

Ethnic Warfare

A bitchy academic fight within SFSU's College of Ethnic Studies puts the future of the program in question

By Tommy Craggs

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The story of San Francisco State's College of Ethnic Studies, the first and still the only program of its kind, is a sort of shadow history of America's latter half-century. In it you'll find all the familiar blips of the past 40 years. There is student radicalism and campus rebellion; there is hopped-up idealism, followed closely by compromise and a struggle against an encroaching obsolescence. And today, the cold, gray Wednesday after the November election, there is this: the school's recently deposed dean, sitting in a Castro coffee shop, offering a postmodern sociosexual justification for using the word

"bitch." "As a gay man, in the Castro in San Francisco, and camp such as it is, we refer to ourselves in very gendered terms," says Tomás Almaguer, who spent 4 1/2 years as dean before resigning this past fall amid accusations that he created a hostile work environment within the college. "You might notice that my e-mail address is 'tomasa' -- it's a play. Have I ever referred to myself and my friends as bitches? All the time! I've been referred to as Queen Bitch of the Universe! Megabitch! That's one of my identities."

Almaguer, 56 years old, is a thin man with short white hair and a fastidious mustache. Soft-spoken and tentative one moment, animated and effusive the next, he has an academic's tendency, in the face of a scandal, to retreat into cautious generality -- an individual, for example, becomes a sexless, anonymous "they" -- lest he wind up in someone else's lawsuit. As described by his constituents at the College of Ethnic Studies, he is either a monster or a titan -- either a sexist and possible racist who played favorites, called a lecturer a "bitch," and only further calcified the rifts in the college; or a visionary who whipped a flabby program into shape. "It's this *Rashomon* thing," says Jim Okutsu, the associate dean and a friend and supporter of Almaguer. "There's not one story that fits."

James Sanders



Former Dean Tomás Almaguer says he was a "change agent." A colleague calls him a "hatchet man."



Then-S.F. State President S.I. Hayakawa unplugs a demonstrator's loudspeaker during the 1968 student strike.

"The truth and context," Almaguer goes on, "are the first things to evaporate from any

retelling of the situation. I've been accused of using the b-word. I've been accused of using the n-word, only to have that be proven a total, total, total lie. There's nothing I've not been accused of having uttered. So when the PC patrol comes in and tries to paint me as this woman-hating, gay, macho Latino, it makes me sick. It's *repugnant* to me. ... If the truth were known, and what the politics were, and what the lay of the land was, and what I had done, and what people wanted to revert back to, it would be a very different story. It may sound like some arrogant, elitist, woman-hating gay man from the Midwest comes in and runs roughshod, but it's repugnant. It's really ugly."

People within the college like to point out that this sort of dispute -- about a new dean and his vision and management style -- is not unique to Ethnic Studies, but that argument ignores a big difference: It's not in the mission of, say, the philosophy department to remedy two centuries' worth of social injustice. And because this is the College of Ethnic Studies -- a bellwether in its field and the only program in the country that's structured as an autonomous unit, rather than a department within a college -- the "stakes are higher, and the battles are messier," Almaguer says. There are pillow fights elsewhere in the academy, yes, but few are set so starkly against the backdrop of America's racial past. So an odd situation arises in the field of ethnic studies: The people involved -- the very Ph.D.s who are supposed to think about race in the most elevated and enlightened way -- are beset by the same sort of racial strife that plagues the world outside the ivory tower.

"It is ironic, on the one hand," Almaguer says, "but it's perfectly consistent and understandable, in perhaps an unfortunate or disquieting or disappointing way. You would hope that ethnic studies would be able to transcend all that reality, but it doesn't because it lives it and reflects it. It's a messy business. It's inherently problematic."

It is, indeed, a real bitch.

There isn't a lot of willingness, on either side, to discuss Almaguer's stewardship -- what some call, discreetly, "the situation," as if it were a relative's illness. There is, however, a lot of talk about "healing" and "not dwelling" and "letting things die," which isn't to say emotions have cooled at all. When I approached black studies chair Dorothy Tsuruta in her office recently and asked her about Almaguer, she refused to comment at length, saying any story about the college's predicament would be "inexcusable" and "unethical." She added that I should go home and pray for myself, only to backtrack and say I should take that "as a metaphor, rather than a glib statement."

In addition, Marlon Hom, chair of the Asian American studies department and one of 18 signatories to a "no confidence" letter sent to the university administration, wrote in an

e-mail: "Tomás Almaguer is a hatchet man now passé. It's time for us to look forward to the future; and I am not interested in dwelling on such a low life in past tense." He quickly sent a second, slightly less ill-tempered version, explaining that he had experienced a "computer operational problem": "Tomás Almaguer is now passé. It's time for us to look forward to the future; and I am not interested in dwelling on him in past tense."

