From West Africa to West Philadelphia: Cultural Routes to Common Ground

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Preface

Since the colonial period, Philadelphia has been home to communities with African ethnic and cultural roots. Indeed, Philadelphia continues to be a significant port-of-call in the African Diaspora, a vital threshold to that modern political and counter-cultural formation that Paul Gilroy calls “the Black Atlantic.” Throughout the metropolitan area and surrounding Delaware Valley we find touchstones to every stage in the still unfolding history of the Black Atlantic: from Congo Square (now Washington Square) to well-known stations on the Underground Railroad; from Merion Cemetery to the displaced graves of Mt. Olivet; from the theater districts of North Broad Street and West Philadelphia’s Fifty Second Street, to the West African and West Indian ethnoscapes – restaurants, churches, community gardens, hair braiding salons, and markets – that are transforming the spaces of Woodland and Lancaster Avenues today.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century African American neighborhoods of West Philadelphia, settled by descendants of slaves who migrated from the south to find work, have begun absorbing thousands of West Indian and African immigrants. The languages, dress, religious practices, foodways, and cultural styles of African ethnic groups are as distinctive as those of European or Asian ethnic groups, but the historical and cultural reasons for distinctions – and similarities -- are not well understood. Teachers in this seminar conducted fieldwork exercises among their students as well as extensive research on cultures of the Black Atlantic to develop a framework that would heighten the relevance of standard curricula for students of diverse backgrounds while ameliorating ethnic tensions that have led to physical violence in recent years.

Through readings, field assignments, and class discussions teachers in this seminar explored three premises: 1) the idea of the Black Atlantic offers a historical and theoretical framework for identifying and building upon expressions of a shared African cultural aesthetic among students in West Philadelphia schools; 2) as a portal on the Black Atlantic, West Philadelphia is possessed of living, African-based vernaculars of language, music, dance, food, visual arts, healing, dress, and bodily style; and 3) these African-based vernaculars form a threshold to the history of the Black Atlantic, and a means of understanding cultural similarities and differences that are subtended by shared aesthetic, social, and spiritual values.

In his introduction to Flash of the Spirit, Robert Farris Thompson argues that throughout the Black Atlantic, “visual and philosophic streams of creativity and imagination exhibit parallels to ancient African organizing principals of song and dance,” including the use of percussion to convey aliveness in sound and motion; simultaneity of competing meters, orchestrated by a rhythmic common denominator; call and response interplay among voices and instruments; offbeat phrasing; social allusion (a critical perspective that
“remorselessly contrasts social imperfections against implied criteria for perfect living.”\(^i\)

Combined elements of this aesthetic, reinforced through a multitude of genres -- from children’s ring games to jazz to gumbo to styles of preaching and ritual insult – function to reinforce ideas that 1) relate the efforts of individuals to an overall group effort; 2) value rotation of leadership responsible for keeping up the spirit of the group; and 3) provide safe structures for the expression of difference within a larger whole.\(^ii\) (Abrahams Singing the Master)

In particular, the capacity for social critique embedded in African and African American forms of collective expression is a resource for reflecting on and bridging across cultural difference. Bringing European and African forms into dialogue across codes and channels of communication has been one way of defining and reflecting on social identity. As Morton Marks put it, “One of the defining features of Afro-American rituals is the alternation or switching between European and African forms, a switch that is interpreted by nonblack observers as going from ‘order’ to ‘making noise.’”\(^iii\) White America has responded with ambivalence, on the one hand rejecting the appearance of joining in the dialogue, while on the other, expressing admiration and envy for African ideas enthusiastically appropriated over the past three centuries into mainstream American culture without due acknowledgment.

In the units at hand, teachers have brought aspects of this aesthetic system (what we came during the seminar to call “reciprocities in motion”) into dialogue with the state standards. The number of units devoted to storytelling speak to the traditions of eloquence that have accompanied Africans bound for North America. To build appreciation for poetry, English teacher Bonnie Breeze turns to the linguistic creativity she hears among students interacting in the hallways at Overbrook High School. Historical interactions between African (Asante and Congolese) and European (French, Portuguese and Dutch) languages are embedded in the speech of her students, a number of whom speak the Jamaican Patois. Bringing the “stories, proverbs, and familial traditions and rituals” into dialogue with the literary traditions of the Black Atlantic, Breese notes, could be a way of “building cross-cultural understanding among students.”

In two other high schools, social studies teachers are engaging older narrators from the students’ communities in oral history projects. Stephanie Wicks of Roxborough High School meets the requirement for African American History by engaging students in locating themselves and each other within the four-hundred year history of African immigration to Philadelphia. Interviewing recent African immigrants will help to establish a common historical matrix, within which the students can explore shared cultural legacies. For a history class Meagan McGowan, of Lamberton, focuses on conveying a sense of historical continuity among her students, by reflecting on vernacular strategies for communicating history in everyday life, including stories and the use of “objects of memory.” Students will connect to history given in the textbook through interviews with elders in the community, while measuring the “human unit of time” in their community: that is, the time frame implied between an elder’s memory of things.
related to her by an elder in her childhood, and the youngest person to whom she relays
that memory. How many generations does it span and what touchstones to local, national,
and world history does it activate?

Two other teachers are exploring genres of folktales in relation to verbal arts in West
Philadelphia. For her TESOL classes at Bartram, Wilda Hayward tracks the fortunes of
the trickster figure enroute from West Africa to West Philadelphia: from Anansi who
traveled from West Africa to the West Indies and Virginia; through the antebellum
trickster heroes Bruh Rabbit and John (for whom Old Master was the foil); through the
figures of Shine, Stagger Lee, Signifying Monkey who register the post-bellum
migrations to find work; and the exploits of contemporary tricksters – eloquent people of
words, all of them -- staged through hip-hop and rap.

Nan Richman will guide her kindergarten students at Hamilton through an inventory of
their stylized verbal routines: handclapping songs, jumprope rhymes, counting out
rhymes, taunts, greetings and so forth. From that foundation they will turn to examples
of African, West Indian, and African American folk narratives to explore the
interrelations of form and function, context and meaning. Both Hayward and Richman
have included a collection of stories from West Philadelphia’s Liberian Elders recently
published by Penn’s Center for Folklore and Ethnography. (A downloadable pdf and
video recordings will be available at this url:
http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/center/service_learning.html)

The four remaining units focus on the material culture of the Black Atlantic. Addressing
the silence in school textbooks on the prominence of African cultural ideas in American
life, Keysiah Middleton, Shaw Middle School, has developed a unit to study the African
contribution to American life in the realms of medicine, food, language, religion, and art.
In her rationale, Middleton cites a proverbial expression from Bob Marley: “Don’t forget
your history, know your destiny: in the abundance of water the fool is thirsty.”
Each of the practices she considers becomes a touchstone to the history of the Black
Atlantic and a way of illuminating cultural linkages among her African, Caribbean, and
African American students.

Kelly Graham’s unit on quilting, for kindergartners at Blankenburg elementary, explores
in depth the long history of meaning-making in fabric, and the contribution of
polyrhythmic and antiphonal aesthetic principles to this visual and tactile medium. To
develop this unit, Graham combined library research together with consultation with an
African American quilting community in her neighborhood.

Under the name of “From Cornrow Village to Corporate City,” Valerie Quartermar and
Karon Waters developed a pair of complementary units for the culturally diverse
population of students at University City High School. Like other units developed out of
this seminar, these units offer a framework for looking beyond cultural difference to
connect around shared aesthetic values. The paired units juxtapose the history of the
Black Bottom community’s dissolution and the students’ experience of the expanding
corporate reach of University City with historical examples of African Americans who
adapted African legacies in the face of crises for the social and economic benefit of the larger whole. Valerie Quarterman’s science unit engages the students in empirical research on hair, music, and food, and explores the contributions of George Washington Carver, Annie Malone and Madam C.J. Walker. Karon Waters, a counselor at UCHS, has developed two Life Skills Guidances to build self-esteem among high school students in tandem with classes in English (drawing on the Harlem Renaissance) and Math (a guidance that uses cornrows and other African hairstyles as a threshold to African fractals.) Students will be encouraged to reflect on the improvisational strategies on which they already rely in everyday life, and to view these bicultural skills in the context of a history of improvisational success, as their worlds expand from their neighborhoods into corporate employment settings and beyond.

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