

Mirrors on Identity: The Latino World Reflected in Latino Poetry

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Overview

This paper deals with concepts of Chicano identity and Chicano poetry of approximately the last sixty-five years. The section on identity is contemporary, though it incorporates historical elements that have gone into the making of the Chicano image and its evolution. The poetry has been culled from those pieces that have had great community, regional and national impact, which came to the fore in the early years. Sections on the poetry are generally dealt with chronologically, seeking to place them in historical context as the U.S. moved forward on civil rights. As works from these early periods are far more difficult to access, and far less widely recognized, more space has been devoted to them than to contemporary poets whose work is wonderful, well known and often anthologized.

When I first approached this work, it was out of love for Latin American writings and then, through that to an equal passion for Latino works. Poetry seems to me to be a particularly useful vehicle with students. It succinctly ties ideas into small, blazing, beautiful bundles. Language is at its best for the lack of the superfluous. Meaning must be tight and images apt. So I began with the desire to examine American writers with ties to Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba, as well as to pay homage to those immigrant writers, often exiled from Latin America. After some research and writing, I found I had to cut back to only the first two, due to lack of space. Finally, because I had begun with Chicano history and writing, because almost 60% of the Hispanics in the U.S. were of Mexican heritage, the wealth of ideas and material stretch out to the point that I had to omit the research I had done on Puerto Rico. In the final appendix I include those poets I would have used, again beginning with the poetry as it first was published- much was initially oral

My use of this research will incorporate the history of the United States' dealings with Mexico; ways Chicano identity has been formed, and also my students' own identity. Without some knowledge of this, the despair and rage found in some of the poetry has no grounding. Some film work will be suggested and the ordering of activities, taking students through the reading of selected poems, ways to write poetry with students (and some revision suggestions), culminating in a fiesta, a coffeehouse, and a poetry slam. Because so many of the works discussed have been easy to find reference to, but extremely difficult to find in actuality, many are reproduced in the appendices.

This material is designed for use with high school students, but could easily be utilized in grades 5-8. The curriculum was created for my students at Schenley High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a public school of approximately 1300 students who are drawn from throughout the Pittsburgh area, because of the many magnet programs offered. I

teach in the International Studies Magnet, with generally, but far from universally, motivated students. I know from past experience that poetry can catch the most unlikely students, that their writing will surprise you, as will their pride in participating in its presentation.

Rationale

Identity is a terribly difficult element to pin down, in part because we do have the concept of being individuals, whose self-image is unique and without a twin. How others see us is, of course, a large piece of identity. As the title indicates, this paper will examine the world of Latinos in this country, in particular assessing what can be found regarding that illusive concept of identity in poetry, focusing on writers with ties to that country having the largest representation in the United States—Mexico.

Even the terminology for various groups of people can become problematic, when they are often seen as one ethnic melting pot, by virtue of speaking Spanish as a first language. ‘Latino’ is the unifying term, useful when human rights are being examined or schooling of children is at stake. It is a word, however, that smoothes over the enormous differences that quite naturally come with people who have arrived from different parts of the world, from varying economic backgrounds and carrying different historical memories and consequent political baggage. So, along with this inclusive term, must be names for each specific group. The term ‘Hispanic’, on the other hand, was coined as a Federal census designation, and will be used rarely in this paper, though it should be added that some Latino scholars seem quite comfortable using ‘Hispanic’ as a reference.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, ‘Hispanics’ comprised 12.5% of the U.S. population, and is a group growing at the rate of 50%, since the last census, faster than any other. It has now surpassed African-Americans as the largest minority group in this country. Of this number, Mexicans make up 58.5%, with Puerto Ricans second with 9.6%. It is interesting to consider that there are nearly as many Puerto Ricans in the U.S. as live on the island. Cubans hold 3.5% of the total Hispanic numbers and Dominicans are 2.2%. Individuals from South America, account for 3.8% of the Hispanic total, with Salvadorans numbering 1.9%; Guatemalans 1.1%, and Colombians 1.3%. That leaves 17.3% who consider themselves Hispanic but don’t list a country of origin, whether because of unwillingness to specify a place of national identity or more likely, not fitting into any one national group because of parents from two places.

(www.factmonster.com/spot/hhm1.html)

Writer Ruben Martinez explains what it has been like living between the old worlds of his parents, Salvadoran and Mexican, and the new world of Los Angeles where he was raised. “Living in-between tacos and pupusas, rock and merengue, and Spanish and English has been an exhilarating journey. The problem is that living in-between also means that you can be misunderstood by people on either side of you.” (Martinez <http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino1.html> p1) He goes on to describe the labels

applied to him when he was perceived as Mexican—“a greaser—a bandit—a Latin lover—a Ricky Ricardo.” Even his writing is outside the canon of “Western” literature, considered instead as “Latino”. In Latin America, however, he finds the reverse to be true. “I am, to my Mexican and Central American colleagues, just another ‘American’ writer. No matter that I speak Spanish, have brown skin, and parents from the Old World. So I’m branded a gringo where I don’t want to be one, and where I want to be one, I’m rejected. Denied my in-between-ness by both sides, as it were.”

(<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino1.html> p1)

That image which others hold of Latinos generally originates with what they see most often. One of the earliest representations was Ricky Ricardo on *I Love Lucy*, which redefined the American family of the 50s by mixing a Cuban with a white, red-headed American. Some critics, such as Virgil Perez Firmat in *Next Year in Cuba*, are totally admiring of what Arnez does in terms of creating an acceptance of a Latin presence, while others like Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez in *José, Can You See? Latino/as On and Off Broadway*, scathingly criticize him for creating contemporary stereotypes. An even stronger negative characterization is laid to an icon from nearly the same era, Carmen Miranda, whose glamour was considered by the majority culture to be a true representation of all that was Latin—never mind that she sang in Portuguese and was certainly considered no hero to her native Brazil, when she returned.

When one considers Charo, who bounced and sang with aged hubby Xavier Cugat (coily pronouncing her affirmative replies as “chais”), and today’s Christina Aguilera and Jennifer Lopez, it’s no wonder that such bombshells, having achieved success with mainstream America, can lead to charges of adding to old stereotypes. Says Juleyka Lantigua, managing editor of *Urban Latino*, a glossy New York magazine aimed at the young and hip (smart, given the average age of the American Hispanic population is 26), “We cease to be complete entities. We become microphones. We become people who shake their bon-bons. We become people who are known around the country for their well-shaped derrieres. This is not who I want to be.”

(http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june01/hispanic_3-13.html p6)

Another point of view comes from Federico Subervi, associate professor of radio, television and film at the University of Texas, who feels that mainstream exposure to pop Latino culture is good. “The dance clubs in this city of Austin have Anglos and Latinos and Asians and African-Americans all dancing to the rhythms of Salsa and Merengue and the Cumbia and enjoying it.” (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june01/hispanic_3-13.html p6) Enter Ricky Martin, Antonio Banderas, and of course, the tragic exit of Selena. Banderas, it should be noted, is certainly considered the quintessential Latin lover by Americans, but was born in Spain. This gives emphasis to the confusion over how Americans look at ‘Latino’ culture *per se*, and the ease with which we clump together all who speak Spanish.

All this glamour snowballs into a Latin ‘other’, glittering with sexuality-sensuality, the entertainers that mainstream America enjoys and admires—from a distance. Harlem nightspots in the 20s and 30s, were the places to be for white New Yorkers, with much admired black musicians and singers, who were never accepted outside of that milieu—never part of mainstream society. In the same way, Latinos are often part of that same admired, but would-you-want-them-next door, category of individuals. Beyond this lens of Latin sensuality, hot in pop culture, there is, of course, another stereotype to be reckoned with--that of the underworld Latino, taking drugs, selling drugs and with lives wholly focused around criminal activities. Recently, NBC released a program called *Kingpin*, in which the protagonists were Colombian-Americans, big-time drug dealers with their own supplier-uncle, back in Colombia, and with many dealings and ‘connections’ in Mexico.

To work against that negative stereotype of outsider, television shows have been added to capture Spanish and English speakers, alike. For children, two worthwhile programs are *Dora the Explorer* and *The Brothers Garcia*. Most interesting of the shows aimed at tapping into the huge Hispanic buying market was a limited television series that premiered on PBS, in January of 2002. The *American Family* was a story “about an American family living in Los Angeles that happens to be Latino.” The director, Gregory Nava, continues, “I wanted to create a show that will make the audience laugh and cry as it chronicles the daily struggles and turnings of a family. *American Family* is about everyone’s family.” (<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/series.html> p1)

This attempt at leveling, smoothing away cultural differences to reveal the essence of ‘family’, is at once noble and foolish. It is noble in the sense that we find what is simpatico to all cultures: Mamá, Papá and los niños and las niñas—and so we see one another as human, not through the lens of some ages old, politically manufactured or Hollywood-revised stereotype. It is wonderful to consider that we could accept *The Cosby Family* as a normal family, though of course, they were no more normal than an upper class black doctor’s family could be-- but what an advance at erasing the stereotype of the ‘ghet-to’ living of Jay Jay’s family in *Good Times*. Yet, the attempt is foolish because of the impossibility of creating a composite Latino family. Listening to discussions by the cast, the actors go out of their way never to mention a country of origin. Since they live in East L.A. , there is a good chance they are Chicano, but nothing was mentioned by director or actors.

American Family also worked against the underworld/outlaw stereotype, though it does have a daughter-in-law struggling with her own drug problem. Perhaps if the two Spanish-speaking channels, Univision and Telemundo, continue to grow, they will also ride the wave of interest in Latino pop culture, into a market for mainstream America with English translations. This has already begun, not with translations, but rather with code-switching from one language to another.

Continuing the discussion of identity development, Otto Santa Ana, UCLA professor of linguistics and Chicano studies, states that community, either as a location or as a one-time

shared locale, is usually a piece of group identity. While enough Puerto Ricans live in New York to have them answer to the name ‘Nuyoricans’, and a great many Cubans live in Miami, and Los Angeles, Texas and Arizona are home to many Mexican-Americans, these do not add up to one melting pot of Latinos. Most cities are experiencing increases in varied Latino populations. Says Fordham University sociologist, Dr. Clara Rodriguez, “Miami now has an increasingly diverse Latin American population with Colombians, Puerto Ricans, and diverse Central and South Americans increasing their presence. New York City now has substantial and growing Dominican, Colombian, Ecuadorian and Mexican populations.” (<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino3.html> p1) It is also true, as Martin Espada, poet and Amherst professor, discusses that there has been a steadily growing Latino population in the Northeast, drawn by farm labor and then industry, both now severely depressed. “Recent statistics on the Puerto Rican community show that the poorest...barrios...are found in central and western Massachusetts.” (*El Coro*, x) So much for a localized place of Latino identity.

Dr. Rodriguez also considers identity as being tied to each individual’s history and to reasons for that person’s immigration, whether for labor or because of political upheaval or by being exiled from home. She also sees a connection, however loose, to Spanish as a language, though it isn’t even necessary to speak it in America, to be classified as Hispanic. Finally, there may be commonalities and great differences in Latino foods, as well as music and the arts. “Most members of each group are proud of their uniqueness and history—both in this country and in their country of origin. This can be seen in such a Chicano difference as the emphasis on chilies in Texas cuisine, and the near lack of them in California Chicano cooking.” (<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino3.html> p1)

Identity can be found in a name. Until at least into the 1930’s, anyone who spoke Spanish was considered ‘Mexican’. Santa Ana elaborates: “In one way, the label was okay. This word innocently denotes ‘citizen of Mexico’ or ‘person of Mexican-descent’. But words mean in two ways. Words also connote. That is to say, the word conjured many things in the mind of Anglo-Americans of the time; a defeated and disgraced enemy, a swarthy race of people who were half Indian, the stereotype of the shifty-eyed thief, dangerous and macho revolutionary, or the passive siesta-taking fellow in a sarape, who is napping against a cactus.” (<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino2.html> p2) It should be noted at this point that the term ‘Chicano’ is now used without risking offense, for all but the oldest of Mexican-Americans. It is, however, according to Santa Ana, an old, derisive, vulgar word referring to Mexicans, that came to favor in the 60s as an off-shoot of the civil rights movement. It was a way of embracing the country of origin rather than the Mexican-American label, which sounded to many as if the Mexican part was rejected. If words can hold so much power and even connote negativity, imagine what effect a few hundred experiences with the Frito Bandito could have on the image a child holds of Latinos.

Stereotypes of women within the Latin cultures have long been divided into the whore and the virgin figures. The whore side of women, of which the pop-icons are extensions,

was modeled on Malinche, the lover of Mexico's conquerer Hernán Cortés, who is often mythologized as traitorous and loose-moraled., Then there was the passive Mamá of the home, taking whatever her husband dished out, who was herself a stand-in for the Holy Virgin Mother. The dichotomies can be stated as follows: Malinche vs Maria/ whore vs virgin. Nava's impulse to do away with the labels, in his *American Family*, and to allow his Latino family to simply be "everyone's family" is, again, understandable in the reflected light of hard-dying stereotypes. Certainly there have been other efforts to resist and counter female stereotypes in Latino culture, to give voice to women where they traditionally haven't had one. "Among Chicana poets, Bernice Zamora and Lorna Dee Cervantes have been particularly powerful voices. In her collection, *Restless Serpents*, Zamora inveighs against boundaries, created largely by men, that restrict not only action but emotion and sexuality." (<http://www.georgetown.edu/tamlit/essays/chicano.html> p5) Others, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga have given voice to all women of color in their book, *This Bridge Called My Back*.

