

Digital Storytelling, Vulnerable Migrant Communities, and Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

Humanizing Deportation is a participatory audiovisual project that since early 2017 has documented and disseminated the repercussions of contemporary migration and border control laws and policies on vulnerable migrants in the United States and Mexico. Through on the ground collaborations with deported migrants and asylum seekers in Tijuana and elsewhere, we have published over 500 digital stories (testimonial audiovisual shorts) on our bilingual website. While fieldwork has been realized principally in Tijuana and elsewhere in Mexico by faculty and graduate students, we have increasingly developed strategies for incorporating undergraduate students at the University of California, Davis, into our research team, by training them in our audiovisual production techniques. This has allowed these students, many of whose families are affected directly by such laws and policies, to become directly and meaningfully involved in helping migrants communicate their experiences and concerns to the world. This article lays out the methods we use in involving undergrads directly, albeit remotely, in our deeply collaborative production processes, highlighting both the rewards and the risks in this endeavor. For many of our students, their participation in Humanizing Deportation constitutes one of the most meaningful experiences they obtain in college.

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The Humanizing Deportation Project

Humanizing Deportation employs digital storytelling to document the experiences of vulnerable migrants in the context of the migration corridor that stretches from the Darien Gap to the US-Mexico border, including noncitizen migrants living with or without temporary authorization in the United States, migrants who have been deported or otherwise repatriated from the US, and asylum seekers and other migrants in transit heading for or waiting at the US border. Since

2017, this community archive has grown significantly to include over 500 digital stories of over 400 migrants (some of whose stories include multiple installments) and continues expanding. While our teams have recorded these testimonial audiovisual narratives at multiple sites across Mexico and the United States, as well as further afield (Honduras, Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador), the heart of this project is Tijuana, one of the major crossing points for migrants heading north, as well as a major resettlement site for repatriated Mexicans and production site for some 57% of the videos published in the online archive.

The digital stories can be located via our bilingual website's homepage, which offers direct access to the archive's thirty most recently published videos, with others accessible in reverse order of publication by clicking at the lower righthand corner on "older posts," or by searching for specific titles. The "Thematic Index" tab leads to a thematic index that includes hyperlinks to videos that touch upon indicated themes. Among the site's other tabs, "Teaching Materials" links to a page containing pedagogical materials on over a dozen different topics, such as "Deported Childhood Arrivals," "Deported Military Veterans," "Domestic Violence and Asylum Law," and "Effects of Policies of Deterrence on Contemporary Migration Experiences." The website aims not only to foster dissemination of the videos, but also to assist those interested in carrying out research or incorporating migrant stories into instruction on topics related to contemporary migration and repatriation.

The majority of the archive's digital stories are recorded in Mexico (or elsewhere in Latin America, depending on available resources) by faculty or graduate students trained in both the project's protocols for community collaboration, and the audiovisual production techniques of digital storytelling. While digital storytelling has significant history as a tool for community activism (see, for example, [Lambert 2017]; [Bickel et al. 2017]; [Nah, Lee, and Liu 2021]; [Vivienne 2016]; [Canella et al. 2017]) and classroom instruction (see [Jamison et al. 2017]; [Shahid 2022]; [Smeda, Dakich, and Sharda 2014]; [Robin 2016]), we developed our innovative use of the genre as a research method based on my own experience with a prior project ([Lizarazo 2017]; see also [De Jager et al. 2017]; [Gubrium and Turner 2011]), with modifications made based on our expectations for Humanizing Deportation and improvisations incorporated in the field as issues arose (see [Irwin, Calvillo Vázquez, and Maldonado 2022]). Since the project's launch, our fieldwork teams have consisted almost exclusively of faculty and graduate student researchers from the University of California, Davis or other academic institutions formally affiliated with the project (see the project website's Sponsors/Affiliates page).

Undergraduate Reception and Interest

The very first public presentation of the *Humanizing Deportation* project was held at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art on UC Davis campus. We booked its largest auditorium space, which normally seats 125. In November of 2017, nearly a year into the first Trump presidency, characterized as it was by a sometimes fierce antiimmigration rhetoric, and following a decade of unprecedented levels of detention and expulsion of immigrants, interest in the project among students on campus, many of whom were from immigrant families, was strong. This "Community Education Space" quickly filled to capacity, and we were soon startled as museum staff raised the back wall, which they were able to open like a garage door, to allow them to add additional rows of folding chairs to accommodate the still growing audience. This was the largest free public event I recall attending or hearing about on UC Davis campus aside from graduations. Although at that time we had published only a little over 40 digital stories, we quickly realized that the archive's potential impact was substantial.

Once I began to teach the material from the archive, I came to learn why, as students related their own families' experiences with deportation, or the weight of the fear of deportation on undocumented or mixed status families, or their own vulnerability to deportation. The digital stories, which focused attention on such issues as family separation, the plight of childhood arrival migrants, and injustices and abuses of US immigration authorities, struck students on a very personal level. Students not only appreciated studying the archive but also expressed interest in volunteering their assistance with the project.

Due to the expenses, logistical complications, and emotional intensity implied in our fieldwork, most of which was being carried out in Tijuana (located over 500 miles from UC Davis campus in northern California), UC Davis fieldwork teams consisted exclusively of graduate students and faculty (me). It seemed impractical and perhaps risky to send

undergraduate students, even under faculty or graduate student supervision, to work in Tijuana, a city increasingly notorious for high levels of violent drug-related crime. However, we realized from the beginning that the production process even for a five-minute DIY-style video required significant labor, some of which could easily be outsourced. We soon began recruiting undergraduate volunteers to provide remote support, usually by transcribing or translating audio recordings, or sometimes by assisting with elements of postproduction, such as adding subtitles, as the archive is meant to offer full access to all materials in both English and Spanish.

Since 2017, dozens of students have helped out in this way, and have been grateful to be offered the chance to get involved in an academic project whose mission of community engagement resounded with them, and also to gain experience as part of a research team. Still, many wanted more. A few opted to carry out independent research, analyzing material from the archive for senior honors theses or other similar projects. However, taking into account the potential for digital storytelling as “one of the innovative pedagogical approaches that can engage students in deep and meaningful learning” ([Smeda, Dakich, and Sharda 2014, 1]), I was often left wishing I could involve them in more profound ways. I was able to engage them in projects to update the website, or to enhance the archive’s searchable index, but was unable to come up with a way to draw them closer to the migrant storytellers.

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Evolving Fieldwork Methods

The method that we use for the production of digital stories is a variation of that laid out in the Joe Lambert’s *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, which documents the community-based collaborative production processes designed by [Lambert 2017] and his colleagues of the Center for Digital Storytelling (now known as the StoryCenter) in the 1990s. This method, in its basic form, involves an outside facilitator guiding members of an existing community organization in producing digital stories that relate the personal experiences of community members, with the aim of communicating through these stories collectively agreed upon messages. A key component of the process is the “story circle,” which gives the community a chance to vet and give feedback on each other’s narratives as they begin to shape them into digital stories. Community members would also be trained in audiovisual production techniques and guided by the facilitator as they produced their own digital stories. We made two main adjustments from the beginning in the *Humanizing Deportation* project (see [Irwin, Calvillo Vázquez, and Maldonado 2022]). First, unlike Lambert’s method, which is oriented toward organized community groups, the lack of sense of community among the deported migrants whose stories we focused on our first year required that we work with individuals. Story circles were not possible in this context. This meant that nearly all dialogue during the creative process was between the storytellers and the academic facilitators, making it difficult to ensure that all involved remained confident that we were not making videos about migrants, but rather were helping migrants realize their own visions in the process of creating their own testimonial audiovisual shorts.

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The second fundamental adjustment we made was to offer migrants our services in carrying out all steps of the montage and editing of their digital stories. Although the audiovisual production processes generally employed in digital storytelling are quite simple, they can be time-consuming. Many participants worked long hours and did not have adequate time to dedicate to learning and then carrying out the processes of audio editing, audiovisual montage, incorporation of visual effects and transitions between images, editing and subtitling. Many others did not have computers – and some, including many living in shelters or on the street, lacked experience and interest in even basic personal computing functions. Therefore, with nearly all the deported migrants whose stories we recorded that first year, our academic teams carried out all of the technical steps in production.

