



# Identifying and Resisting Jim Crow with Words and Songs

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have works of literature and music by Black Americans shared an empowering theme of identifying and resisting Jim Crow?

### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students discover and discuss a shared theme of identifying and resisting Jim Crow by examining works of literature and music by Black Americans.*



Literature and music are powerful tools of self expression and empowerment. Sometimes, when they share a common theme, they can collectively convey a shared experience. Poems and songs that are thematically linked can be especially potent examples of expressing a shared experience.

Two Black American women artists from two different generations, the poet Amanda Gorman (b. 1998) and the songwriter Nina Simone (1933 - 2003), have created works that share an empowering theme: identifying and resisting the racist and discriminatory practice of Jim Crow. The poem and song's shared subject are immediately apparent by the similarities in their titles, Gorman's "Old Jim Crow Got to Go" from 2018, and Simone's "Old Jim Crow" from 1964. In both works, the artists identify Jim Crow and call for the resistance to it.

Merriam-Webster defines the policy of Jim Crow as "racial segregation and discrimination enforced by laws, customs, and practices in especially the southern states of the U.S. from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the mid-20th century." Jim Crow was the impetus for much of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. While Jim Crow sought to be presented by its patrons and practitioners as a benign cultural practice, it was in fact a decades-long and nationwide brutal form of oppression that included acts of domestic terrorism, including lynching. While the Jim Crow Era may have ended in "the mid-20th century," its legacy continues. Throughout American society today, "racial segregation and discrimination enforced by laws, customs, and practices" is rampant in the U.S. justice system, as well as in the nation's financial and real estate markets.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

**1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**

- The poems “The Hill We Climb” and “Old Jim Crow Got to Go” by Amanda Gorman, and the song “Old Jim Crow” by Nina Simone
- How the poems and song share an empowering theme of identifying and resisting Jim Crow
- About the poet Amanda Gorman and the songwriter Nina Simone
- How literature and music can function as creative expressions of protest
- What Jim Crow means, the time frame of the Jim Crow Era, and how its legacy continues

**2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:**

- Students will be able to identify Jim Crow and the resistance to it by examining poetry and songs by Amanda Gorman and Nina Simone.

## ACTIVITIES

**ENTRY TICKET ACTIVITY:**

1. Assign students to read **Handout - Amanda Gorman Biography**. Ask students to be ready to offer biographical details about Gorman.

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY**

1. Display **Image 1, Amanda Gorman**. Then, ask students:
  - Who is the person shown here? (*If necessary, inform students that the image shows the poet, author, and activist, Amanda Gorman.*)
  - Do you know what Amanda Gorman is known for? (*If necessary, inform students that Gorman was the first National Youth Poet Laureate, and is now an acclaimed poet and author.*)
  - What is she doing in this photo? (*If necessary, inform students that in this photo she is reading her poem, “The Hill We Climb” at the 59th U.S. Presidential Inauguration in Washington, D.C. on January 20, 2021.*)
2. Inform students that six presidential inaugurations have featured a poet, Robert Frost being the first in January 1961. While not always the case, the poet creates a new poem and reads it aloud for the first time at the inauguration. Amanda Gorman was asked by the incoming first lady, Dr. Jill Biden, to do so. Gorman was a unique choice in that she was the youngest poet and the first National Youth Poet Laureate. All three of the women who have

read poems at an inauguration have been Black women: Amanda Gorman (2021), Elizabeth Alexander (2013), and Maya Angelou (1993).

3. Inform students that they will be watching a video of Amanda Gorman reading aloud her 2021 poem, “The Hill We Climb” at the 59th U.S. Presidential Inauguration in Washington, D.C. on January 20, 2021. As they listen to the poem, direct students to jot down any names, words, phrases that are familiar to them or stand out to them, and note anything that they don’t understand.
4. Play the **video “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman** (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4994580/amanda-gorman-poem-the-hill-climb>). Then, ask students:
  - Are there any general themes, phrases, words, etc. that particularly stood out to you? Why did they stand out?
  - Who are some figures, groups, communities mentioned in the poem? Does she mention herself? If so, in what context?
  - What historical events are mentioned in the poem? (*If necessary, remind students that an insurrection to delay the U.S. Congress’s certification of the 2020 presidential election had taken place at the Capitol building on January 6, 2021.*)
  - Are you familiar with any of Gorman’s other poems?
  - How might creative works, like poetry and songs, serve other purposes other than this example?