Even today, the circumstances of Almaguer's resignation are murky. What's clear is that he arrived on campus in 2000 with a mandate to shake up the college, and almost immediately provoked a visceral loathing among a certain segment of the faculty. By fall 2004, as the drama within the college played out in the pages of the student newspaper, Almaguer was appealing "for calm and an end to the escalating political frenzy." He resigned in early October, saying he needed time to work on a book.

What's not clear, however, is why he fell out of favor with some of the faculty. There seem to be at least three causes: his style (abrasive); his scheming ("divide and conquer," as one professor put it, and allegedly racist); and his vision for the school ("Very progressive, very forward-thinking, very visionary," says Almaguer, "and that came with a lot of collateral damage").

Everyone seems to subscribe to at least one of the explanations. "They were all in play," Associate Dean Okutsu says. "I'm not saying they were correct or not. What people believed depended on where they were coming from."

In June 2000, Almaguer was brought in as what he calls "a change agent," someone who would return the school -- in flux after the death of the previous dean -- to national prominence. In a press release, the then-university provost cooed, "Dr. Almaguer is the ideal candidate to lead the College of Ethnic Studies into the new millennium." He seemed an apt choice: A published scholar in Chicano-Latino studies, as well as race, gender, and sexuality, Almaguer brought a breadth of experience that spanned the lifetime of ethnic studies. He taught in American studies at UC Santa Cruz and in sociology at UC Berkeley, and served at the University of Michigan as the director of both the Center for Research on Social Organization and the Latino/Latina Studies Program. In the 1970s, as a graduate student at Cal, Almaguer lectured in the newly formed department of ethnic studies. Above all, he counted himself a part of a growing movement within ethnic studies toward a more comparative approach (as in the college's graduate seminar "Theories and Issues in Ethnic Studies"), as opposed to the traditional, compartmentalized model ("Introduction to Black Literature"). He envisioned a college more along the lines of the former. (Since its inception, the College of Ethnic Studies has been split into four departments -- Asian; black; Raza, or Latino; and American Indian studies -- with a graduate unit added in 1988.)

From the onset, Almaguer says, he felt like a "new sheriff in town." "One of the staff people referred to the college as the Wild West before I got there," says Almaguer, now a visiting scholar at Berkeley, though he plans to return to San Francisco State after an extended leave to work on his book. "It's an interesting metaphor. I was brought in as a change agent, which is really kind of a gunslinger, a sheriff with new expectations. ... So when people don't show up to class, when people don't turn in a syllabus, when people don't do course evaluations, when people are teaching a subject matter that leads to a ton of student complaints about perspective, basically arguing there was racism, it's my responsibility to talk to those people. You had a Wild West situation where everyone did what they did with impunity, without any accountability." (Told of Almaguer's description, Okutsu, after a long pause, says, "I wouldn't use that characterization.")

Almaguer says his plan for the college was "bold and provocative and very hard-hitting," with a management style to match -- a "shock-and-awe approach," he says. He pushed for mixed-race studies, as well as a larger gay, lesbian, and transgender presence in the curriculum; he staffed the graduate ethnic-studies program with full-time faculty; he says he "resurrected" American Indian studies, which "had imploded"; and he reallocated money for recruitment and retention of minority students, infuriating Asian American studies but delighting Raza studies.

"It was done, administratively, in a very savvy and astute way," Almaguer says. "I think some folks would've far preferred me to have consulted and gotten their permission and approval to do these things. That would've been a huge mistake for me, because it would've only led to paralysis. I transformed that place under their very noses. They didn't even realize fully what had happened, and by the time, in my fourth year, when it was very clear that the place was completely transformed, people became increasingly alarmed and dismayed at what had happened.

"It led a coalition of people who, at one moment, would never deal with one another, to come together and try to come after me."

That's one version. In another, Almaguer began offending certain faculty members -- especially those in the black and Asian American studies departments -- the moment he settled into his chair. According to an officer in the California Faculty Association, the union representing academics in the California State University system, a grievance involving Almaguer was filed during his first semester on campus -- and at least seven were filed during his first two years. Almaguer says that "every one of the union's formal grievances and complaints that they moved forward -- not one of them was ever, ever validated or affirmed." Indeed, none of the grievances went to arbitration, according to Edwin Waite, the university's director of employee relations. They were resolved with no

admission of liability.

