

# I Resist/I Celebrate Portraits

A Curricular Encounter by Linda Hoeptner Poling

## TEXTURES

THE HISTORY AND ART OF BLACK HAIR



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# I Resist/I Celebrate Portraits

Section: Hair Politics

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*Grade Level:* All (split: Celebrate: K-5; Resist or Celebrate 6-12)

*Expected Length:* 2 – 3 class periods

In this lesson, students will engage in a variety of activities that confront, deconstruct, and rewrite the narrative of the “Black hair is bad hair” stereotype that pervades many mindsets. They will make the choice to either resist and reconstruct a narrative, drawing our focus to the injustice of a harmful stereotype they encounter or are aware of; or celebrate some aspect of identity politics that affect them personally. They will then stage and create an Instagram-like digital photograph using props that enhance and communicate their message.

## Artworks/ Artifacts

**Nakeya Brown, *Hair Portrait #3* from the *Refutation of “Good” Hair* series, 2012** (page 124)

Nakeya Brown powerfully confronts the “Black hair is bad hair” stereotype in her photograph *Hair Portrait #3*, a narrative she says is even ubiquitous in the Black community. We see the smooth texture of the hairpiece she is literally consuming, and the contrasting texture of the natural hair on her head. We are uncomfortable, looking into her eyes, as she consumes the narrative of ingesting the “good” hair while supposedly wearing the “bad” hair. Her gaze and direct eye contact challenges us to reconsider how societal standards are being forced down her throat, and to instead believe that Black hair is indeed beautiful hair.

**Keturah Ariel, *Internal Battle*, 2013** (page 115)

The decision to have natural or straightened hair is complicated for Black women and is a reality that impacts day-to-day experiences that remain hidden to that part of the population who cannot relate. Facing criticism for either decision—to straighten or to grow one’s hair out naturally—is clearly shown in the conflicted expression in Keturah Ariel’s work *Internal Battle*, something Keturah was inspired to depict following a friend’s admission with the personal conflicts about growing their hair out naturally. Black women face criticism for growing their hair out naturally; they also face criticism for straightening their hair. *Internal Battle* is a call for solidarity among Black women who face this criticism.

***Wanted by the FBI: Angela Davis, 1970*** (page 120) + **images of Afros and natural hair**  
(supporting artworks)

Angela Davis, known for her civil rights activism and intersectional feminist work, is also known for her Afro hairstyle. She was wanted by the FBI—and later acquitted—for kidnapping and

murder. The images on the FBI wanted poster were plastered around the country. The hairstyle Davis wore became associated politically with “militant and disruptive behavior” and unfortunately contributed to the oppression of Black women who wore their hair in the same style then and who arguably wear their hair the same way today. Davis did not style her hair as a political statement, yet popular culture gave rise to this enduring belief. Contemporary celebrities such as Prince, Zendaya, and Bruno Mars of Silk Sonic, Tracee Ellis Ross, Colin Kaepernick and many other well-known Black icons have donned and reclaimed the Afro and natural hair and have been vocal about their reasons for doing so, inspiring countless others to do the same.

***Curly Cues* booklets, 1974** (page 144)

***Happy to Be Nappy*, picture book written by bell hooks, illustrated by Chris Raschka** (1999), (supporting artwork):

A children’s book that expresses joy for all kinds of Black hair, for all ages: hooks, b. (1999). *Happy to be nappy*. Hyperion books for children.

**Matthew A. Cherry, *Hair Love*** (video; supporting artwork)

Matthew Cherry won an Academy Award for Short Animation in 2019 for his 7-minute film, *Hair Love*. View the film at <http://www.matthewacherry.com/hair-love>. This film focuses its story on a young Black girl, Zuri, dreaming of a variety of hairstyles and turning to her father, Stephen, to work his magic and to style her hair for the first time. “This story was born out of seeing a lack of representation in mainstream animated projects, and also wanting to promote hair love amongst young men and women of color. It is our hope that this project will inspire.” A native of Chicago, Cherry was recruited to play football at the University of Akron where he played all four years and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in media. *Hair Love* will be a new animated series following the life of the family.

### Key Vocabulary

Resist: to withstand the action or effect of.

Celebrate: to acknowledge something significant or joyful.

Self-portrait: a visual depiction of oneself.

Identity politics: Coming out of the various social movements of the 1970s, identity politics is the assertion “that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” (Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” reproduced in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Rutgers University Press, 1983.) Read more at <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/identity-politics-friend-or-foe>. One’s own identity is primary. Contemporary applications of identity politics describe people of a specific race,

ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, economic class, disability status, education, religion, language, profession, political party, veteran status, and geographic location—one’s own context matters.

Stereotype: a widely held, fixed, and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

## Objectives

(K-5) Critical Inquiry:

Students will identify the various ways in which bell hooks, Matthew Cherry, and Keturah Ariel depict Black hair as something worthy to celebrate.

(6-12) Critical Inquiry:

Students will identify the various ways in which Nakeya Brown and Keturah Ariel resist, deconstruct, and then reconstruct images of resistance when it comes to images of Black hair.

**National Visual Art Standard:**

**Connecting:** *Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context*

**Anchor Standard:** *Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding*

**Enduring Understanding:** *People develop ideas and understanding of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art*

(K-5) Art History Inquiry:

Students will examine the artworks of Keturah Ariel’s *Hair Portrait #3*, Matthew Cherry’s *Hair Love*, bell hooks and Chris Raschka’s *Happy to Be Nappy* and compare and contrast how each uniquely celebrates Black Hair.

(6-12) Art History Inquiry:

Students will examine the artworks of Nakeya Brown’s *Internal Battle*, Keturah Ariel’s *Hair Portrait #3*, the 1970 poster, *Wanted by the FBI: Angela Davis*, images of celebrities and famous people with Afros and natural hair styles, and compare and contrast how each showed acts of both resistance to and celebrations of Black hair, and reflected points of pride in identity politics.

**National Visual Arts Standard:**

**Connecting:** *Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.*

**Anchor Standard:** *Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art*

**Enduring Understanding:** *People develop ideas and understanding of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art*

(K-5) Aesthetic Inquiry:

Students will discover how Keturah Ariel’s *Internal Battle*, bell hooks’ *Happy to Be Nappy*, and Matthew Cherry’s *Hair Love* serve as vehicles of celebration of parts of Black identity and pride.

### (6-12) Aesthetic Inquiry:

Students will discover how visual culture images of the Afro and the 1970 poster, *Wanted by the FBI: Angela Davis*, influence our thinking as well as visual consumers of images, in ways that result in negative stereotypes.

#### **National Visual Art Standard:**

**Responding:** *Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.*

**Anchor Standard:** *Perceive and analyze work*

**Enduring Understanding:** *Individual aesthetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.*

### (K-5) Studio:

Students will design and create photographic self-portraits in the style of Instagram, the online American photo and video sharing social networking service, using props that are personally meaningful to them, identifying which parts of their identity they celebrate and take pride in and then highlight those aspects through the Instagram-like photograph.

### (6-12) Studio:

Students will design and create photographic self-portraits in the style of Instagram, the online American photo and video sharing social networking service, using props that are personally meaningful to them in one of two ways 1. A resistance portrait that addresses a stereotype; or 2. A celebration portrait showing aspects of identity politics, highlighting an aspect of their identity in which they take pride.

#### **National Visual Arts Standard:**

**Creating:** *Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.*

**Anchor Standard:** *Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work*

**Enduring Understanding:** *Artists and designers experiment with forms, structures, materials, concepts, media, and art making approaches*

## Materials

Props

Stations for photographing/staging

Camera (Anything from students' own cellphones to the school's own camera's may be used, as suitable)

## Prepare/Discuss/Create

Instagram-like "Resist" self-portraits showing what they resist (older students) or what they celebrate (younger students); working with props and partners to document

### **K-5**

Show Matthew Cherry's 7-minute film *Hair Love*.

In the film, Zuri remembers her mom saying: “Just took a little bit of work, and a whole lot of love,” one day when her mom did her hair.

*What does this mean to Zuri?*

Then we see Zuri’s dad put down the laundry basket and ready himself to do Zuri’s hair. He scans over all of the hair products. He sees the pink hat. Zuri blows it away with the hairdryer. Dad relents and picks up the comb and goes into what seems like a field of unyielding hair that “fights” back in a boxing ring.

