

## The Latin Rhythms of “Despacito”

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What Latin American genres inspired Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s hit song “Despacito”?

#### OVERVIEW

In August 2017, Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s music video “Despacito” was neck-to-neck with Wiz Khalifa and Charlie Puth’s “See You Again” in a race to receive a record 3 billion views on Youtube. At the beginning of the year, it seemed almost certain “See You Again” would be the new record holder. Since its release in 2015, the song’s viewership continued to steadily grow, no doubt thanks to its two star performers, a Hollywood film tie-in, and the moving story behind its creation. But then in early January 2017, “Despacito” was posted on youtube, and took off like a rocket. In less than six months, it received 2 billion views, a milestone that took “See You Again” two entire years to reach. A remix featuring Justin Bieber helped propel “Despacito” in the #1 position in charts in close to 50 countries, including the United States. By September, the song surpassed “See You Again” to be the most watched video on Youtube, later setting a record of over 4 billion viewers.



Photo: Prisa Radio

It may seem astonishing that a song sung entirely in Spanish and based in a Puerto Rican urban genre so quickly achieved such a level of popularity. Yet, for those familiar with Latin music, it hardly seems surprising. For decades, Música Tropical, or pop music from the Caribbean islands, has had immense popularity in Latin American countries. Reggaeton, the genre “Despacito” most easily fits into, is only the most recent in a long string of Caribbean music styles, from Bachata to Merengue to Salsa, whose infectious melodies and danceable rhythms attract millions. With the globalizing capability of Youtube and other streaming services, it was only a matter of time before this music achieved equal popularity in the English-speaking world.

Perhaps a key to the success of “Despacito” particularly was also due to its embrace of a variety of Latin American genres. While the song’s performers, singer Luis Fonsi and rapper Daddy Yankee, most clearly position the song in the category of Latin Pop and Reggaeton, producers of the song, Mauricio Rengifo and Andres Torres, made an effort to incorporate a wide variety of Latin American musical styles, from traditional Puerto Rican rural music to Colombian Cumbia.

## OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

In this lesson, students are introduced to four Latin American music styles: Reggaeton, Música Jibara, Cumbia, and Salsa. Through a short video they learn how producers Mauricio Rengifo and Andres Torres drew upon each of these genres in creating “Despacito.” Students then participate in a musical analysis activity where they are asked to closely listen to the song to pinpoint where these various Latin American genres are first introduced. Finally, students consider where “Despacito” fits with a longer history of American popular music that adopts Latin American elements.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How Despacito incorporates a variety of Latin American genres
- The history and characteristics of the Reggaeton genre
- The history and characteristics of the Cumbia genre
- The history and characteristics of the Salsa genre
- The history and characteristics Música Jibara
- How popular music in the United States has incorporated Latin Musical elements in the past

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to recognize the rhythms and instruments that make up “Despacito,” and trace each of them to their associated Latin American music genres.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play part or all of Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s song “Despacito,” and ask students to raise their hand if they know the song (*Note: this link will open to the official song on YouTube, we suggest loading the video before class to avoid showing advertising during class.*) Ask students:

- Do you know where Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee are from? (*Answer: Puerto Rico.*)
- What might make this song different than other hit songs in the United States? (*Encourage students to think about the language of the lyrics, as well as any unique Musical aspects they might discover.*)
- What signals this song as “Latin”? (*In addition to the language, encourage students to listen for unique instruments or rhythms that might be unique to Latin American countries.*)



## PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that they will be analyzing some of the rhythms and instruments that went into making "Despacito" to see what sort of other musical styles inspired the song. Split students into four groups, and give one of the four pages of Handout 1 - "Select Latin American Genres" to each group.
2. Tell student groups that they will be responsible for presenting information about the genre in their handout to the rest of the class, as well as teaching the class the Musical activity featured in the handouts. *(If needed, help student groups learn the rhythms by counting to 8 and clapping on the numbers highlighted in the handouts. Encourage students to start slow, and speed up once they understand the rhythm.)*
3. After all the student groups have finished presenting their genres to the class, split students into three groups, with each responsible for one of the Latin rhythms discussed (Reggaeton, Cubia, Salsa). Establish a tempo, and ask groups to clap their rhythms when called upon. At first, call on groups one at a time. Once students are comfortable, call upon two groups at a time to hear how the rhythms sound in combination. Try to reach the point where all three groups can be clapping their rhythms together. Be sure to maintain a consistent tempo throughout.
4. Play students a video clip in which producers Mauricio Rengifo and Andres Torres discuss how they incorporated these genres into "Despacito." *(Note: this link will open to the official video on Genius. Start the video at 2:27, end it at 7:50.)* Ask students:
  - What kind of "Rules" did Mauricio Rengifo and Andres Torres say they broke in making the song? What parts of "Despacito" did they say were not "normal"?
  - Why did the producers feel the need to mix both digital and acoustic tracks for the song? *(Encourage students to think about how the producers mentioned that acoustic instruments gave the song "soul" and "life".)*
  - What instruments do the producers use to signify Salsa music?
  - What instruments do the producers use to signify Cumbia music?
  - What instruments do the producers use to signify traditional Puerto Rican music?
  - How do Rengifo and Torres use the Timbales in the song? Do they use it as it is traditionally used in Salsa? *(If necessary, remind students that Rengifo mentions the timbales help you feel that "a new part is coming.")*
5. Pass out Handout 2 - "Close Listening Activity". Replay the Despacito video again, asking to students to listen carefully while filling out the handout. (See "Close Listening Answers" for the correct answers for Handout 2). Discuss student answers with the class.



## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Play students Clip 1, “Latin Influences in Pop Music.” Ask students:

- When were these songs released?
- Did you hear any Latin influences in these songs?
- Do these songs share instruments or rhythms with “Despacito”?
- In what ways does “Despacito” differ from these older pop songs? (*Encourage students to think about the languages used in the songs, as well as the use of electronic beats.*)
- How might “Despacito” be continuing a tradition? How might it be unique? (*Encourage students to think about how “Despacito” is not the first American pop song to draw upon Latin American sources, but might have achieved a level of success above previous songs.*)

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. **Writing Prompt:** Throughout the world, musicians who do not speak English as a primary language have to make the choice on whether to release songs in their native language or in English. Many choose English, because it gives them a better chance at having a successful song in the United States. Do you think the success of “Despacito” will change this? Will more musicians be comfortable releasing songs in other languages, especially Spanish? Why or why not?

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

**Analyze:** Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

**Interpret:** Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

**Evaluate:** Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

**Connecting 11:** Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## **NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

### *Reading*

**NJSLSA.R1:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**NJSLSA.R6:** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

**NJSLSA.R8:** Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

**NJSLSA.R9:** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

### *Writing*

**NJSLSA.W1:** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**NJSLSA.W7:** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects, utilizing an inquiry-based research process, based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



NJSLSA.W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- Latin Influences in Pop Music

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Select Latin American Genres
- Handout 2 - Close Listening Activity
- Close Listening Activity Answers