



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Pathways to The Imagination 'Creative Writing 101'

Curriculum Unit 95.04.06
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Presently, part of my responsibility as an instructor at the Cooperative High School for the Arts and Humanities requires that I teach two (2) creative writing classes: Play Writing and Introduction to Creative Writing. The play writing unit was developed as a result of my participation in the Yale Teacher's Institute in 1993. Entitled: *The African Playwright as a Griot*, the curriculum is designed to teach the art of play writing to high school students. Now, a standardized component of the creative writing department, the class, exposes students to the works of three (3) playwrights of African descent from three predetermined time periods: Antiquity, Slavery and the Harlem Renaissance.

The impact of this curriculum thus far on my effectiveness as a teacher and the ultimate benefits to my students has been overwhelmingly beneficial. The results were immediate and easily measured. In 1994, when the curriculum was first implemented, my students entered the *Yale Dramat Play Writing Competition*. The outcome was most encouraging. One of my students won the Grand Prize, two were finalists and a number received honorable mention. Likewise, this year (1995) an entry submitted by one of my students has been awarded the Grand Prize, two placed as finalists and a number of them again received honorable mention. Needless to say such incentive is profoundly advantageous to the students' self-esteem and their development as writers.

Through this paper I hope to develop a curriculum for my Introduction to Creative Writing class, comprised primarily of 9th grade students, that proves to be equally as effective. The overall demographic make-up of the classes is significant in-so-far as the choices I have made pertaining to the written material to be utilized.

-70% African-American,

-30% Latin/Caucasian

-80-85% female

-15-20% male

The majority of the students assigned to this class are not avid readers. Those who are, have had limited, if any, exposure to the ever increasing number of African, African-American, Latin, Native American writers and their work. Likewise, I have recently noted that there seems to be a decrease in the emphasis on works by contemporary third world male writers or themes which reinforce positive self images for my male students.

Thus I intend to include works and themes which fulfill this need. I feel this is important because I have found that my male students seem to struggle with written communication to a greater extent than my female students. Additionally, for some reason they have a warped impression of men who write. For some reason they seem to feel it is not a “manly” pursuit.

Lastly, because of the fact that the media (print and electronic) has painted such a negative portrait of minority men, I want to (1) give them images that provide them with positive self images as well as (2) assist them in developing the tools (writing ability, grammatical skills, etc.) to tell their stories and record their perception of themselves on their own terms.

Therefore, I have set out to develop a curriculum which includes poetry, short stories, essays and excerpts from select novels of both renowned and emerging African, African-American, Latin, Native American and Asian writers. It is my objective to utilize these works (much like Kenneth Koch used the works of European and Western poets in his books *Rose Where Did You Get That Red?* and *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*) to construct writing exercises suitable for my first year creative writing students that contain themes with which they can readily identify. As luck would have it school was still in session during the preliminary stage of this paper. Thus, I was afforded with the opportunity to test the effectiveness of a number of these lessons in an actual classroom setting. The lessons included in this paper fall under the following categories:

I. ME

1. AutoBiography (prose)
2. Ego Trippin' (poetry)
3. As Far As I'm Concerned (essay)

II. WORLDS CONVERGING

1. The Ties That Bind (short story)
2. Those Who Don't (prose)
3. Crossing the Abyss (poetry)

III. BUILDING 'BUFF' IMAGINATIONS

1. Mind Dump (Flow of consciousness)
2. Bigger Than a Bread Box? (poetry)
3. Words and Images (poetry/short story)

It is anticipated that the scope of these exercises will entail more than to just enhance writing. They are also designed to encourage reading and provide students with alternative perspectives from which to view themselves, the world and their place in it. Hopefully they will provide and assist students in discovering options heretofore they had not considered.

The exercises that fall under the category of "ME" are designed to foster introspection as well as furnish students with the space to claim their future selves and realize dreams ("Ego Trippin"). Through the lessons in the section labeled "WORLDS CONVERGING" the students have an opportunity to gain a new appreciation of the world view of people from diverse cultures. Additionally, they will re-examine their own environment and the people closest to them from a new vantage point. The assignments devised for the segment designated "BUILDING BUFF IMAGINATIONS" apply varied techniques and mediums to stimulate the imagination.

The decision to develop a curriculum unit of this nature is based on a numerous factors:

1. To expose students to writers and works they may not as yet have discovered.
2. When applicable provide a historical, political, and/or social backdrop.
3. Cover a gamut of genres and cultures.
4. Develop an appreciation hunger for the written word.
5. Widen students interest in reading.
6. Most specifically hone students written and oral communication skills.

To begin I have found it is important to know each student as well as possible. It is also vital that students feel they are operating in a "safe environment" That is, an environment that will allow them to freely express themselves and their feelings, opinions and ideas void of criticism or judgment in so far as the content is concerned. To facilitate the development of such an environment I am careful to advise students that they will:

1. not be judged or graded on their choice of subject matter;
2. be graded on the strength of their use grammar, vocabulary, spelling and structure.

