

Connection Constellation

By Ashley Alexander Furrow

Humanities, Grade 8/ Cross-curricular: History Grade 8, English Grade 8

What is a connection constellation?

If the study of History is represented in timelines, the study of Humanities, might be represented as a web or constellation. Humanities is the intersection of history, literature, art, science, and culture. Understanding how things relate to each other and affect each other, helps us see those connections to ourselves and, most importantly, to each other. I created this unit to coordinate with an 8th grade curriculum, but the content could be changed to coordinate with any Middle School grade level curriculum, from geography and ancient cultures to classic and contemporary literature. Throughout the plan, hyperlinks are embedded.

Unit Overview:

This lesson is part of a larger unit that examines the interconnectedness of art, music, literature, news, history, and advertising. The unit forms a cross-curricular bond with English Language Arts and History classes. To support English Language Arts, lessons referencing *To Kill a Mockingbird* discuss Harper Lee's written work as a form of activism, as well as the character of Scout. To support 8th grade history, primary and secondary source material (music, art, poetry and articles)reference the civil rights movement.



Lorna Simpson
Photo Booth
2008
Tate

The unit begins with an installation on the classroom wall, (inspired by the two artworks pictured) of seemingly disconnected images: a bottle of syrup, a banjo, a crayon, a roll of film, loan application papers, a report card, a peony, a spelling bee medal, a pocket watch, a bar of soap, etc. In addition, pictures of all of the students in the classroom are interspersed with the other images. On day one, students come in and make predictions about how the images might relate to each other. They write these predictions in their personal notebook. This notebook is used daily for students to update their predictions and thoughts as they make connections.

Learning Objective 1: Students will reflect on the role that art, music, history, and advertising have in civic discourse.

Unit Overview:



Annette Messager
My Vows 1988 - 91
MOMA

For each lesson, artefacts in the form of news articles, podcasts, essays, art exhibit photographs, poems, songs, and short stories are shared. For many lessons, the puzzle method is used and students are asked to use a Document Analysis Form (Facinghistory.org) or OPVL chart (IBO.org) to evaluate the source within their sub groups before reporting back to the group. For other lessons, Think, Pair, Share and Fishbowl Methods are used.

As students are able to identify the threads of connection between the photographs, I string an actual line of gold thread between them. The line of thread will begin to connect all of the photographs, not in concentric circles, but in a web, with many photos connecting to several others. As students make personal connections to the stories that the photographs represent, threads are woven between the student photos and the object photos. By the end, we have made our own art installation and have demonstrated how incredibly interconnected we are.

For an end-of-unit project, students make their own connection constellation project. They are given the option of choosing an analytical path, a creative path, or a combined path. The analytic path would be a well-written essay examining a theme that they connected with during our inquiry. The creative path would be to create an artwork, song, poem, video, or piece of creative writing that was inspired by, and builds upon our inquiry (with an accompanying written explanation). Finally, the combined path would be a less involved creative project and a shorter essay.

Learning Objective 2: Students will make informed connections between past events and issues today, as well as creatively express historical understanding through multi-media.

I have laid some of the images out to illustrate how one image may connect to several different topics.

Breakfast

Aunt Jemima, Cream of Wheat, Mrs. Butterworths, Betye Saars, Nayyirah Waheed Poem



Fruit Still Life

Watermelon image: Betye Saars, Strange Fruit, Stranger Fruit (Jon Henry)

Window

Mirrors and Windows, Black Girl's Window,

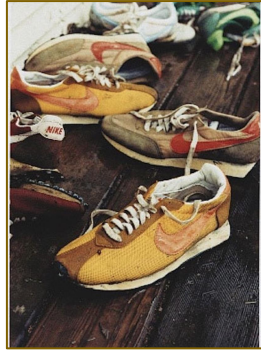


Mirror

Mirrors and Windows, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, "I Too" by Langston Hughes, Boy Breaking Glass by Gwendolyn Brooks

Soap

Racist Ads of the past, Gold Dust Twins, Dove, To Kill a Mockingbird



Sneakers

Nike Ads, Colin Kaepernick, Hank Willis Thomas, Black Athletes and the Draft process, Lift Every Voice and Sing poem/song

Sports balls

Hank Willis Thomas sculpture, Serena Williams Birth Story, Negro Leagues



Banjo

Betye Saar's Sambo's Banjo, Bela Fleck Documentary, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Rhiannon Giddens, Music of the Civil Rights Movement, Etta Baker Johnny St Cyr, Joe Thompson, Slave ship poem, Cultural Appropriation, Elvis, Beatles

Redlining

Woody Guthrie, "Confessions of a Blockbuster", White Flight, NPR audio, The Color of Law, Storycorps



Roll of Film

Teju Cole essay, Roy DeCarava photographs, Dawoud Dawoud Bey, TED talk: Single Narrative, Shirley Cards



Spelling Bee Medal

To Kill a Mockingbird, Chicago Public School boycott, East LA School Walkouts (Facing History lesson)



Peony

Carrie Mae Weems, WEB Dubois, Morgan Parker poem, Harvard study on birth

House at Night

Robert Hayden Poem: Runagate Runagate,
Dawoud Bey, Harriet Tubman, Roy DeCarava,
To Kill a Mockingbird



For Freedoms

Black Lives Matter, Hank Willis Thomas,
Human Rights Campaign, PACs



Four Freedoms

Representations in mass media, Essay on
dominant culture, Freedom by Langston
Hughes



Hair Brush

Lorna Simpson, "Me, My Hair, and I", Politics
and Black Hair, Hair Love Ellen Gallagher
artwork

Unit Guiding Questions

1. How do the actions of one group through history affect the outcomes of another group?
2. How can we identify the common threads in cultural representations and how they connect — to each other?

Unit Learning Objectives

(from Facing History: Choosing to Remember)

1. **Students will reflect on the role that art, music, history, and advertising have in civic discourse.**
2. **Students will make informed connections between past events and issues today, as well as creatively express historical understanding through multi-media.**

Lesson 1: Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards:

1.Students will recognize that multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals. (ID.6-8.2)

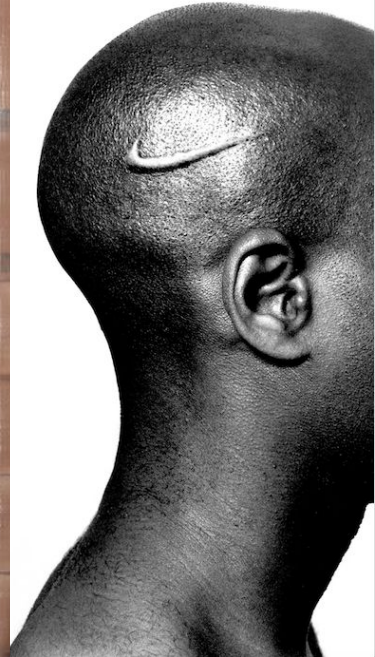
2.Students will express pride, confidence, and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people. (ID.6-8.4)

3.Students will recognize the traits of the dominant culture, their home culture, and other cultures, and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces. (ID.6-8.5)

Lesson 1

(3-4 60 minute class periods)

**“The Dangers of a Single Story”
by Chimamanda Adichie
and
Artists, Betye Saar and Hank
Willis Thomas: symbols of
oppression/symbols of power.**

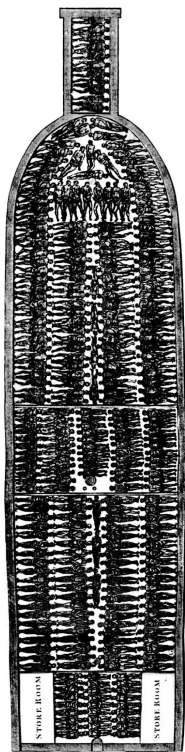




Betye Saar
Black Girl's Window
1969



Betye Saar
Sambo's Banjo
1971



ABSOLUT POWER.

Hank Willis Thomas
Absolut Power
2003



Hank Willis Thomas
The Cotton Bowl
2003

Lesson Guiding Questions

1. What is identity? What makes each of us who we are?
 2. Essential Question: How does a “single narrative” affect our own identities and the way that we view others?
 3. How can people “reclaim” identity and power?
-

Materials

(To be shared with students)

TED Talk: Chimamanda Adichie: [The Dangers of a Single Story](#) (TED.com)

News Video: [Aunt Jemima brand to change name, remove image that Quaker says is 'based on a racial stereotype'](#) (NBCNews.com)

News Article: [Aunt Jemima Brand to Change Name and Image Over 'Racial Stereotype'](#) (NYTimes.com)

Art Article: [How Betye Saar Transformed Aunt Jemima into a Symbol of Black Power](#) (Artsy.net)

Exhibition Catalog: Betye Saar, [Extending the Frozen Moment](#) (Norton Museum of Art)

Image: [Sambo's Banjo](#), Betye Saar, 1975 (California African American Museum, LA)

Virtual Tour: Betye Saar, [Legend of a Black Girl's Window](#)(MOMA.org)

Materials

(To be shared with students)

News Article: [Artist Sews Together Sports and Geopolitics](#)
(NYTimes.com)

Art Article: [Hank Willis Thomas: How to unmake race](#)
(ORArtsWatch.org)

Cultural Article: [BRANDED On the Semiotic Disobedience of Hank Willis Thomas](#) (BrooklynRail.org)

Art Article: [Personal Branding With Hank Willis Thomas](#)
(intermsof.org)

Sports Article: [A Timeline of Events since Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest](#) (TheUndeated.com)

Advertising/Design Article: [One year later, what did we learn from Nike's blockbuster Colin Kaepernick ad?: Brand purpose requires sustained, long-term commitment. Otherwise, it's just an ad.](#)
(FastCompany.com)

Sports Article: [How LeBron James Convinced Nike to Run the Controversial Colin Kaepernick Ad](#) (Sportscasting.com)

News Article: [Colin Kaepernick Joins Medium's Board of Directors, will write about race and civil rights issues](#)
(ABCNews.com)

Materials

(To be shared with students)

Op Ed Piece: [Redesigning Blatantly Racist Brands is Not Enough](#) (Printmag.com)

Blog Post: [Dove Soap Could Learn Something from Children's Books](#) (Princeton.edu)

Archived Photos: Racist [Tobacco Advertising](#) (Stanford.edu)

Documentary Film: [Throw Down Your Heart](#): Bela Fleck Brings the Banjo Back to Africa

Resources:

Document Analysis Form (FacingHistory.org)

The Dangers of a Single Story Viewing and Reading Guide (FacingHistory.org)

OPVL Chart

Windows and Mirrors Handout (NationalSeed Project.org)

Teaching Strategies

Vocabulary Frames
([Tolerance.org](https://www.tolerance.org/))

Think, Pair, Share
([FacingHistory.org](https://www.facinghistory.org/))

Jigsaw ([Jigsaw.org](https://www.jigsaw.org/))

Fishbowl ([FacingHistory.org](https://www.facinghistory.org/))

Activities

1. **Journal Response**

Students write in their journals in response to the following prompt:

Have you ever felt that people form opinions about you based on the way you look? What are some of the positive opinions people might form?

What are some of the negative opinions? You can make a chart with two columns, if that helps.

2. **Create Vocabulary Frames for *Stereotype*, *discrimination*, and *Prejudice***

Students will create vocabulary frames as modeled by the teacher.

1. Write the word in the center of the card.
2. Isolate any word parts (prefix, suffix, and root).
3. Note the meaning of each word part.
4. Note the part of speech in parentheses.
5. Write the word's definition in the top right corner.
6. Write the word's opposite in the top left corner and cross it out.
7. Draw a picture in the bottom right corner to help visualize the concept.
8. Write a sentence using the word in the bottom left corner.

Activities

3. Watch a Video that Explains the Danger of “Single Stories”

- a. Tell students that they will be exploring the relationship between stories and stereotyping and what it means to have a “single story” or “single narrative” of a person or group of people.
- b. Pass out the handout The Danger of a Single Story Viewing/Reading Guide and show the video The Danger of a Single Story. Students work with a partner to create an identity chart for Adichie.

4. Discuss “Single Stories” in Think, Pair, Share

- a. To discuss Adichie’s TED Talk, have students work with a partner, using Think, Pair Share. Ask students to use the following questions as guides: (From Facinghistory.org)
 - i. Do you think it is a natural behaviour for people to sort and categorise the things and people they encounter in their lives? If so, when might it be useful? When does it become a problem?
 - ii. What does Adichie mean by a “single story”? What examples does she give?
 - iii. How did Adichie learn “single stories” about others? How did these stories impact her understanding of herself and of others? How did these single stories impact the choices she made at home and in her travels?
 - iv. What enabled Adichie to change her “single story”? What are other ways for these types of stories to change?
 - v. According to Adichie, why can “single stories” be dangerous? What is the relationship between “single stories” and stereotypes?
 - vi. Why is it that people sometimes make the same mistakes that they so easily see others making?

Activities

5. Write about the Connection between “Single Stories” and Stereotypes

Students choose one or more of the prompts (below) to explore in a journal response. Students can use their resources, such as their identity charts, vocabulary frames, definitions of *stereotype*, and notes from this lesson to help make connections between “single stories” and stereotyping.

1. “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” (quoted from Adichie’s [TED talk](#))
 2. What “single stories” have you noticed that others have about you? What dilemmas have you experienced when others view you differently than you view yourself?
 3. What “single stories” have you noticed that you hold about others? What dilemmas have you seen arise when we view others differently than they view themselves?
 4. What steps can you take, or have you taken, to challenge these “single stories”?
-

Activities

Day 2

1. Discuss Windows and Mirrors

- a. Handout the Window and Mirrors handout.
- b. Discuss representation of different groups in media: books, movies, advertisement using these guiding questions:
 - i. Why might it be important to see yourself represented in media?
 - ii. Why might it be important to see people that are different than you in media?
 - iii. What are the challenges of representation of minority groups?
 - iv. Who should get to choose how groups are depicted?

(continued on next page)

Activities

2. Examine Art, Advertising, Sports and Culture: Betye Saar and Aunt Jemima; Hank Willis Thomas and Nike; Colin Kaepernick and Sports Advertising; The History of Racism in Advertising Puzzle Groups

Students are divided into five groups and each group is given a set of materials:

- a. Group one will study the materials related to artist, Betye Saar.
- b. Group two will read articles related to the decision by Quaker Oats to discontinue using Aunt Jemima.
- c. Group three will examine materials related to the history of racist advertising.
- d. Group four will study materials related to artist, Hank Willis Thomas.
- e. Group five will study materials related to Nike and Colin Kaepernick.

All groups will use OPVL charts/ Document Analysis Forms to guide their discussions. Roles will be assigned to each group: facilitator, recorder, presenter, timekeeper, and artist.

3. Students Work in Expert Groups

4. Students Meet in Teaching Groups

5. Synthesize and Reflect as a whole group

This can be spread over two days if necessary

Activities

Day 3, 4

1. **Watch Documentary: *Throw Down Your Heart, Bela Fleck Brings the Banjo Back to Africa***
 - a. Reflect on the artwork, *Sambo's Banjo* by Betye Saar
 - b. Students take notes using the Iceberg method (if desired) as they watch the film. Be ready to answer the following questions:
 - i. Why was the banjo allowed to be carried by slaves coming to the U.S.?
 - ii. Why were slaves who could play the banjo considered “trip insurance”?
 - iii. What did the ability of slaves to play music do to the argument that they were “subhuman”?
 - iv. Why did blacks stop playing the banjo as much after whites started to adopt it?
2. **Think, Pair, Share:** Students use Think, Pair Share to discuss their thoughts on the film and connects they have made to earlier material.
3. **Whole Group discussion: Connect “Golden Threads”** At this point, some students may have made the connection from the image of breakfast (Aunt Jemima, Cream of Wheat), to the image of the fruit (Betye Saar’s *Sambo’s Banjo* piece), to the image of the window (Betye Saar’s *Black Girl’s Window*), the soap (“History of Racist Advertising”, Dove Soap Ad), the athletic shoes (Hank Willis Thomas and Colin Kaepernick, and Nike) and the banjo (Betye Saar’s *Sambo’s Banjo*, and Bela Fleck’s Documentary).

To Be Continued:

At this point, the unit continues, drawing from various sources (Facing History, Teaching Tolerance, Zinn Educational Project) and intertwined with artwork, music, poetry, historical documents, current events, and essays. From the banjo documentary, we learn about the protest songs of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie; Inscribed on Their Guitar & Banjo: “This Machine Kills Fascists” and “This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces it to Surrender.” We learn about the Music of the Civil Rights Movement

From here, we move on to an article about A 'Forgotten History' Of How The U.S. Government Segregated America (which Guthrie wrote about) and an old news article from the Newberry Library Digital Archives, called Confessions of a Block-Buster in Chicago. This takes us to learning about The 1963 Chicago Public Schools Boycott and Student Demands from the East LA Walkouts.

The image of the spelling bee medal symbolizes the achievement gap but also references one of the items left by Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We talk about Scout and how, even as a child, she addresses issues of race.

From here we learn about The Children's March and this links us to the photography of Roy DeCarava, the music of Mahalia Jackson and an essay by Teju Cole called a True Picture of Black Skin that examines the work of DeCarava and discusses the history of Kodak film and light meters that made it difficult to photograph black skin.

To Be Continued:

From here we move to the photography of [Dawoud Bey](#) through a podcast featuring him with Cole. This takes us to the [The Underground Railroad](#) as Bey's [recent work](#) features photographs of sites along the northern route to freedom. The work is named after the poem [Dream Variations by Langston Hughes](#), which takes us to the work of Hughes, [Gwendolyn Brooks](#) and [Morgan Parker](#). The cover of Parker's book is a photograph by Artist, [Carrie Mae Weems](#). Weems had a new variety of Peony named after W.E.B Dubois which takes us to an [audio story](#) about the memorial built to him at The [University of Massachusetts](#). This leads to a discussion on [Dubois](#) and [Resistance to Anti-Miscegenation Laws](#). Circling back to the peony- in Greek mythology, the peony is a plant of healing and was often used by ancient women to ease the pain of childbirth. This takes us to the discussion of the [disparity in mortality rates of white and black women in childbirth](#). This brings us to the art of [Lorna Simpson](#), and [Ellen Gallagher](#), who discusses disparities between black and white women, particularly surrounding beauty products and hair. We tie it up by looking at the poetry of [Nayyirah Waheed](#), focusing on this one:

you don't have to be a fire
for
every mountain blocking you.
you can be a water
and
soft river your way to freedom
too.

--options

Summary:

In the end, we see that everything is connected; the threads of history, popular culture, the arts, and the way that we move through the world all have an effect on ourselves and on each other. I have found that, when presented with information about difficult subjects, children often feel helpless at first. The hope with this unit is that children can see how much their choices, their beliefs, their actions matter. Much of the actions of the artists, poets, musicians, writers, athletes, marchers, and even those of the fictional character of Scout, are quiet, “soft river” responses to the world around them, however, they are intentional, thoughtful, and informed and they do make a difference.

COVID Considerations:

In the event that learning would need to move to a remote platform, I am comfortable working in this capacity. This year, when we needed to switch to remote teaching, my current school moved to virtual learning without missing more than a day of school. I have been teaching full days remotely via Zoom and the Google suite since mid March.

Sources for materials are all imbedded as links in this lesson and unit. The lessons could easily be made to work in a remote learning setting, by accessing all of the resources online and by utilizing breakout rooms and the Google suite.