

Contemporary Culture Wars: Challenging the Legacy of the Confederacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the ongoing culture war related to representations of the Confederacy and those who fought for white supremacy since the end of the Civil War. Throughout the United States, and particularly in the southern states, there are physical reminders of the Confederacy on public land that take many forms, including monuments and the names of schools. The author shares two in-depth examples of community response grappling with this history and suggests Critical Race Theory as a lens through which to unpack the political nature of the built environment. Through studying the work of contemporary artists who challenge symbols of the Confederacy, students can engage in ongoing dialogues with regional and national implications.

KEYWORDS: culture wars, Confederacy, Confederate flag, monuments, Bree Newsome, Sonya Clark

Since before the inception of the United States and continuing until today, issues of equity have been an ongoing struggle. The struggle for equity takes many contemporary forms, including the criminal justice system, the school-to-prison (or cradle-to-prison) pipeline, educational funding, housing discrimination, equal pay for equal work, access to healthcare, representation and equity for LGBTQIA+ communities, the status of undocumented migrants, and acceptance of religious minorities and people who do not practice religion, among others. Though there are multiple ways to understand each of these issues, these can be broadly understood as ongoing culture wars among people with different viewpoints. Some work to recreate a version of the past when equality and rights were not legally or reliably available to a wide segment of the population based on moral, religious, or other belief systems, and others actively seek a more equitable future in which these issues are present and openly addressed. While some contemporary citizens decry efforts to be inclusive in presentations of history and art as “politically correct” or “revisionist history,” others note that the works and accomplishments of various people who contributed to the development of the United States should also be recognized.

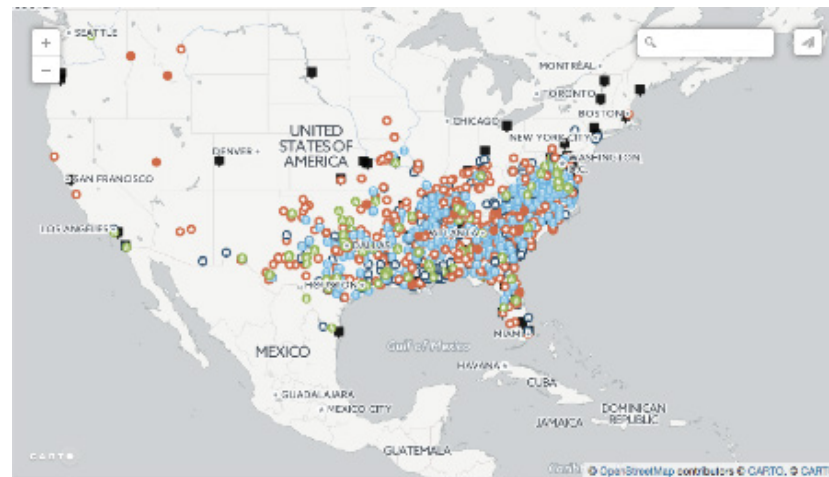
In this paper, I focus on a specific cultural battle related to how historic and artistic representations of the Confederacy and its legacy are contested. After starting with a background about two issues—the

creation of monuments to Confederate leaders and schools named after people who fought to limit educational access—I move on to explore how two communities are addressing these issues. Next, I delve into Critical Race Theory (CRT) as explained by art education scholars and argue for an expanded view of the topics through CRT. The article concludes by addressing the work of two contemporary artists with suggestions for how the artists' work, along with national and local dialogues, could relate to school practice at the secondary level.

Creation of Confederate Monuments and Schools Named for Confederates

Monuments to the Civil War are dotted across the United States. They are particularly prevalent in southern towns and mainly honor Confederates. While they sometimes represent a singular leader and his (or in very rare instances, her) accomplishments, they also frequently represent soldiers in a general sense without calling out specific individuals or events (Mergen, 2015). In his article, photographer Michael Mergen (2015) points out that statues depicting “Johnny Reb” are common in small towns throughout the South, with notable aspects of figures standing at attention with their weapons. Since these sculptures were erected well after the end of the Civil War as one means of disseminating the Lost Cause legacy of the Civil War, Mergen postulates that soldiers are depicted at attention because “the war didn’t end but would merely be engaged on other battlefields: Klan terrorism, Jim Crow, redlining, housing covenants, voting rights restrictions” (p. 1). In light of the June 17, 2015 Charleston massacre and the reverence for the Confederate flag that the mass murderer¹ displayed in photographs he posted online, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) embarked on an ambitious project to document and map the symbols of the Confederacy on public land today. Using public and private records as well as crowd-sourcing information, the SPLC created GPS-based maps of Confederate monuments on courthouse grounds and at other locations, as well as schools named for Confederates (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2016). These maps show the locations of confederate symbols as well as a timeline that visualizes the temporal trends and current events when these symbols were erected. When examining these documents, one can find some trends relevant to art education.

