



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Living Pictures Representing The History Of Black Dance

Curriculum Unit 95.02.03
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I. Introduction

All seventh and eighth grade students in New Haven are fortunate to receive dance and drama classes. I have taught dance at Roberto Clemente Middle School for the past seven years. The student body is made up primarily of Black American and Hispanic students living in the Hill section of New Haven. Both races share an African heritage that is evident in both cultures (especially in their dance traditions). I have often taught different aspects of Black dance in class but I feel a study of Black dance would benefit the students greatly. Discovering similarities in their dances will also enhance the relationships between both cultures as well.

Learning the history of Black dance through chronological periods in time will also enhance the students knowledge already gained as well as thread their insights together. The students are often embarrassed by their history and that seems an awful shame. I think the students often think their history begins with slavery which has been perceived by them to be an embarrassing part of American history that sheds a poor light on their ancestors. I have often told my students that they should not be embarrassed by the slave movement but should feel pride like the Jewish community that their race survived. By focusing on the history of Black dance from Africa to present time, students will learn that slavery was a small part of their history. They will also gain more pride and self esteem as young Black adults who must further their education and go on to contribute their abilities and strengths as Blacks in America so that our history can continue to thrive with notable acts from our community.

The proposed unit is intended to teach students to use research for choreography. Students will embark on a study of this history through paintings, books, photography, and poetry. The collected data will be used to reinterpret their findings and tell stories through dance. The culmination of these prepared stories will ultimately be presented in a video the students will prepare together.

The video format will consist of various poses or "live pictures" taken from noted photography depicting Black history. Paintings will also be used as sources for inspiring choreography. Each picture will be reenacted by students as a living still life that evolves into a story told through movement. We will take a dance from different periods of African American history: African history, The Amistad Revolt, Migration, Jazz and Harlem Renaissance, Modern dance, Ballet, and finally, Integration of Dance Styles.

This unit will initially be presented with historical information that is essential for teaching the history of Black

dance. That material will be followed by lesson plans in chronological order that mirror the periods of Black dance/history covered in the unit.

II. African History

Students will initiate the project with an African dance chosen to represent the nobility of a great civilization which is not always portrayed in the media. Unfortunately my students often think of earlier Africa as a primal spot somewhere on the map where their ancestors were hunters and fisherman with no great claim to fame or contribution to the civilized world. Although these myths have been challenged and are now portrayed with honesty in the media, they are far and few between so the myths seems to take more time to fade into nonexistence.

It is important to start with Africa too , so students will know their history did not begin with Blacks arrival in the New World on slave ships. Africa was a source of western culture and also the cradle of mankind. Dance was detrimental to the African cultures because it was used as a form of communication well before any formal language even existed. We will use the ancient empire of Ethiopia as our first model. “ this was the first ascertainable African state to attain prominence and power’ .¹ It derived it’s name from the Greek word “Aithops” which means dark skinned people. Ancient Ethiopis shared borders with another great empire, Egypt. Both Ethiopia and Egypt benefited from a shared coexistence which resulted in a sharing of cultures through trade and considerable intermarriage. There are wonderful pictures of these two ancient powers in *The Ebony Pictorial History Of Black Americans* . These pictures include symbols, religious artifacts, and clothing from that period which will serve as sources when considering costumes and backdrops for the video. Drums will serve as a sole source of music since they too were used for communication.

Our second picture will depict the famous portrait of Cinque, one of fifty two other Africans who spent three years trying to return to their native land after they were kidnapped for the purpose of slavery. Cinque and his men seized control of the vessel that was to carry them to a land of slavery. During the three year period , the liberty of the kidnapped Africans was defended in the United States courts by a community of people from New Haven and New York who believed in freedom for all. The actual story involves a brutal revolt. We will use modern dance as our vehicle to present the movements needed to depict struggle and finally freedom and independence. African dance will undoubtedly be used as well and will actually complement the modern dance. Quincy Jones has recorded excellent music for the soundtrack of *Roots* that will work well with the choreography.

