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Teaching Writing and Rewriting Reality: An Oral History with Scholar-Activist Yolanda Venegas

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*Teaching Writing and Rewriting Reality:
An Oral History with
Scholar-Activist Dr. Yolanda Venegas*

Interviewed by Yvonne Sherwood

Edited by Irene Reti

Santa Cruz

University of California, Santa Cruz

University Library

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Interview History

UCSC now serves one of the largest populations of undocumented students at any college in the United States. This commitment dates back at least ten years, to the activist efforts of a group of undocumented students calling themselves Students Informing Now [SIN], who through their activism first made their challenges known to the campus community and beyond.¹ There are many staff and faculty at UCSC who were inspired by SIN and have carried on SIN's legacy. Dr. Yolanda Venegas, lecturer at UC Santa Cruz, is one of those people.

Dr. Yolanda Venegas was born and raised in the wetlands of Tijuana, Mexico, on the U.S.-Mexico border. She earned her B.A. in Third World Studies from UC San Diego in 1992 and a PhD in Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley in 2004. After earning her PhD, Venegas realized that her true passion was teaching writing; hence she returned to college to earn an MA from San Francisco in Teaching Composition in 2013 and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from San Francisco State in 2012.

"In the sixteen years I have been teaching college level courses," Venegas writes in her extensive blog,² "I have taught first-generation college students, students from immigrant families for whom English is not their native language, AB540 undocumented students, students from upper socio-economic strata, LGBT

¹ For more on Students Informing Now (SIN) see <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1598/JAAL.52.5.8/pdf> and <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ821605.pdf>

² <https://yolandasantiaگوvenegas.wordpress.com/teaching-philosophy/>

students, returning students, veterans, and students with special needs. In all of these settings, and with all of these students, my objective as a teacher committed to critical literacy has remained the same: to teach students how to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves—for an emergence of critical consciousness through reading and writing.”

From 2006 to 2009, Venegas taught writing for UC Santa Cruz’s Educational Opportunity Program [EOP’s] Faculty Mentor Program. In 2010, she became EOP’s Faculty Mentor Program Director, Pre-graduate Programs Coordinator and AB540 Student Campus Resource. In that position, she developed pre-graduate programs aimed at increasing diversity in higher education. She designed, developed, and implemented an EOP Scholarship Class; the AB540 Resource Guide, the AB540 Slug website, and AB540 training agenda and presentations to educate UCSC staff and the campuswide community. Venegas has also taught and continues to teach for UCSC’s Writing Program and the Merrill College core course. The themes of her courses focus on immigration, undocumented students, Chicano/a identity, and feminism. She has also taught at UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, Santa Clara University, and San Francisco State, where she developed her course *Redefining America: Undocumented Students in Higher Education*.

This oral history was conducted in October 2016 by Yvonne Sherwood, graduate student in sociology (with an emphasis in feminist studies) under the direction of the Regional History Project at the UCSC Library. Sherwood was a UCSC Dean’s

Diversity Fellow from 2011 to 2016 and was advanced to candidacy for her doctoral degree in the fall of 2015. Prior to graduate school, Sherwood was an active student leader who served as an officer for Indigenous Resistance Organizers, M.E.Ch.A., and Yakima Valley Community College Tiin-Ma. She also allied with EWU Pride, EWU Black Student Union, and Spokane's Peace and Justice League. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Elisabeth Remak-Honnef, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and University Librarian Elizabeth Cowell.

—Irene Reti

Director, Regional History Project, UCSC Library

January 20, 2017

Sherwood: My name is Yvonne Sherwood and I'm interviewing Dr. Yolanda Venegas on the topics of activism and teaching with AB540 students. Dr. Venegas, can you tell me your degrees and what you teach?

Venegas: I teach in the writing program at UC Santa Cruz. I teach the Writing 20 series, so these are students who need to satisfy the entry-level writing requirement. I also teach a series of Writing 2 courses specifically designed to address the writing needs of undocumented students and all students, but the readings are about immigration and life as an undocumented student at UC Santa Cruz.

Sherwood: Great, and can you tell me about your degrees?

Venegas: I was a transfer student from my local community college, went to UC San Diego and got my bachelor's there [1992], worked in education for about six years. And then I did my graduate work in ethnic studies and got my PhD from UC Berkeley in ethnic studies [2004] and taught ethnic studies for some years. And then eventually, when it became clear to me that I wanted to work with developing writers, basic skills students, I went back and got a master's in English composition—this was in 2013. So that's my background.

Sherwood: Great. Thank you. I'd like to let the listeners know where we're at right now. Because I'm in Washington State conducting field research, I'm interviewing Yolanda over the phone. Yolanda, where are you at right now?

Venegas: I'm in Santa Cruz, which is where I work.

Sherwood: Well, thank you for agreeing to the oral history interview. I'm excited to do this with you and I can't wait to learn more about your important work and why you do it. I'd like us to begin by talking about your early life. In your blog you write that you were informally educated on the U.S. Mexico/Tijuana border. Can you describe the neighborhood for us?

