Global Consciousness in Art Education: Utility and Problematics of Curriculum Development within a Critical Postmodern Relational Praxis

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ABSTRACT

When we, as practitioners of art education, challenge ourselves to reflect on established views about and beyond local, regional, and national history and knowledge and how these views have necessarily created boundaries, we might think of the utility and limitations of a critical postmodern relational framework. This type of framework allows for the possibilities of thinking through critical and postmodern theories as a starting point for examining and understanding cultures affected by colonial structures, which has resulted in the denial of agency and a flattening of narratives. Often, these "bedrock" views, in their simplistic, one-dimensional, and reductive nature, cast an "othering" on cultures lesser-known in contemporary art education. Additionally, this framework exposes the limitation of Western critical thought in attempting to understand and center the aesthetic practices of non-Western societies. To consider how we might address these views within our teaching, research, and art-making is no small task. In this paper, I present a look at how an attempt at designing a curriculum and art education project for a Secondary Methods art education course offered the potential to critically reflect on the challenges of how Western patterns of thought and practice re-inscribe a colonialist mindset and privilege.

> *Aesthetics is of necessity concerned with differences in the ways of sensing and seeing that distinguish artists, tastes, and sensibilities. Gaining mastery of the whole of "global aesthetics" may be an unachievable goal—but learning more is not so difficult.* (Higgins, 2017, p. 342)

As a former high school art teacher, I am deeply invested in pedagogical practice that reveals the complexity involved with teaching pre/adolescents. I found resonance in my teaching of these youth when I engaged them in meaningful creative acts. Many of my Art I students were merely there to receive an "art credit," so I knew that I needed to provide them with a meaningful experience beyond the basic elements and principles of art (Gude, 2004). As such,

in 2014, when I became an educator of pre-service teachers and was tasked with teaching a Secondary Methods course, I aimed to make connections to my prior experiences in 6-12 visual arts teaching. Since leaving the secondary classroom environment in 2008, educational interest has progressed toward issues of global context and relational mobilities (Alice, 2012; Hague, 2014).

To these ends, every Fall semester from 2014-2017, I designed and taught a Secondary Methods in Art Education course for a university located in the Southeastern United States. Pre-service students in this course were tasked with developing a three-week lesson for a secondary classroom environment. I designed this course to explicitly combine three distinct approaches with aims for contemporary curriculum design and teaching and learning within and for a contemporary global art education. It was my hope that these approaches, like the legs of a stool, when combined, provided a framework which I believe allows pre-service art teachers an opening to critically address the utility of a relational scope in transforming intercultural/multicultural global narratives (Dervin, 2015) into a transcultural approach (McLean, 2015). In other words, my aim is to present to students ways in which we might reach a deeper understanding of other human cultures as a means to awaken a global conscience. Through the process of curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and art-making, my students discovered new spaces to resist a limited trajectory of a Western narrative of dominance.

This paper addresses how I (and subsequently, my students) designed curricula inspired by Anderson's (2004) comparative philosophies of art, a theory of Art for Life (Milbrandt & Anderson, 2004), and postmodern principles of design (Gude, 2004) to: 1) advance teaching and learning about non-Western systems of meaning-making; 2) design curriculum, placing the practices of these cultures at the center; and 3) complicate and inform PreK-16 studio practice so as not to advance and reproduce simplistic/reductive narratives of these cultures.

My specific use of the aforementioned texts/scholarship (Anderson, 2004; Gude, 2004; Milbrandt & Anderson, 2004), allowed my students an introduction into concepts and theories through use of accessible language for deeper understanding. Informed by my prior attempts at designing curriculum for this course, I understood that I needed to contextualize the course material based on students' prior knowledge. Many of them had been taught the elements and principles of design during their compulsory K-12 education (Alexander, Day & Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1991).

When I introduced Gude's (2004) principles, much of the feedback I received illuminated the challenges that my undergraduates faced in understanding postmodern art education principles. Consequently, I acknowledge that these "new found principles" are in fact not "new," which highlights a gap in our field that requires discussion beyond the scope of this paper. On a positive note, I found this offering to be most accessible for my population of first-generation college students. Without establishing the foundation that Gude's (2004) framework provided, my students may have been less inclined to fully engage, which may lead to a stagnation in the learning process (Dewey, 1938).

Contemplations of the Pre-service Art Teacher

It is important to briefly note that art education students exist at a unique crossroads. They are, at once, students of visual art who are also early practitioners within the field of education. Uniquely situated at this intersection, they are provoked to consider *processes of art-making* alongside *theories of learning and instruction*. In my class, students began by discussing and reflecting on who they are as artists in relation to what they know about non-Western aesthetics,[1] along with how they might avoid reductionist pedagogical and art-making practices.

Like Anderson (2004), McLean (2014), and Higgins (2017), my students agreed that the Western world does not have a monopoly on wisdom and insight regarding the fundamental nature and value of art. To this end, they began by critically asking: *What motivations prompt works of art in human cultures?* (see Anderson, 2004) and *What might we learn about the visual practices (symbol systems) of cultures of other nations?* While aiming to keep the integrity of non-Western traditions, students placed varied global narratives/stories at the center of their investigation and curricular planning while carefully aiming to avoid a singular and often marginalized re/presentation of three cultures examined in Anderson's (2004) text, *Calliope's Sisters*: aesthetics of Early India, the San of Africa, and the Aborigines. To examine each of these cultures is beyond the scope of this paper. As such, I highlight an example of a student-planned/led lesson of Aboriginal aesthetics and practice (see chapter three in Anderson), which ultimately led to critical self-reflection of the practices of Western *appropriation of creative expression* often critiqued in critical scholarship (Greene, 2008). I offer recommendations for the possibilities and value of considering a "hybrid space of critical postmodern theory" in art education (Stinson & Bullock, 2012, p. 52).

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1   The author acknowledges the problematics of using a singular term (aesthetics) to define the whole of all symbol systems of meaning-making across cultures. The author's use of the term aesthetics, when referring to non-Western cultures, is a direct reference to Anderson's (2004) use of the term in his text Calliope's Sisters. The author also acknowledges that further development in terms of what constitutes "Western" and what comes to be qualified as "non-Western" aesthetics is sorely needed in K-16 education, yet beyond the scope of this paper.

The Danger of a Single Story

In 2009, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a wonderful TED talk called "The Danger of a Single Story" (Adichie, 2009). It was about what happens when complex human beings and situations are reduced to single narratives. Whether created by a person, group of people, or popular media, these narratives have the potential to reflect flattened views and ideologies (Pauly, 2016). Ngozi's point was that if we are not attuned to the multi-dimensional nature of humans and cultures, this reduction proves to provide a less-than-holistic narrative of distant cultures, whether intentional or unintentional. Further, these limited narratives contribute to cultural apartheid between indigenous and Western ways of being and knowing, and in the case of the project outlined in this paper, an "aesthetic apartheid" (McLean, 2014).

The process of education, in both formal and informal environments, has been critiqued by scholars (Furnham, 2015; Giroux, 1981, 1995, 2015; Robinson, 2015) who argue that reductive knowledge about other cultures is transmitted both through sanctioned and "hidden" curricula. Literature offers varied definitions for a hidden curriculum, including the significance of how the visual plays a role in determining what becomes understood as a "norm" (Baker, Ng-He, & Lopez-Bosch, 2008). For instance, Pauly (2016) offers a nuanced look at the ways in which Native American culture has been appropriated and represented, reinforcing singular and storied stereotyped caricatures. These harmful stereotypes, whether consciously or unconsciously shared, reinforce "asymmetrical systems of power and privilege" (p. 71) and have also been applied to peoples of other historically colonized nations (Harris, 2003).

Drawing from Skelton's (1997) view of the potential influences of a hidden curriculum, critical perspective identifies the hidden curriculum with its function to reproduce inequitable perspectives. Its cycle of reinforcement has been explored by a range of educational scholars (Gatto, 2009; Giroux 1981, 1995, 2015; Phillips, 2009; Robinson, 2015;) who contend that significant changes are required in the way we educate young people. The hidden curriculum both reflects and perpetuates beliefs according to ideologies of prevailing political power, often based on an erroneous or skewed understanding of historic and anthropological developments. Herein lies the value of making connections between critical and postmodern theories.

Toward Building Relational Aesthetic Narratives through Postmodern Principles of Art

In my methods course, students began by examining an *Art for Life* theory and approach (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004) as critical praxis. This approach, paired with examination of non-Western aesthetics (as in Anderson, 2004) and inspired by contemporary approaches to critical multicultural art education curricula (Acuff, 2012; Jay, 2003), challenged students to find utility in critical engagement with postmodern principles of art (Gude, 2004) alongside contemporary non-Western aesthetics in order to offer a nuanced commentary of the lived human experience through art. Though not "new" to the artworld in general, Gude's (2004) postmodern principles of art (*appropriation, hybridity, layering, reconceptualization, juxtaposition, gazing, interaction of text and image, and representin'*), are presented to the field of art education as a fresh way to engage with 21st century art curricula. To these ends, these concepts push beyond standardization and the use of traditional elements/principles of art and disrupt the essentialist system of logic of designing curricula, which fails to de-center the strict use of traditional elements and principles of art.

For my own pedagogical practice, these principles became provocations for challenging reductionist intercultural views, ideologies, and narratives (Dervin, 2015). Additionally, I wanted my pre-service students to expand a myopic view of aesthetics and make a priority to pursue global narratives using a critical theoretical art education lens (Acuff, 2012). Understanding how systems of power have worked to maintain reductionist perspectives allows a supporting lens through which to view, challenge, and de-center systems of domination in various forms (McLaren, 2015). To some, this might seem counterintuitive to a postmodern view with aims to reject a fixed truth - that multiple forms of truth are made/remade with/in socio-cultural, -historical, and -political discourses (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Stinson & Bullock, 2012). The addition of a critical lens allows not only a space for acknowledgement of a history and legacy of colonization and its impact on non-Western and Western culture, but also the tools to intervene with this awareness (McLean, 2014).

I first came to embrace a critical postmodern lens in previous arts-based intra-racial research (Wilson, Shields, Guyotte, & Hofsess, 2016); as a person of color, I saw the utility and necessity of critiquing systems of power while being provided tools for empowerment (Wilson et al., 2016). As I see it, in the specific case of my Secondary Methods course, the utility and strength of a hybrid critical postmodern lens is that it offers: 1) the space for my pedagogical practice to illuminate, critique, and de-center the static discourse of traditional elements and principles of design; 2) my students' entree to accessible "postmodern language" articulated by an art educator;

and 3) a lens through which my students could view and understand non-Western aesthetics.

In what follows, I detail the ways in which a curricular project with aims for nuanced analysis and application of the hybridization of Western and non-Western aesthetics reinforced an imposition of Western appropriation of non-Western expression. Pre-service students were challenged to displace metaphors of primitivism in order to bring attention to how dominant ideologies are shaped by a periphery—by means of appropriation—which has been given less credit (McLean, 2014). Students looked to complicate an examination of these intersections and depart from an ethnocentric gaze/stance in hopes of critical and re-formed understandings that might arise from their investigations of asymmetrical systems of power.

Through close and careful study of non-Western aesthetics, pre-service students in my course were challenged to pull back the curtain to reveal complex narratives of peoples whose cultures have been reduced, marginalized, and submerged. By using Gude's (2004) postmodern principles as a tool for offering a complex view of these cultures, students then designed curriculum for teaching this content within a secondary art classroom. Gude describes these principles as "a fusion of a visual form and a conceptual art making strategy…. [the] hybridization itself is a hallmark of many postmodern cultural productions, eschewing the boundaries imposed by outmoded discipline-based structures" (p. 8). I found utility in these principles for creating a space for students to find the relational aspects of imagined borders between Western and non-Western aesthetic practices. This was my attempt to de-center an othering of the non-Western practice.

Pre-service students also found utility in how these principles would resonate meaningfully with the lives of pre-adolescent and adolescent students (grades 6-12), realizing the necessity to engage youth in this age group beyond the traditional elements and principles of design (Gude, 2004). Inspired by these "post" principles, my students were then tasked with modeling instruction through in-class group-teaching, which resulted in completed studio projects, a naive attempt at offering more nuanced global/cultural narrative.

Critical Praxis: Curriculum Development as Relational Globalizing Narrative

At first glance, my students were overwhelmed by these "new-found principles." Many of them were puzzled to think that teaching art could conceptualize beyond the bedrock elements and principles of art. In other words, it made them anxious. Many had questions about how to apply the principles in general, and more specifically,

about lesson planning and art-making. The first task I prompted was to thoughtfully engage with each principle by creating a visual resource. In this way, students were provoked to take a deep dive into the possibilities of what these principles could become and how they might use them in their planning and art-making. Students began by using their own words to define the concepts (see Figure 1). By doing an internet search, they included examples of what this might look like.
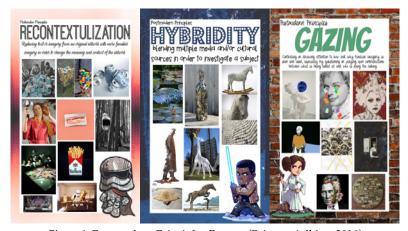

Figure 1. Postmodern Principles Posters (Brigette Adkins, 2016)

Once students were able to define and visualize the possibilities of these principles, their next task was to use these concepts as a provocation for creating a three-week lesson plan. These provocations also served as a means to investigate, complicate, and represent the duality of artist/educator of the pre-service student. Students understood that they could imagine using these principles in any aspect of their planning. Their three-week lessons would become the teaching framework for in-class group instruction.

Divided into groups of three, each group selected a non-Western culture to study, located within the *Calliope's Sisters* text (Anderson, 2004). In order to complicate a global-relational (Hague, 2014) framework, pre-service students needed to address the following in their curriculum: the history of the visual practices of the culture studied, exemplars of contemporary visual art by these indigenous cultures, and reconceptualized meaning-making approaches inspired by traditional and contemporary indigenous visual practices and Western aesthetics.

Pre-service students placed Aboriginal culture at the center of their curricular-planning efforts and aimed to expand on visual practices in Anderson's (2004) text. They encouraged their peers to explore

combining dot-painting techniques along with the shared/relational practice of storytelling in Western and non-Western traditions. In observing their teaching/art-making, I noted that by utilizing "Western aesthetic thought" alongside non-Western visual practices, my students' aims could be critiqued as an imposition of colonialist practice; what was not considered was an alternative way of highlighting a relational aspect and effects of colonialism, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

The lesson designed by pre-service students focused on the Aboriginal theme of storytelling/mapping; students were able to find personal resonance in the relational qualities of this theme, and used the aesthetic tradition of "story systems" (Milroy & Revell, 2013). Additionally, using a dot-painting technique, students were careful to acknowledge the relational aspects of this type of mark-making, which is significant to Aboriginal culture.

Figure 2. In-process dot-paintings

Contemporary Aboriginal artist, Sarrita King, was used as one exemplar and provided initial inspiration for dot-painting techniques (see Figure 2) that pre-service students explored to tell stories, further inspired by the postmodern principles (Gude, 2004). My students used dot-painting techniques to create storied triptychs (see Figure 3). The aim of the final triptych composition was an attempt to keep traditional Aboriginal visual practices intact while working toward a relational narrative. In other words, students wanted to acknowledge non-Western tradition and Western re-conceptualization through development of their own personal stories. The intent was not merely to appropriate the visual practice of another culture. Later, pre-

service students were able to reflexively acknowledge the challenges associated with re-inscribing a Western dominance mindset, questioning whether their curricular aims fell short of pushing beyond imitation.

Figure 3. Student example of a storied triptych, 2017

The broader hope of the original curricular strategy was to engage students in critically thinking about the ways in which cultural practices can be acknowledged, preserved, and given prominence in Western thought—a possibility of disrupting aesthetic apartheid without submerging the narratives of "the othered." My pre-service students were inspired by their new learnings about Aboriginal dot paintings to create symbolic gestural work. Drawing from the postmodern principles of design, they were provoked to complicate their understanding of Aboriginal aesthetics and of human relationality. Using the postmodern principle of *hybridity* (Gude, 2004), for instance, we discussed how representing the complexity of visual practice brings to mind how cultures are inextricably mixed—relational. By first creating postmodern visual resources (see Figure 1), students could think beyond the "technical" aspects of visual practice and embrace the relational aspects of aesthetics across cultures. Still, though, their earnest aims at creating a three-week curriculum failed to push beyond a flattened handling of the art-making that would follow (see Fgure 2). On a hopeful note, after engaging in post-project discussion, I do believe my students will continue to push the boundaries of what is possible in the realm of a global sensibility in their art-making/teaching practice.

Cautionary Tales: Limitations and Implications for Art Education

In writing about this curricular project, the existing tensions in my aims at disarticulating a colonialist imposition through Western (critical) thought were brought to my attention; not only do the examples of pre-service students' curricular art-making tasks necessarily (yet, not consciously) re-inscribe an aesthetics of Western dominance, but also that there exist limitations of imposing a critical theoretical framework when considering non-Western ways of

being/knowing. While my aims to suggest how a hybrid critical and postmodern theoretical framework (Stinson & Bullock, 2012) may work to help students examine, understand, and challenge systems of power/dominance within Western culture(s), as a Western tradition/institution, it necessarily falls short of fully supporting them in critical self-reflexivity against a non-Western backdrop.

To these ends, this emerging question: *How might art education simultaneously look outward and reflect inward?* is salient. Since leaving the secondary classroom in 2008, much has changed in the whole of our world and within our own U. S. borders. Most ubiquitous are the technological advancements (social media, for instance) which have allowed us to be "connected" globally; this speaks to the need for art educators in the West to be equipped to examine biases and blind spots (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) when aiming to address curricular design for transcultural (McLean, 2015) approaches toward teaching and learning. Soberingly, I am also reminded of the many in-service and pre-service teachers who have questions and anxieties about biases and blind spots as they relate to cultural, social, and educational inequities within our own nation. As I mentioned earlier, this work requires accepting that this is no small task, and as Higgins (2017) writes, "Because we know our own culture better than those that are more distant we might conclude that, however positive our attitude toward non-Western aesthetics, it is not our business to discuss it" (p. 342). I would add that perhaps, as educators, it *is* our business to responsibly pursue a deeper awareness and understanding of diverse creative acts beyond our Western borders so as to disrupt a myopic vision of what has historically been deemed "art" (Higgins, 2017).

As a starting point of self-reflexivity, we should ask: *Who are we in relation to other cultures and nations? Why is this important to know/understand?* To visit these questions is a start toward understanding the relational nature of human existence; we are not divorced from one another, whether global or local. We are connected relationally, through educational, social, and political systems.

Art educators are called to serve these relationships through complex intersections of teaching and learning, sometimes as practitioners and facilitators of research and theory, while other times practitioners and facilitators of art-making. In these times of multicultural and transcultural concern (Acuff, 2012; Dervin, 2015), our role challenges us to provide openings for critical global conversation (Delacruz, 2009). We should be awakened to the role our curriculum plays in this quest. As a discipline, art education must also ask itself: *What are our aims for the study of other cultures?* Surely, it must be beyond an ethno-tourist approach.
With recent U.S. societal uptake in issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, we must ask ourselves what role a global discourse should

find in our curricula of arts education, and in this case, how we might thoughtfully transmit our learned knowledge and values so as not to repeat a reductive/deficit narrative. My aims for this curricular project were to extend beyond my own critical multicultural pedagogical practice to awaken my students' consciousness of the nuance of ways of being/knowing in human nature. What must also be considered are the limitations of Western theory when attempting a discussion about non-Western cultures and practices.

An *Art for Life* approach (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004) to curriculum design offered my students a way to bring meaning and relevance of art to humanity by placing the "quest for personal and social meaning" (p. ix) at the center. It allowed these students an opening for a deeper level of engagement by connecting them to the art-making of non-Western artist exemplars such as Talia Smith, Tia Ranginui, and Te Iwihoko Te Rangihirawea whose lives and aesthetic practice speak directly to colonialism and its structures. Through contemporary practice, these artists challenge viewers to become conscious of social and political issues and systemic inequities affected by colonization. As art educators, it is our role to complicate these conversations, as we must do within our curriculum and the curricula our pre-service students advance, while also being reminded of the rigid structures within imposed limitations created by standardization and policy in K-12 environments (Hughes, 2004).

Finally, with aims to combine these curricular frameworks, the blind spots that are capable of guiding our decisions without our being aware of the consequences (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) are revealed. A critical relational and pedagogical practice (Freire, 2000; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) and the possibilities of using postmodern concepts as a means of embracing a critical transcultural educational philosophy broaden a global *circle of concern* for art educators and students. These practices offer a way to begin a nuanced and complex conversation necessary to work within global narratives and a way to strengthen structural and cultural competencies toward disrupting dominant narratives.

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