

Bird
of
Paradise
How I Became Latina
a memoir
Raquel
Cepeda

COMPANION CURRICULUM

To the book by **RAQUEL CEPEDA**

Written by **KAREN ROBINSON**

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER EDUCATION AND TRAINING MANAGER

AT THE **ROBERT F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR JUSTICE & HUMAN RIGHTS**

"I HOPE THAT RAQUEL CEPEDA'S EXPERIENCE SEARCHING FOR HER ROOTS WILL ENCOURAGE MORE LATINOS TO LOOK AT THEMSELVES WITH THE SAME HONESTY AND FIERCENESS." ESMERALDA SANTIAGO "AN IMPRESSIVE STORY OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND REDEMPTION. [CEPEDA'S] MIX OF NEW YORK'S HIP HOP SLANG AND LATINO GHETTO LANGUAGE WITH AN EXTREMELY RICH AND SOPHISTICATED STYLE HAS PRODUCED A RARE PIECE OF HIGH-LEVEL AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE." FRANK MOYA PONS, AUTHOR AND FOREMOST HISTORIAN OF DOMINICAN AND CARIBBEAN HISTORY "A TALE OF SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH THE MANY RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND LINGUISTIC CONFLICTING FORCES THAT LIE AT THE HEART OF U.S. LATINO IDENTITY, AS WELL AS THE STORY OF A PERSONAL STRUGGLE AGAINST A SUPPOSED FUKÚ OR ANCESTRAL CURSE THAT HAS HAUNTED THE AUTHORS' FAMILIES FOR GENERATIONS." CLAUDIO REMESEIRA, NBC LATINO "I'M SO APPRECIATIVE OF THE BOOK. IT'S THE SCIENCE OF THE DNA. IT'S THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF THE FINDING OF THE FINDING OF THE SELF. IT'S A LITTLE BIT OF HIP-HOP THROWN IN THERE. IT'S ALL THOSE DIFFERENT THINGS. IT IS REALLY A LOVELY BOOK." MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY "THE POWER OF THE BOOK RESTS WITH ITS ABILITY TO DOCUMENT THE PERSONAL AND THE SCIENTIFIC TRAVELS; ITS STRENGTH RESTS WITH ITS BLENDING OF MEMOIR AND "OBJECTIVE" SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY." DR. DAVID J. LEONARD, HUFFINGTON POST "UNFLINCHING AND IMMEDIATE AS THE HIP-HOP PULSING THROUGH IT PAGES, BIRD OF PARADISE IS ALL ABOUT STRADDLING FENCES: SANTO DOMINGO AND WASHINGTON HEIGHTS, CEPEDA'S COMPLICATED FATHER AND HER CAPRICIOUS MOTHER, AND FINALLY- GRANDLY, BRAVELY-SHE EXPLORES THE COMPLEX GENETICS THAT MAKE HER LATINA." AYANA MATHIS, AUTHOR OF THE TWELVE TRIBES OF HATTIE "DRAWING ON THE SCIENCE OF DNA TESTING AND HER OWN SENSE AND EXPERIENCE OF MYSTICISM, CEPEDA, AN AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST AND DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER, OFFERS A "SYNTHESIS BETWEEN LOGOS AND MYTHOS" IN A THOROUGHLY ENGAGING LOOK AT RACE FROM A LATINA'S PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT IS TOUTED AS A POSTRACIAL SOCIETY." BOOKLIST "CEPEDA'S COMPLEX FAMILY HISTORY IS BOTH UNIQUELY LATINO-THE BOOK IS PEPPERED WITH SPANISH IDIOM-AND PARADOXICALLY UNIVERSAL IN THIS NATION OF IMMIGRANTS. IT WILL APPEAL TO THOSE WHO WATCH WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? AND WONDER ABOUT THEMSELVES." LIBRARY JOURNAL "A THRILLING AND IMPASSIONED QUEST INTO THE HEART OF THE RACE QUESTION AND THE LATINO-A LABEL AS WE'VE COME TO UNDERSTAND IT. WITH METICULOUS RESEARCH AND REFRESHING HONESTY, CEPEDA BREAKS THE CODE NOT ONLY OF HER OWN ORIGINS, BUT THOSE OF AN ENTIRE PEOPLE. BIRD OF PARADISE IS A NECESSARY AND IMPORTANT BOOK FOR OUR TIME." PATRICIA ENGEL, AUTHOR OF VIDA AND IT'S NOT LOVE, IT'S JUST PARIS

BIRD OF PARADISE: **HOW I BECAME LATINA**

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Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina, along with this companion curriculum, seeks to bring complex and difficult issues such as domestic violence, bullying, claiming ones identity, and truth in reconciliation to the forefront of a classroom learning. As is the case with *Speak Truth To Power*, a project of the RFK Center for a Justice and Human Rights, *Bird of Paradise* challenges learners to draw from and apply the lessons learned from the author's story and those of other human rights defenders to their own life's, their own experiences, and their own journeys.

