Spoken Connections
An Afro-Puerto Rican Workshop
To
Explore Worlds and Words

Thursday, February 21, 2008
10:00 AM
Baird Auditorium
National Museum of Natural History

Organized by the Smithsonian Latino Center in collaboration with the National Museum of American History and the National Museum of African American History and Culture
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Discovering your Cultural Home

The collection of poems that you will hear today and that are included in the activity packet will provide a foundation for the exploration of cultural identity, values, and connections. In your classrooms, please use the attached activity outlined as a workshop in using literature and poetry to discover cultural connections and identity.

**Time allotment:** (2) 45-50-minute class period or a combination of in class and take-home assignments.

**Activities:** 4 sessions

**Type of sessions:** Group exercise, individual, and interactive discussion

**Session 1: Group Exercise- Groups of 4-5**

**Time allotted:** 15-20 minutes

Using the attached Venn diagram chart, as a group, brainstorm the meaning of culture and the different connections that can be explored and discovered. The goals are to determine your cultural home and to discover cultural commonalities. In other words, students will be describing their cultural values and characteristics.

“Cultural Home” Venn diagram

1) Have each student pick a circle and label it with their name
2) Have the students brainstorm together the meaning of cultural home. Some guidance may be needed, and the questions below may serve as an initial prompt for the students.
3) Have students place the key words/phrases that describe their cultural home in the allocated circle. Students may find that they will have key words in common (i.e. close family). They will also find that they have differences.

- Where is your home?
- What does it mean to you?
- Describe your cultural home. Is your cultural home physical or is it a metaphorical home (emotional, spiritual, etc.)? Identify aspects of your cultural home. For example, Puerto Rico- Music- Salsa)

**Sample of Venn Diagram Worksheet (Worksheets in Attachment A)**
**Session 2: Take home activity or follow up activity:**

Time allotted: 20-30 minutes

Using the group brainstorm exercise, each student should complete a written sketch of his/her cultural home. It can be in poetic or in narrative form. Inform students that they will be asked to perform their written sketch at the next session. The narrative should address the theme of discovering cultural identity and connections.

You may instruct students to view an example using Kenneth Carroll’s “DC Wishes” [http://washingtonart.com/beltway/carroll3.html](http://washingtonart.com/beltway/carroll3.html)

**Session 3: Performance**

During your next session (or class period), have students present their work. Prior to the presentations give ground rules and the following guidelines for their performance.

- Stand straight
- Speak loud and clear
- Make sure to have good eye contact with the audience. Engage your listeners.
- Make sure to set the appropriate tone (serious, humorous, sad, etc.) to your recitation

For more tips, please visit:

- the Academy of American Poets at [https://poets.org/academy-american-poets](https://poets.org/academy-american-poets)

**Session 4: Interactive Extension Activity and Discussion**

Time allotted: 15-20 minutes

As a class, discuss some of the cultural values and connections presented.

**Key Questions:**

- How do your cultural values influence your everyday decisions?
- In what ways do you see cultural expression and identity in mainstream society?
- What were some of the cultural values or characteristics that were similar? Why do you think that overlaps exist when describing cultural values or characteristics?
The Poetry of Martin Espada

Courtesy of Martin Espada
En la calle San Sebastián*

Viejo San Juan, Puerto Rico 1998

Here in a bar on the street of the saint
en la calle San Sebastián,
a dancer in white with a red red scarf
en la calle San Sebastián,
calls to the gods who were freed by slaves
en la calle San Sebastián,
and his bronze face is a lantern of sweat
en la calle San Sebastián,
and hands smack congas like flies in the field
en la calle San Sebastián,
and remember the beat of packing crates
en la calle San Sebastián,
from the days when overseers banished the drum
en la calle San Sebastián,
and trumpets screech like parrots of gold
en la calle San Sebastián,
trumpets that herald the end of the war
en la calle San Sebastián,
as soldiers toss rifles on cobblestone
en la calle San Sebastián,
and the saint himself snaps an arrow in half
en la calle San Sebastián,
then lost grandfathers and fathers appear
en la calle San Sebastián,
fingers tugging my steel-wool beard
en la calle San Sebastián,
whispering your beard is gray
en la calle San Sebastián,
spilling their rum across the table
en la calle San Sebastián,
till cousins lead them away to bed
en la calle San Sebastián,
and the dancer in white with a face of bronze
en la calle San Sebastián,
shakes rain from his hair like the god of storms
en la calle San Sebastián,
and sings for the blood that drums in the chest
en la calle San Sebastián,
and praises the blood that beats in the hands
en la calle San Sebastián,
en la calle San Sebastián.

