

LATINO AMERICANS

Discussion Questions:
Puerto Rican Perspectives
(For use with Episodes 2 and 4)

Lesson Overview

This particular lesson examines Puerto Rican experiences of the United States. Specifically, it examines migration to New York and questions of identity for Puerto Ricans, who are often perceived as foreign immigrants by other Americans, despite the fact that U.S. citizenship was granted to the people of Puerto Rico in the early 1900s.

Grade: 7 – 12+

Time: 30 – 45 minutes if discussion-based, 1 – 2 hours if written

Materials

- Internet access for viewing segments (*Spanish-American War, Bernardo Vega, Puerto Rico to New York, Puerto Rican Youth and West Side Story*) and research
- Pencil and paper for notes (and responses, if assigned as written)
- Video segments

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Explore, examine and analyze Puerto Rican stories of arrival, particularly in the 20th Century.
- Describe challenges and successes of the Puerto Rican community in New York (Nuyoricans).

Lesson Procedure

After viewing segments *Spanish American War, Puerto Rico/Bernardo Vega Story of Arrival, Operation Bootstrap/Juanita Ortiz Sanabria Story of Arrival, Puerto Rican Youth/West Side Story, and Herman Badillo*, have students complete the following discussion questions, either in writing or debate/discussion format.

EPISODE 2

1. Many groups come to the United States as immigrants. In the case of Puerto Ricans, the United States came to them. Describe how the United States came to control the island of Puerto Rico.
2. Historian Gary Gerstle describes the contradiction of the United States exercising imperial impulses as it does in the Spanish American War. What is the contradiction? How is this question later played out in the status of Puerto Ricans after the war? How does Luis Muñoz Rivera describe living this contradiction?
3. Once Puerto Ricans have the opportunity to move about the United States, which port do most set out for? What are their initial intentions and how do their plans change over time?
4. Analyze and explain the meaning of Puerto Rico's "Accidental imperial heritage of the Spanish American War"?
5. Explain the concept of a nation with two shores, in relation to the Puerto Rican experience.

EPISODE 4

1. Describe the setting in Puerto Rico in the late 1930s and early 1940s.
2. What did "Operation Bootstrap" mean for Puerto Rico?
3. What was the role of "el barrio" for Puerto Ricans living in New York City?
4. How were Puerto Ricans viewed in New York in the 1950s? Specifically, how did the press portray Puerto Rican youth? Are there any parallels to how youth are sometimes portrayed in today's media?
5. The actions of the "Capeman" reinforced stereotypes of Puerto Rican youth in the public eye, but it had a different implication for Puerto Rican parents in New York. What was it?
6. How did *West Side Story* and Rita Moreno's success contribute to perceptions of Puerto Ricans in mainstream U.S. culture? Describe both positive and negative effects.
7. What were common practices in the education of Puerto Rican and Black youth during the childhood of Herman Badillo? What choices did Badillo make to alter his future opportunities? Can something as simple as deciding which class to register for still make a difference in your future as a student?
8. What was the impact of practices like "Literacy Tests" in shaping Puerto Rican voter participation?
9. What issues did Badillo champion during his political career? Are any of these still important issues today?

EXTENSION I: Headlines Yesterday and Today

The media played an important role in shaping the public's view of Puerto Rican youth. Though youth from many different ethnicities participated in the 1950s gang culture, Puerto Rican youth were especially associated with this trend. Is this still an issue for particular groups of youth?

Research newspaper archives online to compare headlines from New York in the 1950s with headlines about youth today. What is similar or different? How is the media shaping perceptions about young people? What parts of the story are being emphasized or under-emphasized? Would you alter the way the media reports on youth? How?

EXTENSION II: Nuyorican State of Mind

Given the number of Puerto Ricans in New York over many generations, some use the term “Nuyorican” to describe this particular identity and experience. Research the term and its use in poetry, music, art and community activism. How did the term come about? Who are its proponents? While pop culture includes many prominent Puerto Rican New Yorkers such as Jennifer Lopez, Willie Colón and others, larger society does not always understand who they are. For example, in summer 2013, Marc Anthony performed at an NBA game and a social media storm took place in its wake. What was the commotion about?

EXTENSION III: Voting Rights

For a good part of U.S. history, literacy tests were used to determine who could participate in the democratic practice of voting. In particular, these tests have been a tool to control the participation of particular groups such as African Americans in the South, Puerto Ricans in New York and Mexican American migrants as far north as Washington State. Find a copy of a voting literacy test using online archives. Take the test. How do you feel after taking it? What might this test mean to you if English was not your first language? What might it mean to you if you did not have access to a quality education or had to drop out of school at a young age to work and support your family?

The questions of who can vote and how, are anything but resolved. In the summer of 2013, the Supreme Court struck down a sizeable portion of the Voting Rights Act. Activists on one side of the debate see this as an issue of voter suppression, while the other side sees it as protection from voter fraud. Individual states are reacting with new voting legislation that some see as protecting the vote while others see as limiting the voter participation of particular communities. Following the summer 2013 ruling, North Carolina passed controversial voter legislation.

Using a research and presentation or in-class debate, address the following questions:

- What are some of the current issues and main actors in the debate over voting rights?
- Literacy tests may not be one of the tactics used to control who has access to the ballot box today, but there are other measures being used and under debate. What practices do states use today to determine who can vote and when?
- How do different factions see the use of these measures?
- How will history view the actions of today, compared with those of the era of Herman Badillo and the Voting Rights Act?

EXTENSION IV: Island Issues

Much of the discussion about Puerto Ricans has focused on those who have relocated to the contiguous United States. But, Puerto Rico itself continues to have a unique status in its connection to the United States. Take the pulse of Puerto Rico: What is its political status? What are key social, political and economic issues on the island today?