Though the famous portrait of Cinque will be used to start the dance, we will also read sections from Alex Haley’s *Roots* . These selected passages explain life in Africa in detail. The villages and culture are detailed well enough to incorporate some of them into the dance as well as the scenery used. The students will make the final decisions regarding scenery and props.

III. Migration

Our third photograph will depict the great migration of Black Americans to the northern and western states. Blacks began moving in search of employment and a greater measure of freedom. Though black migration had slowed down during the Depression, it was revived by the northern industry sparked by World War II. The move was also seen as spiritual as well. Coming out of slavery, poverty, and racist conditions, Blacks viewed their migration as a holy walk to a Mecca they had heard so much about. The northern states were seen as the Promised Land where better conditions should be had by all its inhabitants.

Our dance will focus on religious aspects of the African Americans which were now heavily influenced by Christianity. Negro spirituals and dance traditions held over from African culture will influence the choreography. A strong voice like that of Mahalia Jackson will be used for the music and modern dance infused with ballet will serve as our basis for the choreography. Modern dance evokes freedom of movement and is traditionally done in bare feet. This will enhance the notion of freedom and promise as well as symbolically show poverty during this time in the dance. Langston Hughes has written many poems suggesting poverty, freedom, and religion. The students will read through some of his work in *The dream keeper* and incorporate his poetry in the choreography and set design of this particular dance. They will also select poems to be read between dances throughout the video. Although I will certainly suggest poetry and poets that I think they will find have appropriate and suitable poetry for the project, I want the students to independently select poetry themselves.

IV. Jazz Dancing And The Harlem Renaissance

"The Renaissance period in entertainment began in 1921 with *Shuffle Along* , a lively musical performed in New York". ² It was written and produced by four black men: F. E. Miller, Aubry Lyle, Eubie Blake, and Noble Sissle. The show lasted in New York for more than a year. It traveled on the road for more than two years. Two songs from the musical ("I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find A Way") became classics used for years thereafter.

Between 1921 and 1939, forty black musicals with lots of dancing and chorus lines were produced. There were many jobs to be had by Black dancers. "it was these black shows that began the precision dancing that has been expected of show chorus lines ever since". ³ There were also jobs in exclusive clubs in Harlem where waiters and cast members were usually all white.

Dance crazes swept the country during the Renaissance period but one of the most famous was the Charleston. Though it was first introduced in a Black show called *Liza* , it didn't really become popular until James Weldon Johnson wrote the hit song, "Charleston". Elida Webb was one of the first Black choreographers for Broadway and claimed to have invented the Charleston. While many disputed her claim, no one argued with the fact that she choreographed the dance for early Black shows and influenced the Charleston craze. "Music scholars have traced the Charleston back to Africa where similar movements were featured in the dances of the Ashanti people". ⁴

Our dance from this era will depict a great chorus line of the twenties with emphasis on the Charleston. We will also feature solo dancers who will portray Elida Webb and other Black entertainers she discovered such as

Lena Horne and Josephine Baker. Of course, big band music from one of the great band leaders of that time such as Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong will be used. The students will choose the music they like best. We will use photographs from the works of noted Black photographer James Van Der Zee as inspirations for dance choreography.

V. Black Pioneers In Modern Dance

Our fifth dance will involve our study of Black pioneers in modern dance such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. These great women studied anthropology and traveled extensively to study the influence of African dance in other cultures. They also applied their knowledge to future choreography. Modern dance is different from ballet in many respects. The most important of these is that modern dance looks to the expressive needs of the individual rather than to European models for its movement techniques. "The ballet is a formal classical style of dance, which recognizes five positions and which requires that any movement begin and end with one of the five positions, Modern dance is expressionistic, and so any position necessary to create the desired effect is acceptable".⁵

Katherine Dunham was always interested in dance as well as anthropology. A lecture on African culture that had survived the new world inspired her to read her to read about Africa. She also took many anthropology courses. Dunham applied to the Rosenwald Fund for a grant to study dances of various cultures and received the grant.

