



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

Introduction

by Albert Laguna, Associate Professor of American Studies and of Ethnicity, Race, and Migration

Our seminar, “Latinx Histories, Cultures, and Communities,” aimed to provide a critical overview of some of the central themes and issues that have shaped the experience of Latinx communities in the US. We went about this work through an emphasis on three basic elements: historicization of primary sources, keen attention to literary and popular culture forms that shape and reflect quotidian social relations, and the importance of close reading as a tool for understanding the aesthetic and formal logics of cultural texts. We began with a simple question: Why have people from Latin America decided to migrate to the US in the first place? To answer this question, we began our study with an examination of US-Latin American relations with particular emphasis on the quotidian life of the imperial project in popular culture. We investigated 19th century political cartoons and Disney films to explore how ideas about Latin America circulated while balancing these representations with writings by Latin American intellectuals like Cuban poet, orator, and journalist José Martí. The seminar then shifted to its primary goal of understanding how Latinx artists and communities have narrated life in the U.S. From close readings of novels like Helena Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* and sitcoms like *Qué Pasa, USA?*, to analysis of the poetry of the salsa “sound” and science fiction films like *Sleepdealer*, we engaged with the diversity of Latinx communities and the wide range of cultural production and theory that speaks to race, gender, and sexuality.

The seminar took into consideration the Fellows’ shared primary goal – to gain knowledge about Latinx communities broadly and to devise a specific curriculum unit they could use in their classes. This desire was a product of a disconnect the Fellows felt in their classes. Demographically, New Haven Public Schools have a large Latinx presence and yet, teachers have been exposed to very little course material in their own training that specifically examines Latinx histories and cultures. For the Fellows, this seminar provided a means to fill knowledge gaps in a way that would allow them to include content that speaks to the experience of their Latinx students while simultaneously helping *all* of their students develop a greater appreciation for the diversity and complexity of the United States and the histories of migration that are foundational to the American story.

The results of this hard work were evident in the units each Fellow produced:

Michael Lauer wanted to devise a unit to include in his “American History and Film” class. Fascinated by the power of the media to shape our understandings of Latinx communities, Lauer focused his energies on unpacking one of the most popular films in US history – *West Side Story* (1961). He uses this film as a point of departure to tackle three objectives: 1) To discuss the long history of stereotypes in films representing Latinxs and Latin Americans extending back to the earliest days of Hollywood, 2) As a means to unpack the history of

the colonial politics that undergird US-Puerto Rico relations and the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City from the mid 20th century onward, and 3) To foreground the history and placemaking practices of Puerto Ricans in New York City and how their own cultural practices in the arenas of poetry and social movements strenuously pushed back against the simplistic, and often offensive, representational strategies featured in the film.

Amy Brazauski built her curriculum unit around a desire to empower her students by helping them develop a “futurist mindset.” She deploys this term broadly to encompass the world-making possibilities inherent in social movement politics and organizing *and* in the world of literature – specifically speculative genres she groups under Afrofuturism and Latinxfuturism. The result is a unit that brings together historical contextualization, readings of central texts from social movements like the Chicano Movement and Puerto Rican Young Lords Party, and close attention to the aesthetic strategies in films like *Black Panther* and comic books like *Puerto Rico Strong* and *Ricanstruction*. Students will use these lessons to put a “futurist mindset” into practice through a range of creative projects that include poetry slams, collaborative projects, and producing their own comics.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>