



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2023 Volume II: Latinx Histories, Cultures, and Communities

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## Exploring Puerto Rican History and Film Portrayals

Curriculum Unit 23.02.01, published September 2023  
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### Rationale:

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As the Latinx population in the United States continues to grow, it is more important than ever for high school students to be exposed to Latinx history. No longer can the stories and experiences of these people be reserved for one class. Instead, teachers must find ways to incorporate the study of Latinx communities into every social studies class. By studying race, ethnicity, and their intersections, each student will understand how these categories and the people they represent have shaped the history of the US.

Incorporating these ideas is essential within New Haven Public Schools. Because of the large and ever-growing student population that identifies with various Latinx cultures, many New Haven students have personal connections to these identities and the overall theme of migration. Many Latinx students throughout the nation have a direct personal relationship with migration. Many students have migrated or know of someone who has experienced the various complexities of migration. Integrating Latinx stories into the U.S. History Through Film course allows students to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum, fostering a sense of relevance and personal connection. This emphasis is often, sadly, completely ignored in the mainstream high school social studies curriculum. As a result of this exposure, all students will become more invested in their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the historical experiences of Latinx communities while learning about previously unheard historical stories.

Throughout this unit, students will be able to recognize and dispel myths and stereotypes about the Latinx community while examining Latinx portrayals in films. This unit promotes cultural appreciation and enhances students' critical thinking and media literacy as they critically analyze visual representations in cinema. Students gain a more inclusive understanding of Latinx experiences by developing these vital skills.

Given unlimited time, it would be ideal to delve into the intricacies of various Latinx cultures and their representations in film. However, due to time constraints, this curriculum's scope and sequence will specifically concentrate on Puerto Rican history and their film depictions. However, it is vital to acknowledge the richness and diversity of Latinx communities with students before delving into this unit. Although this unit will only scratch the surface of Puerto Rican history and culture's unique aspects and contributions, students will gain a valuable glimpse into Puerto Rican migration experience connected to U.S. History.

All students must understand the history of America's ties to Puerto Rico, which remains a colony of the U.S. Currently, the social studies curriculum often overlooks the connected histories of mainland America and Puerto Rico. Students will draw connections to topics previously covered in other classes, such as Civics and U.S. History, by being exposed to these histories. Students gain insights into the impact of imperialism, the struggle for self-governance in this colony, and the ongoing changes surrounding Puerto Rico by studying the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.

Integrating Latinx stories into the U.S. History Through Film course will give students a more engaging and relevant educational experience. It allows them to connect with the material personally, challenges stereotypes, and fosters a more accurate understanding of Latinx history. By exploring the complexities and examining the history of Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States, students develop both a better perspective and empathy. Students will critically analyze historical narratives through this unit and actively contribute to a more inclusive understanding of the United States and Puerto Rico.

## **Objectives and Unit Overview:**

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Throughout the unit, students will explore Latinx representations in movies and the historical context behind three central stereotypes through instructional activities and content. Overall, students are challenged to delve deeply into these narratives as they begin to recognize and dismantle harmful film stereotypes. By the unit's end, students will know and be able to analyze movies critically, connect media to historical sources, and uncover the historical influence of stereotypes on media representation.

The unit begins with an interactive exploration of Latinx representations in past and present-day Hollywood films. Overall, the initial activities of this unit are essential to igniting students' curiosity and critical thinking. At the beginning of the unit, students will learn about three enduring central Latinx stereotypes: the Harlot, the Bandido, and the Buffoon. Once students have been exposed to these common portrayals, they will delve deeper into their origins and profound impact on shaping public opinion throughout history. Students will recognize these stereotypes by carefully analyzing movie clips spanning different eras. They will examine the socio-cultural factors that influenced the creation of these stereotypes and the reception they received from the public. By critically examining film representations, students will explore how these stereotypes have perpetuated misrepresentations and contributed to forming biases and preconceptions.

As we explore these movie clips, students will engage in thought-provoking discussions and activities that encourage them to question and challenge the stereotypes they encounter. Students will better understand the complex relationships between media, culture, and public perception through this analysis. By closely examining the origins and impact of these stereotypes, students will deepen their knowledge of Latinx representations in film and sharpen their critical thinking skills. They will learn to recognize the broader societal implications of media portrayals and understand the significance of accurate and inclusive representation. By the end of the unit, students will be much more aware of the power of media in shaping public opinion and the connection between history and representations in film.

