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Native American and Latino/a Literature

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May 3, 2006

## Sample I-Search

### 1) What I wanted to learn about Latino literature

I feel a connection with Latino people. Not a kinship, but an understanding or admiration or something. I know my freckled face didn't earn it—not in all respects. It could have something to do with the fact that I was formed, birthday to birthday, in as blue-collar a family as any Latino people any neighbor kid could name. Or maybe this connection stems from the ten days I spent ankle-deep in the mud of Honduras, making sand, packing bricks, digging trenches. There was *something* there; it made me cry and I couldn't name the reason. In Dr. Lounsberry's Introduction to Graduate Studies class, I made a Honduran poet, Roberto Sosa, the focus of my semester's research. I fell in love with the lines of his poetry—Spanish and English, side by side. I love the Spanish language. If I could pour it over ice cream and eat it, I would. For all these reasons, I was really excited about taking this half of the class in Latino literature.

What did I want to learn? Anything. I think if I answered this question three months ago I would have said that I would like to learn about poets and poems and, yes, other genres, and really anything that could put me more in touch with Latino culture. I wanted to learn about the language, too. I wanted to see how the Spanish language would come through the English, what would happen to

English when it became a second language in the hands of those whose first language was Spanish. I have been very lucky to teach international students at Wartburg and have witnessed a wonderful, defamiliarizing (for me) use of English as it is filtered through students whose first languages are not English. Their writing is often poetic. Last semester, a Japanese student wrote in a journal about going to a basketball game: "Time stood without moving for the long arc of orange ball." I've never forgotten this phrase. In this class, I wanted to see how the English/Spanish combination would play out—especially in the hands of people who have dedicated their lives to language. I wanted to see what completely new work could arise from the combination in these capable and called hands.

I also wanted to learn how the Latino experience would come through in images and other elements of craft, especially in poetry. I wanted to see if there was anything I recognized in the literature—or anyone; I thought I might see the people of Honduras or my friend Enrique. Enrique, by the way, lives RIGHT NEXT DOOR to his little brother, Vic, and Vic's family. Enrique spoke in church a few weeks ago about his "Tía Lupe" who was a strong woman in the face of machismo in 1960s Mexico. There it is in my own amigo—family, machismo. So I read literature to see myself and to find what I can hold on to. I'm selfish. I don't care a whole lot about research. I want to learn more about my personal connection.

**2) What I already knew (or thought I knew) or expected to learn about Latino literature:**

I knew there were different dialects of Spanish and that choosing/using the correct dialect is extremely important. When I worked for the Southeastern Iowa Lutheran bishop's office, I wrote an article about the Latino ministry program and had the article translated into Spanish to run beside the article in English. It felt like additional outreach that the subjects of the article could actually read it in their own language. I used an online translating service (a real person contacted through a website) who asked me to choose between five or six different dialects of Spanish. The outreach committee was also very nervous about this translation. In the end, it turned out fine. But there was a journey of stress to the final product that I had never anticipated. This experience for me was reflected in how the many different Latin-American cultures left us, as a class, unable to make a list of traits similar to the one we made for the Native American section.

I knew that I loved Spanish.

I knew that I liked Sandra Cisneros' poetry. (I learned that I like her short stories more.)

**3) What steps I took to study and learn Latino literature**

When I read literature, I first read the lines. I don't know if I have a short attention span or what, but I don't seem to concentrate as much on the overall piece of literature as I do the bits and pieces of language or images I love. For this reason, I often feel

like an idiot. For instance, I was in a small group this semester that talked about Cisneros' story *One Holy Night*. Members of our group talked about how the theme of the piece showed a relationship between the narrator's non-acceptance of reality and her ability to cope. My contribution was, "I can't remember what the story was about. But you can tell Cisneros is a poet. Did you see the line where she loses her virginity and creates a second being inside her that jumps out?" She says it better, of course: "Then something inside bit me, and I gave out a cry as if the other, the one I wouldn't be anymore, leapt out" (Cisneros 30). These are the moments which stay with me. And this is why I love literature. This is also the way I study literature.

To begin, I read the lines. I read pretty slowly, usually, and have to concentrate to stay with a narrative. I had a heavy dose of reminder of that aspect of my life in O'Loughlin's Realism and Naturalism class this semester. But, in this class, I read like testing spaghetti. I hurled all these books at myself to see what would stick. (It's an amazing move—you should see it. I got the idea from Cirque de Soliel.) Now that I am done jumping through hoops, this is how I want to read and study literature. I want to eat it and wrap in it and cover it with Spanish sauce and see what sticks. (Though I am actually going to miss writing poetry explications. Does anyone publish those? I have a great lot of them. Great in number. I'd like to try to place a few.)

I suppose I read this way because I write this way. I also read Cisneros' short stories with the idea in mind that she resorted to writing fiction because there was actually some money involved as

opposed to poetry. (You told us this, right Vince?) So, okay, how did I read and study this literature? First step: spaghetti tossing. Second step: emulation, or, "How can I copy this?" Along these lines, another moment I loved in Cisneros' stories was an extended metaphor she used to explore love and sex and life. This appears in *One Holy Night*: "There was a man. [ . . . ] He couldn't talk, just walked around all day with this harmonica in his mouth. Didn't play it. Just sort of breathed through it, all day long, wheezing, in and out, in and out. This is how it is with me. Love I mean" (Cisneros 35). As a storyteller but like a poet, she is accomplishing many things with a single description of a man and his harmonica. Could I, too, use poetry to make myself into a writer of a more saleable genre? Probably not, actually. Not fiction, anyway. I don't know. One thing I didn't love about Cisneros' poetry is that it is often narrative. I don't want to stick around to hear a story in a poem. I want to see something I haven't before, a necklace of lovely words and images, a split second of language with a month's worth of meaning.

#### **4) What I actually learned about Latino literature**

I learned more about the concept of machismo than you probably want to hear me talk about because I bet it is one of the main things people are writing about in this question's response. But, it's true. I knew of the concept of machismo before but never understood it from the many different perspectives from which we've seen it in this class. It seems, from most of the vantage points, machismo is harmful: to both Latino women, men and children. Lori helped me

understand one strange view of this concept when she explained that a woman is expected to take back a cheating husband if he wants to come back because of the understanding that machismo would make a man stray and be unfaithful to his wife. What I learned about machismo gave me a wider view of the world. Not all cultures are defined by American concepts of optimism, freedom, individuality, and rights.

Machismo is a huge part of Latino culture that even affects children. We see this perspective in many of Virgil Suarez's poems. For instance, in a poem titled "Bitterness" Suarez writes:

My father tries  
to make love to my mother. I try now not to listen.  
The mattress springs sound like bones crushing.

My mother refuses without saying a word. This is the final time she does so tonight. My father breaks the immense and interminable silence, saying, "If you don't, I'll look for a Spanish woman who will" (40-46)

Later in this poem, Suarez likens the father to a lion when he asks his father "how much horse meat it takes to appease the hunger of a single lion" (60). The treatment of women in Latino culture is harsh. Machismo. It hurts this speaker to hear his mother being demanded of and treated like an object. It is a form of abuse from my North American, white-privileged viewpoint. I learned in this class, though, to look at it as culture rather than judge.

**5) What this means in my overall career as a student of literature**

The most amazing thing I learned in this class, which I have learned in no other class, ever, was how to look at pieces of literature with a completely different person's glasses on. Even if I never wanted to look at literature again, this would be a lesson of great value. But I *will* look at literature again and I *will* use and hopefully retain this ability to change lenses. This seems an essential motivation to the creation of literature, really. People write to provide readers with a set of lenses through which to reach an understanding the writer felt called to record.

Thank you for making us do this Isearch. I feel lightened by having forced myself to understand my relationship with literature and putting that relationship into words. The timing is meaningful for me as well, as I am at the end of my program and need to figure out how Lit and I will proceed in this new chapter of our lives.