Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume IV: Remaking America: Contemporary U.S. Immigration

Dramatizing the Immigrant Experience

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Introduction

I teach Drama each morning to seventh and eighth grade students at Fair Haven Middle School in New Haven CT. Each ten week marking period that goes by brings 60-75 students into my classroom. By year's end, 300 kids have marched through my door, and hopefully they have connected to some of my knowledge of theater and drama in their own way.

A majority of students at FHMS are Puerto Rican. Others are African-American, Mexican and other Latinos from Central and South America, Far Eastern, and European-American. Many kids arrive in the middle of a semester, and others leave at the same time, in no distinguishable order or pattern. I have come to realize that many of these city kids have moved around a lot, from country to country, city to city, and house to house. Many speak their native language, and a few are bilingual, mixing English idioms into their hallway conversations in Spanish.

Others need to learn English in order to do well in school. Some students adapt rather easily to their changing homes and schools, and quickly make new friends and develop a repoire with their teachers with little or no trouble at all. This must truly be a talent for some—so many things fill the brains of these urban youngsters, where packing and unpacking their belongings is a common chore. Many kids refuse to accept changes, though, and are hard to approach, are introverted and lack focus in learning and fail to develop relationships with their peers.

My own challenge as a theater artist and teacher is directed towards using drama to enrich other subject areas so that young people may think creatively, and express themselves in a clear, articulate and productive manner.

Description of the Course

This curriculum unit, DRAMATIZING THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE, will attempt to help students realize that they have the ability to respond to their many environments and situations in a vivid, creative way. By being able to express themselves and communicate to others (without violence or foul language), students may be able to deal with problems and stress. This may make learning in school and getting along with family decisions and practices an easier and more manageable experience.

The unit will introduce immigration, a topic many youngsters are familiar with on a first-hand basis, through the literature and current news and events in a drama class. It will give them a chance to appreciate their own movement as well as other people's desires to make the United States home. In the course, an understanding that this country began as a nation of immigrants will be a central theme, and that today, more than ever, it continues to live up to that credo.

The course will be divided into three sections, and should take approximately ten weeks to complete. To begin, the class will spend a significant amount of time reading and discussing Rene Marques' play, *The Oxcart* . It is an important play that very clearly portrays the experiences of a Puerto Rican family who struggles to find happiness and success. It takes place outside of their farm in the mountains outside Rio Piedras, PR.

Students will have reading and writing assignments in class and at home, and will learn the basics of dramatic structure, plot development and characterization. I chose this particular play because it affords the student a connection between one's own family experiences to those members included in *The Oxcart* . We will discuss many comparisons from our readings of the play with the students' own life experiences.

The next section of the course will be introduced as our reading of the play commences. It will include a number of lessons with exercises that deal with learning how to write a play. These playwrighting lessons will prepare students for their final project, an immigrant drama.

The final section of the course will be an informative, fun and interesting way to understand the many different people that choose to come to live in this country. We will discover the hardships and joys of many foreign individuals and families whose strength and determination have resulted in gaining American citizenship. We will uncover the plight of the many hard working, loyal family members who strive to become legal residents, but continue to live and work illegally in a country they cannot call home.

By collecting as many profiles and bios as we can, the students will see how their own struggle to find a permanent home fits into the overall picture of immigration into the United States. They will see more clearly how commonplace, yet extraordinary the process of immigration is, and why so many people fail to even make the effort to come over to this side.

In this unit I will try to provide an overview of this part of the course by offering sample profiles and a format as to how to present it in class. I will refer to literature, historical documents, magazine articles, newspaper stories and other media. Students will have an opportunity to research the topic on their own and pique their curiosity about another nationality other than their own by reading about personal stories of moving to America. Therefore, the library, and its many new resources, will be an important part of our study. It will enable students to borrow books, look up maps and photos, watch videotapes and film and even connect through the Internet for information dealing with the immigrant group they wish to write about. Many students may choose to write plays that describe their own experience migrating from Puerto Rico, but hopefully others will be curious to explore an immigrant group that they know little about.

