

## **From African to African American: The Creolization of African Culture**

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So long  
So far away  
Is Africa  
Not even memories alive  
Save those that songs  
Beat back into the blood...  
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung  
In strange un-Negro tongue  
So long  
So far away  
Is Africa

-Langston Hughes, *Free in a White Society*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When I started working in HISD's Community Services my first assignment was working with inner city students that came to us straight from TYC (Texas Youth Commission). Many of these young secondary students had committed serious crimes, but at that time they were not treated as adults in the courts. Teaching these young students was a rewarding and enriching experience. You really had to be up close and personal with these students when dealing with emotional problems that would arise each day. Problems of anguish, sadness, low self-esteem, disappointment, loneliness, and of not being wanted or loved, were always present. The teacher had to administer to all of these needs, and in so doing got to know and understand the students. Each personality had to be addressed individually. Many of these students came from one parent homes, where the parent had to work and the student went unsupervised most of the time. In many instances, students were the victims of circumstances beyond their control, the problems of their homes and communities spilled over into academics. The teachers have to do all they can to advise and console, without getting involved to the extent that they lose their effectiveness. It was an experience that gave me practice in seeing the student as a whole person. Recognizing that their homes, communities, and social lives are all involved in shaping the attitudes and dispositions they bring to school. Philosopher and educator John Dewey says, "the goal is for education to be involved in life itself, and in the social life of the student's world, the teacher and student are involved in the process of living." One obvious way we can get involved in that process is by knowing something about what our students' lives are like after school. This knowledge often gives the teacher insight into solving many problems before they escalate.

After two years, I then started working in a Community Services School in one of the local hospitals with elementary kids; this was also a new and rewarding experience. These kids had

illnesses but they were very enthusiastic about learning. We had lots of fun playing games, singing, dancing, and doing all kinds of learning activities. The facility was equipped with many educational toys for the kids to have fun with. Philosopher and educator John Locke says, “learning might be made a play and recreation to students.” I found that having fun while teaching those kids made me more flexible, patient, and relaxed. After that experience I became much more comfortable in my role as a teacher.

Another Community Services School where I taught for about six years had students who were in CPS (Children’s Protective Services) custody. There were usually from ten to twenty students in a class, and these students were from broken and/or dysfunctional homes. Some of the parents were in prison, some were strung out on drugs, and there were others who had either abandoned their kids, or their kids had been taken away from them for abuse. Some of these students were very bright, some had serious academic problems, many were at grade level. These students are in dire need of Community Services Schools during this time: these schools keep them abreast with their studies when they are going through these unfortunate transitions.

Community Services Schools are a tremendous help for students with academic problems: teachers are able to work with them one-on-one. After working in large classes in other schools in HISD, I found it to be an advantage in smaller classes. Although, some of the students in your classes are medicated due to behavior, physiological or psychological problems, and your students are at different grades levels, you are still able to do more one-on-one with your students. I have found one-on-one teaching to be more fulfilling to me because I am able to see the progress of the student better as we go. This is one of the main reasons I chose to teach in Community Services after my substitute years.

I am presently working in the Community Services Homebound Program, in this program we go into the student’s home and teach the basic courses (English, Math, Science, History). The student is either ill, or out of their home school because of an accident. The family usually gets more involved in the learning process because they are able to see rapid improvements in their child from the extra personal attention. The Homebound Program is one that I have enjoyed because it gives the teachers the room to be innovative and flexible. Teachers are able to try new things much easier than with a group.

## **CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION**

The initial arrival of Africans in the New World, after being forcefully taken from their homeland, marked the beginning of the African’s adaptation to slavery and a totally new way of life. This adaptation may be viewed as a transformation of cultural beliefs and attitudes. This transformation, created most often out of necessity, unmasked in African Americans new forms of spiritual, social, and artistic expression. These African American expressions are now an integral part of the American way of life. African Americans have had a unique experience in America. The miscegenation that produced their mixed-blooded heritage, the numerous atrocities they endured as slaves and as free men, their courageous loyalty in times of war, and their free spirited

approach to the arts have produced a perspective and style that has both aroused and consoled Americans during times of severe hardship and despair.

In fact, the African American's immeasurable contributions to all aspects of American life (family structure, politics, economics, cuisine, and the arts) and the courage they have displayed in fighting for the cause of freedom and justice command the recognition and respect of all Americans. Sincere efforts by historians, archeologists, and anthropologists to uncover any new information pertinent to understanding, and learning from, the diverse cultural transformation of Africans can only be beneficial to Americans and the rest of the world.

### **Creolization of Culture**

I have chosen the topic From Africa to America: The Creolization of African Culture, to gain more factual knowledge from the new historical and archeological perspectives of the creolization process – the cultural interrelations and adaptations of African people, before and after their enslavement in North America. This study offers our students a better understanding of themselves and their peers. We want our students to understand that it is an asset for them to become familiar with different cultures and the diverse groups in their environment. Most of our students are able to relate to the African to African American cultural transition, because they are members of cultural groups that have had to make similar adjustments to the American way of life. The miscegenation, and the enslavement of Africans in America, made African Americans one of, if not the most, uniquely creolized groups in the world.

The African American culture is a fusion of all ethnic groups and cultures in America. This in-group diversity offers students who study African American history an added experience. They are learning from, and being inspired by, a history of the triumphant spirit of a people over the extreme cruelty and degradation of an enslavement that defies reason. This miraculous African American cultural creolization and enslavement experience will also be used to develop student understanding of the different cultural connections that were developed, in spite of all the many attempts by Europeans to deculturize African people. Our students, who are facing more and more diversity each day, would do well to study about the diversity in African Americans. In fact, there are many adults who are not aware of the findings we have discussed in this seminar, and from our research. Making these new findings available to the whole community should be a major goal for educators.

There have been many African Americans creolized by having mixed-blooded heritage. I have had in my classes many students of first and second generation mixed-blooded heritage who have serious problems with identity. These students also have problems with acceptance as a member of either side of their heritage. The problems that these students are confronted with each day surface in unacceptable behavior, academic underachievement, and dropout rates. These mixed-race individuals are the victims of unwarranted ignorance, prejudices, and racist attitudes. Some ethnic groups have internalized the racism and stereotypes of the dominant culture, and often verbally and physically abuse those who have mixed-race parents. These groups need to be made cognizant of the fact that they too are of mixed heritage and culture.

The creolization of cultures issue is one that has caused much confusion and misunderstanding in America. Our students need to be made aware of this issue in the wake of our increasing diversity. The skin color stereotypes, and all of their negative connotations, have been internalized by many Americans according to old-age European concepts and beliefs. Concepts of black as evil and white as pure, the belief that people of color are intellectually inferior to whites, and the idea that Africans were “savages” until they were “civilized” by Europeans, are still prevalent today. There are African Americans who will not identify with Africa, or Africans, because of these myths. Therefore, our students and teachers need to be enlightened about the American creolization process. The development of cultural awareness curriculums in schools could be the answer to this need.

Some mixed-race students are confused because they are culturally divided, and are in dire need of some kind of cultural and ethnic confirmation. Students also need to be made cognizant of the fact that no culture is “superior” to another culture in America. Most cultures believe that their culture is the best, but all cultures in America are interrelated due to the cultural creolization reality. The problems that were incurred in the creolization of the past could be used as a model to keep us from making the same color-conscious mistakes. And to guide us to a world of people without racial or cultural prejudices in the future. Prejudice and racism issues in America must be acknowledged and addressed if our goal is cultural harmony. Educational institutions and the mass media can contribute to the remediation of these attitudes by making this insidious problem, their number one priority. Otherwise, diversity will eventually cause conflict and destruction.

I have chosen the creolization process as the topic for my paper because the historical, archeological, and anthropological facts about creolization can be used to positively alter the consciousness, perspectives, and behavior patterns of our students, and of other Americans. The adaptations of all cultures involved in slave plantation life, has had a profound affect on American psyche today. The factual history of those new findings and adaptations are vital to the study of African American culture. The study of the history of African Americans is the study of a history of cultural creolization. Understanding and acting on the transitions that were made during this process could easily be the key to America’s cultural liberation.

