A course taught by Assistant Professor Sarah Lewis was the inspiration for "Vision & Justice," which will bring together experts, artists, and scholars from Harvard and beyond to “consider the role of the arts in understanding the nexus of art, race, and justice.”

Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard Staff Photographer

Two-day conference explores the nexus of art, race, laws, and norms

By Colleen Walsh Harvard Staff Writer

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When asked in 2016 to guest edit a special edition of Aperture magazine devoted to the photography of the black experience, Sarah Lewis knew two concepts central to the notion of American citizenship — vision and justice — would comprise the issue’s underlying theme.

“No matter the topic — beauty, family, politics, power — the quest for a legacy of photographic representation of African Americans has been about these two things. The centuries-long effort to craft an image to pay honor to the full humanity of black life is a corrective task for which
photography and cinema have been central, even indispensable,” Lewis wrote in the issue’s introduction. The Aperture edition, inspired by Lewis’ Harvard course “Vision & Justice: The Art of Citizenship,” is also the creative inspiration behind “Vision & Justice,” an upcoming two-day meeting hosted by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. The April 25–26 event will bring together experts, artists, and scholars from Harvard and beyond to “consider the role of the arts in understanding the nexus of art, race, and justice.”

Lewis, an assistant professor of history of art and architecture and African and African American studies, spoke to the Gazette about the upcoming conference.

Q&A

Sarah Lewis

GAZETTE: The driving force behind the award-winning Vision & Justice issue of Aperture was inspired by “Pictures and Progress” a speech given in 1861 by Frederick Douglass that explores how African Americans are represented visually, and how images can help redefine the nation. Can you talk about when you first encountered that speech and your reaction to it?

LEWIS: I first came across a digitized version of Frederick Douglass’ speech about the importance of pictures for American progress in the collection of the Library of Congress at home one night. It must have been in 2010 or 2011. I was certainly not the first to find it; I had seen a reference to the speech but reading it in his own handwriting felt like a bolt of lightning. I remember someone calling me with tickets to an incredible New York City performance, but I turned them down, and instead sat for hours poring over the speech. Frederick Douglass was essentially asking, How do we overcome a failure of the collective imagination to see people as they are?

I wrote about Douglass’ ideas in “The Rise,” my book about creativity and failure. At that time, some extraordinary scholars who are now colleagues, like Henry Louis Gates Jr. and John Stauffer, were also writing about this understudied speech or on Douglass’ work at large. There is now, of course, also an extraordinary new biography on Douglass by David Blight, and more scholarship on Douglass by Laura Wexler, Robin Kelsey, Zoe Trodd, Cheryl Finley, Deborah Willis, Celeste-Marie Bernier, Stauffer, and others. Their scholarship — and the contributions offered by making the versions of the speech more widely available through Stauffer's book — is a gift.

When I first read Douglass’ “Pictures and Progress” speech, I thought: Was he also an art historian? If you look at the books in his library at the end of his life, he had many that we would expect from a prodigious orator, but he also had a sizable number of books about the arts by John Ruskin and writings by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. on photography. He had slightly obscure books, too, and even had an exhibition catalog from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He was dedicated. He was studying. It is an exciting development for the field. Douglass’ speeches upend our sense of the context surrounding image-making and national belonging.

So, yes, I was clear that I wanted Douglass to be the framework for the Vision & Justice publication and research project. That wasn’t expected; Aperture is a contemporary photography journal. The accent here is on contemporary. However, thankfully, the journal’s editor, Michael Famighetti, gave me the keys, so to speak, and cleared a path for me to let the issue speak with integrity to the power of Douglass’ ideas. I’ll forever be grateful for his trust. We commissioned essays from prodigious writers and scholars, from Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Robin Kelsey to Claudia Rankine, Margo Jefferson, and Nell Painter, some of whom had never written for Aperture before. The same held
true for the power of the image-makers — Carrie Mae Weems, Deborah Willis, Deana Lawson, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Awol Erizku, Jamel Shabazz, Dawoud Bey, and many more. When you’re framing an entire issue around Douglass, it has to be done with the highest level of care, commitment, and passion. I actually wanted to release four volumes of the Vision & Justice issue over two years, choosing a different guest editor for each.

The Vision & Justice convening is not a Frederick Douglass conference. He has, however, become an emblem of the unfinished work and questions about the nature of representation and justice on American soil. This is not work about how images have served to dishonor human life — unfortunately we know that side of the story well. Instead, it’s about how art and culture has served as a productive counter-narrative and that history has not been fully examined.

GAZETTE: The Vision & Justice issue of Aperture received critical acclaim and nationwide attention in the press, became required reading for incoming first-years at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, and inspired a Harvard course that became part of the University’s core curriculum. Did the response inspire you to think about doing something more, or was this convening always part of your longer-term plans and goals?

LEWIS: To be frank, I had been trying very hard not to organize a conference since the Vision & Justice issue came out. I had been asked to put one together by a number of institutions, but I was finishing a book under contract with Harvard University Press and had just started teaching at Harvard. Those endeavors are my main focus. Yet when the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study approached me about organizing an event, their programming was designed around the idea of citizenship. I was honored to be asked, but we delayed the convening to honor the scholarship I was completing. The reason why I agreed in the end is that, in the intervening period, a number of other events made me reconsider the stakes of such an event — the political climate and the role of images and civic space in that work. It seemed like this event might be contributory for civic life at Harvard at beyond. With support from Radcliffe, the co-sponsors, and the other generous funders — the Ford Foundation and the Lambent Foundation — it seemed feasible to execute on the scale required.