If we look at those elements that must be faced by all Latino cultures, in fact all minority cultures, do you mean "ethnic outsiders" here, as you discussed earlier? I would avoid the term "brothers away from home, as you have not contextualized it. We would certainly need to include economic inequities, the difficulty of making it into America's middle class. Rubén Martínez points up the difference between fighting battles over cultural equality and those involving class, feeling too often efforts have gone into the former. "Feeling the sting of having been branded by cultural stereotype, much of the political organizing among young Mexican-Americans over the last forty years has been decidedly 'nationalist' in value, invoking the greatness of the primordial Mexican culture—that is Aztec history—as a salve against white supremacy. Having pride in one's Old World culture is one thing; questioning the underlying causes of endemic poverty in one's community is quite another." (<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino1.html> p3)

The concept of Aztlán can perhaps be seen as one of those cultural wars, as it lays claim to that portion of Mexico that was taken over by the United States after the Mexican-American War of 1846. Going beyond the fact of original possession, this area is precious through the folklore as being the point where Aztec migrations split, where groups "that would become the various Nahuatl-speaking people of central Mexico passed through...in a prehistoric epoch." (<http://www.azteca.net/aztec/aztlan.html>) While the linguistic similarities of many tribes in the region, also discussed in this web site, are interesting, it is the almost mythical importance of the area that has caused much talk and been the intense focus among Chicanos. This cultural issue would seem to be what Martínez sees as having taken time and effort away from the desperately needed class issues. He goes on to make the point that it is recent immigrants who have put efforts into class inequalities "rather than the culture wars that Mexican-Americans have so famously engaged in over the years." (<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/latino1.html> 3) It is important to see this as a change, as thirty years ago, culture and cultural self-image was the main focus, as can be seen clearly in my discussion on Gonzales.

Class inequalities and culture wars were both brought to the fore during the Civil Rights Movement and it was only at this time in the United States, that a true Latino literary movement could be seen emerging. That is not to say that there was no Hispanic tradition prior to this point, but only that America became aware of its Latino writers at this time. Nicolás Kanellos, Professor of Hispanic literature at the University of Houston and editor of *Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States*, writes in his introduction: “Hispanic life in the United States, however, reveals a greater and richer contribution to literature and culture than has been understood up to the present. Historically, the diverse ethnic groups that we conveniently lump together as ‘Hispanics’ or ‘Latinos’ created a literature in North America even before the founding of the United States.” He goes on to say a huge amount has been written over the past 400 years, beginning with explorer, Cabeza de Vaca in 1542. Because the information is simply too vast, it is the last forty to fifty years on which this paper will direct its focus.

Chicano Poetry

One of the most interesting of early writers who only became known during this time period, as he could not find a publisher before then, was America Paredes, who went from publishing Spanish works in immigrant papers in his native Brownsville, to becoming a well-respected academic responsible for directing attention onto Chicano folklore. His dissertation on Gregorio Cortez, hero of earlier corridos or border ballads, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, was published by the University of Texas Press in 1956, and has remained a seminal work in the Chicano canon. His 1935 poem “The Mexico-Texan”, while written in dialect and with a sense of humor, nonetheless brings to life the fate of the landless Mexican, and makes painfully clear the kind of second classness of being part of two cultures, which poets continue to write of today.

The Mexico-Texan he’s one fonny man
Who leeves in the region that’s north of the Gran’,
Of Mexican father he born in these part,
And sometimes he rues it dip down in he’s heart

For the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan’,
He stomped on the neck on both sides of the Gran’,
The dam gringo lingo he no cannot spik,
It twisters the tong and it make you fill sick.
A cit’zen of Texas they say that he ees,
But then, why they call him the Mexican Grease?...
(*Herencia* 171)[Complete work in Appendix A]

In general, writers at this time were out of a working-class background and utilized folk traditions and the spoken word. The epic poem by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, a boxer and

political activist, is credited with having begun the popularization of the Latino plight; for the public this was a visible beginning to what was seen later as a literary movement. Using the model of a 19th century rebel, Joaquin Murieta, "I Am Joaquin/Yo Soy Joaquin" traced Mexican-American history and exploitation. It was initially self-published in 1967, and spread widely, to be read at rallies and finally was dramatized. Historical background of the times in which any work was authored can be an asset to literary study, but in the case of political writing, seems essential.

Gonzales, for example, was not only a successful boxer, but a businessman, and a would-be politician. He opened the first sports bar in Denver, "Corky's Corner", was an insurance agent and owned a bail bond company. The same year he fought his last professional fight, 1955, he lost a bid for election to the Denver City Council. Gonzales was involved in politics as a Democrat, spearheading Colorado's campaign for Kennedy in 1960 and being appointed by Denver's mayor in 1965 as director of Denver's War on Poverty. In 1967, however, disillusioned altogether with politics, he resigned from the Democratic Party with a scathing letter:

...From my point of view, party politics have traveled backward instead of forward. The individual who makes his way through the political muck of today's world and more so the minority representatives suffer from immense loss of soul and dignity that the end results are as rewarding as a heart attack, castration or cancer!... You compounded the crime of indifference to the needs of the Community, especially the minority people... a Blue Ribbon crew of Uncle Toms and political hacks to represent people who they do not communicate with let alone identify with.

This angry realization for Gonzales, centered around the idea that progress for Chicanos could be made only outside the mainstream, and only when the concept of self-identity and self-pride was explored. This was generally true for all minority groups during the civil rights movement. Gonzales felt that the struggle for Hispanics was more than a class struggle, or a racial struggle, but was primarily a cultural conflict. In that issue, some thirty-five years ago, Gonzales would seem to be speaking to the concept of cultural equality, espousing the reality for him of *Aztlán*, that kind of emphasis which Martinez decries as usurping too much time and energy from what he sees today as class struggle. Time alters perception on issues. Even Gonzales saw this difference between generations: "...I told some of the young guys who picked up one of our old newspapers... They said, 'Say, man, you're here with some sellouts.'" And they started laughing at me. I told them, "Well, us older people had to chop the trees down so you guys could see." (*Message to Aztlán*, 46) Still, his message focuses on the unexplored areas of identity:

...Many people have not listened, they have not looked, and they have not even stopped. They go to high school where their gringo friends say, 'Hey, Chico, come on, let's go,' and the guy's name is Carlos or Pepe or a common

name that they think is Chicano or Mexicano. And the guy accepts it, or he makes a racial joke about it. 'You pay so much for hamburger that the Germans or the Italians made, and for every ten they throw in a Mexican.' And you say, 'What's that for?' And they say, 'For the grease.' The Chicano goes along with it, and says it's all right, and he doesn't resist.

What we have to do is resist. Let no man get way with any word... To the guy that comes and says, 'Hey, boy,' he is going to find out that I am a man.

They try to patronize you or act condescending, like coming up and telling you, 'Yeah, I like tortillas, too,' and try to bullshit you that they are nice guys because they ate a taco yesterday. (46)

That same question of identity and self-pride is inherent in Gonzales' famous poem, "I Am Joaquín: an Epic Poem", 1967, in which he says,

I am Joaquín
Lost in a world of confusion,
Caught up in a whirl of a
 gringo society,
Confused by the rules,
Scorned by attitudes...
My fathers
 have lost the economic battle
 and won
 the struggle of cultural survival.
And now!
I must choose
Between the paradox of
Victory of the spirit,
 Or
to exist in the grasp
of American social neurosis,
sterilization of the soul
and a full stomach, (Message to Aztlán16)

Here clearly stated is that dichotomy between need for a place in the economic class versus loyalty to one's culture. The poem is also filled with an acknowledgment of the debt owed to the past and unity with all those indigenous people both past and present.

I rode with Pancho Villa,
 crude and warm.
A tornado at full strength...
I am Emiliano Zapata.
 "This Land
 This Earth
 Is

OURS”
 I ride with Revolutionists
 against myself.
 I am Rural...
 I am the mountain Indian,
 superior over all.
 The thundering hoofbeats are my horses.
 The chattering of machine guns
 Is death to all of me:
 Yaqui
 Tarahumara
 Chamul
 Zapotec
 Mestizo
 Espanol... (20-21)

Here too is that piece of a new generation wanting assimilation and finding a sense of loss.

I look at myself
 and see part of me
 who rejects my father and my mother
 and dissolves into the melting pot
 to disappear in shame.... (23)

Here also is the need for power, but the unwillingness to find it via the Anglo.

I sometimes
 sell my brother out
 and reclaim him
 for my own, when society gives me
 token leadership
 in society's own name.... (24)

Here is the voice of oppression (when asked once what the solution was, Gonzales replied, "...first we need to find out what the problem is."). This poem explores the problem.

Here I stand
 before the court of Justice
 Guilty
 for all the glory of my Raza
 to be sentenced to despair.
 Here I stand
 Poor in money
 Arrogant with pride...
 My knees are caked with mud
 My hands calloused from the hoe.

I have made the Anglo rich
yet
Equality is but a word...
My land is lost
and stolen,... (25)

The concept of lost land and a people bent under the yoke of colonial power is at the core of the misery expressed.

The part of blood that is mine
has labored endlessly five-hundred
years under the heel of lustful
Europeans
I am still here!...
I have existed
in the barrios of the city,
in the suburbs of bigotry,
in the mines of social snobbery,...
in the fierce heat of racial hatred.
And now the trumpet sounds,
The music of the people stirs the
Revolution,... (28)

La Raza! "(29) [complete poem can be found in Appendix B]

Perhaps one of the questions students need to ask, when they have some concept of the history of the anger Latinos feel, and therefore some sense of the problem, is what has changed in 36 years and to what degree the literature focuses on solutions.

It is interesting to note, in this continuing investigation of identity, that Dr. Antonio Esquibel, who in 2000 wrote the introduction to the first collection of Gonzales's works, *Message to Aztlán*, felt it necessary to examine the extent to which the author was fluent in Spanish. Critics not only leveled charges of his being a college dropout, but that his Spanish was inadequate for composing his work. Indeed, "I Am Joaquín", was written in English and transcribed into Spanish by someone else. Dr Esquibel states, "Being a professor of Spanish and having known Corky for more than thirty-three years, I can attest to the fact he did know Spanish and speaks Spanish today." (*Message* xix) He goes on to defend the fact that he never studied Spanish in college, by declaring it was important in his home growing up. That "until the mid-1960's, Colorado had a law on the books that made English the language of instruction in state public schools," which would clarify why the formal edge to Gonzales' native language would suffer. (xix) . Gloria Anzaldúa talks in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, about remembering in Texas, in the early 50s "being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for 'talking back' to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to

pronounce my name. ‘If you want to be American, speak American. If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.’ (75)

Dr. Esquibel continues, in his defense of Gonzales, to drive the point home: “Many who speak Spanish mistake the hesitancy of one who does not speak Spanish as well as they do as a sign that he does not know Spanish. Usually, these same individuals insist on speaking in Spanish to show their superiority.” (*Message...*,xix) In essence, the question was whether Rodolfo Corky Gonzales was himself the genuine article, giving him the authority to write on Chicano issues. What power language has, and how tied it is into identity.

A poet, whose youth would place her in a later section, has, nonetheless, written a poem that focuses on this problem of language and identity. It is important because it was written in 1998, emphasizing the continuing problem of Spanish and English acquisition, to the self-image of Latinos. Given the recent proposition in California to dispense with bilingual education, this poem, titled “Mi problema” by California native, Michele Serros, seems all the more pertinent.

My sincerity isn’t good enough.
Eyebrows raise
when I request:
“Hable más despacio, por favor.”
My skin is brown
just like theirs,
but now I’m unworthy of the color
‘cause I don’t speak Spanish
the way I should.
Then they laugh and talk about
mi problema in the language
I stumble over (*Wáchale* 100)[*See Appendix C*]

She is harassed about perhaps wanting to be white, and wonders why whites attempting to learn a second language are encouraged. Her flashcards and cassette tape are hidden away.

They tell me
“Spanish is in your blood.”

I search for S.S.L. classes
(Spanish as a Second Language)
in college catalogs
and practice with my grandma,
who gives me patience,
permission to learn.

And then one day,
I’ll be a perfected “r” rolling

Tilde using Spanish speaker.
A true Mexican at last. (101)

Another of the early giants in Chicano poetry, Abelardo “Lalo” Delgado also published his own books, one of which, *Chicano: 25 Pieces of Chicano Mind* (1969), became the first bestseller in barrios and was used in the fledgling ethnic studies programs beginning to find their ways into universities in the late 60s. Despite the fact that this is a work that many credit with beginning the Chicano literary renaissance in Texas, it is difficult to find in print. (<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/CC/kzcf.html>)

In one of the poems from his book, “Stupid America”, Delgado writes of the danger to a society, when it denies opportunities and frustrates the creativity of a group of its people, here personified into anonymous Chicano figures.

stupid America, see that chicano
with a big knife
on his steady hand
he doesn't want to knife you
he wants to sit on the bench
and carve christfigures
but you won't let him.
stupid America, hear that chicano
shouting curses on the street
he is a poet without paper and pencil
and since he cannot write
he will explode.
stupid america, remember that chicanito
flunking math and english
he is the picasso
of your western states
but he will die
with one thousand masterpieces
hanging only from his mind.