¹ It is my deliberate choice not to use the name of the mass murderer because I do not want to draw attention to him, but rather to focus on the individuals who were murdered. They include: Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson.



Map created by Southern Poverty Law Center
 Figure 1. Geographic map showing the distribution of symbols of the Confederacy on public land or supported by public funds.

In Figure 1, we see the geographic distribution of the symbols of the confederacy throughout the United States, with blue dots representing monuments on courthouse grounds, green dots representing schools named for Confederates, and red dots representing other sites (including monuments). To those familiar with U.S. history post-Civil War, the significant concentration of these symbols in the southern United States is not surprising. However, it is important to reflect on ways art educators can expose students, especially students in the United States, to the constructed nature of history via culture wars, especially in areas that have a strong contemporary reverence for confederates.

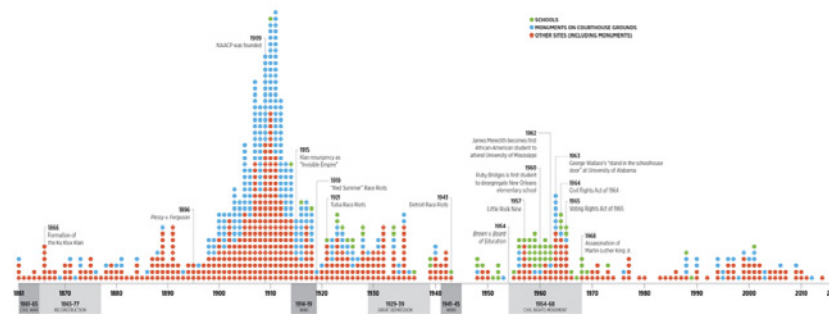


Figure 2. Full timeline showing when various monuments were created and schools were named in honor of Confederates. Green dots indicate monuments on courthouse grounds, and red dots indicate other symbols (including monuments).

The timeline of when monuments were erected and schools were named for Confederates is important because of the trends visible over time. While a few monuments were built during the Civil War, the majority of monuments and schools named for Confederates came well after the 1877 end of Reconstruction and during the Jim Crow era.² For instance, the SPLC study found that the first school was named for a Confederate in 1910, and there were few schools (represented on the graphic by green dots) named for Confederates during or shortly after their lifetimes.

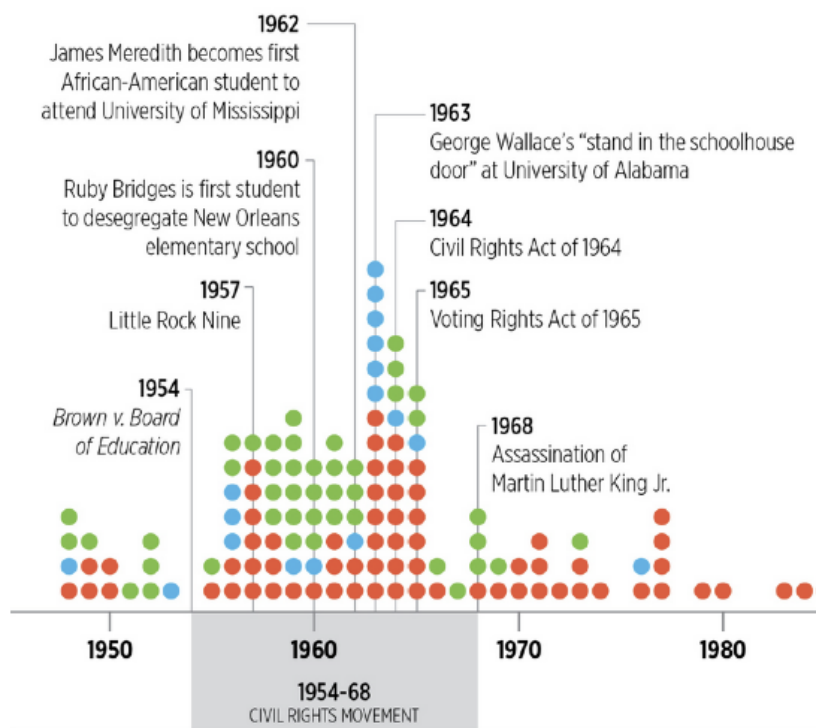


Figure 3. Detail image of the timeline focusing on the Civil Rights era. Particularly notable is the concentration of schools (shown in green dots) named for Confederates during this time.³

² Jim Crow era refers to the time period when state and local laws and ordinances were established, especially in the Southern United States, to require racial segregation in all public places. These laws and cultural practices also restricted the rights of African-Americans in many other facets of their lives, including voting, education, housing, and transportation, among many others.

³ Special thanks to the Southern Poverty Law Center for allowing the use of their images from their site Whose Heritage? <https://www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>

In this detail image from the timeline, we can see other significant historical events around racial equality, including the Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 1954, the Civil Rights movement, and Ruby Bridges desegregating the first school in New Orleans. During the Civil Rights era, in which millions of people protested and worked for equal rights, many school districts intentionally resisted integration by various means, including violence and intimidation. One method of resistance was naming schools after Confederates. The SPLC study found more schools from the Civil Rights era named for Confederates than any other era (SPLC, 2016). Rather than being open to rethinking issues of equity, rights, and democracy, people fought to maintain white supremacy in the educational system, actively preventing people of color from the right to education. These naming conventions continue to more recent times; the study found one school named for a Confederate in 2001 (SPLC, 2016).

Throughout this timeline, it is clear that the vast majority of public symbols of the Confederacy were created well after the demise of the regime. The two most prolific periods were the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras. This reverence for a past in which millions of people were held in chattel slavery contributed to the development of some of the contemporary culture wars in the United States related to race and equity.

Two Contemporary Examples

In the wake of the Charleston massacre, efforts to rethink the reverence for symbols of the Confederacy and other eras of white supremacy are gaining traction and have met with different results in various places. In Charlottesville, VA, the city council voted in February of 2017 to remove a sculpture of Robert E. Lee from a public park and rename the park (Cairns, 2017). As is the case in other cities, this is being litigated and though the park was renamed Emancipation Park, it is not clear when decisions may come about removing the statue (Cox, 2017). On August 11-12, 2017, Charlottesville was the scene for a Unite the Right rally of Nazis, KKK members, white nationalists, white supremacists, and other hate groups who gathered in support of keeping the monument. After a Friday night torch-lit march of intimidation through the campus of the University of Virginia (UVA) in which hundreds of white supremacists surrounded a small group of UVA students who were protecting a statue of Thomas Jefferson on UVA's campus, the protests continued on Saturday. Saturday afternoon, after skirmishes and fights throughout the day, one of the white supremacist members deliberately drove a car into a crowd of counter protestors, killing a young woman and injuring 19 others.

In 2015, Baltimore, Maryland's mayor appointed a commission to evaluate the status of its four major Confederate monuments. This commission voted to remove two monuments and retain two monuments. Due to the significant costs associated with moving monuments, the initial step for all four monuments was the addition of contextual signage installed in December of 2016. According to the public document from the self-study, this signage was the first step in their ongoing work (Special Commission to Review Baltimore's Confederate Monuments, 2016). However, a few days after the Charlottesville rally and violence, the Baltimore City Council approved a plan for the removal of the four monuments. The current mayor of Baltimore ordered the removal of the large Confederate monuments and they were taken down on the night of August 15, 2017.

Thus, this issue of Confederate monuments continues to take on increased importance as lives continue to be lost due to the reverence some show for the Confederacy. In the following section, I discuss the ongoing work in New Orleans to remove a series of four Confederate monuments and the successful efforts in Richmond, Virginia to rename Harry F. Byrd Middle School. I present these as significant examples due to the intense public policy and legal debates on the role and the impact of public monuments on ongoing culture wars that art educators and artists should consider.

New Orleans, Louisiana

New Orleans was home to many large monuments of Confederate leaders, including Robert E. Lee, P.G.T. Beauregard, and Jefferson Davis, as well as a monument to the Battle of Liberty Place, an attempt to overthrow the Reconstructionist government in 1874. Shortly after the Charleston Massacre in 2015, which raised awareness of the impact of public spaces and monuments on ongoing racial issues, efforts to remove these four monuments began. These efforts were a battle in the larger culture war about remembering the past.

