



## **Hispanic Immigrants: Trials and Tribulations**

Curriculum Unit 84.03.02  
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### ***INTRODUCTION***

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The following unit is constructed for the purpose of educating the high school student on the Hispanic immigrants' patterns and problems of assimilation and acculturation to a new life in "el norte". The unit will concentrate on the greater New Haven area and will include real-life dramas from "El Barrio" in New York City.

### ***BACKGROUND INFORMATION***

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They (the immigrants) were strangers—yet—they became each other's neighbors. Practically everyone's ancestors came from different lands. From the beginning the United States had been marked by the diversity of the sources of its population. Many of our ancestors were driven from their homes by religious or political persecution. Others were forced to leave in desperation because of economic conditions. Many countries had lost almost all their industries due to internal wars that destroyed everything a person and his family had lived and worked for.

When the immigrants came to the United States, whether they entered through Ellis Island in New York, San Diego or Florida many of these poor immigrants were closely linked to the economic growth of our country. There were those who weren't so lucky because they had come during the major depressions in our country. Lack of job opportunities quickly brought reduction in numbers to our borders. But many persevered. They were and still are hard-working people. They were builders, inventors, artisans and professionals of all kinds. They supported their families on minimum incomes despite the cold, poor housing and money-hungry landlords. But they survived! ! Many were discriminated against and still are. Some ignored it and some reacted. They are survivors of our socio-economic environment.

The following briefs will compare how little we know about our Hispanic immigrants and what we have to learn from them.

## ***RESOURCES AND ACTIVITIES***

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The unit is divided into three sections:

- a. Interviews
  1. Puerto Rican woman
  2. Cuban-American woman
- b. Brief Article on Mexican Americans
- c. Slide Presentation comparing Spanish Harlem and Little Italy in New York City.

## ***SHORT STORY AND INTERVIEWS***

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The student will work individually on each interview: reading, translating it, if possible, and answering questions pertaining to each story. From this they will relate the similarities and differences to their own cultures.

Each student will interview a Hispanic-American student or adult and give a brief report on how their lives compare with that in the interview or short story.

## ***SLIDE PRESENTATION***

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This portion may be completed in two or three consecutive days. The slides consist of the present every day life in the two ethnic neighborhoods. These slides should be shown simultaneously, if possible, using two projectors so the student may easily compare them. Each student will take notes on the similarities and differences of these groups. At the completion of the presentation students will give a written report on their interpretation.

## ***LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

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At the end of the course the students will be able to achieve the following:

First—to determine how their cultural heritage influenced their parents' lives and how aware they are of the impact it will have on their future.

Second—to instill cultural pride in everyone, not just the Hispanic students, in their past.

Third—to show the importance of understanding and communicating with everyone regardless of race, creed and national origin.

### *THE MEXICAN AMERICAN*

Although the Mexican American is not the most deprived or the most oppressed minority in the United States, nevertheless he is the most historically neglected of all peoples who make up our “melting pot” nation. During my research I was looking for a historical survey concerning the Mexican American’s overall urban and rural role in the development of the United States. But I did not come across anything satisfactory.

The Mexican Americans have a very long history which is not well known. We are more familiar with the Puerto Ricans and the Cuban-Americans. Our proximity of these islands makes us aware of who these people are but not what they are really like as an individual group. We may have perceived them in derogatory ways due to the stereotyping that we have given them through the years.

The following story “In the Barrios of the City of Angels and Seven Hells” by Stan Steiner will briefly describe a Mexican American neighborhood.

## ***THE URBAN VILLAGES***

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On the hills of the City of Our Lady of the Angels there are tiers of little houses, like the strings of villages on the sea coasts of Spain or Italy or Mexico. The houses are painted in dime-store shades of yellow and white and lavender and pink. In between the houses are fig trees, and cypress, and cedars, and old cars and palms rise like questioning fingers out of the flower beds of poverty in between freeways. The sky is blue as the Mediterranean, or gray as a dirty window when the smog does not stay downtown where it belongs.

“Wonder at this scene of many-colored houses! The houses of our city makes us, who are miserable, see light among the flowers and songs and see beauty. Where it gleams forth in fourfold rays, where the fragrant flowers bud, there live the Mexicans, the youth.” So a poet wrote of the capital of the Aztecs, hundreds of years ago.

In the barrios of Los Angeles the modern descendants of the Aztecs have built a suburb of that ancient city. The metropolis is a paradox composed of oldest Mexico and the newest technological gadgetry in the United States.

Signs of that paradox are on the walls of the barrios: “VIVA KENNEDY !” “ABAJO DODGERS!” “GO, DODGERS, GO!” “EL BAZAAR DE MEXICO”: a dry-goods store that sells workclothes and bikinis. “ROPA USADA”: the secondhand clothing store with a surfboard and a pair of water skis in the window, besides used brassieres. “VOTE FOR REAGAN!” “GRINGO, GO HOME!” “THE JOKER’S DEN”: the hamburger joint with “FINE MEXICAN FOOD.” Tacos and Cokes. “TORTILLERIA” Wholesale and retail. “JOIN THE U S. MARINES.” “CHICANO POWER.”

Old women in black mantillas and floral dresses from Sears buy bananas from an open fruit stall. Across the street, in Spanish, the sign in the real-estate office entices the old women: “Naturalization Papers” and “Income Taxes Prepared.”

Here is the religious store: *Art'culos Religiosos , Herbas* . Candles to the Virgen de Guadalupe. Candles to the Infant of Prague. Candles to Christ. Candles to "Papa Julius." And candles to a huge, ominous Indian chief in blood-red wax.

Here is the secular shrine: the storefront mission of the Remedial Education and Cultural Opportunity for the Rurally Deprived (RECORD, let's call it), where a Berlin café skit by Bertolt Brecht is advertised in Pachuco slang, underneath a plastic pi-ata made by the Sunset Years Club of retired farm workers.

Here is the "Extermino La Cucaracha" sign in every drugstore window. In sunny California the cockroaches grow healthy and strong. Exterminating cockroaches is the main sport of the barrios' hunters. Who remembers that "La Cucaracha" was the anthem of the Mexican Revolution?

The barrios of Los Angeles are the third largest Mexican city in the world. Guadalajara and Mexico City alone have greater populations. No one knows for certain, but barrio leaders say that from 800, 000 to 1, 000, 000 Mexicans live in Los Angeles. Either population is larger than the population of Washington, D. C., or Cleveland, Ohio. The people of La Raza in the city, by themselves, constitute one of the ten largest cities of the United States.

Los Angeles is the capitol of La Raza. It is to the Mexicans what Boston has been to the Irish and New York City has been to the Jews. Many people are extremely poor. And yet there is a beauty in the barrios. Roses entwine the junked cars in the backyards, much as the tropical flowers cover the poorest Indian hut in Mexico. In one of the cities in the San Joaquin Valley, there is a Community Poverty Council that has a eucalyptus tree on its front lawn, a lemon tree at its back door, and roses blooming on the window sill of the "welfare lady's" office, where the poor come for their alms. The poverty of a rural home is not visible from outside, especially when the home is in a city.

Ever since the Aztecs built the City of Mexico the people of La Raza have been people of the cities. The conquistadors thought their city as magnificent as any in Europe. Bernal D'az del Castillo, the chronicler of Cortés, wrote: "Some of the soldiers among us who have been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople and in Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before." And Spaniards, too were of the city: "The civilization of Spain is an urban thing," one historian says. "In America it is the one city that symbolizes the rule of Spain," another writes. It is not surprising, then that 85.4 percent of the Chicanos of California live in urban areas.

