ERASURE POETRY
and
INCLUSION

APPETIZER:
RACIAL JUSTICE JOURNEY

FRAMING

"EVERY ACT OF CREATION IS FIRST AN ACT OF DESTRUCTION." -PABLO PICASSO

Begin by reflecting on the following three questions:

To what extent do you agree with this quotation?
Can you think of a time when this principle held true for you?
What were some of the lessons you took away from that experience?

Once you’ve had a moment to reflect, share your thoughts around the table with the other guests.

ENTREE: ERASING WORDS to MOVE FORWARD

WHAT YOU WILL NEED:
BLACK MARKER

FRAMING

It’s easy to approach things and see them as whole and complete. Whether it’s the first time we meet a person or read a text, we might not grasp the work that went into it or what it could become, and instead see only what it is now.

This evening, we’re going to go through a process in which we edit the original text to transform it into something both related and different. In doing so, we’ll gain a stronger appreciation for our role in creating change and seeing how, sometimes, creativity and creation can require and grow from destruction.

Our country and the world exist with many injustices and imperfections. Despite what is, we dream of what can be. As we do so, we’re also challenged to consider what it will take to create a different reality out of the materials we have in front of us. The poems below offer us insight into the poet's understanding of reality and vision for the future. The exercise detailed below allows each guest at this meal to join with the poet in crafting a poem to express your vision. And, in the process, we can also reflect on the things right in front of us that have value and what we need to do to bring about change.

INSTRUCTIONS

Erasure poetry is the process of creating a new poem from the existing poem or found text. You can “erase” (mark out) words, lines, or whole paragraphs of the original poem and rearrange the format in order to find new meaning.

Read the following three poems out loud. After you have finished reading the poems, choose one of the poems and spend 5-10 minutes working through it with a black marker, creating a new poem in its wake. Turn to the person next to you and read your new compositions, taking the time to actively listen to the other person.
THEME FOR ENGLISH B
LANGSTON HUGHES

The instructor said,

Go home and write a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it’s that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem.
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk
on this page. (I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn’t make me not like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?

Being me, it will not be white. But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That’s American.
Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to
be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that’s true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you’re older—and white—and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

ON THE PULSE OF MORNING (EXCERPT)
MAYA ANGELOU

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon.
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no more hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than
The angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness,
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spilling words
Armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face

THE GIFT TO SING
JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

Sometimes the mist overhangs my path,
And blackening clouds about me cling;
But, oh, I have a magic way
To turn the gloom to cheerful day—
I softly sing.

And if the way grows darker still,
Shadowed by Sorrow’s somber wing,
With glad defiance in my throat,
I pierce the darkness with a note,
And sing, and sing.

I brood not over the broken past,
Nor dread whatever time may bring;
No nights are dark, no days are long,
While in my heart there swells a song,
And I can sing.

1. Langston Hughes was a 20th century African-American poet, writer, playwright, and social justice activist. He was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural and social innovation in the 1920’s and early 1930’s. This poem was composed somewhat later, in 1951. Source: poets.org

2. Maya Angelou was a 20th century African-American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She shared this poem at the first inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993. Source: poetryfoundation.org

3. James Weldon Johnson, born in Florida in 1871, was a national organizer for the NAACP and an author of poetry and nonfiction. Perhaps best known for the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” he also wrote several poetry collections and novels, often exploring racial identity and the African American folk tradition. Source: poets.org
DESSERT: THE CREATION OF HUMANITY

To close our conversation, the following text is taken from chapter three of Ecclesiastes, a book of the Bible that offers general life wisdom and guidance.

Read the excerpt out loud together:

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

- a time to be born and a time to die,
- a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- a time to kill and a time to heal,
- a time to tear down and a time to build,
- a time to weep and a time to laugh,
- a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
- a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
- a time to search and a time to give up,
- a time to keep and a time to throw away,
- a time to tear and a time to mend,
- a time to be silent and a time to speak,
- a time to love and a time to hate,
- a time for war and a time for peace.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Which of these verses speak to this moment in time for you?

2. Just days away from the Inauguration of our next president of the United States and a transition of government, what is this moment in time for you? Have you felt differently over time since Election Day? If so, how?

3. What do you hope the coming days will be for you and your community?

With this verse ringing in the air, take a moment to think about what it means to leave no one behind in the fight for racial justice.