

Poems of Arrival

Connecting Middle School Students to the Colonial Era

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THE GIRL FROM QUEENS is quiet and shy—one of the smallest students in her seventh-grade class, she is also hearing impaired, and wears special headphones throughout the day connected directly to a microphone each of her teachers drapes around their neck... that is, when she gets up the nerve to remind them. Now, while her classmates yell and play and wait for their teacher to return from a brief sojourn into the hall, she sits silently, writing on a piece of unlined paper, apparently oblivious to the caterwauling going on around her:

LITZY, SEVENTH GRADE, QUEENS

I still remember the waves of the ocean:
there is always a light when you become brave
and show the world who you really are...

This incredibly bold statement of potentiality—from what seems such an unlikely source—is more than simply an example of the kind of magic that can occur when you connect students' creative writing to their history and social studies texts: it is a testament to the fantastic work that can be done while adhering to the ideologies of the Common Core State

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Standards mandated in the past three years by Boards of Ed., principals, and governors of states across the nation.

At this point anybody reading this probably knows exactly, in more or less specificity, what the Common Core Standards are. The set of “principles,” written by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, has the same simple goal most educational initiatives have: to help ensure students in the US are prepared to enter and succeed in college courses when they graduate high school. And as with most educational initiatives, implementation of these standards has been fraught with controversy: standards mean documentation, mean testing, mean specific structures and, in a sense, mean someone else telling you what to do in your classroom—the kinds of things that, some think, make Kafka cringe, Orwell an oracle, and our students automatons still stuck in the factory schooling system of the 1950s.

For teaching artists and others who understand the importance of the arts in education, the Common Core State Standards present another challenge: how can we complement the intention of these standards and still inspire our students to be engaged with and excited about learning? We know that the kind of inspiration arts education provides is key to the positive learning outcomes that are the Common Core's *raison-d'être*s, but for writers in the schools working

with these new standards, where does creative writing fit in?

The answer is simpler than it might seem: the Common Core can actually be an incredible *gift* to teachers of creative writing. It can enliven and revive a teaching artist's best practices, while pushing us toward innovation and new ideas—things that can only boost our goals for our students.

Personally, like many teaching artists I know, I find that any time a principal or teacher wants me to follow nearly any kind of guidelines it makes me bristle—*ahem*, we are teaching *artists*, after all: our job is to color *outside* the lines, not be constrained by them. But I also find that once I tackle the new challenge, I almost always come up with the same result: being forced out of my comfort zone to teach to a specific curriculum generates exercise after exercise that is practically a fire with innovation and a new energy that my “old faithful” exercises have perhaps lost over time.

Wrestling with the Common Core is no different: when tasked with working with seventh graders as they studied the Colonies and then the American Revolution in the winter and spring of 2012—my first real tangle with the Common Core—I nearly turned the residency down. To create a whole new syllabus was unenticing enough, but to do so based on the poets and writers and record-keepers—necessary to implement the standards—of the 1750s? While I do know in my heart that Blake, Byron, and Burns were the Beats of their day, my teaching has tended to revolve more around newer poets like Brainard, Baraka, and Brooks.

Unsurprisingly, though, I have found my practice blossoming under what I once would have considered the “weight” of Eighteenth Century American writers. Using primary documents like *Reminiscences*

of a Nonagenarian, Sarah Anna Emery's record of her mother Sarah Smith Emery's memories of the Colonial Period, or George Washington's wartime letters to Martha, as starting points for students to reimagine their own possible pasts and futures has led to teachers telling me time and again of increased engagement of their students in discussion of their standard history texts—all while embracing and enforcing the Core.

But the exercise that seems to fire the imaginations of my students in the most consistently surprising ways is the one Litzy was doing that day her teacher stepped out. The exercise is based on the poem “On Being Brought From Africa to America,” by Phyllis Wheatley, and is particularly stirring for both minority students and girls, while offering the chance for every student to imagine the circumstances of their own immigration stories.

Wheatley's story is inspiring on its own: sold as a seven-year-old from West Africa, she overcame the fact that teaching slaves to write was *illegal* during the Colonial period to become the first published

African-American poet in history. The fame that this young woman acquired against such odds—George Washington praised her, and she was invited to meet King George III during a trip to England—is enough to excite young students about their own potential. But the poem itself offers a particularly fine chance to address Common Core Standards while practicing the kind of creative writing we teaching artists are best at:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 “Their colour is a diabolic die.”

Exerehenis qui nam fugitas
 explabo. Estrum eturia
 cone cumquas pelest, ea
 suntur, oditionet liam qui
 occus, sunt ipis volorum
 qui id experum et laborep
 ratisquias as essin consequi

Remember, *Christians, Negros, black as Cain,*
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

The poem is dense, first and foremost, and therefore begs to be broken down line by line, nearly word by word, in exactly the way students will have to do with writing when they take their assessments later. But as it is unpacked students find the richness that lies within: the story of the girl, brought from Africa in a violent and horrible way, who yet embraces the positive aspects of her forced emigration: through it she has come to know the comforts of religion. But it doesn't stop there: because then, with that knowledge, Wheatley uses the very terms of that religion to call out the injustices she sees all around her. The poem is therefore startling, powerful, and ironic, all at once—just the things students love about the poets I usually teach. But more than that: it also touches directly on nearly every single Common Core reading standard for grades K-12; as well as Common Core Standards for History/Social Studies 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8. (And of course many of the writing standards, too, as you'll see below.)

After breaking the poem down, I ask students to imagine themselves back in that time: who would they have been, back then? From where would they be coming to the Colonies? Under what circumstances? What would it feel like to come somewhere new, all by themselves? And, too, I ask them to think about their own “journeys”—when working with immigrant populations those are often literal, but with other groups of students they become journeys of the mind: journeys into their family's past, their own future.

Then it's time to get writing. I ask them to follow Wheatley's form, if not her language: to start by describing how they would have travelled to the Colonies, and the things they might have seen along the way. What did they leave behind? And what did they find when they got here? What kind of transformations might have taken place within them as they arrived? Finally, I ask them to point out the things

they see around them that need to be transformed—the inequalities, unfairness, or problems they can imagine in the past, or even see in their own lives now.

The results, as I said, can show the powerful connection to the historical context so desired in the Common Core:

GIOVANNY, SEVENTH GRADE, QUEENS

...walking step by step
of hurting
beating marks on back
God is helping me
to come back
starving to death
without no health
running away
to a better place...

Or they can show excitement at the mere idea of escape implied in a journey:

SEAN, SEVENTH GRADE, QUEENS

and the ride
went on
and on
and I sang a lovely song...

The students take the text and they make it their own: they show nuance and depth, insight and understanding, and in so doing bring a new emotional life to their previous understanding of the time period:

RUTH, SEVENTH GRADE, MANHATTAN

As I lay on the hard wooden bed
all alone, not a sight or a sound
no one to hold me and say they love me

I longed for her voice and comfort
the stories she read to me
the way she held me in her hands

I heard her laughing in my head
and wished to see her smile.

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 quo totatem voluptio tem ressequis molestrum

The outcomes can be astounding, but even more, they outline a clear path for creativity amongst the Common Core hedgerows. Creative writing and standards, linked like this, couldn't be less opposing: they inform, inspire, and enhance each other, with the Common Core forcing teaching artists to bring new life to their work, and creative writing leading directly—and in amazing ways—toward proficiency in the Common Core. Together, they can bring a perspective and depth to student writing that, after all, is one of the gifts the arts offer us.

And then there is the other gift: the revival and revelation that can come from the challenge of teaching with a different idea in mind. For me, *no Common Core = no Phyllis Wheatley*—and for Litzy, the girl from Queens who sat quietly writing while the other students in her class bounced off the walls, it was Wheatley—and Wheatley specifically—who was the catalyst for her declaration of future strength, as the rest of her poem clearly states:

that we are brave and strong
 just like the others
 we are not weak
 we are mighty
 strong
 and powerful. 🤘