### **Mythical Mass Media Indoctrinations**

When I was a young boy growing up in the Third Ward area of Houston, we lived in the Cuney Homes Projects, where local businessman Judson Robinson Sr., the father of our former Houston city councilman Judson Robinson Jr., was the project manager at the time. We would spend most of our Saturday mornings and afternoons at the Holman Theater on Sampson and Holman. On many of these occasions we would see Tarzan movies and would cheer loudly when Tarzan would single-handedly demolish the “uncivilized” Africans. He was called the “King of the Jungle.” The Africans in these films always seemed to be afraid of Tarzan and “his animals,” in the jungle. I now understand that those mythical depictions of Africa and Africans had a profound psychological affect on the self-concept and self-esteem of all African Americans. In American schools at the time, very little, if anything, was ever mentioned about Africa or Africans. We all

saw Africans as the “uncivilized savages” of those Tarzan movies, and were taught later in our history classes that indeed, they were seen as “savages.” We did not feel in any way connected to our African past, or our ancestral heritage. The mass media defined who African Americans were, and African Americans internalized those definitions. It is now time for African Americans to extinguish those stereotypes by redefining themselves, and by rediscovering their African past. Scholars believe that a collective effort, by all factions of American society, is necessary for this image transformation to become a reality.

This unit is an attempt to dispel many of these kinds of mass media cultural myths and misconceptions. The current findings of historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists will be used to achieve this goal. We also want to determine if African Americans, in fact, do have a cultural connection with their African ancestors. And we want to establish the fact that families created and established by African Americans, during and after their enslavement, can be directly attributed to the inner sense of family that was a significant part of their African heritage. We want to verify that the African in African Americans is what enabled them to overcome the slavery experience and become a vital unit in the American family.

The mass media has the power to play an important role in the remediation of African myths, just as they have played a significant role in establishing many of them. Many scholars recognize this fact, and as Orbe and Harris point out, “media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values. Media culture provides materials to create identities” (79). We can easily understand from this observation that many African American identities have been distorted, and some completely destroyed because of media misrepresentations. The mass media, as one of the strongest influences on American society, can be the catalyst in changing attitudes and developing new perspectives. The mass media has the power to make a young boy believe that a European was the king of the African jungle, that Africans were “savages,” and that Michelangelo’s painting of his uncle, in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, was actually a painting of Jesus. All of these myths have been since disproved, but there are still many others that need to be challenged and extinguished. John Dewey tells us that “education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.”

Current research has revealed that the situation is not getting much better for African Americans, Orbe and Harris inform us that in “opening a book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy.” In the search for African Americans’ true identity, mass media images must reflect and respect a new image of the African American, and not subscribe to images of stereotypes that were created to discredit and demean. Positive media images are essential to the individual and collective growth of African Americans. In many areas in the history of America, African Americans were simply left out. We need to make a concerted effort to correct these omissions as we move toward more cultural diversity. Teachers are left in the vulnerable position of being unable to answer many of the questions posed by their students, because of these omissions – questions that must be answered if we expect our students to become knowledgeable and responsible American citizens. Eventually, American history has to be a reflection of the American past, as it really happened, so that all Americans will know

themselves. Black History Month is a start, but students are already beginning to feel the stress of being bombarded with black history in one month. Many students do not want to hear anything about black history after that month. When having a discussion on black history during a month other than February, I have had students to personally tell me, Mr. Obey this is not Black History Month! African American history in one month has not been the best way for students to understand American history, your history and my history will not be enough. Black history did not occur in a vacuum, it was a major part of American history as it evolved, and should be treated as such.

### **Falling Through the Cracks**

Many of our students have been lost to penal institutions because, in many instances, their behavior and academic problems were not properly addressed. Their incarcerations are directly related to their academic abilities. Our prisons are filled with a disproportionate number of young African American men who have never received a high school diploma. Some of these young men receive their GED's while in prison, but to no avail, they are usually unable to secure gainful employment once they leave prison. These young men usually find themselves back in prison. Clear and Cole revealed that "a large portion of the prison population have difficulties with basic reading and computational skills, and many of these offenders have had behavioral and academic problems in school" (359). Academic problems cause behavioral problems and behavioral problems cause academic problems. This hinders the young African American's ability to secure an education, and creates a prison recidivism rate that continues to grow. The fact that many of our youth turn to a life of crime is directly connected to their educational level, according to scholars. We believe that educational programs that include African and African American studies can do much to raise self-esteem, and instill pride in themselves, and their culture. The great educator and statesman W. E. B. DuBois has written a poem that speaks to this sad situation:

The powers of single  
Black men flash here and there like falling  
Stars, and die sometimes before the world  
Has really gaged their brightness

(W. E. B. Dubois)

### **Unit Projections**

In this unit, we will explore the adaptations of African Americans to slavery, and the impact those adaptations had on the culture and lifestyles of Africans, before and after their enslavement. We will attempt to provide a better understanding of the creolization process and its effects on cultural perceptions and lifestyles. We begin by examining the cultures of West Africa and the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, when Africans were kidnapped by Europeans, or sold by African chiefs, taken from their homelands, and placed on ships bound for the Americas. We will research their harsh treatment on these slave ships and the psychological impact that resulted. Then we will provide an account of slave life in America, the influence of slavery on African culture, and the interrelations that caused the creolization of African, European, and Native American cultures,

then and now. The unit will conceptualize the many aspects of these cultures as they relate to African Americans.

There has been an ongoing debate between historians, archeologists, and anthropologists as to the status of African American culture. There are historians who believe that African culture was completely lost in their transition to African Americans, and a new culture that encompassed European characteristics was born after Africans were enslaved. Other scholars believe that African Americans have retained many of their African cultural traits in this transition. We will expand on these concepts later in the paper, examining both perceptions of the argument, and record the results for the scrutiny of our students.

We are hopeful that this unit will offer students a well-informed overview of Africa, the African people, and the inescapable, spiritual, and physical tensions they endured. The triumphant spirit of African Americans' miraculous survival should be celebrated by all Americans. Our purpose in this unit is to inspire students, using African American history, to want to know more about cultures. We want to make an attempt to transfer the positive traits that were apparent during these cultural modifications to their personal life ways today. Students will also be able to learn from negative aspects of the slave plantation life.

Personally, I was immensely inspired and enlightened by our seminar reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. This book gave me a clear visual image and interpretation of all aspects of the institution of slavery, and its effects on those who were directly involved in that process. There were also some very interesting and informative discussions with seminar Fellows and professor Brown on this topic. Readings from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will be used in the lessons to familiarize students with the institution of slavery.

There is much to be learned and shared about the trials and tribulations of our ancestors, lessons that are crucial to our survival. The influx of so many diverse cultural groups in our school district makes it imperative that we learn as much as possible about the different cultures we encounter each day, and pass the information on to our students. Educational programs that are initiated to provide student harmony through cultural enlightenment are key to the elimination of many of our social and academic problems. Our students have to be made aware that the study of African American culture is also the study of European and Native American cultures. Teaching a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking skills is an excellent prerequisite for cultural enlightenment studies and a strong foundation for our students to become self-motivated to seek cultural enlightenment. Teachers are encouraged to provide the link that will inspire students to respect their cultural ancestors, while informing them that the key to understanding themselves is to respect and understand their culture. Philosopher and educator Jean Jacques Rousseau says, "to be educated we must know our true selves, but knowing ourselves and thinking for ourselves is only the beginning, it is not knowing or thinking but *doing* which is most important."

As we move beyond the attitudes that stagnate our consciousness, African Americans will feel the burdens of the aftermath of slavery lifted as they are restored to their true place in history, among the leaders of the world. But, we have found from our most recent past that changing

attitudes is not easily accomplished when politics, power, and greed are added to this complex equation. A new race-free consciousness is absolutely necessary to meet this challenge. Krebs tells us that, "In promoting a new race-free consciousness, by connecting all of our diverse people, it builds a chain with links in each community and tears down the walls that divide all Americans" (38). Our purpose then, is to bring our diverse students together so that race becomes secondary to the task at hand, teaching them factual information about their respective cultures.

