

# Creative Trouble: Making Spaces for Collectivity within Art Education

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

## ABSTRACT

The *Coalition for Racial Equity in the Arts and Education (crea+e)* is a collective body whose primary aims and activities concern advocacy, teaching, research, and publishing on issues related to race and intersectional racism in the arts and arts education. The collective engages in critical race arts-based research practices that incorporate strategies and tactics of disruption that operate on multiple registers to undermine the normalization of whiteness and spur much needed conversations on how to abolish systemic racism in the arts and arts education. This article discusses crea+e's collective orientation, its mission, and how it operates. It also chronicles three interventions the group undertook that illuminate critical, creative, and constructive modes of coalition-building. The article articulates the significance of collectives in resisting co-optation by white normative institutions while insisting on joy in the pursuit of justice.

**KEYWORDS:** race, racism, anti-racism, equity, justice, collectives, mentoring, art education

The *Coalition for Racial Equity in the Arts and Education (crea+e)* is a collective body of artists, educators, activists and thought leaders of color whose primary aims and activities concern advocacy, teaching, research, and publishing on issues related to race and intersectional racism as they manifest and mediate the arts in educational spaces. Racial knowledge and anti-racist practices are underdeveloped in arts disciplines and institutions. In the United States and other settler colonial societies, arts disciplines (e.g., visual art and design, music, dance, literary arts, and theater) and institutions (e.g., museums and archives, art schools and conservatories, PK-12 schools and universities, professional associations and credentialing organizations) operate within the logic of racial hierarchy (Kraehe, Gaztambide-Fernández & Carpenter, 2018). They were designed to support narratives of Euro-American progress and civilization (Duncan, 1995; Lentis, 2017) that valorized the cultural contributions, histories, and self-image of those people who “think they are white” (Baldwin, 1984, p. 91). Not much has changed in the present.

*crea+e* exists to address the critical need for credible racial analyses

and constructive responses to ongoing racial inequities produced in and through the arts. The collective engages in activist arts-based research practices (Rolling, 2013) to disrupt the normalization of whiteness in arts classrooms, research, teaching, and advocacy and spur much needed conversations on how to abolish systemic racism in the arts. The deep structural nature of racism in the arts demands a response from activist scholars, artists, and educators who can penetrate the pervasive silence about race. Thus, *crea+e* uses collectivity to “get loud” about racism, incorporating various strategies and tactics of disruption that operate on multiple registers as a critical race arts-based research practice.

In the pages that follow, we frame the issues that are important to *crea+e*'s collective orientation, its mission, and how it operates. Then, we describe the specific issues that this collective is grappling with by chronicling three interventions the group has undertaken. They illuminate how the coalition engages in critical, creative, and constructive practice. In the conclusion, we reflect upon *crea+e* as an example of how collectives are uniquely situated to resist co-optation by institutions, like the ones noted earlier, and insist on joy in the pursuit of justice.

### From “I” to “We” in Two Registers

reg-is-ter | \ 're-jə-stər<sup>1</sup>

1. the compass or range of a voice or an instrument
2. a part of this range produced in the same way and having the same quality

Some coalitions are merely assemblies of individuals, each striving for autonomy and recognition as a particular entity atomized and separate from its environment. Others are based on shared identity, a sense of self-sameness. *crea+e* is different from both of these orientations. It is a coalition that was born out of creative solidarity, people working “to reveal new horizons, against which we might not only imagine, but also produce new ways of being together” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 58). Here we frame the manner of our disruptive coalition building through two registers and show how each is part of a genealogy comprising the Guerilla Girls and Combahee River Collective.

### Register 1: Laughing Together

*crea+e* brings an attitude of play and an insistence on pleasure when tackling the very serious problem of racism. This first register of

disruption is a tactical/tactile one. Laughter can be invigorating for those who fight against exploitation, degradation, and exclusion, and it helps us heal from the pain of injustice (brown, 2019). Play and pleasure come through in the way the group employs humor, code switching, and dissensus throughout its work. One important forebear who paved the way for playful tactics is the Guerilla Girls, a group of feminist activist artists. Its membership has included up to 55 people, each participating for different lengths of time. The people behind the Guerilla Girls exercise collective agency by remaining unnamed as individuals. They speak as one. Their anonymity is presented in a humorous way. They always wear gorilla masks in public and for staged interventions (note the gorilla/guerilla word play). This tactic keeps the focus on the group's core issue--the marginalization and exploitation of women and people of color in the visual arts--rather than on the identity of the person under the mask. It is a way to have fun, too.

Guerilla Girls also combine humor with facts as a strategy to critique bias and injustice in politics, art, film, and pop culture. In *crea+e*'s (2020) article, “*Art Education in Crisis: A Critical Race Studies Response to Endemic Complacency*,” published in the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, a similar approach was used. It mixes academic argument, poetry, and idiomatic expression, along with personal reflection on lived experience. When *crea+e* speaks out on matters of racism, it harnesses the power of the various expressions, thoughts, and experiences within the collective and expresses them through an equally modulated aesthetic. This aesthetic, which is described in the aforementioned article as dropping beats, refuses to erase, smooth out, or subordinate differences in voice. *crea+e* speaks in a polyvocal style that mirrors what it is to build an intellectual and social movement.

### Register 2: Disobedient Discourse

To speak loudly on issues of racial justice (or injustice as is often the reality) necessitates pushing against the limits of acceptable discourse. *crea+e*'s general orientation is toward experimentation rather than conformity that typifies life in institutions; risk-taking over complacency that upholds the status quo; collaboration ahead of individuation that attaches rewards to individual productivity; and joyous resistance to overcome silent submission. These values reverberate through the second register of disruption, which concerns how *crea+e* chooses to communicate. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) once wrote, “The medium is the message” (p. 7). Taking this lesson to heart, *crea+e* considers carefully how, when and where to publish their work, that is to say, *make their work public*. Often the strategic use of publishing leads the group to break

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/register>

with modernist formal conventions. Indeed, the way *crea+e* writes is intentionally disobedient to the structures and rules that say knowledge production must look this way or that way (e.g., *crea+e*, 2020), particularly in academic spaces. This disobedience challenges readers', reviewers' and editors' tacit racial knowledge, which is often tethered to an unconscious racial bias toward that which most closely approximates the shifting signifier of whiteness (Morrison, 1992).

*crea+e* has looked to the Combahee River Collective, formed in 1974 by Black feminists as a source of inspiration. Four years later, in a document titled Combahee River Collective Statement, the group articulated its commitment to analysis of and struggle against interlocking racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppressions. *crea+e's* agenda intersects with that of the Combahee River Collective, but beyond that, *crea+e* also draws inspiration from the group's dialogic approach to knowledge construction. In a similar fashion, *crea+e* insists on publishing its ideas and critiques as a collective, not as individuals or individually named co-authors. This is a purposeful strategy. Individual naming is not consistent with the ethics of *crea+e* that are rooted in radical care and movement building. Publishing as a collective and refusing to name names subverts the codes and conventions of White male dominated neoliberal institutions, including corporate and academic publishers, that treat knowledge as individual property, rather than a common good.

### Free Forms of Critical-Creative-Constructive Intervention

**Chord:** The harmony at a given moment. Loosely, a group of 3 or more notes played together.

**Free:** Without rules. Especially, improvising without regard to the harmony / chord changes, or without any harmony / chord changes.

In amplifying collective knowledge, *crea+e* challenges the harmony of academia. Our range becomes far and deep. Multiple voices speak as one. Chords are strung together without rules or restrictions. Here we chronicle three critical-creative-constructive interventions, free form interruptions to the continued endemic complacency in the arts in education.

