LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I WISH I KNEW

By Mariah Rankine-Landers

**THEME**
Power

**LENGTH**
Two Sessions
50-100 min each

**GRADE LEVEL**
9-12

**SUBJECT**
Civics
Social Studies
Art

Historical and contemporary ideas of power are addressed including how to build collective power that bridges people across experiences.

Whoever’s holding the frame gets to tell the story, shape the vision, because Europeans have told the story that’s the story we (get). - Hank Willis Thomas.

This lesson supports students to analyze and understand power through identification of erroneous systems and oppressive ideologies using the contemporary art pieces of Hank Willis Thomas.
# Lesson Objectives

## Creative Inquiries

| How does the work of Hank Willis Thomas help us to recognize erroneous systems? |
| How can we interrogate language that anchors and maintains oppressive ideologies (such as imperialism and white supremacy)? |

## Factual Knowledge

- Students will know...
  - Forms and structures of Power
  - The design of systems

## Procedural Knowledge

- Students will be able to...
  - Read an image for meaning
  - Extrapolate knowledge through contemporary art pieces.

## Conceptual Inquiry

- Students will understand...
  - Distinctions of power
  - Exploitation vs. power

## Inspired Language

- Power
- Ideologies
- Extension
- Projection
- Absolute

## Outline

- Session one: “Absolut Power,” Part One
- Session two: “Absolut Power,” Part Two
- Session three: Reflection

## Performances of Understanding

- Journal writings
- Participation in discussion

## Hamilton Hooks

### How to build anticipation for learning

**Listen: “You’ll Be Back” from the Hamilton**

Listen to “You’ll Be Back” from the Hamilton Soundtrack and explore the verse:

- You’ll be back- You’ll remember you belong to me.
- You say our love is draining and you can’t go on
- You’ll be the one complaining when I am gone...
- And no, don’t change the subject
- Cuz you’re my favorite subject
- My sweet, submissive subject
- My loyal, royal subject
- Forever and ever and ever and ever and ever...

**Writing prompt or group discussion:**

- What is the purpose of using Double Entendre in this song?
- What is the lyrical motivation of You’ll be Back?
- What words suggest relationship?
- What words suggest control?
- What words suggest power?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Circle practices
- Website of Hank Willis Thomas
Hank Willis Thomas, *Absolut Power*, 2003
Inkjet print on canvas
40 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
See, Think, Wonder, developed by Harvard educators, is “a routine for exploring works of art and other interesting things.” Although the technique was developed to use with K-12 students. This approach empowers students to exercise critical thinking skills to make sense of an image. It is always useful and interesting to discover the background information about a work, but some of the potential meaning of a work lies within our grasp. The Harvard approach encourages people to trust their own eyes, their personal knowledge and life experience, and their curiosity when pondering an “interesting thing.”

**Seeing is the first step.** Take time to pay attention to what is visible to the eye and make an inventory of what you see.
This step sounds obvious, perhaps, but in our fast-paced, over-stimulated environments, it is very easy to miss something obvious.
This step reminds us that we have to make time to look before we can expect to understand and make meaning of what we see.
*E.g.* I see a red star.

**Thinking is the next step.** Thinking means making sense of what we see based on reason, analysis, and inferences.
*E.g.* The colors used here, make me think that it’s a polluted place.

**Wondering taps into the imaginative aspect of thinking.** Great art work generally stirs the imagination and further questioning.
*E.g.* I wonder what’s behind the machinery.
Hank Willis Thomas, *We The People*, 2015
quilt made out of decommissioned prison uniforms
73 1/4 x 88 1/4 inches
76 3/8 x 92 1/8 x 2 1/8 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas, *The Cotton Bowl*, 2011
digital c-print
50 x 73 inches
50 1/2 x 73 1/2 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas, *Two Little Prisoners*, 2014
glass mirror and silver
30 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 15/16 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
**DISCUSSION CYpher**

What is a Discussion Cypher? A discussion cypher gathers students together in a circular form either standing or with chairs. Students should be close together, respectfully overlapping their personal space for proximity and connection. Students should lead this process. Teachers can guide the cypher by selecting a student to start the cypher off with a pre selected question or gather questions from students beforehand on the topic of focus. Students discuss interchangeably by beginning their thinking with a selected portion of the question. For example: If you ask the question: Is the cost of our morality truly worth it? The student would start their thinking by saying “the cost of our morality… or… Our morality is worth it…

Teacher as Scribe: During a discussion cypher, instructors should capture resonant words and phrases that the students use in a very visible way, either writing down spoken phrases verbatim on the board, or if equipped, using a computer and projector to reveal the instructor’s dictation as it occurs.

Discussion cypher prompt: Select a student to begin the cypher off by responding to the following question: (Fill in based on content needs) (See lessons for proposed questions)

Break the cypher: Allow students to step away from the cypher for 1-2 mins of think and stretch time and reassemble when ready for the next discussion cypher.

Discussion cypher prompt 2: (Fill in based on content needs) (See lessons for proposed questions)
SESSION 2 OF 2
LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I WISH I KNEW

This lesson continues to support students to analyze and understand power through identification of erroneous systems and oppressive ideologies using the contemporary art pieces of Hank Willis Thomas.

CREATIVE INQUIRIES
- How does the work of Hank Willis Thomas help us to recognize erroneous systems?
- How can we interrogate language that anchors and maintains oppressive ideologies (such as imperialism and white supremacy)?

INSPIRED LANGUAGE
- Power
- Ideologies
- Extension
- Projection
  - Absolute
  - Shadow Narrative
  - Dominant Narrative
  - Counter Narrative

EQUIPMENT
- Projector/monitor to screen video
- Audio player/computer speakers to play digital recording of Hamilton Soundtrack

MATERIALS
- Collage materials (magazines, glue, scissors, paper), watercolor paint, colored pencils/crayons/chalk, found objects, etc.
- Hank Willis Thomas Images Attachment 1 and Attachment 3

OUTLINE
Activity #1: Viewing of Absolut Power.
Activity #2: Thinking Protocol: See Think Wonder
Activity #3: Critical Thinking Circle/Discussion Cypher

1 “ABSOLUT POWER”, PART ONE
50 MIN

SHOW
“Absolut Power” by Hank Willis Thomas

SET-UP 3 MIN
View the image by “Absolut Power” by Hank Willis Thomas

PROMPT 5 MIN
Use the thinking protocol “See, Think, Wonder” to have students explore the image.

SHARE
“See, Think, Wonder” protocol

TASK 42 MIN
Have students share what they see, think, and wonder. Discussion can be lead as a whole group or in small groups.
After discussion, have **students make a quick sketch** of the “Absolute Power” piece in their accordion journals.

- Have **students record** the words they heard others speak and their own thoughts about the piece around the image they drew.

Bring the group together for a critical-thinking circle (alternatively you can hold a discussion cypher). Share the following **agreements for a critical thinking circle**:

- *We use a talking piece to denote who is talking offering them an openness to listen without interruption.*
- *We speak what is emergent in our thinking or resting deeply in our minds. We trust the group to be considerate of each person’s process.*
- *We speak just enough to share our thoughts but are aware of how much air time we take.*

Have students share their thinking on the following questions (select the ones most generative for your students):

- What is meant by “power is absolute”?
- Where does power reside?
- What is the function of power?
- What is the relationship between exploitation and power?
- Is power a contradiction or a condition?
- How must humans understand the nature of power?
- What are the forms and structures of power?
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OUTLINE
Activity #1: Minds At Work: Extension and Projection
Activity #2: Reflection

SET-UP MIN
Make sure all art materials are ready for students to use.
Collage materials (magazines, glue, scissors, paper), watercolor paint, colored pencils/crayons/chalk, found objects, etc. for students to use to create their own visual art piece.

TASK MIN
Minds at work: Extension/Projection:
This strategy calls upon artists to make predictions — to reflect on how a situation will change or to reflect on what might be possible. The implementation of this strategy aids learning because it requires learners of all ages to study an idea before they can think about how it could change (Marshall, 2010).
1. Using the pieces by Hank Willis Thomas in Attachment 3, *The Cotton Bowl* (2011), *Two Little Prisoners* (2014), and *We the People* (2015) have the students analyze the images by asking:

*What is the dominant narrative?*

Follow up their thinking by asking:

*What is the shadow narrative?*

2. Prepare students to extend their thinking on what power will look like if it is further perpetuated in its current forms.

3. In groups of three, ask students to look at the images again and come up with a projection of society and the perpetuation of power that favors the inclusion of oppressed and marginalized peoples. This will be a counter narrative that disrupts the dominant narrative.

4. Provide students with a visual art making experience to show their projections:
   - Have students use found objects from their personal belongings or from around the classroom to build a 3D model of their projection.
   - Provide collage materials for students (magazines, glue, scissors, paper) and have them make a collaborative collage of their thinking.
   - Allow students the choice in how they’d like to show their projections: Watercolor, pencil drawing, collage, found objects.

5. Play the Hamilton soundtrack as you allow time for students to create.

**2 REFLECTION 15 MIN**

**TASK**

Reflection Circle:
Have students sit in circle with their art pieces on the floor in front of them. Have each individual or group share their art pieces.

Reflection prompts:

*What takeaways from earlier conversations informed your piece?*

*What questions are you left with as you think about power and narrative?*