

The Fillmore

Neighborhoods: The Hidden Cities of San Francisco

TITLE: The Harlem of the West

GRADES: 11-12

SUBJECT AREA(S): US History (Twentieth Century)—African American History
English/Language Arts—Ethnic Literature

OVERVIEW: To the residents who called it home in the 1940s and 50s, San Francisco’s Fillmore district was a vital center of African American social, economic and cultural life. How did this once mostly Japanese American neighborhood become a center of Black life? How was the Fillmore district like Harlem during its renaissance 30 years earlier, and how was it unique? What latent tensions threatened to end the hayday of the Fillmore district and displace its thriving community?

[Note: This lesson assumes some prior knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance.]

PROGRAM SEGMENTS:

(1) 0:14-0:20 African Americans arrive from the South and Midwest for jobs to support the war effort, taking up residence in the Fillmore after Japanese Americans are forcibly evacuated.

(2) 0:22-0:34 Labelled “slums” by city officials and targeted for urban renewal, the Fillmore experiences a renaissance of African American culture in the late 40s-50s during a delay by city planners.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will explain how wartime factory employment created new job opportunities for women and minorities.
- Students will explore the roots of cultural life in the Fillmore, comparing and contrasting with Harlem in the 1920s and their own neighborhoods.

NATIONAL

STANDARDS: This lesson addresses the following national content standards found in the McRel Standards Database: www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks.

Grades K-12:

United States History:

Era 8 – The great Depression and World War II

25. Understands the causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs.

31. Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Civics:

1. Understands ideas about civic life, politics and government.
11. Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society.

Language Arts:

Reading:

5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
6. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.

Viewing:

9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

MATERIALS:

The Fillmore, part 4 of *The Neighborhoods of San Francisco*
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou (Ch. 27)
“Harlem [2]: A Dream Deferred,” “Good Morning,” and “Harlem Dance Hall” by Langston Hughes

TIME: 2-3 class periods (60 min. each)

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1. Have students recall the Harlem Renaissance and identify its dates. Read “Good Morning” by Langston Hughes. What does the title suggest? Discuss lines 14-19. What does “dusky sash across Manhattan” mean? What hopes did new arrivals in Harlem bring with them? What obstacles did they face “at the gate”?
2. Introduce Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Explain that after growing up in the South, Angelou spent a brief time in LA and Oakland before moving to San Francisco as a high school student just before World War II. Read Chapter 27 (~5pages).
 - Identify the location of the Fillmore district in San Francisco.
 - Discuss (as a class or in small groups, with each group reporting one question back to the class): Who lived in the Fillmore before and after the “revolution”? Find words that Angelou uses to describe the contrasting cultures of the Japanese and Black residents. In Angelou’s view, how was life in San Francisco different from life in the South for Blacks? How did this influence the new Black residents’ reaction to the forced evacuation of Japanese Americans? What was life like in Angelou’s “Negro neighborhood” during the war? What does Angelou mean when she says, “The air of collective displacement ... tended to dissipate my own sense of not belonging. In San Francisco, for the first time, I perceived myself as part of something”? What was her view on racism in San Francisco at the time?

FOCUS FOR VIEWING:

1. Ask students to call out places where people gather, formally or informally, in their neighborhoods. (e.g. stores, clubs, churches, restaurants, theaters, barber shops.)
2. As they watch, ask students to jot down all the places the Fillmore where Black residents got together and felt a sense of community.

VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

Pause the tape after segment 1.

1. Discuss: Why did African Americans move to San Francisco in large numbers in the early 1940s? What significant economic events preceded World War II? What hopes do you think the new Fillmore residents brought with them? (cf. Harlem)
2. Discuss: Why did they move to the Fillmore? Who was there before them, where did they go and why? (ref. Angelou)
3. What gathering places have been mentioned so far? What was the “main institution” in the black community, and why do you think this was so? [church]

Pause the tape after segment 2.

1. Discuss: How did conditions change for blacks after the war ended? What was the goal of the Housing Act of 1949? (“slum clearance”) Why was the Fillmore labeled a “slum” and why was nothing done for ten years?
2. Have students pair up with a neighbor and compare their lists of all the places (venues) where people gathered in the Fillmore. Add any they missed.
3. Have students imagine they are living in the Fillmore in the late ‘40s-50s. With their partners, discuss where they would hang out and why. Take 5 minutes to do a quick-write describing that place (club, barber shop, roller skating, theater, etc.) and how it feels to be there, using details from the video. Who else is there? What are they wearing? What is the mood? Invite students to read their quick-writes aloud.
4. As a class, discuss singer Supar Pie Desanto’s statement, “We had nothing, but we were happy.” What did the Fillmore neighborhood give its residents other than material goods? Who else liked to come to the Fillmore and what drew them there? Interpret the short poem “Harlem Dance Hall,” by Langston Hughes in relation to the Fillmore.
5. Then why was the Fillmore labeled a “slum” in 1949 by city officials? How is the meaning different for people who live in an area labeled “slum” vs. for people who live outside that area? What areas are called “slums” in your city today? What cultural life exists there?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

Have students re-create a night in the Fillmore district in class. To prepare, students should form groups based on their interest in one of the following areas to explore. Have students use the video, the Web, and other primary sources.

- CLUBS — Research the popular clubs and artists who played in the Fillmore district in the 40s and/or 50s. What songs were popular? Find a recording to play in class.
www.amacord.com/fillmore/museum
- FASHION — Take notes on the segment of the video in which Willie Brown describes the fashions of the times (0:32). Find photos from the Fillmore in that era and print-out or

make drawings. If possible, find clothes from this era to model in class. What did these fashions represent to the men and women who wore them?

www.amacord.com/fillmore/museum

- FOOD — Using Maya Angelou’s text as a guide, research the popular foods of the Fillmore district. What were the cultural origins of this food? If possible, buy or make a popular dish.

- GAMING & GAMBLING — Research the games people played for fun. What did they gamble for? What did Carlton Goodlet win gambling and from whom?

www.sfmuseum.org/sunreporter/fleming.html

EXTENSIONS:

- Lyrics:

1. Listen and transcribe the lyrics to “San Francisco Blues” (on the video) or find the lyrics on the web. What do the lyrics reveal about life for African Americans in San Francisco at the time?
2. Have students interpret the lyrics of a song that’s popular today; in 50 years, what will people think about the people who wrote and listened to it?
3. Have students compose their own lyrics to express feelings about their own neighborhoods.

- The Black Press:

1. Watch the video segments of Thomas Fleming recounting the San Francisco mayor’s assumption after World War II about Black workers leaving (0:22) and Carlton Goodlet’s statement about the importance of neighborhood input (0:24). What roles did these men have in the community? What issues did they care about?
2. Research the friendship between these two men and the origin of the *Sun-Reporter* (formerly *The Reporter*) at www.sfmuseum.org/sunreporter/fleming.html. What was the importance of a Black-owned and run newspaper? Identify a newspaper that serves your community and evaluate its role. (Visit www.sunreporter.com)
3. Watch *Soldiers Without Swords*, the Story of the Black Press.

- Conflict and Creativity:

1. Evaluate the validity of the nickname “the Harlem of the West”. What economic, political and cultural tensions did Harlem and the Fillmore share? How do these conflicts give rise to an outburst of cultural expression? How do the arts (music, poetry, etc.) contribute to cultural identity?
2. Read Langston Hughes’ “[Harlem \[2\]: What Happens to a Dream Deferred.](#)” Why was Hughes afraid the “dream” would be deferred, and what did he imagine the consequences might be? What forces actually caused the end of the Harlem Renaissance? Predict the forces that might have ended the cultural life of the Fillmore in the 1950s.
2. Find artistic expressions (art, music, literature, dance, film) of economic, political and cultural tensions in society today. Discuss: Do they see any “renaissances” in American culture today? If so, where and what do they have in common with the Fillmore or Harlem? What is different?
3. Invite students to create a piece that expresses tensions they experience in society. Possibilities: poetry, drawing or painting, autobiographical essay, music, editorial newspaper article, video documentary or drama.