(www.xroads.Virginia.edu/~VCGO1/voss/otherpoets.html)

(He adapted a “feminizedly” version (his term) also in 1969, with pronouns changed to ‘she’, where ‘picasso’ became ‘frida khalo’)

Abelardo, as he initially referred to himself, was a performer, a *declamador*, who worked festivals, celebrations, marches, in the tradition still followed in Latin America—the intimate, poet-performer. Unlike so many at this time, who felt the performing of a work allowed for its constant growth, which publication would control, Abelardo worked to have his poetry published. Activism was the connecting element of the time, and grassroots, of-the-people poets were what was found in the Latino community. Whereas the above poem is pure frustration of what is not understood and what is denied, I would

include for students, a second poem which focuses on the cultural differences around death. Students will need to have some background on The Day of the Dead and the elements of celebration surrounding it. In brief, this is a variation of a 3000 year old ritual, which the Spaniards tried to kill off, finding it barbaric, but being unable to do so, Christianized it by altering the date to coincide with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day November 1 and 2. While details of the celebration vary depending on where you are, it basically involves the decorating of graves, feasts, sometimes at home and sometimes at the grave, sugar skulls, coffins, skeletons, flowers, incense, etc. The idea is both to honor the dead and to mock death itself. Octavio Paz, the most famous of Mexico's poets, writes extensively of death and how the Mexican "is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it... The Mexican's indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life. He views not only death but also life as nontranscendent. Our song, proverbs, fiestas and popular beliefs show very clearly that the reason death cannot frighten us is that 'life has cured us of fear'" (Paz 57-58). The latter quote is from a popular folk song, "La Valentina". Abelardo's poem, titled "Día de los muertos", compares his early life in Mexico, selling "paper flowers to make the somber tombs bright," to the U.S. where:

los muertos
are personas non gratas.
Here we do not wish
to hold dialogue
with los muertos.
They remind us
we too
will eventually join them. (Cool Salsa 31)

It is certainly true that Americans avoid death as a depressing topic and rarely embrace or talk to the dead as they do in other countries, which is just one aspect of our culture in which a Chicano would feel foreign. Nonetheless, my friend Judy, who just lost her husband, is quite busily incorporating his ashes into the garden he loved, keeping a journal where she shares with him daily happenings. Without knowing him or his poetry, Judy embraces the spirit with which Delgado's poem ends:

Talking with the dead is necessary
to remind ourselves
to enjoy our lives
and not to go about
as if we had already died
and no one said good-bye or cried. (32)
[See Appendix D for complete poem]

Alberto Baltazar Urista, who used the penname Alurista, was another of the early militants and *declamadores* whose poetry I would use with students. He later earned a doctorate, and spoke and wrote in not only Spanish and English, but in the Mexican

indigenous languages of Náhuatl and Maya. In the mid-60's, however, he was a young Chicano activist. Often Alurisa read his poetry as Delgado did, supporting César Chávez and the farm worker movement, and others. I would use “must be the season of the witch” as a poem representative of his work, and the complex way in which he combined languages, religious references (he had studied many), and folklore, with the very real social injustices toward Chicanos that he found in this country.

must be the season of the witch
la bruja
la llorona
she lost her children
and she cries
en las barrancas of industry
her children
devoured by computers
and the gears...

These references to being devoured by American industry is a new take on the old folk tale of La Llorona, the weeping woman who murdered her children, having been abandoned by her husband. (<http://web.nmsu.edu/~tomlynch/swlit.lallorona.html>) (or for a 2nd version: <http://www.literacynet.org/lp/hperspectives/llorona.html>) She walks near the lake, weeping, searching for them, or any other children.

mis ojos hinchados
flooded with lágrimas
de bronce
melting on the cheek bones
of my concern
razgos indígenas
the scars of history on my face
(*Herencia* 205)[*See Appendix E*]

Alurista's beautiful combining of languages, could with a little effort, be understood by students. The struggle to understand would mirror the efforts of second language students.

One other piece I would have to use with students, because it deals totally with identity, and with the stereotypes that come from such concepts, is a play, the author of which comes out of the same time period and frame of mind as the previous writers-- “Los Vendidos”, published in 1971. Luis Valdez is considered to be the “father of Chicano theater” (*Herencia* 222 or check with Arte Público Press of Houston), and in this very short, very funny play, he tucks a multitude of stereotypes. Valdez was one of the founders of El Teatro Campesino, a theater of and for farm workers in California; fitting, since he had come of a family of migrant workers, the second of ten children. Unlike some of the other writers of this time, Valdez went to college, earning an M.A. in English. “Los

Vendidos” (a term which in itself means a sell-out, and has replaced *pocho*, *agringado*, *renegado* as the word of choice for a negative model) is set in Honest Sancho’s Used Mexican Lot and Mexican Curio Shop and features, besides Sancho who sells various models to a ‘sell-out’ D.C. government secretary (who pronounces her name JIM-enez, having Anglicized it) looking for a token brown (“not too dark”) for the government. As a sample, Sancho describes the farmworker model as being economical:

Señorita, you are looking at the Volkswagen of Mexicans. Pennies a day is all it takes. One plate of beans and tortillas will keep him going all day. That and chile. Plenty of chile. Chile jalapenos, chile verde, chile colorado. But, of course, if you do give him chile, [*Snap. FARMWORKER turns left face. Snap. FARMWORKER bends over.*] then you have to change his old filter once a week. (*Herencia*, 223-230)

The movement of Latino literature in the 60s spread to the prisons, via oral *declamadores*, theatrical work, and the new publications focusing on Latino life and political causes, making such writings easily accessible, none of which detracts from the fact that these men were largely self taught. What was produced, as they were freed, was writing with an incredible vitality and energy. Many, whose responses to the poverty and gangs of the barrio, and to the general disenfranchisement within American life, had been violence and drugs, now took up the cause of political justice and the need for social revolution. One of those works which came to be well known was in autobiographical prose form: Luis Rodriguez (Chicano from L.A.), *Always Running: La Vida Loca*. I would use some pages from this to give insight into what LA.gang life was really like, and how amazing it is that a man with those beginnings could move to where he is today. The book also talks about relations with police, which is a constantly important topic, particularly for minority males:

Through the bars of a cell, I talk to a deputy as he sits behind an immense wood desk in the Temple City sheriff’s station, the station responsible for Las Lomas. He’s Chicano like me, but I know how much he hates everything I am, as if I represent all the scorn, venom and fear instilled in him since a child.

“We have a plan here,” the jura says. “We detain every seventeen year-old boy in your neighborhood.”

“Detain them for what?” I ask.

“It doesn’t matter. Curfew, loitering...whatever we can,” he replies. “Then we keep their names. Keep track of them over the years. Soon we’ve picked them up for other things – stealing, fighting, mischief...”

“And that’s how you get a hold of ‘em,” I continue for him.

“That’s right—hey you’ve got half a brain, huh?”

“It ain’t hard to figure out that by the time some of the boys do something serious, they have a detention record a mile long and end up hard time –juvey or camp.”

“You guys just don’t know, “ he says with a smirk. “You just don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

In the barrio, the police are just another gang. We even give them names. There’s Cowboy, Big Red, Boffo and Maddog. They like those names. Sometimes they come up to us while we linger on a street corner and tell us Sangra [another neighborhood] called us chavalas, a loose term for girls. Other times, they approach the dudes from Sangra and say Lomas is a tougher gang and Sangra is nothing. Shootings, assaults and skirmishes between the barrios are direct results of police activity. Even drug dealing. I know this. Everybody knows this.

While Rodriguez is best known for his autobiography, he was also a poet. I like best “The Old Woman of Mérida”, a beautiful, magical piece about an old woman who sees her husband drowned at sea, in her dishwater. (*El Coro* 118) A second one I would use, following more closely from his prose, is “Meeting the Animal in Washington Square Park”, which has his meeting, in a famous New York square, in the midst of acrobats:

someone who didn’t seem to belong here, like I didn’t
belong. It was a big man, six feet and more,
with tattoos on his arms, back, stomach and neck.
On his abdomen were the words in huge Old English
lettering: Hazard. I knew this guy. I knew that place...
My name’s Louis—from East LA. He brightened. “East LA!
Here in Washington Square Park? Man, we everywhere!”

Then The Animal, as he had been called, was given the shock of finding out the man speaking to him is from La Gerahty,

That’s the mortal enemies of the Big Hazard
gang of the Ramona Gardens Housing Projects.
“I should kill you,” Animal replied...

Instead, they end up talking

I told him how I was now a poet, doing a reading
at City College, and he didn’t wince or look
absurd at me. Seemed natural. Sure. A poet (*Aloud* 258)
[*Rodriguez poems in Appendix F*]

While this is a work that calls up echoes of Rodriguez’s past gang years, it also speaks of the present when two men seem to have passed that place.

Raul Salinas wrote of both the conditions of jail and the loss of what was left outside, with his most famous poem written in Leavenworth: “Un Trip through the Mind Jail” (1969), a work which has been compared to “Howl” and “Song of Myself” (Barrios, www.calacapress...). After 30 years it, along with a collection of Salinas’s work, has been

rereleased (Arte Público Press). Salinas found his road to education and writing while in jail, despite abhorrent conditions and a dearth of real reform policies. Louis Mendoza, in his preface to the new release, compares Salinas's life and writings to a journey, one "linked to social movements that are occurring inside and outside of the walls of prison, ... the context for the poet's transformation from individual alienation to justified social rage and finally resistance." (Salinas, 4)

A Trip Through the Mind Jail
La Loma

Neighborhood of my youth
demolished, erased forever from
the universe.
You live on, captive, in the lonely
cellblocks of my mind.

Neighborhood of endless hills
muddied streets—all chuckhole lined—
that never drank of asphalt.
Kids barefoot/snotty-nosed
playing marbles/munching on bean tacos
(the kind you'll never find in a café)
2 peaceful generations removed from
their abuelos' revolution. (56)

...

Neighborhood of Sunday night jamaicas
at Guadalupe Church.
Fiestas for any occasion
holidays holy days happy days
'round and 'round the promenade
eating snowcones—raspas--&tamales
... (57)

Neighborhood of Reyes' Bar
where Lalo shotgunned
Pete Evan's to death because of
an unintentional stare
and because he was escuadra,
only to end his life neatly sliced
by prison barber's razor.

...

Ratón: 20 years for a matchbox of weed. Is that cold?
No lawyer no jury no trial I'm guilty, you're guilty

Aren't we all guilty? (59)

Neighborhood of my childhood
neighborhood that no longer exists
some died young—fortunate—some rot in prisons
the rest drifted away to be conjured up
in minds of others like them.
For me: only the NOW of THIS journey is REAL!
... (61) [*Complete poem in Appendix G*]

In a different tone, from a different time (1986), rather than psychological and intellectual journeying, "POEMA DEL NUEVO LEON" details a truly physical journey, a real trip.

S
e
n
tado
e m
n I
favorite restaurant
surrounded by carnitas
y coronas
me pongo a platonear

Meanwhile...
en un booth by the bar
Gloria (la waitress
especial) sits smiling
whiling away
minutes before her
shift/swiftly munching
on a bunch of
(what I hope are
farmworker-friendly
pesticidee-free,
pro-Union!)

Grapes. (*El Coro* 119) [*See also Appendix G*]

Students will appreciate the concrete construction of "I sit" with a chair, and the gentle, ironic pro-union comment about the grapes, and the comfortable play with two languages.

Other poets were also produced from the prisons. When I teach poetry, I often like to start with the hardest edged, the grittiest of poems, to help dispel in one swoop, students

far-too-often held concept that poetry is all scented with rosewater lyric, for old ladies in cool parlors. I would use Jimmy Santiago Baca as one who began his craft and education with a jail sentence. Baca, a Southwest Chicano has been a favorite of mine since I heard him read at the Dodge Poetry Festival about seven years ago. His “El Gato”, the story of a twelve year old boy finding god in a bag of crack, was a hit there, and has been a favorite of my students since then. Along with this, I would use “Mi Tio Baca el Poeta de Socorro”, his poignant piece about his murdered uncle.

...
Poet de Socorro,
whose poems roused la gente
to demand their land right back...
(*Currents from the Dancing River* 511)

but who, by virtue of the strength of his words, was attacked one night by those with
Faces masked in dusty hankies
men wearing remnants of Rinche uniforms
arms pitchforked you out...
‘Shoot the Mexican! Shoot him!’...
kicking you up the hill by the yucca
where you turned, and met the scream
of rifles with your silence....(512)

The poet imagines his uncle come back, leading him to the church.

I want to believe
whatever problems we have, time will take
its course, they’ll be endured and consumed.
You kneel before La Virgen de Guadalupe...
old jacket perforated with bloody bullet holes.
I close the door, and search the prairie,
considering the words *faith, prayer, and forgiveness*,
wishing, like you, I could believe them. (513)
[*Complete poem in Appendix H*]

Baca seems to see in his uncle’s fate, what far too many Chicano and other minority groups have faced, whether on land seized in the mid-nineteenth century, or in prison. Yet in this poem, even if he can’t find faith, he endures. He faces much that threatens not just his life, but his identity, as in “Like an Animal”, a brief poem from his early book (1979), *Immigrants in Our Own Land*.

