



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

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## Introduction

by Roderick Ferguson, Professor of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies and of American Studies

Black art has historically been not only a domain for various artistic representations but also a venue from which to recast and explore several historical and social struggles. While that exploration has obviously dealt with issues of race, slavery and colonialism, black diasporic art has also been a powerful venue for addressing issues of gender, sexuality, the environment, militarism, technology, and so on. Indeed, recent developments in scholarship, curation, and activism have exhibited the central place that black art occupies in engaging these issues.

These developments have placed at least two significant pressures on how we think of art, in general, and black art, in particular. First, these shifts have challenged conventional assumptions that art is best known and assessed according to its formal properties only. Instead, this rethinking in how we encounter art insists on placing it in dialogue with historical, political, and social contexts. Second, these transformations urge us to understand black art and the social processes that it engages within transnational rather than national frameworks. To this end, these approaches have eschewed frameworks that seek to contain art within any single national tradition and instead has located black art within both national and transnational social processes, movements, and struggles.

To this end, our seminar worked to place art by black artists from Africa, Europe, and Latin America in feminist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, abolitionist, environmental, and queer politics. As the Fellows engaged these works, they produced a dynamic set of conversations about the relevance of black contemporary art in this historical moment. Those conversations led to unit plans that are both pertinent and inspired. In their own individual ways, each one manages to address a variety of social issues and to present the intricacies of black art as well.

Leslie Blatteau's unit plan "Black Art and Climate Justice" powerfully uses the art of African American artists Maren Hassinger and LaToya Ruby Frazier and Kenyan artist Wanuri Kahiu to analyze the global parameters of the environmental crisis and the inequalities that occasion and emanate from it. Carol Boynton's "Contemporary Black Picture Book Artists: Families of Illustrators" creatively presents illustrators from African American families who see their art as a way of educating young people about race as a historical formation. Nataliya Braginsky's "Synopsis of Cultural Histories of 20<sup>th</sup> century Black and Latinx Freedom Struggles" brilliantly presents the visual art, music, performances, and fashion of black and latinx communities within the U.S. to demonstrate to students how cultural forms become participants in and records of historical struggles. Cheryl Canino's provocative unit plan "Blacks in Nature: Oxymoron or Paradox?" asks students to observe African American artists' engagements with nature as a way of illuminating the racialized meanings that

nature has acquired in U.S. history. Dan Croteau’s “The Eye of the Beholder: A Critical Look at Visual Art and *A Raisin in the Sun*” proposes an intriguing exploration of Lorraine Hansberry’s classic play and its resonance with visual artists such as Romare Bearden, Norm Lewis, and Emma Amos, using their art to explore the civil rights movement and battles over racial segregation. Melissa Dailey’s “The Journey of the Artist: Storytelling to Transform” movingly proposes an examination of the healing powers of art, particularly for students who have had to negotiate social and epidemiological urgencies. In Cathy Ramin’s excellent proposal “The Curator as Social Change Agent,” she looks at the work that African American curators have done to foster transformations in U.S. society and the art world. Steve Staysniak’s marvelous “Visual Literacy, Creative Response, and the Afrofuturist Aesthetic” proposes Afrofuturism as an interpretive framework through which students will analyze both art and society, paying particular attention to the work of the Mexico-based artist Clotilde Jimenez. Eden Stein’s capacious proposal entitled “Historical Allusions and Art in Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming*” interrogates the vast visual, literary, musical, and social worlds presumed in Woodson’s award-winning memoir. Rebecca Williams’s pertinent proposal “Contemporary Black Art: Race as a Metalanguage for Intersectionality” uses black visual art to explore the multi-faceted nature of identity, focusing on the work of South African artist Zanele Muholi and the Ghanaian American artist Bisa Butler among others. To engage black art and its social implications, each of the unit plans beautifully culminates in assignments that ask students to become artists and/or curators themselves.

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