a conference of the United Farm Workers at La Paz. At one session Charley Valenzuela of the Bakersfield Fire Department spoke on recruiting more ethnic minorities to the department.⁴⁸ Probably few present at the meeting realized that living together a little more successfully was starting to happen.

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⁴⁴ M.E.Ch.A. Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@ de Aztlán, the @ being a gender neutral inflection. (Wikipedia)

⁴⁵ Renegade Rip, Jan 17, 1973

⁴⁶ Renegade Rip, Mar 2, 1973. BC accepted a compromise buying program.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Renegade Rip, Apr 6, 1973