

BLACK LITERATURE

LESSON PLAN

LEARNING GOALS

Students will be able to...

- Identify major movements of Black lit
- Name significant figures in Black lit
- Create original creative work

TEACHER NAME: Naima Yael Tokunow

CONTACT:

naimytokunow@gmail.com

MATERIALS

Students will be using...

- Internet browser
- Word document
- Paper & pen

SUBJECTS

Students will engage...

- Literature & Literary Movements
- Political Science
- Ethnography

LESSON DESCRIPTION

In this lesson on Black literature, students will be invited to explore Black literary movements and their places within larger cultural frameworks. Students will explore the ways in which Black literature represents, refutes, responds to, and shapes intellectual, social, and political landscapes. Students are invited to pay special attention to the construction and reflection of Black identity, issues of difference within Black America, and the impact that Black historical works continue to have in contemporary culture. Students will be asked to reflect on the legacy of Black literature as they draft an outline for a character study that pushes back against stereotypes of their identities & culture(s).

VOCABULARY (5 MIN)

1. Literary Movement(s)
2. Literary Tropes
3. Sociopolitics

GUIDING QUESTIONS (5 MIN)

1. What texts, authors or themes come to mind when thinking about Black literature? Have you read any texts that you think fall into that category? If so, what are they?
2. Do you feel like depictions of Black life in entertainment or news media are "authentic" or "true to life"? Why or why not?
3. Black literature movements often are concurrent with social and political movements in American history--what political movements (relevant to Black history) can you name?
4. Black writers have told their stories in the face of oppression and creative silencing, rejecting the ideas that their voices weren't important. Do you feel like your creative voice is valued or appreciated? Why or why not?
5. What are some stereotypes about some facet of your identity (race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) exist in popular culture that you feel are damaging and/or oppressive?

INSPIRATION (5 MIN)

1. Slave Narratives (19th cent.) - focused on first-hand accounts of enslaved people, describing the cruelties of enslavement & paths to freedom. Slave narratives were often used by abolitionists to argue against slavery. Noted writers: Frederick Douglass & Harriet Jacobs
2. The Harlem Renaissance (20th cent.) - a revival of Black literature (& art) that began to integrate Black writing into mainstream American culture, gaining positive reviews an wider distribution. Noted writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman & Langston Hughes
3. Black Arts Movement (20th cent.) - inspired by the Civil Rights an Black Power political movements, the Black Arts Movement (known colloquially as BAM), created Black cultural spaces to make up for the mainstream artistic spaces that Black creatives weren't welcomed into. Works from the BAM rejected the idea that they had to conform to white American literary standards and focus on Black Pride and joy. Noted writers: Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, & Amiri Baraka,

ACTIVITY (25 MIN)

1. "Freedom in Representation: a Character Study Exercise" will use some of the overarching lessons learned from Black literature (connection to sociopolitical movements, diverse representation, & rejection of stereotype) to create your own character study.
2. First, read the excerpts from Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, and Elizabeth Acevedo. With almost 200 years between them, these texts all explore place, identity & freedom. Think about the ways that these excerpts sound familiar or foreign. (10 min)
3. In your first free-write, list all of the stereotypes that come to mind when you think about your identities that you feel are harmful--what does the culture at large assume about your lived experience that you don't think is true? (2 min)
4. In a second free-write, list all of the social or political issues that come to mind when you think about your identities (i.e. #BLM, immigration issues, economic struggles, etc.)--what roadblocks exist in your path to freedom? (2 min)
5. In your last free-write, list the things that you love about the culture of your identities--the music? The food? The arts or sports? The resilience or tendernesses? Think of both big picture and personal facets of your identities. (2 min)
6. Using your free-writes, draft an outline of a character that pushes back against those harmful stereotypes, asking yourself what would their interests be? What does their family look like? How do they participate in today's political movements? What do they do for work? Who do they love?
7. If time permits and you feel comfortable, share your character outline with the class.
- 8.

DEBRIEF (5 MIN)

1. Have you ever read a story that has a character like the one you created?
2. How did it feel to reflect on the harmful stereotypes projected about your identity/identities? Did your feelings about those harms dictate how you constructed your character?

FURTHER RESOURCES

NOVELS, MEMOIRS & SHORT STORIES

- Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat" (1926)
- Wallace Thurman, *The Black the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929)
- Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977)
- Jamainca Kincaid, "Girl" (1978)
- Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1985)
- Derrick Bell, "The Space Traders" (1992)
- Jesamyn Ward, "Where the Line Bleeds" (2008)
- Jason Douglass Louie, "Birthday Boy" (2018)
- Zadie Smith, "The Lazy River" (2017)
- Stephen A. Crockett Jr., "Fishbone" (2018)
- Hannah Crafts, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (1853-1860)
- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)
- Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850)
- Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
- Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)
- Alice Walker, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self" (1983)
- Roxane Gay, selections from *Bad Feminist* (2014)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, selection from *Between the World & Me* (2015)
- Pattrisse Khan-Cullors & ashsa bande, selections from *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (2018)

ARTICLES/WEBSITES

- Jordan Elgrably & James Baldwin, "James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78" (1984)
- Morgan Jenkins, "Writing While Black: On Cliché, Stereotype, and the Struggle to Describe Blackness" (2016)

VIDEO LINKS

"Notes of a native son: The world according to James Baldwin" by Christina Greer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKku0AfTs0c>

"Sonia Sanchez-Black Arts Movement (BAM) to Hip Hop"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtRffMdbB0Y>

"Found Voices : Slave Narratives"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3Fk9pqybCA>

"Elizabeth Acevedo: Changing the literary landscape for writers of colour"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq5HNrz3zbs>

Excerpt from Frederick Douglass', Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself (1845), p. 13-15

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out--if not in the word, in the sound; --and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:--

"I am going away to the Great House Farm!

O, yea! O, yea! O!"

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,--and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

Excerpt from Zora Neale Hurston's, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)

My Birthplace

Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.

So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life.

I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.

Eatonville is what you might call hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. The town was not in the original plan. It is a by-product of something else.

It all started with three white men on a ship off the coast of Brazil. They had been officers in the Union Army. When the bitter war had ended in victory for their side, they had set out for South America. Perhaps the post-war distress made their native homes depressing. Perhaps it was just that they were young, and it was hard for them to return to the monotony of everyday being after the excitement of military life, and they, as numerous other young men, set out to find new frontiers.

But they never landed in Brazil. Talking together on the ship, these three decided to return to the United States and try their fortunes in the unsettled country of South Florida. No doubt the same thing which had moved them to go to Brazil caused them to choose South Florida.

This had been dark and bloody country since the mid-seventeen hundreds. Spanish, French, English, Indian, and American blood had been bountifully shed.

The last great struggle was between the resentful Indians and the white planters of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. The strong and powerful Cherokees, aided by the conglomerate Seminoles, raided the plantations and carried off Negro slaves into the Spanish-held Florida. Ostensibly they were carried off to be slaves to the Indians, but in reality the Negro men were used to swell the ranks of the Indian fighters against the white plantation owners. During lulls in the long struggle, treaties were signed, but invariably broken. The sore point of returning escaped Negroes could not be settled satisfactorily to either side. Who was an Indian and who was a Negro? The whites contended all who had negro blood. The Indians contended all who spoke their language belonged to the tribe. Since it was an easy matter to teach a slave to speak enough of the language to pass in a short time, the question could never be settled. So the wars went on.

The names of Oglethorpe, Clinch and Andrew Jackson are well known on the white side of the struggle. For the Indians, Miccanopy, Billy Bow-legs and Osceola. The noble Osceola was only a sub-chief, but he came to be recognized by both sides as the ablest of them all. Had he not been captured by treachery, the struggle would have lasted much longer than it did. With an offer of friendship, and a new rifle (some say a beautiful sword) he was lured to the fort seven miles outside of St. Augustine, and captured. He was confined in sombre Fort Marion that still stands in that city, escaped, was recaptured, and died miserably in the prison of a fort in Beaufort, South Carolina. Without his leadership, the Indian cause collapsed. The Cherokees and most of the Seminoles, with their Negro adherents, were moved west. The beaten Indians were

moved to what is now Oklahoma. It was far from the then settlements of the Whites. And then too, there seemed to be nothing there that White people wanted, so it was a good place for Indians. The wilds of Florida heard no more clash of battle among men.

The sensuous world whirled on in the arms of ether for a generation or so. Time made and marred some men. So into this original hush came the three frontier-seekers who had been so intrigued by its prospects that they had turned back after actually arriving at the coast of Brazil without landing. These young men were no poor, refuge-seeking, wayfarers. They were educated men of family and wealth.

The shores of Lake Maitland were beautiful, so they chose the northern end and settled. There one of the old forts—built against the Indians, had stood. It had been commanded by Colonel Maitland, so the lake and the community took their names in memory of him. It was Mosquito County then and the name was just. It is Orange County now for equally good reason. The men persuaded other friends in the north to join them, and the town of Maitland began to be in a great rush.

Negroes were found to do the clearing. There was the continuous roar of the crashing of ancient giants of the lush woods, of axes, saws and hammers. And there on the shores of Lake Maitland rose stately houses, surrounded by beautiful grounds. Other settlers flocked in from upper New York state, Minnesota and Michigan, and Maitland became a center of wealth and fashion. In less than ten years, the Plant System, later absorbed into the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, had been persuaded to extend a line south through Maitland, and the private coaches of millionaires and other dignitaries from North and South became a common sight on the siding. Even a president of the United States visited his friends at Maitland.

These wealthy homes, glittering carriages behind blooded horses and occupied by well-dressed folk, presented a curious spectacle in the swampy forests so dense that they are dark at high noon. The terrain swarmed with the deadly diamondback rattlesnake, most potent reptile on the North American continent. Huge, centuries-old bull alligators bellowed their challenge from the uninhabited shores of lakes. It was necessary to carry a lantern when one walked out at night, to avoid stumbling over these immense reptiles in the streets of Maitland.

Excerpt from Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2017)

Part I: In the Beginning Was the Word

Friday, August 24

Stoop-Sitting

The summer is made for stoop-sitting
and since it's the last week before school starts,
Harlem is opening its eyes to September.
I scope out this block I've always called home.
Watch the old church ladies, chancletas flapping
against the pavement, their mouths letting loose a train
of island Spanish as they spread he said, she said.
Peep Papote from down the block
as he opens the fire hydrant
so the little kids have a sprinkler to run through.
Listen to honking cabs with bachata blaring
from their open windows
compete with basketballs echoing from the Little Park.
Laugh at the viejos—my father not included—
finishing their dominoes tournament with hard slaps
and yells of "Capicu!"
Shake my head as even the drug dealers posted up
near the building smile more in the summer, their hard scowls
softening into glue-eyed stares in the direction
of the girls in summer dresses and short shorts:
"Ayo, Xiomara, you need to start wearing dresses like that!"
"Shit, you'd be wifed up before going back to school."
"Especially knowing you church girls are all freaks."
But I ignore their taunts, enjoy this last bit of freedom,
and wait for the long shadows to tell me
when Mami is almost home from work,
when it's time to sneak upstairs.

Unhide-able

I am unhide-able.

Taller than even my father, with what Mami has always said
was "a little too much body for such a young girl."

I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips
so that the boys who called me a whale in middle school
now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong.

The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast.

When your body takes up more room than your voice
you are always the target of well-aimed rumors,
which is why I let my knuckles talk for me.

Which is why I learned to shrug when my name was replaced
by insults.

I've forced my skin just as thick as I am.