



America the Beautiful: A Look at Race and Acceptance in America through Poetry

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Introduction

The song “America the Beautiful” claimed to portray America as a land of true beauty. In this unit, students will question the idea of beauty in America, understanding that what was once seen as the landscape must now refer to the beauty of the people of America. Students will be able to review this concept of beauty through various forms of poetry. This is a six week unit, and the focus will be on African American poetry. Students will explore Negro Spirituals, Blues and Harlem Renaissance Poetry, Contemporary and Modern Poetry, together with Hip Hop. Through this context, students will gain deeper comprehension in literacy. Literacy allows for students not only to explore plot, setting and sequence, to name a few, but to dig further and discover more figurative meanings within context. The unit will span through a course of eight weeks. In this unit, students at the elementary level will be given an extensive opportunity to manipulate rigorous poetic texts. The unit will allow for students to gain greater appreciation for literature, the more easily in that the poetry of hip hop is a part of their everyday lives.

Background

I teach at an African Centered Academy. At my school, students are encouraged to learn of their African heritage and embrace various customs of African people. According to Dr. C. Tsehloane Keto, “Fossil, biological and linguistic research has indicated that humanity, with its diverse languages and cultures originated on the African continent. If we accept a monogenetic origin for humanity, then all people of the world are of “African origin.¹” This concept is the core philosophy at my school. The population at my school is 96% African American. Over the past year, my school has made a shift in adopting various African centered customs. For example, each teacher in my school had an African country that was the central theme for his or her classroom. My classroom studied the Seychelles islands. In accordance with our current reading curriculum’s theme, students explored an identical concept at home and in the Seychelles. For instance, if one of the units in our reading curriculum had a theme of animals, students in turn studied the animals of the Seychelles. During the opening of our school, we engage in what is called Unity Celebration/Circle. We come

together in the gymnasium where students from youngest to eldest gather round in two circles. The youngest are in the inner circle, “being protected” by the eldest, who are then on the outer circle. Teachers and accompanying family or community members join in as well. One adult is in the middle of both circles, and leads the celebration. The celebration allows for reflections on ancestors in the Black community, and uplifting words or announcements from staff and students. This practice is common among African centered practitioners. The ritual sets the tone for the day, and encourages fellowship within the whole school. My school still has some ways to go to become fully African centered. As the school continues to grow, students are learning to tap into their roots, and point towards self-discovery.

My students live in a neighborhood that is predominately Black. With the impoverished outlook portrayed constantly in the media, many of my students’ sign of hope is within the walls of the school. The reality that my students face on a daily basis is disheartening. The stories that I am told of the potential dangers they face brings tears to my eyes. They are taught to survive, and have learned to navigate streets in ways that may seem daunting, but seamless to them, because it is their reality. Because my school encourages students to get in touch with their roots, and appreciate their heritage, they bypass the struggles and hone in on their ancestral gift to society.

The African Centered Perspective

My school prides itself with its emphasis on African heritage, and encourages its students to be connected to who they are. A West African saying describes the value of connectedness to a “time-space center” in these sobering expressions: “[“]If you do not know where you are or where you have been, you cannot know where you are going—and, if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there.”² My school strives to give students a vast opportunity to learn of their African heritage. “Afrocentric reform is an educational strategy designed to strengthen and improve the academic performance of students using principles based in ancient Egyptian culture.”³ At my school students learn of Egyptian gods and goddesses, for example Imhotep. Each morning the students and faculty greet one another with “Hotep,” which means peace in Swahili. This practice of reconnection aims to remind students that they came from greatness and are of royalty. Furthermore, Ginwright claims, “Afrocentric education is grounded on the “notion that culture influences all dimensions of human behavior, including teaching and learning.” Thus, my school places a tremendous emphasis on tying in African Centricity within the curriculum. The goal is not only for students to excel academically, but socially and culturally as well. This practice is sought through “ Ma’at—an ancient Egyptian worldview based on truth, justice, propriety, harmony, reciprocity, balance, and order—whereby black students, in the process of reconnecting with African culture, can become more empowered.⁴ ” Watkins outlines that “Afrocentrics desire a curriculum focused on African themes. Holding Africa forth as the cradle of civilization, they turn to ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) civilization as the model for knowledge, culture and social development.”⁵ This idea of empowerment is essential to the Black community. Where students of African American decent may be denigrated in the public eye, the African Centered approach celebrates the attributes of Blacks.

Neighborhood Ties

My school is located in what is referred to as the “Hill District.” This neighborhood is comprised of middle class as well as lower class citizens that are primarily African American. Students are very knowledgeable about the separation that the neighborhoods in Pittsburgh reflect. For instance, when speaking of a particular neighborhood, students can declare which race mostly resides there. Students not only separate by race, but by class as well. Students know which neighborhoods are thriving, and which ones are in a state of decay. My

school encourages my students to think beyond the walls of subsidized housing complexes, and dispel the stigma that all Black people are poor and uneducated.

Understanding Race, Acceptance and Beauty in America

Race is a subject that most can find uncomfortable to discuss. Students at my school are confronted with who they are, and classify where they fit in the world on a daily basis. According to Williams H. Watkins, "Education, like the matter of 'race,' is situated in a context. The treatment of Africans was not a matter of negligence or accident. It was not benign. Massive and strategic attempts were made to use educational structures to destroy 'critical consciousness,' to alienate Africans from tradition and from each other, to teach African inferiority and European superiority.⁶ " My school aims to dispel the absence of awareness, and (re)awaken the psyche to appreciate one's heritage. Students are confronted with adversities, such as police brutality. Although seemingly detached from the screen to what occurs in front of your face, students still "feel" the injustice as seen through the media. This is a traumatic event, and should not be overlooked. When students act out in unpleasing ways, many times they are in crisis, and it is a constant cry for help. Help, because media showcases Blacks in a way where students can clearly see their rejection in America. Furthermore, Watkins adds "The representation of Africans and African Americans looks quite different. School knowledge relegates people of color to savagery and barbarism. Most are now familiar with the negative image representation of African people⁷ ". Watkins' claim goes directly against the notion that acceptance and belonging in America has been achieved, as well as that any sense of Black beauty has been conveyed. He continues, "Again, the problem is not technical, but political. In healthy societies, the school is an extension of family and community. Students are precious recourses. When students become modities or isolates, detached from family, lost from a strong sense of belonging to a family, trouble lies ahead.⁸ " This outcome is unfortunate, and it is often the fate of many of the students who enter my classroom, further proving that the idea of acceptance of Blacks is lacking in American society. My school is a safe haven that encourages students of African American decent to find their place by learning where they have come from, in the spirit of the proverb "You don't know where you're going, until you know where you've been." The sense of family is imbedded in the fabric of my school. Students are given opportunities to showcase their beauty and talent, hoping to fulfill the hope of D. Marvin Jones' *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: America's New Dilemma* for an alternative to "depicting all Blacks as threatening, ruthless, or academically inept, inhabitants of the ghetto, who were believed to live a certain type of lifestyle.⁹ "

Blacks have been known to be ostracized and depicted as a "disgrace" in American society for years. It is unfortunate that this outlook has not changed, and it seems as though Blacks are continuously striving to find their place in American society. America is called the "land of the free," free for whom? Being called an American has its connotations. Many times you find that you have to hide or omit your heritage to "fit in" to the American way. Where do Black people hide? There is a distinctive characteristic that makes them different from any other race in the world. With the revelation of blackness, America has a history of demeaning and degrading the value of the Black man and woman in quite hostile and unbearable ways. How then can Black people be accepted, when the American society diminishes the very thought of empowerment? My students are struggling to find their place in society, and my school is making gains to eliminate this ideology.

Black Poetry

Students are not aware how much poetry is a part of their everyday lives. According to Gabbin, "Black poetry is poetry that (1) is grounded in the black experience; (2) utilizes black music as a structural or emulative model; and (3) "consciously" transforms the prevailing standards of poetry through an iconoclastic and

innovative use of language.¹⁰ ” For purposes of this unit, students will exclusively explore Black poetry. Students can relate to Black poetry because it is reflective of the experiences they face. Black poetry also [enables] an entry point for students that are not familiar with poetry. Moreover, as Gabbin outlines, Black music is a common denominator for nearly all Black students. My students are motivated by song and rhythm. During our unity celebration students are able to play the drums and recite lyrics to songs or chants. The students are highly engaged and I often find them humming or singing throughout the day. Songs are a form of poetry that will be explored throughout this unit.

Negro Spirituals and Hymns

Negro Spirituals and Hymns, which surfaced during the 1800s, are a facet that will be studied throughout the unit. In the neighborhood of the Hill District where I teach, there are roughly 10 churches within close vicinity of the school. Many of the students attend church on a regular basis, and associate with the hymns sung therein. According to the Library of Congress article “African American Spirituals,” “A spiritual is a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African people in the American South.” With this context in mind, students can look at spirituals and hymns and identify trends of race, beauty and acceptance among Blacks. The article continues, “The form has its roots in the informal gatherings of African slaves in “praise houses” and outdoor meetings called “brush arbor meetings,” “bush meetings,” or “camp meetings” in the eighteenth century. At the meetings, participants would sing, chant and dance.¹¹ ” As aforementioned, this routine is very common in my school. “Spirituals also stem from the “ring shout,” a shuffling circular dance to chanting and handclapping that was common among early plantation slaves.¹² ” “Spirituals are typically sung in a call and response form, with a leader improvising a line of text and a chorus of singers providing a solid refrain in unison.” Spirituals are also sometimes regarded as codified protest songs.¹³ ”

“In Africa, music had been central to people’s lives: Music making permeated important life events and daily activities.¹⁴ ” “However, the white colonists of North America were alarmed by and frowned upon the slaves’ African-infused way of worship because they considered it to be idolatrous and wild.¹⁵ ” “As a result, the gatherings were often banned and had to be conducted in a clandestine manner.” On the contrary, celebration through spirituals and hymns is encouraged in my school. In my school there is one spiritual we sing, the Negro National Anthem (Lift Every Voice and Sing). Students are celebrated for their vocal ability, and encouraged to rejoice loudly, and creatively. In addition, students are often compelled to be reflective about the words that embody the hymn , hence need to be taught how to decode a song that is sung habitually.