The complaints seemed to center on Almaguer's personality; he admits he could be blunt, and perhaps even tactless. Once, frustrated with a lecturer who hadn't shown up to her class (after several warnings), he turned to his associate, Okutsu. Almaguer recalls: "I said, 'That bitch didn't show up again? She knows! She's been reprimanded!' But did I say, 'You, Professor X, are a bitch'?" He shakes his head. (At a meeting with faculty and the union, Almaguer wound up defending his use of "bitch," tracing the word's etymology and allegedly citing his own work. "The defense of it was so incredible," says Lorraine Dong, a professor in Asian American studies and the wife of Marlon Hom. "You should've seen the faces. They just dropped." Almaguer insists that he did not quote his own research -- something about Latino gay men adopting the sexist attitudes of heterosexual men -- but that it was brought up to be used against him.)

On another occasion, when Dong approached the dean to complain about the reallocation of the access-and-retention money, Almaguer waved her off. "He said something to me that shows he's fallen into the trap" of believing that Asians represent a model minority, Dong says. "He said something along the lines of, 'Well, you guys are doing fine. You don't need help. You're victims of your own success.' That made me very unhappy -- to hear that from the dean." (Almaguer counters that Asian American studies had received a disproportionate share of the money in the past, especially considering that Asians are overrepresented at the university. "We didn't get enough Koreans," Dong says. And so on.)

"Am I undiplomatic sometimes?" Almaguer says. "Perhaps. A little bit too straightforward? I used more vinegar than honey? Yeah, I would probably confess to that, but it's interesting: I looked at my job description a while back. I wasn't hired to be Mother Teresa. I wasn't hired to make everyone feel good and have us all sit in a hot tub and hold hands and sing 'We Are the World.' That's not what I came to San Francisco State to do. It was to put a vision in place, to move the college forward, to move it out of the '60s and into the current millennium."

Velia Garcia, the chair of Raza studies, goes so far as to call the complaints about the dean's style a "ruse." "There were elements within the college that did not want to change," she says. "They wanted to see things continue the way they had been, and that old way privileged certain folks, certain units. ... [Almaguer] is direct in his dealings. Some people can't handle being talked to directly; some people can't handle hearing the truth; some people don't want to hear criticism, even if it's offered in a constructive way. Maybe he could've been more touchy-feely with some folks, but that wasn't his job. Honestly, I think it was a ruse. It was the one place where they found a weakness."

By 2003, the forces that would eventually drum Almaguer from his post were well in motion. First came a climate survey, conducted by the union; then a complaint filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; and finally, in June 2004, a report from a team of external consultants, led by a Berkeley group called Diversity Matters. That report, coming in at a thin 10 pages, was vague and largely obvious; it took a temperature, but didn't offer much of a diagnosis. Among its 12 "key findings":

"1. There is severe internal conflict and distrust in the College of Ethnic Studies at SFSU.

"2. The Dean is vilified or glorified, depending on how one is treated

"11. The atmosphere to explore differences respectfully is present in small pockets, but not present in any consistent way across ethnicity and gender.

"12. A climate of suspicion exists around the way budget and monies are perceived to be used to gain favor and silence opposition."

It concluded with separate sets of recommendations -- even outsiders couldn't agree on Almaguer. The first suggested the dean be placed on leave and the associate dean, Okutsu, be relieved of his administrative duties and returned to the faculty, and further urged the school to hire consultants to work with the college "around historical and current negative dynamics." The second opinion recommended that the college establish an "independent faculty oversight committee" that would ultimately decide the dean's fate.

Okutsu dismisses the report, which relied on faculty surveys and interviews, as "poor research" with "no scientific basis." Nevertheless, it was regarded by some as an affirmation of their complaints about the dean, and when the university didn't act on the report, 18 of the college's 80 faculty members sent a letter of "no confidence" in Almaguer to the university's president and its provost. By that point, the atmosphere within the college was poisonous. At a CFA-sponsored meeting with faculty in late September 2004, according to Almaguer, a black-studies professor "suggested that the situation in the college was a war zone." The teacher reportedly added that "they had learned in Vietnam what to do with superiors who were problematic," says Almaguer, who was not at the meeting, though the CFA officer confirms this account. "Basically, it was suggested they frag me," Almaguer says. (At the time, he took this as a death threat and passed the matter along to campus police. Now, however, he acknowledges that the comment was "done in an offhanded way." "People laughed," Almaguer says. "It was just a joke.") In October, facing "an untenable situation," Almaguer resigned.