Behind the smooth texture
Of my eyes, way inside me,
A part of me has died:
I move my bloody fingernails

Across it, hard as a blackboard,
Run my fingers along it,
The chalk white scars
That say I AM SCARED
Scared of what might become
Of me, the real me,
Behind these prison walls.

(<http://www.nmcn.org/literary/french/jimmysantiagobaca.html> 1)

With our prisons filling with ever younger offenders, and the disproportionate number of minority convicts continuing, it is important to consider what our system of punishment over prevention does. Norman Mailer writes in his introduction to Henry Abbott's In the Belly of the Beast: "There is a paradox at the core of penology...It is not that only the worst of the young are sent to prison, but the best—that is, the proudest, the bravest, the most daring, the most enterprising, and the most undefeated of the poor. There starts the horror." That will not be a popular philosophy, since we all want to live and teach in trouble-free zones. What we do want to transmit, I think, in our teaching as well as our lives, is that there is always another day, and that within ourselves we are all stronger than we think. The last of Baca's poems that I would use, also from his 1979 publication, is "Oppression".

Oppression

Is a question of strength
of unshed tears,
of being trampled under,

and always, always,
remembering you are human.

Look deep to find the grains of hope and
strength,
and sing, my brothers and sisters,

and sing. The sun will share
your birthdays with you behind bars,
the new spring grass

like fiery spears will count your years,
as you start into the next year;
endure my brothers, endure my sisters.

(<http://www.hope-howse.org/baca.html> 2)

While there may still be eloquence coming out of our prison systems, today's focus in Chicano literature comes from the colleges and training in writing programs there. The 60s questioned with grassroots energy, all the basic, accepted truths of mainstream society, but the 70s began to go to college. In greater numbers than ever before, Latino young people, thanks in part to affirmative action, were allowed access to college. Thanks to pressure from the civil rights activists there were now ethnic studies courses on many campuses and with them were Chicano, Puerto Rican and Cuban writers, coming out of Spanish and English departments. Those academic voices joined the already loud, if not far-reaching ones of the working man's songs of the barrios, the streets, and the prisons. Many fine writers came out of this transitional period between pure activist poetry to the university environment. Now university magazines and publishing houses, particularly in California, made Latino thought and writing more accessible. Berkeley issued the first bicultural-bilingual anthology of Chicano literature. They launched the career of Alurista, discussed previously, who combined the activism of the grassroots poet with a literate tradition that went back to Aztec and Mayan writers in poems that were trilingual. Not until the 1990s were Latino *writers* accepted into MFA programs in creative writing departments. Their writing was considered too lowbrow, too uneducated for mainstream writing programs.

Many of these MFA graduates were major prize winners that mainstream America came to know, if they knew any Latino's at all. They were published by university presses and by large commercial publishers. Many actually made a living with their writing and with positions in creative writing programs throughout the country. It is to be remembered, however, as Ruben Martinez indicated earlier, a writer may remain a minority writer, outside the canon, despite the prizes.

There are many who find the commercial success of Latino writers today, those known and accepted by mainstream American, as far superior to anything that has come before. Ray Gonzales, who has some fifteen Latino anthologies to his credit, categorically states in the preface to his 1994 collection, *Currents from the Dancing River*, "Latino writing is now part of mainstream American literature...how far have they come from rhetorical poetry that fueled the emergence of many 'ethnic' writers in the 60s and 70s." He goes so far as to call "obsolete", the angry writing of Mexican-Americans "marching at mass political rallies." (ii) That in itself seems a massive putdown and a reductionist stereotype, unnecessarily trying to kill off the old to present the new in a refined light of acceptance. Why would anyone, particularly one who is himself part of a minority culture, use a term such as 'ethnic' as a pejorative, or categorize someone's art as 'obsolete'? Gonzales does feel today's Latino literature is at base even more political than before, writing openly of the struggle for social justice because there are now more options and more possibilities for correction. That there are such new options, would seem to lay a large debt at the feet of those whose "rhetorical poetry" helped push the movement to the point where doors have opened for Latinos of today.

On the other side of this point of view, are those who feel there is something slightly insignificant, in some way off the mark, about those current Latino writers whose fame has

made their names known to many. Nicolás Kanellos has done enormous work bringing to the fore much unpublished, forgotten or undervalued Hispanic writings, a lifetime's work and historically invaluable. However, from his vantage point, he levels the rather serious charge against famous modern Latino writers, that "this literature is the literature of a minority of Hispanic writers and tends to distance itself from its indigenous roots." He goes on to claim that they make up the tip of an iceberg, with the rest of the mass built upon centuries of writing in Spanish "as racialized natives of the United States or as immigrants sought for their cheap labor or as the children of political exiles." (*American Review* 2) This accusation recalls and mirrors the charge of not being poor enough, or black enough or Chicano enough, to write validly of an experience. In considering identity, modern writers have much to say, and address many of the problems still faced by Latinos today; and many are following in the tradition of the activist and performance poet whose work echoes loudly from the past.

LeRoy Quintana, who teaches English at Mesa College in San Diego, writes of growing up in the barrio and, in "What It Was Like" tells simply of those who face the scorn of Anglos who still feel Mexican is a word for lesser human being. The truck driver was so good, he "could handle as easily in reverse as anybody else straight ahead", and therefore heard the Anglo words, "Too bad he's a Mexican." The awful moral for the child telling the story is . . .

Where do you begin if
 you begin with if
 you're too good
 it's too bad?
 (*El Coro* 116)

This poem and a second, "Zen—Where I'm From" about how thieves stole a chain-link fence to keep them out, are in *Appendix I*.

Winner of many awards, and currently teaching at U of C, Berkeley, Gary Soto writes, in both prose and poetry of his past, on being young and Chicano and of his family and friends. Two small boys, in "Brown Girl, Blonde Okie", consider themselves as too ugly to ever attain the girls of whom they dream.

. . .
 In the dark I touch my
 Nose, trace my lips, and pinch
 My mouth into a dull flower.
 Oh God, we're in trouble
 (*Cool Salsa* 94)

Then, in "Pompeh and the Uses of Our Imagination", an incredibly funny poem sets up the young Soto attempting to visualize what could possibly have happened on that fateful day, as the lava flowed, listening to his history teacher.

....
 I closed my eyes and imagined a huge tamale,
 Runover by *mole* sauce, my only reference
 To a thing that got smothered. On top of this tamale,
 A chariot, crowned Gods, an emperor in a white robe.
 There was a slave and a slave's bloody ax.
 Then there was Niña, Pinta and Santa María,
 The wrong century. I wiped out this image
 And returned to the flow. . .

(*El Coro* 121)

Soto's poems will be reproduced completely in *Appendix J*. I also strongly recommend the poem, "The Essay Examination For What You Have Read in the Course World Religions" where, the same young boy is facing a history test for which he has no knowledge. (Found in *El Coro* 123)

Sandra Cisneros has also won numerous awards and is best known for her collection of brief autobiographical vignettes, *The House on Mango Street*, which has been translated into ten languages. Her poetry, like her books, deals with the many difficulties of growing up Chicano, as well as memories of family and love poems which echo the title of her book of poetry, *My Wicked Wicked Ways*. In "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me", her use of imagery, bi-lingualism, sensuality and language echoing Latin rhythms, is amazing and funny.

...
 You bring out the Mexican in me.
 ...The tequila Lágrimas on Saturday all
 through next weekend Sunday
 ...You bring out the Dolores Dell Rio in me.
 The Mexican spitfire in me.
 The raw navajas, glint and passion in me.
 The raise Cain and dance the rooster-footed devil in me.
 The spangled sequin in me.
 ...The Aztec love of war in me.
 The fierce obsidian of the tongue in me.
 ...The berrinchuda, bien-cabrona in me.
 The Pandora's curiosity in me...

(*Floriscanto Si* 80)

In the same vein, is her "It Occurs to Me I Am the Creative/Destructive Goddess Coatlicue" in which she pushes away as clearly as she loudly lures in the previous one.

I deserve stones.
 Better leave me the hell alone.

I am besieged.
I cannot feed you.
You may not souvenir my bones,
knock on my door, camp, come in,
telephone, take my Polaroid. I'm paranoid,
I'd tell you. *Láguense*. Scram.
Go home. ...
(*El Coro* 39)

Finally, I would use one of her most anthologized poems about her grandfather, "Abuelito Who". This is a child coping with the death of a beloved friend.

Abuelito who throws coins like rain
and asks who loves him
who is dough and feathers
who is a watch and glass of water
whose hair is made of fur
is too sad to come downstairs today
who tells me in Spanish you are my diamond
who tells me in English you are my sky...

who used to laugh like the letter k...
doesn't live here anymore...
(*Cool Salsa* 55)

(All of Sandra Cisneros's poems can be found complete in *Appendix k*)

Lorna Cervantes is another of the younger poets, who writes with power of the memory of genocide in "Flatirons", with a dedication reading, "for the Ute and Arapaho".

The mountains are there like ghosts
of slaughtered mules, the whites of my
ancestors rest on the glaciers, veiled
and haloed with the desire of electrical
storms. Marginal feasts corral the young
to cave walls, purple smoke wafts up
a chimney of shedding sundown...
(*Dancing River Currents* 549)

Much of her poetry deals with social issues such as the difficulty of remaining human in the face of the urban push, and of facets of nature that become redemptive. Two of her poems deal with California freeways. "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" is her best known, dealing with three generations and "the uneasy relationship with the machoworld

with which women still contend” and the fact that so much of identity for a woman is tied to a man. (<http://collece.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/cervante.html>)

- 1 Across the street—the freeway,
blind worm, wrapping the valley up
from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes.
I watched it from my porch
unwinding. Every day at dusk
as Grandma watered geraniums
the shadow of the freeway lengthened.
- 2 We were a woman family”
Grandma, our innocent Queen;
Mama, the Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior.
Mama wanted to be Princess instead.
I know that. Even now she dreams of taffeta
And foot-high tiaras....
- 3 Before rain I notice seagulls.
They walk in flocks,
cautious across lawns: splayed toes,
indecisive beaks. Grandma says
seagulls mean storms.
(*Emplumada* 11)

One notes the use of nature, particularly birds, as offering pieces of the solutions for living in a world with men. Even one of her poems is called “Bird Ave. 1985”, though it is tough in its imagery as it documents life on the streets. It ends “man/it was tough/to know it all/and we haven’t/learned anything/since”, so perhaps somehow, the ‘bird’ still gave answers:

Life on Bird
was tough
Cat-eyes
me and Mousie
estrolándonos y
marchando
con missions
man I can’t get no
satisfcation
in and out las
baby baby baby
oooo OOO oooo
baby baby

hits all summer

(*Floriscanto* Si 66)

(Poems by Cervantes can be found complete in *Appendix L*)

Pat Mora, one of the few poets who has achieved a recognized status outside of the academy, has been extremely productive. She writes often out of nature and a sense of place—that place being her home of El Paso—as in “Curandera”.

They think she lives alone
on the edge of town in a two-room house
where she moved when her husband died
at thirty-five of a gunshot wound
in the bed of another woman. The *curandera*
and house have aged together to the rhythm
of the desert.

She wakes early, lights candles before
her sacred statues, brews tea of *yerbabuena*.
She moves down her porch steps, rubs
Cool morning sand into her hands, into her arms.
Like a large black bird, she feeds on
the desert, gathering herbs for her basket...
(*Herencia* 330)

As in one of her most often anthologized poems, “Legal Alien”, Mora’s writing is sometimes political, a social commentary couched in terms of human experience. The pain involved in the demands of fitting into two cultures, while satisfying neither, is to be second-class everywhere.

Bi-lingual, Bi-cultural,
able to slip from “How’s life?”
to “*Me’stan volviendo loca,*”
able to sit in a paneled office
drafting memos in smooth English,
able to sit in a paneled office
drafting memos in smooth English
able to order in fluent Spanish
at a Mexican restaurant,
American but hyphenated,
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien,...

(<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/authors/MORAp.html>)

She has many pieces the students would enjoy, from “Dear Frida”, which eulogizes the brazen strength of this woman, rather than the extent of her talent. “We’re stuck on you, on the thorns you press/into your swan neck, black swan niña/limping on a stubborn withered leg.” (*Dancing River* 212) Also, “Mango Juice” is evocative of a time of sensual joy, around the fruit, the “cool rich flesh/ of Méjico” (*Cool Salsa* 88)

(Pat Mora’s poems can be found in Appendix M)

Probably one of the most famous poems to be presented was used in court against the poet, attempting to prove her intent to smuggle refugees across the border, when in truth Demetria Martinez, only 28 at the time, simply accompanied a minister who was helping two women as part of the sanctuary movement. She was acquitted, but “Nativity: For Two Salvadoran Women, 1986-1987” was dubbed subversive by the government.

“You eyes, large as Canada, welcome
this stranger.

We met in a Juárez train station
where you sat hours,
your offspring blooming in you
like cactus fruit,
dresses stained where breasts leak...

Sisters, I am no saint. Just a woman
who happens to be a reporter,
a reporter who happens
to be a woman,
squat in a forest, peeing

on pine needles,
watching you vomit morning sickness,
a sickness infinite as the war in El Salvador,
a sickness my pen and notebook will not ease,
tell me, Por qué están aquí?,
how did you cross over?
In my country we sing of a baby in a manger
finance death squads,
how to write of this shame,
of the children you chose to save/

“It is impossible to raise a child
in that country.”...

