

RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note
Reading Immigration with *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez

By Emily Schnee



As a professor of developmental English and composition at Kingsborough Community College in New York City, I am always on the hunt for books that my students will find engaging and accessible *and* that lend themselves to critical inquiry and analysis. In any given year, I preview a dozen books and abandon most of them. For the past several years, I have taught immigration themed English courses, so when *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez came out in 2014, I read it eagerly, hoping that I could use it in one or more of my classes. At that time, the novel, whose plot centers on a romance between immigrant teens, struck me as facile, saccharin even, and I dismissed it in favor of other texts. Three years later, after the election of Trump and the wholesale demonization of undocumented Mexican immigrants, I decided to give it another look. This time around the novel read differently. I was grateful to find a book that is accessibly written (even for developmental English students, many of whom are novice readers), that portrays Latino/a immigrants in a multi-faceted and sympathetic way, and that confronts white anti-immigrant racism head on. Though I still had reservations about the novel and its lack of literary sophistication, I welcomed its depiction of Latino/a immigrant characters as diverse and full of agency, despite the structural and personal obstacles they face. I decided to use it in both of my courses this fall and was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was enthusiastically embraced by many of the students and that it drew us into critical inquiry on the status of immigrants in the era of Trump.

This past semester my developmental English class was paired with an Introduction to Psychology course as part of the college's learning communities program. One of the main goals of these linked courses is to promote "integrative thinking" through shared assignments that require students to draw on their learning from both classes. The first integrative assignment was a drafted essay that asked students to explore the social psychological concepts of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination in the lives of the immigrant characters in *The Book of Unknown Americans*. In preparation for this essay, students plunged into the novel from the very first week of class. Right away, I noticed a higher-than-usual level of reading compliance and genuine engagement with the novel, particularly on the part of the immigrant women students who represented a majority of the class. Despite the fact that they came from countries as diverse as Burkina Faso and Uzbekistan, students had no trouble empathizing with the plight of the Mexican immigrant main characters, the Rivera family, and seemed emotionally invested in discovering how their lives in the United States would unfold. The novel consists of relatively short chapters that are written in the first person from the perspective of various immigrant characters, all of whom live in the same apartment complex in rural Delaware. Students were quickly drawn into their lives and struggles, identifying strongly with the two adolescent main characters, Maribel— whose family has come to the United States to get her special education after a traumatic brain injury— and her neighbor, Mayor.

The upcoming essay assignment served as a focal point for students to apply their newly learned annotation skills: identifying moments in the novel in which the characters either experience stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination or traffic in their own stereotypical or prejudiced notions about other immigrants. The novel provides more than sufficient fodder for exploring the multiple ways in which immigrants are victims of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination. A white American bully, Garrett Miller, sexually assaults Maribel; Alma, her mother, is stymied when she tries to report the incident to the police; a minor character is trailed by white shop owners who assume he is out to steal; two primary breadwinners for their families lose their jobs; and, in an episode that resonated with many students, a character fears racial profiling after purchasing his very first car. Yet, Henríquez also offers readers the opportunity to consider immigrants' own internalization of the dominant narratives about immigration with an interesting plot twist. When the Rivera family loses their visas and they suddenly find themselves living as undocumented immigrants, it represents a moment of reckoning for the characters and students alike. While Alma seems to buy into the good/bad immigrant dichotomy, lamenting that they have "followed the rules" (181) and are "not like the rest of them," her husband quickly asserts, "we are now" (189). This moment exposes the fragility and porosity of immigration status and, in class discussion, created space for students to pointedly critique (lack of) documentation as the basis on which to welcome or exclude groups of immigrants.



In my composition course, students read the transcript of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" as a starting point for considering the multiplicity of immigrant stories. Although all of the main characters in *The Book of Unknown Americans* are Latino/a immigrants, the structure of the novel lends itself well to exploring the diversity of immigrants' experiences. I encouraged students to consider the various ways in which factors such as age, gender, nationality, educational level, English language ability, and immigration status shape the experiences of the characters. Several Latina students chose to read the novel through a gender lens, focusing on the female characters and the ways in which the sexism and sexual violence they face, both within their own families and in the outside world, shape their experiences as immigrants. Other students identified heavily with Mayor, a Panamanian born teenager who was raised in the United States and finds himself uncomfortably straddling a

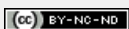
generational and cultural divide. Mayor feels simultaneously estranged from his immigrant parents and excluded by the white American kids who bully him for his immigrant background. He speaks for many students when he poignantly admits that, “the truth was I didn’t know which I was. I wasn’t allowed to claim the thing I felt [American] and I didn’t feel the thing I was supposed to claim [Panamanian]” (78).

Maribel’s disability provides yet another intersecting identity through which some students chose to explore the novel. Though I initially worried that this plot line set the Riveras up as “deserving” immigrants who leave a good life behind in Mexico for the benefit of their injured child, this did not pan out. Instead, students were quick to identify the ways in which Maribel’s parents both sacrifice for their child (as many immigrant parents do, they were quick to add) and compound her disability through overprotection, depriving her even further of her human agency. In class discussions, we explored the symbolism of Maribel’s silence in the novel (none of the chapters are written from her point of view), as a disabled, young, female immigrant. Students read closely, scouring the novel for moments when Maribel’s perspective on events is revealed in subtle ways, and gave her voice through an informal writing assignment that asked them to write a chapter from Maribel’s perspective. These various lenses for analyzing the novel, generated largely by the students themselves, allowed for a multiplicity of perspectives on the immigrant experience and helped us to break apart hegemonic narratives about undocumented Mexican immigrants circulating since Trump’s candidacy.

Despite students’ positive reception of the novel, the jury was still out for me on whether I’d continue to use *The Book of Unknown Americans* right up until our final discussions. The novel’s conclusion (spoiler alert!) shocked and distressed many students who had visceral reactions when a main character is shot and killed in an incident of racist violence. I received an urgent email from an Uzbek student who wrote me the moment she finished the novel: “I feel so bad, even though I know it is novel, fiction. I feel terrible about the end . . . Oh my God, it seems to me a real life that happens with immigrants.” Other students reported sobbing on the bus to school as they finished reading. Still others were angry, at Henríquez and me, that the novel ended the way it did and that I had chosen to assign it. They’d been hoping for Maribel’s full recovery from her brain injury, the consummation of the teen romance, and a happily-ever-after ending that, they later acknowledged in class discussion, belies the experience of most immigrants. Students’ retrospective ability to critique their own desires and expectations for the novel—and for the immigrant experience itself—transformed my own reading of it. Under its simple façade of family struggles and teen romance, *The Book of Unknown Americans* creates deep empathy for its characters and, in so doing, inspired my students to read, fostered multiple interpretations of text, and sparked authentic critique of the current state of U.S. immigration.

Work cited

Henríquez, Cristina. *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Vintage, 2014.



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