

LIVING VOICES

MULTICULTURAL POETRY IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM



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4 Interdisciplinary Connections

Three of my friends—one a PhD candidate in literature, one a humanities teacher, and the other an engineer—all have one thing in common: a love of nature, rivers in particular. The literature student uses philosophy and literary theory as a foundation for studying and writing about rivers. The humanities teacher looks at rivers in a social and historical context, asking about human responsibility to rivers and how we can serve them in productive and environmentally friendly ways. The engineer utilizes calculus to create formulas to understand how rivers affect land and other parts of the environment.

Another group of friends at Colorado State University recently collaborated to create an art/poetry show that featured text as art and visual art as poetry. The show's opening presented art and poetry on the walls, but also poetry readings, modern dance, a short play, and live music. The goal was to bring together as many forms of art as possible and to see how collaboration between different genres might create new brilliance.

We live in an interdisciplinary world that is constantly pushing us to cross lines. The classroom should be no different. This chapter features the poetry of Giovanni, Lee, and Mora, respectively, as part of three interdisciplinary lessons. Nikki Giovanni's poem, "The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr." is paired with Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech in a history lesson about the civil rights movement. The poem "Mnemonic" is the centerpiece of the Li-Young Lee section where students learn about the way memory functions in the brain in a biology lesson. The last section presents an art lesson using Pat Mora's poem, "Still Life." All of these are project-based lessons that require more than one class period to complete, but the multiple levels of learning that they necessitate are well worth the extra time.

Entering History: Nikki Giovanni and Civil Rights

In 1968, the year of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, Nikki Giovanni was twenty-five years old. During that year, she dropped out of graduate school and wrote most of what would become her second volume of poetry, *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement*, which in-

cludes the following poem, a reaction to what she saw at Dr. King's funeral in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.

His headstone read
FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST
But death is a slave's freedom
We seek the freedom of free men
And the construction of a world
Where Martin Luther King could have lived
and preached non-violence

In the quest to make poetry relevant to middle school students, it is important to take them out of their own lives in order to help them understand the magnitude of historical events and how those events still affect us today. This short yet powerful poem does just that. In seven lines, Nikki Giovanni manages to create a setting (the headstone), give the readers a quote from the headstone and from Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech ("FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST"), and include commentary about what she thinks of this tribute to one of the most influential leaders of all time.

This poem gives language arts teachers the opportunity to teach using two forms of literary criticism, intertextuality and new historicism, as the framework for their lesson. Intertextuality is the practice of studying one piece of literature in relation to another, and new historicism allows a reader to take a literary work and study it in a historical context. Giovanni's line, "FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST," links her poem directly to Dr. King's speech, which in turn naturally leads to a study of the history behind the speech and King's death. This section allows students to read a poem using its place in history as a tool rather than just relying on the poem itself to convey meaning. Studying these two texts together is a valuable way to incorporate social studies and literature, specifically the civil rights movement and the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

Readers' Theater

In order to teach middle school students a text like Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech that is so full of historical references and figurative language, it is a good idea to break it down into palatable chunks so that students are not overwhelmed. The speech can be divided up by number of lines or by paragraphs, depending on the number of students there are. It is also important to test students' understanding of the text using more than one type of assessment. In this lesson, a student-gen-

erated quiz, readers' theater, and reflective writing are used to accomplish this goal. Readers' theater is a strategy often used to show students how to give voice to a text and to engage reluctant readers. It usually involves a group reading from a text without memorizing it or using props. For this speech, it is important that students have a good understanding of the text before asking them to read it aloud.

Start by playing the recording that has Dr. King's own voice delivering the speech in Washington while students read along. Allowing students to hear Dr. King's speech given live not only puts the speech into context, but it gives students a chance to hear the way it originally sounded. Ask students to focus on the way Dr. King uses his voice to evoke emotion and place emphasis on specific words. After listening to the speech, allow the class to ask clarifying questions to make sure they understand who King's audience was and what his purpose was in writing such an unforgettable speech. Also, give students a few minutes to underline words that they do not know or phrases such as "Emancipation Proclamation" that have to do with history. (Note: The recording of "I Have a Dream" can be found at many public libraries, and the written copy of the speech can be located at the following website: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/Ihaveadream.htm>.)