As the students read the Marques play, learn the basics of structure, plot and characterization, and have delved into the life of immigrants other than themselves, they will start to work on their final project. Each student will write a play or a scenario that retraces the movement of an immigrant to the United States. For those who choose to write a small scene rather than a full play, they will be required to prepare a portrayal of one of the people written about in the students' work. For those students who prefer to act in the plays, lessons will deal with the work of the actor in a more theatrical setting on stage. These acting lessons may

result in a full performance in the school at the end of the course.

Section 1: *The Oxcart*

I quickly concluded that I needed to teach a play that focuses on the topic of immigration. After an exhaustive search of many international works to find the right one, I decided to return to the Puerto Rican play that I am currently teaching in most of my drama classes. While over 40 years old, *The Oxcart* contains those timeless themes and relatable characters that make students want to read it in its entirety. Structurally, it has three strong settings that make up each act, a well-developed core of central characters (the Family) and an interesting and cohesive plot that moves along quite easily. Kids enjoy it because of the strong relationship between a mother and her son, the feuding actions of brothers with their sisters, and it includes romance, action and a language that young people find believable. It also contains references to issues that young people are bombarded with daily: crime, violence, drugs, crumbling neighborhoods, discrimination and poverty.

The play's three act structure will serve as a model for the students' final projects, for they will try to use three acts to tell their stories. Using the three phases of passage into a new country (as they will learn about from a lesson covering the book, *Shadowed Lives* , by Leo Chavez), each play will describe the separation, transition and incorporation of the immigrant to his or her new country.

So, in Act 1 of their plays, the plot will try to cover separation, or more specifically, the factors involved with moving away from one's homeland. By already having begun to read *The Oxcart* , students may use the play as a model to understand the reasons why the family abandoned the farm and moved. It should be noted that these phases of moving are not much different for migration as they are for immigration, though it should be made evident that as United States citizens, Puerto Ricans do not encounter the legal challenges (e.g obtaining a visa) that immigrants from other countries face.

In Marques' play, separation comes from the need to escape industrialization of the island and sharecropping of small privately owned farms by American corporations and plantation owners. By squeezing the small farmers onto land half the size of what they used to own, and forcing them to grow crops they could not survive on, many independent farmers became farm workers, virtually enslaved by American big businesses.

The family in *The Oxcart* , forced off their land by mortgaging it off, piece by piece, looks toward the oldest son, Luis to lead them away and start a new life in a new location. He believes in mechanization and progress; accordingly, he packs up la carreta, and brings the family to a slum in old San Juan. The short stay in "La Perla" acts as their transitional home, as they save money and eventually move to New York.

On a human level, the old grandfather, Don Chago, represents the old country, and he decides to stay put, prepared to let the land take him. The family separates from him, for they know that the Puerto Rico he knew was very different from the one they would be forced to live with, had they remained. To prosper and become more educated, Luis moves the family away from their beloved farm and grandfather, to seek success through hard work with the machines that he believes in. Students in class should be able to make certain connections to their own family's reasons for moving by the end of the first act. Efforts should be made by the teacher to help them realize which family member may have been instrumental in moving them to America in pursuit of a better life.

I have noticed in my readings on immigration, that it takes incredible strength and courage to make such important decisions. The conviction and vision to inspire one's family to pull up stakes and move to a new

country, is truly a bold and risky undertaking. Part of these lessons will encourage students to take a closer look at their own situation and understand what decisions and sacrifices had to be made to move here. Perhaps a respect for individuals in the household may become more apparent after this revelation has been made.

It is also very important to pay close attention to the students' responses towards the other family members/characters who are included in the decision, but have little or no say in it. These people are caught up in the middle of such "heroic" actions, and for the siblings Chaguito and Juanita, many of their personal desires get pushed aside at the time of the big move. For these younger members of the family, their own needs become secondary to the needs of the whole family. Many students will appreciate these two characters, and it will be important to discuss any similarities between the students and this brother and sister. A self realization of one's own place in the family may happen, and it will be important to stress the responsibility each family member has in their household to keep the family together and happy.

I suggest that some kind of writing assignment—a journal, or a letter to a friend or loved one, be written that spells out this very topic on the role that younger children play in maintaining harmony in the family. At the very least, now, the students get a real interest in these characters, and look forward to reading the play to see what happens to them.

