

DESCRIPTION

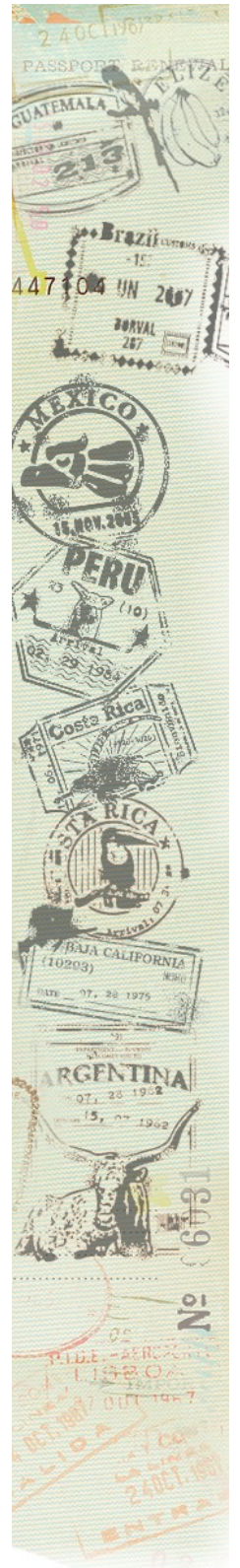
This lesson plan uses the story “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” by Antonio Sacre, an internationally touring writer, storyteller, and solo performance artist based in Los Angeles, who is the son of a Cuban father and Irish-American mother and a Boston native. In this story, Sacre tells of his lifelong desire to learn about Cuba from his father and his father’s reluctance to discuss the country from which he and his family were exiled after the revolution in 1959. In “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” Sacre explores his desire to learn about his family’s history, his father’s reluctance to discuss Cuba, and the time his father finally shared some memories from his childhood. This story and lesson plan explore themes of identity, loss, and family relationships.

This lesson plan is designed to take one 45-minute class period. The lesson can be completed in less time if students read and/or listen to the story on their own. Students can read and listen to “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” by going to www.racebridgesforschools.com and choosing “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” under the “Lesson Plans” heading. There they can download the story in PDF format and listen to the audio excerpt. Make sure students have access to computers that can open PDF and audio files. This lesson can be extended by using some of the ideas listed below.

NOTE: *There are differences between the transcript and the spoken version of this story; it is preferable to listen to the story, using the transcript as a guide while listening or as a way to remember story details while working in class.*

Recommended Method: *Although this will take more time, the best way to complete this lesson plan is to listen to the story in class and then have students answer the discussion questions.*





PURPOSE

- To expose students to the history of Cuban immigration to the United States.
- To encourage students to think about and discuss the importance of knowing one's own history.
- To examine the importance of telling and learning about personal and cultural history

OUTCOMES

By the end of this lesson, each student will

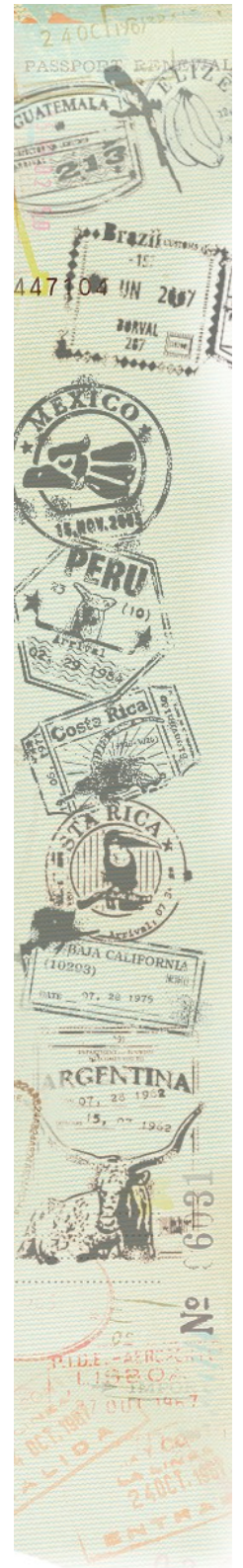
- Be familiar with the Cuban revolution and emigration.
- Understand the importance of knowing one's own story
- Respond to the issues and themes of the story
- Relate their own experience to the story

