A World Without the Blues

Exploring the African Roots of American Arts and Culture

A K - 12 Curriculum Guide

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for
Global Education Center

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Cover Images
Top left: Jalli Yusupha Kuyateh, Gambian kora player. Credit: The Kora Music Site.
Bottom right: Lady Bo aka Peggy Jones, American blues musician. Credit: John Sievert.

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Introduction

Can you imagine a world without the color blue? To live in a world without the color blue would also mean to live in a world without purple or green. It would mean no variations of any of these colors -- no lilac, no lavender, no turquoise, nor lime. What would remain? Variations of reds, yellows, and oranges.

Take your eyes away from this text for a moment and scan the area around you, taking note of all the ways that blue influences and enriches your life exactly where you are. Pay attention to every shade of green and purple as well.

Seriously. Take 60 seconds and do it!

It is almost overwhelming, no? The color blue is everywhere, lending its richness to deep greens and subtle purples to the highlights and shadows around you. Like the color blue, the continent and cultures of Africa are a primary and fundamental part of American culture. It is an impossible task to envision any American art form without acknowledging the influence of Africa.

It sounds so simple. Why is this curriculum guide necessary if Africa's influence is interwoven throughout American arts? Like the exercise we opened with, African influence does not always show up in forms with which our minds make obvious connections. There are countless variations and iterations of African cultural impact--both ancient and contemporary.

> "We will see that it is impossible to imagine the world of American art and culture without Africa."

This curriculum guide's goal is to bring attention to the African elements of American arts. Just like a world without the color blue, we will see that it is impossible to imagine the world of American art and culture without Africa.

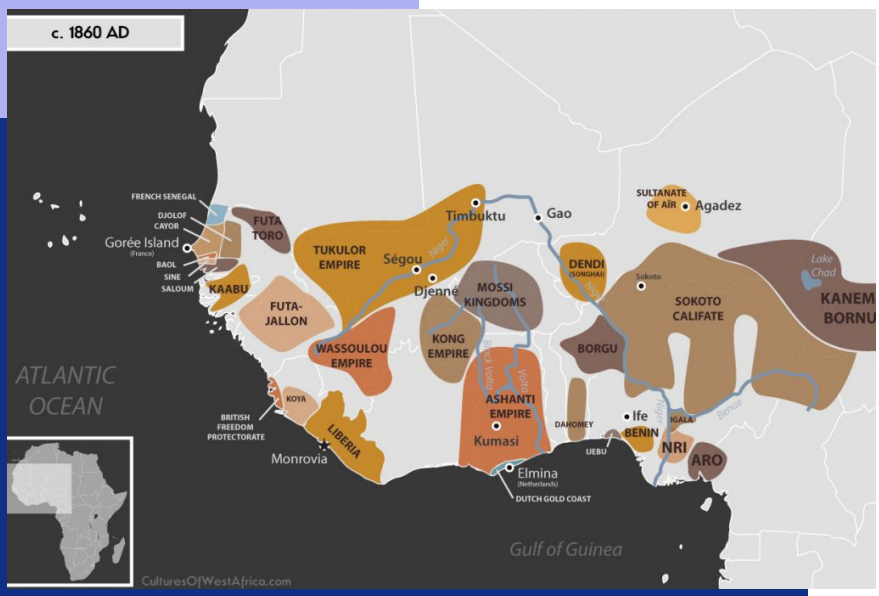
So what is Africa?

For this curriculum guide, Africa consists of the 54 countries on the continent. These include African countries often considered part of the Middle East-- Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Djibouti, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

While every region of the African continent has impacted American culture, we will focus specifically on West African influence in this guide. The countries of West Africa geographically and politically cover Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. There is considerable cultural overlap between the countries, as ethnic groups and territories were split up during colonial rule. However, these are proud nations with unique cultures, traditions, and languages.

This guide focuses on West Africa because it is with this region of the African continent that the United States has had the deepest historical ties. West Africa was heavily-trafficked for slave labor during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade between the 15th and 19th centuries. The British focused most of their energies on trading with powerful African merchants, exchanging European goods for enslaved Africans in the areas now known as Ghana, Guinea, and Sierra Leone.

This explains why the majority of African American descendants in the United States of America can trace their roots to this general area of West Africa.



Prior to European Colonialism in West Africa, various ethnic groups dominated the land. This map shows land and power distribution in 1860.
Credit: www.culturesofwestafrica.com

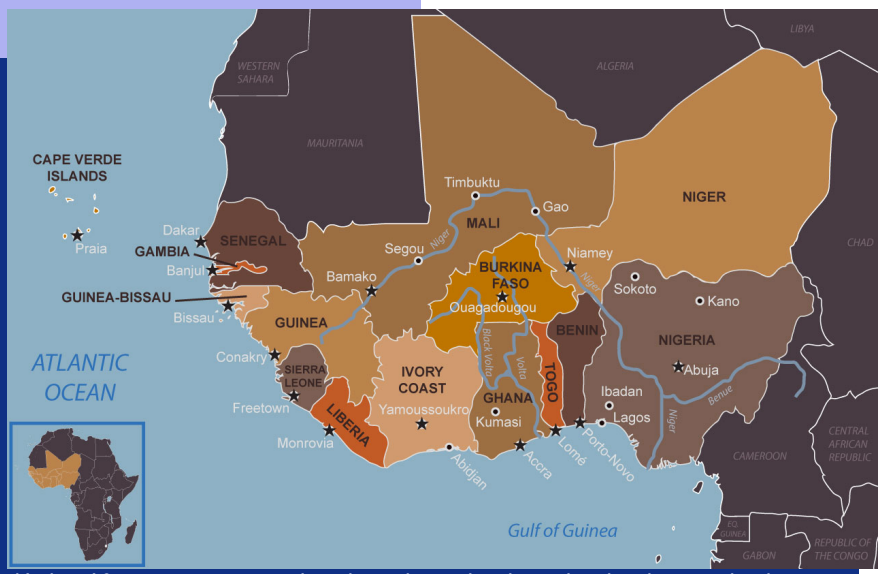
What is...America?

We do not want to take for granted that we are all on the same page about exactly what we mean when we say "America." Technically speaking, the Americas include North, Central, and South America. However, in this guide, we will focus attention on the United States of America. When we refer to "America," we are simply using it as a shortened form of the United States of America.

It should be noted that there are strong, healthy, and living African roots in the cultures of every American nation, from Canada to Argentina. There is an immeasurably rich African presence in every contemporary Western society. While this guide aims to help you identify and appreciate African presence in North American arts and culture, you may also become more aware of the vibrant and dynamic African influence on all Western cultures.

The African Diaspora

The African Diaspora refers to the dispersion of African people throughout the globe. The presence of people of African descent in the Western hemisphere stems largely from early exploration, the slave trade, and immigration.