"I was no longer able to carry out my duties in the productive, effective way that I

wanted to," he says. "The opposition was so orchestrated and so unrelenting that it was just in the best interests of the college for me to step aside. Everything I was trying to do was met with opposition. Sponsoring the colloquium was met with opposition. Hiring positions was met with opposition. There was not one thing I could do that wouldn't be immediately misread, misinterpreted, be completely twisted and turned around and become a source of tension. It got to be almost paralyzing."

Today, faculty members insist that the discord over Almaguer's term centered on management style and policies, not on race or racial discord. But it's hard to see how this was not, on some level, about race. As Okutsu says, "Race really matters in a college like this." Here in a college built atop America's biggest fault lines, where academic and political aims converge, is there anything -- a new hire, an uncouth remark, a line item in a budget -- that isn't ultimately about race?

The College of Ethnic Studies sits dead center on San Francisco State's Lakeshore campus, in the outer orbit of academic buildings along the school's emerald quad. In the building it shares with the psychology department, the college accounts for a couple of dimly lit hallways. This was formerly known as the Psychology Building, but last year a small group of ethnic studies students began to push for a more inclusive name. They succeeded, and in April the new name could be found in white, 2-inch-high capital letters on the building's front doors: "ETHNIC STUDIES & PSYCHOLOGY." In the college's newsletter, Almaguer was quoted as saying: "We now feel that the College of Ethnic Studies has full citizenship in the university. This is very symbolic and it is also quite an honor."

As a field, ethnic studies has always had a tortured self-identity. It was a discipline born out of a revolution, yet midwived, and later baby-sat, by the very people whose offices were being picketed. As an area of study, it borrowed the tools and methods of the social sciences, then tore into those very social sciences as part of the problem. The result was an unsure and defensive discipline, assailed from within and without. Indeed, in explaining the conflict over his tenure, Almaguer partly blames the "ongoing dilemma of ethnic studies trying to reinvent itself and be more than what it was in 1969."

And what was it in 1969? A solution, for starters. The College of Ethnic Studies was forged in the crucible of the late '60s -- of the civil rights movement, in particular -- and today its history is still told with that era's tone of triumphalism and inevitability. (The university holds up its campus strike the way Berkeley does its sit-in.) A brief synopsis: In November 1968, on an already tense campus, George Mason Murray, an English instructor and Black Panther minister of education, was suspended after allegedly encouraging black students to carry guns on campus as protection against racist

administrators. Students protested, and just days later, led by the Black Students Union and the newly formed Third World Liberation Front, they went on strike.

By the end of the month the university's president, Robert Smith, had resigned, and by December his replacement, semanticist and future U.S. Sen. S.I. Hayakawa, was clambering up a striking student's sound truck to disconnect the speakers. According to one history of the strike, written by a former San Francisco State librarian, the crowd yanked Hayakawa's tam-o'-shanter from his head; Hayakawa turned to author and teacher Kay Boyle and yelled, "You're fired!" -- prompting Boyle to call him "Hayakawa Eichmann."

It wasn't until March 1969, three months after the San Francisco State local of the American Federation of Teachers had joined the strike, that a settlement was reached. Assenting to the Third World Liberation Front's demand for a "School of Ethnic Studies for the ethnic groups involved in the Third World," the university established what would come to be the College of Ethnic Studies. The hope, at the onset, was that ethnic studies could correct the imbalances of America's Eurocentric academy -- that new perspectives could be taught from the inside out, says James Hirabayashi, the school's first dean. Today the college's Web site states, somewhat dreamily, that its "curriculum is designed to foster both a comprehensive understanding of the unique experiences of American Indians, Asian Americans, Blacks, and Latinos in the United States and comparative analysis between them."

"The irony of the strike is that the very people who were forced to recognize us still sat in judgment of what we did," Hirabayashi says. "You look at the structure of education, who has control? It's the board of trustees. And who's on the board? Without naming names, you know that basically, the people on the board are old, white, male, and rich. If some ethnics come along and say, 'Hey, I wanna know about my own history,' what's their response? It takes a strike."

(Administrators have perhaps learned that lesson. Ross Frank, an associate professor in ethnic studies at UC San Diego, calls the creation of his own department in the 1980s "a rear-guard measure" by the university -- a sop to minorities to pre-empt any sort of unrest. "It's been a win-win situation," he says.)

The difficulties of the discipline were evident from the beginning. For one thing, the first generation of ethnic studies programs was divided along racial lines, with the curriculum focusing on single groups, rather than the collective experience of minorities. "It was about creating history," Frank says, "about communities and people whose histories had largely been erased from academia. The problem with that -- with each area seen in isolation -- is that the commonalities about race and ethnicity are hard

to get at. It doesn't encourage comparative work, and more to the point, it creates a number of potential divisions within academic structures over resources. The administration sometimes plays [the groups] off each other to minimize the resources committed, and that makes for a very nasty thing."

