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1987 Volume I: The Modern Short Story in Latin America

Puerto Rico . . . Its Land, History, Culture, and Literature

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The purpose of this unit is to illustrate the interdiscipline of geography and culture, of history and literature. The geography of the land initiates the evolution of a culture. As different cultures are intertwined with the original, the culture becomes more complex. As an island which combines Indian, Black, and White cultures, Puerto Rico provides an interesting case in point.

This unit begins with an introduction to Puerto Rican geography, history, and culture and then focuses on its literature.

This unit is designed for middle school students in a social studies classroom. But it could be adapted and used in other settings.

Geography

Puerto Rico is an island which is the top of a submerged mountain crest. The Atlantic Ocean reaches its greatest depth, 27,992 feet, in a chasm about forty-five miles north of Puerto Rico, known as the Milwaukee Deep. South of the island, only a short distance away, the Caribbean Sea reaches a depth of 12,000 feet. There are three small satellite islands, Vieques, Culeha, and Mona, whose combined area when added to the main island, give Puerto Rico a territory of 3,423 square miles, or approximately 2,000,000 acres. Almost three-fourths of the island of Puerto Rico lies in the mountainous interior, which has elevations up to 4,400 feet. The mountains slope down to a coastal plain which varies in width from eight to thirteen miles to the north and from two to eight miles to the south. The plain is chiefly devoted to the raising of sugar, the central crop in the island's economy. Here is where the majority of the population is concentrated. The coastal climate is semi-tropical, with a mean temperature of 73.4 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter and 78.9 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. In San Juan the average number of annual hours of sunshine is 2,845 (7.8/day), which indicates a high level of solar radiation. The climate is moderated by the ocean breezes. Mountain temperatures average only five to ten degrees lower than coastal, and variations from these mean temperatures are slight. The breeze blows from the sea during the day, and at night the coastal plains are somewhat cooled with air moving down from the mountains. In spite of the little difference in mean annual temperature between winter and summer, the seasons are fairly well marked in terms of crops, rainfall, and the duration and humidity of the winds.

The distribution of individuals on the island is patterned by the geographic features, with the coast being more populated than the interior. Anthropological papers have shown the biological and physiological differences stemming from environmental sources.

History

Earliest archaeological remains in Puerto Rico were discovered at a large limestone cave near Foza Aldea, close to the northeast coast. This discovery yielded artifacts dating back to the first century A.D., which points to the fact that Puerto Rico has been inhabited by man for approximately two thousand years. Arturo Morales Carrion calls these first settlers Archaic Indians, who may have migrated from Florida to Cuba, then to the rest of the West Indies. More significance is attributed to the Arawak Indians whose migratory movements started from the Orinoco basin and settled in the whole of the West Indian chain. The first wave of this group that reached Puerto Rico was that of the Iqueris or Saladoids. Some archeologists believe that the Iqueris cultural pattern slowly changed into what is called the Ostionoid culture. This culture eventually evolved into the Taino culture. The Tainos called the island Boriquen . . . the island of strong men. The island still retains its Indian heritage in names such as: Humaco, Caguas, Mayaguez, and Utado. Many aspects of every day life have passed into the Spanish period, leaving a significant imprint on Puerto Rican culture. This was the culture that existed when the Spaniards came in 1492.

On November 19, 1493, Columbus, on his second voyage, found the island of San Juan Bautista (Puerto Rico). A permanent foothold was established in 1508 by Juan Ponce de Leon, when he founded the town of Caparra not far from the present capital of San Juan. Eventually all the Indians on the island were defeated in battle and subjugated. Badly mistreated by the Spaniards, they died out as a labor force and the role of the Indian was taken over by the African slaves. In time this port city evolved into what is now San Juan and the island Puerto Rico. As the Spanish empire grew, Puerto Rico's strategic location over shadowed its economic significance. It was thought of by the crown officials as the strongest foothold of Spain in America.

