

NEPANTLA: **BETWEEN WORLDS**

A Story and Lesson Plan Addressing the Mexican-American Experience

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

This lesson plan uses excerpts from the story “*Nepantla*” by Olga Loya, a professional storyteller based in San Jose, CA. This teaching tool seeks to inspire conversation among students about issues related to living a bi-cultural life in the United States today. It addresses issues of language and bilingualism, issues of belonging and alienation, and the quest to find a place for oneself and all of one’s cultural identities.

Grade Level: Grades 9-12

Purpose

- To help students understand the experience of being bilingual and bi-cultural in the United States.
- To use storytelling to engage students in thinking about issues of discrimination, about the importance of knowing one’s own culture, and about the human need to belong.
- To provide an opportunity for students to tell their own stories of family, culture, isolation, and belonging.
- To encourage students to embrace all of who they are and to allow others to be all of who they are.

Outcome

By the end of this lesson, each student will

- Be familiar with the experience of living bi-culturally and bilingually
- Tell his or her own story as inspired by the story excerpts

Materials Needed

- Teacher Instructions
- Handout #1: Group Activities
- Handout #2: Story excerpts from “*Nepantla*”



Lesson Plan

Outline of Activities

- **Day One**
 1. Introduction and Summary of “*Nepantla*” (7-10 minutes)
 2. Small Group Activity (25-35 minutes)

- **Day Two**
 3. Small Group Pair Up (20-25 minutes)
 4. Whole Class Discussion (15-20 minutes)
 5. Pledge (5-10 minutes)

Lesson Plan

I. Introduction (7-10 minutes)

The following story-excerpts are from a longer story by Olga Loya. It is entitled *Nepantla: Between Worlds*.

Teachers/Leaders should study these excerpts and see which are most appropriate for their students.

Introduce your students to the story “*Nepantla*” from which they will read excerpts and explain that they will be reading the excerpts in groups and then discussing those stories.

Today we’re going to discuss excerpts from the story “*Nepantla*” by Olga Loya, a Mexican-American storyteller who grew up in the Barrio of East Los Angeles. In this story, Loya writes about what it feels to be *nepantla*, which means “between worlds” in the Nahuatl (pronounced ‘na: wat) language, which is the ancient language of Mexico. Loya felt caught between the different worlds she inhabited while growing up because there was tension between the culture of her Mexican-American family and the larger Anglo culture of the United States. Her parents were Mexican Americans, yet they didn’t speak to her in Spanish because they wanted her to fit into American culture. This story includes a series of stories from Loya’s youth: spending time with her Mexican grandmother who encouraged Olga to be proud of her identity, learning to dance with her mother, confronting gangs and drugs in her neighborhood, and being discouraged from going to college by her high school counselor and one of her teachers. Loya shares her struggle to find a place to belong, first by trying to fit into the Anglo world by downplaying her Mexican heritage, then by reclaiming her Mexican culture and identity, and, finally, by finding a way to integrate and embrace her various identities.



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Mexican? American? Chicana? Latina?

Telling her personal story Olga Loya explores that place in between who and where we are in this world. It is a story about searching for a cultural home and along the way struggling with racism, bad cultural esteem, drugs, gangs, and defeatist advice. All along this same path there are influences that help Loya find her way to her culture as a Mexican American, Chicana, Latina, and, finally, to herself. In this story that was created to be performed live, Olga uses humor, dancing and music, wit and a fierce honesty to find a way to bridge the way between her worlds. Olga's hope is that by sharing her story others will have a chance to look at themselves in a whole new way.

This story is explicitly about what it is like to grow up bilingual and bi-cultural in The United States, but it has themes with which we can all identify, no matter what our backgrounds. We all know what it is like to want to belong, to have our dreams slighted, to be disappointed by members of our own family or group, and to try to figure out who we are.

We're going to use excerpts from "*Nepantla*" in small groups to get us talking about some of these issues. We'll have a chance to discuss issues that are specific to Mexican-American culture, issues that face all people who move back and forth between cultures or worlds, and issues that all humans face.

2. Small Group Activity (25-35 minutes)

Describe what students will do during the small group activity and then place them in small groups.

