

Navigating Complicated Spaces

A Curricular Encounter by Linda Hoeptner Poling

TEXTURES

THE HISTORY AND ART OF BLACK HAIR



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Navigating Complicated Spaces

Section: Community and Memory

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Grade Level: Middle – High School

Expected Length: 2 – 3 class periods

Navigating spaces in which one might expect to feel safe expressing one's identity, including one's gender identity, can be challenging and complicated. Teachers can be guides for students in navigating journeys through everyday complicated spaces. In this lesson, students investigate through collage in what spaces and with whom they feel free to express themselves. We assert that this lesson is indeed important in furthering dialogue and support for students' identities and gender expressions and encourage educators to assess the climate of their school and community to create needed support in order to teach this lesson as appropriate.

Artworks/Artists

Devan Shimoyama, *Elijah*, (2020) (page 55)

Devan Shimoyama, a mixed media painter, confronts and critiques associations with traditional Black masculinities and reimagines the Black, queer, male body. In his *Cry Baby* project, he wants the viewer to examine prejudices often experienced against queer bodies in barbershops. Here we see a queer man with a variety of objects that at once seem joyful and celebratory with feathers, rhinestones, and jewels, but then one realizes there are tears coming from the subject's eyes, which can be interpreted as vulnerability, and as tension between the common perception of barbershops as spaces of security and solidarity and Black queerness. The clippers seem ominous and threatening, yet the figure is captive and vulnerable. The everyday space of a barbershop becomes a complicated space that the subject, a seemingly Black queer male, must navigate.

Annie Lee, *All That Glitters*, (open edition) (1935-2014) (page 57)

Annie Lee, born in Gadsden, Alabama, raised in Chicago, Illinois, began making art professionally in her 40's. Her work depicts the everyday lives of Black people. In *All That Glitters* we see similar subject matter as that in Shimoyama's *Elijah*, but in this case, there clearly are no hints at feelings of insecurity. The women shown are conversing and seem at ease, showing each other their necklaces. The lack of facial features—a hallmark of Lee's work—do not give the viewers any clues to the emotions of the figures shown. Are they at ease in this space, or are they not? Is this a safe space for the women to be themselves, or is the beauty salon also a complicated space, hidden due to the exclusion of facial features which might otherwise give the viewers hints to their emotional states of being?

Texas Isaiah, *Don't Kill This Vibe*, (2019) (supporting artwork)

The first trans photographer to shoot a cover for *Vogue* magazine in 2020, Texas Isaiah calls himself a “visual narrator” and feels safest behind—not in front of—the camera. Fierce in protecting his own identity, Isaiah typically does not allow photos of himself, and instead reveals the identities of others, with their permission and collaborative help. In his intimate works he invites his individual subjects to participate in the photographic process, shifting the power dynamics back to his subjects and their own bodies, empowering them to reveal their identities as much as they feel safe in doing. Isaiah builds a connection with his subjects prior to photographing them, guiding them as they navigate their sense of both digital and physical space. Acknowledging this complicated terrain was powerfully seen in the September 2020 British *Vogue* cover depicting Janet Mock, a Black trans woman activist—a significant “first” for the queer community (<https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/texas-isaiah>).

Key Vocabulary

Collage: art made by assembling different media and materials together, often juxtaposing disparate elements, styles, and media against each other to create something entirely new; for example: digital elements alongside hand-drawn elements.

Dominance: the element given the most visual weight in a composition.

Palimpsest: a page which contains partial text that has been scraped, concealed, or washed off so that the page can be reused for another document.

Safety/Security: the state of being free from danger or threat.

Additional Vocabulary (recommended)

Gender expression: describes the way in which we present or express our gender, which can include physical appearance, clothing, hairstyles, and behavior. We have control over some elements of our gender expression, such as behavior, body modification, or ornamentation. (The Trevor Project)

Gender perception: is based on other people’s evaluation of our bodies, which unlike our gender expression, we cannot control. We cannot visually see someone’s sex when we look at them, but people perceive gender based on a variety of visual and social cues, including but not limited to a person’s gender expression, secondary sex characteristics, and the social role they are playing relative to the expected gender of that role. (The Trevor Project)

Cisgender: people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. (The Trevor Project)

Queer: people whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not heterosexual or cisgender.

