Latino and African American Literature: Revealing our Core Identity

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This curriculum unit is recommended for: Advanced Studio Art, AP Studio Art

Keywords: Art, (core) Identity, Art and literature, magical realism, folktales

Teaching Standards: See Appendix for teaching standards addressed in this unit. (Insert a hyperlink to Appendix 1 where you've stated your unit's main standards.)

Synopsis: Students in art class are generally introduced to units of study by the instructor, from which they are supposed to find their voice and create personal and expressive works of art. But is it really 'their' art? This scripted formula is often limiting and creates unintentional boundaries. When does my script become personal to them? What opportunities do I create in my units for this to happen? How can I challenge them to find their own totem and inspiration?

This unit will expose students to literature that is both personal, meaningful, and communicates to a larger audience. Understanding core identity and interpreting how it influences our choices is one of the main objectives of this unit. Throughout the unit, students will create a series of interpretive works of art based on the stories they read. These works will be selections of Latino and African American writers, selections of folktales or magic realism; two styles of writing that have a longstanding tradition in each culture. These two genres also both make use of symbolism and fantasy- they both have characteristics of hybridity, irony, and collective consciousness, supernatural and natural, which is, in my mind, perfectly suited to creating imaginative and original works of art. Through analysis and interpretation, students will discover ways in which authors reveal their core identity in their writing.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year in to 25+ students in Advanced Studio and AP Studio Art.

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Elizabeth Lasure

"Inspiration is for amateurs – the rest of us show up and get to work"[1]
Chuck Close

They are stark white, raw, bone-dry porcelain vessels. They are rough around the edges. Each one is shaped differently; each one awaits the next stage of its evolution. The shelf where they sit is not level. Most of what is in my studio is unfinished and just a bit off.

Over the spring a house wren made a nest in one of these unfinished vessels. It sits snuggly in the form and although the baby wrens have since left this cozy space, what remains is a place where life and memories linger. I keep the nest and other objects like it around my studio -they serve as a sort of totem or compass to help guide my work.

My studio is a place where I can let go of time, organization, symmetry, and my ordinary life as a teacher. It is a place where I am surrounded by my own memories and creations, both finished and not. Yet more often than not, I find myself in a state of uncertainty about what to do. Feelings of doubt and uncertainty about art making is, I suppose pretty common, but nonetheless the source of endless frustration.

The writer and poet Maya Angelou shares what she does when she encounters these moments of doubt. "What I try to do is write. I may write for two weeks 'the cat sat on the mat, that is that, not a rat.' And it might be just the most boring and awful stuff. But I try. When I'm writing, I write. And then it's as if the muse is convinced that I'm serious and says, 'Okay. Okay. I'll come." [2]

I know many of my students often feel that same anxiety and frustration in the process of creating works of art. Students in art class are generally introduced to units of study by the instructor, from which they are supposed to find their voice and create personal and expressive works of art. But is it really 'their' art? This scripted formula is often limiting and creates unintentional boundaries. How can I encourage them to push beyond the scripted lesson to find their own muse? When does my script become personal to them? What opportunities do I create in my units for this to happen? How can I challenge them to find their own totem and inspiration? What can I do to help spark a personal discovery?

Objectives

I teach High School Visual Arts - specifically Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced Placement Studio Art. This unit is written for these advanced visual arts students - those with at least two years of high school art experience. This level of experience is important because the goals and objectives are directly connected to the state content standards for Visual Arts in North Carolina. The program/department that I teach with recognizes the importance of tiered instructional practices. In general, students in level one or two visual arts are focused on learning the materials and techniques used to create art. They are developing observation skills and experimenting with how materials interact with each other. The level three and four students (Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced) are learning how to analyze and interpret the ways artists manipulate these principles to evoke response, communicate ideas, and make visual art that is both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

The North Carolina State Essential Standards for Advanced Visual Arts addresses the need for students to be able to now apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression. The clarifying objective within this standard asks that students create original works of art in response to artistic problems, experiences, and observations to represent individual perspectives. The Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced Placement Studio Art students are expected to make use this knowledge to create works that are both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

As Common Core Standards are beginning to be introduced in our district, I believe it is in the best interest of my students for me to understand the Core Standards in Literacy and use them in this unit.

Good readers examine the choices writers make—their choice of specific words and broader choices—of how to order events and develop characters—of what to say—all these choices are examined by a careful reader. Meaningful appreciation and study of works of art begins with close observation. The Core Standards in Literacy similarly describe reading as the product of sustained observation and attention to detail. No one looks at a great work of art once; likewise, any great piece of writing deserves careful consideration and reconsideration. The arts can train students to look and look again; to listen and listen until one really hears. CS Lewis writes this about looking at a painting or reading a book carefully: “We must look, and go on looking, until we have seen exactly what is there…the first demand any work of art makes on us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.”

