

Community Reading Project 2013-2014
The Distance Between Us by Reyna Grande

Possible topics to discuss cultural aspects of the book:

-El otro lado/the other side as a concept

- How does this concept illustrate the differences between Mexico and USA?
- How do Mexicans (and Latin Americans) see the United States from Mexico? Do these images change once people arrive to USA? Does this concept help to understand other situations in the book? Which ones? How?

-The impact of immigration on family.

- Why is the book called “The Distance Between Us”? What is the relationship between the title and what happens to Reyna’s family?
- Analyze the figure of the father or, better, the “absent father”, and the impact of this absence on the kids; relation to violence.
- Contrast it with the mother and her behavior: her struggle between her kids and a having a man (the boyfriends)→gender roles. Latin American women follow traditional gender roles, in which they need a man to be socially accepted→be careful with stereotypes.
- Paternal authority: differences between USA and Mexico. Parents, especially fathers, have the right to hit the kids and yell. Here is considered child abuse. Of course, in this story, Natalio is a very frustrated man and this contributes to the hard relationship he has with his kids.
- The absence of the parents and the substitutes: the aunts, the grandmothers; problems with male figures (the uncle, the grandfather).
- Abandonment as a theme related to absence.

-Cultural traditions.

- La quinceañera. It is sort of a debutant ball; the coming of age of a female teenager. Gender roles: a girl is no longer considered a girl but a woman. What does this mean in Mexican culture? Could use the grandmothers and the mother of the story for examples. This tradition is affected by immigration, mainly for economic reasons: in this case, the family doesn’t have money to have the party—usually, they are big parties—or they make big efforts to have this parties in order to show economic success in the US.
- Compare with “Sweet 16” in USA. Differences and similarities→this can help to also address gender roles.
- Religion, especially Catholicism. The image of the devil: very common in Mexico and not so much here. Sometimes, mixed with superstition (the devil belongs to this part), such as the “limpias” (cleanses) that grandmother Chinta does in Mexico. Changes in USA: the kids don’t go to church anymore or, in other cases, many Latinos join protestant religions.

- Gender roles. “Mila was not a traditional Mexican woman”: she is independent. Immigration alters traditional gender roles. Differences between her and Juana.
- Pochos and mojados/wetbacks: differences in perception among Mexicans and Latinos. What is a “pocho” and what is a “mojado/wetback”? How do Mexicans perceive other Mexicans and Latinos?
- Assimilation as a concept to understand the changes immigrants face. Be careful: assimilation also means losing one’s culture usually to become part of the dominant culture. Is it a solution for immigrants in the USA? What are the consequences of assimilation?
- The “barrio” and “pandillas” (gangs). Gangs are usually an interesting topic for students. What is a gang and how do they work? Why are they so appealing to some young people? The barrio as a space of containment and isolation.
- Education.
- Language.

Useful resources:

1) <http://www.enriquesjourney.com/educators.html>

Activities and ideas to teach Enrique’s Journey, a similar story. They can be adapted to Grande’s story.

2) <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-quinceanera-dance-20130808-dto,0,315090.htmlstory>

Description of a quinceañera

3) Search YouTube for quinceañera’s videos.

4) *Which Way Home?* A documentary on children immigration to the US that shows some of the topics addressed, such as the absence of the parents.

5) *Precious Knowledge*. Documentary about education and Latinos.

6) *Hombres y Machos. Masculinity and Latino Culture*. Alfredo Mirandé.

7) *Goddess of the Americas*. Ana Castillo. Collection of essays that address female gender roles in Mexican and Latin American culture.

8) *A Better Life*. Movie about immigration.

9) *Sin Nombre*. Movie about immigration from Central America and gangs (it is violent).

10) *The Other Side of Immigration*. Documentary about immigration from Mexico.

11) *A Day Without a Mexican*. Film about Mexican impact in American economics.

12) Latino in America: www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2009/latino.in.america/. A good resource that addresses several issues that Latinos face, such as second generation problems.

13) *Brown*. Richard Rodríguez. Essay about race relations and the concept of a “brown race”.