

CARAVANS OF GOLD, FRAGMENTS IN TIME: ART, CULTURE, AND EXCHANGE ACROSS MEDIEVAL SAHARAN AFRICA

A CURRICULUM RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS
GRADES NINE TO TWELVE

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World on a Camel's Back, 2019
Ekow Nimako

CARAVANS OF GOLD, FRAGMENTS IN TIME: ART, CULTURE AND EXCHANGE ACROSS MEDIEVAL SAHARAN AFRICA.

How to Use this Guide

Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa – A Curriculum Resource for Teachers, Grades Nine to Twelve offers five lesson plans designed to help students engage with this exciting new exhibition.

Each lesson is based on Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum expectations for secondary level courses in English and the Social Sciences. However, these lessons are cross-curricular in spirit and fulfill expectations beyond those stated, to encompass other courses in the same subject area or beyond.

Teachers of different courses are encouraged to adapt these lessons to fit the needs of their own classes and students.

Each lesson follows a three-part format:

Before:	Minds On!
During:	Action at the Exhibition!
After:	Consolidation & Connection

Using the Minds On activity, teachers may choose to begin engaging with the exhibit, before their trip, in the classroom. Or they can truncate the Minds On activity to embed it into their museum visit. The Consolidation & Connection tasks allow students to reflect and extend the learning they started at Caravans of Gold post-visit.

Each lesson has a strong digital and social media component to help students interact with exhibits by using tools that they find personally engaging--and that allow them to participate in knowledge production.

Tag us!

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LESSON SHIFTING THROUGH TIME: SYMBOLS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

EXPECTATIONS:

Reading & Literature Studies: read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, informational, and graphic texts, using a range of strategies to construct meaning.

Writing: generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.

Media Studies: create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques.

Learning Goals

Demonstrate critical thinking to infer meanings of symbols

Communicate ideas clearly using different mediums

Assessment

Informal Journal Response

Digital Time Capsule

Materials

- “[My Mother’s Blue Bowl](#)” by Alice Walker from the essay collection *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer’s Activism* (1997)
- Student Exemplar of an Infographic App: Piktochart

Time: 30 Before: Minds On

Looking at Legacy: What’s Important About What’s Left Behind?

Students will be asked to reflect on the legacy they would like to leave behind by thinking about the items that symbolize their character, values, and beliefs. Students will brainstorm a list of 3–5 items that they believe would best represent themselves to future generations. Students must keep this list, as they may wish to use it for the consolidation section of the lesson.

Next, students will read Alice Walker’s “My Mother’s Blue Bowl” to examine how seemingly mundane personal objects can hold meaningful intergenerational significance and represent one’s legacy to others.

Assessment FOR Learning: Informal Journal Response

Students will respond to the following questions in an informal journal response:

1. What does the blue bowl symbolize to Alice Walker?
2. How does the blue bowl connect to the concept of legacy?

Time: 120 During: Action at the Exhibition!

The Personal is Profound: Seeking Symbolic Significance

Students will select three everyday items from the exhibition (e.g., bowls, kohl applicator, flasks, bottles, spoons, jars, oil lamps, etc.) and consider the purpose of each object, what it’s made of, and why it may have been of importance to its users.

A Moment for Reflection

As English students studying literature and its attendant concerns with symbolism, students will use the concrete object they have chosen as a gateway into inferring more abstract understandings of societal values and structures of Saharan Africa.

Assessment FOR Learning: ‘Show and Tell’

Then, students will choose their favourite item and share their inferences with a partner using a ‘show and tell’ format to present their findings. Students will act as a guide for their peers by taking their partners to where the item is within the exhibition and have their conversation there.

As a large group, students will discuss the following questions:

1. How does what the item is made of underscore what it symbolizes?
2. How does the item’s symbolic significance compare to that of Walker’s blue bowl?
3. What sentimental value might this item hold for its user and/or society?

***Differentiated Instruction**

Learning environment: Full class, pairs, and individual work.

Interest & Content: Choice of artifacts and medium for time capsule.

Time: 150 After: Consolidation & Connection

Leaving Your Mark: Digitizing Your Legacy

Students will reflect on an item from their own home that holds sentimental value for them that could be put in an exhibition centuries from now. This item must be particular to this time period (e.g., wireless earbuds or a pair of Yeezys) and should not be a generic item (e.g., hairbrush or toothbrush).

Students will create a detailed description of the item’s importance to them and address how it represents their personal legacy in a digital time capsule. The time capsule will take the form of an audiofile, infographic, or video file.

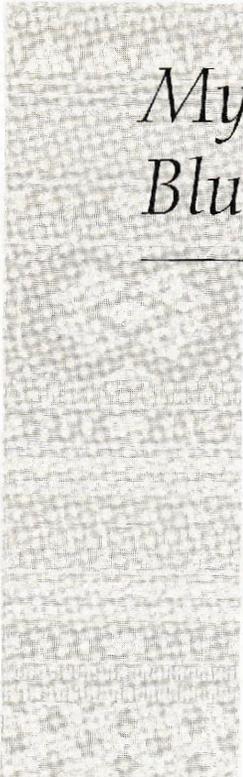
Assessment OF Learning: Digital Time Capsule

Next Steps

This can culminate in a virtual gallery that includes each student’s work. Ideally, students will have access to each other’s work and have the opportunity to question and comment on their class’s ‘exhibition’.

LESSON MATERIAL

My Mother's Blue Bowl
By Alice Walker



My Mother's Blue Bowl

Visitors to my house are often served food—soup, potatoes, rice—in a large blue stoneware bowl, noticeably chipped at the rim. It is perhaps the most precious thing I own. It was given to me by my mother in her last healthy days. The days before a massive stroke laid her low and left her almost speechless. Those days when to visit her was to be drawn into a serene cocoon of memories and present-day musings and to rest there, in temporary retreat from the rest of the world, as if still an infant, nodding and secure at her breast.

For much of her life my mother longed, passionately longed, for a decent house. One with a yard that did not have to be cleared with an ax. One with a roof that kept out the rain. One with floors that you could not fall through. She longed for a beautiful house of wood or stone. Or of red brick, like the houses her many sisters and their husbands had. When I was thirteen she found such a house. Green-shuttered, white-walled. Breezy. With a lawn and a hedge and giant pecan trees. A porch swing. There her gardens flourished

LESSON MATERIAL

My Mother's Blue Bowl
By Alice Walker

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in spite of the shade, as did her youngest daughter, for whom she sacrificed her life doing hard labor in someone else's house, in order to afford peace and prettiness for her child, to whose grateful embrace she returned each night.

But, curiously, the minute I left home, at seventeen, to attend college, she abandoned the dream house and moved into the projects. Into a small, tight apartment of few breezes, in which I was never to feel comfortable, but that she declared suited her "to a T." I took solace in the fact that it was at least hugged by spacious lawn on one side, and by forest, out the back door, and that its isolated position at the end of the street meant she would have a measure of privacy.

Her move into the projects—the best housing poor black people in the South ever had, she would occasionally declare, even as my father struggled to adjust to the cramped rooms and hard, unforgiving qualities of brick—was, I now understand, a step in the direction of divestiture, lightening her load, permitting her worldly possessions to dwindle in significance and, well before she herself would turn to spirit, roll away from her.

She owned little, in fact. A bed, a dresser, some chairs. A set of living-room furniture. A set of kitchen furniture. A bed and wardrobe (given to her years before, when I was a teenager, by one of her more prosperous sisters). Her flowers: everywhere, inside the house and outside. Planted in anything she managed to get her green hands on, including old suitcases and abandoned shoes. She recycled everything, effortlessly. And gradually she had only a small amount of stuff—mostly stuff her children gave her: nightgowns, perfume, a microwave—to recycle or to use.

Each time I visited her I marveled at the modesty of her desires. She appeared to have hardly any, beyond a thirst for a Pepsi-Cola or a hunger for a piece of fried chicken or fish. On every visit I noticed that more and more of what I remembered of her possessions seemed to be missing. One day I commented on this.

