



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

Caribbean Voices: Dramatic Scenes Influenced by Latino Culture

Curriculum Unit 97.01.09
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This curriculum unit is designed to teach students about the history and inherent diversity of three Latino Caribbean cultures: Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. I chose these three islands of the Greater Antilles because they share a common history, racial mixture, and Spanish influence and language.

As a teacher with comprehensive arts for nine years, I have taught seventh and eighth grade students in Dance and Drama. I've often noted how confused and ignorant my students were toward each other's cultures. Especially Puerto Rican, Dominican and African American students. There is a need for lessons that will show them how close their cultures really are.

This unit is intended for use with my seventh grade drama students at West Hills Middle School. It aims to enrich drama by combining the use of the writing process with learning about Latino culture.

Students at West Hills have always practiced using the writing process, a group of related activities used to shape and compose a final draft. The process aims to make writing fun and exciting thus encouraging students to write more frequently. The activities used will help guide the students in creating dramatic scenes with developed characters that will hopefully be inspired by the assigned reading material. The literature will be written by Latino authors native to their respected islands as well. As second generation Latinos living in the United States, the dramatic themes produced will depict an historical event or other topics of the students' choice. The following activities are all part of the writing process:

1. prewriting and exploring
2. drafting and discovering
3. sharing and getting responses
4. revising
5. proofreading
6. publishing and presenting

The seventh grade students meet once a week for approximately forty-five minute sessions. Therefore, I expect the teaching of this unit to last for at least eight weeks. Of course, changes are apt to be made allowing for changes in the school calendar and vacation dates. At the end of the unit lessons, a show will be produced based on the students' writings, interpretations, and experiences. This show will likely culminate during an observance of International Day at the school.

The unit learning will commence with the reading of a play entitled *The Great American Justice Game*. The play was written by the Cuban playwright, Miguel Gonzales-Pando. Its theme speaks out against denying freedom of expression to all people regardless of race or native language. The student population at West Hills is a diverse group rich in different cultural attitudes. Their diversity will enable the students to discuss and examine the play's theme. It will also lead to teaching about the diversity of Latin Americans.

The literature used will represent four forms of literature — nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and plays. These selections will represent the experiences of many people. The literature is intended to help students gain insight to the uniqueness and commonality of Latino Caribbean cultures. It will also help students develop accurate and realistic characters, settings, and historical information for their dramatic scenes.

Introduction to Latino Caribbean Cultures

Miguel Gonzales-Pando was born in Cuba in 1941. He was an active political activist in his country and had been exiled from his home twice, once in 1958 and again in 1960. He was sentenced to a thirty-year prison term for his involvement in the U.S.-backed invasion of Cuba in 1961. An agreement between Cuba and the United States helped reduce his sentence and he returned to the United States in 1962.

Gonzales-Pando settled in Miami where he remained active in politics related to the Latino community. He uses his artistic talents as a vehicle to express a voice for people who are oppressed.

The Great American Justice Game reveals attitudes about Spanish speaking people and their right to communicate in Spanish in an English-speaking country. Gonzales-Pando ingeniously uses a game show format to make fun of the trial of a girl caught speaking Spanish at a time when the language has been fictionally banned.

Students will begin with an overview of vocabulary contained within the play. After a group reading, they will be encouraged to discuss diversity and language. We will then go on to look at the three islands previously mentioned and their relation to one another.

Like the United States, the three islands share the legacy of colonialism. Students will be asked to compare and contrast the differences and likenesses of colonial rule under Britain and Spain. They will look at the effects of colonialism on the indigenous people and any lasting influences still present today.

Vocabulary

<i>English</i>	<i>Spanish</i>
1. pomposity	1. calmate
2. mannerisms	2. oye
3. irreverence	3. mira
4. supra-ethnic	4. hola
5. nolo contendere	5. Que Pasa

6. due process
7. unequivocal
8. cultural pluralism
9. egalitarian
10. unalienable
11. abhorrent
12. sovereign
13. semantic
14. ambiguity
15. morphological

Brief History of Cuba

Cuba is located 90 miles south of Florida and 75 miles east of Yucatan, Mexico. It is the largest island in the West Indies. Cuba's harbors were instrumental for use in the conquest of North America. The island was used as a crossroads for the transshipment to Europe of gold and silver from Peru and Mexico. The African slave trade was also detrimental to the island's commercialism and fertile soils, and a semi-tropical climate further enhanced Cuba's popularity.

The island was originally inhabited by the Arawak, Carib, and Taino Indians. The Conquistadors and their foreign diseases wiped out most of the indigenous people. The island was converted into plantations and factories to accommodate the high demand for sugar and tobacco. By the 1820s, more than one quarter of a million slaves were brought over to work the land.

More than half of Cuba's population is White and 11 percent are Black. Some Mestizos can be found in mountain villages. During the 19th century, Yucatan Indians, Mexicans and Chinese were brought in to work the sugar plantations.

