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PROPOSITION 187, THE AMERICAS, AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE UNIVERSITY

by Alberto Macias, Jr.

Proposition 187 and the controversy it has provoked are a slap in the face to the Latino, whether he or she is the classic alien who crosses the southern border without legal documents or American born. Proposition 187 is not the first such blow Latinos have suffered in this century. America, the democracy we all know, has made many promises: a land of opportunity, a land where education opens doors to prosperity, a land of freedom. But it is also a land that still creates despair.

The America we Latinos know is cruel and reactionary. Sometimes it is downright vicious. It hides its true self behind many masks, masks which lie concealed in historical facts which do not come to light unless we are willing to dig them out. One mask might be the Republican Right and its "Contract With America." Another might be the paranoia of racism and all its idiosyncrasies. Another could be the distorted "American mystique" which holds that people of color are simply parasites that feed off the wealth of this country and its tax-paying citizens.

America is beautiful too. After all, it does allow me to be critical of its nature to be nativistic. But every American, and that means us Latinos too, has a stake in maintaining its beauty. Unfortunately, when America needs its regular historical face-lift, it turns to its nature of democracy by dominance.

In the late 1920s and the 1930s America had many pains. It was the period of the great depression, a difficult time for any American family. The railroads had already benefited from the labor of many Mexican people who had been recruited for their cheap labor by American companies. When the depression hit hard, America decided to give these Mexican families, and their American-born children, the "option" to repatriate. But why such a reaction, and at such cost to the Latinos who had learned to admire this great America? These questions mattered little. The fact was that because America was destitute, because America had to take care of its own first, it was easier to give the repatriation option to people of color, who had little choice. Latinos were different; they spoke a different language and they did not belong to the fabric of this great nation. According to whom? According to whose definition?

In the meantime, Mexican families and their children had already been systematically denied the privilege of an education; they were poor and they were struggling to hold their families together and to stay put in a familiar place. They had already battled years of discrimination and all the other hardships the promised land had handed them. Repatriation was a direct reaction from an America that was not able to take care of all its people. The Mexicans were hard-working people, many of

whom had taken the opportunity to challenge themselves to be a part of something so esoteric as an admired American mystique.

The United States government and its people imposed their laws and showed the true weaknesses of having democratic freedoms. It was easy to pass laws that uprooted American citizens, and repatriation to Mexico was the best option for some. But many American citizens, who had been welcomed as immigrants, were returned to a place now unfamiliar to them. This was forced deportation. They had little choice. And remember this happened in our history only some sixty-odd years ago. Many Americans should know this important part of our history—but how many do? The real story is seldom wrong. This is one of the truths of American history that lies buried. It is the ignorance of it that continues to hurt each of us in the long run.

If we do not learn our history, we cannot learn to understand ourselves. If we do not understand ourselves, what I have called our American mystique will endanger our ability to work with our international neighbors—with the two worlds over the Atlantic and over the Pacific, but more importantly with that world over our southern border, a world which remains neglected and deemed unworthy of our recognition: Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, South America. All of these regions are the Americas. All of us have something in common. Yet here in *Gringolandia*, in our United States, we have taken the stance of exploiting our southern neighbors for their cheap labor, and of defending military regimes that protect American business interests. And today we have NAFTA—but let's not get into that.

There is also that part of our history which predates what I have been referring to—Cristobal Colón and his great discovery of the New World. As if the people who were already here never existed There were already thousands of Native American peoples spread throughout what we know as North America, but somehow we have forgotten to include them as a great people in our history. Their contributions are unrecognized. But let's not get into that.

There is also the Mexican-American War. In the 19th century, Mexico's territory extended north to Oregon and east as far as the Dakotas. America conquered. America dominated. America made citizens of thousands of people who already had their own language, systems of government, and history. But let's not get into that.

Americans are of all races. We speak many languages. But we try to deny ourselves our greatness. This denial is part of the American mystique. We battle individually to understand who we truly are, but the ways we are taught pieces of our history deny us the ability truly to know our strength.

Today, as Americans, we try to protect ourselves by barricading our southern borders. This is where the aliens come from in massive numbers, or at least that is what the popular media tell us. *The aliens are coming!* Oh how I hate that word and its connotations. The only balancing force to all this can be what we learn here at the university, how we learn it, and how we share our ideas and learn to disagree.

The responsibility for performing this balancing act, for playing the opposing role to the American mystique, lies perhaps in the way GVSU and other institutions of higher learning attempt to internationalize their curricula. Where are the major efforts towards internationalization usually made? Look across the Atlantic and across the

Pacific! But where are our southern neighbors represented in this effort? Let me play devil's advocate. Let us say that the university *will* respond positively and constructively to develop its international focus. But are all the pieces of the bigger picture in place? Do we have the solid foundations in our curriculum, in sister-university programs, and in other programs in place to maintain the necessary presence of our Latino neighbors in our intellectual and scholarly pursuits? Internationalization of the university can happen fully only when we understand that the Latino is just as important as the peoples across the Atlantic and the Pacific.

The internationalization of our university will not happen when America turns to democracy by dominance when it comes to the Latino. It will not happen when we see states passing laws like Proposition 187. It will not happen if we sit passively while the Republican Right spreads the message that the only recognition Latinos deserve is to be called *aliens*. It will not happen if *Gringolandia* continues to see international views and the acceptance of the diversity of the people of the Americas as too liberal.

Immigration will continue to change the face of this nation. If we do not understand who we really are, our American mystique will endanger our ability to work with all of our international neighbors. As important as Europe and Asia may be, we must also cease to neglect the Americas. Latin America, with its great history of indigenous civilizations, with all its splendor of natural beauty, with its great modern literature, is also America. And all of us have something in common.