Americans is the obvious way to identify this cross-cultural society. We are all actually brothers and sisters of European and Native Americans, whether we want to admit it or not. Either by blood or by culture, we are all connected: much of the evidence is contained primarily in the study of African American culture and history. Teachers are now able to impart some invaluable historical information to their students. What we have known for centuries about our biological connections, we now know about our cultural connections.

We start this unit with the following quotation from one of our most distinguished ancestors, a great philosopher and educator from the past whose words may be applicable to guide us in our present circumstances: Socrates said, "Know Thyself." Philosophers, psychologists, and historians agree that it is essential that we know ourselves and that in order to know ourselves, we must know our history. It follows that a history that is distorted, prejudiced, and filled with omissions can only make its recipients confused and maladjusted. From archeological excavations on slave plantations our students are now able to learn, first hand, from the many authentic artifacts that are our connections to the history of the African past. The following quote emphasizes the feelings of Africans about their land, and another important reason for African cultural studies:

When Africans talk about civilization, there's a great pride that it started here. We are the custodians of this history.

-Isiah Odhiambo Nengo

## **WEST AFRICAN ORIGINS**

African American history began on the West African continent. West African people were farmers, and lived an agricultural way of life. Their society was very complex in that they spoke many different languages and had an advanced system of government. Long before colonialism there were great empires and great cities in Africa. Societies were governed by both men and women (Kelly and Lewis ix). "The empire of Mali where the system of universities at Timbuktu, Gao, Walata, and Jenne was its greatest legacy. The universities attracted people from all over Africa, Asia, and Europe. This was one of the world's richest and most advanced civilizations" (Earle 1001-16). Many of my students have asked me about these universities specifically, because they can't understand how universities could have been in Africa so many years ago. It reminded me that the same misunderstandings I had about Africa as a young boy are still prevalent in our students today. Educator and statesman W. E. B. DuBois tells us that, "conscious self-realization and self-direction is the watchword of modern man." These are the qualities we want to instill in our students, the self-realization to know who they are, and the self-direction to become independent and interdependent in their relations with others.

After most of the research was gathered and the archaeological evidence, provided by Dr. Brown, was examined, the one fact that stood out very clear was in the transformation from African to African American, Africans really were Americanized, but at the same time America became Africanized. This fact was demonstrated in the artifacts that were found in excavations by Dr. Brown on the Jordan plantation in Texas, at Carter's Grove in Virginia, and on other plantations. The marks and symbols on colonoware, show definite signs of African heritage. There are many Africanisms throughout America, African inspired artifacts and life ways that came straight from Africa during the colonial period, and are with us today. It is now time for America to acknowledge this fact, and reevaluate our relationship with Africa, using the archeological, historical, and anthropological findings to adjust our policies from a new perspective. According to the evidence we can never say again that there is no African culture in America's roots, Africans were in America from its beginnings and they brought their African culture with them. The universities at Timbuktu, Gao, Walata, and Jenne should be renowned and celebrated by educators and all other Americans. To say that African Americans lost their African culture after the Middle Passage is not only to deny that America is not part African, but it also denies African Americans their heritage and homeland. An element of racism could definitely be a part of this debate because there are many Americans today who are reluctant to interpret America as African America. We want our students to question these positions, with questions like: How can a homeland, and heritage be denied one group by another group? All students should be made aware of this debate, so this will be a part of the unit lessons.

Another one of our great thinkers, Confucius, tells us to "turn inwards and examine ourselves." It is time for all Americans to turn inwards and examine the prejudices that have been internalized by all cultures, due to the many stereotypes and myths that have been, and are being perpetuated. In examining African American culture we are given an excellent opportunity to explore these myths and stereotypes at their inceptions, the beginning of European involvement in Africa.

### **"The Dark Continent"**

When Europeans entered Africa they already had preconceived ideas about Africa, and Africans, they saw Africans as "savages," and Africa as a "dark and mysterious continent." Some historians and scholars debate whether Europeans really saw Africans as savages, or if this was just a way of justifying their vicious and cruel actions against them. European distorted concepts caused, according to Pierson, "Africa to enter the American consciousness primarily as a place victimized by the Atlantic slave trade, a supplier of labor, not a mother culture for colonial America" (xx). In the European value system black had all negative connotations as compared to white: blackmail, black list, black ball, black day, devil's food cake. Angel food cake was white, and many other opposites of black were considered to be positive and pure. These are a few examples that show the way Europeans had been conditioned to believe about the color black. So when the European met the African for the first time his concepts caused him to view the African with scorn and contempt (Noel 140-141). It was further pointed out by Wood that "Of crucial significance is the argument that they were the descendants of Ham (Ham had sinned against his father, Noah, and as punishment Noah cursed Ham's son, Canaan, to a life

of slavery)” (23). These observations tell us that Europeans were prejudiced against Africans because of their preconceived indoctrinations, indoctrinations that caused them to conclude that Africans deserved to be enslaved. Thus, Africa became to Europeans “The Dark and Mysterious Continent,” and Africans, because of European concepts, were considered to be “savages.” Europeans also believed their culture to be “superior” to that of the African. This information will be used in the lesson plans to inform students of America’s earliest concepts, for discussion and evaluation.

### ***West African People and Culture***

“Teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old, but the future springs from the past.” These words, spoken by a West African *griot*, or oral historian, provide insight on the amount of respect and reverence the Africans had for their ancestors. The evidence shows that about 200,000 years ago in Africa the first modern human was born. Thousands of years before Christ, Africans had advanced civilizations along the Nile River (Hoobler 9). In recent findings released by Dr. Tim D. White, a Paleoanthropologist from the University of California at Berkeley, an international team found three fossilized skulls of a man, a woman, and a child from their excavations. These skulls were estimated to be over 160,000 years old when analyzed. The research has confirmed the idea that modern man, as we know him today, had his origins in Africa, and later spread into Asia and Europe. Neanderthals, now extinct for 30,000 years, are in fact, not descendents of humans (Wilford). The connotations of such discoveries are vital to the historical perspectives of all Americans. This information will also be used to inform students of the latest findings, discuss questions, and meaning of the findings.

The West African people were farmers; their economy had a varied pattern throughout the continent. Herding was practiced in certain parts of the desert, and in the grasslands. Crops were grown wherever they found a fertile area (Burke 3). Because West Africans were farmers, it made their adaptation to American plantation life less complicated. From this information we will discuss with students the everyday life of the West African in detail, and ask each student to take an area of West African life (farming, marriage, family, fishing, diet, African male, African female, etc.), research that area in the library, and report findings to the class for discussion.

### ***Personal Testimony***

Former slave and author Olaudah Equiano tells us what life was like in his West African homeland:

We are a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus, every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. As our manners are simple, our luxuries are few. The dress of both sexes generally consist of a long piece of calico, or muslin, wrapped loosely around the body...This is usually dyed blue, which is our favorite color. It is extracted from a berry, and is brighter than any I have

seen in Europe. Bullocks, goat, and poultry supply the greatest part of our diet. These constitute likewise the principle wealth of the country, and the chief articles of its commerce. As to religion, the natives believe that there is one creator of all things. They believe he or she governs events, especially deaths and or captivity. We compute the year, on the day in which the sun crosses the line [the Equator], and on its setting that evening, there is a general shout throughout the land. I came from a beautiful fishing village called Ajido, about forty-five miles from the capital, Lagos, known in the traditional way as Ako. I grew up in a situation whereby our music and dance really cover all the [situations] of life, when a child is born there is singing and dancing. When you become an adolescent and come of age, there is singing and dancing. When you took the giant step of getting married, there is singing and rejoicing, and drumming. So it became a way of life from my childhood (Hobler 13-15).

Examining West African archaeological sites, several researchers have noticed radical changes in the material record of the post European contact period. In coastal Ghana, for example, there are significant differences in form, decorative inventory, and manufacturing techniques between the pottery of the Late Iron Age/Early Historic Period and later periods. The data also indicates that there were changes in lifestyles, increasing urbanization and specialization (DeCorse).

