

Why to Name Your Daughter Selena: Journeys in Hispanic Identity in the West and the Women We Worship along the Way

Michael Husni

The simple rhetoric of the “uninhabited west” or “el Norte” as a place of new opportunity and fresh starts leads students to encounter the west as a place of assimilationist economics, where one abandons an old life to adopt a new, often better way of life. For Hispanic/Spanish populations of the American southwest and Mexico, this sense of heterogeneous assimilation is too simple to represent the complex cultural politics of movement in the West/el Norte. While some, like the early Spanish conquistadores, aimed to continue and spread their way of life, native tribes saw many of their cultural practices stamped out. This trend is paralleled in modern cultural politics as many Mexican immigrants face similar identity loss when settling in America. This relationship between native and migrant populations is not easily measured or summarized in one moment in the history of the American southwest and Mexico. Hence, this unit aims to develop a survey of significant symbols and events which left Hispanic identity changed. As cultures negotiate their identities relative to each other and the land they each occupy, they generate materials telling of the journeys, geographic and cultural, that reveal what life was like in the West, and more importantly, what the West symbolized for each population. This unit will trace specifically four artifacts representative of significant icons in Hispanic identity: the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, representing La Malinche, the *tilma de Juan Diego*, representing La Virgen de Guadalupe, the song “Como la flor” representing its singer, Selena, and the *corrido* of Adelita, representing *las soldaderas* of the Mexican Revolution. Each of these artifacts represents a cultural icon (more interestingly, female) that places the negotiation of Hispanic identity at the forefront of their existence. Whether it involves the relations between early Spanish, Christian conquistadores and native tribes or modern Americans of Mexican decent, this cultural exchange will help students explore the process and outcomes of cultural interaction. Most importantly, these figures will pose the vocabulary of an icon within the target language (Spanish), allowing students to produce higher-level analysis based on familiar structures, and then extend thinking into their own lives. Inevitably, students will analyze their own and other cultural identities through a variety of tenses and grammar concepts and create a history of their own traveled object that will tell the story of their “culture” and its evolution in an increasingly diverse world.