(*Floriscanto Sí* 162) [*Complete poem in Appendix N*]

Finally, performance poet Guillermo Gomez Peña should be noted. He writes as one who sees “the cultural dynamism of borders—that is, hybridity, fluidity, syncretism and synthesis—overtaking and becoming the common communication style not only for the

United States and Spanish American but for the entire world.” (*Herencia* 30) His live performances can be found on tape, but must be edited for classroom use simply because of profanity. His ideas, however, his ritual, his costuming, and most of all, his provocative ideas could be great to push students to think and then to put those thoughts into a performance piece. In 1995 Peña pulled together eleven artists from Mexico and from California, whose work “challenges stereotypical and/or official notions of identity, nationality, language, sexuality, and the creative process... The performance work we did covered a wide spectrum...including tableaux vivants, avant-cabaret, spoken word poetry, apocalyptic rituals, and street ‘interventions’. Our goals...were: to create art together (border art is collaborative by nature); to open the Pandora’s box of North/South relations and unleash the border demons; to destroy taboos...” (*Herencia* 625) His is a fascinating, discomfiting effort to pull us together by breaking apart antiquated views.

Nicholas Kanellos finds the whole history of Latino immigrant cultures to be less that of groups melting into the one pot of Americanism, but rather that “the history of Hispanic groups in the U.S. has shown an unmeltable ethnicity.” (15) This stance echoes the words of the narrator at the end of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: “America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain....Our fate is to become one, and yet many. This is not prophecy, but description.” Hence, we are not discussing assimilation as much as the retained focus on those elements of Chicano culture that keep the flavor and essence of the groups; and yet there are many who write of what is being lost from those cultures, particularly Spanish. That remains a pressure of assimilation. Until such a time that true and total tolerance exists in this country, there will always be conflicting pulls on those of varying ethnic groups. Those of us who teach know that teens want nothing so much as to discover easy routes to acceptance. Schools must accept responsibility for building the tolerance and appreciation of cultures for students of the white majority, and in the process, to validate the richness and acknowledge the injustice, for those who make up the minority groups in the United States.

Objectives

First of all, the point of this research and the curriculum inherent in it is to broaden students’ knowledge about Mexico and Mexican-Americans who make up such a large portion of the Hispanic population of the United States. Along with the intellect required in this acquisition, comes, I hope, the heart, which understands in a different way, the difficulties of being a minority group, as well as the richness that comes from being part of more than one culture. True tolerance, I believe, comes from both these areas of understanding—head and heart--and from the two angles, of wrongs suffered and the wealth of one’s culture.

Students will be asked to learn of and demonstrate understanding of the history of Mexican/U.S. relations and land acquisition, looking at it from both sides of the border and of how that border so dramatically shifted. From that history, classes should work to discover what political issues have arisen, to watch for them in the Chicano writings and to

contemplate which of these are endemic to any people reacting as a minority to the majority culture, and which are specific to the Latino.

Students will need to gain an appreciation for the way images of whole groups of people are created, which is, of course, stereotyping. In this case our focus will be on Latinos, but the process could hold true for any group. Music, folklore, holidays, food, and literature, will need to be sampled and discussed, to determine how these elements add up to the definition of a culture, and to what extent that definition results in positive or negative images of the Chicano. While respecting each individual's wish for privacy, students will be invited to assess their own identity and the concepts others may hold of them and groups to which they belong.

By studying the poetry, students will begin to clarify aspects of Chicano identity as is evidenced in the writing, and in doing so, seek out what areas of concern have changed over the past sixty-five years and which elements remain problematic. Students will be expected to grow in their appreciation for the language and ideas specific to Chicano poetry, and to identify those areas that represent universal emotions and ideas.

Students will write poetry, using some aspect of those works read, to give them a prompt from which to begin. This will be discussed further in the activities. Both as a follow-up to this and to the knowledge they have garnered on history and specific poets, students will read and perform both their own works and in several ways the works and words of others, taking pleasure in the strength of their voices. If this latter sounds like pie-in-the-sky, it is not. Almost without exception, my students from many grades and levels of ability have over the years taken pride in what they have written and the applause coming from others.

Strategies

I see the previous objectives as being reached in a variety of ways. First of all, the Internet will be used. Students, given starting points, will study the history of Mexico and of Mexican folktales. We will also use videos to illustrate the way in which images of a group can be formed. CD's will be used on a music day and as background on other days of appropriate group work. Overheads will need to be created for a day on the art of Mexico.

We will utilize the Chicano poems from the research section, to be listened to, read and analyzed, both as a class and in small groups. Language will be featured, both as a poetic technique and as a bi-lingual technique. Various issues will be studied by groups to see if the focus within the poetry has changed over the years, and by extension, whether life in the United States has become easier for Chicanos.

Students will write their own poems, with help, in stages, and beginning often with the Chicano poems as idea and prompt. One day will be our own Dia de los Muertos as we write of our own dead ancestors.

Performance is important here, as students become *declamadores*, using the original poetry; becoming figures from history and folklore; putting on a play (*Los Vendidos*); present original poetry at an in-school coffee house; participate in an off-site evening poetry slam, open to the school.

Finally, we will do some Mexican cooking, changing places for a day with the cooking instructor and utilizing the culinary arts students.

Classroom Activities

The point of these activities is four-fold. First, it is essential that students gain a sense of U.S. history with Mexico and what this has to do with Chicano writing. Secondly, but equally important is the need to investigate the concept of Chicano identity as formed by the paternalistic*, if not racist attitude of the U.S. government, coupled with the landless state Mexicans found themselves in after the Mexican American War. This negative image was further compounded by the work of the media. Thirdly, it is our focus, after building the foundation with the first and second issues, to study Chicano poetry from the last sixty-five years, both as a reflection of issues particular to the Latino, as well as of what is universal to the human condition. Finally, we will write and perform, using the Chicano poems as broad models.

*(speeches by Teddy Roosevelt will clarify this statement)

1. The unit will begin with a day of immersion into Mexico—one class period of Mexican music (see Salsa, Merengue and Cumbia), a Mexican sweet, and slides or overhead transparencies of Mexican art (Diego Rivera, Frida Khalo, Simon Silva, Gunther Geizso—web sit listed). Students will be asked to write the last five minutes of their overall impressions, and a specific image.

2. We will spend a day (or two) in the computer lab. researching U.S. and Mexican interrelations with groups given focus topics and an initial web sight on which to begin. Reports will be given in class the next day. Areas can include: Speeches of Teddy Roosevelt (the responsibility of the white race); Manifest Destiny (more of the rights and destiny of the Northern whites over lesser peoples, i.e. entitlement); the Mexican-American War (Mexico lost 1/3 of their land, i.e. landowners became the landless outsider); Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 (supposed protection of Mexican rights—has it protected?).

3. A marvelous PBS video titled *The Bronze Screen* will be shown. This chronicles the film industry's reflection and creation of Latin stereotypes. It will probably need to be ordered. I suggest coercing the library or personally ordering from Amazon or Half-com. It is well worth it. Each day we will need to discuss what was seen. It will probably take two days, depending on the extent of the discussions. Daily, students should be looking to see things around them that contribute to any stereotypes and what areas of life and media contribute to those frozen images. Students also need to begin a notebook, as homework,

on their own identity—how people see them, to what group(s) they belong (racial, ethnic, economic, religious, social) and how people outside their immediate world may see them. Clarify that this is private and sometimes unsettling, but that part of our study of others is so that we come to know ourselves. They will not have to share anything, and the final writing, “Who I Am and How I’m Seen”, will be turned in to the teacher who promises to share it with no one. However, those who wish to share discoveries should be encouraged to do so.

4. The Disney film, *Tres Caballeros* (*The Three Caballeros*), which is rentable, should be viewed only in part, and prefaced with a discussion of the Frito Bandito and any other such silly, and deceptively innocuous icons, which in reality perpetuate the kinds of stereotypes we are discussing. Stop and start technique is best for this film, forcing students to get beyond the cuteness and to analyze what they have really seen.

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For Classroom Use*

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*It should be noted that specific readings for students are included in the Appendices. Classroom readings may also be applicable beyond resources, for use as assignments.

Appendix A

The Mexico-Texan
by Américo Paredes

The Mexico-Texan he's one fonna man
Who leeves in the region that's north of the Gran',
Of Mexican father he born in these part,
And sometimes he rues it dip down in he's heart

For the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan',
He stomped on the neck on both sides of the Gran',
The dam gringo lingo he no cannot spik,
It twisters the tong and it make you fill sick.
A cit'zen of Texas they say that he ees,
But then, why they call him the Mexican Grease?
Soft talk and hard action, he can't understan',
The Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan'.

If he cross the reever, eet ees just as bad,'
On high poleeshed Spanish he break up his had,
American customs those people no like,
They hate that Miguel they should call him El Mike,
And Mexican-born, why they jeer and they hoot,
"Go back to the gringo! Go lick at hees boot!"
In Texas he's Johnny, in Mexico Juan,
But the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan'.

Elactions come round and the gringos are loud,
They pat on he's back and they make him so proud,
They give him mezcal and the barbacue meat,
They tell him, "Amigo, we can't be defeat."
But efter elaction he no gotta fran',
The Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan'.

Except for a few with their cunning and craft
He count just as much as a nought to the laft,
And they say everywhere, "He's a burden and drag,
He no gotta country, he no gotta flag."
He no gotta voice, all he got is the han'
To work like the burro; he no gotta lan'.

And only one way can his sorrows all drown,
He'll get drank as hell when nexst payday come roun',

For he has one advantage of all other man,
Though the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan',
He can get him so drank that he think he will fly
Both September the Sixteen and Fourth of July.

Appendix B

I Am Joaguín: an Epic Poem, 1967
By Adolfo "Corky" Gonzales

I am Joaquín
Lost in a world of confusion,
Caught up in a whirl of a
 Gringo society.
Confused by the rules,
Scorned by attitudes,
Suppressed by manipulations,
And destroyed by modern society.
My fathers
Have lost the economic battle
And won
The struggle of cultural survival.
And now!
I must choose
Between the paradox of
Victory of the spirit,
despite physical hunger
 Or
to exist in the grasp
of American social neurosis,
sterilization of the soul
and a full stomach.

I have come a long way to nowhere,
Unwillingly dragged by that
monstrous, technical
industrial giant called
 Progress
and Anglo success. . . .
I look at myself
I watch my brothers.
I shed tears of sorrow.
 I sow seeds of hate
I withdraw to the safety within the
circle of life . . .

MY OWN PEOPLE

 Mestizo
We're all God's children

I am Cuauhtémoc,
Proud and Noble
Leader of men,
King of an empire,
civilized beyond the dreams
of the Gachupín Cortez.
Who is also the blood,
the image of myself.
I am the Maya Prince.
I am Nezahualcóyotl
Great leader of the Chichimecas.
I am the sword and flame of
 Cortez the despot.
 And
I am the Eagle and Serpent of
 the Aztec civilization.
I owned the land as far as the eye
could see under the crown of Spain,
and I toiled on my earth
and gave my Indian sweat and blood
 for the Spanish master,
Who ruled with tyranny over man and
beast and all that he could trample
 But . . . Yes,

THE GROUND WAS MINE . . .

I was both tyrant and slave.
As Christian church took its place
in God's good name,
to take and use my Virgin Strength and
 Trusting faith,
The priests
 both good and bad
 took
But
gave a lasting truth that
 Spaniard,
 Indio,

Free
from Spanish rule in

And
 from these words grew men
 who prayed and fought
 for
 their own worth as human beings
 for
 that
 GOLDEN MOMENT
 of
 FREEDOM
 I was part in blood and spirit
 of that
 courageous village priest
 Hidalgo
 in the year eighteen hundred and ten
 who rang the bell of independence
 and gave out that lasting cry:
 "El Grito de Dolores, Que mueran
 los Guachupines y que viva
 la Virgen de Guadalupe. . ."
 I sentenced him
 Who was me.
 I excommunicated him my blood.
 I drove him from the pulpit to lead
 A bloody revolution for him and me.
 I killed him.
 His head
 Which is mine and all of those
 Who have come this way,
 I placed on that fortress wall
 to wait for independence.
 Morelos!
 Matamoros!
 Guerrero!
 All compañeros in the act,
 STOOD AGAINST THAT WALL
 OF INFAMY
 to feel the hot gouge of lead
 which my hand made.
 I died with them. . .
 I lived with them
 I lived to see our country free.
 by the passion and the fire
 of all his earthy people.

eighteen-hundred-twenty-one
 Mexico was free ? ?
 The crown was gone
 but
 all his parasites remained
 and ruled
 and taught
 with gun and flame and mystic power.
 I worked,
 I sweated,
 I bled,
 I prayed
 and
 waited silently for life to again
 commence.
 I fought and died
 for
 Don Benito Juárez
 Guardian of the Constitution
 I was him
 on dusty roads
 on barren land
 as he protected his archives
 as Moses did his sacraments.
 He held his Mexico
 in his hand
 on
 the most desolate
 and remote ground
 which was his country,
 And this Giant
 Little Zapotec
 gave
 not one palm's breath
 of his country to
 Kings or Monarchs or Presidents
 of foreign powers.
 I am Joaquín.
 I rode with Pancho Villa.
 crude and warm.
 A tornado at full strength
 nourished and inspired
 Francisco Madero
 I am

I am Emiliano Zapata.
 "This Land
 This Earth
 Is
 OURS"
 The Villages
 The Mountains
 The Streams
 belong to the Zapatistas.
 Our Life
 Or yours
 Is the only trade for soft brown earth
 and maize.
 All of which is our reward,
 A creed that formed a constitution
 For all who dare live free!
 "this land is ours. . ."
 Father, I give it back to you.
 Mexico must be free. . ."

I ride with Revolutionists
 against myself.

I am Rural
 Coarse and brutal,
 I am the mountain Indian,
 superior over all
 The thundering hoofbeats are my horses.
 The chattering of machine guns
 is death to all of me:
 Yaqui
 Tarahumara
 Chamula
 Zapotec
 Mestizo
 Español

I have been the Bloody Revolution,
 The Victor,
 The Vanquished,
 I have killed
 and been killed.
 I am despots Díaz
 and Huerta
 and the apostle of democracy
 who rule
 By farce and hypocrisy

the black shawled
 faithful women
 who die with me
 or live
 depending on the time and place.
 I am
 faithful,
 humble,
 Juan Diego
 the Virgin de Guadalupe
 Tonantzin, Aztec Goddess too.
 I rode as far East and North
 as the Rocky Mountains
 and
 all men feared the guns of
 Joaguín Murrieta.
 I killed those men who dared
 to steal my mine
 who raped and Killed
 my love
 My Wife

Then
 I killed to stay alive.
 I was Alfego Baca,
 living my nine lives fully.
 I was the Espinosa brothers
 of the Valle de San Luis
 All
 were added to the number of heads
 that
 in the name of civilization
 were placed on the wall of independence.
 Heads of brave men
 who died for cause and principle.
 Good or Bad
 Hidalgo! Zapata!
 Murrieta! Espinosa!
 are but a few.
 They
 dared to face
 The force of tyranny
 of men
 who would lose their blood so pure
 when Revolution made them pay

Wealthy in spirit and faith.
 My knees are caked with mud.
 My hands calloused from the hoe.
 I have made the Anglo rich
 Yet
 Equality is but a word,
 the Treaty of Hidalgo has been broken
 and is but another treacherous promise.
 My land is lost
 and stolen,
 My culture has been raped,
 I lengthen
 the line at the welfare door
 and fill the jails with crime.
 These then
 are the rewards
 this society has
 For sons of Chiefs
 and Kings
 and bloody Revolutionists.
 Who
 gave a foreign people
 all their skills and ingenuity
 to pave the way with Brains and Blood
 for
 those hordes of Gold starved
 Strangers
 Who
 changed our language
 and plagiarized our deeds
 as feats of valor
 of their own
 They frowned upon our way of life
 and took what they could use.
 Our Art
 Our Literature
 Our Music, they ignored
 so they left the real things of value
 and grabbed at their own destruction
 by their Greed and Avarice
 They overlooked that cleansing fountain of
 nature and brotherhood
 I shed tears of anguish
 as I see my children disappear

Diego Rivera
 Siqueiros
 Oroxoco is but
 another act of revolution for
 the Salvation of mankind.
 Mariachi music, the
 heart and soul
 of the people of the earth,
 the life of child,
 and the happiness of love.
 The Corridos tell the tales
 of life and death,
 of tradition,
 Legends old and new,
 of Joy
 of passion and sorrow
 of the people... who I am.
 I am in the eyes of woman,
 sheltered beneath
 her shawl of black,
 deep and sorrowful
 eyes,
 That bear the pain of sons long buried
 or dying,
 Dead
 on the battlefield or on the barbed wire
 of social strife.
 Her rosary she prays and fingers
 endlessly
 like the family
 working down a row of beets
 to turn around
 and work
 and work
 There is no end.
 Her eyes a mirror of all the warmth
 and all the love for me,
 And I am her
 And she is me.
 We face life together in sorrow,
 anger, joy, faith, and wishful
 thoughts.
 And in all the fertile farm lands,
 the barren plains,

behind a shroud of mediocrity
never to look back to remember me.

I am Joaquín.

I must fight
and win this struggle
for my sons, and they
must know from me
Who I am.

Part of the blood that runs deep in me
Could not be vanquished by the Moors.
I defeated them after five hundred years,
And I endured.

The part of blood that is mine
has labored endlessly five-hundred
years under the heel of lustful
Europeans

I am still here!

I have endured in the rugged mountains
of our country.

I have survived the toils and slavery
of the fields.

I have existed
in the barrios of the city,
in the suburbs of bigotry,
in the mines of social snobbery,
in the prisons of dejection,
in the muck of exploitation
and

in the fierce heat of racial hatred.

And now the trumpet sounds,
The music of the people stirs the
Revolution,

Like a sleeping giant it slowly
rears its head
to the sound of

Tramping feet
Clamoring voices
Mariachi strains
Fiery tequila explosions
The smell of chile verde and
Soft brown eyes of expectation for a
Better life.

the mountain villages,
smoke smeared cities

We start to MOVE.

La Raza!

Mejicano!

Español!

Latino!

Hispano!

Chicano!

or whatever I call myself,

I look the same

I feel the same

I Cry

and

Sing the same

I am the masses of my people and

I refuse to be absorbed.

I am Joaquín

The odds are great

but my spirit is strong

My faith unbreakable

My blood is pure

I am Aztec Prince and Christian Christ

I SHALL ENDURE!

I WILL ENDURE!

(This poem is complete. Read left column,
the right column, then move to next page.)CW

Appendix C

Mi Problema
by Michele Serros

My sincerity isn't good enough.
Eyebrows raise
when I request:
"Hable más despacio, por favor."
My skin is brown
just like theirs,
but now I'm unworthy of the color
'cause I don't speak Spanish
the way I should.
Then they laugh and talk about
mi problema
in the language I stumble over.

A white person gets encouragement,
praise,
for weak attempts at a second language.
"Maybe he wants to be brown
like us"
and that is good.'

My earnest attempts
make me look bad,
dumb.
"Perhaps she wanted to be white
like THEM."
and that is bad.

I keep my flash cards hidden
a practice cassette tape
not labeled
'cause I'm ashamed.
I "should know better"
They tell me
"Spanish is in your blood."

I search for S.S.L. classes
(Spanish as a Second Language)
in college catalogs
and practice with my grandma,

who gives me patience,
permission to learn.

And then one day,
I'll be a perfected "r" rolling
tilde using Spanish speaker.
A true Mexican at last!

Appendix D

Día de los muertos
by Abelardo B. Delgado

Renacen los huertos,
también los muertos
El día de los muertos
Por siete minutos

Podemos platicar
Con los seres queridos fallecidos.

I remember

Tagging along
chasing my abuela
to el camposanto
to sell paper flowers
to make the somber tombs bright.
That was back in Mexico.
I was only seven years old.
Here in the U.S.

los muertos
are personas non gratas.
Here we do not wish
to hold dialogue
with los muertos.
They remind us
we too
will eventually join them.
here there is no luto
and there are no novenas
or puños de tierra.
Here is the U.S.

the idea is to hide,
to ignore the dead
and to even avoid death
in our conversations.

In Mexico la muerte
is well known.

She's la talaca, a feminine figure.

Our Puerto Rican

brothers and sisters
call her "la flaca."

Talking with the dead is necessary
to remind ourselves

to enjoy our lives
and not to go about
as if we had already died
and no one said good-bye or cried.

Appendix E

must be the season of the witch
by Alberto Baltazar Urista (Alurista)

must be the season of the witch	la ley del hombre esculpir
la bruja	no puede
la llorona	mi libertad
she lost her children	and the round tables
and she cries	of ice cream
en las barrancas of industry	hot dog
her children	meat ball lovers meet
devoured by computers	to rap
and the gears	and rap
must be the season of the witch	and i hunger
i hear huesos crack	y mi boca está seca
in pain	el agua cristalina
y lloros	y la verdad
la bruja pangs	transparent
sus hijos han olvidado	in a jarro
la magia de durango	is never poured
y la de moctezuma	dust gathers on the shoulders
---el ilhuicamina	of dignitarios
must be the season of the witch	y de dignidad
la bruja llora	no saben nada
sus hijos suffren; sin ella	muertos in el polvo
mis ojos hinchados	they bite the earth
flooded with lágrimas	and return
de bronze	to dust
melting on the cheek bones	
of my concern	
razgos indígenas	
the scars of history on my face	
and the veins of my body	
that aches	
vomita sangre	
y lloro libertad	
i do not ask for freedom	
i am freedom	
no one	
not even yahweh	
and his thunder	
can pronounce	
and on a stone	

Appendix F

The Old Woman of Mérida
by Luis J. Rodriguez

The old woman stares out an open window,
shards of sunlight pierce her face
cutting shadows on skin. She's washing
her hands after the dishes, dipping them
into a sea of hues and shapes,
a sea of syllables without a sound,
in a stone house in Mérida,
her Mérida of dense Mexico.

The water is a view to a distant place:
Kitchen walls fall to reveal a gray sky,
an array of birds in flight through fog—
the crushed white of waves curling at feet.
There appears a woman in forested hair,
eyes of black pearl,
who touches the hewn face of a man
and palms that feel like bark.
She winces at its blemishes
and something in her careens
against the walls of her heart.
She never wants to let go,
never wants to stop tracing
the scars above his eyebrows,
the tattoos on blackened skin,
while the lick of a tongue
stirs the night inside her.

The old woman looks at water and into
this vision shaped into a mouth—
the mouth of the sea that swallowed
her sailor-husband
so many sunlit windows ago.

Meeting the Animal in Washington Square Park
by Luis J. Rodriguez

The acrobats were out in Washington Square Park,
flaying arms and colors: The jokers and break

dancers, the singers and mimes. I pulled out
of a reading at New York City College
and watched a crowd gather around a young man jumping
over 10 garbage cans from a skateboard.
Then out of the side of my eye I saw someone
who didn't seem to belong here, like I didn't
belong. It was a big man, six feet and more,
with tattoos on his arms, back stomach and neck.
On his abdomen were the words in huge Old English
lettering: Hazard. I knew this guy, I knew that place.
I looked closer. It had to be him. I was—Animal.
From East LA. World heavyweight contender,
The only Chicano from LA ever ranked
in the top ten of the division. The one who
went toe-to-toe with Leon Spinks and even
made Muhammad Ali look the other way.
Animal! I yelled. “Who the fuck are you?” he asked,
a quart of beer in his grasp, eyes squinting.
My name's Louie—from East LA. He brightened. “East LA!
Here in Washington Square Park? Man, we everywhere!”
The proverbial what part of East LA came next.
But I gave him a shock. From La Gerahty, I said.
That's the mortal enemies of the Big Hazard
gang of the Ramona Gardens Housing Projects.
“I should kill you,” Animal replied. If we were in
LA, I suppose you would—but we in New York City, man
“I should kill you anyway.”
Instead he thrust out his hand with the beer and offered
me a drink. We talked: What happened since he stopped fighting.
The time I saw him at the Clkeland House boxing arena
looking over some up and coming fighters. How
he had been to prison, joined a prison gang.
“Soy soldado azul—a blue soldier.” How he
ended up homeless in New York City, with a couple
of kids somewhere. And there he was, with a moprtal
enemy from East LA, talking away.
I told him how I was now a poet, doing a reading
at City College, and he didn't wince or look
absurd at me. Seemed natural. Sure. A poet
from East LA. That's the way it should be. Poet
and boxer. Drinking beer. Among the homeless,
the tourists and acrobats. Mortal enemies.
When I told him I had to leave, he said “go then,”
But soon shook my hand, East LA style, and walked off.

“Maybe, someday, you’ll do a poem about me, eh?”
Sure, Animal, that sounds great.
Someday, I’ll do a poem about you.

Appendix G

A Trip Through the Mind Jail
LA LOMA
by Raúl Salinas

Neighborhood of my youth
demolished, erased forever from
the universe.
You live on, captive, in the lonely
cellblocks of my mind.

Neighborhood of endless hills
muddied streets—all chuckhole lined—
that never drank of asphalt.
Kids barefoot/snotty-nosed
Playing marbles/munching on bean tacos
(the kind you'll never find in a café)
2 peaceful generations removed from
their abuelos' revolution.

Neighborhood of dilapidated community hall
---Salón Cinco de Mayo—
yearly (May 5/Sept. 16) gathering
of the familias. Re-asserting pride
on those two significant days.
Speeches by the elders,
patriarchs with evidence of oppression
distinctly etched upon mestizo faces.
“Sons of Independence!”
Emphasis on allegiance to the tri-color
Obscure names; JUAREZ & HIDALGO
their heroic deeds. Nostalgic tales of war
years under VILLA'S command. No one listened,
no one seemed to really care.
Afterwards, the dance. Modest Mexican
maidens dancing polkas together
across splintered wooden floor.
They never deigned to dance with boys!
The careful scrutiny by curbstome sex-perts
8 & 9 years old. “Minga's bow-legged,
so we know she's done it, huh?”

