

The Contested Meaning(s) of Houston 1836: A Contemporary Cultural Battle over Memory and Migration within the Lone Star State

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This paper analyzes a recent debate concerning the naming of a professional soccer team in Houston, Texas and its connection to larger issues concerning national identity, collective memory, and Hispanic immigration within the United States and Mexico. The original team name of Houston 1836, chosen by the mostly white management of the club, was chosen as a way of honoring the year of the city's founding as well as the year in which Texas gained independence from Mexico, both of which efforts were led by white settlers from the American South. The proposed name provoked a contentious and highly public outcry within powerful and influential members of the local Hispanic community who argued that the name served as a powerful and divisive reminder of the oppression faced by the Mexican population as a result of white hegemonic rule in Texas. As a result of the controversy and threats of a Hispanic boycott of the club, team officials relented and eventually changed the name to the less offensive moniker of the Houston Dynamo. This decision in turn led to a backlash among some white supporters of the new club who claimed that team officials had given in to the forces of "political correctness" by changing the name. This paper frames this debate within the context of contemporary issues of identity and migration in Texas, arguing that the debate over Houston 1836 is part of a much larger political and cultural war regarding the place of Hispanics within the myths of American national identity. We argue that the controversy is ultimately one localized case study into what has become an increasingly sophisticated and organized movement of resistance against forms of white nativism, both cultural and political, within the American Hispanic community. It also illustrates the divisive nature of the past, as both sides of the debate possess completely different understandings of what the year 1836 means and represents. *Key Words: Houston 1836, Dynamo, soccer, media and culture.*

Introduction

On December 15th of 2005, commissioner Don Garber, the leader of the 10-year old American professional soccer league known as Major League Soccer (MLS), announced what had been long rumored and threatened in the local and national media---the San Jose (California) Earthquakes franchise were moving their operations to Houston, Texas (Bell, 2005). The decision to move the club to Houston by the Earthquakes' owners the Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), a multi-media and entertainment conglomerate headed by noted right-wing billionaire Phillip Anschutz, came as no surprise to anyone familiar with the landscape of American professional sports over the last 30 years. As noted by Danielson (1997), city leaders of modern American metropolitan areas routinely attempt to lure sporting franchises away from other cities as a way of engendering economic growth and achieving "big league status" within the American urban landscape.¹ Similarly, Newsome & Comer (2000) discuss how corporate greed is making it more enticing to move a franchise from one American city to another. Typically, professional sports owners receive promises of new stadium development and favorable economic and tax incentives from their new urban suitors. In choosing to move to a new city, owners leave behind loyal fan bases and the collective sporting memories associated with their former town. The Earthquakes, for example, were twice champions of MLS and were also one of the original clubs of the now defunct North American Soccer League (Jones, 2007).

The decision to move to Houston by AEG echoed the typical American script. Following 10 years of losing money, AEG and other MLS owners now believed that the only way the sport could succeed financially in the United States would be if the clubs played in smaller, soccer-specific stadiums, typically holding no more than 25,000 fans, and where they controlled the majority of the ancillary revenue streams such as parking fees and concession profits (Collins, 2006). Additionally, modern stadiums invariably include a number of luxury boxes in their design (Schimmel, 1997). These boxes are rented out at exorbitant costs to local corporations and wealthy individuals, offering the teams a more lucrative revenue source than gained through general admission tickets. For example, Schlager (2006) reports that it costs up to \$70,000 for a one-year lease to watch football games at a major college stadium.

Having succeeded in getting new stadiums constructed for its two other MLS clubs in Los Angeles and Chicago, AEG argued that the Earthquakes could not succeed financially without a new soccer-specific stadium built for the team to replace the aging Spartan Stadium, a facility owned and operated by San Jose State University (Robinson, 2006). After failing to achieve a favorable agreement for a new facility, AEG chose to move its operations to Houston, a community deemed to have a political climate much more favor-

able to stadium development. New team president Oliver Luck had recently served as the president of the Houston and Harris County Stadium Authority, a body which has the power to accelerate the process of funding and constructing sports stadiums in the region and which played a key role in developing stadiums for Houston's Major League Baseball, National Football League, and National Basketball Association franchises. Consequently, AEG believed that Luck could use his connections and influence to effectively lobby for a new stadium for the team (Weisman, 2004; Romero, 2006). Tim Leiweke, president and CEO of AEG, commented at the press conference announcing the team's departure that (Halpin, 2005):

It is with great regret that we were unable to find a solution to our facility issues in San Jose. It was not for lack of effort and financial investment made by AEG, providing a life-line to this team for three years, to turn around a difficult situation. Unfortunately, despite efforts by the city of San Jose, there was never a solution to the facility issue. We thank the fans for their support and are hopeful that a team will be back in this marketplace in the near future.

As is usually the case when the owners of professional sports teams choose to move to a new community, the decision by AEG to leave San Jose generated criticism and disgust within the Earthquakes fan-base. Silicon Soccer Valley (SSV), a non-profit group formed by influential local Earthquakes fan to keep the team in the South Bay, released a statement to the media on December 15th, 2005 that "We have been contacted by many of our members who are sad, frustrated, and angry that this has taken place. We share those emotions. We are sad, frustrated and disappointed that the team has left town" (SSV Statement, 2005).