The common literary rhythms, visually stimulating descriptions, and deeply rooted connections to community, identity, and ancestors are all well-known elements in the literature of African American and Latino cultures. These elements will be identified, for the purposes of this unit, into what I am going to call ‘core identity’ (defined in the

rational section of this unit). These elements are also important to the personal artwork my students will create for this unit.

Students will be introduced to three artists in the introduction to this unit. Through a series of collaborative activities, students will identify art and literary techniques that reveal the 'core identity' of theses artist/writers. Students will analyze how this core identity creates work that is both personal, meaningful, and communicates to a larger audience.

Students will select individual short stories for study. These works will be selections of Latino and African American writers. I concentrated this selection of works for my students on folktales or magic realism; two styles of writing that have a longstanding tradition in each culture. These two genres also both make use of symbolism and fantasy- they both have characteristics of "hybridity, irony, and collective consciousness, supernatural and natural"[3], which is, in my mind, perfectly suited to creating imaginative and original works of art. Through analysis and interpretation, students will discover ways in which authors reveal their core identity in their writing.

Throughout the unit, students will create a series of interpretive works of art based on the stories they read. Understanding how our core identity influences us, students will create their own stories and accompanying artwork that is both personal, meaningful, and made available to a larger audience.

Rational

Considering what motivates a person at any given time may help shed light on the ways in which I can approach this unit using both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational objectives. The diversity in my school is pretty high. Our student population is sixty percent African American, thirty percent White, and the remaining students are majority Hispanic and Asian. The economic make-up range from poverty through upper middle class is also broad. About half our population is eligible for free and reduced lunch. Of course we can first look at those external factors that may effect how students are situated in comparison to their peers – the basic demographics that define socio-economic and racial groups. But I think it may be equally important for the goals of this unit to consider how these factors are processed internally. Identity and belonging are such an important part of the years we spend as young adults. Understanding and recognizing our identity may be easier to teach than getting one to 'appreciate it'. My goals in this unit will help students reach a level of comfort/confidence with this idea in hopes that it will help them communicate, within their art, a more personal and meaningful message- one that celebrates an appreciation for their 'core identity'.

Dr. Mary Vasquez, a professor in the Hispanic Studies Department at Davison College addressed the concept of 'core identity' in a seminar on September 12, 2013. In this discussion, Dr. Vasquez shared some of her own ideas about how we identify and

understand our sense belonging and identity throughout our lives. My hope that students will process the components of 'core identity' through the reading and writing exercises in this unit and be able to make decisions in their artworks that reflects more of their personal history/identity and less of my teacher scripted formula for art making - that this new understanding of 'core identity' may become their muse for art that is more personal and meaningful.

My students are at an age where they are intellectually capable of developing answers to the complex question, "Who and I? ". This, as developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposes, requires organization of the individual's beliefs, abilities, drives, and history of oneself. Erikson claims that identity development is not exclusively formed in adolescence; it is shaped in adolescence and continues to change and develop while maintaining the core identity. He proposed that throughout all areas of our life this internal self remains stable, consistent and reliable creating a sense of continuity with the past. It is not rigidly fixed, Erikson's proposed eight stages of development throughout which normative crises occur which may modify our core identity. Psychosocial theory sees identity as stable and assumes that people remain within particular social categories.[4]

Listed in Appendix C are questions designed to help begin the discussion on the topic: "What is my identity?" Additionally, these are some of the components of 'core identity' that were discussed in this seminar and that I will be using in this unit: how we associate with our cultural family (what we embrace/reject within that family), what is told to us (i.e. oral history and traditions), the reflection of self in others, religious beliefs, physical identity, and language. I will be using this list throughout this unit in two ways.

In what ways do the descriptions of place, character, time, and/or history within the text, reveal the core identity of the author? What intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are revealed through these descriptions? Do these choices influence art that is more personal and thus communicate a more meaningful message?

Second, students will be asked identify their own core identity through a series of writing and drawing/painting exercises. These exercises will celebrate the style of writing associated with folktales and magical realism (defined and clarified in the Background section of this unit), allowing for works of art to be influenced by ideas and feelings rather than relying on subject and narrative alone. Again attempting to address the standard where art that is made is both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

The external factors I mentioned earlier in regard to the diversity of my school will be very helpful in generating a diverse collection of artistic solutions to the activates and art works that will be produced in this unit. There is not a classroom teacher in my school who does not have their hand on the pulse of differentiation. My school is not a melting pot; it is 'a multicultural society'. Our differences are celebrated with a number of

collaborative celebrations throughout the year. The diversity includes those whose second language is English, students whose families economic situation fall below the national poverty level, and students whose situation is middle class and suburban. This diversity runs across race as well. The schools demographics report about a 60/30 split of African American and White students with remaining percent are predominately Latino and Asian.