Neighborhood of Sunday nighy jamaicas

at Guadalupe Church.
Fiestas for any occasion
holidays holy days happy days
'round and 'round the promenade
eating snowcones—raspas--& tamales
the games—bingo cakewalk spin-the-wheel
making eyes at girls from cleaner neighborhoods
the unobtainables
who responded all giggles and excitement.

Neighborhood of forays down to Buena Vista—
Santa Rita Courts—Los Projects—friendly neighborhood
cops n' robbers on the rooftops, sneaking peeks
in people's private night-time bedrooms
bearing gifts of Juicy Fruit gum for
the Project girls/ chasing them in adolescent heat
causing skinned knees & being run off for the night
disenchanted talking home affections spurned
stopping stay-out-late chicks in search of
Modern Romance lovers, who always stood them up
unable to leave their world in the magazines' pages.
Angry fingers grabbing, squeezing, feeling,
french kisses imposed; close bodily contact, thigh &
belly rubbings under shadows of Cristo Rey Church.

Neighborhood that never saw a school-bus
the cross-town talks were much more fun
embarrassed when acquaintances or friends or relatives
were sent home excused from class
for having cooties in their hair!
Did only Mexicans have cooties in their hair?
¡Que gacho!

Appendix H

Mi Tío Baca el Poeta de Socorro
by Jimmy Santiago Baca

Antonio Ce De Baca
chiseled on stone chunk gravemarker,
propped against a white wooden cross.
Dust storms faded the birth and death numbers.
Poet de Socorro,
whose poems roused *la gente*
to demand their land rights back,
'til one night—that terrible night,
hooves shook your earthen-floor
one-room adobe, lantern flame
flickered shadowy omens on walls,
and you scrawled across the page,
“¡Aquí vienen! ¡Aquí vienen!
Here they come!”
Hooves clawed your front yard,
guns glimmering blue
angrily beating at your door.

 You rose.

Black boots scurried round four adobe walls,
Trampling flower beds.
They burst through the door.
It was a warm night, and carried the scent
of their tobacco, sulphur, and leather.
Faces masked in dusty hankies,
men wearing remnants of Rinche uniforms,
arms pitchforked you out
where arrogant young boys on horses
held torches and shouted,
“Shoot the Mexican! Shoot him!”
Saliva flew from bits
As horses reared from you,
While red-knuckled recruits held reins tight,
drunkenly pouring whiskey over you,
kicking you up the hill by the yucca,
where you turned and met the scream
of rifles with your silence.

 Your house still stands.
Black burnt tin covers window openings,

weeds grow on the dirt roof
that leans like an old man's hand
on a cane *viga*. . . .

I walk to the church a mile away,
a prayer on my lips bridges
years of disaster between us.

Maybe things will bet better.

Maybe our struggle to speak and be
as we are, will come about.

For now, I drink in your spirit, Antonio,
to nourish me as I descend
into dangerous abysses of the future.

I came here this morning
at 4:30 to walk over my history.

Sat by the yucca, and then imagined you again,
walking up to me

face sour with tortuous hooks

Pulling your brow down in wrinkles,
cheeks weary with defeat,

face steady with implacable dignity.

The softness in your brown eyes
said you could take not more.

You will speak with the angels now.

I followed behind you to the church,
your great bulky field-working

 shoulders

lean forward in haste

as if angels really did await us.

Your remorseful footsteps

in crackley weeds

sound the last time

I will hear and see you. Resolve

 is engraved

in each step. I want to believe

 whatever problems we have, time will take

 Its course, they'll be endured and consumed

 Church slumps on a hill, somber and elegant.

After you, I firmly pull the solid core door back

You kneel before La Virgen de Guadalupe,
bloody lips moving slightly,
your great gray head poised in listening,
old jacket perforated with bloody bullet holes.
I close the door, and search the prairie,
Considering the words *faith, prayer, and forgiveness,*
wishing, like you, I could believe them.

Appendix I

What It Was Like
by Leroy Quintana

If you want to know what
It was like, I'll tell you
What my tío told me:
There was a truck driver,
Antonio, who could handle a
Rig as easily in reverse as
Anybody else straight ahead:

Too bad he's a Mexican was
what my tío said the
Anglos had to say
about that.

And thus the moral:

Where do you begin if
you begin with if
you're too good
it's too bad?

Zen—Where I'm From
by Leroy Quintana

*a good door needs no lock,
yet no one can open it.* —Lao Tsu

You simply have to admire how, immediately after
the twelve-foot high chain link fence
crowned with coils of wicked barbed wire was

erected, the fence the City Council voted on
unanimously to guard against anyone ever again,
again breaking into one of the town's
storage sheds, how immediately after, the
thieves drove up with their welding torches and
stole it!

Appendix J

Brown Girl, Blonde Okie
by Gary Soto

Jackie and I cross-legged
In the yard, plucking at
Grass, cupping flies
And shattering them against
Each other's faces—
Smiling that it's summer,
No school, and we can
Sleep out under stars
And the blink of jets
Crossing up our lives.
The flies leave, or die,
And we are in the dark,
Still cross-legged,
Talking not dogs or baseball,
But whom will we love,
What brown girl or blonde
Okie to open up to
And say we are sorry'
For our faces, the filth
We shake from our hair,
The teeth without direction.
"We're ugly," says Jackie
on one elbow, and stares
Lost between jets
At what this might mean.
In the dark I touch my
Nose, trace my lips, and pinch
My mouth into a dull flower.
Oh God, we're in trouble.

Pompeh and the Uses of Imagination
by Gary Soto

Our history teacher, a southern fellow,
Said, "Close your eyes
And think back, back, back . . ."
This was a new way of sleeping
In an 8 o'clock class, the sun a pink scar
In our eastern window. He told us about Pompeii,
A bad-luck city, and how lava ran over the poor
and the rich alike. Since I was between
a "B" and an inflated "A," I did what I was told.
I closed my eyes and imagined a huge tamale
Run over by *mole* sauce, my only reference
To a thing that got smothered. On top of this tamale,
A chariot, crowned Gods, an emperor in a white robe.
There was a slave and slave's bloody ax
Then there was Niña, Pinta and Santa María,
The wrong centure. I wiped out this image
And return to the flow
Of lava—jugs of wine, leather sandals, horses.
I saw a fountain, oxen, pigs and, for a second,
A covered wagon plugged with burning arrows.
My history was mixed up. I closed my eyes tighter,
And I returned to the lava flow--
Statues crumbling to their knees
And citizens caught in the hot river,
Their legs in the air. I saw virgins run
From the fire, soldiers in leather skirts and
 Plumed helmets,
And then the covered wagon reappeared with
 more arrows.
My God, I scolded myself, What is wrong with you?
The history teacher repeated, "back, back, way
 back,"
I pulled together a harp, a bowl of grapes,
 Figs like scrotums,
And then on the tamale I saw two cavemen
No, three, all with faces of actors—
Yul Brynner, Tony Curtis, and Kirk Douglas
My heroes! They were going to fight the lava
Push it back. But they slipped on the
 mole sauce.
And slipped away on the lens of my tears.

I had gone too far. I was no good at history.
The covered wagon floated behind my closed eyes,
Then an astronaut, then George C. Scott.
I couldn't think right. A fork then rose and fell
On that tamale, the steam uncurling,
Not unlike Pompeii when the land cooled,
And-my god-the covered wagon with Moses
And Charleton Heston struggling for the wheel!

The Essay Examination for What You
Have Read in the Course World Religions
by Gary Soto

From his cross Jesus said, Sit up straight,
And Buddha said, Go ahead and laugh, big boy,
And although no god, Gandhi said, Do unto others . . .
The last one didn't seem right. I relicked my pencil
And looked out the classroom window—two dudes smoking joints,
Yukking it up while I was taking a timed exam.
I noticed a stray dog nosing a paper bag,
Which prompted me to look down at my feet—
My own lunch bag with three greasy splotches.
There was Pavlov, the reaction thing,
And at any moment I could start salivating.
I returned to my exam. I had to concentrate
And wrote, Zoroastrianism was a powerful religion
In a powerful time. Of taoism, I wrote
The split personality made you more friends.
I liked my progress. I looked out the window again—
The two hippie dudes now petting the dog
And blowing smoke into its furry face. I wrote:
Confucius was a good guy who stroked his whiskers.
I stalled here. The last part didn't seem right,
And it didn't seem right that our teacher
Should be reading the sports page while we suffered.
I got back to work. Who was Shiva?
When did Shinto start? Why did the roofs of the agodas
Swing upward? The rubbings from my eraser snowed
To the floor and my tongue was black as plague.
The clock ate up the hour. The teacher put down
His newspaper and said, You've been good students.
After class I went around to see the hippie dudes,
Now passed out against the wall. The dog lay
Between them, also snoozing, the joint smoldering

Next to his furry face. Unlike Gandhi
I didn't have much to say on the matter,
I opened my lunch bag with no judgment, no creed,
No French philosophical *nada*. I ate.
A hog of a burrito and then the ancient, mealy fruit,
The apple of our first sin.

Appendix K

You Bring Out the Mexican in Me
by Sandra Cisneros

You bring out the Mexican in me.
The hunkered thickj drak spiral.
The core of a heart howl.
The bitter bile.
The tequila lágrimas on Saturday all
through next weekend Sunday.
You are the one I'd let go the other loves for,
surrender my one-woman house.
Allow you red wine in bed,
even with my vintage lace linens.
Maybe. Maybel.

For you.

You bring out the Dolores del Rio in me.
The Mexican spitfire in me.
The raw *navajas*, glint and passion in me.
The raise Cain and dance with the rooster-footed devil in me.
The spangled sequin in me.
The eagle and serpent in me.
The *marachi* trumpets of the blood in me.
The Aztec love of war in me.
The fierce obsidian of the tongue in me.
The *berrinchuda*, *bien-cabrona* in me.
The Pandora's curiosity in me.
The pre-Columbian death and destruction in me.
The rain-forest disaster, nuclear threat in me.
The fear of fascists in me.
Yes, you do. Yes, you do.

You bring out the colonizer in me.
The holocaust of desire in me.
The Mexico City '85 earthquake in me.
The Popocatepetl/Ixtachihuatl in me.
The tidal wave of recession in me.
The Agustín Lara hopeless romantic in me.
The *barbacoa taquitos* on Sunday in me.
The cover the mirrors with cloth in me

Sweet twin. My wicked other,
I am the memory that circles your bed nights,
that tugs you taut as moon tugs ocean.
I claim you all mine,
Arrogant as Manifest Destiny.
I want to rattle and rend you in two.
I want to defile you and raise hell.
I want to pull out the kitchen knives,
Dull and sharp, and whisk the air with crosses.
Me sacas lo mexicana en mi,
Like it or not, honey.

You bring out the Uled-Nayl in me.
The stand-back-white-bitch in me.
The switchblade in the boot in me.
The Acapulco cliff diver in me.
The *Flecha Roja* mountain disaster in me.
The dengue fever in me.
The *¡Alarma!* Murderess in me.
I could kill in the name of you and think
it worth it. Brandish a fork and terrorize rivals,
female and male, who loiter and look at you,
languid in your light. Oh,

I am evil. I am the filth goddess Tlazoltédotl.
I am the swallower of sins.
The lust goddess without guilt.
The delicious debauchery. You bring out
The primordial exquisiteness in me.

The nasty obsession in me.
The corporal and venial sin in me.
The original transgression in me.

Red ocher. Yellow ocher. Indigo. Cochineal.

Piñon. Copal. Sweetgrass. Myrrh.
All you saints, blessed and terrible,
Virgen de Guadalupe, diosa Coatlicue,
I invoke you.

Quiero ser tuya. Only yours, Only you.
Quiero amarte. Atarte. Amarrarte.
Love the way a Mexican woman loves. Let
me show you. Love the only way I know how.

It Occurs To Me I Am the Creative/
Destructive Goddess Coatlicue
by Sandra Cisneros

I deserve stones.
Better leave me the hell alone.
I am besieged.
I cannot feed you.
You may not souvenir my bones,
knock on my door, camp, come in,
telephone, take my Polaroid. I'm paranoid,
I tell you. *Lárguense.* Scram.
Go home.
I am anomaly. Rare she who
Can't stand kids and can't stand you.
No excellent Cordelia cordiality have I.
No coffee served in tidy cups.
No groceries in the house.

I sleep to excess,
smoke cigars,
drink. Am at my best
wandering undressed,
my fingernails dirty,
my hair a mess.
Terribly

sorry, Madame isn't
feeling well today.
Must
Greta Garbo.
Pull an Emily D.
Roil like Jean Rhys.
Abiquiu myself.

Abuelito Who
by Sandra Cisneros

Abuelito who throws coins like rain
and asks who loves him
who is dough and feathers
who is watch and class of water
whose hair is made of fur
is too sad to come downstairs today
who tells me in Spanish you are my
diamond
who tells me in English you are my
sky
whose little eyes are string
can't come out to play
Sleeps in his little room all night
and day
Who used to laugh like the letter k
is sick
is a doorknob tied to a sour stick
is tired shut the door
doesn't live here anymore
is hiding underneath the bed
who talks to me inside my head
is blankets and spoons and big
brown shoes
who snores up and down up and
down up and down again
is the rain on the roof that falls
like coins
asking who loves him
who loves him who?

Throw a Maria Callas.
Shut myself like a shoe.

(above poem originally written
in long lines. Indentations
are only space savers. CW)

Stand back. Christ
Almighty. I'm warning.
Do not. Keep
Out. Beware.
Help! Honey,
this means
you.

Appendix L

Flatirons
by Lorna Dee Cervantes
for the Ute and Arapaho

The mountains are there like ghosts
of slaughtered mules, the whites of my
ancestors rest on the glaciers, veiled
and haloed with the desire of electrical
storms. Marginal feasts corral the young
to the cave walls, purple smoke wafts up
a chimney of shedding sundown. Statuesque
and exquisitely barren, my seed shines
in the dying rays. The rich earth of the wealthy
splays the legs of heaven in my view. Monstrous
and sullen, the slabs of death let loose their
hikers, let fall with an old snow. My harmony
of blood and ash, fire on the mound, I feel
them shuffling in the aspen, their vague ahems
marry the sucking fish in a derelict river. The
winter of their genocide still Ghost Dances
with a dream where the bison and mammoth unite,
where the story of their streams is as long
as the sabers of northern ice. The mountains
are the conquest of the sea, the belly of gems,
her fossil stays, her solitudes. The glass
before the angel fish, she stands royal in
her invisible captivity, the impassability of her
element, elemental and efficient. She is there
in the silent baying, in the memory of a native
and the dripping pursuance of thawing babies—
specters in a sunset of The Heights—after massacre.

Beneath the Shadow
Of the Freeway
by Lorna Dee Cervantes

1

Across the street—the freeway,
blind worm, wrapping the valley up
from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes.
I watched it from my porch
unwinding. Every day at dusk
as Grandma watered geraniums
the shadow of the freeway lengthened.

2

We were a woman family:
Grandma, our innocent Queen;
Mama, the Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior.
Mama wanted to be Princess instead.
I know that. Even now she dreams of taffeta
And foot-high tiaras.

Myself: I could never decide.
So I turned to books, those staunch, upright men.
I became Scribe: Translator of Foreign Mail
interpreting letters from the government, notices
of dissolved marriages and Welfare stipulations.
I paid the bills, did light man-work, fixed faucets,
insured everything
against all leaks.

3

Before rain I notice seagulls.
They walk in flocks,
cautious across lawns: splayed toes,
indecisive beaks. Grandma says
seagulls mean storm.

In California in the summer,
mockingbirds sing all night.
Grandma says they are singing for their nesting wives.
“They don’t leave their families
borrachando.”

Mama said, “It’s her own fault,
getting screwed by a man for that long.
Sure as shit wasn’t hard.”
soft she was soft

5

in the night I would hear it
glass bottles shattering the street
words cracked into shrill screams
inside my throat a cold fear
as it entered the house in hard
unsteady steps stopping at my
door
my name bathrobe slippers
outside a 3a.m. mist heavy
as a breath full of whiskey
stop it go home come inside
mama if he comes here again
I’ll call the police

inside
a gray kitten a touchstone
purring beneath the quilts
grandma stitched
from his suits
the patchwork singing
of mockingbirds

6

She built her house,
cocky, disheveled carpentry,
after living twenty-five years
with a man who tried to kill her.

Grandma, from the hills of Santa Barbara,
I would open my eyes to see her stir mush
in the morning, her hair in loose braids,
tucked close around her head
with a yellow scarf.

“But Mama, if you’re good to them
they’ll be good to you back,”

Back. The freeway is across the street.
It’s summer now. Every night I sleep with a gentle man
To the hymn of mockingbirds,

and in time, I plant geraniums.
I tie up my hair into loose braids,
and trust only what I have built
with my own hands.

Emplumada
by Lorna Dee Cervantes

When summer ended
the leaves of shadragons withered
taking their shrill-colored mouths with them.
They were still, so quiet. They were
violet where umber now is. She hated
and she hated to see
them go. Flowers

born when the weather was good—this
she thinks of, watching the branch of peaches
daring their ways above the fence, and further,
two hummingbirds, hovering, stuck to each other
arching their bodies in grim determination
to find what is good, what is
given them to find. These are warriors

“You’re too soft . . . always were
You’ll get nothing but shit.
Baby, don’t count on nobody.”
--a mother’s wisdom.
Soft. I haven’t changed.
maybe grown more silent, cynical
on the outside.

“O Mama, with what’s inside of me
I could wash that all away. I could.”

distancing themselves from history.
They find peace
in the way they contain the wind
and are gone.

Bird Ave
by Lorna Dee Cervantes

life on Bird
was tough
Cat-eyes
me and Mousie
estrolándose y
marchando
commissions
man I can't get no
satisfaction
in and out las
baby baby baby
oooo OOO oooo
baby baby
hits all summer

we wore tease
tight skirts
tough teased hair
talked rough rhymes
developed una
re-puta-ción
for the toughest burns
on Horseshoe
tough
from Memorial Day
to our Labor Day
weekend
we had the key
to the drug locker
of our own developing
temples
highest lites in the district
favors all over town
and we owed
nobody shit

Cat-eyes was beautiful
Mouse made up wizard holds
nobody over 4'11" could contain her
except me—the connection
we always had it

we scored
when we wanted
plus we were ethical

essssahhh Mouse goes
that first initiation
*you gotta understand
about Ethics*
she had it then
all total control
banging my head on
the blacktop for effect
*you flacafeaface
got Ethics*
and she gave me
one of those mouse
grins and made
lemon crap
out of my cheeks
before letting me up
all righteous rage

sin class ni pomp
and circumstance
we were better
than military
beauty brains & brass
man
we were the trinity
that invented it
the model rambos
I coulda killed her
easy
she knew it
we'd kill it
in ourselves
eventually

we knew it all
the code and the symbology
the poetics and the order
of place and gesture
we were honed for the killing
primed for the time

our ganga de camelias
y rosarias would burst
we tended that bust
cultivated it
blistered it
hitched ourselves
up to its hearse
and made up Bird
on the reins
of some wild ride
from the tracks to
Willow Glen and back
we were running
our own private
miracle mile
man
it was tough
with Cat-eyes
on the corner
buttering 'em up
all stupid and blind
me and mouse
always ready
to take advantage
of a relevant situation

Don't Fuck With Us
our motto
We're Here to Serve
the ruse
Listen Watch
Be Silent
was the Conquest's
hidden code

man
it was tough
to know it all
and we haven't
learned anything
since

1985

Appendix M

Curandera
by Pat Mora

They think she lives alone
on the edge of town in a two-room house
where she moved when her husband died
at thirty-five of a gunshot wound
in the bed of another woman. The *curandera*
and house have aged together to the rhythm/ of the desert.

She wakes early, lights candles before
her sacred statues, brews tea of *yerbabuena*.
She moves down her porch steps, rubs
cool morning sand into her Hands, into her arms.
Like a large black bird, she feeds on
the desert, gathering herbs for her basket.

Her days are slow, days of grinding
dried snake into powder, of crushing
wild bees to mix with white wine.
And the townspeople come, hoping
to be touched by her ointments,
her hands, her prayers, her eyes.
She listens to their stories, and she listens
to the desert, always to the desert.

By sunset she is tired. The wind
strokes the strands of long gray hair,
the smell of drying plants drifts
into her blood, the sun seeps
into her bones. She dozes
on her back porch. Rocking, rocking.

At night she cooks chopped cactus
and brews more tea. She brushes a layer
of sand from her bed, sand which covers
the table, stove, floor. She blows
the statues clean, the candles out.
Before sleeping, she listens to the message
of the owl and the *coyote*. She closes her eyes
and breathes with the mice and snakes
and wind.

Legal Alien
by Pat Mora

Bi-lingual, Bi-cultural,
able to slip from “How’s life?”
to “*Me’stan volviendo loca,*”
able to sit in a paneled office
drafting memos in smooth English,
able to order in fluent Spanish
at a Mexican restaurant,
American but hyphenated,
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien,
(their eyes say, “You may speak
Spanish but you’re not like me”)
an American to Mexicans
a Mexican to Americans
a handy token
sliding back and forth
between the fringes of both worlds
by smiling
by masking the discomfort
of being pre-judged
Bi-laterally.

Dear Frida,
by Pat Mora

1

We’re stuck on you, on the thorns you press
into your swan neck, black swan, *niñita*
limping on a stubborn withered leg.

“Frida, pata de palo. Frida, pata de palo,”

You cover the skinny ankle, skirts long
even when the sweat slides down your legs
like blood, *sangre*, your paint, Frida.

You make us taste it, the blood that burst
everywhere, your bones crushed in a bus crash,
a rod shoved through you pelvis to spine
Perfect aim, your clothes ripped away

the young swan plucked clean, limp skin
gleaming in the sun, blood and gold, powdered gold

burst into the air with wheels, eggs, bones
and screams, their screams wild at the glitter
of your mangled red and gold body.

“¡*La bailarina, la bailarina!*” they shouted.

2

Round your bed, she dances round
your stiff white cast, your stiff white room,
La Pelona dances round your body tomb.

Clakati, clak-clak, clakati, clak-clak.

Bald Death watches surgeons carve,
below your swan neck—knives, needles, cut,
stitch, pinch skin together, but your body falls apart.

3

We’re stuck on him, Frida, on your old fat toad-frog,
your “*Sapo-Rana*” croaking, “*Yo, yo, yo,*” into your neck,
with perfect aim stroking each of your scars until

it opens, bleeds. How his thick lips suck on you,
your Diego, immense baby bending your crooked
spine while your babies melt and slip away.

Clakati, clak-clak, clakati, clak-clak.

Your dolls and the hungry black monkeys
curled around your neck watch you slowly brand
yourself, stamp Diego right between your

eyes. We want to tease him, Frida, but he’s stuck
on you, the man you love more than your own sad bones,
the hungry toad who likes a woman in each hand.

He is your sun and moon, your dance, your laugh,
your flowers, your brandy and bread, his sweat
sweet as watermelon on your nervous tongue.

You drink his breath heavy as a storm. Lightning
sizzles through you pelvis to spine, his hands
mold you until you hide in his slow folds.

No others will do. “¡Chingago!” you cry
and try men and women, bite them so hard
they bleed, but always you taste Diego, Diego.

You love the ones he went to. You chew
the lips he’d kissed hungry for some shred
of him, smelling him on their willing breasts.

La Pelona Tonta dances while you paint
yourself, smear the familiar red smell
on floors, legs, breasts, sheets white as milk.

Your paintings don’t laugh like you did,
Frida, that laugh smelling of curses
rough as cactus tossed at sour faces.

Small skulls must have floated in your bath
like white soaps, *La Pelona* grinning at herself
in your mirror when you soaked your scars.

Clakati, clak-clak, clakati, clak-clak.

Why are your wounds always open, Frida,
why can’t you hide stabs, gashes, corsets?
Why can’t you vomit in private, like a lady?

5

You come to your last show in an ambulance,
drugged but on fire, you drink, sing in your large bed.
You are your art, and you make the crowd see you dying.

Frida, *pata de palo*, we still hear you scream,
“NO!” But your withered leg has to go.
Clakati, clak-clak, clakati, clak

6

When your bloodless body slides into its last
Burning, it bolts up in the oven’s hungry heat.
Clak. Around your face, your hair blazes.

Mango Juice
By Pat Mora

Eating mangoes
on a stick
is laughing
as gold juice
slides down
your chin
melting manners
as mangoes slip
through your lips
sweet but biting

is hitting piñatas
blindfolded and spinning
away from the blues
and grays

is tossing
fragile *cascarones*
on your love's hair,
confetti teasing him
to remove his tie
coat and shoes
his mouth open
and laughing
as you glide
more mango in,
cool rich flesh
of *Méjico*

music teasing
you to strew
streamers on trees
and cactus
teasing the wind
to stream through
your hair blooming
with confetti
and butterflies

your toes warm
in the sand.

Appendix N

Nativity: For Two Salvadoran Women
By Demetria Martínez

Your eyes, large as Canada, welcome
this stranger.

We meet in Juárez train station
where you sat hours,
your offspring blooming in you
like cactus fruit,
dresses stained where breasts leak,
panties in purses tagged
“Hecho en El Salvador,”
your belts, like equators,
mark north from south,
borders I cannot cross,
for I am a North American reporter,
pen and notebook, the tools
of my tribe, distance us
though in any other era I might
press a stethoscope to your wombs,
hear the symphony of the unborn,
finger forth infants to light,
wipe afterbirth, cut cords.

“It is impossible to raise a child
in that country.”

Sisters, I am no saint. Just a woman
who happens to be a reporter,
a reporter who happens
to be a woman,
squat in a forest, peeing
on pine needles
watching you vomit morning sickness,
a sickness infinite as the war in El Salvador,
a sickness my pen and notebook will not ease,
tell me, *Por qué están aquí?*,
how did you cross over?
In my country we sing of a baby in a manger,
finance death squads,
how to write of this shame,

of the children you chose to save?

“It is impossible to raise a child
in that country.”

A North American reporter,
I smile, you tell me you are due
in December, we nod,
knowing what women know,
I shut my notebook,
watch your car rock
through the Gila,
a canoe hangs over the windshield
like the beak of an eagle,
babies turn in your wombs
summoned to Belén to be born.

Appendix O

Content Standards

The following standards, as set forth by the Pittsburgh Public Schools, are addressed in this curriculum unit:

1. All students use effective research information management skills.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading...and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems
4. All students write for a variety of purposes...
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and indentify their purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations.