



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume I: The Autobiographical Mode in Latin American Literature

Remember

Curriculum Unit 90.01.02
by Bill Coden

That America is a culturally diverse nation, rather than a melting pot, should come as no surprise to us. That there has been a “breakdown in civility” on U.S. college campuses should shock us. ¹ Incidences of racism and bigotry are rife. Rather than appreciating the richness which diversity can bring, verbal, physical and emotional attacks seek to kill it.

I believe that materials dealing with the life, history and culture of America’s diverse populations should be integrated naturally into all areas of the curriculum. I have chosen the avenue of autobiography to work toward this goal. In two units I have written on autobiography previously, emphasis was placed on the act of remembering in order to gain a sense and appreciation of the past, the future and the self. That the American authors represented were culturally diverse was almost incidental, for I was concentrating on universal themes.

This unit on autobiography will afford me the opportunity to broaden the scope and expand the reading selections of two units which have been used quite successfully with my seventh grade students. In this unit I will:

- A. present a brief overview of my previous units on autobiography;
- B. give background information on Hispanic-American literature, some of which will be shared with students during the teaching of the unit;
- C. concentrate specifically on Chicano or Mexican-American literature and the act of remembering;
- D. briefly discuss poems which will be included in the expanded units.

As teachers, we must correct and prevent. ² We work to correct when we reduce biases and stereotypical views our students have already acquired. We work to prevent when we employ strategies and materials that will thwart the formation of such biases and views.

A. Overview of Previous Units

“Who Do You Think You Are?” (82.02.02), my first unit on autobiography, focused on the act of remembering. Remembering, a solitary activity, was more than reminiscence; reasons and patterns were sought. The structure developed for the unit works well; it accommodates traditional school time periods as well as lack of readily available materials. Briefly, the unit is presented as a series of activities

I. *Lead-up*. A theatre games exercise usually precedes a reading assignment. Theatre games are valuable tools because concentration is of paramount importance in each activity and can have direct connections to the theme of the selection which will be read and discussed.

II. *Literature*. Excerpts from a number of autobiographies are read and discussed in class. Specific readings prompt specific points of discussion. The readings are used as models for student writing. Particular attention is paid to the phenomenon of voice, crucial to the study of autobiography.

III. *Writing*. Assignments range from the broad to the specific and are modeled on the reading selections. Themes include early memories, superstitions/family wisdom, responsibility and turning points.

IV. *Follow-up*. Creative problem-solving and values clarification activities are used to develop the higher level skills of critical reading and thinking.

“I Am...” (88.03.04), my second unit on autobiography, centered on journal writing as a way of remembering. The goal of the writing is to gain an understanding of our lives. Though the majority of the readings in this unit are excerpts from longer autobiographical works, I also employed autobiographical poems, slave narrative, photographs and autobiographical fiction.

The day to day teaching of the units has necessitated changes in activities and authors. Judging success by the quality of student discussion and writing, I know that works by Joan Baez, Gwendolyn Brooks, Bill Cosby, Frederick Douglass, Frank O’Hara and Jesse Stuart are crucial to the units. The entire list of authors I’ve used is not truly representative of our cultural diversity. In truth, my emphasis on the universals to be found in autobiographical writings has largely ignored the uniqueness to be found in the background of each author. This opportunity to expand the list of authors I’ll use when teaching the units affords me the chance to strike a finer balance between the universal and the unique. More importantly, my choice of Hispanic-American literature as the particular instance of the unique reflects the actual increase in the presence of Hispanic students in our school population, as well as the increased awareness of Hispanic culture in America.

B. Background on Hispanic-American Literature

Wherever Hispanic immigrants have settled for any length of time, some form of Journalistic writing has usually preceded the creation of literature. In 1848, when the states of Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah and half of Colorado passed to United States ownership from Mexican sovereignty, a Spanish Journalistic tradition existed which, to some degree, still survives today. In addition, there is a long standing tradition of Hispanic writing done in and about the United States by Latin Americans residing here.

Their works, written from the perspective of temporary visitors to American society, were intended mostly for readers in their home countries.

Contemporary Hispanic-American literature is written by permanent residents of this mainland. The authors are insiders who are nevertheless an ethnic and linguistic minority often excluded from the mainstream. Their literary works are, for the most part, directed at and read by other permanent residents of the United States.

Two categories of Hispanics in the United States may be discussed. The “native Hispanics” is an individual who has been born inside U.S. borders. This category comprises the Mexican-American or Chicano population and ironically Puerto Ricans, because they are born with U.S. citizenship in a territory removed from mainland borders. “Migrated Hispanics” belong to the immigrant generation that has been born and often raised outside U.S. borders. Some among their groups are in the midst of making the transition from emigré, exile, and refugee categories to that of ethnic minority members. Cubans, Central and South Americans, and Spaniards living in metropolitan areas of the Northeast would comprise this group.

The Chicano is a full fledged minority group. The option of returning to a mother country of origin does not exist. “No return” underlies the poetic creation of Aztlán, mythical birthplace of Chicano Indian ancestors; it is, however, a very real historical territory later inhabited by the Indo-Hispanic forebears of today’s Mexican-Americans. Puerto Ricans still have the alternative of going back to the insular society, though the “legality” of their colonial status supposes them to be a true American minority. For other Hispanic Americans, the return to the homeland is almost always possible, for a short visit or a permanent stay, barring political persecution.³ The poet Lourdes Casal returned to Cuba and was hospitalized. “Pare Anna Yeltford” illustrates how she functions in two different environments, but fits completely in neither one. There are ties to two separate realities.

In the same article, Rivero takes exception to some of Juan Bruce-Novoa’s generalized conclusions about Chicano and Nuyorican literature, arguing that the rich and varied texts cannot be easily categorized. Some Chicano authors employ standard literary Spanish, others write almost entirely in English, while others intermingle Spanish and English in their sentence structure. While it is true that most Nuyorican literature is urban-oriented, not all Chicano themes are rural, as Bruce-Novoa contends.⁴

The crossover from rural to urban, as well as the importance of the act of remembering, directed me to concentrate on Chicano literature, and most specifically, on Chicano poetry.

C. Chicano Literature

The majority of Hispanics in the United States today are by far of Mexican origin. They refer to themselves as either “Mexican American” or “Chicano,” depending on a series of factors: tradition, socioeconomic class, political consciousness. Chicano literature is a literature of self-search and a literature of social protest. Chicano literature represents cultural resistance, rejection of domination by the white Anglo culture. Chicanos see themselves as searching for their authentic past, their roots in Spanish-Mexican and Indian culture, resenting and resisting domination by intruders. The bilingual or “interlingual” text illustrates a refusal to assimilate standard forms of speech.

The search for self, for identity is one of the recurring themes of contemporary Chicano novels. I believe that many novels would thus be imbued with elements and traces of autobiography. A young man seeks his identity, as he matures; his quest for artistic freedom is part of the larger quest for identity and must conflict with societal pressures. Cultural duality must play a part.

The quest for a new Chicano identity is another theme in current novels. The protagonists see themselves in an alien environment; social circumstances generally create this sense of alienation and can therefore often be resolved. Often the alienation is first experienced in Anglo schools.

The question of his ancestral roots haunts the protagonist and the author of many Chicano novels. “Who am I?”, the central question of the autobiographer, impels the author to keep digging, to search, to define.

Working against the alienation, the threats to identity and violence—physical and spiritual—in the Chicano novel is a deep sense of Chicano culture, a sense of people in their varied richness. The theme of barrio as haven bears this out. City life is often viewed as destructive, yet el barrio exists as an emotional or spiritual reality within the ghetto. The barrio is distinct, separate from the ghetto and within the ghetto. The hope and support found in the barrio is part of a larger metaphysical theme: a strong desire to reclaim and redefine the sacred vision which has not been completely destroyed by physical conquest. ⁵ Contemporary Chicano novels present a range of people which give the lie to earlier stereotypical characterizations.

Tomás Rivera believes that the ritual of remembering is the basis for a living culture for the Chicano of today. The ritual of remembering goes beyond mere reminiscence or nostalgia; remembering is a ritual of cleansing and a prophecy. ⁶ By drawing upon cultural origins, literature provides a perception of the world, of people, of oneself in awe of one’s own life, with its perplexities and beauties. Because the ritual of remembering is most evident in poetry, works which will be included in this unit will be poems.

Chicano poetry flourished in the 1960’s, simultaneously with the civil rights struggle known as the Chicano movement. It is safe to speculate that Spanish oral poetry made its appearance with explorers of what is now the United States in the sixteenth century. Two centuries later, the Hispanic inhabitants of what is now United States territory had a varied oral tradition, as well as very limited access to printed material. Newspapers printed popular verse written in Spanish as well as Spanish translations of works by English poets. By the time the Chicano movement took place, the Chicano community already had an oral and written poetic process: poetry tended toward didacticism and the narrative form; preferred folk-oral as more authentic than written forms; maintained close links between writing and political activism; rescued communal heroes and history from oblivion. Recent Chicano poetry has transcended the militant demands of the political movement which initially inspired it, making it necessary to view Chicano poetry as a changing, evolving genre consisting of as many varied messages as there are poetic voices. ⁷

For Chicana writers the remembering of the past represents an existential quest, inasmuch as the past enables them to recognize their existence as human beings, as women, recovering and revealing a vital continuum. Chicana writers concentrate more intensely on the human relationships between generations than do their male counterparts, who tend to focus their writings on confrontations between minority groups and the dominant society. For the Chicana writer, remembering means reviving her ancestors, the source of culture, of a certain mode of living and thinking. By creating the past, *her* past (her family background), the Chicana writer creates herself. Remembering leads to self definition. ⁸

I have chosen to focus on the work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, a Chicana poet, for I feel its accessibility and power will provide the basis for productive reading and writing. “Chicana” designates at once a gender and an ethnic identification. Marta Sánchez, in a study of four Chicana poets, has constructed a literary paradigm, in which tension and play exist among the three identities which form the basic coordinates: Chicana, woman, poet. She explores each writer’s unique relationship to these elements.

Lorna Cervantes' identity as woman is inextricably bound to her Chicana self. The central tension in her poetic voice is between her identity as Chicana and her role as poet. She uses a narrative, discursive, "hard" mode, in which the speaker is clearly identified as a Chicana, to communicate the divisive real world she knows as a Chicana and a lyrical "soft" mode, rife with nature images, to portray a contemplative mood employing a disembodied speaker. Cervantes sees herself as a mediator between the Chicano community and the larger English speaking community. She has chosen to write in English rather than bilingually or interlingually. She also views herself as a scribe, translating the experiences of an oral culture to a society that relates primarily to the printed word. ⁹

The summaries of the poems in the following lesson plans are simplistic; copyright laws prevented the inclusion of the entire poems. Phrase and line references will be made in the plans. Copies of the poems I've chosen, as well as other poems by Cervantes, will be on file in the Institute office.

Lesson: "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I,
an Intelligent Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between the Races"

Cervantes' two conflicting but central positions are presented: her desire for an idealized, utopian world countered by a realistic perspective that sees a world rampant with social problems. Her presence as a woman is implicit. The poem is discursive in that it's spoken by an identifiable Chicana speaker who talks about real social struggle in a real world. It is dialogic, forming a pattern of statement and counter-statement. The speaker explains what it means to exist between a Chicano community and a white society. She describes a dream, establishes her identification with it, then moves from the desired dream to the reality.

Poetry Workshop

- I. Poem will be read aloud, first by student volunteers, then by teacher.
- II. Questions/discussion. What mood does the poem put you in? Why? What mood is the speaker in? How can you tell? The speaker mentions her wounds —

"my stumbling mind, my
'excuse me' tongue, and this
nagging preoccupation
with the feeling of not being good enough."

How was she wounded? Who wounded her? How has the wounding influenced her dreams and hopes?

- III. Writing: Often we have wounds, hurts inflicted upon us, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. Remember a time when you were wounded or hurt. Begin working on a poem about your experience. If you'd rather, you may work on a poem about helping someone overcome a hurt.

Lesson: “Shells”

“Shells” is a lyric poem in which a speaker attempts to externalize inner experiences, to express a personal philosophy. We receive a sense of the woman speaker’s life in the past as opposed to the present moment. The stringing of shells symbolizes the putting in order of a life. The speaker dusts pebbles, turning them to sheen; she transforms negatives into positives, dullness into lustre. The shells themselves illustrate the two qualities she wishes to merge in herself, hardness and softness. She realizes her life is one of self-invention.

I. Lead-up: Positive and Negative Space

A group of four-five students forms a “statue,” each student connected to at least one other student. The space filled by bodies is considered negative space. Positive space is the area left open at points of connection. Positive space should be filled by four-five other students. The original group breaks away and views the new statue with its unique positive and negative spaces. A transformation has taken place. The activity should be repeated three or four times.

II. Literature: “Shells”

The poem will be read and discussed. Reference may be made to introductory comments above.

III. Writing

Students might write about ways in which they are aware that they’ve changed. They might also wish to write about circumstances in their lives or elements of their personalities which they would like to change.

Lesson: “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway”

The poem bridges generations: grandmother, mother, daughter. The poem dramatizes the speaker’s efforts to come to terms with the conflicting voices of the two women. The speaker is further conflicted by her role in the family. Grandmother is a “Queen,” mother is “Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior” who longs to be “Princess.” The speaker becomes a “Scribe”: a translator, an interpreter who does “light man work.” These medieval images contrast sharply with that of the freeway, the boundary of the barrio. The poem is both lyrical and discursive. The final stanza shows the speaker envisioning a future (“and in time”) in which three voices are harmonized. How this harmonization is to come about is not discussed.

Poetry Workshop

I. Poems will be read aloud, first by student volunteers, then by teacher.

Vocabulary: *Sal Si Puedes—get out if you can*

borrachando—on a binge

II. Questions/discussion: What mood is the speaker in? How can you tell? What image do you get of the grandmother? The mother? The speaker? Whose advice appeals to you most? Why?

III. Writing: Often we are given conflicting pieces of advice by people we care about very much. Begin working on a poem about a time you found yourself in a similar situation. If you wish, you may work on a poem about a time when you were asked to give advice to someone you cared for a lot.

Remember: Concentrate on rhythm rather than rhyme.

Skip a line between stanzas.

Notes

1. *Time*, May 7, 1990, pp. 104-106.
2. Beryle Banfield, *Black focus on Multicultural Education*. New York: Edward W. Blyden Press, 1979, p. v.
3. Eliana S. Rivero, "Hispanic Literature in the United States: Self-image and Conflict," *Revista Chicano-Riquena*, Vol. XIII, Nos. 3-4, pp. 174-77.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 178-179.
5. Julio A. Martinez and Francisco A. Lomeli, eds., *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide*, Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1985, pp. 184-193.
6. Francisco Jimenez, ed., *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, New York; Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, p. 22.
7. Martinez and Lomeli, pp. 161-172.
8. Marcienne Rocard, "The Remembering Voice in Chicana Literature," *The Americas Review*, Vol. XIV, Nos. 3-4, pp. 150-158.
9. Marta Ester Sanchez, *Contemporary Chicana poetry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 1-23, 85-138.

Bibliography for Teachers

Banfield, Beryle. *Black Focus on Multicultural Education* . New York: Edward W. Blyden Press, 1979.

Banfield offers a plan for developing anti-racist, anti-sexist curricula. A schema is presented and fleshed out with specific lessons. While the black experience forms the core of the lessons, the author's techniques and philosophy can easily be applied to the experiences of other groups.

Cervantes, Lorna Dee. *Emplumada*. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981.

A collection of poems, *Emplumada* offers many examples of Cervantes as scribe, communicating experience to a larger audience, and as Chicano, preserving the past and creating an identity.*

Jimenez, Francisco, ed. *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature* . New York: Bilingual Press, 1979.

A collection of essays, the book offers an overview of Chicano literature, its guiding principles, its role in forming a Chicano identification and proposes critical approaches to literature.

Martinez, Julio A. and Francisco A. Lomel'. *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide* . Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Quite simply, this book offers an encyclopedic view of Chicano literature, authors and themes. I found it very useful—and interesting.

Mehta, Naushad, "Bigots in the Ivory Tower." *Time*, May 7, 1990.

An overview of recent racist, sexist, homophobic and anti-Semitic incidents of U.S. college campuses.

Rivero, Eliana S. "Hispanic Literature in the United States: Self-Image and Conflict." *Revista Chicano-Rique-a* , 1985, Vol. xiii, nos. 3-4.

Offers an insightful look at the Hispanic nationalities we find in our society, illustrating their differences and their commonalities. Useful background information on the Hispanic literary tradition is given.

Rocard, Marcienne. "The Remembering Voice in Chicana Literature." *The American Review*, 1986, Vol. xiv, nos. 3-4.

Details the importance of the past in Chicana literature, a past which lives on and impels the writers to discover who they are.

Sánchez, Marta Ester. *Contemporary Chicana Poetry*. Berkeley University of California Press, 1985. Sánchez examines the work of four poets in a careful, interesting manner. She offers much in background information about Mexican-Americans and concentrates on women writers, who were hardly dealt with in the other books I read.

*A copy of selections from *Emplumada*, including the three poems referred to in the lesson plans, will be on file at the Institute office.

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