MATERIALS

- Teacher Instructions
- Handout #1: "Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind" by Antonio Sacre
- Handout #2: Discussion Questions

LESSON PLAN

1. Introduction and Summary of "Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind" (7 minutes)
2. Listening to / Reading "Cuban Celebrations (15 minutes)
3. Pair Share (10 minutes)
4. Wrap Up (13 minutes)



TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

I. INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY OF THE STORY “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” (7 minutes)

At the beginning of class, place students in groups of three; students will discuss the story with two others. With students already in groups, they can begin discussing the story as soon as they finish listening to and/or reading it. Do not let students choose their own partners; either have them count off into random groupings or place them in groups you believe will be most productive.

Introduce your students to the real-life story “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” by Antonio Sacre. Explain that they will have the chance to discuss each of the excerpts after listening to and/or reading them.

Today we’re going to listen to [and/or read] the story “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” by Antonio Sacre. In this story, Antonio, a storyteller and writer who grew up in Boston with a Cuban father and Irish-American mother, tells about his desire to learn about Cuba, especially his father’s experience growing up there. Antonio’s curiosity is thwarted, however, by his father’s reluctance to share his childhood experiences because it is too painful to discuss. Antonio’s father and his family left Cuba after the revolution in 1959 when Castro took over the country; at that time, many fled the island nation, ending up in the closest country—The United States. Because Castro’s government remains in power to this day, albeit under the direction of his brother now that Fidel Castro is in poor health, many Cubans find it impossible to return to their native country, both because they believe Castro’s government to be illegitimate and because of travel restrictions between the U. S. and Cuba. So, Antonio spends time learning and telling the stories of other cultures. Finally, his father agrees to tell him some of his Cuban stories, which Antonio recounts here.

We will listen to the whole story. Afterwards, you will have the chance to share your reactions, thoughts and own experiences.





2. LISTENING TO / READING “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” (15 minutes)

3. STORY & PAIR SHARE (10 minutes)

I’m going to give you a handout with the text of “Dreaming of Cuba: The Stories that Bind” and a handout with discussion questions. We will listen to the story aloud and you can follow along if you like. After we listen, I will ask you to jot down a few of your thoughts and then share them with your partners.

Hand out the story and discussion questions; play the story. Give students one to two minutes to respond on their own in writing to the questions associated with the story (they should choose the questions they find most interesting). Then ask students to discuss their answers with their group; each person should take one to two minutes to share his or her answer.

3. CLASS DISCUSSION and WRAP UP (13 minutes)

Call students back together and have each group share one major concept, impression, or feeling that they will take away from the story and their discussion. Students may share their own personal experiences. Consider asking students to do some writing on this topic for homework or extending the lesson with one of the ideas below.

LESSON EXTENSION IDEAS

1. Have students learn the recent history of Cuba, from the *coup d’etat* of Batista to the revolution of Fidel Castro through the uncertain political future at this time. Have students study different sides of the Revolution in 1959 and then have one side argue for the revolution and the other argue against it. Be sure to guide students to discuss honestly the strengths and weaknesses of both sides.

