

Since choosing Latin American Studies as my major at Bennington College in 2011, I have been interested in the struggles of Latin Americans, particularly those of indigenous extraction, to access the goods of the Enlightenment. My dissertation research explores the ways in which, as the Spanish Enlightenment evolved from the Renaissance, Spaniards limited access to these political goods. Among other investigations, I build on the findings of Orlando Betancor to demonstrate how the Spanish-Peruvian jurist Juan de Solórzano Pereira purported to develop a “true and prudent reason of state” which could reconcile God’s demands with Spanish man’s. In Solórzano’s conflicted world view, the mines which brought such great utility and happiness to the Spanish monarchy were also so brutal as to be offensive to God. Try as he might, Solórzano could not bring himself to rule against the mining operations, although he recommended improved conditions for the laborers.

Few jurists of the seventeenth century advocated for reforms more radical than Solórzano’s, but in the following century the arrival of the Enlightenment in the Hispanophone world made explicit the questions which the Renaissance had implied without addressing directly: who deserves happiness? Who can provide it? The relitigation of happiness under these new terms informed the debates leading to Latin American independence, but the legal fact of independence did not resolve a legacy of racism and labor exploitation which continues into the present. In my work on the Mexican Enlightenment for *The Latin Americanist* and on modern Brazilian philosophical approaches to the French Enlightenment for *A Contracorriente*, I address Latin Americans’ continuing struggles to assert their status as Enlightenment subjects, an assertion often synonymous or synecdochic with a demand for the recognition of common human dignity.

Thinking historically about struggles between expediency and the humane treatment of powerless persons has forced me to heed the clarion call to repair the crises of the present. In 2014 I was part of the BorderLinks delegation which founded the Bennington node of the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement and Education, which has since expanded to include several northeastern colleges and a long-term grant from the Mellon foundation. Currently I head the Duke Religions and Public Life Initiative’s working group on immigration and will organize a larger conference in the spring. I have also intermittently volunteered as a licensed ESL tutor to migrant workers, and am due to present in 2022 at the Strangers and Neighbors Conference in London, thematically oriented around immigration and hospitality in early modern Europe, with a paper on xenophobia and mercantilism in early Bourbon Spain.

My experience teaching immigrant and particularly undocumented and refugee students, several of whom have gone on to complete graduate degrees for which I recommended them, has taught me that the mere presence of a student in the classroom is evidence of his or her belief in the transformative power of education. One former recommendee, now finishing a master’s degree at the University of York, is a single mother as well as a refugee and former victim of domestic abuse, and I would here like to call attention to the compounding factor of gender in student precarity. One motif in my research is the tendency of early modern humanists to assume that the really useful political virtues are intrinsically linked to masculinity. This reflexive, etymological association of masculinity or maleness and virtuosity persists in modern academia. If I have been aware of this on a crude interpersonal level, several students have made me acutely conscious of the extent to which the visible condition of motherhood can exacerbate the prejudices of those already inclined to dismiss a student for refugee status or geographic origin.

It is one of my dearest concerns to encourage female students to feel comfortable giving voice to their rights and promoting their interests in academia. This can be a double struggle, as women in academia may face prejudice as they simultaneously confront their own early socialization to be conciliatory to a point damaging to respect for self. Cultural expectations can change, and I have seen them change since my undergraduate years, but each successive generation will need, regardless of the ambient evolution of mores, to educate its girls and women to know their rights to respect and safety. It will also need to educate its boys and men not to violate these rights. It is the duty of postsecondary instructors actively to confront prejudice where it appears in the classroom, and where it does not appear to preempt it by instilling an environment of total respect.

This is not only true in the real interpersonal context of the classroom but also in the class’s approach to the material. In the context of postsecondary education in history, it is hardly better to dismiss the views of some historical actor or author because of his or her membership in a group perceived to be marginalized than to dismiss the opinions of a classmate for the same reasons. We may criticize historical people as much as we like, and it is often intellectually productive to do so, but where reflexive bias appears in our analyses it must be identified and condemned. A respectful classroom teaches the kind of self-reflection which students, and instructors, will need to identify even implicit forms of prejudice in themselves and to replace it with an open mind and a thorough commitment to the universal dignity of all people.