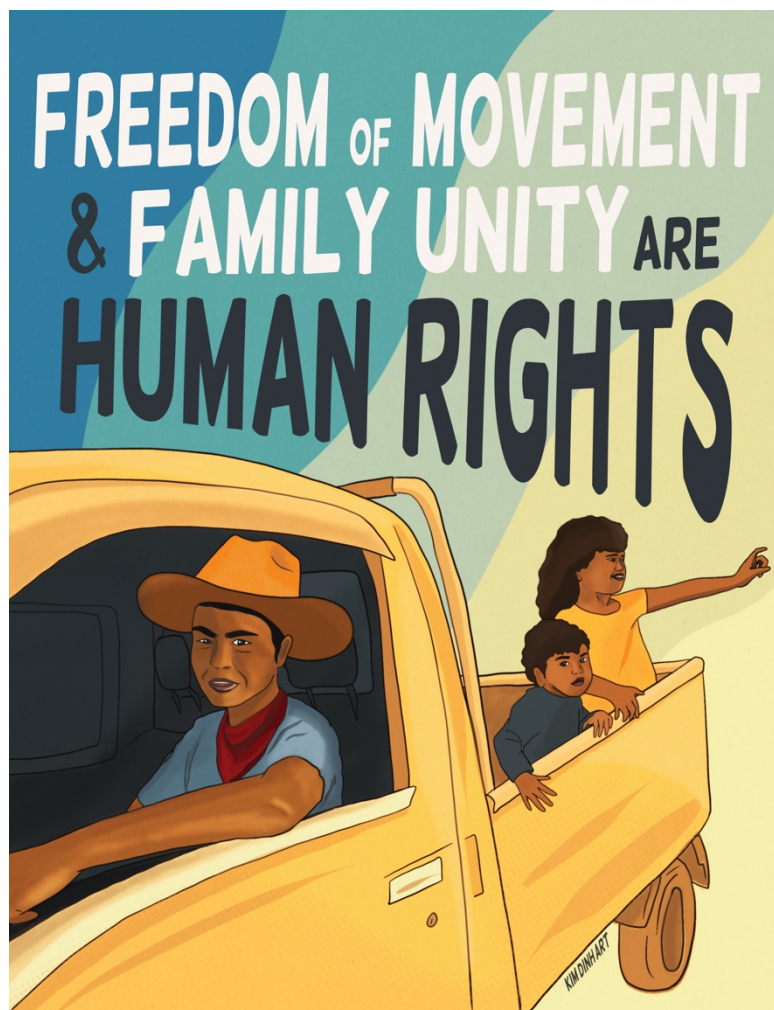


RADICAL TEACHER

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

Teaching U.S.–Mexico Relations to Dreamers in the Time of COVID-19

by Angela Cecilia Espinosa



FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND FAMILY UNITY ARE HUMAN RIGHTS, KIM DINH (2020) VIA JUSTSEEDS

*Long live students! Gardens of our happiness!
They're birds who fear neither beast nor police,
neither bullets nor hounds could scare them!*

- Violeta Parra

On August 18, 2020, I received a call from the chair of Chicana Studies at San José State University (SJSU), asking me if I might step in to teach "U.S.–Mexico Relations," a required course in the curriculum. The class would start the next day. Six weeks earlier, I had relocated to the Bay Area with my partner, who had accepted an administrative position at SJSU. We had been told all summer there were no teaching opportunities for me at the moment, and I had resigned myself to teaching first-year Spanish online. "I know it's audacious of me to ask you this at the last minute," the chair told me, "but otherwise we'll have to cancel the class. With your background in the Mexican Revolution and *folklorico*, we think you'll be a good fit. And our students are wonderful." I was thrilled and panicked by the opportunity, but a few hours later, I accepted. The chair and I agreed that she would introduce me to the class the next day and explain the unprecedented circumstances (a sudden faculty retirement), and that I would present the beginnings of a syllabus the following Monday. What follows are my reflections on building and teaching "U.S.–Mexico Relations" from a Chicana Studies perspective amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the California wildfires, and the 2020 presidential election.

