

OBOC 2017-2018: Teaching *The Book of Unknown Americans*

(1) Opening

- Who here is an immigrant or has an immigrant in their immediate family?
How does that affect you (or not)?
- Who do you think “unknown Americans” might be? Why?

(2) Passages

- Alma Rivera

Back then, all we wanted was the simplest things: to eat good food, to sleep at night, to smile, to laugh, to be well. We felt it was our right, as much as it was anyone’s, to have those things. Of course, when I think about it now, I see that I was naïve. I was blinded by the swell of hope and the promise of possibility. I assumed that everything that would go wrong in our lives already had. (Henríquez 3)

- Maribel as described by Alma

I was used to people looking at her. It had happened often in Pátzcuaro. Maribel had the kind of beauty that reduced people to simpletons. Once upon a time grown men would break into smiles as she walked past. The boys in her school would come to the house, shoving each other awkwardly when I opened the door, asking if she was home. Of course, that was before the accident. She looked the same now as she always had, but people knew—almost everyone in our town knew—that she had changed. They seemed to believe she was no longer worthy of their attention or maybe that it was wrong to look at her now, that there was something perverse about it, and they averted their gaze. (Henríquez 10)

- the Riveras as described by Mayor

WE HEARD A LOT of things, but who knew how much of it was true? It didn’t take long before the details about the Riveras began to seem far-fetched. They had tried to come into the United States once before but had been turned back. They were only staying for a few weeks. They were working undercover for the Department of Homeland Security. They were personal friends with the governor. They were running a safe house for illegals. They had connections to a Mexican narco ring. They were loaded. They were poor. They were traveling with the circus. (Henríquez 13-14)

- Mayor

The only reason I’d gone out for the team in the first place was because my dad had forced me into it. For him, the logic went something like: I was Latino and male and not a cripple, therefore I should play soccer. Soccer was for Latinos, basketball for blacks, and the whites could keep their tennis and golf as far as he was concerned. He’d applied the same reasoning to my brother, too, except that in Enrique’s case, it had actually worked out. Enrique had been the first player in the history of our school to make varsity as a freshman, and when he got a full-ride soccer scholarship to Maryland, it was like my dad had been vindicated. “See?” he’d said, waving around the offer letter when it came in the mail. “You were meant to do this! The next Pelé! And this one,” he’d said, pointing at me, “the next Maradona!”

Enrique might have been the next Pelé, but I wasn’t even in the same galaxy as Maradona. Two weeks into practice, I had bruised shins, a scabby knee, and a scraped elbow. Coach even pulled me aside once to ask whether I was wearing the right size cleats. I told him they were size seven, which was my size, and he patted my shoulder and said, “Okay, then. Maybe you should just sit it out for a while,” and directed me to the sidelines. (Henríquez 16-17)

OBOC 2017-2018: Teaching *The Book of Unknown Americans*

(3) Assignments

- family research: struggle, immigration, etc.
- language and identity
- letters to characters
- problem-solution on immigration reform
- position paper on immigration
- define “American”
- turning point narrative
- sociological examination of immigration / immigrant community
- art projects on being a hyphenated-American
- ethnography (English / sociology / anthropology)
- success interviews (comm. studies)
- self-disclosure of one’s “unknown” status
- define “unknown Americans”
- analyze the cultural capital / wealth of the characters
- analyze expressions of gratitude in one’s language(s)
- career exploration (familial expectations vs. one’s own desires / interests)

(4) Events

- Define “American”
- College of Immigrants: Where Is Your Family From? (world map with flags, pins, photos, stories)
- ethical dilemmas / what would you do? different roles (ICE / immigrant / neighbor / employer)
- cross-discipline activities (ESL & sociology, for example)
- Who is an “unknown American”? What does it mean to be “unknown”?
- career exploration workshop
- discussion of race and gender in sports
- discussion of guilt and shame in first-generation college students
- Latin American food festival
- alumni panel
- student panels on overcoming obstacles / stereotypes

(5) Closing

- Henríquez, Cristina. *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Vintage, 2015.
\$15 ISBN 978-0-345-80640-6
<http://randomhouse.com/acmart/requests/deskform.html>
- online resources
<http://www.cristinahenriquez.com/books>
<http://www.cristinahenriquez.com>
<http://unknownamericans.tumblr.com>
- join OBOC