Cuban Literature

Pablo Medina was born in Cuba, but emigrated to the United States, when he was twelve years old. *La Luisa* is an excerpt from Medina's book entitled *Exiled Memories: A Cuban Childhood*. Through his memories of pre-revolutionary Cuba, Medina shows what Cuban life was like before the change that occurred when Fidel Castro rose to power. Students will preview vocabulary before reading.

Vocabulary

1. Creoles
2. patriarch
3. guayabera

4. eminent domain
5. macheteros
6. jodhpurs
7. cuadillo
8. carreteros
9. botero

After reading, questions will be asked and answered with written responses. Students will then begin using the writing process to create poems about Cuban life, people, history, or political issues. Questions and activities using the writing process follow the text of this unit.

The *Doubleday Children's Atlas* has a great illustration of Central America and the Caribbean. Students will look at the map of the Greater Antilles, and identify Cuba and the capital, Havana. A simple flag of Cuba will be made using construction paper. The poems the students compose will be attached to the flags and displayed in the atrium of the school.

Students will use the poetry of Nancy Morejon for inspiration in composing their own poetry. We will read "Madre" which is beautifully written and expresses cultural pride and African presence elegantly handed down by a mother with great pride, if nothing else.

Brief History of Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern two-thirds of the Caribbean island of Hispanola located between Cuba and Puerto Rico. Christopher Columbus "rediscovered" Hispanola in 1492. It was the site of the first Spanish settlements in the New World.

The Dominican population is the result of nearly four centuries of mixing of European and African elements. The original Indian inhabitants were either absorbed or eliminated within the first one hundred years of the Spanish conquest.

Literature of Dominican Authors

Julia Alvarez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1950. She and her family moved to the United States in 1960. One of her many publications is a biographical sketch called "El Doctor." In it, Alvarez tells the story of her life with her reserved father. Her sketch shows the impact of life in the Dominican Republic and how her father fears the good things will run out even though he has become a successful doctor.

Vocabulary

1. Plato's Cave
2. Por supuesto
3. pyromania
4. Milton

5. arbiter
6. colloquialisms
7. Claudius
8. conquistadores
9. Fontanelle
10. Hippocrates

After reading, questions will be asked and answered. Students will then use the writing process to write a biographical sketch of a fictional character. The sketch must include interests and ideas that best describe the character.

Students will also read a selection written by Deborah Pacini Hernandez. In it, she recounts an evolving debate over the origins of the meringue. The meringue is the country's most popular dance form.

Like many Latin American countries at one time, the Dominican Republic was governed by an authoritarian regime. One of the forms of popular protests was music. In the 1970s, the debates over popular music widened to include the long suppressed issue of the country's African American heritage.

This reading will serve as a catalyst to learn a dance entitled *sopa de caracol*. It is a lively, energetic dance depicting snails dancing in soup. Students often enjoy learning and performing *sopa de caracol*.

Brief History of Puerto Rico

The island of Puerto Rico is located on the northern margin of the Caribbean Sea. It is east of the Dominican Republic and west of the Virgin Islands. The island is a possession of the United States, officially known as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. It was originally named Boringuen by the indigenous people before Columbus' arrival during his second voyage to the New World in 1493. He renamed it San Juan Bautista. Its present name, however, was given by Juan Ponce de Leon.

At the time of Leon's settlement, there were approximately 30,000 Taino Indians, but they were soon subdued by the Spaniards and virtually disappeared by 1582. The introduction of sugar cane spawned the arrival of African slaves around 1518. Puerto Rico was surrendered to the United States in 1898 after the Spanish-American War.

Literature of Puerto Rican Authors

Jesus Colon was born in Caguas, Puerto Rico. He was seventeen years old when he first came to the United States. He was part of a wave of Puerto Rican workers who came to find work in New York City. Before his death in 1974, Colon wrote *A Puerto Rican in New York*. Students will read a selection called "Little things are Big." In it, he describes an event that left him feeling as though he had failed himself. His perception of how others view him influences moral behavior that goes against his beliefs as a helpful, respectful Puerto Rican male. The essay is very powerful and again leads to discussion about racial attitudes of society during Colon's time.

Students will discuss the term "Nuyorican" (originally coined by Puerto Ricans on the island to denote

emigrants who settled mostly in New York. Originally it was a term that had negative connotations.) Puerto Rican authors began to reclaim the term with love around 1960. This was a way of reaffirming their experiences as immigrants, their history and social practices. Another characteristic was a social bilingualism which allowed Nuyoricans to move from one language to another. A slang was developed from this characteristic called Spanglish (an intermingling of English and Spanish words). All these aspects set these writers apart from Latin American writers, and show how language is manipulated to become part of two cultures.

Students will look at works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction by authors like Piri Thomas, Aurora Levins-Morales, Judith Ortiz-Cofer, and Esmerelda Santiago. Luis Pales Matos' famous poems incorporating African presence will be looked at for details about village life and village description, scenes of mythological and social survivals of African customs, and racial relations in Puerto Rico.

The majority of Hispanic students in the New Haven public schools are of Puerto Rican descent. Therefore, we will spend more time reading about Puerto Rico. However, we will compare and contrast material to previous lessons on Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

Upon completion of the presented material, students will begin writing their dramatic scenes. The overall theme will be entitled "Si es Goya, tiene que ser bueno" which means "If it's Goya, it's got to be good." Goya is a popular food name sold in the Caribbean. Its name is often used to imply Hispanic descent by Americans. Rather than applying negative attitudes to the name, Goya will be used to present positive attitudes of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico in the sketches.

The dramatic scenes must also incorporate character sketches included in the lesson plans. They will have the same form of a full length play with a beginning, middle and an end. The sketches will also include stage directions and dialogue.

LESSON 1

Objectives

1. Students will learn and use improvisation.
2. Students will review the play, *The Great American Justice Game* (Miguel Gonzales-Pando).
3. Students will gain insight to bilingualism and retaining Spanish.

Materials

A long bench or set of chairs arranged in a row.

Procedure

Four students will be chosen at a time. They are to recreate a situation or activity where strangers are often

placed together, i.e., bus, football game, park, etc. Two students will be instructed to speak a gibberish only they seem to understand while the other two students speak English or Pig Latin. Their improvisation will elicit further discussion about racial attitudes.

LESSON 2

Objectives

1. Students will review essay written by Pablo Medina.
2. Students will begin developing material for poetry.

Materials

Copy of essay.

Procedure

Answer the following questions:

1. Medina vividly describes his father's great love of the land. How do his descriptions reveal Medina's attitudes toward his heritage?
2. How do these attitudes affect the way Medina views his grandfather?

LESSON 3

Objectives

1. Students will begin using the writing process to create poems about Cuban life.
2. Students will act out coffee house poetry reading using own material.

Procedure

The writing process:

Prewriting —choose a topic and create a list of images related to the topic.

Drafting —refer to the list of images to develop ideas.

Share —read aloud and discuss ideas in class in smaller groups.

Revise —use criticism and own opinions to make revisions.

Proofread —check punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

Publish and Present —coffee house poetry reading.

LESSON 4

Objectives

1. Students will review and answer questions about “El Doctor” by Julia Alvarez.
2. Students will begin using material to develop biographical sketches of a fictional character.

Materials

Copy of essay.

Questions.

Procedure

Students will write a biographical sketch of a fictional character. The sketch must include interests and ideas that best describe the character.

LESSON 5

Objectives

To review and discuss Colon’s essay.

Materials

Copy of essay.

Procedure

1. Answer the following question: How does Colon feel that he failed himself? Think about and write about an experience that made you feel determined to react differently to certain situations.
2. Write an essay or a new ending for the essay “Little Things are Big.”

Student Bibliography

Thomas, Piri. *El Barrio*, New York : Knopf, 1978

This book contains eight short stories relating the experience of Nuyoricans.

Ortiz-Cofer, Judith. *An Island Like You* , New York : Orchard Books, 1995

Another collection of short stories relating the world of Puerto Rican teenagers in New Jersey. The theme of adolescence transcends all cultural boundaries.

Shiffman, Lena. *Mi Primer Libro de Palaras* , New York: Scholastic, 1992

A Spanish word book for students who want dialogue using spanglish or Spanish words.

Oliver, Jane. *Doubleday Children's Atlas* : New York: Doubleday, 1987.

An atlas that contains maps, flags, photographs, and fact charts about Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* , New York: Penguin Group, 1992.

Fifteen interconnected stories reveal cultural attitudes and family life among four sisters who immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic

Pariser, Harry. *The Adventure Guide to Puerto Rico* . New Jersey; Hunter Publishing, 1994.

Offers complete coverage of all Puerto Rico has to offer. Includes information on history, Indians, religions and more.

Globe Fearon. *Latino Caribbean Literature* . New Jersey Globe Fearon, 1994.

A multicultural literature collection with works by authors from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.

Teacher's Bibliography

Weber, David. *The Spanish Frontier in North America* , New Haven and London: Yale University Press., 1992. A definitive and thorough history of the Spanish Colonial period in North America

Skidmore, Thomas and Peter H. Smith. *Modern Latin America* . New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press., 1997. A lively text with in-depth case-study approach that guides the reader through the major countries of Latin America.

Silen, Juan. *WE the Puerto Rican People; a story of oppression and resistance* . New York Monthly review press., 1971. The author presents a history of Puerto Rico with poignant facts and his own ideology based upon the notion the Puerto Ricans are passive and docile.

Cockcroft, James D. *Latin America: History, Politics and U.S. Policy* .Chicago. Nathan-Hall publishers. 1989. A wonderful book with a great historical overview of the Caribbean islands and updated political policies.

Tapscott, Stephen. *Twentieth Century Latin American Poetry—A Bilingual Anthology*. Texas, Texas Press, 1996. A grand anthology with selected poems by eighty-five famous Latin American poets.

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