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Seeking a Home: The Wiz and the Black Arts Movement

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Overview

"Here I am alone

Though it feels the same

I don't know where I'm going

I'm here on my own...

I wish I was home."

Dorothy sings these lines soon after arriving in Oz, having been swept away from Harlem by a blizzard tornado. Earlier, Dorothy expressed her dissatisfaction with her "home" - not so much that it was bad, just that she didn't really see her place in it. In this song, she makes it clear that she wishes to be home. As Dorothy makes her way down the Yellow Brick Road, she meets her three expected companions -- just as Dorothy in the 1939 film from which *The Wiz* is adapted. Each is looking, ostensibly, for the same thing as the original -- brains, a heart, courage. But one could also argue that all the characters -- not just Dorothy -- are looking for a home.

When Dorothy meets each of them, she frees them from an inhospitable place that is holding them down. The Scarecrow is stranded on a pole, tormented by the oppressive Crows, unable to free himself. The Tin Man is literally stuck under his third wife in an abandoned, derelict Coney Island. The Cowardly Lion is locked in a statue in front of the New York Public Library. *The Wiz* is full of scenes of liberation, which inevitably leaves the characters searching for a new place of safety, acceptance, and freedom -- a new home.

The film version of *The Wiz* debuted in 1978, four years after the Broadway musical. Not many would consider it part of the Black Arts Movement, roughly 1965-1975, though it would be hard to ignore the influences the Black Arts Movement had on black literature, film and art that followed.

One connection it shares, however, is that search for home. In the nationalist, separatist beliefs that girded

the Black Arts Movement one might read a search for “home” -- a place liberated from white oppression, where black people could have something of their own that was not defined by the white mainstream culture.

These homes -- that of Dorothy and her companions and the artists of the Black Arts Movement -- might seem like “dream worlds,” to not exist -- but through their journeys, their art and literature, these artists aimed to construct that dream world in concrete terms. Part of their process is to reframe the argument about what it means to be proud, successful, artistic, accepted, free.

In this unit, students will use poetry from the Black Arts Movement and the film *The Wiz*, along with nonfiction essays by black writers from the late 20th century and a Radiolab podcast called “Debatable,” to examine the ways that Black Arts Movement writers used their politics and art to search for a home and the influence of that movement on later black work.

Rationale

Why *The Wiz*? Why now? Though the Broadway musical was a success, the film version was a flop. It was expensive and was panned by critics. Though it has become a cult classic, it has mostly slipped from the eye of mainstream culture. Or has it?

NBC resurrected *The Wiz* for a live musical performance in 2015 and planned to then return the show to Broadway. It’s hard to say why *The Wiz* was chosen (previously NBC did *Peter Pan* and *The Sound of Music*) -- I couldn’t find anything definitive -- but it certainly ignited a firestorm. During the broadcast, people took to Twitter to protest the all-black cast, calling it racist (seemingly unaware that *The Wiz* had always had an all-black cast). Members of Black Twitter -- black Twitter users who tweet about issues related to and important to black Americans -- responded. *The Wiz* created a controversy in 2015.

One tweeter, a woman who goes by the moniker Feminista Jones, “live tweeted” the TV production in December in response to the “*The Wiz* is racist” tweets. Her messages didn’t so much attack those people, but instead framed *The Wiz* as “subversive” and part of the Black Arts Movement. She argued that its themes of liberation and blacks finding strength and belief in themselves made it extremely important for black people then and now, and encouraged people to watch it with the Black Arts Movement in mind.¹

My initial interest in *The Wiz* started with the fact that I had never seen it. My first exposure was during a professional development session in January, during which we watched the scene where Dorothy first meets the Scarecrow and analyzed it through a racial equity lens -- what did the Scarecrow’s experience say about the way black males experienced the education system? I loved it, and wondered why I hadn’t sought it out before. I wanted to share it with my students as a way to consider how telling a beloved American story through the eyes of a different race might have shifted its message. When I encountered the tweets from Feminista Jones, it altered my interpretation of *The Wiz* entirely. The way that some black Americans valued *The Wiz* was on an entirely different level than I had originally thought -- maybe this wasn’t just a “film with black actors” -- it told a story that represented a part of the black experience in white mainstream America.

This unit is written for my 9th grade CAS (Center for Advanced Studies) class. The CAS program is intended for students who have a gifted IQ (130) or above on a psychological test or students who demonstrate talent in

English through a portfolio application. Despite the fact that my school is fairly diverse -- roughly half of the population is black, and a large portion of students are Jewish -- students of color have historically been underrepresented in the CAS program. Additionally, the curriculum in CAS still relies heavily on the canon and represents mostly white, male authors.

When we talk about race in the English classroom, particularly in a room full of mostly white students, the discussion is often superficial, politically correct and removed from students' specific experiences. I certainly believe that students talk about race in the best way they know how -- they just have not been taught, or asked, to think about it in a more local and real way. The main impetus for this unit is to give students a chance to have deeper, more authentic conversations about race. I'd like them to think about not just the different experiences of minorities in our society, but the way that art and literature made by black people functions in a mainstream society that is decidedly white.

Though this unit is intended for advanced learners, it could easily be adapted for any level classroom in grades 9-12. The activities are based on English Language Arts standards, but the unit could be adapted for use in a social studies classroom to complement historical study of the Black Arts Movement.

Content Objectives

The idea that *The Wiz* is part of the Black Arts Movement is probably appalling to some, as it was written, directed and produced by white men for Broadway, a white mainstream institution, and then Hollywood. However, it seems that, given the political and social climate around civil rights and race relations in the decades following World War II, it would be shortsighted not to consider how that historical context affects the interpretation and role of the film. Simply put, a film purposely cast entirely with black actors cannot help but be entangled in the question of racial identity and black people's role in mainstream art.

Though there is not space here to elucidate the complexities of race relations in the 1960s, the question of importance to this unit is between integration -- carrying with it at least some element of the assimilation of black people into mainstream society -- and segregation. The question of what is "best" for the black descendants of slaves, those who were subject to violence, lawful segregation and Jim Crow laws, in relation to larger American culture divided activists. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to "investigate the explosion of 'racial disorders' in American cities."² The Kerner Report, the document that came out of the commission's investigation, noted that "'This is our basic conclusion: Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal.'"³ The report suggested bolstering social programs, eliminating the de facto segregation of schools and overhauling discriminatory housing policies to create a "unified America" and wished for a "'a single society and a single American identity.'"⁴ While certainly a positive outlook -- there is no doubt that then, as well as today, our goal should be to eliminate inequities and eliminate systemic white privilege -- the end goal of "one identity" inherently suggests an erasure of some of the culture of the minority.

Frustration with the progress of this call for equality and unity in the Civil Rights Movement caused some black political and social leaders to reject the peaceful, integrationist ideas espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr. and echoed by the Kerner Report.⁵ Malcolm X may have been the most visible and outspoken, but others, such as Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (and later the Black Panther Party),

resisted preaching of King and began to organize around the willful segregation of a black nation state. Malcolm X wanted Black Americans to develop their own society and ethical values -- to be economically, politically, socially and culturally independent from white society -- and to develop a black pride that rejected the way that white society had made black people hate themselves.⁶ Malcolm X called for a Black Consciousness -- in the essay, "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," Amiri Baraka wrote following Malcolm X's death, "We do not want a Nation, we are a Nation. We must strengthen and formalize, and play the world's game with what we have, from where we are, as a truly separate people."⁷ This separation called for an actual, physical home for black people -- and that home was not back in Africa, but in the land where black people already lived. "The land is literally ours. We must begin to act like it."⁸ Baraka notes that a Black National Consciousness should exist in the places that "black captives" had started to see as home -- a shift from the "Back to Africa" ideology that had previously defined the Black Power movement.⁹

The Black Arts Movement began in 1965, following the assassination of Malcolm X (which some call the inciting incident for the movement), and stretched until about 1975. As a corollary to the Black Power movement, the Black Arts Movement facilitated the creation of a black voice, the creation of a home for black culture. The essence of the Black Arts Movement was a redefinition of what it meant to be a black writer and artist; where the Black Power movement was political, the Black Arts Movement was artistic. The movement served as a way for black artists to define their art separately from the white mainstream. In his poem, "Black Art," Amiri Baraka wrote:

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD¹⁰

Black Arts Movement artists considered their work to be art created by black people for a black audience -- that speaks "directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America."¹¹ The Black Arts Movement encompassed a wide group of black writers in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). With Larry Neal, a dramatist, poet and critic of Black Arts Movement writing, Baraka and a collection of other black artists opened the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem. The movement involved a host of black poets, visual artists, playwrights and novelists, including Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ed Bullins, Gil Scott Heron and Maya Angelou, among others.¹²

Larry Neal wrote that the Black Arts Movement "rejects any concept that alienates the artist from his community."¹³ Not only was the connection essential, Neal felt that the survival of culture was necessary for the survival of a people. Consequently, black art and literature had to reject white mainstream culture in order to facilitate the survival of black people. This idea seems to oppose the idea of assimilation or using the tools of the white mainstream culture to further black art and literature. Seeking to please a larger -- both black and

white audience -- was not in the interest of Baraka, Neal and other Black Arts Movement writers and artists.

Neal asserted that the black community was in need of a new aesthetic - one that was exclusively black and rejected a white, Euro-centric aesthetic. He argued that one of the main pillars of Black Power was the need for black people to define the world in their own terms -- and that tenet applied to art, literature and music as well.¹⁴ It was essential for the Black Artist to express his or her own truth as opposed to the truth of the oppressor, and that was impossible to do using the structures and symbols of the white aesthetic.¹⁵

Neal dismissed almost all black writers who had had success in the 20th century because they were essentially participating in the white man's forms. Baraka called this writing dishonest -- that striving for middle class respectability made these black writers mediocre. Indeed, he said that all past black literature was a "false consciousness" because it failed to express rage at white culture. The Black Arts Movement separated itself from the large artistic achievements of blacks during the 20th century, especially those from the Harlem Renaissance, because their work engaged too much with the pleasing of a white mainstream.¹⁶

The purposes and goals of the Black Arts Movement are certainly hard to pin down to a cohesive, singular definition. Ideology varied among black artists and writers of the time and often depended on region (New York and East Coast artists distinguished themselves in many ways from the South and West Coast members of the movement). Those intricacies, though not insignificant, are too diverse and complex to address completely in the scope of this unit. The key takeaway, according to scholar James Edward Smethurst, was the idea of complicating the question of whether the Black Arts Movement was more concerned with protest or "obsessed with aesthetics," - the answer residing in the weaving of those two purposes.¹⁷

The cultural and artistic movements that informed the Black Arts Movement are just as complicated as its specific goals and reach back to the earliest slave narratives in the 19th century. Tensions between what is considered "art"- whether writing would embrace the everyday, "authentic" tone and language of folk writing or strive for a more "high brow" structure and form - dominated the literary world after World War II. The push for an "art of the people" came from a wide array of black writers in the 1930s and 1940s who associated with the Communist Party and the "Popular Front."¹⁸ These Left artists' work concerned itself with questions of race and ethnicity, place, common language and pushed artistic forms that were considered traditional.¹⁹ Popular Front writers didn't ignore the literary or highbrow, but sought to combine it with popular culture. In the 1960s, literary movements, specifically New Criticism, derided this appeal to mass culture and detached "from social questions and social context."²⁰

Part of the aesthetic developed during the Black Arts Movement was in direct opposition to the New Criticism rejection of popular culture. In fact, Amiri Baraka asserted that black art must engage in conversation with the "continuum" of black popular culture.²¹ His view, admittedly complicated, placed black art in "conversation" with all black art that comes before; he, however, still criticized artists in that continuum whose work borrowed too much from a white mainstream aesthetic.²² Smethurst summarizes, "one could say that Baraka's vision is both synchronic and diachronic in that black culture is something that develops over time and yet is strangely present in its entirety in a single performance."²³

The prevailing features of Black Arts Movement work are amazingly easy to oversimplify, but they are inarguably rooted in black musical tradition. Artists drew on the "rhythms, emotions and gestures of performative style," and touched on gospel, rhythm and blues, blues, doo-wop, jazz and bop. The level to which these influences were directed varied among artists and even between performances over time

(Smethurst notes two radically different versions of “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS,” one of Baraka’s most famous poems, that occurred only a year apart), but seemed to be a vein that ran among most of the work from the movement. Another notable feature is the use of the black vernacular register and the eschewing of formal structures, though again, this varied among artists and many mixed popular and traditional forms.²⁴

To draw this back to our central question – how is the *The Wiz* influenced by the Black Arts Movement, if at all -- I think it is important to reinforce what the Black Arts Movement and the larger questions of the 20th century present. The analysis of black literature and art will have to consider the differences in black culture rather than a simple dichotomy (all black culture in contrast to white mainstream culture). Though this isn’t a groundbreaking revelation, it is easy for a member of any group that spans such a large swath of people to argue that if you’re not with us, you’re against us -- evident in the beliefs of Baraka and Neal. Ajuan Maria Mance writes that scholarly work with regards to “the problem of the color line” (DuBois) will need to shift to the “exploration and celebration of varied and distinct experiences and identities that coexist within Blackness.”²⁵

Complicating the many experiences of blackness allows us to situate *The Wiz* in relation to a cultural movement, yet distinguish its place as unique. *The Wiz* occupies a curious place in our larger American culture, particularly looking with the benefit of four decades since its release. It was criticized harshly and made little money at the box office, though it was nominated for four Oscars. Its soundtrack has been criticized and lauded, its stars praised and panned. It has been said to have “ended black cinema until the arrival of Spike Lee,”²⁶ but has also become a cult classic – capped by its recent revival for live television.

The reasons for its failure as well as its success are varied. Some critics point to the casting as a bright point and a downfall. While the film was star-studded - including Diana Ross, Michael Jackson and Richard Pryor among other black stars -- many criticized the choice of Ross for Dorothy. At the time of filming, Ross was in her mid-thirties playing a role intended to be much younger (in the book, Dorothy is prepubescent and in the 1939 film, though played by a teenage Judy Garland, was meant to be a bit younger than her 16). Contrarily, the performance of Michael Jackson as the Scarecrow is celebrated -- his shy, sweet and vulnerable portrayal, mixed with his meticulously practiced dance and movement, stole the show.²⁷

The film was incredibly expensive for the time, budgeted at \$24 million and allegedly running over, but did not do as well at the box office as hoped. Some claim that it scared Hollywood away from all-black casts and put an end to the rise of blaxploitation films that had become popular in the 70s.²⁸ One might argue that there have been very few box-office hits with entirely black casts, with films such as *The Color Purple* and Spike Lee’s films in the 80s and 90s and neo-blaxploitation films such as *House Party* and *Boyz in the Hood* as exceptions.²⁹ Recently, Tyler Perry’s films have met with fair box office success and generally have heavily or all black casts. Taken together, “black films” -- whether they are intended for a black audience or a larger audience – have had a difficult time gaining footing in Hollywood.

I personally think *The Wiz* is glorious. It is a spectacle in the best sense of the word -- it takes the 1939 film and imagines it larger than life, superimposing the fantasy world of Oz onto a beautiful urban landscape. The tale begins with Dorothy in the Harlem apartment of Aunt Em and her family on Thanksgiving Day. It moves from there to an angular, concrete urban playground populated by graffiti come to life, then to an abandoned Coney Island, then the New York Public Library. The characters dance - not just skip - through Manhattan, over iconic bridges under famous skylines. In the same way that 1939’s Oz was beautiful for its lush landscapes and bright colors, 1978’s Oz is a gritty but sparkling fantasy portrayal of 1970s New York.

To analyze the relation of *The Wiz* in the Black Arts Movement, I will look at production and creation of the film and its role as a musical, some of the major themes that arise and how they reflect aspects of black culture and the use of music. The goal of this analysis is not necessarily to definitively answer the question of whether *The Wiz* is to be considered part of the Black Arts Movement (my inclination is that it is not, but I think that might be a matter of interpretation and perspective), but instead give an example of the way that cultural, political and social context influence the telling of a story and the subsequent interpretation of that story by critics as well as audiences.

The most notable feature of *The Wiz* that might exclude it from direct placement in the Black Arts Movement is its almost entirely white creation team. If we strictly adhere to Baraka and Neal's credo about the Black Arts Movement that it was a separatist endeavor and art that was by black people for a black audience, the fact that the director (Sidney Lumet) and producer (Rob Cohen), along with the writer of the original book for the Broadway production (William F. Brown) and the man who adapted the Broadway book for the screen (Joel Schumacher), were all white seems to be an immediate disqualification.

Lumet certainly aimed to tell a black story, albeit one that purposely weighed certain themes over others. In a 1978 interview, he comments extensively on wanting to remove the negatively associated "problems" of the black experience so that Dorothy's journey of self-knowledge could shine as the prevailing theme. He says, "there's a black element in the U.S. that lives that way -- no severe problems on an external level, in terms of making a living, unemployment, no dope -- none of the usual things associated with the ghetto life."³⁰ Dorothy's home is middle class and the opening sequence shows several generations and branches of her family tree meeting to celebrate Thanksgiving. Though we get a short glimpse, her neighborhood appears to be thriving, filled with other black families. While this certainly allows us to focus on Dorothy's tale and avoid blaming her problem on her surroundings (rather than strictly an inner journey), it also sugarcoats the black experience as a whole.

By consciously avoiding those aspects, Lumet places this work outside of the spirit of the Black Arts Movement, which sought to document and celebrate all parts of the black experience, even those deemed "unsavory" by onlookers and black people alike - there was a commitment to the popular, making the movement egalitarian in nature.³¹ Lumet later comments, "I didn't want to fall into any image that people may have about black life, black crime, any of the pre-judged definitions of black behavior. Since it was a black musical, everybody was going to be nice..."³² The purposeful polishing of black life suggests that Lumet's intended audience was likely white. His language suggests an outsider's judgment of black people, which one could take to assume means that he doesn't envision those black people seeing the movie so much as middle-class blacks and whites who do not associate themselves with that sort of life.

Critics have also used the differences between the musical version and the film as a negative portrayal of black culture. "[The film] even undermines the black stage version's attempt to inculcate black consciousness into a white fable."³³ Al Auster called the stage version a "cheerful piece of miscegenation" that infused elements of black history and social commentary that were "bleached out" in the film version, leaving it "cultureless." He goes on to argue that this was a strategy to make the film as least black as possible because of "the conventional industry wisdom that black audiences will go see a white film, but that white audiences won't go to see a black film" -- ostensibly to attract a more diverse audience.³⁴ Ultimately he credits the hiring of Lumet to this aim toward a white audience.

This calls into question whether the intent was really to purposefully appeal to blacks as a specific group at all, or at best to appeal to "all audiences." While the fact that the movie was a MoTown production certainly does

not allow for an interpretation that *excludes* a black audience, even the idea that a pragmatic approach would be the biggest moneymaker might negate this piece's presence as a truly black piece of art.

That being said, representing middle class blacks undoubtedly speaks to part of the black audience and their experience, acknowledging the "plurality" of Blackness that Mance argued would be the focus of scholarship about the Black Arts Movement.³⁵ So, rather than seen as a "sugarcoat," this film might represent part of a varied black experience. Though the white construction of black experience certainly entangles itself strongly with the meaning of the story, we might step back from that and examine the themes of the film, analyzing them against some of the prevailing ideas of the 1970s in general and the Black Arts Movement in particular.

In Baum's original text, we encounter Dorothy in the bleak Kansas farm she calls home. Though it is an uninviting place, Dorothy doesn't articulate a desire to leave as she does in the Fleming 1939 version. There, her frustrations with alienation from the hard, serious work of the farm, the (ignoring) of her concerns by Aunt Em and Uncle Henry and the threat of Miss Gulch against Toto all contribute to an explicitly stated wish to leave.³⁶ In *The Wiz*, Dorothy indicates a dissatisfaction with something about home, but it isn't the place itself rather than her place in it. Kansas Dorothy sets out on a journey to discover that there is no place like home, you always had the ability to get what you want and (depressingly) everything you really need is in your own backyard. Harlem Dorothy also learns that the things you sought were inside you all along; yet she makes this change through a journey of self-discovery wrapped with a bow of "know thyself" rather than the 1939 film's cloying "there's no place like home" bent. While Kansas Dorothy seems to learn nothing, Harlem Dorothy learns that her self-doubt was misplaced and having confidence will take her where she seeks to go. Though both protagonists return to their homes, we get the sense that while Kansas Dorothy will never leave home again, Harlem Dorothy will finally venture South of 125th street.³⁷

The representation of Dorothy and the representation of other characters illuminates another way we might question the influence of the Black Arts Movement - what comment about black life might be made here and how does that comment play into the film's dismissal by a largely white base of critics? In her essay, "*The Wiz: American Culture at Its Best*," Rhonda Williams asserts that Lumet's use of "stereotypical images and typecast characters point to a greater political statement."³⁸ She argues that the value in the story was overlooked by critics, reinforcing the truth that mainstream America and Hollywood refuse "to come to grips with the issues and obstacles concerning Black people in the United States."³⁹ Williams's essay identifies a Black feminist reading of the story, namely Dorothy's journey to self-discovery as well as her journey to strengthen and unify the black family.

As she dances down the Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy encounters three characters who encapsulate a stereotypical reading of black men. She meets the young Scarecrow, stranded on his stake, unable to free himself in the face of the constant criticism of the Crows. The Crows repeatedly tell him that he is incapable of getting down and existing beyond this place they have carved out for him. He has ingested that view to the point that he croons the Crow Anthem, "You Can't Win," at their request -- all about how he is worthless and helpless to do the things he wants to do. This scene reflects the outside pressures that have belittled black men (some have said the Crows might represent the education system, or more generally white society at large) and the way that black men have internalized that oppression into a reduced sense of themselves and their abilities. Williams notes that it echoes the racial rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s -- reinforcing oppression and the idea that black men may as well not try to do any better for themselves. Dorothy comes along and builds the Scarecrow up - telling him he can do it, that he is a product of negative thinking and even helps him down off the pole to take his first steps into freedom.⁴⁰

Williams argues that Dorothy's character development her role in the development of other characters begs a Black feminist reading -- that the film "highlights Dorothy's position of power within the Black family unit and community as the giver, nurturer and taker of life for Black men and women." Her role is to "rescue, re-educate, support, encourage and uplift the Black man in order to reestablish the Black family unit and community."⁴¹ Dorothy's journey, in Williams reading, is not just one of self-discovery but also one of entering into Black womanhood as someone who will establish a family thereby building the black community as a whole.⁴²

This role is repeated in Dorothy's interactions with the Tin Man, Cowardly Lion and the Wiz. The Tin Man, more mature than the Scarecrow, needs a heart -- Williams argues that he represents the black husband/father figure. He needs to rejoin the family unit, learn his place there and how to love. The Cowardly Lion, with his introduction with the song "I'm a Mean Old Lion," represents the tough exterior that black men put on as way of disguising their hurt and sensitivity before it can be detected by others.⁴³ Her reassurance to him that his strength and courage is valid and already present negates the need for overbearing false bravado. Dorothy's nurturing and re-assuring of these men is playing out the role of the Black woman in building up and therefore repairing the Black family.

In an interview with Lumet, he directly points to the repeated scenes that involve some kind of liberation. He says, "everybody starts stuck or immovable and then makes a progress."⁴⁴ Dorothy, while absolutely experiencing her own liberation along her journey, liberates the black male characters from the stereotypes -- and the feelings of inadequacy that result -- so that they can discover their own power. It might be said that this story is one of one member of the black family -- the woman -- imbuing other members of the black family with power they could not see. Situating this idea within the tenets of the Black Arts Movement, it becomes a complicated assessment -- though it certainly separates black people from needing some sort of "white savior" (the lack of necessity for which I think is implied by the idea of nationalism and separatism), it also acknowledges deficiencies in black men that may have been placed there by white society. Scarecrow feels inadequate because he has been told he is not good enough; Cowardly Lion needs to hide his weakness, his sensitivity and hurt that is the result of an oppressive society, in order to be deemed valid and powerful by that society. This seeming message of "we need to fix ourselves," while certainly empowering, seems to neglect a conversation with mainstream society about how some issues need to be fixed by society at large. That being said, not needing help from white society also empowers the black community as a separate and independent entity.

The issue of Black feminism also complicates this reading of the film. While this reading of Black feminism was a bit more developed than the black woman's role as articulated by Black Arts Movement leaders, it still positions her importance and power in relation to the black male. Her job, and therefore her own strength and womanhood, is directly related to the ways in which she can illuminate the strength of the black man. Mance writes that the sexism of the Black Arts Movement was inherited from black male writers of the Harlem Renaissance, who criticized female writers for focusing their art on "black women's daily experience," which included raising children, domestic duties and relationships.⁴⁵ These topics were dismissed as too "narrow in scope and appeal to advance the goals of a movement that sought to implement a broad program of racial uplift."⁴⁶ Black power and self-defense were seen as necessary in reaction to the "fear and vulnerability" inherent in the black psyche as a result of decades of lynching and other violence against blacks. Because of the rhetorical strength of the representation of a strong, virile black male against the battered, bloodied domination of white supremacy, the primary role (at the onset of the Black Arts Movement) was for black female writers to feature these images in their own writing.⁴⁷ Because the black male was the focus of the

poem, the image of the woman took on the role of the “vehicle” of black male power.⁴⁸

Nikki Giovanni’s poem, “Beautiful Black Men (With compliments and apologies to all not mentioned by name),” exemplifies this celebration of a strong, virile black male figure. In the opening lines, she writes,

i wanta say just gotta say something
bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight
black men
with they afros
walking down the street
is the same ol danger
but a brand new pleasure⁴⁹

Particularly the last lines of this stanza point directly to the celebration of the strong black man, without ignoring the “danger” that might be associated with the image. The poem goes on to laud the realities of the black male, in some cases those that may be unsavory – the beautiful black men are “sitting on stoops/in bars,” they are “running numbers, watching for their whores,” but also recognizes the beauty of the images associated with black men and the Black Power movement – “outasight afros” and “dashiki suits with shirts that match/the lining that complements the ties.” While it would be unfair to say that Giovanni’s poems unilaterally align with the subjugation of the black woman to the black man, this poem certainly shows the celebration of that image that was so integral to the Black Arts Movement.

As the movement progressed, the idea of Black feminism became more complicated and separated itself from dependence on the image of the black male. One notable writing is Ntozake Shange’s *For colored girls who have considered suicide/When the rainbow is enuf* captured incredible realism and honesty to complicate, if not denigrate, the depiction of the “strong black male.” Shange’s “choreopoem” features seven female narrators, identified only by colors, who each speak of instances of pain and hurt (including abuse and rape), often at the hands of black men. Bernard Bell (qtd. in Williams) articulates the qualities of black feminism that go beyond merely uplifting the black male, to include interlocking motifs of racism, sexism and classism oppression, black female protagonists, spiritual journeys from victimization to autonomy, a focus on personal relationships and black feminist language.⁵⁰

Returning to *The Wiz*, it seems that while it does not align with the role and depiction of women in the Black Arts Movement, it seems to fit along a spectrum that is an outgrowth of the development of Black Feminism during and after the decade encapsulating the Black Arts Movement. Dorothy, though she still serves to uplift and “fix” the black man, goes on her own spiritual journey and makes autonomous decisions about when and how to help these men. The focus is on her story and the men play a supporting role in the discovery of her own self-worth and place in the world.

The key connection between *The Wiz* and the themes of the Black Arts Movement is probably its soundtrack. Most of the music in *The Wiz* was adapted from the songs from the stage production written by Charlie Smalls.

Quincy Jones, the musical supervisor, added several songs (including “Ease on Down the Road”) to the film. Sidney Lumet wrote that the goal was to touch on as many periods of black music and dance as possible.

Forms of music traditionally considered part of American black culture include spirituals, gospel, blues, rhythm and blues, jazz, bebop and (eventually) hip hop. Features of these styles can be drawn back to slave songs and the need for communication between slaves to boost morale and organize uprisings. When plantation owners took away slaves’ drums to stifle communication, slaves began replicating the rhythms of the drums with household instruments and their voices. These slave songs also laid the basis thematically for the development of black music – the songs sought to bring slaves together and boost morale, but also sang of the hardship of their lives.⁵¹

Arguably *The Wiz*’s most famous song, “Ease on Down the Road” exemplifies the theme of uplift and togetherness. The characters in *The Wiz* use it as their rally cry – the words that remind them to keep on going and to relinquish anything that might be holding them down.

Come on, ease on down, ease on down the road

Come on, ease on down, ease on down the road

Don't you carry nothing

That might be a load

Come on, ease on down, ease on down, down the road

The song doesn’t dwell on the negative, however -- its upbeat tempo makes it serve as celebration. The anthemic, uplifting tone reminiscent of a Negro Spiritual reminds us that the characters are not beat down by their hardship and the difficulty of the road ahead. Though the memory of that hardship might not be far, crucial to making it further down the road is realizing the positivity there. Though the repetition of the line “ease on down the road” recalls the repetition of blues music, the tone is definitively the opposite.

As noted above, many scenes in *The Wiz* involve liberation and the celebration of finding oneself. The song that might encapsulate this most is “Brand New Day,” which follows the literal liberation of the wicked witch Evillene’s sweatshop workers. The song’s lyrics highlight the end of a journey that has sought freedom; all of the characters sing lines that celebrate liberation and a new start. They sing, “Everybody’s glad/because our silent fear and dread is gone/Freedom, you see, has our hearts singing so joyfully” – developing a theme that could easily be connected with the ideas of liberation and self-sufficiency among the black community espoused by the Black Arts Movement. The characters have been liberated from the things holding them back and realized they had ability and worth in themselves the entire time – they didn’t need an outside force to hand it to them. They sing, “We always knew that we’d be free somehow/In harmony/and show the world that we’ve got liberty” – this and most lines in the song reinforce the freedom the group has found and the larger freedom of the black community. Feminista Jones called this song, in one of her tweets, “Brand New Day is one of the greatest Black Liberation anthems we have EVER had.”⁵²

These two songs provide only a brief insight into the themes of freedom and liberation found through discovering one’s own power that are present in *The Wiz*. Feminista Jones wrote, “So much of *The Wiz* is about

believing in our individual ability to bring about freedom and liberation without waiting on someone else.”⁵³ The idea of being fed up with waiting for others to help mirrors some of the sentiments of Black Power separatists – we are tired of waiting for white America to solve this problem, so we will find a way to solve it ourselves. *The Wiz* certainly doesn’t take this theme to that extreme, yet its echoes are absolutely present.

Given the theme of this unit, I would be remiss to ignore Dorothy’s closing song – “Home.” After her long journey of self-discovery and the demystification of the Wiz, Dorothy learns from Glinda that “if we know ourselves, we’re always home -- anywhere.” After Lena Horne performs “Believe in Yourself,” Dorothy responds with “Home” – “when I think of home/ I think of a place where there’s love overflowing” and goes on to demonstrate her growth. She sings, “now that I have some direction” and “I still know where I’m going” – sentiments that oppose her earlier uncertainty and lack of belief in herself. She concludes,

Living here, in this brand new world

Might be fantasy

But it taught me to love

So it’s real, real to me

And I’ve learned

That we must look inside our hearts

To find a world full of love

The penultimate line – “we must look inside our hearts” – is what I believe connects *The Wiz* to the Black Arts Movement most strongly. The creation, the goals, the messages might have been very different, but underlying it all was black people loving themselves, their blackness. Once it is found, so is home.

Teaching Strategies

Creating a Framework for Discussion

When dealing with sensitive issues such as race, it is extremely important to create a safe environment where students feel comfortable taking intellectual and social risks. It is essential, at the onset of the unit, to set classroom norms for discussion beyond mere procedure. The book *Courageous Conversations About Race* constructs a detailed framework, but a simplified version can be useful for getting started even if the teacher or students have not read the text.

The Courageous Conversations framework begins with four agreements, which are a solid basis for creating norms for discussion in a classroom. The four agreements are:

1. stay engaged

2. speak your truth.
3. experience discomfort.
4. expect and accept non-closure.⁵⁴

The four agreements remind learners to avoid checking out of the conversation (stay engaged), to only speak things that are personal to themselves and avoid speculating or generalizing about others' experiences (speak your truth), that learning occurs when one is uncomfortable (experience discomfort) and that they should not expect a solution to come from one or even many conversations (expect and accept non-closure). The four agreements are a very small part of the Courageous Conversations framework – I encourage further study of the book, particularly for white teachers who teach in diverse settings.

It is helpful to spend time at the beginning of the unit establishing these norms and discussing what they mean in detail. Throughout the unit (potentially daily), the teacher should review the norms with students. If the conversation strays from them, the teacher or other students should guide the class back to the norms.

Shared inquiry discussion

Shared inquiry discussion is a student-centered discussion format that focuses on open-ended, high-level questions. This format, in its ideal form, should contain little or no input from the teacher (though, at first, the teacher should ask follow up questions and ensure that students are explaining their answers fully).

Students should create a list of norms for productive, respectful discussion. These can include, but are not limited to: Allow others to finish before speaking, use sentence stems that convey respect and build on other students' responses (I agree with... because, and I disagree with... because), require evidence and further explanation, challenge ideas (for example, playing Devil's Advocate), and respecting equity of voice (all are given an opportunity or invited to participate and no one voice dominates the discussion).

A final essential component to shared inquiry is the opportunity for students to propel discussion by asking questions of their own. The teacher can facilitate this process by teaching students to write high-level questions (those that allow for multiple responses and interpretation of evidence) and asking each student to write one at the beginning of the discussion. The teacher should also encourage students to ask new questions organically during discussion.

I usually assign students roles to manage discussion – a facilitator who keeps us on track and manages participation, a timer, a participation tracker and a note taker. We typically close with the facilitator choosing a student to summarize the key points of the discussion.

Activities

Lesson 1: Introducing Black Pride

Warm up: Students should write briefly about something that they once felt was an important part of their identity, but they no longer practice. Why is this something that is no longer part of their identity?

Discuss warm up, either in pairs or as a whole class.

Activity: Read “My First Conk” by Malcolm X from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The teacher or students can choose the reading mode (aloud, individually, small groups) depending on the class’ preference or ability level. The essay is relatively short, so it is

Discussion: In shared inquiry format, students should discuss the following questions. Depending on the ability of your learners, it may be productive to have students write answers to the questions individually and then share with a partner before moving to whole class discussion.

- What does Malcolm X discover about his identity?
- What is his realization about this specific act and other choices he has made?
- To what extent does this story comment on the larger black experience?

Closure: What did Malcolm X’s essay help you learn about defining one’s identity?

Extension: “My First Conk” is considered a process essay – one in which the steps of a process are detailed as well as the “reason” that the process is important. Students can analyze the structure of Malcolm X’s essay (it is roughly half “process” and half “reason”), then write a process essay that expands on the ideas from their warm up.

Lesson 2: Analysis of Black Arts Movement Poetry

Warm up: Ask students to discuss or write what they already know about the Black Arts or Black Power movement.

Direct Instruction: Depending on students’ background, share key elements in a PowerPoint or handout.

Activity: Divide students into small groups (3-4 students) and assign each group a poem. Suggested poems are:

Amiri Baraka – “Black Art”*

Nikki Giovanni – “Beautiful Black Men”

Gwendolyn Brooks – “Primer for Blacks”

Sonia Sanchez – “blk/rhetoric”

Gil Scott Heron – “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”

* “Black Art” contains language that some might deem inappropriate for a high school classroom. Consider your curriculum restrictions and community of learners before using this poem.

In each group, students should read the poem several times, then annotate for text features that stand out to them (structure, language, thematic ideas). Using their annotation, each group member should be able to discuss their interpretation of the poem and the features they noticed about it.

The groups should rearrange so that each new group has one representative of each poem. Together, members will share their poem and findings. The group should then attempt to create a master list of features. If time allows, students should share these lists with the class; the teacher can engage the class in a discussion of the impact of certain features and how themes are developed.

Closure: Students should write a brief exit slip conveying what studying the poems taught them about the structure, style and theme of poetry during the Black Arts Movement.

Lesson 3: *Debatable* podcast

Though not presented in a full analysis within the unit, this podcast has thematic connections to the idea of black people challenging the inclusivity of white, mainstream culture. The podcast profiles Ryan Wash, a queer, black man who participated on his high school and college debate teams. Though Wash is quite successful at Policy debate, he feels alienated by the norms of formal debate, particularly at national tournaments where most of his competitors are white and come from “namebrand, private schools.” He and his college debate partner challenge the debate paradigm by with “performance” style debate, using spoken word, citing poetry, and ultimately arguing more about how debate should be argued rather than the topic itself. They meet with much success, but also backlash from their competitors who assert that their style doesn’t belong in debate. Wash speaks of feeling excluded from debate because its structure preferred many quick arguments that required a lot of research, a style that benefitted schools that had more money and resources (and where students were often white). In his final debate in college, he argues that he is searching for a “home” (and makes reference to *The Wiz*).⁵⁵

Students would benefit from listening to the podcast in full – it runs one hour in length, and with guided discussion could be completed in 2-3 class periods. The teacher should frame discussion around the way that Wash and his partner’s style and strategy exemplify qualities of Black Arts Movement writing and how their goal – finding a home, a place where their style is valued – aligns with the movement’s themes.

Lesson 4: Viewing *The Wiz* and analysis of key scenes

The Wiz is the focus text of this unit. The movie is just over two hours long – for maximum value, the class should view the film in sections to discuss aspects of the story, how the adaptation alters the message of the original 1939 film and how the character development and music exemplify, complicate or show influence of the Black Arts Movement. Particularly moving scenes include the opening scene in Harlem, Dorothy’s encounter with her travelling companions, the liberation of Evilene’s sweatshop and her eventual demise, the characters’ encounter with the Wiz and Dorothy’s closing song. The teacher should use the analysis in the Content Objectives section to guide questioning and develop activities.

Lesson 5: Culminating Project - Adapting a story

Students should choose a beloved story (either their own choice or one that is popular in their culture) and write a modern adaptation. Given their study of the Black Arts Movement and *The Wiz*, students should consider what elements of the story they must change in order to make the story their own. Students can adapt the story to account for race, ethnicity, country of origin, gender roles, religion or simply a change in social setting/situation. To keep this project manageable, students should choose one or two key scenes from the story to rewrite. Depending on resources, students can publish the story in print or online for the class, perform it in class or create a video.

A key element of closure for this activity is asking students to consider how the adaptation changed the theme(s) of the story and how their adaptation pushes against a “mainstream” culture. Students should be encouraged to define their own culture however they see fit, and should avoid attempting to place their adaptation in a culture unfamiliar to them.

Resources

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Reading List for Students

It would be impossible to create a list of stellar Black Arts Movement poetry that feels complete. Below are suggested titles that can be used as alternatives to the poems featured in Lesson 2 or as enrichment for advanced learners.

Nikki Giovanni, from The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni

"My Poem"

"Beautiful Black Men (With compliments and apologies to all not mentioned by name)"

"Revolutionary Music"

"Dreams"

"Poem (No Name No. 3)"

"Black Separatism"

Amiri Baraka, from The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader

"SOS"

"A Poem for Black Hearts"

"Return of the Native"

Gil Scott-Heron, from Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron

"Small Talk at 125th and Lenox"

"Winter in America"

"Inner City Blues"

"Dr King"

Appendix

Standards

This unit is written with the Pennsylvania Core Standards in mind. Though activities throughout the unit will touch on numerous reading, writing, listening and speaking standards, those below are the main focus of the unit's work.

In their analysis of *The Wiz*, students will cite evidence from the film that shows development of character and contribution to larger themes in the story. These activities meet the following Reading Literature standards:

CC.1.3.9-10.A -- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.3.9-10.B Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author's explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

CC.1.3.9-10.C Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CC.1.3.9-10.H Analyze how an author draws on and transforms themes, topics, character types, and/or other text elements from source material in a specific work.

Through reading "My First Conk," by Malcolm X, students will meet both Reading Information and Writing Standards:

Reading: CC.1.2.9-10.A Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.2.9-10.B Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author's explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

Writing: CC.1.4.9-10.A Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately.

The culminating project meets the Writing Narrative standard:

CC.1.4.9-10.M Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

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