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The Heart's Migration: Finding, Making, Coming Home

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Overview

For many, the most indelible image of Barack Obama's path to the presidency is the moment he took the oath of office. However, in terms of cultural resonance, the most enduring image may be one that few of us will ever see: President Barack Obama, an African American, at home, at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Any point, geographical or historical, along the African American diaspora can now be calibrated, and indeed celebrated, with this fact: a black man has made his home in the White House. With every passing day, this image becomes more embedded in the American consciousness. Whether his presidency lasts four years or eight, the effects of Obama's residency will far outlast his time in office. Robert B. Stepto, in his latest collection of lectures entitled *A Home Elsewhere: Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama*, notes that, ". . .we read African American literature at the present moment, knowing, and actually being stunned by the fact, that an African American *writer* is our president"(Stepto 2010, 3). And, in the case of this unit, when reading African American literature through the lens of "finding home," this fact changes everything. The long journey to freedom has found a moment of fulfillment. While Barack Obama is but one man among many, he serves as what mythologist Joseph Campbell calls a "constellating image" (Campbell 1988, 163), a "North Star," as it were, to guide future travelers to a place they can call home.

Rationale

I teach at a creative and performing arts magnet school located in a downtown cultural district. The students take regular academic classes while devoting three hours a day to their chosen arts areas. It is both exciting and a challenge to teach a course in African American Literature to a multi-cultural classroom. Although most of the students who take the class are of African descent, about a third are not. Eastern European immigrants, Hispanic, Asian and white students constitute the rest of the class. Most students are seniors; this year two juniors took the class as an elective. The fact that the teacher is a middle-aged white woman adds another dynamic to the mix. The first year I taught it, my race was an issue with some students; last year, my second time teaching the course, my ethnicity was seldom mentioned. I'm not certain whether this is due to additional experience on my part or to the particular group of students. The ways I have addressed the

question of my legitimacy to teach this course are 1) to admit what I know and do not know, 2) to face uncomfortable moments and talk them out, and 3) to give my students the intellectual space they need to incorporate their ideas into our classroom activities. In any class in which race is an essential element, there has to be an atmosphere of trust so that productive discussions can take place. A colleague of mine recently stated an important pedagogical truth: "We shouldn't avoid discomfort in the classroom. We learn by pushing through the feelings of discomfort. That's where important things really happen" (Myers 2012). Thus, to avoid race in this class, or to go around it, won't get anyone anywhere. Knowing how to talk about difficult topics and trusting the process takes time and commitment; when it succeeds, the payback is huge.

Trouble at Home

Even in the twenty-first century, there is an urgent need for students to study material about race and citizenship. For me, the urgency comes from an incident which involved a former student, whom I will refer to as "Jay." Jay is an African American music major who graduated two years ago. He stands about 5'6", has a broad face and an even broader smile. He used to have dreadlocks until the incident; now his head is shaved. I was his senior English teacher.

In January of 2010, two days after his 18 th birthday, Jay was walking home late at night from his mother's to his grandmother's house, both of which are located in a predominantly black, predominantly poor neighborhood. He was wearing a new "big" coat he had gotten for his birthday. It was cold, and there were large patches of ice on the ground. As he was walking, three white undercover police officers jumped out of an unmarked car and shouted at him: "Where's the gun? Where's the money? Where's the drugs?" Jay, frightened, began to run. The men chased him, catching him when he slipped on some ice. The three beat him severely, pulled out several dreadlocks out by the roots and caused serious damage to one eye. Jay fought back, hard. He thought they were trying to kill him. He had no drugs, no money, no gun. There was talk of a suspicious lump in his pocket, a Mountain Dew bottle, but Jay never drank Mountain Dew. The three men may or may not have identified themselves as police officers. They took him to the hospital, where Jay was admitted and then charged with resisting arrest and assaulting an officer.

Jay's race and citizenship had both been violated; all of us, his classmates and teachers, were profoundly shaken. It was 2010, not 1950. How could things like this still be happening? The students peacefully marched on his behalf, addressed the city council, spoke to the press and wrote letters. When Jay returned, the entire school threw its support behind him; at graduation, he received a standing ovation. That summer, the charges against Jay were dropped. Still, the police admitted no wrongdoing. This summer, the three officers are on trial for their actions, and I am one of several witnesses from our school who will appear on Jay's behalf. I don't know what sort of damages the lawyers are seeking; to me, the important part of this trial is to help Jay to regain his self-respect. As I sit in a seminar discussing narratives of race and citizenship in their historical context, I wonder if anything has changed. I'm also angry, very angry, that a nice, quiet black boy with dreadlocks and a big coat can't walk two blocks in his own neighborhood without being chased and beaten by three white police officers who have as yet to admit that they made a terrible mistake.

Some of my current African American students joke that "a bus [public transit] will go right past if there's a group of black kids waiting at the stop." Others observe that certain stores will admit only one black student at a time. What amazes me is their ability to put their anger aside. They have bigger things on their minds, goals that won't be derailed by the pettiness of certain bus drivers and store owners. Would I have that same resolve?