Give each student the organizer in Figure 4.1 to record the words and phrases they underlined. Students will then research their words and phrases in order to complete the organizer. It is important to talk to students about the difference between the meaning of a word or phrase and the way it is used in the context of Dr. King's speech. This is an opportunity to talk about the denotations and connotations of words. Once students have a better understanding of what their sections of the speech mean, they should be able to do two things: write paragraphs explaining their sections of the speech and formulate quiz questions that will test the knowledge of the rest of the class. Allow students to share and discuss their questions with the whole class so that students will have a chance to ask questions and take notes before being quizzed on their understanding of the speech.

Classroom Snapshot: Below are some example quiz questions that my students wrote. My class recorded their questions on a piece of butcher paper that had been divided into two columns, one for questions and one for answers. Every day that we worked on the speech, I gave students a few minutes at the beginning of class to write answers on the wall. This was our way of reviewing for the quiz that

came at the very end of this lesson. Ultimately, I wanted to see that my students could accurately define words and explain phrases using the context of the speech and historical information to support their answers.

- What does “in whose symbolic shadow we stand” mean?
- What is the Declaration of Independence?
- What does Martin Luther King mean by “a bad check which has come back marked insufficient funds”?
- What does this sentence mean? “The whirlwind of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.”
- What was Dr. King trying to say when he said, “together at a table of brotherhood”?
- Who was the Governor of Alabama when this speech was given and how did he change as a person after he was governor?

Now that students have a better idea of what the speech means, they are ready to prepare for readers’ theater. There are several ways to conduct readers’ theater, but for this lesson the goal is for students to perform their parts of Dr. King’s speech in their own, unique ways and to combine their sections so that, in the end, the speech is read in full. For their sections, students should decide who will read what lines, which words or phrases will be read by more than one person simultaneously, and what tone of voice will be used to express different emotions. For example, toward the middle of the speech, the phrases “go back” and “I have a dream” are repeated several times. The whole class might want to read those lines or girls and boys might want to alternate to create different voices.

Once all of the students are ready, rehearse the speech several times before performing it in front of a real audience. One way to give students a chance to ask questions and give feedback is to have the class become the audience. Explain that when students are not performing, they will act as an audience that is allowed to ask questions and give warm and cool feedback after each performance. Warm feedback consists of encouraging comments about the performance, and cool feedback is constructive advice on how to improve the performance. Have each student or group of students perform their part in the correct order, stopping between sections to answer questions and receive feedback. Continue to rehearse until students feel confident enough to perform in front of a new audience.

I Have a Dream		
<p><i>Directions:</i> Use the space below to write your section of the speech. This will help you become more familiar with the speech and will make the speech easily accessible while you define the words and phrases from your section.</p>		
<p>I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.</p> <p>Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.</p> <p>One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.</p>		
<p><i>Directions:</i> Use the space below to record information about the words and/or phrases from your section of the speech. List the words and/or phrases in the left column, record the meanings you found through research in the middle column, and explain what the words and/or phrases mean in the context of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech in the right column.</p>		
Word/Phrase from Speech	Definition	Meaning in Context
Score	twenty years	Dr. King is explaining that the Emancipation Proclamation was signed 100 years ago.
a great American	Abraham Lincoln	He is the President who signed the Emancipation Proclamation.
Emancipation Proclamation	the document that freed the slaves in 1862	Dr. King opens his speech by mentioning the Emancipation Proclamation to show that, even though "Negroes" are no longer slaves, they are still not free.
decree	a lawful order	Dr. King is saying that the Emancipation Proclamation gave hope to slaves by making slavery illegal.
seared in the flames of withering injustice	burning in a fire caused by injustice	Dr. King is saying that slavery has hurt African American people and
<i>continued on next page</i>		

Figure 4.1. Example.

