The Alamo: Myth, Public History, and the Politics of Inclusion

Richard R. Flores

The Alamo in San Antonio is one of the major sites of public history in the United States as well as the most visited location in the State of Texas. Established in 1905 by the State of Texas, the Alamo is a Spanish mission where the forces of Antonio López de Santa Anna defeated 187 men led by William Barrett Travis, Jim Bowie, and David Crockett on 6 March 1836. A battle of some merit in the Texas Independence Movement (although those who died inside the Alamo never knew their compatriots had in fact voted for independence on 2 March), stories of the Alamo have entered the annals of public history as a heroic and mythic rendition of the events of 1836. At the center of this myth is the reduction of the political issues between the government of Mexico and its province of Tejas into a racialized binary of brave and freedom loving Texans and tyrannous Mexicans.

Over the last fifteen to twenty years numerous scholars have taken issue with the dominant portrayal of the Alamo battle, providing alternative readings and strategies so as to rewrite its public narrative. The struggle to rewrite the story of the Alamo as a more representative event of the past has been an important, yet I offer, insufficient tactic. This paper, therefore, has three objectives: first, to provide a brief overview of the dominant narrative of the Alamo; second to examine the various strategies that historians and community leaders have wielded to critique the public history of the Alamo; and third, to offer a historical reading of the public history itself so as to examine the foundation of the Alamo myth.

Myth as Public History
Before addressing the various strategies revisionist scholars have proffered let me first present an overview of the dominant historical narra-
tive concerning the Battle of the Alamo. While this narrative is reproduced in various genres, from historical texts to fiction to film and even poetry, I will address the view presented at the Alamo proper through a short film shown on the Alamo grounds. The brief film is shown under the tutelage of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT), the official custodians of the Alamo. Since 1905, when the State of Texas entrusted the Alamo to them, the DRT has held sole authority over the interpretation of this site. Today, with little or no accountability to the state or the local community, the DRT continues to control the Alamo grounds and, more critically, the public history they have enshrined.

Approximately three times an hour, visitors to the Alamo are encouraged to visit the long barracks of this old mission where they can view a visual narrative of the Alamo battle in a small room known as the Driscoll Theatre. Beginning with a brief reference to the Spanish friars, who founded the mission, the film moves to the events surrounding the Battle of the Alamo.

The year, the film states, is now 1835 and the Mexican General Martín Perfecto de Cos, charged with protecting the Province of Tejas from Anglo-American unrest, is defeated at the siege of Béxar, now San Antonio. After being captured, he and his soldiers are sent south of the Río Grande River.

With unrest in the province growing, Sam Houston takes charge of the Texas forces, and after Cos’s defeat, orders Colonel Jim Bowie to destroy the Alamo lest it become occupied and fortified by Mexican
forces. But Bowie, according to the film, becomes "fascinated" with the old mission, declares that he "would rather die in these ditches than to give them up to the enemy," and refuses to destroy the fortress.

Soon, Lieutenant Colonel William Barrett Travis and Bowie assume joint command of the Alamo and are joined by David Crockett and his dozen or so volunteers from Tennessee. There are about 150 men in the Alamo, few of whom are trained soldiers. The majority of these men are from outside Texas, with a number from European countries. "They had come to aid the revolution." The only outside help the defenders receive are thirty-two men from Gonzalez, Texas, who believed that "This was the place and this was the hour to stand opposed to tyranny."

On 22 February "governed by the ruthless will of the dictator, Santa Anna's cavalry arrived" in Bexar, what is now San Antonio. Upon arriving, Santa Anna orders the men in the Alamo to surrender. Unwilling to do so, Travis answers with a canon shot aimed at the Mexican forces. "One hundred fifty valiant volunteers against the dictator's trained brigades. The siege had begun."

The men at the Alamo begin the battle alone. No help is delivered, although it is requested, as the battle carries on for thirteen days. Bowie, sick and bedridden, passes the full command of the Alamo forces to Travis. The narrator declares:

"According to legend, Travis drew a line on the ground with his sword, offering every man a choice to remain or save his life. According to the legend, only one man fled. History records that 187 remained to die."

