



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2011 Volume IV: The Big Easy: Literary New Orleans and Intangible Heritage

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## **Performing Resilience: The Study of Culture and the African Diaspora through Literature and Dance**

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### **Introduction**

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Eddie <sup>1</sup> never walked into class; he glided, pointed toes first across the threshold. The doorway, an unsaid divide between the freedom of the hallways and the structure of the classroom had no bearing on his body. Sharpening his pencil involved elaborate turns and a Michael Jackson-inspired moonwalk. His desk could not confine him; when he was made to sit down, his arms would contort in ways I thought impossible of the human body.

Eddie was a TURF (Take Up Room on the Floor) dancer, a style of hip-hop dance from Oakland, California, and over the next two years my classroom became his studio. Over lunch Eddie perfected such moves as "bone-breaking" and an elaborate dive into a backbend and twist at the same time. Sometimes his sessions would gather a crowd of students excited by the seemingly impossible contortions of his body but usually it was just the two of us and a boom box, scratchy speakers turned up too high and desks pushed back to provide adequate room on the dance floor.

Eddie was able to respond to the violence, oppression, angst, and excitement in his life through performance art rather than a gun. In essence, Eddie exhibited resiliency in the face of adversity. This is not true just of Eddie; many of my students show immense resiliency, and they have inspired the development of this curriculum unit.

I teach in Emeryville, California, a small urban community surrounded by Oakland, Berkeley, and the San Francisco Bay. Our small, 1.2 square mile town sits at the base of the Bay Bridge, and in recent years, it has become a haven for the young tech community attracted to luxury condos and its proximity to San Francisco. This new group of citizens contrasts drastically with our student population whose families have mostly been in the neighborhood for generations or recently arrived from Latin America, India, and the Middle East. Even as the families of our students are pushed out of Emeryville due to gentrification, they continue to send their students to our schools. In addition, there is a significant group of transitional students that may attend our school for a few months, semester, or just one year. We are also a very small district, with just two schools and about 350 students in 7<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grades. This small environment allows for strong relationship amongst students and staff from which I've greatly benefited.

## Objectives

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The unit I've designed uses TURF dancing in Oakland and excerpts from Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to explore the intersections of culture, diaspora, and resilience. *Mumbo Jumbo* tells the story of Jes Grew, a dancing "virus," which originates in New Orleans and spreads across the United States. Reed describes Jes Grew as an "anti-plague" which enlivens the host. I extend this metaphor to TURF dancing, which is practiced by young people in Oakland (and has now gone "viral" thanks to YouTube) as a means of self-expression in the face of adversity. In particular, we will explore the question, "how does culture support the resilience of people and community?" Ultimately, students will explore this question in relationship to their own life.

By the end of the unit students will have a deeper understanding of the attitudes and beliefs that inform their culture, and other cultures as well as the significance of African Diasporic influences on American culture, and the ways in which culture informs resilience. The unit focuses on a core set of essential questions to guide student learning and for me as a teacher to assess student learning. There will be opportunities for students to answer these questions in relationship to classroom activities, reflective essays, and ultimately through a visual or performance piece.

### Essential Questions

- What influences help shape cultural attitudes and beliefs?
- How has the African Diaspora influenced America?
- What does it mean to be resilient?
- How does culture (and TURF dancing in particular) support the resilience of people and community?

These essential questions are progressive. We will begin with a study of each concept on its own using images, video, and short texts, this part of the unit will be more of an introduction rather than an in-depth study. Next, we will revisit each question in relationship to *Mumbo Jumbo* and more specifically, the character of Jes Grew. In particular, we will focus on how these questions and concepts are intertwined. After studying *Mumbo Jumbo* we will move on to TURF dancing and continue our exploration of the essential questions.

I visualize this unit as a spiral, revisiting each essential question as we move deeper into our studies. This is similar to what Joe Roach refers to from his study of African influences on American performance as "repetition with the possibility of revision." <sup>2</sup> Each time as we repeat our study of the essential questions, we will revise our answers and move towards an increasingly more complex and rich understanding of the concepts.

I designed the unit to not only teach culture, diaspora, and resilience but to also incorporate these concepts into the design of my unit. This is particularly true in regards to resilience. Linda Winfield argues that it is important to think of resilience not as something we do but as something we foster. In this sense, although resilience is a key concept I will "teach" my students through "Jes Grew" and TURFing, it is important that it is also something I will foster through the design of my curriculum. Researchers on resilience education shift the notion of a "deficit model," what students are lacking, to a developmental approach in which we meet students where they are with the skills they currently have. "Taking a resilience approach means meeting a

young person's need for belonging, respect, autonomy, and mastery of relevant and meaningful knowledge." <sup>3</sup> This works best when students are able to draw upon their own unique experiences and talents. Thus I've designed this curriculum unit to teach students explicitly what resilience is but I've also incorporated the theory behind resilience education into the design of my unit.

After studying *Mumbo Jumbo* and TURF dancing I will ask students what they want to do as a final project. I want to give them as much freedom as possible while answering the final essential question through a visual or performance piece. By answering the final question, they will have to touch on culture, diaspora, and resiliency and thus exhibit their newfound knowledge in a personally meaningful manner.

## Background Information

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The first part of this section explores the two main texts for this unit, *Mumbo Jumbo* and TURF dancing. Both texts are unconventional, one a deconstruction of the "novel," and the other, a dance form. For this reason, I've provided a justification for their use in the English classroom with some background information. You will also need a basic understanding of these texts to understand how they support the essential questions.

The second section explores the four essential questions for the unit and provides background information, textual examples, and suggestions for the classroom when applicable. It is intended to provide a guide for the teacher but not necessarily be frontloaded to students.

As I write about each concept and text I constantly refer back to dance. When thinking about this unit as a whole, I felt the need to narrow my cultural focus. The title of our seminar, "The Big Easy: Literary New Orleans and Intangible Heritage," challenged me as an English teacher to think beyond written text when exploring culture. Instead, I chose dance as an intangible cultural heritage to study both because it is fun and because it is rarely viewed as a text in high school English curricula. Intangible heritage is defined by UNESCO as "traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants," <sup>4</sup> this may include oral histories, festive events, and specific knowledge held by a group of people. The intangible heritage of African influences on American dance is embodied in both *Mumbo Jumbo* and TURF dancing. Studying culture, diaspora, and resilience will hopefully make the connections to intangible heritage accessible and interesting to my students.

### Texts

#### *Mumbo Jumbo*

*Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) by Ishmael Reed is about the spread of the "Jes Grew" virus from New Orleans through the rest of the country. Jes Grew is an embodiment of ragtime, jazz, polytheism, and I would argue as a dance form, polyrhythmic movement. The Monotheistic organization, The Wallflower Order, attempts to eradicate Jes Grew as it spreads across the country and threatens Atonist (white supremacist) control over the nation.

The novel is written in an unconventional manner. Immediately one notices missing quotation marks, images used as text rather than illustrations of text and a storyline that does not match the triangular plot diagram English teachers are far too familiar with. Joe Weixlmann notes that Reed's writing style "moves to a variety of

Jazz and Blues rhythms" <sup>5</sup> which adds to the unconventional style of his writing. Reed himself remarked in 1978 that he believed the "novel" is soon to be an outdated term, a genre imposed on "us," instead he referred to his writings as "works." <sup>6</sup>

Reed's deconstruction of the "Novel" will pose a challenge in the classroom. I will teach this curriculum unit in my 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class and I don't think they are ready to read the work in its entirety. Instead, I will use short passages that focus mainly on the Jes Grew pandemic. A concern is that by choosing short passages I may alter the story that Reed tells into one of my own. I do agree that students will not get a full picture of *Mumbo Jumbo* but at the same time, that is okay. I will fill in the necessary information students will need to make meaning of the text. What is most important to me is that they feel success as readers and are able to make connections to culture, diaspora, and resilience.

Jes Grew embodies all three of our concepts for this unit. It personifies many of the intangible influences of African culture in America such as attitudes towards polyrhythmic movement and "rep rev." It is also an excellent example of resilience. Reed writes in the prologue of *Mumbo Jumbo* that, "Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host." <sup>7</sup> Thus Jes Grew fosters positive transformation in the face of adversity.

### *TURF Dancing*

TURF stands for Take Up Room on the Floor and originated in Oakland, California. It draws from hip-hop dance and break dancing in particular but also has specific differences that make it unique. Like breakdancing, it often includes two dancers battling it out in the center of a cipher, or circle, of observers who declare one dancer the victor of that round. TURF dancers also organize themselves into crews or groups often formed through friends, family, and school. It also includes "breaks" in the dance, a common practice in Africanist performance, which Thomas DeFrantz describes as, "an unexpected, uncontrollable space. It is where an instant beat is interrupted by a flash of contradictory rhythmic ideas." <sup>8</sup> In TURF dancing, as in breakdancing, "breaks" manifest as physical feats of the body and are often the highlight of one's dance. Unlike break dancing, TURF dancing is designed to tell a story anywhere from conquering one's opponent to mourning the dead. Jeriel Bay, founder of The Architeckz TURF dancing crew states, "It's like miming with a rhythm, telling a story, expressing a story in your head for people to see visually. How can I tell a story if I couldn't speak? I'll show you in my moves." <sup>9</sup> Like Jes Grew, TURFing is a physical manifestation of storytelling without words. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Jes Grew is seeking it's text in the written form. The same can be said for TURF dancing which seeks a different kind of "tangible" text through YouTube videos.

Susan Leigh Foster coined the term "regroove" to describe the revisions of traditional dance forms by young people. These dance forms are not relegated to prestigious dance schools or troupes and are not confined by the need for perfect repetition. In nightclubs, community centers, workshops, and particularly on YouTube young people are showing and sharing these new dance forms. Although TURFing has not hit the mainstream, several YouTube videos have gone viral. For example, there are now young people in France who use TURF dancing to tell stories about where they come from and how they respond to adversity. In essence, these young people are communicating with one another across the internet, with few words and outside of the international media that tends to dictate this conversation.

In Oakland, TURFing responds to the specific needs of youth as they take inspiration from media, community, and their own experiences to tell their story. As implied in the name, Take Up Room on the Floor, young people are claiming space to tell their story. This is particularly evident in the "Rest In Peace" series of

YouTube videos produced by YAK films featuring the TURF Feinz. The YouTube video, "RIP RichD" <sup>10</sup> highlights the relationship between street violence, institutionalized racism, and death of young black men. It begins with a young man behind a police car on an East Oakland street corner. As the police car passes, the young man breaks into dance. The night before the video was filmed, one of the dancers brothers was shot and killed on the same street corner. Instead of retaliating with more violence he called his friends to come together to "shoot" this video, which has now gone viral. Although the majority of TURF videos are of battles shot on cellphones, the TURF Feinz "RIP" series highlights an important relationship to the "deep time" of African influences on American dance and the process of mourning in particular.

Like the TURF Feinz RIP series, jazz funerals of New Orleans are a time for mourners and revelers to celebrate the death of loved ones through dance. Jazz funerals are parades that break in to what is known as the more celebratory "second line." In the 1990's, with the growing "crack wars" of the city Roach observed that the traditional Jazz funeral was revised for a younger generation burying their peers, "The traditional ritual was taken apart and rebuilt to serve the more pressing needs of a threatened generation." <sup>11</sup> Although drunkenness, nudity, and crack bags nailed to trees along the parade route marked these events, the young people were still exhibiting resiliency. In the face of incredibly adversity and oppression, they found ways to adapt, and survive as a community (although not always as individuals).

The relationship to death is particularly important in New Orleans as well as parts of Oakland. Cornel West writes of New Orleans shortly after the floods of Hurricane Katrina that, "when you live so close to death...you live more intensely." <sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is why New Orleans produces such a rich cultural geography unlike most of America. Cornel West extends his statement to the Jazz era long before Hurricane Katrina ever hit, "Charlie Parker would have killed somebody if he had not blown his horn. The history of black people in America is one of unbelievable resilience in the face of crushing white supremacist powers." <sup>13</sup> Like Charlie Parker, there is an urgency and necessity in the performance of TURF dancers in Oakland. Their dances are an expression of their resilience in the face of oppression, violence, and death.

This unit is inspired by TURF dancing because it is local to my community; however I encourage other teachers interested in this unit to explore and use local practices from their own region. Find out what young people are doing, how they are expressing themselves, and bring it into the classroom.

#### What Influences Help Shape Cultural Attitudes and Beliefs?

Students will ultimately explore a cultural practice of their own that informs their own resiliency. In order to effectively do this, we need to come to a common definition of culture as a class. One definition of culture is, "the specialized behavioral patterns, understandings, adaptations, and social systems that summarize a group of people's learned behavior" <sup>14</sup> or more simply put, it is the learned behavior of a group of people. What is important for my students to know is that culture is learned and that it consists of specific traits, "a trait may be an object, a technique, a belief, or an attitude" <sup>15</sup> . For example, a drum, a dance move, a belief in one god, or an assumption that polyrhythmic movement is superior are all examples of culture.

This unit will specifically look at the cultural attitudes and beliefs that inform dance in the United States. In particular, we will focus on the influences African Diaspora traditions on dance. Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes European attitudes towards dance when she cites ballet for which an erect torso is important, "The straight, uninflected torso indicates elegance or royalty and acts as absolute monarch, dominating the dancing body" <sup>16</sup> which is in conflict with African attitudes toward dance, "Africanist dance idioms show a democratic equality of body parts. The spine is just one of many possible movement centers; it rarely remains static. The Africanist

dancing body is polycentric." <sup>17</sup> Gottschild implies here that political structures and societal beliefs also influence attitudes towards dance aesthetics.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* the Wallflower Order, a European secret society that now operates in the United States, is called upon to end the Jes Grew virus. "But the Wallflower Order had no choice.... Only they could defend the cherished traditions of the West against Jes Grew." <sup>18</sup> In an attempt to hold on to Western values, the Wallflower Order is summoned to destroy this dance and to control the influences that help shape cultural attitudes and beliefs. They want to keep the monarchy and domination over people as described by Gottschild. They are afraid of the more democratic and polyrhythmic movement of Jes Grew. In the classroom, students can explore both the Wallflower Order and Jes Grew as metaphors. We will discuss whom or what might be the modern day Wallflower Order and Jes Grew and how they influence our cultural attitudes. In particular, students should understand that there are always forces that influence cultural attitudes and beliefs and there are always people that challenge this status quo.

As a class, we will look at TURF dancing as a metaphor for Jes Grew and an opposition to the status quo. Like Jes Grew, TURF dancing is heavily influenced by "Africanist dance idioms" as described by Gottschild. The more TURF dancers can use their various body parts in complex ways, the more they are prized for their abilities. TURF dance "battles" are an excellent example of this. The goal of the battle is not so much about physically dominating one's opponent; the point of a battle is to use one's body in increasingly complex ways to contort, isolate, and tell a story through movement. The winner of a battle is the dancer that can most successfully negotiate these complex movements. As a class we will explore the influences that lead to specific attitudes and beliefs about TURF dancing and how these are similar and different from Jes Grew. In particular we will look at the origins of both dance forms, their viral nature, and what they do for their "host."

One of the greatest influences African cultural forms have had on America is the process in which something is done. "Africanism shapes processes or the way that something is done, not simply the product or the fact that it is done." <sup>19</sup> Keeping this in mind, we don't need to look for "African" dance moves in TURF dancing but rather, we can explore the process of African dance, polycentric movement, and how that has influenced TURF dancing. The study of "process" and other intangible heritages allows us to expand the way we record and see history in ways that are more complex. This is not true of just the African Diaspora, but all cultures that have contributed to American culture.

### **How has the African Diaspora influenced America?**

Gotschild claims that "all texts are intertexts," <sup>20</sup> by this she means that all cultural forms are intermixed, particularly in the United States. This is just as true of Southern cuisine as it is of American Ballet. However, Gottschild argues that African and European practices have had the greatest influence on American culture. Joe Roach pushed this idea even further in our seminar when he stated that African cultural forms are not the minority influence but rather the majority in our society. <sup>21</sup> New Orleans Jazz, Chicago Blues, New York break dancing and Louisiana Gumbo are all examples of the African influences on *mainstream* American culture.

The majority of my students are members of the African Diaspora and so there is an immediate relevance for these students; however, I believe that studying the Diaspora is relevant for all students. In particular, hip-hop is now a world-wide phenomenon and people of every background are using it to respond to their own cultures, backgrounds and worlds.

I chose to focus on the African presence in American culture because its significance is often ignored.

Gottschild writes, "Although we do not need to and cannot reduce the intertextuality of the African American/European American equation to a laundry list of sources and influences, we desperately need to cut through the convoluted web of racism that denies the acknowledgment of the Africanist presence of the whole."<sup>22</sup> Holidays such as African-American history month or multi-cultural celebrations in our school, while well intentioned and necessary in the past, often compartmentalize and reduce the cultural intermixing of the United States to sporadic contributions. At the same time, we can extract pieces of a whole, such as the Africanist influence on attitudes towards dance aesthetics, to understand how they influence the whole. This changes the assumption that all American culture is based on European culture unless it comes from somewhere else, to all American culture is a mixture of influences from a variety of sources.

It is important for all students to understand the ways in which African cultural practices have shaped what it means to be an American. When thinking of my student population, both multi-generational Americans and newly arrived immigrants, I want them to be able to grasp this knowledge, "The African-European paradigm is the bottom line of American culture that greets and grounds every newly arrived immigrant, regardless of ethnicity and political, social, religious, or economic persuasion."<sup>23</sup> By unveiling this dynamic, all students will be able to more consciously claim their relationship to this paradigm rather than having it dictated for them (as it often is by media, community, education, etc...). Elizabeth Martinez argues that people of color in America, "spend too much time understanding our lives in relation to whiteness."<sup>24</sup> One goal of this project is to flip this idea and understand our lives in relationship to blackness.

Ishmael Reed sees African influences as the center of American culture through the character of Jes Grew, in *Mumbo Jumbo*. It is important to note that Jes Grew originates in New Orleans's Congo Square, the meeting place of enslaved Africans. Congo Square was a site of commerce and trade, where people of African descent could sell their goods on their "day off" from enslavement and make their own money. But it was more than that; Congo Square became a meeting place where people could freely practice their traditional cultures through dance, music, food, and mix them to create something new, as Reed writes in his preface to the novel, "The foolish Wallflower Order hadn't learned a damned thing. They thought that by fumigating the Place Congo in the 1890's when people were doing the Bamboula the Chacta the Babouille the Counjaille the Juba the Congo and the VooDoo that this would put an end to it."<sup>25</sup> Reed makes a very clear relationship between African dance forms and Jes Grew. In the preface of his novel he clearly establishes that the spreading African influence on American culture is what threatens the Wallflower Order and the traditional power structure of the United States.

TURF dancing is not as inherently political as *Mumbo Jumbo* however class can still use the novel as a model to make their own connections to the African Diasporic presence in TURF dancing. One possibility is to create a "family tree" for TURF dancing, researching and determining major influences for the dance form. The polycentric body and process for creating dance can then become branches on the "family tree."

Although not based on TURF dancing, David LaChapelle's movie *Rize* documents another hip-hop dance form, Krump from Compton, California. In the film, he creates a montage of West African dancers and Krump dancers from Compton to highlight the similarity between their styles. It is clear from this montage that the young Krump dancers were repeating a dance form based on West African dance aesthetics (even though they may have not been consciously aware of this connection). Showing this movie might help students make connections to TURF dancing as well.

LaChapelle also highlights revisions made to this dance form as a response to the specific challenges young people face in Compton. In another montage, images of the Rodney King riots, Watts riots, and police

brutality are combined with Krump dancing. LaChapelle makes evident that Crump dancing is a revision of a very old practice. Not only is this dance form an artistic observation of the time period, it is also a means to express emotion, grapple with oppression, and create something positive. In essence, these young dancers were exhibiting resiliency.

### **What does it mean to be resilient?**

Resilience is "a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity." <sup>26</sup> It is often thought of as the ability to adapt and persist in the face of adversity. The danger with this definition is that resilience may be interpreted as stagnate when in fact it is an on-going process, "a more meaningful conception views resilience not as a fixed attribute, but as vulnerabilities or protective mechanisms that modify the individual's response to risk situations and operate at turning points during his or her life." <sup>27</sup> Most people are resilient most of the time, and this is certainly true of my students. The majority of them have found ways to successfully adapt to risk situations, but being teenagers, they often play with this line. Students will need to explore situations in which they feel they exhibit resiliency and situations in which they struggle with being resilient. Providing the opportunity for students to explore their own resiliency will help them with the final project, and more importantly with their lives.

Jes Grew is a resilient character. Although the Wallflower order tried to eradicate it in the 1890's, it came back more powerful than before. As a class, we can explore how Jes Grew changed in response to its near annihilation by the Wallflower order. This is also a good opportunity to explore Jes Grew as a metaphor for resilience in the face of racism. In particular, we can brainstorm and discuss real examples of times when people have used culture to be resilient.

### **How does culture support the resilience of people and community?**

The TURF Feinz video, "R.I.P 211" <sup>28</sup> starts like many others, a group of kids on an East Oakland corner, already suspects for being together, already feared by mainstream America who may only know the stereotypes of young, urban, black men. What may surprise the uninformed viewer are their smiles and the clear affection in their greetings. The group is on a mission that we are soon made aware of; an abandoned apartment graffitied with messages to a dead friend. Framed by doorways the young men dance alone against the eerie backlight of a floor lamp, their bodies fading in and out almost ghostlike. If you scroll down your computer screen, you will notice a short message, "Rest In Peace Kenneth "211" Ross, gunned down by the police," he was only 18 years old, the video made a few weeks after his birthday. His friends, powerless in one sense against the police, find a way to use their skills to honor and grieve the death of their friend. The RIP series of videos are an excellent example of how culture can support the resilience of people and communities.

In our seminar, Joe Roach introduced the African concept of "repetition with the possibility of revision," <sup>29</sup> or "rep 'n rev," the idea that cultural art forms are repeated and yet revised as needed by each artist, generation, community, etc... The value set on revision allows for the performer to respond to the context of their physical environment, socio-political environment and time period. The RIP series is a part of the African and African Diasporic tradition of mourning death through dance and music. In class, we will explore rep 'n rev as a synonym for resilience. As made evident through the RIP series, *Mumbo Jumbo* and the documentary *Rize*, the "revision" in rep 'n rev is often in response to risk situations and turning points experienced in a racist society. The TURF Feinz in Oakland, Jes Grew across the nation, and Krump dancers in Compton used "rep 'n rev" to respond to risk situations and modify the violent nature of these events into performance.



After studying the ways in which Jes Grew and TURF dancers use culture to influence their own resilience, students will identify a cultural practice of their own that supports their resilience. This will be the final assessment for the unit in which students can demonstrate what they learned and practice these new ideas in a way that is personally meaningful and not dictated by me as the teacher.

## Strategies

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All of the strategies discussed here are part of the core set of strategies I use in my classroom. Most of them are used in our curriculum units and some of them I learned through professional development at our school site. I use these strategies with every unit I teach so that students will become familiar with them. When students are more comfortable with strategies, they begin to internalize them and can explore more complex ideas and texts.

### Think-Pair-Share

This strategy is best used to provide students time to digest and share new information. In this unit, students will be faced with a lot of new vocabulary, concepts, and challenging texts. This strategy is designed to give students time to check in with themselves and a partner on their own learning practice. Students are given a short amount of time (1-3 minutes) to think about a question the teacher or another student poses. Usually I ask students to write down some informal notes during the think time. After, students pair up with someone else and share their thoughts. It is best when this strategy is practiced often and clear expectations are set for what it means to get into pairs. Sometimes student desks are already paired up and other times I ask them to pair up with a neighbor, what is most important is that you know what works best for your class. I will often ask for a few students to share out thoughts to the whole class at the end.

### See-Think-Wonder

This strategy comes from the Visible Thinking Project at Harvard University. Traditionally, students are given an image and have to respond to three questions 1) what do you see? 2) what do you think about that? And 3) what does it make you wonder? This strategy is designed to support deeper analysis of images and generate greater classroom discussions. I've also used this strategy as a structured method of critiquing student work and with items other than images such as student writing.

### Graphic Organizers

I use graphic organizers almost every day in my classroom. Although there are traditional graphic organizers such as the Venn Diagram and T-Chart, anyone can create a new style to fit the needs of a particular group of students or content objectives. Overall, graphic organizers help students arrange ideas in a way that makes sense for them. As a teacher, I find that graphic organizers are an excellent formative assessment tool and help me gauge where my students are in their learning.

### Making Connections

Anything learned must be relevant for a student. One way of helping students make learning relevant is by making connections to what they already know. There are several types of connections that can be made

including text to text, text to self, and text to world connections. In this unit, students will be asked to make text to text connections between *Mumbo Jumbo* and TURF dancing, they will make text to self connections when exploring their own resilience, and text to world connections as we expand the metaphor of Jes Grew. These are only a sampling of the ways in which students will make connections in the classroom. In fact, I tend to use this strategy in both formal and informal ways in the classroom every day.

## Read Aloud

A read aloud is a short piece of text, often a paragraph to a page, read aloud by the teacher to the class. The purpose of a read aloud is to explore a shorter piece of writing in-depth. Sometimes I will ask students a question to think about and respond to after I read the passage, other times I will ask students to highlight vocabulary, concepts, figurative language, and/or something that stands out to them. I always follow up a read aloud with some kind of discussion or analysis by the class. Sometimes I will conduct a think-pair-share after and other times we may have a whole class discussion.

We will use this strategy as our primary method of reading *Mumbo Jumbo* because it is a challenging and dense text. This will allow me as the teacher to choose specific passages that relate to Jes Grew and support student comprehension in a more direct way. The regular analysis and discussion by the class will give students the opportunity to constantly monitor their own comprehension before they get frustrated or confused.

## Activities

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This section is divided up by activities for all essential questions and a sampling of activities for each essential question. Appendices are provided for most activities.

### All Essential Questions:

#### *Warm - Ups:*

In order to give students a better context for the culture and era in which *Mumbo Jumbo* takes place, we will begin class with music, an image, or video, which students will analyze. In particular, we will use early jazz music from New Orleans and images from Congo Square, turn of the century New Orleans, and the Harlem Renaissance. For music and videos, YouTube has many great examples. The Library of Congress has a great selection of images and a simple online search can also uncover many images. I would also like to give the students a chance to physically warm-up on some days, practicing dances like the Charleston so that their bodies can get a feel for dance in the 1920's. This same activity can be applied to TURF dancing as well.

I will mix up the medium and strategy I use each day. On one day we may analyze an image of two dancers in Harlem and I may use the See, Think, Wonder strategy. On another day we may watch a video and use the making connections strategy. There is plenty of flexibility in these warm-ups and by changing the medium used daily, you can use the same set of strategies.

#### *Venn Diagram: Jes Grew & TURF Dancing*

This will be an assessment for me to determine student understanding of the relationship and differences between Jes Grew and TURF Dancing. This should be added to on-going as each essential question is explored. Ideally, students will change the color of pen or use a pencil to note when information has been added while studying different essential questions. This supports visual learners in seeing their progression of ideas.

### *Essential Question Assessments*

After we study each essential question, students will have to write a short persuasive essay in which they answer the essential question. For at least the first two essential questions, this will be an in-class timed assessment. Students will always have the opportunity to improve their essays as we continue our study.

## **What influences help shape cultural attitudes and beliefs?**

### *Warm - Up*

I will provide students with an image, music, or dance video and ask them to respond to the questions, "Do you think this is an example of good (dancing, music, etc...), why or why not?" in discussion I will continue to ask students to justify their response in order to get to the idea of cultural attitudes and beliefs. This should be repeated over several days so that students have the opportunity to develop their responses in-depth.

I will also ask students to describe what they see in these texts to explore what attitudes and beliefs lay behind their descriptions. I will share my own writing to model what kind of writing I want students to do, particularly highlighting descriptive language and analysis. These warm-ups can develop into longer homework assignments in which students focus on their writing style.

I've provided a sample of my own writing here based on the TURF video "RIP Rich D" to serve as an example to other teachers and my students.

We are first introduced to a masked dancer in a bright red jacket, gray bandana over his face and a hood covering his head. He is confident and cocky, when he dances he uses his whole body, dipping and spinning around the edges of the city corner. The cement and light post are his props and his arms and hands perform a series of illusions meant to communicate the beginning of something important. Confidently, he steps outside of his street corner stage into the road. A typical Oakland 1980's tan sedan rolls by and blocks our view for a few seconds, functioning as a curtain for this street performance. When the car passes, the young man is striking a warriors pose; left leg bent slightly beyond a right angle with his hand on his knee, his right leg stretches behind him and his right arm stretches back into the air, it is as though he is flying with determination towards his goal, moving forward even in his stillness. What is he moving towards? Who is he? What is he so determined to do? Almost as quickly as he begins flying he is back on the corner, a potential victim in black enters the scene and soon we discover that the red jacket is death come again to a street corner in Oakland...

## **How has the African Diaspora Influenced America?**

### *Graphic Organizer: Family Tree*

This is a mini research project and assessment. As a class we will brainstorm influences or "family members" that have helped create TURF dancing. Some ideas may be so important that TURF dancing couldn't exist without them, like a parent, and other ideas may be more like a cousin, or indirectly related. Students may come up with ideas such as break dancing, street life, and the media. As a teacher I want them to dig even

deeper, I may need to offer some suggestions as well. On the list I want to see some reference to African dance forms and process. At this point students will have done some reading on these ideas and will have watched a clip from *RIZE* so they shouldn't be too foreign however I may need to support students with these topics in finding appropriate reading material. After the class has come up with a decent list of "family members" they are ready to conduct research.

Depending upon the level of my students, we may do this as a whole class project with pairs researching one family member, more advanced students, can research an entire family tree independently. Regardless, for each "family member" one paragraph should summarize the topic while a second paragraph should discuss how the topic has influenced TURF dancing.

#### *Graphic Organizer: Literal and Figurative Meanings of Mumbo Jumbo*

In order to better comprehend *Mumbo Jumbo* students will need to understand the literal and figurative meanings of Jes Grew. Again, this can be a simple t-chart breaking down the literal and figurative meanings of the character, for which we can add. In order to further analyze the figurative meanings of Jes Grew we can deconstruct Reed's use of literary devices, metaphor and personification in particular, to make sense of Jes Grew and its relevance to students. We can use two outlines, a circle for metaphor, and a dancing body for personification, as our outlines in which students write examples of how Reed uses metaphor and personification. These examples can be short statements or textual.

#### **What does it mean to be resilient?**

##### *Graphic Organizer: How am I resilient?*

Before students complete the graphic organizer I will give them a definition of the word resilient. Usually I have students first try and define a concept on their own but this will probably be a new word for all of them and so it may be more helpful to frontload the definition. Once students have read the definition, put it into their own words, and provided examples we will move on to the graphic organizer.

This will be a simple t-chart. On the left side it will say "times when I've been resilient" and on the other side it will say "times when I've struggled with resilience or haven't been resilient." Students will complete this and have the opportunity to share examples in a think-pair-share. It may be helpful to create a class chart that can be posted in the room as a reminder for students.

#### **How does culture support the resilience of people and community?**

##### *Final Project*

As previously mentioned, the final project for this unit will be a student created project in which they explore the final essential question, "How does culture support the resilience of people and community?" Although the content will be left for the students to choose, I will provide an outline and rubric for the class.

I will present the rubric first so that students have an idea of my expectations (see appendix B). Second, students will choose a cultural practice to explore and keep a journal in which they write reactions, experiences, etc...I will provide journal prompts for students and ideally, read and provide commentary when possible. The last part of the project will be a presentation as determined by the class along with a narrative essay in which they write about their experience with this project.

## Appendix A

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Implementing California State Standards for English Language Arts in Grades 9 and 10 <sup>30</sup>

### 3.0 Literary Response and Analysis

Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They conduct in- depth analyses of recurrent patterns and themes.

- We will address standard 3.0 through our study of *Mumbo Jumbo* and TURF dancing. *Mumbo Jumbo* is historical fiction and will enhance students' understanding of the turn-of-the-century United States. Our extension into TURF dancing will give students the opportunity to explore recurrent patterns and themes.

### 2.0 Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

#### 2.1 Write biographical or autobiographical narratives or short stories:

- Students will present autobiographical narratives as part of their final presentation. The subject of their narratives will be their own exploration of a cultural practice.

#### 2.2 Write responses to literature:

- When we read *Mumbo Jumbo* students will write short responses to the passages discussed in class.

#### 2.3 Write expository compositions, including analytical essays and research reports

- Students will be responsible for writing short research reports as part of the "Family Tree" activity.

#### 2.4 Write persuasive compositions

- The assessment for each essential question will be written as a persuasive essay with a thesis and subclaims.

## Appendix B

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Rubric for the final project (Draft)

This is a rough draft of a rubric I may use with my students as part of their final project. I will edit and modify the rubric as we work through the unit.

	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Getting there</b>	<b>Just beginning</b>
<b>Content</b>	Clearly and exceptionally addresses the essential question "How does culture support the resilience of people and communities?" Makes meaningful and relevant connections to other essential questions	Addresses the essential question "How does culture support the resilience of people and communities?" through relevant connections and makes obvious connections to other essential questions	Addresses the essential question "How does culture support the resilience of people and communities?" but may need to improve connections. May or may not make obvious connections to other essential questions.	Does not sufficiently address the essential question "How does culture support the resilience of people and communities?" and does not make connections to other essential questions.
<b>Organization</b>	The project has a unique and clear beginning, middle and end and/or a natural flow. The main idea of the project is clear to the audience and backed up by relevant examples.	The project has a clear beginning, middle and end and/or has a natural flow. The main idea of the project is clear to the audience and backed up by relevant examples.	The project has a beginning, middle and end and/or has a natural flow. The main idea of the project is somewhat clear to the audience and backed up by examples.	The project does not have a clear beginning, middle and end and/or natural flow. The main idea of the project is unclear to the audience and is not backed up by relevant examples.
<b>Presentation</b>	Performers are comfortable with the audience and know what they are doing. They make sure to project their voice, use bold movements, and speak clearly when needed. Visual presentations are neat, and it is obvious that the artist has paid attention to the presentation	Performers are mostly comfortable with the audience and know what they are doing. They usually make sure to project their voice, use bold movements, and speak clearly when needed. Visual presentations are neat, and it is obvious that the artist has paid some attention to the presentation	Performers are comfortable with the audience at times and usually know what they are doing. They sometimes forget to project their voice, use bold movements, and speak clearly when needed. Visual presentations are somewhat neat, and it isn't always clear that the artist has paid attention to the presentation	Performers are not comfortable with the audience and do not know what they are doing. They do not project their voice, use bold movements, and speak clearly when needed. Visual presentations are not neat, and it is obvious that the artist has not paid attention to the presentation
<b>Quality</b>	Clear attention to detail, going above and beyond expectations.	Clear attention to detail.	Some attention to detail.	Not much or no attention to detail.

<b>Notes:</b>				
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## Endnotes

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