

The Julian Samora Research Institute

The Midwest's Premier Latino Research Center



Forging the path as we go: Latinxs Transforming Democracyⁱ

Suzanne Oboler
John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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Julian Samora Research Institute

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ABSTRACT

This presentation was prepared for the 30th anniversary celebration of the Julian Samora Research Institute. The presentation responds to the theme of the conference: “Latinxs and the Renewal of U.S. Democracy.” Oboler challenges us in her speech to avoid visualizing democracy as a renewal and to envision the transformation of American Democracy by turning to both the history of Latinx movements and of alliance-building with other groups in the struggle to achieve inclusion and representation of all members of society. Oboler argues that the use of the word renewal paints a picture of a return to a time when U.S. democracy was not in a good place and, at times, goes backwards. Specifically, she discusses how other instances in American history paved the way for the current administration, providing examples of how the Reagan era influenced our current politics. She moves on to describe several instances in American history that have shaped the narrative of how America defines and views people of Latinx origin. The primary argument is that White supremacists are driving the current political climate. One way to combat the attendant ignorance and fear, she says, is to spread knowledge of the Latinx community and by working with other minority groups. To conclude, Oboler, urges us to think about new ways by which we can transform democracy through our scholarship and teaching by engaging with displaced members of the community and/or engaging our students more in social justice oriented conversations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Suzanne Oboler is Professor of Latin American and Latina/o Studies at John Jay College of the City University of New York. She is Founding Editor (2002-2012) of the journal, *Latino Studies*. She is author of *Ethnic Labels*, *Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (1995) and numerous scholarly articles and book chapters. She is editor of several anthologies and Co- Editor in Chief of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in Contemporary Politics, Law and Social Movements* (2015). Her research and teaching interests center on human rights in the Americas, focusing on race, immigration, citizenship and national belonging. In 2011, she was named Fulbright Distinguished Chair in American Studies at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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As you all know, a conference keynote is supposed to help to further frame the main theme of the weekend discussions, to help set the context for them. That's a big responsibility, and so I want to thank Ruben Martínez for this keynote invitation and also, more especially, for inviting me to participate in this important, 30 year celebration of the Julian Samora Research Institute! It was a big honor for me to receive this invitation, particularly given the important contributions you make through your policy and activist work, and I really appreciate the opportunity to be part of this milestone in the Institute's history. When I saw the title of the conference, *Latinxs and the Renewal of US Democracy*, I found it both suggestive and intriguing, to say the least! But at the same time, the term "renewal" and its relation to Latinxs' role and social location in this so-called US democracy, wasn't all that self-evident to me.... And so, as I usually do, I started to raise questions about it for myself—and of course, I also wished I could hear how the spectacular, pioneering academic, the relentless civil rights fighter and wonderful storyteller, Julian Samora, after whom this Institute we are honoring today is named—would himself have approached framing a conference with this title, today!

After considerable thought, I came to the conclusion that the idea of renewal, in some form would be the central and, hopefully, hopeful focus of my talk. And so, I want to begin by discussing the term "renewal" in relation to what it is that may actually need renewing... or not. As I hope will be clear by the end of my talk, what I'm actually going to be arguing is that perhaps instead of focusing on renewal, it might be more beneficial to focus in on how we can all begin to imagine --and, as scholars, to narrate-- new ways of transforming US democracy, particularly in our daily lives and surroundings --such that, beginning at the local level, and within our own disciplines and fields of research, our current conception of democracy as we've known it isn't so much renewed, but instead actually transformed into a true and active mechanism for inclusion and representation of all members of US society.

"Renewal," after all, suggests a real concern for what may have been seen to be an inevitable forward movement, that has now somehow stalled. It assumes that there's a past, a history, a moment when US democracy in this case, somehow "got stuck;" when the process stopped and, perhaps, even started to go backward.