Figure 4.1. continued

		that the justice or fairness got smaller and smaller in America during slavery.
manacles	something that confines or binds, especially the hands	Dr. King is using the analogy of binding the hands of “Negroes” to describe how segregation affects them.
<p><i>Directions:</i> Use the space below to write a paragraph explaining what your section of the speech is saying. Explain it so that your classmates will have a clearer idea of what the speech means when you share your paragraph.</p>		
<p>Dr. King is welcoming his audience and acknowledging the fact that the March on Washington was to go down in history as a great demonstration of freedom. He is talking about how things such as the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln, that were supposed to create freedom and equality for African Americans haven’t worked as well as they should have. The Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery but did not end segregation and discrimination.</p>		

Performing a readers’ theater in front of an audience is a great way to publish student work. Invite parents for an after-school performance; perform for another grade in your school, or go into the community and invite people who may be interested in Martin Luther King Jr. or civil rights to watch your students perform.

Reflecting on the Experience

Now that students are familiar with Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, give them Nikki Giovanni’s poem and discuss her reaction to the inscription on the headstone at Dr. King’s funeral. Talk about the meaning of the word *freedom* and how Giovanni uses it in her poem. Then, give students three different ways to reflect on their experiences with these texts.

Martin Luther King Jr. in Today’s World

Ask students to focus on the last four lines of Giovanni’s poem: “We seek the freedom of free men/ And the construction of a world/ Where Martin Luther King could have lived/ and preached non-violence” (4–7). Have students write about whether or not they believe Martin Luther King Jr. could live and preach nonviolence in today’s world. They should support their opinions with evidence from what they have learned about

the civil rights movement, examples of current events, and their understanding of the word *freedom*.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in Today's World

Armand

How does our modern culture accept difference? How would they accept Dr. King? What if Dr. King lived today and had preached to this world?

I believe that his reception would be met with support, but also with a lot of resentment.

Let us say Dr. King returned to us today in, oh, how about Cincinnati, Ohio. If he returned to that city, where there are still race riots, racist cops, and racial injustice, would his vision, his dream, be accomplished? Or would he still have to fight for freedom, still use peace rallies, his nonviolent protests? Or, perhaps, in this unforgiving environment of modern day "civilization," he would have to resort to a different kind of protest, perhaps more like Malcolm X.

The first eight years of my life I lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, a city which is still plagued by "the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination." Not long ago, riots clogged the city and there is still much violence and racial tension. If Dr. King went to Cincinnati, he would probably be met with violence in a world where that is all we know. Dr. King's peaceful protest and nonviolence is almost like ancient history, so used are we to the thought of solving our problems with violence. Many of us think that our problems with racism are through, but they aren't, and if Dr. King could see where his valiant efforts have gotten the African American community, he would probably shake his head like a disappointed father. His efforts weren't in vain though because African Americans do have much more freedom and are treated equally and like people, like the people they are and have been for as long as anyone.

Freedom is not just being free from having a slave owner or not being chained to a stone wall with manacles of iron. No one is truly free, but why must we all be held captive by fear of one another? Isn't this what the good Doctor was saying the whole time? We are all equal, and equality is nothing to fear. The arrogance of superiority is, however, and the ruthlessness of tyranny should be terrifying. If we could all be free of fear and of hate and accept each other as brothers, sisters, and friends, we may then get somewhere.

I think if Dr. King were here today he would still fight back without raising a hand against anyone. I think if he was alive today he would still fight for freedom, for all, from the chains which hold us, binding us to our disgusting beliefs. I believe that he would keep going until the end as he did before, and this time, it will be the majority who is outnumbered.

Writing as Nikki Giovanni

Ask students to imagine that Nikki Giovanni was in Washington in 1963 to hear Dr. King's speech. How would she have reacted to his speech? How would it have made her feel? What would she have written about it? Students must put themselves in the place of Nikki Giovanni and write a reflection about the experience of hearing Dr. King's speech from her point of view. It can be in the form of a letter, journal entry, or poem.

August 28, 1963

Jenny

I saw a million birds today reaching for the sky with clipped wings. All of them fluttering toward the voice of Dr. King, and I was standing like a stone in the middle of it all, frozen in awe. His voice was a deep drum full of promise, so full that it was overflowing onto the frantic birds until they stopped panicking and sang. Things are changing. The air is thick with it, and all I want to do is inhale as deeply as possible. All I want to do is fly.

Agents of Change

Ask students to write a letter to a politician, a modern-day civil rights activist, or a newspaper explaining what needs to change in your community or in America in order for Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream to be realized. You may want to start by brainstorming a list of actions with the class that may promote positive change. Tell students that they should focus on one thing they think should be changed and explain why and how making that change will help your community or our country become more tolerant of differences.

Dear New York Times,

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his amazing "I Have a Dream" speech to try and change the course of racism in the U.S. Forty-one years later there is a new kind of racism, racist jokes among the young community.

Rude nicknames and names based on race and stereotypes include "white trash" and the "N" word. These are all offensive and I hear all these words a lot from my peers, not as insults but as jokes. When people tell these kinds of jokes, it makes them look like racists. It's not that people are born racist, but they learn it in school, from parents, from friends, from TV, anywhere. I personally think that we should not teach racism by telling racist jokes or by listening to them.

I propose that people take a stand against these jokes that can be extremely offensive and have a negative effect on our community. Whenever you hear someone tell a joke that could be hurtful, tell them to stop or walk away so they know it's not funny.

Once this happens, these people might start to think before they tell racist jokes. Do you want this kind of bad humor in our community? Take a stand today!

Sincerely,
Laura and Flip

Extensions

I have often had students become intrigued, obsessed even, with subjects such as the Holocaust or a president's assassination when we have read something related to those subjects, and I always want to give those students more, make time to explore further. Unfortunately, there is rarely time to stop everything to continue with a subject that we may have already devoted several days or weeks to, but it is always a good idea to have literature available in the event that students ask for more.

There are two texts written by Martin Luther King Jr. that may be of particular interest to students. The first is the speech he gave the day before he was assassinated in 1968 called "I See the Promised Land." The second is the letter he wrote to clergymen while he was in the Birmingham jail in 1963 ("Letter"). These pieces offer a great deal of historical context that students will want (and probably need) to research as they read.

Many of Nikki Giovanni's poems are related to the civil rights movement, but there are three in particular that could be paired with Dr. King's texts. All three of the poems can be found in the "Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgment" section of *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*. They are called "Poem (No Name No. 3)," "Poem for Black Boys (With Special Love to James)," and "The Great Pax Whitie." Some of these poems use charged and racial language that may be offensive to some readers, so be sure to frontload with students the reasons and context in which Giovanni may have used such language before you let them go on their own with it.

Discovering Memory: Poetry and Science

Memory is an important tool for poets. We store away what life gives us and hope that it comes back in some form that will be worthy of reaching the page, but sometimes what memory does is perplexing. It stirs around in the brain and shoots out from synapses that turn memories different colors and shapes. Sometimes we remember the same way we dream—in black and white, with the sound off, filled with faceless characters whose names we should know—and sometimes we don't remember at all. Li-Young Lee's poem, "Mnemonic," tells of the speaker's

struggle to understand how his memory works and ultimately to remember his father.

In this lesson, students learn about memory by doing a memory writing exercise, studying the brain to understand how it affects memory, reading Lee's poem "Mnemonic," and creating projects to demonstrate their new understanding of memory.

Prereading: Memory Lists

Start by writing words on the board that will spark students' memories, and ask them to start making a memory list as soon as they see a word that reminds them of something. Explain that the list does not have to make sense and all the words do not have to relate to one another. For example, the words *roller coaster* can lead to *cotton candy*, which can lead to *pink tongue* and *headache* and *sleeping in the car* and *seat belts* and *pillows* and *twinkling stars* and so on. The point is to allow one thing to lead to another and see where it goes.

Once students have the opportunity to brainstorm a good memory list, ask them to read through it and circle the five most important or interesting words or phrases in the list. On a separate piece of paper, have students incorporate those words or phrases into a larger piece of writing. It can be either a poem or story, but ultimately it should use their memories to bring an experience closer to them and to the reader. Give volunteers a chance to share their writing and discuss what their memories mean to them and why they used the words and phrases they did to bring the memories to life.

Cameron

The five words/phrases I used are *snowball fight*, *Kansas*, *fort*, *pain*, and *hiding*.

Winter in Kansas

Crisp frozen air beat us down
six of us working together
in the snow, a Kansas winter
gifted us enough of the solid white stuff
to make a fort, a refuge from the war
we were planning.

"Snowball fight!"

The signal was yelled
and we all went into hiding,
three on a side with steam engines pumping
out of our noses and mouths.

Ice bullets flew from every direction.

"Bam! Bam! Bam!" My brother screamed,

throwing a snowball from each hand.
I was hit, shot with a cold pain that broke through
three layers of clothes.

Our war lasted for hours.
Brothers, sister, and neighborhood friends
recruited to die on the field before
going inside for hot chocolate and cartoons.

Classroom Snapshot: When I asked students to share their memory pieces, I was most interested in helping them understand how their memories developed. How did Cameron, the student who wrote “Winter in Kansas,” remember details about the day she had a snowball fight in Kansas? What kinds of memories were most vivid to them? Most of the students in my class said that they remembered things best that affected them emotionally. For example, one of my students wrote about the day he broke his arm, while someone else wrote about the best birthday present she ever received. I wanted my students to think about why they might be more apt to remember something like what it was like getting their first pets rather than what they learned in one of their classes in elementary school. This discussion easily led to the next activity—learning about how memory works in the brain.

Research: Learning about the Brain

Start by showing students the following Web site—www.exploratorium.edu/memory/—and giving them a few minutes to click around and learn a little bit about the brain in relation to memory. Once they have had a chance to look at the Web site freely, put the questions in Figure 4.2 on an overhead and have students work in groups of three or four to answer the questions on paper. Most of the answers can be found in the section of the Web site called “Sheep Brain Dissection” and other parts of the Exploratorium Web site, but students may have to search other sites to learn about mnemonic devices.

Once the class has compiled as much as they can about how memory works in the brain, they are ready to read the poem “Mnemonic.”

Reading: Filling in the Gaps

In Li-Young Lee’s poem “Mnemonic,” the speaker remembers a moment when his father gave him a blue sweater to keep him warm. He remem-

- What are the three different types of memory?
 - ◆ Working memory, long-term memory, and skill memory
- Which parts of the brain are responsible for each type of memory?
 - ◆ Working memory occurs in the prefrontal cortex. Long-term memory is kept in the hippocampus. Skill memory is in the cerebellum.
- What are some problems with memory? (Answers may vary.)
 - ◆ Sometimes people remember events differently from the way they really happened.
 - ◆ People sometimes remember things that didn't really happen.
 - ◆ Things like stress and sleep deprivation can cause memory loss.
- What are mnemonic devices?
 - ◆ Mnemonic devices are ways to help people remember things such as lists, the order of operations, or vocabulary in a foreign language.
- Why do mnemonic devices work?
 - ◆ Mnemonic devices work because they help break complicated information into more manageable pieces. They connect prior knowledge to new knowledge helping the brain to make sense of information it has never seen before.

Figure 4.2. Brain questions and answers.

bers other bits and pieces of information about his father, like the fact that he was a serious man with a good memory and that he would be ashamed of the speaker because his memory has no order.

While reading this poem with the class, ask them to think about what they have learned about the brain. Is the speaker using long- or short-term memory? Is he using the hippocampus, cerebellum, or the prefrontal cortex? How do you know? Ask students to work individually or in small groups to underline the parts of the poem that indicate some sort of memory and label those lines with a part of the brain. Students should be able to explain their answers using textual evidence and/or information they gathered from the Exploratorium Web site.

Mnemonic

I was tired. So I lay down.
My lids grew heavy. So I slept.
Slender memory, stay with me.¹

1. This seems to be a long-term memory because the speaker wants it to stay with him. It would be in the hippocampus. (Alex)

I was cold once. So my father took off his blue sweater.
 He wrapped me in it, and I never gave it back.
 It is the sweater he wore to America,
 this one, which I've grown into, whose sleeves are too long,
 whose elbows have thinned, who outlives its rightful owner.
 Flamboyant blue in daylight, poor blue by daylight,
 it is black in the folds.²

A serious man who devised complex systems of numbers and
 rhymes
 to aid him in remembering, a man who forgot nothing,³ my
 father
 would be ashamed of me.
 Not because I'm forgetful,
 but because there is no order
 to my memory, a heap
 of details, uncatalogued, illogical.⁴
 For instance:
 God was lonely. So he made me.

My father loved me. So he spanked me.
 It hurt him to do so. He did it daily.⁵

The earth is flat. Those who fall off don't return.
 The earth is round. All things reveal themselves to men only
 gradually.