Bird of Paradise is about speaking truth to power and demonstrating the ability of the individual to not just overcome the doubters, the abusers, and the violators, but to thrive.



Karen Robinson
Speak Truth To Power Education and Training Manager
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Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina is equal parts memoir about my coming of age in New York City and Santo Domingo, and detective story chronicling a year-long journey to discover the truth about my ancestry. The book also looks at what it means to be Latina and American today and illustrates how I reconciled my hyphenated identity in a society that too often looks at racial and ethnic selfhood through a binary lens.

The motivation for this book came out of desire and necessity. I felt compelled to contribute to the existing landscape of American memoirs, a genre in which first- and second-generation narratives are abundant but where I couldn't quite find my self. *Bird of Paradise* is the first memoir to be written by a Dominican-American author of my generation and released in the popular market, one voice in a booming demographic of 53 million and counting. It's critical that we continue to tell our stories, however complex and painful sharing them with the world may be. And as members of this global community, one large dysfunctional family, I believe we owe it to each other.

The process of writing *Bird of Paradise*, as one might expect, was a deeply spiritual and cathartic experience. However, there were a few surprises along the road. For one, the results of the ancestral DNA tests I conducted on several direct family members, detailed in part two of the book, were illuminating. Arriving at a working, albeit complicated, state of peace with my father, whom I had a splintered relationship with for most of my life, was another unexpected outcome.

Through my work, particularly during the course of making a documentary film about American hip-hop culture's obsession with diamonds, or bling, and how that intersected itself into the decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone, I saw firsthand how the process of truth and reconciliation was being used as a tool for reparation after the war had ended. While the severity and sheer magnitude of violence and trauma suffered between the people I met in Sierra Leone and myself differed dramatically, I found myself applying those concepts in my own life. While researching and writing *Bird of Paradise*, I listened to my father reveal details about his experiences for the first time that demystified the beastly image I had constructed of him over the years. It was quite a revelation, an unexpected gift from the universe.

At the end of my journey—that is, for the book, in real life it continues to evolve and surprise me at every bend!—I came away with something I'd like to leave you with. Our identities are fluid and always shifting. While we cannot control everything around at all times, each and every one of us has the freedom and birthright to define ourselves and challenge the status quo. We can become a more thriving community if, from the inside out, we put in the work to ground our selves.

I am profoundly grateful to Karen Robinson, Speak Truth To Power Education and Training Manager at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights for developing this curriculum, and to you, the educators who are committed to making the concept of human rights and social justice accessible to your students.

Yours,
Raquel Cepeda
www.djalirancher.com

ABOUT THIS CURRICULUM

The companion guide for *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* provides activities and lessons designed to engage learners in discussions about identity, a subject that is often a complex one to grapple with. Designed to be as comprehensive and informative as possible, this guide can be used in its entirety as an in-depth unit of study or individual lessons can stand alone as learning extensions after reading the book. An alternative to reading the whole book is using chapters, focusing on Part One or Two, and/or using quotes from the book that correlate with individual lessons.

Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina is a very honest and direct narrative, parts of the story are about the author's life and can be painful and sometimes difficult to read. Prior to introducing the book to students, educators should prepare to support students who may experience personal challenges because of issues addressed within its pages. For example, the issue of domestic violence is present in Part I, and this may touch very close to home for some students. Therefore, providing a safe space and person to talk with should be established ahead of time. After reading the book or selecting parts, chapters, or quotes, give students the opportunity to share their reactions and questions. Use the companion guide to facilitate critical discussion about issues raised.

COMPANION GUIDE OBJECTIVES

- To introduce discussion and analysis of identity as depicted in the book *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina*
- To analyze what it means to be an American.
- To examine the connection between life experiences and how one views and claims one's identity.
- To engage students in a thoughtful and self-exploratory experience in order to better understand what identity means and how to move from self-awareness to understanding to action.

