

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

We The People: Immigration Counter-Narratives in the High School Visual Arts Classroom

by Alisha Mernick



COUNTER-NARRATIVE ARTWORKS ABOUT IMMIGRATION COURTESY OF AUTHOR

For the last decade, I have taught High School Visual Art in the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles, a primarily black and brown immigrant community. The vast majority of my students are immigrants, or children of immigrants, growing up in yet another era of heightened villainization of *the other*, a continuing neo-native attempt at drawing a hard American line between *us* and *them*. I am doing everything in my power to make sure these students do not internalize the same learned self-hatred that I once did.

My parents met and married in Iran and moved to the states just before the 1978 Iranian revolution. Originally hoping to visit regularly with our family, the violence and political upheaval in Iran, and the growing tensions between our countries made these visits unlikely, and then impossible. So, they settled and raised three children in the United States. My mother has not been back to Iran or seen her parents in nearly 40 years, and I have not seen my grandparents since I was an infant.

Growing up in a primarily white area, the little I learned about my Iranian heritage came from a handful of old family photographs, and the ever-present American media. Our pediatrician advised my mother not to teach us Farsi; teachers constantly corrected our behavior and body language; classmates teased about our bodies and cultural quirks; and my path toward assimilation into a culture of whiteness was secured. For the majority of my childhood, I readily consumed the depictions of Iran as a violent, suspicious, backwards society. I assumed the photos of my mother in college, surrounded by unveiled women in miniskirts carrying stacks of books, were just an anomaly.

I was in high school when the 9/11 attacks took place, and the *war on terror* began. The representation of persons of “middle eastern” descent in mainstream media became even more one-dimensional, racist, and vile. I allowed friends to make fun of my mother’s accent, call us “muzzy,” and joke about us being terrorists. Our family was often asked by strangers “what are you?” and “where are you from?” and we were occasionally “randomly searched” at the airport. When people asked about my background, I would often laugh off my “vague ethnicity” and attempt to align my identity more closely to my father’s ethnic Jewish roots. Somehow, this felt safer.

It took me many years to heal - to move on from the embarrassment about my heritage. First, this embarrassment was replaced by anger for having been made to feel inferior, then a guilt for allowing myself to feel that way, and finally to a position of nuanced understanding, self-love, and focused intent to *disrupt* the system that had harmed me. A large part of this healing came while studying critical race theory and critical pedagogy in graduate school, and first naming the white supremacy that had permeated so much of my k-12 education - both in and out of school. I began to deconstruct the dominant narratives about Iran and the Middle East, to identify the political intent behind

these falsehoods, and to critically question what American visual culture and media had taught me about my people.

Today, I aim to equip my students with these critical skills at a much earlier age - to fortify them against the subtle, and not so subtle, lies they would consume about themselves as they come of age in a xenophobic, white supremacist culture. Our small public charter high school is the epitome of contemporary, urban, American public schooling. We operate an award-winning program out of a converted storage facility located underneath a six-lane freeway interchange in downtown Los Angeles. Nearly 98% of our student body checks a box labelled “Hispanic” when enrolling for our school, and 96% of these students qualify to receive free or reduced-price meals and produce boxes. Our families previously lived in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and Ethiopia. Most of our students speak English as a second language, with about a quarter typically qualifying as English language learners. Most of our families speak Spanish at home, and our families

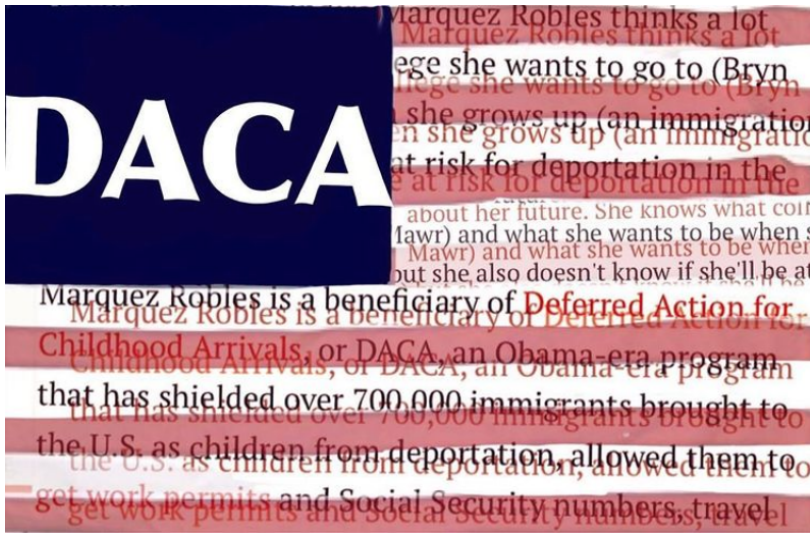


CYNTHIA AND ANTHONY’S SPIRIT WEEK COSTUME ILLUSTRATE THE WAY THAT CONVERSATIONS AROUND IMMIGRATION POLICY AND IMMIGRANT RIGHTS ARE CENTERED ON CAMPUS. (2017)

are deeply invested in their students’ academic success.