In 1935, she began an extended trip to the West Indies. She studied dances in Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti. In Haiti, she found Charleston steps done in native dances. She formed a dance troupe and went on to win fame by appearing in musicals and movies like "Stormy Weather".

Like Dunham, Pearl Primus was a dancer who also studied anthropology. She was born in Trinidad. Her grandfather was a descendent of the Ashanti people and held the distinction of head dancer of Trinidad. She quickly assembled a troupe and performed throughout New York where her family had moved when she was a young teen. "Primus was awarded the last and largest grant the Rosenwald foundation was to make."⁶ The president of the foundation saw her dance and assumed she had been to Africa to study the native dances. When he learned she had never been there, he quickly decided to raise money so that she could go. Primus was noted as a dancer, anthropologist, and lecturer, and completed her doctorate in anthropology when she was fifty-two years old.

Our dance evolving from this modern period will be of great importance because modern dance inspired many Black dancers. Blacks were denied entrance to ballet careers so modern dance became the method of dance by which they could shine. We will use photographs from *Black Dance In America*, as well as videos of The Alvin Alley Dance Theatre. Our music will come from the jazz and blues made between the years 1930 and 1940.

VI. Black Pioneers In Ballet

Janet Collins played a major role in the history of ballet in America. She grew up in Los Angeles where she trained in dance with Lester Horton and Carmelita Maracci. She often auditioned for ballet roles but was not accepted because she was black. Though she had a light complexion she was told she could only perform in white face. Though she refused she later got a part in a movie "Thrill For Brazil", in which she performed a solo. Her performance was so outstanding that she was awarded a scholarship to study composition with Doris Humphry.

A noted critic, John Martin, often wrote about Blacks and ballet. He implied that their bodies could not conform to the strict regulations of ballet. However, upon seeing Janet Collins, he wrote a favorable article about her and ignorantly called her the exception. In 1951, Janet became the first Black prima ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera. Ms. Collins also taught at the School of American Ballet in New York.

Janet's dancing career inspired her cousin, Carmen De Lavallade, to pursue a ballet career as well. De Lavallade and her soon-to-be husband, Geoffrey Holder, would later be hired by the Met as lead dancers. Carmen studied with Lester Horton and later with Alvin Ailey. She succeeded her cousin as principal ballerina at the Met. Carmen retired after two years to give birth to a son and was later relegated to Modern dance.

Geoffrey Holder was from Port of Spain, Trinidad, like Pearl Primus, and joined the Met when his wife retired. He also pursued a career in art. Holder was the recipient of a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in art as well. The husband and wife team quickly rose to stardom and became noted choreographers as well as dancers and actors. "In the late 1960s, De Lavallade joined the Yale School Of Drama as choreographer and performer in residence".⁷ Holder did choreography, direction, and designed costumes for two Black musicals, *Timbuktu* and *The Wiz*. He won Tony awards for both.

Another famous ballet dancer of this time was Arthur Mitchell. He attended the High School of Performing Arts, and upon graduation was offered two scholarships to study dance. He was also cautioned that he could not become a great ballet dancer because he was a Black man in America. Regardless, he pursued a ballet career and later joined the New York Ballet. There are great pictures and videos of Arthur Mitchell and the company that he would later found.

Our study of ballet will be somewhat intensive because critics had always claimed blacks could not perform ballet. Mitchell was often praised more in other countries because racism in America would not allow him to receive the credit he deserved. He wasn't even allowed to dance on television because there were few Black women ballet dancers and if he performed a pas de deux (dance for two dancers), he would have to dance with a white woman. America would not allow that on television. It wasn't until 1968 that Mitchell was finally allowed to dance on television. He performed a pas de deux with a white partner on the progressive Tonight Show eighteen years into his career.

I would like students to attend a master class in ballet for classic training somewhere local yet noted like the New Haven Ballet. The students will pick music they feel is suitable for the dance. Videos of famous ballets like *The Nutcracker* as well as those showing Arthur Mitchell at the height of his career will inspire our dance.

VII. Integration Of Dance Styles

Our final picture of Black American dance will use the history of Alvin Ailey as its main source and interject jazz and hip hop from today's styles of Black dance. Alvin Ailey was another strong modern dancer who used Black themes and situations for his noted choreography. Much of what we intend to do with this unit has already been done by Ailey albeit the initial "living pictures". Ailey had a rough young childhood marked with poverty and poor conditions. His choreography successfully portrays all that he saw and was involved in during that time.

During the 1960's he collaborated with Carmen De Lavallade and later formed the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. Though the company was initially all Black, he later integrated his company and further dispelled racist attitudes about Whites, Blacks, and Asians performing jazz and modern styles as well as about Blacks performing ballet. Ailey's company is famous throughout the world and has indeed traveled extensively. He also created a star out of Judith Jamison, a great dancer who became Alvin Ailey's principal dancer with the company. She is now the artistic director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, a successful dance school with three famous dance companies in New York.

Fortunately there are many videos and pictures to draw upon for this final dance. We will integrate all dance styles (ballet, modern, hip hop, jazz, and African), the way Ailey did when he considered and worked out his choreography. We will also plan a trip Alvin Ailey's school in New York for a modern jazz dance class. This should help our choreography shape up to a befitting finale for our video.

I would like to introduce a movie *Nothing But A Man* , during this time as well. The movie depicts a Black man who moves back south after his dreams of a different life are not realized in the north. Though his father was not there for him when he grew up he tries to be better and discontinue the vicious cycle. Though he encounters prejudice and poor conditions he rises above to do what must be done to care for his family. After viewing this movie, I was determined to show it to my students (with my males especially), so that they can see how this man overcomes his problems but does not compromise his remaining a man.

This movie will help to enhance our finale dance as well as show my students how they can maintain a certain living expectation in America whether they become rich, middle class, or remain poor as many of them are. I want them to feel uplifted after reading about their history through dance without feeling as if they are victims who will remain at the bottom of society's totem pole.

VIII. Sources

Most of the dancers we will study are profiled in *Black Dance In America: A History Through It's People* , by James Haskins. This text will serve as an invaluable tool in our preparation for the video. Videos on African and ethnic dance are readily available for rental and will be shown as models to inspire choreography. I have included a list of poems, videos, and movies that will be used while teaching the unit. The students will also visit different museums like the Yale Art Gallery and hopefully, the Schomberg in New York to further their research for interesting and useful pictures and poses.

LESSON # 1

Objective:

Students will be able to identify Ancient Ethiopia and Egypt on a map as well as define different and similar characteristics of both cultures.

Procedure:

- 1 Study ancient maps.
- 2.Explain cultural differences and similarities.
- 3.Multiple choice quiz.
4. Demonstrate movements seen in photographs.

Closure:

Students will review material and history of ancient civilizations and take a final quiz. They will also develop some choreography for their first dance.

LESSON# 2

Objective:

Students will be able to identify dance terms as well as interpret and demonstrate them.

Procedure:

1. Read terms.
2. Explain meaning.
3. Fill in the blanks exercises.
4. Demonstrate exercises learned.

Closure:

Review terms and later combine them to create a dance combination so students can learn how to integrate terms into choreography.

Sample Vocabulary:

1. Plie
2. releve
3. tendu
- 4.grand plie

LESSON #3

Objective:

Students will learn about different religions associated with Blacks during the great migration. We will see how religion influenced the move as well.

Procedure:

Listen to a respected clergyman explain the role of the church during the great migration period as well as its role throughout Black history. A question and answer period will follow.

Closure:

We will use the knowledge gained through the lecture and enhance it with gospel music to develop choreography that will show religion and the great migration move in one dance.

Lesson #4

Objective:

Students will use the five basic positions of ballet in choreography in choreography they will put together in groups.

Students will also take notes from a ballet video and identify the five positions as they appear.

Procedure:

1. Take a formal ballet class.
2. Review the five basic positions.
3. Divide the students into small groups to collaborate on choreography.

Closure:

The students will view each others choreography and later put all of it together to make a larger dance to be included in the video under great pioneers in ballet.

LESSON #5

Objective:

Students will take some of each dance form and apply it to the integrated dance style segment. Each dance form studied will also be applied to different themes to create an integrated dance.

Procedure:

1. Watch videos for inspiration.
2. Watch particular dance combinations used by Michael Jackson for examples of integrated dance.
3. Take a hip hop class.
4. Watch the movie *Nothing But A Man* .

Closure:

Students will use this for the finale of the video. The finale will include all that was learned through the unit so it will be the most intense and climatic piece.

Student Bibliography

Haskins, James, *Black Dance In America: A History Through It's People* . New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1990

Surveys the history of Black dance in America, from its beginnings with the ritual dances of slaves through tap, modern, and break dancing. It includes brief biographies of influential dancers and their companies.

Haskins, James. *About Michael Jackson* . Hillside, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1985.

Gives a brief biography of Michael Jackson with explanations on how he integrates dance styles to create new choreography.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big . Sea* . New York—Hill and Wang, Inc., 1940.

This is Langston Hugh's autobiography that gives wonderful detail to historic periods in Black history as well as samples of poems and what inspired them.

Maynard, Olga. Judith Jamison: *Aspects Of A Dancer* . New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1982

A wonderful biography of Judith Jamison (principal dancer at Alvin Aileys) with stories of Alvin Ailey as well. Gives some detail about dance and choreography.

Shoener, Allon. *Harlem On My Mind: Cultural Capital Of Black America 1990-1968* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1968.

Details great artists in Harlem that contributed to the Renaissance period as well as art in general. Includes bit biographies of dancers and performers from famous black musicals.

Teacher Bibliography

Haskins, James, *Black Dance In America: A History Through It's People* . New York. Harper Collins Publishing, 1990.

Surveys the history of Black dance in America, from its beginnings with the ritual dances of slaves through tap, modern, and break dancing. It includes brief biographies of influential dancers and their companies.

Edwards, Paul. *Equiano's Travels* . London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1967.

This is a wonderful narrative written by an African who can recount his life in Africa before he is kidnapped into the murky world of slavery. This is one of the few accounts of an African's memoirs that have been preserved by publication.

Editors Of Ebony. *Ebony Pictorial History Of Black America* . Volumes 1-3, Nashville, Tennessee. Johnson Publishing Co., 1971.

Details the history of Black America with prose and artwork. Includes poetry, drawings, paintings, and pottery. This set provides valuable information from Africa and its early civilizations through modern day heroes of the civil rights movement.

Jones, Howard. *Mutiny On The Amistad* . New York. Oxford University Press, 1987.

This serves as a great resource for anyone who wishes to untangle the complicated threads of the story of the Amistad. Jones includes exciting drawings of the central characters involved in the Amistad affair. Though the book contains much research, it is a joy to read.

Adoff, Arnold. *I Am The Darker Brother* . New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979.

This well loved anthology contains a notable collection of poetry by famous African American poets. It includes work by Langston Hughes.

Slier, Deborah. *Make a Joyful Sound* . New York: Checkerboard Press Inc., 1991.

A collection of poetry and colorful illustrations by well known African American poets.

VIDEOS AND MOVIES

The Cotton Club (R). 1984, Francis Ford Coppola

Nothing But A Man (PG). 1964, Michael Roemer

The Wiz (R). 1978, Sidney Lumet

Studies In Nigerian Dance . 1966, video with three complete native dances.

Ethnic Dance, Round-trip To Trinidad . Video with variety of West Indian dances.

Dance Black America . 1983, video.

Dance Theater Of Harlem . Video featuring famous dances of the company.

Ailey Dances . Video featuring famous dances of the company.

Lemonade Suite . Video with interpretation of poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks told through music and dance.

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