2. Although he is Cuban and Irish, as a storyteller Antonio spent time learning the history, culture, and folk stories of Mexico. Eventually, though, he realizes that what he really wants to know is his own history—the history of his family in Cuba. Often, in the U. S., we lump all Spanish-speaking speaking cultures together under the heading of “Hispanic” or “Latino.” Clearly, however, these cultures are distinct and the distinctions matter greatly to those of each culture. Have students interview people from different Latin American cultures and/or do research on different Latin American cultures and then have them discuss the distinct differences between those cultures. If there is a diverse group of students in your classroom, you could have them discuss their own cultures. The goal here is to make clear that the many different cultures in the various countries of Central and South America have distinct differences.
3. Have different student groups research a variety of topics about Cuba and create presentations on them. Topics could include: Batista’s *coup*, Cuba in the 1950s as the “Latin Las Vegas,” The 1959 Revolution, the Mariel boat lift, Elian Gonzalez, the classic cars of Cuba, health care and/or education in Cuba, the exile community, especially in Miami.
4. Have students interview relatives who immigrated to the U.S. (or who know the stories of the relatives who did) and ask questions about the celebrations in their country of origin and about how they have (or haven’t) continued those traditions in this country and about how it feels to celebrate a tradition from one country in another. Students could also interview people about the emigration experience and about whether people want to remember and talk about their country of origin or not and why.
5. Have students research celebrations tied to the land in their own community and write about the history and meaning of the celebrations and how students feel connected (or not) to those celebrations.



6. Buy a copy of the curriculum *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference and Creating Inclusion* (listed in the resource list below) and teach diversity in a more in-depth way.
7. Read one of the books listed in the resource list below and discuss it in class.

RESOURCES

Books

Eire, Carlos. *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*. New York: Free Press, 2004. A memoir of being forced to leave Cuba after the revolution at the age of twelve and without his parents. Eire explores the shock of being forced to leave one's homeland and having to acclimate to another country.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1996. Loewen critiques the way that history has been taught in American classrooms, focusing on its bland, Eurocentric bias. Loewen urges educators to focus on real, diverse stories that make up our history. Eye opening for teachers and students alike.

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. O'Halloran approaches diversity, race, and racism in a way that makes an often intimidating subject approachable and even fun. O'Halloran avoids blame and empowers students to uncover their own biases and to recognize institutional racism and to work for both personal and societal change.

Obejas, Achy. *Memory Mambo: A Novel*. Minneapolis, MN: Cleis Press, 1996. Obejas covers a wide range of territory, including seeking political asylum in the U. S. after the Cuban revolution, sexual orientation, and being Jewish and Cuban.



Obejas, Achy. *We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This? And Memory Mambo: A Novel*. Minneapolis, MN: Cleis Press, 1994. See prior entry.