### Free Form, 2019

The first of our critical-creative-constructive interventions drew from ancestral ways of being and healing in, with and for community. "The Gathering," as we came to call it, sought to define our collective "we." *crea+e* wanted to know who was like us - Black, tired, Brown, frustrated and in need of community - out in the arts education

world. And we wanted to feel joy. Together. The Gathering was an underground party held during the National Art Education Association (NAEA) Conference in March of 2019. *crea+e* utilized visual and embodied data collection and dissemination, employing an old survival technique, scanning the room for who here is us. >>>Head nod<<<Cheek kisses>>> Deep bows<<<

We drew on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call for "creative maladjustment" in our desire and need to find each other, be free and bold together. As educator Herbert Kohl (1994) writes:

Creative maladjustment consists of breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one's place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty--that is, it consists of learning to survive with minimal moral and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and of not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary. It also means searching for ways of not being alone in a society where the mythology of individualism negates integrity and leads to isolation and self mutilation. (para. 10)

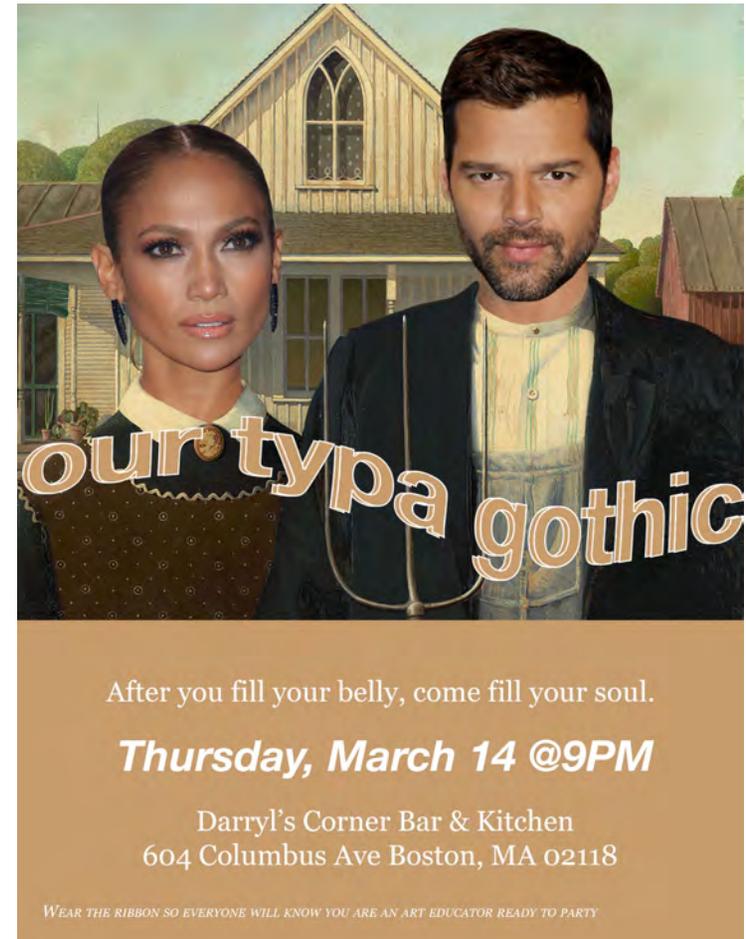
Drawing on the 1930 painting, "American Gothic" by Grant Wood, we created a series of flyers to advertise the event (Figure 1). The flyers remixed the original White husband and wife characters to Black, Latinx and Asian celebrities and musical artists (Figure 2). Titled "Our Typa Gothic," the flyers listed the location, Darryl's Corner Bar and Kitchen, a local Black-owned establishment. The flyer vaguely explained the purpose of The Gathering "After you fill your belly, come fill your soul" and included a brown ribbon. Participants were encouraged to wear the ribbon to "signify you are an art educator and ready to party" (Figure 3). The flyers did not explicitly signal it was a gathering for People of Color (POC) - just like certain art classrooms do not explicitly signal they have a preference for White male European artists, but you know, you can tell (Figure 4). Organized by *crea+e* and fellow co-conspirators, flyers were anonymously and strategically distributed in spaces frequented by people of color at the NAEA Annual Convention. Those included the Committee on Multicultural Concerns business meeting and various Black, Brown and other scholars' of color presentations. The Gathering relied on word of mouth versus many of the other gatherings and parties hosted at the convention that require a formal invitation, a university affiliation, or the "right" credentials (e.g., a PhD). News of The Gathering spread via the mouths of those who are typically silenced within the arts in education, people of color.

At The Gathering, live music played, drinks were plentiful, and conversations were loud. There was joy, laughter, dancing, libations,

and liberation. The Gathering consisted of students, teachers, professors and artists. The Gathering was intergenerational, tenured and non-tenured. The Gathering was thick with Black, Brown, Asian and Latinx faces. Some came to network but eventually learned to let go, put down the mask, show up, and just be. Those in attendance wondered who threw this party, who was the leader here and who was setting the social norms. People were looking for a head for the body, being so used to things being orchestrated in these very top down ways. The Gathering demonstrated a different organizational structure in which no leader could be identified, everyone was able to be in the space without direction on just how to be. The Gathering was our first experiment in intentional community, in what it would look like to build and honor the radical community. The Gathering became a space where the typical performances were not required and that felt like freedom.



**Figure 1:** Free Form 2019 *Our Typa Gothic* Lil Kim + Biggie



**Figure 2:** Free Form 2019 *Our Typa Gothic* JLo + Ricki



**Figure 3:** *Free Form 2019 Ribbon*



**Figure 4:** *Free Form 2019 Our Tupa Gothic Jennie + Kang Daniel*

## Free Form, 2020

Our next critical-creative-constructive intervention was the “Color Theory: Whose Map Is it Anyway?” (Figure 5 and Figure 6), a counter flyer created in response to the existing “Mapping the Possibilities in Art Education Research” promotional flyer depicting the headshots of seven White-presenting research experts as viewable at NAEA.<sup>2</sup> We focused our critique on the NAEA flyer promoting the Art Education Research Commission Online Forum in 2020. Our counter flyer is a visual provocation to decenter whiteness in art educational research discourses that force and create racial hierarchies in the knowledge-making process. White dominance in art educational research has persistently silenced and omitted the voices and scholarship of Black and Brown scholars and other scholars of color who dedicate themselves to decolonial and anti-racism research for many years. The counter flyer advanced a set of research directions for art education. As identified through its marketing materials, the event largely excluded art education scholars of color, which begged the question: Whose voice and perspective matters when determining future directions for art education research? Many art education scholars of color are leading the research on issues of racial equity and anti-racist art teaching. They bring an important ontological and epistemological orientation to the field. Yet, their absence in the forum signifies the privileging of White voices and a formation of a disciplinary canon that is always already framed by whiteness (Scheurich & Young, 1997). The flyer developed by crea+e is epistemic resistance to the injustice that occurs in muting the voice, views, and ideas of Black, Brown, and other scholars of color in the research field (Medina, 2013).

Responding to this White-centered event, the crea+e event, titled *Color Theory: Whose Map Is it Anyway?* was our critical-creative-constructive interruption of the White dominant research space. It reconfigured the slate of scholars in the original promotional flyer using seven endarkened SuperHeroes. These new Black and Brown Superheroes—including Misty Knight, Question, Colleen Wing, Shakti, Black Panther, Storm, and Verb—signified a space for a new mapping of art education research possibilities that do not reinforce White dominance and racial hierarchies within research. First, we critically view that White-centered art educational space parallels the existing dominant SuperHero rhetoric of the comic world in which Whiteness is comfortably grounded, and racial hierarchy and White privilege are naturalized. We counter the dominant White Superhero’s weak curriculum of diversity and inclusion that has grabbed a surface level of understanding of race and racism and treated Black, Brown, and WoC as merely accessories to serve as White futurity.



