

Dance, Readings, Acting, Music, and Art (D.R.A.M.A.): A Study of African American Performing and Visual Arts in the 1940s – 1950s

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Overview

D.R.A.M.A. is an exciting, energetic, hands-on curriculum that allows students to learn about renowned African American performers and artists from the 1940s and 1950s. I will lead students as they build bridges between artistic disciplines—showing the connections between dancers, musicians, and an artist from a particular period. We will read biographies of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Ray Charles, Mahalia Jackson, and Jacob Lawrence, among others. I will introduce my students to popular dance forms from this era--the Lindy-hop, the Cha-Cha, the Freeze, and Minstrel dance--encouraging them to compare these forms to some of their favorite contemporary dances. I will also show how segregation and the emerging civil rights movement affected the development of the arts. Finally, I will guide my students as they read, discuss, analyze, and rehearse the play *On Strivers Row*, by Abram Hill. As a culminating event, students will perform this play during an assembly at Overbrook High School

Rationale

Over the past years the School District of Philadelphia has made several budget cuts in after school extra-curricular programs, especially in the creative and performing arts. My curriculum will help compensate for this deficiency by introducing students to the fundamentals of dance, acting, and performing within the regular curriculum. In addition, I want my students to be able to comprehend, articulate, and write about the importance of this time period for African-American performers. My students will learn pertinent historical facts leading up to the 1940s and 1950s: the Jim Crow Laws and their origin in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case, the Great Migration, The Harlem Renaissance, World War II, The Tuskegee Airmen, *Brown v Board of Education*, the Emmett Till lynching, and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Finally, I want to develop my students’

natural talents in acting, dancing, and playwriting to create a positive, educational and entertaining, performing arts class—a venue in which students can display their artistic crafts on a platform before their peers.

Budget Cuts in the Creative Arts

In a recent article in the *Philadelphia Daily News*, it was reported that the Philadelphia School District is in a financial crisis. Many schools in this district are operating in the red. The district must rebound from a deficit in the millions of dollars. In November, as they closed the books on 2005-2006, District finance officials said spending had actually outstripped revenue that year by over \$73 million, more than wiping out the District's \$50 million reserves and leaving a deficit of \$23 million (12). It has already been anticipated that in order to balance out this budget, the district must lay off personnel, including administrators, clerical staff, and teachers. Consequently, there will be more drastic cuts in after school programs. It is anticipated that desperately needed programs focusing on athletics and creative arts will be operating on shoestring budgets or be obliterated all together. Like commentator Tavis Smiley, we hope that all schools that have been forced to cut music visual arts and performing arts will have these programs restored: "If government officials allocate substantive educational funding to all schools equally, then every child will have the opportunity to explore both creative and academic areas of interest" (41). Ideally, students would not only receive training in acting, directing, and play writing, but also receive instruction in movement and dance. Because this is unlikely to happen in the immediate future, however, teachers must find ways to introduce them within the context of academic subjects like English or Reading. Thus, an important purpose of this curriculum is to deliver an engaging, energetic, and physically active drama class.

Historical Background

In 1892, an African American named Homer Plessey challenged a Louisiana law that forced him to ride in a separate railroad car even though he bought a first-class ticket. He was arrested for riding in a "whites-only" car and brought to trial before criminal court judge John H. Ferguson. Ferguson rejected Plessey's argument that the law was unconstitutional. In 1896, the Supreme Court, in *Plessey vs. Ferguson*, upheld the Louisiana law and expressed a new legal doctrine endorsing "separate but equal" facilities for African Americans. Biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, as well as journalists and novelists, gave support to the doctrine that races were separate and that Whites were superior (Woodward 74). The ruling established the legal basis for discrimination in the South for more than 50 years. While public facilities in the South were always separate, they were far from equal. In many cases, they were inferior. These laws, also known as "Jim Crow" laws, segregated schools, transportation, and communities. The term "Jim Crow" is believed to have come from a minstrel show first staged in 1828 by white entertainer Thomas "Daddy" Rice, who performed a song-and-dance routine called "Jump Jim Crow" in burned-cork blackface and hobo rags (Brinkley 57). Jim Crow formed the background of the The Great Migration, The Harlem Renaissance, The heroic service of the Tuskegee Airmen, the tragic murder of Emmett

Till, *Brown v the Board of Education*, and the Civil Rights Movement. It was also in this atmosphere of segregation and discrimination that African American performing and visual art evolved.

The Jubilee Singers

During the late 1800s African-Americans listened to composer Francis Hall Johnson who combined classical training with his memories of old slave songs to create one of the first spiritual choirs. The Fisk Jubilee Singers began in 1871 as a group of Fisk University students, many of whom were former slaves, who sang folk songs, popular melodies, and some spirituals (Tate 53). This choir gained success and even traveled to Europe to raise money for their school despite harsh apartheid-like laws in the United States. For example, they had to sit in the rear of transportation cars when they traveled; when they were hungry or sleepy, they could not find refuge in white establishments.

Stepin Fetchit and the Jim Crow Era

The career of Lincoln Theodore Perry, a.k.a. Stepin Fetchit exemplifies the plight of the black entertainer and the depiction of blacks in entertainment during the Jim Crow era. He was one of the most successful yet also one of the most controversial entertainment figures of all time. Perry began his career in vaudeville where he performed as Stepin and his partner performed as Fetchit. Later, when their act broke up, Perry kept both names and performed under the name Stepin Fetchit. Fetchit gained notoriety for his lazy, confused, mumbling, stupid character that convinced white audiences that all black men behaved in this fashion. It was not surprising that many blacks didn't like Stepin Fetchit. They thought that his shuffling, shiftless, dumb darkey routine made all black people look inferior to white folks (Davis 82). On the other hand, white audiences loved the character Stepin Fetchit because he was unthreatening, uneducated, and was obviously inferior to his white performers. Consider a slave like old Stepin Fetchit: so dumb that if the master sent him to get a hoe, he would come back with a plow; if he said go to the fields and go to work, Old Stepin would misunderstand and go back to his shack and sit down (Davis 82). It was not surprising that Hollywood loved this silly, lazy, black persona so much that several more black dim-witted characters were created, including Stymie from the *Little Rascals* film shorts.

