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Cover Page Footnote

This work was a collaboration between a student teacher and a professor. For that reason, we would like to collectively thank all the professors and Dean Susan English in the School of Education at Aquinas College for your unwavering support.

PRACTICE

Imagination and Empathy: Reframing U.S.-Mexico Border Crossing Narratives

BRIANA ASMUS & EMMA ANTEL

"We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal intelligence that dwells only in the head. But the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to real events."

--Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

At the turn of the century, a group of German philosophers shaped the meaning of empathy as we understand it today. The word *Einfühlung*, attributable to Robert Vishner, literally translated as "feeling into," and later, into English as "empathy." Vishner argued that it was the imagination that allowed the perceiver (at the time, the viewer of a work of art), to be able to enter "a mutual, empathic relationship with the object" (Nowak, 2011, p. 305). Philosopher and Professor Theodor Lipps added that *Einfühlung* was more than an aesthetic experience; it was a projection of oneself into the object being perceived, resulting in an experience of unity between perceived and perceiver. It is this bond created through engagement with the imagination that remains part of the modern definition, derived from psychology. This spontaneous, sometimes unconscious feeling "can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen, 2007, p. 4). As Maxine Greene (1995) points out, it is this imaginative capacity that "allows us to experience empathy with different points of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours" (p. 31).

Unfortunately, it may be impossible to "teach" such a profound and complex psychological state, and there is little evidence to suggest that any approaches to teaching empathy actually work (Bialystok & Kukar, 2018). However, as Anzaldúa (1987), Greene (1995), Keen (2007), and this article suggest, the door to empathy can be opened through imagination. Teachers may not be able to teach empathy itself, but they can increase the imaginative capacity of their students

through the use of young adult literature featuring authentic scenarios and voices. For a topic that appears in the news media as much as border crossing, an informed, empathic pedagogical approach can work to counter deficit narratives and lead students toward experiencing empathy. In this article, we will explore the need for an informed, empathic approach to border crossing, and the potential that lies in YA texts on the topic. We will examine how stories and other resources about border crossing challenge dominant misconceptions formed on deficit narratives, and the humanizing potential they offer to readers.

An Empathic Approach

There is no shortage of teaching resources on empathy. Plenty of articles, curricula, and even discipline systems in K-12 stress the importance of teaching and modeling empathy, however, there is little that rests on a clear, common definition of the word, and even less that offers teaching tools and practices (Bialystok & Kukar, 2018). Even though empathy is often promoted in K-12 settings and viewed as a desirable trait among students, it remains "a contested term with no clear definition" (p. 29). Various understandings of empathy often regulate the term to spaces devoid of what Nicole Mirra (2018) refers to as "mutual humanization" (p. 10). According to Mirra, expressions that run counter to empathy are made by individuals who "lack the imagination needed to relate to others" (p. 10). In research and in teaching, there is a danger in the oversimplification of empathy. Affect theorists, for example, note that empathic emotions can be "expressions of power, appropriations of others' experience, and falsely oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships" (Jurecic, 2011, p. 11). Instead, empathy should be complicated, and intellectually informed.

Research in the areas of class and behavior suggest that "individuals who are more distant from the day-to-day struggles and realities of other human beings have less empathy" (Dolby, 2014, p. 39), and that humans tend to empathize with

those who are most like us (Bialystok & Kukar, 2018). Even though this evidence may seem to present more challenges in leading students toward empathy, it can offer teachers some clues as to the types approaches and texts to use with a particular student population. For example, Mirra (2018) writes that increased knowledge allows out-group members (those who are not members of the group featured in-text), to step more completely outside of their own frames of reference, creating more possibilities for understanding. Vogt, Chow, Fernandez, Grubman, & Stacey (2016) suggest that first-person narratives can lead students toward empathy, but teachers must make it a point to explicitly discuss the emotional tie to the characters in the text. Good, Fox & Coffen (2011) note that it is important to build on the shared emotional connection present in storytelling as the path toward empathy. This research suggests that when a teacher knows what text to use and how to use it, the possibilities offered by meaningful textual engagement increase the likelihood of students being able to experience empathy. When these conditions are met, there is perhaps no greater subject in need of increased understanding and empathy than border crossing.

