LESSON
Miguel and Michael: Restoring and Reconciling Lost Histories

OVERVIEW

Like any good detective story, Cecilia Aldarondo’s *Memories of a Penitent Heart* began with two things: a mystery and a clue. The mystery was the untimely death of Miguel Dieppa, a young Puerto Rican actor; the clue was a shoebox of decaying 8mm home movies. Although these home movies documented cheery moments like birthdays and vacations, they also prompted Cecilia, Miguel’s niece, to investigate a murky moment in their shared family history: Miguel’s deathbed conflict with his mother, and what had become of Robert, the lover Miguel left behind.

Combining home movies, video and written documents with artfully shot contemporary interviews and vérité footage, *Memories of a Penitent Heart* is a documentary that cracks open a Pandora’s box of unresolved family drama. The intimate film also encompasses defining historic events and challenging social issues, from the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s to the ongoing tensions between social mores, cultural beliefs and LGTBQI rights today. Though the film is an excavation of history, it is also a potent reminder that HIV/AIDS and LGTBQI stigma are not a thing of the past, especially for people of color and residents of rural communities. The conversation about rights and acceptance of LGTBQI people is ongoing, particularly in places where religion is a powerful cultural factor.

Through Cecilia’s journey to recover her uncle’s story, students will explore how we learn about the past and the many factors that can influence—and at times distort—our understanding of history. In the process, they will examine how the HIV/AIDS crisis in particular shaped negative perceptions of the LGTBQI community that persist today, contributing to growth of the HIV epidemic in low-income communities of color, both rural and urban. Using Cecilia Aldarondo’s investigation as inspiration, students will conduct their own research on narratives from their families or communities and understand the broader historic context in which those occurred.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:
• Identify factors that influence our understanding of events, communities and individuals from the past
• Describe Cecilia Aldarondo’s motivations for reclaiming and reconciling her family narrative in *Memories of a Penitent Heart*
• Explain how the HIV/AIDS crisis shaped perceptions of the LGTBQI community and contributed to the distortion and erasure of queer stories
• Discuss how our understanding of history influences our perceptions and actions in the present
• Reclaim stories from their own families/communities and place them within their larger historical contexts
• Understand the ways that issues around stigma and family acceptance persist

**GRADE LEVELS:** 9–12+

**SUBJECT AREAS**
History
Media Literacy
Social Studies

**MATERIALS**
• Film clips from *Memories of a Penitent Heart* and equipment on which to show them
• Student Handouts
  o *Student Handout A: Viewing Notes*
  o *Student Handout B: The Film in Context*
• Teacher Handouts
  o *Teacher Handout: Before It Had A Name*

**ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED**
One 50-minute class period, with homework

**FILM CLIPS**
Film clips provided in this lesson are from *Memories of a Penitent Heart*.

**Clip 1: “If We Only Remember the Good Things” (4:21 min.)**
This clip starts at 00:00 min. with a photo of Miguel and ends at 04:21 min. with Nylda saying, “Everybody that I’ve asked, nobody remembers his last name.”

**Clip 2: “Who Was This Michael?” (6:42 min.)**
This clip starts at 08:38 min. in Robert/Aquin’s room with him saying, “Michael and I had a relationship from ’75 till ’87,” and ends at 15:22 min. with Lourdes saying, “He wanted to share that.”

**Clip 3: “I Felt It Was a Blacklist” (6:40 min.)**
This clip starts at 32:10 min. with the image of a Medic Alert bracelet and ends at 38:50 min. with Aquin saying, “Get that crucifix off of him. It's killing him.”

PREPARATION:

Viewing and discussing sensitive material:
This lesson and the accompanying film address sensitive social issues and teachers should screen the film clips and review all of the related materials prior to the lesson. When facilitating a discussion about HIV/AIDS and LGTBIQ+ history and rights, please be sensitive to the fact that views on the appropriate use of terms and labels may vary depending on the group, individual and/or context. Some of your students may also have personal relationships with these topics and their perspectives and sensitivities should inform how the lesson is presented. In advance of the lesson, it would be helpful to connect with a school social worker for resources specific to your school community’s needs and guidelines.

Remind the class that this is a supportive environment and review your classroom’s tools for creating a safe-space, including class agreements. These might include guidelines like “no name-calling,” “no interrupting,” “listen without judgment,” “use respectful language,” “share to your level of comfort” and “you have the right to pass.” Remind students that when they talk about groups of people, they should be careful to use the word “some,” not “all.” Consider reviewing the pronoun preferences of participating students.