Taking a deep breath, sighing, and following both with a beaming big smile, which lit up her face, the room, and my heart, she

Anything We Love Can Be Saved 219

said: Yes, it's all going. I don't need it anymore. If there's anything you want, take it when you leave; it might not be here when you come back.

The dishes my mother and father used daily had come from my house; I had sent them years before, when I moved from Mississippi to New York. Neither the plates nor the silver matched entirely, but it was all beautiful in her eyes. There were numerous paper items, used in the microwave, and stacks of plastic plates and cups, used by the scores of children from the neighborhood who continued throughout her life to come and go. But there was nothing there for me to want.

One day, however, looking for a jar into which to pour leftover iced tea, I found myself probing deep into the wilderness of the overstuffed, airless pantry. Into the land of the old-fashioned, the outmoded, the outdated. The humble and the obsolete. There was a smoothing iron, a churn. A butter press. And two large bowls.

One was cream and rose with a blue stripe. The other was a deep, vivid blue.

May I have this bowl, Mama, I asked, looking at her and at the blue bowl with delight.

You can have both of them, she said, barely acknowledging them, and continuing to put leftover food away.

I held the bowls on my lap for the rest of the evening, while she watched a TV program about cops and criminals that I found too horrifying to follow.

Before leaving the room I kissed her on the forehead and asked if I could get anything for her from the kitchen; then I went off to bed. The striped bowl I placed on a chair beside the door, so I could look at it from where I lay. The blue bowl I placed in the bed with me.

In giving me these gifts, my mother had done a number of astonishing things, in her typically offhand way. She had taught me a lesson about letting go of possessions—easily, without emphasis or regret—and she had given me a symbol of what she herself represented in my life.

LESSON MATERIAL

My Mother's Blue Bowl
By Alice Walker

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For the blue bowl especially was a cauldron of memories. Of cold, harsh, wintry days, when my brothers and sister and I trudged home from school burdened down by the silence and frigidity of our long trek from the main road, down the hill to our shabby-looking house. More rundown than any of our classmates' houses. In winter my mother's riotous flowers would be absent, and the shack stood revealed for what it was. A gray, decaying, too small barrack meant to house the itinerant tenant workers on a prosperous white man's farm.

Slogging through sleet and wind to the sagging front door, thankful that our house was too far from the road to be seen clearly from the school bus, I always felt a wave of embarrassment and misery. But then I would open the door. And there inside would be my mother's winter flowers: a glowing fire in the fireplace, colorful handmade quilts on all our beds, paintings and drawings of flowers and fruits and, yes, of Jesus, given to her by who knows whom—and, most of all, there in the center of the rough-hewn table, which in the tiny kitchen almost touched the rusty wood-burning stove, stood the big blue bowl, full of whatever was the most tasty thing on earth.

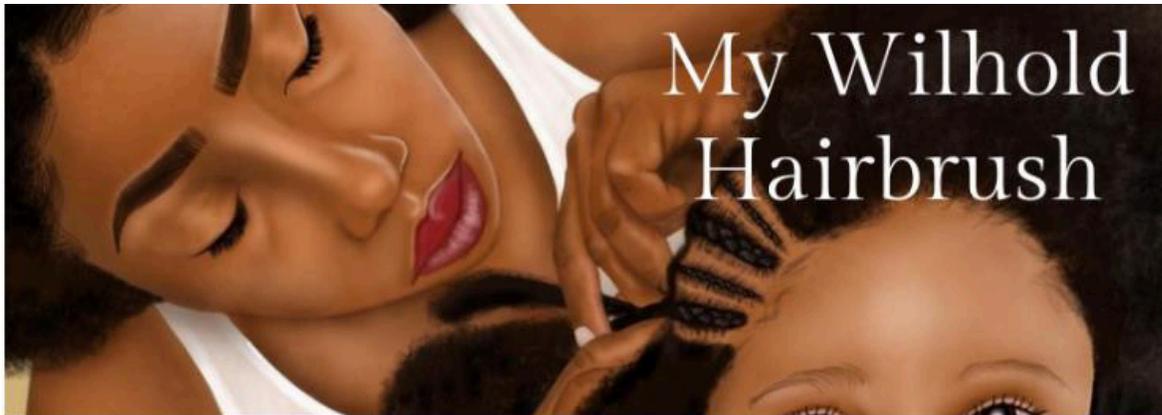
There was my mother herself. Glowing. Her teeth sparkling. Her eyes twinkling. As if she lived in a castle and her favorite princes and princesses had just dropped by to visit.

The blue bowl stood there, seemingly full forever, no matter how deeply or rapaciously we dipped, as if it had no bottom. And she dipped up soup. Dipped up lima beans. Dipped up stew. Forked out potatoes. Spooned out rice and peas and corn. And in the light and warmth that was *Her*, we dined.

Thank you, Mama

LESSON MATERIAL

Student Exemplar of an Infographic using Piktochart.



My Wilhold Hairbrush



This hairbrush is **important** to me because it reminds me of a time in my life when I was obsessed with my hair and how I looked, overall. It wasn't out of vanity but, instead, insecurity because my hair didn't look like that of my peers' (i.e., long and straight). My Wilhold brush is significant to me because it helped me to gain self-pride, feel beautiful, and find my personal strength as a woman of African descent.



The difficulty of having 4C kinky curly hair caused physical (act of having hair combed) and emotional (feeling of shame because my hair wasn't like everybody else's) pain for me as a child.

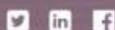


The concept of 'good' hair has plagued the black community for decades, making it hard for me to embrace my natural hair.



This fierce woman is embracing who she is, natural hair and all. She is the picture of strength.

The Wilhold brush represents my personal **legacy** of strength and self-love because using this brush enabled me to properly care for and manage my hair. In doing so, I began to embrace the natural essence of who I am and appreciate my appearance, instead of attempting to adhere to European constructions of beauty.



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LESSON MANSA MUSA: THE RICHEST MAN OF ALL TIME

EXPECTATIONS: RESEARCH AND INQUIRY SKILLS

Exploring: explore topics related to anthropology, psychology, and sociology, and formulate questions appropriate to each discipline to guide their research.

Investigating: create research plans, and locate and select information relevant to their chosen topics, using appropriate social science research and inquiry methods.

Communicating and Reflecting: communicate the results of their research and inquiry clearly and effectively, and reflect on and evaluate their research, inquiry, and communications skills.

Learning Goals

Demonstrate understanding of research skills

Synthesize and communicate research

Materials

- “I Can” lyrics YouTube: [“I Can”](#) by Nas
LCD Projector, laptop and Internet access
- Fact Check Template
- [“The richest man ever was not named Gates or Bezos; he was king of Mali in the Middle Ages”](#)
[“This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History”](#)

Assessment

Digital Archeological Snapshot

Comparative paragraph or visual medium

Time: 25 Before: Minds On

Focus on the Forgotten

Students will listen to Nas’ “I Can” and follow along with printed lyrics to respond to the following prompt: What historical information does Nas provide about the continent of Africa that is not considered common knowledge? In pairs, students will select at least three historical facts that Nas references and then ‘fact check’ them using a research method practiced in class (e.g., consulting a reputable website that ends in .org).

Assessment AS Learning:
Fact Check Template

Students will choose a speaker from their partnership and share one fact that they ‘checked’ with the class. Students will state whether Nas was historically accurate, especially in reference to his articulation of Africa’s wealth. The teacher will use this as an opportunity to pose this question: Who do you think is the richest person of all time? Students will have the answer to this question after reading “This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History” and “The richest man ever was not named Gates or Bezos; he was king of Mali in the Middle Ages,” which provide context about Mansa Musa and the overall exhibition respectively.

Time: 120 During: Action at the Exhibition!

Artifact or Ancient Bling: Creating a Digital Archeological Snapshot

Students will reflect on Mansa Musa’s material wealth and the fact that accounts say he brought 100 camels, each carrying 300 pounds of pure gold with him “on his trans-Saharan pilgrimage from Mali to Mecca.” Students will use their ‘historical imagination’ to infer what Mansa Musa (and other wealthy people of the period) might adorn himself with and possess by seeking out five artifacts from the exhibition that might qualify as ‘ancient bling’ (e.g., gold coins, bracelets, rings, beads, earrings, necklaces, etc.).

Students will select a social media platform (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat etc.) and take a photograph (with the flash off) of the most opulent item they found during their exploration. They must then create a caption that briefly explains why they feel this item is likely a representation of wealth. [Please do not take photos of the archaeological fragments case]

Assessment FOR Learning:
Digital Archeological Snapshot

Students must create an engaging, descriptive hashtag, and are encouraged to share their work with the Aga Khan Museum via [#CaravansOfGoldTO](#) or [@agakhanmuseum](#). Students can decide which of their classmates found the ‘blingiest’ item (for bragging rights).

A Moment for Reflection

After students have explored the exhibition and completed their archeological snapshot, they are invited to consider and discuss the following questions:

1. What are some items that represent wealth in North American society today?
2. How do today’s symbols of wealth differ from those represented in the exhibition?
3. If Mansa Musa were alive today, which symbol of wealth would best represent his title of richest person ever?

***Differentiated Instruction**

Learning environment:

Full class, pairs, and individual work.

Interest & Content:

Choice of key facts, artifacts, social media platforms.

Time: 150 After: Consolidation & Connection

Contemporary Connections: Comparing Musa to his Modern Match

Students will draw parallels between Mansa Musa’s life experiences with those of the contemporary rich and famous by considering their respective wealth, power, influence, and fame. As part of their research exploration, students will reflect on philanthropy as it relates to the many good works that Musa is credited for (e.g., giving away gold and building infrastructure such as schools, universities, libraries, and mosques).

Assessment OF Learning:
Comparative Paragraph or Visual Medium

Students will be asked to grapple with creating a broader definition of wealth by re-examining conventional ideas that largely privilege money. What makes one rich? Is it having a lot of money or must it account for one’s deeds? What kinds of power and influence are valued?

Next Steps

Using a set of their own anthropological criteria and research information, students will determine who is richer: Mansa Musa or a contemporary figure of their choice (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, Kim Kardashian, Bill Gates, Jay-Z, etc.)? This will culminate in a comparative paragraph or visual medium (e.g., Venn diagram).

LESSON MATERIAL

“I Can” by Nas (2002)

[Hook: Children’s Choir]

I know I can
 Be what I wanna be
 If I work hard at it
 I’ll be where I wanna be
 I know I can (I know I can!)
 Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be
 (I’ll be where I wanna be!)

[Verse 1]

Be, b-boys and girls, listen up
 You can be anything in the world, in God we trust
 An architect, doctor, maybe an actress
 But nothing comes easy, it takes much practice
 Like, I met a woman who’s becoming a star
 She was very beautiful, leaving people in awe
 Singing songs, Lena Horne, but the younger version
 Hung with the wrong person, got her strung on that heroin
 Cocaine, sniffing up drugs, all in her nose
 Could’ve died, so young, now looks ugly and old
 No fun ‘cause when she reaches for hugs, people hold their
 breath
 ‘Cause she smells of corrosion and death
 Watch the company you keep and the crowd you bring
 ‘Cause they came to do drugs and you came to sing
 So if you gonna be the best, I’m a tell you how
 Put your hands in the air, and take the vow

[Chorus] I know I can (I know I can!)

Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be!)
 I know I can (I know I can!)
 Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be!)

[Verse 2]

Be, b-boys and girls, listen again
 This is for grown-looking girls who’s only 10
 The ones who watch videos and do what they see As cute
 as can be,
 up in the club with fake ID

Careful, ‘fore you meet a man with HIV
 You can host the TV like Oprah Winfrey
 Whatever you decide, be careful, some men be
 Rapists, so act your age, don’t pretend to be
 Older than you are, give yourself time to grow
 You thinking he can give you wealth, but so
 Young boys, you can use a lot of help, you know
 You thinking life’s all about smoking weed and ice
 You don’t wanna be my age and can’t read and write
 Begging different women for a place to sleep at night
 Smart boys turn to men and do whatever they wish
 If you believe you can achieve, then say it like this
 Careful, ‘fore you meet a man with HIV
 You can host the TV like Oprah Winfrey
 Whatever you decide, be careful, some men be

Whatever you decide, be careful, some men be
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 You don’t wanna be my age and can’t read and write
 Begging different women for a place to sleep at night
 Smart boys turn to men and do whatever they wish
 If you believe you can achieve, then say it like this

[Chorus] I know I can (I know I can!)

Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be!)
 I know I can (I know I can!)
 Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be!)

[Verse 3] Be, be-fore we came to this country
 We were kings and queens, never porch monkeys
 There was empires in Africa called Kush
 Timbuktu, where every race came to get books
 To learn from black teachers who taught Greeks and
 Romans
 Asian Arabs and gave them gold, when
 Gold was converted to money it all changed
 Money then became empowerment for Europeans
 The Persian military invaded
 They heard about the gold, the teachings, and everything
 sacred
 Africa was almost robbed naked
 Slavery was money, so they began making slave ships
 Egypt was the place that Alexander the Great went
 He was so shocked at the mountains with black faces
 Shot up they nose to impose what basically
 Still goes on today, you see?
 If the truth is told, the youth can grow
 They learn to survive until they gain control
 Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes
 Read more, learn more, change the globe
 Ghetto children, do your thing
 Hold your head up, little man, you’re a king
 Young Princess when you get your wedding ring
 Your man is saying “She’s my Queen”

[Chorus]

I know I can (I know I can!)
 Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be!)
 I know I can (I know I can!)
 Be what I wanna be (be what I wanna be!)
 If I work hard at it (If I work hard it!)
 I’ll be where I wanna be (I’ll be where I wanna be!)

[Outro]

Save the music, y’all,
 Save the music, y’all
 Save the music, y’all,
 Save the music, y’all
 Save the music

“I Can”

By Nas (2002)

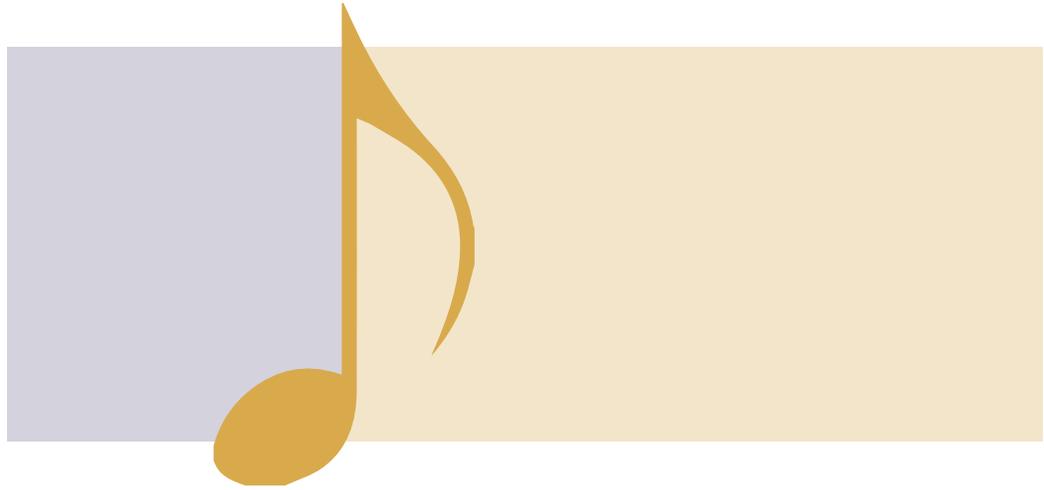
LESSON MATERIAL

**Fact Checking
Presentation Template**

Based on the three quotations you have chosen, write the song lyrics in the left portion of the music note.

Then, write what you learned after fact-checking the lyrics in the right section of the music note.

Be sure to cite where you got your information. Be prepared to share your strongest idea with the class.



In the vast fictional universe of Marvel Comics, T'Challa, better known as Black Panther, is not only king of Wakanda, he's also the richest superhero of them all. And although today's fight for the title of wealthiest person alive involves a tug-of-war between billionaire CEOs, the wealthiest person in history, Mansa Musa, has more in common with Marvel's first black superhero.

Musa became ruler of the Mali Empire in 1312, taking the throne after his predecessor, Abu-Bakr II, for whom he'd served as deputy, went missing on a voyage he took by sea to find the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Musa's rule came at a time when European nations were struggling due to raging civil wars and a lack of resources. During that period, the Mali Empire flourished thanks to ample natural resources like gold and salt.

And under the rule of Musa, the prosperous empire grew to span a sizeable portion of West Africa, from the Atlantic coast to the inland trading hub of Timbuktu and parts of the Sahara Desert. As the territory grew while Musa was on the throne, so did the economic standing of its citizens.

It wasn't until 1324 that the world outside of Mali's border would get a glimpse of the king's expansive wealth. A devout Muslim in a majority Muslim community, Musa set off on a journey to Mecca for his Hajj pilgrimage. But the king didn't travel by himself.

The voyage, which would span an estimated 4,000 miles, was travelled by Musa and a caravan that included tens of thousands of soldiers, slaves and heralds, draped in Persian silk and carrying golden staffs. Although records of the exact number of people who participated in the voyage are scarce, the elaborate convoy that accompanied Musa marched alongside camels and horses carrying hundreds of pounds of gold.



LESSON MATERIAL

This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History

March 19, 2018

By Thad Morgan

Forget today's tech billionaires, the wealth of Mansa Musa of Mali was too vast to be imagined—or equaled.

Mansa Musa on his way to Mecca.
(Credit: Print Collector/Getty Images)

LESSON MATERIAL**This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History**

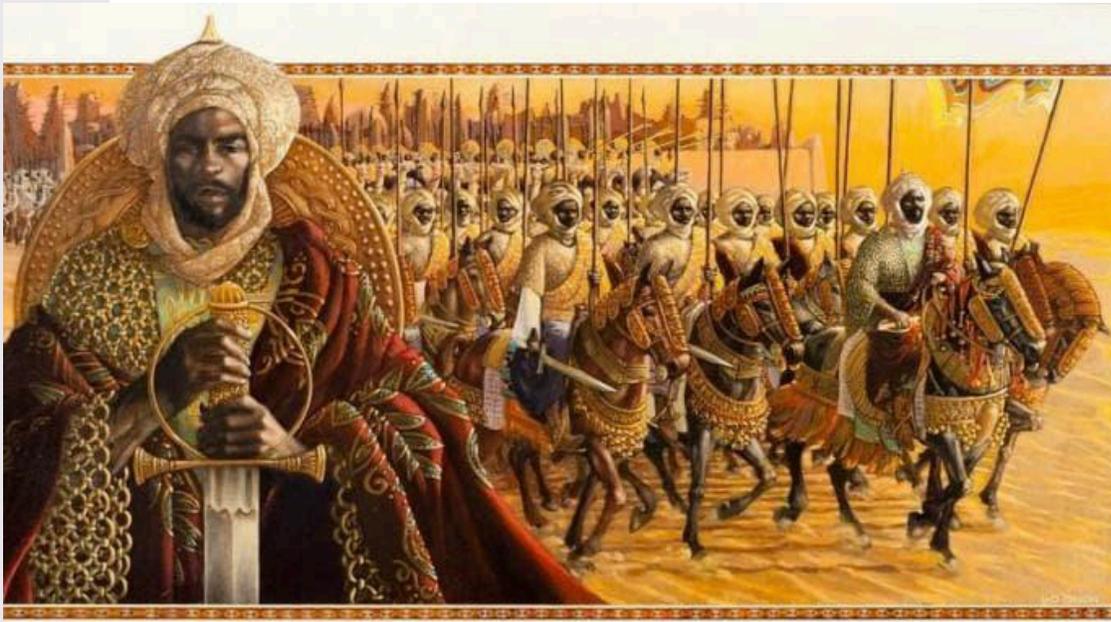
March 19, 2018

By Thad Morgan

Of course, this spectacle was noticed by residents of the territories that Musa passed through—after all, a group so massive was impossible to overlook. The impact the Malian emperor left on the Egyptian people would reverberate for more than a decade.

Arriving in Cairo, Musa’s character was put on full display during his reluctant encounter with Cairo’s ruler, al-Malik al-Nasir. According to texts from the ancient historian Shihab al-Umari, Musa was greeted in Cairo by a subordinate of al-Nasir, who invited him to meet with the fellow monarch. Musa declined the proposition, claiming that he was only passing through on his pilgrimage to Mecca.

The reason why soon became clear to onlookers. “I realized that the audience was repugnant to him, because he would be obliged to kiss the ground and the sultan’s hand,” said a man named emir Abu, as chronicled in the documents. “I continue to cajole him, and he continued to make excuses, but the sultan’s protocol demanded that I should bring him into the royal presence, so I kept on at him till he agreed.”



Mansa Musa, King of Mali.

(Credit: HistoryNmoor/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0)

The meeting grew contentious when Musa refused to kiss the feet of the sultan, and only turned calm after Musa elected to properly greet al-Nasir. Following a conversation between the two men, al-Nasir offered lodging to Musa and everyone accompanying him, and Musa, in turn, left a piece of his incomprehensible wealth in Egypt.

From the markets of Cairo to royal offices to the impoverished people that crossed his path in Egypt, Musa’s generosity and purchase of foreign goods left the streets littered with gold—a resource that was greatly appreciated and in short supply. The people were thrilled—at least at first. Though well-intentioned, Musa’s gifts of gold actually depreciated the value of the metal in Egypt, and the economy took a major hit. It took 12 years for the community to recover.

But the king's trip wasn't all about giving. On his voyage, he acquired the territory of Gao within the Songhai kingdom, extending his territory to the southern edge of the Sahara Desert along the Niger River. He would go on to have an empire that spanned several territories, including current-day Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Mauritania, in addition to Mali.

However, Gao would be of special importance to the king. This territory, in today's Mali, is where Musa would build one of several mosques after completing his Hajj. Timbuktu was also an important city for the affluent king, who used his wealth to build schools, universities, libraries, and mosques there. The burgeoning trading hub was where Musa commissioned the Djinguereber Mosque, a famed place built of mudbrick and wood that has stood the test of time, remaining active for more than 500 years.

Word of Musa's wealth and influence only spread beyond Africa after his voyage to Mecca. Tales of his enormous convoy and generosity continued to be passed on long after his death, which is believed to have taken place sometime between 1332 and 1337. By the late 14th century, Musa had been drawn in the 1375 Catalan Atlas, an important resource for navigators of Medieval Europe. Created by Spanish cartographer Abraham Cresques, the atlas depicted Musa sitting on a throne with a gold scepter and crown, holding a gold nugget.

From the abundance of natural resources he cultivated to the growth and development of communities that he left behind, Musa has a legend that could give the fictional Black Panther a run for his money. As far as wealth goes, it is nearly impossible to quantify the riches that Musa had during his lifetime. The vastness of Musa's land and material holdings, University of Michigan associate history professor Rudolph Ware explained in *Time*, seems downright incomprehensible today: "Imagine as much gold as you think a human being could possess and double it, that's what all the accounts are trying to communicate," he said. "This is the richest guy anyone has ever seen."



LESSON MATERIAL

This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History

March 19, 2018

By Thad Morgan

The Djinguereber Mosque.
(Credit: Marka/UIG via Getty Images)

LESSON MATERIAL

The richest man ever was not named Gates or Bezos; he was king of Mali in the Middle Ages
January 27, 2019

By Steve Johnson

This is what the king Mansa Musa brought with him on his trans-Saharan pilgrimage from Mali to Mecca: “8,000 courtiers, 12,000 slaves and 100 camels each carrying up to 300 pounds of pure gold,” according to the introduction to a superb new exhibition at Northwestern’s Block Museum of Art.

Musa gave away so much of the precious metal in the Muslim holy city that year, 1324, that gold lost value in the region, a scholar wrote. He is thought to be the richest person the world has known. Yet the name of the 14th-century ruler of the Empire of Mali, a place where gold was readily panned from rivers, is barely taught in standard African histories.



Seated figure, probably Ife, found at Tada, Nigeria from the late 13th/14th century, with a baby elephant figure in the background at the Block Museum exhibit ‘Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time.’
(Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

Supplying a fuller sense of the continent was a primary motivation for “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time,” the seven-year vision of a dedicated curator and one of the most ambitious and, at more than \$1 million, costly exhibitions the Block has mounted.

It packs the museum’s 4,000 square feet with a spectacular array of ancient artifacts – and, as the title suggests, pieces of ancient artifacts – borrowed from African museums, the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, among some two dozen lenders. After its stay in Evanston beginning Saturday, it will move on to two of those lending institutions, Toronto’s Aga Khan Museum and Washington’s Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

“Many of these objects have not been seen outside of Africa,” said Lisa Graziose Corrin, director of the Block.

Visitors to the museum will learn that Africa is about more than just standard narratives of colonialism and the slave trade and that medieval times were more than just European men in metal trying to knock each other off of horses. Subtitled “Art, Culture and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa,” the show details trade routes stretching across religions, to countries as far as China and England, and metal working techniques that were stunning on the levels of both craftsmanship and aesthetics.

Two demonstrations of the metal skill come in the eye-opening final gallery stocked with cast bronze figures from Nigeria: a knee-high baby elephant, from roughly the 14th century, and a nearby seated figure cast with copper likely from France, for which the Africans likely traded ivory, the material used in, for instance, the intricate French “Passion of Christ” carving on display, also from the 14th century.

“It’s the first exhibition to use material from the time to conjure the time – to imagine it, to make it visible,” said curator Kathleen Bickford Berzock, who has been developing the exhibition in earnest since 2012, when she was curator of African art at the Art Institute. She is now associate director of curatorial affairs at the Block.

A challenge is that not many whole objects survive from that time, but “Caravans of Gold,” overcoming a federal government shutdown here and concerns about loaning out national treasures in African countries, has brought together some of the most important ones. Gold coins and rings are on display, but so are incredibly fragile textile pieces and excavated shards of pottery displayed alongside the types of bowls or jugs they once were.

“We’re doing this act of reclamation by taking the fragments and connecting them with real art objects and saying, ‘That was here,’” said Berzock.

The world was more entwined at that time than you might expect, she said, and she wanted to detail “Africa’s role as a kind of fulcrum in that interconnectedness. It’s because of the gold resources and the importance of gold in economies of that period of time. That is the impetus for this trade to really expand. But along with that comes a lot of other things: People move and ideas move and other types of materials move. And what the exhibition does is it traces all of those things, and you begin to see how these networks really extend across a very vast area.”

Berzock stresses the deep cooperation and enthusiasm she received from peers in Africa and elsewhere, some of whom will be in Evanston for an opening event this weekend. (After the exhibition ends in North America, more portable versions of it will be given to each of the principal partner countries of Mali, Morocco and Nigeria.)

“A colleague who’s closely involved in the project who is a Moroccan archaeologist called it ‘an homage to archaeology,’” she said. “And I debated whether or not I wanted to share that with the press because sometimes people think of archaeology as being very dry and very boring. But in fact there is a lot of poetry in archaeology, and we use this concept which is called ‘the archaeological imagination.’”

“Archeology is a work of imagination because, you know, you’re taking very small things that you find and you’re using that as a point of access to opening up a much bigger picture. We’re taking that methodology and we’re bringing it into the museum and trying to make it visible to people, but in a really beautiful way. And I think it’s awe inspiring to glimpse into the past in this way.”

LESSON MATERIAL

The richest man ever was not named Gates or Bezos; he was king of Mali in the Middle Ages

January 27, 2019

By Steve Johnson

LESSON PRECIOUS GOODS: STORIES OF TRADE AND INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

EXPECTATIONS: RESEARCH AND INQUIRY SKILLS

Exploring: explore a variety of topics related to world cultures and/or cultural groups

Investigating: locate and select information relevant to their investigations from a variety of primary sources

Communicating and Reflecting: use an appropriate format to communicate the results of their research and inquiry effectively for a specific purpose and audience

Learning Goals Assessment
Demonstrate understanding of concepts of trade, commodities and routes in medieval Africa.

Assessment
Considering Import & Export
Autobiography of a Good

Make inferences and connections

Trading Stories
Epic Global Journeys

Materials

- Statista infographics
- Autobiography of a Good – Guiding Questions (Google Form)
- Voice recorder app via smartphone.
- “Where Does Your T-Shirt Come From? Follow Its Epic Global Journey”

1. <https://www.statista.com/chart/13001/the-worlds-most-traded-goods/>
2. <https://www.statista.com/chart/13691/most-important-countries-and-regions-for-us-peanut-butter-exports/>
3. <https://www.statista.com/chart/19122/biggest-exporters-of-beef/>

Contributions and Influences:

CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

assess the broad significance of historic cultural developments associated with a diverse range of ethnocultural groups

Time: 20 Before: Minds On

Considering Import and Export

Students examine Statista infographics detailing import/export statistics for common goods like beef and peanut butter, as well as the world’s most traded goods. In partners, they consider their clothing/personal items—where were they made? They might research online whether the materials used in the product were imported to the place of manufacture. Students share their observations, questions and connections with the large group.

Assessment FOR Learning: Audio narrative

Time: 55 During: Action at the Exhibition!

Autobiography of a Good

Students will seek out stories of trade within the exhibit—those items used and fashioned in one place, with materials sourced from a far-off place. For example, they may note that the European sculpture “Virgin and Child” is carved using ivory from Saharan Africa. The ivory started out as part of a living elephant; her death begins its journey toward a completely different iteration. If this commodity could tell its own story, what would it say? Students will audio record narratives from the perspective of one material.

Assessment FOR Learning: Prezi/ Visualization

As students collect and document the specifics of these stories of trade and intercultural exchange, they will consider the concepts of commodity, currency and shipment. They will make note of trade routes and what was valuable enough to make lengthy trade journeys and why. These considerations will inform their audio narratives as well as responses to guiding questions (Google Form to assist with note taking, available for teacher download; please save copy to your own account to view or collect responses): <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/11lcAmoUSUd861w5-Ogt9EHhAu6i5KxyuPHI3pftUEM/edit?usp=sharing>:

1. What route might have this item taken?
2. Why was this material worthy of trade?
3. What might have been some challenges faced on its journey?
4. Who worked with the material and in what ways?

Trading Stories

Students will share their draft audio narrative and any related photo(s) with a partner. They will consider links between their narratives. The narratives/photos can be uploaded to social media with the hashtag: #CaravansOfGoldTO. [Please do not take photos of the archaeological fragments case]

*Differentiated Instruction Learning environment:

Full class, pairs, and individual work.

Interest & Content:

Choice of material for audio narrative and Prezi/ visualization

Time: 150 After: Consolidation & Connection

Epic Global Journeys

Students watch Prezi visualization and/or video: “Where Does Your T-Shirt Come From? Follow Its Epic Global Journey” at <https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/7943/making-your-t-shirt-a-journey-around-the-world>.

They research a commodity that directly affects their own lives and record an audio narrative of its journey; or create a Prezi visualization like the one featured at the link above. (Assessment for/of learning).

Next Steps

This can culminate in a virtual audio gallery that includes each student’s work and/or the presentation of visualizations to the large group, followed by questions, feedback and commentary in a roundtable format.

The World's Most Traded Goods

Global trade volume of the world's most traded goods in 2016



Sources: MIT, WTO, Trade Map, Foreign Trade via Teletrac Navman

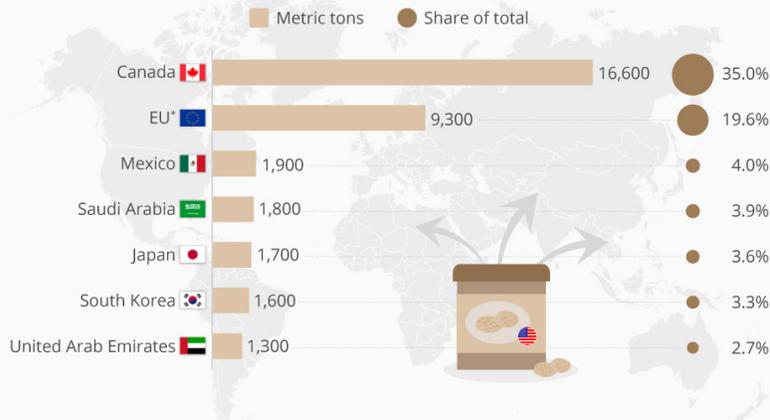


LESSON MATERIAL

<https://www.statista.com/chart/13001/the-worlds-most-traded-goods/>

Who's Importing American Peanut Butter

Most important countries and regions for U.S. peanut butter exports 2017



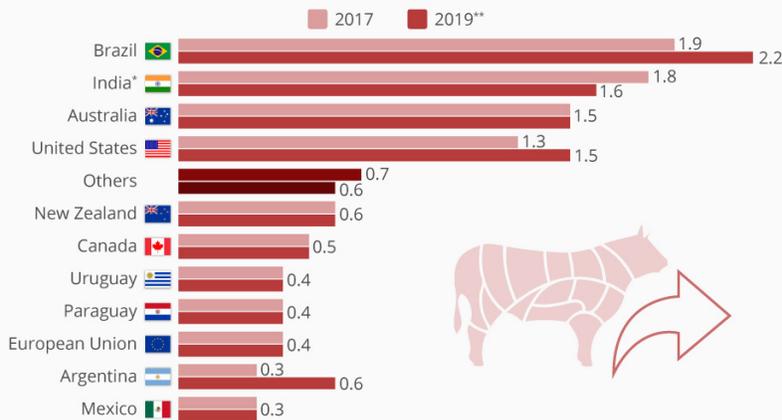
Figures rounded *including non-EU countries Norway and Switzerland Source: American Peanut Council



<https://www.statista.com/chart/13691/most-important-countries-and-regions-for-us-peanut-butter-exports/>

The Biggest Exporters of Beef in the World

Export volume of beef and veal in 2017/2019, by country (in million metric tons)



* Includes other bovines (water buffalo) ** Forecast as of April 2019 Sources: US Department of Agriculture; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service



<https://www.statista.com/chart/19122/biggest-exporters-of-beef/>

LESSON BUILDING NUANCE: BEYOND STEREOTYPES OF AFRICA, ISLAM AND THE MEDIEVAL ERA

EXPECTATIONS: RESEARCH AND INQUIRY SKILLS

Exploring: explore a variety of topics related to equity and social justice

Investigating: locate and select information relevant to their investigations from a variety of primary sources

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Media and Popular Culture analyse stereotypes found in the media and popular culture, and assess their impact

Learning Goals Assessment

Demonstrate understanding of how pieces from this exhibit expand common understandings of Africa, Islam and the medieval era.

Make inferences and connections

Assessment

#fixeditforyou

Identifying Stereotypes Self-Exhibit

Materials

- Article: 'Everyday Africa' aims to undermine stereotypes
- Access to social media and camera via smartphone.
- Exhibitions #Goals (Mission Statements)

Students will briefly explore the IG account @everydayafrica that seeks to nuance popular misconceptions of African life. They may also read the article profiling the collective activism of this IG account: www.voanews.com/africa/everyday-africa-project-aims-undermine-stereotypes

Time: 25 Before: Minds On

Identifying Stereotypes and their Implications

Students will discuss the limited and stereotyped imagery and ideas popularly associated with Africa and Islam in discourse, the media and even historical record. They will also consider the European focus of common understandings of medieval ages (knights, castles, jousting). Students will discuss and list popular images and understandings of Africa and Islam. Are these problematic? Why? How so?

Assessment FOR Learning: 'Fixed it For You' Meme

Time: 55 During: Action at the Exhibition!

#fixeditforyou: Building Nuance with Caravans of Gold

Students will consider Kathleen Bickford Berzock's (Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Block Museum) statement about the mandate of this exhibition: "The legacy of medieval trans-Saharan exchange has largely been omitted from Western historical narratives and art histories, and certainly from the way that Africa is presented in art museums...'Caravans of Gold' has been conceived to shine a light on Africa's pivotal role in world history through the tangible materials that remain." See also mission statements from institutional partners from Mali, Nigeria and Morocco in appendix: 'Exhibition #Goals'.

Assessment FOR Learning: Personal Artifact Meme or Exhibit

In pairs, students will explore the exhibit, making note of items that offer understandings of Africa, Islam and the medieval era that nuance, complicate and challenge the list of stereotyped images and ideas brainstormed before beginning. They will choose one stereotype to highlight and then 'fix it' with information and images gathered from the exhibit. Students will use popular Twitter hashtag #fixeditforyou to highlight this exhibit's expansion of understandings of medieval era Africa and Islam. See exemplar in appendix. [Please do not take photos of the archaeological fragments case]

***Differentiated Instruction Learning environment:**

Full class, pairs, and individual work.

Interest & Content:

Choice of exhibit artifact for meme; choice of personal artifacts

Time: 150 After: Consolidation & Connection

Self-Exhibit: Disrupting Personal Stereotypes

Students will consider how reductive ideas might affect their own lived identities, communities or families. What are these conceptions? How do they affect them? What artifacts from their own lives might disrupt, complicate or nuance these ideas?

Students will return to the #fixeditforyou meme to showcase these. For example, a female student might disrupt gender stereotypes about girls and technology, with a photo of her robotics kit, and include additional items that engage other aspects of her identity in an individualized exhibit; students may engage stereotypes that affect them via ethnicity, faith, race, sexual orientation etc. These can be posted to personal or class social media.

Next Steps

Students will examine each other's 'self-exhibit' memes online and respond digitally with comments, questions, or gifs. (Assessment for learning).

SAMPLE #FIXEDITFORYOU MEME



Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments

**Exhibition #Goals**

Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University

“The legacy of medieval trans-Saharan exchange has largely been omitted from Western historical narratives and art histories, and certainly from the way that Africa is presented in art museums...‘Caravans of Gold’ has been conceived to shine a light on Africa’s pivotal role in world history through the tangible materials that remain.”¹

FROM MALI

Moulaye Coulibaly, Director, Direction Nationale du Patrimoine Culturel
 Mohamed Diagayeté, Director General, Institut Ahmed Baba des Hautes Études et des Recherches Islamiques
 Dr. Salia Malé, Director of Research and Acting Director General, Musée National du Mali
 Dr. Moussa Sow, Director, Institut des Sciences Humaines

“This endeavor promotes and disseminates understanding of the history of Mali and its central role in trans-Saharan trade, which for centuries has been a source of Malian prosperity and influence. As we work to protect Mali’s cultural heritage for posterity, it is heartening to be part of a project that has at its essence a declaration of a historical moment that was of such importance to the world.”²

FROM NIGERIA

Emeka Onuegbu, Acting Director General, Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments

“The ‘Caravans of Gold’ exhibition and its accompanying publication provide an original context for reflecting anew on important artworks from Nigeria’s national collections. By considering these works through the perspective of medieval networks of exchange, the project breaks new ground in connecting Nigeria’s history to an expanded history regionally and globally.”³

FROM MOROCCO

Abderrahim Chaaban, Director, Bank Al-Maghrib Museum, Rabat
 Abdellah Alaoui, Director of Cultural Patrimony, Ministry of Culture and Communication, Kingdom of Morocco

“Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time’ brings attention to the historic relations across North and West Africa for an international audience. It also advances the critical work of revising Western medieval history from an African perspective. In this endeavor we look to these historic connections across the Sahara as a precedent for the role they can play in the region today.”⁴

¹Kulke, Stephanie. (2018). Northwestern shines a light on medieval Africa as a cultural force. Retrieved from <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2018/november/caravans-of-gold-block-museum/?linkId=59700406>

²Northwestern News. (2018). Fact Sheet: ‘Caravans of Gold’ African institutional partnerships. Retrieved from <https://news.northwestern.edu/assets/Uploads/20181015ExhibitionTestimonials.pdf>

³Ibid

⁴Ibid

LESSON FAST FORWARD: AFROFUTURISM AND IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF CIVILIZATION

EXPECTATIONS: RESEARCH AND INQUIRY SKILLS

Reading & Literature Studies: read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, informational, and graphic texts, using a range of strategies to construct meaning.

Writing: generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.

Media Studies: create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques.

Learning Goals Assessment
Reading for meaning (i.e., to understand Afrofuturism)

Communicate ideas clearly using different mediums

Assessment
Short Answer Questions and Class Discussion

Utopian Society Trailer and Review Vlog

Materials

- [“Jonelle Monáe on Afrofuturism”](#)
- [“What the Heck is Afrofuturism?”](#)
- [“Black to the Future: Afrofuturism and Tech Power”](#)
- YouTube: [“Crazy, Classic, Life”](#) by Jonelle Monáe
- YouTube: [Black Panther-The Women of Wakanda](#)

Time: 60 Before: Minds On

In a Perfect World: Designing Your Future

Students will be asked to imagine and design their ‘perfect’ life, but it must be set in the year 3019. Students’ written and/or visual designs must consider (futuristic) fashion/clothing, hairstyles, housing, (modes of) transportation, occupation, and possible travel destinations. Students will discuss one aspect of their future life plan with a peer of their choice, and volunteers will share some of their ideas with the entire class. This will help students think about the future of civilization, which is a great segue to the future of black civilizations, Afrofuturism, and Ekow Nimako’s “Building Black: Civilizations.”

Next, students will watch [“Jonelle Monáe on Afrofuturism”](#) before reading [“What the Heck is Afrofuturism?”](#) by Jamie Broadnax and/or [“Black to the Future: Afrofuturism and Tech Power”](#) by Florence Okoye.

Students will respond to the following guiding questions to help them better understand Afrofuturism:

1. If you had to create a formula or equation for Afrofuturism, what would it be?
2. What do you think is the difference between science fiction and Afrofuturism?
3. Why might Afrofuturism be important to people of African descent?

Then, using their answer to question #1, students will watch [“Crazy, Classic, Life”](#) by Jonelle Monáe, to determine which aspects of her art are Afrofuturistic. Students can organize their findings using a t chart with these headings: Examples of Afrofuturism and Examples of Present-Day Reality.

Assessment FOR Learning:
Think/Pair/Share and Class Discussion

Time: 120 During: Action at the Exhibition!

Building Black: Civilizations

Students will apply their knowledge of Afrofuturism by looking at how Ekow Nimako’s artwork fits into the genre. Students must generate at least three reasons that support the notion that Nimako’s exhibition is Afrofuturism at work. Students may wish to compare the medieval artifacts to Nimako’s contemporary works to fully appreciate both the contrasts and connections (e.g., gold coins juxtaposed against Nimako’s world on a camel’s back pieces) the collections share.

Assessment FOR Learning:
T Chart

LEGO® Legacy

Students will have the opportunity to create their own artwork using pieces of black LEGO®. Students are encouraged to build, snap a photo of their creation, and share it via [#CaravansOfGoldTO](#) or [@agakhanmuseum](#). Students must caption their work with a brief description of what it is and why they chose to create it.

A Moment for Reflection

As a large group, students will discuss the following questions:

1. Why do you think Nimako chose to build his pieces of artwork using LEGO®?
2. How does Nimako’s choice of material differ from that of other artifacts found in the Caravans of Gold collection? How might this be significant to Nimako’s Afrofuturism lens?
3. What material would you choose to build with if this was your exhibition?

***Differentiated Instruction Learning environment:**

Full class, pairs, and individual work.

Interest & Content:

Visual analysis of videos and creating video content.

Time: 150 After: Consolidation & Connection

Welcome to Wakanda: Building a Utopia of Your Own

Students will watch [Black Panther-The Women of Wakanda](#) to begin to think about how Wakanda is structured, as well as how this video is shot through a feminist lens. Then, in groups of 3-4, students will choose a school of thought (e.g., feminist, critical race, post-colonial, gender and queer studies, Marxist, etc..) as a basis for the creation of their own utopian society.

Assessment OF Learning:
Utopian Society Trailer and Review Vlog

Students will have to research the tenets of a utopian society and their school of thought to ensure that their society has a strong foundation. Each group must include the following in the description of their utopian society: name, infrastructure, government, economy, technology, and arts. This will culminate in a trailer (like a movie trailer) that will be shared with the class. The trailer cannot exceed four minutes.

Next Steps

Students will select a piece of art (e.g., film, album, novel, etc..) that reflects an Afrofuturistic theme, and review its merits in a five to ten minute vlog. This will be submitted to their teacher.



Many of us blerds (black nerds, to you) who have read the Black Panther comics never thought the day would come when we would finally see this story adapted for the big screen. With the movie's already profound effect on pop culture, it is provoking deeper discussions around reimagined worlds with black politicians, spiritual leaders and monarchs at the helm. We're hearing the word "Afrofuturism" a lot.

But what exactly is Afrofuturism?

Afrofuturism is the reimagining of a future filled with arts, science and technology seen through a black lens. The term was conceived a quarter-century ago by white author Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future," which looks at speculative fiction within the African diaspora. The essay rests on a series of interviews with black content creators.

Dery laid out the questions driving the philosophy of Afrofuturism:

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers white to a man who have engineered our collective fantasies?

What makes Afrofuturism significantly different from standard science fiction is that it's steeped in ancient African traditions and black identity. A narrative that simply features a black character in a futuristic world is not enough. To be Afrofuturism, it must be rooted in and unapologetically celebrate the uniqueness and innovation of black culture.

The biggest proponent of this cultural movement, even before it had its name, was musician Sun Ra, who infused elements of space and jazz fusion in his work as a musical artist. Prolific science fiction author Octavia E. Butler explored black women protagonists in novels like *Fledging*, *Dawn*, *Parable of the Sower* and *Lilith's Brood*, set in the context of futuristic technology and interactions with the supernatural. In the contemporary music world, singers like Erykah Badu, with her eccentric and experimental imagery in videos and album covers, promote the intersection of art and futurism. Artists like Janelle Monae, with her android alter-ego and electronica sounds, and films like "Brown Girl Begins," a post-apocalyptic tale set in 2049 and directed by Sharon Lewis, pay a huge homage to Afrofuturism.

LESSON MATERIAL

What The Heck Is Afrofuturism?
February 16, 2018

Jamie Broadnax
Guest Writer



ILLUSTRATION:
GABRIELA
LANDAZURI/
HUFFPOST

LESSON MATERIAL**What The Heck Is Afrofuturism?**

February 16, 2018

Jamie Broadnax
Guest Writer

Then there's "Black Panther." The film wears themes of Afrofuturism proudly on its sleeve. Tech genius Princess Shuri is not only the smartest person in the fictional world, but she's responsible for the creation and maintenance of sophisticated gadgets for her brother T'Challa, a.k.a. Black Panther.

