

Whiteness in Art Education

Dorothy B. Smith

Appalachian State University

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Dr. Emily Hood

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Abstract

This paper will explore the concept of Whiteness in the Art Education Curriculum and classroom.

The idea of Whiteness in Art Education is explicitly made evident through the exemplary artists chosen by educators, as well as the choice in techniques and methods offered and suggested to students in the context of artmaking.

Keywords: Whiteness, curriculum, art education

In this essay I wanted to explore the *Whiteness* in visual arts while reflecting on my own experiences and observations. In part, one can also note the Whiteness in many other facets of American culture, such as types of literature, clothing, movies, toys, and other common goods we are surrounded with that, upon deeper observation, are limited to the *common* White culture that dominates the United States of America. While I will not get into each of these categories, for the sake of the arts I will address literature.

In reading *Pedagogies in the Flesh: Case Studies on the Embodiment of Sociocultural Differences in Education*, I found an interesting and heartbreaking story of a family who values education and literacy. They made a tradition of taking their young son to the library weekly to gather new literature, hopefully with an African American protagonist, as they are also African American. When reading the book out loud to their son, the father soon realizes that the book their school recommended to all families was riddled with racism.

“We were arrested with anger and the uneasiness that a book so beloved, both well-received and often used in elementary schools (as we have later witnessed) could have such problematic ideas about race. Taken in consideration with the all too common problem of Black and Indigenous absence in American children’s literature, this whole situation becomes even more absurdly vile! In this case, we existed, but in blackface! This was minstrelsy and worse of all, nobody around us seemed to know or care that a beloved author and book was anti-Black and racist (K.D. Brown and A.L. Brown, 40, 2018)!”

This family’s story is both valuable and vital to understand an all too often unspoken reality in our culture. The *Pedagogies in the Flesh* book made so many great points that I can now better understand what *White privilege* really means: Not having to discover racism against you through everyday activity. In order to truly understand oneself we must take a deeper look at and within

ourselves to better understand what makes us who and what we are. “Brooke argues, ‘radical reflection makes the Self possible by undermining the ego...by going under it, back to [the] body,’ This critical phenomenology of the body is armed with the idea that without the flesh, we are unable to make sense of the material world and, thus, unable to transform neither the relationality nor the materiality of oppression. [...] Hence, social resistance and disruptions of the body are not only essential to humanizing our existence but absolutely necessary to the evolution of political consciousness and social transformation (Darder, ix, 2018).”

In order to better understand ourselves and each other we must be willing to be transparent. It is the sharing of culture that opens doors to understanding. Having knowledge of something typically and naturally makes it less unusual or strange, and more comfortable to be around or engage with. This is a major goal of every teacher: to spread knowledge. Regarding the book *Debates in Art and Design Education*, and the topics of critical race and multicultural art education, Morris writes, “Knowing oneself and culture makes possible an understanding of the construction of identities whereby students can knowingly explore and create art works. Identification, including cultural and historical frameworks, is how we group and identify ourselves and how others do the same. This process is based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, socio-economic status, art forms, dress, speech, dialect, narratives and history, to name just a few categories (Morris, 43, 2013).” Morris explains that Multicultural Education started in the 1960s as a way to combat racism during the Civil Rights Movement. “It was then, and still is, an educational process dedicated to providing equitable opportunities in social, political and especially educational arenas for disenfranchised individuals and groups (Morris, 44-45, 2013).” Morris continues by saying, “The practice of storytelling is key because it requires one to name

one's reality. Such stories can be healing to the teller and can help listeners realize their own participation in the process of oppression (Morris, 45, 2013)."

I feel that it is very important for teachers to incorporate a variety of cultural aspects into their lessons, especially teachers of the arts. Renowned educator, Merryl Goldberg, writes, "Classroom teachers can [...] find ways to integrate the cultures of the children in their classrooms. In this way children can learn about many cultures and individual children will feel that they and their identity is acknowledged. On the other hand, not integrating cultures can indirectly teach children that their cultures are not valued (2004). [...] For children living in nontraditional families, which, judging by my own neighborhood, is more the norm, culture and arts are a natural bridge to gaining, identity and sharing it with others (Goldberg, 14, 2012)."

In continuing this thought Goldberg writes, "The arts provide a means and form to express our understanding of the world in an aesthetic as well as objective manner. Just as we can learn subject matter through the arts, the arts can teach us about the world in which we live (Goldberg, 178, 2012)." In this I have come to an understanding that it is an wonderful thing to offer information and visual art projects on several world cultures, but it is even more efficient and important to explore the cultures of the students you work with in your own community and school to help them feel important and valued.

We do not want our students to feel objectified, hurt, or devalued when they read literature or view art. Morris writes, "[Adrian Piper's art] work and process is an example of Critical Race, Multicultural Education and encourages us to examine critically the negative influence of images from a white lens that perpetuates self-hatred (Morris, 47, 2013)." Since slaves arrived on the shores of Virginia in 1619 their voices had been dulled. "Historically, African Americans have been attuned to the cultures of secrecy and impasse. Before emancipation, enslaved men, women,

and children, although physically and socially confined, were the sentient repositories of a wide range of suppressed information (genealogical, proprietary, and criminal) that their legal status prohibited them from publicly disclosing or responding to, either in testimonies or actions. (Smithsonian, Powell, 13, 2012).”

It wasn't until attending Appalachian State University that I truly learned about the Harlem Renaissance. I may have been taught about it before then, in middle or high school. Regardless, if I was taught about it before it didn't stick. As an adult learning about the Harlem Renaissance I came to understand how important it was, particularly how the African Americans and generations descended from slaves made their voices and stories known through song, literature, and visual arts starting in the 1920s through the 1940s. “[During the Harlem Renaissance] Aaron Douglas's geometric shapes, stylized figures and monumental visual narratives examine the effects of slavery, racism, poverty and labor. In his painting, Archibald Motley experimented with portraiture to resist racist stereotyping at the same time that he produced crowded night scenes reveling in black working-class life to protest against class biases within African American art. Finally, Charles Alston visualized the jazz and blues singers of Harlem alongside Civil Rights protesters and brutalized black bodies to reinforce the relationship between black aesthetic experimentation and political resistance in his canvases. [...] Perhaps the most famous twentieth-century African American artist, Jacob Lawrence, experimented in his epic narrative series with the relationship between text and image to examine issues surrounding slavery, heroism, migration, labor, segregation, civil rights, racism, and representations of the black body (Bernier, 12, 2008).” The was so many rich ideas of Black culture and history told from Black people. They had built their own platform, and people from around the world were listening.

“[In] *The New Negro*, an anthology of poetry, drama, fiction, and essays on music and culture that analyzed and celebrated black culture during the Harlem Renaissance[,] [...] [Alain Locke] talked about the ‘emotional inheritance’ of African art for black Americans and noted its huge impact on Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani, Guillaume Apollinaire, and a host of other modern European painters, sculptors, and poets (Smithsonian, 142, 2012).”

This excerpt fully justified and validates my thoughts that the Harlem Renaissance should, indeed, be explicitly taught in the visual arts classroom. Everyone who has been in an art class has heard the names Picasso and Matisse. To not know who or what inspired their work is to only have a partial grasp of understanding what makes their work stand out, memorable, and valuable.

One argument I wanted to make in this essay was that the materials presented or offered in the K-12 art room can be an example of Whiteness. As I researched further, I found that is not really the case. “Emerging during slavery and surviving on down through a post-civil rights era, black visual arts have taken many forms including mural, portrait, landscape and abstract painting; sculpture; daguerreotyping and photography; pottery, quilting and collage; assemblage, installation, street and performance art. Despite their many and important differences, it is possible to trace thematic and formal continuities across this vast body of works produced by African American artists living and working in the United States. Many artists have repeatedly pushed the boundaries of media and materials in the search for a visual language which would represent the difficult realities of African American struggles for existence (Bernier, 1, 2008)” I was going to argue that sticking to drawing, painting, and working with clay seems to be very traditional in the K-12 art room, and so it must be *White*. However, there is a wide range of mediums used by all people in visual arts.

Finally, I fully consider museums to be a place of education for people of all ages. Many schools take students on field trips to museums of all kinds. In considering art museums representation of fine and contemporary art, and after considering how a huge art movement such as the Harlem Renaissance was not covered in a meaningful way in my own K-12 experience, I wanted to research how Black artists are, or are not, represented in a major gallery museum such as the Smithsonian, as well as how Black artists feel towards museum galleries.

“One of the major difficulties encountered by critics of African American art is not only short-sighted criticism but also the underfunding, marginalization and exclusion of artworks and artists from white mainstream galleries and museums. As contemporary African American artist, Howardena Pindell asserts, ‘The artworld does not want artists of color to be full participants.’ Similarly, Greg Tate insists that the ‘world of the ’serious’ visual arts’ is nothing less than ‘a bastion of white supremacy, a scone of the wealthy whose high-walled barricades are matched only by Wall Street and the White House and whose exclusionary practices are enforced (Bernier, 7, 2008).”

In my own experience I have seen African masks and tribal works in museums in the African section but have not really recognized a section for Black artists, specifically. Most works typically found in art museums are by classic European artists. Is this really the case? On the little plaques on the wall for the artwork description, do they say the race or ethnicity of the artist? No, but they do say the country or location where the artwork is from. Perhaps there are assumptions that museums are for White artists, while public galleries are for Black artists or artists of color. I continued my research.

“Deciding to turn their backs on the traditional gallery space entirely, [Black artists] favor internet sites, street installations and performance pieces which are not at the mercy of white

patronage and funding (Bernier, 10, 2008)” Because they did not feel their work was being taken seriously or because their work was being used in an objectifying manner, many Black artists opt to keep their work out of mainstream art museums today. It is my personal hope that in time this will change.

In conclusion, I feel that it would be a more valuable and noteworthy experience for my students if I offered a diverse array of artists to explore through research and observation. I feel that giving a fuller picture of the artist to my students will help strengthen their appreciation and understanding. After this research I plan on presenting local artists, artists of color, and artists with disabilities within my own art classroom.

Citation

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