Countering Deficit Narratives

So many people, educators included, have strong opinions about “improper entry,” as termed by US Immigration Law. In conversations with pre-service and in-service teachers, our experiences tell us (the authors) that these opinions are not always grounded in fact. Deficit narratives, characterized by terms like “criminal,” “illegal,” and “immoral” persist in discussions of border crossing on all sides of the immigration debate. Although we tend to think xenophobic narratives about Mexicans in particular are unique to the current political climate, they go back hundreds of years, to a time before the war between the U.S. and Mexico. These narratives were used to justify several strategic immigration moves on the part of the United States, including a militarized border and mass deportations, culminating in Operation Wetback (1954). It’s worth noting that in a 2015 speech, Trump endorsed Operation Wetback (although not referring to it by name), suggesting that it was successful at ensuring that those who were deported never returned; a statement that has since been found inaccurate as many did return for unskilled labor (Blakemore, 2018). Deficit narratives about immigrants have grown stronger with repetition and endorsement from multiple administrations. Among my pre-service teachers, I often reference an article written in 1929 by S.J. Holmes entitled

“Perils of the Mexican Invasion” as a comparison to current rhetoric on immigration. Holmes claimed that Mexican immigrants were destroying the White fabric of the United States, and if the Mexican “menace” left, the economic woes of the country would cease. His solutions were mass deportations and a tighter, militarized border. The similarities to calls by the current administration are astounding.

It’s important for students and teachers alike to be able to recognize the repetition of deficit narratives, as these may be the only ones students hear in conversations about the border. These narratives only strengthen the idea of the inhuman “other,” a mindset in direct opposition to imagination and empathy. It’s also important for teachers to help students make links between statements in the media and negative attitudes about specific ethnic groups, in particular, Latinos (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). What has been termed the “Latino Threat Narrative” by Leo Chavez (2008) defines Latinas/os as a group who are unwilling or unable to assimilate and are bent on destroying the American way of life. Chavez notes that while this narrative applies to all Latin American people, the social identity of Mexicans “has been plagued by the mark of illegality, which in much public discourse means they are criminals and thus illegitimate members of society undeserving of social benefits, including citizenship” (p. 4).

Border crossing is less about the border itself, and more about those who experience it. As teachers, we must do what we can to represent all immigrants in humanizing ways. Faceless numbers, data, and immigration policy will not go far with students. If we really want to open them up to another narrative, one that encompasses the human side of border crossing, we must allow the voices of those who have crossed to shine through. The voices are closer than one might imagine. In Michigan we are thousands of miles away from the U.S.-Mexico border, yet nearly 97,000 people in our state are undocumented or had no form of legal status as of 2014 (Crouse, 2017). Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity in many parts of our state has increased, tearing apart families and communities. Anti-immigrant rhetoric out of the White House has contributed to a migrant farmworker shortage in Michigan, where we rely heavily on thousands of seasonal laborers to pick our fruits and vegetables (Block & Penaloza, 2017). Even in the teacher education program at our small, Catholic college, in-service teachers come to class in tears because one of their students didn’t come to school, or never got picked up, due to a parent being detained. The effects of immigration policy is far-reaching, and already

reshaping our communities. We owe it to all of our students to help them understand what it means for an individual to cross the border, as a person, rather than a faceless number or political tool.

The Path to Empathy Through Text Selection

If the goal is to counter dominant narratives about border crossing and those who do it, YA Literature is the perfect medium. While stories in the news usually maintain a professional distance from personal narratives, YA Literature uses intensely personal narratives to paint a broader social picture. In Amy Cummins' (2013) examination of 11 YA novels from the past three decades that explore undocumented immigration between Latin America and the United States, she notes that the first-person narration employed by the authors builds an empathic connection between the reader and the person crossing. Another commonality among the works is that they "implicitly urge the 'empathetic outreach' of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands philosophy and argue for what Pablo Ramirez terms a 'borderlands ethical stance' in which individuals justifiably violate laws" (p. 58). Seeing the human side of border crossing puts systems of oppression into question.

The texts highlighted in this article were chosen because they put faces to a system that often seems faceless, while making the important broader connections to issues faced by those who cross. The texts lend themselves to teaching with a critical, empathic approach represented by the voice and style of the author. Classroom selections should always be made on more specific criteria as well, relevant to student representation, engagement, and classroom environment. Offering an example that illustrates how different this can look, several years ago, I (Briana) took a position as a literacy consultant in a migrant education program near the lakeshore in West Michigan. Many of the children I taught had emigrated from Mexico, some crossing the border without documentation in

south Texas and becoming a part of the migrant farmworker stream. They knew more than I did about border crossing, and while many did not speak of their experience out of fear and trauma, a few students shared their stories, especially once we started reading *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez. *The Circuit* depicts the real-life experience of Francisco and his family crossing the border in 1947 when he was four years old. While this is a wonderful text that all of my students enjoyed, they would often tell me how it was different for their experience, or how things had changed. However, some

of them also noted how the book helped them empathize with their parents' experience. The discussions that took place in this classroom setting would look very different in a predominantly white classroom, where more framing work would need to be done, as well as more to counter deficit narratives. Approach and text selections should be made with students in mind.

No matter what the student population, it's important to remember that all are more likely to empathize with characters like them. This is where a teacher needs to be strategic in text selections. In our own experience, one obstacle to finding a range of voices on border crossing was finding texts that featured Latina

protagonists. Crossing the border as a (young) woman poses its own unique set of challenges, including human trafficking and sexual violence. Crossing with children in tow, or while pregnant, introduces another set of unique circumstances. Though we eventually found a few texts with Latina protagonists, it took some digging. However, we also learned that finding relatable characters does not have to mean a book where students share the same gender, age, or culture as the protagonist. Students often relate to a character's personality, values or morals. Of course, allowing for choice of text whenever possible will increase the likelihood that students pick something they can relate to in a way that is meaningful to them.

There is no singular experience of border crossing, but there are shared stories. There are many reasons why people

Drip Reprise, Wikimedia Commons User Artlife98

decide to leave their homes and undertake such an arduous journey. We wanted to find texts that could provide some context for the urgent reasons people decide to leave everything they know for an unfamiliar place where they don't always speak the language and could be criminally prosecuted or jailed. We wanted the texts to capture our student's imaginations and to counter stereotypes, showing them that border crossing is never a static, singular experience. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa writes "The U.S-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (p. 3). How each character experiences this grating is the shared experience of border crossing. In a way, the multitude of voices of those who have attempted form a single voice of people who have run out of options.

Recommended Texts and Activities

Bettina Restrepo's *Illegal* (2011) portrays the experience of a 15-year-old girl, Nora, whose father leaves Mexico to find work in Texas. Nora and her mother are forced to cross the border together when the money their father was sending from the United States suddenly stops coming in. Since there is not enough work for either of them in their small town, they are forced to leave in search of Nora's father. *Illegal's* sensory details (smells, sights, sounds) combined with first-person narration will give students a rich sense of place. In addition, the protagonist has a strong sense of faith (Catholic) that some students might identify with. In many ways, Nora is very much a typical teenager. How Nora negotiates her beliefs and identity in the face of hunger, loss, and other hardships is one theme to explore, in addition to examining the gendered experiences of border crossing, which put both Nora and her mother in danger.

One way this text challenges dominant narratives is by providing a female voice, and by setting the narrative in a small town in Mexico, largely untouched by the narcotics trade (an often cited reason why people cross). In addition, the crossing happens inside a vehicle, as opposed to over land (desert) or by river. Finally, much of the story takes place in Houston, where the experiences of the characters demonstrate that the hardships do not end when the border is crossed. In keeping with what we know about empathy, teachers could make it a point to talk about Nora's emotional ties to people, places, and even the lifestyle she had grown accustomed to. *Illegal* also lends itself to discussing difficult choices relative to family and survival. So often in stories of

border crossing, only one can exist at a time.

The Border by Steve Schafer (2017) offers another first-person perspective, this time from a teen and his three friends who attempt to cross together. It's fast-paced from the start, with description like an action movie, and will appeal to students who may struggle with getting "hooked" on a text. Despite this, there are still very real, empathic undertones. Escape from narcos (drug lords) is at the core of the story, so the characters have to keep moving. Since one of the friends is a love interest of the male protagonist, focusing on this relationship would also provide an interesting discussion point for students. As the characters cross, the roles of each in the group shift. The friends encounter realistic, adult hardship in the form of gangs, bullets, snakes, dehydration and exposure as they attempt to cross the desert into Arizona. One salient moment occurs when the protagonist realizes the border itself is merely some barbed wire between posts—more of a statement (*you don't belong here*) than a physical structure. This would be an excellent opportunity for students to discuss representations (real and imagined, in the media and otherwise) of a border and the multiple meanings behind it.