Another spiritual that is explored in the unit is “Go down Moses.” This spiritual is sung often in the Black church, and is representative of the enslavement the Israelites suffered under reign of the Egyptian Pharaohs. This spiritual shows the oppression of people by force, and the yearning for freedom and for that reason was “used as a code by Harriet Tubman to escape to freedom.¹⁶ ” Students will review how race, acceptance and beauty are outlined in spirituals and hymns before progressing to Blues and Harlem Renaissance poetry.

Blues and Harlem Renaissance Poetry

Langston Hughes will be the focus of this part of the unit. “Hughes addresses a number of problems facing black poetry: (1) how to affect a modern sensibility and at the same time maintain a grounding in the folk culture; (2) how to achieve the textual representation of the music, especially in terms of improvisation and variation of tone and timbre; and (3) how to use the vernacular without resorting to dialect.¹⁷ ” “He suggests

the dialect without resorting to the contradictions and so-called broken English that mars most dialect poetry and some modern poetry by blacks.” There has been quite a bit of discussion around the area of language of African Americans. Some people just assume that Blacks use slang, and broken English, which is often seen as unintelligible.

Furthermore, Langston’s poetry was known to be “unashamedly black at a time when blackness was demode.” Many of his themes were “black is beautiful.¹⁸” Langston frequently wrote about black lives and frustrations. His poems were also about “music, politics, America, love, the blues, and dreams.¹⁹” Hughes’s focus was particularly regarding “ordinary people, leading ordinary lives, and about a world that few would rightfully call beautiful, but that was worth living and changing.”²⁰ As my students read poetry by Langston Hughes, I want them to gather the vibe that although the world may not be seen as beautiful, it is worth living and changing. I want them to examine how Langston’s craft for writing focuses on Black lives in relation to race, acceptance and beauty in America.

My students will be studying the work of Langston Hughes in depth. Two pieces will be “I Too Sing America” and “My People.” “I Too Sing America” was written in 1926. The poem is a declaration, where the speaker is proclaiming a right “in behalf of the reader” to feel welcomed in America, despite his darker appearance. “My People” was written also during the 1920s. The poem is a celebration of Black people, comparing the people to nature, and qualifies as a sort of anthem for Black beauty. These two poems speak specifically to race, and beauty. The students will review these poems and make connections with the Negro Spirituals studied. When students draw on differences and commonalities in Blues and Harlem Renaissance poetry they can move on to contemporary and modern poetry.

Contemporary Poetry

Students will also study more current forms of poetry. One poem outlined in this unit is by RuNett Nia Ebo, “Why God Made Me Black,” published in 1994. The poem starts off as a plea to God, asking why God made me Black. It starts, “Lord, Lord, Why did you make me black? Why did you make me someone the world wants to hold back?²¹” It goes on to explain the negative connotations associated with blackness. “Black is the color of dirty clothes; the color of grimy hands and feet.” Later, the author provides a perception of what God would say, such as “I didn’t make you in the image of darkness, I made you in the likeness of ME!” Students will also draw on differences and commonalities regarding race, acceptance and beauty in contemporary poetry and then progress to the Hip-Hop Era.

The Hip-Hop Era

Hip-Hop was born in America in 1973. Hip-Hop is a culture that is popular among mainstream listeners. Hip Hop is most notable for its distinctive sound, with percussion and rhythmic lyrical arrangements at the core. According to Marvin, critics of Hip-Hop claim “The narrative of hip-hop is corrosive to the moral fabric of America.²²” “The narrative of hip-hop as a moral corrosive can be historicized: black music from jazz to blues has been demonized as the devil’s music.²³” I notice, when I tell people that I listen to Hip Hop music, they look at me in amazement. They say “I would have never pinned you for someone to like Hip-Hop because you don’t act that way.” “That way” leaves much to imply—do they mean that because I don’t act “ghetto,” and I behave in a civilized manner, I can not possibly listen to that type of music? Does the music make the person? Something that is corrosive is seen as harsh, damaging and often unwanted. If I act as one surmises the music dictates, I will then become corrosive. This is another way of condemning the Black community, making them feel more unwelcome in America.

The fact is, Hip-Hop has roots grounded in reason, and acts as a catalyst to protest against injustices suffered by Blacks. For instance, some of my students have had a taste of police brutality, and when typically one would cringe at the sirens parading through the streets, my students tune it out as white noise. Marvin highlights, “The problem of police brutality is systemic and structural. This structure is almost a sense of modern day lynching, where some law enforcement officers are killing Blacks for sport, and spectacle. This issue is the most talked about in my classroom. My students fear being confronted by the police, and being killed in an instant because of their appearance.