Puerto Rico's strategic location from a navel standpoint demanded special attention from Spain and rightfully so. The English and Dutch also coveted this island as a prize possession. Having thwarted the attempt by these nations to take over the island, the people of Puerto Rico began to develop a distinct society of their own.

Culture

One definition of culture is a way of life practiced by a group of people; a historically derived system of standardized forms of behavior, which is acquired by the individual as a member of a society. Culture is learned behavior. It is the society's systems of belief, social institutions, technology, and material possessions. The Puerto Rican culture stems from its physical environment, its history and its racial mixture.

The Puerto Rican culture began to develop in the pre-Hispanic Indian migrations. It was mixed with the Spanish and African presence. This mixture became the rich Puerto Rican culture of today. Mar'a Teresa Bab'n mentions a multitude of factors which influenced the evolution of Puerto Rican culture. ¹ Some of the factors

are:

1. The island was a colony of the vast Spanish Empire. There is a definite imprint of Spanish literary and artistic trends.
2. The mix of Indians, Spanish, and Black elements is totally entwined in the ethnic and spiritual structure of the population.
3. Although it has been an American possession since 1898, the island's language has been primarily Spanish with much of its literature written in Spanish.
4. The music, arts, and folklore are totally tuned to all the elements of the island.
5. Since 1917 Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, and there is a constant flow to the United States and back which also has an effect on the Puerto Rican culture.
6. The Puerto Ricans love their native land, and this is constantly expressed in their arts.

In pre-Colombian times, accounts of early visitors who described the early landscape and inhabitants, together with letters, chronicles, and epic poems and of the first governors, settlers and missionaries provide a rich cultural history of the island of Puerto Rico. Arturo Carrión in his study of Puerto Rico mentions the heritage of the Ta'nos. "A legendary vein flows from that perennial fountain of Borinquen ancestry. It can be tasted in the subtle achiote (annato) coloring of the native foods as well as in the vibrant notes of a güiro or in a cuatro or in the steps and figures of a bomba (typical dance with strong African influence) in the palm forest of small remote towns. ²

Carrión has commented on the mixing of ethnic strains in the literature of Puerto Rico. "From the heart of the Rio de la Plata or Rio Grande, through the mountains such as the Asomante and the Tres Picachos (Three Peaks) the written testimony of the Puerto Rican creativity seems to be dedicated by the echo of millions of voices whose sound has been made part of the wind, the waves, the air, and the earth." ³

In an oral literature, as well as in written literature, the Puerto Rican people have expressed themselves. "The J'baro and the slum dweller continue to tell stories orally, in which the daily life and nightmares and dreams become legends that beautify the reality of the island's past and present." ⁴ Carrión states that this search for identity, this seeking out a better present through looking at the past, is a trend that is gaining momentum. The Puerto Rican is in search of an image, "in all sources of the inner self." ⁵ He also writes, "Puerto Rico is a most homogenous and congenial country in terms of spiritual and emotional communication among its people. The poor and the rich, the well educated and the humble peasants understand the same signs, and respond to the same silent motions, like and dislike, the same flavors and speak the same language of love, of despair, of hope and of rage." ⁶

Carrión suggests that the Puerto Rican writers express a oneness as a people, and that the absence of writers from their native soil kindles their imagination and makes them think of their native land nostalgically. This looking back on the part of these writers has continued through the twentieth century. "The pervading force of

history in the tropics through the centuries, the menace of heavy rains, devastating floods, swarms of mosquitoes, thunder and lightning, earth tremors, and mysterious beings with long hair, pale faces, and moaning voices, all these enlighten the metaphors and the rhetoric of the Puerto Rican writer.”⁷

In 1898, Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the United States. With this turn of events, Puerto Rican men of letters were placed under a great deal of strain. They had come under a new influence, a different language, and new traditions. They had been nurtured in Spanish and their writings cherished their loyalties to the past. There has been a cultural struggle since then, for they fear the extinction of the country’s language and mores. Much of the writings of the early years reflect a resistance of the people to the United States’ influence. One somber view in the decline of social life in the early decades in Puerto Rico is described in Antonio S. Pedreira’s *Insularismo* written in 1934:

Long ago, innumerable towns on the island maintained an exquisite social life, in which there alternated concerts, soirees, open-air band programs, patron saint fiestas, groups of aficionados, gatherings in homes and religious solemnities. Humacas, Guayama, Juana D’az, San Germán, etc. so inclined with the culture of old, are today mere municipalities. Mayagüez, the center of innumerable cultural events, is today a factory town. Only Ponce gently resist this annihilating contamination.

Despite “this annihilating contamination”, Puerto Rican artists have developed in all artistic media since 1950. The establishment of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture has sponsored many artistic endeavors. The Puerto Rican *danza* is a distinguished and graceful musical composition still played in the concert halls of today.

Plastic art is another development which is well under way in Puerto Rico. Painting has flourished the most. Significant accomplishments in this field have been made by José Campeche (1752–1809); Francis Oller (1833–1917); and Ramón Frade (1875–1954). Culture provides a strong unifying element regardless of the outside influence.

The Puerto Ricans who have left the island for the United States still maintain a strong identity with Puerto Rico. He (the Puerto Rican) still speaks Spanish, still prefers the Puerto Rican foods, and his own music. Carrión writes:

For the purpose of Puerto Rico at all social levels—the poor and the wealthy, the illiterate and the intellectual, the peasant and the town and city dweller, the concept of *mia case*, *mia patria*, *mia tierra* is an unseparable trilogy.⁸

Puerto Ricans have been coming to the United States since the nineteenth century. The peak year for Puerto Rican migration to the United States is considered to be 1950. Family, friends and neighbors make an unending chain that is Puerto Rico itself, no matter where Puerto Ricans find themselves. Puerto Ricans are “exiled” throughout the globe, not for political reasons, but simply because the island cannot support the economic demands of its population. Children of Puerto Rican parents, offspring of mixed marriages continue to identify themselves as Puerto Ricans. Many times these people have journeyed from mountains to towns, to slums, to cities of the United States and back in an attempt to find their identity and maintain their dignity. Many Puerto Ricans have left the harsh home life for the slums of New York City. Their dream of finding a better life is shattered by the reality of the slums there.

Pedro Juan Soto in “That Old Fragrance”, a short story dated 1960, expresses the difficulty that Puerto Ricans experience when they come to the United States in search of a livelihood:

The national and personal identity crisis of the Puerto Rican in New York is not solely with money. The clash with

an anonymous lifestyle is very deplorable. The colonial Puerto Rican goes to New York without knowing who he really is, where he comes from, and toward what future he is moving.

Meeting with difficulties on the mainland, the Puerto Rican emigrant dreams of returning home to his beautiful island. This idea is delicately and pathetically expressed in a short story by Jesus Colon entitled “Grandma Please Don’t Come”.

All people, North Americans and Puerto Ricans alike, are looking to the day, when they can spend the last years of their lives on a tropical isle—a paradise on earth surrounded by clear blue sea imprisoned in a belt of golden beaches. A land perfumed with natures’ choicest fragrances. For many of us this is a dream that will never be realized. The boasted “American way of life” has taken out of us the best of our energies to reach that dream.

Grandma, you are there on that beautiful isle. You were born there. You have been there all your life. You now have what most people here dream about. Don’t let sentimental letters and life-colored photographs lure you from your island, from your nation, from yourself. Grandma, please, please! do not come!

Literature

Today nearly one-third of the Puerto Rican people live in the “Diaspora”; they are homogeneous people who have migrated and dispersed. Puerto Rico today is a multi-racial, Spanish speaking society. The Puerto Rican is bound together by four centuries of Hispano-Antillean culture.

Many first generation Europeans surrender their ethnicity when they settle in the United States, and theirs is usually a one way move. In contrast the Puerto Rican has a great deal of difficulty doing this because he has the problem of identifying with the white or black population while still trying to keep an ethnic balance. Some say the most crucial issue for the second generation Puerto Rican is the search for ethnicity.

A nation’s literature can help define and proliferate this search.

Until the 1940’s and 50’s most Puerto Rican literature was written in the traditional Spanish style (folklore and vignettes). With the large influx of immigrants from Spain and South America, : true Creole literature began to blossom as Puerto Rico developed its own personality.

At the forefront of the writers of this time period were playwright Alejandro Lopia y Rivera (1826Ð1882); poets Lola Rodriguez de Tio (1854Ð1924), José de Diego (1866Ð1918) and José Gautier Ben’tez (1848Ð1880); and essayists Salvador Bran (1842 1912), Cayetano Coll y Toste (1850Ð1930), Manuel Fernandez Juncos (1846Ð1928), and Eugenio Mar’a de Hostos (1839Ð1903).

El gibaro, a major work published in 1849, is a sketch of the island’s rural, agrarian society. The author Manuel A. Alonso wrote of the dances, cock fighting, marriages, slang and music. The first real novel was written by Manuel Zeno-Gandia in 1898. It told of the harsh life in the remote and mountainous coffee region.

This was mainly the type of literature that came out of Puerto Rico until 1898, when suddenly life took a new course. The language of the conquerors from the north was Shakespeare and not Cervantes and the culture was not from mother Spain. Puerto Ricans were faced with a whole new set of rules that was totally foreign. In

1917 when Puerto Ricans became citizens of the United States a conflict arose in all walks of Puerto Rican life including its literature.

After the United States took over in 1898, Puerto Rico remained a poor, agrarian, semi-feudal society. Life was harsh, but in a traditional sense there was at least a sense of stability. In *Three Men by the River*, Marqués decries the loss of that stability that occurred when the people began to emigrate to the mainland. Before 1898, he says, “Everything in the universe had made sense, and that which did not was the doing of the gods.”

World War II brought social change, the machine age was beginning to replace farming as the basic source of earnings. This decline in farming created a void for many whose lifestyle was closely connected to the land. This decline caused the cities to be overrun by migrants ill-equipped to deal with the new set of circumstances. Their traditions broken, these people then moved to the crumbling tenements and to hostility. The new wave of literature reflected the crisis.

Enrique Laguerre (1906-68) was the first author to describe this period of turmoil. He wrote “I am conscious of a wide world, inhabited by millions of humans, but each of us needs a friendly place to stand on.” It seems Puerto Rico was not that place. That Puerto Rico was an island in turmoil is reflected in the literature of those troubled times.

The first piece of literature I have chosen to discuss here is a play entitled *THE OXCART*.

THE OXCART is a powerful three act play written by René Marqués, probably Puerto Rico’s most important contemporary playwright. Marqués was born on October 4, 1919, in the city of Arecibo, Puerto Rico. The playwright’s initial training took place at the College of Agriculture in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. He also spent two years with the Department of Agriculture. This type training occurred because he came from an agricultural family and his roots were both in the soil and in the tradition of the land.

He became interested in literature and in 1946 went to Spain to study for a year at the University of Madrid. It was here that he became familiar with the theater. On returning to Puerto Rico he founded a theater group in Arecibo. He also started writing reviews and literary criticisms. In 1948 he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to study playwrighting. The following year he studied at Columbia University. In 1950 to 1951 he wrote *THE OXCART*.

In his writings Marqués addresses the problem of the Puerto Rican’s divided loyalties. Under the influence of the United States, the Puerto Rican exists in “a schizophrenic society. Puerto Ricans have two languages, two citizenships, two basic philosophies of life, two flags, two anthems, two loyalties. It is very hard for human beings to deal with all this ambivalence.”

Another theme that Marqués develops in his writings is the notion that man is in some way tied to his own environment. Throughout Puerto Rican literature, poems, prose, and plays this topic is always stressed.

THE OXCART centers around hope, the essence of many poor people. The main characters come from the mountains where they are poor farmers. They have very little property, tools or money to make the land profitable. Beneath the struggle for survival is a battle to maintain their dignity, and according to the author, considering all options, only the land and keeping with tradition offer dignity.

The first act opens on a small farm in a rural mountain district in Puerto Rico. After a general description of the

property, one realizes that the characters are extremely poor. The list of characters includes the grandfather, his widowed daughter, her three children: Luis, her eldest adopted son, Juanita the daughter, Chaguito her youngest son, and a neighbor.

The family has exhausted whatever limited resources they had and are in the process of moving to the city of San Juan, in the slum section.

Two main themes are played against each other, one represented by the grandfather who stands for dignity (the dignity of the land). The other is represented by Luis, who stands for a break with tradition. The fact that Luis is adopted and senses he is alone and not part of the family is a statement by the author against the diasporic condition that Puerto Rico finds itself engulfed in. The answer does not lie in the adopting of another country's tradition. The grandfather, who does not leave with the family, represents the natural environment, the old ways. He chooses to stay, totally impoverished. He dies sleeping in a cave, his dignity intact, reborn to the land.

Act Two is situated in the slum district of San Juan. The entire situation is the same, though the site is different. The naiveté of the family shows in their hopes and dreams. The middle act is the middle ground and just exacerbates their condition.

Here they have neither the dignity of the land nor the earnings of the mechanized North. "The smells! The noises! Not even the sea can wash them away. Damn sea. The air gets dirty and harmful. What good is so much water if it can't clean all this filth? The air in the mountains was clean."

The essence of this act is poignantly felt in the above lines. Again it is two environs played against each other. The land represents tradition, the sea represents the new ways.

The section of San Juan has slowly become a slum section simply because it has become inhabited with people not equipped to deal with the environment.

The Third Act is set in New York City. The family finds its standard of living has improved somewhat at the expense of their dignity and freedom. These people have lost control of their lives. Luis, believing that their future lies in the industrial world, has become a slave to the mechanized idea and has lost his freedom. The daughter, Juanita, through an unfortunate series of events, has sacrificed her dignity by apparently prostituting herself to earn extra money. The mother, Dona Gabriela, is losing her will to live. These are people who have lost their identity because they are out of their medium. An industrial accident kills Luis, and the family, with renewed hope decide to go back to Puerto Rico where they will find their true meaning. They may not improve their lot in life, but they may gain an understanding of who they are.

There is a circularity present that seems inescapable—everything changes, nothing changes.

A short story by Marqués entitled *THREE MEN BY THE RIVER* also addresses the concept of tradition.

The plot deals with the Ta'no Indians, early inhabitants of Puerto Rico, and their domination by the Spanish Conquistadors. Their beliefs told them to expect a god to come from the sea. And as history tells us when the Spaniards arrived the Indians welcomed them with great awe. The Indians were brutally treated? which caused some seeds of doubt as to just who and what these oppressive strangers were.

After three of the Indians in the tale intentionally drown one of the "gods" they pull him to shore and sit a three day vigil over his body to see if he truly is a god and can come back to life. Through this experience they

come to realize that his rotting body is as human as theirs and that they are free (only from the concept that their conquerors are gods). Now they can attempt to rid themselves of their oppressors and regain their own tradition.

One statement the author is making is that traditions have been broken, the land forsaken, and dignity lost. Freedom and dignity, though they may be only a concept, are better than empty dreams. Only a few will profit from such dreams.

The next story is by Abelardo Diaz Alfara (1917Ð) who wrote *TERRAZO* , a book of rural short stories. I have chosen two stories by Alfaro, the first one entitled *JOSCO* .

JOSCO is a story about a Puerto Rican bull who is replaced by an American bull to improve the breeding line. Although the story is a humorous tale about rural life, the underlying theme is about a replacement of values, i.e. North American values over Puerto Rican values. A fight occurs between the two bulls and although the native bull is superior in a head to head confrontation, the native bull is still put out to pasture while the North American bull is put to stud. The author is saying that the new values are trumpeted, displayed, and supposedly all redeeming, while old traditional values, though they may be at least as good as the new values, lie covered and broken under the weight of their own deserted and pathetic gyrations. He deplores the idea that the Puerto Rican culture is losing its identity.

PEYO MERCK: ENGLISH TEACHER is another story which tells of bond between man and his environment. Again we see a rural agrarian situation, a school teacher from the mountains forced to break from tradition and teach English to a backwoods group of children. Looming in the background are the latest techniques of personality traits, child psychology, and fixed model classes. Peyo in a bit of frustration calls the English language, "Language of the devil" . . . a resentment of the North American influence. Peyo is filled with indignation over the fact that he has to teach English to his students. His indignation is somewhat diminished as his students enter the classroom: "He loved them because they were his own kind and because for each of them he envisioned a destiny as dark as the night becomes just before a storm."

There is a sadness in this line that echoes from their Indian heritage, a melancholy that forebodes unhappiness, their "Hungry eyes on withered faces." And yet there is deep and fierce pride that comes from a marriage bonded by history to the land of the Borinquen.

Notes

1. Maria Teresa Babin. "A Special Voice: The Cultural Expression", in Carrion, "Puerto Rico -A Political and Cultural History", New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983, pg. 320.
2. Ibid, pg. 322.
3. Ibid, pg. 322.
4. Ibid, pg. 324.
5. Ibid, pg. 324.
6. Ibid, pg. 324.
7. Ibid, pg. 324.

8. Ibid, pg. 344.

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(figure available in print form)

Posición geográfica de Puerto Rico.

Lesson # 1

Goal To teach location by using longitude and latitude.

1. To use direction.
2. To be able to measure to the minute longitude and latitude of a country.
3. To be able to select a body of land and determine its location (Puerto Rico).

Materials World Map, regional map, ruler, compass.

Procedure

1. Determine the location of Puerto Rico on a World Map by using longitude and latitude.
2. Have students read the longitudinal location of Puerto Rico East or West by referring to the Prime Meridian in Greenwich, England.
3. Have students determine the latitudinal location of Puerto Rico by using the Equator as a reference.
4. Have students determine hemispheres of Puerto Rico.
5. To be able to approximate time zones by using every 15 degree of longitudinal change to represent one hour.

Lesson # 2

Goal Once a location has been determined to approximate the climate of Puerto Rico.

Materials World Map, text book (geography) to be used as reference to reinforce answers.

Procedure

1. Determine the latitude of Puerto Rico.

2. Have students use the Equator and the poles as reference points.
3. Determine through the above process if Puerto Rico is in the higher or lower latitude.
4. Once this has been established, have students tell if the climate is expected to be hot, cold or temperate.
5. Establish where any bodies of water are, if there are mountains etc. as this will have some bearing on the general climate.
6. Have students develop a simple type of behavior (culture) that might develop because of the Puerto Rican geography (climate, terrain).
 - a. What type of behavior (work, recreation, transportation) might develop for those natives who lived by the sea?
 - b. In the forest?
 - c. In the mountains?

Lesson # 3

Goal To enjoy reading a play and to explore what the playwright is saying

Materials Any play, but particularly THE OXCART, by Rene Marques

Procedure

1. Research the playwright's background so as to have an understanding as to why the author is writing his play
 - a. Where does the playwright come from?
 - b. What does he stand for?
 - c. Does he have any political affiliations?
 - d. Has he written anything else? Do they have the same message?

The teacher does not have to do all of the questions above, it depends on the interest and ability of the class.

2. Have students either act out the play or read it aloud
3. Discuss the play
4. Try to extract from the students what the play means to them

5. Have students choose a play or story by one of the authors in the units bibliography to do on their own.

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