The one positive for Earthquake fans of the club's move to Houston was the decision by AEG and MLS not to take the name and the recorded history of the team with them to Houston. Following the example set by the move of the NFL's Cleveland Browns to Baltimore in 1995 (Shank & Beasley, 1998), AEG chose to leave the Earthquakes name and history to the city of San Jose in the event another owner chose to place an expansion franchise there in the future.² As such, the club now needed a new moniker and a new brand for the Houston market, preferably one that would excite the local populous and garner support for the fledgling franchise.

This paper examines the initial decision to name the new Houston soccer team Houston 1836 and the rather public controversy that developed once the name was announced to the community. We read this incident as an example of a small-scale skirmish within a greater societal culture war fought over issues of memory, heritage, and identity within a changing American population. As argued by Mitchell (2000, 4), culture wars are "battles rooted in ideology, religion, class difference, the social construction of racial, gender, and ethnic

difference, and so on that mark contemporary society. The battlefields in the culture war are many and varied.” In this case, the controversy that developed over the Houston 1836 soccer team reflects embedded tensions inherent within both the Anglo-American and Latino-American communities regarding both the meaning of the past and the future of American ethno-identity politics. Indeed, the United States is currently in the midst of what Santa Ana (2002) refers to as a “brown tide rising,” a massive explosion of Latino/a population and popular culture throughout the country.

As we document in this paper, the name Houston 1836 was widely criticized within the city’s burgeoning Latino community as an offensive reminder of a long history of Anglo-Texan hegemony and several community leaders threatened a large-scale boycott of the new team if the name was not changed. Though not as widely reported as other sports public relations nightmare involving issues of cultural insensitivity, the name 1836 proved to be a local public relations nightmare for AEG.³ Bowing to the rising external pressure within the city, the team name was eventually changed by AEG to Houston Dynamo. In doing so, the event illustrates the challenge to traditional Anglo-Texan economic and political power within Houston posed by an increasingly organized and energized Latino electorate.

However, the decision to change to the name to Houston Dynamo was not viewed by all members of the community as a positive development. In an counter-protest waged mostly in the “new battlefield” sites of cyber-space chat rooms, bulletin boards, and email blasts, a group of primarily Anglo-Texans and their mostly conservative allies across the United States decried the decision as one made out of “political correctness.” According to this group, some of which have since gone on to form the supporters’ group the Texian Army, the name Houston 1836 reflected the glorious history of the founding of the city of Houston and the independence gained by state of Texas, and should not have been read by the Latino community as offensive. This paper also examines these counter-claims to Texas memory and reads their reactions to the controversy as a culture-war salvo against Latino/a culture and a perceived immigrant threat. Many of the arguments made to the new Houston Dynamo name reflect the recent hate discourses offered by the anti-immigrant Minutemen Civil Defense Corps. Noted self-proclaimed culture warrior, conservative pundit and one-time presidential candidate Pat Buchanan who wrote in his new best-selling book *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* that “a new border war has begun with the first signs of an ‘intifada’ to retake control of the Southwest” (Buchanan 2006, 113).

Your soccer, our futbol

Globally, there is perhaps no sport as inextricably tied to the spatial and cultural fabric of local communities as football/soccer.⁴ The successes and failures of local soccer clubs serve as rallying points for entire communities and the clubs themselves come to represent the spatial identity of communities where they are located (Mercer and Hague 1998; Bale 2002; Maguire 1999; Floysand and Jakobsen 2007). Clark (2006) illustrates how the songs and chants heard on the terraces of English soccer stadia serve to collectively orient the identities of fans to their town and its history. Additionally, soccer matches against rival clubs, referred to within soccer parlance as “derby matches,” often take on economic, social, and political meanings with attachments well beyond simple sporting rivalries (van Houtum and van Dam 2002). The annual derby matches between Real Madrid FC and FC Barcelona, for example, represent cultural and political battles in Spain dating back over sixty years to the Spanish Civil War and the fascist Franco regime (Shobe 2008; Foer 2004). The geographic and cultural importance of football clubs throughout the world is so significant that Scott and Simpson-Hausley (1998, 235) are not guilty of hyperbole in their contention that, “The geography of the sport of soccer governs key aspects of political social and economic conditions of Rio de Janeiro, rather than vice versa.”

Within the United States, however, professional soccer has failed to capture the imagination of many Americans and the connection of professional teams to their local communities lacks the history and passion found internationally. Despite becoming the most important and widely played youth sport in America, soccer has for the most part failed to capture the interest and imagination of American adult audiences. Markovits and Hellerman (2001) claim that soccer has long been viewed by Americans as a “foreign game” to be rejected as part of the American nationalist claim of exceptionalism and the “greatest nation on Earth.” They argue that since the game was not invented here, it has failed to achieve hegemonic status in a country long suspicious of foreign culture and influence. Instead, it is the “truly American” games such as baseball, football, and basketball which have captured the widespread imagination of American sports fans and subsequently developed intensive and long-standing cultural connections with local communities throughout the country (Bissinger 2003; Falk 2005; Foley 1990; Kraus 2003; Johnson 1993; Guffey 2006)

Soccer also has few voices of support within the mainstream American sports media, the vast majority of whom grew up supporting and covering teams in the “American” sports of gridiron football, baseball, and basketball and consequently have little knowledge about or interest in the game of soccer. In his book *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globaliza-*

tion, Franklin Foer (2004) documents that American indifference to soccer within the media is often expressed in vitriolic language, as sportswriters and commentators routinely bash the game as foreign, feminine, and altogether un-American. ESPN football reporter Sal Paolantonio's (2008) recent soccer book of American exceptionalism *How Football Explains America*, written in response to Foer's text, managed to employ a whole range of typical anti-soccer media discourse such as arguing the game is too boring, low scoring, un-masculine, and not tactical enough for Americans to embrace (Wells 2008). In a similar spirit, the noted soccer basher NPR and HBO *Real Sports* commentator and *Sports Illustrated* columnist Frank Deford, stated in a 2006 interview on the PBS show *News Hour* that soccer "doesn't have the proficiency that sports do that use your hands. It's totally bizarre when you think about it that a game would be played with feet and head rather than hands. I mean, this makes no sense whatsoever" (News Hour 2006).