Imagining next steps in research on behalf of crea+e (Coalition for Racial Equity in Art and Education), the CREA+E Research Commission asked the membership this question:  
**What are the most pressing questions, topics, concerns, and curiosities for the field of visual arts education?**  
More than 500 people responded. Now we're asking deeper questions about the data: What values, interests, questions, and ideas are suggested in the data? Whose histories of being, making, and knowing get to matter and be prioritized, and why? What's missing from the data? These questions underscore the reality of a complex map of research that lives differently in different places.

Join us for an interactive webinar to discuss the data collected via the membership survey about research interests and concerns in members' daily contexts. From schools and museums to online learning and a wide range of community based settings, research in art education is a map with many destinations. Come be a part of mapping the possibilities of research for CREA+E.

Please note that participation in this webcast does not provide CREA+E professional development credit.

### Presenters:



**Misty Knight**  
The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.



**Question**  
The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.

Figure 5: Free Form 2020 Color Theory Whose Map Is it Anyway?

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.arteducators.org/learn-tools/need-to-know-webcasts>

Presenters:



**Colleen Wing**

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.



**Shakti**

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.



**Black Panther**

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.



**Storm**

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.



**Verb**

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. You've been awoken. Click the links to learn about each one of us, and next time, feature some people like us.

Figure 6: *Free Form 2020 Color Theory Whose Map Is it Anyway?*

Refusing such a weak curriculum, we bring Black and Asian comic characters back to the center stage, rather than the dominant superhero tropes that treat the characters as merely comic relief niche or their roles as helpful sidekicks for the White heroes. The Black, Brown, and WoC superhero(ine)s we chose carry self-confidence, strong power and voice, brilliant mind, and power of healing wounds, and spirit of solidarity to flip the White dominant script. Centering The Black, Brown, and WoC superhero(in)s signals our envision and action with a new map of the art educational research to highlight Black, Brown, and WoC's perspectives, views, and voices as center toward racial equity.

### Free Form, 2021

*crea+e's* most recent critical-creative-constructive intervention, "Kitchen Table Conversations: A Graduate Mentoring Series" (KTC) (Figure 7), continues to be inspired by de-centering logics of White dominance in art education. KTC is a monthly webinar series and intimate space, targeted to serve the needs and interests of Black, Brown, and other graduate students of color in the arts in education. Conceived from enduring traditions of "gathering," *crea+e* was interested in extending prior gathering moments by conjuring a space for graduate students, to serve as an invitation for ritual, sharing and sustenance.

Immediately we conspired the idea of the kitchens, in general and the kitchen table, specifically. Far more than a simple flat surface on which to dine, the kitchen table can be thought of as the heartbeat of any personal gathering. It's a place to talk, connect and reconnect; and depending on the type of conversation, disconnect. We could all recall spending time around kitchen tables and, at some point, long to recreate special memories shared with family and friends around this seemingly mundane object.

It seems the tradition of gathering in the kitchen has endured over the years, and even in today's contemporary world, this modest table continues to be the center for all sorts of activity; and it's not difficult to understand why — meals are prepared and shared around it, school work is completed under someone's watchful eye, board games and card games bring about playful competition. And when we invite others into our homes, we often gravitate into the kitchen to keep company and naturally sit at the table to relax and play with us. Gathering around the table allows the space to unplug from other distractions and sometimes offers time to imagine the possibilities of our lives; in this sense, the table setting becomes the medium (Wilson, 2020).

**KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS**

**BIPOC IN THE ARTS:  
A GRADUATE  
STUDENT  
MENTORING SERIES**

Join us from **1-2pm EST, the fourth Friday of each month** for an informal mentoring series developed specifically for Black, Indigenous, & People of Color (BIPOC) graduate students in the arts field. **This series is free!**

Some unique components of this series include:

- ⇒ BIPOC graduate students **ONLY**
- ⇒ Sessions facilitated by BIPOC leaders in the Arts and Art Education field.
- ⇒ Topics are chosen by BIPOC graduate students who register; therefore, the series closely attends to BIPOC experiences and interests.

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

Registration closes January 8, 2021.

After registration closes, registrants will be sent the Zoom link that should be used for each monthly session. A flyer that details the topic for each monthly session will accompany the Zoom information.

The first session is Friday, January 22nd, 2021, at 1pm EST. Attendance is always voluntary. You are welcome to attend as many or as few sessions as you desire.

Hosted by [CBOA+e](#). Email inquiries to [wearecreate.org@gmail.com](mailto:wearecreate.org@gmail.com)

Figure 7: Free Form 2021 Kitchen Table Conversations

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The KTC series was conceived out of initial conversations with Black, Brown, and other graduate students of color in early November of 2020 and with the understanding that the arts in education are inherently loaded with racial logics and assumptions, which necessarily influence the Black, Brown and other graduate students of color experience in and through the processes of teaching and learning. Following these logics, we understood that Black, Brown, and other graduate students of color in the arts and art education encounter specific challenges navigating white dominated graduate programs that their White counterparts do not. Our graduate school memories of being the “solo” Black, Brown, or other student of color (or one of two) and the challenges associated with locating other POC students in our programs fueled our determination to mobilize our plans to organize this intervention.

To these ends, *crea+e* agreed that POC students would benefit from a strategic mentorship campaign via recurring monthly Zoom gatherings. By this time, we had experienced almost 10 months of social-distancing and isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we were decisive in moving toward a goal of creating a communal space where students could come together and learn with and from other POC creative professionals and emerging scholars.

POC students were identified across institutions, nationally, emailed a copy of the flyer and asked to opt in by registering. Approximately 40 POC students registered for KTC, demonstrating a clearing yearning

for the space. In order to know where students desired guidance, we created a survey to assess their interests. We learned that students were interested in topics that included, but were not limited to, taking care of mental health in graduate school; getting the job while POC; navigating whiteness in the content and the classroom; building collectives; allies and co-conspirators and writing; and teaching and researching about and for POC.

KTC was launched in 2021 on a Friday in January and convened monthly for up to 90 minutes per meeting. Thematically targeted, the gatherings online are often peppered with mini career stories from professional creatives of color in the arts and education along with knowledge that many students are unlikely to receive from advisers and mentors who are not racially marginalized and minoritized. KTC encourages students to connect with one another and with more experienced scholars of color in the arts and art education using the small group breakout functions. To round out each session, a post-gathering, called “Barbershop, Bi Bim Bop, Bodega,” serves as a lounge space that extends the conversations with a relaxed, open-ended atmosphere.

### Social Practice of Freedom

*crea+e*'s collectivity is a conceptual enclave where freedom resounds. It materializes in the rumble of our voices, the pounding of our steps, the call-and-response in our teaching, the pulse behind our making. This freedom is deep, not shallow. Our creative trouble with dissensual methods and improvisational forms is the genetic progeny of a 400-year old social practice of freedom that keeps us keeping on. Terrors wrought of numbing white noise, evidencing the wounds of genocide, colonial settlements, and possession begin to fade in the distance.

soothing // BROWN NOISE // soothing

Freeing us from the fact of enslavements. We laugh. Risking sovereignty of our bodies and minds. Gathering together, in kinship. Embraced by the ancestors. Much like in antebellum America, when enslaved African people secretly gathered to practice joy and faith, braiding together all the parts of themselves, collectives serve as hush harbors. We heal first in community and build solidarity from the enclave. In the sanctity of each other, we revive. Mend. Reconcile what was, what is with what will be. Here, without the white gaze, we look at each other and remember. Our words are our spirituals. We are free. Let us behave accordingly.

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