The surrounding community is one of the highest density neighborhoods in the country, with many of our students living 5-10 people to an apartment. Most students have additional responsibilities at home - child care, preparing meals, or helping the family businesses - which reduces their available time for schoolwork. Despite these many additional challenges, our school has a strong academic program, an exceptional college acceptance rate, and some of the most committed and intellectually curious young folks I have ever worked with. We have been recognized among the top 25 “most transformative” high

schools in the nation by Newsweek and won a Blue Ribbon Award and other accolades for schools that “beat the odds.” These recognitions are ultimately due to the willingness of staff to overwork ourselves, and the commitment of our students to meet our community’s high expectations.



THEMES OF IMMIGRATION POLICY BEGAN EMERGING IN STUDENT ARTWORK, UNPROMPTED. DIGITAL ARTWORK BY ANGENI V., 2017, FOR THE AP STUDIO ART PORTFOLIO.

Many of our students are undocumented childhood arrivals who benefit from DACA and Dreamer programs. As access to these programs ebb and flow with our national political climate, the mood on campus changes palpably. Our college counselors specialize in supporting students' applications to both of these programs and navigating college applications without a documented immigration status. Our students are politically engaged, by necessity. Our community follows immigration law the way some high schools follow their football teams. The 2016 election season, as well as the four years of living in Trump's America, cast a dark shadow over our community. (Even with Biden's notable call to “preserve & fortify” DACA on his first day in office, at the time of this writing we are still waiting on the passage of the “Dream Act,” which would finally secure a pathway to citizenship for the nearly 2 million

undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children.)

I had always made a point to center and honor my student’s identities and individual funds of knowledge in my classroom, but in the wake of the 2016 election, I saw the need to teach much more explicitly about the topic of migration. Trump’s presidential campaign was centering overtly racist and violent rhetoric about immigrants, and these themes were already emerging in student artwork and class conversation. After Trump took office, feelings intensified, and the mood shifted. As ICE raids began increasing in Los Angeles, as “the wall” started going up nearby, our resting anxiety level rose. I recognized a need to create a safe space for these emergent conversations to be explored and decided to redesign an upcoming portraiture lesson in order to name and counter the dominant narratives of immigration in the United States today.

We began with a lesson resource from Facing History & Ourselves - a guided analysis of a political cartoon created during the Chinese Exclusion Act. The image shows racialized caricatures, laboring over the construction of an *anti-Chinese wall*. The mortar bucket is labeled *congress*. The individual bricks are labelled *prejudice*, *law against race*, *fear*, etc. We watched a short PBS video for historical context, interpreted the image together, and then held a Socratic seminar for students to discuss: What connections can you draw between the Chinese Exclusion Act and today?



STUDENTS EASILY SAW CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT AND THE RHETORIC AROUND IMMIGRATION POLICY TODAY. IMAGE FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: (<https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3G04138/>)

I am always in awe of how sharp and critical my students can be, especially when they are personally invested in the topic. Students brought up the election, the rhetoric around the border wall, the *extreme vetting* of Muslim immigrants, and more. Students were especially quick to recall recent language in Trump’s 2018 speech about immigration reform: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” and “These aren’t people, These are animals.” Several students, who were simultaneously enrolled in an AP European History course, drew poignant connections between Trump’s language and the rhetoric used during Nazi Germany. Other students connected Trump’s racist generalizations to their own lives, sharing personal stories about discrimination. A skinny freshman, whose parents immigrated from Mexico, shared that he was always followed or harassed by cops when out skateboarding, and wondered aloud if he was being seen as a “criminal.” A small, dark skinned classmate related, and shared that she was also Mexican, and was always followed around stores by an employee when shopping with her sisters.

Several students brought up the media, observing that Latinos in Los Angeles were usually represented on TV as criminals, drug dealers, or gang members. A few students connected the conversation to the #OscarsSoWhite movement and proposed that the media was full of racist stereotypes because “everyone running Hollywood is white.” One of my taller, darker students, whose family was from El Salvador, shared that he felt like he made people “uncomfortable” with his mere presence, and that these media stereotypes were probably why. We summarized the key points of the conversation together and created a reference chart on the board defining the “Dominant Narratives about Immigrants” in the US today: violent, lazy, selfish, uneducated, rapists, animals, drug dealers, criminals.

analysis. These artworks portray three women of the global majority in confident poses, painted in red, white and blue, with the text “We the People” centered under each portrait. We analyze the meaning of the text, the color scheme, the confident poses, and the other subtle visual symbols in each art piece. Next, I introduce the term “counter-narrative”: a narrative told by people who have been historically marginalized with the intent of offering positive alternatives to mainstream narratives. Again, we brainstorm the counter-narratives we know to be true about immigrants, and record them on the board: hardworking, family oriented, loving, honest, selfless, determined, powerful, brave.



