

This session will present a poetic history of prejudice and racism in American society. It will mostly be concerned with the history of African-Americans. However, prejudice – against immigrants, the Jews, the poor, Orientals, Muslims – has long been part of human society. The session deals with America – not because the problems are worse there, but because this is where they are being actively confronted. And because the founding principle of the United States was that “All men are created equal.”

The title comes from a 1951 poem by Langston Hughes that we considered in the first session.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore – and then run?

It also alludes to the 1963 speech by Martin Luther King (1929-1968):

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

The painting is from a suite of 60 tempera painting illustrating *The Great Migration* (1910-1970) – the movement of 6 million African-Americans from the rural South to the industrial North of the United States. This occurred as African-Americans became completely disillusioned by any dream of equality in the South.

The Underground Railroad

Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) assisted slaves in their escape to the North through a network of abolitionists called the Underground Railroad. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act allowed runaway slaves to be captured in the North and returned to the South, the Railroad took escaped slaves to Canada. For several years (1851-1858) the final station was St Catherines in Ontario. After the American Civil War (1861-1865) Congress finally passed the XIII Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery.

Harriet Tubman
H. S. Squyer, 1885



The United States was the beneficiary of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Ships brought slaves from Africa to the Americas and returned to Europe with the goods and crops that were the result of slave labor. By the time of the Declaration of Independence slavery was an endemic part of the United States, and the constitution recognized slaves in two parts, one prohibiting the banning of the importation of slaves until 1808 (Article I) and another that stated that the laws of one state could not excuse a person from service (i.e. slavery) – the fugitive slave clause (Article IV). Many northern states passed laws abolishing slavery. By the middle of the 19th Century slavery was limited to the states south of the Mason-Dixon line separating Pennsylvania from Maryland. The region of the southern states was called Dixie – probably from the name of that border. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made plain what had originally been just a clause in the Constitution.

Harriet Tubman, herself an escaped slave, assisted slaves escaping from the South to get to Canada whence they could not legally be returned.



Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
and the night cold and the night long and the river
to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going

Wendell Logan *Runagate, Runagate* for Tenor and Chamber Orchestra



Robert Hayden's poem represents the experience of runaway slaves on their way north. "Runagate" is what the bounty hunters called a fugitive slaves that they were chasing. "Jack-muh-lanterns" are the fleeting lights that can be seen over marshes – probably caused by the oxidation of methane. "Hants" is an old term for ghosts.

Wendell Logan set the poem to music in 1989. This is available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rde5462IAH0>



Hayden's poem is one of the best pieces for group recitation. This clip (forgive the low-resolution) shows some high school students:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5PDP3Zuqu8>



This is the memorial to the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, the first group of African-American enlistees to fight in the Civil War. They were led by a white officer, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. He and many of his men died in a futile attempt to take Fort Wagner in South Carolina in 1863. As an act of vengeance, the colonel was buried by the Confederates in a mass grave with the bodies of his black soldiers. The 1989 film *Glory* starring Matthew Broderick, Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington, tells the story of the regiment and this battle.

The memorial at the edge of Boston Commons was sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens and completed in 1898. William James gave the oration at its dedication and Lowell quotes him in the poem. The actual inscription reads *Omnia Relinquit Servare Rem Publicam* (He gave up everything to serve the Republic). Lowell changes it to the plural so that it might honor the regiment as well as its colonel.

The poem's main subject is the memorial and the regiment it honors. However, it also has a broader scope. It worries about our current inability to memorialize or even to remember what is important in our history. Commercialism – parking garages, advertising, finned cars – demeans our thoughts. Perhaps the most worrying example is an image of Hiroshima used to sell the safe that survived the blast.



Robert Gould Shaw (1837-1863)

Shaw took command of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment in 1862. He convinced his men to boycott their pay until it was equal to that of white soldiers. He died in battle and was buried by the Confederates “in the common trench with the niggers that fell with him.”

Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.



Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989)

Brown's father was a former slave who worked his way through university to become a minister and ultimately a Professor of Theology at Howard University. Much of Sterling Brown's childhood centered around a family farm in rural Maryland. He studied at Williams College and Harvard before becoming a professor of literature at Howard University in Washington. Much of his poetry is about the folklore of the South, and is written in Southern African-American dialect.



Photograph Addison Scurlock, 1930s?

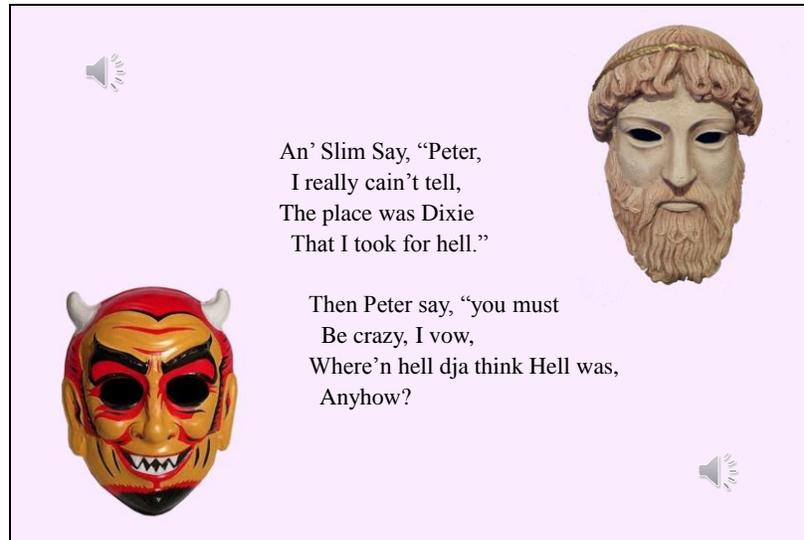


*Thirteen-year Old
Sharecropper, Georgia,*
Dorothea Lange
1937

Butter beans fo' Clara
Sugar corn fo' Grace
An fo' the little feller
Runnin' space.



Brown's *After Winter* is a paean to his father Sterling N. Brown and his simple dream of the good life. The poet Sterling A. Brown is the "little feller" At a deeper level it describes the dreams of all freed slaves. Winter gives way to spring.



Slim Greer was a trickster character in several of Brown's poems. *Slim in Hell* is a comic version of Dante's *Inferno*.

Some notes:

Lindy is Charles Lindbergh who flew across the Atlantic in *The Spirit of Saint Louis*. The plane was named for Lindbergh's supporters in Saint Louis and not for the Saint Louis Blues.

Dis – dialect for this, also a name for hell

big bloodhound – equivalent to the three-headed Cerberus who guarded the gates of Hell

Rampart Street – New Orleans

Beale Street – Memphis

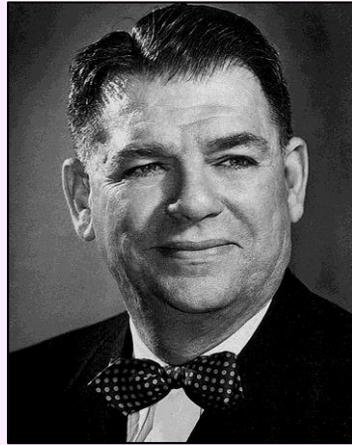
Brown's poem *Southern Cop* though written in 1936 is particularly topical in the present days of Black Lives Matter.



This video presentation of the poem *Gun/Woman/Son* was put together by Hayes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C12uywcUTw0>

The poem has multiple levels. Initially it is the story of the poet's father, whose mother was murdered in rural Georgia by a thief who fled to Atlanta. The father was at that time an infant. He was found by a farmer, and placed in a peach basket. The child (together with the genes that will go on in his unborn future son), is taken away on the train – probably to relatives. The poem collapses time and people – the son becomes the father of the poet, who acts the role of the farmer in the story. At a deeper level the story suggests the history of black Americans over the 20th Century.



1940 Photograph

Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960)

Hammerstein studied law at Columbia University, but when his father, a theater producer, died he turned to show business. He worked with Jerome Kern on *Showboat* in 1927 but after 1933 had no hit for many years. With Richard Rodgers, he then wrote a string of great musicals – *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *The Sound of Music* (1959). These integrated music, song, dance and plot, and defined the American Musical Comedy.

These next four slides provide a brief musical interlude our discussion of racism. We consider two librettists of Jewish origin and two songs about prejudice. Music was an important mode of expression for both Blacks and Jews. Musical theater was one of the great achievements of the 20th Century.

Lyrics

“a fine balance between the benefits of confinement and the benefits of freedom” (Oscar Hammerstein II, 1949).

The lines are short (trimeter or tetrameter).

Syllables usually fit the music with the stress on the downbeat, but vowels can extend over several notes.

/ . . / . . / . .

Oh what a beautiful **morning!**

Oh what a beautiful **day!**

End the line with open vowels (“meadow” rather than “music”) either without consonants or with soft consonants (“n” but not “c” or “t”).

Repetition – of line or part of line – is used much more than in poetry.

Simple rhymes for sad songs and complex rhymes for comic songs.

Internal rhymes: “The corn is as **high** as an elephant’s **eye**.”

Alliteration and assonance “All the **cattle** are **standing** like **statues**.”

Lyrics are a special type of poetry. Many of the tricks of the trade are the same as used by poets of the spoken word. Yet some tricks are more suitable to singing than to speaking. Downbeat rhythms and open vowels.

Stephen Sondheim (1930 -)

After his parents divorced in 1942, Stephen lived moved with his mother to Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Among their new neighbors were the Hammersteins. Oscar became Stephen's surrogate father. Sondheim's first break came when he was asked to help Leonard Bernstein write the lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957). After this he wrote the music and lyrics to a string of successful musicals, among them *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Into the Woods* (1987).



1974 Photograph

Stephen Sondheim had Oscar Hammerstein as a mentor.

You Have to Be Carefully Taught

You have to be taught before it's too late.
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate.

Oscar Hammerstein, 1949
South Pacific



Mandy Patinkin, 1995

Children Will Listen

Careful the things you say
Children will listen
Careful the things you do
Children will see and learn
Children may not obey
But children will listen.

Stephen Sondheim, 1987,
Into the Woods

These two songs are about how children learn to hate.



Chicago 1968

Urban Riots

The Watts Riot broke out in Los Angeles in 1965 mainly in response to police discrimination. The Twelfth Street Riot in Detroit erupted in 1967 because of inner city poverty and overcrowding. Much of downtown Detroit was devastated, and Federal troops were called in. The West Side Chicago Riot of 1968 was triggered in part by the assassination of Martin Luther King.

In the middle of the 1960s anger at discrimination broke out into huge riots. Anarchy and devastation reigned in large areas of major US cities.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

Brooks' family moved to Chicago in 1917 during the Great Migration. She graduated from high school and worked as a typist to support herself while writing poetry. Her 1945 book *A Street in Bronzeville* described black life in South Chicago. She was appointed poet laureate of Illinois 1968.

Portrait Bust
Sara Miller, 1994



The poet that brought the riots into perspective was Gwendolyn Brooks.

Riot

A riot is the language of the unheard.
—martin luther king



Brooks' poem *Riot* captured the essence of the rioting. Much of it was due to social inequity. Two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence and men were still not treated equally.

Some Notes:

John Cabot – the name of the fictional rich white man is not taken from the Italian Explorer who was one of the early discoverers of North America. Rather the allusion is to the rich Cabot family in Boston – another John Cabot was one of the original settlers in Massachusetts (the Cabots and the Lowells were the most prominent of the Boston families). The John Cabot of this poem was from Wilmette (Wilma in local slang) – a rich suburb of Chicago. He was once a prominent Anglican – Wycliffe was the person who first translated the Bible into English.

Lake Bluff – a rich village north of Chicago on Lake Illinois, a summer home for the rich.

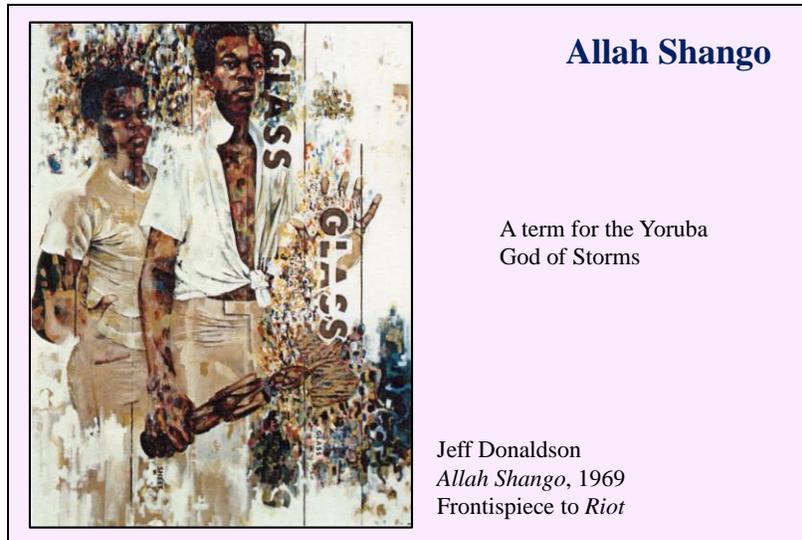
Grandtully is a special Scottish liqueur that tastes like Scotch and honey mixed together.

Richard Gray and Distelheim are prominent art galleries in Chicago.

Maxim's and Chez Henri – famous restaurants in Chicago (both now closed).

Winnetka is another rich suburb of Chicago.

The poem suggests that John Cabot died in the riot and that he had to die so that the poor and the black might live. However, of the 11 people who died in the Chicago riot, all were black.

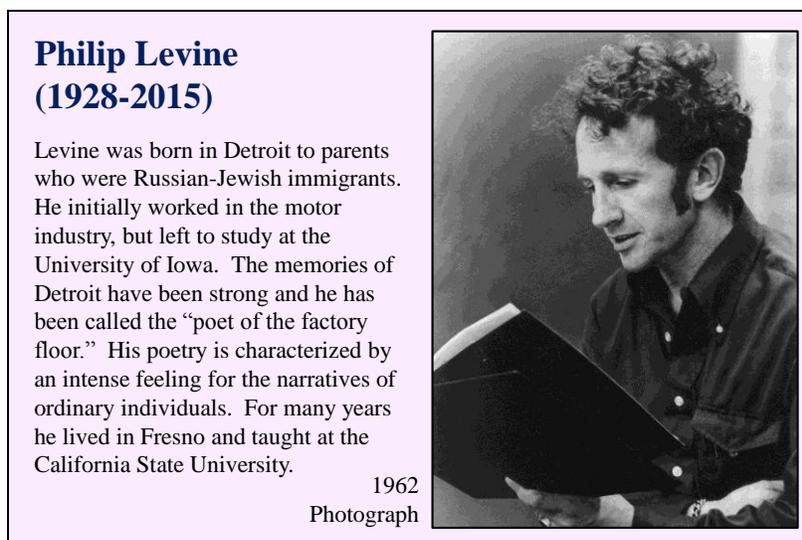


The frontispiece print for Brooks' *Riot* shows two African-Americans. The man is carrying a Yoruba wooden sculpture. They stand in front of a glass window labelled "GLASS." This separates them from the life they should be entitled to. It likely also suggests that words have meaning – glass is something that can be shattered. "Equality" in the Constitution should not just be a word. The title of the print is *Allah Shango* – the name of the God of Storms.

The epigraph for the pamphlet that published Gwendolyn Brooks' poem *Riot* was a 1944 quotation from Henry Miller:

It would be a terrible thing for Chicago if this black fountain of life should suddenly erupt. My friend assures me there's no danger of that. I don't feel so sure about it. Maybe he's right. Maybe the Negro will always be our friend, no matter what we do to him.

In the pamphlet this quotation is printed white on black whereas the poem is black on white.



Many of Levine's co-workers were black, and he became intrigued by their speech patterns.

Black English (African American Vernacular English)

This dialect of African American English differs in many ways from standard English but follows its own linguistic rules. Some examples

Pronunciation: although “thin” is pronounced as in standard English, “then” becomes “den”; voiced final consonants are not pronounced (“hand”) but unvoiced consonants are (“pant”)

Verbs: the verb is not inflected in the present tense (“He go”); verbs can, however, show subtle tenses “He done been workin” (He has been working but has now stopped); verb “to be” often dropped – “She my sister”

Negation: as in many other languages, double negatives are allowed – “Don’t nobody know the answer?”

Possessives: often shown by placing the possessor before the possessed – “They feed they lion”

Black English is often criticized for being English spoken by those who have not learned the good grammar. However, it has its own linguistic rules that are as complicated and definite as White English. Grammar and dialect often serve to accentuate differences and support prejudice.

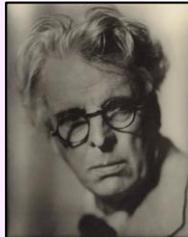


As well as reveling in the poetic nature of Black English, Levine’s poem also suggests that African-Americans have been imprisoned much as lions in a zoo. And one day they might reclaim their power.

The illustration shows the Babylonian Lion in the Royal Ontario Museum.

I was working alongside a guy in Detroit—a black guy named Eugene—when I was probably about twenty-four. He was a somewhat older guy, and we were sorting universal joints, which are part of the drive-shaft of a car. The guy who owned the place had bought used ones, and we were supposed to sort the ones that could be rebuilt and made into usable replacement parts from the ones that were too badly damaged. So we spread them out on the concrete floor, and we were looking at them carefully, because we were the guys who'd then do the job of rebuilding them. We had two sacks that we were putting them in—burlap sacks—and at one point Eugene held up a sack, and on it were the words *Detroit Municipal Zoo*. And he laughed, and said, “They feed they lion they meal in they sacks.” (from an interview in 1999)

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
 Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
 Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
 Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
 They Lion grow.



W. B. Yeats

Allusions

. . . somewhere in the sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

Strong is the lion—like a coal
 His eyeball—like a bastion's mole
 His chest against his foes:
 Strong, the gier-eagle on his sail,
 Strong against tide, th'enormous whale
 Emerges as he goes.

**Christopher
 Smart, 1745**



Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

Maya (the nickname that her brother gave her) was born Marguerite Johnson. She married the Greek electrician and musician, Tosh Angelos. She worked at many occupations – cook, streetcar-conductor, dancer, prostitute, actress, singer – before settling down to become a writer. She is most famous for her memoirs such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). She also wrote poetry and recited one of her poems at the inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993.



Poets reciting at the inauguration are Robert Frost for J. F. Kennedy, Maya Angelou and Miller Williams for Bill Clinton, and Elizabeth Alexander and Richard Blanco for Barack Obama. Republicans are not into poetry ☺

Caged Bird

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.



Read by
Alicia Keys

Karel Fabritius
Goldfinch, 1654



Most paintings of a caged bird fail. This painting of a chained bird better conveys the feeling of the Angelou poem.

The reading is by Alicia Keys. She also performs a song that is a variation of Angelou's poem on her CD *Songs in A Minor* (2001)

Right now I feel like a bird
caged without a key
Ev'ryone comes to stare at me

with so much joy and reverie
They don't know how I feel inside

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5-xi1D2ESc>



Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* was quoted by Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention in 2016. It is a defiant statement for all the down-trodden people of the world.

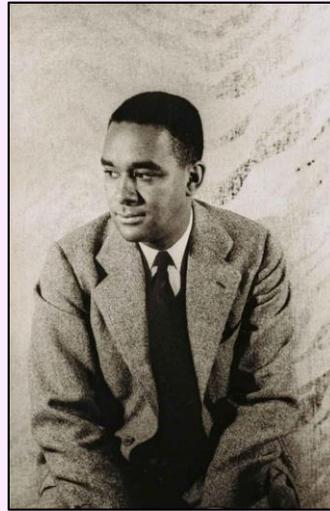
| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>Lucille Clifton (1936-2010)</p> <p>Clifton grew up in Buffalo and attended Howard University. She initially worked as a clerk in a government office and composed poetry in her spare time. As she became published, she taught writing at several colleges and universities. Her husband was a sculptor and professor of philosophy. They both promoted black culture.</p> <p>my dream about being white </p> |
|--|--|

Lucille's Clifton's poem decides that it is far better to enjoy one's own body that to try to fit it to some false ideal. Dancing in the nude is far more fun.

Richard Wright (1908-1960)

Born in Mississippi, Wright moved his family to Chicago in 1927 as part of the Great Migration. He became famous for his searing portrayal of the African-American experience in his memoir *Black Boy* (1945) and novel *Native Son* (1940). Because of his communist sympathies, he lived much of the last years of his life in exile in France. In his last two years he wrote many thousand haiku. In 1998 a book of these was finally published.

1939 Portrait
Carl Van Vechten



We end this session about prejudice and hatred with the serenity and insight of Richard Wright. Living in exile in France he found the form of the Japanese haiku and over 18 months wrote thousands of these poems. His book, entitled *Haiku: This Other World*, was finally published in 1998. A writer considered “other” by his own country found reconciliation in a poetic form quite “other” to his culture.

A Dream Deferred

*After
arriving
North the
Negroes
had better
housing
conditions*
Jacob
Lawrence
1941



The final illustration is another painting from *The Great Migration*. It depicts the tenement housing in the North cities. It is difficult to tell whether the austerity of the image peels away or paints over the poverty that is often the lot of those who strive against the forces of human prejudice.