Moreover, Hirabayashi and the college were relegated to the margins, a puzzling stepchild among some of the more established units. One year, the black studies department offered a course on African drumming, led by a Ghanaian drummer. Hirabayashi first placed the course in a classroom in the math department, which immediately drew complaints. "I guess mathematicians can't add and subtract to African rhythms," he now says with a laugh. He then moved the class outside; the library complained. Finally, he pushed the course off campus.

Some of these problems have persisted, in one form or another, through the four deans since Hirabayashi. When Almaguer took over, he says, the college was "very ethnically Balkanized, very separated, particularistic. Every group and department was only interested in themselves, what they were doing. There were lines of difference within all the units -- different Asian groups, different Latino groups -- but there was very little appreciation of the commonalities that people might have.

"And that's the irony: We embrace the ethnic categories -- black, Asian, Latino, Native American -- that are so inherently problematic. Clearly, race is a very problematic category in this country that is fraught with boundary problems. And so for ethnic studies to use this strategic essentialism, to basically invest in and valorize a certain identity -- that's a problem with an area of study that is so deeply rooted in identity."

Says Okutsu, "There's always going to be controversy around ethnic studies. That doesn't mean it's bad."

In the coming months, a task force -- made up of Ethnic Studies faculty -- will examine the college "not only to look at what happened," Okutsu says, "but at what needs to be done." The group's report will influence the direction the school takes next fall, when it opens a national search for a new head. One option might be to continue Almaguer's recasting of the college as a more comparative program, which could go a long way toward razing the ghettos within ethnic studies, says Frank of UC San Diego. "Our program has not had this kind of a problem, partly because of the approach," he says. "Everyone is to some extent a generalist." Eventually, though, any review of the College of Ethnic Studies will have to confront the uncomfortable possibility of the program's obsolescence. Berkeley has done it. In 1998, Ling-chi Wang, then the chair of the ethnic studies department and one of its founders, suggested merging ethnic studies with American studies. The proposal was deemed heresy, and it ultimately stalled, but

Wang's argument was and remains convincing. As one Cal professor told the online magazine *Salon*: "What would it say about the role of ethnic minorities in America to continue to insist that ethnic studies be separate from American studies? The symbolism is very disturbing."

Until San Francisco State finds a permanent successor to Almaguer, Kenneth Monteiro will serve as acting dean. His experience might make him an ideal substitute: He was previously the university's dean of human relations and a professor of -- what else? -- psychology.

James Hirabayashi, the former dean, lives in a pleasant house jammed into the side of a Mill Valley ravine. He is now 78, and, as he says, "I'm beginning to feel it in my bones." One recent Thursday morning, he is folded into a chair in his study, frail but still quick with a joke or an old quote and still clear-eyed about the field he helped establish. "I'm pessimistic," he says. "I think the system is grinding ethnic studies down. I wrote an article, way at the very beginning" -- and with that he shuffles over to a file cabinet and roots around inside -- "in which I predict that ultimately, ethnic studies is going to look like any other department in the university, because the institution has too much power."

Hirabayashi produces a photocopied article from a journal called *On Common Ground*, published by what was then the School of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State. Written in 1974, its pessimism is remarkable, especially considering the relatively early date -- when the strike was still a fresh memory, and not yet a mere campus monument -- as well as Hirabayashi's stature in the field. He writes of "inevitable and overwhelming forces" and "odds [that] are overwhelming," and then, foreseeing a day when the educational system "will grind us down," he ends on a dark minor note: At that point, he writes, "it will be time to do something else." No one is excepted from blame, not even his colleagues in ethnic studies: "To the extent that we who are involved fail to recognize the fact that, after all, we are also creatures of the total society and that we have internalized those implicit assumptions in terms of which this society operates, we often neglect to question the assumptions underlying traditional education and thus, we do not need outside oppressors. We function very well in that respect ourselves."

Recalling the article today, Hirabayashi offers a sort of resigned chuckle. In his telling, he was an accidental pioneer -- one who joined the teachers' union because it was easier than arguing with his officemate -- but once he became dean, he ran the program with a sort of moral fervor, full of idealistic notions about what could be taught, who could teach it, and where, exactly, the anthropologists could stuff their kinship charts. His disillusionment with ethnic studies, then, was that much more pronounced.

Today, he only shrugs. "We gave it our best shot," he says. "We were doing this back in the '60s, and we still haven't resolved our problems yet." Perhaps it's time to do something else.