In order to compete within a small and sometimes hostile American sporting landscape, Major League Soccer (MLS) placed the majority of its teams in large and diverse metropolitan areas, preferably with a large Hispanic population. Though the move of the San Jose Earthquakes franchise to Houston was primarily driven by stadium-related issues, it was a market long coveted by MLS for expansion. According to 2005 census data, Houston/Galveston is the seventh largest metropolitan area in the United States, a major media market of well over five million people. It is also a city with considerable corporate and financial wealth, with well over 40 companies listed in the 2006 *Fortune 500* list. Additionally, Houston already possessed a large youth soccer community, ranked seventh in the country by the Soccer Industry Council of America in organized youth soccer participation rates (Holcenberg 2005).

Most importantly for MLS officials, the Houston/Galveston metropolitan area also contains one of the largest and long established Latino communities in the United States. According to the 2000 United States Census data, 37.9% of the population in the city of Houston alone identified themselves as of Hispanic or Latino origin, representing a figure of more than 500,000 people. A 2008 report from the Texas State Data Center suggests that the Hispanic and Latino population in the State will continue to significantly expand throughout the long-term future. Mexican-Americans comprised the majority of the Hispanic community in South Texas, including families who could trace their history in the region back to the mid-19th century when Texas first became part of the United States. The Latino community in Houston has developed a reputation for supporting soccer events in the city, as recent friendly matches involving the Mexican national team and elite teams in the Mexican Premier League (i.e., Chivas Guadalajara, Club America, etc.) routinely drew massive crowds to Reliant Stadium (Jewell & Molina, 2005; Mahoney 2007). In a personal correspondence with Steve Mark (2006), an executive with the Houston MLS

club, he describes his club's marketing efforts towards the Latino community as follows:

I wouldn't necessarily say we are trying to *direct* efforts toward Hispanic fans, though that fan component is an important part of the equation. I will say, though, that we have marketed a number of events this season that we know had a particular Hispanic appeal. We helped promote the El Reto Final legends match between Argentina and Mexico, and also promoted a match between Chivas of Mexico and Motagua of Honduras. We do work closely, on a daily basis, with the Spanish media here, and they promote our events with great vigor. Of our print advertising, much [of it] goes to Rumbo, Golas as well as El Dia.

The Latino audience sought by the new Houston club has been long coveted by MLS officials, as the interest, tradition, and passion in the sport is much higher by percentage than within Anglo or African-American communities (Brown, 2006). Soccer (futbol in Spanish) is the most popular sport within almost every country in Latin America. As is the case with much of Latino culture, Central and South American immigrants to the United States have largely kept their sporting traditions intact when crossing the border. As argued by Shinn (2002: 240), "For Latino communities, given the history of futbol in Latin America and their ties to this history, the game clearly constitutes a source of Latino/a pride, cultural tradition, popular folklore, and psychic and social connection to distant homelands." The sight of massive crowds attending matches involving teams from Latin American and playing in local Latino leagues within the urban spaces of the United States led MLS officials in Houston and in other cities with large Latino populations such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, and Washington D.C. to conclude, quite incorrectly in hindsight, that the sport itself would draw in Latino fans no matter what teams were playing and that local Latinos would quickly develop new allegiances to their local MLS sides (Taylor et al., 2006).

Rather than supporting new MLS clubs in large numbers, the majority of American Latinos historically express their love of futbol in two major ways (Pratt, 2005). The first is through the support of both their diasporic national and local teams. As a result of media globalization, Guatemalan, Honduran, Salvadoran, and Mexican immigrants can continue to follow and support the teams of their local town on satellite and cable television. Mexican club and national team matches, for example, receive extensive coverage on Spanish-language networks Univision, Telemundo, Fox Sports World Espanol, Galavision, and ESPN Deportes (Veiga, 2006; Shinn 2002). Additionally, national and club teams from Latin America now routinely stage competitive matches in American cities including the prestigious Interliga club competition, which in 2007 began matching teams from MLS against clubs from the Mexico Pre-

mier League. As such, contemporary Latino soccer fans are well-positioned to continue to support their favorite teams while in exile and, as a result, may not be interested in supporting MLS clubs.

Additionally, many Latino men participate in futbol culture by playing for teams within local Hispanic soccer leagues. There are hundreds of such leagues operating within the United States, many of which include little to no Anglo-American players or club presence. In their study of Washington D.C area Hispanic soccer leagues, Price & Whitworth (2004) argue that these leagues serve as symbolic homeland spaces for Latinos in America. They are important sites of political, economic, and cultural organization, as Latinos coming together to play futbol use the leagues as a one of the few public meeting places available to the immigrant community (Price & Whitworth 2004: 177). Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these leagues are sponsored by local Latino businesses as a way of targeting their core community (Shinn 2002: 247-8). These leagues also symbolically tie their players to their respective homelands, as the games serve as cultural and national celebrations reflecting the diversity of the Latino Diaspora in America (Messerli 2008). It should be noted that, for the most part, the organized American soccer infrastructure---including the United States Soccer Federation and the U.S. Youth Soccer Foundation---have failed to tap into the leagues in their player recruitment and development programs. As such, organized soccer in America has historically been a game largely the dominion of white suburbanites.