Early Life on the Border

Venegas: It was—there weren't any sidewalks. The streets were barely paved. It's part of what's considered the river bottom. There's a river that runs along the border. This is as close as you can get to the fence. It's the last neighborhood before you get to the actual fence. There are wetlands. There's a strip of land that's considered No-Man's Land, so nobody lives there. It's federal property. But then the neighborhood where I grew up—it kind of looked like a river bottom. The streets were not paved. We could see Mexico as we played, from our backyard. My mom actually still lives there. It was a unique experience. We had uncles—at that time you could walk across or run across [the border]—uncles coming over, kind of walking over to our neighborhood during the day and then walking back to Mexico when they were done. It was that close.

Sherwood: Do you get to go back often? You said your mom is still there.

Venegas: I do. I spend about three months during the summer there. So it's still very much a part of my experience and also my kids. They have that growing up in two worlds experience. So I do make it a point to go and spend most of the summer there.

Sherwood: You said that at one point it was easy to go back and forth. Has it changed a lot?

Venegas: Yeah, especially since 9-11, there has been the increased border security. It's essentially the militarization of the whole border area. First there was a bigger, taller fence. Now it's an actual wall. And it just—it seems unstoppable. It's not getting better. It's getting worse. So the triple fence that they just recently finished actually is violating all kinds of environmental laws because there are endangered species in that area. We should not be encroaching in their environment, and yet we're building a fence around it. I have an essay that I wrote in 2012 on that whole building of the fence, the activism around people trying to stop it. They were not successful. The government went ahead and built it, but people in the area were remarkable in the way that they organized and tried to prevent the federal government from putting this huge fence up through that wetland. The wetland area that I'm talking about is part of the national wetlands areas. There are only two in California. One is right there on the border and the second one is Elkhorn Slough, which is here by Santa Cruz—I don't know if you know it? ³

Sherwood: I don't.

Venegas: If you've been to Watsonville—

Sherwood: Yes.

³ Venegas is referring to the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve managed by NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association]. See: https://coast.noaa.gov/data/docs/nerrs/Reserves_TJR_MgmtPlan.pdf and <http://trnerr.org/> See <http://www.elkhornslough.org/> for more about Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve. Elkhorn Slough is located in Moss Landing, California.

Venegas: Yes, so these are federally preserved wetland areas that are part of a wetland system. Most of them are on the East Coast, Chesapeake Bay and all that. But the two in California, the only two left, are right there on the border, where I'm from, and here. And they managed to build a fence right through it a few years back. So it still continues. It still continues. Yeah.

Sherwood: Besides the wall, it sounds like a beautiful place.

Venegas: It's an amazing place. I was very fortunate to grow up there. I mean, you hear, especially with Gloria Anzaldúa's work, you hear a lot about the borderlands and living in two worlds, right?

Sherwood: Yeah.

Venegas: But our family was actually *literally* in the two worlds. So that's my experience growing up.

Education and Philosophy of Teaching

And when I went away to college—well, I started at my local community college, which is right on the border, also, Southwestern College. And I went away to college and it was a huge deal to go away to northern San Diego, which is La Jolla. (laughs) So my going away to college was really in the same town. But to us it was a completely different world, UC. It was in La Jolla, UC San Diego.

Sherwood: Thinking about your home in the wetlands, can you tell me about some important lessons that you learned from home?

Venegas: (pause) I guess I learned to live in both worlds and to navigate both worlds. I was really brought up in the bilingual, bicultural—two different worlds in terms of language and culture. Just different ways of understanding and making meaning, right?

Sherwood: Mm, hmm.

Venegas: There was the *mexicano* way of understanding your world and your place in it. And then there was the traditional, what you're taught at school. So living with this constant difference, but not in a negative way. In a positive way, learning to navigate that. It was a rich experience, growing up that way.

Sherwood: That leads me to my next question. I'm thinking about your teaching philosophy. I read that you like to move your students from an understanding of education as financial stability, to thinking about education as a method to help find your place in the world. I was wondering how your own ideas about education have changed over time, thinking about home and the community college, and then onwards.

Venegas: So do you mean my ideas about my teaching, or my ideas about my own education?

Sherwood: Your ideas about your own education.

Venegas: About my own education. I had to go get a PhD in ethnic studies. It took me a long time to figure out what it is that I'm really passionate about in my teaching. My teaching and my thinking is grounded in ethnic studies. And I think that has a lot to do with my home and my background, which is the place

where I think from. And so ethnic studies gave me the tools to be able to make sense of all of that, right?

Sherwood: Mm, hmm.

Venegas: That's what ethnic studies does, right?

Sherwood: Yes.

Venegas: Very deliberately. But it took me a long time to figure out that ethnic studies couldn't really contain what I'm interested in doing. It's broader than that, in a way. I'm not criticizing ethnic studies as a project *at all*. I'm here because of that and all the people that have worked so hard on that.