The Border has an accompanying discussion guide created by the publisher, Sourcebooks. Several questions in the guide ask students to use their imaginations, for example, "Imagine you were driving through the Sonoran desert and found the teens. What would you do?" These types of questions in particular can move students towards empathy for the characters. Some questions connect directly to current immigration policy. One way to complement the questions would be for teachers to create their own discussion questions for each chapter or two, emphasizing connections between the characters in the text and the lives of the students. Sentence stems such as, "Have you ever experienced something like...?", "How would you feel if...?", and "What would you do if..." are one way to scaffold imagination.

Finally, *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy Determined to Reunite with His Mother* by Sonia Nazario (2013) is an incredibly powerful, true story of an adolescent Honduran boy who tries to cross the border six times before finally succeeding on the seventh attempt. There is an adapted version of this text for young readers, but the text still features some difficult subject matter that would require teacher review before use. In the past, we have used parts of this text to add depth to themes and events in *Illegal* and *The Border* to show how they would play out in a real-life scenario. In addition, this text adds an important missing piece to the narrative of border crossing: those living in Central America who must get

through Mexico before they can even approach the border. A freight train known as “The Beast” runs through central Mexico carrying riders in and on top of its cars for weeks and sometimes months on end, depending on how long riders can stay on. This unforgiving train takes the lives and limbs of many of the hundreds who ride atop its cars each year. The travelers face additional hardships, including discrimination from Mexican citizens who view them as pests.

In the middle of the book are a series of pictures depicting Enrique and his family at different points in his life. The pictures of Enrique really impress upon the reader how young he was when he first boarded the train. The website enriquesjourney.com (Sylabo Creative, 2017) also contains photos, many of them featuring those who appear in the text. There is also an author interview and videos of Nazario’s speaking engagements, videos of Enrique and his mother Lourdes, and a comprehensive teaching guide aligned to the Common Core Standards. In addition, there are bilingual trauma resources. Many of these resources also could be used in combination with the other two texts.

There are several recommended resources that could be used with any border-crossing narrative. The website <http://theundocumented.com> accompanies a documentary by the same name. The website has two relevant resources that could be useful for teachers whether or not they choose to screen the film. One is a map of the U.S.-Mexico border that illustrates the death toll with small crosses to represent each person who passed away trying to cross. Clicking on a cross will reveal the location, name (if available, although many are unidentified), and cause of death. The marking of each death as a gravesite puts the human toll in perspective better than an abstract number or percentage. The map has the potential to help students understand that those who wish to cross face great danger, and yet choose to anyway because it means a greater chance of survival than staying in their country. The other resource is a simulation that allows one to choose between playing as a migrant or a border patrol officer. As a migrant, students must make serious decisions that will ultimately determine their survival (for example, will you carry water, even though it will slow you down?). Playing as a border patrol officer, students must make decisions about helping crossers or turning them in. When properly framed by the teacher as real choices faced by those who cross, the simulation invites students to try to better understand these difficult decisions.

Finally, we recommend taking a look at a list of documentaries about undocumented immigration found at Re-

mezcla (2017). Several contain border crossing narratives and feature stories of youth, including *Don’t Tell Anyone (No Le Digas a Nadie)*, about a girl turned immigration activist who experienced sexual abuse and lived as undocumented for most of her life. The full list of documentaries includes clips and trailers as well, allowing teachers to get a sense of which ones might be best for their students.

If, as Anzaldúa suggests, a person is unable to make distinctions between what occurs in the imagination and what the body experiences, then there is strong reason to believe that students can be led towards empathy through the use of YA texts about border crossing and an informed, empathic teacher. Even if empathy cannot be taught directly, there are ways to bring students as close as possible—to imagine, understand, and possibly even feel a little piece of another person’s experience. If educators are able to accomplish this, it may be possible to change the tenor of the immigration debate from one of faceless criminals to one of individuals with whom we share many commonalities. With hope, empathy will translate into action. Stories of border crossing, combined with a teacher’s intuition and a student’s capacity to feel, can be a powerful emotional catalyst for change.

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