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NOTA CRÍTICA

Vernacular Conversations on Immigration and Border-Crossing: A Narrative-Oriented Action Research Project

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Borders like words are arbitrary symbols designed to frame our human need to control space, time, and language. We, transforming educators, during our daily practices constantly question if this necessity for cultural structure contributes to protect primeval knowledge generated within the communities or to the contrary this structure generates ethnocentric segregation scanning wisdom as meaningless merchandise individuals bear when crossing borders. Propelled by our endless search for effective educational methodologies, we began our journey across the border between Mexico and the United States in search of vernacular voices that could deconstruct historical stereotypes written by scripted discourses of power.

Our objective was to conceptualize the journey that either our students or their parents experienced before they arrived to

“America”, the country without a nation. Understanding why and how individuals leave América the continent can clarify our misconceptions of a phenomenon that is intrinsic to our human nature, transhumant movements.

Starting in Tijuana, we moved north towards the bureaucratic, business metropolis of Los Angeles. During our research, it was evident that there is more than one border individuals have to trespass if they want to become active participants of a society that tolerates them but does not embrace their culture. The urban sprawl has created socioeconomic and cultural layers individuals cross losing aspects of their identity. At this point a critical question emerges, is this journey to the American Dream a subtractive process or does it brings positive aspects that empower its participants?

For us, it was extremely important to analyze this dichotomy





since the final goal of the study was to create an action plan enriched and implemented by the guidelines shaded on each narrative and its vernacular voice. The first morphemes gathered throughout this intellectual work, a work attempting to empower subjugated knowledges, pictured spiral borders rather than linear frontiers. Following semantic patterns throughout the narratives, borders were defined as flows of waves coming out of governmental agencies, drawing participants with sequential tides of acculturation and assimilation. Participants from Tijuana, Pomona and East Los Angeles repeatedly mentioned the lack of opposition to a present (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) a time that is constrained by socio-instrumental actions built to manipulate the organic world (Edgar, 2006). Within this synchronic frame, social actions and public attitudes come from convention without a “mindful” consideration. Thus, this behaviorist management pushes civilians to operate from a single perspective; the government’s voice.

Throughout our lives, we have been positioned in different cultures and in different story lines, first as immigrants from different nation-states, then as silent spectators in various immigration dramas, and finally, as teachers of

immigrant children and youth, as human rights activists, and as action- researchers.

Our inquiry approach lies within the narrative tradition because we understand the world within a narrative. Like educational researchers Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “For us, life-as we come to it and as it comes to others-is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities.” Further, we believe that if conflicting parties narrate their personal story to each other they are more likely to reach resolution through a profound understanding of the context of their individual stories (Winslade and Monk, 2000).

Our approach also lies within the action-research tradition. We saw from the start this action research study as threefold. First, it was to be a systematic inquiry into our own world viewing and that of people who we know well as well as others that we have encountered for brief moments. Jayne Docherty (2004) explains world viewing as the dynamic process of creating and recreating the world. World viewing shapes how people think about conflict and how they behave in conflict situations. Maturana & Varela (2000) have emphasized





the importance of recognizing different kinds of world viewing in conflict situations. They claim that the world everyone sees is not the world but a world we bring forth with others. Thus, Maturana and Varela feel the need to engage in inter-world viewing conversations in order to insure a more peaceful world. Second, the study sought to interrogate a variety of texts as well as interacting factors that have and continue to shape our own world viewing and that of our narrators. Finally, the study was a search for a paradigm and for tools for conversations about immigration in the historical context of the United States in the 21st century.

Research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the vocabulary of many people who have been historically oppressed by European imperialism and colonialism. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) claims that the word research when mentioned in many indigenous contexts, stirs up silence, conjures bad memories, and raises a sardonic smile. In the grassroots worlds that recent Latino immigrants and border-crossers typically inhabit, the practice of academic research often generates distrust and anxiety. For many Latino researchers such as ourselves narrative inquiry is a culturally appropriate way of apprehending the diversities of truth

present in our communities. We agree with Bishop and Glynn-Dunmore (1999) when he suggests that in storytelling the narrator rather than the researcher retains control of the research process. We also agree with Smith (1999) when she concludes that storytelling research with its focus on dialogue and conversation fits well with the oral traditions which are still a reality in the everyday life of indigenous and other minority peoples around the world.

One of the temptations that we resisted in this study was to give in to the positivistic and quantitative assumptions that often undergird most academic research including narrative inquiry projects. Like many faculty and students we have been trained to think of research as beginning with a hypothesis or at the very least with a research question. We constantly reminded each other that our particular study was grounded in our own world viewing and the world viewing of people that we felt was not being included in conversations about immigration. The social exclusion lens that guided our research agenda called for a focus on the processes and relationships that led to their exclusion from conversations about immigration. This focus always brought us back to the importance of participa-





tion. We felt that by listening to and getting input from people from groups excluded from these conversations not only would we building understanding about the problems at hand but that we would be moving toward fair and equitable solutions (Bryant and Kappaz, 2005). Thus, by conceptualizing our research as being about ourselves and about specific groups of people rather than about research questions, we did not lose focus on our narrators and their as well as our own stories.

Individuals interviewed at the border in Tijuana seem to struggle with issues of power and human injustice. They are in dire need of work, victims of a faulty economy looking for a better chance in the United States. The level of education of the individuals interviewed seemed to be low, but how can they think about educating themselves, if they do not have anything to eat. They have to make a choice, either to starve or survive. Humanity is less than equal in underdeveloped countries; People are bound to fight or flight, many times the latter taking precedent over anything else.

A commonality found in all the interviews is a prevalent discontent with current and past political leaders. The individuals interviewed at the border town of Tijuana

expressed a prevalent disagreement with their country's government and decision-making, causing many of them to become frustrated and in turn look for other ways to improve their life circumstances. As a result, they look to their neighboring country, the United States as viable option to gain economic prosperity. These individuals do not yet have the official immigrant label because they still reside in their homeland.

Evidently, immigrants on several occasions leave their native lands due to heightened political upheaval. They are often in search of a refuge that would lend to their needs; instead they find in the United States other forms of boundaries imposed by political leaders. As a result, they endure the same if not more political conflicts in a new land that supposedly fosters liberty and justice for all.

In Pomona, all workers agreed that an open border would not work unless a specific identification card is developed. Further, the group stated that the current conflicts taking place in the U.S./ Mexico border are a reflection of the present war against terrorism. Ever since the incidents in New York took place, everything has changed for us as a nation. The economy has taken a toll and there is less work for us. Less and less people are re-





questing our services. We suppose that the terrorist label applied to all those crossing the border has had a negative impact on us workers.

One member of the group very assertively stated that not only Mexican but also all immigrant workers regardless of ethnic background face difficult employment and living conditions. He stated that governments globally only think about themselves; they look after their own interests. Most government leaders come from wealthy families and have never faced impoverished conditions. For instance, we have not heard anything from our current Mexican president, Vicente Fox in respect to border negotiations. Meantime, border relations are worsening and more lives are being lost. Additionally, he shared that there is a dire need in our countries to escape the current economic conditions established by less than competent governments. We face so much property in our homelands that if the U.S. were to provide one million visas, five million people would apply. All third world countries would come.

The group reiterated that the United States has always provided a sense of refuge for those in search of a “better life”. They agreed that the U.S. is a country made up of immigrants, and anti-immigrant

groups like those clowns who call themselves “minutemen” need to be removed from the border. They anticipate that if these kind of vigilant groups remain at the border, other groups with worse anti-immigrant perspectives are to come. Further, they stated that individuals who share anti-immigrant sentiments have erroneous ideals, especially those who are decedents of immigrants. Those in particular, they said, have forgotten their ethnic roots and reject part of their identity. The workers referred to these individuals as people without a sense of culture, “racists” who are not aware of the beauty of their culture and people.

Similar sentiments were voiced by one of the main Latino activists in the city of East Los Angeles who after overcoming so many hard fought battles, is no stranger to the current U.S./Mexico border issues. As a leader of Mother of East Los Angeles, she is strongly against all those vigilant groups patrolling the border in Baja California. Additionally, she states that the U. S. government imposes all sorts of regulations upon immigrants and yet, they are free to come and go into Mexico and other countries as they please. The question then becomes, how come the same rules and regulations do not apply to Anglos as they travel through Mexico? What





is the difference between them and us immigrants? Perhaps, the difference as stated by Oboler (1995) is that "After fifty years of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 'the Anglo still considers the Mexicans as aliens and has made attempts through the courts to exclude them from citizenship. For instance, in 1896 Ricardo Rodríguez' was denied his final naturalization papers".

She affirms that due to the Anti-immigrant climate immigrant Latinos face in the United States; nowadays, people cannot appear to look a certain way because they are labeled to be a "terrorist" or "undocumented" alien. In fact, authorities questioning their legal status frequently stoop individuals who look a certain way. It is said that even the transportation company, Greyhound has joined the anti-immigration battle by not selling transportation tickets to individual who look a certain way or are perceived to be in the U.S. illegally. In respect, to those Latinos who have joined the anti-immigration movement, she is appalled by it. She can not conceive how an individual of Latino descent can go against their own *gente*.

Researchers like Enrique Trueba delineate his commitment in understanding and helping others understand the complex history and present situation of Latinos in

the U.S.: he says, "I cannot detach issues of my personal identity from issues of Latino solidarity, cultural hegemony in America, and the terrifying experience of discovering that our enduring self is gone or is a stranger from our past" (p. xxvii). The literature indicates later generations of immigrants in general tend to go through a process of acculturation whereby a new identity is adopted, one that resembles the dominant culture (Trueba, 1999).

In spite of Latinos' process of acculturation, our *gente* continues to live under the regime of the United States; they continue to endure the same geographical obstacles they once faced in crossing a manmade border. Consequently, if they successfully get to what they call "el norte", they look to settle in ethnographic enclaves where they feel welcomed and safe. Immigration has become one of the most heated issues of our times. The subject is rife with emotion, conflicting values, and cold economic realities.

El Norte, a politically charged Mexican film, exemplifies this issue. Through the odyssey of two Guatemalan Indians, we experience the courage and fortitude necessary for individuals to make a new life for themselves in America. The film depicts the lives of Enrique and his sister Rosa who decide to leave the poverty and violence of their vil-





lage behind and journey north to the United States. In Tijuana, they have trouble finding a “coyote” to help them across the border. After several mishaps, they are led to an abandoned sewer line and crawling on their hands and knees cross to San Diego. Most immigrant Latinos living in the United States more than likely relate to the story and struggles Enrique and Rosa endured in their multiple attempts to get to the other side, *el otro lado*.

Like Enrique and Rosa many immigrants look for communities that resemble their homelands. They try to find Monty Bravos to help with the transition to a new venture where there are oftentimes misguided. These ethnic enclaves are commonly known as “barrios” and serve as reference points for newcomers. Interestingly, having weaved their way through the U.S./Mexico border; immigrants continue to overcome many other obstacles living in the United States. For instance, they are victims of stereotypes and other social injustices that impose significant limits to the personal growth of immigrants and their families. Like the community of Boyle Heights that fought long lasting battles to have political leaders meet the needs of the community and its members.

Our action research sought to investigate a continuum of immi-

grant voices, raging from potential border crossers in Tijuana, day-to-day labor workers in Pomona, and established immigrant in Boyle heights. In our conversations with these three groups, we confirmed that immigrants leave their homelands advocating for an unfound future in their nations. They embark on a voyage which does not guarantee fortune, but a better life. While newcomers endure an uphill battle attempting to cross “la frontera”; Capitalistic El Norte awaits their labor and skills. If successful, new immigrants find a niche in ethnocultural enclaves. Once settled, they seek to accomplish the “American dream” by joining the labor force. As they search for opportunities to prosper, they find themselves employed in low-wage jobs, often becoming the target of socioeconomic inequalities. Culturally, immigrants face internal boundaries of exclusion within a society that welcomes their working hands and eagerness to do well but does not value their customs, and traditions. Oftentimes, immigrants are labeled as unproductive; a burden to a society that frequently dehumanizes their economic participation. The new trend of globalization has added a new dimension of fear to the categorization of immigrant communities in the United States.





Since the implementation of the Patriot Act, a heightened anti-immigrant climate has resurged; vigilant groups are now patrolling the U.S./Mexico border guarding a border separating two countries with wall.

In either case, irrespectively of immigrants relocating in new frontiers, their communities display a strong sense of culture that often serves as a viable vehicle to endure and overcome personal, cultural, and socioeconomic struggles.

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