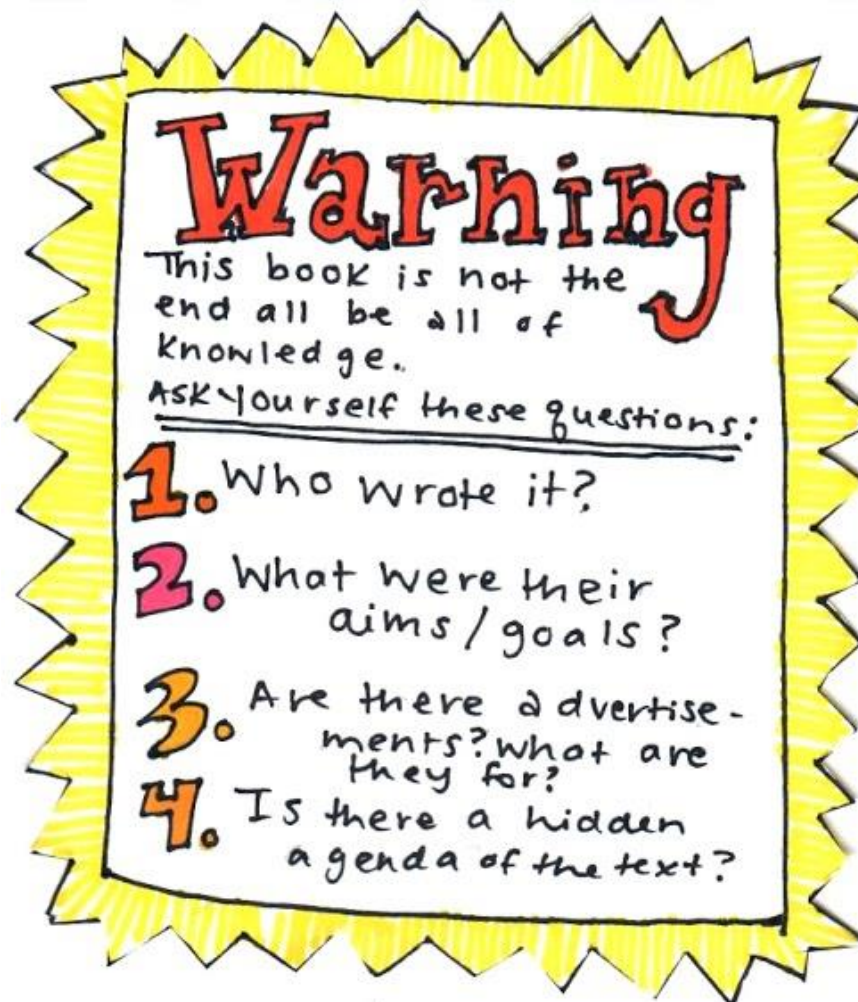


RADICAL TEACHER

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Where Do Social Inequalities Come From?: Class Divides in Chicana/o-Latina/o Literature

by Marcial González



"HIDDEN CURRICULUMS"
BRITTANY SAUTA

There's no denying that the Occupy movement, aside from everything else it has accomplished since 2011, created ample opportunities in college classrooms for teaching about the super wealthy, or the 1%, and their role in reproducing social and economic inequalities in the United States and around the world. In my own courses, however, I have tried to emphasize to students that there is a marked difference between teaching about "the rich" and teaching about "class." The former implies a focus on the disparities between wealth and poverty; the latter, if conducted properly, affords the opportunity to investigate the structural causes of those disparities and their relation to class power. That is to say, whereas the former tends to be observational or empirical, the latter is potentially historical and critical. In what follows, I hope to explore, even if only briefly, the possibilities of developing a critical pedagogy based on a Marxist conception of class for the study of literature. About half way through the essay, I'll turn to a discussion of a specific literary work to link my theoretical claims and pedagogical practice. In suggesting some basic tenets of a critical Marxist pedagogy for the teaching of literature, I shall propose an approach that not only recognizes the inequalities that exist between people of different social class backgrounds, but one that poses and seeks to answer a question aimed at understanding structural causality: "Where do social inequalities and injustices come from?"

For me, "teaching about class" to my students involves helping them to reflect on not only the differences between rich and poor, but the causes of social inequalities and injustices through the study of literary works about Chicana/o and Latina/o working-class characters.

