

## Haiku IV

### Haiku IV: How to Hover Right Above Crashing, and What We Know for Sure

by **Benin Williams Lemus**

Illustration by **Rosalind Helfand**

Curriculum developed by **Katy Eyberg**

Supplementary curriculum and copy editing by **Athena Villard**



## OVERVIEW

### Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 15+ * Grades 10+
Genre/s	* Poetry
Length	458 words
Content Advisories	* References to drugs and violence. * Minor profanity and a racial slur.
One Sentence Summary	This is a collection of three selections by Benin Williams Lemus: one haiku about traffic and two long-form poems about drugs, poverty, and race-related hardships. All selections confront life's chaos in physical, psychological, and social forms.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<b>Topics</b> * Traffic * Drugs * Rehab * Prison * Foster families * Racial inequities * Broken families
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<b>Themes</b> * The world can be a cruel and relentless place for some people * Racial minorities face institutional oppression * Drugs can destroy people's lives * Broken families can lead to broken lives * Everyone faces different struggles — some more intense and crippling than others * Even our heroes have flaws

Lesson Planning	
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<p>* Events in Ferguson, MO (<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html?mcubz=0">https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html?mcubz=0</a> (<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html?mcubz=0">https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html?mcubz=0</a>))</p> <p>* Civil Rights Movement in the United States (<a href="http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement">http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement</a> (<a href="http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement">http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement</a>))</p> <p>* Mass Incarceration in the United States (<a href="http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/michelle-alexander-a-system-of-racial-and-social-control/">http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/michelle-alexander-a-system-of-racial-and-social-control/</a> (<a href="http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/michelle-alexander-a-system-of-racial-and-social-control/">http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/michelle-alexander-a-system-of-racial-and-social-control/</a>))</p> <p>* War on Drugs (<a href="http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war">http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war</a> (<a href="http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war">http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war</a>))</p>
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<p>* <i>The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness</i> by Michelle Alexander</p> <p>* <i>Between the World and Me</i> by Ta-Nehisi Coates</p> <p>* <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee</p> <p>* <i>The Bluest Eye</i> by Toni Morrison</p> <p>* “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou</p>
Author and Artists Information	<p><b>Benin Williams Lemus</b> is an essayist, poet, filmmaker, and educator living in South Los Angeles.</p> <p><b>Rosalind Helfand</b> was the managing editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.</p>

Lesson Planning	
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 ( <a href="http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/9-10/5/">http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/9-10/5/</a> ), CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 ( <a href="http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/">http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/</a> ), CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A ( <a href="http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/a/">http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/a/</a> ), CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D ( <a href="http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/d/">http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/d/</a> ), CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 ( <a href="http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/2/">http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/2/</a> ), CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 ( <a href="http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/">http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/</a> )

## Author Biography

**Benin Lemus** is an essayist, poet, filmmaker, and educator. A longtime resident of South Los Angeles, she earned a BA in English from Bennett College and an MFA in Cinema-Television from USC. Benin has had fellowships with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Hurston-Wright Foundation. She has performed at the Kirk Douglas Theater through her work with the Center Theater Group's Community as Partners Program. Benin has mentored public school students as an English teacher for 15 years.

## Artist Biography

**Rosalind Helfand** was the managing editor for Literature for Life (now Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer. The natural world is her favorite subject.

## SYNOPSIS

This is a collection of three poems by Benin Williams Lemus: one about traffic and two about personal experiences with drugs, poverty, and race-related hardships. All of the poems confront daily experiences of urban life, ranging from dull to violent. Chaos — physical, psychological, and social — permeates these poems, which show its potential to ruin even the most heroic figures of our lives.

## CURRICULUM

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

#### Topic and Main Ideas

RWrite a brief response (4-5 sentences) to the following prompt in your journal:

Is the United States currently a racist place?

Support your ideas with evidence from personal experience, experiences from others, current events, and/or books. Your supporting evidence must be factual — that is, you cannot use fictional accounts of life presented in stories or on sitcoms.

Discuss your ideas with a partner once you've completed your journal entry.

#### Passage-Specific Themes

Read and think about the following excerpt from “How to Hover Right Above Crashing”:

*And 1.2 grams ain't that much anyway and jail is the corrupt, racist, political institution designed to keep / the poor, black and brown – / Down*

Research the idea that jail is a corrupt, racist, and political institution designed to keep certain people oppressed. Do this by Googling a combination of words/phrases related to this topic, such as “American jails and corruption,” “American jails and racism,” etc. Review the quality of the online sources you find and assess their reliability.

Given your research, do you agree, disagree, or qualify this statement? Why or why not? Write down your ideas in a brief (4-5 sentence) journal entry and discuss with a partner once you're finished.

#### Universal Themes



Note: This activity requires some preparation work from the teacher. Before class begins, bring two standard sized sheets (8.5"x11") of paper with the following typed onto them:

- STRONGLY AGREE
- STRONGLY DISAGREE

Tape the two sheets of paper to opposite sides of the classroom. Move desks if necessary so students can stand near the signs or anywhere between them.

Present the following thematic statements to the class and ask students to stand along an invisible continuum between the STRONGLY AGREE and STRONGLY DISAGREE signs according to how they feel about the statements. Encourage students to share their ideas and have a class discussion/debate as time allows. Take care to encourage students who fall somewhere in between the two signs to express their opinions as well.

Thematic statements:

- The world can be a cruel and relentless place for some people.
- Racial minorities face institutional oppression.

—Racial minorities, according to [http://racism.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=280:minorities&Itemid=118](http://racism.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=280:minorities&Itemid=118) ([http://racism.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=280:minorities&Itemid=118](http://racism.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=280:minorities&Itemid=118)), are a subordinate social group that have less power and ownership of their lives than dominant social group(s).

—Institutional oppression, according to <https://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/institutionalized-oppression-definitions.pdf> (<https://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/institutionalized-oppression-definitions.pdf>), is the systematic mistreatment of a social group purely due to their membership in the social group.

- Drugs can destroy people's lives.
- Broken families lead to broken lives.
- The American Dream is inaccessible to some people.

## Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
crossroads	social worker	Gil Scott-Heron
symphony	intervention	hell-pit
racist	vibrant	political institution
institution	rehab	
avenues	corruption	
sprint	slurs	

## Vocabulary Activity Options

- Consider the idea that the word “crossroads” has both literal and figurative meanings. First, determine what its literal and figurative meanings are and write them down on a piece of paper. Next, write a poem that includes a focus on both literal and figurative crossroads. You may choose the subject matter, length, and language style of your poem. Share your poem with the class once you’ve finished composing it.
- Conduct a brief research project on social work with a partner. Your project must include responses to at least the following questions:
  - What is social work?
  - What do social workers do?
  - What education and training do social workers need?
  - What different types of social work can people do?
  - How does social work fit into these poems?
  - Who’s a social worker you know or have found online, and what is their professional specialty and background?

BONUS: If possible, interview a social worker about their job, training, and experiences. Present your work to the class using technology. How you complete this assignment (e.g., what online platform you use) is up to you.
- Consider the words “corruption” and “racism.” Look up the words if you don’t already know them. How do these concepts exist in our society and institutions? How do corruption and racism intersect and reinforce each other? If you don’t think they exist in our society and institutions, why not? Find one outside article discussing either corruption or racism and describe it to the class. Explain whether or not you agree with it, and why.
  - Write out these responses in a coherent, short essay before presenting them to the class.

4. Listen to Gil Scott-Heron's spoken-word poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGaoXAwl9kw> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGaoXAwl9kw>)) and discuss the following questions with a partner:
  - What is a revolution?
  - What revolution is Gil Scott-Heron discussing in this poem?
  - How do references to popular culture enhance this poem?
  - Although this poem is dated, what relevance does it have to modern day?

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Why do you think these selections are poems (including one spoken word) instead of short stories or essays? How do you think they would change if they were short stories or essays?
2. How do these poems make you feel? What different emotions do you experience while reading these poems?
3. These poems depict significant life struggles. Discuss these difficulties. Can you relate to them? Why or why not? Do you think these struggles are widespread among people or are unique to the poet?

## Text-Dependent Question Options

1. "How to Hover Right Above Crashing" ends suddenly. What is the effect of this sudden ending? How does it make you feel, and what do you think it means? Write a brief paragraph in response to these questions.
2. "How to Hover Right Above Crashing" includes a shift from third to second person. What is the effect of this shift? How does the shift change the poem?
3. "What We Know for Sure" places a special focus on numbers. What is the effect of this focus on numbers? How do they enhance the poem? Experiment with crossing out all the numbers, read the poem again, and discuss how it changes without the numbers. Write a brief essay in response to these questions.
4. "Haiku IV" includes a metaphor. Explain the metaphor and the two dissimilar things it compares. What is the effect of this metaphor? What does its inclusion add to the poem?
5. Consider this excerpt from "What We Know For Sure": While your mother sells – / Everything she is told has value. / Anything a man will pay for. Examine the verbs in this selection. Which are active verbs, and which are passive verbs? What is their effect? Note: Students may need instruction and/or guidance on passive vs. active verbs.
6. Consider the character ("you") of interest in "What We Know For Sure." Write a paragraph, using complete sentences, about the character's life, challenges, and family using details from the poem.



7. Imagine that the poems take place on the street in the illustration. Describe at least four events from the poems as if they occur on this street.

## Writing Exercise Options

### **Narrative**

Write a haiku about a daily experience you have. The experience does not have to be anything special, just something real. Share your haiku with the class when you finish.

### **Descriptive**

Write a long-form poem about a difficulty in your life. Add as many specific, personal details as you feel comfortable including. Incorporate figurative language to enhance your writing and connect with your reader. Share your poem with a partner when you finish. Ask volunteers to share their poems with the whole class.

### **Analysis**

Compare and contrast “How to Hover Right Above Crashing” with “What We Know for Sure.” Describe at least one feature the poems share and one feature the poems do not share. Incorporate specific textual evidence from both poems to support your analysis.

## Complementary Reading Text Option

### **Caged Bird**

by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own

But the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts in a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

## Writing Exercise

Select either “How to Hover Right Above Crashing” or “What We Know for Sure” and write a brief, 1-page essay describing how either poem could be an example of the “caged bird” Maya Angelou describes.

## Activity Options

### Classroom Activity One

1. Divide the class into teams of 4-5 students.
2. Instruct each team to reread the poems by Benin Williams Lemus.
3. Teams will then develop their own original poems about some form of social or racial injustice. They may select their own topics.
4. Each poem must be composed of at least three words from each student on the team. Make sure each individual student turns in a paper with his/her contributions on it.
5. Teams will share their poems out loud with the class.

### Classroom Activity Two

1. Divide the class into teams of 4-5 students.
2. Instruct the teams to reread the poems by Benin Williams Lemus and select either “How to Hover Right Above Crashing” or “What We Know For Sure” for this exercise.
3. Each team will create an original, new poem using the text of their selected poem. Each team’s new poem must consist of the same lines as originally composed, except the lines cannot be ordered in the same way as the original poems.
4. Teams will share their new poems out loud with the class.
5. As they listen to the new poems, students will write down their responses to the following questions:
  - How does this new poem make you feel?
  - What emotional effect does this new poem have, and how does it compare to the original version?
6. If time allows, students will share their thoughts on the new poems with each other.

### Home Activity

1. For this activity, students will spend time observing people and their surroundings in a public place outside of school. The public place could be a coffee shop, bus, park, street corner, etc.
2. Students will compose a poem about what they observe in this public place. They should include descriptive, vivid imagery about what they see, smell, touch, taste, and hear.

3. Students will write their poems on a clean sheet of paper and accompany their poems with a picture or drawing of its content.
4. Students will share their poems with a partner upon returning to class.

### **Guest Speaker**

Option One: Benin Williams Lemus, author of “Haiku IV,” “How to Hover Right Above Crashing,” and “What We Know for Sure”

Option Two: Dr. Harryette Mullen, English Professor and Poet at UCLA

- Dr. Mullen’s expertise is in African American literature, poetry, and American literature.
- Ask Dr. Mullen if she’d be willing to read one of her poems, discuss her writing process, and potentially conduct a brief poetry workshop for students.

### **Field Trip**

1. Bring your classes to an 826LA writing workshop.
2. Fill out the appropriate application form and see program details here: <http://826la.org/programs/field-trips/>
3. (<http://826la.org/programs/field-trips/>)
4. After the field trip, have students complete the following reflection exercise.

### **Writing Exercise:**

1. Share your writing with another student who attended the field trip.
2. Reflect on your experience. What did you like/dislike? What did you learn? How did this field trip change your thinking?
3. Write a brief paragraph on your reflection and share it with the class.

## **TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT**

### **Writing Exercise**

Take one line or phrase from each of the three poems and create one of your own to emphasize a theme apparent in one or all of them. You should keep the pieces from each poem unchanged, but you should also add some of your own writing to emphasize your chosen theme.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

### Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3: 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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6: Acquire and use accurately 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 considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.



CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

## Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/9-10/5/>): Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

## Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/>): Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/a/>): Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/d/>): Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/2/>): Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

## Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/3/>): Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.