Teaching Multicultural Literature in Grades 9–12:
Moving Beyond the Canon

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Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.
Nerwood, MA
Chapter 4

A Continuing Journey:
The Puerto Rican Reality
as Viewed From the Narrative

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My name is Johnny Stranger
and I've come across the sea,
If you've never seen an immigrant,
just take a look at me.

Now please don't think I'm different,
because I am an immigrant.
Remember that you were once an immigrant too...

JHS 50, Brooklyn, New York, 1958

These words, taken from a seventh-grade play performed more than 30 years ago in a New York City public school during the celebration of Pan-American Week, purported to reflect a tolerance for difference and its acceptance as a paradigm for American society. A critical evaluation of these lyrics in hindsight reveals the confusion that has been wittingly and unwittingly generated about the perception and definition of an immigrant in U.S. society. In this particular case, the example is ever more poignant, given the fact that the child chosen to sing these words is Puerto Rican: Puerto Ricans, as we will see in this chapter, are not immigrants. Moreover, through the use of creative literature, we will demonstrate that the complex reality of Puerto Ricans residing in the mainland United States and in Puerto Rico, and the
islands precarious yet relevant relationship to the United States, might become part of the discourse on multicultural and interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

**Puerto Ricans' Nonimmigrant Status**

In *The Ethnic Myth* (1985), Steven Steinberg refers to the United States as "a nation without a people." He suggests that, with the notable exception of Native Americans, the American people are not ethnically rooted in the American soil. He differentiates colonial settlers from immigrants, by inference defining *immigrant* as a person who enters an alien society and is forced to acquire a new national identity. Significantly, the colonists referred to themselves as *enigrants* rather than immigrants—identifying with the country they left behind rather than the country they entered. As transplanted British, they sought to forge a *new* England on the North American continent. Consequently, the apparent acceptance of people outside this group was not characterized by ethnically pluralistic altruism but rather guided by economic necessity and carried out via settlement, expansion, and agricultural and industrial development (Steinberg, 1985, p. 11). In 1751, Benjamin Franklin wrote, "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us . . ." (p. 11). This suspicion of and hostility toward the non-British is encountered in other writings of the Founding Fathers and has been generalized and extended beyond Europeans to peoples of color who have been made part of this nation through conquest, exploitation, and enslavement.

John Ogbu's frequently cited work (1978) has been summarized effectively by several authors, including Catherine E. Walsh in *Pedagogy and the Struggle for Voice* (1991). Ogbu's contention that Puerto Rican migration to the mainland is more like the migration of West Indians to Britain than the migration of, for example, the Japanese to the United States, suggests degrees of difference in the conception of *migration* versus *immigration*. Ogbu has classified Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Native Americans, and African Americans within the category of people who have been subjected to conquest, slavery, and colonization. According to Walsh (1991), "Ogbu's distinction between minority groups helps explain why it is that some language minority
students have more academic success than others. . . . [T]he impact of being a colonialized minority clearly defines and positions the latter group's [Puerto Ricans] lived reality” (pp. 121–122).

U.S. school curricula often ignore the information that could help educators understand the particularities of the Puerto Rican minority in the United States. While most U.S. schoolchildren are exposed to some notion of the history of Native Americans as the original inhabitants of the North American continent, rarely do they study the aboriginal Taino population of Puerto Rico. Moreover, most Americans do not know that Puerto Rico was a fully autonomous nation before the Spanish-American War in 1898; it was ceded to the United States as war booty by the losing Spanish side in the Treaty of Paris (Olga & Waggenheim, 1973). In an effort to sustain the hard-won autonomy granted prior to the U.S. military invasion, one of Puerto Rico’s most renowned scholars, Eugenio María de Hostos, sought an audience with President McKinley to ask that Puerto Ricans be allowed to decide their political future by popular vote. In reference to this mission, Hostos stated, “It looks now as if my native land is destined to become American territory, whether the inhabitants desire it or not. . . .” (Olga & Waggenheim, 1973, p. 112).

The ensuing Americanization of Puerto Rico may be characterized as insensitive, arbitrary, and often brutal. From its inception, the economic transformation of the island was predicated on the maximization of profits and the exploitation of cheap labor. The creation of an expendable and seasonal labor force in the oligarchical and largely American-owned sugar industry set the foundation for the “push-out” migrant who now alternates between island and mainland job markets as circulatory and redundant workers (El Centro, p. 89). In the latter phase of this process, the “modernization” of Puerto Rico stressed the industrial and commercial development of the island at the expense of its agricultural production. The massive and unplanned displacement of the Puerto Rican peasantry exacerbated the disruption of social patterns that affected the traditional extended family with its folk ways and mores. This forced urbanization yielded an uprooted and itinerant work force that extended beyond island boundaries to the inner cities of the United States. As the Puerto Rican reality is transformed, so too will be the themes that capture the dynamic essence of the generations to follow.
From “the Land” to the Cement Jungle

In the song “Lamento Borincano,” Puerto Rican composer Rafael Hernandez evokes a narrative style characteristic of the Puerto Rican peasant. Written 31 years after the American military occupation began, the lyrics speak of the lament or deep sorrow of the Puerto Rican jibaro (peasant) who works the land but reaps little or no profit with which to feed and provide for his family. In this same decade of the 1930s, an emergent militant response to the broken promises of American capitalist democracy was chronicled and denounced in the music and verse of Rafael Hernandez as well as in popular folklore. While Hernandez’s “Preciosa” depicted the United States as a colonial tyrant, an Afro-Puerto Rican dance form known as plena revealed the people’s cynicism with the “New Deal,” which promised a full plate and a new pair of trousers. This critical look at “La PRERA” (Puerto Rican Economic Relief Administration) was surpassed in quantity by poems and songs that focused on the relationships between men and women in Puerto Rican society.

This brief account provides a context for the development of a series of themes that emerge from the sociohistorical, economic, and political evolution of a people who, under earlier Spanish rule, resisted colonization and cultural genocide and still continue to forge an identity outside island borders. The lives of Puerto Ricans outside Puerto Rico are reflected in a body of literature produced by the efforts to find “definition”; to identify cultural moorings; and to critically assess the forces that impact (a) migration, (b) the forging of a national consciousness intersecting issues of race, ethnicity, language and gender, and (c) an emerging dialogue on religion in the Latino context.

Marques’s La Carreta: An Incomplete Journey

An understanding of Puerto Rican literature within the context of the United States must begin with an examination of the sociohistorical and economic factors that impacted Puerto Rico during the period of the Great Depression in the United States. Images of “Brother, can you spare a dime?” and once-successful Wall Street lawyers and bank-
ers selling apples on the streets of Manhattan have been preserved in
the print and visual archives of this country, but images of quaint
shacks and picturesque countrysides often belie the story of exploita-
tion of the Puerto Rican peasantry during this era.

Puerto Rico in the 1930s was largely agricultural. Men, women,
and children worked the land on a seasonal basis. During the sugar
cane harvest, the island’s main provider of employment, men labored
from dawn to dusk for less than 50 cents a day. Women were often
employed in the tobacco industry as despalilladoras (separating and
cleaning tobacco leaves). Women also worked the doble jornada (dou-
bling their day with work in the domestic sphere nurturing, feeding,
and clothing their families).

While in 1920 a child labor law provided for the exclusion of chil-
dren from the workplace, an exception was made for children who
resided in communities where there were no schools within a reason-
able distance. Technically, however, children were required to attend
night school if there was one within a kilometer of their homes. In
reality, less than 16 percent of the school-age population was enrolled.
A significant factor was the implementation of a language policy in-
stituted in Puerto Rico in 1899 that made English the primary lan-
guage of instruction, even though the lingua franca of the people was
Spanish (M. Rodriguez, 1947). The school-age children of that genera-
tion recount the somewhat comical and absurd classroom incidents
involving the clash of cultures. Some of these are captured in the sto-
ries of Don Peyo Merce, a fictional rural teacher impacted by the law
decreeing English as the official language of instruction (Diaz-Alfaro,
1951). Maria Sanchez, Professor Emerita of Brooklyn College and
former chairwoman of the Puerto Rican Studies Department, notes
that as her elementary school teacher in rural Cayey drilled English
sentences such as “I am a boy,” students often resisted these repeti-
tive and out-of-context utterances by responding mockingly with “Ay, me
voy.” (“Oh, I’m leaving”). It was not until 1946 that the folly of the
language policy was recognized, and Spanish was restored as the lan-
guage of instruction. Yet it is clear from the literature produced by
Puerto Ricans in the United States and Puerto Rico that the language
issue is still not resolved.

Rene Marquez’s La Carreta (The Oxcart), a three-act play originally
written in a dialect of Spanish characteristic of the Puerto Rican jibam
and subsequently translated into English, captures not only the dynamism of language use among Puerto Ricans but is also a historical depiction of the Puerto Rican journey. Written in 1953, during the height of the post-World War II migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States, *The Oxcart* is both a vehicle of transportation and a symbolic bridge between the countryside and the metropolis.

The first act is set in rural San Juan, where generations of the family depicted have lived but are now readying to leave in search of the "progress" of urban San Juan. Luis, son of the matriarch, Dona Gabriela, is convinced that the future of Puerto Rico and of his family is no longer in the cultivation of the land but in the "machines" of industry. His grandfather, Don Chago, is convinced that Luis's head is filled with *musarnia* or confusion. Luis responds:

'Grandpa,' I'm thinking of the future. Land is not worth much unless you have a lot of it. More and more there is less work in the countryside and more machines taking over. Only the government and the corporations are benefitting from the land. . . . The future is not in the land but in industry. We have to leave the countryside. (p. 10)

The decline of Puerto Rico's rural economy was motivated by the colonial government's emphasis on modernization and industrialization as the answer to the demise of the sugar cane industry in particular and agricultural production in general. The industrialization plan, initiated in 1948 and known as Operation Bootstrap, resulted in the large-scale displacement of the Puerto Rican peasantry from rural mountain areas to the urban slums of San Juan.

The second act finds the family in La Perla (the Pearl). Ironically, this shantytown, situated at the foot of the majestic El Morro castle, contains no wealth and no opportunities for obtaining it. The illusion of good employment, schools, and social progress is shattered and, in Luis's words, becomes the curse of the poor peasant migrant.

In an attempt to maintain the integrity of the family and rid himself of *la maldición* or curse of poverty, Luis runs from the reality of La Perla to the slums of New York City. In a small apartment of the Morrisania section of the Bronx, the family confronts the ultimate alienation of the newcomer. Luis loses his life in an industrial accident, leaving his mother and sister to lament their abandonment of the land.
in search of an illusory progress. The play ends with a recognition by LUIS's sister Juanita that "It is we who must forge our own destiny." Juanita and her mother stand together ready to return to what they left behind, a culture and identity that seemed to have been lost in this journey.

More than 30 years later a young "Nuyorican" poet, Abran ("Tato") Laviera, returned to the themes of La Carreta. In his view, Marques's idealization of the return to the land belies what in fact really happened to this generation. The land had been appropriated by developers, petrochemical and pharmaceutical companies, and other multinational corporations, including hotel chains. Laviera's La Carreta Made a U-Turn, a collection of poetry, acknowledges the disappointment of the Puerto Rican who, facing the conditions on the island, picks up once more and makes his or her way back to the United States.

By 1960, the Puerto Rican population in the United States had grown to more than a million. It was and is characterized by the circulatory migration often referred to as a "revolving door," or commuter migration (Acosta-Belen, 1993). In addition, a sizable population had become permanent residents of the United States while affirming a separate cultural identity and maintaining ties with the island. These efforts gave rise to the formation of Puerto Rican institutions that advocated for community development and educational equity as well as hometown groups organized to foster links to the homeland. Racial and linguistic discrimination were often issues of concern within the community. Non-Puerto Rican scholars would attempt, within the context of the classical "immigrant" experience in the United States, to describe and analyze Puerto Ricans as "newcomers" and "strangers" (Senior, 1959, 1961).

With the first publication of Piri Thomas's Down These Mean Streets in 1967, a more authentic description of the Puerto Rican reality in the United States was popularized and made accessible to the American mainstream. A compelling autobiographical work that has been characterized as an example of testimonial literature portraying the Puerto Rican experience in New York, Thomas's book makes poignant references to the issues of race, cultural identity, and class as a backdrop to the searing encounters of his childhood. As is the case with most Puerto Ricans, Thomas is the product of racial mixing: His father is dark-skinned, and his mother is a light-skinned woman who could pass for
White in the United States. Growing up in the racial cauldron of New York's East Harlem during the 1940s, the author vividly describes the racial and ethnic turf battles characteristic of the enclave communities of the newly arrived and settled immigrant groups. In a chapter entitled "Alien Turf," Thomas humorously depicts the encounters between himself and the Italian youths of the neighborhood to which he had just moved. Part of his coming-of-age as a young Black Puerto Rican in New York is defined in these turf clashes. He writes, "Sometimes you don't fit in. Like if you are a Puerto Rican in an Italian block" (Thomas, 1991, p. 33). The obvious understatement of this quote belies the pain and hurt of a young man excluded from participating in the life of a community because of his race. Aware of the duality in his ethnic and racial background, Thomas attempts to define himself to the Italian youths who confront him on it, "'I'm Puerto Rican,' I said. 'I was born here'" (p. 34).

From the optic of what we now refer to as a multicultural America, which purports to respect difference and diversity as a working paradigm for American society, Thomas's statement in the ethnically and racially pluralistic Harlem of the 1930s and 1940s may appear outdated. Yet then as today, the struggle for identity was framed by an atmosphere of racial bigotry toward those whom we deemed different from and therefore inferior to ourselves. Thomas's work reflects urban America during a world war against the evils of Nazism—Hitler's ideology of White (Aryan) supremacy and anti-Semitism. Internally, the United States was called to conscience for its treatment of African Americans in the socioeconomic sphere. Then as now, worsening economic conditions provided a backdrop for racist acts against African Americans and the scapegoating of recently arrived immigrants. World War II brought economic relief through government involvement in the creation of thousands of factory jobs for the war effort.

However, racial discrimination persisted and African Americans were routinely blocked from employment in the major defense industries. Takaki (1993) observes, "Warplanes—Negro Americans may not build them, repair them or fly them but they must help pay for them." Only after a sustained effort by African American political leaders—including A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—was U.S. policy clarified concerning discrimination in
A Continuing Journey: The Puerto Rican Reality as Viewed From the Narrative

...ron of New describes the e communit... In a chapter encounters od to which lack Puerto tes, "Someti...liam block" s ...cipating in iality in his himself to an,' I said.

...America, king para...ically and pear outed by an ed differ- k reflects Zionism—...tism. In- tment of w, wors- s against d immi...ent the war nericans... indus-nay not them."...ders—...eeping tion in defense industries or the government. Thomas’s allusion to his father’s employment in an airplane factory in 1944 is an example of the forced response to previous discriminatory hiring practices. The relative prosperity that such employment brought the Thomas family allowed his father to save enough money for a down payment on a house in the suburban town of Babylon in Long Island, New York. A young Piri Thomas approached this new move with trepidation, sensing that the social atmosphere would not be much different than in his present neighborhood. Thomas articulates these fears by suggesting, "My friend Crutch had told me there were a lot of Paddies [derogatory term for Irish] out there, and they didn’t dig Negroes or Puerto Ricans” (Thomas, 1991, p. 86).

Thomas’s experience in the suburban context served to remind him of the racial divide. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that living in the suburbs signals the achievement of the American dream, Thomas came head-to-head with the second-generation children of European immigrants whose own families had experienced the shame of rejection by the descendants of the early settlers. For the first 250 years of American history, the vast majority of immigrants came from northern and western Europe. After the Civil War, immigrants from eastern and southern Europe arrived at American shores. By 1900 there were Italian communities in every American city in the Northeast. In the urban ghettos of the United States, the existence of dozens of other ethnic groups reinforced more particularized feelings of community. More conscious of politics and ethnicity than ever before, the eastern and southern European immigrants acquired a strong sense of ethnic nationalism. The Irish Catholics, as well as the Italian Catholics, had large families and often maintained extensive kinship ties in their new communities, “But as soon as they could save enough money, the immigrants purchased homes in the outskirts of the city or in the suburbs...” (Olson, 1994, p. 225).

These were the communities that the Thomas family encountered. As indicated by the title of the chapter in which Thomas talks about the suburbs, "Babylon [was] for the Babylonians” (Thomas, 1991, p. 86). In one of the most searing accounts in this chapter, Thomas appears to reluctantly admit that his friend Crutch was right. At a school dance in a conversation with a White girl, he again explains, "I ain't a Spaniard from Spain... I'm a Puerto Rican from Harlem” (p. 88).
When Thomas asks the girl to dance and she coyly refuses, he becomes suspect. He overhears her telling a White boy, "Imagine the nerve of that black thing... He started to talk to me and what could I do except be polite and at the same time not encourage him." To which a voice answered, "We're getting invaded by niggers" (p. 90).

While Thomas's book highlights issues of race in wartime urban communities, Nicholas Mohr's *Nilda* (1986) provides us with an internal narrative of a Puerto Rican family in New York's Spanish Harlem as seen from the perspective of a young Puerto Rican girl born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City. Set in the years during the American involvement in World War II, the book is written as a diary of a girl coming of age in a troubled but cohesive extended family. In contrast to Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, Mohr writes from a perspective of optimism that stems from her unshinking belief that family relationships can serve as a bulwark from the ignorance and misunderstanding often encountered in societies where pluralism and diversity coexist precariously. Nilda, the main character in Mohr's book, affords us an entry to the social institutions that have molded Puerto Rican communities in the United States. Her observations of the process of assimilation and acculturation include insightful anecdotes about the role of these institutions vis-a-vis the Puerto Rican community. The enclave of Puerto Rican migrants described so vividly by Mohr is a product of an economically displaced peasantry and proletariat from Puerto Rico during the years following World War I and extending through the era of the Great Depression to U.S. involvement in World War II. This was a time of great political turmoil in Puerto Rico's history.

Agitated by the bankruptcy of the U.S.-based economy in the early 1930s, the island's dependent relationship became an issue. The response was an organized militant movement asserting political self-determination for Puerto Rico. Thousands of the island's inhabitants joined in the protest of a colonial relationship that appeared to be temporarily assuaged by the extension of New Deal policies to the island. The growth of a populist movement, led by the man who would become the island's first elected Puerto Rican governor, Luis Munoz Marin, posited an alternative to the militant demands of the Nationalist Party but did not stem the increasing flow of poor families to the large urban centers of the United States, such as New York City. Un-
like the southern and eastern European immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island in earlier decades, Puerto Ricans, as U.S. citizens, migrated to urban shores in great numbers with the expectation of returning home once economic conditions improved. These conditions laid the groundwork for what eventually would be called “the aerial bus route” (Gonzalez, 1989).

Spanish Harlem (El Barrio) became the quintessential home of this exiled migrant community. It attempted to recreate the cultural life of the island’s barrios and the norms and values of an agrarian-based society deeply grounded in the respect and dignity of the individual. In a telling example from Nilda, the cultural conflict comes to the fore when Nilda accompanies her mother to the Welfare Department. Asked to approach the desk, Nilda observes that the social worker, Miss Heinz, does not even visually acknowledge the presence of her mother or herself. When she finally does, she assumes that Nilda’s mother is not going to understand her, for she turns to Nilda and says, “My name is Miss Heinz. Does your mother understand or speak English?” (Mohr, 1986, p. 65). As Nilda’s mother responds in the affirmative, the social worker proceeds to assert her authority by questioning Nilda’s presence as well as the number of baths she takes. The pain of humiliation and condescension becomes exacerbated at the thought that the truth of her mother’s statements will be determined through a follow-up visit by a welfare “investigator.” Nilda is also surprised at the less-than-truthful responses of her mother to the social worker’s questions, and her youthful thoughts do not allow her to understand the bind her mother finds herself in and why she has to respond in that manner.

Language as a determining force in the lives of Puerto Ricans in the United States will continue to play a role in future decades. Mohr’s Nilda utilizes a first-person narration to effectively portray the young protagonist’s extended family through her eyes but also in their own words and their perception of the “Other” society as insensitive and alien. The novel is sprinkled with expressions, aphorisms, and linguistic constructions that meld the English and Spanish languages as a metaphor of the Puerto Rican reality in the United States. Nilda dutifully works on a school writing assignment on the Founding Fathers but has to stop when her mother asks her to join in a spiritualist prayer session to prevent her brother from going to jail. The monotonous
litanies in Spanish to various saints and spirits are contrasted with the standard, expository English that Nilda must use in her composition.

The blending of these two worlds is a running leitmotif in *Nilda*. Variations on this theme appear in the works of later writers of short stories, poetry, and essays. Mohr was also among the first authors of Puerto Rican writing in the United States to portray the woman's reality in her role as "materfamilias" as well as mediator and social activist. In the style of Marques's *Dona Gabriela* and *Juanita* in *La Carreta*, Mohr depicts the suffering and turmoil of the Puerto Rican woman in an alien environment but also shows her inner strength and resilience when crisis threatens to undo the fabric of the family.

The theme of family also comes to the forefront in Edward Rivera's *Family Installments* (1982). This novel utilizes the vignette to chronicle the ordeal of a migrant Puerto Rican family in the period following World War II. Like the writers previously discussed, Rivera taps his personal reminiscences of his life as a young boy in Puerto Rico. The son of a dirt farmer in tobacco country, he is brought to the United States during the period that Puerto Rican migration peaked and the island was approaching a crossroads in its relationship with the United States.

Beginning in the late 1940s through the early 1970s, colonial leaders and the U.S. government embarked upon a plan to modernize the island as a model of democratic, capitalist development in Latin America. The plan would be known as Operation Bootstrap. It involved industrial and commercial development by focusing on depressed urban areas that were a product of the failed economic policies of the colonial government in the early war years. The linchpin of the plan was the attraction of American capital by providing investors with a generous tax exemption that could last from 7 to 30 years and a dirt-cheap labor force that crammed the cities after finding no employment in the depressed agricultural sector.

Operation Bootstrap never lived up to its promise, and the employment it generated was not sufficient to accommodate the tens of thousands of workers displaced in the sugar cane industry. A similar fate awaited the small-scale coffee and tobacco farmers. In many cases, American companies opportunistically used up their tax exemption and then closed plants that were relocated elsewhere on the island under a different name to once more take advantage of the tax exemp-
tion. The response of the colonial government to the displacement and chronic unemployment of the peasant population was to force these Puerto Ricans into an involuntary migration to the United States. Most left with the expectation that their lives in U.S. urban jungles would improve economically, so that the odyssey would end with their return to their native land in a state of financial security that was not available to them when they left the newly urbanized Puerto Rico.

Rivera's *Family Installments* picks up where Marques's *La Carreta* leaves off. Whereas Marques sees the future of the involuntary migrant in his or her return to reclaim the patrimony of the land, Rivera is aware that the odyssey is largely one-way. Geran Malanguez's family will never truly feel a part of their adopted country, but they will struggle together to forge a new identity that will retain the most precious elements of their culture while negotiating with the new social environment. The book is replete with tragicomic instances in which Geran's son Santos learns to adapt to the values and mores of a Catholic education dispensed by second-generation Irish nuns and priests who have very little tolerance for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Puerto Rican children. Geran had enrolled Santos in Catholic school so that he would learn some discipline and not be perverted by those public school kids that the priests and nuns said were so bad. Santos was aware, however, that the public schools were filled with kids like himself whose parents, unlike his own, could not stretch their meager resources to send their children to parochial schools. Early on he experienced the sting of racial discrimination, which exists in American society as well as in Puerto Rican families, where skin color may determine social preference and status. Santos's pale, white skin often led to his being mistaken for an ethnic White. He secretly reveled in this confusion and, recalling a discussion on the American melting pot in his Catholic school, would say the following:

Nobody had ever taken me for someone whose veins might contain Negro or Arab or Caribbean Indian blood. I was too light-skinned for that. On various occasions I had been mistaken for a Jew, an Italian, a Greek, even a Hungarian; and each time I had come away feeling secretly proud of myself for having disguised my Spik accent and with my lineage. I could almost feel myself melting smoothly and evenly into the great Pot. (Rivera, 1982, p. 148)
These childhood encounters and his increasing awareness of what it meant to be Puerto Rican in the United States would eventually mold the grown-up Santos to truly appreciate the diversity in his ethnic and racial heritage. But his coming-of-age in the streets and schools of El Barrio would have an indelible impact on his character and personality. Returning to his native Puerto Rico in his last year of college, Santos feels estranged from the village he knew as a boy. He realizes that he no longer belongs there, even if his parents decide to return to the island. At this moment he is painfully aware of how much of his heritage he has lost, but he is also cognizant of how much he has gained in his experience as a Puerto Rican in the United States.

Summary

We have attempted to portray the sociohistorical and economic reality of Puerto Ricans residing in the United States by examining selected creative works of literature. The focus has been on a play and three novels. The reader has been provided with a discussion of significant events in the social history of Puerto Rico that create a context for the analysis of these works. A conscious decision was made to select novels and a play over other forms of written expression, such as poetry, to enable classroom teachers to present the explicit, concrete, and testimonial accounts of the most accomplished Puerto Rican writers in the United States. This initial exposure to the literature of and about Puerto Ricans in the United States in the novel may serve as a useful starting point for the subsequent examination of more coded texts in the genres of poetry, the short story, and the essay. In addition, the themes of race, class, gender, ethnicity, identity, and language, as well as topics related to migration and immigration, have been uncovered as central and integral to the literature under discussion. Enabling students to understand these texts using the aforementioned themes as lenses may objectify and illuminate their own reality.
Reading List

The titles that follow are a selection of creative works of recent vintage that may help the English Language Arts or ESL teacher in the secondary school. All may be found in English or in English translation.

Acosta-Belen, E., & Sanchez-Korrol, V. (1993). The way it was and other writings. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press.

The authors have edited a collection of essays by the legendary Puerto Rican labor activist and journalist, Jesus Colon. The introduction is must reading to fully understand the sociohistorical and cultural context of New York City between the World Wars and the poignant perceptions of a Black Puerto Rican living in two worlds.

Centro Boletin of Hunter College’s Puerto Rican Studies Research Center (1979–1997).

The Boletin is published once a year by Hunter College’s Puerto Rican Research Center and provides a vehicle for Puerto Rican and other Latino academic and community scholars to publish research articles as well as creative literature of different genres.


Short essays and musings by the illustrious Puerto Rican novelist, essayist, and short story writer that focus on the Puerto Rican reality in the diaspora, which now has a two-way ticket in the island-mainland connection.


A witty collection of poems by the famed Nuyorican poet. Hernandez-Cruz captures the reality of the Puerto Rican in the United States as expressed through a unique, code-switching bilingualism that peppers his poems.

This classic collection of short stories by the renowned author of *The Oxcarí* (*La Carreta*) renders a somber, existential view of the Puerto Rican reality in the United States and Puerto Rico in the context of the island's colonial status.


This poem, written by a young, third-generation Puerto Rican, focuses on the issues of language, identity, and class as prisms to understand the Puerto Rican as outsider in both her own community and the broader U.S. society.


The title is the lead poem of this reedited collection by the dean of the Puerto Rican "street poets." Pietri's *Obituary* is both humorous and searing in its portrayal of the Puerto Rican's existence in the urban ghettos of the United States.


An insightful collection of autobiographical vignettes that reads as a novel and documents the rites of passage and pains of acculturation of a young Puerto Rican woman and her family.


An extensive, broad-based collection of writing in various genres. Fifty pieces by 40 writers run the gamut of urban Puerto Rican life on both shores. Issues of race, identity, class, language, and religion are treated with sensitivity, and the pride of a people in their struggle for self-affirmation is depicted.

An excellent anthology of Puerto Rican writers of the second and third generations in the United States. The author has included some important feminist voices, such as Sandra Esteves, Aurora Levins-Morales, and Judith Ortiz Cofer. Essays and poetry predominate in this valuable yet little-known collection.

References