This guide is designed primarily for high school and college age students, as well as adult learners. It can be used in social and international studies classes, history classes, or as a stand-alone learning opportunity. It can also be used in community settings, such as book clubs.

ANTICIPATORY SET

What factors inform how you see yourself, inform your identity? Do you see yourself in the books you read, the music you listen to, what you are taught in school? What does it mean to be an American? When does one become an “American”?

1) Ask each student to write one page answering the question:

- What does it mean to be an American?

2) Collect the responses to be used in the culminating activity.

3) Provide each student with a causal chart: hand out 1. Have students identify the factors that have an impact how they see themselves and their identity.

INFLUENCES

Includes any and everything that impacts one’s identity. To begin this assignment, students should determine for themselves what influences their identity but make sure they consider the following category:

- 1) Family: where the family is from, the composition of the family
- 2) Ethnicity
- 3) Religion
- 4) Media
- 5) Education: from where they attend school to what is taught
- 6) Music
- 7) Community
- 8) Friends

Throughout the Identity study using *Bird of Paradise*, have students refer back to their chart and note if the study affirms or changes how they see themselves, what affects their identity, and how they understand the fluid and dynamic nature of the influences around them.

	Social Science
GUIDING QUESTIONS	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) How did the author's experience with the actual movement of her and her family impact her life?2) How do different immigrant groups experience the transition from their home country to the U.S.?3) How did the students' family experience with immigration impact their family?
OBJECTIVE	<p>Students will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Analyze immigration flow over the past 50 years.2) Compare and contrast how the world was presented, through maps, over the past 50 years.3) Analyze where people of the same or similar regions of the world settled in the U.S.4) Research their own families' history and compare with data from the time period their family arrived in the U.S.
TIME	2 class periods with a homework assignment
PREP	<p>Place a currently accepted, large map of the world on a visible and accessible wall in the classroom.</p> <p>Place two maps of the world, from within the last 50 years, ago next to the first map.</p> <p>Make available two different colored pushpins.</p>
ACTIVITY 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Have students examine the three maps. In pairs, have the students identify the similarities and differences between the maps. As the students identify the differences, have them write one reason they believe the geographic change occurred.2) Have each pair report their findings to the class.3) As a class discuss the following:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. What reasons did the students believe contributed to the changes? Did the change involve actual borders? Did the change involve a country's name? Did the change involve the governing structure of a country?b. When comparing the maps, did anything surprise them?

ACTIVITY 2

1. Prior to the homework assignment, ask students to put one pin on the map to identifying where their family came from and a different colored pin for where their family settled in the U.S. If tier parents/caregivers are from different countries of origin and/or if they originally settled in different locations in the U.S., have the students use more then one pin.

NOTE TO TEACHERS

Researching one's family history may present challenges for some of your students. As portrayed in *Bird of Paradise*, such research may uncover painful family experiences and/or may lead to conversations parents/caregivers have yet to have or perhaps even never wanted to have with their children. Prior to the assignment, you may want to send home an information sheet about the homework assignment, describing what you are asking the students to research about the history of where their family came from.

HOMEWORK

In *Bird of Paradise*, the author takes us on her journey into her family history. Along the way, we learn about more then just where her family came from, we learn about the "tapestry of races and ethnicities that came together in an ambiguous mix."

ASSIGNMENT

Answer the following question: What is your mix? Drawing on the journey traveled by the author, explore your family tapestry. In researching this paper, use interviews with family members and family friends, research the history of the country and/or city your family immigrated from, research the city your family settled in upon arrival in the U.S.

The paper should be no more then 10 pages long, single space.

2. Based on what the students learn from this assignment, have each student share one thing they learned about their family.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Each week have a student share some aspect of their family experience with the class. This could include a cultural experience such as music or food, it could include a narrative about why the family left their home country or the journey to the U.S., or it could be a poem or song about any aspect of their family tapestry.

