

Workshop 6

Cultural Geography

Introduction

This workshop session introduces the analysis of cultural geography artifacts as a tool in the literature classroom. Peter Hales, professor of art history and American studies at University of Illinois, Chicago, analyzes two photographs of a Chicago neighborhood to help teachers enhance their reading of American literature texts.

By looking at two intellectual products from the same culture—the photographs and excerpts from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*—you will better understand the cultural divisions and social class issues that contemporary Chicago neighborhoods face.

During the course of the session, you will learn how to search for cultural geography artifacts to help teach American literature. In the onscreen class, Peter discusses how he uses cultural geography artifacts to illuminate American culture in his own classroom. He provides high school teachers with ideas about how to read the two photographs; he also suggests specific lesson plans.

We then follow the onscreen teachers into the computer lab where they work with Peter, Laura Arnold Leibman (Reed College English professor), and each other to find artifacts that supplement the themes and context of the literature they are currently teaching.

Next, we follow Michaela Miller, a teacher at River Ridge High School in Olympia, Washington, into her own high school classroom. We watch as she models a similar lesson with her students. Finally we will hear Michaela's reflections on her own teaching practices.

Before the Session

Before watching the “Cultural Geography” video, be sure to:

- Guide: Read the Cultural Geography Reading.
- Video: Watch the *American Passages* episode “Search for Identity.” (The episode can be viewed on the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org. Click on “Video on Demand” or go to <http://www.learner.org/resources/series164.html> and click on the VoD icon next to the appropriate program title.)
- Web: Download the photograph *Transition and Gentrification*,* (serial #9098) from the *American Passages* archive site at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php.
- Literature: Read the following vignettes from Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*: “Our Good Day”; “Laughter”; “A Rice Sandwich”; “Chanclas”; “Geraldo No Last Name”; “Bums in the Attic”; “Four Skinny Trees”; “The Monkey Garden”; “The Three Sisters”; and “Red Clowns.”

As you read, consider the following close reading questions. See the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix for instructions on effective close reading.

- In what ways does the narrator’s environment affect her in these vignettes?
- Make a list of the different geographical references Cisneros uses in the stories. How do these references relate to the culture and lifestyle of the narrator and her family?

Synopsis of Peter Hales’s Presentation

- Peter begins by explaining how cultural geographers are always attentive to space. He points out that the places we inhabit shape us in many ways; simultaneously, we shape them. The study of cultural geography also examines the way the geographical past influences our way of thinking about the future and the spaces we create.
- Peter talks about the first artifact, a photograph of a poster for The Pilsen Gateway Condominiums. The Pilsen is the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago where Cisneros grew up and sets her novel. He walks the teachers through a close reading, discussing the various immigrant groups who settled in this space and then were pushed out of it.
- He then discusses the next photograph: a house located in a typical working-class Hispanic neighborhood. Peter points out different ways that the narrator in Cisneros’s text might see the house. He goes on to discuss different points of view concerning suburbanization and the American Dream.
- Ultimately, Peter examines the connections between the second photograph and the stories. He urges teachers to use examples of cultural geography—built structures, landscapes, and rural and urban environments—to interpret literature.

* indicates a reference in the Glossary.

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts

Facilitators:

- Before this workshop session, you will need to download the first photograph that Peter used (*Transition and Gentrification*, serial #9098) from the *American Passages* archive and print out copies for all your participants. Be sure to print and copy the descriptive information that accompanies the image. (For further information on how to navigate the archive, see instructions in the front matter.)
- Begin the workshop by watching program 6: “Cultural Geography” through the *American Passages* excerpted clip. Watch for approximately 11:30 minutes.
- Follow up with the discussion activity below. The discussion should take approximately 10 minutes.

Activity 1: Discussion of the Literary Movement

1. As a whole group, discuss what literature you have taught or are currently teaching from this literary movement. If you don't currently teach anything from this movement, how might you add it to your curriculum?

Other authors from *American Passages*' "Search For Identity" for potential discussion:

- **Maxine Hong Kingston** (1940–) Memoirist and novelist born in California to parents from China, Maxine Hong Kingston writes about the difficulty of deciphering particular cultural behaviors and practices in her memoir *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*.
- **Leslie Feinberg** (1949–) Journalist and author born in Buffalo, New York, Leslie Feinberg struggled to find her identity in a culture that had no place for her as a transgendered individual. Her autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* is an account of a young woman struggling to come to terms with her sexual identity.
- **Toni Morrison** (1931–) Novelist Toni Morrison is known for placing her novels in specific historical contexts and connecting the personal lives of her characters to public events. *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* are three of her more commonly taught novels.
- **Toni Cade Bambara** (1939–) Short story writer and novelist, Toni Cade Bambara is often praised for the lyrical style of Black American English in her writing. *The Salt Eaters* and *If Blessing Comes* are two of her novels.
- **Alice Walker** (1944–) Poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist, one of Alice Walker's best-known works is *The Color Purple*, which won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize. Walker's talent for portraying the rural South and the character of its inhabitants comes through in many of her works.
- **David Mamet** (1947–) A playwright and screenwriter born on the Jewish side of Chicago, David Mamet is the author of the 1984 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a play that uses the business of sales as a metaphor for the American condition.
- **Diane Glancy** (1941–) Poet, short story writer, playwright, and professor, Diane Glancy's Cherokee heritage is prevalent throughout her fiction. *Trigger Dance* and *Firesticks* are two of her works that feature aspects of the Native American oral tradition.
- **Judith Ortiz Cofer** (1952–) Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, Judith Ortiz Cofer infuses her fiction with the oral storytelling tradition. She writes about growing up in Puerto Rican communities. *Terms of Survival* and *Reaching for the Mainland* are amongst her works.
- **Thomas Pynchon** (1937–) Short story writer and novelist, the elusive Thomas Pynchon is known for writing about the complexity of the postmodern condition. *Entropy* and *The Crying of Lot 49* are two of his better-known works.

