

**Lesson Plan**

# Exploring the Relationship Between Literature and Place

## **The Anisfield-Wolf Murals as Teaching Tool: “Reading-in-place” Katharine G. Trostel, Ursuline College**

This essay thinks through the potential of utilizing Cleveland’s [Inter|Urban](#) mural project as a teaching tool to explore the relationship between literature and place. The project (undertaken by LAND studio, the City of Cleveland, the Greater Regional Transit Authority [RTA], Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards, and the Cleveland Foundation) is:

...a transformation of Cleveland’s public transit rail system into a large-scale public art experience. This city-wide initiative connects public transit riders physically, socially, and culturally to not only their surroundings but to some of the most important and difficult issues facing our society. ([interurban-cle.com/about](#))

Each mural takes direct inspiration from an Anisfield-Wolf award-winning author or text, encouraging students to consider:

What is the place-making function of literature?

With my colleagues Erica Smeltzer and Amanda K. Sharick, I have developed a methodological approach to teaching literature that is particularly effective in the undergraduate classroom that we call, “reading-in-place.” Reading-in-place asks students to think critically about both physical space and the stories we tell about these sites:

We weave together the highly symbolic physical site with the many powerful stories—both real and imaginary—that orbit [a] locus. Reading-in-place—the act of joining stories and geography—add[s] more texture and project[s] another fictional and imaginative layer onto the original site (129).<sup>1</sup>

These discussions are an effort to consider why this award might have emerged in Cleveland. What does it mean for the city to have these spaces infused with the power of words—inspired by world-shaping literature—checkered throughout our urban fabric? How can we make these sites meaningful by infusing them with stories and by centering our conversations around these touchstones for collective memory making?

In this blog post, I discuss both ideas for small-scale experimentations in the digital humanities and more applied examples of how the murals might serve as prompts for discussion within the literature classroom in conjunction with specific award-winning authors or texts.

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<sup>1</sup> From the co-written article by Amanda K. Sharick, Erica G. Smeltzer, and Katharine G. Trostel, “Reading-in-Place and Thick Mapping the Venice Ghetto at 500” in *Doing Memory Research: New Methods and Approaches*, edited by Danielle Drozdowski and Carolyn Bridesall (Palgrave, 2019).

These activities were part of a bigger project undertaken at Ursuline College to incorporate both an examination of the Rust Belt region and the Anisfield-Wolf book awards into our core curriculum; locally-rooted humanities projects are of special importance at our institution as the majority of our students are from the NE Ohio region, and approximately 85% remain local after graduation. Our pathway encourages our student body to think about the relationship between our campus (located in the affluent, predominately white suburb of Pepper Pike) and greater Cleveland. To learn more about our pathway and certificate program, please see our [website](#).

### **Tools for setting the stage**

First, it is important to ensure that students are familiar with the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards and their mission.

- This [video](#), produced by the Cleveland Foundation, gives a brief overview of the life and inheritance of Edith Anisfield Wolf. Before we engage with the media, I ask my students to consider:
  - What was Anisfield Wolf's vision for the award, and how might these mural projects serve as an extension of her legacy?
  
- We watch this beautifully-produced [video](#) that allows students to understand the impetus behind the public art project and the philosophy that guided the creation of the public murals. Additionally, I ask students to explore and engage with the Inter|Urban [website](#). We question:
  - What is the relationship between this literary prize, the ever-growing canon of award-winning texts, the public art project, and the city of Cleveland? How can we activate the potential for social change embedded in this project?

### **Experiment One: The Anisfield-Wolf Mural Tour and the Digital Humanities**



Figure 1: Students at Ursuline College read from Tyehimba Jess's poetry collection, *Olio*, at the base of the mural inspired by this work in the summer of 2019. (Literally “reading-in-place.”)

### Resources:

- The Clio website has numerous free instructional guides and video tutorials (including rubrics) that can easily be embedded into classroom assignments. They can be found [here](#).