Like all of us, my students have lives and memories that are full of complexities and change. I see this unit and the process of art making as a place to explore those complexities, embrace our differences, and find our muse.

In the book *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel beautifully writes about this muse.

> Each of us is born with a box of matches inside us but we can't strike them all by ourselves; we need oxygen and a candle to help. In this case, the oxygen for example, would come from the breath of the person you love; the candle would be any kind of food, music, caress, word, or sound that engenders the explosion that lights one of the matches. For a moment we are dazzled by an intense emotion. A pleasant warmth grows within us, fading slowly as time goes by, until a new explosion comes along to revive it. Each person has to discover what will set off those explosions in order to live, since the combustion that occurs when one of them is ignited is what nourishes the soul. That fire, in short, is its food. If one doesn't find out in time what will set off these explosions, the box of matches dampens, and not a single match will ever be lighted.[5]

I have used this quote many times in my classes as a vehicle to introduce the idea of the muse, asking students to consider what sparks their 'box of matches'. Here is a perfect opportunity to expand beyond that single idea and analyze the (surrounding) text. Where does the box come from, what influences ignite the spark? Does the author expression of experiences, and objects reveal her core identity? Do the descriptions of place, time, and characters give us clues into these identities?

In an interview, Laura Esquivel, is enthusiastically introduced by the host as 'having single handedly initiating the popularity of Mexican cuisine'- the mythical, and feminine cuisine that is gaining popularity around the world. Esquivel describes a traditional Mexican dessert that is placed in front of her "…as you see, it is a display of beauty, commitment, elegance, and the pleasure awaiting you when it is tasted". Food is central to understanding much of a country's culture. The social structure is mirrored in the way people eat, who they eat with, and who prepares the food. It essentially shows the populations view on such core values as relationship building, roles in family and society, and openness towards other cultures.

Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water For Chocolate* is a story of tradition, rebellion, and core identity. To explore and connect many of the themes in the novel, Esquivel uses food as a powerful symbol, present in almost every scene. Esquivel uses food to parody many traditional concepts prevalent in the past. It is her muse.

Background

The literary works recommended for this unit all draw on the common element of core identity. This authorship, along with a voice and style of communications that creates works that are meaningful to a larger audience, is the basis for my selections.

So far in this unit I have quoted from artists Laura Esquivel, Maya Angelou, and Chuck Close. Chuck Close is the only visual artist described in this unit plan. Because this is a literature unit in a visual arts classroom, the list of visual artists is notably short. I will however, use Close's personal story to introduce this unit to my students – a bait and switch technique perhaps, but it always takes some convincing to transition my visual art students to take 'precious studio time' for reading! The following section introduces three artists work and their personal lives. It is the how I will introduce this unit to my students. The format also serves, as an example of what students will be asked to do with the works of literature they select for their individual studies.

Introducing Core Identity to Students through the lives and works of artists

Chuck Close

As a young man, Chuck Close was physically bigger than his classmates and notoriously clumsy. Most of his young life he was called dumb and lazy. He was not terribly popular in school, and his problems were furthered by a neuromuscular condition that prevented him from playing sports. He suffers from severe dyslexia – a diagnosis identified late in his school-age years. As a result, Chuck Close struggled in almost all phases of schoolwork - except art. He was told to forget about college. Ironically, in 1961 he won a scholarship to a Yale summer art program. He was later accepted into the graduate program at Yale, which he completed in 1964.

His early photorealistic style of is one of meticulous technique and unwavering hard work. These portrait paintings average 9 feet tall. The paintings of the 1970's celebrated the glossy, mirror-like look of the photograph. Portraiture in Close's work suggests a " means for exploring unsettling aspects of how self identity is always a composite and highly constructed, if not ultimately conflicted fiction".[6]

On Dec. 7, 1988, at the age of 49, Close was at the height of his career as a portrait painter when he was stricken with a spinal blood clot that left him a quadriplegic.[7] , unable to move either his arms or legs. With a paintbrush clamped between his teeth, he

developed a new way to paint. His return to painting produced portraits that are far looser that his former work. “My new portraits have a celebratory aspect that wasn’t there before…because I felt so happy that I was able to get back to work.” [8] He continues to paint to this day and is one of the most prolific artists of our times.

> All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself. Things occur to you. If you're sitting around trying to dream up a great art idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens.[9]

Introducing Chuck Close’s life story and personal writings about his art may be one way to help students begin to be more responsive to his extrinsic motivation for creating art. What does his art reveal about his core identity? Students will read and discuss his work and his personal history. As a class, we will discuss components of his core identity as it is reflected in the work he has created. How did he identify with his peers (reflection of self in others); what was he was told about his ability to learn and play; and how did his physical identity, which changed dramatically in mid-career, effect what and how he painted? Later, we will turn these same questions on ourselves – and begin to understand our own core identity.

This will be the first introduction to the questions relating to core identity. As a summary activity to this introduction to the Close portraits and personal history, students will be asked take a few minutes to consider the value of knowing this personal information about the artist. Does this change how you interpret the work? Does your opinion of the work change as a result of this knowledge? How?

(In Appendix A, I have shared a list of visual artist whose personal lives and artwork would function well when introducing the analysis of core identity to students. It is very likely I will also draw from this list throughout this unit as classroom warm-up’s or simple as a reference library.)

Maya Angelou

“The caged bird ‘sings of freedom’, writes Maya Angelou in her poem *Caged Bird* – a poignant recurring image throughout her work, as she eloquently explores the struggle to become liberated from the shackles of racism and misogyny.”[10] Angelou’s story is both personal and meaningful. She reveals so much about herself through this poem, which serves as an extended metaphor of “how the freedoms allotted whites are diametrically opposed to those given to blacks…the free bird, or white race, is untroubled. It also shows how the white race has the audacity to own and govern society unjustly….concluding the free bird dares to claim the sky”.[11]

In the introduction to this unit, I shared Maya Angelou's quote about dealing with moments of uncertainty in her work. I am using Angelou as one of the artists to introduce this unit to my students because she exemplifies (through this earlier quote) the importance of the process of art making. This unit encourages students to consider ways to evoke personal and meaningful imagery into their work. As it turns out – the poem Caged Bird turned into the first in a series of autobiographical works. Her friends encouraged her to write what became a seven-volume series. These books convey the difficulties associated with the mixture of racial and gender discrimination endured by a southern black girl. At the same time, she speaks to many other issues such as the relation ship between parents and children, and the search for one's own path in life.

Imagery is evoked throughout so much of her work – and so beautifully through this poem. " A free bird leaps / on the back of the wind / and floats downstream/ till the current ends / and dips his wing / in the orange sunrays" [12]

The poem will be read individually, with a partner, and then together as a whole class, over the course of a few days. The repeated reading will allow for some familiarity as we begin to think about the poem in a broader context: learning about the author, the time and place she lived, along with other personal experiences. It will be a link to the broader idea in this unit in regard to core identity but I think it will be important to make sure students have a solid understanding of the literal and inferential interpretations of the poem before we attempt to analyze its connection to Angelou's core identity.

To help initiate a comprehensive discussion of the poem, students will be asked critical questions to help reveal the purpose of the poem and to clarify the literary devices such as tone, diction, and metaphor. It is important to note that visual artists use something similar to these literary devices when creating visual images – color, pattern, texture, value, space, and movement are a few examples of the elements and principles in art that help reveal its purpose. What is the tone of the poem? Which words reveal the speaker's tone? What symbols are used?

Emphasis in this discussion will focus on the use of imagery. Students will be asked to look at the use of metaphors as a descriptive and creative writing tool. How do the metaphors trigger our emotions? Do these same metaphors have a certain reductive quality to them? Do the metaphors lead us directly to a specific image or allow our imagination to work freely? How can these literary devices be used or transferred in to a work of art?

Maya Angelou was raised in Stamps, Arkansas in the 1930's – the height of the Jim Crow era. In a conversation with Bill Moyers, Angelou talks about the racial divide she experienced there "…because if you were black, you never felt really safe when you simply crossed the railroad tracks. You still had to all this way, like an international tarmac; once you crossed that little bridge and the pond, then you were safe….And I

loathed it."[13] In Stamps, Angelou experienced the brutality of racial discrimination and personal trauma. In her famous work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she describes how she was raped by her mothers boyfriend when she was seven years old. This man was later murdered by her uncles for the crime. Angelou felt responsible for his death and stopped talking for five years. During this time she reads, and reads, and reads. " When Angelou was twelve and a half, Mrs. Flowers, and educated black woman, finally got her to speak again. Mrs. Flowers emphasized the importance of the spoken word, explained the nature of and importance of education, and instilled in her a love of poetry. Angelou graduated top of her eighth-grade class".[14]

As a summary discussion to the *Caged Bird* poem, students will be asked take a few minutes to consider if knowing this background information about the artist change how we interpret the work. In what ways do the descriptions of place, character, time, within the text, reveal the core identity of the author? Does revealing these experiences make the art more personal and thus communicate a more meaningful message? Does your opinion of the work change as a result of this knowledge? How?

The culminating activity for this portion of the unit will be to create an illustration of the poem. Students will reflect on their responses regarding the literary devices used in the work when making the material selection (paint, pencil, charcoals, mixed media) for their illustration. The rubric for the illustration (Appendix B) reflects student's ability to manipulate the elements and principles in art making to evoke response, communicate ideas, and make visual art that is both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

Sandra Cisneros

We have now looked at two artist/writers work along side their personal histories in an attempt to analyze how they reveal their core identity through their works. In Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* we encounter a young Latina girl growing up in Chicago, inventing for herself who and what she will become. The style of writing is designed perfectly for my art classroom (again, students in my classes need convincing that reading is somehow going to help them make art). What Cisneros calls "lazy poems," are vignettes – sometimes only two or three paragraphs long – not quite a poem and not quite a full story. Rich with imagery and symbols these vignettes are a perfect match for my student's to read and then create interpretive works of art.

Within the vignettes, the reader is introduced to dozens of characters, some only once or twice. No one person has very much space. This is a literal and figurative reflection of the barrio/neighborhood. It is a small neighborhood where conflicts and problems are shared – where few secrets are kept. It is my intention to use one or two vignettes to introduce students to the writer, theme, and literary devices used – and then allow them to select their own vignette to analyze and interpret through their art.

The novels narrator, Esperanza is an aspiring writer who longs for a home of her own. The story chronicles a short year in her life - the thing she sees and hears, the relationships she encounters, and her beautiful ability to describe how this affects her desires and ambitions. Identity is a powerful theme in this book. It was in fact, the combined timing of reading this book and talking with Dr. Vasquez about 'core identity' that inspired this unit.

Like many coming of age novels, perception of identity changes over the course of the novel. Esperanza (means, "hope") wants to change her name – define herself on her own terms. She wants to leave her parents and younger sister in order to create her own life. She believes leaving this culture heritage behind is an important step in that direction. The defining of her identity is also reflected in language. Esperanza recognizes the power of language. Those who are not able to communicate in the world are, in Esperanza's words "… relegated to the bottom levels of society". Her father did not eat anything more than ham and eggs when he first moved to this country because he knew no other words for food. Mamacita, who moved-in across the street from Esperanza, became a prisoner in her own apartment because she does not speak English.

Over time, Esperanza realizes she does not need to set herself apart from the others in order to claim her own identity. She accepts her place in her community and decides that the most important way she can define herself is as a writer. Writing promises to help her leave Mango Street emotionally, and possibly physically as well.

Cisneros makes use of symbolism throughout this book. In "*Four Skinny Trees*", one of my favorite vignettes, Esperanza describes the tree's appearance, "skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine." Those trees show a resilience and independence. She relates to them because they also don't seem to belong in the concrete world of Mango Street. This incredibly written vignette creates such a rich visual tapestry of images, though it is one, in a book full of such imagery. In "*The Family of Little Feet*" vignette, shoes become the vehicle of transformation. When Esperanza and her friends play dress-up with a pair of high-heeled shoes, they transform into a sexual world of dangerous desires. Taken off, they return to their childish ways. This newfound sexual identity is easily tossed aside.

Cisneros's grew up as the only daughter in a family of six brothers. Her family was in a constant state of migration between Mexico and Chicago. Constantly moving between the two countries caused Cisneros's six brothers to eventually split –leaving her feeling alone and isolated. Feelings of exclusion resonate in her other literary works as well. In college she recalls being struck by the differences between her and her classmates

> …It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican

> woman. But, I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn't make sense until that moment, sitting in that seminar. That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about." She cast aside her attempt to conform to American literary canons and adopted a writing style that was purposely opposite that of her classmates, realizing that instead of being something to be ashamed of, her own cultural environment was a source of inspiration. From then on, she would write of her "neighbors, the people [she] saw, the poverty that the women had gone through.[15]

As in the earlier summary discussion of the *Caged Bird* poem, students will be asked take a few minutes to consider if knowing this background information about the Sandra Cisneros changes how we interpret the work. In what ways do the descriptions of place, character, time, within the text, reveal the core identity of the author? Does revealing these experiences make the art more personal and thus communicate a more meaningful message? Does your opinion of the work change as a result of this knowledge? How?

The culminating activity for this portion of the unit will ask students to select one vignette / chapter from *The House on Mango Street*, and create an illustration of the selected vignette. Students will reflect on their responses regarding the literary devices used in the work when making the material selection (paint, pencil, charcoals, mixed media) for their illustration. The rubric for the illustration (Appendix B) reflects student's ability to manipulate the elements and principles in art making to evoke response, communicate ideas, and make visual art that is both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

Individual Stories and Studies

In this culminating section of the unit, students will select individual short stories for analysis and artistic interpretation. These works will be selections of Latino and African American writers and list is located in Appendix B. I want to concentrate on folktales and magical realism; two styles of writing that have a longstanding tradition in each culture and as mentioned earlier are writing styles that are rich with symbolism and fantasy - well suited for the visual arts. These stories deal with themes of loss, hope, fear, as well as hope and love. They challenge us to think about our own sense of identity through place, time, traditions, and interactions with others; it is the strong voices in these stories that will help my students uncover themes in our core identity.

Students will read, analyze, and illustrate each story they select (2-3 work depending on the pacing and the time of year this unit is taught); the work(s) studied will serve as a guide for the final section of the unit where students write and illustrate their own short story –based on experiences related to their core identity.

Folktales

Where myths and legends were considered to be true by their originators and tellers, folktales are, for the most part, fictitious. Folktales are often stories of animals that act like humans, and that live in a world of wonder and magic. They are characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tales circulated orally among a people. Most of these stories convey a message or moral to the reader - offering clues / answers to life's questions.

Taken from their homelands, torn from their past, enslaved Africans had to leave all they knew behind – their families, languages, customs and social groups. The African slaves brought to the New World were forbidden to speak in their own languages and denied the right to practice their religion. Strict punishments were given to those Africans who insisted on keeping their own language, called themselves by their true names and continued to practice cultural or religious ceremonies. Learning to read and write was forbidden by law. So, how could African-American people tell their own stories and keep a cultural identity?

The African American folktale has its roots embedded in the West African literary and cultural forms of expression. These rich tales serve as a means of handing down traditions and customs from one generation to the next. Early folktales in African American culture taught lessons about how to survive under slavery. Common folktales of the times reassured the enslaved that they could survive by outsmarting more powerful slaveholders –often through the act of flying.

Writers of the Federal Writers Project first recorded the myth of flying Africans from various sources in the 1930s. In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration sponsored a Federal Writers' Project dedicated to chronicling the experience of slavery as remembered by former slaves. African-American men and women born into slavery were interviewed. Their stories were recorded and transcribed. [16]

Igbo Landing (aka. Ibo Landing, Ebo Landing, or Ebos Landing) is a historic site in the sands and marshes of Dunbar Creek in St. Simons Island, Georgia. It was the setting of a resistance movement of enslaved Igbo people, brought from West Africa on slave ships. The Africans are reputed to have grown wings before flying back home to Africa. Wallace Quarterman, an African-American born in 1844 who was interviewed in 1930 with the Federal Writers Project, when asked about the Igbo landing states:

> Ain't you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and . . . Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good. . . . Anyway, he

> whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then . . . rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa. . . . Everybody knows about them.[17]

As folktales go, there are many versions of what, where, when, and how. This is beauty and sometimes confusion around oral traditions. The folktale probably has its historical roots in an 1803 collective suicide by newly imported slave. Off the coast of the island, the enslaved cargo, those who had "suffered much by mismanagement," "rose" from their confinement in the small vessel, and revolted against the crew. After the ship ran aground, the Igbos "took to the marsh" and drowned themselves—an act that most scholars have understood as a deliberate, collective suicide. The site of their fatal immersion was named Ibos Landing. The fate of those Igbo in 1803 gave rise to a distinctive regional folklore and a place name.[18]

Virginia Hamilton told in *The People Could Fly,* a collection of American Black Folktales, stories of people who could fly. “The young woman lifted one foot on the air. Then the other. She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arm. The she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather”.[19] *The People Could Fly* focuses on Africans as they are captured and shipped off to work in America. Readers see the situation from the slaves’ point of view and the events leading up to or following slavery are not addressed. This book is unique in that it captures the spiritual essence of what happened to African culture and people when they were taken from their homeland. Hamilton’s own grandfather escaped slavery and set up a home in Ohio, on a suspected stop on the Underground Railroad. Hamilton conveys the powerful message that the slave owners could beat, starve, and torture the slaves, but they couldn’t take away their history or their magic.

The People Could Fly is one of the reading choices students will have for this section of the unit. Core identity discussion questions will include: how do the main characters associate within their cultural family, what is told to them, the reflection of self in others, religious beliefs, physical identity, and the use of language. Those students who chose this story will be grouped together and asked to discuss these questions. Independently, students will select a part of the story where symbolism and fantasy prevail, and illustrate that part of the story.

From their origins in oral traditions, these folktales have been the vehicle for imparting culture history, preserving memories and making sense of the world. From the lips of skillful storytellers to the attentive ears and open hearts of their listeners, these tales fostered a sense of identity, communicated values, and provided education and entertainment. By merging what they could retain from their African heritage with forms they could exact from the New World cultures the art of storytelling was created.

Magical Realism

In Magical Realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or magical "native" mentality, which exists in opposition to European rationality. [20]

The approach of the authors of this style is characterized by the straightforward inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction. This was first applied in the 1940's by Cuban novelist, Alejo Carpentier. Some scholars have posited that magic realism is a natural outcome of postcolonial writing, which must make sense of at least two separate realities—the reality of the conquerors as well as that of the conquered.[21]

Although art critic Franz Roh applied the term *magic realism* to visual art in 1925, his magic realism has a very different meaning from the one used to describe the literary work of writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allenda, writers whose work dominates our current understanding of the term. In the visual arts, Roh was emphasizing the "magic" of the normal world as it presents itself to us, and not the world of magic (in which objects are literally transformed into something fantastic). The term itself was in conflict with a more popular group of artists known as the Surrealists. Artists like Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, and Andre Breton, all made work that featured the element of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions and non sequiturs. The surrealist artists of the 1920's, created images that appear to distort reality. While magical realism is rooted in normal reality, surrealism tends to follow dream logic or no logic at all.

This conflict ultimately caused the term itself to fizzle out of the art community, setting the stage for its appropriation as a literary movement. This unit will acknowledge the style and techniques of the surrealist artists but challenge students to look at their own work as a personal artistic discovery of core identity. From the 1930's through the 1950's, the work several European and American painters including Ivan Albright, Paul Cadmus, George Tooker and Andrew Wyeth are were categorized as being magical realists. In the work of Cadmus, for example, the surreal atmosphere is sometimes achieved through stylized distortions or exaggerations that are not realistic.

More contemporary artists associated with this genre have gone beyond mere overtones of the fantastic or surreal by showing a much stronger connection to reality as well as. Artists like Richard Scott and Santiago Caruso draw upon a visually normal, modern world with realistic images of people and places and seamlessly blend personal

memories, dreams, and reality to create intense and cerebral worlds of parallel realities. These works will be more complex for my students to analyze – there is an ambiguity to many of the compositions, which leads the viewer's open to various interpretations.

Strategies and Activities

1. For the 'individual short stories and studies' section of this unit, I will provide a brief excerpt /overview from each of the short stories to expedite their selection process. In an art class this is best done as soon as students enter that class – before they begin working with materials and images. Because there are a number of literary choices in this final section, I will begin these readings as they are still finishing their current work –as an anticipatory strategy – this kind of pacing helps eliminate the need for any 'down time' in the studio. The read aloud will take excerpts from the texts that will spark both their intellectual curiosity (through with symbolism and fantasy) - as well as their visual senses. The example below is from Gaberial Garcial Marquez's short story - A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings:

> " On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea… The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings."[22]

Those students who chose the same stories, will be grouped together and asked to discuss these questions: how does the main characters associate within their cultural family, what is told to them, the reflection of self in others, religious beliefs, physical identity, and the use of language. Students will also be asked to look at the use of metaphors as a descriptive and creative writing tool. How do the metaphors trigger our emotions? Do these same metaphors have a certain reductive quality to them? Independently, students will select a part of the story where symbolism and fantasy prevail, and illustrate that part of the story.

The reading choices for both the folktales and magical realism stories are in Appendix C along with a set of discussion questions related to core identity. Those students who chose the same story will be grouped together and asked to discuss these questions and present a summary to the class. Independently, students will select a particular section of the story to illustrate or create a cover image for the story itself.

I have been very successful in past units where literature is introduced as a concept for artistic inspiration. I feel part of the reason for this success is the collaborative planning

and organization for the reading period. Paring students in small groups (usually two or three) to share responsibility on the given task. Students share the various roles in analysis of the text. Roles can include reader (read aloud), scribe, question generator, and presenter.

2. In addition to reading and interpreting the various stories shared in this unit, students will write a personal narrative that makes use of some of the creative and symbolic techniques that they have learned about from the authors in this unit. Making use of those techniques, student will be asked to create a story about an important and memorable event in their life. A time where something happened that had a strong impact on the way they now see themselves. For example, the loss or gain of a friendship; moving to a new city/school/ neighborhood; a newfound freedom (drivers licence!). How did this event transform the way you saw yourself? Here we can revisit the questions from the list provided in Appendix C. The magical, dramatic, symbolic, and metaphoric experiences created in the story can be used to help explain feelings, events, and scenarios that are otherwise difficult to explain.

3. In addition to the painting genre, magical realism also finds expression in other art forms, notably film. This has become a popular and almost mainstream form in the late 20th century, with the work of director David Lynch and other widely released and commercially successful films, like Pans Labyrinth, Being John Malkovich, Donnie Darko and Edward Scissorhands. Schedule permitting, it would be good exercise to watch one of these films and discuss cinematic techniques used and compare that to traditional art making techniques.

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Endnotes

[1] Inside the Painters Studio. Joe FIg
[2] http://flavorwire.com/343207/13-famous-writers-on-overcoming-writers-block/view-all
[3] http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/magical-realism/
[4] http://quizlet.com/5752733/dse-212-exploring-psychology-concept-flashcards-flash-cards/
[5] Like water for chocolate. Laura Esquivel
[6] http://www.theartstory.org/artist-close-chuck.htm
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[18] https://www.oahsecure.org/login/pub:jah/volume:97/number:1/starting_page:39/pt:pub
[19] Virginia Hamilton, The People could Fly 169
[20] http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/magical-realism/
[21] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/356736/magic-realism
[22] Gaberial Garcial Marquez - A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings

Appendix B – Artist List

Romare Bearden was an African-American artist and writer. He worked in several media including cartoons, oils, collage. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, Bearden moved to New York City at a very young age and went on to graduate from NYU in 1935.

Santiago Caruso (Quilmes, Argentina - 1982) is a symbolist and surreal artist, of an *avant-garde* concept but rooted in the nineteenth century's aesthetic. His work stands out both for the vigor of its poetry as well as for its technique

Faith Ringgold is an African-American artist, best known for her painted story quilt

Richard T. Scott (born 1980) is an American figurative painter working in New York and Paris, France. He is known for his emotionally charged and often unsettling classical paintings, which hover on the border between realism, magical realism, romanticism, and often concern philosophical questions and alternative parallel narratives to biblical stories, myths, and literature

Do-Ho Suh is a Korean sculptor and installation artist

Kara Walker - is a contemporary African-American artist who explores race, gender, sexuality, violence and identity in her work. She is best known for her room-size tableaux of black cut-paper silhouettes

Kehinde Wiley is a New York-based portrait painter, who is known for his highly naturalistic paintings of contemporary urban African, African-American, Afro-Brazilian, Indian and Ethiopian-Jewish men in heroic

Appendix B – Scoring Rubric

The rubric for the illustration reflects student's ability to manipulate the elements and principles in art making to evoke response, communicate ideas, and make visual art that is both personal and meaningful to a larger audience.

***Key Scoring Descriptors**

- General Use of Design Elements to Investigate the Principles of 2-D Design and Drawing
- Decision Making and Intention in the Compositional Use of the Elements and Principles of Design
- Originality, Imagination and Invention
- Experimentation and Risk Taking
- Confident, Evocative Work and Engagement of the Viewer
- Technical Competence and Skill with Materials and Media
- Appropriation and the Student's Voice
- Overall Accomplishment and Quality

This rubric uses a 6-1 scoring scale.

6 – Excellent quality 5 – Strong quality 4- Good quality 3 - Moderate quality - 2- Weak quality 1 – Poor quality

This grading is designed by the Advanced Placement Studio Art –many versions of it are available online.

*http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap11_studio_art_scoring_guidelines.pdf

Appendix C – Conversation Starter

These questions are designed to help begin the discussion on the topic: "What is my identity?"

What traits are parts of my congenital make up?

What parts of my identity have been assimilated through parental influence, religious norms or societal pressure?

Which qualities describe my personality? What are my values and core beliefs?

What are my preferences? What is important to me?

What are my priorities in life?

What are my natural talents and gifts?

What challenges do I face? What comes naturally to me?

What are my individual needs – in every sense of that word?

What makes my heart sing?

What causes me sadness and pain?

What do I love about myself? What am I most proud of?

What parts of myself do I embrace and cherish? What do I wish was different?

To what degree do I accept myself as unique and unlike anyone else?

Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

In this unit, students will be ask to read, analyze, share, and interpret works of literature and share their understanding of the work through their arts works. They will be asked to present their artwork through writing and oral presentations during the final gallery show.

ELA.RL.11-12

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

3. Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

ELA.SL 11-12

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one- on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues,* building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well- reasoned exchange of ideas.

3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

North Carolina Essential Standards for Advanced Visual Arts.

A.V.1. Use the language of visual art to communicate effectively.
A.V.1.2. Create art based on personal expression and applied design.
A.V.1.3 Create art that responds to contemporary themes in art.

A.V.2 Apply critical and creative thinking skills to artistic expression.
A.V.2.2 Create art using experiences and observation to represent individual perspectives.

A.CX.2 Understand the interdisciplinary connections and life applications of the visual arts.

A.CX. 2 Create art using skills and knowledge learned in other disciplines.

A.CR.1 Use critical analysis to generate responses to a variety of prompts.