



Did Things Get Better? Poetry from the Cultural Perspective of American Movement

Curriculum Unit 13.02.09

by Robert Schwartz

Introduction and Rationale

Understanding the historical, economic, social and cultural implications of living in a vibrant American city is in my belief of considerable importance to the educational upbringing of the New Haven Public School student. They are taught, on the middle-school level, many important skills across the curriculum: for instance, analytical problem-solving, scientific method, history and social justice, and important skills in reading, writing and understanding literature, non-fiction, and the purpose of each. In 8th Grade Language Arts, it is important to help them synthesize these skills in a way that would encourage them to apply them to their everyday lives, and therefore enter high school with a view of education and academics as an important personal and cultural aspect of their lifestyle.

To challenge students to think hard about how history applies to them, their families and their varied perspectives, they will discover poetry as an expressive outlet to the many Americans who became so through immigration, and/or changed their lives and that of their family's through migration. The history of the United States, particularly surrounding the occurrence of building the largest, most globally significant cities, has much to do with the movement of different populations from around the world, and throughout the country. Students will begin by discovering the experience of African-Americans during the Great Migration and reflect on poetry written during the Harlem Renaissance; then they will travel to San Francisco where Chinese immigrants met persecution and even detention in anticipation of admittance to America, and wrote poetry about their experience on the walls of the detention center on Angel Island; they will then return to further study of the Great Migration, journeying to Chicago, and finalize with modern poetry centered around Arab immigration. So that students are not confused by the jumps from population to population – they will have several maps and timelines, both digital and physical, to reference during the course of the unit.

The unit will beg the question of this American movement, did things get any better for these people? They moved to discover better options, to improve their lives and that of their family, to earn more for their hard work, to escape persecution and poverty. Throughout the unit the goal is for them to come to understand that different is not always better, and better doesn't necessarily mean absence of struggle. As Americans historically learned this lesson, they expressed their feelings about it through poetry.

Students will develop the understanding that this is still a very viable option for anyone, anywhere, in relation to how they experience the world.

Urban migration and immigration played a significant role in shaping modern America. Students will be responsible for demonstrating understanding of that role as can be related to the art of the written word born of said movement.

Overview

The unit encompasses both Language Arts and Social Studies strands of teaching and study. Students will learn that poetry is an expressive art form that combines human ingenuity and experiential outlet. They will also learn that America was built on people moving into and around this country, growing their cultural legacies around centers, most notably big cities, and contributing to the formation of modern urban culture that makes available such rich art and history. Poetry is such a rich outlet to explore alongside urban migration because it illustrates the struggles and triumph of these populations through art. Students will be privy to provocative confessions, dazzling wording, effective metaphor, and human wonderment, to only name a few advantages of studying the creative perspective of migrating populations in American history.

They do this through both historical learning activities, and poetic study and creative writing. Each "Lesson" outlined in this unit encompasses several class periods of instruction.

Objectives

1. Students will be able to synthesize that people are at the route of all they learn. This is important for students in two ways: One, to realize that there was a person who came up with the mathematical theory they are learning; a real, living breathing person who wrote whatever book they find boring at the time; that the scientist who discovered the cell wall had just as many human problems as the students studying it. And two, because making that human connection with their material, consequently making it more relatable, will make students more engaged in the material and in the learning process. For this unit, therefore, students will focus just as much on the poets and their history as on the verse itself.
2. Students will be able to explore poetry as a means of cultural expression. Each experience outlined in the unit will involve a study of the cultural experience the poet was living at the time.
3. Students will be able to thematically and stylistically connect published poetry with the experience that inspired it. They will compare different poetic conventions and devices to the reasons that the poets likely decided to use said devices. Students will analyze said devices with regard to how they effectively convey emotions born of movement, uprooting, dislocation, struggle and ambition.
4. Students will be able to write about whether movement made the immigrant or migrant's life better, using examples from poetry, as well as histories of the social conditions during the poets' respective eras, in order

to support their stance.

Teaching Strategies and Activities

Lesson 1 - The Map and Timeline; Introduction to the Great Migration; Poetry Scrap Book; The Digital Map; Vocabulary and the 'Word Wall'

Students will follow a wall map of the United States, following the geographical pathways of each ethnic group. It will be a student-led, interactive map following paths through New York, California, Chicago and any place we discover during the unit or that the students are interested in mapping. They will use marked routes with yarn or marker, and historical lessons will be to incorporate pictures and factoids from each experience. Poetry lessons will involve the map as well, adding findings by students of interesting pictures from each region and time period. The map will be a constant anchor to refer to during class discussions and/or teacher-guided mini-lessons, and will therefore be a necessary physical presence on the wall of the classroom (for students to refer to any time). However, there will also be an interactive online map that students will be able to follow during their journey through American movement.

Also, there will be a pre-made timeline on the wall for teacher and students to reference throughout the course of the unit. The mapping of movement by population jumps on occasion throughout the unit, therefore the timeline will be an anchor from which to reference the different periods. The timeline will include the major events of the unit, such as important events during the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, Chinese exclusion and immigration through Angel Island, and significant events in Arab-American experience. Some middle-schoolers struggle with mentally conceptualizing space and time, and therefore the anchor map and timeline will be helpful guides, and assist in their synthesis of exactly *when* and *where* what they are studying took place.

Activity: Building our Map and Journal Write

The unit and map lesson will be introduced by reading a poem. In "I, Too, Sing America," Langston Hughes states:

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes. . .
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed. . .(1)

The first journal prompt is - "Does Hughes describe the America you know? Why or why not?"

After students finish responding in their journals, class discussion will include student input, as well as what this poem signifies as far as cultural change in America. This will lead to discussion about how American cities did not always have the cultural makeup they now do, and that it took a long while, as well as many struggles, to build the cultural centers that are now American metropolises (metropolis: vocabulary word - word wall - see below).

The physical wall map will then be introduced. A student volunteer will hang it on the wall (with a corkboard as a mount), and pin a point in the Deep South where we will begin discussion of the roots of the Great African American Migration. This will be the first in-depth Social Studies lesson about the reasons and motivations for African Americans to leave their homes in the south and head to northern cities. Students will receive a handout and participate in teacher-led discussion.

Activity: Introduction of Digital Map

To assist in student learning, assist in geographical conceptualization, and prompt class discussion, students will also follow a digital map during the course of this unit to introduce or continue discussion of the various populations we'll be dealing with. The map is a digital Prezi presentation and allows students to follow routes of migration and places of immigration on a virtual map of the U.S. Additionally, this map has video clips which give either a brief or in-depth overview of each population and their reasons for migrating, and experience once arrived (2).

Activity: Vocabulary and the Word Wall

Students will also be responsible for vocabulary words through formative quizzes. Every so often, students will be asked to choose words that are challenging, unique, or ones they believe to be of particular significance to the lesson(s). Some word choice will be teacher-led, as exemplified above in the first word for the lesson: metropolis. Words will be written up on a "Word Wall" and included in formative quizzes.

Activity: Formative Written Quiz: The Great Migration

Students will take a formative written quiz on certain facts about the Great Migration, along with vocabulary discussed thus far.

Students will be given a fact-sheet from which to study importance points of the Great Migration and be quizzed on it, along with any vocabulary words up to that point. While this quiz is factual, another formative assessment on the Great Migration will be given later on in the unit when students explore migration to Chicago, at which time their formative assessment will be more conceptual and discussion-based. Material they are responsible for will include the migration beginning in the early 1900's and lasting through the 1960's, that movement was for both economic as well as reasons of escaping persecution, and that most migrants moved to New York City, places in the mid-west like Chicago, and further west.

Activity: Metaphor

After discussion and factual, formative quiz on the Great Migration, students will then connect the experience of African-Americans to the writing of poetry as an expressive outlet for struggle and strife. This will focus on some of the background of Langston Hughes, as example of the black experience in Harlem, and will be accomplished through a quick-write, reacting to poetry. An example is in the poem "Dreams," where Langston

Hughes states:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly (3).

After follow-up discussion on how students think this example reflects the desire to move from places of persecution and struggle toward what one perceives as a better place simply based on hope, explicit lesson on metaphor and other devices in poetry will take place.

Activity (homework): Poetry Scrap Book

Students will be given a "Poetry Scrap Book" from which to consistently refer and utilize throughout the unit. This will be a portfolio folder to keep clippings of poems we read/study, as well as snippets of their own poetry. They will be given a packet of poems from each of the time-periods/areas studied.

Their first homework will be to, using a Harlem Renaissance poetry packet, pick out a few lines of verse that encompass the "feeling" of that time period. After bringing in their homework, students will vote on which snippet to add to the wall map to represent the Harlem Renaissance.