Since its founding in 1996, Major League Soccer has recognized the passion and attendance potential located within the American Latino community. In doing so, they hoped a large Latino interest in the league would help MLS avoid the fate of the failed North American Soccer League and establish a permanent and economically successful professional soccer league. Given this general antipathy towards soccer in America, the courting of Latinos by MLS made a great deal of economic and cultural sense. As part of its early marketing strategy, MLS brought over several recognizable star players from Latin America from 1996-2000 as part of a concerted effort to excite the Hispanic fan base and to raise overall attendance for the league.⁵ Delgado (1999) stated that MLS decided to purposely place marquee-value star Hispanic players in cities with large Latino and Mexican-American populations as a way to grow the fan base (i.e., the Los Angeles Galaxy were stocked with prominent Hispanic players). Though some of these players enjoyed great success on the field, the tactic failed for the most part to excite the Hispanic fan-base and overall attendance at matches remained relatively stagnant for most clubs between the years 2000-2005. Following the 2001 season and the end of a television contract with Telemundo, the league lacked a national Spanish-language television presence, leaving its clubs to negotiate their own deals with local Spanish-language media outlets.

In addition to the cultural reasons why Latinos have failed to support MLS in large numbers, there may be an additional reason that many Latinos (particularly Mexican-Americans) have not greatly supported the league. It seems that many Latinos believe that soccer at the highest professional level in their countries is superior to MLS. These leagues are much older than MLS and individual clubs in the Mexico Premier League have established a long-standing presence in their communities by developing youth soccer programs. The Mexican Premier League is perhaps the wealthiest league in the Western Hemisphere and its players receive much higher salaries than its counterparts in MLS can expect (Brown, 2006). Its regular season matches attract huge crowds to massive stadiums across the country, with an average attendance of almost 30,000 per match. Mexican and Costa Rican clubs have also routinely beaten MLS sides in the CONCACAF Champions' Cup, a tournament held every year for the best teams in the professional leagues of the Caribbean and North and Central America. In other words, Hispanic interest in MLS may blossom as fans become more convinced the league supports a high level of play.

Introducing Houston 1836

In seeking to involve the citizens of Houston in laying the foundations of the new club, the team conducted a public poll where citizens could vote on their preferred name for the relocated club. The poll included 14 choices, many of which had ties to local history, economics and culture. For example, the list included names such as the Houston Apollos, a gesture to the town's association with NASA, and the Houston Toros, a name reflecting the influence of Latino culture within the city (Romero, 2006). The name that ultimately triumphed in the poll, with 22% of the vote out of the 11,000 people who participated, was a rather peculiar name within the history of American sports. The winning name was Houston 1836, a name that reflected the city's history and differed from most American sports nicknames which are generally plural and involve fierce creatures or people to reflect their presupposed masculine abilities.

The intent of choosing Houston 1836 as the team name was to honor the year the City of Houston was founded as well as the year Texas won independence from Mexico at the battle of San Jacinto. The logo of Houston 1836 featured the profile of General Sam Houston with his sword raised as he rode a horse into battle against the Mexicans of Santa Ana (Lopez, 2006). In addition to its tie to local history, Houston 1836 was also part of a new trend in MLS to have European-style nicknames for its clubs.⁶ The 1836 name was similar to some German teams, such as 1860 Munich and Hannover 96, though the years associated with these clubs reflect the year of their founding not the

city itself (Halpin, 2004). Luck and the new club officials ultimately chose to go with 1836 as the club name, believing it to be a unique name with the potential of attracting the local fan base.

Unfortunately for club officials, the choice of the team name served to divide the prospective fan base rather than unite it. Before the team name was announced, Team President Oliver Luck met with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and several Latino business leaders and politicians to obtain feedback about whether or not the 1836 name would be acceptable to the Houston Latino community (Wagner, 2006). The fear was that 1836 might not be a date with positive associations for local Latinos, as it could easily be associated with the end of Mexican and Latino hegemony in Texas and the beginning of Anglo-American domination of state culture and politics. Club officials had begun to hear rumbling within some members of the local Latino community that the name would not be received well within their community. As noted by Luck in an article on the naming controversy in the *New York Times*, "We were aware of the possibility of the double entendre, but at the end of the day we believe 1836 is significant because it was the year of Houston's founding. We spent a lot of time on this internally. By no means was it intended as a slight" (Romero 2006). When the team name was introduced on January 26, 2006, Luck said "The beauty we have as an MLS franchise is we can be a little riskier [in choosing a team name] than some of the more established leagues (Lopez, 2006).

Luck also commented that a blessing of choosing such an unusual team name was that it could spark conversation in the media and among fans for a substantial time period, thus ensuring that the team would be in the public eye (Luck, 2006). Similarly, Houston Chronicle columnist John Lopez wrote on January 26, 2006, "All of you who have your soccer shorts in a bunch because you think 1836 is some kind of insulting reference to Mexico's defeat by Gen. Sam Houston's Texas patriots...Get over it." Lopez awarded the team a grade of "A" for uniqueness in choosing the name. Team officials finally introduced the final choice at a press conference at local Lanier Middle School, where Luck announced to the crowd that:

The name Houston 1836 ... will remind fans that this team represents their city. From this day forward, the Houston 1836 logo will be a symbol of a hard-working team that reflects the pride, loyalty, heritage, bravery and ... the wildcatter, go-get-'em attitude of Houstonians and all of Texas (Houston 1836, 2006).

At that same press conference, Hispanic Houston Councilman Adrian Garcia appeared onstage alongside Luck and addressed the crowd in Spanish to endorse the choice (Wagner, 2006). Despite Garcia's de-facto endorsement of the new name, Houston 1836 seemed to strike an especially raw nerve because it was perceived by some in the city's Hispanic community as being racist and

derogatory towards Mexican-Americans and Chicanos (Rodriguez, 2006). To many within the Latino community, the date 1836 reflected a collective memory of Anglo domination and racism, not a glorious history of Texas independence and heroism. Shortly after the public announcement of the name Dr. Raul Ramos, a historian at the University of Houston, wrote a guest editorial in *The Houston Chronicle* to sharply criticize the name (Rodriguez, 2006):

By naming the team Houston 1836, the newly arrived Major League Soccer franchise has chosen to identify with a year that may divide the city rather than unite it....Naming the team 1836 smacks of nostalgia for a time when Mexican people were absent [from the Houston region] or at least knew their place...Short of changing the name, the team needs to make extra efforts to appear open to Latino Houstonians. Only then, and by removing Sam Houston from the logo, will the team come to symbolize the promise of a global capital...The team compounds the connection [of celebrating Texas' military victory against Mexico] by depicting Sam Houston on horseback, leading the charge against Mexican troops. What other conclusion can we draw?

Additionally, Dr. Tatcho Mindiola, who leads the Center for Mexican-American Studies at the University of Houston, said he believes the 1836 name could be "gung-ho" for Anglos but insulting to Latinos (Fallas, 2006). He commented in *The Houston Chronicle* that "Maybe Anglos find a lot of bravado in 1836. To us, it conjures all this bad history. Why should we put up with this? This community has to change. They could have pulled off the 1836 name years ago, but they sure can't now. We now have a very significant Mexican-American intellectual class that does its own research and isn't going to put up with this" (Rodriguez, 2006).

The public rebuking of the 1836 name by Mindiola and Ramos were soon supported by members of the local Latino press. On the front page of *Rumbo de Houston*, the largest Spanish language newspaper in the city, editor Carlos Puig lambasted the choice of Houston 1836 on its front page calling it a public relations "own goal," a reference to a soccer term when you put the ball in your own goal and score a point for the opposition (Puig, 2006). Puig argued that the name would discourage Latino fans in the Houston area from supporting the club and claimed that "The team does not understand the negative connotation of the name, or it understands it and chose it [in spite of how Mexican fans would react]" (Romero, 2006). Threats of a boycott from Latino fans and from Latino-owned businesses, a sought-after group of corporate sponsors, began to circulate within the Latino community.

Somewhat predictably, local Latino politicians began to publicly comment on the name change and started to put pressure on Luck and AEG to change the name. Sylvia Garcia, a Latina who was the first Latina to serve as a Harris County Commissioner in more than 100 years, publicly rallied Mexican-

Americans to boycott the team name (Barrera, 2006). Garcia noted that her constituency was overwhelmingly against the name and urged team officials to reconsider their choice of 1836. She also argued that the name could have a negative impact on the city's growing international trade links within Latin America, noting that, "[I understand]...concerns that people might have with marketing, [Houston's] image...and [its] image as an international trading partner as a gateway to the Americas" (Barrera, 2006).

The outcry against the 1836 name within the Latino community illustrates deep-seeded cultural and political divisions within an increasingly diverse population in southeast Texas. It suggests that long-standing Anglo-American mythology regarding the glorious history of the Texas Revolution is now being publicly challenged as a one-sided representation of the regional past. As argued by Myszal (2000), dates such as 1836 reflect elements of what scholars refer to as collective memory, a set of historical narratives which provide citizens with simplistic and one dimensional frameworks for interpreting the past. To a large degree, nearly all officially sanctioned national and regional histories are "invented"—to use Benedict Anderson's famous phrase (Anderson, 1983). These heritage memories glorify particular heroes and events of the past as part of a greater effort to construct a usable and mythic past for the population to unite around. The date 1836 thus reflects a certain collective memory that emerged as hegemonic within Texas, one constructed historically by the powerful Anglo community as a narrative of regional Texan pride and exceptionalism.

The Anglo "Texas myth" is permanently marked upon the landscapes of Texas through a myriad of monuments, place names, and battlefield sites throughout the state. The city of Houston itself is named for the Anglo general Sam Houston, the "hero" of the Texas Revolution, and his statue in the city was featured prominently on the original 1836 team logo. The "holiest" site of Texas heritage is, of course, located in the city of San Antonio--the memorial site of the famous Battle of the Alamo. Texans learn the story of the Alamo at any early age, a heroic tale of courage where outnumbered Texans heroically fought off "Mexican invaders" before being overrun by the forces of General Santa Ana (Lind, 1997). The battle served as a rallying cry for Texans during and after the war, as "Remember the Alamo" became the most famous phrase of the Anglo-Texas myth. In serving to construct this heroic story of Anglo-Texas, McLemore (2004) notes the role that early Anglo historians of Texas played in "inventing Texas" and constructing a state mythology replete with tales of Anglo heroes such as Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin and gallant struggles against the evil forces of Mexico at the Alamo and San Jacinto. She notes that, "This was the history that became the standard for school texts at the turn of the century. The Texas myth had come of age. It has become entwined with Texas history, no longer because it was expedient but because it

defined how Texans saw themselves, as the embodiment of their collective memory” (McLemore 2004, 80).

