



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

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## **Things Fall Apart: Piecing it all Back Together Using Contemporary Black Art**

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“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity ... When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

### **Introduction**

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Every year, I teach *Things Fall Apart* to sophomores in my World Literature-centered English class. Every year, I see my students struggle with the content in terms of just familiarizing themselves with culture they are not familiar with. The names of the characters, the use of Ibo language and Ibo proverbs, the structure of the Ibo society are all foreign to them. Students may not quite agree with Okonkwo or his tribe's customs and culture, but they commit to trying to understand this new perspective. Through this commitment of understanding a new world, they struggle and feel uncomfortable; however, they find their bearings and come to sympathize with certain characters and with Umuofian society. And every year, I see my students get to the end of the book, experiencing the irony of spending all this time trying to understand this new world -- feeling every bit of the productive struggle-- only to have their hard work completely invalidated through the District Commissioner deciding that he “could almost write a whole chapter on [Okonkwo]. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.”<sup>1</sup> Shocked (just a paragraph!) and angry (primitive tribe!), students finally understand the feelings of the colonized, and this reinforces the idea that history is always written by the victors and that single stories exist. Their dissatisfaction is palpable as they realize their journey into understanding the world of Umuofia and Okonkwo’s character has been overtaken by colonizers.

After many years of teaching this novel and seeing their frustrations, I want to introduce contemporary Black art to help combat this frustration -- to show students how artists are reclaiming/ rethinking traditional, colonial history or at least are commenting on postcolonial frustrations. In 1958, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* to show that “African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans...Their societies

were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty...they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity.”<sup>2</sup> Modern artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Yinka Shonibare, and Hew Locke are doing a similar service as Achebe did with his novel -- dispelling narratives written by colonizers or white oppressors and reframing perspective to give power to the oppressed.

## Teaching Situation and Rationale

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I teach at a magnet school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It has a diverse student body, ranging from those students who help support themselves and their families to those who are extremely wealthy. Specifically speaking, at Booker T. Washington High School, our current student body is 35% African American, 36% Caucasian, 3% Asian, 13% Hispanic, 9% Multi-Race, and 4% American Indian, with 38% of our population on free and reduced lunch. My classroom reflects this diversity. Also, the two classes I teach, Pre-AP English II IB-MYP (focus on World Literature) and AP Language and Composition (focus on American Literature), have students with ranging abilities, so it is important that I differentiate and scaffold my instruction, as well as build in some flexibility for those students who need it. This unit will be written for my Pre-AP English II IB-MYP classes, but I feel like the information and texts will be useful for other grade levels as well.

Before I start *Things Fall Apart*, I show Chiamanda Adichie’s *TedTalk* “The Danger of a Single Story.” In this talk, Adichie discusses how important it is to hear many different stories about a particular place, person, or history to truly understand that place, person, or history.<sup>3</sup> She also points out that stories have power and who controls those stories can control people and their opinions. By starting off with this, students are armed with the importance of looking at different points of view. After this discussion about the danger of a single story, I then introduce the novel and the historical context of imperialism and colonization, explaining that we are going to be reading a story from the viewpoint of the colonized. In many cases, this novel is usually the first exposure students have to African Literature since most of their literature education has been Eurocentric. This novel serves as a nice bridge from that typical Eurocentric educational setting to a broader, more World Literature-focused classroom that aims to expand students’ knowledge and experience, focusing on different global perspectives, diversifying the often used canonical teachings of a Western education. In an article from *Postcolonial Studies*, Emad Mirmotahari discusses how “*Things Fall Apart* brings the English canon and African literature into dialogue.”<sup>4</sup> Purposefully juxtaposing the stories of the colonizer and the colonized will, hopefully, push students to seek out works outside of the typically taught Western canon, thereby expanding their worldviews.

