Teaching for Respect and Understanding of Difference: Social Media and Contemporary Art as Vehicles for Addressing Racism

Pamela Harris Lawton, EdDCTA, MFA
Virginia Commonwealth University

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how social media is used to promote visual art exhibitions and performances related to racism and racist practices. Current examples of such art exhibitions and performances are highlighted. Curricular strategies are suggested for using social media in teaching students about racism and its effects using Critical Race Theory, the examination and discourse of mainstream media, visual culture, historical and contemporary artworks, and creating and publishing counter-narrative responses via social media.

KEYWORDS: social media and art, implicit-bias in art, socially engaged art curriculum, art-based counter narratives, critical race theory

As a middle-aged Black woman artist/educator, racism has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Having grown up in the protective bubble of Washington, DC, aka "Chocolate City," I did not consciously encounter Black-White racism until I entered college. In my experience, until that time, "racism" consisted of skin tone prejudice perpetrated by Blacks on other Blacks. Regardless, racism of any sort is repugnant. Given my experiences as a P-16 student, I strive as an educator to ensure that my pre/in-service art education students understand the devastating effects of subtle and overt racist practices on young people. I encourage them to actively create teachable moments about respect for diversity through their curriculum and everyday interactions with learners. While individual access to the Internet and digital technology is a privilege, there are many ways teachers can use digital media resources in their schools and classrooms as a means of teaching students to question and critically reflect on the visual culture messages they are exposed to on a daily basis.

Digital Media and the Cyclical Nature of Anti-Racist Activism

When the media thrust the relatively unknown young presidential candidate Barack Obama front and center, I, like many Black Americans, was cautiously optimistic—have we finally attained respect as human beings of intellectual and sociopolitical equality? Or is this just a fluke—a combination of circumstances and timing? Needless to say, like many Americans, I placed too much hope in one man to effect widespread attitudinal change. I thought, "Now we have a powerful general in the highest office of the land to wage war on racism; real change will happen." Unfortunately, acts of racism became even more rampant than in recent years, and they were widely publicized via digital media. I had hoped that President Obama would organize a national committee on race relations, encourage town halls across the country on the subject, and get people in conversations that might engender respect for difference, but instead he had beer with Henry Louis Gates and James Crowley. I'm not faulting our president—the list of issues he inherited upon entering office was massive, and has grown—but he is the ideal person to initiate dialogue on race relations in our country that would hopefully lead to perspective transformation, understanding, and respect for difference. National leadership on respect and appreciation of racial and ethnic difference could open up dialogue on other contentious issues: women's rights, religious freedoms, LGBTQ rights, immigration rights, etc. Social media platforms could be used to broaden the discussion beyond physical realms into virtual spaces, providing opportunities for more people to participate and interact.

The cycle of anti-racist activism is on the upswing; the election of an African-American President acted as a catalyst, much as the O.J. Simpson trial, the Rodney King beating, and the civil rights and anti-slavery movements of the past did. As a consequence, ideologies concerning politics, economics, gun control, religion, race, ethnicity, age, education, and gender continue to be hotly contested issues, developing into causes that result in divisive and often violent actions. Mainstream and digital media outlets bombard us with heinous acts of prejudice and counter-narrative responses. Against this backdrop of social divisiveness and media proliferation, educators need resources to assist them in generating positive classroom/community models.

Contemporary Art Practice and Social Media

Social media has been used effectively to promote sociopolitical grassroots activism as well as visual and performance counter-narratives. For example, a wide range of work has been captured by and disseminated through social media, including *Black Lives Matter* and *Occupy* performances in New York, Washington, DC, and other cities. An illustration of the power of social media to propagate ideas can be found in artist Sonya Clark's deconstruction of the Confederate

flag, as promoted on a variety of social media platforms and blogs including the *Huffington Post*. Shortly after Clark's "Unraveling" performance, video of filmmaker Bree Newsome's daring climb to remove the Confederate flag flying over the South Carolina State Capitol went viral on social media. This confluence of events led to the removal of the flag. Discussion of the emotions surrounding this contentious symbol illustrates how conflicting ideologies contribute to racial unrest.

> *Unraveling* by Sonya Clark. Her [Clark's] upcoming performance at Mixed Greens Gallery, 'Unraveling,' combines her [Clark's] interest in symbols, race and identity with a passion for unconventional takes on traditional craft techniques. Clark will invite audience members to collaborate with her in deconstructing the many threads of the polarizing emblem, along with special guests including curator Lowery Sims and civil rights [law professor] Olatunde Johnson. The physically time consuming and demanding ritual will allow visitors to reflect on the ways the state and country have changed over the past 150 years, as well as what changes we're still waiting for. (Frank, 2015, para. 8)
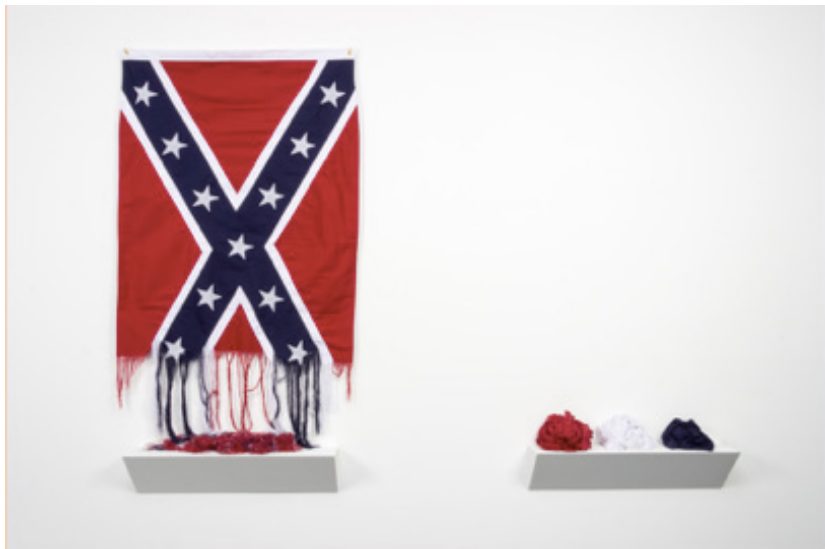

Figure 1. Unraveling and Unraveled by Sonya Clark. Photographed by Taylor Dabney

I recently displayed artwork in a juried exhibition entitled, *Implicit Bias: Seeing the Other-Seeing Our Self*, shown simultaneously in several gallery spaces across Washington, DC. That exhibition also harnessed the energy of anti-racism in contemporary social movements as explained on exhibit websites:

> *IMPLICIT BIAS – Seeing the Other: Seeing Our Self* is an exhibition that will engage and investigate the issues of racial disparity in our country, as well as help us visualize what an equitable future might look like. This show will not solely depict an introspective view of Bias, but extends to more prevalent matters, such as injustice in all its forms; police, judicial, education, voting rights and urban planning for example. (Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, 2015)

> We are living in important and dangerous times, where racial bias has stepped into a place that can no longer be ignored. *IMPLICIT BIAS – Seeing the Other: Seeing Our Self* is an exhibit that strives to reflect these serious matters with honesty, integrity and an urgency these times deserve. (Busboys and Poets, 2015, para. 3)

The exhibit was on view from September through December 2015 at the Joan Hisaoka Gallery at the Smith Center for Healing and the Arts as well as Busboys and Poets restaurants across the city. The Busboys and Poets website provides a contextual understanding of their space:

> Busboys and Poets is a community gathering place. It's a space where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted…a place for art, culture and politics to intentionally collide… Both visual and performing arts are a constant and daily part of the Busboys' environment and experience. By creating such a space, Busboys and Poets believe they can inspire social change and begin to transform the community and the world. (Busboys and Poets Tribal Statement, 2015, para. 1)

To promote this citywide exhibition, the curators launched a social media campaign consisting of Instagram, Facebook, and blog posts. Participating artists were asked to promote the exhibition through their online contacts. Promoting art exhibitions and socially engaged art practice online has become more common. It is less expensive and further reaching than mailing postcard invitations and disseminating posters and flyers. Artist and curator talks connected to the exhibition were organized and promoted through social media, blogs, local arts organizations, and college websites. Using social media to promote such events makes it possible for interested participants to add these

events to their email calendars or apps such as Eventbrite. Of course, there are also drawbacks to promoting events through social media. It assumes that potential participants have access to digital media and the Internet, which many do not, and this presents a social justice issue in itself.

Social Media as a Curricular Tool

Like myself, several of the artists in the exhibition are educators with an active art practice. This exhibition, promoted exclusively through social media, presents an ideal teaching opportunity for the artist/teacher participants. Social media outlets promoting the exhibition along with images of their own and others' work could be used to demonstrate to students how and why social media is effective in publicizing sociopolitical art and issues. "The art classroom… encourage[s] critical thinking to understand the events that shape our world. If major media outlets present a hegemonic viewpoint, the public [may assume] they have the necessary facts to form their opinion on…media issue[s]" (Patton, 2005, p. 86). As a curriculum resource, social media can provide opportunities for students to participate in critical discourse on racism by examining how the mainstream media portrays certain groups, unpacking stereotypes and misconceptions and having students create their own counter-narratives on racism. There are many art websites, digital gaming, and portfolio platforms (e. g., Artandresponse.com, WochenKlausr, Archive.org, and Behance) that depict works influenced by sociopolitical events. An examination of these cyber art communities in conjunction with the news stories that inspired them provide a rich minefield of visual culture responses for students and teachers to navigate. Additionally, through the use of free blog, game design tools, and website building software such as Wix.com and Wordpress.com, students and teachers can construct their own class blog, video game, or website and encourage feedback through survey tools and comment boxes (Patton, 2005).

Students might also create serious Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) using "what if" scenarios connected to discriminatory practices. "ARGs are open-ended interactive narratives that are collectively played by participants in real time using a variety of Interactive Social Media including blogs, wikis, short text messages (SMS), digital video, podcasts and so on" (Clark, Mejias, Cavana, Herson & Strong, 2011, p. 171). Serious ARGs are used to imagine and simulate possible solutions to real-life social ills (Clark et al., 2011). Clark et al. (2011) had their students create serious ARGs to address the issue of racism and other forms of discrimination on their college campus. The researchers sought to discover whether or not serious ARGs could

provide other ways of understanding, and perhaps combating or eradicating racism and other types of discrimination; provide mechanisms that allow participants to act otherwise both inside and outside of the social network; be used as a tool to confront issues that are difficult for people to address face-to-face. (Clark et. al., 2011, p. 171)

Their goal was two-fold: to raise awareness of racism on campus and facilitate a campus-wide, solution-focused discussion on racism and other forms of discrimination.

Art educators should make use of mainstream and social media platforms to be informed about local exhibitions and performances such as the one in which I participated. Student and/or teacher generated media could be used to open a dialogue with students and teachers in other schools and communities through a variety of formats. Some of these may include: classroom blogs, Instagram, Snapchat, serious ARGs, and Facebook posts of students' written and visual responses to racist sociopolitical events including songs, poetry readings, theatre, video games, television shows, movies, sports, and other aspects of visual culture that consciously and unconsciously influence our thoughts and actions on topics like racism and other social inequities.

Examining Art Education and Social Media through a Critical Race Theory Lens

Using social media and a Critical Race Theory lens to reflect on the racist media and visual culture students encounter on a daily basis could serve to effectively educate them on respect for difference in place of a national government-based initiative. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has its roots in critical legal studies and legal theory (Bell, 1987; Harris, 1993), focusing on "race as the primary lens for exploring legislation and its political enactments" (Chapman, 2007, p.157). As an educational approach, "CRT has explicitly sought to develop its conceptual constructs out of the experiences and stories of people of color in order to destabilize the presumed neutrality of universality of Whiteness" (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013, p. 297). CRT connects to, broadens, and extends the field of critical theory, "a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color" (Solorzano, 1997, p.6).

CRT theorists (Davis, 1989; Lawrence, 1987) contend that racism comprises at least four factors:
      1.   It has micro and macro components;

2. It takes on institutional and individual forms;
3. It has conscious and unconscious elements;
4. It has a cumulative impact on both the individual and group. (Solorzano, 1997, p. 6)

Through a CRT lens, examination, analysis, and critical discourse on contemporary art that focuses on racism and racist practices allows both teachers and students to identify and discuss these four dimensions of racism from a depersonalized perspective. In this way, some contemporary art initiates the process of recognizing racism and the institutional barriers it creates for people of color. For non-White students in particular, awareness of these obstructions are the first step in overcoming them and developing strategies for success. For White art teachers and students, an understanding of Critical Race Theory provides a lens through which to take up anti-racist engagement from a stance of solidarity and more effective activism.

Any critical reflection exercise on racism should begin with a definition and discussion of stereotypes. Examples taken from social media outlets, YouTube, the film industry, and art works are an excellent starting point. Every student can personally connect to the concept of stereotyping through fashion choices, youth culture, cuisine, gender, etc. as a means of understanding how stereotypes are applied and can be hurtful. From here, conversations that challenge and transform stereotypes can take place. A discussion on power and privilege could follow after reading the still prevalent "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1989).

Next, inviting students to engage in oral, written, visual, and performed critical discourse on racism and how it is perpetuated through mainstream media, as well as publishing their responses on social media outlets, provides them with a sense of empowerment in grappling with thorny issues that can be overwhelming. Voicing stories of situations that rendered one powerless can affect the oppressor and become self-empowering for the oppressed. Critical race theorists advocate for the formulation and exchange of personal stories because "stories serve as interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience and it on us" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). These experiences could also encourage students to be proactive in launching racism awareness initiatives within their own school communities (Darts, 2006).

One of the best ways to begin such a dialogue is through a critical self-examination of one's implicit biases. Prior to discussing mainstream media's covert and overt racist practices, teachers should have students write down and discuss their definitions of racism, and consider having students take one of the online implicit bias tests produced by Harvard University as part of Project Implicit:

Project Implicit is a non-profit organization and international collaboration between researchers who are interested in implicit social cognition - thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control. The goal of the organization is to educate the public about hidden biases and to provide a "virtual laboratory" for collecting data on the Internet. (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html)

Additional approaches would be to compare and contrast art works and sociopolitical events from the Civil Rights era to contemporary art works and sociopolitical events. For example, the works of Faith Ringgold (*Die Nigger Flag for the Moon, American People Series: Die*), David Hammons (*Injustice Case*), Sonya Clark (*Unraveling*), Fred Wilson (*Mining the Museum*), and Hank Willis Thomas (*A Common Misunderstanding)* would expose students to both traditional and conceptual ways of making art as well as subtle and obvious approaches to the effects of racism and racist practices. Through these pedagogical approaches students question: What remains the same? What has changed? In what ways has/does socially engaged art practice encourage critical discourse and perspective transformation? How has social media impacted awareness of and response to racist practices? What can I do to make a difference?

Social Media Promotional Images from *Implicit-Bias, Seeing the Other, Seeing Our Self*

Below are some of the images from the exhibition that were included in the social media campaign, along with suggestions for how they might be used in teaching. Each of the artists' websites feature artwork addressing other social justice themed topics that teachers might consider using as a curricular resource.

I created this piece (see Figure 2) after two months of collecting articles from *The Washington Post* on gun violence. I collaged the headlines, creating an image transfer plate as a background for a mixed media relief print. Students could follow mainstream print media for a specific time period and social justice issue, then create a collage of articles and headlines to critique mainstream media approaches to the issue. What/whose story is told? What viewpoints are highlighted or ignored? How might they create a visual counter-narrative? What "headlines" would they create to illustrate their perspective? The works could then be posted on social media to initiate glocal (both global and local) conversation and feedback.

Figure 2. Recipe for Disaster (Author)

Figure 3: Abaya with Flag Pin by Helen Zughaib

Helen Zughaib, born in Beirut, Lebanon, came to the US to study art. Her colorful work visualizes Arab American life, focusing on women in particular (http://hzughaib.com/press.html). In viewing her work, students could be asked, "What does it mean to be American?" "What does an American look like?" "What stereotypes are associated with being American?" Students could then find magazine images of 'Americans' or create drawings. The teacher could display students' images alongside art works such as Zughaib's (see Figure 3) and begin a conversation about stereotypes and how they affect our perspectives and attitudes. Students might then be asked to examine popular video games for images of 'Americans' and use critical discourse to address how these games perpetuate stereotypes.

Figure 4. A Tale of Two Hoodies by Michael D'Antuono

What symbols and artifacts are associated with racism? Students could be asked to create a list of racist iconography. What makes these artifacts/symbols contentious? What do we think about the people we see associated with them? Students could be asked to create a visual counter-narrative using one or more of the artifacts/symbols from their list. Images could be uploaded to a class blog for students to comment on. D'Antuono's work (http://artandresponse.com/) provides strong visual commentary on social justice issues and has garnered a lot of controversial media attention that itself could be part of a lesson on First Amendment rights, art, and the media (see Figure 4).

Figure 5. Loosie Law by Justyne Fischer

After viewing YouTube clips of a variety of racially motivated aggressions, students could study Fischer's large format woodcut series of victims of racially motivated police brutality (see Figure 5)—Garner, Rice, Davis, and Martin (http://www.justynefischer.com/home)—and discuss techniques for creating simple visual narratives of complex racist events. They could then study the animation and video work of Hank Willis Thomas (*A Common Misunderstanding*, http://www.hankwillisthomas.com) and collaborate on the creation of digital animations of their narratives.

Conclusion

Social media greatly influences young people's attitudes and responses to visual culture imagery and messages. Thus, incorporating aspects of social media into the art curriculum provides real world, relevant, engaging, culturally responsive, and accessible ways for art educators to involve learners in critical discourse on difficult sociopolitical content. Using social media resources and visual art works that resist compliance with mainstream media messages teaches students to question and challenge mainstream media and visual culture messages rather than blindly accept them, and allows them to create self-empowering counter-narratives of events that impact them in unconscious and conscious ways.

References

Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Busboys and Poets. (2015, November). *Implicit Bias: Seeing the Other Seeing Our Self.* Retrieved from http://www.busboysandpoets.com/events/event/implicit-bias-artist-reception

Chapman, T. K. (2007). Interrogating classroom relationships and events: Using portraiture and critical race theory in education research. *Educational Researcher, 36*(3), 156-162.

Clark, P. E., Mejias, U. A., Cavana, P., Herson, D., & Strong, S. M. (2011). Chapter 12: Interactive social media and the art of telling stories: Strategies for social justice through "Osw3go.net 2010: Racism on campus." *Counterpoints, 403,* 171-185. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981603

Darts, D. (2006). Art education for a change: Contemporary issues and the visual arts. *Art Education, 59*(5), 6-12.

Davis, P. (1989). Law as microaggression. *Yale Law Journal, 98,* 1559-1577.

Frank, P. (2015, June 20). Artist asks how far we've really progressed in the 150 years since the Civil War. *The Huffington Post.* Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/02/sonya-clark-confederate-flag_n_7488316.html

Harris, C. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review, 106,* 1709-1795.

Kraehe, A. M., & Acuff, J. B. (2013). Theoretical considerations for art education research with and about "underserved populations." *Studies in Art Education, 54*(4), 294-309.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47-68.

Lawrence, C. (1987). The id, the ego, and equal protection: Reckoning with unconscious racism.*Stanford Law Review, 39*, 317-188.

McIntosh, P. (1989, July/August). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom Magazine.* Retrieved from http://nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack

Patton, R. (2005). "Why" project: Art in the aftermath. *Visual Arts Research, 31*(1), 76-88.

Smith Center for Healing and the Arts. (2015, November). *Implicit Bias: Seeing the Other Seeing Our Self.* Retrieved from http://www.smithcenter.org/arts-healing/joan-hisaoka-art-gallery.html

Solorzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 24*(3), 5-19.