

What Happens When High School Students Study the Role of Trauma in Black Art

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The most fundamental truth to be told in any art form, as far as Blacks are concerned, is that America is killing us. - Sonia Sanchez

Abstract

Much of the political and social conflict since the election of President Barack Obama, followed by one-term President Donald J. Trump is rooted in the enduring legacy of white supremacy in the United States. Just as the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 was a seminal spark in the formation of the modern civil rights movement, the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 served as the impetus for the Black Lives Matter movement. Since George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin, there has been a series of African-American women, men and children needlessly killed by police. Eric Garner, Michael Brown Jr, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are only a few of the unarmed African-Americans killed by police. The released video recording of a Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds sparked uprisings both nationally and internationally. Black artists have played a crucial role in analyzing and publicizing police brutality and this form of state violence has been a persistent theme in hip hop, "from Grandmaster Flash to Kendrick Lamar" (Siliezar, 2020). Additionally, numerous hip artists rap about the individual and collective trauma resulting from the many forces that lead to institutionalized racism and oppression (Orejuela, 2018). The artists featured in this unit unify the musical, literary and poetic mediums for revealing what trauma means for many people who experience it, and what happens when we study such art in the formal context of a classroom.

Key Words

Trauma, generational trauma, music, brain science, hip hop, Black Art, racial violence, Black Lives Matter, white supremacy

Unit Content

Context

My students are 10th and 11th graders at George Washington Carver High School of Engineering and Science in Philadelphia. Carver HSES is a two-time National Blue Ribbon School with a culturally and ethnically diverse population, 72% of whom come from low-income households. Many are either immigrants or children of immigrants. I most enjoy taking an interdisciplinary approach to writers like Chinua Achebe, August Wilson and Toni Morrison, as well as filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene and Raoul Peck. Past participation in Teachers Institute of Philadelphia (TIP) has helped me create curricular units based on the role of women in both the classic civil rights movement, as well as the Black Lives Matter era. Additionally,

TIP has enabled me to study African music, Black visual culture, and now the role of music in healing trauma. These artists and historical figures systematically examine the lives of people who live the legacies of chattel slavery and colonialism while also reinforcing that history exists as a continuum and not as a set of randomly connected events. They also examine gender, power and the inability of certain communities to establish generational wealth.

I have to come to realize that much of the curricular content that I teach at the George Washington Carver High School for Engineering and Science unveils the consequences of trauma resulting from inter-generational systemic racism, misogyny and oppression. Artists like August Wilson, Arthur Jafa, Kendrick Lamar and Jean-Michel Basquiat are able to demonstrate that trauma is widespread in American culture, and is often caused by the oppressive conditions experienced by most Americans of African descent. I have come to recognize that by illuminating the presence of trauma in art, students can gain the awareness that some forms of trauma are the result of systemic oppressions, and can often be passed on generationally.

This is Aisha (not her real name), a 10th grade student in my class during the 2022-23 school year writing about the impact of studying Black Art during the academic school year. While her comments refer specifically to an artist not featured in this unit, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Aisha's comments implicitly intersect with other Black Art and artists that we studied during the 2022-23 school year:

All artists' creativity displayed the history of African Americans, slavery, and racism to a point that it wasn't visual to the naked eye unless you really stopped, cleared your mind, and scanned over every piece of art as if you were looking up at the crystal blue sky. Analyzing so many different pieces of art opened my eyes to a new perspective of not just visualizing art but how I interpret all works of art. My favorite artist we learned about was Jean-Michel Basquiat. His work of art was more on the abstract side of things but his art wasn't like anyone else's perception of abstract. Basquiat's art made you stop and think. His art was personal. His art conveyed what he truly and most passionately believed in and that's what I enjoyed most about his art. Basquiat's art grew my passion for learning. Learning about our society, capitalism, and the hidden gems of misogynistic discrimination within huge industries such as Hollywood. Learning about the global issues of capitalism, racism, and how African Americans suffer most from these occasionally governmental issues. Basquiat was intelligent and after watching his filmed documentary, it was amazing to see how his creative ambition for art grew after all his trials and tribulations.

Writing about how I interpret different pieces of his art made me a better writer. Yes, I could and can be a better writer in all aspects but now I enjoy writing my perspective and how I interpret other works of art such as novels, plays, and articles. Studying different works of visual art didn't change my perception of the world but more supported my perspective of the world. In our world today learning about your own history is like getting the rug swept right from under you. If not everything you see on the internet is true and books and textbooks revolving around our world's history are being banned and restricted, a great learning source is visual arts.

It is clear that Aisha welcomes access and exposure to the kinds of texts that are not ordinarily featured in an English classroom, particularly when these texts challenge conventional understandings of whose stories should be represented, and what their subject matter should be—including intergenerational and individual trauma.

According to Missouri’s Early Care & Education, “individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that can have lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional well-being.” Included in the causes of individual trauma are “sexual abuse,” “traumatic grief,” “community violence,” and “loss.” All of these themes are reflected in the texts that are featured in this interdisciplinary curricular unit.

This unit is organized around three Black artists who explicitly incorporate music into their work. Similarly, these artists confront trauma, often as a byproduct of racism, oppression and other forms of systemic violence. The artists we discuss are the dramatist August Wilson, filmmaker Arthur Jafa, and hip hop artist, Kendrick Lamar. (A friendly critic might call attention to the fact that there aren’t any women artists in this unit. While I have taught several artists that explore trauma, including Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward, Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems, their works are not applicable to this project.) The role of music as a source of empowerment and healing will be examined in our study of Wilson, Jafa and Kendrick. Similarly, students will learn how some Black artists utilize their medium in order to articulate the ways in which social, political and historical forces coalesce in the formation of widespread trauma, both individually and generationally.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities

Unit I: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*: Trauma and Music

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom by the American playwright, August Wilson, is part of his extraordinary Century Cycle, in which African-American life is examined and interpreted, decade by decade. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is set in 1927 and is centered on a recording session led by the “Mother of the Blues,” Ma Rainey. According to Mariana Brandman, “Rainey’s songwriting was notable for its raw depiction of life from the perspective of a woman struggling with heartbreak, depression, and other maladies” (“Gertrude “Ma” Rainey,” 2021). In addition to being a Black woman in the south, Ma Rainey performed several songs openly acknowledging her sexual relationships with women (*Women’s Health*, 2020). Wilson, who according to Michael Eric Dyson (2015), regarded the blues to be the “sacred book” of African-Americans, explores the vital role of music as both celebratory, culturally affirming and a source of healing.

Wilson’s play is set during a fictional recording session in Chicago. Ma asserts her power in a variety of ways, including arriving late, making a series of demands, and by standing up to the two white producers, Sturdyvant and Irvin. Additionally, as the clear boss of her four-man band. Ma Rainey’s strong, independent character contrasts to that of the other principal protagonist, a trumpeter named Levee. Levee is the youngest member of the band and the most volatile. He is talented, desires to modernize Ma’s more traditional music, but is also immature and prone to angry outbursts. We eventually learn that Levee’s difficult personality stems from a profoundly

traumatic childhood event. Here is a lengthy quote from the passage in which Levee explains the event:

LEVEE: Levee got to be Levee! And he don't need nobody messing with him about the white man -- cause you don't know nothing about me. You don't know Levee. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating here! (He pounds his chest.) I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted. (Pauses.) We was living in Jefferson County, about eighty miles outside of Natchez. My daddy's name was Memphis . . . Memphis Lee Green . . . had him near fifty acres of good farming land. I'm talking about good land! Grow anything you want! He done gone off of shares and bought this land from Mr. Hallie's widow woman after he done passed on. Folks called him an uppity nigger 'cause he done saved and borrowed to where he could buy this land and be independent. (Pauses.) It was coming on planting time and my daddy went into Natchez to get him some seed and fertilizer. Called me, say, "Levee you the man of the house now. Take care of your mama while I'm gone."

I wasn't but a little boy, eight years old. (Pauses.) My mama was frying up some chicken when them mens come in that house. Must have been eight or nine of them. She standing there frying that chicken and them mens come and took hold of her just like you take hold of a mule and make him do what you want. (Pauses.) There was my mama with a gang of white mens. She tried to fight them off, but I could see where it wasn't gonna do her any good. I didn't know what they were doing to her . . . but I figured whatever it was they may as well do to me too. My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it. I'm gonna show you how spooked up I was by the white man. I tried my damndest to cut one of them's throat! I hit him on the shoulder with it. He reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it. (Levee raises his shirt to show a long ugly scar.) That's what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death.

My mama wrapped a sheet around me and carried me two miles down to the Furlow place and they drove me up to Doc Albans. He was waiting on a calf to be born, and say he ain't had time to see me. They carried me up to Miss Etta, the midwife, and she fixed me up. My daddy came back and acted like he done accepted the facts of what happened. But he got the names of them mens from mama. He found out who they was and then we announced we was moving out of that county. Said good-bye to everybody . . . all the neighbors. My daddy went and smiled in the face of one of them crackers who had been with my mama. Smiled in his face and sold him our land. We moved over with relations in Caldwell.

He got us settled in and then he took off one day. I ain't never seen him since. He sneaked back, hiding up in the woods, laying to get them eight or nine men. (Pauses.) He got four of them before they got him. They tracked him down in the woods. Caught up with him and hung him and set him afire. (Pauses.) My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man. Nosir! And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do him. That taught me how to

handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man (Wilson, 1985).

This speech is an extraordinarily powerful example of how sexual violence is weaponized by forces of institutionalized racism and oppression. It also helps us better comprehend Levee's erratic behavior throughout the play, behavior that ultimately leads Levee to murder one of his bandmates over a trivial slight. Additionally, this passage serves as an effective launching point for inquiry into one of Wilson's recurring themes: the impact of trauma on individuals and, in turn, how that trauma becomes destructive to others.

After reading this speech we will take a brief pause from the play and spend two classes getting acquainted with trauma and students will make a Prezi ([Prezi - YouTube](#)) or some other form of presentation format. Students will choose two sources from the following selections:

Sources for Learning About Trauma:

[Trauma-Informed Care | Early Connections](#)

[Trauma and Violence - What is Trauma and the Effects? | SAMHSA](#)

[Trauma | Psychology Today](#)

[Trauma](#)

https://psychology.uga.edu/sites/default/files/Slide1_4.png

Using at least two of these sources, students will respond to the following questions:

1. What is trauma?
2. What are the sources of trauma?
3. How does trauma affect the human brain?
4. How can trauma influence human behavior?
5. What is generational trauma?

Following this, students will use the Cornell Notes template to record evidence and analysis of Levee's trauma throughout *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Additionally, they will utilize evidence drawn from their Trauma Prezis in order to support their claims about Levee.

Cornell Notes Template:

https://www.google.com/search?q=cornell+notes+template&rlz=1C5GCEM_enUS980US982&oq=cornell+notes&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0i433i512j0i51213j69i64l3.7433j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8&safe=active&ssui=on#imgrc=X63HvVJ910McLM

Finally, students will use both Cornell Note data and Trauma Prezis in order to write an analytical essay.

Ma Rainey Essay: Analyzing the Role of Trauma on Levee

Directions: Your job is to compose a 1,000 word essay analyzing the role of trauma in Levee's life. Hargrove, quoted by Upham (2023) claims "When someone experiences trauma in childhood, it's often a situation where their power was taken away, or they were not allowed to voice what they felt or what they needed. These individuals were likely put in a situation that was painful or very wrong, and it's appropriate to have anger at those kinds of situations"

Here is a guide to drafting the essay:

1. Hargrove's quote certainly applies to Levee, who often flies into a rage when he feels disrespected. Identify 3-5 episodes from the play that illustrate Levee's challenging persona. How does each episode reflect upon Levee's attitude toward other people and his propensity for anger?
2. Using the following organizer draft an essay:

Directions: Your job is to compose an essay analyzing one theme that is articulated in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Feel free to use the following outline in order to structure your essay.

No one structure fits all written arguments. However, most college courses require arguments to consist of the following elements. Below is a basic outline or an argumentative or persuasive essay.

This is only one possible outline or organization.

I. Introductory Paragraph

Your introductory paragraph sets the stage or the context for the theme you are analyzing. This introduction should end with a thesis statement that provides your principal claim (what you are arguing for) and the reasons for your position on an issue stated just briefly.

A. Your Thesis:

- states your position on an issue is
- usually appears at the end of the introduction in a short essay
- should be clearly stated and often contains emphatic language (should, ought, must)

II. Body of your Analysis

A. Background information

This section of your paper gives the reader basic information he or she needs to understand your position. This could be part of the introduction, but may work as its own section.

B. Claims, Reasons and Evidence

- All evidence you present in this section should support your position. This is the heart of your essay. Generally, you begin with a general statement that you back up with specific details or examples from the text. Depending on how long your argument is, you will need to devote one to two well-developed paragraphs to each reason/claim or type of evidence. Types of evidence include:
- First-hand examples and experiential knowledge on your topic (specific examples help your readers connect to your topic in a way they cannot with abstract ideas)
- Opinions from recognized authorities

Examples

1.

Claim:

Reason:

Evidence:

Analysis:

2.

Claim:

Reason:

Evidence:

Analysis:

3.

Claim:

Reason:

Evidence:

Analysis:

IV. Conclusion

- The conclusion should bring the essay to a logical end. It should explain what the importance of your issue is in a larger context. Your conclusion should also reiterate why your topic is worth caring about.
- Some arguments propose solutions or make predictions on the future of the topic.

- Show your reader what would happen if your argument is or is not believed or acted upon as you believe it should be.

BASIC SENTENCE STARTERS

***CLAIMS** are the main ideas of your essay. Your main claim is your thesis statement.*

***REASONS** are your justifications **WHY** your claim is true.*

- One reason that _____ is _____
- Another reason that _____ is _____
- For one, _____
- For another, _____
- In addition to _____,
- Besides, _____, _____

***EVIDENCE** supports your reasons.*

- For example
- For instance
- In the instance of _____,
- Take _____, for example
- This is shown in

***ANALYSIS** shows the meaning of your evidence. Re-frame your analysis after the word “THIS.”*

- This _____ reveals...
- This _____ illustrates...
- This _____ shows...
- This _____ highlights...
- This _____ demonstrates...
- This _____ exemplifies...
- From this _____, it is clear that (rephrase your evidence) proves/shows/demonstrates/illustrates that (rephrase your main point) because...
- It is important to notice how (rephrase your evidence) proves/shows/demonstrates/illustrates that (rephrase your main point) because...
- Taken together, the fact that (rephrase one piece of evidence) and that (rephrase more evidence), clearly demonstrates that (rephrase your main point) because...
- This (illustration/graph/statistic) is indisputable evidence of (rephrase main point) because...

CONCLUSION:

- It is safe to say...
- Following an analysis of _____, it is clear that....

Students will engage in peer conferences prior to completing final drafts.

Essay writing will over five-eight academic days, and will be completed partly at home and partly in class.

Rubric for Analytical Essay:

[Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Domain Scoring Guide](#)

Unit II: Arthur Jafa and the Ethics of Teaching Black Art that Analyses Trauma:

The second unit will focus on a short groundbreaking film, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, by Arthur Jafa. This unit will only take about three days and will help me learn more about what happens when I teach texts that are infused with ambiguity.

O’Grady (2019) describes the film in this way:

Composed to a large extent of found footage spliced together, it’s a kind of D.J. mix of pure chills, spun with urgency: The white South Carolina police officer Michael Slager shooting and killing the unarmed black forklift operator Walter Scott in 2015; a black Texas teenage girl in a bikini being hurled to the ground by a white policeman two months later; a clip of the British sprinter Derek Redmond pulling a hamstring in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, followed by his father rushing to help his injured son hobble to the finish line. We see swaying crowds and iconic faces — Coretta Scott King, Nina Simone, Barack Obama singing “Amazing Grace” — as well as newer ones, like the young actress Amandla Stenberg, who asks, “What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?” In the finale, LeBron James gloriously dunks a basketball, the surface of the sun blazes and James Brown grabs a microphone stand and collapses onto a stage. A phantasmagoria of brutality and magnificence, the short unsparring film is an expansive, unshakable fever dream of blackness as both a creative force and an object of white violence, a kind of digital-age “Guernica.”

The images described by O’Grady are accompanied by a soundtrack consisting of *Ultralight Beam* by hip hop artist, Kanye West.

Deura (2022), on the other hand, characterized Jafa’s film in the following manner:

Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death tasks audiences with witnessing a strategically curated assemblage of a checkered U.S. history of police brutality, promotions of church gospel and spiritual litanies, distilled expressions of dejection, perseverance for social change, beatific animations of song and dance, articulations of sexual expression, exhibitions of athletic exceptionalism, and other acts of Black performativity and expressivity in all its awesome variety. These images graphically undulate in nature from violent, reckless, and aggressive to exulting and spiritual. Gestalt psychology would read Jafa’s work as speaking to the false prism of progress formed under accumulated experiences of trauma, repeated and reproduced [in media]—itself traumatic.

Davis, quoting Ingram (2020), offers a different reading of *Love is the Message*: “The earlier critiques—that these images were retraumatizing, that circulating them could be an act of violence itself—have had a cumulative effect on how people understand and circulate images in general and the stakes involved, the commitments that should be implied, the ways to point them toward interpretations and actions.” I share Ingram’s perspective that Jafa’s use of imagery is fundamentally generative. For example, the students I work with had a range of views on *Love is the Message*, and I think differing perspectives often leads to substantive dialogue. Consequently, I will endeavor to frame these competing perspectives prior to showing the film.

Viewing this film in the formal context of a classroom creates a wonderful opportunity to learn more about what happens when students examine trauma through audio/visual media. This is particularly relevant considering that, while our culture in general seems more willing to recognize trauma as a pervasive presence within our society, there are critics who are questioning popular art and entertainment that present Black trauma. According to Georgetown student Ajani Jones (2023), “Contemporary pop culture is filled with gratuitous explorations of Black trauma and pain across all major artistic forms. From books to films and even music, there seems to be no limit to the depiction of Black suffering despite limited Black media representation.” This concern is echoed by one of my students, Maya (not her real name). In 2022 I showed two short films by the experimental filmmaker, Arthur Jafa. Both films, *Apex* and *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, use found images, many of which are extremely violent or otherwise disturbing, accompanied by musical soundtracks. This is Maya reacting to Jafa’s groundbreaking experimental film, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*:

The film may be good for white people who will never be able to grasp the full picture thanks to not growing up in rural areas or parts where this may be common, but for black people, this is only returning anxieties that are practically natural in us and making it worse. To drag out such terrible feelings of anxiety just for having a certain complexion and return it full-force in a non-optional film viewing of black people being beat to death by white cops is quite brutal for most students, including me. I honestly just think these films are too much. The previous film we focused on contained so much gore that it gave children anxiety attacks. At the end of the day, we are kids trying to study in school, and should not be treated as full on adults as the majority of us are merely 15 or 16. This is just my opinion, however, I am not willing to take criticism for it. Not because I am offended, but you cannot, as a white and privileged teacher, make me understand the reasoning that you have to show us this film.

Maya’s response is obviously one that I take very seriously, and serves as a reminder that teachers must exercise awareness and caution when sharing emotionally challenging art. I believe that Maya’s reaction is rooted in a misapprehension of Jafa’s intent, as well as a mischaracterization of my intent. She and I discussed this, but I don’t think I was very convincing. Additionally, I engaged in several “dry runs” before incorporating *Apex* and *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* into a formal curricular unit. I showed it to two classes in the school year leading up to COVID quarantine, as well as to a few other random students. Although several students felt that *Apex* was particularly difficult to watch, no one thought it was inappropriate. Several students suggested that *Love is the Message* is an accurate interpretation of what it is like to be a Black person in the United States.

Jafa himself explains his artistic intention in repurposing images that may, in Maya's words, "drag out such terrible feelings of anxiety," in the following terms:

I'm a little clinical about it, because I dwell in the place of "this shit needs to be rooted out". You've got to go to the root of the problem, you can't be trimming branches, that's not going to do anything. It may save X amount of people there, but it's not, fundamentally, going to change anything (2020).

Expanding on these ideas, Tina Campt (2021) argues that current Black artists are building on the past innovations of Black artists in order to move from a place of realistic "depiction" to "the complex positionality that is blackness... (7)." In *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, Tina Campt posits that:

...a group of Black fine artists are initiating a ... transformative cultural, aesthetic, and indeed, political shift that is drawing unprecedented attention. They are shifting the very nature of our very interactions with the visual through the creation and quite literal curation of a distinctively *Black* gaze. It is a gaze that is energizing and infusing Black popular culture in striking and unorthodox ways. Neither a depiction of Black folks or Black culture, it is a gaze that forces viewers to engage Blackness from a different and discomfiting vantage point (8).

I believe that concerns about *Love is the Message* raised by both Maya and Deura are rooted in the "different and discomfiting vantage point" as described by Campt. In my view these responses collectively affirm the need to include challenging visual art in a humanities classroom, while making sure to lay down the proper groundwork. Students already experience a high degree of exposure to the visualization of trauma and violence through social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, violent video games and popular cinema. Bringing complex visual art, as we do with difficult depictions in literature, into the classroom can challenge students to think critically across art forms and disciplines. Furthermore, engaging with student work in the process of designing curriculum can bring teachers closer to how students are experiencing the world, and therefore improve our capacity to make learning more relevant. Additionally, while these units center Black experiences, and Carver HSES is racially, ethnically and religiously diverse, these texts provide space for examining trauma across cultural lines and developing more compassion for each other.

The assessment for this film will be far less formal than those for the other two units in this project. Rather than engage in a sustained, deep reading of *Love is the Message*, students will compose a journal responding to one of three prompts. Following that, I will select excerpts from among the most interesting submissions and create a script that we will read and discuss as a class. This collective text can also serve as a reference point for the value and relevance of studying hip hop in an ELA classroom.

Journal: Choose one of the following prompts and compose a 500-word response.

1. How does *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* portray African-American culture?
2. In your opinion, is this film appropriate for high school?
3. What is your view of the film based on Jafa's aesthetic approach?

Students will compose a journal entry, and then I will select excerpts from among the most interesting submissions and create a script that we will read and discuss as a class. This collective text can also serve as a reference point for when we study the value and relevance of hip hop in an ELA classroom.

Unit III: Kendrick Lamar, Hip Hop and Healing

Music has always played a critical role in the fight for Black freedom in the United States. From slave songs, spirituals, blues, jazz gospel, rhythm & blues, and now hip hop, music has served to articulate the experience of oppression, called for collective response to this circumstance, celebrated Black culture and identity, while also serving as a pedagogical medium.

Hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar has been at the center of several cultural movements ever since he gained national prominence after the release of his 2012 masterpiece, *good kid, m.A.A.D city*. Lamar's song *Alright* served as the official anthem of Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd (Orejuela, 2018, 1). His 2017 recording, *DAMN.*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2018. Kendrick's art and music is rooted in confession, cultural critique and articulates the trauma that comes with systemic oppression and cultural negation. Lamar is one of the most high-profile and intellectually engaging hip hop artists working today. In addition to issuing a series of brilliant recordings, he curated the soundtrack for the hit movie, *Black Panther*, and even performed at the halftime show at Super Bowl LVI. Lamar's early masterpiece *good kid, m.A.A.D city*, for example, is a vivid portrait of a male teenager navigating the terrors of Compton, California. Here is an excerpt:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuikIJZpt_8

Brace yourself, I'll take you on a trip down memory lane

This is not a rap on how I'm slingin crack or move cocaine

This is cul-de-sac and plenty Cognac and major pain

Not the drill sergeant, but the stress that weighing on your brain

It was me, L Boog, and Yan Yan, YG Lucky ride down Rosecrans

It got ugly, waving your hand out the window, check yo self

Uh, Warriors and Conans

Hope euphoria can slow dance with society

The driver seat the first one to get killed

Seen a light-skinned nigga with his brains blown out

At the same burger stand where-, hang out

Now this is not a tape recording saying that he did it

But ever since that day, I was lookin' at him different

That was back when I was nine

Joey packed the nine

Pakistan on every porch is fine

Interestingly, even this early release has found its way into at least one college classroom. Moore (2020), quotes Adam Diehl of George Regents University, who teaches several Lamar albums:

I used it [*good kid, m.A.A.D city*] as a way to look at the things that happen to kids. It's a rap album that sinks into literature. He's a master storyteller, and it's such an engaging album to play through (97).

Just as *Alright* from the 2015 recording *To Pimp a Butterfly*, *The Blacker the Berry*, a song from the same album was originally conceived after Kendrick learned about the killing of Trayvon Martin. According to Moore (2020),

An hour later, he had the first draft of a new song called "The Blacker the Berry." Trayvon's death "made me remember how I felt. Being harassed, my partners being killed," Kendrick told the publication. To him, Trayvon wasn't just some kid in the wrong place at the wrong time. He could've been Trayvon, shot down in cold blood as the public looked elsewhere (100).

Kendrick's ability to translate community violence and national trauma into high art makes him an ideal artist through which we can examine the relationship between hip hop and trauma.

Journal: Choose one of the following prompts and compose a 500-word response. You may choose any Kendrick song as long as its content conforms to the questions:

1. Listening to Kendrick, what can we learn from about the role of violence in traumatizing young people?
2. How does Kendrick help us understand what happens when a large number of people in a community experience trauma?
3. How does Kendrick help us understand the self-destructive aspects of collective trauma?

Generational Trauma

Kendrick's most recent release, *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers*, gained wide acclaim for its self-confessional nature. According to Harvey (2022), a scene in *Mother I Sober* "embodies the driving theme of *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers*: unresolved trauma perverting, manifesting itself unhealthily, and ultimately inflicting trauma on others."

Carmichael (2022), echoes Harvey:

Oh, man, it's a lot. It's an album that's fueled by childhood trauma, abuse, self-contempt and struggle for acceptance. It's really acceptance from an equally damaged and contemptuous culture.

It seems that for Kendrick *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers* is an effort to come to terms with the implications of generational trauma that exists in his own family.

[Kendrick Lamar - Mother I Sober ft. Beth Gibbons of Portishead \(Official Audio\)](#)

Ooh, I wish I was somebody

Anybody but myself

I remember looking in the mirror knowing I was gifted

Only child, me for seven years, everything for Christmas

Family ties, they accused my cousin

“Did he touch you Kendrick?”

Never lied, but no one believed me when I said “He didn’t”

Frozen moments, still holding on it

Hard to trust myself, I started rhyming

Coping mechanisms to lift up myself

Journal: Choose one of the following prompts and compose a 500-word response. You may any Kendrick song as long as its content conforms to the questions:

1. What happens when personal trauma is represented in a public venue, such as a hip-hop song?
2. How can learning about the challenges of others help us learn empathy for others?

After this brief inquiry into Kendrick Lamar students will work on group research/presentations on hip hop artists who intentionally address mental health and trauma in their art.

Group Project for Hip Hop Artist:

Student inquiry with lots of choice

[34 Rap Songs That Address Mental Health & Depression - Okayplayer](#)

This video compilation consists of artists such as the Notorious BIG, Tupac Shakur, Lil Wayne, Eminem among others who explicitly rap about mental health.

11 hip-hop artists who had something to say about mental health

Additional resource for hip hop artists who rap about mental health.

1. Students will gather in groups of four.
2. Each group will choose songs by three different Hip Hop artists that articulate the issue of trauma, as either a personal or societal issue.
3. Each group will prepare a presentation incorporating the following elements:
 1. A brief biography of the hip hop artists
 2. Lyrics that exemplify the issue of trauma
 3. A critical perspective based on cited evaluations of scholars and/or professional music critics
 4. Analysis of what each artist is trying to communicate and how effective they are in doing so.
 5. Explanation of the value of teaching hip hop in an English class.

Each group prepare a slideshow documenting the work of these artists:

The slideshow should be **at least** twenty slides.

- A slideshow that has a title does not count as one of the twenty slides.
- Each slide should include an image and written text.
- Sources must be cited.
- Individuals in the group should divide the labor evenly.
- The presentation should be rehearsed ahead of time.
- The final presentations may be presented to different grades/ classes.
- Be prepared to take questions at the end of your presentation.

Note: Students may incorporate musicians from their own cultures, though these artists should represent the post-colonial era. Additionally, groups may choose other platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, I-Move or podcasts. These adaptations will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Lesson calendar with Due Dates: Hip Hop and Trauma Research Assignment

Note: All time frames subject to change depending on how the process evolves.

Time Frame:

This will be the second unit of the year and likely begin sometime in November.

Day 1-2

Students will divide research areas and begin to look for relevant information.

Days 3-7

Groups will compose slides, place them in appropriate order and enhance design.

Day 8-9

Students will self-record while practicing presentation.

Days 10-12

Presentations.

Audience will complete reflections on post-its. Each group will have a piece of chart paper where post-its will be placed:

- What stands out?
- What do I want to know more about?

Day 13

Whole class discussion:

- What did we learn?
- What does it mean that we may not have been aware of some of these artists?
- How does this new knowledge transform our understanding of Black popular culture and artistic expression?
- Presentation final draft - TBD
- Peer review/ presentation rehearsals will take place on – TBD
- Presentations- TBD

Rubrics

[Collaboration Rubric](#)

[Copy of Rubric for group presentations](#)

- *Thanks to my colleague, [Renaë Curlless](#) for sharing these rubrics.*

Resources

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Appendix

Pennsylvania ELA Standards

1.2 Reading Informational Text

Students read, understand, and respond to informational text—with an emphasis on comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

CC.1.2.11–12.C Analyze the interaction and development of a complex set of ideas, sequence of events, or specific individuals over the course of the text.

CC.1.2.11–12.D Evaluate how an author's point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.1.2.11–12.E Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CC.1.2.11–12.F Evaluate how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.

CC.1.2.11–12.G Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

1.4 Writing

Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

CC.1.4.11–12.A Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately.

CC.1.4.11–12.B Write with a sharp, distinct focus identifying topic, task, and audience.

CC.1.4.11–12.D Organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a whole; use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text; provide a concluding statement or section that supports the information presented; include formatting when useful to aiding comprehension.

CC.1.4.11–12.M Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

CC.1.4.11–12.N Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple points of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters.

CC.1.4.11–12.O Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, reflection, multiple plotlines, and pacing to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, settings, and/or characters.

CC.1.4.11–12.R Demonstrate a grade-appropriate command of the conventions of standard English grammar, usage, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

CC.1.2.11–12.A Determine and analyze the relationship between two or more central ideas of a text, including the development and interaction of the central ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.2.11–12.B Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences and conclusions based on and related to an author's implicit and explicit assumptions and beliefs.

CC.1.2.11–12.I Analyze foundational U.S. and world documents of historical, political, and literary significance for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

CC.1.2.11–12.J Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college- and career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

National Standards for Visual Art Education

Content Standard #4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
Achievement Standard: • Students know that the visual arts have both a history and specific relationships to various cultures • Students identify specific works of art as belonging to particular cultures, times, and places • Students demonstrate how history, culture, and the visual arts can influence each other in making and studying works of art

Content Standard #5: Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others
Achievement Standard: • Students understand there are various purposes for creating works of visual art • Students describe how people's experiences influence the development of specific artworks • Students understand there are different responses to specific artworks

Content Standard #6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines
Achievement Standard: • Students understand and use similarities and differences between characteristics of the visual arts and other arts disciplines • Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum