

Humanities & Civil Rights

African American Culture in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Your task:

1. Research and discover three artifacts from various African American cultural movements in the United States: one from the 1920s, one from the 1950s/60s, and one from the 2010s. Explore many before you choose.
 - “Artifacts” may include: art, music, speeches, poetry, short fiction, court cases, letters, interviews, stand-up comedy. They must be composed by African Americans, of course, and you must do research on the author/artist.
 - You may not “double-up” on artifacts; only one song, etc.
2. Once you have researched, explored, and annotated these three artifacts, identify what they have in common, even though they are from different periods of American history. That is, come up with a *thematic concern* that each of the artifacts helps you to understand. (You might have to do more searching to ensure a common thread.)
3. Design a visual that portrays this understanding in a creative way. This is absolutely up for interpretation!

The visual must:

- Make the thematic concern clear.
- Show the interrelationship among the three artifacts.
- Offer analysis/interpretation of each of the artifacts in a meaningful, accessible, way.
- Within that analysis, acknowledge that art reflects history (politics?).

Be sure to brainstorm the many ways you can visually depict your analysis. It may be almost anything except for a PowerPoint. (You *could* create a one-pager like the model, but you could also make it book or pamphlet style, or poster style, or make a video, or include pop-ups, envelopes, etc. I am expecting high-level analysis—and it constitutes the majority of the grade for this project (aesthetic appeal matters, but not *more* than content)—so you might need more space, is what I’m saying.

4. On a separate page, include a Works Cited page for sources and all research. You will use in-text citations within your visual.

Where to get started:

- poetryfoundation.org —search for Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights poetry, etc.
- National Gallery of Art.
- Top Ten song lists of given years.
- PBS, National Public Radio.
- <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/>
- ...any careful Google searches will deliver many results. (e.g., “black poets I should be reading right now,” or “best black photographers of the Civil Rights Era”) Run ideas by me; generally, if the website is credible and if you can find a biography on your artist/composer, their work has been influential.

Shirley Chisholm, first African American woman elected to congress.

Speech at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

April 21st, 1969.



Chisholm's speech was delivered not long after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She recognizes that change happens in the black community when people unite to "organize the rage" and "build a sense of community among our people" (Chisholm). She encourages the crowd to embrace their African roots, but notes that until black leaders emerge, "change" will be identified by what white men say it should be: "it has just been inevitable that black Americans are tired of being governed by laws they had no part in making." She implies that identity comes from unity and the group, yet the group is only strong when the individual is strong.

"WE MUST BECOME DOERS AND PRODUCERS IN THE SYSTEM IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO CONTROL OUR OWN DESTINIES."

Individuals can have identities,
and groups can have identities.
One can inform the other.

**A person cannot
make a difference
until they know
who they are.**

People lose
themselves when
they let others
label them.

Poem, "No Images," by William Waring Cuney, 1923.

Cuney's poem, which won him an award in the Opportunity Literary Contest in 1926 (Bhatt), is a classic of the Harlem Renaissance. The woman in the poem is defined by her reflection, but because she is working a lower class job, her reflection is murky: "and dish water gives back/no images" (12-13). Her identity, thus, is stripped by the conditions of her employment, which one could argue is a product of what a "predominately white society has given her" (Bhatt). Cuney writes that if "she could dance/naked" (5-6), she'd have the chance to be her true self, but she thinks her "brown body/has no glory" (3-4). She doesn't have the capability or the time to consider, let alone celebrate, her important place in the world. Society has trained her in this way. The Eden-like/paradise of Biblical imagery and the word "glory" (4) reinforces that this has been taken from her. She was born pure, like every other human, but has been shielded from that understanding. Finally, she does not have the clean "river"--an archetype of movement and growth--only the stagnant dirty water of the wrong kind of cleansing.

No Images

She does not know
her beauty,
she thinks her brown body
has no glory.

If she could dance
naked
under palm trees
and see her image in the river,
she would know.

But there are no palm trees
on the street,
and dish water gives back
no images.

**"SHE THINKS HER BROWN
BODY / HAS NO GLORY"**

People cannot know their true selves if
society doesn't offer an opportunity to
celebrate individuality.

Thomas' series *Branded* uses multiple images to critique the troubling connection and exploitation between the athletics industry and African American men. This piece shows that "contemporary advertising imagery perpetuates stereotypes" (Portland Art Museum). In this print, the man does not even have a face, an identity. The Nike "swoosh" is the focal point, and it reads like a scar more than it does a logo, which reinforces the damage that stereotypes can have--scars do not disappear. Moreover, it is placed on the man's skull, which suggests he is the logo, only has "sports" on the mind, and that sports consume all of his thoughts; thus, he is incapable of thinking about or achieving anything else.

Hank Willis Thomas, "Branded Head," Chromogenic print, 2003.

