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Spencer Symposium on Immigration and Education

***“We Are Here”: (Im)migrant Youth at the Center of Social Activism and  
Critical Scholarship***

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*Introduction and Overview of Symposium*

During the winter quarter of 2007, the UCLA Research Training Grant (RTG) Spencer Fellows<sup>1</sup> and their faculty advisors began meetings to plan and organize a symposium that would focus on immigrant youth and education. The symposium would be sponsored by the Spencer Foundation and guidance would be provided by faculty advisors, but decisions about the conference structure, goals and focus would be left to the graduate students themselves. Following five months of planning, the Spencer Symposium on Immigration and Education entitled, “We Are Here: (Im)migrant Youth at the Center of Social Activism and Critical Educational Scholarship”<sup>2</sup> took place on May 3, 2007. In thinking about what we wanted this symposium to achieve, we reflected on the events that took place in the spring of 2006, when immigrant communities and their allies mobilized across the United States in defense of their human rights. One of the rally chants was, “*Aquí estamos y no nos vamos!*” [We are here and we will not leave.] In the spirit of solidarity and human rights engendered by this movement, we, as Spencer Fellows, wanted this symposium to address and transform the

conditions of immigrant youth and families. These mobilizations and the responses they elicited have helped focus important issues relating to the education of youth from many immigrant communities. In light of the one-year anniversary of these marches, this symposium sought to bring together youth, community organizations, educators and members of the academic research community to present critical work that centralizes immigrant youth in both social activism and educational scholarship. Moreover, we wanted this symposium to foster an ongoing dialogue that both addresses and assists in transforming the discriminatory conditions that immigrant youth and families encounter, both inside and outside of schools.

With these goals in mind, we began the conceptual planning of the symposium. It took many weeks of discussion to draft a conceptual framework with the following guiding premise: Immigrant youth have intellect, passion and powerful life experiences. They also have much at stake in the debates surrounding their schools and anti-immigration legislation. Unfortunately, youth are often ignored, both in research and social activism. Work that fails to recognize youth as catalysts for social change risks undermining the potential of a more democratic and just society. Specifically, the goals of this symposium were:

- 1. Learn from our work:* To explore the bodies of knowledge and practices that inform (and transform) critical work in community organizations, schools and academic research. In particular, we seek work that centralizes immigrant youth and education.
- 2. Future steps:* To redefine relationships among youth, community organizations, educators and academic researchers; to share strategies for using our work as tools for community organizing, educational practice, policy reform and social transformation.

The Spencer group was careful in choosing a keynote speaker and panelists for the symposium that would speak to the ways they work towards connecting academic research to social activism while centering the experiences of immigrant youth. In our search for researchers and activists who are incorporating these ideas into their research agendas and community work, we found a very limited number of individuals undertaking these tasks. However, among those we found, their efforts in academia and the community were powerful and inspiring. Dr. Sunaina Maira, Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at UC Davis, was keynote speaker of the event. She discussed how Southeast Asian immigrant youth and their unique forms of political activism are largely ignored in discussions of globalization. Dr. David García, Lecturer in the UCLA Department of Chicana/o Studies discussed how he has been able to

facilitate the personal and educational transformation of Chicana/o college students, many of whom are from immigrant families, through his class on oral histories and performance art. Dr. Kysa Nygreen, a UC President Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Santa Cruz and UC Santa Cruz student group, SIN Vergüenza! Students Informing Now (S.I.N.), discussed the collaborative writing process utilized to document the experiences of undocumented AB 540 students at UCSC. Benji Chang, doctoral student in the UCLA Department of Education, presented his work with immigrant youth of color in Los Angeles. He described how he utilizes critical pedagogy to create an environment of transformative learning and social justice in the classroom. Following the keynote speaker and panelists, the symposium held a poster session showcasing work on immigration and education by community members, students, educators and researchers. The session was designed to be an interactive space where symposium presenters and attendees could engage in dialogue around that lie at the intersection of immigration and education. Our hope was that this space would enable participants and presenters alike to connect these issues to their own work in the community, the academy and beyond. Finally, the symposium concluded with a reception and “open mic” where attendees were invited to perform artistic expressions that reflected the critical discussions of the day. Some performances included powerful spoken word pieces by UCLA graduate student Denise Pacheco and undergraduate student Maria C. Olivares. A local community organization, HabiArts,<sup>3</sup> also displayed several pieces of artwork throughout the symposium reflecting the struggle for human rights.

### *South Asian Immigrant Youth and Empire*

Dr. Sunaina Maira, Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at UC Davis, delivered a keynote speech that addressed important issues around the political activism of Southeast Asian immigrant youth. Dr. Maria shared the findings of an ethnographic study which explored the impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror on the political identities of Southeast Asian Muslim immigrant youth living on the East Coast. Dr. Maira highlighted several key issues in her study that were especially significant given the focus and goals of the Spencer symposium. First, she acknowledged the need to re-define our understandings of “activism” and “scholarship,” particularly in the context of youth in educational settings. Second, she addressed how the efforts of youth, and especially youth of color, are often marginalized within academic research on youth political development specifically, but also within the academy in a general sense. Third, Dr. Maira discussed U.S. Empire as the root of the marginalization of these youth in particular, but also communities of color in general. Through this discussion, Dr. Maira accurately contextualized the focus and goals of the Spencer symposium while problematizing the very language we use to define these goals. These key

issues provided a strong foundation for a productive dialogue to occur throughout the day.

*Facilitating Personal and Educational Transformation through Critical Race Theater*

In winter quarter of 2007, Dr. David García was able to use his dissertation research as a pedagogical tool through the creation of his UCLA undergraduate Chicana/o Studies course entitled, “Social History in Performance Art: A Seminar Featuring Culture Clash”. The course featured Culture Clash, the premier Chicano-Latino performance troupe in the U.S. In his dissertation study, García explored how Culture Clash utilizes ethnographic, site-specific performance to illuminate the lives and histories of marginalized communities while consciously challenging social and racial injustice. He names this method critical race theater. In his undergraduate course, Dr. García joined with Culture Clash and teaching assistant Corina López Benavides to translate Culture Clash methodology into classroom pedagogy. Students in the class collected their own ethnographic data and oral histories to create performance monologues of their families and communities. Through this class, students were able to document the stories and histories of Chicana/o communities, a process that led to educational and personal transformation. During the presentation, two students from this course performed their powerful monologues. Jennifer Morales performed her comedic monologue, “Olvera Street”<sup>4</sup> about a mid-life U.S. born Chicana’s experiences growing up in East Los Angeles and her struggles with coming to terms with her identity. Her magnetic interpretation included light-hearted references about trips to Olvera Street as well as insightful reflections about her lack of educational opportunities and work as a UCLA custodian. Aimee López performed “Hot-dog Vendor,” based on the life of a Mexican immigrant woman selling hotdogs from a vendor cart in downtown Los Angeles to sustain her family. Aimee takes us into the heart and soul of her character's life. Maria Olivares performed her piece about her father’s journey to the U.S. as a Mexican migrant worker. She exposed the exploitation of migrant workers and the personal sacrifices they make in seeking better opportunities for their families. All the students delivered incredible performances, illuminating both their research and artistic talent. In addition, these portrayals demonstrate the commitment and pedagogical work of the educational team—Dr. García, Corina Benavides López and Culture Clash.

*Students Informing Now (S.I.N.): Youth Activism for Racial Justice in Education*

Dr. Kysa Nygreen, UC President’s Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Santa Cruz, Veronica Velez, UCLA doctoral student and UCSC student activist group SIN

Vergüenza! Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) joined efforts to document the formation and development of the S.I.N. organization. Kysa, Veronica and the members of this group, or SINistas, worked together in a collaborative writing process (a total of sixteen authors) to create a journal article about the development of S.I.N. as a current example of youth activism for greater educational access. During this process, the group works toward transforming traditional research methodologies to more accurately portray the student's lived experiences. Moreover, the article would function as a way to document the experiences of its student members within higher education. The S.I.N. organization began out of necessity for its members who lacked adequate institutional support to continue their college educations. Many of the SINistas are from immigrant families and some had been admitted into the university under the AB 540 law because of their status as undocumented immigrant students. Thus, the S.I.N. organization was formed as a support network for AB 540 students at UCSC. This presentation described the emergence of the S.I.N. organizations as a site of resistance at the intersection of the youth-led movements for educational justice and immigrant rights. Moreover, this presentation demonstrated the powerful role that immigrant youth can play in their own struggle for greater educational access and equity.

