

Assembling a Story

Length: Four 50-minute class periods

Grades: 8th grade U.S. History

Overview: Many valuable histories are not written in history books but are shared between family and friends from one generation to the next. Radcliffe Bailey's work *By the River* uses images and objects that the artist inherited from his family to represent personal and historical narratives. Bailey's stories offer perspectives on African-American history and contemporary life, but they are also deeply personal. This lesson allows students to explore the history of groups of people that either immigrated or were forcibly moved to the U.S. in the 18th or 19th century.

Note: References in this lesson are made to students doing parts of the lesson online. If computers are not available for student use, alternate options are given.

Objectives:

- Students will observe, discuss, and interpret Radcliffe Bailey's work *By the River*.
- Students will recognize the similarities and differences between oral history and documented history.
- Each student will create a personal narrative or assemblage that offers a perspective on the experiences of a people who came to the U.S. during the 18th or 19th century.
- Students will practice presentation skills by delivering monologues and presenting their artwork.

Connections to 8th grade TEKS for social studies:

- Student describes how different immigrant groups interacted with the environment in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. (8.12C)
- Student identifies selected racial, ethnic, and religious groups that settled in the United States and their reasons for immigration. (8.24A)
- Student analyzes the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to our national identity. (8.24D)
- Student differentiates between, locates, and uses primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about the United States. (8.30A)
- Student analyzes the relationship between fine arts and continuity and change in the American way of life. (8.27B)
- Student creates written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information. (8.31D)

Materials:

Computers with internet access

Poster or computer image of Radcliffe Bailey's *By the River* ([Click here to order poster.](#))

[Secondary sources on 18th- and 19th-century America](#)

Journals or spirals of note cards for each student

Canvas boards (11" x 14" or larger)

Acrylic paint and brushes
Found objects and photos
Hot glue gun and hot glue sticks

Procedure:

1. Show students the poster or computer image of Radcliffe Bailey's *By the River*. Have them observe the work for a few minutes before giving students any background information on the work or artist. Tell them that this work includes many symbols and artistic elements that guide the viewer to understand the work better. Have each student either write down three questions he/she wants to know about the objects or images they see.
2. Guide them through a critical inquiry of the painting by having them ask their questions and inviting the other students to share responses supported by visual evidence in the work. Allow ample time in the discussion for debate and differing opinions.
3. Following a thoughtful discussion with the class, you may want to fill in the gaps with the following information or have students click on elements of the work to hear the artist discuss details. Have them log onto the Blanton website and go to:

eLearning > Learning Activities > Assembling a Story > The Artwork in Context or URL
< <http://wwwtest.utexas.edu/blanton/utopia/elearning/aac/student.html> >

- The black curving symbols refer to early 19th-century ironwork often made by African American craftsmen as well as to modern-day burglar bars.
 - The red pouch contains red clay from Georgia where Bailey lives and works.
 - The numbers allude to slave trade numbers and the number of lynchings in the South.
 - The center photograph was one of over 400 photographs of family members given to the artist by his grandmother.
 - The travel photographs document a relative's travels through the South and a friend's visit to West Africa where a majority of slaves were traded and put on ships to the West.
 - Green represents the color of his grandfather's room where he built birdhouses.
 - Indigo represents water and Oshun who is the Yoruban female patron of rivers; and red represents Shango who is the male deity of natural forces.
4. Have students reflect on the work and how the meaning of it has changed for them now that they understand several of the symbols. Ask them:

Interpretation and Evaluation:

- Now that you have learned about many of the symbols' meanings, how do they work together to create a story?
- What do you think the artist trying to say or to teach?
- What seems to be the personal significance of this work to the artist?

5. Explain to students that one purpose of Bailey's work is to tell a personal story and at the same time highlight his heritage as an African-American. He also attempts to make visual the oral histories and unrecorded stories of individuals who came to live in America by carefully selecting and placing symbolic images and objects. Tell students how many people who came to the U.S., either voluntarily or forcibly, kept oral histories of their communities or families.

6. Ask students to choose a group of people who came to live in the U.S. history or an individual, perhaps a relative or family friend, whose family immigrated or were relocated to the U.S. in the 18th or 19th century. If a student chooses a group of people, he/she will create a fictionalized character based on research about the group's experience. Students will research their groups through [secondary sources](#), including library and [internet resources](#) and through interviews, if appropriate. The goal of each student is to discover:

- A basic biography and family history
- His/her native country and circumstances surrounding relocation to the U.S.
- Where he/she lived in the U.S.
- The historical events that influenced his/her character
- His/her first experiences with work, society, and living conditions in America
- How he/she maintained his/her culture while he/she adapted to American life
- What contributions his/her culture made in creation of our national identity

7. Students may compile research notes in a process journal or a spiral of note cards. These notes will be used as a guide for the actual project and will be turned in as part of the assessment. Ask students to create and develop a personality for their character that is based on the facts they uncover. The purpose of this assignment is for the students to gain an empathetic understanding of this group of immigrants and the time in which they lived.

8. Once students gather their facts, they should begin to create believable and interesting "oral histories." Ask students to select one of these creative projects:

Write a *monologue* written in the form of a character revealing his/her thoughts and feelings by talking aloud to himself/herself. Use your imagination to add appropriate details and to give your character a believable voice and depth. When presenting your monologue to the class, speak in a conversational way as the character telling his/her story to a friend, not delivering his/her biography in a class. You may choose to perform your monologue live as a dramatic reading or have it videotaped at home or before school and play it for the class. Monologue performances should be 5 to 8 minutes long.

Create an *assemblage*, a work of art similar to a collage but with of three-dimensional as well as two-dimensional objects and materials, that reflects the life experiences and personality of your character. Your artwork may include a portrait and/or symbols from the character's life like Bailey's work. You will present your work to the class explaining the

images, symbols, colors, and materials used and how those elements relate to the person you researched. After drawing a sketch of your design on paper, you should:

1. Sketch out basic shapes for painting on canvas board.
 2. Paint image(s) with acrylic paints.
 3. Use glue gun or other strong glue to attach photos or other found objects.
9. The presentations allow students to serve as teachers to their peers and provide them with an opportunity to synthesize what they have learned. Students who wrote monologues will deliver those speeches “in character,” affecting an accent for added drama. Students who created artworks will display the paintings and describe the works in terms of organization of elements, meaning of symbols, and historical relevance. Questions from the audience and dialogue should be encouraged for both presentations. Students should be evaluated on the project as well as the presentation.

Related Resources:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/index.html>

Information on immigrants and history lesson plans

<http://www.bergen.org/AAST/PROJECTS/Immigration>

How immigrants were treated and why they came to America

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/oralhist.htm>

Oral history questions that may help students interview someone or develop their characters

<http://www.tenement.org>

America's urban immigrant history

<http://www.ellisland.com>

Ellis Island Immigration Museum and a search engine for genealogy

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/tm/black.html>

Large list of African-American history links