

Welcome to **Zinctown**: *Bringing Salt of the Earth* (1954) to Your Classroom

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How shall I begin my story that has no beginning?

—Esperanza Quintero

While these words belong to the film *Salt of the Earth*'s protagonist, Esperanza Quintero, they also speak to the task of social studies teachers, students, and curriculum. As districts, schools, and classrooms continue to struggle with the (under)representation of marginalized Groups and difficult histories, we highlight the 1954 film as not only an essential film for classroom room instruction to help introduce the stories of marginalized groups, but as a central text for the U.S. history curricula. The film features a Latinx community, centers a labor strike, develops strong female characters, interrogates unjust economic systems, and provides insight into the political battles of the Cold War United States.

Such storylines, both in front of and behind the camera, caused the film to be censored, banned, and hidden by various industry and political leaders. Additionally, there is a rich depository of primary source materials that students can investigate as companion/inquiry texts. Now, nearly 70 years after its initial release, it is well past time to bring this film into contemporary curriculum. In this article, we outline why teachers should use this film in their classrooms and provide ideas for incorporating it.

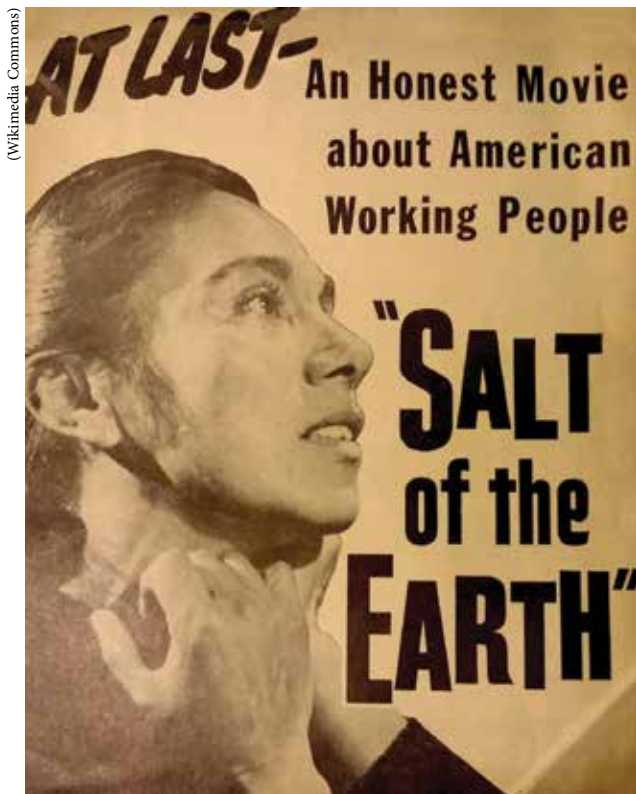
Representation of Oft-Overlooked Communities

This is our home. The house is not ours.
But the flowers ... the flowers are ours.

—Esperanza Quintero

With all the turmoil of recent years, while it may be natural to question what and how we teach, many of us are still wondering how to change our classrooms. This is nothing new; as Busey and Russell point out, teachers often stick to the books.¹ But given that those books are absent of stories about Latinx communities, change is hard to come. An analysis of those textbooks by Diaz and Deroo exposed that most Latinx representation in textbooks was both lacking and flat² and Davis found that this problem continues even in Florida, a state with a high number of Latinx peoples.³ Without expanding our resources, there is a real risk of (re)producing problematic and racialized discourse about Latinx people that does not address specific socio-political contexts, like changing laws, policies, and regulations.⁴ Students want these valuable and diverse representations. Brugar, Halvorsen, and Hernandez found that not only were students extremely interested in women's history when presented to them through non-textbook sources, their thinking and engagement levels remained high after the lesson was

over.⁵ In short, students are craving learning outside the traditional textbook, and *Salt of the Earth* is a prime source for such learning.



A poster promoting the New York City theatrical premiere of *Salt of the Earth* in 1954, featuring Mexican actress Rosaura Revueltas.

Film Summary and Overview

Written by Michael Wilson, directed by Herbert J. Biberman, and produced by Paul Jarrico, *Salt of the Earth* recounts the story of a small New Mexican mining community, “Zinctown.” The movie opens with a brief history that describes how the land changed hands from Mexico to the United States just as it went from being owned by Esperanza Quintero’s husband’s family to the mining company. Viewers then follow Esperanza and Ramon Quintero’s family. We witness tensions in their house from the stress and danger of Ramon’s mining job and his union organizing. The tensions are fueled by racial discrimination and disparities between the mostly Mexican miners of the Quinteros’ town and the mostly white miners of another town.

Following a deadly accident, Ramon’s miners union votes to carry out a strike, but rejects pleas from the women of the town (the wives of the miners) to include sanitation and better housing in their demands. As the strike begins, there is open hostility between the owners of the mine, the local sheriff who backs him, and the mostly Mexican miners. When the miners are eventually jailed for picketing and marching, the union votes to let the women take the lead.

Ramon and Esperanza have a back and forth about her participation in the strike because she just gave birth. The women take over the strike and picket in place of the men. A visit from the East Coast owner of the mine raises tensions as Ramon and Esperanza find their home targeted. Near the end, all the miners come together at the Quintero home and Ramon highlights the bravery, necessity, and resilience of the women’s refusal to back down. The movie concludes when the owner relents, in large part because of the women’s refusal to end the strike, and agrees to start negotiations for better working, living, and economic conditions.

A Controversial, and Censored History

Then I knew we had won something they could never take away
—Esperanza Quintero

Salt of the Earth was groundbreaking in many ways. It brought to the screen topics that 1950s America still avoided and invisibilized. The film focused on the intersection and reproduction of inequalities due to race, class, gender, and imperialism. It also took pains to cast roles in a representative manner. Not only were Latinx actors recruited to depict striking miners and their partners, many parts were filled by actual miners or families that participated in the strike.

The film was heavily criticized both for its content and its content creators. Made by filmmakers accused of and jailed for communist sympathies during the Red Scare of the 1950s, some film historians consider it the only truly suppressed and censored movie in U.S. history. Theaters refused to show it, industry trade groups organized against it, reviews labeled it propaganda, and a Republican

congressman described it on the House floor as a “Communist-made film.”⁶ Such draconian measures were fairly successful in stymying the release and popularity of *Salt of the Earth*; however, “the film—and the strike that inspired it—were later embraced by Chicano and feminist movements, who saw it as an example of what social justice movements could look like.”⁷ In particular, Chicana feminists saw the actions of Esperanza and the other female labor organizer as analogous to their important, and often undervalued work—their *movidas*—in the homes, hallways, and organizations of the Chicano movement.⁸ Thus, although the film may have been deemed out of place in the 1950s, it resonates with the fight for racial, economic, social, and gender justice today.

Salt of the Earth (1954) in Your Classroom

Inquiry and Primary Sources

There are a number of resources that can provide support for you and your students to explore the stories behind the historical events of the film.

Some of these sources include:

- *Salt of the Earth* - Research Guides at University of Montana-Missoula. The University of Montana offers a research guide and a comprehensive newspaper bibliography for many of the local news stories about the miners’ strike and the community (https://libguides.lib.umt.edu/Salt_of_the_Earth).
- The University of New Mexico Library also has rich digital resources about the film, including the FBI file about the investigation that led to the film being blacklisted and subsequently forgotten (<https://econtent.unm.edu/digital/collection/saltofearth/id/0/rec/1>).
- An oral history project about the city and the strike captures the words and lives of the people who experienced the strike and conveys how subsequent generations recall the events’ importance (<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com>).

- Latino U.S.A created a podcast about the movie and town (www.latinousa.org/2019/05/01/empirezincstrike/).
- The Zinn Education Project has teaching activities about the film (www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/salt-of-the-earth-premieres/).

Having students reference these resources will not only provide an important historical grounding for the film, but also support a wide variety of inquiry questions and projects. The resources we outline also center the people at the heart of the story to help students realize and remember that most of the actors in the film were individuals who took part in the strike (the roles of Lupe and the Sheriff were filled by professionals). Balancing the film, history, and primary sources is a vital task for students as historical fact and fiction are closely connected in this instance.

Connections to Today

The struggles that the mining community faces in the film (and real life) have parallels to challenges faced today. Although there is no pandemic or disease in the film, the community faces problems with gender inequity, poverty, income inequality, and racism. Today, news outlets are replete with stories about the injustices around the country from income inequality (NPR, “My Bank Account Has \$4’: Pandemic Has Left Millions of Livelihoods in Limbo,” Dec. 21, 2020); to gender inequity (NPR, “How The Pandemic Reveals Gender Inequality in the Household,” Fresh Air, May 21, 2020); to racial injustices (NPR, “Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans Bear Heaviest Financial Burden of Pandemic: Shots - Health News,” Sept. 18, 2020, and “Many Asian American Candidates Face Racism During Pandemic,” Nov. 1, 2020). It may seem odd to parallel these stories and the current crises with a film made about a strike in New Mexico, but the truth is that this film, the conflicts, and the community, all represent an invitation to help students learn about the long arc of racialized socio-economic problems and the everyday people who take “informed action” to make change.

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Sample Lesson Plan

The goal of this lesson plan is to provide an example of things you can do to incorporate this film into your class. Almost every U.S. state has standards that reference labor organization, strikes, gender politics, and the post-World War II politics of the nation. The question is not if you can incorporate this film into your class, but *how*.

Salt of the Earth (1954) Possible Lesson Ideas

Inquiry Question: How does a community produce change?

Historical Thinking Question: (Why) Does history (dis)appear?

Time: 3 blocks, 90 minutes each

Overview & Inquiry Questions:

Lesson 1	Watching with primary sources	Lesson Inquiry Question: When do people act for justice? Why do communities unite?
Lesson 2	Following the strike	Lesson Inquiry Question: How does a strike work? What does it mean for the community?
Lesson 3	A fight with history	Lesson Inquiry Question: Should some films be banned? What value does that serve?

Sources:

- Salt of the Earth Library Guide, University of Montana (https://libguides.lib.umt.edu/Salt_of_the_Earth)
- Salt of the Earth Recovery Project (<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com>)
- Salt of the Earth FBI File (<https://econtent.unm.edu/digital/collection/saltofeearth/id/0/rec/1>)
- Latino USA, And They Will Inherit It Podcast (<https://www.latinousa.org/2019/05/01/empirezincstrike/>)
- Film is available on Kanopy and many local libraries
- NPR Report on Salt of the Earth Conference (www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1176713)

Lesson 1:

In this lesson, the goal is to introduce students to the history of the mine strike, what occurred, and the primary sources. You will split watching the film between this class session and the next.

Prior to the Film:

- Listen to the Latino USA Podcast. Have students take notes about the podcast.
- Have students research the following terms: Union, EmpireZinc, mining, zinc, and strike.
- Have students explore the Library Guide and Recovery Project sites and examine the different primary sources.

Activity: Gallery Walk

- Students will create exhibits, either around the classroom or virtually, to share their observations and analysis about their primary sources. You might assign documents to small groups of students to expedite the process too. Each exhibit should connect evidence from their research to the history of the strike and how they understand it. Also make sure that there are resources and means to connect with current economic struggles.
- Be sensitive that some students' families may be living these struggles right now.
- Leave up the exhibits so that students can compare them and re-examine their work after the film is over.

During the film: Have students take notes. Pause the film and ask them to write their reactions to the film at certain points.

<p>Important moment 1: After Ramon is in jail.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompting questions: How is the Quintero family doing right now? What is the state of the union? How is the company reacting? 	<p>Important moment 2: After the women are arrested.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompting questions: How is the Quintero family doing right now? What is the state of the union? How is the company reacting? 	<p>Important moment 3: End of the film.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompting questions: How is the Quintero family doing right now? What is the state of the union? How is the company reacting?
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Pause movie here return to this in the next class.

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Lesson 2

After finishing the film, the class will begin to compare their notes and thoughts about the movie with their previous research. Students should explore the differences between what they noticed in the film and what they learned in the research they did in lesson 1. After that comparison, they should engage in a Town Hall discussion.

Activity: Town Hall discussion.

- Students will prepare for engaged discussion on a variety of questions. Separate students into groups to prepare for a town hall. Each group should have a question to answer and discuss in front of the class, as well as prepare questions for other groups. Have them create notes, draft responses, and questions for each of the other groups with a rationale.
- The Questions:
 - ◆ How did the miners change?
 - ◆ How did the union adapt to challenges?
 - ◆ How did the company respond to the strike?
 - ◆ How did the community's attitudes about gender change?
- End the class with a review of what they've learned, how they are thinking about the film, and the questions at large. Tell students that this will be where they pick up tomorrow.

Lesson 3

Activity: Letter writing

- Students will be writing a letter about the legacy of the film, whether it was right to ban the film, and if it should be added to the National Registry of Films. They can write to a local congressional representative, the head of the Smithsonian, or the Library of Congress. Their letter must make it clear whether or not the film's history needs to be preserved and made part of the film. Encourage students to cite specifics about the film in their letter.
 - ◆ Consider hosting a screening of the film for your students and community. Reach out to local Latinx organizations and/or unions to see if they would be willing to serve on a panel to discuss issues facing local Latinx and Labor communities.
- Wrapping up:
 - ◆ Have students write up a review of the film. Make sure they include specifics about scenes from the film, evidence that they researched, and a reflection about the activities that occurred in class. Tell them to be as specific as possible. Last, their reflection should include a section to you as to whether or not you should use the film again in class. Encourage students to describe and outline why (or why not) the film should be used in class.

Additional Resources

R. Boren. Interview with Juana Sierra (November 5, 2013) who recounts walking the picket line during the Empire Zinc strike, www.youtube.com/watch?v=It6JEsL8Zak

Silver City Daily Press and Independent (August 17, 1951). "Board Examiner Says Company Refused to Bargain in Good Faith," https://libguides.lib.umt.edu/ld.php?content_id=31318789.

Western New Mexico University Miller Library (n.d.) Bibliography of Silver City Daily Press Newspaper Articles and Advertisements about the Empire Zinc Company Strike, October 1950 to February 1952. <https://library.wnmu.edu/mdocs/EmpireZincStrikeBib.htm>

WELCOME TO ZINCTOWN *from page 166*

Connecting to Local Places

History, and historical films, can often feel very distant—not just set in a past that we cannot access but in places that seem foreign and removed. Wineburg explains how these sentiments make history feel alien and unreachable to students. But *Salt of the Earth* does not feel unreachable.⁹ This story is not about a monumental victory against a supernatural enemy, but rather how a community came together against difficult odds and a tough situation. The film, and the *Salt of the Earth* Recovery Project, present a glimpse into history that inhabits ordinary and everyday spaces. The film’s lack of epic vistas and landscapes is acutely mirrored with scenes in homes, restaurants, meeting rooms, and the environment that capture how and where the story took place. In their book, *Chicana Movidas*, Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell highlight the importance of such everyday actions for justice, and much like the film, place a premium on how women enact such history in “backrooms and bedrooms, hallways, and



Republic Mine, Empire Zinc Mine, Hanover-Fierro Mining District, Grant County, New Mexico, 1905. (Courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey).

kitchens.”¹⁰ The film is an excellent reminder that while the grandeur of films and history may be compelling, there are stories, and important ones too, that live close to us and on a different scale. *Salt of the Earth* can bring this to your classroom and the Recovery Project can inspire you and your students to find local history to explore and recover as well. ■

Notes

1. Christopher L. Busey and William B. Russell, “We Want to Learn’: Middle School Latino/a Students Discuss Social Studies Curriculum and Pedagogy,” *RMLE Online* (2016): 1–20.
2. Edgar Díaz and Matthew R. Deroo, “Latinxs in Contention: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis of 11th-Grade U.S. History Textbooks,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 48, no. 3 (2020): 1–28.
3. Erika Davis, “(Mis)Representation of Latinxs in Florida Social Studies Standards,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 14, no. 1 (2019): 1–13.
4. Tim Monreal and William McCorkle, “Social Studies Teachers’ Attitudes and Beliefs about Immigration and the Formal Curriculum in the United States South: A Multi-Methods Study,” *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education* 53, no. 1 (2020).
5. Kristy Brugar, Anne-lise Halvorsen, Sunshine Hernandez, “Where Are the Women? A Classroom Inquiry into Social Studies Textbooks,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 26, no. 3 (2014): 28–31.6. Lee Hockstader, “Salt of the Earth is Back from the Blacklist,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 4, 2003).
7. Sayre Quevedo, “And They Will Inherit It” *LatinoUSA* (May 1, 2019), www.latinousa.org/2019/05/01/empirezincstrike.
8. Dionne Espinoza, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell, eds. *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).
9. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
10. Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell, 2.



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