After twelve days of fighting, Santa Anna, on the morning of 6 March, sounds the "deguello," the Mexican bugle melody that announces "that no prisoners will be taken, no quarter will be given."

As the Mexicans begin their attack, Travis gives the order, "The Mexicans are upon us. Give them hell!"

The Texans fight bravely, pushing back two assaults on the Alamo. The third assault breaks the Texans' forces and the Mexicans soon reach the inner fortress of the old mission. Travis falls holding his sword, Crockett dies fighting in the plaza, and Bowie, still bedridden, fights with his pistol and knife in his hand. All the defenders are killed.

The battle of the Alamo was not in vain, for Santa Anna's army is tattered and needs weeks to recuperate from this victory. Less than six weeks later, Sam Houston's army defeats Santa Anna's forces at San Jacinto, screaming: "Remember the Alamo! The Alamo! The Alamo! The Alamo!"

I have written about this narrative elsewhere; suffice it to say here that this film is founded on the following binary structure:
Photo courtesy of R. Flores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXANS</th>
<th>MEXICANS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaders:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travis</td>
<td>Santa Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowie</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Crockett</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>brave, valiant</td>
<td>ruthless dictator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>independence</td>
<td>tyranny</td>
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<td>liberty</td>
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<td>freedom</td>
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<td>Soldiers:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>volunteers</td>
<td>trained brigade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome:</td>
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<tr>
<td>victorious even</td>
<td>defeated (six weeks later)</td>
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<tr>
<td>in death</td>
<td>and tattered in victory</td>
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</table>

We learn from this brief film that the Battle of the Alamo was fought between the tyrannous forces of Santa Anna against the brave, valiant, and independent seeking Texans. Little effort is made in presenting
the political complexities of this era. Instead we are offered a highly structured narrative of good and evil, including the highly suspect and totally incorrect project of racializing this event as one between Texans and Mexicans. Structures such as this bring into relief the underlying principles that give credence to these narratives in the first place. As such, this binary narrative form is not that of historical discourse, where the murky waters of the past are defined by their sheer multiplicity and ambiguity, but the structural features of myth and collective memory that serve to underscore the social order of those who write this story.

Before continuing let me briefly re-inscribe this narrative with several key elements erased by the DRT.

For one, 12,000 Anglo-Americans had entered Mexico by 1827 and were living in the province of Coahuila-Tejas, outnumbering the Mexicans by 5,000 people. Foreigners continued moving into the province in large numbers, and, by 1835, Mexican citizens in Tejas numbered 7,800 to 30,000 Anglo-Americans. The growing number of Anglo-Americans moving into Tejas alarmed Mexican officials, and in an effort to curb the growing immigration from the United States, the Mexican government passed an emancipation proclamation in 1829 outlawing slavery. Slavery was not a practice in Mexico, but the law was aimed at curbing the number of U. S. citizens moving into the Mexican provinces.

Another factor causing concern among citizens of Tejas—both Mexican and Anglo-American—was the cumbersome distance between Tejas and Saltillo, where government offices and appellate courts for the province were housed. In 1833, Stephen F. Austin traveled to Mexico City to try to persuade President Santa Anna to allow Texas to become an independent Mexican state with control over its own affairs. Santa Anna refused, adding to the growing unrest.

Tensions between the Mexican citizenry in Tejas and the Mexican government came to a head when Santa Anna discarded the Mexican Constitution of 1824, causing great consternation among Mexicans and Anglo-Americans in Tejas. Perhaps the biggest misnomer in the annals of Texas history concerns the immediate affects of Santa Anna’s annulment. Historians agree that his actions led to the military engagements that resulted in the independence of Texas, but it is also quiet clear that the move to independence was not the immediate stance taken by all, especially among the older settlers. Many had come to Tejas seeking new ways of life and were slow in responding to the call to arms, and even fewer fought at the Alamo. As historian Stephan L. Hardin demonstrates, “Few of the real Texans were there, for few of the old settlers had originally sought independence or war.”3