The year 1836, however, represents something entirely different to many people of Mexican heritage within South Texas. As argued by Nora (1981) in his book *Lieux de Memorie*, heritage is not only about remembering. It is also, by definition, a practice that involves acts of exclusion and forgetting. In this case, the name 1836 tapped into a meta-narrative of Texas memory that has tended to exclude the contributions and the struggles of Latinos in Texas from the official version of state heritage. This exclusion takes many institutional forms, most notably within primary and secondary education within the state. In her study of history textbooks used in Texas schools over the last 30 years, Noboa (2006) argues that the recent national trends towards multi-cultural education have failed to fundamentally change the way young Texans learn state history and heritage in school settings. The contributions of Hispanic people in the region continue to be undervalued “at every level of schooling from elementary through college, American history textbooks generally have done little justice to the topics of Hispanics in terms of the quality and quantity of coverage” (Noboa 2006, 22).

It is within this historical context of exclusion and omission that the name Houston 1836 was interpreted as an insult by a large percentage of the local Latino/a community. The name served as a permanent mnemonic reminder to many Latinos of their long-standing position as second-class citizens within post-revolutionary Texas. It represents a year when Hispanic culture and history began to be marginalized and excluded within the heritage sites and discourses of Texas. Given the rise of contemporary anti-immigrant sentiments throughout the United States, it should also be noted that the name could also be read within the Latino/a community as an attempt to reassert Anglo hegemony within a changing demographic and political climate. Indeed, the Hispanic community of Houston had begun to more aggressively flex its political muscle in city politics, nearly electing Cuban-American candidate Orlando Sanchez in 2001. In losing just 51% to 49% to incumbent mayor Lee Brown, Sanchez received 75% of the Latino vote, a quite impressive total considering that Sanchez was a Republican running within a city whose Latinos tend to vote almost exclusively Democratic. (Geron 2005, 123). Additionally, his massive support within the Mexican-American community illustrated that Latinos will vote for “their” candidates in large numbers even if they are not technically from within the same ethno-national group.

Reversing Fields: The Change to the Dynamo

By all accounts, the local controversy over the 1836 name caught both AEG and the team officials by surprise. Indeed, we are not arguing in this pa-

per that Oliver Luck or any other member of the club management intended to intentionally insult the Latino community. As we have previously argued, it was this same Latino community that the club hoped would support the team in large numbers. The choice of 1836 was an act of ignorance on the part of team management, a public relations blunder which threatened to derail support for the team before they had even played a league match. As Paco Bendana, the Latino Geographic Marketing and Community Relations Manager for Anheuser-Busch in Houston commented: "Clearly, not enough homework was put into this. Historically speaking, 1836 is not something [Hispanics] celebrate" (Romero, 2006). Public relations specialist Dan Keeney (2006) further criticized the choice of Houston 1836 as a public relations error, noting that:

It's incredible that the team's owner....failed to fully consider how the name would be received by the soccer-crazy fans they were hoping to lure. After all, they are basing the venture in part on the crowds of Spanish-speaking futbol aficionados who regularly fill stadiums here to attend the matches of visiting clubs from Mexico....Don't insult your core customer and show yourself to be disconnected at best and callous and uncaring at worst by failing to fully consider their point of view.

The decision to ultimately change the name from 1836 came after the story broke nationally, putting additional pressure and scrutiny on MLS, AEG, and the club management to reconsider their choice. Fox Sports soccer columnist Jamie Trecker of the Fox Soccer Channel published a column on the Fox soccer website titled "What's In a Name? Plenty of Controversy," the first article published outside of Houston on the topic. The original story merely introduced the controversy to a wider audience and Trecker did not take a personal stand on the name within the original column. In an email correspondence with Trecker, he noted that "the response to the story took all of us in edit by shock. I got about 400 emails pro and con that day, we saw very heavy traffic, and I decided to follow up with my own take on it two days later." His second column strongly advocated changing the name of the club and included a number of interviews with the local Latino leaders who first brought their objections to the Houston-based media. This column also received a huge email reaction both for and against changing the name, including some highly racist and offensive emails that Trecker forwarded along with other emails supporting the name change in a packet to the MLS front office. MLS spokesman Dan Courtemanche admitted to Trecker that he had begun to now have concerns over the name, commenting that "We've heard from a very vocal audience that some people are upset about the name. At no time did we want to offend people with the choice of the name...so we have to look closely at changing [it]" (Trecker 2006).

Under pressure from their bosses at MLS and AEG, Houston officials eventually relented and agreed that a name change would be the best course of action. The resistance to the name change within Houston's Latino community produced its desired result, as on March 6, 2006, team officials announced the club would now be known as the Houston Dynamo. Though this certainly amounted to a victory for the Latino activists and business leaders who had advocated a name change, Trecker (2006b) notes that it took the intervention of a white male reporter to finally make AEG and MLS take notice of the issue and eventually take a decisive action against the 1836 name. As such, the controversy followed the all too frequent model of community resistance in which white leadership and press is required to finally bring about a desired change from officials in power (Sandercock 1998). Trying to make the best out of a rather awkward situation, Oliver Luck (Dynamo 2006) noted in the press release announcing the name that:

Houston's Major League Soccer team is proud to announce a new name that will be representative of a hard working team, and inclusive to all fans. To me, Dynamo has a blue-collar feel to it, as well as an association with the energy business, which is one of the things Houston is known for. We think this is a great name that Greater Houston can rally around.

The decision to change 1836 to the Houston Dynamo, however, was not greeted favorably by some fans, heritage activists, and conservative commentators across the United States. To these groups, the decision to change from 1836 was one made under the pressure brought by the forces of "political correctness." There was also a half-hearted attempt by some 1836 supporters to claim that the Dynamo moniker was also offensive, as it was the name used by several former Soviet and Eastern bloc soccer clubs with ties to the forces of the state secret police during the Cold War era.⁷ The topic of the 1836 controversy was a major talking point on the bulletin boards of the largest online soccer community in the United States, a website known as BigSoccer.com. The majority of posters in the Houston soccer board favored the initial name of 1836 and, somewhat bizarrely considering the team had yet to play a match, expressed their opinions against the Dynamo name with an expression of passion one would expect to find in fans that might have supported a team for decades. Sylvia Garcia, Latino politicians and agitators, and Jamie Trecker were particularly blamed by posters for inflaming the passions of the local community against the name.⁸ One informal poll during the time of the controversy on the site revealed that 60% of respondents favored keeping the name and saw it as a "positive name" for the team (BigSoccer, 2006). Some of the Anglos who did not want the "1836" name changed were trying to make the point, in vain, that every conceivable team name has a controversy attached to it, so 1836 is, therefore, also appropriate.

Other posters suggested that Anglo-Americans should start their own boycott of the team as a counter-protest against the new Dynamo name. Others argued that the name was appealing to a Hispanic community which had yet proven to be fully supportive of MLS in other markets with a large Latino fan base. One frequent poster to the Houston soccer board, using online moniker of Celt Texan, was one of the more vocal supporters of the 1836 name from the beginning. Celt Texan, who has gone on to be one of the leaders of the mostly -Anglo Texian Army supporters group, argued in a number of postings that the meaning of the name had been misinterpreted by the local Hispanic community and that the name 1836 was actually an inclusive one. In a post on February 28, 2006, he noted that:

Again, 1836 was never to be about the founding of Houston as the first Capital in the Republic of Texas...and then have the decision made by AEG to run from the very core of the Spirit of Tejas. 1836, as I was the guy that submitted it to AEG, was to say first and foremost that in Jan of 1836 the national language in Tejas was Spanish. Thus in a futbol and cultural viewpoint, the club needed to bleed that Latino heritage from the start. Then the concept of Texas as an "immigrant" friendly place, was to be used to bring the "Anglo"/Northern European immigrants like Germans, Czechs and the Celts peoples. Thus the whole 1836 concept would have never hit a "raw nerve" if the true Spirit of Texas, that has always been here, was marketed properly. Our unique Texas history speaks for itself.

The online protestations by some Houston-based soccer fans were only one example of how the decision to abandon 1836 struck a nerve with some groups in cyberspace. Several online blogs and conservative commentary message boards picked up the story, arguing that it was proof that political correctness had gone too far and that Anglo-American versions of heritage were being unfairly silenced in favor of multi-cultural discourse. Greg Nilson (2006), a conservative Christian blogger from Pittsburgh, Pa., wrote on his blog *Further Up and Further In* that the name change, "is rampant abuse of political correctness. It's the equivalent of having a large number of British people move into Massachusetts so that they represented a majority of the population, and then complain that the name 'Patriots' is insensitive to them because they lost the Revolutionary War. It's just flat-out ridiculous." Daniel Clark (2006), a staff writer and contributor to the right-wing blog *New Media Alliance*, similarly commented on his personal blog *Shinbone* that:

The result is the kind of absurdity that political correctness is designed to produce: a soccer team based in Houston, Texas, that is ashamed to associate itself with the founding of Houston, or the history of Texas. Now that the academic p.c. police have gotten one MLS franchise to bow to their demands, just wait until they realize

that the league has another team called the Columbus Crew -- a clear reference to the shipmates of history's most infamous, genocidal Earth-rapist.

Such responses reflect the racial fears of some Anglo-Americans that "their heritage" is under threat from the forces of political correctness. The term "political correctness" emerged in the 1980's as conservative backlash against inclusive and multicultural forms of education, particularly within higher education. As argued by Ehrenreich (1993), the term politically correct was appropriate by the right-wing as a useful "straw man" to attack progressivism in education and within greater society. The 1836 controversy was even more disturbing for some anti-PC warriors because the decision to change the name came as a result of Latino political and economic pressures. This incident suggested that the emerging "brown threat" within the border-states were gaining political and economic power in these areas and were threatening "real" American cultural values. This strain of discourse is very much in the spirit of Pat Buchanan's frequent culture war ranting on Fox News and in print as well as Samuel Huntington's (2004) latest claims of a new Hispanic threat against a long-standing American national identity.

Additionally, strands of the now familiar anti-soccer arguments also filtered into the discourse. The Fox News conservative correspondent Debbie Schluskel (2006), writing on the controversy for her right-wing blog *Debbie Schluskel.com*, used xenophobic discourse in her critique of the 1836 controversy noting that, "We thought you couldn't get more politically correct in sports than soccer. After all, the boring sport is popular in all the countries that hate us. And not popular in the greatest country on earth (America, to our "fans" from the Al-Jazeera audience)...But we were wrong." Schluskel's argument is typical among right-wing soccer bashers, as she is suggesting that the sport of soccer is a game for foreigners (read: Latinos) and not for real Americans. As such, we should not be surprised that this latest incident of Latino political correctness involved "their game" and not "one of ours."

After writing a column strongly in favor of changing the 1836 name, Fox columnist Jamie Trecker (2006b) received a number of emails bashing him for taking the stand. He informed us in our personal correspondence with him that MLS officials "were stunned by the viciousness of the racism expressed in many of these emails. " The emails came from all across the country and included a few death threats from outraged "fans" of the game. Trecker's personal data, including his email address and home address, were also posted on two separate websites operated by right-wing hate groups. Trecker also was asked to appear on right-wing talk shows across the country on the story, where according to him he was "yelled at" and abused.

Conclusion

In an ending seemingly scripted in Hollywood, the Houston Dynamo went on to win the 2006 MLS title and played in front of large crowds nearly all season. The 1836 controversy has largely dissipated, in large part because the team was so successful on the field and because of the pro-active damage control by team officials and AEG in the early days of the public debate. For example, the club now regularly meets with Hispanic and Mexican-American fan groups to resolve differences and to repair any lingering damage from the 1836 flare-up. Dynamo games are broadcast in Spanish over a local cable TV and radio stations, a large part of the team's official website is in Spanish and is directed to recruit Hispanic fans, and Houston's fan contingent has a distinctly Hispanic flair all season, including a largely Latino supporters group called "El Batallon" which sings chants in English and Spanish during matches to support the Dynamo. Team officials ended up getting a great deal of the Latino support they coveted and the team has now begun fielding offers from several communities in the Houston metropolitan area competing to be the site for a new Dynamo stadium to be built in the next few years. Obviously, things eventually fell right for Houston's professional soccer team. Even though the initial choice of the team name was, by nearly all accounts, very poorly planned and a public relations disaster, the team eventually took positive steps to correct the problem. By beginning frank and honest dialogues with Latino fans and business leaders that may have been offended and by openly apologizing for their mistakes, Dynamo and AEG officials were able to repair much of the damage from the controversy.

The controversy does, however, illustrate the wide political and cultural chasm that exists within an ever-changing American cultural landscape. This case illustrates that the Anglo-American and Hispanic communities of Houston understand and interpret the heritage of Texas very differently and that the Anglo-Texas myth is beginning to be challenged more openly within the Latino community. The 1836 debacle reveals that there are still serious, deep, and unhealed wounds within Texas regarding the past and present treatment of Hispanics in Texas and suggests that these fractures can be revealed through the cultural and sporting practices of everyday life.

Notes

1. It should be noted that the moving sporting franchises is, for the most part, a uniquely North American phenomenon. Professional football (soccer) clubs in Europe, for example, rarely if ever make such a move. The one recent exception to this was when Wimbledon FC in England moved away from south London to the suburban community of Milton Keynes some

forty-five miles away. The club has since been rebranded as Milton Keynes Dons FC.

2. Though this looked like a hollow gesture at the time, the likelihood of a new Earthquakes team playing in MLS now seems quite high. Lew Wolff, the owner of Major League Baseball's Oakland A's, has bought the rights to the club and is looking to build a new stadium in the South Bay to begin play in 2008 or 2009.
3. One notable recent example of a public relations incident involving sports was the controversy which developed around the Spanish National Basketball team posing for a team picture before the Beijing Olympics while "slanting" their eyes (Hooper 2008). Similarly, Jackson (2002) describes how Maoris in New Zealand filed suit after stereotypical images of their community and the tribal haka dance were used without permission to advertise and market the Adidas' sponsorship of the All Blacks rugby team. Lastly, the often highly offensive use of Native American symbols and tribal names for American sporting teams has been under scrutiny in the United States for over a decade (Davis 1993; King and Springwood 2001; Spindel 2000; King 2007) The Dallas Burn, for example, was renamed FC Dallas when it moved into its new stadium in 2005. Also, the expansion franchises in both Salt Lake City and in Toronto chose European style nicknames for their clubs—Real Salt Lake and Toronto FC respectively.
4. We use the term soccer instead of football in this paper since the sport is more commonly referred to by this name within the United States.
5. Among the many stars imported including Columbian star Carlos Valderama, Mexican national team players Luis Hernandez, Carlos Hermosillo and Jorge Campos, Bolivians Marco Etcheverry and Jaime Moreno, and El Salvadoran legends Raul Diaz Arce and Mauricio Cienfuegos.
6. The Dallas Burn, for example, was renamed FC Dallas when it moved into its new stadium in 2005. Also, the expansion franchises in both Salt Lake City and in Toronto chose European style nicknames for their clubs - Real Salt Lake and Toronto FC respectively.
7. These claims can still be seen online at the Houston Dynamo's entry on Wikipedia. It should be noted that Dynamo was also used by an American
8. Our examination of the message boards from BigSoccer at the time of the controversy revealed Garcia alone was referred to as a "bitch," a "communist," a "moron," and several other negative terms. Another post suggested Trecker should "go die in a fire." University of Houston professor Raul Ramos also received scorn on the message boards and he reported to the Houston Chronicle that he got a number of emails suggesting he "go back to Mexico" (Rodriquez 2006).

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