*Do you think this is Zuri’s perception, or is it Stephen’s perception? Why?*

After some attempts at using hair ties, Zuri and her dad look at each other. He tries the hat again, upsetting Zuri. She runs to her room, watching a hair tutorial, the same we heard earlier in the video. It reminds her (and the viewers) that it just takes a little confidence. The video blog, we learn, is actually her mom, and the assistant model is Zuri. Zuri shows her dad, who smiles, and he now has renewed confidence to give the hairstyling another try. The two play the video from the start. We see the steps, and Zuri and her dad are now going through the steps.

*Why is it important that we see the steps between father and daughter?*

*Once done, we see dad go in for a fist bump. Instead of a fist-bump, Zuri lunges in for a hug.*

*Why is that important?*

Dad and Zuri then get ready, Zuri grabbing a piece of paper from her wall; dad getting dressed in a button-up shirt. We then see them enter a room. Zuri’s mom is in a wheelchair in the room. They have flowers for her. Her full head of hair is covered by a headwrap.

*Why do you think this is important in the film?*

Zuri hands her mom a drawing of a bald woman who is wearing a crown.

*Zuri’s mom is obviously moved by this. Why?*

She then removes her head wrap and Zuri touches her smooth head and the family share a group hug. Zuri’s mom is wheeled out of the room and Zuri and her dad then share a fist bump as they turn out the lights. In the credits, we slowly see Zuri’s mom’s hair grow back.

*What were the lessons learned in this film for Zuri? For Zuri’s dad? For Zuri’s mom?*

Next read bell hooks’ and Chris Raschka’s *Happy to Be Nappy*:

What does the book teach us about the joys of Black hair? Framing Black hair in a positive way centers this lesson. However for historical references to the negative framing of the word “nappy” see “The Racial Roots Behind the Term ‘Nappy,’ by Michael Paulino at <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/08/09/412886884/the-racial-roots-behind-the-term-nappy>, as well as excellent essays in the TEXTURES catalog.

Suggested questions for discussion:

*What do you like about your own hair?*

*What do you like about your friend's hair?*

*Why do you suppose some people are happier with their hair than others?*

*How do we fix that?*

*What can you do today to make someone feel better about themselves if you knew they did not feel good about their own hair?*

Next, let's look at *Internal Battle*, by Keturah Ariel. A friend told her how much they struggled with growing out their hair naturally. Suggested questions for discussion:

*Here we see another way of looking at Black hair. It is not exactly celebrating it like bell hooks did. But we do see a connection to Matthew Cherry. What is Keturah's struggle like?*

(Her struggle is the internal battle of listening to society about what beauty means. Or *not* listening to society's rhetoric. She, like all other women, have to make this choice and not be swayed, but be decisive in her own way).

*Why is it important to listen to yourself when making decisions?*

*What can society do to help make the decision-making process easier?*

*What can society do to help the subject in Keturah Ariel's painting be able to celebrate her hair instead of being in "battle" with it?*

Now let's think of something about yourself you would like to celebrate, something about yourself that we can look at or represent and say "yes! That is--"

We will be taking our photos to preserve how amazing we are, for the world to see, to celebrate our hair and whatever else we want to celebrate, just like bell hooks did and the other artists we looked at today. Now think about what you like about yourself. We are going to make a self-portrait. What prop or item will you use to make your self-portrait stand out? Once we print them all out, we will hang them in the hall for everyone to see and celebrate with us all the unique qualities that make us who we are

Team up with a partner. Interview each other first. Each of you ask the other: what part of yourself do you celebrate? Then brainstorm together about what prop you could use to really show that part you are celebrating. If you are celebrating your hair, could you bring in some of your favorite hair ties, barrettes; or a crown or tiara; or a favorite hair covering/hijab, and put them all over your hair? What about your athletic ability--could you show a running stance in your favorite pair of running shoes? Are you musical? Do you sing? What prop could you pose with? Are you a quiet person who loves to read and think and observe? What book would you pose with? The possibilities are endless! Talk with your partner to help you brainstorm if you get stuck. We all have something to celebrate about ourselves. Our friends can help us decide on which to focus on.

*\*Teachers: make sure you have permission from parents/caregivers on file to take pictures of your students. Be sensitive to each child's social-emotional needs. If a child is introverted, for example, do not attempt to force them out of their comfort level; suggest instead that they pose for their photos in a way that conceals their identities in a way that they are comfortable with*

(e.g. face hidden behind a book). Consider children's stress levels when it comes to exposing other contextual factors. You know your students best. Honor children's choices and voices.

## PREPARE/DISCUSS/CREATE

### 6-12

Begin by showing a collection of Googled images of Afro hairstyles of men and women, including celebrities students might know. Ask:

*What do you know about the history of the Afro hairstyle?*

Then show *Wanted by the FBI: Angela Davis, 1970*. Share contextual information about Angela Davis, civil rights activist and intersectional feminist, who was also known for her Afro hairstyle. Discuss how she was wrongly charged and later acquitted for kidnapping and murder and how the Afro hairstyle Davis wore became associated politically with "militant and disruptive behavior." This unfortunately contributed to the oppression of Black women who wore their hair in the same style then, and who arguably wear their hair the same way today. A negative stereotype of the Afro was created.

Juxtapose the Davis image with Nakeya Brown's image, *Hair Portrait #3* from the *Refutation of "Good" Hair* series. Brown powerfully confronts the "Black hair is bad hair" stereotype in her photograph *Hair Portrait #3*, that she says even is ubiquitous in the Black community. We see the smooth texture of the hairpiece she is literally consuming, and the contrasting texture of the natural hair on her head. Ask:

*Why are we uncomfortable looking into her eyes?*

*Is she ingesting or vomiting the hair? Why is the hair in her mouth in the first place?*

We know that she "consumes" the narrative of ingesting the "good" hair while supposedly wearing the "bad" hair (her natural hair). Her direct gaze and eye contact with us, the viewer, challenge us to reconsider how societal standards are being forced down her throat, and the throats of all Black people, and to instead believe that Black hair is indeed beautiful hair.

Now, I'm going to ask you to think about something that school doesn't often give you the time and space to think or talk about. We are going to lay down some ground rules for today's discussion.

1. We will be open and listen to people and their thoughts and ideas.
2. We will use the correct terms for gender, pronouns, race and ethnicity.
3. We will not use shortcuts or nicknames for people's names.
4. We will allow everyone to speak.
5. We will question ideas--not people.

Now that we know we all will have the chance to contribute and be heard:

*What do you feel is "being forced down your throat"?*



Let's look at another work. Keturah Ariel's piece *Internal Battle* shows another aspect of the "good hair/bad hair" struggle. *What can we do to show that it is not OK to make someone feel less than they are feeling having straight/natural hair?*

Let's talk about identity politics. The Black Lives Matter movement started long before the killing of George Floyd; but it is one example of a social movement drawing attention to one's own context. Coming out of the various social movements of the 1970s, identity politics is the assertion "that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," reproduced in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Rutgers University Press, 1983. Read more at <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/identity-politics-friend-or-foe>. One's own identity is primary. Contemporary applications of identity politics describe people of a specific race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, economic class, disability status, education, religion, language, profession, political party, veteran status, and geographic location—one's own context matters.

So the question is,

*What is it about your own identity that you celebrate? That you claim/fight for/assert?*

Ariel and Brown are depicting a form of identity politics in their art. Now, it is your turn. You may think of this as a *form of resistance to* or as a *celebration of*—

*What stereotype do you resist, or what do you celebrate?*

Here is your challenge:

Create either 1) A resistance portrait that addresses a stereotype; or 2) A celebration portrait showing aspects of identity politics, highlighting an aspect of your identity in which you take pride.

Create an Instagram-like self-portrait, with at least one prop that helps tell the story or message.

*\*Teachers: make sure you have permission from parents/caregivers on file to take pictures of your students. Be sensitive to each child's social-emotional needs. If a child is introverted, for example, do not attempt to force them out of their comfort level; suggest instead that they pose for their photos in a way that conceals their identities in a way that they are comfortable with (e.g. face hidden behind a book). Consider children's stress levels when it comes to exposing other contextual factors. You know your students best. Honor children's choices and voices.*

**Studio model:** ....*And Watch Her Run It*, by Christina Timmons

Reflect

"Positive vibes only critique" using classroom platform, e.g. Google Classroom, Schoology, etc. Ask students to post one positive comment about each of their classmates' portraits, stressing

that comments should center around celebrating that which is good about their classmates' qualities and what is seen and highlighted in the portraits.