For the genre of Hip-Hop, one song students will study is “Changes,” by Tupac Shakur, written in the 1990s. Tupac highlights the struggles of the Black man and woman. He makes reference to police brutality, and other injustice in America. Students will pinpoint commonalities and differences from the range of poetry studied throughout the unit: Negro Spirituals/Hymns, Blues/Harlem Renaissance Poetry, Contemporary/Modern Poetry and Hip-Hop. Students will zoom in on how race, acceptance and beauty are depicted throughout, and highlight changes that may or may not have occurred over time.

Rationale

“What is the difference between living, and surviving—is there a difference? Do Black people live or survive? Do White people live or survive?” “I think Black people are surviving, because they have to fight for everything they have, and hold on to everything, because it’s so precious. I think White people are living, because they have the money and they have the resources.” This was a discussion I had with one of my 4th grade students. I was astonished at his response, and left in awe that someone so young could conceptualize a system that many minorities identify with. Do minorities just survive? If so, why? Is there a system that prohibits minorities from making gains as easily as their counterparts? Is there really a difference? On what terms does America deem itself beautiful? Are there conditions to this beauty? Who is seen on the portrait that makes up a beautiful America? Are minorities in the picture, and is their image one that is ‘fighting’ to hold on, because it’s so precious? The spark in this conversation is why I would like to explore the topic of beauty, race and acceptance with students at the elementary level—and particularly, lead this investigation through various forms of poetry.

When I think of beauty I look in the mirror and admire my reflection. I carefully examine what I see, and quite often smile back at the image looking back at me. Unfortunately, being a woman of color and a minority I question whether my ‘beauty’ is accepted in America. Though it has been nearly 60 years since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Black Americans still suffer racial injustice. I teach at an African Centered Academy where students are encouraged to embrace their heritage and celebrate their ancestry. I find this task rather daunting when students are uncertain whether they ‘make up’ a beautiful America. I will travel with my current class to the 5th grade. All of the students I teach in this class are of African American descent. I have been an ear to many of my students that have witnessed racial injustice first hand or through the media. The media in particular is what drives many of the emotions that my students come across the threshold with regarding racial relations. In Sharon Flake’s premier novel *The Skin I’m In*, one character asks: “What does your face say to the world?” These students are plagued with this question every time they enter a space where they are identified as the minority. As a woman of color, I wonder when I walk down the streets of a predominately White neighborhood, am I seen as someone who is welcomed? Many questions tend to

flood my mind, such as: “Do they think I will steal something?” “Do they think I can afford to buy anything from this store?” “Do they know that I have a Master’s Degree, and am a highly educated woman?” “What do I have to prove to be accepted by these people?” If I am puzzled with these questions, I wonder what questions my students have, especially with the media at their fingertips. I know that this topic pushes the envelope, and is quite controversial, but my students are at the forefront of controversy the moment they walk out the door. Why? Is America a place full of beauty that accepts Black Americans, and all other minority races and creeds? As my students confront these questions, I want to empower them to think critically, and navigate through systems that are seemingly set against them.

At the elementary level poetry is not widely studied. It’s unfortunate that many times students are ill prepared for the rigor that responding to poetry calls for. According to the Common Core State Standard in Reading Literacy Craft and Structure students in 5th grade must “explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.²⁴” My school district’s current curriculum does not present in depth studies of poetry at the elementary level. My unit will grant students opportunities to explore various forms of poetry and allow deeper understanding of poetry according to the standards. Moreover, poetry is one of the most complex forms of literature. If my students are equipped with skills for reading poetry, it may help to decrease some of the literacy deficits seen when students transition to middle school.

Teaching Black American poetry is essential at the Elementary level, because students are constantly looking for a vehicle to channel their inner voice. Often times, the voice of the child gets tuned out. If a child appears naive, their cries for help may often be overlooked. In the age of media, children are susceptible to any and everything. The unfortunate event of death is now seen in the public eye, and often recorded. Consequently, there is not much hidden from the child, and their innocence is often stripped from them before they know it. Since Black poetry evokes the black experience in depth, students at the elementary level should see the variety of ways in which this experience is portrayed. Often times the Black experience is seen as one that is engulfed in oppression and persecution. Students need to see how poetry has changed over the years. Is there a continued sense of oppression and persecution, or is there an underlying sense of hope, and belonging in America? These questions are essential for this age group. Although poetry at the Elementary level is often confined to rainbows and butterflies, and drowned in fantasy, the reality that some students face does not reflect a magical image. Students need opportunities to confront these issues, because often times by middle and high school it is too late.

In addition, when students see poetry that confronts the issues they face, it is like a pillow of comfort, and they notice they are not alone in the world. Studying poetry that is challenging and thought-provoking may help students view the world from a different perspective. As students take a deeper look at race, acceptance and beauty, they will determine their value in society. Many of the poems outlined in this essay do not portray the Black American experience as one that is celebrated and admirable. I want my students to figure out why this is. I want my students to acknowledge difference, but appreciate their own beauty, despite what may not be seen as part of the totality in America.