Visit the Teaching Tolerance website for the resource Let’s Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics With Students, which offers strategies for tackling challenging topics in the classroom: http://www.tolerance.org/lets-talk

ACTIVITY

1. Introduction: Do “Wrap Around” Activity (also known as “Whip Around”)
   Have students free-write a brief response to the following prompt:

   *How do we learn about past events? (Examples: history books, newspapers, journals, artifacts/objects, films/videos, interviews, photographs, and letters.)*

   Have students quickly share their responses one at a time. When everyone has shared, ask students to identify common answers and themes as well as surprising responses. Have a volunteer record the responses on the board.

   Think-Pair-Share: Give students five minutes to think about the following question and discuss and refine their responses with a partner then share with the class. Have a volunteer record the responses on the board:

   *What factors might prejudice how a historian, biographer, reporter, documentarian or even a friend or family member interprets or reports about an event from the past?*
Facilitator Tip: Responses can include: social and cultural beliefs/bias, unreliable sources, missing information, personal expectations, and storytelling style. Use the examples below, as needed, to provide context:

Napoleon Complex?
Contrary to popular belief, Napoleon was taller than the average man of his time. The belief that he was small arose in part because measurements were not standardized, and the French inch was longer than the English inch. When Napoleon’s height was documented as five feet and two inches (in French units), it appeared to the British that he was a short man. The rumor of his small stature was widely exaggerated in anti-Napoleon propaganda during the Napoleonic Wars, and the myth persists today.

Additional information:

Cleopatra, Seductress or Political Mastermind?
Cleopatra possessed unmatched prestige amongst her contemporaries. From her coronation as queen of Egypt at 18 until her death by her own hand at 39, she commanded armies and controlled her empire economically, neutralizing diverse threats to her power. However, according to writer Stacy Schiff, her historical image “survives as a wanton temptress, not the first time a genuinely powerful woman has been transmuted into a shamelessly seductive one.”

Additional information:
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/rehabilitating-cleopatra-70613486/

Nelson Mandela, Peacemaker or Terrorist?
Today, Nelson Mandela is celebrated as a champion for democracy, peace and human rights, but this was not always the case. During the Cold War, the United States strategically allied itself with the white governments of African countries, despite widespread human rights abuses against black Africans. The U.S. labeled Mandela as a violent terrorist for working with the African National Congress to fight South Africa’s apartheid regime. After apartheid was repealed and Mandela was released from prison, he was celebrated for his commitment to civil rights and awarded the Liberty Medal and the Nobel Peace Prize. Despite this, Mandela remained on the U.S. government terrorist watch list until 2008.

Additional information:

The Civil War or the War of Northern Aggression?
During the Jim Crow Era, Southern segregationists coined the term "War of Northern Aggression" to refer to the Civil War. This wording cast the Union as the aggressor against the Southern states. In some parts of the U.S., the label persists today along with the debate about which side was responsible for instigating the war and whether slavery was the primary reason for the conflict.

Additional information:

The Propaganda of History

If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy and faithfulness of detail which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guidepost for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation.

If, on the other hand, we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement… then we must give up the idea of history either as a science or as an art using the results of science, and admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish.

It is propaganda like this that has led men in the past to insist that history is "lies agreed upon"; and to point out the danger in such misinformation…. Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?


Complete the activity with a brief class reflection on the following prompts:
Why is it valuable to revisit historical narratives?
What is the benefit of examining past events and stories from different perspectives?

2. Who was this Michael?
Facilitator note: This is a good time to review your classroom agreements and tools for supportive listening and sharing. The Teaching Tolerance guide Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics With Students has a number of tools for checking in with students about how they are feeling. (http://www.tolerance.org/lets-talk)
Explain: Today we will explore the mystery surrounding the life and death of actor Miguel Dieppa through the lens of his niece, filmmaker Cecilia Aldarondo, and her documentary *Memories of a Penitent Heart*. This film tackles some important and challenging topics, such as LGBTQI rights and stigma, the peak years of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and how our understanding of history is shaped.

Distribute *Student Handout A: Viewing Notes* and review the handout with the class before screening Clip 1 from *Memories of a Penitent Heart*.

“Conver-stations” Discussion activity: Organize the class into groups of four to six students and have them discuss the first question while writing down responses, ideas and themes. After a few minutes, have two or three students in each group rotate to a new group and discuss the second question. Repeat for the third question, making sure that different students shift groups. Have the groups shift a fourth time and review their notes and responses for all three discussion prompts, then share with the class. (For additional information on the “Conver-stations” activity visit: [https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/conver-stations-strategy](https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/conver-stations-strategy).)

Follow with a class or group reflection:

*What do you think Cecilia hopes to achieve through this project? Why is it important for her to revisit her uncle’s story? What evidence can you give from the film?*

*The filmmaker asks, “If we only remember the good things about the people we love, what do we lose?” How would you respond to this question?*

*Before Cecilia began her research, which family member had the most influence on how Miguel was remembered? What story was this person telling about Miguel? What was missing from her story and why?*

1. **The Film in Context: Identity and the HIV/AIDS Crisis**

Offer brief background about early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the social impact of the disease on the gay community using *Teacher Handout: Before It Had A Name*.

Jigsaw Viewing and Discussion Activity: Assign each student one of the following four subjects to focus on while watching Clips 2 and 3. Distribute *Student Handout B: The Film in Context* (page 1) and have students use it to take notes.

Subjects:

1. Miguel’s mother (Cecilia’s grandmother)
2. Miguel’s partner, Robert/Aquin
3. Miguel’s New York friends
4. Miguel’s sisters
After viewing the clips, organize students into discussion groups based on their assigned subjects and have them compare their notes and discuss the clips using the following prompt:

How did the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS influence Miguel’s relationship with your subject? (Merriam-Webster’s definition of “stigma” for English language learners: “A set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.”)

Reorganize the class into discussion groups with at least one representative for each assigned subject. Have them share their subject notes and discuss the clips using the prompts in Student Handout B: The Film in Context (page 2).

2. Reflection:
Conclude the lesson with a reflection using the prompts below. Students can discuss the question with partners, then write their responses as journal entries or share them with the class:

How does our understanding of history influence our perceptions and actions in the present? What examples can you give from the film and from your own experience?

Homework:
In her interview with POV, Cecilia Aldarondo explains her motivations for making Memories of a Penitent Heart, her journey of discovery about her uncle Miguel, and the social and political challenges he confronted before his untimely death in 1987. Have students use Aldarondo’s experience as inspiration for their own research on an individual, event, or story from their families or communities.

Filmmaker Interviews: Cecilia Aldarondo:
What is Memories of a Penitent Heart about?
http://www.pbs.org/pov/penitentheart/video/what-is-memories-of-a-penitent-heart-about/

How does the film explore forgiveness?

What is the role of Puerto Rico in the film?
http://www.pbs.org/pov/penitentheart/video/what-is-the-role-of-puerto-rico/

Students should interview at least two people who were eyewitnesses to the event or time period being examined and also research the larger historical context in which it took place.

They can present their research as written reports and/or multimedia presentations incorporating photographs, video and artifacts that reveal new perspectives on the historical narratives they are investigating. Have students reflect on if/how their new perspectives on the past have altered or influenced their understanding of current relationships and events.
EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS

1. **HIV/AIDS in the First Person:**
   Have students work in groups to research oral histories from the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the impact that the fear and stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS had on the treatment and outcomes for people like Miguel who contracted the disease. Have the groups compare these oral histories with contemporary perspectives on HIV/AIDS and the experiences of people living with the virus today.

   Resources:
   - ACT UP Oral History Project
     [http://www.actuporalhistory.org](http://www.actuporalhistory.org)
   - Oral Histories on the AIDS Epidemic in San Francisco
     [http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/sci_tech/aids.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/sci_tech/aids.html)
   - StoryCorps: AIDS
     [https://storycorps.org/?s=AIDS&type=listen](https://storycorps.org/?s=AIDS&type=listen)

2. **Intersectional Histories:**
   Examine the origins of “intersectional” theory and how applying an intersectional perspective to historic events can reveal hidden narratives and the complex social, political and economic factors at play. Have students apply an intersectional lens to their own family research and identify how this new perspective expands, alters and/or challenges existing historical narratives.
   - Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy: Resources
     [http://www.sfu.ca/iirp/resources.html](http://www.sfu.ca/iirp/resources.html)
   - TED: “The Urgency of Intersectionality”

3. **Truth and Reconciliation:**
   Further explore how recovering lost or distorted histories can contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliation on a personal and/or national scale using one or more of the following POV lessons:

   **Granito: How to Nail a Dictator**
   Lesson Plan: Collect Oral Histories About the Genocide in Guatemala

   **My Perestroika**
   Lesson Plan: Experiencing Perestroika

   **Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North**
Lesson Plan: The History and Legacy of U.S. Slavery
http://www.pbs.org/pov/tracesofthetrade/lesson-plan/

RESOURCES

The Film

POV: *Memories of a Penitent Heart*
http://www.pbs.org/pov/penitentheart/
The film’s official POV site includes a discussion guide with additional activity ideas and resources.

*Memories of a Penitent Heart*
http://www.penitentheart.com/
The film’s official website provides information on the film and filmmakers.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

ACT UP Oral History Project
http://www.actuporalhistory.org/
This is a collection of interviews with surviving members of the ACT UP coalition, formed in New York City in 1987 to direct action to end the HIV/AIDS crisis.

AIDS Memorial Quilt
http://www.aidsquilt.org/
More than 48,000 panels make up this community art project started in 1987 to memorialize those who lost their lives to AIDS.

amfAR
http://www.amfar.org
This group provides support for AIDS research, HIV prevention, treatment education and the advocacy of AIDS-related public policy.

