

Caroline Hay  
NEH 2106 - The Immigrant Experience in California through Literature and Theatre  
Implementation Plan  
Unit Plan: The Book of Unknown Americans

### **Teaching Context:**

This unit plan will be part of the third-year Spanish as a Heritage Language Class that I teach (titled Spanish for Native Speakers 3). This is an honors class and also receives dual credit with our local community college. Students have taken at least one year previously of Spanish as a Heritage Language; most students have taken the two previous levels of the series. Almost all students have lived in the US their whole lives or were brought here as small children, with a few students who are more recent immigrants. Because of this demographic and the lack of bilingual education in our school district, most students are studying Spanish formally for the first time when they come into these classes. A typical student in my classes speaks Spanish with their family, to varying degrees with friends, but has not done much reading or writing in Spanish.

This unit is centered around the 2014 novel *The Book of Unknown Americans / El libro de los americanos desconocidos* by Cristina Henríquez. The book is told from multiple first person points of view, with two main characters whose stories track throughout the entire book and various other characters who have individual chapters describing their particular immigrant experience. Note: although I have written my implementation plan in English, all reading, writing, and activities are done entirely in Spanish. This is a unit that is done in pieces as we continue to work on other content (for that reason I have not listed Day 1, Day 2, etc.).

### **GOALS**

- Identify elements of effective writing and apply those characteristics to your own writing
- Identify thematic connections between different characters in a literary text
- Conduct an effective interview and use an interview to write an effective first-person narrative essay
- Transform informational and literary texts into a work of theatre

### **UNIT PLAN**

\*As an introduction to the chapters in the novel we will be reading, students will be given the title of the novel (*The Book of Unknown Americans*) and asked to discuss possible significance. A representative from each group will share two or three key points from the discussion. As a whole class we will discuss what makes a person or group of people "unknown." Splitting the class into three groups, with some of the letters of the alphabet of the board (about 15) students will complete the relay, listing people or groups that might be considered "unknown" according to the criteria previously established. After all groups have completed their list, groups will rotate to a different list and circle the three people or ideas they found most interesting or important. Students will then return to their original list and choose one person or group to focus on. As an introduction to the idea of a tableau, students will create a frozen picture, with everyone in the group participating and doing something different, to say something about the person or group they have chosen.

\*Over the course of several weeks, read the chapters from the book of the characters who appear one time only. Each day, students focus on examples of strong writing. In their daily notebook each day they list the character's name and 3-5 examples of phrases, sentences, or passages from the reading that demonstrate effective writing (strong description, sensory details, figurative language, strong word choice, writing that impacts the reader emotionally, etc.). For the first two or three characters complete this activity as a class, then on subsequent days students will choose examples individually or in groups. Some students are chosen day to share an example they identified and explain why it was effective.

\*Starting with the second or third character, preview with students that we will be using book to inspire our own writing as well as a piece of theatre. Again starting with the second or third character, explain that we will be creating a piece of image theatre to help illustrate the characters' lives. Remind students of the tableau they created on the first day. (During the year we will have done various movement activities, such as walking around space first making eye contact, then touching shoulders, then touching elbows; other icebreakers that involve movement, etc.). Students form groups and create three images, one of a "photo", one of a nature scene, and one of something in the process of happening. Groups share all three and other groups discuss what they are observing. On subsequent class periods, after identifying effective lines of writing, groups will create their own image to represent the chapter for each character.

\*During the time period in which the class is reading the vignettes, begin to discuss interviewing skills, with some activities interviewing one another, practicing follow-up questions, etc. Students will choose someone to be their interview subject, someone whose story they believe should be told (an "unknown American") and conduct at least one interview with that person. Give an interview guide with pre-prepared questions and brainstorm and add other questions together as a class. We will discuss technology use (for example, recording the interview on their phones) and using the interview as the basis for an essay.

\*Students write a first-person essay based on their interview (*The Book of Unknown Americans* is written in first person). They have options in terms of giving a broader picture of the person's life or focusing on a selected incident or selected experiences around a theme. They will turn in a draft to receive feedback as well as participate in a peer-revising session focusing on the elements of good writing they have been identifying while reading the vignettes. The final copies of the essays (with the subjects' permission, and with the choice of being named or anonymous) will be compiled into a class anthology, with a student designing the cover.

\*Give a brief introduction to documentary theater, and as an introduction to the UE style in particular, using video and a few short example texts. Students will participate in a reading of one of the vignettes we have read that I have adapted into a performance piece. Students will have time to re-read the original vignette, then have time to "rehearse" the piece before performing for the class. After the performance we will discuss how the original text was adapted and what elements we observed (dates, repetition, names, etc.).

\*In groups, students will then create a similar style of piece based on a character's vignette from the book which will then be performed for the class.

\*As a culminating project, in groups of three or four students will create a more complex theater piece, this time including elements from their own lives as well as from the lives of their interviewees. They can use UE style as well as other documentary elements like text/images/sound, and can also incorporate movement.

\*Ideally these works would be performed at a Latino/a family night event, but realizing it may be challenging to require all students to attend, could perhaps be performed during the day with families invited, or perhaps performed for another of my Spanish as a Heritage Language classes as audience (perhaps my second year class). A few pieces of select performance could also be performed as part of the entertainment at our annual end of the year Multicultural Recognition Night.