First, some background: I teach literature in the English Department at UC Berkeley and specialize in Chicana/o-Latina/o literature. As one might expect, issues such as racism, sexism and class oppression are robustly represented in many of the works I teach. Lately, my teaching has increasingly focused on works that depict the experiences of immigrant and migrant laborers, including such works as Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Elva Treviño Hart's *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*, Tomás Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, Ramón Pérez's *Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant*, Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*, and Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, among others.

Many of the students who enroll in my courses—and for that matter, a large percentage of students enrolled at Berkeley—are from affluent families, some of which are representative of "the 1%." But as a public institution, Berkeley has a student population that is actually fairly diverse in terms of class—at least in the humanities. In a recent survey of the English Department's 650 majors, 14% self-identified as "low income or poor," 25% as "working class," 37% as "middle class," and 23% as "upper middle class or wealthy." From what I can tell, my own

courses usually comprise a similar demographic breakdown.

By historical materialism, I mean to convey generally the same definition that Engels assigned to this term in 1892 when he wrote that "historical materialism" designates "that view of the course of history, which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another" (23).

For me, "teaching about class" to my students involves helping them to reflect on not only the differences between rich and poor, but the causes of social inequalities and injustices through the study of literary works about Chicana/o and Latina/o working-class characters. One of my goals in the classroom is to help students recognize that class divisions and class antagonisms as represented in literature are not caused by "good" or "bad" individuals, but stem from the built-in structural contradictions of capitalism as a system. My aim is not merely to expose students to the realities of poverty and human suffering, important as this task might be, but to teach them to ask questions about the causes of these conditions. One of the most basic questions I pose to my students when studying literary representations of class is "Where do social inequalities and injustices come from?" To help my students answer this question, I employ a pedagogical approach that seeks to understand social inequality as a fundamental, necessary feature of capitalism, constituted by the labor-capital relation—that is to say, a pedagogical approach informed by the theories of historical materialism.

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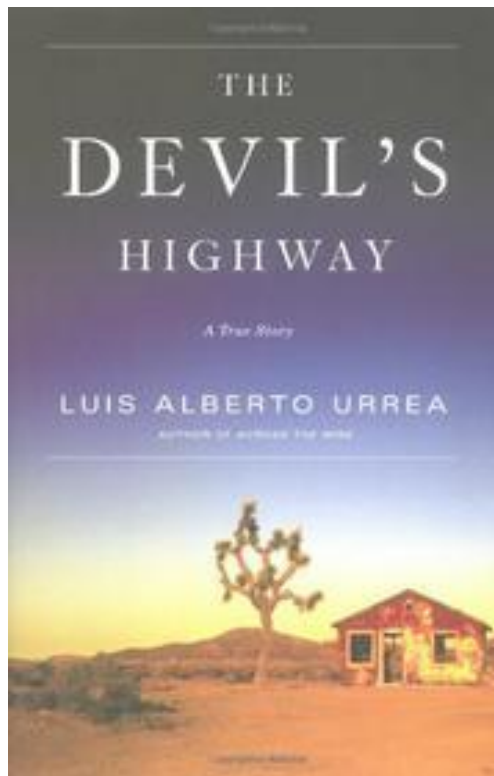
can be understood to one degree or another as expressions of class struggle.

I'm not exactly proposing a unique idea here; I'm suggesting, rather, the need to advance a critical approach that others have put into practice but that still remains underemployed and undervalued. This same suggestion has been made, for example, by Peter McLaren and Nathalia E. Jaramillo in an article entitled "Critical Pedagogy, Latino/a Education, and the Politics of Class Struggle" in which the authors argue that it is crucial to understand the differences between class struggle as a particular social form and other social antagonisms such as sexism and racism. But they also stress that these other social antagonisms are not entirely unrelated to class struggle either insofar as they emerge from and are made possible by the same political/economic/cultural system in which they exist. They play distinct but intricately interconnected roles in the consolidation of social class domination. Here, I share McLaren and Jaramillo's position that "class struggle is the specific antagonism, the generative matrix, that helps to structure and shape the particularities of the other antagonisms. It creates their conditions of possibility"(79). But likewise, the other antagonisms facilitate the operation of class exploitation and enable the consolidation of class power.