## Importance of Using Contemporary Black Art in the ELA Classroom

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In addition to using *Things Fall Apart* as the text for this unit, I will be connecting the novel to contemporary Black visual art, inviting another conversation to take place. Through this particular exchange, I want students to see how contemporary Black artists are combating the dominant narrative that has been told throughout history. This echoes Adichie’s point in “The Danger of a Single Story.” The visual world is where students live - they are constantly posting or consuming images while on social media. However, when my students think of

art or art history, many will picture work that does not mirror them or the issues they are concerned about. They will think about the Eurocentric artwork they view in museums or have been shown in an art class. By presenting to students Black artists who deviate from the whitewashed world, you can show students that art can fill in the absence of Blackness in history and literature. The artists chosen for this particular unit do what we as readers of *Things Fall Apart* cannot do -- create a proper response to the colonizer and give the voice back to the oppressed. This will bring some optimism and a sense of empowerment for my students.

In a world where there is much debate and division concerning teaching - what you teach and how you teach it - it is more important than ever to continue to challenge the idea that “Western thought [emerges] from the genius of those great, dead, White male Europeans.”<sup>5</sup> By bringing in contemporary Black art and literature in my classroom, we can begin to “transform the curriculum by not only highlighting the complicity of Eurocentric knowledge in producing the racist world, but by giving a platform to the knowledge produced by those who are a victim of it. To decolonise the curriculum, the first step is to listen to those who have fought, and continue to fight, for liberation.”<sup>6</sup> By using Black contemporary art in the classroom paired with Black literature, students will be listening to stories and perspectives they are rarely shown.

## Unit Content

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### Guiding Questions

What is the danger of a single story? How can visual art help students understand themes in a text?

### ***Things Fall Apart* Cultural Context**

Before I introduce the main focus of this unit, which will be the contemporary Black artwork in conversation with a novel, I want to briefly provide content and context about *Things Fall Apart*. Many teachers who read this unit will have either already taught the novel, or if they are new to teaching it, there are a variety of resources out there to help them with context and ideas to approach the teaching of it.

However, I want to spend some time on some cultural context that will help students navigate this text, which will yield the best results for the pairing of the artwork chosen for this unit. At the beginning of this novel, students have strong, usually angry, feelings centered around Okonkwo, especially centering around his extreme personality, his killing of Ikemefuna, and his treatment of his wives. Juxtaposing Achebe’s description of culture and characterization against the European colonizers will need to be carefully discussed and laid out, so students understand Achebe’s themes. When students finish the novel, it is imperative that as a class you discuss Achebe’s purpose for writing the novel which should touch upon his desire to depict pre-colonial Ibo society and have readers understand his culture’s value which was clearly diminished and destroyed by colonialism. Have students write this down in their notes, as this will connect to the art analysis in this unit.

### **The Ibo Balance of Masculine and Feminine**

According to Tanue Ojaide’s “African Literature and Its Context: Teaching Teachers of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*,” “Okonkwo...is presented as not the representative Ibo; rather as an extreme.”<sup>7</sup> He is hypermasculine, concerned with proving to his tribe that he is the opposite of his failure father. What needs to be pointed out to students is that the Ibo value a balance between the masculine and the feminine. If students

look critically at the society, they will find priests serve Ani, the Earth goddess, and Chielo, a priestess, serves a god. Being too masculine, like Okonkwo, or too feminine, like Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is what gets you in trouble. It also shows how Okonkwo's mother's land becomes his refuge when he is exiled for his feminine crime of accidentally killing a member of his tribe --- yes, there is negative connotation of the feminine crime, yet what absolves the crime is his feminine homeland, showing the importance of balance between the feminine and masculine. This subject of masculinity will come into play as well when students are introduced to the works of Kehinde Wiley, Yinka Shonibare, and Hew Locke.

### **Cultural Context for the Sacrificial Killing of Ikemefuna**

Oftentimes, students don't understand the sacrificial killing of Ikemefuna, and, frankly, it is hard to understand from a modern American perspective. Ojaide explains how in "a communal society like Umoufia the overall well-being of the group supersedes the rights of an individual."<sup>8</sup> So, the sacrifice of Ikemefuna was the better of two evils, saving hundreds of lives from two warring communities. Also, it is important to understand that it was customary in most African societies that "the first son is supposed to bury his father and it is shameful and disgraceful for a father to lose his first son."<sup>9</sup> This is why Ikemefuna was taken in the first place rather than his guilty father. What was discouraged by the Ibo tribe was "Okonkwo's participation in the sacrifice."<sup>10</sup> By explaining these cultural practices, students will understand that the Ibo were trying to find balance and do what was right by both tribes, avoiding a bloodfest and just sacrificing one. Okonkwo's decision of delivering Ikemefuna's final blow is his overcompensating masculine ego. The idea behind communities vs. individuals and the idea of justice both could also be brought up in the artwork shown at the end of this unit.

### **Domestic Abuse as a Function of Hypermasculinity and Hubris**

Okonkwo beats his wives often. My students hate him for this, but again, students shouldn't confuse Okonkwo with the entirety of the Ibo. Okonkwo beats his wives because of his rash and hot-headed behavior -- not because the Ibo say it is ok.<sup>11</sup> Make sure to point out to students that it is the elders of the tribe that punish Udo when he is brought before them for beating his wife. This anger management problem Okonkwo has is what brings his downfall. Hypermasculinity and ego will be another focus of our discussion about the Black art pieces examined after we finish reading the novel.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses Ibo Traditional Practices**

Students also show concern about certain traditional/ religious practices of the Ibo tribe which warrant some explaining. Ojaide describes how "Achebe gives a balanced portrayal of traditional and precolonial Africa...[presenting] the strengths and weaknesses of the culture"<sup>12</sup> (173). Ojaide lists examples of strengths by first mentioning how in Ibo society, a person is judged by their accomplishments, not their family. We see this with Okonkwo rising in the ranks of society, with his titles, land, and yams, despite his father being a disgrace in the Ibo tribe. They also celebrate the Week of Peace, respect their elders, and conduct investigations into spouses before marriage as it is a hallowed tradition. A government and court system exist, consisting of elders and high-ranking men and women (titled men, priests, and priestesses) -- and nobody is above the law. Weaknesses of Ibo traditional practices include the *osu*, the outcasts of society who can only live in one part of the village and can never marry. They are also not allowed to cut their hair- an outward sign of their exclusion from their society. Ibo society also believed that twins were bad omens sent by the gods, so they were thrown out in the Evil Forest to die. These weaknesses are eventually used by the colonizer to divide the Ibo society because there are characters like Nwoye, Enoch, and Obierika who are beginning to question some of these traditions that seem unfair. Strengths and weaknesses permeate every culture and it

is important to address these. We will see Wiley, Shonibare, and Locke engage in this discussion about our own culture and history in their works.

### **Division of the Novel**

When they get to the end of the novel, it is important to point out to students that “Achebe’s novel neatly corresponds to delineated historical periods. The first part of the novel is the longest because Achebe uses this space to document pre-colonial Ibo society in great detail. The second and third parts are shorter because they simulate both the relative brevity of the colonial process and its recency as a historical development.”<sup>13</sup> This division also helps to aid in the irony and frustration at the end of the novel. The first part is where we learn all about Okonkwo and the complexities of the Ibo Tribe and where most of our time is spent -- putting in the hard work to understand the characters and culture. After all that hard work, the colonial invasion begins, and we see all of our efforts get squashed to eventually be minimized by the District Commissioner. We now empathize with the shrinking of their history and diminishing of their culture.

### **Introducing the Use of Contemporary Black Art**

After reading the novel and discussing the ending, teachers will want to explain why they are bringing in the use of contemporary Black art. Inevitably, students are frustrated by the ending, but after discussions understand Achebe’s purpose of shedding light on the importance of telling the story of the colonized and the oppressed. Achebe was fighting against the single story in 1958, and artists and writers continue to fight today. By bringing in artists Kehinde Wiley, Yinka Shonibare, and Hew Locke, students will be able to see how Black artists continue to tell their stories to empower their communities and give voice to their struggles --- doing the important work of disassembling a narrative that is incomplete, untrue, and written by the victor. Make sure to let students know that this study of artwork will be connected to the final project of the unit.

With each artist, I would give students notes on their background and personal history. You could divide the class into groups that would work with one artist and then present their findings to the class, or you can have students work in pairs or individually while you display each work on a smartboard. I would definitely try to show the works by Wiley and Shonibare with their original artwork inspiration side by side. A teacher could make this a week-long dive into the artwork or scale it down to a few block days -- do what makes sense for your teaching situation. Since my students are sophomores, I would probably walk them through the process with Wiley during one class period, then on our 90-minute block day, give them Shonibare and Locke to do on their own or in small groups.

### **Kehinde Wiley and Works to Examine**

Kehinde Wiley is an artist who paints portraits of Black and Brown people in positions of power. He is a socially relevant painter that students may have already encountered, since his work was featured on a popular show *Empire*, and he was the first Black artist to paint a portrait of a president -- Barack Obama. Giving students background information on the painter himself, and maybe making these connections before showing the artwork chosen, would allow them to feel more comfortable with analyzing the paintings. We will focus on his earlier portraits where he would street cast young men from Harlem. Together, they would pick out an Old Masters painting from a textbook, and then Wiley would paint large-scale portraits of these strong, urban Black men, mimicking the stance and power of the original. Daniel Haxall writes, “By rewriting the history of art to include the Black subject, Wiley overturned what he called ‘the Western European white men in positions of dominance.’”<sup>14</sup>

This does the opposite of what the District Commissioner did in *Things Fall Apart*. Instead of minimizing the Black man, Wiley is expanding him and rightfully putting him back in a position of power, forcing the viewers to acknowledge the colonizer's manipulation of history. Wiley "renders [his subjects] in a language historically reserved for" white men in power,<sup>15</sup> much like Achebe does using Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" as an epigraph in *Things Fall Apart*. Here, Achebe uses the language of those in power to explain the feelings of those whose power was cruelly taken away.

You might even point out to students that "what's become pretty remarkable about Wiley's paintings is that, if you Google the titles of some of the original artworks he's appropriated, what comes up isn't the original. It's Wiley's... Wiley has already succeeded in inserting brown faces to such an extent that they often supplant the originals."<sup>16</sup> Students should recognize the strength in this -- an intelligent sabotage of the Old Masters's paintings.

### **Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV**

Juxtaposing the original work to the modern work will be essential for this part of the unit. I would start by showing students the original painting by Diego Velazquez entitled *Philip IV on Horseback*, painted in 1634. This painting features Philip IV of Spain on a white horse set against a background featuring a muted, serene landscape. Philip stares off into the distance, facing towards the right. In contrast to the landscape, the king wears regal, distinguished colors of black, gold, and red, carrying a baton, atop of a horse that is in mid-leap - the ultimate pose of strength and power.

In Kehinde Wiley's painting *Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV*, Wiley uses this image to inspire his modern take on power and masculinity, but instead of perpetuating the dominant narrative of rich, white men in power, he uses a Black man in urban clothing and vibrant colors to reframe dynamics of power. In his painting, the Black man, looking just as regal and powerful - if not more so - wears camo and carries a sword rather than a baton like the original. Replacing the baton with the sword could possibly represent the serious fight that Black men have to do to get positively recognized as a person worthy of strength, power, and admiration. Instead of gazing off into the distance, this man has this side glance as if looking at the viewer. Wiley uses vibrant colors for the background - rich greens and browns- and in the foreground, luscious green ivy winds across the bottom of the painting. At first glance, the green vegetation gives the painting movement and energy, signifying life and hope for the future Black men in America. However, some students may take note that the woven vegetation could prove to be problematic for the powerful man and his rearing horse, causing him to not succeed.

Challenging the status quo, Wiley counteracts the American cultural construct that only shows images of Black and Brown people in poverty, slavery, or struggle by showing us a strong, proud Black man in a position of power with a gaze that says, "Try me."

### **Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps**

Show students the original painting *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, from 1803, by Jacques-Louis David. Here, they will see Napoleon on a horse, leaping in a curvet. He dons a blue jacket, gold pants, and a striking red cape that wraps around his body, which stands in contrast to the bleak, gray background. These regal colors emphasize his importance and authority. He points the way to victory, and he directly looks out to the viewer. There are three stones on the foreground of the painting that pay homage to three admired military leaders that have led victories over the alps: Hannibal, Karolus Magnus, and, of course, Napoleon himself. This original painting conveys Napoleon's military victory over the Austrians, but actually is a portrait of great



exaggeration. It would be interesting to tell students that, in fact, Napoleon did not lead his troops over the Alps on horseback as the painting suggests.<sup>17</sup> He sent his troops ahead and followed them behind on a mule.

