

Centro Teaching Guide



Pura Belpré, Storyteller is a 56 minute documentary that explores the life and work of Pura Belpré. She was New York City's first Puerto Rican/Latina librarian and an ambassador for the New York Public Library's work with the Latino community. The innovative storyteller used puppetry, arts and crafts as tools to teach children to read, write and express themselves and transformed a community.

The DVD is available at the Centro store at <http://www.centropr-store.com/pura-belpre-storyteller-dvd/>

Two essential questions guide this teaching guide:

- 1) What do we know about the folklore carried to the U.S. by different immigrants/migrants and that of indigenous people in the U.S.?
- 2) Migrants and immigrants contribute to the culture of their country in multiple ways. What are the contributions of Puerto Rican migrants to the cultural, intellectual and daily life of cities in which they settled such as New York City?

This guide contains:

- Discussion Questions
- Activities
- Centro Teaching Resources
- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Social Studies
- A Curriculum Map for K-12 Educators
- A Biographical Essay & A Background Historical Era Essay
- A Bibliography

Discussion Questions

Grades 9 - 12 and College:

Before Viewing *Pura Belpré, Storyteller*

- 1) What do we know about the folklore carried to the U.S. by different immigrants/migrants and that of indigenous people in the U.S.?
- 2) What are the contributions of Puerto Rican migrants to the cultural, intellectual and daily life of cities in which they settled such as New York City?
- 3) What do we know about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the U.S.?

After Viewing *Pura Belpré, Storyteller*

- 1) What do we want to know more about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the U.S.?
- 2) In your opinion, what is Belpré's most important legacy?
- 3) How important is Belpré's connection to the Harlem Renaissance? Do you see Belpré carrying ideas or information from Harlem Renaissance activities in Black communities to New York's multiracial Puerto Rican communities?
- 4) Discuss a definition of diaspora and how Belpré's work responds to the diaspora or helps to construct the diaspora.
- 5) Discuss the theme of migration in Belpré's life and work. Is Belpré dislocated geographically, culturally or by other forces? What about her characters?
- 6) Universal themes/themes that transcend time and space:
 - **Place:** What place/s is Belpré evoking through her writing? What seems important to her to explore about the places of which she is writing?

- **Gender:** What do you notice about the way Belpré creates gender in her fiction? Is there anything surprising about the gender roles? Is there anything stereotypical? What are the gendered lessons found in her folkloric stories?
- **Journeys:** What do Belpré's characters learn through their journeys?
- **Wisdom and foolishness:** Identify characters who make wise decisions and those who make foolish decisions. What is the social position of the wise character and the foolish character? What might stories about wisdom and foolishness point out to the reader about recognizing these characteristics in life? Is there an element of social critique in stories about wisdom?
- **Autonomy:** How does Belpré work with the themes of power and independence? What is the outcome of independence or autonomy for the characters in Belpré's stories?

7) After reading some of Belpré's texts, how would you define the mission of her work and activities?

Activities

Grades 3 - 9:

Make Pura's Story Come to Life

Dramatize one of Belpré's stories or a scene from a story in a small group.

Grades 9 - College:

Write About it

- 1) Write a script inspired by one of Belpré's stories.
- 2) Write an article on a set of Belpré's stories or Belpré's life and work for a student newspaper, a blog or another Internet source and publish it

Created by Victoria Nuñez, PhD, 10/10/12

Centro Teaching Resources

Pura Belpré (1901-1982), the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City, was also an accomplished writer. She collected Puerto Rican folktales, translating and publishing them as children's literature. Her primary motivation in doing so was to bring Puerto Rican culture to the continental United States. In 1931, she authored perhaps the first book published in English in the U.S. by a Puerto Rican author, and certainly the first published by a major publishing house.

The Puerto Rican Heritage Poster Series

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/research-education/education/puerto-rican-heritage-poster-series>

Timeline of Puerto Rican History Booklet

The Centro Puerto Rican Heritage Poster Series documents the history of Puerto Rican migration and the experiences and contributions of Puerto Ricans to U.S. society.

centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/events_2015/ChronologicBrochure_2015.pdf

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

For K-12 teachers, this teaching guide responds to the following Common Core State Standards (CCSS):

Grades K-5 English Language Arts:

-Recount stories, including fables, folktales and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

-Analyze how and why individuals, events and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text

-Analyze how a particular chapter, scene or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting or plot.

Curriculum Map

Reading and Writing Levels: Upper Elementary, Middle and High School

Essential Questions

What do we know about the folklore carried to the U.S. by different immigrants/migrants and that of indigenous people in the U.S.?

Migrants and immigrants contribute to the culture of their country in multiple ways. What are the contributions of Puerto Rican migrants to the cultural, intellectual and daily life of cities in which they settled such as New York City?

Learning Activities KWL chart: What do we know about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the U.S.? Watch documentary then answer: what do we want to know more about? At the end of unit fill in:

What did we learn?

