

"Where I'm From" Poems: An Introduction

Margarita Jiménez-Silva

In the mid-1990s, I was working as a middle-school teacher at a charter school in Oakland, California within a Newcomer Program. Most of my 7th-9th grade students were recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Building community within the classroom was a primary focus during the first few days and weeks of school and I was always looking for ideas that would allow me the opportunity to learn about my students' backgrounds in ways that valued their voices and respected their experiences. This was the era of Proposition 197 in California, a proposition that among other things, asked that all state and local government workers report suspected undocumented immigrants to the Attorney General's Office. Given the political climate at the time, students in our school were being told at home not to reveal anything about their home situations, immigration status, much less anything about their immigration stories. We had estimated through a community scan and informal conversations with our community liaison that 90% of the students in our Newcomer Program at that time were undocumented. As a teacher who believes strongly in culturally relevant pedagogy and in addressing the academic, linguistic, and socio-emotional needs of my students, it was a critical for me that I learn as much about my students' backgrounds as possible.

I started sharing my own story about my family's immigration to the United States from Mexico during the first day of class and then invited my students to share their stories in whatever language they chose and using whatever format they preferred – through art, using family pictures, a traditional essay, music, or poetry. Perhaps because I chose poetry as the vehicle for my own story, many of the students chose poetry as well using a variety of formats. Through this activity, students often shared details that then led to conversations that in turn led to revelations about their immigration stories. For example, I vividly remember Sandra who as an 8th grader used poetry to describe a scene at a cemetery in which three crosses stood on a hill. Through conversations, I learned that her father and two uncles had died in the previous year's uprisings in the Yucatán region in Mexico. She had lost all the important men in her life and now lived with three sisters and her mom in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Oakland. This information allowed me to understand some of the struggles she was experiencing in class.

A few years later, I came across an article by Linda Christensen titled "Where I'm from: Inviting Students' Lives into the Classroom." I adopted the poem format and have used it with almost every group of students with whom I've worked. The format was developed by poet George Ella Lyon and there are a number of resources online that are available to support use of the poem in the classroom. These resources include a reading by Lyon herself, examples of poems, and the history of the poem format. (<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>). Another valuable format is a template (<http://www.swva.net/fred1st/wif.htm>) that has been very useful when working with English learners or students who simply struggle with writing poetry.

Since beginning my work with preservice teachers at ASU, I have consistently used it in my traditional face-to-face, hybrid, and online classes. It is the very first assignment due in class and I begin my classes by sharing my own poem, included in this special issue. I give students the freedom to adapt the format and many do. As I read preservice teachers' poems during the first week of class, I always find myself laughing, crying, and in amazement at the diversity of my students' life experiences. Preservice teachers are invited to share only what they feel comfortable sharing with others and the second assignment of the class is to read others' poems and share a personal connection to three classmates' poems. This works well for building community as connections are made about places of origin, family traditions, and/or shared experiences.

In this special issue, we have included two poems from Arizona State University students who have shared where they are from through their poems. I hope you enjoy the poems and that you are inspired to use "Where I'm from poems" in your own work...or perhaps to write your own.

References

Christensen, L. (2001). Where I'm from: Inviting students' lives into the classroom. In B. Bigelow, B. Harvey, Karp, S. & L. Miller (Eds). *Rethinking our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (pp. 6-10).

Where I'm from...

Diana Alarcon

I am from pyramids and temples
from feathered serpents and prophecies of the feared dioses

I am from the city that builds and builds on top of mountains, on top of fields
from where the cerros can be seen no more

I am from where the metro becomes a can of sardines due to overpopulation
from where clouds are non existent due to the pollution situation

I am from my mother Maria Guadalupe Esteban with no father and my sister Maria Adriana too
from having a single parent never understanding what its like to have two

I am from crossing the border wandering through the scorching desert and swimming across the violent Rio Grande
from where many die in hopes of attaining the American Dreams I've been so lucky to have been given

I am from sleeping in a cramped two bedroom apartment with thirteen tios and tias, primos and primas I had never met
from never seeing my madre because she worked 12 hour shifts and sometimes more in order to feed my sister and me

I am from my mother telling me every day "los errores se pagan muy caros" and "no salgas con tu domingo siete"
from "ya ves a tu hermana, tres niños y batalla, no seas como tu hermana"

I am from getting a call that someone's been deported and I have to leave class immediately
from where helping family comes first rather than studying for a final exam

I am from a family that asks "why don't you have a boyfriend?" or "why aren't you married or have children?"
from a family that tells me I think I'm better than them because I go to college instead of congratulating me on awards and excelling

I am from having to attain the highest grades because my mother sacrificed so much for me to be the best
from where the pressure of family and working two jobs while going to school full time is not an excuse to get anything lower than an A

My life is split in two from that girl who crossed the border with a life of hardships who puts family first and the student who must maintain her grades while keeping a smile on her face. In my mind are my memories, both big and small, happy and sad, but all of which have shaped the woman I am today.

Where I'm from...

Laura Gomez

I am from that which you (racists/nativist) fear
I am the daughter of a gardener and a housewife
I am from the product of the crossover
I am that little girl who crossed the border in plain sight
From memorizing a fake name, a fake address, a fake school, and a fake friend
From being coached to say "I am a U.S. citizen" to hide her true nationality
From not being questioned because of her light complexion and dirty blond hair
I am part of the one percent of immigrants, which a fence did not and will not keep out
I am from rejection for being the one no one wanted to play with because I was Mexican
I am the one no one wanted to sit next to because I spoke Spanish and not English
I am from segregation to "learn" English
I am the translator for mom when she is scared of being judged
I am from a family where no one asks questions, but me, an individual full of questions
I am from being afraid I do not know enough
I am from being afraid I know too much
I wonder if I am a statistic gone wrong
I am from a community where very few make it out; the one who made it out
I sometimes wonder why?
I am from seeing dad physically hurting from a long work-day to support his family
I am from getting angry when they say we are here to take
I am from seeing my family work extremely hard to obtain the "American dream"
I have witnessed how most of them never make it out of the low-income status
I am from crying when a family is broken by unjust deportation fueled by corporate greed
I am from wondering "What if it had been my family?"
I am from seeing immigrants become for sale like raw material
I am from rebelling when they say I can't, we can't
I am from proving that I can, we can
I am from where they say "close the boarder" "build a fence"
I see hatred based on misconceptions
I want these misconceptions to change
I am from a place of hope that one day they will
I worry that it won't and that it never will
I am from dreaming that I can bring a voice to those that are silenced by oppressive laws and policies
I hope that one day I can
I say we can change it
I hope one day we can

Where I'm from...

Margarita Jiménez-Silva

I am from stainless steel pots bought with mamá's savings from selling Avon and Tupperware, bubbling over with sopas and frijoles, From carne asada on Sundays, tamales at Christmas and capirotda every Friday during Lent.

I am from the olive and fig trees that I liked to climb on summer afternoons, rollerskating around abandoned cars in the backyard, and from playing in the street with the neighborhood kids until the street lights came on.

I am from chicken coops and rabbit cages, the goats in pens, stray kittens brought home, and Sultan, the faithful collie we got for free outside the Boys' Market grocery store in Southern Cal.

I'm from Abuelita Lencha, Abuelita Juanita, one Abuelito, more tias and tios that I could keep track of and countless cousins. From relatives from Mexico, who would visit unexpectedly from places with exotic names like Tenochitlán and Soyatlán del Oro.

I am from a dad from Mexicali, the capital of the world where *everything* was invented and is the most beautiful and technologically advanced city anywhere. From a mom who dreamed of Harvard, but was held back by her role as the eldest daughter of a much older dad, a very traditional mom and the sister of three brothers who went on to become doctors while she stayed back and helped pay their tuition.

I am from the Jiménez, Carrasco, Mesa and Basulto families. From short, tall, dark, light, thin, and thick relatives. From eyes as blue/green as the ocean and eyes as dark as the night sky.

I am from three younger sisters and a younger brother, from "You're the oldest and have to set the example" after every time I got in trouble. From "You're so lucky" uttered after every award I have ever received.

I am from sitting in classrooms where I understood no English, the busing era forcing school integration. From private Christian schools where we worked as janitors to pay the tuition.

I am from the numbered rented stalls of the swap meet, working from sunrise to sundown on weekends to help support the family. From the halls of Harvard where I nodded in agreement during lectures and then ran to the library to look up all the words and read about ideas I hadn't understood, feeling again like an English learner in Mrs. Dyer's kindergarten classroom.

I am from "You're too smart to be a teacher" and from "Maestra, gracias for helping me learn English." From being mom to two boys, Sweetie to my high school love and now husband of almost 20 years, and Tita to most of my family.

My closet is full of scrapbooks, pretty boxes overflowing with old pictures, my mom's wedding veil and brother's baptism gown on shelves. On the floor there are many journals full of poems and stories about things that have happened and dreams I still nurture. I am from la familia and la familia is from me.