

Understanding Mexican Immigration: Teaching *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream*

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IMMIGRATION IS A SIGNIFICANT part of several of my courses on the histories of Mexican Americans, the American West, and Latinos. Eight years ago, I developed an undergraduate course that compares the histories of various Latino groups through the lens of immigration. I have taught the course in a variety of settings, including a private liberal arts college, a public teaching-intensive university, and a public research university as I transitioned from lecturer to assistant professor. The upper-division course, currently titled "Latina/o Immigration," enrolls mostly history majors, but it also attracts students from various liberal arts fields and a smaller number from business and engineering. The course begins in the nineteenth century with the forced incorporation of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans into the United States, the rise of nativism, and the first immigration restrictions. It follows a general chronological sequence, adding the experiences of Cuban Americans, Central Americans, and South Americans as these groups arrive in larger numbers toward the end of the twentieth century. In this essay, I will discuss my use of a book that contains a journalist's account of Mexican immigration.

Placing Latinos' experience in the larger context of American immigration history has helped students understand the commonalities in immigrant experiences across several decades and the unique challenges faced by recent arrivals. When I first taught the course, I focused on Latinos exclusively, but I decided to add some background on European and Asian immigration when I realized that students were getting the impression that only Latinos were subject to certain immigrant experiences (e.g., Americanization programs). This comparative background helps students learn how various immigrant waves were met with hostility as a result of racial, ethnic, and religious differences. I began teaching this course in California, where most students are very familiar with immigrants from Latin America. My move to Iowa (three years ago) presented some challenges, as students there are generally less familiar with the immigrant experience and tend to be more reserved about expressing their opinions. However, because their knowledge

is limited, the students in Iowa are very curious about immigration topics and are willing to consider different points of view. The undergraduate population at my current institution also includes some students from the Chicago suburbs and larger Iowa cities, who have had more experience living among immigrants.

To compare the immigration and migration experiences of various Latino groups, my “Latina/o Immigration” course uses various readings and documentary films. The course readings include a book, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (2000), that provides a synthesis, and course readers containing journal articles and primary sources.¹ The academic scholarship draws from various disciplines including history, sociology, and anthropology. Because current newspaper articles on immigration have sparked student interest, I have routinely posted them on the course website (created with the university’s course-management software).² These articles repeatedly fueled enthusiastic class discussions, convincing me to incorporate more nonacademic readings into the syllabus. I selected Sam Quinones’s *Antonio’s Gun and Delfino’s Dream: True Tales of Mexican Migration* because it captures immigrants’ experiences in their home country, on their harrowing journeys, in the United States, and on their occasional return to Mexico.³ It has been successful in fueling good discussions and reinforcing key concepts from the course readings.

The book relies on interviews and participant observation in Mexico and the United States. Quinones, currently a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, worked for ten years as a freelance journalist in Mexico starting in 1994. His introduction provides a brief overview of current Mexican immigration and explains the first of two stories that give the book its title. The tale describes the life of Antonio Carrillo, who immigrates to the United States, saves money to purchase a gun, and returns to a small town in Michoacán to avenge his father’s death at the hands of the town boss’s henchman. Carrillo’s story serves, in effect, as a parable that embodies several of the book’s recurring themes: government corruption, limited economic opportunity as a push factor, and the immigrants’ goal of returning to Mexico. The second story suggested in the title is that of Delfino Juárez, a teenager who leaves a small town in Veracruz for Mexico City to work in construction. After a seven-year immersion in urban culture and vices, he migrates to the United States to fulfill a dream of financially supporting his family. Delfino’s story exemplifies the economic desperation and limited educational opportunities in small towns in Mexico (and elsewhere), internal migration to regional and national capitals, and the cultural influence of returning migrants in their

sending communities. Three chapters are devoted to Delfino's sojourns. The remaining chapters depict immigrant entrepreneurs in a Chicago suburb, hometown associations in California's Central Valley, and Mexican culture's growing influence in a small Kansas town. The author also devotes chapters to municipal politics in South Gate, California, the corrupting influence of drug trafficking on a Mennonite community in Chihuahua, and the transnational cultural influence in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez.

This journalistic account of Mexican migration complements academic readings and documentaries by helping students gain a fuller understanding of the problems facing immigrants. Students have found the well-written and contemporary stories in *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream* more accessible than academic articles. In turn, they are more willing to ask questions and engage in class discussions. The book also appeals to students across various disciplines because it engages issues relevant to journalism, political science, and history. By presenting a detailed account of immigrants' day-to-day struggles, it teaches students about a segment of the population with which they have had little experience. Quinones describes the messy details of several controversial issues, so students are able to consider various points of view. In his description of a corrupt Mexican American mayor of South Gate, California, he touches on voter fraud, undocumented immigrants' disenfranchisement, and machine politics. Quinones shows parallels between the machine's use of prize giveaways to entice voters to the polls and the corrupt practices of Mexico's PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Through a compelling narrative of lengthy political developments, the author argues that the story of South Gate is ultimately about immigrants adjusting to American democracy by organizing a multiethnic coalition of community organizations to vote the machine out of politics.

The book may present certain challenges for undergraduates, but these can be overcome by incorporating complementary materials. Because most students at the University of Iowa have limited knowledge of Mexico, this book is often their first introduction to contemporary Mexican politics and society. Quinones does an admirable job of providing some political context of the immigrants' plight. I offer additional background in lectures and class discussions and use documentaries to help fill in some gaps. I have found that segments of the documentary films *Destination America* (2006) and *The New Americans* (2004) are useful because students can hear interviews with immigrants describing their limited economic opportunities; the documentaries also enable them to understand visually the reality of poverty in Mexico.⁴ Students read Quinones's book over several weeks

while completing other course readings. I assign specific chapters of the book to complement the weekly topics on the syllabus. For example, in the same week that students read the chapters on Delfino's journey (with some of his friends) from Xocotla, Veracruz, to Mexico City, and eventually to southern California, I also assign scholarly articles on chain and step migration. Another potential difficulty for students emerges from the book's narrative structure. Each chapter focuses on a different story, and some students may find it challenging to follow the threads of several stories. The chapters can stand alone, so the variety of topics is not necessarily a drawback. However, in order to guide the students in their reading, I provide weekly questions that link each chapter to course themes. These reading questions are designed to direct the students to consider specific issues in each chapter. I began posting these questions online after I realized that some students were reading the chapters uncritically; they enjoyed the reading but neglected to link it to course topics.

This book lends itself to class discussions. Students are familiar with the effects of Latino immigrants on U.S. communities but are less certain about the consequences of emigration on Mexican towns and cities. In various chapters, Quinones describes the monetary, demographic, and cultural impact of immigration on both the sending and receiving communities. So I assign a set of reading questions that ask students to consider the positive and negative effects of remittances. In order to address a range of learning styles, I use various formats including online, small group, and open class discussions. Shy students, who might be reticent to offer a comment in an open class discussion (where the entire class participates simultaneously), are often more willing to participate in online and small group discussions. The latter consist of groups of four to five students who are given a list of three to four questions to answer cooperatively. I usually circulate around the classroom to address queries about the assignment, and occasionally I join a group. Students are asked to choose a facilitator who records their answers and presents them to the entire class. The questions are designed to reinforce concepts covered in lectures or academic articles. Ideally, they should also motivate students to offer their own analysis of the readings. Quinones shows how remittances sustain extended families and fund municipal improvement projects in Mexico. But various chapters also describe how Mexico's federal and state governments have come to depend on remittances and consequently have failed to create enough jobs to stem the human flow to the United States. Through group discussions of reading questions, students learn that remittances have raised the standard of living for some

residents in sending communities but have also increased costs for those without relatives in the United States.

Reading *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream* has allowed students to gain a better understanding of several concepts in immigration history. Quinones's chapter on the chain migration from Atolinga, Zacatecas, to McHenry, Illinois, contains detailed examples of the influence of social networks in helping immigrants adjust to life in the United States. He explains not only that many Atolingans became mainstay workers in a chain of pancake restaurants in Illinois, but also how this experience led to multiple cultural changes. Immigrants helped one another obtain restaurant jobs; some moved up into management and a few gained enough experience to establish a separate chain of Mexican restaurants. While this account amply demonstrates the entrepreneurial spirit of immigrants and their adaptation to the U.S., it also shows that they influence U.S. society. Moreover, their impact extends to their hometowns. Quinones describes an oft-seen pattern of immigrants building houses (patterned after U.S. architectural models) in their sending communities with a goal of retiring there, but eventually realizing that such homes will remain empty. Having grown accustomed to the educational and economic opportunities in the United States, immigrant families are reluctant to return (or in the case of U.S.-born children, relocate) to Mexico. This chapter illustrates the cultural divide that separates children from their immigrant parents as youth speak Spanglish, listen to American pop music, and dress in urban styles. Such divisions also contribute to schisms between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants (which Quinones describes in another context in the chapter on South Gate).

The book has several potential pitfalls for use in the classroom, but none are insurmountable. Quinones develops a searing critique of Mexico's failures to provide basic social services and jobs for its citizens and of Mexican government corruption. His account can lead students to mimic immigration restrictionists' shibboleths about the undemocratic culture that immigrants bring with them. Mexico's political elite also incurs the author's wrath. He singles out their hypocrisy in criticizing the discriminatory treatment that immigrants receive in the United States while the elite remains mum about racism and sharp class divisions in Mexico. In class discussions, I acknowledge the validity of the author's criticisms while also reminding students of government corruption, wasteful spending, and racial insensitivity in the United States. Their awareness of the U.S. government's failure during Hurricane Katrina and profligate spending in the Iraq War has enabled them to understand my point. Another pitfall is the book's chapter on the small

town of Garden City, Kansas. Quinones details the growing popularity of high school soccer in Garden City and the cultural change introduced by the immigrant-dominated team. A few students obtained athletic scholarships to college, but most of these eventually dropped out to work in the meat-processing plants that initially drew their families to the Midwest. A fear of debt (which Quinones identifies as cultural baggage from Mexico) prevented them from taking out student loans, and an attachment to their families added to their homesickness while away at college. Some readers might be disappointed that Quinones does not fully explore structural factors that contribute to the dropout rate. Nevertheless, the author's description of Mexican immigrant cultural attitudes (which he contrasts with the perspectives of the town's Vietnamese immigrants obtained from personal interviews) offers a nuanced view of the challenges facing students. Providing study questions that ask the class to analyze structural and cultural obstacles to higher education can help students consider the complexity of immigrants' educational challenges.

No clear answers to the nation's immigration conundrum emerge from Quinones's book. But it does personalize the migrants' experience. Journalistic accounts of immigration can complement academic scholarship if they are properly integrated into undergraduate courses. By using reading questions and group discussions that emphasize course themes, instructors will encourage students to think critically and learn about real world examples of academic concepts. *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream* wonderfully illustrates the messy political consequences of immigration while highlighting immigrants' resilience and adaptability.

NOTES

1. Juan González, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York, 2000); Jon Gjerde, *Major Problems in American Immigration and Ethnic History* (Boston, 1998). In addition, I have assembled a course reader from various journal articles and newspaper stories.

2. The University of Iowa has developed its own course-management system called Iowa Courses Online (ICON).

3. Sam Quinones, *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream: True Tales of Mexican Migration* (Albuquerque, NM, 2007). In previous offerings of this course, I have assigned Diana Walta Hart, *Undocumented in L.A.: An Immigrant's Story* (Wilmington, DE, 1997); Luis Alberto Urrea, *Devil's Highway: A True Story* (New York, 2004); and Dale Maharidge, *Denison, Iowa: Searching for the Soul of America through the Secrets of a Midwest Town* (New York, 2008).

4. Both documentaries are multipart series: *Destination America: The People and Cultures*

that Created a Nation, a series by David Grubin, produced by David Grubin Productions and Penguin Television, story directors David Grubin, Blair Brown, Stephen Stept, and Chana Gazit (Hollywood, CA: PBS Home Video, 2006); and *The New Americans*, Kartemquin Films, Independent Television Service, series producer Gita Saedi, executive producers Steve James and Gordon Quinn, story directors Susana Aikin, Carlos Aparicio, Jerry Blumental, Steve James, Indu Krishnan, Gordon Quinn, and Renee Tajima-Pena (Chicago: Home Vision Entertainment, 2004).