In collaboration with Dr. Bari Stith in historic preservation, I team-taught a three-part summer series (2019) entitled, “Narrating Place and Connecting with our Northeast Ohio Community” which focused on building public humanities skill sets such as archiving, digital exhibit building, and digital mapping. In the class, “Creating Clio in the Community”, we used the digital application [Clio](#) to explore and document some of the Anisfield-Wolf inspired murals located along the red line of the rapid. Through this small-scale digital humanities project, students learned about the process of how to curate the stories we tell about place and our community for a public audience and gained transferrable skills in digital mapping and virtual tours for future projects.

The three-day assignment was presented to the students as an experiment and we emphasized that the process was more important than the final product. On the first day of the class, we took a lot of time to understand the Anisfield-Wolf case study, learning about the award itself and its history in Cleveland, researching the murals through Inter|Urban’s interactive website, and understanding the possibilities and limitations of the tool itself, Clio.

The course was focused on the idea of connecting stories to place, and we utilized the work of Todd Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano’s [Hyper Cities](#) (2015). In their book, they define what we mean by “thick” or “deep” maps, made possible by overlaying a physical geographic map with a myriad of stories centered on place that are housed or represented in the digital

realm: “Thick maps are conjoined with stories, and stories are conjoined with maps, such that ever more complex contexts for meaning are created” (19).

What web of connection between story and place would this specific mural project produce, and what could we add by creating another layer of storytelling through digitally mapping physical sites in the built environment?

Before engaging with the murals themselves, students were asked to do their homework:

- Which murals will appear on our route along the red line of the RTA?
- What authors and books are the murals inspired by?
- How will we be experiencing the murals? (At some points we could physically walk up to and explore the murals and at other points, they whizzed by as we rode past them on the rapid.)
- What kinds of artifacts could we collect and how? We pre-downloaded various applications onto our phone (the official RTA app, an app to capture 360-degree panoramic photos, a simple voice recorder) and also made sure that we had turned on our geo location on our phones so that photos could be easily attached to specific points on the map.

On the second day of class, we traversed the red line, starting from University Circle where we were able to visit the mural based on Tyehimba Jess's *Olio* and read from the poetry collection that inspired it “in place.” We rode to the airport, and then reversed course, hopping off at Ohio City to meet with Joe Lanzilotta of LAND Studio, an expert who had been involved first-hand in the project, and who gave us a tour of many of the murals in the Ohio City neighborhood, and answered student questions about the logistics of the project itself.

We spent the final day of the course building entries on the Clio application. Clio has a great teaching guide and video tutorials (linked at the top of this section of the blog post) and the format of these entries, similar to Wikipedia, is formulaic. As we experimented with the platform, we privileged process over product; we discussed the limitations and possibilities of marking these murals on Clio. As we worked, students came up with amazing questions that demonstrated profound critical thinking about the role of these murals and their associated literary works within the urban fabric, including:

- Could we conduct interviews with both the authors whose works inspired the murals and with the visual artists themselves to understand the layers of this artistic production and attach them to our digital map? How do these two forms of storytelling work together?
- How do individuals who live in the vicinity of these murals react to them? Do they spark community-wide conversation? Do people stop to question the murals and interact with them on their daily commutes? And if not, how might a digital app or digital tour help to encourage conversations?
- How do the citizens of the city of Cleveland discover these murals? Could we design a kind of digital scavenger hunt? The murals fly by quickly on the train—How could we slow down the experience for the passengers and allow them to really interact with these important sites?
- Could these murals be activated by hosting events in their proximity—by encouraging a practice of reading-in-place?

- What application might work differently (or better) than Clio to encompass the project that we envision?

Overall, visiting the murals in-person inspired in-depth conversations amongst the students—English, business, and historic preservation majors—about the role of public art and literature in public spaces, as well as the role of technology in highlighting, documenting, and interacting with these sites in the urban fabric.

