It is such an incredible honor to be standing here in front of you, being recognized for my teaching and the work I've done to integrate the study of US Latino/a literature and community-based learning. I know that I'm extremely lucky to be part of a University that values and advances both Latino Studies and community engagement. The strides we've made as an institution in these areas have made an indelible impact thus far. I can't think of a more crucial moment for Notre Dame to continue its leadership role and provide a model for other colleges and universities to follow. Latino Studies seem more important than ever, and the connection with our Latino/a communities has never been greater.

I do not take for granted the support that Notre Dame has given me because I've seen how Latino/a Studies—like other minority studies—is often relegated to the margins. Don't get me wrong, the field has made great strides in the last decades, but as recent events have made clear, we are still facing many obstacles. Most of these are the products of stereotypes, fear, misinformation, and misunderstanding. One particular issue that concerns me is that of invisibility, which I see reflected in a range of areas. Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of this is House Bill 2281, the infamous "ethnic studies ban," which passed in Arizona in 2010, and which, with one swift stroke of a pen, effectively eliminated Mexican-American Studies programs from Tucson-area schools. This happened despite the fact that the program had been shown to improve student outcomes and graduation rates among minority and at-risk students.[1] HB 2281 sought to prohibit courses or classes that

[1] See the study "Missing the (Student Achievement) Forest for All the (Political) Trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies Controversy in Tucson"

"promote the overthrow of the United States government; promote resentment toward a race or class of people; are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group; and advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals."[2] Many have denounced this controversial law, including the Modern Languages Association, which in a 2012 statement referred to it as an, "attack on Mexican American citizens and cultures" (MLA statement, February 2012). Latino/a Studies scholars know that the elimination of this program meant much more than an attack on Mexican-American culture and history. We watched, astonished, as canonical US Latino/a literary works were prohibited in the classrooms. Literary classics by Chicano/a authors Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Tomás Rivera, Dominican-American author Junot Díaz, and Puerto Rican poet Martín Espada, among dozens of others, were, in effect, physically removed from classrooms and carted away to storage facilities. For academics like me, who have taught and studied the very literature targeted by HB 2281, words can hardly convey the sense of loss that these events generated. It's hard to understand how the law can be used to try to erase a culture or the memory of a people.

But many have fought against the ban, especially a number of the young students who had seen incredible academic gains after discovering a literature that they could claim as their own. By studying those works, they had been able to see themselves in the broader narrative of this nation. Armed with a new sense of self-

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[2] See the text of the bill at: http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/hb2281p.pdf

esteem, they had begun to dream about the possibility of truly playing a role in the betterment of our society.

We can learn a lot from what transpired in Arizona. Even if the ban does not affect us directly, it speaks volumes about the perceived role—or lack thereof—that Latino/a literature and culture play in the broader US society. Based on my own students' reactions every semester, I'm aware that, generally speaking, this material is not being taught at our middle schools and high schools. In the best-case scenario, a few students in my classes are able to explain the difference between Latino/a and Latin American literatures when I ask them at the beginning of the semester. Sometimes, one or two of them have read a work by Sandra Cisneros, or perhaps Julia Álvarez. In terms of historical figures, they tend to recognize the name César Chávez, but they confess not having learned much about him. The Chicano Movement? Usually news to them. They thought the civil rights movement was only about issues affecting African-Americans. I can give you a long list of examples, but the bottom line is that every semester I am reminded of the gaps and silences in my students' educations. And I ask myself, can't silence also work as a symbolic ban?

When we deny Latino/a children and youth of their chance to see their own stories reflected in books, we deny them the right to see themselves as integral to the fabric of this nation. When we don't implement a curriculum –from preschool through college—that includes diverse voices and alternate histories, all of our children—not just those who are Latino/as or other minorities—suffer the consequences of not seeing and understanding the complex textures of our diverse society. This is how a nation begins to build its own internal walls. Today we are

experiencing the results of this literary and historical whitewashing. But we are also witnessing a push against these erasures in the works of many Latino/a authors who are rewriting history and the narrative of this country. Take for instance the work of Latino/a children's author Duncan Tonatiuh, whose book *Separate is Never Equal* tells the lesser known story of Mexican-Puerto Rican child Sylvia Méndez, whose family fought to end school segregation in a case (*Méndez v. Westminster School District*) that preceded the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) by seven years. Or, consider the poem titled "Purifying America's Textbooks of Ethnic Studies" by Cuban-American poet Dan Vera, which he wrote as a response to HB 2281. In this poem, the poetic voice considers what might have happened if key Cuban figures had not provided their support during the American Revolution, as the following stanza illustrates:

> Hearing the commotion,
>
> Francisco de Saavédra de Sangronis has stirred in his Andalusian grave
>
> demanding that while you're purifying the record
>
> you return the half a million dollars in silver
>
> that he collected in twenty four hours
>
> to fund your great final victory in Yorktown. (*Speaking Wiri Wiri*)

And, speaking about the American Revolution, let's not forget that the cultural phenomenon that is *Hamilton: An American Musical*, is the brainchild of US-born Puerto Rican Lin-Manuel Miranda, and as such, a work of Puerto Rican, Latino/a, and American literatures—all at once. So, when we ask ourselves what we can do as

a nation to heal our divisions and to build a stronger, more inclusive society, let's not forget the power of literature to pave the way.

It all begins with stories. The problem is that we don't listen to certain voices. There's not a lack of authors and poets; there's a lack of readers. There's also not a lack of Latino/a and other minority historical actors, people who helped build this nation from its inception; but sometimes there's a lack of willingness to integrate them into the dominant historical narrative. In a way, we have normalized the exclusion of minority voices from this country's narrative. And as a result, the task for those of us who teach US Latino/a and other minority literatures can be as frustrating as it is rewarding. When my students lament not having learned more about US Latino/as during high school, I remind them they didn't have much control over the curriculum. But I also tell them that now that they're in college, it is their responsibility to make up for that lost time by listening to those stories that have remained absent from their U.S. literature and history books.

I tell them this because as a literature professor, I'm convinced that without a sound historical background, my students' understanding of the literature would be compromised. How can they understand the foundational Chicano poem "I am Joaquín" without being exposed to the "other side" of the story about the Mexican-American War? How can they understand the works of Tomás Rivera without knowing about the Chicano Civil Rights Movement? How can they understand Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* or Martín Espada's piercing poetry without knowing about Puerto Rican history? How can the poetry of William Archila make sense to them if they're not familiar with the history of the Salvadoran Civil War?

What students discover is that, unlike what many of them have been led to believe—that is, that Latin American and US histories stand alone and independent of one another—the truth is that the histories of these regions are deeply intertwined. [Juan González's book and documentary titled *Harvest of Empire* is a good place to start]. Gaining a balanced perspective of the history of US-Latin American relations is the first step toward understanding the presence in this country of the highly heterogeneous group that we call "Latino/as," and which includes people of so many races, ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultural backgrounds.

Armed with the perspective that only historical knowledge can add to the study of literary works, students begin to see the value of US Latino/a literature. More importantly, I have seen how they begin to claim that "minority" literature as part of their broader cultural heritage, regardless of their own backgrounds. I have seen how they thrive learning about and finding connections with groups that at the beginning of the semester many perceived as unfamiliar and even "foreign." That's the power of literature, it provides a space that allows us to discuss delicate and important topics; and it allows us to connect with one another. Listening to Latino/a stories through the study of narrative, poetry, and theatre, becomes a powerful act of community-building. Books are bridges. We depend on them in order to cross cultural borders.

And yet, as important as this is, we all know that a holistic education depends not only on what we learn from books, but also on what we learn from experience. As physician and educator Maria Montessori once said: "Education is a natural process carried out by the human individual, and is acquired not by listening to

words, but by experiences in the environment." One of the main reasons why I felt compelled to integrate Community Based Learning (CBL) into my US Latino/a literature courses was for this reason; I wanted my students to experience "literature coming alive," and to understand its power to foster social change. [There's no standard definition for CBL, but it refers to a pedagogy that combines community engagement with structured learning, where engagement is based on reciprocity, and therefore both students and community partners should benefit from the partnership; the students' goal shouldn't be to "save" anyone, but rather to share their expertise and encouragement while learning from the children and the environment]. In addition to its potential to encourage a deeper appreciation for literature, I felt that student engagement with the local Latino/a community would allow my students (who are mostly non-Latino/a) to learn from and about this population, and to connect with this group in ways that literature also tends to promote. Although teaching US Latino/a letters had proven fulfilling throughout my career, I had always been aware of the significant social and cultural distance between most of my students and the material I teach. Therefore, I thought that one way to bridge that gap could be through CBL, and the opportunity it would afford my students to experience a weekly "immersion" in the local Latino/a community. Personal interactions, I believe, have the potential to open the eyes of my students to the issues and challenges affecting the local and national Latino/a community.

Because of the demographic profile of most of my students, I came to see CBL as the "missing link" in my courses. After eleven consecutive semesters of teaching upper-level US Latino/a literature courses with a CBL component, and with over

4,500 hours of student engagement with the local Latino/a community, I am convinced that in the majority of cases, this pedagogical approach leads to more profound student learning and a deeper sense of civic engagement. This is because CBL links the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom with real-life experiences rooted in the community. In this sense, it is an instructional methodology that provides us with ways to bridge the "town-gown" divide, and in the process, often inspires students to become civically engaged and committed to social transformation. My own experiences have shown that bringing students into the community within the context of rigorous academic course work, often produces deeper learning outcomes. Through tutoring and mentoring children at La Casa de Amistad—a local organization that serves the Latino/a community through a range of programs (tutoring, mentoring, college preparation, citizenship classes, food pantry) that promote education and literacy—many students begin to see the bigger picture and find common ground with children with whom many never thought they could share anything in common. A significant number of my students have gained a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges of growing up as a Latino and a minority in this country. This understanding, in turn, fosters empathy. And perhaps more importantly, many become aware of their own privilege while confronting and challenging the stereotypes that society tends to perpetuate about US Latinos/as. This is how social transformation takes place: one student at a time.

The world is our classroom. While students may memorize definitions for immigration, transculturation, racism, poverty, bilingualism, achievement gap, etc.,

such “knowledge” pales in comparison to the ability to understand these concepts after consistent interaction with the local Latino/a community. These words gain a much deeper meaning because the concepts become personalized. Many students in my classes come to realize that an “immigrant” is not just a statistic, or an abstract figure at the center of today’s political debates, but rather the little boy they have been helping all semester with his math homework, someone they see struggling with English, eager to earn good grades in order to be a doctor someday. All of a sudden, “undocumented immigrant” ceases to be a “dangerous” and criminalized figure, but rather the sweet and soft-spoken mother of the siblings they have been mentoring, someone they come to admire after learning of the risks she took fleeing inconceivable gang or cartel violence in order to give her children a chance at life. In the end, it’s about listening to, connecting with, and humanizing those who have become dehumanized in today’s society. Dialogue is key, and so is being willing to hear other people’s stories. When students learn from those who are typically “invisible” or marginalized, they are more likely to recognize the interconnections that bind us as all humans, as well as to respect our differences. Once we begin to cultivate solidarity, understanding, empathy, and tolerance, we are opening the doors to a more peaceful and inclusive future.

Experience and human interaction are crucial both to learning and to producing social transformation. However, in academia it’s easy to lose sight of this truth and ignore the potential that we have to foster positive social change by connecting our academics to the world around us. For years I’ve been hearing my students say how glad they are that my CBL course has pushed them to break away

from what they call the "Notre Dame bubble." It's easy to remain secluded in our ivory tower, living under the illusion that our work exists in a vacuum. I try to remind myself, and my students, that we have much to gain by trying to link our intellectual pursuits with the needs of the underprivileged communities around us. I urge them to consider how what they do, or will do in the future, can have a direct on society. I encourage them to be open to breaking the mold, to take risks, and to get out of their comfort zones. All of this they accomplish through the work they do at La Casa de Amistad and I remind them that in doing so, they are choosing to be bridges.

As a society, we're experiencing unprecedented levels of divisiveness, intolerance, and hatred. This is why we can no longer afford to remain complacent within the four walls of the classroom. The stakes are simply too high. I've been lucky enough to witness incredible growth in my students throughout the years, a growth that is the product of the literature they read and their experiences at La Casa de Amistad. Allow me to share with you a few of their comments from their final reflections:

• "Going to La Casa helped me become aware of the regional population outside the 'Notre Dame bubble,' especially regarding the struggles immigrants face, from language barriers and education, to socioeconomic issues."

• "I learned a lot about my personal biases as a result of the CBL component. Realizing these assumptions that I have, and then meeting real people with real problems while learning about the overarching context, led me to change my

opinion on several issues concerning the education system, undocumented migration, and racial tensions here in South Bend."

• "I now have a clearer picture of what being an immigrant in this country can mean, and I've developed awareness and gratitude for the privileges I've had."

• "As we talked about in class, working with the children of today is an investment in the future of America—a future that gets brighter when children of all races and ethnicities are all given equal opportunities. Programs like La Casa do just that by trying to give the best possible experience and support to the Latino community of South Bend. La Casa makes a tremendous difference in the lives of these children every day. I am lucky to have been able to be part of something so inspiring and special and want to continue service such as this in the future."

• "If more people could study this literature and get to know kids like those at La Casa, there would be more peace and understanding in this world."

My students' words have stayed with me over the years and have been an important reminder of what's at really stake. And it is much more than simply mastering literary analysis. I want my students to learn from the literature and engage with the community that has produced it. This is how we begin to break down the walls produced by racial, ethnic, national, class, gender, citizenship status, and religious differences. As new generations begin to appreciate diversity, and see it as the gift that it is, those values will transform society into a more inclusive space. Because I have seen, firsthand, the transformative power of US Latino/a literature and CBL, I can't imagine teaching this literature without the help of the community.

It’s ironic to think that a “minor” literature that has remained marginal to both the U.S. and Latin American canons can be such a powerful tool to promote social justice and positive change. But I see it happen every semester. Books are bridges. And we can be bridges too.