



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2007 Volume I: American Voices: Listening to Fiction, Poetry, and Prose

Searching Literature to Find and Fall in Love with Your Own Voice

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Introduction

Malcolm X writes in his autobiography that he was the most articulate hustler on the block; a few hundred words were all he knew and needed to work the street. But once imprisoned, and motivated to write a letter to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, he was embarrassed to discover that not only did he not have the vocabulary to express his thoughts, he couldn't even read his own writing. Frustration with his handicap turned into powerful motivation, and he transformed his incarceration into a crash course in literacy: copying the entire dictionary, joining the prison debate team, and reading so many books that he permanently impaired his eyesight. Gradually he liberated the voice that was imprisoned inside of him, and he liberated himself from prison three years before serving his ten-year sentence. In the course of time, he became a formidable voice for the Nation of Islam in the United States and ultimately used his vocabulary and writing skills to craft his renowned autobiography.

If Malcolm X had not aggressively sought and exercised his voice, both orally and in writing, he might have languished in obscurity in prison with only a couple of mug shots in a file cabinet folder instead of the two by three foot poster on my bulletin board capturing him dressed in a suit and tie, making a dynamic speech into the bank of microphones before him. Printed across the top of the poster, referring to the right of African Americans to be respected as human beings and to be given the rights of a human being in this society, is his famous mantra: "By any means necessary." If anyone had told the hustler, Malcolm (Red) Little when he had his mug shots taken for prison that he would discover the eloquent and riveting voice of the man who later became Malcolm X, he would have laughed at them and probably called them some of the four letter words in his limited three-hundred word vocabulary.

Ironically, Malcolm X had to go to prison to liberate the power of the voice inside him. I am adopting his mantra, "By any means necessary," in this unit that focuses on a diversity of voices in literature. It is designed for my high school students, many of whom feel imprisoned in school, in the 'hood, in themselves, within the limits of their street language, within the limits of their writing skills, and their futures. I will teach it with the optimism that in *hearing* the voices in this literature, they will begin to explore, experiment with and hear the range of their own powerful and amazing voices.

Rationale

The high school students, ranging from grades nine through twelve, in my Writing Seminar classes at Wilbur Cross Annex have been consigned or relegated to the Annex because, among other things, they need to catch up on the credits they are missing to be at the grade level appropriate for their age. Along with a shortage of credits, most students, due to erratic attendance, are missing many skills that are crucial for effective speaking, reading, and writing, and for communicating, in general. For my students, ninety-nine percent of whom are African American and Latino, the 'hood is the extent of their world, where they jockey for visibility and voice among their peers. For most of them, their voices do not extend beyond the borders of their neighborhoods. And they have little opportunity to hear the language that professional men and women use to promote themselves and to communicate in politics and commerce. Mostly, they talk and listen to their peers. They have not been encouraged to advocate for themselves or exercise their entitlement beyond their own small world. And they are unconvinced and/or unaware that exploring literature will open possibilities for them and expand their world. Uncertain and fearful, many of them have no interest in pushing beyond their perimeters.

My goal in this unit is to expose my students to a diversity of voices in literature: poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and autobiography, along with the feelings and attitudes behind these voices, ranging from voices that belong to people who think of themselves as victims, and those of people who are trying to break out of the victim image, to voices of people who think of themselves as utterly liberated and empowered. Through listening to these voices, and identifying the range in attitudes and feelings of the people or characters who own them, my students will have the opportunity to discover the attitudes and feelings behind their own voices, and experiment with their newfound awareness.

Interpreting the attitudes and feelings behind the voices in the literature we read, and performing and listening to these voices, students will break out into their own new-found voices and will create a portfolio of their work. Some students may wish to illustrate their pieces, displaying both in the classroom. It is my hope that this unit will make my students more aware of how one's attitudes and feelings influence how he/she sounds, and make them more aware that they can use their own voices creatively and effectively in a context larger than the one in which they now live. At the conclusion of the unit, students will have a portfolio of their own work, with reflections and observations about their own attitudes and feelings and how these drive the voices in the pieces they have crafted. I am going to encourage students to include in their portfolio pieces of published writing that the class has read which they especially like, because in many cases, these pieces will have been the inspiration for their own work. While they will have shared their work orally as the unit unfolds, students will pick their favorite pieces they have written to present in a culminating event.

Practicing Language Arts CAPT skills

Because reaching competency on the Language Arts section of the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) is a requirement for graduation, my unit also will include exercises that familiarize my students with the four questions that appear in this Language Arts section of the CAPT. These questions range from: a response/reaction, "What are your thoughts and questions about this piece of literature?" to "How successful

was the author in creating an effective piece of literature?" Students need opportunities and the vocabulary to experiment with and practice various ways of answering these abstract questions.

Voices in the 'hood with Tupac Shakur

A natural place to begin this adventure into the mystery of how voices express attitudes and feelings is in the 'hood with a few poems by Tupac Shakur from the posthumously published book and CD, *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*. Students will read poems in Tupac's handwriting, and listen to the voices reading these poems on the CD: "Sometimes I Cry," and "Please Wake Me When I Am Free." They will read these poems out loud, experimenting with the voice of the person in the poem. We will brainstorm about how the person whose voice we hear feels, and then specifically what his/her life is like to make him/her feel that way. Hearing the voices on the CD and hearing students experiment with the voices should help with these activities. "Sometimes I Cry," composed, for the most part, of rhyming couplets, opens and closes with feelings of loneliness:

Sometimes when I'm alone

I cry because I'm on my own

The world moves fast and it would rather pass u by

Than 2 stop and c what makes u cry

It's painful and sad and sometimes I cry

And no one cares about why (Shakur, 7).