*Transformative Learning and Social Justice for Chinatown Youth*

Benji Chang, Urban Schooling doctoral student in the UCLA Department of Education presented his work, "The Next Movement? Teaching and Organizing for Self-Determination". Chang discussed how he used theory to inform a teaching and community organizing pedagogy in the classroom as an elementary school teacher in the downtown area of Los Angeles. Chang described how this area in particular offers unique insights into the educational experiences of Students of Color who negotiate multiple issues within their community such as race, class, ethnicity, language, and immigration. Chang's work follows a cohort of Los Angeles youth labeled as "the bad class" from the first through the fifth grades attending an overcrowded and under-resourced inner-city school located in a racially segregated, working class community of Los Angeles. Through his classroom pedagogy, Chang encourages his students to develop a critical consciousness about their school, community and neighborhood conditions. He simultaneously provides them the necessary tools for engaging in community organizing and transforming those conditions. During this process, Chang shared his findings that revealed the student cohort out-performed all other classes in the second grade on high-stakes state and national standardized tests. Students demonstrated high levels of engagement and achievement, built a culture of teamwork, community, pride and service for four years while in Chang's classroom. In his three-year follow-up of the student cohort he found students

continue grassroots community building projects long after they have left his classroom. However, he also found that some students are now experiencing low achievement in middle school and high school. Chang raises key questions about what happens when students leave affirming and empowering classrooms and enter oppressive schooling environments which do not address issues of power, class and race nor encourage students' self and cultural identities. Chang's work makes an important contribution about the transformative power of critical pedagogy with youth and the potential of grassroots organizing to counter the oppressive forces students face in and out of school.

Together, the keynote speaker and panelists participated in a question and answer session at the end of their presentations. During this session the audience had the opportunity to engage with the panelists about their projects and perspectives on immigrant youth and education. The presentations provided valuable strategies on the ways research is coupled with youth activism to achieve what panelist Benji Chang names *personal and educational transformation*. Each presenter provided powerful models, through their various research projects, of how researchers can work towards connecting academia and activism while centering the experiences of immigrant youth, and providing a space for youth empowerment. Moreover, these projects highlighted the efforts of immigrant youth, whose role and agency in transforming marginalized educational conditions are often unacknowledged and ignored within academia.

### *Evaluations*

At the end of the symposium, the approximately 145 conference attendees provided feedback about the day's events with an evaluation form.<sup>5</sup> Through these evaluations we found that attendees primarily consisted of undergraduate and graduate students at UCLA as well as several UCLA faculty members. However, students from neighboring institutions such as the University of Southern California and Santa Monica College also attended. Los Angeles community organizations and advocacy groups with an interest in immigration in education also attended the symposium. The evaluations also provided insight to the symposium presentations, poster session and reception.

The evaluations revealed that overall, participants were highly satisfied with the symposium. As part of the evaluation process, participants were asked to identify and comment on the part of the symposium they enjoyed the most. An overwhelming majority of the participants (67%) identified the panel presentations as being their favorite part of the symposium. Seven of these respondents commented on their overall satisfaction with the panel presentations in general. For example, one participant wrote, "Panel discussion. Very informative and powerful. I learned something valuable from each presentation" and another participant wrote, "The panel, as it personalized the issues and

provoked critical questions as to how I will approach my career in education.” Thirteen people provided more detailed feedback, commenting on the specific part or parts of the panel presentation which they enjoyed the most. Seven respondents identified the Critical Race Theater presentation and performances done by Dr. David García and his students as their favorite part of the panel presentations. One of the participants wrote, “...Professor García’s student monologues were great. Very inspiring.” Four people noted that the presentation by Kysa Nygreen and the student group, SIN Verguenza, was their favorite part of the panel. Four respondents mentioned that Benji Chang was the panelist they most preferred. Some participants highlighted more than one panelist. For example, one respondent wrote, “SIN Verguenza and Benji Chang. Both the organization and presenter make positive changes in the education system and include otherwise oppressed groups and ideas.” Among the 33% of respondents who did not identify the panel presentation as their favorite part of the symposium, six enjoyed the reception the most, two commented on their appreciation for the keynote address, and one highlighted the poster session. One attendee in particular did not identify any particular part of the symposium as his/her favorite and simply wrote, “Everything.”

