

Beyond the Three Roots: Building a Living Puerto Rican Cultural Identity

A Historical Inquiry Project for Fifth- and Sixth-Grade Students

For generations, Puerto Rican history education has commonly introduced children to the idea that Puerto Rican identity emerged from three principal ancestral roots: Taíno, Spanish, and African. Students repeatedly encounter these “three roots” as a foundational explanation of who Puerto Ricans are.

But what if historical evidence invites us to integrate additional voices into that story?

Beyond the Three Roots: Building a Living Puerto Rican Cultural Identity is a creative historical inquiry project designed for fifth- and sixth-grade students to explore what other cultural voices may have contributed to the formation of present-day Puerto Rican identity beyond the three ancestries traditionally emphasized in the classroom.

The purpose of the project is not to replace, minimize, or disprove the fundamental Taíno, African, and Spanish contributions to Puerto Rican history. Nor does the project begin with a predetermined conclusion about what additional ancestries students will find.

Instead, it begins with a historical question:

Beyond the Taíno, African, and Spanish roots we already know, what other cultural voices can historical evidence help us discover in the story of Puerto Rico?

Puerto Rico can be understood not only through the traditional metaphor of three roots, but also as a **port of encounter between cultures**. Different peoples have migrated to, settled in, traveled through, and formed families in Puerto Rico throughout its history. The project invites students to investigate those movements and to ask whether some voices that became part of the Puerto Rican people may be less visible in the historical narrative they have traditionally learned.

What Is a Historical Source?

Before students investigate how many cultural voices may be found within Puerto Rican history, they must confront an even more fundamental historical question:

What counts as a historical source?

An important introduction to this question will be the Puerto Rican historian Cayetano Coll y Toste and the theatrical work *Cayetaneando*. Coll y Toste is particularly relevant to the project because his approach to Puerto Rican history extended beyond a narrowly academic understanding of historical knowledge. He collected documents, stories, traditions, memories, and evidence found among Puerto Rican people and their living culture.

His work provides a powerful starting point for our classroom discussion:

Where can historians find history?

Students will learn that historical evidence is not limited to textbooks. We can learn about the past through written documents, photographs, maps, newspapers, family records, oral traditions, artifacts, archaeological evidence, and many other sources.

But twenty-first-century technology allows our students to ask a question that historians of previous generations could not investigate in quite the same way:

Can our genetic cultural ancestry also be a historical source?

Genetic Cultural Ancestry as a Historical Source

This question has already begun as an open debate in our History classroom.

Is genetic cultural ancestry a **primary historical source** because DNA is biological evidence inherited directly from our ancestors?

Is the ancestry report a **secondary historical source** because scientists, reference populations, and computational methods are required to interpret that DNA?

Could it be understood as a **hybrid historical source**—primary biological evidence accessed through contemporary scientific interpretation?

Or could genetic cultural ancestry represent a **new kind of historical source made possible by twenty-first-century technology**?

The students do not need to begin the project with an established answer.

The debate itself is part of the project.

Our DNA carries biological evidence inherited across generations. Genetic ancestry technology allows us to examine that evidence in ways that previous generations of

historians could not. At the same time, the ancestry regions and percentages presented to us are interpretations produced by comparing genetic information with reference populations.

This creates an extraordinary opportunity for fifth- and sixth-grade students to think critically about the nature of historical evidence.

Rather than simply asking students to memorize the difference between a primary and secondary source, the project allows them to encounter evidence that makes the distinction genuinely worth discussing.

Is genetic cultural ancestry primary, secondary, both, or something new? Why?

That question will remain open for students to debate and defend with historical reasoning.

From Genetic Evidence to Historical Questions

The inspiration for this inquiry comes partly from my own experience.

I completed a genetic cultural ancestry test provided by Ancestry (username: kalabadoom).

To the best of my family knowledge, my family has been Puerto Rican for at least four generations, with no known ancestor during those generations born outside Puerto Rico. I therefore had every reason to expect my ancestry results to reflect primarily the three cultural ancestries traditionally emphasized in Puerto Rican history: Spanish, African, and Taíno ancestry. Instead, I encountered something unexpected. The largest component of my estimated genetic cultural ancestry was associated with **Portugal**, a country from which I have no known recent relative.

That result immediately created a historical question: If my known recent ancestors were born in Puerto Rico, how did such a significant Portuguese ancestral component become part of my family's history?

Researching that question led me to discover historical connections involving migration to Puerto Rico and Portuguese populations, including migration connected with the Azores and the wider Atlantic world. The ancestry result, therefore, did something historically important: **It made me ask a question I would not otherwise have known to ask.** This is precisely the experience I want to make possible for my students. What happens if students who have understood themselves simply as Puerto Rican encounter unexpected ancestral connections? What if several students discover Portuguese ancestry? What if they encounter ancestry connected with other parts of Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, or elsewhere?

A classroom sample cannot establish the genetic composition of the Puerto Rican population as a whole, and students will be taught that distinction. But unexpected patterns can generate meaningful historical questions.

For example: **If several students encounter Portuguese ancestry, what historical sources can we find that document Portuguese migration or settlement in Puerto Rico?**

The objective is not to begin with a conclusion and search for evidence that proves it. The objective is to allow evidence to create questions.

My own results can be seen in the following screenshots, it gives an idea of the scope of the horizon of cultural ancestries that the students can also find as puertorricans in their own tests:



Damaris's 20 ancestral regions

Iberian Peninsula

 Azores	19%	>
 Portugal	9%	>
 Spain	9%	>
 Canary Islands	4%	>
 Northern Spain	4%	>
 Basque	3%	>
 Madeira	3%	>

Indigenous Americas

 Puerto Rico	23%	>
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Northern Africa

 **North Africa** 7% >

Jewish

 **Sephardic Jews in Northern Africa** 2% >

 **Sephardic Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean** 2% >

 **Ashkenazi Jews in Central & Southeastern Europe** 1% >

West Africa

 **Mali** 3% >

 Ethnic groups >

 **Senegal** 1% >

 **Yorubaland** 1% >

 Ethnic groups >

England

 **West Midlands** 3% >

 **Southeastern England & Northwestern Europe** 1% >

Celtic & Gaelic

 **Hebrides & Western Highlands, Scotland** 2% >

Central Africa

 **Western Bantu Peoples** 2% >

Persian Gulf States

 **Arabian Peninsula** 1% >

Researching the Questions: History at a Fifth- and Sixth-Grade Level

Once genetic cultural ancestry has generated historical questions, students will investigate those questions using **historical sources that are accessible online and appropriate for fifth- and sixth-grade research**. These may include digitized historical documents, census and population information, immigration records, old maps, photographs, historical newspapers, family-history records, genealogical information, and trustworthy digital collections from Puerto Rico and other relevant places. Students will search for evidence about the peoples who migrated to Puerto Rico and became part of its history and compare what they discover with questions generated through our classroom ancestry research.

The process can be expressed through four simple questions that fifth- and sixth-grade students can use throughout the project:

What did we find?

What might it mean?

What other historical evidence can we find?

What can we reasonably conclude from the evidence we have?

In this way, students will learn that history is not simply information received from a textbook. History can be investigated. They can ask questions about the past, locate historical sources, compare evidence, reconsider their first ideas, and construct conclusions based on what the available evidence allows them to say.

Turning the Classroom Into a Historical Source

This brings the project back to Cayetano Coll y Toste. If historians such as Coll y Toste learned to find Puerto Rican history among Puerto Ricans themselves, our students can experiment with a twenty-first-century version of the same principle: **What happens if the classroom itself becomes a historical source?**

Our participating students can explore their own genetic cultural ancestry and then look collectively at the cultural ancestries represented within our classroom. The classroom does not become a scientifically representative sample of Puerto Rico, nor will students make population-wide genetic conclusions from 83 individuals. Instead, it becomes a source of **historical questions**. Perhaps we will find exactly what students expected. Perhaps we will not. Perhaps one unexpected result will send an entire group searching through online historical records to discover a migration story they had never

encountered in their textbook. That is precisely the point. The classroom becomes a place where students do not merely receive history. **They investigate it.**

Beyond the Three Roots: An Open Inquiry

An essential principle of *Beyond the Three Roots* is that students are not being asked to prove that Puerto Rican identity has any particular “fourth root.” The project begins with a question rather than a thesis. Perhaps the traditional three-root framework will prove remarkably powerful in explaining what students discover. Perhaps students will encounter additional migration histories that deserve greater attention. Perhaps different families will reveal dramatically different ancestral histories. All of these outcomes are historically meaningful. Students will therefore investigate a larger question:

Beyond the three roots we already know, what other voices can historical evidence help us hear in the story of Puerto Rico?

That question also invites students to think critically about historical narratives themselves. Why do some groups become central to the way a country tells its history while others become less visible? If historical evidence shows that a particular immigrant population became part of Puerto Rican families, what can we discover about those people's lives? Did they preserve a distinct cultural identity? Did they become integrated into Puerto Rican culture so thoroughly that their descendants eventually understood themselves simply as Puerto Rican? And if their biological descendants remain among us while their historical voices have become difficult to hear, **can historical research help us hear those voices again?**

Giving Immigrant Voices Their Place in Puerto Rican History

Beyond the Three Roots also invites students to consider why recognizing immigration matters when we tell the history of Puerto Rico.

If historical evidence shows that immigrants from different parts of the world settled in Puerto Rico, formed families here, contributed to our communities, and eventually became part of the Puerto Rican people, then their contribution also deserves to be investigated and given its appropriate place in our historical narrative.

This question is particularly meaningful in the context of Puerto Rico's colonial history. A people can inherit not only the history produced under colonialism, but also ways of **telling that history**. If we simply repeat an inherited historical narrative without asking whose experiences it includes, whose contributions it emphasizes, and whose voices may have become less visible, we risk unintentionally reproducing—or even **colonizing for ourselves—the way we understand our own past**.

The purpose is not to diminish the Taíno, African, or Spanish foundations of Puerto Rican history. It is to ask whether those three categories tell the whole story of the people who actually lived, migrated, formed families, worked, created communities, and became Puerto Rican.

This raises an important historical and civic question for our students: **Who gets a voice when we tell the history of a people?**

If Portuguese, Canarian, Corsican, Caribbean, or other immigrant populations contributed meaningfully to the formation of Puerto Rican families and communities, historical inquiry should allow students to discover and recognize those contributions rather than exclude them simply because they do not fit neatly within the traditional three-root narrative.

In that sense, *Beyond the Three Roots* is also an invitation to **decolonize the way we tell our own history**: not by replacing one predetermined narrative with another, but by allowing historical evidence to determine which voices deserve to be heard.

Our students will therefore be encouraged to ask:

Whose voices are already present in the Puerto Rican history we learn?

Whose voices might be missing?

What historical evidence could help us find them?

And how does our understanding of Puerto Rican identity change when we allow those voices to become part of the story?

Recognizing immigrant contributions is ultimately an act of historical accuracy. If people became part of Puerto Rico, then their stories became part of Puerto Rican history.

Beyond the Three Roots seeks to help students discover those stories and give them their rightful place within our **living Puerto Rican cultural identity**.

The question of immigration also gives this historical inquiry exceptional contemporary relevance for our students. Immigration is not only a subject from the past; it is part of an important cultural conversation taking place in the United States today. As Americans, our students should be able to recognize with pride that American cultural identity is necessarily **plural and fraternal**. America has never been the story of only one cultural ancestry. It is a shared *we* formed through the encounter, coexistence, contributions, and histories of many peoples.

Puerto Rico offers an especially meaningful place from which to explore that reality. Our island can be understood as a **Puerto Rico of cultures (a port rich in cultures)**: a meeting place where

Indigenous, African, European, Caribbean, American, immigrant, and other histories have encountered one another across generations and participated in the formation of a distinct Puerto Rican people. Genetic cultural ancestry may allow students to see that plurality in an extraordinarily concrete way—even within themselves. Their DNA may preserve traces of encounters among peoples whose descendants, after generations of living together, no longer understand themselves primarily through those separate origins, but simply as **Puerto Rican**.

This makes *Beyond the Three Roots* not only an inquiry into ancestry, but also an inquiry into **belonging**. Cultural plurality does not have to fragment a people. On the contrary, discovering how many different peoples have contributed to a shared history can deepen our understanding of the fraternity that makes a people possible.

In this sense, Puerto Rico can offer our students a particularly vivid example of a larger American ideal: **unity does not require cultural sameness**. A genuinely shared identity can be enriched by many cultural histories while allowing all of them to belong to the same *we*.

Beyond the Three Roots therefore invites students to discover Puerto Rico as a **Puerto Rico of cultures**—a living example of how many ancestral voices can become one people without requiring those voices to disappear. By learning to recognize those voices in our history, students can also learn to understand cultural plurality not as something foreign to their identity, but as something that may have been part of who we are all along.

Genetic Ancestry Does Not Define Cultural Identity

The project will make an important distinction between **genetic ancestry and personal cultural identity**. A genetic ancestry result does not tell a student who he or she is. A child whose DNA report identifies ancestry from Portugal, Africa, Spain, another Caribbean island, or anywhere else does not become culturally defined by a percentage on a screen. Our students are investigating the history carried through generations of Puerto Rican families. Genetic cultural ancestry is therefore being used as historical evidence—not as a definition of race, nationality, worth, or personal identity. This distinction is itself an important part of the project's historical and civic learning.

Student Participation, Family Choice, and Genetic Privacy

Because genetic information is deeply personal, participation in the DNA-testing component of the project will be voluntary and will require explicit parent or guardian authorization. Parents or guardians—not the school—will activate the kits, submit the samples, maintain control of the Ancestry accounts, and receive the complete results directly. The classroom will not require access to students' Ancestry accounts or raw genetic information. For purposes of the historical project, participating families need only provide a printed version of the broad genetic cultural ancestry percentages or

other ancestry information they voluntarily choose to share. Students who do not participate in genetic testing will still participate fully in the historical research component of *Beyond the Three Roots*. Genetic testing is a source available to the project, not a requirement for a student to participate in learning.

Proposed Partnership With Ancestry

Making genetic cultural ancestry available as a historical source creates one significant practical challenge: access.

Our bilingual school has **83 fifth- and sixth-grade students divided among five History groups**. Providing these students with access to genetic ancestry testing would create an extraordinary opportunity to transform an abstract discussion about Puerto Rican cultural ancestry into a real historical investigation.

Therefore I propose that we as school invite **Ancestry to become an educational sponsor of *Beyond the Three Roots***.

We envision Ancestry's participation in *Beyond the Three Roots* as more than a donation of DNA testing kits. Ancestry has the unique ability to support **both sides of our students' historical inquiry: the genetic evidence that generates historical questions and the historical records that help students investigate those questions**.

For this reason, we would be honored to explore a partnership that combines **AncestryDNA® testing with access to AncestryClassroom® and Ancestry's historical record collections** for our five fifth- and sixth-grade History groups.

Our ideal sponsorship would provide AncestryDNA® kits for all **83 fifth- and sixth-grade students** whose families choose to participate. Alternatively, a minimum sponsorship of **20 kits—four for each of our five History groups**. Within each group, the four sponsored opportunities would be distributed as follows:

- one kit awarded through a drawing among participating boys;
- one kit awarded through a drawing among participating girls;
- one kit recognized through positive classroom conduct; and
- one kit recognized through outstanding performance in History.

If possible, we would also be grateful for **educational discount coupons or promotional codes for the remaining students**, allowing families who wish to participate to purchase an AncestryDNA® kit at a reduced cost, **with educational discount codes for additional participating families** would make it possible to introduce genetic cultural ancestry as a historical source within every classroom.

We would also like to request **AncestryClassroom® access to Ancestry's historical record collections for our students and teacher during the research phase of the project.**

This combination would create an especially meaningful historical inquiry:

What does our genetic cultural ancestry suggest?

What historical questions does it create?

What can we find in historical records that might help us understand it?

Students could use age-appropriate historical records available through AncestryClassroom and other trustworthy online collections to investigate migration, families, communities, and the different peoples who became part of Puerto Rico's history.

In this way, Ancestry would not simply provide students with ancestry results. It would help provide them with the **historical tools necessary to investigate what those results might mean.**

The partnership would therefore allow our fifth- and sixth-grade students to put different kinds of historical sources into conversation with one another: genetic cultural ancestry, census and immigration records, family-history records, newspapers, maps, photographs, and other digitized historical evidence.

For a project whose central question is “**What counts as a historical source?**”, this combination would be especially powerful. Students would be able to experience firsthand how one source can generate a question and how other sources can help investigate it.

Ultimately, Ancestry's contribution would help transform our bilingual History classrooms into small historical research communities in which 83 young Puerto Rican students can move beyond simply learning what historians have concluded and begin learning **how historical conclusions are constructed from evidence.** All this creates several possible levels of partnership—from making the experience available to selected students in every classroom to potentially making it accessible to all 83 students.

Why This Partnership Could Have an Exceptional Educational Impact

This project is taking place in a **bilingual school in Puerto Rico**, where fifth- and sixth-grade students are learning not only Puerto Rican history but also how to discuss historical ideas, evidence, and research across languages.

Ancestry's sponsorship would therefore reach far beyond the distribution of DNA kits and access to historical records.

It would give **83 young students** an opportunity to experience history as something they can actively investigate. For many of them, this could be their first experience realizing that a historical question does not necessarily begin in a textbook. It can begin with their family. It can begin with a historical source they discover online. It can begin with an unexpected genetic cultural ancestry result. It can even begin with a debate among eleven-year-olds about whether genetic cultural ancestry should be considered a primary historical source, a secondary historical source, a hybrid source, or an entirely new kind of historical source made possible by twenty-first-century technology.

Ancestry would be helping students discover that **their own questions can become historical questions**.

The educational impact could potentially extend beyond these five classrooms.

My own AncestryDNA® results raised a question about the possible historical significance of Portuguese ancestry within Puerto Rican families. If the results voluntarily shared by participating students were to reveal a recurring Portuguese genetic cultural ancestry pattern across our classrooms, that observation would not establish a population-level conclusion about Puerto Rico. A classroom of 83 students is neither large enough nor designed to constitute a representative genetic sample of the Puerto Rican population.

It could, however, generate a significant **population-level historical question worth investigating further**:

Could Portuguese ancestry represent a more significant component of Puerto Rican population history than is commonly recognized in the way Puerto Rican history is taught?

If such a pattern emerged, the classroom project could provide the starting point for a small article on the philosophy and teaching of Puerto Rican history, tentatively titled:

Beyond the Three Roots: Building a Living Puerto Rican Cultural Identity

The article would not present the classroom findings as proof of a Puerto Rican population trend. Instead, it would use the students' inquiry as a case study demonstrating how new forms of historical evidence can generate questions that deserve broader historical, genealogical, and population-level investigation.

More importantly, it could propose a broader reflection on **how Puerto Rican history is taught**.

If further historical and population research were to support the presence of significant immigrant contributions that remain comparatively invisible within the traditional narrative of Puerto Rican cultural formation, this would raise an important educational question: **Are we giving all of the peoples who became part of Puerto Rico their appropriate place and voice in the history we teach our children?**

Puerto Rico's colonial history makes this question particularly meaningful. Decolonizing the teaching of Puerto Rican history should not mean replacing one predetermined historical narrative with another. It should mean teaching students to follow historical evidence wherever it leads, critically examining inherited narratives, and making room for the voices of the peoples whose lives and contributions became part of Puerto Rico—even when those voices do not fit neatly within the categories through which our history has traditionally been taught.

In this sense, *Beyond the Three Roots* could become more than a classroom project. It could provide a small but meaningful example of a **decolonizing approach to history education: one that allows evidence to broaden the narrative and seeks to integrate all the voices that historical inquiry enables us to recover.**

Ancestry's partnership could therefore help 83 young Puerto Rican students do something larger than discover where their ancestors may have come from.

It could help them discover that **they can participate in asking new questions about how the history of their own people is researched, understood, and taught.**

Project Timeline

The principal historical investigation and culminating activities are planned for **November**, in connection with Puerto Rican Heritage Week and our study of Puerto Rican history and cultural identity.

Because AncestryDNA® results require processing time, participating families would ideally receive and submit their kits during the **last week of September and first week of October.**

As results become available, students will use them to generate research questions and investigate relevant historical sources available online.

During November, the five History groups will bring those discoveries together as part of *Beyond the Three Roots*.

Culminating Historical Inquiry

The culminating work may include student presentations, historical maps, timelines, visual projects, comparisons of historical evidence, and presentations of the migration stories students discover.

The final exhibition will not ask:

“What percentages are Puerto Ricans?”

Instead, it will ask:

“What did our evidence make us wonder?”

“What historical sources did we find?”

“Whose stories did we discover?”

“What can we reasonably say from the evidence?”

And ultimately:

Beyond the three roots we already know, what other voices can historical evidence help us hear in the story of Puerto Rico?

Beyond the Three Roots seeks to teach children that Puerto Rican cultural identity is not merely a completed story inherited from a textbook.

It is a **living cultural identity** whose history can still be questioned, investigated, documented, and understood more deeply by each new generation.

Proposed email to be sent to Ancestry:

Dear Ancestry Community Impact / AncestryClassroom Team,

My name is Damaris, and I am a fifth- and sixth-grade History teacher at a bilingual school in Puerto Rico. I am writing to invite Ancestry to consider an educational partnership for a historical inquiry project that will involve **83 students across five History groups** this November:

Beyond the Three Roots: Building a Living Puerto Rican Cultural Identity.

For generations, Puerto Rican students have been taught that our cultural identity emerged principally from three ancestral roots: Taíno, African, and Spanish. These three contributions are fundamental to Puerto Rican history and identity. But my students and I are beginning with an additional question:

Beyond the three roots we already know, what other cultural voices can historical evidence help us hear in the story of Puerto Rico?

The project begins not with DNA, but with one of the most fundamental questions a young historian can ask: **What counts as a historical source?** My fifth- and sixth-grade students have already begun debating an especially interesting twenty-first-century version of that question:

Is genetic cultural ancestry a primary historical source, a secondary historical source, a hybrid source—or could it represent a new kind of historical source made possible by modern technology?

The question remains deliberately open.

DNA contains biological evidence inherited across generations, which makes a strong argument for understanding it as primary evidence. Yet the ancestry regions and percentages students receive are produced through contemporary scientific analysis and comparison with reference populations, introducing an interpretive dimension. Rather than giving my students the answer, I want them to investigate and debate it.

Ancestry has an extraordinary opportunity to make that inquiry tangible.

Part of the inspiration for the project came from my own AncestryDNA® experience. To the best of my family's knowledge, my family has been Puerto Rican for at least four generations, without a known recent ancestor born outside Puerto Rico. Yet my ancestry results presented something I did not expect: my largest estimated ancestral component was associated with **Portugal**, despite my having no known recent Portuguese relative.

The result did not give me a historical conclusion. It gave me a historical question. How could such a substantial Portuguese ancestral component have become part of a Puerto Rican family whose known recent ancestors were all born on the island? That question led me toward histories of migration, Atlantic movement, Portuguese populations, the Azores, and aspects of Puerto Rican immigration history that I had never previously thought to investigate.

I want my students to experience that same intellectual process: **evidence → question → research → interpretation → historical understanding.**

During *Beyond the Three Roots*, students would explore their genetic cultural ancestry as one historical source and then investigate the questions it raises through **historical sources accessible online and appropriate for fifth- and sixth-grade research.**

Students may work with digitized census and population information, immigration records, historical maps, photographs, newspapers, family-history records, genealogical resources, and trustworthy online historical collections. This is why we would be especially interested in combining AncestryDNA® with **AncestryClassroom® access to historical records.**

Ancestry is uniquely positioned to support both sides of this inquiry: the genetic evidence that can generate historical questions and the documentary records through which students can begin investigating them. Students would repeatedly return to four simple questions: **What did we find? What might it mean? What other historical evidence can we find? What can we reasonably conclude from the evidence we have?**

The objective is not for students merely to learn historical conclusions. It is for them to learn **how historical conclusions are constructed from evidence.**

There is also a larger historical purpose behind this inquiry.

If immigrants from different parts of the world settled in Puerto Rico, formed families here, contributed to communities, and eventually became part of the Puerto Rican people, then their contributions deserve to be investigated and given their appropriate place within Puerto Rican history. Puerto Rico's colonial experience makes this question particularly meaningful.

A people can inherit not only a history shaped under colonialism, but also inherited ways of **telling that history**. If we simply repeat historical categories without asking whose experiences they include, whose contributions they emphasize, and whose voices may have become less visible, we risk reproducing those limitations ourselves.

For our students, decolonizing the teaching of Puerto Rican history does not mean replacing one predetermined narrative with another. It means **following historical**

evidence wherever it leads and allowing that evidence to broaden the story we are capable of telling. Our students will therefore ask:

Whose voices do we already hear in Puerto Rican history? Whose voices might be missing? What evidence could help us find them?

This makes the project particularly relevant to the cultural conversations our students are encountering today. Immigration is not only a subject of the past. It remains one of the significant questions through which Americans discuss identity, belonging, and community. As Americans, our students can learn to recognize with pride that American cultural identity is necessarily **plural and fraternal**. America is a shared we formed through the histories and contributions of many peoples.

Puerto Rico provides an especially meaningful place from which to explore that reality. Our island can be understood as a **Puerto Rico of cultures**—a meeting place where Indigenous, African, European, Caribbean, American, immigrant, and other histories have encountered one another across generations and participated in the formation of a distinct Puerto Rican people.

Genetic cultural ancestry may allow eleven- and twelve-year-old students to see that plurality in an extraordinarily concrete way—even within themselves. Their results may contain traces of peoples whose descendants, after generations of living together, no longer understand themselves principally through those separate ancestral origins, but simply as **Puerto Rican**.

The lesson is therefore larger than ancestry: **Many ancestral voices can become one people without requiring those voices to disappear.** Cultural plurality does not have to fragment a shared identity. Puerto Rico can offer students an especially vivid example of how many histories can belong to the same we.

So, we want to ask Ancestry a sponsorship for our history 5th-6th class project this November.

Our ideal educational partnership would make this experience available to all **83 fifth- and sixth-grade students** whose families voluntarily choose to participate.

We would therefore be extraordinarily grateful if Ancestry would consider providing:

1. AncestryDNA® kits for participating students.

Our ideal sponsorship would provide up to **83 kits**, making access possible regardless of family income.

If sponsorship at that level is not possible, we propose a minimum of **20 kits—four for each of our five History groups.**

Under our current proposed model, and subject to school policy and Ancestry's recommendations, each group would receive:

- one kit through a drawing among participating boys;
- one kit through a drawing among participating girls;
- one kit in recognition of positive classroom conduct; and
- one kit in recognition of outstanding performance in History.

We would also greatly appreciate the possibility of an **educational discount or promotional code for the remaining students** whose families wish to purchase a kit.

2. AncestryClassroom® access to historical records.

We would welcome access for our five History groups to age-appropriate historical collections that students can use to investigate the questions generated by their ancestry findings.

If possible, we would also greatly value guidance from the AncestryClassroom team in identifying collections particularly relevant to **Puerto Rican family history, immigration, migration within the Caribbean and Atlantic world, and populations that settled in Puerto Rico.**

Together, these resources would allow students to move from genetic evidence to documentary investigation within the same educational partnership.

All genetic testing would be completely voluntary and subject to explicit parent or guardian authorization. Parents or guardians—not the school—would activate the kits, submit samples, control the Ancestry accounts, and receive complete results directly. The school would not collect raw genetic information or require access to students' Ancestry accounts. Families participating in the classroom investigation would share only the ancestry information they voluntarily choose to contribute. Students who do not participate in genetic testing would participate equally in the historical research and would not be required to explain their decision.

Most importantly, genetic ancestry would never be presented as determining a child's race, nationality, worth, or cultural identity. **DNA would be investigated as historical evidence, not used as a definition of the person.**

Ancestry's support would immediately benefit **83 young students in a bilingual Puerto Rican school**, giving them an opportunity to experience history as something they can actively investigate.

But the educational impact could potentially extend beyond our five classrooms.

My own Portuguese ancestry result has already raised a historical question. If voluntarily shared student results were to reveal a recurring Portuguese ancestry pattern across our classrooms, that observation would **not** establish that the same pattern exists across the Puerto Rican population. Eighty-three students do not constitute a representative population sample. It could, however, raise a fascinating population-level historical question worthy of further research:

Could Portuguese ancestry represent a more significant component of Puerto Rican population history than is commonly recognized in the way Puerto Rican history is taught?

If our classroom inquiry produces such a question—or another similarly unexpected one—I would like to consider developing the experience into a small article on the philosophy and teaching of Puerto Rican history, tentatively titled: ***Beyond the Three Roots: Building a Living Puerto Rican Cultural Identity***

The classroom findings would be presented not as population-level proof, but as a case study of how new kinds of historical evidence can generate questions worthy of broader historical, genealogical, and population research.

At the same time, the experience could open a broader reflection on **how Puerto Rican history can be taught through a decolonizing and inquiry-based approach**. Rather than presenting students with a historical narrative as something already completed and simply to be memorized, history education can invite them to question inherited narratives, search for evidence, identify voices that may have been overlooked, and remain open to allowing new evidence to broaden our understanding of who participated in the formation of Puerto Rico.

Such an approach also gives the teaching of history an impact that reaches beyond academic knowledge. Learning to recognize the many peoples whose lives, migrations, families, and contributions became part of Puerto Rican history can help students develop a **more fraternal understanding of cultural identity**: one in which difference does not necessarily divide the *we*, and belonging does not require everyone to have the same ancestry or cultural origin. In this sense, historical inquiry can become part of students' everyday formation as persons and citizens. If students learn through history that people of many origins can contribute to and eventually belong to the same people, they can carry that understanding into the way they encounter cultural difference in their own communities and daily lives.

Beyond the Three Roots therefore proposes that teaching history can accomplish more than helping students understand the past. It can help them learn **how to live together in the present**: approaching cultural plurality with curiosity rather than exclusion, recognizing the dignity of different voices, and understanding that a shared identity can be strengthened—not threatened—when we learn to recognize truthfully all the people who have contributed to it. In that sense, a decolonizing and inquiry-based approach to

Puerto Rican history is also a **fraternal approach to history education**: one that seeks historical truth while helping students discover how many different voices can belong within the same shared we.

The larger educational argument would be equally important: **How can we teach Puerto Rican history in a way that allows historical evidence to recover and integrate voices that inherited narratives may have left less visible?**

In that sense, *Beyond the Three Roots* could become a small example of a decolonizing approach to history education—not by deciding beforehand what history ought to say, but by giving students the tools to discover what the evidence allows us to say.

You may ask: why Ancestry?

Ancestry's participation would make this project possible in a particularly coherent way. You would not simply be providing DNA kits. You would be helping children encounter historical evidence, formulate questions from it, search historical records, compare sources, reconsider assumptions, and construct conclusions. For many of these students, this may be their first experience realizing that a historical question does not necessarily begin in a textbook. It can begin with their family. It can begin with a document discovered online. It can begin with an unexpected Ancestry result. It can even begin with a debate among eleven-year-olds about what a historical source actually is.

Ancestry would be helping **83 young Puerto Ricans discover that their own questions can become historical questions—and that they themselves can participate in investigating the history of their people.**

Because our principal inquiry will take place in November, participating families would ideally receive and submit DNA kits during the last week of September or first week of October, allowing processing time before the project's principal research period.

I would be honored to provide our complete project proposal, learning objectives, school information, parental-consent and privacy framework, anticipated timeline, or any additional documentation that would be helpful in considering this request.

Thank you for considering an educational partnership with our students.

We would be honored to welcome Ancestry as a partner in helping a new generation discover Puerto Rico not simply as the story of three roots, but as a **living Puerto Rico of cultures whose many voices together have become one people.**

Sincerely, **Damaris**
History Teacher, Grades 5–6