There are numerous factors to consider in attributing a motive to
those who bore arms against the Mexican state. The most common, at least in the initial stages of the revolt, was the intent of local citizens to return Mexico to a federalist republic. In fact, as settlers in Tejas organized during the early months of conflict, their efforts at forming a provisional independent government led to open feuding about the issue of independence. These initial efforts in November 1835 led to the formation of a provisional government "as a state within the Mexican federation," not a separate independent Texas republic. The latter, however, was only a few months away. The rationale for independence was that local citizens of Tejas believed that many of their troubles with the Mexican government would be sufferable if decisions were left in their own hands. Federalistas and centralistas, then, bear the primary responsibility concerning the open hostility erupting in 1835. Among these two camps, ethnic or national origin did not serve as a primary factor in choosing sides. Some found Mexican citizens sided with the federalists, opposing the dictatorial regime of Santa Anna; some Anglo-Americans backed the centralist forces of the dictator.

In an effort to suppress the federalist movement in Texas, Santa Anna led his forces north, making his move on San Antonio de Béxar and the Alamo. The aftermath of the battle was one of blood, carnage, and utter death and destruction. José Enrique de la Peña described Santa Anna’s arrival at the battle scene: "He could see for himself the desolation among his battalions and that devastated area littered with corpses, with scattered limbs and bullets, with weapons and torn uniforms... The bodies, with their blackened and bloody faces disfigured by a desperate death, their hair and uniforms burning at once, presented a dreadful and truly hellish sight."

Those who died defending the Alamo did so for a "borrowed cause," claims Hardin: "the majority had only recently come from the United States to fight for Texas independence. Among them were Scots, Welsh, Danes and English, as well as U. S. citizens. Few of the real Texans were there..." But there is no doubt that news of the defeat, and the death of all of the Alamo defenders, gave impetus to an already growing but not wholly subscribed to independence movement.

Critical to this historical portrait are several factors. First, as noted above, the initial dispute in Texas stemmed from both Mexicans and Anglo-Americans seeking to restore a federalist government in Mexico. Mexicans in the province also tired of Santa Anna’s exploits and of the tedious political circumstances affiliated with their distance from the provincial and national capitals in Coahuila and Mexico City. Second, in spite of his unilateral control of Mexican affairs and politics, and his egotistical and personal ambitions, Santa Anna’s actions can be viewed as an effort to control an internal uprising in his own country.
Finally, an element that seems quite overlooked is the identity of the men who died. The public version of this event provided by the DRT claims that this was a battle between Texans and Mexicans. This is not correct. There were only thirteen native-born Texans in the group, and eleven of them were of Mexican descent. Of those remaining, forty-one of them were born in Europe, two were Jews, two were African American, and the remainder were Americans from other states in the U.S. Thus, the portrayal of the Battle of the Alamo as a conflict between Texans and Mexicans is a misrepresentation. Prominent Mexican citizens fought on both sides, dividing their allegiance along political and ideological lines rather than according to the ethnically or nationally circumscribed positions popularized at the Alamo.

The public narrative of the Alamo as a Manichaean drama of noble Texans and ruthless Mexicans continued to shape the understanding about the Alamo until the mid-1960s with little resistance. In the last thirty years, however, through parody, critique, and other strategic interventions, this dominant narrative of the Alamo has come under intense scrutiny. While some challenges have emanated from the realm of popular culture (Peter Ustinov’s film, *Viva Max*, being the earliest) here I will focus on those efforts made by academics and community leaders.

