



Titus Kaphar (American, born 1976). *Shifting the Gaze*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 83 × 1031/4 in. (210.8 × 262.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum

Canon Fire! Critically Interrogating What We Teach and Why through an Antiracist Lens

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Most of the following examples are from the discipline of art history since that is the facilitator's expertise. What examples might be found in your discipline?

Part 1: How Canons Shape Our Teaching

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How is your teaching affected by the presence of a canon in your discipline? How did this disciplinary canon develop?
- Who is included in your discipline's canon? Who is excluded?
- Think about the demographics of your students.¹ How do these demographics compare to the identities of the authors/artists/musicians/scholars/performers included on your syllabus?
- What message does the content of your course send to students about who gets to belong in your field?

Part 2: Decolonizing the Canon

Strategy 1: Plan a lesson where students get to “talk back” to textbooks in your field, focusing on issues of inclusivity.

Strategy 2: Design an assignment where students get to create a new canon.

Strategy 3: Allow students to suggest ideas for what is included in the course content.

For example, students might annotate or revise parts of the textbook noting which voices or perspectives are missing.

For example, you might create a scenario where students role-play members of a committee to redesign [the AP Art History curriculum](#).

For example, the first assignment of the semester might be to crowd-source readings from diverse authors for the syllabus.

¹ You can get specific data about your students' racial identity, gender identity, and first-generation status from the CSU Student Success Dashboard: <https://csusuccess.dashboards.calstate.edu/public/dashboard-index>

Part 3: Subverting the Canon

Strategy 1: Teach contemporary artists/musicians/authors/scholars/performers who are commenting on, reclaiming, undermining, or subverting the traditional canon.

Strategy 2: Connect historical examples from the canon with issues that are relevant to students' lives. For example, when teaching historical artists who famously behaved badly, such as Caravaggio, you could connect the lesson to contemporary discussions about whether it is possible to appreciate art created by artists who have committed immoral acts.

Strategy 3: Teach theories such as postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and/or critical disability theory in ways that are accessible to students. Create structured assignments and activities so that they can practice applying these theories to the canonical examples included in your syllabus.

Strategy 4: Have students create works of art (visual art, performances, creative writing, etc.) that reference canonical texts or artworks and comment on the exclusivity of this canon.

Resources and Bibliography

Ch'ien, Letha. "[Responding to the Early Modern European Tradition](#)," *Reframing Art History*, Smarthistory.org's open-source art history textbook.

Dyches, Jean. "Critical Canon Pedagogy: Applying Disciplinary Inquiry to Cultivate Canonical Critical Consciousness." *Harvard Educational Review* 88, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 538-564. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-88.4.538>

Dyches, Jean. "Investigating Curricular Injustices to Uncover the Injustices of Curricula." *The High School Journal* 101, no. 4 (Summer 2018): 236-250. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2018.0013>

Ervin, Jennifer. "Critically Reading the Canon: Culturally Sustaining Approaches to a Prescribed Literature Curriculum." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 64, no. 4 (January/February 2022): 321-329. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1208>

Kaphar, Titus, "[Can Art Amend History?](#)" *Ted Talk*.

Khalid, Amna and Prather, Anika. "[Expanding the Canon: Are 'Great Books' Obsolete?](#)" from the *Banished* podcast.