Transgender: people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Many transgender people transition to align their gender expression with their gender identity; however, one does not have to transition in order to be transgender. (The Trevor Project)

Nonbinary: people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as outside of the male-female gender binary. Many other words for identities outside the traditional categories of man and woman may be used, such as genderfluid, genderqueer, polygender, bigender, demigender, or agender. These identities, while similar, are not necessarily interchangeable or synonymous. (The Trevor Project)

References

The Trevor Project: Saving Young LGBTQ Lives: Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth

The Collage Ideas Book, by Alannah Moore (2018), ilex

Materials

Discarded maps, atlases, architectural plans, floor plans

Photographs (color or black and white): actual or printed from digital files

Other print material that is age-appropriate showing a variety of spaces and environments

Popular culture references e.g., youth-oriented magazines

Objects students identify? that embed personal meaning (e.g., ephemera [collectible memorabilia], contemporary fan-oriented items, jewels, beads, rhinestones, feathers, etc.)

Decoupage glue or other school glue

Glue stick (glue sticks that apply one color and dry clear can be helpful to assure more complete application)

Low-temp glue gun + glue sticks

Objectives

Critical Inquiry:

Students will investigate how everyday spaces and situations aren't always what they seem to everyone, and how Devan Shimoyama's work, *Elijah*, uses imagery to symbolize personal themes that challenge the viewer to think of traditional spaces differently.

National Visual Art 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: *Through art making, people make meaning by investigating and developing awareness of perceptions, knowledge, and experiences.*

Art History Inquiry:

Students will compare and contrast the ways that Devan Shimoyama in *Elijah* and Annie Lee in *All That Glitters* navigate identity in the everyday spaces of barbershops and beauty salons.

National Visual Art Standard:

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

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

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

Aesthetic Inquiry:

Students will identify how Texas Isaiah in *Don't Kill This Vibe*, Devan Shimoyama in *Cry Baby*, and Annie Lee in *All that Glitters* shine a light on how spaces can enable/disable our ability to be truly ourselves/our true identities.

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.

Studio Inquiry:

Students will design and construct a mixed-media collage investigating a personal “complicated space,” incorporating elements of dominance and symbolism.

National Visual Arts Standard:

Creating: Creating and developing new artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Enduring Understanding: Artists and designers balance experimentation and safety, freedom and responsibility while developing and creating artworks.

Prepare/Discuss

Gather discarded maps, old magazines, decommissioned magazines from library sales, ephemera items from garage sales and thrift stores.

Gather discarded frames, pictures, canvases, and other flat structures that could be suitable for mounting collages.

Gather scraps of paper and organize by colors, patterns.

*Take care not to cut/collage family heirloom photographs. It is recommended to photocopy any pictures/items brought in by students.

Prepare

In order to have an open and honest discussion about the work of Devan Shimoyama, become familiar with the terms and concepts in *The Trevor Project: Saving Young LGBTQ Lives: Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth*. Practice using correct terminology, pronouns, and honorifics (the use of respectful titles or forms of address) of your students. Make a conscious effort to model inclusive language that honors all of your students’ sexual orientations and gender identities. Key questions to guide discussion about the artworks, artists, and big idea of “complicated spaces” include:

Teacher Reflective questions *prior* to the lesson:

When we think of *complicated spaces*: Where are people trying to create safe spaces but are failing? Where are people creating safe spaces and people are thriving? What can we do as educators in our own classrooms, in our curriculum, and in our language, to assure all students’ identities are honored?

Discussion *during* the lesson:

Think about in which spaces you feel most secure and safe; is it with family? With friends? In another space in your community? What is it about that space and the people in it that makes you feel like you can be “you?”

Now think about a different kind of space that is more complicated; a space in which you don’t feel as safe, or as secure, or a space in which you have to hide your true self or a part of yourself or a part of your identity. What is it about that space or the people in that space that makes you feel that you have to hide parts of yourself?

Now let’s look at some artists who have thought about these questions, too. We are going to talk about some important identity issues alongside some complicated spaces. Know that everyone’s identities are their own and that we all deserve to be in spaces and with people with whom we feel we can be our true selves.

Barbershops have a distinct reputation for being epicenters of communities where men, often Black men, can meet and be their true selves. Devan Shimoyama does not feel this way as a queer person confronting a traditional masculine space in which cisgender men typically meet. What does it mean to be a queer man in this space? A masculine man in this space? How does Annie Lee’s work differ from Devan Shimoyama’s work?

Now let’s look at Texas Isaiah’s work. As the first transgender man documenting a trans woman activist for the cover of British *Vogue*, and hearing how he works behind the scenes with his subjects, how does Isaiah navigate complicated spaces?

All three artists work through ideas of complicated spaces as well as through ideas of identity, much of it about gender identity and gender expression. Now let’s move into thinking about our own personal spaces and situations, complicated or not. In my collage, I’m showing my son with whom I share different political views. This poses a very complicated situation in our relationship. The one place we can uncomplicate our time together is out in nature, where “shade” and “gardens” and “roots” become metaphors for healing, and we find common ground literally and metaphorically.

Use the idea generator below to help with your collage:

Teacher’s note: the worksheet is designed to be two sided.

REFLECT and Think About...

What is/Where is an uncomplicated space/or a time in which you feel like you can be your true self?

Setting: where will your space be—a space that is complicated or uncomplicated and safe?

A complicated space or a time or situation in which you feel like you must hide parts of yourself:

Next, CREATE:

- Think of the background first: What will your bottom layer be?
- Then play with layers: Will you use a map? A palimpsest?
- What are the symbols, if any?
- What is the dominant visual image, or that which you want the viewer to focus their attention on? Think of it as the thing that has the most visual “weight”—what do you want to stand out the most, if anything

*Don’t glue any pieces down until you have pieced them together and you are satisfied. Take a picture of the composition with your cell phone first once you have decided on your final composition. Consider:

Do you want any one thing to stand out and be dominant in the composition? How can you make that thing stand out—draw on it to highlight it? Make it the largest thing in the composition?

A map might serve as a metaphor for a journey; or it might mark an actual place. How might you use imagery and objects to symbolize your ideas, like Shimoyama used the clippers in his work?

A *palimpsest* is a page which contains written words or partial text that has been scraped, concealed, or washed off so that the page can be reused for something else —will you scratch out the text? Use the black-out poetry method in which you select words to censor while leaving others? Scratch out words randomly or highlight others? Make your choices meaningful.

Patterned paper or repeated images can create visual interest, too.

Images of people, whether they are of people you know or not, will draw the viewer’s eye there. Make your choices meaningful to you.

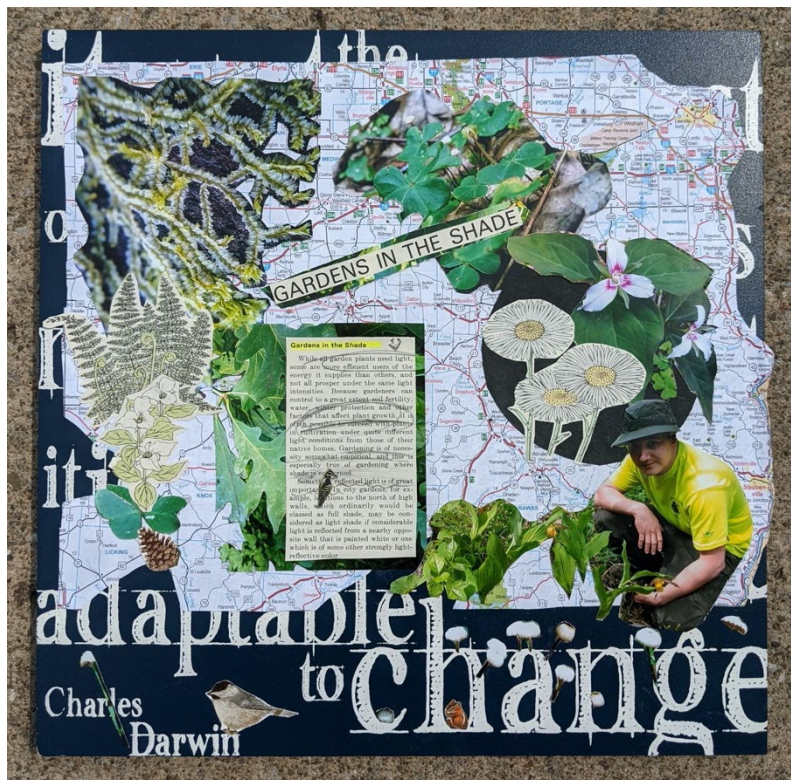
Who will the people in the space be? Yourself? People you know? Printed images? Magazine or photographs? Ephemera? How will you pick your images?

2-D Embellishment: Will you add hand-drawn elements with markers? Pencils? Sharpies? Will you cut and paste letters to form words/phrases?

3-D Embellishment: What 3-D items will you add to enhance the meaning?

Consider: Hybrid creatures: bringing together seemingly disparate elements to create a whole new entity.

Consider: Creating texture by peeling, ripping, and layering paper.



Studio Model: *Gardens in the Shade*, by Linda Hoeptner Poling

Reflect

Use the strategy of *Blackout Poetry*, a form of “found poetry”, as a form of reflection on their own work or the work of their peers’ collages. For resources and strategies for the creative and inspiring form of reflection: <https://www.teachkidsart.net/the-art-of-blackout-poetry/>