Instructor reads aloud to students.

Students read silently in class.

Reading journals that document at home reading.

Instructor-led dramatization of a story or part of a story.

Student-led dramatization of a story or part of a story.

Students write an article on a set of Belpré's stories or Belpré's life and work for a student newspaper, a blog or another Internet source and publish it (S).

Enduring Understanding

Puerto Rican migrants have contributed to U.S. society and culture in a variety of ways. Belpré was one of the most professionally accomplished Puerto Rican migrants of her time. She was a professional librarian in the NYPL in the early and thus contributed to creative activities carried out by public libraries. She was among the first Puerto Ricans in the States to write and publish books in English in the early period of Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. territory.

The study of culture includes the study of folklore. Folklore is an important aspect of human culture around the world although it is underappreciated in the western world and is considered most commonly a part of children's culture.

Students' understanding of folklore will be advanced, specifically in understanding folklore as a literary genre. They will learn how folkloric stories differ from other fictional texts.

Strategies Used to Teach Concepts or Skills

Instructor's presentation to the whole group;

Silent reading in class;

Reading journals that document at home reading.

Instructor reads aloud to students.

Instructor models article-writing, including targeting a magazine or web site, identifying a model article and following the model.

Student work in pairs.

Student work in small cooperative learning groups.

Differentiation by Content

The use of at least one documentary will provide visual reinforcement to information provided through instructor presentation and reading; it will reinforce key concepts.

Instructor can choose different reading assignments for students reading significantly above or below grade level.

Instructor can outline lengthier reading selection and give the outline to all students; it is expected to be most crucial for students with limitations in English literacy.

Differentiation by Process

Assign peer partners in multiple patterns. At times students will be partnered with stronger peers, at times with peers working closer to their level.

Small groups and individual conferences so teacher can target assistance.

Essential Knowledge (K), Concepts© and Skills (S) After this Unit of Study:

Students will know (K):

Pura Belpré's most significant contributions to folklore of the U.S.

Belpre's contributions to children's education in New York City.

The people, places and events that influenced Belpre's life and her development as a professional.

Puerto Rican folklore was carried to the States by Puerto Rican migrants. Students will learn some folklore that is familiar to stateside Puerto Ricans as well as other U.S.

Latinos and those from Spain.

Migration is a central experience for stateside Puerto Ricans in part because it is relatively easy to travel from Puerto Rico to the U.S. and also because the majority of Puerto Rican migration occurred relatively recently.

Students will understand these concepts (c):

Folklore: Folkloric stories are told over and over again and are so familiar to a culture that they may not appear in a book.

Migration: Migration is a term describing human travel from place to place for a purpose other than leisure (i.e. a vacation). Examples include travelling in order to work, attend school or gain training in a skill.

Dramatic elements:

Students will discuss how drama and humor add to the interest in a folkloric story.

Students will build the following skills:

Gather information from archival documents.

Build skills in gathering information from oral histories excerpted in documentaries.

Apply, analyze and synthesize information from primary and secondary sources.

Write in the genre of magazine/newspaper article.

Write to incorporate information from primary and secondary sources

Participate consistently in group planning for performance tasks.

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Biographical Essay

Pura Belpré (circa 1899-1982) was a Puerto Rican storyteller and folklorist. She built on her love of telling and retelling stories during her career at the New York Public Library and as a published author. As the first Puerto Rican librarian in the New York Public Library system she pioneered the library's work with New York's Puerto Rican community.

Belpré was born in Cidra, a small town in Puerto Rico. There is a discrepancy in her date of birth, which is variously cited as February 2, 1899, December 2, 1901, or February 2, 1903. She graduated from Central High School in Santurce in 1919 and enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras. In 1920 she interrupted her studies in order to attend her sister Elisa's wedding in New York. As it turned out, except for brief interludes, Belpré was to remain in New York for the rest of her life.

Like many of the Puerto Rican women who came to New York in the early twentieth century, Belpré's first job was in the garment industry. Her bilingual language skills and her education soon earned her a position as Hispanic assistant in a branch of

the public library at 135th Street in Harlem. Belpré became the first Puerto Rican to be hired by the New York Public Library (NYPL).

While working in the children's division of the NYPL Belpré discovered her passion for storytelling, her love for children's literature and her interest in librarianship. In 1926 she began her formal studies in the Library School of the New York Public Library. The first story she retold in written form, in a storytelling course, was *Perez and Martina*, a love story between a cockroach and a mouse, became her first published book.

In 1929, due to the increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans settling in southwest Harlem, Belpré was transferred to a branch of the NYPL at W. 115th Street. She quickly became an active advocate for the Spanish-speaking community by instituting bilingual story hours, buying Spanish-language books, and implementing programs based on traditional Latino holidays such as the celebration of Three Kings' Day. In her efforts to reach children and adults, she attended meetings of civic organizations such as the Porto Rican Brotherhood of America and La Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana. Through Belpré's efforts, the 115th Street branch became an important cultural center for the Latino residents of New York City. The library next transferred Belpré to East Harlem, where the largest Puerto Rican community in New York was growing.

In 1940, Belpré met her future husband, the African-American composer and violinist, Clarence Cameron White. They were married on December 26, 1943 and Belpré resigned her position to go on tour with her husband and to devote herself to writing.

Belpré's first book, *Perez and Martina, A Puerto Rican Folktale*, was published by Frederick Warne in 1932. It is notable as one of the first books published in English by a Puerto Rican living stateside. The story became Belpré's touchstone story; it went through a number of editions, she adapted it to a puppet play and recorded it on a record. It may seem odd that a story about an elegant cockroach would be popular, but in the early twentieth century cockroaches were characters in a number of celebrated

stories, including Archy and Mehitabel, a popular cartoon published in a U.S. newspaper.

Belpré went on to write and publish many Puerto Rican folktales as well as her own original fiction. Belpré's second story, *The Three Magi*, was published in 1944 as part of the anthology *The Animals' Christmas* by Anne Thaxter Eaton. Once she stopped working in the library, Belpré pursued her literary ambitions in earnest. During this period she compiled a collection called *The Tiger and the Rabbit and Other Tales*, which was the first English collection of Puerto Rican folktales published in the United States. Consequently, Belpré became a well-published writer, editor and translator. Although she collected children's tales from many countries, her primary interest was the preservation and dissemination of Puerto Rican folklore.

Throughout their lives together, Belpré and her husband maintained their residency in Harlem. In 1960, White died of cancer and Belpré returned to work part-time in the library as the Spanish Children's Specialist. She worked all over the city wherever there were large numbers of Puerto Rican children. In 1968, she formally retired from the New York Public Library. She then accepted a job with the newly established South Bronx Library Project, a community outreach program to promote reading and library use.

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Background Historical Era Essay

Pura Belpré (circa 1899-1982) was born at a key moment of change in Puerto Rico. The United States invaded the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico in 1898 and incorporated it as a U.S. territory following the close of the Spanish American War. The first five decades of the 20th century was a period when Puerto Rico and the United States were establishing the parameters of their relationship. U.S. citizenship was extended to Puerto Ricans in 1917, and in 1952 Puerto Rico's status changed to that of a Commonwealth of the United States. An impassioned debate has surrounded the issue of Puerto Rico's relationship to the U.S. since its inception, and the question

continues to dangle as to whether Puerto Rico's status should remain as it is or change. Some advocates for change favor statehood, others advocate the continuation of the current status as a commonwealth, and still others favor independence for Puerto Rico.

Belpré traveled to the U.S. in an early wave of migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. There was a small number of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. in the early twentieth century with the U.S. Census counting 7,300 Puerto Ricans in New York in 1920 when Belpré arrived. Puerto Rican migration picked up substantially following the end of World War II and the initiation of an economic development initiative in Puerto Rico named Operation Bootstrap. By 1960 there were 612,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York.

Broad public education and mass literacy were two concepts rapidly evolving in the early 20th century, both in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico. Libraries, which heretofore had been privately funded and existed primarily to serve various professions and students in private schools, were built to serve the public. Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was a key supporter of the construction of the New York Public Library system, which began in 1905.

Belpré found her profession in the New York Public Library during this early period when librarians in New York's newly established public libraries were developing their profession. Librarianship was one of the few professions open to women throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century. Belpré was first hired to work at the central public library in Harlem, the 135th Street Branch. In the early 1920s, African American migration and cultural activity transformed Harlem to become the heart of New York City's black community and the setting for the Harlem Renaissance. The community used the library as a logical site to collect works on people of African descent as well as for cultural activities. The original 135th Street Branch became the Schomburg Center in 1962.

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story hours, buying Spanish-language books, and implementing programs based on traditional Latino holidays.

Belpré lived in New York City during the Great Depression. As a resident of Harlem, a neighborhood filled with working-class and poor families, Belpré would have witnessed evidence of the poverty and devastation endemic to the era. Further, she lived through a number of worldwide crises: World War II and the Holocaust. Yet, crisis is not a theme that Belpré commented on in her writing.

Two social change movements swept across the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s: the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty. One of the major targets of civil rights activists in New York City was the unequal education offered in the public schools to students of different races. By the 1960s, civil rights activism intersected with the efforts of grassroots organizations to respond to the effects of poverty around the nation. In this period of broad activism, libraries adopted an experimental attitude toward reaching out beyond their buildings to connect to diverse communities, especially those in areas with high rates of poverty. Belpré carried out library activities through community organizations and mobile library vans in the 1960s. The ethnic pride movements that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement renewed interest in books by and about U.S. communities of color, and increased interest in Belpré's accomplishments toward the end of her life.

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