



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume I: Twentieth Century Latin American Writing

Chicano and Puerto Rican Literature

Curriculum Unit 97.01.01
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In this unit, my students and I will be reading the works of several Latina writers. I have been looking for avenues to introduce literature to my middle school Spanish classes. I have chosen to study Latina writers for two reasons. Firstly, most of my students are studying Spanish for the first time and many of the works published by these writers are either bilingual or in English. Secondly, these writers live in the United States and this may enable my students to more readily identify with their works. Some of my students are of Puerto Rican descent and I thought that it would be appropriate to study works that represent their heritage. In addition, we will also be reading some Mexican-American works.

A new initiative for the City of New Haven for the school year 1997/1998 is to have students read at least 25 books during the year. Foreign language teachers will have an excellent opportunity to participate in this endeavor. I intend to have my students read two novels, short stories and poetry.

The objectives of this unit are:

- to familiarize my students with Mexican-American (Chicano) literature through a brief overview of Chicano literature and reading works of Sandra Cisneros.
- to familiarize the students with the works of two Puerto Rican writers, Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer.
- to engender awareness of the common themes that are found in both Puerto Rican and Chicano literature.

Chicano Literature

There has been a long history of Mexican presence in the USA. Prior to 1848 a large portion of land, now a part of the USA, was a part of Mexico. With the signing of the Treaty Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican-American War was ended. Mexico agreed to sell California, Nevada, Utah and parts of Wyoming and Colorado to the USA. The USA paid fifteen million dollars for the acquisition of this territory which amounts to approximately one-sixth of its current day size. Included in this treaty was a guarantee that the Mexicans living in these

areas would have the same rights and privileges as United States citizens. This however proved not to be the case and is clearly documented in Chicano literature.

Chicanos are people living in the USA whose ancestry can be traced to Mexico. Most Chicanos live in the south-west of the United States. In this paper the use of the term “Chicano” is synonymous with “Mexican-American”. Chicano literature can be defined as “the literature written since 1848 by Americans of Mexican descent or Mexicans in the USA who write about the Mexican-American experience.” (1) Chicano literature is in a constant state of flux because it draws from the people living here and the migration of others across the border.

Despite the changes in the population, there are several common themes represented in the literature. They are:

- identity
- social and political protest against exploitation
- immigration experience
- life in the barrio
- unity of all Hispanic people (2)

The question of identity is an integral part of Chicano literature. There is the realization by the writers that they are no longer Mexican and that they are not accepted as ‘true’ Americans. Therefore their identity is established somewhere between both cultures. In fact, the Chicano is rejected and treated as inferior by both groups. According to Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* , “The Pachuco does not wish to return to his Mexican origin, nor it would seem does he wish to blend into North American life.” (3) This desire to create a unique identity by taking parts of both cultures has led to the creation of a literature that reflects a distinct Chicano culture.

The migratory experience has been important in Chicano literature. It tells of Mexicans coming to the United States and their experiences of living here. They document racial prejudices , difficulty in adjusting to a new culture and language barriers. The literature also tells of people crossing the United States border illegally and the perils they face.

During the 1960’s and 70’s, social and political protest became very evident in Chicano literature. This protest coincided with the Black Civil Rights Movement. Mexican-Americans demanded the same civil rights as other racial groups. They contended that discrimination against Latinos should end. Chicanos had more success on this issue regionally than on a national level.

From the mid 1970’s to the present, Chicano poetry has been characterized by a call to action instead of mere protest. Another trend during this time was the increase in the number of works published by Chicano women. Chicanas have also added other themes to the literature. They have embraced themes such as opposition to the patriarchal Chicano culture, domestic violence, sexuality and female stereotypes. The students will be

reading works by Sandra Cisneros who is a celebrated Chicana writer.

In general, Chicano literature can be defined as the expression of a culture that has grown despite the odds of oppression in the USA.

Sandra Cisneros

Cisneros was born in Chicago to a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. She was the only girl of seven children. She grew up in poverty and moved back and forth between Mexico and Chicago. She has said that the instability arising from the frequent moves and the loneliness of not having a sister was the early impetus for her writing.

She has worked in a variety of fields, one of which was teaching. At present, she primarily works as a writer and occasionally she is a guest lecturer at various universities. Cisneros writes about the Latino experience from a female perspective. She writes about topics that are of importance to her. These topics include feminism, love, oppression and religion. She has indicated that her writings are about things and people she knows.

Her first novel, *The House on Mango Street* is almost autobiographical for Cisneros. The novel is a delightful collection of stories about Esperanza Cordero's life in the Latino section of Chicago. Through Esperanza's eyes we can see what life is like in her neighborhood. She "hopes" for a better house, a better life and the opportunity to help the people of her neighborhood. In the novel, Cisneros focuses on the women she grew up with. Often they were victims of the men in their lives.

My students and I will be exploring several themes in the novel. We will examine the ways women/girls are viewed, the prejudices that Chicanos experience and Esperanza's "hopes" throughout the novel.

Works to be studied

The House on Mango Street

Poems: Arturo Burro, Good Hot Dogs, Mexicans in France

Puerto Rican Literature

Puerto Rico occupies a unique position in the history of the USA. Puerto Rico was ceded to the USA after the Spanish American War. Puerto Ricans are also citizens of the USA. At the end of World War II many Puerto Ricans began moving to the mainland to find better economic conditions. Many were directly recruited to work on farms and in factories. Most moved to the cities in the North East and to New York City in particular. In their new home on the mainland they encountered problems such as racial discrimination and linguistic barriers. Their experiences on the mainland is documented in their writings.

Puerto Rican migration is somewhat unique because of its circular pattern. Many Puerto Ricans participate in life both here on the mainland and on the island. When the economic conditions are good, they move to the mainland. When there is an economic recession many return to the island. This type of migration is made easy because of Puerto Rico's geographic proximity to the mainland. Other factors include cheap and abundant transportation and the fact that there are no legal barriers to enter the mainland. Since Puerto Rican migration is so "circular" the literature reflects life in both worlds and the question of identity.

During the 1970's, young Puerto Rican writers began to emerge.. Many of these writers were born in or raised on the mainland , particularly in New York. Many of these emerging writers wrote in English. One example from the emergence of Puerto Rican literature was the novel *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) by Piri Thomas. The book chronicles Thomas' life growing up in New York, his drug addiction, armed robbery and prison term. It also explains the lessons Thomas learned along the way.

As identified in Thomas' novels, there are several common themes in Puerto Rican literature. These themes include:

- identity
- cultural
- heritage
- social background
- immigrant stories
- racial, ethnic and linguistic barriers.

They also include themes of life in Puerto Rico, life on the mainland and the conflict of being a part of cultures.

Judith Ortiz Cofer

One author who writes about life both on the mainland and the island is Judith Ortiz Cofer. She was born in Puerto Rico but moved to the mainland and other places because her father was in the military. "Her work focuses on the effect on Puerto Rican Americans of living in a world split between the island culture of their homeland and the teeming tenement life of the United States." (4)

I chose to study Ortiz Cofer because many of her writings can be read by middle school children. A complete list of her works is cited in the bibliography. I have included a list of works my students and I will be reading.

Poems: El Olvidio, Exile, Quinceanera, So Much for Manana, Suenos, Mamacita. Selected stories from *The Latin Deli*

Esmeralda Santiago

Santiago is the eldest of 11 children. She grew up moving back and forth between the countryside and the city in Puerto Rico. Along with her family, she moved to the USA in 1961. She later received degrees from Harvard University and Sarah Lawrence College. She now works as a journalist.

Her novel is autobiographical. The book begins in the countryside of Puerto Rico and describes Negi, the main character, her family and the poverty they experienced. Santiago writes about their subsequent move to New York City. She describes Negi's reaction to new experiences, for example, seeing snow for the first time. She includes the difficulties of adjusting to life in New York. The book touches on several issues such as the role of

women, racial prejudice, bilingual education, adolescence and cultural identity.

Comparison of Puerto Rican and Chicano Literature

There are several similarities between Chicano literature and the literature of Puerto Ricans living in the USA. Both chronicle the experiences of their people in the USA. They write about the linguistic barriers they face when they move to this country. The immigrant experience is also very prominent. Two very good books dealing with the migrant experience are *Barrio Boy* and *When I was Puerto Rican* .

There are some differences however. Often Puerto Ricans write in Spanish and many Chicanos use English or a combination of English and Spanish in their works. Chicano writings are characterized by their identity, that is of being in the middle of the American and Mexican cultures whereas the Puerto Rican writers stress their direct links to the island.

I have included some sample lesson plans. This unit can be taught at anytime during the school year. I will be interspersing the literature of this unit with the grammar that I usually teach.

LESSON 1

Objective: The students will learn about the accomplishments of the authors.

Activities: The students will choose one of the authors studied and make a timeline of their lives and major accomplishments.

LESSON 2

Objective: The students will write about the theme of “hope” in the novel *The House on Mango Street* .

Activities: Explain that the name “Esperanza” means “hope”. The students will write specific examples of the hopes and dreams of Esperanza.

The students will identify some of their hopes and compare them to Esperanza.

LESSON 3

Objective: Students will decide if their names affect their lives.

Activities: The students will research the meaning of their names.

They will find out why their parents chose their names.

The students will include their feelings about their names and whether names have had a positive or negative impact on their lives.

The students will write an essay explaining all of the above information.

LESSON 4

Objective: The students will compare the roles of females in the novels *The House on Mango Street* and *When I Was Puerto Rican* .

Activities: The students will record examples of the role of women/girls in both novels.

After discussing the roles of women in these novels, the students will write three paragraphs comparing the roles of women in the books to the roles of women in mainstream American culture.

LESSON 5

Objective: The students will pretend that they are about to migrate to another country like Esmeralda Santiago. The students will decide what they would bring with them.

Activities: Give the students a picture of an open suitcase. The students will cut out pictures of things they would bring to their new country. They will glue the picture in the suitcase and label it in Spanish.

Variation: The students could write two paragraphs telling why they chose those items.

LESSON 6

Objective: The students will discuss the title *When I Was Puerto Rican* .

Activities: Possible discussion questions.

Why is the word “was” used in the title?

What is Esmeralda if she is not Puerto Rican?

What is Esmeralda now? Is she American?

What might have changed her?

At the end of the novel she calls herself a “hybrid” What does this mean?

LESSON 7

Objective: The students will discuss the poem “Arturo Burro” by Sandra Cisneros.

Activities: Discuss how the parents and the writer feels about having a mentally retarded son and brother.

Discuss how people with mental retardation are viewed and treated.

LESSON 8

Objective: To create a questionnaire with which to interview an immigrant to the USA.

Activities: The students will suggest questions that they would like to ask an immigrant to the USA. The questions might include:-

When and why did you move here?

What are the similarities and differences between your native country and the USA?

Has living here changed you in any way?

Did you have to learn English when you moved here?
The students will share their results with the class.

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Notes

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2. Ibid pp. 8-9

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