I'm going to place you into small groups and give you a handout with an excerpt from "*Nepantla*" and a handout with discussion questions and directions for your small group. Choose one person, more if there is dialogue, to read the story out loud. Choose a timekeeper, reporter, and a facilitator who will ask the questions and keep the discussion moving. Then read the story aloud, discuss the questions, and take time to tell your own stories.

Place students into groups of no more than four students. Do not allow students to choose their own groups. [The goal is to create groups that contain students with different backgrounds and experiences and that allow students to work with students who are not already their friends. There are many ways to create random groups, such as having the class count off by the number of groups you want; in this case, there are eight stories, so have students count off by eight.] Each group should get a different story and a set of discussion questions; if you can, provide each student in the group with his or her own copy of the excerpt and discussion questions. If there are more groups than stories, more than one group can work on a story; just be sure not to pair them up in the next activity.

Check on groups, making sure they are moving quickly enough so that there is time for them to tell their stories. Check, too, that they are working only on the discussion questions associated with their excerpt and telling their own stories. (In other words, they should not work on the three discussion questions on



Handout #1 until they pair up with another group.) Remind the Reporters that they are to take notes on the group's answers to the discussion questions and on the individual stories told. You may want to collect these notes to pass back at the beginning of the next class.

3. Small Group Pair Up (20-25 minutes)

Pair two groups to work together. Ask each group to describe the story they read and summarize the discussion they had as a group about the excerpt from "*Nepantla*." Students can tell their own stories. To shorten this activity, ask each group to choose just one or two students to share stories. Then this larger group should discuss the questions on Hand Out #1.

Remind them to choose a timekeeper, reporter and facilitator for this new, larger group. Check on groups to make sure they stay within the time limit.

4. Whole Class Discussion (15-20 minutes)

Bring the groups back together so that the entire class can discuss the stories, the students' reactions to them, and their own stories. End the class by reading the final excerpt from the story and discuss it as a class. Some discussion questions follow the excerpt to guide your conversation.

Bridge Between Worlds

His panic. Her panic. Whose panic? I know I am not Hispanic. When I first heard that word, I felt as though the government was trying to box me in with another label. I didn't need any more labels.

Then people started using the term "Latino" more and more. I thought, "Oh no, here we go again!"

One day I asked my daughter, "Maya, what does 'Latino' mean to you?"

She looked at me and said, "Can I get back to you?"

A few days later she came over and said, "I think being a Latina means anyone who uses a language with Latin as its root."

She thought for a while longer, "But if I say I am a Latina, you know I speak from a Latin-based language but you don't know where I come from."

"Hmm," I thought, "this just gets more and more interesting."

All my life I have been in a state of *Nepantla*. Between worlds. Mexican American. Mexican AMERICAN. MEXICAN American. *Chicana*. Latina. Now I am *orgullosa de mi cultura*, proud of my culture, *orgullosa de mi idioma*, proud of my language, *orgullosa de mi misma*, proud of myself. I am no longer straddling two worlds. I walk the bridge from my Mexican world to my American world and I am at home in both.



Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does Loya end her story the way she does?
- 2) How does the ending of this story influence your understanding of Loya's story?
- 3) What labels have you been given in your own life? What labels have you chosen for yourself?
- 4) How do or did you respond to these different labels?
- 5) When you think about yourself and all of your various identities, how would you describe yourself right now? Who are you?

5. Pledge (5-10 minutes)

In order to honor the diversity of your classroom, ask students to write a short pledge that promises to respect difference and celebrate diversity. Have each group read these to the whole class.

Notes to Teachers:

Any part of this activity could be expanded and extended, but all of the activities are necessary to include in order for the lesson to work.

The bolded text can be read out aloud and followed word for word; however, you may want to read over the material a few times so that you are comfortable putting these ideas into your own words, in the way in which you normally talk to your students.