(*en la calle San Sebastián=on Saint Sebastian Street)
My Name is Espada

Espada: the word for sword in Spain
wrought by fire and the hammer's chime,
name for the warrior reeling helmut-hooded
through the pandemonium of horses in mud,
or the face dreaming on a sarcophagus,
hands folded across the hilt of stone.

Espada: sword in el Caribe,
rapiers tested sharp across the bellies of Indios, steel tongue
lapping blood like a mastiff gorged on a runaway slave,
god gleaming brighter than the god nailed to the cross,
forged at the anvil with chains by the millions
 tangled and red as the entrails of demons.

Espada: baptizing Taíno or Congolese,
name they stuttered in the barking language
of priests and overseers, slave's finger pressed to the blade
with the pulsing revelation that a Spaniard's throat
could seep blood like a fingertip, sabers for the uprising
smuggled in the hay, slave of the upraised saber
beheaded even as the servants and fieldhands
murmured he is not dead, he rides a white horse at night,
his sword is a torch, the master cannot sleep,
there is a dagger under the pillow.

Espada: cousin to the machete, peasant cutlass
splitting the cane like a peasant's backbone,
cousin to the kitchen knife skinning a plátano.
Swords at rest, the machetero or cook
studied their blisters as if planets
 to glimpse the hands of their father the horseman,
map the hands of their mother the serf.

Espada: sword in Puerto Rico, family name of bricklayers
who swore their trowels fell as leaves from iron trees;
teachers who wrote poems in galloping calligraphy;
saintcarvers who whittled a slave's gaze and a conqueror's beard;
shoemaker spitting tuberculosis, madwoman
dangling a lantern to listen for the cough;
gambler in a straw hat inhabited by mathematical angels;
preacher who first heard the savior's voice
bleeding through the plaster of the jailhouse;
dreadlocked sculptor stunned by visions of birds,
sprouting wings from his forehead, earthen wings in the fire.

So the face dreaming on a sarcophagus,
the slave of the saber riding a white horse by night
breathe my name, tell me to taste my name: Espada.
We Live by What We See at Night

for my father, Frank Espada

When the mountains of Puerto Rico
flickered in your sleep
with a moist green light,
when you saw green bamboo hillsides
before walking to East Harlem rooftops
or Texas barracks,
when you crossed the bridge
built by your grandfather
over a river glimpsed
only in interrupted dreaming,
the craving for your island birthplace
burrowed, deep
as thirty years’ exile,
constant as your pulse.

This was the inheritance
of your son, born in New York:
that years before
I saw Puerto Rico,
I saw the mountains
looming above the projects,
overwhelming Brooklyn,
living by what I saw at night,
with my eyes closed.
Coca-Cola and Coco Frío

On his first visit to Puerto Rico, island of family folklore, the fat boy wandered from table to table with his mouth open. At every table, some great-aunt would steer him with cool spotted hands to a glass of Coca-Cola. One even sang to him, in all the English she could remember, a Coca-Cola jingle from the forties. He drank obediently, though he was bored with this potion, familiar from soda fountains in Brooklyn.

Then, at a roadside stand off the beach, the fat boy opened his mouth to coco frío, a coconut chilled, then scalped by a machete so that a straw could inhale the clear milk. The boy tilted the green shell overhead and drooled coconut milk down his chin; suddenly, Puerto Rico was not Coca-Cola or Brooklyn, and neither was he.

For years afterward, the boy marveled at an island where the people drank Coca-Cola and sang jingles from World War II in a language they did not speak, while so many coconuts in the trees sagged heavy with milk, swollen and unsuckled.
Return

245 Wortman Avenue
East New York, Brooklyn

Forty years ago, I bled in this hallway.
Half-light dimmed the brick
like the angel of public housing.
That night I called and listened at every door:
in 1966, there was a war on television.

Blood leaked on the floor like oil from the engine of me.
Blood rushed through a crack in my scalp;
blood foamed in both hands; blood ruined my shoes.
The boy who fired the can off my head in the street
pumped what blood he could into his fleeing legs.
I banged on every door for help, spreading a plague
of bloody fingerprints all the way home to apartment 14-F.

