

**The Celebration of color: How the literature of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s inspire us to find internal beauty and grace**

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...Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need of my care,  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.<sup>1</sup>

*-Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou*

**Abstract**

Reading this excerpt from the poem *Phenomenal Woman* written in 1978 by African American writer Maya Angelou, a storm of emotions and visions exploded inside of me. As an artist and an art educator, I can fully envision how Angelou's poems celebrate African American men and women; at the same time, they are a testament to the trials of black (African Americans) people in this country, the United States of America. Either explicitly or implicitly, white Americans, who have always been the majority in U.S., are held accountable in Maya Angelou's poetry for the prolonged abhorrent disregard of the civil rights entitled to every American. Gifted with the art of words, Maya Angelou's poems have a comprehensive universal language that constantly commemorates the beauty and pride of the African American people. I believe Maya Angelou's poems have not completely ostracized white Americans. Quite the contrary, her poems are generous in their directness, light in weight, and humorous about body image, cultural

characteristics and stereotypes alongside with her outrage and pain. In the end, I believe they are a well-written symphony that is heard in a spirit of rejoicing. The words in the poem *Phenomenal Woman* are a rich and full embrace of life. They are truly celebratory, taking pride in the way a woman looks, feels, and carries her self.

I have found this celebration within Maya Angelou's poetic words and songs to have stirred my soul, energized my body, liberated my mind, and healed my heart. It makes me wonder, what emotional roller-coaster ride would other African American writers from this time period take me on? The magnetic attraction between the confident words, rhythmic jazz - like sounds, and visual images created in my mind has lead me to ask myself over and over again: how and why do the context of these words and their historical origins - empower, impact, as well as liberate people? Writers as well as artists have a message or story that they want to convey and a corresponding response they wish to evoke from their reader or their audience. What is it that makes an American writer, especially an African American writer, feel compelled to have these words communicated and remembered? To find the answers, I need to return to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—1960 to 1970s—during a time in which these passionate words by Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, and other amazing writers originated. In this time when the questioning of civil rights and liberties had reached a saturation point by the masses, I believe there was a great need for words of empowerment, a time when strong voices echoed for people to hear them.

## **Introduction**

Although I was born in India, I came to Parma, Ohio, as young child in 1972. As I grew up, I became aware of the similarities I shared with all the children and people in Parma. Quietly, however, I was made aware of how I was different. I realized how my name, the food I ate, the language I spoke, the clothes I wore, and the way spices smelled on my skin, all were “different”. The one difference that was pointed out to me the most, however, was the color of my skin. Being naïve, I never took it offensively when I received stares and turned faces - I “masked” my feelings just like so many did. Paul Lawrence Dunbar stated in his famous poem, *We Wear the Mask*: “We wear the mask that grins and lies / it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes”<sup>ii</sup>. I believe these two lines from his poem deal with the idea that we, those who have been stereotyped, tend to put on a façade (a mask) in life, hiding our true inner feelings and selves in order to better conform to society. In the line “with torn and bleeding hearts we smile”<sup>iii</sup>, I believe Dunbar wanted to speak to the experience of pretending to be happy while hurting on the inside. As a young child, these memories made a deep impact on me.

My mother always loved me unconditionally, without any reservations – a way in which all children should be loved - the way Tess’s parents loved and believed in her in the book *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin. To this I attribute my confidence and pride of identity. I was able to hold my head up and walk with a sense of optimism and purpose. I didn’t even notice or see that I was one of two “dark” skinned students in my elementary school. As I grew older, I was the only one in my middle school, and one in five in my high school.