### *West African Women*

African women were in high demand in Africa, by both European slavers, and African chiefs. Few women entered the Atlantic slave trade because of these counter demands. In African societies women were valuable because they were the means of securing status, kinship, and family. The relationship with the family of origin, or with her husband determined the farmland a woman had access to within the family unit. Women were expected to provide for the family through their own labors in the field or by using money from their father or husband. Economic roles within the family were determined by kinship structure and gender. Cattle was the primary means of subsistence in West African societies and women's access was determined by the way she met her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Women always used their marriage capital to feed their families (Hay and Stichter 10-12). The poet Countee Cullen speaks of his visions of his beloved African homeland.

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronze men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?

## **THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**

When Africans were transported from their homelands to the New World during the colonial period, it marked the largest displacement of people in the history of the world. The interaction of blacks and whites during this period was a new experience for both groups (Reef vi). On the West Coast of Africa, slaves were made available due to the divisiveness of the different groups. The political divisions between these groups led to many battles that produced prisoners who would be converted to slaves. Many of these slaves would be used by a particular group, or sold by chiefs to slavers. The African continent was never politically united, so there were many disputes. The European slavers would take advantage of these disputes by buying the spoils of battle from the group that prevailed. The Africans, who were either Ibo, Mandinka, Biafada, or Bram, never had a concept of "African." Their concept of identity did not go beyond ethnicity (Kelly and Lewis 13).

Even though the Atlantic slave trade played a central part in the development of the west, and had a devastating impact on African society, it was one of the areas that historians and archaeologists had not given much attention. Until recently, the Atlantic slave trade was one of the least studied areas by historians, archaeologists, and other scholars. This lack of recognition was not because materials were not available: it was due to its association with European imperialism, and the absence of the proper tools to analyze the complex data. The academic, and the general literate world were unaware of the historical aspects of the trade. The Civil Rights Movement of the sixties sparked the growth of a new interest in African American history, and this new interest caused a surge of historical interest in the Atlantic slave trade (Klein xvii).

### **Messages From The Past**

As justification for imperialistic actions, Europeans disseminated the myth that Africans were incapable of being more than primitive. Thus, Africa was considered to be a continent that was dark and uncivilized. Europeans had no factual evidence to support these assumptions. This was the beginning of stereotypes and racism espoused by the Western world. We now know that this kind of rationale has been used continuously to justify the actions of Europeans throughout the history of slavery in the Americas (i.e. If Africans were believed to be "savages," then Europeans were justified in treating them accordingly). Because of these myths and stereotypes Africa was not considered to be of any historical value, nothing of any cultural significance could come from this backward and uncivilized continent. It was the conclusion of white scholars that Africans were brought to the New World with nothing of value but their ability to work. According to European Americans no traces of African heritage could be found in American culture (Piersen xx-xxi). White scholars came to these conclusions without evidence, though Africans did absorb much of European and Native American cultures, they also held on to much of their own. But it was understood that if Africans did hold on to their African heritage then that would make America part African, and part African in America would mean African American. This was possibly what fueled the main thrust of the argument by white scholars in denying African Americans their African heritage and culture.

It was the view of traditional scholars that the Middle Passage, and consequent slavery, completely wiped out any traces of African culture. These scholars believe that the emergence of African American culture came directly out of European American culture. The new and most recent opinions on this crucial issue are those of the revisionist, who believe that slaves brought to America their own customs and life ways. They were usually from different West African cultures, but were able to establish communication with their shipmates and new plantation families in forming a new culture. The revisionist view is that these Africans restructured a new African based culture that was influenced by European and Native American values (White 8). Students will be given an exercise in their lessons that will use this debate to determine their own perspective, what they believe are the facts about African American culture from their research and personal experiences. Naomi Long Madgett laments on the Middle Passage and the proud history of Africans before their abduction:

Above the sable valleys of my sorrow  
My swarthy hands have fashioned  
Pyramids of virgin joy

### **THE MIDDLE PASSAGE**

Slavers would abduct the Africans as they planted in the fields, tended their cattle, or retrieved water from the rivers. The Africans would be snatched away from their chores, chained together, loaded with ivory and gold, and marched for miles before reaching their destination on the coast (Macht and Hull 62). When these slaves would move too slow or fall, they would be beaten or left to die (Meadows 14). They were then placed in stockades completely naked. The Africans were later led to slave ships destined for the Americas. The early part of the voyage was the most traumatic, many Africans suffered from severe depression and sank into what is called suicidal melancholy, a condition that caused many deaths (Smead 22-23). The unsanitary conditions and the intense heat caused dehydration and diseases that were epidemic in nature. Yellow fever, typhoid fever, measles, and smallpox were the causes of many deaths of both slaves and crewmembers. Diarrhea that was caused by contaminated water and food also caused many deaths. On some occasions all of the ship's slaves and crewmembers would perish. The Middle Passage experience was a very abnormal condition for Africans, most of them had never been on a ship, vomiting due to seasickness was frequent, and the whole voyage was dehumanizing and demoralizing. But the slaves still managed to hold on to the only resource they had left after the voyage, their African roots (Dodson 43). In this poem, George Moses Horton expresses how many of the Africans were feeling during and after this voyage.

And when this transient life shall end,  
Bid me from servitude ascend,  
Oh, may some kind, eternal friend  
Forever!

## **NEW WORLD BEGINNINGS**

Many of the difficulties the slaves confronted on plantations can be viewed as contradictions within the plantation system. The difficulties were caused by the establishment of a new African culture, just as Europeans were establishing themselves as the dominant culture in this new environment. These difficulties in cultural readjustment by both groups had much to do with the way cultural systems grew in American society, and the way African Americans were able to draw from their cultural heritage (Mintz and Price 24-25). The European slave systems were governed by both racial prejudice and greed. The slave system of the south was different from those of New England and the Middle Atlantic because racism became more overt in the south. Racial prejudice became, in the minds of the upper class, essential to the slave operation (Wood 8). Slavery provided many of the lower class whites with a sense of “us and them.” Racial feelings against slaves gave many whites a common purpose, and that purpose was to make their attitudes toward blacks publicly known. As a result, African Americans have been kept segregated, and at the bottom of the economic ladder, as racial prejudice grew (Wright 99). The evidence shows that racial affiliations are sociopolitical constructions that are supported by persons, groups, institutions, and the mass media. People use this framework to stereotype others in ways that benefit their purpose (Orbe and Harris 43). Our history has shown us that skin color has always had significant social implications in America. To be judged by the content of one’s character was Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream for all Americans.

### **Psychological Repercussions**

But the American Dream for African Americans has been a series of nightmares, nightmares that have been constantly filled with the lack of quality education, prejudice, discrimination, injustice, institutionalized racism, and violence. All of these negative and obtrusive aversions have prevented African Americans from accomplishing their American dream of equality, justice, quality education, employment, and humane treatment. Those African Americans who are unaware of the subtlety of these racial attitudes may have feelings of inadequacy, after being unable to accomplish their basic goals. These persons may become mentally frustrated if they believe these obstacles are personal or racial, rather than environmentally induced and controlled. African Americans also have to confront institutionalized racial discrimination, which compounds the issue. If one’s basic needs are not met because these obstacles, directly or indirectly, tremendous stress, tension, and/or psychological disorders will occur (Houston 107-108).

In fact, where any one group, excludes others, and establishes control for its own interests, the body politic is surely endangered, as is the human body when a cancer begins to grow. A viable balance demands the participation of all of those who form part of a system, not only of those who have temporary control of a part of it (Mead 154).

All media images are instrumental in developing our personalities, when we listen to the radio, read magazines or newspapers, watch television and/or movies, or in using the Internet. Psychologists tell us that all of these activities are directly connected to ethnic or racial identity and representation. Mass media images determine how we see ourselves and others, and define how

we see races and understand race relations in America. Mass media representations that involve races must be monitored, and redirected when they interfere with positive racial interrelations (Orbe and Harris 260). Students will use the mass media to write about racial issues concerning African Americans, and for the posters they will create on African and African American culture.

