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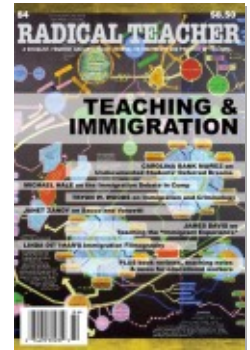
## Introduction: Teaching & Immigration

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Radical Teacher, Number 84, Spring 2009, pp. 3-7 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.0.0037>



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# Introduction: Teaching & Immigration

By James Davis, Joseph Entin and Susan O'Malley

This issue of *Radical Teacher* features work that conveys the urgency of teaching about immigration and offers educators ways of meeting that challenge in its full complexity. In editing this cluster of essays, we have been motivated in part by the vibrancy of the public demonstrations of 2006, which generated coalitions and mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in dozens of cities across the United States—a movement on a scale we had not seen since the civil rights era. If its long-term impact is still unclear, this movement intensified the level of resistance to the anti-immigrant legislation and xenophobic public discourse that arose in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. It also registered the grievances and hopes of many migrant people caught up in the flows of transnational capital and the vagaries of neoliberal state policies, phenomena that are not easily comprehended through traditional approaches to immigration. Together, the articles that follow suggest the importance of improving our teaching *about* immigration and our teaching *of* immigrants, students so many of us teach in secondary schools, community colleges and universities; in traditionally immigrant-rich cities and in the small towns and suburbs that they increasingly call home; and in and out of documented status.

We are struck by the peculiar, even contradictory, set of immigration-related developments characterizing the current

moment in the United States. We have just witnessed the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the United Nations General Assembly's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms in Article 13 that "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state" and "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." We have just witnessed the election of a new President whose very body—if not his politics—seems to be the site of many a progressive's utopian investment. The son of a man from Kenya and a woman from Kansas, educated in Hawaii and in Indonesia, raised by his anthropologist mother to respect cultural differences, the cosmopolitan Barack Obama represents for many a welcome change from the divisive politics of national chauvinism of the previous administration. His selection of Hilda Solis, a Latina who represented East L.A., as his Labor Secretary has encouraged a belief that low-wage and immigrant workers will benefit from this administration. And on this administration are also pinned the hopes of many for passing federal legislation—the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act—that would streamline the process through which foreign-born students qualify for legal resident status.

However, even as the President-elect fills his cabinet as we go to press, we are also

mindful of the ongoing U.S. government policies and trade agreements, such as the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), through which both Democrats and Republicans have advanced a free-market economic hegemony with devastating effects worldwide and domestically. We are conscious of the many limitations of the DREAM Act, including its inducement to military service as a means of expediting undocumented immigrants' residency and naturalization process and its denial of federal financial aid such as Pell grants to undocumented students (see Bank Muñoz herein). We are mindful of the 700-mile wall being erected along the U.S. – Mexico border and the patrols of Minutemen and other vigilantes who prey upon the Latin American workers who cross it.<sup>1</sup> In the ongoing raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, we see the federal government's desperate effort to cast itself as the protector of "the homeland" and to conflate immigration with terrorism. "I am not the impressionable kind," wrote Erik Camad-Freixas, an interpreter who blew the whistle on a massive ICE raid at Iowa's Agriprocessors, Inc. in May 2008. "As a professor of interpreting [at Florida International University], I have confronted my students with every possible conflict scenario, or so I thought. The truth is that nothing could have prepared me for the prospect of helping our government put hundreds of innocent people in jail." Camad-Freixas described the roundup, which involved 900 federal agents and yielded 306 arrests, as "the saddest procession I have ever witnessed, which the public would never see, because cameras were not allowed past the perimeter of the compound.

Driven single-file in groups of 10, shackled at the wrists, waist and ankles, chains dragging as they shuffled through, the slaughterhouse workers were brought in for arraignment, sat and listened through headsets to the interpreted initial appearance, before marching out again to be bused to different county jails, only to make room for the next row of 10. They appeared to be uniformly no more than 5 ft. tall, mostly illiterate Guatemalan peasants with Mayan last names, some being relatives (various Tajtaj, Xicay, Sajché, Sologüi . . .), some in tears; others with faces of worry, fear, and embarrassment. They all spoke Spanish, a few rather laboriously. It dawned on me that, aside from their Guatemalan or Mexican nationality, which was imposed on their people after Independence, they too were Native Americans, in shackles. They stood out in stark racial contrast with the rest of us as they started their slow penguin march across the makeshift court. 'Sad spectacle' I heard a colleague say, reading my mind. They had all waived their right to be indicted by a grand jury and accepted instead an *information* or simple charging document by the U.S. Attorney, hoping to be quickly deported since they had families to support back home. But it was not to be. They were criminally charged with 'aggravated identity theft' and 'Social Security fraud'—charges they did not understand . . . and, frankly, neither could I."<sup>2</sup>