History of Cal State; California as a Borderland

After the Mexican–American War (1845–1848), Mexico lost over 50% of its territory and the United States acquired the Four Corners states, California, and access to the Pacific Ocean. The California Gold Rush of 1849 brought an influx of wealth to the region, and the precursor to San Jose State—Minn's Normal School—was founded in San Francisco in 1857. It is the oldest public university on the west coast and the first university in the Cal State system. During the 1960s and 1970s, it was the site of student activism. Most notably, San Jose State students John Carlos and Tommy Smith raised their fists in a Black Power salute to protest African Apartheid and anti-Black racism in the United States. They had just received medals at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Today, a statue of the two track stars stands in the center of the SJSU campus. Not far away, César Chávez helped organize the Salinas Lettuce Strike of 1970–1971.

SJSU is a Hispanic-serving institution. Most of my students were Latinx, and all were either Chicana Studies majors or minors. Some were children of migrant farm workers or worked on the farms of the Central Valley themselves. One student referred to himself as an "anchor baby," apparently unaware of the term's racist connotations. Another was Vietnamese-American but identified with the Chicana community, having grown up in East LA. Some had been in California for generations. Others openly identified

as Dreamers; all of them at one time or another had been inspired by other Chicana faculty to continue learning about their culture and how it brushed up against the dominant Anglo-American culture. The only white student—a young woman from the Central Valley—found the alternative pedagogies of Chicana Studies so energizing that she wanted to learn more. I was excited to teach upper-division content to engaged students after so many years of teaching first-year Spanish to students who might not continue their language studies long-term.

Over the years, I've had to reckon with my own identity politics. My relationship to the "Chicana" tag is ambivalent. I grew up in Denver, Colorado, home of Rodolfo "Corky" González and site of key moments in the Chicana movement. My mother was second-generation German American, my father a Mexican national she'd met while abroad in Mexico City during the 1970s. My father sympathized with the Chicana movement but did not identify as Chicana himself until 2001. Both of my parents supported the student-led movements throughout Latin America, and the parents of my closest childhood friends actively resisted U.S. military action in Central America. My parents spoke Spanish to each other but English to me. (I was born a generation before public schools embraced bilingualism/dual immersion.) As a result, my Spanish is fluent but academic, lacking any of the spontaneity of "Chicano" Spanish/interlingualism. I worried that my new students might not view me as "authentically" Chicana (whatever that means). Nevertheless, having spent my summers in rural Veracruz, Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s, I could provide them with vivid accounts of recent history on both sides of the U.S.–Mexican border, as well as provide a context for the family histories of children of immigrants. By reading the history of U.S.–Mexico relations from the late twentieth century to the present, we could all understand more fully the political and economic factors that had brought us together in this class. Then I remembered Gloria Anzaldúa's description of *Nepantla*: "... that in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity" (Anzaldúa 2009: 180). All of us inhabit multiple, hybrid identities and have negotiated our relationships to the dominant culture on both sides of the border.

"The Future is Today": A Humble Attempt at Rocking My Students' Worlds

The first day of class was the usual combination of icebreakers and protocols. I described my academic background and research. I completed my Ph.D. in Latin American literature at UC–Irvine. My research focuses on race, gender, and the historical avant-garde period, with a special emphasis on Mexico and Brazil. I've taught courses on Latin American civilization and culture, revolutionary poetry, and utopia and dystopia, and the cultural production of the Mexican Revolution. My background was in the humanities rather than in the social sciences (Chicana Studies at SJSU is housed in the College of Social Sciences), and so my approach to teaching U.S.–Mexico Relations

would be different than, say, a political science course. In addition to covering traditional texts on history and economics, we would look at how U.S.–Mexico dynamics played out in film, music, and literature. We would then relate that material to our own experiences negotiating hybrid identities in the borderland of California. That we were coming together under the umbrella of Chicana Studies afforded all of us an intercultural, hybrid vantage point from which to study our topic.

I ended our first class by screening the music video “Futuro” (2017) by the Mexican rock band Café Tacuba. The video depicts the four band members disguised as a skeleton, a priest, a rainbow-colored furry, and a grim reaper (or perhaps a saint) clad in garbage bags. The band hurtles through space on a galactic bus outfitted with airplane wings. Their passengers are a motley crew: female back-up dancers dressed as Zapatista rebels, a skeleton, a U.S.-born drug dealer, and Native Americans from both sides of the border. World political figures like Queen Elizabeth II and the Mexican President are impersonated by little people, while Donald Trump and Pope Francis appear from the waist up in their traditional garb but are feminized below the waist by tennis skirts. The lyrics evoke indigenous views of life, death, and the passage of time. The song’s refrain states, “El futuro es hoy” (“The future is today”).

