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Reflection: Coming of Age(ncy) on the Migrant Trail: Central American and Mexican Adolescent Journeys in Contemporary Young Adult Literature

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Susana Martínez, Associate Professor DePaul University
Social Transformation Research Collaborative Report
February 15, 2024

I am so thankful for the privilege of being an inaugural STRC Research Fellow in 2022-2023. It was such a gift to have a year to focus on writing my book manuscript. Thanks to the fellowship, I was able to meet my goal of submitting a first draft to the press and I am eagerly awaiting feedback from reviewers.

My book, *Coming of Age(ncy) on the Migrant Trail: Central American and Mexican Adolescent Journeys in Contemporary Young Adult Literature*, examines youth migration as a transnational social justice issue that brings visibility to characters who are rarely depicted as having agency. As protagonists who come of age on the migrant journey and gain critical awareness of the dangers they face, their stories challenge us to rethink narratives that portray poverty and violence in their home countries while erasing the U.S. role in destabilizing the communities they flee.

My project provides a roadmap for how YA literature and the humanities can engage complex issues such as immigration and youth agency to address the histories and contemporary structures of racism. The literature I study attests to the power of storytelling to create empathy across differences which can ultimately lead to healing, restoration, and social transformation.

I was very happy to participate in the STRC Symposium “The Right to Story: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in an Age of Banned Books.” My talk summarized key themes of the project, along with an acknowledgement of the impact that volunteering with immigrant rights groups in Chicago have played in shaping my thinking. I was able to draw connections between notions of “illegality” and “undocumentedness,” concepts

created to exclude and exploit - to our politically toxic era of book challenges and banned books, rooted in white supremacy and racism. I noted that The American Library Association reported that book challenges nearly doubled in 2022 from the previous year. Of the reported challenges, “58% targeted books and materials in school libraries, classroom libraries or school curricula; 41% of book challenges targeted materials in public libraries.” In my view, it’s no coincidence that Young Adult titles led the category of books banned at 56% (as opposed to 24% Adult, 15% Middle Grade, 4% Picture Book, and 1% Chapter Book), since YA titles tend to offer critical perspectives to a population that is simultaneously exploring their own sense of identity and questioning the world around them. Young readers are well aware that conservative policy makers predominantly attack books by authors of color and the LGBTQ+ community - also historically underrepresented in the publishing industry.

I am especially grateful for the support of Victoria Vega Castañeda, my STRC Research Assistant. Victoria expertly compiled data on Latinx diversity in publishing, compiled author biographies, created tables, and organized my Works Cited. This year, I will present some of my research at two academic conferences, the Latinx Studies Association in Tempe, AZ in April and the Children’s Literature Association in Madison, WI in May.

As I await feedback on my manuscript, I continue to keep an eye on recent developments in Central America, Mexico, and the wars raging around the world to help me situate U.S. immigration politics in perspective when white supremacy displays “zero tolerance” towards racialized others and book bans feel paralyzing. For youth coming of age in the U.S., particularly youth of color and undocumented Latinx, it is impactful to

see their experiences reflected in the pages of a book. YA novels can serve as validating mirrors that help them make meaning of their histories and identities; for educators and more privileged youth, they are windows and sliding glass doors that provide insight and encourage empathy, as education scholar Rudine Sims Bishop stated in 1990.

As more Latinx YA authors gain entry into the white dominant publishing industry, I hope that my book will contribute to lifting up the agency and activism of Central American, Mexican, and Latinx youth that boldly denounce borders and repression, including dehumanizing detention and deportation policies.

Note: I am attaching the paper I delivered at the STRC conference. I cannot submit book chapters since they are currently under review for publication.