If you would like to extend this lesson:

1. Pair small groups with more than one other group to share story excerpts, discussion questions, and personal stories.
2. Read all of the story excerpts out loud and in order at the end of the lesson during the large group discussion so that students hear more of Loya's story.
3. Ask small groups to create a dramatic retelling of their story excerpt and have each group perform or tell the story for the whole class. Consider allowing students to choose alternative ways of telling the story, such as creating a poem, song, drawing, activity, or pantomime of the story.
4. Use the resource list for ideas to add material to the class. For example, you might show a clip of a movie, begin or end with a story from another author, assign a story or essay for students to read before they come to class or as a follow-up to the discussion.
5. Wrap up the learning that occurred during this lesson by having students brainstorm all that they learned, how they have changed their minds during this class, and making a commitment to change their behavior in some way as a response to this lesson. Have a student record these statements on newsprint and hang it up in the classroom.
6. Have students write down an "excerpt" from their own lives, telling one event that has influenced their



understanding of their own identity. These could be shared in class, hung on the walls, and/or turned in for a teacher response.

Ask students to identify all the ways that someone might be *nepantla*, or "between worlds." Write the *nepantla* list on the board and then have students choose one way in which they are *nepantla* and to think of a story to demonstrate that. Have students either write that story or tell that story to another student.

Resources

Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Philadelphia: New Society, 1996. Written by a white man and primarily for a white audience but useful for people of all backgrounds.

O'Halloran, Susan. *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference & Creating Inclusion*. Available at www.susanohalloran.com. A two-level curriculum for schools about diversity, race and dealing with difference.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Written by an African-American woman for a diverse audience. Focuses specifically on race and racism among adolescents.

Real Women Have Curves. Dir. Patricia Cardoso. HBO Independent Productions, 2002. A first-generation Mexican-American teenage girl growing up in east Los Angeles tries to walk the line between her "American dreams" and her traditional family.

If you would like to read other stories written by Olga Loya or engage her to perform at your school, go to www.olgaloya.com



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Handout #1: Group Activities

Directions

Identify which member of your group will be the Reporter. The Reporter will take notes during the discussion and share some of what your group says in the Group Pair Up Activity and to the larger classroom. Go around the circle when answering the following questions so that each group member gets a chance to share his or her answers. You only have 20 minutes for this discussion, so be sure to divide your time evenly between the discussion questions and your own storytelling.

Small Group Questions

Discussion Questions

1. What is your first reaction or response to this story?
2. If you met the author, Olga Loya, what would you want to ask her?
3. Answer the discussion questions that accompany the story excerpt from “*Nepantla*” that you read.

Storytelling

Reading and listening to this story probably made you think of events and experiences in your own life. Take a few moments to call those experiences to mind. Then take turns telling one another your own stories and how they relate to the excerpt from “*Nepantla*.” Make sure each person gets a chance to share his or her story.



Group Pair Up Questions

Take time to hear from each group what they discussed about their story and the personal stories that they shared. Then as a large group answer the following questions:

1. How do the stories from “*Nepantla*” inform, influence, challenge, and/or explain one another?
2. How do the stories told in your groups extend the message of the stories from “*Nepantla*”?
3. After hearing a few stories from “*Nepantla*” and the stories of your classmates, what message will you take away from today? Take turns sharing what each one of you will take away. As a group, write one to two sentences that capture those learnings.

Choose a student from your group who will share your messages and learnings with the class during large group discussion.



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Handout #2

Story Excerpt #1—*Nepantla: Between Worlds*

English . . . Spanish. American . . . Mexican. Spanish . . .
English. Mexican . . . American. All my life I felt like I was straddling worlds
and I could never seem to find my balance. I had never even put it into words
but I knew I didn't quite fit anywhere.

One day I met a woman who was putting up an art show called
Nepantla.

As we talked I asked her, "What does *Nepantla* mean?"

She said, "It is a Nahuatl term. Nahuatl is the ancient and still-used
language of Mexico. It is the language that the Aztecs spoke and
speak. *Nepantla* means "between worlds."

I stared at her for a while, just thinking.

"*Nepantla*," I repeated. "*Nepantla*—between worlds."

For the first time, I had a word for what I had been feeling all those
years!

I thought, "I have been in a state of *Nepantla* all my life."

Where I grew up there were many Mexicans and some Japanese and
Jewish people. I knew I wasn't Japanese or Jewish but I wasn't sure about
being Mexican. I was six years old when I went to my mother and asked her,
"Mamá, am I Mexican?"



