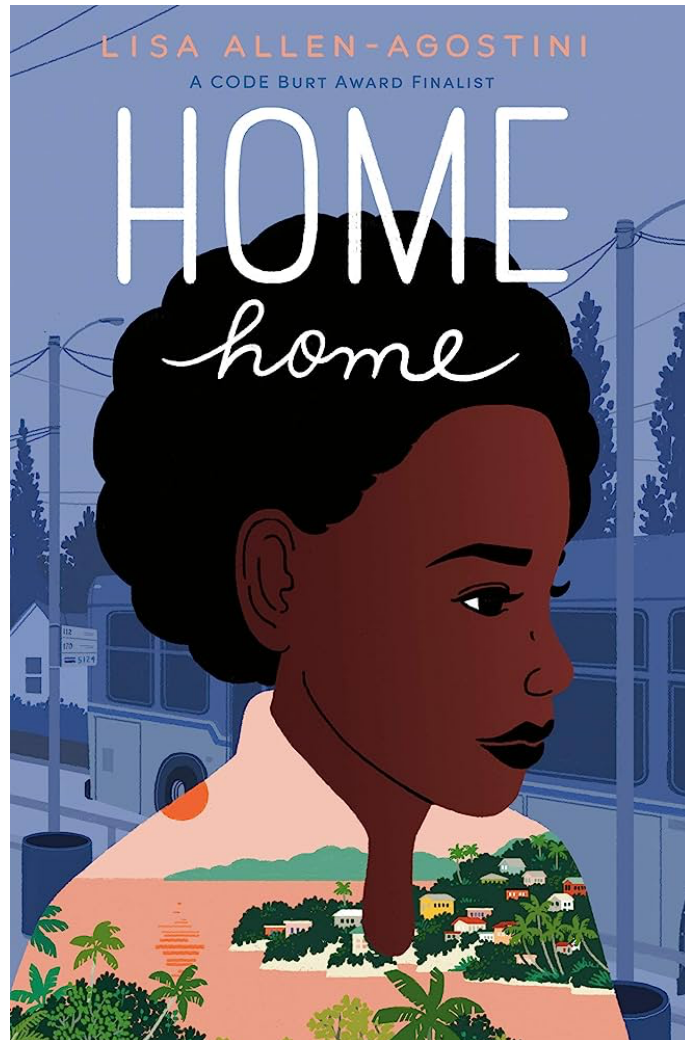


**'HOME' AS A WORD AND WORLD:
HOME home by Lisa Allen Agostini
Classroom Activities (Working Document)
Developed by Araceli Masterson-Algar
University of Kansas, July 7, 2023**



Grades: 9-12

General description: The novel *HOME Home* by Trinidadian author Lisa Allen-Agostini is a venue to explore transnational processes through the lived experiences of adolescents in locally specific contexts. The protagonist, a 14-year old girl from Trinidad is sent to live with her aunt in Canada, following a diagnosis of depression and anxiety. The novel is an ideal venue to understand mental health and adolescence as inseparable from global and local contexts. The lesson plan that follows explores the interconnections between health, global processes, locally specific histories, and individual stories.

Through the suggested activities, students will:

- Show general knowledge on the Caribbean, and specifically on Trinidad and Tobago.
- Understand cross-cultural approximations to mental health.
- Reflect on mental health socially, culturally, and biologically.
- Understand how our sense of belonging is inseparable from social hierarchies of gender, race, class and sexuality, among others.

CONTENT STANDARDS

Social Studies Standards

1.1 The student will recognize and evaluate significant choices and consequences that have impacted our lives and futures.

1.3 The student will investigate and connect examples of choices and consequences with contemporary issues.

3.1 The student will recognize and evaluate how societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups.

3.2 The student will analyze context and draw conclusions of how societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups.

3.3 The student will investigate and connect how societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups with contemporary issues.

5.1 The student will recognize and evaluate dynamic relationships that impact lives in communities, states, and nations.

5.2 The student will analyze the context and draw conclusions about dynamic relationships. 5.3 The student will investigate and connect dynamic relationships to contemporary issues.

English Language Arts Standards

RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development.

RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

RL.9-10.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RL.9-10.7 Analyze and evaluate the representation of a subject or a key scene in multiple mediums-- including media, artistic, and other visual formats.

RL.9-10.10 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE NOVEL AND ITS STORY

1. In a world map, find the Caribbean. Identify Trinidad and Tobago. What is the closest country in the mainland to Trinidad and Tobago? What languages are spoken in Trinidad and Tobago? When did Trinidad become an independent country? In a general research, find out what the relation is between Trinidad and Tobago. Why do people popularly refer to these two locations as 'Tribago'? What is the capital of Trinidad? What are some of Trinidad's main exports to the U.S.? What are some of the main sources of income for Trinidad and Tobago?
2. Now find the city of San Fernando, the home home of the novel's protagonist. Do some general research on San Fernando: How many people livethere? What are its main destinations? Now find Edmondton in Canada. What is its population? What are some places one can visit in Edmonton? Look on the web for pictures of both of these cities. What are some similarities and some differences you can list when thinking of both of these locations? With a partner, complete a Venn Diagram:
 - a. Identify 3 specific characteristics of each location, and three aspects that are similar.
 - b. Now turn to the novel. How does our protagonist perceive the contrast between both locations? Back up your observations with specific references from the text.

Contextualization of the Novel and Its Story: Teacher Notes

- A. Guide the students through the ‘perception’ of space. That is, to the ways in which the protagonist experiences that space.

Some examples:

- How Edmonton feels:

“You think my hair is gonna just submit to you, flip and dance in you, fly and move in you? Not my hair. It’s worked too hard for too long to just give in to you. It’s tough hair, wiry hair, strong hair, hair that won’t be cowed by some damn peirie wind. No siree, not this hair.” (3)

“The wind they raised [trucks] was bitter and hot, not like the wind that normally blew cold, odorless, and sterile. The wind blown from the sides of the trucks was dusty and tasted like ashes in my mouth.” (4)

“Here I was always cold” (8)

“I am a Caribbean hermit in exile in Edmonton. I could disappear amidst the cookie-cutter houses.” 28.

“I missed walking on High Street, San Fernando. I missed Akilah. I did not miss school” 11.

- B. Invite them to think about how a space is perceived differently depending on how we feel. The above quotes are inseparable from the fact that the protagonist is suffering a panic attack on her way to the bus station. Can you give some examples when you felt that a space was overwhelming and unwelcoming? Can you share any personal examples of moments when your personal wellbeing had an incidence on the way that you experienced a place?

- C. Reflect on this quote:

“The summer flowers outside each house in this road were brighter than I would have imagined when I was living in the Caribbean [...]. I had been surprised to see that the blossoms could be as red, as yellow, and as blue as the flowers in my own yard in Trinidad. Not caring to learn the names of the flora I wouldn’t be around much longer, I called these Canadian blooms by their sizes, shapes, and colors: the big pink one, the small blue one, the orange one with the dizzy, swirling petals. The wind had more success with these than with my wiry, tight curls. Those flowers danced in it, their little heads nodding and twisting in the strong breeze.” (12)

What are some of the parallels you identified between San Fernando and Edmonton? What are the flowers and landscape you associate with your hometown? How does the quote above anticipate the development of the story line, and the protagonist process in making a home for herself in Edmonton?

ACTIVITY #1: Homesickness and Tabanca. Cultural Specificity and Connection

1. What does 'home' mean for you? Is the house where one lives always a home? Is the place where one lives always a home? In your opinion, what makes a place, home?
2. Title of the book. In your opinion, why is the book titled *HOME home*? What is, ultimately 'home' for the protagonist? Does this change through her journey, or is home a fixed concept? Focus now on the book jacket. How does it speak to the protagonist's experience of home?
3. In her walk through Edmonton, the narrative voice of the protagonist describes:

“I counted the streets again, and then I was home. Not home home, I thought with a little wave of longing. Was this what tabanca was like? I'd never been in love before, much less lovesick. But I pushed the thought down. I'd worry about it later” (17-18).

The protagonist refers to 'tabanca'. This is a very significant concept in the folklore of Grenada, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago. It represents the feeling of unreturned love and heartbreak that can consume a person entirely. Have you ever felt 'homesick'? How might those terms dialogue with each other?

4. On page 101, we learn that Bunji Garlin is one of the protagonist's favorite music artists. The concept of 'tabanca' works its way through art, and music is no exception. Tabanca is a recurrent theme in music, and the song "2014 Soca" by Bunji Garlin is one example. Listen to the song and lyrics in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiYTfkvdtNg> In your opinion, how do the song (sound and lyrics) convey that feeling of 'tabanca'? Be specific. What are some songs that you listen to when you feel homesick? If you have never felt homesick before, what do you think are some songs you would want to listen when far from home? Provide two specific examples. Why did you pick those songs? How do they help you connect with your idea of 'home'?
5. In a skype call with her best friend Akikah, the protagonist sees Akikah's mom cooking in the background: "I hear the rapid whack of a blade on a chopping board and could imagine the kitchen redolent with pungent *chadon beni*, the dark green leafy weed we use for seasoning food in Trinidad. A wave of homesickness hit me" (91). Research *chadon beni*. Find a picture of the plant. Have you ever tried this seasoning? What are flavors that you associate with your home? Provide two specific examples. Explain: How are those flavors/foods tied to your experience of home?

ACTIVITY #2. What is Diversity? How is a Community Diverse?

A. Opening discussion: What is diversity, according to you? How does a group of humans share experiences of being a minority within the majority?

B. In the novel, when Nathan, a white man and good friend of aunt Jillian is complaining about the lack of diversity in Edmonton, Julie responds: “Come on, Nathan. I think you can safely call Edmonton multicultural. Even right here in this restaurant, there is diversity: I was born in Canada but I’m South Indian, Indian to be specific. And Jillian and her niece are black, from Trinidad. The waiter is Indigenous. The hostess is Latin American. And at least two of us in this table are gay, a minority in itself –don’t you think that counts as diversity?” (55).

How is your hometown diverse? What about your school? And your family? How might you argue that there is diversity within your immediate community?

Hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality

C. The protagonist, in a conversation with her friend Josh about Trinidad, explains:

“Indo-Trinidadians were the largest ethnic group in Trinidad” (34-35). What is the largest ethnic group in the U.S.? And in your city?

What is the population of Trinidad and Tobago? Do a general search online: what are the main ethnic groups in the islands? Now search the U.S. Census. What are the main ethnic groups of the U.S.? And in your specific state? In your town?

D. Often, social hierarchies work through the experiences of people living in a space. The protagonist reflects on the racial hierarchies of Trinidad:

“Walk through downtown San Fernando, my hometown, and you’ll see a spectrum of complexions ranging from palest ochre to darkest ebony. It’s beautiful to me. As a child I took it for granted; my world was full of brown people, people who looked like me” (92).

“Being black in a black country doesn’t mean race isn’t important, though. I grew up accustomed to people referring to me by the color of my skin: I was a dark-skinned girl. Not just me, either; so-and-so was a red-skinned lady; so-and-so was a brown-skinned fellah. I had a neighbor everyone called Blacks because his skin was so dark. Nobody said it out loud but skin color mattered.” (93).

How do we learn that skin color *matters*? How does it the protagonist perception of herself speak to the racial hierarchies of race in Trinidad? Find examples in the novel that illustrate this. (see Teacher notes #2).

E. In the novel, we learn about the general perceptions in Trinidad and Tobago towards non heterosexual identities. The protagonist and her friend Akikah explain to Josh how “It was technically against the law in Trinidad to be gay” (32). She explains feeling how it was difficult for her to fully understand the relationship between her aunt Jillian and Julie (“it was pretty weird to me”, she says). What does she gradually work through this ideological challenge? What are the factors that help her overcome her initial ideas about the LGBTQ community? How does her friendship with Josh prove helpful in this process?

Discuss how other experiences of diversity traverse the story. Is mental health an experience of diversity? What about age? Reflect on the protagonist's relationship to her mother, and on her specific experience as someone that suffers from depression and anxiety.

Activity #2: Teacher notes

Below are the extracts from the novel that can contribute to the discussion:

"Indo-Trinidadians were the largest ethnic group in Trinidad, and lots of Trini Incianp people wore traditional clothes, beyond just for celebrating religious festivals like Diwali and Eid. 34-35. And she is also familiar with Bollywood billboards". (35).

"Girls freaked out over light-skinned boys –"red man"– as though they were some kind of prize." (93).

"Now understand that my mother is as black as the ace of spades, just like me." (23)

Her friend Akikah, jokingly, comments: "What kind of Trinidadian woman are you, if you don't care about your butt?" Now she was laughing outright. "We sing songs about it, even! "Sugar bum, sugar bum-bum,"" she sang. The lyrics to a famous calypso didn't impress me." (39)

"I'm too dark, my hair is too picky, and worst of all, my butt is flat! I'll never get a boyfriend!" I bawled in mock agony." (40).

"Why weren't there more people like me at home home in the advertisements on TV? Pale Indian faces adorned billboards for skin lightening cream, Bollywood movies, and rum. Light-skinned mixed-race people sold pretty much everything else, from car batteries to rum (94)

"As a bony, dark-skinned girl with short, kinky hair, I felt I was nobody's first pick. Matchstick. Charcoal. Bun-bun. Those were some of the nicknames the other kids called me. My personal fave was Corbeau, after the pitch-black vultures that lived on garbage and dead dogs in the dump" (93)

"There was nothing wrong with my own hair, was there? And if there was something wrong with my hair, was there also something wrong with me?" (95)

"A few months ago, I cut it all off, without consulting my mother, and she hit the roof. But I liked it better that way, almost clinging to my head, so short. *You look like a boy*, my mother said, but I didn't care. It was my hair, and if I wanted to cut it right off I would." 23.

The protagonist narrates the event again on p. 95, and the words from her mother when she found out: "A woman's hair was her glory, she said again and again."(95).

"Every couple of months she herself [mother] went to the beauty salon and paid a lot of money for her hairdresser to put a chemical paste into her hair to take the kink out of it. The cream smelled like old pee and burned her scalp, leaving painful sores that scabbed over the next day, but when she walked out of the salon she had straight hair that swished past her shoulder, for a while, at least." (95).

Extensions: Mental Health from a Transnational Perspective

-“Having a panic disorder sucks” (i.e. pages 6, 16). Why say this?

-Why does the protagonist use the term “troubles” to describe her mental health condition? She describes, “Where I come from a lot of people think mental illness is either demon possession or deliberate bad behavior” (116). Reflect with students on why in the U.S. people also shy away from sharing that they have a mental health diagnosis.

Employ the various moments in the novel when the protagonist shows her gradual understanding of her health condition:

“I’m on some pretty strong antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds, and have been ever since they took me to the hospital after I overdosed on painkillers to try to kill myself” (59).

“He [the doctor] told me I had to start sharing my feelings with other people, and that I had to remember depression and anxiety tell lies to my brain.” (69)

The protagonist explains the brain chemistry with depression, and its relation to the production of lower levels of serotonin. (p. 78).

A. Have students read “Cultural Influences on Mental Health” (see bibliographical references)

Engage with them in a discussion of how the way that we respond to health is ‘cultural’. This is a difficult point of departure. It might help to start by raising awareness of differing ways in which they have been treated with ‘home remedies’. Other questions to incite discussion might include: did the adults you grew up with express pain when they were sick? Do you think they acted ‘tough’ or were they open to talking about not feeling well? Why do you think some adults do not speak of their health, or act ‘tough’ in the face of mental or physical pain?

Then from there, the discussion can gradually move to understanding our response to disease and pain as ‘cultural’. According to the article, how is ‘culture’ key to how we diagnose, understand, and treat mental health? How does the novel by Allen-Agostini illustrate the content of the article? Explain.

B. Have students read:

-“Mental health crisis: U.S. Depression Rates Reach all time High”

-“Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health” and “Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health.”

- “National, State-Level, and County-Level Prevalence Estimates of Adults Aged ≥18 Years Self-Reporting a Lifetime Diagnosis of Depression — United States, 2020”

The sources above will allow to see how depression does not affect all population equally. Discussing the racial, gender, class factors running through the articles will help understand how ‘culture’ is traversed by hierarchies of class, race, and gender/sexuality.

Other topics that call for expansion:

- ***Diabetes. Known in Trinidad and Tobago as “the ‘sugar”.***

Discuss the history of violence tied to the production of sugar cane. The U.S. has a very high incidence of diabetes as well. Students will be able to see how, once again, hierarchies of race, gender, and class are key to the diagnosis, perception, and remedies for diabetes.

- ***Macoing, use of social media, and bullying in school***

“Miraculously, they [bus drivers in Edmonton] asked nobody how their grandson was doing in school, or how their diabetes –in Trinidad we call it sugar– was treating them, or how their *macomere* was keeping” (16).

“Macoing people on Facebook” (27)

The protagonist, in response to the rumors from kids that she left school because she was pregnant, comments: “Why do they maco so much?”(41).

On p. 95, the protagonist describes her feelings on the day she cut her hair off. She expresses that she cannot explain why she did it, but that, “School had been agony that day; maybe that was it”.

P. 110-112 conversation between the three friends about schools in Brooklyn and in Trinidad. Opportunity to make ties with U.S. context and students’ experiences in/and opinions about their school trajectory.

- **Musical archives**

Work with students through the playlist that is the novel. How does the music we listen to say about who we are, our histories, personal ties, and access to technology? The protagonist’s journey ‘home’ is a musical journey. How so?

Some references in the novel:

- Calypso and Soca:

“I have to admit, they put a lot of dark skinned soca singers on billboards. I liked Fay-Ann best of all. She had short hair, even shorter than mine!” (94).

In a conversation with her best friend Akilkah: “What kind of Trinidadian woman are you, if you don’t care about your butt?” Now she was laughing outright. “We sing songs about it, even! ‘Sugar bum, sugar bum-bum,’” she sang. The lyrics to a **famous calypso** didn’t impress me.” (39).

Discussion of Jillian’s play list: What did Jillian have in her library?: Prince, Santana (*Supernatural*), *The miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

“But the stuff that I listened to at home –Rihanna, beyond, Drake Popcaan, Kendrick Lamar, Machel Montano, Bunji Garlin- was conspicuously absent from Jillian’s ipad.” (101).

“We talked a bit more, listening to some of his music too. He was deeply into trap, the strange, hectic hip-hop music from the southern US. I knew some trap songs, the ones that had made it to the radio at home. “Oh, I like this one: ‘Baking soda! I got baking soda!’” I sang along. But I wasn’t really a fan. He played his favorites and explained what the songs were about – many were about selling drugs. “I don’t get it” I finally admitted. “Word,” he said, grinning. “You don’t have to. We can like different things and still be cool.” (117).

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