After numerous meetings and public feedback sessions, the City Council voted 6-1 on December 17, 2015 to remove these four monuments and indicated it might be willing to rename Lee Circle (Rainey, 2015). Due to the fact that the city did not have the necessary equipment to remove and relocate the monuments, they hired a local contractor for the job. After repeated threats, protests, and the firebombing of the owner's car, the company withdrew its bid to complete the project ("Confederate Statue Removal in New Orleans Turns Nasty," 2016). A group, Save our Circle, formed to preserve the Robert E. Lee monument and Lee Circle. Via social media, they encouraged their more than 10,000 members to contact construction companies and make it clear that participating in this removal would

"not be appreciated" (McClendon, 2016, p. 2).

The tactics of phone calls, threats, and firebombs used against the removal of the monuments are reminiscent of those used by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) during the Jim Crow era and by those opposed to the Civil Rights legislation. A civil rights advocate, Bill Quigley, noted similarities between the contemporary resistance to removing the monuments, the resistance to Ruby Bridges integrating an elementary school, and the resistance to integrating Mardi Gras parades in the 1990s ("Confederate Statue Removal in New Orleans Turns Nasty," 2016).

The project stalled for months while legal battles ensued. After a March 6, 2017 5th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruling, New Orleans was authorized to remove the monuments (Litten, 2017a). During the dark early morning hours on April 24, 2017, the monument to the Battle of Liberty Place was removed by workers wearing bullet proof vests, scarves over their faces, and military-style helmets (Holland & Herbert, 2017). The timing of the removal, the security measures, and not naming the contractor were necessary due to the "intense level of threats and intimidation" (Litten, 2017b, para. 1) that the previous contractor received. New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu noted that this sculpture was the most offensive of the four because it represented an effort on the part of the Crescent City White-League to overthrow the Reconstructionist government. The original plaque on this monument praised "white supremacy in the south" and the more recent inscription covered the previous one and commemorated "Americans on both sides" who died in the battle (Evans, 2017, para. 5). This monument was built to honor white supremacists who attempted to topple a government that protected the rights of African-Americans, and the fact that this monument was allowed to stand until 2017 tells us how strong the systemic and insidious nature of white supremacist thought is. As the initial inscription was literally covered by a softer, kinder, less accurate version of events, so too do some commemorative groups cover the past as they claim "heritage" to conceal the long history of racial violence. Since April 24, the remaining three large Confederate monuments have also been removed from New Orleans.

Richmond, Virginia

Harry F. Byrd Middle School, opened in 1971, was named for Virginia senator, governor, and ardent segregationist Harry Flood Byrd who served in the U.S. Senate from 1933-1965 (Heinemann, 2014). Though not a Confederate, Byrd continued the legacy of the Confederacy through his work as the architect of Massive Resistance, which was a series of interventions to resist the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision to require school desegregation. These interventions included pupil placement boards in which

municipalities had the right to decide various criteria they would use to assign students to schools. In reality, the only criterion that mattered was race (Hershman, 2011). If Virginia schools followed the federal law and defied the illegal laws implemented by Virginia, they were subject to significant sanctions, including the complete removal of state funding, and Harry F. Byrd advocated for closing schools rather than integrating them (Heinemann, 2014). These efforts led to the Prince Edward County School District closing for five years rather than integrating, depriving thousands of children of their educational rights (Hershman, 2011). Byrd's actions brought significant national attention to Virginia's efforts to retain segregated schools as he worked tirelessly to promote school segregation, scheming with various state officials to devise the Massive Resistance interventions. It is important to consider the context of who Harry F. Byrd was and the actions he was most known for when we consider that this school was named for him in 1971, fully 17 years after the Brown ruling. What message did the political act of naming a school just outside the former capital of the Confederacy for a segregationist send?

In 2015, after a history teacher taught about Byrd's efforts to keep schools segregated, Jordan Chapman, a student at a nearby high school, began publicly expressing concerns about the name of Byrd Middle School. She created an online petition, collected hundreds of signatures, and presented this to the school board. Her letter contained the following statement, "Why on earth should a school be named after someone who actively denied schoolchildren education?" (Williams, 2016).

Unbeknownst to her, there was a simultaneous movement underway with parents at Byrd Middle School. After the initial press report about the teen's actions, the groups merged and worked together, beginning the effort to reexamine the school's name and work toward a change promoting equity (Williams, 2016). Through a year-long process, the school board solicited input, collected more than 200 new name ideas from the public, held public meetings, and eventually came to the decision to rename the school Quiocassin Middle School on April 28, 2016 (Robinson, 2016). The word "Quiocassin" comes from a Native American language and means, "the gathering spot." Further, Quiocassin is also the name of the historically African American community that previously occupied the land where the school is now located (Robinson, 2016). Certainly, there were those who believed the name should not change and others were not pleased with the new name. However, through a transparent process, many voices were included in the discussion that influenced the school board's decision (Robinson, 2016). Thus, the new name and this process worked to bridge the culture war between those who long for the past and those who see aspects of the past as ones we should not venerate.

Relationship to Art Education

The scenarios in New Orleans, LA and Richmond, VA as described above show how cities are grappling with racist works of art and racist school names. Within the context of art education, many scholars point out that our field has historically sidestepped conversations about race and difference (Alfredson & Desai, 2012; Knight, 2006; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). Recently, more scholars have begun to employ CRT, drawing on the foundational work of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991) to challenge the status quo. Crenshaw's key work around intersectionality, the idea that humans have multiple social and cultural identities that intersect related to systems of oppression and domination, has impacted art education. Further, CRT is premised upon the understanding that there are systemic factors that create and perpetuate inequities based upon race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism is not fixed, but continues to mutate in response to changing cultural forces. An example of this is how schools in the southern U.S. were named after Confederates during the Civil Rights era. Though federal laws and Supreme Court decisions were attempting to open up educational access, racist efforts morphed, and they increasingly named schools after Confederates, resisted desegregation, and enacted discriminatory bussing practices, among other efforts.

Art Education and Critical Race Theory

Current art education scholars look to issues of teacher and personal identity, cultural representation, the curriculum, the display of objects, histories of art education, and community-based programs, among others, as systems of oppression (Acuff, 2013; Chernoff, 2015; Desai, 2000, 2010; Kraehe, 2015; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Levenson, 2014; Spillane, 2015; Stankiewicz, 2013). In discussing some racialized aspects of community-based art programs, Carolyn Chernoff (2015) notes, "The social context of teaching (a diverse, divided America) cannot help but influence what happens in the classroom" (p. 98). To this existing scholarship, I wish to add the notion that the literal settings of our schools and communities need to be investigated and understood through these same critical lenses. As countless schoolchildren and adults passed by the monument to the Battle of Liberty Place, they were learning racist messages. Decades of children who attended Harry F. Byrd Middle School were exposed to white supremacy. As a field, we now address and critique the inequities in our curriculum with some regularity. If we broaden our understanding of education to include learning as experience in communities, art education becomes a site to address historical and contemporary works of public art that may be among the most prominent in a community's built environment.

If we draw from the ideas of Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) that places are sites of learning embedded with pedagogical force, we need to consider the lessons embedded within the public spaces we inhabit. She notes that “learning as a lived experience” (p. 17) is something that deserves additional consideration. Further, as Carolyn Chernoff (2015) notes, art educators need to examine “what the rhetoric of ‘community’ assumes, silences, and reproduces with regard to racialized conflict” (p. 97). Thus, CRT functions as a tool to help investigate the intersections of place, race, community, and other facets in public spaces.

In that vein, the culture war discussed here addresses numerous issues including works of public art and school names (i.e. Robert E. Lee Elementary School). Groups, public or private, with significant political and economic power are usually the ones who commission public art to tell stories that reinforce their power in a complimentary fashion, often ignoring or glossing over other views, frequently creating a single hegemonic narrative. These works of public art may then obscure the stories of others who are not privy to the political and economic power of the elite (Loewen, 1999). In the case of Confederate statues throughout the southern U.S., these works go far beyond obscuring other stories by creating a dominant racist narrative within many communities. This sets up an important situation for art educators wishing to engage their students in a study of their community or works of public art in which the educator needs to grapple with and teach about the racist origins of the works. Some questions that educators may consider include: Who or what aspects of U.S. history should be commemorated with works of public art? What should we do with works that revere the Confederacy or other intolerant regimes? What messages do racist school names and mascots send to students? What are ways that cities in the U.S. can address Confederate artworks that conflict with democratic values?

Activist Artist Bree Newsome

On June 27, 2015, artist, activist, and filmmaker Bree Newsome (<http://www.breenewsome.com/>) climbed the flagpole at the statehouse in Columbia, South Carolina and removed the Confederate flag from the place that it had flown since 1961 (McCrummen & Izadi, 2015). It is ironic to note that the flag was added to the statehouse grounds during the midst of the Civil Rights era when schools were being named for Confederates. Just ten days after the Charleston massacre, Newsome’s artistic act of civil disobedience garnered international attention to the issue of displays of the Confederacy on public grounds. Newsome discussed her now famous act as a performance art piece, and the documentation of it shows the highly visual elements she clearly intended (Gaiter, 2015).

