

## **Wicked Problems, Place, and Liberation**

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### **Abstract**

It is challenging to understand how oppressive systems and their history impact our lives on a daily basis. One way of doing this is to explore them through the discipline of Geography. The goal of this Senior Project unit is to teach students to use the analytical frames of Black Geographies to understand how their chosen wicked problems show up in their own Philadelphia neighborhoods, and to consider spaces of liberation that exist. The unit begins with an exploration of perceptions of Philadelphia as a whole and its neighborhood, and then introduces the frames of Black Geographies to think about how history and oppression show up on Philadelphia's landscape and impact these perceptions. Students will then be introduced to the concept of marronage, and will explore spaces of liberation that already exist, and analyze examples of how organizing might be used to create additional liberatory spaces. This unit is designed as one component of a larger project, and is the jumping-off point for a larger Participatory Action Research project that will extend this exploration.

### **Content Objectives**

#### **School & Class Context**

The U School is an "Innovation Network" school in the School District of Philadelphia. We are non-selective, with about half of our students coming from our broadly defined neighborhood (including Kensington and North Philadelphia) and half from the rest of the city (mainly Southwest and West Philadelphia). We serve just under 300 students, with 70% of our students identifying as African-American, 20% as Latinx, and the rest identifying as Multi-Racial, White, or Asian. All of our students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and over 20% of our students receive Special Education services.

Our Senior Project curriculum, which originated in the 2017-18 school year with our first graduating class, builds on the work students have done in Humanities classes over the course of their time at The U School. While exploring English and History, students have created portfolios of Narrative, Argumentative, and Informational writing inspired by World, American, and African-American History. For Senior Project, students are asked to identify a persistent issue that they see in their lives or communities, which we term "wicked problems". These writings combine to form their portfolio website, which inspires a final presentation in front of their peers, educators, and community members.

In their portfolios and presentations, students reflect in deeply personal ways while expanding and deepening their understanding of their wicked problems. In general, the strongest components of students' Senior Projects are the narratives - sometimes personal and written in the first-person but most often written through a created character that served as a vehicle to tell a story that was either theirs or the story of someone close to them. In these pieces, students chose to create monologues, poetry, scripts, journal entries, and more straightforward short stories. The results are generally deeply personal and complex narratives.

“Wicked Problem” is a term from social engineering that has been central to the work of The U School since its founding in 2014. Rittel and Webber (1973) defined “wicked problems”, stating:

As you will see, we are calling them “wicked” not because these properties are themselves ethically deplorable. We use the term “wicked” in a meaning akin to that of “malignant” (in contrast to “benign”) or “vicious” (like a circle) or “tricky” (like a leprechaun) or “aggressive” (like a lion, in contrast to the docility of a lamb) (160-161).

In defining wicked problems for our students as they started the Senior Project this year, [we wrote](#), “A problem that is difficult or impossible to solve based on how complex and contradictory it is. These are problems that have existed for many years, which one would not be able to effectively solve ‘overnight’.” Attending under-resourced schools in Philadelphia, and living in some of its most oppressed communities, our students face many of these types of issues on a daily basis.

Students generally select a wide array of wicked problems, often clustering around a few main themes with some outlier topics. This year, many of our projects focused on gun violence - due particularly to the increase in its impact on young people in our city and the shooting death of a fellow member of their Senior class, Mohammed Cisse, last Spring. Students generally choose topics that are deeply personal that impact them, their close friends, or family members, and their neighborhood.

While we have talked about community in selecting wicked problems, and I have required all students situate their problems and projects in Philadelphia, I have not had students spend much time thinking directly about place as their projects develop. While place informs the selection of their project, and is peripherally mentioned throughout their projects, it has never been a central component of the interrogation of their Wicked Problems. With this year's curriculum unit, I plan to ask students to think more directly about the geography of Philadelphia, and their neighborhoods, and to interrogate the way that place contributes to their wicked problem and also can (and does) allow liberation from it.

## Seminar Content

I envision the curriculum from this year's seminar as adding layers of complexity to our Senior Project work. Students already create work that is often personal, passionate, and insightful. I have long searched for ways to encourage students to interrogate the role that (often oppressive) systems play in their wicked problems in their communities. Through this seminar, I have realized that the discipline of Geography with layers of race, class, and gender is the way to incorporate this level of critique in these projects. While I have specifically focused my final unit in the applications of the work *Black Geographies* to student projects, all of the content in our seminar informs the final unit that I created.

In the first week of the seminar, we learned about the discipline of Geography. We started with the key concepts: Locations, Distance, Scale, and Space & Place. A major misconception of Geography is that it is just about facts, but, as with other disciplines, it is really about explaining why things are the way they are. We then dove into the way that Geography relates back to how we define ourselves, and how we are defined by others - specifically through the lens of maps. As I introduce this unit to my students, I think that the four key concepts of Geography will be an important starting point to the exploration - and a helpful frame as we move through the rest of the unit.