I won't last. Memory is sweet.
 Even when it's painful, memory is sweet.

Once I was cold. So my father took off his blue sweater.

After students have had a chance to label different lines from the poem, ask them to share their answers as a class. This is a good time to

2. I think this memory was triggered by the blue sweater because he says "this one" like he's wearing it while he's thinking. If that's true, then this memory is in the prefrontal cortex. Working memory takes things that have been stored in the brain, probably in the hippocampus, and brings them up when one of the senses causes them to be triggered. (Veronica)

3. The father used mnemonic devices to help him remember things. Mnemonic devices help working memory in the prefrontal cortex. They store information in the working memory until it's ready to become a long-term memory and go to the hippocampus. (Charlie)

4. I think this is describing the hippocampus because long-term memories are the most disorganized. The website we looked at talked about how people usually remember things wrong, especially when they happened a long time ago. The speaker is trying to remember his father, but he can only remember pieces of him. (Robin)

5. This would have to be a long-term memory in the hippocampus because the speaker's father is dead and can't spank him anymore. Plus, I think the speaker is an adult because he's talking about his father in past tense. (Isa)

discuss the poem together to help students discover how this poem might be a mnemonic device in itself. How might the speaker or Lee be using this poem to remember his father? Does it work? Why or why not?

Classroom Snapshot: I used this discussion time with my class to relate the poem “Mnemonic” to the memory pieces my students wrote at the beginning of this lesson. I passed students’ writing out to them and asked them to compare their memories to those that Lee wrote about in his poem. Most students realized that if they wrote about events that happened a long time ago they were less likely to remember details, while those students who wrote about a pet that they still owned or a place they had just visited were able to describe it much more accurately. From this, students were able to conclude that the speaker in “Mnemonic” still had the sweater that his father gave him because he described it in great detail, but they thought the father probably died a long time ago since the speaker could not remember as much about him as he could about the sweater.

Activity: Representing Memory in the Brain

Now that students have learned some basic information about how memory works in the brain and have related that information to Lee’s poem, it’s time for them to use what they know about memory to create something new. Put students into groups of three or four and ask each group to choose a product from the lists below. Groups should sign up for one of the categories to make sure everyone is not making similar things. Ultimately, it works best to see two or three products from each category in the classroom at the end of the project.

- Informational: brochure, PowerPoint, poster, research paper, pamphlet, public service announcement . . .
- Creative: sculpture, drawing, painting, game, diagram . . .
- Personal: poem, story, letter, photography with captions . . .

The goal of this activity is for students to create something that shows what they have learned about memory and the brain. Students should use the brain questions that they answered earlier as a guide while working on their products. For example, students might make a brochure informing people about the causes of memory loss. They might also create a diagram or a clay model to show the different parts of the brain that are responsible for memory, or they could write a poem describing a mnemonic device that works for them.

Internet Note: The Exploratorium Memory Exhibition Web site that students were introduced to earlier has several features that will assist them in their projects. Besides having a diagram of the brain with descriptions of different parts relating to memory, the site also includes “Lecture Series Webcasts” about a range of memory-related topics such as how stress affects memory and how children’s memories are different from adults’ memories. Students will also enjoy playing with Doodles, a combination of riddles and doodles, to test their own memories.

Classroom Snapshot: When I taught this lesson, I required that students incorporate Li-Young Lee’s poem “Mnemonic” into their products. For some students this worked well, and for others it was frustrating. One group sculpted a brain out of clay and, instead of just labeling the parts of the brain, they also included different stanzas from the poem to show where in the brain these memories were stored. This was a creative and successful project, but another group decided to act out a public service announcement about stress-related memory loss, and they could not find a good way to integrate the poem into their idea. It turned out that the groups whose products were informational had the most trouble including “Mnemonic,” but most students who chose creative or personal products were able to incorporate the poem. My greatest concerns were that students understand both the poem and what we had studied about memory, but since “Mnemonic” was discussed thoroughly before students started working on their projects, I felt assured that both of these goals were met.

Extension

Organize a Memory Fair

In the spirit of making projects like this one as authentic as possible, give your students an audience by helping them organize a memory fair. Like a science fair, students can set up their projects in the gym or another open space in your school and prepare to present their work, answering questions about the brain, memory, and how Li-Young Lee’s “Mnemonic” applies to what they have produced. Have students collaborate with one another to find classmates who have made things that connect with one another. For example, one group may have made a PowerPoint presentation about how children remember things while another group conducted memory tests with younger siblings. Putting

these together will allow students to learn from one another while creating more complicated and thorough projects for the fair.

Artistic Endeavors: Creating a Still Life

Not long ago, I was flipping through Nikki Giovanni's *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* and came across a poem called "Fascinations." The last stanza goes like this:

"if you were a pure bolt
of fire cutting the skies
i'd touch you risking my life
not because i'm brave or strong
but because i'm fascinated
by what the outcome will be" (40–45)

I was prompted to paint something to illustrate these lines, an endeavor I'd never attempted before—three blue-purple watercolors cut open by yellow-orange flames. Unsatisfied by any one of the paintings I'd done, I cut them up and put them back together to make one stained glass collage set in a black shadow box topped off with a transparency yielding Giovanni's words, and when I was finished, I couldn't remember which came first, the words or the images. Which was the art? I wasn't sure that it mattered, and to distinguish between the two seemed like a mistake. I gave the piece to a friend as a gift, hoping that ultimately the picture would forget that it was born from words, hoping that it would understand that its real purpose was to frame the world in a new light and become something special for this person. This is the miracle of poetry and art; they seem to bring one another to life, that is, if they can ever really be seen as separate entities.

Pat Mora's poem "Still Life" lends itself to this sort of artistic endeavor, a merging of words into images and back again.

Still Life

Still hearing dawn
alive with birds
stirring the morning breeze.

Still warming my fingers
round a cup, *café* I made
in the quiet
before the world fills the air.

Still opening these doors
heavier now
with my own hands,

Name _____
<h2>Framing the World</h2>
<p><i>Directions:</i> Use the space below to draw everything inside your frame to the best of your ability paying close attention to details.</p>
<p><i>Directions:</i> Write a detailed description of what is inside your frame as if you are trying to describe it to someone who has never seen it before. Be sure to use all of your senses to create as vivid a picture as possible.</p>

Figure 4.3. Graphic organizer.

Reading: Exposing the Images

Now that students have a better understanding of what a still life is, they are ready to read Pat Mora's poem "Still Life" and expose the images in it. Cut the poem into five stanzas, and make enough copies for each student to have one stanza. (The poem is six stanzas long, but since the last stanza is only one line long, it works well to pair it with the next to last stanza for this activity.) Give each student a stanza and unlined paper they can draw on.

After reading the poem aloud the first time, ask students to determine what the most important image is in the stanza they are holding during the second read through. Remind students that Mora is trying to create a certain effect with each of the images she presents in this poem, so finding the right images to draw is of the utmost importance. For example, in the first stanza, "Still hearing dawn / alive with birds / stirring the morning breeze," students must decide whether Mora wants readers to focus on dawn, birds, or the morning breeze. The goal is for students to illustrate their stanzas by making such decisions.

Take it a step further by giving students different materials to work with such as pliable metals (aluminum, pewter, or sheets of gold used to emboss), clay, fabrics, construction paper, or things from outside such as sand, sticks, or leaves and ask them to revise their sketches using these materials. How does this change their snapshot? Has its focus shifted? How does the artwork help to interpret the poem? Students should think about these questions as they create, and at the end of this activity, ask them to write artist statements describing their processes and defending their use of certain materials and techniques. Once all of the stanzas have been illustrated, ask students to put them back together. They need to stay in the order they were originally in, but since there is more than one student per stanza, they can decide how to collect the illustrations. In this way, students will work to construct their own stories and their own interpretations of Mora's poem.



Still hearing dawn
alive with birds
stirring the morning breeze.

Artist Statement for Stanza One:

Kelly

I decided that the most important things in the first stanza were the birds. Since they were “stirring the morning breeze,” I made a bird with a spoon for a tail because I wanted my art to represent as much of the stanza as possible. I used Model Magic, feathers, and toothpicks to make my still life three-dimensional because I didn’t think I could make the bird look as alive if I just drew or painted it. I attached it to construction paper facing east because the sun rises in the east and this stanza happens at dawn.



Still warming my fingers
round a cup, *café* I made
in the quiet
before the world fills the air.

Artist Statement for Stanza Two:

Christina

My still life was made with clay, pipe cleaners, and acrylic paint on brown construction paper. I chose brown paper because I wanted it to look like coffee, and the cup comes out from the paper because I wanted people to feel like they could touch it like the speaker does, “Still warming my fingers / round a cup.” As you can see, the world just slightly comes into the picture. This is foreshadowing since the world hasn’t filled the air yet in this stanza. I wanted the world to be kind of big though, not just off in the corner, because I have a feeling that once it takes over nothing will be quiet.



Still opening these doors
 heavier now
 with my own hands,
 weathered brown on brown.

Artist Statement for Stanza Three:

Kevin

The line I liked most in this stanza was the last one, “weathered brown on brown,” so I decided to show how the hand and the door are both weathered. Ms. Wood brought in a bunch of scrap metal and leaves from outside, and I found the perfect piece of metal. It was almost the same color as the leaves and it really was heavy. It was hard to make a hand out of crunched up leaves, but I wanted it to look as weathered as possible. I drew some glue in the shape of a hand and made it look like it was reaching out to open the door.



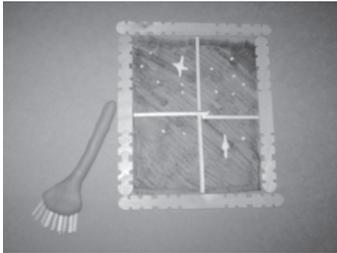
Still holding soles and hammer
 mending leather stubborn as my palms
 gently drumming
 gently drumming.

Artist Statement for Stanza Four:

Scott

For stanza four, I made a hammer out of Model Magic and the sole of a shoe out of construction paper. I put the hammer above

the sole to show that it is “gently drumming” on the sole. I didn’t want to include anything that could move like “my palms” because a still life isn’t supposed to have movement. I just wanted to show what was being held.



Still sweeping slowly as the sun
sets before I walk to the *plaza*
to watch the stars come out,
to watch the girls.

Spring again.

Artist Statement for Stanza Five:
Veronica

I thought that it would be interesting to create a still life of what the room looked like after the speaker left to go to the plaza. The broom is left alone in the corner, and you can see the stars through the window. I knew that the broom had to be part of my picture because that’s what the speaker is still doing before the stars come out. I used clay and toothpicks to make the broom, and I used Popsicle sticks, toothpicks, Model Magic, and a black marker to make the window.

Classroom Snapshot: While my students worked on this project, I noticed that they were learning to pay attention to detail without much prompting. My goal was for them to see the poem in new ways through their artwork, and by focusing in on single images, they were able to make the kinds of connections that they had missed when studying other poems. For example, several students noticed that Pat Mora mentions hands in three of the six stanzas in this poem. This led to a discussion of the different reasons Mora might have repeated this image. The ideas they came up with are as follows:

- The speaker is trying to describe herself/himself by showing what the hands do. The hands are weathered and stubborn and need to be kept warm.

- Hands are used as tools to open doors and mend soles in this poem so maybe Mora is saying that the hands are the most important part of the speaker.
- This poem is about showing pieces of the speaker's day or life through specific images. Pat Mora might have decided that she needed to focus up close on one part of the speaker instead of showing everything.

Students were able to interpret this poem using detailed examples from the text so this project became more than just an exercise in converting words to images. It enabled students to work closely with a poem to create something of their own and to more effectively use textual evidence to defend their points of view.

Extension

Writing from National Geographic Photos

The photographs found in *National Geographic* magazine are exceptional tools to get students to write from images. Play a game by spreading a pile of *National Geographic* photos on a table and letting students choose one. Tell them that their task is to tell a story about the picture or describe the picture in detail without giving away its contents. Then, pick up all the pictures and redistribute them, making sure that everyone has a new photo. Now pick up the descriptions that the students wrote and read the first one aloud. As soon as someone thinks they have the picture that goes with the description, they should stand up and yell "Bingo!" Whoever guesses correctly gets to read the next description unless they don't want to or the handwriting is too illegible. The game continues this way until all the pictures have been matched up with their descriptions. This is a great way to share students' work without requiring that they read it in front of everyone.

LIVING VOICES

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