Unfortunately, in this play, the picture is bleak, and the family, while failing to incorporate to the way of urban American life, goes back home to their more humble and modest surroundings.

> By the time we meet them in their dilapidated Bronx tenement, the 'typical' jibaro family . . .
>
> . . . has been so traumatized by their collision with a hostile, technocratic Anglo-Saxon society that their only hope for salvation is in return to the Island and the resumption of peasant life in the land. [1]

In his description of the play, Juan Flores describes the vision that the remaining family members cling to after the accidental death of Luis, (he dies from a machine, the very thing he believed so much in), the family's workhorse and breadwinner. A belief in a "regained life of decency on the sacred soil" [2] is a long held one among Puerto Ricans young and old, and especially for those who have migrated first hand.

Classroom Activities for *The Oxcart*

1. From a world atlas or encyclopedia, make a diagram of the places the family has lived in over the course of the play. Include the names of mountains, bodies of water, cities and towns mentioned in the play, as well as any landmarks that exist. Then draw a line, using a different color for each character, to show each person's movement from one place to another.
   Now do the same diagram, but use the colored lines to show your own family's movement over a certain period of time. If you'd like to, make charts for other family relatives, and show their movements from place to place.
2. The characters in *The Oxcart* change drastically as they move from one place to the other. In a journal, or through a series of letters to a pen pal, discuss the factors that you believe made them change. Outside of class, talk to your brothers and sisters, as well as your parents, about how each of you is changing because of the move that someone decided to make.
3. Many Puerto Ricans enjoy the rare freedom to move from the Island to the US and then return

back to Puerto Rico. Would you consider this a freedom, or feel that having two places to move back and forth to, diminishes any feelings towards establishing a permanent home?
4. Name the elements of the play that you feel other boys and girls that aren't from Puerto Rico could not identify with. Name the good things and the bad things that these people may not be aware of. For non-Puerto Rican students, identify the parts of the play that were "foreign" to you. Perhaps a class discussion of these elements could be answered by students who have lived there and can offer insight into a part of Puerto Rico that some may not have known about.

Section 2: Lessons on Playwriting

According to Walter Kerr, NY Times theater critic, playwright and author, learning how to write a play is the easiest thing in the world to learn. It is in his book *How Not to Write a Play* , that we will base our lessons on dramatic writing. In this second section, students will get a clearer understanding of how to start work on a play. Kerr's easy to read book will be mentioned often in the class, and we will study a number of his recommendations and insights into the art of playwriting.

The following research should be helpful to teachers who may not have a background in drama, and I leave your method of teaching the following data up to your own style of teaching such material to youngsters. My approach would be to give copies of chapters to the students piecemeal, depending on the subject being covered that day. It is not necessary to buy a book for every student in the class, but handouts of certain parts of chapters in his book would be helpful in teaching this section of the course.

Kerr states that all drama in performance is an experience in time, therefore it is essential to keep the audience's attention from one minute to the next. There should be, in each play that one writes, clean, neat, well-balanced construction, and the appearance of verisimilitude (it has to be believable).

He also writes that writers throughout history have felt the need to use previous plays as models of their own works. Many plays have similar plots, themes, settings and character types. While many of these plays are well constructed, they have little to say that hasn't appeared already on the stage. Our greatest playwrights have written original works that while not copied from other works, have been influenced by other writers' ideas and methods. This influence a writer acknowledges to a style of writing is taken from a unique way of writing that gives one the impetus to create new works containing innovative ideas and styles. Also, audiences need new, inventive plays to keep their attention as times change.

The first time a playwright used his characters to illustrate the issues of the day, a thrill came to the audience. Today all plays deal with the predictably contemporary issues, and a hunger exists for new works. The thrill is gone, it doesn't stir the blood or startle the intelligence in the way it once did. For that reason the theater needs new writers to implement change.

Today's drama is not the classical drama of action, character or of the human condition, but a drama of ideas. Kerr identifies three modern play types:

1. The “problem play,” which simply states its problem, it plays fair to both sides of the problem, and it ends before any solution is made.
2. The “thesis play,” which presents a political, social or moral problem and suggests a solution to it.
3. The “propaganda play,” which outlines a problem, presents the author’s solution, and then tries to evoke the audience to act on the solution.

Where the thesis playwright wants his audience to be enlightened by his solution, the propaganda playwright is not satisfied until his audience runs from the theater determined to change his world based on his solution. In this type of play, both sides of the play are not treated fairly, and a black and white case is made to prompt your quick response.

There will be a number of students who interpret the readings we do in class and feel a need to express their thoughts in a non linear, abstract way. In the past, this may have not been an accepted way of learning proper writing techniques. However, since this class deals with elements of drama and the theater, new forms of expression must be welcomed and encouraged. Too many English classes have taught the ideas of the well-made play, and have virtually ignored any notions of abstract writing. This class will give students an opportunity to express themselves in a manner in which they may exhibit freedom of creativity, and it will be encouraging to watch students delve into new areas of creative writing that they may not have been allowed to use in another writing class.

Walter Kerr writes that the piece bien faite, or well-made play, is an old method that was introduced when Henrik Ibsen wrote. In this modern era, the importance of ideas has overtaken the need to devote plot and theme to only characters and their conflicts with fate.

> “The movement of the drama of ideas is always toward greater and greater emphasis on the abstracted idea, the bare bones equation” [3]

Kerr implies that a form of this abstracted drama of ideas leads to what we call “expressionism,” where human identities were not as important as the ideas themselves. It was not unusual, then, for Elmer Rice to name his characters X, Y and Z in *The Adding Machine* , for the names and faces of people disappeared.

So what are young writers supposed to write about? Do they write a play that expresses their personal feelings toward an issue? Not necessarily, for what they may like or not like doesn’t have to even enter the picture when it comes to writing the play. While many playwrights write about something near and dear to their beliefs, others keep a distance from their preferences, and find they have a freedom to write about almost anything.

> It is an old story that Shakespeare so little intruded personal bias and personal beliefs upon his materials that to this day we cannot say with any certainty what his political, social or religious beliefs may have been. We know the accuracy of his eye and the honesty of his ear, but the rest is silence. [4]

By writing objectively, that is to say, without taking sides on a play’s issues, writers are forced to go out and observe what they write about and must look to life for their materials. If they write plays dealing with

immigrants and their struggle to live in this country, then they must see the struggle in order to properly write about it.

> A good way to destroy a play is to force it to prove something. Forced it will always be. Life, caught in its complex immediacy, doesn't present itself as a tidy equation. [5]

Kerr urges the young playwright to write a play without thinking about it too much. Get the words down on paper as soon as possible, before you have thought too much about what you've written, and resist the temptation to analyze it or become too general or abstract. It is more important to create images and write them down than to become analytical about them.

Kerr mentions the philosopher FSC Northrup, who in his book, *The Meeting of East and West* , describes the different kinds of truth—aesthetic truth and theoretical truth. They are both very different truths in that when each is worked out, they produce two different effects. Aesthetic truth is all a playwright needs to reflect his images in the mind onto a piece of paper. The young writer who theorizes on the idea is in danger of presenting his thoughts in the forms of data and hard factual items, and not images or ideas.

He suggests to write about life, and let the writing live life, i.e., hold the brain back when you are writing because it will only label the things you call life, and is bound to limit it. The best thing to do is to work by touch as long as possible. Use detail as much as you can while gathering information, and control yourself from constant editing. After this gathering of images, you may summarize, but get it all together first.

Kerr mentions that the subject matter in modern drama needs to have a certain size and shape, and must be large enough to spark the interest of the audience. He makes an interesting analogy of this point by reminding the reader of how on hearing the screeching of brakes and some sort of thud or thump, that we immediately rush to see the event. Our attention becomes seized and we slowly move toward the accident site. It is at this point that something happens to us:

> We are drawn toward the scene of violence by an immediate, unquestioning impulse. The closer we approach it the more intense does a counter-impulse become. Having shouldered our way to the spectacle, we are overcome with the urge to turn away. We are simultaneously fascinated and repelled. [6]

This human response gives our modern art forms a responsibility to present to us a vivid look at those events that are much too tremendous to be seen clearly in life. In the theater, we may witness the intense passion, violence or hatred of an event without really being at close range and in direct involvement with it.

It seems that in our age of television, movies and computer action games, kids love the intensity of a battle, a steamy romance or the excitement of the car chase through a downtown street. The loud music from the scene in a disco keeps the viewers at home captivated, and they respond by moving along with the beat. It is not unusual to find teenagers dancing in the aisles of a theater to a movie's soundtrack while the cops chase down the bad guy.

The larger the event, the more likely we are to lose hold of it in life, and the more necessary it becomes for the theater to shape it for us. It is this sensationalism in today's media that make audiences demand a clearer knowledge of life without experiencing it, and our art forms must rise to the occasion to provide it for them.

So, to summarize the topics Walter Kerr has so wonderfully stated, the following handout may be formed by the teacher as a writer's guide. It may help the students beginning work on their projects to form ideas about

how to write a play.

A Study Guide for HOW NOT TO WRITE A PLAY

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by Walter Kerr

Some points to consider, and questions to ask as you write your play. The author is a famous author, playwright and former theater critic for the New York Times.

1. Write, don't think.
If you think about your work too much it will only make it more theoretical and analytical. Try to write down your images and ideas first, as many as you can, and then summarize them when you have finished.
2. What do you want your play to say?
Is it a problem play, that offers no solution?
a thesis play, which answers a problem?
or a propaganda play, which urges the audience to do something about the problem by accepting your solution?
3. Is your play about specific details of particular characters, or are ideas more important than the people in the play?
4. What events take place in your play that will make an audience sit up and take notice?
5. Is your play based on someone else's work, or were you influenced by a particular style of writing?
6. Do your personal, moral or religious beliefs influence the content of your play, or are you neutral regarding the issues it contains?

Section 3: Immigrant Stories

The third portion of the course will introduce students to the stories of immigrants. It will present the struggles Puerto Ricans and other nationalities have to go through to achieve success in the United States. Time will be spent on reading about a particular immigrant's account of their move to this country with focus on Chavez's three phases, separation, transition and incorporation, mentioned earlier, and described in more detail, here.

Esmeralda Santiago's autobiographical novel, *When I Was Puerto Rican* , is an excellent first person account of an 8 year old's growth towards puberty, or *casi senorita* . Many students will enjoy reading shared experiences, from a remarkable individual, truly as strong a role model for kids as there could be. Esmeralda, or Negi, as her family calls her, struggles with seemingly everything, fighting with her sisters, listening to her parents argue, constant moving according to who was angry with who, an ever growing family. While her story includes seven children, she eventually would be the eldest of eleven! Many of these struggles are evident in today's New Haven student, and the class should easily relate to Negi's plight.

For non Puerto Ricans, the combination of Marques and Santiago's works will shed a clearer light onto the culture and tradition of the Puerto Rican people. Both compliment each other in that they share images and events with very clear detail. An understanding of the food, climate, music, and way of living is represented very well in both novel and play.

By studying the Santiago piece, students may choose to write a play adaptation of the novel, or write their own play dealing with another set of experiences. Students may be able to conceptualize the plots of their play assignment from following the Marques and Santiago readings we do in class, but a freedom to create independent concepts should be allowed by the teacher. While realistic plays will be written by a majority of the class, there may be more abstract writers who grasp the material, yet interpret it differently. This manner of expression, though offbeat, should be encouraged, and students should be allowed to produce any style of play they wish.

As a guideline, teachers should encourage students to write along a three part, or three act form, using the lessons on Chavez's three phases of territorial passage; separation, transition and incorporation. By this I mean his three elements of the immigrant's process of moving. Seperation deals with reasons why a member of a family moves away from the home country, transition describes the hardships incurred in the actual move, and then the difficulties of becoming accepted into American society, or incorporation, as he states it caused by an immigrant's status through the eyes of the community. Teachers should read the Chavez book, taking careful notes on the personal and social aspects of these passages.

The students' plays should begin by introducing the main characters, relatives and friends. The opening act or scene should involve their decision to move away from their present home toward an eventual migration to the United States. The description of the characters' feelings towards a decision to move should add tension and provide conflict to the work. Students should include the opposing views of those against any attempt to move away to provide confrontations that may clearly define the reasons to move to support their argument. The young playwrights should add other information to develop the plot and characterization by writing about economic status, religious beliefs, health, and other characteristics of wanting or needing to move, that the family may have. Was separation considered due to an attraction for the United States, or the repulsion of the present way of life in their homeland? Were the characters in the play willing voyagers to the US, or were they forced to pull up stakes and move, an action so many kids have experienced over and again? These questions should be introduced to the students as they conceptualize their projects.

In *The Oxcart* , the family separates for economic reasons. Facing eviction off their farm, Luis takes his family away from the land and seeks his fortune through technocratic forms of industry, a product of the American colonization efforts in the 1950's. Esmeralda's family, in *When I Was Puerto Rican* , moves from Macun to El Mangle, then to San Juan, back to Macun, then Sabana Grande for many reasons. Many of the moves were to upgrade economic conditions, but many were made as Mami attempted to escape from Papi (her names for her parents). The sometimes bitter parental feud ignites the need to migrate away from a life of sadness and

poverty.

The need to improve and succeed in the United States has an enormous influence on future movers to this country. Separation becomes a force in the development of the family, for most members believe it will improve the conditions of their kin. Some family members though, feel differently, and thus conflicts may arise as the family begins their arduous migration to the new country.

Separation of a family may also have an influence on neighbors and friends who ponder such a move away from their village, or barrio. The success stories heard about the immigrating family may sway another to take the risk and move:

> 'If things go well there, write.'
>
> The clear implication of this refrain is that if things go poorly, the immigrant should not add this to the historical record and perhaps more to the point, should think twice before returning. In this way the successes of immigrants become mythologicized and serve to encourage additional immigration. By contrast misfortunes are frequently minimized, even buried. [7]

In *A Visa for a Dream* , Patricia Pessar writes a number of accounts dealing with separation of both legal and illegal immigrants, from the Dominican Republic to New York City. Some of her accounts of Dominicans may be helpful to those students who choose to write plays about other immigrants of other nations, particularly those who have the additional burden of entering the country illegally. Here are two accounts that may help students in their search for an immigrant story that uses the three phases learned from Chavez:

Gustavo, a restaurant worker in New York City, was considered both "a perpetrator and object of the myth of success." [8] After returning to his homeland, a parade was held, with the villagers honoring him as the town's first immigrant, whose instant success in New York became an inspiration for all Dominicans considering a move there. It didn't matter that Gustavo didn't really own the restaurants he would tell people about (he worked in them, actually), for despite his stories he was deemed a legendary figure for his apparent financial windfall, while others continued their lifelong struggle with poverty. The fiction of success is then maintained so that others may be inspired by stories of fame and fortune; these serve to encourage others to move on and seek improvement to their own lives.

The story of Willy and Lidia is surely the makings of good drama, and should help students that wish to write about the adventures of undocumented immigrants and their tougher struggles to make America home. The story's pioneer, Willie Ramirez, was a furniture store owner who, beset with debt from his creditors, and mounting mortgage payments for his middle class house, decides for the betterment of his family, to move to New York. The story describes how Willie buys an illegal visa, transfers all of his assets to establish credit, then begins his destiny to move his entire family to the US. His story is fascinating, because he must find a way to regularize his legal status in order to begin the process of sponsoring family members and obtaining visas for them. His "business marriage" becomes an ordeal, and sacrifices are made to ensure his family's immigration to this country. He waits years before he can divorce, then remarry his Dominican spouse, and then slowly, he begins the process of bringing over his children.

These examples of different families' separation, wanting a better life, leaving loved ones (and unloved ones), escaping from creditors, are all realistic choices that students may want to write about when they develop the

plots of their plays. The students may select any of the accounts presented in class from our readings, to tell the tale of an immigrant's move from one place to the next. These stories may either be read to the students aloud, or they may be handed out as reading assignments. The teacher should have an ample supply of stories that deal with separation from all types of sources, and freely read them in class or hand them out for home reading.

Once the students' plays have introduced the characters and have presented their desire to separate, a large part of the content should cover the transition that occurs before any actual move is made to a destination.

In *The Oxcart* , the family suffers from their stay in La Perla, a rundown, dirty slum in Old San Juan, and it makes life unbearable for its inhabitants. Dona Gabriela, trying to keep her family together, struggles with her children's exposure to the perils of urban life. She complains about her younger son's laziness, his penchant for staying away from home, "to go to the movies" with money that comes from who knows where. She is ashamed of his unwillingness to go to school or contribute to the family financially, and finds out he smokes, to boot. She is annoyed at her daughter's absence from the home as well, and disapproves of the time she spends at a friend's home listening to the soap operas on the radio. Gabriela shows her weariness towards La Perla, its stinking ocean smells, noisy jukebox from the bar in the alley, and wishes for the day her son decides to move away.

In Santiago's novel, she becomes frustrated also, by her painful situation. She endures the smell of the raw sewage that streams underneath her stilted San Juan house, and is repulsed by the vomit and urine that is found outside her front door each morning on the way to school, the product of that evening's drunkards from the adjoining bar. She must also tolerate the jukebox music and raunchy singing of the bar's patrons nightly.

Esmeralda's transition is spent waiting for her mother to take her, and she is forced to live apart from her father and sisters in the home of her uncle and his family. This family of Evangelical followers, made her situation even more difficult when they forced her to work each day for the family's market, and seemingly forced her to practice their religion by giving up the music and other niceities she was used to enjoying. She describes her transition as one of a loveless, distrusting time when she thought everyone had given up with her. She was certain her life was a failure, with little or no hope for success.

In Leo Chavez's book, *Shadowed Lives* , the writer describes the very dramatic experiences that Mexican and other Central American migrants suffer in order to get into the United States:

> Despite the bravado and joking that some (especially successful migrants) express about the experience, crossing the border is not a frivolous undertaking. The journey poses risks, the least of which is apprehension by the Border Patrol. Border crossers face the ever-present possibility of being robbed, raped or killed by a border bandit. . . . .And yet hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, take that risk to seek work or find relative safety in the United States. [9]

Many of the readings that students may use to learn about separation , transition and incorporation are available in Leo Chavez' book, *Shadowed Lives* . Copies of the accounts should be made available to them, or the teacher may read different accounts piecemeal during classtime.

One of Chavez's interviews recalls the transitional story of a married couple from El Salvador. Leaving her three young children behind, Maria Favala and her spouse embarked for the United States by treacherously crossing many borders before crossing the final one into California. She tells of how, after leaving a train that had taken them into Mexico, the police had stripped them naked, and at gunpoint, took all the money they

had. While disheartened, the couple was still determined to finish their journey, and scrounged for food and received help from other travelers like themselves. After a series of freight train rides as stowaways, they arrived at the US border. With the help of a paid guide, or coyote, they made their way across the border, and into a camp to join her father in law, where they could begin working and earning enough to bring over the remainder of the family.

These varied accounts of transition will help students decide on how their plays will take shape, and provide the direction that their stories lead. Some may wish to write about the pain and suffering of the waiting periods of moving, and yet others may write about the arduous task of the eventual move itself. The second act or scene should contain the rising action and possibly the climax of their plots. It will be interesting to read which plays have the characters succeeding in their migration, or which ones have the families failing in their attempts, and face the consequences of the risk and danger.

The final act or scene in the writings will need to contain parts of the incorporation into American life that the family develops. Or if the family fails to incorporate, what they do about such a situation. Marques' family in his play finds it very difficult to incorporate into the ways of the inhabitants of New York. They do not enjoy the cold, gray skies of a noisy metropolis, and find it disappointing to have to eat traditional foods from a tin can. While they earn more money, and spend it on items of comfort and luxury, they feel the need to leave when an offer to return to the farm is made. Of course the family's decision is quickened upon the accidental death of their own pioneer, Luis.

Esmeralda Santiago, however, paints a much more positive story, and it is here that the two works differ, yet still compliment each other in our study of immigration. While we witness the failure of a jibaro family to easily mesh into an urban American lifestyle, we are also fortunate to be enlightened by a woman's success story. Santiago incorporates into the American culture, and provides others with a pathway towards future Puerto Rican success stories. Her ability to seek opportunities and excel at her challenges are a marvel to experience. As she graduates from the High School for the Performing Arts and then Harvard University, we see a jibaro whose talent, determination and spirit conquers problems and difficulties and she achieves a high standard of living that remains a source of pride for herself and her family.

Finally, in Chavez's book, he writes that incorporation of Mexican immigrants has two ends that are part of a continuum: those that leave the United States, like the Marques family, and those that stay, like Esmeralda does. He cites the reasons of people failing to incorporate as having to do with loneliness of a missing imprisoned spouse or absence of children, as well as a failure to grasp the use of English to communicate to outsiders. Many Mexicans do stay, learn the language fluently, befriend others, and form social networks that enable them to establish homes in Southern California. In time, these incorporated immigrants become part of the community, though looked on as outsiders, they still contribute to the community and are active politically as well as socially.

These important lessons describing separation, transition and incorporation will give structure to each student play, as well as teach them how many people share the situations they encounter on a nearly daily basis. By using the various forms of literature introduced in this unit, as well as other contemporary resources such as newspapers and the Internet, plenty of material may be presented to reinforce the ideas put forth in the creation of a written drama. Many options lay open to the student in terms of what their play should be. They may choose to follow the plots of the play we read in class, and write an adaptation of the novel, or a play may include elements of another immigrant group, with material from other available readings and research done in the library or at home. While the results of the course's lessons on playwrighting and immigration will

produce a written piece of dramatic literature, the process of writing such works will be emphasized. It will be geared towards the presentation of the various stories of immigration to this country we call the United States of America.

Classroom Materials

Students should be supplied with a copy of Rene Marques' *The Oxcart* and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* . Copies of articles and chapters from other published books will be distributed when appropriate. It will be important for each student to keep a notebook so that over the duration of the course, drafts of the final project, a written immigration drama, will be produced.

Notes

1. Flores, Juan. *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* , "La Careta Makes a U-Turn" Houston, TX, Arte Publico Press, 1993 p.169.
2. Flores. p.169.
3. Kerr, Walter. *How Not to Write a Play* , New York, Simon and Schuster, 1955. p.51.
4. Kerr. p.59.
5. Kerr. p.65.
6. Kerr. p.93.
7. Pessar, Patricia. *A Visa for a Dream* , Needham Heights, MA, Allyn and Bacon, 1995. p.15.
8. Pessar. p.15.
9. Chavez, Leo R. *Shadowed Lives* : *Undocumented Immigrants in American Society,* Fort Worth,TX, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992. p.57.

Teacher's Bibliography

Chavez, Leo R. *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society* , Fort Worth, TX, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992.

A book based mostly on Mexican accounts of border crossers and the lives that they live on farms. There are

many personal stories of his encounters with families that have made the long, dangerous move, and the risks that illegal migrants take are presented thoroughly in the book.

Flores, Juan. *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* , “La Careta Makes a U-Turn” Houston, TX, Arte Publico Press, 1993. 157-181

An article that explores and examines the new wave of Puerto Rican writing, it describes the assimilation that is taking place both in the US, and the island of Puerto Rico.

Kerr, Walter. *How Not to Write a Play* , New York, Simon and Schuster, 1955

The famous New York Times theater critic and playwright’s informative book, it details the areas that young playwrights must avoid, in order to write successfully for the modern theater.

Marques, Rene. *The Oxcart* , Translated from the Spanish by Charles Pilditch. New York, Scribner [1969]

The 1955 play that describes a Puerto Rican jibaro family’s migration and their quest to live a better life.

Pessar, Patricia. *A Visa for a Dream* , Needham Heights, MA, Allyn and Bacon, 1995.

A detailed account of the lives of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, and their struggle to establish successful lives in the United States, specifically in New York City. There are good personal accounts that can be used in the lessons on separation, transition and incorporation.

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican* , New York, Vintage Books, 1993.

A beautifully written autobiographical account of this remarkable woman’s childhood days, this book is must reading if one is to truly get a picture of the jibaro migration experience.

Student Bibliography

Marques, Rene. *The Oxcart* , Translated from the Spanish by Charles Pilditch. New York, Scribner [1969]

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican* , New York, Vintage Books, 1993.

Readings taken from:

Chavez, Leo R. *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society* , Fort Worth, TX, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992.

Kerr, Walter. *How Not to Write a Play* , New York, Simon and Schuster, 1955.

Pessar, Patricia. *A Visa for a Dream* , Needham Heights, MA, Allyn and Bacon,1995.