We are virtually at the end of 2019 --the final months of the 2nd decade of the 21st century! And, certainly, from our vantage point today, the political climate in US society, at least at first glance, seems somewhat rockier than anything many of us might immediately recall if we were to look back, for example, to the decade of the 1980s, when the Julian Samora Research Institute officially opened its doors.

Even for those of us immersed in the contemporary woes of our current times, a quick look back to what was happening to US democracy during that 1980s period, may remind those of us who lived through it of its own very intense and equally woeful and rocky edges. After all, it *was* the Reagan era and, both in broader societal terms, and in terms of this conference's main theme --"Latinxs and the Renewal of US Democracy"-- it was during that very decade that one of the country's most vicious efforts actually began in earnest to destroy the social contract that until then had kept US democracy more-or-less democratic for all.

The dismantling began that decade with an unambiguous attack on American labor, specifically on the union of air traffic controllers. And, in hindsight, we can see that the attack pretty much succeeded in normalizing union busting. During the 1980s we also began to witness the full-fledged corporate embrace and promotion of globalization, and the abandonment once and for all of any and all commitment by US corporations to this nation's people and society. As the corporations laid off workers, closed their doors, and left the country, they didn't only take their profits with them. They also left behind a surging number of unemployed Americans, followed by a growing homelessness. They basically de-industrialized the country, "downsized," and then transferred American manufacturing, living wages, and jobs overseas or even across the border, to their growing numbers of maquiladoras. Also among the ravages of the 1980s is the rise of an all-out so-called "War on Drugs," with its hateful racist rhetoric, its unforgiving drug policies, police killings particularly of youth of color, the invention of "three strike laws" and the consequent rising numbers of long term, incarcerated African American and Latinx people, the effects of all of which we continue to witness today.

I want to emphasize that white nationalism then, as now, was also alive and well. It was most visible in the siege then led by white nationalist, John Tanton and his US English organization, particularly against Latinxs through the "English Only" movements.ⁱⁱ And like African Americans, Latinxs were also impacted by the backlash against the then-relatively new Affirmative Action policies, and more broadly against every single gain of the 1960s and 70s civil rights movements.

But, just as important from a cultural point of view, it was also during that decade that Reagan's

re-sized, larger-than-life image as a B-movie Hollywood actor was allowed to permeate the culture and behavior of the US financial elites. This is rather similar to the way that Trump's sick corrupting influence seems to be permeating the Republican political elites today. As Michael Moore captured so brilliantly in his documentary, *Capitalism, A Love Story* --the permissive "wild west" cowboy culture of the 1980s, based on so-called "Reaganomics" --the codeword for the open worship of the free-market--, which instilled an acceptance of a culture of unmitigated greed. This culture, and concomitant backlash, went on to declare the unambiguous end of the civil rights era and the beginning of a new period in US society --one which I believe is only now culminating under the current administration.ⁱⁱⁱ

In short, to me, particularly for Latinx and other people of color, --and more generally, for the poor and all working people in this country --the 1980s' Reagan years, socially, culturally and economically, represents a major turning point in the trajectory of US democracy. The decade marked a real break in the historical narrative of this country's democracy. It was the era that abandoned US society's commitment to social democracy, to greater equality, to the rule of law; even the lip service paid to American values such as freedom, or equality of opportunity, fairness, and the American Dream were ultimately to fall by the wayside. And in so doing, those years set into motion a greater tolerance for the practice of de-regulation, and thereby made corruption even more acceptable both in practice, as well as in law, as we've since come to see.