I am now teaching writing, because I think that the most powerful gift of higher education is the shift into consciousness—not only to understand your situation, your reality, as an individual inside and outside—inner work and public acts as Anzaldúa might say—but also the possibilities for transformation. So it's very much still the [Pablo] Freire that I was reading when I was an undergrad, but with a different student population. Most of what I do as a teacher is that: develop reading, writing, and thinking—towards the development of critical subjectivity—which is in fact what Chicana feminism via Norma Alarcón is about and more broadly the project of ethnic studies. We called this practicing transgressions in Chicana feminism and in fact put together a conference around this at Berkeley when I was graduate student for the 20th anniversary publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*.

When I was teaching ethnic studies before and when I was a grad student even, it mattered to me that my students understood the content, the counterhegemonic versions of history, for example, that I was presenting, and how they were different. That's still important to me but it's a broader goal that I have now. That's probably one of the more important ways in which I've changed—understanding the relationship between writing and thinking and consciousness and figuring out ways to create classrooms that legitimize my students' ways of being and knowing, and create a space for them to bring in their own theorizing, their own ways of understanding the world.

I think as educators, and specifically as educators of color, as scholar-activists, we've done a lot of work in terms of creating spaces for our methods, for voices that have been silenced. I think the part that we need to work on now is making transformative interventions that change our educational institutions, our civic institutions, our communities. It is not enough for people of color to theorize in the university, if our theorizing is part of what has been happening since Kant and the Enlightenment project. What I think we need to do now is use our own indigenous theorizing, ways of knowing and being, to transgress, to come up with new ways of thinking about the issues that matter, and hence solutions that enact this paradigm shift. So how do you bring that knowledge? How do you create spaces in the classroom for that knowledge to be part of the knowledge that's being produced in the university? Is that making any sense?

Sherwood: It does. I hear that you're saying there's a difference between the idea of giving voice—between giving voice and making space for that knowledge to make an impact in the classroom.

Venegas: In the classroom, and if we're really thinking about transforming our institutions, it's outside of the classroom too, in terms of institutional practices, which is much harder.

Sherwood: So can you tease out the differences between giving voice and what you consider as a much larger project?

Venegas: I can answer that question by mentioning some of the ways in which we still need to work, the places where I think we still have a lot of work to do. And we have started to do that and women of color have been writing about it. But then, to what extent is it influencing practice? Indigenous people in the Americas have always had our own ways of theorizing and our own ways of creating knowledge. How do we bring those into our institutions, into our universities? How do we create spaces for allowing students and encouraging students to bring those into the university in order to have real diversity, real change? I think in terms of changing our institutions that's where we have the most work to do. I think the institutions are still—and I don't have to tell *you* this, you know. The institutions are very much still Western-centric in what is considered knowledge even, and what is considered theory, right?

Sherwood: Right.

Venegas: And that is where we have the most work to do. I don't know if that answers your question.

Sherwood: You did. I want to talk more about the fracture you felt—maybe if you can describe it for me—between community engagement and theory. For

example, in “La Classe Mágica,” you discuss the split between the need to give back to the community and your engagement with theory, which you then characterize as indulgent. So I hear this split between reading and writing and thinking—if you could just reflect back on how you felt at that time about that split between community and theory.

Venegas: When I wrote that chapter in the early 1990s, I was a really heavily involved community activist. I was going to school because it provided the financial resources for me to continue to be an activist. (laughs) You know? And so I had this very binary way of thinking. I think when you’re an activist, it’s common, right? Steeped in Marxist theory and all of that. You have these ideas about social change and how to do that, and ideas about what is revolutionary and what is not. For me, a huge part of what graduate school was about was understanding the possibilities of change, as a teacher, as a writer, as an intellectual. And also really questioning what is revolutionary, right?

Sherwood: Yes.

Venegas: I remember at one point in graduate school, after tons and tons of theory, and tons and tons of debates and discussions, heated discussions, with women of color, we just came to a point where we said, “You know, if I can just be happy in my own personal life and love myself, that is revolutionary.” (laughs) (This, by the way, is what Sherman Alexie says in one of his poems, raising a self-loving Indian child is revolutionary)

Sherwood: (laughs)

Venegas: You know, we came to that, after spinning and spinning for months, with a lot of theory and a lot of discussion and all of that. So we redefined social change for ourselves and that was a really important moment.

So now, in the classroom, in the writing classroom especially, most of the students in the Writing 20 series and some of the students in Writing 2—they take this class because it's a GE requirement and they have to satisfy this university GE requirement by the end of their fourth quarter at UCSC or they are barred from enrolling. So we kind of have like this captive audience. They have to be there. And they have to get a passing grade. Most of our ELWR students are very aware that UCSC put them on a special track, the ELWR unsatisfied track and they've come to see themselves as struggling writers, students who are not "good" at writing, and in some cases, not good at critical thinking (which is one of those empty terms we see thrown around in all kinds of ways yet one that ELWR-required students understand as a must in the university).

So the challenge for us is: how do you get them to make the huge leap from: "I'm not really a good writer because I'm a science person," or, "I've just never been a good writer," or, "This is a requirement"—to understanding that they can use reading and writing as tools for intellectual inquiry in the development of critical subjectivity? It doesn't have to be about social justice. But it can be. And, in fact, people who write about how to teach writing to students of color find that we have to make the content of our courses urgently relevant to their lived realities. It most definitely can be about transformation within. People in composition studies have been writing about this for years. But I think that when you get a student to really see what Freire would call the power of literacy, or

concientización, then you're good. Then you kind of have them. And they're excited about writing an academic paper. Instead of having a feeling of dread about writing a research paper, they're actually excited about it.

Sherwood: Would you go as far then, as to say that writing is a kind of activism?

Venegas: Yeah, definitely. I think that many of us who are in academia and write and teach use the term "scholar-activist." It was coined as part of the Chicana/o movement. I don't know when. But it's been around. Your mentors probably use that, right?

Sherwood: Right.

Venegas: It's part of that.

Teaching Writing: Gloria Anzaldúa's Influence

Sherwood: I also wanted to ask you about Gloria Anzaldúa. You mentioned her a little earlier. I was wondering—did your discussions with her, particularly about her theories of borderlands, shape your approach to teaching? I know you've talked about it shaping much of your life—the ways that we know and our methods about moving through—but can you speak particularly about [how she influenced] your teaching with undocumented students and more?

Venegas: Gloria Anzaldúa, before she passed on, was working on a book that was going to be for writing teachers and people who were interested in teaching writing, and different ways to think of writing and the possibilities of writing.⁴

⁴ See Venegas's article "On the Relevance of Gloria Anzaldúa's Mestiza Rhetoric to the Study of Composition for G1 Students of Color":

Her unpublished work is at the University of Texas, Austin, at the Benson Latin American Collection.⁵ And it's sealed⁶ but because we were writing *comadres* when I wrote, she would give me her essays, and I would supposedly give her comments.

Sherwood: (laughs)

Venegas: Now I read some of the feedback I gave her and think, oh, my God, what was I thinking? (laughs) Oh, my God, this is totally useless.

Sherwood: (laughing)

Venegas: Her effort is brilliant. What I have to say is so useless. But she was really developing her theory—what she had to say about identity and writing—

<https://yolandasantiaگوvenegas.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/on-the-relevance-of-gloria-anzaldc3baas-mestiza-rhetoric-to-the-study-of-composition-for-g1-students-of-color.pdf>

⁵ See the Guide to the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers at:
<https://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utlac/00189/lac-00189.html>

⁶ According to the Guide to the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers: "By request of the Anzaldúa Literary Trust, the "Writing Guide" material is open to researchers but cannot be photocopied until publication or release by the Trust."

and how important writing was to coming to understand her identity and her positionality. She was taking that a step further, and essentially in her latest work, arguing that you could rewrite yourself into a new reality, very explicitly. She had an essay that she was working on that was called “Rewriting Reality.” So what does that mean? What would it mean to use writing and the writing process to rewrite your reality? I can’t think of a more powerful use of writing and rhetoric than that. Yeah, it’s really something.

In 2012 and 2013, when I was working on the English Composition MA degree at SFSU, I worked with Nancy Jodatis, a friend and colleague, to create a writing class for undocumented students who needed to secure money via scholarships (this was before the California Dream Act) and also needed to improve their English composition skills. We called this class *Dreamer’s English*. I have essays from the students who were in the workshop that I did at San Francisco State for undocumented students, and I have all kinds of essays from students that were in my 2014-15 Writing 2 class [at UCSC], *Redefining America: Undocumented Students and Higher Education*. We see in their essays students writing about their coming to consciousness about what it means to grow up as an undocumented student, and what it means to be a university student. This is an example of the transgressive power of knowledge, how you can write your way into critical subjectivity.

So my friend, Irene, and I have put a panel presentation for the NACCS [National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies] conference in March of 2017 that titled something like *Teaching Anzaldúa: Toward a Pedagogy of Conocimiento*, where we’re going to present this work along with Susy Zepeda

from UCD. There's a whole cohort of us that are working with Anzaldúa. Irene is at San Diego State. She teaches women's studies. But she's shared similar experiences in her classes. So we finally decided that we're going to put a panel together and start working on a book this year that brings together women of color in different fields all teaching Anzaldúa.

Sherwood: How exciting.

Venegas: Yeah, it is.

Teaching Writing

Sherwood: Thinking about identity and rewriting—can you share how you understand 1.5 generation writing difficulties, or alienation. How do those surface in writing classes?