Other Resources

Teaching Tolerance

<http://www.tolerance.org/>

The Barking Mouse by Antonio Sacre

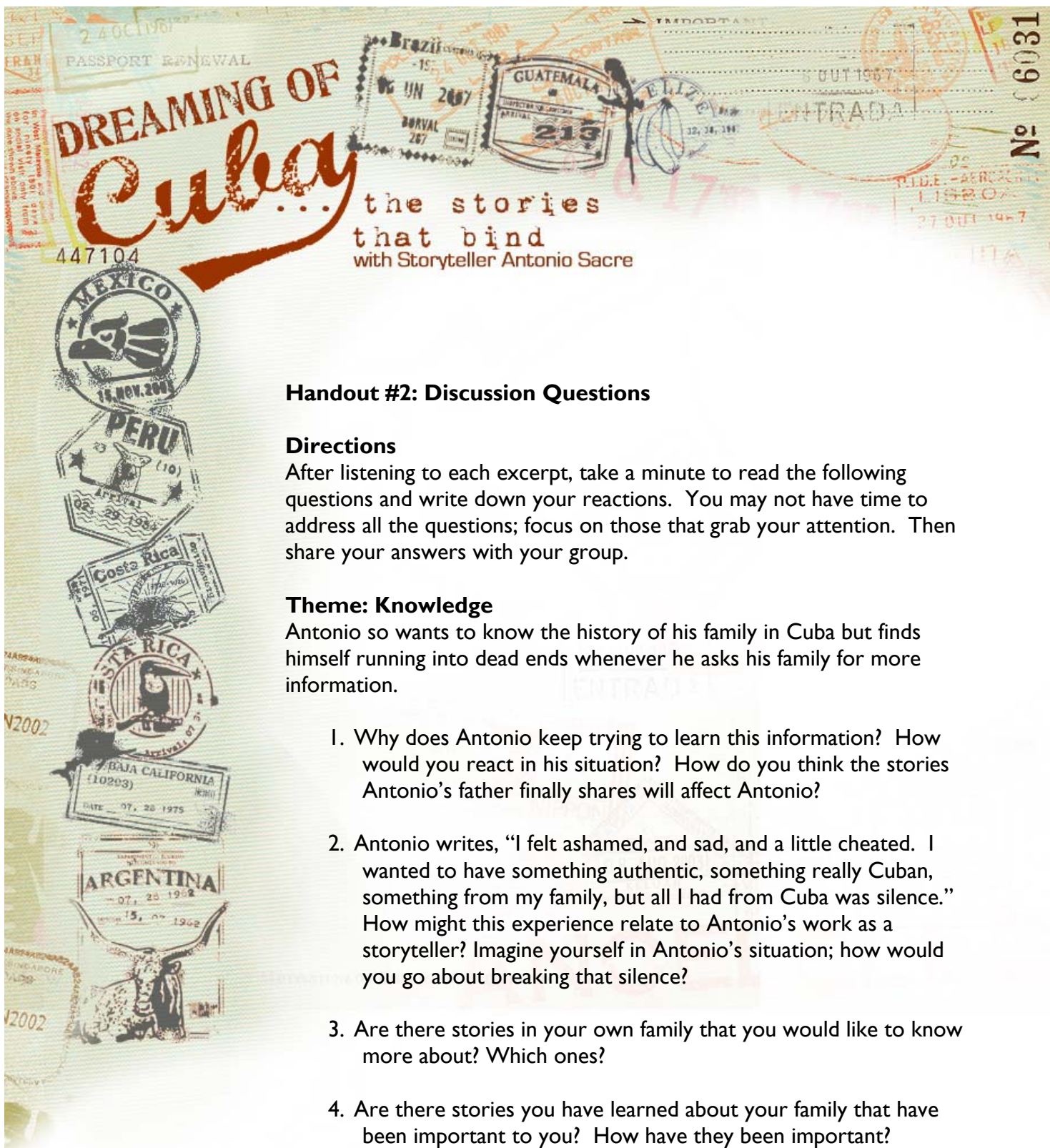
<http://www.antoniosacre.com/store.html>

If you would like to engage Antonio Sacre to perform at your school or buy one of his videos or CDs, go to www.antoniosacre.com.

Note to Teachers:

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.





Handout #2: Discussion Questions

Directions

After listening to each excerpt, take a minute to read the following questions and write down your reactions. You may not have time to address all the questions; focus on those that grab your attention. Then share your answers with your group.

Theme: Knowledge

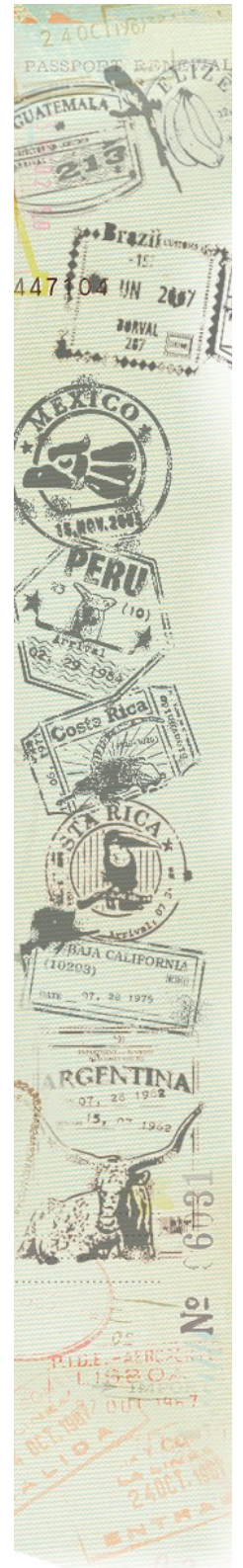
Antonio so wants to know the history of his family in Cuba but finds himself running into dead ends whenever he asks his family for more information.