In addition, this unit will also expose students to the complex relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. Throughout these lessons, students will research the historical challenges faced by Puerto Ricans as they migrated from the island to New York City. Students will learn how Puerto Ricans asserted their

communities and culture during these activities and assignments. By examining significant historical events and diving into the socio-political factors that have shaped this relationship, students will understand the history behind the often confrontational connection between the mainland U.S. and the island of Puerto Rico. During class discussions, students will share their personal experiences and viewpoints, relating their own perspectives in connection to historical backgrounds. The concepts and activities below promote a collaborative learning environment where students can investigate their understandings, enhance their media literacy, and actively contribute to an inclusive society.

While engaging with the concepts and lesson plans outlined below, learners will not only develop a deep understanding of the historical context of Latinx representations in film. They will also strengthen the critical skills necessary to analyze and challenge stereotypes. As a class, students will be exposed to the factors influencing the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. This exploration will illuminate the challenges and victories experienced by Puerto Ricans as they endeavored to create their communities within the framework of American society.

## **Relative Information on West Side Story:**

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To deliver this unit effectively, educators must be thoroughly familiar with the film *West Side Story*. Understanding this movie extends beyond merely knowing the plot; it necessitates an appreciation of its deep-seated cultural significance. The following sections contain a comprehensive plot synopsis and vital cultural components that should be considered for a holistic understanding of the film's relevance to the unit.

Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins were the directors of the wildly successful musical film *West Side Story*, which debuted in 1961. The movie focuses on the love story between Tony, a former Jets member who happens to be white, and Maria, the Sharks' leader's sister, who is Puerto Rican. The film, set in New York City's Upper West Side, depicts growing conflict and violence between the Jets and Sharks as they battle for control of neighborhood space.

*West Side Story*, a huge box office success, was the first time many members of the general American public saw Puerto Rican characters and culture on screen. However, the film's portrayal of Puerto Rican characters raised severe issues due to problematic representational choices. Instead of casting Puerto Rican actors, white actors, and actresses used brownface makeup to play these roles. On-screen, Puerto Ricans were depicted as violent, sensual gang members and thugs who disobeyed the rules set by the "noble" white gang. Also troubling was the film's portrayal of Puerto Rico itself. Overall, the film's portrayal was largely stereotypical and reduced to background settings, failing to capture the island's rich cultural diversity and heritage. These inaccurate and damaging stereotypes significantly impacted many viewers' perceptions of Puerto Ricans and their culture, contributing to lasting misconceptions and biases.

## Part I: Exploring Common Latinx Stereotypes in Movies

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The overall goal of this unit is to have students explore the history of Hollywood, specifically focusing on film representations of Latinx cultures. This unit will begin with critically examining Latinx stereotypes in movies, both past and present. By tracing the evolution of these stereotypes, students better understand the problematic ways Latinx individuals have been portrayed throughout America's cinematic history. This exploration prepares students for a detailed analysis of specific films, ultimately leading to a critical viewing of *West Side Story*.

This initial lesson will equip students to recognize, challenge, and question the harmful stereotypes in movie narratives. Students will be able to analyze a specific example of Hollywood's representations of Latinx people. Students will be able to compare and contrast these movie representations with the historical experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York City at the end of this unit.

Students will have developed an increased understanding of Latinx representation in movies by the end of this unit, as they will also be better able to identify, comprehend, and confront negative stereotypes. The goal is to foster a more accurate, inclusive, and realistic understanding of the Latinx community, enabling students to engage with media portrayals critically and form a more inclusive experience.

### Concepts Educators Can Explore:

Students must first understand the prevalent Latinx stereotypes in Hollywood's history to start this unit. These stereotypes have distorted the portrayal of Latinx individuals in film for decades, distorting the description of the Latinx community. In teaching Latinx history through cinema, educators must highlight these stereotypes, providing students with tools to challenge these harmful portrayals.

Among the examples of Latinx stereotypes, the El Bandido portrayal is one of the most recognizable. This stereotype originated in the early days of Hollywood, appearing in Westerns such as *Broncho Billy and the Greaser* (1914). Latinx characters were shown as dangerous figures with unshaven faces, scars, and habitual scowls in these depictions. Also, in these movies, Latinos were portrayed as violent, erratic, and reluctant to communicate effectively, resorting to violence instead.

This El Bandido stereotype has endured, transitioning from the landscapes of spaghetti westerns to modern urban settings. Present-day films frequently depict Latinx characters as street gangsters or drug traffickers.