## Experiment Two: Murals and Texts

### Resources:

- Have students engage with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2009 TED Talk, “[The Danger of a Single Story](#).”
- Have students read the article, “[‘Sing Unburied Sing’ Gets Its Own Mural In Cleveland](#).”

These activities stem from a semester-long literature course designed to fulfill a core curriculum requirement entitled, “From Rust Belt to Revival: Anisfield-Wolf.” The course description reads as follows:

Cleveland’s Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, “...the only juried prize in the nation for books that confront racism and celebrate diversity,” is rooted in the idea that literature is a vehicle for social justice. It brings renowned authors and scholars to the city to explore globally and locally important themes such as race and identity. In a rustbelt city like Cleveland, a “city of neighborhoods”, marred by a history of segregation and uneven decline, these themes are of special significance. We propose an English course committed to the spirit, literature, and activities of Anisfield- Wolf, in which students read the canon, meet the authors, explore the legacy of the founder, and enliven and contemporize the works through the digital humanities. Students will engage in traditional close-reading, while also using mapping platforms to analyze and contextualize the literature. The class will culminate with the creation of a public-facing exhibit.

Given the context of the course, it is especially important that I demonstrate the connection between literature and place. Within the classroom, I have paired the examples of specific murals with the texts that inspired them. I ask students to consider the visual choices of the artist, and then encourage them to think through what questions are prompted by text versus the visual representation of this same text. How do the two pieces work together to encourage civically-engaged interaction with the cityscape? What does it mean to translate a literary work into a visual representation?

As a short exercise, I have used the example of Ellen Rutt’s mural, inspired by “The Danger of a Single Story”—a powerful TED talk given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in 2009. I used the activity as a way of introducing Adichie’s work before my class tackled her intricate novel, *Americanah*, and as a way of thinking through how the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award might have place-making potential within the urban fabric of our city of Cleveland. We pulled the [description of the mural](#) from the Anisfield-Wolf website in which Rutt speaks specifically about

the idea that “the broader narrative about the Rust Belt [is] flawed.” We then worked through Adichie’s TED talk itself, asking important questions about storytelling and representation, at last returning to Rutt’s colorful visual. While I asked many questions that specifically centered on Adichie and her work, I also posed such questions as: “What is the relationship between power and storytelling?” and “What does it mean that Adichie’s story is now woven into the story of the city of Cleveland?” Students were struck by the potential of this mural space to spark conversations regarding stereotypes (about people and places) and specifically were interested in the idea of avoiding single narratives about greater Cleveland and what it means to dwell in the Rust Belt. However, they also wondered how we could activate such spaces as the murals themselves are not self-explanatory and are scattered throughout the city without signage or explanation.

At a second point in the semester, I returned to the case study of the murals in the context of reading Jesmyn Ward’s compelling novel, *Sing Unburied Sing*. I waited to have this conversation until we finish the entire book. In class, we read out loud the closing passage together as a group, and thought through the imagery of what it means to communally care for ghosts and to collectively engage with acts of haunting. We then contemplated the idea of the mural as a site of collective memory.

In the final response paper of the semester, they were asked to interact with this project from the perspective of creator. In a three-page paper, they addressed the following questions:

- 1) In our class, we learned about the mural that was painted in 2018 in Cleveland based on Ward’s novel (article available [here](#)). React to the design. After completing the novel, what is it meant to capture about the work? Do you think that it’s an effective representation of the spirit of Ward’s story? And more generally, what do you think about the project as a whole?
- 2) In the second half of your paper, imagine that you are designing your own mural based on *Sing Unburied Sing*. What would it look like? (You may provide a sketch if this is easier.) Pull passages from which you’ve gained inspiration and explain why these textual moments stood out to you.

The final papers were thoughtful, inspiring, and left the students feeling connected to both the literature and the place that had shaped them over the course of the semester.