DIANE PAINTING A PORTRAIT OF HER FATHER, 2018



PROTEST ART THROUGHOUT HISTORY SERVES AS A “COUNTER NARRATIVE,” TO DOMINANT POLITICAL DISCOURSE. SHEPARD FAIREY IMAGES. IN PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The next day, students viewed and interpreted Shepard Fairey’s “We The People” series as a class. Again, students impressed me with their visual literacy skills and contextual

Finally, I give student’s their assignment: research a real U.S. immigrant to honor with a painted portrait and write an artist statement that serves as a counter-narrative about immigration. Since the majority of my students are the children of immigrants, and since we have already established our classroom as a “safe space” for personal vulnerability, many students choose to represent a family member or loved one. Students write their own interview questions and interview the immigrants in their lives. Most questions focus on how their subjects migrated to the United States, why they chose to leave their home countries, and what it was like when they first arrived.

Many students shared with me that these interviews were initially uncomfortable for their loved ones, many of whom had previously hidden some of the more traumatizing details about their migration stories from their families. Some parents cried as they recalled needing to pack up everything and leave their home communities, often in haste, with the abstract hope of finding safety and a better means to survive in a strange land. For many students, this was their first-time hearing about their parent's experience crossing the border without legal documentation. Some students learned that their parents were taken advantage of by *coyotes*, were physically smuggled, robbed on the road, suffered from dehydration, or witnessed sexual violence against women during their journey. One child recalled his own dangerous journey to reach the United States from El Salvador, and how the only personal belonging that survived the journey was a small gift from his grandmother—a handwritten prayer on a postcard of the Virgin Mary.

Each student painted a representational portrait and wrote an artist statement, informed by their interviews. When complete, students presented their artworks to the class and read their artist statements aloud. I model this emotional act first by holding up a painting of my own mother and sharing my family's story. I give plenty of time and space for students to respond and discuss each other's work, while I facilitate respectful dialogue. The resulting conversation is rich, and organic - and the sharing is real. Many students share with their classmates, for the first time, their own undocumented status.

One common theme in student's artist statements is how hard-working and family-oriented real immigrants are, and how so often, their choice to migrate was a necessary sacrifice made for the sake of their children. Many students speak directly to the stereotype of South and Central Americans as 'lazy,' clarifying in detail just how hard-working their loved ones were. They share how common it is for U.S. immigrants to simultaneously study English, work multiple jobs, keep a home, prepare meals, care for elders, and somehow still find the time and energy to attend parent teacher conferences.

Another common topic for dialogue is the dominant narrative of immigrants as violent criminals and drug addicts. Students discuss the very real presence of drug addiction and crime in their neighborhoods - generally concentrated in the houseless communities of veterans and persons with mental illness around Skid Row, MacArthur Park, and Downtown Los Angeles. Growing up around so much abject poverty and addiction, many students develop a strong aversion to drug culture and find it ironic and aggravating that immigrants are represented as "drug dealers" in dominant media narratives. One student shared that her mother came to the United States to flee an alcoholic partner in Mexico. She came to the United States in order to escape substance abuse, not to bring it with her.

Throughout our class presentations, students respond with love and support of one another's stories. They relate

similar experiences, applaud each other's vulnerability, and swear themselves to secrecy—and to protect each other. This is due in part to the work we have done all year to develop a "safe space" and model respectful dialogue in our classroom. This feeling of mutual love and respect was summarized beautifully in Jenny's (2018) end-of-year reflection: "When I think of [our class], the word that comes to mind is *community*... I remember that many students would break down crying because of how emotional their projects were but because of the community built up over time in the classroom, everyone was very open as an audience and respected one another."

This project also showed students that art making was a form of activism. Daniela (2018) remembers learning that "art wasn't all about sunshine and rainbows," but that it "has the power to educate people... and raise awareness for social issues." Kimberly (2017) summarizes this beautifully, "Art has a really big impact in shaping the world." I believe strongly in the power of artwork to not only reflect, but to also shape our culture, and so public exhibition is a core element of every project we do.