No doubt many teachers have students who have been victims of over-zealous and outright racist police procedures. Teachers of color have been victimized as well. It's still going on, in far too many places. What can one teacher in one classroom do? As stated earlier, honesty and trust go a long way in creating a space for purposeful dialogue. Reading and studying narratives of race and citizenship are ways we can help our students to understand the complex issues that surround social justice, and to address the work that remains to be done. The works will provide information and, one hopes, inspiration. The students' own narratives will move the story forward, continuing the drive to make America a home that promises *and* delivers justice for all.

Objectives

This unit may intertwine with an existing course in African American Literature, or it can be adapted to an American Literature course, provided that there is a representative body of work by African Americans on the reading list.

Students will create journals that will contain reflective and analytical writing as well as substantial visuals for each work of literature they study. In addition, several journal entries will establish the students' own ideas about what makes "home." A detailed list of journal entries appears later in this unit in "Resources."

Students will research the African American diaspora as it relates to the United States. This will include reading slave narratives on the Internet and in the library to gain an understanding of the choices and dilemmas faced by newly-emancipated slaves.

Students will read novels and plays in which "home" is a strong thematic strand. These works include poems by Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Pearl Cleage's play *Flyin' West*, August Wilson's play *Gem of the Ocean*, Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*.

For the culminating project, students will create posters that will include both text and visuals relating to the theme of home. They will also write a "Home Bill of Rights," and write an artist's statement for the poster. The posters will then be laminated so the students can take them along when setting up their new "homes" at college. This project will be evaluated based on completion and thoroughness of journal entries, completion and execution of the poster, the "Home Bill of Rights" and the artist's statement for the poster.

This unit may be spread over a school year, or it may be adapted for a shorter period of time. As written, it is meant to be infused in an already existing curriculum. It could be abridged and made into its own unit, using *Flyin' West* and *Song of Solomon* as core pieces of literature.

Strategies

Initially, even before introducing the readings, the teacher should conduct some class activities to get students to think about the meaning of home. This can be done with a quick-write journal entry — "What are the first words that come to your mind when you think of the word 'home'?" — followed by pair-sharing and whole class discussions. Students can also begin with online research, using GoogleEarth and MapQuest and other Internet resources to locate their homes geographically. Students who have come to the United States from other places may choose to use their original homes for this project; their input could prove quite valuable later on in the unit. The main idea is to elicit assumptions and ideas about home, finding commonalities and differences among the class. Student responses can be charted and posted at the outset of the unit, or each student can enter the various responses in the beginning of their "Writing Home" journals.

Each journal entry for this unit is actually a series of questions designed to incorporate the information the student is reading about with the student's own experiences and ideas about home. It is essential for students to include several visual images for every journal entry, since these will be necessary to complete the culminating project. The teacher should build in time for students to work in groups of three or four for each journal entry based on class readings. This will help to deepen their understanding of the literature, and sharing their ideas and visuals will reinforce the importance of being thorough in their journals.

When the time comes to create the project, teachers should be prepared to provide poster board and art materials. Teachers may want to purchase parchment paper or other decorative paper on which students can print their "Home Bill of Rights." If the school does not have its own laminators, teachers will have to go elsewhere. The cost of laminating varies; most businesses charge by the square foot. Possible sources for funding include the principal, the parent-teacher organization, or even the students themselves. It is important for students to produce a durable, professional-looking final product to justify the amount of preparation that has gone into it.

The following sections will provide background information as well as specific information for each of the works covered in the unit. The list of detailed journal entries will be provided under "Resources."

The Idea of Home

The course as written follows a fairly chronological path through African American literature. As stated above, the major works from this curriculum that will be incorporated in this unit are: poetry by Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, *A Mercy*, *Flyin' West*, *Gem of the Ocean,* selections from *Invisible Man,* and *Song of Solomon*.

It became obvious to me that most of these readings feature the idea of "home," whether it is something lost, something gained, something extrinsic, or something found within. Seniors in high school are on the verge of leaving the place they have come to call home, many of them for the first time. Using the concept of "home" as a unifying theme is an effective way to read, interpret, and contextualize African American literature. It will also provide students with a variety of ways to approach making a home for themselves in the world beyond their neighborhoods.

Understanding the African American Diaspora

"Diaspora" is a beautiful-sounding word, but it is a cruel fate for those caught up in it. It is defined as the

historical mass dispersion, usually involuntary, of people with common roots, the most common examples being the Jewish people and Africans sold in the slave trade. Members of the diaspora may dream their entire lives of returning to their homelands, and they often find it difficult to feel fully assimilated in their present surroundings. While nearly three centuries of slavery did little to habituate displaced Africans to their new land, there is an equal possibility that Africa may not be "home," either. This can create some uneasiness among students, and understandably so. Teens in particular need a sense of belonging, which is why their peer groups are so important. One of the purposes of following the thematic strand of home is to allow students to explore the different ways one can claim a place as home.

Seeking the Source: Africa

The African identity quest continues to this day. Two recent examples are Eddy Harris, who toured Africa in the 1990s, and Saidiya Hartman, who spent a year in Ghana in 1997. Harris's memoir, *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*, follows his travels across the continent. Harris says that "Now that I have been there, Africa lives in my memory like a gigantic vessel bearing all that I am and all that I will ever be, for Africa has opened my eyes and awakened my fears, brought them to life and kindled my compassion" (Harris 1992,14). About midway through his journey, he reflects on Alex Haley's famous return to his ancestral village (documented in 1976 in *Roots*), but, like Hartman, he feels a sense of displacement. "Africa was so long ago the land of my ancestors that it held for me only a symbolic significance. Yet there was enough to remind me that what I carry as a human being has come in part from Africa. I did not feel African, but was beginning to feel not wholly American anymore either. I felt like an orphan, a waif without a home" (138).

Hartman's memoir, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, begins with her sense of being a stranger upon her arrival in Ghana. It is not the homecoming she anticipated, and she is forced to "acknowledge that I didn't belong anyplace" (Hartman 2007, 4). Later, while standing in a holding cell for female slaves, Hartman says "I felt both the pull and the impossibility of regaining the country lost. It has never been more clear than it was then: return is what you hold on to after you have been taken from your country, or when you realize that there is no future in the New World, or that death is the only future" (99). And while she hopes that returning could "resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat," she realizes that, ultimately, she has "no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one's existence. . . .It is to lose your mother, always" (100). Her year is filled with bittersweet revelations, and while she embraces the complexity of her relationship with Africa, she returns to America with a new sense of what it means to be home.

Hartman and Harris go to Africa in search of home, or a new sense of self, and they discover that, problematic as it may be, America is their true home. Harris says he will always have "second thoughts" when he returns home, not in the sense of changing his mind, but as a reflective inner voice that connects him to the community of African peoples. Hartman chooses to claim the legacy of "the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all of its myriad forms" (234). Both authors bring back from Africa with a new way of negotiating physical and historical spaces that gives them the ability to create a sense of place wherever they are.

Many students today are not familiar with Alex Haley's *Roots*, so one option for the teacher is to have students view the last part of the film showing Haley's return to his family's ancestral village. There he meets with the griot who tells the story of his African ancestor Kunta Kinte. Teachers need to be aware that the accuracy of Haley's story has been a source of controversy for years. The students should be told that this is a

dramatization for film and, as such, takes the liberties one expects with historical fiction. The purpose of showing this at all would be to allow students to recognize that questions about their African roots are still leading the descendants of slaves back across the danger water to see if there is something recognizably "home" in Africa for them.

Following the Course: America

For students wanting to get an overview of the American end of the African diaspora, an excellent and accessible resource is Dr. Dee Parmer Woodtor's book *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity* (1999). While she gives practical how-to directions on tracing one's ancestry, she also provides insights about the various paths slaves and then emancipated slaves took in search of freedom, livelihoods, and home.

As citizenship was tied directly to owning land, and land was held exclusively by whites, African Americans knew that they would never advance their situation by remaining in the South. During the Civil War, some slaves fled north and became "contraband," or human "spoils of war," as it were. They were not returned, since it was decided that the fugitive slave laws didn't apply to seceded states; they worked and were paid, but did not have any rights as citizens. Still, many considered it preferable to slavery. As many as 40,000 contraband slaves wound up in the Washington, D.C,. area alone. In other places, such as plantations on St. Helena's Island off the coast of South Carolina, the white slave-owning families fled the Union troops enforcing the blockade, leaving the slaves behind to fend for themselves. Interestingly, this enabled the Gullah culture, one with strong ties to African traditions, to flourish. Other slave owners fled with their slaves to remote places both in and out of state, becoming refugees of a sort. Still other slaves were taken to Brazil, where slavery continued until 1885. After emancipation, labor agents encouraged people to migrate, and, according to Woodtor, there was a great deal of movement during the Reconstruction era pre-dating the "Great Migration" that began shortly after the turn of the 20 th century. And while Booker T. Washington promoted remaining in the South and developing a separate society of "black artisans," Robert S. Abbott, founder of the *Chicago Defender*, encouraged his readers to move rather than limit themselves in that way (Woodtor 1999, 104).

Woodtor's introductory material shows that the routes taken the diaspora were propelled by necessity, by desperation, by accident, and, in perhaps a few fortunate cases, by choice. Students may want to compare the range of the choices they have today to the ones their ancestors had. The resilience of the newly-emancipated slaves, the daunting odds they faced, the sacrifices they made, and their ability to recreate themselves in new places are inspirational, to say the least. From this perspective, choosing a college and moving away from home are far less intimidating than they appear to be.

There are many websites featuring African American first-person narratives that are easily accessible to students. One is sponsored by the Library of Congress: "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936 – 1938." The stories may be browsed by narrator, by state, and by key word. There are accompanying images for many of the narratives. Another site, "Been Here So Long," is sponsored by the Teachers College of Columbia University. It has seventeen selected narratives posted. Another site, "American Slaves Narratives," sponsored by the University of Virginia, has thirteen narratives posted, along with photographs. Most of the narratives are fairly short, so students can get a quick yet powerful overview of the lives and experiences of former slaves.

The Problem of Home

When reading African American literature with the idea of "home" in mind, it becomes clear that it may be

more accurate to say "the problem of home." These problems, catastrophic in impact, include being kidnapped from their homelands, enslaved in the homes of their masters, prevented from owning homes of their own, and forced into urban ghettos, all of which have been rendered in compelling and powerful literature. At the moment of emancipation, amidst feelings of shock, anger and confusion, former slaves had to ask themselves, "Where is home?" This question, in all of its problematic, frustrating, triumphant, philosophical complexity, is a legitimate approach to literature that speaks to all of my students. The search for home is a powerful lens with which students can examine the African American experience as well as their own. Since the course opens and closes with excerpts from President Obama's speeches and memoirs, the African American journey to freedom is framed with what Obama calls the "audacity of hope" and the historical moment in which America celebrates its first African American president.

Kidnapped from Home

Two of the earliest African American poets, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, both kidnapped from Africa, mask their feelings about home in poems that, on the surface, appear to align with their captors' beliefs. Lucy Terry, in "Bars Fight," describes an attack by Indians upon English settlers in a part of Deerfield, Massachusetts, known as Bars. Terry names various people and the fates that befell them, including Samuel Amsden, who was found ". . .dead/Not many rods off from his head" and Eunice Allen, who was ". . . tommyhawked. . .on the head/And left. . .on the ground for dead" (Terry). Terry clearly deplores the brutal deaths of the settlers, but she ends the poem mourning the kidnapping of Samuel Allen to Canada. Structurally, the poem's events go from bad to worse; could Terry, then, be saying that kidnapping is a fate worse than death?

Phillis Wheatley, in her famous poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," never names her first home. The title refers only to a continent, and in the poem itself, it is called a "Pagan land." This is quite telling. "Pagan" with a capitalized "P" effectively negates (or excommunicates) any religious institutions that already existed, and "land" reduces political and cultural boundaries to empty voids. Has Wheatley been hoodwinked? Is she writing propaganda? The rest of her poem answers those questions. She calls upon her fellow "Christians" to remember what they have taught her about salvation, and implies that she and other "Black as Cain" converts may be practicing a faith their captors only nominally observe. The ironies begin to stack up quickly here: religion was used as a major rationalization for colonial expansion; the slaves who were forcibly "converted" could see the hypocrisy behind the promises of salvation; in time, Christianity provided the slaves with inspiration, imagery, and, indirectly, a path to literacy, all of which served to further the cause of freedom. It can be argued that Wheatley wholeheartedly adopted her new culture, and her work is consistent in that regard. However, she was at least seven years old at the time of her capture, and I, for one, think that her earliest voice was never completely silenced.

When studying these two poets, students are sometimes surprised and a bit taken aback at the forms Terry and Wheatley use, as neither poet sounds at all "African" to their ears. It is only when students are encouraged to read between the lines that they can see that the African tradition of "signifyin'," an important element seen throughout traditional folklore, is at play (Gates 1989, *x*). Stated simply, signifyin' is a way of using language in all of its connotative and cultural complexity, with some of the meanings understood only by those who are in the same cultural and speech community. An example of signifyin' would be the way slaves used spirituals, such as "Wade in the Water," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," to send messages to fellow slaves trying to escape. Wading in water could throw bloodhounds off the trail, and at certain places, wagons, or chariots, would take slaves to the next "stop" on the Underground Railroad. To a white audience, the words appear to say one thing, while to those in the black community, the message is definitely more complex. Signifyin' eventually became an important survival skill, enabling slaves to communicate with each

other under the oblivious noses of their owners.

Sold From Home

From its inception, slavery created a race of exiles. Saidiya Hartman says:

> The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, the shamefaced child in the lineage. (Hartman 2007, 4)

Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* is set in 17 th century America, at a time before slavery was institutionalized, and it features a variety of human conditions, including chattel slaves, mail-order brides, free blacks, and indentured whites. In this novel, students come face to face with an all-too-common predicament faced by female slaves in particular. Florens, the young female protagonist, is permanently scarred by the tragic choice her mother makes to send her away from home (and inevitable sexual abuse from the master) to a master who is less corrupt, but who lives far away. For Florens, home is where her mother loves her; for her mother, home is where Florens will be safe. The idea of home becomes a dilemma when it is impossible for love and safety to be found in the same place. Many of my students are from non-traditional homes (a loaded phrase, to be sure), and all of them know of families where children have been divided by the parents, or sent to live with other family members. Reading this novel, which presents many points of view, lets students understand the reasons behind some very difficult choices. It may not make their lives any easier, but it shows that some choices wind up being the lesser of two evils.

Westward to Home

Benjamin "Pap" Singleton led hundreds of former slaves to new territory in Kansas in 1877 and 1878, with the purpose of establishing all-black towns. He called himself the "Father of the Kansas emigration" (Painter 1977, 116), who would lead blacks to freedom. The people he recruited were nicknamed "Exodusters," an appropriate sobriquet for people who followed a man who saw himself as an instrument of God.

One of these all-black towns was Nicodemus, Kansas, the setting for Pearl Cleage's play *Flyin' West*. In this play, home and family are created through the pioneering efforts of the play's four female protagonists. Sophie, an orphaned mulatto, becomes a "sister" to two blood sisters, Fannie and Minnie; Miss Leah, an elderly neighbor no longer able to live on her own, becomes a grandmother to them all. Sophie, a force of nature herself, believes that freedom comes from owning land. She also has a strong communal interest; she wants to make sure Nicodemus remains an all-black town and lobbies her neighbors to resist selling to white land speculators. The complication in the play arises when Minnie comes to town with her mulatto husband, Frank, who, upon the death of his white father, has been disowned by his half-siblings. Frank prefers life in England and sees Minnie's share of the family's land as his ticket back to London. He refers to the town as "Niggerdemus," and sees acreage only in terms of cash. It is easy to vilify Frank, but he is at war with himself; he cannot live in a place where his pride is in jeopardy. The fact that he is a mulatto light enough to "pass" amplifies his dilemma.

