

Exploring Black & Blue: A Study Guide

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Originally adopted as the seal of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in England in the 1780s, this woodcut image appears on the 1837 broadside publication of John Greenleaf Whittier's antislavery poem, "Our Countrymen in Chains."

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Black & Blue

Four Hundred Years of Struggle and Transcendence

Presented by Gemini Ink Dramatic Readers Theater
and the Estate of Sterling Houston
Compiled and written by Sterling Houston, 1945-2006

Wednesday, February 15, 7 pm

Palo Alto College Performing Arts Center
1400 W. Villaret Blvd., San Antonio, TX

Free and open to the public

Tickets are required due to limited seating.

Please pick up your free tickets at Gemini Ink or
Palo Alto College Performing Arts Center Box Office, February 6-10, 1-5pm.
Limit four tickets per pickup.

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In one of his last collaborations with Gemini Ink, beloved writer Sterling Houston (1945-2006) scripted the popular repertory piece *Black & Blue: 400 Years of Struggle and Transcendence*, pairing traditional jazz and blues with documents from the American slavery era. Four award-winning actors and jazz musicians—Bett Butler, SkuR Jones, Danielle King, and Ron Wilkins—bring history to life in this hour-long snapshot of the African-American odyssey, which includes public postings offering rewards for runaway slaves, excerpts from letters and journals by both slaves and slave owners, and a San Antonio ordinance defining punishment for slaves caught out after curfew. Described in audience evaluations as "A virtuosic display of writing, singing, and telling the truth," this performance is the kick-off event for San Antonio's celebrations of Black History Month and is free and open to the public.

The following is a study guide, for adults and mature young people, designed to accompany *Black and Blue*. (*Due to the intense nature of some subject matter, parental discretion is advised.*)

"There is an undeniable connection between the shared life-experiences of enslaved Africans in America and the nature of the art generated by that common heritage," notes playwright Sterling Houston in *Black & Blue*. In this Gemini Ink Dramatic Readers Theater production—through letters, stories, poems, songs, theatrical excerpts, and actual historical documents from the slavery and civil rights eras—we view revealing snapshots of the African-American journey.

Mining the depths of human resilience, “The old Africans...tapped into the ageless resources of their cultural memories and used the song, the drum, the story-twice-told as an antidote to the poison of enslavement,” incorporating European and native American influences to create a unique culture which has greatly influenced and contributed to American and world culture in general.

(For a historical overview of the African-American experience, visit the African American Odyssey exhibit of the Library of Congress online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohhtml/exhibit/aointro.html>).

I. The Power of Popular Song

“Black & Blue”

The title song “Black and Blue” (music by Fats Waller, words by Andy Razaf) was written in 1929 for the Broadway revue *Hot Chocolates*. Gangster Dutch Schultz, one of the show’s investors, suggested that Waller and Razaf write a novelty number about a woman whose man left her for a lover with lighter skin. (It’s said that he pointed a loaded gun at Razaf’s head to emphasize the seriousness of his request.) Razaf took the opportunity to pen a poignant metaphor of protest against racial discrimination. Read the lyrics and more at <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/printerfriendlylyricsblackandblue.html>.

“Black and Blue” was recorded by Louis Armstrong and remained a life-long part of his repertoire. (During a 1956 tour of Ghana, he performed the song for an audience of 100,000 African fans; moving footage of that experience is featured in many documentaries, including the 2000 release *The Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong*, available on VHS and DVD.)

“Black and Blue” earned a page in the great American songbook and is still frequently performed and recorded today.

“Brother, Where Are You?”

Playwright, poet, songwriter, entertainer, social activist Oscar Brown, Jr. has been called the father of rap music. Read a short biography at <http://www.visionaryproject.org/browncar/>.

For a version of Oscar Brown, Jr.’s song “Brother, Where Are You?” with additional lyrics by rap artist Boots Riley, click here: http://www.pbs.org/kcet/senioryear/music/brother_pop.html.

