Lecture: Understanding Multicultural Literature

While reading your essays, I noticed that there is some confusion with some of the basic terms. Specifically, terms like Latino or Spanish American, seem to have been misunderstood. Therefore, I decided to explain the terms as they relate to the study of literature in the US. My area of specialty is contemporary and multicultural literature so the examples below compare and use definitions of Women’s Literature and African American literature to help you to gain a better understanding of the terms we use in class.

Although the US has never been homogeneous, the literature taught as classic in the US has traditionally been European with greatest emphasis on British male authors. However, since the civil and cultural revolutions of the late 1960s, many of the previously underrepresented groups are finding their way into the cannons of US literature. Because they have been previously omitted and are still considered non-traditional, they are often taught in classes that center on literature that is ethnic, race or gender specific.

Courses in women’s literature focus on women writer’s, most of whom are European or North American. Further, they usually have a similar social and political histories and their language of origin is English.

African American or black literature centers on works written by people of African descent who were born or have immigrated to the US. Although one of the elements that links black literature is the author’s relationship to Africa, the specific African country is not usually a consideration because the primary unifying factor is a 400-year history of slavery and oppression. Since so much time has elapsed, the descendants’ original country of origin is rarely known. Therefore, the shared history of oppression is what unites the literature.

Although the primary unifying element of Latino literature is similar to that of African American literature, one of enslavement and oppression, the Spanish began their conquest 500 years ago and the people affected come from both North and South America. Catholicism is another connecting factor. It is prevalent in countries colonized by the Spanish, but indigenous religions that reflect the history and culture of the regions can also infuse the work.

Another unifying factor is language. In African American literature, English, the language of the oppressor, is the language of “origin” for the literature. The same is true of Spanish in Latino literature. However, instead of being transported as the Africans were to the US, the “Indians” or indigenous people were enslaved or oppressed in their own homelands and as the societies evolved, many indigenous people commingled with the Spanish. Further, the northward movement or process of emigration to the US is a relatively new one when compared to the African American.

Latino literature usually refers to literature written by people of Spanish descent who live in the US. These writers come from various countries and cultures, cultures that are still active. Furthermore, although each was conquered by the Spanish, each country has its own culture and contemporary history.
Cubans and Puerto Ricans, for instance, come from islands in the Caribbean, tropical places. In 1959, after a lengthy revolution, Cuba became a free country. Conversely, Puerto Rico is a currently a commonwealth of the US. Its people are US citizens. Traditional foods include things grown on the islands like roots and tubers, yucca, yams and green bananas. Reggaeton, bachata and salsa are music that originated on the islands.

While Mexicans once claimed much of the southwest US and still lay claim to a large portion of Latin America. They have fought a number of revolutions against many oppressors including the French from whom they gained independence during a battle fought on Cinco de Mayo in 1862. Corn, which was traditionally used to make tortillas, beans, and spicy peppers are common foods. Ranchero, Tejano or Tex-Mex are popular musical genres.

Latinos living and writing in the US can come from any number of Spanish speaking countries including Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama and as far south as Peru, Chile and Argentina. The idea in a course called *Latino Literature* is to study the written work of these diverse people. However, in order to understand the work we must review elements of their shared history and influences. Further, we must explore their similarities, their differences and consider how those elements effect what they write.

To that end, we are following a trail, which begins with the indigenous people, the Incas, Mayans, and Aztecs (Quechua myths and legends). We continue working our way through the ravages of conquest as wrought by the Spanish (the soldier’s journal, Sor Juana). Then as the cultures struggle and merge creating something new, we explore what that transformation has wrought (Borges, Cardenal, and Carpentier). Finally, we read and explore the works of those who are the product of this history that live and write in the US (Arenas, Castillo, and Anaya).

So, when you use the term Latino recognize that it is a term that encompasses many cultures, cultures that span two continents, North and South America. Remember there is no one music, no one type of food, no one terrain or climate, and no one race.

**Rough Timeline:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Native Societies</th>
<th>Conquest (1492)</th>
<th>Revolution and Freedom (18-1900s)</th>
<th>Latinos in US (20/21st Century)</th>
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</thead>
</table>

Terms you may have encountered:

- **Latino**
  a common or populace term for people of Spanish descent living in the US.

- **Hispanic**
  a governmental term for people of Spanish descent living in the US, considered conservative.

- **Spanish American**
  synonym for Hispanic

- **Chicano**
  a populace term for a Mexican-American
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boricua</td>
<td>indigenous term for a Puerto Rican</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boriquen</td>
<td>indigenous or Taino name for the island of Puerto Rico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marielito</td>
<td>one of 125,000 Cubans who came to the US during the Mariel boatlift in 1980, considered derogatory</td>
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