### PROCEDURE:

1. Inform students that they will be examining a poem and a song by Black American women that share an empowering theme: identifying and resisting Jim Crow. But first, ask students:
  - What was Jim Crow?
2. Display **Image 1, Definition of Jim Crow**. Ask students:
  - Considering the definition, what was being enforced by the “laws, customs, and practices” of Jim Crow?
  - When did Jim Crow occur? What had happened in the previous decade (1860s) in the U.S.? How might events in the U.S. during the 1860s be connected to Jim Crow?
  - Where did Jim Crow occur? (*If necessary, prompt students to notice that the definition qualifies the specificity of where Jim Crow occurred with the adverb “especially.”*) According to the definition, were the “laws, customs, and practices” of Jim Crow exclusive to the region detailed in the definition? If not, what might that suggest?
3. Continue to display **Image 1, Definition of Jim Crow**. Inform students that Jim Crow-like policies existed nationwide in the U.S. While they may not have been referred

to as Jim Crow, “racial segregation and discrimination enforced by laws, customs, and practices” existed throughout the U.S. (For example, the discriminatory practice of “redlining” that began in the 1930s, which resulted in racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods nationwide.) Ask students:

- When did Jim Crow end? What was happening in the U.S. during the “mid-20th century” (1950s - ‘60s) that would relate to the end of Jim Crow?
- Although the definition explains that Jim Crow ended in the mid-20th Century, what might be some “laws, customs, and practices” of Jim Crow that still exist in the 21st century?
- What might it mean that Jim Crow-like policies existed nationwide but weren’t known by that name outside of the “southern states of the U.S.”? What might be words or terms for the beliefs that lead to Jim Crow-like policies throughout the U.S.?
- During the Jim Crow Era “from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the mid-20th century,” how might Black Americans have identified Jim Crow and resisted it?

4. Display **Image 3, “Old Jim Crow Has Got to Go!” Pamphlet**. Inform students that this is the cover of a widely distributed pamphlet from 1941 created by the Black American political leader and civil rights activist, Henry Winston. (If desired, visit this Smithsonian webpage for more information: <https://transcription.si.edu/project/8170>) Ask students:

- What are some of the words, phrases, and slogans on the pamphlet? How do they relate to the two Jim Crow

definitions previously examined?

- What might be the purpose of the pamphlet? What do the slogans suggest the pamphlet and the activism behind it are trying to achieve?
- Is there any imagery on the pamphlet that is familiar to you? If so, what is it and what does the familiarity of that image tell you about its history?
- How is this pamphlet an example of identifying and resisting Jim Crow?

5. Display **Image 4, Amanda Gorman Quote**. Inform students that this is a quote by the poet Amanda Gorman and that she is speaking about her 2018 poem, “Old Jim Crow Got to Go,” which students will be examining. (If beneficial, this video can be used for additional context about the quote: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/us/a-coda-to-black-history-month.html>) Ask students:

- Considering the title of the poem and Gorman’s words in the quote, how might this poem be related to the 1941 Old Jim Crow pamphlet and what might the poem be about?
- What might Gorman mean by “the revelation to be found when we re-examine the poetics of the past”? What might be some things that become more understood when you examine works of the past?
- What might be some events that occurred in the “mid- to late-20th century” that provided Gorman with so much media content to draw from for her poem?

6. Distribute **Handout - “Old Jim Crow Got to Go” Poem**. Inform students that after

reading the poem they will be watching a video of Amanda Gorman reciting her 2018 poem, “Old Jim Crow Got to Go.” Direct students to underline names, words, phrases that are familiar or stand out to them, and note anything that they don’t understand.

7. Play the **video “Old Jim Crow Got to Go”** (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/amandagorman>) by Amanda Gorman. Ask students:

- What do you think this poem is about?
- When was this poem written? Considering the definitions explored earlier, how might the time when this poem was written relate to your understanding of the history of Jim Crow?
- How does Gorman characterize the current status of Jim Crow considering the words of the poem?
- Did you recognize any of the people mentioned in the poem. If so, what do you know about them? How might they have aided in identifying and resisting Jim Crow? (*If time permits, invite students to make a list of the names of all of the people mentioned in the poem and describe in a few words what they know (or think they know) about each one. Students can then reference biographies for each person in the poem to confirm or amend their understanding of who they are and how they fit in with the theme.*)
- How does this poem identify Jim Crow and call for resistance to it?

8. Inform students that they will now examine a similarly themed song.

9. Display **Image 5, Nina Simone**. Ask students:

- Who is the person shown here? (*If necessary, inform students that the image shows the musician, songwriter, bandleader, and activist, Nina Simone.*)
- Do you know what Nina Simone is known for? (*If necessary, inform students that Simone was a critically-acclaimed musician, songwriter, and bandleader. She wrote, arranged, and performed songs drawing from multiple types of music, including: Blues, Gospel, Jazz, R&B, and Soul. She is also particularly well-known for her activism during the 1960s and ‘70s.*)

10. Distribute **Handout - “Old Jim Crow” Lyrics**.

Inform students that they will be listening to Nina Simone performing her 1964 song, “Old Jim Crow.” Direct students to underline names, words, phrases that are familiar or stand out to them, and note anything that they don’t understand.

11. Play **Clip 1, “Old Jim Crow”** by Nina Simone. Ask students:

- What do you think this song is about?
- When was this song written?
- Considering the definitions explored earlier, how might the time when this song was written relate to your understanding of the history of Jim Crow?
- What state or region does Simone reference in the lyrics? Considering the definitions explored earlier, how might this relate to your understanding of the history of Jim Crow?
- How does Simone describe her

intentions toward Jim Crow considering the repeated lyric phrase, “Old Jim Crow, You’ve been around too long, Gotta work the devil, ‘Til you’re dead and gone, Old Jim Crow, don’t you know, It’s all over”? How might this relate to the 1941 Old Jim Crow pamphlet and the 2018 poem by Amanda Gorman?

- How does this song identify Jim Crow and call for resistance to it?

12. Organize students into small groups. Assign each group to create a list of all the shared themes and elements between Gorman’s poem and Simone’s song lyrics. Also, each group should note where the poem and song don’t share themes and elements. When completed, ask students to assign one person from each group to share their list with the classroom.

### SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. At a place in the classroom that is viewable by all students, create a T-Chart with Gorman Poem: “Old Jim Crow Got to Go” on the left side and Simone Song: “Old Jim Crow” on the right side. Then, ask students to share their lists. (*If necessary, use the following questions as discussion prompts.*)
  - What were some stylistic traits that each work shared? (Rhyming, references to people, places, and things, etc.) Are there any differences in style that you noticed?
  - What are some similar themes found in each work? What are some dissimilar themes?
  - Whose perspective and experience is being represented in these works? Is it a single person’s, a group of people, a community, all or none?
  - When were these two works written? How might that relate to the definitions we examined and discussed? What might the time frame tell you about the status of Jim Crow?
  - Considering the titles of each work and when they were written, might one have influenced the other?
  - How do these works of literature and music identify Jim Crow and call for resistance to it?
2. When the T-Chart is complete, ask students:
  - Considering the information on the chart, how might you summarize these works in a sentence or two? How are Gorman and Simone’s works identifying Jim Crow and calling for resistance to it?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Encourage students to find out more about the National Youth Poet Laureate Program. Assign students to explore the [youthlaureate.org](http://youthlaureate.org) site and select a poem from one of the several youth poets featured. Students can then either read the poem in class or in a video, and then lead a classroom discussion about it.
2. Encourage students to learn more about Nina Simone. Assign students to read and explore TeachRock's Nina Simone Trace It Back (<https://teachrock.org/traceitback/nina-simone/>). Ask students to create an infographic about Simone based on the information and content they find.
3. Encourage students to gain a better understanding of the current status of Jim Crow by watching this video of author Michelle Alexander talking about her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* at a TedTalk in 2013 (<https://youtu.be/SQ6H-Mz6hgw>). They can also use these study guides from Alexander's website to explore the issue more deeply: <https://newjimcrow.com/study-guides>.
4. Encourage students to explore how photojournalism highlighted the Black American experience of Jim Crow, while also functioning as a creative expression of empowerment and protest.
  - First, students read a testimonial by photojournalist, R.C. Hickman about his personal experience: [https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/narrative\\_hickman.html](https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/narrative_hickman.html).
  - Next, students view Hickman's work: <https://briscoecenter.org/exhibitions/ behold-the-people-r-c-hickmans-photographs-of-black-dallas/>
  - Finally, students choose one photo by Hickman to feature in a poem they write or a song they compose expressing what emotions the image invokes, especially considering the knowledge they gained from this lesson.
  - In relation to Hickman's work, students can go even deeper and explore a Black newspapers archive (<http://blackpressresearchcollective.org>) highlighting the history and work of this important part of the media industry.
5. Pursue independent research on a person mentioned in Gorman's poem, "Old Jim Crow Got to Go." Summarize their life, career, and creative, political, and social contributions. Share biographical details about them with the class (either in person or with a video).

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 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.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 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.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: 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.



## STANDARDS

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

### **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distributions, and Consumption

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

### **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

#### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

#### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## STANDARDS

### NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

#### *Responding*

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work, performers' expressive intent.

#### *Connecting*

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- “Old Jim Crow” by Nina Simone

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - Amanda Gorman Biography
- Handout - “Old Jim Crow Got to Go” Poem
- Handout - “Old Jim Crow” Lyrics