Students at my school listen to music on a daily basis—primarily hip hop and often R&B. I want my students to examine the lyrics of the songs they listen to. I want them to be equipped with the skills to read songs as poetry, because they are poetry. I want them to examine the trends in the types of songs they recite, and determine whether race, acceptance and beauty are common themes.

Doing this unit at my school is like trying on the perfect sized shoe, it fits right in with the African Centered

framework. Throughout this unit, students will analyze poetry and write poetry about their own experiences regarding beauty, race and acceptance. As students unpack these comprehensive layers, they will be able to write using the various styles of poetry that we have reviewed in the unit, such as: Negro Spirituals and Hymns, Contemporary Poetry, Blues/Harlem Renaissance Poetry and Hip-Hop. The students will write using the conventions of poetry, such as: rhythm, meter, rhyme, repeated lines, to name a few. Students will be able to declare which type of poem they write, such as: sonnet, acrostic, haiku, ode, limerick, free verse, etc. Finally, students will be able to articulate the rationale for poetic selections.

Teaching Strategies

When I teach this unit, there is a timeline of study. There is a time order sequence outlined in this unit, with poetry dating back as far as the 1800s, with Negro Spirituals and Hymns. As aforementioned, students will discover how beauty, race and acceptance are portrayed throughout. Within this context, students can also determine figurative elements, such as imagery and metaphor, and dig deeper into the author's craft. The key to this unit is instruction through layers. Students will look at three layers when studying these poems. The layers follow a sequence, with students examining race at the forefront, followed by acceptance and concluding with beauty. When students read each poem they will consider the aspect of race that is outlined, why it is portrayed in such a way, and how the writer situated race. For example, does the writer situate race in a negative tone, or one that is uplifting, or both? From that, students can move on to acceptance. In the poem, are the people described accepted by their counterparts in America? Is this acceptance, or a cry to be accepted? Finally, does the writer show that these people embody beauty in America? Throughout this time order sequence, students will examine how times have changed or have not changed in regard to beauty, race and acceptance in America.

The strategies that follow are some methods that may be helpful in teaching this unit, and can be used in a wide range of grade levels, from elementary to high school, and even at the collegiate level.

Poetry Read Aloud

Students can read poems aloud. Students can use their voice to show inflection and place emphasis on meaning throughout. Students will be able to understand the breaks in lines, capitalization, and rhyming patterns, using their style of recitation to indicate this understanding.

Analyzing Poetic Formation

When being taught poems in this unit, students can review the format of a poem, how it is written, calling attention to rhyme, meter, syntax, etc. Students can analyze the format based on the time period. For instance, when analyzing Negro Spirituals, students can examine rhythm and repetition.

Figurative Language Hunt

Students can search for simile, metaphor, personification, symbolism, and imagery when reading poems in this unit. They can determine meaning and speak to the relation of figures of speech to the theme of the poem as a whole.

Examine Poems by Jigsaw

Students can review poems in pieces, and determine meaning gradually, as opposed to looking at the poem as a whole. For instance, students work in groups to determine the meaning of one stanza from the poem, while others are working on another stanza from the same poem. Students all come together to share afterwards.

Poetic Journals

Students can keep a daily log of how each poem depicts race, acceptance and beauty in America. Students can share out and what they say can be used to monitor understanding.

Using a Critical Lens to Understand Poetry

A critical lens can give students a refined outlook when reviewing poems in this unit. Students can examine poems and zoom in with a lens of race, acceptance and beauty. For instance, students can read poems with an “eye on” beauty and acceptance in Langston Hughes’ “I Too, Sing America,” as well as Runett Nia Ebo’s “Why God Made Me Black.” Students can take the lens a step further, and look at gender, and question whether men and women are viewed the same or differently through the embedded themes of race, acceptance and beauty. The use of lenses can help students gather greater understanding of the complex themes in the poems throughout this unit.

Activities

Activity 1: Poetry Matching Game

This activity should be completed to determine prior knowledge of selected poems, and also to monitor student understanding after reviewing poems throughout the unit.

Learning Objective

Before reading poems, students will review titles of poems and try to match them with a few lines or a stanza from the poem. Students can share out and provide a rationale for pairing titles with lines/stanzas.

Procedure

Start with having students gather at a common place in the classroom: carpet area, desks in a circle, etc. Play a game called “Guess that song.” Repeat certain lyrics from popular songs that students may listen to, and see if students can name the title of the song. After a few rounds, dismiss students to work individually and tell them they will be doing a similar activity at their seats, but with poems and titles that some of them may not know. Assure them that the activity is a teaching tool and will help provide the teacher with information about what students know so far about the topic. Poem titles and passage pairings should include one from each style: Negro Spirituals and Hymns, Blues and Harlem Renaissance, Contemporary, and Hip-Hop. For example, for Blues and Harlem Renaissance, the title “I Too, Sing America” can be on one slip and the passage “Besides, They’ll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed” ²⁵ on another slip. Using 2Pac’s “Changes”

may be ideal to represent Hip-Hop, so add the title “Changes” and students must pair it with the verse from the song, “That’s just the way it is,/ things will never be the same,/ that’s just the way it is/ aww yeah.”²⁶ These selections should be cut out and placed in an envelope for students to sort and match. To show the differences between titles and passages, perhaps use different colors (titles are blue, and stanzas are red), or different sizes of font. Once students have matched titles with passages, they can share out and explain their reasoning for selections. Afterwards share with students the accurate correlations. As an enrichment activity, students can choose a favorite title and passage and write a short essay about how race, acceptance and beauty are displayed.

Activity 2: Poetic Visual Representation

This activity is intended to be completed through the duration of one week, and may be shortened if necessary.

Learning Objective

Students will focus on how race is portrayed in the poem. After reading “Go Down, Moses,” students will be able to develop a visual representation that depicts a segment of the poem. Students create one of the following: poster, three-dimensional display or PowerPoint Presentation.

Procedure

Launch the lesson by reading aloud “Go Down, Moses.” Ask students if they have heard the song before. On chart paper or other display jot down places where students have heard the song. Write on the board the chorus: “Go down, Moses, / Way down in Egypt’s Land. / Tell ol’ Pharaoh, / Let my people go.”²⁷ Ask students what they believe the lines mean. Have student volunteers circle key words that they find essential to understanding the song. After students circle key words, have students make a list of the words in their journals. Ask students to define each word to the best of their ability. Afterwards, students may share out. Students may need some prompting when viewing through the lens of race. Therefore, ask students to add a column to their key word list and definitions that says “race.” Ask students to jot down ways the words represent race. Add stanza seven to the board: “The Lord told Moses what to do, / Let my people go, / To lead the Hebrew children through, / Let my people go.”²⁸ Ask students to add “Hebrew” to the list. Have student turn and talk with one another about what the word Hebrew means. Once students share out, distribute the song and ask students to circle all the races in the song. Students should circle, “Egypt’s Land, Israel and Hebrew.” Ask students to make a three column chart in their journal and explain the role each race plays in the poem. Once students complete, have students make a two column chart that says “Moses and Pharaoh.” Tell students to summarize how the characters are portrayed. Students should conclude that Egyptians held the Hebrew Israelites under captivity in Egypt as outlined in the song. Students will then develop a visual representation that depicts a segment of the song. Students may work in partnerships, groups or individually to complete this activity. Distribute pieces of paper that have the chorus, and stanzas one to seven on each paper. The student(s) will then plan how to create the visual representation of the stanza selected. After students complete the displays, students can explain how race is shown throughout.

Activity 3: Poetic Call and Response

This activity can be completed after reading a portion of a selected poem or whole poem, when students can write a “response poem” to the poem as a reflection of their own experience.

Learning Objective

Students will focus on how acceptance and beauty are portrayed throughout the poem. After reading the first portion of the poem, students will be able to write a “response” poem to Runett Nia Ebo’s “Why God Made Me Black.” The “response” poem should be in an identical format to “Why God Made Me Black.”

Procedure

Write on the board “Why are you Black?” Encourage students that this thought provoking inquiry is to guide discussion regarding a poem called “Why God Made Me Black.” Ask students to turn and talk to one other about the question. Shortly after, read the first portion of “Why God Made Me Black,” by Runett Nia Ebo. The poem is written as a call and response, with the writer asking why she is black in the first portion, and God responding in the second. Encourage students to consider who the writer is speaking to. Guide students to question whether the writer shows that being Black is something that is accepted and embraced, and something that is beautiful in America. Ask students to determine whether what the writer is saying correlates with how Blacks are seen in America today. Afterwards, distribute a copy of the first portion of the poem, and have students annotate the lines and couplets. Students may work individually or with a partner. In the students’ annotations they should add an arrow next to the lines or couplets and write a response. After students write their responses some may share out. Once students have shared, read and distribute the second portion of the poem, God’s response. Ask students to draw a Venn diagram in their poetry journals to compare their responses with God’s. After reading the entire poem, revisit the questions “Why are you Black,” and “Is being Black something that is described as being accepted and beautiful in America?” Ask students to record responses in their poetry journals.

Activity 4: Poetic Imagery Time Travel

This activity should be completed after students have reviewed at least one poem from each time period, from the 1800s to 2000s.

Learning Objective

After students select a favored poem from a time period studied in the unit, they will be given an image showing portrayals of race, acceptance and beauty. They will create a new poem that shows a combination of the image and how it relates to issues regarding race, acceptance and beauty in America through time. Students will write free verse. They will also include imagery, personification, simile and metaphor in their poems. They will also conduct research surrounding the time period the poem was written in and when the picture was taken, then include this information in their poems.

Procedure

To begin, on four pieces of chart paper, displayed in a central location of the classroom, write the time period, year and title of one of the poems studied in the unit. For instance, write Contemporary, 1990s, “Why God Made Me Black,” by Runett Nia Ebo. Write Hip-Hop, 2000s, “We Will Not,” by T.I. Write Negro Spirituals and Hymns, 1800s, “Go Down, Moses.” Finally, write Blues and Harlem Renaissance, 1920s, “I, Too, Sing America,” by Langston Hughes. Ask students to work in groups with no more than four people in one group. Consider assigning roles so that aptitude for the work is shared diplomatically in groups. Groups can select one poem. After students select a poem they should randomly choose a photo. Consider photos that are appropriate for the grade level. Photos can depict positive and negative stances in Black History. Tell students to make

connections between the selected poem and the image selected, and how they both relate to this day and age. They are to write a new poem that includes imagery, personification, simile and metaphor. After students write their new poems, they are to research the selected poem from a specific time period and the image selected. After research has been conducted, students can caption their image, and give their poem a title. As an extension students may transform the image to what the image would have looked like today. For example, students can adapt a black and white image and change it to color. Students may also consider pixel art, 3D depictions, collage, or any other form to modernize their image. Students should share their new poems with the class, and provide a rationale for the style of their poems, explaining how their poem relates to issues regarding race, acceptance and beauty in America. Students' poems and images can be displayed throughout the classroom to show thematic variations and comparisons.

Activity 5: Poetic “Living Timeline” or Interpretive Dance

Learning Objective

For the “living timeline” students will be able to perform a “live” timeline of how race, acceptance and beauty are depicted through the poems over time, starting with the earliest forms of poetry, Negro Spirituals and Hymns, and ending with more contemporary forms of poetry, such as Hip-Hop.

For the interpretive dance, students will select a poem or section of a poem and “dance out” the lines or lyrics of the poem. As in Charades, other students can try to guess which poem is being represented and provide a rationale regarding selections.

Students will have a choice to perform the living timeline or an interpretive dance. The student(s) performing will write a rationale for the types of movements or dialogue selected to portray the meaning of what they are performing.

Procedure

As a warm-up and culmination to the unit, ask students to recall all the poems read over the various time periods studied. Ask students to write a one page opinion essay that shares how they thought race, acceptance and beauty was represented in the poems. After explaining the meaning of living timeline and interpretive dance, post the words living timeline on one side of the classroom, and interpretive dance on another, and have students walk to the location they are interested in. Ensure that students are aware that interpretive dance includes no words, just movements, and can include music, and the living timeline can have dialogue, movement and music. Moreover, the living timeline would preferably include “still shots,” where students are still like a mannequin, and then when someone gives a cue the still images come to “life,” and act out the time period in history. Students should use lines from poems read, and make reference to poets throughout the scenes. There should be a total of four scenes highlighting each poetic time period studied. In both the timeline and dance students should be able to bring the poems to life. For instance, in “Go Down Moses,” students should be able to show the laborious conditions for the Israelites under captivity. Furthermore, in “I, Too, Sing America” students may see someone working in the kitchen when company comes. Students can begin working in groups of four or less to perform a living timeline or interpretive dance. Post the criteria for both selections in a visible location in the classroom. The criteria should encourage students to present a performance that is no more than three minutes, and no less than two. Students in groups are required to provide a step by step playbook or guide that shows movements and/or dialogue. Prior to performing, students should write a one page essay indicating how their group’s performance portrays race, acceptance and beauty throughout the piece.

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Teaching Resource

Understanding the Structure of Poetry

These terms and definitions may be helpful when teaching young learners about poetry.

Poetry Term	Definition
Line	*The main organizational unit of a poem.
Stanza	*The grouping together of lines arranged according to a fixed plan, such as line length or rhyme scheme; stanzas are set apart by blank space.
Rhythm	*The regular repetition of a beat, the rise and fall of syllables, and the arrangement of them from word to word and line to line.

Meter	*The regular rhythmic pattern in a poem; the arrangement of beats or accents in a line of poetry designated by a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that helps establish the rhythm of the poem.
Free Verse	*Poetry that makes use of natural cadences rather than a fixed metrical pattern.
Enjambment	*The break at the end of the line that interrupts the natural rhythm or grammar and is dragged onto the next line.
Limerick	*A humorous nonsense poem.
Lyric Poem	*The focus is on the poet’s feelings, observations, thoughts and perceptions.
Couplet	*A two-line stanza.
Tercet	*A three-line stanza.
Quatrain	*A four-line stanza.
Iambic Pentameter	*Five iambs in one line.
Concrete Poem	*Poem whose shape is composed to match its theme.
Formal Poetry	*A predetermined, uniform, and regular pattern of lines, rhythm, and stanzas.
Sonnet	*Has 14 or 16 lines and is written in iambic pentameter.
Repeating Lines	*Words, or phrases as a way that poets make poems musical.

***Definitions Cited from:** *Poetry Lessons to meet the Common Core State Standards*

Additional Poets and Poems to Consider throughout the Unit

Poet/Artist	Poem or Published Work	Connection to Unit
Nikki Giovanni	<i>Hip-Hop speaks to children: A Celebration of poetry with a beat</i>	Includes poems by Nikki Giovanni and various poets that talk about Black beauty and empowerment.
Langston Hughes	“My People”	Short poem that depicts the beauty of being Black.
Maya Angelou	“Phenomenal Woman”	Poem that declares and celebrates Black women.
Alicia Keys	“Girl on Fire”	Contemporary song that celebrates the strength of women.
Common, John Legend	“Glory”	Lyricists speak of standing up for justice against brutality.
Black Eyed Peas	“Where is the Love”	Call to action for love due to the condition the world is in, with hate and violence.
Aaradhna	“Brown Girl”	Speaks of having more to offer than what is seen on the outside.
Beyonce, Kendrick Lamar	“Freedom”	Highlights being free in a society that captivates Black Americans.
Louis Armstrong	“What a Wonderful World”	Speaks of the beauty that makes up the world.
Marvin Gaye	“What’s Going On?”	Call to action for peace and brotherhood.

Reading List for Students

“America the Beautiful” by Katharine Lee Bates

An American Patriotic song, sung to commemorate the beauty of the American landscape.

“Go Down, Moses”

Negro Spiritual and Hymn that is most common in the Black Church. The song tells the story of Moses’ journey to escape captivity from the Egyptians. Can also be read through the lens of slavery, where Harriet Tubman’s code name was Moses, and this song was sung during slaves’ escape to the North.

The Negro National Anthem: “Lift Every Voice and Sing”

The Negro National Anthem, sung popularly by Blacks in America to celebrate independence and as a dedication to ancestors that fought for freedom.

“I, Too, Sing America” by Langston Hughes

The poem was written in the 1926, and is Hughes’ declaration of America. He writes to let the reader know that he is also a part of America, and he is beautiful, just like anyone else. He writes to show that he should be included and accepted in America.

“Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes

The poem describes the narrator’s experience in America. He writes informing the reader that America was never America to him. He never had a place in America, yet is claiming that America needs to be “taken back,” and become what it once was—seemingly the land of the free, and a beautiful place to be.

“Why God Made Me Black” by Runett Nia Ebo

The poem, written in 1994 is formatted as a call and response. The writer is calling on God and asking why she is Black. The author shares examples of how Black represents negativity, something that is ugly and hated. The response is from God, and His declaration for how beautiful Black is.

“And We Are Still Here” by Millard Lowe

This contemporary poem is loaded with imagery and symbolism. The poem makes comparisons to how far Black people have come in America, and how much farther Blacks have to go, with the fact that “we are still here.” We are still here, implies that not much progress has been made. The writer also includes chorus lines from Negro Spirituals and Hymns between stanzas, such as “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve seen,” and “Amazing Grace...I once was lost....” These lines are there to symbolize ancestry, whereas the preceding lines speak of what is implied from the spiritual referenced subsequently. In other words, the “troubles seen,” and the act of “being lost” are outlined in preceding stanzas.

“Changes” by Tupac

The Hip-Hop song, similar to Lowe’s “And We Are Still Here,” shows the gains that Blacks have made in America, and how things must change, and as a contradiction Tupac repeats the line “that’s just the way it is,” implying that change may never come.

“We Will Not” by T.I.

This Hip-Hop song speaks to a movement of the new millennium, called “Black Lives Matter.” T.I. is proclaiming that Blacks must come together to fight police brutality, and that as the Negro Spiritual says “I shall not be moved,” T.I. is declaring that “we” as Blacks in America will not be moved in our stance to be treated equally and fairly in America. T.I. repeats the line “We will not,” stating that we will not continue to sit back and watch Black lives taken from us, and we will stand up and fight for justice.

Appendix—Implementing District Standards

The following standards are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for 5th Grade Literature. The Craft and Structure standards outlined address the poetry content within this unit.

CCSS. ELA-Literacy RL 5.2

“Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic summarize the text.”

Students will analyze the theme(s) of poems and how they have evolved to discuss issues of race, acceptance and beauty in America.

CCSS. ELA-Literacy RL 5.4

“Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.”

Students will identify and implement figurative language in poems reviewed and created throughout the unit.

CCSS. ELA-Literacy RL 5.5

“Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.”

Students will analyze the structure of poems and synthesize how the stanzas are arranged in order to make up the whole poem.

Endnotes

1. Keto, Tsehlona. *The African Centered Perspective of History*, 13
2. Ibid
3. Ginwright, Shawn. *Black in School: Afrocentric reform, urban youth, and the promise of hip-hop culture*, 16
4. Ibid
5. Watkins, William. *Race and Education: The Roles of History and Society in Educating African American* , 25

6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. Jones, Marvin D. *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: America's New Dilemma*, 37
10. Gabbin, Joanne. *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, 64
11. "African American Spirituals"
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. Ibid
16. Ibid
17. Gabbin, Joanne. *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, 77
18. "A Reading Guide to Langston Hughes"
19. Ibid
20. Ibid
21. "Why God Made Me Black"
22. Jones, Marvin D. *Fear of a Hip-Hop Planet: America's New Dilemma*, 58
23. Ibid
24. "Common Core State Standards"
25. "I, Too, Sing America"
26. "Changes"
27. "Go Down Moses"
28. Ibid

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