This piece of literature provides great opportunities for students to research African American migration to the open spaces of the West (what we consider today the Midwest). Black cowboys? Of course. I was surprised to discover last year that few students knew about the Buffalo Soldiers. Seeing African Americans in the role of pioneers is a new concept, one that presents blacks in solid possession of their own land, shaping their own

destiny. It is an image that resonates with the earliest settlements in the Americas, and lets students see that blacks were not always imprisoned on other people's land.

The Heart of the Home

The kitchen in African American literature represents a gathering place, a place of nourishment and celebration, a place where culinary traditions are practiced and passed on – in sum, it is a theatre for family life. My students are always interested when cooking and food are part of the lesson. Many pieces of literature in this course give us a look into the kitchen: Aunt Esther's kitchen in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*; Mary Rambo's kitchen in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and even Pilate Dead's kitchen in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. These locales feed both body and soul and, in the case of Aunt Esther, a good bit of conjurin' can go on there as well.

Valerie Sweeney Prince take a close look at the kitchen in her book, *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature*. She begins by tracing some of Bigger Thomas's problems in Richard Wright's *Native Son* to moving north to a "kitchenette apartment," where the physical constraints increase the friction among the unhappy people who live there (Prince 2004,15). A later essay on Ellison's *Invisible Man* describes the "blues kitchen" of Mary Rambo, who offers the narrator "good company, rest, and food" (48). It feels familiar to him because of the cultural values she represents (49). When Mary runs short of funds (since the narrator doesn't pay rent for a while), she is reduced to cooking cabbage and singing the blues. The narrator observes, "Then from down the hall I could hear Mary singing, her voice clear and untroubled, though she sang a troubled song. It was the 'Back Water Blues.' I lay listening as the sound flowed to and around me, bringing me a calm sense of my indebtedness" (Ellison 297). Mary's kitchen is as close to a real home that the narrator experiences throughout the novel. The warmth he finds there is genuine, in contrast to the hot, stolen incandescence of 1,369 light bulbs in his secret apartment where, at the opening of the novel, he is "hibernating."

Aunt Esther's kitchen in *Gem of the Ocean*, is a gathering place for everyone. She brings displaced people, like Black Mary and Citizen Barlow, into her home for food and, in Black Mary's case, for good. Citizen Barlow's purpose for coming is to get her to "wash his soul," something others told him she could do. Before she agrees to help him, she asks him if he prefers cornbread or biscuits. Hospitality comes first. Aunt Esther's home, in particular the kitchen, functions as a refuge, a hospital, a place to get news, even a church. Anyone who enters knows it to be a sacred space, as Eli announces repeatedly, "This is a peaceful house. . .It's right there on the door" (Wilson 2006, 77).

From "kitchenette apartments" to homes with kitchen/great room configurations, students all have stories about their kitchen lives, and are quite willing to share them. In a very real way, sharing kitchen stories and favorite recipes and actual dishes with each other transforms the classroom space into a kitchen space where everyone feels at home. Later in this unit, under "classroom procedures," this activity will be described in detail.

The Soul of the Home

If there is one literary work that could claim to be obsessed with the theme of home, it is Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. It incorporates the geography of the diaspora, beginning somewhere in Michigan and traces its way through Pennsylvania and Virginia. The further south the protagonist Milkman goes, the closer he gets to his ancestral roots. His search for lost gold becomes a search for his and his family's identity. Morrison adds an additional layer to this discussion of home by creating a series of houses that embody the characters who

live there. Ironically, only Pilate appears to be at home in her house. Ruth Foster Dead and her two daughters are imprisoned in their grand house. Macon Dead is only concerned with owning houses; he cares less about the space around him than he does about the ring of keys jangling in his pocket. Pilate Dead, Macon's sister, lives in Southside, clearly the wrong side of the tracks. Yet, when Macon passes by her house on his way home one day, he is hypnotized by the warm glow coming from her kitchen window and by the song he hears Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter, singing. Circe's house is the site of her massive retaliation against the system that enslaved her for most of her life. All of the home's former owners, a wealthy slave-owning family, have died, and she and her pack of ghostly-eyed Weimaraners are destroying the grand house room by room. Though never described fully, Milkman's grandfather's farm, Lincoln's Heaven, exists almost as a dream. Both Pilate and Macon remember it as an idyllic place that disappeared with the violent death of their father at the hands of his covetous white neighbors.

Return to Home

There has been a quiet counter-migration of African Americans from the north back to their rural homesteads in the south. Carol Stack, in *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*, presents the stories of several extended families who left and then returned to their ancestral homes in the Carolinas. She says that over half a million African Americans have returned to the south as of 1990, which is equal to the number that left in the 1960s (Stack 1996, *xiv*). Family ties, stretched out across states for generations, have remained strong. The reasons for returning are many and varied; a "blend of motives" that include helping family, escaping the city, and redeeming a community. Once back, many returnees view old problems as opportunities, and their lives take on a sense of mission.

Stack uses a term, "kinwork," to describe the "interdependencies. . . shuffled back and forth across generations" (Stack 1996, 105). These interdependencies range from child rearing to monetary stipends and loans to caring for invalid relatives. Kinwork draws people home and often keeps them there. It is a complex set of relationships that begins within a family but soon connects with the wider community. Those who have lived elsewhere bring with them "social capital," that is, skills that will help them to bring about positive change in their neighborhoods. Stack says:

> What people are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference – a place in which to *create* a home. (Stack 1996, 199).

From this perspective, home consists of family-*owned* land, relatives living close by, a sense of responsibility to both family and community, and the willingness to do whatever it takes to make it all work. Eula Grant, a returnee interviewed in Stack's book, says it best:

> You can definitely go home again. . .You can go back. But you don'tstart from where you left. To fit in, you have to create another place in that place you left behind. (Stack 1996, 199).

Classroom Activities

Following this section, under "Resources," are a series of detailed journal entries that can serve to shape the unit. The following are classroom activities based on three of the journal entries.

Journal Entry #2: Geography

Students will need access to laptops or to a computer lab. MapQuest is easily navigated, and Google Earth is a free application that is also easy to use. Using a county or city real estate web site could potentially cause problems if students started to compare the prices of each other's homes. MapQuest will provide a good street grid to use, and Google Earth will give an actual aerial or street view of the house/apartment. Students may also choose to take pictures of their houses with cameras or with their cell phones. This can also work, provided that students have a way to print the images.

The student will print up a street grid that shows his/her neighborhood, about a three-to-four block area surrounding his/her house. Then, the student will up a picture of his house in either black and white or in color, depending on the school's printing capabilities. Next, the student will list distinguishing characteristics of the outside of his home, including the house/apartment number, mailbox, paint colors, fences, trees, plants, steps, sidewalk, etc. The student will write these details on lined paper, or the teacher may provide larger paper on which students can attach their pictures and write the details with arrows pointing to the picture. Using the street grid, the student will list immediate landmarks, which would include the names of neighbors, the location of bus stops, nearby stores and businesses, open lots, playgrounds, schools, churches, etc. As with the house picture, the details can be listed on lined paper or put on a poster-sized paper with arrows pointing to the locations on the street map. Finally, the student will list sensory elements of his home in his journals.

The student will share this information with a partner, then with a small group of three to five students. Depending on the amount of time available, the teacher may allow one person from each group to present his house information to the class, or each student to share three to five specific details about his home to the class.

The teacher can lead a short whole-class discussion using the following questions: 1) What elements of home did the people in your group have in common? 2) Which aspect of where you live is the most important to you? Location? Size? Style? 3)How much of your self-image is affected by or shaped by the place in which you live? Evaluation will be based on completion of the three journal entry sections and participation in the class discussion.

Journal Entry #7: Flyin' West and Kinwork

Before reading this play, it is recommended that students get a little bit of background knowledge about African Americans in the American West. The teacher will assign pairs of students (or small groups) the following topics to research either in the school library or at home. There is plenty of information available online for these topics: Exodusters, Buffalo Soldiers, dugout homes, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, the town of Nicodemus, black cowboys, John Brown, "Bleeding Kansas," the Homestead Act of 1862, and "passing" (for white). Each pair or group of students should have enough information for a two-minute presentation. Students will take notes on each presentation in their journals.

Flyin' West is a very engaging play, and students will enjoy reading it aloud in class, taking parts. The theme of family is very important in this play, and several parts of the journal entry assigned to this book have to do with the meaning of family. Many students today have single parents, divorced parents, step-parents, step-siblings, half-siblings, etc. Seeing the strong self-created family in this play speaks to many students who have struggled with shifting family ties.

About midway through the play, the teacher may want to lead a short class discussion about the character of Sophie, an orphaned mulatto who starts as a laundress, then becomes a friend, and then a sister to the black middle-class sisters Fannie and Minnie. The value of what Carol Stack calls "kinwork" (see previous notes) definitely comes into play here. Some questions may include: 1) How does the shared ownership of land reflect the relationship between Fannie, Minnie and Sophie? 2) In what ways does Sophie act as head of the family? 3) What is the dynamic between Sophie and Miss Leah? How does this relationship portray kinwork? 4) Do you have friends who have become like family? What are the differences (if any) between blood relatives and friends who are like family?

After reading the play, students should consider how it depicts the idea of home. A recommended activity is to have students debate the following question: "Is Sophie's desire for an all-black town reasonable?" To prepare, students can list the advantages and disadvantages to having a town for blacks only. They should also consider the historical period, the problem of land speculators, the town's relationship to the State of Kansas, and the basic logistics such a choice requires. The debate may be in small groups or as a whole class. One method is to form groups of five, with two students arguing for and two against all-black towns. The fifth student will take notes on the major points and conclusions, and keep the discussion on topic. If the debate is whole-class, the teacher can assign team captains, a timekeeper, and students to take notes on the discussion. After the discussion is over, the note-takers can present their findings to the class and summarize them on charts. For homework, students will write a response to the following prompt: "If you could create an ideal town, where would it be? Who would live there? List five rights and/or responsibilities each citizen would have in this town." Discussing some of their responses could be used as a warm-up activity for the next class. Evaluation will be based on presentation of original research, participation in the whole class discussion, participation in the debate, and completion of homework reflection.

Journal Entry #9 Recipes from Home

The character Mary Rambo appears in only four chapters (Chapters 12 to 15) of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, but she makes a lasting impression on the reader. Perhaps it's because of her swashbuckling last name, although she couldn't be more unlike Stallone's gritty character. She stands out in the novel as the one, maybe the only, genuinely nice person the narrator encounters. When the narrator collapses outside of the subway, she helps him up, takes him home, feeds him, and lets him get some much-needed sleep. Mary does this with no ulterior motives; she genuinely cares about other people and, when an opportunity arises, she does something about it. Mary becomes a mother figure to the narrator; she also appears to be the only person he ever trusts. She tells him he always has a place in her home and, after he is kicked out of the men's boarding house, he stays there for a while. Mary gives the narrator shelter, food, rest, and wise advice, never asking for anything in return. Only when he smells cabbage cooking for the umpteenth time does the narrator realize that Mary is running low on funds and is reduced to cooking the cheapest foods.

The first part of the journal entry asks students to respond to a quote from Chapter 14 that describes Mary Rambo singing "Back Water Blues" while cooking cabbage. One interesting feature of this quotation is the way it balances opposing details: Mary's untroubled voice is singing a troubled song; the narrator has a calm sense

of his indebtedness. Students can share their responses with a partner or in a small group.

The next two parts of the journal entry are based on food memories and family recipes. The student is to write of a pleasant experience he/she had featuring a favorite dish made at home. This should be between 200 and 250 words. Then, the student will get the recipe for this dish and write it in proper recipe format. This gives students the chance to write a reflective piece as well as an informational piece. The teacher can provide students with models of recipes and a table of abbreviations to use. The memory piece and the recipe should be submitted in hard copy and in electronic format so the teacher can assemble a class cookbook. This product may be simple or elaborate, depending on time, funding, and other variables. My cookbooks have construction paper covers with an original student drawing or a color deskjet-printed picture of the class. Each student is represented by a story and a recipe. My school has a binding machine and the plastic spines are very inexpensive. The cookbook can be organized by food category or arranged alphabetically by student. Distributing the cookbooks and sharing the stories may be the culminating project of this lesson. Evaluation will consist of journal completion, editing of reflective piece, formatting of recipe, and presenting the story and recipe to the class.

To take this activity one step further, the teacher can arrange a class banquet. Each student will bring in his/her favorite dish, enough for everyone to have a sample-sized serving. There are a good number of logistical concerns with this sort of project, most of which can be addressed if the teacher has a good relationship with the school cafeteria staff. While the students are eating, each will take a turn and read the story he wrote about his favorite food. If a teacher is truly ambitious, this could turn into a community engagement project. The banquet could be held in the evening in the school auditorium or other large area, and parents would be invited. In that case, each family would need to provide enough food for approximately 40 to 50 sample-sized servings. As with the class banquet, each student would read his/her story to the group. Extra copies of the recipe book could be provided or even sold to help offset the costs of the banquet.

Resources

Journal Entries for "Writing Home"

For *each* entry, you must include some (at least two) visuals: they may be computer-generated, photographs, copies of photographs, pictures from magazines and newspapers, or original drawings.

1. Write the word "HOME" in the center of the first page. Then, in the space of one minute, write the first words and ideas that come to your mind when you think about home. Prepare to share this with a partner, and then with the class.

2. Geography – Using GoogleEarth or MapQuest or a real estate data bank, locate and print up your house/neighborhood. It may be a street map, an actual photo, whatever. You may take pictures of your house and street. This should focus on exteriors.

Make a list of the things on the outside of the house that identify it as your home. For example, house number, name on the mailbox, outdoor furniture, fences, plants, flowers, etc.

Make a list of the immediate landmarks around your house. For example, your neighbor's house, the mailbox, fire hydrant, telephone poles, bus stops, hedges, open lots, playground, etc.

Make a list of the sensory elements of your home: sound of traffic, smell of flowers, touch of your doorknob, sight of your curtains, taste of your favorite snack.

VISUALS

3. Memories – think of the memories that, for you, exemplify what home is like.

First, write about a very early memory you have of your home. It may be of your room, your yard, your kitchen, a fireplace. Include as many sensory details as you can about the room and about the way you felt in that space.

Second, write about a family gathering in your home. What was the occasion? Who was there? What about this occasion gave it the feeling of home?

Third, write about something you did that is directly connected with your home. For example, did you decorate your room? Did you help to buy furniture, build a deck, or plant a garden? In what way have you imprinted yourself upon your home?

VISUALS

4. Far-off relatives. Do you have relatives living in other states? Other countries? How many places can you list where you have family connections? How many of them have you visited? Print up a map on which you can pinpoint the various branches of your family. What are the reasons you and/or your relatives moved?

VISUALS

5. Kidnapped! Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley. Write what you think each of these poets has to say about her homeland and where she is now. This may require some "reading between the lines." What feelings and observations are behind the "veil" in these poems? What is ironic about the relationship between the poets, Christianity, and the Christians who kidnapped them?

VISUALS

6. Think of the many situations in which the characters in *A Mercy* find themselves. Some are chattel slaves. Some are indentured servants. One is a mail-order bride, of sorts. There are free blacks. For each of the following characters, describe what he or she wants in a home. Florens, Jacob Vaark, Lina, Rebekka Vaark, Senhor D'Ortega, and the blacksmith. Describe what he or she gets for a home. How does this affect that character? Which of these characters has an understanding of home closest to your own? Explain.

VISUALS

7. In *Flyin' West*, emancipated blacks are given the chance to buy land and create a town of their own. Describe the composite family that the characters create. What makes them a family? What values do they share? How does the term "kinwork" apply to their family and its relationship to the land itself and to the larger community? Contrast the way Sophie views the land to the way Frank views it. Sophie and Frank also view freedom differently. Explain.

VISUALS

8. In *Gem of the Ocean*, nearly all the important events occur in Aunt Esther's kitchen. In many ways, the kitchen is regarded as the "heart of the home," and it functions, literally, as the theatre for family life. How does the "kitchen as theatre" work in this play? What aspects of black and/or family tradition are found in Aunt Esther's kitchen? What does the kitchen mean to Black Mary? What happens to Citizen while he's there? What happens to Solly Two Kings?

VISUALS

9. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator finds himself most comfortable in Mary Rambo's home, particularly in the kitchen. Write about the quotation below:

"*Then from down the hall I could hear Mary singing, her voice clear and untroubled, though she sang a troubled song. It was the 'Back Water Blues.' I lay listening as the sound flowed to and around me, bringing me a calm sense of my indebtedness*" (Ellison 1995, 297). Why is Mary singing the blues? Explain how the blues creates a troubled/untroubled mood.

What is one of your favorite dishes prepared in your kitchen at home? Find the recipe. Describe a memory you have about it. Take a picture of it.

VISUALS

10. In *Song of Solomon*, houses are used as a vivid method of characterization. For each of the main characters, write a 1-page description of how his or her home portrays character. Use specific examples from the text. These characters will include Macon Dead, Milkman Dead, Ruth Foster Dead, Pilate Dead, and Circe. You may also choose to include the perspectives of Magdalena, First Corinthians, Sweet, and Michael Mary Graham.

VISUALS

11. Describe your ideal home. What does it look like? Where is it located? Who lives there? What are the essential things you need for it to feel like home? Write your home "Bill of Rights." Include serious things ("You have the right to a key to the door.") and less serious things ("You have the right to decorate as you please.")

VISUALS

12. First Step Away From Home. What do you anticipate you will miss the most when you move into a college dorm? What do you think you will enjoy the most when you are living away at college?

VISUALS

13. If you were to make a care package for yourself that contained items that would bring a "little bit of home" to you at college, what would be in it?

VISUALS

14. Culminating Project: Drawing from your writing and the images you have collected, create a poster that, for you, will exemplify what you think home is about. You may incorporate words of your own, poetry, excerpts from the literature we've read, street names, family names, a picture of your room. This piece should measure at least 18 X 24 inches. Your name should be readily visible. Once you have put this together, we will get it laminated so you can take it to school with you. This project will include an artist's statement, describing your piece in terms of image selection, text selection, arrangement, and overall effect. Your "Home Bill of Rights" will be edited, set in a formal type font such as Book Antigua or Copperplate Gothic, and printed on a parchment-style paper.

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Pennsylvania State Standards for Reading Writing, Speaking and Listening

1.1. Reading Independently

1.1.12.A: Apply appropriate strategies to construct meaning through interpretation and to analyze and evaluate author's use of techniques and elements of fiction and non-fiction for rhetorical and aesthetic purposes.

1.2: Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Text

1.2.12.B: Distinguish among facts and opinions, evidence, and inference across a

variety of texts by using complete and accurate information, coherent arguments and

points of view.

1.2.12.D: Evaluate textual evidence to make subtle inferences and draw complex conclusions based on and related to an author's implicit and explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

1.3: Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature - Fiction and Non-Fiction

1.3.12.A: Interpret significant works from various forms of literature to make deeper and subtler interpretations of the meaning of text. Analyze the way in which a work of literature is related to the themes and issues of its historical period.

1.3.12.C: Analyze the effectiveness of literary elements used by authors in various genres.

1.4: Types of Writing

1.4.12.B: Write complex informational pieces (e.g. research papers, literary analytical essays, evaluations)

1.5: Quality of Writing

1.5.12.A: Write with a clear focus, identifying topic, task, and audience.

1.6: Speaking and Listening

1.6.12.A: Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations.

1.7: Characteristics and Functions of the English Language

1.7.12.A: Analyze the role and place of standard American English in speech, writing, and literature. Evaluate as a reader how an author's choice of words advances the theme or purpose of a work. Choose words appropriately, when writing, to advance the theme or purpose of a work.

1.8: Research

1.8.12.B: Conduct inquiry and research on self-selected or assigned topics, issues, or

problems using a wide variety of appropriate media sources and strategies.

1.8.12.C: Analyze, synthesize, and integrate data, creating a reasoned product that

supports and appropriately illustrates inference and conclusions drawn from research.

1.9: Information, Communication, and Technology Literacy

1.9.12.A: Use media and technology resources for research, information, analysis,

problem solving, and decision making in content learning. Identify complexities and

inconsistencies in the information and the different perspectives found in each

medium.