



Creating Blues: An Interdisciplinary Study

Curriculum Unit 97.05.05
by Medria Blue

SECTION I: BLUES BACKGROUND

PART A: WHAT IS THE BLUES ?

*The blues. I was born with the blues. You were born with the blues. We were wombed with the blues. Traveling the birth canal blues, first boo-boo blues, too much homework blues, macaroni and cheese again blues, pimple blues, racism blues, love blues, money blues—everyone has experience with blues. Micheal S. Harper's poem, *The Blues Don't Change* and Ntozake Shange's *Takin A Solo/A Poetic Possibility/A Poetic Imperative* capture the essence of what the Blues is:*

"The Blues Don't Change"

"Now I'll tell you about the
Blues. All Negroes like Blues.
Why? Because they was born with
the Blues. And now everybody
have the Blues. Sometimes they
don't know what it is."

—Leadbelly

And I was born with you, wasn't I, Blues?
Wombed with you, wounded, reared and forwarded
from address to address, stamped, stomped
and returned to sender by nobody else but you,
Blue Rider, writing me off every chance you
got, you mean old grudgeful-hearted, table-
turning demon, you, you sexy soul-sucking gem.
Blue diamond in the rough, you are forever.
You can't be outfoxed don't care how they cut
and smuggle and shine you on, you're like a
shadow, too dumb and stubborn and necessary
to let them turn you into what you ain't
with color or theory or powder or paint.

That's how you can stay in style without sticking

and not getting stuck. You know how to sting
where I can't scratch, and you move from frying
pan to skillet the same way you move people
to go wiggling their bodies, juggling their
limbs, loosening that goose, upping their voices,
opening their pores, rolling their hips and lips.

They can shake their bodies but they can't shake you

Ntozake Shange "Takin A Solo/ A Poetic Possibility/ A Poetic Imperative

they come at you like leroi jenkins comes or cecil taylor/ or b.b. king.
they come at you alone/ in the theater/ in the story/ (in art)/ in the poem. Like with billie holiday or betty carter/they (we) shd give you a moment that cannot be recreated/a specificity that cannot be confused. our language shd let you know who's talkin, what we're talkin about abt how we cant stop sayin this to you. Some urgency accompanies the text. Something important is going on. We are speakin. Reachin for yr person/ we cannot hold it/ we dont wanna sell it/we give you ourselves/if you listen

PART B: HOW DID BLUES BEGIN ?

How did the blues begin? Many music historians site elements of African drumming in the blues and jazz. As Hughes in *The First Book of Jazz* writes, "for centuries, folks in West Africa have worked to rhythm, rowed boats to rhythm, pounded their corn to rhythm, built their houses to rhythm" (Hughes, 5). African slaves carried these rhythms in their bosoms across ocean to the Americas. Hence the work song emerged. Eventually the rhythm of the drums and the work songs became a part of blues. Accordingly, Langston Hughes offers this possible scenario to explain how the blues songs began:

Maybe somebody somewhere in the Deep South long ago started to make up a song that began with a kind of field holler. Perhaps the man was working in a rice field on a hot day when a song came into his head, then out of his mouth, like this:

Oh, the sun is so hot and the day is so doggone longÉ

Then when he couldn't think of anything else right away to go with it, he repeated the same lines:

Yes, the sun is so hot and the day is so doggone longÉ.

But by that time he had a new thought:

And that is the reason I'm singing this doggone song.

Something like that must have happened the day the first blues was born, for that is the pattern of the blues: a twelve-bar musical pattern—one long line of four bars to rhyme with the first two lines that are always the same. Their melody and beat are like those of a field holler. He continues to explain the format of the blues indicating that the melodies can also be written around five notes and that blues are almost always sad songs, songs about being out of work, broke, hungry, far away from home, wanting to get on a train but having no ticket, or being lonely when someone you love has gone . . . But behind the sadness in blues there is almost always laughter and strength.

SECTION II: PEDAGOGY

Many sections of this unit (*especially Section III: Reading the Blues and Section IV: Blues Poetry*) require students to employ the writing process or a reader response process. This section provides teachers with background on instructional methods.

PART A: THE WRITING PROCESS from Atwell and Murry

Writer's Workshop

mini-lesson : introduce the workshop topic and procedures in the first fifteen minutes and students write on their own during the remainder of the time

writing workshop sessions : a set time period where students generate writing

peer editing sessions : students listen to and critique each others work in progress

self conferencing sessions : students may 1)revise their work and 2)edit their work

group share sessions : feedback given when students read their work to a small group or whole group; could take place during the last seven or eight minutes of class

Freewrite: Letting the pen be the blind man's cane, telling you where you're going "the ability to let the writing flow, to develop the potential for surprise (Murray, 4-6)

Writing Process:

Prewriting : rehearse (explore ideas or prompts)

Drafting : write formulated ideas

Revising : the act of saying something better after it has already been written. It is improvising on what exists on the paper to produce writing that is strong in terms of its voice, style, coherence, unity. "Surprise is the reward for the line-by-line crafts of revision and editing—the writing keeps saying what we do not expect to hear." (*improvising by saying it better*) (Murray, 6)

Editing : Involves convention checks. Students should do separate edit checks for grammar. For example, they should check once for comma splices and then once for subject and verb agreement and then once for spelling

Publishing : read and/or display final copy to public

PART B: READER RESPONSE DISCUSSION/INSTRUCTION from Judith Langer

The Classroom Environment

Create an environment where there are not right-answers-only

Questioning Techniques

focus on questions that are schema based and require students to 1) gather information; 2)

perceive relationships and make inferences and 3) use information to form new ideas

encourage students to develop and ask questions

guide and participate in the discussion while answering questions that elicit other questions

create an environment that requires students to engage in critical and creative thinking as they solve problems; clarify values; explore controversial issues; and form and defend positions

The Focus of Instruction

Students have personal and cultural experiences that are unique. There is no way to predict student contribution. When discussing, student understanding is the central focus. Pick up on what students say and encourage them to gain vision from others. Probing, questioning and redirecting—all are methods to be used to direct discussion

The Process of Literary Understanding

A literary orientation involves living through the experience—involves calling on that which is known (schema-based); it may result in multiple interpretations, demonstrating and expanding the complexity of our understandings as new ideas mix with the whole. Literature allows students to ponder, contemplate, reflect on, interpret, develop, question, and defend. Students should share questions and develop interpretations and should not be banalized: right answer/true or false. The possibilities for exploring should be endless

How To Conduct A Reader Response Classroom

Initiation

Replace vocabulary and review of plot summary initiation with inviting initial understanding, developing interpretations, and taking a critical stance (i.e.: related readings; personal, historical, cultural, or conceptual connections)

During Reading

Keep students' thoughts at the center; develop interpretations: develop explanations, reflect, use conflicting views; examine related issues; challenge perspectives and responses

Post Reading

Summarize key issues, noting changes in ideas, and pointing to concerns not

adequately addressed; leave room for further exploration of possibilities; invite continuing envisionment building

Expressionist/Socio Historical Implications

1. Voice

Students should develop a keen awareness of voice. Accordingly, Schneider writes, "I hear them trying to sound like Tennyson, Emerson, T.S. Eliot, or some other half-remembered (almost always male) literary model, trying to write, not guessing that the rhythms of the language they heard spoken at the kitchen table by their own mothers and fathers are what hold the power of art for them—Stories can be written in the voice of street language we hear on the subway and poems in the voice of the mother at home as she braids the hair of the child who sits on the kitchen stool." This unit is designed to give students opportunities to explore a multitude of voices (Schneider, xviii).

2. Teaching Unstandard English

Min-shan Lu in her article “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle” writes of the experience of being multi-lingual: speaking in one dialect of Chinese at home to servants, another in school(standard) and English with her parents. Upon reflecting on the explanation given by her as reasoning for speaking standard Chinese and English and the explanation for speaking “proper” given her daughter, Lu expresses concern that the metaphor of a survival tool (the explanation) dominates their (young people such as her daughter) understanding of language as it once dominated her own. In relation to instruction she writes, “ I am especially concerned with the way some composition classes focus on turning the classroom into a monological scene for the students’ reading and writing. When composition classes encourage these students to ignore those voices that seem irrelevant to the purified world of the classroom, most students are often able to do so without much struggle. Some of them are so adept at doing it that the world process has for them become automatic.” Lu goes on to suggest that we encourage students to explore ways of practicing the conventions of the discourse they are learning by negotiating through these conflicting voices . . . and that we must teach them from the beginning to struggle. Supporting Lu’s position is Gloria Ladson-Billings who points out the difficulty black students have when “choosing” academic excellence without losing their sense of self as black people. In her essay, “Like Lightning in a Bottle: Attempting to Capture the Pedagogical Excellence of Successful Teachers of Black Students,” she suggests that teaching with cultural relevancy is the buffer to this difficulty and the essence of pedagogical excellence for teachers of black students. Cultural relevancy, being directly related to self-esteem, allows students to feel validated in the classroom. Thus, it does not yield feelings of exclusion and masked voice as depicted in following excerpt from June Jordan’s essay:

Black English is not exactly a linguistic buffalo; African Americans living here depend on this language for discovery of the world. We begin to grow up in a house where every true mirror shows us the face of somebody who does not belong there, whose walk and talk will never look or sound “right” because that house was meant to shelter a family that is alien and hostile to us. As we learn our way around this environment, either we hide our original word habits, or we completely surrender our own voice. (Jordan, 363-367) Teaching the blues allows students to reclaim their voice whether it speaks in Black English or Standard English. Exploring writings from the works of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou and others who write in Black English provides students with rare opportunities to be validated. Jordan and her students provide the classroom teacher or novice writer with rules and qualities of Black English in the same article which can be discussed and revised according to trends and dialects spoken by the African-American population in the classroom. In addition, it could be contrasted with other trends and dialects of the natural voices in the classroom.

Section III: READING THE BLUES

Part A: IMPROVISATION IN THE HUMOROUS SKIT

Background: Jesse B. Simple

Jesse B. Simple, the birth child of Langston Hughes, is a character who graced the pages of the 1940's *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Defender*, *New York Post* and *Chicago Defender* newspapers. He lived in the magnificent city of Harlem, New York. The Simple stories were so popular that they eventually filled volumes with their humor and blues. Books, radio, television and musical comedy stage—all eventually were places that allowed the common man to transform the ugliness of defeat and despair into an optimistic conviction, a song of survival, a train moving forward.

Although Simple stories deal with the Negro's jobs, play, churches, and relationships; the paradoxes of America's racial double standard; and various elements of being poor, they are timeless and have universal appeal. Through the years, the humor is still effective as are the social issues poignant. This duality allows readers to both laugh and cry as one relates to the Black "Everyman" Simple. It is this element of " *laughing to keep from crying* " or laughing and crying through the gray areas of life that makes the stories as valid as the blues. Furthermore, as David Littlejohn states in his *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing By American Negroes* , his (Hughes') tone has that intimate, elusive, near tragic, near-comic sound of the Negro blues. On Hughes' theme(s), Littlejohn writes, "his theme is not so much white oppression, as the Negro's quiet resistant to it. (Nowhere about Simple is there the mark of oppression). His writings typify (and probably support) the famous and useful myth of Negro endurance—the knowing grin, half-smile-half smirk, of the bowing but unbeaten" (Littlejohn, 147).

Employed skillfully in the Simple stories are elements of satire, irony, and paradox. Of Hughes' narrative technique, Phillis Klotman submits that it consists of 1) skit technique, 2) simple development of theme and character 3) reader identification, and 4) the intermittent sound of the blues in prose. Hughes is said not to write fiction with Simple; instead, he is described as telling a story. As Hughes tells the story of blacks in Harlem, he uses a skit format involving primarily a narrator, Boyd, and Simple. The two are stand-up comics that play against each other. Simple is not formally educated, but he is witty, while Boyd appears to be educated. As with all blues, its content has to do with staring adversity in the face while maintaining a survivalist sensibility. Hughes accomplishes blues mastery as Simple rises above despair, with his passion for life, laughter, and language. Skit themes vary and can be grouped into the following categories women; race; Africa and black pride; social issues; and political issues. Readers can identify with the themes and the characters while facing the harsh realities of America's 'ism's' with an ear of laughter. The blues in Simple can be heard in the mastery of language: black southern dialect and the latest hip Harlem expressions and folk idioms. Its fast paced dialogue moves quickly like the passing trains about which blues artists sang.

Lesson I: The Best of Simple

Ethical or Human Dimensions:

Simple stories can provide students with an example of how authors use humor as a metaphor for problems and issues.

Objective:

Students will:

Recognize humor as a literary device that can be used to express feelings about problems and issues

Activities:

Read and discuss Simple vignettes

Explore and research a case study based on a school problem; local, state or national issues; historical problem; scientific issue; family problem; or moral question

Prewrite, draft, revise, edit and publish a modern day Simple skit involving two stand-up comics.

Act out vignettes in teams of two

Materials:

Simple Stories: "Census"; "Seeing Double"; "Simple Stakes a Claim"; "Color Problems"

Pencil/pen and paper

Procedures:

Read and discuss selected Simple skits/vignettes. Discuss how humor is used to improvise. Ask each student to explore an issue or a problem of interest and about which a skit can be written. Upon publishing skits, assign pairs of students to act out skits.

Extension:

Read Simple stories and create a mock interview with Langston Hughes discussing his views on social issues past and present.

Research the life of Langston Hughes.

PART B: VIGNETTE BLUES

Background Maud Martha

Gwendolyn Brooks, a black American novelist and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, shares with Langston Hughes a remarkable ability to capture the plight of the Black community. In *Maud Martha*, she writes about racial discrimination, economic and social strife, family, parenting, death, and suffering. Of equal remarkability is Brooks' ability to play with words. With language she is said to create, "a highly stylized screen of imagery and diction and sound—fastidiously exact images, crisp Mandarin diction, ice-perfect sound—to stand between the reader and the subject" (Littlejohn, 90).

Maud Martha is a novella written in thirty-four vignettes that span the life of Maud Martha. The vignettes paint a portrait of life which "teaches more, more quickly, more lastingly, than a thousand pages of protest (Littlejohn, 153). Thus Brooks succeeds in transforming pain into creativity.

Lesson II: reading the Blues in Maud Martha

Objective:

Students will:

explore personal, historical and social interpretations of selected vignettes
compare perspectives of interpreting a text

Activities:

Read "description of Maud Martha;" "death of grandmother;" "home;" "Helen;" and "the kitchenette"
Write a reader response of first impressions (anything that comes to mind) for each vignette
Exchange response journals (in groups of four) and read and respond to each peers initial response to the reading in a dialogue session
Chart out similarities and differences of opinions in terms of textual, experiential, cultural; social and historical observations of the text
Discuss implications of responses with whole class

Materials

Maud Martha vignettes

Pen; response journals/notebooks; chart paper; and markers

Procedures:

Students can read vignettes as a class or individually. Students will develop understanding in small group arrangements. Monitor progress of group discussions. As a whole group, discuss interpretations and meanings of the readings.

Extension:

Identify the author's view point of a social, political, historical or cultural issues based on an understanding of the novel *Maud Martha*.

SECTION IV: BLUES POETRY: IMPROVISATION; FORM; AND AFFIRMATION

Part A: A SATIRICAL APPROACH TO IMPROVISATION

In *Section I* : Langston Hughes used humor and laughter as devices to add to his writing a blues sensibility. In *Blues Poetry* , several authors' uses of satire, affirming, ego-tripping, and a blues format and content will be examined.

Background: *The Inner City Mother Goose and The House that Crack Built*

In her dedication of *The Inner City Mother Goose* , Eve Merriam writes, " REMEMBERING , JESSE B. SEMPLE'S DADDY. " What a fitting dedication from one blues artist to another! Eve Merriam in unleashing the pain of inner city New York used satire to improvise and move forward as she modernized the Mother Goose Nursery rhymes. Modernizing the nursery rhymes was a brilliant, but controversial idea. In fact, Tthe book was so controversial that it was barred from schools and public libraries.

Mother Goose rhymes date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although nursery rhymes have been inducted into our society as soft bedtime whispers, their original purpose was to pass news, gossip and warnings quickly and inconspicuously. Likewise, they came to be "methods of laughing at the powerful and passing the truth along" (Merriam,12).

Examinations of original versions illustrate that they may have been taken on as social and political commentary on the vice-ridden times. An example given in the book's introduction reads:

In the case of " *Who Killed Cock Robin ?* " ("I" said the sparrow, "With my bow and arrow'") the gossip in government circles during the rule of Oliver Cromwell was that Robin was Sir Robert Walpole, secretary of the treasury (Merriam,6). Merriam's version *The Inner City Mother Goose* is written in satiric verses. Its language is easy to read and down-to-earth. It addresses traditional blues themes including: inadequate housing, unemployment, rats and rodents, crime, violence, public transportation, cutbacks in funding, and community issues. In doing so, Merriam is able to give a voice to "those who were being silenced" as it protests living

conditions with “healing words” (Merriam,3).

Similar to poems in *The Inner City Mother Goose* is *The House that Crack Built* written by Clark Taylor and illustrated by Jan Thompson Dicks. It is a poem created by transforming the well-known nursery rhyme, “The House that Jack Built,” into a commentary on a societal problem. Its language is straight-forward and direct. It has a rhythm as do most blues poems; its rhythm is created by using a rap music beat and rhyme. The content of the poem reveals the dynamics of the drug problem in the United States. The harvest king pens, the planters, the soldiers who guard the king pens and monitor the planters, the street peddling drug dealers, the drug addicts and the crack addicted babies—all are traced in this poem. The poem further keeps in the blues tradition as it does not suggest that our society is helplessly beaten by the drug problem. Instead, it offers readers a choice. This is evident when looking at the girl who’s killing her brain, her head setting symbolically upside down atop her shoulders. Likewise, the reader realizes the choice when reading the last two lines of the poem, “And these are the Tears we cry in our sleep that fall for the Baby with nothing to eat.” The makers of the book stress this choice in the Afterword as it is stated, “The author used his poetic voice to remind us that the problem is out there. The illustrator used her artistic vision to bring the tragic nature of the problem powerfully alive. And the publisher chose to blend these visions into a book and to use its profits from that book to help fight the problem.” Hence, it can be concluded that the problem of drugs is tragically blue in this book, but its creation is a different hue of blue, a survivalist blue, an improvisationalist blue.

Lesson III: Transforming the Nursery Rhyme

Objective:

Students will:

- recognize satire as an improvisational literary device
- become familiar with the historical purpose of nursery rhymes
- use the nursery rhyme as a format to express a blues theme

Activities:

- To discuss satire and nursery rhymes
- To identify a blues theme to express in a poem
- To read and select a nursery rhyme to rewrite

Materials:

The House that Crack Built and *The Inner City Mother Goose* (teacher selected poems)

Pen and paper

Procedures:

Discuss satire and the historical purpose of nursery rhymes. Read and discuss selections from *The Inner City*, *Mother Goose* and *The House that Crack Built*. Discuss what current issues or problems would appear in modern nursery rhymes. Using traditional nursery rhymes, transform the traditional rhymes by rewriting them into modern day poems.

SECTION V: IMPROVISATION AND JAZZ

According to African novelist Chinua Achebe, there are three elements to any work of literature: words; maker/arranger of words; and the audience and that these three elements produce a new and living organism. This section will emphasize how this living organism is shaped and transformed as the arranger of words defines his/her voice.

Sekou Sundiata, a recording and performing poet, in an interview with Bill Moyers argued that, once you (an artist) get past the level of technical proficiency, or even virtuosity, there's the question of how you sound. This theory emerged as he learned (in listening to and studying improvisational music) how important it is for each instrumentalist to develop his or her own sound. The development of sound is somewhat improvisational and somewhat planned. It is improvisational as poetry can be influenced by the call and response tradition which is the exchange or dialogue between a singer or storyteller and the audience. It emphasizes the interdependent relationship that exists between an individual and the community such as the interaction between the preacher and the congregation in black churches, between the soloist and the ensemble in jazz performances. It is planned as the poet can follow a particular format and the poem can be completely written out, but unplanned interplay can enhance a poem. This can occur through listening to poetry out loud over and over and over. Supporting this theory Sundiata comments, "My feeling for the poem is never satisfied on the page. So at home when I'm working in my studio, I do the same thing the kids do who walk around practicing their raps. For me there's always something about poetry that just has to be heard"(Moyers, 394).

Another poet of the same vein, Quincy Troupe, says this of the sound of poetry:

I think every language has a musical core. I call our language the American language rather than English because the sounds of the American language come from all our different ethnic communities, and these sounds are beautiful to me. As a poet, I try to get the music that's underneath all of that. I grew up listening to blues and to the old African American people talking in bars and churches and walking the streets and in funeral homes and barbershops and in the beauty parlors and in parks, and I especially loved to listen to jazz musicians talk. So all that musical language that I grew up listening to is what I try to make (Moyers, 413).

Troupe, who is the reigning "World Heavyweight Poetry Champion," when told that more pleasure is gotten hearing him read than reading the poem from a text, comments:

It's very important to touch the audience where they are. There's a debate going on right now about poetry in the United States between those who think that it should be performance and

those who think it should be more academic. I happen to be in the academy, but I also think that, in order to get into people's blood and into people's consciousness and into people's lives, poetry has to sing (Moyers, 417).

How does one make poetry sing? Perhaps the answer lies in blues and jazz. Troupe points out that blues and jazz is constructed close to the way Americans speak. Blues, he says, speaks in circles—coming back and saying things over and over again just for emphasis—just as people speak and similarly in blues there is also a whole repetition of lines coming back like refrains. According to Troupe, jazz provides the model for taking a text and improvising on it in a performance (Moyers, 417).

Lesson IV: Improvisation and Jazz

Objective:

Students will:

find their voice and recognize an author's voice

demonstrate an awareness of their voice by writing and performing a poem

Activities:

watch and discuss the PBS Bill Moyers "Language of Life" series featuring Sekou Sundiata's interview and reading of *Blink Your Eyes* (Moyers, 396-98)

experiment with voice and movement by reading (poem and commentary), discussing and reciting *A Poem For Magic* by Quincy Troupe (Moyers, 424-26)

listen to Pee Wee Crayton's "Blues After Hours" from *Urban Blues CD Volume 1* and Miles Davis's "Autumn Leaves" from *Dream Session* and freewrite a poem to be performed while improvising

Materials:

PBS Bill Moyers *Language of Life* video series and *Language of Life* text

Dream Session and *Urban Blues Volume 1* CDs

Pen and paper

Procedures:

Watch and discuss Sekou Sundiata's interview with Bill Moyers. Discuss the impact of improvisation on poetry and the question of poetry being either academic or performance.

Experiment with voice by reciting poetry in contrasting voices in both tone and pace i.e.: fast, slow, mad, and soft. Recall times when these voices came naturally and employ these voices when reading "A Poem For Magic." Read commentary on the creation of the poem prior to reciting.

Listen to Blue Mitchell's *Down With It* and freewrite. Compose a poem and perform it in the class improvising where possible.

Extension:

Listen to W.C. Handy's *St. Louis Blues*, *Yellow Dog Blues*, *Joe Turner Blues* or *Beales Street Blues* ; Leadbelly's *Midnight Special* ; "Fats" Waller and Alberta Hunter's *Beale St. Blues* ; *Louis Blues* ; and Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's *My Baby Left Me* and 1) cite patterns in blues and 2) note the regional differences of Mississippi and Chicago blues.

SECTION VI: BLUES FORMAT TWELVE BAR BLUES

Blues consist of a twelve bar format. In written music, a bar is a vertical line that separate notes. The word bar also means the whole group of notes that appear between two vertical lines. Each verse is made up of three statements or questions. The first two are alike. The third is different but still related to the other two and rhymes with them. Each one is four bars long, making a total of twelve bars. Eloise Greenfield's *My Daddy* and *Watching the World Go By* are written like the lyrics of twelve-bar blues.

Lesson V: Twelve Bar Blues

Objective:

Student will:

identify a twelve bar blues format

write a blues song or poem in the twelve bar blues format

Activities:

Read and discuss *My Daddy* and *Watching the World Go By*

Write a lighthearted blues song or poem modeling after *My Daddy* or *Watching the World Go By*

Materials:

My Daddy and Watching the World Go By in Nathaniel Talking

Paper and pen

Procedures:

Read and discuss the format of *My Daddy and Watching the World Go By*. Create a spontaneous blues poem in class in groups of two. Share poems with the class.

Extension:

Variation blues poetry, similar to improvisation, allows poets to mold the blues format/structure to fit their purpose. However, the essentials of blues poetry: repetition/call-and-response must remain.

Read *love blues #1 (to be sung/performed)* by j.w. henry (Jordan,113).

Improvise on poem with three lines of verse. In the first line make a statement, in the second repeat it (with or without changes), and in the third resolve the stanza in a rhymed response.

SECTION VII: A LOVE SUPREME: IMPROVISING TO AFFIRM

Michael S. Harper sheds important insight into what it means to travel the road of pain to find meaning, hope and brightness. He tells a story of John Coltrane who searched for the perfect mouthpiece because he wanted to play a very difficult note. When he couldn't find the reed, he finally gave up and Harper says, "There was no easy way to get that sound; he played through it (the pain) to a love supreme." He suggests further that "jazz musicians and poets often have to go through pain to find inspiration." As Harper describes his writing process he informs that he writes notes to try to get through the circumstance (Moyers,175). This writing through pain and circumstance is an act of improvisation. Improvisation is creating. It is the creating of things—poems, art, music, crafts—that keeps us alive and affirms our being.

Poetry is a wonderful vehicle of affirmation; it is the written testament that in fact we are phenomenal, we rise, and we are baad. It is ego tripping and it is healthy for the mind, body, and soul. There are many poets who blend blues themes with an ego tripping principle. These poems can serve as models to follow to create original poems of the same nature. In fact, words, phrases, sentences, or lines from one or more of these poems can be taken to create a new poem. This technique, dada poetry, can result in a new version of a well-known poem or can result in a new poem.

Lesson VI: A Love Supreme: Improvising to Affirm

Objective:

Students will:

recognize poetry as a vehicle of transcending blues and affirming oneself through writing 1) a

dada poem and 2) a poem of affirmation using their senses to describe themselves in a positive manner

Activity I:

Listen to track 16 *love jones* and select lines where senses are used to personify images
Discuss self-appreciation as a whole group
Discuss how improvisation relates to affirmation
Draft ten valuable, admirable, or cherish worthy features

Complete *Metaphor of Me* worksheet to create an affirmation poem

Activity II

Read and discuss models of poems that affirm and models of poems to use to create a dada poem

Complete *Modeling From Great Poems* worksheet to create a dada poem

Materials:

love jones c.d. (track 16)

Poems that affirm: *Ego-Tripping* (Giovanni,1) ; *Still I Rise* (Angelou, 41); *Aint that Baad* (Angelou, 43); *Young Cornrows Callin Out the Moon* (Foreman, 3) ; *Cherish Me* (Thomas,1); *Remember* (Moyers, 162-3) and *Child of the Americas* (Severino, 306)

Worksheets: *Modeling from Great Poems and Metaphor of Me Worksheet*

Extension:

Read *Wishing* by Lois Simmie and *The Trouble Is* by Myra Cohn Livingston. Write a wish or trouble list and turn it into a *Wishing* or a *The Trouble Is* poem. Compare how it was to write the *Ego Tripping/Dada* poem with writing a *Wishing* poem or *The Trouble Is* poem.

Metaphor of Me

(figure available in print form)

(figure available in print form)

Modeling from Great Poems

Below are titles of several poems that affirm identity and culture. These poems can be models to use to create poems that do the same thing: ego trip.

Claim a poem below as “verbal property.” Choose one of the poems below and create an uplifting poem about your identity and culture. You may repeat favorite lines from these poems in your poem.

Ego-Tripping	Still I Rise	Remember
Young Cornrows Callin Out the Moon	Child of the Americas	
Aint That Bad		Cherish M

(figure available in print form)

SECTION VIII: WHO IS THE BLUESMAN ?

Lesson VII: The Musician

Objective:

Students will:

Listen to songs by blues artists to determine elements of blues lyrics to determine sad/humorous tones and themes

Research blues musicians

Write a biopoem (minimum five facts about the artist) based on music and research

Activities:

Listen to selected blues songs according to tone and theme

Select and research a blues artist

Read models of biopoems

Write a biopoem for a blues artist

Materials:

Music: Dinah Washington’s *Baby Get Lost* and Johnny Otis with Robins and Little Esther *Double*

Crossing Blues in Urban Blues Volume 1 ; Muddy Water's Same Thing in Chicago Blues ; Monk—Standards; Slow Blues in John Coltrane Lush Life

Independent research sources (student provided)

Biopoem models in *Every Shut Eyes Aint Sleep : Homage to the Empress of the Blue 8; Jazz Fan Looks Back, 161; For Bud, 174; Here Where Coltrane is, 176; Last Affair: Bessie's Blues Song; Elegy for Thelonious, 251; Canary, 284; and Thelonious, 303*

Extension:

1) Create a children's book or a short research paper or 2) dramatic monologue based on freewriting to music and research.

Challenged Writer: Write an acrostic poem based on research.

Section IX: Visual Blues

Artist Background

Romare Bearden: Born in North Carolina, raised in Harlem and Pittsburgh, Bearden studied in Paris and settled in New York. He had a short career in song writing, before he turned to collage. His works are in the collections of every major museum across the country. He is quoted as saying, "I paint out of the tradition of the blues, of call and recall. You start a theme and you call and recall. You must become a blues singer—only you sing on the canvass. You improvise—you find the rhythm and catch it good and structure it as you go along—then the song is you" (Shange).

Johnny Otis: Born John Veliotes to Greek immigrant parents, he is drummer, pianist, vibraharpist, vocalist, bandleader, songwriter, record producer, disc jockey, television show host, civil rights activist, preacher, cartoonist, painter, and sculptor. Otis is a member of the Rock & Roll and Rhythm and Blues Halls of Fame and is often referred to as the Godfather of West Coast rhythm-and-blues music. It is said that Otis draws a parallel between the construction of chords from individual notes and the blending of hues from primary colors. He is a master of both processes, and from each has created works that are rich in texture, thought-provoking, at times humorous, and frequently spiritually uplifting. His work is compared to Jacob Lawrence and Archibald Motley and artists who paint their environments and the circumstances of the people they know. Of his

art he remarks, “My music feeds my art” (Hildebrand and Lovelace O’Neil).
Archibald Motley : Motley’s work is noted as “capturing the energy and the character of black urban life and is said to “create images that were compelling manifestations of the creative spirit of the African-American.” The capturing of this spirit—of Blackbelt residents who have put the care of the wartime economy temporarily behind them—is magically blues. Other themes in Motley’s art mirror those of Chicago’s Bronzeville: themes in Black life including music—jazz, blues, and in particular Chicago’s Urban Blues.

Lesson VIII: Visual Blues Artists

Objective:

Students will:

apply critical thinking skills to describe blues in art

create blues/vernacular art

Activity:

Discuss and view works of Bearden, Ottis, and Motley

Write a group response to a blues image (genre to be determined by group members)

Listen to music to produce a blues influenced piece of vernacular art

Procedures:

Look at books containing the art of Bearden, Ottis, and Motley in small groups.

Discuss artists and historical periods.

Respond to one visual image by relating it to *elements of blues*.

Listen to music and create a piece of vernacular art improvising on student generated materials.

Materials:

Colors and Chords (The Blues; Little Esther; Silas Green; Olive and the Primaries; Two Dancers/Saxophone Player; Uncle Blue; Great Moments in Musical History) The Art of Archibald Motley Jr. (Blues; Blackbelt; Lawd, Mah Man’s Leavin; and Night Life)
i live in music (whole book 21 painting by Romare Bearden)

John Coltrane’s *Blue Train*

Student generated recyclable materials, glue, assorted colors of fabric, construction paper, paint, scissors and available art supplies

Extension:

Create a blues cartoon modeling Johnny Ottis.

Compare Aaron Douglas’s painting, *Ma Bad Luck Card* , with Langston Hughes’ poem, *Hard Luck* . Analyze the painting’s ability to relate the same concept as the poem. Compare William H.

Johnson’s painting, *Chain Gang* , with Sterling A. Brown’s poem, *Southern Road* Ð [Note these two pieces do not share the same intention as Douglas’s and Hughes’ works as Douglas painted *Ma Bad Luck Card* specifically for *Hard Luck* .] Discuss the ability of each artist’s work to “express in a natural way what is felt rhythmically and spiritually” (Abradale, 135).

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