Wielding power, dominance, and control have been the means by European Americans have used to subdue and debase in their actions with others. Behind this way of thinking is the concept of manifest destiny, which has caused European Americans to believe that, as a race, they have been ordained to take over the universe, the earth, the moon, the stars, and even life itself by the manipulation of genetic codes. Manifest destiny brought on attitudes of “cultural superiority” that have persisted to the present day. Differences in people, whether by race, culture, or even sex were not seen by European Americans as opportunities for mutual sharing and positive interaction, but as an opportunity to oppress, and persuade others to conform to their unjust laws and life ways (White 13).

### **Colonial Slave Life**

The living arrangements and close interrelations between the European and the African cultural exchanges favored white over black life ways, but the slaves were able to adopt some of the European culture, but not as a sign of submission. Blacks and white indentured servants worked, ate, slept, and drank together. This kind of social interaction led to sexual intimacy and brought them closer together (Walsh 34).

Because the slaves were not allowed to read or write, their lives, beliefs, and adaptations were never a part of the historical record. The writings that were recorded about blacks, by whites at the time, were distorted and differed from one writer to another. The different perspectives were not recorded in related historiography. There are no primary documents that can be attributed to the early lifeways of enslaved Africans (Brown 2).

### ***African Male Emasculation and African Female Victimization***

Since the days of slavery the black male has been abused and misused, he has been pressured to be dependent, passive, and unassertive. If he acted in any other manner he was subjected to beatings, or he would be eliminated. His masculinity was in jeopardy the moment he was put on the slave ships. European Americans believed that the emasculation of blacks was a necessity in maintaining the slave system. In many instances, groups of black men were punished as a “lesson” to the whole community. The community would often keep the male slave from retaliating because of the threat to the entire black community. Since economic wealth is correlated with manhood and power in America, the black man has been denied the opportunity to establish himself as a man in any capacity. These attempts to emasculate the black male are considered to be the major cause of anger among black males then, and now (Houston 108-109). Black men were unable to demonstrate any power in their families as they had in their homelands. This

transformed the African model of family to a new democratic style. This was the first democratic family on the American slave plantation. Authority and responsibilities were shared by the family (Blassingame 178). The racist castration of the black male has been devastating to the black family, but the victimization of the black woman was worse. Because they share in all aspects of oppression toward blacks, black women have been raped and exploited by white men, in many cases, to terrorize the black community. Black men were unable to interfere when their women were being debased. Black women and black men were victims of institutionalized oppression, black men were unable to secure jobs at wages that would support their families. Black women are then victimized again by not having the economic support of a male in the family, or the extended family (Lerner 149). "Thus," Houston concludes, "there is a functional relationship between the castration of the black male, the victimization of the black female, and the institutionalization of racism" (Houston 109).

### *Resources for Discovery*

Archeological research conducted within communities occupied by enslaved peoples of African descent is the only way to directly obtain primary data related to their lives, beliefs, and adaptations. Such sites are the repositories of the objects utilized by the enslaved. As such, the sites may be reflections of the beliefs and behaviors of those who occupied them. One such site is the Levi Jordan Plantation Quarters (41 BO 165), located in southwestern Brazoria County, approximately 60 miles south of Houston, Texas. This community of Africans and African Americans was occupied over a period of approximately 38 years, from 1848 until 1886" (Brown 2-3).

We had the opportunity to visit the Levi Jordan Plantation site with Dr. Kenneth Brown, and observed artifacts that were excavated from slave cabins. These artifacts displayed designs and symbols that were the likeness of those of traditional West African origin.

One ever feels his twoness, - an American  
A Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two  
Unreconciled strivings; two warring  
Ideals in one dark body, whose dogged  
Strength alone keeps it from being torn  
Asunder.

(W.E.B. Dubois)

### **CREOLIZATION**

The "acculturation" process in early colonial American did not move in one direction, from African American to European American or Native American, but in all conceivable directions. Those who disagree with this analogy have a narrow vision of culture, and this view cannot challenge the evidence. According to Wright, "blacks and whites from different preindustrial worlds shared many of the same values and held many of the same ideas, especially in thoughts, space, world view, causality, family ties, and on death and the afterlife" (101).

As the institution of slavery evolved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when North America was under British and later American rule, blacks and whites adapted to the demands of the institution of slavery, and settled in to a complex transition, in all settings. But there was one aspect of the system that was a constant; according to Dr. Brown, “under European and European American control the development of North America was accomplished, in large part, through the labor of enslaved people of African descent” (2).

African American historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists have long been trying to establish a theoretical framework for the syncretic process by which all would acknowledge a truly “New World.” Most of the previous theories more properly described “assimilation,” than “acculturation,” for they assumed that the process implied the adjustment of one culture to a “superior” one. Subsequent commentators, down to the present day, have generally assumed that “acculturation” involves a one-way transfer. We therefore propose that the concept of “creolization” might usefully replace the older notions of “acculturation” and “assimilation.” The word creolization describes something that is born or developed in the New World, it describes that “syncretic expression” in which new cultural forms came to life in the New World (Buisseret 3-6).

Using creolization as the guiding theory helps explain how African American culture developed. The creolization theory also allows for wide ranging analysis of social and political interaction. Since the emphasis of such studies is on the process of creolization, cultures need not be commonly known as “creole” cultures for an analysis of creolization to be applicable. Slaves and their masters were both involved in a multicultural adjustment or creolization, which entailed interaction, exchange, and creativity. In fact, plantation colonies along the southern coasts of North America witnessed settlements so diverse culturally that in ordinary usage “creole” came to mean a cultural and racial mixture created in the New World (Ferguson xli).

As many historical writers (Wolf; Fagan; Fausz; Mouer) have observed, when diverse cultures come in contact they change each other. *Creolization is the processes whereby cultures in contact generate new cultural forms.* Archeology, and particularly the archeological remains of folk art, may offer one of the best avenues available for studying the processes by which such new ethnicities are formed. Designs, functions, and forms of Colono-Indian pottery and Chesapeake pipes have characteristics of Indian, English, and African origins, suggesting that these characteristics were selected from a creolized universe, and that it was the set of shared elements which came to characterize creole folk craft traditions in the Chesapeake (Singleton 112). We might say that creole culture began to be formed when Europeans and Africans first came in contact. It was the beginning of the formation of new African and European American cultures, and it was a two-way exchange. At the heart of the concept of creolization is describing something that is born or developed in the New World. Creolization of cultures in contact is a natural process that expands and transforms all cultures involved. Our young students are usually unaware of the role that culture plays in their everyday lives, or the differences in cultures.

## **Creating a New Paradigm**

American history was not written for young black boys growing up in the ghetto: the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male determined what was written based on European traditions and culture. Anglo-Saxon Protestant males made all of the major decisions and used the books with the “facts” that suited their purpose (i.e. Africans are “savages,” and Africa is “The Dark Continent”). They defined what an American was supposed to be and how an American was supposed to live. All other Americans, particularly women and people of color, would have to pattern their lives accordingly. In this new diversity in population the Anglo-Saxon male’s definition of how an American is suppose to act and live are now obsolete. For most women and people of color those definitions are now unnecessary. A new America that accepts all cultures as their own, without prejudices, is the order of the day. Are we ready for a reformed American culture that recognizes and reveres the contributions of those cultures that were left out in the past? (Krebs 37). Students will be asked to create their own perspective of the direction America should take in making diversity a mutual integrated process, where all American cultures are a part of the social and economic decision making.

Conceiving of African American cultures as creolized helps us see the structure that is the cultural substance behind the artifacts we find. It provides another important advantage in answering questions about the African American past and about the American past in general: within the bounds of this model we can look at relationships that cut across creolized subculture groups as well as relationships within such groups. Ferguson’s position on the issue is as follows:

If we can grasp the strands of our cultural heritage, weave them into a proud mantle, whether the colors clash or blend, we do not need to amputate half of our social reality. As people around the globe learn to work effectively with bold textures and colors, we can all celebrate differences rather than splitting them off and trying to hide them (Krebs 108).

These are the kinds of attitudes that we must adopt if we are to make our lives in diversity a successful endeavor. Racial prejudice or discrimination to a great extent will cause the positive efforts to be ineffective. Many of the racial attitudes that have been prevalent in America must be extinguished, if we are to make diversity a “proud mantle” that we can hold up as an example for the world. Horace Mann tells us, “Whatever is really and truly valuable may be possessed by all, and possessed in exhaustless abundance.”

## **Evidence of Creolization Process**

So that the concept of creolization can be made clearer, some examples of the process taken from different regions and different areas of culture will be examined.

Architecture, for instance, is an area in which creolizing influences have been studied. Many architectural features of Caribbean houses (and hence of those in the Mississippi Valley) go back to Africa. Creolization has been demonstrated convincingly in the

continuing role of Amerindian, Spanish, and African ingredients and cooking methods. Language in the Americas house an extraordinary number of creole dialects, deriving from combinations of Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, English, and African tongues with various local languages; many of these combinations are recognized as having passed from the stage of pidgin to that of creole languages. Medicine is another area in which creolization has been exceptionally frequent and varied. In truth, given the urgent need to find the best possible cures, medical practices have been one of the most fertile areas of collaboration among people of different cultures. European dance styles adopted by some of the slaves of Virginia, who in exchange passed on to their masters the “Congo minuet” and the “Negro jig.” In early-nineteenth-century Louisiana, Louis Moreau Gottschalk borrowed melodies played by African musicians in New Orleans’s Congo Square to write piano compositions that reflected the creole way of life.

Famous Jazz musician and composer Wynton Marsalis describes his musical experience as he was growing up in New Orleans. “From my childhood, I remember the many parades and social functions that were drenched in African and African Americanism. From this perspective, I could see just how much of the old ways carry on. In 1817 the city council had dedicated Congo Square as a place where enslaved Africans could gather and practice their religious and cultural heritage. As many as 20 distinct African national or ethnic groups would gather to dance and sing in traditional ways, dressed in traditional African garb, playing slave made replicas of traditional African drums. Our enslaved African forebears, drawing on their varied customs, began to create new forms of American music and dance, and new African American cultural forms emerged from a synthesis of the African and European life in New Orleans (Dodson 11).

There were many mutually opposed beliefs in the area of religion (Buisseret & Usner 8-12). The attempts to proselytize the slaves by their masters and white preachers was a common occurrence on most plantations, but the influences of their African past were always apparent. The slaves still practiced voodoo, and conjurers were very influential in the slave community. Masters and white preachers made great efforts to proselytize the slaves. The consequence of these diverse traditions coming together in America, was a distinct, syncretic African-Christianity (Parish 82-83). Evidence found in the conjurers kit and cabin on the Levi Jordan plantation showed that it was an actual kit used for medical purposes. There were also the remains of an Nkisi used in curing rituals found in the plantation cabins – it was also used by the West African BiKongo people (Brown 21).

### **Abusive Classification System**

In 1929, slaves interviewed by historians often referred to mulattos as “yellow bitches,” and it was very difficult for them to believe that their being mixed in race, or that being “nearly white,” was something that they could be proud of and use to gain status. But to the contrary, slaves of mixed race were outcasts in the slave community, and outwardly expressed disdain for their white fathers. The degree of contact between blacks and whites was directly related to the slave’s status

in the quarters. House servants were taught to believe that, because of their white blood, they were superior to other slaves on the plantation. Many mulattos considered their surveillance in the house, under the watchful eye of the Master at all times, a liability rather than an advantage (Owens 138-139). The interrelations of blacks and whites on the Bacon-Burwell plantation suggest that some intimate personal relations were formed. Fourteen (or 16%) of the 1692-1710 group of slaves were the offspring of interracial relationships. Slave women were exploited on a continuous basis by white men, and they gave birth to many mixed race children. Whenever slaves and white laborers shared living quarters, intimate relationships by mutual consent were common. This conclusion is based on the county records in Virginia and Maryland during the colonial period (Walsh 35-36).

### **Cultural Confusion**

In America, races have been mixing since its beginnings. In fact, there has been so much mixing that today most Americans are of mixed blood: many have the blood of several cultures running through their veins. This all happened when races were segregated, and when race mixing was taboo, or against the law. And yet, the whole African American race is a mixed race and culture: one would be hard pressed to find a one hundred percent pure blooded African among African Americans today. Many whites in America are also of mixed blood, some whites will tell you that they are a certain percent Native American, but they could never reveal that they are part black, because in America, part black means African American. In America mixed race, at one time, meant mixed up, but the multiracial Americans who are mixed up, are mixed up because of the society that has given little attention to a designated identity in classification. Having to check “Other” on forms because you don’t want to deny either of your parents, or to be asked “What are you?” in a disrespectful manner, are problems that these ostracized Americans face each day. The derogatory “mongrelization of people” has been used to describe the result of the mixing of races. These genetic creoles are forced to identify with one side of their heritage over the other, “Tiger Woods broke the mold when he asserted the legitimacy of his mixed blooded heritage by coming out with a refreshingly confrontive approach” (Krebs 37-38). Tiger Woods is only defining himself by both sides of his heritage, something that all African Americans should be able to do if they so choose, but many refuse, or are unable to do so, because part of that heritage is white. Many African Americans refuse to identify with the race of their oppressors. There are other African Americans who are proud of their mixed heritage, even if they can’t dismiss their African American status. All of this ethnic confusion has been due to the European American’s belief in their “cultural superiority” and the subsequent separation of races during the colonial period.

My old man died in a fine big house  
My ma died in a shack,  
I wonder where I’m gonna die  
Being neither white nor black?

(Langston Hughes)

## **African American Past, Model for America's Future**

The history of African Americans is a dramatic saga of a people attempting to remake the world. The actions, thoughts, and dreams of Africans are responsible for some of the most profound economic, political, and cultural developments in the modern West. Black labor generated unprecedented wealth, and helped give birth to capitalism. Black creativity influenced virtually all forms of Western art, from music and dance to theater and the plastic arts; black visions of freedom and their tenacious efforts to realize them, not only transformed American politics, but inspired uprisings throughout the world (Kelly and Lewis ix).

What is beyond all questions is that slavery was, throughout its history in North America, a growing, changing, mobile, flexible, and variable institution. It varied greatly not only from time to time, but from place to place (Parish 4). Cultures may develop complexity through certain internal developments and variations, but by far the main source of cultural growth and development seems always to have been through the forces of external contact. Civilization is largely the accumulative product of residue of this ever-widening process of cultural contact, interchange and fusion. Creation comes from the impact of diversities, cultural values arise upon the confrontation, impact, and consequent disintegration and readjustment of different orders, with the emergence therefore of new harmonies (Wallace 74). Archaeological evidence suggests that pottery found on South Carolina and Virginia plantations bear marks similar to those commonly used in African religious expression. They appear to represent material aspects of African religion incorporated into the creolized culture of African Americans. Different from acculturation, creolization emphasizes the creative character of early America, including African American culture. In creating their American creole subculture, African Americans drew elements from African, European, and Native American culture and combined these into a new and unique way of life (Singleton 116-117). Evidence from the Bacon-Burwell plantation suggests that some early members of the group succeeded in retaining a greater amount of their African identity than the later arrivals (Walsh 33-34).

## **THE COLONIAL SLAVE FAMILY**

European American oppression during the many years of slavery was endured by African slaves, in large part, due to their close relationship with the family and the church. The family and the church helped the slaves to maintain their collective sanity. These institutions offered them community support and gave them a sense of personal identity. The institutions also provided them with the foundation for resistance and escape from a life of slavery (Blassingame and Berry 70). According to Smead, "Slaves struggled valiantly to maintain this vital institution. If the master prohibited slave marriages, blacks conducted their own ceremonies in secret, often drawing on traditions of West Africa. For example, instead of taking their vows in a church, the slaves jumped over a broom, a ritual that can be traced back to their homeland. The emphasis slaves placed on family lent dignity to relationships between the sexes" (Smead 39). Many scholars and historians believe the emphasis that was placed on family was a major factor in the survival of slaves. The family provided slaves with a revised culture which some historians believe came completely out of America. The traditional opinions that African heritage had been virtually lost

in the Middle Passage, or the southern colonies, have now been dismissed by historians and archaeologists. Attention is now focused on the diversity in African cultures that has formed a unique and distinctive African American culture (Parish 88-89).

### **Ancestral Inner Guidance**

Psychologist Joseph L. White describes:

. . . the psychologically healthy black who has interpreted the African American ethos into his or her life space: He or she accepts as a given that unavoidable pain, struggle, disappointment, and tragedy are necessary for personal growth; is open to self, in touch with others. These individuals understand the principle of give and take in close interdependent relationships, and there is a low quotient of narcissism; He or she is attuned to the language patterns of Blacks. These individuals are not immobilized or devastated by the realities of oppression in American life. Psychologically healthy Blacks are resourceful, inventive, imaginative, and can identify with the liberation struggles of Black Americans; By learning to absorb, and overcome, actualizing Blacks have developed an unshakable resolve; They are proud of being Black, not afraid of being destroyed by racism, do not need the personal validation of European Americans, and no longer entertain illusions about fair play as the cornerstone of American life; They feel the need to be in touch with their elders and ancestors, and the responsibility to pass on what they have experienced to the next generation; They are not apprehensive about the prospect of aging, and have mastered the fear of death by learning to celebrate life fully in the present.

### ***Spiritual Transformation***

When we have differences there is a center for which we must reach, this center is a spiritual connection that is universal but personal. Each individual is able to make this connection when they are open to a challenging mind expanding experience. As people who hold an unlimited amount of spirituality, experience differences in others, their inner peace makes it much less threatening. From this center we are able to touch the same spiritual center in them (Krebs 109). The role that is played by subjectivity in the remediation of prejudice, and bias in research problems, cannot be overstated. We have to use the power of the subjective, and celebrate ourselves, in knowing ourselves, we must go back to our past heritage to attain the clearest factual research. We must heal by knowing that we can move forward and restore order to the universe (Myers 88-89). Whether spiritual, or otherwise, a mutual connection is needed, hopefully a spiritual one.

Subdued and time-lost  
Are the drums – and yet  
Through some vast mist of race  
There comes this song  
I do not understand,  
This song of atavistic land,

Of bitter yearnings lost  
Without a place  
So long  
So far away  
Is Africa's  
Dark face

(Langston Hughes)

## CONCLUSION

The evidence from the historical research and the artifacts excavated from plantation sites overwhelmingly confirm the fact that cultural adaptations have been a reciprocal and interchangeable process, among the groups that inhabited America in its beginnings, and to the present day. Evidence from archaeological excavations informs us that we are all connected in America, either by blood or by culture. When cultures live in close contact according to the evidence, they automatically exchange ways of doing things, it is a natural process – it happens whether they want it or not. Research also revealed that African Americans did retain much of their African culture in their transition from African to African American. Many of these African traditions and cultural traits were passed on by Africans to Native and European Americans, as Africans absorbed European and Native American traits. And we can now add the Asian and Latino traits. Through the process of creolization America has become a multicultural and/or cross-cultural nation. The miscegenation that produced creolized offspring is living evidence that African, European, and Native Americans were engaged in cross-cultural relationships.

The research shows that in both African and African American cultures the family was the center of their universe and the African and African American women were the most important individuals in both family units. African and African American women have to be commended for the spirituality, strength, and resilience they have displayed before, during, and after their transition to African Americans. The African American woman created and recreated the African American family after many slave separations, runaways, and deaths. This determination to hold together the family unit and survive all of the many atrocities can only be attributed to their strong spiritual connection with their African heritage: it was all they knew.

We may also conclude from the evidence that cultures grow immensely when they are in direct contact with other cultures, as was the case with Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans, and this growth will occur naturally. We have had the opportunity to observe such cross-cultural exchanges in American culture, in language, in music, in cuisine, in religion, in dance, in art, and in creative inventions. Pablo Picasso, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, and The Beatles are just a few who have openly admitted that their careers in music and art were greatly influenced by African and African American cultures. There are many other Americans who have embraced the African American culture; they see through the myths and stereotypes that distort the image of African

Americans, and diminish the perspectives of those who refuse to examine the new historical and archaeological evidence.

We have witnessed on many occasions situations where African Americans have been expected to accept the ways of the dominant culture without any consideration for their own African American culture. When Richard Williams danced a little jig, after his daughter Serena had won a tennis tournament in Europe, the mass media and others attacked him for acting improperly. When black players in the NFL dance in the end zone after scouring a touchdown they are penalized for celebration. This is in direct opposition to the African American's natural emotional instincts and culture. As former slave Olaudah Equiano reminds us earlier in this unit, "we are descendents of a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets, every great event is a cause for public rejoicing." This dancing, singing, and rejoicing heritage has remained with African Americans throughout their history, dancing and celebrating outstanding achievements are Africanisms that they brought to America from Africa. Social rules are being constructed according to the European American's point of view, with no respect or tolerance for the African American culture, when most of the players on the field are usually African Americans, and they usually score the majority of the touchdowns, the rule seems to have been established for African Americans. African American culture should be studied because, it's not only the democratic way, but it shows tolerance and respect for another American's culture. The traditional methodologies are not applicable to our present social, political, and educational circumstances. Students will be asked to cite an incident and/or story from the news media that specifically involves African American culture.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan 1: Trying to Understand: Seeking Answers to Difficult Questions**

#### ***Purpose***

Synthesizing information by attempting to answer difficult questions.

#### ***Resource***

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, other books and articles: The inspirational triumphant spirit of the slave experience is examined using readings

#### ***Materials***

Sticker notes, dictionaries, and paper and pencil to answer questions from readings

#### ***Responses***

This lesson may be used for all secondary students, and at lower levels if possible. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the book by Harriet Beecher Stowe, is in the genre that is preferred because it gives students an up close and personal view of the slave experience, and the issues that the experience created. Personal and collective issues of tragedy and the triumphant spirit of those who overcame such adversity will stay in the minds of students throughout their lives. These experiences may be at times extremely grotesque, but slavery in America demonstrates some of the most inhuman acts

against people in recorded history. For this reason, we find that many of our teachers will refuse to discuss the horrendous acts that were committed. Many teachers will not discuss the most gruesome acts, because they don't believe that they are prepared to answer the questions from their students questions about the reasons slaves had to be treated in such a vicious manner. Our students need to know all the facts about American history in order to evaluate and use that history to improve their lives and the lives of others. There is a direct correlation between the history of slavery and the intolerance and oppression throughout the world. Not knowing about these tragic events of the past prevents students from experiencing, through former slaves, the strength of the human spirit and the triumph of survival over extreme adversity. Teachers know that it is easier if we don't discuss these humiliating acts, but if we don't remind our students of these atrocious acts they will forget them. Teachers want students to leave the class with an understanding of our past history of slavery, and a personal commitment to tolerance and respect for others.

There will be an orientation before the lesson begins. In this orientation students are told what the lesson will cover and what is expected of them. Students will build background knowledge about all aspects of slavery by reading literature, feature articles, picture books, essays, and poetry. Their inquiry ends with each student constructing a poster for a poster contest between classes at the end of the lessons. The posters will encompass all of their reading assignments, with pictures, symbols, news articles, and project their personal concepts of slavery. The student's commitment to tolerance and respect for others must always be adhered to during these assignments.

Questions are to be devised by students from the readings, and these questions will be answered in class discussions. Prompted by the questions, students will be able to synthesize their thoughts and feelings. These questions will motivate thinking and give insight into personal feelings that had not been explored before. The more students share their questions and talk about their posters and readings, the more they will learn about slavery, and the more they come to realize the effects that slavery has had on their own lives. What they will come to understand is the spirit of survival that kept slaves alive, and the hope and compassion that still burns within African Americans today. Their stories live on in the slave narratives that students will always remember. This is the true legacy of slavery.

## **Lesson Plan 2: Recognizing Plot and Inferring Themes**

### ***Purpose***

Differentiating between plot and theme, and inferring the big ideas of themes

### ***Resource***

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass

### ***Responses***

Class discussion of themes using examples; theme boards, theme charts.