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Still, we strove to ensure that our production processes were highly interactive, as we sought significant direction and feedback from community storytellers at all stages of production, even as we assumed all of the technical labor ourselves. Basically, once we launch a collaboration with a community storytellers, our production process consists of the following steps: 1) definition of story, 2) audio recording of narrative (including any necessary editing), 3) design of visual track and assembly of visual materials, 4) preparation of storyboard (transcription of edited audio, with selected images assigned to appropriate phrases), 5) audiovisual montage, 6) review of draft video, 7) revisions to draft video based on storyteller feedback, and final postproduction steps, including incorporation of titles, subtitles, and credits. Frequently, we meet six or more times with community storytellers, maintaining a sustained dialogue as our teams carry

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out each of the steps of audiovisual production.

During our first year, we worked almost exclusively with deported migrants, most of whom had fixed addresses, and with whom it was easy to maintain contact, and, with some exceptions (for example, with homeless migrants) it was relatively easy to follow these procedures. During the summer of 2018, however, we had a team in Monterrey, Mexico, who had been invited to present the project at a migrant shelter to an audience that turned out to be principally not deported immigrants to the United States, but migrants in transit from Central America on their way to the US border. Although they had not necessarily experienced deportation, we welcomed the collaboration of any migrant who wished to share their experiences via our website. The Monterrey team members were able to collapse the first four steps of the production process into a single weekend, but when they returned a week later with draft videos ready for viewing, the migrant narrators were already gone. In those days many migrants still travelled without cell phones or telephone contracts, and many were reachable only via WhatsApp or other messaging platforms via wifi, while others were not reachable at all once they moved on from the shelter. Initially, we abandoned the idea of working with migrants in transit due to the importance of ensuring that our production processes remain deeply collaborative.

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However, with the arrival of huge caravans of migrants in Tijuana in November of 2018, I made an on-the-spot decision to make a major revision to our production process in the case of vulnerable migrants who felt an urgency to publicly document some of their experiences, especially in the face of the increasingly politicized and sensationalized discourse about them in both the media and in international politics. These migrants, who evaded some of the dangers typically experienced by Central American migrants (exposure to criminal assaults, reliance on human smugglers, travel on the network of freight trains commonly known as “La Bestia”) by travelling in large groups (often thousands of migrants moving together), were jarringly visible during the course of their journeys, much of which they travelled on foot, from Central America to the US-Mexico border, representing a novel means of mobility in the region (see [Torre Cantalapiedra 2021]). As the caravan migrants arrived in Tijuana, no one, including our teams or the migrants themselves, knew when they would cross the border, where they would find shelter, and where they could be found from one day to the next. So when I recorded the story of a caravan migrant from Honduras, although I gave him our project calling card, which included our web address along with my personal email address and phone number, it was clear to both of us that we might never be in touch again. So, as we completed the first steps in a single meeting, he signed the shared intellectual property rights form that we use, and agreed to let me complete the production process, following the guidance he’d given me, even if I was unable to locate him and obtain his final approval before publishing the video. While the contract gave him the right to withdraw his story from the archive at any time in the future, it would also allow me to publish it if I was unable to track him down when it was finished. The urgency of the moment motivated me to produce his story in only a few days, but by that time he was already gone – I learned only later that he had already crossed the border and was being held in a detention center in southern California [Irwin, Calvillo Vázquez, and Maldonado 2022, 53–55].

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Over time, even as cell phones and WhatsApp become essential travel tools for nearly all migrants, we learned that it could be difficult to maintain contact with migrants heading northward. While a few might keep our card and contact us, many just disappeared. Those who crossed the border and initiated asylum processes in the United States, for example, tended to quickly give up their Mexican (or Honduran, etc.) cell phone numbers and enroll with US carriers (using US numbers). And while Facebook Messenger, which registers a name and not a phone number, was a better option in some cases, WhatsApp was the preferred method of communication for many migrants.

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An additional difference we have found in our collaborative experience in working with deported migrants versus migrants in transit is that the former were much more likely to incorporate materials from personal archives, such as family photos, into their videos. Migrants in transit, many of whom are afraid to give any clues of their whereabouts to individuals or organizations that may be pursuing them or are fearful of revealing information that might be used by against them by state authorities, often prefer to not reveal their identities in their digital stories, opting instead to represent their experiences through more generic imagery. For many of these community storytellers, the dissemination of their story is what is most essential; while they understand that the visual track can enhance their narration, they are often uninterested in involving themselves that deeply in the minutiae of audiovisual production when they are still in the middle of their migration process. We’ve realized over time that even those who end up waiting months at the border for

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an opportunity to cross, with little to occupy them, are unwilling to engage deeply in the production process. Our policy in such cases is to discuss the visual track with them and try to get as good an idea as possible of how they imagine the video version of their story so that we can produce something that meets their expectations.