In the Southwest the number of city dwellers is but slightly less; only in New Mexico are the urban Chicanos a minority—little more than one-third of the state. The population of La Raza in urban areas from Arizona to Texas ranges from 69. 3 to 78. 6 percent. The Chicano population of Los Angeles, Denver, and Phoenix is 10 to 20 percent of the city; in Albuquerque it is 25 per cent; in San Antonio and El Paso 40 to 50 percent; in Laredo 85 percent.

Even so, the barrios of the Chicanos are not the gray tenement tombs of the ghetto. The barrios sprawl over the hills and into the arroyos and valleys, amid the weeds and flowers, like wandering Indian villages. They are a paradox that defies easy comparisons.

Ghettos are the refuse dumps of the industrial city.

"Who creates the ghetto?" asks Eliezer Risco, the editor of *La Raza*, the newspaper of the barrios of East Los Angeles. "The ghetto is where you are forced to live by housing discrimination. But *La Raza* has been living in the barrios for hundreds of years. No one has forced us. The barrios are not ghettos, although we do have ghettos in the barrios. There are suburbs and there are skidrows; there are ghettos of the poor and there are neighborhoods of the rich. We have everything here that you have in the larger city, but one thing—you, in the larger city, govern us. We do not run our own lives because you do not let us. You run the barrios and you don't know how."

“Barrio” is a Spanish word that simply means “neighborhood.” In the colonial era of Mexico the Spanish rulers subtly changed the meaning by using barrio to designate the “native quarter,” where the Indians lived. It was a word of contempt. The word barrio, as it is used in the United States to designate the Mexican or “Spanish” neighborhood, is a modern version of that colonial term; except that today the Chicanos have once more changed the demeaning meaning of the old colonial word to one of pride.

It is a city within a city. Wherever the outsider sees one barrio, there are not one but many barrios within the boundaries of family ties, origins in Mexico, or simply street-map geography. Each barrio has its own loyalties, churches, local shrines, shopkeepers, gangs of boys, customs, history, and old village patriarchs.

“Urban villages” may be a better definition of “barrios.” In these communities the Chicanos try to live in the best of both worlds: those of the village and those of the city.

“Why do you still live in East Los Angeles?” a man on the street is asked by La Voz, the newspaper of the Community Service Organization. “Just a matter of being in a place something like the old country,” one man replies. Incongruous? Where in Los Angeles is Mexico? He feels it is in the barrios.

Men and women who come from the rugged mountain towns or northern Mexico and the rural valleys of the Southwest to seek jobs in the city do so warily. In self-protection they bring their village ways with them. The rural feeling of independence, the little gardens, the religious ecstasies, the large and comforting family loves, the communal ways of life—all of these give the urban villages and villagers a resilience that resists the numbing conformity of the concrete streets. None of these human exuberances fit within the confines of gray ghetto walls.

In the old days a goat and a vegetable garden were more of a necessity for the survival of a barrio family than a car port. Some of the barrios are still derisively referred to by outsiders as “Goat Hill.”

“Years ago Los Angeles was rural. It was all farms,” says Eduardo Perez, a barrio leader. He remembers that it was just one generation ago. “Where I was born, in East Los Angeles, there were Japanese farmers. Hundreds of vegetable farms. In World War II the Japanese farmers were put in concentration camps. And their land was confiscated. Up to then the Mexican people used to come to Los Angeles to work on the farms.”

It was not simply out of migrant camps that the barrios grew. The people of the Sonoran deserts and mountains on both sides of the border could have moved into the ghetto tenements, but they would have been suffocated. “We need open sky,” Perez says, or we would die.

“Our people in northern Mexico are rural people,” Perez says. “We’re in the mess we’re in partly because of that. Mexicans coming to this country head for the countryside. We’re always going to the rural towns first to work in the fields, to do stoop labor. We’re being displaced by automation on the farms.

So we go to the cities. In the barrios we know our country-men will help us. We’re desperate. Where else can we go?”

## ***THE CUBAN EXPERIENCE: INTERVIEWING VICENTA***

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Vicenta was born in Cuba, 1954. At the age of two she and her mother immigrated to the United States via Florida. Vicenta has since married an Italian and has two beautiful children. She has moved from West Haven and is living in Bethany.

Interviewer: Can you brief me on your family's first few years in the United States?

Vicenta: My father had preceded us in 1955. He came to New Haven because his brother Jorge had written him many times telling him of the opportunities available here and how much better life would be for his family. At that time Cuba was under Battista's rule, but many Cubans felt that life would not be so easy if the young militant Fidel Castro took over. And that's exactly what happened. My father came alone to establish a household and secure a job. He was working in a factory and brought home a sufficient amount every week to feed and clothe his wife and daughter.

Interviewer: At what age can you remember your neighborhood and any features that are still quite visible in your mind?

Vicenta: At the age of four I began picking up English words I had learned from playing with my newly acquired friends. I remember feeling comfortable with these friends. My neighborhood consisted of diverse ethnic families, including Italians, Irish, Polish, Puerto Ricans and other Cuban families. One day I came home and asked my mother for milk and cookies. My mother gave me a strange look because she did not understand what I was saying. My mother had not learned English because she wasn't exposed to the English language. She had only gone up to the sixth grade in Cuba, but from that point on she became determined to learn. Soon afterwards I had a new brother, which thrilled me so much, because now I was becoming like the other kids in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: What can you recall about your grammar school experience?

Vicenta: I attended a Catholic elementary school, because my parents' felt that a Catholic education is more valuable than that of public school. I remember my grammar school days as a new learning experience. I did enjoy going to school very much.

Interviewer: Did your peers treat you differently?

Vicenta: As I grew older I recall some of my classmates calling me names. When they learned that I wasn't of Italian origin and that I was Cuban, they called me a "Communist", "Cube" and a Puerto Rican. I found these downgrading and at times harmful. I would run to my mother and ask her to explain the difference between myself and the other neighborhood children. The nuns I had in school would always protect me and later would ask me curious and strange questions. What type of foods do you eat? What is your family really like? Why are you so different than the other Hispanics?

Interviewer: As a teenager did you find yourself being defensive in peer or social situations?

Vicenta: Yes, at this point my defenses arose. I tried to understand why people were so mean. My mother helped me understand as much as possible. I felt like a minority in comparison to the dominating Puerto Ricans and Italians. As years went by I developed a proud attitude of being Cuban.

Interviewer: What problems did your family face while you were growing up?

Vicenta: In high school (still Catholic) I began helping my parents out. Although my mother had been working full-time, I did not regret coming home to an empty house. I understood that it was necessary for my mother to work outside the home also so she could help my father make a better life for us. We then moved from New Haven to then a suburb—West Haven—. The neighborhood was ethnically integrated, but it wasn't as noticeable as the one in New Haven. My father was attending night school to learn English and he eventually owned a small business of selling clothing, household goods and hardware door to door. I became his private secretary. I would do all the accounts payable and receivable. I would call the distributors in New York. I also helped my mother around the house and helped raise my little brother.

Interviewer: What values developed from your family situation?

Vicenta: My family (parents) were instilling their Cuban values and family traditions. I had learned to become responsible and aggressive. I was taught that the family is very important, UNITY. The family always comes first no matter what.

Interviewer: You also mentioned that to this day, although it may sound funny, but part of the Cuban tradition that is still hard to understand is superstition. What type of things would you be superstitious about?

Vicenta: Well, like I said it sounds funny, but whenever I see a black cat, or walk under a ladder, I get nervous! My mother would tell me stories about witches or *curanderas*, who is a healer. How herbs cure certain ailments. How certain types of animals aren't good luck. Just a few things like that; makes my life interesting I suppose.

Interviewer: How do you feel towards other ethnic groups now?

Vicenta: I naturally feel very open towards other ethnic groups. I have a definition which I would like to share about being a Cuban. " Cubans are the Jews of the Caribbean, they are ambitious, persistent, hard-working and very responsible to their ethnic group."

Interviewer: Would you explain the last line of your definition?

Vicenta: Other Cubans and I feel proud to be what and who we are. We take pride in our jobs, upkeep of our homes, raising our children properly and mannerly and instill responsibility in them at an early age. We have priorities and every Cuban will put forth their best.

Interviewer: How would you prepare your children in accepting their own ethnic groups?

Vicenta: Although they are still young, my husband and I show them where Italy and Cuba are located. I cook many ethnic meals and explain to them any traditions or customs that are linked with them. At Christmas we show them our different customs. We are slowly trying to teach them Spanish. My husband does not know the Italian language well, because he has since forgotten it. But, generally speaking, we prepare them on a daily basis to accept others and not to hold any prejudices.

## ***THE PUERTO RICAN EXPERIENCE: INTERVIEWING ROSITA***

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Rosita was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico in 1967. At the age of four Rosita and her mother immigrated to the United States via New York. Rosita is presently seventeen years old and attends a local New Haven high school. She eventually plans on working in the medical field. She is a hard-worker and is academically sound. She helps her mother daily and is very active in her Church functions.

Interviewer: Rosita, briefly describe your family and why you are in “El Norte.”?

Rosita: My grandmother lived in Paterson, New Jersey. She had been writing my mother for many years trying to convince her to come to New Jersey. My real father had left my mother even before I was born. So my mother suffered very much trying to raise me. Her cousins helped her through this ordeal, but my grandmother felt that if she came to New Jersey she could live with her without worrying. My grandmother had been in the United States since 1959 and she had secured a very good job and owned her own home.

Interviewer: So, was your mother convinced to go north?

Rosita: My mother felt very comfortable on our island. Her luck (rather) our luck began to change. My mother re-married when I was two. My step-father had a small fruit and vegetable market in the center of town. He worked very hard to make us happy. But my grandmother kept writing and would not give up. I remember one evening, my mother and step-father discussing the problem. It had become a problem, because my step-father wanted to go to New Jersey and he also started to convince my mother. So, at the age of four we left for New Jersey, leaving my step-father behind. He insisted that he remain on the island. He turned the roles around. My mother came to New Jersey and found a job, I went to school and we were established in Paterson. My grandmother was very happy, but my mother would be sad at times because she missed her husband.

Interviewer: What did your step-father have in mind by sending you and your mother to New Jersey?

Rosita: My step-father wanted to come to the north, but he did not want to come to an isolated state. He had no family in the north and was doing well with his fruit business. So by having my mother established first, he would then follow.

Interviewer: Was your mother content with this idea?

Rosita: Well, yes and no. She could not figure her husband out. (She later confessed this to me a few years ago.) But, because she worked and made many new friends she was happy. When I was about seven years old I remember my mother telling me about another city named New Haven, in the state of Connecticut where two of her friends had moved to. My mother was also considering the move because Paterson was beginning to deteriorate. It was nicknamed “Devil’s Corner.” There were many racial riots between the Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Many of the apartment buildings were not being kept up. The landlords were Chinese and were really slum-lords, because they did not care.

Interviewer: Were there other ethnic groups in your neighborhood?

Rosita: Yes, my grandmother would always tell me how nice the neighborhood used to be when she first came. There were Italians, Cubans and Puerto Ricans. And as she quotes “things were different then, we all cared about our homes and apartments.” Ever since the Blacks moved in, the fights began. I wasn’t allowed to play in the park and some times in front of my home unless my mother was there watching. I also remember



white boys picking on me. I was very quiet and shy. My mother did not want me answering anyone back, regardless of whom they were. One day I came home with a a big bruise on my arm. Some kids had thrown rocks at me as I walked home from school.

Interviewer: Meanwhile your step-father was still in Puerto Rico. Did this bother your mother?

Rosita: Many things began bothering my mother at this point. He was not corresponding like before. The neighborhood was really getting to her. So, meanwhile her friends convinced her to move to New Haven. In July, 1977 we moved to Fair Haven. A few months later my step-father joined us. We were happy, but his savings were getting low and we were depending on my mother for work. During this period my sister was born and my mother stopped working. I attended Roberto Clemente School and blended in well. Although still shy, I was surprised how friendly the Blacks were compared to those from Paterson. There were no fights, the teachers were great and I was doing well academically. But life at home was not too happy. My step-father left us. He still lives in New Haven and we do see him occasionally, my mother was happier without him and still is very happy today.

Interviewer: How did you feel about him leaving?

Rosita: I was happy because I saw my mother happy. My mother is a very strong woman and can survive without a man. We have our religion which keeps us strong. We belong to the Pentecostal Church. My mother has raised us in the traditional way and we follow our Church rules and are very happy.

Interviewer: Do you find your religion too restrictive, socially?

Rosita: No, I like wearing dresses and I have beautiful long hair, plus material things are not important. When I am in Church, which is at times four nights a week I feel happy, it's like my family, we do things together, we are unified.

Interviewer: How do you feel about being Puerto Rican?

Rosita: I am very proud to be Puerto Rican. My Church helps me understand) my ethnic group. I also met my boyfriend in Church and he is Puerto Rican and I am happy to be with him.

## ***SLIDE PRESENTATIO N***

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Description of slides: New York City: Mulberry and Mott Street.

Numbers 1-16: Little Italy. These slides depict how life was and how the Italians have preserved the ethnic flavor. Open fruit carts, the outside cafe, the import stores containing cheeses, salami, breads and Italian specialties. Notice how people go shopping in the local stores and still have time to stop and chat with each other. Ferrara's which started out as a small ice cream stand and later expanded to pastry, is now a thriving multi-million dollar business.

Numbers 17-36: El Barrio. These slides depict the Spanish neighborhood, which begins around 139th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Here the Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Haitians and Blacks live together in their own unique world. They have similar traits as the Italians, their own grocery stores, religious artifacts, clothing and

outside vegetable and fruit stands. Their travel agencies also act as banks that send money back to their island.

After viewing the slides and doing the prescribed lesson plan, if possible, the students should be taken to New York City to view it for themselves. Seeing it in slides is not as great as actually being there.

#### *LESSON PLAN # 1*

***Objective Students will read the interviews on Cuban-American and Puerto Rican women to compare life styles and experiences.***

***Procedure Students will discuss what they have read and in turn interview a Hispanic student or adult and give a brief report on their comparisons.***

***Assessment Students and teacher will discuss the values and differences found between the two interviews read and the person the interviewed.***

#### *LESSON PLAN #2*

***Objective Students will view the slides of New York City. If possible using two projectors, showing Little Italy and El Barrio simultaneously.***

***Materials Two projectors, slides from curriculum unit.***

***Procedure As the students view the slides they should compare the similarities and differences in living quarters, shops and people, and notice any particulars that strike them. If possible, they should compare it to an ethnic neighborhood in New Haven.***

#### *LESSON PLAN #3*

***Objective Students will visit New York City and visit two restaurants, or stores one in Little Italy and one in El Barrio, to compare the actual experience.***

***Materials Transportation, money, pencil and notebook.***

***Procedure Students can visit an Italian deli, fruit stand and artifacts store in both section, taste the food, compare things and talk to people on the street.***

Students can visit a church, clothing store, and religious store in both sections and compare the differences, as well as visit the "Museo del Barrio" on 104th Street and 5th Avenue.

## **Notes**

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1. Reprinted by permission from: La Raza: The Mexican Americans. c 1969, 1970 by Stan Steiner. Harper and Row Publishers, New York.

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