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Unfettered Genius: The African American Sonnet

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Overview

I was given the privilege of piloting a new course for an inner-city high school: African American Literature. Students can take it as their senior English class or they may take it as an elective. It is designed to dovetail with the district's African American History course, and therefore follows a chronological pathway. The depth and variety of literary selections have been chosen to celebrate the creativity, the passion, and the resilience of African American writers. Since the literature and history courses are closely aligned, they offer a natural opportunity for teachers to work on an interdisciplinary project with their students. The sonnet cycles presented in this unit are historically grounded in three important points in African American history: the Civil War, World War II, and the Jim Crow era.

There are several sonnets featured in the course, and I propose to include a sonnet sequence by Natasha Trethewey that voices the experiences and thoughts of African American soldiers fighting for the North during the Civil War. Teaching sonnets in an African American literature class raises an issue that presents itself rather early in the course with the works of Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, namely, "How are we to read formalist African American poetry?" Other, related, questions include: Is it imitative? Is it "selling out"? Does it undermine or ignore the rich vernacular so many other African American writers use? For whom is it written?

A highly recommended work to include in either the African American Literature class or the African American History class is Marilyn Nelson's book of sonnets, *A Wreath for Emmet Till*. Nelson's choice to create a "crown" of sonnets to capture the depth and complexity of a seminal historical moment exemplifies the best use of a traditional form by an African American poet.

This unit will address the pedagogical problems that arise when students encounter black writers expressing themselves in what is perceived as a "European" form. It will provide some perspectives for teachers to consider when introducing this material, as well as some strategies students may use to uncover the layers of meaning so cleverly hidden by the quintessential African muse: the trickster.

Rationale

Students come to a course with certain expectations. In the case of this new African American Literature class, students had been anticipating material that was uniquely African American: innovative, passionate, jazzy, exciting, uplifting, bluesy, political, street-smart and, above all, real. After looking at the works of Terry and Wheatley, one student snapped her book shut and asked, "What's black about this?" I did not have an adequate answer for her, and immediately began to do some research. The opening phase of the unit places great emphasis on "audience," which, in many ways, justifies the strategies early African American poets used. However, a consideration of audience does not explain why African American poets continued to use traditional European forms such as the sonnet long after they had reached their desired audience. What both my student and I needed to know was that even as early as Terry and Wheatley, the double-voiced device of the African trickster was already at work. These poets were conveying messages that, to one audience, appeared to mean one thing, while another audience understood an entirely different message, embedded in the same words. This technique is called "signifying." Michael G. Cooke, author of *Afro-American Literature in the 20th Century: The Achievement of Intimacy*, explains that "an adaptive skill in misleading was an important basis of survival for blacks" (Cooke, 1984). He adds that signifying "has done better than the blues at guarding its secret freight of purpose and value." Cooke sees signifying as originating in an unequal power relationship: ". . .the signifier is the one who as best he can makes up for a lack of social power with an exercise of intellectual or critical power."

Partway through the course students take a close look at two essays: George Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum" (Schuyler, 1926) and Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (Hughes, 1926). The discussion that follows focuses on whether or not there is such a thing as African American art. Students who are familiar with and comfortable with jazz, blues, and hip-hop are less comfortable with sonnets, eclogues, and classically structured poetry written by African Americans. In many ways, the formalist dilemma that began with Terry and Wheatley continues to this day.

African American formalism has been explored in Henry Louis Gates' book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), and Keith D. Leonard's book *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2006). Jon Woodson explores both formal and vernacular African American poetry in *Anthems, Sonnets, and Chants: Recovering the African American Poetry of the 1930s* (2011). In addition, contemporary theorists including June Jordan, Michael Cooke, and Toni Morrison, offer highly accessible perspectives that a teacher can offer to high school students.

Gates' work is rooted in the tradition of tricksters in African mythology, Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey. Both characters are concerned with language and interpretation; Esu "serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance," while the Signifying Monkey, a distinctly Afro-American figure, "serves as the trope in which are encoded several other peculiarly black rhetorical tropes" (Gates, 1988). Put in simple terms, "signifying" [or "signifyin'" or "signifyin(g)"] is a phenomenon that operates on many levels, including intertextuality, formal revision, and linguistic subversion. On the one hand, a message is encoded in poetry (or prose) that meets conventional criteria for both form and content. At the same time, a second message is woven into the work that is obvious only to the audience for whom it is intended, an audience normally not included in the body for whom the "conventional criteria" constitute meaning. This subversive use of language arises when a disenfranchised group finds its own voice temporarily suppressed or erased. Refusing silence, the trickster will master the language of the oppressor and then use it

to fight against oppression.

The Signifyin' Monkey has made his way into a wide range of African American poems and songs that range from bawdy to playful. The character of the monkey misleads others by his words, causing arguments among the animals until he is uncovered. True to form, the monkey gets away with it, but his neighbors are now aware of his lies and tell him to "stay up in that tree" (Gates, 1988). Time and again the Signifyin' Monkey throws himself on the mercy of his victims, but, as Michael Cooke notes, "He submits only to subvert" (1984). On one level, the Signifyin' Monkey is an episodic children's tale featuring countless adventures and misadventures. On a deeper level, the Signifyin' Monkey is exercising power over the other animals in the jungle, most of whom are far stronger than he. He perseveres and he persists (Cooke, 1984). He is a keen observer of the others, an instigator who uses language to create disorder as well as to talk his way out of punishment. His "lies" are often subverted truths; this would explain why the other animals allow him to remain. In a way, they need the Signifyin' Monkey, whose use of language mediates (and perhaps exacerbates) the disparity between the way things are said to be and the way they really are.

Gates discusses Phillis Wheatley's interrogation at the hands of eighteen of Boston's "finest" scholars which proved to them that she had a mastery of Latin and Greek and English prosody sufficient to have produced, by her own hand, a sheaf of poetry. At that time, writing was "the visible sign of reason itself" (Gates, 1988). Soon after the publication of her poems, Wheatley was manumitted, as her work proved that she was capable of reason and therefore should not be enslaved. Even so, despite being vetted by a white panel, Wheatley's poetry contains protest that is embedded *sotto voce*, able to be heard by those who share or who can empathize with her plight. Thus, even Wheatley was a "double-voiced" writer.

At that time, not only could most African Americans not write, but statutes were soon enacted that made reading and writing for African Americans against the law. Teaching slaves to read and write was against the law as well. Many feared, and rightly so, that slaves who could read would get "ideas." Another fear was that literacy (the sign of reason) could "disqualify" the entire enslaved work force, rendering the plantation model philosophically and financially impossible. These laws made written language a coveted, elusive, illegal pursuit that promised power to whoever could acquire it. Ironically, the slave would eventually find his voice using the very syllables and verbal tools his oppressor used to enslave him. This irony has played out repeatedly over many generations of post-colonial discourse. The earliest African American writers were "signifyin'" simply by writing at all. Their presence in the literary world created a space for more to follow. It is here that the work of Gates and Leonard intersect.

Keith D. Leonard explores the "liminal cultural space" created by African American formalist writers in *Fettered Genius*. He challenges the flawed dialectic of African American literary theorist Houston Baker, who insists that formal poetry is the cultural province of white people into which black writers can only insert black content, that is, a white envelope containing a sort-of-black message. At best, the result is "mastered 'masks' with which black people cover their true selves in order to protect themselves and to manipulate white people" (Baker, qtd. in Leonard, 2006). The arena of dueling racial ideologies fosters the idea that ethnic differences are absolute and static, and denies the possibility of development on either side. The level of frustration this binary system causes is felt by poets and audiences on both sides, and allows little room for shared human experiences. Leonard repeats Gates' question asking how African Americans can "posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?" (Gates, 1988).

To address this question, Leonard re-situates it in terms of cultural differences vs. shared humanity. He states that

The triumph of the African American formalist poetic tradition is the fact that African American poets from slavery to Civil Rights did indeed resolve the oppositions of this binary logic of race politics in their best poems by combining the aesthetic power and social validity of traditional formalist artistry with the complexities of African American experience, culture, and heritage to produce a full and sufficient African American artistic and cultural self. (2006)

In other words, the African American poet creates a middle ground by the very act of using traditional artistry to protest against the attitudes that form the foundations of that tradition.

According to Leonard, formalist mastery is itself an act of subversion that demonstrates self-defining resistance. Pitting black vernacular, blues and jazz against white formalism and modernism creates a different set of "fettters" for the African American artist. Rather than creating a space for expression, this attitude places the artist in a confrontational mode. While this is a legitimate, even common stance for an African American writer, it is not always the perspective he or she may desire to take. Leonard details the difficulty early critics had with Gwendolyn Brooks' traditional poetry. Jean Toomer, who experimented with both traditional and innovative forms in his work, *Cane*, was misunderstood by nearly everyone. Langston Hughes said that

Both [white and black readers] would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial. (Hughes, 1926)

In Chapter Two of *Anthem, Sonnets and Chants*, Jon Woodson focuses on the sonnet itself, what Beth Palatnik calls "a privilege-soaked, white-identified form" (qtd. in Woodson, 2011). Woodson notes that sonnets written during the 1930s were particularly effective vehicles for anti-lynching discourse. In 1935, one-third of the poems published in the magazine *Opportunity* were sonnets (Woodson, 2011). African American newspapers such as *The Pittsburgh Courier* regularly published poems, many of which were sonnets. Rather than being considered a privileged form, it was a common form used by poets black and white, distinguished and minor. Again, while this may have been a way to garner a wider literate audience, that ploy does not explain why African American poets chose the sonnet again and again for some of their most important work. According to Woodson, ". . . radical poets invested the cultural capital of the sonnet in a political agenda" (2011). What, then, is this "cultural capital"? The history of the sonnet shows its effectiveness in the political arena as well as in its service to love. Sonnets by Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon protesting World War I were widely circulated during the Harlem Renaissance. The sonnet was just waiting to be taken up by African American poets who could cash in on its cultural capital and coin some phrases for the ages as well.

An overview of the use of the sonnet by noted African American poets shows that they recognized in it the potential for free and powerful expression. Claude McKay, author of the well-known sonnet "If We Must Die," employs many of the traditional elements of the sonnet, but mixes the rhyme scheme of an English sonnet with the structure of an Italian sonnet. The poem also harks back to Henry V's inspirational speech in Shakespeare's play of the same name (Francini, 2003). Both the literary form and the allusive resonance of the poem are used to link the struggles of African Americans to the struggles of Henry V's army, while critiquing the culture that Henry V, among others, helped to create. It is a love-hate dialectic frequently found in African American sonnets. Francini says that "the colonized subject, having lost forever his or her original identity, interprets and reconstruct (sic) the colonizer's language and cultural patterns according to his or her marginalized perspective," resulting in a "new eloquence" (2003).

While some African American poets introduced gospel themes into their poems, others, like Jean Toomer, used folk rhythm and imagery without going completely into black vernacular. In his multiple-genre creation *Cane*, Toomer includes a sonnet, "November Cotton Flower." It starts with "Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,

Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old," lines that have rustic imagery, and a definite folk-ballad quality (Toomer, 2011). The poem continues with a description of a winter landscape, but the sestet, particularly the concluding couplet, suddenly steps out of folk idiom and into an echo of Shakespeare's Sonnet #73, "That time of year. . . ." Both McKay and Toomer are not afraid to appropriate the sonnet form and its literary heritage and use them together to give power and resonance to their poetry. Their success with these devices demonstrates the cultural bond that validates the certainty of "shared humanity."

Several well-known African American poets have chosen to create sonnet cycles, a device that 1) extends the lyrical moment, 2) allows for cross-referential imagery, and 3) provides a way to express multiple points of view and/or speakers' voices, placed in a framework that gives them a cohesive wholeness (Francini, 2003). African American soldiers living during the American Civil War provide the voices for Natasha Trethewey's sonnet sequence, "Native Guard," contained in her collections of poems by the same name, published in 2006. This work earned her the Pulitzer prize for Poetry. The cycle consists of ten sonnets covering the years between 1862 and 1865. The last line of each sonnet is repeated, usually altered slightly, in the first line of the next sonnet. The tenth sonnet's final line ends with "Truth be told," the phrase which opens the first line of the first sonnet. This tight, almost military structure nearly erases the divisions between sonnets; it presents the years of the war in a circular pattern, implying many days and months of repetitive experience. One sonnet compares being a soldier to being a slave: "For the slave, having a master sharpens/ the bend into work, the way the sergeant/ moves us now to perfect battalion drill, /dress parade. . . ." (Trethewey, 2006). Another poem explores the irony of being a black soldier in charge of guarding "white men as prisoners — rebel soldiers,/ would-be masters. . . ." Repeated themes include the importance of memory, writing and telling the truth, hunger, injury, death, and the problem of identity.

Marilyn Nelson's historically-based sonnet cycle, *A Wreath for Emmet Till*, is the result of her desire to explore a true landmark event via poetry and to find a way to present Emmet Till's story to a younger audience. She creates a "crown" of sonnets: fourteen individual sonnets with a concluding sonnet made up of the first lines of the previous fourteen. Like Trethewey, she links the sonnets by repeating, sometimes with variations, the last line of each sonnet in the first line of the next one. Thus, the concluding sonnet is repeating lines that have already been repeated, creating a poem that is a close-woven summation of the cycle. In her introduction, she says, "The strict form [the sonnet] became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter, and a way to allow the Muse to determine what the poem would say" (Nelson, 2005). The variety of voices in *A Wreath for Emmet Till* demonstrates just how complex the event actually was. For the benefit of her younger readers, Nelson includes in the back a gloss on each poem. She reveals in her fourth sonnet that Till was a stutterer, and had been taught by his mother to prepare to speak by whistling; this bitterly ironic fact may explain why others had thought he "whistled at" a woman with whom he wanted to speak. Another poem gives an imaginative voice to the lynching tree. Nearly every sonnet connects with a universal theme, image, or idea explored by others, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, Robert Frost, Shakespeare, the Bible, Walt Whitman, and Roman mythology. Rather than shying away from non-African cultural devices and landmarks, she embraces them all, and places Emmet Till's memory squarely among other significant American and African American monuments.

Antonella Francini, in an article entitled "Sonnet vs. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry,"

states that "the fourteen lines in African American poetry have opened a space within tradition where, at least aesthetically, a dialogue between races and cultures seems possible" (Francini 2003). Her substitution of "dialogue" for the more commonly used term "dialectic" implies that poets who enter the realm of the sonnet will, eventually, find themselves sitting in adjacent couplets, remarking on the "endless lines" surrounding them, and sharing an iamb or two.

My research has led me to several conclusions about the nature of African American formal poetry:

1. The choice to write a formalist poem is one way, particularly for early African American poets, to gain credibility with a predominantly white audience. It is also an opportunity for a disenfranchised person (or people) to use language in powerful, subversive ways in order to further their own agendas.
2. Many African American poets started with well-known, conventional forms as any apprentice or journeyman writer would do. That they continued to write sonnets throughout their careers implies that these forms did not fetter their ideas, but inspired them. The sonnet cycle appears to be a particularly effective form for interpreting and presenting historical material with multiple voices.
3. Creating and maintaining rigid binary "rules" governing what belongs to either black or white culture is self-defeating to all culture. Furthermore, artistic freedom demands that a poet's choice of form should be honored, whether he chooses to write in the language of the oppressor or in his own idiom. Finally, no culture remains the same over time. Everything evolves, including art.
4. The art of signifyin', that is, using language to mean several things at once, can be exploited to an impressive degree in formalist poetry. It is part of the trickster tradition that was transported from Africa to America. Signifyin' revels in the subversion of form and content, and creates a cultural "space" in which new, evolving forms can flourish.

Including more sonnets in an African American Literature course will allow students to consider the ways in which African American poets explored traditional forms, using them to convey important ideas while subtly re-working these forms in a creative and often subversive way. Hopefully, when students have a moment to step back and look at the bigger picture, they will realize that when an African American poet, writer, artist, speaker, or politician speaks "proper," or "sounds white," it ain't necessarily so. In the hands of a skilled trickster, a significant number of subversive ideas can be "signified" in a most respectable way.

At this point, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the literary and rhetorical contributions made by America's first African American President, Barack Obama. His memoirs and speeches demonstrate his ability to blend his gift for traditional African American oration with his Harvard Law School education. The course I teach opens with a commencement address by then-Senator Obama to graduates at Knox College. This speech, while demonstrating the sophistication and depth of a well-educated 21st-century orator, includes several examples of what scholar Malefi Asante refers to as "nommo," a style of delivery that is unique to African Americans (Melbourne S. Cummings, 2002). A few studies have examined particular elements of Obama's speech, including rhythm, repetition, call and response, and mythoforms (Howard, 2011). The latter can be defined as a resonant understanding of certain symbols, rituals, etc., shared by a human community. An example is President Obama's effective use of images that evoke important moments in United States history. The list of devices attributed to nommo is long, and includes several other elements that will be found in this study of the African American sonnet: lyrical language, historical perspective, indirection, and signifyin'. (Howard, 2011)

Objectives

Put simply, students will study African American formalist poetry using the lens of double-voicing (signifyin'). Students will come to understand why African American poets sometimes chose traditional forms to express their ideas. This will begin with close readings of early African American poets Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley. To introduce the sonnet form, students will discuss a quote from Maya Angelou relating to Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," and then study the poem for form and content. A deeper analysis will show the ways in which Shakespeare and his sonnet can relate to a modern and perhaps non-white audience. This will constitute the first classroom activity.

At a time appropriate to the historical era being studied in class (in this case, the Civil War), students will study Natasha Trethewey's sonnet cycle, "Native Guard." They will explore how the cycle gives a voice and perspective to otherwise "forgotten" parts of history. They will also analyze Trethewey's use of vocabulary and the variations she introduces to the sonnet form. This will be the second classroom activity.

Finally, when students reach the 20th century, they will read and respond creatively to Marilyn Nelson's crown of sonnets, *A Wreath for Emmet Till*. This is the final classroom activity included in this unit.

Obviously, these activities are not designed to be consecutive. Rather, they offer a teacher an ongoing pattern to insert throughout an African American Literature course, an American Literature course, a poetry course, or an American History course. As Trethewey's and Nelson's sonnet cycles are grounded in history, they provide excellent opportunities for collaborative study between English and Social Studies.

Strategies

Historically speaking, Terry's poem "Bars Fight" is the first poem written by an African American. It addresses an Indian raid on an area (Bars) outside of Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1746. It was not published, however, until 1855, which is why Phillis Wheatley is credited with being the first published African American poet. For both poems, students will be asked to compare their initial impression of the authors, their audiences, and their messages with closer readings of the texts.

Initially, the students know nothing about Lucy Terry. A first reading of this piece finds an historical event presented in sing-song detail, showing great sympathy for the settlers who were attacked by "awful" Indians. Students are then given details about Terry's history and social position, and are asked to consider the importance of the writer's audience. Then, they re-read the poem and discuss why Lucy Terry would write in this style from this particular point of view. They are challenged to find any hidden or deeper messages embedded in the text. They will likely select passages like, "Eleazer Hawks was killed outright,/ Before he had time to fight," "Simon Amsden they found dead/ Not many rods distant from his head," "John Sadler fled across the water,/ And thus escaped the slaughter," and Eunice Allen getting "tommy hawked" on the head because she tripped on her petticoats. These lines indicate that Terry is showing particular empathy for people who were killed, injured, and kidnapped in a surprise attack — something not unlike the experience of Africans, including herself, who were brought to America. The subtext, then, is a vivid statement against being

attacked and enslaved.

To take this lesson a bit further, students will be asked to step back from the poem for a moment. The questions they must consider are: "Why would Lucy Terry, a slave, want to compose this poem? It wasn't going to be published. She had no reason to feel any sympathy for the white people who were attacked by the Indians. No slaves appeared to have been involved in the incident. Why write it at all?" These questions, in fact, appear to supersede those concerning audience. Through guided discussion, students will infer that Terry was seizing an opportunity to protest the conditions of slavery, presenting it in the guise of a poem that eulogizes in a most traditional form the white victims of racial violence. It is not a stretch to imagine young Lucy Terry deliberately using the double-speak tactics of the trickster, part of her own cultural heritage, to voice an objection. Not only does she escape any negative consequences; she is recognized for expressing salutary sentiments in a poem that was kept alive for 100 years before its actual publication.

When reading Phillis Wheatley, one can conclude that much of the complexity of the embedded messages in Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" eluded her predominantly white audience. This poem not only employs traditional poetic form, but it appears to embrace Christian values wholeheartedly. It goes so far, on one level, as to express her gratitude for being kidnapped so that she could escape her "Pagan" world for a Christian one.

Students will be asked create lists of "messages" in the poem that are both evident and implied. They will then analyze these messages in terms of audience, author's purpose, and evidence of "trickster technique." A close reading of this poem for audience can conclude that the first stanza sets up the second one which, even to an "unsuspecting" reader, implies that in the eyes of God all peoples may achieve salvation. Saying "some" instead of "all" in line 5 allows any reader to exempt himself from being the one who scorns or calls Africans "diabolic." And yet Wheatley indicts them all when she says, "Remember, Christians. . . ." Her scolding tone is then modified by the self-referential "black as Cain," implying her and her people's sinfulness, and the use of the word "may" in the last line, implying that not all Negroes are deserving of salvation. Many students may note the irony of her calling herself "benighted." First, it is a sophisticated term that plays against the ignorance it denotes. Second, it plays on the word "be(k)nighted," implying either "of the darkness," or deserving of the dignity of a knight, a person who is recognized for great achievements. Reading "mercy," "taught," and "understand," ironically can turn the poem nearly inside out. Another irony makes the case that since "Once [she] redemption never sought nor knew," it is not likely she needed redemption, already possessing the religion of her people. This religion is rendered invisible, as is her entire country; the capital "P" in "Pagan" denotes it as a vague "somewhere" ("land" is also far less definite than country), obliterating the specific indigenous name it possessed. When students have finished their lists and compared them, they will hopefully see that, in addition to gaining an audience, this highly publishable, traditional poetic form selected by Wheatley provides endless opportunity for double-meanings, irony, word play, and, above all, protest. And, like the trickster, she gets away with it, brilliantly so. While Lucy Terry had to be bought out of slavery by her husband, Abijah Prince, Phillis Wheatley essentially "earned" her emancipation through her work. For reasons discussed earlier, it is quite clear that "a 'gifted Negro' in the time of slavery was more politically provocative than an angry slave would have been" (Leonard, 2006).

Introducing the sonnet form itself will be accomplished through using a short excerpt from Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. After the horrors of being raped and feeling responsible for the murderous revenge taken on her attacker, Angelou returns to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with her grandmother. Initially, her trauma renders her mute. A neighbor, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, intervenes and introduces her to poetry, which eventually draws Angelou out of her silence. Upon reading Shakespeare's

Sonnet #29, she "met and fell in love with William Shakespeare" (Angelou, 1983). Using the excerpt from Angelou and the text of Sonnet #29, students will determine why this particular poem mirrored Angelou's feelings so closely. Following a discussion of the poem, students will address the sonnet form itself, including number of lines, rhyme scheme, rhythm, the *volta*, and so on. The students will review sonnet structure sufficiently to be able, later, to see the ways in which African American poets modify the form for their own purposes.

To prepare for Natasha Trethewey's "Native Guard" sonnet cycle, students will do some historical research on African American soldiers during the Civil War. There are many websites devoted to this topic, so the students will have plenty of information. After sharing their research, students will read "Native Guard," comparing what they have discovered to what Trethewey portrays in the cycle. They will then write an analytical essay about the differences and similarities between textbook history and poetic history, and the different kinds of "truth" found in each.

As with their study of Trethewey, students will research the lynching of Emmet Till in 1955. The murder of this young boy, accused of "whistling at a white woman," galvanized the Civil Rights Movement. Many websites have information about this event as well, along with images, newspaper articles, coverage of the trial, speeches, and other material. Nelson's book offers helpful glosses for each sonnet, so students can, in groups, address sonnets individually, and then share their discoveries and analyses with the whole class. As they did with Trethewey, students will discuss what Nelson's work brings to the story of Emmet Till. Then, in small groups of three to five, students will select another important historical moment, one which may or may not be related to African American history. They will research the event, and then write three to five original sonnets relating to that event. These sonnets will bring a different angle or insight to the event while remaining true to history. In addition, they must connect poetically with each other, by repetition of imagery, first and last lines, or some other way the students choose among themselves.

Classroom Activities

Activity #1: The concept of double-voicing; Maya Angelou's introduction to Shakespeare; the sonnet form.

The teacher will distribute copies of Lucy Terry's "Bars Fight" (available online) to the students with no introductory material. The students will be asked to read the poem and answer specific questions about the time, place, events, speaker and audience, perhaps on a teacher-made handout. They will share these observations first in pairs, then with the whole class. The teacher will then provide some historical material about Lucy Terry and the poem (as a handout, a power point, or a web search). Some questions that follow this may include: "How many of you thought Terry was black? A woman?" "Does anything about this poem surprise you now that you know the identity of the poet?" "Does this knowledge change anything about the meaning of the poem?" The students will be asked to re-read the poem, this time taking into consideration what they know about the author and the historical time and place of the poem. When they read it a second time, they are to look for any sort of "hidden message" they can find in the poem. They can enter this information in their notebooks or on the handout and then share it with a partner.

The partnered students will share their observations with the class, and the teacher or a designated student

will chart a list of the "hidden messages" they found in the poem. After all of the students have shared, they will discuss the nature of these messages and what they are intended to do. The teacher may facilitate this discussion by asking questions such as: "What are the most effective lines in the poem?" "What is the cumulative effect of these lines?" "What other group of people have been attacked, killed, and kidnapped?" The students should see the parallels between what happened to the colonists at the hands of the Native Americans and what happened to the Africans at the hands of the slave traders. Then, the teachers will ask students to step back and think about the simple question, "Why?" Why did Terry write this poem, which had no hope of every being published? What was she doing writing something that was so very sympathetic to her captors? Students may want to discuss this in small groups of 3-5, or they may continue to do so in pairs. After a few minutes, the groups will share their ideas. At this point, the teacher can introduce the idea of "signifyin'."

The teacher would be advised to summarize the ideas presented by Henry Louis Gates in his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. [Gates' preferred spelling of the term is "signifyin(g)." Other critical sources simply use the apostrophe to denote the missing "g".] Ideally, a handout could be made that includes Gates main ideas and Abrahams' list of elements that make up "signifyin(g)": 1) It is a black term and a black rhetorical device, 2) It can mean "the ability to talk with great innuendo," 3) It can mean "to carp, cajole, needle, and li,." 4) It can mean "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. 5) It can mean "making fun of a person or situation," 6) It can "also denote speaking with the hands and eyes," 7) It is "the language of trickery, that set of words achieving Hamlet's 'direction through indirection,'" and 8) The Monkey "is a 'signifier,' and the Lion [the monkey's usual victim] is "signified upon" (Gates, 1988, and Abrahams, 1970). Combined, these elements form a lens for reading African American literature that opens the door to new meanings and a greater appreciation of the writers' craft

A few questions the teachers can ask for comprehension are: "How does the dictionary define the word 'signify'?" "How does this contrast to Gates' and Abrahams' definition?" "What are some reasons that African American slaves would resort to signifyin(g)?" "Can you think of other things you have read that use puns and word play to create several levels of meaning?" "How many of the elements in Abrahams' list have you encountered already in your study of poetry?" "How may the 'signifyin(g) lens' change the way you read African American writing?" Through class discussion, the students should infer that it is important to pay attention to the denotations and connotations of words, and that they should not assume that they have interpreted the author's entire message after only one reading. They should realize that, for many African American writers, particularly the early ones, voicing opposition or rebellion meant certain punishment, even death, unless it was stated in such a way that only other African Americans could understand it. Finally, they should conclude that "signifyin(g)" is not just a lens or a technique; it is a way of thinking on several levels at a time.

For the second part of this lesson, the teacher should ask students who is familiar with the work of Maya Angelou. Many of them will be familiar with her memoirs as well as her poetry. Students will be asked to recall the time Angelou was mute as the result of trauma. If necessary, the teacher can read or have a student read a longer excerpt from Chapter 15, the one in which Maya rediscovers her voice with the help of Ms. Bertha Flowers (Angelou, 1983). An important passage to quote is:

During those years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. . . .it was Shakespeare who said, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." It was a state of mind with which I found myself most familiar. I pacified myself about his whiteness by saying that after all he had been dead so long it couldn't matter to anyone any more. (Angelou, 1969)

In groups of three to five, students should read the quotation aloud and place it in the context of Angelou's autobiography. Then they should read the Sonnet 29 aloud, at least twice, looking up words they don't know and discussing what they think it means. The teacher can call on students from each group to contribute to a class "paraphrase" of the poem, clarifying misunderstood vocabulary or syntax as needed.

Once the students have a sound sense of the sonnet's meaning, they can answer the following three questions: 1.) What about this sonnet do you think appealed to young Maya? 2.) What "modern" ideas can you find in this sonnet? 3.) In later years, Maya Angelou was quoted as saying, "Shakespeare was a black woman;" explain what she means. Have the students share their answers with each other in small groups. Their responses will vary, and the teacher should encourage students to explore as many angles to the questions as possible. A short formative assessment would be to have each student select two lines from the sonnet that stood out to him or her and write a one-paragraph response explaining why. For additional material, the teacher may want to refer to Beth Dewhurst's lesson entitled "Shakespeare was a Black Woman," available at the Folger Shakespeare Library website (see Bibliography).

Following a class discussion or formative assessment, the teacher will ask students to list the kinds of patterns they found in the sonnet. These patterns should include rhyme scheme, rhythm, and the point at which the speaker's attitude shifts (the *volta*). There are many materials available that provide the literary elements of the sonnet. One of them is Michael J. Cummings' "Shakespearean Sonnet Guide," part of a series of free study guides available online, and Nelson Miller's "Basic Sonnet Forms" on his web page *Sonnet Central* (see Bibliography). Most literature books have a section describing the sonnet as well. Students should have a sufficient understanding of the sonnet form to be able to detect when the rhyme scheme, the type of rhyme (i.e., slant), the rhythm, and the *volta* are being manipulated for the purpose of signifying(g).

Activity #2: The African American soldier during the Civil War; Natasha Trethewey's sonnet cycle, "Native Guard;" a comparison of historical perspectives

To prepare students for reading this series of sonnets, it will be necessary for them to do some historical research. This may be done in the literature class, or it may be done collaboratively with an American History or an African American History class. Suggested web sites for this research are listed after the works cited. In addition, students should research the following topics: parishes in Louisiana, Louisiana Native Guards, Ship Island (Mississippi), Fort Massachusetts, the East Pascagoula Raid, General Nathaniel P. Banks, Major Francis E. Dumas, the Battle of Fort Pillow, the Corps d'Afrique and the Battle of Port Hudson.

Students should be divided into groups of three to five, and given one of the web sites and one of the individual topics to research. This should take approximately two days. Then, each group will present its findings to the class by creating posters or using power point. Once every group has shared their information, they will respond to the following prompt in writing: "What information would you still like to know about African American soldiers who fought during the Civil War?" These responses can be collected for a formative assessment, and then combined to form a list of pressing questions. Some of these questions may have to do with how the soldiers felt themselves. If not, the teacher can give students a homework assignment asking each to imagine himself as one of the Black Soldiers. What would it feel like? What sorts of problems would he face? What would it be like to come face to face with a white Confederate soldier? Students can respond by either writing a short descriptive essay or a "letter home."

The next day, students will read "Native Guard" all the way through as a class. The teacher may read the poems or students may take turns reading them. After a first read, the teacher can check for understanding by asking students which research topics they heard mentioned in the sonnets. After the students have

shared their responses, the teacher will divide the 10 sonnets among the students, making sure each poem has at least two students working on it. Each group of students will read the poem aloud again, and study it for the following: 1) historical information, 2) speaker, 3) basic meaning of the poem, 4) words with double meanings, 5) use of irony, 6) what the poem adds to the history they have studied for this unit, and 7) specific examples of signifyin(g) in the sonnet. These and other questions can be made into a group handout; each group should make a poster listing their responses to their assigned sonnet.

Following the order of the sequence, each group will present their assigned sonnet to the class, explaining the things they discovered. First, one student will re-read the sonnet to the class and then the group will share their findings. After each presentation, there should be time provided for students in other groups to ask questions or share additional observations. The posters should be hung so that students can study them in the proper sequence.

If students have difficulty identifying signifyin(g), a quick review of the basic elements of the sonnet should help to get them started. Trethewey's rhythm and rhyme are quite different from the traditional form. The *volta* is not traditionally placed. Yet, some elements are retained: there are 14 lines, and most lines have 10 syllables, although they are not iambic pentameter. The tradition of the sonnet as a political instrument is alive and well in this sequence. In addition, studying words with alternate meanings can lead to discovering alternate messages within the poem.

As an example, a study of the first sonnet, "*November 1862*", is provided below. This is by no means a comprehensive treatment of the poem; it is designed to show some possible approaches to analysis, discussion, and understanding.

1) Ascension Parish is located just outside of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It is set alongside the Mississippi River.

2) The speaker is thirty-three years old, and was born in the fall. He has been whipped because there are scars on his back. He now knows how to read and write, and is setting down a record to preserve the "truth."

3) The speaker wants to remember his former life, which he describes in terms of powerful, though painful, natural images. He is confused at his conflicting thoughts: "want" of freedom could be either the desire for freedom or the lack thereof. He is an adult, newly literate, and hopes that language can place memory in a solid container, a book. He sees memory as being "flawed" and "changeable," giving as an example the way a master easily forgets the pain of the lash, but the slave remembers it all too well.

4) As previously mentioned, "want," has several meanings. Other words that play with meaning are "bondage" (bonded to the land, bonded by the land), "remembrance" (a memory, being remembered by someone, a ritual observing someone who has died), "recollection" (which depends entirely on who is doing the recollecting), "inscribed" (written on paper, or, in this case, "written" in scars left by whips on a slave's back), "closed book" (something which can contain the truth or exclude the truth).

5) "Truth be told" is ironic in that it can be used as a casual phrase meaning "I'm going to tell you something you should know," or it can be a command to tell the truth. It is the phrase that opens and closes the sonnet sequence. The speaker wishes to remember parts of his former life, even though he was a slave. This memory is painful, but his roots run deep into the land of his birth. He was born at harvest time — a specific time as well as a time to gather what has been produced during the year. Slaves, too, were seen as a product; they were bred like livestock. The speaker's birth was an addition to his parents' family as well as a potential valuable addition to the master's work force. The poem ends with an ironic reflection that "records" go into

closed books and thus remain stable, while memory shifts with time, and events themselves are remembered differently by those who experienced them.

6) This poem gives the historical African American soldiers some complexity; perhaps they were not unequivocally "happy" to fight for the north. Many issues remained, including what exactly the status of a freed slave would be. A question this could raise is whether or not any writings by these soldiers ever made their way into history books. Another question could be how accurate history itself is since, most of the time, one group's perspective is given priority over another's. As Winston Churchill said, "History is written by the victors."

7) On one level, signifyin(g) is done with the form of the sonnet. There are fourteen lines, each with ten syllables. Other than that, the rhyme, rhythm, and placement of the *volta* follow patterns completely different from the traditional sonnet. Trethewey creates her own music with words, using assonance and consonance with words like "dirge" and "churns," and "churns" and "choked." She uses enjambment to emphasize irony and meaning, as when she ends one line "that dulls the lash" and begins the next "for the master." The other level of signifyin(g) has to do with meaning. The poem constantly plays against expectations. The slave-now-soldier does not want to forget the past, even though it would seem logical to do so. The landscape's "song of bondage" is the community of slaves working the fields. The river's "dirge" is the sad lament of those sold "down the river," to the most difficult field work and almost certain early death. The trees are "choked" with vines as were the slaves who were hanged for their transgressions. Even now, the speaker speaks of "want" of freedom - does he mean the desire or the lack? He may not be sure - the next sonnet goes on to describe the similarity of being a soldier to being a slave. He winds up speaking of memory and its mutable, elusive nature. He carries one "story" on his back, told in scars, while he sets down in ink another "record." Yet, will this written record suffice? The story of the lash becomes dull for the master, while, for the slave, it remains sharp (both clear and painful). Whose "truth" is to be told? The Signifying Monkey might reply, "Neither," or "Both."

After the students have shared and discussed each sonnet in the sequence, the teacher will ask students to think back to the questions they had after researching the history of African American Civil War soldiers. Some questions the teacher may use include: "What additional information did you get when reading Trethewey's sonnet cycle?" "What insights did you gain into how the African American Civil War soldiers may have felt?" "What are the strengths of presenting this information using poetry?" "Is a poetic interpretation of history 'valid' in terms of presenting the facts?" "Can you think of any other stories in history that have probably gone 'untold'?" "What other (political) purpose can poetic interpretation of history have?" "Is there a particular audience Trethewey may have had in mind when writing this sonnet cycle?" "Does the concept of 'signifyin(g)' bring a different perspective to our understanding of history and its limitations?" These questions could be divided among small groups or discussed with the class as a whole.

For their culminating assignment, students will write a paper comparing their historical research to Trethewey's poetic interpretation of history. They will have available their charts from their research as well as the charts from each of the sonnets. They should be given the opportunity to get out of their desks and consult with these charts when necessary. The prompt itself may ask the student to focus on one sonnet or on the entire cycle. The teacher will need to determine what scope would enable the students to produce the best work. This paper can be a comparison essay, an analytical essay, or a persuasive essay. Emphasis should be placed on a close reading of Trethewey's poems, the appropriate use of quotations from the poems, and an accurate understanding of the historical context of the poems.

Activity #3: Researching the story of Emmet Till; Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmet Till*; writing sonnets to interpret history

Marilyn Nelson's book of sonnets, *A Wreath for Emmet Till*, is a teacher's dream. It provides an author's introduction, historical material about Emmet Till, notes on each of the sonnets, a note by the illustrator, and recommended books and web site. The approach to teaching this "crown" of sonnets (which refers to a series of fifteen sonnets, the last one being made up of the first lines of the previous fourteen) is similar to the one used for Natasha Trethewey's "Native Guard." It is simpler, though, since the thrust of this activity is to encourage groups of students to write a short series of original sonnets about historical events they will select themselves.

The PBS American Experience website listed in the back of Nelson's book provides background information, timelines, links, and primary sources. One day spent in a library computer lab should be sufficient to gather enough information about Emmett Till, since there is so much material available online. After their research, students can discuss what they learned in small groups, and then share with the whole class. Some may find the images of the open casket difficult; the teacher may need to lead a discussion about Mamie Till Mobley's reasons for doing this. Also, emphasis should be placed on the timing of Till's murder and its importance to the Civil Rights Movement. If the teacher chooses, she can show the PBS film, which is available on DVD.

The importance of Emmett Till to the Civil Rights movement provides a perfect segue to reading the sonnets themselves. Students today would not necessarily be aware of how important the event was, since it occurred in 1955, before many of their parents were born. Nelson's purpose is to help ensure that people do not forget Emmett Till. In her introduction, Nelson talks about the Italian, or Petrarchan sonnet, but in the first line of the first sonnet, she invokes Shakespeare by quoting, "Rosemary for remembrance." Her sonnets, while appearing to be closer to traditional form, are actually quite innovative. Nelson sometimes uses slant rhyme, and uses typographical techniques such as italics and different fonts for emphasis and expression. The illustrations provide a terrific visual counterpoint to the sonnets. Students should be encouraged to read the illustrations as carefully as they do the sonnets. Philippe Lardy provides his rationale and a key to some of his images in his short essay in the back. The teacher may choose, however, to allow students to discover common images and patterns for themselves.

The teacher or student volunteers should read the sonnets aloud all the way through. One way to keep students engaged during this first reading is to have them keep track of the different perspectives presented in the series. These include the lynching tree, Till's mother, sometimes "I," sometimes "we." Once the sonnets have been read aloud completely, students can form larger groups of four to six and re-read the poems aloud. They can discuss what the addition of other perspectives does to the story of Till, and make a list of their observations to share with the class.

The class discussion will begin with shared observations, and may be directed further by questions such as: "What is the purpose of having, for instance, a tree as a speaker?" "Who is the speaker who goes by 'I'?" "Who is the 'we'?" "How do multiple perspectives affect a story?" "Which sonnet in this series comes closest to the way you feel about Emmett Till?" The teacher can also present students with a series of questions similar to those provided earlier to analyze Trethewey's sonnets. For formative assessment, the teacher may have the students write their responses to these questions in their journals or on a paper to be turned in for credit.

For homework, students are to research one or two historical events that could provide inspiration for a short series of sonnets. They may consult with their parents about this. The next day, they will share these events and make a class list. Some "popular" selections are likely to be September 11 or the election of President

Obama. Have all students share their findings and discuss which ones would merit poetic treatment. The goal is to find enough events to distribute among the class, assigning four to five students to each event. The students can be assigned to selected events by drawing index cards with the topics listed on them. Students with the same topic will form a group that will create a series of three to four related sonnets about that topic, and a visual representation of the major images and themes found in those sonnets. Each group will determine how the work is to be accomplished. Students may work together or individually on the sonnets, and may assign one person to illustrate their work or have all contribute to the illustration. Jobs may be divided into categories such as: proofreader, researcher, poetic consultant, artist, etc. Students in each group will share the same grade, so everyone is a stakeholder in making sure the project is well executed. Logistically, the teacher can allot a portion of the class period over several days (up to a week) for students to meet as a group. They can work on their individual parts of the project at home.

The visual component of the piece can take many forms. Some students may want to create a collage, while others may choose to draw or paint their illustrations. They may create a digital piece on the computer, take a series of photographs, make a book, sew a quilt. If this part of the assignment seems to be intimidating, direct the students back to Nelson's book. Lardy's illustrations are quite simple; students could choose to simply use markers, tissue overlays, or even pencil drawings. The art work will draw its images from the poems, and will serve to visually highlight the ideas presented in the poems. Students should also be reminded that their selection of type fonts and effects could enhance their work.

Material for the sonnet format is, as noted earlier, available both online and in various literature and poetry textbooks. A quick review of the difference between the Shakespearean sonnet and the Petrarchan sonnet would be useful at this point; some groups might find the concluding couplet in the Shakespearean sonnet a useful tool, while others might prefer the eight-and-six structure of the Petrarchan sonnet. Rhyme, too, is a useful tool, and students should be reminded of the possibilities inherent in slant rhyme. Students may follow Nelson's lead by including references other historical events, to other poems, people, mythological references, popular songs, etc. Most of the emphasis should be placed on a) the event the students wish to preserve in poetry, b) the images used to deepen the meaning of this event, c) verbal "links," such as repeated lines, between the sonnets, and d) what their poetry will "add" to the understanding of this event. The teacher will monitor each group daily, making suggestions when necessary. The sonnets should be proof-read by the teacher before they are finalized.

Presenting the sonnets with their illustrations to the class should be treated as an event. It could range from an in-class activity followed by cake and ice cream to an evening presentation that parents could attend. The projects should be displayed somewhere that students in other classes can see them as well.

Pennsylvania State Standards for Reading Writing, Speaking and Listening

1.1 Learning to Read Independently

A. Locate various texts, media and traditional resources for assigned and independent projects before reading.

1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas

A. Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas.

C. Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre.

1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

B. Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style.

C. Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.

D. Analyze and evaluate in poetry the appropriateness of diction and figurative language (e.g., irony, understatement, overstatement, paradox)

F. Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction, including poetry and drama.

1.4 Types of Writing

B. Write complex informational pieces

C. Write persuasive pieces.

1.5 Quality of Writing

D. Write with a command of the stylistic aspects of composition.

E. Revise writing to improve style, word choice, sentence variety and subtlety of meaning after rethinking how questions of purpose, audience and genre have been addressed.

F. Edit writing using the conventions of language.

1.6 Speaking and Listening

D. Contribute to discussions.

E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.

F. Use media for learning purposes.

1.7 Characteristics and Functions of the English Language

B. Analyze when differences in language are a source of negative or positive stereotypes among groups.

1.8 Research

B. Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.

C. Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.

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Trethewey, Natasha D. *Native Guard*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Contains her sonnet sequence, "Native Guard;" however, the other poems in the collection are well worth reading.

Woodson, Jon. *Anthems, Sonnets, and Chants: Recovering the African American Poetry of the 1930s*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011.

A new, useful book offering introductory material and specific discussion of Harlem Renaissance poetry.

Some recommended web sites for researching African American Civil War soldiers are:

Teaching with Documents: The Fight for Equal Rights: Black Soldiers in the Civil War

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/>

Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861- 1877: African American Soldiers During the Civil War

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn///features/timeline/civilwar/aasoldrs/soldiers.html>

Civil War Academy.com: Civil War Black Soldiers

<http://www.civilwaracademy.com/civil-war-black-soldiers.html>

History of African Americans in the Civil War

http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/history/aa_history.htm

KnowLA: African Americans in the Civil War, 1861 - 1864

<http://www.knowla.org/entry.php?rec=891>

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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