Lesson 2 - Gallery Walk from the Harlem Renaissance to Angel Island; Continuation of Electronic Map with Journal-Writes

Students will then move from the Harlem Renaissance to the Immigration Station on Angel Island from 1910 - the 1940's. To encourage the perspective and realization that many different forms of migration and immigration were happening during this time period, this segment of the unit will begin with an in-depth discussion. The conversation (a "while this was all happening" perspective regarding the Harlem Renaissance) will juxtapose the two populations to show students that the first half of the 20th century saw considerable immigration and migration activity, and that many populations dealt with persecution and hardship in order to seek better lives for themselves and families. The goal is for students to see that migration in America was and is multi-faceted, and the country is made up of many different populations.

In order to segue from one place to the next, students will participate in a gallery walk, introduced by a teacher-led discussion.

Activity: Gallery Walk

After a discussion on the background of Jacob Lawrence and his connection and indeed influence during the Harlem Renaissance, as well as a background discussion about the Angel Island Immigration Station, students will participate in a Gallery Walk. Around the room, pictures are posted of artwork by Jacob Lawrence, leading into pictures of Chinese Immigrants detained on Angel Island from the book *Island* by Him Mark Lai. Each

image will be numbered, and extra copies will be available. Students will walk around the room deciding which image most accurately depicts struggle, and react in writing to the very prompt: "How does this image depict struggle? Explain."

Student responses will be followed by a discussion about how there are different types of struggles for migrant Americans than for immigrants from other nations. This will segue into the fact that much of the poetry written by Angel Island detainees are specifically as an expressive outlet to the struggle they faced (4).

Activity: Digital Map Continued

Students will continue following the digital map to San Francisco and the Angel Island Immigration Station. Here they will watch an in-depth video on the immigration station. They will be prompted to take notes on the video, as facts from it will be part of their formative quiz.

Activity: Catharsis

During the time of immigration and migration surrounding the turn of the century, many immigration laws were put in place that shaped the scope of populations and policies. Students will get a sense of this through discussion and multi-media study. After discussion of how immigration laws affected Chinese immigrants in California, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 through the formation of the Bureau of Immigration and Nationalization in 1906, students will connect these experiences to the concept of catharsis through art (catharsis: vocabulary word - word wall).

After a brief video on the Angel Island experience, we will make it a point to discuss the fact that much of the poetry found after Angel Island was no longer used to detain immigrants was written on the wall. Not only that, but most all writing on the wall was in fact poetry. This begs the question, why did the detainees choose poetry as their expressive outlet during the time they were detained?

Students will then look at poems as written by Angel Island detainees. One such example is the following, where a detainee stated:

Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?
I look to see who is happy but they only sit quietly.
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep. . .
Nights are long and the pillow cold; who can pity my
loneliness?
After experiencing such loneliness and sorrow,
Why not just return home and learn to plow the fields (5)?

We will read examples of poems aloud, as well as several other poems written by detainees. There will be several quick-write prompts for students to consider this verse over the course of this lesson activity:

1. "Do you think writing this poem made the poet feel better about their plight"? Explain.
2. "Consider the injustice in the imbalance of power the Chinese met with upon their arrival at Angel Island. How do some of these poems portray protest of that injustice? Explain.

Activity (homework): Poetry-write

Assignment: Write a poem about struggle that has personally affected you. This can be from your own experience, or those of someone you know (which would require an interview with that person or recollection of a story).

This will be the students' formative poetry-write, with which to gauge their take-away of the concept of writing poetry as a form of personal expression.

Activity: Chinese Exclusion and Immigration Formative Quiz (fact, reasoning and vocab)

Students will take a written formative quiz exploring facts surrounding the Angel Island Immigration Station as well as Chinese exclusion, and any vocabulary words that have come up since the last quiz. Information students are responsible for include the station being located on an island near San Francisco, CA, other populations also went through the station, but most of the poems found on the walls were written in Chinese, many detainees were concerned they'd never see their family again, many fled China because of poverty, and the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, which began a series of U.S. laws limiting immigration from specific populations.

Activity (homework): Poetry Scrap Book

Students will continue their "Poetry Scrap Book" using a packet of poems from Angel Island detainees.

They will pick out a few lines of verse that encompass the "feeling" of that time period. After bringing in their homework, students will vote on which snippet to add to the wall map to represent Angel Island.

Lesson 3 - Poetry Book; Pain in Expression

Once students have demonstrated knowledge of historical periods through written quizzes, and discussed certain poetic devices and used them to form poetry expressive of their own experience, they will move on to other areas of migration and begin building their poetry book.

They will re-visit Angel Island, reviewing the question: "Why were most of the writings on the detainees' walls poetry?" This will lead to a discussion on whether or not most poetic verse or song lyrics are expressions of pain or misery. We will explore multi-media once again, looking at certain hip-hop song lyrics, and exploring the Nick Hornby quote: "Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable, or was I miserable because I listened to pop music (6)?"

This discussion will continue the concept of using poetry for both protest and cathartic release. The intention will be for students to think hard about the living conditions of the Angel Island barracks and why the use of poetry is apt for such conditions. Additionally, it will be a talking/thinking point for students to consider audience here. Who do we write for? The detainees knew that others would be imprisoned after them. What message were they trying to communicate?

Activity: Poetry Books

Using all the assigned poetry writes throughout the unit thus far, students will begin compiling a book of poems. They will include snippets from poetry they like from their poetry scrap books, as well as the picture they chose from their gallery walk and any other images they like and believe enhances the effect of the book itself.

Lesson 4 - Continuing the Great Migration into Chicago

In this section, students will return to the Great African American Migration. Discussion will ensue, as to not confuse students about jumping around in time, about how this is a study of migratory patterns in America, and in order to get a full understanding of the time period, we are studying several. Explicit explanation will include that this migration is part of the *same* migration that resulted in the Harlem Renaissance, but instead of poetry of struggle, they will focus on poetry of empowerment, as written by Gwendolyn Brooks. Brooks stated in her poem "Primer for Blacks":

The word Black
has geographic power,
pulls everybody in:
Blacks here—
Blacks there—
Blacks wherever they may be.
And remember, you Blacks, what they told you—
remember your Education:
"one Drop—one Drop
maketh a brand new Black."
Oh mighty Drop.
____And because they have given us kindly
so many more of our people
Blackness
stretches over the land.
Blackness—
the Black of it,
the rust-red of it,
the milk and cream of it,
the tan and yellow-tan of it,
the deep-brown middle-brown high-brown of it,
the "olive" and ochre of it—
Blackness

marches on.

The huge, the pungent object of our prime out-ride
is to Comprehend,
to salute and to Love the fact that we are Black,
which is our "ultimate Reality,"
which is the lone ground
from which our meaningful metamorphosis,
from which our prosperous staccato,
group or individual, can rise. . .(7)

Students will react to the following journal entry: "How does the tone of this poem seem different from those we've read previously in this unit?" and then continue their journey in the digital map.

Activity: Continuation of Digital Map

Students will continue following the digital map. First, they will go back to the south to see a video clip of southerners who have their sights on Chicago, and then travel to Chicago and take a look at the significance of the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. They will view a brief video of Brooks reciting a poem with an optimistic tone, and discuss that tone and its significance in the progression of African Americans through movement.

Activity: Reading an Excerpt from "Land of Hope" by James R. Grossman

To gain a perspective of the real reasons and motivations for black southerners to migrate north, students will read, either in class or for homework, an excerpt from James R. Grossman's *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (8).

Activity: The Great Migration and Movement to Chicago Formative Discussion - Reasons and Motivations Behind Migration

In lieu of a written quiz, in order to check for understanding (and since students will have already had a written quiz on the Great Migration), we will pursue formative assessment as discussion of movement to Chicago, during which students will analytically discuss reasons and motivation for movement instead of just facts, based on the Grossman reading. This will be teacher led, and anecdotal notes will be taken.

Activity (homework): Poetry Scrap Book

Students will continue their "Poetry Scrap Book" using a packet of several poems from Gwendolyn Brooks.

They will pick out a few lines of verse that encompass the "feeling" of that time period. After bringing in their homework, students will vote on which snippet to add to the wall map to represent Chicago during and after the Great Migration.

Lesson 5 - Modern Poetry and Modern Movement; Pain in Expression (continuation)

Before the end of the unit, students will discover that in modern times, people still immigrate and migrate to try and forge better paths for themselves. This part of the unit is also to introduce some modern poetry to students to show them that it is still an art-form used for both expression and entertainment. It will center around Suheir Hammad - a modern poet of Palestinian descent.

There will be a brief discussion about historical trouble in the Middle-East centered around America's involvement in the Gulf War, and subsequent Arab migration to the U.S.

Activity: Continuation of Digital Map

Students will continue the journey along the digital map back to New York City, where they will watch a video

of a powerful performance by Hammad regarding struggle in the Middle East. Their quick-write will be: "Why type of struggle is evident in these pieces of poetry?"

Activity: Timeline

During discussion of modern poetry, the Gulf War and Hammad's birth will be pointed out on the physical timeline to indicate that we will now be discussion the recent past and present.

Activity: Painful Words

With more modern, lyrical and provocative verse, Hammad's poetry is an example that is meant to excite as well as educate. For example, Hammad states in her poem "4:02p.m.":

one minute and the lives of three women in it
writing it and up
the block a woman killed
by her husband. . .
haitian mother
she walks through
town carrying her son's
head—banging it against
her thigh calling out
creolecome see, see what
they've done to my flesh. . .
brooklyn lover
stumbles—streets ragged under sneakers
she carries her heart
banged up against
thighs crying ghetto
look, look what's been done with
my flesh, my trust, humanity,
somebody tell me
something good (9)

Students will utilize this poem to choose words that they feel express pain, and then write their own poems in class using those words.

Activity (homework): The Blues

Assignment: Students will choose a (clean) song that they like, and believe articulates pain by the artist. Including the song lyrics in what they hand in, students will react in writing, explaining why they think the work expresses pain, using examples from the lyrics (texts).

Lesson 5 – Summative Project; Poetry Books; Poetry Café

Activity (Essay): Is it Better?

Movement in and to America is rooted in the migrants' and immigrants' desire to improve their station in life. However, many of these people met with hardship, extreme poverty, and further persecution. Students will write an essay on whether they believe migrants and/or immigrants of their choice (or several different groups) succeeded in finding a "better" life for themselves and their families. They will touch on how we as Americans choose to improve our lives. What does the history tell us about whether or not this is possible? Students will need to use examples to support their stance from the poetry we study during the unit.

Activity: Poetry Books

Final poetry books will be submitted with at least 5 original poems with at least 20 lines each, along with any snippets of verse the students liked or images they found helpful along the way. The poetry book will accompany the submission of their essay.

Activity: Poetry Café

Students will have an opportunity to share with the class their favorite original poems or found snippets in their Poetry Scrap Book, along with images and reflections on their findings and experience during the unit. This will be a whole class period and be an informal "café" type experience.

Synthesis

The goal is for students to come away from this unit with a broader perspective on the human experience, as well as a much deeper understanding of the historical, political, social and cultural implications of migration and immigration. This is so that they might think more critically about the different paths Americans have historically taken. Middle-schoolers have a tendency to view the world predominantly through their own eyes. Through the poetic form of expression, I hope that they will grow to see a world where many live, many have struggled, and persevered. I hope that if they take away nothing else, they take away a picture of how America was built, and that in many instances it was not pretty. However, even in times of struggle, artists are

born and made, and that is something we have as humans. That is something that makes life a little brighter.

Notes on Poem Quotations

The poems quoted as examples are several of many examples that can be used surrounding the lessons contained herein. Many other are also available at www.poets.org as well as the links listed in the "Notes" section below.

Notes

1. Langston Hughes, "I, Too, Sing America," available at www.poets.org
2. Prezi Presentation: http://prezi.com/kwsvtlkrde1o/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share
3. Langston Hughes, "Dreams," available at www.poets.org
4. Photographs of images by Jacob Lawrence and of Angel Island detainees available through online search engines such as www.google.com
5. Him Mark Lai et al, *Island* .
6. Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* .
7. Gwendolyn Brooks, "Primer for Blacks," available at www.poemhunter.com
8. James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*.
9. Suheir Hammad, "4:02p.m." available at www.famouspoetsandpoems.com

Bibliography

1. Hughes, Langston. "I, Too, Sing America." From *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (Knopf and Vintage Books, 1994), <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15615/> (accessed June, 2013)
2. www.prezi.com. http://prezi.com/kwsvtlkrde1o/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share (accessed July, 2013)
3. Hughes, Langston. "Dreams." From *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (Knopf and Vintage Books, 1994), <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16075> (accessed June, 2013)

4. www.google.com (accessed April – July, 2013)
5. Lai, Him Mark et al. *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910 – 1940* . Library of Congress: HOC DOI Project, 1986. A powerful meditation on the experiences and poetry of Chinese detainees at the Angel Island Immigration Station.
6. Hornby, Nick. *High Fidelity*. New York: Riverhead Trade, 1996. An explorative novel of the relationship between pop music and happiness.
7. Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Primer for Blacks." From www.poemhunter.com, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/primer-for-blacks/> (accessed July, 2013)
8. Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* . Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. Rich text exploration motivations for black southerners to migrate north during the Great Migration.
9. Hammad, Suheir. "4:02 p.m." From www.famouspoetsandpoems.com, http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/suheir_hammad/poems/22459 (accessed July, 2013)
10. Osofsky, Gilbert. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890 – 1930* . New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966. A history detailing the formation of Harlem as an African American neighborhood beginning with the Great Migration.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>