In *Falling Up*, the El Bandido stereotype takes this form, as Latinx characters are depicted as local gangsters. In the movie, there is a scene where Latinx gang members attempt a robbery, reinforcing the longstanding stereotype of Latinx individuals as criminals. This portrayal reinforces negative assumptions and broad generalizations about Latinx individuals being associated with violence, contrary to the rich diversity and varied experiences within the Latinx community. By discussing such scenes, educators can highlight how these stereotypes are perpetuated in the media and prompt students to question these problematic portrayals.

The 1961 film *West Side Story* also shows the El Bandido stereotype. Bernardo, the leader of the Puerto Rican gang The Sharks, embodies many El Bandido characteristics. With his jet-black, greased-back hair, Bernardo is the first character to choose violence over logical discourse. The Sharks also show striking similarities to the El

Bandido stereotype. For example, violence is nearly sparked when a rival gang member, The Jets, simply bumps into one of the Sharks at the school dance. As soon as The Sharks feel threatened, they resort to violence. This exaggerated portrayal was especially detrimental when it was first shown in the movies, as it was many people's first exposure to Puerto Rican culture and undoubtedly affected understanding and interactions for years.

Another notable stereotype in cinematic representations of Latinx characters is the Harlot. Like El Bandido, this stereotype originated in the early days of Hollywood Westerns. This stereotype reduces Latinx women to overly sexualized figures, rendering them objects of desire rather than fully developed characters. These portrayals generally attribute to Latinx women's excessive sensuality, fiery temperaments, and lack of honesty, reinforcing negative gender and ethnic stereotypes. The Harlot stereotype is harmful as it severely simplifies the diverse experiences of Latinx women, restricting their representation to one-dimensional characters defined primarily by their sexuality. In *West Side Story*, Anita's character similarly aligns with the Harlot stereotype. Throughout the film, her dialogue often revolves around the sexual nature of other characters' attire and her attraction toward Bernardo, thus accentuating her sensuality. Furthermore, the visual contrast between Anita and Maria is intentionally designed to stand out. While Maria is dressed in a modest white dress, Anita wears vibrant, revealing attire, further entrenching her in the Harlot stereotype. These contrasting characterizations polarize the 'good' Puerto Rican character, Maria, from the more sexual and promiscuous Anita.

Another example of a prevalent Latinx stereotype is the male Buffoon. In this representation, Latinx men are shown as simple-minded, with poor English skills, and drawn to emotional outbursts. One character embodying these traits is Luis from Marvel's *Ant-Man* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp*. With his lengthy, amusing anecdotes, Luis's character primarily serves as comic relief. A white character's logical intervention is the only way to stop or interrupt them. In *West Side Story*, the Male Buffoon stereotype is evident in the character of Chino. Chino's simplicity is recognizable from his first appearance as Maria's dance date. He frequently resorts to Spanish to express his feelings and exhibits a lack of grace and confidence when asked to dance with Maria, reinforcing this stereotype. His ultimate act of impulsivity—murdering Tony—paints him as an emotion-driven rather than reason-driven person. Having set the stage with the history of Latinx stereotypes in Hollywood, students will be better equipped to analyze *West Side Story* as a case study. By the end of this lesson, students will have improved their ability to recognize these stereotypes. Overall, at the end of the unit, students will be exposed to skills to critically deconstruct such portrayals, contributing to a better understanding of Latinx culture beyond Hollywood's traditional depictions.

### **Lesson Plan 1:**

Teachers start the lesson by introducing the stereotypes of El Bandido, The Harlot, and The Male Buffon. Next, students will discuss these characters, their distinct traits, and the negative implications of these stereotypes. With this foundation in place, students will then transition into the core activity for this lesson: film analysis. Students will be shown selected clips from the 1961 version of *West Side Story* and other movies demonstrating one of the three stereotypes. After viewing, students will be tasked with identifying the presence of El Bandido, The Harlot, and The Male Buffon. This interactive discussion will foster a deeper understanding of these stereotypes and their presence in cinema.

