

# Reading Activist Playwrights, Writing Activist Plays

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## **Overview**

This unit asks students to engage in reading and writing plays that feature explicit political, contemporary, issues-oriented themes. Centering Black, queer, and feminist/womanist artists' work, this unit will help students investigate a range of the form and content used by playwrights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anchored in the Black Aesthetic being articulated by adherents of the Black Arts Movement. They will use these plays as “mentor texts” as they move into the second part of the unit: developing their own original theater pieces.

Working in groups, students will dig into a play, chosen from a selection of titles. Students will engage in multiple lines of inquiry: researching the historical and social context of the play and playwright; uncovering the structure, design, and genre of the “big picture” of the piece and how the form relates to the message of the play; understanding how dialogue, character, and staging contribute to the larger effect of the piece and how the conflict(s) emerge(s); and evaluating the stylistic elements of a piece of political theater. The second phase, and perhaps, larger intent of this unit, will then be realized through students endeavoring to write a theater piece that directly expresses their own worldview about the issues of society, community, power and identity. The hope is that their own aesthetic will emerge as their generation displays its own particular versions of voice and identification, specific to this moment in time.

## Rationale

I teach high school students both English and Drama. In the drama classes I teach, I have noticed that many of the scenes produced by my students are laden with homophobic, sexist, and anti-Black sentiment (even when these same students are queer, women, and/or Black.) For instance, in a basic improv prompt I find that my students succumb to stereotype and thus often recreate narratives that have been packaged by profit-seeking media and people who do not share their identities – i.e. “Jerry Springer/Baby Mama Drama” or “Hoop Dreams/Let’s get an NBA deal out of the ghetto” narratives. This mimicry of images and narratives is another way in which self- and community-hatred is perpetuated. At those moments, it is very clear that these young people are lacking the space and practice of imagining other worlds and possibilities. I believe that more exposure to theater that is explicitly “political” in intent, as well as expertly crafted in form and content, will help them push their own creations.

This curriculum unit is designed to work in concert with earlier units in which we build different “sets of muscles” as performers, directors, playwrights, and theater-goers. Students excel at applying the theatrical tools we focus on in class (face, voice, breath, body) to scripted work, but often fall short of my own expectations and their own creative potentials when it comes to original, self-generated work. By bringing in these mentor texts, anchored in the Black Arts Movement, I hope to expose my students to works written by playwrights who sought to engage their current lived realities, throwing off the sorts of stereotypes found in mainstream representations of the lives and experiences of people often deemed to be *Other*. Reading works by writers who have embraced their history, positionality, and aesthetic distinctiveness, I hope to invite my students to see the value of doing the same and translating those reflections into works that express their unique take on the world.

Ultimately, the playwriting unit I teach in the Spring semester will be an opportunity for my students to put what they have learned into practice. With the support of a teaching artist from the Philadelphia Young Playwrights, I would like to see my students develop richer, identity- and issues-oriented pieces that reflect more of their worldviews. The proposed curriculum unit will help them to see how other artists – even from earlier generations – have created plays and theater experiences that spoke back to society and their community and imagined a transformed world. I want them to be able to take issue with and critique those works, as well as find solace and inspiration in them. Further, I want them to use other plays as mentor texts as they craft their own pieces, and to do their own research in order to develop their topics, themes, characters, and plots that are rich and multi-dimensional.

## **Pedagogical Objective**

### *Creativity beyond standardization*

“Educators, and especially educators who have a particular and very special relationship to words and the national language, ought to consider quite literally the question: What good is the word without the wisdom?” – Poet, Editor, Educator David Llorens (qtd in Bracey, et al. 179)

I am struck by David Llorens’ words, as they articulate the internal tensions that many of us who teach in the public schools must unpack. We are told too often by administrators and bureaucrats that we should be in constant pursuit of outputting test scores that show “student growth” – as opposed to cultivating young people with critical and engaged consciousness who can *use* their skills to build a more equitable world. This testing-oriented objective sits squarely atop the so-called “school reform” business of the last decade(s) – a neoliberal project that would turn school systems into a marketplace, students into data, educators into deliverers of standardized instruction, and parents into consumers. (Lipman, 9; Picower and Mayorga, 14)

And, as the project of capitalism has never been “race neutral” in terms of the exploitative sets of relations and resource extraction that profit requires, neither is the matrix of policies enacted through neoliberal school reform. Indeed, as the authors of *What’s Race Got to Do with It* detail at length, the methods of standardization, privatization, and disinvestment in education disproportionately negatively affect low income students of color, as those policies seek to support and sustain the contemporary economic relations and needs of our heavily bifurcated world, i.e. low wage service workers vs. high wage financial capitalists, prison labor vs. high tech start-up innovators. (Picower, et al. 8)

But we know better – or feel more deeply – about our purpose in helping to raise children and cultivate their critical thinking and consciousness, than to succumb to delivering standardized instruction.

Because, as David Llorens reminds us: “What good is the word without the wisdom?” What is the purpose of a rich literacy-focused education, except to help students “read the word and the world.”? (Friere and Macedo, qtd in Christianson 58.)

As Sonia Sanchez so directly lays out in her 1974 poem, *Introduction (Queens of the Universe)*:

“white schools teach/ Black children to hate themselves, each other/ and their parents. / white schools teach our/ children tomish ways./ white schools bring/ our children in contact with unholy people/ who contaminate not only their minds but/ their bodies as well.” (qtd in Bracey, et al. 116)

I see this as a direct request/demand to me and all teachers who work with majority Black students. We are being asked: “Which side of history are we on?” (Black Lives Matter, Dream Defenders) Llorens’ reminder to aim toward accessing “wisdom” and Sanchez’s scathing critique of “white schools” should tell us that we must be working toward student expression, self- and community-knowledge and -actualization, humanization, and critical thinking.

To do this, our job as educators is to provide texts that meet students in their lived experiences, create units that ask them to dig into their worldviews and question who/how they are in their lives, and give a practice space to engage in a process of inquiry, knowledge cultivation and co-creation of culture. The process of playwriting can successfully meet these objectives.

## **Historical Context**

### *The Black Arts Movement*

A question that might echo across centuries of life in the United States (and around the world) is: How do we value Blackness in such an anti-Black, white supremacist society? In the 1960’s and 1970’s groups of Black artists re-centered their own communities in the asking of that question: How can Black people value Blackness in such an anti-Black, white supremacist society? And as their response, created written, visual, and performance-based art to claim their identities and communities, define their worldviews, and chart out new social formations.

As context, in the early- and mid-1960s, many Civil Rights Movement student activists, who had led the lunch counter sit-ins as direct action to end southern Jim Crow segregation policies, were coming into political consciousness and growing tired of the strategy and approach espoused by the older Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) movement leaders. This can be seen in the formation and political framing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose members did grassroots work to build leadership among poor, Black frontline communities in the South and the North, pushing against the mainstream Civil Rights Movement’s doctrine of negotiation and pure nonviolence to build toward the call for Black Power and Liberation. (Ransby)

Responding to the socio-political upheaval, the articulation of a movement for Black Power, and then the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, BAM artists sought to create art that explicitly pushed into the realms of the “political.” In the words of Amiri Baraka, trying to explain the early formation of the Black Arts Movement: “[we had a] growing need to fully express our soul and mind connection with Black struggle in our art and in the street... We were in the struggle to liberate Black people, to liberate ourselves.” (Baraka 24) And with this orientation toward Black liberation, artists of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) anchored their work in Malcolm X’s organizing for “Self Determination, Self Respect and Self Defense.” (Baraka 24) This is, indeed, a break

from previous generations of Black artists and writers, who were focused on portraying themselves and their subjects as respectable in the eyes of a mainstream audience.

As scholar Herman Beavers writes, “By turning to Africa and other sites where black folks are found in large numbers, black writers sought to break out of the conundrum of looking for influences issuing from writers/artists who held black people in contempt.” (Beavers, correspondence) In other words, these Black of the BAM artists were much less worried about pleasing, and therefore being bound by the confines of a mainstream (read: white) audience than earlier generations of Black artists. They worked to break free from the Eurocentricity of cultural production, in form, content and (anti-) professional posture, in pursuit of Baraka’s aforementioned objective of cultural and political liberation.

Because of the immediacy and interpersonal nature of the form, artists of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) created a sizeable amount of theater. In fact, several of the institutions built in the BAM were theaters, like the Black Arts Reparatory Theater School (BARTS) and the National Black Theater. The work was varied in form and content – from more “conventional” works maintaining the “fourth wall” to more “experimental” works that operated akin to rituals, and everything in between – but was always tethered back to the central objectives of raising their own and their Black community’s consciousness and recovering their humanity. (Beavers, class lecture)

As Baraka reflects from his vantage point a couple decades later, some of the work created by the early cadre of the BARTS was so concerned with “what is Blackness?” that they made lines of demarcation between themselves and those more “mainstream” artists who were not as concerned with the liberation of Black people. He cites the anti-colonial psychologist and theorist Frantz Fanon’s work about the petty bourgeoisie intellectuals who claim a “super Black” identity in order to compensate for their previous, embarrassing alignment with the colonizer. They can easily become arrogant and overly-concerned with authenticity. (Baraka 27)

Indeed, much of the writings of the BAM can be read through that lens, revealing many artists’ preoccupation with the motivation of authenticity and exclusivity. For many artists, like Amiri Baraka or Ed Bullins, this came out in a nationalistic and hyper-masculinized way. And yet, there is much to be gleaned from these works and used as inspiration for future writing – as students parse out what speaks to them that they want to model their work after, and, conversely, what they find problematic, like toxic masculinity and homophobia, that they won’t perpetuate in their own work. There is a definite place for the assertion that artists have a place, as culture-builders mobilizing the power of imagination, to participate in the shaping and continuation of a movement for social change and racial/economic/gender justice.

### *A Black Aesthetic*

In the Black Arts Movement, artists and critics engaged in the act of defining what they termed a Black Aesthetic. They contended that their work was situated atop a literary legacy of white supremacy woven into the imagery, connotation, and word choice of “western” literature. As BAM writer Addison Gayle mapped out, for several millennia the dichotomy has existed within the western canon that painted *white* as goodness, purity, and superiority and *black* as evil, sin, and inferiority. (qtd in Bracey et al. 157) In response they sought to create work anchored in a different set of standards, aimed at raising the consciousness and affirming the Black identity of their Black communities.

Activists and artists alike were proclaiming that “Black is beautiful” and were moving to embrace the style, intent and substance of something unmistakably Black. This could be seen in the way that writers used non-mainstream spelling, punctuation, and vernacular; how they composed their works on the page that defied a traditional stanza/margin layout; how they performed their work to show the rhythm and/or to layer it with music and beats. This was not simply a question of the superficial, but as BAM writer Hoyt Fuller spells out, a question of survival. In his re-articulation of Frantz Fanon, he asserts that “in the time of revolutionary struggle, the traditional Western liberal ideals are not merely irrelevant, but they must be assiduously opposed.” (qtd in Bracey et al. 154)

Writers did not desire to simply insert themselves upon white texts, to simply reproduce the assumptions about universality to be found in the works of white writers, but were working to build up a way of representing their own specific realities. In his 1971 essay, Fuller paints the task of BAM artists: “The young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience.” (qtd in Bracey et al. 154) While he agrees that seeking a Black aesthetic may have been beyond codification -- as Black artists and communities indeed include rich subtleties and complexities -- he still believes that in the face of being shut-out by the political and economic policies of the privileged white majority, “the road to solidarity and strength leads inevitably through reclamation and indoctrination of black art and culture.” (qtd in Bracey et al. 155) In no uncertain terms, artists of the Black Arts Movement were engaging in their contemporary revolutionary project through their art making.

### *Plays of the Black Arts Movement/Black Aesthetic*

As stated above, many BAM writers wrote plays. This unit plan will discuss four plays as suggestions for the unit.

### ***Day of Absence*, Douglas Turner Ward**

This play features a satirical view of US race relations, inverting the format of a minstrel show to place Black actors in “whiteface” and using comedy to make its points about the interdependence of white and Black communities in the US. In his own words, Ward describes his connection to the thesis of the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic. He desired to make theater operating from a “Negro angle of vision.” One that is focused on a Black audience and delves into “the themes of Negro life.” (Ward qtd in Swanson 10).

The premise of the play is that the white residents of a small southern town wake up and there are no Black residents to be found. Eventually, pandemonium breaks out, as commerce is ground to a halt, domestic work and childrearing goes undone, and political institutions no longer function. Students will gravitate toward the comedy within *Day of Absence* and its over-the-top caricatures of small town, southern white ignorance. However, a careful reading will draw out the scathing commentary Ward embedded in his farce about the absurdity of white denial of the importance of Black people (in society in general, and *to* white people’s understanding *of* that society) and the inherent interdependence of a diversity of communities in the US.

### ***A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry**

Hansberry’s first Broadway play is often considered a proto-BAM play. While she published the play in 1959, Hansberry clearly was dealing with the same issues that Baraka and Fuller came to outline in the following decade. Indeed, “her expansive political vision—linking race and class struggle with the histories of women, Black Americans and colonial peoples abroad—not only marks her as a critical bridge between the civil rights and Black Power eras but also underscores her role as a crucial progenitor of the Black Arts and Feminist movements.” (Welch 302). In the framing of this historical Black Arts Movement, Hansberry’s political and artistic contributions need be included.

*A Raisin in the Sun* follows the Younger family as they make decisions about how to navigate a post-War, segregated Chicago. The play is set in a South Side tenement apartment during the days when the matriarch of the family, Lena Younger, receives the insurance check in the wake of her late husband’s death. Conflict ensues as mother, brother, and sister collide around the importance of family and home, dreams for an improved future, and the best way to deal with the spatialization of white racism within the city. Many cultural critics attribute the fame and recognition received by *A Raisin in the Sun* for the way it was able to straddle the line of “universality” and “ethnic particularity.” (Mafe 31) In other words, the play appealed to white/mainstream/Broadway audiences because it dealt with so-called “universal issues” of a family’s dreams for a better future within a changing world, but it also spoke to the

specificity of being a Black family whose very dreams were beset on all sides with the limitations of racialized capitalism. Even though it appealed to mainstream audiences, Hansberry was *not* just inserting Black people onto white life. She was writing a Black family living inside the political economy of racialized post-War Chicago.

***for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, Ntozake Shange**

Another play, which is often credited for straddling the same line, is Ntozake Shange's 1975 choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. This work explores the painful and gorgeous positionality of being "of color and female in the twentieth century." (Shange)

In her comparison of *A Raisin* and *for colored girls*, historian Diana Adesola Mafe writes:

"Both Hansberry and Shange address such controversial issues as abortion, sexuality, and female empowerment while challenging obstacles like sexism, patriarchal ideology, and gender stereotypes. But in their exploration of broader women's issues and feminist thought, these playwrights clearly write as/about/to black women. Their pioneering engagements with subjects like abortion or their representations of gender stereotypes must also be read in the 'particular' context of black womanhood. By stressing female agency, self-definition, and the 'right to choose,' these plays posit constructive models of 'universal' femininity. They also, however, signify important sites of black feminism in the larger socio-historic context of patriarchal civil rights and black nationalist movements, as well as exclusive white feminist movements." (Mafe 31)

Shange's work can be seen as was speaking back to the hyper-masculinist works of men within the Black Arts Movement, as well as the posturing of some Black Power spokesmen, and centering the experience of Black women and women of color dealing with the intersections of racism and sexism.

The play details heavy subjects, such as sexual assault, abortion, cheating, and domestic abuse. While some students may find the content challenging, they will probably all have some initial trouble comprehending Shange's own style of formatting. She uses abbreviations and alternate spellings, as well as a non-traditional method of writing stage directions and dialogue. This is again an evolution of the Black aesthetic. They may perhaps find some solace in BAM writer Sarah Webster Fabio's conclusions: "Black writers, finding themselves up a tree with 'the man's' rhetoric and aesthetic, which hangs them up, lynching their black visions, cut it loose." (Fabio, qtd in Bracey et al. 150) Shange's *for colored girls*... most definitely cuts loose from those structural and



topical confinements. Students should be encouraged to *hear* the voices of the piece by getting the language off the page and into their own performance of the work.

### ***Dutchman*, Amiri Baraka**

Finally, Amiri Baraka's 1964 *Dutchman* rounds out the selection of plays. In this provocative one-act play, Baraka explores the "temptations" of white middle class America to lure Black intellectuals and artists away from their larger purpose of awoken Black consciousness into a mainstream lifestyle. Witnessing the flirtation between Lula, a white woman, and Clay, a Black man, on a New York City train, *Dutchman* eventually reaches a climax of Clay rejecting the place white society has carved out for Black artists to "perform for them," and Lula retaliates with fatal violence. This play definitely does not escape misogynist portrayals of heterosexual interaction, even while it complicates the portrayal through its intersections of race and gender. Students may approach this with more of a critique of the storyline, than with the other selections.

If a teacher is interested in pursuing titles not from the 1960s and 1970s, but still clearly deriving their power from a Black aesthetic, the works of Suzan Lori Parks are not to be overlooked. Some favorite titles include *Topdog/Underdog* and *In the Blood*, which both center Black voices and experiences within late twentieth, early twenty-first century United States. Further, her essay/performative lecture called "New Black Math" is a must read when wanting to meditate on what constitutes a Black aesthetic, and more specifically, a "Black play." (Parks)

### **Unit Objectives**

This unit is for my Drama students (mostly 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders.) It will occur over 2 months of the year. Students will:

1. Engage in reading from a variety of titles of plays from (and inspired by) the Black Arts Movement.
2. Synthesize excerpts from the play into a 10-minute performance that exemplifies the form and content of the full script.
3. Perform their cut excerpt of the play for the rest of the class.
4. Read a non-fiction article associated with the play, in order to gain a wider understanding of the context of the play, playwright, and historical moment.
5. Develop their own opinions/preferences around how they want to express political messages.
6. Generate ideas for their own work, using a variety of entry points - topics, themes, character, conflict.
7. Do research related to their ideas – find an event, public figure, article, quote, something of historical relevance, etc. – in order to flesh out the character and conflict.

8. Engage in the writing process – brainstorm, draft, revise, edit, publish.
9. Work with professional theater artists to move from “page to stage,” in order to reflect on successive versions of the play.

### **Essential Questions:**

1. What does it look like for theater to reflect, critique, and/or reject the way society is structured? How do playwrights do this effectively?
2. How do playwrights craft their characters through dialogue and stage directions?
3. How are plays constructed to let the conflict and themes unfold?
4. What is your approach to expressing your political messages about identity, community, and society through theater?

### **Standards**

I will use the Common Core Standards for Reading and Writing. As my students are from 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, I chose to mix and match from the grades.

Reading:

#### **CC.1.3.9–10.C**

Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

#### **CC.1.3.11–12.D**

Evaluate how an author’s point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

#### **CC.1.3.9–10.E**

Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create an effect.

Writing:

#### **CC.1.4.11–12.O**

Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, reflection, multiple plotlines, and pacing to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, settings, and/or characters.

#### **CC.1.4.11–12.T**

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

## **Strategies**

See the objectives listed above. We will engage in small group reading of plays, researching context of the plays, performing a scene from the play for the whole class. We will discuss the form and content choices of the playwright, and explore our own opinions on how to express political messages through theater. Then we will work to brainstorm, research, develop, revise, edit, and publish student-written original plays “with a message.”

## **Activities**

Sample Lessons:

### **Week 2, Day 1:**

Objective: SWBAT choose key scenes that illustrate the form and content of their play IOT synthesize into the 10 minute excerpt of the play.

#### 1. Warm Up:

Medley game!

Break into your play reading groups.

Think of 4 songs that have a similar theme. Pull out lines and phrases from each of the 4 songs to build a medley.

Example: Christmas medley

Practice for 3 minutes. Perform for the class.

Lots of laughter!

#### 2. Direct Instruction:

Today you will do the same thing with your plays. You need to make some serious choices to build up your 10 minute excerpt – which you will be rehearsing and performing for the class next week.

Steps/Parameters for group work:

1. Go back to your stickie notes that you have been taking as you’ve been reading.
2. Each person offers up their ideas for key moments in the play.
3. Try to get a diversity of content: emotions, conflicts, characters, issues etc.
4. Make sure what you perform is a good illustration of the format of the play: style of language and stage directions, how it looks on stage.
5. Make decisions with your group – listen, find overlap, compromise
6. Check that we can see different moments from across the time and narrative arc of the play, so that your excerpt tells a story.

### 3. Group Work:

Students will work in their groups. Teacher will check in as needed.

Students will compile a “cut” of the script that fulfills the requirements, so that they can begin to rehearse.

Exit: Show teacher progress.

Homework: Finalize the “cut” of the show.

### **Week 4, Day 1:**

Objective: SWBAT individually and collectively brainstorm lists of ideas IOT generate a focus for play.

#### 1. Warm Ups:

Zip Zap Zop

#### 2. Independent Brainstorm work:

In your portfolio, fold a piece of paper in half vertically.

On the front of the paper:

Left Column: Things that changed the world

Write for 2 minutes.

Right Column: Things that changed Me.

Write for 2 minutes.

Flip the paper over:

Left Column: Things that could change the world

Write for 2 minutes.

Right column: Things that could change me.

Write for 2 minutes.

Go back through your list and star the top 3 things that speak to you.

Now, from your list of 12 ideas, walk around the room and add to the big pieces of paper on the walls.

Choose 1 thing from each of your 4 lists to add to the collective list.

After students write, they may go look at the collective lists in a gallery walk.

#### 3. Individual writing:

Now, focus in on one thing (either from your own list or from the collective list) and allow it to inspire you.

Write for 5 minutes a 10-line scene from that point of inspiration.

For the last 10 minutes of class:

Get into groups of 3-4 and workshop with each other.

Take turns reading each other's work out loud, having different people read the different characters' voices.

Exit: Make a note of: What works? What stands out to you? What do you want to keep? What inspires you to keep writing?

### **Week 4, Day 3:**

Objective: SWBAT individually and collectively brainstorm lists of ideas IOT generate a focus for play.

#### 1. Warm ups

Who else is in here?

Stand in a circle.

Student gives a generic location (e.g. kitchen, park, etc.)

One student goes into the circle and begins miming (+3 words max.) in a way that builds a character that is appropriate to the location.

Students get tapped on the shoulder and need to enter into the location. They can join what the first student is doing, or they add on to the scene to show more variety of activity in the location.

Try to get 5-10 students into the location.

#### 2. Individual Brainstorming:

- Look at your list of potential issues that matter to you.

- Make 3 columns.

- In column 1 - Write out three people (or things, if you want to personify something non-human) who would be in a scene about this issue.

- In column 2 - Write out three other people (or things, if you want to personify something non-human) who might have some type of conflict with any/all of the people from column 1

- In column 3 – Write out three other people (or things, if you want to personify something non-human) who could also be in a scene about this issue, but maybe you wouldn't expect.

#### 3. Start playing! (Individual and then Group)

- Choose any 2 characters from any of the lists and write a 10 line scene with them.

- Get into groups of 4 with the other students working on the same issue.

- Assign roles to 2 of the group members to read the script.

- Then, decide on one more person from the 3 column list to enter the scene.

- The 3 characters will then improv for an additional minute, to see what comes up.

- Switch, so that this happens for each of the 4 group members.

#### 4. Reflect

- As a group reflect on these questions: Which issues, scenes or characters capture your interest? What from today do you want to continue to work on? What “cool things” could you envision coming from today’s first brainstorm?

- Write down ALL of your ideas! We’ll use them to keep working tomorrow.

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#### **Note:**

The students in my classes are from a variety of backgrounds. The majority are Black (African American, African, and Caribbean). I also have a sizable population of Southeast and East Asian students, white students, Muslim and/or Arab students, and Latin@ students (as well as LGBTQ students of all racial backgrounds). A suggested amendment to this unit would be to include plays that reflect a diversity of activist topics, and allow the groups of students to choose.

Secondly, if educators are worried about using work from the Black Arts Movement for the reason that it may be “too racially charged,” it is important to realize that *all* of the texts we share in our classrooms make a political statement about race; the presence of whiteness, the centering of white characters, and/or the absence of characters of color who possess agency within the story is equally “racially charged.” We teach in a school system that proposes that the Western, white canon is “universal” and therefore not “racialized,” but we owe it to ourselves and our students to push past those notions and get comfortable exploring a range of authors and works.

## Sources Cited

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This is an excellent encapsulation of Amiri Baraka's reflections back on the founding of the Black Arts Movement.

Christiansen, Linda. *Reading, Writing and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, Ltd. 2000. Print.

Linda Christiansen is a long-time social justice-oriented high school teacher. She writes for the publication, *Rethinking Schools*, and this is a grouping of several of her literacy arts units.

Fabio, Sarah Webster. "Tripping with Black Writing." *S.O.S. – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Ed. John Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, James Smethurst. University of Massachusetts Press. 2014. 145-50. Print.

As the title sounds, Sarah Webster Fabio goes on a journey through examples of Black writing over the past several centuries, giving her take on how the form and content shifted as Black people moved toward liberation. Her own writing style eschews a conventional, conservative, Eurocentric tone.

Fuller, Hoyt. "Towards a Black Aesthetic." *S.O.S. – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Ed. John Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, James Smethurst. University of Massachusetts Press. 2014. 179-84. Print.

Powerfully written, Hoyt Fuller makes a case for defining a Black aesthetic.

Gayle, Addison. "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic." *S.O.S. – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Ed. John Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, James Smethurst. University of Massachusetts Press. 2014. 157-61. Print.

Addison Gayle explains, with detailed evidence, how embedded white supremacy is in Western Literature since the Greeks.

Lipman, Pauline. *High Stakes Education*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer. 2004. Print

A necessary overview of neoliberal education policy and its consequences on schools, communities, and students of color.

Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. 2011. Print.

George Lipsitz shows how US urban policy has created racialized spaces which lock in benefits and opportunities along racial lines.

Llorens, David. "What Good the Word without the Wisdom? Or 'English Ain't Relevant.'" *S.O.S. – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Ed. John Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, James Smethurst. University of Massachusetts Press. 2014. 151-57. Print.

This is a necessary read for anyone who teaches Black students. Llorens pushes educators to think about the purpose of an English education and why it may be unwelcomed when not taught with cultural relevance.

Mafe, Diana Adesola. "Black Women On Broadway: The Duality Of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun* And Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*." *American Drama* 15.2 (2006): 30-47. *International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance with Full Text*. Web. 14 Feb. 2016.

This article explores the duality of the two plays as being seen as "universal" stories at the same time as being Black feminist plays.



Pate, Alexs. "A Conversation with Ntozake Shange." *Black Renaissance* 10.2 (2010): 78,85,151. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Feb. 2016.

A beautiful interview with Ntozake Shange about her art.

Picower, Bree, and Edwin Mayorga. *What's Race Got to Do with It: How Current School Reform Policy Maintains Racial and Economic Inequality*. 2015. Print.

This anthology looks at neoliberal school reform as a “many headed hydra” that all adds up to negative consequences to students of color and their schools and communities.

Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*. 2003. University of North Carolina Press. Print.

This is a thoroughly researched biography of Ella Baker, an incredible contributor and unsung hero of the Black Freedom Movement. The chapters detailing the work of SNCC are relevant to this curriculum.

Sanchez, Sonia. “Introduction (Queens of the Universe). *S.O.S. – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*. Ed. John Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, James Smethurst. University of Massachusetts Press. 2014. 114-20. Print.

This poem reads like a manifesto (or, rather, in the words of my queer and feminist community – “femmifesto”) about Black women’s role in the liberation of her people. It definitely demonstrates Sonia Sanchez’s form and content.

Ward, Douglas Turner, “American Theater for Whites Only?” *New York Times*, 14 August 1966, sect. 2.1. qtd in *Playwrights of Color*. Ed. Meg Swanson. Yarmouth, Maine. Intercultural Press. 1999. 3-19. Print.

This op-ed from 1966 was an important piece to be published within a mainstream newspaper, pushing the question of where Black artists and Black art can find a place within American theater. Note: Turner uses the word “negro,” which places him in a pre-BAM lexicon.

Welch, Rebecca. "Spokesman of the Oppressed? Lorraine Hansberry at Work: The Challenge of Radical Politics in the Postwar Era." *Souls*. 9:4 (2007): 302-319. Web 14 Feb. 2016.

Rebecca Welch traces Lorraine Hansberry's political and artistic contributions, locating her as a proto-BAM artist.

Annotated list of materials for classroom use:

Baraka, Amiri. *Dutchman; and, The Slave: two plays by Leroi Jones*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1964. Web 21 Feb 2016.

This is Baraka's famous play that explores the "temptations" of white middle class America to lure Black intellectuals and artists away from their larger purpose of awoken Black consciousness into a mainstream lifestyle

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun: A Drama in Three Acts*. New York: Random House, 1959. Print.

This is Hansberry's famous play that follows the a working class Black family as they make decisions about how to navigate a post-War, segregated Chicago.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. "New Black Math." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4, Black Performance (Dec., 2005). pp. 576-583. Web 1 May 2016.

Part lecture, part performance piece, Parks explores the question: "What is a Black play?" It is provocative, as Parks is always, and will encourage elicit an array of responses.

Shange, Ntozake. *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. New York: Collier Books, 1977. Print.

This is Shange's famous work, a choreopoem, that explores the painful and gorgeous positionality of being, in her words, "of color and female in the twentieth century."

Ward, Douglas Turner. *Day of Absence*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1966. qtd in *Playwrights of Color*. Ed. Meg Swanson. Yarmouth, Maine. Intercultural Press. 1999. 20-42. Print.

This is Ward's satirical view of US race relations, which inverts the format of a minstrel show to place Black actors in "whiteface" and uses comedy to make its points about the interdependence of white and Black communities in the US.