We exhibited our counter-narrative portraits and written statements together around campus (anonymously, to protect our artists) in order to reach the broader community and have a deeper impact in *countering* the dominant stereotypes the images addressed. Through public exhibition, our artists become activists—publicly challenging the negative stereotypes and xenophobic, racialized assumptions about our community.



STUDENT PAINTING A HYBRID MEXICAN AMERICAN FLAG, TO SERVE AS THE BACKGROUND TO A PORTRAIT OF HER MOTHER. 2018

One year, we had the opportunity to exhibit our paintings at a nearby immigrant rights fair. Families who came to learn more about their legal rights from a panel of expert speakers were greeted by our counter-narrative portraits and written statements—faces and stories that

likely reflected their own experiences as immigrants. Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, who spoke at the fair, reflected that “At this time of fear and uncertainty for so many in our communities, events like this are crucial.” Most impactful to me though were the smaller and more intimate moments of students and their families interacting with the artwork. Occasionally, one of the artists would bring their loved one to see their portraits in person. I watched Daniel, one of my young artists, translate his artist statement into Spanish for his mother. As he read, tears welled up in her face. She laughed, spoke to him softly in Spanish, and embraced her child. “To me that is an ultimate sacrifice,” Daniel recalled later, “to give up all you own, and make such a commitment solely in the name of your children. When I look at this portrait, I see a brave, powerful woman, and the most honorable human I know.”

the myriad issues around human migration, neo-nativism, and xenophobia. Visual culture and representation have the power to dismantle oppressive systems, especially as regards to our internalized white supremacy. Our public exhibitions of these artworks began to serve this purpose, and I hope that this publication will amplify my student’s truths and broaden their impact. I hope that these art works will provide a necessary counter-narrative to the xenophobic representations of immigrants and our families that we encounter daily.



WHEN INVITED TO CREATE COUNTER-NARRATIVE ARTWORKS ABOUT IMMIGRATION, MANY STUDENTS CHOSE TO REPRESENT THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES.

This is the learning experience that was missing from my own youth. One that saw *me*, honored *my* story, and validated *my family’s* experience of marginalization. I imagine how this space for processing, analyzing, and countering xenophobic narratives might have liberated me from so much of the internalized racial inferiority that plagued my teenage years. Self-love and critical self-knowledge have become so central to my personal journey and my educational equity work—my mission for this project is to spark the same confidence and sense of agency for my students.

I also hope that the images and narratives we created will heal our culture beyond ourselves: that our truths will educate and motivate others to better understand us and

Student Artwork &
Written Counter-Narratives



“My mother came to the U.S. in the year 1990 with her brother and the help of a ‘coyote.’ She decided to migrate because she wanted to escape poverty, and follow my father to the States. My mother challenges the stereotypes that immigrants are ruining the country. Her sole motive was to work, for her children, for a better life. I painted her because she represents the innocent immigrants and refugees that want to come to the U.S. for a better life. It is important that people learn about these immigrants and that they aren’t here to commit crimes. Immigrants are innocent people who may have been victims of poverty, wars, or other hardships.”

- Daniel, 2017

“My mom came to the U.S. at the age of 16. She was the oldest so she had to drop out of school during 5th grade and started working at the age of 11 to help out her parents. She came to the U.S. for a better job with just a friend and lived with a woman who would treat them badly. The next day she went walking around asking for a job for almost 3 hours, and eventually she found one. Even today she goes to work and takes the bus and when she gets home she immediately starts cooking. My mom is important for the audience to know because she didn’t steal jobs, she doesn’t do drugs, or something like that. She is a hardworking woman that worked with sweat and tears and because of her I am here today.”

- Anonymous, 2017





“My mother, is an immigrant. She came to this country seeking opportunity when she was just 19. It’s crazy to think a teenager was willing to leave everything and risk her life to get away from poverty and violence. My mom went through a lot and was still treated badly here by ignorant people. Many wouldn’t hire her because she was an immigrant but eventually she got a job. When I say immigrant many may imagine a rapist or a delinquent. But my mom is none of that, she is a respectable woman that came for a better future. There’s no delinquency in that, in fact it’s inspiring. It’s important for people to know this in order to end the negative assumptions there are about immigrants.” - Ashley, 2017

“I chose to paint my mother, to represent how her immigration story challenges stereotypes towards immigrants. My mother lived in Mexico up until the age of 12 when she crossed the border to enter the U.S. When my mom entered the U.S. and went to school, she knew nothing of English and struggled to make friends and didn’t have time because she would have to take care of her little brothers and sisters...I chose my mom because she’s a perfect example of how not all Mexicans, Latinos, or Hispanics are criminals, rapists, and drug dealers. My mom would rather work hard for every dollar she makes and do what is right rather than do what is easy.” - Rebecca, 2017





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