

Workshop 4

Oral Histories

Introduction

This workshop session introduces the analysis of oral history artifacts as a tool in the literature classroom. Mary Pat Brady, literature professor at Cornell University, uses a *corrido* titled *Versos del Mojado* (*Verses of the Wetback*) to help teachers enhance their reading of American literature texts.

By looking at two intellectual products from the same culture—the *corrido* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem *El Sonavabitché*—you will better understand Chicano/a* culture in the mid to late twentieth century.

During the course of the session, you will learn how to search for oral history artifacts to help teach American literature. In the onscreen class, Mary Pat discusses how she uses oral history artifacts to illuminate the discipline of literature in her own classroom. She provides high school teachers with ideas how to analyze the oral history artifacts; she also suggests specific lesson plans.

We then follow the onscreen teachers into the computer lab where they work with Mary Pat, Laura Arnold Leibman (Reed College English professor), and each other to find artifacts that supplement the themes and context of the literature they are currently teaching.

Next, we follow Michaela Miller, a teacher at River Ridge High School in Olympia, Washington, into her own high school classroom. We watch as she models a similar lesson with her students. Finally we hear Michaela’s reflections on her own teaching practices.

* indicates a reference in the Glossary.

Before the Session

Before watching the “Oral Histories” video, be sure to:

- Guide: Read the Oral Histories Reading.
- Video: Watch the *American Passages* episode “Exploring Borderlands.” (The episode can be viewed on the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org. Click on “Video on Demand” or go to <http://www.learner.org/resources/series164.html> and click on the VoD icon next to the appropriate program title.)
- Web: Download and listen to the *corrido Versos del Mojado* (serial #6393) from the *American Passages* archive site at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php. If you do not have access to the Internet, you can also hear an excerpt of the *corrido* at approximately 4:30 minutes into the video. Print out the descriptive information and review the Spanish lyrics and the English translation. Please note: The *corrido* was recorded in 1939. Due to poor technical quality, the Spanish lyrics are not complete, so the English translation is similarly incomplete. Missing words are marked by ellipses [...].
- Literature: Read Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem *El Sonavabiche* and her essay *How To Tame a Wild Tongue*.

As you read, consider the following close reading questions. See the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix for instructions on effective close reading.

- How does the multi-lingual aspect of Anzaldúa’s poem affect you as a reader?
- Who is the intended audience for this poem? What leads you to this conclusion?

Synopsis of Mary Pat Brady’s Presentation

- Mary Pat begins by discussing oral history as a field of study, highlighting how it functions as a discipline in its own right. She then discusses the importance of using oral history artifacts in relation to literature; she emphasizes that the spoken word is dynamically different from the written word. By listening to songs, interviews, and narratives, students can glean different messages than if they were merely reading the lyrics or transcripts in the written form. Listening to an authentic recording—be it scratchy and difficult to decipher—helps create a contextual picture for the student.
- Next, Mary Pat describes the first artifact, the *corrido Versos del Mojado*, and gives some relevant background information. By analyzing the performance she helps the teachers make thematic connections to Anzaldúa’s poem. Mary Pat then presents a second artifact—a recording of the narrative of *La Llorona** (*The Weeping Woman*). She and the teachers use this artifact to make further connections to Anzaldúa’s poem and essay.
- Mary Pat concludes her discussion by inviting the teachers to brainstorm other ways to bring oral history artifacts into the classroom: How can oral history artifacts apply to a vast range of contemporary or traditional literature?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts

Facilitators:

- For this workshop session, you will need to download and listen to the audio file of the *corrido* that Mary Pat used (*Versos del Mojado*, serial #6393) from the *American Passages* archive. To listen to the audio file online, you will need to have Internet access to the *American Passages* Web site. Be sure that the computer you will be using has speakers. If you do not have Internet access in your meeting room, you will need to audiotape the *corrido* for use in the session.

Before the session, print out the narrative description that accompanies the audio file, which includes the Spanish text and English translation, and copy for all of your participants. (For further information on how to navigate the archive, see instructions in the front matter.)

- Begin the workshop by watching program 4: "Oral Histories" through the *American Passages* excerpted clip. Watch for approximately 11:30 minutes.
- Follow up with the discussion activity below. The discussion should take approximately 10 minutes.

Activity 1: Discussion of the Literary Movement

1. As a whole group, discuss what literature you have taught or are currently teaching from this literary movement. If you don't currently teach anything from this movement, how might you add it to your curriculum?

Other authors from *American Passages*' "Exploring Borderlands" for potential discussion:

- **Americo Paredes** (1915–1999) Novelist, poet, professor, and activist, Americo Paredes pioneered work in recording and explicating Chicano folklore. *George Washington Gomez: A Mexicotexan Novel* and *With a Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* are two of his better-known works.
- **Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca** (1490–1558) Often called the first culturally Chicano or mestizo writer, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca composed *Relacion y Comentarios*, a narrative which tells of his experiences as a Spaniard integrating into the Native American culture in the New World.
- **Bernal Diaz del Castillo** (1492–1584) Born in Spain in 1492, the same year Christopher Columbus declared himself the "discoverer" of the New World, Bernal Diaz del Castillo seized the opportunity to leave Europe by joining an expedition bound for the Americas in 1514.
- **Christopher Columbus** (1451–1506) Characterized as both the archetypal American hero and an overzealous colonizer, Christopher Columbus is one of the more controversial historical figures in America. Columbus' *Letter to Luis de Santangel* and *Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella* are often studied for the cultural situations they recount.
- **Bartolomé de las Casas** (1474–1566) Of the Spanish colonizers, Bartolomé de las Casas is one of the first Europeans to recognize and protest the cruel treatment of Native Americans at the hands of their conquerors. *History of the Indies* and *The Very Brief Relation of the Devastation of the Indies* are two of his most important writings.
- **Garcilaso de la Vega** (1539–1616) One of the first American writers of mixed ethnic heritage, Garcilaso de la Vega descended from Incan royalty and proudly declared his mestizo identity by signing "El Inca" to his name. Most of his writings are historical narratives of the New World, including two works on the Incan culture, *Commentarios Reales* and *Florida of the Inca*.
- **Samuel de Champlain** (1570–1635) Often called the "Father of New France," Samuel de Champlain was a leader in exploring and claiming areas of North America for France. One of his four books is *The Voyage of Sieur de Champlain*.

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

- **Adriaen Van der Donck** (1620–1655) Commissioned to travel to the Dutch commercial colony in America, Adriaen Van der Donck encountered political strife amongst those settled there. Giving up his mission to promote agriculture over the fur trade, Van der Donck eventually bought land and built one of the first sawmills in North America. His *Description of New Netherland* endeavors to encourage immigration from the Netherlands through details of the land and Van der Donck's experiences in North America.
- **John Smith** (1580–1631) Despite his inauspicious beginnings, John Smith's adventures in Virginia have afforded him a large place in American mythology. Selected to form a settlement in Virginia, Smith eventually became the most knowledgeable colonist at Jamestown, both in the geography of the region and the customs of the Native Americans. Though he understood their customs, Smith never regarded the Native Americans as friends; even in his famous *Rescue of the Indian Princess Pocahontas*, he portrays Pocahontas as the only one in her tribe who possesses "civilized" graces.

For more information on these authors, visit the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org.

2. How did the Oral Histories Reading change or enhance your view of Gloria Anzaldúa's poem *El Sonavabitché*?

Facilitators:

- Continue watching the video until the point where Mary Pat Brady finishes analyzing the first artifact (*Versos del Mojado*, serial #6393). Begin at the title First Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 9:30 minutes.
- Next, proceed with the activity below. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes. First, as a whole group, listen to the recording of the *corrido Versos del Mojado* (*Verses of the Wetback*) and ask participants to individually write down some initial observations about the artifact: Use the questions in step 1 below.
- Then divide the session participants into groups of three and hand out the narrative description, Spanish text, and English translation of the *corrido*, and proceed with step 2 of the activity below.

Activity 2: Reading the First Artifact

1. Listen to the *corrido Versos del Mojado* (*Verses of the Wetback*). First, make some initial observations about the artifact:

- What strikes you about the cadence and rhythm of this music?
- How does it compare to ballads* or folk songs you may have heard in the past?

2. Next, read the artifact more closely; use the **CAATS** acronym on the following page, along with the Oral Histories Reading, the synopsis of Mary Pat Brady's lesson, and the Spanish text and English translation of the *corrido*.

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

CAATS

Creator: Who created this artifact? What do we know about the person(s) who created it? How did it influence his/her life at the time it was created? Would the creator find relevant connections to the literature you are pairing with this artifact?

Assumptions: What do you know about the context of this artifact? What assumptions can you make based on prior information that you bring to this analysis?

Audience/User: Who was the audience for this object when it was originally created? What leads you to this assumption?

Time and Place: When and where was this artifact created?

Significance: Why is this artifact important? How does it help explain the literature you are teaching with it? Does the context of the artifact parallel the context of your literature?

Facilitators:

- After discussing the first artifact, the *corrido Versos del Mojado*, spend five to seven minutes discussing Gloria Anzaldúa's poem *El Sonavabitché*. Use the close reading questions from the Before the Session section as a starting point for discussion.
- Continue watching the video of Mary Pat analyzing and making connections to the second artifact. Begin at the title Second Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 8:30 minutes. Stop the video after this second artifact reading, before the title Lesson Planning.
- Then do the activity below. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 3: Connecting Literature to the Artifact

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions:

- What is the first step that Mary Pat Brady takes with the onscreen teachers to discuss the oral history artifacts?
- How does she move the teachers' discussion from the artifact analysis to connecting the artifact with the literature they are reading?
- What techniques does Mary Pat use on-screen that are helpful to you as a viewer? Could you use these techniques in your own classroom?

2. Return to small groups. Begin to draw connections between the *corrido* and Anzaldúa's poem. Use the following guiding questions:

- What important cultural metaphors do the language in the text and the language of the *corrido* provide?
- How does the *corrido* help to highlight the themes of being an outsider or "other" that are so prevalent in Anzaldúa's poem?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- Watch the Lesson Planning and In the Classroom portions of the video. Begin at the title Lesson Planning and watch for approximately 34:30 minutes.
- Then do the next activity. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 4: Classroom Strategies Discussion/Create Lesson Plan

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions: You just watched Michaela Miller apply what she had learned about connecting artifacts and literature to her own classroom. Take 10–15 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the benefits of using music in your classroom? What are the difficulties?
- What methods did Michaela use to help her students understand the contextual connections between the *corrido* and the text *All the Pretty Horses*? Why were these methods effective? What other methods might you use to help students connect literature to music?

2. In your same small groups, brainstorm different literary movements/pieces of literature that you could use with *Versos del Mojado*. Also, brainstorm other oral history artifacts that could work with different literary movements.

Facilitators:

- Watch Michaela Miller's reflective interview. Begin at the title Reflection and watch for approximately three minutes.
- Ask session participants to comment on what Michaela felt worked in her classroom. Did this parallel what they thought worked as they were watching?

Building a Lesson Plan and Teaching With Artifacts

For the detailed six-step process for artifact selection, see the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix.

Homework

1. Create a lesson plan using an oral history artifact with a piece of literature you are currently teaching.

For example: If you are teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, go to the Works Progress Administration Web site and download interviews given by migrant farmers. Discuss with your students how the interviews relate to the plight of the Joad family.

Share this lesson with fellow teachers at the next workshop session.

2. See next week's Before the Session section.

Artifacts and Literature Pairings: Oral History Artifacts

The following oral history artifacts can be found in the *American Passages* archive at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php. Enter the serial number to view a picture of the item and a detailed description.

Artifact and Serial

African American
sorrow song*
(1943) (#6276)

Chippewa Song
(2002) (#9087)

Literary Movement and Literature

Slavery & Freedom:
Claude McKay's
The Lynching

Native Voices:
Louise Erdrich's
Love Medicine

Teaching Tip

- Michaela uses the constructivist approach to teaching *corridos* in her classroom. She does not tell her students how to analyze an oral history. Instead, she has students create their own oral histories based on the literature they are reading in class.

Notes

Session Reading

Oral Histories Reading

What do we mean by oral histories as artifacts?

According to Linda Shopes, author of *Making Sense of Oral History*, oral history is a “maddeningly imprecise term: it is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition-bearers; to informal conversations about ‘the old days’ among family members, neighbors, or coworkers; to printed compilations of stories told about past times and present experiences; and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.” Oral history artifacts, such as folk songs, interviews, and folktales, provide valuable new knowledge about the past and give merit to the historical evidence and memories provided by everyday people.

Why are they useful to bring into a literature classroom?

Bringing oral histories into the classroom helps students better understand the value and legitimacy of the spoken word. Oral histories expose students to the ways that ordinary people have shaped the historical process. These authentic, oral links to the past help to make the content they read more relevant, interesting, and accessible. These folktales, interviews, and folk songs also help to highlight the value of orality as a literary tradition.

Contextualizing oral history artifacts and literary texts: The case of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *El Sonavabitch* and *How To Tame a Wild Tongue*

Mary Pat Brady introduces the subject of oral history by having the teachers listen to a Mexican American *corrido* called *Versos Del Mojado* (*Verses of the Wetback*), written and recorded in 1902. Having the teachers listen to the original Spanish highlights the authenticity and oral value of the recording, as well as the complexity of working with an oral history in a different language. This complexity is found, as well, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s multi-lingual poem *El Sonavabitch*. The poem and the *corrido* both describe the struggles of being an outsider or “other.” This feeling of alienation was common for Mexicans struggling to come into America and for Mexican Americans born in America.

After the Mexican American war, the United States and Mexico adopted the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which settled the location of the boundary between the nations at the Rio Bravo (or Rio Grande) River. This forced and unnatural boundary separated people who had once considered themselves neighbors. In the early twentieth century, the U.S. began to create and enforce stricter regulations in an attempt to control trade and movement across the border. The many challenges that arose from these regulations are recounted in *corridos* like the one that Mary Pat uses in the workshop class.

Americo Paredes also writes of the unfair treatment of Mexican Americans in his novel, *George Washington Gomez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (completed in 1940, but published in 1991). Paredes tells the story of a Mexican American man who experiences discrimination in his childhood and eventually renounces his culture. Paredes is known for his extensive work recording and explicating Chicano folklore.

Gloria Anzaldúa built on Americo Paredes’s legacy of Chicano activism to empower Chicana and mestiza* women. Her 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera** gives voice to women of mixed identity and challenges traditional racial, cultural, linguistic, and gender boundaries. Anzaldúa’s essay *How To Tame a Wild Tongue* explores the origins of languages and how language influences identity. Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez are two other bicultural writers who infuse their prose with Spanish and write about the struggles of identity and culture. These authors are only a few who have made a contribution to this constantly changing and influential literary movement; a contribution which moves to broaden the traditional canon to include Chicano/a and Latino/a writers who have not been as widely read in the past.

* indicates a reference in the Glossary.

Oral Histories Reading, cont'd.

Contextualizing oral history artifacts and literary texts: The case of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*

Teacher Michaela Miller uses the *corrido* of Gregorio Cortez to highlight the themes of oppression and marginalization that are found in Cormac McCarthy's novel *All the Pretty Horses*. In this first novel of his "Borderlands" trilogy set in the mid-1950s, McCarthy's young protagonist, John Grady Cole, moves from his home in Texas to Mexico. Cole relocates in order to make meaning of the constantly changing values and the historical shifts occurring in the South at this time. Once in Mexico, Cole finds that he is in a world he no longer understands and is unfairly arrested for horse thievery. Published in 1992, McCarthy's novel finds a place in the ever-expanding borderlands literary movement. Many of the writers in this movement seek to challenge the geographical, cultural, political, and racial boundaries in the U.S./Mexico border regions—Anzaldúa and McCarthy among them.

Written in 1910, the same year as the Mexican revolution against dictator Porfirio Diaz, the *corrido* of Gregorio Cortez recounts the story of a Mexican Texan who fled for his life after he killed an Anglo sheriff. The killing was in self-defense, following a misunderstanding over stolen horses. Cortez triumphs in the end:

*The Americans were coming
as fast as the wind,
because they would earn
a reward of 3,000 pesos.
He fled toward Gonzalez.
Several sheriffs saw him
but they didn't want to pursue him
because they were afraid.*

This heroic *corrido*, immortalized by Americo Paredes in his book *With His Pistol in His Hand*, shares the same theme of alienation that McCarthy writes about in his novel; both Cole and Cortez are strangers in a land that is unwilling to understand them. Despite the chronological gap (Michaela uses a text written in 1980 and a *corrido* written in 1910) these cultural and thematic similarities make for a useful and appropriate artifact and literature combination.

This pairing also serves to help students see the multifarious ways that history can be shared, especially by those whose voices may not have been recorded and documented in traditional history textbooks. As a genre, *corridos* are still a strong and vigorous literary tradition. They are generally sung in Spanish and today cover not only themes of alienation, but also political issues. The *Corrido de Cesar Chavez* details the United Farm Workers boycott; it celebrates Chavez's commitment to founding and leading the first successful farm workers' union in U.S. history.

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Notes
