

**Alec Lacerte**  
**EDUC 0515: Teaching LGBTQIA History**

**Unit Plan Title:** “Creating Community: A History of Ballroom”

**Recommended Grade Level(s):** 11th or 12th grade

Students should have a basic knowledge of modern U.S. history (1900s onwards)



## **LETTER TO THE TEACHER**

### **Unit Rationale:**

Aspects of Ballroom culture (and Black trans culture in general) have been heavily incorporated into mainstream American media, and students are therefore likely to be familiar with its impacts. It is crucial that students know the people who shaped the culture that shows up in so many aspects of modern American life — countless songs, TV shows, and books reference or base themselves on the stories of the Black trans women of Ballroom, oftentimes without credit. Through this unit, students will learn the importance of giving credit where credit is due, and how studying history can play a role in enabling this process. Yet much of the unit will also revolve around critical hope: students will learn how Ballroom and House culture gives the oppressed a space to thrive and grow, and will be able to connect such spaces with their own lives. By learning about the importance of these spaces, students will be better equipped to form and engage with communities that support one another in times of need.

As a quick summary, the unit starts with historical context and connections to larger U.S. history that students are familiar with. It then progresses into applying this knowledge and context to actual people (icons) that are associated with Ballroom culture through a viewing of the films *Paris is Burning* and *Kiki*. Students will then focus in on their own communities, a common thread throughout the unit, and work on final projects that explore ways that their communities could benefit from structures in a manner similar to Ballroom.

If you are only able to do portions of this unit but not the full thing, I would recommend that students get a chance to view excerpts either of the two films mentioned. There are countless ways to connect U.S. history to these films, and movies are a great way of understanding the lived experience of people at certain historical time periods and contexts. Apart from the

movies, the historical context on Day 2 would also be a great addition to any unit on U.S. history. It showcases queer history and celebration in a way that students are sure to want to engage with.

I want to note that this unit is really designed for students who come from backgrounds of oppression. Though parts of it would be great for any U.S. History course, I think that the unit as a whole — the final project especially — is best for students who are familiar with oppression. Seeing as students will be choosing a community that could benefit from the structures of care and support so intrinsic to Ballroom, this activity is really only relevant for communities that do not already have immediate access to this. Students from privileged backgrounds may recognize the importance of support and care, but do not have the same necessity to create instances of community seeing as their identities already have automatic senses of community in American society. This is not to say that the unit should absolutely not be taught to privileged students, but extra thought and care should be put into making sure that students are able to have productive conversations. The final project should also be modified so that students are able to pick from a wider range of communities; as written, the project specifies that students choose communities that would benefit from structure and support.

I hope that you enjoy teaching this unit as much as I enjoyed creating it!

### **Final Project**

For this project, you will create your own “house” modeled after the Ballroom Houses and lineages that we have studied. Your house will be a representation of an identity or community that you are a part of. By the end of the project, you will have a visual representation of your house – a physical poster is preferred, but any digital or physical representation is welcome as long as it can be easily shared with your classmates. You’ll also come up with three different drag or Ballroom personas – one of whom will function as the house parent or founder – and trace the history of the house in relation to real-world historical events. In creating your house, you should think about reasons that this house is unique or special. How does it relate to your own identity and what you journaled about on Day 1? What communities does it serve? How did it come into creation? What is it’s “purpose,” and how does this show up in its own unique performance or artistic styles?

You will create a few different elements that will come together to portray your house:

1. A name for your house. How does the name reflect your house’s origin story?
  - a. A “house statement” and reasoning behind this statement. This can be very simple and is very flexible – examples include a short motto or jingle, a logo, or a signature dance move/pose. It should reflect the values of your house, as well as the communities it was created to serve. Make sure to include a short, 5-7 sentence explanation of your statement and why it matters.
2. A simple lineage with at least three house members, including the house parent and a contemporary member. Who started this house? How do contemporary members of the house reflect the values of the original house parent? You should explore a founding member and a contemporary member; the third member that you write about can be from any period of your house.

- a. A short autobiography for each of the house members you create. Each autobiography should be 5-7 sentences and should include basic facts about the person, as well as their own motivations for being a part of this community. Each autobiography should include at least one reference to a historical moment (see the timeline below). Remember that autobiographies are written from the subject's point of view! Be creative with their voice and style.
  - b. A "portrait" of each of the house members you create. Have fun with this! If you feel as though visual art isn't your forte, consider literary arts – could you complete a portrait through poetry? Make sure that their character traits shine through. The portrait should be written or created from their point of view.
3. A timeline of the house. Your house's creation and history should be grounded in historical events. What events catalyzed the house parent to found this house? How have the house dynamics shifted and changed over time? You should include at least 5 major historical points, demographic shifts, political movements, or other factual references in your timeline. You should also include at least 3 important dates for your house (one of which should be its founding). By grounding your project in history, the timeline as a whole should prove that your house *could* (and maybe even should) be a legitimate community.
  - a. If you want your house to be more contemporary and are having trouble finding historical references, consider starting your timeline before the house's creation. How did past historical events lead to the contemporary context that necessitated your house's existence?

To present your work, all three of these major elements should be put together into a large-scale visual "poster." A handmade, paper version or a digital version are preferred options, but let me know if you'd like to explore other means of demonstrating these aspects (e.g. a video, paper, website, etc.). Make sure you are grounding your creativity in the research and work we have done this unit, but most importantly, have fun with this project! It's your chance to connect the history we have learned with your own identity and communities.



Crystal LaBeija (left) in a still from *The Queen* (1968), directed by Frank Simon [Grove Press/Photofest](#)

Here is the link to Alec's full Unit Plan if you would like to see how he recommends to teachers and students to complete this creative project. [📄 Copy of Alec Lacerte Final Unit Plan](#)