



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

1991 Volume I: Regions and Regionalism in the United States: Studies in the History and Cultures of the South, The Northeast and the American Southwest

---

## **Between Aztlan and Quivira: Europeans and Indians in the Southwestern United States**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 91.01.01

by Jeannette Gaffney

Aztlan was the land of mythical origins of the Aztecs, somewhere to the north of Mexico. In recent years Aztlan has been claimed as poetic title of the southwestern United States borderlands, the stage of the collision of three cultures: the American Indians, the Spanish, and the Anglo Americans. These borderlands are geographic, the valley of the Rio Grande, and the arid lands stretching east and west and north. They are the political boundary between Mexico and Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Beyond geographic and political, they are a cultural frontier, an edge where the mixture becomes more important than the prototypes, a border where “mestizo” stops meaning mixed parentage and begins to be a people itself, “la raza.”

This unit is the beginning of a regional study of the southwestern United States to be taught in middle school to students of Spanish. For in the Southwest, Spanish was the language of the explorers, of the settlers, and of the government for three hundred years, before the region was annexed as territories of the United States. Spain, and later Mexico, united a vast and sparsely populated region with language.

We will concentrate on the people who first inhabited this land, the prehistoric Indians and their descendants, and on the endurance of Indian culture through the successive waves of invasion. The second section is a study of the Spanish explorers and conquerors in the region up to the reconquest of the Pueblos in 1693. The final section explores five Indian nations after the reconquest: Pueblo, Hopi, Zuni, Chiricahua Apache, and Navajo. Their histories are very different. The ability to adjust and adapt as first Spaniards and later Anglos entered the territories was survival. Those who could not adapt died fighting.

Teaching strategies include a timeline, beginning 35,000 BC, the date of the earliest archeological evidence of humans in North America. On one side of the timeline will be recorded events in the southwestern United States. Opposite we will record events, either parallel or contrasting, elsewhere in the world. Photographs and videos of the southwest will teach geography, and the extensive Anasazi ruins. Novels about Indians will lead students to understand culture and mythology. We will study Spanish explorers, using novels, history, and maps. And we will use movies to learn about the collision between Indian and European.

As concluding activities students will demonstrate their understanding of the truth of two opposite statements, the universality of the human experience, and the uniqueness of the Indian in North American history. I would like to see projects such as a comparison between Geronimo and Cochise on the one hand and Nat Turner on

the other. I would like a student to write a journal of a fictional Spanish explorer and a second journal of an Indian who is his contemporary. A comparison of the reactions of the Pueblos, Zuni, Apaches and Navajos can provide an interesting analysis of the relative merits of cooperation, separatism, violence, and constant adaptation. How do these methods of survival relate to the experiences of middle school students in the inner city of America? Who wins?

(Recommended for Spanish and Social Studies, grades 5-8)

**Key Words**

*Early Man Archeology North America Southwestern Native American History*

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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