



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2016 Volume III: "Over the Rainbow": Fantasy Lands, Dream Worlds, and Magic Kingdoms

Introduction

by Joseph R. Roach, Sterling Professor of English and Professor of African American Studies, of American Studies, and of Theater Studies

Literature, film, and popular culture abound with utopias and otherwise wonderful but impossible places. Based on imaginative journeys to three of them—Oz, Never Land, and a Wood near Athens—"Over the Rainbow" explored some of the greatest geographies of wishful thinking ever fancied. In a context created by related critical essays, three popular works and their spinoffs were central to the seminar: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum and its cinematic and stage versions, including *The Wizard of Oz* (MGM, 1939) and *The Wiz* (1978); J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan; or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* and its variants, including *Peter Pan* (Disney, 1953); and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Branching out in different directions from these fantastic realms, participating Fellows created Curriculum Units that feature their own dream worlds based on original works and adaptations drawn from different media and genres. Along the way, they develop various strategies for inspiring magical thinking in their students. As is the case with almost every invocation of a utopia, however, each of their dream worlds casts the shadow of a dystopia as well. The Fellows allow that dreams and nightmares, like fantasy and reality, can stand opposed and still change places.

One recurring and troubling theme of our unit-preparations and seminar discussions was our collective sense of the overall flattening of the imaginative lives of school children today. Fellows reported variants of this systemic phenomenon across the country, across the grades, and across the subjects. The hyper-availability of formulaic and repetitive amusements through mediated communication came up repeatedly as a manifestation of the problem, and it was also identified generally as a probable cause of it. But we concluded that media-saturation is but one symptom among others of the intensifying pressures of the real world on childhood. Reality today includes the increasingly urgent summons of the here and now on the attention of students, especially those enrolled in high-need public schools. Krista Waldron, from the Phoenix Rising Alternative Day School, Tulsa, framed the issue clearly in her unit, meditating on a quotation from the late Mohammed Ali:

For several days after Mohammed Ali's recent death, I found and heard Ali maxims everywhere. Because one fraction of my mind is always percolating something for my seminar or unit, this one stayed with me: 'The man who has no imagination has no wings.' I thought about how rich his imagination must have been. Then I thought about how grounded in reality my students are. Burdened with it, really. Their lives are so survival-oriented and rooted in immediacy and basic needs that the imaginative realms are lost to them. Units that have come from previous seminars have ambitiously addressed issues of social justice or the effects of trauma on literacy and writing skill—the realities of my classroom. But what if Ali is right? If not cultivating one's

imagination is equal to sentencing him or her to a life of predictability—which in the case of many of my students is one of recidivism and prison or blue collar jobs that make ends meet at best. Can the ability to suspend one’s belief in fiction transfer to one’s life, goals, dreams?

Citing Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous phrase—“that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith”—Waldron builds her unit, “Magical Multi-Culti Yellow Brick Realism,” around L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Gabriel García Márquez’s short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, Octavia Butler’s short story *Bloodchild*, and *The Subtlety*, an art installation piece by Kara Walker. The Walker piece, a colossal bandana-topped sphinx made of sugar, is titled in full “The Subtlety; or, the Marvelous Sugar Baby.” Walker installed it in the old Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn. It is the most provocative work by one of America’s most thought-provoking artists, and it creates an environment of richly imaginative meanings—a dream world—for interpretation and discussion. Topics include but are not limited to the very real histories that “The Subtlety” embodies and symbolizes, but also the constructed-ness of those realities. Waldon’s students will then be challenged to create their own installation, drawing on their imaginations under the inspiringly open-ended guidance of “magical realism.”

In a similar vein, “Afirmando Nuestra Identidad (Affirming Our Identity): Exploring Dream Worlds and Storytelling through Alebrijes” by Mary Carmen Moreno of the Tarkington School of Excellence, Chicago, takes up the popular art of Mexico, in particular the vibrantly colored sculptures known as “alebrijes,” to explore the intersection of visual art and literary narrative. Her objective is to “welcome my bilingual students into a world that they construct from both ideological and mythological spaces informed by language, culture, and art.” In this world, her students “will engage with tales that span geographical spaces, and in particular visit their ancestral lands of Mexico through the written and oral word, through the visual landscape of el arte popular Mexicano, and the dreamworlds of alebrijes.” In the end, the Mexico Moreno seeks to bring into her classroom is no less real because it has been made more magical in the minds of her students, many of whom still call it “home” even though they have never been there. But this reality is aspirational, expansive rather than reductive; it is tangible and verifiable; but, at the same time, it is not inevitable. It is a reality that must be imagined, disbelief suspended, in order to be perceived and properly understood.

Our seminar discussed possible techniques whereby this kind of creative imagination might be stimulated into fullness of being, and the curriculum units reflect the variety of these discussions. In “Stick to Your Story: Fleshing Out Existing Narrative Structures,” Tharish R. Harris of Boushall Middle School, Richmond, sets out her plan for empowering her students by teaching them the techniques of storytelling derived from theories of narrative such as Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) and Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984). She writes: “Technology and social media have dulled my students’ imaginations. They are so hyper-engaged with immediacy—the ‘here and now’ of shared experiences—that they do not have time to reflect on the past, much less look forward or *elsewhere* into the realm of imagination.” Narrative, Harris argues, imparts the importance of *before* and *after* by disclosing the meaning of passing through the present from a beginning to an end. “Narratology” is a fancy way of saying that we know that stories are told in certain ways wherever they are told, using and re-using certain techniques, leaving room for idiosyncrasy and innovation but disclosing clear patterns of meaning-making. Corrina Christmas, of Andrew Jackson Elementary School, Tulsa, in “Getting Graphic about Writing” thus proposes to use the word-and-image techniques divulged by Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* to teach her student to read—and also write—comic books and graphic novels.

Another recurring discussion in seminar was the mixed blessing of the emphasis on non-fiction reading and

writing in Common Core Standards. In “Easing on Down the Road: Teaching Students to Critically Read and Write Fantasy Lands,” Brandon Barr of Mark Twain Elementary School, Chicago, addresses this issue head-on: “While the standards represent a major effort to bring rigor to language arts instruction, I believe the narrow focus on one approach to understanding and engaging with text is short-sighted and harms literacy instruction. Reflecting on the experience of the *Over the Rainbow* seminar, a key element that propelled conversation was not only reading *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but also reflecting on what critics had to say about each text and its derivative texts.” Using accessible excerpts from critical analyses of the dream-world texts he assigns, Barr will help English teachers willingly suspend their disbelief in Common Core while empowering his students’ imaginations for the truths that only fiction can relate. Easing on down another stretch of the same road, Jennifer Giarrusso, of Taylor Allderdice High School, Pittsburgh, in “Seeking a Home: *The Wiz* and the Black Arts Movement,” began her critical and historical inquiry with a non-fiction Twitter feed from “Feminista Jones,” responding to the NBC TV revival of *The Wiz* in December, 2015, and quoting the lyrics:

What would I do

If I could reach inside of me

And to know how it feels

To say I like what I see.

The Tweet explicitly linked *The Wiz* to the Black Arts and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Giarrusso well understands the problematic nature of such a linkage (the creative team for the production of both the musical and the film was all white), but she develops it nevertheless to explore the idea of “home” on the cusp of the separatist-integrationist debate in American racial politics, which remain as rich a source for fantasy and non-fiction texts, sometimes confused for one another, as can be imagined. Bringing related issues up to the moment in popular culture, Sydney Hunt Coffin, of Edison/Fareira High School, Philadelphia, addresses the problematic portrayal of black and Puerto Rican identities through the hip-hop swagger of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* in “Dreaming on Imaginary Stages and Writing Imaginative Scripts: The Magical ‘If’ Fulfilled, in *Hamilton*.”

As the enormous impact of *Hamilton* shows, notions of fantasy land and home land remain creatively interrelated in the American imagination, but not in the American imagination alone. Priya Talreja, from Pioneer High School, San José School District, in “Unraveling the Dream World Stereotype of the Arab People,” unravels the Orientalist fantasy at the heart of T.E. Lawrence’s role in the Arab Revolt during World War I, focusing on the dream-world vision of Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. “The unit’s essential question,” she writes, “is the following: *How are stereotypes used to diminish the contributions of colonized people?*” Here the dialectic of dream world and historical fact reaches back into the past to illuminate how the reality of the present carries the burden of fantasy from long ago. But dream worlds empower more dreamers than they disempower. Tiffany Tracy, of the Ganado Elementary School, Diné Nation, in “Journey to the Sun: Reclaiming Self-Esteem through Culture and History,” claims the historical truth of Navajo creation stories embodied in the adventures of the Warrior Twins, Monster Slayer and Child-born-for-Water. Her students will learn that monsters still need slaying, in their dreams and for real.

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