



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2000 Volume I: Women Writers in Latin America

Galeria De Pinturas

Curriculum Unit 00.01.06
by Michelle Sepulveda

Galeria De Pinturas (gallery of pictures), is a curriculum unit planned to showcase scenes from life in the Caribbean according to Latina writers. The “gallery” showcase will be presented during Hispanic Awareness month (November). Its aim is to focus on women from three Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands (Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic). These are three distinct countries with cultures that typify Spanish culture as a result of historic conquests and imperialism but also maintain distinct differences. Another intention of this curriculum is to represent the cultures of Latino students at West Hills Middle School and provide enlightenment to the greater population of the school of their Hispanic peers. Through this showcase students will recognize similarities in their own cultures like experiences of first generation immigration, religion, roles of women, and an infinite belonging of two cultures.

West Hills Middle magnet has been celebrating Hispanic Awareness Month for three years. An assembly with speakers, music, and dance has been the previous format. Students have also researched famous Latinos and shared them with the school through murals and bulletin boards. Although the variety of people presented have come from all areas of the Americas, little is done about women. Students will be guided through Latina literature and pick important sections that provide visual images. These images will then be translated into pictures that will literally come to life with drama and dance. Poetry will also be incorporated into the presentation so audience members can use their own imagination to conjure up visual images of their own.

“Readers are intrigued by a literature that can claim antecedents in the Spanish-language Latin American literary tradition, the English-language literature of immigrants to North America, feminist literature, and the literature of the emerging voices of America’s ethnic minorities”. 1

Students will study life in the writer’s native land, if applicable, but focus on the transition to life in the United States and cultural traits that were kept and discarded. The preparation for our “picture” involves a technique in drama called creating tableaux. A tableau is a silent and motionless depiction of a scene that is often taken from pictures. Students will be encouraged to form visual pictures from the descriptive stories read in class to base their tableaux. Drama classes often use the pictures as a springboard to develop characters and stories through the use of improvisation. The improvisation will lead not only to acting but to poems and dances also. The final assembly will showcase these talents in a gallery of pictures encased in frames that is presented to the audience and will evolve into motion. The whole process of developing the resulting pictures involves:

1. Choosing pictures
2. Planning a tableau.
3. Developing improvisation.
4. Performing to a small audience.
5. Responding to audience critique.
6. Adapting the project for a larger audience.

Overview Of Women's History In Latin America

"Women in Latin America and the Caribbean have always been a vital part of family and national survival, although historically their contribution has often been overlooked. In addition to their roles as wives and mothers, women have frequently borne a large share of economic responsibility for their households. This is a particular true for power women, whose income is essential in providing food, clothing, school supplies, and other basic goods for their families".² The status of women declined when indigenous people were colonized by Spain. The conquerors had a strong European notion of linking family honor with the purity of women. "An elaborate social and legal code kept women's movements and activities under male control".³ Women's roles changed however, due to economic changes, especially in the Caribbean. Women eventually participated in political processes but not openly. They also never held high positions in political offices during early times. Women never challenged their roles as subordinates to men either. A cultural ideal the exalted male virility called machismo ruled the times. It has been the basis of relationships between men and women but is being questioned and debated during our modern times. The opposite of machismo is marianismo which is a cultural idea that treats women as keepers of virtue. Women are modeled after the virgin Mary and kept from independent life beyond their jobs as nurturing mothers and obedient wives.

When women had to defend and protect their families, these cultural traits weakened though they have not totally vanished. Women who formally tended house while their husbands provided for the family entered the workforce like many women in North America despite their racial make up. Political activism provided another venue for women's voice in all parts of Latin America. Education has propelled women to positions that were formally denied to them. They represent occupations that range from doctors and teachers to agricultural and factory workers. "As a result of their experiences, the women of Latin America have developed their own distinct feminism, one that challenges the persistence of male and female stereotypes".⁴

Puerto Rico

The second largest Latino population, after Mexican Americans, is the Puerto Rican population. One fact that distinguishes them from other Latino groups is that they are U.S. citizens and therefore not immigrants as far as the law is concerned. Nearly as many Puerto Ricans live in the U.S. as on the island of Puerto Rico. Although a cultural imperialism has affected Puerto Ricans through a colonial relationship to their island and culture whether they are first or third generation inhabitants of the mainland, cultural pride is reflected in their bilingualism. Puerto Rican writers born or raised on the mainland often write about what it means to be Puerto Rican in the U.S.

Esmeralda Santiago is one such writer. She was born in Puerto Rico and later moved to New York, and maintains pride in being Puerto Rican though her culture was often tried and challenged as a result of fitting into an ideal mold of an American. Like most Puerto Ricans, her assimilation did incur changes but she also held to certain traditions of being Puerto Rican. Her book *When I Was Puerto Rican* will be explored with the students. The entire book will not be read but it is written so that parts of it can be read and analyzed like essays. She provides rich details of country life in Puerto Rico as well as visual images of the New York she encountered as a child.

Aurora Levins Morales is another writer we will explore. She has an essay titled “Puertoricanness”. The essay captures her realization that no matter where she lives she will always be Puerto Rican. Levins Morales was a child born from a biracial marriage. Her father is Jewish and her mom is Puerto Rican. Though she claims allegiance to both cultures it is interesting that she considers herself Puerto Rican.

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in Puerto Rico but moved as a child to New Jersey. She says, “I lived in a bubble created by my Puerto Rican parents in a home where two cultures and languages became one.”⁵ Her essay titled “The Myth Of The Latin Woman: I Just Met A Girl Named Maria”, explores her constant struggle with perceived notions, and the stereotypes others openly apply to her because she is Latina despite her success as a writer and teaching position at the University of Georgia. In the essay, she tells of embarrassing moments when ignorant people have openly insulted her by singing the refrain from “Maria” or insisting that she must be the waitress or maid.

This essay will help the students at West Hills deal with an action that was taken a year ago at the school. Many students were offended and upset because the decision to produce the play, *West side story*, was overruled when a parent wrote in that it [the play] offended Puerto Ricans. Open discussion was encouraged but it left a sore spot with students who could not understand what was supposed to be offensive about the play.

Lessons

Students will be asked to define key words from their reading and to design venn diagrams with adjectives that describe the following questions: Do you ever feel that you have two selves? One that acts a certain way with some people and another that comes out with a different group of people? How do the halves create the

one person that is you?

Vocabulary

1. citizen
2. commonwealth
3. constitution
4. bilingual
5. stereotype
6. assimilation

Students will also listen to music by Marc Anthony, Jennifer Lopez, Tito Puento, and Elvis Crespo.

Cuba

The migration of Cubans differs in many ways from the experiences of other Latinos because they are the only Caribbean group whose immigration was welcomed by the U.S. Government. Cubans receive special treatment under immigration laws and have access to the White House and Congress. During the 1960's and 70's they considered themselves to be political exiles with the hope of returning to their island after the fall of Fidel Castro and his political regime. But that dream has started to deteriorate with some as they assimilate yet hold onto some of their cultural traditions. Changes in immigration policies geared toward Cubans have also changed so that some of the privileges initially granted have been taken away. New immigrants from Cuba who find their way to U.S. soil express a mixture of reasons that lead them here whether they be political, economic, or personal.

Another unique aspect of Cubans is their relative mass existence in South Florida. Miami has never been a primary destination for them. There is a small population concentrated in New Jersey. "For many Cuban-Americans, particularly those who left the island as children and those born in the United States, Cuba has become a creation of the imagination, a fictional space pieced together by recollections, fading photographs, and family anecdotes". 6

Writers

Lourdes Casal was born in Cuba and emigrated to the United States in 1962. She became a teacher famous for her studies of Black Cubans. She is also known for her work on attitudes and behavior as a result of transitions for Cubans. "Casal was one of the first exiles to make return trips to Cuba. She is remembered for her pioneering efforts to bring about improved relations between Cubans in Cuba and those in the United States." 7 We will look at poems from a collection called Palabras Juntan Revolucion. In these poems the author speaks of contrasting feeling with the Cuba she left and the New York she has made her home. Though she admittedly defines herself as a New Yorker she also feels she will always be a welcome stranger because of her upbringing. Her poetry also describes cultural traits and symbols the help the imaging of pictures.

Marisella Veiga was born in Havana, Cuba but raised in the U.S. Her essay titled "Fresh Fruit," compares two Latinas, one older, one younger, and through the comparison the reader sees the difference in generations as well as the implications of machismo and marinisma.

A third author, Margarita Engle, was born in Los Angeles to a Cuban mother and American father. We will study an excerpt from her book Singing To Cuba which describes a visit to her beloved Cuba. Scenes of Castro's influences and restrictions contrast memories of her parents and images imagined through their stories.

Lessons

Students will look at stories gathered from periodicals that probe into the conflicting feelings of Cubans in Miami and those in Cuba in relation to the Elian Gonzales debacle. Venn diagrams will again be used to explore similarities and differences between two distinct Cuban populations. Students will also explore the history of some Cuban music and dissect the cultural influences that are part of its make up.

Dominican Republic

More than 20,000 Dominicans arrive in New York city each year. They are the city's fastest growing group of immigrants although Puerto Ricans maintain the largest Latino group. Since the decline of economic security in their homeland in the 1980's, the wave of immigration has grown. Policies in U.S. immigration laws like the change to legal petitions for family members have also helped with the growth spurt. Most Dominicans live in New York in Washington Heights. Life for them has been difficult, as it has been for other newly arrived immigrants, because of poor neighborhoods and dilapidated buildings. Many strive to change their situations but those dreams fade amidst a bleak reality. Many of the factories that provided jobs to earlier immigrants have left the city. A small middle class exists and many have a hard time faced with studies when they must also support their families. "Many U.S. Dominicans still believe they will eventually return. They remain emotionally tied to their homeland and actively involved in it's politics."8

Political parties in the Dominican Republic have representative branches in New York. In 1996 many flew home to their island to vote in the presidential elections.

Writers

We will look at the work of Josefina Baez who was born in the Dominican Republic but came to New York when she was 11 years old. She teaches, dance, and writes using cultural aspects of her island for inspiration. Her story of Laciguapa is intriguing because it tells the story of a favorite folkloric character inherited from the original indigenous people, the Taino. The story is romanticized with elements of modern and economic details.

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City but spent part of her childhood on the island. Her book provides enlightening vignettes that provide visual images for this curriculum. How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents has an excellent excerpt called “snow” that describes the authors first reaction and feeling to seeing snow for the first time.

Lessons

Students will read passages from Caribbean Connections that detail Dominican life in Connecticut. A field trip is planned to Bridgeport, Connecticut to visit the Dominican social and cultural club. Students will also compare music indicative to the clubs members like salsa, balada, and merengue.

Conclusion

Through the use of the writings of Latina writers, students will get pictures of Caribbean culture among Latinos that persists whether they return or not to their respective islands. Though a partial investigation will be made of the larger picture among them, students will also see the historical aspects that have molded and shaped the lives of Latina women and how those molds are being refashioned amid more modern times where education, politics, and economics play a crucial part.

Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic share historical similarities and language. Colonial rulership by Spain, slavery, and struggles for economic or independence are prevalent factors of all the islands mentioned. But each island has maintained its own flavor that distinguishes each from the other. Galeria de Pinturas aims to celebrate the differences and commonalities of all three through a program of music, poetry, and dance flavored with dramatic scenes.

The use of improvisation and tableau will enable students to bring their historical research to life. Oral histories, essays, and novel excerpts will help the students bring realism into their enactments. Music is a vital component of the curriculum since dance will be featured in the final showcase. Dance is a universal way to show pictures. Students will listen to popular Latin music and learn basic steps of dances like the danza, la bomba, plena, seis, merengue, and salsa. The dances will be incorporated into the final choreography.

Seniors from Casa Otonal (this organization located in New Haven operates a bilingual and bicultural senior center with apartment units for the elderly), visit the school and bring traditional musical instruments from Puerto Rico.

Notes

Lillian Castillo Speed, *Latina; women's voices from the borderland*. 1995 pg 17

Bernadette M. Orr, Americas-study guide 1993 pp 76-77

Ibid

Ibid

Network of Educators on the Americas Caribbean Connections 1998 pp 138-141

Ibid

Network of educators on the Americas Caribbean Connections pp 100-101

Ibid

Bibliography

EPICA/NECA, Caribbean Connections-overview of regional history 1991 NEA Washington, D.C. A historical secondary school source that contains history, poetry, and essays as well as other sources. EPICA/NECA Caribbean Connections-Moving North 1998 NEA Washington, D.C.

Another secondary school source that focuses on the history of the Caribbean islands and includes information on english and french speaking islands as well.

Glasser, Ruth, Aqui Me Quedo, Puerto ricans in Connecticut 1997 Connecticut Humanities Council.

An excellent resource that details the migration of Puerto Ricans to Connecticut with oral histories alongside historical information. The book is also written in both Spanish and English.

Castillo-Speed, Lillian Latina-women's voices from the borderlands 1995 Simon and Schuster New York.

A collection of short stories and essays that represents Latinas from various places. Also contains excerpts from books that might be too lengthy to read with this curriculum.

Orr, Bernadette Americas Study Guide 1993 Oxford University Press New York.

This study guide is part of the Americas telecourse and provides an overview and quiz of every aspect of the companion video.

Connecticut Educators Aqui Me Quedo Interdisciplinary Teacher's Guides 1999 Mattatuck Museum.

A very useful and practical guide to incorporation Puerto Rican knowledge in the classroom. The curriculum was developed with teachers from Connecticut and Ruth Glasser, author of the book Aqui Me Quedo. I was fortunate to participate in a week long institute where the curriculum was enhanced by speakers, performances, open dialogue, and cultural exchanges.

Lesson Plan #1

The Geography Of Puerto Rico

Goal: To acquire knowledge of the geographical location of the island and put faces of people who have been researched on a large relief map.

Objective: Students will be introduced to the island of Puerto Rico and the citizens

From that island that reside in New Haven. Activity: Students will make a mural of the map of Puerto Rico using large copies of the people they will here from in class as well as their classmates who may be Puerto Rican.

Lesson Plan #2

Goal: Students will present skits that tell the story of a speaker's oral history.

Objective: Through role play and discussion, students will reinforce the lessons learned from the speaker.

Activity: Students will listen to one or two class speakers who will share their migrating experience. Their stories will then be acted out by the students using role play and improvisation.

Lesson Plan #3

Vocabulary

Goal: To familiarize students with common Spanish words as well as words that have been adopted into the English vocabulary.

Objectives: Students will practice words together and quiz each other using a game show as a format.

Activity: Students will use flash cards to quiz each other and partner up in teams that will then play jeopardy as a fun class activity.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>