Modern African nations are not based on ethnic tribes, but political and geographical systems established by European colonialism. Credit: www.culturesofwestafrica.com

Ancient African people were seafaring explorers. Historical evidence shows African people had close contact with prehistoric Indigenous civilizations of the West. Yes. Before Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue, African explorers had done it, but that investigation is for another curriculum guide!

The Transatlantic Slave Trade forcefully brought more than 12 million enslaved Africans to the lands that would come to be known as the Americas. The mass influx of West & Central African people is primarily why modern Western societies and cultures contain an inextricable African imprint. Britain outlawed slave trading in 1807, while the Portuguese ended the slave trade 62 years later in 1869. Because Brazil received enslaved Africans for so much longer into the century than the

USA is one of the factors in understanding stronger retention of African influence in Brazilian culture.

There was also a spectrum of African cultural reticence within North America. Enslaved Blacks living in larger Black communities, such as those in Lowcountry South Carolina, managed to preserve African customs and kinship systems. Over time, generations formed the creole culture known as Gullah Geechee (Battle). On the other extreme, the majority of Blacks in North America were enslaved in regions where European colonists were the majority. More often than not, Whites severely punished Black people for most displays of African culture. At a broader level, cultural assimilation was a survival mechanism for enslaved Black people. The obvious intergenerational transference of African culture was more difficult.

Finally, African people have migrated of their own will and accord over the centuries. The United States of America has a robust and lively population of African immigrants that has grown exponentially since the 1980s. Waves of African immigration have a steady and refreshing impact on contemporary American arts and culture. Taking all of this into account, it becomes clear that the African influence on the USA is age-old, active, and ongoing.

How to Use this Curriculum Guide

This curriculum guide is an educational tool for educators and learners. It will provide insight and background on commonly overlooked elements of West Africa in arts and culture in the United States of America. We will explore the following categories: food, music & dance, and literature.

We aim to provide context and spark conversations and deeper exploration of the countless expressions of arts and culture in America, West Africa, and the rest of the world. You will find suggestions for essential questions and suggestions for hands-on learning activities!

Essential Questions are ESSENTIAL!

At the beginning of each chapter, we have given a list of essential questions. Essential questions help guide your exploration of the topic. They are most effective when asked multiple times throughout a course of study, as responses will evolve as the subject is explored over time and from different angles. Essential questions are open-ended and do not have definitive answers to stimulate critical thinking, dialogue, and deeper investigation. Here are several essential questions to ponder as you progress throughout the curriculum guide. Notice how responses develop.

- How did African people shape the American arts?
- What is culture?
- What is art?
- Does art imitate life or vice versa?
- Does culture reflect or determine who we are as people?
- Who is American?
- Who decides what history we learn?
- Does it matter whether we know the origins of our culture?

General Education and more!

This curriculum guide is applicable and usable in any learning environment. Use it in the general education classroom from kindergarten through high school and beyond! It is for traditional schools, homeschools, and curious individuals. This guide will be exciting and engaging for young learners, who will undoubtedly throw themselves with gusto into the fun activities suggested. It is also perfect for elective courses, such as music, dance, and culinary classes. Certainly, teachers and learners of English Literature, World History, U.S. History, and Social Studies Studies have many points to connect with their current lessons.

While it is possible, it is not necessary to create an entire unit or overhaul your lesson plans to successfully integrate this curriculum guide into your teaching. It is a wonderful supplement and enrichment to your lessons. Share any part of this curriculum guide with your students, not only the activities. We hope this curriculum guide invites exciting engagement, rich discussions, and deeper investigation. Please share your feedback and experiences with the Global Education Center at info@globaleducationcenter.org.

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AMERICA'S SOUL:

African Influence on American Agriculture and Culinary Arts

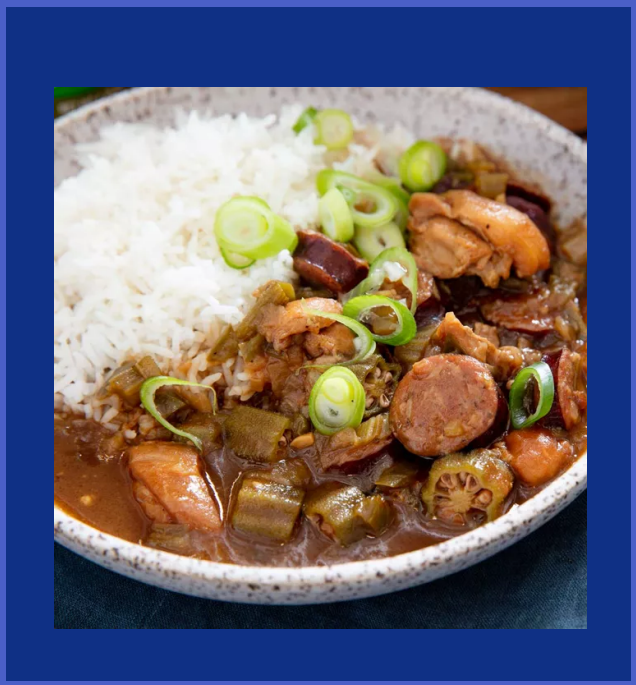
Essential Questions

How is our diet influenced by Africa?

How did African people add value to American agriculture?

How do our food and eating customs reflect our identities?

What impact does it have to learn about African influence on our lives?



Some might argue that soul food is quintessentially American food. But many of the foods that Black and White Southerners eat for comfort and nutrition are linked to West African heritage. But its influence on American food spans much more broadly. West Africa has had a profound historical, agricultural, and economic impact on America.

"West Africans built one of the world's wealthiest economies in the 1700s."

Agricultural Expertise

In the 18th century, South Carolina boasted global economic importance and extreme wealth. The crop bringing in this unprecedented American wealth was called Carolina Gold Rice. Yet, Carolina Gold Rice was almost a failed business venture taken on by European colonialists until West African agricultural experts were enslaved and shipped to the South Carolina colony.

The tropical, moist climate of West Africa makes it perfect for cultivating rice. People in Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and Benin cultivated rice for centuries before the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The men and women of various ethnic groups in this region worked together to grow this staple crop. Typically, men cleared the swamps while women sowed the rice seeds. Everyone worked together to harvest and clean the rice. European slave traders called this portion of the Continent the Rice Coast.

When European settlers failed at growing rice in the swampy lands of South Carolina for a few decades, they turned their interest toward enslaved Africans from the "Rice Coast." They even paid considerably higher prices for enslaved people from this African region because their rice-growing expertise was priceless (Opala).

African people from the Rice Coast brought generations of ancestral knowledge and skills that proved to be highly successful. Their knowledge included the toe-heel planting method, where women and girls used their toes to create holes to sow the rice and covered the seeds with soil using their heels. Handwoven fanner baskets used to throw rice into the air to clean it and mortar and pestles used for hulling were also cultural products of West Africa that the enslaved continued to produce in America (Battle).

Women of Sierra Leone husking rice circa 1910. Credit: Mary Evans.

