

Editorial: Whiteness and Art Education

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“The white power bloc develops a bag of tricks to mask its social location, making use of disguises, euphemisms, silences, and avoidances” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009, p. 16).

In my graduate course, “Critical Analysis of Multicultural Art Education,” I assign the 2009 book chapter, “Smoke and Mirrors: More Than One Way to Be Diverse and Multicultural,” by Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe. To frame the chapter, the authors critique the way liberal educators and scholars have historically failed to account for the power dynamics within institutions, especially schools, thus maintaining systems of domination and subordination. Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009) then build on John Fiske’s concept of “power blocs,” which “describe the social formations around which power politics operated in Western societies in the late twentieth century” (p. 8), to make suggestions for how critical multiculturalists can elevate their understanding of educational equity. In the chapter, three power blocs, “the white supremacist power bloc,” “the patriarchy power bloc,” and “the class elitist power bloc,” are conceptualized as an ever-shifting set of social alliances, and as being representative of the way power flows in varying directions. Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009) explain,

Along lines of race, class, and gender, individuals can simultaneously fall within the boundaries of one power bloc and outside another. While no essential explanation can account for the way an individual will relate to power blocs vis-a-vis their race, class, or gender, such dimensions do affect people’s relationship to power-related social formations. In most cases individuals are fragmented in relation to power. (p. 9)

The recognition and understanding of the power and also inequity that these varying social alliances produce is critical if teachers are to be able to identify and attend to the material and emotional needs of their students. Further, Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009) assert that teachers who fail to recognize these systems will “always be limited in their attempts to understand, provide for, and help empower their marginalized students...” (p. 9).

To activate Steinberg and Kincheloe’s chapter, I assign an artmaking activity in which the graduate students must visually represent the

three power blocs and place themselves within the bloc framework for each category. I ask them to then consider, "What implications do your bloc positions have on how you navigate your role as an art educator / artist / researcher, etc.?" (See Figure 1)

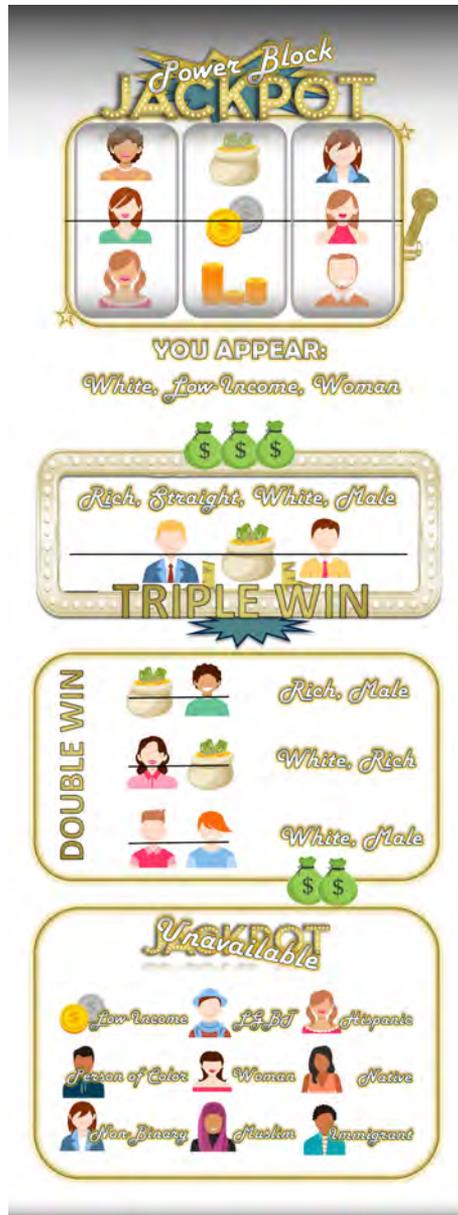


Figure 1. Courtesy of Miranda Koffey, graduate student enrolled in 7767

In most cases, this is the first time that my white students have named and positioned their whiteness on a hierarchical plane in any visual way. Further, for many, it is the first time they realize that their positionality actually *does* and *should* impact how they perform their art educator / artist / researcher identity. The students' task to visually represent the three power blocs, and moreover, entangle themselves in the system has been significantly more impactful and ignited more critical reflection than most other readings and assignments throughout my course. Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009) write, "The white supremacist power bloc assumes its power from its ability to erase its presence" (p. 14); however, students' ability to *see* the power blocs, represented in color and dimensionality, counters its ability to maintain invisibility. Additionally, visually representing this power system makes clearer that individuals can indeed move in and out of empowered and disempowered positions depending on access to certain identity-based privileges (e.g. race, class, gender). This mobility inevitably impacts an individual's *overall* social location. However, certain social alliances, certainly those that align with whiteness, will always supercede others simply because that is the way power systems have been set up to work. The visual representation of Steinberg and Kincheloe's "power blocs" provided a constant reminder of these systems for my art education graduate students—such a continuous consideration forced introspection, reflexivity and accountability. Likewise, *jCRAE*'s *three* issues on whiteness aimed to be a constant reminder of these systems and prompt introspection, reflexivity and accountability for the art education field at large.

Whiteness is one of the most powerful "nothings" we can conjure (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009). As senior editor of *jCRAE*, my goal for developing three consecutive issues on whiteness was to model the way the art education field must continue to face and challenge this "nothingness." Our collective failure to recognize what whiteness entails has resulted in centuries of gatekeeping in the arts and art education. The articles published in *all three issues* of Volume 36 need to be read *over and over again* by art educators around the world, assigned to preservice art teachers in our university classrooms, forwarded to practicing art teachers who mentor our preservice students in their classrooms, shared with art museum professionals and community partners, etc. Considering the clear and direct content offered in these three issues of *jCRAE*, there should be *no more excuses, no more gasps of disbelief, and no more denying that white supremacy is a problem in the art education field*. Volume 36 has presented over 20 essays, research articles, creative writings and artworks in which art educators of varying races and nationalities have theoretically and empirically demonstrated the ways whiteness and white supremacy manifests in art education. Therefore, any further and ongoing attempts to deny responsibility or maintain

“neutrality” must be called out for *willful ignorance* (Alcoff, 2007), or even further, *colorblind racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The authors provide us with ammunition to publicly push back against the perpetuation of racial injustices, as well as the construction and maintenance of *white ignorance*, which refers to the cognitive tendency to engage in “self-deception, bad faith, evasion and misrepresentation” on matters of race, racism, and racial domination (Mills, 2007, p.17; See also Mills, 1997).

Beth Link opens Volume 36, Issue 3 with a research project, grounded in Critical Whiteness Studies, that investigates varying public school districts’ art curricula and their attention to race and whiteness. Link presents an analysis that suggests that district curricula reinforces racial inequities by omitting artists of color, reaffirming racial hierarchies through the master narrative of white progress, and decontextualizing the socio-cultural concerns of non-white artists. Link makes suggestions for schools to reform art curricula so that is explicitly anti-oppressive and critically multicultural. Then, **Melissa Crum** investigates the ways in which a public art museum engaged in an iterative reflection process that resulted in culturally responsible exhibition practices. Crum identified the ways in which white museum educators and practitioners assumed the role of “white accomplice” during the planning, curation and exhibition of art from varying regions of Africa.

In an engaging personal essay about teaching, **Heath Schultz** illuminates the ways some of his white art education students have internalized white supremacy, and thus developed a “white savior complex.” Schultz presents the antiracist pedagogical strategies that he has used (sometimes with failure) to attempt to disrupt white supremacy in the art education classroom. Next, **Alphonso Grant** pulls back the curtain on the ways whiteness drives how gay Black men, specifically Black gay men “on the DL,” are represented in visual culture and literature. Using his personal lived experience as data, Grant interprets how these (mis)representations of Black gay men may impact students’ ability for meaning making in varying art education contexts. **Sarah Travis** presents a research study that examines the ways whiteness intersects with and drives students’ of color development of artist identities. Travis worked with youth engaged in a teen arts internship program at a contemporary arts center in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. Even in this predominantly Black and brown city, Travis’ study demonstrates the ways that artworld identities and spaces remain within the milieu of whiteness and related power structures. Issue 3 of “Whiteness and Art Education” wraps with **Kevin Slivka** work, which “critically examines the deployment and pervasiveness of Whiteness defined

by structural power/knowledge relationships related to Indigenous ways of knowing and the arts.” Slivka. Overall, Volume 36, Issue 3 of *jCRAE* continues to work to interrupt the normality of whiteness (Bell, 2017), making it visible and holding those who benefit from it most accountable for its destabilization.

References

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