Kaci Neves

Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: Problematizing Today's Immigration Issues

This summer, after thousands of unaccompanied Central American children crossed into the United States, Americans protested and counter-protested border control policies. Citizens of my hometown, Conroe, Texas, gathered across a major interstate where they toted signs and argued for their side of the immigration debate. Many of the signs read *No Amnesty!* Other signs read *Refugees Welcome.* As the signs seesawed up and down, I wondered, *how will my students and I discuss immigration in my future classroom*? Protestors from each side yelled. Their voices soared over the highway noise, and I continued to wonder, *how will I discuss immigration without angering or oppressing certain parents, students, or administrators*?

To resolve these questions, I set out to find texts to help my upper elementary students and me problematize current immigration issues. I knew I needed texts that were appropriate and relevant to students' experiential knowledge, and I needed culturally relevant texts that considered the estimated 4.2 million immigrants living in Texas (Brown & Patten, 2012).

I was beginning to wonder if such texts existed when I came across *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (Tonatiuh, 2013). The author weaves folkloric storytelling, Aztec-style illustration, code-switching, and ultimately, he succeeds in opening a dialogic space where teachers and students can discuss the complexities of the modern immigrant experience.

In this text, Tonatiuh depicts a rabbit family living on a *rancho* ravaged by drought. During the drought, Papá Rabbit heads to *El Norte* to find work. When the harvesting season ends and Papá Rabbit does not come home from El Norte as expected, the Rabbits begin to worry. So, Pancho, Papá Rabbit's eldest son, packs food in his *mochila* and journeys through the desert in search of his father.

Kaci Neves is currently pursuing her master's degree in education at Texas State University. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Texas at Austin. She can be reached at ken24@txstate.edu.

In the desert, Pancho meets Señor Coyote, a red-eyed creature that offers to lead Pancho north. Pancho and the coyote struggle through a series of obstacles, including a dangerous train ride and a river crossing. After each obstacle, Pancho must share a portion of his rations with Señor Coyote.

When Pancho and Señor Coyote finally reach *El Norte*, they collapse in exhaustion. The coyote asks for more rations, but Pancho's rations are gone. The coyote bares his teeth and explains that now he must eat Pancho. Pancho screams, but fortunately, Papá Rabbit, who is finally returning to the *rancho*, hears Pancho's cries. Papá Rabbit bursts in and saves Pancho just in time.

Though Tonatiuh's story is folkloric, the human struggles he describes are real. The train Pancho and the coyote ride is reminiscent of *Tren de la muerte,* a train hundreds of Central and South Americans ride atop in hopes of reaching the borderland. They ride this train, although many of its passengers die amid gang violence or the treachery of the train track itself. The text's bright orange deserts represent the expanses where 350 to 500 immigrants die yearly. The coyote that takes Pancho's rations represents the smugglers called by the same name who often exploit undocumented immigrants, and the worry felt by the farm animals is reminiscent of the anguish of families torn across borders.

In his Author's Notes, Tonatiuh (2013) states, "We often hear of immigrants in the media, however too often with negative and sensational tones" (p. 30). As critical pedagogues, this story and others like it are necessary to challenge the dominant narratives perpetuated by the media in which undocumented immigrants

By discussing and charting different immigration perspectives and text features, teachers and students establish a sense of community and cultural tolerance, such that both foreign-born and American-born students feel comfortable sharing personal experiences and ideas.

are often dehumanized or scandalized. This story reminds us that these people *are* people, people who often endure unfathomable adversities in their home country, on their journey to the United States, and in the United States. Further, many students in Texas can make direct connections between their life experiences and the adversities presented in Tonatiuh's text. Using a text like *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote,* teachers may establish a space for foreign-born students to make text-to-self connections, engage in a more complete dialogue, and develop a critical consciousness concerning the modern immigrant experience.

This is not to say that immigration issues should be examined solely through Pancho's perspective. To help answer the question I posed earlier, *how will my students and I discuss immigration issues in my future classroom?,* I suggest developing a unit study that explores the American immigrant experience through multiple text perspectives and student-driven dialogue (McKay, 2009).

Teachers might begin by selecting a library of immigration texts to accompany the reading of *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote.* These texts should provide varying cultural and historical angles on immigration (additional text recommendations follow). Based on these texts, teachers can facilitate a discussion where students discuss and identify opposing representations of immigration. In consideration of each text, students might discuss push-pull factors related to immigration, authorial intent, immigration issues across cultural and historical landscapes, and personal reactions to the texts. Students and teachers can chart this information throughout the unit to continue to problematize opposing ideologies and glean a more holistic representation of the immigrant experience, from past to present, across cultures, and across sociopolitical domains (McKay, 2009). Teachers might also consider asking students to discuss and chart notable text features across each book, including stylistic choices, text structure, and illustrator style. In this way, the immigration texts act as mentor texts through which students can learn and emulate rhetorical and stylistic techniques (Chase, 2008).

By discussing and charting different immigration perspectives and text features, teachers and students establish a sense of community and cultural tolerance, such that both foreign-born and American-born students feel comfortable sharing personal experiences and ideas. At this point, students can benefit from creating their own texts about immigration. Student-created texts might include folkloric texts, like *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote,* personal immigration narratives, biographies about migrant relatives, or nonfiction texts about immigration policy or news (McKay, 2009).

While writing their immigration texts, students can continue to refer to the unit's mentor texts to enhance their writing techniques. For instance, English language learners might consider code-switching from English to Spanish, like Tonatiuh does. Code-switching is not only a sophisticated stylistic approach that illustrates the immigrant's occupation of two diverse cultural and linguistic spheres, but it is also an approach that helps promote the growth of students' English writing abilities (Fu, 2009).

Students can then share these texts with their peers, their communities, and persons outside of their communities through assemblies or social media. By sharing these stories, we acknowledge diverse immigration stories, we give traditionally disenfranchised students a voice, and we assert that all of our students' stories matter.

Additional Texts for Children

Sylvia & Aki (Conkling, 2011):
Sylvia & Aki describes the civil rights issues faced by two third-grade students growing up in the 1940s. Aki is a Japanese American student, and Sylvia is a Mexican American student.

The Upside Down Boy (Herrera, 2006):
The Upside Down Boy discusses the complexities regarding English language immersion and the immigrant experience.

The Keeping Quilt (Polacco, 1988):
The Keeping Quilt tells the true immigration story of Anna, a first-wave immigrant from Russia who fled in response to the country's anti-Semitic policies.

Additional Texts for Young Adults

Our Stories Matter (Nash & Viray, 2013):
Our Stories Matter empowers traditionally marginalized students through the teaching of personal narrative writing.

Enrique's Journey (Nazario, 2006):
Enrique, a teen from Honduras, travels alone to America to find his mother who immigrated to America 12 years prior.

References

Brown, A., & Patten, E. (2012). *Statistical portrait of the foreign-born population in the U.S., 2012.* Retrieved from http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/04/29/statistical-portrait-of-the-foreign-born-population-in-the-united-states-2012/#foreign-born-by-state-2012

Chase, M. (2008). The warp and the weft: Using mentor texts to weave together reading, science, writing, and art. *Journal of Children's Literature, 34*(2), 60-67.

Conkling, W. (2011). *Sylvia & Aki.* New York, NY: Random House.

Fu, D. (2009). Transitional stages in ELL's writing development. *Writing between languages: How English language learners make the transition to fluency, grades 4-12* (pp. 48-76). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Herrera, J. F. (2006). *The upside down boy/el niño de cabeza*. San Francisco, CA: Lee & Low.

McKay, K. (2009, December 1). Building culturally responsive units of study: From Texas to Mexico and back. Retrieved from http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2929

Nash, R. J., & Viray, S. (2013). *Our stories matter: Liberating the voices of marginalized students through scholarly personal narrative writing.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Nazario, S. (2006). *Enrique's journey.* New York, NY: Random House.

Polacco, P. (1988). *The keeping quilt.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Tonatiuh, D. (2013). *Pancho rabbit and the coyote: A migrant's tale.* New York, NY: Abrams.