In week two, we looked at the city - analyzing poetry, songs, and film clips about cities, particularly focused on New York, considering metaphors for the city, and exploring the work of Simmel, Mumford, and White. I plan to incorporate the first activity in my curriculum unit by collecting poems, songs, and film clips about Philadelphia to analyze with students - and also having them submit some of their own. While I don't plan to use the work of Simmel, Mumford, or White with students, I do plan to use their work as I consider how to frame my curriculum unit. At this early stage, I think I will primarily draw on the work of Simmel (tension between individuality and the city) and White (the idea of hope and terror being present in any city today). The activity of analyzing creative work about Philadelphia will hopefully help students unpack some of the contradictions that exist in our city today - and open us up to the conversations to come about race, class, and gender.

For the next three classes, we dove into each of the three core concepts for the course, beginning with race. We listened to an episode of *This American Life*, watched *I Am Not Your Negro*, and explored Touré's work defining modes of Blackness. Our exploration focused on how we are raced, and the way that plays out on both a micro and macro level. I already explore race and racism in my curriculum, though I think I could be more explicit about the way I connect it to the Senior Project. This class session gave me ideas about how to incorporate the micro and very personal experience of race and racism in my curriculum, when I often focus mostly on the macro.

In our session on gender, we explored the ways in which our identities, particularly our gender identities are performed. We watched a TED Talk by Ben Doyle, discussed work by Crenshaw, Irazábal & Huerta, and Lorber & Moore. I have previously introduced the concept of intersectionality to students, and found it to be easily grasped and deeply engaging. Irazábal & Huerta's work was particularly interesting to me because it chronicled a project similar to one I might envision with my student - a reframed walking tour. I want to dive deeper into this piece, and think about how the way intersectionality applies here could be applied in my own curriculum.

In the next class session, we took a look at class and caste. We began with a deep dive into Engels, Marx, and Lenin's concept of Dialectical Materialism, and then explored the work of Ehrenreich and Wilkerson. I have long wanted to find ways to bring a critical conversation about capitalism into my curriculum, and these resources gave me some ideas. What Ehrenreich describes in *Nickel & Dimed* would hit close to home to my students, many of whom work many hours at retail or fast food businesses, and experience the churn she describes, as well as the conditions.

Following the submission of our prospectus, we dove into a number of topics to expand on our thinking about race, class, and gender that we had established before submitting. We focused on the work of Stuart Hall, and the concepts of semiotics, encoding, and decoding. We closed this session with an activity on reading images of places, and how they might be interpreted differently by people of different races, classes, and genders. I will be adapting this activity to include it in my unit during the introductory days where we look at creative work about Philadelphia and consider perceptions of neighborhoods of Philadelphia.

Our next session looked at the concept of gentrification, and we began with a presentation by Dr. Edward Epstein about his dissertation research on gentrification and education in West Philadelphia. This lecture went a long way in connecting the content from the seminar with our experiences in Philadelphia schools and neighborhoods. In his presentation, Dr. Epstein mentioned that to those at the University of Pennsylvania driving the planning and development in West Philadelphia, Black spaces were often seen as nonspaces. When I inquired about this, Professor Sanders recommended that I explore the work of the Black Geographies Specialty Group, Dr. Katherine McKittrick, and the concept of maroonage. Much of this unit is focused on this concept, and I will explore it in more detail in the next section.

In our final content session, we looked at public spaces and immigration, and considered how we might create lessons or units based on two different pieces - a story from *This American Life* about Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's growing up undocumented in the United States and a discussion with Elijah Anderson on his concept of the cosmopolitan canopy. I could see the *This American Life* selection working in another unit, but it doesn't fit with the vision of this current unit. As we discuss perceptions of

Philadelphia and Philadelphia's neighborhoods, particularly Center City, we may touch on Anderson's work - and the idea that parts of Center City are places where people feel comfortable engaging across racial lines. I would be curious whether this idea would resonate with my students, or whether they feel differently about Center City.

### **Extension of Seminar Content: Black Geographies and Marronage**

In determining the direction for my curriculum unit, I am most drawn to the work of the Black Geographies Specialty Group. I was first introduced to this work by Professor Sanders during Edward Epstein's class presentation. This shifted my focus for the unit, but I also think it clarified my path to get to the ideas I want to explore with students.

I explored the work of Katherine McKittrick and Willie Jamaal Wright, as recommended by Professor Sanders. In "On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place", McKittrick explores the ways in which urbicide and disinvestment have impacted Black communities, and the way those ideas are connected to histories of racism - extending all the way back to the plantation - and to the current prison-industrial complex. McKittrick identifies traits of the institutions of the plantation, urbicide, and prisons that McKittrick defines: displacement, surveillance, and enforced slow death. This work does a powerful job of looking at the ways that structural racism and history impact the geography of places, including today's cities. These are dots I have been hoping to connect with student wicked problems for a while, and this work seems like a part of that key.

A major challenge of exploring this work with students is that it presents a bleak outlook on many of their communities. Although McKittrick is explicit in her work about pushing back against the idea that these issues are deterministic, I can see how students could feel that the outcomes are all predetermined given the deep historical and structural oppressive forces. This is where Soja's socio-spatial dialectic fits. He describes the dialectic, writing "Space itself may be primordially given, but the organization, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience." The conditions that we are discussing were created, and they can also be transformed.

