

# Arte Público Press

## Teacher's Guide

Julian Nava:  
My Mexican-American Journey

### **Book Synopsis**

*Julian Nava: My Mexican-American Journey* is the story of the life of one of the most renowned and distinguished elder statesmen in the Hispanic community in the United States. In this autobiography, Nava chronicles the events, people, and places that shaped his journey -- from his roots in Mexico and early life in the barrio in Los Angeles, to his years of higher education, civil rights activism and public service.

Nava's previously untold story articulates the motivations and significant contributions of an inspiring Mexican American leader, who, alongside other Latino World War II veterans, paved the way for major reforms in U.S. law and custom. His commitment and perseverance to achieve in spite of numerous obstacles, including the political climate during his years of public leadership on the Los Angeles School Board and as the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, serve as an important reminder of what one individual can accomplish in and for this nation.

### **Teaching Overview**

#### *Intended Audience and Disciplinary Connections*

This guide seeks to facilitate the exploration of Latino/Hispanic contributions to U.S. civic culture among high school and junior college students (as well as lower division university students) in history, social studies, and civics classes. It is also intended to educate general adult readers interested in issues of civil rights, racial equality, leadership development, and community empowerment.

#### *Important Curricular Themes*

*Julian Nava: My Mexican-American Journey* is valuable as a tool to strengthen student comprehension and understanding of several important themes, including:

- the nature of racism in American society and its impact on Latinos;
- the impact of Latino individuals on the U.S. political consciousness; and
- the contributions Mexican American World War II veterans as trailblazers of the modern Latino political movement

## Reading Comprehension Strategies

**Before Reading:** *Initiate in-class discussions with students on topics that underscore the social and historical relevance of the work. Sample topics include:*

- The American Dream: key thinkers and its evolution
- The Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848
- The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 and its impact on Mexicans in the U.S.
- World War II and the participation of Mexican Americans
- The Chicano Movement – a summary of major issues, events, and leaders
- Orientation to landmark civil rights legislation and government programs, including: the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Right Act of 1965; the Bilingual Education of 1967; the Great Society and War on Poverty programs; and Affirmative Action
- Segregation: focusing on important judicial decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and other court decisions that specifically affected Mexican Americans (e.g., the *Méndez* and *Delgado* school decisions, and the *Hernández* jury desegregation decision)
- The U.S. Embargo on Cuba, as well as U.S. involvement in the wars against communism in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala
- Other key political events that are referenced in Nava’s book, such as the U.S. hostage situation in Iran and the Iran-Contra Scandal

Many of the literary tools listed in this teaching guide can be readily incorporated into pre-reading activities.

**As Reading Progresses:** *Pose questions to students designed to improve reading comprehension. Sample questions include:*

### Chapters 1-3

- How was Nava’s identity shaped by his parents and his Mexican American roots?
- Why did Nava’s parents move to the U.S.? What were the political circumstances in Mexico at the time?
- What were the political circumstances in the U.S. when Nava was very young? How were immigrants from Mexico treated? For example, what was the Repatriation Program of the 1930’s?
- What memorable experiences from his early years does Nava describe that contributed to his understanding of poverty, prejudice, discrimination, and racism? For example, what did he learn from living among Anglos? From living in the barrio?
- How did Nava’s life change when his family became members of the Divine Savior Presbyterian Church? What lessons did he learn about volunteerism and public service?
- What were pachucos? Why did they develop? How were they perceived by others?

### **Chapters 4-8**

- Why were the Japanese neighborhoods occupied by Mexican Americans after Pearl Harbor? How did Nava feel about Japanese in America versus in Japan? What were his feelings about Germans and Russians?
- How did Nava enter the military? How was Nava's identity shaped by his years in the Navy? What was his experience with discrimination?
- How did Nava's military service help shape his college experience? What memories does he describe of his college years? Who were the individuals and events that most influenced him?
- How did Mexican Americans distinguish themselves in their military service during the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War? What reason does Nava give for their exemplary service?
- What new world did Nava discover while at Harvard? What lessons did he learn about race and class?
- What were the political and economic circumstances that Nava encountered upon arrival in Venezuela to begin his doctoral research? How were they connected to American governmental and corporate interests?
- How did Nava pay for his doctoral studies at Harvard? What jobs did he work? Who were his patrons?
- Who were some of the professors who most influenced Nava's doctoral studies experience? How did they support his studies?

### **Chapters 9 - 12**

- What did Nava learn about the Puerto Rican educational system at the high school level? At the college level? How was it different from the U.S. mainland educational system?
- What was the impact of his mother's death on Nava's life?
- What did Nava see as his purpose in teaching?
- What were the political circumstances in Spain when Nava and his wife arrived for his Fulbright teaching year? Who was Francisco Franco? Who were the Guardia Civil?
- What are some of the experiences that Nava recounts of his time in Spain? What did he learn about Spanish culture and history? Where else did Nava and his wife visit during his year in Spain? What experiences impressed him most?
- Why did Nava and his family go to Columbia? Why was going to Columbia a mistake? How was it a learning experience? What did it help him to secure upon his return to the U.S.?

### **Chapters 13-14**

- How did Nava enter into politics in Los Angeles? What was his first elected position?
- How was Julian's perspective on political activism different from his wife?
- What was the Community Service Organization (CSO) in East Los Angeles? Why was it important?
- What were the circumstances facing Mexican Americans post-World War II? How were Mexican American veterans involved in bringing about social change?

- Why was it a significant political feat to elect an African American to the Los Angeles School Board in 1965? How was it accomplished? How then did Nava come to be elected?
- What change did Nava and his allies on the school board help to bring about? How did Nava's service on the school board effect the Mexican American community?
- What were the political circumstances in the U.S. during Nava's school board years?
- What actions did President Johnson take to support social change that benefited Mexican Americans? Why, according to Nava, was President Johnson so active on Mexican American issues?
- How was Nava involved with the National Hispanic Scholarship Fund? Why did his role with the fund become controversial over time?

### **Chapters 15 – 16**

- What was the significance of the East Los Angeles Walkouts in 1968? Why did they take place? Who was Sal Castro and what was his role in the walkouts?
- How did the walkouts create a split between Nava and the students? How did the walkouts impact Nava's efforts on the school board?
- How did the walkouts bring about other Mexican American educational reform efforts? How did they result in increased parental and community involvement in educational decision making?
- Who were the Chicanos? What was the Chicano Movement? How were Chicano beliefs different from those promoted by Mexican American World War II veterans?
- How were Chicanos viewed by the U.S. government and law enforcement agencies? Why were they feared? How did the government seek to discredit their efforts, for example, with the Brown Berets?
- How did Chicanos view the traditional political party structure? What was the La Raza Unida Party?
- What other issues did Chicanos take on? Were their organizing efforts successful? Why or why not?
- How did Chicanos view Nava? How did Nava view their efforts? Did he consider himself a Chicano?

### **Chapters 17 – 18**

- What are vaqueros? How is the use of vaqueros an example of how private interest groups in the U.S. benefit from undocumented immigrants? Why then are vaqueros viewed as a problem in U.S. communities?
- Why did Nava come to embrace institution building as an important social reform strategy? What are examples of the institutions that Nava helped to build?
- How did the Los Angeles School Board increase minority administrator appointments? Why was this important?
- What was the significance of the Bilingual Education Act of 1967? What were some of the arguments for bilingual education? Against bilingual education?
- What was Nava's position on bilingual education?
- How did bilingual education create conflict with the black community?

## **Chapter 19**

- Why was the integration of schools in Los Angeles a crisis issue? How did it represent a disconnect between local and national interests?
- What is de facto segregation? What is de jure segregation?
- What was Nava's position on school segregation?
- Why is school integration promoted? What are some of the problems with school integration?
- What were Magnet Schools? How were they presented as a school integration solution? Were they implemented? Why or why not?
- What other strategies were presented to resolve the school integration issue? What were community reactions to school integration? For example, what was "white flight"?
- What is "nativism"? How did this attitude or belief effect the treatment of Mexican Americans?

## **Chapter 20 - 22**

- How did students in the 1960's, such as at California State University at Northridge (CSUN), engage in activist efforts? What were their issues and tactics?
- What was the institutional response to student efforts? For example, why were Black Studies and Chicano Studies established at CSUN?
- What contributions did Nava and Rudy Acuña make to increase the public's knowledge of Mexican American history?
- Why did Nava decide not to run for reelection to the school board?
- What are charreadas? How did Nava's charro experience remind him of the continued discrimination against Mexican Americans?
- Why was Nava unsuccessful in his bid for the California State University – Los Angeles presidency? What racial politics were involved?
- Why, according to Nava, was he unsuccessful in securing other academic administrative leadership positions? How did his experiences affect his views on affirmative action?

## **Chapter 23**

- How did Nava come to be the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico?
- What was the Mexican people's reaction to Nava's appointment as ambassador? How did Nava manage his relationship with the Mexican press?
- How did Nava exercise leadership with his embassy staff? How did Nava work with and for U.S. corporate interests in Mexico?
- What were some of the experiences Nava recounts with other embassies?
- What were some of the key issues that Nava addressed during his ambassadorship? For example, what negotiations did Nava engage in with the Mexican government in response to the Arab oil boycott? What was Mexico's position? How did U.S. military officials attempt to weigh in on these negotiations?
- How was Mexico City "at the heart of the Cold War"?

## Chapter 24

- Why was Nava not reappointed as U.S. Ambassador to Mexico?
- How did Nava assist in the transition to a new U.S. Ambassador to Mexico under the Reagan administration?
- How were border issues and immigration to the U.S. regarded by the Mexican government? What was the Mexican government's policy on granting work permits to Americans? What was its position on American imports? On Mexican exports to the U.S.?
- What was Nava's position on why Mexican workers come to the U.S.? What was his position on affirmative action?
- What were Nava's reasons for "appearing to help" Governor Pete Wilson of California in his presidential bid?
- Why was President Carter not reelected?
- How did Nava feel the Iran hostage situation could have been resolved?
- Why, according to Nava, did the Iranians delay the release of the hostages?
- What was the Iran-Contra Scandal?

## Chapters 25 – 34

- Why did Nava decide to retire from teaching?
- What kinds of projects did Nava get involved in after his retirement? In the U.S.? In Mexico? In Cuba? In China? In Russia?
- Why did Nava become involved in these projects? For example, as a candidate in the Los Angeles mayoral race? What lessons did he learn about himself? About the evolving political situation facing Latinos?
- What is Nava's position on the Cuban Revolution and communist Cuba? What experiences does he share of his visits to communist nations, such as Cuba, China, and Russia?

## Writing/Composition Ideas

- What do you think were Nava's most important contributions? Why?
- How did Nava's international experiences enrich his perspective on Latino civil rights? Give examples.
- What is the difference between *de facto* and *de jure* policy? Give an example of each.
- Are immigrants an asset to the U.S.? Why or why not? Write an essay using information provided in Nava's book.
- Make the case for or against one of the following civil rights issues using information provided in Nava's book – bilingual education, school integration, or affirmative action.
- Who are the key people, places, and events that have influenced who you are as a person (e.g., family members, where you grew up, where you went to school, jobs you have held, etc.)?
- What beliefs and personal values guide the way in which you live your life?
- Describe a personal experience with racism/discrimination and how this influenced your identity.

- Write a biographical summary of a person who has impacted your view on civil rights.

### **Word and Terms Study**

- *Anglo*: An informal expression for an Anglo-American -- an English-speaking person, especially a white North American who is not of Hispanic or French descent.
- *Aztlán*: The mythical homeland of the Aztecs, said to have been situated geographically in the area of the five southwestern states obtained by conquest from Mexico as a result of the Mexican-American war (ceded to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848). This concept heavily influenced Chicano activism – to undo the injustice against Mexican Americans that started with U.S. imperialism and the unfair taking of land from Mexico.
- *Barrio*: In the United States, the term refers to a chiefly Spanish-speaking urban district or neighborhood that is economically depressed. *Barrio* has similar connotations to the terms *slum* and *ghetto*.
- *Chicano*: A term for a Mexican American that took on political meaning when it was appropriated by many U.S. Mexican activists in the U.S. Southwest. While it was originally used as a derogatory label for Mexicans who had recently arrived in the United States, it became a term of ethnic pride among Mexican activists during the 1960's and 1970's. Today, there is debate over continued use of the term.
- *Gringo*: A slang term for a foreigner in Latin America, especially an American or English person. In the U.S., the term is often used interchangeably with *Anglo*.
- *Hispanic*: Of or relating to Spain or Spanish-speaking Latin America. Often used to refer to a U.S. citizen or resident of Latin American or Spanish descent.
- *La Raza*: Literally means “the race” in English. A common term for being of Mexican descent.
- *Latino*: A person of Latin-American descent, often one living in the United States. While *Latino* and *Hispanic* are often used interchangeably, *Hispanic* refers more broadly to culture and persons descended from both Spain and Latin America. *Latino* and *Hispanic* also have strong geographic and political connotations, whereby some prefer the use of one of the terms to the other.

*Word Study Note: Given that many of these words possess deep and complex meanings, encourage students to conduct more in-depth analysis of these terms through paperback and on-line dictionary and encyclopaedia sources. Nava's text also contains other Spanish language words that can be further explored using a Spanish-English dictionary. These strategies may also serve to enhance student reading comprehension.*

### **About the Author**

Julian Nava and his wife live on their horse ranch near San Diego, close to their children and four grandchildren. A long-time professor at California State University at Northridge, he has published numerous books and articles on Mexican-American life and education.

## Related Literary Tools

### Background Research:

Many original documents referenced this book can be found in the California State University at Northridge library.

### Other Arte Público Books:

- Gonzales, Rodolfo. 2001. *Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings*. Ed. A. Esquibel. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.
- Gutiérrez, José A. 2001. *A Gringo Manual on How to Handle Mexicans*. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.
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- Tijerina, Reies L. 2000. *They Called Me "King Tiger": My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights*. Ed. and trans. J. Gutiérrez. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.
- Treviño, Jesús. 2001. *Eyewitness: A Filmmaker's Memoir of the Chicano Movement*. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.

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