After hearing this poem read aloud and reading it aloud themselves, students will make observations as to how the speaker feels, while a student records them on the board or on a transparency on the overhead projector. Then, next to each feeling, students will identify the line or couplet in the poem that led them to this observation. They will speculate on what the speaker's life is like that causes him/her to give voice to these feelings. And dealing specifically with the text, they might answer what it means to be "on my own." I will ask them to give some examples of what the narrator means by, "The world moves fast." Or why does he/she think "it would rather pass u by?" Another question that challenges students to make connections (which is one of the CAPT questions) is, "Have you ever been on one end or the other of this situation: the one who feels alone and as if no one cares, or have you been the one who passes people by when they needed you to listen or to care, or have you been both?" Students might speculate on whether the speaker will ever get anyone to listen.

These last questions should create an opportunity for students to write about their own experiences on one end or the other, or both ends, of Tupac's topic. This is also an opportunity for students to write about fictional characters rather than themselves. In fact, a student might write a dialogue between the person who feels alone and is trying to make contact with the world and the person who is rushing by.

The second poem, "Please wake me when I'm free," by Tupac, also written in rhyming couplets, is about feeling culturally and intellectually imprisoned by a prejudiced society. It contrasts the pre-slavery period in

Africa when kings reigned over men and women who were equals with the present nightmare of poverty and captivity by a culture that dismisses the significance of black men and women:

Please wake me when I'm free

I cannot bear captivity

Where my culture I'm told holds no significance

Please wake me when I'm free

I cannot bear captivity

4 I would rather be stricken blind

than 2 live without expression of mind (Shakur, 15)

We will follow the same formula for this poem that we used for Tupac's first poem, listening to the poem on the CD, and reading it aloud ourselves, varying the voice to try to hear the full range of the feelings and attitudes. The students will answer the question, "What feelings do we hear from the speaker's voice as the poem continues to unfold, and what evidence is there for these feelings?" Students will consider the significance of the line that the speaker repeats, "I cannot bear captivity." To what kinds of captivity might he/she be referring? How is he/she choosing to deal with his/her captivity? The first poem was rather personal; is this one personal, political, cultural? Students will give reasons for their answers.

This would be a great place for students to try writing a poem or a piece of prose that expresses captivity by society or, for that matter, feelings of discrimination, calling on their own voices to express what *they* are feeling. For their own poem or prose, they will repeat the brainstorming activity we did for Tupac's two poems: "How does the person in the piece you have written feel, and, specifically, what is his/her life like to make him/her feel this way?" I hope this might begin to raise my students' awareness of this rather profound question, "How does the way I feel make me sound?" This also will be the start of their portfolios, which may include, not only the pieces they write and select, but their observations and reflections on them.

Poetri gives full voice to his po-hop poem *Urges* and others

To stay in their comfort zone a while longer, we will read aloud several free verse "po-hop" poems by the poet Poetri who appeared on Broadway in Russell Simmons' 2003 Tony Award winning *Def Poetry Jam* production. The poems we will read may all be found in the publication *Russell Simmons Def Jam Poetry on Broadway* . Poetri also has produced "Poetri: the beginning of Po-hop," a CD of several of his very popular poems, available at his website. Aply classified as "po-hop," Poetri's free verse poems are a popular combination of poetry and hip-hop. Here too, students will have the opportunity to listen to the poems performed by Poetri, himself, and to try their own voices out on the funny and poignant poems in the book: "Urges," "Dating Myself," "Money," "Sometimes I pretend I'm Michael Jackson," and "Poet Rock Star."

Again, the underlying question for each of these poems is, "What is the relationship between how the speaker

feels and how he sounds? How does the voice in the poem convey his feelings and attitude? How does the voice change during the course of the poem?" And, of course, the students will practice the skill of finding evidence to support their observations. Students need a lot of practice at finding evidence to support observations, not only for the CAPT but as a life skill. For that matter, my students need a lot of practice making observations.

The poem "Urges" is a litany of every kind of urge: from jumping over the counter at McDonalds where they never get his order right, and the urge to start yelling in the library because they're always Shhhhshing him, the urge to go rob a bank on broke days, to the urge to cry in public. He explores what urges are, what kinds of situations prompt them, and why he doesn't follow through on most of them. This poem is a natural for my students to try writing about the kinds of urges *they* have. Illustrating their poems on "Urges" should be a lot of fun for visually creative students.

In "Dating Myself" the young man whose voice we hear is trying to find a way to cope with the rejection he feels that no one seems to want to date him and be his girl. He comes up with the brilliant idea that he will date himself because as he says,

. . . you know how women are

once they see you with someone

all of a sudden now they want to get with you! (Simmons, 65)

While he puts on a brave front, and sounds as if he really has found the answer to his dilemma, underneath his humor and cleverness, it seems obvious that he is trying to make the best of his pain. But, from the students' point of view, they might speculate on whether they think the voice is trying to mask the pain that flows just beneath the surface or whether he really is satisfied with his rather unusual solution to the problem. Students will demonstrate how they think he feels by reading aloud and showing how they think he sounds. To answer the question, "How are attitudes and feelings expressed through the speaker's voice?" students will need to track the speaker's feelings and attitudes through the seven stanzas of this poem, finding evidence for their observations. In many of the poems we will read, the voice expresses a progression of feelings and attitudes, sometimes easy to discern and sometimes very complex. One of my lesson plans focuses on this activity.

Because students will be creating their own representations of many pieces they are reading and *acting*, if you will, it seems most effective to separate the works by genre, progressing from poetry, to short, short stories, and concluding with autobiographical excerpts, in each case observing who feels trapped, with no way out, who feels trapped but is strategizing a way to get himself or herself out, and finally, who has managed to liberate himself or herself entirely. These observations are critical if students are to develop an awareness of how attitudes and feelings are the force behind the voice in the literature and the force behind their own voices; and it makes the goal of liberation clear, i.e., helps the students see it as a matter of stages. As I expressed earlier, students will reflect on the text we discuss, make observations, and find evidence for their observations for both the literature we read and their own pieces of writing.

An African American and a Latino consider "The Question of Race"

After playing with and exploring the voices and what lies beneath them in Poetri's po-hop, and trying their own hand at it, students will experiment with the voices in the poem "On the Question of Race . " This is a free-verse dialogue between an African American and a Latino American who speak alternately and then simultaneously in shared stanzas that repeat themselves almost as a chorus, about how they feel about filling out application forms that ask them to write down their race. With the potential for drama and the interaction between two readers, this poem will make an effective segue between Poetri's po-hop and a quintet of poems that will wrap up this section of the unit. This poem, "On the Question of Race," in which the two students explore in eight stanzas their real identity beyond the standard choices, (Black, White, Hispanic, or other) on the application, offers an effective formula for my students to imitate as they write about their own identity. The topics cover: favorite foods, favorite music, childhood games, grandparents, geography of ancestors and their own geography, addresses where they have lived, schools they have attended, family make-up, etc. My students will present their poems as a dialogue, just as the two students did in the original poem.

Students could readily answer the first of the four Language Arts CAPT questions in response to this poem, "On the Question of Race," "Dating Myself," and several other poems. The broad question is: "What are your thoughts and questions about this poem? Write down your first reaction or response to the poem and explain why you reacted this way." Prompts that might get students started are: (1.) At first I thought. . . but then as I finished reading (2.) The character . . . who said or did reminds me of . . . (3.) This poem seems to be about . . . because . . . (4.) The title of the poem is a good choice because. . . (See Lesson Plan # 2.)

Five poems explore the voices of the locked in and the liberated

"Locked In"

We will wrap up this section of the unit with a quintet of poems that progresses from the protagonist, in the poem "Locked In," who laments that he lives, of all places, in a coconut, and is waiting to be extricated, to the protagonist, in "The Journey," who announces with conviction in the very first line of the poem, "One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began. . ." (Oliver, 38). These five poems may appear eclectic at first glance, but the feelings and attitudes expressed by the voices progress from one who sees himself as a willing victim, cramped up in a dark coconut, hoping someone will rescue him so he won't spend his entire life there, to one who has empowered himself to walk away from the forces pulling him down and holding him back, and finally listening to and following the lead of his own voice:

into the world,

determined to do

the only thing you could do -

determined to save

the only life you could save (Oliver, 38).

While the free verse poem "Locked In" by Ingemar Leckius is a mere thirteen lines long, the image of someone trying to manage to live in a coconut, and "shave" every morning, is so bizarre that it challenges the reader to wonder just why a person would *choose* to spend his entire life in a coconut, and it makes us feel how hard it is to do even ordinary things in as un-free place. He declares:

A person who chooses to live in a coconut!

Such a person is one in a million (Nye, 152)!

At the same time, he says he is most pained by the thought that he has no way to get in touch with the outside world; miserable as he is, alone in his tight, dark space, his liberation seems totally dependent upon someone from the outside world stumbling upon the coconut and cracking it open:

If no one out there happened to find the coconut,

If no one cracked it, then I was doomed

to live all my life in the nut, and maybe even die there. . . (Nye, 152)

The final image with which he leaves the reader, and his *take* on it, is, perhaps, the most bazaar, and students will probably have varying interpretations of what this reveals about the coconut-dweller's feelings and attitude about himself:

But, I have a brother-in-law who

lives in an

acorn (Nye, 152).

As students give voice to the protagonist through reading this poem aloud, I will challenge them to brainstorm about the feelings and attitude behind the voice. This could present an opportunity to think and talk about what living in the coconut might represent and how any of us may from time to time live there, hoping to be rescued from situations and lives over which we feel we have no control. It could also be a metaphor for one's voice being locked inside himself or herself, waiting to be liberated. I am excited by the prospect of students illustrating both "Locked In" and the students' poems that it generates.

"Saturday at the Canal"

One of my favorite lines from this set of five poems is the opening line of the free-verse poem, "Saturday at the Canal," by Gary Soto:

I was hoping to be happy by seventeen (Soto).

While the man stuck in the coconut gives the impression that he has been there for a while (he, at least, is old enough to shave every morning), the protagonist in Soto's poem is a high school student adept with metaphors and indictments:

School was a sharp check mark in the

An obnoxious tuba playing at noon because our team

Was going to win at night. The teachers were

Too close to dying to understand (Soto).

Revealing his feelings and attitudes about his present incarceration in school, he and a friend sit by the canal on Saturday, planning their get-away to San Francisco, a place on a picture postcard he has pinned to his bedroom wall:

Hitchhike under the last migrating birds . . .

. . . By bus or car,

By the sway of train over a long bridge,

We wanted to get out. The years froze

As we sat on the bank. Our eyes followed the water,

White-tipped but dark underneath, racing out of town (Soto).

Unlike the victim of life in a coconut, Soto's narrator is making his own plans to get out. At the end of the poem, however, it appears that life is passing him by, and he is still sitting by the canal, watching water racing out of town. Students should be able to relate to this protagonist because he is a high school student and he doesn't like school. What I want to know is what feelings and circumstances may have held him back from his dream? Why didn't he make it happen? We will brainstorm about these questions and they should provide a good segue for students to write their own poem or prose piece beginning, "I was hoping to be happy by. . . ." or, "I was hoping to be by"

This poem also offers an opportunity for students to practice the third question on the Language Arts section of the CAPT: "With which character, event, or events in the story can you most closely relate? When have you or someone you know needed or tried to make a similar decision or been able to have a similar realization? Use examples of the specific actions, reactions or feelings of one of the story's (or poem's) characters and connect them to your own experiences or other experiences you may have read about or seen." Obviously, the question will have to be tailored slightly to fit this piece.

"The Prison Cell"

The next poem in the quintet is titled simply "The Prison Cell" by Mahmoud Darwish, a famous Palestinian poet and dissident, who was in fact imprisoned for his political activism. While his title is simple enough, there is nothing simple about the poem. Like the others, it takes the first person narrative stance and puts the author in close proximity to the reader, inviting identification. The narrator in this poem has been imprisoned, but the poem begins by emphasizing possibility:

It is possible

It is possible at least sometimes. . .

It is possible especially now

To ride a horse

Inside a prison cell

And run away (Nye, 48)

This poem includes a dialogue between the prisoner and the prison guard in which the prisoner gradually turns everything in his cell into objects of liberation, i.e. his chain into a pencil, the ceiling into a saddle, and the cell itself into a distant land. And the guard attempts to keep locking him down and bolting him in, declaring ". . .he didn't care for poetry." Poetry and speech, of course, allows for freedom, even when one is confined in prison.

The prison guard got mad:

He put an end to my dialogue.

He said he didn't like my poetry,

And he bolted the door to my cell (Nye, 48).

In the end, the prisoner/poet had liberated himself and it was the guard who felt imprisoned:

The prison guard grew so sad. . .

He begged me to give him back

His freedom (Nye, 48).

Questions for my students are, "Does the narrator really leave the prison? If not, how does he manage to free himself and imprison the guard to the extent that the guard is begging him to give him back his freedom?" I will ask students to observe techniques that the poet uses to convince the reader that the prisoner is truly liberated. I am counting on them identifying the use of imagery; for example, in the very first stanza, the prisoner describes riding a horse inside a prison cell. He describes bringing water from the Nile, and trees from the orchards of Damascus, the moon from the nights of Baghdad, and wine from the vineyards of Algiers.

Of course, there is the over-arching question, "How does the voice of the prisoner express his feelings and attitude about himself, and how does the guard do this as well?"

Here, a man in a prison cell tells us in the first stanza that it is possible to run away; in the second stanza, to make the prison walls disappear. This is certainly not a fellow feeling stuck in a coconut! The character of the guard is very interesting because at the outset, he is the in-charge prison guard, using conventional means such as chains and bolts on the cell door to confine his prisoner. But, by the end of the poem, as he has gradually come to realize that his conventions don't work anymore, and he has lost his power; he is pleading for his freedom from the self-empowered prisoner. Students will grapple with how it happened that the prison guard felt that he had to plead to his prisoner to have his freedom returned.

This poem could lead to a discussion about one's sense of freedom. To what extent does being imprisoned determine one's freedom? Are those who are not in prison cells free? Do they feel free? Malcolm X said in his autobiography, an excerpt of which we will read in this unit, ". . . and my reading of books, months passed

without my even thinking about being in imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life."

"The Calling"

In "The Calling" by Luis J. Rodriguez the protagonist takes the first person narrative stance as in the other poems in this group, and he too is imprisoned, but he too infuses hope in his first line and first stanza:

The calling came to me

while I languished

in my room, while I

whittled away my youth

in jail cells

and damp *barrio* fields (Rodriguez).

Using the verbs *languished* and *whittled* to refer to how he spent his youth, he goes on to say that the calling brought him to life out of this captivity. Rodriguez uses strong images to refer to his body as street-scarred, a brown boy without a name, hidden from America's eyes, before the calling made him feel visible. He says he waited sixteen years for this calling, for this time:

It called me to war,

to be writer,

to be scientist,

and march with the soldiers

of change (Rodriguez).

This is no conventional war to which he is being called. I will ask students to speculate on what kind of war this is and on what feelings and attitude his voice expresses in this poem. What did he go through before he heard the calling? Of course, the "calling" he hears is an experience he is having with voice. Is the calling coming from the outside or inside him? If outside, what or who could it be; if inside, what is it? Is it a positive voice? How do you know? He says he waited sixteen years for this time. Why was he waiting? What happened that caused this voice to call him *now* ? How did it happen that the voice was calling him to be *writer* , or *scientist* ? Are those simply two contrasting careers he is juxtaposing? I have way more questions than I have answers, so I hope my students will be able to come up with some possible answers. And then, I will encourage them to try writing about whether they have experienced a *calling* to make a change in their lives, or, to explore if they were to hear a *calling*, what might it be calling them away from, and toward what is it calling them? Once we have followed the progression of Rodriguez's eight stanzas, possibly using a graphic organizer to chart this progression, students may choose to follow Rodriguez's format to develop the progression of *their* calling.

"The Journey"

In the last of these five free verse poems, the narrator in "The Journey" by Mary Oliver speaks of the main character in second person, and with clear conviction from the first lines:

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice__ (Oliver, 38)

And in spite of the familiar tugging and voices imploring the protagonist to stay, the lines unfold:

But you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do (Oliver, 38),

And from a dark, stormy night, and a street strewn with branches and stones, the protagonist pushes on, and eventually sees stars burning through the night sky and hears, not the voices pulling him back, but his own voice keeping him company, as he strides out into the world. Oliver's poem is rich with images that enhance the trepidation and difficulty the traveler must be experiencing, and the word *finally* that appears in the very first line, implies that the he has been entangled back in that trembling house for some time. But in the final lines in the poem, the reader learns that the traveler is:

determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save (Oliver, 38).

There is a momentum that builds in Oliver's poem from the very first line. It carries the protagonist forward and contributes to his/her determination to escape. There is no stopping. I hope when my students read "The Journey" out loud, they will be able to sustain this driving force that I think is an integral part of the poem. The phrasing, the images, the progression of the traveler stumbling from a terrible, stormy night to one of stars and adventure helps convey how the protagonist feels about him/herself.

The second part of the Language Arts CAPT questions asks the students to choose the most important passage from the story they have read and discuss what it means and why they think it is the most important. They may write about what the quote is saying or showing about a character, the theme, or the conflict. I think "The Calling" and "The Journey" would be excellent choices for this activity.

For these five poems, I am planning to have the students complete a chart or graphic organizer that compares the voices of protagonists who see themselves as victims and stay victims, and who see themselves as victims or caught in some way but are trying to liberate themselves, and those who actually succeed in

liberating themselves. (See Lesson # 3.) I am exploring the idea that in our lives we all feel caught, from time to time, by various situations. When do we give up and remain caught, and when and how do we try to free ourselves and fail, and when and how do we succeed in liberating ourselves? The voices in these poems express these alternatives. I want to challenge my students to think about these questions in relation to their own lives.

"The Parable of the Eagle" who thinks it is a chicken

The short, short stories I have included all have themes about protagonists who are either helplessly caught, or are struggling to get free, or who have actually succeeded in freeing themselves from some form of confinement. Their attitudes and feelings expressed through their voices about their confinement are crucial to the extent to which they are able to free themselves. "The Parable of the Eagle" by James Aggrey is an interesting place to begin because the protagonist doesn't even know its freedom has been taken away from it. A chick (baby eagle) is captured by a farmer who takes it home and raises it to be a chicken among his barnyard chickens. A naturalist comes along when the eagle is grown and insists to the owner that it is still has the heart of an eagle. The farmer disagrees with him, stating, "It is a chicken, and it will never fly" (McCormack). But he allows the naturalist to test his theory. After three attempts, first picking the eagle up in the barnyard, then taking it to the top of the farm house, and finally, to the top of a high mountain, the naturalist convinces the eagle that it is not a chicken, but an eagle, and it soars into the sky and never returns. This little story also introduces body language because the eagle never utters until it shrieks at the very end as it soars high in the sky. Yet, its actions throughout the story clearly express its sense of itself.

It appears that the eagle never would have been liberated if the naturalist had not come along and insisted, again and again, "It is an eagle!" to the farmer who retorts, again and again, "No, it is a chicken!" (McCormack) This story is, in some ways, similar to the poem about the man who lives in the coconut, except the eagle has no idea that it is imprisoned in the barnyard and seems perfectly willing to live as a chicken, which is ironic because, of course, chickens are prey for eagles.

This story is short enough to be read aloud a few times during a class period. Students might discuss what they think the conflict is; at first reading, one might think it is between the naturalist and the owner, but after another reading or two, students might focus on the naturalist and the eagle, or more importantly, on the eagle struggling with itself, as each time the naturalist lifts it up and commands it to fly, it hesitates and looks around, as if it doesn't know what to do. If the naturalist had not come along and challenged the eagle to be itself, it likely still would be in the barnyard eating chicken feed. Except for a triumphant cry at the end, the eagle doesn't make a sound; the voices we hear are those of the farmer and the naturalist. All the same, with body language, the eagle expresses itself, giving us the opportunity to explore how body language works.

As a parable, the farmer, the eagle, and the naturalist all suggest people in different positions in society. We will definitely brainstorm and discuss who these characters might represent, keeping in mind the difference between an eagle and a chicken in the bird kingdom. For example the eagle might be a teen-ager who has great potential within, but is totally unaware of it, and like the eagle, is settling for a marginalized life, such as that of the chicken. The question of who the farmer/owner represents should be a lively discussion prompted by the question, "Who in our lives tries to *own* us, or eat us, or make us less than we can be?" Ultimately, I hope my students will write about themselves or someone they know who may be living in a barnyard when

they should be in the mountains, soaring in the sky.

Fear can cause us to suppress our own voice in "Little Things are Big"

"Little Things are Big" by Jesus Colon is about a black Puerto Rican who worries that if he tries to help a white woman with her small children to get off a somewhat deserted New York subway train at midnight, she may scream, thinking, because he is a black man, he is going to mug her or hurt her, and he is so frozen by his fear that he just lets her struggle. "But how could I, a Negro and a Puerto Rican, approach this white lady who very likely might have preconceived prejudices against Negroes and everybody with foreign accents, in a deserted subway station very late at night?" (Au, 113) But then, after she has gone, he feels terrible that he disavowed his own culture that would never ignore a woman in need. He vows that if he ever gets another opportunity to help a woman, no matter what the outcome, he will do it. "But here is a promise that I make to myself here and now; if I am ever faced with an occasion like that again, I am going to offer my help regardless of how the offer is going to be received. Then I will have my courtesy with me again." (Au, 113) Struggling to liberate himself from the fear of racism, his feelings change considerably in the course of this short, short story and his voice reflects this change.

The two short stories, "The Parable of the Eagle," or "Little Things are Big," give students another opportunity to practice answering the second CAPT question, "What do you think is the most important passage in the story? What does it mean and why is it important to the story?"

A customer orders an omelet and ends up owning a restaurant in "Deportation at Breakfast"

Another short, short story, "Deportation at Breakfast" by Larry Fondation, is such a surprise. The protagonist, who tells the story in the first person, walks into a small New York restaurant for breakfast, and by a sequence of events, and because of his positive attitude, finds himself running the restaurant within an hour or so. Once he has ordered his breakfast and is settled at the counter reading his paper, the owner, Javier, "with dark black hair and a mustache and a youthful beard," who is also the cook, and apparently an illegal alien, is suddenly and swiftly spirited away in handcuffs (Thomas, 213). The hungry protagonist must decide whether to sit there and watch his breakfast burn on the griddle or throw on an apron and rescue it. "After some hesitation, I got up from my red swivel stool and went behind the counter. I grabbed an apron . . ." (Thomas, 213). Once he dons the apron, everyone mistakes him as the cook, and not wanting to disappoint customers who have come in for breakfast, he pours coffee and makes toast and scrambles eggs. Referring to six customers who walk in, he says, "I thought of telling them I didn't work there. But perhaps they were hungry." One of his last thoughts is, "Maybe I'll take out a help-wanted ad in the paper tomorrow. I have never been in the restaurant business" (Thomas, 213).

At any point he could have walked away; he could have left his breakfast burning on the griddle and gone off to another restaurant; he could have said to the two women whose money he accepted when they came to the counter to pay their bill, "I don't work here." He could have said to the six folks who came in for breakfast

after the owner had been taken away, "I'm sorry, but I am just a customer." I want my students to consider his attitude about himself and how that affects what happens in the story. I want them to think about times they have been "sitting at that counter." I hope they will write about it.

A moth follows his heart in "The Moth and the Star"

The last short, short story "The Moth and the Star" by James Thurber is also a fable. A young moth sets his heart on a star, and every night he flies toward it until he is exhausted, and every morning he crawls home. His parents are very disappointed in him that he does not fly around street lamps like his brothers and sisters, getting his wings singed like a proper moth. "You haven't burned your wings in months, boy, . . . A big strapping moth like you without a mark on him!" (Thurber, 261) But the little moth does not heed them and he continues to chase his dream. He is so intent on reaching his star that eventually he actually thinks that he has reached his star, and he is very content in his old age, while his brothers and sisters and parents have all been burned to death flying around street lights. ". . . but he went right on trying, night after night, and when he was a very, very old moth he began to think that he really had reached the star and he went around saying so. This gave him a deep and lasting pleasure, . . ." (Thurber, 261).

This fable is only two paragraphs long, so students will read it a few times out loud before we explore what might have made this little moth different from his family and how difficult it might have been for him to ignore his parents' advice. Also we will consider why his parents did not support him in his dream. This story will open up for my students the topic of having a dream that at first glance seems outrageous and unrealistic to others, even those who love you, and the challenge of hanging onto that dream even when those around you try to discourage you. This will be the basis for a creative writing piece.

All four of these stories are short enough for us to read aloud in class, listening to and experimenting with the voices in them. Students will write their own short, short stories, perhaps based on some of the dilemmas and lessons present in these stories and certainly drawing on their own dilemmas and life-lessons.

Students evaluate these four stories to practice answering the final CAPT question

These four very short stories will give my students plenty of opportunities to practice answering the final and, perhaps, the most challenging of the four Language Arts CAPT questions: "Evaluate this story. What qualities does it have that make it effective or ineffective for you as a reader? Give specific examples from the story to support your reasons for your evaluation." My students, many of whom lack the skills for this kind of challenge, have little idea what it means to evaluate a story, short of saying they didn't like it because it was boring, nor do they have the terminology to discuss *qualities*, and often do not understand what the word *effective* means in the question. Practicing answering this question and dispelling the mystery around the terms they do not understand will diminish much of the anxiety they feel when they are confronted with this test. I have found that using a short, short story for practice and, in many cases, to *introduce* question four, is far more manageable and gives students a greater feeling of confidence, than trying it out on a story of

several pages.

One of the most helpful visuals I have found to clarify what the abstract word *qualities* means is a large mobile hanging in my room. A piece of poster board measuring about three feet by six inches supports the pieces that dangle and float below. The phrase QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE STORY is highly visible on the poster board. On smaller pieces of poster board dangling from the large piece are the terms: ACTION, DETAILS, SURPRISE ENDING, CONFLICT, REALISTIC, FULL OF FEELINGS, DESCRIPTIVE, LESSON, HUMOROUS, SCARY. On the back of each of these pieces is a collage that students make from magazine cuttings, representing these terms, such as a photo of two people shouting at one another for conflict. Throughout the year, when we practice answering the question, "Is this an effective story," students have learned to look in the story for the qualities hanging from the mobile.

Malcolm X finds his voice of freedom in prison

I am completing the unit with an autobiographical excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, who describes the remarkable transformation that he experienced in prison which I referred to in my introduction to this unit. He relates how he felt in prison when he wanted to write a letter to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and he couldn't even read his own hand writing, much less make himself understood. He says, "In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there . . . But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even functional" (Malcolm X). He recounts how, with the guidance Bimbi, a very knowledgeable Muslim prisoner, he started reading and copying the dictionary, and became so fascinated that he copied the entire dictionary. He began reading in every spare minute, and the more he read, the more he wanted to read. He nearly ruined his eyes reading by the light outside his cell, after lights out. He joined the prison debate team, and used every opportunity to educate himself. After he was paroled, Malcolm X became the most charismatic speaker for the Nation of Islam in this country.

I will ask my students to consider how Malcolm X is like the protagonist in "The Prison Cell." Malcolm X transformed his prison cell into the world by copying the dictionary and reading everything he could get his hands on. Unlike the protagonist in the coconut, he wasn't waiting around for someone to rescue him. Unlike the student who was hoping to be happy, he wasn't thinking up a strategy that would liberate him, and then sitting around not executing it. He had his dream and never gave up flying towards his star, and he actually got there. I will expect my students to consider what emotions and attitudes lay behind his voice as he tells his story in this excerpt.

This four-page excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* readily lends itself to all four of the Language Arts CAPT questions which, once completed, will prepare my students to write their own creative piece about someone they know or know of who has experienced a transformation, perhaps even themselves on this adventure to find their voices.

Lesson # 1 Students track how changes in voice signal changes in feelings

Objective: By listening to the sound of the protagonist's voice and the choices of words he uses, students will track the progression of his feelings and attitudes, through the stanzas of the poem, "Dating Myself" by Poetri, and then find evidence for their observations of these feelings and attitudes. The *skill* being practiced is making observations and backing them up with evidence; the *content* for this skill is to discover how the sound of a voice and the choice of words convey the changing feelings and attitudes of a character in a piece of literature.

This activity works well in a landscape graphic organizer format that separates the paper into two columns; in the column on the left, students can make observations in their own words as to the feelings and attitudes expressed by the protagonist from the opening to the last stanza. On the right side of the paper, in the second column, they will record evidence from the poem to support observations they have made in the left column.

For example, in the first stanza one might observe that the protagonist is setting the stage for his dilemma, and he isn't feeling very good about it because he progresses from wondering what he has to do to get a *cute* girl, to what he has to do to get any girl. In the column on the right, students will copy lines or phrases from the first stanza to support this observation. Already, in the first stanza, he lets the reader know that he has had to alter his hopes for a cute girl to hope for just any girl.

In the second stanza, he admits that now he is totally discouraged and worn out from trying to get a girl; he is so debilitated from trying to prove his worth to another person that he declares he will no longer even try. Evidence for these feelings shows up in phrases such as, "I'm exhausted from thinking, fatigued from trying," . . . tired of looking." " . . .I'm desperate, weary. . .consumed . . ." "no longer will I be at the mercy of ladies to like me, no longer will I be trying to look my best for women . . ." (Simmons, 65)

And in the third stanza, he declares that his solution is simply to date himself. Students might wonder here how he might really be feeling if his only solution to finding someone who wants to date him is to date himself, even though he sounds as if this actually is a good solution. The evidence is clear in this one line of the stanza, "Yes from now on I am dating myself!" (Simmons, 65) But the jury may be out on whether he really is happy with this solution.

In the fourth stanza, the longest in the poem, he makes a case for all of reasons why dating himself is such a brilliant idea, and he actually seems very excited, satisfied, and happy about his decision. Evidence is easy to find for his positive feelings about his decision. For example, he says, "I already talk to myself / so I know my conversations will by good / I've always said that I wanted to be with / someone that's just like me. / Well there's no one more like me than me." He wraps it up by saying, "now we can get through the rough / times together. / no one to impress but myself" (Simmons, 65).

The seventh stanza begins to reveal how he really feels about dating himself when he admits that one of the best ways to attract women is by dating someone. Tongue-in-cheek he admits that he will be more appealing to women if he is with someone; he loves the idea of being a cute guy dating someone; of course all the while, the someone is only himself. So in reality, under the surface of this very up-beat little scenario, students might consider whether he really buys this innovative idea of his, or whether he is trying to make the most of it to make himself feel better. This gets tricky because, he either is really sincere, or he is lying about how he really feels.

At the end, in stanza eight, he seems totally happy about the idea of dating himself and he says that he really likes himself and finds himself appealing and will stay with himself forever, (as if he had a choice!). There is plenty of evidence for this very up-beat attitude. But then in the last two lines he reveals that if *someone better* comes along, he will abandon himself, which uncovers his real feelings about this innovative idea which is in the end, perhaps, just a desperate measure. It also suggests that this poem may be about self-image, implying that you're not worth much if you can't get a date.

Students might consider, once they have tracked his feelings and attitudes and found evidence for their observations, how his emotions change in the course of this rather short poem, and how the sound of his voice and his choice of words and phrases convey these changes in feelings and attitudes. In the first stanza he asks point blank, "What do I have to do to get a girl?" And in the second, he seems to hit emotional rock-bottom admitting to his audience, "I'm fatigued from trying to convince myself that I'm worthy of another being." By using the words *convince* and *worthy*, he is trying to convince himself, not someone else, that he is worthy. Yet, in stanza eight, he has done a 180, crowing, "I am completely happy with myself / I like myself / I mean I think I'm attractive." But in the final lines, he gives it up, "I plan to be with myself . . . until someone better comes along" (Simmons, 65).

Ideally, this activity will lead to students writing a piece in which their voices convey a change in their own feelings or attitude. This will be a challenging assignment.

Lesson # 2 Students practice the first CAPT question: Respond/React to literature

Objective: After reading aloud and listening to other students read the poem, "On The Question of Race," students will practice answering the first question that always appears on the Language Arts CAPT: "What are your thoughts and questions about this poem?" This simple question can be daunting for students who do not know what kinds of phrases will help them explore their thoughts and questions on a piece of literature. Therefore, to help them become more adept at answering this question, they will practice using some of these prompts:

"At first I thought . . . , but then, as I continued or finished reading . . . I realized that . . ."

"The narrator who said or did . . . reminds me of . . ."

"This poem seems to be about . . . because . . ."

"The title of this poem is a good choice because . . ."

"I wonder why . . ."

"This poem made me feel . . . because . . ."

"The problem in this poem seems to be . . ."

"On The Question of Race" is a dialogue poem in which there are shaded areas that two students read in

unison and then they alternate reading the other sections indicated by numerical sequence. The underlying question in this poem is how do a Latino and an African American feel about answering the question on an application form, "What is your race?" Do they simply write down "Hispanic" or "Black"? Does that one generalized word explain their identity? In the opening stanzas that each reads, they say that they think seriously about the question and consider writing down the truth about their identity and having their answers read. They decide that to answer the question each will write about his and her grandparents:

I have a dark man I have my grandmother's laughter

listening to a bolero inside this body

lighting a match

inside this body

Each will write about streets on which they have lived and/or music they love:

I have 18th and Columbia Rd I have rare essence

15 & Irving sarah vaughn

Petworth tonya la negra

Shaw and a yaqui deer song

Julio Iglesias inside this body

and Jackson 5

and Lilo Gonzales

inside this body

They will write about games they used to play:

I have doubledutch

miss mary mat

and king of the mountain

inside this body

One will write about his child:

I have a son

named John Enrique

who's brown and black

and human and tender

I have you

inside this body

They will name all of the schools they have attended, languages their ancestors knew, and aunts and uncles who live both near and far. In the final shared stanzas they write and read in unison:

But I stop | But I stop

And simply | And simply

write down write down

"Hispanic." Black (Lee, 403)

The rich diversity of their identity and the images they conjure juxtaposed to the single depersonalized word "Hispanic," or "Black," are provocative. Students will consider the effect of the repetition of the phrase "inside this body" at the end of many stanzas. As we listen to pairs of students read this poem, they may hear how the repetition of the phrase, "inside this body," gives the voice strength as the poem evolves. But then, at the end, that strength disappears in the last few lines.

I will give them a list of the prompts and we will choose one to write together, while I record their collective responses on a transparency on the overhead projector. We might experiment with, "I wonder why they repeated the phrase, "inside this body" at the end of so many stanzas?" This would give us an opportunity to explore the effects of repetition, and the repetition of this phrase in particular, where students are describing their unique racial and cultural make-up.

Once we have written our collective response to, "I wonder why . . ." students may choose one or two more prompts and respond to them as we have to this one.

Students ultimately will write their own poems using this format and their own stanzas addressing: ancestors, games, streets, countries, schools, music, ethnic foods, relatives, and any other categories that identify their uniqueness. In pairs, they will practice and read their poems to the class.

Lesson # 3 Students compare the voices of the locked in with the liberated

Objective: When students have read the five poems beginning with "Locked In" and concluding with "The Journey," and listened to the voices of the five protagonists in these poems, they will complete a chart comparing the degree to which each protagonist expresses his/her sense of freedom. To do this, they will consider words and phrases the protagonists have chosen to describe whether they feel caught or free, physically, intellectually, and, perhaps, spiritually. They will identify how the protagonists' voices express their feelings and attitudes.

The purpose of this lesson, ultimately, is to make the students aware of ways in which they themselves have

feelings of being caught and/or liberated in some of these same ways.

Once students have completed the chart, they will answer part of the CAPT question number three: "With which character, or event or situation in the poems can you most closely relate? When have you had a similar realization or made a similar decision? Connect your own experiences with those of one or more protagonists."

From the locked in to the liberated

(This exercise may require two charts to make room for descriptions etc.)

1. Describe the surroundings in which each protagonist lives or finds himself.
2. List words or phrases that indicate how he/she feels about and/or is dealing with these surroundings.
3. Describe how he/she feels about him/herself.

"Locked In" "Saturday at the Canal" "The Prison Cell" "The Calling" "The Journey"

1. | 1. | 1. | 1. | 1.

2. | 2. | 2. | 2. | 2.

3. | 3. | 3. | 3. | 3

Appendix: Language Arts Standards addressed in my unit.

Language Arts English Standard 4.0 Listening

Students will develop strategic listening skills by interpreting and constructing meaning from auditory cues.

While students will read poetry and prose and engage in creative writing routinely in this unit, it focuses, largely, on listening to the voices of the narrators and protagonists in the poems and prose that we will read for the purpose of discerning from the diversity of these voices the feelings and attitudes that they express. Through listening to these voices, and identifying the range in attitudes and feelings of the people or characters who own them, my students will have the opportunity to discover the attitudes and feelings behind their own voices, and experiment with their newfound awareness. Therefore, students will, among other skills, establish a purpose for listening, construct meaning through initial understanding and interpretation, and will

compare and contrast similar characters and their problems.

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