LESSON TWO

LATINA, DOMINICANA, AMERICAN, DOMINIYORKIAN, LATINO-AMERICAN: THE LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

	Language Arts
GUIDING QUESTIONS	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do people use language to identify themselves?2. Why is word choice important, what does that communicate?3. Can a name used to describe a person or a group ever be reclaimed?
OBJECTIVE	<p>Students will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Examine the language of identity from multiple perspectives.2. Explore how different word or terms are used in different communities.3. Create poems express how they see themselves.
TIME	2 class periods
PREP	Have board space or flip chart paper available and in a place where it can remain for the duration of the lesson.
ANTICIPATORY SET	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Identify two examples in <i>Bird of Paradise</i> where a word or term was used to positively or negatively describe the author: note the place, who used the term and its impact on the author.2. In groups of three, share your examples and answer the following questions:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Did everyone in the group understand the example the same way?b. Did the words or terms used mean the same thing to everyone in the group?3. As a class, share the words or terms and write them on a flip chart paper or the board.4. As a class, discuss the words and terms and answer the following questions:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Do the words and terms mean the same to everyone in the class?b. How does using the words and terms selected make students feel?5. Leave the word on the board or flip chart for the duration of the lesson.
ACTIVITY 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In groups of three have the students define "identity".2. As a class, read the following definition from Merriam-Webster:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Identity: who someone is; the name of a person; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others.

LESSON TWO

LATINA, DOMINICANA, AMERICAN, DOMINIYORKIAN, LATINO-AMERICAN: THE LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

ACTIVITY 1 (CONT'D)

3. Did the group definitions meet the Merriam-Webster definition? Why? Why not?

4. Keep all of the definitions on the board or the flip chart paper.

ACTIVITY 2

1. Ask students to answer the following question and write the responses on a post it notes:

a. How do I identify myself to:

i. my parents

ii. my friends

iii. my teachers

iv. my neighbors

v. my best friend

2. In small groups, ask the students to discuss their responses and answer the following questions:

a. Did you use the same words or terms with each group? Why? Why not?

Why not?

b. Did any of the responses surprise you?

3. Ask the students to put their post it notes up around the definition of identity.

4. Individually, each student writes one reflective sentence on what their class identity means to them.

ASSIGNMENT

Have students write a poem about claiming their identity.

LESSON THREE

KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION: THE POWER TO CLAIM OR CRUSH IDENTITY

	Language Arts and Social Sciences
GUIDING QUESTIONS	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How are different communities represented or not represented in most commonly used curriculum?2. How has formal education in the U.S. treated the experiences of under-represented communities?3. Who determines what should be taught in schools?
OBJECTIVE	<p>Students will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Examine current educational content in relation to representation of the population.2. Research an example of politics in the classroom and school.3. Engage with the work of organizations seeking to represent multiple voices and experiences in teaching.
TIME	3 class periods
PREP	<p>Have the following websites and or materials available for the students:</p> <p>http://zinnedproject.org http://www.teachingforchange.org</p>
ANTICIPATORY SET	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Ask the students to list 5 areas of study, any subject, where they see themselves represented.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Was this easy? Why? Why not?
ACTIVITY 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none">2. In groups of four, assign students the following:

LESSON THREE

KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION: THE POWER TO CLAIM OR CRUSH IDENTITY

ACTIVITY 1 (CONT'D)

- a. Give each student group a school district (you can focus on your state or you can focus national depending on the class) and one group represented in your community (this can be defined based on ethnicity, race, religion, etc.)
- b. Ask students to analysis how the group they have been given has been represented in the formal educational system in their assigned school district, have them research:
 - i. Curriculum Content
 - ii. Teaching practices
 - iii. Parental or guardian involvement
 - iv. Access to full curriculum and programs

3. Have each group create a power point presentation addressing the four above points as they relate to the group they were researching.
4. As a class discuss similarities and differences among how various groups are represented within the formal educational system.

ACTIVITY 2

1. Divide the class in half.
2. Ask each group to research the Arizona law banning Mexican-American studies in the curriculum.
3. One group will be assigned to defend the law; the other group will challenge the law.
4. Hold a debate on the constitutionality of the Arizona law.
5. After the debate, regardless of which group won the debate, ask the class to consider what is lost and what is gained by banning the study of any group of people.
6. Have the students write a 10-minute journal response.

Language Arts and Social Studies

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What role does music play in the life of different communities?
2. How does music support or enhance ones identity?
3. Why is music such an important medium in often underrepresented or marginalized communities?

OBJECTIVE

Students will:

1. Explore different music genres.
2. Examine the role music plays in communicating a message and ones truth.
3. Create their own personal, musical truth.

TIME

1 class period

PREP

1. As a class, discuss the following:
 - a. What role did music play in the author's life?
 - b. How did music connect to the author's community and how did it connect her to her community?

