

Made You Look: Reflecting on the Trump Election and Patterns of False Response

Adam Freas and Jesus Limon-Guzman¹

Sacramento City College

100 Years and Running*

Before the start of this past fall semester, our campus, a large Northern California community college, celebrated its 100th anniversary. One of the lead programs featured a panel of current faculty, staff, and students, in addition to a former Japanese American student who attended the college during World War II. As a student, she experienced our government's efforts to round up Japanese Americans for imprisonment in internment camps. She shared her experiences during that time and provided pictures from the campus, which offered some insight into how the college responded, or failed to respond, to such a deplorable time in our country's history.

Without ill regard, her powerful retelling of her student experiences provided an opportunity for the panelists and campus as a whole to reflect on and process how our histories impact our current institutional practices and students. Her story offered an opportunity for us to contextualize our current role as a public institution of education. Instead, however, the panel and campus at large responded minimally to this conversation; it may have been startling or inspiring in the moment, but few actions or outcomes were attached. Most attendees returned to the normalcy of preparing for the upcoming semester and did not fully reflect on the relevancy of her story.

Yet fast-forward to the middle of the fall semester, and the presidential election uncovered the beliefs and practices of our larger society, creating a crucial time for educational institutions and spaces to hold exactly these conversations about institutional history and responsibility. Within that discourse, many non-dominant communities and the educational institutions that served them would face uncertain futures depending on the outcome. The election included the soon-to-be victor, Donald Trump, who was campaigning on returning the glory days of America's past, featuring a more pronounced white idealism and blue-collar industry, while people of color and marginalized populations were more openly targeted by groups, proposed policies, and systems. Our campus' student population is widely diverse; post-election anxiety and fear were evident and palpable throughout the halls, social spaces, and classrooms of the college.

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jesus Limon-Guzman, Department of English, Sacramento City College, 3835 Freeport Blvd, Sacramento, CA 95822. Email: limongj@scc.losrios.edu.

You Know Our Steez

We are two hip-hop educators. We collaborate as an English professor (Limon-Guzman) and Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) counselor (Freas). We organize unique student empowerment events and professional developments, and are committed to uplifting marginalized communities. We teach culturally responsive courses, integrate art and social justice into our classrooms, and use social media as a repurposed tool to connect students to the world. One of us is tenured (Freas), and the other (Limon-Guzman) is on a tenure track. We have worked in this community for over 10 years in a range of roles and have witnessed how student needs become intellectualized and forgotten. However, we have also witnessed incredible work take shape through the commitment of passionate educators and students. In that sense, we have heard token, sometimes exploitive, promises and have seen silent, unacknowledged yet impactful labor.

Hence, as a pair of faculty members who are deeply impacted by the results of the election, the following is our reflection and our warning. We aim to move past safe social and political investments and prompt other educators to take an active role in responding to the struggles our communities are likely to face in the following years. We cannot wait to respond. We have to lead.

I Left My Wallet in El Segundo—Freas

In the final days of the election, I was attending a statewide EOPS conference, which focused on the practices, models, pedagogies, and student-service approaches associated with the success of low-income and historically marginalized students by the program and its respective campuses. The general mood of the first two days was upbeat, being that the majority of the attendees were a mix of both willing and unenthusiastic (e.g., pro-Bernie Sanders) supporters of Hillary Clinton. These feelings were also supported by how remote the possibility of electing a former reality star—who was openly racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic—seemed. Or so we thought.

The Tipping Point—Limon-Guzman

The night of the election, I was giving an in-class writing midterm for my evening class. My students were naturally stressed because of the midterm, and I was growing anxious tracking the results on my phone. Some of my colleagues started texting around 8 p.m. One of them, a sociology professor and youth-development specialist, started the conversation with, “At what point do we start to worry?”

I replied, “Now.”

I am a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient, a Dreamer, a tenure-track English professor at the same community college that I attended, a lecturer at the university I graduated from, and an organizer in the community that raised me. I came to the country when I was 8 years old; since then, I, like so many other Dreamers, have not taken a single shortcut. I worked full-time to finance my entire education, and organized consistently with multiple groups to increase access to education and literacies in our community. But that night, the night of the election, I felt it all slip away. Just like

that, I was back to being an undocumented immigrant, sorting through the options available to plan my next move.

By the time the first student turned in his final, my stomach was twisted into a ball of stress and silent panic. At 10 p.m., I collected the remaining midterms and drove home. My fiancé was up watching the coverage of the results. She was worried, too. I sat with her, held her hand and tried—tried—to reassure her that everything was going to be okay, regardless of the results. But in my mind, I was running through ideas, options, plans, and actions I could possibly take given the worst possible outcome.

Respiration—Freas

The morning after the election, we reconvened per the conference's morning schedule. The room was full of 500 community-college faculty, staff, and administrators, the majority of whom saw themselves as social-justice advocates; we were devastated by the outcomes. The day before, the same room buzzed with enthusiasm, with attendees invigorated by peers doing work that matters. Now the room felt heavy, and the eyes of many looked like we were at a funeral. Even the energetic speakers scheduled that morning struggled to chip away at the depressive state that permeated the room. We were in disbelief.

As the day went on, the conference focus shifted to address the inescapable heavy feelings and remind us what was now at stake. Calls were flooding in from students and community members from across the state worried about the potential proposed changes of the new administration. Dreamer students were consumed by worry about their families, as well as their own status. I checked in with a fellow conference attendee who told me that his daughter was already assaulted with racial slurs that morning at a gas station in Southern California.

There was a sense of helplessness being at this conference isolated at a hotel, far from our home campuses. Yet, I also found solace being in the presence of fellow educators. We offered each other ears for listening, arms for hugging, and ultimately space for reconnecting with our focus and commitment to social justice and education.

The Next Movement—Limon-Guzman

The next morning, when it was official that Trump had won the election, I received an enormous amount of emotional support from a wide range of people who knew my story. Colleagues emailed me, texted me, and walked over to my office to let me know they were there for me. It was heartwarming, but it also elevated my stress. I felt like there was a spotlight on me, and I was asked again and again the same question that had been swirling around in my head: What are you going to do now?

During my classes at the community college, I asked students to share how they felt. They expressed their concerns. Most of them were shocked and in disbelief. But within the first 20 minutes of each class, they all eventually asked me: How do you feel? What does this mean for you? Can we still take you in the spring? How about English 302? Will you still be teaching that in the summer? And Puente? What about Puente? Who's going to teach that now? And what about the Dreamer Experience courses at the university? Will you still teach those?

I was moved and inspired by my students' concerns, more so than the support of my colleagues. They were, maybe selfishly, worried about whether I would be there for them during the next few semesters. That shook me out of my self-centered fear and anxiety; it reminded me that I had a responsibility within the community. Some students reminded me that they were only attending this college in order to take my classes. They felt safe in my class because they knew and could relate to my story.

I emailed the Dreamers I was working with and scheduled a meeting. We broke bread and held a circle conversation, and I prompted them to reflect on the challenges that they and their families had already overcome. I asked them to recount their strengths, their skills, their abilities, and their stories; I asked them to look over their scars and remember the journeys they had already traveled. We began healing with our stories and prepared for a new day. And just like that, I was recharged, reenergized, and ready for the work ahead. My role, my commitment to the students, and their trust in me helped me move forward. But it wasn't an acknowledgement of the threats ahead that united us; it was a conversation and an honest reflection on our strengths that empowered us.

The 6th Sense—Freas

We all returned to our campuses finding mixed efforts and responses to the pending changes, which would detrimentally change our educational and community landscapes. I met with fellow educators and students to plan how to support our campus, and its staff, faculty, and students, who may specifically be targeted in the coming months. I met with several Dreamer students who were seeking support and direction, hoping to connect with helpful resources. Many of them talked about dropping out of school to pay for immigration lawyers for their families and themselves. At the same time, some faculty aimed to communicate to our students, campus, and the larger community that we as a college would be a space of refuge. Inspired by the efforts of the City of San Francisco and other colleges and universities, a contingency of faculty, staff, and administration wanted our campus to declare itself a sanctuary space, thus identifying ourselves as a safe space for Dreamers with an imminent shift in immigration policy.

Shook Ones—Limon-Guzman

My connection to students is not accidental; I take an active role in recruiting students into my classes. I visit high schools, collaborate with academic advisors, and help organize various outreach events. Likewise, when the college asked to publish an article on my story last year, I intentionally agreed in order to help increase awareness. During the previous spring semester, the college documented my journey from being an undocumented student, to a DACA recipient, to a tenure-track professor. The article was included in a district-wide publication that was mailed to several thousand households. I was told that the purpose of the article was to increase enrollment by promoting the possibilities available through community college, and I consciously agreed to help that effort.

The college took a gamble and ran my story. But now, would the college or the district support me in a meaningful way? No, not really. The people did through their emotional support. Not the institution. The college, along with so many other institutions, began to express their commitment to students and vowed to protect all students during

the Trump presidency, but what about their faculty? Would they make an effort to secure faculty? Would they challenge the federal government to protect us?

In the following weeks, a colleague asked several college and district sources what would happen to DACA tenure-track faculty if Trump repealed DACA. The response was not surprising. One district official wrote, “The employee will likely have to shoulder the burden of dealing with the immigration services. The District does not have resources dedicated to the issue.” This response follows an institutional pattern in which they gradually and silently begin disengaging after assessing the risk. It also aligns with institutional traditions of exploiting the stories and struggles of individuals to symbolize support and connection in order to, above all, elevate institutional status, just as they did when they used the story of the Japanese American alumna to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the college.

False Prophets—Freas

When dealing with issues around people of color, social justice, and whiteness in educational spaces, I have observed a norming response. In many cases, as educators and institutions synthesize the issue into intellectualized discourse, the situation becomes more palatable, particularly for educators with dominant cultural identities, and limits the extent of the investment in truly addressing the issue. In this case, one example was the faculty’s trepidation around the term *sanctuary*, causing enough hands to be raised and ultimately throwing the movement into the educational vortex of bureaucracy. As it currently stands, the State Chancellor’s Office has communicated—through its December 5, 2016, press release—its choice to resist offering any support to law enforcement or share any student records in relation to the pending changes, accompanied by suggested guidelines for the 114 California Community Colleges (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2016).

Ain’t Sayin’ Nothin’ New

There is a process of institutional silencing that comes from overly complicated discourse. That silence, however, is itself a response. It is an active attempt to neglect, to turn the other way, to pretend nothing is happening, meanwhile vocalizing concern and support. It becomes a checkbox for the conscience, while staying in a mode of self-preservation, in particular for those who fit the dominant frameworks of privilege. This process—this tokenized empathy, over-celebrated heroism, and gradual paralysis—is what we have to move against. We cannot be distracted by discourse and dialogue that does not actually create movement, especially in times when actions are indispensable. So much of our time and energy can be lost in chasing an option that creates zero impact. This begs the question: How do we know what conversations we need to pay attention to and what conversations to avoid? This is a dilemma we battle with constantly, especially because the returns of a token conversation often appear to be so grand and rewarding. If we just get this policy right, then we will be in the clear to do so much more and make large-scale change. Or, if we specify and line up our objectives, then our efforts to address equity will be supported. However, the reality is that by the time all of the preliminary work is done, the students and the community have already been impacted.

Instead, we argue that focusing on movement and building communities of support are the starting point. Too often we assume that unless it is fully planned, it cannot happen, as though we do not have the capability to improvise and find direction as we build. In this sense, building a community of support and of social justice-minded educators should be a priority. We should focus on connecting with folks who will be our allies right now, folks who trust us and will not require a bureaucratic trail of documents to get involved. These partnerships are necessary and instrumental in helping students in dire need. These partnerships should expand across disciplines, institutions, grade levels, and communities. If nothing else, we should look at the next four years as an opportunity to unify based on our shared struggles, collective strengths, and intentions to act.

Likewise, we, as educators, should re-envision ways we can utilize assignments to prepare students. We should seek ways to empower students by constantly prompting them to recognize their strengths, not just through a reflection assignment, but also through a habitual process. Our students have to build confidence to face the world ahead, and we must prompt them to do so through the acknowledgement of their realities and the histories that are attached to them. It continues to be important that our spaces foster inclusiveness and value the importance of narratives, which, in turn, supports agency and self-efficacy.

If DACA is repealed, some of the most difficult questions we will face as a community of educators will be: How do we support our DACA colleagues who lose their work permits? Do we limit our support to moral offerings? Do we take on an extended battle with immigration services and the federal government? Both of these options appear to be busy responses with minimal genuine impact, especially in a discussion about the employment and livelihood of our fellow educators. Instead, we should use our understanding of local systems to figure out ways to provide economic relief for impacted DACA faculty to provide the sustainable means to take on the longer battles ahead. Are there resources available for contract work? Can we use available established pathways to contract former faculty as consultants? Obviously these are not ideal options, but we are not facing ideal conditions. We are facing conditions that require risks, and conditions that will test our courage and our commitment to principles. If the Trump administration delivers on his promises, the years ahead will only bring security and comfort to the privileged, the indifferent, and the docile. The rest of us will have work to do.

Conclusion: The Ultralight Beam

As we reflect on this experience and prepare for the near future, it is critical that we as educators and students stay committed to changing lives. However, the cost of achieving such a profound goal will require all of us to begin or continue radical advocacy paired with action. It must go beyond campus pamphlets. This will vary depending on who you are and where you exist, but there is work to be done no matter the situation. We ask you to be aware of the distractions, keep institutions accountable, form bonds with allies, recommit to principles of social justice and, above all else, empower students by prompting them to recognize their strengths, especially during times when the world attempts to highlight their deficits.

***Section Heading Playlist: Preferably Played at Loud Volumes**

- A Tribe Called Quest (1990). I left my wallet in El Segundo. On *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* [CD]. New York, NY: Jive Records.
- Black Star. (1998). Respiration. On *Mos Def & Talib Kweli are Black Star* [CD]. New York, NY: Rawkus Records.
- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (2016). *California community colleges chancellor's office provides guidance related to undocumented students* [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/DocDownloads/PressReleases/DEC2016/PR-Principles-12-5-16-FINAL.pdf>
- Cole, J. (2016). *False prophets* [single]. New York, NY: Dreamville, Roc Nation, Interscope.
- Common (2000). The 6th sense. On *Like Water for Chocolate* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: MCA Records.
- Gang Starr (1998). You know my steez. On *Moment of Truth* [CD]. New York, NY: Virgin Records.
- Mobb Deep (1994). *Shook ones* [single]. New York, NY: Loud/RCA/BMG Records.
- N.W.A. (1990). 100 miles and running. On *100 Miles and Running* [EP]. Los Angeles, CA: Ruthless/Priority.
- The Roots (1999a). The next movement. On *Things Fall Apart* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: MCA.
- The Roots (1999b). Ain't sayin' nothin' new. On *Things Fall Apart* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: MCA.
- The Roots (2004). *The Tipping Point* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: Geffen, Interscope.
- West, K. (2016). Ultralight beam. On *The Life of Pablo* [CD]. New York, NY: GOOD, Def Jam.

Author Biographies

Adam Freas is a doctoral candidate in the Benerd School of Education at the University of the Pacific. His current research interests examine hip-hop education, white privilege, and historically marginalized student populations in higher education. He is also a counselor and instructor for the EOPS program at Sacramento City College.

Jesus Limon-Guzman is an Assistant Professor of English at Sacramento City College. His current research interests examine the impact of culturally responsive texts and student-teacher relationships in the writing classroom.