Venegas: Part of it has to do with the specialized vocabulary in academic writing. And I think a lot of it has to do with myths. Students arrive at the university with all kinds of myths and ideas about what we do in academia. I think that is because we academics are guilty of throwing—and that's our job—to have them read theory and have them read difficult material. I tell my first-year students, "You know, even if you're reading Foucault, I don't care who you're reading—it's people offering ideas about, usually how the world works, or why we do things that we do. It's explanations. It's people trying to understand. So if you can kind of get past the specialized vocabulary and just think: okay, what is this person saying about how x works, or how this other thing works. And imagine yourself participating and talking to that author." So a

lot of it is demythologizing, breaking down the myths of what academic discourse is. Going through a piece, sometimes staying with one paragraph for the whole hour and having them understand that, even though there's all of this specialized vocabulary, she's really just saying this—and it's quite simple if you think about it. So just breaking it down like that for them really helps. So the first thing is having them understand what we do in academia. And the other part of it is convincing, or guiding them to see them that it does make a difference, that knowledge matters, that there's a relevance in the real world. What we do in academia makes a difference.

And then, getting them excited, in Writing 2, about the possibilities for them to contribute, in a way that only they—because of their own individual social and historical position, experience—can contribute. And having them become excited about what that contribution might look like.

The Inspiration and Impact of Students Informing Now [SIN]

Sherwood: Also, I know that you use SIN's [Students Informing Now] writing in your classroom.⁷ Can you share how you became familiar with their work particularly, and then why you chose to use those articles?⁸

⁷ See Dr. Venegas' syllabus for Writing 2: Redefining America: Undocumented Students in Higher Education at: <https://yolandasantiaگوvenegas.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/redefining-america-writing-2.pdf>

⁸ See Dominguez, Neidi; Duarte, Yazmin; Espinosa, Pedro Joel; Martinez, Luis; Nygreen, Kysa; Perez, Renato; Ramirez, Izel; Saba, Mariella, "Constructing a Counternarrative: Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Reframes Immigration and Education in the United States" *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, v52 n5 p439-442 Feb 2009 and "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame..." "SIN Verguenza!," *Educational Foundations*, v21 n1-2 p71-90 Win-Spr 2007. Both articles are available in full text online through the ERIC Institute of Education Sciences database.

Venegas: The articles by SIN. Right after I finished my graduate work, as I was finishing my graduate work, I began at UC Santa Cruz working in the EOP office. I was hired to run—it doesn't even exist anymore—at that time it was the Faculty Mentor Program. And the reason why I accepted that position, even though it was not an academic position, was because my job was going to be—I was told, “Do something about their writing, Yolanda. We're sending them off to graduate school and they're way behind in terms of being ready to do the kinds of writing they'll be required to do in graduate school.” So I was hired to design a writing workshop series for students who were on their way to grad school, usually seniors.

So that's how I was part of EOP. And EOP, at that point we had a couple of students working with us—they were our work study students, that were some of the first SINistas. So as I was busy putting the seminar together, very focused on that, the SINistas, the first SINistas—they would be coming around and they'd say, “Yolanda, this-and-this is going on. Can you help us?” There were a lot of crises. It felt like we were moving from one mini-crisis to another, every day. And a lot of it was because undocumented students didn't have housing, didn't have funding, so students were always on the verge of leaving. And this was a time when—it was in 2006 that I started there, when the university [UCSC] was not what it is—I don't know, when did you start at UC Santa Cruz?

Sherwood: Not until fall of 2011.

Yvengas: So I'm talking about the days when I didn't feel comfortable as an EOP graduate school counselor calling somebody on the phone to talk about

undocumented student issues, or about a particular undocumented student. We really had no leadership. We had no direction. It was all done on the down-low. The university was not acknowledging that it had a pretty good number of undocumented students. It was still in denial. (laughs) It is a very different place from where we are now. We're probably number two or three in terms of our services to undocumented students. Other UC campuses look to us and our Undocumented Student Services Office as a model.

[But 2006] was a very different time. That's why I'm saying, if I had a student who was having an issue and I had to talk to people in Financial Aid, I literally had to walk over there and talk to one of my colleagues because I didn't feel comfortable sending an email, or calling even.

And frankly, what changed all that was the SINistas, the five or six people, we had a few of them working at EOP. They were relentless in terms of saying, "Okay, we need to do this. We need to do that." They knew exactly what needed to be done. I did my graduate work at Berkeley in ethnic studies. All of my research, undergrad and grad, was on bilingual education, pipeline projects and diversity. I was a new PhD, and when I arrived at EOP, I thought, I *thought* that if anybody knew about diversity, that I was in the know about issues of diversity in higher education. And then I met these students and I realized, oh, my God, there's this whole other world that even at Berkeley we did not learn about. So those students essentially educated me. And not only me, but educated the whole campus. And within, I want to say, a span of less than five years they transformed the campus. So by the time you got here in 2011, it was a completely

different climate. The campus climate was changed. And it was changed because of this group of SINistas.

Sherwood: So it sounds like a lot of your education happened in direct contact with the five or six SINistas that were organizing. Do you remember any events or things that happened at that time that would serve as examples of their popular education methods?

Venegas: Well, they were doing everything. They would do performances using the guerilla theater tactics, plays that the campus community went to. They had teach-ins for faculty. They put together workshops. They had a radio show that was intended to educate Santa Cruz, everybody and anybody could listen. I think they would bring in speakers, too. I want to say there was a conference or two that they put together, with Rosie Cabrera's help.⁹

They really moved the whole campus. It was a multi-pronged approach in terms of how they were educating. And it was very much using the methods of popular education. [One of the activists] showed up at our office with a little pamphlet, a SIN pamphlet. It was one of the first SINistas pamphlets. She said, "This is our methodology." It was their popular education methodology: this is what we do in our meetings; this is how we—she would come in and explain, take us through what they were doing. There was a flower or a tree representing their methodology.

⁹ Rosie Cabrera was the director of the El Centro [Chicano Latino Resource Center and worked closely with the SINistas. See Susie Zepeda, Interviewer and Editor, *With Conocimiento, Love, Spirit, and Community: Rosie Cabrera's Leadership at UC Santa Cruz, 1984-2013*. (Regional History Project, UCSC Library, 2015). Available in full text at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7vv2v3rz>

Sherwood: You said that at that time it was scary just to send an email, that you had to walk people over. Do you feel like it is now safe to send an email? Or in what other ways has it changed, that you can identify?

Venegas: Well, I think the campus is in a very different place. The campus is taking a position, the actual mandate that we have, that we received in writing, I think in 2009—I probably have the letter somewhere—says that we need to do what we can to ensure—well, first of all it officially acknowledges that we have a good number of undocumented students. They are no longer invisible. We need to make sure that, as staff (it was sent through Student Affairs), that as staff we’re doing everything we can to make sure they succeed. I think it came from somebody at UCOP [UC Office of the President]. So it was a document that basically told all of us, “Okay, you can be open about your undocumented students—” Many of us were already doing the work. But the university essentially said, “We want you to do everything you can to help undocumented students succeed.” And that made a huge difference.

Sherwood: It sounds like a big shift could be felt with that letter.

Venegas: It was. It was a huge shift.

Sherwood: Yeah. Doing all that work underground, to then the institutionalizing of it.

I read that you use the SIN essays in your classroom. Do you believe that their writing, and the ability to read those [SIN] writings—that it has an effect on your students? And in what ways?

Venegas: I think it's important for students to understand, and that's the reason why I assign it—it provides a model. It's a very clear model of what's possible. Because especially for first or second-year students, it's overwhelming, this huge institution. As a student, and especially as a historically underrepresented and marginalized student you can begin to think that the university is that alienating professor, or the out of touch administrator. You don't understand that the university is people like you. And I think what these articles show is that it's *their* university and if they feel like there is something that needs to be changed, they can change it. They can change it because that's what the SINistas did. That's exactly what they did. They changed all of us. And they did it in the span of less than five years, which is really amazing. It's a perfect example of that.

Sherwood: Can you remember any particular responses—if you ever noted any type of response from your students about the writing?

Venegas: The SIN article—I know for a fact that when I assign it students—they never imagined that this was possible. I haven't had any negative reactions to it. Most students are really empowered by the experience of reading about this group of students that organized themselves, changed the university, but *then* went on to author these two essays. So that whole process. And so I ask them, "What is it that you want to change and what would your SIN essay look like? If you can imagine yourself writing a SIN essay, what would your essay be about? What issue would it be about?"

More on Teaching Writing Classes Focused on Immigration and Undocumented Students

Sherwood: Can you take us a little deeper into your class? This is a wonderful example of how you would use the article and then ask: “What would you do? What would be your issue and how would you approach it?” Are there other examples that you could share about what you do in your classroom from day-to-day?

Venegas: One of the things that I have them—well, it’s not only in one essay—but students in my writing classes are allowed to—this is a real simple one and it seems simple but it’s actually harder than it sounds—there are experiences and home knowledge, the knowledge from the home—they are encouraged and welcomed to have that be part of the “evidence” that they use in constructing an argument, for example. I encourage them—in one of the essays for Writing 2—students write their family’s immigration story. And so what do you do when the student, their family doesn’t have an immigration story? That’s what I was asked once and I said to them, “Well, unless you’re Native American, you have an immigration story.”

Sherwood: (laughs)

Venegas: (laughs) “So find out what it is. If you don’t remember it, then who are you going to interview to get it?” So providing spaces for students to share. The blogs from my Writing 2 class are up, so you could look at what my students wrote. Each one of their essays is up on their blog. I think the family immigration

story is an important one.¹⁰ Yet in telling their family immigration story they are not only narrating, they are reading academic pieces around immigration and using those pieces to analyze their immigration narrative. I tell students that while the essay is their family's immigration story, the assignment is to use the readings as "thinking tools" to critically analyze their experience.

One of the things about my classes is that I tell students on the syllabus, I let students know that this is a class where we're going to center their experiences—and really, we want to provide spaces for the experiences of students who historically have been underrepresented or marginalized. So I put that on my syllabus and I read that to students on the very first day of class, in my Writing 2 class especially, when they have more of an option to stay in the class or not. Because I want to make sure, from the get-go, that a student who decides to stay in the class needs to understand what the class is about, and how knowledge in the class is going to be constructed. And what I say is, "I don't have time; we don't have time for an immigration debate—we have only a quarter." You can imagine resistance to this, right?

Sherwood: Yeah.

Venegas: I don't have time for those students in this class. This class is designed for students who want to do this work. So I think it's important to tell them from the get-go the work that we're going to do. That way if a student doesn't want to do this work, and does not care at all about immigration or immigrant students, this is not the class for you. And that's okay. You know. That's okay. I tell them

¹⁰ See <https://yolandasantiaگوvenegas.wordpress.com/courses/>

very nicely that if it's not something that they're genuinely interested in, if they're not okay with the work we're going to do in the class, they should probably find another Writing 2 class. And that generally makes it so that we are able to create a space where students feel like they can share their home histories, their histories of immigration. So it generally does work out.

Sherwood: Have students ever shared with you the issues that they're still facing in other classes, and what might those be? Or in other spaces?

Venegas: I think that they understand our class as being one of the classes where, as one student put it, "I can be myself." And they've shared with me also, those students that are not out as undocumented students in their other classes because they're not sure if it's safe to be out. So the students who do come out as undocumented students in my Writing 2 class, which is the class dealing specifically with those themes—I, of course, would never out them. If they're out, it's because they've self-disclosed. Yet, you know how ignorant we are as a nation about immigration—just in the way discussions are framed in the popular media and so forth—and many students come to UCSC with that same ignorance, so our undocumented students face that challenge.

Sherwood: Do you think it's because students are unaware of UC Santa Cruz's position on the matter? Or for what other reasons is there still a fear?

Venegas: [pause] Because of people like Donald Trump, right?

Sherwood: Mm, hmm.

Venegas: Because of the—

Sherwood: The general climate.

Venegas: The general climate. The history of racialization in this country and the current very real targeting of undocumented immigrants in the current political rhetoric. All of those things make it so that they're not going to feel like it's okay to disclose. They're very careful about where and how they disclose.

Sherwood: What things, then, do you think that other teachers could do, not in encouraging people to "out themselves," but to feel comfortable so that they can *be* themselves.

Venegas: I think acknowledging that you're—it's like the queer awareness—like I've seen that when we put up the different signs around our office, so that a student who is queer knows that is a place where it's okay—so how do you create safe zones? By including a diversity statement on your syllabus and reading it to students the first day of class. Have you taught yet?

Sherwood: I have TA'd, and so I've run my own sections.

Venegas: Yeah, so you know that they're just bombarded with information. So read them the diversity statement, include something about undocumented students in that diversity statement, along with the other information about being sensitive to he/she/they pronouns use etc., diversity defined broadly.

And then, in terms of designing the assignments in the class, we have thirty years of multicultural education research that has taught us a great deal about how to teach in culturally responsive ways that are specific to the needs of the population that we're teaching, and how to provide spaces that legitimize their

experiences and encourage them to write from them, instead of putting them in opposition to this other world, in academia, but actually seeing it as a really powerful place from which to do academic work. How to very consciously do this in your assignment prompts, in your in-class activities? How to very explicitly shift the paradigm from a place of difference as deficit, to your difference as a valuable asset within the university

I think that those are some good ways.

Sherwood: Reading those statements out, directing them towards appropriate programs or people. I know that for disability issues, there is a particular number that students can call. Do you direct people, then, to EOP? Or is there a place that is for these specific students?

Venegas: Yeah, EOP has flyers, and they have also their website. So we show them. So usually a course assistant will go through the EOP website, and the AB540 student services section, so that they understand the resources that are available to them.¹¹

Sherwood: So that would be the place that you send them?

Venegas: Yeah, and also student groups, like the caucus— Are SINistas still meeting? I don't know what happened this year. I haven't been following it. So I don't know if they're still meeting or not? Are they?

¹¹ See http://eop.ucsc.edu/undocumented_student_services/index.html

Sherwood: I don't know lately. But I did understand that they were still last year.¹²

Venegas: They were last year?

Sherwood: From my understanding.

Venegas: But I know that there is now a caucus that works out of EOP. And so just making those connections for them.

Sherwood: And you mentioned how multicultural education has helped in the classroom. But there's been a backlash against multicultural education in the last few years. Could you speak more to that?

Venegas: I'm not sure what the backlash is about, but I know that we have three decades worth of research, especially people in the last ten years, who have looked at achievement gaps in widely different populations: Why do African American students and Latino students not get through particular classes? There are people who have researched this, and they've gone at it from all the disciplines, and they all agree that we need to have culturally responsive teaching. So people can say it doesn't work all they want, but there's enough research that those of us who understand equity in education know there's no doubt that this is the way to go, especially when you think of a campus like UC Santa Cruz, which is 40 percent Latino now, right?¹³

¹² See: <https://studentsinformingnow.wordpress.com/>

¹³ In the fall of 2015, 30.4 percent of undergraduates at UCSC were Chicano/Latino/a. See <http://admissions.ucsc.edu/apply/parents-and-guardians/prospective-students/facts.html>

Sherwood: I don't know the exact percentage but it's up there. And it's increasing, always increasing.

Venegas: Yes. I was on CAAD, which is the Committee for Affirmative Action and Diversity, last year. I was part of that. And there was a chemistry instructor on it. She taught one of the big chemistry classes, one of what we call the gateway classes that lets students into particular STEM majors. So we were having this conversation. And she mentioned the backlash. And she said, "But really, how can I make chemistry culturally responsive? I am teaching math and chemistry how can I make that political or culturally responsive." First is the issue of conflating culturally responsive teaching with politics, this is not about being political, although people like James Berlin are right when they say that teaching is always political. In this way NOT paying attention to your student population's diverse culture is, in fact, taking a political stance, isn't it? Anyway when she asked that, I think I said something like, "There's definitely a way but people have been writing about that for twenty-five years." (laughs)

Sherwood: (laughs) Yeah, exactly that question. Here's a stack of books.

Venegas: (laughing) Do your homework! I'm not doing it for you.

Sherwood: Thank you, Yolanda.

I do have a question, before we sign off, back again to the split—because I'm a grad student—about the split between community engagement and theory and how we pull those together as a praxis. I was a student in Chicano education and

a *mechista*. You also said that the split is reinforced by Chicano nationalism. Do you think that that's still relevant for some of us?

Venegas: Sure.

Sherwood: Yeah, so I was wondering if you could speak more to that?

Venegas: I think *mechistas* have come a long way. My experience was with the 1990s *mechistas*. So it was a very different kind of *mechista*. It was a *mechista* who—you know, we were wearing bandanas and we thought you had to have a banner up and be out protesting. That's what it was about—taking over so-and-so's office.

I haven't been to a MEChA meeting in a while, but I think the Chicano ethos in general has changed. The ethos of the Chicano movement has evolved, so how we understand social change has evolved. And I think that many women *and* men understand that it's not an either/or. And that, in fact, was one of the "failures," one of the things we did wrong in the last generation, one of the things that—it's not an either/or, really, and it was never an either/or in most of our lives.

I think that that ethos, which is a nationalist ethos, has to be contextualized. We have to see it as part of what it was like to grow up in the sixties and seventies. So I think that it's important to understand that that's what it was. And at that time that was probably the best way to do things. I don't know. I don't know, but I know that it was because of that movement towards social change that people like me made it to college.

As an undergraduate at UCSD I was part of a group called M.U.J.E.R. Don't ask me what the acronym was for. At one point I wrote a piece someone else titled "I Voted But..." In that piece what I was trying to get at—we would constantly be fighting with [an activist organization] in Logan Heights, where the murals are in San Diego—we would constantly have arguments with Barrios Unidos, we called them Vatos Unidos, because they thought that we were elitist because we spent our time writing articles and producing this newsletter and we didn't do the kinds of things that the guys thought we should be doing. So that's where that [article] is coming from.

So tell me a little bit before we break off, why you are interested in this?

Sherwood: Because I've had those similar conversations as a graduate student with a partner who does community organizing. And when I started graduate school, these conversations came up a lot about what it's worth and who is doing the real work, and where that "real work" is supposed to happen. So it still resonates with me.

Venegas: It still resonates, but one way to think about it, I think, is—so if you think about your work as scholar and a teacher, or a future teacher—if you think about your work as teaching the next generation, or teaching the masses, now you can say "the masses," how to think. If you think as your work as teaching young adults, people who are going to be leading the state and the nation, our community leaders how to think, isn't that revolutionary? I mean, I can't think of a more revolutionary thing to do than that. People who say otherwise don't really understand what it is we do in academia.

Sherwood: Thank you, Yolanda.

Venegas: (laughs) Right?

Sherwood: Yeah. I want to ask you then, before we sign off, if you have any other comments or statements you'd like to contribute to the archive, teaching AB540 students, activism, programs—if there's anything else that you'd like to add?

Venegas: There are still many, many, many of us working at UC Santa Cruz who were educated by the SINistas and by the whole student movement that they started. It's not a thing of the past. The students started it. The students graduated and left. Maybe there's no SIN anymore and maybe it doesn't look like it did when they were here. But I would argue that there's still a movement. And maybe it doesn't look the way that it did and it's not as coherent as it was then, but there are still many of us, many, many, many colleagues that I have on campus working towards the goal that they started us on. I think that's important to acknowledge.

Sherwood: The movement shapes and moves forward.

Venegas: Exactly. You got it.

Sherwood: Thank you, Yolanda. I'll sign us off.

Venegas: All right. I look forward to when it's all done.