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English 112B

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Unit of Study: Reshaping (Im)Migration Through Literature

Rationale:

Growing up, it didn't matter where you came from, neither did the color of your skin or the language you spoke. All that mattered was that when recess or lunch came around you would run out of class, eat your food, and onto the black top or the grass to play. Throughout preschool and elementary school, I felt American, but I knew that I wasn't fully embraced as an American because of the color of my skin. I remember staying in during lunch for "English as a Second Language" courses with a very impatient teacher. School for me was the last thing on my mind. Since my parents were unaware of the American educational system, a "satisfactory" was enough to keep them off my back and it made my teachers feel like they were doing their job.

It wasn't until maybe third grade when two of my third graders and three fifth graders told me to "go back to Mexico, you Beaner!" I remember running towards them, with broken English giving me wings, and my tears giving me strength, as I pounded the fifth grader who called me a "Beaner." Only to have the Principal of Bubba Elementary School scold me with her finger because that's all I could understand. I realized that to defend myself and feel embraced in this country I had to learn and master the language. After this realization, Christina (a pseudonym) had told my Mom to sign me up to the Mountain View Public Library's summer reading program. My first summer in the program I read all of Dr. Seuss, R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps*, Franklin W. Dixon's *Hardy Boy* series, and Alvin Schwartz' *Scary Stories* series. I

rapidly progressed as a reader throughout the six times that I participated in the program. During fifth grade we'd take the STAR Reading tests and I'd average a 12.2-12.5 (12th grade) reading level, while my peers would average between 7.4-9.6 (7th-9th grade) reading level. I felt successful because I finally felt comfortable with the English language. During my last participation in the summer reading program, I set a goal for myself to read an American classic. I stumbled across John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Being twelve years old, that was the most dreadful book I had ever encountered. It was really dry, and it felt like an eternity to read and I couldn't connect at all with the Joad family. Twelve-year old me thought, "come on, an American family being racialized because of their migration West?"

Fast forward to 2019, race and cultural identity has a much heavier weight to children compared to when I was child. In present day United States, qualifications are overshadowed by one's heritage. Trump has rebirthed the racist rhetoric of the 1930's, instilling a deep hatred among Mexicans and Central and South Americans. Brown folks have become walking targets because of their search for stability, opportunity, and the American Dream. During the Fall term of 2018, I reread John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* for Dr. Shillinglaw's Steinbeck course. I was completely taken back by the novel. I thought it was incredibly relevant in Trump's America. I reiterate the fact, that as an American society, racism and hate is deeply rooted within this country's foundation. It is important to note that John Steinbeck was conscious of the turmoil between Californians and the Okies of the Dust Bowl. *The Grapes of Wrath* was written in 1939 during the end of the Great Depression and it is based on the migration of Oklahomans to California. This canonical piece of literature touches on many themes that many people, including high school students, go through in their lives. These themes include feelings of migration, identity, discrimination, environmental awareness, gender roles, and the importance

of family. With a variety of themes, there is no doubt that young adult readers will find something or someone to connect to in this novel, just like I did.

Introducing the Unit:

Dr. P Antonio Cuevas, of Downtown College Preparatory El Camino (DCP-EC), conducted a study titled, “The Journey from De-Culturalization to Community Cultural Wealth: The Power of a Counter Story-Telling Curriculum and How Educational Leaders Can Transform Schools.” Here he explores the importance and value of his students’ experiences or *testimonios* in a classroom setting. Throughout my experience as an Academic Mentor for students of the East Side of San José, I found that by exploring their personal counter-stories, *testimonios*, Mexican and Central and South American students were able to tap into their Cultural Community Wealth provide insight into their experience, and help heal some wounds caused by the racist and oppressive educational system (Cuevas, 2016). The practice of *testimonio* in a classroom setting has been evident throughout my entire academic journey, but I never realized that it could be used as a pedagogy. I’d introduce *Grapes of Wrath* with this article, highlighting the importance of the Joad family’s experience as outsiders of California. Steinbeck described firsthand the experience of migrant workers in 1936 as he was reporting for the *San Francisco News*. He followed up his experience with the Joad family struggling to find a new life in California after being driven out of their farm by the drought in Oklahoma. The Joad’s are a hardworking family who have to endure loss and instability. Much like the Joad’s, the children in Cuevas’ article describe their struggles of being an (im)migrant family. Esperanza for example talks of a realization that she has about how hardworking her mother is. Cuevas’ article may be dense for a high school classroom, so I’d solely focus on the Abstract, Introduction, pages 51-53 of Educational and Historical Context, Racial and Cultural Identity, and Self-Confidence.

As we digest our interpretation of the article, I'd provide the students with journals and have them write their *testimonios*. I would give them the option of placing the journal on the "read me" pile or "don't read me" pile. We'd then group up and discuss the aspects of the article that they could relate to. I would also introduce them to my story and bring in various guests (friends of mine) of different countries to explain their *testimonios* to prepare them to share. I would also present a brief historical description of the setting of *The Grapes of Wrath*, followed with an assignment based on someone's (im)migration story, whether it be domestic or international.

Prior to introducing the novel, I'd play them Mario Dommm's, "*El Sueño Americano*," along with the translated lyrics. The topic of (im)migration can be very sensitive and heavy for high school students. While lack of maturity may be an issue, this song provides a profound seriousness to the topic because it conveys the message of struggle and highlights the gravity of crossing the border. I'd play this song once without the video and have them describe pictures the lyrics paint and who it reminds them of. Followed by the official of the song to see how some of his lyrics are portrayed. Some important lyrics to take note of include "*Tres dias, caminando a cielo abierto / a 120 grades el desierto / Latinos, en aparadores*." "Three days, walking under the sky / 120 degrees of desert heat / Latinos, caged up."

As we prepare for the novel, I would present a few questions on the board and have them write about situations where they have experienced racial discrimination because of their country of origin in their journal.

- a) Introduce the activity with an [audio recording](#) of a six year old child from within an ICE Detention Center where humans are caged for seeking asylum.
 - a. Where else has this happened? Has it happened in the US before?

- b) Have you ever been discriminated against due to your origins? Ethnicity? Visual appearance? Culture? How did that make you feel? Why do you think it made you feel that way?
- c) Are you an (im)migrant? They child of (im)migrants? How does that make you feel? Do you feel less American or more American?
- d) Does every human deserve a right to a better life? Is the “American Dream” universal?
- e) What is the difference between immigration and migration?

- a. Here I would reintroduce the definition of Migration vs. Immigration.

Historically, natives of this land have migrated up and down California before the colonization. Many Mexican/Chicanas-os/Central/South Americans have migrated and cultivated this land since before the arrival of the Mayflower.

Therefore, the identifying Mexicans/Chicanas-os/Central/South Americans as immigrants is incorrect. Like the Joad’s, the Okies, and others who cultivate this continent are considered migrants.

We’d then circle up and allow one mic at a time for students to talk about that experience. Like the Joad’s, people from Oklahoma are not Oklahomans, they are Okies. Similarly, many Brown folks are now considered rapists, gangsters, and/or drug dealers thanks to Trump’s rhetoric.

Finalizing the introduction of the text, I will present diverse selection of poems providing different stories in search of the same outcome: hope. *Dear Exile*, by Mai Der Vang, *Villagers* by Ari Banias, and *Day of the Refugios* by Alberto Ríos. We’ll begin the class as a circle, and I will read a poem and select two other students to read the two left over. Followed by a selection of lines that impacted the students that will allow us to create one poem from the three we read. Afterwards, they will write their own poem about their experience of being an outsider or a

migrant, reinforcing Cuevas' *testimonio* pedagogy. Hopefully this allows the students to see that humans are mobile and cannot remain stagnant and even more so when one's home country is in shambles.

Presenting the text:

As the students dive into *The Grapes of Wrath*, they will be doing various activities to keep them engaged with the reading and facilitate critical analysis of the text.

1) Diary of a character

- a. As they read five chapters a week, they will select a character of the novel and write a diary from the characters point of view. This allows them think critically and analyze the text at a deeper level. This might also help provide a foreshadowing to events in the text which will affirm their ideas.
- b. They will split into groups based on the characters that they are writing for, allowing for different ideas and points of view, prompting analytical discussion and interaction with the text.

2) The students will also be assigned a short creative writing assignment based on their experience.

- a. This assignment will be assigned after the Joad's make it to California. Here the students will begin their own interpretation of the *Grapes of Wrath*.
- b. Their story will be a short 5-10-page story of their (im)migration journey. This assignment is creative, they are allowed to include drawings, images, collages, that pertains to their story. Everyone in the class will submit one week after we conclude the novel and there will be a gallery walk, allowing other students to see their experience.

- 3) For a text to text comparison, *Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle will be paired with *The Grapes of Wrath*. This novel is an adaptation of the TGOW with the chapters alternating between a Mexican migrating couple and an American family. We will be reading this novel to analyze the parallels of themes; identity, migration, unity, and family ideals.

Finishing TGOW

As the class concludes the unit, students should have a better interpretation and understanding of the severity of (im)migration. The dehumanization that people go through in search of a better life is horrendous. Through *testimonio*, the class discussions, the analysis of the three poems, and T.C. Boyle's novel, the will not only be educated on the matter but advocates for justice against the inhumane treatment people receive for crossing an imaginary line.

The *Grapes of Wrath* aligns cohesively with chapter eight of Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson's *Literature for Today's Young Adults*: "History and History Makers: Of People and Places." Within this chapter, they discuss the characteristics of a "good historical novel" by making sure it includes a setting that is integral to the story, an authentic rendition of the time, place, and people being featured, followed by an author who is familiar with the time period, along with other characteristics but with those being the most important when discussing *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck's novel also reflects traits that are described in chapters four through seven in Dr. Mary Warner's novel, *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. *The Grapes of Wrath* deals heavily with real-life experiences, identity, discrimination, and courage and survival.

Extending the Unit

- 1) *Burro Genius: A Memoir*, Victor Villaseñor

This novel by Victor Villaseñor highlights the complexity that an (im)migrant child goes through, along with highlighting the importance of *testimonio* and storytelling. Victor Villaseñor is present during the 1940s and envisions himself as a cowboy just like the Western movies portray most people of the Southwest.

2) *The Border*, Steve Schafer

This novel puts the reader with Pato, Arbo, Marcos, and Gladys and their treacherous journey through *la frontera*. Surrounded by *Narcos*, these four teenagers are on the run for their lives, literally.

3) The final novel on this list is, *The Distance Between Us*, by Reyna Grande. This novel talks of the separation between and their parents, which is something that a lot of kids on the East Side have felt. This novel captures the difficulty that Reyna and her siblings endure while trying to adjust to her father and a new culture.

Importance of (im)migration literature and counter-story telling

The importance of understanding (im)migration deals beyond who deserves what in this world. (Im)Migrants are human beings and they deserve the right to live happily, in harmony, and with prosperity. Steinbeck's novel highlights the importance of treating everyone with respect and as a friend rather than an enemy. It is through (im)migrant literature and *testimonio* that this country can one day see its people as humans rather than aliens.

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