Their methods and techniques did more than salvage a previously failing venture of rice production in Georgia and South Carolina. West African expertise made the American rice economy flourish and gain global fame. Although they did not enjoy its benefits or protections, West Africans built one of the world's wealthiest economies in the 1700s.

African agricultural expertise was the force that drove the other economies for which they were the source of free labor. The cotton, tobacco, and sugarcane

Previous page: Top left: Fresh Okra. Credit: Elianna Friedman.
Botton right: Gumbo. Credit: Vicky Wasik.

economies flourished under the care of enslaved Africans and their descendants, bringing tremendous riches and, therefore, political power to the fledgling United States.

African Crops in America

In addition to the invaluable agricultural knowledge, West Africans transported actual crops in innovative ways. Oral narratives throughout the Americas describe how African women and girls would braid the seeds of precious crops in their hair so that if they were captured and forced into slavery they might be able to grow their foods from home.

This was one of the ways several crops indigenous to West Africa have become a part of the American agricultural landscape over the centuries. Here we will discuss some of the crops that made the Middle Passage in addition to human cargo between the 16th and 18th centuries.

African Origins of Southern Soul Food

Black-eyed peas are an earthy and filling Southern dish. Black-eyed peas originated in Africa, and the slave trade brought them to the West. To this day, they are a vital part of the West African diet and Black American diets. Many Black American families customarily eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day, believing them to bring good luck for the rest of the year. Otherwise, they are consumed with other soul food dishes, such as rice (the combination of black-eyed peas and rice is commonly known as “hoppin’ john”), cornbread, greens, and sweet potatoes. Black-eyed peas are still a staple food in West Africa. In Nigeria, people peel, mash, and fry them in palm oil. These tasty fried bean fritters are known as akara. This same fritter survived the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and several centuries in Brazil, where it is a beloved national dish known as acarajé.

Enslaved West Africans also carried okra seeds on the Middle Passage. You cannot talk about okra without talking about Africa. This highly nutritious crop originated in tropical West Africa and grew well throughout the southern United States. Enslaved blacks often grew sustenance gardens that frequently included okra (Sousa & Raizada). Again, okra is an irreplaceable ingredient in the modern soul food tradition, where it is typically fried, stewed, or made into a thick soup, like gumbo. Across the Atlantic, in contemporary West Africa, it is most frequently blended finely and eaten as soup with boiled and pounded cassava or yam.

Thousands of years ago, watermelon grew wild throughout much of the African continent. Different wild varieties grew, but the sweet, fleshy version of watermelon with which most Americans are familiar was first domesticated in West Africa between 4,000 to 5,000 years ago (Sousa & Raizada). During the Reconstruction Period after the Civil War, many African Americans grew and sold the fruit to make a living for their families. The watermelon symbolized freedom for the liberated black Americans who gained agency in the American economy by growing and selling this delicious fruit (Black).

Contemporary Commercial Crops

Although the African crops of **palm oil** and **shea butter** are not commercially grown in the USA at a significant level, they are consumed at high levels in products that Americans use and consume all the time. Palm oil comes from the red fruit of the oil palm tree. It is a key ingredient in many products, including cosmetics, soaps, detergents, and even ice cream! Rich, red palm oil is an essential element in traditional West African cuisine, used especially for frying and cooking many soups and stews. It is also a central ingredient in Afro-Brazilian cuisine. Palm oil is the most consumed vegetable oil in the world (Cramb and Curry). Shea butter is an ingredient in several skin and hair products used daily in American households but is grown almost exclusively in the West African countries of Nigeria and Mali. You can find it in lotions, hair conditioners and creams, lipsticks, and much more.

Cuisine and Cooking Styles

The African influence on American gastronomy is well-acknowledged by American society. Certain soul food dishes have transcended the bounds of African American heritage and have become iconically American. Moreover, some quintessentially American cooking techniques have African roots. American food would not be what it is without the inspiration and innovation of Africa and her descendants.

Whether or not you have ever tasted a thick, savory spoonful of gumbo or felt the peppery spice of jambalaya on your tongue, you have probably heard of these famous dishes. These dishes are part of deep southern heritage, but these classic dishes go much farther back. As we mentioned earlier, both okra and rice were staple food items in West African cultures long before the beginning of the colonial era. West Africans had been preparing okra soups using meat broths and rice cooked with a stew of tomatoes and peppers for a long time!

To this day, these dishes still reign supreme in many West African countries. Okra soup is a common dish typically paired with boiled and pounded cassava, yam, or plantain. Jollof rice is an iconic dish often served at weddings, baptisms, and other joyous celebrations. There is a playful and long-standing feud between Ghanaians and Nigerians about who makes the best jollof rice! It is easy to see the connection between gumbo and jambalaya. West African descendants kept the soul of their ancestral foods alive through these two dishes.

West Africans used their traditional barbecuing methods through the colonial era. Cred Michael Twitty.

African Roots of Fried Fish and Barbecue

Deep frying fish and barbecuing meats are about as American as the Star Spangled Banner. Yet,

even these popular forms of preparing meat have African roots. Historical documents show that deep-fried fish and barbecue were traditional West African cooking methods in the 15th century (Mekouar). Both of these styles of preparing meat are still widely popular in West Africa today. As you walk along any city street in Lagos, Nigeria, you are bound to smell food vendors grilling mouthwatering meat known as suya.

Normalizing the African Food Legacy in America

Enslaved Africans prepared the meals for Southern White slaveholders, indirectly sharing the legacy of African cooking. A traditional West African diet consisted of sauces and stews made with leafy green vegetables eaten with starch, such as yam, plantain, cassava, or rice. While enslaved, Black American cooks continued to incorporate these cooking styles into the diets of their enslavers. Historians have argued that this helped stave off nutritional deficiencies in the White population (Mitchell).

Some Black chefs gained fame for their artistry and skills. Hercules Posey was the head chef for George Washington. He gained fame as a talented chef. Washington's grandson, G.W. Parke Custis hailed Posey "a celebrated artist . . . as highly accomplished a proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States" (Lawler). Posey eventually fled fame and slavery, escaping to New York on February 22, 1797, Washington's 65th birthday. By the 19th century, African-inspired dishes prepared by Black chefs across the South began appearing in recipe books gathered and published by slaveholding women of the times (Deetz). The presence of dishes like okra stew, jambalaya, and pepper pot in American recipe books of the 18th century forever stamped them into American culture.

Modern African Food Influence

The African influence is not merely historical. African immigrants in the 21st century are also altering the contemporary culinary landscape. Most urban cities have a plethora of African restaurants that serve traditional cuisines from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Ethiopia, to name a few. Many modern chefs create Afro-fusion cuisines, combining African fares with Jewish, Asian, and Indian foods. Rich African culinary traditions continue to shape and satisfy the American palette.

America's cultural and ethnic diversity makes it a melting pot. But the flavors in a melting pot do not disappear into one another, becoming a bland, tasteless porridge. Instead, they enhance one another. Africa is a prime ingredient in this melting pot. From the nation's inception to this very moment, African people and traditions have cultivated and inspired the American landscape and diet.