“Quiet or hidden racism,” as I liked to call it, took place when my family and I were away from home. Upon our return we would always find rolled toilet paper on our trees, BB gun holes in our windows, or raw eggs smashed in our windows and on our cars. Naïveté soon passed and grew to ignorance; it seemed to explain my lack of understanding for all these acts at the age of eight. My mother would mask her feelings about these acts of prejudice, never revealing what she really felt. My father was the opposite. He came to America in 1969, a time when many immigrants came – to thrive and prosper. With English as his second language, and the status of a minority in this country, he was determined to take pride in his culture, but he also adopted, ironically, the ideals of racism towards other Americans. He would always tell me not to take the bus, or go on the east side of Cleveland. He had in him a fear I never understood. Yet, my father had built a strong definition of racial prejudice towards the white people in Parma who cowardly committed these acts. My ignorance persisted, perhaps as a shield: I didn’t see color in skin; I just saw a beautiful spectrum of people. I was then left to choose how I wanted to react to this racial prejudice and take action. My personality was never quick to judge. I just remember questioning “why?” I hadn’t studied in school why prejudice was happening in the 1970s to my family. There was no teacher who addressed the racial prejudice I was experiencing, or how the town I lived in was being integrated with cultures such as mine. I and the four other students of “dark” skin complexion were all being judged, not for our talents and abilities, but for something as trivial as a shade of a color.

As I grew up, I took the bus to go to Cleveland Institute of Art to be an artist in downtown Cleveland, the same bus my father advised me not to ride. On my rides to my college, I saw a part of town I had never seen before. To me it was, once again, beautiful. I saw all different people- African American, South American, Caribbean, Hispanic, Asian, as well as people who were of mixed races and cultures. It was as if I had opened my eyes wider to see more of the life that had surrounded me. I don’t believe I had the same fears my family and friends had. They had always judged a person based on the way they looked, a stereotype someone had spoken of often, or on the 6:00 criminal news report. I felt myself distancing my opinions as I read books such as *Roots; The Saga of*

*an American Family* by Alex Hailey and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. I watched the mini-series/ movies that were made from them and adopted the characters and the American history with both sorrow and joy. My love for art and culture lead me to complete my education at Parsons School of Design in New York City where my vision of the world expanded even more. As an adult now, I am surrounded by all cultures, made up of all colors. I am fortunate to be teaching the importance of imagination and creativity as an Art teacher. The High School I teach at is Mallard Creek High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, a school filled with diversity. It is an international mini-world that everyday coexists harmoniously, for the most part. But I am an adult, and I am not naïve or ignorant anymore; I know prejudice still lurks all around me, as well as the “quiet hidden racism” I knew as a child.

My memories of the past have led me to recall a recent memory, a moment I am most proud of. A moment, I believe, of celebration. When both my daughters first spoke of their desire to have a doll, the color of the doll’s skin they wanted was their own. With pride they wanted a custom made doll that had their perfect shade of brown because in their eyes, it was beautiful and “normal”. The idea of not having to question what both my daughters felt aesthetically beautiful without prejudice is most liberating as a mother and a woman in 2012.

## **Background**

I believe as an art teacher, I take this optimism, this ideal with me everyday in my diverse group of creative students. I am fortunate to teach Contemporary craft and design in both the introductory levels as well as the intermediate levels. These classes combine both the utilitarian aspect of art with the aesthetic experience of art. This combination is a perfect way for students to see the relevancy and need for art making. At the beginner level of Craft and Design, I am often told, “Art isn’t that important, why do we need to learn about art?” My answer is “without art, you would be standing naked in a forest.” This statement often leaves the students without a response, a rare moment. I begin to explain how the school they are in has been designed by an architect, the chair they sit in has been designed by an interior space designer, the clothes they wear have been designed by a fashion designer, and so on. My students begin to see how the very choices they have made with their clothing, bags, and shoes are aesthetic decisions, what they find beautiful and attractive to their eyes. Soon the full understanding of art and design is one they are living everyday at every moment of the day. Introducing and making connections of both foundations of art: the elements of art and the principles of design are essential tools for successful introductory art making.

At this stage of their artistic development, my students have a newfound confidence on how to make connections between researching cultures and histories in association with their own cultural identity and lineage. Students will learn to use this confidence to contextualize research directly with the art making process. In this unit my students will study color and its representations. Thus, identifying connections made between art-history-literature and how it is relevant to them personally today. A higher level of morals, ethics, values, and respect toward one another will be cultivated in the environment of my classroom. I believe in this environment I can introduce the unit on celebrating color as it is defined in Visual Art, as well as in the Literature of the Civil rights movement.

## **Rationale**

I want to take my students on a journey where they are surrounded by the words and art of African American writers and Artists from the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement in prose, song, music, performance and visual art. I would like for my students to become aware of and understand the deep American history that has inspired the emotions felt by these writers and artists. How is it that the work these writers have created is not read and studied in our public school system? How can I get my students to become inspired to create from the images and stories we will see and hear? I believe my students will feel moments of pride and shame as they learn of the actions taken by so many African Americans during this blatant disregard for civil liberties in America. I want to show students contemporary movies where they may learn of their American history through an actor familiar to them, speaking the words of writers such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni, and Toni Morrison. By making the words and their histories relevant to my students in a contemporary/ 21<sup>st</sup> century way, I will be able to engage them in a dialogue about “race” and “color”. Each student will then interpret literature as a visual art form.

## *Common Core*

As Common Core Standards are beginning to be initiated in our district, it is especially important for each teacher to contemplate the new parallels unit plans have to these Standards. In North Carolina, the visual arts have The Essential Standards which communicate what students should know and be able to do as a result of instruction at each proficiency level: beginning, intermediate, proficient, and advanced (Grades 9-12).

The standards are defined using three strands: Visual Literacy, Contextual Relevancy, and Critical Response. All three strands refer to (1) the language of art and how it is organized and communicated (2) the application of knowledge in the visual arts in relation to history, culture, heritage; and (3) how the how art is analyzed to generate responses. Below is my attempt to ensure that I integrate these standards into my teaching.

Significant appreciation and study of works of art initially begins with close observation. Similarly the Core Standards in Visual Literacy define reading as the result of continual observation and attention to detail. Each time a sculpture, painting, photograph, or any other work of art is viewed, without question a second viewing or glance follows. Similarly, poetic writing deserves careful consideration and reconsideration. This is the amazing quality about the arts – visual or performing. It can train students to gaze and look again, to watch and listen until one really hears. A friend once read a quote by CS Lewis in which he writes this about looking at a painting or reading a book carefully: “We must look, and go on looking, until we have seen exactly what is there...the first demand any work of art makes on us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.”<sup>iv</sup>

Much of this unit relies on the relationship between the Literature and art of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement and the student’s response. Students will be both studying works of art and the words of poems and stories through careful observation. They will then be asked to “read” for signs of aesthetic meaning. I put the word read in quotes because my students may not read in a traditional way. My students will read art through sketching, reciting, performing, analyzing in a critique format, and many other methods of “reading” art – both visual and in literature form. The Core Standards in Literacy requires that analysis include the ability to cite that evidence as the basis of understanding. Of course, we draw on sources of historical reference as evidence outside of a text and a work of art, but the standards insist that students come to understand with evidence from the particular work of art or text they encounter. This encounter or meeting is where inspiration is drawn from. Part of what this kind of close attention includes is noticing and analyzing the choices artists as well as writers make—choices such as what is the object or focal point of a painting, sculpture, or a poem, to how it is composed, to color, to light to all the choices that accumulate to make a work of art. Good and careful readers examine the choices writers and artists make—their choice of specific words and broader choices—of how to order events and develop characters—of what to say.

## Content Objectives

I want my students to merge two similar disciplines – Literature and Fine Arts. In order to facilitate this merger, I will first introduce the historical influences of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement in the literary works written during this time period. Although the message of the Civil Rights Movement is familiar to my students, the message of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) may be vague or unknown. In my opinion, I found the underlying message of liberation in the Black Arts Movement was not meant to undermine the civil rights movement. On the contrary, the African Americans in the United States were celebrating their presence, their culture, their “Blackness”. This liberation suggested if the African Americans as well as other cultures whose civil liberties were being disregarded and revoked were to unite as one voice - all would thrive and prosper. This is what the American culture is established on – the idea that each citizen, no matter their race or religion has the ability to thrive and prosper.

In order for my students to understand why there was a need for liberation, I will first have them read articles that explore the meaning and origins of the word race, of being black or African American here in America. Lawrence Blum, an educator/Professor in Massachusetts, wrote, “Racial literacy is not the same as telling students how to think about politically controversial racial topics like racial profiling and affirmative action. But without an accurate understanding of race, they cannot have an informed opinion on those issues.”<sup>v</sup> Group discussions and activities relating to what the word race means to each student is the first step in comprehending and identifying with the word race. In my unit I would like to define racial literacy and inform the student about what it means to have an informed opinion after reading a variety of works by writers of the Civil Rights era.

First, I believe we must define race. As Lawrence Blum candidly put it: “The whole idea of race, an arbitrary means of classifying people by skin color, was created to rationalize slavery and to privilege white people over all other groups”<sup>vi</sup>. Mr. Blum has written an article in the Harvard educational press titled *5 things high school students should know about race*. In the article he states:

“If students leave high school informed about the history and social reality of race and enabled to discuss it with other students, especially of different racial groups, they can avoid the strain and discomfort that so often accompanies race talk. They will be better able to have the

conversations we need to have. They will be better-informed citizens and more comfortable and constructive members of our multiracial and multiethnic democracy.”<sup>vii</sup>

This is the world we live in; this is the environment my students are surrounded by on a daily basis in a multiracial and multiethnic high school. The literature I will have my students read will focus on issues of race, and allow students to reflect with honesty, incite and humor. I anticipate the lessons I teach will have: challenging moments of unexpected turns in conversation, the invigorating inspirational directness of students’ questions, the amazing “aha” moments and the unforgettable awkward ones.

### **Exploring the Literature**

My unit will start with the poem, and title of the book from Maya Angelou’s, *And Still I Rise*. Maya Angelou, an amazing African American writer, audaciously writes an inspirational poem about the emerging significance of African Americans during the nation’s civil rights movement. “ Out of the huts of history’s shame / I rise / Up from the past that’s rooted in pain / I rise”, in this excerpt of the poem Maya Angelou exclaims the strength and pride of the African American people. I believe this poem channels the expression of the free spirit of all African Americans through the voice of one woman who speaks of overcoming the hardships of the beginnings of the race in America. Maya Angelou is famously known for her ability to talk intimately and with detail about her personal life. Within her books she focuses on racism, family and identity in an attempt to expand what is typically regarded as the autobiographic genre.

In another poem *Phenomenal Woman*, from the book *And Still I Rise*, I believe Angelou conveys three overall arching themes: optimistic pride, confidence, and a sense of celebration. My students will study each and every line of the poem. Lines such as:

“Pretty women wonder where my secret lies /I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size /But when I start to tell them They think I’m telling lies. I say, It’s in the reach of my arms The span of my hips, The stride of my step, The curl of my lips. I’m a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That’s me ”

address questions of beauty and self-acceptance. The concept “Black is Beautiful” was a constant catchphrase in a time where I believe people needed to hear it and understand it.



All young people, especially the students I teach, are concerned about size and how they carry themselves. Angelou celebrates her own size and tells others to do likewise. Pride is replacing a prejudicial stereotype of the “black body”. In the movie *Poetic Justice* by John Singleton, Janet Jackson, a singer and actor, recites Maya Angelou’s poem *Phenomenal Woman*. By seeing a clip from the movie, students will see how famous contemporary people interpret poetry in a performance – making the entire literary experience relevant using all the senses. Ruthie Foster, a contemporary African American singer, performs the same poem on a stage in song with the drums and the jazzy sounds of the saxophone. Maya Angelou has recited her poem countless times in front of audiences, allowing so many to experience her words. I was fortunate to witness an esteemed Professor and friend perform *Phenomenal Woman* by Maya Angelou. With all the sultry softness, the pauses and the short breaths, the flicks of hair and nods of her head, my friend ignited all that was woman within me. After that experience I recognize the importance of feeling the words with our senses. My students will begin to interpret this poem visually after watching and listening to so many performances.

Students will then read poems from the book *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, especially the title poem *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, by Nikki Giovanni. I believe Giovanni takes on the task of coming to terms with and loving who you are in a world that might not ever accept it. Although she was speaking of a world in the 1970’s, I believe her underlying theme still resonates in the lives of my students today – the struggles of identity and acceptance. Many of Nikki Giovanni’s earlier collection of poems, such as *Black feeling*, *Black talk*, *Black judgement*, focused on more political issues. I know students will understand the struggle our fellow Americans have had to endure leaving a bitter, frustrated, and at many times angry taste in their mouth. Though *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* was first published in 1978, I believe the poems are timeless and can be understood by any reader, from any walk of life who has dealt with the issues of identity and self-definition.

Giovanni has a confident way of making private matters public in a way that does not abuse or attack the senses. I personally would like to bring out the mature, sensitive side of my students. As they read, I wish for my students to interpret the softness as well as the deep meaning in Nikki Giovanni’s words. Interpreting these words would simply become natural, a visual extension to the art of poetry. My students as the readers can almost hear her honest and powerful voice whispering her poetry as they read along. The structure of the book *Cotton Candy on Rainy Day* has poems that seem so realistic. The way Nikki Giovanni gives details I feel like she has experienced those challenges or she has been surrounded by them in her own life.

In several poems in this book, Giovanni addresses the woman's inability to define herself in a male-dominated society with frustration and finally the understanding and self-acceptance is born from this plight. However, her tone in the poem *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* does not shift from fluid and conversational.

“ I strangle my words as easily as I do my tears  
I stifle my screams as frequently as I flash my smile  
it means nothing  
I am cotton candy on a rainy day”<sup>viii</sup>

The feeling of being trapped and yet still facing each moment of life with the mask we wear is a common theme most students find relevant in their lives. I want the words to take them to a place they know and understand first, and then I can help them find their own voice in the art they create. This is the reason I believe this book has so much to convey and interpret. In this next excerpt from *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, Nikki Giovanni connects the lush rich words of poetry with the visual vocabulary of fine art.

"I share with the painters the desire  
To put a three-dimensional picture  
On a one-dimensional surface."<sup>ix</sup>

A biographer, Virginia C. Fowler interprets this statement in her book *Nikki Giovanni* by stating, “Nikki Giovanni, like the painters, desires a goal impossible of attainment but nonetheless worthy of Pursuit.”<sup>x</sup> This is a direct link between the two disciplines – literature and art. It leads me to ask my students how are the disciplines of painting and poetry similar? What is this passion this desire that is so difficult or impossible to attain? Do you think Nikki Giovanni is successful in her attempts at using words to portray life? My students will begin their journey through reading, writing and art making.

The next journey will be to study a quote from the book *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison. My students will analyze how the character Pilate interprets the meaning and symbolism found in the ‘colors’ around her. Morrison writes:

“And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain't.

There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still, it moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow.”<sup>xi</sup>

This quote is full of emotions and color. My students will learn to visualize color just by hearing and reciting these words. Once they have read this quote, we will discuss its meaning using our visual, tactile, and auditory senses. Vocabulary both in Visual arts and Literature will be tackled simultaneously using various group activities. The students will dissect the meaning behind the words with the historical references Toni Morrison originally wrote from. Pilate had a talent for detecting different kinds and shades of color in the world around her, and she connected these colors with recollections of memories and emotions. I know my students will connect with this character. Toni Morrison defines the meaning of “dark” as a color and its relationship to an entire spectrum of “black”. We as a class will discuss the metaphors related to colors such as purple – often associated with royalty. In the book *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, the characters were treated the opposite of royal, they were degraded and dehumanized by white Americans. Color will be looked at in a visual way as an artist, in a historical way in the context of the civil right movement, and in a literary way – once again, as an artist. I wish to ask the question: Why not be proud of who we are and how we look? This question alone can set off many inspirational visual art lessons, but for now I will focus on one – how we look.

Toni Morrison’s book *Beloved* has a famous, powerful ‘sermon’ by the character Baby Suggs that celebrates how all the African Americans looked, and how they should look and feel about themselves.

“Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love our hands! Love them! Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either’. You got to love it, you!”<sup>xii</sup>

After viewing a clip of the entire sermon by Baby Suggs in the film adaptation of *Beloved* directed by Jonathon Demme, students would understand the historical and cultural

reference of the hand gestures made while the words from the quote were spoken. Due to the graphic nature of the words spoken, a detailed discussion into the historical meaning of words such as “tie” and “chop off” will take place for those students who do not make the connections with slavery and lynching. It is important to explain to students what the African American people of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* were and had been experiencing. I do not wish to leave my students with just the historical connections of these powerful words. I believe Baby Suggs was attempting to embrace the beauty, grace and joy found in laughing, crying, singing, dancing, touching – in all that should be celebrated in humanity. Her hands expressed all the words she said as they rose high in the sky, as they made fists, and as they caressed her arms. With this connection to words and hand gestures, I will begin to teach my unit.

### **Teaching Strategies:**

At this stage of their artistic development, my students have a newfound confidence on how to make connections between researching cultures and histories in association with their own cultural identity and lineage. Students will learn to use this confidence to contextualize the research directly with the art making process. In this unit my students will study color and its representations, thus identifying connections made between art-history, literature, and how it is relevant to them personally today.

The Students in my Intermediate *Contemporary Craft and Design* class will create a 3-Dimensional Body Art Sculpture inspired by the physical gesture of words rhythmically arranged in poems written by various African American poets from the Civil Rights Movement. As a class, they first will read and research the books and poetry I have introduced in this unit by Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. I will also show clips of powerful speeches, photographs of demonstrations, readings of famous novels and poems, all to begin a dialogue on how to read and interpret the readings students are to explore in this unit. Students will study how artists, actors, films, and, athletes such as: Muhammad Ali, Tommy Smith, and John Carlos, Elizabeth Catlett, the movie “ The Great Debaters” directed by Denzel Washington (from an article written about Wiley College debate team), and other clips of poetry spoken by current actors.

This initial part of the project identifies the students with personal, hands on, understanding of 3-Dimensional Form (an Element of Art) and 2-Dimensional line (an Element of Art). Students then investigate their own cultural identities by painting their

skin tone, thus linking Culture with Art via the Element of Art - Color. The mixing of the paint color is an extended lesson because of its complex subject matter taken from the text and poetry of the writers we have studied. The results will show how students in Contemporary Craft and Design have the ability and confidence to create bold, daring, graceful, and expressive gestural sculptures honoring their American culture and identifying with it.

### **Activities:**

Students will begin lessons in this unit with a variety of methods of literature and technology:

- There are a number of videos on YouTube that show Maya Angelou reciting her poem “And Still I Rise”. My students will watch one and interpret the difference between reading it and seeing it performed.
- My students will watch Janet Jackson speak the words of Maya Angelou’s *Phenomenal Woman* in the movie, *Poetic Justice*. Students will also watch Ruthie Foster sing Angelou’s words recorded in a live concert. Once again, interpretation will be the focus for the literature to art activities.
- Students will listen to on the computer of Nikki Giovanni reciting the poem *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*. How are the words spoken different from the way they are read? We will have multiple group brainstorming activities.
- A hand out that has the quote below as well as a poem from *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* By Nikki Giovanni. “Writing is ... what I do to justify the air I breathe,” Giovanni wrote, explaining her choice of a vocation in *Contemporary Authors*. “I have been considered a writer who writes from rage and it confuses me. What else do writers write from? A poem has to say something. It has to make some sort of sense; be lyrical; to the point; and still able to be read by whatever reader is kind enough to pick up the book.”<sup>xiii</sup> Students will analyze what the emotions she is feeling means to them and how they would interpret their own emotions in a writing prompt.
- Students will study both Toni Morrison’s books: *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Quotes taken will be analyzed and interpreted visually using various activities.

- Students will watch and research reality shows that illustrate the themes of race, cultural diversity, pride in culture, and many more topics covered in this unit. This will be done on the school computers in the library or the computer lab.
- Students will view artwork by African American artist Elizabeth Catlett. She pays homage to the poets of the 1960's to 1970's. The body language and hand gestures she creates in her sculptures speak loud and clear. Students will physically study the sculptures draw them.
- Students will listen to a rhyming video montage of images and videos of Muhammad Ali. His hand gestures expressed a strong message, which will resonate with the males in my class.
- Students will study the hand gestures made by Olympians Tommy Smith and John Carlos. Students will learn of the story of the two 1968 Olympic Athletes in Mexico who raised their hand in a symbol of Black Power and how the world reacted to it.

I will then introduce - Gestural hand drawings based on the listening to one excerpt of a poem of their choice.

1. In groups of four, students will choose a poem to read – slowly one stanza at a time.
2. Next they will break up into pairs of two students. One student will read the stanza over and over again – making hand gestures to express the words. Students have freedom to express their hands and arms in whichever position words take them.
3. The student in front of them will then draw the gestures their partner find best represents their stanza. The hands as well as the arms are to be in the gesture drawings.
4. Once one students' gestures have been drawn, the opposite student will draw their gestures.
5. The gestures will become a visual dialogue between the words of the poem and their visual interpretations.

6. I will then have a one-on-one in-person critique with each student to select the final drawing. Students will then draw horizontal and vertical lines to create a 3-Dimensional drawing of their hand gesture.

A trip to the library will allow students to find books and/or work on a computer and research historical, cultural, and social issues at the time the words of the literature were written. Students will learn about the authors of these poem, short stories, songs, etc. At this time, other works by other African American writers may inspire students. With this full body of information, students will be able to add more visual detail to their 3-Dimensional Hand Sculptures.

- Once students have gathered this information, each student will present a small oral report performance with in 5-10 minutes. In this report, the students will be able to answer 5 key questions in a conversation style performance report.
  1. What was the real meaning behind the words – the poet’s intent?
  2. What is the historical, cultural, and social impact that inspired these words?
  3. What visual imagery is created when you read their work out loud? Name five descriptive words that immediately come to mind.
  4. Does the work differ in reading it in your head as apposed to out loud? How?
  5. What type of response do you want or expect to get from your audience? What did you do to get it? (With your voice, your body actions, the rhythm of the words you spoke, your pauses, etc.?)
- Students will then take all of this contextual information from the literature as well as the creative expression from their oral “performance” report and translate it visually into their hand gesture drawings. Their final gesture drawings will have even more meaning as they add the Element of Art Value (by shading darks to lights) in order to create a 3-Dimensional Hand Gesture.

- Next the word “color” will be studied as an Element of Art as well as a literary metaphor for race in the poetry we read. Students will take all this literature and historical information and become inspired to create a 3D Body art sculpture in their own personal skin tone. The subject art and literature will align side by side as I teach color theory and literary metaphors found in the poetic literature.
- Once students understand how to create their own skin tone, they will proceed to make a plaster cast of their hand in the gesture they have drawn.
  1. Students will work in pairs; one student will cast at a time.
  2. Students will first prepare strips of plaster gauze strips for casting
  3. Students will put baby oil on the hand(s) and arm(s)they are casting.
  4. Students will dip the plaster strip into water and apply it onto their hand.
  5. At this time students must remain completely still, holding the gesture exactly as they have drawn it.
  6. As students apply the strips onto their arms and hands, they will be sure to overlap the strips so each strips will attach to one another. Both the student and the partner will work on smoothing the wet plaster on the strips in order to have a smooth result.
  7. Students will allow the cast to dry for about 20 minutes before removing the cast from their hands.
  8. The following day, students will take liquid plaster and apply a thin layer over their Plaster hands.
  9. After 24 hours students may sand the plaster with fine sand paper (#220)
  10. The next day, students will apply a coat of gesso – a painting primer – onto the plaster cast hand gestures.
  11. Students will be taught a number of color blending and color theory skills and techniques.



12. Students will use their color techniques and skills to paint their own skin tones onto the Plaster cast hand gesture. Students will add shadows and highlights based on the personal meaning of their 3Dimensional Hand Sculptures.
  13. After the painting has been completed, students will construct a stand for the way they would like their sculpture to be presented.
- In the end students will present their sculpture in a class presentation and reflect on their art making and its process by writing a formal critique. Oral presentations will follow with an audience of invited guests from different classes, other teachers, administrators, and parents.

## **Materials**

1. Drawing paper and a variety of graphite pencils
2. Plaster gauze Sheets –to be cut in strips
3. Oil (Baby Oil) to protect hands
4. Powdered plaster – make into a liquid to apply onto strips for a smooth finish
5. Acrylic Gesso – to apply over the liquid plaster
6. Acrylic Paints, Brushes, and Pallets
7. Wood for a base – if desired

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup>Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*(New York: Random House,1994)130-131

<sup>ii</sup> Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*(New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co.,1913) 71

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*(New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co.,1913) 71

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iv <http://blog.artsusa.org/2012/09/17/common-core-architect-adds-to-blog-salon-discussion/>

v <http://hepg.org/hel/article/553#home>

vi <http://hepg.org/hel/article/553#home>

vii <http://hepg.org/hel/article/553#home>

viii Nikki Giovanni, *Cotton candy on a rainy day: poems* (New York: Quill, 1980,1978) 8

ix Nikki Giovanni, *Cotton candy on a rainy day: poems* (New York: Quill, 1980,1978) 8

x Virginia C. Fowler, *Nikki Giovanni* (New York: Twayne Publisher, 1992)

xi Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 49

xii Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 104

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xiii <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/nikki-giovanni>

### **Visual Resources for Students and Teachers**

Maya Angelou recites the poem “And Still I Rise”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqOqo50LSZ0>

Ruthie Foster sings her interpretation of the poem “Phenomenal Woman” live on stage in Anchorage, Alaska  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZLLfUX\\_jOE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZLLfUX_jOE)

Elizabeth Catlett, “Bather”(2009), Sculpture in wood.

Elizabeth Catlett, “Homage to My Young Black Sisters” (1968), Sculpture in wood.

Muhammad Ali, Poetic video montage  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWAj5CCNLVA>

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Gary Young, *The Guardian*, Friday 30 March 2012 17.59 EDT The story of the two 1968 Olympic Athletes in Mexico, Tommy Smith and John Carlos.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

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Angelou, Maya. *The complete collected poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994. Print. Amazing collection of Angelou's poems such as 'Phenomenal Woman' that inspire confidence and pride. A great collection of poems found in various books by Maya Angelou

Angelou, Maya. *And still I rise*. New York: Random House, 1978. Print. Maya Angelou celebrates the courage of the human spirit over the harshest of obstacles. The collection of poems in this book represent an ode to the power that resides in us all to overcome the most difficult circumstances.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Black feeling, Black talk, Black judgement*. New York: W. Morrow, 1970. Print. Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement is Nikki Giovanni's first public collection of poems. In this slender volume one will be caught up in the Black Revolution of the 60's. Giovanni's voice is loud, clear and inspires all who will dare hear her.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Cotton candy on a rainy day: poems*. New York: Quill, 1980/1978. Print. The poems in this volume express the conflicts in the conscious of Nikki Giovanni and the disillusionment shared by so many during the early 1970s, when the dreams of the Civil Rights era seemed to have evaporated.

Fowler, Virginia C. *Nikki Giovanni*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. Print. The volume features: A critical, interpretive study and explication of Nikki Giovanni's works, a brief biography of the author, an accessible chronology outlining the life, the work, and relevant historical context of Nikki Giovanni.

Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print. This brilliantly imagined novel by Toni Morrison develops the coming-of-age story genre as she follows Milkman, her main character, from his rustbelt city to the place of his family's origins. Morrison introduces an entire cast of strivers and questers, liars and assassins, all the inhabitants of a fully realized black world using metaphors of each color in the rainbow.

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Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: a novel*. New York: Knopf :, 1987. Print. Morrison combines in *Beloved* her visionary power of legend with the indisputable truth of history. Sethe, the main character, works at beating back the past, but it makes itself heard and felt continuously in her memory and in the lives of those around her.

Walker, Alice. *The color purple: a novel*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. Print. Walker's main character Celie is a poor black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, filled with hardship and strife. Celie eventually is given an example of love and independence provided by her close friend Shug, pushing her finally toward an awakening of her creative and loving self.

Baldwin, James, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Vintage Books, 2006. Print. James Baldwin writes a honest and stunning novel of love in the face of injustice. Told through the eyes of Tish, a nineteen-year-old African American girl, in love with Fonny, a young African American sculptor who is the father of her child. Baldwin writes a love story that evokes the blues, where passion and sadness are inevitably intertwined.

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Haley, Alex. *Roots: the saga of an American family*. 30th anniversary ed. New York, NY: Vanguard Books, 2007. Print. Alex Haley's *Roots* was a book that galvanized the nation, and created an extraordinary political, racial, social and cultural dialogue that hadn't been seen since the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Roots* opened up the minds of Americans of all colors and faiths to one of the darkest and most painful parts of America's past. The amazing saga of an African American family's trials and triumphs was made into a mini-series that has been seen by millions.

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