



Teaching Latino Literature in a World Literature Class at an African American University

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At Virginia Union University, where I work, my colleagues do everything they can to teach our students about their African American heritage, but I have always felt that Black and White is not enough. The future is global. I try to teach African, Caribbean, Latino, Asian, Native American, European, and African American literature.

I wanted to put in a small change to the curriculum: a requirement that at least a token work of Latino literature be taught in World Literature II. A simple task took about three years to pass. I talked to my chairperson. She said, do you have any lesson plans to help people teach? I said "no." That was the end of the conversation, but mysteriously for the next couple of years I was assigned to teach World Literature II (Usually I teach World Literature I.) and in the course of teaching it, I gradually put together a booklet of teaching suggestions for doing a Latino literature unit. I also have nice Microsoft Publisher software. I was able to easily create the booklet, and it looked really nice. I presented the booklet to my colleagues at a meeting and the requirement passed unanimously. I put together suggested teaching tips for three works of Latino literature: the poem, "I'm Explaining a Few Things," by Pablo Neruda; "The Garden of Forking Paths," by Jorge Borges; and "Death Constant Beyond Love" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"I'm Explaining a Few Things"

The Norton Anthology of World Literature suggests that "I'm Explaining a Few Things" be taught interdisciplinary with an examination of Picasso's famous painting, *Guernica*. Both works deal with a tremendous moment in world history: the bombing of the town of Guernica, during the Spanish Civil War, in 1937. Adolf Hitler gave Generalissimo Francisco Franco the planes, and bombs to conduct an experiment on the people of Spain. The experiment was "saturation bombing." Guernica was bombed non-stop from 4:30p.m. until approximately 6:45p.m. on April 26. Guernica was just a small little town. There was no military importance or advantage to be gained by bombing it. No one had ever witnessed such an event, such widespread destruction. The bombing became a precursor to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The bombing upset people all over Europe. People saw how dangerous Hitler could become. They saw what happened in Guernica and realized how easily their town, village, or city could be annihilated. Pablo Picasso was from Spain. His art was not normally political, but he got



political after the bombing of Guernica. He created one of his greatest works of art. Pablo Neruda was an ambassador from Chile to Spain, so he was living in Spain at the time. He wrote the poem 'I'm Explaining a Few Things' which is about the bombing of Guernica.

Usually when I teach, I make sure students can see projected pictures of the painting very well, but in addition, I give students a short group assignment: I ask them to get into groups of 2 – 4. Then, I ask them how many people are depicted in Picasso's painting. How many men? Women? Children? I ask students to write down how many animals are depicted and what kind of animals is depicted. Then, I ask students to make a list of the objects they see in the painting. The assignment is simple, but it serves a purpose because it gently gets students to look closely at the painting.

I also use a historical approach. I talk about the history of the bombing, but I also talk about Hitler and Frances Cress Welsing's theory about why Hitler waged genocide on the Jews. Welsing's theory is that the name Semite means "semi-white" which means that Jews, Arabs, Babylonians, Assyrians, etc. at one point in time had a significant amount of African DNA flowing through their genes (Welsing 222). Hitler exterminated the Jewish people because he felt they were contaminating the great white Aryan race (227).

Moreover, Hitler also exterminated Gypsies, who may have originated in Africa (Egypt). "Gypsy" is said to be a variation on the name "Egyptian." (226-227). I explain further about the history of the Moors in Spain. The Moors were an African people who invaded and conquered Spain. They stayed in Spain for 800 years and left a lot of African DNA there too. Generalissimo Francisco Franco played right into Hitler's hands when he bombed Guernica. Hitler was all too happy to exterminate and experiment on the Spanish people since they probably help to contaminate the great Aryan race too.

I usually give students a writing assignment to compare and contrast the picture to the poem. If some students say they don't know how to compare a painting to a poem. I ask them to look at the words they wrote down when they listed animals, people and objects. Then, I ask them to see if they can find the same words in the poem first, before comparing and contrasting how the word is used compared to the picture.

"The Garden of Forking Paths"

I have students do a Venn diagram that compares and contrasts Yu Tsun, Stephen Albert, and Ts'ui Pen. I tell students to read the short story twice for homework. Then, I will either have them draw the Venn diagram for homework or as an in-class assignment. The Venn diagram really helps students to follow the story better. I will give students study questions to help with comprehension too. 1) What does Yu Tsun have in his pocket? Why? 2) How does Yu Tsun feel about being a spy for Germany? Why would a Chinese person want to be a spy for



a racist European country? 3) At what two times does the train leave for Ashgrove? What is the life mission of each of the main characters?

In a lecture, I usually talk about the role that a scholar plays in society. I ask the question how can Stephen Albert be both an enemy and a friend to Yu Tsun? I also digress a bit and talk about World War II and how the Navaho language was used as a secret code the Germans could not break. During the latter part of the 19th century, Germany was a leading intellectual and cultural base for Europe. Scores of German scholars came to the U.S. to study native American Indian language and culture. They helped to preserve much of the culture, but well meaning scholars could also sow the seeds for destruction. The same information used for scholarly purposes, was used during World War II. The Navaho language was used because it was the only language the Germans had not infiltrated. That is why the Germans could not break the Navaho language code. When scholars go to study in foreign lands, the information they gather can be used for the purposes of good during times of peace or the information can be used to destroy people.

All three men (Yu Tsun, Stephen Albert, and Ts'ui Pen) are intellectuals immersed in the field of literature. All three men have a sacred purpose. Ts'ui Pen's mission is to create his book which takes 13 years to write. Then, he dies violently. Stephen Albert's mission is to decipher the book, but deciphering the book is not enough. If only white people read and understand the literature, then Albert has not fulfilled his mission. In talking to Yu Tsun, and passing on his knowledge and understanding to a Chinese literature scholar, Albert not only gathers information and translates it, but Albert also sees to it that the knowledge gets back to the Chinese people. Albert is just able to complete his mission before he dies. Finally, Yu Tsun has dual missions to accomplish. He has to send a coded message to his superiors. He manages to do so and gets himself arrested. As he waits in jail for the day he will be put to death, Tsun writes down what Albert told him. By doing so, he fulfills his life mission to get the knowledge and understanding of a great work of Chinese art to his family and his people.

"Death Constant beyond Love"

I tell students to get into groups of three or four. If there is an odd person left out, then a group can have five members, but the groups should be no more than five. I have students to make a story map of the adventures of the rose that Sanchez carries with him, only the story is told in pictures. I tell students that everywhere in the story they see the word "rose" or "roses," draw a picture of what the rose is seeing and doing. When finished, students are expected to post the story map and select a spokesperson who can explain it to the class. Students get extra credit if they color their pictures.



Problems with the Assignment

1. Sometimes students complain. They say "Why are you asking us to do kindergarten work."

My reply is as follows: Drawing pictures can be used for different learning purposes.

- a. Drawing pictures improves comprehension because students tend to read the text more than once.
 - b. Drawing pictures helps students better listen to class lectures because students wonder what I am going to say about something they had to draw a picture about.
 - c. Drawing pictures is therapeutic: it has a calming affect on students.
 - d. Drawing pictures suggests different perspectives to the meaning of the literature.
 - e. Drawing pictures can help to better foster an exchange of ideas about the literature.
 - f. The combination of hand, eye, and brain coordination that is part of the writing process helps students to learn more about any topic (Emig). If true, then drawing and coloring pictures ought to work too.
2. Students say, "I can't draw!"

I tell students that I am not grading them on their drawing abilities, but on their ability to read closely and comprehend the text. I tell stick figure drawings and to write captions underneath their drawings that explain what they are drawing. Finally, I go to the black board and draw something using stick figures. Students laugh at my drawings and after they see how I draw, they are not as intimidated. I have found that once students figure out that I am NOT going to grade them on their drawing abilities, they are all



right. At that point they can relax and begin to enjoy drawing pictures.

2. How do I grade?

Real easy! Sometimes not at all. I could grade according to how many pictures of a rose are drawn. Six pictures = an "A" Five pictures = a "B." Four pictures = a C," etc.

3. Drawing takes too much class time.

Drawing pictures does take up class time, but recently a March 6, 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, stated that online students are found to be helped just as well by a 60 second "micro lecture" in combination with "outside assignments and discussion" as they are helped by the conventional lecture (Shieh A-1). I suggest putting the power point presentation online via a course management system like Blackboard or Jenzabar, for example. If people are now giving one minute micro lectures, then ten minutes can be an eternity—more than enough time. Also, I tend to walk around talking to students and answering their questions. A lot of the lecture comes in minute exchanges with groups.

4. Sometimes a group will want one person to do all of the drawings. That is not a good idea because people will be sitting down doing nothing. I usually allow about 30 minutes on the assignment. I tell students that they have to draw at least 8 pictures, they do not have much time and that to complete the assignment well in the time allotted, they have to work together as a team. Professors also can make a graded requirement that everybody in the group help in some way.

5. Some students ask if the town's name "Rosal de Virrey" should count as a variation on the word rose. I leave that one up to the students.

6. What is "saltpeter"?

The word "saltpeter" can be found in the dictionary, but the dictionary does not fully explain the meaning of the word." The dictionary only defines saltpeter as meaning "potassium nitrate." I have no idea what potassium nitrate is. I asked if there were any biology majors in the class, but they did not shed much light on what saltpeter is either. I told students what I know or rather what I have heard about saltpeter: Saltpeter was given to African people in the U.S. serving prison sentences in order to cut down on their sex drive. I talked to a colleague in



Biology. He said that saltpeter was mixed into the cafeteria food of African American college students from the U.S., during the 1960's in order to cut down on their sex drive, but that it does not work.

7. "X-rated pictures" Sometimes students ask if the pictures can be "X-rated." I say "yes" and tell them the pictures are their creation. Most students do not draw X-rated drawings.



8. Why color pictures?

- a. When students put more time into coloring pictures, they put more time into thinking about the literature.
- b. When students take time to color, the pictures are usually more interesting, which suggests a deeper intellectual experience. I bought \$5.00 worth of crayons 10 years ago and still have the crayons. I collect old poster board and the backs of signs. I give them to students and that makes the drawings special.

Questions for discussion

1. Is Senator Sanchez a good senator?
2. Why does he not tell his family about his illness?



Works Cited

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