

Using Hispanic Memoirs to Create a Culturally Sustaining Common Read Program

Ford, Robin ^{1, a} and Counihan, Beth ^{2, b}

Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York

^a bcounihan@qcc.cuny.edu, ^b rford@qcc.cuny.edu

Abstract

This article shares a best practice for developing a Common Read program grounded in a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) within a diverse urban community college. The authors make the argument for choosing memoirs by Latinx/Hispanic authors to promote greater cultural understanding and connections for both students and faculty, especially in light of the current political climate in the United States. Recent memoirs by Rosie Perez, Sonia Sotomayor, Richard Blanco and others are discussed as strong examples of successful Common Read texts, and a suggestion is made for a HETS and/or HACU-wide Common Read program.

College Common Read programs, where students from varying disciplines read and discuss one book, are promoted as providing students with a shared intellectual experience and increasing academic achievement. For two years in a row, 2017 and 2018, memoirs by Puerto Rican women were chosen as Common Read texts at our diverse community college: *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life*, by choreographer/actress/director Rosie Perez, and *My*

Beloved World, by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. In this article, we will focus on these two memoirs as model Common Read texts, works that share unique and inspirational life and cultural experiences and align well with Paris's concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (2012). In our current polarized political climate, it is more important than ever for students to have a deep experience of another culture--or of seeing their own culture represented through another's experience. In particular, in the wake of the El Paso mass murder targeting Hispanics, we believe that it is imperative for Hispanic-Serving Institutions to lead the way in giving college students exposure to the broad Latinx/Hispanic experience. We will also share our College's adaptable approach to the Common Read and some recommendations by Latinx/Hispanic authors to consider using as a Common Read text at your own institution. Lastly, we suggest expanding the Common Read concept from one institution to the consortium: a HETS /HACU member institution-wide Common Read program.

Common Read programs, part of Common Intellectual Experiences, have been recognized by the American Association of Colleges & Universities as a High Impact Practice, ones that engage students and result in deeper learning, for the past decade (Kuh, 2008). Queensborough Community College's website states that "The Common Read is a Common Intellectual Experience that promotes integrative learning across the curriculum through multi-disciplinary approaches to a common text." Many colleges offer Common Read events for traditional-aged dorm-living students as a bonding experience during orientation week (Ferguson, 2006). However, there is little research on how Common Read programs impact two-year college communities; most work focuses on particular disciplines or four-year institutions (Edington, Holmes, and Reinke, 2015; Ferguson, Brown, and Piper,

2014). The Common Read program at Queensborough Community College-CUNY (QCC) has been running since 2012, and is highly popular, with faculty from most departments participating.

Maloy, Counihan, Dupre, Madera, and Beckford (2017) describe Queensborough's approach as "The UnCommon Read" in the edited volume *What is College Reading?* (Horning, Gollnitz and Heller, 2017). What makes Queensborough's program "UnCommon" is that faculty integrate the Common Read selection into course curriculum with events offered during class time that emphasize interdisciplinarity and community. The text is chosen a year in advance by a college-wide faculty committee, based on input from faculty, staff, administrators and students. A faculty coordinator is selected and works with an administrator at the College's Center for Teaching and Learning to first train participating faculty through a book group in the Fall, and then implement the Common Read in classes in the Spring. The book group provides an opportunity for participating faculty to discuss the text and possible writing assignments, as well as suggest and plan events. Events vary, from showing dramatic films and documentaries to guest speakers to faculty and student-led presentations. Faculty then teach the text in the Spring and bring their classes to the events, which run for two to three weeks. Students then integrate what they learned at an event into a reflection paper or another writing assignment. At the conclusion of the Common Read, both students and faculty take surveys, reflecting on the experience, so that the Common Read program can be adjusted in various ways.

Queensborough is not alone in our curricular approach to the Common Read: Westchester Community College, just north of New York City, also integrates the Common Read text into the semester's curriculum, as does Washington State University. UCLA runs

a year-long program in which some faculty integrate the text into their curriculum and the culminating event is the author's visit. For many Common Read programs, the author's visit is the main event; however, for our highly interactive Common Read, with many students making presentations, we have found it is not imperative.

The first instance of any form of a Common Read program we have found was in the early-mid 80s; SUNY Cortland had a "Common Text" program (McLaughlin, 1986). The concept lay dormant until 2006, when the National Endowment for the Arts began the Big Read Program in libraries across the country, which then expanded to colleges, becoming part of the rite of passage for college freshman nationwide. However, some colleges have eliminated Common Read programs: for example, Purdue University cut its Common Read in 2014, "citing cost and lack of data showing benefits" (Grasgreen).

While some of the literature is skeptical of the benefits of Common Read programs (Ferguson, Brown and Piper 2015), our college's internal survey data for years using both Sonia Sotomayor's *My Beloved World* (2014) and Rosie Perez's *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life* (2013) indicate that both students and faculty did feel more connected to the college after reading the books and participating in Common Read events. We believe this connection is due to students and faculty finding these two particular memoirs to be not only engaging, but highly relevant reading. Both Perez and Sotomayor tell their stories as grounded in a rich experience of Puerto Rican culture that students and faculty of any background can relate to their own culture: food and family; music and language; education and identity—and the strong connection to one's homeland, no matter if one is a recent immigrant or a generation or more removed.

As the fastest-growing segment of American society, Latinx/Hispanics are not a monolithic group, although categorized as one by traditional demographic measures. Overall, two-thirds of the American Latinx/Hispanic community identify as Mexican, and, at Queensborough, we have representation from all geographical areas of Hispanic origin: the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. According to the College Factbook 2018-19, the top countries of Hispanic origin are the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and El Salvador. Seventeen years ago, when Queensborough first joined HETS, QCC was not yet a Hispanic-Serving Institution, but now 29% of the student body identifies as Hispanic. Our community college has a rich and robust diversity, with students from China, Jamaica, Bangladesh, Guyana and South Korea, as the top-non-Hispanic countries of origin--as well as other self-reported demographic groups: 28% Asian, 27% black, 15% white. All of our students each bring with them their unique history, culture, and language. It is important for students to see their culture as an essential aspect of college curriculum and, of course, for students and faculty of other backgrounds to learn about and connect to cultures and identities different from their own.

With the choices of Sotomayor and Perez's memoirs, we explored Puerto Rico's unique status as both American and Latinx/Hispanic, one that many students were not aware of. Perez's documentary, *Yo Soy Boriqua*, combines her family history with island history, creating a uniquely historical memoir. With both Perez and Sotomayor identifying as Nuyoricans – Puerto Rican, American, and in particular, New Yorkers (Sotomayor was born and raised in the Bronx and Perez is from Bushwick, Brooklyn) -- and as strong confident women from difficult backgrounds who tell their stories with humor, our students can relate to many of their struggles and are encouraged by their ultimate triumphs.

A unique part of our Common Read program is the inclusion of culturally sustaining pedagogical practices in the form of faculty sponsored events and their proceeding assignments. Students are required to attend at least one of the events, and to reflect on that experience in some form of formal assignment. These events are connected to the authors or books through various approaches, depending on the faculty member's discipline and interest. Working with the Perez memoir, faculty developed over twenty various events as diverse as examining and dealing with schizophrenia, which afflicted Perez's mother, from the Counseling department, to an old-school "Soul Train" dance with instruction from student Dance majors, to the Nursing department providing an educational session on HIV and STIs, to several creative writing workshops and opportunities for students to present their own original works. Our Uncommon Read program works against the previous pedagogical approaches, which perceived students of color as entering college academically deficient. It instead seeks to utilize students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll and Gonzalez, 1994) both in the creation of events and with the formal assignments that follow. According to Paris (2012), a culturally sustained pedagogy must be more than just responsive or relevant to students' cultures and practices, it "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (p. 95). In our role as coordinator of the Common Read for both these books, it was particularly essential that students be encouraged to use their home language, knowledge and cultural background when asked to respond to the books and events. One such assignment was used for both years, as both books are memoirs, and both Perez and Sotomayor are Puerto Rican. After attending a screening of *Yo Soy Boriqua*, or the workshop on memoir writing, and finishing the memoir, students were to write a brief two-to-three page personal essay describing a time when they

struggled with something in their life that was particular to their cultural identity. They were encouraged to incorporate their home language as both Sotomayor and Perez do, and to use an incident or statement from the book to help illustrate or contrast to their own struggle. While students were at first reluctant to use language other than Standard American English (SAE), having had previously been taught that the classroom was not the space for any other languages, with encouragement and repeated reference to how Perez and Sotomayor move from English to Spanish with great effect, they began to create moving and beautifully narrated stories, which included detailed descriptions of their own particular cultural practices. Students in some classes then went on to share these with other students in a later Common Read event. Based on informal responses by students and faculty, this particular assignment was successful in not only encouraging and validating students' "funds of knowledge," and their home languages, but also in increasing interest in and awareness of other cultures. Encouraging and facilitating students to use the languages they know and speak outside of the classroom, "allow[s] for them to engage more deeply in classroom conversations and enhance[s] their learning experience" (Irizarry, 2017, p. 87). Having a text that uses more than one language, particularly a memoir where the author's identity is demonstrated through this use of multilingualism and code-switching, is a huge first step in creating a culturally sustaining curriculum.

Two more significant assignments required students to look beyond their immediate knowledge and delve more deeply into the themes of the books as suggested by the college. The first is a five to seven page analytical essay connecting Sonia Sotomayor's experience as described in *My Beloved World* to theories of success in light of the challenges of gender inequality. "Students will work together in groups to discuss, debate and share quotes and

scenes from *My Beloved World* to illustrate connections between Sotomayor's experience and the additional texts they have read. Thus, analysis and evidence are at the heart of [this] Common Read assignment" (Counihan, 2018). The second assignment required students to do outside research by creating an annotated bibliography: "The project will ask you to reflect on your connection with *My Beloved World* by Sonia Sotomayor, while engaging in research. In her book, Sotomayor, the first Latina on the U. S. Supreme Court, takes on the many issues she encountered in her life and on her journey to becoming a judge; political ones like poverty and affirmative action, and personal ones like alcoholism and diabetes. You will create an annotated bibliography that provides four articles that examine the issue of your choice, ending with the conclusion you reach after your analysis" (Ford, 2018). Although both assignments allowed students to choose their own topic of interest, underpinning this and all exercises in the classes was the significant contributions of Latinx women and men. "Because of their long histories of academic neglect and marginalization within schools, students [are] understandably, reluctant to [engage with] a curriculum that foregrounded their communities, history, literature and languages" (Irizzary, 2017, p.90). However, once introduced, we see how student engagement increases and their educational opportunities expand.

Other assignments that fit a culturally sustaining pedagogy include creating a collection of personally significant texts about New York City's cultural landscape, which could include anything from poetry to a guide to specific neighborhood and examining the history, culture, and beauty of Puerto Rican identity in the memoir and the poetry of Martín Espada. A Business Law class also required students to explore aspects of ethics and social responsibility, citing specific examples from personal knowledge of areas where persons and society fall short, or excel, in supporting the less fortunate within our society.

Queensborough's pedagogical and curricular approach to the Common Read can be easily adapted to fit the needs of your institution, and a significant budget is not necessary. Colleges can use their own resources—the students and faculty—as presenters develop events that match up to your institution's resources. While having the author come to speak at the college is desirable, as we have shown, it is not necessary to have a successful program. The choice of books and the pedagogical grounding for events and assignments is what is most important. As our experience with the Sotomayor and Perez books indicates, memoirs that include Spanish and Spanglish or other patios work well to illustrate the importance of cultural heritage and language in both personal and academic success. Students identify with one real person's experience, and that experience can be explored through the lens of different disciplines, from history to sociology to political science, nursing, biology, and criminal justice. It is helpful as well if the memoir is also a literacy narrative --or, while education need not be at the heart of the memoir, as it is for Sotomayor's, it is still a theme running throughout the work. *When I was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago (1993), Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982) are all frequently excerpted and anthologized works that merit possible consideration of the whole text for a Common Read if you wish to take a historical perspective: How has the Puerto Rican or Mexican-American experience changed since these texts were set or published?

However, more recently published memoirs address some of the political and social issues of our time, particularly immigration and the complexity of Latinx/Hispanic identity. We suggest the following that may be of interest to your students and faculty:

- ***My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss and Hope*, by Diane Guerrero (2014)**

Actress and activist Diane Guerrero, known for her roles in *Orange is the New Black* and *Jane the Virgin*, shares her story of coming home from high school one day to an empty home: her mother, father and brother were deported to Colombia. In an engaging and conversational style, she writes of how she completed her studies at the Boston Arts Academy, staying with friends as she navigated life without family. “Immigration affects all of us,” Guerrero writes in her introduction, “It affects how safe we feel, the food we eat, and our friends and neighbors” (p. 3).

- ***Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina*, by Raquel Cepeda (2013)**

Journalist and film-maker Raquel Cepeda’s memoir, written in a provocative “woke” style, is an exploration of her Dominican identity, first as a young girl, a fan of hip-hop in the New York City neighborhood of Washington Heights. As an adult, Cepeda took a DNA test and investigated the complexity of the results, in a fascinating journey that took her from Guinea-Bissau to Morocco and Spain. Cepeda weaves history and her own story together with great skill and consideration.

- ***The Distance Between Us: A Memoir*, by Reyna Grande (2013)**

In her heart-breaking, plaintive story of family separation, Grande describes how her mother left her and her brother in Mexico to be raised by her grandparents, as her mother joined her father, already in the United States, to work and send money home. Her father then sent for his children, to live with his new wife and family in Los Angeles, and Grande struggled with learning English and adapting to this sudden new life. Grande, through the lens of her child

self's perceptions, raises questions of the risks and rewards of immigration and its impact on families.

- ***The Prince of Los Cocuyos: A Miami Childhood*, by Richard Blanco (2014)**

Spanish/Cuban-American poet and engineer Richard Blanco shares his experiences coming of age in this funny and poignant memoir of growing up in Miami in the 1970s and 80s. Blanco, who is gay, writes frankly about his struggle with his identity, as he is raised in a conservative multigenerational home. Blanco's eye for detail and creative use of language makes for a vivid and touching read.

- ***The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*, by Francisco Cantu (2018)**

In this controversial memoir, University of Arizona writing professor Francisco Cantu, the grandson of Mexican immigrants, graduates from college and chooses to become a border patrol guard. For four years, Cantu witnessed and policed the horrible reality of human suffering and desperation at the border. He writes in a literary and impressionistic style that is both challenging and intriguing.

In closing, we suggest expanding the reach of our college-bound Common Read and organizing a HETS/HACU-Member Institution-Wide Common Read. The valuable resources of our campuses can be shared, to the great benefit of our students. As we constantly strive to give our students meaningful and memorable educational experiences, we can explore Latinx/Hispanic culture together, faculty and students, across campuses throughout the country. By expanding this culturally sustaining program, we are helping all of our students to realize, as Justice Sotomayor wrote in a letter to our colleague John Yi's students, "the richness of your past is a strength." Sotomayor continued: "Throughout my

life, my Puerto Rican background has helped me to succeed. My culture gives me a strong moral grounding that allows me to view problems from perspectives that others might not see. Your cultures have the power to do the same for you.” (2019).

References

Blanco, R. (2014). *The prince of Los Cocuyos: A Miami childhood*. New York, NY: Ecco Press.

Cantu, F. (2018). *The line becomes a river: Dispatches from the border*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Cepeda, R. (2013). *Bird of paradise: How I became Latina*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

“Common Intellectual Experiences: The Common Read” (n.d.). Queensborough Community College-CUNY. Retrieved from <http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/cetl/commonread/commonIntellectualExperiences.html>

Counihan, B. (2018). “*My Beloved World* Common Read Assignment.” QCC-CUNY.

Edington, S., Holmes, A. L., Reinke, P. (2015). "A tale of two common reads: Models for developing a successful common reading program for first year engineering students." *Proceedings of the ASEE annual conference & exposition*.

Ferguson, K., Brown, N., Piper, L. (2015). “Exploring sense of community in a university common book program.” *The learning assistance review*. National College Learning Center Association, 20(1).

- Ferguson, K., Brown, N., Piper, L. (2014). "How much can one book do?": Exploring perceptions of a common book program for first-year university students." *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 44(2),164–199.
- Ferguson, M. (2006). "Creating Common Ground: Common Reading and the First Year of College" *Peer Review*, 8(3).
- Ford, R. (2018). "My Beloved World Common Read Assignment." QCC-CUNY.
- Grande, R. (2013). *The distance between us: A memoir*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press.
- Grasgreen, Allie. (2014). "Common read canned" *Inside Higher Education*.
- Guerrero, D. (2016). *My family divided: One girl's journey of home, loss and hope*. New York, NY: St Martin's Griffin Press.
- Irizarry, J.G. (2017). "'For us, by us:' A vision for culturally sustaining pedagogies forwarded by Latinx youth." In H.S. Alim and D. Paris (Eds.). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kuh, George D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- Maloy, J., Counihan, B., Dupre, J., Madera, S., & Beckford, I. (2017) "The unCommon read: Perspectives from faculty and administration at a diverse urban community

college” In A. Horning, D. Golnitz & C. R. Haller (Eds.). *What is college reading?*
Colorado State University Press.

Paris, D. (2012). “Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology,
and practice” *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.

Perez, R. (2015). *Handbook for an unpredictable life*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

“QCC Fact Book” (2018-2019). Queensborough Community College-CUNY.

Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger of memory*. New York, NY: Bantam.

Santiago, E. (1993). *When I was Puerto Rican*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Sotomayor, S. (2018). Letter to “Students of John D. Yi.” Supreme Court of the United
States.

Sotomayor, S. (2013). *My beloved world*. New York, NY: Knopf.

Thomas, P. (1967). *Down these mean streets*. New York, NY: Knopf.