ACTIVITY 1

2. Ask each student to select one form of music and write one page describing the following:
 - a. What type of music did you choose?
 - b. What is unique to this genre?
 - c. What role does this musical genre play in the community and why is it important?
 - d. How does this musical genre speak the truth of the community?
3. Have the students share their pieces and as a class, compare and contrast the responses.
 - a. What are the similarities?
 - b. What are the differences?

ASSIGNMENT

Either individually or in a group of no more than 3, have the students write a song using any genre. The only requirement is that the song shares some experience from the students' life.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Host an evening where the students share their songs and poetry from their work with *Bird of Paradise*.

	Social Studies
GUIDING QUESTIONS	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How prevalent is domestic violence in US society?2. Does domestic violence discriminate?3. What role does power and control play in cases of domestic violence?4. Why does stopping domestic violence matter?
OBJECTIVE	<p>Students will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Examine the statistics of domestic violence in the US.2. Research how current law related to domestic violence is being implemented and funded.3. Know what the Violence Against Women act is and what it does.4. Explore the work being done to eradicate domestic violence.
NOTE TO TEACHERS	<p>Domestic violence is a difficult subject to address because it is often hidden and is often a cause of shame for the victim and those close to the victim. However, one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. The odds are likely that one of your students has direct experience with domestic violence. As you begin this unit of study, make sure to have available the names and contact details of community programs to support individuals affected by domestic violence. It is also important to explain what domestic violence is. Domestic violence is any of a series of behaviors used by one person in a relationship to control the other. Partners may be married or not married; heterosexual, gay, or lesbian; living together, separated or dating</p> <p>Learning about the issue of domestic violence is a critical step in eradicating this epidemic.</p>
TIME	2 class periods
PREP	<p>Anticipatory Set</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In pairs, have the students discuss how the author's experience with domestic violence made them feel. How would they describe their reaction after reading about the first incident verses the last incident?

ACTIVITY 1

2. In small groups, ask your students to read the domestic violence fact sheet from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

[http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet\(National\).pdf](http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet(National).pdf)

3. Ask each group to select one statistic from the fact sheet for further research.

4. As a class discuss the statistic and highlight facts that were surprising to the class and discuss why?

ASSIGNMENT

1. Each group will research how the statistic they selected impacts different communities, to include but not limited to:

- a. Women of color
- b. Recent immigrants
- c. White women
- d. Upper class women
- e. Teenage girls

2. Depending on the class size, a group could conduct their research based on domestic violence against men.

3. Ask each group to prepare a power point presentation for the class.

ACTIVITY 2

1. As a class, review the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA):

<http://nnedv.org/policy/issues/vawa.html>

2. Discuss the following questions:

- a. What does the VAWA do?
- b. What are the shortcomings of VAWA?
- c. How effective is VAWA in stopping domestic violence?
- d. Who is not protected under VAWA?

3. Ask the students to return to their small groups and analysis how VAWA would or would not affect the women and the statistics from their homework.

4. Each group will present their findings to the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Invite a domestic violence organization to talk to your students about the issue and the role they can play in eradicating domestic violence.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Language Arts

1. What does it mean to be an American?
2. How does *Bird of Paradise* examine the issue of fitting in, of being an American?
3. How do you come to terms with conflicting messages about who you are and where you belong?

OBJECTIVE

Students will:

1. Explore who they are as Americans?
2. Examine their truth as it relates to how they see themselves verses how other see them.
3. Reflect on their experience with *Bird of Paradise*.

TIME

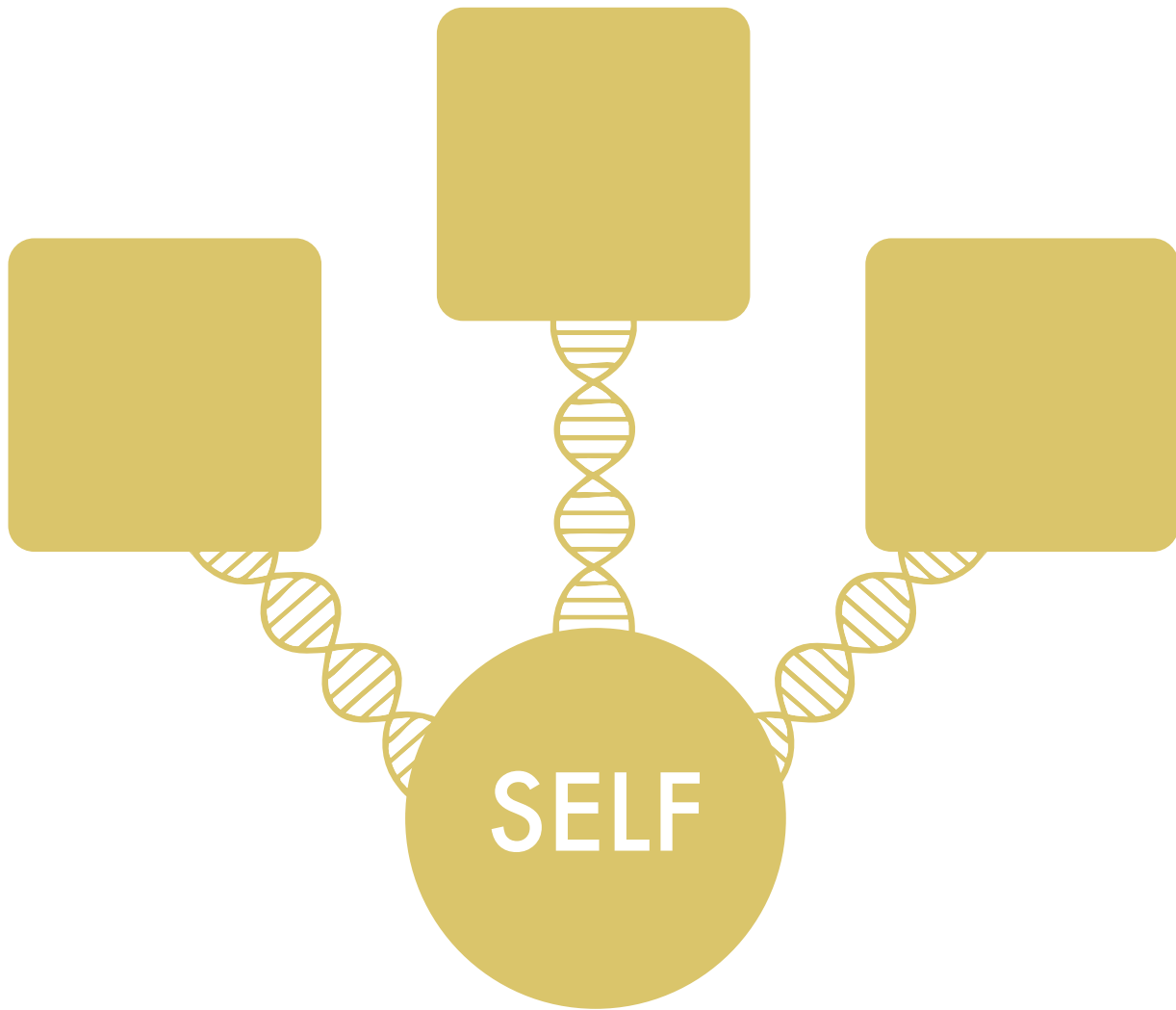
1 class period

FINAL PROJECT

1. Ask the students to write a 5 page paper answering the following questions:
 - a. What does it mean to be an American?
 - b. How does one find the truth about who they are?
 - c. How does one reconcile conflicts between who they believe they are and who society or their family says they are?

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

Ask the students to write a letter to the author of *Bird of Paradise* reflecting on what her story meant to them. You can send them to author Raquel Cepeda directly by visiting her website at www.djalirancher.com



How I see myself:

We greatly value your input and guidance in our work. If you have recently used this curriculum, we would love to hear your feedback. Please complete this form and email it to robinson@rfkcenter.org

NAME:

LOCATION:

EMAIL:

AGE LEVEL OF LEARNERS:

· In what kind of educational setting did you use this material? (classroom, community group, etc.)

· Where did you first hear about this curriculum guide?

· Why did you choose to use this curriculum guide?

· Have you taught about human rights issues prior to using this curriculum guide?

What did you find to be most beneficial/helpful about this curriculum guide?

- What did you find to be least beneficial/helpful about this curriculum guide?

- Would you add anything to this curriculum guide?

- Which part of the curriculum guide seemed to resonate the most with your learners?

- Did you teach the entire curriculum or pull pieces from it?

- Did you find the curriculum guide to be user-friendly?

Additional comments/feedback: