

SEE Me/See ME: Speak Truth to Power Portraits

A Curricular Encounter by Linda Hoeptner Poling

TEXTURES

THE HISTORY AND ART OF BLACK HAIR



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MUSEUM

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SEE Me/See ME: Speak Truth to Power

Portraits

Section: Black Joy

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Grade Level: 6-12

Expected Length: 4-5 class periods

In this lesson, students control how they want others to see them, celebrating those things in which they take joy, whether they are physical qualities, accomplishments, moments, facets of their identity, people with whom they are close, or any other things that they want to draw attention to, as opposed to those surface features they feel others often see and highlight first instead. Self-love, cultural pride, and thriving imbue this lesson, as does Speaking Truth to Power.

[Artworks/ Artifacts](#)

James Van Der Zee, *Harlem, ca. 1940* and *Portrait of a Black Girl in a Dance Outfit, 1936* (page 148)

Van Der Zee's photographs provide important documentation of life in Harlem before World War II, showing Harlem residents, travelers through Harlem, institutions of Harlem, and community events within Harlem. Van Der Zee is credited with documenting the rise of the new African American middle class and was known for using props, backdrops, and other items that reflected the fashion and styles of the time. The figures shown in these two photographs exude joy and contentment, in part due to the addition of the props and additional items that Van Der Zee helped curate.

Kehinde Wiley, *Tanisha Crichlow (portrait of Henrietta Maria of France, Queen Consort of England, Scotland and Ireland), 2015* (page 161)

Kehinde Wiley asks both strangers as well as friends to sit for portraits in which he reimagines influential roles from history--a history that largely overlooked Black people. In the reimagining, Black people now assume a sense of authority, voice, and ownership of their individuality, despite the adoption of some of the European court fashion as seen in this work. Tanisha's tattoo is visible; her hair shows magnificent curly extensions, and braids that range in hue. Her Black skin contrasts with expectations of what one might normally see in this time period, forcing the viewer to adjust their thinking and their gaze.

Olaf Hajek, *Black Antoinette #001, 2017* (page 147)

Reimagining the infamous Queen of France, Hajek says of his series of Black Antoinettes: “My idea was to create an image of luxury, opulence, and beauty which has nothing to do with wealth and prosperity. I adapted the idea of Marie Antoinette and created a ‘Black Antoinette’ who is wearing the idea of the whole nature on her head—the beauty as well as the birth and death and the evanescence.” Read more at <https://www.brwnpaperbag.com/2017/04/27/olaf-hajek-black-antoinette/>. Changing the context in this way through objects and context changes our perception of what we see and what we know and what we thought we knew.

Key Vocabulary

Embroidery 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. In this kind of collage embroidery thread is sewn into the images becoming the topmost layer.

Emphasis: Visual importance, value, or prominence given to something in an image.

Contrast: Enhancement of the apparent brightness or clarity of a design provided by the juxtaposition of different colors or textures.

Speak Truth to Power/Speaking Truth to Power: A movement to defend human rights around the world, begun by Robert F. Kennedy, whose primary vehicle is storytelling and education. See <https://www.speaktruthtopowerinschool.com/speak-truth-power> for resources.

Objectives

Art History Inquiry:

Students will compare and contrast how Kehinde Wiley in *Tanisha Crichlow (portrait of Henrietta Maria of France, Queen Consort of England, Scotland and Ireland)*, James Van Der Zee in *Harlem*, and *Portrait of a Black Girl in a Dance Outfit*, and Olaf Hajek in *Black Antoinette #001* pose the subjects of their portraits in positions of power, imbuing their subjects with the ability to Speak Truth to Power.

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.*

Studio:

Students will create an embroidery collage addressing their own voice to Speak Truth to Power, highlighting that which sparks their inner joy and strength in themselves, through contrasting colors and emphasis of images.

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.*

Aesthetic Inquiry:

Students will deconstruct and debate if a White male artist, in this case Olaf Hajek, in his work *Black Antoinette #001*, can shine a light and perspective on the need to Speak Truth to Power, by utilizing a Black model from the lens of a Black individual. In other words, students will debate the questions: can a White person represent the Black experience?

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*

Materials

Embroidery floss, various colors
Embroidery needles (pointy are best, as opposed to blunt)
Needle threaders
Scissors
Glue sticks
Colored pencils
Markers
Copier paper or other inexpensive paper
Cardstock or other sturdy paper for support
Student-chosen imagery

Preparation/ Discuss

Visit Speak Truth to Power website at <https://www.speaktruthtopowerinschool.com/classroom-resources#defenders>. Select a “Defenders” story from the “In Their Own Words” resource, or from the “Digital Lesson” resource at <https://www.speaktruthtopowerinschool.com/sites/default/files/pdfs/RFK-STTP-Sparking-Chagngge-Powerpoint-PDF-V1.pdf> (e.g. teens Mari Copeny “Little Miss Flint” or Ashton Mota stories).

Discuss: How might people view these individuals knowing nothing about their backgrounds or stories? How might they be *seen*?

Now, read their stories. Pick one. What is their story? What does it mean to *speak truth to power*?

Is it possible to speak truth to power right here, right now, in “XYZ town/village/city”?

Now think about all the ways people see you. Have you ever felt seen and acknowledged for something? Yes? That feels good, right? But I am guessing there are things that we wish others would also see and acknowledge, too, that they often overlook. What if we could take control and make them see what we want them to see? To make them see the parts of you that you want them to see?

Next discuss the works of James Van Der Zee, Kehinde Wiley, and Olaf Hajek. Ask:

How does each bring a sense of *joy* to the sitter in each portrait? How does each bring a sense of *power* to the sitter in each portrait?

Now think of what each would say. If possible, project each image, with a word bubble next to it. Allow students to either post a hard-copy word bubble dialogue next to each image, activating the “Speak Truth to Power” of each portrait, one by one, or in your school’s platform (e.g. Google Classroom; Schoology), allow students to add to a Google shared document what each might say. Complete for each portrait revealing each subject’s “Speak Truth to Power” statement.

Next, create an anonymous poll (Kahoot (using pseudonyms, Google forms, etc.) Suggested questions:

Black Antoinette #001 should be on the screen: This image is a joyful image. It shows Black joy. True or false: Only a Black artist could have created this work.

Pause and discuss the results.

Help students through this discussion. Ask if race of the artist matters. When does it matter? It is anticipated this conversation will be uncomfortable. Remember, the theme of this lesson is situated within Black Joy.

Next, share with the students that Olaf Hajek is a White artist. Were they surprised? Why? Does it change their reaction to *Black Antoinette #001*? How did he reposition how we see Marie Antoinette and her power? How is it different knowing he is a White man? We certainly want to center the voices of Black artists in our curriculum for a plethora of reasons, as they have been historically overlooked. Having conversations like this are important. Debate: Does race of the artist matter when it comes to depicting experience? When we look at *Black Antoinette #001*, did it surprise you to learn that Olaf Hajek is a White and male artist? Why or why not? Give specific reasons.

Now, let’s get back to our quest for joy and Speaking Truth to Power in your own art.

After looking at James Van Der Zee’s celebration of Black identity in the Harlem Renaissance in his photographic portraits, or Kehinde Wiley’s reclaiming and repositioning of power of the Black sitters of his painted portraits, now it is your turn to Speak Your own Truth to Power. To do the same and create a work in which you control how you want others to see you; to control the joy, to speak truth to power, to reveal the narrative for all to see. In my portrait, I wanted to show others that I get many compliments about my hair, and I’m grateful for them, but what I

really want others to see--*really* see--is the real me. The “me” that works in service to others in the many roles I assume as a mom, as a professor and educator, as a community member, as a leader, as a volunteer. And I am a published author, too. But you wouldn’t know that by looking at my hair, would you? But I got to Speak Truth to Power in this portrait and control how others see ME.

Create

Start with an image, printed on copier paper.

Next, decide on the background: how will it enhance the message? Will it be comprised of words? Printed images? Hand-drawn images?

Print a collection of images that you can experiment with placement--will you conceal your face, and draw attention elsewhere? Or highlight your hair and add attention to it like Wiley and Hajek did in their work? Remember: we will be adding embroidery enhancement. At this point, we are printing images to collage. We are playing with placement at this point.

With your collection of images, now it is time to decide on placement and what you want to emphasize. What do you want to stand out or to be visually most important? In other words, this is what artists do when they place emphasis on elements in a work, whether it is through color, contrast, etc. Make sure you think about this before placing your pieces down permanently; play with the placement of your images. Take pictures with your cell phone of a few ideas BEFORE gluing the pieces down.

Next, decide if you want to add color with marker or colored pencils. Copier paper ink can be dull. Color can make the images pop.

Your last step is to layer your image on cardstock, another piece of copier paper, or other paper so that the floss is supported. Now it is time to add the embroidery floss embellishment to make your collage even more powerful. The floss is a great way to add emphasis to the parts of the collage you want, to add meaning and symbolism, or to be purely decorative. What images or parts of the images would you like to pop with the colored floss? Or would you like to add an overall effect with the colored floss? Think about contrasting colors. **Resource video for simple embroidery techniques:** *Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Handi-hour Crafting: Embroidery on Paper* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iCRIClxEO4>.

Don’t worry too much about what the back looks like--no one will see it!



Studio model: *I am more than my hair (but thank you for the compliment)*, by Linda Hoeptner Poling

Reflect

Mount the Speak Truth to Power portraits on the wall. Share the prompt: *What truth is your classmate speaking? What do you know now that you didn't know before? What is their joy?* Give each student three sticky notes. They will write the answer to three of their classmates randomly assigned by you, assuring they do not get their own. Allow 10-15 minutes for writing and posting the notes near the works. Give time for students to circulate and read each other's interpretations of the works. Then gather around the work. Ask for volunteers to share their work and impressions of the work. Ground rules: only positive and constructive feedback may be given. Students then may volunteer to share content of their personal sticky notes and if the content was close to or different from the actual intent of their Spoken Truth to Power. The teacher should act as a role model for positive dialogue, assuring each student is highlighted for their Truths.