This is where I will be drawing on Wright's definition of marronage, laid out in "The Morphology of Marronage". Before this course and reading these articles, I was familiar with the term maroon, used to describe communities of people who escaped enslavement and created their own communities on the outskirts of slave societies. In his work, Wright encourages us to expand our thinking about marronage and consider the ways it shows up beyond slavery, including today. Wright writes, "Landscapes of marronage are those difficult terrains that marginalized, hunted, and exploited people have made habitable—areas where communities have taken a desire for liberation and merged it with an ignored and undervalued environment to gain liberties in opposition to repressive administrations." I think that this could be a helpful frame for me to have

students explore how people in their communities have created community, and indeed liberation, in the face of an oppressive system.

I had been familiar with the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore through her interviews last year in the context of police and prison abolition. Through reading McKittrick's "On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place", I was encouraged to look deeper into her work. McKittrick says of Gilmore that her frame exemplifies "an analytical pathway that pays attention to geographies of relationality and human life without dismissing the brutalities of isolation and marginalization" (2011). This is precisely the type of analysis I was looking to have students do throughout this unit. Gilmore's work pushes back against the naturalization of incarceration, and encourages us to move away from isolating the incarcerated from our communities in our minds even as they are physically separated. She works to bring our understanding of this oppression to a human level - which pushes back against the often dehumanizing way we view incarcerated people.

After reading McKittrick's work, I was inspired to read the "Mothers Reclaiming Our Children" chapter from Gilmore's *Golden Gulag*, a book that has been on my list to read. In reading this chapter, I learned about the work that Mothers ROC has done in Los Angeles and California more broadly. The chapter traces the history of the organization, and emphasizes the way that they pushed back against the individualization of incarceration, and emphasized mothering as a collective action. This connects powerfully to the concept of marronage and also to the work of students focusing on wicked problems. It is a powerful example of how organizing can expand on and create new spaces of liberation for folks who are facing wicked problems - and can work for transformation of conditions.

## **Unit Outline**

During this unit, we will think about how place has impacted people, and how people impact place. We will "zoom in" with each lesson - starting with a view of Philadelphia as a whole then considering neighborhoods (regions) of the city then looking at our own neighborhoods and even blocks. We will then shift our perspective back in time - beginning with our current perceptions and then moving back to consider the historical underpinnings. Various analytical lenses will be applied throughout this unit - including Black Geographies.

I have conceptualized the unit based on this content to have three major segments. We'll begin by exploring perceptions of Philadelphia, first through artistic representations then through perceptions of neighborhoods. This will push students in the direction of thinking about race, class, and gender, and the way that those aspects of our identity impact the way we see the city as a whole, and specific neighborhoods of the city. We will then explore the analytical frame of Black Geographies, and end by

extending the unit into Participatory Action Research work that will impact students' Senior Projects.

### ***Perceptions of Philadelphia***

The unit will begin by looking at how Philadelphia is portrayed in various forms of art - music, film, and poetry. In addition to presenting an array of pieces I selected, I will encourage students to contribute work that they think represents Philadelphia and we will analyze their submissions as well. The purpose of this activity will be to get students to think about the meaning carried in a place, which extends far beyond just a spot on a map.

From there, I will introduce students to the concept of region, which we will apply to neighborhoods of Philadelphia in this unit. Through this activity, students will look at maps of Philadelphia's neighborhoods and discuss the perceptions of those places. Students will share their own ideas, and then consider how those perceptions differ depending on race, class, and gender. To extend this unit on perceptions, we will analyze local news coverage of particular neighborhoods in a follow-up lesson to consider how these media portrayals influence how neighborhoods of Philadelphia are perceived. As an extension of this lesson, students will be asked to bring in 2 photos of their blocks that show different perspectives on that place.

### ***Black Geographies & Marronage***

After this series of framing lessons, we are going to dive into the work of Black Geographies Specialty Group. This work has given me a powerful way of framing something that I have wanted to explore with students for a long time. I want students to have an opportunity to take a hyper-local focus on their own neighborhood or block, which connects current issues ("wicked problems") to structural and historical forms of oppression.

I will introduce students to the concept of Black Geographies, specifically using the work of Katherine McKittrick to help frame this aspect of the unit. Her work focuses on how Black spaces are treated and viewed, and what she refers to as the "ongoing destruction of Black sense of place in America". She frames this place annihilation around the traits that she says connect the modern prison with the plantation, and ultimately also with urbicide: displacement, surveillance, and enforced slow death. I will introduce this concept to students, and apply it to Philadelphia today by looking at incarceration, redlining, and policing.

I have been concerned through this process about how to bring levity and positive energy to this work for students. I am uncomfortable with too strong a focus on "assets-based" study, as I think it can often serve to obscure oppressive conditions. In thinking

about how these wicked problems can be addressed in place, I am going to draw on the work of Wright when it comes to marronage and on the work of McKittrick, who cites Ruth Wilson Gilmore, about the importance of relationships and relational work.

As we explore the concept of marronage, I will begin by introducing students to historical examples of its origins, as a term to represent people who escaped enslavement and formed autonomous communities on the outskirts of slave societies. We will discuss and analyze this idea historically before looking at an excerpt of Wright's work connecting marronage to today. This will connect back to our previous lesson's study of McKittrick's work, and I will ask students to consider what spaces exist in Philadelphia that provide liberation for Black folks from the oppressive conditions with traits of displacement, surveillance, and enforced slow death.

Students will generate a list of these places, breaking them down into categories. We will use the lists that students generate as a jumping off point, and I will use it to further probe and add additional places. I thought that it was important to include virtual places as well as physical places in this conversation - because I know there are some students we work with who find their most liberatory places on the internet. In terms of physical places, we will divide them into categories of public, semi-public, and private. I will also be leaving an open category for places that students don't see as fitting into any of the existing categories.

I will define public places as those spaces that anyone can access, regardless of membership. This would include places like public parks or other natural settings that are open to anyone, as well as places like Dilworth Plaza outside of City Hall in Philadelphia. Even though that place is actually privately owned, for the sake of this activity we will focus on access rather than ownership. I derived the term semi-public from Gilmore's work. She uses it to describe places like churches - which while technically open, often require something like membership to access them or feel welcomed. Finally, I use private places to define those that restrict access - like a home or a bedroom.

Gilmore's work focused on Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (ROC) is an important component of this unit. In addition to understanding how today's oppressive conditions relate to history, and understanding the liberatory spaces that exist, it is important for students to understand how spaces of liberation are created. One of those ways is through organizing - and Mothers ROC is a powerful example of that. The story of this organization shows how liberatory spaces were used to connect the mothers and create the organization. It also illustrates how, through organizing, new spaces of liberation can be created in the face of persistent oppressive conditions. And this story illustrates how those liberatory spaces can create freedom in the midst of all of this, and lead to lasting changes.



As an extension of this unit, students will be asked to apply the analysis we are doing as a class to their own wicked problems, and to begin to consider how those places of liberation (marronage) can play a role in pushing back against the forms of oppression. I think that Gilmore's work on Mothers ROC is a powerful way of connecting the Black Geographies work of McKittrick and Wright with the work that students are doing on their own wicked problems - and it can also get them to think about how they might be able to organize to utilize or create liberatory places through the rest of their project.

### **Extending the Unit Into the Rest of the Project**

I was inspired by the work of Cahill and Irazábal & Huerta with young people in New York City. This gave me a lot of ideas for how to take the work I am having students do in the classroom to a deeper and more meaningful place where the action that extends from their projects has an impact in the broader community rather than just within our school.

Building from these explorations of Black Geographies, marronage, and connections to organizing, I will continue the connection to Senior Project by encouraging students to consider how liberatory spaces and organizing might be effective ways to address their wicked problems. I would have students undertake this process collaboratively - combining with other students focused on similar problems or similar communities. This is where students would move into the Social Research portion of this project, diving deep into data, interviews, mapping, and observations to further explore their problems and how organizing and liberatory spaces might help address them in their communities.

### **Teaching Strategies**

#### **Text Rendering**

This strategy is used to get students to break down and discuss a text. In this unit, this strategy will be particularly useful in the lesson that looks at songs, films, and poems about Philadelphia. In this strategy, students are asked to choose a line (sentence), a phrase, and a word from the text that most stands out to them or represents the meaning of the text. In terms of a film clip, this could also be applied to images. After watching, reading, or listening to the piece 1-2 times, the teacher should have students go around and each say their line, one after the other without explanation. Then repeat the same with phrases, then words. If time is a concern, it also works to just do rounds for 1 or 2 of these things, rather than all 3. After students have shared each of these, it is time to open the floor for conversation.

## **Jigsaw Reading**

This strategy is used to get groups of students to focus on different parts of a text or different texts before returning to teach their classmates about what they learned. This is a great strategy because it allows the class to cover a wide range of content, without every student having to read every word of an article or every different article. In this unit, groups will be assigned to read or review 4 different articles or resources. They will be given guiding questions, and then asked to present to their classmates after the activity.

## **Gallery Walk**

In this strategy, students walk around the room to look at various resources or think about various topics, making notes about each as they go. In a classroom, this can be done by hanging sheets of chart paper in different areas of the room, with each student having a stack of post-it notes. Each sheet of paper (or station) can either have a reading / photo / resource, or just a prompt. Give students time to brainstorm individually before they get up and get a chance to walk around and contribute to each station. Once students have had some time (5 or 10 minutes, depending on the activity) to write their ideas, they should be given some more time to go around to each poster to look at what other students have written before returning together. If your class is operating virtually, this activity can be done on Jamboard, by making each station a different board and encouraging students to add to each.

## **Photography**

The fact that the vast majority of students now carry around a good quality camera with them everywhere they go (in their cell phones) is something that I have not utilized enough in my teaching practice. During this unit, I will be asking students to take photographs of landscapes in their own journeys to school and neighborhoods that relate to what we have been discussing in class. In the early stages of the unit and before I assign any photography for students, we will have a conversation about safely and ethically taking these photographs. I will encourage students to take photographs of landscapes, buildings, and objects, but not of people unless they have specific permission - and preferably the photograph is of someone they know personally.

## **Participatory Action Research**

I have long considered adding Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a component of Senior Project, but haven't done so to any significant extent yet. The framing of my unit this year presents a possibility for greater incorporation of these principles. PAR approaches research from "ethical commitment to building capacity and doing research that is useful to the community" (Cahill 300). The Senior Project structure is currently

framed in a way that privileges the perspectives of my students and lets them shape their own questions and interpretations based on their experiences.

A major difference between the work I have done with students and the work that Cahill describes is that I have had students design projects that are deeply personal and individual, while Cahill's work was very collaborative. While I do appreciate providing students the opportunity to create projects that are individualized and meaningful, I also think I am missing out on a lot of the deeper analysis of systems by isolating student projects (and by association wicked problems) from one another. The push towards PAR is a push to find additional ways to make the projects more collaborative.

The other major difference, and place that I hope to have our Senior Project grow, is orienting the work students are doing towards action. Students have generally put together a portfolio of work around their topics, and presented their portfolios publicly through a website and a presentation. However, the work that Cahill describes, such as developing campaigns to reach out to the public, a website, a collection of their writing, and a report for local organizations inspires me to consider additional ways for students to take their deep, personal work to audiences beyond the school and classroom level.

### **Social Research Methods**

While I have had students conduct various kinds of research, mainly interviews and collecting data, I have not put much attention in previous years on developing an understanding of research methods with students, and making sure that their research is done systematically. Through this unit, I hope to plan some opportunities for students to learn research methods before heading out and doing their research. This will include various types of data collection, mapping, photography, and reflective writing, as well as possibly a deeper understanding of how to incorporate interviews. There is already an assignment in this unit that walks students through the process of interviewing, but moving forward Social Research Methods will be used to help combine interviewing with other strategies to form more coherent and systematic research.

### **Classroom Activities**

My classroom activities will include a selection of activities from throughout the unit. These lessons can be executed in one day or across several days, depending on how you hope to pace the unit and the number of resources you decide to use. These lessons are all from the first portion of the unit, but are not sequential. They represent the content that I thought might be most challenging to structure for the classroom, and so I decided to use it as my focus for the lesson plans.

## Lesson 1: Art About Philly

### *Guiding Question:*

How is Philadelphia perceived? What do artistic portrayals show us about how Philadelphia is seen?

### *Objectives:*

- Analyze different perceptions of Philadelphia in songs, film, and poetry.
- Identify their own examples of songs, film, and poetry that depict Philadelphia.
- Compare and contrast the different perspectives shown in each piece, and explore the roles of race, class, and gender in each depiction.

### *Materials:*

- Songs, Poems, Film Clips about Philadelphia (Note: If you are teaching in another place, these could be replaced with works about your own context):
  - [Meek Mill, “Dreams and Nightmares \(Intro\)”](#)
  - [Boyz II Men, “Motownphilly”](#)
  - [Bruce Springsteen, “Streets of Philadelphia”](#)
  - [Rocky Training Montage](#)
  - [Creed Training Montage](#)
  - [Sonia Sanchez, “Elegy for MOVE and Philadelphia”](#)
  - [Vincent Flannery, “It’s Rarely Sunny in Philadelphia”](#)
  - [Yolanda Wisher, “5 South 43rd Street, Floor 2”](#)

### *Standards:*

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.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.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- Learning For Justice Social Justice 5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.

### *Lesson Progression:*

1. Introduce students to the key idea of this lesson: Place is about much more than just a dot on a map. And one of the ways that ideas about a place are presented is through different forms of art. Today, we will look at ideas about Philadelphia

- through music, film, and poetry. I've chosen some pieces for us to analyze, and I encourage you to add your own throughout the lesson.
- a. In a classroom, you could set up a post-it wall for students to add songs, films, poems, and other art about Philadelphia. They could get up at any time during the class period to add.
  - b. Online, you could set up a Padlet or Jamboard where students could add links to the pieces they chose. If students have devices in the classroom, you could also use this option in that setting.
2. You can decide whether to focus on songs, film clips, or poetry first. In my classroom, I will focus on songs first - because I think that is often the easiest point of entry for students. Then we will move to film clips, followed by poetry.
    - a. Play each song or clip, have a student read each poem.
    - b. As the piece is played or read, have students complete a text rendering activity (see above).
    - c. After you have students share their lines, phrases, and/or words, open the floor for a conversation. Focus on the question: What picture does this give us about Philadelphia?
    - d. Once you have finished playing all of the pre-selected pieces in a particular category, you can also play some student submissions and complete the same activity above.
  3. After reading or listening to all of the pieces in a particular category, open a conversation about how the pieces are similar or different, and what they show us about Philadelphia. You can ask the questions:
    - a. What similarities did you notice between these songs / film clips / poems?
    - b. What differences did you notice?
    - c. What do these pieces show us about Philadelphia and how it is perceived?
    - d. What role do you see race, class, and gender playing in these depictions?
    - e. What perspective is missing? What would you (or someone else) add to these perspectives?
  4. Depending on how much time was spent on conversation, and how many student pieces were added, it is possible to complete different categories on the same day. If a lot of student pieces were added, or a lot of time was spent in conversation, this may need to be extended across multiple class periods.
    - a. Repeat the same process above in 2 and 3 for each of the categories.
    - b. If you want to add another category (like visual art or photography) or replace one of the categories, that is certainly a possibility.
  5. Once you have completed at least 2 different categories, spend some time reflecting on overarching similarities and differences between the depictions of Philadelphia in these forms of art. This can be a bit of a challenge, so it is possible that you may want to model an example of a comparison or contrast as a teacher. This is a place where you could include a writing assignment to assess these lessons.
    - a. What do these various forms of art show us about Philadelphia?

- b. How are they similar? How are they different?
- c. How do these perceptions of Philadelphia relate to race, class, and gender?
- d. What is missing from these perceptions of Philadelphia? What would you want to add?

## **Lesson 2: Black Geographies as an Analytical Frame**

### ***Guiding Question:***

How can analytical frames help us to understand how current conditions of oppression (and ultimately wicked problems) connect to historical origins?

### ***Objectives:***

- Define Black Geographies and some key components of its perspective.
- Analyze how perceptions of Philadelphia's neighborhoods relate to reality, and how that reality connects to history.
- Explain how the traits of surveillance, displacement, and enforced slow death manifest in Black communities in Philadelphia through redlining, mass incarceration, and policing.

### ***Materials:***

- [Black Geographies \(from blackfeminisms.com\)](#)
- [Housing Segregation in Everything from NPR Code Switch](#)
- [How a Philly neighborhood, where almost everyone has loved ones in prison, is bridging the divide](#)
- ['The Relationship Has Always Been Tense.' Philadelphia's Police Department Has a Troubling History With the City's Black Community](#)
- [How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia from NextCity](#)
- [Study: Philly among leaders in gentrification, which has pushed out people of color from the Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

### ***Standards:***

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 13. Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today.

- Learning for Justice Social Justice 14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.

***Lesson Progression:***

1. Begin by revisiting some of what has been addressed in previous lessons, and previewing what is coming today.
  - a. The previous lessons in this unit have pushed you to think about perceptions of Philadelphia, and its neighborhoods. Today, we are going to dive into reality and history - which in some cases reinforces perceptions, but in other cases calls them into question.
  - b. We are specifically going to use the frame of Black Geographies to look at the ways that Black neighborhoods have been viewed and in many ways attempted to be destroyed throughout history.
2. Defining Black Geographies, [using this short article as a basic overview](#). Some key points to emphasize as you introduce the concept:
  - a. Traditional geographies often reinforce oppressive structures in society, especially in terms of race, class, and gender.
  - b. Black geographies work alongside and beyond traditional geographies, and are sites of struggle.
  - c. Emphasize the interconnectedness of race, practices of domination, and geography.
  - d. Traditional geographies often erase Black place-making, and equates Black people and places with subordination.
  - e. The way that traditional geographies think about space can reinforce domination. As an example, when we see maps that emphasize homicide rates in Black communities, this can create a limiting and deterministic view of Black experiences.
  - f. Blackness is often treated as both hypervisible and placeless.
  - g. Black Geographies lay out these ideas in order to understand them and resist / move beyond them.
3. Traits connecting the plantation, prison, and urbicide: surveillance, displacement, enforced slow death
  - a. Katherine McKittrick, one of the major thinkers of Black Geographies, defined the connections between the plantation, the destruction of cities (urbicide), and mass incarceration.
  - b. These are traits we see throughout history, but also in our neighborhoods today:
    - i. Surveillance: close observation, especially of someone accused to have committed a crime
    - ii. Displacement: the forced movement of people from their home

- iii. Enforced Slow Death: factors forced on a person that lead to their death, even if it doesn't happen right away
4. Show students [Housing Segregation in Everything from NPR Code Switch](#). As they watch, ask:
  - a. What stands out to you about this video?
  - b. Though it mainly focuses on Baltimore, how does this video connect to Philadelphia?
  - c. How do you see the 3 traits we just defined (surveillance, displacement, enforced slow death) in this video?
  - d. How do these traits and this video relate to the wicked problem you are exploring for your project?
5. Open a conversation based on the video and definitions from earlier in class. Push students through your questioning to understand how current conditions (and even perceptions that were discussed in previous days) relate to historical oppression.
6. Depending on the length of your class period, and how long the discussion lasts, this activity may have to begin the following day. Divide students into 4 groups, and assign each group to focus on one of the 4 resources below:
  - a. [How a Philly neighborhood, where almost everyone has loved ones in prison, is bridging the divide](#)
  - b. ['The Relationship Has Always Been Tense.' Philadelphia's Police Department Has a Troubling History With the City's Black Community](#)
  - c. [How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia from NextCity](#)
  - d. [Study: Philly among leaders in gentrification, which has pushed out people of color from the Philadelphia Inquirer](#)
7. As students review the resources, ask them to consider the questions:
  - a. How do you see the traits defined by McKittrick (surveillance, displacement, enforced slow death) in your example?
  - b. How does this relate to your wicked problem topic?
  - c. How does this problem relate to space, place, and region?
8. Give groups time to work through their articles (feel free to create modified / shortened versions of some, if necessary) and prepare to share. If you want, you can have them prepare a visual aid (like a simple poster or a few Google Slides). When groups have had a chance to work, bring the group back together and have each group share while other groups take notes.
9. Assign students to take 3 pictures and bring them back with them to class the following day. Each photo should represent a different trait (surveillance, displacement, enforced slow death) and how it shows up in their neighborhood or on their block. Students will be encouraged to take photos of objects or buildings, rather than photos of people.



### **Lesson 3: Spaces of Liberation & Marronage**

#### ***Guiding Question:***

How might the ways that Black Americans have created spaces of marronage historically provide guidance for how spaces of liberation are created in Philadelphia today?

#### ***Objectives:***

- Define marronage and identify examples of maroon communities in history.
- Analyze how the concept of marronage applies to the creation of liberatory spaces today.
- List spaces of marronage that exist in Philadelphia today, whether physical or virtual.
- Connect the concept of marronage to their wicked problems.

#### ***Materials:***

- [Inside the Historic Swamp Refuge for African-American Slaves](#)
- Chart paper for Gallery Walk with these stations:
  - Public (Physical)
  - Semi-Public (Physical)
  - Private (Physical)
  - Virtual
- Post-it Notes

#### ***Standards:***

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.

#### ***Lesson Progression:***

1. Draw a connection to the previous lesson: Today we will be exploring another concept that is central to Black Geographies: marronage. We'll begin by looking at this concept historically - and then consider how it plays out today.

2. [Play this video](#) to introduce students to the concept of marronage. As they watch this video, ask them to think about the questions:
  - a. Why did enslaved people create maroon communities?
  - b. Where were these maroon communities located?
  - c. Were you familiar with this idea before watching this video?
3. Review with students historical definitions of maroons and marronage.
  - a. Maroons: People who escaped slavery and created independent communities on the outskirts of slave societies
  - b. Marronage: The act of running away from enslavement and creating independent communities
    - i. Grand marronage: Permanently escaping
    - ii. Petit marronage: Escaping for a short period of time (maybe days or weeks) and then returning
4. Explain to students that this concept is often forgotten or ignored when teaching about and discussing slavery. Ask: How does the concept of marronage add to or change our understanding of slavery?
5. Explain to students that, while marronage is often seen as a historical concept that mainly lives in the past, there are scholars who argue that the concept still exists today.
  - a. Present students with this quote from Willie Jamaal Wright: “Landscapes of marronage are those difficult terrains that marginalized, hunted, and exploited people have made habitable—areas where communities have taken a desire for liberation and merged it with an ignored and undervalued environment to gain liberties in opposition to repressive administrations.”
  - b. Emphasize for students the two key parts of this definition: liberation from marginalization (or hunting or exploitation) and spaces that are ignored or undervalued.
6. After reviewing Wright’s definition, ask students to brainstorm the ways that they see marronage play out today, particularly in Philadelphia. Emphasize for students that the idea of marronage is centered around the experiences of Black Americans - so those spaces that are liberatory for Black Americans should be at the forefront of our conversation. There is also space to expand the idea to consider other folks who are marginalized based on other aspects of their identities.
  - a. Begin by having students brainstorm, openly and individually, based on the definition above. Tell students that they can list, free write, or draw.
  - b. Then, explain to students that you are going to do a Gallery Walk activity, where they are going to walk around the room and add their ideas (and see the ideas of their classmates).
  - c. Set up stations (a piece of chart paper) with each of these prompts:
    - i. Private (Physical) - What kinds of spaces are liberatory that are not open to everyone? An example of this would be a home or apartment or a bedroom.

- ii. Semi-Public (Physical) - What kinds of spaces are liberatory that are open to people who are members or invited? An example of this could be a church or school or recreation center.
  - iii. Public (Physical) - What kinds of spaces are liberatory that are open to everyone (who knows about their existence)? An example of this could be a park or trail.
  - iv. Virtual - What kinds of spaces are liberatory that are online? An example of this could be a group or site.
  - v. Other - What kinds of liberatory spaces exist that don't fit into the other categories?
- d. After students have had time (maybe 5-10 minutes) to contribute their ideas to each station, give them some time to walk around the room and look at the ideas that their classmates added.
  - e. Debrief: Ask students what they noticed about what they and their classmates wrote. What does this show us about how marronage shows up today in Philadelphia?
7. Connections to Wicked Problems: Ask students to consider how this idea of marronage connects to their Wicked Problems - and what types of spaces can help folks find liberation from those issues.
  8. Similar to the previous day, ask students to take 2-3 photos of the spaces listed today and submit them before the following day's class.

### **Resources (evolving list)**

#### **Bibliography for Teachers**

Cahill, Caitlin (2007). Negotiating grit and glamour: Young Women of Color and the gentrification of the Lower East Side in *City and Society*, 19(2): 202-231.

Like the work of Irazábal and Huerta, this piece provides a model of work I can try to do with my own students. I appreciate the way that Cahill works with the young women in this community to explore their own experiences and connect them to globalization and neoliberal restructuring of society. I am also inspired by this use of Participatory Action Research (PAR), and this is an inspiration for its inclusion in this unit.

Irazábal, Clara & Claudia Huerta. Intersectionality and planning at the margins: LGBTQ youth of color in New York, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23:5 (2006), 714-732, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2015.1058755

As I think about my work with my students, I think that the work of FIERCE with LGBTQ youth of color in New York City around their limited access to spaces based on

their multiple disenfranchisements is helpful in thinking about how to overall structure and present this material, especially the concept of intersectionality, to students.

McKittrick, Katherine. "On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place." *Social & Cultural Geography* 12.8 (2011): 947-963.

In this essay, McKittrick draws connections between the plantation, racial violence, uricide, and the prison-industrial complex that I also hope to bring to light with my students in their analyses. In this article, I also appreciate how she uses the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore to explore how we might be able to transcend these current structures. This piece was a core inspiration for this unit, and I recommend that you read this piece as you prepare to teach this unit.

"Mothers Reclaiming Our Children." *Golden Gulag*, by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 181–240.

I was inspired to read this piece by McKittrick's reference to this specific chapter. This chapter traces the history and implications of the work of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children in California. It is an interesting history, and I would likely use some excerpts as a part of the unit for students. A core concept that ties this to the unit is the connection between liberatory spaces that exist (or are created) and organizing - connecting relationships to build power and support.

Sanders, Rickie. "Trayvon Martin: The Blogosphere, Racial Profiling, Social Justice, Pit Bulls, and 'The Talk'." *Antipode*, Nov. 2013.

In this article, written by Professor Sanders, she grapples with the concept of the Socio-Spatial Dialectic. Interspersing the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman with her own experience, Sanders raises important questions about the boundaries, both physical and in the mind, that are drawn in regards to race. This is an important layer to add to my unit, and for me to get students to consider and notice.

Soja, Edward W. "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 70, no. 2, June 1980, pp. 207–225.

This essay is core to understanding the idea of the socio-spatial dialectic - basically the concept that we impact places and they impact us.

Wright, Willie Jamaal. "As above, so below: Anti-Black violence as environmental racism." *Antipode*, 2018.

I was intrigued to read this piece from a member of the Black Geographies Specialty Group, as recommended by Professor Sanders. I was particularly interested in the way that this piece reframed environmental racism to include anti-Black violence rather than

just what we would normally consider to be environmental pollution. Wright reframes environmental racism as a form of state-sanctioned violence, citing the work of Pulido. Wright states that he's interested in exploring "why Black people remain subject to gratuitous violence and death, and how this relates to geography and the environment." He also uses the work of James Baldwin, Billie Holiday, and Robert Hayden to underscore the important work of art and literature in underscoring these ideas.

Wright, Willie Jamaal. "The Morphology of Marronage." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 2019, 110:4, pp. 1134-1149.

This is another core text I used as I developed this unit. In this article, Wright explores the way that the concept of marronage extends beyond its traditional use in reference to communities built by folks who escaped enslavement. He brings the idea right up to modern day, and this is a core piece to the design of this unit.

## **Resources & Materials for Student Use**

### ***Poetry, Songs, Film Clips about Philadelphia***

These will be used for the introductory lesson for this unit. These can be replaced with other works about Philadelphia. Students should also be encouraged to submit their own selections for analysis.

- [Meek Mill, "Dreams and Nightmares \(Intro\)"](#)
- [Boyz II Men, "Motownphilly"](#)
- [Bruce Springsteen, "Streets of Philadelphia"](#)
- [Rocky Training Montage](#)
- [Creed Training Montage](#)
- [Sonia Sanchez, "Elegy for MOVE and Philadelphia"](#)
- [Vincent Flannery, "It's Rarely Sunny in Philadelphia"](#)
- [Yolanda Wisher, "5 South 43rd Street, Floor 2"](#)

### ***Articles and Videos for Student Use***

- [Inside the Historic Swamp Refuge for African-American Slaves](#)
- [Black Geographies \(from blackfeminisms.com\)](#)
- [Housing Segregation in Everything from NPR Code Switch](#)
- [How a Philly neighborhood, where almost everyone has loved ones in prison, is bridging the divide](#)
- ['The Relationship Has Always Been Tense.' Philadelphia's Police Department Has a Troubling History With the City's Black Community](#)
- [How Redlining Segregated Philadelphia from NextCity](#)
- [Study: Philly among leaders in gentrification, which has pushed out people of color from the Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

## **Appendix**

### **Common Core Standards**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.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.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

### **Learning For Justice Social Justice Standards**

- Learning For Justice Social Justice 5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 13. Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.
- Learning for Justice Social Justice 20. Students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective.