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Border Issues Demand Empathy: Speakers at Colby's Walker Symposium consider ways to consider La Frontera

Charlie Eichacker

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Border Issues Demand Empathy

Speakers at Colby's Walker Symposium consider ways to consider La Frontera

By Charlie Eichacker '08 | Illustrations by Robert Hernandez

Mexican-American fiction writer Helena Maria Viramontes strives to help her readers understand the harder parts of the Chicano experience. Her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, for example, is about the dangerous lives of migrant farm workers in California.

Viramontes—one of four speakers participating in an Oct. 17 multidisciplinary symposium organized by the Latin American Studies Program—began her address with a cautionary tale. She recalled an advisor she had while enrolled in the fiction-writing program at University of California, Irvine, in the early 1980s. He called her writing “a cheap imitation of Gabriel García Márquez,” Viramontes said. The advisor told her, “The trouble with your work is that you’re writing about Chicanos. You should be writing about people.”

Ever since, Viramontes said, she’s worked hard to remind her audience “how important it is to have empathy, how utterly, utterly important it is to see the world in other people’s eyes.” (On the Márquez comment, she added, “I was only offended at the word ‘cheap.’”)

The subject of the symposium was the U.S.-Mexican border—*La Frontera*. Joining Viramontes were two anthropologists and a public policy professor who recently served in Mexico’s Ministry of the Interior. All of the speakers, said conference organizer Professor Ben Fallaw, director of Colby’s Latin American Studies Program, brought perspectives that cut through the noise coming from the national media.

A subtitle for each of their presentations could have been, “How to see the world through other people’s eyes.” Like Viramontes, each speaker touched on the importance of empathy when trying to understand topics such as immigration, drug trafficking, and the negative effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Empathy is a quality that’s been conspicuously absent from recent discussions of our southern neighbor, including those prompted by Donald Trump’s observation that Mexico is “sending people that have lots of problems. ... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Trump’s controversial

comments have made the news many times over, but a different border issue was in the headlines when Fallaw was considering the theme for this year's symposium: the tens of thousands of unattended children, many from Central America, who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border last year.

"The mass incarceration, especially of children who had arrived without documents, was a subject of great concern," Fallaw said. "A federal judge ordered that children be treated in a better way since then, but this is still a problem."

René Zenteno, Mexico's undersecretary of population, migration and religious affairs from 2010 to 2012, used data to point out that Mexican immigration has slowed considerably in recent years. Anthropologist

Howard Campbell said he has interviewed members of the Mexican drug trade and found their motivations to be economic need and status—not some inherent badness. Plus, Campbell argued, the great demand for drugs and availability of firearms in the United States enables cross-border drug trafficking. The other anthropologist on the panel, Alyshia Gálvez, has been researching the corn industry and criticized NAFTA for the way it's allowed cheap, U.S.-grown corn to proliferate—a boon for soda companies that require corn syrup and a bust for the health of communities that can more easily acquire sugary beverages.

That the symposium considered so many different disciplines is fitting for Colby's Latin American Studies Program, which requires students to study everything from language to history to economics. The program is also tied to the College's interest in attracting a

RENÉ ZENTENO | ALYSHIA GÁLVEZ | HOWARD CAMPBELL | HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

LA FRONTERA

9TH ANNUAL WALKER SYMPOSIUM
LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM
COLBY COLLEGE

SAN FRANCISCO
SAN DIEGO
TIJUANA
SANTA FE
EL PASO
CIUDAD JUAREZ
CHIHUAHUA
SAN ANTONIO
CORPUS CHRISTI
MATAMOROS
TAMPICO
VERACRUZ
MEXICO CITY
FORT LEAVENWORTH
NEW ORLEANS

OCT. 17, 2015
9 A.M.-4:45 P.M.
PARKER-REED ROOM,
SCHAIR-SWENSON-WATSON ALUMNI CENTER
RECEPTION: 5-6 P.M., DIAMOND ATRIUM

Colby

more diverse student body, according to Fallaw. Through its relationship with the Posse Foundation, for example, Colby recently started recruiting in Houston, Texas—far closer to Latin America than Waterville.

Maine is also becoming more diverse as a whole, Fallaw said, and events like October's ninth annual Walker Symposium are useful for students who eventually want to work in Latin America. One of those students, Caroline Tegeler '16, studied abroad in Mexico and said she appreciated the chance to hear from experts with knowledge of an area she experienced firsthand. Another student, Meghan Kelly '17, was interning in Mexico last summer when Trump made his now-infamous comments. "He's certainly not popular among the people I was talking to," she said.

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