Following the film analysis, students will have the opportunity to conduct their research. Working in pairs, they will utilize a provided database to find images that counter the stereotypes previously discussed. This research will encourage students to challenge these stereotypes and seek historically accurate

representations. Once students have selected their “counter-stereotype” images, they will compose a brief write-up explaining how their chosen picture counters a stereotype. These two activities will serve as preparation for a gallery walk presentation. During this presentation, each pair will display their image and write-up. Once the group work is complete, the subsequent class period will begin with an interactive gallery walk. During this time, students can move around the classroom, viewing and reflecting on each pair's sources and accompanying write-ups. Overall, this activity will facilitate peer learning and broaden students' understanding of alternative representations. At the end of the lesson, the teacher will lead a discussion on the gallery walk findings, encouraging students to share their observations and reflections. This conversation will give students a chance to articulate what they have learned and discuss how these stereotypes and their counter-images have influenced their understanding of Puerto Rican representation in film. Throughout this lesson, students will be assessed on their ability to identify and discuss stereotypes, research and presentation skills, and active participation in class discussions and the gallery walk. With the guidance of these exercises, teachers can ensure that students are active learners rather than merely passive recipients of content.

## **Part II: History Between the United States and Puerto Rico**

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After a study of Latinx stereotypes in film, as well as an exploration into the historical relationship between Puerto Rico and New York City, students are now better prepared to draw connections between cinematic portrayals and the real-world challenges faced by Puerto Ricans. Overall, this unit has empowered students with the necessary skills and content knowledge to unravel the relationship between the mainland United States and Puerto Rico. This unit focuses on New York City in the 1950s, as it is a prime example of this complex intersection between historical context and cinematic portrayals. This era witnessed a substantial influx of Puerto Ricans into the city. The implications of this demographic shift are further complicated when viewed through the lens of the cinematic world.

During the early 1950s, the film industry was filled with damaging stereotypes that neglected to respect or reflect the actual culture of the Latinx community. A consistent pattern emerged from producers and directors to viewers where Latinx characters were reduced to simplified, stereotypical depictions. For a large portion of the audience, these film representations set the standard for understanding the behavior and culture of this newly arrived-community. As Puerto Ricans settled in New York City, preconceived notions influenced by these negative cinematic portrayals frequently greeted their arrival. Over time, these misrepresentations influenced societal perceptions, molding and distorting how the broader community understood the Latinx population. In sum, the enduring presence of Latinx stereotypes in cinema had a profound and lasting impact on societal views of this community, further complicating the integration process for Puerto Ricans in New York City and beyond.

Understanding the complex relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico unveils critical insights into the factors that have shaped the representation of Latinxs in the media. Analyzing film representations provides a window into the intricate dynamics of power, colonization, and cultural influences that underlie the portrayal of this community in film.

Moreover, delving into the historical ties between the United States and Puerto Rico allows students to gain the necessary knowledge to reflect on the profound impact of colonialism and imperialism on the island and

its people in the classroom. By immersing themselves in this historical backdrop, students will develop a strong perspective that empowers them to evaluate and challenge stereotypes perpetuated in the media critically.

After gaining foundational knowledge, students can view the film *West Side Story* as a captivating case study. Students will gain a deeper understanding of Puerto Rican history while watching and will be able to identify scenes that reflect the three common stereotypes. Analyzing the movie will allow them to identify and discuss the stereotypes associated with Puerto Ricans portrayed within its narrative. Also, students can contextualize the broader history of Puerto Ricans in New York City, their migration experiences, and their enduring struggle to preserve their rich cultural identity.

By the end of the unit, students will equip themselves with the tools to critically engage with media representation, dismantle harmful stereotypes, and foster a more realistic and inclusive understanding of the Puerto Rican and Latinx populations in the United States. By exploring the historical and cultural context, students can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of representation in film and its far-reaching implications in our diverse society.

### **Concepts Educators Can Explore:**

After this unit, students have strengthened their understanding of the relationship between the film *West Side Story* and historiography. Students will develop a better understanding of the harm of the film's portrayals once they acquire knowledge of the complicated history of the United States relations with Puerto Rico. While investigating this history, students now have the skills needed to uncover the socio-political circumstances that allowed such stereotypes to persist over time. This understanding aids in grasping the film's role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes and shaping public perceptions of the Puerto Rican community.

Once students have mastered class concepts, it is crucial to explore the nuanced history of the relationship between the United States and the island of Puerto Rico to comprehend the harm the film's portrayal has caused fully. This historical context sheds light on the socio-political factors that influenced the media's representation of Puerto Ricans and how these stereotypes persisted. By delving into this history, students will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the film's impact on perpetuating harmful stereotypes and shaping public perceptions of the Puerto Rican community.