Read Up:

Nonfiction: *Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf* by Barry Singer (Schirmer 1993)

Nonfiction: *Ain’t Misbehavin’: The Story Of Fats Waller* by Ed Kirkeby with Duncan P. Schiedt & Sinclair Trill (Da Capo Press 1966), a narrative of “the most perfect of all the jazz pianists” by his personal manager.

Poetry, Nonfiction: *What It Is: Poems and Opinions of Oscar Brown Jr.* by Oscar Brown Jr. (Oyster Knife Press)

Speak Out:

With the lyrics to “Black and Blue,” Andy Razaf continues an age-old tradition of using song lyrics metaphorically as a political statement. In song, poetry, and literature, the metaphor can offer a safe platform from which to criticize established seats of power. What were the risks in writing a song protesting racial discrimination in 1929?

It’s traditionally thought that earlier examples of “protest by metaphor” include nursery rhymes (<http://www.english.uwaterloo.ca/courses/engl208c/esharris.htm>) and spirituals (<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Literature/>)

functional.cfm). What are some other historical examples from literature using metaphor to criticize the powers-that-be? What are some examples from contemporary popular music?

Does adding rhythm, rhyme, and music to words and ideas add to their effectiveness as a tool for social change? Why or why not?

The bridge of “Black and Blue” includes the line, “I’m white inside....” What do you think the lyricist means? How has our society historically used the words “black” and “white” to refer to character or value, good or evil? What are the implications of using language that way?

Do the Write Thing:

Write a short, straightforward essay about a social injustice that you perceive around you today; then write a poem, rap, or song lyrics about the same topic, using metaphor. Present both to a group of friends for feedback. Ask them which is more effective in connecting the topic with the audience, and why.

II. Slavery: the Economics

Playwright Sterling Houston describes commerce in early America as “an economic system that required for its proper functioning the employment without compensation of massive organized work gangs to support the cultivation of labor intensive high-end cash crops like sugar, cotton, coffee and tobacco, which were exported at great expense to European markets. On the basis of this wealth, our nation’s earliest great fortunes were acquired.”

For an overview of the economics of slavery in America, check out:

http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_cotton.htm

http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_indigo.htm

Read Up:

Nonfiction: *Slaves in the Family* (Ballantine Books) by Edward Ball

An invitation to a family reunion in South Carolina led to this well-researched biographical family history. Edward Ball explores the regrettable legacy of slave ownership and trafficking in his background, visiting the Bunce Island fortress off the coast of Sierra Leone where his ancestors loaded frightened captives on to slave ships.

Speak Out:

How did the availability and use of slave labor affect the antebellum American economic system? How has this early concept of labor without compensation impacted labor relations today? How has it affected our general attitudes toward labor and work in America as opposed to other industrialized nations whose industry was not founded on slave labor? Do some businesses and institutions still operate on this master/slave model (authoritarian management, low wages, poor or non-existent benefits)?

Slavery was illegal in the Northern U.S. and most European countries; yet, these regions had a voracious appetite for cotton cloth produced in the South. Are there similar situations in contemporary life where a society or country continually feeds the market for a product while deploring the conditions under which it is produced?

Do the Write Thing:

Imagine that slave labor never existed in America. What kinds of industry might have developed as opposed to labor-intensive industries like cotton production? How would our history have turned out differently? How would it affect our daily lives in the products we buy or in the way we interact with each other? Write a memoir of a day in your life as you would imagine it had slavery never been a part of our culture.

III. Slavery: the Everyday Reality

Black and Blue includes a letter by Roswell King, who spent his early career as overseer of two large plantations belonging to Philadelphia society scion Pierce Butler. King writes, "To treat Negroes with humanity is like giving pearls to swine....Those animals must be ruled with a rod of iron."

Well-known for his cruel treatment of slaves, King went on to become a successful Georgia politician and industrialist. The town of Roswell, Georgia, is named after him, and his portrait hangs in the local Presbyterian church. Read more about Roswell King at <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/HistoryArchaeology/AntebellumEra/People1&id=h-800>.

British Shakespearean actress Fanny Kemble met and married Roswell King's employer, socially prominent Pierce Butler, who she met while touring America. Moving to one of her husband's Georgia plantations, she kept a journal detailing the harsh realities of slavery, including the cruelty of plantation overseer King. Her attempts to persuade her husband to free his slaves were unsuccessful and were probably a factor in the tensions leading to their divorce. Upon her return to England, she published the journal, which influenced public opinion in favor of abolitionists at the onset of the Civil War. Read this excerpt about enslaved women and childbirth from Fanny Kemble's diary: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2922t.html>.

Read more about Fanny Kemble at <http://www.cfa.ilstu.edu/jmwilso4/aboutfanny.htm>.

Pictures Worth a Thousand Words:

To see how artists and illustrators from the era depicted slavery, click here:

http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/082_slave.html

Read Up:

Nonfiction: North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920, an online series of biographies and autobiographies at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>.

Nonfiction: *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (Brown Thrasher Books) by Frances Anne Kemble.

Read it online at <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=KemPlan.xml&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>.

Fiction: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (Random House), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a woman who kills her daughter rather than allow her to be enslaved.

Fiction: *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones (Harper Collins), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about Henry Townsend, a black farmer and landowner who is also a slaveowner.

Speak Out:

To some, naming a town in Georgia after Roswell King is tantamount to naming a town in Germany after Adolf Hitler. Read here about a similar contemporary situation: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/01/01/MNGMGGFS8H1.DTL>.

Can you name other people in contemporary society who, identified with immoral, cruel, or unethical behavior, have nonetheless held respected roles in social or religious institutions? If a person does both great good and great evil, what are the parameters determining whether they should be honored or vilified?

Do the Write Thing:

Write an imaginary conversation between Roswell King and Fanny Kemble.

IV. The Flight to Freedom

“Mr. Abraham Lincoln he gonna emancipate
If you just be patient, if you just hush up and wait,
Gonna shout with Juba through the garden gate
But it’s already too late.
Hell, I’m too tired to wait....”

—from “The Ballad of Henry Box Brown” by Sterling Houston

Many enslaved people risked dire consequences—torture and punishment, often leading to maiming or death—to escape. Read an overview at <http://www.inmotionaame.org/print.cfm?migration=2>.

Read about the Underground Railroad, a network of sympathizers who helped countless enslaved people make their way to the Northern U.S. and Canada (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>), and one of its most famous engineers, Harriet Tubman (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html>).

Read the letter by Joseph Taper, an enslaved man who escaped to freedom in Canada.

<http://www.wqln.org/safeharbor/Archives/Letters/Taper.htm>.

Sterling Houston’s play “The Ballad of Henry Box Brown” tells the true story of a man who mailed himself to freedom. Read about him here: http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Brown_Henry_Box_ca_1815.

Pictures Worth a Thousand Words:

Slaves risked severe punishment by running away but were frequently subjected to brutality even when they stayed. The University of Virginia has a collection of historical images depicting the punishment of slaves—often at the whim of their owners—for escape attempts and transgressions real and imagined at <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/slavery/return.php?categorynum=16&categoryName=Physical Punishment, Rebellion, Running Away> (warning: these are disturbing images containing graphic violence).

Read Up:

Nonfiction: *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Oxford University Press) by Henry Box Brown, Richard Newman, Henry Louis Gates, the true story of a man who mailed himself to freedom in a wooden box.

Nonfiction: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Dover) by Harriet Jacobs

After enduring abuse from a brutal owner and separation from her children, Harriet Jacobs hid in a cramped attic space for seven years, finally escaping to the North and reuniting with her family.

Speak Out:

Henry Box Brown and Harriet Jacobs confined themselves—one to a wooden box, one to a tiny garret for seven years—in order to gain freedom. Countless others went into hiding for years. Martin Luther King Jr. and others went to jail for it. What other examples can name of people who gave up freedom in the short term to achieve it in the long run? How do you define freedom? What is it worth to you? What would you risk in order to achieve it? What would you give up?

V. Free at Last?

Read the full text of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail:" http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

Dr. King's bio: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/history/about-dr-king/>.

Read Up:

Nonfiction: *Parting the Waters, Pillar of Fire, and At Canaan's Edge*, by Taylor Branch (Simon & Schuster), a trilogy hailed as the definitive history of the civil rights movement.

Nonfiction: *Carry Me Home—Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Movement* by Diane McWhorter (Simon & Schuster).

Part personal memoir and part investigative journalism, this well-researched history of the apex of civil rights battles in 1963 Birmingham lays bare the behind-the-scenes collusion between the city's wealthy white elite, the police, and the klan in opposing integration. Read a review at <http://www.racematters.org/bombinghamrevisited.htm>.

Speak Out:

Answer these questions Dr. King poses in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail:"

"There are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.' Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust?"

Do the Write Thing:

"There was never a time when—

Dissent!

Resistance!

Struggle!

—were not a common response within the enslaved community and among enlightened free people pushing for change. Without this dynamic, there would have been no Underground Railroad, no Abolitionist movement, and ultimately no Emancipation."

—Sterling Houston, *Black & Blue*

What if there had been no Emancipation Proclamation? Write a memoir of a day in your life as you imagine it had there never been successful, organized resistance to slavery.

The Power of Popular song: "Strange Fruit"

Under the pseudonym Lewis Allen, Jewish schoolteacher and union activist Abe Meeropol wrote the poem "Strange Fruit" after seeing a photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. Jazz vocalist Billie Holiday and Sonny White composed the melody, and it became the signature song of her career, bringing awareness of lynching to a wider audience. It was first recorded in 1939, the same year *Gone With the Wind* won eight Oscars, including Best Picture.

Listen to a sample of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>.

Read an overview of the practice of lynching to maintain white supremacy in "The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1880-1950" at <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html#b>.

Read literary references to lynching by authors such as Richard Wright, James Weldon Johnson, Mark Twain, Lorraine Hansberry, Ralph Ellison, and others at <http://www.americanlynching.com/literary-old.html> (warning: these are disturbing descriptions containing graphic violence).

Speak Out:

How does the portrayal of antebellum South in movies such as *Gone With the Wind* differ from that of historical documentation? Why? Are there parallels today, where movies and other purveyors of popular culture “sanitize” events in our recent history?

Do the Write Thing:

Study the photograph which inspired “Strange Fruit” (warning: these are disturbing images containing graphic violence) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Shipp_and_Abram_Smith.

Observe the onlookers in the picture. What is their reaction to what’s going on? What is the general mood? Pick out a face in the crowd. Pretend that you and this person are sitting across from each other at a kitchen table fifty years after this photograph was taken. What questions would you ask them? What do you think their answers would be? Write a dialogue as you imagine it.

Now pretend that you are sitting across that same kitchen table from a son or daughter of Thomas Shipp or Abram Smith. What would you ask them? How would they respond? Write a dialogue.

VI. Survival...Healing

“Think about our legacy, our common history; people of all colors who call this world home. Listen to the music of Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday; to the words of Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, the immortal Zora Neal Hurston; and understand why there is reason to rejoice.

In even the direst of circumstances, these human spirits inspire us because they refused to be destroyed; and survival is where healing begins.”

—Sterling Houston, *Black & Blue*

Speak Out:

Read the above paragraph. Why is there reason to rejoice? What do you think the author means by the statement, “survival is where healing begins”? What, or who, needs healing?

(Exploring Black & Blue was developed by Gemini Ink interns René Villanueva and Michelle Mitchell and former Writers in Communities Director Bett Butler.)