I also kept thinking back to my grandfather, who was expelled from a public school in 1926 for asking in the 11th grade where African Americans were in the history books. His question seemed downright radical at the time. He was expelled for his so-called impertinence. He became an artist, and here I am, two generations later, teaching the very topics at Harvard he was expelled for asking about.

As I was thinking of this, I also learned that President Emerita Drew Faust had been dean at Radcliffe during the time of an extraordinary event around cultural citizenship in 2004 led by Homi Bhabha and continued through his work at Mahindra Center for the Humanities. This is one of many events that have taken place. So, putting together this event felt like an organic outgrowth of events that had happened on Harvard’s campus.

GAZETTE: The list of speakers for the convening is as vast as it is varied. Why did you feel it was so important to have voices from so many different fields of expertise taking part?

LEWIS: What is the role of the arts for justice? If you take Douglass as a starting point, these are questions we’ve been asking in the United States for over 150 years. What interests me as a scholar is the question behind the question. Why do we even need to consider the relationship between art
and justice? Why does the structure of our laws and norms freight culture with this work? The convening is meant to address these guiding questions. Doing this in a thorough and probing way meant inviting speakers from across a range of disciplines that rarely converge to answer these questions anew.

For example, on the topic of culture and inequity, one of the panels at the conference will bring together photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier and Mona Hanna-Attisha, who uncovered the Flint crisis. What is the work of image-makers on the front lines, of those identifying a crisis that seems to require more than laws and policy changes? The event is vast and intergenerational — from Naomi Wadler to Bryan Stevenson. It is designed to let people speak across the silos of their own fields. I feel so fortunate that we can have an event on Harvard’s campus that is so deeply public-facing.

In his installation address, President Bacow also reflected on the unique nature of this moment in which people are asking, “What does higher education really contribute to the national life?” As a scholar looking at how artists can contribute to civic discourse, I take that important question to heart. My hope is that this event can help serve to address it in some small way.

This scale of this event benefited from Dean Tomiko Brown-Nagin and Radcliffe’s support, along with that of the co-sponsors from the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research and the Harvard Art Museums and the American Repertory Theater and extremely generous funders including Radcliffe, the Ford Foundation, and the Lambent Foundation.

Advice from the advisory team was also invaluable: Henry Louis Gates Jr., Lori Gross, Evelyn Higginbotham, Elizabeth Hinton, Robin Kelsey, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Yukio Lippit, Jennifer Roberts, Tommie Shelby, and Damian Woetzel. I had extensive conversations with each of them, along with Claudine Gay, Doris Sommer, Larry Bobo, Sharon Harper, and more, that let the event take on this shape. There were also a large set of students who acted as researchers — the Vision & Justice Ambassadors, led by graduate student Elsa Hardy and undergraduate Liat Rubin. It was a collaborative effort from the start.

GAZETTE: In your editor’s note for the issue, you write: “Understanding the relationship of race and the quest for full citizenship in this country requires an advanced state of visual literacy, particularly during periods of turmoil.” How do we get to that visual literacy?

LEWIS: Seeing is a way of reading the world. We’re so accustomed to the visual literacy we’ve developed that we often forget that it is a critical skill. It’s the mechanism that we use to sort, edit, sift, and make value judgements. When it comes to race and equity, representation has served an urgent, civic function.

The conference will also confer the inaugural Gordon Parks Foundation Essay Prize, given to graduates and undergraduates whose work examines the nexus of visual art, racial equity, and justice. It’s an honor to be able to have an extraordinary Gordon Parks exhibition on view at the Cooper Gallery at the Hutchins Center to coincide with the convening. That show has been curated by Maurice Berger. All of the images are culled from the collection of Kassem Dean and Alicia Keys, who have been phenomenal champions of the visual arts.

On the day of the conference, we’ll also release a civic publication, a visual literacy course pack for a digital, democratic age. This volume contains cornerstone texts about the nexus of images, race, and justice organized into four categories — Art, Race, and Activism; Civic Space and Memorials; Race,
Technology, and Justice; and Race, Childhood and Visuality. While this is not the approach I take in teaching, it is a response to the themes that I see under debate in public life. Teaching about the intersection of vision, race, and justice means expanding any course syllabus on a near-daily basis. It is with that spirit that I hope it is seen as a starting point for discussion, an open-source invitation for more collective work. We’ll release the issue as a free digital publication on the day of the event.

GAZETTE: Can you talk about what you see as the landscape of visual representation today and what it says to minorities about their representation in American life?

LEWIS: The demography of this country is shifting quickly, and we see this through an expanded landscape of visual representation. We might live in increasingly siloed communities, but we’re able to penetrate boundaries because we live in a world where events around the globe can greet us as an image. This is an era of hyper-representation, and in an increasingly connected global landscape, it is challenging what we mean by minorities at all.

GAZETTE: In the age of social media, how do we turn the internet into an inclusive force for representation?

LEWIS: Technology can be inclusive, as a gathering point. But this means addressing the algorithmic bias it contains … Darren Walker will be in conversation with Latanya Sweeney and Joy Buolamwini, two of the scholars joining others in doing path-breaking work to address this issue and propose solutions. I’m looking forward to learning from them.

GAZETTE: What do you hope the convening will achieve, and how do you hope to share your message beyond Harvard’s gates?

LEWIS: I have a number of ideas about what I hope will come of this, but what excites me most is the magic that may come of an event that brings together individuals who don’t often speak together.

James Baldwin wrote in his essay “The Creative Process” that “[t]he artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.”

Pursuing the truth about who we are as a nation requires that we refine the questions we ask about the history and nature of justice in this country. What questions will our speakers raise that lead to new perspectives, new frameworks? That’s what I’m interested in hearing about most of all.