HANDS-ON LEARNING

Plant a small garden of black-eyed peas , okra , or watermelon and watch them grow! Then enjoy a meal with your harvest.

◇

Look for an African restaurant near you. Go try the food!

◇

Collectively prepare and share a delicious African-inspired American dish like hoppin' john.

◇

Write down and share family recipes. Make a class recipe book.

◇

Write thank you letters to the Africans and Black Americans who developed American cuisine. Bury them in the ground as seeds of acknowledgment and appreciation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites & Streaming

Feast Afrique Digital Library of West African Food & Drink Knowledge & Heritage

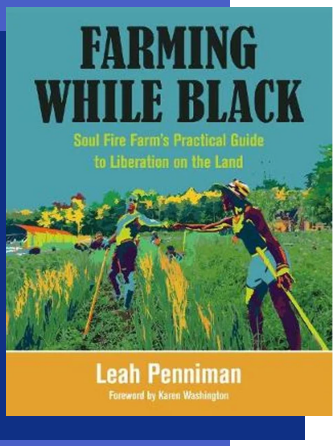
High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America, a Netflix limited series

YouTube

Real Colonial American Food with Michael Twitty | Atlas Obscura

A feast of African-American culinary contributions, baked into the South's DNA | PBS NewsHour

The Man Who Relives Slave History Through Food | Vice News



Books

Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land by Leah Penniman

Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking by Toni Tipton Martin

The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South by Michael Twitty

Community

Soul Fire Farm - www.soulfirefarm.com – is an Afro-Indigenous-centered community farm committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system. Located in Petersburg, NY.

Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living - www.blackoakscenter.org - a 10-acre teaching farm on the 40-acre eco-campus is located in the historic Black farming community of Pembroke Township, Illinois.

Gullah Geechee Nation - https://gullahgeecheenation.com/ - people from numerous African ethnic groups linked with indigenous Americans and created the unique Gullah language and traditions from which later came "Geechee." It is an officially recognized nation within the United States.

AMERICA'S HEARTBEAT:

African Influence on American Music and Dance

Essential Questions

How did Africa influence American music?

Does music reflect or shape identity?

What function does music serve?

What can we learn about a society when we listen to their music?

Why do people dance?

It is impossible to cover Africa's vast influence on American music and dance in one chapter in this curriculum guide. Volumes have been written on the subject. Our goal is to explore a cluster of American musical roots that trace themselves to the western coast of Africa. Let us look more closely at these fascinating origin stories.

Rhythms, Notes, and Instruments

One gift from Africa to American music is known as polyrhythms. A polyrhythm is when independent rhythms play simultaneously. Various drums, shakers, bells, and other instruments, including the human body and voice, can produce polyrhythms.

At a symbolic level, polyrhythms represent African cultural values of collectivism and plurality of experience. Practically speaking, rhythmic complexity allows for infinite innovation and creativity in music. Jazz and funk are great examples of the intersections of different rhythms coming together to innovate new genres. Polyrhythms have infused various American musical genres. You will commonly find elaborate polyrhythms in hip hop, pop, rock, and heavy metal.

The Blues

And what of the blues, the soul-wrenching music of the American South? On one hand, the blues are distinctly American, specifically Black American. The blues were born in the fields of the Deep South after the Civil War. Influenced by slave spirituals, field hollers, work songs, and popular music of the time, the blues emerged with the personal and collective stories of sorrow, suffering, and longing of Black America. But the elements that made the blues possible come from…you guessed it…Africa!

The pitch, vocalization, and instrumentation at the core of American blues stem from West and Central Africa. On the blues scale, there exist "blue notes." These notes are flattened pitch inflections common in West African tonal languages and musical forms. The blue note is a highly expressive way of singing, playing, or even talking at a slightly different pitch from standard. It adds salt to the song playing and storytelling. Complex vocal runs (also known as melisma) and fluctuating nasal intonations are further evidence of a link between West African musical traditions and the blues.

"AMERICAN BLUES STEM FROM WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA."

Some scholars suggest a connection between African Islamic prayer songs and the blues, citing an uncanny resemblance between the Islamic call to prayer and Black American field hollers and work songs. Islam has been a major religion in West Africa since at least the 7th century. It is estimated that a significant amount of African captives brought to labor in America were Sunni Muslims taken from an Islamic region known as the Sahel (Tottoli). African Muslims traditionally used

Previous page: Top left: Masculine Dance from Eastern Nigeria. Credit Gogeafrica. Botton right: Breakdancer Stretching New York Street. Credit: Zac Ong.

wind and string instruments in their music. This predilection gave them an advantage for cultural preservation because White slaveholders perceived these instruments as less threatening than the drumming and chanting common in non-muslim West African cultures.

The Banjo

West African string instrument traditions remained surprisingly intact for centuries in America. The banjo is so deeply tied to Americana music that it's hard to imagine what the national soundtrack would be like without it. Yet, up until the early 19th century, the banjo was recognized as a distinctly "African-American tradition with a West African heritage ("Banjos"). Created by enslaved West Africans and their descendants, early banjos were hollowed calabashes or gourds and a long neck with three strings. A shorter string stopped midway up the neck. It was no coincidence that early banjos were strikingly similar in build and playing style to a West African instrument known as the akonting. Early banjo and traditional akonting playing styles are almost identical, according to Ghanaian musician and music historian Laemouahuma Daniel Jatta (Allen). The akonting and the banjo are the clearest and strongest evidence of the African roots of blues and American folk music.

West African Akonting. Credit: Elderly Instruments.

Early American Banjo. Circa 1840. Credit: Met Museum.

Percussion

Drumming and percussion are much more than entertainment in the African musical tradition. Hand and stick drums communicate particular and detailed information across long distances. Different patterns, tones, and rhythms express news and announcements as effectively as a written announcement or newspaper. British slaveholders forbade Africans from drumming in the American colonies, aware that mass communication was a form of great power. They feared slave revolts that drum communication would have helped to organize.

Despite strict laws banning African drumming traditions, percussive techniques and styles evolved. Black Americans embodied their ancestors' rhythms, creating new and expressive music and dances. The rich heritage of percussive instrumentation is integral to the development of most American musical genres. The djembe, congas, bongo, and cajón are examples of African-derived drums. Such instruments form foundational elements of jazz, hip hop, funk, pop, rock and roll, and r&b.

Call and Response

Throughout American churches and classrooms, one can witness the powerfully unifying expression of call and response that has its origins in Africa. Call and

response can take various forms. The "call" may be made in the form of rhythms, hand claps, movements, or words and phrases. According to Luana, The caller initiates the pattern and the audience responds most commonly in one of the four patterns in the graph below.

Call and response serve various purposes. At a practical level, it is a means by which the caller (musician, singer, preacher, teacher, etc.) can gauge his/her performance. It is functional for keeping attention and gauging the effectiveness of the performance. In the case of a teacher, it helps gauge student engagement.

On a more transcendent level, call and response create an elevated experience in which the caller and the audience become one, forging a powerful, unified identity. Blurring lines between performer and audience is highly characteristic of West African performance cultures. In addition to being a unifying force, call and response help gather morale and help a group tackle grueling or tedious tasks, explaining why it is everpresent in the blues and the songs of sailors, soldiers, and laborers.

Square Dancing

Call and response saturate American folk music. Square dancing is associated with White America, but one of the celebrated elements of square dance has Black roots. The square dance's characteristic call and response originated from enslaved Black fiddlers performing for White partygoers, who traditionally would memorize the dances (Blakemore). Square dancers kept the call and response long after Black fiddlers were free to choose which parties to play.

Contemporary Call and Response

Call and response did not stop at shaping square dancing. Examples of call and response in American popular music include:

- "Can You Hear Me?" (1975) by David Bowie
- "My Generation" (1965) by The Who
- "Dueling Banjos" (1954) by Arthur Smith
- "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) by James Brown

These few examples highlight the enduring nature of this infectious cultural practice ("What Is Call and Response"). Hip hop songs and popular line dance songs such as the "Cha Cha Slide" and the "Cupid Shuffle" are popular contemporary incorporations of call and response.

Dance in the African Context

Dance! Even the word itself makes you want to move! When we talk about American dance forms, we cannot avoid the towering presence of Africa. The African roots of most American musical genres have naturally produced bodily expressions that echo generations of dynamic dance from the Motherland.

Since long before the beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade, African peoples have used dance in both sacred and mundane activities. Ritual dance is an expression of worship. It is an expression of belief and a physical manifestation of powerful natural forces. Ritual dance was (and still is) learned and performed by those

initiated into religious sects within the community. These dances are performed in the gathering of the larger community during community rituals, instilling a strong sense of awe and the presence of the divine.


An Igbo cultural dance troupe from Enugu, Nigeria. Credit: Raphael the Artist.

Ceremonial and communal dances serve broader cultural purposes for African societies. Ceremonial dances throughout the African continent acknowledge the spiritual profundity of momentous occasions such as birth, death, coming of age, and marriage. These dances are the foundation of a larger cultural canon of each ethnic group. Communal dance is a time-tested way of strengthening social bonds and reinforcing communal values and expectations. Through communal dance, children learn social structures and expectations regarding gender, kinship, age, and ethnic identity (African Dance).

This is the necessary context and beginning place for discussing Black dance in North America. Unfortunately, many "history" books have taught that enslaved people sang and danced because they were simply happy. However, as you now know, music and dance served several social, practical, and spiritual functions in African societies. Enslaved Blacks maintained this even through subversion and adaptation. Now that we have discussed some practical and spiritual purposes of dance within the African context, let us explore how this impacts Western dance traditions.

American Adaptations of African Dance


A couple dances Lindy Hop. Credit: David Bailey,.

Most enslaved Africans in North America were forbidden from dancing. Slaveholders understood the power of African dance culture to create unity, structure, and instruction within the Black community. Black people did not stop dancing. Instead, they developed adaptations of bodily expression such as stepping, shuffling, and stomping. Stomping and stepping served the dual purpose of physical expression and percussive communication. These adaptations to the restrictive environment eventually evolved into dances of the plantation, such as the calenda, the juba, the chica, and the ring shout (Black History and Dance).

Body isolation is a hallmark of West African

and Black American dance. This blend of physical control and coordination is when individual body parts perform movements while the rest of the body is still or other body parts make different isolated movements. For example, the shoulders may move in response to djembe rhythms, while the hips move along to the bass drum, and the feet take directions from the cowbell. Bodily isolation is now a popular technique in contemporary dance, pop locking, breakdancing, jazz, and ballet.

African dance is also known for angular stylization, total body movement, and percussive steps. These trademarks evolved with each generation of African descendants on American soil and gradually became part and parcel of White American culture. By the end of the 19th century, Black American dances gained exposure with White American audiences through minstrel and Broadway shows. Black dances such as The Cakewalk, the Lindy Hop, the Jitterbug, and the Twist became wildly popular with White audiences, eventually becoming iconic American dances (Black History and Dance). The Harlem Renaissance further popularized Black dances amongst White audiences. White people frequented concerts, theater shows, and performances by all-Black ensembles and imitated the lively dances they saw performed. Even tap dance – a distinctly American dance – is a fusion of African stepping and Irish clog dances.

By the middle of the 20th century, Black Americans had begun influencing otherwise White-dominated dance arenas, such as ballet and modern dance. Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus were both anthropologists and dancers. They pioneered the fusion of traditional West African dance with classical ballet. The results were astonishing and elegant. Alvin Ailey became a household name for his unique style of seamlessly blending disparate aesthetics from Black America and White America, drawing upon jazz, hip hop, ballet, modern dance, and more. Ailey, Dunham, and Primus gained fame doing what their ancestors had done – innovating and uplifting dance as a tool for forging Black identity, corporal excellence, and spiritual elevation.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge the explosion of contemporary dance styles that also owe their existence to Africa. Hip hop dance, break dancing, and most popular dance forms all point to Africa, from the stepping and stomping to the bodily call and response and the physical isolation. Perhaps the most exciting element is that the African influence is still vibrant and active. Contemporary West African music is a current global phenomenon, popularly called under the umbrella term afrobeats. This music and dance style hails from Nigeria and Ghana and has taken the pop music world by storm. A listen to any afrobeats song is a master class in all West African musical and dance elements we have discussed in this chapter. And that's a groovy wrap!

HANDS-ON LEARNING

Listen to a variety of American songs and identify the polyrhythms. Have different groups of students replicate the rhythms created by different instruments.

◇

Create your own polyrhythm as a class using instruments, voices, and body parts.

◇

Create a class playlist of musical styles and genres that have African roots.

◇

Attend a local West African, hip hop, or swing dance class or invite the instructor to your school or class.

◇

Create a virtual concert experience with your students. Have students research elements discussed in this chapter and then curate an online concert together as a finale.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites

TedEd.com - The History of African American Social Dance by Camille A. Brown

Smithsonian Institution - African American Music

YouTube

Juba Dance: The Dance of African Slaves on American Plantations

Babatunde Olatunji African Drum Performance

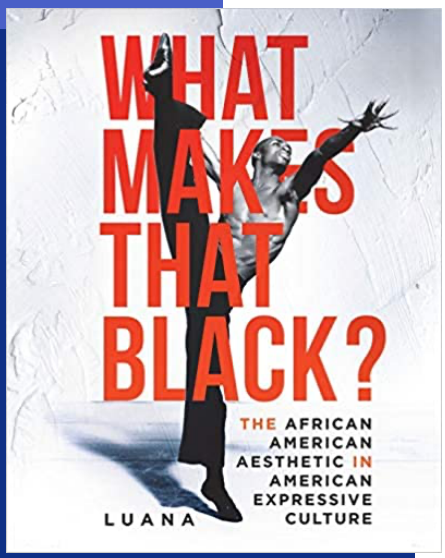
Plantation Dance Ring Shout by Georgia Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters

Books

What Makes That Black: The African American Aesthetic in American Expressive Culture by Luana

The Black Tradition in American Dance by Richard A. Long

Steppin' On the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance by Jacqui Malone



Community

National Museum of African American Music
www.nmaam.org — Located in Nashville, Tennessee, it is the only museum dedicated to preserving and celebrating the many music genres created, influenced, and inspired by African Americans.

Museum of African American Dance
www.museumofafricanamericandance.org — Located in Washington, D.C., its mission is to collect, conserve, explore, interpret, exhibit, educate, curate, and promote, the material and intellectual culture of African and African American dance in the African Diaspora for current and future generations.

AMERICA'S CONSIENCE:
African Influence on American Literature

Essential Questions

Why do people tell stories?

Is the pen mightier than the sword?

How do writers impact the society in which they live?

What are our collective stories as a nation?

How has Africa shaped American literature?

American literature also carries Africa's indelible imprints. West African people and traditions have brought and continue to bring both practical structure and imaginative inspiration to the American creative arts scene. Historically, Africa has been both subject and object in American literature and the hearts and imaginations of American writers.

Oral Tradition

Without exception, every world literature has an oral tradition as its foundation. The West African oral tradition has been a fundamental part of the development of American literature. The rich African oral tradition has endured in North America despite deliberate attempts of slaveholders to eradicate African languages, customs, and cultures. While drumming and dancing were banned, storytelling was deemed acceptable, allowing African folktales to remain relatively consistent across generations of Black storytellers in America.

> "African folktales remain relatively consistent across generations of Black storytellers in America."

African folktales, like those from all over the world, are a means of expression, entertainment, and instruction on moral codes and cultural values. The folktales that traveled across the Atlantic in the minds and memories of enslaved Africans helped to unify, console, and even liberate many descendants over the centuries of bondage in North America.

The African oral tradition was kept alive through storytelling. Folktales were frequently performed in a particular setting, at a particular time, and used special language and audience participation. Enslaved Blacks told stories to uplift one another, express their innermost feelings, and build community. Not only that, but storytellers used performances to pass along encoded messages about secret rendezvous, planned escapes, and revolts (Cunningham).

The characters in the folktales evolved to reflect different North American wildlife. For example, the African hare, who played the trickster role in various West African cultures, became Brer Rabbit (also known as Bruh Rabbit) in America. And the sneaky jackal became a sly fox. In most of these tales, the smaller, weaker animals use their wit and intelligence to outsmart and overpower the larger, menacing animals. These motifs reflect the yearnings of Black Americans for freedom and self-determination.

For over two hundred years, these folktales remained in the realm of oral tradition, passed along to generations of Black Americans. Then, in 1880, Joel Chandler Harris, a White American, published a book called *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-lore of the Old Plantation*. Harris's book takes place on a plantation where Uncle Remus, an enslaved elder, joyfully tells folktales to a young White child. Although written in a difficult-to-read dialect, the book was a huge success with White audiences, many of whom had never experienced the rich storytelling tradition with which Black Americans were very familiar. While Harris's book helped to introduce and popularize African folktales with White Americans, later Black authors would produce works that capture

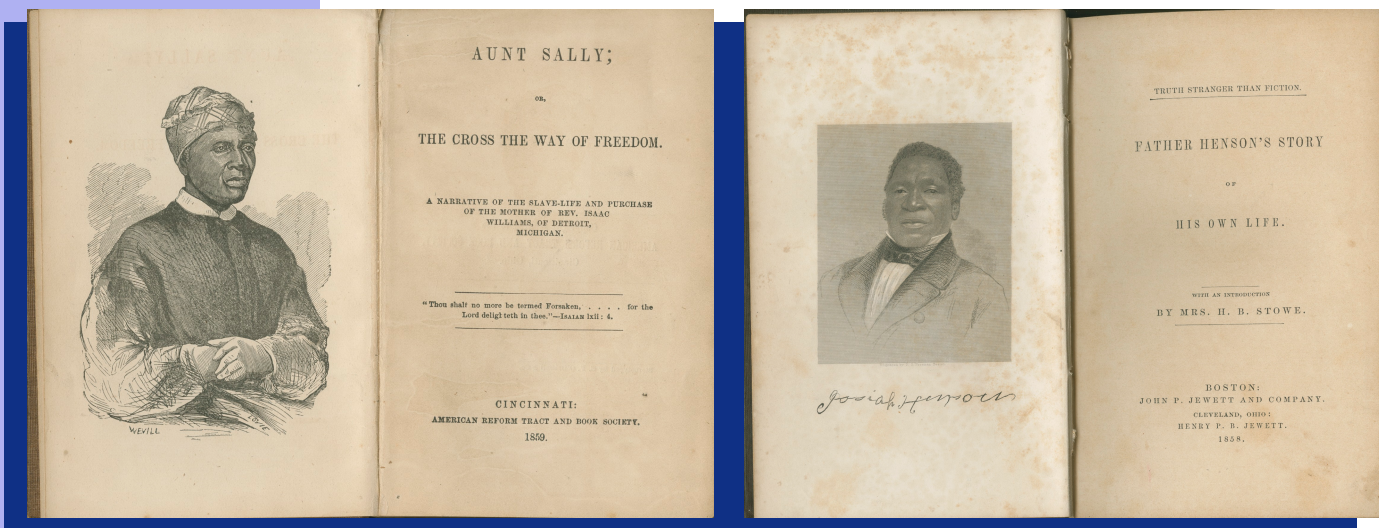
Previous page: Top left: Harriet Jacobs, author and abolitionist. Credit: Dickinson College. Botton right: Ntozake Shange, playwright and poet. Credit: Sylvia Plachy.

these folktales from an inside perspective (culturally speaking). Such works include Zora Neal Hurston's Of Mules and Men (1935) and Virginia Hamilton's The People Could Fly (1985).

Slave narratives

More than sanguine entertainment and cultural edification, the African oral tradition became a revolutionary weapon that helped form the world's ideas about freedom and race. The slave narrative was the meeting ground of the African oral tradition and the written word, creating a powerful force that shaped American history and literature as we know it.

Slave memoirs were detailed first-hand accounts of an individual's experience of slavery and his/her subsequent escape. They were written and published after the author had reached freedom in the North. More often than not, the authors dictated their stories because they were unable to read. Being a literate Black in the South was punishable by death. Therefore, authors told their stories from memory to someone who wrote them down. Their ability to recall and recount their lives with emotion and vivid detail are thanks to their cultural connection to the African oral tradition.



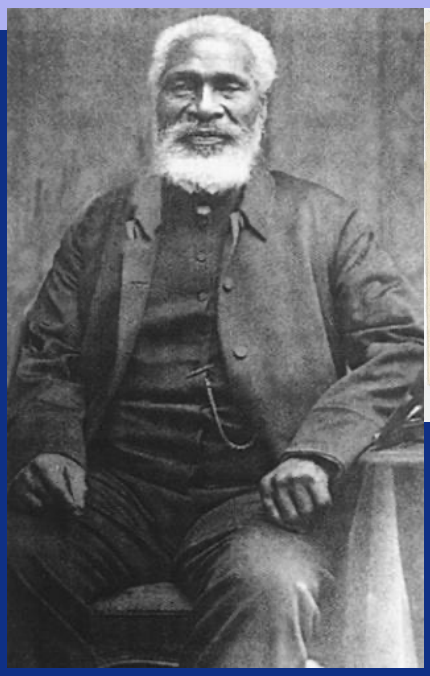
Title Pages from slave narratives of the 19th century. Credit: Grand Valley State University Special Collections

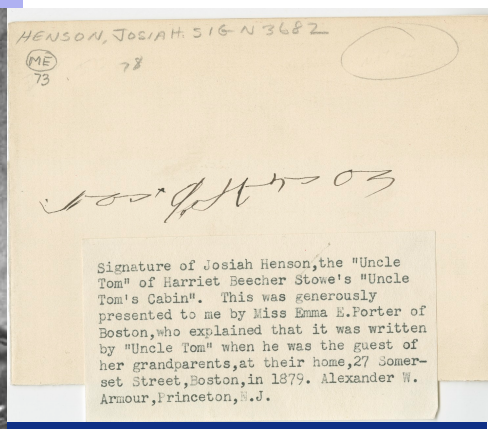
Aiding Abolitionist Efforts

The abolitionist movement gained strength due to slave narratives, which were often sold at abolitionist meetings. Early slave memoirs typically documented the deprivation and bitter violence commonplace in slavery. Narratives written in the middle of the 19th century began to reveal the striking racial disparities in the so-called "free" North. The bestselling slave narrative of the time was Up From Slavery (1901) by Booker T. Washington. Washington's account was particularly palatable for White readers because he did not focus on racial injustice, but urged readers that the nation would progress through interracial partnership and Black progress.

After the Civil War, Black Americans continued to document their experiences of

slavery with a twofold purpose: First, they wanted to remind Americans of the institution that almost destroyed the nation. Secondly, the narratives helped to rally and build momentum amongst newly freed Black Americans towards social and financial progress. Slave narratives are also an indispensable answer to revisionist history. When White Southern writers romanticized plantation life in their novels, the slave narrative preserved the grim facts. These accounts "chronicle[d] the evolution of white supremacy in the South from eighteenth-century slavery through early twentieth-century segregation and disfranchisement" (Andrews).





Josiah Henson was the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. In addition to inspiring this iconic American literary character, Henson was a prominent preacher, abolitionist, and conductor on the Underground Railroad. In 1849, he published his autobiography, The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, As Narrated by Himself.
Left is a portrait of Henson. Credit: Public Domain.
Above is his signature. Credit: Grand Valley State University Special Collections.

These narratives also presented the humanity and dignity of Black Americans to a White audience who had been taught that Blacks were not human. The depth of expression, resilience, and intelligence portrayed in these memoirs indubitably impacted White Americans and Europeans. White readers throughout the United States and Great Britain consumed slave narratives in great numbers. Most narratives sold tens of thousands of copies (very high numbers for the period) and went through several editions (Andrews).

Foundations of American Literature and Social Discourse

Slave memoirs were crucial in opening dialogue between Blacks and Whites about race, justice, and freedom. These books forced Americans to consider the supposed American values of liberty and justice for all. They inspired and informed American literature from that point forward. Slave narratives informed Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884). These great American novels drew heavily on the authority and impact of the slave narrative.

Black American literature stands firmly on the shoulders of the slave narratives. Consider classic Black American fiction such as Ernest J. Gaines's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987), and Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing (2016). Additionally, African American autobiographical writing was shaped by the legacy of the slave memoir. For example, Richard Wright's Black Boy (1945) and The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965) by Malcolm X draw strongly from the compositional legacy of the slave narrative. The slave narratives and the literature they directly influenced constitute some of the most widely discussed literature in contemporary American universities.

Harlem Renaissance

By the 1920s, America teemed with Black authors. Several continued to document their stories of former enslavement, but many wrote to create a new Black consciousness. They placed Africa as the central figure in their cultural

landscape. For them, Africa was a source of cultural pride and historical significance. Moreover, it was a countermeasure against contempt, violence, and marginalization from White American society.

Some Black writers were so enamored with Africa that they traveled throughout the continent to witness the culture and landscapes first-hand. In 1923, leading Black thinker and writer Langston Hughes made an adventurous tour through Senegal, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Angola. He arrived with grand notions of being welcomed home, but his voyage was bittersweet. The people of Senegal called Hughes a White man because of his light skin and straight hair (Harris). Centuries of forced miscegenation on southern plantations had diluted the deeper skin tones of many Black Americans. This rejection stung particularly badly for Hughes because his "light brown" skin was considered entirely too dark by White American society. The irony was painful, but it did not stop Hughes' romanticization of the African continent in future writings.

Africa in the American Imagination

Such romantic notions about the African continent saturated the writings of several Harlem Renaissance writers – Black and White alike. Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and Gwendolyn Bennett were Black writers who were smitten with the idea of Africa as a homeland and a reason to celebrate Blackness. These writers wanted Black Americans to reject the myth of racial inferiority that had been taught to Black people since the earliest days of slavery. They pointed to Africa as the cradle of civilization and wanted Black American people to stand taller because of these noble origins. Like Vachel Lindsay, White writers of the era also looked to Africa as a creative muse.

> "Evoking Africa was a well-intentioned effort to undo the psychological trauma of slavery and boost morale."

Evoking Africa was often a well-intentioned effort to undo the psychological trauma of slavery and boost morale amid the disenfranchisement of Jim Crow violence. It gave Black Americans a sense of belonging. Black writers occasionally undermined their good intentions surrounding Africa with intense romanticism. They portrayed a mythological Africa as a monolithic place that opposed all things American. This creates false notions of Africa as a land of unrestrained wildness, uninhibited people, and atavistic natural forces. These images did not represent actual African people or culture of the time; rather they reflected a longing of the Black American spirit to break free of restrictive American social mores and rigid racial castes. By writing about Africa, Harlem Renaissance writers created what Black Americans in the 20th century were most in need of – a home.

Black Arts Movement

The seed sown by Harlem Renaissance writers had taken root and was in full bloom by the 1960s. The Black Arts Movement sprang up as the cultural and artistic arm of the Black Power Movement. This movement occurred at the same time several African nations were going through revolutionary independence wars. Africans were refusing to accept European colonial rule any longer. And Black Americans were emboldened and empowered by the surge of Black African independence.

Between 1951 and 1980, fifty-four independence movements succeeded against the European colonial powers of Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and Belgium. In 1960 alone, Black Americans watched and read as Blacks in seventeen African countries took back their land and re-established their cultural practices. It inspired a powerful wave of cultural nationalism among many American Blacks.

Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism

There were two primary leaders of Black American cultural nationalism. Maulana Karenga and Amiri Baraka. Both were writers and activists who placed Africa at the center of their vision for Black American progress. Karenga co-founded Us, an organization founded on the philosophy known as Kawaida. Kawaida is a Swahili word meaning tradition. As a philosophy, Kawaida integrates Pan-Africanist ideologies, socialism, and cultural nationalism. Karenga's organization "called for the reclamation of black Americans' African past and identity through a set of cultural, social, and political practices based in the African value system" (Ogbar). He also created Kwanzaa, based on traditional Pan-African communal values of unity, self-determination, collective responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Karenga on the West Coast and Baraka on the East Coast partnered together and fanned the flames of Black nationalism through the literary and performing arts.

Scores of Black Americans joined the movement via a new Black power aesthetic as all things African gained new respectability. Afros and other natural hairstyles replaced straightened hair. African-inspired patterns on dashikis and bubas replaced suits and ties. African names replaced European names. Ronald Everett became Maulana Karenga. LeRoi Jones became Amiri Baraka. Paulette Williams became Ntozake Shange. Thousands of Black Americans followed in the footsteps of these artists and Black cultural icons.

Black American men, women, and children proudly represented a Pan-African aesthetic during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Left: The Grandassa Models, New York, 1967 demonstrate just how beautiful Black is. Credit: Kwame Brathwaite and Philip Martin Gallery. Center: A child exudes Pan-African Pride pride from hairstyle to clothing, to her lovely brown doll. Credit: Bob Fitch and Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries. Right: Stokely Carmichael was a central figure in the Pan-Africanist Movement. He blends an African dashiki with a leather jacket, creating a ne kind of cool. Credit: Bob Fitch and Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Not all Black Americans were on board with cultural nationalism. The Black Panther party viewed African-centered culture as a futile distraction from the

main issues of social, political, and economic progress for Black people. The Black Panther party dismissed the idea that pride in African origins and culture would make a meaningful difference for disenfranchised Black Americans. Instead, they pushed for radical shifts in power structures at community and national levels.

Altering American Consciousness

Writers of the era produced dynamic work that challenged Americans to reconfigure their concepts of race, power, beauty, and justice. Different than their Harlem Renaissance Predecessors, Black Arts Movement writers were fierce and confrontational in their language. The goal was not only to challenge the status quo but to create entirely new forms of consciousness and social constructs through the arts. Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, Kalamu ya Salaam, Audre Lord, and Gil Scott Heron are a few heavy hitters that rose to fame with their riveting writing.

These authors, playwrights, and poets challenged deeply ingrained elements of American culture — racism, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. Their literary legacy added priceless value to America. Their artistic rebellion successfully inspired drastic shifts in consciousness for all Americans by creating alternative realities with their literature. It empowered Black Americans to consider themselves worthy of power and pride. It also shifted power dynamics in American cultural and artistic institutions by demanding respect. Through it all, writers of the period gained inspiration and strength from Africa. Many of them considered themselves Pan-Africanists and showed their loyalty to Pan-Africanism through their relentless activism, visual aesthetic, and recurrent themes in their writing.

At times, African literary traditions have directly influenced American cultural and moral values and swayed public and political opinions. At others, Africa has been a muse of mythic proportions for American writers. Even amid political and social debate, Africa stands at the center of dialogue that has shaped American history and literature, molding the hearts and minds of all American people. Now that is something to write home about!

HANDS-ON LEARNING

Read and compare Uncle Tom's Cabin (Stowe) and Josiah Henson's autobiography.

◇

Act out and/or illustrate a traditional African folktale.

◇

Read and compare antebellum slave narratives with post-Civil War narratives.

◇

Create a Pan-African Timeline, highlighting key political and social events of the Black Power Movement and the African Liberation Movements.

◇

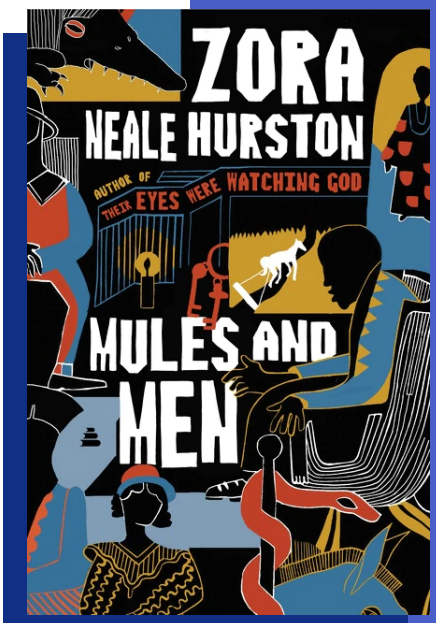
Facilitate a Socratic Seminar focusing on a text by a Pan-Africanist writer. Consider "Ego Tripping" by Nikki Giovanni.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites

Library of Congress - Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938 – free access to this collection that contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves.

University of Virginia - American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology



YouTube.com

Winter in America by Gil Scott Heron

Middle Passage by Sonia Sanchez

The Harlem Renaissance narrated by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

The Harlem Renaissance's cultural explosion, in photographs by PBS NewsHour

Books

Mules and Men by Zora Neale Hurston

And the People Could Fly by Virginia Hamilton

The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance edited by Alaine Locke

The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s by James Smethurst

Children of Blood and Bone Young Adult Series by Tomi Adeyemi

Community

Black Writers Museum - www.blackwritersmuseum.com - Located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, it is a venue and forum for the public to explore, celebrate, and experience the wonders of writing and reading through the exhibition and study of Black Literature.

Black Writers Collective www.blackwriters.org - an online community that offers a space for Black writers to get creative support and accountability.

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Author, travel writer, and educator, Kana Kavon has written books, blogs, and curricula that inform and inspire intercultural dialogue and world exploration. Her publications include *Third Root of Mexico: Exploring Afro-Mexican History and Culture K-12 Curriculum Guide*, *The 50 States: Amazing Landscapes. Fascinating People. Wonderful Wildlife.,* contributions in DK travel books *Go Here Instead* and *Eyewitness Mexico,* and her blog www.TheUnlikelyLife.com.

This curriculum guide is a culminating creation from a year-long project of the Global Education Center exploring Black Arts in America: What the American Arts Scene Would Be Missing without the Contributions, Influences, and Aesthetics of Mother Africa and Her Descendants.

GLOBAL EDUCATION CENTER is a nonprofit multicultural, anti-bias education center that uses the arts of diverse cultures to highlight the commonalities of all people and promote cross-cultural understanding and respect through highly participatory arts programming that creates experiences in the arts that aid in dispelling myths, dismantling stereotypes, unlearning biases and alleviating fears. All programming is designed to create an environment of inclusion and a climate promoting wellness and emotional wellbeing.