I asked the students about their impressions of the video. Only one of them had heard of Café Tacuba. I asked them, if this video was the future, what did it look like to them? How were the figures of power represented? What was this video saying about U.S.–Mexico relations or Mexicans’ view of the United States? The students remarked that the future looked grim, especially as we were living through a pandemic. They were perplexed by the androgynous depictions of Trump and Pope Francis but ultimately found them appealing. I asked them to consider how these depictions might undermine patriarchal structures and to keep the video in mind as we progressed through the class. Later, we would read about the delicate line the founding fathers trod between efforts to create a Caucasian democracy through land grabs and mass murder of indigenous peoples, and their desire “to prove themselves good stewards of its [the United States’] land and its people” to Europe (Grandin 2019: 48). Andrew Jackson, however, was not concerned with international opinions, and he pursued a brutal campaign of genocide against Native Americans. “Jackson was the future,” Grandin writes. With Trump’s anti-immigrant policies such as family separations and caging small children, he was that future personified.

Laying Foundations/Foundation Myths

Chicana Studies had provided me with a syllabus, but it was centered around history and political science texts. I didn’t feel that I could provide meaningful insight into them. I did retain Shannon K. O’Neil’s *Two Nations Indivisible: Mexico, the United States, and the Road Ahead* (2013). Thanks to a colleague’s recommendation, I decided to use Greg Grandin’s Pulitzer prize-winning *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*

(2019) to provide both a historical and theoretical framework for the class. But I needed to give students time to order the book online and meanwhile give them some background on the topics we would be discussing.

That second week of class, I gave a PowerPoint presentation on the introduction to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983). I wanted to question the very idea of national identity because so much of the rhetoric of the past four years concerning *who* was “authentically” a resident of the United States had excluded most of my students. It was important to me to address the very notion of nationality as illusory and alternately idealistic and problematic. Drawing on the subtitle of Grandin’s book, I chose the idea of myth as a secondary theme throughout the semester. What myths dictate U.S. attitudes and policies toward undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants? What myths about the United States do those same immigrants carry with them across the Rio Grande? What myths are children in the U.S. school system taught about the founding fathers, the Civil War, or social mobility? My students’ personal histories and previous coursework facilitated an understanding of Anderson’s concepts. Having grown up on the margins of mainstream US society, they knew national identity was not univocal.

I problematized the ideas of myth and “imagined communities” in the context of Chicana Studies and U.S.–Mexico relations by having students read “Conquerors and Victims: The Image of America Forms (1500–1800)” in Juan González’s *Harvest of Empire* (2011). The introductory chapter provides a brief history of the territories that would later become the United States. It discusses the indigenous peoples who first inhabited the continent, as well as the Spanish conquest and its aftermath. I asked students to describe and identify aspects of early U.S. history that were new or interesting to them as a result of reading the chapter. Many said they were familiar with a superficial version of this history but had not put much thought into its relevance today. One student was impressed to learn that English settlers had adopted aspects of the Iroquois constitution and that “Several of the Founding Fathers were influenced by the Iroquois system of checks and balances” (González 2011: 25).

Picking up on González’s account of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, I screened a climactic scene from the Mexican film *Cabeza de Vaca* (1992), in which the Spanish explorer—captured and enslaved by a Native American dwarf shaman—attempts unsuccessfully to escape. This scene provides a counter-narrative to the history of the conquest most of us learned in school, not to mention the melodramatic images we see in Hollywood films. The conquest successfully annihilated millions of indigenous people in the first hundred years of colonization, so the image of a European male being subjugated by an indigenous man with physical disabilities is powerful. It reflects the traditional indigenous belief that those born with disabilities are special in the eyes of the gods. Such people were highly revered in pre-Colombian societies. Second, it demonstrates the power of alternative (or subjugated) knowledge in a non-Western context. Third, it shows that

the conquest was not uniformly successful. Finally, it calls into question the Eurocentric dichotomy of “savage” vs. “civilized.”