However, profanity is inappropriate thus disallowed. Likewise slang is not permitted because it is essential that students have a strong command of the "English language". I explain to students that the application of slang in the their work does two things, neither of which is positive. First, it restricts the number of readers who might read their work by confining it to only those familiar with the vernacular. Secondly, the use of slang shortens the "life expectancy" of their work. Popular slang today may very likely be pass' tomorrow. Thus any

work in which the outdated slang is utilized will become “old fashioned” (a deadly term among teenagers) the moment the slang is replaced with something new. These explanations are usually enough to dissuade the majority of students from employing the use of slang in their work.

The door to this matter is, however, left slightly ajar but only slightly. Slang is permissible once students have displayed that they have a good command of the language and they use slang only when appropriate. For example: if it establishes and/or clarifies the persona of a particular character. Under any other circumstances the use of slang is unacceptable and will have a detrimental effect on the grade they will receive for the work in question.

There are usually no more than two students who “test” this boundary. Once they realize it is non-negotiable they learn to work within the perimeters exhibited. Amazingly I have noted that students quickly learn to search for “new words” in the dictionary and thesaurus (which they are at first resistant to use) to take the place of the slang. Once this takes place students seem to no longer desire to use slang.

I. ME

1. AutoBiography

Two (2) lessons which I have utilized on a consistent basis are: “The AutoBiography and the Mind Dump (See “Building Buff Imaginations”). Both are completed in class. The AutoBiography carries a minimum required length of two pages (double spaced). The AutoBiography is routinely assigned to students the first day of class. This is done for two reasons first, because an assignment of its length (minimum requirement two (2) pages) and nature usually provides insight into the students’ use of grammar, spelling and sentence structure. Secondly, if students know they have the option of reading their work aloud or not they are usually quite candid thus this exercise may be quite revealing.

To add a twist to the assignment and allow students to stand outside themselves, I usually instruct them to complete the work in the voice of the third person narrative. “Pretend you are someone else talking about you. Consider how other people (parents, siblings, extended family, friends perceive you. Or just pretend you are a TV commentator talking about you life. :” The results are quite enlightening and usually provide a great deal of insight (intellectually, and emotionally) about each student. This exercise is usually provides valuable information which I can utilize to formulate an idea of just what elements I’m dealing with so far as the individuals in a class are concerned.

2. Ego Trippin’

The centerpiece for this exercise is Nikki Giovanni’s poem entitled “Ego Trippin’”. In this piece Ms. Giovanni gives to the continent of Africa a feminine persona, a voice and an extremely well developed ego (built loosely on the history of the continent:

“ . . . My oldest daughter is Nefertiti

the tears from my birth pains created the Nile.

I am a beautiful woman . . . ”¹

It also contains, as the title suggests no small amount of vanity:

“ . . I am so perfect
so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission. I mean . . . I . . .
can fly like a bird in the sky. . . ”²

This exercise, like the AutoBiography, requires a bit of introspection on the part of the students. More importantly it demands unbridled utilization of their imagination and an ability to be uninhibited. First students are requested to define the term “ego trippin”. Once a clear perception of this term is established they are instructed to read Ms. Giovanni’s poem aloud. Then I play for them an excerpt from her recording *Truth Is On Its Way* in which Ms. Giovanni reads her poem “Ego Trippin” accompanied by the New York Community choir under the direction of Benny Diggs.

Then we discuss the images she has presented in this piece and the manner in which she has transformed the continent of Africa into a woman with extraordinary powers. In addition, to the aforementioned discussion is encouraged pertaining to the format the poet has chosen for reading her poetry and its link to the African oral tradition as well as present day “Rap”.

Students are finally instructed to write an “Ego Trippin” poem about themselves. They are told that they may claim any super-human traits or powers that they desire. The only limitation is their imagination.

The results of one class in particular suggest that my students took the final component of my instructions: “the only limitation is your imagination” quite literally. Armed with pen, paper and unencumbered imaginations they came up with some vivid if not unique images. One of my less boisterous students, Adrienne Carroll, wrote a tiny little poem that I found to be as quiet and gentle as her presence:

“I was born in the palms of a creator
I give light to the sky at night I stay in one place
& spin around
until morning”

Garrett Santillo is an excellent writer he possesses a good command of the language and his grammar is precise. However, Garrett had difficulty unleashing his imagination. . . his work was too often analytical, stiff. Needless to say I was pleased to see the imagery he utilized in order to complete the assignment:

“I was born on Jupiter
102,500 years ago. . . .

my arms . . . rivers which provide transportation

My soul is pure and flawless

My breath is the wind of life. . . .

I realize this is not E.E. Cummings but for Garrett and me it was a long awaited triumph he had finally relinquished his inhibitions and accessed his imagination. I only hoped it was just the beginning. For the others it was an opportunity to become super heroes, music stars, celestial bodies and even a monster or two.

3. As Far As I'm Concerned. . . .

When most of my students think of prejudice and discrimination they see the pictures of slavery that have been bored in their heads over and over again. They see also the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X even Ghandi (thanks to the movie) and Jews in concentration camps. But the apartheid inflicted upon the Native Americans (the original Americans) does not come to their minds as readily, if at all. In an anthology composed to the writings and art of Native American women, called "A Gathering of Spirit", I found a narrative that dealt quite eloquently with this issue as well as the cruelty children impose on each other.

In "A White Man's Word" by Debra Swallow deals with her nine-year-old son's first brush with racism and the recollection of her own:

"I got into a fight, Mom. Mom what's a half-breed? I felt like my blood stopped running, and I closed my eyes to kill my tears, my mind opening up a day I'd almost forgotten. . . The first girl said, "Look this Indian is staring at us, and glared at me with icy blue eyes, her nose pointing to the ceiling. The second girl said, "Oh, she don't know what we're saying anyhow. Dirty Indians don't know anything." Her friend said, "I don't think she's a real Indian. My day says some of them are half-breeds. So she's not all dirty. . .

"Now eighteen years later, I was wiping blood from my son's face, and his question made my body shake with anger, sadness, frustration and hatred. Opening my eyes, I answered, "You're Lakota, son. The way of living is Indian. You're Lakota. He looked at me with black eyes shining with tears he now refused to shed, and asked me again what a half-breed was. "A white man's word", is what I said. "It's just a white man's word." ³

This narrative was read aloud to my students in class. As the story evolved the students began to empathize with the protagonist (Debi) When we reached the end opinions flowed quite freely. They ranged from outrage for the way Debi was treated, to disdain for the antagonists, joy when she finally lashed out at her tormentors and for some frustration with the way she answered her son eighteen years later. I allowed my students a short time to vocalize their opinions. Then I instructed them to write their feelings out in essay form.

In order to help them formulate their thoughts I suggested that they might want to consider: How they would handle the situation if they were in Debi's position? Whether or not they have been in such a situation? Where they the victim or the victimizer? How would/did they handle the situation if they were the victim? If they have been in this position before would they handle it any differently should it happen again? What would make you feel justified to treat someone so cruelly if you were he victimizer. How did it make you feel being the victim? victimizer? What to you think motivates a person to mistreat other people? Why? If you were a parent and your child came to you as Debi's son did, how would you handle the situation? If you could talk to the girls who insulted Debi or the people who offended and assaulted her 9 year-old son eighteen years later what

would you say to them? What do you think could be done to eliminate such negative behavior?

While the purpose of this lesson was to have my students write essays, I also wanted to sensitize them to the feelings of others. I wanted them to empathize with another human being, to understand the overwhelming detrimental impact mere words could have on an individual. It worked. The finished papers were read aloud and some were submitted to the school newspaper.

II. Worlds Converging

1. Ties that Bind

In yet another instance, when working with characterization, I stumbled across an anthology edited by Nikki Giovanni entitled *Grand Mothers*. Contained within this book were a host of lovely short stories, poems and memories of Grandmother's by people of various ages, genders, ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as geographic locations. Two of the pieces which I used in class were: "A Conspiracy of Grace" by Ethel Morgan Smith and "Roofwalker" written by Susan Power. I read "A Conspiracy of Grace" aloud to the class who became quite enthralled. Once I finished the story the duration of the period was dedicated to discussion of the piece. We talked about how the writer developed and presented her characters in such away that the reader had a vested interest in their well-being. The mechanics she employed to describe her characters. Whether or not they seemed to be three dimensional (real)? Why? Discussion also revolved around writing about the things and people closest to you. They were instructed to do two things for homework. First they were to read Susan Power's "Roofwalker". Secondly, they were to select someone in their family that they wanted to write about. The next time class met, following a preliminary warm-up writing exercise and an exercise on characterization, students were asked select a memory and use it to write a short story about the family member they had selected. After some moaning and groaning over the minimum word requirement (200 words) they came up with some pretty interesting results. Actually some which were quite touching.

2. Those Who Don't

Sandra Cisneros' book "The House on Mango Street" is a collection of short stories about growing up female, Hispanic, in the "Hispanic quarter of Chicago" in a house on *Mango Street*. It is also about the neighborhood, the people who inhabit it their hopes, dreams, heartaches, disappointments and lives. None of the stories are especially lengthy. Some are as short as three paragraphs (ideally suited for the fast clip MTV music video generation). All of the stories are strong, moving and captivating.

Because of the brevity of some of the stories I was initially reluctant to expose the book to my first year creative writing students. A number of who would try to pass off a paragraph as a short story if they thought they could get a way with it. But the power and innocence present in *Mango Street* could not be ignored. So when I decided to present my pupils with an exercise that would allow them to view their neighborhood from a different vantage point I immediately referred to "Those Who Don't". In this extremely short story Ms. Cisneros considers the way her neighborhood appears outsiders as opposed to it's inhabitants:

"Those who don know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.

But we aren't afraid. . . .

. . . we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. . . . That is how it goes and goes.”⁴

This tiny story opened the door for discussion pertaining to appearances, formulating assumptions and walking a mile in another person's shoes. It also speaks to making judgments based on our personal values and experiences as opposed to considering another perspective. To reinforce this point students were assigned to read Nikki Giovanni's Nikki Rosa:

“. . . if you become famous or something they never talk about how happy you were to have your mother all to yourself and how good the water felt when you got your bath from one of those big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in and somehow when you talk about home it never gets across how much you understood their feelings. . . .

. . . I really hope no white person ever has cause to write about me because they never understand Black love is Black wealth and they'll probably talk about my hard childhood and never understand that all the while I was quite happy”⁵

Once the material was read and discussed, students were instructed to write about either being in an unfamiliar place or situation (i.e. a strange neighborhood in a strange city; meeting new people) and how they reacted to it. They were told they could describe how their neighborhood looks/feels to them and how it would appear to an outsider (perhaps someone from another part of town, a different city, another country, or even another planet!)

3. Crossing the Abyss

Over the three (3) year period that I have taught at Coop High School I have noted a change in the demographic make-up of the student body as increased numbers of Latino and Caucasian students have enrolled. During the school year I teach four (4) freshman creative writing classes (Introduction to Creative Writing) one each quarter (approximately 9 weeks each.) The classes are two hours long and meet twice a week.

In one of my freshman classes I was lucky enough to have a relatively large number of Latino students. (Frankly, it was the most racially balanced class I'd had all year.) I sensed no racial tension among the students. Actually I found them to be refreshingly accepting of one another. However, I did note that they tended to be cliquish. For instance, when allowed to sit where ever they wanted the students (African American, Latino and Caucasian) tended to segregate themselves. Noting this I decided to reinforce, for them, the things they had in common as individuals while allowing them to explore and celebrate their differences. At the same time I was looking for material that the Latino students could identify with.

As luck would have it I discovered *Currents from the Dancing River: Contemporary Latino Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry* edited by Ray Gonzalez. It has proven to be a fantastic find. Among the 556 pages of short stories and essays I found a number of pieces that I could use in my class. One of the first pieces of literature in the book to catch my eye was “Kitchens” by Aurora Levins Morales. I decided to have the class read this short story out loud because in this exploration of her status as an immigrant, Morales recalls the cooking lesson she received in her mother's kitchen. In so doing she discusses the dishes they cooked and the methods of preparation that they applied:

“It’s a magic, a power, a ritual of love and work that rises in my kitchen, thousands of miles from those women in cotton dresses who twenty years ago taught the rules of its observance to me the apprentice, the novice, the girl child: “This much coffee in the colador, girl, or you will be serving brown water.””Always peel the green bananas under cold water, mijita, or you’ll cut you fingers and get mancha on yourself and the stain never comes out: that black sap stain of guineo verde and platano, the stain that marks you forever.” 6 .

All of my students love to eatMy class is at the end of the day, an especially long day since our day ends at 3:45 P.M. Therefore by the time they reach my classroom they are (to hear them tell it) famished. Food is a frequent topic in their Mind Dumps and as they converse among themselves. It is not unusual for the discussion to revolve around what they plan to eat “as soon as they get home!” So there was no doubt in my mind that this particular short story would get the attention of each and everyone of them. Needless to say it did. Because my Spanish, which was never especially wonderful, is a bit rusty I asked the Latino students to assist the rest of us with pronunciation and translation. By the time we’d finished reading the story aloud their appetites were primed for food and literature.

I then moved on to a poem by Juan Felipe Herrera called “Notes on Other Chicana & Chicano Inventions.” I don’t know why but for some reason when I read the title I assumed this poem was a historical survey of one type or another. The dedication, “for all middle school teachers” while propounding that my initial assumption could very likely be incorrect sparked my interest to an even greater degree. Once I read the poem, written in English and heavily seasoned with Spanish , I realized it was a poetic overview of the rich, vibrant, raucously colorful Latin culture:

.”(I am not going
to mention the low rider
actually created in Tijuas in the 40’s
Jose Samuel Flores told me
mecanico de primera)”. 7

When it came time to read the poem aloud I explained to the class that because more years than I’d admit to had passed since I’d studied Spanish the Latino students would have to help again with the pronunciation and translation. As we read through the poem, amid giggles which grew to peels of laughter, I watched my class transform from numerous fragmented clusters to a single cohesive group. My usually reserved, quiet, unassuming Latino students were being drawn out and placed squarely in the spotlight by their peers who bombarded them with questions like: “What does that mean?” “How do you say that again?” “It’s a what?” The Latino students were practically rolling in the aisles laughing at the way we mangled their language and all of them got a charge out of my absolutely horrendous accent!

The classroom was abuzz with the chatter of sharing in a discovery. It was only when they’d finished taking turns reading the poem aloud that I realized everyone was seated on the same side of the room. All smiles . . . with their heads bent over Juan Felipe Herrera’s poem. Things had progressed just as I’d hoped they would. It was time to move them to the next step.

“Ending Poem” is, fittingly the last piece in the anthology. It is a collaborative poem by Rosario Morales and

Aurora Levins Morales. It was the inspiration for the writing exercise I had planned for my class. But first I wanted them to read the poem together:

“I am what I am.

A child of the Americas.

A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean

A child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads

I am Puerto Rican. I am U.S. American.

I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx.

A mountain born country-bred, homegrown jibara child,

up from the shtetl, a California Puerto Rican Jew

I am a product of the New York ghettos I have never known

I am an immigrant

and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.”⁸

Once they finished reading the poem. I explained to the class that what the poets were doing in this piece was comparing the ways in which they are alike and the ways they are different. Which was what I wanted them to do. I divided them into groups of two being careful to pair a Latino student with one who was not. Then I asked them to alternate lines and come up with a poem in which they considered the things they have in common and the things that are different about them. The Latino students were told to feel free to write in Spanish if they so desired. When everyone finished the assignment each pair read their poem out loud to the class. In one or two instances the students opted to work in larger groups. This was the case for three 9th grade boys (James Jeter, Torres Derr and Jose Garcia) who co-authored the following poem:

“We Have Something in Common”

In this country we are both minorities.

Nostotros fuemos forcaso en esta pias.

We are mistreated in this country.

Y sufrimas mucho in esta lugur.

We are different in many ways.

Comimos diferentes comidas.

Our music differs.

Our dance differs.

Our history differs.

and our traditions differs.

But yet we are looked upon

By society the same way.”

As could be expected in some cases, usually when males and females were paired, the obvious was noted. Likewise it was of no surprise that students did not neglect to mention food. Rosemary Johnson and Billy Cordero’s poem is a good example:

“I am a girl.

Yo soy un muchacho.

I am Italian.

Yo soy Boricuan.

We have a lot in common.

Pero, Nostros tieremos mucho en distinto.

We both go to Coop School.

Pero, no me gusta.

We both like music.

Pero no el mismo estilo.

I like pizza.

Pero, me gusta arroz con tostones.

Different or Miso

III. Building “Buff” Imaginations

1. The Mind Dump

The Mind Dump is merely a free flow of consciousness exercise. I explain it to my students as “an exercise done at the onset of each class to “warm up” their imaginations.” Students are instructed to write on a blank

piece of paper any and everything the comes to mind (obscenities are not acceptable or permitted in this or any exercise). Students should not be concerned with whether or not it makes any sense. Nor does it matter if they focus on one idea or image or a plethora. Students are informed that the Mind Dumps are not graded but will be reviewed. However, if for some reason they feel that a particular mind dump is personal and do not wish to have it read, they merely have to indicate this by writing "PRIVATE" at the top of this page and their privacy will be respected. Lately students have left notes on their Mind Dumps that say: "Ms. Freeman please read."

This exercise is essentially a five (5) to ten (10) minute warm-up exercise that will allow students to access their imaginations and begin to focus on the task at hand—writing. Students should save and date all of their work including Mind Dumps which should be referred to by students for possible writing ideas on those occasions when students experience writer's block or simply need a new topic of consideration. Thus, in essence the "Mind Dump" becomes a source for numerous ideas which pupils may draw from.

2. Object Poems

Recently I used Maya Angelou's "Tears" (Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die) as the centerpiece around which students wrote "object poems" i.e. poetry describing any object of their choice. To begin this lesson I read the poem to the class omitting the title and the first line (which revealed the title):

"The crystal rags
Viscous tatters
of a worn through soul
Moans
Deep swan song
Blue Farewell
of a dying dream." ⁹

Students were then asked what Ms. Angelou was describing. Once the theme (i.e. object) was ascertained students were instructed to select an object and write a poem describing it just as Ms. Angelou did "tears". The results were exhilarating both for the students and myself.

3. Words & Images, Images & Words

Sometimesno, most of the time when I present a new lesson for the first time to my students, those exercises about which I am the most insecure usually turn out to be the most successful. The following exercise is a case in point. Russell L. Goings, Jr. (Xavier University alumni, ex-professional football player, member of the New York Stock Exchange, first chairman of the board of the Studio Museum in Harlem and founder of "Essence Magazine") had agreed to come in and speak with my students. He wanted to talk to them about his life, the creative process, the importance of getting an education and the work and life of his friend, Romare Bearden.

To help me prepare them for the latter Mr. Goings had mailed me a videotape entitled *Griots of Imagery: A*

Comment on the Art of Romare Bearden and Charles White . After previewing this twenty-seven (27) minute video I found it to be highly professional, extremely informative and very moving. I had no doubt that this video could be beneficial to my students. The question was, after seven (7) months of Words! Words! Words! how do I help them make the transition to images. More importantly, would they be able to comprehend the correlation which exists between the two? As I watched the video these questions, and others, ricocheted through my mind. Suddenly I heard the narrator compare the drawing of Charles White to the poetry of Langston Hughes:

“Charles White draws like Langston Hughes wrote poetry: straightforward, representational, with a clearly defined penchant for the heroic; flowing, curved lines. For his whole career he drew in the tradition that has been labeled social realism.”¹⁰

The dilemma was resolved. The narrator had just reminded me that both the artist and the poet created pictures. One used paint, brushes and a canvas. The other, the poet, used paper, pens (often in this time of technology a computer) and most importantly words. Both, nonetheless, were capable of creating and re-creating images. But I was going to let my students discover that for themselves.

Before they viewed the video tape, each student was provided with a list of paintings that were discussed in the video and included in the syllabus which accompanied it (See Appendix A). The students were instructed to select one of the titles and write a corresponding poem or short story. This exercise proved to be especially beneficial to those students who usually had a difficult time deciding on a topic. Very likely because the lesson provided them with clearly defined options from which to work. Time was allotted for those students, so inclined, to read their final product to the class once everyone had completed the assignment.

The next step entailed viewing the video. At the conclusion of the video a discussion was initiated by posing various questions to the students for their consideration. For example: Did they enjoy the video? Why? What aspect(s) did they find to be particularly enlightening? Which of the paintings did they like most? Why? How did it make them feel? Did they agree with the statement that Bearden and White were griots? How is this manifested in their work? Was the influence of music evident in their work? How? Did you find their work made any social or political statements? If so what? Does the intent of an artist differ from that of a writer? What is their intent? etc.

After a lively discussion, the students were instructed to examine the reproductions of Romare Bearden’s work which appeared in Lowery Stokes Sims’ book *Romare Bearden*. They were then requested to select one and write a poem or short story by responding to what they saw or the feeling(s) which the painting invoked. As a result of this exercise the students were ‘introduced’ to two (2) artists they had been heretofore aware of. They also discovered a new vehicle through which they could expand their imagination and utilize as a source of inspiration. And they were prepared for Mr. Goings visit!

In the future I intend to include in this lesson essays by Ishmael Reed (“Writin’ Is Fightin’”) and Julius Lester (“Falling Pieces of Broken Sky”) as reading assignments. Each, in their own way, examines the role and responsibility of writers in general and African American male writers in particular. Ishmael Reed speaks to power of the written word. He perceives the potential power of a writer as being not unlike that of a well trained prize fighter and the act of writing (like the existence of a black male) as a battle for the title.

“ . . . I think it’s important to maintain a prolific writing job, as long as my literary legs hold up, because even during these bland and yuppie times, there are issues worth fighting about. Issues that require fresh points of view.

. . . If I had to compare my style with anyone's it would probably be with Larry Holmes. I don't mince words. Nor do I pull any punches, and though I've delivered some low blows over the years, I'm becoming more accurate, and my punches are regularly landing above the waistline. I'm not a body snatcher like Mike McCallum, and I usually aim for the head. . .

. . . as long as I can be a professional like Larry Holmes, that is have the ability to know my way around my craft, I'll probably still be controversial." ¹¹

Julius Lester, on the other hand, takes a rather metaphysical stance regarding his intent and responsibility as a worker:

"My responsibility as [an African American] writer is to the ideal of the human. . . .I cannot succumb to the collective definitions and collective ways of Being. To do so is to act irresponsibly in relationship to my gift.

To be responsible as a writer means that every word of mine will have been written truly, as truly as I know how at the time of writing. . .

Being responsible is the act of making a promise to another. . .

My promise is to that part of you which is beyond and separate from definitions of gender, race, and all of the sociological and political descriptions that hang from our limbs and rattle like the chains of Marley's ghost. There is a place of sacred truth in each of us. It is from within that place I seek to write and it is to that place in you my words seek to go." ¹²

Personally I tend to agree with Lester. As a teacher and a writer it is from this very premise that I operate as well. That is to say I attempt to share with my students the greatest part of my humanness. I feel in so doing it is my responsibility to be honest and truthful with them while making it very clear that I expect no less from them. I believe that my role as a teacher is not to instruct but to empower. To accomplish this I feel obligated to help them obtain the information and skills that are necessary to succeed. Additionally and equally important I feel in this capacity it is my responsibility to and help them to discover their potential as human beings (or at least begin the search). This is what I do. This is what I feel artists (no matter what their field of concentration) attempt to do: open that "place of sacred truth" within themselves. They celebrate it. Share it with others (through their craft) in the hope that it will somehow touch that special place in others and in some small way change them for the better. This is what I want to give my students in addition to the ability to express themselves fluently. I want to help them find that pure spot within them and learn to operate from that axis in any and every endeavor they may undertake.

NOTES

1. Nikki Giovanni, *The Women and The Men* , 19

2. Ibid, 20

3. Beth Brant (Degonwadonti) ed. *A Gathering of Spirit. Writing and Art by North American Indian Women*, 43

4. Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* , 28

5. Tom Wilentz & Tom Weatherly, eds. *Natural Process: Anthology of New Black Poetry* , 22
6. Ray Gonzalez, ed. *Currents from the Dancing River: Contemporary Latino Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Poetry* , 30
7. Ibid, 122
8. Ibid, 555
9. Maya Angelou, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Die* , 12
10. Russell L. Goings Jr. & Evelyn N Boulware Executive Producers Syllabus Griots of Imagery: A Comment on the Art of Romare Bearden and Charles White. , 4
11. Herb Boyd & Robert L. Allen. *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men In America* . 522-3
12. Ibid. 519

Annotated Bibliography

1. Angelou, Maya. *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Die* . New York, N.Y. Random House. 1971. This collection of Ms. Angelou’s poetry is divided into two (2) sections: Part I labeled “Where Love Is a Screaming Anguish” contains “poems of love and nostalgic memory”. The second section “Just Before the World Ends” depicts “confrontations inherent in a racial society—some scathing and even bitter in their language, some sardonic or satiric.
2. Brant, Beth, ed. *A Gathering of Spirits: Writing and Art of North American Indian Women* . Sinister Wisdom Books. 1984. Collection of writing and art by North American Indian Women who “were dark seers of the future. . .who do not allow anyone to speak for [them] but [them]”.
3. Boyd, Herb & Robert L. Allen, eds. *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America* . New York, N.Y. Ballantine Books. 1995. “Brotherman! is a special greeting among Black men. With that single word a bloodline is invoked, a gender proclaimed. It is a verbal handshake, a shared mantra that expresses much more than a mere hello. . . It proclaims: Our bloodlines and soulforce are the same and we have a common fate—what happens to one happens to all. . . More than a charting of the Black man’s travails and triumphs . . .the central purpose of this collection is to create a living mosaic of essays and stories in which Black men an view themselves, and be viewed without distortion.”
4. Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street* . New York, N.Y. Vintage Books. 1984. The story of Esperanza Cordero, a young girl growing up in the Hispanic quarter of Chicago, told through a series of vignettes.

5. Giovanni, Nikki. *Grand Mothers* . New York, N.Y. Holt Publishing. 1994. A collage of short stories and poems by various writers both renown (i.e. Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks and Gloria Naylor) and new (Ethel Morgan Smith, Susan Power and Yolande Giovanni) about their grandmothers. The book is edited by Nikki Giovanni who says of it: "this isn't a balanced book nor a sociological book nor a look at grandmothers through the ages. It is just a book that makes me miss the one person I know for sure whose love I did not have to earn."
6. Giovanni, Nikki. *The Women and The Men* . New York, N.Y. William Morrow & Co, Inc. 1975. The third book of poems by Nikki Giovanni. It covers a large period in her life and contains work that "is sometimes gentle, some times angry. . . always moving."
7. Goings, Russell L. Jr. & Evelyn N Boulware Executive Producers Griots of Imagery: A Comment on the Art of Romare Bearden and Charles White. New York, N.Y. Praise Song on a Shoe String, Inc. 1993. 27 min. Videotape. Based on the 1993 exhibition of the art of Charles White and Romare Bearden at the Manhattan East Gallery in New York City, Julia Hotton, Director.
8. Gonzalez, Ray, ed. *Currents from the Dancing River: Contemporary Latino Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Poetry* . New York, N.Y. Harcourt Brace & Co. 1994. Contains the work of some outstanding Latino writers living in the U.S. As a contemporary anthology it represents some of the "most vibrant cultures in the emergence of multicultural literature. . . Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans.
9. Sims, Lowery Stokes. *Romare Bearden* . New York, N.Y. Rizzoli International Publications, Inc. 1993. "This edition of the Rizzoli Art series celebrates Bearden's elevation of traditional African-American themes to the inspiring levels of the great masters."
10. Wilentz, Ted Tom Weatherly, eds. *Natural Process: An Anthology of New Black Poetry* . New York, N.Y. Hill and Wang. 1970. "Black poetry today has it's own quality, which is distinct . . . There are differences in the themes, attitudes, and in the language used by young Black poets. This anthology introduces some of these new poets and shows the energy and talent that is flourishing among Blacks."

Appendix A

1. "Sunset" Romare Bearden, 1981, Watercolor
2. "The Guitarist" Romare Bearden, 1980
3. "Out-Chorus" Romare Bearden, 1979
4. "Rooster" Romare Bearden, 1980
5. "Purple Flower/St. Maarten" Romare Bearden, 1984
6. "Head of Indian 'Woman" Charles White 1946
7. "St. Maarten Woman" Romare Bearden, 1984
8. "Love is a Naked Shadow" Charles White 1984
9. "Delilah in Gingham" Romare Bearden, 1974
10. "Iliad (1-4)" Romare Bearden, 1948
11. "Conversation" Romare Bearden, 1979
- 12 "Battle of Atlanta" Romare Bearden, 1974
13. "Soldiers At Richmond" Romare Bearden, 1974
14. "A Temple Burns" Romare Bearden, 1974
15. "Odysseus in Disguise" Romare Bearden, 1979

16. "Siren's Song" Romare Bearden, 1977
17. "The Red Circe" Romare Bearden, 1977
18. "The Guitar Player" Romare Bearden, 1975
19. "The Trombone Player" Charles White, 1954
20. "William Warfield" Charles White, 1954
21. "Delta Blues" Romare Bearden, 1975
22. "Jazz Combo, Black Mat" Romare Bearden, 1983
23. "Jazz Musicians/Pink" Romare Bearden, 1983
24. "Woman on Beach/St. Maarten" Romare Bearden, 1975
25. "Fortress" Charles White, 19
26. "Man of Distinction" Charles White, 1934
27. "Profile" Charles White, 1974
28. "Coffee Break" Charles White, 1934
29. "Nude Torso" Charles White, 1934
30. "Lo, I am Black" Charles White, 1934
31. "St. Maarten Woman" Romare Bearden, 1985
32. "Maudell Sleet" Romare Bearden, 1982
33. "Island Rain Forest" Romare Bearden, 1985
34. "Orange Bird/St. Maarten" Romare Bearden, 1985
35. "Green and Yellow Abstraction" Romare Bearden, 1985
36. "The Baptism" Romare Bearden, 1975
37. "End Job Discrimination!" Romare Bearden, 1960
38. "Conjure Woman" Romare Bearden, 1979
39. "Circus" Romare Bearden, 1964
40. "Carolina Blue" Romare Bearden, 1970
41. "Carolina Interior" Romare Bearden, 1970
42. "Village of Ayo" Romare Bearden, 1972
43. "Odysseus the Bowman" Romare Bearden, 1969
44. "Come Sunday/Print" Romare Bearden, 1975
45. "Pepper Jelly Lady #1" Romare Bearden, 1975
46. "Mecklenburg Autumn #4" Romare Bearden, 1979
47. "Totem #1" Romare Bearden, 1960
48. "Mother & Child/Print" Romare Bearden, 1978
49. "Death and the Dancer" Romare Bearden, 1985
50. "Salome/John the Baptist" Romare Bearden, 1974
51. "Noah's Ark" Romare Bearden, 1974
52. "Juba" Charles White, 1934
53. "I'm On My Way to Canaan" Charles White, 1934
54. "Contemplation" Romare Bearden, 1960
55. "Dramatic Woman" Romare Bearden, 1960
56. "Marchand" Romare Bearden, 1961
57. "Meditation" Charles White, 1934
58. "Female Torso" Charles White, 1934
59. "Conversation" Romare Bearden, 1979
60. "Two Women" Romare Bearden, 1981-82
61. "Odalisque" Romare Bearden, 1959

62. "Storyville Idyll" Romare Bearden, 1981
63. "Mother and Child" Romare Bearden, 1973
64. "Woman with Child" Romare Bearden, 1973
65. "Woman with Child/Big Hand" Romare Bearden, 1980
66. "Susan Taylor and Daughter" Romare Bearden, 1984
67. "Pastel: Young Woman" Romare Bearden, 1961
68. "Woman in Green Hat" Romare Bearden, 1961
70. "Woman in Grid Room" Romare Bearden, 1961
71. "Woman in Yellow Hat" Romare Bearden, 1961
72. "Two Women" Romare Bearden, 1961
73. "Crispus Attucks" Romare Bearden, 1960
74. "Music Man" Romare Bearden, 1970
75. "Saxophone Player" Romare Bearden, 1981
76. "Carnival Dancer" Romare Bearden, 1982
77. "Mother and Child/Big Hand" Romare Bearden, 1980

Please note this list was compiled using data obtained from Syllabus Griots of Imagery: A Comment on the Art of Romare Bearden and Charles White

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