Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume I: Twentieth Century Latin American Writing

The Influence of Musical Folk Traditions in the Poetry of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén

Guide for Curriculum Unit 97.01.05
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By studying the poetry of Langston Hughes from the United States and Nicolás Guillén from Cuba, students will come to see the friendship of these two literary figures as both a symbol of the interconnectedness of the English and Spanish-speaking worlds and the importance of race to human experience. Both of these are poets of mixed racial background who wrote about the African culture in their respective countries. Students will learn about the history of Africans in Cuba in order to understand the context of these poems, most of which were written during the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when many Americans were exploring their African heritage for the first time.

Students will listen to the blues and *son* music these writers based some of their poetry on and make connections between the music and poetry. They will learn about and create an Afro-Cuban percussion instrument, memorize and recite a Nicolás Guillén poem, learn how to talk about a poem in Spanish using literary terms, as well as write their own poems based on personal cultural issues.

Topics covered in narrative form in this unit include: Biographies of the two poets and an account of their meeting, the Négritude and Afro-Cubanist movements, a history of Africans in Cuba, the blues poetry of Langston Hughes, the *son* (a Cuban folk music), and the poetry of Nicolás Guillén. There are many possibilities here for collaboration with teachers of French, English, Music, History, and Geography. This would be a great unit to do during African History Month.

(Recommended for Spanish and Spanish for Spanish Speakers, grades 8-12)