She looked at me for a long time and then she said, "Yes and no, *Mijita*, little one."

"Yes and no?"

"Yes and no."

"What does 'yes and no' mean?"

"You are Mexican but you are American. You were born here in Los Angeles, California in the United States. You are a Mexican American just like your father and me."

"Oh, ok mamá."

I decided to ask my Grandma Loya, too. Of everyone in the family, I trusted her the most. I loved being with her and I wanted to see what she had to say.

I went to my *abuelita*, grandmother, and asked her, "*Abuelita*, soy *Mexicana*, Grandmother, am I Mexican?"

Making the sign of the cross, she said, "*Que dios te bendiga*, May God bless you. *Ay si mijita*, oh, yes, my little one, *eres Mejicana*, you are Mexican. *Sus bis abuelos, y yo y tus otro abuelos vienen de Chihuahua, México*. Your great grandparents and grandparents and I come from Chihuahua, Mexico. *Vives aquí pero eres Mejicana!* You live here but you are Mexican!"

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between the answer that Olga's mother gives her and the answer her grandmother gives her when she asks if she is Mexican?
2. Why do they give her different answers?
3. What different messages have you received about your own identity? Who gave you those different messages? How did you make sense of those messages?



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Story Excerpt #2—Spanish is Dangerous

I lived in East Los Angeles where everyone spoke Spanish. Well, at least the adults spoke Spanish to each other, but they didn't speak Spanish to us children.

They didn't speak Spanish to be mean or to deprive us of our *cultura*. They wanted us to fit in, not to have an *accento*. They wanted us to be *Americanos!*

It was the 50's and schools didn't allow you to speak Spanish either. If a student spoke Spanish, the teachers scolded, "Don't speak Spanish in school!" If a student continued speaking Spanish, the student got sent to the Vice Principal. The Vice Principal made the student wait and wait. Finally, the Vice Principal called the student into his office and said, "Didn't we tell you not to speak Spanish?! Why don't you people listen?"

If a student kept speaking Spanish, the Vice Principal came to the classroom and stood in front of the room. He said to the one who had been speaking Spanish, "Come to the front of the classroom—now."

The student would go to the front of the classroom shaking. Then the student put his or her hand out for what was going to happen. "Whap!" The Vice Principal hit the student on the hand. If the student moved the hand away, the Vice Principal hit again, even harder.

I thought to myself, "*Chihuahua*, this Spanish is dangerous!"

At the same time that I was not allowed to speak Spanish, I was hanging around with my Japanese friends. All through elementary school, at least once a week they went to a Japanese after school program. Sometimes I



went with them. I sat and listened to the lessons about their culture and their language. I wondered, "So, where are the Mexican after school programs? How come nobody is showing me about my culture and my language? What's wrong with us that everyone is so ashamed?"

I was filled with questions and I didn't know who to ask. When I tried to ask my family questions, everyone said, "Don't ask so many questions. You don't need to know that stuff."

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about the way the adults in this story tried to integrate the Mexican-American children into the Anglo-American culture?
2. Which elements of your own cultural background were you encouraged or discouraged to express? How have you learned to integrate your personal background with that of the larger culture?
3. Why should we try, or not try, to integrate our ethnic culture with our identity as a U. S. citizen? Is one more important than the other? Why?



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Story Excerpt #3—Grandma Talk

The only ones who spoke Spanish to us were my two grandmothers and my grandfather and that was only because they couldn't speak English! My two grandmothers talked all the time. My grandfather didn't like to talk much. If people talked too much around my grandfather, he just got up and went to the garden so he could be alone.

I adored my Grandma Loya. She was about five feet tall and small boned. She had high cheek bones and deep set brown eyes with thick black eyebrows and she always wore her long gray hair back in a *moño*, bun. She wore those shiny dark gabardine dresses with *botones*, buttons, in the front. She wore old lady shoes with the *taconitos*, little heels. She was gentle and kind, but she ruled the family with an iron fist. When she said to do something, everybody jumped.

She'd call my father on the phone and say, "Sandy, *ven a cortar el zacate este sábado por favor.*"

He'd be there the next Saturday cutting the grass at her house even if the grass was up to our knees at our place.