Forty years later, I stand in the hallway.
The dim angel of public housing is too exhausted
to welcome me. My hand presses
against the door at apartment 14-F
like an octopus stuck to aquarium glass;
blood drums behind my ears.
Listen to every door: there is a war on television.
My Native Costume

When you come to visit,
said a teacher
from the suburban school,
don't forget to wear
your native costume.

But I'm a lawyer,
I said.
My native costume
is a pinstriped suit.

You know, the teacher said,
a Puerto Rican costume.

Like a guayabera? The shirt? I said.
But it's February.

The children want to see
a native costume,
the teacher said.

So I went
to the suburban school,
embroidered guayabera
short sleeved shirt
over a turtleneck,
and said, Look kids,
cultural adaptation.
Sleeping on the Bus

For my father

How we drift in the twilight of bus stations,
how we shrink in overcoats as we sit,
how we wait for the loudspeaker
to tell us when the bus is leaving,
how we bang on soda machines
for lost silver, how bewildered we are
at the vision of our own faces
in white-lit bathroom mirrors.

How we forget the bus stations of Alabama,
Birmingham to Montgomery,
how the Freedom Riders were abandoned
to the beckoning mob, how afterwards
their faces were tender and lopsided as spoiled fruit,
fingers searching the mouth for lost teeth,
and how the riders, descendants
of Africa and Europe both, kept riding
even as the mob with pleading hands wept fiercely
for the ancient laws of segregation.

How we forget Biloxi, Mississippi, a decade before,
where no witnesses spoke to cameras,
how a brown man in military uniform
was pulled from the bus by police
when he sneered at the custom of the back seat,
how the magistrate proclaimed a week in jail
and went back to bed with a shot of whiskey,
how the brownskinned soldier could not sleep
as he listened for the prowling of his jailers,
the muttering and cardplaying of the hangmen
they might become.
His name is not in the index;
he did not tell his family for years.
How he told me, and still I forget.

How we doze upright on buses,
how the night overtakes us
in the babble of headphones,
how the singing and clapping
of another generation
fade like distant radio
as we ride, forehead
heavy on the window,
how we sleep, how we sleep.
The Poetry of Reuben Jackson
From the Beltway Poetry Quarterly
LATISHA'S HOUSE OF BEAUTY

long before nasa
thought negroes
worthy of exploring heavens
dark as we were once,

sara wilcox and
countless other sisters,

(legs crossed like stars in a
constellation)

spent nearly every saturday
beneath moaning,
space helmet-sized dryers,

trying to straighten and perfect
that which was round and lovely as a planet

distant as the men upstate.
FOR BEN WEBSTER

where do his eyes go when he plays ballads?

higher than smoke fogging the room,

cymbals which rustle god's earlobes like kisses.

a friend swears there is a skylight in his hat where notes gather before plunging toward the bell of his tenor,

while ben gazes longingly up the skirts of stars.
FRANK

frank was fired from the el diablos
for inserting hendrix licks into their celebrated
james brown medley.

there was silence
as he bent to unplug his wah-wah pedal;

metal tongue banished from
their matching suits and
rote precision choreography.

one year later,
the ghetto was teeming with
posthumous interest.

frank's door was bruised from
all the knocking.

but that friday afternoon
the el diablos stood waiting
for his skyline of amps
to come down.
TEE

a bic lighter
cranked to the max

the tear-shaped flame
sparks a pipe

whose smoke surges
like young brothers

entering a theater
to watch john wayne

eliminate entire tribes
with a single bullet

before the box of raisinettes
opens like your eyes

when the pusher comes
DISHWASHING

more spots than a leopard
mother chided

hoisting each glass
to the light

an unconscious toast
to perfection

(hers)

not that i didn't
get it

since i wanted
prayed for

michael jackson's
every onstage move
to be brilliant

as her handed down
crystal

when she purified them
for beverages

we could not drink
anyway
TWO HAIKU

two bickering crows
on two separate branches
could be you and i.

as you gather strength--
i fade like autumn colors
when november comes.
THE WARTIME ISSUE

KEITH

Legs which almost outran
the scuffed football
wobbling toward his ex-fingers,
Could not elude landmines
meant for Uncle Sam.

Now he looks like Black america
after integration.

Boarded up.. Abandoned.

Graffiti-riddled as Nick's,
Where War was on the jukebox,
The ribs were to die for,

And Keith's Stateside moves
sent more Sistahs to bliss
than Jackie Wilson in his prime.

Foxhole tight sharkskin suit
glittering like sweat on a brow
dark as the Eastern horizon.

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