A few caveats: I don't believe a Marxist pedagogy is the only way to teach literature. When appropriate, I have employed other critical systems in the classroom, including psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, critical race theory, cultural critique, or a combination of these approaches. Nor am I arguing that a literary work needs to be Marxist for it to be considered a good work of literature. I hold rather that a literary critic gains advantages from a Marxist interpretive approach regardless of the political bent of the literary work. Similarly, when employing this approach, the value or merit of a literary work should not be judged by its political claims, but (at least in part) by its ability to give readers the opportunity to investigate the historical, material, and ideological conditions that made the work possible in the first place. Further, the study of literature to my mind would be lacking without proper attention to the formal or stylistic aspects of literary works (about which I'll say more below). I do believe, however, that form and style are always related in some way to a literary work's social content, and this relation might be even more relevant for literatures that offer sharp critiques of social conditions, as in Chicana/o and other minority literatures.

To ground the theoretical claims I am making, I'll now turn to a discussion of a specific literary work: Luis Alberto

Urrea's *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*. I taught this book recently and found that it lends itself to a historical materialist approach, even though it does not pose nor does it claim to answer the question, "Where do social inequalities and injustices come from?" *The Devil's Highway* is a work of literary non-fiction based on actual events. Written in a style that might be described as creative journalism, it details the experiences of the "Welton 26," a group of undocumented Mexican immigrants, all males, who enter the United States illegally on foot through the Arizona desert in May 2001. Of the twenty-six men, fourteen die, and the twelve that survive are on the verge of death when they are rescued by the border patrol. Welton, the namesake of the group, is a town in southern Arizona where the survivors were taken after their rescue, along with the deceased. Urrea documents the experiences of the twenty-six men beginning in their home villages prior to undertaking their journey and culminating in that treacherous stretch of desert in Arizona known as "The Devil's Highway"—a region described on the book's back cover as "so harsh and desolate that even the Border Patrol is afraid to travel through it."



A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *The Devil's Highway* is beautifully written and emotionally engaging. It's a great book to teach—both for what it says and what it leaves out. The graphic content of the narrative is tempered with seductive prose making the tragic experiences of the Welton 26 bearable to read. At one point, Urrea describes in gripping detail the five stages of hyperthermia, which trace the physiological changes the body undergoes as it slowly dies of thirst and dehydration. He also reveals in a kind of mocking realism aimed at exposing the desperation experienced by the border crossers that "sooner or later" they come to

the realization that "you have to drink your own urine. . . If you're really lucky, someone might piss in your mouth"(126).

The experiences of the Welton 26 and other border crossers help to explain, according to Urrea, why some of the border patrol agents have sometimes paid out of their own pockets to construct water stations and a signaling system that walkers can use to alert the "Migra" if they find themselves in need of rescue. Contrary to what readers might expect in a narrative that is sympathetic to the plight of border walkers, Urrea depicts the "Pinche Migra," often vilified by undocumented immigrants and pro-immigration activists, as sympathetic and benevolent. In effect, he humanizes the border patrol.

Urrea's treatment of the Migra is actually central to analyzing the issue of causality in *The Devil's Highway*. The narrative aims to make readers aware of the grave dangers

faced by undocumented immigrants who enter the United States through the desert, and the desperation that drives them to take such deadly risks, but it does not address the cause of the Welton 26 tragedy, nor does it point a finger at villains. In writing this kind of narrative, Urrea is reluctant to blame anyone for the death and suffering of the immigrants, and thus he remains elusive on the issue of causality. In a telling moment, Urrea speculates on the thoughts of the border crossers as they become increasingly desperate and afraid upon realizing that they are lost in the desert with a dwindling water supply and there is a good chance they will die. The immigrants (as ventriloquized through Urrea's consciousness) are trying to figure out who they should blame for this mess. "It was that goddamned Mendez [their guide]: no, it was this evil desert. No, it was the pinche Mexican government that picked the homeland apart, officials who got fat and rich while they starved. No, it was the Migra, it was the gringos, it was the U.S. government and its racist hatred of good Mexican workingmen just trying to feed their children! They themselves were the fools"(134). Urrea avoids asserting the cause of the tragedy by insinuating that everyone might be partly to blame, including the immigrants themselves. As Sandra Cox astutely observes, "One cannot, if one reads [*The Devil's Highway*] attentively, easily ascribe blame for the brutal conditions and eventual deaths that the migrants face to a single agent" (24).

In an effort to understand the significance of Urrea's silence on causality, I posed the question, "What kind of narrative is *The Devil's Highway*?" to my class of 30 students. The subsequent discussion shed light on the way narrative style can contribute to the ideological assumptions of a literary work. Some students described the book as journalistic, pointing out that its sub-title is "A True Story" and that the back cover categorizes it as "current events." They felt that Urrea's non-accusatory stance should be considered a positive quality of the narrative because it conveys a sense of fairness and neutrality. Others, however, argued that the narrator's non-committal vacillation can be read as problematic in falsely assuming the "objectivity" of a journalistic style. One student cited Cox, who states that *The Devil's Highway* is a "testimonial narrative," (10) even though a *testimonio* usually refers to a first-hand account of political struggles in which the speaker is a participant, which is not the case here. A few students argued that *The Devil's Highway* is written from the perspective of a sympathetic but nevertheless detached observer in the manner of ethnography, in which an author problematically attempts to speak for the subjects of a study. Further complicating the question of genre, Urrea (who is also a

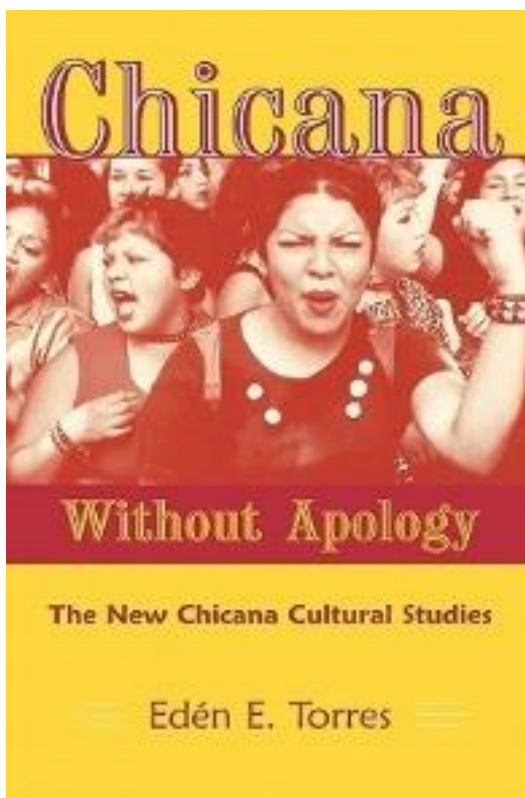
prolific novelist) narrates the story with the skill and habits of a fiction writer, often times employing free indirect discourse to imagine the conversations and feelings of characters. One of my students commented that Urrea's use of both a journalistic approach, which claims to represent the truth from an objective standpoint, and a fictional style, which takes liberties in imagining realities that may or may not be true, runs the risk of committing "ethical misrepresentations." Though not all students agreed with this claim, the general consensus was that *The Devil's Highway* employs a literary style that troublingly steers clear of asserting (or even speculating on) the causes of the tragedy it represents. The narrator seems to justify such a reading by claiming, somewhat scandalously, that "In the desert we are all illegal aliens," (120) as if to imply that a kind of equality exists when it comes to explaining the causes of suffering, exploitation, and death.

In the end, the story of the Welton 26 in *The Devil's Highway* is a tragedy for which no one is to blame: not the unscrupulous, greedy Coyotes; not the "good old boy" border patrol agents that Urrea befriends; not the indifferent U.S. or Mexican governments; and certainly not the capitalist system itself, strangely absent in Urrea's quasi-fictional journalistic account.

To be fair, Urrea does not claim to offer a political analysis of causality; his narrative can be characterized more accurately as a human interest story. Nevertheless, in teaching *The Devil's Highway*, I did not require tremendous effort in getting students to recognize the narrative's silence on causality. They tended to reach that conclusion on their own once I raised the topic for discussion. The greater challenge was getting them to analyze and verbalize the content of that silence while appreciating the book's literary

value. In an effort to undertake this challenge, I encouraged students to discuss the absence of causality in Urrea's account of the Welton 26 and to identify the structural aspects that he omits or only alludes to. I did this by involving students in an in-class exercise in which I asked them to write the sections of the story that Urrea has left out—to fill in the missing blanks, so to speak—and I instructed them to focus on the structural or political causes of this tragedy. I then reproduced their writings which I shared with the entire class for discussion at our next meeting.

Conducting this exercise required reading a good amount of secondary material beforehand and discussing it. We read, for example, chapters from Gilbert González's *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?*; Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis's *No One is Illegal*; David Bacon's *Illegal*



People; and Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects*. In discussing this material, and in trying to arrive at an analytical consensus of causality in *The Devil's Highway*, students expressed no qualms about attempting a historical materialist literary critique, even though they didn't always agree with one another or with me in their specific readings of the text. One of my students, for example, wrote that "despite his silence on the issue of causality, Urrea writes in such a way that allows readers to indict the globalization of capitalism as the culprit responsible for the border policies that exist between the United States and Mexico." The same student argued that literature should be suggestive rather than assertive, and that Urrea's narrative accomplishes this task. By contrast, another student wrote that "Urrea frustrates his readers through his silence, mirroring the frustration that many people feel at the inaction on behalf of the government in response to tragedies," such as that of the Welton 26. She emphasized that, because of Urrea's silence, "we as readers are forced to bring our own sensibilities and analytical viewpoints to the narrative, thus rendering the government and the capitalist class at least partly to blame." Notwithstanding the differences of opinion, I was amazed at the ability of my students to think beyond immediacy, to link narrative style and political interpretation, and to strive toward a structural understanding of illegal immigration and the class implications of death in the desert. By the end of our class exercise, my students collectively produced the following two conclusions about *The Devil's Highway*:

(1) *Ultimately, the death of undocumented workers in The Devil's Highway was caused by the economic system of capitalism which needs cheap labor to satisfy the labor needs of industries such as agriculture, hotels, and food service, and to keep wages depressed in these and other industries. The workers were lured into the desert by the implied promise of a wage.*

(2) *Anti-immigrant ideology serves to blame undocumented immigrants for the depressed economy and other social ills, and it prevents some people from understanding the real causes of economic crisis, low wages, and unemployment. The story of ideology, however, remains untold in The Devil's Highway.*

Although I was pleased that my students were able to make these critical observations about *The Devil's Highway*, I could have done more, in retrospect, to help them formulate a sharper class analysis by exploring the issue of agency as it relates to structural causality. That is to say, the capitalist system is not agentless; it is not a machine that operates without machine operators. It is promoted and sustained by individual capitalists and corporations that together make up the ruling class, and the oppressive actions of those agents of capitalism are more often than not calculated and intentional. Recognizing this fact without giving ground to the analysis of structural causality is crucial for understanding the conditions that exist along the border for undocumented workers and for devising strategies to change those

conditions. Nevertheless, I felt that my students took a large step toward learning how to analyze literature from a historical materialist perspective, and hopefully they left my course with some basic critical tools that will enable them to continue doing this kind of work in the future.

In Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies, Eden Torres argues that "those of us in the humanities," in addition to studying culture, must become "amateur economists." She gives this sound advice not to promote interdisciplinarity, in that crude academic sense, but because she believes we need to "pay attention to the implications of the widening gap between the rich and the poor . . . the disappearance of civil liberties . . . [and the constant] threat of war."

Finally, in a book entitled *Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, (a section of which we also read for this course) Eden Torres argues that "those of us in the humanities," in addition to studying culture, must become "amateur economists." She gives this sound advice not to promote interdisciplinarity, in that crude academic sense, but because she believes we need to "pay attention to the implications of the widening gap between the rich and the poor . . . the disappearance of civil liberties . . . [and the constant] threat of war." She adds, "Whatever we write about, teach, analyze, or interpret . . . class analysis and the political economy must be the subtext" (59) of our work. Torres's bold historical materialist assertion reflects a position not taken nearly enough in U.S. literary and cultural studies these days, and it's a welcome breath of fresh air. I would simply add that those of us studying and teaching ethnic, feminist, anti-colonial, working-class literature must also consciously look for, detect, and analyze the ways that literary works open up avenues of inquiry into the issue of causality—even when those references are not fully formed, or are only alluded to in the various tropes of the literature. Ultimately, it's not enough to recognize that social inequalities and injustices exist. We must also engage students in asking (and seeking to find answers to) the question: Where do those inequalities and injustices come from? What is their cause?

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