A prosperous alternative afro future can be seen in their fictional East African home of Wakanda, a small country the size of New Jersey that has never been colonized and is steeped in its blackness. It's a utopian society that also boasts one of the world's richest resources, vibranium. Because white supremacy never intruded on Wakandan culture and its people, ancient African traditions remain common practice there.

But this movie is more than just a glorious film—it's the expression of a movement.

Africans and African-Americans have full autonomy as Afrofuturists. A community of people can take a piece of visual art or notes from a song and develop an entire universe and say, "This is ours." And that's what this film represents to so many excited fans. Black Panther is a superhero who is for us by us. We can claim him.

In addition to the predominantly black cast filled with Hollywood stars and starlets, "Black Panther" also had a black production team spearheading the shaping of this story. The writer, filmmaker and executive producer are African-American. Production designer Hannah Beachler, who was influenced by Afrofuturistic architecture and Afropunk aesthetics, helped lay the groundwork for this world. The African regalia and elaborate costumes by famed wardrobe designer Ruth E. Carter created a Wakandan couture that would give New York Fashion Week a run for its money—just look at her use of kimoyo beads as both a fashion accessory and a communication device.

**WALT DISNEY STUDIOS™**

"Black Panther" stars Lupita Nyong'o (Nakia), Chadwick Boseman (T'Challa) and Letitia Wright (Shuri), among others.

This intersection of sci-fi and African pride is what we've come to know as Afrofuturism. For many of us in the blerdb community, the film with its love for technology, science, visual art and music (if you haven't checked out the "Black Panther" album, you should make it a priority) is what we've been hungry for.

I hope, for all of our sakes, that this is also just the beginning. I hope that "Black Panther" can prove that stories permeated in blackness have crossover appeal. I hope we get more and more stories of black people who have agency, who are free and subservient to no one. Black people deserve to see themselves leading the way in real or abstract futures.

Jamie Broadnax is the editor-in-chief and creator of the online community for black women called Black Girl Nerds.

I grew up learning that all the kids in Nigeria were geniuses. Whenever a laptop broke, our mother would shrug it off and say “Well, when we go home this summer, we’ll take it with us to Enugu. The boys there will know what to do with it.”

Fast forward to now. I’m not at all surprised to see hand-made vehicles and green blazered teenage girls showing off urine powered electricity generators, all over the Maker Faire Africa website. We’ve always been makers, even before it was cool.

Both in Africa and amongst the diaspora, the rise of affordable computers, electronics, mobile technology and access to free education, facilitated by an ever more accessible internet, are making black futurist dreams a reality.

As a young black girl who read too much science fiction, I discovered within it a striking lack of futuristic black cultures. It seemed obvious to me that this was part of an overarching association of blackness with stunted development, whether artistic, political, social or technological.

In 1990s Britain where I grew up, generally blackness was equivocated with violence and low achievement. We were too ‘street’ to see the stars above. The kids of Onitsha and Enugu who could hack into networks and mend laptops by hand went ignored, the distance in geography and perception rendering them almost fictional.

Afrofuturism is a literary and cultural genre in which the black experience is explored, often through speculative fiction. It is grounded in diversity, avoiding science fiction’s usual racial pitfalls. Although the term was first used by Mark Dery to “describe African-American culture’s appropriation of tech and sci-fi imagery”, afrofuturism is part of a wider black futurist picture which, in the words of academic Damion Scott, “represent[s] aesthetic counterparts to the struggle for equality”.

LESSON MATERIAL

Black to the future: afrofuturism and tech power

25 August 2015

Florence Okoye

*I'd love to live in
a world where
the thug, the
drag queen, the
single mum, the
octogenarian
churchwarden
and the black
girl geek could
overthrow the tech
corporations.*



The work of musician Janelle Monae is associated with afrofuturism. Credit: nerdreactor.

LESSON MATERIAL

**Black to the future:
afrofuturism and
tech power**

Florence Okoye
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Notable afrofuturists include musicians and theorists like Sun Ra and Janelle Monae, as well as science fiction writers like Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okarafor. Their work combines the tropes of science fiction with non-Western and minority ethnic aesthetics to produce new, more complex visions of the future.

As a kid, I was inspired by the work of author Malorie Blackman, who placed young black protagonists centre stage in her narratives. Blackman's *Thief* showed me not just that I could exist in the future, but that I could be empowered by technology to reclaim ownership of my otherness. Blackman helped me to grasp that I - the weirdo black girl who loved dinosaurs and astrophysics - could be more than just an 'other', or a silent prop in someone else's story.

There's something ironic about the lack of diversity in science fiction. Although there is Western science fiction set in Africa such as Nancy Farmer's *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm* and *Stand on Zanzibar* by John Brunner, these works are anomalous, or at least easily forgotten due to the stereotype of science fiction and futurism as a white affair.

The exclusion of blackness from the narrative of progress is strange considering that from the earliest roots of modernity, the black imagination has been a key contributor to social 'futurism', from the abolitionist and anti-colonialist movements, to providing the very aesthetics that we commonly associate with modernism and rebellion, such as jazz, cubism and rock and roll.

Today, the rise of tech means our individual and social futurisms are closer to becoming concrete realities. Looking at the various movements in open access research, technology and citizen science gives a sense of these possibilities. DIY bio-hacking and 3D printing open up exciting avenues for healthcare justice, in a world where the health of minorities and the disadvantaged can be notoriously poorly served at every level from research to distribution. Being able to program and develop software means we can make the most of cloud and wearable technologies, not just to make websites and cute little apps, but to keep our politicians accountable and help protect us against the abuses of the state, for example by enabling us to record our interactions with abusive police forces.

Social networks are another example of technologies used to promote liberation and spread consciousness about contemporary social issues.

We joke about 'black twitter' and 'black tumblr' but the reality is that these multinational, multiethnic and intercontinental networks have produced a new conscious black identity, an example of what Moya Bailey, founder of 'Quirky Black Girls' and member of the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network referred to as "digital alchemy". She describes this as the way "everyday digital media is transformed into valuable social justice media magic". Though it is fraught with its own internal antagonisms, this network enables visible, self-organised political identities. This has galvanised many of us to unite across the world for the cause of social justice.

Of course, technology alone does not create utopias, neither is it neutral. Because of this, it is crucial to encourage engagement and ensure open access. Organisations such as Free Code Camp and Codebar.io recognize this. They provide free courses and the opportunity for mentoring to those less well represented in tech. While the big players in science and technology may always dominate, at least others can disrupt, embellish and beautify where they cannot.

Afrofuturism also tends not to be in the business of utopias. Reflecting the complexity of the black experience of progress and scientific development, in many ways, the works of writers such as Octavia Butler look more towards the struggle, the constant search for a dynamic equilibrium. In the case of Butler, in works such as *Fledgling*, according to Susana M. Morris, her “visions of the future are often ambivalent [and] reveal an ongoing struggle for peace and justice”.

Both in my own experience and that of many in the black diaspora, technology has played a crucial part in self empowerment. Through programming, many of us are sharpening the skills to create technology to shape the world we live in for ourselves, rather than relying on handouts from the likes of Apple and Microsoft.

I’d love to live in a world where the thug, the drag queen, the single mum, the octogenarian churchwarden and the black girl geek could overthrow the tech corporations through the power of homemade cloud computing networks, Arduinos (an open-source hardware for electronic prototyping) and hacked Raspberry Pis (small computers that can be plugged into a TV or monitor), but at the very least we can still provide our own blend of techno-anarchy.

Like all science fiction, afrofuturism both illustrates contemporary issues and provides new visions of the future. But most particularly, by portraying blackness as compatible with futurism, it is part of the revolutionary process where we move from silence to speech, a gesture of defiance, as bell hooks says, that ultimately makes new growth possible.

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