There are many themes in literature, in both fiction and nonfiction. Knowing the difference between plot and theme and understanding inference are the kinds of conscious critical thinking

skills that we want to instill in our youth, so that they are able to understand fully the impact of slavery on America. In my lessons I am using all reading skills exercises because I have found reading comprehension skills to be one of the weakest academic areas for many of our students in Community Services, and we serve students from all schools in Houston I.S.D. Many of these students have serious reading comprehension problems that not only stunts their ability to understand, but also causes problems in behavior, focus, interest, and motivation. These problems keep these students from being able to use their imaginations to visualize historical events or the author's point of view. The main purpose of the discussions in these lessons is to assist those with reading problems in understanding the impact of slavery. We let them know that the plot is simply what happens in the narrative. The theme represents the main ideas of the story, and the plot carries those ideas along. To demonstrate we choose a plot that is familiar to most students, we might review the plot of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, or another book of our choice. We then explain to students that themes are the underlying ideas, morals, and lessons that give the story its texture, depth, and meaning. Themes are rarely written out in the story, they are implied: we are likely to feel themes in our gut. Students understand and identify with themes like selfishness, thoughtlessness, piousness, and so on. They have experienced these attitudes and they understand them.

### ***Inferring Themes in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave***

One of the books we will use to demonstrate inferring themes is *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. This is a moving authentic story of slavery and the courageous struggle of a people in bondage. It goes beyond the history and describes the personal Master-Slave relationships between Africans and Europeans in the building of America.

To continue the exercise in inference students are asked to put on a chart the themes in the story that were either written or suggested. The following are some of the themes that students might record:

anger	segregation
internal pain	self-determination
self-control	taking a stand
bravery/courage	violence
loneliness	self-respect
racism	sadness
unity	racial inequality
friendship	fairness/unfairness

The teacher then reiterates that all of these themes represented the most prominent ideas in the story, and that most of these ideas elicit strong feelings. We have noticed that students are more likely to remember important themes when submit the ideas themselves, this helps them to gain self-realization by showing empathy and compassion. Prior knowledge is often applied by students to infer themes and better understand the narrative. As we discuss the different ideas, we then have the students label the ideas and define the themes. For example, they may understand the

concept of self-realization, but they might not know the word for it. As teacher-facilitators we are able to help them put language to their thoughts and feelings.

### **Lesson Plan 3: The Magic Box: Exploring Stereotypes**

#### ***Purpose***

To demonstrate the role that stereotyping plays in our personal lives, and show ways that stereotypes can be broken

#### ***Resource***

Books and articles pertaining to stereotyping

#### ***Materials***

Index cards, masking tape, a box, a bottle, a newsprint flip chart

#### ***Responses***

The stereotyping espoused by Europeans in labeling Africans “savages,” and Africa “The Dark Continent,” has much to do with the way Africans and African Americans have been viewed and treated throughout the history of America. Seeing Africa as “The Dark Continent” has played a major role the foreign policy of America toward Africa, a foreign policy which has been almost non-existent. Not respecting Africa as one of our mother cultures is a slap-in-the-face of both Africans and African Americans. These are the kinds of stereotypes that we must extinguish if we are to bring all of our diverse population together as Americans. The divisiveness of stereotyping must be challenged by all of our institutions (educational, government, mass media, and business) if we are to move forward with cohesiveness, and respect for our democratic ideals. The purpose of this lesson is to bring out these stereotypes for our students to recognize the damage they cause, and to dispel them with factual information.

The game can be played with 4 to 20 people. If there are more than 20 people, groups can be divided into several small groups playing simultaneously. The amount of time needed to play the game is 30 to 60 minutes, and 60 to 90 minutes for debriefing. A large room is the preferred setting, with room for students to walk around and collaborate with one another. In human relations, stereotyping has polarized and alienated different groups. This exercise is designed to transform the stereotyping process into dialogue which will make us more sensitive to our tendency to stereotype others, and prepare us to become more effective, efficient, and humane in dealing with diversity, in schools and in public life.

Researchers studying the development and functions of stereotypes have concluded that they are an attempt to cope with the unknown and uncertainties we face, using derogatory labels to describe people and things we don't understand. These labels cause a great deal of pain and distress for those who are stereotyped. In this process people are victimized by narrow and prejudiced judgments that prevent advancement in our society. This activity is an attempt to address the stereotyping issue and the many ways they influence our lives in our schools and in our communities.

Many excellent studies on the role of stereotyping give insight into the influence that stereotypes have, especially as self-fulfilling prophecies for those who are labeled. In our own personal monitoring, we have observed how some members of different ethnic groups have internalized these stereotypes to the extent that they act out their group's stereotype, with no shame. In this exercise we want to create and develop awareness of stereotypes and the different methodologies in breaking them. These are the following conditions for breaking stereotypes:

1. Make the environment one of equal status, where everyone feels recognized and respected.
2. Make the atmosphere one of interdependence. I need you, and you and you need me, or an "I got your back" kind of attitude.
3. Provide for interpersonal interaction for students to appreciate their similarities and their uniquenesses.

"The Magic Box" is in accord with these three suggestions.

### ***Procedure***

1. The teacher as facilitator places each group of students in circles, and one by one, have them introduce themselves briefly to others in the group. The important thing is to develop a cohesive unit with the different groups. Where everyone feels safe and open enough to disclose their thoughts and beliefs. The facilitator explains to students the goals of the activity and posts them review throughout the activity.
2. The Facilitator then asks each student participant to choose an identity, explaining that we all have many identities. Examples are: White, black, boy, girl, tall, short, student, athlete, male, female, etc. It is very important that each student's choice of identity is one that they feel strongly about.
3. The students will then write their identities on their 8 x 10 card. Then, using the masking tape, the students tape their cards to their bodies. Students circulate around the room for each to understand the diversity that exists among the groups.
4. The students are then asked by the teacher to think of a stereotype that is related to their identity that has been particularly painful for them. As they decide what the stereotype is, they write it on their 8 x 10 cards, and keep them. Examples of stereotypes that students have previously chosen are:
  - Jews are misers
  - Latinos are drug dealers
  - Italians are gangsters
  - Blacks are always late
  - Asians are smart
5. The teacher gathers the whole group in a circle, and places a bottle on its side in the center. Then the teacher asks one of the students to spin the bottle. When the bottle stops, the student that it points to has to tell the group about that stereotype. They need to tell their own personal

experience with that stereotype. What is annoying about the stereotype? How has it caused pain? What effect has the stereotype had in and outside of school environment? In some cultures spinning the bottle is inappropriate. If it is, the teacher then asks for volunteers to take turns.

6. The teacher asks each student to talk about their particular stereotype. When each student finishes talking, the teacher then asks the students if they know someone who negates the stereotype. They have to know of a personal experience with themselves or someone else in their presence. If anyone in the group has had such an experience, they are asked to articulate the way the stereotype was negated to the group.
7. If someone is able to disprove the stereotype, the student who “owns” it must then put his or her 8 x 10 card in the “magic box” in the center of the circle. If the students do not negate or know anyone who negates the stereotype, that student must keep the card taped to his or her body.
8. The game goes on until all group members have had the chance to talk about their stereotypes and either put them in the “magic box” or attach them to their bodies.

### ***Debriefing***

It is extremely important to spend enough time debriefing this exercise. Here are some examples of questions that you can begin with:

- a. What do you think of this game?
- b. How did you like losing your stereotype?
- c. How did you feel about the stereotype being attached to yourself?
- d. How do stereotypes function?
- e. Do you know how to break stereotypes?
- f. Have stereotypes played a role in your school, or community, if so, how can they be neutralized?

### ***Who Should Facilitate This Activity***

Experiences with students in this program have indicated that, in sharing such personal and sensitive information, students experience pain and anger. So it is required that a person administering such a program be trained in interpersonal communication and skilled and experienced in cross-cultural training. If you don't have the training skills and experience, or if you feel uncomfortable with students expressing feelings of pain and anger, this simulation exercise may not be the right one for you to use.

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