For more information on these authors, visit the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org.

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

2. How did the Cultural Geography Reading change or enhance your view of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* or other literary works you have read in this movement?

Facilitators:

- Continue watching the video until the point where Peter Hales finishes reading the first artifact (*Transition and Gentrification*, serial #9098). Begin at the title First Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 9:30 minutes.
- Divide the session participants into groups of three and hand out the previously downloaded cultural geography artifact. Each group should have the same photograph to analyze. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 2: Reading the First Artifact

1. In your group, analyze the photograph that your facilitator provides for you. First, make some initial observations about the artifact:

- What aspects of this photograph make this a cultural geography artifact?
- What prior information about this neighborhood would you need to understand the meaning of the sign in the photograph?

2. Next, read the artifact more closely; use the CAATS acronym below, along with the Cultural Geography Reading and synopsis of Peter Hales's lesson.

CAATS

Creator: Who created this artifact? What do we know about the person(s) who created it? How did it influence his/her life at the time it was created? Would the creator find relevant connections to the literature you are pairing with this artifact?

Assumptions: What do you know about the context of this artifact? What assumptions can you make based on prior information that you bring to this analysis?

Audience/User: Who was the audience for this object when it was originally created? What leads you to this assumption?

Time and Place: When and where was this artifact created?

Significance: Why is this artifact important? How does it help explain the literature you are teaching with it? Does the context of the artifact parallel the context of your literature?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- After discussing the first photograph, *Transition and Gentrification*, spend five to seven minutes discussing the excerpts from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. Use the close reading questions from the Before the Session section as a starting point for discussion.
- Continue watching the video of Peter reading and making connections to the second artifact. Begin at the title Second Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 8:30 minutes. Stop the video after this second artifact reading, before the title Lesson Planning.
- Then do the activity below. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 3: Connecting Literature to the Artifact

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions:

- What is the first step that Peter Hales takes with the onscreen teachers to discuss the cultural geography artifacts and their histories?
- How does he move the teachers' discussion from the artifact analysis to connecting the artifact with the literature they are reading?
- What techniques does Peter use on-screen that help you as a viewer? Could you use these techniques in your own classroom?

2. Return to small groups. Begin to draw connections between the photograph and the text. Use the following guiding questions:

- What makes the city landscapes in both the photograph and the text meaningful?
- How does the narrator in Cisneros's stories use her surroundings as a metaphor for imprisonment?
- What are the physical spaces that change the narrator?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- Watch the Lesson Planning and In the Classroom portions of the video. Begin at the title Lesson Planning and watch for approximately 34:30 minutes.
- Then do the next activity. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 4: Classroom Strategies Discussion/Create Lesson Plan

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions: You just watched Michaela Miller apply what she had learned about connecting artifacts and literature to her own classroom. Take 10–15 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the benefits of using the computer lab as your classroom? What are some of the pitfalls?
- What methods did Michaela use to help her students understand the contextual connections between the images of different prep schools and J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*?
- What are some techniques that Michaela used to help her students search for cultural geography artifacts to accompany Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*? What are the benefits and disadvantages of selecting artifacts before class versus having students look for artifacts themselves?

2. In your same small groups, brainstorm different literary movements/pieces of literature that you could use with the *Transition and Gentrification* photograph or the cultural geography artifacts you saw in Michaela's classroom.

Facilitators:

- Watch Michaela Miller's reflective interview. Begin at the title Reflection and watch for approximately three minutes.
- Ask session participants to comment on what Michaela felt worked in her classroom. Did this parallel what they thought worked as they were watching?

Building a Lesson Plan and Teaching With Artifacts

For the detailed six-step process for artifact selection, see the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix.

Homework

1. Create a lesson plan using a cultural geography artifact with a piece of literature that you are currently teaching.

For example: Have your students select a character in the novel/short story that you are teaching. Next, have them draw the space that they see this character inhabiting. In addition to this drawing, they should write a short explanation why that space is representative of the character.

OR

Research the histories of famous buildings or popular sites in your community using the library or historical society. Use a camera to make a visual record of what those areas look like today. Compare your own photographs to historical descriptions and older pictures of these sites. What changes have occurred? How are these buildings used today compared to their uses in the past? What are the larger implications of these changes? (For example, the advent of automobile ownership led to the rise of shopping centers outside of urban downtowns, which were often more accessible to pedestrians.)

Share this lesson with fellow teachers at the next workshop session.

2. See next week's Before the Session section.

Artifacts and Literature Pairings: Cultural Geography Artifacts

The following cultural geography artifacts can be found in the *American Passages* archive at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php. Enter the serial number to view a picture of the item and a detailed description.

Artifact and Serial

View, Dismal Swamp,
North Carolina
(1850) (#1876)

View of Hannibal,
Marion Co., Missouri
(1869) (#3994)

Ancient Map
(1555) (#7672)

Literary Movement and Literature

Slavery & Freedom:
Harriet Jacobs's
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Regional Realism:
Mark Twain's
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Exploring Borderlands:
Alvar Nunez Cabeza De Vaca's
The Relation of Alvar Nunez Cabeza De Vaca

Teaching Tip

- Michaela introduces her students to the concept of cultural geography before she begins the lesson. Having your students brainstorm about cultural geography and how it influences their lives would be a good pre-lesson activity. Have students talk about their own towns and neighborhoods. Ask them to discuss how where they live influences their own lives and behaviors. Then have them extend this concept to characters in the novel they are reading.

Notes

Session Reading

Cultural Geography Reading

What do we mean by cultural geography artifacts?

Cultural geography references how the spaces people occupy are infused with cultural significance. As Peter Hales notes in the video, the study of cultural geography explores both literal mapping and maps of meaning. Literal mapping involves the actual physical characteristics of space, both naturally occurring spaces (such as rivers, hills, or ravines) and human constructions (such as freeways, skyscrapers, or city parks). Maps of meaning, which are almost always intuitive and unrecorded, indicate the ways that people relate to particular spaces and how those spaces shape their understandings of themselves. A child who plays in a city park would likely have a different sense of herself in relationship to that space than would the groundskeeper whose job is to clean and maintain the park. Cultural geography artifacts include maps, photographs, paintings, drawings, or depictions of spaces through other media. Cultural geography artifacts also include zoning laws, census data, and any other records of how people occupy and use space.

Why are they useful to bring into a literature classroom?

Because cultural geography shapes the ways individuals think about themselves and their communities, an analysis of cultural geography artifacts can offer students a useful tool to better understand the spaces represented in literary texts. These spaces are infused with meaning, both for the characters and for the reader. For example, Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place in and around a single building. But considering the story within the broader setting of New Orleans—a city often depicted as a site of greater sexual promiscuity and cultural intermixing than other areas of the American South—students may better appreciate the themes of sexuality, ethnicity, and culture in the text.

Contextualizing cultural geography artifacts and literary texts: The case of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros's 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street* is infused with an interest in identity that is common to literature of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Growing out of the Civil Rights, Women's Liberation, and Gay and Lesbian Rights movements, this literature explores the relationship between group identity and individual experience. Gender Studies and Ethnic Studies were established as academic disciplines during this time period to provide venues where these texts could be explored. Increasingly, authors, critics, and readers have come to understand identity not as rigid and discrete, but as fluid and overlapping—at times even contradictory.

In presenting the fictional Esperanza, a young Chicana, to readers, Cisneros does not offer a traditional linear narrative. Instead, she crafts a series of vignettes in which aspects of Esperanza's experiences and character are gradually revealed. The episodes are tied together in that they follow Esperanza's exploration of the house, street, and neighborhood in which she lives, revealing her growing understanding of herself and her community. While earlier *bildungsroman* literature might trace a young protagonist's development by portraying his journey out into the world, late twentieth-century texts such as Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* examine their protagonists' complicated attachments to the spaces and communities in which they already live. Cultural geography artifacts can help students better comprehend the specific spaces depicted in these texts, guiding them to appreciate how the authors engage the relationship between place and identity.

Cultural Geography Reading, cont'd.

Contextualizing ritual artifacts and literary texts: The case of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

A hundred years before Cisneros, Morrison, Kingston, and their contemporaries wrote, "local color" authors also crafted literary texts with a keen understanding of how particular places conveyed meaning for characters and readers. In the late nineteenth century, authors striving to create realistic representations of American society focused on the particularities of different regions; these details are expressed through dialect, customs, and geography. Local color texts by Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Chesnutt, and others represented regional communities as much as specific protagonists.

Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* depicts how Edna Pontellier, a well-off white woman, struggles against her Creole community's ideas about the proper roles for wives and mothers. Edna's individual desires set her against the provincial culture in which she lives. In fact, the protagonist's struggle is so at odds with her culture's norms that the author herself was socially ostracized when the book was first published. Despite the accurate detail with which she depicted Creole Louisiana, Chopin, like Edna, was ultimately seen as being out of place among her neighbors.

Cultural geography artifacts can be especially useful when teaching regional realist literature like *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Awakening*. Readers today must bridge temporal as well as geographic distance to appreciate these texts, and drawing attention to the cultural geography inhabited by the characters can help students appreciate how different the characters' worlds are from their own. Understanding the nature of antebellum river travel or the restrictions placed on "proper" white women's movement in the late Victorian era reveals subtle thematic elements in these literary works.

Works Cited and Referenced

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