



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2021 Volume I: The Social Struggles of Contemporary Black Art

The Journey of the Artist: Story-telling to Transform

Curriculum Unit 21.01.06
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Background

The Aquaculture and Agriculture school my students attend has students from 25 different districts making it a diverse community of science-minded kids. English is not always the most popular subject. Additionally, the arts are not as prominent as in many other schools. I teach senior English and AP English Literature and Composition. Although at least some of this unit will be used with the AP Literature students, it is primarily written to cater to senior English students. I always incorporate art and performance in my course. Students inevitably dive in and enjoy the creative outlet. My students have shared that music has been key to getting through difficulties in their lives during the pandemic or otherwise. It inspired this idea of the healing power of art with the guiding text “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin. We will read “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin and *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine. Some of the artwork we will look at includes works from Trenton Doyle Hancock, David Leggett, Nick Cave, Kara Walker, Zanele Muholi, Bisa Butler, and Yinka Shonibare.

The students will explore the literary and art materials to analyze their transformative and/or healing elements. Through this exploration, students will sharpen their own voices and find within themselves a cause worth expressing for, fighting for and/or healing from. They will work on creating playlists as we travel through the texts and artwork. They will also create a piece of artwork with an artist’s statement that we can publish in a magazine representing the whole class’s effort and aspirations.

The Texts

In “Sonny’s Blues”, Sonny and his brother struggle to connect and understand one another, but music helps that relationship. Through Sonny and his brother’s journey amazing music is made. The journey of the artist is told through their artwork. The act of creating art and telling the story is transformative. Understanding these varied stories and their power will be discerned by the students and in turn will result in the students own creations.

“Sonny’s Blues” will be the central text because it explores the role of art in the lives of the artist and the consumer. Students will begin by reading the text. This will provide them with a framework for approaching the art we will be looking at and the art they will be creating.

In “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin, Sonny’s older brother seeks to understand Sonny, his drug addiction, and his choice to be a musician. The journey in the story is really Sonny’s, but told from his brother’s (who remains nameless) point of view. The story starts with the brother reflecting on Sonny and his recent stint in jail. The story has flashbacks to provide us with the insight into Sonny’s life experience. turns his pain or channels his pain into the music he creates. His brother develops an understanding of both music and Sonny while watching him play. It is a spiritual experience for both men. Sonny has a serious drug problem and the music is a not only an escape and a channel of self acceptance for him, it is the life saving force. In Jacqueline C. Jones’ article, “Finding a Way to Listen: The Emergence of the Hero as an Artist In James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’” argues that in a number of Baldwin’s pieces he uses the artist as a hero and the hero as an artist. It is the painful experiences in the artists’ life that drives them to their craft and is expressed in their craft. In the case of Sonny, his journey as an African American male struggling with drug addiction is the source of his pain and the conduit of self affirmation as an artist. Jones feels that Baldwin’s “primary identity” is of an artist and the focus on him and his writing as an African American and a gay man is a bit misguided. The point is well made, but even in her article it is clear that it is all intertwined. None of these things operate in isolation. She may just be making a point counter to many of the outspoken writers of Baldwin’s time that felt art by African Americans must fight racism and oppression with their work. The role of the individual as an artist can take the forefront of their identity because artist seeks truth, expresses it and saves through it.¹

In Leah Turner’s podcast, *The Whole Five Fifths* with Reverend Cheryl Jones they discuss this exact topic of the healing power of music. Reverend Jones said that healing can be instantaneous, when spiritual, but for the most part it is a journey. She said that transformation is healing and it is a process. She said it is, “freedom from a painful place, turning from a painful place to a less painful place.” She continues to describe the process of such a journey. It starts with acknowledgment and being ready to let it go, not forget it, just let it go.²

Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, “One Art” describes this process well. She is talking about loss in the form of an imperfect villanelle. “The art of losing isn’t hard to master” is the opening line of the poem. As the poem progresses she loses things that are more significant. The losses become more serious and more real until she loses a love and writes in the final two lines, “the art of losing’s not too hard to master/ though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.” In this poem the art form and the purging of the pain are one. She sheds her pain through the act of writing and the writing cannot even capture the pain perfectly as she is not adhering the standard form. The act of writing about the loss reflects the difficulty she is having with it. It may be a true form of the healing journey that Reverend Jones describes in that Bishop relinquishes the pain through the poem. ³

In the podcast, Leah Turner turns the conversation back to the pain of racism. She mentions how black music was stolen by white musicians. She also talks about racism working in “darkness and silence.” This is exactly why these stories need to be told and revisited. Bringing the stories to light is an act of combating racism. A part of this healing process is the telling of the story. This is what I refer to above. The act of telling the story through art, music, or literature is part of the healing journey itself. ⁴

The students in this unit will be producing their own piece of art. The goal is to produce art and an artist’s statement. Although it would be ideal for the students to comment on an issue that they are passionate about

or feel needs to be addressed, they should express their personal journey. By reading literature that exposes the subtle and not so subtle racism in America in *Citizen: An American Lyric* students will find a guide for how to express their own struggle or topic.

Citizen is a visual and literary view into microaggression and direct aggression toward Black Americans. Claudia Rankine writes in part prose and part poetry to provide insight into everyday encounters and the questioning mind of the targets of these aggressions. She explores everything from an everyday racist occurrence to the racist fueled calls against Serena Williams to police murdering Black people in this country. She collaborates with her husband, John Lucas, who makes short films and is part of *Citizen*. This text provides writing, film, and visual art for students to view and discuss.

The Artists

Although all artists do not explicitly indicate they are striving to heal, there is clearly an effort to remedy ills of society through their art. Each artist has the intention of exploring a problem through their distinct medium. In some cases the mere act of shining light on the issue is helping to rectify the problem. The medium and approach to the topic is sometimes key to the recovery. In other cases there are solutions woven into the pieces. The argument could be made that all of these things are evident in each of the artists' works. Hence, a story can be seen and experienced. There is powerful journey in the art that can heal the artist and the viewer.

Trenton Doyle Hancock is an artist that has an entire mythology behind his artwork. He was raised by Evangelical Ministers and Missionaries in Paris, Texas. This upbringing influenced his art. His alter ego and hero of the artwork is Torpedo Boy. There are "Mounds" that are preyed upon by the Vegans. Torpedo Boy strives to protect the Mounds. In his art he uses comic books, illustrations, animations, horror films, toys, and performance as inspiration and as his medium. Murray White from the Boston Globe writes about Hancock's exhibit, "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass" in his Boston Globe article, "A Hero's Tale, Freshly Told at Mass MoCA." White explains Hancock's depiction of the religious atmosphere of his grandmother's house and says, "If this was Hancock's typical visit to Grandma's, you can see why he might need the Moundverse as solace and refuge, a place to call his own." The personal becomes artwork that addresses the political.

White also says of Hancock's artwork that it's "truly heroic impulse to overcome obstacles both cataclysmic and mundane..." The hero, Torpedo Boy, in Hancock's work provides the kind of hope that I want the unit to promote while exploring black experiences and racism. The hope must be the central idea.⁵

David Leggett is another visual artist that deals with political and social issues. He grew up in Springfield, MA in a neighborhood cursed with the crack epidemic of the 80s and 90s. He had a mixed experience in that he attended a private Catholic school while living in a community that was struggling. He attended the Savannah College of Art for undergraduate school and the Art Institute of Chicago for graduate school. Leggett says of his work in the article "David Leggett Has the Last Laugh" by Kerry Cardoza, "I wouldn't outright call myself a political artist, but there are some very political things that go on in my work. It's just the climate-people are responding to that more now. I've seen other artists after Trump won, saying, 'We need to get back to work.' I'm like, 'What were you doing before that?' Whatever you make, it's still your duty to be involved in some way.'" The students should identify with this sense of duty.

Leggett has a sense of humor with his art. He uses anything and everything as inspiration. He uses bright colors, television characters like Fat Albert, Bozo the Clown, Superman, and Kermit to name a few. He reels the viewer in with his bright colors, pop culture imagery, and humor. Still, there is a message. Leggett said, "If you're going to make something that is politically charged or has maybe a deeper message-having color, having humor, also craft materials, having these things is like sugar helping the medicine go down," he says. "It makes people come closer. And sometimes people are laughing at something they probably shouldn't have laughed at because it's almost like camouflage." (Cardoza) His artwork is fun and alluring while critiquing various racist constructs. He is calling out the viewer with his style. ⁶

Nick Cave is an artist with hope and healing on his mind. Growing up in Fulton, Missouri with his mother and grandparents Cave currently creates and lives in Chicago. He is a fashion designer and artist. He is a trained dancer and this is evident in his art that is often meant to be worn and therefore mobilized. The many manifestations of racism are behind much of Cave's works. In 1992 Cave created a "Soundsuit" after the Rodney King beating. The suits he is famous for, seek to and succeed in making race and genderless figures. Cave's initial reaction to the Rodney King beating was one of horror and isolation. The suits are made of all kinds of materials and are worn. Through one moving and dancing in the suits a sound is made by some of the materials on the suits. The first suit has twigs on it which helped create the sound. Cave said of the suits in a New York Times article with Megan O'Grady, "The sound was a way of alarming others to my presence. The suit became a suit of armor where I hid my identity. It was something 'other.' It was an answer to all the these things I had been thinking about: What do I do to protect my spirit in spite of all that's happening around me?" The suits are a tool that express Cave's journey as well as help him move forward. The anonymity and beauty of the suits help the viewer as well.

Cave wants to transcend surface aspects of the persona and start a dialogue about true humanity. Gun violence is of particular concern to him. Living in Chicago and seeing the violence in a Black community that is in need of change. He not only works to help communities through his artwork, but also through his teaching and numerous humanitarian projects. Students should be able to see that there is a clear force for good in Cave's work and that they too can use their medium of choice to inform and heal their community.⁷

Bisa Butler, a former art teacher from New Jersey, tells a story in each of her quilted works. She is inspired by photos of people in history. There are clear and identifiable stories in her pieces of famous people and situations that she is teaching her viewers about. There are also stories of people that may not be famous or specifically known, but still a life is there on the fabric telling the viewer a story. She has a portrait of Frederick Douglas, a famous figure whose historical significance cannot be denied. Another piece is "Safety Patrol" of a group of kids with one at the front of the group holding his hands out to prevent them from crossing the street. Although the children depicted in the piece are not well renowned, they have their own story. Butler was leaving teaching and thinking of her students and Trayvon Martin. She said that the piece gave her hope in a difficult time.⁸

While in art school at Howard University, Butler learned about the importance of showing people in a positive light and she learned about color. She referred to it as her mission to educate and portray people of color positively in her art. Her professors taught about the use of bold colors or "Kool-Aid Colors" that were more of an African influence. Although she was taught to use such color, she said she isn't using these colors because of this, she is just drawn to bright colors and uses them in her art. Bisa Butler's vibrant quilting brings such joy to the viewer. Some of the quilts may tell a story of pain or hardship, there is also hope. In her Art Institute of Chicago video she says that she wants to deal with the problems in society, but most importantly wants to say, "Look what we can do."⁹

The hope is that students will look at all of these artists and their artwork and think about what they themselves can do and then do it.

Teaching Strategies

The analysis and reflection on the individual's journey is the core of this unit. Students must look at the journey of the artists' we are viewing. All of the artist's we look at have a message that addresses an important issue. The students will explore the artists' techniques to convey their messages. Finding the hope or transformative aspect of the artist's work is vital to this process. After exploring the works of others, students will need to reflect on their own experience. This reflection will lead to the heart of their artwork. Finally, their artwork will be shared with the school community in a magazine of all the student work. This will be an opportunity to spread their messages of hope with a broader audience.

The artists listed above will be specifically highlighted in the unit. Students will also have the opportunity for choice. They will peruse a variety of artists and artwork and select one artist to do a deep dive. We will look at the lives, art, and craft of each artist as a class and then the students will have the opportunity to do the same with their own artist of choice. We will read articles, watch Youtube videos, create playlists, respond to guiding questions, create questions and just spend time sitting with the artwork in order to appreciate it. Analysis of the choices the artists make is integral to this process. It will both enhance the reading of the art, but inform how the students will create their own pieces.

In some cases the topic of the artwork may be elusive to the viewer. Although the hope and healing of the art is the art itself, the conversations that come out of the art can be that as well. All of the art can bring joy and inspiration. There may be difficult conversations to have that the art brings to the surface, but the result should always be the love for the artwork and the solutions they imbue. That is what I want the focus to be.

Because this unit is being used with seniors, most of them will have written college essays or a personal statement. The kind of self reflection required for such writing will be a nice jumping off point for their thoughts on the topic of their own artwork. The sculpture, quilting, painting, photography, etc. that we will view over the course of the unit will provide them with options for their own creations. They can choose any medium they want to create a work of art. The art must come from their own journey and address something they feel needs to be healed. There must be a message of hope in either the art itself or the artist's statement that they write.

After an in class art walk, we will compile all of the artwork and statements into a publication. The students will be able to distribute the final product to the community.

The Lessons

The following assignment helps students develop a personal connection to the text and mine their own experience for a topic of their own to generate art later in the unit. A sample assignment for this portion of the unit is the following:

Playlist

Background:

Bisa Butler and her husband, a DJ, created a playlist with songs to coincide with some of her quilts and other works at the Art Institute of Chicago. As a class, we will look at the art and listen to the playlist. We will read Butler's descriptions of her artwork and speculate on the music choices.

In this assignment, students will select their own pieces of art and a song. While generating this compilation of artwork and music, students will need to write a justification for the choices they made and the specific connections between the two.

1. In a Google Document or Google Slides Document there should be at least 12 slides.
 - A. The first slide is the cover page with a title to the playlist, a list of the artwork and a list of the songs.
 - B. The 5 next pairs of slides will consist of one slide with a picture of the artwork and the link to the track followed by a slide with a rationale for the selections.
 - The rationale must explain the significance of the art and contain 1 to 3 lines of lyrics as support for the connection.
 - C. The final slide must be a Works Cited.
2. Students will present their final work in class.

Another lesson for students to delve into contemporary Black artists is to search for art that speaks to them. I will provide them with a list of Instagram Sites of stellar artists to explore.

They can peruse the following sites:

Shonibarestudio - A site that has Yinka Shonibare's artwork

Trenton_doyle_hancock - A site with Trenton Doyle Hancock's artwork

Cocofunhouse - A site with David Leggett's artwork

Jordanmcasteel - A site with Jordan Casteel's artwork

Kara_walker_official - A site with Kara Walker's artwork

Nickcaveart - Nick Cave artwork

Bisabutler - Bisa Butler's artwork

muholizanele- Zanele Muholi's instagram with some of her own artwork

Jackshainman - Jack Shainman Gallery artwork

Students will look over the artwork available on the artists' Instagram. As the artwork that appeals to them most rises to the surface they can start to process what they are viewing. I will have students take a day to absorb their art piece. Then students will respond to the some basic prompts below.

1. What draws you to the artwork?
2. Describe what you see.
3. What colors, shapes, images, ideas, etc stand out to you?
4. What do you think the artist is trying to convey in the piece?
5. How is the artist conveying their message?
6. What questions do you have?

Annotated Bibliography

"Sonny's Blues." *Going to Meet the Man*, by James Baldwin, Dell Publishing, n.d., pp. 86-122.

This is a short story about the relationship between two brothers. One of the brothers is a recovering drug addict and a musician. The other brother took a more sedate route as a teacher and family man.

"Bisa Butler: Portraits." *The Art Institute of Chicago*, Sok Vision, www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9324/bisa-butler-portraits.

Bisa Butler discusses her art. She focusses primarily on how her Howard University education helped solidify her mission and her thinking about art.

Bishop, Elizabeth. "One Art by Elizabeth Bishop." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47536/one-art.

This is a poem about the art of writing and loss.

Cardoza, Kerry. "David Leggett has the Last Laugh." *Reader*, Jun 29, 2017, pp. 17-18. *ProQuest*, <https://www-proquest-com.yale.idm.oclc.org/newspapers/david-leggett-has-last-laugh/docview/1918309696/se-2?accountid=15172>.

This article is about David Leggett and his dedication to making art that deals with the issues of the day.

Jones, Jacqueline C. "FINDING A WAY TO LISTEN: THE EMERGENCE OF THE HERO AS AN ARTIST IN JAMES BALDWIN'S 'SONNY'S BLUES.'" *CLA Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1999, pp. 462-482. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44323260. Accessed 4 June 2021.

This article explores the idea that the hero in James Baldwin's works are artists.

Jones, Rev. Cheryl A. "The Whole Five-Fifths: EP 004 - Healing Power of Song on Apple Podcasts." *Apple Podcasts*, 1 Feb. 2021, podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-004-healing-power-of-song/id1546032569?i=1000507427448.

This podcast is a discussion between Leah Turner and Rev. Cheryl A. Jones. They discuss how music can be healing and the importance of the process in that healing.

“PrintbyPrint Group Interviews Bisa Butler.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 11 Jan. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFY0K0gmu_U.

This video gives an introduction to and background information on Bisa Butler. She discusses her family and their impact on her life and work.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An AMERICAN Lyric*. Penguin, 2015.

This book is a fusion of poetry and prose that reveals the reality of micro aggression and racism in America.

O'grady, Megan. “Nick Cave Is the Most Joyful, and Critical, Artist in America.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 15 Oct. 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/15/t-magazine/nick-cave-artist.html.

This article discusses how Nick Cave came to the idea of creating Soundsuits and the impact the art has on Cave.

Whyte, Murray. “A Hero's Tale, Freshly Told at Mass MoCA - The Boston Globe.” *Boston Globe.com*, The Boston Globe, 2 May 2019, www.bostonglobe.com/arts/art/2019/05/02/hero-tale-freshly-told-mass-moca/Oq39FqW8Q62Ji2YSKCHVXP/story.html.

This article provides background on Trenton Doyle Hancock and his exhibit at Mass MoCA.

Appendix-Implementing District Standards

1a. Comprehend complex literary and informational texts by determining what the text says explicitly and what it implies. (CCR.R1;CLEP1)

Students will delve into the complexity of the art and literature in this unit.

1c. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics. (CCR.R9)

The analysis of the artwork and applying music tracks to it will be one way to take the two texts and explore how they address a theme.

1d. Analyze the text to determine how author’s choices are relate to each other to shape the meaning of the work as a whole. (CCR.R4-6; CLEP4)

Both the analysis of the artwork and the literature will address this standard.

3c. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence appropriately for task, purpose, and audience. (CCR.SL4; CLEP4,9)

¹ Jones, Jacqueline C. “FINDING A WAY TO LISTEN: THE EMERGENCE OF THE HERO AS AN ARTIST IN JAMES

BALDWIN'S 'SONNY'S BLUES.'" *CLA Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1999, pp. 462-482. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44323260. Accessed 4 June 2021.

² Jones, Rev. Cheryl A. "The Whole Five-Fifths: EP 004 - Healing Power of Song on Apple Podcasts." *Apple Podcasts*, 1 Feb. 2021, podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-004-healing-power-of-song/id1546032569?i=1000507427448.

³ Bishop, Elizabeth. "One Art by Elizabeth Bishop." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47536/one-art.

⁴ Jones, Rev. Cheryl A. "The Whole Five-Fifths: EP 004 - Healing Power of Song on Apple Podcasts." *Apple Podcasts*, 1 Feb. 2021, podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-004-healing-power-of-song/id1546032569?i=1000507427448.

⁵ Whyte, Murray. "A Hero's Tale, Freshly Told at Mass MoCA - The Boston Globe." *BostonGlobe.com*, The Boston Globe, 2 May 2019, www.bostonglobe.com/arts/art/2019/05/02/hero-tale-freshly-told-mass-moca/Oq39FqW8Q62Ji2YSKCHVXP/story.html.

⁶ Cardoza, Kerry. "David Leggett has the Last Laugh." *Reader*, Jun 29, 2017, pp. 17-18. *ProQuest*, <https://www-proquest-com.yale.idm.oclc.org/newspapers/david-leggett-has-last-laugh/docview/1918309696/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁷ O'grady, Megan. "Nick Cave Is the Most Joyful, and Critical, Artist in America." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 15 Oct. 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/15/t-magazine/nick-cave-artist.html.

⁸ "PrintbyPrint Group Interviews Bisa Butler." *YouTube*, YouTube, 11 Jan. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFY0KOgmu_U.

⁹ "Bisa Butler: Portraits." *The Art Institute of Chicago*, Sok Vision, www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9324/bisa-butler-portraits.

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