The complex relationship between the continental United States and Puerto Rico has existed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, Puerto Rico has undergone a significant transformation, transitioning from what can be described as a "classic colony," where the United States engaged in extensive resource extraction and systematic cultural imperialism, to a territory entirely financially dependent on the mainland. This exploitation has taken various forms, with mainland cooperation and government officials extracting resources, finances, and even people from the island to maximize their profits. The result of such actions has left Puerto Rico in a state of poverty that is notably worse than that of the weakest state on the mainland. This disparity is reflected in distressing statistics, with the island experiencing the highest rates of homicide, drug addiction, and AIDS in the entire United States.

To fully grasp the implications of these realities, it is essential to delve into the historical context and understand the systematic extraction that has shaped Puerto Rico's trajectory. This historical background sheds light on the deep-rooted issues that have affected the island and its people over time. By comprehending the historical context, we can better understand the present dynamics of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the mainland. Through this lens, students will recognize the situation's complexities

and explore potential avenues for addressing the unsatisfactory state of affairs that both parties acknowledge.

As a victim of a complex history of colonialism and economic exploitation, Puerto Rico's relationship with the continental United States has been shaped by profound challenges and disparities. This section will further explore the deep-rooted consequences of colonization, economic exploitation, and media misrepresentation that continue to shape the island's economic inequality struggles and its quest for a more equitable future. The oppression of the Puerto Rican people continues to affect the community on the island negatively. Furthermore, poverty, directly related to U.S. economic policy on the island, has become a chronic issue, exacerbating the existing inequalities and hardships. One result is the alarming mental disease rate among Puerto Rico's population. Overall, people on the island are three times as likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses compared to the national mean. These grim statistics illustrate Puerto Rico's challenges, many of which stem from its colonial relationship with the United States and the subsequent economic policies that have governed the island's development.

Puerto Rico's history is deeply rooted in colonialism, having endured centuries of Spanish rule before becoming a territory under the influence of the United States. For centuries, Puerto Rico served as a "classic colony" for Spain, contributing resources, land, and people for the betterment of the empire. The Spanish colonial period profoundly shaped Puerto Rico's culture, language, and traditions. Overall, Spanish influences resulted in a rich and diverse cultural heritage that still endures. However, the island's inhabitants faced the oppressive weight of Spanish colonial rule, with their lives and resources serving the interests of the distant crown. However, in the 19th century, due to the end of The Spanish-American War of 1898, Puerto Rico was taken over by the United States. Initially, many island inhabitants were pleased with the arrival of America. However, the initial feeling would soon disappear as the island became subject to complete U.S. control and administration.

This change in rulership had implications for Puerto Rico's cultural identity and political status. As a U.S. territory, Puerto Ricans gained American citizenship in 1917, granting them rights and privileges to be part of the nation without a voting member in Congress. This unique status created a truly unclear identity. Puerto Ricans were naturalized citizens of the United States but were denied the same rights to representation and voting as people who lived on the mainland.

Puerto Rico's connection to the rest of the country has evolved into a complicated one over time. Puerto Ricans still debate whether to seek statehood or independence regarding their political standing. The continuous struggle for independence has exposed Puerto Rico's complicated connection with the United States government and its effects on the island's political and cultural identity to the nation's media.

Over the years, mainland governments and corporations have taken resources, money, and people from Puerto Rico to increase their profits, leaving the island in a far worse state of poverty than the poorest state in the union. The island's poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality directly result from this economic exploitation. The Merchant Marine Act of 1920, popularly known as the Jones Act, was passed by Congress in 1920 and had an even more significant effect on Puerto Rico's economy. Due to this legislation, all trade between the island and any other nation had to transit via American ports and be carried out by ships flying the American flag. As a direct result, island residents must pay significantly higher prices for imported goods, increasing Puerto Ricans' economic challenges. Lobbying organizations representing the marine industry have hindered efforts to change the Jones Act, adding to the complexities of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the continental United States.

Throughout its history, Puerto Rico has experienced various waves of migration to the mainland United States,



driven by economic opportunities and seeking better living conditions. However, the portrayal of Puerto Ricans in multiple films as violent foreign refugees intent on infesting American territory perpetuates harmful stereotypes. As money leaves the island and is never really invested back, Puerto Ricans are responsible for paying for Social Security and Medicare. As the island struggles with its reliance on the continental United States, Puerto Rico still faces significant economic challenges. The aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017 attracted attention to the island's susceptibility to natural disasters and the federal government's shoddy reaction and aid during such emergencies.

Overall, a long history of colonialism, economic exploitation, and harmful stereotypes reinforced by media representation has shaped the relationship between the continental United States and Puerto Rico. The national media coverage the island continues to receive shows the United States that acquiring a colony is much easier than providing for one. The exploration of the convoluted relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, combined with a critical analysis of *West Side Story's* representation of Puerto Ricans, has offered students valuable insights into media's significant role in shaping public perception. They have comprehensively understood how history, politics, and media interplay to create narratives perpetuating harmful stereotypes or promoting genuine representation. This understanding is vital to fostering media literacy that aligns more closely with historical truths and experiences.

## **Lesson Plan 2: The Complex Relationship: Exploring Puerto Rico's Statehood Debate**

In this lesson, students will explore the historical and current complexities surrounding Puerto Rico's connection with the United States, focusing on the statehood debate. The study begins with a warm-up activity asking students to share their prior knowledge regarding the argument for statehood. After working individually and talking in pairs, the teacher will ask each group to share. During this time, the teacher will correct misconceptions about Puerto Rico's relationship with the US. After the warm-up discussion, students will receive two texts: "Puerto Rico: A Brief History" and "Why Puerto Rico has Debated U.S. Statehood." The class will be divided into two groups, one reading "Puerto Rico: A Brief History" and the other reading "Why Puerto Rico has Debated U.S. Statehood." After individually reading their respective texts, students will partner with someone who has read the other source. Once in pairs, students will summarize their readings and share three key points that stood out.

After a class discussion based on the readings, students are divided into smaller groups, each assigned to focus on different aspects of the statehood debate, such as economic implications, political status, cultural identity, and social consequences. Within their groups, students conduct further research using a school-issued database. Groups will be tasked with finding two sources. The first source must be a "pro" statehood article or graph, while the second can be a "con" article or chart. This activity will allow each student to evaluate multiple perspectives critically.

The groups share the research results with the class, emphasizing significant findings and explaining why some think Puerto Rico's statehood is problematic. The class will then be divided into teams representing "pro-statehood" and "anti-statehood" viewpoints for a formal discussion on Puerto Rico's statehood following this activity. Students can decide which side to support based on their research and participate in a formal debate, presenting arguments and supporting their claims. After a discussion in class based on the readings, students are split into smaller groups of three to four students, with each group being given the task of focusing on a different component of the statehood argument, such as its economic ramifications, political standing, cultural implications, and social repercussions. Intending to locate two sources—a "pro" statehood article or graph as the first source and a "con" statehood article or graph as the second source—students undertake additional

research within their groups utilizing a school-issued database. Overall, this activity allows each student to evaluate multiple perspectives critically.

To expand their understanding and engage in thoughtful discourse, students will use an online discussion board to share their perspectives on the Puerto Rican statehood question. Each student must post their position, provide research evidence, and constructively comment on the posts of at least two other students to address opposing viewpoints and promote civil debate. Each group will also collaboratively write a blog post summarizing their findings, and they will be required to comment on the blog post of another group, opening up the possibility for intergroup communication and the discussion of different viewpoints. This all-encompassing strategy promotes in-depth examination and civil discourse that improves students' capacity to consider multiple points of view about Puerto Rico's statehood.

Overall, this lesson plan allows students to deeply explore Puerto Rico's complex relationship with the United States, specifically focusing on the statehood debate. Students develop critical thinking skills by engaging in research, arguments, and online discussions, expanding their understanding of diverse perspectives, and fostering respectful dialogue on this intricate issue. This approach challenges students to become informed citizens, better equipped to recognize the complexities of real-world challenges and contribute to impactful discussions on Puerto Rico's future.

### **Part III: History of Puerto Ricans in New York City**

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The context of Puerto Rican immigration and their relationship with New York City is crucial for students to understand before critically viewing *West Side Story*. This historical context ensures their understanding of the movie's depictions and themes. Students can better appreciate the film's storyline and cultural representations by understanding the real-life narrative first. Studying the history of Puerto Rican immigration gives students a broader understanding of the Puerto Rican people and their communities in the United States. Students can develop a more empathetic view through a nuanced look at their difficulties, experiences, and significant contributions. This detailed exploration helps dispel any preconceived myths surrounding Puerto Rican immigration.

Teaching students about the real-life experiences of immigrants can deepen their cultural awareness. The journey of immigrants is filled with numerous challenges, and understanding these hardships promotes empathy. Through this lens, students will also gain insight into the resilience and strength that define the immigrant experience. Furthermore, equipping students with an accurate historical understanding allows them to evaluate media representations critically. *West Side Story*, like any film, contains its misrepresentations and biases. Students can distinguish between accurate portrayals and dramatic exaggerations by comparing these depictions with historical facts.