ASSESSMENT:

1. Review students' quick-writes and participation in class discussion.
2. Evaluate students' written notes and presentations in the post-viewing activities and/or extension activities.
3. Post or have students' perform their creative work.

Good Morning, by Langston Hughes

1 Good morning, daddy!
I was born here, he said,
watched Harlem grow
5 until the colored folks spread from river to river
across the middle of Manhattan
out of Penn Station
dark tenth of a nation,
planes from Puerto Rico,
and holds of boats, chico,
10 up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica,
in buses marked New York
from Georgia Florida Louisiana
to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx
but most of all to Harlem
15 dusky sash across Manhattan
I've seen them come dark
 wondering
 wide-eyed
 dreaming
20 out of Penn Station—
but the trains are late.
The gates are open—
 Yet there're bars
 at each gate.

25 What happens
 to a dream deferred?

 Daddy, ain't you heard?

Harlem [2]

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore —
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over —
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Harlem Dance Hall

It had no dignity before.
But when the band began to play,
Suddenly the earth was there,
 And flowers,
 Trees,
 And air,
And like a wave the floor —
That had no dignity before!

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou

In the early months of World War II, San Francisco's Fillmore district, or the Western Addition, experienced a visible revolution. On the surface it appeared to be totally peaceful and almost a refutation of the term "revolution." The Yakamoto Sea Food Market quietly became Sammy's Shoe Shine Parlor and Smoke Shop. Yashigira's Hardware metamorphosed into La Salon de Beauté owned by Miss Clorinda Jackson. The Japanese shops which sold products to Nisei customers were taken over by enterprising Negro businessmen, and in less than a year became permanent homes away from home for the newly arrived Southern Blacks. Where the odors of tempura, raw fish and *cha* had dominated, the aroma of chitlings, greens and ham hocks now prevailed.

The Asian population dwindled before my eyes. I was unable to tell the Japanese from the Chinese and as yet found no real difference in the national origin of such sounds as Ching and Chan or Moto and Kano.

As the Japanese disappeared, soundlessly and without protest, the Negroes entered with their loud jukeboxes, their just-released animosities and the relief of escape from Southern bonds. The Japanese area became San Francisco's Harlem in a matter of months.

A person unaware of all the factors that make up oppression might have expected sympathy or even support from the Negro newcomers for the dislodged Japanese. Especially in view of the fact that they (the Blacks) had themselves undergone concentration-camp living for centuries in slavery's plantations and later in sharecroppers' cabins. But the sensations of common relationship were missing.

The Black newcomer had been recruited on the desiccated farm lands of Georgia..... The chance to live in two- or three-story apartment buildings (which became instant slums), and to earn two- and even three-figured weekly checks, was blinding. For the first time he could think of himself as a Boss, a Spender. ... The shipyards and ammunition plants brought to booming life by the war let him know that he was needed and even appreciated. A completely alien yet very pleasant position for him to experience. ...

Another reason for his indifference to the Japanese removal was more subtle The Japanese were not whitefolks. ...

No member of my family and none of the family friends ever mentioned the absent Japanese. It was as if they had never owned or lived in the houses we inhabited. On Post Street, where our house was, the hill skidded slowly down to Fillmore, the market heart of our district. In the two short blocks before it reached its destination, the street housed two day-and-night restaurants, two gambling houses, plus diners, shoeshine shops, beauty salons, barber shops, and at least four churches. To fully grasp the never-ending activity in San Francisco's Negro neighborhood during the war, one need only know that the two blocks described were side streets that were duplicated many times over in the eight- to ten-square-block area.

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San Franciscans would have sworn on the Golden Gate Bridge that racism was missing from the heart of their air-conditioned city. But they would have been sadly mistaken.