The evaluation form also asked participants to identify topics related to immigration and education that they would be interested in learning more about. Several people expressed their interest in learning more about undocumented immigrant students’ experiences in the U.S. educational system. Early childhood education and the education of English Learners were also topics of interest. Additionally, topics related to risk and resiliency among immigrant populations were mentioned by several participants. They were curious to learn more about promotive factors such as parent involvement, community outreach, effective teaching practices, and multicultural education, as well as risk factors such as gang involvement. Several attendees mentioned that they would like to hear about issues related to immigration and education from a different viewpoint. Specifically, they were interested in learning more about how these issues can be understood from a policy perspective.

### *Beyond the Symposium: Continuing Dialogue*

The evaluations from conference attendees for the Spencer symposium demonstrate the need for continued dialogue on the issues discussed throughout the day. In our conversations as symposium coordinators, our hope for this event was to: (1) provide a space where students, community members, educators and researchers could come together to begin a dialogue around issues of immigration and education; (2) work to bridge research in the academy and work in the community on these issues and; (3) to begin a sustained long-term dialogue. As we return to our respective roles in the community and academy, we need to



develop these kinds of spaces to share our work, collaborate, discuss our challenges, progress, and best practices. Strengthening the link between theory and practice is a continuous process, and we feel that the Spencer Symposium was a productive beginning to this process. While many of the symposium attendees came to the event because of the work they already engage in, there were also many attendees who came with a curiosity about the event's focus and goals. We hope that this symposium encouraged the participation of those interested in critical issues around immigration and education to become involved and work together as a collective to move this work forward.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Spencer Foundation was established in 1962 to provide research funds for investigating ways to improve education around the world. The Foundation is committed to improving education through research and strengthening the educational research community.

<sup>2</sup>We utilize parenthetical brackets around “im” in “immigrant” as a way to acknowledge the epistemological dilemmas that surface when the term “immigrant” is used as a reference and defining category for a particular group of people. We agree with DeGenova (1997) that “migrant” is a more accurate term of the movement of people within a transnational context. It calls for a more fluid conceptualization of the spatial and cultural borders that are crossed and inhabited in a process of movement from one place to another. Yet, because the term “immigrant” is still widely used, we cautiously use the term while making note of this dilemma.

<sup>3</sup>HabiArts is a Los Angeles based community organization whose mission is to promote political and artistic empowerment to inspire and mobilize people for progressive social change. For more information on this organization, see [www.habi-arts.org](http://www.habi-arts.org).

<sup>4</sup>Olvera Street is the birthplace of the City of Los Angeles, otherwise known as El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument. The colorful village features 27 historic buildings with a traditional Mexican style plaza area.

<sup>5</sup>In the evaluation form, attendees were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each of the following statements: 1. The symposium was well organized, 2. The stated goals of the symposium were accomplished, 3. Through my participation in the symposium, I learned something I consider to be valuable, and 4. The symposium was a worthwhile experience and I would definitely come again if similar events are offered in the future. Participants indicated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = extremely disagree to 5 = extremely agree. When ratings from all of the evaluation forms were compiled, the average level of agreement ranged from 4.5 to 4.8 for each of the statements delineated above, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the symposium overall.

## Authors

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**Rosa Jiménez** is a doctoral student in education at the University of California, Los Angeles. She was a 7th and 8th grade Social Studies teacher in Los Angeles for five years. Her research interests include literacy and identity development with Latina/o immigrant youth, the racialization of Mexicans, critical pedagogy and social justice education.

**Veronica Velez** is a third year doctoral student at the UCLA Graduate School of Education in Social Science and Comparative Education (SSCE), specializing in Race and Ethnic Studies. She is currently a Spencer Fellow working on several projects, including historic geographic spatial analyses of Los Angeles based communities and public schools. Her general research interests include the historical legacy of racism in education, community engagement in school reform, and scholar-activism. As a member of the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA), Ms. Velez is also involved in several community organizing efforts in the region around immigration reform. She earned her BA in Psychology from Stanford University and her MA in SSCE at UCLA as well.