



Smithsonian Institution

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

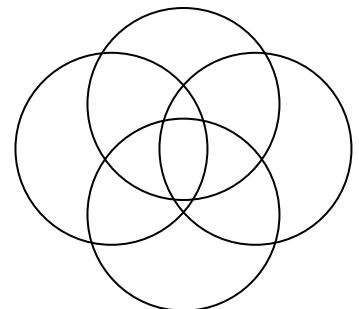
**Time allotted:** 15-20 minutes

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>

## **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 National Endowment for the Arts and Poetry Foundation's Poetry Out Loud website at <http://www.poetryoutloud.org/>
- the Academy of American Poets at <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 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 helmet-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,  
rapier 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.



Kathy Keler  
*Double Moon*

1997, 15" x 15", oil and alkyd on wood panel  
[see more work by Kathy Keler](#)

## 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 didnt  
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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# Attachment A

Venn Diagram Activity Sheets

