an African American

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Practice the Skills

1 Key Reading Skill

Questioning Ask Yourself three questions after reading the first few lines of the poem:

• What is the title of the poem?
• How does the title relate to the places mentioned in the first nine lines? To the speaker?

Then answer the questions.

i wanna tell you a story of washington, dc
of atlanta, georgia
of addis ababa
of tangier, soweto and lagos

i wanna shed some light on the dark continent
i wanna tell you a story of me

i stand before you
dark and proud
asante princess
african queen
born and bred
on black soil
in a black nation
they call ghana

i spoke the language
of my ancestors

i ate the food
planted by our mothers’ hand
i danced the drumbeats
of our animist* gods

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5 Addis Ababa is the capital of Ethiopia in East Africa. Tangier is a city in Morocco in North Africa. Soweto is a group of townships in the country of South Africa. Lagos is a city in Nigeria in West Africa.

7 Europeans called Africa the dark continent in the nineteenth century because parts of it were so difficult for them to explore that they didn’t know a lot about it.

23 An animist believes that all things in nature have a spirit or soul within them.
an asante princess
an african queen
who crossed the middle passage*
arrived in america
speaking very little english
with thick lips
and thick accent
unable to pronounce my name
people called me
the foreigner
the african girl
i went to school
with your daughters and sons
your cousins and friends
mimicked their speech
dressed their style
seemingly became one of them 2
i wore my blackness
my africaness 3
chameleon-like
into the red, the white and the blue
which is the fabric of this nation
wanting desperately to belong
when i sleep
i snore with the lions and tigers
in the safari land
i snore with the sounds
of the noontime traffic on georgia avenue
in the district of columbia

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2. The Middle Passage was the journey that many slave ships took from West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas.
3. A chameleon is a type of lizard that changes the color of its skin to fit in with its surroundings.

Vocabulary

mimicked (MIH mikt) v. copied; imitated
when i dream
the voices of jomo kenyatta, patrice lumumba
and dr. martin luther king, jr.
speak to me in unison
when i cry
rain falls on the sahara
and the potomac river overflows
60. i sway to alpha blondy
as easily as i do stevie wonder
open your ears
my children
and listen to this griot
65. talk of history
being made
i wanna tell you this story
of my life
the blood which flows
70. through the left side of my body
is the mississippi river
every day i wake it croons
“lift every voice and sing”
the anthem of the american negro
75. the blood which flows
through the right side of my body
is the nile river
every day i rise it screams out loud
“africa, oh africa, cry freedom
for all your children”

Analyzing the Photo In 1960 Patrice Lumumba became the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was assassinated in 1961. What do you learn about him in this photo?

Practice the Skills

4. Literary Element
Sensory Imagery A person crying doesn’t really create rain in the desert or make a river overflow. What idea is the author trying to get across here?

5. Key Reading Skill
Questioning To what does the speaker compare the blood flowing through her body? Reread lines 69–80 to help yourself answer this question.

Vocabulary

unison (YOO nih sun) n. one voice
anthem (AN thum) n. the official song of a country, school, or group

590 UNIT 5 How Do You Stay True to Yourself?
don't think me confused
because i don't know
where home is anymore
i just know
that the veins
in the body from the right and the left
flow to the heart
and become one love

if i die on african soil
bury me in jeans and sneakers
let my tombstone read in english
"native washingtonian"
and sing an old negro spiritual for me please

if i die on american soil
pour libation* on the ground
lay a flag of red, green and gold
with a black start
on my coffin
let the talking drums spread the news
let the words on my tombstone
be multi-lingual and let them scream
asante princess
african queen

let no one question my origin
let me live and die in peace
as who i am
because you see
i have broken all barriers
of love and unity
i am
in the truest sense of the word
an african american

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*To pour libation is to pour wine or oil on the ground as an offering to the gods in a religious ceremony.

**The flag of Ghana has red, green, and gold bands with a black star.**