

Art Education in Crisis: A Critical Race Studies Response to Endemic Complacency

Coalition for Racial Equity in the Arts and Education (crea+e)

ABSTRACT

This commentary advances thoughtful and imaginative alternatives to endemic complacency on matters of racial inequity in the field of art education. In a style that embraces cultural irony and a spirit of serious play, the Coalition for Racial Equity in the Arts and Education (crea+e) identifies three areas ripe for anti-racist intervention—discourses, embodiment, and form and proposes audacious new movements, like dropping beats, for racial justice in art education. The crea+e collective's form of writing is intentionally polyvocal and aesthetically eclectic in a way that mirrors the very nature of collective work in intellectual and social movements. Collectives need not erase or smooth out the different modulations of expression, thought, and experience to speak as a collective voice. Thus, through its content and form, the commentary aims to propel critical race discourse within the arts and arts education.

KEYWORDS: race, racism, crisis, COVID, equity, justice, collectives, arting, art education, embodiment

It has been three years since the Art Education Research Institute (AERI) invited the panel *Race and Racism in 21st Century Art Education* (November 2017). During this interactive assembly, critical race scholars, artists, and educators Joni Boyd Acuff, Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis, B. Stephen Carpenter, II, Amelia M. Kraehe, and Vanessa López, led a discussion about race and racism in art education research. The takeaways from the discussion were that because race is not widely understood as a central organizing structure within the field of art education, the field lags in addressing the problem of white supremacy; art educators of color are mentally and emotionally exhausted from doing race work and White art educators need to more critically and intentionally engage in anti-racist research, reflection, and teaching; and the white supremacist structures in art education are a problem created by and, therefore, best solved by people who perceive themselves to be White. In this commentary, the Coalition for Racial Equity in the Arts and Education for (crea+e)¹

1 The anonymity of individual authors is a purposeful intervention. Individual naming is not consistent with collective ethics of crea+e that are rooted in radical care and

This approach generates writing that is intentionally polyvocal and aesthetically eclectic in a way that mirrors the very nature of collective work in intellectual and social movements. When present, this approach invites the critic to consider an aesthetic in stark relief to status quo, colormute-conscious arrangements implicated in societal structures of domination (Morrison, 1992). Collectives need not erase or smooth out the different modulations of expression, thought, and experience to put forth a collective voice. Thus, through its content and approach to knowledge production, the commentary builds upon the groundwork laid at AERI so as to move forward critical race studies in the arts and arts education.

Beat 1: In Times of Crisis, Arting Is Essential

In an essay titled “What Is Art Education For?” published in *The High School Journal*, Elliot Eisner (1958) asks his readers, “Is art education merely the whipped cream on the cake or is it a part of the meat of basic education? Can we justify to our students the fact that most of them are required to study art?” (p. 263). These opening questions are not focused on whether or not art is basic; that has been decided already. As he says, the majority of students are required to study art. It is compulsory and universal, and thus part of a basic education. Proponents of art education have continued to elaborate and reiterate the idea of art education as basic since the mid-20th century (e.g., Chapman, 1982). Common core subjects and standards are among the newer vocabulary to have evolved from the discourse. Although art educators may debate where art fits in the hierarchy of school subjects and they may disagree on what ought to be included in the art standards, the logic that art is a part of basic education is mainstream and relatively uncontroversial.

Discourses are inherently political. For Foucaudian scholars, they are the *conditions* that enable and constrain what objects may be designated at all and what thoughts may be accepted as true, effective, reasonable, and necessary (Ball, 2018). As Foucault (1972) says,

All manifest discourse is secretly based on an ‘already-said’; and that this ‘already-said’ is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a ‘never-said’, an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath. (p. 25)

In a society that for hundreds of years has been structured on the basis of white supremacist heteropatriarchy, theft of Indigenous lands, and looting of Black bodies, as is the condition of the United States and many other settler colonial nations, there is no such thing as innocence through silence or race-neutral discourse. Silence is an

inaudible presence. It contributes to the conditions that enable or constrain thought and action. Art education discourses may appear benign, but they are nevertheless “an instrument and an effect of power” (Foucault, 1990, p. 101) constituting artist subjects and that which we designate as art. The discourse of art education as basic—a discourse that is the invisible backbone of art education—is implicated in conditions that marginalize, exploit, oppress, and exclude particular groups of people.

We believe it is vitally important that the field of art education interrogate its hidden discourses as potential hindrances to racial and social justice. For us that means reframing. Going back to Eisner’s provocation, What is art education *for*?, we ask instead, What does art education *produce*? More specifically, what does art education sustain or achieve for *Black and Brown people*? Who have been the primary beneficiaries of the discourses that constitute and are reconstituted by art education?

The answer we come away with is that the basic discourse of art education advocated in previous eras has not resulted in a system of K-20 art education that serves all students equally well, least of all those for whom crises of educational neglect and social exclusion have foreclosed possibilities in the arts.⁴ Rather than making educational inequity visible and knowable, basic art education discourse aligned with disciplinary specialization—art as a *special* subject in schools, artists as *specialists* with credentials and associations, and *specialized* professionals licensed to teach art (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Singerman, 1999). Both discourses avoid race talk. Indeed, they exemplify color-muteness, a pattern of silence that masks race-based exclusion, aggression, and inequality in art education (Alfredson & Desai, 2012; Pollock, 2004). Race-evasive discourses not only make it difficult to recognize white supremacy but also provide a shelter (Foucault, 1990) for racism to persist within the field. The effect is endemic complacency.

We are interested in responsive and generative critical race alternatives to prevailing discourse that, intentionally or not, eclipses concerns about racism in the arts. This is a site of intervention since discourse can be “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1990, p. 101). In communities that have endured American genocide, enslavement, Jim Crow, and other

4 One need only look at studies like those by Basmat Parsad and Maura Spiegelman (2012), the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) surveys (Frenette & Dowd, 2020), and many others to see persistent large-scale patterns of racial disparity as a consequence of how art education opportunities and the educational complex for artists are organized in the US.

systematic forms of violence, exploitation, and marginalization—social crises that have not been eradicated and for which modern science and industry offers no pill, no vaccine—creative activity is life affirming salve that lubricates and liberates the spirit, eliciting joy and possibility even in the midst of debasement and atrocity (Warren, 2015). As Alain LeRoy Locke (1925) observed nearly a century ago, creative cultural practices are a primary modality through which (Black) people’s struggle for freedom and fully human existence would be waged.

Creative activity is not basic, nor is it special. It is just what people do. It is what people have always done for *survivance* (Vizenor, 2008). The grammar of COVID-19 has brought this to the foreground: creative activity is an *essential* service, one that we do for ourselves and each other and without which we cannot be free. We lean toward the alternative language of *arting* to designate and encourage a range of creative activity, movements, and beats that resist and exceed the distortions of silent racism normalized in and through discourses that give art distinction as a special part of basic education.

Arting is essential for anti-racist thought and action. Just say it aloud. Arting. On the lips and in the ears, arting feels both familiar and yet clumsy, unrehearsed, even awkward. It is neither established, pinned down, disciplined, nor incorporated as (white) property (Gaztambide-Ferndández, Kraehe, & Carpenter, 2018). It is a radically nonhierarchical discourse that includes creative practices that arouse the senses, stimulate thought, and build perceptual capacities. “[A] rting refuses closed categories for what is and is not art and instead is open to that which is yet to be known or come into being” (Kraehe, 2020, p. 7). In many ways, this commentary is an instantiation of arting.

Beat 2: When This Body Is Weary, It Owes No Apologies

This body. This experience. Our superpower. We are the inhabitants of diaspora. A friend once said, love doesn’t need to be so hard. But what if our love has always been hard? What if the only way we know (or have been allowed) to function in love and life and work is hard? We all know the work of racial equity is hard; emotionally and physically exhausting (Acuff, 2018; Smith, Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). Being Black in the US weathers the body (Wilson, 2018). Indigenous, Colored, Queer, Poor, Trans, Immigrant bodies in the US are also weathered. How might we begin to live and work in relation to the requirements of this weather-ing? Living and working and loving within this “racial climate.” Which is to say, the variable conditions that support the totality of this imperial racial project necessitates a reckoning *of* and *with* our present material conditions. Pivot. This weather-ing might then produce improvisation, changeability, and

new ecologies; a political act, which seeks to protect and heal this environment. Gardens in abandoned lots. Black Lives Matter street murals. Corner concerts. Online love letters. Idioms aesthetically texturizing, self-consciously.

What does healing and pleasure around racial equity look like in action? Our bodies cringe over and over again. But we keep coming back. Keep coming back to the conversations around this body and action in front of children who can see clearly. Children who refuse to hold the pain and trauma of their ancestors. How does one survive with a spent body and exhausted heart? You keep going. You stop talking to closed ears. You stop centering White desires and ambivalence. You stop writing so they understand. You find the people who already understand. The people who laugh at the audacity of the statements. The audacity of silence. You find the people who can see you when you can't see yourself. You find the people who tell the truth. Over and over again. You refuse together. You laugh together. You cry together. You dance together. You eat together. You write together. You heal together. You offer blessings. You perform rituals. You kiss and touch and hold one another. These are conceptual possibilities to perform and how up differently.

The healing comes in the here and now. The back then. And right now. And not again. In the children who have had enough and have taken to the streets to demand a reckoning. The multiple leaders. In multiple shells. All screaming the same thing. The polyvocal. In the children who refuse to be called out of their names. The children who pick new names and new pronouns and new ways of being. And demand we be braver. Bigger. More hue-myn. They make us think maybe we can be free in this body. Healing comes in making. Making out of nothing and everything. Design thinking started in the hood. Arting has been on the streets. Imagine a new world. Black. Brown. Yellow. Red. Magic.

Beat 3: If the Future Looks Dystopian, Revisit the Past

The arts give language to our dreams.

High pitched voices crackle in dark supper clubs, wailing in unison with a lone saxophone.

Vibrant color palettes and hair-raising textures fill canvases that design and illustrate Black and Brown existence. The images magnify visions of our love and humanity...because it is indeed magnanimous.

Intricate Nuanced Complex Thorough Ambitious ~~~> Deep

Black and Brown bodies move in conversation with beats from the

sun's vibrations. Unmediated by eyes from others, we create waves with our arms and earthquakes with our feet. These vibrations cannot be copied because they are sent directly from the soil to our soles.

Innate Natural Untethered Ancestral Peaceful ~~~> Light

Black and Brown souls art all the time. We exist-mediating, unmediating, remediating.

Make Create Generate Produce Imagine Build Direct
Plan Execute ~~~> Arting

Black and Brown hands, voices, bodies and minds have overcome the confrontational energy that overwhelms White bodies, particularly those with demonic hearts and green eyes.

Our work is never, but always Loud Bland Muted
Vague Frisky Meek Gentle Assertive
Rowdy Complex Quiet Ugly
Beautiful Simple Simply simple ~~~> All Encompassing

It can be nothing, but everything. If that is what we want, if that is what we imagine, if that is what we feel. All on our own. Even without the language of tongues.

Our arting can ~~~> Be
We can ~~~> Be

To lie on your back, star gaze, breathe deeply, imagine (anything) and smile...is a futuristic goal. Nostalgically remembering tomorrow, with color, rhythms and drama. The proposition is to not lie parallel with, but to be perpendicular to...maybe even oblique with. To move forward with uninhibited memories of the past, built with our collective imaginations, souls, and energy. We move in and out of consciousness. A mass of minds. Jumping through ropes like a double dutch marathon. That is now, but so it was then we followed their lead, while hoping to find new moments to enter and exit the rope, all without welting our ankles in the process.

Movement building has never been the act of one mind moving an agenda forward, but the minds of many moving forward together. Like ants building a colony. Everyone with an important job in the assembly line. Do not follow prescribed protocols and procedures. See AfriCOBRA, the collective made their own language, values, and principles to create, discuss, and appreciate art created with Black and Brown hands. The Black Arts Movement initiated their audacity. Whitestream "standards" be damned.

It is time. The opportunity is ripe for shift, for sustenance, for more

courage to re-vision.

It is time to Move Drag Pull Restore
Begin Fulfill~~~> crea+e

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