HIV.gov
https://www.aids.gov
This website provides information about federal programs and resources for individuals at-risk for or living with HIV and partners who work in HIV education and prevention.

UNAIDS
This group is a collaboration between the UNAIDS Secretariat and 10 United Nations organizations coordinating sustained efforts to educate about and cure HIV/AIDS.
University of California San Francisco: AIDS Oral History Project
https://www.library.ucsf.edu/archives/aids/oral-history-project/
Personal stories from physicians, nurses and scientists who played key roles in the early years of the AIDS epidemic can be found on this site.

World Health Organization: HIV/AIDS
http://www.who.int/hiv/aboutdept/en/
This organization provides evidence-based information and policy support on HIV care and prevention services.

STANDARDS
Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- CCSS.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume and clear pronunciation.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.5 Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence and add interest.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Content Knowledge: a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).
• Language Arts Standard 4. Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
• Language Arts Standard 8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
• Language Arts Standard 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
• Behavioral Studies, Standard 3. Understands that interactions among learning, inheritance and physical development affect human behavior.
• Behavioral Studies, Standard 4. Understands conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions.
• Thinking and Reasoning Standard 1. Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.
• Thinking and Reasoning, Standard 3. Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Allison Milewski has developed media education resources for a range of award-winning filmmakers and national media organizations, including PBS LearningMedia, Independent Television Service (ITVS), Latino Public Broadcasting, HBO Documentary Films and Tribeca Film Institute. She is also the founder of the international media education program PhotoForward.org.
MEMORIES OF A PENITENT HEART
Student Handout A: Viewing Notes

STUDENT NAME____________________________________________________________

Instructions: Watch the film clips and make notes in response to the following questions. Record general notes about scenes and quotes that surprised, confused or interested you:

1. Whose story is being told in this film? What is his relationship to the filmmaker?

2. Who are the “historians” in this family? Which members of the family are shaping the family’s history?

3. What is motivating the family “historians” to tell Miguel’s story?

Viewing Notes:
STUDENT NAME____________________________________________________________

Instructions: Watch the film clips and take notes on your subject. Record general notes about scenes and quotes that surprised, confused or interested you:

Which subject are you focusing on while watching these clips? (Circle one)
5. Miguel’s mother 7. Miguel’s New York friends
6. Miguel’s partner, Robert/Aquin 8. Miguel’s sisters

1. How did your subject(s) “see” Miguel?
   (Write down at least two quotes that demonstrate your subject’s feelings about and perception of Miguel.)

2. How did your subject feel about Miguel’s homosexuality?

3. What was the public attitude toward gay men during the time when Miguel was living in New York?

Viewing Notes:
Instructions: Share your Viewing Notes with your group members and collaborate to answer the following questions. (If you need more space to record your responses, use a separate sheet of paper or the back of this worksheet):

1. Why did Miguel refuse to be tested for HIV/AIDS? What did he mean when he said a positive HIV/AIDS result was a “blacklist”? How would that diagnosis have affected how his family and friends remembered him?

2. Which of the factors that we identified in the first activity influenced how Miguel and his story were remembered? What aspects of Miguel’s story were erased after his death?

3. What were the similarities and differences between Miguel’s religious beliefs and his mother’s? How did their beliefs influence Miguel’s decisions before his death? How did they shape how Miguel was remembered after his death?

4. In the film, Cecilia asks, “Who did Miguel want to be?” What do you think? Why did Miguel change his name to Michael? How do you think Miguel would want to be remembered?

5. How might the fear, bias and social stigma experienced by Miguel and his contemporaries influence our historical understanding of the AIDS Crisis and the LGTBQI community?
In the early 1980s, same-gender sexual relationships were still illegal in most states and the stigma of homosexuality was so strong that very few people would risk being openly gay. It was in this hostile climate that an unknown, unnamed disease began spreading across the United States. Many of the early victims of the disease were homosexual men, and as a result, the disease became associated with the gay community. In fact, doctors and scientists incorrectly labeled the condition gay-related immune deficiency (or GRID) and the public called this devastating and mysterious disease “gay cancer.”

Even after the disease was renamed AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and the National Cancer Institute found the cause of the disease and confirmed that it was not a “gay” illness, the stigma from those early days of the AIDS crisis lingered. Many believed that homosexuality was immoral and that this disease was a divine punishment. The shame and fear associated with the illness often isolated the victims and survivors and had a devastating impact on their relationships with their partners, friends, families and the broader community. This stigma and fear-mongering continue to affect the LGTBQI community today: a common misperception among LGTBQI youth is that their sexual orientation means that they will become HIV positive at some point in their lives, which is false.

Additional resources on the AIDS Crisis:

- American Historical Association: “Silence = Death: It’s Time to Teach AIDS History”
- AVERT: “History of HIV and AIDS Overview”
  https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/overview
- HIV.gov: “A Timeline of HIV/AIDS”