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# Global Contributions of African American Writers: Using Poetry to Facilitate Connections Between Historical Periods and Students' Personal Experiences

By Kristin Krull

As an English major and pre-service teacher, I am naturally drawn to the literary canon as a means of reflecting upon historical periods. Throughout my public and post-secondary education, literature has illuminated, and at times even revealed, periods of historical significance that were not a part of any traditional history curriculum I experienced. It was through the writings of Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois that I first heard many of the voices of our nation's past that often go unheard within our public schools. Similarly, the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez provided a new and authentic perspective on history that glaringly revealed the exclusion of many African American voices from our nation's classrooms.

Throughout my teacher education program, I have been immersed in culturally responsive teaching theory and practice, which Geneva Gay defines as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively." It is based on the premise that "when academic skills are situated

within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly."<sup>1</sup> This immersion in culturally responsive teaching has given me a heightened awareness of the injustice of denying students the opportunity to study the works of African Americans who have had a defining role in shaping the American social, political, and cultural consciousness, and also the negative impact that such an exclusion has on student engagement and student achievement.

Last fall, I had the opportunity to meet Sonia Sanchez while attending the 93<sup>rd</sup> Annual Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) Convention in Birmingham, Alabama. Experiencing firsthand the powerful grace and truth of her spoken word was a bittersweet experience. I was reminded of my own limited K-12 educational experiences, but more importantly, I was faced with the realization that the majority of today's students are experiencing a similarly narrow curriculum. Despite decades of curricular reforms designed to be inclusive of the multiplicity of voices that comprise the Ameri-

can experience, students continue to be taught a narrowly defined view of both history and literature. Ultimately, my encounter with Sonia Sanchez served to solidify my belief in and commitment to using literature as a means to facilitate student connections to history and their own lives through culturally responsive teaching.

Literature is a powerful lens through which historical periods come alive. It allows the reader to connect with history in a unique and often very personal way.

While numerous African American writers have made significant contributions to the literary canon, many are only now being recognized for their work.

The global contributions of African American writers were prolific at two distinct, yet connected, points in American history: the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

The Harlem Renaissance, situated historically between the Great Migration and the Great Depression, gave birth to a new African American cultural identity despite rampant racism and economic oppression. Alain Locke deemed it a “spiritual coming of age” offering the “first chances for group expression and self determination.”<sup>22</sup> Through this spiritual awakening the voices of James Weldon Johnson,

Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Langston Hughes were resoundingly heard.

Langston Hughes, one of the best known writers of the Harlem Renaissance, was thrust into the mainstream of American literature, successfully earning a living by writing. Hughes’s writing was powerful and groundbreaking; however, his success is due in part to the cultural movement that became the Har-



lem Renaissance. An emerging and open sense of racial pride and identity burgeoned into a movement. In a 1926 essay published in *The Nation* titled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes denounced

writers “who would surrender racial pride in the name of a false integration.” Hughes declared, “We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.”<sup>23</sup> Hughes became a powerful voice resonating with other African American writers, artists, and musicians, both in the United States and around the world. According to Alan Davis, the former curator of the Langston Hughes House in Harlem, Hughes’s poetry has been translated into sixty different languages and countries from Asia to Africa include Hughes in their curriculum at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. Known as “the poet-laureate of the Negro”

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during the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes continues to resonate with readers today and is globally recognized as one of the greatest writers in American literature.

A strikingly similar, yet more forceful sentiment is expressed by Larry Neal, whose words solidified the Black Arts Movement. Neal defined a “Black aesthetic,” which advocated a “cultural revolution in art and ideas” based on African American cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup> Neal put into words the revolution that was occurring within the community of African American writers and artists. During the Black Arts Movement, figures such as Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Gil-Scott Heron, Adrienne Kennedy, and Sonia Sanchez emerged. The influence of the movement extended beyond the period to writers such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison.

Actively involved in the Black Arts Movement, Nikki Giovanni wrote poetry that melded literature and politics, resulting in a radical and deliberate assertion of Black consciousness that dominated her poetry and the movement as a whole. Following the Black Arts Movement, Giovanni’s role as a mother motivated her to begin writing poetry for young adults and children. In a career spanning more than forty years, Giovanni has consistently emphasized social justice and racial equality within her poetry. As a poet, writer, activist, and educator, Giovanni continues to be an influential force within modern literature.

Although her social and political activism began during the civil rights movement, Sonia Sanchez is best known for her influence during the Black Arts Movement. Initially an integrationist, Sanchez was influenced by the ideology of Malcolm X. Her poetry, spanning forty years, addresses issues of racial justice, class conflict, women’s liberation, and generational conflict. She has lectured at more than 500 universities and colleges in the United States and has traveled extensively, reading her poetry in Africa, Asia, Cuba, Latin America, China, and Europe. As writer, poet, playwright, editor, educator, and activist, Sanchez’s work, particularly her spoken word, is powerfully captivating and engaging.

The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement were both situated within a larger cultural and historical context in which African American writers and artists made significant contributions to the American literary canon, as well as influencing writers and artists around the world. The poetry of Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez resonated with audiences within their respective historical periods and continues to speak to audiences today. All three poets offer the opportunity for students to connect with their poetry and consequently engage in the study of two revolutionary historical periods in African American history and literature. Students are able to identify with the passion of the poets as well as appreciate the power and influence of their poetry in defining African American identity and culture.

## Notes

1. Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
2. Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (1925).
3. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* (1926).

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/299.html>

4. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* (Summer 1968), 29-39.



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## Lesson Plan

### **Global Contributions of African American Writers: Using Poetry to Facilitate Connections between Historical Periods and Students' Personal Experiences**

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#### **Connections to Middle School**

Students often have difficulty making connections between literature and the historical context in which it is written. Additionally, students struggle to make connections between historical movements and their own lives. The importance of these connections is emphasized by their inclusion in both the National Council for Social Studies Standards and the National Council of Teachers of English Standards. This lesson will facilitate students making connections between literature, history, and their own lives. Additionally, students will identify with African American authors who have made significant contributions to the literary canon while simultaneously advancing the cause of civil rights, and recognize the powerful impact of the written word in evoking change.

#### **Goals**

Students will gain knowledge of the significant contributions of African American writers within the historical, social, and cultural contexts of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

#### **Objectives**

Students will read and analyze poems by Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez. Students will examine the cultural significance of each of the poems in their respective historical contexts and discuss the significance of the poems to their personal experience.

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## National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards

### Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns
- Assist learners to apply understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns

## National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards

- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (Standard 2)
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (Standard 4)
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (Standard 11)

## Activity

1. Begin by activating students' prior knowledge of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, listing information on the board. Discuss the significance of Harlem and the pride in African American culture and heritage that fostered the first explosion of African American writers, artists, and musicians into the mainstream. Discuss Langston Hughes' role as leader of the Harlem Renaissance.
2. Listen to an audio file of "Dream Deferred." Discuss students' initial reactions to the poem.
3. Divide students into groups of three or four. Distribute a copy of the poem and the Poem Analysis graphic organizer. Students will discuss the poem and complete the graphic organizer.
4. Discuss students' analysis of the poem and the relevance of the poem to Hughes' readers, their own lives, and future readers.
5. Provide background information and historical context for the Black Arts Movement. Discuss the cultural and historical significance of the movement, listing information on the board. Discuss the emergence of the "Black aesthetic," which advocated a "cultural revolution in art and ideas" based on African American cultural traditions. Help students make connections between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Introduce Nikki Giovanni as a powerful female poet within the Black Arts Movement.
6. Listen to a reading of "Ego Tripping" and read the poem "Choices" by Nikki Giovanni. Discuss students' initial reactions to the poems.
7. Divide students into different groups of three or four. Distribute a copy of the poems and the Poem Analysis graphic organizer. Students will discuss the poems and complete the graphic organizer.
8. Discuss students' analysis of the poems and the relevance of the poems to Giovanni's readers, their own lives, and future readers.

9. Listen to a reading of “Homecoming” by Sonia Sanchez. Discuss students’ initial reactions to the poem.
10. Divide students into different groups of three or four. Distribute a copy of the poem and the Poem Analysis graphic organizer. Students will discuss the poem and complete the graphic organizer.
11. Discuss students’ analysis of the poem and the relevance of the poem to Sanchez’s readers, their own lives, and future readers.
12. Distribute the T-Chart graphic organizer and have students compare and contrast “Dream Deferred” and the Harlem Renaissance with “Choices,” “Homecoming,” and the Black Arts Movement.

### **Assessment**

1. Students will demonstrate their understanding of the poems, their historical relevance, and their personal significance through a performance-based task of their choice using one of the poems.
2. Show students the Nike commercial “A Dream Deferred.” Discuss the relevance of the poem within this context. Discuss other contexts in which the words of Hughes, Giovanni, and Sanchez continue to speak to readers. Students will then choose a performance-based task such as creating a multimedia presentation, writing a poem, essay, or rap, or creating a collage or other visual representation.

### **Teacher Resources**

1. “Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/dream-deferred/>
2. The Schomburg Legacy: Documenting the Global Black Experience for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century online exhibit. <http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/WEBEXHIB/legacy/legacy2.htm>
3. “Ego Tripping” by Nikki Giovanni. [http://nikki-giovanni.com/page\\_51.shtml](http://nikki-giovanni.com/page_51.shtml)
4. “Homecoming” by Sonia Sanchez. <http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/%22homecoming%22>
5. Sonia Sanchez, her poetry, and her social activism. [http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Sonia\\_Sanchez](http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Sonia_Sanchez)
6. Freedom’s Song Lesson Plans and DVD. <http://www.freedomssong.net/>
7. Nike commercial. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiL2znfkvFk&feature=related>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Poem: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

What does the title suggest the poem is about?

Content

What is the subject or topic of this poem?

Context

What is the historical context of this poem? When is the author writing? Is the author speaking from personal experience?

What words or phrases directly relate to the topic or subject of the poem? Indirectly relate?

Who was the audience for this poem? How would it have been relevant to the reader?

What figures of speech are prevalent in the poem?  
Similes? Metaphors?

Does this poem have relevance to readers after the era in which it was written? Is it relevant to your life?

What is the message you think the poet is trying to convey in this poem? What emotions or feelings does the poem elicit in you? Now go back and take another look at the title, the historical context, and the content. Does the evidence support your interpretation? Are there specific elements in the poem that engender these emotions or feelings?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Complete the T-Chart, comparing and contrasting “Dream Deferred” and the Harlem Renaissance to “Choices,” “Homecoming,” and the Black Arts Movement.

Similarities	Differences