In fact, the most important legacy of the 1980s is that it abandoned the very idea of upholding human dignity --the key value that solidifies the very foundation of any democratic society. So that, while the 1980s began with the destruction of the air traffic controllers' union, by the end of that decade, as members of a democratic society we were actually resigning ourselves to the idea --or, said differently, actually allowing ourselves to accept-- that all working people --particularly, but not only brown and black people--could be thoroughly perceived as dispensable and as disposable. I include many poor and lower-class whites who also became part of the ranks at least of dispensable people. However, the so-called culture wars of the 1990s, and the perennial racism at the foundation of this nation's democracy, ultimately and once again prevailed in preventing their solidarity with people of color. And this failure is what eventually paved the way for Trump to stumble into the role of "white supremacist superhero savior," picking up the pieces, at least in rhetoric, of their shattered hopes of ever passing on the American Dream to their children. The 2016 election served yet again to reinforce the idea that the particular type of fear and distrust that only racism can create, really does destroy community more deeply than anything else....

Anyway, my brief review of some of these events of 40 years ago, led me to conclude that Reagan's 1980s era and its immediate aftermath, really shouldn't come to mind as I considered which recent decade could be used as a starting point for renewing US democracy for anyone, much less for Latinxs and other people of color.

Given the current administration's trackrecord so far, helped along by the country's long and virulent history of racism, there's no doubt that democracy is under attack. And so, yes, it is up to everyone-- including of course the *mas o menos* 60 million Latinxs in this country-- to fight in any way we can against Trump's fascist designs. And let me be clear: in terms of the broader picture, some form of the general notion of democracy is definitely worth defending and perhaps renewing....

Still, whether we talk about defending democracy or renewing democracy, the questions that continue to come to my mind --specifically in terms of the historical experiences of US Latinx communities --, and particularly in relation to this weekend's conference discussions, is: What kind of democracy are we going to fight for?

Clearly, it's not the one that has existed since the Reagan era --and I think even a cursory look through the Latinx lens, at what existed before the Reagan era wasn't that great either. I mean: do we really want to renew and defend a democracy that has forced Latinx communities to continuously have to fight against invisibility in the public sphere? Or to have to struggle, literally every day for over 150 years, for the right to have rights in this society? Or to continually be forced to affirm Latinx belonging every day, and to insist that it be acknowledged by the mainstream national community? To me, however horrified people were, when Trump came on the scene announcing that "Mexicans" are criminals and rapists and whatever else he said --there should be no doubt that that long history is what ultimately also permitted the mainstream media and US society as a whole to allow those statements to go practically unchallenged and unpunished in 2015! In other words, the collective shock expressed by the mainstream media wasn't really about the actual content --the substance-- of Trump's attack on Mexicans, or even the attack itself against people of Mexican descent. "Mexicans," after all, have been attacked more or less openly for so long in this society, and in so many different ways... So to me, the collective shock was more

the fact that Trump actually voiced it in such unambiguous terms in 2015. I don't have time here to detail all those ways, but over time, those different ways led people of Mexican descent, regardless of legal status, to find themselves going from citizens, to immigrants, to "foreigners", to "undocumented" and ultimately, to "illegals", and "strangers" and even "enemies" of this country.

And make no mistake: Trump's focused emphasis on Mexicans isn't intended to single out or distinguish people of Mexican descent, including Mexican Americans, from other Latinx groups. On the contrary: I believe he was simply doubling down on the relatively-recent cultural trend which I've noticed particularly strongly in New York and some mainstream media, at least since 2010 --of referring to all Latinx people, regardless of citizenship status or national origin, as "Mexicans." As such now the assumption is that all Latinxs are Mexicans, and therefore probably immigrants, and hence, foreigners, and ultimately strangers in this country too. In this sense, one of the things we as scholars, and as educators, need to do is to develop within Latinx studies but also throughout the country as a whole, a renewed emphasis, a clear consciousness about the significant role and historic place that Mexico, Mexican Americans, all people of Mexican descent, actually occupy in the struggle for inclusion and the achievement of the democratic aspirations that have eluded these communities for so long. As I believe we are all aware, the Mexicanization of all Latinxs and the attendant discrimination that goes with that, just further complicates that particular struggle.

Given the increasingly vicious targeted attacks on the Latinx community, which have gone from the President's tirades against "Mexicans" to the state implementing policies aimed at traumatizing Latinx children for life, to now openly including mass murder, whether in Texas, Florida, or elsewhere, one question that kept coming up for me as I was writing this talk, is: on what grounds would Latinxs actually be able to participate in a "renewed" democracy? Or stated in blunter terms, once our assumed democracy has been renewed, is its coexistence with a now-overt white supremacy even possible?

These kinds of considerations about this conference title led me to the next, and maybe kind of obvious question: What would really have to change in order for Latinx communities across the country to fully participate in transforming this iteration of democracy that we've been living under for the past 50 years--say since the final decade of the Civil Rights era? We need to keep in mind here that almost 1/3rd of the Latinx vote contributed to Trump's 2016 election. In some ways this too needs to be seen as some sort of referendum on democracy as we've experienced it in the US.^{iv} In other words, we shouldn't underestimate the complexity of the Latinx community in terms of political and electoral preferences and social, cultural and economic perspectives. That might very well be one of the unexpected consequences of thinking of democratization as a process rather than as a fixed destination.

To be honest, although things are different, of course, in some ways, not that much seems to have actually changed in terms of the cultural foundations on which that democracy we are thinking of renewing has rested on, certainly over the past 50 or 60 years. For example, around the same time that Arizona passed SB-1070, the "Show me your papers" bill in 2010, and everyone was deploring the rise of legalized and official racial profiling, legal scholar, Kevin Johnson published an important essay. In it, he detailed the *Brignone-Ponce* Supreme Court decision of 1975. Briefly, that case was brought to the Supreme Court by Felix Humberto Brignoni-Ponce, a US citizen of Puerto Rican descent. He'd been stopped on a California highway in 1973, while driving with 2 other people in the car, a Mexican and a Guatemalan, and he ended up charged with "illegally transporting undocumented immigrants in violation of federal law." Johnson describes how the border patrol openly acknowledged that "the only reason they stopped Brignoni-Ponce was that three occupants in the car appeared to be of Mexican descent." And the Justices openly recognized in their ruling that only one of those three people in the car was actually Mexican. They also acknowledged that not only was it inherently inaccurate, but also wrong for the Border Patrol to have even used the term "Mexican" as the stated reason for stopping Brignoni-Ponce's car. But then, Johnson tells us, the Supreme Court ignored its own reasoning, and instead supported the border patrols' argument. They concluded that, "The likelihood that any given person of Mexican ancestry is an alien is high enough to make Mexican appearance a relevant factor." So already in a 1975 Supreme Court decision --and not just in 2010 in the state of Arizona's bill, the racial profiling of people who "look Mexican" to the detriment of the rights of a US citizen, in this case a Puerto Rican, had been nationally sanctioned by the Supreme Court of the land. And as Kevin Johnson noted, the Court's use of the term Mexican has since been extended to include all "Hispanics" in all subsequent cases.

Perhaps this is what Mark Twain meant when he commented that "History doesn't repeat itself," but it often "rhymes"....

In terms of the cultural foundations, then, not much has really changed over the past 50 years. So,

do we really think that we might be able to somehow “go back” to “the way things were?” And.... would we want to just pick up where we left off before 2016? Right now, as we watch Trump crash through and destroy the nation’s institutions, the political rituals and customary practices, the long-held values, ethical practices, beliefs, patterns of behavior and relationships across the government and, of course, across the world, there is a lot of hand ringing particularly visible among the media for example. That hand ringing comes together with a strong dose of nostalgia. And it seems to be leading to a collective shock, a suspended animation –a kind of inaction and passivity that comes from a sense of hopeless impotence.

In some ways, it’s understandable; but I’m not sure it’s really useful to us. Right now, I think there’s a real desire for change. But it comes together with a belief that all we can do is wait and see –pin our hopes on the impeachment process; or on the 2020 election --which everyone trusts --although not everyone believes-- will just rid the country of Trump.... y ya! Se acabó! -- We’ll be back on the road, and we’ll be able to get the democracy show on the road again...

Except that I really don’t think that getting rid of Trump is going to get anyone or anything back on the road, *así no mas*. In part, because that road that everyone thinks is still there, waiting to be gotten back onto, doesn’t exist anymore: I’m referring to that road that allowed the country to move forward by suppressing all the ugliness –the evil ugliness we call racism--and which continues to permeate every aspect of our institutions and daily life, no matter what part of the country we live in --that road doesn’t exist anymore. The country has indeed broken apart, the divisions are clearly spilling out everywhere in the open –and the overarching rule of white supremacy is visible to everyone and anyone who wants to acknowledge it –and particularly to Latinxs and people of color. In addition to the fact that that road doesn’t exist anymore, we also need to delve into some realities about the US that perhaps we have ignored for too long....

For example, perhaps we need to fully engage in a thought process outside of this apparent wall that Trump seems to have successfully corralled this society into. Can we come up with some real alternatives, that could help us all finally meet the real challenges? -- white supremacy for sure, but also climate change, the outrageous social and economic inequality, the lack of compassion, and its corollary, the ongoing decline in the value of human dignity – that we as a nation, as a society of diverse communities, as a democracy, are clearly now up against?

Right now, fear seems to be what is driving the main narrative that this nation’s leaders, whether on the left or the right have to offer. Those narratives of fear and the distrust --on both sides--seems to revolve around the idea that if we actually put forth a real alternative vision for this country, we will lose the election. So better to just stick to the past, no matter how ugly we can all see it is, elect one of our past leaders (Biden), and try to go back at whatever cost. The problem with fear is that ultimately, it doesn’t unite people at all. Fear breeds distrust, fear divides, it separates, fear sometimes ends up simply paralyzing any movement toward change. And more than anything it makes us think small.... And so holding on to it, embracing it, allowing ourselves to get swept away by it, is in so many ways, the best way to ensure that our fight becomes a fight about preserving whatever is left, regardless of its value or its destructiveness to us.

At the same time, I want to suggest that what we understand as “liberal democracy” as it is played out in contemporary US society, did have a big push toward its contemporary form of decline, just as the Reagan era was about to get started. For, that is when the entire US national community was officially divided --recategorized not as “one Indivisible nation”, but as 5 distinct racial/ethnic groups -- one of which, as we all know, was called “Hispanics.” And I believe that, that official division of the US population back in 1977, has culturally contributed to the decline of the US “community of citizens.” First, because resources were attached to that recategorization, and so instead of fighting for the rights of the entire citizenry, each so-called racial or ethnic group was forced to develop its own historical narrative, to justify why it should fight for itself. That, I believe, continues to explain at least to some extent, why we have all since been pitted against each other, as well as why it’s so difficult to come together.... It was a great way to divide and conquer.... And it worked well, right from the beginning. It has been accompanied by the rising backlash particularly apparent in the 1990s, against what was then being called multiculturalism, or diversity--which affected all people of color. Today, we can see that the stakes are different than they were back then –largely because the scapegoating has increasingly been narrowed down to a primary focus on one particular group ---at least for now, anyway. That group is the Latinx category, which is now renamed “immigrants”-- even though according the Pew Foundation, roughly 79% are US born citizens.^v

At one level, of course, it is a continuation of the vitriol and attacks against the very presence of people of Latin American descent, whose numbers as you know, began to grow significantly in the 1980s

and especially the 1990s, whether due to ongoing Civil Wars or the implementation of NAFTA. But it's important to note that the vitriol and attacks were all out in the open, even before Trump. They were audible certainly in the aftermath of the 2012 election, when Latinxs were vociferously singled out as "the other" –as the ones responsible for Obama's re-election. At least two prominent white supremacists, influential media commentators, for example, explained the consequences of the so-called "Latino vote" to their audiences the day after that 2012 election, in these terms: "We are losing the American way of life!"; "We've lost the country!"; "We've been outnumbered!;" (Rush Limbaugh); "The white establishment is now a minority!"(Bill O'Reilly).

So it's not surprising that earlier this month, on October 7th, Tomas Saenz, the head of MALDeF, commented on the current context, saying: "The discrimination is certainly more direct, more open than in my lifetime and certainly emanates from the president of the United States." [Trump's policies and practices seem,] "intent on eliminating the Latino community as an essential part of the country".^{vi} And so, we arrive at what I could call my "statement of the problem"-: that is policies that are "intent on eliminating the Latino community as an essential part of the country."^{vii}

To me, this is the context in which I think a major conference such as this one, organized by a major policy research institute such as this one, could really play a significant role for the future of the Latinx community. Certainly, the destruction of that past, the decline of everything we know can be disconcerting for sure --but only if we don't have anything to ground ourselves in, as we work to reimagine this diagnosis of the present and transform it. Fortunately for Latinx communities, and for all of us, whether as members of those communities and particularly as Latinx studies scholars, the narrative that we can create with our knowledge –drawn from our research for sure, but also drawn from Latinx history and experiences, doesn't have to be about fear. And it doesn't have to be about fear, because we have knowledge –and we've used that knowledge to come up with solutions before. As Carlos Fuentes once said, "the name of knowledge is imagination." And when it comes to solutions –certainly for transformative survival -- Latinxs have plenty of that. So, this is a moment that is signaling to us to use our imagination, to take this new opening, to step into this very real space for us to finally imagine, transform, and build a new path –nuestro camino. Not to see how we can fit into the horror that is the Trump administrations' vision for Latinxs—but instead to look into the history of Latinxs and other people of color that has been suppressed for so long, to begin to retell the history of this country's people. What should the Latinx narrative be about both for today, and for the future? After all, it is up to us as intellectuals and as scholars, to create and to provide Latinx communities with the narrative about and for our times, --and to put forth in and through our various disciplines (based on our particular research arena and data), the framework for how to re-imagine—and how to transform--this society, in a way that we can all get excited about.

I think we are already way ahead of anyone else if only because Latinx communities historically have long led the way in the struggles for the types of transformations we actually need. Even a cursory look at Latinx historical experiences of political and labor struggles, boycotts, acts of solidarities, shows that instead of individualism – Latinxs act collectively; instead of recoiling in fear, Latinxs collaborate as a community; instead of the hand ringing and the waiting for change –Latinxs have always ultimately had to take control of their lives and fight for their right to have rights. Instead of letting their own humanity down, Latinxs mobilize not only on their own behalf, but also for the human dignity of every person in this society.

The long history of Latinxs'. successful defense and upholding- of people's rights and dignity at the local level across this country has to be told. We have to disseminate that narrative, make sure the country knows, for example, the Latinx story of labor strikes and negotiations, of Latinx entrepreneurs, and the successful struggles to oust corruption from our communities, as we saw in Puerto Rico last July. We have to do more research and emphasize Latinxs' long history of participation and collaboration with African Americans, Native Americans and other groups –whether in the underground railroad, the abolition of slavery, the various labor strikes, and wars to defend this country. And then there's the creativity of the boycotts, which became a quintessential part of Latinx strategies for social change, because s Cesar Chavez explained, "... solutions don't come [from the vote]there's another place to vote and that is in the market place."^{viii} And the boycotts as we all know, were powerful—in the fields, and across the country. In several cases, they also included long term alliances with others, including allies such as women, indigenous and African American organizations, LGBTQ groups, labor unions and community and grassroots organizations. More recently, on May 1, 2006, we saw, for example, the massive day-long boycott of schools and business, that Latinx immigrant organizations put together for joining other national origin groups during *El Gran Paro Estadounidense* ("The Great American

Strike.)^{ix}And again, it's worth recalling that that mobilization, wasn't about material issues like wages or better working conditions –it came as a response to the direct attack on the dignity of all immigrants – and Latinxs in particular—by Sensenbrenner's HR 4437 bill, that sought to criminalize all immigrants.^x

I certainly believe that the transformation of democracy will entail finding ways of mobilizing with an emphasis on human dignity and justice. I mean, whether as academics, as citizens, as community members, we need to both draw from and rely on the creativity of Latinx history and experiences, to re-affirm the value of people over profit, of justice over corporate privilege, of equality over exploitation, of citizenship rights over tyrannical oppression in the twenty-first century. And as I mentioned before, part of that process entails revisiting the specificities of the Mexican Americans and Puerto Rican experiences as historical minorities to find new ways of better disseminating their respective experiences as long time members of the US citizenry and national community, making their experiences thoroughly known to all US citizens and residents, regardless of ethnic or racial background.

But beyond spreading knowledge about our own communities, I also think it's important to point to additional avenues that we might consider as part of our work as scholars and intellectuals. For example, how can we find ways of reinforcing solidarities and alliances among people of Latinx descent, as well as with the African American and Native American communities. I strongly believe that those ties, those solidarities—which again, are already present in US history -- are worth exploring so that we can find more ways of joining with other people of color; their histories, as Latinx scholars like Laura Pulido, Paul Ortiz, Natalia Molina, Ed Morales among many others have argued, are so entwined with the histories and contemporary experiences of Latinx communities in this country, and beyond. In his recent book, *African American and Latinx History of the United States*,^{xi} Paul Ortiz goes even further, arguing that there is a need for what he calls “International Emancipation” –a need to rethink how we frame the serious social, economic and political problems we confront today, and that for 500 years, the working people of the Americas have lived in a capitalist, global economy, built on the violence and destructiveness motivated by the absolute denial of human dignity. Otherwise, no substantive long-term experience of democracy seems actually possible. Seen in this broader context, our scholarship can better bring to light not only some of the policy implications of having thousands of refugees on the border, but also examples of solidarities and collaborations whether in and across national contexts, or in local arenas, that to date remain hidden by the dominant narrative. I believe these are the narratives that can contribute to helping us to rebuild community, that can allow US democracy itself to be rebuilt and transformed. As Latinx scholars, we need to reshape –and we can transform-- the narrative of this country's working people, and finally understand their lived experiences not as divided, statistical, bureaucratic, racial or ethnic group categories; --and also, not as the current false and divisive distinctions between citizens and immigrants (as if a wall can and should define who is human and who is not!); but instead as people, each and every one of us, with the right to dignity, to life, and to the right to have rights.

Finally, I also want to say that as Latinx studies scholars and educators, I increasingly see our role more as facilitators of a new way of using our classrooms –one that turns our students into participants in the creation of a democratic public sphere; and uses our knowledge of the Latinx historical experience to get them—and non-Latinxs-- to think more about their own experience as citizens.

Can we, for example re-focus our scholarship and discussions in conferences such as this one, so that it includes how we can all live as a collectivity in active solidarity with one another including of course with migrant or otherwise dispossessed fellow human beings? Can we engage our students in the discussion of how to achieve that much needed transformation? Can we find a way of showing our students why we need to change the narrative, a way to explain the urgency? And then, can we ask them to participate with us in finding new ways to contribute to this conversation? One thing that seems clear to me is that we need new ways of teaching, of making it clear to our students as much as to ourselves—that not continuously and actively discussing that we are members of a community and what that means; and not acknowledging our humanity and that of others, is today reinforcing the hate, the prejudice and government-sponsored scare-tactics that try to wall us off from each other, such that it demobilizes and demoralizes us all.

And so, I want to suggest here that what we each practice and achieve as scholars, as professors, as citizens, within our own local communities –however we define that local community,--whether it's our classroom, our neighborhood, or town or city, -- may be a solid basis for transforming democracy into a true mechanism for inclusion and representation of all members of American society. And as for the seeming destruction of this country and its institutions by the current administration and its disempowering narratives, I want to end with the wise and I think very prescient advice offered by the sociologist, Zigmunt Bauman a few years ago: (2009:2). He was talking about the unpredictability of

change. And he said:

Unpredictability breeds anxiety and fear... But the unsteadiness, softness and pliability of things may also trigger ambition and resolve: one can make things better than they are, and need not settle for what there is since no verdict of nature is final, no resistance of reality is unbreakable. One can now dream of a different life – more decent, bearable or enjoyable. And if in addition one has confidence in one’s power of thought and in the strength of one’s muscles, one can also act on those dreams and perhaps even force them to come true...^{xii}

I trust that Bauman’s insight will also help to inform your discussions this weekend

Thank you.

ⁱ Keynote Address for the Julian Samora Research Institute’s 30 Year Celebration Conference: “Latinx and the Renewal of US Democracy.”

ⁱⁱ On the US English movement, see for example, Ana Celia Zentella. 1997. The Hispanophobia of the Official English movement in the US. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 127(1): Pages 71–86. ISSN (Online) 1613-3668, ISSN (Print) 0165-2516, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.1997.127.71>; and Ronald Schmidt Sr. 2000. *Language Policy & Identity in the U.S.* Temple U. Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Under Reagan, the median income grew, in contrast to both Bush the younger and Bush the elder. (The median income declined 3.2 per cent during the elder Bush’s single term.) When Reagan was done, the median income stood at \$47, 614 (again in constant 2008 dollars), 8.1 per cent higher than when Jimmy Carter left office in 1980. But despite that income growth, both overall and childhood poverty were higher when Reagan rode off into the sunset than when he arrived. The number of poor Americans increased from 29.3 million in 1980 to 31.7 million in 1988, an increase of 8.4 per cent. The number of children in poverty trended up from 11.5 million when Carter left to 12.5 million when Reagan stepped down, a comparable increase of 7.9 per cent. The total share of Americans in poverty didn’t change over Reagan’s eight years (at 13 per cent), but the share of children in poverty actually increased (from 18.3 to 19.5 per cent) despite the median income gains.”
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2009/09/closing-the-book-on-the-bush-legacy/26402/>

^{iv} As the Pew Research foundation documented at the time, Clinton’s 66% share of the Latinx vote in 2016, was already lower than Obama’s 71% share had been in 2012 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/29/hillary-clinton-wins-latino-vote-but-falls-below-2012-support-for-obama/>).

^v Luis Noe-Bustamante. Key facts about U.S. Hispanics and their diverse heritage, Pew Hispanic Center; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/16/key-facts-about-u-s-hispanics/>; Sept. 16, 2019

^{vi} Dani Anguiano. 'It's worse than ever': how Latinos are changing their lives in Trump's America. *The Guardian*. Oct. 7, 2019
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/06/latinos-trump-hate-crimes-el-paso>

^{vii} Dani Anguiano (ibid)

^{viii} Cesar Chavez Explains Boycotts. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLqDu5yZj0M>

^{ix} On the 2006 mobilizations, cf Chris Zepeda-Millán. (2017) *Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, and Activism*. Cambridge U. Press. Amalia Pallares and Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, eds.(2010) *Marcha: Latino Chicago and the Immigrant Rights Movement*. U of Illinois Press.

^x In this case, the boycotts included schools and businesses, as people urged others to participate and refrain from going to work and from consumption. Movement participants set aside their legal status and joined together in a movement to collectively affirm their belonging, and they waved signs that said we work hard, we pay taxes –the major pillars on which the American Dream is built.

^{xi} Paul Ortiz. 2018. *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*. New York: Beacon Press.

^{xii} Zygmunt Bauman, 2009. *Identity in the Globalizing World*. In Anthony Elliot and Paul du Gay. (eds). *Identity in Question*. New York: Sage Publications.