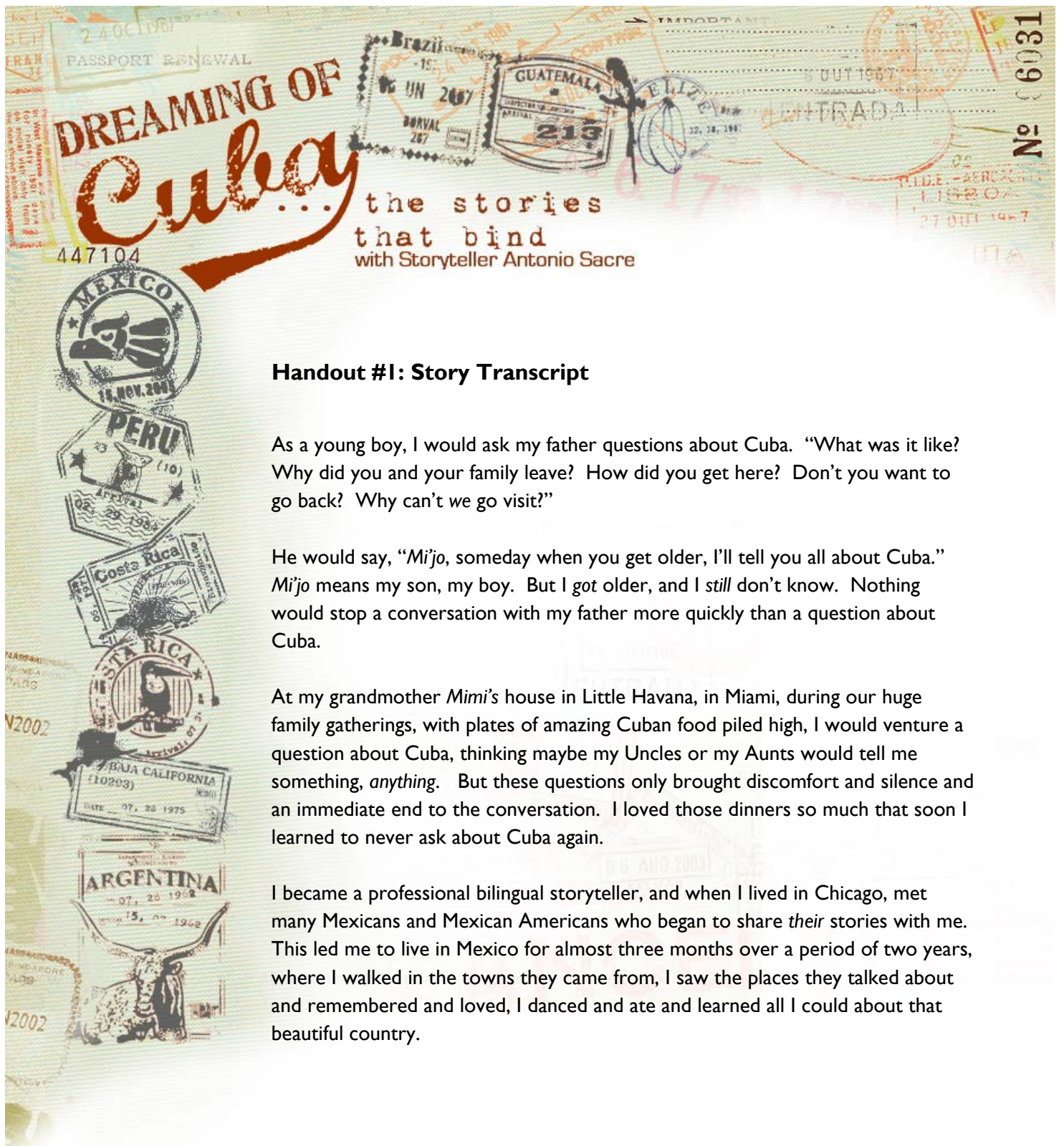
1. Why does Antonio keep trying to learn this information? How would you react in his situation? How do you think the stories Antonio's father finally shares will affect Antonio?
2. Antonio writes, "I felt ashamed, and sad, and a little cheated. I wanted to have something authentic, something really Cuban, something from my family, but all I had from Cuba was silence." How might this experience relate to Antonio's work as a storyteller? Imagine yourself in Antonio's situation; how would you go about breaking that silence?
3. Are there stories in your own family that you would like to know more about? Which ones?
4. Are there stories you have learned about your family that have been important to you? How have they been important?



Theme: Place

1. Antonio thinks about going to Cuba after spending so much time in Mexico learning another Latin culture that he recognizes as beautiful and fascinating but not *his*. He says that he “wanted to walk those beaches and those city streets [in Cuba], I wanted to smell the air and feel the land in my body, in a way that only being there would satisfy.” Why do you think Antonio thinks he has to go to Cuba to understand it fully? What does it mean to “feel the land in my body”?
2. Discuss any experiences you have had understanding a culture or place through the physicality of it.
3. Antonio’s father tells him about some of the traditions associated with religious holidays in Cuba, holidays celebrated all over the world, but his father says that many of these traditions died when the family came to Cuba because “those traditions are tied to Cuba.” Why are those traditions tied to Cuba? What traditions in your own family or community are so tied to “place” that they couldn’t be transferred to another place if you moved?
4. Antonio emphasizes the tenuous possibility of ever getting the whole story from his father and ends his story with a string of “maybes.” What do you think would allow Antonio’s father to tell his stories completely?





Handout #1: Story Transcript

As a young boy, I would ask my father questions about Cuba. “What was it like? Why did you and your family leave? How did you get here? Don’t you want to go back? Why can’t we go visit?”

He would say, “Mi’jo, someday when you get older, I’ll tell you all about Cuba.” *Mi’jo* means my son, my boy. But I *got* older, and I *still* don’t know. Nothing would stop a conversation with my father more quickly than a question about Cuba.

At my grandmother *Mimi’s* house in Little Havana, in Miami, during our huge family gatherings, with plates of amazing Cuban food piled high, I would venture a question about Cuba, thinking maybe my Uncles or my Aunts would tell me something, *anything*. But these questions only brought discomfort and silence and an immediate end to the conversation. I loved those dinners so much that soon I learned to never ask about Cuba again.

I became a professional bilingual storyteller, and when I lived in Chicago, met many Mexicans and Mexican Americans who began to share *their* stories with me. This led me to live in Mexico for almost three months over a period of two years, where I walked in the towns they came from, I saw the places they talked about and remembered and loved, I danced and ate and learned all I could about that beautiful country.



After those few months in Mexico and the many stories I heard *there*, I realized that I had never truly done that with my own culture. Me, a Cuban-American *storyteller* with a wealth of stories about Mexico and nothing about Cuba. I realized I hungered for the same experiences I had amidst Mexicans, but with Cubans, maybe even in Cuba. The last time I was in Mexico, I was in the Yucatan, a quick and cheap flight away from Cuba. I called my dad from a travel agency and told him I wanted to see the place he lived, I wanted to walk those beaches and those city streets, I wanted to smell the air and feel the land in my body, in a way that only being there would satisfy.

He said that his dream was to take me to Cuba someday himself, but that I was a man and if I needed to go, I could make my own decision. He then added that none of his immediate family would ever go back to Cuba until Castro died.

My dad had never told me about his dream of taking me to Cuba, and I almost started to cry. I wanted so bad to go to Cuba *with* my dad. But I also remembered my grandmother telling me that Castro was going to outlive everybody, and here I was so close. Legally, it is difficult to get to Cuba from the United States.

I decided I would honor my father and his family, and not go to Havana.

Castro is no longer in power, but his brother is. To my Dad, that's basically the same thing. Maybe someday my dad and I will go to Havana to the places where he lived and studied and played. Maybe someday. Maybe.

A few months ago, I got a call from the radio show *Living on Earth*. They told me they were doing a holiday program about land, culture, and celebration in the Latino culture and they were looking for submissions from storytellers.

There I was, a Cuban-American storyteller, and I knew nothing about the land and culture and celebrations in Cuba. I stammered through the initial interview, saying, well, I know a lot about Mexico. I began to tell them, and they were interested, but not sure how it fit in, how I fit into their program.

I felt ashamed, and sad, and a little cheated. I wanted to have something authentic, something really Cuban, something from my family, but all I had from Cuba was silence.



As a last ditch effort, I told them I would ask my father about the celebrations in Cuba. I didn't tell them that all my previous attempts to learn about Cuba from him had failed.

We hung up and I was nervous. I was nervous about causing my dad any pain by asking him about Cuba, I was nervous that I would ask and he would shut me off again. The closest we ever got was last summer when my dad told me, "Mi'ho, some time, when we have four or five days together alone, I want to tell you the whole story." But I live in Los Angeles, and I travel a lot, and he lives in Delaware still works harder than anyone I know, so those four or five days have not happened yet. Sometimes it seems almost like it's not going to happen at all.

I called him and told him about the radio program. I set an appointment to interview him by phone at 9 AM the following Tuesday about rituals and celebrations tied to the land in Cuba. It was my assignment; it was my work. He understands work, and he wanted to help me in anyway he could.

Here was the chance I had been waiting for, couched in the *idea* that it was for my career. But deep down, I knew it was just an excuse for me to ask- and for my dad to answer- questions I've always had and he's always evaded. Maybe now I would be able to complete my understanding of myself, as a performer, as a writer, as a son, as a human being.

He called at 8:59 AM on Tuesday. I breathed deeply as I picked up the phone. He said, "Dime. Tell me. What do you want to know?"

I said, "Tell me about the rituals and celebrations tied to the land or the harvest in Cuba."

He thought for a minute, and said, "There is the bringing in of the sugar cane harvest. Those men used to cut the fields down with the old machetes, and they would come in and there would be a huge celebration for them." I couldn't believe it, a celebration in Cuba tied to the land, just what they wanted!

I quickly asked if he ever went to one. He said, "No, no, that was for the *campesinos* and the people who lived in the country. I was a city boy, raised in Havana."



There was silence. I tried to mask the disappointment in my voice. I asked if they had any celebrations in the city.

Again he thought for a minute. I could sense an urgency in his silence; he wanted to be able to help his first born son, the son who shares his name. He said, “No, not really, *mi’jo*. Many of those things are tied to the Indians, and there were no Indians in Cuba. The Spaniards killed all of them, not like in Mexico and South America where a lot of them still survive. On the island, there was no way for them to survive like the Indians in the mountains of the Americas.”

I waited, unsure what to say, waiting for the inevitable ‘that’s enough’ that I was so used to hearing.

Then he said, “Wait a minute. We have big religious festivals, the running of the Snappers from San Juan, the Holy Week before Easter, and the feast of the assumption of the virgin Mary, August 15 and, of course, the really big celebration on *Noche Buena*, the Christmas Eve Celebration.

I asked what these were like.

He told me about party on the beach to mark Easter and the running of the snappers. And the *ferrias* and carnivals every August, the whole week before the assumption of Mary, and how they’d have long processions, from the church, through the different barrios, and back to the church. Everybody was either parading or on their porches as the procession went by.

He said, “Mimi and me and my father would go to the porch and watch the saint, you know, that huge statue that four strong men would carry, and say prayers as the virgin went by, Mimi with her hand on my head, saying prayers over me.”

I heard a joy in my father’s voice that I had rarely experienced. I know how his eyes crinkle up whenever he truly laughs, and I knew they were crinkling up now. I felt my own eyes as he talked. They were crinkling too, just like my dad’s.

He quickly said, “Then we have the *Noche Buena*, Christmas eve, that’s the best celebration we have, we celebrate the eve, not the day like you do here, Christmas day for us is only to recover from *la Noche Buena*, the all night Christmas eve vigil and feast.



But on the 20th of December my Uncle Ti Tí and I would go and pick out the pig, and he would kill it. I would help him shave the hair, like bristles, off the skin. First, I would pour boiling water over the skin to soften the hair, while he would take that straight razor and sharpen it fifty times. Mimi and the other women would prepare the *Adobe*, the marinade, made from the oil, the cumin and sour orange and oregano and garlic, and we would poke holes in the pig and adobe the pig, it took three or four days, to fill it with that marinade, to cook it outside in the fire. It was a big macho thing, killing the pig, stabbing it in the throat; I'll never forget the time I was old enough to do it. Ti Tí was so proud of me, and I had my first full beer with the men. I know it sounds disgusting, but *mijo*, that's what we did. Mimi used to say the problem with America is people don't see their meat before they eat it, so they have less respect for the animal and less respect for the land that is necessary to raise that animal. They always ate free range in Cuban, organic, no hormones, and they live to be old, old, old."

He said there would be a huge gathering, usually at his grandmother's house. All the family would come, and there would be the special plates of food that they only cooked on the feast days, and special drinks and wine, and all kinds of stories. People would exaggerate, and lie, and get caught, and remember things, and laugh. I realized that he was describing for me a dinner at my own grandmother Mimi's house. Every detail was almost exactly the same

I asked him what happens after killing the pig.

"*Mijo*, you eat it. We had a huge table outside, the weather always beautiful, with my grandmother at the head of the table. We had fruit trees in the yard where we plucked lime for the meat, and lemon for the water, and avocados for the salad right from the tree to the table, and mangoes for dessert. The toast begin, for the ones that are dead, and the ones that are alive, and we are happy to be alive, and we miss those who are dead, and we are happy that Jesus will born soon, and we are sad that he died, but happy that he rose, toasts for everything, for the pig and Ti Tí and the table and the laughter. We are thankful for the laughter. Then we go to the *Misa Del Gallo*, the rooster's mass, the midnight mass, and we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, then off to somebody's house for breakfast and some more drinks and food and stories."

I asked him if they ever had a pig for other celebrations.



He said, “A pig could be for any event, baptism, wedding, funeral, but *Noche Buena* was the big tradition. But it was a lot of work, and a lot of money, and a lot of preparation. The last pig we had was in 1957, and then the revolution happened, and we all came to America.”

I asked if he ever did the pig in Miami the way they did in Cuba. He said no, things got too complicated. “We came with no language, no money, no job, many families divided by politics, it was a mess those first years. Besides, those traditions are tied to Cuba. It’s not the same here. My mother tried to do some of those things, but after she died, a lot of those traditions died as well, at least in our family. We move here, the traditions get broke; my friends in Cuba tell me the revolutionary government bans certain things in Cuba, so the *ferrias* in Cuba, the *carnivales*, they all are different. We replace them with other excuses to get together now, but they are not the same. You and I have this excuse of the radio program to get together now. Different, not as big, but just as sweet.”

I couldn’t say anything. He said, “Before Batista’s government it was a big party. After that he started to rob the country, and then Castro promised different for a while, but he robbed the country in a different way, and after the both of them, the party was over. Our youth, our innocence was robbed from us, and it has never been the same and I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

The conversation had finally reached the point that I had feared. He said, “You call me if you need anything else,” and he hung up, and I felt a profound sadness for my father and his people.

Maybe someday my father and I will walk the beaches of *Cojimar* outside of Havana, laughing with the fishermen as they bring in a load of s, praying to San Juan to bring us more fish. Maybe someday I will pick a mango from a tree in Havana and bring it to the table and laugh with all my family as my brother takes the apple out of the pig’s mouth and says something silly. Maybe someday my father will place his hand on my son’s head as the statue of the Virgin Mary goes by on the backs of four strong men, and bless him the way his grandmother did to him and mine did to me. Maybe someday. Maybe.

Until then, those stories will live in my memory, and in my imagination. And maybe that will be enough.