Such craven operations indicate the catastrophic failure of the U.S. government to provide sensible leadership amidst the complexities of contemporary immigration. Their legitimacy relies on a resurgent form of nativist racism that

equates foreignness and non-whiteness with criminality. And they provide tacit encouragement to the backlash we are witnessing against Latinos, whose rate of victimization in hate crimes has increased every year since 2004, according to FBI data.<sup>3</sup>

As well, the current economic crisis, the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression, has far-reaching implications for immigrants.

Even before the sub-prime mortgage debacle hit, the financial sector took a nose dive, and the elite and middle classes were compelled to acknowledge a recession, many immigrant communities were already hurting. Between 2006 and 2007, while the median annual income of U.S. households increased 1.3 percent, the median annual income of non-citizen immigrant households dropped 7.3 percent. Remittances, a reliable indicator of the financial health of immigrant communities, are in sharp decline: Mexico alone lost an estimated \$300 million in the year between August 2007 and August 2008 due to the drop in remittances, which are its second largest source of foreign income after oil exports<sup>4</sup>

People who work in the service sector and domestic labor, many of whom are immigrants, may not have the stock portfolios and 401K retirement plans whose depletion is now loudly bemoaned by wealthier folks. But their wallets are taking a beating too, and they are often the most vulnerable to an economic downturn, facing layoffs, work freezes, and

salary contractions. Their employers are short on revenue, clients and customers have nowhere near the disposable income they used to, and it is affecting their livelihoods dramatically.

**WHAT MODELS AND RESOURCES DO WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND TEACH EFFECTIVELY ABOUT THE NEWLY EMERGING PATTERNS OF MIGRATION, PATTERNS THAT HAVE OUTSTRIPPED OUR TRADITIONAL APPROACHES? HOW DO WE TEACH TO AND ABOUT GENERATION 1.5?**

A real estate broker in Westchester County recently told a *New York Times* reporter about the difficult conversations the economic crisis prompted her to have with her nanny. “We talk about the trickledown effect of Wall Street, how my

selling less houses is going to affect her mother living in her hut in Dominica, which is crazy . . . . But her mother is going to get less sugar because she has less money to send home.” An organizer at Domestic Workers United, Ai-jen Poo, told the same reporter, “Essentially, 10,000 jobs lost at Lehman Brothers means 10,000 domestic workers’ jobs that are in jeopardy . . . [and] unlike other sectors getting hit, domestic workers have no safety net. It’s the invisible, untold story of this crisis. It’s really hitting people hard.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, these difficulties temper our optimism regarding the health, wealth, and safety of U.S. immigrant communities and the faith we place in the new President and his administration to address them. However, immigration is one of the few arenas in which it still seems possible to apply public pressure on policy makers and effect social transformation from the ground up, so we are emboldened by the force being exerted by immigrant communities and their advocates and place a great deal of faith in them.

Finally, we are drawn to immigration as an urgent subject for educators because it does not map neatly along partisan lines (see Hale herein). Its intricacies invite us, and our students, to think critically, historically and ethically. A classic example is the strange bedfellows that the immigration debates make of bleeding-heart liberals and bottom-line conservatives, both of whom tend to favor relaxed immigration policies. Another is the current campaign being run by some environmentalists, traditionally on the left of the political spectrum, who advocate highly restrictive immigration policies and a neo-Malthusian view of U.S. population control. It is an issue that opens not only onto questions of nation and culture but also of race, gender, religion, language, criminality and class. What models and resources do we need to understand and teach effectively about the newly emerging patterns of migration, patterns that have outstripped our traditional approaches? How do we teach to and about Generation 1.5? How do we teach to and about the estimated 11.2 million undocumented immigrants currently in the United States?

Consider the improbable case of Trinity High School of Euless, Texas, where the male children of Polynesian immigrants have turned their school into a football dynasty. In the land of "Friday Night Lights," the gridiron exploits of students from the Pacific island of Tonga have almost singlehandedly made of Euless (pop. 54,000) a multicultural mecca. Tongans constitute less than seven percent of the Euless population (roughly 3,000 to 4,000 Tongans live there, many of whom work at the nearby Dallas - Fort Worth airport), but two-thirds of the players on the Trinity High football team, Texas state champions in 2005 and 2007,

are of Tongan descent. Their success has transformed the town.

The Hawaiian Market advertises kava root used for a traditional drink. A nonprofit organization called Voice of Tonga addresses concerns about immigration, culture, language and health, and broadcasts a program, including Trinity football highlights, on local cable television. The Free Church of Tonga, the Tongan First United Methodist Church and the First Tongan Assembly of God Church—three of nine Tongan-affiliated churches in the area—sit on or near South Main Street. . . . Trinity has a Polynesian Club, and Polynesian students frequently join the choir and participate in the arts. Often, they are chosen homecoming king and queen, coaches said. Ukulele music wafts through the school courtyard at lunchtime and between classes. Occasionally, someone wears a traditional lava-lava sarong. Before and after each football game, Tongan players lead a ceremonial team war dance called a haka. . . . City officials have patiently assisted Tongan residents to acclimate to a new culture. [For example,] compromises have been reached to accommodate large family gatherings at funeral rituals that last for days. And the city has promoted alternatives to the slaughtering of pigs at home for open-pit cooking. A mobile health unit helps to provide free flu shots and medical checkups.<sup>6</sup>

On one hand, the story of the Texas Tongans affirms everything we like to tell ourselves about the melting pot and the American dream. The locals have not only tolerated cultural difference, they have embraced it. As Trinity's star running back, an African American, said, "It makes you a better person, learning

to accept different people.” On the other hand, one is forced to wonder whether the residents of Euless would extend so enthusiastic an embrace to immigrants who were not furnishing their high school with a steady supply of 200-300 pound linemen. No one in Euless had heard of Tonga when Fotu Katoa, the first Tongan to play football at Trinity, met head coach Steve Lineweaver in 1982. But the 6’2”, 210-pound linebacker quickly put Tonga on Lineweaver’s map: “The first time he hit somebody in spring practice, I knew we had something. He would yell, ‘I love this Texas football’.”<sup>7</sup>

Are the Tongans of Euless a success story or a cautionary tale? What are the circumstances in which immigrants can make a place for themselves in different parts of this country? How do we account for the paradoxes raised by such a story?

The contents of this issue of *Radical Teacher* include articles that grapple with these questions. Carolina Bank Muñoz addresses the challenges that undocumented students face in today’s higher education system. Michael Hale writes of the vitality that the issue of immigration brings to his college composition courses in Ohio. Tryon Woods considers the vexed place of immigration in the field of criminology in which he teaches. Janet Zandy examines the letters of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, written in prison while they awaited their execution in 1927, as powerful primary documents for today’s teachers. James Davis discusses the importance of students’ own social location to their encounters with cultural representations of immigrant experiences. Linda Dittmar’s contribution, a filmography that describes new and old films in several genres and from several different countries, is an invaluable

resource for educators at every level. The issue closes with a book review and teaching note that extend this conversation. Together, the authors and reviewers help us extricate the dynamics of immigration from the discourse of nationalism and the shallow dichotomies—legal/illegal, us/them—on which public debates have too often foundered.

## Notes

1 President Bush signed House Resolution 6061, the “Secure Fence Act,” in October, 2006. The projected cost of the construction is 4 - 8 billion dollars.

2 Erik Camad-Freixas, “Interpreting After the Largest ICE Raid in U.S. History: a Personal Account,” 13 June 2008. <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2008/07/14/opinion/14ed-camayd.pdf>.

3 “Anti-Latino Hate Crimes Rise for Fourth Year in a Row,” Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report* 132, Winter 2008.

4 Larry Tung, “Immigrants Confront the Recession,” *Gotham Gazette*, Nov. 2008 <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/immigrants/20081103/11/2735>. Non-citizen immigrant households account for 7 percent of all U.S. households and 52 percent of all immigrant households. Data on remittances were provided by the Bank of Mexico.

5 Julie Scelfo, “Trickledown Downsizing,” *New York Times*, 11 Dec. 2008: D1.

6 Longman, Jere. “Polynesian Pipeline Feeds a Texas Football Titan,” *New York Times*, 8 Oct. 2008: A1.

7 Longman.