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

Robinson was born Luther Robinson on May 25, 1878 in Richmond, Virginia. At the tender age of 8, he ran away from his over protective grandmother and got a job as a stable boy at a race track and danced for change on street corners and saloons. He developed his uniquely rhythmic style of tap dancing by watching the dancers in the popular minstrel shows of the day. He earned the name "Bojangles" while he was entertaining in vaudeville because of the "happy-go-lucky" way he danced (Tate 41). By 1908, he was regularly earning more than \$3,000 a week. This kind of salary was unheard of for a black entertainer. Unfortunately, he gambled most of his monies away and spent many dollars supporting his womanizing habits. Robinson longed to play "the

romantic leading man,” but Hollywood was not interested in hiring blacks to play those roles. That changed in 1943 when Robinson played the leading role in *Stormy Weather*. This would be Robinson’s last film. He died six years later on Nov. 25, 1949. I plan to show my students the film *Bojangles* so they may gain more understanding of this remarkable entertainer. I remember watching Bill “Bojangles” Robinson as a little girl in the Shirley Temple movies. I recall thinking what a great tap dancer he was. Also, I remember falling down the stairs in my home because I tried tap dancing up and down the steps like he did in *The Little Colonel*.

The Great Migration

The two main reasons for the Great Migration were economic and political oppression. Many southern blacks lived in squalor and found little reputable work. Hundreds of thousands of blacks left the rural South as economic conditions worsened and Jim Crow Laws became unbearable. As World War I and the demand for American products increased, it was rumored that the North promised not only jobs, but also housing, and educational opportunities on a scale undreamed of by most black Southerners. Northern manufacturers were badly in need of unskilled and semi-skilled labor. Northern factories were eager to hire whoever was available. This was the answer to many prayers. Not only could blacks hope to earn a decent wage, they could live in much better conditions and their children could attend good schools. Many Blacks considered the North to be a safe haven. Another reason for the Great Migrations is that political oppression in the South grew intolerable. There was no apparent tendency toward abatement or relaxation of the Jim Crow code of discrimination and segregation in the 1920s, and none in the thirties until well along in the Great Depression years (Davis 116). The Ku Klux Klan was casually lynching black men and raping black women at alarming rates. Whites now enjoyed unlimited power to take whatever steps they deemed necessary to “purify” southern society (Adams and Sanders 230). To make matters worse, many Klansmen were police officers, lawyers, and respected businessmen. The very people who should have protected black people were terrorizing them

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance has its origins in the urban migrations of black people during and immediately following World War I. For many, the final destination was Harlem, New York. Harlem was an attractive neighborhood; they called it “the Mecca of the New Negro,” “the Culture Capital of the Black World,” “the City of Refuge,” and “the Promised Land” (Honey 20). Harlem boasted the largest population of urban blacks anywhere in the world and became the center of African American political and cultural life. According to Maureen Honey, “Harlem is indeed the great Mecca for the sight-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro world; for the lure of it has reached down to every island to the Carib Sea and has penetrated even into Africa”(21). Aspiring writers flocked to the community. “Writers like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B DuBois soon became some of the most influential examples of Alain Locke’s ‘New Negro’” (23). These influential writers did

their best to advise fellow African Americans on how to handle prejudice. However, even in Northern cities, African Americans did not find safe and fair practices. Many cities practiced their own forms of Jim Crow. In the North, de facto segregation of housing, schools, hospitals, and even churches was instituted as a way of life; racism was as widespread, though more subtle than the South (David 3).

Mahalia Jackson

Born in a poor section of New Orleans on October 26, 1912, Mahalia Jackson had a voice with such power, style, and grace that she moved a nation. Ms. Jackson moved to Chicago searching for a better way of life. Her dream was to be a nurse, but shortly after she arrived in Chicago, the stock market crashed and America went through the dismal Great Depression. To make ends meet, Mahalia worked domestic jobs, joined the Johnson Gospel Singers, getting paid less than two dollars per performance. From 1927 to 1932, the Johnson Gospel Singers began singing all over Chicago and Mahalia toured the world as a popular soloist. Her most famous song was “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” which was written by Thomas Dorsey in 1932. Despite her popularity, white entertainment executives kept strict control over and placed many commercial restrictions on Mahalia Jackson’s singing. She often complained, not only about these restrictions, but also about the commercialization of black gospel.

Ray Charles

Ray Charles was born September 23, 1930, during the dwindling years of the Harlem Renaissance. As a child he was influenced by blues, country, gospel, jazz, and big band music. He showed an interest in music at 3 years old. When he lost his sight at 7 years old, he became a charity student at a school that specialized in teaching blind and deaf children. This school exposed him to formal musical training. Charles learned to read, write and arrange music in Braille; score for big bands; and play piano, organ, sax, clarinet, and trumpet. With his mother’s death, Charles left school at age 15, and joined a group of talented black musicians on the so-called “Chitlin Circuit”. In 1947, Charles recorded “Guitar Blues,” “Walkin’ and Talkin,” and “Wonderin’ and Wonderin.” In 1954, he recorded “I Got a Woman” which reached #1 on the R&B chart in 1955. This song brought together gospel music in a secular setting in a way that had never been done before, and served to spawn a whole new genre later to become known as “Soul.”

Ray Charles was no stranger to Jim Crow laws. On tour, he was allowed to play to white audiences in popular performance halls, but he was not allowed to sleep in white-owned hotels, eat in white-owned restaurants, or be in white neighborhoods. Ray Charles came under fire when he refused to play to a segregated crowd during the fifties. This enraged the state of Georgia and local officials banned Mr. Charles from ever playing in his home state.

Lionel Hampton

Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1909, Hampton was the first musician to use the vibraharp. In fact, he appeared as a vibraharp player in a movie starring Danny Kaye which was titled *Flying Home* after Hampton's hit song. Although known for the vibraharp, Mr. Hampton made his recording debut as a drummer. Over his long career, he played with Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and Thomas Dorsey. In 1940, he formed his first big band and soon established himself as a dominant figure in the world of jazz. He was active in radio and television and appeared in many films including *A Song is Born* (1948), *The Benny Goodman Story* (1955), and *The Rooftops of New York* (1960). He was credited with important innovations, including the establishment of the vibraharp as a standard instrument of the jazz ensemble. He was the first to add the electric organ and bass to the jazz group; and the first to add the electric bass (Tate 101).

I was a Lionel Hampton fan without knowing I was a Lionel Hampton fan. I first heard his famous song "Flying Home" in the dance segment in the movie *Malcolm X*. I remember tapping my feet and bopping my head to the rhythmic beat. It was during this seminar, "Art and the Life of the City" that I learned more about this tune and the band leader who wrote it. Once again I heard this same song and my toes tapped and head bopped. I learned that these toe-tapping; head-bopping beats are examples of syncopation, interlocked polyrhythms, and call-and-response.

African Americans and World War II

Nearly one million African Americans served during World War II. Most worked in auxiliary units, transportation, and engineering corps. Black soldiers in the transportation corps loaded supplies and drove them in trucks to the front lines. As they drove toward Germany in 1944 and 1945, African Americans braved enemy fire and delivered the fuel, ammunition, and other goods that made the fight possible. Black engineers built camps and ports, constructed and repaved roads, and performed many other tasks to support frontline troops. Black soldiers performed well in these tasks but were often subject to unfair military discipline. They were jailed and even executed in vastly greater numbers than whites even though African Americans made up only 10 percent of the total number of soldiers. Although the military held to the fiction of "separate but equal," its policies gave black soldiers inferior resources or excluded them entirely. This meant that black soldiers were placed in the least desirable spots and denied the use of officers' clubs, base stores, and recreational areas. America's racist treatment of black soldiers and sailors, its failure to end racial discrimination in defense employment, and its preservation of racial disfranchisement and segregation in the South, all instilled apathy (Hornsby 372). For example, in Norman Jewison's *A Soldier's Story*, which is set in 1944 at an army base the all-black battalion were given orders to paint the white officer's club and clean its bathrooms. Even the enemy German prisoners of war were accorded better treatment than African-American soldiers. German prisoners were free to move around the camp, unlike black soldiers who were restricted. However, the creation of The Tuskegee Airmen led to many changes in how black soldiers were treated.

The Tuskegee Airmen

In January 1941, the War Department announced the formation of an all black Pursuit Squadron and the creation of a training program at Tuskegee Army Air Field. This program was for black pilots. Access to military aviation was the most prized goal of those who wanted blacks to fight in the war (Hornsby 358). After months of rigorous training, the 99th squadron was ready for combat; but the Army Air Force, unyielding in its belief in black inferiority, would not send it to battle (Hornsby 358). With pressure coming from Eleanor Roosevelt, the Tuskegee Airmen finally went to war. This squadron regularly engaged German pilots in aerial combat. The Tuskegee Airmen escorted heavy bombers deep into Germany's territory. They destroyed over four hundred enemy aircraft, sank an enemy destroyer, and knocked out numerous ground installations. They were feared by the enemy and finally recognized for their heroism by the army. Their performance refuted the Army's contention that the 99th squadron pilots were lazy and cowardly (Hornsby 358). They earned 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 14 Bronze Stars, and almost 800 Air Medals. The Tuskegee Airmen became the pinnacle of the African American wartime success and showed what blacks could do with the appropriate training and opportunity.

The Tragic Death of Emmett Till

Like many African Americans, the Till family moved from the South to Chicago to escape oppression and hope for better opportunities. During the summer of 1955, Mamie Till allowed her son, Emmett Till, to visit relatives in Money, Mississippi. Before departing, Mamie Till warned her son to "mind his manners with whites down there" (Hampton and Fayer 2). While visiting, Emmett and some family members were walking into the local grocer. According to accounts, Emmett whistled at a white woman. The woman told her husband who became so livid that a few days later he and a group of white men kidnapped, beat, shot, mutilated, and drowned fourteen-year-old Emmett. The boy's body was so mutilated that Mose Wright, the boy's grandfather, had been able to identify Emmett only by the ring on his finger (Hampton and Fayer 6). When his mangled and decomposed body was found, it was shipped back to Chicago. Mamie Till insisted on an open casket funeral because she wanted to world to see what Jim Crow laws did to her only son. The white men who murdered Emmett were tried by an all white male jury and acquitted of all charges. The murder of Emmett Till frustrated and angered black (and some white) communities across America. African Americans grew tired of being violated, harassed, and treated like third class citizens. African American music had reflected this frustration in the past. For example, Billie Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit"(1939), a song about the violent lynching of black men. I believe that Emmett Till's story is poignant for my students because they have much in common with him. Like my students, Emmett was a teenager, lived in the North, and was supported by his single mother. I plan to show my students a documentary on this tragic case called *The Murder of Emmett Till*.

Brown vs. the Board of Education

In 1954, the Supreme Court decided to combine several cases and issue a general ruling on segregation in schools. Linda Brown, a young African-American, had been denied

admission to her neighborhood school in Topeka, Kansas. She had been told to attend an all-black school across town. With the help of the NAACP, her parents sued the Topeka school board. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It was agreed that the doctrine of separate but equal had no place in the field of public education and that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal.

Civil Rights – The Movement Begins

In the midst of the uproar over the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, Rosa Parks made her decision to challenge segregation of public transportation. In Montgomery, Alabama, blacks were expected to board the bus, pay their fare, exit the bus, then reboard using the rear doors and sit in the back. Ms. Parks took an aisle seat in the racially neutral middle section, behind the movable sign which read “colored” (Brinkley 105). When the bus became crowded and a white man was standing in the aisle, the bus driver ordered Ms. Parks and other blacks sitting in the middle section to move. They all moved, except Ms. Parks. She was immediately arrested. Outraged by Park’s arrest, the black community boycotted Montgomery’s buses. African Americans decided they would rather car pool, ride bikes, or walk to their destinations. For the first time African Americans realized the power of allegiance and the power of their contribution to the economy. The boycott was a dramatic success and nearly crippled the Montgomery Bus Company. African Americans leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to run the boycott and to negotiate with city leaders for an end to segregation.

Creating D.R.A.M.A.

I created this curriculum because I wanted to educate my students on the legacy of African Americans in the creative and performing arts. I wanted to expose my students to not only African-American contemporary playwrights and dramatists, but also teach on its renowned dancers, performers, musicians, and artists. Also, I wanted to create a unit that not only focuses on English, reading, and writing, but also history. In addition, I was assigned to teach an actual drama class during the 2007 – 2008 school years; developing the D.R.A.M.A. curriculum will greatly aid in that task.

Above all, for my students, “drama” is not just an academic subject, but the way they live their lives. Many of my students are boisterous attention-getters who holler at the top of their lungs in the hallways as they go back and forth to class. I see many of them stopping to not only talk with friends, but also show the latest dance craze. One time one of my students stopped a few feet from my door and showed five or six comrades the Wu-Tang. They think they invented something new, but this dance is similar to the Lindy Hop. I turned my back to ask a student to pass out some papers and when I turned back around, about fifty or more kids surrounded and watched my student do this popular dance. I studied their happy faces and witnessed the raw and exuberant energy that these teenagers exhibited. When a school district police officer blew his whistle, the crowd of dancing darlings dispersed. My student, the leader of this impromptu dance contest, burst in my room with so much energy and glee that he

actually danced his way to his assigned seat. When I asked him to calm down, he obeyed. However, he had so much energy in him that his feet kept rhythmically moving under his desk, and he smiled all period. That mini-recital made him happy that day, and I was happy that he was happy. In spite of the great potential shown by this incident, funds were not available to support an after school program that might cultivate such an interest. Areas of study that stimulate other parts of a child's brain must not be the privilege of children who attend private schools or public schools in wealthy districts (Smiley 40). I want to teach my students how to channel and transfer their energy onto the stage. I want to train them in theatrical arts including acting, directing, and dance movement. Like Tavis Smiley, I believe that schools must provide for the experiences where personal effort is encouraged and rewarded (40).

Also, I believe it is important to teach across the curriculum and I am excited to be incorporating English, reading and history into my unit. I selected the forties and fifties because most of my students are not aware of the triumphs of African American performers from that period, and many are not aware of their own history. Finally, I wanted to guide my students as we rehearse a play written during this era. I know my students will have a wonderful time not just learning popular dances, but also learning forties and fifties jargon and the entertainers who spoke this jargon

Objectives

Reading Objectives

My students will read and understand biographies on Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Ray Charles, Stepin Fetchit, and Mahalia Jackson; they will read the play *On Strivers Row*. They will comprehend, from reading these texts, important historical facts about Jim Crow laws, *Plessey v. Ferguson*, *Brown v the Board of Education*, and early Civil Rights—and relate these events to the lives of the performers mentioned. For example, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was a famous dancer and actor who gained critical acclaim for co-starring in several Shirley Temple movies. However, he was required to use back doors to enter white owned establishments. During the height of his career, Ray Charles refused to play to a segregated crowd in the state of Georgia. His boycott supported the Civil Rights Movement and helped eradicate Jim Crow Laws. Mahalia Jackson was very close to Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King and used her powerful voice to sing at several of Dr. King's speaking engagements

Writing Objectives

In an ideal teaching environment my students will all know how to write sentences, paragraphs, and essays. However, it has been my experience that many of my students lack the basic writing skills needed to excel in secondary academic settings. Thus, I will introduce writing assignments by reviewing simple, compound, complex, and compound complex sentences. After this is accomplished I will teach and/or review with them how to write a paragraph, reminding my students to use correct punctuation and spelling. Next, I will review and teach my students how to write clear, concise, and fully developed five-paragraph narrative, compare and contrast, and persuasive essays.

Students will select one of the performers covered in this unit and write essays about that individual in these various sub-genres that show their comprehension and knowledge of assigned literary terms and the historical background from this era. As a basis for this writing, I will encourage them to develop an outline with clear thesis statements and supporting details.

Vocabulary Objectives

Students will read *On Strivers Row* and define and apply various literary terms to this play. My students must be able to understand these terms and identify examples in a work of literature. In addition, they must pronounce, spell, define and understand selected vocabulary words from the play and from historical texts. Finally, they will learn popular slang from the forties and fifties.

Speaking and Listening Objectives

My students will perform the play *On Strivers Row*. While reading through “On Strivers Row,” students will listen to several jazz, blues, and gospel songs from this era, and I will ask them not only to relate the feelings these songs evoke, but also to find comparisons and contrasts with this music and their own popular forms of music. It is my intention to teach them that most of their recording artists follow a musical tradition that is related to the styles and sounds of artists like Lionel Hampton, Ray Charles, and Mahalia Jackson. In addition, as students perform *On Strivers Row*, they will demonstrate knowledge of forties and fifties slang, song, dance, and costume.

Strategies

D Is for Dance

There is one thing I know without a shadow of a doubt: my students love to dance. I share their passion for dance, and I will introduce my students to popular dance forms from this era. However, very few of them have ever received training in dance. Furthermore, many feel that because they can “break-dance,” “pop and lock,” and “krump” that they don’t need any classical dance training. Carter G. Woodson encapsulates this bias: “Because the Negro is gifted as a dancer and can render more successfully than others the music of his own people, he has been told that he does not need training” (78). Students will learn and demonstrate the Lindy-hop, the Cha-Cha, the Freeze, and Minstrel dance also known as mime dance. Afterwards, I will allow my students to teach me some of their favorite dances that resemble the dance forms I taught; I will begin each class with basic stretch exercises, jumping jacks, and other calisthenics that will strengthen the cardio-vascular system. Then, I will show my students the mechanics of the dances they must learn. Within the drama class I plan to teach later, it is my goal to offer dance three days a week.

The Reciprocal Approach

It is important that my students believe and understand that they play a major role in the success of this unit. I plan on offering many ways for my students to participate. I will place students in learning teams and ask members of each team to select one of their favorite performers, research that individual, and present this information to the class. Also, I will encourage them to develop their own quizzes and tests and encourage them to model these after my own. Then, students will mark and grade these tests. How exciting it will be for my students to assume the role as teacher and be responsible for not just building social skills by working collaboratively, but also by developing, marking, and grading the tests that they created! I can easily envision my students learning one week about Steppin Fetchit—then the next week leading the lesson and teaching me and their peers about performers like Wil Smith, 50 Cent, or Savion Glover. I am excited at the opportunity to learn from my students!

Compare and Contrast

Presently, in most black films, black performers are used as the funny guy, the comic relief, and the character who is wrong most occasions. For example, Chris Tucker is a popular comedian who earned fame by his dim-witted, clumsy, and ignorant character called “Smokey” in the movie *Friday*. In this popular movie, he portrayed a weed-smoking, narcotics-selling, lazy, foul-mouthed young man who avoids hard work and speaks in a humorous tone. Many critics bashed Tucker’s character, believing it was stereotypical of how the dominant society saw urban youth. When my students study Stepin Fetchit, they will compare and contrast him with one of their favorite black actors.

Gregory Hines and Savion Glover are both well-known contemporary tap dancers, and I will ask my students to compare and contrast Bill Robinson with these modern-day performers. Also, several black fraternities and sororities use a form of tap dance (“stepping”) when they perform as a unit. I will show my students segments from the movie *School Daze* to teach how tap has influenced many of their dance styles. Bill Robinson was the greatest tap dancer of all time and although my unit does not focus on tap dance in particular, it is important to note the influence he had on other performers. In addition, Yolanda Adams, Kirk Franklin, and Fred Hammond are very popular gospel performers and many of my students know who they are. I will ask my students to write essays comparing and contrasting Mahalia Jackson and other past greats to their favorite contemporary performers.

R Is for Reading

Students will read biographies and commentaries on several performers who excelled during this era. I will use context clues so students can deduce on their own the definitions to most vocabulary. Then they will write narrative, persuasive, and compare and contrast essays on these individuals and present them to their class. Also, we will read the play *On Strivers Row*. I will ask them to read the biography of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. I am aware that this gentleman was primarily a tap dancer. However, after viewing the movie *Curley Top*, I noticed that Mr. Robinson demonstrated a dance called “the freeze”—a dance that my students know as “popping and locking. It is important that my students understand that though Robinson’s work may seem outmoded, it has

influenced many contemporary performers. I will stress this point by asking students to write about similarities between old and new styles in one of the various essay modes.

Shared Reading

In shared reading, a fluent reader (usually the teacher) reads to the group and others follow along with the text. The purpose of this activity is to model or demonstrate explicitly how a skilled reader would read the text. This method captures my students' attention because in doing it I display exuberant emotions and use different voices and dialects. Another purpose of this reading aloud is for my students to develop love of reading. Normally, I read to my students for about ten or fifteen minutes. Then, I gauge their attention by asking high-level literary and review questions. For example, students will be asked to describe main characters to someone who has not read this play; to describe situational, dramatic, or verbal irony; to define and identify the four major parts of the plot in the assigned reading.

Popcorn Reading

Popcorn reading is rapid-fire readings by a number of students. The teacher begins by reading a short passage, then calls on one of the students to read. When that student is done reading, he/she will call on another student to read. This process continues until the text is read and many students have participated in the out-loud reading. In the beginning, it is best to ask for reading volunteers before the class starts. I have found that most students will read when asked ahead of time. Furthermore, as students continue to read in this manner, I have found that they are so enthusiastic about it that they actually demand more time reading and insist that I read less.

Group Reading

It is important my students learn to work together. In order for them to strengthen these cooperative skills, I will divide them into groups of three or four. Within the groups, each student will take a turn reading. I will closely monitor this process to ensure that students are focused and on task. Next, they will answer questions as a group on the reading selection. I will visit each group to field questions and if necessary eliminate disruptive behavior. Finally, each group will select one person (or divide responsibilities among the whole group) to present their information.

Think/Pair/Share

In this strategy, I will ask students to form pairs. The pairs will take turns reading to each other, discussing the material, sharing ideas, and editing each other's work. They will follow a grading rubric to ensure that most mistakes are corrected. Once students have reviewed and revised their essays and other writings, I will ask my students to submit their work. Together, they will answer teacher-designed questions. Afterwards, each pair will share their ideas with the class.

A Is for Acting

In this section of the unit, students will learn about the early Minstrel Show. In the early nineteenth century, white performers began to blacken their faces with burnt cork, paint their lips red or white, and imitate the slave performances. These minstrel shows developed into grotesque and offensive caricatures as time went on. They followed a formula that included a comedy routine, music, and dancing, and short skits and plays. Even when black entertainers were allowed to perform, they had to play in black face and promote demeaning stereotypes. Several decades later, blacks no longer had to perform in blackface, but they could not always escape the degrading associations of the characters from this genre.

Who Am I?

I will lead students as we play the game “Who am I?,” which is very similar to charades. They will select a performer who we studied in this unit. Then they will have three minutes to “act out” the selected performer through dialogue or movement. Finally, their classmates will have a chance to guess who the person is. Students will also watch films that were made with or about the performers mentioned above, and they will complete teacher-designed worksheets showing their understanding of these films.

M is for Music

Students will read about and listen to Lionel Hampton’s “Flying Home,” Mahalia Jackson’s “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” and Ray Charles’s “Guitar Blues,” “Walkin’ and Talkin,” and “Wonderin’ and Wonderin.” In addition, I will ask students to compare these famous musicians to some of their favorite musical artists. Then, I will allow students to bring in the music of their favorite artists, and the class will listen to their selections.

The Computer Lab

It is imperative that my students be allowed one or two days weekly for strengthening their computer skills so they may download music, find biographical information on the performers they want to present to their classmates, and type their student-designed tests. Because I am certain that in the area of music software, some of my students have more skills using the computer than I, I may have a lot to learn from them. Finally, I will ask the computer instructor if he/she can give my students lessons on how to search for general information and performing arts resources.

A Is for Art

I will teach a mini-lesson on painter and storyteller Jacob Lawrence and the role his art played during this time period. Jacob Lawrence often depicted historical themes that ranged from the Civil War period to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. He called himself a child of the Great Migration because his family moved to the Harlem during the

1930s. Lawrence's formal and informal education occurred within Harlem's community art workshops and on the streets (Leach 19). He painted all kinds of subjects including storefront churches, pool halls, and political movements. At the conclusion of this unit, students will view artwork from his Migration Series including *The Fire Escape*, (1938), *Harlem Street Scene* (1942), and *The Librarians Are Appreciated* (1943). Students will write commentaries on how this art relates to this time period.

Classroom Activities

The activities described below will increase rapport and trust among my students and motivate them as they learn and reinforce previously learned material. I will accomplish this through provocative class work, cooperative learning, and group games. As a preparation for the unit, I will create two word walls. The first word wall will focus on literary terms, and the second word wall will focus on historical terminology. I will place daily vocabulary words on chart paper and post it on my classroom wall.

The Power of Words

It is vital that my students unlearn many negative social skills that they have adopted. Many students think it is acceptable to call each other derogatory names, all under the guise of "playing". For example, for years African Americans fought to eradicate the word "nigger" from popular media; now young people are adopting it themselves. Throughout my years of teaching I have heard students playfully call each other "niggers." I and many other African Americans had always perceived this word as disparaging. When I asked them why they chose to refer to each other in such derogatory manner, they informed me that they do not call each other "nigger" but "nigga" and the latter is more friendly and affectionate. I think a clever activity will be showing my students the first fifteen minutes of the movie *Stormy Weather* and *Friday*. Then, I will ask my students to list how many times they heard the n-word. Next we will discuss why earlier black films did not use the n-word compared to recent ones that use it non-stop.

I plan on dedicating at least one day per week so we may have whole group and small group discussions on these matters. Also, I will have students fill out a surveys and questionnaires on these topics. My goal is for my students to begin to see themselves not as "niggas," "hos," "bitches," and other disparaging descriptors, but as brothers and sisters who must encourage each other.

Jeopardy

Students will be placed in groups of four or six and each group will be given a bell. I will appear dressed as if I am an actual game show host, and will explain the rules to my students. To avoid confusion, I will display these rules on chart paper. Next, I will ask my students to select a category and point value. I will recite the answer and point value, and they will have five seconds to discuss and tell the correct answer. If they answer correctly, they will continue. If they answer incorrectly, the question goes to the group that rings their bell first. When I use this fun game in my curriculum, I will include questions about entertainers from the 1940s through the 1950s.

Guest Speakers, Trips, and Financial Support

I plan to invite guest speakers from the University of Pennsylvania, Freedom Theater, and the Arts Sanctuary to speak to my class about this era. I am hopeful that my guest speakers from the University of Pennsylvania will speak, teach, and demonstrate to my students various dances from the forties and fifties. Second, I plan to take my students on trips to see vibrant plays at these venues mentioned above. In order for me to pull this monumental task off, I must receive financial support. Currently, I have correspondence with several funders. I am hoping to have a total of five thousand dollars when I begin this unit.

Lesson Plan 1

Title: Separate but Unequal

Grade: Level -9 -11

Subject: English/ Drama/History

Time Necessary: 3 days

Materials:

American Vision history text
The Murder of Emmett Till biography
Stepin Fetchit biography
DVD player
Chart paper
Markers

Goals

Students will gain an understanding of how their lives would be if they were born during the Jim Crow era.

1. Students will learn more about the role of blacks and the black performer in that society.
2. Students will learn specific Jim Crow laws and understand how they created repressive conditions for blacks.
3. Students will read biography of Emmett Till in their History text books.
4. Students will watch DVD *The Murder of Emmett Till*.
5. Students will write narrative essays responding to the Emmett Till video.
6. Students will learn cooperative work habits.
7. Students will connect Jim Crow laws of the past and segregation in today's society.

Vocabulary Words:

Jim Crow
Lynching
Plessey vs. Ferguson
Superiority
Inferiority
Segregation
Emmett Till
Apartied
Racial Profiling

Narrative:

The goal for this lesson is for students to understand life during the Jim Crow Era. For this lesson I will segregate students by skin complexion, and I will ask them to make guesses as to why I arranged their seats in this fashion. After hearing responses, I will inform them and show them visuals of “separate but equal” laws. Students will read about Jim Crow laws in their *American Vision* books. I will lead students in a conversation in how Jim Crow laws affected blacks and whites. Also, I will ask them how they think black performers were able to make a living during this time. Next, we will read the biography on Emmett Till. Finally, we will watch, discuss, and respond to the DVD called “*The Murder of Emmett Till*”.

Outcome: Students will make connections between Jim Crow laws and the Emmett Till murder.

Assessment: Students will take test on vocabulary words and historical facts on Jim Crow.

Lesson Plan 2

Title: *On Strivers Row*

Grade: Level -9 -11

Subject: English/ Drama/History

Objectives:

1. Students will read and comprehend the play *On Strivers Row*.
2. Students will identify and apply various literary terms to this work.
3. Students will compare and contrast forties and fifties jargon with their own forms of slang.
4. Students will learn dance movments from this time period.
5. Students will recite, define and know vocabulary words.
6. Students will listen to jazz, blues, and gospel music.
7. Students will watch segments of various films made during this time period or about this time period.

Materials:

1. *On Striver's Row* play
2. Word Wall with various literary terms and definitions
3. DVD player
4. The DVD of *Malcolm X* and *Ray*
5. Teacher Designed handouts
6. Dictionaries and Thesauruses

Match these forties' and fifties' slang to their actual meaning. Compare and contrast any 5 terms to your own slang language

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Balling | a. Women, usually loose |
| 2. Beat up my gums | b. Partying |
| 3. Chippies | c. Talk all about it |
| 4. Cop a squat | d. Take a seat |
| 5. Dracula | e. Good friend |
| 6. Cholly Hoss | f. A fine looking woman |
| 7. Hoff Riffs | g. Good-looking suit |
| 8. Lid | h. Pour me a drink |
| 9. Knock me a shortie | i. Hat |
| 10. Righteous Peg | j. Dancing |

Vocabulary Words: Define these words. Indicate any synonyms and antonyms

Bourgeoisie/Bourgeois

Balustrade

Affluent

Paraphernalia

Synchronizing

Debutante

Palatial

Nonchalant

Congenial

Benevolence

Narrative:

Students will read ten popular terminologies from *On Striver's Row*. I will ask them to translate popular slang terminologies from the forties and fifties to standard English, then contrast them to their own popular terminologies. The product will be a translation from the forties and fifties to modern day slang. Afterwards, I will use context clues so students will be able to identify and comprehend vocabulary words. Next, I will lead students as we read segments from *American Vision* books on the Jazz Era. Then, we will listen to Lionel Hampton's "Flying Home" and read a hand-out on this jazz musician. Also, we will watch dance segments from *Malcolm X* and *Ray*. In addition, I

will demonstrate a portion of the Lindy hop and ask for volunteers to learn this dance. I will ask students what emotions this song evokes within them. Finally, I will assign characters and lead students as we begin to read *On Strivers Row*.

Outcome:

At the end of this lesson students will be able to write a short skit using jargons from the forties and fifties as well as vocabulary words.

Assessment:

After reading *On Strivers Row*, students must be able to answer to answer the following questions, applying their knowledge of literary elements and terms:

Who is the protagonist?

Who is the antagonist?

What is the setting?

What is the conflict?

Describe in detail three external conflicts.

Describe in detail three internal conflicts.

Thus far, what do you believe to be the theme of this play? Support your answers with details from the play.

Determine the irony and retell it using specific details from the play

Make a prediction on the next events in the plot of this play.

Homework: Students will write a narrative essay from the point of view of any characters we studied in class.

Annotated Resources

Teacher Reading List

Adams Francis, D., and Sanders Barry, *Alienable Rights*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2003. This book chronicles the African American struggle from the Reconstruction Era to post Civil Rights Era.

Brinkley, Douglas, *Rosa Parks*, New York: Penguin Books, 2000. This book chronicles the events of Rosa Parks before, during, and after her controversial arrest that changed the way the world viewed separate but equal doctrines.

Craft Anna, Jeffrey Bob, and Leibling Mike, *Creativity in the Classroom*, New York: Random House, 2002. This book gives descriptive methods for teachers who want to have lively, enriching, and educational classrooms.

David, Jay, *Black Defiance*, New York, N.Y.: William Morrow & Company, 1982. In this splendid collection, twenty-three black women and men provide a personalized history of black defiance and rebellion.

- Eleanora E. Tate, *Black Stars: African American Musicians*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000. This book is filled with biographies of some of the most celebrated African American musicians of this century.
- Davis, Ossie, *American Legacy*, “Storyteller: A Collection of Writings by the Late Ossie Davis”, Spring 2007. Ossie Davis writes about the controversial Stepin Fetchit and tells how pivotal he was to African Americans in films.
- Hampton Henry, and Fayer Steve, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950’s Through the 1980’s*. New York: Bantam Books, 1990. The pages of this remarkable book resonate with the voices of men, women, and children who have participated in this country’s great civil rights movement.
- Hornsby Alton Jr., *A Companion to African American History*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. A collection of original and authoritative essays arranged thematically and topically. This book details recent theories and explanations for the changing contours of African American life.
- Leach, Debra, *I See You, I See Myself*, Washington D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 2001. This book chronicles artist Jacob Lawrence life and focuses on his Migration Series.
- Patton, Venetria, K and Honey, Maureen, *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, Rutgers University Press, 2001. This collection of short stories, essays, plays, and poems is an excellent selection for anyone researching the Harlem Renaissance.
- Patterson, Fran, “Schools in Crisis”, *The Philadelphia Daily News*, 2 February 2007. This article informs the reader of the financial crisis of the Philadelphia School District.
- Smiley, Tavis, *The Covenant*, Chicago: Third World Press, 2006. This is a long term plan for Africans Americans to address and fix pertinent concerns within the black community.
- Woodson, Carter G, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Washington: Associated Publishers, 1933. Repr. AMS Press, 1972. This book encourages blacks to learn their culture and strive in educational pursuits.
- Woodward, C Vann, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Oxford University Press, 1976. This book follows the beginnings of the Jim Crow Era.

Student Reading List

Hill Abram, Pamela Jackson, ed. *On Strivers Row*, New York: First Applause Publishing, 1997. This black comedic plays depicts the life of the Van Striven family and their new life in Harlem.

Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, *American Vision History Text*, Austin, Texas: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 2004. This text is filled with relevant information on African American History including famous singers, dancers, and writers.

Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, *African American Literature*, Austin, Texas; Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1998. A colossal compilation of biographies, and plays by renowned African American writers

Bojangles, Dir; Bill Lake, With Gregory Hines, Savion Glover, Kimberly Elise. Showtime Entertainment, 2002. The story of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a man who overcame harsh Jim Crow laws to become one of the most successful African-American entertainers of all time.

A Soldier’s Story, Dir. Norman Jewison, With Denzel Washington, Patti Labelle, Howard Rollins Jr., Columbia Pictures, 1984. This academy award winning shows how Captain Davenport solves the murder of a black sergeant who led an all black battalion.

A Song Is Born, Dir. Howard Hawks, With Danny Kaye, Lionel Hampton, Virginia Mayo, 1948 Samuel Goldwyn Company, Professor Hobart Frisbee falls in love with her wise cracking Honey Swanson. A dynamic musical scene featuring Lionel Hampton, Tommy Dorsey, and Louis Armstrong.

The Little Colonel, With Bill Robinson, Shirley Temple, Lionel Barrymore, Twentieth Century Fox, 1935. Temple plays the strong-willed Miss Lloyd Sherman who is trying to reconcile her mother with her short tempered grandfather. This film performs the legendary “staircase dance” with Bill “Bojangles Robinson.

Malcolm X, Dir. Spike Lee, With Denzel Washington, Spike Lee, Angela Bassett, United Artists, 1992. Forty Acres and a Mule This movie chronicles the life of petty thief Malcolm Little and his transformation into Civil Rights leader Malcolm X.

The Murder of Emmett Till, Dir. Stanley Nelson, Nar. By Andre Braugher, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2003. This documentary interviews close relatives and friends of Emmett Till and describes events of his tragic death.

Ray, Dir. Taylor Hackford. With Jamie Fox, Regina King, Terrance Howard, Universal Studios, 2005. This film chronicles the life of Ray Charles and his path to stardom.

School Daze, Dir. Spike Lee. With Laurence Fishbourne, Spike Lee, Tisha Cambell, United Artists, 1984. This movie takes place among an all black college and

shows how black sororities and fraternities divide themselves according to skin color.

Stormy Weather, Dir. Andrew Stone, With Bill Robinson, Lena Horne, Cab Calloway, Twentieth Century Fox, 1943. Upbeat tale of music, dance, and romance set during World War II.

Audio Resources for Students

Dorsey, Thomas “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” sung by Mahalia Jackson, 1933.

Dorsey wrote this song after the tragic deaths of his wife and son.

Charles, Ray, *Confession Blues* “Guitar Blues,” sung by Ray Charles in 1954, IMC Music LTD, Release date 2001

Charles, Ray *Confession Blues* “Walkin’ and Talkin’,” sung by Ray Charles in 1954 IMC Music Release date 2001

Charles Ray *Confession Blues* “I’m Wonderin’ and Wonderin’,” sung by Ray Charles in 1954, IMC Music Release date 2001.

Charles Ray, *Confession Blues* “I Got A Woman,” sung by Ray Charles in 1955, IMC Music Release date 2001.

Hampton, Lionel, “Flying Home” performed by the Goodman Quartet, with guitarist Charlie Christian, soloist Illinois Jacquet on tenor sax. Decca Records, 1942

Appendices

Materials/Resources for Lesson Plans

Chart Paper

DVD Player

Markers

Internet Access

Presentation System (over-head projector, white screen, chart paper, markers,)

DVD or VHS video player

Television

Radio

African American History Text

Handouts from *Black Stars*

Grading Rubrics

Jim Crow Visuals

On Striver’s Row

Pennsylvania Standards

- 1.1 Learning to read independently
- 1.8 Select and refine a topic for research
- 1.1C Use knowledge or root words as well as context clues and glossaries to understand specialized vocabulary in the content areas during reading.
- 1.2.A Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas.
- 1.3.A Analyze and understand the works of literature
- 1.3.B Analyze the use of literary elements by an author including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone, and style.
- 1.3.C Analyze the effectiveness in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.
- 1.1.E Expand a reading vocabulary by identifying and correctly using new words acquired through the study of their relationship to other words; use a dictionary or related reference.
- 1.1.F Understand the meaning of and apply key vocabulary across the various subject areas.
- 1.1.G Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of both fiction and non-fiction text, including public documents
- 1.2.C Produce a work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of that genre.
- 1.4.A Write short stories poems and plays: Apply varying organizational methods; use relevant illustrations; apply literary conflict; include literary elements; use literary devices.
- 1.4.B Write multi-paragraph informational pieces.
- 1.6.C Speak using skills appropriate to formal speech situations.

Learning Rubrics taken from *Elements of Literature* (2005) pgs. iii - iv.