



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2018 Volume II: Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers

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## **The Spirit Task: African Americans Reclaim Power through Art and Poetry**

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by Nina M. Ford

### **Introduction**

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Ekphrasis is an intermedial form of poetry inspired by or written about works of art or objects. Reading, interpreting, and writing ekphrastic poetry will be a new activity for my students – as it was for me too at the beginning of my work on this unit. Students will have had prior experience with visual art analysis and that will be a portion of the work we do in the classroom together. After all, how can you understand a poem about a work of art without first understanding the piece on which it is based? Relating a text back to a piece of visual art will be skill that requires modeling and practice.

William Blake, a Romantic Age poet, used ekphrasis to marry art and text in his now well-known collection of poems with engraved plates, “Songs of Innocence and of Experience.” You are likely familiar with his poem, “The Tyger.” In his book of illustrated poems, words and images are co-created to make a richer experience for the viewer/reader. My students will use this same concept in their work during this unit.

Because ekphrasis is an amalgam of art forms, it’s a natural way for students to make connections within disciplines. Ekphrastic poets “read” works of art and translate what they gleaned from those readings into poems. In this unit, students will become familiar with ekphrasis: how to read it, how to write it, and why we even bother.

### **Social & Emotional Components**

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In an interview with *Alternative Radio*, June Jordan, prolific African American poet, said,

“the task of a poet of color, a black poet, as a people hated...is to rally the spirit of your folks... to figure out ...a perspective... that other folks can use to pick themselves up, to rally and...to jump higher, to reach more extensively in solidarity with even more varieties of people to accomplish something. I feel that it's a spirit task.”<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, that is the goal of this unit – for my students to experience solidarity, to understand and resist racist narratives that are embedded in the fabric of our country, and to look to creative outlets for healing and growth. I want students to think critically about how those racist narratives have been created, supported, and perpetuated throughout our history and how artists and writers have used their art forms to respond, retaliate, and re-envision. This work is an essential part of anti-racist activism. I want my students to know their voices and opinions matter - that they can use creative outlets to amplify their voices, to honor and work through frustration or despair, to reclaim their power, and to rejoice. My hope is that a major takeaway from this unit of study is that young people of color can be and are agents of change both locally and globally. I want my students to recognize the potential of their stories and experiences in transforming the world as we know it into a place we hope it could be but is not yet real.

Using ekphrasis, students will explore the relationship between art forms. Poetry and art will allow students to delve into what they have to say about inflammatory and inspiring images, complex topics, and American society at large. A combination of text and image will bring these explorations to life.

I recommend teaching this unit to students with whom you already have relationships, or saving this unit until you know your students well and have built a solid foundation of trust and mutual respect.

## Demographics

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Richmond Community High School is a specialty school within Richmond Public Schools. Rising 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students from across the city of Richmond apply to attend and are vetted through a process that includes an interview, testing in math and writing, an examination of the students' past standardized test scores, attendance, and behavior records. In short, our school serves gifted-and-talented, predominantly low-income students of color. "Community" is not just part of our name, it is a key tenet of our school's philosophy. A student body of around 300 students allows students and teachers to grow to know each other well and those close bonds are as significant a draw to prospective students as our distinguished academic record.

## Rationale

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I have been privileged to teach visual art to 9-12 graders at RCHS for the past two years. My students are bright, creative, and driven despite facing a variety of challenges. They've taught me a great deal too - about perseverance, about family, and about unconditional love.

My students know me to be social justice-oriented. I do my best to design meaningful and relevant units that push students to confront their implicit biases, to consider other perspectives, and to use visual art as a way to communicate meaningfully. I've found that having authentic relationships with students is foundational to initiating discussions on difficult topics in the classroom. The close bonds I have with my kids set up this unit in particular, because of its heavy themes, for success.

Because I am a white teacher of students of color in a predominantly black school district in a predominantly black city, the unit I've designed is tailored specifically for the community of students I serve. It is my intent for white teachers to use this unit in predominantly black schools. However, a teacher of color could certainly tweak some aspects of the unit to better fit their circumstances and student demographics. Likewise, a white teacher of predominantly white students could also manipulate this unit to better match her goals. The objectives in each of these circumstances will vary, with all variations being equally meaningful. Regardless, it is important that the thread of white supremacy throughout American history and into the modern day remains in focus and in constant critique, as it is a foundational concept to the work of anti-racist teaching and specifically to the content of this unit.

This unit will be taught to my Art II class and will span approximately ten 90-minute classes. I intentionally chose this group because it will likely contain an equal number of students whom I've taught and students who will be new to me. Due to the controversial and potentially triggering nature of the content I will be teaching, I will prepare a letter home to parents, which will explain in detail what we'll be studying, why it's relevant, and how it connects to the Visual Art, English Language Arts, and United States History curriculum by citing specific state standards. I will create an opt-out clause for students whose parents don't want them to participate. My plan to notify parents in advance of the unit will give parents/guardians an opportunity to make a well-informed decision about their child's participation. Communication with my principal about the content of this unit will also be of the utmost importance.

## Objectives

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When I tell colleagues I'm going to be using Jim Crow-era racist objects to teach towards social justice at a predominately black school, I get sideways looks. I understand their confusion. Using blatantly anti-black images as tools for teaching social justice to black adolescents may seem like a strange and unorthodox approach. How can objects designed specifically to induce pain and self-hatred, reduce humanity, and subjugate an entire race of people be used for learning, let alone healing? What is my role as a white teacher in this process and how do I navigate this content in an anti-racist, color-conscious manner?

David Pilgrim, public speaker and one of the United States' leading experts on race relations, is a self-proclaimed "garbage man." He began collecting racist objects in his early adolescence. He recalls his first purchase as a young black teenager - a ceramic mammy salt shaker that he destroyed promptly after purchasing. Afterwards, he wrestled with the idea of buying this object just to break it - not in a political act of rebellion, but simply out of hatred for the thing.

The desire to amass and study these objects, their origin, and how they fit in to today's society prompted his founding of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. Whether or not these objects should be saved is a point of contention amongst scholars - should they be discarded to the trash heap where they belong? Or should they be reclaimed and repurposed, forcing us to ask questions, to help us better understand historical and present-day racism, and to move us forward? Henry Louis Gates, teacher, historian and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, grapples with these questions. In the foreword to David Pilgrim's book, he explains his understanding of those who believe that presenting these hateful and violent images to students "could lead to internalization of the very racist messages [they are] trying to eradicate."<sup>2</sup> While he acknowledges this

possibility, he suggests that these objects, if studied through specific lenses, can be made to function as validation of African Americans' experience of racism, and as a call to action, providing African Americans with new insight and understanding of the history of anti-blackness in America and ways to combat it. Bryan Stevenson, Harvard University-trained public defense lawyer and best-selling author said, "when somebody affirms that [racism] exists, it can be really liberating. It can be really affirming to know that you are not crazy."<sup>3</sup>

On my first trip to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., imbued with sorrow, frustration, and hope, I stumbled upon one artifact in particular which stopped me in my tracks. On view in the museum was a slave master's bullwhip. Of course this is not an unlikely artifact to be present in the catalog of such a museum, but upon closer inspection, a small bronze plaque read, "On Loan from Oprah Winfrey."

Oprah Winfrey is one of the world's wealthiest black women. She is a philanthropist and mogul. I imagine you would be hard-pressed to find someone in America who doesn't know her name as well as a handful of facts about her. One of Oprah's first important art purchases was in the 1980s of Harry Herman Roseland's 1906 painting "To the Highest Bidder" which depicts a female slave with her young daughter on an auction block. This work of art is conspicuously displayed in her home - it engages you as soon as you enter.<sup>4</sup> Kathy Y. Wilson, a black writer and Jim Crow remnant collector in Cincinnati, Ohio, lives amidst her collection of lawn jockeys and mummies. As a white woman, I have had to consider what would inspire African Americans to not only purchase objects like these, but also put them in places of prominence.

There aren't any racial groups that have escaped being caricatured in the United States. But none have been caricatured more often or in as many ways as Black Americans. Blacks have been depicted as naturally subservient, criminal, opportunistic, feeble-minded, animalistic, and hypersexual. Attitudes like these have been represented on many different everyday objects: cookie jars, penny banks, paper ephemera, advertisements and children's games. These objects were made in America by white people, for white people. The mere existence of these objects not only supported racist stereotypes, but also perpetuated them, physically inserting them into the homes of many white Americans. Racist stereotypes were then used as justification for the inferiority and maltreatment of blacks. For example, citing feeble-mindedness as a common trait of African Americans made it easy for whites to rationalize their feelings of superiority. These stereotypes have been widespread - they remain in place today, although they're manifested slightly differently. These objects, in addition to being used as a jumping off point for talking about race and racism, will also become the subject of student ekphrasis.

So why teach the history of racist objects in America using the arts? African Americans have used visual art, poems, jazz, spirituals, and rap as forms of resistance to these racist impositions. Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher, refers to these forms of resistance as "lines of flight." Lines of flight empower marginalized groups to assign meaning to their existence "over and against imposed and narrow definitions of being based on current conditions" -- in essence, taking on the role of activists to reclaim their identities and cultural representation.<sup>5</sup>

What can we learn from this activism? How can we use our understanding of the history of racism and how folks rally against it to become architects of the future? My students will learn some ways in which the arts, visual and verbal in this case, can heal and transform them as well as their communities. I want to focus on implementing steps for building safe spaces for students to take on weighty topics like race, approaches for discussing race effectively with students once the safe community has been established, and ways to

empower students to take what they've learned and transmogrify it artistically.

Ultimately, students will synthesize all of this to write ekphrastic poems and make visual art to understand how black artists and poets are using these themes in their work. Jim Crow era racist objects will be the subjects of student ekphrasis. Then, including text from poems they've read and written, students will create a layered self-portrait with renditions of how they see themselves and how they believe society sees them.

### **Anti-Racist Teaching**

This unit seeks to uncover and name difficult truths about anti-blackness in America, today and throughout our history, while examining the effects of white supremacy and how we might shift into a way of thinking about conflict as productive.<sup>6</sup> The idea of this unit is that objects of racial intolerance can be used to teach about race and racism and that those conversations will yield difficult but honest conversations and less racism.<sup>7</sup>

It cannot be overstated that work within this unit will require students of all races as well as myself to consciously move beyond surface-level conversations about race. If done with care and intention, a certain level of discomfort will likely accompany this pursuit. To teach this content and to teach for social justice in general, I must get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

A core concept of this unit is for students to understand the systemic nature of racism. Systemic racism, also called institutional racism, hides in plain sight and is woven throughout our lives and society as a whole. By definition, institutional racism describes racism, whether conscious or unconscious, that is expressed in the practice of social and political institutions. It is a structural distribution of resources, power, and opportunity for the benefit of white people and the exclusion of people of color. The consequences of institutional racism are manifest everywhere. The reproduction and reinforcement of institutional racism through destructive policies and laws forms a long history that has shaped our attitudes about others and ourselves. It's important to recognize the difference between this level of racism and the racial biases of your elderly grandfather, for example. Both, of course, are harmful, but systemic racism does more widespread harm than individuals with racist ideologies. In fact, the systemic nature of racism in the United States creates an incubator for individuals with racist beliefs. Perhaps the biggest danger of institutional racism is that it is almost totally elided by deeply-rooted metanarratives such as the "bootstraps" ideology ("if you work hard, you will ascend the socioeconomic ladder," and the corollary, "If you didn't succeed, you didn't work hard enough").

Embedded in every realm of our society is evidence of pervasive anti-blackness. From issues of representation in academia to police brutality to housing discrimination, America is obsessed with perpetuating the lie that all have equal opportunities. Black men who commit the same crimes as white men with similar backgrounds receive longer sentences.<sup>8</sup> One-third of African American men in their 20s are under criminal justice supervision.<sup>9</sup> African American unemployment is higher than all other demographics and 83% higher than white unemployment.<sup>10</sup> Public schools remain separate and unequal despite mythology leading us to believe otherwise. Black students are expelled at three times the rate of white students. Schools serving mostly white student populations are more likely to have more experienced teachers. Black students are under-represented in gifted-and-talented programs.<sup>11</sup> All of these things and many others disproportionately and negatively affect black people. To ignore hard truths prevents us from holding ourselves accountable and taking action.

We have all heard people say they don't "see color" in conversations about race. What they are saying is that

because race is so insignificant to them, there is no possibility that they have racist proclivities. They are free from the burden of racism and consider themselves as “one of the good ones”. Many people see racism as a dichotomy – either you are guilty or you are innocent. This “us” and “them” attitude blinds us to covert racism that occurs in the in-between and actively prevents progress – how can you fix what you don’t perceive to be broken? White teachers bring this with them into the classroom. Tunnel vision, unconscious/inherent bias, and fear of appearing racist handicap our work.

On a macro-level, a “colorblind” ideology asserts that racism is over. This philosophy is often based on the notion that The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s led to racial equality and an often-cited piece of evidence to support this is the election of America’s first black president in 2008. How then do we account for the vitriolic racist responses to and in the wake of Obama’s presidency? Or the ongoing trend of police murdering unarmed black men? If we are indeed living in a post-racial era, how do we account for the resurgence of a white supremacist presence in mainstream society, or the increase of murders committed by white supremacists?<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the blatant and overt racism of Jim Crow, “colorblindness” can seem like “racism lite”. During Jim Crow, lynchings, racist laws, anti-black signage in storefronts, and beliefs about blacks inferiority were the norm. If white folks say that race is unimportant to them today, why is that a problem? Color-blind racism suggests any adversity an individual faces is result of a deficit within that person – not the color of their skin. It becomes a way of simultaneously “othering” and minimizing the experiences of people of color. Colorblindness also assists whites in projecting racism onto “bad racists” like neo-Nazis and other self-identified white supremacists, the way of thinking being “I don’t ‘see color,’ therefore I’m not like those extreme individuals and cannot be racist”<sup>13</sup>

Society as a whole is not the only space where “colorblindness” causes harm. In the classroom, a “colorblind” philosophy of teaching can wreak havoc, particularly in circumstances involving a white teacher of students of color. By ignoring the race of our students of color, we are effectively ignoring their identities, lived experiences, culture, and reality. This creates a detrimental rift in relationships in the classroom, which are essential to effective teaching.<sup>14</sup>

### **Self-Reflection**

Before tackling the painful racial history of the United States in the classroom, as white teachers we must self-reflect. Questions I want to ask myself include: How has the color of my skin put me in positions of privilege throughout my personal and professional life? How have my experiences been informed by the way I am perceived outwardly? In what ways has my privilege clouded my perception of others’ experiences? Regardless of intention, have my words or actions belittled or ridden roughshod over the thoughts and feelings of people of color? Are there occasions when I absolve myself of racism as one of the “good” white people?

If I am honest with myself, I realize that I have benefited tremendously from a society that values whiteness over blackness. Undoubtedly, the first order of business is to accept this. Without acknowledging the ugliness, how can we build the world we want? The question all of this data begs of us is how and where do we start? Do we lament the death of the myths we’ve been told since birth - about America the Great, the land of opportunity, about freedom and justice for all? What actions can we begin to take to right these wrongs? Whose work is it to do? We must ask of our students and ourselves: what events throughout history led us here and why? What connections can we make amongst ourselves? What commonalities can we see? What

might come of valuing our differences as much as our commonalities? Armed with information, self-awareness, and ownership of the problems we face, we can make change, but only if we engage with our own learning. We can build a new world – but we have to transform the one we’ve got first.

## Resources

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To introduce the United States History portion of the unit, I will show a compilation of historically racist imagery. The use of lecture with effective questioning techniques will get students to make connections between the artifacts, exemplary artworks, and poems. The poems as well as the works of art all share the desire to uncover the truth. In my resources, artists and poets use their work to dig deep, exploring despair, joy, frustration, and beauty. Hosting a guest artist who is currently working through these topics will supplement and further learning. Literary and visual art resources will include living and non-living poets and artists. Some but not all poetry examples will be ekphrastic.

### Artifacts

Students will make the connection between laws passed during Jim Crow and the racist artifacts from the same era that were made as a way to perpetuate the stereotypes regarded as truth by many whites.

In 1828, after seeing a black man perform a song referring to himself as Jim Crow, Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, a struggling white actor in New York, appeared on stage as a character of the same name. Rice’s *Jim Crow* character was an exaggerated and stereotypical black man. One of the pioneers of “blackface” makeup, Rice used the ash from a burnt cork to appear black onstage in minstrel shows. By the early 1830’s, Jim Crow was a stock character. Rice and his cohort of other blackface performers helped to popularize the notion that blacks were lazy and sub-human. Jim-Crow era objects reflected and molded whites’ attitudes towards African Americans. These stereotypical images of black people fortified the idea that blacks were not fit to: assimilate into white schools or neighborhoods, partake in relationships with whites, break bread with whites, or speak in a casual and informal tone with whites.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1850 and 1870, minstrel shows were exceedingly popular. By the late 1830s, the phrase *Jim Crow* was synonymous with the words *coon* or *darkie*. Beyond that, *Jim Crow* transformed in meaning to also encompass the racial system in place between 1877 and the mid 1960’s. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a landmark Supreme Court case, upheld the legality of racial segregation and the way of life in the Jim Crow south. Laws supported the notion that blacks were second-class citizens. Etiquette norms were stringent too. Black men could not offer to shake hands with a white man. Blacks could not show public displays of affection. Even while driving, blacks were subordinate - whites had the right- of-way at all intersections.<sup>16</sup>

### Caricatures

From the 1830s to well into the mid-20th century, blacks were visually represented in ways that mimicked minstrelsy. Pitch-black skin, large and exaggerated mouths, lips - sometimes white and sometimes red - and wiry or unruly hair were all characteristics of racist depictions of blacks.

In 1889, Charles Rutt and Charles G. Underwood coined the name Aunt Jemima to pair with their development

of a self-rising flour product.<sup>17</sup> Aunt Jemima, the quintessential mammy, was wholesome, overweight, and sexually non-threatening. Caricatures, although they have morphed, remain in place today. Aunt Jemima is no longer portrayed as a large-lipped, head scarf-wearing housekeeper. On packaging found in supermarkets today, Aunt Jemima appears as an attractive and content housewife or maid – her character is intentionally ambiguous.

If the caricature was meant to depict a household worker, like the mammy or the Tom, docility and faithful subservience would be evident in their facial features and other visual elements.<sup>18</sup> The contentedness of the mammy and Tom represented in advertisements, postcards, and packaging was not accidental. These caricatures were created to be further the notion that if blacks were content at the bottom of the social hierarchy, then slavery and Jim Crow era laws were just and moral. Attitudes did inform the manufacture of anti-black caricatures and stereotypes, but more insidiously, the stereotypes were created to maintain and perpetuate them. Each stereotype – that blacks were dangerous, dumb, and subhuman – was *designed* specifically as a tool to ensure that blacks were perceived to inferior to whites in all ways. Stereotypes and caricatures, in effect, functioned as political propaganda.

## **Visual Art**

The exemplary artists I've chosen for this unit are all African American. Each uses a different medium to make commentary on some area of their experience being black in America. The majority of the artists I chose are living contemporary artists. This intentional choice reinforces the notion that these issues are relevant today and that artists are grappling with them. Visual art exemplars in this unit work with issues of representation, cultural identity, black excellence, fury at racial injustice and the beauty and power of resilience.

I will show selected artworks by the following artists: Kehinde Wiley, Paul Rucker, Hank Willis Thomas, Elizabeth Catlett, Kara Walker, Alison & Betye Saar, Carrie Mae Weems and Titus Kaphar. The thematic focus of the selections will be the artists' (re)presentation of anti-black caricatures and/or attitudes and the ways in which these artists achieve that. We will also look at how each artist explores personal and cultural identity.





Fig. 1 Alison Saar, *Sea of Moisture*, Bronze, 2008

Alison Saar comes from a family of artists and radical thinkers. Her mother, Betye Saar, was an assemblage artist during the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, which was an artistic offshoot of the Black Panther Party. Like her mother's, much of Alison Saar's work uses vehicle for activism.

*Sea of Moisture* is a sculptural wall hanging depicting the back of a human torso. Only two colors are visible in the piece – black and turquoise blue. Both of these colors are patina, which is the result of a chemical change to a metal surface. It is a process often employed by artists working with metal to add color or textural elements. From this, we might infer that this person has undergone a change, perhaps a superficial one. The drops of water could represent the ocean, as the title suggests. They could also be tears, maybe both. The bottom left of the back has a large cut that is reminiscent of a whipping welt. Marks and scars like these were extremely common among slaves – evidence of punishment for even the smallest offense. This piece could be interpreted as a representation of African American resilience and reckoning with the past - the beads of

water are literally rolling off the back, being let go. Additionally, this piece has a moody quality. It evokes a spectrum of feelings – relief, introspection, and inner strength.

Made of bronze, we can assume this piece is physically heavy. The things that cause us physical and emotional pain are too.

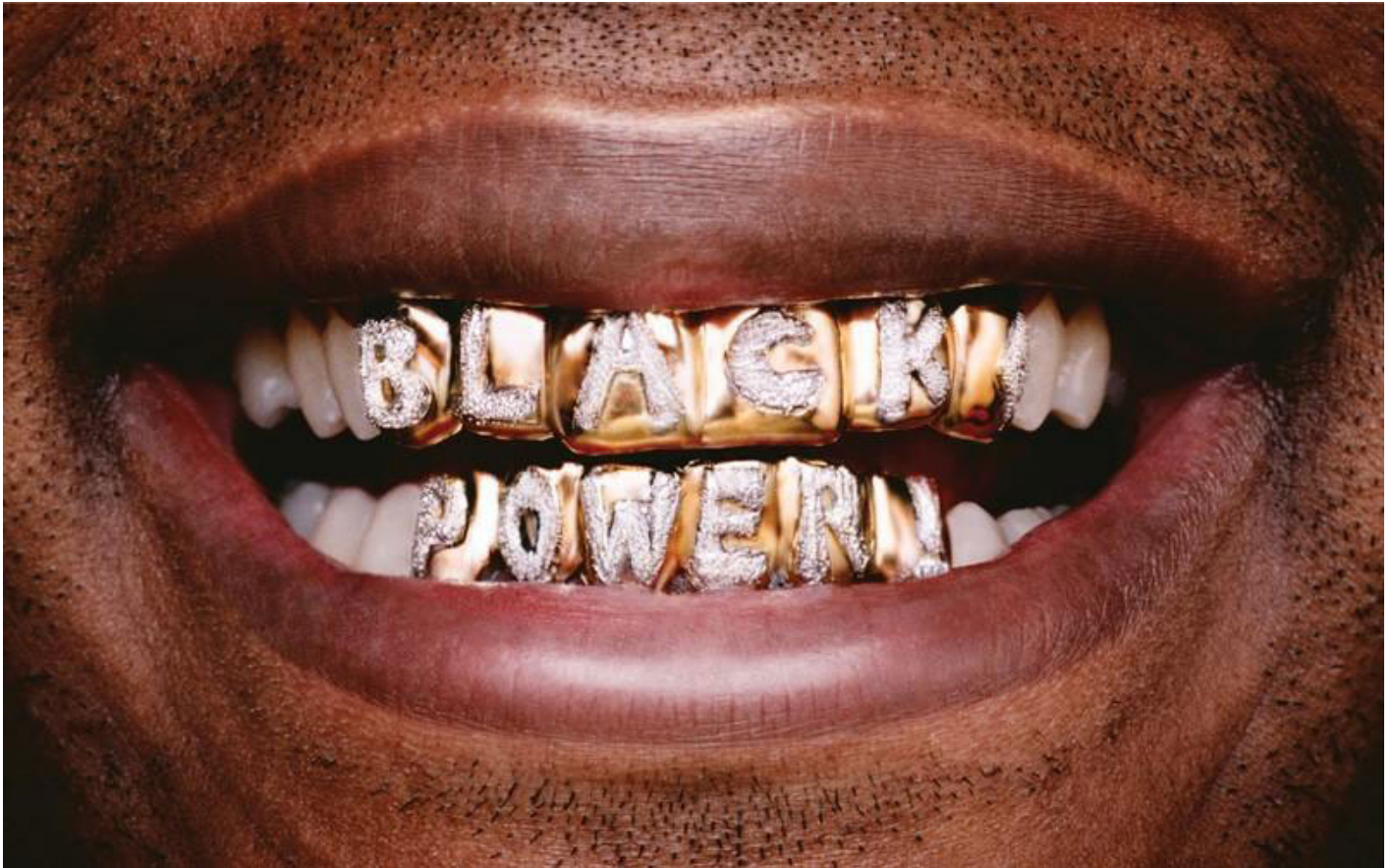


Fig. 2 Hank Willis Thomas, *Black Power*, photograph, 2006

Hank Willis Thomas is a conceptual artist living in New York. His photograph entitled *Black Power* depicts a close-up of black man's smiling mouth. The subject is wearing a gold grill that has "BLACK POWER!" spelled out in what appear to be diamonds.

Grills are considered jewelry and made in a variety of metals often inlaid with precious stones. Today, grills are status symbols and fashion statements for rap artists and aficionados. As an object of luxury, the wearing of a grill communicates to onlookers the wearer's ability to purchase such a lavish item. The excess capital necessary to obtain status symbols like this is evidence of upward mobility and financial success.

If my focus moves from the words on the teeth to the photograph in its entirety, I see a man's smile. A smile is an obvious indication of happiness, but perhaps in this case, it is duplicitous. Maybe he is thinking, "Despite all that I was up against, I found power in my blackness – and it paid off." In their 2018 song "Walk It Talk It", widely popular trap music trio Migos substantiate this with the lyric, "get your respect in diamonds."<sup>19</sup>

There seems to be an obvious connection between Thomas' interest in the mouth and a reference to the exaggerated mouths of racist caricatures. Illustrators would hone in on their renditions of giant mouths and lips on the black individuals they drew. Because we cannot see the subject's eyes to analyze his expression,

the smile is ambiguous. The nod to racist representations gives me reason to believe his smile could just as easily be steeped in irony as it is sincerity.



Fig 3. Elizabeth Catlett, *The Torture of Mothers*, Lithograph, 1970

Elizabeth Catlett was a highly regarded figure in the field of sculpture and printmaking.

Referred to by Maya Angelou as a “queen of the arts,” Catlett used her work to speak to social issues, particularly those involving African American women. In Samella Lewis’ book “African American Art and Artists”, Catlett says “I have always wanted my art to service black people - to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, and to make us aware of our potential.”<sup>20</sup>

Printmaking is a term that encompasses many different processes. This print is an example of a lithograph. Using a flat surface, typically stone, and a greasy drawing implement, lithography exists because of the immiscibility of oil and water. Ink is applied to a greasy image on the surface of the stone. The blank areas of the stone, which hold moisture, repel the ink and result in a print of the exact image that was drawn.

Printmaking appeals to many artists because it provides multiples of an image. Why go through the hassle of

drawing an image over and over when you can draw it once and print it an infinite number of times?

Although this image was made in 1970, Catlett's *The Torture of Mothers* could be printed again today – and would still be just as relevant. Black men and boys are dying at the hands of police at an alarming rate. Black mothers warn their children of what dangers exist in the world for black youth. For a black child even in the most innocuous of interactions with law enforcement, anything is possible.

In the image, this woman's son is literally on her mind – his entire body, surrounded by blood (or fire), is cradled inside of her. Is she agonizing over his murder? Or is she fixated on the possibility of such a fate? Dwelling on thoughts of my family members or myself being murdered senselessly is not something I typically do – this is a privilege clearly not afforded to this mother and others like her. The violence African Americans face in our country remains a torturous reality, unyielding and ongoing, forty-eight years after the creation of this artwork.

### **Works of Art for Students**

In addition to the three works of visual art previously mentioned, I will include the following pieces in my unit:

Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972

Hank Willis Thomas, *Raise Up*, 2014

Kehinde Wiley, *Prince Albert, Prince Consort of Queen Victoria*, 2013

Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

Titus Kaphar, *Space to Forget*, 2014

Kara Walker, *The Marvelous Sugar Baby*, 2014

*Rebel Leader*, 2004

### **Poems**

Bryan Stevenson asserts, "You can't do reconciliation work, you can't do restoration work, you can't do racial justice work, you can't create the outcome that you desire to see until there has been truth-telling. And truth-telling has to happen when people who have been victimized and marginalized and excluded and oppressed are given a platform to speak, and everybody else has to listen."<sup>21</sup> The poetry portion of this unit will be our opportunity to listen carefully and internalize the words of black poets.

Poets whose work we will study will focus on topics like truth telling, fear, sorrow, power, and redemption. The variety of tones present in this collection of poems will mirror that of the visual art. These pieces will run the gamut of human emotion. Written responses and reflections are not uncommon in the high school art curriculum. But why use poetry, rather than prose, to get students to respond to visual art? Poems open up the possibility of nuance and give the writer space to say what cannot be said in prose. Reading poetry offers feelings of solidarity and relief. Not only are we able to use poetry to help us confront suffering, it helps us investigate the relationship between suffering and beauty. It's a natural vessel for discussions about social principles. It teaches us to not be constrained by our imaginations.

My assumption is that the majority of the class will choose to write in free verse, so several of my examples will reflect that. Getting teenagers to avoid clichés and ready-made phrases will be a significant part of the challenge in this portion of the unit. Through our exploration and writing of poems, students will begin to understand not only the nuance of language, but that words are, contrary to popular belief, not interchangeable.



Fig. 4 Paul Rucker, *Storm in the Time of Shelter*

### **Guest Artist**

In considering exemplary artists I would use in this unit, the first artist whose work came to mind was Paul Rucker. I became aware of Paul Rucker's work through a workshop centered on the theme "Clearing Roadblocks Together: Critical Conversations on Diversifying Art Education". Paul spoke at length about the necessity of working together to move our field towards inclusivity and anti-racist pedagogy. I knew immediately I wanted to work with him.

Often using unlikely combinations of objects and images, all of Paul Rucker's work brings inequality and the desperate need for change into focus. Recently, I was fortunate to see his work at Richmond's new Institute of Contemporary Art and one piece in particular took hold of me. When I stepped into the gallery, the visual violence of his work was arresting - both literally and figuratively - inside, pieces explore the relationship of slavery to the modern day prison industrial complex. In an installation of particular interest, Paul showcased bespoke Ku Klux Klan robes, made using fabrics in unlikely prints and patterns like Kente cloth and camouflage.

At the time of this writing, Paul Rucker is a TED Fellow as well as a Virginia Commonwealth University iCubed Visiting Arts Fellow embedded at the ICA in Richmond. Mr. Rucker has graciously agreed to be a guest artist in my classroom during this unit. His visit will allow students an opportunity to hear about his approach to these topics and themes as they relate to our studies. Students will be able to interact with an artist whose work deals in the very content we will be studying. Because the nature of his work is so closely related to what we will be doing in the classroom, Paul Rucker’s visit will function as a resource.

## Teaching Strategies

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### Accountable Talk

Courageous Conversations About Race™ provides tools for white teachers to find success in building and maintaining authentic relationships with students of color. These conversations jumpstart students who won’t engage, keep the dialogue moving despite discomfort, and push those involved beyond the superficial. Part of that requires the teacher to remain engaged, speak truthfully, sit out discomfort, accept and expect tension and lack of simplistic resolution. This tool assists in facilitating conversations about race by challenging and upending assumptions.<sup>22</sup>

David Pilgrim believes in what he calls the “triumph of dialogue”. Teachers must internalize the belief that through our teaching, another reality is possible. Without this hope and determination, our work is in vain. Acknowledge your feelings, good and bad, throughout the process. Anguish, fatigue, and disillusionment will all be effects of having meaningful conversations about race. So too will feelings of hope, humanity, and accomplishment. Consistent examination of how white fear and fragility manifest themselves in your life will yield better outcomes in all realms, but particularly in your relationships with your students of color.

White students who are struggling with the idea of how white privilege and white supremacy manifest themselves in our society can be directed to specific resources like Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”. As a white teacher, I know it is important for white students to hear me acknowledging my privilege publicly, citing specific examples, and providing resources to change attitudes and behaviors.

### Close Reading and Literary Analysis

Students will read poems written by African Americans and will participate in class discussions regarding the poems. Students will read “Riddle” by Jericho Brown, “It’s a Miracle” by Yesenia Montilla, “beverly, huh.” By Jamila Woods, “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, “In Time of Crisis” by Raymond R. Patterson, “New Rules of the Road” by Reginald Harris, “Affirmation” by Eve Ewing, “Gravity” by Angel Nafis, and “No Country for Black Boys” by Joy Priest. In this component of the unit, I’ll model how to annotate and analyze poetry. I will introduce various aspects of interpretive vocabulary and concepts using a toolkit.

For the purpose of this unit, I will focus on the analysis of two of these poems. Poetry will be read slowly and with purpose to implement the various processes of poetic interpretation starting with free association, moving into analytic responses in prose, and even the writing of more poetry – a kind of cousin of ekphrasis. Students will draw conclusions after exploring context, style, mood, and theme. A key component will be explorations of the moral and ethical dimensions of poems. Connections to prior knowledge will be of particular significance here.

Dr. Eve Ewing is a writer and visual artist. Studying the sociology of education at the University of Chicago, Ewing's research focuses on the impact of racism on public schools.<sup>23</sup> Her book *Electric Arches* is a compilation of poetry, prose, and visual art. Eve Ewing's work was a natural fit for this unit. Her poem "Affirmation", which she dedicates to youth living in prison, is relevant for other marginalized youth as well. In the poem, Ewing encourages youth to "fake it 'til they make it" - to speak positivity unto themselves until they are convinced their words are true, even if in the moment they are not. For the purposes of this unit, we will use this poem to focus on resilience.

We can all relate to the need to bolster ourselves in the face of chronic adversity, or even a single particularly challenging moment. Before a job interview, for example, soliloquies on positive themes embolden and encourage us. Through our own words, we convince ourselves we have the ability to persevere, to make it through, to get the job, to nail the audition. Ewing suggests that the courage youth needs is intrinsic. They already possess power - it's just a matter of recognizing and harnessing it. In this regard, teachers can serve as mirrors for their students. We can use our teaching to reflect back to them who they are.

In her poem, she describes being alive as "messy" and "lovely." The true story of our lives is not complete without acknowledging this duality. "The sun shines" while "somewhere it rains". Life is complicated. Good and bad things occur unevenly, and there's no stopping this ebb and flow as much as we might like to. Ewing suggests to youth that the best they can do is know that "somewhere inside [them], it rains, and things will grow green and wonderful." In moments that are "bad", "ugly", and "scary", we can't do much except acknowledge our feelings. We can, however, help others who also might be struggling. We can honor the magic within us.

Langston Hughes was a poet and social activist during the Harlem Renaissance in New York City. He is one of the most famous African American poets in history, well known for his poem "Harlem" in which he poses the question "what happens to a dream deferred?" In his poem "Mother to Son", a mother is telling her child about the challenges she has faced in life that he, too, will need to conquer. The mother refers to a variety of experiences in her life. She talks about "turnin' corners", changing directions, but continuously moving onward. She speaks of "reachin' landin's" that provide respite during her journey. She addresses "goin' in the dark"- the inevitability of encountering moments in life when direction is unclear and progress is not quantifiable.

Using metaphor, the mother compares adversities to "tacks" and "splinters" and "places with no carpet". I will ask students to identify some of the "tacks" and "splinters" they or members of their community have encountered or come up against. The overarching theme of this poem is my message to students every day: life is far from easy, less so for certain groups of people. The world out there is indifferent to what we hoped life might be. How will you adapt? How will you persevere? This poem serves as a bridge to discussions about privilege, resilience, and possible courses of action.

### **Daily Snapshots**

Beginning of class activities called "snapshots" will serve as warm-ups. Each day, a new activity will be assigned. The content of the activities will vary, but each will relate to the themes being discussed in the unit, either directly or tangentially. Among other things, snapshots could be based on debatable, factual, and conceptual key questions or current events. They will include a spectrum of simple to complex activities. A simple activity could be for students to define what they think propaganda is and to give an example. Students might use a Visual Thesaurus tool to "collect" words that describe how they are seen in society and

how they see themselves. Students can draw small sketches to accompany each word. A more involved activity could include watching Childish Gambino's "This is America" video, having students create a visual response, and then participating in a facilitated class discussion. The purpose of these activities will be to get students thinking about topics that might not be on their radar, to provide structured opportunities for students to develop personal opinions and defend them, and to practice empathy building.

### **Visual Thinking Strategies**

Before looking at historically racist and anti-black images, it is important to build a foundation for looking at images critically. In theory, this is a skill that an art educator will focus on exercising regularly with their class. Practice of this skill will have been started prior to the beginning of this unit.

Guided by the teacher, students will use Visual Thinking Strategies. Art educators use this method to facilitate high quality conversations with students about art. Students exercise skills in observation and critical thinking, and work to develop evidence-based arguments. VTS works through asking students a prescribed set of questions: What is going on in this image? What evidence do you see that supports that? What else do you see? As students answer, the teacher will paraphrase what the student has said to validate their comment and encourage confidence. David Pilgrim cites this method as an approach that creates "nonthreatening space where honest, facilitated discussions are possible."<sup>23</sup>

### **The Feldman Method of Criticism**

Edmund Feldman was a professor of Art at the University of Georgia who developed a simple four-step process of looking at art. Using this exploratory method of art criticism, students describe, analyze, interpret and judge selected works of art. The description step starts by simply stating what can be seen. I often tell students to pretend they are describing the artwork to someone who isn't able to see it. Next, students focus on the principles and elements of design in the piece. Here, we are looking for observations about the work's color, texture, rhythm, etc. Interpretation requires students to synthesize what they learned about the piece in steps one and two, paired with evidence, to come up with possible meanings or purposes for the work of art. What did the artist want viewers to consider or understand? Finally, students judge the merit of the work. If examples from the three previous steps can be cited, the level of criticism becomes more sophisticated. This process ensures that students think all the way through works of visual art rather than making snap judgments. A key takeaway from both VTS and Feldman's method will be that what we say about art is, by definition, ekphrasis.

Students will use The Feldman Method for the artworks taught in the unit as well as for the historically racist objects I share, although the objects will require a slightly modified method. Judgment of the racist objects will look different, as we will not be discussing whether we like or dislike these objects but instead focus on what we see and how they make us feel. This will help students begin to make connections between Jim Crow-era racist memorabilia and the purpose of their own original visual artwork.

### **Non-linguistic Representations**

Students will use mirrors, ultra-fine permanent markers, and Yupo® paper to create self-portraits from observation. On Yupo®, students will create a self-portrait that represents how they think society perceives them and a separate self-portrait that represents how they see themselves. Students will select words or phrases from the poems we read in class or from the original poems they've written to create a text "layer" on its own piece of vellum. The portraits will be overlaid and sandwiched together to create visual texture and



depth. To begin, students will learn contour and continuous contour drawing techniques with a variety of subjects including still-life and their classmates. I've selected Yupo® as our working surface for a number of reasons. Yupo® is translucent, allowing the other layers of the “sandwich” to show through. It is a synthetic, waterproof surface that allows for exploration of interesting processes. In particular, for a period of time, Yupo® allows permanent markers to be erased, smudged and blended. This will allow students to achieve value in their self-portraits.

Students will also use non-linguistic representation to respond to snapshots. Tasks will include creating sketches in response to a news article and re-imagining a historical event, among other possibilities.

## Classroom Activities

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I will describe three activities that this unit will include. One will detail how I'll implement the use of daily snapshots, one will show how I'll integrate the use of racist images with ekphrasis, and one will focus on the making of a visual art product.

### Snapshot Activities

We will start by reading “Gravity” by Angel Nafis together as a class. Then I will show students the photographs on which the poem is based - images from Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series*. This activity will be a great jumping-off point for discussions about microaggressions. The term “microaggression” was coined in 1970 by psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce to describe insults and dismissals he regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflict on African Americans.<sup>25</sup> Microaggressions are everyday verbal and non-verbal slights and insults that communicate negative or hostile messages to a marginalized group. They are often hidden messages that threaten or demean, like when a white woman clutches her purse when a black man walks past. As a class, we will unpack the meaning of microaggressions alongside the reading of the poem and analysis of Weems' photo series.

### Racist Imagery and Ekphrasis

Prior to the start of this unit, students will make collage haikus so they will have experience integrating visual art and poetry. Students will write as many of their favorite words as they can in three minutes. In the style of round robin, each will share one word they wrote. Next, I will select a simple poem to “dissect” - I will cut up each of the words individually. Students will work in pairs to reassemble the poem, as they see fit, using all of the words. Then, I will provide students with copies of the original poem. We will discuss the similarities and differences. Next, students will write three lines about the sky. I will encourage students to be imaginative and avoid clichés. Then, I will select one poem from the list I've mentioned to read and analyze in class together. This activity will provide students with an opportunity for guided practice of reading and understanding poetry. After we have annotated the poem and discussed it as a class, I will show students a compilation of racist images. The lesson will involve situating these objects in a historical context while also making connections to modern day racist imagery and stereotypes. Students will be encouraged to write down words or phrases from the presentation, or words that describe how they're feeling. Finally, students will brainstorm how they want to approach writing a poem about an image or object from the presentation.

## **Art Making**

Before starting their self-portrait, students will gain experience working from observation with a variety of media. Exercises will include using contour and blind contour to draw a still life as well as portraits of several of their classmates. Given examples of the plethora of ways that artists create self-portraits, students will make a plan for their own. The only requirements for the finished product are: Use of translucent paper, use of line and value, one layer must include a representation of how they see themselves, another layer must include a depiction of how they think society sees them, and a third layer can be the students' choice.

## **Appendix**

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### **Virginia Visual Arts Standards of Learning**

All.2 The student will make critical and reflective choices to create works of art.

Students will consider how society perceives them and how they see themselves as inspiration for an original work of art.

All.13 The student will examine and discuss social, political, economic, and cultural factors that influence works of art and design.

Students will examine social, political, and cultural themes explored by contemporary African American artists.

All.17 The student will use art criticism skills when analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating personal and professional works of art and design.

Using Visual Thinking Strategies and Feldman's Method of Criticism, students will build art criticism skills when looking at their own work and the work of exemplary artists.

All.20 The student will define and practice ethical behaviors when responding to works of art and design. Students will gain experience looking at contentious imagery, in this case, racist caricatures, and will respond appropriately and ethically.

All.24 The student will describe personal responses to aesthetic qualities found in works of art and design. Students will write ekphrastic poems based on their personal responses to racist objects.

### **Virginia U.S. History Standards of Learning**

VUS.8 The student will demonstrate knowledge of how the nation grew and changed from the end of Reconstruction through the early twentieth century by analyzing prejudice and discrimination during this time period, with emphasis on "Jim Crow". Students will demonstrate understanding of how Jim Crow era etiquette and laws influenced and perpetuated anti-black stereotypes that remain in place today.

### **Virginia English Standards of Learning**

9.4 The student will read, comprehend, and analyze a variety of fictional texts, including narratives, literary

nonfiction, poetry, and drama.

e) Analyze the cultural or social function of a literary text.

g) Explain the influence of historical context on the form, style, and point of view of a written work.

Students will read and analyze poems written by Black poets, focusing specifically on cultural/social function, style, and point of view.

10.6 The student will develop a variety of writing to persuade, interpret, analyze, and evaluate with an emphasis on exposition and analysis.

The student will elaborate ideas clearly through word choice and vivid description.

Students will write ekphrastic poems in response to their analysis, interpretation, and response to racist objects.

11.4

g) Interpret how the sound and imagery of poetry support the subject, mood, and theme, and appeal to the reader's senses.

Students will relate the imagery of poems to the reader. They will also relate visual imagery to the viewer. Students will compare and contrast the ways poets and visual artists do this.

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