

Responding to Injustice: Select Works from the African Diaspora

Educator Resource | Grades 9–12 | Subject Areas: ELA, History, Art

INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s and 1970s, African American and Haitian artists in the Cap-Haitien region used their work to express cultural pride, political resistance, and visions of liberation. In the United States, artists were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement, while some Haitian artists responded to political oppression under the rule of Francois Duvalier, and reflected on their cultural traditions and history of revolution.



Jean Wilner, *Arrest of Toussaint Louverture, June 7, 1802, 1971*. Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of anonymous donor

LEARNING TARGETS

Students will explore African American and Haitian history through the lens of visual art and literature. They will develop a deeper understanding of how artists like Vincent Smith, Philomé Obin, and Jean Wilner, and writers like James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka, used their work to respond to injustice, express identity, and document resistance. Students will connect these historical experiences to present-day issues in Detroit and beyond, and will use their own voices to reflect, write, and create. Through this process, students will come to see art and writing as powerful tools for personal expression, emotional release, and social change.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can personal narratives challenge systemic injustice?
- In what ways do art and writing help us reclaim identity and reshape history?
- How does legacy live on through family, memory, and artistic expression?
- How do artists and writers across the Black diaspora use their work to resist oppression and express pride?

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Analyze James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" for tone, structure, and message.
- Connect Baldwin's words to their own experiences and histories through writing.
- Analyze artworks of the Civil Rights Movement and African Diaspora in Haiti.
- Interpret Amiri Baraka's poems and write original poetry inspired by their themes.
- Evaluate how historical figures like Toussaint Louverture are remembered and symbolized through art.

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COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Responding to Injustice Presentation Slides
- Student Handout A: See, Think, Wonder
- Student Handout B: See, Think, Me, We
- Student Handout C: Letter by James Baldwin
- Student Handout D: Poems by Amiri Baraka
- Colored pens and highlighters for annotation
- Chart paper, sticky notes, or digital platforms for posting responses

Pre-Visit Activities

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Using the **Presentation Slides**, display [The Fire Next Time](#) by Vincent Smith, and the James Baldwin's quote: "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us."
2. Distribute **Student Handout A: See, Think, Wonder**, and ask students to journal or discuss their responses to Vincent's painting
3. Select one student per question to share with the class

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4. Tell students, “This painting, *The Fire Next Time* by Vincent Smith, shows one of many rebellions that happened in U.S. cities during the 1960s. The title comes from a book of the same name by James Baldwin, where he warned that if things didn’t change for Black Americans, there would be consequences. By 1968, his warning came true: protests, violence, and the loss of civil rights leaders shook the nation. Smith was inspired by artist Jacob Lawrence and African art. You can see this in the bold shapes, strong colors, and powerful emotions in the painting. As we look at Baldwin’s letter today, keep in mind his quote: “*History is not the past. It is the present,*” and how it is still relevant today.”

Supplemental

- Watch a James Baldwin [biography](#).

Reading and Discussion | 35 minutes

1. Distribute **Student Handout C: Letter by James Baldwin**, a chapter from Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, 1963). Guide students in reading with annotation. Use “I Do – We Do – You Do” format:
 - a. **I Do:** Read the first two paragraphs aloud. Model annotation: tone (loving, firm, prophetic), figurative language, key themes (struggle, survival, hope).
 - b. **We Do:** Students annotate paragraphs in pairs.
 - c. **You Do:** Students annotate a final paragraph independently.
2. Use a Socratic seminar, fishbowl, or small group format:
 - a. Baldwin writes, “*You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason.*” How does this line reflect the realities of systemic racism?
 - b. How does Baldwin balance love and anger in the letter?
 - c. What does Baldwin mean when he says, “*The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off*”?
 - d. What does Baldwin suggest about legacy and responsibility in the Black community?
 - e. What connections can you make between Baldwin’s message and struggles faced by Black youth today?

Written Response | 20 minutes

1. Prompt: Write your own letter to your younger sibling, cousin, future child, or your past self.
 - a. Frame it as Baldwin did: honest, hopeful, and reflective of your own identity, struggles, and dreams.
2. Scaffold with sentence starters:
 - a. *You were born into a world that...*
 - b. *There will be times when you feel...*
 - c. *But you must remember...*
 - d. *I hope you will always...*

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Exit Ticket +Reflection | 5 minutes

Ask students to respond to the following prompts using a digital platform (Padlet, Microsoft Forms, Teams). Alternatively, write each prompt on a separate sheet of chart paper and have students place their sticky notes on the corresponding sheet. **Note:** You can encourage anonymous posting for honesty and emotional safety.

Prompts:

1. Before this lesson, I used to think...
2. After this lesson, I now think...
3. Bonus: One thing I'm excited about for the museum visit is...

During Visit Activities

Guided Tour Explanation & Rationale | 45–60 minutes

To complement this lesson, consider booking the “Shaping Identity | Africana” guided gallery experience with one of the skilled Gallery Teachers. Designed for students in grades 3–12, this tour explores art from the African diaspora and uses a variety of open-ended questions while layering in information about the artworks and artists. [Click here to book a field trip today!](#)

Self-Guided Experience | 45–60 minutes

1. Prior to the museum visit, print and distribute **Student Handout B: See, Think, Me, We**.
2. In the museum, allow students to self-explore the exhibit. After they've completed the handout, direct students to stand next to a piece that stands out to them the most.
3. Have students share out loud with the group why they chose that piece.
4. Ask students what inspiration they can take from today.

Post-Visit Activities | 1–2 class periods

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Using the **Presentation Slides**, display *The Procession to the Citadel* by Philomé Obin and *Arrest of Toussaint Louverture* by Jean Wilner.
2. Pair and share
 - a. What do you notice about the setting, people, and mood in each artwork?
 - b. What's going on in these images?
 - c. What questions come up for you about Haiti, rebellion, or the role of history?

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3. Tell students, “Philomé Obin was a famous Haitian artist who inspired others in his family, like Jean Wilner, to paint too. Both artists showed pride in Haiti’s history through their work. Obin’s *Procession to the Citadel* honors Henri Christophe, a leader in Haiti’s fight for freedom and the builder of a massive fortress. Wilner’s painting shows the arrest of Toussaint Louverture, who helped lead the 1791 slave rebellion for Haitian independence. He was captured by the French and died in prison in 1803. These artworks remind us how powerful art can be in telling the stories of people who fought back against injustice.”

Historical Framing | 3 minutes

1. Watch Haitian Revolutions: Crash Course World History #30 [video](#) (7:45–9:13).
2. Provide context around the presidency of Francis Duvalier.

Reading and Discussion | 30 minutes

1. Print and distribute **Student Handout D: Poems by Amiri Baraka**
2. In groups of 3–5, ask students to read and annotate both poems. Next, groups should discuss the following questions:
 - a. In “Incident,” what does Baraka reveal about the relationship between Black bodies and state violence?
 - b. How does the structure and rhythm affect the emotional weight of the poem?
 - c. What is the “legacy” being passed on in the second poem? How does it reflect generational pain and resilience?
 - d. What do these poems say about memory and survival?
 - e. How do Baraka’s words connect to Baldwin’s letter? To *The Fire Next Time* painting? To Louverture’s arrest?
3. Select a representative from each group to share any insights or comments from their discussion with the class.

Written Response | 20 minutes

1. Prompt: Write a poem inspired by today’s lesson. Your poem can:
 - a. Reflect on personal or family legacy
 - b. Speak to injustice or survival
 - c. Honor someone from your life or history
 - d. Include repetition or strong imagery like Baraka’s style
2. Students can share in groups and select a few to present to the class.

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Exit Ticket + Reflection | 5 minutes

1. How can poetry and art help people remember history, express pain, or imagine freedom?
2. What story do you want your own poem to tell?

Supplemental

- The Black Arts [Movement](#)
- The Wrongful Death of Toussaint Louverture [article](#) and podcast
- Read about [Toussaint Louverture](#)
- Amiri Baraka is Back in the Building [podcast](#)

CREDITS

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