The Confederate Flag as an Impetus for Artmaking

Throughout the United States, the Confederate flag is an incredibly divisive symbol that changed several times during the Civil War. The first two Confederate *national* flags were changed because they too closely resembled the U.S. flag and a surrender flag, respectively, causing confusion on the battlefield (Clemens, 2016; Coski, 2005). What we know today as the Confederate flag evolved from the *battle* flag of the Army of Northern Virginia, created in 1861. This was a square flag with a red field, two dark blue intersecting diagonal lines, and, eventually, thirteen white stars representing the thirteen states that seceded. Rectangular versions of this flag served as the Confederate naval jack and the battle flag of the Army of Tennessee, which is most often the subject of frequent protests today. However, immediately after the Civil War, the flag was considered sacred by white southerners and was not routinely used for racial intimidation until the late 1930s when the KKK began using it (Clemens, 2016; Coski, 2005). Throughout that era, into the Civil Rights era, and up to today, the Confederate flag has been widely used by white supremacist groups as they inflict violence upon others and prevent people from exercising their rights. The use of the flag continues today with many groups claiming that its presence is a reminder of their heritage. For instance, in Richmond, Virginia, a group called the Virginia Flaggers regularly protests at a local site where a Confederate flag was removed in 2010. These protests typically occur three times per week and involve groups of people standing and sitting on public sidewalks holding large Confederate flags. Some protestors have added flag pole holders to the back of their trucks to fly large Confederate flags.

Artists including Sonya Clark (<http://sonyaclark.com/>) reinterpret the Confederate flag in a variety of ways. In one of Clark’s pieces from 2015, *Unraveling*, she worked with gallery visitors to literally unravel a Confederate flag. This piece went on display about ten days before the Charleston massacre, required participation, and took a great deal of time, metaphorically addressing the slow and communal work of racial progress (Boucher, 2015). In a piece from 2010, *Black Hair Flag*, she used black fiber and stitched the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag on top of the Confederate flag in a manner to allow both to be visible. The black fiber is reminiscent of hair, and the piece relates to her as an African American woman from the northern U.S. now living in the south. With this work, she is artistically engaging in the culture war about the meaning of the Confederate flag and projecting her own identity, experiences, and hopes for the future through her art.

Conclusion

In addition to the obvious connections to art education through the artistic form of monuments and aforementioned anti-racist artistic practices, as well as a movement to change school names, there may be less obvious connections related to the contemporary role of artists in civic life. Rabkin (2013) describes the role of the arts in a community as “powerful tools that can serve meaningful social purposes, and it assigns great value to engaging *communities in making art* that reflects and is relevant to their lives” (p. 6). He goes on to describe that these ideas are at the heart of the concept of the citizen artist who is engaged with the community. This is fundamentally different from programs and people who promote the idea of art for art’s sake and the elitism of many traditional arts programs (Rabkin, 2013). Further, many art educators promote the study of contemporary art as a means to understand the contemporary world and challenge racist beliefs and practices (Denmead & Brown, 2014; Desai, 2010; Desai, Hamlin, & Matson, 2010; Knight, 2006; Whitehead, 2009). If we want our students to be engaged in the life of their communities, exposing them to the culture wars related to racist practices in their communities is one way to foster this mindset.

It is crucial to teach students that history and art are living disciplines involving interpretations that change over time (Desai, Hamlin, & Mattson, 2010; Levenson, 2014). These changing interpretations and understandings may be the cause of culture wars, as is presently the case in the U.S. To help students understand a variety of issues, such as race, embedded in larger culture wars, we need to recognize and acknowledge the atrocities of the past and how those with power have silenced, and continue to silence, others. At the same time, as teachers, we need to be sure to include works of contemporary art that directly address ongoing culture wars within our curricula. Bree Newsome and Sonya Clark are two artists, among many, who do just that. To help our students become citizen artists, we need to look at the present day with a critical eye, using art to call out injustice and oppression as a means to promote human rights and preserve our democracy. Desai (2010) argued “that through new representations of race/racism in the art-world, media, and classrooms we can shape anti-bias art education practices” (p. 22). To her point, I would like to add that considerations of space, including schools and other public sites, can help teachers and students work to dismantle enduring legacies of white supremacy. Working with our students to create a democratic future requires that we help them understand the ways public art and power have shaped their understandings of the past and how challenging traditional, and often inaccurate, views is a part of ongoing culture wars and an important role for artists.

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