While our evolving fieldwork protocols and collaborative production methods raised a number of logistical and ethical issues for our research teams (for example, we needed to put protocols in place for migrants fleeing danger or otherwise at risk, to maintain their anonymity, with the option to not reveal their real name in their videos or even in their interactions with our fieldwork teams), I eventually realized that they opened opportunities to involve undergraduate students more deeply in the project. If videos, like that produced with the caravan migrant cited above, could be managed with only a single meeting, perhaps it would be possible to incorporate student contributions to different steps of production without compromising the project's commitment to guarantee that community storytellers maintain a feeling of ownership of their digital stories, and that our team's interventions in the creative process remain minimal.

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Bringing Remote Collaboration to the Undergraduate Classroom

The summer of 2022 was a particularly active one in Tijuana, and the field work team we sent to record migrant stories there ended up with an abundance of material. Our policy is to never turn away any migrant with a sincere interest in sharing their experiences through our archive. That summer in particular, with the border still remaining closed to most asylum seekers under the Title 42 pandemic emergency order, many migrants who had made arduous journeys to the border were left waiting for permission to cross and were especially eager to participate in our project. Indeed, our research team that summer recorded so many digital stories that they were unable to produce them all by the end of the summer. Also, a few videos had been delayed: as our practice is to encourage migrants to narrate their stories in their native tongue, and that summer we ended up recording a number of videos in other languages, we had to find people fluent in those languages (specifically, Haitian Creole and Russian) to transcribe and translate them for us, which took extra time. Meanwhile, I was going to teach a first-year upper-division honors seminar in Spanish that fall, so I set aside nine of those recordings for a class assignment. In each case, I'd asked the team member who had recorded the story to get us, in addition to the audio recording itself, whatever information they could regarding the migrant narrator's ideas for the visual track of their story.

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From there I assigned them as a class project. The class met for 80 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays over the course of fall quarter (10 instructional weeks), and I reserved the last half hour each Thursday for workshops in which I walked the students step-by-step through our production process, including audio editing, preparation of storyboards, audiovisual montage, translation (from English to Spanish or vice versa – or, from other languages into both English and Spanish), and subtitling.

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Students thus advanced gradually in the production of these videos of recently recorded experiences of real people in the process of migration. Not only did they learn our audiovisual production techniques, but they also became deeply involved in the stories of the migrants whose recordings they'd been assigned. While they'd learned in class about many of the challenges faced by contemporary migrants arriving at the US border, their need to engage deeply with the details of these stories (for example, in seeking out the best images to depict dangerous migration routes or intimidating bureaucratic processes, or in trying to fully capture the emotion of a given scene in a translation) made this hands-on assignment especially memorable and instructive. Moreover, they became officially part of the *Humanizing Deportation* research team, their work in the audiovisual production acknowledged in each video's credits, and their collaboration with the project duly recognized on our webpage, on the "Research Team" tab. Of course, many students are also excited to be part of a publicly visible research project, which gives them practice with practical skills, and allows them to include this community-engaged research on their résumés.

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It should be noted that this experiment required significant supervision on my part to ensure that students performed the task at hand with sufficient care. Given their lack of experience in the field and limited knowledge of the migration contexts narrated by the community storytellers, it was important for me to give them feedback, most especially on the visual design – for example, to ensure that a scene set in Tapachula, Chiapas, not be illustrated with images from Tenosique, Tabasco, as well as on technical details in which many were equally inexperienced. I was grateful that I was

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teaching this small-enrollment honors seminar, both because of the perhaps deep commitment on the part of this profile of student to their studies, and also due to its small class size.

While not an expert at all in what is known as “educational digital storytelling,” the claims being made for its use in the university-level classroom (i.e., its benefits in helping students to develop digital, visual, and oral literacies, among others – [Wu and Chen 2020, 1–2]; (see also [Clement 2012]) made intuitive sense to me. And its potential to incorporate what [Stewart and Gachago 2016] call “transcontinental border crossing” – i.e., a form of transnational collaboration between the migrant storytellers and the students who produce their digital stories – as a meaningful component of on-campus “border pedagogy” (see especially pp. 530-531) as well as the opportunity it permitted for community-engaged learning or “implicated scholarship” ([Bickel et al. 2017]; [Fletcher and Cambre 2009]) was compelling to me. While conscious of potential ethical issues implicit in turning to what is effectively a form of “student labor,” on which digital humanities critics have reflected incisively (see, for example, [Anderson et. al 2016]; [Keralis 2018]), for the advancement of a research-oriented project, the learning outcomes that I foresaw for students seemed more significant. The most important learning experience came in the editing and montage of the digital stories, which required listening carefully to the stories, and then interpreting them thoughtfully by relating them to materials studied in class or, in some cases, carrying out additional research in order to produce a visual track that both was both accurate in its depictions of the story and true to the community storyteller’s vision. However, for most students the audiovisual production itself was also a newly learned skill, and while students were already at least nominally bilingual (an advanced proficiency in Spanish was a prerequisite for enrollment in the class), the translation process also required guidance and care as they were being produced not for literalness or completeness, but for subtitles, which require some conciseness, often at the expense of nuance [Bittner 2011].

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The experiment was largely successful, and nearly all of the videos were published in December of 2022 – the roughly four months from audio recording to publication was longer than our normal production time, which usually is only a few weeks. However, enlisting the students allowed us to produce more stories that year than we otherwise would have. I was especially happy that our process itself was not sacrificed. While we did lose track of some of these migrant storytellers due to our prolonged production time, we were able to maintain contact and offer most of them the chance to give us feedback before finalizing and publishing the videos. I did not involve the students directly in contact with the migrants, as our normal protocol is for the person who recorded each story to be the one to manage communication. This policy aims to maintain a personal relation with each migrant (rather than a bureaucratic one in which different members of an organization communicate at different times), as well as to avoid miscommunication. From the perspectives of migrant storytellers, the only difference with this variation when compared to our more orthodox audiovisual production method was that it took longer.

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Complications and Repercussions

This scenario was not without risks. Although the course objectives and deliverables were listed on the syllabus and presented in detail on the first day of class, this did not guarantee that all students would fully comply. After a few weeks, for example, I noted that one of the students was missing most of our Thursday meetings. The student appeared to be keeping up with readings, and was punctual with assignments, including their midterm essay. However, it was not clear that they were keeping up with the audiovisual production schedule. I guessed that they already knew how to perform some of the tasks (for example, the insertion of simple transitions between images or the proper placement of subtitles), or that they simply deemed this aspect of the class less important than others that more directly reflected questions of language or culture, the more standard areas of pedagogical focus in upper-division Spanish classes. Reminders and reproaches did not seem to motivate the student, who I had to infer was either working independently, despite not attending the Thursday workshops, or was falling behind with the hope of catching up at the very end of the quarter, not necessarily an uncommon practice among undergraduate students. The student did hand in their digital story, but only after requesting an extension, and the final product did not incorporate all formal requirements (e.g., it did not apply any motion effects to its images). I offered the student the opportunity to fix several problems I found, directing them to the PowerPoint slides of the classes missed, which laid out the omitted procedures, step by step. Time was short, however, and the student had other final exams or papers to turn in, and so ultimately chose to take a bad grade on this assignment rather than fix the problems. Unfortunately, this left a digital story that did not meet the standards of

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the project and could not therefore be published.

At that time another undergraduate student had approached me seeking an independent study project for the following quarter, and I offered him the production of this digital story, starting over from the original audio recording. I thus repeated the material of the weekly Thursday workshops over the course of winter quarter with this student, who had not been enrolled in the seminar. While with one-on-one supervision I was able to ensure that the student complied with each element of the production process, it ended up delaying the production of this video for another three months. This uncertainty of whether all students would properly complete each step of the production process – or that all students would even complete the course – is an inherent risk in this process. I knew this from the beginning, as several faculty research team members from Mexican universities had previous experience with involving undergraduates in the production of digital stories for the project, and knew of numerous cases in which the videos produced by the students were not publishable. The possibility of careless undergraduate work, or of students' inability to complete an assignment for health or other reasons, will always be a risk for these scenarios, but with careful supervision nearly all digital stories do get produced properly; it is just important to have a backup plan in place to ensure that any videos that are not published through the classroom exercise to get produced in as timely a fashion as possible.

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Since the fall of 2022, I've repeated this exercise twice, once with the same upper-division honors seminar (the second time I had a larger class and assigned students to work in pairs, which may have served as a motivator for keeping up with deadlines for production steps), and once as an extra-credit assignment in a larger class (of the 60 students enrolled, 22 participated, again, working in pairs). Although it takes some coordinating to manage all the moving pieces, most especially to ensure smooth communication with migrant storytellers (whom we now warn that audiovisual production may take several months to complete), this has proven an effective way to involve undergraduates in a project that many of them feel passionate about without incurring the costs and risks of taking them to the border. Over time I've realized that it is essential to emphasize that our project pledges a commitment to community, and that anyone who wishes to participate on our team must therefore bring a high level of dedication to their contributions; specifically, I've experimented with a pass/fail grading in order to motivate students who might turn in sloppy or incomplete (and unpublishable) digital stories to bring them up to the standards of the project. To do this, I've set deadlines early enough so that any student who turns in work that is not up to snuff will have time to make necessary revisions by the end of the term (any student who does not comply receives no credit for the assignment, whether assigned as extra credit or a component of the course grade). As a result, more students have made the effort to produce higher-quality digital stories.

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While I have not compiled student comments on their experience (and would feel uncomfortable quoting such comments, whether from casual conversations or course evaluations, even if I obtained their permission or did not refer to students by name), many participants clearly have found the experience to be rewarding. Indeed over a dozen of the students who participated in the project through these class assignments have signed on as volunteers beyond the context of the class, thus extending their experience as members of our research team for another year or even longer.

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It is likely that these students appreciate the opportunity to participate in an academic research project, and I certainly encourage them to list their contributions to *Humanizing Deportation* on their résumés. I also believe that many of them see their involvement as an expression of alliance with an imagined community of vulnerable migrants to which they belong or with which they sympathize, whether because of the migratory experiences of their families, their friends, neighbors or classmates, or of their own personal histories. This is not to say that the project demands any particular political standpoint of its research team members. Indeed, although its name implies an attitude of compassion toward migrants, neither the stories in the archive nor the research that draws from it are required to convey a particular political position. The stories express whatever migrants wish to share about their experience, or whatever opinions they wish to disseminate, many of which may not align with those of our team members. Participation in the project does not demand any particular stance regarding immigration laws or policies; what it insists upon, and which I emphasize to students who take part, is that we are committed to treating migrants with dignity and listening respectfully what they have to say. Any student who is willing to approach their collaboration in these terms is welcome to work with us. As with any material studied in class, the data at hand (in this case the very heterogeneous stories of migrants) is open to interpretation. Indeed, the videos offer nuanced real-world evidence of how contemporary migration law and politics play

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out in the lives of migrants, making for productive analysis and discussion.

I should also add that I personally recorded some of the audio narrations that have later been transformed into digital stories by undergraduate students enrolled in my classes and have told migrant narrators that their videos would likely be produced by my students. While I believe that most migrants who participate in *Humanizing Deportation* are motivated principally by a feeling of urgency for the public documentation and dissemination of some of their experiences, I have also noticed that migrants seem pleased that it is not only our research teams (usually faculty or graduate student with expertise in migration studies) that are interested in helping them record their stories and sometimes air their grievances. They are often gratified to hear that I will be taking their stories into the classroom as instructional materials to help my undergraduate students (mostly US citizens and permanent residents, with some DACAmented, and others undoubtedly undocumented) to learn about the contemporary dynamics of migration. Migrants often appreciate that we are able not only to disseminate their stories widely on the internet, but also to use them promptly and directly as a teaching tool in the university classroom.

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Final Words

Incorporating undergraduates in community-engaged research can offer them a memorable and meaningful experience, even if their participation is remote. Even at a distance, the process of audiovisual editing and montage involves students deeply in the stories of community storytellers. Although working with students always implies some risk, as it is not possible to guarantee that all students will adequately complete the assignment, the learning experience can be significant.

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