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Micro Essay: Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert: Borderlands Narratives NEH Summer Institute

I have been traveling for a month and these two weeks being the end of my journey. I came knowing that contradiction and conflict would be part of a story of place on a border. Though my classroom is in Virginia, the Mexican/ U.S. border is always a topic in my classroom most of my students have crossed or their parents and family members and friends. Part of my regular classroom toolkit is to have cards available with the title “Conozca Sus Derechos” and numbers for the overburdened legal aid that only occasionally takes one of my kid’s cases. I write so letters of many letters to judges that I have a template. This is the normal state of affairs.

This normal state of affairs on the cliff with the border patrol made me feel like I had vertigo. My students and I share the experience of being incarcerated as children and the memory the rationale for the absurd game you have to play, being on that cliff in the sun listening to him reminded me how there isn’t a solution, the impossible subject perhaps.

Two stanzas from “The River on our Face” by Emmy Perez

The young border patrol officer  
 flashes sirens daily  
 lifts his gun  
 with the river  
 on his face

Relatives

disappear  
 die detained  
 with tributaries  
 of many rivers on their face

This institute came after an extremely difficult three years as a teacher, maybe the most difficult. In these past couple years I have watched an already inequitable system for immigrant youth deteriorate dramatically in a way I could not have imaged. It moved from a question of access to an equitable curriculum to explicit civil rights violations without apology. However, this connects with the narratives presented in the institute, history demonstrates that conflict and contradiction are part of the overall human experience and literature offers the voice. This has been communicated repeatedly in the juxtaposition of narratives. How does this all fit into the formation of identities as people intertwined in this state of existence that has continued throughout history?

I think that the integration of these narratives becomes a state of magical realism for those most harshly affected. It seems that this perspective itself is a belief system that offers a better rationale than the rational. I have observed frustrated community organizers wonder why the preferred choice of the most oppressed will often be the likes of the Alpha y Omega de Jesus or one of the Pentacostas or The Nation of Islam or Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ instead of their political action.

The outrage demonstrated by those with social mobility in the system in compassion to those with little power is striking. I find an entirely different response, a sort of chess game. When attending the Federal Immigration Court in Arlington Virginia that hears cases of unaccompanied alien minors, the rooms are filled to capacity with children and parents waiting for the judge to make a decision. They have already made an alternative plan if the asylum isn't granted. Outrage is a luxury, there isn't time to worry if a rationale is rational or fair but only to

make a new plan with guidance of angels and some very worldly connections. I think if you have ever been in the system, the acceptance of the surreal is pragmatic.

Today we watched the documentary “Precious Knowledge,” at the time we had followed these events in my classroom as they unfolded and my students learned the word “ethnicity” and “ethnic studies” which are always new vocabulary in my classroom, even for those born in the United States. They are rarely aware of the African American Studies class that typically exists in the schools where I teach and would not know its context as an ethnic studies class. However, I think an even more fundamental point not made in the film was that the information that particularly seemed to disturb those in power was the awareness of Marx and Lenin and the reading global literature. This curriculum is available in specialty centers, Governor’s schools, and International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculums. A student in an IB curriculum is required to seek out these contradictions and conflicts in their environment and complete a two year research project using narratives from sources that compel discourse. I have been a mentor for these students who over the years have included the perspectives of Che Rivera, Tupac Shakur, and many other such dangerous individuals.

My public school career as student ended in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade but in a way I was lucky, Richmond at that time was like Grace Jones meets John Waters in the setting of the Confederacy of Dunces. It was boarded up and horrible and it was magical realism, a perfect classroom. A place where everything contradicts but nobody noticed. I spent my teen years going to art houses to see cult films and Fellini movies and listened to debates with coffee shop philosophers on socialism and existentialism. Every kind of music came to the city and if it didn’t we took the Greyhound to DC or the Village in NYC.

In graduate school, I was in a hybrid program that was an international cohort which offered classes that crossed disciplines in k-12 education. My colleagues were often teachers in International Baccalaureate schools around the world exposing me to their curriculum framework and I realized even more acutely how dreary things truly were in our part of the school. I began to create curriculum for students labeled as struggling that connected the same critical questioning as the IB curriculum framework and though they may not output as easily in the form of an essays or easily access text, they have little difficulty with the concepts and are often already well equipped as independent thinkers.

Dr. Leyva and Dr. Perales were a perfect addition in connection the kinds of projects I have been developing in my classes. I am very interested in the story and they brought a perspective on the collection of stories. Dr. Perales was very nice to take time t listen to what my kids have been doing. I so rarely get any feedback. I think the addition of Pat Mora with poetry and fiction along with the personal narratives is the direction I would like these project to move. In my classroom the fiction becomes the voice of the people in the historical text along and this is makes the connections for students to respond with their own personal works. Just overall I found all the presentations to be of interest and I need to take the end of the summer to focus on all the readings. I think that as a public school teacher this was really an amazing program, we are given little to nothing that would stimulate the kind of dialogue and reflection that occurred the last weeks. This was really a good experience and I had come close to leaving teaching in June but I think now I can return there is still so much to tell them!

In reflection this institute reminds me that contradictions unending and my role is not to offer solutions but to offer a dialogue, the conversation, a voice, my perhaps unique perspective

in the k-12 labyrinth and maybe a map as to how to avoid the Minotaur. A paper map, you can't trust the internet.