**Oral Histories & Zora Neale Hurston**

**Lesson Guide**

Author: Tatiana McInnis

Vanderbilt University

**Overview and Objectives**

**Grade levels:** 6-12th grade (can be adapted)

**Subject areas:** Language Arts/Social Studies/ Technology

**Duration:** 3 sessions

**Topic:** Oral Histories and Zora Neale Hurston’s Audio Recordings

**Prior Knowledge:**

Students will ideally have studied other work by Hurston and have a working understanding of her tendency to write stories about story-telling, and her use of vernacular to facilitate connections between vernacular and oral histories and cultures. Having prior knowledge of use of vernacular and working definitions of oral histories, students should be able to articulate the stakes of understanding and engaging with these cultures as they link to issues of race, gender, and representation (as in, diversifying who we are studying and how we are studying them).

**Summary:**

This lesson could be used as an extension plan on a unit on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or on rhetoric, vernacular, folklore, and/or social studies methods in a Human Geography, US History, Sociology, or Geography course. Oral histories as a focus could be adapted to many questions across the social sciences/language arts and literature classroom.

**In this lesson, students will:**

* Develop a definition of oral histories/oral culture/orality and be able to articulate the important distinction between oral and written histories
* Create their own written/oral histories
* Close-read story and analyze how Hurston merges the form of the parable/folk tale to produce a story about story-telling in “Magnolia Flower.”
* Engage a focused analysis of the story’s content and style to consider how Hurston addresses issues of Black and Native American interactions, the memory of nature, colorism, gender roles, etc. (could be tailored to educator goals)

**Content of Lesson Guide**

1. Objectives and Connections to Prior Knowledge
2. Materials
3. Activity Staging
4. Curriculum Relevance/Common Core Standards
5. Glossary

**Materials**

* Internet Access/Projector
* Paper/ Pencil and other art supplies
* Recording Device (camera, smart phone, etc.)
* If possible, access to a computer lab

**Lesson Plan**

**Day 1**

Activities:

1. Think-Pair-Share (15-20 minutes): Have students individually think of a funny story to share with one of their classmates. Encourage students not to write these stories (yet) just to think of them and organize them in their minds to talk about with their peers. Allow 5 minutes for students to share their stories with each other.
2. Have students work individually and write down the story they have just told to their students. If they feel compelled, they can add art/ draw/ decorate the written pages in ways that help further convey the meaning of these stories (allow 10-15 minutes)
3. Have students exchange their written stories and each reader should take notes/discussion about things that changed from the written and oral forms of the story.
4. Have student’s write brief self-reflection on what challenges they experienced in translating their stories to the written word.
   1. Was anything lost or gained in the written form?
   2. Do they prefer telling or writing the stories?
   3. If the story was different (i.e., instead of funny, telling a sad, dramatic, angry story) do you think you would prefer to talk or write about it? Why?
   4. From your own experience, what do you think oral history is?
   5. What does sharing oral histories allow us to do that writing does not?
5. Show video of Dr. Nwankwo defining “oral history” to spark closing discussion and reiteration of oral history and how it relates to the stories the students have created.
6. Homework:

Assign “Magnolia Flower” (please refer to the appendix; also available at: <http://www.pf.jcu.cz/stru/katedry/aj/doc/kocmichova/Z_N_Hurston_Magnolia_Flower.pdf>) and “Story in Harlem Slang” (please refer to the appendix; also available at: <http://www.loa.org/images/pdf/Hurston_Harlem_Slang.pdf>)

As students read, ask them to annotate how Hurston captures the sound of speech/vernacular (particularly in “Story in Harlem Slang” and how she shows the importance of telling stories, the way we tell stories, and who (or what) gets to tell stories.

**Day 2**

Activities:

1. Students should have read “Magnolia Flower” and “Story in Harlem Slang” before the class session.
2. In small groups, have students discuss their initial reactions to the stories, with particular attention to vernacular and Hurston’s meta-storytelling. Have students repeat the conclusions drawn in small groups to the broader class.
3. General Discussion Questions to be answered using jigsaw technique. Break class into three groups to answer each question.
   1. How does each of the stories call attention to the difference between writing stories and listening to stories?
   2. How does the use of “slang” help us think about the challenges of writing how people speak? Can we think of any current scenarios that highlight this challenge (hint at texting)?
   3. Why do you think Hurston chose to personify nature in “Magnolia Flower”? What commentary is she presenting be allowing things to speak that normally would not speak?
4. If possible, in a computer lab, have students listen to at least three of Zora Neale Hurston’s audio-recordings (folk songs accessible on <https://www.floridamemory.com/collections/folklife/people/?id=hurston>) and have students choose one and answer the following questions in an in-class written assignment:
   1. How does the song you have chosen present a story you might not have otherwise have heard?
   2. How does Hurston introduce this song? Is there anything in the framing of the song that makes us think about oral cultures in different ways? Pay particular attention to:
      1. How and where these songs are developed and transmitted? What do they reveal about working conditions and about WHO is using oral history to communicate and document history?
      2. What story is being provided within the songs?
5. After addressing questions in written form, have entire class discuss their findings as a larger group.
6. If for whatever reason access to a computer lab is limited, play “Tampa” (available on the aforementioned website) for the entire class and have them answer the aforementioned questions in writing and then discuss as a group.

**Day 3**

Activities:

1. Show oral histories by Darria Hudson (MA Divinity), Carlin Rushing (MA Divinity), and Annie Castro, (English PhD candidate), available on <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/zoraclas/>. Hudson discusses Hurston’s ethical inclusion of working-class voices in her work, Rushing describes her experience of teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Castro discusses the relationship between oral culture/histories and spirituality, focusing on her research on *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. While not analyzing the works the students will have read, the histories will give a sense of Hurston’s importance, as well as model how the students might approach their own histories.
2. Depending on resources in a given classroom, either:
   1. Have students partner up and spend ~10 minutes preparing what they would like to record. If working with partners, students might prefer interview format (modeled by Annie Castro’s video) or a monologue (modeled by Carlin Rushing’s video).
   2. If resources allow, each pair could be given a recording device—allow 15-20 minutes to complete recording for both students (histories should be 3-5 minutes long).
   3. After students record their oral histories, have them write short-self reflections of the experience of recording their histories: What specific challenges did they experience? What did they enjoy about their histories?
   4. If resources allow, upload oral histories on a WordPress blog, or similar website, and require students to comment on at least two of their peers’ histories with discussion questions or an analysis of the video itself.

\*\*\* If there is not access to digital publishing and/or recording technology available for multiple students to work simultaneously, have students practice their histories with partners while individual students record their histories with instructor. Have students who have finished either a) help other students practice or b) begin reflection process.

**Glossary**

**Vernacular**

A language or dialect spoken by the common people of a region (usually different from official/literary standards).

This lesson plan specifically focuses on the relationship between Black Vernacular English/African American Vernacular English and oppression and self-expression. Oral history research values multiple perspectives across formal educational levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, regional communities, etc., and provides an inclusive model for researching the human experience.

BVE- Black Vernacular English

AAVE- African American Vernacular English

[Pullum, Geoffrey K. “African American Vernacular English is Not Standard English with](http://web.stanford.edu/~zwicky/aave-is-not-se-with-mistakes.pdf)

[Mistakes.”](http://web.stanford.edu/~zwicky/aave-is-not-se-with-mistakes.pdf)

Pullum, Geoffrey K. “African American Vernacular English is Not Standard English with

Mistakes.” Rebecca S. Wheeler (ed.) *The Workings of Language.* Westporn CT: Praeger, 1999.

**Folklore**

the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth].

**Oral History**

The collection and study of historical information using sound recordings of interviews with people having personal knowledge of past events.

Oral history is a tool for learning about people, places, and events. Explain to students that we learn about the past (and how we feel about things going on now) by asking people to tell them stories about it. These stories are called oral history.

**Curriculum Contents/ Standards**

**Tennessee College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading**

* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/1/)  
  Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/2/)  
  Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/10/)  
  Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

**Tennessee College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing**

* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/W/1/)  
  Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/W/6/)   
  Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/W/9/)  
  Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**Tennessee College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening**

* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/SL/1/)  
  Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/SL/4/) [Culminating Activity 1]  
  Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**Tennessee English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 11-12**

* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12/1/)  
  Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12/2/)  
  Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12/3/)  
  Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

**Tennessee English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 11-12**

* [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/9/)  
  Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**Tennessee Anchor Standard for Literacy in All Subjects**

* + RH 1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
  + RH 3: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.
  + RH 7 (technology): Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
  + WHST 10: Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
  + SL 1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.