



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2007 Volume IV: Latino Cultures and Communities

Introduction

by Stephen Joseph Pitti, Professor of History and of American Studies

This 2007 national seminar gathered talented and energetic teachers to discuss the history and culture of Latinos in the United States. Aware that communities from Maine to Hawaii are now home to tens of thousands of residents who trace their family histories to Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other parts of Latin America, we attempted together to historicize recent trends—the "Latinization" of the United States—and to find ways to integrate Latinos more fully in school curricula.

Fellows first read, and seemed to enjoy, Juan González's *Harvest of Empire*, a book of popular history that describes how Latin Americans have been incorporated, by migration and other processes, into the United States. That reading prompted many good seminar discussions about the 19th and 20th century past, about the influence of the U.S. in the Western hemisphere, and about the possible connections between histories of migrant Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. From that point forward, we took on questions about citizenship, about race and racism, and about community politics, beginning a set of conversations that defined our seminar meetings face-to-face, and that guided a number of Fellows' units in subsequent weeks.

Along the way we also had a number of stimulating discussions of broad interest to seminar participants. We considered the past and present struggles of Latino kids in U.S. schools, as well as teachers and administrators, in the writing of Ernesto Galarza, historian Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, and social scientists such as Stephanie Bohon. We talked about the differences between the Latino neighborhoods, workplaces, and leisure practices in established communities such as Philadelphia and Santa Fe, and those which newly-arrived populations have created in Richmond and Charlotte. We studied educational trends in Latino communities nationwide, exploring rates of literacy, high school graduation, and college matriculation. We considered works of fiction and memoirs by Latino authors, including Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*—which a number of the participants had already used in their own teaching, although in many different ways—and Junot Díaz's *Drown*, an account of life in both the Dominican Republic and the New York City area. We tackled short stories, paying particular attention to the ways in which authors narrate their arrivals in the United States, and how they explain cultural change and continuity among Spanish-speakers. We watched several films and music videos, listened to corridos and salsa tracks, read a history of Latin music in the United States, and analyzed a late-19th century cookbook written by a Mexican American woman in California. Fellows analyzed the art of the Chicano movement, and they talked about the ways in which recent Guatemalan migrants to the South connect Central American indigenous histories to the contemporary United States. In our final session we considered the contemporary immigration debate, and how proposals aimed at border enforcement, new guest worker systems, or an easier path to naturalization might soon reshape the 21st-century United States.

These interesting and wide-ranging discussions helped guide Fellows as they wrote fascinating units intended for a wide range of students. Samuel Reed put together an exciting approach to introducing his mostly African American middle school students to Philadelphia's Latino communities, and to salsa and other Caribbean musical traditions, through various writing and performance projects, and a pen pal program with a school that boasts a large Latino population. Sara Thomas created a unit that guides high school art students in New Haven to consider how Latino artists, and others, have adapted the historical figure of La Malinche, and the Virgen de Guadalupe, and that then encourages them to make their own adaptation of a familiar image or icon. Nicole Schubert responded to the growing number of Latin American immigrants in her North Carolina community to design a middle school unit about Mexican immigration that focuses on immigrants' personal narratives. Raymond Theilacker developed a unit meant to guide his eleventh and twelfth grade Delaware students through several genres of Latino literature, to teach something about Puerto Rican and Mexican American history, and to prompt discussions about literary analysis and identity formation. Yvette Carter of Richmond designed an approach to the popular children's song "Bate, Bate, Chocolate" which she hopes will inspire her primary school music classes to sing, learn about rhythm, and write short essays. Paulina Salvador developed a unit for her bilingual education classroom that will guide her Latino fifth grade students in Santa Fe towards new types of readings, and that will help them better understand their own families and communities. Finally, Kathy Zimbaldi of Houston assembled a unit about Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic for English-language learners in her Houston primary school, a unit that relies upon recently-published picture books to encourage a love of reading, to improve general literacy, and to provide Mexican-origin children some basic information about the Caribbean.

Taken together, these units offer a number of exciting ways to bring Latino content into classrooms throughout the United States.

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