**Public History as Myth**

The primary method of contemporary critique in relation to the Alamo builds on a model of inclusion. While numerous historians have participated in this process, Gilberto Hinojosa, a notable Tejano historian teaching in San Antonio, is perhaps the most well known. In 1986 Hinojosa advocated recognizing the often-neglected role of Mexicans who fought inside the Alamo. "Tejano participants," he stated, "appear to have shared political ideals with their Anglo-Texan compatriots and exhibited acceptable if not equivalent determination to see Texas free of centralist rule." More recently, in 1997, Hinojosa claimed, "Including Tejano participation in the powerful Alamo story—since bravery and defiance for the sake of self-determination was manifested by all the Alamo defenders—will produce a founding epic for all Texans in the states twenty-first century society." Hinojosa is not alone in his sentiments. Félix Almaráz, Jr., another San Antonio historian, has expressed similar views as has local radio announcer Henry Guerra, who has read the list of Alamo defenders in commemoration ceremonies held each year at the Alamo, including the names of Tejanos. These efforts, while only partially successful, warrant significant recognition. The Alamo battle was not a race war, and efforts to write the history of this battle as one between Texans and Mexicans, as do the DRT through their video presentation, does a great disservice to how we understand this event.
A second inclusionary model concerns the expansion of the history of the Alamo so as to provide a broader representation of the Alamo's past, specifically the Spanish Colonial period. Efforts in this direction have coalesced in the last few years with Mexican-American scholars and community leaders joining ranks with Native Americans and African Americans. At issue is the fact that the Alamo—as Mission San Antonio de Valero—contained within its walls, as did most mission compounds, a campo santo, or burial ground for Native Indians, Spanish missionaries and later on for slaves and mestizos from San Antonio. According to Gabe Gabehart, president of the Inter-Tribal Council of American Indians, census records from the Spanish Colonial period indicate 1006 people buried in the Spanish mission of the Alamo, out of which 883 were North American Indians. Such claims have led to various efforts both to recognize the presence of these plots and to recuperate these long-forgotten remains. Responding to this issue, in 1994 the City Council of San Antonio established an Alamo Plaza Study Committee to recommend a plan of action. One strategy put forward by several members of the committee called for closing several streets surrounding the Alamo and leveling buildings that now stand on the original mission compound. The goal of the proposal was to restore the
Alamo to its original mission plot of land. What the DRT recognizes as the Alamo is only a reconstructed version of the mission church, which was in ruins at the time of the battle. The original walls to the compound have long been destroyed and built over, partly supported by members of the DRT themselves.\textsuperscript{11} In support of this idea, Richard Santos, chairman of the Bexar County Historical Commission and himself of Mexican descent, argued, "Enough of John Wayne, show us some blacks, some Mexicans, some Indians. We're proud of our heritage. Why should we take a back seat."\textsuperscript{12} The DRT, however, has vehemently worked against any effort to recenter the historical focus of the Alamo from 1836 to a more inclusive historical portrait. Still, the popularity of the Alamo as a site of public history continues to grow, attracting several million people a year even as criticism persists. Carlos Guerra, a San Antonio newspaper columnist claims, "I think if you talk to Hispanics overall, you'll find they are very uncomfortable with the symbol of the Alamo. They find it a symbol, not of liberty, but of racism."\textsuperscript{13}

The efforts and strategies proposed in these two models of inclusion serve as important efforts to rethink and rewrite the story of the Alamo from a position that represents a sense of the past beyond the events of 1836. The first model aims at recognizing that "good" Mexicans fought alongside the traditionally-known heroes against the "treacherous" Mexicans. The second model, which further expands the history of this site, aims to incorporate the Spanish Colonial period thereby giving more credence to a full range of historical actors whose lives were associated with the Alamo. In both cases, Hinojosa can claim: "I'm not against the Alamo story or the Alamo epic. The question is what does the story say."\textsuperscript{14}

While both of these models serve an important role in rethinking and expanding the story of the Alamo, they fail, I suggest, because they remain, as Hinojosa's comment states, at the level of story, epic, or myth. Recognizing the mythic elements of the Alamo story is not new. Historian David Weber, for example, writes that "a number of the cherished stories about the Alamo have no basis in historical fact, but have moved out of the earthly realm of reality into the stratosphere of myth."\textsuperscript{15} But myths are not stratospheric tales; they are deeply grounded narratives through which communities express deeply held convictions. Myth, as the literary critic Frederick Jameson explains, is a type of "storytelling that seals the unity of the tribe, confirms their common past through the celebration of the heroic founders of culture . . . through a shared symbolism and a shared ritual."\textsuperscript{16} Thus, contemporary critiques that follow these inclusion models fail to move beyond the heroic and mythic elements embedded in the structure of the Alamo narrative. Lest I be misunderstood, let me clearly state that any effort to expand the
Alamo story is an important and necessary one. Strategies of inclusion, however, do not question the roles that binary and mythic constructions serve in the formation of the larger social order.

Deciphering the Alamo myth is not a task of picking through the rubble of fact and fiction, discarding the invented and upholding the real. Criticism of the Alamo myth must examine the contents of the story and come to terms with the raw materials of fact and fiction as genuine elements in a story that must now be recovered. This recovery must, in turn, recast the materials of the myth as inflections of a society coming to terms with itself in real historical time. Such expressive and important cultural forms are not unique to the modern world, nor is the convergence of myth with narratives of the past. What is unique about such narratives is their particular relationship to the past. A criticism of the Alamo myth, therefore, must examine the story told as a means of accounting historically and socially for its own presence. In our case, we must return to the late nineteenth century when the myth became organized, both as a real moment of the past and as a marker for an era of social transition I have termed the Texas Modern.

The Alamo as Tex(Mex) Master Symbol of Modernity
Several critical changes affected the Texas economy between 1880 and 1900, namely the closing of the range, the introduction of the railroad, and the beginning of commercial farming. Between 1900 and 1920 these changes accelerated, leading to increased social pressure and conflict. Overall, the period between 1880 and 1920 was one marked by the "working out" of new relationships, habits and practices brought forth by the rapid transitions of this period and that resulted in the establishment of a social order segmented into various ethnic and class divisions. By 1915, however, these struggles for position erupted into violent conflict. The various social and class contradictions of this period could no longer be restrained by earlier social and ideological arrangements, like those between elite ranchers and their workers that revealed the depth and magnitude of social erosion in the Mexican community of South Texas. These eruptions constituted a "cultural revolution," an unsettling and transitional period in which new practices and customs, forged from new relations of material and ideological production, are ascending to a position of dominance.

The changes associated with the Texas Modern are evident in the increased and rapid transition to commercial farming and the erosion of local agricultural and cattle-related practices. In deep South Texas farmers from Kansas and Illinois played a principal role in this transformation, influenced by developers promising cheap land worked by even cheaper Mexican labor. Between 1910 and 1920 these Midwest
transplants were responsible for doubling the number of farms in Cam-
eron County, while in neighboring Hidalgo County, farms grew more
than seven fold in this same period. These increases resulted in a popu-
lation boom in South Texas—mostly from outsiders—as the area grew
from 79,974 inhabitants in 1900 to over 159,000 in 1920.20 While these
events affected all sectors of the population, the displacement of Mexican
skilled workers, landowners, and vaqueros was disproportionate to
their overall numbers.

Urban areas were equally affected. San Antonio’s West Side had
developed as an enclave of Mexican social and cultural life whose
population mushroomed by the early 1900s. Although founders of the
city and early civic and business leaders, by 1915 Mexicans were primar-
ily poor, maintained as such by their “forced social and economic segre-
gation.”21

The effects of the Texas Modern on the lives of the local Mexican
population were severe: most experienced underemployment that in-
sured living in poverty, little access to public institutions enforced by
practices and policies of segregation, loss of political power guaranteed
through gerrymandering and the institutionalization of poll taxes. These
tactics, reproduced through the political and social apparatus of the
state, served to assure a social body stratified along racial, ethnic and
class lines.

The Alamo, I offer, served as a key symbolic formulation, or Master
Symbol, that legitimates the exploitation and displacement of Mexicans
during this period. It must be remembered that the Alamo, unlike
Gettysburg, did not become a public memorial immediately after the
battle. Instead, this former mission, which was already in ruins at the
time of the conflict, served as grain facility for the U.S. Quartermaster’s
Depot, a supply store and saloon. It was not until the 1890s that efforts
to purchase the property, then in private hands, was initiated. My
argument, therefore, is that the Alamo emerges as a site of public history
and culture in the midst of the Texas Modern as a means of justifying
the deep social and racial cleavages of the moment.22

Ricoeur’s discussion of “plot,” “events,” and “historicality” assist in
developing my position. Historical events, he claims, serve to advance
“the plot” of a particular narrative, endowing them with historicality.
At the level of the narrative, historical accounts represent “the aspects
of time in which endings can be seen linked to beginnings to form a
continuity within a difference.”23 It is through this model that the Alamo
must be understood. Why, I ask, was this location not recognized as a
site of public history until the late nineteenth century? Is it not a coinci-
dence, I suggest, that the events of 1836 were not thought historically
significant until the advent of modernity in Texas. As a transformational
process, modernity serves to reproduce society "with a difference." In Texas, this difference is found in the rearrangement of relationships between Anglos and Mexicans into a hierarchical structure. The events of 1836 serve as an episodic element that advances a plot of dominance by linking the modern episteme of difference with a myth of origin. While historians, both professional and amateur, may debate the "factual" details of how Davy Crockett died, or the location of various persons during the engagement, or the names and racial/ethnic identities of those involved in the battle, the "meaning" of such discussion is warranted only as a result of the formative weight we give to 1836 as an explanatory factor for the present social order. The Alamo exists as an event in history, but its history emerged in culture as a way to unify experience and social context.

Richard Slotkin persuasively argues how mythic complexes inform the westward expansion of the United States. Critical to his discussion is the way violence serves as a mechanism of social and cultural reproduction that shapes notions of power and dominance over nature and the Other of the Western frontier. Is it coincidence that the heroic, mythic tale of the Alamo is itself a story about the birth, not merely of Texas, but the United States and the Western frontier? I hardly believe so.

This is not to suggest that the Alamo was without meaning or significance prior to the Texas Modern. Immediately after 1836, the death of the Alamo defenders fueled anti-Mexican sentiment throughout the Southwest for many years. But the production and representation of the Battle of the Alamo during the Texas Modern serves as a key symbolic formulation that is constitutive, and not merely reflective, of the material and social changes of the moment. As important, the significance of the Alamo is itself reconstituted in this process. The coupling of the Alamo with the Texas Modern brings its significance out of the narrow confines of the past into a story that resonates with the present, a narrative in which social actors present at the Alamo are remade into heroes in the service of a modernist agenda.

Precisely because of these issues, most contemporary critiques of the Alamo are in need of rethinking. Any effort to expand the "myth" of the Alamo serves only to offer a more inclusive reading without considering what symbolic work is being accomplished by the myth in the first place. Perhaps John Sayles is correct when he concludes his film Lone Star by having Pilar, whose has just learned of her mixed Mexican-Anglo ancestry, claim: "Forget the Alamo!"

Notes
This article is part of a continuing series on the public presentation of the nation, reflecting the political transformations that have challenged or refuted the legitimacy
and national stories told by past regimes. For the first installment of this series see Radical History Review issue 75.

1. Quoted material in this section references the Alamo film from notes I took on various occasions during my research at the Alamo.

2. For a more complete discussion of these issues see my essay, “Memory-Place, Meaning, and the Alamo,” American Literary History 10 (1998): 428–45.


4. Ibid., 57.


6. Stephen L. Hardin, Texian Iliad, 156.

7. This is not to say that the formation of the Alamo as a place of public history has gone uncontested until this time. There have been numerous “second battles” over the Alamo. Nearly all, except for that waged by Adina De Zavala, did not concern the myth of the Alamo but various political postures on how to best preserve the myth in a public forum. Most of these issues concerned various beautification efforts by the City of San Antonio as they have attempted to preserve the space around the Alamo as this area grew in size and density. On De Zavala, see her History and Legends of the Alamo and Other Missions in and around San Antonio, edited and introduced by Richard R. Flores (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996).


17. See my book manuscript, Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity and the Master Symbol, under review with the University of Texas Press.