I could never figure out how she made everyone do what she wanted. Oh, I knew why I did things for her: I wanted to please her. I especially loved her because she never scolded me about being too rough and being a tomboy.



Everyone else was always after me. My mother always said, "Why are you always so dirty?"

My aunts said, "Olgita, why are you always running from one place to another?"

But my grandmother was a different story. I'd go see her and be all dusty and dirty, and she would just laugh and give me a big *abrazo*, hug. Then she'd say, "*Mijita quieres una taza de café?*" Coffee? Coffee for me? Nobody ever gave me coffee. She gave me a cup with a little bit of coffee and lots of milk. She'd put her arm around me, and I fit there perfectly! We sat sipping our *cafecitos* and talked. She shared stories with me and told about the family and her friends. I loved hearing stories about my Papa and my *tíos* and *tías*! And sometimes she told me folk tales, which I loved.

All the time I was with my Grandma Loya I didn't realize I was speaking Spanish. To me it was just grandma talk.

Discussion Questions

1. How is speaking Spanish related to Olga's relationship with her grandmother?
2. In this story, Olga mentions being a "tomboy"; how does that relate to the issues of speaking Spanish and being Mexican American?
3. Who has been a strong influence—positive or negative—in your life? How?



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Story Excerpt #4—Why Do You Want To Go To College?

When I went to high school, I realized I wanted to go to college. I talked to my girlfriends about it, and they said, "Why do you want to go to college? Don't you want to get married and have kids?" My parents said the same thing. My mother was always saying: "We want you to get married and have a good life."

It took me a long time to get my nerve up to go see the school counselor. I was in the 10th grade when I walked into the counselor's office. The counselor was sitting behind a big desk. He motioned to a chair across from him and I sat down. I could hardly speak I was so nervous. I just sat there.

Finally, he said, "What can I do for you?"

I gulped and said in a scared voice, "Do you think I could go to college?"

I wanted him to say, "Yes, there is no problem. You can surely go to college!"

Instead he said, "Olga, you can't go to college. Your family is too poor. You'll never make it. This is what you should do—study shorthand and typing. That way you can work and then get married."



I just sat there, staring at him. I couldn't believe he had just told me I couldn't go to college. Finally I got up and left. I thought, "Well, he said I can't go to college. He should know. He's the counselor." Then I went to the bathroom and cried.

So I started to study typing and shorthand but I wasn't interested in getting married. I didn't want to get married; I wanted to have some time to myself. I wanted to figure out what I wanted in my life. In my senior year, my best friend got married. There was a joke in her family about me because when they took pictures of her throwing her bouquet, I calmly stood there with my hands behind my back as all of my other friends were reaching out for the bouquet. That's how much I didn't want to get married!

One morning in my junior year of high school, I woke up and thought about the advice the counselor had given me. I thought, "What kind of advice was that? Why can't I go to college? I'm not dumb and I can work. How dare he say that to me? To hell with him—I'm going to college!"

I didn't say anything to anyone but I began to study hard. Just before I graduated from high school, I found out I had received a small scholarship to go to the local community college. The day after I got my scholarship, I was walking down my high school hall feeling good. Then I saw my shorthand teacher. She had always been nice to me, and I was excited to tell her about my scholarship. I waved to her, and she came towards me. She was short and round with beady eyes. Before I could say anything to her, she walked right up to me and got so close that she spit in my face as she hissed, "What a waste. You shouldn't have that scholarship—you'll never even finish college!"

I felt like she had kicked me in the stomach. Anger washed over me. I felt my face getting redder and redder. I thought, "Don't say anything. Olga. You are almost out of school. Don't get into trouble



now!” I just stared at her, and if looks could kill she’d be dead. I looked at her and thought, “We’ll see.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the counselor told Olga she couldn’t go to college? How did that affect Olga?
2. What effect did her shorthand teacher’s words have on Olga?
3. When has someone not believed in you? What was the effect of that? If you’ve never had that experience, how would you have reacted to the counselor and/or teacher in this story?



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Story Excerpt #5—But You Don't Look Mexican!

There was also the thing about color among us. If you were *guera*, light-skinned, you were more favored than if you were *prieta*, dark skinned. I have been mistaken for Italian, Greek, and French. When I was younger, I thought it was cool that people didn't know if I was Mexican. In my late teens, I went into my Mexican-AMERICAN stage. My family didn't help with my Mexican image either. My mother was always saying, "You should go with a white guy. He will treat you better." Oh, I wanted to be an *Americana*. Even though I hung around with my Mexican friends, I wanted to be in the white world, speaking English, and being oh so la-di-da.

People often came up to me and said, "But you don't look Mexican!" As though that was a compliment. When I was in my Mexican-AMERICAN stage, I smiled and said, "Thank you very much."

So I was a Mexican American, Mexican AMERICAN

When I was around 17 years old, I started going to parties outside East Los Angeles and began to realize that where I was growing up was different from other places. I'd walk into a party, and someone would ask, "So, where are you from?"



I'd answer, "I'm from East Los Angeles." Many times, the person stopped smiling, got a scared look and took a few steps back.

Often they leaned over and asked with a sneer, "So where's your knife?"

They were lucky I didn't have a knife because sometimes I wanted to cut out their racist tongues!

As for racists, that school counselor actually did me a great favor. I would never have made it through college without . . . shorthand. I worked my way through school.

As for the teacher who treated me so disrespectfully, well, every time I felt like quitting I remembered her beady little eyes and thought, "I'll show you."

I used that scholarship and went to the community college.

But one day I was standing around with some college classmates and someone asked me how I had gotten to college.

I said, "I was the weener of a scholarship"

They all started to laugh.

I said, "What's so funny about me being the weener of a scholarship?"

They laughed even harder.

"I don't get it. What's so funny about being a weener of a scholarship?"

One of the students finally stopped and said, "A weener goes into a hot dog. You were a *winner* not a *weener* of a scholarship. You don't say 'weener' for 'winner,' 'seeng' for 'sing,' or 'weeng' for 'wing.'"

It was the first time I realized I had an accent. How would I know? Where I grew up, everyone talked like me. I was so embarrassed! It was humiliating to have people making fun of the way I pronounced words, to have people make fun of the way I looked, of the way I was.



I continued my move away from my *cultura*, my *raiz*, my race. I was seriously in my Mexican-AMERICAN time. I was most comfortable in the white world. I spoke perfect English except when I got excited or spoke too much Spanish. I went home but I didn't stay long. I had chosen another world.

I graduated from college and started teaching. But there was an emptiness, a hole in my heart. I did not know I was missing the warmth of the family gatherings and the sweet, lilting sound of Spanish being spoken. I did not know I was missing the music and the affectionate way we Latinos greet each other.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Olga struggling between her Mexican and American identities?
2. What causes Olga to emphasize her American identity? What does she lose by choosing one side of herself over another?
3. How have you struggled to juggle or integrate two or more identities? Did you choose to emphasize one over the other (s)? Why and how did it affect you?



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Story Excerpt #6—What Does a Mexican Look Like?

Then I went to see a man speak in East Los Angeles. He was soft spoken and charismatic. He talked about our powerful ancestors and the importance of standing up for oneself and one's people. He stopped and stared at all of us with his kind brown eyes and said, "*yo soy orgulloso ser un mejicano*. I am proud to be a Mexican." I felt like a bolt of electricity ran through my body. I wanted to cry because I had never heard anyone say those words. Then he talked about how we should be proud of ourselves, of the *cultura*, and about how everyone was equal. His name was César Chávez, the leader of the United Farm Workers of America, the union that protects farm laborers. As I listened to him, I began to feel I needed to go to Mexico to see what made him so proud.

So I went to Mexico to learn more about my *cultura*. What a revelation! Color exploded everywhere—in the flowers, the clothes. There were many different tribes in their beautiful clothes. I went to the *mercados* and the smells of flowers, *yervas*, herbs, chocolate, and *café* surrounded me. There were people with white skin and dark skin, people with blue eyes, brown eyes, and green eyes, redheads, blonds, and brunettes, and all of them *Mejicanos*! There were the pyramids and the museums that showed what my ancestors had done. I visited churches that looked like my own church in East Los Angeles. I saw the *Virgen de Guadalupe* statues everywhere, just like home. In my family's homes, everyone had at least one *Virgen de Guadalupe* statue or picture on the altar. I went to a café and drank *café con leche* just like



my Grandma Loya used to give me. I watched the people, listened to the music, heard the Spanish, and I felt at home.

I saw the elegance and grace of my *cultura* in a whole new way. In my late twenties, my MEXICAN-American stage began. When people said, "But you don't look Mexican!" I didn't thank them. Instead I replied, "Oh, what does a Mexican look like? My grandfather and uncle and aunt were light skinned and redheaded. I have one aunt who was blond and green eyed and I have uncles and aunts who are dark skinned and dark haired. So what does a Mexican look like?"

So I was a Mexican American, Mexican AMERICAN, MEXICAN American.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think it was so important to Olga to go to Mexico?
2. How is Olga beginning to integrate the various parts of herself?
3. In this excerpt, Olga challenges the idea that Mexicans look a certain way. When have you been surprised by someone from a particular group looking or acting differently than you expected? When have you challenged someone else's stereotypes?



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Story Excerpt #7—My Own Rhythms

A few years after I went to Mexico, I moved to Northern California. I missed being around people of color. Often the only people of color were the Native American tribes, and they rarely left their reservations.

One day I was invited to go to a Native American ceremony. The first time I went, I was stunned. All the old people looked like my *tías* and *tíos*, aunts and uncles. There was *tía Neni*, *tía Licha*, and *tío Loli*. They all were brown skinned and brown eyed, and the women were bossing everybody around and acting as if they weren't. It made me feel so at home. I went as often as possible to the ceremonies. I loved the dancing, the chanting, the music. I loved the rhythms.

But they weren't my rhythms.

I began my return to my heritage with my trip to Mexico and I continued my search for my own rhythms by going back to East Los Angeles and really looking and listening. I heard the rhythms of the Spanish language, of the *cumbia*, *ranchero*, and *salsa* music coming out of houses and cars as I walked around. I saw brown people who looked like they had just come from Mexico walking along the streets with Mexican Americans whose families had been here for generations. I saw a proud



people doing the best that they could. At family gatherings I saw love and vitality.

I looked at East Los Angeles and I saw beauty!

Discussion Questions

1. As much as Olga loves and appreciates the Native American culture and ceremonies she experiences, she realizes that they aren't enough for her. Why?
2. How does Olga see her home of East Los Angeles differently when she returns as an adult?
3. What cultures do you enjoy and appreciate that are different from or similar to your own? What do you like about them? What do you love about your own culture? What things can you only get from your own culture?



NEPANTLA: BETWEEN WORLDS

A Story and Lesson Plan Addressing the Mexican-American Experience

Story Excerpt #8—*Mezcla*: The Best of Both

Then I discovered the *Chicano* world. I was glad we were exploring our indigenous past and feeling pride for our people and our land. I felt pride in having Indian blood. After all, I had gone to Mexico and seen the grandeur of my ancestors. However, my parents did not like my calling myself a *Chicana*.

They said, "y qué es eso? Eres mejicana. Eres Americana. Pero no eres Chicana. And what's this? You are Mexican. You are American. But you are not *Chicana*."

I said to them, "But Mom, Dad, I want to feel pride for my ancestry. I mean, we've got some great ancestors—the Aztecs, the Toltecs, the Mayans, the Tarahumaras."

They said, "No, you are not calling yourself a *Chicana* in our house. You are American. You are Mexican. You are not an Indian."

But I argued: "But don't you get it? A Mexican is a *mezcla*, mix, of Indian and Spanish. The best of both are in the Mexican."

"We don't care. You will not call yourself a *Chicana* in this house. Just think what your grandparents would say!"

So I was a Mexican American, Mexican AMERICAN, MEXICAN American, CHICANA.



Discussion Questions

1. Why were Olga's parents against her identifying herself as a *CHICANA*?
2. Why was it important to Olga to identify herself as *CHICANA*?
3. How do you and your family agree or disagree about your identity? How do you negotiate the difference between how you think of yourself and how your family thinks of you?