Getting into the Nitty Gritty

After laying these foundations, we were able to delve into our main text, Grandin’s *The End of the Myth*. The author argues that the idea of the frontier was at the heart of independence from Great Britain. Constant westward expansion provided a safety valve to relieve mounting social, political, and economic tensions (Grandin 2019: 3). Donald Trump’s election in 2016 marked a turning point in the founding myth. The idea of the frontier gave way to that of the border. Grandin writes, “Trumpism is extremism turned inward, all-consuming and self-devouring” (9). Although the word “race” doesn’t figure into the title, it is central to Grandin’s argument. The history of the United States is the history of expansion for the sake of Anglo-Saxon Americans, which took a heavy toll on Native Americans, on enslaved Africans, and on Mexicans whose government ceded their territory in 1848. As such, it is also a history of white nationalism, with its most recent (and perhaps most dangerous) incarnation in Donald Trump.

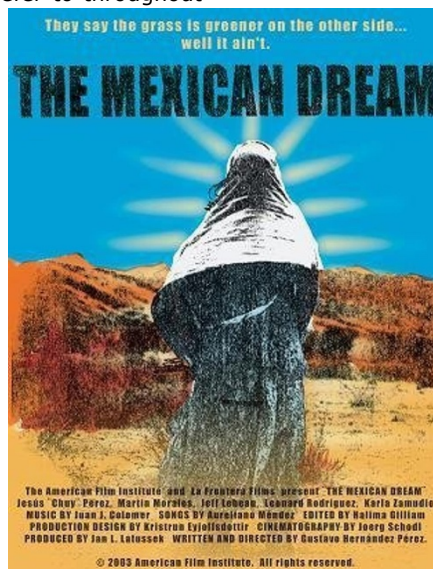
I scaffolded *The End of the Myth* by assigning an interview of Grandin on *Democracy Now!* via YouTube. As we read through the first few chapters, some of my students expressed difficulty reading Grandin’s language. Many of my students were heritage speakers of Spanish; and as much as I loved Grandin’s mesmerizing prose, he used words I was unfamiliar with, too. So I assigned students the task of looking up two to three unfamiliar words and posting their definitions on the weekly discussion board. Students thus had a working list of terms they could refer to throughout the semester, generated by their own inquiry rather than mine.

To lighten our first week with Grandin, I also assigned the short film *The Mexican Dream* (2003, dir. Gustavo Hernández Pérez). The film follows Ajileo, a would-be Hollywood actor, as he treks across the desert from Mexico into the United States in search of his dream. The film splits the screen to tell the story of Ajileo’s migration and subsequent life as an immigrant working menial jobs. As the students contributed observations on the main character’s tragicomic circumstances, I pointed out the multiple borders he continued to cross (in terms of language, social class, gender, etc.) once he had arrived in the United States. Picking up the myth theme, we discussed how the film parodied “The American Dream” and the idea that any immigrant to this country could achieve success through grit and hard work. I asked the students what they thought of the representation, knowing that many of their parents had

made the same trek as Ajileo. One student shared that the scenes of Ajileo with the border patrol triggered her, as her mother had experienced a similar encounter when she crossed into the United States. I thanked her for sharing and apologized for causing her distress. At the end of the class period, I acknowledged that several other students might have similar memories. I commended them for taking Chicanx Studies courses and for wanting to learn about their place in history. Nevertheless, many of them are experts in the immigrant experience and in some ways don’t need such classes the way that a mainstream white college student would, or any individual who supported the Trump platform. At the end of the day, I argued, the discipline of Ethnic Studies is really American Studies. They are not mutually exclusive. We could all benefit from acquiring a more complete picture of our shared history than the one we learned growing up. After laying these foundations, I assigned chapters of Grandin’s book alongside additional texts, websites, and videos about contemporary U.S.–Mexico relations with the intention of weaving the two threads of the class together into a cohesive whole by the end.

“Cruel Summer”: The COVID-19 Pandemic, the California Wildfires, and the 2020 Presidential Election

Students—especially Dreamers—experienced a myriad of issues during the fall semester of 2020. Each week of the semester brought a new onslaught of crises. My students and I suffered from battle fatigue caused by what I refer to as “Cruel Summer 2020”. The state of California, which had mostly been able to contain the COVID-19 pandemic when it erupted in the spring, found itself in the throes of a summer spike after July 4th festivities. As early as April, the California State University system had declared that most courses would be taught virtually in the fall; by mid-September, it had announced the entire academic year would be conducted online via Zoom. Given the population Cal State served, the administration made it clear that faculty should not require students to turn on their cameras during Zoom meetings. Because I had come so late to the scene, I received relatively little guidance in this regard. I felt the loneliness of being in a new city, and this feeling was compounded by the anonymity of mask mandates. Teaching virtually at a new institution fifty miles away was even more alienating when I logged into my class and saw nothing but a grid of Zoom tiles. Because teaching is inherently performative and interactive, the virtual setting made it difficult for me to “read the room” and know if students were engaged in the discussion or understanding the material.