Finally, fostering a precise understanding of Puerto Rican immigration promotes a more comprehensive grasp of this critical period in American history. By knowing the events and lived experiences, students can appreciate the stories overlooked in media narratives.

#### **Concepts Educators Can Explore:**

Significant opposition to immigrant arrivals has been a feature of American history since its beginning. These

tensions have manifested strongly in New York City, which serves as the gateway to the country. Two significant waves of immigration from the island have shaped the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City within this larger narrative. Due to laws that prohibited European immigration during the turmoil of World War I, the first wave of Puerto Rican Immigration occurred in the 1920s. Puerto Rican immigrants faced prejudice and discrimination despite their citizen status, particularly when moving into predominantly white city blocks. Their inaccurately perceived 'alien' quality and presumed inability to assimilate impacted their challenging experiences in the city.

In 1947, there was a second sizable wave of Puerto Rican immigration due to increased demand for agricultural labor on the mainland. As a result, many Puerto Ricans opted to settle in New York City in the early 1950s, making the city home to 83% of the country's Puerto Rican population. Most newcomers were drawn to the existing social networks and cultural spaces established by earlier immigrants. However, as the Puerto Rican population in urban areas grew, anxieties and fears about “the other” began to increase. Misguided concerns emerged that a large influx of Puerto Ricans would soon overwhelm the city's welfare and housing services. During the 1947 New York City mayoral election, the term the “Puerto Rican Problem” was coined by Congressman Marcantonio, sparking a media frenzy. The Puerto Rican population was painted as refugees fleeing an economic crisis, further expanding the public's fears of mass migration and an impending burden on the city's welfare system. The image of Puerto Ricans being content with substandard living conditions because life on the island was even worse was also widely published, stoking fears of overcrowding as diverse cultural groups vied for living spaces in the city.

In response to these troubling narratives, the island dispatched its journalists to challenge the “Puerto Rican Problem” propagated by mainland media. The *El Mundo* newspaper series focused on the Puerto Rican community that had settled in Harlem in the 1940s. They reported a community with a strong focus on middle- and working-class values, with many members contributing to the local economy as shopkeepers or hospitality staff. The series painted a picture of Puerto Ricans as a group that looked out for their own, particularly those struggling with English or considered unskilled. The reporting emphasized the adaptability of Puerto Ricans due to their exposure to American culture and ideas, contrary to the mainstream media narrative. Instead of being the cause of the housing shortage crisis, they were, more accurately, its victims. Despite these findings, the narratives around the “Puerto Rican Problem” continued appearing in the news. As these stories gained national traction, they inevitably influenced the history of *West Side Story*, contributing to the film's depiction of Puerto Ricans in New York City.

### **Lesson Plan 3:**

For the second lesson in this unit, students will explore cultural exploration by focusing on the connection between artistic expression and cultural identity. This lesson examines how art forms such as music and poetry can communicate cultural experiences. Students will specifically focus on narratives associated with Puerto Rican cultural identity. Students began this lesson by listening to the song "America" from *West Side Story*. The lyrics will be projected onto the classroom screen, allowing students to engage with the music actively. After listening, students will explore literature with Pedro Pietri's poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary." Each student will be given a copy of the poem, and the whole class will participate in an out-loud reading session. Upon completing the reading, the teacher will facilitate a discussion allowing students to recognize the poem's core themes.

After the reading, students will be instructed to form small discussion groups. Students will work together to complete a set of reflective questions that will challenge them to participate in a comparative analysis of the

narratives within these two narratives. After the discussions, each group will contribute to the classroom conversation by sharing a significant insight or discussion point.

For the creative component of the lesson, students will be introduced to the concept of blackout poetry. This art form will challenge students to repurpose the existing text of 'America' or "Puerto Rican Obituary" into new narratives while using the notes from their discussion groups. During this activity, students will identify phrases or lines from "America" or "Puerto Rican Obituary" that resonate with them and then transform these selections into unique art pieces. Students must incorporate visual elements like drawings or symbols to enhance their poems. Throughout this lesson, students will be evaluated on several key aspects. First, students will be assessed on their ability to identify, interpret, and discuss themes in the song and poem. Additionally, their skill in comparing these two art forms and synthesizing their understanding into blackout poetry will be evaluated. Lastly, active participation in small groups and more extensive class discussions will also contribute to their evaluation. However, it should be noted that while the creation of blackout poetry is part of the learning process, students will not be assessed on their artistic creativity. Instead, the focus is on their ability to apply their understanding of the themes and narratives from the original works to their blackout poems.

## **Final Unit Assignment:**

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At the end of this unit, students will embark on a project that encapsulates their progress in research, writing, and presentation skills throughout the semester. This project will also provide a platform for students to display their understanding of the unit's key themes: Latinx stereotypes in film, the ties between Puerto Ricans and New York City, and the correlation between media portrayals and historiography.

For the concluding assignment of the unit, students will work in pairs or small groups to create a unique, innovative, and historically accurate movie poster. Drawing inspiration from the history and experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York City, this poster will counter the stereotypes they have encountered in film, offering a more accurate depiction of Puerto Rican culture and history. The lesson will start with a recap of the critical points from the unit, focusing on the stereotypes portrayed in films and the necessity of constructing authentic narratives. Then, the teacher will present the requirements for the final project, emphasizing its objectives and expectations. Next, students will be guided through the online archive at The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College. Teachers must demonstrate how to navigate the database efficiently and outline the steps to identify pertinent images, documents, and articles since this will be many students' first time using such a resource.

In the following days, students will dive deep into the archive. Working in groups, they will sift through the vast array of material, selecting pieces that resonate with them and can be utilized to add an authentic narrative to their movie poster. This research process will be crucial to their project as it allows them to construct a "counter-narrative" to the stereotypical depictions. Once the students have compiled their resources and designed their movie posters, they will present their work. Students will share their research process, discoveries, and insights in a group presentation with their class. Next, students will explain how their project, infused with authentic representation, opposes the stereotypical portrayals frequently seen in *West Side Story*.

Additionally, students will be tasked with writing a reflection on whether or not *West Side Story* can be used as a tool for teaching history. They will use their understanding of historiography and the influence of media portrayals, as well as their newly created movie posters, to support their viewpoints.

Overall, in the final assessment, teachers will provide feedback to the students based on several factors. Teachers will examine how students navigated and utilized the online archive, the depth and relevance of their research, the creativity and historical accuracy in their poster design, their narrative writing skills, and their thoughtful reflection on using *West Side Story* as a teaching tool. Students will also be assessed on their presentation skills and ability to link their project to the central themes of the unit, particularly Latinx stereotypes in film.

This innovative final assignment will reflect students' comprehension and skills and provide them with a creative avenue to challenge stereotypes and represent an authentic narrative about Puerto Rican history in New York City through a historically accurate movie poster and thoughtful reflection.

## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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As a project-based unit within a Social Studies classroom context, this unit challenges students to grapple with understanding themselves and our society concerning human conditions over time, acquire historical thinking skills, understand and deal with change, ask questions and locate evidence to support answers, go beyond the textbook to examine historical records, compare multiple points of view, and gain historical perspective. While participating in this unit, students will explore the connection between media representations and stereotypes, the importance of historiography, and the connection between past and present. By the end of this unit, students will be able to explore and refine 21st-century skills such as research, formative writing, small group collaboration, critical reading/viewing, and active listening skills. Below is a summary of the standards and skills students will refine over this unit.

### Critical Reading and Inquiry

- Comprehend a variety of sources in different modes (written, oral, debate, etc.) CR&I1b.
- Contextualize and analyze sources of different types (maps, cartoons, paintings, text, etc.) to interpret historical and current ideas, topics and events. CR&I1c.
- Analyze sources to determine bias, perspective, and reliability. CR&I1d.

### Research and Argument

- Form an arguable claim or thesis. R&A2a.
- Gather sources related to a specific topic or to support a claim. R&A2b.
- Organize and clearly present an argument using various methods appropriate to your audience, context and purpose. R&A2e

### Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools

- Apply knowledge and concepts of civics and government to analyze historical and current ideas, topics, and events. ADC&T3a.
- Apply historical concepts (continuity and change, cause and effect, comparing and contrasting,

contextualization, etc.) and tools to analyze historical and current ideas, topics, and events. ADC&T3d.

### **Communication and Civic Participation**

- Communicate about topics and issues in the social sciences in an organized, clear manner orally, through visuals, and in writing. C&CP4a.

### **Materials for Classroom Use:**

- Reading materials (as listed above)
- Notebooks
- Black Permanent Markers
- Construction Paper
- Research databases
- Video Projection
- Computers/laptop

## **Bibliography of Teachers and Students Resources:**

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