In Wiley's *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, his subject is a Black man in the same stance and composure as the original Napoleon. He wears camouflage, Timberlands, and a white bandana which alludes to fighting against violence towards young Black men. This is his contemporary war. Just like Napoleon, this man wears a yellow cape and has a blue jacket peeking out, also adorned with a gold sword. Instead of a landscaped background, there is a gaudy print, fashioned after French fabric, with a red background and gold overlay for the repeated print. Dodging in and out of the pattern in the background, gold sperm have been painted to accentuate Wiley's joke -- this is his "way of poking fun at the highly charged masculinity and propagation of gendered identity that are involved in the Western tradition of portraiture."<sup>18</sup> Wiley also has the engraved stones in his painting, however, he added one more name, bigger than all the others: Williams. He does this because "Williams is a common African-American surname, [and] hints at the imposition of Anglo names on Black people who were brought by force from Africa and stripped of their own histories."<sup>19</sup> Wiley writes this name bigger than all the others to reclaim Black people's power.

Dereck Conrad Murray writes how "the symbolic power of the masculine pose is just that: symbolic. Masculinity is performed in European paintings, but not as a myth-making gesture. It also shows to both ideologically and historically solidify a set of power relations utilizing the visual image."<sup>20</sup> The poses chosen by the Old Masters and Wiley both use these hypermasculine poses to bestow their subjects with respect and power; the only difference is that the Old Master's subjects already had established authority and Wiley's subjects do not. What interests me about both of these paintings is that the themes of masculinity that show up in *Things Fall Apart* are just as prevalent. Students can make connections about the notions of power and the staged nature of masculinity between Okonkwo and the subjects in Wiley's paintings.

### **Yinka Shonibare and Works to Examine**

Yinka Shonibare is a Nigerian-British artist who creates works that comment on African identity and European colonialism. He uses a variety of mediums like sculpture, painting, installation, photography, and film. John Picton describes how Yinka Shonibare "exposes hidden realities and challenges commonplace stereotypes with irony and gentle humor."<sup>21</sup> Students will appreciate the humor in his work.

### **Mr. and Mrs. Andrews Without Their Heads**

Like Wiley, this piece uses an Old Master's painting and recreates it using sculpture and installation. Show students the original piece which was produced in 1750 by Thomas Gainsborough, commissioned by the couple to show off their wealth, land, and status. In this painting, you might point out how the two figures are shifted off to the left, rather than the typical centering of the subjects in the middle. This is done to give equal attention to the Andrews' financial success. Another element teachers may want to point out to students is that "We do not see the rural labourers who would have worked the land. The Andrews' wealth is presented as an inevitable outcome of privilege. We are invited to admire the commercial success of the farm owner and the lifestyle benefits it brought to the Andrews', who could afford the most expensive clothes from London tailors."<sup>22</sup> These are important details to know as we put it in conversation with Shonibare's work.

Shonibare's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Without Their Heads* (1998) "restage[s] the famous painting by Gainsborough, but the figures are dressed in African-print cloth and shown with neither their estate (no landscape as backdrop) nor their heads."<sup>23</sup> The figures are placed in the same position as the Andrews in

Gainsborough's painting, however, there is the absence of heads and now includes the presence of African fabric. The unsettling headless figures seem to allude to the French Revolution and the beheading of the aristocracy<sup>24</sup> and also "hints at postcolonial revenge"<sup>25</sup> as if the workers of Andrews' land led an uprising against the family who exploited them. The blatant absence of the laborers from Gainsborough's painting show how "colonial slavery constructed a division between consumer and producer," especially when looking at the estate and clothing of the subjects.<sup>26</sup> Typically, in Western paintings like the Gainsborough, the consumer/ the colonizer is shown reaping the benefits from producers/ the colonized. It has been pointed out in more recent years that we need to look at and question the absence in these paintings. And that is exactly what Shonibare does; he takes this absence and brings it to the forefront, condemning those complicit in the colonial empire. The original work is about status and wealth; this work is about who was sacrificed to provide that status and wealth. Shonibare seems to be saying "off with their heads" to those who enjoy the excessive wealth built on the shoulders of slaves.

Another detail to focus on is the African print that envelops the figures in the installation. The Dutch wax fabric Shonibare uses on his figures creates an irony because "Dutch wax fabric initially found its way to Africa via colonizing powers that brought Indonesian batik techniques to the continent. Their use and adoption in Africa evokes the complexity of concepts such as identity, authenticity, ethnicity, race, class migration and globalization."<sup>27</sup> The beautiful African fabric covering the figures has the same effect as the figures having no heads; it focuses the viewers on the colonized and the effects of colonization in Africa. In the Gainsborough, there was an absence, but in Shonibare's, the oppressed can take center stage through the fabric used. Although this work predates Wiley's and Locke's work, students should be able to see how similar these works are -- taking a "significant cultural image and giv[ing] them a postcolonial twist"<sup>28</sup> and shedding light on the dehumanizing system that is colonialism.

#### **Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 11.00 hours**

Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* is a series of five photographs that are vibrantly colored, hung in large gold frames, and have a theatrical quality, creating a sort of mise-en-scene. In this series, Shonibare uncovers "the secrets of nineteenth century English prosperity and leisure: their dependence upon the hidden presence and work of Black and African people."<sup>29</sup> Using the photograph entitled *11.00 hours*, students will see a Black man in a Victorian nightdress and nightcap still in bed, surrounded by white servants fawning over him with expressions of concern. The Black dandy looks annoyed by their attention, not wanting to be bothered. The fact that he wakes up at 11 a.m. suggests that he has no cares or responsibilities -- representing the wealth and decadence of the Victorian elite. Shonibare turns the tables on the English upper-class, disrupting the social order by having a Black man in a place of power, ingratiating white servants and all. This reversal of power "invert[s] the stereotype of otherness."<sup>30</sup> I would want my students to talk about this inversion and speculate what Shonibare is trying to get his audience to think about. Again, I would not use the whole series of photographs because the last one especially may be inappropriate for a school setting.

#### **Hew Locke and Works to Examine**

Hew Locke is a Guyanese-British artist who works with a variety of mediums. In 2005, Locke had asked to actually adorn monuments and statues around London, which he was turned down for. In spite of the rejection, he realized that his proposal was the true artwork, embellished photographs of the statues. Recently, in his series *Patriots*, he manipulates controversial statues in New York which make people look differently at history. He takes the photograph of the statue and "give[s] them costumes made of plastic, metal, and glass beads that loosely refer to the slave trade. There are loads of skulls... which are memento



mori”<sup>31</sup> This manipulation of the statue is exactly what Achebe tries to do, showing a different side of the story. Pes writes about how “artist Hew Locke has found a new way to reveal overlooked or marginalized histories—by re-imagining the statues of dead white males who benefited from colonialism or the slave trade.”<sup>32</sup> Clearly, Locke calls our attention to the darker narratives that surround our American “heroes.”

### ***J. Marion Sims, Central Park, 2018***

The statue of J. Marion Sims was recently removed from Central Park in 2018 because “the 19th-century surgeon... is a Josef Mengele-like figure for many African Americans. The ‘father of modern gynecology,’ Sims advanced surgery by experimenting on enslaved Black women without an anesthetic.”<sup>33</sup> After describing the hidden history behind this statue and then looking at the photograph that Locke embellished, students will notice that he is mainly adorned with plastic gold beads and shapes. A striking blood red trim follows the length of his jacket, indicating the horrific torture he imposed on enslaved women. Metal renderings of African women fill up the front of the statue and along the sleeves that almost seem like badges of honor for the crimes he committed against these innocent people. Gold chains connect these renderings, reminding viewers of their enslavement. In between the images and chains are caducei, the symbol used for medicine, a cruel reminder of the irony of Sims being a doctor -- a healer who tortured, and skulls which are meant to be the memento mori. The skulls are a reminder of those who died from the slave trade, taking away the focus from the memorialized and placing it upon the colonized. Among other items, you can find cowrie shells, gold ornate circular structures, and plastic greenery. You might point out that cowrie shells were used as protective amulets in West African culture, which again provides a pointed commentary of the irony that as a doctor, Sims should be helping, not hurting human beings. The golden circles and plastic greenery represent the bounty of colonialism and rape of Africa, again, bringing to light the wealth that was attained from the shoulders of slaves.

### ***Washington, Federal Hall, 2018***

The statue of George Washington was targeted by Locke to underscore that this revered president was indeed a slave owner, a fact often ignored or glossed over in history books. This photograph uses illustrations of tortured slaves by William Blake that dangle from his hands, connected by gold chains, as they are desperately looking up at Washington as if begging to be released from their bondage. Dull gold coins, cowrie shells, bright gold ornamentation make up the bulk of his jacket. At his neck and right hand are red and blue jewels, clearly representing America and its wealth, and at his waist is a long red and blue ribbon and Black chains that seem to fall from the tortured slave placed there. The red from the ribbon signifies the blood of slaves that America was built on.

## **Teaching Strategies**

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### **Values, Identities, Actions**

This strategy comes from Harvard’s Project Zero Thinking Routines.<sup>34</sup> When students are analyzing works of art, have them use these following questions for each piece. In connection to values humans hold on to, have students use these: What values does the work invite us to think about? Are they your values? Other’s values? Whose? Does the work affirm or challenge or raise puzzles about these values? Then have students

turn to looking at identities: Who is this work speaking about? And who is this work trying to speak to? Is there anyone left out of the story who should be there? Do you fit in the story or not? Why? Then we look at action: What actions might this work encourage? Answering these questions will allow students to look beyond what they see.

### **Compare, Contrast, and Connect Charts**

When you are working with two pieces of art and a text, have students make a three column chart with the names of the works they are comparing on the first two columns and then 'connection to text' on the last column. In the first two columns, you would have students write down at least ten observations they make about each work. These can be concrete details about the work, adjectives to describe the painting, and/or vibes they get from the work. Once they come up with these details, on the third column, students should connect the works to the text that is being used. Do they share similar subjects, social commentary, or purposes? How are they different? Does the work connect to any words, images, characters of the chosen text? I would not require students to write in complete sentences. This should mimic a brainstorming session, trying to capture as many ideas as they can.

### **Artist's Purpose Statements**

For each art piece studied, students should then create artist purpose statements which will include a sentence describing why the artist created this work and for whom this work was created. Students should use the VIA questions from an earlier activity to help them create this sentence.

### **In-class timed writing**

After spending class time prepping for a prompt, students will write in a timed setting, usually a 50 minute class period. Since this is the first time my students will do this in my class, I will pare this down to one strong thesis statement and two body paragraphs where students will need to use at least three examples of textual / visual evidence. Using this strategy will allow students to work on thinking quickly and critically, which will help them prepare for advanced classes and standardized tests, in addition to writing in college.

### **Fictional Portraiture**

Have students create their own portraiture for characters in *Things Fall Apart*. This will not only allow them to be inspired by the artists that we just studied, but also see how it feels to change the narrative for Okonkwo. To create a fictional portrait for their chosen character, students will not have to use drawing skills, they can take a more nontraditional approach. But this will allow them to connect the text to art as well -- using the beauty of Achebe's words to help define and give power to the work that they are creating. Students will have creative license on what medium to use: photography, collage, tracing, digital, drawing, sculpture, etc. This fictional portraiture will portray the humanity of the Ibo characters from *Things Fall Apart* and will be used as important discourse against a system, like colonization, that dehumanizes its victims.

## Classroom Activities

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### Analyzing the Artwork

After giving background information on each artist, I would display the work on a smartboard. Individually and in their notes, I would have them create the three column chart described above, starting with Kehinde Wiley. Like I mentioned earlier, I would display the work where they could see the Old Master's original next to Wiley's rendition. Giving them ten minutes or so, I will have students fill out the first two columns of their chart which is just to write down what they see and feel about each work. Once they are done with that, I will have students get into small groups where they will answer the questions about the art using the VIA strategy. After another ten minutes of answering these questions, I will direct them to start making connections of the artwork to *Things Fall Apart*, focusing on similar themes, subjects, and connotations and filling this out on the third column of their chart. For this connection part, teachers might remind students to think about the subjects of masculinity, ego/hubris, community vs. individuals, and finally the strengths and weaknesses of culture. Finally, I will have students return to working individually to come up with an artist purpose statement. Then we will come back together as a class and discuss our findings. Repeat this process with Shonibare's and Locke's work. All of this information they have written in their notes can be used for their in-class synthesis essay.

### Synthesis Essay

I will also end this unit with an in-class writing where they will use their analysis skills to compare and contrast the message of *Things Fall Apart* and their chosen artwork from the unit. Being able to make connections between multimodal sources is an important task for my sophomores to grasp. Throughout the unit and as they read the novel, I will be working with students on how to write an essay. We will examine thesis statements and practice writing them. They will work on embedding quotations and writing analysis for both text and art. When students get to this activity, they will be fully prepared to write in-class and be armed with the knowledge on how to approach this essay, which will fully synthesize the novel and the artwork we studied. I will give them this prompt: Using textual and visual evidence, what comparisons can you make in theme or main ideas between *Things Fall Apart* and one or two of the works by Wiley, Shonibare, and Locke, and how does this connect to author and artist's purpose? Again, I will have students just focus on creating one thesis statement for their introduction and write one to two body paragraphs. This will be their first in-class writing in my class, so a full essay will not be necessary.

### Culminating Activity - *Things Fall Apart* Character Portraits

Through photography, tracing, or some other mode of art, I want students to create portraits of Okonkwo or their favorite Ibo characters, inspired by the artists used in the unit, giving Okonkwo and the Ibo power back from the European invaders. Using quotes from the novel that highlight the beauty, power, and value of this culture for the portrait's background will tie together the power of the written text and the visual image. After choosing their character from *Things Fall Apart*, have students ask the following questions to help them come up with ideas for their fictional portrait: What qualities does your character represent? What is important to your chosen character? What words would you use to describe your character's personality? What images could represent your character? What colors reflect their mood and personality? Using these questions will help students develop ideas to create a strong portrait that will bring back value to the Ibo. Again, by using portraiture for this final project, students will be able to choose a character whose power has been stripped

away from them by the colonizer and to bring that humanity and power back -- just as the three artists we studied do in their own work. Students will feel empowered and know to constructively fight against systems of power and the importance of understanding the many stories and the many perspectives that make up our world.

## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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10.2.W.2 Students will routinely and recursively develop drafts, applying organizational structure(s) (e.g., description, compare/contrast, sequential, problem/solution, cause/effect, etc.).

When writing their synthesis in-class writing, students will be focusing on how to organize and draft a compare and contrast essay.

10.3.R.1 Students will analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts.

Before reading *Things Fall Apart*, understanding and studying the historical and cultural perspective is necessary for students to understand the themes, plot, and characters of the novel, as well as the Ibo Tribe's customs and beliefs.

10.3.R.2 Students will evaluate authors' perspectives and explain how those perspectives contribute to the meanings of texts.

Students will need to connect the themes and meaning of the text to the author's purpose.

10.6.W.2 Students will develop a clear, concise, defensible thesis statement.

For their in-class writing, students will be instructed on how to write a clear thesis which will be a roadmap for their essay.

10.6.W.3 Students will integrate quotes, paraphrases, and summaries from research, following a consistent citation style (e.g., MLA, APA) to avoid plagiarism.

Students will use textual and visual evidence to back up their argument in their in-class writing.

10.7.R Students will analyze and evaluate the techniques used in a variety of multimodal content and how they contribute to meaning.

Using the artwork from Wiley, Shonibare, and Locke, students will analyze and evaluate the pieces using VIA and Three-Columned Charts.

10.7.W Students will create engaging multimodal content that intentionally addresses an audience and accomplishes a purpose.

Then culminating activity will have students creating multimodal content in the form of fictional portraiture which will not only showcase the student's understanding of their chosen character, but will also employ the

techniques from contemporary Black artists. This project's purpose is to empower the characters and take back their story from the hands of the colonizer.

## Resources

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