THE MEXICAN DREAM (2003) DIRECTED BY GUSTAVO HERNÁNDEZ PÉREZ AND WRITTEN BY GUSTAVO HERNÁNDEZ PÉREZ

Once, I asked them all to turn on their cameras for five minutes, just so I could associate a face with a Zoom tile. After class, I administered a short survey on the Learning Management System to get an idea of their circumstances. One student was a single mother with a kindergartner. She was juggling working from home, her own coursework, and her son's online schooling. Several lived in loud, chaotic households with younger siblings whose schoolwork competed for the family's bandwidth. At the end of class one day, a student turned on her camera to show that her seven-year-old sister was sitting on her lap—something that absolutely delighted me. A few were transfer students from community colleges looking for the traditional residential college experience, so they were living in the SJSU dorms. The information from the survey helped me understand my students' circumstances better. Additionally, there was the usual handful of students who consistently used cameras and participated frequently. Several other students posted questions and comments in the Zoom chat, all of which quelled my performance anxiety and apprehension over their engagement.

Of course 2020 tied a record set in 2016 for the hottest year in the state. There were nearly 10,000 wildfires that consumed 4.1 million acres of land. The North Complex fire blazed through the mountains surrounding the Bay Area during our third week of classes. On September 2, 2020, San Francisco became engulfed in orange haze. Air quality levels registered extremely unhealthy. I had to turn on all the lights in my apartment for my 9 a.m. class due to the perpetual twilight. As I wrapped up our conversation about their first written assignment, I found myself telling my students, "See you Monday, and wear your masks."

"Professor," a student spoke up, "next Monday is a holiday."

"Oh, that's right," I replied, turning to look at the orange glow outside my apartment window. "See you next Wednesday." For instructors to forget a holiday weekend is common enough; but in that instance, my heart sank. The days were melting into each other like Dalí's clocks. Nothing felt normal. It was difficult to imagine celebrating labor on Labor Day when unemployment was so high and Californians were being told to stay inside to avoid COVID-19 *and* bad air. The fires continued through October; one of my students missed a week of class because the Silverado fire in Orange County had disrupted electrical service to parts of Los Angeles.

The 2020 presidential election and racial unrest following the police murder of George Floyd added to our collective unease. Teaching within the context of Chicana Studies afforded me the opportunity to talk about—rather than shy away from—race and politics. All of my students—but especially the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) ones—had been directly affected by Obama's DACA memorandum in 2012 and Trump's efforts to undermine it. Our first few weeks of classes coincided with the Republican and Democratic national conventions. One week we were reading about the idea of the frontier and how expansion, according to historian William Appleman Williams, was

"exhilarating in a psychological and philosophical sense" because it could be "projected to infinity" (quoted in Grandin 2019: 5). It was the same week that Eric Trump declared, "And soon under my father's leadership, it [the American spirit] will send Americans to Mars" (RNC speech Aug. 24, 2020, 6 p.m.). As the election drew closer, I assigned students to listen to two episodes of *The Daily* podcast from *The New York Times*. "The Field: A Divided Latino Vote in Arizona" (Oct. 19, 2020) profiled Latinx voters of all ages and political leanings to demonstrate how deeply divided the demographic was. In particular, the journalists interviewed a Mexican-American veteran in his forties who, after both witnessing and experiencing repeated acts of intimidation by law enforcement officials, became an active member of the Democratic Party and mobilized a voter registration effort in Naco, Arizona. On the other side of the spectrum was an older police officer who was voting for Trump. One of his daughters was gay, and his grandson was half black. The daughter refused to engage with him on the topic of politics because she loved him and didn't want to create bad blood between them.

I asked students if they identified with any of the interviewees, or if they had similar issues with family members. Some could relate to the discrimination one of the interviewees described; another shared that his family owned a small business and therefore sympathized with Trump's pro-business platform. We pondered how immigrant culture generally reveres its elders, and how young Latinx people might be less inclined to argue with their parents than mainstream white Americans. The second episode, "A Peculiar Way to Pick a President" (Oct. 22, 2020), provided an overview into the Electoral College. Students appreciated the review of US civics, and I emphasized these two points: 1) The Electoral College made it all the more incumbent upon us to vote in off-year elections. 2) It reflected another way in which racism (via the Three-fifths Compromise) was deeply entrenched in our democracy.

The week of the election, we were increasingly anxious. During the Monday morning check-in, one student mentioned she was worried about potential hate crimes around polling areas. Others wished for a quick and easy resolution to the election, even though the pandemic and resulting need for mail-in-voting would thwart that desire. It was November 2nd, Día de los Muertos, and the United States had reached 240,000 deaths from COVID-19.

Before jumping into our discussion of the day's readings, I opened up a Google Jamboard and created a virtual altar. I had asked students beforehand to bring pictures of friends, family members, or anyone else important to them who had passed on in 2020. Over the next ten minutes, photos of *abuelitos* (grandparents) appeared on the screen, as did some of flowers and hot chocolate (traditional altar items). I posted photos of John Lewis, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Oscar Chávez (an important Mexican protest singer), and Quino (a beloved Argentinian cartoonist). I invited students to share about their loved ones, but mostly we were silent as we contemplated the circle of life and death. A powerful sense of peacefulness and

healing overcame me. It was the closest I'd been to community since moving to San Francisco.

On election day, I was a nervous wreck. I couldn't focus on planning my class. The lesson was supposed to be Mexican Muralism, the influence of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, and Mexico City as an international center for revolutionary art and thinking. As I watched the returns on the Internet, I decided to cancel class. Instead, I posted an assignment on our online discussion board. Students would watch one hour of election returns and then comment on their own levels of political engagement and their experiences with voting. The following is a lightly edited selection of my students' comments:

I was not politically active until Trump threatened to take way DACA. I started to do my own research about my rights and become informed. When I took your class, I realized how much power the United States actually holds, and how political decisions made in the United States affect everyone else...Throughout the election I have been super anxious. I work at Five Guys, and I have seen a couple people come into my store decked out in MAGA wear. I have been feeling even more nervous because of how they see me. I'm happy to see Biden turn three states blue that were red last election. It helps me be calm and remain hopeful. (Student A)

My main priorities for this election are making sure a transparent COVID relief plan is set for helping regular citizens who are struggling to make ends meet, as well as giving businesses the materials they need to ensure safe and secure reopening in regions with low infection rates. Also, I think it's important that whoever wins the election is determined to heal our divided country by supporting the many minority communities who have been hurting and are vocal in their fears. Lastly, I hope the new administration begins to redistribute the national budget so areas such as education, renewable energy, poverty/income security can be invested in more properly. (Student B)

I've been more politically active this past year and taking Chicano Studies classes has helped me be more aware of how history has led us to this particular moment. I started reading more about Che Guevara last August, and I really admire the way he helped the working class, debunking what I had initially learned about him in my US history classes in high school. The events that occurred this year (starting with police brutality) really opened my eyes to how BIPOC [black, indigenous, and people of color] are perceived. I can think for myself about where I stand in all of this, and how I can be more active within my own community as well as others. (Student C)

As a first-generation Latinx voter from parents that immigrated from Mexico, one of my main priorities is

having fair and reasonable immigration policies. This pandemic forced me to reflect on my own identity. I realized that the fear my undocumented parents instilled in me about deportation shouldn't have been a norm for me as a human. Thankfully, my military service and veteran status helped my mom get residency. My dad's case is up next, so we're hoping for the best. I know not everyone is fortunate enough to receive these documentation statuses, so I feel like it is my civic duty to have my vote represent my parents and others who can't vote. (Student E)

Other students described their anxiety as the election results streamed in. Cancelling class gave us breathing room to reflect on what Biden called "the most important election of our lifetime." This event provided me with valuable insight into my students' experiences as we walked the border between our class and the new post-election reality.

Student Assessment and Finding Closure

Given the extreme circumstances of the pandemic, wildfires, and the election, I endeavored to make student assessments accessible yet challenging. I used weekly discussion boards to boost student participation both synchronously and asynchronously. Taking guidance from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2009), I assigned response papers that were argument-driven yet seemingly low-stakes. For example, their first written assignment was a letter to a friend or family member dispelling the myth that the American revolution was solely about taxation versus representation, and instead that the revolt was fomented by the white colonists' desire to expand unhindered into Native American territory. I asked students to write another paper defending or refuting President Trump's condemnation of "The 1619 Project" by *The New York Times* and his subsequent creation of "The 1776 Commission" (Whitehouse.gov 2021).

In their final project, which I called "Debunking Myths, Reclaiming History," students wrote a blog post they uploaded to the Learning Management System. Specifically, I wanted them to debunk one of the myths about U.S.-Mexico relations or immigration. I gave them the opportunity to expand or revise previous response papers in this essay/blog, with the requirement that they reference three main texts from our class plus two additional sources. I also required them to include relevant images and hyperlinks. Some of the blog titles included "Debunking the Myth of Job-Stealing Immigrants," "Debunking the Myth of Limited Resources," "Debunking the Myth of Freedom and Liberty for All," and so on. Students created fascinating posts that were imminently readable. During a non-election year, I would have placed more emphasis on Mexican history and culture to compensate for knowledge gaps.

I tried to end the course on as positive a note as possible. We read Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2015), about the author's

experience translating for immigrant children seeking asylum in the United States as she taught at an elite private Eastern college. We discussed how her students took the initiative to create a club dedicated to immigrant outreach. I encouraged them to volunteer in their own communities. I told them it was the best way to gain job experience in the current economy.

We watched the documentary *The Tinaja Trail and Transborder Migration Tool* (2012), which follows the collaboration of performance artist Ricardo Domínguez and a human rights organization as they provided water and poetry in locations across the desert to aid migrants in their journey across to the border. Finally, we watched the trailer to the documentary *Fandango at the Wall* (2019), in which Latin jazz artist Arturo O’Farrill participates in the annual celebration of *son jarocho* (an Afro-Mexican musical genre from the state of Veracruz) at the San Diego/Tijuana border. As painful as the events of 2020 and reading about our country’s racial past had been, I wanted students to see that “regular people”—not politicians—could create positive change for their communities.

Throughout the semester, students would occasionally linger after class to continue discussing one of the readings, or to get clarification about politics. One student told me the class was his therapy as he dealt with caring for an ailing mother and taking engineering classes. Another expressed her dismay over learning about Andrew Jackson’s Trail of Tears, but she thanked me for opening her eyes to the scope of racism in our shared history. Teaching this class allowed me to feel hopeful about the future.

What Did Students Learn?

Although many students were children of Mexican nationals, their understanding of Mexican history, much less U.S.–Mexico relations, was limited. This was not surprising, after all, given that they had grown up in the United States. Their parents, often having little more than an 8th grade education, either couldn’t or wouldn’t share with them the historical and social factors that prompted their departure from Mexico. Because of their undocumented status, many students had never been to Mexico or Central America. One student, for example, remarked on her surprise at how “modern” Mexico was upon visiting the city of Aguascalientes for the first time. This phenomenon reflects both the Chicanx experience and what we’ve heard so many times about DACA students/Dreamers: The United States is the only country they’ve ever known, yet they are foreigners in it. They occupy Anzaldúa’s Nopantla.

Having grown up in the United States, it was sometimes difficult for students to conceive of different approaches to race, democracy, etc. They didn’t think that another country could be more liberal or progressive than the United States. For example, the post-revolutionary, single-party Cárdenas government expropriated foreign-owned oil companies, to the benefit of that industry’s workers, while Franklin Delano Roosevelt worked to convince workers to support corporatist policies that increased oil company profits at their expense

(Grandin 181). They learned U.S.–Mexico relations didn’t just begin with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but rather in 1821 when Mexico gained its independence from Spain. They also came to realize that the racism they’ve witnessed and experienced did not simply date back to U.S. immigration policy from the 1990s to the present or even to the Mexican–American War, but is instead a foundational aspect of the United States.

Conclusion

In the days following the election, students observed former President Trump’s attempts to overturn the results in Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. They asked me if Trump could possibly stay in office by simply refusing to leave the White House. Based on my knowledge of Latin American history, I told them it could only happen with the support of the military, and this would constitute a coup. And then January 6th happened. Despite the chaos Trump created, he still found time to release the report of the 1776 Commission on Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a final snub to the Civil Rights movement. Biden promptly removed the report from the official White House website upon taking office. If the events of 2020 have shown us anything, revising history can only take us so far. It’s time for the White House to sponsor a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. The work of debunking myths continues.

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