

Talking about, Writing from, and Performing

4th Period English by Judith Arcana

These notes are a supplement to **4th Period English** for students, teachers, theater people, and everybody else who wants to encourage dialogue about the complicated issue of immigration in the United States of America in the 21st century.

This collection of poems and characters will be most interesting, meaningful and useful when it's read from start to finish, in order – and gains impact when it's read out loud, or performed like a play.

The action takes place in the early 21st century at George Washington High School – GWHS, a school that could be (and often is) found in any US city. Some elements here are drawn from or inspired by actual events, and everything talked about in these poems could have happened (and probably *is* happening right now while you're reading this) in virtually any city in the USA.

The characters are mostly high school students; they're all in the same English class, an elective, where they're working on immigration and related themes: race, class, nation and border. Their teacher has invited guest speakers, suggested films, assigned readings, and offered extra credit for community experience. The students are all “talking” – as the poems' titles show – and so are the adults who join them.

~ **Some questions to help start discussion:**

. Are these characters like people you've met, people you know about, or yourself? How? What do you find in the poems to make you answer this question the way you do?

. How are these poems like other poems you've read or heard? How are they different?

. What do you believe is the relationship between what the writer might be thinking – about all these people, ideas and situations – and what the characters, who often disagree with each other, seem to be thinking?

. These are all made-up characters, and they're all telling made-up stories. What makes them sound true, or real? What makes them seem to be real people, talking about things that have actually happened? Or – if you think the people and stories in these poems are *not* realistic – why not? What seems not-real about them?

. Are there differences between the ways the adults talk/think and the ways the students talk/think? What differences do you find? How does each group talk? If you *don't* think they're different, find some examples of similarities – places in the poems where the two groups think and talk alike.

. Are there differences between the topics, subjects and ideas the adults talk about and the ones the students talk about? If you think so, what are the differences you see? If you *don't* think so, find some examples of similarities – maybe some places where the two groups are talking about the same things.

. Do these characters seem to have more in common with people their own age than with people older or younger than they are? How can you tell? What do you find in the poems that makes you think so?

. Do these characters seem to have more in common with people of their own class or race or ethnic group than with people of different classes or races or ethnic groups? How can you tell? What do you find in these poems that makes you think so?

. In most of these poems, one person is talking. But often we know what one or more listener(s) may be thinking. How does that happen? Find examples that show *how the poet lets us know* about those listeners. For example: Khatereh Jafari is obviously talking to the students of the class she's come to visit. We can tell by what she says that the students have spoken up – *spoken out loud while she's talking* – because *she responds to their response* as she talks.

. There are many connections among the poems and characters. Some connections happen when characters actually talk to each other or refer to each other from one poem to another. Others connect when themes, ideas and topics are mentioned by more than one person. Here's one example of that kind of connection: Vicente's Tío Tony talks about history & geography, and he mentions the first people of the Americas; the Native American nations are also mentioned by Professor daSilva, emphasized by Huynh Chinh, and become a strong presence when Franny speaks up. Can you find other connections between and among poems & characters in this collection?

. Translated into English, Mikoor's name means "sweetness," Khatereh means "memory," Corazón means "heart," and Huynh Chinh means "older brother" + "correctness/rightness" – does knowing this make your response to these characters any different? If it does, what is that difference?

. What countries are named or referred to in these poems? What do you know about them and their relationship to the USA? How is that knowledge related to your response to this collection of poems?

. How do *choices* shape the lives of these characters? Some choices have been made for them, and some choices they've made on their own – consciously or not. Is there a difference – in the results – between choices made for them and choices made by characters for themselves? Is there a difference – in the results – between the choices they made deliberately and the choices they made unconsciously? How can you tell? What information is there in this collection that makes you think as you do?

~ Some sparks for your own writing from and about **4th Period English**:

. Write a physical description of one (or more) of the characters in this collection. How does she dress? How tall is he? What about posture – how does she sit in class, or stand at his locker – or at the bus stop? How does she walk down the hall? What’s his hair like – color, texture, style? What does her voice sound like?

. Write a poem or story about one of these characters in another part of her/his life – at home, or at an after-school/week-end job, or at an event (examples: the prom or a parade or ballgame or holiday dinner with the whole family – parents, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins – everybody).

. Write a poem or story in the voice of a character who could be part of this group (someone you make up) – a student or other character who could fit into this collection.

. Write a poem or story in the voice of somebody who is mentioned in this collection but doesn’t actually show up or talk.

. Write a poem or story in which you use words/phrases of a language other than American English, and create translation notes like the notes at the end of this collection.

. Write a poem or story in the voice of somebody who is *answering* one of the characters in this collection (like the way Cesar answers Jamayah after she talks).

. Write a review of this collection – either as a poetry book, or as if you’d seen it performed as a play, or as if you’d seen it made into a movie.

. Write a short essay, in the form of a blog or newspaper op-ed, about one of the issues these characters mention/talk about (examples: the border fence; the situation of children raised as Americans who have no citizenship papers; immigrant labor in agriculture and other low-paying jobs; speaking English as a second language, *etc*).

. Write a poem or story in the voice of one of the book’s characters talking six years *earlier* – *before* the action in this collection takes place.

. Write a poem or story in the voice of one of the book’s characters talking ten years *later* – *after* the action in this collection takes place.

~ Some notes for reading out loud/performance in theaters and classrooms:

. There are twenty-five poems with speaking parts for thirty characters – though a *much* smaller group of performers can do it by reading multiple parts. In schools, the poems can be performed by young people who – essentially – embody most of these characters. In theaters, skilled actors across a wider age range can play all the roles.

. All of these characters have speaking parts. Some of their “talking” is really *thinking*, as in a *soliloquy* from a play (as Shakespeare’s Hamlet does, in his “to be or not to be” speech, when he’s talking to no one but himself); this kind of situation is signaled in the particular poem’s title. Others are talking directly to other characters, a situation signaled inside the text of the poems.

. Some characters, as in the case of Khatereh Jafari noted above, have tiny conversations with their listeners. Ashley, Corazón and Jamayah also are “interrupted” by their listeners; such exchanges may be added, perhaps improvised, in performance.

. The whole collection tells a story and each piece *in* the collection tells at least one more story, offering layers of complexity, providing more action and locations. These additional layers can be imagined and may be enacted by any group wanting to add these layers, as additional scenes, to performances or readings of **4th Period English**. There are several in the book; here are some examples – scenes can be created for:

- Mr. Lacey’s class (in Franny’s poem)
- Ashley’s experience on the streetcar (in her poem)
- gangs at City High (in Tyrone’s poem)
- the cafeteria (in Adelita’s poem)

. The action of the collection has a dramatic arc just as a play does: the speakers grow more passionate, the poems get longer, the collection comes to an emotional climax – and then calms down at the end. The ideas, the situation, the emotions and attitudes (*eg*, fear, kindness, ignorance, anger) that have been revealed are gathered up – and named – by Professor daSilva, who describes such exchanges as healthy argument, which he calls “learning.”

. Near the end of the book, the exchange among Cesar, Jamayah, Franny and Tyrone might be considered a “resolution” in a play. Resolution or not, this collection is realistic: it doesn’t end by saying everything’s ok now, everybody’s happy. Rather, it shows us that everybody can talk, everybody can listen, and everybody can think about what all the talking and listening means.

~ **the characters:**

Adelita ... Latina, student & cafeteria worker at GWHS, 16

Ashley ... white/US girl, student, 17

Aurelia ... Latina, student, 17

Becky, talking ... white/US girl, student, 15

Boys’ soccer team ... students, various races/ethnicities/nationalities/ages (3-6 characters/voices)

Cesar ... Latino, student, 18

Corazón ... Latina, student, 15

Franny (Frances/Fire-Inside-Her-Heart) ... North American Indian girl, student, 16

Huynh Chinh ... Vietnamese boy, student, 17

Jamayah ... African American girl, student, 16
Jason ... white/US boy, student, 15
Kathy & Megan ... white/US girls, students, both 16
Khatereh Jafari ... Persian/Iranian woman, visitor, 53
Kimberly ... white/US girl, student, 18
Matthew ... white/US boy, student, 17
Mikoor, talking ... Eritrean girl, student, 18
Ms Solomon ... white/US woman, teacher, 37
Professor Saúl Ricardo daSilva ... Latino, visitor, 39
Raquel ... Latina, student, 16
Señora Morales ... Latina, visitor, 46
Tiffany ... white/US girl, student, 15
Tío Tony ... Latino, visitor, 50
Tyrone ... African American boy, student, 16
Verónica ... Latina, student, 18
Vicente ... Latino, student, 17

+ **a note about casting for performance:** Because race and skin color are so various, easily and constantly crossing lines of definition, the identity designations for these characters are pretty basic; sometimes words spoken by a particular person add information about what that person looks like, but often do not. Casting should be mindful of the necessary differences (necessary for making meaning in a play about immigration, race, class, nation and border) – deliberate and thoughtful about how difference and similarity might be open to interpretation. So: all the “white” people in the ensemble may be portrayed in a range of apparently European-American ethnicities/nationalities. The majority of the characters, however, should be cast more specifically: Huynh Chinh, for example, will be most credible if the actor who plays him is obviously a 17 year old boy whose people have come to the US from southeast Asia.

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