



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2022 Volume III: The Social Struggles of Contemporary Black Art

"Do you see me?" "I see you." - Identity and Activism in Black Art

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Introduction and Rationale

Of the many fascinating texts included in Professor Ferguson's seminar, *Social Struggles of Contemporary Black Art*, the one most significant to me was a 2011 documentary, *AfriCOBRA: Art for the People*, about the AfriCOBRA group: an artists' collective founded in Chicago in 1968 to develop a positive and empowering Black aesthetic. The film combines new and archival photographs and interviews of the artists with images of their artworks, whose bright "cool-ade" (the artists' play on "cool" and "Kool-Aid": grape, lemon-lime, cherry, orange, raspberry) colors echo in the African prints in the artists' clothing or accessories. Quick cuts and the animation of words—either found on the artworks or quoted from the artist interviews—give the documentary a frenetic energy. As a review from the Studio Museum in Harlem (a central institution of Black art, founded, like the relatively modest AfriCOBRA group, in 1968) observes: "Lettering, which forms images in the paintings is animated by special effects and exaggerates the dynamism of the already electric canvases."¹ The documentary concludes with the animation of words spoken by AfriCOBRA artist Barbara Jones-Hogu that also appear earlier in the film: "Do you see me?" "I see you."

The question and answer resonate with the AfriCOBRA artists, who affirm: "Right," "Exactly," and "Beautiful." [2 Their work—like that of other artists in the curriculum unit—responds to the seeming absence in American art of both images of Black subjects and the work of Black artists. Just as the AfriCOBRA artists share their work within Black communities ("Do you see me?"), their work represents the members of those communities ("I see you."). In sum, Barbara Jones-Hogu's words vividly express the communal nature of the AfriCOBRA group's art, which—again—is made to be seen in the communities and homes of the people who inspire it rather than preserved in art museums (institutions that have only recently begun to include artists and curators of color). In the documentary, the direct address of call-and-response of Jones-Hogu's words welcomes everyone—regardless of race—to enjoy the celebratory art and join the group in its future-oriented, liberatory movement. The art is so "electric,"³ the group's ethos so positive, the artists—many of whom were in their seventies when interviewed for the documentary—so energetic and engaging, that I found myself thinking: "Yes! Where do I sign up?!" My response is notable, I think, for a few reasons: I am not Black. I am not an artist. And, most important for the curriculum unit, I had never heard of the AfriCOBRA artists (whose work has now continued for more than half a century) before Professor Ferguson's seminar.

During the seminar, in fact, I recognized only a single artist, Kehinde Wiley. Living and working in Richmond,

Virginia, I am familiar with Wiley's *Rumors of War* (2019), a bronze-on-limestone sculpture that stands outside the city's Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA). Wiley's first public artwork, *Rumors of War* shows a physically powerful and exultant Black soldier, who wears contemporary clothing (jeans and a hooded sweatshirt) rather than a uniform and rides a charging steed: This image of Black heroism confronts Richmond's racist legacy as the former Confederate capital and, until very recently, home to numerous monuments of the Confederacy's equestrian generals.⁴ Wiley's June 2016 visit to Richmond for the VMFA opening of his exhibition, "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic," inspired *Rumors of War*, as the artist responded to the "'dread and fear'" he experienced while walking amidst the city's commemorations of the Confederate cause.⁵ The sculpture shares its title with a 2005 series of paintings in which Wiley responds to the tradition of equestrian portraiture, replacing figures like military officers, nobles, and royals celebrating projects of conquest with Black sitters whom the artist encountered "on the street [. . .] in Harlem."⁶ [In 2020, national demonstrations against racial injustice—particularly police violence against Blacks—were concentrated, in Richmond, at the controversial monuments, resulting in their eventual removal.] In addition to *Rumors of War*, I am familiar with Wiley's 2006 painting, *Willem van Heythuysen*, which the VMFA also owns and exhibits. Like other paintings of Wiley's, the work critiques the art of European Old Masters by putting it in conversation with the Black men and women it excludes: *Willem van Heythuysen* is named for a Dutch merchant from Haarlem, the Netherlands whose 1625 portrait Wiley echoes in his representation of a contemporary Black male from Harlem, New York.⁷ The juxtaposition alerts the viewer to the lasting impact of European colonialism (and its corruption) on where and how we live today. Finally, like many others, I know Kehinde Wiley as the artist chosen by Former president Barack Obama to paint his portrait for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. At the portrait's 2018 unveiling, Obama explained that "he was drawn to Wiley's work because the artist challenges conventional views of power and privilege. 'He would take extraordinary care and precision and vision in recognizing the beauty, grace and dignity of people who are so often invisible in our lives.'"⁸ This making visible of the too-often invisible ("I see you.") is a theme that will recur throughout the unit, and it is the reason that—whether or not they choose to read further and employ the information or materials that follow—I urge teachers to find ways to include the artworks (listed in the "Content" section) in their instruction.

Before the seminar, several observations about myself and my students informed my interest in the development of a curriculum unit about contemporary Black art. While I am extremely verbal and spent spare time during adolescence either reading or talking on the (corded) telephone, twenty-first century learners most often engage the world by means of the visual and communicate with one another via apps like *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *TikTok*. In addition, although our district ELA curricula include texts that reflect our students' identities (my school's population is roughly 50% Black and 50% Hispanic, with increasing rates—currently about 37%—of English-language learners), students tend to struggle with the antiquated vocabulary and complex sentence structures of curricular texts like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* and *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*. There is also frustration from both students and some faculty members about subject matter (colonialism, slavery, racism, colorism, mental illness, etc.) that is not more positive, particularly given the range of traumatic experiences that are commonplace among our students: homelessness or housing insecurity, domestic violence, drug abuse, hunger, and—increasingly—migration. A study of Black art, as I will discuss below, enables students to engage relevant texts with immediate authority and analytical complexity while looking both toward the past—about which I would argue students should know more—and the future.

The curriculum unit has been designed for my 10th-grade ELA students and will serve as the mandatory, skill-and-content "crash course" with which the school year begins: Students will review academic vocabulary while practicing skills like annotation, persuasive and analytical writing, research, and oral presentation. We

will start with a week-long study of works from the artists of the AfriCOBRA movement (described above and, in more detail, in the unit’s “AfriCOBRA” section). During the second and third weeks, we will examine artworks from Kerry James Marshall and Hank Willis Thomas respectively. Works from additional artists (Faith Ringgold, Kehinde Wiley, Ester Hernandez, and Betye Saar) will supplement the selections from Marshall and Thomas. (See the relevant sections of the unit for information on these artists.) Students will examine the politics of celebratory representations of blackness as well as the ways that Black artists resist and undercut a dominant culture stemming from European and American colonialisms that would erase or malign Black identity. Students will consider the ways that personal style (clothing, hair, music, dance) can serve as forms of resistance. Finally, students will examine the ideological power of advertisements and the ways that some artists seek to disrupt that power through an engagement in advertising content and techniques.

Demographics and School Information

My school, George Wythe High School, is located in the Southside of Richmond, Virginia and is one of eight secondary schools in the Richmond Public Schools (RPS) district. George Wythe serves 1,300 students with 97% minority and 100% low-income enrollment. As noted above, 37% of students are English-Language learners, but the skills of these students vary significantly: Some students perform near or above the (below-average, according to state testing) levels of their native-speaking peers, while others, many of whom are recent immigrants, struggle with extremely limited English and/or literacy. Many George Wythe students work full-time or more, and the rates of absence and skipping are troubling. Many students, as noted above, have experienced a range of traumas. Violence and drug use at school are not uncommon. The school’s athletic and extra-curricular activities are extremely limited, especially when compared to the offerings at other district schools. Students want and deserve better.

Objectives

Virginia is among the states that have not adopted the Common-Core standards, and this curriculum unit will, as a result, follow the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs).

- 10.1 The student will make planned multimodal, interactive presentations collaboratively and individually.
- 10.2 The student will examine, analyze, and produce media messages.
- 10.3 The student will apply knowledge of word origins, derivations, and figurative language to extend vocabulary development in authentic texts.
- 10.4 The student will read, comprehend, and analyze literary texts of different cultures and eras.
- 10.5 The student will read and analyze a variety of nonfiction texts.
- 10.6 The student will write in a variety of forms to include persuasive, reflective, interpretive, and analytic, with an emphasis on persuasion and analysis.
- 10.7 The student will self- and peer-edit writing for capitalization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, paragraphing, and Standard English.

- 10.8 The student will find, evaluate, and select credible resources to create a research product.

Content

AfriCOBRA

—“Art for people and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable.”⁹

The first week of the unit will consider some of the artists of the AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) collective. The group is impressive for many reasons, one of which is its focus on art of and for the people. Founding member, Jeff Donaldson, writes: “Our guidelines are our people, the whole family of African People, the African family tree. And in this spirit of familyhood, we have carefully examined our roots and searched our branches for those visual qualities that are most expressive of our people/art.”¹⁰ Rejecting the culture of galleries and museums, the AfriCOBRA artists seek to bring art to people’s homes and communities, and, in the case of Jae Jarrell’s clothing, to their bodies. Here, we find an important coherence with other forms of Black resistance that create space for expression and representation in personal style, music, and dance.¹¹ The first public work of the artists who would found AfriCOBRA involved the communal production of a mural on a building’s exterior wall in a Black, South-Side, Chicago neighborhood; the mural, called the *Wall of Respect* (1967), celebrated contemporary and historical Black athletes, musicians, and activists. Interestingly, the artists’ approach to the mural was modelled on that of Jazz musicians who improvise spontaneously on a theme while the rhythm section maintains the tempo.¹² [Improvisation, in fact, has been identified as an important element of all forms of Black art, linking it to its roots in African art and enabling it to accommodate “impermanence and change” in contrast to a sterile Western art that strives for permanence.¹³] The mural was also innovative in its combination of mounted photographs and painting.¹⁴ The future AfriCOBRA artists agreed that the work had been successful in its communal production, but more coherent political and aesthetic standards would develop the following year. With African-inspired, “cool-ade” colors, joyful representations of Black men and women, collage and craft techniques as well as reproducible posters (Jeff Donaldson asserts that “We want *everyone* to have some,”¹⁵ [emphasis mine]), AfriCOBRA found its aesthetic and established a productive community of artistic inspiration. This community included both men and women, and each artist sought to uplift the others. As founding AfriCOBRA member, Napoleon Jones-Henderson, stated during a 2010 interview, “Each one of us, individually, are good at what we do. But collectively, we’re gooder. You know. So, as a collective, we’re gooder than we are as individuals.”¹⁶

Works to study include: Wadsworth Jarrell (*Home to a Giant, Boss Couple, Black Family, I Am Better [. . .] and They Know It, Revolutionary*), Jeff Donaldson (*Victory in the Valley of Esu, Soweto/So We Too, Stone Singer*), Jae Jarrell (*Urban Wall Suit, Revolutionary Suit*), and Gerald Williams (*Malcolm, I Am Somebody*). Within these works, we see the combination of image and text which the artists—observing the effect in poster and billboard advertisements—used to communicate their message. We also see the celebration of Black families: Wadsworth Jarrell, in fact, painted himself and the members of his nuclear family in *Boss Couple* and *Black Family*. We see African colors and patterns as well as figures from the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Angela Davis). More historical figures, like Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman, also appear, and it is here that I see the opportunity to include instruction on historical Black activism. In sum, we find the compelling connection of past, present, and future that is integral to the

group's overtly political aesthetic.

Readings will include poems by Amiri Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, a letter from Frederick Douglas to Harriet Tubman, and excerpts from chapters one and seven of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*.

Kerry James Marshall, Faith Ringgold, and Kehinde Wiley

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.¹⁷

The second week of the unit will consider the art of Kerry James Marshall, Faith Ringgold, and Kehinde Wiley and examine the artists' expressions of blackness as well as their subversive responses to European art. Kerry James Marshall is notable for the breadth of art historical knowledge that informs his work as well as the wealth of artistic skill acquired during his long career: The 2016-17 exhibition, Kerry James Marshall: Mastry, celebrated thirty-five years of Marshall's work. Born in Birmingham Alabama in 1955, Marshall moved west to Los Angeles with his family at the age of seven, part of the final wave of the Great Migration of Blacks leaving the South in the wake of the Civil War.¹⁸ Though escaping the extreme violence against Blacks of the Civil-Rights-Era South, Marshall and his family arrived in Los Angeles in time to witness the Watts riots of 1965.¹⁹ Years later, Marshall, then a young art student, attended David Driskell's 1976 exhibition for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750-1950."²⁰ The exhibition was pivotal to Marshall and his contemporaries—as well as younger artists, who would see the images in the exhibition book (1976)—for its establishment of a previously unacknowledged—and, therefore, unseen—history of Black art in the United States.²¹ This play between visibility and invisibility would become a central theme for Marshall, who was powerfully influenced by Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* (1952): "Ellison's 'description . . . of the condition of invisibility literally changed everything for me. What I was reading there, the notion of being and not-being, the simultaneity of presence and absence, was exactly what I had been trying to get at in my artwork."²² Marshall would subsequently paint *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self* (1980), expressing the invisibility of the Black artist while also celebrating the beauty of black as a rich and complex color rather than any absence of color.²³ Marshall includes only Black subjects in his artworks, and they are consistently painted in very dark ("unequivocally black . . . emphatically black"²⁴) shades. Marshall would eventually develop seven kinds of black for the skin tone of his subjects, which photographer and art-historian, Teju Cole, describes as, "Black, black, black, black, black, black, black. Seven different kinds, an infinity."²⁵

Faith Ringgold—a child of the Great Depression, born in Harlem in 1930—had a similar interest in the color black while producing her Black-Light series of the 1960s. In this series, Ringgold rejects representations of light that use the color white, which she associates with Western culture, and experiments with darker colors while exploring African influences: "Black art [. . .] must use its own color black to create its own light, since that color is the most immediate black truth."²⁶ Ringgold, however, over the course of a career even longer

than Marshall's—she is twenty-five years his senior—has produced art in diverse styles using varying materials and forms (among them, painting, quilting, soft sculpture, performance, and even a series of children's books), and I am most interested in her French Collection of story quilts in which she combines painting, quilted borders, and written narratives in a creative response to the absence of Black, women artists in Paris of the 1920s. I particularly enjoy *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1991), in which Ringgold contrasts the artistic isolation of Vincent van Gogh, whom she sets in a corner of the artwork, with a quilting group of eight Black women, each an important American activist. Where van Gogh stands alone, the women enjoy a rich and productive community. Ringgold's experiences during art school are instructive: Though her teachers criticized the colors of her figures as "exotic," they were unable to show her how to mix paints to represent Black skin.²⁷ Ringgold left art school "doing French Impressionist flowers and trees" in her attempt to produce something "acceptable" to her teachers.²⁸ Ringgold later celebrated her liberation from limiting influences and the discovery of her own voice. Interestingly, Ringgold's feminism stemmed from her experiences of exclusion from the same Black male artists who benefitted from her organization of demonstrations for museum access.²⁹

Kehinde Wiley, born in Los Angeles in 1977, grew up in poverty. Like Kerry James Marshall, however—whom he considers an important influence—Wiley benefitted from extracurricular art classes, won scholarships for art education, and was awarded a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Like Marshall, Wiley produces enormous, majestic canvases that engage with the long history of European art. As in earlier artworks (for example, *Willem van Heythuysen* and the paintings of the Rumors of War series described in the "Introduction and Rationale" above), Wiley's Trickster series shows Black subjects replacing the privileged subjects of traditional European portraits. In the Trickster series, however, Wiley paints fellow Black artists rather than unnamed models selected at random. I am especially interested in Wiley's portrait of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, in which the violence of hunting is emphasized by the abundant presence of dead game absent from the 1763 painting, *Jacob Morland of Capplethwaite*, that the portrait references. We will also, however, consider Wiley's portraits of Kerry James Marshall and Hank Willis Thomas.

Works to study include: Kerry James Marshall (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*; *Portrait of the Artist and a Vacuum*; selections from the Garden Project and Souvenir series; *De Style*; *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture*), Faith Ringgold (*Dancing at the Louvre*, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, and *Mona Lisa and Little Girls*), and Kehinde Wiley (selections from his Trickster exhibition).

Readings will include the "Prologue" of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, an excerpt from James Baldwin's *Notes from a Native Son*, and poems by Claude McKay and Maya Angelou.

The third week of the unit will consider the work of photographer and conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas, as well as the ideological content of advertising. Thomas, born in 1976 in Plainfield, New Jersey, and living and working in Brooklyn, New York, focused much of his early work on advertising photographs. Interestingly, Thomas, who has degrees in Photography, Africana Studies, and Visual Criticism, understands photography to be a "lie," describing his under-graduate work as an attempt to "comment on the lie that is photography."³⁰ Thomas adds that, although photographs are frequently perceived to be evidentiary documents, they capture only a fraction of a second of an extremely limited perspective (determined by the camera's framing) of a further limited—two-dimensional—image.³¹ Thomas elsewhere observes: "My work is about framing and context. More specifically, I am fascinated with how history and culture are framed, who is doing the framing, and how these factors affect our interpretation of reality."³² Those with the power to direct the composition of visual images, then, determine the narratives by means of which we understand the world. Finally, Thomas's

work considers the ways that these narratives “shape our notion of who counts in society.”³³ I am looking forward to sharing some of the artworks from Thomas’s B(r)anded Series with students as I expect the works (with their slick images of professional athletes and references to popular brands like Nike) to appeal to students while the thematic focus on the commodification of Black, male bodies and the connection of that commodification to the legacy of slavery will elicit interesting and challenging ideas and debate. Later, we will consider the ways that Ester Hernandez and Betye Saar subvert brand mascots in *Sun Mad* and the *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* respectively.

Works to study include: Hank Willis Thomas (*Branded Head*, *Cotton Bowl*, *I Am. Amen.*, *Absolut No Return*, *Absolut Reality*, *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, and selections from *Punctum*), Ester Hernandez (*Sun Mad*), and Betye Saar (*Liberation of Aunt Jemima*).

Additional texts will include “Advertising and Youth” from *JAMA—Pediatrics* and John Green’s “Evaluating Photos & Videos: Crash Course Navigating Digital Information #7.”

Classroom Activities

- Students will view and discuss slide presentations of artwork photographs. A recent district training on “Engaging in Visual Literacy” emphasized the importance of asking just two questions when eliciting student responses to artworks: First: “What do you see?” Second: “What makes you say that?” The instructor directs these questions to a series of students without evaluating the responses provided or sharing her own perspective. Students, therefore, are able to practice analytical thinking in a low-risk environment, uninfluenced by the instructors’ interpretations. Professor Ferguson employed a similar approach during our seminar meetings, and—given my own strong impulse to seek the confirmation of a “correct” answer (which Professor Ferguson admirably resisted)—I appreciated the opportunity to practice a productive method that encourages both student ownership of learning and student-led discussion.
- Students will read brief texts or view brief videos to provide context for the art/artist under discussion. Students, for example, will view an excerpt of the AfriCOBRA documentary, *AfriCOBRA: Art for the People* (described in the “Introduction and Rationale” above), after discussing samples of the group’s work. Students will also view an excerpt from an episode, “Sunflowers by Vincent van Gogh,” of a BBC television series, *The World’s Greatest Paintings*, in order to provide context for Faith Ringgold’s representation of van Gogh in her *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*. The BBC’s “Sunflowers by Vincent van Gogh” emphasizes van Gogh’s loneliness and isolation at Arles, which were interrupted only briefly by the artist’s anticipation of a visit from fellow-artist, Paul Gauguin: Several paintings of sunflowers were rapidly produced by van Gogh in a burst of creative power in order to decorate his guest’s bedroom. The artist’s hopes for artistic community were not realized, however, and van Gogh would die, a victim of suicide, within two years. Having students scan the titles of the 2020 series’ ten episodes will also serve to swiftly confirm the bias in institutional art: All ten paintings were produced by European men. Although the paintings were selected by the series presenter, Andrew Marr, no one at the BBC appears to have objected to the series title (“World’s”?). Students will write exit tickets in which they demonstrate their comprehension of the historical, cultural, and political contexts considered during class.
- Each week, students will have the opportunity to create an artwork inspired by the course content.

Students will, for example, use *Canva* (a graphic-design app with free accounts for teachers), to digitally create an AfriCOBRA-style poster with images, words, and even colors chosen by them. Students will next design a collage on a topic of their choice. Whether produced virtually or using school/student-provided supplies, students will make choices about what kinds of artifacts to include, when and how to transform them, and how best to organize them into an effective composition. Finally, students will choose an advertising image (a print magazine ad, product packaging, or the digital download of an advertising image, etc.) to first analyze (see assignment below) and then creatively subvert in the manner of Thomas, Hernandez, and/or Saar. After each of the three creative assignments, students will be required to complete a *Google Doc* in which they will assess their creative choices and the reasons behind them—another opportunity to engage in writing and critical thinking. I will consult a colleague from my school’s art department for guidance on appropriate scaffolding for the creative assignments.

- Final Project: Virtual Art Show Curation and Presentation. I will introduce the final project by means of a class reading and discussion of a 2020 article about major museums’ invitations to urban teens to guest curate shows in order to both increase the museums’ relevance to young people and introduce those young people to museum careers.³⁴ The article is available on *Newse/a*, and I have taught it before. Pairs of students will curate a virtual art show of 12-15 artworks (students may include up to 5 works previously discussed in class and up to 2 of either their own or a classmate’s creative projects). Students will choose the themes for their respective shows and will write Exhibition Notes to accompany class presentations of their selected images. Students will be encouraged to be creative in the sourcing of their selections but will also be provided with resources like the Digital Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (<https://www.artic.edu/archival-collections/explore-the-collection>). Again, I will be consulting my colleague in the art department for scaffolding suggestions and guidance.

Ad Analysis Assignment

Note: This assignment is preceded by a lesson on Robert Scholes’s analysis of a 1988 Budweiser commercial.³⁵ Students study notes on Scholes’s argument and analysis—which are reviewed very briefly below—and view and discuss the commercial. The class then views and discusses recent print ads together, discussing the questions suggested below, before students independently write their analysis of the ad that they will later transform in an art project.

In his essay, Scholes argues that the texts of popular culture (for example, a 1988 Budweiser television commercial) are just as important—if not far more important—to contemporary cultural identity as the “great books” (of thinkers like Aeschylus and Sophocles) favored by conservative critics like William Bennett and E. D. Hirsch.³⁶ Scholes further argues that the ability to analyze cultural texts critically (as he analyzes the Budweiser commercial, uncovering its dependence on the myth of America as a land of opportunity where talent is more important to success than race or class) is essential to the resistance of potentially harmful ideologies.³⁷

1. Using your laptops, product packaging, or one of the magazines provided, please select a print advertisement to analyze in the manner that Scholes analyzes the Budweiser advertisement. The more narrative (or story) included in or implied by the images in the advertisement, the more content you will have to analyze.
2. Write a couple of paragraphs in which you describe and analyze the advertisement. It may help to consider the following:
 - What is the **CONTEXT** of the advertisement?

- In which magazine or on which internet site did the ad appear? (If product packaging, where did you purchase the product? Who consumes it, and why?) What assumptions can you make about the readers of the magazine or visitors to the site? What, for example, is the subject of the magazine/site? Who is interested in this subject? What product or service is being advertised? Who would want that product or service? Why?
- What images are used to influence you, the viewer?
 - Describe any manipulation you perceive. Did you find yourself persuaded or were you able to resist what Scholes describes as the “pleasure of the text”?
- What—if anything—other than the product is being *sold*?
 - Remember Scholes’s argument that the Budweiser advertisement *sells* not only beer but the myth of America as a meritocracy and “land of the free.”
- You may also find it helpful to consider the Center for Media Literacy’s “5 Key Questions of Media Literacy”:
 - Who created this message?
 - What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
 - How might different people understand this message differently?
 - What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
 - Why is this message being communicated? (What does the advertiser want *you* to do?)

Appendix for Implementing District Standards

English SOL 10.1

The student will make planned multimodal, interactive presentations collaboratively and individually.

For the unit’s final project, pairs of students will curate digital art exhibitions, choosing the themes for their respective shows, researching the art and artists they include, and writing Exhibition Notes to accompany class presentations of their selected images.

English SOL 10.2

The student will examine, analyze, and produce media messages.

Students will write an analysis of an advertisement and then alter the advertisement to subvert its ideological content.

English SOL 10.4

The student will read, comprehend, and analyze literary texts of different cultures and eras.

Students will read, discuss, and write about poems and excerpts from autobiographies and novels.

Critical Context

The paragraphs below provide contextual information for the theories on race, aesthetic debates, and political history that inform the unit content as well as consideration of the social-emotional relevance of the unit to students.

In her introduction to *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), feminist theorist, bell hooks articulates the theory behind dominant and oppressive representations of blackness:

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people. Long before white supremacists ever reached the shores of what we now call the United States, they constructed images of blackness and black people to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave. From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination.³⁸

Constructing blackness as inferior, then, is essential to the establishment and continuation of a society that depends on the enslavement and/or economic exploitation of disempowered groups to function. Escape from a disabling dominant ideology requires the replacement of self-hatred with love: “Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.”³⁹ The idea is not a new one, but hooks expresses her shock at the “fascination [. . .] with black self-hatred”⁴⁰ she sees regardless of race and finds it to be a measure of the continuing power of white supremacy. Finally, despite the efforts of Civil Rights and Black Power movements to celebrate Black identities, hooks finds that white supremacist ideology in mass media and public education as well as the privileging of material success over political protest have obscured efforts to establish alternate Black identities.⁴¹

Thirty years after the publication of hooks’s *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, I struggle to draw conclusions about challenges to institutional racism, particularly given social media and the kinds of communication, activism, and self-representation they do and do not foster. Attempting to reflect on internalized racism, I first recall the Clarks’ “Doll Test,” which I have discussed with juniors reading excerpts from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Students viewed a CNN video about the network’s 2010, modified reenactment of studies conducted by Drs. Kenneth B. and Mamie P. Clark during the 1940s: Though the bias of children (regardless of race) toward lighter skin was less consistent and extreme in 2010 than in the 1940s, it continued to dominate.⁴² The same bias was evident in a more recent, small, qualitative study of the behaviors of Black preschool girls at play conducted by researchers Toni D. Sturdivant and Iliana Alanis and published in 2020.⁴³ The provocative title of Sturdivant and Alanis’s article—“‘I’m Gonna Cook My Baby in a Pot’: Young Black Girls’ Racial Preferences and Play Behavior”—begins with a small child’s statement about one of the consistently-rejected-or-abused Black dolls. Sturdivant and Alanis conclude that “anti-bias adult intervention” during early-childhood education is essential to the disruption of racism (internalized or interpersonal) that small children both perceive and communicate.⁴⁴ The researchers’ literature review

includes discussion of the occurrences of racial “awareness,” “identification,” and “preference” between infancy and age three years; dozens of studies over decades documenting pro-White bias in Black children; and the impact of negative “racial identity development” on the subsequent academic success and mental health of Black children.⁴⁵ Interestingly, although the results of the Clarks’ research had been cited in *Brown v. the Board of Education* as evidence of the consequences of segregation, Sturdivant and Alanis’s study was conducted at a racially and culturally diverse school, showing the persistent presence of anti-Black bias regardless of setting;⁴⁶ Sturdivant concludes that children require overt and positive messages about racial difference at home, in their communities, and at school—the mere presence of diversity in school books an inadequate intervention.⁴⁷ In conclusion, I borrow words spoken by Dr. Kenneth B. Clark during a 1995 *New York Times* interview that were reprinted in his 2005 obituary: “‘There’s no question that there have been changes’ he said then. ‘They are not as deep as they appear to be.’”⁴⁸

Aesthetic and Political Theories of Black Art and the Black Arts Movement

In an address to a group of Black writers on March 1, 1959 at a conference organized by the American Society of African Culture, Lorraine Hansberry situates the work of Black writers in a deliberately international and historical context: Hansberry opens and closes her essay with references to Irish dramatist, Sean O’Casey, and uses a quotation from James Baldwin while describing the work of Tennessee Williams. Further, Hansberry claims that Black Americans (Hansberry, following the conventions of the time, writes “American Negroes”) and Africans are “inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever.”⁴⁹ Like other artist-activists of the period, Hansberry recognizes the need to “reclaim the past if we would claim the future”⁵⁰ and understands art in communal terms: “Isolation,” is the “foremost enemy”⁵¹ of Black intellectuals, and the nature of art is inescapably social. Just a few years before Hansberry’s talk, the first international conference of Black writers and artists met in Paris to determine common goals given the cultural changes occurring in the wake of African decolonization and the growth of mass media.⁵² European culture was identified as problematically “individualistic”⁵³ and alienating and would have to be replaced by a socially conscious, world culture of all peoples—regardless of technological advancement—serving “political action” while protecting “freedom of expression.”⁵⁴

In both Hansberry’s talk and the earlier *Presence Africaine* report, we find ideas consistent with those of Black Arts Movement (BAM) thinkers like Amiri Baraka (born LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, who—we will see below—influenced the aesthetic and ideology of the AfriCOBRA group. In his 1968 essay on “The Black Arts Movement,” Neal describes it as “radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.”⁵⁵ The movement’s art—rather than voicing a protest aimed at White spectators—“speaks directly to Black people”; the movement’s artists seek a “Black aesthetic” with cultural values to replace those of a sterile and oppressive Western one.⁵⁶ In establishing a Black aesthetic, both Neal and Baraka saw the work of the BAM as “nation building.”⁵⁷ Baraka writes: “‘The purpose of our writing is to create the nation.’”⁵⁸ [Jeff Donaldson—AfriCOBRA founder and important artist, critic, and teacher—alludes to Baraka’s poem, “It’s Nation Time,” in his “AfriCOBRA Manifesto,”⁵⁹ even addressing the poet directly by name: “And yes, Imamu, it’s Nation Time.”⁶⁰ Forty years later, the words permeate interviews of the AfriCOBRA artists.⁶¹] Where the Black Power movement sought political liberation, the BAM sought “cultural and spiritual liberation.”⁶² The movement, Neal argues, is also an “ethical” one: “Ethical, that is, from the point of view of the oppressed. And much of the oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American cultural sensibility.”⁶³ Here, we again see an overt pairing of Black Americans and a global community of colonized peoples. Neal returns to this pairing in his essay’s conclusion: “Afro-American life and

history is full of creative possibilities, and the movement is just beginning to perceive them. Just beginning to understand that the most meaningful statements about the nature of Western society must come from the Third World of which Black America is a part.”⁶⁴

Though I have thus far described ideas either of or consistent with the Black Arts Movement, it is important to acknowledge that many opposing perspectives were articulated by Black artists and critics during the impassioned debates on Black art of the 1960s and 1970s. Martin Kilson, for example, did not believe in the existence of a Black aesthetic: He found aesthetics and ideology to be incompatible and equated attempts to join them with the state-sponsored propaganda of Communists and Fascists.⁶⁵ For Kilson, the sole purpose of art was to engage the viewer’s “contemplation.”⁶⁶ Similarly, David Driskell argued that artists who included social commentary or political activism in their works had confused ethical concerns with aesthetic ones.⁶⁷ For Driskell, a Black aesthetic could exist, but it would have to be one that attended solely to the artwork’s “formal organization” and its capacity to fascinate the viewer.⁶⁸ The “Revolutionary Art” of Black Panther Minister of Culture and lead newspaper illustrator Emory Douglas, on the other hand, served overt political action both in its attack of “tyrants” and its modeling of forms of resistance.⁶⁹ Douglas’s illustrations for *The Black Panther* newspaper were deliberately designed to provide “visual instructions” for revolutionary acts while also documenting the circumstances that warranted those acts.⁷⁰ Though his illustrations of revolutionary Black women, in particular, were powerful and empowering, Douglas rejected the kinds of “positive” images valued by the AfriCOBRA group.⁷¹ In contrast, Frank Bowling’s understanding of Black art focused more on method, including the “ability [. . .] to rearrange found things.”⁷² Meaning, Bowling argued, should be covert and layered, with varying messages for mainstream (White) and Black viewers.⁷³ As the BAM declined in the mid-1970s, with Baraka and other leaders moving from Nationalism to Marxism while feminist and queer theorists disrupted the notion of a singular “Black” identity, many artists moved toward more covert content and an increasing engagement with the spiritual or magical.⁷⁴ The AfriCOBRA artists, however, maintained their group’s aesthetic and ideology for decades, even as they experimented with new materials and forms. As Jae Jarrell, remarked in a 2010 interview, “Well, once you in AfriCOBRA, you’re always in AfriCOBRA.”⁷⁵ An argument for the group’s continuing relevance—with its focus on communities (both local and international), positivity, and an empowering Black identity engaged with its past and intentional about its future—is persuasive.

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